My Beloved Oppressor

# Epilogue

“Did you approach me on purpose from the beginning?”

“…… yes.”

“Must have been hard pretending to love the enemy’s daughter.”

Annette, of royal blood and the only daughter of a military general.

After two years of passionate love, she married her father’s loyal subordinate, Heiner.

The happiness she thought would last forever with her wonderful and loving husband.

Everything was perfect.  
Everything seemed perfect.  
Until her husband’s treachery caused the downfall of her family.

“I’m divorcing you, Heiner.”

“It is not granted.”

“Do you still have any use left for me? My parents are dead, the monarchy has fallen. I have nothing. Your revenge is over.”

“Madam, where do you intend to go to be happy?”

“…… there is nowhere I can be happy.”

Heiner stretched the corners of his mouth and smiled.

“If that’s the case anyway, you’ll be unhappy by my side for the rest of your life.”

Annette suddenly realized that his revenge was not over.

And that she had to break off this sickening toxic relationship with her own hands.

# Chapter 1

In retrospect, there was no such thing as fate in their meeting.

Annette was quite the romantic fatalist. She had long since abandoned such notions now, but she was when she was younger.

Her philosophy teacher told her that there was no such thing as fate. Only the moment one accepts the inevitability of a passing coincidence, one interprets it as fate.

If the words were right, it meant there was not even a coincidence between them.

Annette looked dryly at her maiden name written on the envelope.

“Rosenberg’s Biography," a brief letter describing the events that led to her family's downfall.

It was pitiful, considering the effort that had gone into obtaining this one piece of paper. The correspondence had to be handwritten because of the fear of being monitored.

Annette left the room with the letter. Her steps took her to Heiner's office. Her husband, who she had been married to for four years. The young commander-in-chief of Padania.

Arriving in front of his office, Annette knocked on the door without hesitation. Then, before she was even told to come in, she gulped and opened the door.

This was unusual considering that Annette usually acted cautiously to avoid offending him by watching his countenance.

Heiner raised his head as if trying to see who the rude person was. His eyebrows rose a little in surprise after he identified Annette, but there was no further change of emotion.

Annette walked over to the desk and held out the letter.

“Would you like to read it?" She asked in her usual good-natured, soft-spoken tone. But Heiner did not even give the letter a glance. He turned to his papers again as he spoke clerically, "Ma'am, I'm busy right now, so I'd prefer to have this conversation later."

The pen moved over the paper, making a crunching sound. Annette slowly lowered the hand that had received the letter.

“Heiner. I've had a hard time digging up your past.”

Thump. Heiner's pen stopped.

“My father is dead, but that doesn't mean that everyone in his entourage is dead. They and I know each other very well. So it wasn't impossible."

"...... madam," the low voice contained a warning. It also meant demanding an explanation. But to Annette it was comical. Because she was not the one who should be explaining.

“I've always wondered," she said. Why are you doing this to me?"

“…”

“Why do you do this to me? Why has the person who loved me so much when we were lovers changed so much? They say that the heart can grow cold, but still, isn't this just too much?"

Annette smiled calmly, "But I understand now."

Heiner's face as usual was expressionless as he looked up at her, but he was somewhat a little pale.

"From the beginning, you approached me on purpose, didn't you?" (Annette)

“…Yes.”

“You’re not surprised by the fact that I knew."

I knew you would find out someday."

All the meetings that Annette thought were fate were under Heiner’s control.

She was at the mercy of that plan from beginning to end.

“Is it so…” haha. Annette gave a short laugh. “It must have been hard pretending to love the enemy’s daughter.”

They got married after two years of dating. Annette's father, Marquis Dietrich, was a nephew of King Piete, and Annette was of royal descent.

Marquis Dietrich was one of the five generals in the Padania army, and Heiner Valdemar was a commander under the Marquis. Heiner, who had married the daughter of his superior, quickly rose to victory.

Everything was perfect. Everything seemed perfect. Happiness, which she thought was eternal, quickly came to an end.

Before the honeymoon was over, the monarchy was overthrown by the revolutionary army and a free government was established.

It was around that time that Heiner, who had been a wonderful and kind husband, suddenly changed his attitude.

“I was very surprised when I heard that you helped the revolutionary army to establish the new government, and that you became commander-in-chief of the army on that condition. In effect, you betrayed my father."

"---"

"But I trusted you. I thought that if the times were such, it was a choice you had to make to protect yourself...... and the cause. Even if it meant killing my father," said Annette, who once knew nothing of politics.

The free government, the revolutionary army, and the royal family were outside her sphere of knowledge. But with the fall of the monarchy, the Rosenberg family bore the brunt of the blame. Her father was killed by the revolutionary army, and her mother committed suicide. From then on, all of this was thoroughly Annette's business.

"The assumption that you, a revolutionary from the beginning, approached me on purpose….

not that you didn't, but that you couldn't. Because if that’s true, I really have nothing left. Because all I could do was trust you."

Since then, she had lived her life holding her breath. She couldn't even go outside. The moment she stepped outside, she was subjected to all kinds of accusations from the public.

Royal blood. The daughter of Marquis Dietrich, the military general who oppressed the revolutionary army and civilians. The abominable woman, fed on blood.

Even though she was alive, she was not living.The only person she could count on was her husband, but Heiner had long since changed his mind. He was always busy, indifferent, and sometimes seemed to despise her.

“I tried somehow to change your changed mind. Foolishly. When, in fact, you haven't changed at all-----"

“…”

"It’s just that you never loved me in the first place."

Heiner only stared at her, sitting still like a stone statue. He had an unknown face. He always had.

Annette had once thought she knew Heiner very well as her beloved lover, but in fact it was all a lie and a false image.

“Am I wrong?”

“….No.”

"Then say something, Heiner. I need to hear the truth from you.”

Heiner seemed a little surprised to hear the harsh words come out of her mouth. A moment of silence followed. Eventually he opened his mouth.

“I was trained to be a spy for the military training institution supervised by your father.”

Military training institutions. Annette had also heard about it.

It was two years ago, when the revelation of the secret training of trainees on the island under the leadership of the royal family caused a stir. To protect the trainees' human rights, the list had been kept private.

However, it was the first time she learned that Heiner had been a trainee there.

"Training, drugs, torture, confinement… every method necessary for training was mobilized. I graduated at the top of my class, and they were happy with me, so your father took me in.”

Old stories flowed from his mouth.

Heiner was an active and accomplished military spy. In the process, he was tortured several times and nearly died, but that was something he had to accept.

Annette's father - Dietrich Rosenberg - was the first to remove the spies who were threatened or in danger of being discovered.

They were Heiner's peers and associates. In any case, the operation was mostly successful. Dietrich's rise to the rank of general was largely due to Heiner.

Heiner ended his spy career and began working in earnest in the shadow of the regime.

He said, "...... But I hated Dietrich and the royal family, so I helped the revolutionary army to establish the current government. Getting close to you was part of the plan. That’s it.”

Heiner's words were more like a report than an explanation. The letter crumpled slightly in Annette's hand. Her lips pressed in a thin light as it lost the smile.

"The object of your hatred......”

“….”

“Am I included?”

Their gazes met in the air. Annette hoped he would answer no, even if it was a lie. Because everything was a lie from start to finish anyway, and adding one more lie wouldn't change anything.

"Six years ago."

A voice flowed from Heiner as dry as desert sand.

“Three of my comrades were killed in the last Munich operation in which I was sent in as a spy, and the other two were eliminated by Dietrich. As such, I survived alone…then I was invited to enter the Rosenberg residence.”

Annette also remembered that day. She had a vivid moment of liking him as he smiled at her in the middle of a rose garden in full bloom.

“I saw you smiling in the rose garden of the mansion, wearing jewels and a fancy dress. You mourned "those who gave their lives for the country" as if you were performing a great favor. I thought something was wrong. Are you included in the hatred, you asked?" A different color hazed in Heiner's gray eyes. The answer fell cleanly, "Yes."

Annette opened and closed her lips quietly, rendering speechless.

"I hate you." (Heiner)

His answer cleared the fog from her head. She certainly wanted him to say no, but it felt rather refreshing to hear the truth.

“Okay," Annette mumbled, her voice low. “I see…”

It was simple. Heiner Valdemar hated Annette Rosenberg. He only approached the object of his hatred for revenge. And she loved him without knowing it.

“Then it should be easy.” Annette stepped back. Her crushed pride and betrayed heart ached, but she tried her best to ignore it. Hoping that her voice would not tremble, she said articulately. “I’m divorcing you, Heiner.”

“It is not granted."

"You have broken the trust in our marriage. That is a suitable reason for divorce."

"I said it is not granted."

"Do you still have any use left for me? My father and mother are dead, the monarchy has fallen, and I have nothing. All I have is what I had as Heiner Valdemar's wife. Your revenge is over ......!"

Heiner slowly stood up. His large body rose endlessly higher. Annette looked up at him. He stood with his back to the light shining through the window, his figure immersed in shadow.

Horrified, Annette tried to take another step back. But before she could step away, his hand reached out and grabbed her chin.

"Madam," he said. "Where do you intend to go to be happy?”

“...... there is nowhere I can be happy.”

“Then it should be easy.” Heiner's lips stretched into a smile as he repeated Annette's words. Deep dimples dug into both cheeks with a cold smile.

“If that's the case anyway, you'll be unhappy by my side for the rest of your life.”

The red sunset light behind him glowed eerily. Amidst the red blood-like entrance to hell, Annette suddenly realized that Heiner's revenge was not over.

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# Chapter 2

“Should we leave the remnants of the monarchy of Padania as it is?”

Annette put the newspaper away after skimming the title with tasteless eyes. Discussing the disposition of those who had benefited from the monarchy was a topic that was dragged out on a daily basis.

Most of the nobles' property was confiscated. It was Heiner Valdemar's doing. He exposed every economic and military injustice and secrecy and scraped them to the bottom.

But the citizens still debated atonement and reckoning for their crimes. This was because some of the aristocrats and military officials had fled into exile, fleeing to foreign lands.

Countless letters of condemnation and threats were sent to Annette, the wife of the Commander-in-Chief. This became even more intense after the Republicans' proposal for a law to liquidate the monarchy.

Annette, who was staring blankly at the letters piled up on the table, covered her mouth. It was maddeningly disgusting.

It seemed like she would get sick any time soon.

After drinking a sip of cold water, Annette jumped up and left the room. The air was too stifling to bear. She wanted to walk in the deserted backyard.

Annette crossed the mansion at a fast pace. She felt the stares of the servants touching her like needles. It was extraordinary how much the servants gossip about her.

By the time she passed through the first floor corridor, she ran into a face she was not happy to see.

“Madam Valdemar."

"....... Major Eugen."

It was Eugen Markov, a loyal subordinate of Heiner. He was also one of the many who despised Annette.

“It's been a while. Are you at peace?”

Eugen asked with a smile. It was a common greeting, usually with the answer, "I'm at peace."

But the bottom line was different. He meant that you should not be at peace.

“As usual.”

Annette replied as such with squeezed vanity. She walked away with a small murmur, "Bye." She didn't want to talk any more with Eugen.

“Congressman Günther put in a marriage proposal.”

The voice that followed dragged her feet. His words were out of the ordinary. Annette turned her head slightly and smiled.

"...Congratulations."

“Not to me, but to the Commander-in-Chief (Heiner)."

Her lips hardened as she smiled.

"The marriage opponent is Annelie Engels, who was in the militia. She is also a colleague who’s in operations with the Commander-in-Chief."

His tone was matter-of-fact. Eugen always taunted her with his casual tone of voice. Annette gently gripped her sleeve with one hand.

Republican Günther Engels.

He was the main force behind the victory of the revolution by disarming the illegal trade unions and was a great figure who had participated in the establishment of the Provisional Government.

His wife and son were killed by gunfire during the demonstrations, and his daughter Annelie Engels was active in militia organizations.

Naturally, he had been receiving great support from the public to this day.

In many ways, he was the opposite of Annette.

“…What about it?"

“By the way, madam." Eugen sneered. “Do you still live in the flower garden?”

A rose in a flower garden. It was a derogatory term people called her in mockery.

The moment she heard it, her head became frighteningly calm. Annette looked at Eugen with a face devoid of emotion.

Eugen said sarcastically.

“Madam is no longer the daughter of a powerful man. You’re merely a remnant of the past that must be lost. Read any number of lines in the newspaper and you will understand."

"...."

“It is purely at the mercy of the Commander-in-Chief that madam still be able to carry your head like this. You are his stain. What people are saying about your marriage..........."

“I asked my husband for a divorce yesterday.”

Annette cut him off with a tired look. Eugen delayed a beat before asking back.

“...What?"

“I demanded a divorce. Heiner didn't accept it, and apparently he wanted to see me unhappy up close."

Until yesterday, it had been hard for Annette to grasp Heiner's intentions at all, but now that he had said it out loud, it seemed a little more understandable.

“Because Heiner hates me. I realized that fact far too late. The Major hates me, and people hate me too, so why couldn't he be that person?"

Annette's plaintive voice echoed through the hallway. Eugen looked perplexed, pretending otherwise, as if he had not anticipated this situation at all.

It could be that way. For Annette, her last life preserver was Heiner Valdemar. There was nowhere in the world that would accept Annette if she divorced him.

It was common sense that she would not want a divorce, even if Heiner did.

“So I asked for a divorce. I would be grateful if the Major could persuade my husband to agree. Since your intentions and mine seem to coincide.”

"...."

“Do what you want with this information, whether you want to spread it to the newspapers or not."

Annette smiled beautifully.

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The next day, an article about Senator Günther making a marriage proposal to Heiner Valdemar was widely reported.

A union between a Republican Senator and the Commander-in-Chief. There was a conflict between welcoming and alarming glances, but it was a terrific issue anyway.

The positive reaction was a bit more predominant because two years ago the two had handled an internal dispute between the revolutionary leading forces fairly and cleanly.

Needless to say, Annette's position, which had been almost non-existent, had narrowed even more. All her relatives who still tried to connect with her in order to connect with Heiner also turned their backs.

Heiner and Annette's divorce became a fait accompli amid rumors. And it was quite pleasing to the public.

People wanted her downfall. But her position as the wife of the Commander-in-Chief limited her unhappiness. As for Annette, this place was just another hell, but from the outside it just looked like she was living peacefully with her eyes closed and her ears covered. On the surface, the words were also true to some extent.

*So it was only natural that they would speak ill of me* - Annette thought to herself.

She lay in bed and looked at the high ceiling moldings. Lying alone in this huge room, she felt like a corpse in a coffin.

Annette turned over and lay on her side. Several copies of the newspaper she had read earlier were scattered on the floor.

One of the evening papers had an article that listed and criticized the price of every dress and piece of jewelry she had owned in the past.

*“If you read even a few lines of the newspaper, you would know.”*

*‘Ah, newspapers.’*

Annette also read the newspaper often. The problem was she couldn't read it all the way through.

She closed her eyes, but she couldn't sleep because of the overwhelming headache.

The migraines, which started out as stress, became chronic over time. There were more and more days when she had to take headache pills or sleeping pills so she could get some sleep.

Thump.

Suddenly there was a knock on the door. Annette lay dead against the wall. Soon the bedroom door opened quietly.

Annette held her breath as she watched the leaking light reflected on the wall. Footsteps echoed through the desolate room.

“Madam.”

Heiner sat down on the bed and called out to her in a quiet voice.

“Annette.”

Annette did not answer. Not because she didn't want to answer, but because she just didn't feel well. And her head hurt.

Heiner let out a low sigh behind her.

"I know you're not sleeping. Just listen."

"...."

“I don't know if you know this, but I received a marriage proposal from someone in Congress. I tried to quietly decline since I had no intention of accepting it in the first place, but the article got out….. In any case, there is no overturn."

"..."

"If you're looking forward to it, I'm telling you to give up."

There was a brief silence before he spoke again.

"You're leaving this place."

He acted like someone who didn't necessarily want to utter the word "divorce." Would the sky collapse if he said that word?

“….We all do."

Heiner could feel Annette listening to him. Annette lay back and said quietly.

“They said that I had to completely fall, and yet I live so richly thanks to being the wife of the Commander-in-Chief. They wondered why the Commander-in-Chief had not divorced the woman. No matter how much he helped the Revolutionary Army..........he was once the Marquis's subordinate and the Commander of the Legion, so that’s why he still couldn't give up that habit?”

“Just words anyway."

"I'm your stain, people say."

Annette sat up. Her golden hair cascaded down her shoulders and back.

She turned and looked at Heiner. His eyes, which she met up close, seemed blackened by the darkness. They were eyes that knew no joy.

Annette had once loved her lover's joy. She loved his smiling face and gentle voice. But it was not all real.

Heiner Valdemar was truly a competent spy.

“Do you have any resentment left for me to such an extent that you even suffered a loss?”

“I don’t know where you will live well when you leave here, Annette. Maybe you have hidden your wealth away without my knowledge?”

Annette laughed out loud. She was astonished that Heiner would say such a thing. Wasn’t he the man who knew everything in the world and everything went through his hands?

“I have nothing and nowhere to turn. As you know."

“Have you forgotten that you have been in contact with those who were in your father's inner circle in order to uncover my past?"

"How can they help me when they are in prison? And it was long ago that I started digging into your past. In the meantime, all of them were either executed or sent to prison camps on the island. I can list them by name if you wish."

“Your father had great connections. You might never know. And it's not like you don't know that some who escaped are living well in exile abroad.”

“I promise you that I will not go abroad. Nor will I take anything from this house with me. Just a divorce."

“…Since you want it so much, I don't want to listen to it even more.”

Heiner threw away the minimum amount of smoke and pretense and looked completely chilled.

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# Chapter 3

“If what you said is true, and you are still living in abundance thanks to being my wife, then there is no reason for you to want to separate. The fact that you would go so far seems to me that there’s something.”

"No, that can't be true. I just don't want to live with you any longer.”

“Why, do you hate me now that you know I betrayed you?"

“I don't hate you, Heiner.”

Heiner's eyes twitched briefly at

Annette’s words. He made a small movement of his lips as if he wanted to say something. Annette did not wait for him and spoke first.

“I don't hate anyone. Even if everyone in the world hates me, I don't. Because I don't deserve it."

Heiner looked incredulous that such words had come out of her mouth. Annette felt a little odd.

Did he think she was stuck in this official residence, seething at people talking about her disposition? Without a bit of guilt.

“All the newspapers were saying that all the dregs of the dictatorship must be destroyed. I am not sure what part of me needs to be destroyed, but I am willing to do so if you wish."

Annette was still unfamiliar with politics. But she did know what the cause was. She knew what human rights were and what democracy was. She even knew why people wanted to establish a new system.

In the past she didn't know and didn't want to know, but now she did.

There was a sense of guilt, debt, and shame. Of course, that was not really a heart based on understanding.

She just came to be convinced because everyone in the world was telling her she was wrong. Three years after the fall of the monarchy. Three years was enough time to drive a person’s mind to a corner.

"You don't mind if I do what I wish? Do you know what you’re saying right now?"

"I don't care about anything, as long as you give me a divorce."

Even if she fell, she did not want to fall as Heiner Valdemar's wife. She did not want the man she loved to see her downfall. This was Annette's last remaining pride.

The only thing she wanted to be compensated for was the time she had spent loving Heiner.

"Divorce, divorce, divorce."

Heiner hissed. “Maybe it's because you’ve lived a really easy life, but divorce seems to come easy to you.”

"...what could be more difficult? As long as you agree."

“I don't agree."

His large hands gripped both of her shoulders. The heat she felt through her nightgown was excessively hot.

He said ferociously. “I disagree.”

“I am of no further benefit to you. Like I said, I’m only a stain. Please let me go.”

But Heiner grabbed her shoulders even tighter. They were so close that their faces were in the touching distance. Her breath was choked by the ferocious force.

His low, deep voice pierced her ears.

“You will gladly be my stain.”

“Heiner.”

“You will always be my wife, you will never leave this place, you will never dream of freedom or happiness. As I see it, you will atone for your sins by indulging all your misfortunes."

Heiner spat out as he chewed each word. Their gazes collided. They were close enough to feel each other's breath.

When Annette frowned slightly at the numbness in her shoulders, Heiner finally let go of her. A dangerous silence fell.

The heated atmosphere slowly subsided. After watching Annette for a while as if observing her, he opened his mouth in a calmer manner.

“There will be an opening banquet at the Belen Hotel in a few days. You’ll attend it with me. Be ready, madam.”

"...."

“As my wife."

He added for emphasis. Heiner's eyes, once shaken, quieted again. Like a well-sculpted marble, there was an unrecognizable meanness to the flawless, elaborate face.

"I don't want to."

Annette rebelled for the first time.

"You will have to go."

“I don't want to go."

"Why, didn't you like to party?"

Heiner sarcastically asked. She had been to many different parties and social gatherings before her marriage.

“If I don’t, are you going to forcefully drag me?”

"Think carefully, madam. If you continue to go against my will in this manner, I could lock you up in an asylum for the rest of your life.”

“...What?"

“No matter how much you deny that you are not crazy, no one will believe a word you say. Try me and you’ll see, or just do what I ask. There is no use in running away. I will definitely find you. You don’t want to spend the rest of your life locked up in a mental hospital.”

His voice was like shards of broken glass lodged in her ears, syllable by syllable.

Annette turned pale and stared at Heiner. Her head creaked like an uneven chair.

Her hand that held the blanket trembled thinly.

Was this really Heiner Valdemar?

The lover she had once loved and never again?

Heiner's cold eyes were no different than usual, but he was like a stranger to her. He was so unfamiliar it was frightening.

Why hadn't she known about this long ago? She should have known from the moment her father died, when he turned cold as if he had been waiting for the exact moment, that he had approached her for a purpose from the beginning. That he was like this from the start.

No ...... she knew the truth. In fact, she knew. She just couldn't admit it. She was mentally exhausted at the time and needed to hold on to something.

That was Heiner.

At the time, Annette brainwashed herself again and again. She could never have endured it otherwise. Because she was in the dire position.

She got married thinking she was lucky to remain noble, but oh, how she had fallen.

Once she thought love would come back. The moments they had loved, the seasons they had loved….

“Answer me, madam."

*Ah.*

Why didn't she notice it sooner?

Even though the love that resulted from the usage was not love.

Annette opened her mouth to say something, then closed it again. Her voice did not come out well. She barely swallowed a shaky breath and nodded, seemingly invisible.

Despite her agreement, Heiner

did not look at all pleased. Instead, he looked unhappy. As if he didn't like the fear he had planted in her and the weakness that came with it.

An ashen gray gaze slowly scanned her face. His eyes looked infinitely cold, but it held a strange heat.

For some reason Annette found it difficult to look him in the eye and lowered her head. Eventually, Heiner got up from the bed. He left the room in a great hurry without looking back.

Slam. The door closed behind him with a strong force.

Annette sat in a daze, calming her confused mind. It was as if a storm had blown through.

What had just happened felt like a long time ago. With a short sigh, Annette opened her bedside drawer.

Inside were several pill packets of sleeping pills. They had been prescribed by Dr. Arnold.

She opened the packet and took one of the three pills, and put the other two in the medicine chest. The medicine chest, which was about the size of one hand, was already more than half full.

Annette had long ago been collecting sleeping pills like a squirrel hiding food.

Each time the medicine chest got heavier, she felt inexplicably reassured.

She closed her eyes and lay back, waiting for the medicine to take effects.

She hoped she would not have nightmares tonight.

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"That's why I didn't go to study abroad. I'm kind of timid. I can't speak a foreign language. I heard that Heiner has been abroad a lot?"

“Yes, I've been around quite a bit for operations."

"Can you speak their language?”

"Yes, but there were many places speak common language."

"How many languages do you speak?"

"Up to four languages. I was educated in an institution from an early age."

"Wow, that's really impressive. I don't have any aptitude for studying at all."

"I know you are very good at playing the piano."

"I, well, I've been playing since I was a child. For a very long time I dreamed of being a pianist....... but I don't know much these days."

“Why is that?"

"I'm a bit skeptical about my talent. I'm wondering if this path is really right for me. Oh, you don't have to take it too seriously. It would be considered more elegant to play piano as a hobby rather than a profession in my position anyway."

"...... Annette's performance is excellent. I am sure you will be an excellent pianist."

"Haha, what? You've never even heard me play."

"You are very good."

Heiner said pompously. Annette patted his arm mischievously and laughed. He smiled. Rose petals fluttered in the wind.

The scene blurred like a fog, then became clear again. The seasons changed again and again. They had always been together.

Scenery passed, and passed, and passed. The night sky was full of stars on a summer day.

They were on a boat floating by the lake.

"Annette, will you marry me?"

Heiner got down on one knee and put a ring on Annette's ring finger.

“I will make you happy for the rest of your life.”

Her eyes widened. Annette covered her mouth with one hand and embraced him in an overwhelming hug. Heiner laughed and wrapped his arm around her back. Stars fell over the waves.

The sight of the boat and the man and the woman floating in a sparkling world was as beautiful as a painting.

Air currents created from afar flowed in and destroyed the scene. Her vision gradually collapsed. In the midst of the ruins, only Heiner’s voice resounded like an echo.

“I will make you happy for the rest of your life.”

“Happily ever after…”

“Forever…”

“You will be unhappy by my side for the rest of your life.”

Annette startled awake.

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# Chapter 4

Immediately a sharp headache hit her brain. She squeezed her temples and curled up her body tightly. Her head was broken, it seemed.

Annette habitually tried to find her headache medicine, only to realize later that she was out of it. She sighed and sat up.

The lush dawn light hung in the air. She sank deeper into bed and waited for the sun to rise.

Annette tended to wake up early because of her headaches, but she always killed time quietly like this. Until the world woke up and moved about.

She quite liked this time of the day. She liked that no one seemed to be alive, including herself.

It was quiet. Peaceful.

So much so that she wished the sun would never rise.

Annette turned her head to look at the seat next to her. It was where Heiner had sat yesterday.

She always woke up alone. Padania was a country where

couples, both aristocrats and commoners, who normally used the bedroom together, but that was not the case for them.

In the past, Annette had visited Heiner's bedroom from time to time. She wanted to maintain their marital relationship.

Also, Annette had long wished to have a child. Doctors told her that it was difficult for her to conceive, but she still did not give up.

She thought that having a child would improve their relationship. And Heiner did not refuse her visits to the bedroom.

Why was that? Why did he not reject her?

Was he trying to make her live with vain hopes?

But Heiner was not gentle in the bedroom either. They had s\*x in the dark, without taking off their clothes and with the lights off. Annette had never seen him naked.

After the end of their illicit deed, he always left the bedroom before the the day dawned. Even if it was his bedroom.

It was as if it was a sin to spend the morning together. Annette closed her eyes and slumped. She felt the urge to cut off her throbbing head.

As soon as it was light, Annette called the doctor. Arnold examined her mechanically and took out some pills from his bag. They were the same pills as before.

Annette slightly frowned.

"These pills don't work very well.”

"Madam, this is a good enough medicine. You seem to want some kind of perfect medicine. And migraine is a common ailment. There is no need to be oversensitive."

"Do I have to live with this headache?”

"Yes."

Annette clamped her mouth shut. She couldn't believe it, but there was nothing more to say when the doctor said it was so. It wouldn't be particularly helpful to ask him anyway.

"...I understand, in a manner of speaking. But it's not just the headache.......... my body doesn't seem to be doing well overall lately. My stomach is also very upset, and I'm wondering if it might be gastritis."

“It is probably stress-related, lack of exercise, etc. Avoid stimulating foods and walk a little instead of lying down so much."

Arnold's tone sounded like he was mocking Arnett's laziness, who was always confined to her room. Sure enough, sarcasm disguised as advice followed.

“Madam grew up preciously and is sensitive to even the smallest discomfort. I can't be your personal doctor."

“...I see."

Annette replied in a crawling voice. A few steps away, she could feel the servants' sneers.

“I understand. Thank you for tolerating me, Doctor Arnold."

Annette smiled gently. However, her lips moved with insincerity.

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“Which one would you like, madam?”

The servant showed her several dresses. All of them were dull clothes of dark blue or gray.

Annette chose a bright navy blue dress. She did not want it to be too dark for a party.

After the fall of the monarchy, Annette lived a simple life. Heiner did not tell her to do so, but she did so herself.

It was obvious that if she wore anything even a little fancy, she would immediately be gossiped about.

The whole time she was being decorated for the party, there was an air of awkwardness. It was a long time ago that they chatted happily, listening to all sorts of praise and gossip.

The servants generally followed the power structure of the house. Sometimes they acted with a human heart, but this was not the case with Annette.

They are all ordinary citizens and have no relation to the powerful during the monarchy.

Rather, there were many cases where they lost what they had by the royal family and the military or joined the revolutionary army.

It meant that there was absolutely no reason for them to show Annette any favor or sympathy.

“Shall I put your hair up?"

"Yes, please do."

“How would you like it decorated?"

"My bangs cover my eyes, so it’d be nice if you use a pin.”

But their ill feelings toward Annette were not expressed to any greater degree. Be it gossip, taunts, irresponsibility.

They were not fundamentally evil people.

That made Annette even more distressed.

"It's done. His Excellency is waiting outside.

The servant said stiffly, bowed her head, and then retreated.

Annette put a handkerchief and headache medicine in her handbag, as was her custom, and left the residence.

Her feet seemed to stick to the floor. The car was parked at the entrance to the gate. She could see Heiner through the backseat window.

The driver opened the door and Annette got in and sat carefully next to him.

While Annette sorted out the big hem of her dress, Heiner rested his chin on one hand and stared blankly out the window. His profile looked sleek and strong, like a well-managed hound.

A truly inscrutable man, she thought.

Annette was terrible at parties. But a partner had to accompany him to the party, and Heiner always took her. As the wife of the Commander-in-Chief, he told her to do the minimum.

*“Heiner, do I always have to go? Why don't you find another partner...?"*

*“Why should I do that when I have a wife?"*

Why would he bother to take her to a place where no one welcomed her?

He was really a difficult man to understand, or so she thought.

Now she could see that the answer was really easy.

It must have been that he wanted to open a chapter of misery for Annette, who rarely left the residence. Because it was rare to find a place where the malice was as clear and blatant as at the party.

The car left smoothly. There was no dialogue of any kind between them. Annette turned her head to the other side.

A clear autumn sky stretched out beyond the window. Street trees passed by. No one was looking at her, but she scrutinized her expression.

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“Your Excellency! It has been a really long time."

"Thank you for the invitation, Mr. Schmidt.”

Heiner and Arno laughed and shook each other's hands. Arno Schmidt was a commercial capitalist and a great supporter of the revolution. He was one of the richest men in Rochester.

“Of course I have to invite you. You are a big investor in our hotel.”

“I hear you are planning to open another branch in Menhaven as well.”

“I will first keep an eye on the transition and decide when the time is right. Um, why are words flying around these days? Pro-France and Rutland’s groups have joined forces........... You can't go out half-heartedly for a defense treaty, can you?"

“We are currently making it our top priority to get the waitresses to join the small negotiating powers. I guess the odds depend on whether we succeed, but we'll do our best."

Arno smiled with relief.

Hotel business, gold mining business, civil wars in other countries, republican and royalist factions, gossip in the capital............ Various stories were exchanged. People gradually gathered around Heiner and formed a crowd.

Annette did not open her mouth the whole time. It was because no one greeted her or spoke to her.

In the past, they would greet her, but now they didn’t even do that. In any case, Heiner did not care at all how she was treated.

“Well, sir. I've heard that Senator Günther has put in a marriage proposal!"

“I'm afraid I have declined that offer.”

"Oh, that ...... The Senator must have been very disappointed."

“Why did you refuse? There were so many people saying that it suits you well!”

Annette's hands tightened. They acted as if she were not here.

It was nothing new, but discussing a husband's marriage proposal in front of his wife was clearly disrespectful to her.

“The refusal was natural.”

Heiner reciprocated with a polite but not warm smile.

"I'm not quite sure why he made the proposal in the first place. I already have a wife.”

At those words, people's eyes lingered on Annette for a moment, then scattered again. Heiner added.

"------ Miss Annelie Engels is a wonderful woman and she will marry a better man than me."

"Oh, my, what a better groom than Your Excellency in Rochester."

Concurrence and laughter followed. Annette couldn't stand the ignorance and awkwardness, so she picked up one of the cocktail glasses.

The cocktail was a little high in alcohol content, and as soon as she took a sip, the heat scratched the back of her throat. It was not bad. It was better to concentrate on this sensation.

“Gold has been discovered in Langstein..."

"How did the mining rights---"

All the conversation seemed like a distant noise. Annette sipped her cocktail in a daze. She desperately wanted to go home as soon as possible.

She was almost through her third glass when someone snatched it from her hand. Annette looked up in bewilderment. It was Heiner.

He was carrying on a conversation as if nothing had happened. She wanted to say something, but it seemed difficult to interrupt.

Eventually, just as she was about to reach for another cocktail glass, a large hand lightly grabbed her shoulder to stop her. Annette looked back at him again to see Heiner was faintly frowning.

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# Chapter 5

*What the hell?*

Annette thought about taking another glass, but she didn't want to draw attention to the situation with unnecessary fuss. Eventually, she gave up and had to endure the time again.

Suddenly, there was an ah-ha sound from the podium. The emcee stood on the stage, holding a microphone. People's gazes were drawn forward.

Annette looked at the emcee for a moment, then quickly looked out the window disinterestedly. A distinct darkness had fallen outside at some point.

People burst out laughing at the emcee’s jokes. After asking if the food was good and if they were enjoying the banquet, he cut to the chase.

"We, at the Belen Hotel, have welcomed a very special person for our guests here today. Your representative put a lot of effort into it."

Then came people’s exclamations. Even then, Annette only stared out the window.

"For a performance worthy of a beautiful autumn evening, here is Felix Kafka, the amazing genius born of Padania, the master of the keyboard!"

Annette's body jerked. Her half-closed eyes gradually widened and her pupils began to flicker. She spun around and turned her head to look at the man who was going up on the podium along with the applause.

Felix Kafka.

A prodigious pianist who had won first place in all kinds of competitions, including the world's most prestigious Pricarlo International Competition.

He was once Annette's idol.

After politely greeting the crowd, Felix sat down at the piano. He took a long breath in and exhaled. Then he closed his eyes as if immersed in his own perfect world.

His face was as pious and holy, unlike anything of this world. It was as if only Felix and the piano existed in this huge hall.

Opening his eyes, Felix swept his hair once and raised his left hand. His fingers, which had been suspended in the air for a moment, landed slowly on the keys.

Annette couldn't breathe until the keys were pressed and the first notes were heard.

Nocturne No. 2.

The neat melody wound through the air. At one time, Annette had played this piece countless times. Despite a gap of nearly three years, she could recall the notes vividly.

E flat. Binary form. Dispersed chords in the left hand. Non-harmonic notes and chromatic melodies that were added the more the melody was repeated…

Before the breath of sound died, Felix gave it life by linking the next note. Key to key and key to key. Life force was continually given along his hand.

It was as if Felix was the messenger recreating the Idea here. At this moment, the world they stepped into became meaningless, as if the inhalation and exhalation were all pledged to his performance.

The melody of whispering love to a lover at the window in the middle of the night was so beautiful that it brought tears to her eyes.

Piano Sonata, La Campanella---and until the encore ended, Annette gripped her hands tightly together. She didn't even feel the gaze on her the whole time.

The applause overflowed as Felix stood up to bow. People gathered around him as he came off the stage.

Annette stared desperately at him, standing frozen in place. Her chest was tightly filled with emotion and sadness.

*You were my idol.*

*I nurtured my dreams by listening to you play.*

*I wanted to be a pianist like you.*

Words that she had conveyed at one time and could not convey now lingered in her mouth.

Annette and Felix had met several times in the past. It was thanks to her father's connections. She had gotten autographs, conversations, support and encouragement from Felix.

But nothing was the same now as it had been then.

Felix was a successful pianist prodigy from a commoner's background. He probably despised her then, too, even if he didn’t show it. And now it would have added to it.

Annette's lashes quivered. Heiner looked down at her emotional face with sunken eyes. The moment he opened his mouth to say something.

“Didn't Madame Valdemar play the piano, too?"

The gentle question was directed at Annette.

Annette, who was half dazed, flinched. She looked around, not hiding her confusion.

All the people, including Felix, were looking at Annette, as if words had already been exchanged once. Annette laughed awkwardly and shook her head.

“Yes, but I.........."

"You also won third place in an international competition, didn't you?"

“Oh, I remember that too. It also made a big splash in the capital’s newspapers.”

“And didn't you give a recital as well?"

"It was because of the late Marquis Dietrich who personally paid for the hall.........."

The more they spoke, the more the blood drained from Annette's face.

While it was true that her father had spent money on her concert, the recital itself was a qualification given to competition winners through the foundation.

The woman who first asked Annette a question suggested it with a smile.

"If you don’t mind, Madame Valdemar. Would you like to play us a piece?"

“Oh, no. I am not capable of that.”

“There is no need to be too humble. I heard that from a very young age you were taught by very talented pianists."

“I haven't played for a long time, and now my skills.........."

“It’s fine. Come on."

The woman wrapped her arms around Annette's shoulders and led her forward. Annette looked back at Heiner as if seeking help, but he just stood there nonchalantly with an absent-minded look on his face.

It felt like he was about to burst out laughing for a moment.

*'What did I expect from that man?'*

If she wanted this situation, he wasn't the man to stop her. What on earth did she want from him?

Annette sat at the piano, crushed, and looked at the audience for a moment. Felix looked at her, nodding at his neighbor's words.

Annette turned her attention to the piano. It had been a long time since she had seen the keys up close, and she was infinitely unfamiliar with them.

No matter what she played now, it would look shabby in front of Felix Kafka, the top pianist. Even more so after a three-year break.

The reason for having her play in this situation was obvious.

She was fortunate to have been born into a wealthy aristocratic family, to have received the best education, and to have given a recital... but she was only this good. They wanted to insult her by revealing that fact here.

Annette lowered her head with a pale face. Apart from the occasional clinking of glasses, the hall was frighteningly quiet.

The longer the silence lasted, the more her mind crumbled moment by moment. After she had not moved for quite some time, some of the people began to whisper. The whispers sounded like the sound of whips.

Annette closed her eyes and raised her hands with difficulty. But her hands did not reach the top of the keyboard.

Her fingers began to tremble. It was not due to nervousness or shame.

It was not because of fear of the ridicule she would get for playing a terrible song. It wasn't even because she forgot the song.

*“Annette!"*

Just….

*“We have to run!"*

Just play the piano….

*“Get up!”*

She couldn't play the piano. Not a single note.

*"Come on, run!"*

A chill circulated as if she had been doused with cold water. Annette involuntarily covered her mouth with one hand. She felt her stomach churn like mad as a sudden headache came crashing down on her.

Annette jumped up. The chair was pushed out with a loud crash.

She quickly left the hall, ignoring the bewildered faces of the people.

She entered the restroom before the door had time to close. Her stomach churned as she grabbed the toilet seat in the corner and emptied the contents inside.

"Ha…!"

Her throat was burning hot. Annette vomited continuously. After a couple of throwing ups, nothing more came out, but she still felt sick to her stomach.

*“I heard of Miss Rosenberg. They said she’s very talented. I hope we can meet again someday as juniors."*

Who knew they would face each other like this again? Annette's tightly closed lips trembled convulsively. Talented?

She doubted if she even had it in the first place, but even if she did, what was the use now? Even sitting at the piano was hard enough.

Annette, who had been breathing heavily for a while, stood up with a struggle. Her movements stopped as soon as she flushed and headed for the sink.

Heiner stood like a ghost by the bathroom door. For some reason he looked surprised. She had never seen him like that before in the past three years.

Annette didn't want to think about it too deeply because her head hurt. She washed her hands at the sink, rinsed out her mouth, and walked toward the door.

Even then, Heiner was glued to the spot. Arriving in front of him, Annette closed her eyes tiredly.

She was exhausted.

“...I want to go home."

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In her experience, everything happened overnight.

Annette was playing the piano in the practice room of her parents' house when armed revolutionary forces invaded the Rosenberg’s residence. A competition was just around the corner.

There was no time to worry about anything else. With the sound of the piano filling the room, she could not hear the noise outside. Even until her father with a tense face burst open the door and entered.

“Annette, Annette! We have to run away!”

"Father? Why all of a sudden…”

“There's no time to explain, just get up for now! Go to the back of the mansion!"

Bang!

Dietrich's pupils shook with the sound of the gunshot. Blood splattered on the walls and floor. Annette screamed and covered her mouth.

Her staggered body immediately fell to the hallway outside the door with a thud. From Annette's vision, all she could see was her father's sprawled legs.

The footsteps of the revolutionary army rang through the mansion. They entered the hallway and stood in front of Dietrich's body and said something.

"Don't kill him immediately.......!"

“..... misfiring ......!”

“Until they come…”

One of them met Annette's eyes. The Revolutionary Guard immediately pointed a muzzle at her and, perhaps deciding she was not much of a threat, he withdrew it.

“The daughter of the Marquis."

A sneer came to his mouth.

“Leisurely playing the piano, are we? So noble.”

It was three years ago.

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# Chapter 6

Annette entered a room at the far end of the first floor of the government residence. She turned on several incandescent lights hanging on the walls, and the inside was revealed.

In the middle of the room was something large covered with a white cloth. She grabbed the piece of cloth and hesitated for a moment before slowly removing it.

A smooth black surface appeared. It was the piano she had used since her maiden days. She had moved from the Rosenberg residence to the Valdemar residence when she got married, and then to the official residence when Heiner became commander-in-chief.

Annette sat down on a chair and opened the lid of the piano. The keys were clean and not faded. However, it had not been tuned for a while, so it was difficult to expect a beautiful sound.

She stared at the keys. She could still be sure what sound she would hear if she pressed the right spot on the keyboard.

*‘It's all useless now, though.’*

After her father's death, of course, she could not enter competitions. Everything Annette had accomplished in her career crumbled. She was labeled as something achieved by using her power, connections, and money.

It was then that she could no longer play the piano. She couldn't even press the keys, let alone play.

At first she made many efforts to try to play it again, but they all ended in failure. After that, she gave up on the piano altogether.

She forgot about it and lived with it. She tried hard to do so.

*'I thought it would get better with time........'*

The keys reflected in the not-so-illuminated incandescent lights turned the surface pale. When she touched them, her fingertips froze and seemed to shatter into pieces.

Dawn was breaking. Annette, who had been sitting in front of the piano for some time, suddenly realized.

There was really nothing left for her.

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“The main armament was a .30-caliber bolt-action rifle with a five-round magazine. It certainly appears to have a higher degree of closure and less chance of being inoperable."

“This is about as close as you can get without using a semi-automatic gun machine. And here, the heat of the gun falls off the barrel and to the maximum extent possible."

“I see."

Nodding, Heiner wrapped the gun model in a cloth again. In the case of the Chief Sniper, he was the one to review and approve the model himself.

“It's past work time. Let's call it a day. Good work."

"Yes!"

Brigadier General Fritz and Major Eugen raised their hands in salute, and left the commander in chief’s offices.

Heiner examined the documents concerning the purchase of fighter planes, stamped his seal, then looked at France’s diplomatic situation report.

“Breakdown of Weapons Purchases........”

Heiner's brow narrowed as he checked France’s munitions form.

Rutland had long ago become independent from France, but there were still many French people living on the land. They were the pro-France who wanted to merge with France again. The motive for war was sufficient.

Rutland's internal politics were in disarray due to frequent military coups. If this civil war spread to a diplomatic issue between the major powers, a major war could break out.

Heiner's age and sense kept the defense treaty amicable, but this was not a definitive answer.

It was a time when most countries were tending toward nationalism. A war that would take place at a time like this would surely bring about a frenzy of volunteer enlistments. It would involve countless sacrifices.

Heiner knew well what after-effects war would leave in its wake. He did, and so did his peers. Anyone would surely suffer any kind of shock, in whatever form....

“......I want to go home."

The thoughts suddenly stopped in one place.

Heiner looked somewhat irritated and let go of the hand that had been touching his forehead. Why was he thinking of that woman here? He rubbed his eyes once, then looked down at the papers again.

But the print only broke down into disjointed spellings beyond the realm of comprehension.

He struggled to expel the messy thoughts, but it didn't work the way he wanted it to. It was always this way when he thought about her. Heiner looked away from the papers, displeased.

A series of scenes replayed in his head.

The way she looked at him as if asking for help, her thin, trembling body in front of the piano, the strangled face as she ran out of the banquet hall, the back of her as she sat and vomited…

The behavior Annette displayed at that moment seemed like the manifestation of a trauma.

"Ha."

Heiner couldn't help but laugh.

Trauma? How could a woman who hadn’t shown a single tear in the last three years be traumatized?

*“When I was a little girl, I used to cry a lot for different reasons.”*

When the woman cried about her lack of improvement in piano skills, Heiner was in training camp undergoing rigorous training under verbal abuse and beatings.

While the woman was partying elegantly in her fancy, peaceful mansion, he was killing and torturing people under the guise of an operation.

How could such a woman be traumatized?

The papers in Heiner's hands were slightly crumpled. He gritted his teeth and tossed the papers carelessly. The papers fell with a fluttering sound.

*“I'm divorcing you, Heiner.”*

The woman was so upset about one piano, yet she was talking about divorce with a nonchalant look on her face. It didn’t make any sense.

*“Do you still have any use left for me?"*

Use? It was useless. But the time for discussing usefulness in the first place was already long past.

Heiner also knew that his choice was irrational. But he could not just let her go peacefully.

What had he endured himself to get that woman?

*“It must have been hard to pretend to love the enemy’s daughter."*

“Damn it….”

Heiner rubbed his face with one hand.

The clumsy unrequited love of his childhood, when he was young and lonely, was just a past he wanted to erase.

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The butler passed the word to Heiner when he returned to the official residence. His expression hardened as he listened to the report. Heiner went to Annette's bedroom without changing his clothes.

After the opening banquet at the Belen Hotel, Annette hid herself in her room. She had never been out much, but this time was severe.

According to the butler, she even refused to eat. It wasn't something Heiner cared much about, but he was curious if it was a sign of rebellion.

His hand stopped for a moment as he was about to open the bedroom door. Heiner tightened his grip and then rapped twice on the door.

Heiner's hand was still clenched, for the noble lady would have despised his ungentlemanly manner.

*'It's funny, I’ve already set aside all of that woman’s planting.’*

Heiner opened the door with a self-deprecating smile. Inside, Annette was sitting and embroidering. She still looked uncomfortably isolated.

Annette did not look at him. Her eyes were downcast and her mouth was closed, and her profile was flawless as if measured with a ruler.

Unlike the perfect still-life landscape, there were medicine bags lying on one of the small tables. Displeasure flashed in Heiner’s eyes.

“Have you been embroidering in your room all day? And skip meals?"

He said, hiding his irritation under a cold tone.

"Are you protesting?”

“No, I'm not, don't worry about it.”

“How many pills are there?"

Heiner mumbled as he strode up to a small table. All the translucent papers lying on top were empty. He opened the drawer under the side table.

Annette, who was threading colored thread through the fabric, looked up quickly.

“Why do you open it without permission?”

“Did you hide classified documents in here?"

“No, that's not what I meant."

"Then is there a problem with me looking?"

Annette said nothing more. Heiner closed the first drawer and opened the second. Inside were several medicine bags and one palm-sized box.

The box he opened was about half full of white pills. He took some in his palm to check. On top of the small, round pills were inscribed letters and numbers.

"What is this?"

Heiner asked, turning around. Blinking several times, Annette answered with hesitation.

"...It's just medicine."

"Don't you get your meds from Arnold on a regular basis?"

Annette took medicine more often than she ate. She seemed to overdose on her medications so he made sure that Arnold prescribed them in individual bags, not in a medicine box.

“I haven't been taking them much lately…since I didn’t take them, it piled up.”

Pile up? If it was piling up because she didn’t take them, they should be in the individual bags, not piling them together like this.

Heiner closed the lid of the medicine box with a hard look on his face.

“I’ll take this for now.”

“Why do you do that?”

"I don't see the need to keep the old medicine. Ask your doctor for a new prescription.”

It was a demanding voice that

would not tolerate any excuses or counter-arguments. Annette moved her lips as if to say something, then dropped her head helplessly.

Suddenly, Heiner's gaze landed on the embroidery cloth on the table. The embroidery on the white cloth was a wiggly mess even to his unfamiliar eyes.

Heiner knew that her embroidery skills were quite good. Annette had once given him several handmade embroidered handkerchiefs.

*“Heiner, here's a present for you.”*

The embroidery on the handkerchief she gave him with a shy smile was very delicate and beautiful. Heiner thought that if the training school had had this subject, he would have flunked it without a doubt.

He laughed when he thought about the noble ladies who learned all this elegant and graceful stuff, overflowing with leisure.

He did not use the disgusting handkerchief. But that didn't mean he could throw it away. It was nothing more than a piece of cloth, but he remembered the shape and elaborateness of it vividly.

It was hard to believe that the embroidery she had done then and the embroidery she had now were done by the same person. It was as if a child had made it…

Heiner, who was looking annoyingly at the embroidered fabric in front of him, pressed his pager. A servant entered immediately. Heiner ordered without turning around.

“Bring some food. Something light."

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# Chapter 7

“I don't want to eat."

Annette protested, but Heiner just removed the empty papers on the side table without reply.

"I don't want to eat."

"Are you trying to starve yourself to death?"

“It doesn't matter if I'm going to starve to death or not."

"If you are going to die, do it in a more graceful way."

Heiner turned away from the clean side table and looked at her coldly.

“You’re the princess of Rosenberg."

At that moment, Annette's expression hardened. She stared at him, her mouth closed and her eyes downcast. In that hurt look, Heiner felt dirty all the while he was being sarcastic.

Princess of Rosenberg. That was what people used to call Annette.

Annette was the envy of every man in the capital.

The only daughter of the noble Rosenberg, she had a beautiful appearance, a kind heart, and was even an aspiring pianist.

No one could treat her disrespectfully. Annette was a person who made you acutely aware of her nobility just by looking at her.

To call her then-name now was nothing but a mockery.

Around the time they were surrounded by uncomfortable silence, a servant came in with some food. Heiner had it placed on the table and then said.

“Eat."

“Please leave. I'll eat it on my own."

“So you're going to leave it untouched?"

"If I do, what are you going to do about it?"

Annette said in a sharp tone. Heiner's eyes widened slightly.

“This isn’t like you…”

“What about me? How much do you know about me?"

Annette scoffed when she said that. This was not like her either.

Since Heiner had known her, Annette had never spoken in such a sarcastic way. Even when she was angry, she was honest.

Annette was a woman who acted nonchalant and pliable even when she knew of his deliberate approach and demanded a divorce.

But now she seemed quite sensitive.

“Perhaps I took your pills?”

What in the world was about the drug?

Heiner said quietly , tightening the nerves that had risen up.

“At least I know more about you than you know about me."

"Of course you do. Because only by knowing about me would you have been able to perform to win my heart."

The words made Heiner want to question her.

“But, Heiner."

*‘Am I still in your heart?’*

“Nothing is the same anymore as it was then."

*‘You still love me.’*

“Everything has changed."

Why did he want to ask her that?

"I am no longer the 'Princess of Rosenberg,' I am no longer your lover, and I am no longer that young age who was oblivious to the world. The me you knew and the me you know now are totally different people."

"------ Well, I don't know."

“Then you should know now."

Heiner looked down at her with an expressionless face. He really didn’t know.

Surely Annette was right. She was nothing anymore. Her great birth was now a piece of paper, all the love she had received in abundance was gone, and she could no longer play the piano she loved so much.

She was nothing. But why.....

Heiner quietly moved his lips.

But why?

Why was she still so beautiful and noble,

Why must he still feel such inferiority and misery when he stood in her presence?

He really didn’t understand.

“Please ...... eat. Before I force feed you."

Heiner sat down in the chair across from her and spoke in a slightly faint voice. Her features looked even more delicate from a close distance.

“Quickly."

At Heiner's urging, Annette reluctantly began to drink her soup. She ate so quietly and slowly that there was not even a clattering sound from the dishes.

Heiner observed her with a slightly flustered look on his face. It was possible because Annette did not pay any attention to him.

A white, small face.

Blond hair and blue eyes, long eyelashes that cast shadows under her eyes, and a flawless nose, the symbol of Padania’s beauty.

She was exactly as she was younger. Only much more mature.

Heiner remembered the moment he first saw Annette.

A doll-like girl.

The little white hands that moved back and forth over the keyboard.

An appearance so virtuous that he wondered if it was really true that they were born under the same sky and breathed the same air.

How low and lowly he felt then.

Heiner struggled to dispel the thought. He looked at the embroidery on the table with heavy, sunken eyes. Threads were tangled here and there.

Annette, who was slowly stirring the soup, suddenly opened her mouth.

“I'd like to go somewhere alone for a while. A little far away."

“Alone? Where?”

“I haven't decided yet, but anywhere......”

“Do you think I would listen to that? Where do you think you're going?"

"Think about it."

The spoon that had been circling in the soup stopped.

“When did I start asking your permission for every single thing?”

Her downcast eyes did not look at him. She murmured quietly.

“I know what you're thinking.”

With those last words, Annette said no more. Heiner also stopped talking. Silence once again descended.

Scooping her food, she finally emptied a third of it and put down her spoon.

"I can't eat it."

"I'm sure people who starve for a few days eat better than that."

"How could I miss it when you’re monitoring me so closely? It's going to make me sick to my stomach."

With a low sigh, Heiner stood up. As he walked toward the door, his steps stopped for a moment. He turned his head slightly and spoke as if warning.

“…If I hear you refuse to eat one more time, I will consider it a psychotic eating disorder and put you in the hospital."

No reply came back. Annette looked down at her soup with a completely emaciated face.

Heiner clenched his fists and opened the door roughly.

\*\*\*\*

Long legs crossed the room. Entering his room, Heiner placed the medicine chest on the desk and then turned the dial on the telephone.

It wasn’t long before the other end picked up.

[Yes, this is Arnold Berkell.]

“It's Heiner Valdemar. I'm sorry to call you in the evening, Dr. Arnold, can I talk to you for a moment?"

[Oh, Sir, it's all right. How can I help you?]

“I have one drug I would like to know the name of.

It was the medicine you prescribed for my wife. It's small, circular, white, and in the middle has the letters S, Z, and 5 on it."

[S, Z---oh, that's Sinazel.]

"Is it a stabilizer?"

[Yes. I usually prescribe sleeping medication. And that’s for the madam.]

“…okay, thank you. Then see you next time.”

[Yes, Your Excellency, have a peaceful evening].

Putting down the phone, Heiner rested his hands on the desk and caught his breath for a moment. A deathly silence flowed in the dark room.

In his dark vision, the medicine chest was so white that it hurt his eyes. Its surface seemed to overlap with Annette's pale face.

Heiner snatched the medicine chest from the desk and tossed it into the trash can.

*'Not even funny.’*

Gloomily, he turned and walked toward the closet. He took off his gray coat, hung it on a hanger, and unbuttoned his shirt.

Collecting pills was a behavioral sign of people contemplating death. However, Heiner had never thought that Annette was seriously considering suicide. It would just be a habit for psychological comfort.

Annette was a timid and weak woman. She didn’t have the courage to die.

That was why she trembled so much in the public opinion of the newspapers or in front of the piano.

She knew nothing about drilling, beatings, torture, hunger, or the sensation of murder ------. She felt terrible misery at such a mere thing.

Heiner wasted the whole time unbuttoning. But he didn't care. He looked at the full-length mirror in front of him with an insensitive look on his face.

A gloomy man with dark gray eyes was trapped in the glass.

*"The more I look, the more I think about it, but I think you have really beautiful eyes."*

*"My eyes? It’s the first time I’ve heard that.”*

*"Really? No way, you are so beautiful. I like your eyes the most out of all your features.”*

*"Are the other places not as good?"*

*“It can't be! I have high eyes. I never take a man who isn't handsome as my lover."*

*"Oh my, I would have liked you even if you weren't pretty."*

*"Does that mean I'm pretty anyway?"*

*"You are the most beautiful person in the world."*

Eyes filled with love softened. He locked eyes with Annette’s blue eyes. A spring breeze blew from the distance. Dazzling golden hair fluttered. A clear laugh followed, spreading like petals.

Where the illusion had passed, only a desolate gray zone remained. Heiner closed his eyes for a long time and opened them. It was reality again.

*‘I’m glad you’re unhappy.’*

Heiner murmured to himself.

*‘You should despair as much as I despaired.*

*You must lose as much as I have lost. Because you were there in my unhappy moments, I must be there in yours. As much as my life has been so long and dark, so should yours.’*

Heiner took off his shirt. Only the sound of clothes rustling in the silence filled the room. The mirror, half buried in darkness, reflected his wide shoulders and chest, tightly knit with muscles.

The upper part of his chest was inscribed with official letters in a messy handwriting. Tangled with red marks were the remains of a fallen shape.

*“I’M A RENT BOY OF PADANIA."*

*\*\*\**

# Chapter 8

After lunchtime, a servant informed Annette of a visitor’s request for a meeting.

"Madam, a gentleman requests to see you. He said he is a former acquaintance of yours..........."

"An acquaintance of mine?”

Was there an acquaintance who might visit her? Just as Annette was getting puzzled, she heard a familiar name.

"Yes, he said you would know if his name is Ans.”

Annette’s eyes slowly widened as she chewed on the name. She mumbled absentmindedly.

"Ans....?"

Ansgar Stetter.

The second son of the now fallen Count Stetter, and a friend of Annette's.

Ansgar had once courted Annette, but it never materialized. When Annette married, he went to study abroad and had not been heard from since the Revolution.

"Um, madam? What should I do?”

"...... Oh, um, ......."

Annette hesitated, unable to answer right away. It wasn't because she didn't trust Ansgar or that she was uncomfortable. Just ......

It was miserable to see him like this.

Stetter was a close friend of Rosenberg's. This was also why Annette and Ansgar grew up close to each other from an early age.

With the fall of Rosenberg, Stetter collapsed as a matter of course. Ansgar was abroad at the time of the revolution and fortunately avoided disaster.

However, Annette and Ansgar’s position was different. It was not merely a difference of distance. She was in a different position not only with Ansgar but also with other fallen nobles.

After the revolution, the revolutionary forces used public opinion to justify the bloodshed and consolidate the unrest. Annette was used for this propaganda.

She was quite well suited for this task. She was royal blood, a symbol of "nobility," and the daughter of a military commander.

The press bit Annette up to the neck to spread anti-noble sentiment. Today, the image of Annette in Padania was nothing short of a rare villain.

Annette, distressed, eventually gave her permission.

"...... in the reception room...Please let him in the reception room first. Ask him to wait a moment…."

“Yes, Madam.”

The servant bowed her head and left. Annette sat down at the dressing table and looked in the mirror. The woman she saw looked melancholy and seemed to collapse at any moment.

She applied simple makeup. Red lipstick to her lips and blush on her cheeks, she looked lively in an instant.

When she went down to the reception room, a servant was waiting for her.

“The guest…?”

“He is inside. Tea has been served.”

Annette took a slow, deep breath and opened the parlor door. Her hand was shaking slightly as she turned the handle.

There was a faint aroma of tea in the parlor. A man in a brown suit was sitting neatly on the sofa. As Annette entered, Ansgar took off his hat and rose from his seat.

“ Annette."

“---It's been a long time."

Annette responded plainly with a light smile. On the contrary, a happy and sad look was evident on Ansgar’s face.

Ansgar strode over and embraced her with a big hug. Annette almost cried and placed her hands on his back.

They parted after a brief embrace. Ansgar did not take his eyes off Annette's face while he sat down again.

"You look very thin."

"Do I look that way?"

"Still beautiful as ever."

Annette laughed without reply. She quickly dismissed the thought, wondering if Ansgar still had feelings for her. Whether he did or not no longer mattered.

“I sent you a letter first, but you didn't reply. So I had no choice but to visit you in person."

“I think it’s because I told the servants to filter out any letters with unknown addresses. By any chance, you didn't waste your time visiting the old mansion, did you?"

Annette said it like a joke, but Ansgar’s expression was not cheerful.

“..... that can't be. Of course I looked for the official residence first, since you’re the wife of the Commander-in-Chief."

“How have you been? Are you by any chance completely back in Padania?"

"Not really, I just came here to sort things out. I had to come and see you once….and now I'm working as an ambassador in France."

“France?"

“I went to France right after I graduated. I know a lot of people there."

Most of the Padania aristocrats who left in the aftermath of the revolution defected to France. Perhaps his acquaintances were them.

"An ambassador. You succeeded, Ans."

“Success is something that might have been a better life had it been lived as it was.”

Annette felt a strange discomfort in his words.

The original life. Life before the revolution. Or a life that would never happen. Was that life really better? Perhaps it was. Perhaps....

“How have you been, Annette?”

Annette suddenly came to her senses. Ansgar was looking at her with a sympathetic expression.

She answered roughly.

“...... umm, well, I just stay here.”

Ansgar’s odd look seemed to suggest that he knew everything about Annette’s life. Certainly, he couldn't have known. Especially if he was working as an ambassador.

After taking a sip of tea, Ansgar quietly opened his mouth.

“I got married."

"Oh, really? Congratulations. What kind of woman .........."

"I got divorced last year."

Seeing Annette in a slightly puzzled expression, Ansgar chuckled.

"We got married out of necessity anyway. I needed citizenship."

“Ah…”

“What about you?"

“Me?”

“Are you going to stay in this marriage?"

Annette was rendered speechless by his direct question. Not simply because she couldn’t choose what to say. There were servants waiting in the parlor. All the servants in the official residence were Heiner's people.

In other words, all conversations that took place here were reported to Heiner.

“First of all..."

“Perhaps you want to continue because you want to? You are not unaware of what your husband did to us, are you?"

“I'm not that stupid, Ans.”

“It was never my intention to suggest that…”

“I know. And I want a divorce too. Just not right now.”

Annette hesitated for a moment.

What should she say? That her husband wouldn’t agree to divorce? That she couldn’t guarantee the odds of winning the divorce trial? And if she persisted, she would be locked up in a mental institution?

Whatever she chose to do, the words were going to be long. Annette looked at the servant standing behind her like a shadow and gave a vague answer.

''Well…divorce right now is kind of difficult.”

“You wouldn't have had anywhere to go if you divorced, right?”

"Are you here to make me aware of my circumstances?"

"Don't take it so sensitively, Annette. I am sincerely concerned about you. I just don't want to change the subject for no reason."

Ansgar let out a short breath as he raised his hands and showed them as if he didn’t mean evil. He clenched both fists and then lowered them again. Soon a decisive confession flowed.

“Come with me to France."

“...What?"

“I still have you in mind. I’ve always been thinking that as soon as I settled down, I would bring you with me. If you marry me, you will be granted French citizenship.”

"...."

“I know how the atmosphere in Padania is. You have been used by the republican forces. Your husband agreed with them, and he will not help you. Currently, I am your only option.”

"...."

"Take my hand, Annette."

Ansgar raised his lips gently to

reassure her.

“You'll be happier."

“….”

“I will make you happy for the rest of your life.”

Annette stared at his confident face. Ansgar waited patiently for her response.

After thinking about something, Annette replied weakly.

"My husband ..... he won't allow it."

"If you get divorced and become strangers, permission doesn't mean anything."

“He's the Commander-in-Chief. He won't tolerate acts against his will.”

"Annette, could you possibly ......"

A slight astonishment crossed Ansgar’s face. Annette vaguely guessed what he was about to say. Perhaps her husband had locked her up here, mentally and physically abusing her.......... Well, that was what it seemed like.

She couldn't say Ansgar was completely wrong. But Annette did not want to be pitied. Not even in this situation.

"Whatever you think, Ansgar, I'm fine. You don't need to worry too much."

"Aside from the divorce issue….the overall situation is too much for you."

"Three years."

Annette cut him off quietly.

"Three years I've endured. And I see no reason why I can't endure more."

Ansgar’s expression became a little strange. In no time at all, the atmosphere had sunk. Annette closed her eyes for a long time and then smiled quietly.

“I want to get my thoughts straight first. It was too sudden. Yes?"

“Right. I talked too much from the main point, didn't I? Sorry. I---I've been waiting for today for a long time, but from your point of view, it must have been sudden.”

Ansgar scratched his cheek in embarrassment. His neck and earlobes were slightly red. Annette shook her head.

“No, I should have gotten your letter. Um, which way should I talk to you? I'll get back to you later."

"Ah, yes! I have to give you my contact information. Um, here's my business card --- oh, and I'll put my address on the back as well. Wait a minute, I'm staying at a hotel temporarily right now. You can ask for my name at the front desk, or you can come straight to my room."

Ansgar fumblingly took a pen from inside his coat and wrote the address on the back of his business card. His appearance reminded Annette of the boy she had played with in the past.

He had been somewhat unfamiliar to her earlier.

“Well, make sure you call me again. Anytime you need help, just let me know."

"Sure. Thanks."

After reminding her several times, Ansgar regretfully stood up. Annette saw him off to the gate. She did so despite Ansgar’s attempts to stop her.

He was an old friend. He was a friend who had come to visit her again, and she was very happy, no matter what the circumstances.

Back inside the building, Annette closed the front door and leaned against it for a moment. The desolation that had enveloped the area after Ansgar's departure was especially heavy.

Annette stared at his business card.

[Ansgar Stetter.]

The Stetter family. France’s ambassador, acquaintances, exiled nobles, marriages. Republican forces........... Annette slowly murmured in a low voice.

“..... restoration of the monarchy?”

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# Chapter 9

Cases of monarchies being restored after revolutions were not uncommon.

In some cases, the former prevailed between royalists and republicans; in others, the military removed the opposition and enthroned the king.

Or there were cases in which the people, repelled by the incompetence of the revolutionary forces and the politics of authority, once again came to desire a monarchy.

At present, however, the forces of monarchical restoration were largely trampled on within Padania. It was thanks to the abilities of the Commander-in-Chief of Padania - Heiner Valdemar. Sometimes one outstanding person could lead an era.

Heiner solved the problems of post-revolutionary turmoil and conflict, the infighting among the revolutionary forces, and the solidification of the dictatorship in a fairly idealistic way.

Currently, Heiner was the idol of Padania. In this situation, the royalist faction was unable to exert its power due to national sentiment and could only move abroad.

‘If they are in a state of exile in France, they are more likely to receive help from outside forces to restore the monarchy.’

Annette did not know much about international affairs, so she could not make any further analogies. But this much was clear.

‘My father is a nephew of King Piete. I have royal blood in my veins. ......’

If necessary, it would be used as a means of restoring the monarchy.

Her mind sank coldly. There must already be several royals in exile, so why would they reach out to her? She didn't know the details.

Whatever it was, she could not accept Ansgar’s words with perfect good intentions. In the past, she would have rejoiced at a rescuing hand offered by an old friend, but not now.

Annette walked away from the door. The business card crumpled slightly in her hand. Her blue eyes took on a slightly cold light.

“Take my hand, Annette."

"Come on."

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Annette checked the sponsorship list and the monetary comparison chart. Her slender fingers slowly ran down the numbers.

Managing donations and sponsorships in the name of civic organizations was one of the tasks she had taken on after she married.

Since the Revolution, Annette's name had been officially excluded from this task. However, she still made the final inspection.

No one else was willing to take on this daunting task. Annette could truly boast that she had handled this job cleanly and transparently. No one had ever admitted it, but it was so.

[We must do our duty. All of you listening to this radio right now are enlightened and are not prevented from acquiring information. Your government does not censor information to you...........]

Tak.

After examining the documents, Annette turned off the radio. Her head throbbed again. She opened the window to ventilate the room, but the headache did not go away.

She put on a shawl and went out into the garden. Lately she had been following her doctor's recommendation to walk at least an hour a day. Not for health reasons, but because she did not want to be called lazy.

After wandering around the garden, Annette soon became exhausted. Her health really wasn't what it used to be these days. She didn’t remember when........ she stopped after trying to remember.

She sat down on a bench in front of the fountain. The afternoon sun was making her body feel sluggish. The stream of water pouring from the fountain glistened in the light. She smiled calmly in its peace.

Ah .

It’s okay to die like this.

She suddenly had that thought. Annette always wanted to die at the moment she wanted, in the place of her choice.

Right here, right now. But…

Wasn’t it strange indeed? That her breathing kept getting longer without her permission.

Annette closed her eyes and breathed in and out very lightly and slowly. Her breathing felt crippling and foreign.

Suddenly, she heard a talking voice behind her. The voice sounded somewhat familiar. Annette opened her eyes and turned around.

A man and a woman were walking down the corridor connecting the main building of the official residence and the secretary's office. The tall, slender man was Major Eugen, and the woman standing next to him was...........

‘Annelie Engels?’

The woman looked at Annette the moment she noticed her. Annette remained still without averting her gaze. Major Eugen, who was talking about something next to her, followed Annelie’s gaze.

As soon as he saw Annette, Major Eugen raised his eyebrows. Annelie looked a little surprised. After a short conversation with the Major, Annelie approached Annette.

Annelie's stride was long and confident. She soon reached Annette and greeted her in a rather gentle tone.

“Hello, madam.”

“..... hello.”

“This is our first meeting.”

"Yes.”

It was the first time Annette had met Annelie in person. Although she knew her face through the newspaper.

But Annette didn't know why Annelie was talking to her. They had a verbal relationship that was unapproachable.

It was not just a matter of a fallen aristocrat and a revolutionary army. Annelie had openly wanted Heiner. Annette was Heiner's wife.

However much her marriage was not normal, it was awkward to converse with her husband’s admirer.

"May I have a moment of your time? Can we talk?”

“....Sure.”

With Annette's permission, Annelie motioned for Major Eugen to leave. Major Eugen disappeared with a look of total displeasure on his face.

Annette stared at his back.

'So Major Eugen and Annelie Engels knew each other.'

Perhaps it was natural. Major Eugen was a close associate of Heiner's. He may have been a colleague of Annelie's during the Revolutionary Army days.

Whatever the case, it was clear that Annelie was not too fond of him. Annelie asked with a smile.

“I was hoping to meet you once, but we ended up meeting this way. Shall we sit here and talk? Or we can take a walk."

“Please have a seat."

“Thank you. The garden was very beautiful. You must have taken very good care of it.”

“It’s not something I manage.”

“Oh, I see. I heard madam used to manage it........"

“It was a long time ago."

Annette replied blandly. She didn't feel the need to have a friendly discussion with Annelie.

“......How is life at the residence? I heard you're not going out much."

“I just spend my time quietly.”

“You seem like a quiet person. Actually, I only saw you in the newspaper, so I didn't expect you to be like this."

"I see."

Annelie smiled awkwardly, as if she had nothing else to say. An awkward silence fell. Annette spoke with an expression unchanged on her face.

“Miss Annelie, I'm sure you didn't really come here to find out if I'm well or not. If you have something to say, feel free to say it."

Annelie's lips clamped together and parted as if perplexed by Annette’s directness. She steamed for a while and eventually opened her mouth as if she had made up her mind.

"Madam, I heard you demanded a divorce."

"Was it from my husband?"

“No, Major Eugen told me. His Excellency did not agree to divorce...... I also heard the reason. I wasn't convinced."

“And?”

“I actually don't like the madam.”

"..."

“It's close to hate. I’m sure madam would feel the same.I shudder when I think of what the Marquis Dietrich did and what you enjoyed under his power. I also respect His Excellency as a human being. I do not think you are a good fit next to him.”

Her string of words came out as if she had been waiting for this moment. Annette stared at the high fountain stream. Annelie sighed lightly next to her.

''Well...that’s all from me. For the sake of keeping the Republicans and liberals in check, His Excellency’s marriage to me must take place. I am not sure you are aware, madam, but the international situation these days is extraordinary. First of all, Padania needs to be organized internally. And if war should break out, for the sake of easy conscription."

“As for the divorce issue."

Annette’s voice came out a little faint. She briefly cleared her throat and continued speaking again.

“As for the matter, you might as well go and talk to my husband. It is no longer in my purview."

“Madam, I am warning you.”

Only then did Annette turn to face Annelie. Annelie still looked as gentle as ever.

"His Excellency is willing to accept damage for the sake of this marriage, but what if the damage is greater than the extent of the sacrifice? Of course, we cannot attack His Excellency. Nor do we intend to."

"....."

“Remember, madam has many enemies."

Annette understood the meaning of Annelie's words without difficulty.

The easiest way to get a court-ordered divorce was to make one party guilty. This was also what the revolutionary army, the Congress, and the press had done very well so far.

To drag Annette down so far that Heiner could not bear the damage.

"Miss Annelie, I know that you and your colleagues have used me in public opinion."

Annette said, looking straight into Annelie's red eyes.

“At first I was frustrated when I first heard the accusations. I wanted to explain myself. I also wanted revenge."

“It’s not like it was not true….”

“Don't psychotics firmly believe they aren't crazy? I think maybe I am too. I think I alone am crazy and believe in my own innocence, when in fact I am wrong about everything? If everyone in the world says the same thing except me, then of course I am wrong."

"...."

"Well, at the point where I started to feel that way.............. all my will to explain and all my desire for revenge is gone. I do not hate you people. I know why you did it. I respect that cause. I mean it."

Annelie's pupils shook as if she had been told something unexpected. Annette looked at the fountain again. The towering stream of water broke white.

“As I said, Miss Annelie, the divorce issue is no longer in my authority. But I understand what you are saying. Don't worry too much."

A stream of water sprung up. It rose high then fell,

bathed in light.

Annette slowly rose from the bench. Standing with her back to the light and looking down at Annelie, she declared.

"...this marriage will end soon.”

Annette smiled quietly in the shadows.

\*\*\*\*

# Chapter 10

Annette was having a late dinner when Heiner came into the dining room. It seemed that he had taken a bath right after work since his hair was wet.

Spotting Annette, Heiner gently raised his eyebrows. He spoke in a surprised voice.

“At this hour?”

Annette responded with a light nod of her head. She had no appetite all day, and she got hungry late.

Heiner sat down and a servant brought out some soup and a glass. Annette silently took the food into her mouth.

For a while, only the clattering of dishes filled the space.

"Annette, I heard Ansgar Stetter had visited the official residence.”

Snap.

Annette's hand holding the fork stopped for a moment. She raised her head and looked at Heiner, who had an unusual expression.

The same dish as Annette's was served before Heiner. It was a Muscovy duck stuffed with a mixed garnish of mushrooms, eggs, and bread.

Heiner dismissed all the servants in the dining room with a hand gesture.

“What did you talk about?"

"Didn’t you hear everything anyway?”

"Still, it's not the same as hearing it from the mouths of the parties involved, is it?"

"...he asked me to go to France with him after the divorce. That's all."

“Are you going to marry him?”

A dry smile hung on Heiner's lips.

"Was that why you wanted to divorce, so that you could marry him?"

"It was the first time I’ve seen Ansgar in four years.”

“I don't know. You might have kept in touch with him behind my back. Like secretly digging into my past.”

Even if they had exchanged contact, why would that be a matter that should be censored by Heiner? The question rose to the top of her throat, but Annette did not speak up.

“You won't be holding his hand.”

A decisive voice deafened her.

“You will never leave here.”

A dark, tenacious stare landed on Annette's face. Annette stared at the asparagus she had just cut and thought.

If Ansgar was right about her being the restoration force of the monarchy, of course Heiner would not want to give her to them. This was not an emotional issue.

Perhaps this was also why he would not allow divorce. It was easier to restrain her if they were legally bound.............

‘But then why do Heiner's aides disagree with him about divorce?'

She couldn't come up with a suitable answer. She was by no means a clever person, Annette thought. In fact, there was nothing she could do about it, even after she tried to reason it out.

She stopped thinking any further. The strength drained from her hands. The fork made a clanking sound as it hit the dish. Heiner’s gaze moved to her thin hands.

\*\*\*

Early in the morning, Annette changed into her going-out clothes. In her bag was some money, headache medicine, and a handkerchief.

Finally, she finished her preparations by draping the black veil from her hat over her face.

“I'm going to church. I don't need an attendant."

“But madam.”

“I'm going to pray. I don't want to be disturbed.”

“If you wish to go out alone, you must first get permission from the commander.”

There was no way Heiner would allow it. She even questioned why she had to ask his permission in the first place, but the attendant was stubborn. In the end, she gave up and let the attendant accompany her.

Annette drove to a nearby church. Once a religious person, she had long since stopped attending church. She was in contrast to Heiner, who, despite being a religious person, steadily attended services.

The church was empty at noon on a weekday. Annette put some money in the offering box and sat in the front row. A cross hung over the platform.

Annette prayed as she gazed up at the crucifix in a daze. She did not close her eyes. She did not put her hands together. She just spoke from her heart.

‘Forgive me for my sins. Forgive me for all the sins I have committed. Please forgive me for my remaining sins. Please save me.’

But there was no response back. For all the people who claimed to have received God's answers, Annette had never experienced one.

She clenched her fists in despair.

‘Why won't you forgive me? Why did you throw me out into the muck? Why do you make me suffer so much? Why me….?’

Annette, who had been expressing her resentment, suddenly stopped praying. It was pointless, she thought.

She picked up her bag and stood up. She handed a letter to the attendant waiting at the entrance.

“If you go to the back gate, you will find an old man. Please give this to him. He is physically handicapped, so he may be a little late."

“May I examine the contents?"

“Do whatever you want."

The attendant, who opened and read the letter, decided that there was nothing unusual about it, and put it back in the envelope.

Annette hurried out of the church as soon as the attendant left. On the road, she grabbed a hansom cab and took a ride.

(\*Hansom cab, a rented carriage with two wheels and two seats)

"Go to the train station."

As the carriage departed Annette looked behind her. She did not see anyone following her.

There had never been an old man waiting at the back gate. She just needed an excuse to get the attendant away. The carriage increased the speed. Annette leaned back and closed her eyes. Her heart beat wildly, rattling its cage.

A few days ago, she saw the ocean in Glenford in a dream. She wanted to see it in person.

\*\*\*

There was quite a bit of time left before the train departed. The soon departing train had already sold out seats. Annette sat in the waiting room and watched the people passing by.

Everyone was moving busily, wondering what they were doing to keep themselves so busy. Annette tilted her head as she stared at the boy grunting with a bag of luggage the size of his body.

Where were they going and what they were doing?

What goals were they working so diligently to achieve?

It was truly a renewed feeling, even though it was natural that all people had their own lives. It was also amazing that everyone was finding their way without getting lost.

The world turned rapidly, except for Annette. She was alone, standing still against the passage of time.

After quite some time another train arrived at the station. Annette stood in front of the train with a ticket in hand, feeling lost.

'D200, G-12.........'

It was the first time for her to find her seat by herself because it had been a very long time since she had taken the train and she had always been guided by the crew to a special seat.

Eventually, Annette asked an attendant for help.

"Excuse me, could you please check my ticket? Where do I board..."

"Just a moment, please. Oh, it's the next car. There's a seating chart posted above, please check it and take a seat."

After boarding the train, Annette was fortunate enough to find a seat right away. The seats, with four people facing each other, were small and uncomfortable.

The passengers on the train carried newspapers like shields. Annette pressed down on her hat. She was afraid that the newspaper might contain news about her.

It took about seven hours to get to Glenford. Annette looked out the window and, unable to bear the boredom, bought a magazine from the train salesman. But even that was quickly covered because her head hurt from reading it.

“Hey, lady.”

An old man in the front seat suddenly called out to her.

“Yes?"

“Have you finished reading that?"

"Oh ...... not really, but I'm going to stop reading it now. Would you like to read it by any chance?"

“I would appreciate it."

The old man nodded his head and accepted the magazine. Annette observed him discreetly. The shabbily dressed old man looked thin and poor.

After watching him for a while, Annette bought a sandwich and orange juice from the sales clerk. The sandwich, wrapped in wrapping paper, was divided into two equal portions.

She lifted the veil lightly over her head and took a bite of the sandwich. The crusty bread was flaky in her mouth. It was the worst sandwich she had ever eaten.

The old man who was reading the magazine raised his eyes and glanced at her. Annette covered the sandwich with its wrapping paper.

Immediately the old man put down the magazine. Annette, who was fidgeting with her hands, asked in a gentle voice.

“Do you, by any chance, want to eat this?"

“Didn’t the lady buy it to eat?”

"I was going to, but I don’t feel well."

The old man hesitated a moment, then accepted the sandwich, murmuring, "Thank you." Annette hastened to add.

"Oh, I ate one, so take the other one…”

“It’s no problem."

The old man unexpectedly took a big bite of the sandwich that Annette had taken a mouthful of. The old man, who had been munching and chewing, spoke up.

“Where are you going, young lady?"

Annette replied happily. “I am going to Glenford."

“A vacation?”

“Ummm--- I want to see the ocean."

The sea in Glenford was famous for its beauty. Annette had been there long ago for a vacation.

"Alone? Why aren’t you with your lover?”

“I'm married."

“Oh, your husband. Is your husband away?”

“My husband and I don't get along. There's even talk of divorce."

“Do you have children?"

“No, I don't."

"What if you don't have kids? Young people these days get divorced a lot. I don't think it's a big deal anymore."

“Really?"

“Really. When I was younger, it was shameful when women got divorced, but times have changed a lot. Life has become a bit better for women, there are no lords, and life is as hard as ever, but.....”

Annette's lips twitched. It was difficult for her to answer casually. The old man also disliked the aristocrats? It would be rather strange if he did not.

After Annette had remained silent for a long time, the old man, who had swallowed a bite, asked.

“Why don't you and your husband get along?"

"...... just ............ My husband and all of his people don't like me. I don't want to live with my husband any longer either."

“You don't have any affection for living together?"

“Well. Maybe for that person...even if I die, it won’t matter to him.”

"I know that feeling too. The fact that someone hates you is much harder to bear than you think."

The old man spoke in a serious tone, putting down the sandwich he was eating.

“But you can’t be loved by everyone. That’s not possible. So just live with those who love you.”

His voice sounded somewhat forlorn. Annette was in a daze and gave a small nod. Her mouth was bitter. If all the people who loved her were dead, what was she going to do?

She didn’t want everyone to love her. She just didn’t want to be hated. If all she had left was hate, what was she to do?

The thought slowly faded away. The train shook. Outside the window, golden wheat fields spread out, filling the vastness.

The old man opened the crumpled wrapper and took out the rest of the sandwich. Looking at his wrinkled fingers, Annette handed him the glass of orange juice.

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# Chapter 11

Annette arrived at the beach in Glenford. It was already evening time.

Families and lovers were walking along the shore. A child's laughter resounded and was carried by the wind.

Annette lifted her veil and gazed blankly at the scene before her. The ocean colored by the sunset was unbelievably beautiful.

Waves surging from the straight horizon rippled up and down. If you put your hand in the sea water and removed it, it seemed to be filled with red water.

Bubbles rose like a bouquet of flowers on the shoreline where the waves ended. Lovers who took off their shoes played with their feet in the water.

Annette lowered her veil again. Then she slowly walked away, her skirt fluttering in the wind. The wind was a little chilly.

On one corner of the beach, a man was displaying paintings. Judging from the large canvas placed in front of him, it looked like the man had painted them himself.

Intrigued by the work, Annette approached and asked.

"Are these paintings for sale?”

"Of course. I paint and sale them.”

Annette read the price tag below. The price was not that high.

"I was going clean up since it’s getting dark. So I'll paint one for free. Please sit down."

“Ah ......"

Annette did not answer readily. Her heart was grateful and she was interested, but she had to take off her hat to do so.

After reading Annette's hesitation, the man joked.

“Why, you’re not confident to show your face? Then I can draw with your hat on."

“Uh, no, sir."

Sitting in her chair hesitantly, Annette swallowed and then took off her hat. She sneaked a look at the man's face, but he didn't react in any particular way.

'Either he doesn’t care or he is pretending not to…’

Either way, it was a blessing. She straightened her hat, feeling a little more at ease.

“How long will it take?"

"It'll be quick. It’s free, but what do you want?”

“Don’t draw me too strangely.”

“Ha, at this rate, I might do just that. You’re too stiff. Try smiling a little."

Annette smiled awkwardly. The man clicked his tongue and shook his head.

“Too awkward, you have a pretty face, but you're no actor. Try raising your lips more."

“Isn’t it too much?”

"Not much. You’re like this.”

The man mimicked Annette's expression. The strangely folded eyes and the quivering corners of the lips were indeed bizarre.

Annette couldn't help but laugh at the funny look on his face.

“Was I doing that?"

"Your face is much better now."

The man pointing at her with his finger quickly moved his pen. Annette smiled, a little embarrassed.

After finishing a simple coloring with oil pastels, the man showed her the drawing. Annette let out a small exclamation.

“It’s much prettier than I am.”

"Of course it is. I draw prettier than the real thing."

The dancing blonde hair, the narrowed blue eyes, the brightly smiling face and the sea of red behind it. It wasn't a live-action version, but there was quite a bit of resemblance compared to the real thing.

“Are you going to buy it? Of course you don't have to buy it, and if you do, I'll subtract the fee."

"Well---I really like the painting, but I'm a little embarrassed to see my face on it, so I'd rather buy......another painting."

Annette pointed to the painting of the ocean with the shimmering surface, which she had been eyeing earlier. In fact, it was because of this piece that she had asked the man if his paintings were for sale.

The man was happy to give her three pounds off. Annette accepted the paper bag containing the artwork and thanked him. Before she knew it, the sun had set and evening dusk descended.

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Heiner stared at her, transfixed. It was as if he could smell the sweetness from the sea breeze that was rushing in.

Despite the distance between them, her smile was captured on his retina as clearly as a fingerprint.

Heiner's drooping hands were shaking. His stomach churned to the point of nausea.

“Your Excellency, the madam has disappeared.”

As soon as the report reached Heiner, all capital checkpoints and train stations were informed of the communication regarding Annette's appearance. This was a guideline that Heiner had set in advance.

If she stayed within the capital, she could be caught at any time, but if she slipped out into other areas, things would become more complicated. The next report came from the train station.

Since the station staff did not have the authority to detain Annette, they held Annette back to take a late train. Immediately, Heiner drove to the station. Then he saw a woman sitting on a bench.

She looked somehow terribly unfamiliar. Annette looked so forlorn as she stared at the people behind her veil. It was as if the woman alone was placed there in the midst of all the noise in the world.

He thought perhaps the moment he caught her in his grasp, her thin body would disappear without a trace. He knew it was a crazy delusion, a bizarre feeling of unease, and yet he felt it.

It was for this reason that he changed his plan to take her back to the residence and decided to follow her instead.

Annette did not look like someone who was trying to escape. She had only one handbag and her destination was a place famous for travel and relaxation.

'Is she going to see Ansgar Stetter?'

Just thinking about it made his head ablaze. Heiner barely calmed his raging emotions and followed her onto the train.

Annette boarded in third class, which didn't suit her, perhaps because it was the first time she had ever purchased a ticket. Heiner paid the extra money and switched seats with someone in her back seat.

Annette was completely oblivious to his presence. It was only natural. She was a civilian and he was a secret agent experienced in tailgating.

The train was small and damp. It was strange that such a classy woman should be sitting here. Heiner sat down uncomfortably.

For some reason, Annette chatted with the old woman across from her. Heiner wondered if her voice had always been that clear.

He listened to the small sounds of conversation through the gap between the seat and the window.

"Why don't you and your husband get along?"

"Just .......... my husband and all of his people don't like me. I don't want to live with my husband any longer either."

“You don't have any affection for living together?"

"Maybe that person would be fine even if I died.”

It was not wrong.

He did not know, however, why he wanted to argue that she was wrong. Perhaps it was because Annette's voice sounded lonely when she said so.

“But you can’t be loved by everyone. That’s not possible. You just have to live with those who love you."

The old woman's words were just ridiculous in this situation. Heiner thought as he slowly tapped his finger on the window frame.

There was no one left for that woman.

Except him.

He was the last.

They would suffer, but they would still be together.

Even if it was not love.

The thought always ended with them holding each other tightly.

Annette got off at the Glenford station and got into a carriage. Heiner followed her. Her destination was the beach.

Annette looked at the sea for a while and slowly started to walk. Her white legs, stretched under the hem of her skirt, which was rolled up to her knees, were dazzling.

After walking along the shore for some time, Annette stood in front of a stall selling paintings and talked to a man. Hesitating for a moment, she then sat down on a chair and took off her hat. Then she laughed.

Like now.

Seeing her face smiling brightly from afar, Heiner felt an inexplicable shock.

When was the last time he had seen that woman laugh so innocently? The only time that came to his mind was all distant memories. He gritted his teeth quietly.

‘Let's go back.’

Heiner thought.

There was no reason to wait for Annette. Let's take her back to the official residence now. It was wrong that he wasted his time and followed her here in the first place.......... His hands trembled slightly.

Somehow, his feet did not move. Heiner stared at Annette blankly.

He should just go, grab her wrist, force her to her feet, and lock her up when they returned to Lancaster.

But he could not do so.

He should ask her if she was thinking of running away, what was the reason she had come here after evading her attendants, was she trying to meet Stetter?

But he could not do so.

He did not want to see that woman happy. He could not allow her even a moment's freedom. He had to warn her that if she did this again, she would not be allowed to leave the residence.

But he could not do so.

At that moment, he saw the laughter vanish from Annette's face like a mirage. Even though her laughter was one of the things he hated and found most offensive.

Nevertheless, he could not anything.

Whoosh.

The waves surged, like his heart was rising with emotions.

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Annette carefully removed her shoes and ankle stockings. It was the first time she had ever taken off her shoes outside, since the Padania nobles were originally ashamed to show their bare feet.

She put her luggage in one place and went to pick up useless things on the beach.

Broken conch shells, empty shells, blunt glass shards, fragments of unknown origin.

Annette put them in the pocket of her cardigan. One pocket quickly became heavier than the other.

The waves rose to her ankles and then washed away again. She straightened her body and looked out at the ocean in the distance. The sun was setting and the horizon was dark.

Something that looked like this piece of glass or a shard of china might have come from a foreign country across the sea. Riding the waves and being pushed by the current to an unknown distant place.

To an unknown distant place…

Annette took an involuntary step toward the sea. The cold sea water splashed on her legs.

She stood there for a moment, then took another step. Another step. The hem of her wet skirt wrapped around her legs.

Before she knew it, the water was up to her calves. Annette's gaze remained on the horizon. And just as she was about to take another step toward the water, a large hand grabbed her arm. She was quickly dragged backward and hit something solid.

Burying in the broad chest and strong arms, Annette raised her head. A familiar scent wafted past her nose. A deep cavernous voice descended.

"Where are you going.....?"

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# Chapter 12

Heiner's back was facing the moon so his expression in the shadow was difficult to see.

For some reason, Annette's legs weakened as soon as she heard his voice.

Heiner grabbed a firm hold of her arms as she staggered. Once she gained her balance, he led her ashore.

Annette stood on the sand and looked up at Heiner cautiously.

In the moonlight, his face was shadowed by the high bridge of his nose. His figure was pale and beautiful, like a perfect statue.

His jaw tightened as he met Annette's gaze. His gray eyes sank a layer as if they were sinking.

Annette murmured.

“You’re late. I thought you'd come to get me sooner."

"Put on your shoes and pack your things. Now."

Heiner ordered, looking completely adamant. With a small nod, Annette tried to carry her feet but stopped. She felt pain from her foot.

She had accidentally stepped on something and blood was oozing out. Annette wondered if she should ask him to bring her shoes. It was hard to open her mouth casually, even though it was not a big request.

Heiner, who was watching her, sighed somewhat agitatedly.

"Just stand there."

He walked over to where her luggage was and picked up her shoes and a paper bag. Annette inadvertently accepted the paper bag held out in front of her.

The next thing she knew, her body suddenly lifted.

Annette let out a short scream and grabbed Heiner’s coat. Heiner’s one hand was supporting her back and one under her knees with her shoes dangled from his fingers.

“I'll walk...!"

Annette exclaimed in panic, but he did not answer. The hem of her dress, which had gotten wet in seawater, soaked Heiner's clothes.

“It’s not like I can't walk. Put me down, Heiner."

Annette said repeatedly, but he didn't even pretend to hear her. She eventually gave up and relaxed her body.

Heiner hurried off the beach, holding Annette and her shoes. The cold sea breeze slowly dried the water.

They arrived at a nearby hotel. Even when they were at the hotel entrance, Heiner did not seem inclined to let her down. Annette twisted her body slightly and tried to escape.

"You really need to let me down. I'll put on my shoes............."

"Hold still."

He cut Annette off in a gloomy voice.

Heiner's mood seemed very low. Annette wondered as she looked at his neck, where the faint veins stood taut.

'Did I run away and make him angry............ Why?’

She didn’t expect him to be angry. She thought Heiner would send his attendants to catch her, give her a few words of warning, and lock her in her room.

'This time I might end up in a mental hospital.'

While Annette was nonchalantly foreseeing the future, Heiner strode into the hotel.

When they came under the bright lights, Annette buried her face in his chest. She was afraid that someone would recognize her.

Heiner’s unique body scent became thicker. Annette remained still with her nose in his chest. She could feel his body faintly stiffening.

Heiner would not like it, but it couldn’t be helped. It was he who had refused her request to let her down in the first place. If he didn't want to be in close contact with her, he could have just let her walk.

However, only Heiner’s lips harden slightly, still holding her firmly.

After being handed a key to a vacant room at the front desk, Heiner got into the elevator. They didn’t talk even after they reached the room.

As soon as Heiner entered the room, he roughly tossed her shoes aside. He also snatched the paper that Annette was carrying and threw it carelessly. Her handbag, which she had placed in the paper bag, fell out on the floor.

Heiner raised his eyebrows when he saw the black handbag.

"Did you leave it on the beach? What if someone stole it?”

"...yes."

She didn’t think. It sounded stupid, but she really didn’t. Annette had never once thought that someone could "steal" her things.

It was a very uneducated and vulgar act to steal someone's things. She had never imagined such an act. There was nothing missing, so there was nothing to steal.

Also, Annette always had servants. Naturally, they protected her luggage. It was something she did not need to worry about.

While Annette was immersed in her newfound enlightenment and shock, Heiner took her and headed for the bathroom, still with her in his arms.

He pushed down the tin tub that was standing against the wall and placed Annette in the tub. Annette leaned against the wall with her injured foot slightly raised.

"I'll do the ...... washing."

At that, Heiner stared at her face for a moment. Then he quickly turned and left the bathroom. The door remained open.

Annette hesitated for a moment, then rolled up her skirt and washed only her legs and feet.

With the open door, she could only do that much. There was no hot water anyway, and a bath was going to be difficult.

The water washed away the blood and the sand. The wound was deeper than she expected. When she checked it with her eyes, the pain she had forgotten about surged back in. Annette looked away from the wound.

At the entrance to the outer room, she heard Heiner talking to someone. It seemed to be his attendant. Annette hastily wiped the water off with a towel.

By the time she left the bathroom, Heiner had already turned on the oil stove and even laid out the first aid kit. He gestured, as if telling her to come and sit down.

As Annette carefully sat on the bed, Heiner silently examined the wound on her foot. His hand wrapped around her leg was particularly large and hot.

For some reason, Annette couldn't bear the embarrassment of this situation.

Despite the fact that they were a married couple, they had never once looked at each other's bodies properly. It was only a foot, but the embarrassment was the same.

Heiner's face was as hard as ever. The series of actions of disinfecting the wound, applying medicine, and then bandaging it seemed familiarly done, as if it were an old habit.

While tying the knot in the bandage, Heiner spoke in a cold tone.

“What on earth were you thinking?"

"...."

"Was it so important to come to a place like this that you had to deceive the attendants?"

"..."

“Why, did you have an appointment here with Ansgar Stetter?"

Heiner sat with one knee on the floor and looked up at her with angry eyes. But the hand that held her little foot was gentle.

“..... a place like this.”

Annette opened her mouth quietly.

"Yes. It's only a place like this."

Their clashing gazes caused a small ripple in the air. Annette tilted her head.

“So why should I ask your permission to come to a place like this? I thought so.”

"Permission or no permission, have you forgotten that you are the wife of the Commander-in-Chief? Are you in your right mind to walk out without an attendant?"

"That's why I asked for a divorce.

Because I don't want to be the wife of the Commander-in-Chief anymore."

"So is your little getaway a rebellion to get a divorce?”

"Not necessarily, no. I just wanted to see the ocean....."

Heiner sighed and put her foot on the floor.

"Well, it didn't seem like you simply came here just to see it.”

"....."

"Were you planning on swimming in the ocean this evening?"

"That...!"

Annette opened her mouth to refuse, but could not think of a suitable answer. She finally clamped her lips shut again.

Annette wasn't sure why she had done it. She definitely didn’t intend to drown herself right there and die.

But that didn't mean she was thinking of living like this…

“...... I just wanted to soak my feet."

Annette, distressed, simply replied. She didn't feel any reason to have to explain to him how she felt, how she was feeling, and what was going on in her mind.

Heiner raised one corner of his mouth with an expression of unknown mischief.

“I suppose you're right.”

He spoke slowly, as if trying to convince himself.

“You are afraid of many things. The dark, heights, water…”

Annette stared at him blankly. Heiner's words were half right, half wrong.

She was still afraid of many things. But the examples Heiner mentioned were in the past.

Annette was no longer afraid of the dark. Now she rather liked the dark even more than the light. No one could see herself.

She was no longer afraid of heights. Seeing that she went into the water earlier without hesitation, perhaps she was no longer afraid of water either.

It was a slightly different kind that Annette was afraid of now.

“While we are all afraid of insignificant things….. you don't even worry about what might happen to you in the absence of attendants. I always hated your guts every time this happened." (Heiner)

"...."

"You can't even assume that someone might steal your stuff, that innocent thought." (Heiner)

"..."

“The world has changed, but you are still the same. As frustrating as it is, nothing has changed. Just like that disgusting woman back then.”

Heiner finished his words as if he were chewing each word. He didn't look relieved at all after he let it out.

What an old emotion, Annette thought idly. One corner of her chest ached as if it had been dug in, but her mind was as calm as if it was malfunctioned.

Annette retraced her memories. How old was his hatred? When exactly had it been? Was it from the moment they first saw each other? Or was it before they even knew each other existed?

“......Heiner”

And togetherness.

“You must have been laughing at me.”

What on earth did he think when she confessed her love?

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# Chapter 13

Heiner looked puzzled like someone who doubted his ears. Clenching her fists in her lap, Annette spoke again.

“You must think I'm really, really crazy.” (A)

She felt strangely empty, though, in this situation she should grab him by the shoulders and string together a few words of resentment.

Annette lowered her head and then raised it again.

“It must be so. If you pretend to be in love with a woman you hate and disgust......... that woman is a fool for loving you too, so you can laugh at her for doing so.” (A)

She gave a small laugh, as if it were really funny. But the laughter soon subsided. Then she continued with a face that had lost its laughter.

“But if it was like that…I'll tell you what I told you three years ago. I will tell you when you have achieved your goal and no longer need to deceive me. I didn't even know that…” (A)

She choked on her emotions. But no tears came out. A tight voice flowed from deep within.

“For three years I have loved you more….” (A)

Heiner's eyes seemed to shake with those words. No, perhaps her vision shook. Annette quietly dropped her gaze.

For three years, her love had been broken countless times, making it hard to tell its original shape.

Frequent crumbling meant often rebuilding. For three years, Annette had often crumbled, and in turn, had often been rebuilt.

He will be back. He will smile again. He will change his mind again. He will whisper kind words again. He will love me again.

How much more must this be repeated?

"Even now."

Heiner broke the silence. He asked in a voice that sounded broken around the edges.

"Even now, do you still love me?"

Annette thought his words were sarcasm or ridicule. It wasn't that kind of tone, but it sounded that way to her anyway, at least.

Annette mumbled with a bitter smile on her face.

“If I say I do, how pathetic am I?" (A)

The stove quietly warmed up the room. Annette’s gaze turned to the sheets of the bed and spoke blankly.

"I don't quite know. I loved you the way you pretended to love me. Everything I loved about you turned out to be a lie, so isn’t my love a lie too?” (A)

Veins protruded from his hands as they rested on the floor.

Annette remembered the past when she buried her cheek in those hands.

“Now, what’s the use of all that…I also think .......... I just can't blame it on love, because the situation I'm in isn't very good." (A)

Would it really be the first time that countless times it had been rebuilt and rebuilt again? Annette wasn't sure. In fact, it didn't even seem important.

“My heart is not particularly useful anyway. Whether I love you or not, nothing will change." (A)

Annette, who had raised her head again, just had a peaceful look on her face. As if she had no past.

"It will never happen again." (A)

"...."

"Never again." (A)

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As she had vaguely anticipated from the moment they entered the hotel, it seemed that Heiner was planning to stay here for the night.

His attendants had brought his luggage, which included a change of clothes, shoes, and toiletries. Annette took a shower with the hot water provided by the staff.

When she came out of the bathroom after changing, she stopped. Heiner, whom she thought would stay in another room, was sitting at the table flipping through a newspaper.

"...Are you staying here too?"

"Why, if I stay somewhere else, would you run off by yourself again?"

"That's not what I meant.”

“It's about not knowing."

Heiner replied curtly and stood up. As he was about to enter the bathroom with his clothes, Annette hastened to tell him.

"Wait a minute, get the staff to get some warm water.”

"It’s fine."

He turned back again as he was about to close the bathroom door. A cold voice came through the gap in the door.

“Don't even think about leaving. Unless you want to be caught and dragged away by the attendants.”

After the door closed, Annette stood there in a daze. She felt a little confused. Like his venomous tongue earlier, he seemed genuinely angry.

She listened to the sound of the water for a moment before stepping away. She sat down at the dressing table and pressed her wet hair with a towel.

On the surface of the glass was the reflection of a woman with empty eyes. There didn't seem to be a single sign of life. Annette rubbed the mirror once, leaving a handprint on her mirrored face.

By the time she had dried her hair and laid down on the bed, Heiner came out of the bathroom. Annette pulled the covers over her and curled up. Heiner turned off the lights and then turned on one of the gas lamps on the table.

The yellow light dimly illuminated one corner of the room. He took a document envelope from his suitcase and sat down in a chair.

Annette closed her eyes and tried to sleep, but she did not feel sleepy, let alone sleep. Every now and then there was the sound of papers being turned over in the desolation.

‘Why did he come all this way when he’s so busy?'

Even after hearing all the messages from Heiner, she still could not understand his behavior.

Heiner acted as if he did not want to see her or as if he wished to sit by her side forever.

Either way, their relationship was as precarious as standing on a shallow, frozen lake.

Heiner worked until late at night.

Annette glanced at him. The sound of his pen writing something, his fingers tracing over the paper, his low breathing…

Only after a considerable time did Heiner turn off the gas lamp and get up. As he walked over to the bed, Annette turned and moved herself to the edge of the bed. Heiner narrowed his brows at her actions.

"You haven't slept yet?"

"...... I couldn't sleep..."

Heiner climbed into bed with a look of some discontent on his face. The mattress felt like it was sinking.

Annette sat up shakily and poured water into a glass on the side table. Then she bent over and picked up the handbag that lay under the bed. She took a medicine bag from inside and went to open it, but he grabbed her wrist.

“What is it?"

“It’s medicine."

“Sleeping pills? Why?"

“I can't sleep."

"So every time you can't sleep you take sleeping pills? Do you think that's any good?"

"It’s not like I take it because I like it.”

Heiner sighed irritably and snatched the pills from her hands. With her hands still raised, Annette helplessly watched him.

She wasn't sure what part of herself had angered him again. What did taking medicine have to do with him?

"Don't take this stuff anymore. Do you want to become addicted to it?"

“I’ll take care of myself.”

“Let you do as you please and this is how you take care of yourself?”

Annette turned her head to avoid his eyes.

It was always like this every time she talked to Heiner. He didn't like everything she did. Perhaps just her mere existence annoyed him.

‘...I wasn't like this before.'

She would often think about the past, even though she knew it was pointless ruminating.

In the past, there was always love and affection in their conversations. Sometimes they fought, but it was just a little conflict, just like normal lovers.

After a quarrel, Heiner was always willing to apologize and seek reconciliation first. After making up, he always hugged Annette and kissed her forehead and cheeks.

‘In hindsight........ I suppose it was because he, for his part, had to maintain a good relationship with me.’

Because in order to become a member of the Marquis' entourage, he would have had to be sure to marry the daughter. He must have pretended to be happy and to love her.

Her stomach churned even though she hadn't eaten anything. Annette turned to lie down, then turned her head at the sound of Heiner getting up again.

He set the teapot on the stove and selected the tea leaves the hotel provided. The sound of boiling water filled the silence. Soon the room was filled with the faint aroma of tea.

"Come on."

Heiner held out a teacup. Annette’s eyes widened as she looked up at him. He urged her on.

"Drink."

Raising her upper body, Annette inadvertently accepted the cup of hot tea. A warm feeling passed through the palm of her hands.

"It should help you sleep."

"...... what is it?"

“Chamomile."

Heiner's voice was still brusque and sounded seemingly displeased.

She didn’t know what he was thinking.

Annette sipped her tea, taking in his expression. Heiner looked at her coldly and tapped his chin.

"Give me your bag."

"My bag---why?"

"To see."

See what?

Swallowing her words, Annette hesitantly picked up her bag. Heiner snatched it from her and sat down on the bed. Then he put the belongings in the bag out on the bed one by one.

"Are these the sleeping pills?"

"No, the sleeping pills are these................"

“Then what is this?"

“Headache medicine."

“And this?”

“Digestive medicine.”

Annette, watching his hard face, added as an excuse.

"Because my stomach keeps getting upset."

“What does the doctor say?"

"Just ......"

Annette was conflicted for a moment, then answered honestly.

“...... I'm oversensitive.”

It would all have been revealed anyway if Heiner had asked Arnold. She didn't want to tell unnecessary lies for the sake of her pride.

Heiner held the medicine bag quietly for a while. Then he silently looked in the bag.

His warm face seemed to say,

"Of course.”

Annette gently tugged at her lower lip. After taking out most of the belongings, Heiner picked something up from the bottom of the bag.

It was a white piece of paper. Annette's face hardened as she realized what it was.

It was Ansgar Stetter’s business card.

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# Chapter 14

After staring at the business card for a while, Heiner surprisingly had no particular reaction. He just put the business card in his pants pocket, not in Annette’s bag.

An uncomfortable silence fell. Annette, who had been fiddling with her teacup, hesitantly opened her mouth.

“It’s Ans.”

Heiner's hands stopped for a moment as he was putting the belongings back into her bag. He silently looked up, closing the bag with a natural movement.

“If I follow him…”

Closing her eyes, Annette continued to speak.

"Could that be the next best thing for me? I'm not saying I’ll follow him. I just wonder.”

“I don't know what kind of answers you want from me.”

“Is there a Restoration faction in France?”

Heiner's eyes narrowed slightly at the straightforward question.

“Heiner, you do know?”

"Did Ansgar Stetter say something like that? That there are forces for the restoration of the monarchy in France, and that you should join them?"

“No. I came up with the idea on my own. All Ansgar wanted was for me to go with him.”

"Why do you ask me if you already have that idea in mind?”

“I am informing you. That I'm not hiding anything from you, and that I'm not going to follow Ansgar secretly."

Her voice was not very desperate, though she insisted on her innocence. There was no special emotion on Heiner's face as he listened.

"...well. It could happen."

He spat out tastelessly as he was thinking about something.

“Because in the past, Ansgar Stetter liked you, and now you’re single. Also, if there is a monarchy restoration force in France as you think, they will treat you quite well. However, I cannot assure you of this. Your reputation is so bad within Padania that you may think you have no use.”

Heiner stopped speaking for a moment and smiled without warmth.

“You said there is nowhere for you to be happy, and yet you've found a place that accepts you. It's a useless assumption anyway."

“As I said, I won’t go with Ansgar. I could be wrong in my guess, just ......"

Annette continued to speak in a cautious tone.

“Just if you don't know... so I just wanted to let you know about the possible existence of retro forces within France. Of course, you might have already known….."

“You won’t gain anything by telling me that.”

The gray eyes, like those of a snitch, slid slowly down her body, then back up again. The ends of his hair, against the light, looked pale yellow.

Annette laughed bitterly.

"I thought you were trying to make the world a better place."

Was the world today a better world than it was before? Annette didn’t feel it. Because the changed world was too harsh to her.

But the people said, “The world is much better now and will be better in the future.”

Then they must be right. Because she herself was an unwise and foolish woman.

She had never made her own judgments, and even if she did now, they would be wrong.

Her words to Annelie Engels were also sincere. Annette respected the cause of people trying to change the world. Even if that cause was infinitely cruel to her.

Even if she did not relate.

Feelings like vengeance and resentment had long since disappeared. Like burnt ash, it was just an old scar.

In the quiet, she could hear Heiner’s breathing. It was a breath as strong and regular as his temper.

“… I have never asked for sympathy from you.”

Silent for a moment, Heiner put his hand on the blanket. Then he lowered his upper body close to hers. Annette's shoulders tensed as his stern face approached.

A husky voice hung in the air.

“Don't think, Annette. Just go with the flow.”

"...."

"You're good at that, aren't you?"

She was surely being ridiculed, but for some reason Heiner looked hurt. He quickly erased his expression and opened his mouth again with a cold face.

“I know better than you that Ansgar Stetter wanted you. If you had not married me, your husband would have been him. I don’t believe a word you say."

“I never loved him."

"Where did ever the marriages of nobles be done by love alone?"

Heiner's words were not wrong. They were a unique case in that they loved each other and married after dating. Actually, he lied, though.

The tea had gone cold before long. Annette murmured in a low voice.

“I mean it whether you believe me or not.”

If following Ansgar was the next best option, she already knew her best option. Two sad gazes intertwined. Annette took another sip of tea, then set her teacup on the side table.

"I'm tired. I want to go to sleep.”

Heiner stared down at her face as if trying to see if her words were true. When Annette turned her head, he raised his upper body.

When Annette turned over, Heiner turned off the gas lamp, and darkness quickly filled the room.

There was a rustling sound behind her as he got into bed. Annette closed her eyes and tried to sleep.

The two untouched bodies slowly cooled like tea water.

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Heiner raised himself up in bed at dawn. The light filtering through the curtains that didn't close completely bathed the bed pale.

Silently, he removed the covers and looked at the woman lying away from him. Annette, who seemed to be unable to fall asleep until late, was peacefully asleep.

Her face was buried in the blanket with her body curled up. The white blanket rose and fell in small, regular motions.

Heiner unconsciously leaned close to her. Her soft cheek was exposed between her hair and the blanket.

He inadvertently tried to place his hand there and stopped. Then he rubbed his face bitterly with the hand he had taken back.

'It's inconvenient. I should have just booked a separate room...'

It had been a long time since he had shared a bed with Annette. He originally intended to get another room, but he felt strangely uneasy.

Exactly what was unsettling Heiner himself did not know. He tried to drive the image of the woman in the sea out of his mind.

Quietly, he got up from the bed and walked toward the hanger. Heiner's gaze was suddenly fixed on one spot as he pulled a cigar from his coat pocket.

Annette's cardigan pocket next to his was bulging. He took out things from the pocket and looked at them. Something glinted in the darkness.

He thought it was jewelry, but upon closer inspection, it was useless fragments.

‘What are all these pieces of trash?’

He wondered what she was so eager to pick up, but it was just this stuff. For some reason, it made him feel uncomfortable.

Heiner tossed them in the trash and went out onto the balcony. His breathing became easier in the open air.

He could not stay in the dark, enclosed space for long. His condition was better now and not completely impossible, but the feeling of being mentally put on the defensive still remained.

This was due to his memories in the torture chamber. His psychiatrist was the only one who knew of this fact. Everyone else who should have known was long dead.

His hair fluttered in the cool night breeze. Heiner stared out at the dark sea with an unlit cigar in his hand.

He could hear the waves crashing in the distance. He was not a smoker.

It had been a long time since he had quit smoking, but when his mind was in a complicated state, a cigar in his mouth felt like it could dull his thinking, if only a little. It did help even though he never lighted it.

‘I guess it's psychological.’

Heiner saw many psychological aspects of this kind: people complaining of pain in a leg that had been amputated long ago (phantom pain), or people who were tricked into taking fake medicine during a time of war when medicines were in short supply and they believed that it really worked.

He lowered his gaze and looked down at the cigar he was holding. A whitish brown stick came into view.

He had quit smoking six years ago. That was when he and Annette had started dating. She didn't seem to mind the smoke or the smell, but he voluntarily quit smoking.

He didn't need to look good anymore, so he didn't need to quit smoking. However, he still couldn’t smoke again. Because…

When his mind wandered to that point, Heiner faintly frowned. He clicked his tongue and put his arm over the railing.

“You must think I'm really, really crazy.” (A)

If that was the case, he wouldn't have felt so dirty.

Was it her problem or his that no matter how much she was dragged down and trampled on she still looked so goddamn virtuous?

Heiner smiled bitterly. He had been pondering this for a very long time, but he still hadn’t come to a conclusion.

Annette Valdemar,

You touch my lowest and weakest part.

Make me infinitely miserable.

At least this is your problem and your fault.

Heiner pulled out the cigar from his mouth and straightened his body. He turned and entered the room. Putting the cigar in his coat pocket again, he stared at the trash can for a moment.

The things Annette had picked up had lost their shine and lay abandoned in the darkness.

“My heart is not particularly useful anyway." (A)

Your heart is useless.

Heiner quietly bit his lips.

He wanted her to feel the despair of not being reciprocated. He wanted her to suffer the reality she couldn’t reach.

He hoped her heart was heartbroken and miserable.

Just as he once was.

So at least Heiner needed her heart.

He raised his head with a downcast look. After checking on Annette, who was still asleep, he quietly entered the bathroom.

He turned on the water tap and cold water flooded out. He stood still for a moment with his fingertips against the running water.

He felt the rubbish Annette had picked up on the beach rattle inside him.

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# Chapter 15

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After returning from Glenford, Annette had not seen Heiner for nearly a week.

It was no big deal. They had hardly encountered each other until she demanded a divorce.

The official residence was large and had a different radius of activity, so they each lived only their own lives unless one of them looked for the other first.

After the revolution, the role of finding a partner was mostly Annette's. Though, things had changed a bit after the mention of divorce.

As far as Annette was concerned, there was no reason to seek him first unless it was about divorce.

Birds chirped loudly outside the window.

Annette put the documents summarizing the breakdown of the donations into the file binders and opened the safe in the closet.

After placing the files in the safe, she took out a jewelry box. Placing the jewelry she had stored in the box into a paper bag, she pressed the pager. Soon a servant entered the room.

“Miss Ritzburg, I have one favor to ask of you, go to the nearest jeweler..........."

"Yes, madam."

"...."

"Tell me, madam."

When Annette did not speak, the servant looked at her with puzzlement. After thinking about something for a moment, Annette smiled faintly and shook her head.

“No, I will go there myself.”

"If you want to buy jewelry, I have a catalog........"

"I'm going to look at it in person at the store. Could you have a driver on standby?"

“All right.”

As soon as the servant left, the smile disappeared from Annette's face. She changed into her outdoor clothes and put on her veiled hat.

With her gloves donned, Annette left the building with a paper bag. Naturally, an attendant followed and opened the back seat door. After getting into the car, Annette asked the driver.

“Are there any nearby jewelry stores that are unoccupied?"

"Oh….then how about Huffine Jewelers? But the store is in a back alley, so I have to park the car on the main street, so you'll have to walk a bit."

"No problem. Please go there.”

Since the driver was a knight who accompanied noble ladies, he was knowledgeable about jewelers. The man skillfully turned the steering wheel and

turned down the street.

Before long, the car stopped on one side of the boulevard. Annette stepped into an alley lined with shops. When she arrived in front of Huffine Jewelers, the attendant said,

“I'll be waiting outside. Madam.”

It was a pleasant sound to hear. Annette nodded her head slightly and went inside the store.

"Welcome."

The jeweler greeted the customer in a somewhat insincere tone. Annette said as she placed a paper bag on the display stand.

“I want to get rid of everything."

"Perhaps you have received an appraisal from another place first?"

“No."

The jeweler glanced inside the paper bag and put on his glasses.

“Please wait a moment.”

The amount of jewelry was not much. All of the Rosenberg family's property had been seized, and Annette, who belonged to Valdemar, was forced to semi-donate most of her possessions by public opinion.

The reason she suddenly disposed of her emergency fund or jewelry was simple: to prevent a situation in which, someday after her death, the jewelry would appear in the newspapers or be auctioned off under the name ‘Jewelry owned by Dietrich's daughter.’

While the jeweler was appraising the gems, Annette looked at the jewelry on display.

She had always loved jewelry. Not because they were expensive, but simply because they sparkled.

Heiner knew Annette's taste for such things. On every past date together, he would always buy something sparkly and put it in her hand. Jewelry, beads, glass crafts---

“Do you know that everything in my room is a gift from you? I'm going to die in them.” (A)

“It’s not that much.” (H)

"Could this be ---your grand plan to crush me to death?" (A)

"It's similar. You will live surrounded by all kinds of shiny things." (H)

"Haha, you don't mean to propose?" (A)

"Let's make the marriage proposal even cooler than this." (H)

There was a time when she felt the world a little brighter when she was with him.

Annette placed her hand lightly on the display stand and peered inside with dry eyes. The whole place was dazzling and shining, but now she felt no excitement.

“We're done, madam. Please check this ticket here.”

The jeweler who had finished the appraisal quickly presented the prices for each item.

“All in all, I can give you 2,300 pounds. Do you have any questions?”

"Please dispose of them as such."

“Ah, yes. Understood."

The jeweler's voice was somewhat reluctant. Annette withdrew her gaze from the table with a look of disinterest.

It didn't matter what the price was. In fact, the lower the price, the better.

Suddenly, the diamond ring on her ring finger caught her attention. The diamond was bigger and more beautiful than any of the gems on display. It was the wedding ring that Heiner had given her when he proposed.

Annette removed the ring and handed it to the jeweler.

“Perhaps you could tell me how much this diamond ring is worth? I'd like to get rid of it together."

“Get rid of it?”

The jeweler examined the ring and asked in surprise.

“Huh. This one alone would cost

over 7,000 pounds. I'm sorry, but we don't have the capacity to pay for this. I'm afraid you'll have to go to a larger jewelry store.”

“…I see.”

Receiving the ring, Annette put it in her bag after a few moments of thinking.

The owner counted the check and handed her an envelope containing the payment. Annette left the store without confirming the amount.

The attendant waiting at the door soon followed. Annette slowly exited the alley.

Twenty-three hundred pounds. It was not a small amount. The gems were not large, but they were all high quality so it was expected.

'But this one ring is 7,000 pounds..........?'

Even in her single days, she had never had a jewel of this magnitude. Did Heiner think he could satisfy her only by proposing with an expensive ring?

It was an effortless portrayal of what he must have thought of her.

A foolish woman, born into a powerful family, who knew nothing about the world. A vain woman who grew up without lacking anything and enjoyed everything she wanted and desired.

'That's not wrong.'

Annette thought to herself, and turned onto the main street. Looking around, she saw a car parked on the side of the road. She turned her head again at a gaze she suddenly met.

A man was standing under a street lamp. The young man, who looked to be in his early twenties at most, was staring at her. His eyes met hers, but he didn't avoid her gaze.

'Is he looking at me?'

Annette wondered if he perhaps knew who she was, and hurriedly put on her hat. But the man's eyes were still fixed on her. Something strange and intense flashed through them.

Those eyes.

It gave her chills.

Horrified, Annette involuntarily backed away. Her instincts were warning her to run. At that moment, the man pulled something from his waist.

In the sunlight, the silver color shimmered in the shape of a cross. The light was pointed at her.

The series of actions seemed very slow.

Annette instinctively turned to her attendant. Surprise spread across the attendant's face. The man then raised his hand.

Bang!

A gunshot passed by. The attendant grabbed her shoulder.

Bang!

A burning sensation was felt in her side. Annette froze for a moment, breathing roughly. The attendant hid Annette behind him and pulled out a pistol.

Bang! Bang!

Gunshots rang through the midday streets. The attendant, who had been exchanging gunfire with his opponent, pushed Annette in front of the vehicle. Her staggering gait collapsed.

“Stay hidden!”

Annette crouched in front of the car and gasped for breath. A cold chill rose from the floor. Her shoulders shook erratically.

"Madam! Are you all right?"

The driver got out of the car and hurried to check her condition. He looked down and opened his eyes wide.

“Oh my God, madam!”

Her lips quivered madly. Annette slowly lifted the hand that was holding her side. Red blood dripped from her palm.

A sharp pain surged from her lower abdomen. She felt as if she had been hit. Annette shuddered as she clutched her stomach.

"Madam…for now… to the hospital immediately..."

The driver's voice rose and fell like a malfunctioning phonograph, breaking off from time to time. Annette gasped for breath. Her head was heavy and far away, as if immersed in water.

Annette backed up against the body of the car with the support of the driver. When she finally raised her head, the deep blue sky filled her field of vision.

It was dazzling.

The driver next to her said something, but it fell on deaf ears. Annette let out a thin breath and thought idly.

‘If I’m shot in the head….’

Then she could have gone at once without pain.

Her eyes flickered. It was strange. Surely the gunshot wound was in her side, but a terrible pain covered her entire lower chest. It was as if it had been shattered into pieces.

Was this what it was like to be shot by a gun? She didn't know as she had never been injured like this in her entire life. Her fingers, hanging on the floor, twitched intermittently.

“......! Madam!"

Her eyelids felt heavy. Cold sweat ran down her temples. The sound of the gunfire was gradually fading from her ears.

Heiner said he was injured many times during the mission. Three of them were gunshot wounds. Was he in this much pain?

Had he experienced this kind of pain so many times that it made her pain seem like nothing?

Her pain was so much more than her……

The thought didn't go any further. Annette gave up on holding onto her consciousness. The flashing lights in front of her eyes eventually turned black.

A scene emerged from the edge of her consciousness as if it were being filmed. It was the face of the man who had shot her. His eyes when he was aiming the gun at her without hesitation. The emotion that shone brightly.

It was clear hatred.

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# Chapter 16

[Your Excellency, the madam was shot and rushed to a city hospital. She is currently undergoing treatment.]

The papers crumpled in his hand. A moment of silence passed. Heiner put down the papers and asked back briefly.

“What's her status…”

[She’s unconscious, but not in serious condition. Um, and...]

“I'll be right there. I'll ask the doctor directly."

Heiner made it clear without further questioning the status of the accident. His subordinates who had been reporting to him in the office looked at him with bewilderment.

“What hospital is it?"

[Lutheran Hospital in Lancaster.]

Heiner hung up the phone and pressed his pager.

"Have a car waiting downstairs."

He stood up and put on his coat. His subordinates looked at each other as their boss's face sank completely.

"I'll listen to your report later.”

“Yes, sir!"

In response to the commander-in-chief's short salute, his men raised their hands in attention. Without looking at them, Heiner left the office in a great hurry.

With each step he took, he felt his feet were in danger. He clenched his trembling hands tightly into fists. Everything he heard felt like a terrible noise.

Heiner ran down the stairs without waiting for the elevator. As soon as he got into the parked car, he immediately ordered.

“Lutheran Hospital. As quickly as possible."

He couldn't hide his impatience all the way to the hospital. He rummaged through his pocket and pulled out a cigar. It wasn’t lit.

Heiner tilted his head back with the cigar in his mouth, his fingers tapping his thigh.

Not in critical condition. But unconscious.

The obvious questions of who, when, where, and why didn't occur to him at this moment.

Just…. He didn’t feel sane. Only the report he heard over the phone kept running through his head.

Heiner squeezed his tired eyes. He felt a twinge in his neck and touched it involuntarily, but there was no relief.

The car soon arrived in front of the hospital. He tossed his unlit cigar into the ashtray and got out. He quickly entered the hospital and stood at the front desk.

“Annette Valdemar. Gunshot wound patient.”

“Uh...yes! Yes, sir. Um, to the A-4---Walter! Guide this gentleman!”

A staff member hurried out from the back and led him to the hospital room. Heiner quietly followed him with a grim expression.

As soon as Heiner entered the private room, the doctor followed. The doctor's forehead was beaded with sweat, as if he had rushed to the hospital after receiving the report.

“Janice, ha, Schulze. It is an honor to meet you, Your Excellency."

Heiner did not look at the doctor, but at Annette, who lay pale. His eyes traced her body obsessively. He did not notice that his face was disturbed.

"How is she?”

"She was transported here quickly and the gunshot wound was not deep, so I got it out without complications. Her wound should heal in no time.”

The doctor hesitated, finding appropriate words. However, Heiner was giving Annette his full attention and did not notice the signs.

“However, Your Excellency, I don’t know if you knew, but the Madam…”

"..."

"...she was pregnant..."

"...."

"It was still early, but unfortunately she miscarried.............. the injury is expected to heal quickly, but there may be some aftereffects of the miscarriage ...."

“...what?"

Heiner abruptly turned his head and asked belatedly.

“What did you just say?"

"Oh, um, that madam had a miscarriage..."

"You said she was pregnant?"

"Yes, yes. It’s about 11 weeks ....... She was bleeding down there when they brought her in, and that's why she lost consciousness."

Heiner stood still and said nothing. The doctor hesitantly added.

"I'm sorry, Sir, but in my opinion...........this incident will make it difficult for madam to conceive in the future."

"...."

“Her body is weak, so even if she were to give birth, I think it would be difficult for her to have another child."

Heiner listened to the doctor without breathing properly. The words coming out of the doctor's mouth felt like a nightmare.

Pregnant...... She's pregnant?

Miscarriage?

The two words collided dizzyingly. Heiner turned his head again, stunned. His gray eyes shook as he looked down at Annette.

In the past, she had desperately wanted children. She had not given up, even when doctors had found that it was difficult for her to conceive.

During the first year of their marriage, they often spent the night together, and even after the revolution, Annette sought his company.

Perhaps she had hoped to conceive. A vain fantasy that once they had a child, things would return to the way they were before.

But despite Annette's efforts, in the past four years she had never become pregnant.

Naturally, the child-related issue no longer surfaced. Heiner had a vague idea that she was infertile.

However, she was pregnant. Annette.

‘11 weeks ......?’

That was the last time they were intimate.

The reason was that Annette had never visited the bedroom again before or after she brought up the subject of divorce.

It was that time, of all times.

It was bad luck, as if someone had played a bad prank. Bad luck was the only explanation.

Heiner went through the chain of events of this sudden accident with a sharp mind.

Annette was pregnant, that time, this happened, she miscarried, she would never be able to get pregnant again…

His thoughts crumpled like paper. It was neither coherent nor rational. Heiner touched his mouth with a trembling hand.

"...... first, ...... I understand."

"Yes, Sir, the madam will wake up soon. The byproducts in the womb will be excreted naturally.”

"Byproducts..."

It was an extremely dry word that didn't sound one bit like life. Heiner found the word very offensive. He did not know why.

“But if the bleeding doesn’t stop or she feels pain, she may need to undergo surgery to take out the byproducts.”

Heiner tried to take in every word the doctor said, but he wasn't sure if his mind was working.

He struggled to part his lips when he heard about the possible aftereffects after a miscarriage.

“Please don’t let the miscarriage information leak out.”

“Yes, Your Excellency. Do you have any further questions or needs?"

"...... My wife usually has insomnia, but it seems to have gotten worse recently. Is this related to her pregnancy?"

"It varies from woman to woman, but there are many possible symptoms during the early stages of pregnancy. If she has insomnia, it might worsen it.”

He could not recall when exactly Annette's insomnia became worse. He had made a conscious effort not to find out.

Heiner clenched his fists, then asked in a quiet voice, “Can she continue taking her existing medications?"

“If it's the medicine she’s been taking without any problems, that would be fine."

“Can you check it out? If there is a better medicine, please prescribe it.”

“I will do so, Sir. If there is anything else you need, please let me know at any time.”

“Yes, thank you.”

Heiner's gaze was still fixed on Annette as he replied calmly.

“Yes, then......"

The doctor glanced at the Commander-in-Chief's large back and left the room. Feeling like he shouldn't make a sound for some reason, he closed the door quietly.

Tak.

“Whew.”

The doctor wiped the sweat from his forehead and adjusted his gown. The rumored young commander-in-chief was more deadly than he had expected. He was a remarkably handsome man, but with a great overpowering aura.

His wife was also one of the most beautiful women in Lancaster, but the pictures did not do her any justice.

Even though the stories about them were hideous, the couple really looked good together, minus all the newspaper stories and inside information. And the way he looked at his wife...........

Remembering the commander-in-chief's expression, the doctor tilted his head. Didn't they say the two had a bad relationship?

\*\*\*

\*past/ memory \*

“Heiner."

Annette moved her lips, standing in front of Heiner’s bedroom and holding the lamp. The lamp's pale light illuminated Heiner's angular face.

“Are you busy today? If not….”

The end of her voice trembled slightly. Heiner knew full well what Annette wanted. She had visited him and demanded intimacy countless times over the past three years, but he was not used to this strange sense of shame.

Heiner looked at her in silence. Annette bit her lower lip. She felt suffocated on those ashen eyes.

If you don't like me, just tell me.

If you don't like it, refuse.

Just get rid of me.

The words that had reached the end of her throat were swallowed again.

Annette lowered her head and gripped her skirt. She wanted him not to say no.

She wanted him not to refuse. She didn't want him to kick her out. She knew in her head that their relationship was already broken, but only when he held her did she feel like everything was okay.

Despite the fact that after everything ended, misery remained like a leftover.

Heiner's gray eyes scanned her up and down.

Annette's hand holding the hem of her dress trembled slightly. With one last look at her hand, Heiner quietly led her into the bedroom.

The door closed silently. Annette stepped into the room, feeling like being dragged. Her form was slowly swallowed by the darkness.

Inside, only one incandescent lamp was lit, not very bright. Heiner walked over and turned off the light. In an instant, the room darkened.

He sat down on the edge of the bed. Annette closed her eyes tightly.

There was no conversation. That was all there was.

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# Chapter 17

That evening, Annette woke up.

Her body was as heavy as wet cotton. A sharp pain came from her stomach. Annette let out a faint moan and curled up her body slightly.

A black figure appeared at the edge of her half-blurred vision. She blinked her furrowed eyes several times. Slowly it came into focus. It was Heiner.

Heiner looked down at her as if he had seen a ghost. It was so unlike him that Annette mistook it for a dream for a moment.

Heiner called a doctor as soon as he saw that she had regained consciousness. The doctor arrived shortly after and diagnosed her condition.

He said the gunshot wound was not very deep. It was a diagnosis that was nothing compared to the pain that she had felt so horribly. Annette wondered for a moment, but was soon convinced.

Arnold said she was hypersensitive. He said she was sensitive to even the slightest discomfort. Judging from his words, she guessed that she must be hypersensitive this time, too.

After giving some precautions regarding the gunshot wound, the doctor hesitated for a moment and then told Annette that she would be bleeding for the next three to four days. Annette thought it was menstruation.

Normally her menstruation was very irregular. Sometimes it would skip months at a time. She assumed that was the case again.

But the doctor said it was because she had a miscarriage.

Annette could not believe what she heard.

*Don't be surprised, as the byproducts left in your womb should come out later.*

*If the bleeding continues, surgery will have to be performed. The uterus may contract and cause pain in the abdomen..............*

The doctor's voice was half disconnected. A blue vein appeared on the back of Annette's hand as she clutched the bedding.

The doctor looked very sorry and informed her that it would be difficult for her to conceive in the future. By then Annette was half lost.

"Well then, you should get some rest."

The doctor bowed politely and left the room. Annette sat in a daze, not having a mind to greet the doctor.

She involuntarily put her hand on her stomach. She could feel the bandages wrapped tightly under the hospital gown.

*‘Pregnant---? When? How?’*

She hadn't been feeling particularly well lately, but she just assumed it was stress, never dreaming it was pregnancy.

A strange chill came over her. Annette’s shoulders shook lightly. It was a child she had never even known existed, and yet there was a great sense of loss in her stomach.

It was a child whom she would never get to meet, whom she desperately wanted.

“...I kept your miscarriage a secret from the outside world.”

Heiner opened his mouth quietly.

“I will handle all matters concerning the incident myself, so don't worry about that part.”

Annette slowly turned her head to look at him. His words sounded very strange.

*'He's going to handle it?'*

There was no way that Heiner would handle things in her favor. He normally would let her fend for herself when the reporters bothered her. He was fed up with newspaper stories.

“The perpetrator was apprehended at the scene. We are investigating what his purpose was and whether he had accomplices.”

"..."

"...Currently, the use of firearms is restricted in public and you were pregnant with a child, so attempted murder charges will be strictly applied and punished.........."

"...the child..."

Her voice cracked loudly. Annette didn't care and kept talking.

“How old was the child?"

Heiner stared at her stomach for a moment, then quickly raised his gaze.

"It was 11 weeks."

This roughly coincided with when her menstruation had ceased. Annette closed her eyes for a long time before opening them again. Her mind was fuzzy.

"Annette, the child is......"

Heiner added heavily with slight hesitation.

"There are ways to adopt a child if you want….."

“Adopt?"

Muttering softly, Annette looked up at him. Heiner's face was, as usual, hard to tell his intentions.

“What are you talking about all of a sudden?"

"So, if you want to raise a child.”

“No, I don't want it. I'm rather glad it happened like this.”

At that, Heiner's brow furrowed slightly. Annette said, lowering the hand on her stomach.

"It was a child who should never have been born."

“What do you mean?”

“It would have been unhappy if it was born. Because it would have to live in a home without love and with a mother with all kinds of labels. I took a lot of medication during my pregnancy, and I don't know if it would turn out all right…”

“I thought you wanted a child."

“Not anymore. And you didn’t want it. Aren’t you glad it happened this way?”

Annette sincerely thought so. There was not a single reason why Heiner would want a child, and there were too many reasons not to want one to count.

But Heiner shook his head defensively. The way he looked was like someone who had been attacked unexpectedly.

"What in the world… Why do you think that?"

"Then, did you ever want to have a child with me? No, you didn't."

"Annette, I just..."

Heiner moved his lips with a look of not knowing what to say.

"I just ...... never thought about having children. The doctors said it’s difficult for you to conceive….and there’s no news in four years.”

“Whatever your true feelings, it’s good for you, Heiner."

Annette's mouth lifted slightly.

"It's not a good political idea, is it, to have a child with me?"

Superficial issues notwithstanding, it was clear that Heiner was lucky. With a child born to a woman he hated. There was no way he could love it.

The miscarriage was a blessing in many ways.

For Heiner, for the child that was never born, and for the people out there.

“But you."

Heiner's speech broke off. His low, resonant voice was tightly closed. He let out a slightly shaky breath and then sighed.

“You wanted a child, didn't you?”

“….What about it?"

“Why is it different now? Knowing that I betrayed you? Not much has changed between us then and now anyway."

Heiner's eyes were dark and sunken. He looked like a giant shadow as he sat in his chair with his head half bowed.

“What does this have to do with you, whether I want it or not?”

“Annette, I am not trying to argue about superiority.”

"Then what exactly is it that you want to discuss?"

"Just because you have wanted it in the past - that you could consider adoption."

“I don't want it anymore!"

Annette's voice rose. She spat the words out, half out of reason.

“I don't want it anymore. I don’t need a child. I’m glad I didn’t have one! Why do you insist on it…!”

The last words sounded almost like a scream. Annette's lips trembled violently. The atmosphere became precarious like cracked glass.

Heiner sat in shock, stiff as a frightened animal. A heavy silence descended. In the silence, only Annette's breath fluctuated unsteadily.

For a while neither of them said anything. After a moment of silence, Annette turned her head away from him.

“Please leave. I want to be alone."

Heiner stared at her without reply. The ticking of the clock chilled the room. Annette's fingers, laid over the sheet, shook slightly.

Eventually he quietly stood up. His footsteps became distant as he walked away. The door opened and then closed again.

Annette turned onto her side. The cold air pressed down on her whole body. Nothing seemed real, even though she opened her eyes in a sane spirit.

Perhaps, belatedly, the pregnancy was selfish greed. If she really thought about the child, she should never bring it into the world.

The world that the child would be born into would be infinitely cold and cruel. Because it was her child, because it was of the Rosenberg bloodline.

Perhaps it would hate his mother while growing up. She was used to being hated, but for the child, how would it feel?

Annette curled her body tightly. Her body began to tremble despite the thick covers. A chill that seemed to come from inside her stomach was excruciatingly painful.

*“You wanted a child, didn't you?"*

Did she want a child?

Yes, she wanted it.

Whether it was because of loneliness, desperation, or some other selfish reasons, she herself did not know. Whatever the reason, she wanted it.

She had lost a child she had wanted so much, but strangely enough, there were no tears. She did not feel guilty that she had failed to protect her child, nor did her heart ache so much that it broke.

She just felt very cold.

It was cold as if there was a big hole in her body.

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While in the hospital, Annette underwent various additional tests. She also conducted psychological counseling at the semi-forced recommendation of the doctor and Heiner.

They seemed to be concerned about the impact of the miscarriage on her, but Annette thought the counseling was unnecessary.

She herself wasn't too shocked. She was just a little dazed.

“How are you feeling today?"

"Not too bad."

"Did you sleep well?"

“Yes, I slept well."

“That’s good. Who did you talk to yesterday?"

"The doctor, the nurse, and my husband............"

“May I ask what you and your husband talked about?"

"I don't remember much."

“I heard that you had a little fight the other day about the adoption issue."

"It wasn't a fight, I was just --- sensitive."

"It was just a difference of opinion. Why don’t you want to adopt?"

Annette stared at her hands resting on her thighs for a moment. Her lips slowly moved.

“I'm ......"

There were many reasons. Because she was not confident that she could love her child completely. She felt sorry for the child who would grow up in such a home.

Because it was obvious that people would whisper that she used the child to keep her husband from divorcing her. And adoption itself was pointless anyway.

“I've just had a miscarriage and ....... To think of a new child again so soon…it’s too much.”

“Ah, yes. I can fully understand how you feel."

Annette lied repeatedly in counseling. She would tell the truth, in effect, only superficially about her wellbeing, and even invented responses when deep feelings were involved.

Basically, Annette did not believe in the confidentiality of the counseling sessions. If she made even the slightest mistake in her reply, she expected to be in the gossip tomorrow morning.

And even if it wasn’t for that, the entire session would be reported to Heiner.

The counselor was satisfied with her answer and did not question her further. Annette closed her eyes, feeling tired from the light conversation alone. A familiar darkness surged over her vision.

She just wanted to be alone.

# Chapter 18

The bleeding stopped on the fourth day. After draining all the by-products, she thought it was really over.

At Heiner's request, the doctor checked the medications Annette had been taking. The doctor's expression as he examined the medications was not very good.

“Ummm ...... Synagel is a banned drug for pregnant women to take in the early stages. The doctors usually make it clear if you are pregnant when they prescribe it. Has your doctor ever mentioned the possibility of pregnancy? The symptoms you mentioned are common in pregnant women......... and your menstruation also stopped.”

“No such word specifically ......"

“Hmmm, I see. First, I will prescribe a nerve stabilizer different from this one. The effects will be mild and long lasting.”

Annette nodded. The doctor, who had written something on a form, handed her the prescription.

“And if you take a lot of medicine, you may end up with an overdose headache. The same goes for headache medicine. Do not exceed the durations and dosage written here.”

"Yes."

She just learned that she had taken a drug that was forbidden to pregnant women, but surprisingly, she had no feelings about it.

The accident didn't go well, as if there was a malfunction somewhere in her body, to be precise.

Annette was unable to regain her fuzzy spirit even when the doctor laid out the explanation of the medications she was taking and left the hospital room.

“...the doctor."

Heiner's cracked voice broke the silence.

"Let's change your primary physician.”

Annette slowly turned her head to look at Heiner.

Their eyes of different temperatures met. Heiner stared at her, not moving slightly, like a person who didn’t even breathe. Eventually, Annette slowly shook her head.

“There is no need for that.”

"How many times has he been seeing you and not noticed that you were pregnant?”

“It's all right."

“What do you mean it’s all right?”

Heiner asked back in a rather sharp tone. There was a faint hint of anger beneath his pretty face. It was an unfamiliar expression.

Annette thought he was overreacting. She didn't really care about anything. She didn't need any more doctors anyway.

"Well, it doesn’t matter, so…"

“What do you mean it doesn't matter?"

Annette swallowed the sigh that was trying to escape.

She really didn't want to fight Heiner anymore. Not because she was concerned about her relationship with him, but because she was just tired of draining her mental energy with meaningless arguments.

"Why do you care?"

Annette turned her head, pressing her throbbing temple with her fingers.

"...if you want to change it, change it. You're going to do whatever you want anyway.”

Her voice was full of tiredness. Heiner’s lips were pressed into a thin line and said nothing. An unreadable gaze gathered over Annette's face.

The second hand on the pocket watch chimed regularly. An inertial silence hovered between them. After a while, he spoke up.

“Doctor Arnold is examining not only you, but also me and the servants of the official residence, and I don't want to hire someone who is not competent or dishonest....... regardless of you."

His voice was softer than before. Annette kept her eyes on the edge of the bed and nodded absentmindedly. The atmosphere that had been tense gradually calmed down.

“...... Annette."

Heiner called her, hesitating for a moment.

“I'm sorry you had to go through that............ Sincerely, whoever is responsible for this be held accountable. Legally and morally."

*‘Sorry ......’*

His words sounded so strange. Heiner spoke as if he were consoling someone else who had nothing to do with him.

Annette couldn't help but laugh out loud. She would rather him not saying anything.

At least it could have been a silly consolation that he was taking this job as his own.

How much more must she expect and how much more must she be disappointed? She had been utterly disappointed in him for the past three years that she didn't think she could expect any more.

*He regretted it.*

*He was sorry.*

Annette had no idea what to make of such cheap sympathy. She wanted to despise him, she wanted to be angry with him, and at the end of the day, everything felt empty.

He was the kind of man who would look at her death with an unchanged face and say, "Too bad." Or at all relieved. Annette chose to change the subject instead of questioning him about it.

"When will I be discharged?"

“When you want.”

“I want to as soon as possible."

“You still need to recover. You still haven't finished your psychological consultation...”

“I told you I don't need a consultation. And I'll call the doctor to the official residence.”

Annette spoke in a firm tone. Her voice was colder than when she spoke of divorce.

In the past three years, Annette had never given a similar order to Heiner.

She was just terrified of not going against his will in the slightest.

Despite her past living as the most prosperous person in the capital, Annette was not comfortable with using the servants. So calling the doctor to the official residence was something she would have said in the past.

"......"

"Why not?"

"Let's do the ...... treatment."

Heiner answered after a few moments of silence. His gaze touched Annette's fingers. Annette followed his gaze and looked down. A rough voice descended over her head.

“Where did your ring go?"

For a moment Annette could not understand his words.

"...... yes?"

"Your ring."

Heiner eyed her ring finger. Annette let out an Ah sound belatedly. The ring finger of her left hand was empty.

*‘Should I make the excuse that I left it off because it was inconvenient?'*

But there was no reason to make excuses in a situation where she had already requested a divorce. After a few moments of thinking, Annette calmly replied.

“I just took it off.”

“Just?"

"It doesn't make sense to wear it now.”

Annette thought that Heiner

would demand an explanation. Because lately he had been quite sensitive to every single one of her actions.

Unexpectedly, however, Heiner said nothing more. Staring at her empty ring finger for a moment, he then turned his head.

"...... rest."

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The doctor said there would be no problem if she was discharged immediately. It was not a serious gunshot wound and she was now mostly recovered.

The discharge procedure proceeded rapidly. The fact of the miscarriage did not leak out, but the incident and the hospital where she was staying at the time were described in detail in the newspaper.

“We couldn't prevent the incident from spreading.”

Heiner said, as if in an excuse. However, Annette did not think he should have gone through the trouble for her in the first place.

*‘Are being bitten by the public different from actually having one's safety threatened?'*

Annette thought numbly and put on her black brimmed hat. Even her dress and shoes were black, making her look like a woman going to a funeral.

Annette slightly pulled back the curtain. The light, dotted with the shadows of raindrops on the windowpane, reflected on the back of her hand.

It was raining outside. Round umbrellas hovered at the entrance of the hospital. It was the reporters who had come to wait for her.

Warmthless gaze scanned the group. Behind her, she heard a knock at the door. Annette answered, still looking out the window.

"Yes."

The door rattled open. A quiet voice echoed behind her.

“I've already taken all your stuff to the car. Let's go.”

Annette finally released her hand from the curtain. The hem of the curtains covered the window glass, glazing it with a pale white light.

She turned around, grabbed her bag on the bed, and left the hospital room. The four attendants followed her in front and back.

“If the reporters gather, don't say anything.”

Heiner, who was walking alongside her, whispered softly. Annette looked up at him.

“They have been waiting impatiently to catch anything. Don't even give a simple answer."

Because of the difference in height, only his sharp jawline and firm lips were visible in Annette's field of vision. Under the bluish hallway lighting, he looked like a large ghost.

"Did you understand?"

" ...I understand."

Annette lowered her head again and replied automatically.

A cold silence hung in the air while they rode down in the elevator for only nobles. Annette pulled down the black veil of her hat. Her fingers began to tremble slightly.

The elevator arrived at the first floor and beeped an announcement. As they entered the lobby through the aisle, the eyes of the people in the building were suddenly focused on her.

The lobby, oddly quiet, felt foreign. Annette kept her eyes on the tips of her shoes and concentrated only on moving with a straight gait. The sound of her heels echoed desolately.

The attendant in the front reached for the entrance door. Annette's shoulders stiffened with nervousness and fear.

The moment the door opened, the sound of rain and chaos came with it. Camera’s flashes burst through the rain.

“She’s out!"

“Turn on the lights!"

“Please look this way!"

"Is it the madam’s will that your medical record be kept private?"

"Do you have any reason to think that this shooting was due to a grudge?"

“Do you have any intention of doing interviews?”

The questions, thrown like shouts, rang in her eyes. The attendants blocked the gathering of reporters. A thin bony knot formed on the back of Annette's hand as she gripped the strap of her bag like a lifeline.

Heiner guarded Annette, almost hugging her. His familiar scent hit her nostrils.

But Annette could not feel at all secure. For a time, she even hoped that these large arms would protect her.

But now that she thought about it, it was impossible to wish for his protection from the start.

Wouldn't it be better if she just covered her eyes so she couldn't see anything?

Shards of broken light bulbs crushed under her heels. Every time the camera flash went off, there was a popping sound.

"...Are you in a secret relationship?”

"...in the course of the statement............"

"...madam!"

In the midst of the commotion, a sharp voice suddenly pierced her ears.

“Madam Valdemar!”

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# Chapter 19

The call sounded a little farther away than the reporters'. Annette, who had kept her head down the whole time, involuntarily looked to the side.

“I'm ......! I'm ...... of ......."

The woman's voice was again buried in the commotion and the sound of rain. The woman, who appeared to be a civilian and not a reporter, looked very nervous and desperate.

The woman pushed her way through the reporters, shouting what? What did she say? The reporters with cameras looked at her in surprise.

The buzz slowly subsided. Everyone presented was looking at the woman. The woman opened her mouth, staring straight at Annette.

“I am David Buckel's sister!”

Until that moment, Annette had no idea who David Buckel was. It was the first time she had heard the name.

“I have something to say to madam Valdemar!"

Annette's eyes widened slightly.

*You want to speak to me? Why?*

There were countless words of fuss over Annette. But it was a multitude of situations against her alone, and only reporters were willing to talk to Annette one-on-one.

The reporters began to buzz at the woman's words. A similar interest floated on each person. Cameras and notebooks turned toward the woman.

“David Buckel? Are you the sister of Mr. Buckel who shot madam Valdemar?"

“Did your brother do it on his own will? On what business did you come to see the madam?"

“Have you heard anything from Mr. David Buckel?"

“I’m Rose Schwartz from Graphic, Inc! Can I interview you separately?"

“No!"

The woman's shrill cry made the surroundings quiet for an instant. She did not look at the reporters, but only at Annette from beginning to end.

For some reason, her clear and emotionless eyes made her heart skip a beat. The woman's lips slowly opened.

“I would like to see the madam in person. I had no choice but to come because I couldn't reach you, and I don't want to do any kind of interview with these people."

"Quickly, clear the area.”

Heiner murmured overhead to his attendants. His voice was cold as usual, but somewhat angry.

“Well then, I’ll look forward to hearing from you, madam."

The woman’s last words were barely audible, drowned out by the reporters' questions. Heiner pulled Annette, who was standing in a daze, to his chest.

"Get on quickly."

“I ......"

“Hurry."

A decisive voice fell.

Annette wanted to get a closer look at the woman's face, but she had to walk, swept away by the force that embraced her shoulders.

"Madam Valdemar, just one reply...."

"You know why............"

All the sounds drifted away from her ears and just buzzed away like noise. Annette breathed in the familiar scent of Heiner.

Her head was dizzy, but only the desperate woman's face was oddly clear on her retinas.

*‘Where did I see that woman.....?'*

Annette thought inadvertently, and recognized it after a few moments. She quickly turned her head and looked at the woman. Her vision repeatedly blurred and became clearer.

She had seen that woman somewhere before. But she couldn't remember anything other than that vague certainty. Was she a commoner? When had she seen her? Where?

Did she hold a grudge against her then? What the hell did she do to her? If she didn't remember as much, she wouldn't have known her. If she saw her a few times….

*‘Is my memory accurate to begin with?'*

His tightly closed lips quivered slightly.

Lately, Annette had been living with forgetfulness. She was constantly making mistakes, unable to remember a single trivial detail, while in the past she could remember hundreds of pages of sheet music.

At this point, Annette began to doubt even her own deja vu about women.

While her thoughts were confused, they arrived at the waiting car before she knew it. The attendant opened the car door. Until then, Annette and the woman had not taken their eyes off each other.

Heiner pushed her into the car. He then got in the seat next to her and her view was blocked. With a snap, the car door slammed shut.

Reporters clung to the windows. The car rolled onto the road. The twinkling flashing lights disappeared behind them.

“...... who is she?"

“She’s the sister of David Buckel, the man who was arrested.”

“That's not what I'm asking."

“Then?"

“She wanted to tell me something…”

Annette’s words became slurred. She tried to explain to him what she was not sure of. She felt like he would only treat her like an idiot.

“No.”

A heavy gaze landed on the back of Annette's head as she lowered her head. Heiner asked in a seemingly generous voice.

“What is it that you want to know?"

“Why..."

She trailed off.

"Why did she come to see me?"

Annette looked at her hands on her lap and around in the air and continued to speak in a daze.

“What is her reason for wanting to meet with me personally? She didn't even tell the reporters............."

"It must be because she wanted to help her brother. Don't think too much about it."

“It just didn't seem to be for that reason. And what did she mean she couldn't reach me…?”

Annette looked back at Heiner, as if to pursue the matter.

“You know something, don't you?"

“...she’s sent you a few letters.”

He was surprisingly straightforward and agreeable.

“But why didn't you tell me?"

“I decided it was not necessary to give you, the victim and patient, the letters from the criminal’s sister.”

"I'll be the judge of that, Heiner."

Annette did not believe his excuse. There must be some other reason, she thought. Because there was no way he would take care of her situation like that in the first place.

"Are there any other letters that haven't gotten through to me like this before?"

Heiner did not answer. From the silence, Annette read the affirmation.

She wasn't particularly angry or annoyed. She just felt as if something deep in her chest was worn out. Annette spoke quietly, fiddling with the strap of her handbag.

“I want to meet her."

“Aren’t you going to ask more about the letters?”

“No, it has already passed."

"You mean you don't care anymore if I continue to do so in the future?"

For an instant, Annette's hands stopped. She looked at him with puzzlement. His words were very strange.

*'In the future.....?'*

Did Heiner assume that they have a future? What exactly did he think the future was? Was he really willing to risk everything and look to the future?

She found it somewhat comical.

“I wondered if the letters had her number or address on it. If not, please look it up. In place of stolen letters.”

“Madam, there's no reason to meet her at all.”

“Nor is there any reason to ask your permission."

Due to her originally weak tone, her words did not sound resolute at all. At first glance, it sounded like an appeal.

However, Heiner nodded without further objection, although he still looked dissatisfied.

“I’ll take care of it. But with personal protection."

She had expected that much, and Annette accepted. For reasons unknown, Heiner’s was not as overbearing as before.

Annette nodded her head as if that were the answer. Fallen leaves swept past the car window. The trees, most of their leaves withered, had somehow become emaciated.

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The woman's name was Catherine Grott.

Catherine was married for less than six months and lived with her husband in a fruit business on Western Road 23rd Street.

Even after hearing her name and address, Annette could not recall who she was. It was a name she had never heard of before, and there was no contact at all with the place of her address.

Holding the note in one hand, Annette slowly turned the dial on the telephone switchboard. On the note was a phone number.

She dialed the numbers and heard a ringtone. Annette nervously held the phone answer swallowed. After a long ring, the call was connected.

[Yes, this is Brunner Grott.]

“Are you Catherine's husband?"

[Yes, who is it?]

For some reason, she was at a loss for words at the question. Who was she? Annette, who had been silent for a moment, opened her mouth hesitantly.

“Um, to Mrs. Grott...Would you please tell her my message? Tell her to come to my house tomorrow or the day after that, and that I had given her permission to come in and out, so just tell the people at the front gate her name, they’ll know…”

There was a strange tension behind the period. The other party was silent for a while, probably guessing her identity.

Since he was her husband, he couldn't have known about the problem of his wife’s brother.

Annette was nervous, not knowing what the woman had told her husband.

Eventually, a clerical answer came back.

[......I understand. I will pass this on to Catherine.]

“Thank you.”

Annette waited for the other person to hang up first, but the call remained unbroken, only silence. Unable to bear it, she put down the receiver first.

Silence fell with a clank. After that, Annette stood there for a long while, unable to take her hand off the receiver.

In fact, she didn't need to find Catherine first. It was unlikely that she liked Annette, and as Heiner said, it was highly unlikely that her purpose was good.

What did that mean, why did she do it, what feelings did she have for her, what did she want to say, and what she would say back.

Still, strangely enough, Annette felt compelled to listen to her.

Perhaps, for the first and last time, it was an opportunity to face the past.

Even if it hurt her….

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# Chapter 20

The next morning, Heiner visited Annette’s room with the newly hired attending physician. The doctor, who appeared to be in her mid-40s, had a very kind smile on her face.

“Hello, madam, I'm Mila Lauren. I studied family medicine at Verden University and have been a specialist at Lancaster Cross Hospital for 12 years. I promise to do my best."

"Uh, yes. I’m Annette......."

It felt strange somehow to put Heiner's last name after her name. Annette hesitated for a moment, then added.

" ...... Valdemar. I look forward to working with you.”

At that momentary interval, Heiner's strange gaze touched her and then fell away. Annette folded and averted her eyes.

Mila Lauren, not noticing this, simply smiled softly and continued.

“I have been informed of your previous situation. I will take special care to ensure that no drug abuse or overdose occurs. By the way, madam, I heard that you received psychological counseling while you were in the hospital."

“Yes, just a few times."

“I'm not sure about that one, so why don't you try to get a separate counselor?"

“If you wish, I can call the same counselor that we have at Lutheran Hospital.”

Suddenly, Heiner interrupted. Annette's brow furrowed slightly in discomfort.

She didn't want them to think she had mental problems.

The same was true even if it was just a consultation. Socially, it was never considered a good idea to seek psychological counseling.

The perception of it was better than in the past, but it was still the same among the close minded aristocrats.

A history of mental illness could bar a person from marriage.

This was a very important issue since the nobles were usually married for political reasons.

Annette was a rare case of a love marriage, but the thinking of the privileged class was embodied in the same way.

Even now that the aristocracy had fallen, the thinking that was etched into the marrow of their bones could not be easily erased.

"I don't need a consultation."

"Oh, madam. There’s nothing to be wary of.”

Mila Lauren, who had once taken on the role of attending physician to an aristocratic family, noticed Annette's reluctance.

"A simple psychological consultation is almost mandatory in children's schools these days."

“No, I really don't need it."

In fact, it was ridiculous to worry about reputation now. Adding at least one more rumor of mental illness to an already rock-bottom reputation was not going to change anything.

But Annette still didn't like it. She hated seeing people pretending to be concerned about her miscarriage, and she hated the mention of it in the first place.

She wanted to live as if nothing had happened. As if the child had never existed in the first place. And most of all...

*“I could lock you up in a mental hospital for the rest of your life if you continue to go against my will like this."*

Lately, Annette had sometimes wondered.

Perhaps she had really gone mad.

At one point or another, she felt as if her mind was floating. It was as if she was standing on the borderline between reality and dreams.

Under pressure or stress, the feeling would intensify.

She was likely to find herself in that state of mind when she sought advice. Annette was not particularly cooperative in psychological consultations at Lutheran Hospital, even giving lies for answers.

'First of all, I understand what you mean, madam. Still, please take your time and think about it more. I will leave a consultation form here for you to fill out when you have time."

Mila Lauren placed some papers on the table, but Annette did not look at them.

While Heiner watched, Mila Lauren briefly checked her condition. It was close to a formal medical examination, as she had already undergone the tests at Lutheran Hospital.

"Well then, madam, if there is any discomfort, you can call me anytime. As I said, please be sure to take your medications only as prescribed."

"Yes."

With a small smile and a greeting, Mila Lauren left the room. Annette stared at her gray hair.

She was a gentle person. A graduate of a prestigious university with a 12-year career as a medical specialist, she must have great ability, and at best, though she was a waste of a doctor to treat someone like her, Annette thought.

“Annette.”

Annette raised her gaze at the quiet call.

“Why do you refuse counseling?”

It was an expected question. And it was an obvious question. In the past, she might have been pleased with a handful of his attention, but now they were all just too annoying.

"I told you. I don't want it."

"I understand your aristocratic perception of psychological consultation, but how long are you going to live trapped in that cliché notion? I think you need it because you have a problem….”

His words trailed off for a moment. Heiner's eyes shook faintly.

“Even if it’s a small problem, you’re hurt.”

"......"

"A cold, a headache, ...... well, something like that. You’re not well.”

The edge of his voice cracked slightly. Annette soaked up the arsenic without noticing it.

"Yes."

To her, his words were just comical.

“I don't think that should be coming from someone who said he was going to lock me up in a mental hospital.”

Heiner's brow furrowed. He moved his lips once and said with a sigh.

“I didn't know you were keeping those words in mind…”

“You told me that just to forget it?”

“I said that only because you keep rebelling."

"...rebel?"

Annette cut him off and asked back. A laughter flowed from her lips.

“Did asking for a divorce seem like rebellion to you?” (A)

“I didn't mean it.” (H)

“I am not the one beneath you." (A)

“I have never treated you as someone beneath me.” (H)

“Bullshit.” (A)

“You're the one who thinks of me that way.” (H)

"...... what are you talking about all of a sudden?" (A)

Immediately Heiner fell silent. An unnatural silence hovered between them. Annette asked again.

“When did I ever consider you as an underling?” (A)

"You always thought so....."(H)

“No, I never did." (A)

“You did." (H)

“No, never. What in the world are you talking about?"

Heiner touched his mouth with a tired expression. His large hand swept over his mouth once, and his low, insensitive expression returned in a flash. It was a remarkably quick change.

“So much for that. I didn't mean to fight you."

There had been countless conversations broken off like this. But Annette neither refuted nor added anything.

Conversation was an attempt only with the person who had the possibility of restoring the relationship.

In that respect, Heiner was not a person worth constructive dialogue.

Also, Annette did not think much about the future.

"......fill these forms and give them to your doctor.”

Heiner touched the consultation papers for a moment. Annette did not look at the papers until the end.

\*\*\*

The noon sun shone through the half curtained window. Annette sat by the window and slowly tapped the window frame with her fingertips. The slow, steady sound echoed dully.

Annette was waiting for Catherine Grott inside the official residence.

Catherine did not visit the official residence the next day or the day after. Today marked a week had passed. But Annette waited for her.

Time continued to pass. She didn't call again, and she didn't hear from her, but Annette waited for her.

She did not know how long she would have to wait. But the feeling of waiting for someone was not bad, and Annette felt it was okay if she came very late.

“Ah ......"

Annette, who was looking out the window, involuntarily opened her lips.

Annelie Engels was walking on the first floor with a heavy-looking briefcase. She looked busy.

Annette stared down at her. It wasn't that she had any special personal feeling for Annelie Engels. Her eyes just caught her in passing.

She wondered why she was so busy.

Suddenly, Annelie stopped. Annette looked to the other side where her head was turned.

From there, Heiner, accompanied by an aide, was walking along. He was so large that he stood out from a distance.

Heiner and Annelie greeted each other when they ran into each other as expected. They engaged in some conversation, and Heiner changed direction and began walking by her side.

Heiner held out his hand as if he was about to take the briefcase from Annelie. Annelie hesitantly handed it over.

Annelie laughed out loud at something they were talking about. Heiner, too, smiled faintly.

Birds perched on the fence flapped and flew up.

A calm gaze stared at the two.

Annette was not familiar with the emotion of jealousy. She had never made the assumption that Heiner would look at any woman other than herself.

It was a little strange to think about it, but it was the same even after her situation was like this.

*"I tried to refuse quietly because I had no intention of accepting it in the first place, but the article got out and ...... there was no reversal anyway."*

She didn't think those words were lies. She knew that Heiner was not someone who would lie about such things, or at least not someone who would cheat.

Suddenly an empty smile broke out on her lips.

*'That's how I’ve been trick into believing them.'*

Was the Heiner she knew really Heiner? Was she sure about any of the things she thought she knew about him?

Suddenly, her empty hand with a missing ring caught her eyes. Her ring finger, where the ring had been worn for so long, was slightly thinner at the bottom.

She didn't think it was this empty.

With a strange feeling, Annette looked out the window. The view became clearer. Time slowed down, almost as if it had stopped.

Heiner raised his head, looking her way.

Annette was not particularly surprised, nor did she avoid his gaze. She was too far away to be sure he was really looking at her.

After a moment, Heiner turned his head again. Time, which had stopped, began to flow faster again. The branches of the trees swayed slightly in the breeze.

A light breeze and Annelie's laughter seeped in the slightly open window. The tow carried their steps. A path continued before them.

Annette quietly closed the window.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 21

It was four days later that Catherine Grott visited the official residence.

Shortly after noon, the woman put her bonnet deep over her head and announced her request for a meeting. It was the coldest day since last winter.

Annette asked Heiner to keep no one but herself and Catherine in the parlor. Heiner objected, but she was more persistent than ever.

Eventually, he allowed it on several conditions, including Catherine’s body search. Heiner been had Annette carry a small knife for self-defense.

Annette entered the parlor, fiddling with the folded knife she kept in her pocket. Catherine, who had been sitting in a chair, stood up. The woman had smelled of the cold outside.

Catherine took off her hat and bowed her head. She was a common brunette and had monotonous features, but the two tear dots under her left eye made her look somewhat lonely.

Annette also bowed her head slightly and then raised it. Silence reigned as they sat down, exchanging greetings with only a head nod.

Catherine looked absent-minded. Unable to bear the discomfort, Annette opened her mouth.

“So..."

"Um…."

Their voices overlapped. Annette chuckled awkwardly.

“You first..."

“No, madam, you speak first.”

“It's no big deal, let’s have a cup of tea. ... what kind of tea do you like?"

“Everything is fine."

In response to the answer that came back indifferently, Annette blurted out, saying, “I see….”

This seat seemed cramped and uncomfortable. She could not make eye contact with Catherine and glanced elsewhere for no reason.

Annette knew nothing about the situation. Why did David want to hurt her, what feelings did Catherine have for her, and what was her knowledge…?

The fact that she was alone in this ignorant situation made her very uneasy.

Annette had the attendant serve two cups of warm lemongrass tea. While she was contemplating what to say while the tea was being prepared, Catherine casually inquired.

"Are you feeling well?"

"I feel much better."

"I'm very glad."

Was she sincere? Annette could not accept Catherine's words as they were. Annette's eyes suddenly touched Catherine's belly as she looked down. Noticing where her gaze was, Catherine put her hand on her stomach.

“It's five months."

“.... Ah.”

Catherine was newly married and she was pregnant. Somehow Annette felt strange about the news.

“Congratulations."

Annette struggled to speak in a rough, sandy voice. It was a reaction that was not at all congratulatory, even from her own ears.

“Thank you."

Catherine replied calmly. Annette clenched her hands that were resting on her lap. Her nails dug into her skin.

Her miscarriage was not revealed to the outside world. There was no way Catherine could have known. Annette felt the urge to reveal all the facts to her.

*I had a miscarriage.*

*Because of your brother.*

*It was 11 weeks.*

*Will your child be born blessed?*

*My child was not blessed, no one even knew it existed.*

Her words that had no sound, were swallowed into her throat with self control. Annette's hands relaxed.

What difference would it make if she said so? Would she have to pretend to feel sorry for her? What would change anyway?

Nor could she break what Heiner had already stipulated as confidential. It had happened to her, but Annette had no authority. It had been that way for a long time.

A servant brought simple refreshments. but no one touched it. Steam rose quietly in the air.

Catherine, who had been gazing at the surface of the teacup, suddenly opened her mouth.

“The madam must think I came to visit you hoping for a favor, right?"

“...No?"

“No."

"I thought it might not be true."

“Surprising, isn't it? Why is that?"

"I don't know ------."

Annette couldn't make a guess she wasn't even sure about, that the woman was familiar for some reason. Fortunately, Catherine did not question further.

“I came to visit madam because I have something to tell you.”

"..."

“I thought I would meet with you after you had gotten better. So I came a little late on purpose. Although the madam may have hoped I wouldn't visit."

“No, I ......”

Annette quickly denied it, then hesitated for a moment, not knowing what to say.

“..... not really.”

“I see."

Catherine's lips went up slightly. It was a smile without sincerity.

“Madam is a little different from what I expected.”

Catherine's smile grew a little wider as a question mark appeared on Annette's face.

“I thought you would be more arrogant and self-righteous."

“Ah..."

“Because you’re an only child.”

Annette, Marquis Dietrich's only daughter, chewed the previously omitted word alone.

“Well, a lot of time has passed. A lot has happened. People change."

The words had a strange connotation. Annette couldn't find an answer, so she just kept silent.

In the past, she would have tried to prove that she was not such a person. But now she had no such will.

Annette thought inwardly that she might really be such a person. Only she was just unaware.

“Do you have any relatives?”

"...There were a few, yes."

"You must have been very close to them, yes? Especially since you are an only child."

“We were good friends.”

Annette did not understand why Catherine would ask such a question, but she answered as asked.

“I guess you weren’t very close.” (A)

“My relatives lived in other parts of the country. I have one older brother and one younger brother. We grew up together, as most families do."

Catherine, who naturally brought up her personal history, continued her words like flowing water.

“My brother graduated from the academy and got a job at a trading company. He was an ambitious man. He always wanted to rise to a higher position.”

Catherine's eyes became a little watery as she slowly traced her past. Annette recognized those eyes.

“My brother tried hard to rise to a higher position. He worked hard at his job, he flattered his boss to make him look good, and he did some dirty things. He did everything he could to get that position."

It was nostalgia.

“But my brother failed to get promoted every time. I heard that the branch manager was an aristocrat and he stole all my brother’s credit. Then he (the manager) promoted his own son. Apparently James could put up with the former but not the latter. I'm not sure what the criteria are..... anyway."

Catherine seemed oblivious to the fact that she had subconsciously said her brother's name. Annette repeated the name quietly.

James.

James….Buckel.

“My brother joined the revolutionary army after that.” Catherine sighed. “Not much of a reason, is it?”

But Annette had no response. From the moment the word "revolutionary army" was mentioned, she felt her breath catch in her throat.

“The Revolutionary Armed Forces, although the name seems plausible, were actually mostly people like my brother. Not particularly out for any great cause or ability, just ...... ordinary, maybe even a little insignificant.” [C]

After the revolution, radio and newspapers highlighted the heroic aspect of each revolutionary soldier. It was a good way to push the legitimacy of the revolution and to create public opinion at the same time.

“To be honest, I didn't know much about the Revolutionary Army. I didn't want anything to do with it. But I'm convinced, though, that my brother wasn’t assigned to any important work there. He would have been just a sacrifice at best." [C]

Annette patiently resisted the urge to walk away immediately. She didn't want to listen. But she had to listen. She didn't want to hear. But she still had to. But still...............

“Five years ago, the hunt for the revolutionary army was in full swing. Many people were sought out and taken away, and my brother was one of them." [C]

Why did she have to listen to this? Annette thought.

“At that time, the person in charge of the interrogation was Marquis Dietrich. Inquisition---torture, you might say. Anyway, that was brought to a very quick conclusion.” [C]

Why did she want to listen?

“The conclusion was that my brother was a spy of a hostile country who had come to Padania to start a civil war, and that he would be sentenced to death according to the National Security Law. The Marquis finished his interrogation quickly and immediately went somewhere. Like someone with urgent business." [C]

Why was she telling this story?

"There was a piano concert for you that day." [C]

At that moment, Annette remembered where she had seen the woman. Annette's face rapidly paled.

She involuntarily covered her mouth with both hands. If she didn't, strange noises were going to pop out.

\*\*\*

*She was 23 years old. After a successful recital, Annette was baptized in celebration with several bouquets of flowers.*

*She was unnerved by the crowd that had gathered around her. The lights were dazzling, the scent of the large bouquet of flowers she held to her chest was strong, and the people's praise made her dizzy.*

*“Honey, take a picture of the three of us together."*

*"Right this way, father!"*

*"Oh, yes. I have to take a picture with my daughter, of course...Oh, wait a minute. You want to take pictures with others first?”*

*Suddenly a man hurriedly approached and whispered something in the Marquis Dietrich's ear. Annette nodded her head and took a picture with her friends.*

*The man's words somehow made the Marquis angry. Annette stopped laughing at her friends' jokes and looked back at her father.*

*"Don't ...... cry ...... now ......."*

*“The reporters….”*

*After a short conversation, Marquis Dietrich waved the man off. He had an annoyed expression.*

*Suspicious, Annette asked her father what was going on. Marquis Dietrich faked it, but had no choice but to vaguely answer his daughter's persistent question.*

*“Someone is making a fuss in front of the concert hall.”*

*“A fuss? Who? Why?”*

*“It's probably because they are dissatisfied with the trial. Idiots who do not know the strictness of the law are the law everywhere. Don't mind it."*

*\*\*\*\**

# Chapter 22

*Annette nodded her head. As her father said, criminals always said they had committed no crimes.*

*Having come to the conclusion that it was no big deal, she stood in front of her parents and the photographer. A happy smile was all over her face.*

*“I’m taking the pictures! One, two, three."*

*The shutter speed was slow, so Annette had to remain still for quite some time. While she was pouring her heart and soul into a beautiful smile, the commotion that had occurred in front of the concert hall disappeared from her mind.*

*“Mom, I'm going to rest for a minute. My head hurts from the smell of the flowers."*

*"The dean should be here soon. Go back quickly.”*

*Annette went to the window to catch her breath for a moment as the crowd that filled the surrounding area gradually diminished. Her heart was pounding from the tension that had not subsided and the excitement she felt immediately after the performance.*

*Annette let out a long breath and touched the window pane. As she casually looked out without much thought, something caught her gaze.*

*In front of the door of the concert hall, two strong men were struggling to drag out a woman.The brown-haired woman held onto a lamppost, unwilling to move.*

*That seemed to be the commotion her father had mentioned. Annette studied the woman with a faint frown. From the second-floor window, she could see the situation at the entrance quite closely.*

*"....!"*

*The screaming sound could be heard even through the closed windows. After several jostles, one of the woman's arms fell from the lamppost.*

*It was not difficult to pull her away who had lost her strength. Then the woman whose arms had been grabbed was dragged out.*

*She struggled and resisted to the end. Her face, scorched with anger, regret, and despair, turned to the second floor window. Annette involuntarily took a step back.*

*Oh, that face.*

*A feeling of horror and discomfort, for reasons unknown, crept up her legs. It was as if she had seen the bottom of the human race. Annette shook off the afterimage with misery.*

*Suddenly, someone grabbed Annette by her shoulder. Startled, she spun around.*

*“Ah!"*

*Ansgar was smiling as he raised his hands in surrender. His eyes were squinted as he spoke teasingly.*

*“What, why are you so surprised? Were you having strange thoughts?”*

*“Strange thoughts..........! It's because you caught me so suddenly."*

*“Sorry, sorry. By the way, why is the main character here instead of mingling?”*

*"Oh, I just saw a commotion outside.”*

*“Commotion? What happened? It is not a big deal, is it?”*

*"No, just a person who was displeased with the trial......"*

*Annette looked back, stretching her words. The woman had already been taken away. It had been peaceful outside for some time.*

*Annette turned her head again and said monotonously.*

*"...They were making a fuss."*

\*\*\*

The woman in her memory and the expressionless face in front of her overlapped.

Annette slowly lowered the hand that was covering her mouth. Her throat was tight. She reached for her teacup, but it was shaking so badly that it made a loud rattling sound.

“My brother was shot the next morning. There was no appeal. Because it wasn't a trial in the first place." [C]

Annette was barely quenched, and it tasted nothing.

“When I heard the news of the fall of the royal family, I had high hopes. I hoped that the man would apologize properly and receive the appropriate punishment. But the next morning the news of the death of the Marquis was in the paper…. He was killed immediately after a gunshot by the revolutionary troops at his mansion---well, that was how it ended. Without a word of apology." [C] (\*Remember, Catherine has two brothers, James who died back then, and David who shot Annette)

The more Catherine continued to speak, the more disgusted Annette's face became. It was an emotional face that seemed to crack when touched.

Annette struggled to swallow a groan. Somewhere in her head she could hear her ears ringing and Catherine's voice overlapping.

“I am not asking for leniency or agreement. I know there are situations where violence is the only language, but this was not one of those situations. My brother committed terrible things against the madam. I have nothing to say on that point. My brother must be punished." [C]

"..."

“But I just---I wanted to tell you once. I wanted you to know how my other brother died." [C]

Catherine dropped her gaze for a moment then looked at Annette. Her dry voice flowed out quietly.

“Is ignorance a sin? Can I really blame you for this? I still could not come up with an answer. Maybe I will never find the answer. So I am not saying this because I think the madam is guilty." [C]

"...."

“This is all I have to say. I have no more personal feelings than this. I express my sincere regrets for what has happened to you. Please accept my best wishes for a speedy recovery of your body and mind. ......Then."

Catherine stood up after a short silent bow. The thudding of her shoes echoed across the floor. Annette was still not breathing.

*“Annette!"*

Why did she have to hear this story?

*“We must run away!"*

Why did she do it?

*"We have to run, now!"*

Why was she telling this story…?

Catherine reached the door and grabbed the handle. The cold metal felt on her skin.The moment she tried to turn the doorknob.

“I'm sorry. ......” (A)

Catherine's movements came to a halt at the faintly flowing words.

“Sorry.........." (A)

Her choked voice cracked into a mumble. Annette stopped talking for a moment and bowed her head. Her knuckles turned white as she gripped the hem of her skirt.

“I'm really sorry. .........." (A)

Dropped tears left wet marks on her dress.

"I'm sorry. ......" (A)

Annette repeated the words through her tears. She didn't know what else to say. All she could do was repeat the apology like a malfunctioning machine.

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. ......” (A)

Catherine turned her head and looked at Annette. Her face was seemingly numb, but there was an old sadness hovering over it.

“...... I see.”

Catherine murmured quietly as Annette’s sobbing slowly subsided.

“I wanted to hear that from someone.” [C]

\*\*\*

She once told Heiner.

*“All the newspapers were saying that all the remnants of the dictatorship must be destroyed. I am not sure what part of me must be destroyed, but you may do so if you wish."*

Those were just words of resignation. She didn't say it because she really understood them, felt guilty, or wanted to apologize.

In retrospect, she never once tried to understand them. She never even thought she should understand them.

There has to be a shared point in life for people to understand others.

Annette saw no such point in her life with the revolutionary forces. Even though she was currently entangled with them, it was not of the "shared" kind because it was something she did not know.

*"There was your piano concert that day."*

But at the completely opposite point, they had shared a moment in their lives.

Annette still did not understand Catherine's life. She couldn't even dare to say she understood. It was arrogance and deception.

A noble with a royal bloodline and a commoner.

A highly educated woman dreamed of becoming a pianist, and a woman selling fruit on the market floor.

The family of a military commander who had captured and executed revolutionary troops.

Even if she tried to fit the pieces of the past together for the rest of her life, Annette would never be able to understand them all.

It was an unchangeable fact, diverged from the footprints already lived.

The only reason she was willing to listen to her story was to face the past.

To know and to judge.

To understand.

Even if it hurt her...

A blanket of cloud retreated, revealing the afternoon sun and brightening the parlor.

Perhaps deep down inside, she knew. That the moment she came to understand them, even a little, there was really nothing that could be undone.

Annette cried for a long time in the empty room.

\*\*\*

Annette sorted through her belongings and took out the account books and documents from the safe. They were documents related to donations and sponsorships of civic organizations.

She prepared the final financial statements and then organized them for easy viewing by the person in charge. The work was soon done, as it had been steadily prepared for quite some time.

Annette took out a sheet of paper and wrote a letter of mercy for David Buckel.

Then, just in time for Heiner to leave for work, she went to his office.

Although it was a little past his working time, Heiner was still working. When Annette entered his office, Heiner noticed her footsteps and raised his head.

"...... madam."

He was different from how he usually didn't even take his eyes off the papers, but Annette didn't bother to think too much about it.

She approached the desk and held out a piece of paper. Heiner's brow furrowed.

“What is it?"

“It's a letter of mercy.”

“Why did you write this?"

“Because it’s my right."

"You don't have to write it. What did Catherine say to you?"

"Heiner, this is my right."

"..."

"It is my choice."

\*\*\*

# Chapter 23

Excluding the circumstances before and after, Annette was a victim, at least in this case. She had every right to forgive the sinner.

But Heiner still looked uncomprehending. He said in a tone of exasperation,

"Are you going to be a saint?"

At that, Annette laughed softly.

“You know I can't do that."

It was funny. Because if you had to name the least qualified woman to be a saint in Padania, it would definitely be her.

“Catherine didn't ask me for leniency. I just made my own decision. And ......."

Annette stopped speaking at the gaze she suddenly felt. Their eyes met, with a small smile still on her face.

The air ceased to flow. Heiner continued to stare, not looking away. After a few moments of silence, he muttered with a somber expression.

“… It's been a long time since I've seen you smile like that." (H)

In a flash, the smile disappeared from Annette's face. She unconsciously raised her hand to cover her mouth. Their eyes met again.

Annette slowly lowered her hand. A quiet voice flowed through the room.

“I'm sorry." (A)

"...."

“I don't resent you.” (A)

“I don't know what you're talking about." (H)

Annette tried to smile at him again, but for some reason it didn't work the way she wanted it to.

"It's just everything......" (A)

"..."

"I'm sorry, Heiner. For everything, even what I don't know." (A)

Annette spoke with the utmost candor, but was not at all upset about her heart or the words she uttered.

She was calm as if she was telling the truth. It was as if she was a person who had exhausted even the least amount of emotion she could show.

It was rather Heiner who was upset. His jaw tightened. Heiner gently clenched his back teeth and chuckled.

“Do you know what you should apologize for?"

Annette didn't answer. She didn't know exactly what answer to give.

She knew that Heiner hated her, but she didn't know if it was just because she was the marquis' daughter or if it was because of some other personal grudges.

Seeing Annette unable to answer, Heiner laughed, half mockingly and half bitterly.

“Just don't apologize to me for the rest of your life.” His voice cracked slightly. “Because it's better that way.”

Annette bit her lips tightly. She was speechless, as if she had swallowed poison that robbed her of her voice. After several attempts, she barely whispered.

“...... okay.”

\*\*\*

Annette thought as she poured water into the tub. The reason Heiner didn’t want a divorce was that he still wanted revenge.

When one strives through life for a single goal, one often loses his way. They will mistakenly believe that that goal is what they really want.

Such people always realize this only after they have come a long way. That is actually not what they really want.

Annette thought Heiner was in such a state. He was still stuck in the past. As long as she was around, Heiner would be unhappy for the rest of his life.

Steam bloomed softly in the tub. Annette put her hand in the water. Warmth soaked her fingers, a little too much, she thought.

No, actually, it didn’t matter.

It didn’t matter if he really wanted to maintain a deformed life, tied up in misery together.

She was tired and broken. What Heiner wanted had already come true. However, the period was only shorter.

Annette poured rose water into the hot water. She had poured too much, and the scent of roses was terribly unpleasant, but she didn't mind.

Annette got into the tub with her clothes on. The surface of the water rose high enough for her body to sink. Her tense muscles softened and her eyes became blurry.

She tilted her head back and slowly closed her eyes. Dark, old afterimages flickered in her mind.

*“Don't think, Annette. Just live with the flow."*

How could she do that?

*“You’re good at it."*

How could she not think about anything?

She couldn’t possibly turn her back on all the commotion. She couldn’t ignorantly cover her eyes and ears to keep her innocence.

Things required her mind to work. The weight of life, guilt or innocence, the past, the future, responsibility, and cost.

After much thought, the conclusion she reached was clear.

If she was born and raised in the wrong place, if continuing to live her life would hurt someone, then it would be right to abandon it.

Annette grabbed the knife she had left by the tub. The not long day was clouded in vapor.

It was the knife Heiner had given her for self-defense when she met Catherine. She had thought about dying countless times. She even speculated on methods such as falling from a high place, submerging her head in the water, taking pills, shooting herself in the head with a pistol, or cutting her wrists.

In the first case, there were no buildings around that were tall enough to fall and die. A little further out was a bell tower, but the parapet blocked access.

The second one, she couldn't stand it and raised her head, and the third method was no longer an option since Heiner had already taken her medication away.

And the fourth was difficult to execute because of restrictions on firearms use in the private sector. Suddenly getting a gun looked suspicious.

So the last was the one she chose.

Annette did not know exactly where and how deep to cut to die. She had never heard of such a thing in her life.

So she was going to cut it as deep as she could.

Of course she was scared. Annette knew how much it hurt to see blood from the last shooting.

But she didn’t hesitate.

The awful scent of roses stung her nose. Her head hurt, but she felt refreshed instead. She gently put pressure on the hand that held the knife.

Her breathing calmed and sank. It felt like an end to a long period of anguish, conflict, and pain. Annette smiled with a lighter heart.

*Congratulations, Heiner.*

*Your revenge has been successful.*

\*\*\*

The only light in the darkened room was an incandescent lamp. Heiner took out a cigar. The surface of the unlit cigar glowed white.

It was already well past his work hours, but he didn't feel like getting up. He couldn't decide how he should act and react if he ran into Annette at the official residence.

She had never come out of her room anyway.

A cold breeze blew in through the open window. Heiner looked from a distance at the letter of mercy Annette had left behind. Gradually, it came into focus, and the blurred text became clearer. The contents of the letter of correction remained in its original form. There was not much to it. However, the handwriting was disordered, as if it had been written with her left hand.

Heiner, who had been reading it with a furrowed brow, reached down and opened a bottom drawer. It was filled with bundles of letters and small objects.

He untied the strings of the bundle of letters, pulled out an envelope and opened it. It had elegant handwriting. It was a distinctly different appearance than the messy handwriting on the letter of mercy. At first, Heiner simply compared the handwriting, but before long he began to read the letter.

*[To Heiner, who fits everything he says.*

*Did you think I would be happy if you just sent me a gift after we parted like that? Shouldn’t you have sent even one short note with the gift? The necklace is beautiful. You have as good an eye for jewelry as you do for women. However, you need to learn a little more about the female mind. You may think I am a b\*tch when I say things like this, but I meticulously read articles in newspapers and magazines about love fortunes and how to have a healthy relationship…]*

Heiner chuckled involuntarily. He had never thought she was a b\*tch. If she had been, he would have had her executed much sooner during the revolution.

His eyes steadily moved down the letter, even though he thought it was a really boring story.

*[You know, when I'm walking down the street and the clothes on the display case remind me of my next meeting with you. I wish I could wear this on a date, do you ever do that too?*

*(...... omitted---)*

*The day before yesterday, I had tea with Coco at a cafe, but I was too tired to listen to what she had to say because I remembered our previous argument. Then, suddenly, Coco brought up several types of stories about male-female relationships. Finally I started to concentrate on the conversation. I was curious to know what type we belonged to---]*

Heiner himself did the same. When he was in the army, the biggest saga was how many women the soldiers could charm, and the screw-ups, and about male-female relationships.

Heiner listened to them unconsciously, thinking they were bullsh\*t ramblings, but at the same time he always thought of Annette.

He knew that she was not at all suited to such vulgar talk, but he could not stop thinking about her.

Why did he listen to those stories…

*[And I mean I am sorry to some extent too, Heiner.*

*And it means that I love you that much.*

*AU 714, early summer.*

*Your Lover, Annette Rosenberg]*

*\*\*\**

# Chapter 24

Heiner could not take his eyes off the last sentence for a long time.

He noticed a step late that a faint smile was drawn on his lips. Heiner touched his mouth with a trembling hand.

Unable to resist, he opened a few more envelopes. One by one, the fragments of memories he had tried to keep hidden came to light.

Everything was a lie, but it was the happiest time of his life. The moments when he wanted to forget everything and live in peace like that. He wished that the future would never come…

*“I’m sorry." (A)*

Her words came to his mind suddenly as if he had been hit on the back of his head.

*“Just everything…” (A)*

Annette was not a woman accustomed to apologies. She was a woman who, even after a fight, could not speak directly to him, but only delivered letters later.

*“I'm sorry, Heiner.” (A)*

Even then, the first part usually began with a criticism, and the word sorry was sometimes preceded by the qualifier ‘I'm sorry, too, to a certain extent.’

*“Even for the things I don't know." (A)*

She wasn't the kind of woman to apologize, at least not in that way.

Heiner's face tightened as he looked at the letter of mercy in the pile of letters on his desk. The uneven handwriting and spacing between the lines seemed to speak for her inner feelings.

The blood slowly drained from his face as he traced the disordered handwriting.

Sleeping pills she had saved up for months. The crooked embroidery on the handkerchief, the way she walked absentmindedly into the sea.

The answer was that there was no need to change her doctor.

The traces she had been showing were opposite to the woman he knew, the traces he was suspicious of came together one by one.

She was not that kind of woman.

*Ah.*

Since when did she stop being the woman he knew?

A terrifying feeling of foreboding ran down his spine.

Without time to reflect further rationally, Heiner jumped up from his seat. The chair was pushed back with a loud thud.

He strode out into the hallway without closing the door to his office. The sound of his shoes echoed heavily in the vast hallway.

He wasn't sure. It might have been a groundless fear. Maybe he was just being oversensitive. But his steps didn't stop and became faster.

Major Eugen, who was on his way home late, called him with a surprised look on his face.

“Your Excellency ......?”

The question of what was wrong was added, but Heiner walked past him without even looking at him.

All the way to Annette's room, his heart pounded horribly. He was the kind of man who never held frivolity without certainty, but it was hard to ease his anxiety.

Leaving the eastern government office and passing through the gardens, Heiner entered the main building. The servants greeted him hurriedly at the unusual presence of the Commander-in-Chief.

As he ascended the stairs, he could see the door to her room. Heiner caught one of the passing servants and asked.

“Where is the madam?"

"Yes? Oh, she is probably in her room. She's tired and going to bed.”

He turned toward the room without further questioning. With each step closer, the horrible premonition became more vivid.

Heiner stood at the door and knocked twice, calling for her.

“Madam…”

Before she could reply, he knocked again impatiently.

“Madam, are you inside?"

Heiner waited to hear the usual small voice. He hoped for a whispered reply without the characteristic force.

Then he would be able to leave, scoffing that he had been foolish and that she was not a reckless woman after all.

But there was no sign of her inside. Heiner quickly opened the door.

The room was frighteningly quiet. Things were neatly arranged, and the bed was tidy, with no signs of having been laid down. The strange silence made his heart pound for an instant.

"Annette!"

Heiner walked around the room with razor-sharp eyes, calling her name. A servant came along with anxious eyes at the commotion in the room.

He checked the closet and even the powder room, but there was no sign of her anywhere. Finally he walked to the bathroom.

“Annette!"

He had no reason left to knock on the bathroom door. Heiner yanked the doorknob roughly.

As soon as the door opened, a terrible scent of roses stung his nose along with a misty steam. Meanwhile, something faintly emanating from the mist caught him.

The smell was disgustingly familiar. His head felt cold.

Before his mind could register that this was the smell of blood, the scene in the bathroom rushed before his eyes. Heiner stopped. For a moment, time seemed to stand still. After a moment's interval, his pupils gradually dilated.

A sharp pain passed through him as if a giant needle had penetrated his head.

He tried to shout her name, but his voice failed him. Heiner rushed over and pulled out Annette’s wrist, which was submerged underwater, to check her condition.

Her pale face stung his retina painfully. Fortunately, she was still breathing. But she was in danger of stopping at any moment.

A servant who then checked the bathroom gasped and covered her mouth. Heiner did not look back, but shouted ferociously.

“Get a doctor! Now!"

The servant, belatedly came to her senses, rushed to call a doctor.

Heiner pulled Annette out of the water. The red-tinted water dripped down like a shower. His clothes were soaking wet.

Like a broken doll, her body sagged in his chest was a horrific mess. Anxiety overtook him more than when he was waiting for his abuser in the torture chamber.

“No, no, Annette, no…”

Heiner moved Annette to the bedroom, mumbling like a madman. He tried to hold her tightly to his chest, but he couldn't because he felt like she was going to break.

After laying Annette on the bed, he took a handkerchief from his pocket. He reached over and grabbed a water cup to wet the handkerchief with cold water.

The glass he accidentally touched fell and cracked. He poured the water on the handkerchief, not caring.

The stream of water kept falling in odd places due to his hands shaking maddeningly.

He wrapped the wet handkerchief around Annette's wrist and lifted her arm above her heart. Instantly the handkerchief turned red. Heiner's eyes shook.

There was too much blood. Too much to think it was blood from her little body.

Heiner had had many wounds like this, or worse than this. But he felt completely different. He had never felt such fear, even when he had killed someone for the first time.

“It's all right, it's going to be okay....... Annette....."

Heiner repeated the mumbling, not knowing whether he was talking to her or to himself. Meanwhile, the doctor burst into the room.

While he was unable to speak for a moment due to the situation in the room, Heiner opened his mouth.

"Help her.”

The doctor winced at the murmur that spilled out threateningly.

“Save her!"

Heiner shouted in a gravel voice.

His words sounded like a threat, or perhaps a plea of someone driven to the edge of a cliff.

The doctor hastily examined Annette's condition and prepared to treat her. Others assisted with the treatment and covered Annette's body with blankets to maintain her body temperature.

While the first aid was being administered, Heiner stood guarding his seat, not moving an inch. His face was as pale as Annette's.

It was hard for him to breathe, as if his airways were filled with water. Heiner gasped for breath as if the air was scarce.

His eyes slowly rolled from left to right.

A thin body lying motionless, a sheet soaked with red water, a blood stained handkerchief, the doctor's moving hands, thin fingers hanging helplessly............

The whole series of scenes did not connect smoothly and looked disassembled in pieces. In the midst of this disharmony, Heiner absentmindedly bit his lips.

*‘How did you...'*

*How can you do this?*

*You can't do this to me.*

*You shouldn't be doing this to me.*

*You must despair as I despaired. You must lose what I have lost.*

*You have always been there in my unhappy moments, so I must be there in yours.*

*For as my life has been too long and dark, so must yours...*

*Your life too .............*

Somewhere in his head seemed to crack. The doctor shouted something to the assistants, but the voices sounded distant.

Heiner took an involuntary step back. And he couldn't move for a long time.

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In the dream, Heiner was standing in the middle of a rose garden.

Annette was with him. A green jeweled pin was in her wavy blond hair, fluttering in the wind.

Her sky-blue dress and blue emerald necklace shone in the sunlight.

Heiner remembered this moment clearly. It was the moment he first formally met her.

But Annette's face was red like it had been rubbed with red crayons. Only her smiling mouth was visible beneath it.

Annette tilted her white parasol slightly with a small smile.

“Heiner. What are you thinking about?”

This was also a dream. Annette did not say this at the time. Heiner looked down at her somewhat suspiciously and answered.

“I am thinking of you.”

“Of me? What kind of thoughts?”

“When I first met you........”

“Isn't it here? The rose garden of Valdemar's mansion. My father introduced you to me.”

“No, before that.”

“Before that?”

“Before that.”

Annette tilted her head as if she had no idea.

Somewhere along with the wind came the melody of a piano. Annette's shape was swept by the wind. Soon she turned to dust and vanished without a trace.

Heiner slowly looked behind him, following the source of the sound.

The sound of a piano was streaming from inside the mansion through the open window. He stepped toward it as if possessed.

The closer he got, the clearer the sound of the piano became. Arriving at the window, Heiner stood stunned and stared inside.

A girl in a white dress was playing the piano in her room. Her small hands went back and forth over the keys like waves. Soft melodies rose and fell in the gentle shimmering sunlight.

It was a figure that could never be erased from his memory.

Heiner looked down. A rich bouquet of woven lilies and hydrangeas lay by the window.

Whoosh.

The wind blew again from a distance. The petals of the bouquet swayed helplessly. Suddenly the sound of the piano stopped. The girl turned her head to the window.

He woke up from his dream.

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# Chapter 25

Annette did not wake up for several days.

In a corner of the room with little light, Heiner sat pensively. His dark gray eyes remained fixed on the face of the woman lying on the bed.

He was afraid that her pale, closed eyes would never open. His head knew that guarding his seat like this would make no difference, but his body did not obey reason.

He rubbed his face, feeling out of it from not sleeping properly. His usually neat appearance was now completely disheveled.

*“Fortunately, the wound is not deep enough to kill her.”*

That was what the doctor said. In the first place, it was difficult to die by slitting her wrists. That was the part that Heiner also knew.

But Annette did not wake up. He didn't need all those words about not dying from such a thing. She did not wake up. That was the only conclusion left.

The doctor gave various reasons for this.

First, she was still not fully recovered from the aftereffects of the previous gunshot wound and miscarriage. Even if she had not, she was at a point where she needed more time to recover, and the combination of these events had left her completely debilitated.

Also, it was not 'enough to die', but the wound itself was quite deep, so he said that she was probably in shock due to excessive bleeding.

Finally, he said it might be a matter of the patient's own will.

He said it might be because the patient didn't want to wake up.

“Annette."

Heiner mumbled in a cracked voice.

“Annette Valdemar.”

Despite countless attempts to pronounce it, it was still an unfamiliar name. He chuckled briefly and slowly bowed his head.

“It makes no sense that you did that. The idea that you did such a thing... impossible."

Heiner couldn't look at her face and kept his eyes on the floor as he continued.

"You're afraid of many things. You're afraid of the dark, you're afraid of heights... you're afraid of water... you're afraid of blood..."

His throat tightened. Heiner gritted his teeth.

She was a woman of many terrible things. She was a timid and weak woman. She was just a woman who had been raised so beautifully without knowing anything truly unfortunate and miserable.

Even now, his opinion had not changed. Annette's decision to end her life was not because she suddenly had the courage to die.

It was just because her life was more frightening than death right now.

*'You got what you wanted.’*

A faint whisper echoed in his mind.

*‘She is unhappy enough to die. Just like you wanted.'*

Yes. He had wished that the woman, who had lived her life enjoying only every beautiful and good thing, would be terribly unhappy at one time. As he had been.

*‘There were times I wished you were dead. It would be so much easier on my mind if you could just disappear from the world.'*

At one time, he wanted that. Many times he thought about killing her. But in the end, he couldn't.

In the end, he couldn't.

But it turned out like this.

His large upper body gradually crumpled on the bed. He was slumped in a crumpled heap and buried his face in his hands.

Where did it go wrong? What should he have done? What exactly did he want?

After a few inconclusive questions, he mumbled dangerously.

*No.*

*At least not like this.*

*You can't leave me like this.*

*This is not what I wanted.*

*What I wanted was............*

His thoughts stopped quickly, as if something in his head had broken. The whispers somehow vanished, and only a muffled ringing in his ears.

Heiner sat motionless for a long time with his face buried in his hands.

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The news of Annette's suicide attempt was widely reported in the newspapers. The entire residence was in an uproar.

Rumors spread before Heiner could do anything about it.

The capital was abuzz with the story. There was sympathy, but the prevailing opinion was that her actions were just a show to get attention and sympathy.

In front of the official residence, reporters gathered busily from morning. Heiner stood by the window and looked down at them with downcast eyes.

He had always been an advocate of freedom of speech, but now he felt like shooting the reporters who had gathered like a herd.

The butler, who had been hesitant for some time in Heiner's ferocious presence, approached cautiously.

"Commander, the madam’s guest has come to visit… what shall we do?"

Heiner replied, still keeping his gaze outside.

"Tell them that she’s in no condition to see anyone right now and send them away.”

“Well, he said if he can't see madam, he'd like to see the commander.”

“Who is it?"

“Mr. Ansgar Stetter. He has visited the madam before.”

"Just send him…”

Heiner, who was about to tell the butler to dismiss the man, stopped speaking for a moment. He sighed quietly.

Ansgar Stetter was one of the last people he wanted to see right now. But whatever it was, it was better to settle it now than to make a scene after Annette woke up.

“Bring him to the reception room in the main building.”

The butler bowed his head and left. Heiner glanced at the old man’s back. He was the eldest son of a family that had held the position of butler for generations.

After the Revolution, many people who had worked for the nobility had lost their jobs. The general butler of the official residence was currently one of them.

Heiner, who was the leading force of the revolution, created jobs in entities seized from the nobility and in newly established public institutions.

He also gave priority to those who were in the employ of aristocratic families.

But it was not enough. Other problems littered the landscape. Not every part of the revolution was good.

All the responsibility and obligations were placed on Heiner, who had somehow become a hero. Sometimes he wanted to throw it all away. But he couldn’t.

Justice of the cause? Belief? It was not for such things. Heiner knew that such hyperbole did not suit him.

It was solely because of *her*.

Because of his low inferiority complex and his desire for revenge.

Heiner's gray eyes darkened even more. The reporters were still buzzing on the first floor. He gripped the window frame tightly and then released it.

\*\*\*\*

As soon as Ansgar saw Heiner, he grabbed him by the collar.

"You bastard ......!"

Even though Heiner was able to shake him off easily, he stood still. Ansgar growled.

“I guess you feel better now, huh? Are you relieved now that you’ve made Annette like that!”

"..."

"...a human bastard without blood or tears..."

"..."

“Why, do you feel offended to hear this from a trashy nobleman? Feeling dirty? You had so much fun when you trampled on the nobles’ families, right?"

"...."

“Speak, bastard."

“You have a rough mouth."

Heiner shook off Ansgar’s hands and adjusted his collar. Ansgar’s neck reddened when Heiner shook off his hands with vain ease.

Although he was not as good as Annette, Ansgar Stetter was also a decent groom who boasted the epitome of aristocracy. But he had changed, just as Annette had changed over the years.

Heiner took a step back from him and asked in a dry tone.

“Why are you here?”

“I came because I couldn't trust a bastard like you with Annette's life. That’s why.”

"..."

"Maybe you could take this opportunity to kill Annette. If she dies, you're the killer."

“If I was going to kill her, I would have done it long ago."

Heiner gave a small sneer. Just as Ansgar thought he would fire something back, Heiner opened his mouth, his face completely devoid of laughter.

“So you're going to take her?"

“Yes.”

“Where to, France?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you think I would give Annette to some monarchy retro force?"

“So you think you’re going to live like this for the rest of your life without getting divorced?"

"..."

"It's a loss for you too, having Annette with you. And you know that even if I took her to France, she would pose no threat to you.”

Ansgar was not wrong. At least in Padania today, the forces of the restoration of the monarchy were not strong enough. Perhaps they would want a separate dynasty for themselves.

And for that, they needed Annette. She was of royal blood, the most legitimate of the old nobility now living, and young enough to produce heirs.

In other words, Annette's descendants could follow in the royal footsteps.

*‘.... only superficially…’*

Annette's infertility was a matter not known to the outside world. She had no utility value that the restorationists desired.

Would Ansgar still want to take her if he knew this? Heiner did not know.

“You are not wrong, but Ansgar Stetter.”

Heiner held his breath for a moment, then exhaled slowly.

“I can't just give her to you.”

“Ha…” Ansgar shook his head in disbelief. “Still not enough? How much longer...... are you going to make Annette unhappy?"

Heiner couldn't answer. Because he himself didn't even know the answer to that. He slowly closed and opened his eyes.

For a moment the bloody scene grazed his vision.

*That woman can't leave me.*

The sentence circulated in his head like a categorical imperative with the back and front removed. Heiner repeated it as if to brainwash himself.

*She can't ......leave me.*

*\*\*\**

# Chapter 26

Heiner had never thought of the situation should she ever leave him. He consciously avoided the very conception of it.

This was unusual for Heiner, who was always read and prepared for the future. Only she was the exception. He was always rash and foolish when it came to her.

A colleague once said to him, "Love makes you a better person.” Heiner thought that was wrong.

Because she always made him a worse person.

“I heard Annette wanted a divorce." (Ans)

At those words, Heiner's eyes glowed with a cloudy light.

"I'm going to help Annette get a court-ordered divorce. You drove your wife to suicide, so she had enough grounds for it. After that, even if she defects to France, you will not be able to enforce your rights." (Ans)

"...... it won’t work the way you want." (H)

“Why, do you intend to wield the power of the Commander-in-Chief? That you detest so much?" (Ans)

Ansgar snorted as if it was bullsh\*t. He seemed to think that Heiner Valdemar, with his reputation for justice and integrity, would never do such a thing because of a woman.

But Ansgar was wrong to the core. Initially, Heiner's participation in the revolution was itself because of Annette.

She was his cause.

She was also the result.

“…well."

Heiner laughed loudly as he muttered a vague reply.

“Just say you would. I will bring international shame on you for your abuse of power. You seem to forget that I am here as France's ambassador." (Ans)

It was a threat of the highest order, but Heiner did not react. Glaring at Heiner with ferocity,

Ansgar half turned his body and said.

“I guess the negotiations are useless anyway. See you in court." (Ans)

"If you go to France." (H)

Ansgar stopped dead in his tracks at the dry voice.

“Are you going to marry Annette?” (H)

“It's none of his concern.” (Ans)

“Do you still love her?" (H)

Ansgar furrowed his brow as if trying to determine if Heiner was serious.

The clouds that had covered the sun dissipated, and the sky suddenly brightened.

Sunlight poured into the parlor.

With his back to the window, Heiner's face was sunken in shadows, making it hard to see.

After thinking for a long moment, Ansgar asked if there weren't any answers he could come up with.

"What do you mean?" (Ans)

“I mean it literally." (H)

“Why are you curious about that?” (Ans)

“If she goes to France with you............." (H)

*Even if Annette is infertile which makes succession production impossible.*

"Would you make her happier?” (H)

The edge of his voice was rough, as if scratched with sandpaper. Ansgar couldn't understand why he was asking such a question.

A moment of silence passed. Thin, wide clouds slowly drifted by. The light that had filled the room subsided slightly.

It was only then that Ansgar was finally able to see Heiner’s face clearly. His eyes widened slightly. *Ah*. A small moan flowed from his lips.

Ansgar couldn't help but give an honest reply.

“...... at least she won't be unhappy enough to die." (Ans)

\*\*\*

“Commander-in-Chief."

Major Eugen, holding a thick pile of papers, knocked on the open door. Heiner, who had been packing up his necessary belongings, turned to the door. The Major bowed his head.

“I apologize, sir. I know you are on vacation, but I had to see you because I have some urgent documents to be approved.”

Heiner nodded his head and motioned for him to come in. Major Eugen entered with excessive politeness and presented the documents.

Heiner stood by the desk, read the papers, asked the Major a few questions, and signed them. Major Eugen thanked him and bowed his head again.

After watching him for a moment, Heiner said curtly.

“No need to go that far, Major. It’s my job.”

"Still, I feel bad for disturbing you while you’re on vacation.

You look tired…."

Heiner listened to the Major with a slight frown, and then, realizing what he meant, he pressed his eyes with one hand.

His eyes, which had become very hollow, were sunken.

He was now looking like a ghost. Heiner knew it as well. These days, he had been surviving on the bare minimum of sleep and food.

Looking at his superior, who was not a talker, Major Eugen sighed in frustration.

“All this because of the madam?”

‘Because’, that word bothered him a great deal. Perhaps accepting Heiner's silence in the affirmative, Major Eugen began to speak a little more enthusiastically.

"Moreover, some of the reporters were publishing speculative articles, as if Your Excellency had driven the madam to commit suicide. Of course, no one agreed with them.”

"...."

“They all think the incident is just a show for her to try to get attention anyway.”

The usual Heiner would not have bothered to stop the words of Major Eugen, who hated nobles to the bone.

His personality would have tuned him out with silence without words.

But now he could not sit back and watch as usual.

“Major Eugen."

Heiner cut off the Major's words quietly. Major Eugen jumped at the inexplicable weight contained in that deep voice.

“That woman ...... really tried to die.”

Having said that, Heiner now realized. It wasn't a show. It was not mere suicide. He let the fact slip out again.

“Annette really wanted to die.”

The words came back to him like a withdrawal. For some reason, his throat choked tightly.

Heiner suddenly realized that he had kept the nib of the pen on the paper the whole time. He belatedly removed the pen, but the ink had already spread black like mold.

\*\*\*

After her suicide attempt, Heiner did not look back at the trail Annette had left behind.

Partly because he did not want to enter her room where Annette had attempted to kill herself, and partly because he did not want to admit that she had indeed "prepared" herself to die.

Heiner absentmindedly walked to her room. Annette had been moved to an annex where outsiders were restricted from entering.

When he opened the door to her room, he could smell the warm, familiar scent that was uniquely hers. It always smelled like this where Annette stayed for long periods of time.

Not the smell of blood, sweat, iron, or decay, but just a soft, fresh scent. Heiner, who hesitated for a long time without being able to step inside, moved his hesitant steps.

The room remained the same as usual, as if something terrible hadn’t happened.

The bed on which she lay, covered in blood, had been replaced with a clean sheet and comforter. Heiner swept the bed once. The surface of the bedding was cold without warmth.

He wandered around her room like a restless dog. He looked at the books on the bookshelf, checked to see if the chair creaked, and examined the cosmetics on the dressing table one by one.

He opened the drawers of the desk, but found nothing special in it. As he opened the last drawer, he heard a rattling sound coming from inside.

It came from a small cloth bag tied with string. Heiner pulled it out.

He opened the pocket and something blue shone from within.

*‘A jewel...?'*

As soon as he thought so, he saw the shells. Heiner's brow narrowed as he stroked them.

They looked like broken clam and conch shells, and pieces of dull glass. They were things that weren’t even worth a penny, left alone jewels.

Heiner knew these things.

They were things she had picked up on the beach at Glenford.

*‘I'm sure---I threw them in the hotel trash can.’*

For the past three years, that was the only time Annette went to the beach. After the Revolution, they moved to the official residence and he inspected Annette's luggage personally, but there was no such thing at the time.

So this was definitely what he threw in the trash.

*‘Why?’*

He felt as uneasy as he did when he first found these in her cardigan pocket. Why on earth did she pick up useless things? Why even pick them up from the trash?

Heiner held them in his palm for a long while, then put them back in the pocket. Then he put it back where he had found them and closed the drawer.

The back of the woman walking toward the horizon rose like a haze in his mind. In front of the vast ocean. A small, precarious figure.

*"Well. Maybe that person...I don't think he would mind if I died." (A)*

A lonely, scattered voice in the rattling train.

Heiner squeezed his eyes shut then opened them and rose to his feet. Then he began to search her room.

As soon as he opened the closet, he saw a safe sticking out unnaturally from underneath. It looked like something from inside had been taken out.

Heiner got down on one knee to check it out. The safe's door was not locked. He pulled the door open.

Inside the safe was a file and one jewelry box. Heiner took out the file and opened it. It was the civic donations and sponsorships accounting job Annette had been in charge of since their marriage.

After the Revolution, Annette's name was officially excluded from this job. Even Heiner did not know that she had continued to be in charge of this.

The books were transparent and meticulous, and even the handover forms for the staff were neatly organized.

He read and reread them for a while, forgetting how to breathe. He couldn't understand it. Why did she continue to do something that no one knew about?

Why did she keep all this garbage from the beach, which was of no use to anyone?

\*\*\*

# Chapter 27

Heiner's jaw tightened. He lowered the ledger and pulled out the jewelry box. He had seen this jewelry box several times in their romantic days. Heiner opened it slowly.

Contrary to his expectation that it contained plenty of jewelry Annette owned, it was empty inside. Only a diamond ring lay there.

It was their wedding ring.

Heiner stared at it blankly. The large diamond shone in the darkness.

No other jewelry could be found in the room. It seemed that this was the only jewel currently in Annette's possession.

It was reported that on the day of the shooting, Annette had disposed of some of her jewelry.

However, it was not a very large amount. Then, was that all of Annette's jewelry?

Since the amount of money from the disposed jewelry was not that large and, if anything, replacing jewelry was her maidenly hobby, she did not care much.

But now that he thought about it, it was time to sort through her belongings.

Heiner picked up the diamond ring with a trembling hand.

*“Where did your ring go?"*

*“I just took it off.”*

*"Just?"*

*"It doesn't make sense to wear it anymore."*

Heiner looked down at his hand. He still had his wedding ring on his ring finger. He had never taken this ring off.

Even when he hated her deeply.

Even when he wanted to kill her sometimes to ease his mind. When he visited her room with useless excuses to see her face.

Or the many nights he spent loitering in the garden overlooking her room. Heiner had never taken off this ring.

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The woman lying motionless on the bed was pale but still beautiful.

The caregivers were constantly taking care of her, and Annette looked much the same as she usually did. Annette, it seemed, would wake up as soon as he called her name.

Heiner stared blankly at the bandage wrapped around her wrist. The bandage on her small, thin arm looked strangely thick.

He fiddled with the ring in his hand. He tried to put it back on her finger, but the bandage was on her left hand. She was also clenching her fists weakly.

She looked so precious that he was afraid to touch her carelessly. Even if it was just to put on a ring on her hand, it was far too much to handle.

After much deliberation, Heiner eventually put the ring in his pocket again.

The iron chair creaked. He leaned his elbows on his knees and stared at her face. For a very long time he had been coveting and craving…

Old memories soared like water from a fountain.

A small girl sitting in the corner of a flower bed, sobbing sadly. A fine dress, long, neatly braided blonde hair and glassy eyes.

“Annette."

A girl who was so dazzling and noble that he felt like a sinner just looking at her.

“I still.......... don't know what to do."

*You are still as innocent as ever. Even if you choose death, it cannot replace your innocence.*

*So nothing is resolved between us.*

*If you wake up again, what am I to do?*

Heiner clasped his hands together and rested his chin on them. His heart was so painfully tight that it was hard to even sit up straight.

“When you wake up…”

His throat choked up slightly. He let out one shaky breath and spoke with difficulty.

“Let's go to Glenford.”

He couldn't say let’s go back to happier times. He couldn't be sure that everything would be better than before. They had drifted too far apart for that.

“If you want to see the ocean, I will let you see it."

Nonetheless, Heiner said so.

“I will take you wherever you want to go."

*If you want to ride the train, ride with me; if you want to walk along the seashore, walk with me; if you want to see artist's paintings, see it with me; if you want to pick up seashells along the sand, let’s pick them together.*

“So come with me..........."

Heiner reached out to touch her cheek. But the hand that hesitated in mid-air inevitably failed to reach her and was quickly retrieved.

He still hated her. He still couldn't forgive her. He still wanted revenge, and he still wanted to tie her to his side, leaving her unhappy.

“So come with me."

Nonetheless, Heiner said so.

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It was the evening of the fourth day when Annette awoke.

Heiner, who was sitting by the bed flipping through a document, swiftly caught her small movements. Her eyelashes and fingertips were moving slightly.

Jumping up, Heiner spat out her name in a shaky voice.

“Annette?"

Her eyelids trembled as if in response. Heiner immediately called a doctor.

“Annette, are you awake?”

Annette's eyes slowly opened. Her blurry pupils were unfocused. Heiner spoke incessantly, worried that her eyes would close again.

“Can you hear me? Can you see me?"

Little by little the light returned to her blue eyes. She blinked again. Heiner called her name again in a wistful voice, a mixture of relief and anxiety.

"Annette......!"

Annette's gaze reached him from wherever she had been following in the air. For a moment all her movements stopped with a snap. Her dry lips opened and then closed again.

The next moment, Annette's eyes were stained with despair and disappointment.

Her hands and shoulders began to tremble thinly. Her quiet breathing gradually quickened.

Like a small animal, eyes wet with grief, she seemed to be asking why.

Heiner watched the series of changes, but could not perceive them properly.

The door burst open. A couple of nurses and a doctor hurried into the room. The doctor asked Heiner, who was standing by the bedside, for his understanding.

“I'll check on the patient."

Heiner retreated in a daze. While the doctor checked Annette's condition, he could not take his eyes off her face.

Tears trickled down on the corners of Annette's eyes. She sobbed in a hushed voice, her shoulders shaking.

“Madam, can you please nod your head? ......Madam, can you hear me? Can you nod?”

The doctor's calm voice went round and round in his head. Heiner clenched his fists and released; he was not sure what to do.

A bloodied bed. A body lying like a wax doll. Limp arms, hasty hands administering first aid---the day seemed to replay itself.

After completing several tests, the doctor approached Heiner.

“She appears to be conscious, but her mental state is unstable. I think we should let her rest a bit.”

"...."

It was then that Heiner finally turned to the doctor. A belated reply poured out.

“Uh, yes."

“I think it’d be better to leave the room with just one nurse."

"...... yes."

Heiner nodded, looking too distracted to think for himself. It took a few seconds for his mind to comprehend the doctor's words.

Annette closed her eyes and shivered. Tears ran down her temples incessantly. He slowly turned to his feet.

Heiner continued to stare at her until he left the room. Scenes of Annette's eyelids opening, her exposed pupils darkened, and finally her tears welling up were played continuously.

A white face flickered through the narrowing door. Eventually the door closed completely. He leaned against the wall by the door. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

*I'm tired.*

*‘I have to --- talk to her.'*

Heiner thought, even in his confusion. He didn't know what to do, but he just had to.

There seemed to be so much to say. There was so much to ask and answer. The fact that she was mentally unstable---yes, she had just woken up, so there was that.

It would get better when she came to her senses. Heiner was going to talk to her. Something he had been avoiding for a very long time.

Annette might regret her decision to commit suicide. It must have hurt when she slit her wrist. Because she hated being sick.

Pain was not the kind of thing you get used to. Heiner knew that very well. A weak woman like her could not endure pain. Like her ......

The thought that had been growing endless branches suddenly froze.

An empty laugh flowed from between his lips. His large body slid down against the wall.

He grabbed his hair with both hands and lowered his head between his knees. He knew this was all a stupid idea.

Just because Annette had tried to kill herself did not mean that everything could be back to the way it used to be.

*'But does that mean I want to keep pushing her into the abyss?'*

*I don't know.*

He himself was in a situation where he had no answers, and a conversation with Annette was not going to change that.

It was also a funny thought that Annette might regret her suicide attempt. Heiner could read everything from her waking eyes.

Annette was in despair that she had survived.

While everything was foggy and unclear, that was the only thing that was certain.

That was the only reality left.

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# Chapter 28

Consciousness pulsed itself diagonally over the surface of the water. In the silent darkness, Annette tapped her fingers slowly on the bed.

The world seemed to consist of C minor. Annette quietly hummed Rachmanioff’s Symphony No. 2, C minor, first movement.

Her fingers moved along the chords in her head. A dark, gloomy piano introduction bloomed from her fingertips. The desolate world was soon filled with piano music.

Adagio (heavy and slow) C major introduction, Piu andante (a bit slower) transitional section, Piu allegro (faster)........

Her hands, which had been moving incessantly, stopped just before she hit the Picardy cadence. The world instantly fell silent.

Annette blinked as she stared into the black void.

*'Why did I live?'*

In the brief that came back, she questioned.

She cut herself to death. But she could not die. Was it because she had lived a life with uselessness, leaving it to the servants to open even a bottle cap?

Still, if they had left her alone, she would have died.

Why did she survive?

Who in the world saved her?

The same questions kept repeating in her mouth, one after another. She repeatedly asked herself like a mad person. Why did she live? What was the problem? How on earth could she die?

*Rustle.*

There was a sound of movement at her feet. It was the nurse who had remained in the room. The nurse looked a little dazed, probably waking up from a nap.

"Hello.”

Annette's call startled the nurse into standing up. The nurse asked, a little flustered.

"Madam, yes, is there anything you need?"

"Could you please go out for a while?"

“Yes?"

Annette spoke again, a slight smile on her lips.

“Can you please leave?"

"Madam, um, ......"

“I would like to be alone."

"I'm sorry, madam, but I was told not to leave you…”

The nurse wore the kindest possible smile on her troubled face. Annette smiled as well.

“Still, don’t my rights come first?”

"Madam is in a state of mental instability. I need to be by your side. If there is anything you need, please let me know."

“I'm fine."

"But the doctor…”

"Please leave."

Annette flatly dismissed her. The nurse made a sound of distress and sighed.

“Let me call the person in charge first.”

“No need to call.”

"Still, I'm afraid I'll have to discuss it with him…oh.”

The nurse who had opened the door to the room took a step back. Annette stared at the door with her eyebrows furrowed. However, she could not see clearly because her eyes had adapted to the darkness.

The nurse mumbled in a surprised voice.

"Commander, why are you here..........."

“What's going on?"

A familiar deep voice came from outside the room. Annette felt a headache rush over her that she had forgotten about for a while.

"...no.......Madam........."

The nurse informed Heiner of the situation. Heiner answered briefly and stepped into the room.

The nurse nodded as she looked sideways at Annette with worried eyes.

The door closed behind Heiner. The faintly illuminated light was completely dispelled. The room was once again submerged in darkness and silence.

Heiner, who seemed to hesitate for a moment, approached her.

As he got closer, her world of music notes was gradually pushed out of sight.

Heiner moved the chair the nurse had been sitting in closer to the bedside of the bed.

He sat down in the chair and looked at her with a cautious gaze. Annette remained silent with her eyes downcast.

“Annette."

Her name pronounced in his voice was very unfamiliar, Annette thought.

"...Are you feeling better?"

"..."

"...you are in an unstable state right now. Someone needs to be by your side."

"...."

“So... to be alone...I won’t know what will happen to you."

Heiner hesitated like someone who didn't know what to say. Annette ignored him and asked abruptly.

“Did you find me?"

“...Yes."

"And did you save me?"

"Yes."

“Why?"

Annette's voice was not particularly sharp or aggressive. Instead, her tone sounded innocent. She looked into Heiner's eyes and asked again.

“Why did you save me?"

Heiner stared at her, speechless.

“Heiner, I am already unhappy enough to die.”

"..."

"...I'm really 'deadly’ unhappy. It’s as you wanted. I have nothing more to give you."

"...."

"This was the end of me that you wanted and that I wanted. But you ruined it all."

A slightly higher toned and clearer voice concluded as such. Annette repeated in a whisper.

“You ruined everything.”

“I ......"

Heiner’s lips moved in a laugh-cry expression, spitting it out.

"I messed up? What the hell? So you're saying I should have let you die?"

“You should have."

“I never wanted it to end like this."

“Then what in the world did you want?"

Annette struggled to raise herself up. Heiner grabbed her gently by the shoulders and restrained her.

"Don't get up."

Shaking his hand off, Annette finally got up. A throbbing pain spread throughout her left arm, but she didn't care.

"So, Heiner, what in the world did you want?"

Annette continued speaking matter-of-factly.

“To repeat the last three years until we die? What's the point? We’re only going to suffer. At least I didn't think of that."

"Seriously, I've never thought of a conclusion like this, not even once." (H)

It was truly --- an odd sound.

To wish a certain human being bottomless misery, but not to assume that they would choose death.

“You didn't see me as a decent human being.” (A)

Heiner had completely overlooked the fact that Annette also had a choice between life and death. Annette laughed bitterly.

“That's worse than wanting me dead, Heiner.” (A)

His eyes widened slightly. Heiner opened his mouth as if to say something, let out an unsteady breath, and closed it again. Silence descended. Heiner's hands moved intermittently. After several attempts, he finally let out a word.

"I ....." His voice trembled terribly. “I don't want you to die."

Annette felt his voice was far away. Heiner repeated it as if he were reciting a poem.

“I don’t want that.”

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Two afternoons later, Ansgar Stetter asked for an interview.

Originally, as soon as he heard the news that Annette had awakened, he visited her at the official residence that day.

But he had to go back, leaving her with only a short note, for reasons of her stability.

Heiner sent Ansgar back the next day he came. He did not even tell Annette about the visit.

Annette was able to receive the note that Ansgar had left on the first day, two days later.

*[I heard that you are not able to see me at the moment. I hope to be able to greet you as usual. I'll be back tomorrow afternoon.*

*—Ansgar Stettter.]*

Annette looked at the note with a tasteless face. She did not dislike Ansgar. Rather, he was an old friend with only good memories.

But some relationships were better left in the past. To Annette, Ansgar was like that.

They were able to maintain a good relationship because of "the situation and" the background they were in at the time.

Now everything had changed. Annette knew she could not go back to the same relationship she had before with him.

Still, she accepted Ansgar’s request for a meeting because she liked him as a human being anyway.

She also felt sorry for the Ansgar family to some extent. Of course Annette gave him a hard time "as a friend."

She did not feel obligated to confide in him. So she was not sorry about this.

Annette tidied her messy hair as she looked in the hand mirror. Since she was in no condition to go down to the parlor, she had no choice but to meet Ansgar in her room.

A skinny woman was reflected in the mirror as large as the palm of her hand. Annette removed a lock of hair that clung to her forehead.

She felt like looking in a mirror for the first time in a long time. As she looked in the mirror absentmindedly, she suddenly heard a knock at the door.

"Annette, I'm coming in."

Ansgar’s voice echoed outside the door. Annette answered as she placed the mirror on the side table.

"Come in."

The door opened with a creak. Ansgar walked in, his ears red from the cold. He took off his hat and raised one hand.

“Annette."

“Welcome, Ansgar. Is it very cold outside?"

Ansgar nodded and sat down across from her.

“It's gotten much colder. The wind is very chilly."

“Would you like some hot tea?”

"No, I'm fine...How are you feeling?"

“I'm fine, thank you."

The conversation stopped short. Annette smiled casually at him as if nothing had happened. Ansgar did the same.

\*\*\*\*

# Chapter 29

Ansgar asked, pretending to know nothing.

“Has it been long since you went out?"

"...... umm, kinda."

“It's really winter out there already. It feels good to get out once in a while and go for a walk and get some fresh air."

“I like to walk too. Remember before? After eating, I always went around the garden like a merry-go-round.”

"Oh, yes, that's right. No wonder my feet always hurt when I see you.”

“It’s because you lack exercise."

"That's not what I want to hear from you right now.”

Annette covered her mouth with her hand and laughed. Ansgar chuckled. Eventually her laughter slowly subsided.

Annette dropped her hand and spoke with a face still full of laughter.

"Ansgar, I'm sorry."

Ansgar stiffened slightly at her apology. Soon he replied with a wry smile on his lips.

“What do you have to be sorry for me about?”

"...."

"Still ......... you should have told me it was hard."

Annette silently lowered her eyes. In fact, ever since she had met Ansgar again, she had never once trusted him as a friend.

At first, she thought that Ansgar's reason for visiting her was also for the purpose of gaining power to restore the monarchy, nothing more and nothing less. That view had not changed.

“Sorry......”

So this wasn't her word to him as a friend.

“I'm really sorry."

It was just because she couldn't give him what he wanted.

Ansgar’s reasons for wanting to bring her to France were obvious. To carry on the royal bloodline, or to increase its numbers.

Annette did not know exactly how many of the exiled royalty were still alive. But of the women, at least, she would be the closest to the bloodline, or comparable.

"Annette, I'm so sorry..."

Ansgar took Annette's hand. His hand was warmer, even though he was outside and she had been inside all along.

“Come with me to France."

"....."

“I won't ask you anything about why you didn't tell me or why you even made that choice. I won't blame you for anything. Don't think any more of bad thoughts….just go to France with me. Why did you make that choice when there are better options?"

His voice was gentle. Annette clasped her hands together and calmly looked into Ansgar’s eyes. His golden light brown eyes were completely filled with her.

Even if Ansgar’s proposal was not purely a favor, France might be better than here, as he said. Even if she was an unwelcome presence in France.

In fact, it would be better anywhere than Padania. For Annette, Padania was hell.

"Ansgar, I......."

Annette spoke slowly. Ansgar waited patiently for her words. She spoke slowly but without hesitation.

“I can't go with you."

Ansgar’s eyes grew wide. Annette said again with conviction this time.

“I can't follow you, Ansgar.”

"...May I ask why?"

“I know why you are trying to take me to France. It's because I have royal blood, right?"

Ansgar’s pupils shook for a moment. Annette smiled faintly.

"Did you think I didn't know that?"

"Annette, I don't know what you're talking about, but I'm really here for you....."

"I know."

Annette cut him off softly and removed his hand.

“I know, Ansgar. In fact, it doesn’t matter if you have other agendas. Anything would be better than here."

"Yes, I swear I will help you wholeheartedly, Annette, and I will help you live a happier life."

“I'm infertile."

Annette spoke quietly in a very plain tone, as if she were conveying a routine. Ansgar’s face hardened.

“I cannot carry on the royal bloodline."

"...what ......"

"If you wish, I can bring my doctor in to confirm it for you. I am infertile and my reputation is rock bottom so I am not worth much as a royal symbol. I appreciate that you've come this far, but..."

“Wait a minute, Annette.”

Ansgar waved his hand with a puzzled expression. Annette looked up at him with her mouth closed.

Ansgar slurred. He scratched the back of his head as if bewildered, stared at Annette for a moment, and let out a short sigh.

“I understand what you mean. So you, no, I...” (Ans)

Annette took over out of consideration for the man who had found it difficult to withdraw the offer he had made himself.

“I don't care if you don't take me to France. I was never going to join the monarchy's restoration forces anyway." (A)

"...... huh. Annette, I'll be honest about how this happened."

Ansgar resumed his posture and brought his face close to hers. Annette nodded expressionlessly. It really didn't matter what he said.

“First of all, your thoughts are not wrong. It is true that the monarchy retro forces needed you, and it is also true that the higher-ups sent me to Padania. Connecting the royal bloodline......... I really hate to say it out of my own mouth, but yes, yes it is."

Ansgar explained carefully, as if very sorry. But Annette was not interested at all, since she had expected all of this. It wasn't that she resented him in any way.

“But that's really not the only reason why I came to see you. So just because you're infertile... I'm not going to cancel my offer to take you to France."

“...Why?"

She didn't understand. She was useless to him. Annette shook her head.

"You have no reason to take me."

"Why not?"

Ansgar frowned and opened and closed his mouth as if slightly annoyed. Eventually he sighed.

“Don't you know that I liked you?"

She knew. There was no way she could not have known. In the past, Ansgar had courted Annette for quite some time. His courtship continued for some time even after she started a relationship with Heiner.

Annette did not particularly respond to his confession. She merely counter-questioned him nonchalantly and a little curious.

“But Ans. ...... you didn't really love 'me', did you?"

He loved Annette herself, but he also loved what made her that much more. Status, power, wealth, glory, fame, dignity, position......... What Annette once had.

And all that had disappeared now.

“I have nothing more to give you."

“No, Annette. Even without such things......I still want you as ever."

*‘He wants me.’*

The words sounded strange for some reason. Annette was silent for a moment with her eyes downcast, but after a few beats she asked.

“Do you want to marry me?"

"That…."

There was a short pause after the broken word. Ansgar continued with his characteristic good-natured smile.

“Of course. But the issue of your divorce still remains, and I've just been divorced, so let's take our time and think about it."

“...... Yeah?"

Annette nodded, as if she understood, but with a subtle, nonchalant look on her face.

“Anyway, it’s hard to decide right away. First of all, I understand what you mean, thank you Ans for thinking of me until the end."

"So, what's your answer? I'd like to hear your answer---"

Ansgar seemed impatient and asked again. Annette looked at him quietly. His pale eyes were still those of his youth.

“Come with me.”

Ansgar had a talent for putting others at ease. With him, they could just laugh and talk and play without thinking.

That was why Annette really liked Ansgar as a friend. It was a long time ago that she could never go back. She slowly parted her lips.

"I…..."

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"Now I want you to stop requesting meetings.”

A low voice halted Ansgar’s steps as he was leaving the official residence. In the hallway corner on the first floor, Heiner stared at him coldly with his arms crossed.

"I'm telling you not to use your power unnecessarily because everything will be rejected from now on."

Ansgar snickered. “What right do you have to refuse Annette's visits?"

"By the right of being her husband."

"Can you say that a husband who drives his wife to suicide is a husband?"

“Currently, Annette is in an unstable state of mind. The doctor also said we have to reduce external stimuli as much as possible, so this is also a measure for the patient's benefit." (H)

"I told you. I said I would help Annette get a court-ordered divorce. Let's see if you can say that after the divorce." (Ans)

"Well." With a cold smile on his face, Heiner tilted his head. "If you can win.”

“Annette is going to divorce you and leave for France."

"...and she agrees?"

“What do you think? Isn't that a hundred times better than rotting here?"

Ansgar smirked uncharacteristically. Heiner, who was half leaning against the wall, straightened his body.

“If you intend to use her for the restoration of the monarchy, forget the idea.”

Heiner said angrily, even knowing that Ansgar might leak the information to the outside world.

“Because she is incapable of having children."

"I know."

"...What?"

“I know, you bastard. Well, did you think I'd go back to France by myself if I heard that?"

Even though it was a fact that he had just heard the news from Annette, Ansgar acted as if he had known for a long time. The light in Heiner's gray eyes became dull.

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# Chapter 30

“I already know Annette very well. At least I know her better than her husband, who is worse than anyone else. So, if you're trying to stir things up between *us* by talking like that, then stop." (Ans)

“*Us*." (H)

Heiner murmured coldly and carried his steps slowly. Within three steps, the distance between the two had completely closed.

Ansgar was no small man, but when he was next to the huge Heiner, he looked like a hyena next to a lion.

"Do you think you've become something just because you met her a few times in three years?" (H)

Heiner said quietly, his head tilted at an angle.

“Even if Annette agreed, so what?" (H)

His voice, which had sunk completely, was accompanied by a faint death threat. A chill ran down Ansgar’s back.

“You'll never win against me, Ansgar Stetter."

Ansgar involuntarily tried to back away, but his feet wouldn't go. He felt the pressure as if a huge rock were pressing down on his body. Heiner continued to speak slowly.

"That woman............."

The edge of his voice trembled slightly. In a flash, the momentum that had been weighing down Ansgar dissipated. Heiner muttered.

“She can't get away from me."

His words sounded like his own brainwashing. Ansgar tried to fight back, taking advantage of Heiner's slightly weakened spirit.

“You ......" (Ans)

*You will kill Annette in the end. No matter how great you are, there is nothing you can do until death. One way or another, she'll leave you. (Ans)*

But Ansgar could not say anything in the midst of it all. Only a stunned voice flowed through the air.

“You, Annette .......” (Ans)

“Now."

At that moment, Heiner gruesomely shook his head.

“Get out of here right now.”

With those last words, he quickly passed Ansgar. The sound of footsteps echoed loudly through the hallway.

Ansgar stared at his retreating back in a daze. Heiner Valdemar's back, like a cold, gigantic stone statue, gradually moved away.

Ansgar could not say anything, not because he was afraid of Heiner. Certainly his momentum was horrifying, but there was something vulnerable there.

Suddenly Heiner Valdemar’s cold voice he heard a few days ago seemed to linger in his ears.

*"If she goes to France with you…”*

Why didn't he know?

*"Make her happier.”*

What did that defeated look mean?

\*\*\*

Annette curled up in bed, waiting for sleep. It was still early evening outside, but the dark curtains made the room pitch black.

Various thoughts scattered through her mind as she closed her eyes.

*“Come with me to France."*

*“No, Annette. Even without all that.... I still want you."*

*Lies.*

Annette whispered.

Ansgar did not affirm the question of whether he wanted to marry her. In that brief moment, Annette could read his thoughts.

France was a relatively liberal country in terms of sexuality. Married people had their own lovers, and unmarried men could keep hidden lovers without being condemned.

So Ansgar just wanted her to be his lover. Perhaps even after he was married again.

It wasn't something she couldn't understand. He had nothing to gain from being legally tied up with a woman who had nothing.

All she had was youth, a woman with nothing to rely on.

*‘She's fit to play with.’*

Annette thought in distaste.There was no particular resentment or sadness.

Even if it was the position of Ansgar’s lover, it was too much for her right now. She curled her body up a little tighter.

Her hands and feet were cold, even though she was under the covers in a warm room. As she waited for sleep that never came, the door suddenly opened quietly.

Annette still had her eyes closed. The nurse got up and said something to the other person.

Eventually, he walked over to the bed.

“Annette."

"......"

“Let's walk around the garden for a bit. It's not good to just stay in the room.”

"....."

“Quickly."

Annette quietly got up. She put on her coat and socks.

Heiner wrapped a large scarf around her neck. Her eyes met Heiner's as he tied the knot.

For a moment his hands stopped. He said as if to excuse himself.

“It's cold outside.”

Annette blinked without reply. The hands that had been hovering near her neck moved away.

With a very awkward gesture, Heiner put his hand on her waist and led her outside. The air outside was very cold, something she hadn't smelled in a long time.

It was the smell of winter that Heiner and Ansgar had doused in when they came to visit her. A thin breath escaped from between her lips.

They walked through the garden in silence.

The garden in front of the main building, which had been constantly tended by the caretakers, was not desolated in spite of winter.

Rather, it was serene and beautiful. The wind blew past, sweeping the floor of dry leaves.

Annette's shoulders shook slightly. Heiner, who had been watching her for a long time, asked right away.

“Are you cold?”

“I'm fine.”

“Your hands are red."

Heiner hesitated for a moment, then pulled a pair of leather gloves from his pocket.

"These…”

Annette didn't really need them, but she accepted them nonetheless. She didn’t want to quarrel with him any more than she already had.

At first glance, the gloves, which looked much larger than her hands, were predictably baggy. She had to hold on to them as they seemed to slip off when she lowered her hands.

“If it's uncomfortable, you don't have to wear them."

“No."

The dialogue was lost again. Heiner, who glanced at her side profile with her eyes down, spoke with difficulty.

"Is there anywhere you'd like to go?"

"...... yes?"

"Somewhere you want to go."

Annette shook her head without thinking too deeply.

"No."

"Didn't you want to go to the beach?"

It was a long time ago. Now she didn't really want to go. But Heiner laid out his plan as if he had her in mind.

“When the weather gets a little warmer, we'll go to the beach next spring. There are many places even better than Glenford. There's Sunset Cliff, which is famous for its beautiful sunsets, a little further down.”

"..."

“You remember Santiago Beach, where we used to go? You wanted to go back to see the seals in Belmont County."

"......... Yes."

After a short pause, Annette answered briefly. It was a bit of a late reply. Not because she was worried, but just because she thought Heiner would continue to talk.

“Then why don't we take a vacation to Belmont County sometime soon? When spring comes, go to Sunset Cliff or some other western area."

"...."

"Annette?"

Heiner stopped and called out to her. Annette stopped with him and looked up at him. His face was sharp and delicate like the cold winter wind, and there was a hint of nervousness on his face.

“I see."

Annette answered with a nod. Heiner's expression brightened faintly. She stared at his face for a moment, then stepped away again.

Heiner was beside her, matching her pace. Feeling the cold enveloping her face, Annette exhaled slowly. White breath scattered in the air.

\*\*\*

The next morning, a caregiver found a comb with a sharp end between Annette's bed and the wall. With a little more sharpening, it looked like it could have been a murder weapon.

Heiner's face hardened horribly as he received the comb with the report. He immediately went to Annette's room and instead of questioning her, he assigned her a professional counselor.

Annette did not refuse to seek counseling. She was not cooperative, but she was not uncooperative either.

She just ignored everyone who visited. Heiner visited her room three or four times a day and attempted conversation. Most of the time, the conversations were routine and superficial.

He didn't even mention the discovery of the comb. As if he was afraid to mention the incident.

Annette seemed outwardly quite well, except for a marked decrease in her speech.

She did not bring up the subject of divorce any further, nor did she complain of headaches or indigestion. She did not protest or fight when Heiner said something.

But every moment Heiner felt as precarious as if he were standing on a shallow frozen lake.

He often woke up in a cold sweat, even in his sleep. Then, after visiting Annette's room and checking on her breathing, he finally felt relief.

Time passed slowly.

Lancaster was very much in the mood for the end of the year. Everyone's houses were decorated with trees and year-end gifts were exchanged.

Heiner purchased ladies’ gloves and a purple jewel brooch at an upscale western clothing store. It was Annette's first end-of-year gift he had bought in three years.

On the way back, the first snow fell. Heiner looked up at the sky as white flakes fluttered.

Annette loved snow. She loved all the romantic things in the world, not just her eyes.

*‘I guess we could go for a walk.’*

As soon as he got out of the car, Heiner grabbed the paper bag and headed for Annette's room.

Annette liked gifts. Surprise gifts were even better.

For some reason, he thought it would make her happy, even though she rarely expressed emotion these days. He just felt that way.

Heiner knocked on her door, but there was no answer from inside. Normally, a caregiver always had to open the door for her.

Suspicious, Heiner called her name.

“Annette?"

“Ah, Commander.”

Heiner turned his head toward the voice. The nurse was walking down the hallway with a bowl of warm water.

She spoke with a slightly shy smile.

"We’ve been shorthanded lately due to the end of the year vacations, so I went…”

Before the nurse could finish talking, Heiner grabbed the doorknob and turned it. With a click, the doorknob stopped in its original place without turning.

He felt cold, as if his chest had been cut open.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 31

Without thinking further, Heiner took two steps back and slammed the door in with his shoulder. Boom! The sound was deafening.

He hit the door again and again, like someone who felt no pain. Bang! Bang! The roar rang through the entire hallway. Immediately, with a jerk, the door tilted into the room.

Between the collapsing door and the doorframe, a thin figure was faintly visible.

For a moment, time passed very slowly.

His dilated pupils reflected the scene in the room. A red cord hanging from the ceiling, a bloodless, pale face, a body struggling in the air, two shaking legs.............

Somewhere in his head a string snapped. Heiner's feet kicked the ground. He jumped over the door that had fallen to the floor and pulled a knife from his inside pocket.

The blade cut through the air. The red cord snapped and the body, suspended in midair, crashed downwards.

Heiner rolled on the floor as he received her. The knife that had fallen along with them clattered and rolled several times on the floor.

The two tangled bodies stopped. The woman in his arms was as cold as a corpse. A choking cough echoed from below.

Heiner looked down at Annette with a completely soulless face. His hands holding her were trembling.

Ha.

Haa.

Haaa.

His rough breathing filled his ears. His brain buzzed as if his head had been hit with a blunt instrument. Annette's coughing gradually subsided.

Heiner got up from the floor and grabbed her by the shoulders. Annette's blue eyes filled with tears. Heiner’s face contorted.

"This…." (H)

His lips quivered.

"What the hell is this..." (H)

The hand on her shoulder tightened. Heiner shouted in a cracked voice.

“What the hell are you doing............!"

Tears spilled down Annette's pale cheeks. They dripped down the tip of her chin in torrents.

Strength drained from Heiner's hands. One corner of his chest tightened painfully. He gritted his teeth and spat out.

"What on earth... is this... what the hell are you...!"

Annette didn't reply, only her tears dripping. Sitting helplessly on the floor, she looked like a lost child.

Heiner exhaled roughly for a moment and half-consciously embraced her. Her thin body leaned against him without resistance.

He could feel her faint breathing on his shoulder. Reason had long since fled. He struggled to swallow the nauseous rush of emotion, trying to clear his brain.

“Annette."

"...."

"Annette, please..... How in the world am I..."

He didn't know what to do.

Heiner didn’t even know what to say. *Stop it. What should I do? What can I do? Please, Annette. Please don't do this.*

"I ......." (A)

A thin voice flowed between breathless sobs.

“I don't want to live anymore..........." (A)

Heiner's body froze like a stone statue at the small whisper. He stared straight ahead, unable to breathe. His vision dizzily shook.

Suddenly something red and thin came into view. It was the string that Annette had used to bind and store her documents and knitting tools.

She had chosen it to strangle herself.

Suddenly, Heiner realized.

She could make her own life and death decisions at any time. And she could leave him forever whenever she wanted.

It really ......was simple from the start.

It was so simple in so many levels that he cursed himself for not realizing it before.

*‘Then... what on earth am I supposed to do...........?’*

They were legally bound in the name of marriage. And Heiner could use the power he had to lock her up in the residence or a mental hospital for as long as he wanted.

There were many excuses for this unethical practice. Joining the monarchy's restoration forces, trying to flee to France with secrets, or because his wife was sick, or went mad.

Speaking of which - no one in the world would blame him. Confinement under perfect surveillance may even prevent death.

She would only think about death, but if she could still live, if he could hold on to her body.

They would be together in brokenness---.

*‘Crazy.’*

The breath he had been holding in erupted. Heiner closed his eyes with a bitter smile. It was him, not her, who should be locked up in an asylum. His rough breathing slowly subsided.

He opened his eyes again.

“Annette."

Heiner quietly called her name.

“What should I do?"

"..."

"...would you like a divorce?”

"...."

“Is that what I should do? That’s what you wanted. So much ......... you wanted to leave me."

"...."

“If you want to go to France, go. If you want to follow Ansgar Stetter, do so. I'll give you what you want........"

Annette was held silently to his chest like a broken doll. Heiner embraced her as if he would never let her go again, and spoke in a defeated tone.

“No more, please............." (H) (\*no more trying to die)

The daughter of Rosenberg, the bloodline of a marquis, the daughter of a military general, the object of a long hatred --- nothing mattered now.

"If we divorce, say you’ll live.”

"..."

"You also want to leave me as soon as possible. So hurry."

"...."

"Please answer me, Annette..."

Heiner spoke in a desperate tone, like someone who had no self-respect. Nothing really mattered anymore. Annette, who had been still and breathless, nodded slowly.

\*\*\*

After Heiner's decision, the divorce proceeded rapidly. Annette was able to get the divorce papers the next morning.

She just sat still and all was well.

The lawyer explained to her the reasons for the divorce and the division of property. But everything fell on deaf ears.

"...... and.............. For various reasons, intangible assets such as buildings and securities are difficult to divide. ............ cash and ...... would be provided."

During her meeting with the attorney, Annette often looked out the window. It was the divorce she had desperately wanted as Heiner said, but there was no excitement about it.

Come to think of it, she didn’t know why she wanted a divorce so badly at the time. It would be the same life if she was divorced and moved out anyway. It would be a life no better than death.

“Here are the bank documents. The alimony will be paid here within a day or two. If you have any concerns, please contact us here---just sign here and the divorce process will be complete."

Annette took the pen as the lawyer said. Above where the lawyer had pointed out was Heiner's signature. She looked at it for a moment and then signed in one corner of the document. The lawyer spoke as if he just remembered when he retrieved the papers.

“Oh, and your ex-husband said you could stay here if you wanted to stay longer.”

"...."

"He said he would give you a separate building in the official residence.... would you like to stay a little longer?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Oh, I understand. Now, if you need help finding a house? I know a few good properties. I can introduce you to a broker.”

Annette shook her head expressionlessly without even showing a polite smile.

"It's okay. I'll leave immediately."

"...... Ah, yes. I understand."

Annette stood up with the divorce papers in her hand. When she returned to her room, she found the caregiver and the servants fidgeting awkwardly.

“Well, Madam, no, Lady Rosenberg…Are you by any chance planning to stay here a little longer?"

“No."

“Then shall we pack your bags right away? Is there anything you would like to bring with you?"

“I will do it myself.”

"Ah, yes. If you need more bags, please let me know. And if you need a carriage when you leave, I will prepare it.”

Annette stared at the smiling faces. Everyone was being overly nice. Had they been given an order from above?

"...Yes, thank you very much. I'll get my luggage ready, so could you please leave?"

The servants looked at each other for a moment, then bowed their heads and left the room.

Annette sat for a while in a daze before starting to gather her belongings. However, she just threw what she had in her hands into her bag at random.

It didn't matter what she brought. In fact, it didn't matter if she didn't bring anything.

Annette, who had packed her bag carelessly, rose from her seat. The property division and bank documents given to her by her lawyer were still on the bed.

Annette left the room with only one suitcase. The servants glanced at her and greeted her. She received their greetings with a glance and walked down the hallway.

Heiner stood like a shadow at the entrance to the first floor. Annette paused for a moment and looked at him quietly. He said as he approached.

“I guess you won't be staying here anymore." (H)

"..."

“Do as you please. … Just keep your promise.” (\*promise to stay alive) (H)

Heiner stood in front of her and put a glove on her hand. Annette silently watched his actions.

Heiner placed something in her hand and made her clench into a fist. In her hand, which she opened again, there was a purple brooch and a business card.

It was Ansgar Stetter's business card that Heiner had taken a while ago.

Annette raised her head again and met his gaze. Heiner took a step back.

“Have a warm holiday season, Annette Rosenberg.”

His deep voice lingered in her ear for a strangely long time. Annette fiddled with the brooch in her hand. Then she parted her lips.

“You too."

\*\*\*

# Chapter 32

After leaving the official residence, Annette stood still and stared at the sky. It was a fairly sunny day. The snow that fell yesterday had already melted.

She turned around and caught a glimpse of the official residence for a brief moment and carried on her steps.

She walked as far as her feet would take her. It didn’t matter where she would arrive.

*“If we divorce, say you’ll live.” (H)*

Frankly, Annette had no intention of keeping her promise to him. She did not lie with the intention of lying. She just hadn't thought anything about it.

*'Should I die?'*

She didn't care whether Heiner was angry or sad after she died. Anyway, they got divorced and now they were strangers.

Although they weren't so different before the divorce.

Walking aimlessly, Annette found a park bench. She put her bag on the bench and sat down for a moment.

The air was cold, but the sun was warm. She lowered her head, shielding her eyes from the dazzling sun. Her gloved hand caught her eye. The brooch and Ansgar’s business card were still clutched in her hand.

*‘What should I do now?'*

Annette wondered idly as she looked at the Princess- diamond-cut brooch that she had loved in the past.

Even if she wanted to die, she couldn't figure out how to die. It was as if she had forgotten how to think.

Suddenly a shadow fell over her head. Annette slowly raised her head. Ah. Her mouth opened slightly as she saw the opponent’s face. The light returned to her pupils that had been blurry without focus.

\*\*\*

Heiner stood by the window and watched the small figure in the distance. Even after she had disappeared, he stood still in place for a long time.

Gradually the sun went down. His shadow on the wall hung long.

*'Where did it all go wrong?'*

Heiner thought vacantly.

At first, it was just a feeling of infatuation. All he wanted was to touch her just once. He dared not want her.

So, with persistence, he became the marquis' dog. To gain a higher position, to gain more power, to become a "suitable" person.

To get a little closer to *her*.

Because there was no way she would pay attention to a soldier who was an orphan and all he knew was to kill people...

Heiner looked down at his hand on the window pane. He could still smell the blood that had long since been washed away.

He tightened his fists.

*I know that I am a dirtier and lower human being than you if I am to blame for wrongdoing.*

*I know that I am more of a sinner, having killed countless people and sent my colleagues to their deaths.*

He didn't want to admit it.

He wanted to put all the blame on *her*.

*You are so happy being noble while I rolled through the mud to bring you peace. You have no idea whose blood was shed and whose lives were sacrificed.*

*The hardest and saddest thing in your life is not improving your piano skills, that’s all.*

*So….*

*I hated you for it.*

A wave of every dirty, inferior emotion flooded his chest. Heiner's body slowly collapsed. She alone was the reason he struggled so much, but in the end, it turned out like this.

Heiner cradled his head in his hands. His breath came in gulps. He eventually couldn't hold it in and let it out. The man crouched in the corner sobbed quietly.

From far away, the sound of a piano carried on the wind.

He cried for a very long time.

\*\*\*

*AU703, Sutherlane Island.*

*Thud.*

*Thud.*

*Dull thuds echoed in the warehouse, filled with white cigar smoke.*

*A group of people surrounded a boy who was lying curled up.*

*Seeing the boy who did not shed a single groan, one of them who had been beating him spat out.*

*"You damn bastard."*

*"Do you like flirting with the director? Because of you f\*cker, my name was put on the list."*

*Still angry, he kicked the boy in the stomach with all his might. The boy curled up his body even more from the attack.*

*It was outrageous. It was not his fault that they were on the survival training list this time, despite the fact that they were in their senior year.*

*It was just because they were compared in ability to a boy who was only in the third grade. The director put them on the survival training list by saying they were no better than the kids.*

*“Hey, we should get going."*

*The woman who was smoking a cheap cigar and fooling around with her friends in a chair jumped up.*

*"If we're late, we’ll be beaten.”*

*The woman dusted off the ashes and squatted in front of the boy. Her brow furrowed as she checked the boy's face.*

*“Oh, God! Don't touch his face!"*

*"Why the hell are you again?"*

*"He’s handsome! Don't hurt that face!"*

*“Hey, hey, shut up and come quickly.”*

*The woman clicked her tongue ruefully, patted the boy lightly on the cheek, and stood up.*

*“Don't you think you hit him too hard? Be nice."*

*The boy lay dead with his eyes open. The woman puffed her cigar and quickly turned around.*

*A voice followed, "Come.”*

*Slam. The warehouse door closed. Silence crept into the dark interior.*

*The boy raised his upper body in a heap and dragged himself toward the wall. He sat leaning against the wall and coughed.*

*His gray training suit was crumpled and dirty. The boy struggled to sit up, and the name tag on the right side of his jacket came to his view.*

*'Heiner Valdemar.'*

*Heiner spit out a plop of blood. His whole body ached, but fortunately there were no broken bones. The men didn’t want to draw the director’s attention and beat him (Heiner) to relieve their anger.*

*Lynchings were common here. Groups formed among the trainees, who had various reasons to relieve their stress and eliminate their rivals.*

*Most of the time there was no valid or appropriate reason for the lynching. If they just wanted to hit, they hit. If someone died, well, it was their bad luck.*

*As Heiner was an excellent trainee in the eyes of the supervisors, he caught people’s attention.*

*Heiner checked again for any broken bones and then slowly stood up.*

*“Ugh."*

*The groan he had been holding back for so long flowed out. He forced himself to his feet through clenched teeth. If he missed a class, he would lose points.*

*Here at the Sutherlane Island Training Institution, they had survival training every three months. The term was "survival training," but it was murder training. In fact, killing was sometimes allowed in the training.*

*In survival training, weapons were assigned according to scores. If your score was low,*

*you would be thrown into the woods with your bare hands.*

*Heiner struggled with his steps. A quick peek under his training jacket revealed a dark bruise on his stomach.*

*Heiner stopped to take a painkiller out of his inside pocket.*

*He had to learn to feel dulled by pain.*

*Because he was due for torture training soon.*

*He took a deep breath and moved quickly. His whole body seemed to be screaming, but he didn't show it, at least outwardly.*

*However, Heiner ended up having to show up late for class that day and lost his points.*

*\*\*\**

*The Sutherlane Island Training Institute was an institution under the Royal Military. At the training center, spies and informants were intensively trained.*

*The best among them even formally joined the army. Of course, in order to do so, they had to prove their loyalty to the royal family by overcoming the threat of death in various operations.*

*Those who entered the training institution were mainly teenagers and were divided into two types. Criminals and orphans.*

*For more than a decade, the royal family removed the homeless and orphans for the sake of the city's aesthetics. The homeless disappeared out of sight and the orphans were sent to training camps.*

*Heiner was one of them. He lost his parents at an early age and grew up in an orphanage with poor facilities until the age of 12. He then boarded a ship bound for Sutherlane Island.*

*The children trapped on the island were brainwashed and educated to pledge allegiance to the royal family. Then, after graduating from a six- to seven-year completion course, they worked in the shadows under the military.*

*The survival rate by the time of graduation was around 30%. It was a low number, but orphans were so plentiful that the military considered even that to be a lot.*

*“Heiner."*

*The candle flickered at the approaching opponent's presence. Heiner raised his head, in the middle of sorting through his royal history textbooks.*

*It was Ethan, who shared the same room.*

*“Is your body okay? The day after tomorrow is survival training."*

*“...... just so so.”*

*In fact, Heiner wasn't in very good shape. The bully men had been tormenting Heiner relentlessly after that. He could not make his usual moves during training.*

*“What's the score?"*

*“Not high.”*

*“Oh, I see. Hmmm, so what I was going to say is that if we were on a different team tomorrow ......"*

*Ethan hesitated to speak for a moment. He was a year younger than Heiner.*

*“Let’s just keep each other alive.”*

*"...."*

*"We don't want each other to have new roommates again who we don't know, do we?"*

*The candles melted. Heiner asked, glancing at the two empty bunks that had not yet been occupied.*

*"What about Hugo and Stefan?"*

*"I’ve made an agreement with them as well. So are you going to do it or not?”*

*Heiner struggled for a moment.*

*He was not in a good condition, no, he was in pretty bad shape, but he was sure he was able to compete and win two or three rounds. Of course, he assumed they had the same weapons.*

*But with the current score, the odds were high that he would get good weapons. There didn't seem to be anything wrong with accepting Ethan’s proposal.*

*'...... okay.'*

*“Yes, good choice. Don't hit each other in the back?"*

*Ethan slapped Heiner on the shoulder with a bright face. Heiner nodded expressionlessly.*

*\*\*\**

# Chapter 33

*“Then we will begin the 42nd survival training. Five people will form a team and each will receive a weapon according to their score. The game will run for 3 hours and the maximum number of personnel must return to their original positions in time to find the hidden flags in the area............. There are no other rules of combat."*

*After the briefing, the instructors assigned weapons. Some got guns, others knives; some received nothing.*

*Heiner fiddled with the jackknife he was given. It was a heck of a weapon compared to the automatic pistol he had last time.*

*Heiner was on Team D. The team members were all familiar faces. The training camp was a tight place, and everyone knew each other's faces, even if they were not close friends.*

*They were given one minute for a strategy meeting. After briefly deciding on their positions and roles, they stood at the starting line. A senior member of the same team patted Heiner on the back.*

*“Heiner Valdemar, right?"*

*“Yes."*

*“Amy White, fourth grade. You're a third grader, yes? You're no joke for someone with your age and size. Anyway, let's give it our best shot."*

*Heiner nodded. A fourth grader standing to Heiner's left interrupted.*

*“I'm David. I've heard a lot about you. I hear you fight very well. But no weapons at all this time.......... Anyway, let's do it well.”*

*David fist-pumped him. Heiner did it with a blank look on his face.*

*A green signal round was fired into the sky. As soon as there was a ‘pop,’ the trainees sprang forward. After running together for some time, they dispersed to their respective positions at some point.*

*Heiner ran straight into the grass at a frightening speed. He was running like a flash, and his gray eyes bent to the side.*

*He quickly caught up with one of the opposing teams who had departed from a different spot. It was Germa, who was in the same grade as him. Germa had an eight-round pistol.*

*Heiner tossed his jackknife upward. The knife spun around several times in the air and fell back into his hand.*

*He quickly snapped off a sharp branch and threw it right in front of Germa. The branch flew at a furious speed and fell, hitting the tree head-on.*

*“Ah!"*

*The opponent, who let out a sound that could be either a scream or a sigh, stopped.*

*It was only a brief stop, but Heiner took advantage of the opportunity to throw his jackknife, which he had re-positioned so he was holding the tip. It was a surprisingly agile move.*

*Germa’s head belatedly turned to Heiner's side.*

*His face was a mixture of bewilderment, fear, surprise, and tension. The muzzle of his gun met Heiner's gaze.*

*Bang!*

*A gunshot echoed through the forest. The birds that had been sitting on the branches of the trees fluttered up. For a moment, the world was still as if it had stopped.*

*Blades of grass rustled under black military boots. Heiner walked slowly from behind the tree. He approached his fallen opponent.*

*Germa was clutching his neck, gasping for breath. Heiner grabbed the handle of the knife with an indifferent face. Then he pushed it in a little deeper.*

*Eventually Germa's breath stopped. Heiner pulled out the jackknife and blood gushed out. He tore off Germa’s nametag. If the number of flags was a team win, the number of nametags was an individual score.*

*Heiner grabbed the handgun that had fallen to the ground and checked the ammunition.*

*There were seven rounds left. It made sense since the match had just started, but it looked like the first shot had been fired earlier.*

*Generally speaking, reducing the number of enemy teams from the beginning was not a very wise choice. After finding them, killing them was an easier way to take their flags.*

*However, Heiner needed a gun in case of an emergency situation. Because the graduates who participated in this survival training were eager to kill him.*

*Heiner began running through the forest again. He found one flag in a tree and one in a rock cave, killing another in the process and getting a name tag. However, the other opponent didn't have a flag.*

*Gunshots and screams began to be heard everywhere in the forest. Pop. Yellow signal round was fired into the sky. It meant an hour had passed.*

*In the midst of falling into a side road, Heiner ran into Ethan head-on. Ethan looked somewhat nervous when he met his roommate.*

*Heiner silently moved out of the way. Ethan gave a small nod and chuckled, slapping him on the shoulder.*

*From then on, Heiner found another flag among the grass. He spotted one of the enemy team, but quietly ducked for cover as his opponent had a rifle.*

*Pop. A yellow signal round was fired. There was one hour left until the end of the match.*

*Heiner met with Amy and shared the number of flags and information. Amy focused on killing and stealing the flags rather than looking for them and took a total of two flags.*

*After leaving Amy, Heiner headed in the direction of 5 o'clock as per the information. Just as he was about to jump over the creek, he sensed the slightest sign and reflexively lowered his upper body.*

*Bang!*

*A flying bullet struck a tree near his head. Heiner, who escaped death by the slightest margin, quickly hid behind the tree. He heard a familiar voice from the other side.*

*“Damn, you’re filthy quick.”*

*It was Benjamin Holland, one of the men who had lynched Heiner. Benjamin lightly tapped the muzzle of his gun and said.*

*"I’ve been looking for you and just this is how we're meeting."*

*"Hey, that guy really almost died."*

*“Then you want to save him?”*

*"I don’t want to kill him. I'm just wondering if there's another kid who looks like him in the training center."*

*Grumpled Olivia, who had told her colleagues not to touch Heiner’s face. Heiner stood leaning against a tree and watched the dynamics.*

*There were four opponents. They were all a herd that had tormented Heiner badly. They were about to graduate anyway, so they seemed to have given up on the score and were trying to survive.*

*"Hey, is this your friend?”*

*Grita, famous among the seniors for being an idiot, kicked something over. It rolled through the grass to Heiner's side. It was a dead body.*

*Heiner's eyes narrowed slightly as he checked the corpse's head, which was lying on its side. The head had shoulder-length hair and was relatively small in stature. It was a familiar figure.*

*"If we're on a different team tomorrow............"*

*“Let’s just keep each other alive.”*

*It was Ethan.*

*They tried to help each other, but he had died sometime. Judging by the fact that he had not yet developed rigor mortis, it looked like he hadn’t been dead for too long.*

*Grita and Hayden chuckled and taunted Heiner.*

*“Your friend wasn’t even f\*cking good at fighting. How have you survived so far? Did you give your body and survive?"*

*“Did you give your hole to that bastard?”*

*"I’m sure he gives it to the instructors. One sausage after another, hahaha."*

*They chuckled at their own low-grade jokes.*

*Heiner took his eyes off Ethan's body and looked around. It looked like a good place to take cover as it was dense with trees.*

*Four opponents. Benjamin and Grita in particular were quite capable. If they were outnumbered and confronted head-on, they were likely to lose.*

*Olivia and Hayden were relatively less talented, but they too were seniors.*

*Considering their survival rate to graduation, they were at least in the upper-middle range.*

*Heiner quietly regained his grip on his pistol. Laughter and trivial jokes went on. His opponents seemed to be completely relaxed.*

*Ethan had once told him.*

*“Why do you keep getting beat up all the time? Frankly, if you die, they’ll be in trouble. You have to show them that if they touch you, they’ll fall too.” (E)*

*Ethan's not entirely wrong. Despite being a third-year student, Heiner was bigger than his peers and was the trainee that the instructors were watching closely.*

*The first or second graders in senior classes could not overpower him. However, despite his strength, Heiner had never attacked them back.*

*"...It is forbidden to kill trainees in any situation other than survival training." (H)*

*"No. Who told you to kill them? Just show them your strength.” (E)*

*“It won’t end there.” (H)*

*“What?” (E)*

*"It won't end unless you break or kill them.” (H)*

*There were different types of violence. Heiner knew very well about the violence that takes place in closed spaces.*

*He had experienced it countless times since he was a child, when he couldn't remember much.*

*It was impossible among the trainees, just as it was among ordinary groups. Among them, Benjamin's group was the leader.*

*In the training camp, power was absolute. As seniors, they would never have tolerated the humiliation of being trampled by third-year students.*

*An ambiguous victory would only lead to greater violence. If there was one thing Heiner learned most clearly at the orphanage, it was precisely that.*

*Violence was something inescapable in his life. The sequence of his life growing up from a child to a boy was imbued with that kind.*

*If he had to face it anyway, it was better to avoid the greater violence. Unless the very person to whom the violence was inflicted was removed.*

*Heiner exhaled slowly, holding the pistol to his chest. Whoosh. The grass that encased Ethan’s body swayed in the wind. A faint light drifted in his indifferent gray eyes.*

*In survival training, murder was condoned.*

*It also meant that he could see the end.*

*\*\*\*\**

# Chapter 34

*Marquis Dietrich looked down at the training ground from his vantage point on the hill. He was sitting cross-legged in his chair. The supervisor, standing next to him, said, pouting.*

*“Thanks to the Marquis, the facilities at the training center are getting better and better, the education is more structured, and the percentage of excellent trainees is higher than in previous years."*

*“Facilities don't have to be good. It is a characteristic of the lazy race to try to lie down as long as there is a place to stretch their legs.”*

*Marquis Dietrich said cynically and took out his pipe. The supervisor, who was rubbing his hands beside him, immediately took out a lighter.*

*“I'll do it for you."*

*The supervisor carefully took the pipe from the Marquis and lit it. The puffed tobacco leaves burned. The supervisor placed the lit pipe in the Marquis’s mouth himself.*

*Most nobles still clung to their pipes, although the relatively easy-to-use cigars were gaining popularity these days. Cigarettes were made for frivolity.*

*The Marquis held the smoke for a moment, then opened his mouth.*

*"Only let a minimum number of them live. There will only be more mouths to feed if there is too much useless trash to survive.”*

*"Of course. But the children are too uneducated and barbaric---if we allow them to kill, there could be chaos, so we are cutting branches at this stage to the maximum extent possible."*

*“And what about the kids who stand out in the graduating class?"*

*"There are quite a few. One of them is --- well, I don't know if you remember him, but he is Benjamin Holland, a trainee who visited the Marquis' residence the other day."*

*“Yeah, you remember him."*

*"Yes, he's a talented man."*

*"Hmm."*

*The Marquis nodded insincerely and took a deep puff from his pipe.*

*Pop. The last signal round was fired, signaling the end of the training.*

*“Now the trainees are coming back. How many survived this time, haha.”*

*Shortly after the signal round was fired, heads could be seen coming up from the bottom of the hill. Upon arrival, the trainees submitted their flags and name tags to the instructor for scoring.*

*Exhausted trainees sat down here and there. The injured were quickly treated or, in the severe cases, transferred.*

*Suddenly, a murmur could be heard from across the starting line. Marquis Dietrich turned his gaze in that direction. A dark-haired trainee was staggering up from below. Even from a distance, his injuries looked quite serious.*

*One shoulder was limp as if dislocated, and his injured thigh was still bound with a piece of cloth. He also had a tight grip on his side. It looked as if a bullet or knife had grazed him there.*

*Injuries of that magnitude were common here. Just as the Marquis was about to look away without interest, the supervisor said.*

*“It's Heiner. I hear he's an extraordinary trainee.”*

*“A senior?”*

*“No, he's probably a junior."*

*The Marquis looked at the trainee again with a surprised look on his face. Heiner was larger than the average graduate.*

*The instructor's eyes grew wide as Heiner handed him the flags and name tags. The instructor asked Heiner a few questions incredulously and showed the name tags to the instructor next to him. The Marquis, who was watching this, tilted his head.*

*“What's going on?”*

*“....... I'll go check it out."*

*The supervisor walked over to the instructors and asked what had happened. After hearing the situation, the supervisor's face had a bewildered expression as he walked back to the Marquis.*

*“Well, Benjamin Holland, who I told you about earlier---is dead.”*

*“Wasn’t he a senior? Did he participate in this?"*

*“If they are disloyal or show signs of insubordination, they may be rostered to the survival training at the instructor's discretion.”*

*“What a waste. Why would you let a good trainee, whom you spent money to train to graduate, die at the last minute?"*

*“It's just a warning level, and we provide them with good weapons. Also, survival training victories don't mean much to a graduating class, so they usually band together. It shouldn't be so easy to defeat them..........."*

*The supervisor hesitated for a moment, then continued his words as if he himself was puzzled.*

*"The four seniors who participated this time were all beaten by one person."*

*"What? One man?"*

*"Yeah, that guy. Badly wounded….”*

*The Marquis' gaze turned again to Heiner. Heiner was receiving first aid. As he removed his training uniform, blood gushed from his side, where the bullet had grazed him.*

*“His name is Heiner Valdemar, a third-year student.”*

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*After survival training, Heiner was confined to bed for some time.*

*His left shoulder was dislocated, he had a puncture wound in his thigh, and a bullet scraped across his side.*

*He also had other injuries, large and small, all over his body. His face, which had been struck in the struggle, was so swollen that it was difficult to recognize his original features.*

*Even the doctor, who was trained in most of the injuries, was tongue-tied, wondering how he moved with this body.*

*“It’s admirable that you got this many injuries against those men and are still walking.”*

*Hugo clicked his tongue and handed him a cup. Heiner popped the pills into his mouth and swallowed them with the water.*

*“How in the world did you kill them? Four at once.”*

*“Just…”*

*“How do you just kill four seniors? Say something that makes sense."*

*Heiner laid back on the bed without answering. Hugo asked, leaning back in his chair.*

*“Did you at least avenge Ethan?”*

*“Not really.”*

*“Well, it’s the end anyway. No one can beat you up recklessly anymore."*

*Heiner kept his eyes closed and did not answer. He was neither happy nor sad. He was just tired.*

*Suddenly, without a knock, the door to the room slammed open. Heiner and Hugo looked at the door at the same time. Their instructor was standing in front of the room.*

*Hugo bounced out of his seat and raised his hand in a salute. The chair he was sitting in fell over. Heiner also tried to get up from the bed, but the instructor waved him off.*

*“How's your body?”*

*“I'm fine."*

*Unable to lie still, Heiner finally raised his upper body. As he tried to stand up, the instructor once again stopped him.*

*“Just stay where you are. There is an infirmary at the entrance to the first floor of Building A. As soon as the day dawns, you will receive treatment there.”*

*“Yes, sir.”*

*“And the Marquis has invited you to the next supper. This Saturday evening at the Rosenberg residence.”*

*“Yes, sir. Thank you.”*

*“Okay. I hope you receive proper treatment and recover quickly.”*

*The instructor left the room after briefly conveying his business. Silence reigned for a moment. Hugo, who had been quietly astonished, looked back at Heiner, jumping up.*

*“Hey!"*

*Hugo screamed with a face full of excitement.*

*“Damn, did you hear that? You heard what I heard, right? Receive good treatment and recover quickly? Is that what he said? And building A? That’s the instructors’ building, and they're letting you use the infirmary there?"*

*Hugo immediately grabbed Heiner by the shoulders and was ready to swing him around, but fortunately he didn't, perhaps remembering he was injured.*

*“And what about the Marquis' dinner?! That's what top graduating students go to!*

*Wow, it’s crazy! It looks like the Marquis likes you. This bastard has a way of life.”*

*Attending the Marquis' dinner meant a higher chance of joining him in the future.*

*Marquis Dietrich, a high-ranking aristocrat and military general, was the chief executive of the special operations corp. And the special operations corp was where every trainee wanted to be.*

*It was like picking a star in the sky for a training camp graduate to enlist in the military and get a promotion.*

*They had to achieve some distinction in operations and prove their competence and loyalty. However, the existence of training camps was a necessary evil of the Padania royal family.*

*The royal family wanted them to handle every dirty work that the formal army could not, while at the same time wanted to keep them hidden.*

*Thus, most of the training camp graduates died during the operations, unrecognized for the achievements they had made. Or they suffered trauma for the rest of their lives.*

*An exception was made, however, for those who joined the special operations corp. They were placed under the direct jurisdiction of the Marquis, which was the same as opening the way for formal military enlistment.*

*“Well, at least you deserve to be in the special corp. Still, it's really unusual for a third year to be invited to the Marquis' dinner.”*

*Heiner, who had been listening quietly to Hugo's words, murmured with a face devoid of laughter.*

*"Can we really take this invitation as a positive?"*

*“What kind of nonsense are you talking about all of a sudden?”*

*“Benjamin and Grita were invited to the dinner as well. There was a good chance that they would join the Special Operations Corp when they graduated. Now they’re dead…because I killed them.”*

*"Hey, come on, that's a statement that overestimates them. To the Marquis, we're just one of his many chess pieces.”*

*Hugo shrugged and chuckled.*

*“Not even a knight, just a pawn.”*

*“..... I can at least be a knight.”*

*“You're a big boy. Bastard.”*

*"Ethan would have been jealous if he’s here.”*

*"Yeah, he would have. His lifelong wish was to join the Marquis. He sang so much about wanting to set foot in the Rosenberg mansion just once............."*

*Hugo’s face turned bitter. He let out one long breath and waved his hand.*

*“No point in telling you from now on. Get ready to welcome a new roommate."*

*Roommate changes were common. They knew how not to grieve. They knew how to get used to the loss.*

*Heiner's eyes lingered for a moment on the empty bunk. The surface of the white sheet shimmered in the dim candlelight. He soon averted his gaze.*

*\*\*\**

# Chapter 35

*The Rosenberg mansion was splendid, as if it were made of every beautiful and rare thing in the world melted together.*

*From the short staircase at the entrance to the pillars of the building, nothing was less than perfect. Even Heiner, who was not easily moved by most things, stopped in his tracks by the opulence.*

*Lion statues towered on either side of the huge, high marble staircase. The square columns supporting the lion statues had a script in an ancient language, but he could not make out what it said.*

*Standing in front of it, Heiner thought he looked like a little ant.*

*Inside the dining hall was a long table. The Marquis sat at the top, followed by the supervisors and officers, and the trainees sat in a row below.*

*The food was new to him. The chef came out to explain each plate personally, but Heiner could not understand him well because of the mixture of fancy words.*

*Heiner answered questions from time to time and continued eating. He looked up and saw a huge mural on the ceiling.*

*Even to Heiner, a complete stranger to art, it was a solemn mural painted with an incredibly delicate touch.*

*Since the ceiling was so high that it was impossible to capture it all at a glance, only part of it could be seen.*

*When Marquis Dietrich confirmed that Heiner was looking at the ceiling, he suddenly opened his mouth.*

*“It’s a two-hundred-year-old mural.”*

*Everyone's eyes, including Heiner's, fell on Marquis Dietrich. The Marquis chuckled as if he was enjoying the attention.*

*"I've called in some of the best muralists and they've been repairing it for a long time."*

*"...I'm sorry. I've just never seen such an amazing mural before."*

*“No, the commoners can't help themselves but be shocked, even the ordinary aristocrats are amazed to see it. Monk Gustav and Saint Marianne, August the Righteous............. most of the famous figures are depicted."*

*Marquis Dietrich was not a particularly frivolous man. However, this mural was one of his greatest pride, and it was also a work of art that was worth exactly that much.*

*As soon as the Marquis finished his words, people began to compliment.*

*“When I first saw it, I couldn't keep my mouth shut. It is still a marvelous work of art no matter how many times I see it."*

*“This mansion is probably the only place, apart from the royal palace, where you can indulge in such a mural.”*

*Heiner let their words sink in and gazed up at the mural for a long time. Sunlight streamed in through the multicolored windows throughout the ceiling.*

*\*\*\**

*After the dinner, the trainees went out to the rose garden of the mansion with the Marquis. The rose garden at the Rosenberg residence was said to be as famous for its beauty as the gardens at the royal palace.*

*Heiner looked around the garden in silence. The roses were in full bloom in late spring.*

*The scent of roses wafting from all directions stung his nose. He closed his eyes for a moment, as the strong fragrance seemed to encroach his head.*

*‘I'm tired.’*

*He felt sorry for Ethan, who should be in this place instead. In fact, Heiner actually had no great interest in joining the Special Operations Corp. This dinner party was no different.*

*Heiner had never craved anything before. He had fallen short of his expectations and learned more quickly to give up than to hope.*

*Few things in his life were important enough to crave in the first place.*

*"Um, Marquis."*

*The deputy hurriedly approached the Marquis and said something to him. The Marquis nodded, touching his chin.*

*The trainees stopped walking altogether abruptly and waited for the Marquis, who had stopped. Like someone who belatedly realized their existence, the Marquis said ahh and opened his mouth.*

*“I have some business to attend to and must be going now. It was a nice time to see all of you.”*

*Marquis Dietrich, who spoke in a somewhat insincere tone, turned around. Even in the midst of the suddenness, the trainees raised their hands in salute after the Marquis, as was their habit that stuck like glue.*

*Instead, Deputy Larsen explained to the trainees.*

*“The carriages will leave at four o'clock. Until then, you are free to look around the garden here. If you want to see the library, halls, etc., just ask the butler and he will guide you. Please thank the Marquis for inviting us to his mansion."*

*“Yay!"*

*The other trainees gathered in groups to debate. Heiner answered briefly to the other seniors who approached him, then went deep into the garden alone.*

*He intended to rest in a corner of the yard. His body, which had not healed in a short time, was complaining of severe fatigue.*

*Heiner wandered around looking for a place where he could relax without being disturbed. The further into the corner he got, the more distant the conversation became.*

*Soon he found a bench among the vines. Placed in the shade of the trees, the area was empty and peaceful.*

*Heiner lay on the bench for a long time. A speckled shadow fell over his face as he lay looking at the sky. He squinted and looked to the front.*

*Tall, large tree branches were entwined with leaves. The leaves swayed with the currents of air. Heiner closed his eyes, feeling not so bad.*

*He was tired, but he couldn't sleep. Lying there in the quiet seemed to wake up all his senses even more keenly.*

*At that moment, a piano melody was carried in the wind from somewhere. He opened his eyes.*

*''This .......?''*

*The sound was very faint, but Heiner recognized it clearly. It was a familiar melody. He knew this tune.*

*He did not know whose tune it was or what was the title of the song, but he remembered this melody.*

*During his time at the orphanage, Heiner had a small music box. The music box had been given to him as a gift by a noblewoman who had volunteered at the orphanage.*

*And it instantly captivated the little boy.*

*The music from the music box was like a lullaby that no one had ever sung to him. Every day, Heiner would hide deep in the backyard of the orphanage and listen to the music box.*

*When he was beaten for no reason and his whole body was full of bruises, when he had a terrible cold and his fever was boiling, when his stomach ached painfully from hunger, when he was lonely and alone.............*

*The music box was the first precious thing that young Heiner acquired. He intuited that he would never get anything like it again in his life.*

*Less than a few days later, another boy from the orphanage stole the music box. It looked quite expensive, so he thought he could make some money by selling it.*

*Heiner struggled with the boy to get the music box back. The boy was five years older and bigger than him, but he desperately fought him and won.*

*However, the music box broke and shattered to pieces during their struggle. It was hit so hard that not only the music box was damaged, but other fixtures as well.*

*As punishment, Heiner was severely beaten by the Director and did not receive food for three days.*

*Heiner tried to fix the broken music box but failed. When he tried to turn the stick, it only spun around instead of producing sound.*

*The young man kept the broken music box for a month. Then, the day before the patrons' visit, someone mistook it for trash and threw it away during cleanup time.*

*The leaves rustled in the wind.*

*Fragments of old memories creaked and assembled in his head. Heiner slowly rose from the bench. His feet moved as if possessed, following the sound of the piano.*

*This was the melody that had been playing on that music box.*

*Music was of no use to survival. Heiner did not know about music, nor did he want to know much about it.*

*But he could not stop walking. The sound of the piano gradually became clearer, as if he could hold it in his hands. Eventually, Heiner arrived in front of a building in a secluded area.*

*It was an all-white building, as if it should not be touched. The sound of the piano was streaming from an open window on the first floor.*

*Heiner approached the window with quiet steps. The curtains were still half drawn on the window. The performance continued.*

*He slowly popped his head out. A dress whiter than the walls of the building flickered between the curtains. Heiner blinked for a moment. Soon his vision became clearer.*

*‘Ah.’*

*The surfaces of all the objects glowed white in the sunlight.*

*A large piano, white and black keys, tiny hands, white dress, braided blond hair, downcast eyes, sacred and holy face...........*

*Heiner froze like a stone statue, gazing upon the landscape of the room. He couldn't move, as if his breath had caught in his throat.*

*He felt an emotion similar to, but more intense than, the one he had felt when he saw Saint Marianne in the mural.*

*A soft, beautiful melody, similar to a cloud, wrapped around his ears. Excessive ecstasy resembled the reverse side of fear. Heiner involuntarily backed away.*

*Crack.*

*Branches were stepped on and crushed under his feet. He inhaled quietly. At the same time, the piano stopped playing.*

*The girl in the white dress turned her head. Heiner quickly ducked for cover. The piano chair was pushed back gingerly in the room. He heard small shoes approaching the window.*

*Heiner fled from there.*

*\*\*\*\**

# Chapter 36

*Throughout his life, Heiner looked back on that moment countless times.*

*Why on earth had he run away at that moment? Why didn't he just say that he hadn't snuck into the garden, that he had just stumbled upon it while out for a walk?*

*Why didn't he just tell her that her performance was really good?*

*At the time, Heiner did not know who the girl was. He could have guessed if he had thought a little deeper, but he didn't have the time and just ran away in a hurry.*

*But perhaps, deep in his heart, he had known vaguely from the moment he saw the small, shining white figure.*

*That she was different from him.*

*Perhaps that is why he was not so surprised when he learned of the girl's identity and the fact that she was a promising pianist.*

*He thought it was rather natural. It would have been strange if such a noble and sophisticated girl had been of a lesser status.*

*When he had been struggling to get his little music box, the girl would have learned all kinds of culture, including music, from professional teachers.*

*When he was devising ways to satisfy his hunger today and tomorrow, the girl would have eaten her fill of warm, delicious food.*

*When he was struggling not to be beaten right now, the girl would have dreamed of a future on stage as a pianist in a big, fancy hall.*

*From cradle to grave she was going to live a completely different life from him.*

*He was of a status that could not even be compared. Thinking about it only made him miserable.*

*Heiner tried to shake the memory away.*

*The training camp was a very good place to forget something. He was trained to move his body mechanically, to torture his limbs until they creaked, and to be brainwashed and educated about loyalty so that his head would go blank.*

*He did this from dawn to dusk, and his entire body became completely exhausted. It was almost as if the ultimate goal of the place was to prevent him from thinking.*

*Moreover, he had to endure pain all the time because his injuries weren’t fully healed. He often broke out in a cold sweat with a pale face when he moved his body incorrectly. There was no time to think about things.*

*One day, he heard that a trainee in the next room had been beaten by an instructor and that something was wrong with his head.*

*It was no big deal for a trainee to get hurt or die. Normally, people turned an blind eye and moved on. But at that moment, Heiner was suddenly aware of his situation.*

*“We are just one of many chess pieces.”*

*The words constantly buzzed in his head.*

*He felt rushed, as if something had been chasing him all day. Even though it was just a day like any other, it was different from usual.*

*Because of the clutter in his mind, Heiner made many mistakes during training. At first they were overlooked with the excuse of his injuries, but eventually he was punished with 10 laps around the training ground.*

*Around the time of the last round, Hugo walked into the training ground with something in his hand. Heiner ran sputtering to a stop.*

*“Hey, why do you keep making mistakes you shouldn’t have made these days? Have you finally gone crazy?"*

*Hugo threw Heiner a water bottle and scolded him. Heiner held his side and scowled. Hugo’s nagging soon returned.*

*“What is it?”*

*"...I think my wound is torn."*

*"Huh? Let me see. Wow, yeah, it’s bleeding."*

*The wound on his side, which had barely healed, was torn. His shirt was slowly wet with blood. But Heiner didn’t have the strength to walk to the infirmary, so he just sat down under a tree.*

*“What, you're not going to the infirmary?”*

*“Later.”*

*“Yeah, that wound's gonna get infected and you’ll die.”*

*“Why do you have that piece of garbage?"*

*“It's not garbage, it's a reed."*

*Hugo shook some reeds in his hand. But in Heiner's eyes it was no different than trash.*

*“I went to the seaside and picked it up. Thought I'd make a grass flute."*

*“...a flute?"*

*“I lived in the country when I was young. My father taught me how to make grass flutes.”*

*“Did it really make a sound?”*

*“It did. Do you want to make one too?"*

*Heiner silently held out his hand. Hugo gave him one of the reeds with a look of what's wrong with him. He sat down next to Heiner.*

*"Do you have a knife? Take it and copy me."*

*Heiner pulled a pocketknife from his pocket and listened to Hugo’s explanation quite carefully.*

*“If you pull the core out at an angle of about 30 degrees, it will separate like this........."*

*Heiner imitated Hugo's method quite well. When the central core was separated, a cylindrical space was created inside.*

*"With the knife, cut a little scratch in the middle...........put one leaf between the gap and cut all the remaining leaves, leaving a little at the end and cutting all of them........... then wove it."*

*It was a process as simple as it was futile. Heiner looked around at the grass flute with a dubious expression on his face.*

*“How do you blow it?"*

*"Put your mouth right here and blow."*

*Heiner tried blowing into the entrance, but all he heard was a whoosh of air. After several attempts, he opened his mouth and mumbled.*

*“I don't hear anything.”*

*“That's because you're not good at it. Look.”*

*Hugo put his mouth over the entrance of the grass flute and blew on it very gently. At the same time, a beeping sound came from the grass flute. Heiner’s eyebrows raised slightly.*

*Hugo blew the grass flute several more times, making a whistling sound. It sounded like a broken whistle. It sounded like a young bird calling for food.*

*Whatever it was, it was not at all the "instrumental sound" that Heiner had in mind.*

*“Hey, what do you think?"*

*"..."*

*"Why are you not talking? Isn’t it cool?”*

*“What about a performance?”*

*"A performance? What performance is there to play on such a crude grass flute? You would have to practice for about a hundred years. Oh, by the way, an old man in the town where I used to live used to play his flute using leaves......"*

*Hugo began to ramble on about his childhood story. Heiner, however, did not listen at all and looked down vacantly at the grass whistle he had made.*

*In the first place, there was no way that a proper instrument could be made from a single reed. What in the world did he expect?*

*Did he think he could play a song with such a grass flute?*

*“Look at the sound, what kind of flute is that?”*

*“This is a flute, what do you think it is?”*

*"A real flute is like that flute or clarinet."*

*"Hey, as long as it makes a sound, it's all a musical instrument."*

*“No, you have to be able to play something."*

*“You're being prejudiced, man."*

*Heiner shrugged and lay down on his back. I wondered what good it would do to talk to people who had only had contact with a grass flute when it came to musical instruments their whole lives.*

*'Why are you lying down? Not going to the infirmary?"*

*"Later."*

*“Then you will die early.”*

*Heiner closed his eyes without reply. A slightly cold wind enveloped his face, and Hugo played his flute next to him.*

*How nice it would be if this was the sound of that girl’s piano. Heiner turned on his side.The grass swayed in front of him.*

*He wanted to hear her play again. He couldn't help but think.*

*He had the illusion that the sound of the grass flute with only one note would turn into a piano piece whose title he did not even know.*

*He wanted to hear that performance again.*

*That enchanting performance, that dreamy scene from that summer night, just one more time...............*

*Heiner let out a laugh. He tried to shake off the memories, but in the end he couldn't shake off anything. His mind was at the original place.*

*The air flowed differently. The sound of the grass flute spread from the hilltop.*

*\*\*\**

*Heiner was unremarkable compared to his talent and ability.*

*Of course, he had been an excellent trainee and the supervisors had been keeping a close eye on him, but it was during survival training that he first showed his full potential in a serious way.*

*This was partly because Heiner deliberately killed his own presence.*

*He was not particularly interested in the future, like dreams or success. He just wanted to escape as much as possible from the possibility of imminent violence.*

*But since his visit to the Marquis' mansion, Heiner no longer hid his competence.*

*He literally did his best. He did everything he could. Instantly, Heiner was transformed into the top of his class and was invited to every dinner party at the Marquis’s.*

*If anyone were to ask, they would think he was crazy. The only reason why he endured bloody training to get the top spot was to listen to the piano play.*

*He was too pathetic to even think of himself.*

*The humanities and the arts were the concern of the kind of people who didn't have to worry about living in struggle.*

*It was a luxury for his kind.*

*But listening to the girl’s performance, Heiner could understand perfectly why people read literature, admired art, and go to concerts.*

*Coincidentally, the time of the dinner party coincided with the girl’s piano practice time. Thanks to this, Heiner was always able to hear the performance at the same time and place.*

*He hid himself in the grass by the window and listened to the flowing melody. Birdsong, the rustling of leaves, and the soft sound of the piano were the only sounds in his ears.*

*It seemed that only he and the girl were left in a world filled with sounds and soft piano notes.*

*For that moment, his life seemed so much better.*

*As the girl’s fingers moved back and forth over the keys, Heiner felt as if he were floating somewhere in the air. He felt as if the sense of the world under his feet had completely disappeared.*

*The performance took him to a foreign country beyond the hard sea, to the vast meadows he had only seen in pictures, and to his hometown, which he could not even remember.*

*Not to cold reality, but to some other distant place..............*

*Heiner crouched in the grass and hugged his legs. His body, large for his age, seemed infinitely smaller. He bowed his head and rested his cheek on his knee.*

*\*\*\**

# Chapter 37

*“How's it going lately, Heiner?"*

*The doctor asked as he walked in through the white curtains and sat down next to Heiner. He replied curtly.*

*"Same as usual."*

*"Is it? You look a little different to my eyes."*

*"In what way?"*

*"Just oddly."*

*The doctor chuckled and pulled the needle out of Heiner's arm. Heiner turned his arm a few times, having used to it, and stood up.*

*It was a drug therapy for emotional suppression. Whether it really works, but it was one of the essential procedures that all trainees must undergo.*

*Heiner stared at the empty syringe for a moment, then bowed his head.*

*"I'll go leave now.”*

*“Heiner."*

*"Yes."*

*"Don't push yourself too hard."*

*“Huh?"*

*The doctor didn't immediately answer Heiner's question. He slowly opened his mouth, staring a little farther away, not at Heiner.*

*"I've been working here for 12 years. During that time, I've never seen a single trainee who ended up with a good ending.The very act of wishing for something is toxic to you."*

*Heiner looked at the doctor, hiding his confusion. The doctor was almost the only one of the adults who treated the trainees like human beings, but that didn't mean he was suddenly a great man to say this.*

*“I meant that you need to take it easy.”*

*The doctor, his back to the white curtains, smiled faintly. Heiner didn't answer, but kept his eyes down. He could not answer anything recklessly here.*

*The doctor was found hanged the next day.*

*\*\*\**

*The doctor's body was taken off the island. He was from a lower class aristocratic family, had never married, kept his family name, and returned to his family.*

*If the doctor had been found by the instructors in the first place, the trainees would have received a new doctor without even knowing that he had died. Fortunately or unfortunately, however, it was a fourth-year trainee who discovered the dead doctor.*

*And then that trainee disappeared one day. No one brought his absence to the surface. Nothing had changed.*

*The very act of wishing for something is poison to you. Heiner sometimes recalled the doctor's words.*

*The seasons changed twice. In the cold winter, solitary training, which came every six months, began.*

*In fact, it was a bit exaggerated to name the training. It was simply the confinement of a trainee in a room for three days.*

*In solitary confinement, there was no light, no one to talk to, nothing to read. After a certain period of time in a space that was closed to the influx of new information, one's psyche became weak.*

*At this time, brainwashing education allowed trainees to absorb the relevant information like a sponge. They would think of it as information that they "thought up" on their own, rather than information that "came in" from the outside.*

*Thus, the trainees were all brainwashed to some degree. This was also the reason why there was little questioning or rebellion against the anti-human rights regime on the island itself.*

*Heiner was no different. He had never considered the gap to be unreasonable or unfair, even while looking at the Marquis' glamorous residence.*

*It was only after seeing the girl that Heiner first felt miserable about his situation.*

*Why am I like this while you are infinitely clean, virtuous, and beautiful? I was not born wanting to be born like this, but it happened.*

*I wish I had been born in a certain decent family.*

*So I could talk to you like your equals. I know you will smile kindly and accept me. We might have a longer talk..............*

*The end of the thought always resulted in a cruel reality.*

*She was the only daughter of Marquis Dietrich, who ruled and wielded power over the fertile southern territories, and Heiner was one of the orphaned chess pieces who had died countless times in the training camp.*

*The more he thought about the girl, the lower and unhappier he became.*

*Nevertheless, in the solitary confinement, Heiner thought about her constantly.*

*There was nothing else to think about. That was all. In the lonely, cold room, he thought about her over and over again. He recalled the piano piece of which he did not even know the title.*

*Little by little his sense of reality became dull. Something was created, disintegrated, and reassembled.*

*In the boy's head, lying crouched in the corner of his cell, the little Rosenberg girl knew him.*

*The girl of noble status greeted him with a smile. She asked him how he was and if he was all right where he was injured.*

*It was funny. Heiner did not even know the girl's voice.*

*She was wearing a white dress that was long to her knees. With her hands behind her back, she raised her head slightly and stared up at him. Her little lips moved gently.*

*‘What do you like most these days?'*

*Heiner answered in a daze.*

*‘The piano….’*

*‘Piano? You can play the piano?’*

*'No. I like piano music.'*

*'Really? I'm learning to play the piano! What song do you like best?’*

*‘Anything.’*

*‘Anything?’*

*‘Anything.’*

*'Would you like me to play something?'*

*'...... I’d like that.'*

*The little girl ran to the piano and sat down on a chair. Heiner followed her. The surrounding scene pushed and changed along with his steps. White curtains fluttered in the wind. He knew this place.*

*It was the piano practice room he had seen through the window curtains.*

*'I bet you'd like this song, too.'*

*The girl who spoke with a smile turned her head toward the piano. Her white hands fell slowly on the keys.*

*A quiet, beautiful melody bloomed from her fingertips. It was a tune that had been playing from a broken music box a long time ago.*

*The scent of roses in the garden wafted in through the open window.*

*Heiner did not hide himself in the grass like before. He was standing near the girl. They were very close.*

*He could see the girl’s shiny blond hair up close, her soft cheeks, her fingers swimming over the keys. There, he was the girl’s only audience.*

*Just as she was his only pianist.*

*Heiner awoke from his dream.*

*\*\*\**

*“Each man has a different use, but God did not create useless men. But orphans like you and your peers, criminals and beggars, do not contribute in any way, but rather devour society. Don't you think it is absurd?"*

*"....."*

*“There will always be a need for resocialization for such people, and this training center has taken on that role. To make useless beings like you into necessary beings."*

*"...."*

*"Then it remains to be seen exactly 'what' use you’re for, but I'll point it out. There is a common misconception that pacifists, stupid and foolish, often make. That "a no-war situation is peace."*

*"...."*

*“That is incorrect. War is exactly peace. To have the power to defend one's homeland, to make sure that no one can target one's homeland through war, to achieve a long and stable peace. That is true peace."*

*"...."*

*"So in the end, you will be very useful people for the peace of your homeland. The country is there to help you do that. And you are obligated to be grateful and obedient to it.”*

*The instructor spoke of the consequences of people who were disobedient and who obeyed.*

*Those who could not withstand torture and interrogation during espionage and disclosed confidential information. Those who distributed disturbing documents to the private sector.*

*Those who organized illegal groups. Those who instigated and participated in strikes.*

*Heiner heard for a long time how stupid, vicious, and contingent they were. During that time he took several oaths and signed several pledges.*

*The oil lamp flashed a couple of times. The instructor's face was half hidden in shadow and only his mouth was visible. Heiner sat in a hard iron chair and fidgeted with his hands.*

*Ding.*

*Ding.*

*Ding.*

*Outside, the spire clock struck the hour. The trainees could not check the time here. It could only be known from outside information.*

*The oil lamp blinked once more. The instructor smiled and announced.*

*“It's three o'clock. Good work.”*

*\*\*\**

*Winter rain fell that day.*

*Wet grass was trampled underfoot. Heiner walked closer to the white building, breaking through the overgrown leaves.*

*The windows of the practice room were closed today, and he could only listen to the performance by listening very closely. He moved somewhat recklessly closer.*

*The faint music sound played in his ears.*

*It was a somewhat lonely melody, appropriate for a rainy day.*

*Heiner stared blankly inside while leaning on the window frame.The girl had her eyes closed. Her profile looked very small and lonely as she played the tune.*

*He couldn't take his gaze away from her profile, knowing that it was just an illusion that the music was giving him.*

*Heiner felt a tremendous sense of familiarity. It was an extraordinary, truly impossible familiarity. He wasn't sure if the music captivated him or if she captivated him.*

*Cold raindrops fell from the sky and the constant melody echoed in his ears.*

*Heiner, who was about to remove his hands from the window frame, hesitated for a moment. His forearm that was exposed under his rolled-up sleeve still bore the marks of the injection.*

*\*\*\*\**

# Chapter 38

*Heiner stared at the girl, head raised again. Before he knew it, the performance was over and she was flipping through the next sheet of music.*

*Unlike her in the warm, cozy room, he stood in the cold rain. A chill was drifting through his body, along with a terrible sense of reality.*

*Ha. A low, bitter laugh erupted. What in the world was he doing?*

*At the most, the girl’s pain would be from having a hard time practicing the piano, or falling and scraping her knee, or getting into a fight with a friend.*

*No one would dare to administer strange drugs to her. No one would ever violate her or lock her up in solitary confinement.*

*What he was experiencing was far from the range of pain the girl could ever imagine. Perhaps the girl did not even know that there was such a thing as a training camp.*

*It was a well-known fact that the Marquis loved his only daughter dearly. He would have raised her to see and hear only good things.*

*His precious daughter would not need to know about trainees who were undergoing cruel training.*

*Who in the world would feel sympathy for anyone in spite of such a situation?*

*He (Heiner) must have gone insane not long after coming out of solitary confinement.*

*In the midst of a fuzzy mind, hearing a performance like that was a distraction.*

*‘Still .........'*

*He clenched his fists tightly.*

*‘If she knew my existence….’*

*In Heiner's mind, she was something religious. What it was exactly could not be described in the words he knew.*

*But if it were him, he would be sorry about the situation. He would sympathize. He would be angry.*

*Suddenly her hands pressed the keys. A low sound came through the closed window. The next song began. The raindrops became a little thicker. Heiner stood still in the pouring rain for a while.*

*The song, whose title he did not even know, was like a soul-stealing demon.*

*\*\*\**

*Time flowed like running water.*

*Heiner, who had never missed a dinner at the Marquis’s after that, graduated from the training camp with exceptional grades. He immediately enlisted in the Special Operations Corp.*

*After completing two domestic assignments, he was assigned overseas. He was to assassinate a high-ranking member of the newly established revolutionary party in Demadonia and extract secrets.*

*The operative took at least a year and a half and up to two years for this job. He was told that he could not return to Padania for the time being.*

*Heiner looked for the girl one last time before leaving. The longer and stronger legs crossed the garden. In four years he had become a distinct young man.*

*The girl’ hours of practice had not changed. She was always there, and he always found her at the same spot.*

*It was a clear, cloudless day.*

*Heiner was holding a bouquet of starlings and hydrangeas in his arms. It was the first bouquet he had purchased at a street florist in the territory.*

*It was something he could not have dreamed of when he was a trainee. There were still restrictions, but compared to when he lived confined to the island, he was relatively free to roam around.*

*A wind blew from behind. His dark hair, which was quite long and reached his neck, fluttered away.*

*He raised his eyes and looked where the wind was headed. The windows of the white building were half open.*

*Heiner approached the building with silent steps. The curtains were wide open, and in the window he saw a familiar dazzling body.*

*She tilted her head slightly, marking something in the sheet music. Her nose was slightly crunched up, as if she was troubled.*

*Heiner stood by the window and took in the sight. The girl’s curves shone in the sunlight.*

*For four years, the girl had also grown up. But her body had changed only slightly, her features were still the same, making her look like a child at first glance.*

*She repeatedly pressed the keys and then released them again. She seemed to measure the sound, putting the harmonies in slightly different ways.*

*Her soft blonde hair cascaded down along her neck and shoulders. Heiner stared at the scene with eyes half nostalgic and half bitter.*

*“His lifelong wish was to join the special corps.”*

*Heiner had fulfilled someone's lifelong wish. And now he was about to join the formal army, the dream of all trainees.*

*To do so, he had to prove his competence and loyalty with his life. If a person at the bottom wanted to rise to the sun, he had to do so.*

*If he rose above his pitiful life, became someone more significant other than trash, perhaps he could get close to her.*

*Heiner's lips silently pressed thin. At the same time the keys were pressed and the piano sounded.*

*Can I try to speak to you?*

*Will I be able to stop looking endlessly at you from afar?*

*Can I let you know that there is someone like me, that there are people like me?*

*Heiner's gray eyes shook slightly. He closed his eyes and opened them again. When they reappeared, most of the emotion was gone.*

*He returned to his usual cold face and looked at the bouquet of flowers in his hand. He slowly placed the bouquet on the window sill. Unlike his cold face, his hands were very careful.*

*The girl’s fingers fell on the keys again. The chords that had been reworked countless times echoed in harmony.*

*Blue petals swayed along the wave-like melody.*

*\*\*\**

*Time continued to pass.*

*Heiner traveled abroad, completing three short-term assignments and two long-term ones. In the process, he joined the Marquis' entourage.*

*Of course, due to the nature of the special operations unit, this was never official. Heiner always worked as a shadow. Only those involved knew of his exploits.*

*Whenever he returned to the country, Heiner was invited to the residence of the Marquis. He was greeted with congratulations and encouragement for his success, and he joined him for dinner.*

*And he always went looking for the girl.*

*The girl.*

*She had grown so much that he could no longer call her that. The chubby face and childish cuteness in his memory had disappeared, and a perfect ladylike figure was in its place.*

*Her small body had filled out and her features had matured elegantly and seductively.*

*Rosenberg's precious lady entered the social world several years ago and received many courtships. Everyone loved her, young and old.*

*She also became a real pianist. She won prizes in several world competitions and even gave private recitals.*

*As she grew, her practice room was moved to the back of the mansion. Heiner finally learned of this fact the day he completed his second short-term mission.*

*Thus, for the past eight months he had not seen her once.*

*“Hey, did you see that?"*

*His colleague Jackson whistled and slapped Heiner on the shoulder.*

*“The Marquis's daughter. She just passed by. Right over there."*

*Heiner nodded absentmindedly, which was unlike him. He saw her, too. He saw a woman with a slender neck walking like a swan, leading three maids.*

*Jackson said admiringly.*

*“I just had a glimpse, and she's just as rumored. Don't you feel that she’s really a different kind of class from us by nature?"*

*Even though he knew that fact well, Jackson's words came to him anew. Heiner replied huskily.*

*“I know..."*

*It was the first time he had seen her outside of the practice room. Heiner stared at the hallway she had passed for a long time.*

*He could not even see her anymore without such good luck. And that luck was only a passing moment at best.*

*A sudden wave of dejected feelings flooded him.*

*‘What the hell am I doing?’*

*In fact, it was a thought that was constantly on his mind as he carried out the operation.*

*What in the world am I doing? What the hell am I doing this for?*

*During the mission, he was injured countless times, had been on the brink of death several times, and had lost many of his comrades. As all of this happened, Heiner felt something inside him being chipped away.*

*Still, he endured for the sake of Annette Rosenberg, and solely for that one woman.*

*Because of that one woman.*

*He wanted to stand next to her.*

*‘Is that really possible?’*

*She was the most beautiful and noble lady in Padania. No matter how hard he struggled to climb, he would never be able to reach her feet.*

*As Jackson said, they were different from birth. The kind that could not be changed by hard work. He wondered if these things really meant anything.*

*“Oh, oh? You son of a b\*tch. You can't take your eyes off her, can you?"*

*Jackson's blunt voice woke Heiner from his thoughts. He replied casually, mentally cursing at his carelessness.*

*"I was just checking the Marquis’s daughter’s face."*

*“It’s bullsh\*t. Miss Rosenberg is really beautiful. Even the indifferent Heiner can't take his eyes off her, eh?"*

*Jackson chuckled and continued to tease him. Heiner was silent, as if he didn't deserve an answer.*

*“Hey, give it one good try."*

*Jackson told him, raising an eyebrow. Heiner frowned.*

*“Stop talking nonsense.”*

*“The handsome bastard pretends not to know that Miss Rosenberg is a great romantic. Also look at her appearance. That's why she’s not always about meeting men of high status. Contrary to how she looks, she's so stubborn that even the Marquis can't interfere with her love affairs. Of course, he makes sure she marries a man of the same class."*

*"...... No matter how casual the date is, he's probably at least middle class."*

*“Hey, hey. We're exactly middle class too, as long as we're officially enlisted. If you hide the fact that you are from a training camp…Haha."*

*Heiner's eyes were fixed on the end of the hallway for a long time as he dismissed Jackson’s words as nonsense.*

*Though, in his head, jealousy thoughts of what kind of men she met were running.*

*The pale green dress that had already disappeared flickered before his eyes. Heiner gently bit his lower lip. A low curse escaped.*

*“Damn it.”*

*“It's hopeless even if you want to cheer me on.”*

*\*\*\**

**Chapter 39**

*Crackle.*

*Anne lit the firewood. Soon there was a crackling sound and red dots began to arise on the surface. Deon spoke as he looked at the map on which he had placed the compass.*

*"It's only 47 kilometers to go from here."*

*"Why is that 'only’?"*

*"It's 'only’ for this much. Think of the distance we’ve traveled so far, man."*

*"Ha---I don't think I can feel my legs."*

*“I've long since lost my senses."*

*"Oh my God, can you hear the wind? We just walked through it.”*

*Trivial talk was exchanged. Voices, not loud, rumbled through the cave. Heiner silently stirred the stew in his tin can.*

*It was originally forbidden for colleagues to get to know each other beyond a certain degree. Personal feelings would interfere with the operation.*

*The members of the team were also afraid to develop friendships among themselves. Since the survival rate during operations was usually not very high, it was not wise to show affection to those who would soon be separated.*

*However, this time, the members were people who had crossed the threshold of life and death together in a previous long-term project. Regardless of intentions or reason, they had no choice but to become closer to some extent.*

*“Why does Heiner look so serious?"*

*"He has that face to begin with, that guy."*

*"Did he put drugs in our food? He's actually a spy for France!"*

*Anne replied with a chuckle.*

*"I think we’ve been resistant to the drug."*

*"You have a point. Didn't they give us a lot of injections at the training camp?"*

*“The one that suppresses emotions? But does that really work?"*

*“At any rate, I think it really has affected Heiner."*

*“Do you think it really worked, Heiner?"*

*"Especially since I feel like my loyalty has increased a little."*

*Heiner replied with a shrug. If the drug had really suppressed his emotions, he would never have come to the situation he was in now.*

*"Yes, I agree. It doesn't work in my opinion. I have a girlfriend."*

*"Why would you date if you can't even marry?"*

*“What's the big deal about marriage? All you have to do is love now."*

*“What would you do if your lover was taken hostage during an operation?”*

*"Then ...... I can’t help it.”*

*"You're going to give up your lover?"*

*"If I don't give up, then what should I do!”*

*“You still have some reason left in you."*

*Anne and Jackson continued to bicker. Heiner divided the stew into separate bowls without any change in expression.*

*The seemingly light tone of the conversation sounded like everyday talk, but the actual situation was not. If anyone said anything that showed signs of insubordination, it was to be immediately reported to the Marquis. They would then be interrogated and tortured.*

*After receiving his stew, Jackson took a sip and said. “If I were the Sutherlane instructor, I would never let you make something so important in your life. That could be a weakness.”*

*"I've always heard kids who don't have anything important in life say things like that."*

*“Is there?"*

*“What? Not my country.”*

*“My dog.”*

*“If you don't have something so important, you make an example out of a baby animal?”*

*“All the animal lovers in the world can kill for them.”*

*“Hey, hey, be thankful you have something important. I can't think of anything."*

*Deon said curtly, folding the map into a crumpled mess. He added softly, tucking the compass into his pocket.*

*"I value precious things very much. It's so rare for us to have that in our lives. So you guys hold on to it. Don't let them take it from you."*

*“You’re stating the obvious!"*

*Anne asked Heiner as she slammed Deon's arm.*

*“Heiner, what do you hold dear? A hidden lover?”*

*“Hey, does a woodstone like him have a lover?”*

*"There are a surprising number of women who like that kind of wood stone type. Anyway, do you have anything valuable? What would you do if you could? Would you take good care of it? Are you the obsessive type?"*

*Heiner answered Anne's barrage of questions curtly.*

*“Even if I try to cherish it, it’s useless.” (H)*

*“How can you say it's useless?"*

*"Generally, what's important to me is also important to others............. There are people better than us. They're going to take it anyway.” (H)*

*“That's a statement that really brings tears to my eyes, from a position where I've lived deprived my whole life. So what are you going to do? Open both eyes and let them just take your precious thing away?”*

*Heiner mumbled as he stared at the stew.*

*“If you can't hide it perfectly.......... you might as well break it. So that it is no longer precious to others.” (H)*

*"What the heck, then it won't be precious to you either."*

*"Well..."*

*“Yes, thank you for your psychopathic reply."*

*Heiner smiled dryly as he held his stew.*

*As a young boy he kept his broken music box. No one wanted broken things anymore, but it was still precious to him.*

*Perhaps he was broken. All the trainees on Sutherlane Island live with a tattered spirit, but perhaps he was more broken than they were.*

*So much so that he couldn't value the precious things.*

*His feelings for the girl were probably not normal either.The more he thought about a precious object, the more unhappy he became, probably because it was wrong from the beginning to the end.*

*Heiner put down the stew and took out a cigar. He placed the end of the cigar against the firewood, lit it, and put it between his lips.*

*The white cigar smoke spread along with the wood smoke. He leaned his back against the wall and closed his eyes.*

*Endless crumbling thoughts rose like haze. She was always in the cause and effect.*

*I know you, but you don’t know me.*

*I gaze at you, but you don’t see me.*

*I think of you, but you don’t think of me.*

*The heart, deformed from the start, became more distorted and coarse the more it grew. The image of the young boy who genuinely loved the girl’s performance had long since faded.*

*Heiner slowly exhaled the smoke he had been holding for so long. A bittersweet taste drifted over his tongue. He flicked off the ashes.*

*Precious things always made him unhappy. Like the broken music box. And like her, who was unreachable.*

*If such an emotion was so important, it would be better to have nothing at all.*

*\*\*\**

*The operation was almost a failure.*

*Someone tipped off the operatives that they were being spied on, and the entire operative team, except Jackson, was captured by France’s Labor Party members.*

*Heiner was confined to a dark, damp cell. It was also a place he was quite familiar with. The only difference was that the screams and cries of others coming from the torture chamber could be heard in graphic detail.*

*At times, Heiner could recognize his colleagues. It was closer to an animal's voice than a person's, but he could clearly distinguish whose it was.*

*Heiner made an effort to remain calm. Torture itself was an easy way to break a person, but creating a sense of fear in a situation where one did not know when the torture would begin was another way to drive a person crazy.*

*It was even more effective here, where one could hear the screams of their colleagues vividly.*

*Unknown amount of time passed in the darkness. At one moment, the cell door opened with an old creaking sound.*

*A total of three people stood in front of the door. They were neither officers nor interrogators. They were guards dressed in brown uniforms and carrying clubs.*

*Their legs crossed into the cell. Heiner looked ahead without changing his expression. They did not carry him into the interrogation room or drag him to a cold chair.*

*They began beating Heiner without saying anything.*

*Heiner's body bent at his waist. A rumbling sound popped out of his throat. The guards kicked him again.*

*Soon he collapsed to the floor. Fists, feet, clubs, palms, and chairs alike attacked his body.*

*Heiner let out muffled groans and screams as he crouched like a dying animal.*

*His whole body seemed to be torn into pieces. He would rather have fainted, but his mind was clearer with each blow.*

*He shook like mad, as if something was broken. He vomited on the ground. But no food came out, just sour water.*

*After a long beating, the guards spat on him and left the cell. Heiner was thrown like a sack on the cold floor, his body shook violently.*

*Bang. The door slammed shut.*

*Consciousness blinked and flashed. Heiner's eyelids trembled as if in a seizure. He closed his eyes, short of breath.*

*He fainted several times and started over. When he finally came to, the guards were in his cell.*

*They began beating him again. His unrecovered body screamed. A completely unfamiliar pain engulfed his brain.*

*The stone floor was wet with blood and water. Heiner was beaten, passed out, slowly regained consciousness, writhing in his pain, then was beaten again.*

*The words of begging for help rose to the top of his throat. But in the end, he didn’t spit it out. The moment he let those words out, it would be all over.*

*At one point, the guards dragged Heiner out of his cell. He was made to sit on a cold steel chair in the interrogation room.*

*But he was too dazed to properly perceive the situation. The interrogator, wearing rimless glasses, folded his hands across from him, said,*

*“Now let's have a little conversation."*

*\*\*\**

# Chapter 40

*The interrogations continued day and night. The interrogations, which started out with simple questions, were soon accompanied by violence. It was to be expected.*

*“Your colleagues had already opened their mouths. After confiding everything that was not there, they told me that you would know more about it."*

*The interrogator said, instilling in Heiner a distrust of his colleagues, and sometimes even appeasing him. Each time, Heiner responded cynically.*

*"You're lying."*

*“Lying?"*

*The interrogator chuckled.*

*“What makes you think I'm lying?"*

*"You said they've already talked......but here you’re asking me for information.”*

*"Is there any more information I need to know from Marquis Dietrich's minions?"*

*Heiner's expression cracked slightly. They knew who was behind them. It couldn’t be ruled out that someone already opened their mouth….or the person who tipped them off in the first place already knew everything.*

*If that was the case, who on earth was the snitch?*

*Heiner tried to use his head, but it didn't work the way he wanted it to. He was having a hard time just to be conscious.*

*The interrogator questioned him various questions, and when he didn't get the answer he wanted, Heiner was punched in the head or slapped in the face. Although it was far less violent than the beatings he received from the guards, they added to his sanity. The interrogator played with his psychology and made him unable to think properly.*

*The interrogator bombarded him with questions without a break, and tortured. Still, Heiner confessed nothing because he remained loyal to Padania and had not yet given up hope.*

*Jackson had not been captured. He was a capable man; surely he would take some action. Or he could ask the Marquis for help.*

*From the Marquis's point of view, he would be worried if his secret agents were captured. Perhaps he would rather they died than divulging secrets while alive.*

*Still, Heiner thought that there would be a prisoner exchange in the near future, or that a rescue troop would come. He would just have to hold out until then.*

*“Okay, then let’s try this.”*

*The interrogator gently raised the frames of his glasses and said, deliberately and mercifully.*

*“I promise to stop the interrogation and spare your life. Instead, you’ll give me some plausible information....... it doesn't necessarily have to be confidential........... something that only you and your colleagues would know. Then go to your colleagues and say this."*

*"...."*

*“I'm sorry, it's already blown up. If we endure like this, we will continue to be tortured or die, so let’s just confess all together.”*

*The interrogator tilted his head with a twinkle in his eye as if it were a good suggestion. There was silence for a moment.*

*A laugh escaped Heiner's torn lips.*

*"Ha."*

*"..."*

*“Ha, ha, ha. Ha, ha!"*

*"...you're laughing?"*

*"Haa ......with all the classifieds coming out of my mouth. What the hell do you think is the difference......?"*

*Apparently the interrogator thought Heiner had lost his reason after severe interrogation and torture.*

*"You lot are a bunch of lowlifes, uneducated….You've never lived in poverty and never had anything like friendships, have you?" (H)*

*In fact, the words were eating his own flesh, but to the ears of the interrogator, who did not know Heiner’s status, they sounded like an insult.*

*Heiner spat on his desk and said.*

*“Go to the factory and crank up the spinning machine. Judging by the way you dress, it seems that your technical skills are far inferior to those of Padania.”*

*A terrifying silence followed those words. Heiner looked at the interrogator with a sneer.*

*In fact, he could not deny that he was momentarily shaken by the interrogator's suggestion.*

*Your life will be spared. Those words were very tempting. More tempting, at least to him, than the words they would stop the interrogation.*

*Heiner did not want to die. He had not lived his whole life just to die here like this. He had to live. He had to return alive.*

*He couldn't die so vainly without saying a word to her.*

*His reasons for not accepting the interrogator's proposal because he knew. They were not going to let him live anyway.*

*And even if he were to return alive, the Marquis would get rid of him for disclosing the secret. The only way to survive was to keep his mouth shut until the end and wait for rescue.*

*"------ okay.”*

*After a long silence, the inquisitor opened his mouth.*

*"Is that so?"*

*Heiner turned to face the serpentine eyes without reply. The interrogator called loudly for the guard. Soon after, the guard entered the interrogation room and received an order.*

*“Get him up."*

*The guard raised his hands in salute and then roughly helped Heiner to his feet. Heiner staggered, his legs had no strength. The two men stumbled together.*

*Eventually, another guard joined them. They put Heiner's hands together and handcuffed him. It was a typical torture position.*

*The interrogator walked in front of Heiner. He tapped his thigh with the club, then placed it on Heiner's shoulder.*

*Bang!*

*Heiner grunted painfully and twisted his upper body. But he could not move his body properly because his arms were bound. A heavy, dull pain surged into his shoulder.*

*“Arrogant son of a b\*tch."*

*Bang!*

*"Without knowing your subject."*

*Bang!*

*“Who's who?”*

*Bang!*

*“Tell me, dog!"*

*The club hit him everywhere.*

*Swollen and bruised, his ruptured body was severely vulnerable to violence. Heiner was beaten mercilessly, unable to even scream properly.*

*After beating him for a while, the interrogator threw the club, breathing heavily. Heiner's almost-closed eyelids trembled. Blood dribbled from his mouth.*

*His eyes flashed constantly. The interrogator ordered the guards to do something. But his muffled ears couldn’t hear him well. The guard who had left the interrogation room reentered not long after.*

*A subtle heat was felt. A flame was burning in a large can that the guard had brought with him.*

*"Dirty … All of your parents.… Like that with the Marquis..."*

*The interrogator kept talking. Heiner couldn't hear exactly what he was saying because of the ringing in his ears, but it was clear that it was a sexual insult.*

*Heiner was used to that kind of insult. They had harassed him terribly when he was in training camp, and they had also made similar snide remarks.*

*“Your friend wasn’t even f\*cking good at fighting. How have you survived so far? Did you give up your body to survive?”*

*"...Didn't you give it to that bastard?"*

*“I’m sure he gives it to the instructors. One sausage after another, haha.”*

*A life accustomed to such insults. It was truly miserable. Heiner let out a sound that could be either a laugh or a groan.*

*He knew he would never be able to have "something precious" in his life. If he put something into this life, it would quickly be taken away….*

*Pain shot up his spine. It was as if his whole body was crushed. It was the kind of pain that made him wish he were dead.*

*He laughed at himself for not wanting to die in such a situation.*

*Why in the world did he want to live so much in spite of such a life?*

*What on earth was he doing…?*

*Heiner blinked his eyes wet with the blood that flowed from his head. He suddenly remembered what his instructor had said in torture training. Don't focus on the current situation. Think about something else. The distant past or the distant future.*

*Beep. His ears kept ringing. Heiner imagined and recalled the distant past and distant future in his fuzzy mind.*

*Memories passed like fragments in the darkness. The area gradually became brighter. The surroundings gradually brightened. Everything disappeared, and where it remained, a dazzling white building loomed.*

*Heiner looked out to the far edge of his field of vision. Before he knew it, the ringing in his ears had vanished and only the sound of the beautiful piano filled his ears.*

*It was that girl.*

*In his past, the little girl had grown up. The same dazzlingly beautiful figure just as he remembered in his memory.*

*Heiner moistened his dry lips.*

*Come to think of it, he had never pronounced her name out loud. He mustered the courage to say her name.*

*Annette Rosenberg.*

*“Dirty man-wh\*re.”*

*The interrogator set an iron bar on the fire and cursed. The guards ripped off Heiner's torn shirt. His chest was covered with angry bruises.*

*The fire-burned iron bar was placed close to his bare skin. He could feel the burning heat. Heiner mumbled the girl’s name in his gaping mouth.*

*Annette Rosenberg.*

*If I come back alive and see you, I will definitely try to talk to you. I’ll stop hiding by the window and spy on you.....*

*I want to look into your eyes and talk to you.*

*A searing heat fell on his bare skin. It was a horrible, horrible pain that he had never experienced before, even though he had lived a life spelled with pain.*

*Screams filled the interrogation room. The interrogators and guards chuckled as he struggled.*

*His tightly torn lips parted through clenched teeth, and fingernails dug into his palms. The smell of burnt flesh wafted past his nose. Still, Annette was still in his head.*

*Ah.*

*How could my past and future be all you when you didn’t even know me?*

*\*\*\**

# Chapter 41

*Heiner was again confined to his cell. The burned wound in his chest was repeatedly festered and ruptured.*

*He was terribly ill all night. His whole body was burning hot and painful. He gasped, struggling to even breathe, and at one point he was so cold that he clutched himself and shivered.*

*It felt like a very long time had passed. One day the guards brought him back to the interrogation room. Someone was sitting on the other side of the desk. It was Anne.*

*"...."*

*Heiner was speechless as he looked at her bony body. She was literally looking horrendous. He might not be able to tell without a mirror, but he probably wouldn't be much different than her.*

*After looking down at the desk for a while, Anne finally opened her mouth. A dry voice poured out, scratching at her throat.*

*“Let's talk..."*

*“What?"*

*Heiner asked back, as if he doubted what he had heard. Anne said again.*

*“Let's just blow it as it is, what’s the use of holding on like this? This is ...... What the hell is all this?"*

*"What are you talking about? Did the guards threaten you?"*

*“It’s all the same.”*

*“You think they’re going to let us off the hook for doing that? Do you think they're going to let us live, if we blow the whole thing?"*

*Anger was in Heiner's voice. But Anne continued without batting an eye.*

*“No, they won't let us live.”*

*"..."*

*“That's what I want. To die quickly."*

*Anne's red, swollen eyes were unfocused and vacant. Heiner stared at her, speechless. Anne was a completely different person now.*

*"You---why did you suddenly..........."*

*As any trainee would say, Anne was greatly loyal to her country. Heiner couldn't understand why she would suddenly say such a thing. No matter how badly she had been tortured…*

*"Heiner, who do you think ratted us out?"*

*“I don't know. ......"*

*“It’s Jackson."*

*“…”*

*“The interrogator told me. It was then that the puzzle finally fit perfectly. That bastard was a spy all along... Isn’t it funny? He was the one who saved my life in the previous operation, but he was France's spy."*

*Heiner opened his mouth and closed it again, the back of his head cool. Actually, maybe, just maybe… he had expected it. He just couldn't admit it by a long shot.*

*Anne laughed in a cracked voice.*

*“I'm not so sure anymore. Jackson was also my classmate at the training camp, but then he was brought in there as a spy from an early age. To be raised as a spy from an early age............. I wonder how much he was brainwashed in France.”*

*"..."*

*“I wonder if Jackson thought of us that way, just as we thought of Jackson as a f\*cking spy for France.”*

*"...."*

*“I was wondering what in the world this was all about.............. Heiner, I don't know what is right anymore........."*

*Tears welled up from Anne's eyes. Heiner looked at the tears blankly. She slumped down and sobbed.*

*Heiner slowly looked down. His hands on his thighs were trembling. He tried to clench his fist, but he could not do it.*

*He held his hands together as if in prayer.*

*\*\*\*\**

*In the end, Heiner said nothing.*

*For while the goal of Anne and her colleagues was simply to die quickly, Heiner's goal was different. His goal was to live.*

*That was why he said nothing.*

*He had no idea how much time had passed. In the darkness, Heiner thought and thought of the girl over and over again, engulfed in pain and loneliness.*

*Sometimes he missed Annette, sometimes he admired her, sometimes he resented her, and sometimes he hated her. Unexpressed thoughts spread their branches out of alignment.*

*Annette Rosenberg.*

*You know nothing of what is going on. All you do is sit gracefully at the piano and play whatever you want.*

*You, the daughter of a Marquis, know nothing of what I endure these works for.*

*He knew it was a twisted thought. But, deformed as his mind had been from the start, this enclosed space and the harsh conditions were driving him into a quagmire.*

*Heiner hated her and resented her terribly, but before long he missed her again. Annette Rosenberg.*

*No.*

*It wasn't your fault. You were just born too precious. Only, no one told you these things.*

*When you find out, you will think something is wrong with this world. You will feel sorry. You will be angry. Because your soul is as noble and pure as your performance---.*

*Longing, yearning, resenting, hating, missing again, yearning, resenting, hating...... the thoughts repeated endlessly. He felt like he was going mad. One day, war broke out in France.*

*It was Rutland's war for independence from France. The chances of winning the war tilted to the side of Rutland.*

*Prisons and interrogation centers fell, and political and ideological prisoners captured by the Labor Party were released.*

*Taking advantage of the chaos, Heiner and a few surviving colleagues stole France’s secrets and escaped.*

*He also burned the records that his colleagues had disclosed, but not all. In the process, two colleagues whose condition was serious got eliminated.*

*Deon was among them. Heiner eliminated them according to the rules. He could not deliver them back into France’s hands.*

*In the end, apart from Jackson, Heiner and Anne were the only survivors. By the time they reached the border, Heiner turned around, re-gripping his pistol. Anne was following him, breathing heavily.*

*“Ha, ha...what's wrong?”*

*Anne looked at him curiously, wiping the sweat off her face. Heiner raised the muzzle of his stolen gun without answering. Anne's hand, which was wiping the sweat from her forehead, stopped.*

*The air felt cool. There was not an ounce of tremor in the aimed muzzle. Anne slowly lowered her hand and slowly closed and opened her eyes.*

*The pistol dropped from Anne's hand with a pop. She muttered with a small, disappointed smile.*

*"Yeah, well ........"*

*"..."*

*“*

*Maybe it's right to die here."*

*Anne had a lot to say to France. There might be some records that had not yet been burned. If the Marquis found out about this, she wouldn't be able to die in peace anyway.*

*Even if not for this reason, Anne was a traitor who had leaked state secrets.*

*Traitors would be punished.*

*No one would be left behind.*

*It was a sentence they had learned so well that it was etched into their brain. Anne, who had come from the same training camp, knew this. She knew it, and that was why she said what she did.*

*Never question the system and its orders. That was their way.*

*Bang!*

*Gunshots echoed through the forest.*

*Blood gushed from Anne's head. Her body, which seemed to stand still for a moment, eventually collapsed.*

*The moment seemed very slow to Heiner. It was as if a chain of images were being shot in sequence.*

*Her powerless body no longer felt massless. The grass was stained red with the blood that flowed from her head.*

*Heiner stood still with the trigger pulled. His posture remained the same, but unlike earlier, the gun muzzle was shaking like mad.*

*He lowered the muzzle like a broken doll. His eyes blurred for a moment, then became clear again.*

*Heiner staggered and grabbed his face with one hand. His head was dizzy. He caught a glimpse of Anne's fallen body through the fingers that blocked his view.*

*Why...?*

*Why did he kill her?*

*He couldn't quite remember why. His mind was hazy, as if a fog had settled in. He looked back for a while and listed his stammering thoughts.*

*Leaking state secrets.*

*Because she was a traitor.*

*Traitors must be dealt with.*

*But what did Anne betray? Suddenly a small question popped into his head. The answer came shortly.*

*The motherland.*

*Their homeland.*

*But was it really their homeland?*

*Heiner rubbed his face with a trembling hand. The blood that had dotted his face disappeared.*

*Who was Padania a homeland for?*

*His thoughts tangled in a mess. But the end pointed to a truth whose shape was unknown.*

*Ann's words lingered around like tinnitus.*

*“I wondered what in the world this was.........."*

*What was what?*

*"Heiner, I don't know what is right anymore.........."*

*What was right and what was wrong?*

*His heart thumped. He felt like Anne was getting up now and blaming him. It was an emotion he had never felt before, even though he had killed countless people.*

*Heiner backed away slowly. The grass felt heavy and sticky under his feet.*

*He turned and fled.*

*The forest rustled in the wind. In his blurry vision, the whole forest was red.*

*Heiner ran through the red grass. He ran and ran.*

*His breath came in choked gasps, the sensation of pain engulfed his wounded body, the screams of his colleagues and the smell of blood trailing behind him, but he kept running.*

*He kept running because he still had to live.*

*He had to make it home alive.*

*“Heiner, what do you hold dear?"*

*To where his precious things were............*

*\*\*\**

# Chapter 42

*After the Munich operation, which he thought had failed, Heiner miraculously returned with even France’s secrets and was warmly welcomed by the Marquis.*

*France was the opposite faction of the Allies, to which Padania now belonged.*

*Moreover, it was a representative among them.*

*Therefore, this operation was as important to Padania as its difficulty. What Heiner brought not only solidified the Marquis's position, but also gave him a boost in his promotion.*

*However, Heiner did not tell the Marquis that he had disposed of the traitor. Anne and other colleagues were declared dead during the operation.*

*Because of Heiner's achievements, Marquis Dietrich became the highest-ranking of the five military generals. After great satisfaction, the Marquis approved Heiner's entry into formal military service.*

*It wasn’t a simple approval of his enlistment. In addition to the rank of second lieutenant, which was the starting rank for a military academy graduate, the Marquis also ordered him to be appointed lieutenant in recognition of his career so far. It was truly an extraordinary appointment.*

*Heiner was invited to the Rosenberg residence for the first time after many years. It was his first visit as a reserve officer about to be commissioned, not as a trainee spy whose identity could not be revealed.*

*The dinner was held in the banquet hall, the pride of the Rosenberg mansion. Heiner was familiar with this place.*

*Heiner looked again at the murals on the ceiling. It was as gorgeous and sacred as ever, but he felt no excitement.*

*His eyes rested on Saint Marianne. Heiner always saw Saint Marianne through the multicolored windows in the midday sun.*

*But in the middle of the night Saint Marianne looked not like a saint, but only like an ordinary woman. It was as if she had escaped from a mirage---.*

*"Congratulations on your promotion, Mr. Valdemar!"*

*“Not yet, sir."*

*“Almost there, and that's it! Come on, let's have a drink, shall we? It’s a precious wine from Emburg."*

*"Thank you, Lieutenant General. However, I am currently recovering from an injury........... I cannot drink alcohol. Please understand."*

*'”Um, not even one drink?"*

*“According to the doctor, I’m in a poor condition because I had not received any treatment there, and that it could become serious if not properly treated now.”*

*"Well...... that won't do. Let's do it together next time. Before, I would have drank despite the injuries, but the world has really improved, hasn't it?"*

*The lieutenant general waved the bottle of wine at the attendant with a teasing laugh. Straight away the attendant came over and opened the bottle. The meal was then served in course order.*

*The dinner with the general officers was incomparable to what Heiner had experienced when he was a trainee. The food and wine were of the highest quality.*

*But Heiner felt like chewing sand the whole time. He politely answered incoming questions and poured the drinks.*

*Late in the evening, everyone, except Heiner, became drunk. The Marquis laughed vigorously, as if he was in a good mood, and tapped Heiner on the shoulder.*

*“I've been studying you since your trainee days! I knew one day you would do something big!”*

*“I am very honored to have come to the attention of the Marquis.”*

*“Yes, the first time I saw you was when you........ killed four senior members, right? You were only in third grade! I heard you and them didn’t get along.”*

*"It wasn't personal. Just because they tried to attack me............"*

*“That's why you didn't get along! Now that I look at it, you don't seem very sociable, do you? Were you okay with your colleagues during the operation?”*

*“We were not allowed to interact with each other more than necessary during the mission. There was no personal proximity."*

*"Still, it's a blessing. In this job, you often experience the deaths of people close to you, so you shouldn't give it too much emotion.”*

*“I'll keep that in mind."*

*The drunken Marquis kept talking alone, no matter what Heiner replied or not.*

*“Everyone died in this mission except you, didn't they? It's a pity. I'm really sorry. Two of them died in a carriage accident---and the rest died of torture---the vicious French bastards........!"*

*Heiner's hand holding the fork suddenly stopped. He raised his head without a change of expression. Then he stared blankly at Marquis Dietrich.*

*“Still, how honorable is it to die while working for the country? How much ......! Originally, they would have died on the street without having accomplished anything.....!"*

*Said in a tone of exaggerated theatrics, the Marquis set down his glass roughly. He was still smiling with a face full of liquor.*

*Heiner replied that it would have been a great honor for them and filled the Marquis' cup. Blood red wine filled the glass to the brim.*

*The Marquis talked more about it, but it was a story without the nourishment of sin. Shortly thereafter, the drunken Marquis said he was tired and left his seat.*

*The maid led Heiner to his bedroom. It was late, so the Marquis was considerate enough to ask him to stay the night.*

*"If you need anything, just pull this string. Then I wish you a peaceful night."*

*“Thank you."*

*As soon as the door closed, Heiner opened the window and turned on the oil lamp. It was then that he finally had a chance to catch his breath a little. He pulled up a chair near the window and sat down.*

*Since escaping from the interrogation center, Heiner had never been able to stay in an enclosed, dark space. Just being in such a place seemed to be a recurring nightmare.*

*It was a major drawback for an active duty soldier. He intended to get through this alone without telling anyone, but he had no idea how to overcome it.*

*Heiner was pensive as he looked at the lamp. His fingers tapped slowly on the window glass. Many things passed through his mind. Some of them were the words of the Marquis.*

*His regular tapping on the window stopped. Heiner’s gray eyes darkened.*

*Aiden and Michelle did not die in the carriage accident. Or, more accurately, not reported as such.*

*It was a multiple rear-end collision. The result was that they were hit by the carriage, but since he could not determine the exact cause of the accident, he just reported it as an accident that was caused by a collision on the road.*

*The Marquis, however, accurately referred to it as a carriage accident.*

*His memory went back in time.*

*It was a time when the domestic situation in Padania was unusual for the Marquis. Before his death, Aiden had said something meaningful about this.*

*"The Marquis tends to make frequent mistakes. That will catch up with him someday."*

*"Oh, really? Still, there hasn't been any noise about him, has there?"*

*Aiden answered Anne's question with a look of stifled laughter.*

*"That's right. Because he removes those who can hold back his ankles in advance."*

*As Dietrich's close associates, Aiden and Michelle knew the Marquis' secrets. That could probably be called shackles.*

*Heiner quietly let out an empty laugh. It was really quite absurd. They were overseas and in a classified operation, and they were killed.*

*They had been loyal to the Marquis, willing to give up their lives, but he had discarded them like pieces of paper.*

*In any case, it was all over. The operation was a success, and the Marquis became the first military general with uncontested power.*

*Dead chess pieces were worth less than trash to the Marquis. They did not even have graves or small stone monuments.*

*Heiner clenched his fists and released them, as if he had lost his will. The night wind that flowed into the room was cold.*

*\*\*\**

*The Marquis and the others did not get out of bed until the next morning.*

*It was a particularly sunny day. After washing up and having a quick breakfast, Heiner went out to the rose garden like an old habit.*

*The sun shone on the empty garden. He walked where his feet took him. The warm light seemed to blur his mind.*

*Walking aimlessly, Heiner suddenly stopped in the middle of the path. He realized belatedly that he was heading for the practice room.*

*Heiner lowered his head and stared at his feet. His eyes met his shadow against the light. The shadow was exceptionally dark.*

*The practice room had long since been moved deeper into the mansion. She would not be there either. So where exactly was he going? Heiner asked himself.*

*Why did he want to come back here?*

*‘To see her.’*

*What was he going to do when he saw her?*

*'To talk to her.'*

*What would he say?*

*'What words. ............'*

*Everything was vague. He was living this way for that one woman, but the place he came back to was very bright and unfamiliar.*

*Painful heat crawled along the letters engraved on his chest. Heiner gritted his teeth. What in the world was he going to do when he met her with a body full of wounds and scars?*

*‘Let's go back.’*

*He thought, but for some reason his feet wouldn't move. He struggled to turn his body.*

*At that moment, he suddenly heard a rustling sound nearby.*

*With characteristic agility, Heiner noticed that it was the presence of a person.*

*He immediately took a step back and raised his head. About ten paces away, the shape of a white umbrella flickered.*

*The surface of the umbrella glistened in the sunlight. It took him a moment to realize that it was not an umbrella, but a parasol.*

*A woman in a light blue dress was walking toward him. Her long blonde hair fluttered in waves as she walked.*

*Heiner looked down and slowly raised his eyes as if he was trying to escape.*

*He could see slender ankles under the not-so-long dress. The woman was wearing white socks and low heeled shoes.*

*The monochromatic dress had no special embellishments, but it was elegant and classy. Heiner did not know much about the dress, but he felt it suited the woman perfectly.*

*Her thin arms were visible under the short sleeves. The hand holding the parasol had a pair of translucent lace gloves on it.*

*A necklace of blue emeralds hung from her slender white neck. The necklace was the same color as her eyes. Her eyes and..........*

*For a moment, time seemed to stop. Little by little, the thoughts in his head, which straddled the border between consciousness and unconsciousness, became clearer.*

*Heiner, who had been standing there like a nail, finally realized who the woman was.*

*It was her.*

*\*\*\**

# Chapter 43

*Heiner wondered if he was dreaming now. His fantasy must have gone too far and affected his reality.*

*While he stood there in a daze, she was getting closer before he knew it.*

*Annette stopped two steps away. Her emerald blue eyes were completely filled with him. Heiner's eyes blinked erratically like a broken toy.*

*A gentle voice with a slightly higher tone entered his ears.*

*“Are you all right, sir? You've been standing so still for so long............"*

*He was too nervous to hear her words clearly. Heiner was too transfixed, only looking at her lips. Annette asked again.*

*“Um---is there something wrong? Do you need help?"*

*Those words belatedly brought Heiner to his senses. He put his hand involuntarily over his trembling lips and slowly shook his head as he replied.*

*“No, I'm fine. I was lost in thought for a moment….”*

*"Oh, I interrupted you, didn't I?"*

*"No, it’s fine."*

*Annette smiled, as if it was fortunate. Unable to take his eyes off her face, Heiner couldn't help but smile along with her.*

*"Are you a guest of my father's?"*

*"Yes."*

*“Are you a soldier?”*

*"Do you know me ......?"*

*"No, I thought I did."*

*"Oh."*

*Not knowing how to interpret Annette's words, Heiner just smiled. It was obvious that his smile was unnatural, but it couldn’t be helped.*

*He drew and re-drew countless scenes of meeting her, but the moment he actually faced her, his mind went blank. Heiner managed to open his mouth without direction to continue the conversation.*

*"I'm ......."*

*I have been overseas for a long time for operations and am about to be officially appointed. I had visited the Rosenberg residence many times before.*

*You don't know me, but I have actually known about you for a long time.*

*“Father!" (A)*

*Heinerlost his train of thought. Annette looked behind him and waved at the Marquis. Heiner looked back a step later.*

*"Why did you come so late?" (Annette to the Marquis)*

*"Not that late." (Marquis)*

*"You drank too much again yesterday, didn't you? I told you not to drink any more alcohol." (A)*

*Annette bruised the Marquis with a worried voice. At first glance, the father and daughter had a close relationship.*

*“The only daughter I have is nagging me every day...... more importantly, when did the two of you meet again?”*

*“I just met him. It seems he was taking a walk in the garden.”*

*Their gazes turned to Heiner. Heiner, who had been stiff for a while at the intimacy between the Marquis and Annette, turned his head stiffly.*

*“I was going to meet this girl in the garden, but I forgot. So I came out in a rush. That’s why I’m dressed like this…Excuse me, haha.”*

*The marquis said with a chuckle.*

*“Is this the first time you two have seen each other? Annette, this is Mr. Heiner Valdemar... soon to be Lt. Heiner. Valdemar, this is my daughter Annette."*

*"...... Yes, it's a real pleasure to meet you............. It's an honor."*

*Heiner could not speak well, as if his tongue was frozen. Heiner hid his trembling hands behind his back. His heart thumped erratically.*

*Annette was the only daughter of Marquis Dietrich. The two were inseparable by blood, and the marquis was famous for loving his daughter. It was only natural that they should be close.*

*‘But, why on earth do I have this feeling...........’*

*"You look very young, but are you already going to be a lieutenant?”*

*“Valdemar made a big contribution in a operation. He was the only one came back alive from Munich operation this time.”*

*“Ah..! That's him! My father told me. You’re really amazing."*

*Annette clapped her hands and looked up at Heiner with sparkling eyes. Heiner felt the urge to run away from those beautiful eyes.*

*He opened his mouth reluctantly, despite the fact that he knew he shouldn't speak carelessly.*

*“Yeah...just me, I'm the only one who made it back alive. All of my friends were in the operation …”*

*Like an idiot, he couldn’t speak well. He couldn't count the number of times he had acted as a spy, and yet he could never quite control his own emotions at this moment.*

*"Yes. The people who gave their lives for the country. My heart goes out to them.”*

*Annette looked not at all mournful, and said so as if their sacrifice was natural.*

*“By the way, when will your ceremony be?"*

*For an instant, time stopped.*

*Heiner’s eyes widened slightly and his lips twitched. His mouth was now completely dry. The Marquis laughed and talked with Annette.*

*The air around them felt cold and somber. Heiner's legs were barely tied, as he kept trying to get out of the place.*

*"Sometimes… in the future.”*

*"Okay...... I will be sure to attend....”*

*He couldn't remember the details of how he answered the Marquis' question or what he had promised Annette. Everything just flowed absentmindedly.*

*"Then, congratulations on your appointment in advance. See you next time the opportunity arises."*

*Annette greeted him with her eyes and her characteristic good-natured, innocent smile. Heiner bowed his head slightly.*

*When he looked up again, the Marquis and Annette had already turned their backs.*

*She chuckled and crossed her arms over the Marquis’s. When they were a short distance away, Heiner stepped back.*

*The time that had stopped began to flow again.*

*Two, three steps and he staggered backwards like a man who had been shot. Immediately, Heiner turned around and started walking somewhere.*

*The area was full of blooming roses. He looked at them as if they were hideous corpses. The thick scent of roses enveloped him and kept him away.*

*Where his feet unconsciously touched was a bench positioned among the overgrown vines. It was also where he first discovered the sound of her piano.*

*Heiner sat down on the bench and exhaled roughly. His large back moved unsteadily.*

*He often experienced breathing difficulties, but this was the first time it had happened in a place that was neither enclosed nor dark.*

*Trapped in the dangerous breathing, Heiner coughed. It was painful, like a stab in the chest.*

*He knew it was not the woman’s fault.*

*She was just born so precious, only no one had told her these things.*

*If she knew, she would think something was wrong with the world, she would feel sorry, she would be angry.*

*Because that woman's soul would be as noble and pure as her music…*

*Ha!*

*A guttural laugh erupted mixed with hard cough. Heiner gasped and mocked himself madly.*

*Noble?*

*Pure?*

*Who the hell was that?*

*He must have been separating Annette from Marquis Dietrich in a part of his mind all along.*

*He thought of her as neither the daughter of the Marquis nor a noblewoman, but as a more sacred and holy, religious being.*

*It was funny.*

*Annette Rosenberg was no saint. She was not the kind of person who could sympathize with pain, sorry for the sufferings, or outrage at the unfairness.*

*It was all his own delusion and projection.*

*Everything he had about the woman was an illusion. It was literally nothing more than a fantasy. He could tell just by talking to her for the first time.*

*Her demeanor, her words, her tone, her eyes, her actions, her facial expressions …everything…clearly indicated that every thought he had was an illusion.*

*Her voice was mixed in between choking breaths.*

*“Yes. The people who gave their lives for the country. My heart goes out to them.”*

*At least she shouldn’t say that. She shouldn't say it like that.*

*What other things could make her happier than playing her favorite piano? How many sacrifices were made for her father's position?*

*“By the way, when will your ceremony be?”*

*If she was that kind of person--*

*Why had he had to go through all that pain for such a person?*

*What would he be to come back alive for someone like that?*

*What would become of him who was buried in so much blood to live?*

*His life… for what on earth—*

*Heiner let out a final cough. His breathing slowly regained stability. But his bent body still trembled faintly.*

*His lips moved slightly.*

*Annette Rosenberg.*

*Emotions that had been repeated endlessly in the solitary cell of the interrogation center were revived.*

*Missing, longing, resenting, hating, missing, longing, hating, resenting............ his mind, deformed from the start, was terribly warped.*

*Heiner heard the sounds of what had been inside him breaking and distorting. Deeply rooted, they changed shape on their own and stabbed inside. He repeated it again.*

*Annette Rosenberg.*

*The name, once pronounced as if in fervent prayer, came out broken at the edges.*

*Before he knew it, his breathing had completely returned to normal. The hand that had been gripping his throat dropped away, and his back, which had been hunched over, straightened.*

*Heiner's gray eyes were dark and sunken like a fish crawling on the bottom of deep water.*

*A long, gentle breeze flowed over, as it had at that time. But there was no longer a piano melody in it.*

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# Chapter 44

*Annette attended the dinner following Heiner's promotion ceremony.*

*She sat directly across from him and listened to him talk. Sometimes she even laughed a little, covering her mouth with her hand.*

*The atmosphere was much more convivial, but Heiner could not erase the feeling that he was alone and apart. It was as if he existed in a place where he should not be.*

*Heiner was the only one who recognized her presence and was struck with a strange fear every time she called his name, making eye contact.*

*This was the person he had always seen from afar. She was the one he had longed for. She was the one he dared not speak a word to, the one who was far away.*

*The gaze of the young lady, who was thought of as an unreachable Saint was more terrifying than exciting. In front of those glassy eyes, Heiner couldn't even breathe properly.*

*He was no longer the shabby orphan boy he had been when he was officially commissioned. He was a promising young officer and a trusted confidant of the Marquis.*

*Still, Heiner felt infinitely low.*

*He hated himself for not being able to take his eyes off her.*

*Since their first meeting they had met quite often. They met at the Marquis’s residence, at a social party hosted by a certain nobleman, and at a performance hall.*

*Sometimes it was coincidental, sometimes not. In any case, they met quite often.*

*Around that time, the Sutherlane Island training camp was briefly abandoned because of the search for spies. Marquis Dietrich ordered a rigorous search.*

*Trainees who had not yet reached adulthood were interrogated. If they were unlucky, they were suspected of being spies and executed. Many who had already graduated and were active in their current positions were also taken away.*

*Heiner did not know if there really were spies in the training camp or if it was just a groundless fear. Of course, he didn't think it was just a lie. He had seen the precedent of Jackson.*

*But was this really the right way the Marquis was taking?*

*Heiner wondered. He was not a qualified judge of good and evil, but he could at least question it.*

*Was this right?*

*He questioned and questioned, but he could not come to a conclusion. But...... he wanted to bring down the Marquis.*

*It was around that time that Heiner began to gradually join the revolutionary forces.*

*He had learned of the existence of the Padanian revolutionary army when he stole secrets from France and fled. France had sponsored the revolutionary army in order to create internal strife in Padania.*

*He originally intended to report it to the Marquis. However, when he returned to Padania alone, he destroyed the document.*

*After that, Heiner occasionally passed on military information and supplies, large and small, anonymously to the revolutionary army. He did so knowing that if he was discovered, he would be summarily executed.*

*It was not because he had a great sense of justice or a sense of purpose. It was motivated by the outbursts of a broken and distorted mind.*

*The woman.*

*Annette Rosenberg.*

*Having so much blood on his hands, having lived this way*

*was entirely the woman’s fault. His twisted mind convinced.*

*Someone had to take the blame.*

*No matter how.*

*Heiner prayed every night in front of the forever-lit candle. He didn't believe in God, but just memorized and re-memorized it like a life prayer.*

*I hope you despair as much as I despair, I hope you lose as much as I lost.*

*As long as my life has been dark, may yours be too...*

*Prayers that reached nowhere scattered in his mouth. Whssh, the candle flickered.*

*\*\*\**

*On the fourth day they met, Heiner stopped her for a moment before returning and asked.*

*"Miss Annette, may I have a moment of your time this weekend? If it's not too much of a burden......... I'd like to treat you to a meal."*

*Annette nodded with a shy, but familiar, smile.*

*She had liked him from the first time she had met Heiner. Heiner could see that fact without difficulty.*

*But he also knew how light and shallow the liking Annette had for him was.*

*"Miss Annette is a great romantic. And look at her appearance. That's why it's not always a matter of dating men of high status." (A colleague)*

*She had probably met a lot of men with whom she was slightly attracted. And if she did and her heart cooled, she would have broken up with them.*

*Annette Rosenberg was the most beautiful and noble woman in Lancaster. There would have been no man she could not have had if she had wanted him.*

*He was sure he would be one of her many dates...*

*He wouldn’t let it go that way.*

*He would not be one of those men she met and broke up with easily. He had to be the ideal partner she wanted.*

*It was not difficult to play the perfect lover. Heiner had once approached the colonel's secretary and briefly pretended to be her lover in order to assassinate Colonel Rowanov.*

*The colonel's secretary preferred a rational, intelligent man. Heiner approached her under the guise of a fake lawyer.*

*A competent lawyer, with whom she could have a sophisticated conversation about international affairs and economic trends. Heiner brilliantly portrayed her ideal type.*

*For a short period of time, the secretary was completely smitten with Heiner. The operation was successful before they officially became lovers, and he simply walked away without a word to the woman.*

*Everything would be the same as it had been then. Heiner thought. Changing his identity and personality was familiar to him.*

*Heiner began to gather all the information he could about Annette.*

*Her hobbies, food preferences, favorite books and operas, artists she admired, recent concerts she had seen, places she had and never been to, the types of men she had met before, the reason she broke up with them…*

*He had a perfect grasp of Annette Rosenberg and led every conversation around her*

*interests.*

*"Oh my, have you read that book?" (A)*

*"Yes, I have. It's one of my favorite books. The scene right after Ivan escapes from prison is so memorable that it stays in my memory forever.” (H)*

*“I like that scene too! The twisted and broken psychological portrayal of Ivan as he wonders if he should go back to jail again is really ......" (A)*

*"It's not a very famous book, but it's amazing that Miss Rosenberg read it." (H)*

*“I am very curious about Mr Valdemar too. I thought all soldiers didn't like literature.” (A)*

*“Haha, why did you think that?" (H)*

*“Don't think it's an outdated prejudice; it's not. As you know, half of the men I met, including my father, were in the military. They thought that literature made the world unhappy and pessimistic.” (A)*

*“It is the job of writers to show the light and dark side of society." (H)*

*“Mr. Valdemar is very literary in your choice of words. Aren't you actually working as a writer on the side?" (A)*

*"Oh, I’ve been found out." (H)*

*"Haha, what kind of books have you written, writer?" (A)*

*"I wrote a book on tactics, analyzing aspects of second generation warfare." (H)*

*“I won't look at it then." (A)*

*Heiner met regularly with Annette. He ate the foods she liked, went to the places she liked, and did the things she liked.*

*He always gave her flowers whenever they met. If there was anything she noticed while they were together, he would secretly buy it and give it to her right before they parted ways.*

*Heiner worked hard to mold himself perfectly to her tastes.*

*A young and promising officer who was handsome, fashionable, kind, affectionate, romantic, yet not too lighthearted, and a lover of culture and art.*

*All was well.*

*Annette was a different woman in every way from him. She was accustomed to being loved and was also equally lovely.*

*Heiner rather wished she had been less lovely.*

*All was well.*

*Occasionally, Heiner would suddenly find himself engrossed in the pretense of a fake lover. When he left her and went home, he felt as if he had awakened from a sweet dream.*

*All was well.*

*Every time he saw Annette, he would find a new aspect of her. She was good and kind, but at the same time aristocratic.*

*It was not because of her nature, but because of the life she had been given. Since no one attacked her, she did not have to attack anyone either.*

*She could be good because of that, and because of that she could be kind.*

*Realizing the brutality of the world was the challenge of life, the opposite of his life, where he had to kill to not die.*

*Heiner both admired and hated everything she enjoyed and wanted to destroy it. The more frequent his encounters with her, the greater his longing and obsession became.*

*All was well...........*

*“What are you thinking, Mr. Valdemar?"*

*“Ah…”*

*Heiner came to his senses belatedly. Annette was looking at him with her shining eyes.*

*The sleepless night had left him in a daze. He swept his face once with the palm of his hand and then apologized.*

*“I'm sorry. I've been working very hard lately.” (H)*

*“I heard you've been busy. Why did you come out when you could have just rested? It wasn't even the day we were supposed to meet originally---" (A)*

*Heiner smiled and replied calmly.*

*"Is there a day we should and should not meet? I just want to see the lady whenever I feel like it.” (H)*

*To which Annette did not answer for a moment, but stared up at him. A strange silence followed. Heiner looked at her, wondering if he had said something wrong.*

*"Mr. Valdemar."*

*But the words that came out of Annette's mouth were a little different than he expected.*

*“Are you confessing to me?”*

*\*\*\*\**

# Chapter 45

*Her words sounded both innocent in a way and questioning in a way.*

*Heiner stiffened as if caught off guard. He should respond naturally, but he couldn't remember the next sentence. He laughed awkwardly.*

*“Miss Rosenberg, what suddenly…”*

*“Not suddenly. It's been months since we met, but we haven't even mentioned that we're officially dating... don't you like me?"*

*Annette’s pride seemed to have hurt. Heiner shook his head, not hiding his bewilderment.*

*“Absolutely not. If I didn't like you, I wouldn't have tried to see you all this time.”*

*“So you just want to play around with me? You don't want to be in a formal relationship?"*

*“Miss Rosenberg, why are you thinking like that? That’s not true. I just….”*

*His words trailed off. Heiner looked at her with anxious eyes, unable to continue for a moment. Annette hurried to ask.*

*“Just what?"*

*Yes, why didn't he confess?*

*Heiner gazed at the woman's small, beautiful face. He still couldn't believe the fact that this face was right in front of him.*

*In his head, he knew that she already had some feelings for him. But his long-learned sense of inferiority put the brakes on the thought.*

*Because deep down he knew that there was no way a woman like her could have feelings for him.*

*It didn’t matter if he was an officer, being from a commoner background was an inseparable label. Nobles would flirt with commoners, but never thought of a serious relationship.*

*Arranged marriage was the task of all nobles. As times changed, people were willing to tolerate a little bit of playing with fire in one's youth, but very few people overcame the difference in status and got married.*

*Furthermore, Annette was the only daughter of the great Rosenberg family. She was also of royal blood.*

*Therefore, Marquis Dietrich was willing to turn a blind eye to Annette's love life. Knowing whoever she met in her youth, her marriage would eventually be according to her family's will.*

*However much Annette loved romance, she was at the same time the epitome of aristocracy.*

*“I just..."*

*Heiner opened his mouth hesitantly. Only at this moment did he put off the act and the pretense and speak his mind. He said in a slightly trembling voice.*

*“I just thought you might turn me down.”*

*The sentence that came out of his mouth was pathetic and poor. Heiner immediately regretted saying it. If he were a woman, he would not want to meet a girl who talked like this.*

*However, Annette looked a little surprised. He didn't know what that look meant exactly, and he was worried all by himself.*

*Annette asked as if she didn't understand.*

*“Why do you think I would turn you down, Mr. Valdemar?”*

*“...It's just my qualifications, don't worry about it.”*

*“Why do I not care if the man I like has not confessed to me because he’s afraid of rejection?”*

*"So I'm alone ...... huh?"*

*Heiner asked back, sounding somewhat too bewildered, even to his own ears.There was a moment of silence. Suddenly Annette gave a small laugh.*

*“The last one was a joke, Mr. Valdemar.”*

*“Oh..."*

*“I was just trying to complain, but you were too serious. I know you are not one to play with my heart."*

*Annette took another step toward him. Heiner barely felt his legs as he instinctively tried to back away.*

*"I like you."*

*She said that with a flawless smile.*

*His heart throbbed. For a moment, Heiner couldn't move as if struck by lightning. He remained frozen in place, keeping her pretty, pure white face locked up in his mind.*

*“Do you want to make it official with me, Mr. Valdemar?”*

*Heiner's fingers twitched slightly. He had to say something, but he couldn't speak. His lips were just moving like an idiot.*

*Heiner looked into her dark blue eyes, lowered his gaze to look at her lips, and looked into her eyes again. She was still smiling beautifully.*

*Annette seemed to have no qualms about anything.*

*His head felt frozen, as if he had been doused with cold water. Though his heart still rattled wildly, his reason and emotions played separately.*

*He should be glad that the operation was going smoothly.*

*He should congratulate himself for the success.*

*He should be satisfied with the valuable results.*

*But why, why did he feel like this…*

*“Why, do you love it so much that you are speechless?"*

*Annette asked jokingly with a jovial laugh. She wasn’t really asking.*

*It was a certainty. The certainty of someone who had grown up being loved her whole life, that he would naturally like her.*

*Given that woman's background growing up, it was not arrogance. Arrogance was obviously one of the things that made it unpleasant, but it was not the main reason.*

*The cause of these feelings was the very thing that he liked.*

*It was also inconsistently so. Even though it was the words he wanted to hear so badly.*

*“I like you."*

*Because the words that came out of the woman's mouth just sounded infinitely lighter and fresher.*

*I like jewelry. I like piano. I like parties. I like spring. I like white.*

*One of many. The kind of thing that could be replaced by any number of things - even if it was not him anyway.*

*“Are you surprised that I said it so suddenly?” (A)*

*"------- "*

*“Still, you have to respond. Won't you tell me?" (A)*

*Heiner tried to smile gleefully at her. And he actually almost succeeded. Until Annette gently leaned into his arms.*

*“I ......"*

*Heiner murmured in a slightly choked voice. He reached out a trembling hand and wrapped it around her back, lowering his upper body slightly.*

*The expression on his face slowly fell as he held the small, soft woman in his arms. Annette whispered softly.*

*“You, what?"*

*He managed to control his breathing, which kept getting disturbed, and finally answered.*

*"I really… really… like you, too."*

*He could feel the woman smile. The power drained from his head. Heiner, half overwhelmed and half helpless, muttered his confession.*

*“I really like you, Miss Rosenberg."*

*Annette Rosenberg.*

*The most beautiful and noble woman in Padania.*

*He was just be one of many good things in her life. Maybe a little better, maybe a little less good, that sort of thing.*

*Heiner was so miserable with the awareness that flowed through him without consciousness. He tried his best not to be aware of it, not to belittle himself, but it didn't work out the way he wanted it to.*

*"Let's say Mr. Valdemar confessed to me first, okay?”*

*“...You really are the worst, like a man.”*

*“What does it matter? Isn't it time for women to enter society these days? Can't you confess that it’s you first?"*

*Annette said it as if she were a feminist, but Heiner knew she wasn't really interested in such things.*

*Just as no matter how much literature she read that secretly denounced discrimination in society, she would take one tear and fold the book.*

*If Annette married, the title of Marquis would pass to her husband after her father’s death. But like most aristocratic women, she took this for granted.*

*In any case, Annette would receive the Countship of Rosenberg. Unless she was tremendously greedy for the honor, there was no reason why she would dare to indulge the damage and hope for reform.*

*“...... I see. Then let us assume as it is that you have confessed."*

*"Don't you mean you're not going to leave it done?"*

*"Let's assume you did.”*

*“I rescind my confession."*

*“Then I will confess again."*

*Hugging Annette even tighter as she tried to get out of his arms, Heiner closed his eyes. A confession flowed from his lips, each word heavy with emotion.*

*“I like you.”*

*His voice sounded somewhat earnest, as if he was reciting a prayer.*

*“Make it official with me, Annette.”*

*She carefully wrapped her arms around his back. The warmth of their touch was soft. In a moment that he wished would never have passed, Heiner thought as he crumbled.*

*Annette, I guess I'm just one of the many good things in your life................*

*Not me.*

*To me you are different.*

*You are the only good thing left in my life. The only thing that is precious.*

*You are the one woman I would never dare to see up close. That fact makes me feel yearning, satisfied, desperate, and frustrated all at the same time.*

*I wish you were nothing to me, just as I am nothing to you.*

*I want to destroy you. I want to drag you down to the bottom. I want to let you know how bad everything in the world is. So that no one will want you any more.*

*Not even me.*

*So that no one will love you any more, not even me.*

*\*\*\**

*AU 716. The first revolution, led by factory workers, was suppressed. Marquis Dietrich, aware of public opinion, married Annette Rosenberg to Heiner Valdemar, a commoner officer. In return for this marriage, Heiner Valdemar gave Marquis Dietrich false information about the revolutionary army. Heiner Valdemar acted as a double agent, disguising himself as having infiltrated the revolutionary army on the orders of Marquis Dietrich.*

*February AU 717. A second revolution broke out, led by students, but it was suppressed.*

*September AU 717, the third revolution led by the armed revolutionary forces succeeded, and the ruling forces were replaced. A free government was established and the military forces were separated. Heiner Valdemar, a leading figure in the revolutionary forces, took the position of Commander-in-Chief.*

*AU 718. The inhumane training process that had been taking place within Southerlane Island was exposed. The names of the trainees were kept privately in order to resocialize the trainees and protect their human rights.*

*AU 719. The Republicans proposed a law for the liquidation of the monarchy, and the issue of disposing of the remnants of the monarchy became controversial.*

*AU 720. The Commander-in-Chief and his wife divorced.*

*\*\*\**

# Chapter 46

“As you know, this past winter wasn't as cold as usual. All of the berries were originally produced smaller." (The man)

"Still, something like this…”

“Well, I’ll take two pennies off per kilogram for the grapes. How about it?" (The man)

"It's not a decision I can make, sir. The owner is away for a while. Would you like to discuss it when he comes?"

"No. I'm giving it to you at a discount because the lady is pretty. You can't get something this cheap anywhere else." (The man)

“Haha ......”

“By the way, have we seen each other somewhere before? Your face is strangely familiar." (The man)

“No, we haven’t."

Suddenly, a baby’s cry was heard from the back. Annette stopped talking and turned around.

"Wait a minute." (A)

Click. She opened the door and turned on a small electric light, and a yellow light came on. The baby was awake and crying.

Annette picked up the baby. The tiny, newly awakened body was as soft and hot as a melting marshmallow. She patted the baby's back and soothed him.

The crying slowly subsided. Annette leaned against the door, still holding the sobbing baby.

“Would you please sit there and wait for a moment? The owner will be back soon.” (A)

“Okay. Are you the one who came in a few months ago? Are you her friend?" (The man)

"...... Yes, well."

“Where did you meet her?" (The man)

"In the capital."

"The capital? Are you from the capital?" (The man)

"Yes."

“I've been to the capital before. Where did you live?" (The man)

"Just ...... near Britannia Square."

“Britannia Square? Isn’t it a rich place? Miss, are you the daughter of a wealthy family?"

The man laughed as if he had told a very funny joke. Annette frowned, looking at the baby without reply.

“By the way, are you sure we haven't seen each other before? I'm not just saying that but because you’re really familiar.”

"No."

"Not even ...... Oh, how could I forget someone as beautiful as the lady? Where did I really see you? Miss, could it be......"

“Hans!"

Suddenly, Hans's shoulders shook at the roar that suddenly echoed through the store. He turned back with an awkward smile.

A brunette-haired woman glared at him at the entrance to the store. she said ferociously, striding toward him.

“What crazy tricks are you doing in my store?”

"What trick? I was just telling the lady she looked familiar.”

Bang! The woman slammed the basket down on the table.

Hans immediately stopped talking.

"I've told you many times how you make the staff uncomfortable! I know you're the main culprit for scaring female customers away.”

"No, I don't know how often they come when I come…"

Hans’ words blurred at the end. The woman was adamant that she would not be contradicted any further and quickly ended the price negotiation.

“Thirty-two pennies per kilogram. No more.”

In the end, Hans left the store after writing a receipt for a slightly lower price than the first time.

He did not forget to cast a sneaking glance at Annette until the very end.

After Hans left, the woman leaned her head back, shaking her head.

“I'm sorry. Hans has known my brother since he was young, and now that he's older, he's learned all these weird things..."

“No."

“Was the store a sight to behold? Can I leave it with you now?"

“Then I might be asking for money at the time of settlement.”

“Then you have to fill it yourself.”

Annette gave a small laugh. The hand patting the baby’s back stopped and the baby in her arms began to fuss again.

“Oh, give her to me."

The woman stretched out her arms. Annette hurriedly handed the baby over to her as if she had committed a crime. The woman embraced and snuggled the baby.

"Did you sleep well, my baby girl? Did you miss your mother?"

The baby soon cooed and stopped fussing in her mother's arms. Once again she fell asleep.

“Annette, look at this.”

“Oh my, ......."

“She even talked in her sleep yesterday."

“Do babies dream, too?"

“What kind of dreams would babies have?"

The woman muttered as she looked at her daughter with eyes filled with love.

It was the most peaceful and happy scene ever. Annette stepped away and quietly watched the scene.

The woman who had been stroking her baby for a while said in a small voice,

"Oh, Annette, my husband wants to go to the furniture store tomorrow. Do you need anything? Would you like to go see it together?"

“I’m okay."

“Your bedroom is still very drab. Do you want to have a bookshelf?”

"Then... May I get a small bookshelf?"

“Of course, yes. How big is it?"

“Hmmm, about this much......? I'll measure the exact size a little later and let you know."

“Okay. Let me know whenever you need something."

The woman said as if it were no big deal. Annette stared at her feet with her hands clasped, then replied in a whisper.

"Thank you….Catherine."

\*\*\*

*It was Catherine Grott who approached Annette as she sat on a bench in a nearby park contemplating death after her divorce from Heiner.*

*“What are you doing here?"*

*"------- "*

*“Do you have a place to go?"*

*"...... Yes."*

*“Where are you going?"*

*"------"*

*"...... follow me."*

*“No, I ......"*

*“Please follow me.”*

*Still hesitant for a moment, Annette followed Catherine almost by force.*

*They were silent the entire walk. Catherine headed for the train station. She bought two tickets to Cynthia.*

*Annette had no idea of Catherine's intentions. Her address, which Annette knew, was Western Road, a 40-minute carriage ride away.*

*But Annette did not ask first. In fact, she didn’t care where she was going, even if Catherine had a bad heart toward her. Instead, she thought it would be fine if she had.*

*Catherine opened her mouth only after the train had departed.*

*“I moved to Cynthia a while ago. The capital was too crowded.”*

*Catherine did not add any particular reason for the move. However, Annette guessed that it was probably her fault.*

*Her brother had tried to kill Annette. Whatever the circumstances, rumors must have spread throughout the town.*

*And even if they didn't care, they would have had to worry about the problems of their soon-to-be-born child.*

*Of course, this may be an oversensitive guess. There could be many other reasons. But for Annette now, her thought circuit did not work properly.*

*They got off the train and headed for the streets of the old town. Catherine said she would reopen her fruit shop there.*

*Cynthia was less busy*

*than the Western Road, confirming Catherine's statement that "the capital is crowded."*

*The buildings seemed to have been built more recently than those in the capital.*

*Catherine lived in a small mansion near her store. She took Annette to her own house, and as she showed her the rooms on the upper floor, she said.*

*“The room is a bit small since the house itself isn't very big, so it can't be helped.”*

*Until then, Annette did not exactly understand Catherine's words.*

*“Why do you tell me this place......."*

*“What?"*

*"Here, why me."*

*"Because it's where the madam will be staying."*

*"I'm not going to ...... stay here."*

*"Then where are you going?"*

*"I, just ......."*

*“Are you going to die again?"*

*Annette was speechless at the blunt question. Catherine stared at her blankly for a moment, until she walked into the room and explained.*

*“I've done all the cleaning. The luggage can go inside first... Hmm, it looks like you don't have any luggage to unpack. For now, please use my clothes. My belly is like this, and I can't wear regular clothes anyway. Meals are on the first floor......"*

*Annette, still confused and reluctant, could not refuse any longer. She just kept her eyes downcast with a weary expression.*

*From that day on, Annette began staying with the Grott family.*

*Catherine, a pregnant woman in her last month of pregnancy, ran a small fruit stand, and her husband, Brunner, drove a carriage. The Grott family was not rich, but they had no major financial worries.*

*Catherine never asked for rent or living expenses. She only asked if she could help her with chores from time to time, which was a pleasant surprise for Annette, who was feeling indebted*

*Annette would help Catherine with the fruits and the ledger for the store. She even tried her hand at housework, but she was useless there.*

*In her quiet, peaceful life, Annette still contemplated death. But for some reason, she was not ready to carry it out as in the official residence.*

*''Are you going to die again?''*

*Annette thought Catherine would ask about it. But Catherine never brought it up again.*

*That wasn’t the only thing Catherine did not ask.*

*She didn't ask if she really had nowhere to go, if she had any property that had been divided after her divorce, what her plans were for the future.........she didn't ask any of them.*

*She just had a routine conversation with Annette as if nothing was wrong.*

*Perhaps because of her impression of Catherine in the parlor where they had talked about her dead brother, Annette thought Catherine was somewhat cold and quiet.*

*Catherine was more talkative and active than she had expected. Contrary to Annette, who had become much less talkative over the years.*

*However, Annette and Catherine did not have deep conversations. Despite living in the same house, there was still an invisible wall between them.*

*They never brought up the original arguments that existed in their relationship. For example, stories about David Burkel, the fact of Annette's miscarriage, or the suicide attempts that occurred after Catherine's visit.............*

*I don't think 10 or 20 years of living together will break this barrier.*

*Annette thought so.*

*\*\*\**

# Chapter 47

Annette peeled the washed fruit and cut it into small pieces with a knife. Her knife work, which Catherine and Bruner had teased her about, was gradually improving. Of course, she was still slow.

She liked doing chores so that she wouldn’t have to think. When she put all her energy into the blade, the distracting thoughts in her head would disappear.

"Annette, when you're done cutting, can you put it over here? I'll do the rest."

"Uh, yes. Here............"

Catherine was selling homemade fruit juices in the store. Annette's knife skills had also improved while helping her make the juice.

As she was engrossed in her work in silence for a long time, the front door opened with the sound of a lock turning. It was Catherine's husband, Bruner.

“It's chilly already. Good evening, everyone.”

Bruner took off his hat as he shivered. Immediately, Catherine admonished him.

“Then put on a jacket. How can you not take care of yourself like that?"

"It's still hot in the daytime."

"You call that an excuse? It's cold at night. Is it so hard to take off during the day?"

"Yes, yes, okay. I'll take it with me tomorrow. Ugh, Annette, does she nag you so much during the day too?”

Annette smiled without reply. Catherine said Annette did nothing wrong for her to nag about, nothing to nitpick.

While the couple exchanged banters, Annette continued cutting the fruit. But she didn't get it as effortlessly as she just did.

Her hands moved slowly as she quietly pondered.

Her father and her ex-husband said something similar to her. She nagged too much.

Annette was the one who took care of those around her, "her people" to be exact.

It was only by taking care of every little thing that she felt at ease. That was her way of expressing her affection.

When did she stop doing that...

“Where's Olivia?"

“Sleeping.”

“My princess sleeps all the time. Daddy is upset.”

“She sleeps a lot because she’s like her father.”

“There is no one as diligent as me.”

Catherine clicked her tongue and went into the kitchen. She prepared dinner while Bruner went into the nursery to see his sleeping daughter.

Annette peeked in and asked if she needed any help, and was kicked out to finish with the fruit. But she could not finish her work until the meal began.

The three of them sat down at the table where the food was ready. After Bruner briefly prayed for the meal, everyone picked up their silverware.

As they ate, they went about their day. Annette opened her mouth only occasionally to answer a question, agree, or add a word.

“The atmosphere has been unsettled lately."

“Is it because of the war? A deal in which we participate?”

"Well. The problem is the government….”

Annette stopped her spoon.

She thought she had glanced at an article in the newspaper about the war. She carefully asked about the story she had picked up.

“I hear that everyone wants war... is that true?"

"That's the atmosphere, apparently, and the hostility toward the belligerents is sky high…”

These days, the concept of ethnicity had become almost identical to the religious meaning of the word. War was both a way of solidifying their nationalism and a means of proving their power.

The former ruling class, which emphasized the role of war leaders, as well as numerous intellectuals and artists, welcomed the war.

It was a very strange phenomenon.

"Is Padania really going to war?" (Ca)

“I think so.” (B)

“Are you not going to enlist?” (Ca)

"Where would I go without my wife and my daughter. And my daughter is still a baby." (B)

“How commonplace it is for men to leave their babies to go off to war." (Ca)

“Those are professional soldiers." (B)

"It's common among civilians, too." (Ca)

“Anyway, it's not me. Why are you so worried about it?" (Ca)

"What if you’re forced to enlist?" (Ca)

"They can't do that these days. We're in an era where the King was even brought down, so there’s no forcing anyone…Ah.” (B)

Bruner, who had said something outrageous, covered his mouth with his hand. The atmosphere quickly sobered.

Talk of revolution was a kind of inviolability to them.

Annette had never told them not to talk about it, and she hadn't shown any qualms about it, but they didn't even mention it.

Because Annette's ex-husband was a military commander-in-chief. Her ex-husband was also taboo to them.

Annette swallowed her stew and agreed with Bruner with a polite smile.

“Bruner is right. We are not in the era of monarchy, and they cannot force people. Don't worry, Catherine." (A)

“Ha, ha, see. What are you so worried about---" (B)

“… If that's the case, I'm glad." (Ca)

"More importantly, are you going to look at furniture with me tomorrow? Annette, is there anything you need?" (B)

"She needs a small bookcase. It's roughly this big." (Ca)

Immediately the subject was changed. The atmosphere that had subsided was revitalized, but the strange awkwardness remained like dust.

Annette was completely indifferent to any mention of the revolution. But she felt uncomfortable nonetheless.

The meal ended in a friendly atmosphere. Olivia, awakened just in time, whined in her room.

Annette cleared the table for the couple, who hurried to check on their daughter. As she lifted the plate, she suddenly noticed that her hand was shaking slightly.

Annette clenched her fists and opened them. Then she cleared the table. Bruner, who had arrived later, dismissed her, saying he would do the dishes.

She tended to the few remaining fruits, and before she knew it, it was late at night. Annette finished cleaning up and went out into the living room.

“I’m turning in a little earlier. Good night, Bruner; good night, Catherine."

"Yes, good night, Annette.”

Annette approached Olivia who was in Catherine's arms. Her closer face smelled of face powder. Her cute cheeks were soft and plump.

Olivia's big eyes fluttered as she stared at Annette. Annette kissed the baby's cheek and muttered.

"Good night, Olivia."

"Good night, Annette."

Catherine replied, mimicking Olivia’s baby voice. Annette smiled lightly and waved.

\*\*\*

After washing and dressing, Annette opened her bookshelf. Yellow lights flickered on the gray bookshelf.

Annette's gaze moved slowly along the print. But then the gaze stopped moving, staring for a moment, then back to the previous one, and then staring again.

Eventually, Annette closed the bookshelf with a sigh. Her mind was buzzing and she couldn't see the print.

She looked at her empty hands. The shaking had stopped, but the feeling of uneasiness, for reasons unknown, persisted.

*“Will Padania really have to go to war?"*

What did she know about war? Had she heard about it? Annette didn't even know what war was.

She had no idea how it would practically affect her and Catherine's household if Padania were to enter the war.

It suddenly seemed laughable.

She had lived for several years in the official residence as the wife of the Commander-in-Chief, how could she know so little about anything?

How pathetic could she be?

Annette, who had been ridiculing herself, realized one step too late the reason for her uneasiness.

Commander-in-Chief. Heiner Valdemar..........

Her ex-husband. The war and the man were inseparable. If Padania went to the war, he would of course be a major decision maker.

*'......It has nothing to do with me anymore...'*

Annette thought dryly.

No matter what decisions he made, no matter what accomplishments he made, whether he was on the front lines or at the end of the battlefield, they now had one connecting point left: the country of Padania.

He, commander-in-chief of Padania and she, the citizen of Padania. That was just about the extent of the relationship.

She felt no sadness or nostalgia at this fact. She was just a little more clearly aware of a fact that she had already known before.

Annette could not define exactly what the rest of her feelings were. She was in a state where it was difficult to even control her own feelings.

But Annette was slowly forgetting about him. She used to think about him a hundred times a day; now she thought about him ten times a day. And she would be able to forget him forever.

Just as the world had forgotten her.

Once again, she thought that was a blessing.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 48

Annette wore a slightly old, shaggy cape shawl and a deep black bonnet. Only the tip of her nose and mouth were visible under the shadow of the hat.

She stood before a full-length mirror that had handprints everywhere and checked her appearance. She looked like any normal family woman with a basket made of palm trees in her hand.

No one would think she was Rosenberg's only daughter in this outfit. Annette straightened her wrinkled skirt and left the house.

The midday sun was still warm, even though it was well into autumn. Shopping stalls lined the streets under a vast sky.

“How about this? It's in really good condition."

"Well, how much is the basket?”

"I want to fix this..........."

The street was quite lively. Annette moved her steps, her face buried in the shadow of her deep-brimmed bonnet.

It had already been six months since she had left the capital. She had adapted to life in peaceful Cynthia.

When she first stayed at Catherine's house, Annette had hardly gone out. In particular, she could not even set foot in crowded places.

She felt like someone would recognize her as the Commander-in-Chief ‘s ex wife. She thought they were going to throw stones at her, saying that she was of dirty aristocratic blood. Someone would point a gun at her, saying that she was the daughter of the military general.

She felt contradictory. How could she wish to die and yet fear death?

She spent months alone in the house, surrounded by helplessness, fear, and a sense of self-destruction. As such, Catherine and Bruner were completely oblivious to her.

In the quiet and monotony of her life, Annette slowly regained her stability. She even attempted to go out when Catherine's stomach began to grow larger.

By the time it was six months, she was able to get around the market. It was a lot of development, although she still hid her face.

“Welcome."

The owner of the fabric store, who was in the middle of a chat, greeted her cheerfully. Though she didn’t even look at Annette when she said the word.

Annette was pleased by his indifference, and quietly looked around at the fabrics. She was going to make clothes for Olivia. Her embroidery skills, which had been a mess, had recently almost returned to normal.

*‘Since she's still a baby, would pure cotton be better?" Or even circular knit--- it's a bit complicated to make…’*

While Annette was struggling with fabrics, the store owner had a heated conversation with her partner.

“After Rutland, it's Aslania or us."

"Rutland, it’s because there are a lot of French people living in that region. There's no reason it affects us."

"Yes, and asking for the liberation of the French system is just another de facto pretext. Just give us some land."

“Right…. without a declaration of war, barbaric bastards. It's obvious that they will turn on us as well."

“It is a hundred times better to go to war than to stagger along as before, taking all that can be taken from us and keeping the peace.”

“Needless to say. Royal, aristocratic, incompetent, and cowardly..."

“Now, at least, we have some relief. Regardless of whether there is a war or not, the commander-in-chief will be in charge of military command.”

Annette's hand, which had been touching the cloth, stopped for a moment.

"Just the other day, they signed a treaty of some kind, an alliance. They said that it was done, but they said it was the work of the commander-in-chief.”

"I was worried because no matter how he was from the revolutionary army, he had been in the royal army for a long time and was too young and handsome, but he is really good at his job."

Then the woman burst out laughing and slapped the shop owner on the shoulder.

"What else did you worry about because he’s handsome?"

“They say handsome would make you lose face."

“That's the word used only for flirting with women. By the way, doesn't the Commander-in-Chief remarry?"

“I thought he just got divorced."

"Well, there's Senator Günther's daughter. Wasn't there talk of him getting engaged to this woman who was in the militia?"

"I think so............ But this isn’t the right time to remarry. I think he will when the situation is over."

Annette pretended not to mind the conversation and walked as naturally as possible. Her heart pounded like someone who had been exposed for who she really was.

All the way across the store they talked about the issue of the Commander-in-Chief's remarriage.

Annette's steps quickened a little more. It seemed as if her own story was about to come out of their mouths at any moment.

Only after she was outside and the store door closed was she able to exhale the breath she had been holding back.

“How much if you mix the two halves like this..." (shoppers)

"...is that correct?" (Shoppers)

The hustle and bustle of the streets was particularly dizzying. Her hand holding the shopping basket began to tremble slightly. Annette nervously clenched her hands and released them.

*'Perhaps they found out who I am and deliberately broached the subject ......?’*

She knew it was an overly sensitive thought, but it didn't stop her from feeling uneasy. Annette stood still and closed her eyes. The murmur of words slowly filled up in her head.

At that moment, a shout echoed through the place.

“Extra!”

Startled, Annette raised her head. The paper was fluttering down. At the same time, a bicycle swished past her.

A boy selling newspapers was distributing an issue with a large, black title.

“Extra! Extra!”

People buzzed, picked up, and read the extra editions. Annette, who had been in a daze for a moment, also picked one up. The large, bold title inscribed at the top was the first thing that caught her eye.

*[Rutland Defeated, Document of Surrender Signed.]*

The hastily issued paper contained only the core content in a simplified form. Annette's eyes moved along the lines.

[Rutland's 1.2 million troops were annihilated in the Red Line War. Signing of a document of surrender, including huge reparations and the leasing of major ports. France's demand for exchange of Aslania territory expected............]

Annette covered her mouth with one hand. She read it over and over again, but the conclusion was the same. Rutland had lost the war.

The result was quicker and more futile than expected. No one had expected Rutland to surrender so easily.

Shocked people began whispering.

"So what happens now?"

"We'll probably declare war on them, too, won't we? We are allies..."

“Are we really going to join the war now?"

“I don't think so...not right away. Because you never know when a declaration of war will lead to a real military action…."

“I think our participation in the war is planned anyway. Oh Lord!"

“It’s going to happen at some point anyway. Everyone must not be afraid, must not avoid, must enlist our sons with patriotism!”

The surroundings quickly became chaotic. Some people expressed enthusiasm for the war, while others could not escape shock and worry.

Some middle-aged women with grown sons wept.

Annette slowly removed the hand that covered her mouth. Shaky breaths flowed out from it.

Hearing the news of Rutland's defeat made the war truly felt.

Padania's entry into the war was imminent.

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“France plans to incorporate the three peninsular countries into its sphere of influence in order to pave the way to the continent. It must be stopped!"

“Not right away! The manpower and material losses we will suffer while helping them are too great. We must be prepared with supplies to defend against a possible invasion of the mainland in the future."

"What are you talking about? If we let this go, it will be like a foothold to Padania! We need to make a move right away.

Aren’t we going to do more damage trying to postpone it?"

The excited chiefs of staff began to argue, banging on their desks. Heiner stood alone at the top of the table, arms crossed, quietly staring at the map.

"The war has just ended, and France won't be able to give it all. Now is the time!"

“We can't stop them completely with this anyway! It would be much more efficient to prepare for the mainland invasion!”

The news of Rutland's defeat, and its horrific annihilation, had everyone on edge. Several arguments were exchanged, and the atmosphere became increasingly tense.

Heiner uncrossed his arms, not taking his eyes off the map. As the discussion escalated into an argument, he banged his hands on the desk.

"Your opinions are well taken."

The low but powerful voice silenced the audience instantly. Silence passed for some time. The previously overheated atmosphere gradually subsided.

Heiner, still looking at the map, slowly opened his mouth.

"In effect, the annexation of the sphere of influence is not a matter for us to decide. Because the three countries may not want war. Whether voluntarily or involuntarily….The problem we face is..."

Heiner's finger swept slowly over the map.

“Here, Terra Rossa.”

He pointed to the southern region of Aslania.

“It is the largest granary and contains vast reserves of resources. France will surely demand an exchange of territory, and if Aslania is not willing to accept it, they will send a large armored force into Terra Rossa. It’s a land they’ve had their eyes on for a long time."

"But the time is right................"

“It's unclear. We can't move quickly either. First we will formalize our entry into the war."

This meant a declaration of war. The general staff gasped. All of them had expected this, but what came out of the Commander-in-Chief's mouth had a different weight to it.

“Military action will commence only if Aslania requests assistance.”

Heiner raised his head. His gray eyes, ashen after the bombing, shone sharply.

“In the meanwhile, we’ll complete the construction of defensive fortifications on the western front of Padania.”

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# Chapter 49

[…Therefore, please declare in Congress that Padania will enter the war as an allied force.]

A period was struck at the end of the sentence. Heiner stared at it for a moment. The starting point of countless sacrifices had begun with just one sentence he had written.

He gathered up his papers, handed them to his secretary, and stood up. He rubbed his tired eyes and his vision blurred and then became clear again.

He put on his coat and stepped out into the hallway. The sound of his shoes echoed in the cold, dark passageway.

*"But if it was like that... I'd have told you three years ago."*

As he entered the main building, he suddenly stopped in his tracks. Heiner inadvertently tried to put his hand near his ear.

*"You have achieved your goal and no longer need to deceive me."*

It happened again. Without any warning, without any time. Traces and memories of Annette appeared suddenly, like delusions or ringing in his ears, tormenting him.

*"I didn't even know that…"*

Heiner clenched his fists. Then he took another step.

*“--- I loved you more for three years.”*

His eyes darkened and sank. A low murmur flowed out like a cold breath.

“Lie.”

*You have never loved me. Even when I was the only one left for you, you never loved me.*

It would have been a light amusement in the past, and at that time it would have been as much as an impending hug. It was nothing new.

It was a fact that he had been painfully aware of for a very long time.

*How could a woman like you possibly love me?*

"Ha."

Heiner gave a small laugh. It was ridiculous to see him talking to himself about a story that had already ended a long time ago.

He was becoming more and more insane. He wondered if he would be able to maintain his position as commander-in-chief with this kind of mentality.

From the very beginning, the castle had been built for this one woman. Now she was gone, and only the castle walls remained.

Heiner stopped in front of a large window and looked out into the garden. A huge, white fountain caught his eye. It was the same fountain that Annette had used to sit on a bench looking at.

In the past, Heiner had occasionally spotted her sitting there on his way to and from this hallway. Then he would stop his busy steps and watch her for a while.

From here he could only see the back of the bench, but he observed her with great agility and alertness, as if he were a spy uncovering a secret.

Heiner's eyes, which had been tracing a moment in the past, clouded over. He wondered suddenly what her face looked like sitting on that bench.

A happy or peaceful face was not portrayed at all. The image he had seen of her for the past three years was all stained with dark colors.

When he moved his gaze, he saw his own face reflected in the dark window. The expressionless face was like a dead giant tree. He silently moved his lips.

*Are you happy now?*

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The radio was broadcasting about the war all day long.

The story was that France had invaded Aslania's western front with fast maneuvers without a declaration of war. It said that Padania had so far shown no definite military movement.

Apart from the chaos in the world, Annette's life flowed along without much change. She was still not very good with a knife, the house smelled like a baby, and the nearby market was bustling as usual.

But word got around that Padania would soon be fully involved in the war. Annette had a vague premonition of the end of her life.

While she was folding the laundry, she heard the sound of a key turn. It was still early evening. She looked curiously at the door.

It was Catherine who entered. For some reason, she looked a little nervous, unlike usual. Annette stood up with a puzzled expression.

"Catherine? You're already here?"

"Oh, uh, I finished work a little early."

It was a strange excuse. What kind of fruit store finished its operation this early?

“Is that so.....?"

Annette sat down without further questioning. Catherine took off her coat and looked around.

“Is Olivia sleeping?"

"Yes, a while ago."

"Thanks for watching her. Hmm, you didn’t go out today, did you?”

“I was home all day."

“Do you have anything else to do tomorrow?”

"Maybe ...... I can go out for a bit...?"

Annette asked, puzzled, wondering if she had to leave the house. But Catherine visibly panicked and waved her hand.

“No, no. I was told to stay home. The atmosphere is a bit violent because of the war, and anyway, it's a bit

It's not safe.”

“Catherine, what's wrong?"

“Huh? No, nothing. I'm a little nervous because of the war. And the fact that they’ve declared war."

Catherine mumbled, "I have to change out of my clothes," and went into her room. Annette looked at her back with worried eyes.

When the laundry was finished folding, Catherine came out into the living room again after changing her clothes. She drank water in the kitchen as if she were thirsty.

Annette gathered up the folded laundry and called her.

“Catherine."

“Huh?"

“What’s going on?"

"It's nothing."

"Is it about me? Did someone recognize me?”

Catherine's hand with the glass trembled. Annette was sure of her reaction.

“...There is, isn't there?"

“No, Annette, not because of that.”

“There is no need to hide it on purpose. It's a fact that they will find out one day anyway."

Annette said calmly. Catherine, whose lips were moving as if she was at a loss for words, let out a sigh.

“If only it had been as light as Hans' mouth..........."

Hans was the man Annette had once met at the fruit stand. Catherine was away that day. He ran into her (Annette) before she had time to hide her face.

He seemed to finally recognize who she was.

In fact, Annette was not that surprised by the situation. In the meantime, her face had appeared in countless newspapers and magazines. It was rather strange that no one had recognized her sooner.

She could not understand Catherine, who had put herself on the line from the beginning. Unless she was going to live in hiding in the house for the rest of her life, it was bound to happen at some point.

"Catherine, please tell people what kind of relationship you and I have."

Annette said calmly but decisively.

“What......"

“If you don’t, they could be misinterpreted as you helping me. So it’s okay to help me, but apart from that you are a victim and your brother was in the revolutionary army. You had nothing to do with me or the nobility in the first place.”

“Saying that doesn't help, Annette."

“It’s useful to Catherine and Catherine's family. I don’t care what they say about me, but I won’t stand by letting them misjudge you. It could hurt your business.”

“Why don’t you care what they say about you?”

"I really don't mind. I'm used to it by now."

"Why does it matter if you're used to it or not anyway ......!"

Catherine's voice rose slightly higher. Annette was taken aback and stopped talking. But still, the question remained unanswered. She couldn't care less what people said about her.

Catherine, who had been looking at Annette with an uncertain face, quickly turned around.

"...... Anyway, don't go out for a while."

\*\*\*

Annette hesitated for a moment in front of the telephone. She repeatedly turned the dial to the number on the business card and stopped.

Finally she made up her mind and turned the dial. A regular beep sounded from the receiver. Annette bit her lower lip as she waited for the phone to connect.

[St. Lawyer's Office].

“Oh, hello. I'm a client who previously proceeded with a divorce through St. Lawyer. I called to ask him about something.”

[What is your name?]

"Annette... Rosenberg."

When she said my name, she heard an "ah" sound from the other end.

[Please wait a moment. I'll put you through to the attorney."]

“..... yes.”

Annette waited for her lawyer, on edge. She called him with doubts, but was glad to see that it still seemed to be progressing.

Soon she heard a familiar voice over the phone.

[This is Fabien Saint. It's been a long time, Miss Rosenberg. How are you?"]

“Hello, Mr. St. I am well. I called because I wanted to ask you something. Is it alright?"

[I am glad to hear that you are well. Of course. Please feel free to ask.]

“When I left the official residence after my divorce, I left behind all the alimony payments and related bank documents...will this still be paid to me, if my rights are still valid...."

Annette asked nervously, twisting the phone line between her fingers. It was a piece of property she had thrown away. It was quite embarrassing to ask for it again, but right now there were more important things than her pride.

[Hmmm ..... Your rights are legally valid, but since a lot of time has passed, it could be considered a waiver of authority depending on the circumstances........ I think I have to check with your ex-husband first, but if you don't mind, can you wait a moment? I will call you back soon.]

“Yes---Thank you.”

Annette hung up the phone and did not leave her seat. She stared at the telephone, folded her arms, leaned against the wall, and then repeated the process of pacing around again.

Ding-

Annette picked up the receiver as soon as the phone rang.

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# Chapter 50

“Annette Rosenberg.”

[This is Fabien Saint. Miss Rosenberg, as I said, I checked and the alimony payment is still in effect.]

“Ah…”

Annette was relieved. It was because she had expected that Heiner would refuse.

Even if she had the legal authority, she would have difficulty filing a lawsuit. And even if she did go as far as litigation, there was no way she could take on the position and connections of the Commander-in-Chief.

“So, should I go to the official residence to collect my fees? Or do I have to pay a visit to the lawyer's office?"

[Oh, that part will be settled on your ex-husband's side...]

"If it's settled...?"

[Someone will be coming from there this week. To where you live. They will call ahead the day before the visit.]

“In person?”

It was a situation that could not have been anticipated. Annette did not want to be reunited or involved with that man in any way. She pondered for a moment, then cautiously asked.

"If it’s not rude, can Mr lawyer take the alimony payment for me? I'll get it from your office. I'll give you a reward.”

[Oh, I suggested that earlier. Apart from the gratuity fee, I was madam’s lawyer, so I thought it would be fine for me to represent you to the end. But….]

The lawyer stretched his words. Annette waited for the words that would lead to her uneasiness.

[The contract between me and the madam is over on the paperwork, and that alimony could not be left in the hands of others. It is difficult for me to insist any further since the parties involved wish to communicate directly ...]

"...... no. Thank you for your time to the end, Mr. St."

[You're welcome. If you have any other questions, feel free to call me.]

Annette squeezed out a bottomless dose of sociability, said thanks again, and hung up. Her head was still in a complicated state.

But she was fortunate to have settled the biggest alimony issue. This didn't seem like such a bad compensation or parting gift.

Annette let out a breath. It felt like everything that had been faint and far away was slowly becoming clear.

She had gotten used to making arrangements for her departure. It was her talent, the only thing she had left.

\*\*\*

The next day Catherine did not open her store. A paper was posted in the store saying that she would be closed for a week.

The excuse was that she was not feeling well, but the reason was obvious. Annette didn't argue or ask her further.

It was sure that Catherine would be evasive with her anyway. During the time they lived together, they were always like this.

They laughed and fussed on the surface, but never went below the surface. They knew that the deeper they dug, the more they exposed each other's wounds.

Annette sat with Catherine while she nursed. Annette looked at Olivia with kind eyes.

Her chubby face moved eagerly. Annette touched her lovely cheek with her fingertips. The softly pressed flesh was unbearably cute.

"She eats well.”

"Doesn’t she look like a fat kitten?”

"She seems to suck very hard, doesn't it hurt?"

"It hurts a little. And sometimes it hurts really bad. When all her teeth come in, I'm in big trouble."

“You’ll have to wean her then."

"Will Annette make baby food for her?"

Annette smiled at Catherine's question without reply. Olivia sneezed at that moment. The two burst into laughter at the sound of the small, insignificant sneeze.

When the laughter slowly subsided, Annette carefully brought out the main subject.

"Um, Catherine, I think someone is coming this afternoon, can you pick up one item for me?"

"Of course. What is it, by the way?"

"I have something to receive from my ex-husband..."

“Oh, I understand. It must be difficult to meet in person."

“I wonder if it’ll be someone I know.”

Naturally, Heiner's entourage and attendants knew Annette's face. It was unpleasant to face them again.

"Just accept the goods, right?"

"Yes. Just in case, I will leave you my identification and my proxy certificate."

“Understood."

“Thank you, Catherine."

When Catherine laughed lightly saying no need to thank her for this, Annette smiled silently. She was thankful for her. Always.

\*\*\*

It was quite late in the evening when someone came from the commander in chief’s office.

Annette had retired to her room after dinner and was sewing. When she saw a carriage parked outside her window, she knew someone had arrived.

She sat down on the bed by the window, holding the sewing kit. The coachman opened the back door of the carriage. A pair of long legs appeared in the open door.

A man in a long black coat and a deep hat got out of the carriage. He was a man so large in stature and built that he stood out even from a distance.

Even without the gray military cap and boots visible under the long coat, his strong physique and imposing movements gave him the appearance of a soldier. The stern, cold atmosphere…

Annette stopped sewing and squinted.

It was a familiar figure. And it was not uncommon to see a man of that stature. However, she could not think straight because of the assumption that it could not be true.

The man then removed his hat with his gloved hand. Annette, who had doubted her eyes, opened her mouth involuntarily the moment she saw his face.

*'Heiner ......?’*

A low murmur drifted out. Her sewing case in her hands fell onto her lap.

Heiner approached the door with his characteristic confident strides. Annette could no longer see him from her vision.

The sound of knocking on the door carried to the floor above. Annette clasped her hands to her chest as if in prayer. In an emotion she didn't know if it was nervousness or fear, she wondered.

*‘Why on earth?’*

Of course she thought he would send an attendant. The assumption that he would come in person had not been made in the slightest from the beginning.

It took three hours each way by train from Lancaster to Cynthia. It was not far, but it was not close either.

Furthermore, it was now a situation where Padania had declared war on France. There was no way that the Commander-in-chief could afford to travel all the way here.

*'Has he come to see where I live? To see how well I’m living? Or he’s going to get his alimony back?’*

Only questions kept popping up endlessly, but no clear answers were forthcoming.

While she was confused, the door opened. Catherine said something shortly first, followed by Heiner. Downstairs they seemed to be having a conversation, but Annette could not hear it. She held her breath as she placed her fist-clenched hand on her lips.

They talked for quite a long time, though it would have been better if they had only handed over the goods. It was only after a physically long time that the door finally closed.

Annette remained in her fixed position, only raising her eyes to look out the window. Heiner turned and walked back to the carriage.

The fallen leaves that had been scattering the city swayed in the autumn wind. The hem of his long coat fluttered along with it. Annette half hid her face behind the curtains and stared at the scene.

Suddenly, he looked back.

A moment later, his gaze turned toward her direction.

Annette reflexively ducked behind the curtain. Her breath shook like a soldier whose position had been revealed to the enemy.

She wasn't sure if he saw her or if their eyes met. Annette wanted to check again to see where his eyes were going.

But she could not move the curtains. The very fleeting time she saw him just now, his face was gaunt.

He seemed to have lost some weight. However, she was puzzled at the only passing glance.

Annette moistened her dry lips. Her head was in turmoil.

*‘Why so...?’*

Why was she so nervous?

Her heart seemed to rattle out of its cage. Annette dropped the hand that was on her pounding heart.

She could not define her feelings for him. At one time it had been love, but now........ it was too complicated.

At least the love she knew never felt like this.

Come to think of it, it was foolish to still love someone who had been through such a trial.

Even if it was still love, Annette had no emotional capacity for it.

She had her hands full just taking care of her own heart. And, in fact, she couldn't even do it properly.

Whatever it was, it didn't change the fact that they were now strangers.

As her thoughts lingered, she heard the sound of the carriage leaving. Only then did Annette gently open the curtains and look out the window.

The street where the man was standing was now empty.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 51

The war gradually turned into a protracted war. At the request of Aslania, Padania dispatched support forces to the Eastern Front.

With the help of Padania, Aslania was able to defend the Eastern Front, but had to surrender the Western Front to France.

The western side of Aslania, which was divided in half, was occupied by France. Predictions that the next would be an invasion of Padania's mainland were widely circulated, and the number of volunteers increased.

Food prices skyrocketed and people tightened their purse strings. Catherine's store also decreased its customers.

Bruner also had a significant drop in income, and some days he even made nothing.

It wasn't to the extent that it put a strain on their life, but it was true that it was tighter than before.

Late at night, Annette came down to the living room with a cloth bag. As expected, Catherine was still on the couch, not sleeping. She was working on the household accounts.

Catherine raised her head at the presence of Annette.

"Oh, Annette? What are you doing here without sleeping?"

"Catherine has been sleeping much later lately.”

"I, well, I doze off every day at the store and can't sleep at night."

That meant there were no customers in the store. Annette put her bag on the table and sat down next to her. Catherine tilted her head.

“What is this?"

"It's for Catherine."

"For me? Is it a present? I'm still a long way from my birthday, you know?"

"It’s a present, but it's not a birthday present."

Annette pulled a small outfit out of the bag. It was a baby outfit she had made for Olivia.

"These are Olivia's clothes. I just embroidered it, but I don't know how it will turn out, since it's my first time making clothes properly."

“Oh my goodness."

Catherine accepted the clothes, covering her mouth with one hand. She looked at the clothes and smiled.

“Oh my gosh, they are adorable. Is this your first time making it? How are you so talented?”

“I should have given it to you a little sooner...it took longer than I expected."

“What are you talking about? The season is perfect now, I really like it. Thank you so much."

“I'm glad you're pleased. And......"

"And? What else is there?"

Annette took an envelope from her bag and held it out to Catherine. Catherine opened the envelope with a puzzled expression. Her face hardened slightly as she checked inside.

"...... What is this?"

"It's the alimony I received from my ex-husband."

As soon as Annette received the bank documents, she turned all the money in them into checks. From the beginning, she wanted to get her alimony back so she could give it to Catherine.

The amount of alimony, which she confirmed more than six months after the divorce, was more than she could have imagined. Even though she had contributed nothing to the marriage.

According to her estimate of the cost of living she had learned while staying at Katrin's house so far, this amount of money could support a family of four for the rest of their lives.

It may not have been exact, but it was clearly enough for Catherine anyway.

After confirming the amount on the check, Catherine immediately handed it back to Annette. Annette, however, shook her head.

“It's yours."

"Why are you giving this to me, Annette?"

“Um, because I want to give it to you?”

“I don't remember doing anything to deserve this.”

“Catherine has done so much for me. I've made it hard for you since I began living here, and with this much money, you could open a better store somewhere else."

“Even if you add up all your living expenses so far, it’s not even one hundredth of this, no, not even one thousandth. Please take it quickly because my hands are shaking."

Annette gave a small laugh as if she had heard a funny joke, but Catherine did not laugh at all. Catherine placed the envelope on Annette's lap. Annette put it on the table again.

There was silence for a while. Annette still smiled and quietly opened her mouth.

“If Catherine had not taken me in that day, the day of my divorce, I would have just died."

"..."

"I thought I was going to die."

Annette spoke monotonously, as if describing an ordinary day in her life.

“I had tried to die several times before my divorce. Catherine, I know you've been wondering about this too, ...... but I'm going to be honest with you. After I first met you, I knew I had to die."

"...."

“You can think of it as escapism. However, I am not trying to shift the blame to Catherine. Rather, I am grateful to you."

Catherine froze hard like a breathless person and listened to Annette. Annette was not confident enough to look her in the face, so she lowered her gaze and continued speaking.

"Catherine, I just---I couldn't live any longer. I was so ashamed of myself. I was so ashamed of my life. Perhaps secretly I had completely separated my father from me. I thought I was different. I thought I was a better person, but being born as my father's daughter - I was a little bit unlucky."

"...."

“I realized after meeting you that this was not the case."

Looking back, she always had different options.

A choice to reflect on her own position. A choice to reflect on the position of others. A choice to judge and to face her father's actions. A choice to act.

A choice to listen to Catherine’s story at that piano recital ......... A choice to try to save her brother.

There were always a myriad of choices.

She just didn't choose them herself.

“By the way, my attempt to die........ I wonder if I hurt you again. I always worried about that. What if you feel guilty for telling me your story?........... because you are a good person."

“I am not a good person."

Catherine’s voice was a whisper. Annette denied her statement with a gentle smile.

“You are kind. I can attest to that from the fact that I am here."

“I ......."

Catherine was about to say something more, but Annette interpreted.

“I'm thinking of going to the field hospital. I heard they are very understaffed.”

“What do you mean? A field hospital? What is Annette going to do there?"

"I already put in my volunteer application as a military nurse before. I have to leave tomorrow morning."

"What? In the morning?"

Catherine screamed, forgetting that it was the middle of the night. Annette hurriedly looked in the direction of Olivia's room. Fortunately, there was no crying.

Catherine asked in a low but aggressive tone of voice.

“..... what the hell does that mean? A military nurse? And you’re going to leave in the morning?”

"You heard me right. I knew from the beginning that I had to leave sometime. Now is just the right time."

“Are you crazy? Why there? Have you ever done something like that?"

"Most of the field nurses are civilians like me. And they get educated before they will be put to work."

“Are you the same as those people? You are......!"

"The same."

Catherine paused at the low but decisive answer.

“I think those people are like me.”

"...."

"Just like you and me, just like me and Bruner and Olivia.......... Isn't that the kind of world your brother tried to create?"

Catherine's lips quivered. She looked at Annette with shaking eyes. Annette slowly raised her head.

“I still hate myself. I still don't want to live."

Finally their gazes met. Up close, Catherine's eyes were brown mixed with gray. Annette closed her eyes and smiled.

“So help me to be a better person.”

\*\*\*

Cynthia Station was crowded with people early in the morning. Annette stood in the crowd with a luggage case in one hand and a train ticket in the other.

Catherine insisted on seeing her off to the station, but Annette stopped her. She just asked her to give Bruner a letter apologizing for the sudden separation and her farewell.

Bruner, who had a lot of worries and concerns, would have prevented her from going by any means. It also seemed that Catherine would be more sympathetic to Annette's feelings on the matter.

It was for this reason that she spoke directly only to Catherine. Annette did not want them to be overly concerned with her problems.

They were good people. She sincerely wished them happiness.

A short time later, a locomotive began to be seen in the distance with a loud steam noise. Before the train could stop at the station, people rushed forward.

“This train is a troop transport train bound for Bernault! Let me say again! This train is headed to Bernault............"

The train came to a complete stop and the doors opened. People rushed to the entrance in droves. Annette boarded the train, being swept by the crowd.

It was packed inside with no space to sit. She leaned against the glassless window and looked out.

After the train stopped for a while, the locomotive started to spew smoke again. With a chugging sound, the wheels began to turn.

Her golden hair swayed slowly in the wind. Annette took off her hat. Her vision brightened.

She closed her eyes and felt the wind pouring in the window.

The train rattled away from the station.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 52

Heiner walked in the dark.

He walked as far as his feet could take him, losing his bearings in the darkness, unable to see a single inch ahead.

He wandered and wandered again to find the light, but it was only darkness. A space filled only with death-like silence.

He trembled helplessly. Still, he could not stop walking. It seemed the moment he stopped walking, he was going to be swallowed by this great darkness.

Thinking back, it seemed that he had always lived his whole life trembling.

Always surrounded by fear and dread............

Heiner entered the abyss with his feet constantly moving. As he entered the center, he saw a dim light. He quickened his steps.

At the deepest point, at the root of the darkness that brewed all his weak emotions, was a little girl.

She was sitting in the middle of a rose garden. Unable to get any closer, Heiner stood far away on the border of the flower field and stared at her.

The child gradually grew. In no time at all, she had grown taller and had become a mature woman. Heiner finally stepped toward her.

Within a few steps, the area suddenly shook. Red rose petals fell to the ground. Soon the entire floor was red.

Heiner, who had been looking at the floor in a panic, raised his head again. Before he knew it, the woman had a pistol in her hand.

She slowly raised her hand and pointed the muzzle at her own head.

Heiner's eyes went wide. He opened his mouth to yell her name, but his voice was inaudible. He hurriedly kicked the floor and ran towards her.

His feet were incredibly fast. The floor, overgrown with petals, looked like blood. Perhaps it really was blood. He could hear the sound of the gun being loaded properly. Heiner shouted, "No," but there was no sound.

The woman slowly opened her mouth.

“I'm now ..."

Her voice flowed out, infinitely weak and trembling. She sobbed with a tearful expression on her face.

“I don't want to live anymore.......”

Her finger on the trigger moved.

Heiner reached for her.

Bang!

\*\*\*

“Ha!”

Heiner rose from the couch, startled. His vision flashed, unfocused and blurry.

Rough breaths repeatedly filled and exited his lungs. His back was soaked with cold sweat. He cupped his face in his trembling hands. His breathing was still unsettled. He kept his face in one hand and kept breathing for a while.

Finally, after a long time, the shaking slowly subsided. The flow of air became more vivid than his breathing. Only then did he slowly remove the hand covering his face.

It was a nightmare he was sick and tired of. The repeat of his recent nightmares were generally similar. Only the way the woman chose to die was different.

Heiner looked around with deep-set eyes, as if a fog had settled in. He was lying on the sofa without a blanket.

There was only one low-lit lamp in the barracks. He closed his eyes long before opening them.

He couldn't remember why he had slept here last night, not in bed. To be precise, he remembered the situation, but his emotions at the time were unclear.

It was not a new thing. He was trapped in the thought of the woman’s voice, making it difficult for him to even perceive what he was doing.

Heiner got up from the sofa and walked to his jacket that was loosely draped over the chair. He searched his pockets and pulled out a cigar.

He lit the cigar with an oil lighter and walked out of the barracks. It was still dark outside. The tip of the cigar was burning red.

It had been a long time since he had smoked again. It seemed to coincide roughly with the time Annette left. She was the reason he had quit smoking in the first place, so there was no reason for him to quit it anymore now.

Heiner inhaled deeply on his cigar. As he exhaled slowly, a clouded smoke dispersed into the air.

By the time he had smoked most of the cigar, his distraught mind had calmed down quite a bit, but it was as empty as a void. The dry, gray eyes were motionless.

*“Love makes me a better person."*

The voice of his dead colleague, whose face he couldn't quite recall now, floated up and disappeared with the smoke. Heiner took a puff of his cigar and mumbled.

‘It’s a dog barking.'

\*\*\*

The rainy season was over and winter had arrived. As expected by the Commander-in-Chief, the Axis’ forces pushed the Western Front of Padania as the wet land dried up.

In the season when the ground had frozen, the Winter War began.

A massive offensive of 700,000 troops, 2,200-odd tanks, and 800 aircraft swept across the Padania front.

Padania had only about two-thirds of the Axis’ forces for simultaneous defense of the southern front. However, an impenetrable defensive fort was guarding the front line. It was the result of continuous construction even during the rainy season.

The Axis forces were divided into two groups of 90 divisions, one to the defensive fortifications of Padania and the other, led by an armored division, to advance toward the forested area above the fort.

The dense woodlands were difficult for the armored divisions to penetrate. It was also a place where fortifications could not be built. In order to induce the illusion of Padania, France sent the southern group forces to the fortress as expected and had the northern group forces secretly deployed above.

Opinions were divided on this within the Padania command. France would invade the forest area. Be prepared. Or there would be no penetration. They must concentrate their forces in the fortifications.

“The mechanized units cannot pass through the woodlands. It is a waste to deploy forces here."

"Because of the last battle, not all of France's troops are able to fill their capacities. They even deployed more grenadiers. There is not enough strength in France to carry out such an offensive."

The decision, in which these arguments prevailed and leaned toward the latter, was overturned by the Commander-in-Chief just before the battle.

Through information brought by spies operating in France, the Commander-in-Chief determined that France’s mechanized and vehicular forces were advanced enough to break through the forested areas.

He also considered the combination of deciphered codes and the offensive ideas of the France’s command staff. He concluded that France would divide the group into two.

The Commander-in-Chief's judgment and ability to execute was faster than the speed of France's advance. He did not even report to the Allied command, but re-divided the fortress forces and placed it in the north.

“Immediately move the 13 divisions of the Western Fortress and place them in the defensive line. France's armored forces will cross the Lenin River from Leomold. We will use this bridgehead to destroy the enemy."

By order of the Commander-in-Chief, troops were immediately deployed in the north. As such, the Axis classified offensive operations returned to the Padania’s counterattack.

Even so, France, who had advanced to break through the supply route with insufficient troops, began to be noticeably pushed back from the front line.

Eventually, after three weeks, the France command issued an order to stop the operation and retreated. It was a victory for Padania.

It was not a great victory, as it did not substantially inflict any significant damage on France’s main force. However, the victory in the first battle that occurred on the mainland was a great relief to the people.

The victory at the Western Fortress was widely reported in newspapers and on the radio. In particular, all kinds of praise was expressed for the commander-in-chief, who was the main contributor to the victorious battle.

Around that time, Heiner heard a rumor from his subordinates. They were talking about the fierce first battle had just ended on the Western Front.

“...What did you just say?"

"It's a word that I heard coming from the Western Front, actually, but I have to be sure it's accurate."

Heiner didn't hear his subordinate finish what he was saying, but asked back.

"Who's on the frontline?"

“Madam, no, Miss Rosenberg...........rumor has it that she is a military nurse at a frontline field hospital.”

The papers in Heiner's hand were crumbled.

He was silent for a moment, then ordered in a cold, somber voice.

“Check the facts.”

\*\*\*

# Chapter 53

As soon as his men left the office, Heiner immediately picked up the phone. He turned the dial on the switchboard as he was accustomed to doing, without even checking the number.

The ringing went on for a long time. Heiner tapped the desk with the tip of his finger and waited for the connection.

After a rather long wait, the call was connected. He heard a man's voice, sounding a little out of breath.

[------ yes, Brunner that---oh my! Olivia! Don't touch that!!!]

"..."

[Hello, wait a minute!]

There was a clatter from the other end of the receiver. Heiner endured the long commotion on the other end without changing his expression. After a while, the man took the call again.

[ha, sorry. This is Bruner Grott. Who is this?]

"My name is Heiner Valdemar."

[Ah, Your Excellency! It's been a long time since we spoke. How are you? I heard about your victory. You’re really amazing! Haha! We’re all honored---]

“Thank you. Can I speak to you about Annette?"

Heiner replied extremely clerical and asked. Bruner said, "Oh," in a slightly hesitant tone.

[Shall I call Catherine then? My wife knows more about Annette than I

do.........]

“Then I would appreciate it.”

He didn't sound grateful at all, but Bruner didn't particularly care, and spoke a little more about congratulations and thanks for this victory.

[My wife is upstairs, please wait a moment.]

Heiner held the receiver and looked at the map on the wall. His gaze remained on the Montiore area, where the Western Front was located.

While he waited for Catherine, he brooded over the words of his men. Front lines. Field hospital. A war nurse .....Dry laughter escaped his lips. The woman wasn’t even stationed at a local hospital but at the frontline.

The frontline.

How could that woman be on the frontline? It was not even a cold joke.

Attacking buildings bearing the emblem of a hospital or clinic was morally forbidden. But it was only an international morality and was not specified in any official agreement or international law.

Nor could shells avoid only field hospitals, even if there was no intention to attack there. The frontline was a hell island full of bullets and dropped bombs exploding everywhere.

Civilians were dying at random, and the danger of chasing after troops, even front-line military nurses, was increased.

But the woman said she was there.

[Phone changed. Catherine Grott here].

"...this is Heiner. I'm going to start with the main subject. I heard a story."

Heiner asked coldly, having finally exhausted all patience in waiting for Catherine.

"It was news that Annette is on the Western Front as a field nurse. I don't seem to have received anything from you about that.”

Only silence crossed from the other end of the receiver. Heiner's jaw tightened. He asked again, in a gloomy voice, warningly.

“Did I hear it correctly?"

[....]

"Is Annette at your house right now?"

[Annette is not at home.]

Catherine answered, terribly nonchalant.

[She must be at the frontline. As you heard.]

“You ......”

His mouth dropped open in amazement. A blue vein stood out on Heiner's neck. He shouted, clutching the receiver, almost breaking it.

“Have you gone crazy?"

[...]

"Did you watch the woman go there with your eyes open? You should have reported it to me right away! I'm sure I would have ----!"

[Your Excellency.]

Catherine had a calm but determined voice, at odds with Heiner, roamed his ears.

[It's her life.]

Heiner was momentarily speechless.Catherine continued calmly.

[It’s up to her to live however life she wishes.The only reason I have ever reported to Your Excellency about Annette is because I saw the need to do so. In case of Annette's unstable condition, or any threat to her person, etc.]

"Personal threats? Isn't Annette's presence on the frontline a threat to her safety?"

[It was her choice.]

“If you think about it that way, it was also her choice that she was going to die...!”

[No, Sir. Annette did not go there to die.]

After a brief interval, Catherine slowly clarified like someone reporting very important classified information.

[She went there to live.]

“….”

Heiner let out a quiet, rough breath as he grabbed the desk. His knuckles were white on the back of his hand.There was some silence.

"That woman........"

He counter-questioned, half out of conversation, and half with sincere curiosity.

"Annette told you she went there to .......... live?”

[Yes, to live.]

[No, it can't be. No way .....she doesn't have that kind of courage. So neither the courage to live, nor the courage to make that choice to live............."

The words, which were somewhat slurred, became more blurred as they went on to the end. Heiner wasn't sure even as he spoke.

He had always thought Annette was a weak woman. A woman who did not have the courage to die, or to live properly for that matter. A woman who passed her life helplessly without being able to do anything without the power and wealth that supported her.

So he never once assumed the end. Even as he dragged her to the bottom he never once considered the idea that she would choose death.

*“Seriously, I had never considered this conclusion, not even once."*

He had never thought…

*"You never saw me as a decent human being."*

That she was such a person.........

[Annette is a person who can take responsibility for her own choices. Your Excellency doesn't seem to know that yet].

"..."

[Before leaving, Annette said to me, “Help me to be a better person."]

“….”

For some reason, he felt like he was going to throw up. He involuntarily lifted his hand from the desk and pressed the back of it to his lips.

[I do not know exactly what happened between Your Excellency and Annette. But I dare judge that ...... Your Excellency seems to love her, perhaps."]

Love?

Was it love?

This was not love. Heiner knew he had no heart.

It was something out of the normal range of his own emotions. This could not be love.

Just as Annette's feelings for him were not love, his feelings for Annette were not it either.

[Sir, if you really love Annette, or at least as a human to human, please respect her choice.]

This was nothing more than a sticky mass of very old, rotten, dregs of a heart.

Just dirty and ugly ..............

It was something like that.

\*\*\*

*“Anne."*

*“Why?”*

*“How do you know that you love your lover?"*

*"What, out of the blue, Heiner, did you get a woman?"*

*"Maybe."*

*"What, did you really get a girl? Hey, no. I feel sorry for the woman already."*

*“How do you know?"*

*"Well ...... how do I know? I just feel good, that’s all.”*

*"How exactly do you know it’s good?”*

*"Specifically? It's just that, well, it feels good to be with that person, and being around him makes me feel like a better person, and the world looks more beautiful when we're together, and, well, that's just how it is, ugh."*

*"It sounds stupid just hearing about it."*

*"Why do we fight about this again? But when you love someone, you do a lot of stupid things."*

*“And you still want to carry on?"*

*"Yes."*

*Why?"*

*"Well, just ......"*

*"..."*

*"Love makes me a better person."*

*A glimpse of golden hair glimmered on the second floor window. Heiner turned and stood still for a moment, head raised. The cold winter wind bit into his collar.*

*It was foolish.*

*There was no reason to come all the way here in person. It would have been better to let someone else do the job of delivering the alimony. No, that was what he should have done.*

*It was really a waste of time. Especially since it was this time of the year. The woman didn't even come out and check it in person.*

*‘Still…’*

*His eyes staring at the golden hair gradually darkened. A white breath escaped his lips.*

*How foolish he was to think that seeing a glimpse of her face passing by the window was enough.*

*Heiner was barely able to control his legs which had wanted to rush to the house. He knew that the moment he did it, there would be no going back. He had a place he had to return to.*

*Soon he had to head for the command post near the front lines. He looked down at his empty hand for a moment. In those hands, the lifelines of countless people were held.*

*He raised his head again, clenching his fists. One corner of his chest throbbed painfully.*

*He rather wished that time would stop like this.*

*You’re right there.*

*I am just standing like this, facing you. Like that sometime ago when a young boy watched you impatiently from afar... Even if this is not love.*

*“But when you start to love someone, you do a lot of stupid things."*

*“......I guess there's at least one thing like that."*

*Heiner murmured bitterly. Before long, he couldn't even see her shadow at the window.*

*Hesitating for a moment, he slowly turned his feet. In the place where he left, only the cold, dry air lingered like scattering snow.*

*\*\*\*\**

# Chapter 54

After the battle of Leomold was over, most of the personnel were replaced or moved to the rear.

Soldiers in difficult-to-transfer conditions and the small medical staff of the field hospital remained on the front lines. Annette was one of those remaining.

A fresh dusting of snow fell last night underfoot. Annette headed for the tent with her arms full of bedsheets.

At the entrances of row after row of tents, dried bloodstains remained in places. It was something that was not even recognizable when she was busy.

The walls and floors of the field hospital always smelled of blood, earth, and iron. It reminded her of a slaughterhouse, not a hospital. It was the traces left behind by the fierce battle.

Two hospital facilities were lost in the shelling that occurred during the battle, and seven medical staff members were killed. This was said to be fairly good damage for a field hospital on the frontline.

Annette entered the tent and began to change the sheets on the empty beds. Moaning and coughing continued everywhere.

By the time she turned the third sheet, a sleepy voice came from the bed next to her.

"....hey there…some water.”

The soldier coughed, unable to finish the sentence. His voice was so harsh and hoarse that it was hard to believe it was human.

Annette closed the curtains and checked the man. He was a recruit who had taken poison gas in the trench. He had removed his mask too quickly at the time the poison gas was sprayed.

"Please wait a moment."

She brought a glass of water and poured some into his mouth. The soldier swallowed it like life water.

The soldier, who had been eagerly slurping, coughed violently again. Small black shards from his mouth splattered onto Annette's cheek.

Annette quickly wiped it away with the back of her hand. For several days he had been coughing up his burned lungs.

The aftereffects of the poisonous gas had made him blind.

The military doctor said that he was going to die soon.

"Kak kakkk kakkkkK!” (Coughing)

“Can I give you more water?"

The soldier, barely stopped coughing, shook his head. Instead, he struggled to move his mouth to speak.

"Don't go..... Can you stay next to me, nurse, please?"

“I will."

The soldier mumbled something. He seemed to say thank you.

This was only possible because the battle was over. When wounded soldiers were brought in from fierce battles in mountains, there were times when military doctors would amputate injured limbs without even time for proper treatment.

"Can I hold your hand?" (Soldier)

"I didn’t wash. ......" (A)

“It’s fine." (Soldier)

The soldier made no reply. When Annette took the soldier's hand, he took a small breath and murmured.

"It's soft."

Annette's hand was not soft at all. They were rough from washing dozens of sheets today alone.

“Ummm, I'm sorry. My voice wasn’t like this before…” (soldier)

Annette held his hand a little tighter without changing her expression, though it was an unpleasant voice, like rusty iron creaking.

“It's all right." (A)

“The mask, the ...... people on top of the trench took it off, so I thought, kak, it was okay .....ha.” (Soldier)

"It was bad luck. It was not your fault." (A)

"Ah, um --- that’s why.” (Soldier)

The soldier looked like he was about to say something more, but his breath caught in his throat.

“If it's too hard to talk, you don't have to say it." (A)

"...... don’t…" (soldier)

“I’m not going anywhere, I'll stay here." (A)

Annette took his hand and talked about how inexperienced and foolish she was when she first came here. Sometimes she even mixed in exaggeration.

Occasionally the soldier laughed as he listened to her. It was hard to tell if it was laughter or pain because he kept frowning in pain, but there was a faint smile on his face.

“You .......”

“Yes?"

"...... this ......."

The soldier kept trying to say something. There was a crackling sound from his breathing. Annette squinted to read the words from the movements of his lips.

*Name*. His blackened lips asked. Annette took his hand in her other hand. Then she replied in a whisper.

“...... Annette.”

The soldier's blurry eyes grew slightly larger. His mouth opened. He murmured quietly.

“Oh, you are .......”

The soldier's condition deteriorated rapidly after that conversation. Annette held his hand for a long time and patted the back of his hand.

Tears streaked the corners of the soldier's eyes as he coughed. Tears sloshed on his temples as his arteries swelled.

“I miss my mother.”

The soldier whispered, morbidly gasping for breath. Eventually, he slowly closed his eyes. He was still breathing. It was unclear whether he was asleep or unconscious.

Annette remained in her seat for a while, then stood up to line the soldier's hands on his stomach. She had to finish the rest of her work. She couldn't stay here forever.

As the sun slowly slanted toward the horizon, she finished her work and returned to the wounded soldiers' tent. The tent was quiet except for a few groans.

Annette closed the curtains and approached the soldier. Her hand paused for a moment as she checked the pale face.

The soldier was in the same position as before, eyes closed peacefully. He no longer coughed. There was no more hoarse breathing or moaning of pain.

After checking his breathing, Annette raised the covers over his head.

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“Annette!"

Annette, who was carrying a medical waste bag, turned around. Ryan smiled brightly and waved at her.

"It’s cold. Don't you want to come and get some warmth?"

Ryan was sitting huddled with his colleagues, basking in the fire and smoking cigars. Annette shook her head.

“It's all right. I have work to do.”

“Are you going to throw it away? I'll help you. Let's go together."

Ryan jumped up before Annette could answer. Those who sat with him giggled and laughed. One slapped his shoulder and smiled significantly. Ryan roughly kicked him and ran to Annette.

“Give it to me.”

“It's all right.”

“It looks heavy. Give it to me quickly."

Ryan snatched the bag from Annette’s hand.

Annette, whose hands empty in an instant, thanked him bewilderedly.

"Thank you. It's heavy..."

"Heavy? Look, I can hold it with one hand."

Ryan held the bag with one hand and a cigar in another. Annette looked up at him with a silent smile, and her earlobe turned slightly red. Ryan, who was holding a cigar to his mouth, suddenly inhaled.

"Right, you don't like cigars, right?”

"No, it's all right..."

Before she could finish, Ryan threw the cigar on the ground and rubbed it out. Annette added quietly.

"It's really all right. I'm used to it."

“How can you get used to this?"

“This is what happens when you get used to the smell of blood."

"Really? Have you gotten completely used to the smell of blood?"

"...... not really completely."

Ryan laughed.

“Still, Annette is amazing. I was originally a soldier, but Annette was far from anything like this.”

"I'm the slowest to adapt. The first time I saw blood, I vomited.”

"Yes, of course that happens. You used to live so preciously."

A little taken aback, Annette smiled awkwardly. She knew that Ryan was not being sarcastic or trying to be sarcastic. He was plain and direct.

In effect, he was the one she was comfortable with. Everyone, including her fellow nurses, was hard on her. Even the officers were the same.

That did not mean they would bully her. However, it was not only because of her previous status, but also because of the tremendous distance that her position as the former wife of the Commander-in-Chief gave her.

In the military, rank was absolute. It was even more so for a person at the top of the Padania military command structure.

The commander-in-chief was a great man, a man of great reputation and fairness, and the couple had divorced in a disagreement, but one never knew what had happened to them. Annette fully understood their feelings.

"By the way, Annette, don’t you want to move the rear?”

...... this sergeant was a bit odd.

Annette pondered for a moment, touching her frozen hand, and then answered shortly,

“Shouldn't we go if we have to?”

“Where personnel are needed, of course, is on the frontline. I asked for your opinion.”

“What will Ryan do?”

“Hey, I’m in a position where I have to do whatever I’m asked. I wonder if I'll switch with the next troop... . The orders of the superiors are unpredictable.”

“Please go to the rear as quickly as you can.”

“Oh, is that because you want to leave me quickly?"

"Huh? No, no, it's not that, it's just that I want you to get to safety as soon as possible............."

“I know, I know."

Ryan laughed out loud, as if it was funny. Seeing Annette's slightly puzzled expression, he cleared his throat.

"...There's going to be another battle here in the near future. Will Annette still be here then?"

“If they need me to be."

"Wait a minute, Annette has an opinion of her own. You can support us in the rear if you want. Do you want to stay here?”

"I'm ............."

Slurring her words, Annette answered with slight hesitation.

“Maybe ......... yes."

“Why? Isn't it dangerous here?”

Ryan asked innocently. Annette's lips pursed and she looked at him blankly.

It was a simple question, but she couldn't understand why she couldn’t answer.

Yes, why?

Why did she want to remain in the forefront?

\*\*\*

# Chapter 55

While they were fretting, they arrived at the waste incineration plant. Ryan tossed the bag roughly into the waste pile.

Another flame was burning on the other side of the incineration site. It seemed to be burning the corpses of enemy troops. Smoke rose in the sky that was getting darker by the second.

Annette, who had been staring at the smoke, opened her mouth.

"I don't really know how to say this, but---I---there are people I would like to ask forgiveness from."

"Forgiveness? For whom?"

“I don't know who or even how many people ...... and that's why I'm here. Atonement--- I think.

It's the only thing I can do. I am someone who has nothing more to give."

Annette laughed bitterly and dropped her head.

"I’m trying to stay on the front lines because, yes, it makes me feel a little less guilty."

It was a feeling she was putting out for the first time. Even she herself realized a decent reason only after speaking out of turn.

Perhaps she didn't know if she needed someone to say this to.

“Atonement for your father?"

“...... not necessarily.”

"Then Annette has done enough. Everyone here thinks you’re amazing.”

“You don't need to comfort me."

"It's not comforting, it's true."

Ryan mumbled, but Annette listened with one ear and let it out in the other. Suddenly he stopped walking back to the barracks. Annette couldn't help but stop with him.

"When the shells were pouring down here so thickly.”

He looked down at Annette with a serious look on his face and spoke.

"While we were all face down on the ground---you ran out to another broken barracks and brought first aid and bandages. As you bandaged up James, who had a gunshot wound, you told him he was going to be okay the whole time."

“...The man eventually died."

“Many people lived with the items you brought."

Annette looked troubled without reply. Ryan raised the corners of his lips and smiled. The impression that had seemed grim softened somewhat.

“I am a person who has always done what I was told, so I am ignorant of what goes on in the world. I had only vaguely heard of Annette, so I don't know exactly what you were like off the battlefield.”

"..."

"At least here Annette is a really nice person. It’s not empty words when I say people think you're great."

Her eyes warmed a little. Annette gave a small smile on her lips. She was speechless.

“So you don't have to beat yourself up about it."

It had been a really, really long time since......... she had heard those words.

"...thank you. For saying that."

She barely whispered. The sun had set completely beyond the horizon. The ground sank into darkness.

\*\*\*

The nurses sat gathered in their tents and made nursing supplies such as splints and triangular cloths. They talked about this and that to relieve the boredom.

Annette sat in the far corner, her hands moving silently, unmixed like oil in the sea.

"I heard Haley's fiancé got a letter of return?"

"Yes, I’m going home soon, too."

"So you're getting married as soon as you get back?"

"Probably. ......."

Haley replied shyly. She giggled and said, "It has been a good time.”

"You must get the proposal right and get married. I got married for goodness sake, and how disappointed I will always be."

"Still, the ring is very beautiful. It looks like your husband chose it with care."

“...He did say that he did."

She pretended to be casual, but could not hide her proud smile.

Annette, who had been quietly listening to their conversation, suddenly looked at her left ring finger. Only the part where the ring had been worn for a long time was particularly smooth and pale.

During the conversation, a nurse came into the tent. She handed out additional materials to each of them.

“Excuse me, please take these.”

"Oh, there's no end to it."

"There's still a mountain of stuff left over there, and if we don't do it when we have a little bit of time…”

The nurse replied, turning her head as she held a full load of material. Just as she reached Annette's seat, several items fell off her arms.

Annette hastily raised her hand to catch them. At the same time, she felt her left arm catch somewhere and heard the sound of fabric tearing.

Instantly Annette's arm froze in the air. The items not yet caught fell onto the table and the floor. Annette raised her arm in a daze and checked the torn area.

The sleeve of her left arm was torn all the way to the end and tattered, apparently it was caught on a piece of the table's grain that had cracked and stuck out.

It was only a short commotion, but the air around her became more delicate. She tried to turn her head, but a step later she became aware of the scar on her wrist.

Annette hastily lowered her arm. But already the nurses' faces were rigid. Only the few who had not seen her wrists were curiously looking at them.

In the awkward silence, someone began to speak.

“Your clothes are torn. Are you hurt anywhere?"

"Yes. Was there a sharp spot.........."

"What can I do? Do you want me to sew you up?"

“Yes, she has really good sewing skills.”

They pretended to be unconcerned about her scars. However, it was difficult for Annette to respond naturally.

“No, I'm fine."

The nurses slurred their words “oh…” in response to the firm answer....... Annette picked up the fallen items and placed them on the table, then bowed her head and continued her work.

However, the subtle atmosphere remained the same. After they had been looking at each other for a while, they deliberately started talking about a different subject.

"Ah, did you hear the news that the president of Balichen has dissolved all the other parties?"

"Yes, I did. From what I've heard, he's pretty good at what he does, but he's very particular about his abilities.........."

"Not that his abilities are good, but that he is just a very good talker."

Annette kept her head down and quietly focused on her work. Unlike before, the nurses' stories did not reach her ears.

In fact, it wasn’t something she had to hide. It had long been reported in newspapers and magazines that she had attempted suicide.

However, she felt a strange and intense sense of rejection and embarrassment. Even if everyone outside knew what kind of person she was, this was the one place she did not want to be discovered. Even if it meant living with her eyes closed and ears covered, she wanted to be a normal person here.

*'This place…… Is it because it feels separated from the real world?'*

The frontline was the place where the reality of life and death was most closely connected. Paradoxically, it was also, therefore, the most unrealistic place.

Suddenly, her left hand lost its strength. She managed to grab the cloth again just before she let go.

Annette took a slow breath and then continued to move her hands.

\*\*\*

It was early morning as the sun began to rise over the horizon. It was in the middle of a troop change and was busy with vehicles and people coming and going.

Ryan, who was on standby, said he would soon move to the rear. He persistently encouraged Annette to move with him, but she finally refused.

Annette, who was carrying her supplies, suddenly looked into the void. The air was white and cold, as if she could reach out and touch a piece of ice.

The weather still hadn't warmed up, even though it was past the middle of winter. It had been a really bad winter. Even more so when she looked back at how many boxes were left during the war.

A chill enveloped her shoulders. Annette moved her feet with her upper body slightly shriveled. She was about to enter the treatment barracks when suddenly someone stopped her.

“Miss Rosenberg!”

Annette flinched and stopped. She instantly felt a chill up her spine.

She stiffened on the spot and only her eyes were moving. Miss Rosenberg. The name sounded extremely strange and bizarre.

Normally, here they called her by her title or name. Adding a title after a family name was something that was done only in the outside world.

Moreover, the family name "Rosenberg" was like a stigma to her. She had never been called by that name here.

"Miss Rosenberg, is that correct?"

Annette slowly turned around. A man wearing round-rimmed glasses and carrying a notebook and pen approached her with a friendly face.

From all appearances, he was definitely a reporter.

“Pleased to meet you, Miss Rosenberg. My name is Zeke Arnaud, editor-in-chief of Free Gene."

"..."

“I am here to meet and talk with you as I have heard that Miss Rosenberg is a military nurse on the frontline. May I have a moment of your time?"

The man raised his lips and smiled smoothly.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 56

Annette tightened her arms around the package as if it was her shield. Her hands trembled slightly.

She had met enough reporters to be sick of them for a lifetime. She might have gotten used to it after all this time, but the fear was still there, making her feel like a screw-up.

In fact, she didn't expect her presence here to stay underwater forever. In the first place, most of the front-line workers recognized her.

During the war, they didn’t pay much attention to her, but after the war, she became the focus of attention.

“Come to think of it, I didn't even give you my business card. Here, let me formally introduce myself again..........."

“I don't need it."

Annette refused, shaking her head as the reporter put his hand in his pocket. The reporter, one eyebrow raised, smiled and pulled out a business card.

“Then would you like to look at it? I think it would be better if you confirm my identity with certainty.”

The reporter held out his business card in front of Annette, but she did not look at it. The reporter gently coaxed her away with a look of no ill will on his face.

"I know you've had a difficult time, Miss Rosenberg. There are so many reporters without conscience in the world who are only interested in scoops. But I have never, I swear to God, tried to write an article that would be malicious or harmful to you."

Annette kept her mouth shut and her eyes down. The reporter did not care for the obvious display of refusal to dialogue, but diligently explained his purpose.

“Why would I want to write such an article when Miss Rosenberg is here serving as a field nurse and working hard for her country? Rather, I wanted to ask you to let the world know of Miss Rosenberg's dedication."

"...."

“Miss Rosenberg, don't you want to put your past behind you? I can help you. It's true. In fact, I think the reason you are here. ......"

“No."

Annette stepped back and spoke in a firm voice. But the trembling in her voice just made her look like a frightened animal.

“I don't want it. I don't want the article, good or bad."

"But Miss Rosenberg, what you're doing now is a really good opportunity to restore your image.............."

"I don't want any articles. Please step aside."

“I too am truly impressed by Miss Rosenberg's dedication. You serve on this front, not in the rear. ...."

“I say I don't want it!"

The reporter's mouth closed tightly at the sudden sharp voice that suddenly raised. Silence reigned for a moment. Annette's shoulders shook.

She had constantly tried not to hold grudges against everyone, including the reporters. She had brainwashed herself, and worked hard not to really do so.

She felt she had no right to hold a grudge.

"I don’t want it. If you continue…”

But now she was resentful.

"I've been telling you all along..............."

She was horrified and sickened by the reporter who had followed her here.

It wasn't an emotion that began with pulling her out of the past. Rather, it was an emotion against the only one world that was advantageous, the one where she had just stepped in.

Why?

Why was this work not of her own volition?

Why should that be denied?

Why was she still so timid and weak?

"I am sorry if I have offended you,

Miss Rosenberg. But really, I am just trying to illuminate Miss Rosenberg's changed life, let the world know about it, and hope that it will be useful to you..."

“Hey!"

The reporter and Annette turned to the side in surprise at the same time. A nurse was glaring at the reporter with her hands on her hips. She walked over to them in a great hurry and fired at him.

“You've been busy huh, what are you doing now? Did you get permission to come in and out of this place?"

"Oh, in my capacity as a military reporter.............."

"If you're a military reporter, are you allowed to grab a busy person and semi-compel them to request an interview? Where do you belong?"

“If a reporter from any newspaper writes one article of his own and reports that he made a lot of noise where wounded soldiers live and die?"

“No, I did not force her…”

“If it is not coercion then what is it when she told you to leave her alone? It’s not an agreement, is it!”

The reporter was perplexed by the accusations that poured in like rapid-fire artillery. When Annette spoke, he didn't even listen and only said what he wanted, but now he seemed frightened at the mention of him being reported.

“Go quickly before I call people and drive you out. If you publish anything strange in connection with this, we will formally protest at the military hospital level, so please think about it.”

Her words contained a warning. However, no matter how professional she was from a specialized hospital, it was difficult to get a formal protest with a few words from a military nurse.

The reporter tried to argue against it, but after a delay, he realized that there were many eyes watching in the vicinity.

Since they were near the barracks of the treatment center, the nurses had gathered around to watch them and whisper to each other. Some of the soldiers looked extremely unhappy.

The reporter fumed and grew impatient. If more than one or two people reported the incident to the military, this could lead to an official protest. Then he would get into trouble.

"Is there anything else you would like to say?"

The nurse said, tilting her head. Just as the two soldiers were about to move toward them, the reporter, who had finished making a quick decision, hurriedly opened his mouth.

“I didn't mean to make a fuss, but I really do beg your pardon. Miss Rosenberg, I'm sorry to have disturbed you. Now, please go back to your work ….Have a good day."

The reporter spoke like a fast-forward tape and left at a great speed. He was quickly away from Annette. It was almost like running away.

Annette stared blankly at his back. It was difficult for her to properly perceive what was going on. Her brain seemed to slow down from the moment she faced the reporter.

“He’s finally kicked out. Are you all right?"

The nurse exhaled and asked, looking at Annette. Annette looked at her without answering.

Saddam had never done this before, but Annette knew this woman. She was also one of the people who had produced goods with her a few days ago.

“I didn't kick him out for nothing, did I? You didn't seem to have any intention of interviewing............"

“No, thank you."

"If someone like that comes in, please make an official complaint.

Then he'll go away on his own."

"I will. Sorry for causing unnecessary commotion..."

“No, no, no, why are you apologizing? That man was at fault.”

Annette couldn't find the words to answer and hugged her luggage tightly.

That reporter wouldn’t be the end. If he had come here to get an interview with the person in question, he would have already published several articles on the situation.

She didn't want any articles, but in reality it seemed impossible.

"Um, regarding articles........... do you need any other help?"

"...... yes?"

Annette couldn't understand the question, so she asked back. Not only did she have no idea what kind of help the nurse was talking about, but the nurse had absolutely no reason to help her in the first place.

The nurse hesitated for a moment, then replied hesitantly.

"So, I was thinking that if the reporters write a strange story

...... we could help with a rebuttal interview, because people will believe more in the words of us who have worked with you than in the reporters."

Annette blinked as if she didn't quite catch what she was saying.

"There's no guarantee that only that one reporter will come---and I don't know if you know about that..........but I hear it's actually been in the newspaper a few times already. Oh, it's definitely not a bad one. Like it's so-so.............."

The nurse chose her words very carefully, looking at Annette's face. As for Annette, she had no idea why on earth she was saying that.

The other nurses, who had been watching the situation from earlier, came a few steps closer. One of them coughed and said,

“That much we can do.”

“If you don't take sides specifically, but just say certain facts, well ......”

Everyone just knew each other by name and face, only they had never interacted with each other privately. Annette didn't want to, and they didn't want to either.

Silently staring at them, Annette gently parted her lips.

"I….."

*It's okay.*

*I don't need help.*

*I have never expected help from you guys and I will continue to do so.*

“If."

"...."

"If you would be willing to do so."

The words that popped out like a sob she couldn't hold back didn't last any longer. Was it because she had too much to say?

Or was it because she had nothing at all to say, she did not know.

Annette slowly lowered her head. The cold, frozen ground looked as if it would crack if she stepped on it hard enough. She bit her lower lip gently.

Suddenly, a whispering voice bit into her ear.

“Of course.”

The sun rose at an angle. The light penetrated to where they were standing. The cold air that had risen from the ground frozen overnight sank as if weighted.

“We can help."

Someone answered, even in unspoken words.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 57

Even after the visit of the reporter, Annette's daily routine did not change much.

She still saw no articles outside of the war and did not spend time with the nurses separately and close to them privately, only talking about business matters.

Annette did, however, occasionally exchange greetings with them. It was so close to formal that it was embarrassing to call it a conversation, but if it was different before, it would have been a different atmosphere.

Annette was as busy as ever in her daily life. She spent the day crafting scarce medical supplies, managing supplies, and caring for wounded soldiers. Even if she had two bodies it was not enough.

But the fact was that she had much more leeway than when we were treating wounded soldiers where shells were exploding. It was also a reason for a certain amount of psychological fear to have lessened.

As the heat of the post first war period slowly subsided, a nursing officer called Annette.

Annette had never been personally called by a nursing officer. She went to the barracks feeling anxious. The officer told her the following.

“You have been ordered to move to the rear.

“The rear ......?"

Annette asked curiously, her brows furrowing.

It was not strange to receive orders from the military, but this was a bit sudden. And what’s more, it was to move to the rear.

“If there is a shortage of manpower on the frontline, there isn’t enough, even though there was no reason to replace nursing personnel who dared to remain on the front lines in a situation where they couldn't afford to.............”

The nursing officer replied curtly, as if she had no interest in Annette's questions.

“Yes. It's an order from above."

“I've never volunteered to go to the rear. But what's this about a sudden move?”

“I'm just passing on an order.”

The nurse officer must have known that this was not the natural way to go about it. Annette was a little adamant.

“I want to stay here."

"It’s already decided. Please follow orders."

"...Do you know where the order came from?"

“It is difficult to go into detail about the instructions from the higher ups.”

It was a hard answer. She just couldn't seem to get the information she wanted. In the end, Annette could only say she understood.

As she left the nursing officer's barracks and headed back to the treatment center, she pondered. The more she guessed, the more ominous she felt.

*‘Could it be that man?’*

It was the only thing that came to mind with the limited information available to begin with. Even though she denied that it was too sensitive a thought, once the assumption came to mind, it was hard to get rid of it.

*‘If it is that person.......... why? Is it because my intentions are questionable? Or because he thought I was creating extra noise here?’*

Of course, it could not have been him. It could be that someone in upper management moved her because she was the former wife of the Commander-in-Chief. Or some sort of article was published.

The thought that bit her tail ended up being a question mark. Annette patted her cold frozen cheeks and gave a small sigh.

Suddenly, a familiar voice came from beside her.

“Annette!

“Oh, Ryan.”

Ryan approached her with his characteristic strong and wide smile. Annette also expressed her delight with a smile.

“How are you?”

“Fine. Thank you.”

“So the reporters didn't show up today?”

“No, not after that.”

Ryan went on a long diatribe about the rudeness and bad omen of "that bastard". Annette was getting used to this kind of language from the soldiers, so she tuned in nicely.

“Oh, and by the way, Ryan, it looks like we're going to be moving to that rear.”

“What? Really? Did you apply to the rear?"

"No, I didn't, but I was ordered to do so from above."

"Orders? Orders given to the nurses?"

“No, it appears they were just given to me personally."

"Personally given? It's not like Annette volunteered to be in the rear.”

“Strange, isn't it?”

“It is strange.”

Ryan said thoughtfully as he rubbed his chin. He seemed to be contemplating something before he spoke cautiously.

“Annette, could it be…”

“Huh?"

“How are you and your ex-husband getting along now?"

Annette was a little taken aback by the sudden question. She knew Ryan wasn’t a nosy man, but she didn't expect that he would ask such a straightforward question.

"What about my...... ex-husband?”

“I thought that the person who dared to move Annette to the rear might be him, haha, am I being rude?”

“No, just ......”

Annette clasped her hands awkwardly and continued.

“I just don’t have anything to say. We haven't met or contacted each other since the divorce, and now we're strangers.”

“Oh, I see."

Ryan's face brightened a little. He quickly abandoned his assumption.

“Then it wouldn’t be.”

"Actually, it's not that I didn't think so too, but I decided to think differently. And there's a good chance it's not."

“Then it seems I have gone off on a tangent. Please forget about it! Never mind. Anyway, it is good news for me that Annette is going to the rear. Maybe we will meet in the back. Ha ha."

Ryan laughed a little exaggeratedly. But his face was full of genuine joy.

Annette stared at him as if observing him.

“Soon it will be dangerous here again. There is talk of another war starting as soon as we enter the end of winter and the cold weather passes a bit."

"Again......will they invade the Western Fortress as they did this time?"

“I don’t know. It's a decision to be made by the command. There are many possibilities. They could replenish their forces and come here again, or they could find another route because it was broken last time, or they could come ashore in the southern sea."

“It’s a mainland invasion. Are they trying to take over the capital?"

“The capital is the capital, but first they will try to secure a base. Or a territory that can receive material support. In fact, the capital has a strong symbolic meaning."

“I see. ......”

Annette mumbled thoughtfully. Of course, she had expected this, but it was a different feeling to convey in words.

They had not ended the war. It was only a brief truce.

“Move troops!"

Suddenly, a shout came from the other side of the armory. Startled, Ryan straightened his upper body, which had been leaning toward Annette.

“It's a call to arms, so I have to go. I will see you later in the rear. Until then, take care of yourself!"

“Yes, Ryan, take care of yourself too.”

Ryan nodded and rushed away. He turned around to look at Annette once as he was running. Annette kept waving at him. From a distance he seemed to smile at her.

After Ryan had completely disappeared from sight, Annette walked on. She also had to prepare for her departure.

\*\*\*

The soldiers, standing in a line, walked briskly across the clearing. They moved in a straight line without the slightest disturbance. In front of them, an infantry tank was moving slowly.

Annette lined up in front of the transport with her suitcase. Several familiar faces were seen standing together.

A few nurses passing nearby spotted Annette and stopped. When her eyes met theirs, Annette only greeted them lightly with her eyes.

Contrary to the expectation that they would pass by across the street from each other, they approached Annette. Some of the nurses had helped her when she was in trouble because of the reporter.

"You’re going to the rear.”

"Yes, how….?”

“I see."

The conversation was cut short. In the awkward atmosphere, they looked at each other. One nurse hesitantly opened her mouth.

"Thank you so much for all your hard work here."

For an instant, Annette's eyes shook. The nurse stepped closer and gave Annette a light hug. Even though it was a common greeting when parting, Annette felt very unfamiliar and odd.

"I hope you are well whenever you’re.”

"Good-bye. I'm sure we'll see each other again if we have the chance."

The other nurses hugged Annette one after another with their greetings. Annette embraced them wholeheartedly, feeling touched.

The last nurse to embrace her stepped back and whispered.

“We wish you good luck.”

Annette's eyes widened slightly.

Luck was a word that meant the luck to win and lose a war, and was usually given to military personnel who were going to enter the war.

But Annette knew that her word did not simply mean here on the battlefield.

The transport truck with all the seats filled departed with a heavy rumble. Then the next transport vehicle rattled in. A dry dust cloud filled the air.

Annette smiled faintly over the familiar noise of the engine.

“You too...good luck.”

On all battlefields of life.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 58

The field hospital in the rear was much cleaner and better than the one on the frontline.

In the first place, it was difficult to expect proper facilities because frontline field hospitals routinely broke down and had to be repaired repeatedly.

Arriving late at night, Annette was assigned quarters and immediately put into the field the next morning. She spent a few days getting to know the facility and its geography before getting to work.

The wounded soldiers here were not in as serious condition as before. However, many soldiers were already incapacitated from combat. When their condition worsened beyond help, they were moved to the morgue.

Annette passed from one bed to the next with a basket of bandages and antiseptic under her arm.

Glances came from everywhere, and low whispering noises could be heard. She paid no attention, but walked on, looking only ahead.

From the first day of Annette's arrival, rumors had spread that the only daughter of the late Marquis Dietrich and the former wife of the Commander-in-Chief was here.

The atmosphere was such that everyone, including the nursing officers, was uncomfortable with her.

“Do you know how to do airtight dressing on that patient?”

"...... Yes, I know."

“I asked for confirmation, so please don't be offended. Just to be sure."

They treated Annette as if she were a picky and difficult girl to handle, not a military nurse.

In fact, it was what she had expected. This place was not like the frontline.

On the frontline, no one had time to pay attention to rumors because it was an exhibition of minutes and seconds. And after the battle was over, they were already adapted to each other's presence.

Even if the troops were replaced, they naturally formed the leading atmosphere, since the remaining existing personnel had increased considerably.

For this reason, those who were surprised to see Annette for the first time soon did so. Here, however, she was forced to make a completely new adaptation.

Annette went to the bed of one of the wounded soldiers assigned to her. He was a soldier with a gaping wound in his leg. He was lying on his back, staring into the air with his eyes bizarrely open. Annette said, putting down the basket.

“Let me change your bandage.”

"...I don't need it."

"It's soiled and needs to be replaced."

“I don't need it."

"If you don't change it, it will get worse."

"I said......"

The soldier, who had turned his head in frustration, stopped when he saw Annette's face. He watched her for a moment with narrowed brows, then opened his mouth bluntly.

“I have seen you in the newspapers.”

“I'm going to change your covers.”

"You are the wife of the Commander-in-Chief, aren't you? He sent you to anesthetize me, didn't he? He thinks I’m going to fold easily if they send a woman like you?!”

"I have to disinfect you, so stay still..........."

"Don't anesthetize me and cut off my leg! My leg will never be cut off! If you cut it off, I'll kill myself! I’ll die!"

Suddenly the soldier began to have seizures with open eyes. He jumped up and reached out as if trying to grab Annette.

Panicked, Annette stepped back. The soldier did not get out of bed, fortunately with a minimal awareness that he had injured his leg.

He just flailed his arms around as if to keep anyone from getting too close. Hearing the commotion, several soldiers and nurses rushed to the scene. They grabbed the man's arms and held him down. He screamed and went berserk.

“I knew this was going to happen! I knew this would happen! Don't anesthetize me! I'll kill you! You bastards!”

All kinds of vulgar abuse overflowed. Even Annette, who had been trained in a certain degree of harsh language, was bewildered by the offensive and naked swearing.

The soldiers who had subdued him yelled at him excessively.

“Hey! Calm down!"

“We are not going to cut your legs off! It’s not going to happen! Can't you hear me, you crazy bastard?"

Annette opened the lid of the disinfectant and ordered the soldiers.

"Hold him still for a moment. Over there, can you hold his leg?"

The soldier cried out. His pupils were dilated to the point of terrifying. Annette applied antiseptic to the wound and calmed him while she waited for it to dry.

“Calm down, sir, we won't anesthetize you.”

“I'm going to stab you to death ......! F\*k! And I'm going to kill myself too!"

"Your injuries aren't bad enough to amputate! I'm only going to bandage it!"

“Don't bullsh\*t me! How can you trust the words of aristocrats!”

“Look! Look at me! I don't have any anesthetics! I’m just disinfecting the wound!"

Finally, after a few more shouts, the soldier stopped talking, only sighing. But his aggressive momentum remained the same.

Annette placed some antiseptic gauze on the wound for a few moments, then wrapped it with a clean bandage. When she finished the procedure, sweat was beading on her forehead.

Annette looked up, stared at the soldier, and murmured,

“Look. I only changed the bandage."

"..."

The soldier silently dropped his gaze on his leg, which had a white bandage wrapped around it. His shoulder was still shaking like a seizure.

When he seemed calmer, the soldiers let him go. In the quiet of the hospital room, everyone's eyes were on this place.

"Your face..."

One of the soldiers said, pointing to Annette’s cheek. Annette unconsciously touched her cheek.

She checked her fingertip and found a little blood on it. She felt a tingling pain afterwards. It seemed that she had been injured by the angry soldier's swinging hand earlier.

“I'm fine.”

Annette answered calmly and collected her items. The glancing gazes felt like needles. She took a long breath, closed, and opened her eyes.

*I'm tired.*

\*\*\*

There was a commotion in the field hospital in the morning. There was news that the Commander-in-Chief was going to visit here to encourage the wounded soldiers and medical staff.

Rumor had it that the barracks of the Commander-in-Chief's headquarters were close by.

Not only the officers but also the soldiers of lower ranks were nervous at the fact that the Commander-in-Chief of the Padania Army was coming.

The hospital staff swept the building early in the morning, not to mention checking for errors in the paperwork and organizing the supplies.

Even in the midst of this busy schedule, there was no shortage of behind-the-scenes conversations about Annette. It felt like everyone was watching her. Annette tried not to be conscious and carried out the tasks assigned to her. After a full day of physical activity, her thoughts seemed to disappear a bit.

Time flew by especially quickly. It was well past afternoon when the Commander-in-Chief visited the field hospital.

Annette, who had been staying in the inner ward the entire time, tending to the patients, came out late to the central ward. The Commander-in-Chief was already almost at the end of his visit.

She was about to enter the ward with a file when she stopped.

In the distance of her vision, she saw a group of gray military uniforms. The soldiers were lined up on both sides and behind a man in a black coat. At first glance, they were in unusual positions.

The man who stood in the middle of the crowd was completely different from ordinary people by the atmosphere he exuded. His rigid posture was like a sharply cut still life.

He was the commander-in-chief.

He was discussing something with his head slightly bowed, holding his officer's cap in one hand, which he had taken off. Occasionally, he nodded his head and said something.

The huge man standing under the light of the dim, pale bulbs characteristic of field hospitals looked like a demon who had come to take the lives of wounded soldiers.

Annette's fingers, gripping the file, tightened a little. Just as she was about to turn around, the Commander-in-Chief raised his head.

For a brief moment, his eyes seemed to grow dim. Almost at the same time, Annette turned and walked in the door.

Click. The door closed behind her back.

\*\*\*

One of the officers stopped Annette as she was returning to her quarters late at night. The message was that someone wanted to see her for a moment.

Since she had never been called by anyone of higher rank, except for nursing officers, Annette had a hunch as soon as she saw the number of stars on the other officer's uniform.

It was the Commander-in-Chief's call.

"------ Where did he request to meet?"

“I will take you there."

The officer's manner was very polite and courteous, but on the other hand he seemed to have no respect for her wishes.

Annette pondered for a moment. Even if she refused the request and returned to her quarters, they wouldn’t drag her out. But, it was difficult to say for sure what would happen after that...........

She couldn't even fathom what Heiner was trying to say. It was a relationship that had already ended. Needless to say, it was a relationship with nothing to add or subtract from.

It was right that they should continue to live on parallel lines.

The officer waited for her response with a polite smile. Annette, troubled, opened her mouth cautiously.

“Lead the way….”

\*\*\*

# Chapter 59

The officer led Annette to the backyard of the church. It was also the place currently used as a mass for military material.

“Please go inside.”

The officer stopped at the back door and said, illuminating the path with a flashlight. Annette looked at the white light projected by the cone for a moment, then stepped into it.

The backyard was dark and empty. An untidy, overgrown patch of grass grazed the hem of her dress as she passed.

She passed through a narrow alleyway and came to a small clearing. Moonlight dimly illuminated it. Annette stopped just inside the shadowy border of the grass.

A tall figure stood in the middle of the clearing, bathed in pale moonlight.

The surface of his black hair and coat appeared white. All the lines of the man were opaque, as if shrouded in fog.

Feeling a presence, Heiner slowly turned his head. Annette stood firm in her place, staring at him as if she were a small animal facing the hunter.

Their gazes collided in midair.

Instantly, Heiner’s expression faltered.

It was such a small change that she wondered if it was an illusion. It was as if a thin layer of skin had peeled off, like a sandcastle slowly being eroded by the waves...........

For a brief moment, Annette felt as if she had peered deep within him.

But when she blinked, the subtle change vanished. Heiner looked just as usual, the cold, indifferent face.

He was the first to move his feet when Annette did not move from her original position. The sound of grass rustling under his hard military boots was heard in the dark silence.

A distinctive broad, imposing body approached. Annette looked at him with an unfamiliar face, as if she were facing a stranger.

Suddenly, Heiner slowly reached out. Annette reflexively tried to retreat, but stopped. His hand did not reach her. Heiner gently opened his mouth, keeping his hand in the air like someone who didn't know what he was about to do.

“Your face…” (H)

"..."

“On your cheek, a wound.” (H)

His fingertip went to her left cheek. Annette finally became aware of the scratch on her face today. The wound wasn't that deep and was only covered with medicine.

Annette covered her left cheek with her hand and stepped back. Then Heiner withdrew his hand as well. She responded somewhat defensively.

“I just got scratched."

“Where did you get scratched?"

"At work."

"While working?”

“Never mind it.”

Heiner seemed a little taken aback at her clerical manner. An awkward silence fell. He stared at Annette quietly for a moment and then spoke blandly.

“I didn't expect to see you here."

It seemed to be just a word of surprise, a reprimand. Annette asked as if to point out his contradiction.

“Wasn't it Your Excellency's order

that I was moved here?"

Heiner's eyebrows furrowed at the title that came out of her mouth. After a brief interval, he asked back.

"Why do you think so?"

"Because there is no way that upper management should be involved in the position of a single service nurse from a civilian background."

“You make it sound like you're not happy about it."

“Please withdraw the order. If there is no proper reason, I would like to return.”

"Do you want to go back…?"

"Yes."

"To the frontline?"

"Yes."

"What is it that you want?"

"Huh?"

Annette raised her eyebrows at the sudden question. Heiner repeated the same words.

“What is it that you want?"

"I don't know what you mean.”

"That you volunteered as a military nurse, yes, let's say that is understandable. But is there a reason why you want to be on the frontline? Have you forgotten what you promised on the condition that I divorce you?"

"What promise are you referring to?"

A heavy silence descended at the end of Annette's question. Heiner's face, which had gradually hardened the longer the dialogue continued, now looked as if he was angry.

“...to live."

His voice was suppressed by something.

“You said you would live."

*"Tell me that if we divorce, you will live." (Past)*

“You promised me that."

*"Please answer me, Annette....” (past)*

The precarious words that seemed to collapse at any moment overlapped.

A subtle confusion came over Annette's face as she finally remembered that promise.

She had never considered it. No, she had never even thought of it as a "promise" that had to be kept in the first place.

Even after the divorce, Annette was still contemplating her death. And now quite some time had passed. The promise Heiner was talking about had absolutely no effect on Annette.

Heiner's eyes narrowed as he read the emotion in her vague expression. Eventually, he let out a dejected laugh.

Heiner murmured bitterly.

“You didn't remember that promise from the beginning, did you?"

"..."

"...I was the only one who believed it like an idiot, again.”

Annette didn't know what the hell he meant. To say that he was angry because she couldn't remember that promise, their relationship was really nothing anymore.

Her heart kept getting confused. She tried to eliminate as many emotional facts as possible and only make objective statements.

“Sir, first of all, I don't think it is necessary for you to understand why I volunteered for the frontline. Moreover, not only do I not think that the promise is valid.........."

“Don't you think it's really convenient logic to judge the validity of mutually discussed promises on your own?"

“Even if it were valid, Your Excellency has no authority to participate in my right to life and death decisions. Then as now."

“I have no authority to do so now.”

Heiner chuckled in amazement. Annette ignored him and spoke clearly.

“Also, I am not dead yet. I have never intended to die here. But why are you telling me I didn't keep that promise?”

"I heard that you recklessly ran out alone to bring supplies in a barrage of bullets.”

Annette gave a small jerk at that. She didn't know where on earth he knew it all from. Heiner mockingly told her.

“At least one thing is certain. Your life is not a priority for you at all.”

“...I'm a member of the military staff here. You can’t criticize me for risking my life for my country."

Annette's words clearly indicated their distance. The Commander-in-Chief and the Servicemen's Staff, that was all there was to it.

“I am not sure why Your Excellency is telling me this in the first place. You don't have to know if I'm dead or alive. If this was what you wanted to say, I would like to go back now.”

“Stop being a field nurse.”

“Unless there is another reason."

“You've done enough. Now go back to Lancaster.”

"...Unless you have a reason, I hope you won't interfere with my place of employment."

“There will be another battle in the near future."

Annette paused and stared at him. Heiner said unreservedly, his peculiarly sharp eyes tightening.

“It is a great thing that you served on the Western Front. Apart from the circumstances, I want to thank you for your service and dedication. You can stop now and go home."

"...Your Excellency."

“Tomorrow there will be a transport train heading towards Dornante. Please join me there."

"...Sir."

"I heard that a journalist has visited you. I'll take care of the article problem in your favor... ”

"Your Excellency!"

“Please!"

Suddenly, a rough voice boomed from Heiner. A sudden silence followed. Both of them glared at each other with stubborn expressions.

It was Heiner who opened his mouth again first.

“Please...... listen to me.”

"..."

“I'm not asking you to do anything harmful; I just want you to go somewhere safe. I'm telling you I'll clean up everything. So….”

“If it is an order as Commander-in-Chief, I will obey it. But what you are saying now, Your Excellency, is hardly an order from a superior military officer."

“It doesn’t matter which way you take it.”

"Please treat me as a military personnel. No, if you treat me as at least one human being, you cannot do this."

At these words, a strange light drifted over Heiner's face. Annette questioned him with clenched fists.

“Again, Your Excellency, all this time you've been talking as if I came here to die. I have no intention of dying myself. That's fine then, isn't it?"

“I have seen your record. I don't know if this is a new way to kill yourself or not."

“…It's a pointless argument."

Annette turned her head wearily. The cold night air flowed between them. Heiner looked at her with eyes full of emotions and said.

“Is this all meaningless to you?"

"...."

“No, did I ever mean anything to you in the first place?”

\*\*\*

# Chapter 60

Annette looked up at the somewhat outlandish question. The moon was hidden behind a passing cloud. Heiner's face was shadowed and dark.

"I've always been nothing to you. It was the same when we were at our best, and it was the same when I ruined your life."

"Is that what you want to say, Your Excellency? I was nothing to you too.”

"I hated you at least!"

The words carried raw emotion. Annette's eyes widened slightly. Heiner fell silent as if to restrain himself and spit out the half-mashed words.

“Well, then, at least.”

"...."

“At least---isn't it right that you hate me for the rest of your life, too?"

"..."

"Why do I always like this…nothing?”

The edge of his voice trembled slightly. He sounded like someone who had returned after being missing for a long time.

He seemed surprised, angry, and sad. Annette stopped trying to detect his emotions.

All the words lingered in her mouth were erased. There was no good in the relationship that could no longer be saved.

Annette took another step back from him.

"Your Excellency, I-"

For some reason, her throat choked and her words trailed off. She barely got her words out.

"I never want to see you again ....

for something like this. I'll leave you to it."

As if to declare, Annette turned her back immediately. The lightless grass gave it a grotesque feeling. She retraced her steps back the way she had come.

She couldn't take a few steps before her shoulder was grabbed.

A force, not strong but stubborn, pulled her body back.

Suddenly turning around, Annette stiffened. His face was close before her eyes. His gray eyes were dark and hot like a shell pit.

Annette locked eyes with him, not even thinking about freeing her trapped arm. Their breaths mingled in close proximity.

A chittering insect chirped among the swaying grass. Slowly his mouth opened.

“Annette."

"..."

"Annette, to you......."

The tightly closed voice flickered out. Strength drained from the hand that had grabbed her arm.

Heiner hesitated for a moment.

What came after a long hesitation was an infinitely helpless confession.

"......I didn't mean to be angry with you."

"..."

"...like this........... it was not my intention to see you again."

For some reason, he choked on those words.

Annette carefully pulled her arm out of his hand. Heiner stood in the distance, staring at her like a child who had missed his precious balloon.

"...... you divorced me according to your will because you said you would live. I would never have let you go if I knew you would give up your life in a place like this."

“That's all over now, isn't it?”

“Annette, let's go back to Lancaster.”

"...what do you mean?"

“You can buy a townhouse and stay there instead of the government mansion. Although I can't promise to give you back the life you used to, where everything happened.”

He bit his lips, as if choosing what to say.

“But I want…"

“No."

Annette said decisively, avoiding his gaze.

“We are done here."

“Annette."

“I don't know exactly what on earth you want from me, but I have nothing more to offer Your Excellency.”

"..."

"It is better that we never meet. It’s a relationship that only hurts each other.”

Heiner did not answer. Annette read between the many lines in the silence.

All the while she acted like someone who didn't know what to say, but it wasn't because she had nothing to say. Rather, it was because she had too much to say.

Annette also had many questions she wanted to ask him.

Why did he seek her out again? What exactly did he want from her?

Why did...... he act like someone trying to hold on to a past lover?

But she did not ask anything. And she was not going to ask anything. In fact, Heiner's words and actions, which seemed to have lingering feelings for an ex-lover, did not touch her at all.

In the past, Heiner had acted as if he loved her dearly. But everything he showed her was a lie.

It was not something to resent Heiner for that now. But what he was saying could no longer be trusted.

No matter how much Heiner tried to have her well-being at heart, Annette just wondered what kind of revenge was left.

“If you insist on giving me a discharge order, as for me, I will have no choice but to obey it. Why are you asking me otherwise? You do what you want anyway."

"------."

“I hope I never see you privately again. Commander-in-Chief."

Annette turned away again, ending in a cold tone. A cold air swept over her cheeks. This time there was no voice or hands to catch her.

The winter night deepened chillingly.

\*\*\*

Somewhere along the way, he had a wild dream that made him sick.

When he saw her in her dreams he didn't know it was a dream, but now when he saw the woman he realized it was a dream.

Perhaps that was why.

The fact that her figure standing quietly among the grass didn't seem terribly real....

Heiner lived every day wandering through his dreams. Most of the dreams did not even produce a proper memory, but the cause and effect were always clear.

Just as the cause and effect of a life of persistence was always clear.

It was strange. Life couldn’t be like this. It was about erasing the only woman in his world. It didn't make sense to suffer from such a terrible feeling of emptiness.

He felt like something had been taken away.

It was for this reason that he had finally come to see the woman, knowing in his head that he had no reason to see her, or rather, that he should not see her.

The chirping of the grass insects slowly subsided. The world was locked in a dark silence.

Heiner leaned against the wall. The moonlight that had been streaming white in the air was now completely shattered.

He took a deep breath under the shadow of the wall.

*“If you treat me at least as a human being, you cannot do this.” (A)*

"...ha."

A bitter sneer flowed through his lips.

Catherine Grott had said the same thing. Respect her choice, human to human, even if it wasn't love.

It was unbelievable and ridiculous.

He witnessed with his own two eyes that the woman was standing on the verge of death. But he was told to sit back and watch her dive into death again.

He really did not mean to ruin the conversation. He was just scared.

The woman who had dismissed all of this as meaningless, who had never even considered her promise to live when she said she would return to the frontline...

Very easily, it seemed, she could let go of life again.

*‘Why did it end up like this again?'*

He thought with empty eyes.

It was possible, he thought, that Annette would rebel against the order to move. But it had to be resolved successfully through dialogue.

Of course, he had some confidence in that idea.

Heiner thought that Annette was also completely tired of this life. The battlefield was not a place that a woman from an aristocratic background who had grown up precious could endure.

He expected that she would accept the pretense of not being able to win if he gave her a hint of the next battle, along with an appropriate praise, and recommended that she be discharged.

*“I hope I never see you privately again.” (A)*

He had expected that........

*“Your Excellency, Commander-in-Chief.” (A)*

Come to think of it, how many times had she met his expectations?

Heiner had always superimposed his old fantasies and delusions on her image.

A graceful swan. A princess of noble blood, as if she were made from all the precious things in the world. A weak and beautiful woman with her selfish blue-blooded habits intact.

From one moment to the next he couldn't even distinguish whether it was really the woman he was drawing or a distorted memory. He really didn’t know anything anymore.

*“It would be better if we never met.” (A)*

Still, he just couldn’t let go, was it because he was a deeply broken being?

Heiner straightened up. He put on the officer's hat he was holding and raised his head. He was compulsively neat and well-groomed.

Before long, his conventional disheveled appearance was completely gone. He moved his steps at regular intervals.

*“It’s a relationship that only hurts each other.” (A)*

"Hurts..."

Heiner muttered blankly across the backyard.

It was a meaningless word. His life had always been full of wounds. If he was going to be unhappy, he would rather be unhappy around her.

Like a dog circling around while tied to a stake.

Until it no longer waited for its master.........

\*\*\*\*

# Chapter 61

It was her first Sunday since being placed in the rear.

Early in the morning Annette washed up and changed into neat clothes. It was to attend Sunday Mass. Several of the people who shared the room with her got up in a daze and prepared to leave. The quiet room was soon filled with rustling noises.

Annette had always been a religious person, like all aristocrats. She had rarely attended the church since the revolution, but here she was a conscious participant.

About 15 minutes before Mass began, Annette left her room. As usual, her roommates were busily preparing in the back.

Annette had never spoken to them beyond the barest minimum of words. She did not even expect to get close to them in the first place.

She closed the door. It didn't matter.

The church was not far from the inn. It was also where she had met Heiner yesterday. She walked away, erasing last night's conversation piece by piece.

There were quite a few people in the church. Annette sat in the last corridor and stared blankly at the cross until Mass began.

A calm and peaceful piano accompaniment began, announcing the start of the Mass. It was a hymn she knew well.

Annette stared blankly at the piano and slowly tapped her thigh with her fingers. It was a half-conscious movement.

Just before the Mass began, someone dressed in black came into view beside her. He sat at the end of the aisle, right next to Annette.

The presence and scent were somewhat familiar. Before she could think straight, Annette involuntarily turned her head to the side.

Then she immediately stiffened.

Annette looked forward again as naturally as possible. But she couldn't be sure that it was really natural.

The people began to say the prayer. Annette also recited it a step later. But she only mumbled it inertially, and none of the content entered her mind.

His voice was small but clearly audible as he said the prayer. Annette kept her eyes closed and pushed the voice away from her ears.

The choir's hymn ended and the sermon for the Mass began. Even then, Annette had a hard time concentrating on the Mass.

She kept seeing his shadow at the edge of her vision. Thoughts naturally drifted to those related to him.

*‘Was it a coincidence? Or on purpose?’*

Come to think of it, this was the only military church in the rear. Rear-echelon personnel had to attend Mass here in order to be official.

*'From an early age... I wonder if it was when he was a trainee.'*

The Sutherlane Island training camp was under the jurisdiction of her father, Marquis Dietrich. Inferring from her father's character, who was a devout believer, it was highly likely that he would have had the trainees attend church.

To the trainees.........

For a moment she was dazed as if she had been hit once in the head.

Annette slowly dropped her gaze. Her hands on her thighs were cold. She held them tightly together.

She had consciously or unconsciously avoided thinking about it. So, about his past (Heiner’s past).

She had guessed that there would be a connection between him and her in some way. Because after she brought up the wish for divorce, he didn't even bother to hide his hatred.

But in retrospect, she always left out the "why" in her questions to him.

She always thought it was very simple. Because her father was a royal military general who persecuted the revolutionary army against the great nobility. Because she was his daughter.

So the hatred was natural.

She never thought of asking Heiner about the past…not even once. Not the false past he made up as part of his operation, but his real past.

Her thoughts were jumbled together. In the end, the mass ended without her being able to concentrate on even a single sentence. Annette sighed and took out the offering envelope.

For no reason, she hesitated for a moment as she slowly put the money into the offering envelope and delicately closed it. She didn't want to face him.

But even then Heiner had not left his seat. Annette gently bit her lower lip.

*'What the hell is he doing?'*

She didn't have the confidence to turn her head to check. Eventually, Annette couldn't stand it and stood up first. She put the envelope in the offering box and immediately left the chapel. The entrance was quite deserted because of the slight delay in time inside.

Walking fast with her eyes on the floor, she suddenly bumped her forehead into something. Annette stopped, startled.

"Ooh."

She raised her head to apologize and saw a familiar face smiling brightly in front of her. Annette’s eyes widened.

"Where are you going so fast?"

It was Ryan.

“Ryan!"

Annette happily called his name out loud. She was even happier to see a familiar face for the first time in the rear, where she didn't know a single person.

Ryan gave her a light hug and laughed heartily.

"Ha ha, how have you been?"

“I've been great. Why are you here? Did you attend Mass?"

“I’ve only been here once. I heard the news that Annette was placed in the rear, but the area seemed different. I thought if I came here, I could see you. You always attend Mass, don't you?"

“Ah, the news ......"

It was more like a rumor. Her story had already spread far and wide in the rear. Annette smiled, not expressing her opinion.

"It's kind of awkward to see you here, isn't it?"

"Oh, awkward? I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Perhaps it’s more unfamiliar than awkward.”

“Oh, how’s it here?”

“It's completely different."

"Oh, wait. What's wrong with your cheek?"

Ryan asked, pointing to her left cheek. Annette groaned.

She didn't think it was a very big scratch, but it certainly seemed to stand out. Seeing as this was Heiner's first question when they met last night......

"I got hurt a little bit on the job."

"What happened?"

"From the patient’s hand…I was trying to change the bandage, but he got angry because he thought I was going to amputate his leg."

“Oh dear…”

Ryan clicked his tongue.

"Did he apologize?"

"Um, no. But it's okay."

"During wartime, we don't have enough medical supplies or manpower, so many military doctors just amputate first. I understand his feelings, but if you hurt someone's face, you have to apologize.”

Ryan said sadly as he carefully examined her wound. Their distance was close, but she stood still, knowing it would be too awkward to back away.

“If it happens again, just call someone else. Be it a nurse or a soldier.........."

Their eyes suddenly met. Annette blinked quickly.

Ryan stared at her for a moment, bewildered. After a few seconds, his face suddenly turned red. He straightened his upper body as he bounced back. Instantly, the distance between their faces became distant.

“Well, still, the wound isn't too deep, so it's not too bad. I’ve seen a lot, so I know the wounds well. Oh, of course, I'm sure Annette has seen a lot too since you’re a nurse ......."

Ryan retreated, slurring his words. A passerby in the hallway bumped into him slightly.

"Oh, excuse me. We're blocking your way, aren't we? Annette, come this way........."

Ryan, who had apologized roughly to the other person, led Annette inside. But Annette did not move. Freeze was the correct way to describe it.

A man stood behind Ryan.

His peculiar cold, brooding face turned to Annette, then to Ryan, and then to Annette again.

Annette stood frozen and still. Ryan's confused voice came from beside her.

"Commander......?"

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# Chapter 62

The chief executive of the Padania army was right in front of him. As soon as he said it, Ryan immediately straightened his posture and raised his hand in salute, as if he had realized the identity of the opponent.

"Loyalty! Greetings, Commander-in-Chief!"

For a moment, Annette was confused as to whether she, too, was required to salute the Commander-in-Chief.

Ryan, who had lowered his hand, was still careful to keep his body firmly at attention. Heiner did not look at him; he spoke in a tasteless voice.

“This is a church. There's no need for that."

“Yes, I understand!"

Ryan's attitude toward Heiner was that of dealing with a high-ranking person. Thanks to this, even people who walked by without thinking glanced at them.

Furthermore, Ryan was a large man, but Heiner was taller than him. With two large men occupying the hallway, the gaze naturally had no choice but to go there.

"Where do you belong?"

"I'm Sergeant Ryan Perom of the Army's 62nd Division Replenishment Battalion!"

"Are you a new transfer?"

"Yes, sir! I served in the frontline replenishment unit until recently!"

"Since when did you start serving in the military?"

"Six years now!"

“But are you still a sergeant? Normally, promotion would be quick in wartime.”

“I’m sorry!"

Ryan exclaimed unnecessarily apologetic, not even knowing why he should apologize.

In the first place, the Commander-in-Chief and the sergeants had a large difference in rank. This was not just a question; it was close to a ridicule.

“Do you have any siblings?”

“I have one older brother and two younger sisters!”

“Did your brother enlist as well?"

“He did!"

“What about your sisters?"

They're at home!"

"So your brother enlisted side by side."

“Yes!"

Annette was dying from the uncomfortableness of this position. She felt sorry for Ryan, but she wanted to get out of here.

"Do you two know each other?"

“Yes---yes!"

“Did you meet on the frontline?"

“Yes!"

“Are you two close?"

“Yes?"

Ryan sounded confused. Annette also looked at Heiner in dismay. Heiner repeated the same question without any change in expression.

"Are you two close?"

“Yes, yes---yes---yes..."

As he spoke, Ryan glanced at Annette.

"...... it seems so."

“Friends?"

"Yes."

She didn't know what the hell this conversation was about. Annette, who couldn't bear to watch, eventually got on board.

"There are many eyes watching. I think you should leave.”

“We were just talking, what’s the matter?”

Annette was greatly taken aback by Heiner's childlike reply.

The passing dog could tell that it was not "just a conversation". Heiner himself must have known what she was insinuating.

Annette sighed and spoke quietly,

“…I guess so. I don't want to be here because there are many eyes watching anyway. What happened to knowing what people would think?"

Heiner's face seemed to say, "What do they think?" She could clearly see that he wanted to ask back.

But fortunately, he kept his mouth shut without further questioning. Of course, his expression of dissatisfaction remained the same.

“I'll go then."

Annette quickly left her place in order not to exchange any more words.

Sensing that now was his chance to escape, Ryan also hurriedly followed Annette after saluting. A dark gaze followed them as they left.

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"Wow, to see the Commander-in-Chief in person, whom I'd only heard rumors about. And to have a one-on-one conversation with him. I thought he was someone I would never meet even if I spent 100 years in the military! No, I'm already an idiot for not becoming a senior officer even if I did 100 years."

A slightly agitated Ryan spat out the words.

“I heard he has a very calm personality, but he's a lot scarier than from what I’ve read in the articles….”

Annette was concerned about Ryan, who had been in an uncomfortable situation because of her, but he didn’t seem to resent her.

Still, the awkwardness didn't go away. Annette hesitated and finally apologized briefly.

“I'm sorry, Ryan."

“What? Why would Annette apologize?"

Saying "it's my fault" was going to seem a little self-conscious. In fact, the question Heiner asked him was ostensibly no big deal.

"Oh, it just seems that I kind of cut off the conversation you were having with the Commander in Chief.”

“What? No. It was uncomfortable to say the least.”

"...... was it so?”

"Ha ha, what soldier would be comfortable talking to the Commander-in-Chief?"

It wasn't a big deal to Ryan, but Annette still felt bad. For no reason, she wondered what she would do if the Commander-in-Chief singled Ryan out and made him suffer.

“By the way, Annette.”

“Yes?”

"You’ve been given orders to deploy to the rear........ It's an order from the Commander-in-Chief, isn't it?"

Ryan asked in a cautious tone. Annette looked at him blankly for a moment, then lowered her head and gave a small reply.

“...... maybe."

They had talked about this before. She had concluded then that it just wasn't true, but now she was sure.

"I guess I was right after all."

"Yeah."

Annette chuckled. Ryan let out a breath, trying to jog his memory.

"When I asked you before what kind of relationship you had with your ex-husband............... you told me you were just a stranger. You don't see each other or contact each other anymore."

"Yes."

“Do you think that is still the case?"

The dry wind of late winter caught up with both legs as they walked. Annette's steps slowed a little. Her

eyes touched an unidentified piece of rolling debris.

“Yes...yes."

The shard shone in the morning sunlight. It looked white from afar, but the closer it got and the more the angle changed, the more it revealed its true color.

“I still think so.”

“The Commander-in-Chief doesn't seem to think so."

“Regardless of what he thinks, I do. And I think he should."

“Did Annette request the divorce first?"

"That is correct."

The debris she saw up close was dark black. Annette stepped past it. With a snap, something broke under her foot.

"By the way, why does everyone make it sound like Annette was the one who ‘got f\*cked’ over?”

"Well, because I had so much to lose in the divorce, and that person had so much to gain."

"Right."

Ryan tilted his head.

“He seems to have lost you, though."

“...What do you mean?"

“Exactly that. I think the Commander-in-Chief still cares about Annette."

Ryan said this without a shadow of a doubt. On the contrary, Annette was at a loss for words.

"----- Not so."

"It isn't? It's very obvious. Like the fact that he moved Annette to the rear, or the fact that he made an unexplained inspection a few days ago. And he seemed very hostile towards me as he questioned me….”

"The feelings he has for me are..... a little complicated. They're not all good feelings like Ryan thinks."

"Hmm."

Ryan still looked unconvinced.

"I don't know what happened between Annette and that man, so I can't be entirely sure, but from what I've seen anyway. The Commander-in-Chief still has you in mind."

“What, are you completely assured of that?"

"You can see it clearly too ...... can't you?"

Ryan quickly admitted, with no intention of hiding. Annette asked with a wry smile.

"How can you be so sure?"

"There are things that only men seem to see."

"What in the world is that? Ryan, I can't read the air."

"Wow, you're suddenly attacking me."

"So what is it?"

"By nature, all men know each other’s thoughts. Especially when women are involved.

Come to think of it, wasn't it like a three-way meeting just now? Ha ha."

"Okay, I won't ask. Please go and have another chat with the Commander-in-Chief since men know each other so well.”

"I'd rather kill myself."

Annette burst into a small laugh at the immediate reply. Ryan made it like it was no big deal, but it didn’t seem so.

"It's your day off, and you're going right back to your lodgings?"

“I think I'll get some rest.”

"You don't grasp the intent of the question at all---"

Annette laughed again at Ryan's disappointed tone. Seeing her laugh, Ryan followed suit with a cool smile.

In fact, she pretended not to understand his question because she was concerned about his opinion. She just felt bad that he had experienced a bad situation because of her.

It was her own way of trying to ease his mind that maybe he had been hurt. It was also not that she did not understand Ryan's words.

No, it was rather justified. If she had not experienced something similar in the past, she would have thought so, too. But Ryan did not know.

Heiner was a man who could act out even the most trivial of glances. Pretending to love, pretending to be jealous, pretending to regret - it was all as light and easy for him as holding a piece of paper.

Just like those days when they were young...

Annette closed her eyes and then opened them. The cloudy dawn sky had cleared before she knew it. The path she was walking on was once again ahead of her.

She stepped toward it.

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# Chapter 63

The weather had been particularly sunny lately. As Annette was returning to the sanitarium building after lunch, she suddenly felt dizzy from the dazzling sunlight.

She closed her eyes, furrowed her brow, and resisted the dizziness.

Recently, the dizziness and migraines had become worse again. She was also overworked, but she blamed her stress on the atmosphere in the field hospital.

Standing still, her throbbing head seemed to gradually quiet down. Annette waited until she felt completely better.

"Hey...hey."

"...."

"Hello?"

"..."

“Hey! Are you okay?"

Annette opened her eyes quickly. A strange soldier with a cigar between his index and middle fingers was leaning over her. Annette took a startled step back.

She heard voices, but they sounded a little far away and she thought they were calling for someone else.

"Yes, yes..........?"

“You were standing still and I wondered if there was something wrong."

"Oh, I'm fine. I got dizzy from the sun for a moment.........Thank you."

Annette smiled awkwardly and tried to walk past him. Then the soldier called her again.

“Excuse me!"

“...... yes?"

Annette turned around. The soldier held up his hands as if he hadn't meant to startle her.

"Oh, I just wanted to ask you a few questions."

Annette looked at him warily, as was her habit. Scratching the back of his head, the soldier hesitantly asked,

"Um, I was wondering if---do you remember Martin?"

“Martin?"

"Yeah, the one with the penetrating wound on his leg ......... you changed the bandage a few days ago."

"...... Ah!"

Annette, who had been listening to the soldier's explanation with a faint smile, nodded.

“I remember. But why...........?"

It was the wounded soldier who had been violently aggressive, screaming don't anesthetize him. He was also the one who wounded her cheek.

"My name is Justin. I am a colleague of Martin's."

The soldier introduced himself and extended his hand for a handshake. Annette inadvertently shook his hand and introduced her name as well.

“I'm Annette."

"I'm the one who held Martin down when he was aggressive that time, don’t you remember?”

Annette smiled vaguely. Frankly, she didn't remember him at all. It was an unnerving and all too brief moment at the time.

“Oh, well, it’s not about me. I wanted to talk to you about Martin. Are you busy, by any chance?"

"No, I'm fine. What is it?”

Justin put the cigar in his mouth and took a deep drag, his cheeks sunken.

“My friend is in shock and a little upset. He can be very violent if not in his right mind. He was in the trenches."

With his words, a whitish puff of smoke flowed. Annette nodded quietly, as she had guessed.

“Shell shock, I guess."

"That's what we call it. Well, I guess we all do, but several of Martin's colleagues have died and been injured. But as you know, it's hard to treat them properly in combat. We were extremely confined in the trenches, so we weren't even in a situation to procure supplies."

"..."

"Wounds that would normally have taken time to treat were, well, in that situation…there's nothing you can do about it. The injured limbs were anesthetized and amputated by a military doctor. And Martin stood by and watched it happen."

It was a common story. There was no time in wartime to carefully treat each soldier.

The treatment had to be done in the shortest possible time and in the most efficient and life-threatening way.

The military doctors could amputate limbs with their eyes closed, so much so that they said they felt like a butcher instead of a doctor.

“I don't know when exactly Martin became that way. But when the war was over, he did. He has an extreme fear and reluctance to be anesthetized. He was afraid they were going to amputate his leg."

"I see."

Annette replied calmly. In fact, it was a story every front-line nurse could have predicted. Justin looked at the burning cigar for a moment, then chuckled bitterly.

“It's a common story, isn't it?"

“I can't say it's ...... different."

“Everyone said you don't have experience. They said if get treated by you, something might go wrong.”

Annette stared at Justin with no sign of anything. It wasn't that she didn't have any feelings, but she was used to the treatment by now.

The nursing officer and even her fellow nurses were asking her if she could do the dressing.

What should the soldiers think of her?

“I'm not trying to attack you, but there was a lot of talk about how you were on the frontline and pretended to work for your reputation.”

"..."

"When I heard that, I thought, well, I guess that's true---"

"..."

"Now that I get to know you, the rumors don’t seem to be true.”

The smoke dissipated into the wind. Justin dropped his burnt-out cigar on the ground and rubbed it out with his foot.

“What my friend said---I apologize on his behalf.”

“No."

“I know it sounds meaningless, but he wasn’t originally like that.”

Annette thought about the word for a moment.

She wondered if there were people who were originally like that. If he really wasn’t "originally such a person," was it his birth, his raw background, or his direction of life where the guilt lies?

Did people born to be that way, or circumstances made them that way?

“Is your face alright?"

Justin asked, tapping his own cheek. Annette nodded quietly with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

"I'm glad ......."

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“Medic! Medic! Nick's been shot!"'

“Heiner! Cover me!”

Heiner nodded as he ducked behind the turret. Shells exploded in all directions and bullets rained down incessantly.

Adolf injected Nick with morphine as he laid him down. Nick stared at the gunshot wound in his stomach, gasping for breath.

Heiner, who had fired over the turret, looked back at them and shouted.

''It's about to open! We have to go now!'

“Damn it! He’s bleeding too much!”

Heiner ran over to check the situation. Nick's face was white as flour dough.

Heiner made eye contact with Nick and shouted.

“Nick, look at me! It's going to be okay. You’ve got to be strong. It’s going to be okay. You got it?"

Adolf stuffed gauze into the gunshot wound to stop the bleeding. Nick mumbled with a sob through his pale lips.

“Lord, I don't want to die. I......"

“You're not going to die! You're going to be okay. Can you hear me?"

Heiner said determinedly, but Nick didn't seem to hear him at all.

A gurgle of blood spit out of his mouth.

“I don't want to die...........”

Bang! Bullets flew. Nick's body twitched and limp. Seconds later, Adolf shouted as he was concentrating on stopping the abdominal bleeding.

''It's done! I've stopped the bleeding!''

Heiner gritted his teeth and grabbed Adolf's shoulder. Only then did Adolf finally take his eyes off Nick’s gunshot wound and look up.

Nick, who had been hit in the chest by another bullet, was dead with his eyes open. Adolf threw the gauze away with his bloody hands.

“Jesus Christ! Give them time to heal, dog!”

“I'll cover you, go left!”

Adolf cursed and readied his equipment. Heiner removed Nick's military tag, shoved it into his pocket, and reloaded his pistol.

His ears were deafened by the sound of shells falling as if they were going to burn the world. Ta ta ta ta! Heiner turned around as he fired into the opposing camp.

He ran, shot, and ran again. He took cover, threw grenades, killed someone, watched someone die.

At one moment, the world slowly drifted away. Heiner looked around, breathing hard. Only the sound of his breathing filled his ears.

The whole place was a sniveling mess. Bullet-riddled soldiers flopped to the ground everywhere. Some were wandering around at a loss, holding up their own arms that had fallen off.

For a moment he felt as if he had lost his way. He knew for a fact that he should not stop, but for some reason his legs would not move.

*What on earth is at the end of this hell?*

Just as he thought that, someone passed by him.

A soldier with a broken knee was limping toward the emergency room. The soldier tripped over a rock and fell, but finally crawled to the entrance of the clinic.

A woman in a nurse's uniform, messed up with dirt and blood, ran out. The nurse helped him up and supported him. She then raised her head.

Her golden hair shone in the light of the noon sun. The blue eyes resembling the sea that he had pursued all his life were looking straight at him.

“Ah..."

All the noise in the world faded away. Boom. His heart was beating wildly with the tension and excitement of the battlefield. Heiner closed his eyes and then opened them.

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# Chapter 64

The world was quiet as it came into his view again.

There was no sound of gunfire, no sound of exploding grenades, no screams, no shouts, no dead bodies. Only the blue-white light of incandescent lamps illuminated the hospital.

Annette was recording the number of items, unaware of his presence. His face, severely gaunt and rough, looked remarkably pale under the incandescent light.

Heiner stared at her for a moment, then slowly lowered his gaze. There was no gun in his hand.

However, his fingers were still trembling slightly, and he couldn't even breathe. It was a symptom that often appeared every time he became psychologically unstable.

Heiner had fought in many wars for operational purposes, but ironically, he had rarely participated as a member of the Padania army....

During his time in the war, Heiner would often see Annette as one of the nurses.

When he was unconscious from a gunshot wound to the shoulder, he mistook the nurse who treated him as her.

After coming to his senses, he laughed at himself, feeling dumb.

There was no way that woman could do such a tough job in a place like this.

*‘How could that vain fantasy become a reality?'*

Heiner's eyes traced Annette’s fingers. Her slender fingers counted the items one after another.

When she reached the end of the goods, Annette rechecked the chart. Something about the numbers didn't add up, and she tilted her head.

Heiner was about ten paces away and looked at her with shaken eyes. Her lips moved slightly as if to say something.

*If we ................*

*I wonder what would have happened if we had met here.*

*What if I had met you here for the first time as just an ordinary soldier and nurse?*

*I came here injured, you treated me, and so we met for the first time. I asked your name and told you mine.*

*I would try to find out if you had a fiancé or a lover. I will hang around you like a dog with nothing to do to see if there is anything I can help you with.*

*We may sit side by side in front of the campfire, as soldiers and nurses do on their days off. You and I would laugh as we watched the others dance.*

*We may even go to the nearest tavern together and have long talks...............*

Heiner's fingers still trembled faintly as they hung powerlessly. His gaze remained fixed on her face.

*Maybe, just maybe.*

*If I were to meet you not in that huge, beautiful Rosenberg mansion, but in this place, full of the smell of blood and screams.*

*If I met you not in your pretty white dress, but in your old nursing uniform.*

*Not you in your unreachable distant status, but you as an ordinary woman volunteering to serve in the army.*

*Maybe I would see you as...*

Annette straightened after checking the items. She turned around, rubbing her eyelids, perhaps tired. Her skinny back looked precariously like she was about to collapse.

Heiner clenched his trembling fingers. The thoughts that had begun at home ended without further ado. He had to return to the barracks. Even if the fighting was over, it was wartime now. There was no time to waste here.

He had to go back.

She, too, had to return.

Heiner barely turned his heavy legs. Inside the field hospital, the groans of the soldiers continued unceasingly.

He pulled back the half-closed tent. It seemed darker beyond the tent's entrance than it was inside. Heiner hesitated for a moment, then moved his legs.

At that moment, he heard something fall with a thud from behind him.

Heiner unconsciously turned his head. But because of the bed and the medical tray, he could not see the floor properly.

“Oh my!”

A passing nurse bent to her knees in surprise. She raised her head and shouted to the others.

“Someone has collapsed!"

\*\*\*

*[Dear Annette.*

*Cynthia has been cloudy and cold every day. How is it over there? It shouldn't be so cold.*

*I have enclosed a scarf with it, but I don't know if it’s delivered*

*properly.*

*I heard that the letter and the parcel Mrs. Hoss sent to her son were lost on the way or delayed.*

*(...... omitted---)*

*If I had known you were going to the frontline, I would have stopped you by any means necessary, but really, Annette is insane! How are you doing?*

*Are you feeling alright? We are doing fine. Olivia hasn't started talking yet. When will she start talking?*

*I can't wait to hear her voice. I will be sure to teach her Annette's name as well.*

*By the time you return, you will be able to hear Olivia calling you.*

*(...... omitted---)*

*We all miss you Annette. When the war is over, please come to my house immediately without thinking about elsewhere. Do you understand?*

*With love,*

*13th December, 721*

*Catherine Grott.]*

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*[Dear Annette.*

*I am writing in the hope that by the time my letter arrives, the situation will have improved. I have just received word that the Montiore front is at a standstill. I understand that operations are being reassigned? Please, I only hope that as many people as possible will return safely.*

*(...... omitted---)*

*Oh, perhaps you remember Hans? He is the one who was picking on you for no reason at the fruit stand. He is the brother of a friend of Bruner's.*

*I heard that he enlisted too. He's a new recruit, so it looks like he's going to the rear. I cried when he said he was going to that battlefield, even though he was just an idiot.*

*Everyone is living in fear of the war. I go to church every day these days. I always pray for Annette…]*

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*[To my proud Annette.*

*Oh, what a happy day!*

*As soon as I checked the Victory Issue, I almost collapsed. No wonder I couldn't help but catch a glimpse of hope from your last letter!*

*Of course we don't expect the war to end like this, but we are all so relieved.*

*Internationally, France has been heavily criticized, so is it too much to hope that maybe they will just retreat?*

*(...... omitted---)*

*My God, you met your ex-husband? I must confess that I had expected him to visit you.*

*He called me as soon as he heard the news of your service. How terrifying it was when he was angry…*

*So, did you listen to my opinion?*

*(...... omitted---)*

*Annette, do you plan to stay there longer? We hope you will come back to Cynthia as soon as possible.*

*I heard that a lot of medical staff as well as soldiers were injured and died.*

*Of course, I know I have no right to stop Annette. But how about at least moving to a safe rear hospital.*

*Annette, I know these are boring words, but please take care of yourself until the end.*

*May the Lord always guide and protect you.*

*Celebrate your victories and love you,*

*Catherine Grott]*

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Annette lifted her heavy eyelids.

Her dim vision shuddered open. She felt heavy, as if her whole body was buried in a mound of stone. Her fingers could barely move.

She had just woken up, so the accident had dulled her grasp of the situation. But her head felt clearer than before.

Annette turned her head fuzzily. A dim light was on in the barracks, which appeared to be a simple building. It was an unfamiliar place.

She looked back at her faltering memory. She was sure she was checking on the goods. She had not been feeling well for a while until.........

Lately the headaches and dizziness had been getting worse again. Her body had been fine on the frontline, but apparently she was under a lot of mental stress.

Annette got out of bed. She seemed to have slept a lot, judging from her fatigue, but she could not check the time.

Furthermore, she had no idea where she was. It was more like a private room than a treatment center. As far as Annette knew, there was no such place in the field hospital.

*'Is this an empty officer's room?'*

It was just strange. She wasn't seriously hurt, and at most was dizzy, but they placed her

on an empty bed.

She shouldn’t have this luxury…

With unnecessary anxiety, Annette hurried out of the room. She grabbed the doorknob and turned it, and the door creaked open.

She looked up through the half-open doorway. Contrary to her expectations, outside the door was not a hallway, but another room.

There was a yellow lamp on a spacious desk in the room. Just as she was about to question her vision, her eyes met those of a man holding papers.

Annette froze involuntarily. A face that was all too sharp and neat and seemingly unreal was facing her.

"...... Ah?"

It was the Commander-in-Chief.

He found Annette and got up from his seat. The scraping sound of the chair being pushed back rang in the silence. Annette stood still until then.

Heiner walked over to her with large strides. A shadow fell on Annette's frightened deer-like face.

A familiar deep voice landed overhead.

"Are you awake?"

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# Chapter 65

Annette looked at him somewhat bewildered without replying. She still did not have a good grasp of the situation. Heiner asked in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Do you remember what happened before you collapsed?"

"......roughly.”

“You collapsed. You seem to be overworked. Nutritional imbalances, lack of sleep."

"..."

"...go back in. You need some more rest."

“No."

Annette tried to shake her head, but Heiner was adamant. He pushed her back into the room as if he would not tolerate defiance.

With little strength in her body, she was easily pushed out despite Heiner's very weak force. He entered the room with her and closed the door behind him.

After Heiner had almost half-forced her to sit on the bed, he ordered.

“Lie down.”

But Annette did not lie down again; she just sat on the bed.

He sighed at her stubbornness.

Annette spoke as forcefully as she could.

“I have to go."

"You didn't even take a vacation. Consider it used now. I instructed them to move you here. Don't worry, I made sure the outside world couldn't see it."

"If I take a break, I want to rest where I belong. If others find out….I have no right to stay here.”

“I will decide who has that authority.”

Heiner said stubbornly without an inch of leeway, and after a moment he added with a gentler tone.

“It's an ...... order.”

It was really not much of an order.

Annette tugged gently on her lower lip. She was sure she had told him the last time they parted. She hoped they never see each other privately again.

But Heiner had ignored her wishes. Even after the divorce, she was not free from him.

"So this is how it is until the end....... I am disappointed in Your Excellency."

“Disappointed?”

“What is the reason for moving me to Your Excellency's barracks when I surely told you not to meet each other anymore?"

“How many more times must I see you unconscious?"

“It is none of Your Excellency's business.”

“If I had not seen you collapse with my own eyes, I would have tried to respect your wishes as much as possible.”

“You saw it with your own eyes? Where on earth were you?"

Annette asked, frowning. She wondered if she was being watched. But Heiner answered without batting an eye.

“I was just passing by."

“Then why didn't you just pass by?”

“I know what your position is at the field hospital. I decided that you could not take a proper rest there. Am I wrong?"

“So you should have left me in the frontline!”

“You mean I should have left you there when I know full well what the situation is like up there?"

"For me, the front is better than here. If I had stayed there, at least I wouldn't have been under such stress."

“What kind of stress are you talking about?”

“All of it! All the rumors against me, the condescension about my competence, even running into Your Excellency! Oh, is it good for you? That I am in a more difficult situation?"

“I didn't know you were such a sarcastic woman.”

"I'm glad you know now."

Stress and fatigue levels were at their peak, and Annette was in a rather sensitive state. Even more so as she remembered that the cause of this situation was the order to move her to the rear hospital.

Heiner looked at her with a speechless expression, one hand roughly rubbed his face.

"Annette, I really don't want to fight you!"

"If I didn't see you, there wouldn’t be a fight.”

"Why on earth do you think that every time we meet.............!"

“Because I don't understand!"

Heiner went silent. Annette, like someone who has put up with this for a long time, shouted with great emotions.

“I forgave you for destroying everything. I'm not trying to blame you, it's the truth. Now, I really don't understand why you're doing this. Rather, please tell me that Your Excellency's revenge is not over yet! Because that is more understandable!"

"Need to understand? I am trying to return what I can to you, and I mean it! Isn't that enough? Why are you making things harder?” (H)

"I said this before, I never wanted your sympathy. You once told me don’t think about anything and just go with the flow. Because that’s what I do best."

“Annette, I…."

“Yes, you're right. I've avoided thinking my whole life."

Their gazes met each other's without missing a beat. Annette regulated her breathing, which was erratic, and continued to speak properly.

"So I try not to do that anymore. I’ll use the rest of my life to understand others."

"Understand others? You? You will never understand ------ for the rest of your life."

"I know."

"....."

"But I think I can try."

Heiner's eyes shook for a moment. He shook his head weakly, letting out his suppressed voice.

“Using your life to understand others...?” (H)

Ha. A sobbing sneer flowed from him.

“As usual I am not there. Not in hatred, not in understanding...........after all, I couldn't have a piece of your life, could I?" (H)

Heiner's face slowly crumbled. It seemed like a very slow decline.

"Annette, you woman....... have a talent for making people feel insignificant.”

"...."

“Everything---everything was pointless, wasn't it? Everything I did---all of it was pointless. It was going to end like this anyway."

“I loved you!" (A)

Annette cried out in a fit. Instantly, Heiner's shoulders stiffened.

“That's why I will neither hate you nor understand you. The moment that happens, it's going to hurt both of us in the end. I know that!" (A)

Annette looked terribly sad, as if she were about to cry at any moment, but at the same time she also looked angry to the top of her head.

“How can you not know this, that we hurt each other just by meeting? How can you be so stupid? By doing this it ruins not only me, but you too!" (A)

“Love? Don't lie to me. You are just a noble packaging for not wanting to step into my life.” (H)

"Yes, it must not have been love. Because it really wasn't you that I loved! So what do you want me to do? What on earth are we talking about now when I really don't know anything about you in the first place?" (A)

"If you know that, don't make such a lame excuse that you loved me!" (H)

Heiner growled like a wounded animal.

“You never loved me, not once! Even after you found out that I had deceived you, you never really even tried to get to know the real me!" (H)

"Because I was afraid to know!" (A)

“No, you didn't want to know. All these three years since the revolution, you just missed the false image! While believing that you would return to the past, wrapped up in an illusion! You couldn't even recognize reality...........!" (H)

“I knew...I knew! It was all lies!” (A)

A tear slid down Annette's cheek at the same time as her cry. At that moment, a brief silence fell between them.

“I knew you would never come back." (A)

Heiner stood stunned, staring at her blankly.

“That there was no going back.That you have never loved me from the beginning. All of it ....... I knew. But I could not get you to confirm that fact with your own mouth." (A)

"...."

“Then there was really nothing left for me, no reason to live. Because the best option I could choose is death."

She closed her eyes as she collapsed, and the tears that had been pooling heavily fell in drops.

"If I choose to live with whatever feelings I have, but why do you keep tormenting me….”

The end of her words trembled faintly and quieted. Annette swallowed a sob with difficulty and hung her head.

In the precarious silence, an old, old heart pulsed itself. Life without gills underwater to breathe. It floated above, but repeatedly sank back down again, unable to bear the weight.

Heiner stood at a distance, like a soldier who had fallen from the ranks. Not knowing if those coming through the forest were friend or foe.

With a look of fear on his face.

A cracked voice came from his tight throat.

“Don't... cry.”

Heiner staggered forward a step. His trembling hands reached into the air.

“Don't cry, please......... I don't know what to do when you cry........."

He held her head clumsily in his arms and mumbled to himself.

“Being with me makes you unhappy… ”

\*\*\*

# Chapter 66

In his arms, Annette felt longing, fulfillment, and at the same time unbearable pain.

It was a familiar sensation.

She felt as if they were thorny vines.

Her practice room had once been in the deepest part of the Rosenberg mansion. The nearby garden had been untended by the caretakers and was overgrown with thorn vines.

The vines were so tangled together that it was hard to tell where they began and where they ended. It was the same for them now. Their mutual visibility held their lives together, binding and repressing each other............ When would this distorted desire end?

*"Miss Rosenberg, when do you think desires are satisfied?"*

Suddenly the philosophy teacher's question came to mind. It was the teacher who had taught her about chance and the notion of fate.

*"...Man walks endlessly toward an object to satisfy his desire, as if he wanted to touch a mirage in the desert................ The object of desire can never satisfy desire."*

*"So, will humans live their whole lives without fully satisfying their desires?"*

*"No, only one thing is possible."*

*“What is it?"*

*"Death."*

While embracing each other's thorny lives.

*“Death is the only thing we want for nothing."*

Binding and oppressing each other until death.

Suddenly his embrace became unbearably tight. Annette pulled her body back as if in denial. The tears that had been smeared on the tip of her chin fell in drops.

She squeezed her eyes shut and turned her head. Heiner looked down at his empty hands for a moment, then turned his gaze toward her again.

A moment of silence passed. Annette still stubbornly turned away from him.

"...... in the past."

At some point, Heiner quietly opened his mouth.

“I had been in several wars. My status varied. Sometimes I was a French soldier, sometimes an Armenian soldier, sometimes a mercenary in some civil war.”

"..."

“I learned in my bones, as I moved from one battlefield to another, how terrible justice can sometimes be. Too much was allowed to happen in the cause of justice."

"..."

"I now hold up justice as my name. From the time I joined the Revolutionary Army until I assumed this position... I have always done so. But do you know..."

Heiner's bittersweet sneer was heard.

“I have never been a righteous man.”

"..."

"Come to think of it, I’m like them, and I allowed many things to happen in the cause of justice. I killed enemy troops. I killed civilians when they went against the operation, and sometimes my colleagues and friends."

Annette finally turned her head slowly back to him. They faced each other, about two spans apart.

"No. Perhaps I am less of a person than they are. Because, in fact, I have always had more important things to do than justice."

As he said this, he looked like a young animal craving warmth. Just infinitely lonely and weak---

"Annette."

"...."

“I am not qualified to discuss sin with you. I always knew that fact. And yet, I shifted the responsibility for my life onto you.............. I guess I really am not even the worst person."

"...."

“Is that why God took everything from me?"

Pain stained his face like fingerprints. Heiner smiled bitterly.

“Everyone around me has left me. You’re one of them. My one…”

Heiner bowed his head with his eyes closed. His breath came in thin quivers.

“It is true that only you remain in my world.”

Annette thought he was crying. Even though she couldn't see the tears in his eyes. For the first time he brought up a part of his past, and she could see sadness, not hatred.

*‘Why?’*

The question she remembered from seeing him at the military church came back to her. She had never asked him questions about his true past.

*What happened in your past?*

*Do I exist in your past?*

*What am I to you? What kind of existence am I?*

Strange words circled her my chest. She knew it was already too late. She knew it was better not to ask.

Because there were things in life that became irreversible the moment you found out.

Annette's lips slowly moved. She hesitated for a moment, and just as she was about to open her mouth, Heiner opened his eyes and spoke first.

“I am releasing you from your post for the time being.”

“I...what?"

“For the time being. You will be transferred to another location as early as next week or as late as the week after that.”

His voice was devoid of all emotions as it had been like that.

“Until then, you will stay here. All business activities are prohibited until reissued. If this is violated, the order will be delayed by that amount."

"Your Excellency."

"From now on, as you wish... I will not intervene in the life you have chosen. I will be a perfect stranger in your life---......."

"..."

“That's all you have to do."

His eyes were as calm as water in the cloudy shadows at dawn. His face showed no more glimpses of emotion.

Annette tried to protest, but she was somewhat at a loss for words. Even though that was what she wanted.

She did not know if it was because of what she had just heard him say, or because of his still-stained face, or because of his promise to be a stranger in her life from now on.

Of course, she had only one option in this situation anyway.

Annette looked at him with a subtle expression. Heiner did not avert his gaze to prompt a response. Eventually she substituted an answer by lowering her eyes.

\*\*\*

*[P.S. 1. Olivia can even speak the word "ummm." Now she just needs to say 'ma'.*

*P.S. 2. Bruner said that Olivia has already added "ah" a few thousand times.*

*P.P.S.3. I didn't use this word after wondering whether to use it or not, but apparently it is correct to use it, so I am adding it.*

*Because the mention of your ex husband came up, sometimes I thought you still can not forget him.*

*I don't mean that you still love him. Annette, memories are like little shells in your pocket.*

*We usually live in oblivion, but when we suddenly put our hand in our pocket and touch it, we can recall the memory of the sea.*

*You don't have to make an effort to forget. After all, some memories can never be forgotten. There is no need to blame yourself for not being able to forget.*

*If the feelings you feel when you touch the shell one day are still valid, let them remain valid. Annette always tried to be overly permissive of her heart.*

*If this is true, just let it flow. It’s okay to feel as your heart desires. You deserve that much, don’t you think?]*

\*\*\*

Annette had to stay put and rest in the new place after the Commander-in-Chief ordered her to take a mandatory leave of absence.

Heiner did not even allow her to return to her original quarters. The reason was that she might walk around and try to work and that she could not rest properly in the hospital.

Actually, he was not wrong.

In the rear hospital, Annette was suffering from as much stress as she had been in the official residence. She even added hard labor, which increased her fatigue level.

She would rather take on more work and have her body suffer, the stares and whispers she had to endure were mentally draining.

In addition, Annette shared a room with seven other people. In the past few months, there had been only a handful of times she's been able to be alone.

To be honest…Having a private room was really comfortable.

Of course, it was only a small space within the Commander-in-Chief's barracks. But just the fact that it was a private room was a huge luxury here.

She was sure all kinds of stories would circulate about her suddenly vacating her quarters, but she could care less about that.

She was completely exhausted.

In any case, everything that happened in the Commander-in-Chief's barracks was confidential. The same was true of Annette's presence.

The others knew of her absence but not her whereabouts. Naturally, Annette was not allowed to enter Heiner's office or look at his papers without permission. She was assigned the farthest room.

She spent most of the day sleeping, partly because she was tired, but most of all because she had nothing to do.

In the first place, there was no way to have a proper hobby in the army. There were a few books on the shelf, but...that was it.

She was forbidden to even meet outsiders. This was because the exact location of the Commander-in-Chief's barracks was classified.

After all, Heiner was the only person Annette had any real communication with in this place.

Heiner was generally very busy so she did not see him often. Meetings often dragged on, and they usually ate late.

However, he would sometimes come to her room when he had time and invite her to dine with him.

“Have you eaten?”

.... Like this.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 67

In the quiet, the only sound was the clattering of spoons on the simple table. Annette crumbled the crusty bread into small pieces and added it to the soup.

The food at the Commander in chief's barracks was not as fine as she had thought. It was of a slightly better standard than the food served by soldiers in a situation like now, when supply routes were smooth.

*‘Well, even when we were dating, he ate everything so well.'*

Unlike her, who was quite picky, Heiner had no likes or dislikes about all food. He seemed to be a man who was content as long as he could fill his stomach.

Annette looked at the food with melancholy eyes. She had become quite accustomed to the low quality food after serving in the army, but she was also at a loss as to how much longer she would have to eat only this kind of food.

But that didn't mean she could complain about the food. She stirred the soup with a spoon and soaked the bread.

When Heiner saw this, he frowned weakly and said.

“You still haven't broken that sneaking habit of yours, have you?"

“…I didn’t have that habit.”

"You did."

"When?"

"Whenever you feel bad or the food isn’t good."

"All normal people are like that."

“I am not."

"Originally, Your Excellency is good at eating things that aren't tasty without saying anything."

“Your taste is too sensitive.

“Your Excellency is too insensitive."

Heiner raised one eyebrow. Annette avoided his gaze and looked down only at her plate. He sighed.

"Let's say it is.”

“But that doesn't mean Your Excellency is really that obtuse."

"I'm not the sensitive type, but I'm not the insensitive type either."

“… I have to point it out, don’t you remember how you ate well even though the food tasted bad?”

Heiner looked back at his memory. Annette once asked during a meal,'Don't you think the ingredients of this food went bad?'

But it was too long ago.

“Not only that, but you often ate food that looked so bad that I just had to put up with it too."

"Then why didn't you tell me then that the food wasn't very good?"

"I did say it."

"At first, yes. It wasn’t until a little later that I began to figure out your habits when the food was not good. I don't think I've ever heard you complain about food after that.”

“I didn't want to be seen as a picky woman."

"..."

Heiner was momentarily stunned by Annette's matter-of-fact reply.

Annette continued eating as if what she said was no big deal in the slightest. Heiner stared at her with hardened eyes.

For some reason, he felt his throat tighten.

Annette in the past---she had always been an honest woman. Unafraid to speak her mind about her feelings and frank in her affections. Come to think of it, she was the one who confessed her feelings to him first.

Every time she did so, Heiner lost his balance and panicked. This was the kind of thing he could never get used to, no matter how much he experienced it. Now was such a moment.

"...What do you mean?"

"Huh? Literally that."

“So what ‘that’ means?”

Heiner asked like a child who dared to ask for confirmation of a fact he already knew. Annette tilted her head slightly and answered.

“It was when we were dating. Isn't it natural that you want to look good to your lover?"

He couldn't make any reply when he was being asked. He mechanically scooped the spoon, but he couldn't taste much.

In the past, Annette had always been an object of fascination for him.

He had to look good, he had to be loving. He was always worried that going against her mood would end their relationship.

In his mind, Annette was the one person who could wield him with a single gesture.

Therefore, he never once thought that she felt the same way he did.

Of course, he never thought her feelings were sincere. At most, it must have been something like humility and appearance, something you do in public.

Even as he thought this, Heiner could not hide the expression on his face, which he tried repeatedly to break.

Annette still hadn't been able to eat her food.mLooking at her bowl, which was more than half full, Heiner asked.

"...... So, is the food not good?"

"The food is fine."

"Then I guess it must be the mood.”

Heiner asked, wiping his mouth with a handkerchief.

“What's wrong?"

"Nothing.”

“Then what is it for?"

"...Just because I don't have anything to do. I don't have to use my strength, I don't have to eat a lot."

Annette replied dryly.

As she said, she looked very bored. Heiner recalled the things to do in the barracks.

"Are you bored?"

"Never mind, it's not like that.”

Again there was silence. Their conversation here was generally like this. It was like they had just pulled out of a moment when they had fallen in love in the past, only to have an argument and subsequent cold war. Heiner recalled the past Annette, who was always eating very eagerly.

It was something he didn't understand why she was so eager to share a meal with him, even though she must not have been particularly comfortable with him.

"Before I move, there's one person I'd like to meet. May I?" (A)

"...... Who is it? A soldier?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

“I think I should say something before I leave.”

“What?"

“You mean leave ......?"

"Not allowed."

He said once and for all. Annette quickly opened her mouth in bewilderment.

"I have to wait for the transport truck anyway. Before that, if I have a minute…” (A)

“I said no.”

“Then let me pass on the letter."

"Are you aware of where you are staying right now? What are you going to say?”

“The content of the letter can be censored, right? If I reduce it to three or four sentences…”

“Is it that sergeant?"

Heiner asked, gently setting down his spoon. In no time at all, the atmosphere at the table turned cold.

“…Does it matter who he is?” (A)

"Are you planning to get married when the war is over?"

“What?"

Her voice rose involuntarily as she was stunned. Annette denied it, shaking her head.

“What are you talking about? We just got to know each other a little when we were at the front.”

“Does the sergeant think so too?”

Unable to say anything, Annette's lips twitched. She seemed to have lost her words.

She had guessed that Ryan had feelings for her. She knew, but she had deliberately pretended not to know, and lived in ignorance.

Ryan was almost the only person in the barracks who she could talk to. Even if it was selfish, what could she do?... she couldn't bear to ghost him.

Heiner let out a gasp at Annette's silence.

"You’re not so stupid that you don't know that."

"...."

“Do you want to start anew with a soldier who has lived his life only on the battlefield and knows nothing?"

"I've never thought about that."

“If you have never thought of that, then you are even more foolish.”

“What on earth are you trying to say?"

“When the war is over, you will have to go back into the world. Where are you going? The Grott family? You don't intend to spend the rest of your life there either, so if you were to become independent. You've never lived alone, and besides, it would be unspeakably difficult for you, an alone woman in Padania, and a known face at that, to live alone!”

Heiner continued to speak with a slanted, sharp look on his face.

“The most ideal way is to remarry. You are still young and beautiful. There are enough screw-ups in the world.”

“So what?”

Annette looked directly at him with cold eyes.

“What does my remarriage have to do with you, Your Excellency? You said it yourself. From now on, you will not interfere with my life."

"..."

“Keep your word, my lord."

She felt tired at the direction the conversation was going. Annette stood up, leaving her half leftovers.

She could feel his silent gaze following her face. Annette ignored him, turned and walked toward the entrance.

She heard a somber reply from behind her.

''Well...yes.''

\*\*\*

After a not-so-good meal, Annette did not see him for a while.

Recently, the atmosphere in the Commander-in-Chief's barracks had been unusual. For security reasons, it seemed that the meeting place had been moved to another location instead of the barracks.

She could guess that something had happened. Annette spent the rest of the day feeling uneasy because she had no way of knowing what it was.

She wanted to go to church and pray, but she was in a situation where she could not move on her own. In the end, Annette spent all day in her room reading the Bible and praying to calm her anxiety.

A few days later, Heiner visited her room quite late in the evening.

"May I come in?"

"Yes, it's fine."

Annette replied as she sat on her bed, removing stitches from her clothes with a pair of scissors. The door opened with a squeak. Heiner stepped into the room and spoke, his eyes focused on her.

“Sorry it's so late ...."

Immediately next, his body stiffened. At the same time, the book and the briefcase he was holding fell to the floor.

Annette was puzzled, unable to grasp the situation. Heiner strode towards her and snatched her by the wrist, which was holding a pair of scissors. (\*he thought she was trying to kill herself, again…)

\*\*\*\*

# Chapter 68

It happened so fast that there was no time for proper recognition. Annette's hand relaxed in surprise. The scissors fell with a plop onto the bedding.

As if time had stopped for an instant, both of them stood still and looked at each other.

Annette blinked quickly. In the stillness, Heiner's unsteady breathing was clearly audible. His face, like a stone statue stuffed in its place, was completely crumbled.

“Heiner, what.......”

Annette, bewildered, called his name involuntarily.

His gray eyes, which had been shaking madly, rolled slowly downward. The black pupils were slightly constricted.

Heiner's gaze touched the clothes on Annette’s lap. All of a sudden, the strength drained from his grip.

Annette pulled her freed wrist toward her chest. Heiner staggered back a step. He slumped a little with a anxious face.

“I---you--."

"...."

"You again..."

The breathless voice quieted as if engulfed in flames. The air that had been standing still gradually sank.

Heiner roughly rubbed his face and sighed, not knowing whether to be relieved or annoyed. He looked again at the scissors that had dropped on the bed.

"...where did the scissors come from?"

"I asked for them. I was trying to sort through the stitches....."

"You'll have to tell me about that."

It was a ridiculous idea to visit the busy Commander-in-Chief to ask for a pair of scissors. Annette mumbled in a small voice.

“…I know what you're worried about, but I don't intend to do that anymore."

“I don't know."

Heiner replied stiffly and picked up the briefcase and books that had fallen to the floor. Annette placed the scissors and clothing on one side of the bed.

“What are you doing here?” (A)

“Take it.” (H)

Annette inadvertently hugged what he handed her. Upon checking, she found several novels.

“Why this…”

"Read it."

“Uh, yes."

*"I got you a book because you're bored." (H)*

He used to always say things like that. Annette smiled gratefully, thinking nothing had changed in the past or now despite everything was different.

“I really don't mind, though.” (A)

“And there's one thing I'd like to ask you.” (H)

“What is it?" (A)

After hesitating for a moment, Heiner took out some sheets of paper from the briefcase. They were music notes written with a pen. He held them out to Annette.

"Do you by any chance know what this song is?" (H)

"A song......?"

“Even those who are quite well versed in music say they don’t know what song it is.”

It was a somewhat outlandish question, but Annette accepted the sheet music without further inquiry. It was certainly an unfamiliar combination of tones.

After examining the sheet music several times, she tilted her head with a vague expression.

"Hmm, in my opinion, this part seems to be a new, previously reported version of Vladimir's Symphony No. 101......"

"Newly pre-reported?"

“Yes, but I see that it was borrowed from other pieces besides Vladimir's. So it’s hard to tell what exactly the song is.

It's a little strange to combine notes that don't suit each other, even though his music is quite good."

“Could you perhaps go into a little more detail on the oddities?"

Heiner's face stiffened. Annette hesitated, nervous for some reason.

"I haven't looked at the sheet music for a long time............"

“You can look at it slowly, so if there's any part that takes a little longer, please tell me all about it."

Annette tried to examine the sheet music again with a narrowed brow, but had no idea what exactly it was that she was looking for.

"Your Excellency, I understand that this is classified, but ......”

Annette looked at him with a troubled look.

“Please tell me exactly what you want to know. Do you want to find the technically weird part or the musically weird part?"

“I want both.”

"Technically it might be wrong, but musically it might be permissible. If you think about it that way, the limits are endless. What is the odd point, exactly?"

Heiner was silent for a moment at her question. He stared at the sheet music as if he was trying to figure something out, and then he softly opened his mouth.

"...A few days ago, an Armanian liaison plane crashed nearby. This music sheet belonged to the pilot of that plane.”

Annette's eyes grew wide. Armania was an ally of France. It was widely expected that they would dispatch their troops along with France as an Axis power.

“Other documents had been obtained separately, and the chiefs of staff said they could find nothing odd in this note and that it seemed to be an ordinary one........ I wanted to ask you just to be sure before I destroyed it.”

Annette looked at the paper again with a nervous expression. It was harder than she thought it would be. Besides, she wondered if she would be able to find what others couldn’t.

She was totally skeptical, but that didn't mean she could take it lightly. Annette’s fingers traced the notes.

"Have you tried mapping the notes to the alphabet?"

"I tried, but it didn't fit."

"I see. Hmmm, there are a few notes that stand out in the middle. It seems quite familiar.”

Annette tilted her head and murmured. Overall, there was nothing suspicious about it, but there were parts that made her question why it was notated this way.

In particular, the repeated motive of F-G-A bothered her a bit. After looking at that part for a long time, her brow narrowed.

Annette quickly opened a drawer and pulled out a notebook and pen. Mumbling along the way, she wrote down one note after another.

Heiner, who had been observing this closely, crossed his arms and said,

"I've tried to deal with the note forms, too."

"Wait a minute."

Interrupting him, Annette busily moved her pen. Eventually she transcribed all the notes on the sheet music to her notebook.

Annette read it carefully from the beginning and indicated several places with her pen. Then she showed him her notebook.

“...... names vary from country to country. The notation is also a little different. One of them, which is almost dead now, is called the Norman style."

“Norman? Are you referring to the people who settled in Portsman?"

“Yes. My piano teacher once studied in Portsman, and I learned a little bit of the Norman style from her."

Annette continued, pointing to the sound form marked "FGA".

"This is a motive that appears repeatedly in the score, and if you read it according to the international notation, which Padania also follows, this is correct. However, if you read this in Norman style, it is ......"

Their gazes met up close. Annette's lips moved slowly.

"Pa, Sal, La."

"..."

"...will go."

Heiner, who had been standing rigidly for some time, snatched the notebook. He read the phonetic form on the paper with a hard face.

Pasala was a coral island located in the Black Sea. It was a key frontline location connecting supply ships in the southern region, and it was an important enough place to be called the land version of the Allied aircraft carrier.

“… Did you find anything else?"

"Right now, well ..... I don't know, maybe there's something more hidden. By the way, the Norman formula uses "s" for flats. A flats are As and B flats are Bs.....There might be a contrast in this way.”

"Try to decipher it. Perhaps there is a way to hide passwords here with numbers instead of letters?"

"Numbers ......?"

Annette, who was pondering while biting her lower lip, shook her head.

"I'm not sure I understand that much. I'll take some time and think about it some more."

"Very well. I will give you a written copy of the score sometime tomorrow, so please give it some more thought...you’ve been very helpful.

“That's good to hear."

“I am sorry, but we will be extending the term of your position release. The travel ban will also be extended for the time being."

"What......? Now, wait a minute.

“Let’s have breakfast together tomorrow. Then get some rest."

It was not that she did not understand this order, since she had suddenly learned of the classified information that had leaked out of Armania. But in any case, it was an unfair problem for her.

"How long is the position release period? When will I be moved?"

Despite Annette's question, Heiner put the sheet music in an envelope without reply, then gathered up the scissors and clothing that lay on the bed.

“Why are you taking those with you? I didn’t even finish it........."

“I'll do it and return it tomorrow morning.”

“It's outrageous. Please!"

Heiner moved on without even pretending to hear her. It was ridiculous, and without being able to say anything more, she sat down on the bed in a daze.

As he was about to open the door, Heiner half turned his head and said softly,

“…Good night, Annette.”

\*\*\*

# Chapter 69

The next morning, Heiner gave her a copy of the sheet music and some clothes. Annette checked the well-stitched clothes and asked.

“Did you do this yourself?"

"If I didn’t then?"

“Thank you for your hard work….”

Of course she thought he had some subordinates do it. It was amazing that he really did this himself in such a busy time.

In the pile, she didn't see the scissors that she had used yesterday. Only the well prepared clothes were given back to her.

*‘It's borrowed, so I have to return it.'*

But the very mention of it was a bit disrespectful. She didn't want to bring up past memories here for no reason.

Annette eventually gave up on asking for the scissors back and opened a copy of the sheet music and looked it over. The dialogue that followed was also mostly about cryptograms.

She checked the sheet music again and asked him for a few more details. This included the circumstances under which he had discovered it and the existence of other classified documents pertaining to the cipher in question.

Heiner surprisingly answered her questions with ease. Perhaps it was because her outside involvement was already restricted, or perhaps she would leave soon anyway.

She wasn't sure but she decided to think of it that way.

“The truth is that the Armanian liaison plane did not simply crash; it was shot down by our military. The officers aboard were in possession of the operation plan and other classified documents."

“Operation plan? Are those and other classified documents also encrypted?"

“Half of them are, and half of them aren't. Thanks to that, the cryptanalysis department is busy day and night."

“Still, I'm really glad we've been able to occupy the information advantage. If they are deciphered, we can try to combine them with this cryptographic information."

“Even just comparing and contrasting, there are blanks in the information about the numbers. That's why I asked if there was a way to hide the numeric passwords in the notes."

“I see......”

Annette's face clouded over slightly. The more she listened to the story, the more her sense of burden doubled. Her confidence dropped in inverse proportion to his.

Yesterday was just a lucky day, and she wasn't going to find anything more.

Naturally, Annette was clueless about deciphering codes. She was worried what if she misread it again?

This was too much secrecy for her to undertake.

Perhaps noticing her concern, Heiner opened his mouth.

“You don't have to feel that you must uncover something. I just need your insight. Just telling me how to do it is enough. Like the Norman style of yesterday."

He put down his cup and continued speaking casually.

“Then we will decipher it, taking into account any opinion you have."

His gray eyes looked directly at her without wavering. His calm and sure words gave her great confidence.

Somehow, at this moment, Annette realized his position.

Heiner Valdemar, the Supreme Commander of the Padanian Army - a core figure who was born an orphan, rose to a position of close aide of Marquis Dietrich, and participated in the reform of the country as a revolutionary military officer.

Legendary for being the youngest person to attain the rank of General of the Army and then Commander-in-Chief. A triumphant general who led his country to victory in the Winter War, the first battle on the mainland. And the powerhouse who held the supremacy of the Allied Forces........

Apart from their personal problems, Heiner Valdemar was a hero of Padania.

The problem was herself. Annette hesitated, still unsure.

“But I've long since stopped playing the piano.......... performance and technical maintenance are completely different fields...... I think it would be better to ask people who are more professional than I am."

“You are the most talented pianist I know."

Annette dismissed his praise thinking that he was flattering her with empty words because the situation was urgent. She smiled at him and said.

“Of course, I will do as much as I can, so you don’t have to say that.”

"You think I’m lying."

“You've met Felix Kafka. You know very well what a great pianist he is.”

If you had not stopped playing the piano, you would have been a much better pianist by the time you reached Kafka's age.”

Heiner's face was calm, his tone had no highs or lows, and he did not seem to be lying by any means. But at the same time, Annette knew very well how good he was at lying.

She cut a sausage with her knife and laughed bitterly.

“Well...I don’t think so. Because a lot of my fame came from my father."

In the past, everything Annette had accomplished had been labeled with the Marquis.

Annette always won all the grand prizes in national competitions, beginning in her youth. She also won third prize in international competitions, gave private concerts, and was called a "piano prodigy."

However, with the revolution, everything fell apart. It did not matter whether Annette had really accomplished them on her own merit or not.

Even if it were true, there was nothing to say because it was right that she had achieved them under the wealth and power of the Marquis.

"Come on."

His sudden outburst stopped Annette's knife for a moment.

"I can't say what you've had is fair, but at least your talent and hard work are real."

"------."

“I know how many songs you have memorized. I also know that you were the only participant in the competition who did not have a single mistouch. And I also know how hard you worked to get there.”

Annette slowly raised her head. Heiner continued to speak in a matter-of-fact tone, as if pointing out mere facts.

“I know you suffered and cried alone in the practice room. You had interest and talent in composing as well as playing, and that you had many unreleased songs."

"-------."

“Your whole world was it. So you were indifferent to the outside world. I've never tried to live that kind of life, so I can never understand the passion and frustration you felt."

"------."

“But as far as I know, at least you're great in that field. So you are the most talented pianist I know. And the most qualified for this job."

The sentence was as firm as the first. Not an ounce of wavering or hesitation.

Annette was rendered speechless and tried to hide her trembling hands. She parted her lips a beat later.

"The composition…."

For some reason, her throat choked and the words trailed off.

“I didn’t even finish my studies properly."

“You quit.”

"...for an aristocratic lady, playing is more noble than composing."

“As always, with the insight of the nobility.”

“I never had much talent for composing. It was one of the reasons I quit."

"You never once officially announced it. Had you published it, I'm sure it would have been different."

Annette looked at him blankly, as if she had just woken up from a deep sleep. It felt strange. How could he be so sure?

How could he be so sure of something that even she herself had never been sure of?

Heiner had been interested in her performance from the beginning. He was one of the few people Annette showed her own compositions.

But essentially, Heiner did not enter deeply into her world. There was never any musical exchange between them.

Annette had thought nothing ofit. To begin with, Heiner's field was far removed from music.

It was just as difficult for her to empathize with his field.

In addition, men generally considered women's piano playing to be only an elegant hobby. Compared to them, with this degree of respect and interest, she considered him a decent man.

So it was only natural that Heiner did not venture too deeply into her world.

No, perhaps to try to keep some distance.............

Annette thought up to this point and became a little suspicious with a strange certainty. Yes, as if he was trying to keep his distance.

Why?

Heiner knew all her tastes. Not only did he know well, he even tried to match them.

Of course he did. Because he had to win her heart.

So there was no reason to distance himself in that area. Piano was the biggest part of her life. It was also the part of her life where he could most easily dig into her heart.

As usual, the results did not follow the end of the thoughts that came easily to mind. Their past was as unknown as if wrapped in a translucent film.

“It was my judgement to leave it to you. I decided it was right to leave it to you."

A voice that sounded too calm and sure broke the brief silence.

“So you need not take the time and care to ascertain its presence or absence.”

The words might have sounded arrogant. But perhaps because he was the initiator, it felt like he was simply explaining the facts.

Annette nodded slowly and put the cut sausage in her mouth. When she bit into it, its savory and salty taste, with a little oil, spread in her mouth.

For the first time, she thought the distributed food tasted good. She chewed everything in her mouth and swallowed it, then she stabbed one of the sausages with her fork and put it in her mouth again.

Her heart was constantly rumbling in her chest. It was not a pleasant sensation, but it was not unpleasant either.

It was ironic, really.

The only person who had once accepted her for everything she was, was also the person who had destroyed her everything.

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# Chapter 70

It was clear that it was all pointless now. But even in the calm emptiness, the emotional byproduct went up and down, shaking like dust.

Concluding Annette's hesitation simply, he asked.

"Is there anything else you need to decipher?"

"I'm not quite sure yet."

"If there are parts that you need to play directly, I’ll prepare it."

"Prepare......?"

Annette muttered curiously. Heiner answered simply, as if asking the obvious.

“Piano.”

"Ah."

Annette understood his words belatedly. She had been lost in other thoughts for a moment and couldn't think straight.

“No, I'm fine. I’ll just look at the sheet music......"

Annette trailed off. It was because she wasn't sure.

She could analogize all the notes by just looking at the sheet music, but she had been away from it for so long that she might miss some parts. And if she actually played it, she might discover a part where the sound was strange.

Heiner, who was staring at the hesitant Annette, suggested it.

“Just to be sure, why don't you try it? There's a piano in a nearby church.......... If only you're willing."

Indeed, his words were valid. She thought it was better to try than not to try. The problem was that she wasn't sure she could ...... play the piano.

It had been a long time since she last played the piano. Running out of the party where Felix Kafka was was the last failure she could remember.

But for the life of her, she couldn't get the words out that she couldn't play the piano at all in front of him.

The safety of her country and the lives of many others were at stake. In such a situation, it didn’t make sense to make excuses like that.

She seemed to wonder what the problem was. Because she herself thought so.

"...yes, I’d love to."

Annette finally answered with a smile.

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That afternoon, Annette and Heiner traveled in a military vehicle to a nearby church. All the windows of the car were covered with blackout curtains.

The vehicle rattled as it went. In the dark car, the two sat at a distance from each other on the edge of their seats.

Annette had her hands clasped in her lap, her eyes silently downcast.

She could not look out the window, so there was nothing to do but to dabble in her thoughts. It felt as if it had been a very long time since she had been to church.

In fact, she had only skipped two Sundays.

It was really strange.

She hadn't been to church for years since the revolution, and yet her heart was so uneasy just because she had skipped only twice.

As if looking into her, Heiner suddenly asked.

"You've been attending church after a long time, haven't you?"

"...... huh?"

"Here."

“Ah, yes. Every week ......”

“Even in Cynthia?"

“No, I rarely went out in Cynthia.”

"Then why did you start going to church again from here? You haven't been attending for a while."

Annette hesitated for a moment.

"I think so. I need a place to talk, so…"

"What are you talking about?"

“Just everything."

“Then tell me."

“Huh?"

“All of it."

At that moment, Annette looked at him in bewilderment. Heiner had a thoughtful look on his face.

“Why?”

“You said you needed a place to talk."

“It's not Your Excellency."

“Why not me?"

Speechless, Annette bit her lips.

*'What is he talking about.....?'*

She didn't know what the hell this conversation was about. She crossed her arms and tilted her head.

“Your Excellency, do you tell me everything?”

“I am trying to talk to you.”

Heiner spoke plainly. It was Annette who was surprised by the sudden and frank answer. She murmured

uncomfortably.

“… How many times have our conversations been honest.”

It wasn't how much they talked that mattered. It was how they interacted.

In this relationship, where there was no trust in each other and no future, any dialogue was futile. He and she were just too busy hiding the depths of their hearts.

After a while, the car gradually came to a stop. They got out of the car in silence. The sun was gradually setting in the horizon.

“The interior is empty.”

Heiner said as they entered the entrance. Annette nodded quietly.

He was right, the church was empty. She stepped into the quiet chapel.

Stained glass windows filled both sides of the chapel. The multicolored glasses decorated with torchlight at the bottom gave off a sacred and noble atmosphere in the slanting afternoon light.

Annette walked across the center to the piano. The black lid opened to reveal a cold keyboard.

After staring at the keys for a moment as if unfamiliar with them, Annette placed the sheet music on the stand. Then she pulled out a chair and sat down.

Heiner approached her and leaned against the chapel chair just in front of the piano. No words were exchanged between them.

Annette stared at the first page of the paper. Her hands were still on her lap. She looked down at the keys.

She dropped her eyes and raised them again.

Everything was still familiar, like an old habit.

She pressed the keys even before she could speak properly. Piano was her first language. There was a piano in every moment of her life.

She had practiced every day, felt her talent was a barrier, failed, overcame it through bloody efforts, failed again, and still put her hand on the keyboard again hundreds and thousands of times.

One could say that she was crazy.

She knew how blessed she looked to live a life without any lack of anything, and yet she was unhappy at the lack of progress in her piano skills.

But for Annette at least, the piano was the eternal unrequited love, something she could never fully have. And now she couldn't even reach it anymore.

Annette took shallow breaths as she closed her eyes. She didn't know how much time had passed. Finally she softly opened her mouth.

“I actually can't play the piano. Not at all.

"..."

“It's been a long time since I did."

She could feel his eyes touching her profile. Heiner spoke after a while.

“… .Since the revolution, I have never heard the sound of a piano in the house.”

*I'm surprised you know that,* Annette thought with no emotion.

"Since that time?"

"You knew it."

"Even at the party where Felix Kafka was, you couldn't play the piano."

“If you knew, why did you bring me here?"

"Because things weren't looking good at the time, and I thought it might be because you were in front of people......."

At the time, people brought Annette up on stage to ridicule her. Of course, the situation itself was difficult. But that was not the reason.

“No."

Annette turned her head to him and said,

“I just can't play."

“May I ask why?"

“......There are many things. I was playing the piano when the revolutionary army rushed into the practice room, and I even saw with both eyes that my father was shot dead at the time."

Her tone was matter-of-fact, as if she were touching an old scar.

"Your Excellency said my talent and hard work were real, but well, people didn't think so. Everything that I had achieved was denied and crumbled.”

"...."

“And now I can’t play. I came here to try it because it's important, but I'm sorry I can’t help you. I think you should leave the playing to someone else."

In the insignificant confession, she felt anew that many emotions had been volatilized during the time that had passed.

She was immature with her emotions until she ran away from the party. It was very painful and hard and unbearable, so she fled.

For a very long time.

So far.

After several seasons gone, she finally saw the fading traces. Her empty hands with nothing left. And her worn-out, familiar self.

“I really..."

Heiner suddenly murmured in a low lament.

“...I guess I took everything from you.”

He didn't look at all happy as he said this. He looked a little empty, a little bitter.

“Do you think so?" Annette asked with a faint smile.

She couldn't say that it was all Heiner's fault. He initiated it, he sidelined it, but conclusively all of this would

have happened anyway.

But there was no denying that he was there every moment of that hell.

“Then you must be satisfied. That was your goal, wasn't it?" (A)

"..."

“I am not trying to be bitter. Just wondering." (A)

Her tone was refreshingly light. Heiner stared at her, standing in the distance as if a door had closed in front of him.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 71

Annette found his face weak, transparent and fragile.

Despite the fact that all of these expressions were completely out of character with him, Heiner opened his mouth emphatically.

'You always say that,' he said. You are not trying to blame me. You said you don't hold it against me."

“It’s true."

“I wanted you to blame me and hold a grudge."

He laughed, barely lifting one side of his mouth.

“Then, you could have an excuse as to why I did it to you."

"------ Excuses are for the wrong people."

“Do you think I did you no wrong?”

“Sometimes I think I did, sometimes I didn't.'

“Then what about now?"

Annette's hand gave a small jerk. She curled her fingers weakly, then sighed lightly.

“I'd rather not talk about this."

"..."

"...Shall we go?"

Before hearing his reply, Annette organized the sheet music from the stand and put it in an envelope.

The sky had turned reddish as if on fire as she was about to close the piano lid. She stopped moving and looked up.

The clouds retreated and the sunset entered the front of the window. The illumination inside the chapel gradually increased.

The red and blue light that permeated the inside of the multicolored glass shimmered in the air.

It was as if a handful of the most beautiful sunsets floating above the surface of the sea had been separated and brought here. Annette, who had been watching it idly, opened her mouth as if possessed.

“The sun is setting.”

"..."

“This is the first time I've ever been in church at this hour. We always have morning services.”

She didn't realize how beautiful the stained glass was bathed in the sunset. Annette felt as if she had become invisible under this enormous light.

Sitting on the piano chair, her clothes were stained with color. She looked down and saw rainbow-colored light streaming from the keys.

Annette held out her palm above it. A rainbow pooled in her hand. She smiled and murmured softly.

"It's so beautiful."

Annette slowly looked back at Heiner. His face was also bathed in colorful light. It was too dazzling to see his expression.

“I see...yes."

After some interval, he answered. He sounded as if he was somehow submerged under water.

The clouds were overcast again, and for a moment the interior became even darker. Only then did she finally get a good look at his face.

However, only his features, as hard as the hard ground after the rain, were clear.

His incomprehensible gaze stared at her. The gaze was precarious as if it would break at any moment, and on the contrary, it was extremely tenacious.

For some reason, she felt imprisoned in that gaze.

Annette turned her head and closed the lid of the piano. The rainbow was gone before she knew it. She removed her hand, which had been resting on the lid for a while.

“Let's go back now.”

\*\*\*

It had been a few days since she had been to church.

The days were just like any other. Annette had breakfast with him every day, and the rest of the day was spent looking at sheet music and reading books.

If there were any gaps in the score, she wrote them down and reported them to Heiner.

Of course, she never knew if it was really used as a ciphertext.

That day, Annette continued to spread out the sheet music and examined it. Papers were scattered on her desk. They were tightly packed with her own notes.

After peering at the notes and commas for a while, writing something, comparing, contrasting, and peering again. Annette's eyes, which had been repeating this process, stopped steadily in one place at one moment.

She wrote down some numbers on a piece of paper. Her increasingly slow hand eventually came to a complete stop.

She stared at the numbers she had written for a moment, forgetting to breathe. Then she snatched the paper and hurriedly left the room.

Her steps across the barracks became faster and faster. When she finally arrived in front of the Commander-in-Chief's office, Annette hurriedly asked the aide,

"May I possibly see His Excellency now?"

The aide, buried in a swamp of papers, pushed up his glasses and glanced at the door.

"Oh, there are other guests inside right now, is it urgent?"

"...It’s urgent….”

Annette trailed off. She certainly thought it was important and came right away, but she wasn't sure if this was important enough to interrupt his visitor.

The aide was troubled for a moment when he noticed her distress. Soon he pulled back his chair and said.

“I’ll be back. Please wait.”

“Oh, yes. Thank you.”

The aide reported about her after knocking on the office door. From behind the door came the sound of something being said.

After a short conversation, the aide nodded toward her.

Annette took a step, clutching the paper to her chest. When she entered the office, the aide closed the door. She then glanced up.

Heiner, sitting in the middle of the large desk, was the first to come into view. Then she saw a man before him, half turned back, staring at her in disapproval.

Annette stopped and froze.

The man looked delicate at best and nervous at worst. Of course, the latter was more than she was accustomed to.

The guest inside looked like Major Eugen. Despite not having seen him in about a year, he hadn’t changed much.

Annette greeted him with a bow of her head, showing no expression.

“I'm sorry for interrupting. I have something urgent to report.”

Her tone was very clerical, as if she had just met him for the first time on the battlefield. Heiner must have sensed her feelings, he replied dryly.

"It’s fine. What's wrong?"

"So, the sheet music ....... It's about ......."

“You can say it. The Major is the Operations Planning Staff.”

It was hard to tell exactly how high a job classification that was. But in any case, since the term "Staff" was attached to it, it seemed that Major Eugen also had a seat at the table in this war.

But apart from being a private inspector, he was also a competent man. Even though he did not graduate from a military academy, Major Eugen was one of those who were recognized for their abilities and became a close associate of the Commander-in-Chief.

He was a man who had risen to this level with only one ability, so his opposition to the nobility was reasonable. She didn’t remember exactly, but she heard that he had inflicted great damage on the nobles.

In any case, it was still awkward to meet again someone with whom she had had a connection in the past, someone who had hated her terribly.

Annette approached the desk without looking at Major Eugen. Whether he was there or not was not important right now.

“…I'll just get right to the point.”

She continued as she placed the piece of paper on the

desk.

"Since this is a guess related to the numerical ciphertext you mentioned last time, I decided it was right to report it right away. I have a point that matches the number you shared with me last time."

“A matching point?"

“Yes. I have a couple of points of coincidence. First of all, in the monophonic scale, 'la' is the principal note. That is, it is considered to be the basic number 1. Here is the last word of each of these, the part of the original piece that was altered............."

Annette explained briefly, pointing to the paper. Heiner and Major Eugen did not say anything until after the explanation.

“… This collation results in substitution equal to this number. It may have been forcibly put together, but it still came out the same."

Annette, who wasn't entirely sure, added an excuse that wasn't an excuse.

For a while, Heiner and Major Eugen looked at the paper in silence with hard faces. For some reason, Annette bit her lip nervously, as if she were waiting for the results of the competition.

Time passed slowly. Eventually, Heiner opened his mouth.

“I understand what you are saying. I will reflect it and communicate it to the decoding department. Thank you for your help."

His voice sounded very calm, as if he were honoring a routine errand runner. Therefore, Annette had no idea if this was a big deal or not.

But as far as she was concerned, she just had to keep her eyes down and finish her report.

“...... yes, then.”

\*\*\*

As soon as Annette left, Heiner directly transmitted the relevant information to the decoding department. Major Eugen, who was watching this, laughed in disbelief.

"Sheet music, or the way spies use it, I see."

"They must have realized that the chord book could be read. Or maybe it really does belong to a spy."

It was certainly not a mundane method. Although some spies had used such ciphertexts before, it was because sending ciphertexts to codebooks had become universal in recent wars.

To this, Major Eugen replied cynically.

“It is very likely that they have realized that we are decrypting them over here. But they will have no choice but to continue using them."

“Because time is very short to develop a new encryption machine.”

"Crypts that you couldn't risk being read wouldn't have been transmitted to the codebook. If you're going to use it, you have some pretty unique preferences in that area............."

"Or the information is so important that you can't risk it.”

"It seems that help is available to us."

Major Eugen chuckled. Heiner replied tastelessly, staring at the paper Annette had left behind.

"...... well. I wish it were."

\*\*\*

# 

# Chapter 72

Major Eugen, who had been thinking long and hard about something, suddenly spoke up.

“Rather than that, Your Excellency.”

Heiner raised his eyebrows, as if telling him to speak. Major Eugen hesitated for a moment, then spoke.

"What are you going to do about Miss Rosenberg?"

“What do you mean?"

"To be honest, the first time I learned about the ciphertext, I thought it was a coincidence---. But from what I saw, it really does do something. Yes, and if they decode the current one, too, we'll get some great information."

What Annette did was not something that could be dismissed as 'something'. Major Eugen also knew this. However he just did not want to admit it.

It was no exaggeration to say that wars were divided into killing wars and code wars.

Thousands of lives lived and died with a single code, and the game of war changed. And the information that Annette Rosenberg deciphered was not simply a matter of identifying a few clues.

“So I was curious what you were going to do for Miss Rosenberg."

Major Eugen acknowledged her credit but looked uncomfortable.

The Commander-in-Chief was a man who was certain of awards and punishments. Major Eugen himself was someone who had come this far and experienced that virtue, so he knew better than anyone else.

But he couldn't help but feel bad about the fact that the reward was going to Annette Rosenberg.

Of course his words hid his ill feelings toward Annette Rosenberg to the best of his ability. Not only did he not call her "she," he even acknowledged her credit.

The choice was not a logical one, but a vague instinct. After the divorce, the Major was also vaguely aware of the Commander-in-Chief's changed mood.

If the former commander-in-chief had been a well-trained beast, he was now like a raging creature, chained to a single rope, waiting for an opportunity.

This made Major Eugen involuntarily pay attention to what was being said about Annette Rosenberg. However, the Commander-in-Chief did not like his efforts.

"...first, the award will have to be decided after seeing how this information will be used, and..."

His voice, which continued without highs or lows, was cold and chilling.

“What Miss Rosenberg is doing is not 'something', it's code breaking. And even if it wasn't, she served as a nurse and is dedicated to her country. Do not underestimate her conduct and loyalty."

The words made Major Eugen flinch.

There was no mistaking the Commander-in-Chief's words, except for the fact that his opponent was Annette Rosenberg.

Certainly, his superior was not someone who judged people by their personal supervision.

Major Eugen felt embarrassed and at the same time admired once again the Commander-in-Chief's refusal to make exceptions, no matter how many Rosenbergs he had to deal with.

With his hands clasped tightly to his thighs, the Major exclaimed in a spirited voice.

“I was thoughtless. I'm sorry!"

\*\*\*

Time passed slowly.

Annette spent most of the day reading ciphertexts. However, no progress was made after she reported her guesses about the numerical ciphers to the Commander-in-Chief.

Time passed without discovering anything more. Annette began to think that she had found everything she would find at this point. Now she had memorized the entire sheet music.

One day, while out walking, she ran into Major Eugen in the camp. Unlike her expectation of cold sarcasm would fly at her, he only greeted her with his eyes and had no special reaction.

Annette was too startled to face him and froze. It’s time for me to die, she thought.

Anxious moments passed slowly.

The Commander-in-Chief told her that she could stop the decoding process. As for Annette, she did not know if this was a good or bad sign.

Then, two days later, a bomber surfaced in Lancaster, the capital of Padania.

It was at the same time that the Axis High Command, consisting of the coalition of France and Armania, launched land forces on the Padania front. After all, there was no declaration of war.

Indiscriminate carpet bombing rained down on the capital. Buildings were destroyed and casualties were high. The newspapers were full of stories about the bombings.

Annette put down the newspaper she was reading. Her shaky breath came in shallow puffs. She hurried to drink her coffee.

The hot liquid burned her tongue.

"Oh.....!"

Annette stuck out her tongue and furrowed her brow. The tingling sensation brought her to her senses. She looked at the front page of the newspaper again.

Bombing? In the capital? Why?

The questions slowly surfaced.

The capital was meant to be virtually symbolic. To make the bombing of the mainland substantially more effective, it was more efficient to bomb military bases and production facilities rather than the capital.

*‘The "demoralizing effect..." is the only thing I can be sure of.'*

The bombing left all the citizens of Padania in shock and grief. This had nothing to do with the substantial damage.

It was as if the war, which they had thought would happen only on the front lines, had sericopoied their town overnight. The psychological terror felt by the citizens was tremendous.

Annette folded the newspaper in half and set it aside. Her heart thumped uneasily in her chest. Then that evening, Annette was given the order to move.

*“Tomorrow morning at 6:30, there’s a transport train bound for Huntingham. It is your final destination, so just get off at the end."*

It was not the Commander-in-Chief who delivered the order, but his aide. In fact, it was a matter of course. The Commander-in-Chief was the one who gave the orders, not the one who delivered them.

But until now, Heiner had reported everything directly to her, and had personally received her reports. Even the smallest detail.

It was the first time he had orders delivered by someone else. This made Annette realize once again that he was currently very busy.

"...... Huntingham would be......"

“It's a field hospital a short distance from the central front. It's behind the Recruiting Corps and you will be taking care of the wounded and prisoners of war who are being sent back."

“I see.”

If it was behind the replacement recruits, they were at the end of the line. She had expected to be moved further back, but it was a strange feeling to actually hear the news.

After the aide left, Annette started packing right after dinner. The orders had been given in such a hurry that there was not enough time.

Annette put the items she was taking and the items she was throwing away separately into a luggage compartment and a box, respectively. In the process of cleaning out the drawers, she found the letters that Catherine had sent her.

She was distressed and put them all in the box, except for one letter dated the last day of the month.

*'Cynthia is far from the capital...they will be fine.'*

All the news reports about the bombing were focused on the capital, Lancaster. It was such a blessing that Catherine had moved out of the capital.

It was late at night when she was ready to leave. Annette left the barracks with the discarded box.

She passed several buildings and headed for the bonfire at the back of the camp. She could see some soldiers busily moving about, but it was generally quiet inside the commander's camp.

A fire was faintly flickering from afar. Vermilion lights rippled like waves on the floor, submerged in darkness.

A few more steps and her feet stopped abruptly. A man was sitting on a simple chair in front of a blazing bonfire.

His cigar was still wedged between his index and middle fingers. He was sitting with his body bent forward.

It was as if he had submerged himself carelessly into the darkness. His face was expressionless as he stared at the bonfire. Smoke rose silently from the end of the cigar.

Her eyes shook for a moment as she watched his lone figure. Annette had always thought of Heiner as firm and hard as steel.

He would never break, she once thought. But in this moment, he looked infinitely vulnerable and weak, as if he would break without effort.

Annette felt as if she had peeked into a very intimate part of him. Not the Commander-in-Chief of Padania, just a man.

Annette deliberately made her presence known.

Heiner raised his head. She approached the bonfire and threw the items in the box into the fire one by one. Flames flickered and devoured them.

Heiner watched her in silence. He did not open his mouth even after Annette threw in the last letter.

Annette watched the letter burn to ashes. Finally, when there was nothing left to burn, she turned around. Her eyes met his. Annette smiled faintly and asked.

"May I sit with you......?"

\*\*\*

# Chapter 73

Heiner did not answer easily, but opened and closed his lips. Though not outwardly, she noticed that he was a little perplexed.

After a few seconds, Heiner finally answered.

“...... of course.”

Then, as if he had come to his senses belatedly, he looked at the cigar in his hand. Heiner dropped the cigar to the floor and stepped on it gently with his foot.

Annette cautiously sat down beside him and murmured,

“I didn't know you smoked cigars."

“I just quit......"

"Are you going to smoke again?"

"------ It's not that I'm smoking again, it's just that I've been having a lot of miscellaneous thoughts lately."

"Is that why you smoke again?"

"That…. "

Heiner frowned slightly and eventually sighed.

"Yes."

He slurred as if he had just awakened from sleep. Annette stared at the trampled cigar and opened her mouth again.

“I'm moving to Huntingham early tomorrow morning. As I'm sure you know."

"...And when you go, you won't contact me again?"

"Why do you ask such a question?"

Annette laughed as if she had heard a bland joke. Heiner realized she wasn't going to answer and asked no more.

He swept his lips once with the palm of his hand. Silence fell between them. The fire and the burning wood made the occasional sound of crackling.

Annette asked him with a slight turn of her head.

"Isn't it hard?"

“What is?"

“Just everything."

Their gazes entwined in close proximity. He stared at her, as if trying to guess what she meant.

His gray eyes were an unfathomable abyss.

“I'd be lying if I said it wasn't hard."

A brief confession flowed from Heiner's mouth.

"I have too many lives on my shoulders ........"

His words scattered like white smoke.

She suffered from a tremendous pressure and impatience to decipher even a single ciphertext. Annette could not dare to guess the weight that the commander-in-chief of a country was carrying.

No words could come out half-heartedly. No comfort or support seemed to be enough. At best, any words coming from her would have been even worse.

“There was something I wanted to tell you.”

Heiner took his eyes off of her and said. His vulnerability had somehow cleanly vanished.

“The code you deciphered was very helpful. No, helpful is not even the right word. The achievements you made will definitely be announced and rewarded later. So.”

“Yes?”

“Is there anything you want?"

"Something I want....?"

“I've been trying to figure out what I should compensate you with, and I thought I should ask your opinion first.”

It was something Annette hadn't even thought of. Initially, she did not expect to receive any compensation for this.

It was only natural to help, but throughout the work, she wondered if this would really help.

"Oh, I..."

Annette was about to say she didn't want anything, but stopped for a moment. She clasped her hands on her lap. The trouble wasn't very long.

“Two things, not big ones. Will you listen to me?"

“I'm nervous when you say it like that. What do you want?"

"I told you the other day........ I would like to pass along one letter before I leave."

"...... to Sergeant Ryan?"

"Yes."

Heiner was silent for a moment. Annette waited quietly for his response.

Actually, it didn't matter if he said no. Ryan was surely a nice person and she would be sad not to see him, but it was just the way of human relations to try to send him a letter.

"...The letter will be given to him after the censor. What’s the other one?"

Fortunately, the reply was positive. There wouldn’t be anything bad, so censorship was not a factor.

Annette nodded and continued the conversation.

"The other thing is, what I said before."

"Before .........?"

"I really hope this meeting will be our last."

“…”

“That's the second reward I want."

The expression faded from Heiner's face.

Crack. The flames flickered. Annette looked directly at him, unfazed. Heiner suddenly laughed humorously after scanning her face absentmindedly.

“Well, come to think of it---you've always wanted that one thing. To get me out of your life."

"..."

"...even though I've spent my entire life trying to get into your life."

Heiner didn't look too angry or sad. He just looked emotionless and defeated like fallen leaves.

“'Yes, I suppose I should listen if that's what you want.”

He looked like he would crumble with a light touch…

“You may go. Forever."

The ashes rustled as the fire burned out. Annette relaxed her grip on her hand. Then she rose from her seat.

“Annette."

Just as she was about to walk past him, he suddenly grabbed her wrist. It was not a strong force. Annette turned her head and looked down at him.

Heiner smiled bitterly and asked.

"Can you give me a hug just once?"

Annette looked at him with surprised eyes. Heiner released her wrist from his grasp, as if he had no intention to force her.

She tried to give him a certain look, but failed. She didn't even know what she looked like.

She just hoped that she did not look weak.

Annette quietly approached him and hugged him. He let out a small moan as if he had been strangled. Heiner held her around her waist and buried his face in her like a young beast digging into his mother’s arms.

The breath in his chest quivered thinly as if he were sobbing. His hard, thick arms held her pitifully as if he were frightened.

Annette seemed to know vaguely what this was.

In the past, she had done this too. The only thing in her painful and lonely life that she could not let go of until the end. A welcome where she could comfort herself that all would be well, just as long as she held on.

For Annette, it was Heiner. She held on for a very long time and finally let go. And now it was his turn to let go.

Annette removed the arms that were holding her. Then she stepped back. His arms, having nowhere to go, slowly fell.

Heiner still had his head down. Even though he was not looking at her, Annette tried hard to school her expression.

She moved her lips a few times. It took her a few moments to adjust her voice. When she finally spoke, her voice was surprisingly firm.

“Let's make sure we never see each other again."

\*\*\*

*Annette returned to her room with a bouquet of blue flowers. It was a large bouquet decorated with statis and hydrangeas.*

*"Nanny, do you know who left these here? I found them by the window in the practice room."*

*"Oh, by the window of the practice room?"*

*“Yes, outside by the window."*

*“If it's the outside window---I don't know either. The rose garden and the window of the lady’s practice room are connected. Shall I warn the servants not to let people in that way?"*

*"Yes? No, no."*

*Annette spoke shyly, looking down at the bouquet with a slightly flushed face.*

*“It’s romantic to secretly leave flowers in the practice room. I guess my performance was good.”*

*“Oh, my lady. When is she going to grow up?”*

*“Quick guess, nanny. Who is it? Who left it there?"*

*"Hmmm..... let’s see. Oh, it could be soldiers under the Marquis' command. Today is the day of the weekly dinner party. They have access to the garden too."*

*“No, it’s not from the soldiers."*

*“Why not?"*

*"Because the soldiers don't know about romance. If I say I play the piano, they'll say things like you have a great hobby?"*

*"Miss, beautiful words, beautiful words!"*

*"All right. Anyway, the soldiers couldn't possibly be interested in the garden enough to come inside. And the fact that he prepared a bouquet of flowers means he’s seen me play in the practice room before. He must like my performance, right?”*

*"Young lady, this is not a matter for rejoicing; it is an abomination. He secretly spied on you, young lady!"*

*“Hm? Why not? Isn't that romantic? It's 100 times better than hanging out like an animal looking for a mate at a party."*

*"Oh, because the lady is still so young and innocent. We really should move the practice room. Even if this didn’t happen, I was worried about it being connected to the garden."*

*“What are you talking about? Oh no! We have to find out who it is!”*

*"The lady is really ...... okay, I won’t report this matter right away. Still, it’s right to design and move to a professional practice room in the near future. The lady can’t practice in a room like that for the competition. Do you understand?"*

*“Yes, I understand. I'll think about it later. Nanny, can you put this in a vase?"*

*Cheekily answering, Annette handed the bouquet to the nanny. The nanny shook her head as if she had surrendered, tended to the flowers, and placed them in a vase.*

*“They're beautiful, aren't they?"*

*"The hydrangea is the same color as the lady’s eyes.”*

*“Yes?"*

*Annette smiled and looked at the flowers with both hands holding her face.*

*A gentle breeze blew into the spacious window. The blue petals swayed as if dancing along the wind.*

\*\*\*\*

# Chapter 74

Air raids on the mainland of Padania by the Axis forces continued day after day. Every day, civilians hid in air-raid shelters and could not sleep to the sound of the bombs coming from the ground.

The Allied Forces of Padania fought fiercely to defend the mainland. However, they had to give up the front in the face of an onslaught by France, Armania, and even the Balichens.

They won a few battles and lost a few. It was also difficult to keep track of all the battles, how many there were.

Along the way, the news that Padania allies had defeated France’s navy in the southern straits came. It was a great victory obtained under various adverse conditions.

The Padania allied forces once again reversed their tilted version of the war by preventing the occupation of Pasala Island, which connected supply ships in the Black Sea.

Pasala Island was a key military point of great significance. However, the war was still raging. The power lines changed several times a day. Numerous soldiers were wounded and killed for advancing only a few meters.

In particular, the front line of the Central Group Army, which was defending Huntingham to the death, was heavily pushed out. It was also the location of the field hospital where Annette worked.

The Huntingham Field Hospital was therefore saturated by the influx of patients. The existing medical staff could no longer cope with the situation.

“Check the patient here! He's not breathing right!"

"Damn it, tsk, give me some medicine!"

“Oh, help me, it hurts too much, please—“

A mountain of wounded soldiers were brought in from the nearby battlegrounds. Among them, a considerable number had already died and rigor mortis had set in.

“Annette! Stop the bleeding here! He’s going to need stitches!”

“Now, hold on!”

Annette grabbed gauze and bandages and ran. Her nursing uniform was a mess, covered in blood and sweat.

Without time to properly check the condition, she quickly began to stop the bleeding. Blood spurted out with a popping sound. The soldier's face, already white, was like a sheet of paper.

“Oh, oh, oh….”

“Don't worry, don't worry, I'll sew you up now, it’s okay!"

She didn't know how many times she said it was okay, or even that it was okay because it really was okay. Annette memorized those words like a spell. It's okay, it's okay.

As soon as the stitches were done, Annette immediately looked at the next wounded soldier. Perhaps because she had seen too much blood, an optical illusion occurred as if the front of her eyes had turned red. No matter how much she washed her hands, the smell of blood did not go away.

The time for the shift change was getting closer. Annette blinked and checked the chart. At that moment, she heard a rough voice from behind her.

"Annette?"

The voice was unfamiliar, but Annette reflexively turned around. A man lying on his bunk was looking at her, his head slightly raised. Annette approached the man and asked.

"Is there anything you need?"

"Uh, no. Um, maybe --- you don't remember me?"

“Huh?"

“We’ve met before."

She raised her eyebrows, thinking he was playing tricks. To which the man said, gesturing this way and that in a frustrated manner.

“Um, Cynthia! At Catherine's fruit shop! I delivered fruits that day!”

"...... Ah!"

Annette, realizing belatedly, raised a small voice. Finally, she remembered. It was Bruner’s acquaintance who had flirted with her at the fruit stand.

She had seen so many similar soldiers that she had not been able to recognize him for a moment. His name had been mentioned in Catherine's letter.

"Hans---? Is that correct?"

"Oh, you remember. Yes! I saw the article about you serving as a nurse. It was true!"

Annette replied with a laugh, "Hmmm. So you thought it was fake?”

"Oh, I didn't mean to imply that you pretended to serve for the sake of your reputation and actually you were staying in a safe place."

People seemed to think that was the case. Annette smiled, not answering specifically about it.

“Catherine's letter mentioned you. She said that you joined the Recruiting Corps.........."

With that, her eyes fixed somewhere for a moment. Annette turned to him with a stiff face.

Hans laughed awkwardly and scratched his head.

“Well, it happened.”

She hadn't noticed because of the covers. The white blanket covering his legs had disappeared completely under his knees. (\*he lost his legs at the knees). Annette mumbled, stunned.

“What happened......."

"Booby traps."

Hans imitated the shouts he screamed when he discovered the mines. Annette, however, could not laugh.

According to Catherine's letter, Hans was a recruit for the rear.

But the situation seemed to have worsened as the other soldiers died and he was pushed out to the front. Indeed, the situation was such that from this Huntingham Field Hospital suddenly became the closest hospital from the central front.

“Does Catherine know?"

"No one back home knows yet. Oh, the lady is the first to know. If you can say that you are also from my hometown---."

"You're not going to tell them until you get back?"

"What's the point of telling them in advance? They’ll find out anyway."

"Still..."

"More importantly, am I holding you back from your busy work?”

"Oh ...... that's okay."

It was true that she was busy, but the words that she had to go didn't come out. Even though they didn’t have a relationship, she couldn’t help but feel sorry for the young man who lost both of his legs in an instant.

"Wow, but when I met you in Cynthia, the lady was really beautiful, and at first glance I knew you were from a noble background. Now you look very tired. I guess people change depending on their environment. Oh, of course, you’re still as beautiful as ever."

Annette smiled awkwardly. She had no idea what answer to give. She was clueless about this kind of person.

"Oh, yes... You didn't happen to volunteer here because of me, by any chance, did you?"

"What? What do you mean by that?"

"Well, it seems that I was mouthy for no reason that time, and spread rumors against you. Know that Brother Bruner was very angry with me. I've been wondering if maybe you left Cynthia because of the rumors."

Frankly, it was troubling. The problem was not limited to her; it even affected the Grott family.

But that was not why she volunteered to be a military nurse. It was merely a slight acceleration of what she had originally thought.

“Half right, half wrong.”

“Huh?"

“It's true that I got in trouble because of Mr. Hans, but I didn’t volunteer to be a military nurse because of you.”

“Oh ...... I'm glad it's not half."

Hans rolled his eyes, scratched his head, and spoke in a small voice,

"Well, anyway, so......... I just wanted to say I'm sorry. It's been on my mind for a long time, and it's good to see you here, too."

It was a lousy apology. But Annette could see that this young man really cared about the issue.

"----- I’ll accept your apology."

Hans laughed out loud at her answer. It was a hearty laugh.

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“Hey, didn't you see it earlier?”

“See what?”

“I see the kid slobber as he watched the Commander-in-Chief's ex-wife."

"You have to say the subject. Hey, isn't she pretty?"

"Too skinny. It's not my taste."

"Crazy guy, you'd welcome a woman like that if she came along."

“You don’t know anything. Just because a woman is beautiful doesn't mean she's everything. Men get tired of that quickly.”

"Pretty is important to me. Then what's more important?"

"It's not the face, it's the body."

"Hey, it's because you haven't looked closely enough. She may look skinny, but if you look closely, you'll see that her breasts….”

Clink!

The iron tray fell to the floor and made a sharp popping sound. At the same time, the eyes of the two soldiers were drawn to it.

The nurse closed the curtains and looked out.

"Miss, I'm sorry."

Annette was sitting next to the smiling, apologetic nurse. The soldiers, upon confirming her presence, froze with a grimace.

The nurse closed the curtains again. The soldiers, frozen solid, were hidden behind the cloth. The nurse picked up an iron tray and slowly pulled the tray again as if nothing had happened.

Annette gave her a little bow. The nurse received a light look, then left.

*“Made fun of just doing my job…?’*

Annette sighed and put away her supplies. In fact, it wasn't as if she had heard soldiers bad-mouthing or sexually harassing her once or twice.

Most soldiers wore a peculiar lightness and touch. Those who did not do so in the civilian world became especially bad on the battlefield.

Annette found that it was the way they withstood the killing. It was a place where they had to be light to survive in a sane way.

But understanding that was another matter. Annette's appearance and her past as the former wife of the Commander-in-Chief made it easy for people to talk up and down.

She pushed the thought aside and focused on her work. But within seconds of making that decision, the entrance suddenly became more noisy.

Annette stood up with a suspicious look on her face. She wondered if wounded soldiers had been brought in, but something was out of the ordinary.

The atmosphere was unusual. Everyone was buzzing. Through the increasingly loud commotion, someone shouted.

“The outskirts of Huntingham have been taken over by enemy forces! We must retreat!”

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# 

# Chapter 75

Huntingham was pushed to the brink of being captured, and the operation turned to street fighting.

The allied forces were sneaking into the city to defend Huntingham, while the enemy forces were busy trying to find the people hiding in the city.

Power lines were pushed out and the Huntingham Field Hospital prepared to move to the rear. The problem, however, was the wounded soldiers who could not be moved.

A minimal medical staff was needed for them and the rest of their allies. Someone had to remain on this site.

“Are there any more volunteers? Volunteers, please raise your hands! We are short on staff, and if you can stay, I'd appreciate it if you could!"

One nurse walked around among the people packing their bags and asked for volunteers. Most, however, only looked at each other and did not readily raise their hands.

Had the situation been slightly different, many would have stayed. But now a search-and-find operation was in effect. They weren’t sure what would happen.

Annette's drooping hand jolted. She looked at the nurse recruiting volunteers with anxious eyes.

Someone had to stay.

"Only one of you can ......"

Someone had to stay ........

*“You are the only one left in this world.”*

A low voice buzzed in her ears like tinnitus. Annette clenched her fists. She turned her back to the nurse and began packing.

There was a flurry of activity in the area as people prepared to leave. Annette packed her luggage bag with a handful of clothes and items.

Before leaving the hospital, Annette looked for Hans. But he was just lying in bed, unprepared.

“Hans? What are you doing here? Aren't you going?"

“Ah…I."

Hans scratched his cheek and smiled shyly.

"I think I'll stay here."

"You're going to stay? Why?"

In the case of wounded soldiers like Hans, they were to be placed in a transport vehicle first. There was even a separate duty vehicle for transporting wounded soldiers.

He could not move on his own. But had no problem moving around long as he had the help of others.

Annette spoke urgently, wondering if he knew the protocols.

“The army has an obligation to return wounded soldiers to their homes. You don't have a single thing to worry about.”

“Oh, no, no, no. It's more than that.”

Hans hesitated for a moment, then gently looked down at the white comforter covering his legs and continued speaking.

“I honestly ...... don't have the confidence to go back home and see my family. It's obvious that I will become a burden in the future."

"My God, Hans, why do you even think that?"

"I’m being realistic. With this body, I won't be able to do what I normally do, and there isn't anything else I can do, so I'm just going to walk away."

Annette was speechless and only moved her lips. She wanted to say that’s not true, but that didn't mean she could give practical advice.

“Also, I'm sure others will go through all sorts of trouble to relocate me. I think it would be better to put someone more deserving in my place."

“Hans, it is your seat that has to be made even if you don't have it."

"That's all right, lady. There is nothing to worry about. Just put off leaving, and just because I’m staying here doesn't mean I’m going to die, does it?"

Hans laughed out loud in a light tone. It was the same hearty smile as always. For some reason, Annette felt embarrassed in front of that smile.

She stared at Hans with new eyes.

At first she thought he was rude. When she met him again, she thought he was a poor young man. And now...........

Annette felt the same way when Justin told her that he wasn't that kind of guy to begin with.

Do people make situations, or do situations make people? Annette couldn't tell what was right and what was wrong.

Her world, which had always been divided into black and white, became all but unclear after the revolution. What she thought she understood became ambiguous, and she learned what she did not know.

Annette tried to remove the confusion from her face. Then, as usual, she smiled faintly.

"Well...yes, I guess I will see you again in Cynthia."

“Of course. Good luck, Annette."

\*\*\*

Outside the hospital, there was a long line of people in front of the transport trucks. Annette didn't know what to do, so she kept her head down and looked only at the situation ahead.

After wandering around for a while, Annette eventually asked the nursing officer standing next to her.

"Um, where do the nurses stand?"

The nursing officer's face turned noticeably polite as she spotted Annette.

“They have to pick up the wounded first, so those who can walk will move on foot because there are not enough vehicles.”

“I see, I understand.”

“Well---If you wait a moment, I will try to find you a seat.”

The nursing officer's attitude was very cautious. She could see that she was treated differently because she was the former wife of the Commander-in-Chief. Annette shook her head stiffly.

“No, it's all right. I'll walk."

"At least one seat..............."

“I will walk."

A decisive reply fell. The nursing officer seemed to hesitate for a moment, but eventually nodded,

“Just go to the line over there.”

Annette moved with her bag to where the nursing officer pointed. People were buzzing, waiting to leave.

Fog hung in the air. An uneasy feeling suddenly came over her that if they advanced in this condition, they would not notice any enemy forces ahead.

Annette hugged her bag tightly. The others were also anxious, but little by little she could hear them complaining why they weren't leaving quickly yet.

Soon the transport trucks began to depart. Wheels rattled on the ground full of broken wreckage.

Soldiers and medical staff moved in after the transports. They were dressed as if they were evacuees. Even so, everyone was demoralized by the news that the Huntingham suburbs were almost completely occupied.

"Is anything being built as we move to the rear?"

"Is there room for reinforcements to come in...?"

A quiet whisper spread through the procession. Annette looked pale and pensive. Her thoughts kept coming to her without trying to remember, but it was inevitable.

*'I wonder if he's okay.'*

She was worried about the Commander-in-Chief of this country, and her own person.

No matter how competent Heiner was, the difference between the Commander-in-Chief's individual abilities and the military power of different nations was another matter.

"Hey.”

Someone whispered nearby. Annette turned her head to the side. A weak-looking nurse widened her eyes and asked.

"I'm sorry, have you heard anything about this news...........?"

“...What?"

"Well, about the subsequent operation, or the news about the reinforcements............?"

Annette looked puzzled.

It was odd to ask a military nurse about such military secrets. But the other person seemed convinced that Annette knew something.

“How would I know such a thing?”

"But."

“I don't know anything. I haven't heard anything, sorry."

"Oh, yes. ....... ..........."

The woman slurred her words in disappointment. Then another nurse, walking beside her, poked the woman in the waist with her elbow and said.

“Hey, why are you asking her that?"

"No, she might know."

"Sometimes you can tell. Excuse me.”

She heard the woman mumbling. Annette pretended not to hear and walked with her head, looking straight ahead.

In the distance, the sounds of gunfire and shells continued constantly. Even though the sounds were now as familiar as everyday life, they were still chilling.

As they continued walking, they began to see other refugees. The remaining residents of Huntingham seemed to be evacuating further back.

It was getting late in the evening. Everyone was completely exhausted. When the sky was completely dark, the group stopped moving and prepared shelters.

The soldiers who had followed the transport continued to exchange signals in front of the communicator. Annette, who was spreading a blanket, glanced at them with anxious eyes.

"This is Eagle Six, I want you to take a look at the situation. That's all."

“Sentry, can you hear me? Stop moving and stand by. Over.”

The others' whispered chatter mingled among the hard, rigid voices.

"They say there's a minefield in front of us and it's slowing down our movement."

"Still, I heard that the Northern Group forces succeeded in stopping them, so there is hope, isn't there?"

"They say the French bombers are dropping bombs on the mainland again............"

Even though she tried not to listen, the news of the war was still coming into her ears. Annette sat curled up in a corner, tightly wrapped in a blanket.

It was uncomfortable, cold, and hard, but she had no other choice. She closed her eyes and tried to sleep. It was the easiest way to escape in this situation.

At that moment, someone’s words came into her ears.

“They say bombers flew into Cynthia. I hear the city is in complete ruins..."

\*\*\*

# Chapter 76

Annette's eyes widened. She threw the blanket down and approached the people who were having a conversation.

"Excuse me, is it true that Cynthia was bombed?"

The nurses who were talking looked at Annette in surprise and nodded awkwardly.

“Yes, it's in an article. The bombing of the capital was so shocking that Cynthia was not reported in detail..."

"Why did they bomb Cynthia? What is there to gain by bombing there?"

Annette's voice trembled as she asked.

The capital was a symbolic place, and even then, Cynthia was just a dense old town.

“Oh, it ...... was originally going to bomb the factory area near Cynthia. The bombers flew in at night, but it seems they made a misfire because of the recent foggy and dark conditions."

“Then the damage--how much damage did you say was done?"

“I heard that the damage to the buildings was severe, but I am not sure about the damage to human life.”

“Ah..."

The two nurses noticed Annette's unusual reaction. One of them clumsily offered comfort.

“Well, there is a difference between damage to buildings and damage to human lives. If it is not a busy place like the capital, maybe not many people have died.”

But that consolation did not touch Annette. The nurses didn't know what a place Cynthia was.

Cynthia was a densely populated residential area. On top of that, they were all old buildings, so underground facilities and air-raid shelters had not been properly constructed.

At the moment she could only hope that the bombers had bombed a wrong place and not a residential area.

"Yes, I hope so. Thank you for telling me."

Annette returned to her seat as she answered absentmindedly. She struggled to pull back the bulky blanket to cover her. Her body kept shivering, but it was unclear whether it was because of the cold or some other reason.

*‘Are Catherine and Bruner all right? And Olivia? Their house is relatively suburban, so they should be fine, right? No, but…There was a misfire to begin with. Come to think of it, Hans .... Does he know this fact?’*

The unanswered questions came out like a tangle web.

Currently, she could not even expect to exchange letters. Relying on newspaper articles and the situation as it was heard she had to guess.

Annette hugged her body tightly. A familiar feeling of uneasiness crept up her limbs.

Like everyone, Annette detested anxiety. Formless and result-free, it squeezed one's brain and made it difficult to think properly.

She leaned her head against the exterior wall of the half-broken building and closed her eyes. The coldness passed through the concrete wall, but it was enough to forget her thoughts.

\*\*\*

The moving procession continued.

The circumstances were such that they could not move quickly otherwise, but the movement was considerably slower as they proceeded to help the injured residents who were crushed by the rubble.

They had been hiding to avoid the bombing and enemy forces, but when they saw the procession of allies, they slowly came out. However, they seemed more than a little disappointed by the fact that the majority were wounded soldiers and nurses.

The inhabitants stood among the buildings ruined by the bombing. Among them Annette suddenly spotted a girl.

The girl, who had lost one of her legs, was on crutches, staring at the procession. The child's face was expressionless.

Annette’s and the girl's eyes met. Empty eyes caught Annette's. For some reason, Annette could not take her eyes off the girl for a long time.

Suddenly, the girl began to approach the moving procession with a limp. Annette paused for a moment.

Nurses and soldiers passed by Annette. When the girl took a few more steps, a soldier reached out a hand to stop her.

“Oh, don't come any closer."

The girl silently raised her head and looked up at the soldier. The soldier snapped his fingers.

“Go to your parents."

"I don't have any parents."

“Then there must be an institution run for war orphans in the country….Visit them.”

"... I heard it was full."

"There are other facilities. Or you could go to church."

“It's not safe there. The injured people are hiding there."

"Then go to ........."

“Wait a minute."

Annette, who had been listening to their conversation, interrupted.

"What do you mean there are injured people hiding in the church?"

"Just about everyone is hiding there. Some are residents, some are soldiers. Everyone is hurt.”

"There are soldiers?"

The last question was from the soldier who stopped the girl. Immediately, Annette and the soldier's faces became serious.

“Is it true? Where is that church?"

"Over there, sir. It's a bit of a walk."

The girl pointed in the direction they had passed. It was also an area already occupied by enemy forces. Annette grabbed the soldier and said.

“If it is true, we must check it out."

“But ......"

“There are injured people and even soldiers. I think it is right to report it."

"I will report it to the higher-ups...... in due course."

The soldier replied with a sigh. The girl stared at them with a puzzled look on her face. Annette took a small breath.

As for Annette, there was nothing she could do for the child now. Her lips trembled, and she ended up giving out irresponsible words.

“We'll look into the church ...... we'll see what we can find out. Stay as safe and sheltered as possible."

\*\*\*

The girl's words were true. Some wounded residents and soldiers were hiding in a church located inside the occupied area, and they

seemed to be in a situation where they could not make a move.

They had to be rescued when conditions were right. The church was not far from here, but there were two problems.

The first was that the area was already occupied, and the second was that they could not miss the moving procession while they carried out the operation in question.

“Can’t we go in disguised as civilians?”

“Nurses would be able to get in and out of the occupied areas. There are nurses like Mother Shelley............."

Mother Shelley was well known for her ability to move from place to place on the battlefield, treating both ally and enemy troops.

She was sometimes criticized for treating even enemy troops, but she was an amazing person anyway.

Quite a number of nurses went to battle in her cause. Perhaps because of this, the enemy forces were generally not hostile to nurses.

“But with civilians even hiding, how can we be sure that we are safe just because we are civilians or nurses?l

Someone objected. It was a valid point. If the enemy forces could easily spare civilians, there was no reason for them to hide.

“Yes. It's a sensitive situation for both sides in the war. Aren't they frantic to find the Padania army hiding all over town?"

"You’re right. Enemy forces will think that churches and villagers are hiding their allies.

And that's actually the case.”

"Then what should we do......"

After a long meeting, it was decided to send a small number of soldiers and nurses. But again there was a problem with this. Would there be nurses who would volunteer?

Initially, the nurses who followed the moving procession were those who had left the dangerous Huntingham Field Hospital. The probability of sneaking into a place that might be even more dangerous was extremely low.

Fortunately, although there were a few volunteers, it wasn't enough. The higher ups said they would sent

resources by tomorrow morning, as they did not have enough time.

The nurses who were preparing in the underground shelter sighed.

“I hate to say this, but aren't the living people more important? Not just one or two people get hurt and die, you can't save everyone."

“That's what the military is like.”

"You're being facetious for no reason..............."

“The truth is, in the larger scheme of things, this is correct. This is a matter of fraud. Think about it, a colleague gets hurt or leaves the ranks, but no one goes to help. So what do those who see it think?"

“Well."

“They'll think, ‘If I get hurt or desert, they're not going to come to my aid.’ That's why in the military we often sacrifice the many to save the few."

Their voices gradually quieted. Someone blew out the candle. Soon the surroundings were completely engulfed in darkness.

Annette stared at the dark sky late into the night. The image of the girl on crutches did not leave her mind.

Strangely enough, the image of the girl overlapped with that of Catherine, who was dragged away from the piano recital.

Annette reconsidered the life choices that had troubled her countless times.

The choice to reflect on her own position. The choice to reflect on others' situations. The choice to face, to judge, to act.

There were always a myriad of choices.

She just didn't choose them herself….

Annette tossed and turned. The cool air penetrated the inside of her blanket. A constant darkness serrated her vision whether she closed or opened her eyes.

Sometimes the world she had never known approached her with more vivid sensations in the darkness.

She was still not good at distinguishing between right and wrong. With any of those choices came responsibility, and any of those

choice did not always have a good outcome.

In the past, Annette always chose the "don't." And then came the responsibility and the consequences. But it would have been the same if she had chosen the "do" option.

Something had to be given up. Something had to be indulged.

*“You may go. Forever." (H)*

Even if it hurts someone else again..........

\*\*\*

# Chapter 77

"We must not lose Huntingham. To lose Huntingham is to lose the Husson, which is to give the enemy a conduit. We must send in reinforcements somehow."

"The situation of France's central group army is currently good, and there is talk of dividing some of these troops and sending them to the relatively inferior north............."

"Does this mean that we will continue our march or stop?"

“We won’t stop until before the occupation of the city. That is something we will have to figure out later, there are a lot of problems right now!”

"Due to the movement of civilians, the paths of our allies are being obstructed. The movement must be prohibited."

"That's like forcing civilians to build defenses! There'll be children!"

The meeting continued non-stop until dawn. After dismissed his staff, Heiner continued to receive

and discussed the plan of action.

At one moment, his vision blurred and then became clear again. Tuk. Two drops of blood fell on the paperwork.

As he carelessly swept his finger under his nose, he found blood. Irritated, Heiner took out a handkerchief and wiped his nose.

He could not remember when was the last time he had a good night's sleep. There was no end to the amount of work that had to be done and done again. Like the corpses of soldiers who were constantly being carried on stretchers.

His hand stopped for a moment as he wiped away the drops of blood on the piece of paper. Looking at the bright red blood, the scene of "that day" seemed to replay like a nightmare.

The red water splashing in the bathtub, and the body hanging helplessly like a doll with broken strings..........(\*Annette tried to kill herself in the tub)

Heiner raised his head and looked at the large map on the wall. His gaze stayed on the central front, marked with blue lines, which contained significantly more electric lines than the northern and southern parts of the country.

“Ha…”

He let out a low sigh and rubbed his face.

According to the report, Annette did not stay in the hospital but followed the moving procession. But there was a war going on in Huntingham, with a search operation. Safety could not be guaranteed until the end.

He went to the trouble of sending her to the farthest end that he thought was the safest, but the defense lines there were pushed. If she were to be in danger, it would be unbearable.

Danger ----

In retrospect, it was always he himself who put that woman in danger. All of her danger, pain, sadness, and unhappiness came from him.

And they went straight back to him, and in complete defeat, Heiner closed his eyes and buried himself deep in his chair.

He thought he would never lose. But every time he thought that, he was slowly losing.

Heiner slowly let go of the handkerchief he was holding to his nose. His hand was shaking like inertia. He clenched his hand. The handkerchief crumpled with his force.

Everything was over.

She was drifting away. So far away that he could hold on no more.

*'But why am I...........'*

*You are still here alone and feel like dead, and I am still thinking about you.*

*Have I spent all my life on you, so my life ended here, having lost you?*

Heiner stared at the round bloodstain on the paper with vacant eyes. His hands slowly stopped shaking. In desolation he asked himself.

*'What is left for me?'*

He counted them one by one, but they were all things that he had never wanted in the slightest. No, it was what he got for the only one thing he had wanted from the beginning.

*“Isn't it hard?" (A)*

For the only one thing he’d ever wished for--

*"Just everything." (A)*

A faint light returned to his empty eyes. The surroundings gradually became clearer. Then he reached out and grabbed the pen again.

The bleeding eventually stopped. Heiner tossed his handkerchief on the desk and flipped over the document, which still had blood stains on it. He mechanically repeated the act of reading, reviewing, signing, and rereading.

The dried blood stains faded as the document progressed, and by the third or fourth page, they were completely gone. Only the stark letters were inscribed on the white paper.

Heiner moved his pen. Black ink spread across the paper. Along the tip of the pen, his name was inscribed in the signature line.

[Heiner Valdemar.]

The Central Front had to be defended to the death. For the sake of the country where someone would live.

\*\*\*

By the time Huntingham's wounded soldiers and medical personnel had left the city, the enemy forces had seized control of most of the city's suburbs in a rapid advance battle.

As the outer defensive line collapsed, the allies retreated to the inner defensive line.

The French Air Force bombed Huntingham indiscriminately. Under 1,300 bombers, Huntingham turned into a sea of fire.

Padania gathered as much manpower as it could mobilize. Military personnel and even civilian volunteers were mobilized to build a defensive line.

Annette joined the rescue operation and went to the outskirts with medical supplies. Since the suburbs were already almost entirely controlled by the enemy, it was inevitable to encounter them.

“What's there!"

The enemy shouted something in French. Annette raised her hands and answered in the clumsy French language.

“I am a nurse.”

“You ...... Padania ...... come here..."

The French soldier said something, but Annette could only understand a few words. She tried to approach them to hear better.

The French soldier asked Annette many questions. However, seeing that Annette couldn’t understand the soldier gestured with his hand, pointing to the military vehicle.

Annette turned her head to where he was pointing. The soldier was lying on a liver gurney beside it.

“You want me to treat ...... him?”

“Yes!"

Annette nodded hurriedly, then walked towards the injured person. On the way there, she glanced back discreetly.

From the lack of any particular commotion, it seemed that the allies were safely moving on while Annette got the enemy’s attention.

She quietly exhaled in relief as she approached the stretcher. The other person was a boy soldier, he had a young face, perhaps sixteen years old at most.

"..."

“Wait a minute."

Perhaps he had been near an explosion, half of the boy soldier's body was full of burn marks. His right arm, in particular, was in a critical state, with the flesh completely torn.

Annette hurriedly took out antiseptic and bandages and began to treat the wound. The boy soldier groaned like a dying animal, his wounds were obviously painful.

There was actually no time to do this, but there was nothing that could be done properly when a person, a young boy, was dying in front of her.

Annette, tightly bandaged, rearranged her belongings. As she was about to leave with her bag, she heard Padania language coming from nearby.

"Thank you."

“Ha."

The other man grabbed Annette's waist as she almost slipped in surprise. She looked at the man with her eyes wide open.

“Oh, I'm sorry."

"Yes, yes ...........?"

"I thought the job was done."

Listened carefully again, and the man's Padania language was a bit poor. Apparently, he was French, who could speak Padania language.

"Oh---it's all right."

Annette awkwardly slipped out of the man's arms. The man pulled back, scratching the back of his head.

“He’s just a baby, that one."

"What? Oh, that soldier."

"He's a baby and he's hurt a lot."

“Umm. You can speak Padania language............."

"I can listen better, but I can't speak much."

"I see."

"Because I like Padania food. I learned a bit of the language."

"Yes. ......"

Annette didn't know what to do. Was he trying to brag that he understood Padania language?

Annette was a little nervous. There was nothing good about staying here for so long. The odds of a foreigner even knowing the face of the Commander-in-Chief's ex-wife were slim, but it was difficult to know for sure.

"Where are you going?"

“Just---there."

“It's not safe there."

“I'm a nurse. Nurse."

"But it's still dangerous."

“I appreciate your concern, but I'm fine. Now then--"

Annette spoke quickly, deliberately not paying attention to the other man's language level. When she tried to turn around, the man hurried to block her way.

"...?"

“Yes?"

“I would like to know your name."

"...... Catherine."

Annette didn't bother with the borrowed name for long. Then the man smiled and mimicked her pronunciation.

“Catherine."

“Excuse me, but I'm busy, may I go now?"

"Yes?"

“I have to go."

"Oh, you can speak French?"

Annette furrowed her brow. Apparently, this person didn’t seem to be able to communicate. She could only understand to some extent.

The French soldiers who were playing cards next to them chuckled as they pointed at them. It was too fast for her to catch, but she was sure it was a teasing remark.

She heard the word "woman" in between. Even if she didn't understand, she had an idea what they were talking about, and Annette gently bit her lower lip.There really wasn't time to do this.

\*\*\*\*

# Chapter 78

“Just ignore them. Where do you live?"

"..."

"I'm weird - no, I'm not."

Annette walked away with her bag without responding. But the man continued to follow her and talk to her.

“You are really cute."

Normally, "cute" as used in France meant something a little different than it did in Padania. It didn't mean literally cute, but rather that the man was attracted to her.

“Give me your address. I would like to write to you."

"I don't know if my house is still intact....... there are bombers that flew in from your country."

Annette replied coldly. Then the man turned his head and asked.

“Yes? Can you say that again?"

Despite Annette's constant cold adherence, the man continued to follow along and ask a variety of questions.

“I like Padania. I learned the language. It's a shame that this is the reality."

"..."

"All the women of Padania are beautiful and kind. So are you. Catherine."

"..."

“By the way, do you have a boyfriend?"

“......Can you stop following me?”

Eventually, Annette was able to get away from the man after she gave him a note with a home address. It was a made up address, of course.

“Goodbye, I'll write you a letter! Be careful!"

Annette hurriedly left the place.

\*\*\*

The further into the suburbs, the more dire the condition of the city became.

Huntingham, which at one time had been called a city of transportation on the trade routes through the river, was reduced to ashes. It was truly a gray city.

All the buildings were destroyed by bombs, leaving only their skeletons. The ruins, shrouded in a hazy mist, looked like one of a long-dead city.

Sometimes she could imagine the people in the houses whose ceilings had been blown away. Their faces were uniformly expressionless.

Annette thought of Cynthia as she looked at this miserable scene. Even though she tried not to think of it, she couldn’t help but remember.

*‘…Does Cynthia look like this?’*

Of course, it would not be as bad as Huntingham, where the battle was practically fought, but the devastation of the bombing could only be similar.

Annette painted the Grott family home with only its skeleton. She herself did not know why she was having these terrible thoughts.

The defense mechanism of having to assume the worst was invariably triggered. She went through several assumptions, then gave up as she felt sick to her stomach.

"Oh, here you go! Excuse me! Please accept the child!"

Once a family found an ally, they tried to hand over their child. They thought it would be safer to leave him in the hands of the military.

"I can't take it! You must leave them in a facility outside the city! We can't take anyone!"

“I can't leave the city! Please! Just one child!"

The parents forcefully tried to hand the child over to the soldiers. Realizing that he was being entrusted to a stranger, the child turned and called for his mother.

The soldier, who was forced to hold the child in his arms, handed him back again, playing with reason.

“Really, no. I can't take him! It's not that kind of situation!"

"Then let the nurses............!"

"I'm sorry, but we don't have the extra personnel either! It will be more dangerous if you go with us."

Eventually, the child returned to his parents again. The child, cradled in his father's arms, cried, screaming with a mixture of relief and resentment.

The father kissed the child's forehead with hot tears. His face and hands were dirty and scarred, covered with black ash.

The rescuers left the scene behind and continued walking. Someone among those who were moving asked.

“When will the war end?"

And someone answered.

"When they all die, it will be over forever."

After dark they arrived safely at the church. The outer wall was slightly broken, but the church building remained intact and survived the fire.

The church's location was not yet completely occupied by enemy forces. However, it was only a matter of time before it was occupied because the enemy was very close by. They had to move fast.

Officer Miller peered inside the church with his index finger on his lips. Then he signaled to come in. Four soldiers quietly entered the building.

They were followed by military doctors and nurses. There were a considerable number of people in the chapel, including a few soldiers, who had been hiding here.

Their faces brightened when they saw their allies.

"Oh my God, you've come to save us!"

"Thank you, God........"

“Shhhh, lower your voice. We only treat the severe wounded and move on."

Officer Miller ordered promptly. Military doctors and nurses hurriedly unloaded their gear and began treating the wounded.

Annette approached an old woman holding her young grandson. There was dried blood on the old woman’s clothes.

She asked Annette with a rough voice.

“Are we able to get out?"

"Soon. I will check your wounds."

The grandson held his breath with frightened eyes, still clutched to his grandmother's arms. Annette said as she gently stroked her child's cheek.

"I'm going to check your grandmother's condition, can you move for a minute?"

The child rolled his big eyes this way and that and hesitantly got out of his grandmother’s embrace. Annette smiled at his good behavior.

While the inside was being sorted out, the other soldiers stood guard and a communication officer reported the situation.

“Bravo 3, this is Eagle 9, our current position is as follows. Delta, Shackle, Lima, Shackle, Alpha, Foxtrot---"

"Those who can move on their own, move on their own; those who need help, speak separately. Move quickly."

Officer Miller whispered, his voice low. Annette carefully cut the thread that sutured the wound. At that moment, the sound of a military vehicle rattling came from outside the church building.

Everyone held their breath in unison.

The sniper who had been up in the church attic lowered his head and signaled with his hand. Officer Miller and the soldiers' expressions hardened terribly.

The wounded soldiers who were being treated also grabbed their guns. Annette put down the scissors and quietly embraced the child.

Officer Miller, who had crouched near the entrance, beckoned down. The soldiers then beckoned to the civilians.

They all got down on the floor and lowered themselves. Annette pulled the child's head to her chest and held her breath.

The surroundings were so quiet that she could even hear the needle drop. Suddenly a light shone through the chapel. It seemed to be a flashlight shining through a window outside.

Annette made an effort not to tremble. She was afraid that her nervousness and fear would be transmitted to the child. It would be dangerous if the child started to cry under the circumstances.

The flashlight that seemed to illuminate many parts of the church for a while soon withdrew. It was quiet outside. People’s relief could be felt silently.

Bang!

At that moment, a gunshot shattered the window. At the same time, someone screamed.

Ahhhhh!!!!!!

A shooting followed. The horrifyingly quiet interior of the church was soon filled with commotion. It was impossible to distinguish what shots were friendly and what shots were enemy.

Annette clutched the child tightly and crawled shakily into a corner. The child did not cry and gave a small giggle.

"...!"

Officer Miller shouted something, but it was drowned out by the gunfire. No, it felt like everything was far away as their ears were muffled by the loud shots.

The shooting went on for quite some time. It was not known how things were going.The commotion, which seemed to never end, calmed down before long.

"Ah."

Someone let out a sound that

couldn't be distinguished if it was a groan or a sigh.

Annette opened her tightly closed eyes.

Her senses began to blur. Old memories bubbled to the surface. For a brief moment, Annette walked through a moment in the past when everything was as perfect as a still life.

The fence of the mansion was guarded by a chain of tangled vines, the beautiful rose garden, the delicate marble staircase, and the lion statues that guarded either side of it.

The ivory-colored columns that supported the mansion, the numerous doors in rows, the spacious banquet hall and the murals carved on the story-high ceilings, and.......

Bang!

The church door burst open. The heavy footsteps characteristic of military boots rushed in. The eerie awareness brought Annette back to reality.

Several gunshots rang out. Someone collapsed and coughed. Annette wanted to raise her head to check, but the moment she did, a bullet flew past her head.

Soon the interior was completely silent. The sound of one soldier's boots echoed in the stillness. The opponent muttered.

“The rats have been hiding here.”

\*\*\*

# Chapter 79

He was fluent in Padania language. For a moment, Annette almost raised her head, thinking he was an ally. But she stopped moving when he said something in French.

“..... confirm survival.....”

The man's command sent soldiers rushing into the building. Annette was face down on the floor, unable to breathe.

“Wake up! Wake up!"

The enemy ordered in French. Annette hesitantly raised her head. But the people around her were still hunched over. The enemy kicked one civilian and shouted.

"Get up!”

The old man who had been kicked in the stomach squealed, grabbing his stomach and groaning.

Only then did people finally understand the meaning of the words and hurried to their feet.

“You see...... he is a ...... resident..”

“A lot of these guys… died…”

The enemy seemed to dissuade him, but his hostility remained clear. Annette moved her eyes and surveyed her surroundings quickly.

The allies who had come with them had already been killed in the previous gun fight.

Suddenly, the French soldier who had mentioned "the rats" clapped his hands twice. All eyes were on him. He stepped forward and smiled.

“Now, everyone, if you cooperate with us, we will return you safely. We had no choice in the situation now. There is quite a bit of damage on our side due to those little rats that hide and attack here and there."

Annette went still.

She heard it again, but he was fluent in Padania language. The man's words had none of the intonation characteristic of foreigners.

It was almost believable that he was a Padanian.

The man asked with a smiling face and narrowed eyes.

"So, what were you doing here?"

"...ugh, we're just a bunch of wounded people hiding here! The enemies are out there.......!"

“Oh, really? With the Padania soldiers?"

“They thought we were surrounded and came to our rescue. And babies, children, we are civilians to begin with. We have nothing to do with them.”

“Yes!"

The nurse who came with Annette exclaimed.

“I am a nurse! International agreements give civilians and health care workers the right to be protected........"

“Ah, the Collective Agreement."

The man cut off the nurse's words coldly.

“That was when you guys didn't violate the right of belligerency first.”

“Yes.....?"

"Now that we're in a war and the soldiers and the people of this town are all firing their guns as one, who is the rat now? How do you compartmentalize who is an innocent civilian?"

"Well, that."

“The bastards who throw bombs at our camp pretending to be civilians are also civilians, so should we let them live?”

The man's voice seemed sarcastic in a way, and also in a way he was just making a light joke.

Annette quickly examined his military uniform. His rank was Captain, and his name was inscribed on a nameplate with the spelling of French. She read it slowly.

Elliot ...... Sidow.

It was certainly not a name or surname from Padania. She thought he might be one of the Padanians who defected to France, but that didn't seem to be the case.

Of course, he could have changed his name, but his accent, expressions, and too much like someone born and raised here forced her to repeat her confirmation.

"Well, okay, I heard that the Padania army is fortifying one of the buildings here, where is it?"

"..."

People didn't answer and only looked at each other. As for Annette, she didn't even know if they knew the answer to that question.

At that moment, an ally who had thought he was dead groaned. Elliot pointed the gun at him without even looking at him.

Bang. His shaking body stopped moving.

Everyone sucked in a breath. Annette immediately bowed her head and pulled the child tight to prevent the child from seeing the scene. Elliot mumbled.

"If I don't get answers, I won't be able to distinguish whether these people here are soldiers or civilians.......Should I keep you here until I get one?”

The international agreement to which the nurse had previously referred explicitly stated the protection of civilians, of course. However, it was "a treaty limited to those who do not participate in hostilities".

So what Elliott was saying was that the people here today were considered participants in hostilities.

"...here.........."

A trembling voice came out. Elliott's dark brown eyes rolled over her.

Annette squeezed the words out.

“...... There are old people and children.”

The words were choked with cynical sarcasm. In fact, most of the French soldiers had very hostile looks in their eyes.

From a third party's point of view, civilians were literally just ordinary people who were innocent, but not so for the soldiers who went from limb to limb every day with the fear of death.

“So I don't see what you want me to do about it."

They turned enemy civilians into friends with enemy troops. They killed their comrades and were also targets of vengeance that threatened their own lives.

While the act should never be defended, the war was. Historically, wars in which there was no massacre of civilians were

rare and could be seen as nonexistent.

The Battle of Huntingham in particular was a battle in which civilians were quite deeply involved. Nothing was supposed to be easy, as the damage on the enemy side was equally devastating.

For every enemy army that killed its allies, its allies killed more enemy troops. Too many people died and were injured to impose agreements and humanity. Like the French boy soldier who happened to be treated...........

“ Eh?"

One of the French soldiers walked up to her, pointing at her. Annette looked at him, her shoulders shaking.

“Catherine!”

The man laughed brightly and raised his hands. In one hand he held a rifle. He was the French soldier who had followed her and wanted her address.

“Why the church...treatment............."

“...What?"

“Why are you here?"

“I took a different path earlier, a different direction."

The man cocked his head. She obviously went the other way when they parted, so he wondered why she was here.

Annette struggled for a moment to find a suitable excuse.

Should she say that she arrived here while wandering around looking for a patient to treat? That she heard there were injured people here?

But what if they asked how she found those hiding?

“What is it, Nicolo?"

Elliot questioned him. It seemed that the man's name was Nicolo. Then the other French soldiers giggled and said.

"That nurse ...... Do us a favor---by the way, Nicolo told the woman..........."

“Nurse?"

Elliot frowned as he muttered to himself.

He looked alternately at Annette and Nicolo and said something to the soldiers in French. Annette could only understand the word 'woman'.

What in the world did he say? Elliot's words startled the faces of the French soldiers. They stared at Annette at once with expressions of disbelief.

Annette could not grasp the situation and looked anxious. Something unexpected had certainly happened.

The French soldiers whispered among themselves. Nicolo had his mouth wide open. Elliot turned his head to look at Annette and said flatly.

“Isn't that right, Annette? You're the commander-in-chief's ex-wife, aren't you?"

\*\*\*

\*past

*"Hey, is it true what you said earlier?"*

*"What, go to sleep."*

*Jackson exclaimed loudly as he sat down next to Heiner. Heiner glanced at him, picking up some firewood and tossing it in the bonfire.*

*“Is it true that you will just destroy something precious to you?”*

*“I don't know either…”*

*"Oh, my God. This bastard will be miserable for the rest of his life."*

*"It's been that way from the beginning anyway. You and I both."*

*“Why?"*

*Heiner chuckled at Jackson's blunt question.*

*“We will never live in normalcy. That was obvious from the very beginning."*

*"Bullsh\*t. I'll be so damn happy when this is over."*

*"What are you going to do when this is over?"*

*"After I succeed and gain momentum, I will meet a nice, kind-hearted woman, get married, have children, and live."*

*“You have a big dream."*

*"Bastard."*

*Amy's small moans came from inside the cave. She seemed to be treating an injury she had sustained earlier.*

*Jackson glanced inward and lowered his voice. Everything sounded louder because the space was quiet and enclosed.*

*"...I don't know about marriage, but I will succeed.”*

*"Success in what?"*

*"Hmmm, winning?"*

*"Then what you're saying is the success of this operation?"*

*"Well... it's 'this mission' and I want to make a merit in a proper battle later. I will definitely be an officer. I'll even get a house in my country and a medal."*

*Jackson pulled a cigar from his pocket and held it close to the bonfire. Soon the tip of the cigar burned red. He took a puff and muttered,*

*"We need to be recognized, too."*

*As the smoke scattered, Jackson smiled faintly.*

*“Shouldn't we do that sometime?"*

*\*\*\*\**

# Chapter 80

France’s soldiers collected the bodies scattered throughout the church and burned them outside. They were the corpses of allies who had come here with Annette.

The only survivor among the allies was a sniper in the attic. Despite his surrender, he was not being treated as a proper prisoner of war.

France's soldiers made him carry the bodies of his colleagues and burned them himself. All through the operation, swearing, assaults, and taunts followed.

This, too, was also against international agreements. But who cared about such agreements in this situation?

War was like that.

Annette looked out the window at the red flames. She was a little dazed. She had no idea what was going to happen or what she should do.

*‘He would be furious if he knew that I had done something dangerous again.’*

In the midst of all this, she had a feeling. Somehow the fear seemed to disappear a little when she thought about Heiner getting angry with a blue vein on his neck with a horribly hardened expression on his face.

Come to think of it, he had been angry a lot since they met again. He had never once raised his voice from their first meeting until their divorce, but she had seen him angry more recently than she had seen in six years.

*‘...was he always like that, or he had become that anxious and impatient?’*

Annette swept the child's hair with thoughts that were no longer meaningful. The child, who had been shivering the whole time, was tired and fell asleep.

She rubbed the child's pale cheeks and wiped away the soot. Come to think of it, she had never heard the child's voice.

It was natural for children to cry and scream, but he didn't. Perhaps noticing Annette's stare, the old man sitting quietly beside her suddenly opened his mouth.

“He can’t speak."

"...Ah."

“That's what happens when you go through a war.”

“His parents are ......”

“I don't know if they're dead or alive.”

"Aren't you his grandmother?”

"I picked him up because

because it looks like he lost his parents. If I had known this was going to happen, I wouldn't have brought him in...."

"I see...."

“Hey! Don't talk there!”

One of the French soldiers shouted furiously. Annette and the old man hurriedly closed their mouths. The child, who had turned over with a furrowed brow, opened his eyes fuzzily.

The child rolled his eyes anxiously, probably from the screams he had just heard. Annette patted his cheek again and gave a small

whispered.

“It's okay, it's okay. ......”

It was a phrase she had spoken countless times to wounded soldiers, and had failed to keep. And countless times they had failed to protect her. At that moment, someone approached Annette.

She looked up. There was a deep look of alarm on her face as she identified the curly haired soldier. It was Nicolo.

“Annette.”

He called Annette's name. He had an accent peculiar to the French, who often omitted pronunciations.

"Your real name is prettier. Why did you lie?"

"..."

"...Are you hungry?"

Annette avoided his gaze, shaking her head. Nicolo squatted next to her, not caring. He had an alarming smile.

"I can give you food."

"..."

“Ah, you’re amazing….madam…”

"...."

"Why are you in the war? A woman like you."

"Just."

"When did you do it? When did your marriage end?"

"..."

Annette turned her back to him, her mouth clamped shut. As was the case from the first impression, she had a bad feeling about this man.

Nicolo, who had been staring at Annette's profile, let out a chuckle.

“You’re too cute.”

The words he murmured gave her a chill. The way his gaze swept her face and body over and over again earlier made her feel dirty.

Despite Annette's continued neglect, Nicolo kept talking to her. He also casually touched her shoulder and hand.

When they had met earlier, he seemed to show minimal respect for her as a nurse, but as soon as she became a prisoner of war, he treated her like this.

The other nurses and civilians glanced at Annette, but could not step forward. Annette

understood them. It was hard to know what would happen if they interfered.

Annette imagined several worst-case scenarios that could happen in a time of war, where law and morality had disappeared, so murder, assault, torture, and rape ------ the same thing.

“Hey, Miss Rosenberg. You better watch out for that guy."

Suddenly someone said in a calm voice. Annette looked at him, startled.

Elliott was sitting cross-legged on a chair in the chapel, leisurely smoking a cigar. A small red light crackled and burned in the dim darkness.

“He’s a pretty bad guy.”

For a moment, Annette barely swallowed a mocking laughter that was about to break out.

Who was he to talk? He was just sitting there and taking no action.

But there was something more important than that. It was what the man called her.

Miss Rosenberg.

Ordinary foreigners may not even know the face or name, let alone the identity, of the Commander-in-Chief's ex-wife.

This was because the news media was not that developed. However, that man knew her face and name, as well as her maiden name. Needless to say, the curiosity was natural.

"What, what did you say?"

"That you ...... be careful ......."

The French soldiers thunderingly laughed at what Elliot had said. Nicolo was mischievously angry.

Elliott laughed for a long time, then spoke to Annette again.

"Miss Rosenberg, the thoughts that run through the heads of filthy bastards like these guys are a bit similar. They think if they sleep with powerful women their level of power is similar to that powerful person."

"...."

“You have a pretty face and a powerful ex-husband, so how dangerous for you right now? You see that man’s eyes are sweeping? Be careful. I'm giving you good advice.

Wouldn’t that help? Ha ha."

"...... ha..."

“Still, Miss Rosenberg is a good hostage, so take good care of her and treat her well.”

“Is this your use for blackmailing the Commander-in-Chief?" (A)

“Well, it would be something similar. And I can get a hefty price."

A sneer was drawn on Annette's lips. She replied as if she had been told a very funny joke.

"You are mistaken. I am not worth a hostage at all." (A)

“Hm?" Elliot cocked his head. “What does that mean?"

"Well, you apparently know a lot about the Padania situation, but then you must also know about my ex-husband's past with me. My ex-husband had already broken up the family business and we were divorced due to acrimony. The whole nation knows this fact. Do you think the Commander-in-Chief will save me?"

"Ah ...... hmm?"

Elliot nodded his head without any response. His expression was unreadable. Annette had no idea what that ambiguous response meant.

“Well, I know roughly about Heiner’s relationship with you…. ”

Elliot murmured, touching his chin. The way he called Heiner’s name was strangely natural and familiar.

*‘There’s something there.’*

This made it impossible to see the man's true identity as simply an enemy officer who knew a lot about Padania. Annette asked in a trembling voice.

"---Who are you?"

"Well, let's just say I was your ex-husband's classmate at the training camp. We were colleagues, too."

"What in the world is that.......?"

The training camp Elliott mentioned was probably on Sutherlane Island. Because that was the only place that could be called Heiner's training camp.

But it didn't add up. It didn't make sense that a French soldier, a captain at that, would come from a camp under the royal Padanian military.

She wanted to question him, but she could not. Everyone in the building was listening to their conversation.

The French soldiers could not understand Padanian, but even so, there were too many listening ears.

It was an external secret that Heiner was a trainee on Sutherlane Island. The list of trainees in question was kept private. She didn't want to expose his past here.

However, Elliott continued to talk carefree as if he did not care about such things in the slightest.

"Heiner and I carried out a few operations together. We were pretty good friends. Oh, and we visited Marquis Dietrich's residence many times.............. you don't remember, do you? Miss Rosenberg didn't care for the likes of us. Even though there were many soldiers who adored you, haha."

Annette's face turned slightly pale.

Her father's men and soldiers often came and went at the Rosenberg residence. Heiner was one of them.

Then it meant that this man was really her father's subordinate or a soldier. With him being a captain of the enemy forces meant two things.

He could have defected after the revolution and become a collaborator of the enemy country.

“The name I used at the time was........"

Or he was France’s spy from the beginning.

“Jackson, it was Jackson."

\*\*\*

# Chapter 81

A bitter taste grazed Elliot's lips as he said his former name. But the moment was so brief that Annette thought she had misjudged it.

"You look like you're dying of curiosity."

Elliott said with a smirk. Annette cast her eyes down to hide her expression.

Of course she had to be curious. It was a story about Heiner's past. She had never even heard a single word or asked about it.

The moment she knew, she knew that the pain they had buried would once again sericultrate their lives. That's why she had tried so hard to avoid it.

“Well, if it bothers you, I can tell you. Most if not all---------? It's not particularly a secret anymore."

"..."

“What are you curious about? Your ex-husband's former lovers?"

"...I don't care."

"Haha, maybe it's because you grew up so preciously, but you're a terrible liar."

Elliot shook off the ash at the end of his cigar and rose from his chair. He walked toward Annette with his rifle slung over his shoulder.

Annette's shoulders stiffened as the sound of military boots approached. Elliot smiled as he held out one hand politely, like a gentleman requesting a dance.

"Lady, shall we take a walk for a moment?"

Annette looked up at him with a mixture of alarm, suspicion, and fear.

Elliot furrowed his brow as if asking her what she was doing without holding his hand. But Annette just sat there stiffly.

Everyone's eyes were focused on them. She had a reputation that couldn't be any worse, but it was obvious how it would look if she held the hand of this officer and followed him.

Women whose livelihoods were difficult by the war sometimes sold themselves to enemy soldiers. And usually such people were heavily ostracized by their own countrymen.

Literally, severe ostracism. Annette had heard several stories of women who were stoned to death for prostituting themselves to enemy troops.

They wanted to live, they were forced, they had no choice, they were pushed to the edge of the cliff................ but there would be no understanding and those excuses were useless.

It was truly a strange thing. People detested women in their own country who gave themselves over to the enemy more than political deviants. Annette forced her lips to move and asked.

“Why?"

Her throat bobbed. She tried to hide her nervousness, but could not hide it completely.

Then Elliot bowed his head and pressed his lips to her ear. Annette flinched but did not avoid him. A low voice drifted into her ear.

“It won’t be good just staying here. A precious and beautiful woman like you is even more in danger. When I say we leave, I think you should leave."

"..."

“I am giving you some advice considering your old relationship with your ex-husband.”

Unlike earlier, his voice devoid all emotions. It was as if he was someone else entirely.

The rifle came into view on the man's bent shoulder. The hard, smooth iron surface gleamed coldly.

Elliott straightened his body. His outstretched hand was still in place. He playfully clenched his hand into a fist several times and then opened it.

Hesitantly, Annette raised her hand and grabbed his. Elliott chuckled, grabbed her hand, and pulled her upward.

Her body was semi-forced to stand up. A panicked Annette resisted falling into him. Unlike her skinny appearance, her strength was no joke.

Elliott took Annette's hand in his and walked with a big step, saying something to the French soldiers. Then the soldiers burst out laughing.

A soldier patted Nicolo on the back and chuckled. Nicolo replied with a grumpy face, then choked him and laughed.

Annette asked anxiously as they exited the church entrance.

"What? What did you say?"

“What, about the higher rank get to eat first?”

Annette's face rapidly paled. Noticing that her steps had become heavier, Elliott casually said,

“Don't worry. I won't touch you, I may be trash, but I'm not that terrible to my old friend’s woman.”

These were not particularly reassuring words. She wondered if he and Heiner were really friends.

Annette surreptitiously backed away from him. Elliot took a step as if he didn't care.

The occasional French soldiers he encountered greeted Elliott. It seemed like the entire area had been taken over by enemy forces.

"Where are you going?"

"Just walking. Oh, the city's a mess. Have you been here before?"

"...... No."

“It's a pretty famous tourist destination in the west. It used to be a very pretty city. If you go straight along this river, you’ll reach the ocean, and the border between the river and the ocean there is an art."

Western Tourist Attraction. Annette looked with new eyes at the urban scene after all these years.

*"Then why don't you take a vacation to Belmont County sometime soon? When spring comes, you can visit Sunset Cliff and other western*

*area." (H)*

Yes, Heiner had said that.

The suggestion seemed far fetched. In fact, it wasn't that long ago........... All of her memories associated with the man were.

Everything seemed far away.

In the end, they didn't make the trip. Soon she attempted suicide again and they divorced.

In fact, the time Heiner made that suggestion was after her first suicide attempt. Recognizing that fact Annette posed the unreachable question.

Why did he speak as if they had a future?

With what feelings did he say those words?

As if saying so would bring any hope in their future…

Annette stared distantly at the burned and trampled buildings of Huntingham.

No matter how beautiful the city had been in the past, it was now nothing more than a ruined battlefield.

"...And why did you say you wanted to walk?"

"I told you, I'll tell you what you're curious about. Is there anything you really want to ask me?"

"No."

"I see you don’t have any interest in your husband. Heiner, that bastard, must have suffered quite a bit. My heart hurts for him."

Elliott grabbed his chest with one hand, acting all grandiose. Annette reluctantly stared at his action. What was he doing, this man?

“Actually, I was just making an excuse to ask Miss Rosenberg to go for a walk. I called you because I was a little curious. How’s Heiner? All I hear about him is just his movement as Commander-in-Chief."

"...were you really close? With him?"

“Yes.”

“Did you defect or are you a spy?”

“Oh, you're a lot cleverer than I thought. But let me correct one thing. If you defected before the war, you’re considered a traitor. There's no way around it.”

“So, which is it?"

“Which one do I look like?"

“I've heard that the trainees at Sutherlane Island enter at a fairly young age. So it's the former."

“That's a good guess."

Elliott added with a short laugh.

“But it's too pure a guess. No matter how much you roll on the battlefield because you're a nurse, you're still clueless.”

"That..."

"I was in Padania for a very long time, Miss Rosenberg. I’ve been here since I was quite young. It was a mission I received from my homeland (France) to infiltrate the Sutherlane Island Training Camp.”

Annette stopped for a moment. Elliot followed suit and pulled out a new cigar. He rummaged through his pockets and mumbled with a faint frown.

“Oh, I didn't bring my lighter.”

"...."

"You don’t have a lighter, do you?"

"no ......."

“Try smoking. It's pretty good... Oh, I wonder if Miss Rosenberg is the type of person who only smokes elegantly rolled cigarettes like Marquis Dietrich?"

“How can you say you are friends with Heiner?"

“Hm?"

Elliot cocked his head. Annette glanced at him and said coldly,

“You're a spy. You're a traitor."

"Well, yes, I am. It's a little funny to hear you talk like that when Heiner betrayed you and your family.”

“That's another matter."

"Then I have nothing to say, but hey, don't glare too much. You're so beautiful no matter what expression you wear."

Elliot chuckled. Annette looked at him with her brows narrowed in dismay. He

shrugged his shoulders.

“But I don't have any feelings for you. I feel like all women look the same to me, no matter how beautiful they are. Maybe it's because I'm sick of pretending to be the fake lover."

As soon as Annette heard that, she thought of Heiner again. He, too, had come from a trainee background and must have played the role of a spy countless times.

Would all women have felt similar to Heiner? Was she just a target work object to him, nothing more and nothing less?

Even though she already knew the fact, she couldn't help but feel new when she heard it from the man who had done the same thing.

“But what can I say---you were a great presence to the trainees and soldiers who were in and out of the Marquis' mansion at that time. That's why it's a little difficult for me to deal with you.”

"...What do you mean by 'a great presence'?"

“I told you, it wasn't just one or two soldiers who adored you. You are beautiful, elegant, high status, the daughter of the highest superior. You were untouchable, we could only look from afar…so wouldn’t that make you special?”

Elliot chuckled as he folded his fingers and listed his reasons.

"But I didn't think that was the case with that stone-like bastard Heiner though.”

\*\*\*

# Chapter 82

Annette couldn't believe her ears for a moment. It was obvious who the wood-like man he was referring to was, but for some reason she just couldn't make the connection.

"You mean Heiner ........?"

"Well, then, who do you think it would be?"

"...that person and me….”

"Yes, he must have feelings for Miss Rosenberg. He couldn’t take his eyes off of you when you passed by. It was the first time I'd seen him do that."

Elliott chuckled, but Annette couldn't even force a smile.

“When I told him to ask you out, he told me to stop taking nonsense, but he ended up marrying you. I’ve always wondered how in the world did that wooden bastard ask you out?"

"...... you, when did you end the operation and return to France?"

“Huh Hmmm--- I think it was the beginning of 713."

At that time, it was before she had even met Heiner for the first time in the rose garden. Had he known her before?

Certainly this made sense p, since he had approached her deliberately from the beginning.

But regardless of whether Elliot’s words were true or not, she could not be considered an important person to Heiner at the moment.

If she died, she should no longer be in his way. Annette spoke matter-of-factly, as if she didn't mean much.

“He must have been interested in me. Because that person had a purpose for me from the beginning. After the revolution, he didn't even think about hiding his true face."

“Ah, the revolution. That's right. And while we're on the subject, why is it that you and him still stayed married for three years?"

“It must be because of reputation."

"Reputation? What good is a reputation if you live with the daughter of Marquis Dietrich?"

“Because he couldn’t force me out. Because I ...... because I did not accept the divorce."

“Oh, that makes sense. Haha, because Miss Rosenberg was holding up in the official residence.

I guess you didn't have any pride, either."

Pride......

It was a strange word. At one point, she didn't even think of it as something she had to keep.

Just because of course "it was something to be protected".

"Right."

Annette murmured, looking a little far away.

*'Why?’*

The scorched treetops were shrouded in mist. The blackened trees looked precarious as if it would break if touched.

She suddenly felt a gaze on her and lifted her head. Elliot was staring at her. He said with a grin.

"Let's walk."

Borrowing a light from a French soldier on patrol, he put a second cigar in his mouth. She always thought that soldiers on the battlefield were 100 percent serious addicts.

"So how has he been?” (Elliot)

"Just well ......"

“Well?"

Annette answered somewhat mechanically.

"The revolution was a success, he became commander-in-chief, and lived a prosperous life with all the respect and love of the people. Don’t you agree?”

"Oh dear, I meant the more personal part. What you said I can see in the newspaper."

"If it’s his personal............"

"I meant his happiness. I thought he was going to be unhappy for the rest of his life. So I promised him. I'm going to be very happy."

Elliot's face did not seem to show any concern or worry as he said this. Annette couldn't help but ask.

“.....What made you think that? That person would be unhappy."

“Well, there are many reasons. For one, the goals and the life he lived didn't make him happy, that he wasn’t particularly willing to be happy, and most of all, he hit rock bottom in his life."

“What the ---?"

"Didn't he go on a rampage to kill all the French bastards?"

A puff of cigarette smoke followed Elliot's laughter. Annette shook her head slowly without reply.

“So you're saying you don't know if your husband lived happily ever after?"

He didn't seem particularly happy.

She answered Elliott as if she didn't know much about Heiner, but the truth was that Heiner was someone who could pretend to be happy even when he wasn't. So it was pointless to judge him based on appearances alone.

That said, she did not want to tell

Elliott everything. There would be nothing good to come out of it.

"So, then he never talked about his friends? Doesn’t know if they’re are alive or dead."

"......in passing..."

“Hm? Then do you know what exactly Heiner did for the Marquis and why he hates him?"

"...."

“Miss Rosenberg, you don't know anything about your ex-husband, do you?”

Annette barely concealed her agitation. It seemed that every question she heard about him made her mouth dry up. Elliott said suspiciously.

“I thought you should know the story of his past, even if you don't know the rest of it. After all, this whole thing happened because of your father. Didn't Heiner tell you? No."

"...."

“Miss Rosenberg, have you ever asked your husband properly?"

Annette hid her trembling hands behind her skirt. She didn't ask. She knew she shouldn't have asked. Because the moment she found out, they would be stuck in pain forever.

How far had she escaped with that thinking?

Elliot sucked deeply from his cigar while staring somewhere in the air. He exhaled the smoke like a sigh and gave a small click of his tongue.

“I don't think it's really for me to tell, but now that you’re divorced, it doesn't look like you and him will be seeing each other again.”

"..."

"I have a personal feeling about Marquis Dietrich, too. Apart from Heiner, I hope Miss Rosenberg gets to know the man properly."

She felt as if the fog around them was slowly dissipating. But still the distant vision was blurred.

“It's a long story."

Annette stepped into the fog.

\*\*\*

*There was a time when he was going to stop. He had to stop visiting her.*

*He had to stop gazing at her from afar. In fact, he thought about it constantly. Every time he stepped into a place and realized that it was a quagmire from which he could not get out, Heiner promised and swore to stop all this.*

*Graduating from the training camp and becoming an official soldier was a different matter. It was the same when it came to getting all the honors one could enjoy as a trainee graduate.*

*His soul would be imprisoned on this island until he died.*

*There would be nothing more miserable than hoping to see that shining star in the dark and persistent muck. So he must stop. There was a time when he thought so.*

*That was the day.*

*The instructor kicked him with his foot, and his abdomen, bruised bright blue, ached every time he moved. It was because he had been beaten while trying to stop an instructor who had assaulted a fellow student.*

*This, and that was because Heiner had caught the Marquis’ eyes.*

*The motive for the dozens of assaults on his face and body gained permanent disability.*

*A trainee who could not move was of no use. All the beating here was done by classmates who had been trained together. He was fast, strong, and quiet. There was no particular reason for them to bully him. The instructor was in a bad mood that day and Heiner was at the end of his luck. That was all.*

*He was used to losing his motivation. But Heiner intuited that the bloody scene that filled his eyes would forever remain in his memory.*

*His life would sink with this sad memory. Like garbage buried at the bottom of the deep sea.*

*So Heiner thought again that day. He had to stop all this. He really had to stop all this and never come here again.*

*Never again.*

*The boy walked briskly into the garden, supported by a strange will. There was a crackling sound from the ground. Then he stopped at the sound of sobbing that he suddenly heard.*

*A little girl, like a small animal, was sitting in the corner of a flower bed. Her fancy dress and long, neatly braided blonde hair suggested at first glance that she was of a high status.*

*Reflexively, Heiner hid behind a tree and watched her. She was sobbing sadly with her face in her lap.*

*For the first time in his life, Heiner froze hard at the sight of her tears, which he thought he would never see again.*

*What was so sad was that she cried so sorrowfully. Seeing her small back swaying thinly, he felt a painful sensation deep in his chest.*

*''Why .........?''*

*Why was she crying here, leaving her big, fancy room? Why was she here alone, not seeking warmth from anyone?*

*Were there things that were difficult for her to endure?*

*Was there something heartbreaking for her too?*

*Did she too ...... feel a little lonely?*

*It was a funny thought. The sadness she could imagine was only small and shallow.*

*Nevertheless, Heiner felt that she was crying for him. Even though he knew it couldn't be true.*

*And so he could not leave.*

*He couldn't approach to talk to her, or hug her and comfort her, but he stayed there for a long time.*

\*\*\*

# Chapter 83

"The Central Group Army has halted its advance? Redeployment of troops?”

Heiner asked suspiciously. The officer steadfastly and forcefully answered.

“Yes, sir, this is an urgent report just received!”

"Wait a minute, more troops..."

Heiner stood up and went to a table with a huge map on it. His gaze shifted from the Central Front to the Northern Front and from the Northern Front to the Southern Front.

"Southern ...... South........? Cheshire Field?"

He mumbled, then repeated it again as if to assure himself.

“..... Cheshire Field…”

France's Führer was a man full of ambition who wanted to capture Cheshire Field, the breadbasket of the South. For him, it was no exaggeration to say that Cheshire Field was one of the most primary objectives of this invasion of the Padania mainland.

Currently, however, the war situation in the south was drifting in Padania's favor. It was the opposite of the central front just before the city was occupied.

Führer, perhaps in a hurry, seemed to have the intention of dispatching some of his troops from the Central Group forces, which were advancing relatively fast, and sending them to the south.

“What a fool. How fortunate for us.”

If they were to send troops, the Central Group Army would have to stop their advance for a while. Then Padania forces would have time to build a defensive line here.

He also got the news that Huntingham's moving procession had escaped safely late last night. Everything was going quite well.

Heiner tried to raise one side of his mouth slightly, but for some reason it didn't work the way he wanted it to. He touched his lips with his fingertips for a moment. (\*he thought Annette had safely escaped with the moving group)

It was as if he had forgotten how to smile. He didn't even know when it had been. No, he had to retrace his steps when he learned to smile.

*“I like you." (A)*

Since when .........

*“Would you like to date me formally, Mr. Valdemar?” (A)*

Heiner consciously stopped his thoughts. He closed and opened his trembling eyelids. He removed his hand from his mouth and raised his head.

“Call a meeting now."

\*\*\*

"......That's where my mission ended. The colleagues were handed over to the interrogation room and tortured. For quite a long time. Did you know that our military is famous for its torture skills? Ha ha. They're also good at creating facts that didn't exist. I was trained as a spy for the military educational institution that your father supervised."

“…”

“Heiner was the only one who didn't reveal anything. According to the interrogators, they thought he had been seduced by some kind of pseudo-religion. Like if he could endure this torture, he would have been scheduled for a ticket to heaven….I would have blown anything in heaven.

Training, drugs, assault, confinement---every method necessary for training was mobilized. He graduated at the top of his class and your father was so pleased with him that he promoted him.

Anyway, during that period the war between France and Rutland broke out, and during the chaos, some of those who survived escaped. In fact I thought they were all dead before they even reached the border. It's almost impossible to get to the border with their battered bodies.

But Heiner hated Dietrich and the royal family so much that he helped the revolutionary army to establish the current government. Getting close to you was also part of his plan.

But later I checked and it seems that Heiner lived alone and returned to his home country. Miracle, right? How did he succeed in returning home with that tortured body of his? I don't know if that's how he ended up getting a ticket to heaven, haha."

Eight years had passed since the day she first met that man in the rose garden. Only now, after a long time had passed, did she pick up the fragments of his younger days.

Among the pieces, Annette suddenly realized.

The dry recollections that flowed from him could not reflect even a small part of his life.

Annette covered her mouth with her pale face. Hot breath exhaled in the palm of her hand. Her whole body trembled helplessly.

She didn't know.

*"Yes, I'm the only one who made it back alive." (H)*

How much more was in his words.

*"All of my colleagues died in the operation..............." (H)*

How he felt when he said that.

Annette now understood how pain and suffering could rule a person's life.

You can run away from it, but you can't escape it. They are always there, fluttering under a layer of water. Memories are also trapped there forever.

They always move together along the trajectory of life. It just goes down little by little as time goes on.

Coming up at each weak moment of life, pulling at your ankles.

"That's why I asked Miss Rosenberg. Is he happy?"

Annette blurrily removed the hand that covered her mouth. Then she looked at Elliot. She said in a monotonous tone.

“I’m wondering if it was heaven or hell where he got back alive."

Elliot laughed lightly, holding his long cigar, already burned out, between his fingers.

“I haven't seen Heiner since. Well, I can't meet him. I have a sense of shame, too."

“......You... ......."

"Just don't have to worry about the after effects if it all dies, haha. I won't even experience the uncomfortable situation for no reason. Don't you agree?"

“How in the world can you call yourself his colleague and friend after what you've done..........?"

A voice filled with anger came out intermittently. Annette glared at Elliot, her shoulders shaking slightly. She hated this thick-skinned man.

“It’s just like that.”

Elliott tossed his cigar roughly on the ground.

“There are people in this world born to live that way. People who have to live that way. Like Heiner and me. Like us."

"Ha."

"And it was Miss Rosenberg's father who conclusively didn't even send a rescue unit or attempt a prisoner exchange. He threw them away like old shoeboxes. It's a special skill of Marquis Dietrich. To 'throw away' those who were loyal to him."

“And you are blameless?"

“Well, not so much that I am blameless as that I was not the only one guilty. If I dare to question original sin---now, is it my homeland (France) for me? But then again, you're the intangible counterpart to whom I can't even question sin."

Terribly, Elliot muttered. He still had the same smiling face, but it was strangely empty.

“Bullsh\*it.”

Annette said bitingly. Her voice was suppressed, but her tone was clear.

“There was a time when I thought just like you. There are people in the world who are born to live that way. I was born that way, my environment that way, and there is nothing I can do about it. I didn't make myself this way.”

"..."

"But, here's the result. All I have left is my broken life and the lives I ruin.”

The expression faded from Elliot's face.

“You were born that way, and you had to do it? Think about it. Did you really have no choice? A choice that wouldn't destroy your life and the lives of others in the slightest." (A)

“...That's not even funny advice."

“Took me a little while to realize that. It will take you much longer." (A)

"Not that there are many people who have attempted suicide and realized how important life is."

Elliott was sarcastic, as if he even knew Annette had attempted suicide. But there was more bitterness than laughter in it.

Annette was not upset and spoke plainly.

"...If I really had no choice, I would have to make a minimal apology, and of course different people will have different ideas. But at least that’s my conclusion."

Elliott did not answer. The sun was setting and the fog was slowly dissipating. Silence passed between them for a while.

He looked down only at his feet with his eyes downcast, wondering what he was thinking. The atmosphere was completely different from before, when he seemed to have no weight at all.

“My father's work, Marquis Dietrich's.”

Annette suddenly opened her mouth.

“If I am qualified. I would like to apologize instead. Because you are also a victim, at least in that part."

"..."

“I'm sorry."

Elliot raised his gaze. His eyes showed no particular emotion. He laughed tastelessly and shook his head.

“Well, I don't know about the others, but I've never thought you were guilty. There are many who are worse than you.”

“Nonetheless.”

"It's getting colder by the minute. Shall we go in now?"

Elliot turned around before she could answer. He looked like someone trying to avoid something.

They silently walked back the way they had come. Elliott greeted the soldiers casually.

When they reached the front of the church, he suddenly said.

“Miss Rosenberg, there is one thing I haven't told you.”

“..... what?”

“That time in the interrogation room I visited Heiner once in the cell where he was locked up. I can't stop wondering."

"..."

"He was bloody and lifeless. I thought he was dead, but he mumbled about something and I knew then he was alive. I tried to listen closely to see what he was saying. I heard….”

Elliot looked at her with quiet eyes, his lips moving slowly.

“Annette."

Annette’s eyes widened.

"He was calling your name for a long time, a long time."

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# Chapter 84

Annette looked at him blankly and turned her head slightly. Her trembling lips opened several times before closing again.

She knew that she had to explain herself. She should not be seen as a useful hostage threatening the Commander-in-Chief. She should not be seen as important to Heiner..............

Her lips couldn’t move even though she knew. Her head felt like it was jam-packed with gaps or, paradoxically, empty.

As if he was giving her situation some consideration, Elliot shrugged his shoulders and spoke flatly.

“Well, I don't know. At the time I thought it was because he was desperately in love with Miss Rosenberg, but when I heard what you said earlier….”

"..."

"Calling out the name of the woman he loved probably wasn’t as romantic as it looked.”

Elliot chuckled and added jokingly.

“Maybe I couldn’t hear the rest of the sentence he mumbled in his unconscious mind, like 'Annette, I'm going to kill you.’ I only heard the first part, haha."

Annette was confused as to whether he really believed her that she was not a worthy hostage or if he was just teasing her by pretending to believe her.

*‘If it's the latter, ...... what should I do?'*

In fact, Annette could not even believe the words herself.

If she wasn't important to Heiner in the first place, she wouldn't have cared whether she was a hostage or not. Because Heiner would not come to negotiate anyway.

But Annette desperately denied it and explained it away. Because, in fact, she subconsciously knew.

That she was important to him. It would have been strange if she didn't know. It was evident from the fact that he had persistently encouraged her to be discharged and had given her orders twice to move to the rear.

But Annette didn't think that "importance" was love, as Elliott thought. At least, this was not the kind of love she knew.

*"I'm only unhappy with you…"*

Love was not like that.

Annette adjusted her expression and her breathing and spoke in matter-of-factly tone.

“...because his goal was to destroy me and my family.”

“To think that the silent, uninteresting fellow turned against you, after all, things in the world don't always work out as expected."

Elliott led her after opening the church with perfect decorum, as if he were escorting a lady at the entrance of a party hall.

“Now, let's go in first."

Elliot was back to his usual light and mischievous manner. Annette entered the building, keeping as much distance from him as possible.

At that moment, something fell like a flying object at her feet.

Annette let out a short scream and stumbled backward. Elliot supported her back.

The man who had fallen by the door groaned painfully as he curled up. He was the only surviving friendly sniper of the group that came with her.

His face was completely covered in blood. It was difficult to find the shape of his original features.

“Oh my god...!"

Annette, startled, pushed past Elliott and ran forward. Elliot, who had been inadvertently pushed out the church door, took hold of the center.

"He’s been dumped without even confessing."

Elliott grumbled behind her. Annette knelt down and carefully observed the soldier's condition.

Seeing that there were no major problems elsewhere, it seemed that they had assaulted him intensively, but only in the face. Annette turned to Elliott and shouted.

“Stop!"

“Why?"

Elliot cocked his head suspiciously. Annette sighed. It was like her mindset itself was different from that man's.

At that moment, a French soldier approached and spoke quickly. But his tone was so angry that she couldn't catch anything.

Elliot asked the soldier something. The soldier replied quickly and hurried to approach Annette.

“Calm down.”

Elliott extended his arm to stop him. The French soldier still looked ferocious, but he stopped where he was, perhaps he couldn’t disobey the words of his superior.

Elliott looked down at Annette as if in trouble.

“Hmmm, Miss Rosenberg. The unit that that sniper belonged to killed a lot of our kids. A friend of this soldier here also had his face exploded by a bomb. I think he's just pissed off."

"...piss off?"

“And it's hard to let go completely.

You know what I mean. There are things that need to be settled.”

"Give him the least humane treatment!"

“Miss Rosenberg. I know you've changed quite a bit, but as I said, you're still too innocent.”

Elliot sighed.

Do you want to keep your allies alive, or do you want to help your people? If it's the former, well, I understand, but if it's the latter…"

"...."

“I'm also trying to keep a lot of our people alive. For that I will have to kill a lot of Padania soldiers. Isn't that what war is all about?"

Annette glanced at Elliot with a shudder. Her chest was tight with anger, frustration, and helplessness.

At this rate, the sniper would be tortured. In the worst case, they could make not only him but others reveal information.

She looked around the chapel, biting her lower lip. Everyone was scared and holding their breath.

The only people here were civilians, nurses, and wounded soldiers. With this manpower, it was impossible to devise a countermeasure or escape plan.

There was nothing she could do here. That was the reality.

Elliot chuckled and said softly.

“I would appreciate it if you would be relieved that I am not cutting off your hands right now and sending it to the Commander-in-Chief."

"..."

“Well, go over there now. Leave the man.”

Elliot pointed at the injured sniper with his chin as he approached. Below, the sniper kept groaning.

Annette did not get up; she knelt with stubborn defiance.

“You really ......”

Elliot clicked his tongue and took a step closer. Annette's body jerked. Just as he was about to take another step, someone called Elliot.

Elliot turned around with an annoyed look on his face. A communication officer on France's side stood breathless at the entrance of the church.

“What?"

Elliott asked irritably. The correspondent raised his hands in salute to him and then, without pausing for breath, reported something.

"---Southern ....... Orders to move .............. tomorrow morning......."

The longer the report continued, the more expressions of France's soldiers, including Elliott’s, changed.

Elliott frowned terribly, listened to the report, answered roughly, and beckoned. Several of the French soldiers who had been sitting around the chapel stood up.

They began to discuss something in a serious atmosphere. It seemed to be about the report received from the correspondent.

Annette concentrated as much as she could to understand what they were saying.

“Anything here ------ is not my responsibility.”

"Then what about these people…”

"Now ..... nothing of value---"

However, it was difficult to hear them, as their voices were not loud enough and the situation was not conducive to peaceful concentration.

Suddenly Nicolo turned his head toward her. Annette met his eyes. Nicolo moved his lips.

"Time …. the middle of the night.....get rid of them all............"

\*\*\*

"Your Excellency, orders have been given to assign the Southern Front Armored Corps to the Huntingham Occupation Force!"

That evening, an urgent report was made to the General Headquarters. It was good news for them. Heiner immediately called the General Staff together.

“As expected, the enemy forces intend to redeploy their forces to focus on Cheshire Field. We will send reinforcements through the river to recapture Huntingham and support forces to Cheshire Field..........."

At first glance, France's bombing of the Padania mainland had done a great deal of damage to Padania. This was due to the sight of the city in ruins and the low morale of the Padanian army.

Therefore, France expected that Padania would soon surrender.

No matter how hard they defended the front, it would be useless if the mainland was not protected. In fact, after the air raid on the mainland, the citizens of Padania felt substantially threatened. However, this was an illusion on France's part.

While France was concentrating on raiding the Padania capital and other urban centers, Padania was preparing a huge counterattack.

Thanks to the fact that factories and military facilities escaped damage while the bombing of the mainland continued. Padania had restored most of its facilities to fast availability.

On top of that, the redeployment of troops had halted the enemy advance for some time, giving Padania the time to build up its defensive line.

The plan built in Heiner's mind was going smoothly. Even though he knew that he shouldn't jump to conclusions in wartime, subconsciously he was envisioning it until after the war was over.

First of all, he intended to publicize the achievements that Annette had made. Not only her military service as a nurse, but also her role in deciphering the codes.

He also had to correct the false articles and rumors against Annette. That way she would regain her more peaceful life….and not have to think about death. And after her discharge, his plan was to find her a home in the most peaceful and livable place in Padania.

If she wanted to live with the Grott family, he would have to look for a slightly larger home. It seemed that he would have to get a separate caretaker, as it might be difficult to manage the divided property.

*“I really hope this meeting will be our last." (H)*

Even if he wasn't sure about every moment of it.

Even if it meant standing behind Annette for the rest of his life, just so he could hear the news of her life…

Soon the long meeting was drawing to a close. The huge map on the desk was filled with all kinds of marks and numbers.

A supremely difficult discussion finally came to a conclusion. Heiner opened his mouth, gripping the desk with both hands.

“Two days later at dawn."

The eyes of the high ranking officers turned to him. Then the final order came from the mouth of the Commander-in-Chief.

“The battle to retake Huntingham begins.”

\*\*\*

# Chapter 85

After gathering and discussing for a while, the French soldiers eventually made a move. Without saying a word, they herded the prisoners into a corner far from the door.

“This way, this way!”

The frightened people rushed to obey the order. Annette helped her wounded comrade to his seat.

The prisoners of war were gathered near the pulpit. Next to the platform was an old piano used for mass.

Annette carefully laid the injured soldier down near the piano.

"Ha...."

The soldier let out a low moan. Annette tried to say it would be fine out of habit, but kept her mouth shut.

People gathered in one place began to whisper anxiously.

“Why all of a sudden......”

“What's going on?"

Annette took medical supplies from the luggage she had brought and began silently treating the man. His face was a ghastly sight as she wiped off the blood.

“Perhaps they are trying to free us?"

Someone guessed cautiously. People did not readily agree, but they seemed to have a faint hope for the changed situation.

Annette's hands trembled faintly as she disinfected and applied the medicine. She clenched and unclenched her fists, but the trembling did not stop.

Based on her interpretation of the words the French soldiers said earlier, it seemed that they were going to clean up this place tomorrow morning. And she did not think long about what kind of cleaning that would be.

*“I want you to ...... live." (H)*

Annette squeezed her eyes shut.

*“You said you would live."*

She was suddenly afraid of dying. In fact, she was never afraid of death. It was not because she was not afraid of death itself that she tried to end her life.

She was just more afraid of living than she was of dying.

But strangely enough, at this moment, more than her fear of death, it was the feeling that she could not keep her promise to him.

She was finally able to face his past, even if only a little. The fragments and rhythms of the words he let out like his last breath, but passed so easily by............she could finally get a dim grasp of it.

She should have listened to him properly at least once.

She should have asked properly at least once.

But it was not just because she was the daughter of Marquis Dietrich. It was not only because of her bad relationship with him (Heiner), to whom she was terribly connected.

But as his longtime lover and as a couple who had lived together, they should have a proper talk at least once.

That became a regret.

\*\*\*

The sun set over the horizon.

The French soldiers did show any particular action. They were just busy going to and fro outside, keeping an eye on the prisoners.

Annette tried to see Elliot, but he was nowhere to be seen. She tried to find an opportunity to get the child out of here, but there was nothing she could do against the armed soldiers.

*'It’s hard...'*

Annette was completely exhausted, both mentally and physically. Her body was stiff from sitting on the cold floor for so long.

She got up from her seat, pulled out a long piano chair and sat down. Rubbing her stiff shoulders and inhaling, she saw a small pair of shoes standing out of her view of vision.

Annette looked up. The child stood hesitantly. She smiled gently and asked.

“Is there anything you need?"

The child shook his head. He just stood still with his eyes down on the floor.

Annette had no idea what the child wanted. She pondered for a moment and then extended her arms.

“Would you like to come over here?"

The child meekly approached and hugged her. Annette then realized that the little body was trembling like an aspen tree.

“Are you cold?"

The child shook his head. Annette took the child in her arms and placed him on the chair. The child was held still with his face against her chest.

Eventually, bored, he began to play with his hands this way and that. He touched the buttons on Annette's nursing uniform, her hair, and then opened and closed the piano lid.

Seeing the innocent child, something surged up in her heart.

The fact that such a small child had to be sacrificed to the ambition and selfishness of adults was heartbreaking. This child did nothing wrong.

No fault.........

The image of Heiner was superimposed over the child's face. At the time he was in the training camp, he too was only a boy. That fact came anew.

The child pressed the piano keys. Unconnected notes made random sounds. Annette watched it for a while and then asked.

“Have you ever played the piano?"

The child shook his head. Annette grabbed the child's index finger and started to move with him. The keys were pressed by the child's finger and the notes followed in turn, creating a melody. It was one of her favorite songs from her childhood.

Perhaps it was strange, but the child's breathing became a little erratic. Annette laughed quietly at his frank reaction. They played the piano together for some time.

Armored vehicles created a heavy noise as they rolled outside. The sound of soldiers' military boots trampling over the city was also a challenge.

Annette watched the small back of the child's head. The body held in her arms was small and warm. There was a time like this for her.

There was a time when she wanted to be comforted, despite her very small sadness.

Annette let go of the child's index finger and placed both of her hands on the piano. The keys were softly pressed under her thumbs. She began to move her hands slowly.

It was like approaching a very agile animal to put on a leash.

When her father died in the shooting, Annette was playing the piano before a competition. To win. To push herself beyond her limits.

But now Annette did not play the piano for competitions.

Here there were no well-dressed spectators, no lavish bouquets of flowers, no dazzling camera shutters.

Still, she pressed the keys.

The second half of the song they had just played together continued from her fingertips. A melody that sounded both beautiful and sad bloomed like a flower.

It was to comfort someone.

It was for all the sick and lonely things in the world.

The eyes of the people sitting there turned to Annette. They held their breath without saying anything, as if they had promised.

The soldiers who had been watching the captives, and had been busy coming and going, stopped in their tracks. They listened to her performance with faces as if they had received an invitation at the border between the living and the dead.

The performance, which started very slow and clumsy, slowly picked up speed.

Shells still exploded from afar. Somewhere, wounded people prayed and children cried. The remaining fires that set the city ablaze were crackling everywhere.

An unnamed corpse without a military tag lay on the wreckage of war without closing his eyes. His unfocused eyes reflected the cloudy sky.

Gently, a yellow butterfly flew into the center of her blurry vision. The butterfly, which had been hovering over the corpse, changed direction and flew all over the city.

Annette closed her eyes. Her fingertips constantly touched the keys. A sorrowful and gentle tune caressed the ruins filled with blood and groans.

Despite the long hiatus, there were hardly any gaps in her performance. Annette just pressed the keys as if she were breathing.

The culminating performance soon drifted to its conclusion. The melody gradually faded away. She pressed the last note and glided her hand away.

The surroundings were quiet.

Annette opened her closed eyes. Her body was shivering lightly. There was a tingling sensation in her chest.

The child, who had been staring at her hands in a daze, quickly turned his head. His eyes sparkled as he looked at Annette.

The large, moist eyes flashed quickly and his chubby cheeks twitched. Annette could feel the child's emotions as they were. She smiled and pressed her forehead to his. She could feel the child's unique warmth on her skin.

For some reason, she choked up.

\*\*\*

Night was falling. The church was full of fatigue and tension. Some remained completely asleep. Annette was leaning against the wall with her eyes closed. Suddenly someone tapped her on the shoulder. She opened her eyes dimly.

Through her dark vision, she saw a familiar face. It was the red haired soldier. Nicolo.

Annette narrowed her brows and looked at him suspiciously. Nicolo pointed with his thumb toward the door. He seemed to mean, "Follow me.”

An ominous feeling crept up on her back. Annette shook her head, keeping her body as close to the wall as possible.

Nicolo laughed hysterically, grabbed her arm and pulled her up. Her upper body was forcibly raised by the pulling force.

Annette tried to hold on, but the difference in arm strength was too great. Others who had been sleeping woke up one by one and recognized the situation.

But no one stepped forward to interfere recklessly. They just looked at her with scared and worried faces.

Annette glanced down. Fortunately, the child had fallen into a deep sleep. She couldn't let her child see this situation.

Nicolo tugged at her. Annette forced herself to swallow the scream that was about to escape. Her mind went white with fear.

At that moment, someone grabbed Nicolo by the shoulders. It was another soldier who was watching the prisoners. He said with a slight frown.

“Hey, stop.”

\*\*\*

# Chapter 86

Annette looked up at the soldier with her eyes wide open. He was the one who had been here all along to keep an eye on the captives.

Nicolo said irritably, slapping his hand.

“What is it? Suddenly."

“In the morning, sir, you'll make a scene.”

“But first, let's get…”

They struggled for a while. After another soldier interrupted and together they stopped Nicolo, Nicolo angrily left the church.

The first soldier looked at Annette, seemingly a little distraught, and sighed briefly. The second soldier shook his head and returned to his original position.

In a daze, Annette came to her senses and stopped the soldier.

“The child.”

Annette's lips paused. It had been too long since she had learned to speak French, and she was not used to speaking it.

"The child."

She pointed to the sleeping child and the door in turn. The soldier looked troubled, as if her meaning was understood.

He said, "I'm sorry, I can't ...... I can't ......... Elliot ...... If you tell him....."

He waved his hand and explained at considerable length. Appropriately, he seemed to mean that he had no authority. But Annette hung on, not giving up.

“Please, he is too young."

“I'm sorry."

The soldier forcibly removed Annette. Annette staggered to her feet and sat down with devastation.

Was there really, really no way?

“Give it up."

At that moment, a broken voice came from the side. Annette quickly turned her head. It was the friendly sniper she had just treated.

He leaned against the wall with a bruised face and spoke slowly.

“We're all going to die. They're not going to help us."

Annette was vaguely aware of this fact. But she couldn't bring herself to tell people, so she didn't say it out loud.

Before Annette could respond, people began to murmur.

“What.........? They’re not going to spare us?"

“What does that mean? They're going to kill us?”

“That, that, what then?”

“Quiet down there!”

The French soldier shouted, but the people were already gripped by the fear of death.

The commotion woke a child who rubbed his eyes. He looked around sleepily with a face that had not yet fully awakened.

“Everyone, we have to leave immediately!”

“If you move like that… !”

"What are you doing......... sit down!"

A man jumped up and started running frantically toward the entrance. A French soldier with a rifle stopped him.

“Sit back right now!"

“Let me out, please.”

“Go back and sit down!”

“You'll kill us all, damn it! Get out of the way ......!”

The man pushed the French soldier unnecessarily, as if he were invisible. A couple more soldiers rushed to the commotion. The scuffle continued for a while.

Bang!

A gunshot echoed through the chapel.

For a moment, it was as if time had stopped. Not even the smallest breath could be heard.

The body of the man who had been standing motionless for some time dropped. His body flopped down on the cold floor. There was a hissing sound somewhere. Blood flowed from under the fallen man's body.

Annette hurriedly covered the child's eyes to prevent him from seeing the scene.

“This man ...... suddenly ......”

"...anyway---it doesn’t matter."

The French soldier who shot the man scratched his head and left the building. The other soldiers turned and went back to their positions.

The chapel was empty and desolate.

Trembling, the nurse who had come with Annette approached and checked the fallen man's pulse. She turned around and slowly shook her head.

\*\*\*

Before dawn, the concern began.

The line of movement of the French soldiers, which had been constant throughout, changed.nOutside, it felt like more military vehicles were coming and going than usual.

One by one, they, who were in charge of monitoring the prisoners, were also exiting the church building. People watched them with half doubt and half fear.

Finally, the two remaining soldiers in the chapel pointed their guns at the prisoners. Everyone gasped and crouched down.

But they did not pull the trigger and retreated. Just before they did, one of the soldiers met Annette's eyes.

The soldier, who looked quite young, looked as if he was frightened. They took their last steps out of the building.

Bang!

The chapel door was slammed shut. There was a rattling sound from outside for a while, and then it was completely quiet.

“Huh?"

“What, what?"

The people murmured. But after waiting for a while, the French soldiers did not come in again.

Someone cautiously got up and approached the door. He turned the doorknob and pulled. But there was only a clatter, and the door would not open.

Clank.

Clank.

He tried pulling on the door a few more times, but to no avail. After a moment of silence, a shaky voice drifted out.

"Is it......... locked.........?"

“It’s locked?"

“Did they lock the door?”

“What the hell does that mean?”

The people who were sitting in a corner got up one by one. A few more tried to open the door, but all failed.

Outside it was as quiet as ever.

Annette's pupils shook as she sensed something was wrong. She scanned the entrance, the walls, and the ceiling in turn.

“There is a strange smell.”

Annette slowly opened her mouth.

“It smells funny."

People looked back at her at once. Annette could speak no more, only her lips shook. The shape of her mouth said quietly.

“I smell burnt......”

For a brief moment, there was a deathly silence.

The smell was getting thicker. Only then did people finally realize this and the faces were filled with astonishment. Someone mumbled dumbfoundedly.

“The bastards..."

The French soldiers were going to burn this place down.

Along with the prisoners of war.

Annette jumped up. The child sitting next to her with the old woman looked up at her with a worried look on his face.

Annette ran toward the door. Then she screamed, banging on the door madly with both hands.

“Open this door!”

She shouted urgently to the French soldiers still outside.

“Open this door! Or let the child out at least! Can't you hear me? Wait a minute! Please!”

Bang! Bang!

“Elliot Sidow! Captain Sidow! Please open the door!”

Bang!!!!!!

“This is what humans do! Please open this door now!"

Bang!!!!!!!

“You are all insane!”

Annette kept banging on the door. But no answer was heard from outside. Slam. A reddened fist slammed the door one last time, then hung limply.

She sobbed with her forehead against the door.

“You are all mad.”

\*\*\*

The church door rattled constantly. From inside, the cries of the prisoners and all kinds of screams were pouring out. The fire was slowly engulfing the building from one end to the other. The sound of the flames meshed with the noise of the battlefield.

“Is this ...... right?”

One of the French soldiers staggered and leaned against a tree, then slipped down. It was the young soldier who had locked eyes with Annette at the last minute.

"Is this, is this right?......... There is a child inside."

The soldier scratched his head in agony. His shoulders were shaking like they had been doused with cold water.

"There are some who are not soldiers........ No, even if they are soldiers............"

“Max, get a hold of yourself."

His superior officer spat out. The young soldier looked up at his superior with tear-filled eyes.

“It can't be helped. Have you forgotten how many of your colleagues died? They were certainly involved, and even if not, there are so many who saw what we did. We don't have time to weed out every single one of them."

“Ha, but ......"

“Get up and move. We have to move fast.”

The young soldier gasped for breath and let out a pained groan. He closed his eyes, but the afterimage did not disappear. It was as if the melody of the piano the woman had just played was mingling with the sound of crackling flames.

That melody was so beautiful.

A suppressed tear leaked from under the soldier's bowed head. He wiped the tears away roughly and then took off, grabbing his gun.

But soon he broke down again. He cupped his face in one hand and groaned in pain.

A hard wind blew from the edge of the city.

Elliot was smoking a cigar as he watched the church building begin to be consumed by flames. A soldier carrying luggage asked him,

"Captain, aren't you going?"

“Go ahead. I will organize and go last.”

“Oh, yes, I understand.”

Elliot sucked in the smoke until his cheeks grew hollowed, then exhaled. His brow furrowed as he repeated the process over and over.

He put out a cigar he hadn't even finished smoking and mumbled,

“......It doesn’t taste good.”

\*\*\*

At dawn the next day, reinforcements arrived in Huntingham via the Husson River. The goal was to retake the city.

The enemy forces were trapped in the front and back by the Padanians, who were resisting on the internal defensive line, and reinforcements that entered the outer wall through the river.

One of France's generals had excellent mobility. But in a city where every building was as good as a trench, it could not be properly exploited.

Allied forces continued hand-to-hand combat, using city structures and the remains of collapsed buildings. They retook one-third of the occupied area in just two days.

Bombing and gunfire continued throughout the day in the city. To minimize civilian casualties, Padania launched an evacuation order to retake the city and save lives.

The recapture operation was proceeding successfully. As the front moved again, the general command barracks were moved closer to the central front.

In the meantime, news reached the commander-in-chief's barracks.

"...not on the list?" (H)

The news was about the whereabouts of Annette Rosenberg, who had reportedly joined the evacuation procession from the Huntingham Field Hospital.

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\*TL: For comments about how Heiner kept spying on Annette and didn’t leave her alone but failed to protect her this time. Come on, seriously you guys, I know you don’t like Heiner, but realistically he is at all time high concentration with many lives on his shoulders, and not just him who is busy but others as well as they are fighting against the army, so of course communication delays or gets lost. He also thought she had made it with the evacuation group. So stop sitting there and bashing him for not being able to do everything at once.

\*\*\*\*

# Chapter 87

“What the hell is that about? She was supposed to be in the evacuation procession!"

Annette Rosenberg was not on the final list. Despite this simple report, Heiner's emotions were remarkably intense. The Commander-in-Chief was not a man to be upset even by the news of defeat.

He just immediately prepared anew and assembled the next edition. The aide was unintentionally perplexed by the unprecedentedly violent reaction of his superior, and replied.

“That, I checked it myself........... It looks like her name was taken out of the evacuation procession in the middle of the process.”

“Taken out? Where to?"

"So............ they had an operation to rescue allies and civilians who were trapped in the occupied territory during the evacuation. Apparently they joined up there. However."

The aide hesitated for a moment later. After watching his superior’s extreme reaction, it was nerve wracking to report the next part…but he had to. The aide moistened his dry lips and continued.

“But when that operation failed and contact was lost, the enemy dealt with them urgently before they left."

Bang!

The aide's shoulders shook at the loud noise. The chair fell backwards as the Commander-in-Chief jumped up.

"Enemy forces..........." (H)

The Commander-in-Chief looked as if he had heard the news of Padania's defeat. No, even if he had heard the news of defeat, he would not have been this shaken.

“What did the enemy do ......?" (H)

His voice trembled horribly.

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The military vehicle carrying the Commander-in-Chief rattled onward across the city. It was fast, as if in pursuit of enemy troops.

“According to the survivor's testimony, the French soldiers locked the prisoners in the church and burned them together. Fortunately, a door suddenly opened and they escaped late.............. It looks like there were injured people inside.” (soldier)

The buttons all the way to Heiner’s neck felt unbearably tight. He felt like he was suffocating. He tried to unbutton it, but to no avail.

“They inhaled a lot of smoke and many people were stuck due to injuries, and Miss Rosenberg helped them escape to the end. However, the building collapsed on the way out .........she couldn't get out..........." (soldier)

Heiner tried repeatedly with shaking hands to unbutton his coat, but failed. He clutched at his chest and neck and coughed.

"The fire was extinguished with a light rain and efforts by the survivors to put out the fire, but they said no rescue was possible due to the situation. They’ve been trying…but it’s already been three days..." (soldier)

A cough that went on and on quickly turned into a sobbing moan.

“I think it should be considered that she died … .” (soldier)

Heiner gasped and let out a choked moan. His head was filled with buzzing noises. He hunched over like someone who feels an unbearable cold.

*It was as if I was responsible for all of this.*

*No, it was all my fault.*

*It was not enough that I had ruined the woman's life; I gave the order to move to the Central Front. All the talk about not expecting the front to be attacked was meaningless.*

He could feel the pain like a knife cutting down on his chest. If he relaxed his body just a little, he felt like crying and vomiting blood.

"Please .............."

Heiner touched his forehead with a trembling hand. And he prayed fervently to a God he had never believed in.

“Please let it be me..........."

*Please don't take her away from me.*

*Please don’t take everything from me.*

*Leave me that one woman.*

*Because so far you have taken everything from me.........*

*Please leave me that one person.............*

His ceaseless prayers overflowed. Everything around him was crumbling every second. Heiner prayed and prayed again as his whole body felt destroyed.

In a flash, the car stopped. Heiner quickly got out of the car. The sight of a completely ruined city came into sight.

The church where the rescue operation was carried out was located in an area that had been recaptured earlier. The infantry that had been deployed since then had already eliminated most of the remaining forces.

However, they still could not be 100% sure of their safety. They did not know where the snipers were hiding.

A subordinate who had hurriedly followed him from the driver's seat spoke with a troubled look on his face.

“Your Excellency, we still don't have an accurate location of the sniper, so it would be better for you to stay in the car...... it's dangerous.”

Heiner stared blankly at his subordinate's face for a moment and turned his head. Then, like a half-crazed person, he began to walk aimlessly.

He looked around for the shape of the church among the wreckage of the building.

However, as if to prove the fierce battle, most of the buildings had crumbled horribly. He could not even tell what kind of buildings they had originally been.

Heiner wandered among the wreckage, tracing the remains of the battlefield.

Here and there were bodies scattered about that had not yet been picked up. The surface of their uniforms had turned ashen.

The gray scene from the countless shells looked like white bones. He stopped and looked out into the distance. Everything from where he stood to the horizon was a pile of ashes.

Whenever the wind blew from afar, the ashes scattered.

Heiner let out a small moan of laughter as if he were crying. The end of the ruin he had walked on his whole life was once again ruins.

*Why is life like this?*

*Why is every path I walk like this?*

*Why did I even send her here?*

Annette did not belong in such a terrible place. She was someone who had lived in a beautiful world filled with fragrant flowers and sparkling jewels.

*‘No…’*

Was the world the woman lived in really all that beautiful?

Was it really?

Even at the bottom of her life, was she not still noble and dazzling?

Even when she crashed to the bottomless pit, even when everyone abandoned her, even when she contemplated death, even when she was exhausted in her old nursing uniform in the middle of a battlefield full of blood and groans.

Was she not still noble and dazzling?

It was like being hit in the back of the head. Heiner stared at the wreckage and slowly bowed his head.

The world she was in did not make her noble and beautiful.

Only by her presence, by her being.

Something hot welled up from his chest. It was something very primordial and uncivilized. Heiner wrapped his face in trembling hands.

*Annette.*

*Annette.*

*Annette.*

*When you smile, it's like flowers blooming all over the world...*

Suddenly, a yellow butterfly grazed him. Heiner raised his eyes and looked at it. The brightly colored yellow butterfly did not fit with this ruin.

The butterfly, which had been hovering in one place for a while, fluttered behind him. One of his men was running from the end in that direction.

"Sir!"

Heiner stared at the scene blankly. Everything felt like a bleak illusion.

"Sir......"

His subordinate's mouth moved. But he heard nothing, as if the sound had disappeared from the world.

"Survivor—survivors…”

Heiner blinked several times. He seemed to come to his senses slowly.

“Location found!”

At that moment, light returned to his dark gray eyes. His eyes gradually widened. Heiner took off.

Staggering steps tread the path. The steps quickened. Dust, a mixture of dirt and ash followed his wake.

He ran through the ruins.

The surrounding scene passed quickly. Everything felt quiet as if it had stopped. In a world where only his breathing was clear, he kept running.

At the far end of his field of vision, he saw a mixed crowd of soldiers and civilians. The soldiers hurriedly approached and saluted him.

“Your Excellency, Commander-in-Chief!”

“Rescue, rescue operation ......?"

Heiner asked urgently, out of breath. A soldier, noticing the unusual appearance of the Commander-in-Chief, answered cautiously.

“It has just begun, sir. We finished removing the remaining troops this morning, so..."

The soldier continued, "According to the survivors’ testimony, she’s inside the church. They said they didn't see her at the entrance."

Heiner turned around without hearing the last of what the soldier had to say. He rushed to the back of the collapsed building and began digging through the wreckage with his bare hands.

He didn't care that his palms were scraped and scratched. He concentrated solely on his task, as if he felt no sensation.

The soldiers saw this and stopped in a hurry. They didn’t dare to stop him. The commander-in-chief had just about halfway started the rescue operation. Not only the soldiers who had been deployed, but also the nearby civilians who had heard of the news that he seemed to have lost his mind.

His speed accelerated. Three dead bodies were found during the operation. Heiner continued to work, holding on to the fading hope.

His head was screaming at him that it was no use, but his body moved without rest. He could not give up. Once again he prayed fervently.

*please take my life and save the woman.*

*From all death, pain, and sins...............*

\*\*\*\*

# Chapter 88

The work continued for several hours. Everyone was getting tired. The fact that all the people they had found so far had died also played a part.

Heiner gritted his teeth and lifted the wooden post. A flurry of dust and ash rose in the air. His dirty hands were torn and scratched in places.

Where did this come from?

Suddenly, a vague question followed.

How did this happen?

Lifting up a wooden plank with a split end, a broken piano was seen through the rubble. Even in this ruin, the keys looked clean and white. Heiner looked through the place just to be sure.

What was he to do?

But no matter how much of the wreckage was lifted, the woman he so desperately sought was nowhere to be found.

For a moment, Heiner felt a destructive urge to destroy this piano.

*What has ruined you, me, all of this?*

To this question, in the past, Heiner had answers. The world's fault, the fault of a corrupt monarchy, the fault of the evil and venal Marquis Dietrich, the fault of the masses who were indifferent to the powerless and the poor.

The fault of that woman who was just infinitely beautiful and innocent, deformedly constructed in his mind.

But in front of this huge ruin, they all became worthless.

Water dribbled down the back of his hand. Sweat dripped from his forehead and left round marks on the broken gray stonework. Heiner lifted the stone structure.

He thought. He made sure of it.

That he would break her and drag her down in the abyss he was in. He would make sure that no one would want her.

Not even him.

So that not even he would love her.

A laugh that bordered on sobbing broke out. Heiner roughly wiped the sweat from his eyes.

*How had I forgotten? How had I overlooked it?*

*How could I have overlooked what a terrifying abyss I was in?*

*That the only way out of this place is death...........*

Sweat continued to pour down his forehead and around his eyes. He could no longer tell if this was sweat or tears. Thick veins bulged on his wet forehead.

"Annette.............."

Now no more.

He wanted to stop questioning right and wrong.

Unresolved feelings should have remained unresolved. It was the right thing to do. He moved her all the way here and now all left was destruction.

He finally made her like this.

Heiner barely swallowed the scream that threatened to burst out. His chest felt like it was being pierced by a hot blade. He thought he was going to collapse.

*I shouldn't have been born...*

Then, from deep in the rubble, he saw a gray military uniform.

Heiner's hands stopped. He called one soldier who was working in the vicinity and together they began digging there. As they removed the debris trapped in a crevice under the piano, a white hem appeared along with the gray military uniform.

“What?"

The soldier who was working with him looked up and exclaimed.

“I found two here!”

Heiner's eyes widened when he saw their white hems.

“One woman and one man........ They are a nurse and a soldier!”

There were a total of two nurses, including Annette, who joined the rescue mission. And the other nurse survived.

So this nurse........

His heart sank in an instant, even though it was news he had been hoping for all along. The dirty nursing uniform glimpsed through the debris stung his eyes painfully.

Heiner began digging deeper, his lips quivering. The woman in the nursing uniform did not move an inch.

Annette, please, no, please, you can't do this to me, you can't do this to me, Annette, please, don't do this to me. No, no, no, no.

He mumbled, not even knowing what he was saying. But those words could not make a sound, they drifted only in his mouth.

“It seems they have been trapped in the space beneath the piano! There is hope!"

“Lift in one, two! One, two!"

Heiner and the others lifted the debris. As the work progressed, bodies began to be revealed little by little.

Eventually, a pale profile came into view. Her eyes were closed, as if she were dead. Heiner felt his breathing intensify.

The woman buried in the rubble looked like a dirty rag doll. There was no life force whatsoever.

The soldier above Annette was lifted first. His face was a complete mess, and it looked like he had taken a bad beating before he collapsed.

Work began immediately to rescue Annette. The soldier who looked down gave the order.

“It looks like we need to clear this place out!”

Part of the building rubble was crushing Annette's left arm. Heiner lifted the wooden wall and cleared it outward, then threw out a large amount of debris.

"Grab it right here! Lift up!”

Eventually, Annette was removed from the wreckage. Her face and body were covered in countless scratches.

A soldier who quickly examined their condition raised his head and said.

“They're alive! They are both alive!"

The moment he heard the words, strength drained from his entire body. Heiner staggered for a moment, then stopped as fast as he could. He shouted at the top of his voice.

"Medical doctor! Medical doctor! There are survivors here!"

The moment he uttered the word "survivor," he felt his heart filled up.

It was as if his whole body was burning.

Heiner touched her hair as carefully as he would a fragile piece of glass. His hands, torn and scratched from digging up the debris, were shaking with relief and thrill.

A hurried army doctor rushed over and treated them urgently. People gathered in a rustle. The military doctor, who had been examining Annette, paused for a moment.

“Oh, her hand ......”

He sighed low as he checked Annette's left arm, which was crushed under the wreckage. Her left hand looked in serious condition at a glance.

“Bring a stretcher! Transfer her to the nearest hospital immediately!"

Quickly loaded on a stretcher, Annette and the soldier were carried toward the transport vehicle. Heiner ran alongside Annette's stretcher.

Even the shaking of the stretcher seemed to hurt her. All sorts of nasty worries that could happen on the way to the hospital consumed his thinking.

The transport vehicle was three or four steps ahead of him. He could not take his eyes off Annette's pale face from start to finish.

At that moment, his vision slipped.

At the same time, he felt a burning sensation from his side.

Heiner stumbled forward, breathless. Reflexively, he put his hand to his side. Blood dripped from his hand.

It was a gunshot wound.

“Your Excellency!"

“Sniper!”

“Take position and protect His Excellency!”

His gray uniform was wet with blood. Heiner raised his blurry eyes and looked at Annette again.

“Nine o'clock! On top of the bell tower!"

“Sir, get in the car!”

"Damn it, enemy troops are still here............"

All the noise sounded distant. Only Annette’s beautiful, sublime face was as clear as if it had been imprinted on his retinas. Heiner slowly closed and opened his eyes. His lips parted slightly.

*God, if you really exist, please take my life...........*

*Spare the woman............*

*Ah*...

His thoughts slowed. The soldiers pushed him into the transport vehicle. Shouts and gunshots could be heard from outside. Blood spilled from his mouth.

Two more stretchers came in. Heiner leaned back and kept his eyes on Anntte’s gurney until the end. A military doctor hurried to stop the bleeding from his gunshot wound. Heiner tried to push the doctor away with his exhausted hands.

“No, stop.......”

Blood gushed from Heiner's mouth again. He tried to tell the military doctor to stop treating him and to look after Annette, but all that came out was breathless gasp.

Eventually the vehicle departed. A sensation like an electric shock burned his stomach. His eyes began to flash. His eyelids trembled.

“Sir, you must not lose consciousness!”

Heiner groaned, frowning and staring at Annette. Her body shook with the rattling of the car.

*'Is it safe to shake like that.............?'*

She looked like she would break just by touching her. She usually looked like that, but now even more so. The fact that the wreckage of the building had landed on that little body seemed unbelievable.

Heiner strained his eyelids, which were getting heavier by the minute, and stared stubbornly at her face. The countless marks on her beautiful face and body made his heart ache.

*Annette.*

*Annette Rosenberg.*

He mumbled the name he had called countless times one more time. It was the name that had dominated his entire life.

*You were right. We were better off not seeing each other. We hurt each other just by meeting.*

*So when you wake up, I will let you go completely.*

*Go very far away.*

*Very far away from me.*

His vision clouded over then became clear for a minute. His mind slowed its thoughts. A slow breath escaped his pale lips.

Far, far from me............ to a place where I can’t see you and you can’t see me...............

Tuk. Tuk. Tuk.

The transport vehicle pulled away from the ruined Huntingham.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 89

Heiner was transferred to Portsman Emergency Hospital, located right next to Huntingham, where he underwent surgery to remove the bullet.

The gunshot wound was quite deep and some organs were damaged, but fortunately there were no spinal injuries or organ failure. This was thanks to the quick initial response.

The news of the Commander-in-Chief's injury was first classified. This was possible because it was an unofficial move and there were no reporters or other enemy forces in the vicinity.

The sniper who shot the commander-in-chief was shot dead on the spot.

And the horrific incident that took place inside Huntingham Church was widely reported in all newspapers. Survivors gave their full testimony of what happened, and the reporters told their stories as they were told.

The atrocities committed by the French army in burning prisoners of war alive drew international condemnation. The fact that civilians and even young children were involved aroused great anger among the Padania public.

Hostility within Padania toward the French skyrocketed. So much so that, at the time, statements were constantly being issued that the soldiers complicit in the act should be punished under Padania law. Annette was at the center of that incident.

The story concerned a nurse who saved the wounded in a church engulfed in flames to the last minute and nearly lost her life. Many people spoke about Annette Rosenberg.

The prisoners of war who survived with Annette's help, the nurses who worked with her, the soldiers who were treated by her...............

"She went in again without hesitation to help those who remained inside, even though the building was collapsing. From the beginning to the end, her priority was to keep the children alive."

“Last winter during the war, Annette went out alone into a hail of bullets to bring medical supplies, which saved many lives. She always worked quietly and did the best she could with the work she was given.”

“She was a dedicated nurse. That's the impression I got from her. I still remember what she said to me after she nursed me. She was always saying, "It's going to be all right, it's going to be all right."

No matter what amazing things she did, the past was unchanged.

People acknowledged the words but offered different opinions.

“I wouldn't do that. That's the important part."

“I recognize her dedication and courage, but doesn't that mean the past never happened? Everyone has a chance. Everyone......... should be given the opportunity to live a better life."

The world was all abuzz.

In the midst of all this noise, Annette just quietly lied there with her eyes closed (still unconscious). Like someone who wanted to escape from it all.

Heiner looked at her pale face and listened to the doctor who followed.

“The surgery itself went well, but..... the procedure was too late.”

"...."

“It will be difficult for her to use her left hand normally. I am truly sorry. Sir."

Heiner’s gray eyes moved slowly to the side. Her left hand, bandaged with a brace, lay limp as if dead.

Heiner asked after a pause.

“What exactly does ...... normal look like?"

“Assuming the recovery continues to go well, there will be no serious disability. But she will have difficulty putting strength into her fingers, making it impossible to carry heavy objects or perform delicate tasks. This includes writing and embroidering. Of course, if she’s right-handed, that would be a blessing.”

"..."

“I heard she played the piano. She probably won't be able to play the way she used to."

“Even after some time?”

“I see it as a permanent aftereffect."

Heiner stared at Annette without reply. His face seemed ostensibly as indifferent as possible, but at the same time it could look horribly dangerous without any expression.

The doctor who had been watching this carefully opened his mouth.

“Sir, I understand your concerns, but --- you are also currently a patient.”

"..."

"A gunshot wound is not to be taken lightly. Do not move and return to rest."

"..."

\*\*\*

Heiner flipped through the magazines from his hospital bed. The bedside table was piled full of newspapers and magazines.

He would not normally pay attention to magazines that were of interest to him, but this time was different.

This time as magazine reporters had devoted much of their attention to interviews with survivors. Heiner read the interviews to find out more about Annette.

[Leonie: It must have been really scary.

[M: I thought I was going to die. I thought I was going to die like this. I told them we had nothing to do with it because we were civilians, but those guys didn't even pretend to listen. The nurse asked them to just let the child out, but they all ignored the request.]

[Leonie: When you say nurse, you mean Annette Rosenberg?]

[M: Oh, yes. Yes, that's right. Actually, I didn't even know at the time that the nurse was the ex-wife of that famous Commander-in-Chief. It was dark and I was out of my mind............. I found out after the enemy forces discovered her identity.]

[Leonie: there's a lot of talk about her these days.]

[M: She is an amazing person. Judging by what I saw, I couldn't imagine her as the arrogant, selfish woman we have been reading about in the newspapers.]

[Leonie: Could you elaborate?]

Heiner's eyes faltered over the print. He chewed and chewed again on every word M described about Annette.

The Annette he saw through the eyes of others was both a woman he knew and a woman he did not know. It was a very strange feeling.

He thought he knew everything about her.

He was convinced that he was the only person in the world who knew her well.

But ever since Annette chose to die, his thoughts had been off and his certainty had faded. Somewhere along the line, she had ceased to be the woman he had known.

[M: I never really seem to know what's going on in the world. Do people make situations, or do situations make people?]

Now everything was fuzzy.

[Leonie: Tough question.]

[M: At any rate, at least for that one time she created a miraculous situation. At the expense of herself.]

[Leonie: By the way, I heard that Miss Rosenberg seriously injured her left hand because of that.]

[M: I don't know how surprised I was to hear the news. It is very unfortunate. Her playing was really beautiful.................]

[Leonie: Have you ever heard Miss Rosenberg play?]

[M: Yes, it was when we were locked in. There was a piano in the church, and she played it for the child. It was a really, really beautiful performance. I forgot about all the situation and became so absorbed in the performance........... It was a healing feeling. Yes, it felt soothing.]

Heiner's eyes lingered on that part.

He lowered the magazine, after having read the same part over and over. He felt a lump deep in his throat. Annette played the piano.

She had taken back for herself one of the things he had once taken from her.

After a long time, finally overcoming all the pain and suffering, she finally lifted her hand over the keys in the midst of that horrible ruin.

The fact returned to him with a heavy joy, at the same time painful.

Heiner closed his eyes and bowed his head. The lights that illuminated the darkened hospital room flickered several times. The hand holding the magazine trembled faintly.

And he could not raise his head for a long time.

\*\*\*

The war continued amid intense hostility.

The operation to retake Huntingham was in the final stages of success. The Commander-in-Chief, despite being wounded, received all reports on the phone and was involved in major operations.

On May 18, the Commander-in-Chief's speech, along with new discussions on international treaties, was carried throughout the country through newspapers and radio.

In the summer of AU717, the free world, gained through blood and sweat, shone with hope.

[We remember the moment when we awaited justice for our free citizens].

Troops dispatched from France’s Central Group Army steadily made their way to the South. A huge war shadow hung over Cheshire Field.

[However, our brilliant future was trampled by the horrors of war.

France and other Axis leaders are threatening peace by antagonizing our rightful and true will.]

At the same time, the support force, which past commanders-in-chief had succeeded in making the minor negotiating powers join them, was on its way to Cheshire Field.

[We hope to reach peaceful agreement. And we hope that France will show the will to do so, sign the Biche Peace Treaty, stop the massacre of civilians and release the prisoners of war].

Also, while France redeployed their troops, Padania restored all its facilities and built a huge defensive line.

[We will defend justice and will not be swayed by the threat of invasion. We honor our sons and daughters who answered the call of their country. We will never forget their noble sacrifices and we will never sit on our trampled dignity].

The Commander-in-Chief declared.

[We will surely win.]

And that night Annette Rosenberg woke up.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 90

Her whole body felt heavy, as if she were buried under a stone. She tried to turn her head, but she couldn't move as if trapped.

Turning over, Annette let out a faint moan. A pain, heavy and stiff rather than sharp, was pressing down on her whole body.

Delayed, a white ceiling came into view. Annette rolled only her eyes to check her surroundings. After a few moments, her mind slowly began to register.

*'It's a hospital.'*

Her last memory was of the crumbling wreckage.

She repeatedly woke up in it and then blackness. It was unclear whether she had fallen asleep or fainted.

In fact, she seemed to have woken up a few times here and there, but her memories of those times were fuzzy.

*‘Was I rescued….?’*

She thought it was impossible. The church was located in an area already occupied by enemy forces, so it was difficult to expect a rescue team.

But she was rescued. She survived.

It was nothing short of a miracle.

She was very glad that she survived. She was glad she kept her promise to him. She was glad she got another chance.

Another chance to ask him what she couldn't...........

At that moment, the door opened. A woman entered the hospital room carrying a tray. She was unfamiliar.

Upon finding Annette awake, the woman’s eyes widened and she immediately pressed her pager.

"Are you awake? Are you all right?"

Annette was about to answer, but realized her voice wasn't coming out well and nodded.

"The doctor will be here shortly. May I offer you some water?"

Annette nodded again, and the woman gave her a sip.

Soon a doctor and a nurse entered the room. The doctor asked this and that and checked her condition.

Only then did Annette realize that she had been unconscious for four days.

The doctor said he had performed procedures, including supplying her with nutrients, while she was regaining consciousness. But those moments were as faint as a hazy dream.

Suddenly the door to the hospital room opened again. Annette's gaze went to the door. A huge man stood in the doorway, breathing heavily.

It was Heiner.

Their gazes collided in mid-air. He was dressed in a relatively light white shirt and looked completely disheveled.

“Now then, is there anything particularly uncomfortable?”

"...nothing......... the same."

Her voice cracked horribly even to her own ears.

She tried to clear her throat, but she didn't have much strength left. Annette closed her eyes and opened them.

He was still standing in the same spot like a stone statue.

He did not approach her or speak to her, but just remained there, their gazes continued looking at each other.

Annette looked at him, not hearing the doctor's words. For some reason, her heart ached.

“..... and ....... With your left hand, it will get better with rehabilitation, but you won't be able to use it the way you used to."

“..... huh?"

Annette asked back, looking at Heiner and unable to understand clearly. The doctor opened his mouth again in a cautious tone.

“Your left hand was buried under rubble for a long time…”

The words that followed sounded distant. Annette stared blankly at the doctor's face, then slowly lowered her gaze. Her left hand, with a brace attached, was wrapped in a bandage.

"...With hard rehabilitation, you will be able to recover to some extent. But the treatment was too late, and it will be difficult to get back to full strength."

The doctor then advised precautions. Annette could make no reply and looked at her left hand with shaky eyes.

Actually, she had expected some of this.

From the moment she realized that her left hand was crushed, she knew something was wrong. As time passed in that state, her hope gradually faded.

She had certainly expected it, but the doctor's diagnosis, which she heard in her right mind, felt completely different.

Her breathing became ragged. Even when she tried hard to calm it down, it wasn’t easy. She clenched her teeth.

The doctor gave her a brief word of comfort and left the room. After the nurse who inspected the therapeutic infusion left the room, only the two people remained.

Silence hung over the room.

Annette slowly raised her head. Their gazes met again. Heiner was still standing in the doorway. Only silence.

There was so much to ask him, but it was all volatile in her head.

His breath was still rushing. After a while of only moving her lips, Annette eventually uttered a word.

“I'm sorry."

It was not her usual soft, clear voice, but a voice that sounded completely cracked and barely audible.

She didn't even know exactly what she was sorry for.

Joining the rescue mission against his will, putting herself in danger, worrying him, taking the liberty of hearing about his past, all of this, too late...........

There was so much she really wanted to say, but nothing came out. The whole situation was just overwhelming for her.

"...What is there to be sorry for?"

Heiner replied with an almost invisible smile.

“You're alive, that's all that matters.”

His smile looked broken and distorted in some way.

Annette expected Heiner to say something more. He had been so angry when she served as a nurse on the front lines.

But contrary to her expectations, he said nothing more.

With those dry words, "That's all right," Heiner stopped talking. His gaze that trailed over her face eventually drifted away. He slowly turned around.

Annette tried to call for him, but he had already turned away. His retreating back looked like a defeated soldier.

Click, the door was shut.

Annette stared at the closed door for a long time.

\*\*\*

Annette recovered slowly in the hospital. The Central Front was now completely in the hands of the Padania, and the Portsman Emergency Hospital was now relatively safe and spared.

Many people came to visit Annette. Nurses from the front lines who had been moved to the Portsman Hospital, soldiers who knew her, prisoners of war she had saved...

“Reporters came for interviews. Don't worry, I answered according to what I saw and felt. Annette was a great field nurse.”

She thought it was a passing relationship.

“Perhaps you remember me? We met on the Western Front. I was your patient. Please get well soon."

She thought they were people she would never see again.

"Thank you so much for saving me. You must have been very scared too... What would have happened if it wasn't for you..."

She received many letters.

The child Annette saved first in the burning church also came to visit her. The child has been staying at a shelter near the hospital since he was rescued.

When the child saw Annette, he shrank back as if shy. But when Annette smiled and held out her hand, he immediately relaxed his guard and approached her. A poorly written letter was presented. Annette read it and smiled.

Because of the injury to her left hand, she was able to hold the child with only one hand. The child still could not speak. Annette asked him, holding out a notepad and pen from the small bedside table.

“Oh, come to think of it, I still don't know your name. Can you write it here? Oh, you can write?"

The child nodded vigorously with a proud face for some reason and grabbed the pen. The little hand moved.

"That's a beautiful name .......”

[Joseph.]

It was the name of the precious life she saved.

\*\*\*\*

Catherine's letter arrived late at the Portsman Hospital. The tense wartime situation caused a considerable delay in delivery. The date on the letter was before the bombing in Cynthia.

Annette tried to call the Grott family, but the connection was unavailable.

*‘...I guess I'll have to visit them in person after my discharge.’*

Annette intended to be discharged from the army in the near future. She wanted to quit on her own because it was difficult to do a proper job with these hands anyway.

This hand.

Annette looked at her left hand with downcast eyes.

She deliberately tried not to be aware of it, or to remember it, but she couldn't. She had long foreseen that she would never be able to play the piano again................

When it actually took on the name "forever" and approached reality, Annette touched the threshold of despair every time she was alone.

After all, it was an unfinished business that remained unresolved because she couldn't die.

About what had once been most important to her.

The bandage from her left hand was removed as the wounds on her face and body disappeared. The sensation in her numb hand was infinitely unfamiliar and painful.

Time continued to pass.

In all that time, Annette had never seen Heiner.

Heiner never came to see her or contacted her. The last time Annette saw him was the day she first regained proper consciousness in the hospital room.

Annette wanted to see him and talk. There were many things she needed to ask and had to ask. But now she knew he was busy, so she just waited.

Time kept passing.

Around that time, news about the shooting of the Commander-in-Chief in Huntingham was belatedly published in the newspapers.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 91

The edges of the newspaper crumbled in her hands. Annette read the article repeatedly with trembling eyes.

[The sniper was a French soldier hiding in the Huntingham recapture area who was immediately shot dead on the scene. The General Command is investigating additional backgrounds.

... Fortunately, there’s no life threatening injury, but he suffered a serious wound in the abdomen and is currently recovering in the hospital---]

It appeared that this was concealed to the maximum extent possible on the part of the command, but was eventually revealed by civilian witnesses who were on the scene at the time.

The article gave mere facts. Location, date, approximate circumstances............ Nowhere did it state that the reason the commander-in-chief was shot was because of a rescue operation.

However, Annette was able to deduce all the circumstances from it.

There was only one circumstance in which Heiner could have been on that day and in that place, unprotected enough to be exposed to a sniper.

*‘Did he come to the rescue himself...?'*

Annette's expression changed to stunned. It was only then that she finally understood why Heiner was here at the Portsman Hospital.

He had been brought here with her after suffering a gunshot wound during the rescue operation.

Annette tossed the newspaper and rose from the bed. She had to see him. She had to see him and talk to him.

She knew she was going back on her promise to never see him again. But now was not the time to question that. She moved briskly and stopped for a moment to look at the mirror on the wall.

The woman in the mirror looked terribly haggard and tired. The reason she had not been able to sleep properly was due to her recent nightmares, not just because of her injuries.

On top of that, the scratches on her face that had not healed were particularly noticeable. No matter how she looked, she was a complete mess. Annette couldn't help but compare her past self with her present self.

Her honey-like hair, her innocent sparkling eyes, and her beautiful, white skin were nowhere to be found. In their place was dry, tangled hair and dark eye shadows.

Now she was just a shabby, tired, old woman.

Staring into the mirror, she tidied her disheveled hair. She brushed her pale lips, then, realizing she had no makeup on, she lowered her hands.

Annette withdrew her gaze from the mirror and left her room.

The hospital hallways were filled with patients and caregivers passing by. Annette walked as far as her feet would take her. Then she came to a stunned stop at the end of another hallway. When she finally got out, she didn't know where to go. Or who to ask for his whereabouts.

“Oh my, why are you out?”

Annette's caregiver spotted her wandering down the hallway and approached. Annette turned her head, half dazed.

"Oh..."

“Is there anything you need?"

“No............ Can I see the Commander-in-Chief, His Excellency?"

“Huh?"

The nurse asked back, perplexed. Annette repeated.

“I would like to see His Excellency the Commander-in-Chief.”

“Oh ...... sorry, I don't know anything about that.

“Isn't he who hired you?"

“I was just hired, literally. So far…”

"...okay. I understand."

Annette backed away nicely. There seemed to be nothing to be gained by further questioning.

The nurse, who had been watching her for some time, led her back to her room. The nurse inquired about her condition and mood in a friendly tone, as if nothing had happened.

Annette returned to the ward, continuing the conversation as usual. As soon as she sat down on the bed, she brought up the subject again.

“Then, by any chance, can you deliver my words to someone else? I want to meet His Excellency.”

“Someone else?”

“Yes. Who is currently my guardian?"

"Uh........... another officer."

“Please inform that person, then."

The nurse then looked troubled and replied that she would try anyway.

Annette thought the officer would tell her the commander-in-chief's whereabouts. No, even if he did not know his exact whereabouts, she was sure that all of this would be brought to his attention.

Otherwise, there was no way he would have visited her so soon after she woke up.

Heiner was definitely in this hospital. If he was busy because of the war, they could discuss the details next time. But at least she had to see him face to face and talk to him properly again.

*I’m sorry.*

*Thank you.*

\*\*\*

"She wanted me to tell you that.............."

Working on his sickbed, Heiner stopped his hand, unaware that ink was falling from his pen. A drop of ink spread black on the paper.

Tick-tock. The sound of the ticking sounded louder than ever. Dark, sunken gray eyes appeared, sinking between eyelids. Heiner, who had been silent for some time, eventually opened his mouth.

"...How is her recovery status?"

“There are no particular problems, but according to the doctor, it is a little slow. She’s had some loss of energy and, in his opinion, she has some mental problems."

“Mental problem?”

"She has nightmares a lot. She has trouble sleeping.”

“Ah….”

Perhaps it was natural.

She was almost burned to death along with the building, and then endured days in the rubble. There was no way she could have gone through that and got out unscathed.

In addition, her performance, which she had just recovered after 5 years, became her last. Annette had now permanently lost what was once her whole life.

Heiner asked in a slightly muffled voice.

“She didn't say anything about her left hand?”

“Nothing specific was said. She just said ...... okay."

"...okay?"

"Actually, she said that she had expected it to some extent since her left hand was under the debris, and she wasn't going to play the piano again anyway........... she said she was fine."

Heiner looked at the nurse incredulously.

“She said so.”

It was a lie.

It had to be a lie. Heiner was sure of it.

She had dreamed of being a pianist. Despite giving up on her dream, he knew that she still loved her piano.

*‘But she’s fine?’*

Even if that was a lie, there was nothing he could do now. A sense of helplessness weighed heavily on his shoulders.

“Also, if I may be so presumptuous,...... another thing that worries me is that Miss Rosenberg doesn't seem to be motivated to do rehabilitation at all.”

“You mean she doesn't want to undergo treatment?”

“No, she is not particularly refusing. It's just that she’s very unenthusiastic…........... Actually, this is just my guess, so I apologize if I've said anything unnecessary.”

"...... no. I would appreciate it if you would report everything."

As Heiner spoke, a scene from his past came to mind. It was after Annette's first suicide attempt.

Even then she was fed up with everything. Like someone who neither liked nor disliked it, just that everything was "okay". Looking back at it again, Heiner felt his chest burn.

“Um, Sir. What should I do about Miss Rosenberg’s request to see you?”

The nurse’s words brought Heiner back from his recollection. She said she wanted to meet him…Heiner slowly inhaled and then exhaled.

It seemed that if he let go of his rationality for even a moment, the thoughts he had already organized and closed out would be disrupted again. The regular ticking of the second hand of the clock filled the room. Eventually, a curt reply came out of his mouth.

“Tell her I didn't respond.......”

\*\*\*

Quiet footsteps came to a halt on the hallway. A man leaning by the sliding door tilted his head slightly. His gaze went to the door and into the small window.

A woman sat still in the middle of the rehab room. She had her rehab equipment by her feet and was staring at her left hand.

There was no expression of any kind on her pale face. Only her eyes would blink slowly from time to time. Heiner stood still and watched the figure as if trapped in a very small space. In the quiet, a silent sinking sound leaked out.

The wreckage of the broken ruins rattled in his chest. They continued to move and inflicted sharp scratches.

His drooping hand moved slightly.

He wanted to open this door now, to call her name, to see her close up with both eyes. He wanted to say, *I'm sorry for everything, that it was me who made you that way, and thank you for still being alive.*

But Heiner did not.

He chose not to.

He knew why Annette wanted to see him. Perhaps she knew the news of his gunshot wound. Being a perceptive woman, she must have been vaguely aware of the situation at the time.

But Heiner hoped she would gradually forget everything that had happened at the time.

Just as he was letting her go far away….

Annette's application for discharge had already been processed. She would return to the mainland, far from the front lines, and they would never see each other again.

Just as she wished.

His intermittently shaking hands tightened their grips. He desperately tore his gaze away from the window and turned silently.

It was right to end it now.

It was right to end his guilty heart and this deep regret.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 92

*[Dear Catherine,*

*I am writing to you in the hope that this letter will reach you safely.*

*I received your letter very late in the process of evacuation when the defense line was breached. I am sorry if I worried you.*

*Catherine may have read the newspaper. I was slightly injured during the operation when things went haywire. Do not worry. It was not a serious injury and I’m now being treated at the Portsman Hospital and is doing well.*

*I can't tell you how alarmed I was when I heard Cynthia was bombed.I tried calling the Grott’s phone number, but the phone lines didn't seem to be connected.*

*Are you okay? Are you safe?*

*(Omitted)*

*I’ve been involved with that person (Heiner) recently. My heart is complicated, so I went back and read the P.S. of the letter you wrote to me last time. It was very helpful.*

*Actually, in my head I understand. That it is right to end here completely with that person. There is nothing left to hold on to, and going our separate ways is good for each other.*

*But I want to have a proper talk with him once. In the church where I was held captive, I realized it only when I was on the verge of death. The fact that I never did............ That became a regret.*

*Catherine, I do not believe that everything can be miraculously resolved through deep conversations.*

*However, I do believe that by knowing what I did not know, I will have the opportunity to make a few better choices. As you and I did in the reception room of the official residence under the winter sun.*

*If I miss this opportunity again this time --- I think it will remain as a regret for the rest of my life.*

*Catherine, you said it yourself. That I am trying too hard and I should let my heart feel as its pleases. I think I’ll do it. You will support me, won't you?*

*(Omitted)*

*I will be discharged as soon as I am healed. I will be making a little stop at Cynthia on my way back. I am so looking forward to meeting you, kind Bruner, and the lovely Olivia. I hope to have an in-depth conversation with you when I get back that I didn't even get to have with you.*

*Until then, please be well.*

*With love,*

*Annette Rosenberg.]*

\*\*\*\*

As her body began to recover, her caregiver no longer needed to be on call day and night. Annette decided to call her caregiver only during the day, during the hours she needed them.

Around that time, Annette heard back from her caregiver about Heiner's response. She said he did not respond.

He did not respond.

She struggled with this answer. She wasn't sure if it was meant as a rejection or simply a real non-response.

Annette put in another request to the caregiver. But the answer she got back was still the same. In the end, she gave up trying to get the word out.

But that did not mean giving up on seeing him.

There was still some time left before she would be discharged from the hospital, and she had nothing to do right now. Annette decided to wait idly for him in the lobby on the first floor of the hospital.

No matter how busy he was, he wasn't going to be confined to a hospital room all day. He was hospitalized like she was, so she was sure he would be discharged someday, and she believed she would be able to see him at least once if she stayed here.

With this in mind, Annette spent most of the day sitting on the lobby chair.

Actually, she knew it was stupid. Killing time here all day was no guarantee that she would see him. But it was all she could do.

And sitting in an open and crowded lobby provided more stability for her body and mind than being in an empty private room.

Sometimes, when she was in a hospital room with the door closed, she would be plagued by a strange fear that the ceiling was about to collapse. It was so even though she knew it couldn't be.

Of course, she did not tell her caregiver any of this. She let her think that she was just here waiting for the Commander-in-Chief. Because only then would it reach him.

Time passed slowly.

[Celent broke its declaration of neutrality and announced its intention to enter the war. Celent's declaration under the current neutrality law is in the spirit of the state religion .......]

Annette knitted while listening to the radio in the lobby. A certain Mrs. in the next hospital room told her it was a good way to spend some time. Since it had been so long, she started over with a simple scarf. As she did it, she got used to it, and it was already more than halfway through.

“Oh my, who is this?”

Annette's head snapped up at the sound coming from overhead. A wrinkled face was smiling before her eyes.

“Annette opened her mouth happily.

“Grandmother."

She was the old woman who was injured in the church.

The old woman had made it out of the church safely with her help and was currently being treated at Portsman Hospital. She hadn't seen her since the last time she had visited Annette's hospital room.

“May I sit with you for a minute?"

“Of course. It's been a while. How are you?”

“I'm almost healed and will be discharged soon. Are you all right? You don't look well.”

“I'm fine. Maybe it's because I haven’t been sleeping well.”

“Why can't you sleep?”

“Just bad dreams….”

“That’s normal, I suppose. If you experience something like that and it's normal, it's not right."

The old woman gave a small click of her tongue. Annette smiled silently.

“But more importantly, why are you here?”

“Oh, I'm just---I'm waiting for someone.”

"Waiting? When are they coming?"

"I'm not sure. As a matter of fact, I don't even know if he will be coming or not."

“Is that so?”

The old woman did not ask anymore. She just remained silent and deliberate, as if thinking about something, and gave quiet advice.

“If you are going to wait, you must wait very long, so you won't have any regrets later.”

The old woman's voice sounded somewhat sad. Annette listened wholeheartedly.

“When I was young, my husband worked in a coal mine overseas. But one day I received word that he had died because the mine collapsed. At first I didn't believe it and waited for him, but eventually I remarried. Because I could not feed my children on my own."

"Ah...."

"But, six months after I remarried, my husband, whom I thought was dead, came back alive. It was a miracle, but I couldn't just rejoice. At the time, I was pregnant with my new husband's child........ Well, that's how it ended."

Her wrinkles proved that the passage of time did not wait for anyone. They were the marks of a hard life.

“I don't think my choice at the time was wrong. It was the best I could do at the time. But I do regret it. At the time, waiting for my husband seemed terribly long, but now that I think about it, it wasn't even that long.........."

The end of her words cracked like the roots of a tree. The old woman's voice was small and weak, but it came through strangely clearly.

The old woman chuckled and said.

“In fact, no matter which one you choose, you will always have regrets. That's life, so what can we do about it? We just try to have a little less regret.”

\*\*\*

The hospital lobby was quiet and dark late at night.

Annette, who was sitting alone knitting, realized that she had knitted the wrong stitch in the middle, and began to undo it.

However, it took her a while to untwist it because she realized after a while that she had sewed it wrong. Annette worked calmly.

The moment she grabbed the yarn and pulled out the tangled thread with her right hand, her left hand felt weak as if it didn't belong to her.

It was as if she had thought there were stairs, stepped out and crashed straight down.

The knitting dropped onto her lap. Without time to grab it, the material slid to the floor on the hem of her skirt.

For some reason, she felt her heart pounding.

Annette sat idly, not even thinking about picking up the fallen knit. Her left hand rested limply on her lap.

She lowered her gaze and looked at her weak left hand. She tried to move her fingers, but it didn't work as well as she wanted.

A dark desolation crept up her limb. Annette kept her eyes down and held her breath. Just what good would all this do, she wondered.

Suddenly, footsteps rang out at the far end of the lobby hallway. Annette didn't think to check for anyone in particular, but just kept her eyes down.

The regular steps continued, and before she knew it, she heard them nearby. The moment when Annette belatedly tried to raise her head, realizing that the sound of those steps was somehow familiar.

A large, thick hand suddenly came into view.

The hand picked up her fallen knit

and held it out to her. Annette stared blankly at it and slowly raised her head.

A peculiarly sharp, brooding face looked down at her. The deep, sunken gray eyes contained no light of any kind. He looked somewhat angry.

Annette, who had been staring at him in a daze, hesitantly accepted the knit.

Heiner silently held out one hand. He seemed to mean to grab it and stand up. Annette hesitated, looking a little perplexed, but cautiously took his hand and stood up.

He moved toward the hallway. Annette said nothing as she was pulled along by his hand. She glanced at the hand she was holding.

The hard, calloused hand held hers with minimal force. As if handling a small creature that could have easily died. It felt strange.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 93

He didn't say anything until he had walked up the stairs and reached Annette's hospital room. Annette wiggled her little fingers together awkwardly. Then he weakly tightened his grip and quickly released it.

Heiner entered the hospital room and turned around, releasing her hand as soon as he closed the door. Annette blinked, trapped between him and the door.

Standing with his back to the moonlight, his body seemed especially huge in the shadows.

Heiner said in a suppressed voice as he clenched his teeth.

"...... what are you trying to do?"

Annette was suddenly silent, unsure how to interpret his words. Her silence caused Heiner to let out an even more heightened voice, as if his emotions had intensified.

“What in the world is the problem? Are you trying to start a fight?”

“I didn't mean to..."

“Then what is this? If sitting in the lobby from morning till night without proper rehabilitation treatment is not a protest, then what is it?”

“I am receiving proper treatment.”

“Don't lie to me. You don’t want it, do you?”

Annette choked on her words. Actually, his words were not wrong. She was not intentionally refusing treatment, but that did not mean she was eager to comply.

It wasn't because of any particular reason, but because she was unmotivated. The hand was already useless, so what's the point of all this?

"...It has nothing to do with that. I'm not protesting.”

“Then why are you sitting in the lobby like that all day?"

“I’ve been waiting for you.”

She felt him pause at the appellation "you." For ever since they had met again on the battlefield, she had always called him "Your Excellency."

"Really…."

But Heiner looked rather angrier because of it.

“You really never do the way I want you to.”

“I just wanted to talk to you. If you didn't want to see me, just briefly…”

“I don’t want to see you?” Heiner sighed in resignation. After a short interval he spoke in a raspy voice.

"I tried to get you to go, just like you wanted me to.............!"

“I just wanted to say thank you."

To which Heiner interrupted, looking caught off guard. Annette added in a whisper.

“.... for coming to our rescue.”

"...."

“I'm sorry, but I just wanted to say it again.”

Silence fell between them. For a moment he said nothing. Annette only looked up at him with a cautious gaze.

Heiner shuddered and turned his head away, as if her gaze was an excruciating torture. He said with difficulty after a few moments.

“You ...... don't have to say that.”

“It's your choice to accept my apology or a thank you. I just wanted to talk."

“I don't know why on earth you wanted to talk to me after all this time, but at this point….”

"I met a man who was a former colleague of yours."

Annette began in a quiet tone. For a moment, there was a faint tremor in Heiner's eyes.

Heiner knew about this. According to the survivor's testimony, a certain French Captain, who was fluent in Padania language, had introduced himself as an old friend and colleague of the Commander-in-Chief.

Elliot Sidow.

Jackson.

It was a name he never thought he would hear again.

However, Heiner did not know exactly what conversations had taken place between Jackson and Annette. He could only guess.

"...So, have you heard anything about my past?"

Heiner felt a strange sense of shame that she knew about his tragic past. Ironically though, he had hoped Annette would know about him for a long time.

“Do you pity me?”

He knew he shouldn't have said this to her. Even though he knew, he was still angry about this whole situation.

That Annette was doing so in the lobby instead of taking care of her own body, that she was thanking the person who had ruined her life, that she was apologizing when he was the one who should apologize.

He had decided to cut himself off from everything, and he finally had the will to do it.

He was really not going to see her again. He knew that if he saw her, he would be shaken. He knew he would want to throw it all away and hold onto her.

But in the end, it was like this. In the end, he did what she wanted. He had never beaten Annette.

Not even once.

Whether she knew his feelings or not, Annette continued calmly.

“Heiner, I once told you. That I have avoided knowing you because I loved you. Because the moment we know, we hurt."

Blue eyes looked straight at him in the darkness.

"But, ever since Captain Sidow told me about you....... for the first time I regretted how I had avoided you.”

"...."

“I had to ask you properly at least once. I had to try to understand you. I should listen to you."

"..."

“Heiner."

This supremely sweet voice called his name.

"Is that why you hated me......... just because I am the daughter of Marquis Dietrich?"

For a moment a dangerous ripple floated over his face.

Heiner clenched his fists with effort, then relaxed them. And he stared at her for a moment. It was as if he had lost all willpower in his eyes.

“There are things you need to tell.”

Annette spoke in a quiet, sensitive tone.

“There are things I need to know. To just go on living as if nothing had ever happened........... we've had too many problems, and we've spent so much time together, haven't we?"

“ ...... even if nothing changes?" (H)

“Even if it doesn't guarantee us a future, so that we don't leave each other with any more regrets.”

They had no future.

They both knew it.

To rekindle a relationship that had already ended in pieces would only cause each other pain.

Annette knew and understood his past, but that did not mean a complete reckoning of the old feelings that existed between them.

Their path would be filled with remnants of the past. In order to stay together, they had to step on sharp pieces of glass placed on the path as they went along.

For this reason, Annette did not speak of the future they would have together. However, she did speak of the regrets that would remain in each of their lives.

“Heiner, what kind of feelings do you have for me?”

She asked again.

Their breaths tangled in the air.

In the lasting silence, numerous things emerged like smoke. They were fragments inherited from a past of hurting each other.

After a long hesitation, he barely parted his lips.

"Annette, I......."

*Actually, I….*

*I didn't want you to see me so shabby. Because you were so beautiful and precious.*

“I have been.......... for a long time..........."

*But at the same time I wanted you to know me. Like you said, if you really loved me, I hoped you would.*

“A really long time ago..."

*Even though I knew that it couldn't be true.*

“I've kept thinking about you."

*Even though I know that you could never truly love me.*

“You were the only thing I wanted in my hellish life. Even though I know that I shouldn’t want you, and the more I want you, the more miserable I become..."

His words shook. Heiner closed his eyes for a moment to control his breathing.

“I thought it was all your fault that my life is such a mess. You live a life so glorious that just looking at it feels like a crime......... made me realize how broken my life is."

Annette looked up at him with shaken eyes.

Even her face, emaciated from hard work, was sublimely beautiful, and he felt the need to flee the place. Like the darkness fleeing from the light.

Heiner suddenly became aware.

Even at the moment he had dragged her down to the ground, he had always been at her feet.

"...you."

Annette asked in a trembling voice.

“Why didn't you tell me, from the very beginning? What you went through, that you’ve known me for a long time….... Why didn't you tell me from the

beginning..........."

"The feelings I have for you are nothing like the romantic love you once dreamed of. They are nothing more than a distorted obsession."

His heart was wrong from beginning to end. There was no way he could have an ideal path that could be followed by just one love.

“But at first I wanted to tell you. I wanted you to know my life. I wanted you to understand my pain, my suffering. But when it comes time for me to face you."

There was a fleeting pause in his words.

“You were---too innocent, too noble."

Heiner took a step back from her. Two steps, three steps.......... He backed away slowly.

“So I couldn't tell you.”

Moonlight was streaming in through the open window. Heiner took his shaking hands to the buttons of his shirt.

“Because you and I have lived very different lives.”

He undid the buttons one by one. His white shirt opened to reveal a firm chest. The surface of his bare skin shone brightly under the moonlight.

With a plop, his shirt fell to the floor.

Annette took a sharp breath and covered her mouth with her hands.

“I didn't want to show you my miserable and ugly self….so low in the bottom.”

He smiled distortedly.

"So I couldn't tell you............."

\*\*\*

# Chapter 94

Under the blue midnight light, everything looked pale. It was as if the moonlight had taken all the color out of things.

Annette let out an erratic, stifling breath. Her hands, which covered her mouth, were trembling. His upper body without concealment was full of scars.

His chest, where he had been beaten countless times, was discolored black and brown and full of puncture marks, as if he had been stabbed by sharp objects.

His side was still bandaged from the recent gunshot wound. His body looked like a half-broken, cracked piece of dead wood.

In the middle of his ghastly body, there was a branding that could never be erased.

A cool breeze streamed in through the open window. The hem of the curtains and his black hair swayed lightly.

“It was my last mission before being commissioned as an officer.”

He didn’t have the confidence to face her, so he continued talking with his head bowed.

“I wanted to live, even though I was tortured severely and had to kill my colleagues with my own hands.

I wanted to come back alive....... and talk to you.”

That day.

To a woman as perfect and beautiful as a sugar doll who was walking through a rose garden in full bloom under the dazzling sun.

“I shouldn't have."

"..."

"... I shouldn't have wanted you."

*I wished for someone I shouldn't have wished for. I wanted someone I shouldn't have wanted. It was not because she was the daughter of Marquis Dietrich.*

*They were just so different.*

"............... you said you loved me?"

Heiner spoke blankly, as if he had given up everything.

“Could you have loved me like this? Would you have let me into your perfect life---with all these blemishes?"

The love Annette spoke of, yes, it could be love.

A loyal subordinate of Marquis Dietrich, a promising young officer, a kind and righteous lover. The perfect match for her, who had lived a life filled with love.

“No, it can't be, it can't be you."

If it really was love, Annette loved that version of the perfect man. Not this messed up, broken man.

“Now…did you get your answer?”

It was a sarcastic tone. Heiner raised his head to hide his wounded heart and shattered pride.

Then he raised one side of his mouth in mockery. He tried to build a defense.

Immediately next, Heiner's face was once again cold and indifferent.

The corners of his mouth twitched. He stared at her blankly, forgetting what he was trying to do.

Annette slowly lowered the hand covering her mouth. Transparent droplets were constantly rolling down from her blue eyes. Tears covered her pale cheeks.

She was crying.

Without a sound.

Heiner stopped like a soldier trapped in the middle of enemy lines with no way through. He was rendered speechless.

Annette took a step closer to him. Heiner stopped retreating involuntarily. She took another step toward him.

The distance between them gradually closed. Her face, half covered in the darkness, was bathed in light. Her cheeks with scratches in places that hadn’t healed were damp.

Annette stretched out her hands slowly. Heiner stared at her, not knowing what to do.

Immediately Annette embraced him with both arms.

Like comforting a wounded young animal.

Heiner's body stiffened. His gray eyes began to shake violently.

Warmth could be felt on his bare skin as they touched each other. A small sob escaped from the body that held him. The sobs grew louder and louder and became a strong cry.

Sad cries filled the room.

She wept devastatingly. She cried like a child. She didn't care that her face was drenched in tears.

Heiner lowered his head to look at her in his arms. Her small, weak body shook intermittently as she cried.

Ah.

He groaned quietly.

Such a precious woman was crying for his insignificant life.

Heiner heard something cracking deep inside his chest. It had been deformed and hardened for a very long time and even he himself could not touch it.

He thought he would live with it until he died.

The deformed mass kept cracking. The fragments that fell from it caused pain. But it was by no means only agonizing pain.

Heiner did not know how to describe this feeling. There were no words he knew. It was a feeling he had never experienced in his life.

A wet breath burst out of his mouth. His body shook uncontrollably. Eventually he raised his hands, which had been suspended in mid-air.

Then he hesitantly hugged her. Annette continued to weep. She said nothing, but Heiner could feel her unspoken words and the silent emotion.

Annette said there were things needed to be said to understand. But at this moment, he thought. There were some things you didn’t have to say to know.

He shivered and hugged her even tighter. Like never to let go again.

Heiner groaned in agony.

He just wished that time would stop like this. No matter what the outside world looked like, no matter how ugly the past or how unknown the future, he wanted this moment to be eternal...

Heiner suddenly felt something dripping from his chin. He closed his eyes and when he opened them, it streamed down his face.

The moment he became aware of it, tears poured down like a dam had broken.

A choked sob escaped his mouth. He bent lower and buried his face in her neck. Then he wept unceasingly.

Just ceaselessly.

What had been rotting inside him for a long time poured out with tears in a torrent. Countless pain and suffering proved and oxidized his life.

Heiner collapsed, holding her tightly in his arms. Their bodies slowly sank to the floor. Annette continued to stroke his shoulders and back.

A faint light shone on the two who were tangled together, stained with wounds. Under the beautiful moonlight they cried for a very long time.

“Annette."

After a while he spoke up.

"Annette.............."

It was a voice marred by crying. Heiner murmured last he sobbed.

He sounded like he was in tears. Heiner mumbled as he sobbed.

"I........... ruined your life. I made you this way. I did this to you."

Aghhh, he cried out. He shuddered convulsively, gasping for breath, finally crashing far down and confessing.

"I'm sorry…”

The moment he said this, Heiner realized that he had held these words in his heart for a long time.

His distraught mind whenever he saw her, his heart that was aching and suffering, and his determination to let go of her.

Even the regret that he still couldn't let go of until the end.

Because they all held these words in their hearts.

“Don't forgive me."

Heiner said again with falling tears.

“Don't forgive me, Annette........."

Those were the words that negated and destroyed all the future that had been placed before him in his life.

Her arms that had been holding him fell away. Heiner remained still, his upper body still bent over.

A chill ran through his whole body.

Suddenly, a warm hand wrapped his cold cheek.

The hand gently lifted his face. He looked at her with wet eyes. Annette gave a tearful smile.

Heiner couldn't take his eyes off that smile. He bit his lips.

*Annette.*

*When you laugh, when you smile---*

Annette closed her eyes. Then she kissed him softly, tilting her head.

It was like flowers blooming all over the world.............

Heiner's eyes grew wide. His shoulders shook as he remained firm, lost in his wayward hands, and soon his eyes slowly closed.

It was not a sexual act between a man and a woman. It was not a kiss of tender affection, nor was it a kiss of fervent love.

It was a kiss of redemption, forgiveness, and comfort.

Heiner felt an intense sensation welling up inside him. Something hot surged through the broken pieces.

She stroked his cheek and kissed him again and again. As if trying to wash away all the sins, all the harsh feelings of each other. So many times.

Eventually their lips slowly fell apart. Heiner opened his closed eyes.

He looked at her with a face full of every emotion he could not express. Annette was still smiling.

She was dazzlingly beautiful.

Her face kept getting blurry from his tearful eyes. He wiped away his tears roughly, but his eyes quickly turned blurry again.

“I'm sorry."

Annette whispered.

“I shouldn't have said that, but it was so easy..........."

Her smile broke into tears, as if a stone was thrown into the calm waters. The sobbing she couldn't hold back burst out again.

“It hurt so much. ......"

Heiner raised a shaking hand and placed it over her hand that covered his cheek. Then he smiled quietly. Tears fell onto their clasped hands.

It was the last tear.

The curtains fluttered in the breeze that blew in. The night air whirled once around the room. The thick emotions that had been heavy and submerged were carried along by the wind.

At the end of the ruins that had passed away over a lifetime, there was a single flower. Despite being damaged and broken, it finally bloomed without dying.

It was enough.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 95

*AU 715.*

*The reeds rustled and shook in the river breeze. Annette, who had been sitting on the mat with her shoulder to Heiner's, suddenly asked,*

*“Heiner, would you like to learn to play an instrument?"*

*“What are you talking about all of a sudden?"*

*“It's always been my dream to play a joint performance with my lover. I play the piano and he plays another instrument. It's my lifelong wish."*

*At the mention of the word "lover," Heiner's hand paused for a moment. It had been six months since he had started seeing her, but it still didn't feel real.*

*Heiner gave a spontaneous shrug of his shoulders.*

*“That dream will never come true."*

*“No? I'll find someone else.”*

*His one eyebrow rose at those words. Annette often jokingly said she would look for someone else.*

*Of course, it wasn't a very funny joke. Heiner sighed and popped a grape into her mouth. Annette naturally mumbled as she ate.*

*“I still haven't eaten everything in my mouth.”*

*“Where are you trying to find someone else?”*

*“Ummm.......... should I go to the performance hall?”*

*One of her cheeks was plump as she pondered with a grape in her mouth. Heiner touched her plump cheek and said sullenly,*

*“I heard you like handsome men. Do you think it's easy to find a man who is handsome and also plays well?”*

*“Isn’t it?”*

*Annette passed lightly. Heiner, however, was not quite relaxed and could not put off his uneasy feeling. He opened his mouth impulsively.*

*“I also know how to play an instrument.”*

*“Really? That's a lie. What is it?”*

*“Wait.”*

*Heiner got up and went down to the reed field. After a while, he broke one of the reeds and returned.*

*“What is this all about all of a sudden?”*

*Annette asked curiously. Heiner took his pocket knife from his pocket and silently cut the reed and removed the core.*

*He cleaned the middle of the reed with the knife, cut the leaves, and the grass flute was complete. It was something his classmate had taught him at training camp.*

*“It's a grass flute."*

*“A flute?”*

*Annette tilted her head. Heiner put his lips to the opening of the grass flute, then blew in a moderate breath.*

*What at first was only a hissing wind noise gradually began to make a sound. It sounded like a beeping sound in the middle of a peaceful riverside field. It was a completely unsuitable tone.*

*Heiner played the grass flute a few more times and slowly lowered his hand. Annette looked at him and the grass flute alternately with a dazed look on her face.*

*Heiner was a little embarrassed by the look on her face and ran his hand through his hair. He wondered if he had done something unnecessary. At that thought, Annette burst out laughing.*

*“Ha ha, ah ha! What is that!"*

*She laughed with one hand covering her mouth, but soon forgot even that before cackling. The laughter went on for a long time.*

*Heiner helplessly stared at her face as if possessed.*

*The reddened cheeks, the hair stuck to her forehead, the folds of her eyes, the wide open mouth, the laughter that erupted so beautifully............*

*All of them embedded in his eyes one by one like a series of photographs. Instantly the whole world brightened and his heart throbbed. He felt a subtle ache in his heart.*

*“Ha ha ...... So I play the piano and you blow it next to me? No, the audience will all stare at you. I like to be the center of attention.”*

*“Annette."*

*“Yes?”*

*“Can I kiss you?”*

*Annette blinked quickly, perhaps confused by the sudden question. Silence fell between them for a moment.*

*After a few seconds, she laughed again and covered his cheeks with her both hands.*

*“Why are you asking me that all of a sudden?”*

*Heiner slowly lowered his head. Annette smiled gently and closed her eyes. Soon their lips touched.*

*The river wind swept over them through the hills. The blooming flowers swayed finely. The gentle scent of flowers embraced the kissing lovers.*

*It was spring.*

\*\*\*

Before she knew it, she was three days away from leaving the hospital.

Except for her left hand, Annette's body had fully recovered. The doctor actually said she could leave the hospital now, but Heiner suggested she stay a few more days.

He was quite insistent on Annette's treatment. He even stood beside her like a monitor to watch over her, especially during rehabilitation.

Thanks to this, despite Annette's lack of motivation, she had to work hard in rehabilitation training half-forced.

Of course, no noticeable results for this training had yet been felt.

They often took walks and had meals together. As they did in the command barracks on the Western Front.

“I don't want to go out today."

“Why not when you didn't go out all day?”

“I went out yesterday."

"Yesterday was yesterday. It is sunny. If you stay like this in the hospital room, you won’t get better.”

"Ah..."

Every time he did this, Annette seemed to know what it was like to be a lazy dog with an owner who was eager to take a walk.

It actually felt good to go outside, the weather was nice and the air was fresh, but the act of coming out was too much of a chore in itself. In the midst of war, she couldn't believe how diligent Heiner was.

Annette raised her head with one hand on her forehead to form a shade. Tree branches littered the borderless sky. Buds sprouted on the branches.

“It really is spring already.”

“It's been a long time since spring came.”

"It means it's totally spring."

"It is already clear at the time of year............"

Annette took the lead, not listening to him. But as soon as she walked a few steps ahead, he quickly caught up with her.

Standing by her side, Heiner added.

“It's totally spring."

Annette gave a short laugh. For a

while they walked along the boardwalk in silence. Their shadows hung long behind them.

Annette, who had been walking quietly, enjoying the sunshine, opened her mouth as if she remembered.

“Oh, Heiner. Speaking of which........ do you know anything about the Grott family? Their phone has been disconnected."

“Must be because of the bombing.”

"Maybe."

"I haven't had any contact with the Grott family at all this year....... I don't know if they’re okay."

"I see........."

Annette's face darkened slightly. It seemed that the only way to find out was to visit them in person. While retracing the letters she had exchanged with Catherine, her pace suddenly slowed down.

*[Oh my God, you met your ex-husband? I must confess, I expected him to visit you...]*

A passage from the letter suddenly came to mind.

*[He called me as soon as he heard the news of your service. How terrifying it was when he got angry…]*

“Heiner."

Annette stopped and turned to him.

“By any chance, have you been in touch with Catherine ever since we divorced?”

Heiner stopped after her. Their gazes met in midair. He stared at her for a moment with an unknown face, then opened his mouth one beat slowly.

"I've been in constant contact with them since you started living with them.”

“So it was from the very beginning.....”

"It wasn't because there was any special meaning. It's just that you were in an unstable state, just in case anything happened."

“I understand. I am not trying to tell you anything."

Annette shook her head gently. He moved his lips as if to say something more, but then quickly closed them. They began to walk again. Across the grass the children’s giggles and laughter were heard. When they reached the edge of the boardwalk, he spoke carefully.

“Annette, when you are discharged from the army --- where do you plan to go?”

Annette hesitated for a moment, as if she had heard a very unexpected question.

After their reunion at the hospital, they had never talked about their future. It was something unspoken.

There was no future in their conversation.

As Annette said, the atonement and forgiveness that night was for the regrets that remained in each of their lives and did not guarantee their future.

Therefore, there was no change in the path they were to take.

She would soon be discharged and return to the mainland, far from the front lines, where they would part as planned.

Both she and he knew this.

Heiner checked Annette's expression, which seemed ambiguous, and spoke as an excuse.

“I'm just here if you need anything, so if you want a hospital in another country, or if you have a special area you want to live in, let me know…”

"I don't want a hospital.”

"...but you might be happier that way."

*Even if we will never see each other again forever.* Heiner swallowed the rest of his words.

Annette said nothing for a moment, closing her eyes. Petals fell softly on her shoulders.

Heiner reached out and removed the petal from her shoulder. Annette raised her eyes. Their gazes met in a close distance . She opened her mouth nonchalantly.

“I made up my mind from the moment I volunteered as a military nurse that I would not avoid it any longer. If I have to accept something, I accept it.”

"..."

"...I am not trying to live a happy life. I am trying to live a better life."

Annette smiled.

“So it's all right.”

\*\*\*

# Chapter 96

Heiner stared down at her with deep-set eyes. The petal was crushed in his hand. As he loosened his grip, it crashed to the floor.

"Why?"

Heiner asked quietly

"You could be happier."

It sounded like words that must be said. It was as if he was talking to himself. Annette smiled faintly and murmured.

"...I guess so."

In fact, for quite a long time, she had never felt happy herself. She had felt a sense of peace and stability in Catherine's house, but she could not define it as 'happiness'.

She would venture to say that living in the Rosenberg mansion and the year-long newlywed life she spent with him were times when she was at the height of her happiness.

But not only could she not return to those times now, she had no desire to do so.

Annette thought that everything had been broken since the revolution. But it wasn’t. The world around her life had been destroyed before and since before the revolution.

It was happiness built on top of it.

"If people have a fixed amount of happiness, I think I have already enjoyed it all in the past." (A)

Annette said calmly, turning her steps at the end of the walking path.

“At least I won't be unhappy now. I think so. And…… That's enough.” (A)

The calm voice slowly submerged under the sunlight.

"How about you?" (A)

Heiner’s eyes widened slightly for a moment at the returned question.

"What will you do when the war is over?" (A)

When the war was over............

The shadows of leaves on the trees speckled his face. Heiner considered the question. He spent all his life pursuing her.

Everything he had done, even the things he held in his hands sedulously, was in pursuit of her. And now it was of no use. There was nothing more to do in his life.

Still, Heiner opened his mouth to answer.

"I will live...... just as it has always been."

*Under your shadow who held up my life.*

He could not be happy. Unhappiness was foreseen. Perhaps ...... this unhappiness was innate, something he would never be able to escape.

But now it was good. It was really good.

He had gone through a long, lonely, dark tunnel. It was night outside the tunnel, and his world was still pitch black, but now he felt no pain, even though he was unhappy.

His life was all consumed on that beautiful moonlit night.

Even if he died right away, he would be fine.

The sunlight broke over the ground. The road glittered as if small pieces of glass had been scattered. A few petals fluttered in the air, though it was a momentary stream.

Annette stared at him among the fluttering flowers. The answer didn’t match his expression.

But she asked no more.

She just walked down the path with him. One step at a time, side by side.

\*\*\*

Heino's feet stopped abruptly as he was about to head to her hospital room. His gray eyes fixed on one spot.

Annette and a child were sitting on a long chair in the hallway.

It was the child she had saved in the church.

Annette was sitting close to the child and reading to him. A sweet, quiet voice permeated his ears.

"Across the river and over the hills, William finally arrived at a deep cave. But William ran into another difficulty. A large stone was blocking the cave entrance. ............"

The child was so focused that he had his nose buried in the book, as if he had forgotten how to breathe. While reading, Annette glanced down at the child and gave a small smile.

Heino watched the figure, frozen in place. For some reason, he couldn't get close to them.

*"No, I don't need it. It’s better this way.” (A)*

A dry, defeated voice overlapped in his head.

*"It was fortunate that the child was not to be born." (A)*

The pale face that turned away from him, and the fingertips that twitched briefly on the sheet ..........

*"It's pointless anyway. I've already had a miscarriage, and I can't have children from now on, so please leave......... I want to be alone." (A)*

Heiner’s eyes shook faintly as he recalled what he had said to her that day. He talked about adoption and adopting a child.

He did not mean to taunt her. But in hindsight, his words were insensitive and foolish.

Why did he always choose only the wrong answer?

Was it because his life was born with wrong answers?

Heiner slowly closed and opened his eyes. Annette's voice increased slightly. The child was covering his mouth with his eyes wide open.

"A big lion jumped out of the cave at that time! It was a terrifying lion with a very large mouth and very long claws."

Heiner involuntarily imagined a family.

Annette would not miscarry, she would have her child safely, and the child would grow up between them...but that image soon vanished.

Annette was not wrong when she said that it was good that the child wasn’t born. Still, Heiner felt a throbbing pain in one corner of his chest.

He did not move from his place even after they reached the end.

Annette read the last sentence in a calm voice.

"...And they lived happily ever after."

Finally, the child let out the breath he had been holding. Annette laughed softly and touched the child's cheek.

"Catch your breath.”

It was the most peaceful and warming sight. To the point where he couldn't even dare to approach it. Heiner involuntarily took a step back.

At that moment, Annette, sensing the presence of someone, turned her head. She looked happy to see him and the blood rushed to his face. At that reaction, Heiner stopped in his tracks.

"Heiner."

Annette called him, her eyes squinting softly. The call left a dull echo in his heart.

Heiner could not recall the face of the parent who gave him his name. There was no nostalgia or excitement. The same was true of the names his parents had left him.

However, when she called him by his name, he felt as if his name was very special.

"What are you doing standing there?"

Heiner took hesitant steps. As he carefully sat down beside them, Annette put her hand over her mouth and whispered quietly.

"I’ve read this book more than ten times now. It seems to have stucked."

Heiner’s lips relaxed slightly. He examined her with a tender gaze.

"Joseph, have you seen this man? It's the Commander-in-Chief."

Annette introduced him, but the child didn't quite make eye contact with him as he stiffened nervously.

"He seems afraid of you." (A)

"...... Me?" (H)

"You do look scary." (A)

Heiner put his hand on his cheek, slightly perplexed. He had never thought of himself as scary.

"You... didn't you say you liked my face?" (H)

"When are you talking about?" (A)

"Even six years ago….." (H)

"There is a difference between handsome and scary." (A)

Heiner wasn't sure if it was different or not. He thought it would be nice if he looked handsome in her eyes anyway, even if he looked scary.

"Anyway, say hello to Joseph." (A)

"Hi….." (H)

"It’s stiff.” (A)

Suddenly the child's shoulders began to shake finely. Heiner looked back to see if there was something wrong with his greeting, but there was no way that could be the case with a two letter word.

After a few more lively moments, the child suddenly sneezed loudly. Achoo! With the sneeze, saliva

spattered his (Heiner’s) chest.

The child froze in surprise. Heiner’s brow furrowed faintly, and the child began to gasp with a frightened expression on his face. Annette hastily took the child by the shoulders and said.

"It's okay. His Excellency won’t be angry, okay? You won’t be angry, right?” (A)

She looked at Heiner as she said the last words. It seemed that she wanted him to tell the child it was okay. Her raised eyebrows looked quite fierce. Heiner nodded obediently.

"...... It's okay." (H)

"He said it’s okay. He's not a scary uncle. He likes Joseph. He said you’re a good boy." (A)

He had never said anything like that. But he just stayed silent. Annette took out a handkerchief and wiped the child’s mouth. Heiner involuntarily looked at his wet clothes.

His clothes looked like it needed to be cleaned more urgently, but Annette just put away her handkerchief after cleaning the child’s mouth.

"What shall we do now?"

Heiner wanted to know if he was part of that 'we’. It seemed unlikely.

Joseph pointed again at the book with a hesitant hand. He seemed to want to read the same book again. Heiner wondered if he would ever get tired of it.

"Well, shall we ask Uncle to read you the book this time?"

Annette raised her head towards Heiner, smiling brightly. Joseph looked at him hesitantly as well. There was a strange look of anticipation in his eyes.

Heiner broke out in a cold sweat.

\*\*\*

Time flowed like running water. Ten days had passed since that night. Too short for them.

All the buds hanging on the branches sprouted. Each time a strong wind blew, petals fell like a light rain.

They reunited on the cold, harsh winter battlefield and welcomed the mid-spring together. It was the season when flowers bloomed all over the world.

And by the time the Axis troops arrived at Cheshire Field, Annette had finished preparing for her discharge.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 97

The dim dawn light danced down on the window. Annette circled her room to make sure nothing was missing.

Last night, she had also finished saying goodbye to Joseph. His only place to go was the orphanage, and she was very much tempted to take him with her if the circumstances were different. However, she could not make a decision when her immediate residence was not properly decided.

Annette pushed her disappointment aside and checked the time. There was still some time left before the departure.

The reason she finished her preparations early was to say goodbye to Heiner. She could not let him come to the station as he was terribly busy. It was right to part here.

*"I will live...just as I always have been." (H)*

Suddenly his plaintive, lonely voice floated away and dissipated like smoke.

She paused in the middle of the room and watched the dawn filtered through the curtains. Dawn was approaching, heralding the last day.

*‘It’s right to part here.’*

Annette thought as she closed her eyes in the dawn light.

Now they could just smile and cover up the past because they did not assume the future.

The future was uncertain. It was self-defeating for them to establish a relationship in that uncertainty. For the incessant doubt, distrust, and resentment that began in the wreckage of the past would torment them.......

Their relationship was built on lies; Annette could no longer trust him as a lover. This was apart from the fact that she came to understand and forgive him.

It was not just her problem. Annette realized why their relationship had become so distorted when he said she was the only thing he ever wanted in his hellish life.

Heiner had made her his purpose in life.

It was certainly not a normal form of emotion. It was a toxic way of thinking. So their relationship needed to end here.

Annette opened her eyes. Her blue eyes were a little darker than before. She reached out and closed the curtains.

The dawn light penetrated the gap.

She stuffed her bag tightly and zipped it up. Her luggage bag and a scarf lay alone on the empty bed.

After looking at the scarf for a moment, she heard heavy, moderate footsteps coming from outside. Annette turned her head toward the door. As expected, the knocking followed.

“May I come in?"

"Come in."

The door opened and a tall man in an officer's uniform entered. Annette greeted him with a smile.

Heiner's gaze lingered on her face for a moment, then shifted to her suitcase.

“Are you finished already?”

“I didn't have much to pack, so I finished early.”

“I really think I should see you off to the train station. The meeting can be delayed........."

"That’s outrageous. Then a revolution breaks out and you want to be removed from your position as commander-in-chief?"

“…Are you kidding?"

“I am joking.”

Heiner looked as if he didn't know whether to laugh or not.

“Oh, and ......."

Annette lifted the scarf from the bed and offered it to him. Heiner recognized it. It was the one she had been knitting the entire time she had been staying here.

Heiner looked at the navy blue scarf offered to him, unable to accept it willingly.

“It's been a long time and I'm inexperienced---here's my parting gift to you.”

She added shyly.

“It seems a bit strange to give out a scarf in the spring. I guess I'll have to do it next winter. You can throw it away if you don't need it.. ."

Heiner accepted the scarf, shaking his head. His fingers trembled faintly. After a moment, he tried to raise his lips and muttered.

“I can't ...... waste it."

Annette just smiled. An awkward silence drifted between them after those words. Heiner fiddled with the scarf, looking as if he was holding something back.

“I….”

“Annette."

Suddenly they both opened their mouths at the same time.

“You go ahead.”

“No, you speak first."

“Quickly.”

Annette urged. After a moment's hesitation, Heiner pulled something out of his pocket and placed it in Annette's hand.

“What is this?"

It was a small pouch, the kind that held jewelry. Annette opened the pouch and checked inside. Something sparkling through the fabric. In an instant, her expression hardened.

“..... because it originally belonged to you.”

Heiner spoke plainly.

“It doesn't mean anything. Whether you keep it or sell it, do what you want with it. I've been trying to return it to you for a long time, and now is my last chance."

It was her wedding ring that the jeweler could not process to sell.

Annette looked at him in bewilderment. It had been kept in the official residence, and she had no idea that Heiner had brought it here.

“But Heiner, this is what you bought.”

“I gave it to you."

He cut her off and added.

“Consider this a parting gift, too.”

“Thank you.......”

Annette was no longer adamant, but quietly accepted. The ring containing many memories felt especially heavy.

“What was it you were going to say?”

Heiner asked quietly. Annette's lips twitched as if she were choosing her words.

They stared at each other. His eyes contained her and hers contained him. A myriad of emotions swirled around them.

Eventually, Annette made her final confession.

"...Heiner, you said I didn't love the 'real' you.”

She spoke with emotion in every word, hoping that her sincerity would be conveyed.

“I loved you much more than you know.”

His eyes shook with great intensity.

“So if you had shown me all of you then---I would have loved you still.”

"..."

"...you deserve to be loved. I wish you happiness."

Annette closed her eyes and opened them. In his eyes she was as confident as ever. In them she smiled faintly.

“Goodbye, Heiner.”

\*\*\*

“Stand over here!"

Annette stood behind a long convoy of transports. She had ridden the transports countless times when she was in the frontline, but this time she was especially emotional.

Perhaps because it was the last.

Both her status as a military nurse and her relationship with him.

Annette turned and looked at the hospital building. Her skirt swayed in the spring breeze along with flower petals.

From here she could only see the windows of the hospital building. Still, she had the strange certainty that he was watching her.

“Get inside, please! We will be leaving for Portsman Station shortly!"

Annette turned around again. Then she forced her legs to take a step that did not fall. The hem of her skirt, fluttering in the wind, wrapped around her legs as if blocking her path.

“Some get in here. Everyone else, get on the next transport!"

As being swept away by the crowd,

Annette was the last in line to get into the transport. Soon the car rattled off. She mumbled quietly as she looked at the hospital building.

*Bye*.

The person who was most important to me.

Wheels started running down the road. The car carrying her was slowly moving away from the Portsman Hospital. Annette didn't turn her head until the hospital building disappeared into a dot.

The spring breeze that had followed her stopped in the middle of the street and returned to where it had come from.

\*\*\*

The strategy meeting on the Cheshire Field War ended earlier than planned. As he was returning to sickbay, Heiner heard the news that the train to Portsman Station kept getting delayed.

He sat in his chair and stared longingly at his neatly folded scarf. It was as empty as his chest.

*“It seems a bit strange to give out a scarf in the spring. I guess I'll have to do it next winter. You can throw it away if you don't need it…" (A)*

Heiner reached out and gently touched the scarf. It felt soft and warm against his fingertips.

Now he had a reason to live until this winter came.

For him, life was not always about living, but about prolonging it. And in this way, life was extended again.

Heiner bowed his head with his hand on the scarf. The weight of a much longer life and the afterimage she had left behind held him down.

*Is there anything left for me from now on?*

*“If people have a fixed amount of happiness, I think I have already enjoyed it all in the past.” (A)*

*What amount of happiness has been given to me?*

He slowly reflected on his life. Times of nothing but pain in pitch darkness passed and passed again. All that remained at the end of his recollection was that rose garden again.

It was her again.

*“Heiner, come here." (A)*

*“Ahaha, are you giving this to me again? At this rate, I will be buried in flowers and die.” (A)*

*“What are you going to do tomorrow? You're not going to see me?" (A)*

*“I love you.” (A)*

*“I love you, Heiner.” (A)*

Even if everything was a lie, scenes from the happiest moments of his life filled the empty room. Those were the days he wanted to live stuffed with those moments forever.

A thick vein was raised

on the back of his hand as it was placed on the scarf.

He called her name sadly.

*Annette.*

*If people had a fixed amount of happiness, I would have spent it all in the times I held you in my arms and whispered my love to you.*

For an instant, a strange light appeared in the gray eyes that had sunk in the dark.

*In the days when I whispered love to you.............*

Heiner's hand froze. He stared at the scarf with a dazed look on his face. Then he raised his trembling hand and slowly rubbed his face.

His wristwatch entered his vision. The minute hand was pointing to twenty-five minutes. He jumped up from his seat.

There was something he wanted to say to her.

He left the hospital room in a frenzy, without time to get his coat. The sound of impatient footsteps echoed through the corridor. The quick pace soon turned into a run.

There was something he had to tell her.

Heiner jumped down into the lobby. He did not care that people were looking at him. At this moment, only one sentence filled his head.

*Annette.*

*I, I love you..........*

He arrived at the hospital entrance and opened the door.

The spring breeze brushed his face.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 98

The station was very crowded. Annette stood in the crowd with her luggage. The train was being delayed far longer than it was initially announced.

“What's wrong?"

"They said it's because of construction or it’s using another railroad.”

"There have been a particularly large number of delays lately............"

“What should we do? The situation is like this."

People buzzed around. Every now and then a voice could be heard mixed with frustration, "It's terrible even if we try."

After looking around for a while, Annette shifted her seat toward the wall. Then she sat down, hugging her luggage.

Her legs ached from standing for so long.

People hurried past in front of her. Leaning against the wall, she looked up at the blue sky.

Waiting for the train at the station, she realized that she had really left him. She hugged her luggage tightly for no reason.

She knew this was the right way, but she couldn't help but feel pain in one corner of her chest.

There was no such thing as a perfect choice. She had to make the best choice. She began to make other assumptions, even though she was convinced that this was the best choice.

Could they not have endured and indulged in all the pain and hurt that they had to beat just because they were together?

Could they not move forward together into an uncertain future...............

Suddenly, a presence was felt at her legs. Annette checked beside her. A dog with a collar was wagging its tail and pushing its nose at her. Its black nose was sniffing.

She smiled and patted the dog. The warmth wrapped around her hand made her feel like she was going to cry.

\*\*\*

A car ran on an empty road due to a vehicle requisition. His hands gripped the steering wheel tightly. Heiner glanced at his watch.

8:42.

The train was scheduled to arrive at 10:05 after a long delay. He could only make it just in time if he ran without rest.

No, in fact, the probability that he would not make it in time was much higher. But he had no choice.

She had led him out of the long, dark tunnel. It was now his turn to go on.

8:58.

The scenery outside passed quickly through the car window. The road continued endlessly beyond his field of vision. He spat out a confession to the woman at the end of that road.

*Annette.*

*Annette Rosenberg.*

*I finally figured it out. I understand now. Why I couldn't let you go.*

*Why you, who ruined me and I ruined you, remained the most important person to me.*

Heiner pressed down on the accelerator. The car sped up even more. The road was rough and the car rattled terribly.

9:24.

*In retrospect, even my loneliness, sadness, and pain gained by you became something different for me at the end of the long road.*

*All the pieces of life that have piled up inside of me all shine through you.*

*I could not express this feeling in one word. I could not put into one sentence this deep and deformed feeling I had for you.*

*Yet if there is one word that truly must reach you.*

9:47 pm.

Heiner gritted his teeth. Eventually he made a quiet confession.

*I love you.*

*I love you, despite all your past and all of mine, despite all that I have broken, despite our future that can go no further.*

*I love you.*

*My love for you is not a lie. The me you loved is not a lie, and my love is not a lie.*

*I wanted to love you. I wanted to love you without any guilt, without any flaw, just as we once were in those dreamy days.*

*In fact, I always did.*

*I learned that fact too late.*

9:56.

The Portsman train station was visible in the distance. However, the area around the station was crowded with military vehicles and carriages, so he could not go any faster.

Heiner eventually pulled over to the side of the road. After putting his hat on deeply, he got out of the car and started running toward the station. The minute hand on his wristwatch pointed to the appointed time.

A crowd of people swarmed out of sight. The whole world, filled with mayhem, seemed quiet. Only his disordered breathing was clear in his ears.

Heiner entered the station and looked around frantically. He grabbed a passing station attendant and asked urgently,

“Where is the platform for the 10:05 train to Lancaster to Cynthia?"

The station attendant, who was slightly puzzled, pointed in the direction with his finger.

"If you're going to Lancaster, go to that entrance......."

“Thank you.”

Heiner rushed there without listening to the rest of what the attendant had to say. The train had already arrived at the station. The platform was crowded with people trying to board the train.

10:03.

He waded through the crowd to find Annette. However, no matter how many times he wandered around, he only saw unfamiliar faces. A station attendant shouted loudly.

“The train will be leaving soon! Please get on board!”

The number of people gradually decreased. Heiner began to check the faces of the people sitting by the train windows one by one. He was out of his mind with worry.

The train made a sizzling sound as if it was about to depart. He breathed heavily as he ran along the windows.

10:05.

It wasn't until he reached the tail compartment of the train that he caught a familiar profile at the end of his gaze. For a moment his breathing stopped. Annette, seated by the window, had her head down and her eyes closed.

Heiner rushed over and tapped on the window. Annette's expressionless face involuntarily turned her head. Immediately next, her eyes widened.

“Heiner?”

Her lips said.

She hurriedly opened the window. After a moment of astonishment, an incredulous voice flowed out.

“Heiner! Why are you here...?"

“Annette, I have something to say to you.”

The chugging sound of the train gradually grew louder. In the middle of the noise, Heiner spoke quickly, omitting the entire beginning.

“The time I spent with you was the happiest and most precious time of my life. That time was not a lie. It was, in fact, my true heart and my everything. Annette."

"..."

"I actually wanted to live that way--- with you forever. Even when I hated you, there was never a time when I didn't love you."

Annette looked at him with surprise. The train gradually began to depart.

“Annette, I love you.”

He confessed urgently in his labored breathing.

“With all my heart.”

A loud steam rang out. The train moved forward. Heiner stepped in its direction and said once more,

“With all my life.”

It was love.

He returned to the ruins at the end of a long road and found love.

The wheels turned and chugged. The train gradually picked up speed. Heiner began to walk faster along the train.

“I am not trying to hold you back. I just wanted to tell you that our time together was not a complete lie. That my love was not a lie. So............"

"..."

“I hope you are happy, that you are not in too much pain anymore. Annette, you are most important to me."

"..."

“Thank you for loving me like this."

His voice choked. He tried to smile, but failed because his lips kept quivering.

The train sped up even faster. Heiner ran after her. As he had done all his life. But now for the very last time.

Heiner captured her beautiful face in his shaky vision without blinking. They stared at each other as if they were the only two people left in the whole world.

Annette, who had been listening to him in a daze, moved her lips. Her face, which had been stained with confusion, immediately hardened with a certain determination.

"...I'll write to you."

Her words were half buried in the steam noise of the train.

But Heiner could hear clearly. He also knew what her words meant. An intense sensation ran down his spine as if the blood in his entire body was flowing backwards.

"Annette, to you.............."

He exclaimed in a hoarse voice, using the last of his strength over the noise.

“I will bring you victory!”

His breath had reached its limit. Annette reached for him. At that moment, the chugging sound of the train grew deafeningly loud.

Heiner tried to take her hand, but only grazed her fingertips. At the same time, his legs gave out. The train moved faster. Her hand moved further away.

A loud steam noise interrupted them. Windows passed him by. Soon she was completely out of sight. After running slowly with weak legs for some time, he stopped.

The only sound left in the deserted platform was a shuffling sound like lingering snow. Heiner stared at the train as it sped away.

*I love you.*

No matter how many times he told her, it was never enough.

*I love you.*

The train, which looked like a dot, soon disappeared without even a sound. Still, Heiner could not leave for a long time. The sunlight illuminated the spot where he stood.

*I love you.*

Even the shady days were all miracles to him.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 99

*AU 716.*

*Their wedding took place in the Manhern Church in the heart of Lancaster. It was the largest and most luxurious church in the capital, with huge stained glass windows filling both walls.*

*The chapel was filled with well-dressed guests. All were the connections of Marquis Dietrich. The groom's wedding pew was empty.*

*It was a chaotic time of revolution, especially for the factory workers, but the faces of the guests did not seem to show any signs of concern or worry.*

*Heiner hid his contempt beneath his indifferent expression. Then he painted a bright smile. Just for today, he had to be the happiest groom in the world.*

*The officiant informed the bride of her position. Heiner stood straight in front of the podium and looked at the dazzling white figure walking from the end of the aisle.*

*His bride walked up to him along the flower aisle.*

*She was holding the hand of Marquis Dietrich. The veiled bride with her white bouquet looked immaculate and holy.*

*In front of her, Heiner felt an unknown fear. She looked terribly beautiful and innocent. His heart throbbed and ached.*

*Soon the bride reached the platform. Heiner took over her hand from Marquis Dietrich. The hand wrapped in a white lace glove felt like it should not be touched carelessly.*

*The groom and bride faced each other. Heiner reached out a slightly trembling hand and carefully lifted her veil.*

*Along the veil, her graceful white neck and slender jawline, her red lips and pink cheeks, and her deep ocean-blue eyes appeared in sequence.*

*His bride smiled shyly. Heiner groaned quietly before the sublime face before him. Dual emotions tangled messily together.*

*He wanted to destroy this innocent woman.*

*Or he just wanted to take her hand*

*and run far away.*

*He wanted to take this colorful and happy world away from her.*

*Or he just wanted to get away from this noisy and harsh world with her.*

*Just to be where they were everything to each other…*

*They stood looking at the platform. The pastor's officiating continued.*

*Heiner tried to submerge his swaying emotions under the surface.*

*“I ask the groom Heiner Valdemar. In the presence of the Lord and the witnesses here, do you take bride Annette Rosenberg as your wife, and do you pledge to respect and love each other and to fulfill your husband's duty as long as you live according to the legal laws of marriage?"*

*“I do.”*

*“I ask bride Annette Rosenberg. Do you, in the presence of the Lord and the witnesses here, take the groom, Heiner Valdemar, to be your husband, and do you swear to respect and love one another and to fulfill the duty of a wife as long as you live according to the laws of marriage?"*

*“I do.”*

*“With this you have promised to become husband and wife in the presence of the Lord. In accordance with the beautiful covenant and holy promises, I declare that you two have become lawfully wedded husband and wife."*

*Following the pastor's declaration, the audience clapped their hands in unison. Annette looked back at him, smiling like a blooming flower.*

*They placed their wedding rings on each other's fingers. Heiner gazed for a moment at their hands, which were gleaming with identical rings, then bowed his head and kissed her rosy lips.*

*"...I love you."*

*He whispered between kisses.*

*“I love you, Annette Valdemar."*

*Truth and lies blurred at this moment. He could only let out a confession like a far-off crash through his lips. With the brightly smiling bride's face locked in his vision.*

*The sunlight that streamed through the stained glass drenched them both brilliantly. They kissed once more. The sound of bells filled the chapel.*

\*\*\*

The child was sitting in a chair in the dark hospital hallway. His short legs dangled under the chair.

Heiner looked at the child quietly from a few steps away. Joseph was reading alone. His profile seemed especially small and lonely.

The child, who had lost both parents in the war, was too shocked to speak. The doctor could not say for sure whether the symptoms were temporary or permanent.

He originally had to be brought to the orphanage much earlier because he had no guardian. Annette seemed to care for him and just let him stay here longer.

Heiner made his presence known so that the child would not be startled. Joseph raised his head. Heiner slowly approached the child and carefully sat down next to him.

"...Is it that book again?"

It was a book called The Adventures of William or something. Heiner narrowed his brows slightly, but relaxed his expression as he remembered Annette's comment that he looked scary.

“Don't you ever get tired of it?"

Joseph shook his head. He must have read the same story dozens of times, and yet he never got tired of it. It was hard to understand.

For some reason, Joseph was no longer wary of him, even though he seemed to be having a hard time with him. Heiner thought the reason was because of Annette.

This little child was now completely alone. And he (Heiner) was someone who was still related to Annette who was this child’s friend.

Heiner looked down at Joseph’s round head for a moment.

"...Would you like me to read you the book?"

Then spoke the words he would never have said under normal circumstances.

The last time Annette asked him to read the book to the child, he made an excuse and ran away.

Joseph’s face broke into a smile. The child nodded and immediately offered him the book. Heiner hesitantly accepted the book with a completely stunned expression on his face even though he made the suggestion.

"...Once upon a time, there was a legend in the Kingdom of Grandel."

The fairy tale was nothing special. William, a rambunctious boy living in the countryside, heard a legend about the only flower in the world that could help him find happiness.

“William crossed the river over the mountain for a year in search of the flower.”

William the Rambler ventured north, and with all his hard work, he found the flower.

“And William finally found the flower of happiness on a snowy mountaintop.”

However, he just couldn’t break the flower that bloomed so beautifully, so he walked away.

“After a long adventure, William returned home. His family welcomed William with tears after being away from home for so long.”

The child’s breathing fluctuated next to him. Heiner continued in a calm voice.

“William felt great happiness in the arms of his family. He regretted his past, when he had lived like a rampaging child, and he farmed hard, helping his parents."

It was a performance far short of Annette's, who had lively made the book more interesting with different voices. Heiner knew it, but for him this was the best he could do.

“And they lived happily ever after."

His low voice ended the fairy tale. Silence followed. Heiner glanced at the child.

It was an uninteresting narration even in his own opinion, but Joseph looked reasonably pleased.

"...Was it fun?"

Joseph nodded. Heiner wondered if the child could read and write. If he had to read like this all the time, he thought, he would be in a bit of trouble.

“Wouldn't you like to see Annette?”

The child's lips pursed. It seemed to mean that he wanted to see her.

"Me too."

Heiner murmured in a low voice. Then, as he remembered, he asked Joseph.

“Did Annette say she would write to you?”

Joseph nodded several times, more forcefully than before. At that, Heiner's expression turned a little jealous.

"...... I wasn't the only one, was I?"

For some reason, he felt empty. He knew it was childish to feel this way, but he couldn’t help it. But there was a faint smile on his lips.

The hospital lights flickered on and off several times. Heiner stroked the child’s head in the dim light.

\*\*\*

“We are arriving at Cynthia station! If you're getting off at Cynthia, just get off at this station!"

The train immediately became lively. Annette packed her luggage and looked out the window at Cynthia. Whether it was because of the war or the bombing, it felt more desolate than before.

Since the bombing, restoration work had progressed from the main facilities and was now almost complete. However, most of the city center remained untouched.

After getting off the train, Annette took a carriage to the old town of Cynthia. Her companion in the carriage recognized her and greeted her.

“Oh, hello."

“Ah........ hello."

“My name is Lily Sherbet.”

“I’m Annette.”

“I know."

The woman smiled brightly and asked to shake her hand. Annette awkwardly shook Lily's hand. At the same time, the carriage rattled off.

"You're a celebrity these days."

"...Really? I don't read the papers much these days."

“It was the good ones I saw, so don't worry. Where are you going?"

“The old town.”

“The Old Town? The one on Guardford Street? Do you live there?”

“No, I know someone who lives there. I haven't seen her in a while. I haven't been able to reach her.”

"Oh….”

Lily's expression darkened slightly. She opened her mouth after a moment’s hesitation.

“You know there was a bombing at Cynthia, don't you?"

“Yes, I heard... Perhaps there was bombing in the old town as well?"

“Yes. But as you know, Cynthia itself is an area where it’s densely populated. I don't want to say anything bad to you who are going to visit there after a long time..........."

"That's ok. I would be grateful if you would tell me.”

“The old town side was badly damaged. Since the buildings are so old, the air-raid shelter was not appropriately built, and if the place you want to visit is in the affected area, go to the refugee camp on Simon Avenue."

Lily hastened to add, perhaps noticing the sudden deterioration in Annette's expression as she listened.

"The damage to the buildings was severe, but the death rate wasn't high. I think everyone is safe."

“..... yes. I'm sure you are right. Thank you so much for telling me.”

"What? You've served on the front lines.”

Lily placed her hand over the back of Annette's hand, which was on her lap. The stranger's warmth was warmer than she expected. The carriage rattled. Lily said with a smile.

“Thank you for all your hard work."

\*\*\*

# Chapter 100

The old town of Cynthia was still in ruins from the horrific bombing. Annette wandered around the once familiar city.

Buildings with collapsed ceilings and walls lied helplessly. Restoration work was underway in various places, but it seemed to be moving slowly.

Annette went deeper into the street. A woman was sitting on a collapsed wall reading a book. When her eyes met Annette's, she greeted her.

"...Good afternoon.”

Children kicking a ball ran by Annette as she greeted them. People were still living as usual in the town that had been so horribly changed.

Life went on as usual.

Annette entered the street where the Grott family lived. The two buildings at the entrance to the street were still completely collapsed. Her heart sank looking at the scene.

She quickened her pace. Soon, her gaze caught sight of a familiar house. Fortunately, it did not appear to have been severely damaged on the surface.

Arriving in front of the house, Annette knocked on the door. An ominous thought came to her mind: what if a stranger came out from inside?

A few moments later, she heard footsteps coming from inside. Annette tightened her hand on her suitcase. Soon the door opened.

A familiar face appeared through the gap in the door. As soon as she saw who it was, her tension melted away. The man with the surprised look on his face opened his mouth in confusion.

“...... Annette?"

Bruner’s puzzled expression turned bright as he came to his senses belatedly. He hugged Annette with joy.

“Who is this!"

“Bruner!”

“Let's have a look at your face!”

Bruner grabbed Annette's cheek and turned her this way and that to check her. He spoke in a slightly trembling voice.

“Your face is all scratched up.”

"We've all had a tough time, haven't we?"

“I’ve read the papers. What nonsense have you been doing?"

“It’s not nonsense.”

Annette laughed it off lightly. But Bruner looked angry and lowered his voice.

“You know there are more than one or two things that are upsetting me right now, don't you? Why in the world did you leave without saying a word to me? If you go, you should be safe!”

“I did so because I know this is how you would react."

“Ha......... Still, I'm really glad you're safe. Really---did you come here right after your discharge?"

“Yes, I did. It’s on the way from the station.”

“Let's go inside. It’s a bit messy.”

Bruner led Annette inside the house in bewilderment. Upon entering, there was a familiar smell peculiar to the Grotts.

As Bruner said, the house was quite messy. It was odd, though, considering Catherine's neat personality.

She figured that was probably because things had been so hectic lately.

Annette looked around the house with a new face. Her gaze stopped in the middle of the living room.

Olivia was playing with a toy on a blanket. Annette covered her mouth with one hand,

“Oh my God…!”

“She's getting so big, isn't she?"

Annette put down her suitcase and squatted in front of Olivia. The new child she hadn't seen had grown up amazingly. She wondered if all children really grow up this fast.

“How did you get so big already?”

Olivia started to babble when she saw Annette. But she couldn't quite understand what she was saying.

“What are you saying?"

“I don't know either, haha. But I'm sure mom and dad do. Apparently, they are geniuses."

“Olivia, do you remember me? I fed you and put you to bed."

She looked over at Olivia as she mumbled. Her cheeks were soft and plump from a belly full of love. Bruner said from a distance.

“Catherine tried to teach her Annette's name, but ultimately failed.”

“Catherine mentioned it in her letter. Oh, by the way...---"

Annette asked as she looked around the house.

"Where is Catherine...........?"

But there was no sign of Catherine anywhere in the house. Annette turned her head to look up at Bruner.

Her gaze met Bruner's, who was standing behind her. The moment she read his expression, Annette knew something was wrong.

\*\*\*

A tea cup was placed on the table with a clink. The tea shook precariously. Annette stared at the corner of the table half in a daze, unable to even think about lifting the teacup.

Bruner, who had set the teacup down, sat across from her. They said nothing for a while. After a long silence, Bruner struggled to open his mouth.

"...... the evacuation order was issued."

A passage from the letter came to mind over the swaying tea.

*[When the war is over, come straight to our house without going elsewhere for no reason. Do you understand?] (Ca)*

“I was at home with Olivia that day, and my wife was a little far away at the market…We were evacuated to another place during the bombing."

*[Annette, I know these words are boring, but please take care of yourself until the end.] (Ca)*

"But the bombing caused the gas pipe in the air-raid shelter where Catherine was evacuated to burst, and she was immediately taken to the hospital, but after two days she did not survive….”

*[May the Lord always guide and protect you.] (Ca)*

Annette grabbed her hands, which were shaking uncontrollably. On one side, Olivia babbled softly.

*Why?*

A strange chill touched her skin. Even though there was no one to answer, she continued to search for the reason. Why did Catherine have to die?

*Why?*

She continued asking. And at the point of origin, in the middle, an irreversible past. Her mind wandered endlessly.

Annette slowly lowered her head. Her rough breaths poured out. She crouched small and spoke in a low voice.

“I'm sorry, Bruner..........."

“What do you mean all of a sudden? Why are you apologizing?”

Bruner waved his hand as if perplexed. But Annette could not quite erase her guilt. She slurred.

“You all moved here because of me. If it wasn't for me, you wouldn't have come here and gone through all this......"

"This is nonsense. Annette, there is nothing wrong with you. Rather ---."

Bruner hesitated for a moment, then continued in a matter-of-fact tone, as if telling a very old story.

“Catherine always felt rather sorry for you, Annette."

“What ...... is that?"

“Ever since my wife went to the official residence, she heard you tried to die. Twice too....... Catherine always felt guilty about it."

“It wasn't Catherine's fault.”

Bruner chuckled and shook his head.

“Catherine told me this. ‘You would think the woman would live happily in a huge mansion, but the woman I actually met.......... looked so lonely and unhappy’."

It was the first time Annette heard of it. Annette and Catherine had never talked about their past during the time they lived together.

“And in hindsight, she said that you lost your family just like she lost her brother. It must be very painful to be hated by everyone in the world.. Why did she think that woman was just living a happy life?”

Even in her daze, Annette felt perplexed. Catherine didn't need to apologize to her. She was just a victim.

“So when she heard the news of your divorce, she was hanging around the vicinity of the official residence every day. She wanted to see you and talk to you again. So she kept waiting for you to come out.........."

“…”

“She said you always seemed like someone who was going to die again. It seemed like you had nowhere else to go."

How did Catherine find her that day? Was it really a simple coincidence? Annette had wondered countless times.

“So she brought you here on an impulse.”

Why did she take her to her house...........

“Actually, we knew that you had miscarried because of what David did. But we just couldn't............ bring up the story half-heartedly. Because as you know, we've all been reluctant to talk about the past. I'm afraid we'll hurt each other...… .”

Annette listened to him in silence. She didn't think they knew. For that matter, she just assumed that it would be buried forever.

“That left her with some emotional baggage. Before she died, Catherine wanted to tell you how sorry she was.”

Bruner chuckled sadly. He looked calm, but his eyes were a little red.

"...Will you forgive us?"

\*\*\*

The old door creaked open.

Annette's steps stopped for a moment as she was about to enter the room. As Bruner had said, everything in the room remained the same.

Catherine said she had not cleaned up her room. She sat down on her bed after looking around the room, saying that Annette would be back here when the war was over. Coming to this room, it was as if time had gone back to last year.

Too much had happened during that time. Too much had changed. So much that the days spent here felt far away.

Annette hesitantly opened the letter she was holding. It was the letter that Bruner had given her, the last letter Catherine had left her.

The paper full of text was written in a rather unfamiliar handwriting. Catherine was unable to write at the time, so Bruner said he had written it for her. The letter was not long.

Compared to past letters, it was rather too short. However, Annette spent a considerable amount of time reading it.

Her heart hurt, terribly…

Blue eyes moved slowly left and right. The hand holding the letter was shaking faintly. After reading through the last sentence, Annette slowly closed her eyes.

Then she hugged the letter preciously. Dust floated silently in the sunlight in the room. She slumped forward. A small sob escaped from her curled body.

The sobbing did not cease for a long time.

*[Dear Annette,*

*I'm sorry I had to leave without being able to see your face and say goodbye to you like this, and without being able to talk about deep subjects. My husband will continue the rest of my story.*

*Annette, I did not respond to your apology. It is only late now that I finally give you my answer. I have already forgiven you for everything.*

*Please forgive me.*

*Do not grieve for long.*

*Please don't be in pain for long.*

*With time, you will be able to let everything flow calmly.*

*May you always be happy, my kind and beautiful sister.*

*With friendship, comfort and love.*

*Catherine Grot.]*

\*\*\*

# Chapter 101

Catherine was buried on a hillside behind the village.

In addition to Catherine, other war victims were buried together in this communal cemetery. Annette walked slowly among the graves carrying a bouquet of flowers.

Birds scampered over the grass and flew away as she approached. It was a peaceful sight, without any pain or suffering.

Eventually Annette spotted a gravestone and stopped. On it was inscribed a familiar name.

*Catherine Grott.*

*(AU 691-722)*

The year that Catherine's life ended was truly strange. The number made her realize that she really was dead.

Annette placed the bouquet of flowers she was carrying in front of the tombstone. Then she swept the inscribed name with her fingertips for a moment.

The grass rustled in the wind. Annette removed her hand from the tombstone and slowly sat down. After looking at the distant landscape for a while, she quietly opened her mouth.

"...Why are you apologizing to me?"

The empty question dissipated. There was no reply back.

“Thank you for forgiving me. I also....... forgive you. If I deserve it….”

Her throat was starting to get choked up. She took a long breath, paused for a moment, then added the complaint that it was now pointless.

“You told me to come back.”

The edge of her voice trembled dangerously. Annette closed her eyes and lowered her head. Her chest throbbed painfully.

How long would it take for her to calmly let everything go?

How much time would it take for this heart to become strong?

Annette raised her head. Her flickering vision was dazzlingly blue. She looked at the bouquet of flowers she had left by her grave. Petals rustled in the wind.

“…Thank you so much, sister.”

\*\*\*

*Heiner was lying in the middle of closed darkness.*

*His whole body was as ragged as a rotten piece of bread eaten by a rat. His rapid breathing became progressively slower.*

*At one moment, a faint light leaked out with the sound of old iron. The guards, who had come in with a rush, made him stand up.*

*Handcuffs were placed on his wrists. Someone walked in with heavy boots. A strange heat flared up nearby.*

*"Dirty---your parents and the Marquis.........?"*

*He struggled to lift his bloody eyelids. Between his dim vision, a man with rimless glasses smiled sarcastically.*

*“Dirty man wh\*re.”*

*Annette Rosenberg.*

*Heiner licked his torn lips and murmured quietly. The name, both terribly cursed and terribly lovely, dominated his mind.*

*Then, pain like an iron hot stamp was engraved on his chest.*

*Annette Rosenberg.*

"Ha."

Heiner jumped up with a sharp intake of breath.

The area was pitch black. His whole body was drenched in a cold sweat. Breathing irregularly, he got out of bed and staggered to the window.

Heiner opened the half-open window all the way. The cool night air touched his face. But his breathing, once disturbed, did not come back easily.

His vision shook wildly. Heiner opened the top drawer and took out a white medicine chest. He stopped for a moment as he tried to open the lid with shaking hands.

His gaze fell on the open drawer.

Heiner, who had been standing some distance away, placed his medicine chest down on the shelf.

Then he reached for the picture frame in the drawer.

He hesitantly took out the frame and looked at it.

The night air streamed in through the expansive window. Heiner slowly sat down on the bed holding the picture frame.

His cautious fingertips touched the face in the painting. The face (in the picture) had a bright smile on it. He felt that the dark place became brighter.

Her blue eyes, narrowed by laughter, seemed to be looking at him. Behind her was the sea, glowing red in the setting sun.

It was a painting he had purchased on the beach in Glenford before he and Annette divorced.

It was also the one he always carried with him while he was traveling.

Heiner still remembered the moment vividly. The shock he felt when he saw her bright, smiling face was also vivid.

Somewhere along the way he often looked into this picture when he suffered from breathing difficulties in the enclosed space or when nightmares of the past visited him.

Seeing her bright smiling face, even if it was only a picture, made ...... something flood out of his chest.

Such an overflow filled him to the brim, pushing aside his anxiety and pain. It was like pouring clean water into a glass of muddy water.

Heiner already knew the name.

It was love.

He exhaled slowly. Before he knew it, his unsteady breathing had become stable. His realization of this fact included a bitter sneer.

*I know.*

*I know that this past, this memory will haunt me until the day I die. No matter how hard I struggle, I will never be able to escape it completely.*

The love that filled him paradoxically brought him another form of anxiety and pain.

Heiner touched the frame, noticed the marks of his fingerprints on the glass, and pulled his hand away.

*Annette, the punishment of my life.*

*My beautiful shackles.*

*How long will it be before I can escape from you?*

A cool night breeze ruffled the curtains. His quiet gaze did not leave the painting for a long time. He already knew the answer.

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The pen nib fell from the paper. Annette waited for the ink to dry, folded the letter neatly and placed it in an envelope.

She put the envelope in her bag, carefully not to wrinkle it, and got up from her seat. The sunlight shining through the open window was warm.

Annette left the house with her bag slung over her shoulder. Her first stop was the post office three blocks from Guardsford Street.

The post office was packed with people. After a long wait, she sent her letter at the front line field post office.

A little prayer was carried with it.

Annette came out into the street again and grabbed the carriage. Its destination was the central Passau prison run by the local government. It was not far from Cynthia.

After getting off the carriage, Annette raised her head and looked at the high walls. There was barbed wire netting on the walls that blocked all four sides of the Passau prison.

She entered the cold gray building. After looking around for a moment inside the bleak interior, she put in an inmate visitation application at the reception desk.

"I would like to visit an inmate."

"Let me check. What is the inmate's name?"

"David ......"

Annette recited a name she hadn't spoken in a long time.

“His name is David Burkel.”

\*\*\*

In Annette's faint memory, David seemed large and formidable. In fact, she had never met him except once.

So Annette had only one impression of David. That moment when he pointed a silver gun at her.

“......Hello."

But David Burkel, who was in front of her, was a young man of ordinary build and frail looking.

As soon as she saw him, Annette realized that her memory was distorted.

“Do you remember me...........?"

David nodded quietly at her careful question. He opened his mouth with his eyes downcast.

"............... Miss Annette Rosenberg."

The title "Rosenberg" that came out of David's mouth was not laced with any special personal feeling. Rather, it was even plaintive, as if merely pointing out a fact.

An uncomfortable silence fell between them. Annette struggled with her prepared words and finally managed to get one out.

“I'm sorry about your family’s loss…”

"...."

“Catherine was a truly good person. I will never forget her."

David's shoulders jolted. He looked smaller and petite than his natural size. And Annette looked at him with new eyes.

David Burkel.

She shouldn’t have good feelings towards him. This was a different matter from the letter of pardon she had written and the favors Catherine had done for her.

Still, Annette felt resentment, awkwardness, discomfort, and at the same time............ human pity for him. David had lost his brother long ago and now even his sister.

Annette felt that if he got the punishment he deserved, that would be enough.

That thought calmed her heart even more.

“It is too late, but I wanted to apologize on behalf of my father for what he committed. That is why I came. I will never visit again."

"...."

“I'm sorry. It was an innocent and unfair death."

David did not answer. Annette did not continue to speak any further either. Numerous emotions danced in the heavy silence.

They sat for quite a long time without saying a word across the bars.

"...... My sister........."

David, who had kept his head down the whole time, mumbled.

“She was a righteous woman.”

“Yes, she was."

“My sister was terribly angry with me. She said I shouldn't have done that. That it was the wrong way. She told me to come out after getting the proper price for my sins....."

"..."

"------ about my legacy as well."

David slowly raised his head. His eyes, which had once aimed at her in anger, no longer held any heat.

Annette finally looked into his eyes. David sobbed.

“I'm sorry .......”

"..."

“Sorry."

Tears rolled down his cheeks.

Annette's eyes trembled faintly. She took a low breath and clenched her fists, but soon relaxed them completely. Then she answered quietly.

"...............I forgive you."

\*\*\*

# Chapter 102

Support forces also arrived at Cheshire Field just as some of the Axis troops redeployed from the Central Front arrived in the south.

Cheshire Field was a large breadbasket, boasting vast plains that lived up to the region's name. It was also one of the main purposes of France’s instigating this war.

However, the moment they saw the Allied troops appearing on the plain, the French high command had to admit that their expectations had been terribly wrong.

The young commander-in-chief of Padania was a very quick-witted man.

The morale of the enemy forces hit bottom when Padania, which had expected to surrender in a mainland air raid, launched a huge counterattack and even recaptured Huntingham.

On top of that, the enemy forces moved inland to Padania, which made the distance from the mainland, the supply base, excessively far. It meant that they were experiencing considerable difficulties in spreading out.

Nevertheless, the Axis soldiers had to keep advancing toward Cheshire Field. Because their Führer wanted the land.

Riding this momentum, the Allied forces pushed the front line about two kilometers with an onslaught.

It happened in just one day. The early battle quickly tilted to one side.

As the situation became more difficult, there were many deserters on the enemy side. Upon receiving this report, France’s Führer issued strict orders.

“There will be no surrender. We will occupy Cheshire Field no matter what. Deserters must be shot."

The capture or shooting of deserters alive was originally a requirement of military law as well. But the order directly from the Führer's mouth carried even more weight.

The notorious French militia began to exercise strict control over deserters. They did not hesitate to punish deserters in any way. The soldiers, engulfed in fear, advanced as if driven.

The Führer's orders worked. The helplessly pushed out front line entered into a stalemate to some extent.

And in the Allied General Headquarters, located behind this front, meetings continued day after day from morning until dawn.

“We need to keep this place as consistent as possible. If one division advances excessively like this, it is obvious that it will be isolated among the enemy forces.”

“But at present, both of these wings are unable to advance. Please consider making a slight adjustment to the power deployment.”

“Then there are forces that can be deployed right now ......”

Suddenly, the door opened with a bang. All eyes of the high-ranking officers, including the Commander-in-Chief, were on one spot.

The soldier who had stormed into the conference room was breathing heavily. Heiner's one eyebrow lifted.

Eventually, the soldier shouted in a trembling voice,

“It's an air raid on Balichen! The location of the command center has been discovered! We must evacuate!"

\*\*\*

Newspapers reported extensively on the results the Allied forces had achieved at Cheshire Field. It was meant to boost morale that had been broken by the air raids on the mainland.

However, apart from the favorable war situation at Cheshire Field, Padania was suffering from the prolongation of the war.

Countless men and women who had gone to the front with the mission of serving their country had perished. The land was devastated, and war orphans were aplenty.

Still, the seasons passed steadily. The beginning of summer was approaching.

And it was then that Annette prepared to leave Cynthia.

"Knock, knock.”

Bruner said as he pushed the door, which was slightly ajar. Annette, who had been putting away her clothes, looked up.

“Are you packing up?”

“Yes. I’ve moved so much that I’ve become an expert at packing.”

“Did you go there as a nurse and only develop your packing skills?"

Bruner walked into the room laughing.

“Are you going to Santa Molly after all?"

“Yes, well…”

Santa Molly was a small southern town by the sea. Annette was going to move there.

Originally, she had looked into other rural areas. But three days ago, out of the blue, Heiner's lawyer came to visit her. He told her about the alimony that was still unpaid.

The lawyer stated that she had not yet received any portion of the alimony and showed her documents concerning the tangible property that Heiner Valdemar owned and now to be paid to her.

It was the first time in Annette's life that she had ever heard of the unpaid alimony.

Annette thought she had missed something. Because in fact, she did not know anything about alimony.

It was only natural. The payment documents had only been communicated late; everything else had been left at the official residence, and she hadn't even listened to her lawyer at the time.

Annette examined the documents, but her ignorance in this field made it difficult for her to point out anything. The brilliant and logical speaking skills of the expert lawyer also played a role.

After two days of agonizing, she finally stamped her seal on the documents. Predictably, Bruner remarkably liked her decision.

"I got it well, really. Why did you sit there worrying about it? I have to take it now."

“Well, what’s wrong with that? Catherine said Annette’s not much greed is a problem. A little greed is one way to live.”

“Still.......... it’s a little strange…”

Annette laughed without reply.

She never had any greed. She was just castrated for the last few years.

The revolution had taken away all her past. She should not be greedy for anything. She had long since resigned herself to it and got used to it.

"Don't pretend you don't know me just because you’re moving far away, come visit me often."

“Of course. Catherine and Bruner are my benefactors. And I have to see Olivia grow up."

“You don’t owe us anything. What is this unnecessary talk?

Please take this.”

Bruner held out the envelope he was holding. Annette accepted it, wondering why he was already giving her a farewell letter, even though she had not yet gone.

“May I open it now?”

“Yes, please.”

Annette carefully opened the envelope. What came out of it was not a letter but a bank document.

The account shares were in Annette's name. Her expression hardened as she read a few lines of the documents.

Bruner said in a matter-of-fact tone.

“I’m giving it back to Annette.”

"...Bruner, this is what I gave you guys."

The night before she left, the amount of the check Annette had given Catherine was still in the account.

Annette put back the document into the envelope and tried to give it to him. But Bruner refused, shaking his head.

“I kept it all along to give it back to Annette.”

“I gave it to Catherine.”

“Annette, it was her will that I give it back to you.”

"...Her will?"

“Catherine took it at that time because she decided that you, who had to leave soon, would not be able to handle or manage it. She told me just before she died that Annette had given her this. She thought I might get greedy if I found out.”

Bruner laughed as if he was making a light joke.

"Knowing that if she left it in her will......... I'd have no choice but to protect it."

"..."

"That's too bad. If it wasn't in the will, I would just keep it. Haha.”

But Annette did not laugh. She couldn't laugh. The edges of the paper bag crumpled slightly in her hands.

She had once said to Heiner, "If people had a fixed amount of happiness, I would have already enjoyed it all in the past. "

“….Bruner. If people had a fixed amount of good fortune."

Annette spoke in a choked voice.

“I would have used it all to meet you and Catherine.”

Bruner's eyes widened in surprise at the words. His lips quivered as if he were about to say something but did not, and he sighed.

Bruner's gaze was fixed on Annette, but he was not looking at her. His longing eyes were staring at something in the distance beyond.

Bruner, who had been silent for a while, chuckled and asked.

"Was it worth it ......?"

Annette answered without hesitation.

“Overflowing.”

\*\*\*

An emergency evacuation order was issued. It was a major air raid by the Balichen Air Force targeting the officers' barracks.

Heiner first put the letter in his pocket. It was a letter he had received yesterday through the military post office.

Then he grabbed his rifle and ammunition and loaded his gun. There was a clatter from his heavy rifle.

Because of his position, it had been a long time since he had fought directly with a weapon. But he used the rifle skillfully as if it were his own body.

After a brief moment of work, Heiner holstered his pistol and left the barracks. It was already half a mayhem outside.

There was a heavy thud from overhead. Heiner looked at the sky with a furrowed brow.

Two enemy helicopters were flying side by side in the blue sky. Heiner, who was watching them, asked the chief of staff.

“Didn’t you say they were not showing up on the radar network?"

“It's very hard to intercept them. It looks like they sprayed aluminum debris in the air to avoid radar."

“Summon as many anti-aircraft guns as possible and shoot them down on land.”

The anti-aircraft guns, which were firearms that attacked targets in the air, were not perfect, as they were in the midst of development. But for now, this was all they had.

Bang!

Boom!

A bomb fell to the ground and caused a huge dust storm. Heiner ran to a military vehicle with his rifle strapped to his chest. Bombing continued everywhere.

"Your Excellency!”

Suddenly his men shouted behind him. Heiner looked back. At that moment, there was a loud roar nearby.

At the same time, there was a sharp ringing in his ears. He staggered as he covered his one ear.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 103

For a moment, time seemed to have stopped. The noise of war that filled the world seemed distant.

The ringing in his ears continued constantly for a while. His vision flickered as he staggered.

He closed and opened his eyes, but he still couldn't come to his senses.

Eeeeee….

The ringing in his ears gradually subsided as if he were sinking beneath the surface of the water. Heiner opened his eyes again and suddenly looked at the distant view to the west. There, a vast horizon stretched endlessly.

With 80 kilometers of power lines. Both the Allies and the Axis powers were fighting with their lives on this Cheshire Field War.

So many soldiers were dying, and yet the battle lines had been stalled for days.

*Why?*

*What on earth are they going on for?*

"...... ha..."

*What is the purpose of all this?*

"...... Your Excellency ......"

*What in the world am I doing…?*

“Sir!”

Suddenly the world became clear. A soldier gripped his shoulder. The soldier made a faint sound, though Heiner could only see his lips moving.

“Are you all right!"

Only then did the sound of the bombing that had filled the area finally hit his brain dully. Blinking several times, Heiner nodded.

“I'm fine. Go.”

The hastily packed luggage was loaded into the car. After getting into the car, Heiner lowered the muzzle and took a long breath. His heart thumped wildly.

Soon the military vehicle carrying the commander-in-chief rattled off. The gray car sped across the middle of the bombardment zone.

The Allied Operations Command was located not far from the front lines, near a small house. At least as far as this village had to be evacuated.

Black smoke filled the area seeing through the dirty car window. From a distance, he caught a glimpse of a rear replenishment unit advancing toward the frontline.

Heiner took unsteady breaths and stared at the chaos. One of his ears still seemed to be waterlogged.

Thump!

Suddenly, with a roar, the car shook wildly. The car, which had been moving forward a few meters, came to a complete stop.

The panicked driver stepped on the accelerator and restarted the engine. However, once the car stopped, it did not want to move any further.

The driver got out of the car and hurried to check. His face was contemplative as he reported.

"I’m sorry---the wheels are....."

The driver said something, but Heiner couldn't hear him well because of the noisy surroundings and his muffled ear. Reading the movements of his lips Heiner guessed the meaning and asked.

“Can you fix it?"

He shook his head, saying it was impossible.

Then there was no other way but to get out of the car and evacuate on foot. It would have been rather conspicuous to use several escort vehicles in the current situation.

“We will have to leave the vehicle behind."

Heiner opened the car door and jumped out with his loaded rifle. He looked back and his gaze touched the luggage.

His gray eyes shook for a moment.

In his personal bag, which he had brought in a hurry, was a picture of Annette and the scarf she had given him. It was the things that prolonged his life.

Hainer struggled to turn his head from it.

Then he started running.

The rear replenishers coming up from the east continued to advance toward the frontline.

For something he didn't even know what it was. Heiner raised his eyes and looked at the end of the road he was running on.

A stigma-like name came to mind along with the bombing.

*Annette.*

*All my paths lead to you. I no longer care what comes to me. I don't need to have anything.*

*For the path I took was in ruins anyway, and everything I hold is broken.*

*So, Annette, what matters to me now is your future.*

*I want you to live in a better world. I want you to walk into a brighter future. And at the end of that road, I want you to smile again, like the dazzlingly bright Glenford Sea. But if there is one last desire allowed to me,*

*[Dear Heiner.]*

*I want to face the end of this road with only your letter in my heart.*

*[I am staying in Cynthia for a while. I am taking a break here and also helping the refugee camps occasionally. (Please don't be angry, just in case you don’t know. I'm really only helping out a little at a time.) How about you? How are you?*

*As I write, all the newspapers are eagerly carrying the news of the victory from Cheshire Field. But that doesn't reassure me.*

*For, as you know, newspapers are not very trustworthy. I only hope the articles are true.]*

The ground exploded everywhere as bombs fell from the enemy planes. Balichen was apparently trying to turn this place into a sea of fire. Heiner exhaled roughly.

*[Heiner, after I left you, I really thought a lot. About the past we have been through and the future we are going to thread.*

*I believe you when you said that our past together was not all lies.*

*I believe your words that you loved me as I loved you and that I was important to you.*

*Heiner, you know what?*

*I longed for the romance of giving everything to love, but I believed that would never happen to me. In the past I had so many things that were important to me.*

*To give up all those things and choose just love? It's really romantic but not possible, isn't it? But to my surprise since I met you, I used to think like this sometimes.*

*If I could be with you, I would be willing to give up all of it.]*

Boom! The ground shook. Ashes and dust swept up to where he stood. He could see the bones and flesh of soldiers who had been caught in the bombardment, their bodies being shredded.

Boom! Boom!

The boom rained down incessantly. The ringing in his ears that had quieted down once again filled his ears. Along with the dizzying noise, a severe headache pounded his brain stem.

The driver standing to his left pointed to a private house and shouted something. But his left ear could not hear well, as if it was muted.

It was only then that Heiner realized something was wrong.

*[But Heiner, the conclusion I've come to after a long struggle is that we can't move forward together. I have nothing to lose now because I have no more than I had then. But this is not a matter of gaining or losing anything.*

*The fact that we cannot be together really comes with many reasons. Our past and future, our political or social problems, and even the essential problems scattered between you and me.*

*We cannot live as if nothing has happened. We will struggle to forget the past in order to be together, and so just being together will remind us of each other's pain and hurt.*

*Nonetheless, Heiner.*

*If there is one last greed allowed to me.]*

Heiner forcibly lifted his slightly trembling eyelids.

*[I want to see your face again.]*

Then he moved forward.

*[While living, I want to hear the story of your life.*

*Even if we can't move forward together, I want to live in the same world that way, checking in on each other's progress and encouraging each other.]*

He kept going. To bring victory to his dearest one at the end of these ruins.

*[Thank you for loving me like this. If I have any happiness left, any luck left, I will give it all to you. Please win. Make the world a better place. I am waiting for you in the world you will create.*

*Forever.*

*At the end of spring,*

*Annette Rosenberg.]*

\*\*\*

Before the real heat began, Annette headed to Santa Molly.

Santa Molly, the westernmost coast of the southern cities, was a more beautiful area than expected.

She admired the jewel-like waters as she walked along the stone walls that led to the seascape.

It was the first time she had come here in person, having only sent her luggage ahead of time to the appropriate address. The map showed that the house she would be living in seemed to be right in front of the ocean.

The sun was sinking toward the horizon. The surface of the sea gradually began to turn scarlet.

Annette climbed the low hill with her gaze fixed on the sea.

She gazed absorbedly, and before she knew it, she was approaching the location on the map. Soon she saw a house with a sky-blue roof. She checked the map over and over, wondering if the house was real.

"...Oh my."

Then she let out an unintentional exclamation.

The house bordered the cliffs that cut along the shoreline and across the road. Annette crossed the road as if possessed, not even thinking of entering the house.

Above the precipice was a wide, flat, rocky open space. Annette looked around in the distance. Families and lovers were sitting on the cliff, waiting for the sun to set.

Waves crashing against the cliffs broke into pieces. The foam rose white. On the waves that wrapped around the rocks, white lines swayed as if drawing a painting.

Annette checked the map she was holding once more. The name of the place was written in small letters on the coordinates where the sea met the cliff.

[Sunset Cliff.]

Suddenly, a forgotten memory came to mind.

*"Is there anywhere you would like to go?” (H)*

*"...What?" (A)*

*“Some where you want to go.” (H)*

*"No." (A)*

*“Didn't you want to go to the beach?" (H)*

The tilted sun finally reached the horizon. As if drawing a circle, the entire sea and sky were dyed red in a radius around the sun. Waves that had come in from afar crashed over the cliff again.

*“When the weather warms up a bit, we'll go to the beach next spring. There are many places even better than Glenford. A little further...."(H)*

All of the scenery was imbedded in her eyes like fingerprints.

*"There's also Sunset Cliff, which is famous for its beautiful sunsets." (H)*

Annette froze and stared at the sunset as it ate away at the entire sky. The crashing waves spread in her ears.

She couldn't move from the spot for a while. As Heiner had said, the sunset here was beautiful.

Like a dream.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 104

Annette, who had her first morning at Santa Molly's house, headed to Sunset Cliff as soon as she opened her eyes.

Her untrimmed blonde hair fluttered in the sea breeze. The surface of the sea glistened in the pure brilliance of the morning sun. It was as if jewel dust had been scattered.

Annette sat on a rock and watched the waves crashing against the cliff. She still couldn't believe that she was living in such a beautiful place.

After watching the scene for a long time, she crossed the road again to return home. The sloping road meandered all the way to the top of the hill.

She was about to enter the house when she heard the sound of a bicycle screeching. She turned her head to check.

It was a newspaper delivery man.

"Hello, I guess you've just moved in?"

The man asked, handing her the newspaper. Annette answered, hesitant to accept it.

“Yes, I moved in yesterday. But I haven't signed up for the paper yet... ”

"Is it so? But this is the right house.”

The delivery man had a question mark on his face and gestured roughly.

“Just take it. You can cancel it later.”

"Ah... yes, thank you."

"So have a nice day."

The bike started off with a rumble. Annette stared at him as he descended down the hill for a moment, then she turned her head and moved towards her house.

Annette thoughtlessly unfolded her newspaper, which had been folded in half. Her gaze, which had been scanning the front lazily, was fixed on one spot.

"Balichen Air Force, concentrated air strikes on the barracks of the General Command."

It was a headline that adorned the front page of the newspaper. Annette's eyes widened as she checked the title of the article. General Command Barracks. That was where Heiner was.

With a tense face, she began to read the article in detail. The outline of the article was as followed.

The coordinates of the headquarters were discovered by the enemy, and Balichen's air force launched a concentrated airstrike in the area. One senior officer was killed in the raid.

However, while this air raid was in progress, the allied forces engaged in the trench warfare on the central front of Cheshire Field and great success was achieved ......

Annette reread the article several times. Fortunately, there was no talk of the commander-in-chief anywhere.

When she entered her house, she went through all of the articles from cover to cover before she put the paper down.

For some reason, her heart was restless. Annette let out a heavy sigh, poured water into a kettle, and prepared a simple breakfast. Soon, the fragrant aroma of coffee spread throughout the house.

After breakfast, as she was unpacking her unfinished luggage, someone knocked on the door. Since she didn’t expect anyone, she wondered who it was.

Through the door latch she could see the postman and the mail carriage. The postman asked as soon as she unlocked the latch and opened the door.

“Are you Miss Annette Rosenberg?”

"Yes, that's right."

“The parcel has arrived. Can I bring it into your house?"

A parcel? She wasn’t expecting anything. Annette asked.

"Wait a minute. Are you sure you have the correct name and address?”

“Hmm? Hold on.”

The postman who checked his notebook again nodded his head.

“Yes, both the address and name are correct. Someone must have sent it to you.”

"Ah… .”

“You can check it out later, or you can request a recollection. Should I bring it in?”

"It's okay. I'll do it."

"Yes, then."

Soon the postman left in his mail coach. Annette, who was examining the outside of the box, which was not very large, bent down and picked up the box. However, the box was much heavier than she thought.

Annette managed to carry the box into her house and opened it. She muttered curiously as she checked the items in the box.

“… books?"

She was taken aback seeing such ordinary things. Annette took out each book and checked to see if there were any notes or letters sent separately.

She pulled out the last book, but she had no information about the sender anywhere. Annette stared at the book pile beside the box. Then she discovered what they had in common.

They were all novels.

*“What else are you doing?” (A)*

*“Take it.” (H)*

*"Why is this..." (A)*

*“You can read it.” (H)*

*"Ah yes." (A)*

Suddenly, the time when Heiner brought her a novel when she was bored at the barracks overlapped. Annette narrowed her brows involuntarily.

There wss nothing in common except that they were novels, so she didn’t know why she was suddenly reminded of that time.

Annette lifted the top book and flipped through the first page. She read a few more pages without thinking, then walked over to the sofa with the book and sat down.

Bright sunlight streamed into the house through the large window in the living room. Annette turned the pages one by one, leaning back on the sofa.

In the silence, only the sound of papers being turned was heard. It was a peaceful atmosphere like a deep forest.

After quite a while, Annette took her eyes off the book. The book had already reached the end.

Annette involuntarily gasped as she checked her watch. It was already well past lunch time. She felt a sense of alienation belatedly found.

It was her old habit of finishing a book on the spot once she started reading it. But from some point on, Annette found it difficult to focus on anything for long.

To be more precise, it was about a year after the revolution.

She lived with headaches and forgetfulness, and her handwriting and embroidery, which had been her talents, were also messed up.

But now..…

Annette fiddled with the cover of the book with a puzzle expression. She felt her chest tickling.

After she closed the book, she raised her eyes and looked at her watch. After staring at the diligent movement of the second hand for some time, she murmured in a low voice.

“… Reply, when is it coming?”

\*\*\*

A week later, Annette received two letters. One from Joseph and one from Ryan.

There was no reply from Heiner. Ryan's letter had been addressed to the Grott family, the address she had given him before, and had been forwarded here by Bruner.

She had no idea that Ryan would actually send her a letter. She thought she should give him her new address in reply.

Annette's hand, which was about to open Joseph's letter first, stiffened. She looked at the envelope with her narrowed eyes.

*‘Why is the sender's address......?'*

The address of the sender, Joseph, was in the capital city of Lancaster, which was also the official residence of the commander-in-chief. After checking again and again to see if this address was indeed correct, Annette hurriedly opened the letter.

The white stationery was full of large, crooked letters.

*[Dear Annette,*

*Hi. This is Joseph.*

*I am doing well.*

*I have fish in the garden here, so I see them every day.*

*Does Annette have a house? The house is*

*I miss Annette a lot.*

*I miss reading books with you.*

*Uncle (Heiner) is not good at reading books.*

*Bye~]*

Even though it was short, the letters were so large that one side of the letter was filled. At the child's cute handwriting, Annette forgot her curiosity for a moment and laughed out loud.

What was the sentence that was cut off after ‘The house is’? Besides, seeing that Uncle wasn’t good at reading, it seemed that Heiner had read to Joseph.

*'He was nervous and ran away.'*

She was curious as to how he came to read it. How the hell did Joseph end up in the official residence.… .

Annette, who was about to put Joseph's letter back in the envelope, hesitated. Inside the envelope was another piece of paper, slightly smaller in size.

Annette took it out and opened it. It was a letter from the butler who managed the official residence. Its contents were relatively simple.

*[Hello, Miss Annette Rosenberg. This is Martin Adolph, butler of the Lancaster official residence.*

*According to His Excellency's wishes, Joseph is temporarily staying here in his official residence rather than in the orphanage. But Miss Annette Rosenberg can take Joseph with you if you wish.*

*The case will be entirely according to Miss Rosenberg's will, and of course the child must agree, but if Miss Rosenberg doesn't want it, Joseph will stay at the official residence or we’ll find him a good adoption place.*

*If you want, I'll check Joseph's opinion first. For more details, I would like to talk over the phone or visit the official residence. Then we will wait for your contact.]*

Annette put down the butler's letter with a puzzled face. And she alternated between Joseph's letter and it several times.

It was true that she had a desire to bring Joseph with her. At that time, she was not in a position to take responsibility so she just gave up.

Even if conditions were created to take care of the child now, it would have been better to find a better adoption place.

Annette's last name, Rosenberg, was an eternal social stigma. Once the child was taken under her wing, he had to grow up without a father.

After thinking for a while, Annette checked the butler's letter again. The word ‘official residence’ brought back memories.

"The official residence..."

Bitter voice flowed from Annette's mouth.

She honestly didn't want to go there. For her, the official residence was a place full of pain and scars. But she also needed to meet and talk with Joseph in person.

Her blue eyes sank silently. After thinking about it for a long time, she picked up the phone.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 105

Naturally, the guards at the official residence recognized Annette as soon as they saw her. As she was given permission to enter, she was overcome with a very strange feeling.

It was the first time she had entered the official residence as a guest. It was only natural, since this place had once been her home.

Since her divorce from Heiner, she had never once set foot in the official residence, or even the capital. And she thought she would never come here again.

She came back to such a place not only to meet Joseph, but also because of what the butler said over the phone.

*“I heard you have moved. It may be presumptuous of me, but I have left the things belonging to Miss Rosenberg in the official residence as they were. Would you care to take a look and see what you need?"*

At the time of the divorce, Annette had very little with her from the official residence. Since she filled her bag absentmindedly without thinking, it was safe to assume that there was nothing usable at all.

She bought most of the things she needed right away, but it was true that she regretted every single thing since she was starting from scratch.

Besides, everything she had once treasured was also in the official residence. If she could have brought them, she would have.

Annette took the path to the main building. The gardens of the official residence were lush and blooming in the summer. The scent of fresh grass wafted across her nose.

There had been far too many times spent here. The deeper she went into the gardens, the more she felt as if she was going back in time.

When she suddenly turned her head, a young couple were walking down the path holding hands.

*"Heiner, it's hot, can't you let go of your hand?"*

*"Didn't you say you wanted to hold my hand because yours were cold?"*

*"I did, but I kept holding it and it got hot."*

*“You change your mind too easily, and once I grab it, it's over."*

*“So you're going to hold on to it until you die?"*

*“Not a bad idea."*

Water spurted from the garden fountain that could be seen from inside her room in the official residence. The stream of water fell in a curving line with a light sound. Annette shifted her gaze to the brown bench in front of the fountain. On the bench, they sat close together with her sketchbook.

*“What did you draw in this one?”*

*“It's a fountain.”*

*“And this one?”*

*“Annette Valdemar.”*

*“There is nothing you can't do.”*

As she walked, memories of the past kept flooding back. The scene that continued like a panorama ended in the middle of one winter.

Annette was walking silently with him, wearing a pair of bulky gloves. Heiner, who had glanced at her several times, fidgeted and opened his mouth.

*“When the weather warms up a bit, we'll go to the beach next spring. There are many places that are even better than Glenford. There's Sunset Cliff, famous for its beautiful sunsets, a little further down."*

*"..."*

*"...remember Santiago Beach, where we used to go? You wanted to go back to see the fur seals in Belmont County."*

*"Yes."*

*“Well, why don't you take a vacation to Belmont County sometime soon? When spring comes, go to Sunset Cliff or some other western area."*

*"...."*

*“Annette?"*

Heiner stopped and called her.

Annette stood, looking up at him. Before she knew it, the woman from the past had disappeared. It was just him and her on this path.

Heiner looked nervous, as if he was waiting for her answer. Annette, who had been staring at him blankly, answered a beat later.

*“Okay.”*

Heiner's face brightened faintly. For some reason, that answer was not enough. Annette nodded again and answered.

*“Yes."*

Days that were either infinitely happy or infinitely unhappy. Even though all the moments eventually passed, the place where love and hate intersected remained here as if it were eternal.

The path that had led along the garden ended. Annette entered the entrance to the main building. The butler was waiting for her.

“Welcome, Miss Rosenberg."

“It's been a while…”

The butler, an old man, did not seem to have changed much. Neither his great white hair nor his face, which always wore a benevolent smile.

“How have you been?”

“Fine. And the butler?”

“I am always the same. Joseph's writing class isn't over yet, so would you mind waiting? Or you can go ahead and check the items to be collected in your room. They should all be there.”

“May I check the room for a moment then?"

“Of course.”

The butler smiled and led her to her room. Annette followed him to her former room. It was unfamiliar, even though she had passed through the corridor countless times.

“I’ll be on the first floor. Please take your time to look around and if there is anything you need, please let me know."

“Yes, thank you."

The butler closed the door to the room. Left alone, Annette stood still for a moment and looked around.

Despite the fact that it had already been two years in years since she had divorced him, the place was remarkably unchanged. Everything remained exactly where it had been.

It was as if someone had stuffed it just the way it was.

It was a completely different feeling from seeing her room in Catherine's house. Everything here was too..........

It was like an unnatural still life.

A little bewildered, Annette looked around the room and began to move around. She opened drawers and closets to find something to take with her.

As she was checking the drawers under the desk, Annette's hand touched the last drawer. When she opened it, there was a rattling noise inside.

Inside the last drawer was a fine cloth pouch that she had never seen before. Annette took it out, wondering if she had such a thing.

"Ah...."

Annette gasped as she checked the contents of the cloth bag. They were things like clams and conch shells that she had picked up on the beach in Glenford a long time ago.

But it was strange. The cloth bag in which Annette had placed these things was clearly something else. An old cloth bag with no color or pattern of any kind, and even slightly torn at the edges. Heiner had thrown them in the hotel trash............

Annette's eyes shook faintly. She stared at the surface of the bag, which was fine and soft without any damage.

\*\*\*

“Joseph!"

Seeing Joseph, Annette took the child in her arms. Joseph hugged her with a slightly bemused face. Just as she was about to feel disappointed that the child wasn’t happy to see her, she felt the child's fast heartbeat and elevated breathing in her chest, as if he were a little excited.

Annette chuckled and kissed the child lightly on the cheek.

"Joseph, how are you? Did you miss me?"

Joseph nodded. The child still seemed unable to speak.

Her chest ached. She thought that one day he would be able to speak again, but she never knew when that would be.

Annette tried not to look gloomy and asked him a few questions.

“Is it okay for you to live here? I hear you're learning to write. Is it hard to follow?"

Joseph answered those he could with a shake of his head, and those he could not, he showed them by writing words and sentences in his notebook.

“What is your teacher like?" (A)

[She just gives me homework.]

The cooked handwriting she had seen in the letter was written in his notebook. Annette said, stifling a laugh.

“You have a lot of homework. But you're doing all of it, right?" (A)

Joseph shook his head.

“Yeah, just do what you can. I didn’t even do the homework the teacher gave me.” (A)

[No, I do almost all of it though.]

"... I see."

They talked for quite a while. Annette was sorry she had left Joseph in Portsman and expressed her feelings by patting him on the cheek and stroking his hair.

“I'm glad to see you're doing well. After all, Joseph is good everywhere, isn't he?"

Joseph then rolled his eyes and looked at Annette. He lowered his head and wrote something in his notebook, then showed it to her hesitantly.

“Am I going to live with Joseph from now on?” (A)

Annette's face hardened when she saw the text in the notebook. And the child was quick to notice her expression.

Annette slowly moved her lips. She had surely prepared perfectly what she was going to say to Joseph, but she just couldn't bring herself to say it.

“...... Joseph, so---"

She had already made up her mind from the moment she called the butler. She could not raise the child.

“I gave it a lot of thought.”

Annette recalled what had happened to the Grott family. They had to leave their hometown and move to Cynthia for her. And Catherine was killed in a bombing attack.

"I like Joseph a lot, and I kept wondering if we could stay together."

Annette was not confident that she could raise Joseph in the best possible environment. She did not want him to get hurt like she did.

"But if I stay with Joseph, it would be difficult. Joseph could live happily in a much, much better place, so…”

With the arrangements of the commander-in-chief, he could find a really good adoption home. The adoptive parents would never treat the child badly, if the Commander-in-Chief was his guardian.

“So, I decided not to do that for Joseph's sake."

Joseph would grow up in peace, receiving quality treatment and education in a perfect home. And even if they couldn't find an adoptive family, the official residence would take good care of the child.

“You know this is not because I don't want to be with Joseph, right?"

Joseph didn't seem to understand and shook his head with a hurt look on his face. Still, it was obvious that he was not expressing his emotions with his facial expressions.

Annette hugged him. The child did not push her away, nor did he show enthusiasm like before.

“...... I’m sorry.”

Annette whispered, removing her hand from the small back. The child's warmth remained in her palm. She clenched the hand and opened it for a moment.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 106

“Are you going right away?”

The butler standing in the hallway asked her with a benevolent face. Annette stopped and nodded.

“Yes..."

“Should I tell you news about Joseph from time to time?”

“I’d appreciate it if you would.”

She couldn’t be with Joseph, but it would be nice to hear about the child growing up. The butler said with a smile.

“Joseph seemed to miss Miss Rosenberg very much. Apparently, it is difficult for him to adjust to life in the official residence since he is a stranger to everyone.”

“Oh no…”

Annette expected the butler to tell her what it would be like to take Joseph with her, that the child would like it better, and so on.

But the butler added no more words about him. He just smiled gently.

The general butler of the official residence was originally from a family of butlers who had worked for the count's family for generations. He was also almost the only person in the official residence who had not been hostile toward her since the divorce.

A short silence fell between them. After a moment's hesitation, Annette opened her mouth cautiously.

"Well, I was wondering if you had heard anything about His Excellency?”

It was time for Heiner to reply, but he hadn't yet. She fully understood that it was wartime and that there would be a delay, but for some reason she couldn't shake off the feeling that something was wrong.

The butler's eyes narrowed slightly at Annette's question. She wondered if he knew something, but the butler immediately shook his head.

“I only hear about it in the newspaper.”

"...... I see.”

“He will return safely."

Somehow, she felt like she had just revealed her true feelings. Annette lowered her eyes and murmured,

“Then, butler, I must leave now. Take care of yourself."

“Thank you. May Miss Rosenberg be well whenever and wherever she is."

Despite his age, his voice was clear and warm. Annette smiled faintly and turned her head.

Then suddenly the butler called her.

“Miss Rosenberg."

Annette stopped and looked back at him. The butler asked quietly with that benevolent face.

“You don't intend to come back to the official residence, do you?”

For a moment, her eyes shook. She didn't know why the butler was asking this question.

A brief silence fell. Annette looked at the butler searchingly. But nothing could be read from his wrinkled face.

Eventually, Annette substituted a response by lowering her eyes and bowing lightly in silence.

\*\*\*

On her way home from shopping, Annette found a small piano abandoned on the side of the road in front of her house. The piano was a pretty expensive item.

She couldn't believe that someone would throw away something that most people wouldn't dare to buy. She guessed that people living in the seaside city of Santa Molly could afford it, but she didn't expect this much.

Annette looked around. Even after checking to make sure no one was there, she hesitated and approached the piano.

She set her hands full of luggage on the side of the road. Opening the piano's lid to reveal the keys, she pressed one of them carefully.

The keys were old and not what she expected, but the tone was relatively beautiful. A little adjustment would do the trick, she thought.

She sighed softly, looking around at the piano for no reason like her nervous puppy.

Annette picked up her bags again. Taking one last glance at her piano, she took her steps as if running away.

Then, a few hours later, her shadow fell again in front of the piano.

Fortunately or unfortunately, the piano was still there. Annette looked down at the piano with troubled eyes.

"...it’s driving me crazy."

Muttering softly, she opened the piano's lid again. The surface of the keys shone white in the midday sun.

\*\*\*

Time flowed like running water.

Annette continued to exchange letters with Joseph and Ryan. It seemed that they were going to find out about Joseph's adoptive place in earnest after the commander-in-chief returned.

Joseph was still not adjusting to life in the official residence. Every letter that came oozed the child's desire to come to her. Annette, however, made an effort not to respond to that part of the letter.

Ryan, on the other hand, was very surprised to hear that Annette's newly settled home was Santa Molly. He told her that his family's home was in Norverberg, a town right next to Santa Molly.

Ryan congratulated her on her new start and told her that he would visit Santa Molly as soon as he was discharged.

Annette continued to write to Heiner. As usual, no reply came.

The season passed and the summer began.

Since the war in the southern straits, including Fasala Island, had completely ended, articles about code breaking were widely published in newspapers.

And by far the greatest contribution to the decipherment was made by Annette Rosenberg.

A substantial compensation was paid to her at the national level. Annette donated the entire compensation to an orphanage established for war orphans.

The incident re-lighted Annette's past accomplishments as a pianist. She was immediately flooded with requests for interviews.

Annette accepted one of the requests. It was a newspaper whose articles in this war focused primarily on individual stories, rather than large-scale versions of the war situation and battles.

*Yanis: I heard that not all pianists can analyze sheet music.*

*A: It depends on the pianist. But I learned score analysis and composition together from the teacher who taught me, so I was relatively comfortable with it. I actually composed myself.*

*Yanis: You composed?*

*A:Yes, I was interested in composing.*

*Yanis:I'm sorry. Actually, this is the first time I have heard of an aristocratic woman who not only played an instrument but also composed music.*

*A:（laughs）I have never heard of it either.*

*Yanis: Then have you stopped composing music?*

*A:I have stopped. But I am going to start studying again.*

*Yans: I see. This is a cautious question.......... the reason why you are ready to start studying composition again is because of that day or because of your hand injury?*

*A: Both are correct. There is another major reason.*

*Yanis: Can I ask what the reason is?*

*A: I originally thought I had no talent for composing. So I did not publish a single one of the many songs I completed long ago. I gave up so much and lived............. After a long time, someone said this to me. That my talent and hard work are real. That they knew how hard I had worked and how much I had suffered until I was the only participant in the competition who had not had a single mistouch.*

*He knew that I had an interest and talent in composing as well as playing. He said that since I had never formally presented a piece of music, it would have been different if I had.*

*I am still not sure if his words were true or not. So I’m going to check it out. If not, I will have to hold him accountable. Haha.”*

Time continued to pass, driving away the heat. One day, when the summer was over, the news of the final victory came from Cheshire Field.

It was an allied victory.

The Axis Powers, which had been distributed all over the continent, collapsed at once. This was the reason why the economic power of France, which had been dangerous for so long, had reached its limits.

Another season passed. That winter, an unprecedented cold hit the continent. The number of deaths among the enemy forces due to frostbite reached an all-time high.

The war that never seemed to end was finally in its final pages.

On January 21, AU 723, in the cold snow, France surrendered to the Allies.

After France's declaration of surrender, the official end of the war was broadcast over the radio by Heiner Valdemar, the main commander of the allied forces and commander-in-chief of Padania.

*[Today, January 21, the belligerents jointly declared that they would abolish the existing Armistice Agreement and move toward a peace treaty by completely ending the state of war that had caused enormous damage and bloodshed on both sides.]*

This radio broadcast was carried throughout the country, from the front lines, where the blood had not yet dried, to the mainland, where the damage of the war had not yet reached.

*[Under this immediate and complete end-of-war agreement, all hostilities and armed actions of a military nature are prohibited, and prisoners of war and internees on both sides will be exchanged].*

Some rejoiced in the joy of the end of the war, while others still grieved over what the war had taken away.

*[Dear citizens of Padania, we have overcome a long period of adversity and are now standing on a major page of history. At this crossroads, the government and military will do their best to advance the reality of complete peace. I send my support and applause to all of you who have fought for peace and justice].*

A yellow butterfly flew in the distance and landed lightly on the barbed wire. Beneath the barbed wire, light-green buds sprouted from the soil that turned gray from countless shells.

*[---I am delivering you victory!]*

*\*\*\**

# Chapter 107

Soldiers in French uniforms were sitting in a row on their knees with their hands behind their heads. Among them were soldiers who had taken part in the Huntingham church massacre.

They were soon to be brought to trial. Fourteen key French military leaders were sentenced to death by a military tribunal yesterday.

The complexion of the French soldiers was all gloomy. A Padania officer walked among them to check something.

He checked the soldiers’ name tags one by one, then stopped in front of one and asked.

"Elliot Sidow.”

"Yes.”

“Stand up.”

The officer ordered. Elliot got up from his seat quietly. The officer motioned for him to follow.

Two soldiers with rifles flanked Elliot’s both sides. Elliot walked, still had both hands on his head.

Eventually they arrived at the back of a vacant lot. There, a high-ranking officer of an imposing large physique stood with his hands behind his back.

Elliot recognized the opponent just by looking at his back.

"Give me your hands.”

The soldiers tied his hands. Although his body staggered a little from the rough treatment, Elliot kept his eyes on the back of the other man's head. His hands were bound extremely tight. The numbing sensation was unpleasant. But Elliot opened his mouth in a strangely cheerful tone.

"It's been a long time, hasn't it?"

At his words, the other man slowly turned around. His face, as numb as a bleached rock, gradually revealed itself. Elliot raised his eyebrows at the unchanging look of his friend.

"Heiner."

\*\*\*

Heiner looked a few steps away at Jackson, who he had at one time thought of as a close companion.

Jackson didn't look much different than he had ten years ago, just a little older. Neither was that loud laughter, nor the tone so light that it felt frivolous.

"Hey, you look very strong, too." (J)

Jackson, who had looked Heiner over, spoke as if in admiration.

"I guess the gift I sent you didn't work." (J)

"I knew it was you who left the sniper that day." (H)

Heiner had guessed that it was no coincidence that the sniper was there the day he rescued Annette from the crumbling wreckage of the Huntingham church. He just wasn't sure. But now he was certain.

Jackson chuckled as if he knew Heiner would notice.

“How sad that he (the sniper) was killed right on the spot. He was talented.” (J)

“It seems that you were sure that I would be there.” (H)

Heino said matter-of-factly, gesturing to the soldiers standing behind Jackson. The soldiers immediately fell back.

"Heh, about 73 percent sure? 27 percent I didn’t. You’re the commander-in-chief of a country, and if you knew how important you were, you wouldn't move so carelessly. But seeing that you came…” (J)

Jackson, who was dragging out his words, erupted into a short laugh.

"You, I knew you loved that woman. I wanted to see if it was real, but Miss Rosenberg denied it. If I had known this was going to happen, I would have used her as a prisoner of war and advanced in rank. And get a medal." (J)

"So."

Heino continued to speak, staring at him with cold eyes.

"You said that when this was over, you would be happy to be an officer, receive a house and medals in your country. .......... To what extent have you fulfilled your dream?" (H)

“….”

"Are you happy?" (H)

For a moment the gleeful expression on Jackson's face disappeared. It was clear what Heiner meant by his dream.

Jackson lowered his head and looked at the ground for a moment, then raised his eyes again, and laughed briefly.

"Well..."

“Surely you could have taken her captive.” (H)

Jackson raised one eyebrow as if to ask what he meant.

"But you didn’t and I don’t think what you said earlier was the reason.” (H)

"Well, I was thinking of keeping her as a prisoner…but Miss Rosenberg insisted that she had no value as one, and when she told me about her relationship with you, I stupidly believed her.” (J)

"..."

"And she apologized to me in her father’s stead. She said I was also a victim. That was another first for me. Well, so ............" (J)

Jackson's mumbled words were scattered to the wind and could not be heard clearly. Jackson shrugged.

"That's why I didn't want to keep her prisoner.” (J)

Jackson was scheduled to go to trial. He would probably be sentenced to life in prison or death.

Because Captain Elliott Sidow was the main culprit in the Huntingham Church massacre. The young man, who was always happy to be recognized, was now a defeated war criminal awaiting punishment.

The sun was slightly slanting. Between the branches of the trees, the sun reflected in shattered pieces. The time for their transfers was approaching. Heiner asked one last question.

"Why did you open the door (of the burning church) then?"

The two men's gazes met in a straight line. Eyes that no amount of disguise, no matter how many different appearances and identities they wore, could hide, gazed straight at each other.

"Well." Jackson whispered. “Shall I call it a belated apology?”

Watching his lips mouthing the words, Heino murmured, "Right.” The hem of his coat fluttered in the dry winter wind.

There was a brief silence. Jackson's somewhat somber face quickly regained its liveliness.

"Still, it's a little self-indulgent to see you successfully making a name for yourself." (J)

"Well, I'm not fine, so maybe that'll comfort you a little." (H)

"Hmm? What are you talking about?” (J)

Anything that wasn't fine by their standards was something that was at least permanently damaged. However, Heiner seemed to be fine without any injuries, let alone disability.

Jackson's gaze, filled with incomprehension, slowly scanned Heiner.

After a brief observation, Jackson realized that earlier, when Heiner had turned to face him, he had turned to his right. He also noticed that he had been watching his mouth the entire time they were talking.

Ah! Jackson let out a little yelp. He chuckled.

"Nice facade."

That laugh quickly died down. There was a rattle from the clearing and the sound of an iron window opening. Heiner signaled to the soldiers standing behind Jackson.

“Don't get too happy with her. You’ll make my stomach hurt.” (J)

The soldiers approaching grabbed both of Jackson's arms. Jackson uttered his last words as they were led away.

"Be a little happier."

Three military boots stomped away from the ground. A small layer of dirt rose on the cold, icy floor. Watching their retreating backs, Heiner answered in a low voice.

"...Yes."

\*\*\*

The post-war situation was as busy as it was during the war.

There was a mountain of things to deal with, from trials and punishments for war criminals, reparations issues for the defeated countries, territorial redistribution, and the diverse treaties to be signed.

Armistice agreements were scrapped. In the city of Biche, the city of allies, where the Biche Peace Agreement and Peace Treaty was being discussed anew.

A postwar treaty was also signed at the strong insistence of the Padania's commander-in-chief, Heiner Valdemar.

It was a wartime international law with new provisions added. The main content of the treaty was to prohibit attacks on doctors, nurses, ambulances and medical aid, hospital ships, and buildings bearing the emblem of the International Medical Organization.

Many things were gradually being sorted out.

The plane that had been crossing the evening sky gradually lowered its altitude. Clouds passed through the windows and the white and yellow lights of the city began to appear.

Heiner placed the sealed Final Wartime International Law documents in an envelope and opened his briefcase. At the top of the thick, light brown envelope lay several plain white envelopes.

He took one of them out and unfolded it. The letters in neat handwriting started out with the phrase ‘Dear Heiner’.

*[I am writing you a letter with the window open. Winter has arrived in Santa Molly, but it's not as cold as the capital, perhaps because it's in the south. That's fortunate. As you know, I'm weaker in the cold than in the heat.*

*How is the weather there? Are you safe and well? I'm worried that I haven't received a reply...*

*I am learning to compose music again. In fact, it looks like I will be able to complete one of my songs in the next month or so. It's not a new song, it's just a refinement of something I've made before. When I stopped by the official residence to meet Joseph, I brought my belongings, and I found songs I had written in the past.*

*I am always worried about you.*

*I hope you come back safe and sound soon.]*

Heino's eyes delicately traced each word. All those miraculous sentences.

There were several reasons why he had not responded to her letters. The biggest reason among them was the lack of confidence in this war. He felt even more so after hearing the news of Catherine Grott's death.

That day, in the middle of the Cheshire Field bombing, he realized. That there was a possibility that he might not be able to return home in a perfect body.

Heiner did not want to burden her with anything. He only wanted to give her a victory like a bouquet of flowers.

A new day of peace where everything ended.

"Your Excellency, we will be arriving in Lancaster soon."

The noise from the plane grew louder and louder. His left ear was particularly deaf. Heiner turned his head and looked out the window.

The lights of the city were getting closer.

It was a beautiful scene, like a night sky studded with countless stars.

\*\*\*\*

# Chapter 108

At the end of winter, the still cold air swept through the fallen leaves. Santa Molly Market was quieter than usual.

A man in a black coat was walking down a deserted street. The man, with his bowler hat pulled deep into his face, entered a small flower shop on the corner of the market.

“Welcome."

The owner of the shop, who was tending to the stems, rose from his seat to welcome his first customer in a long time, but was momentarily startled when he saw who it was. He was a very large man with an intimidatingly large build.

Because of the small size of the shop, the man had to bend slightly. When the man looked around inside the shop, the owner gently asked him,

"Can I help you find what you are looking for?"

“I'd like to order a bouquet of flowers.”

“Of course. Is there a particular flower you would like?”

“Blue hydrangeas and stachys.”

“Oh, but the stachys are summer flowers---we have them as dried flowers, and they are very beautiful, too. Would you like to see them?"

The man nodded. The owner brought a bunch of stachys wrapped in paper from inside the store.

The bluish-purple petals were gorgeous despite the complete absence of freshness.

"Usually other flowers discolor or dull a little when dried, but the stachys keep their color. Even after a long time, they are as beautiful as ever."

The owner's calm explanation continued. The man looked at the stachys carefully, as if observing them.

"That's why stachys also have the flower language of unchanging love."

The man's gaze never left the flowers. The owner smiled, guessing that he was about to present the flowers to his lover.

"Then can I get you this?"

\*\*\*

Heiner climbed the hill with the bouquet of flowers. Beyond the low stone walls surrounding the road was a vast expanse of ocean.

The petals swayed in the cool sea breeze. He covered the bouquet in his chest with the hem of his coat, fearing that the petals might fall off.

Not long ago, Annette's first song was completed. Although she had not yet officially announced it, she planned to submit it to a composition presentation for new composers.

That was the reason he bought the flowers. He wanted to congratulate her new path before the presentation day started.

Waves rolled in from afar.

Heiner imagined Annette walking down this hillside with a view of the horizon beyond. With her characteristic graceful but light steps.

Her golden hair fluttered in the sea breeze, her long eyelashes glistened in the sunlight, and her blue eyes contained the sea in them sank between her eyelids and reappeared.

The hem of her fluttering skirt wrapped around her legs as she climbed the path, white ankles exposed, low heels tapped the ground….

The series of scenes unfolded like a masterpiece in his mind.

Suddenly a strong wind blew.

She was climbing the hill and looked back.

Her blonde hair fluttered in the air. Annette stared at him breathlessly. Heiner looked up at the woman standing far above his eye level.

Whoosh, her image disappeared as if scattered by the wind that blew again. Heiner continued up the hill in pursuit of the vanished form.

A house with a sky-blue roof came into view in the immediate distance. His steps quickened slightly.

The house was directly connected to the door, unobstructed from the road. Heiner approached the door with the thought that a high fence should be put up around the house.

His heart beat like a colt running amok in his chest. Due to the constant strain on her body, he had to struggle not to crush the bouquet.

Heiner straightened as he stood in front of the door. After inspecting his clothesr for no apparent reason, he took off his hat and held it in his hand. A quivering breath dissipated from his mouth.

Just as he was about to knock on the door with the hand holding the hat.

"...."

Suddenly, out of nowhere, laughter was heard along with faint voices.

Heiner's hand stopped. It was clearly the voice of a man and a woman. However, he could not distinguish whether the sound was coming from the right or the left.

After standing there for a moment, he cautiously removed his feet.

Heiner slowly followed the distant sound and stepped into the backyard of the house.

The voices got closer and closer. He approached, killing any signs of his presence. Dry grass trampled under his shoes.

The backyard scene that eventually emerged was of the man and the woman. In Heiner's hazy eyes, the woman sitting on a white chair was the first thing he saw.

The woman, with a thick light brown cardigan covering her shoulders, hugged both legs. Her head, tilted at an angle, was turned to the side.

Heiner's gaze shifted sideways along the woman's head.

At the end of the sight was a man. The man with the tools was repairing the fence in the vegetable garden and talking to the woman constantly. Heiner recognized him.

Ryan Perom.

He was a sergeant of the 62nd Division of the Army who had met with Annette in the rear church building.

"Ahaha."

Ryan said something and Annette covered her mouth and laughed out loud. The fresh laugh carried through the cold air to his ears.

*‘Ah.’*

Heiner groaned quietly.

They looked like ........ newlyweds who were starting a family together. It was an infinitely peaceful and happy scene. So close to perfect.

Heiner stared at the scene, feeling like an uninvited guest.

His feet could no longer move. He couldn't say or do anything.

Actually, maybe,

Maybe, just maybe, he could move on like this.

If he gave her the bouquet, showed her his pain, showed her that he was broken again like this and so pitiful and miserable....

She might embrace him again. She might feel hurt seeing his wounds, just like she couldn’t bear to pass by the beggars on the street. Like that night when the moonlight enveloped them so beautifully.

But he could not do so.

Just as he could not hold her hand as she smiled dazzlingly on the beach at Glenford. Like he couldn't force her to go back to the official residence.

He could not do so.

Just as he could no longer restrain her in the face of Annette's thirst for death. Just as he had no choice but to let her go.

He could not do so.

He wanted her to laugh. He just wanted her to be happy so that she wouldn't hurt anymore. In fact, it should be like that from the beginning.

So...............

He could not do so.

If he couldn't bring back what he had ruined, at least he shouldn’t ruin what left of it anymore. Now that was all he had left to do.

Heiner backed away slowly. The sound of friendly conversation faded into the distance. The peaceful scene of the couple soon disappeared behind the wall. He turned fully away from the light blue roofed house.

Half a day of winter had almost passed, and it seemed as if spring would come.

Where someone had left, only a bouquet of flowers remained.

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“Annette, it's done. Would you like to come and check it out?"

“Wow, perfect, perfect."

Ryan chuckled at her exclamation. Annette looked apologetic when she saw the sweat beading on his forehead.

“I can't thank you enough. You have taken care of the inside of the house, and now this….”

“I'm more grateful to you for taking care of my nephew.”

Ryan's teenage nephew decided to learn the trade for a month at a workshop in a market in Santa Molly, and decided to stay at Annette's house for a while with her permission.

Ryan thanked her and helped her

with all the work of repairing the house and rearranging the furniture. Annette asked anxiously.

"You're not late, are you? I heard you have to go in the evening."

“Ha ha, no problem. I still have some time left."

“Please go inside and have something to drink. You’ve been working hard."

“Okay, then I’d like something cold, please.”

Ryan got up from his seat with his toolbox. Annette said she would hold it for him, but he would not budge, and a small tussle ensued all the way to the door.

“Huh?"

While arguing good-naturedly, they stopped when they saw a bouquet of flowers in front of the front door. It was a bouquet of woven hydrangeas and stachys. The blue petals were swaying gently.

“A bouquet of flowers?” Ryan joked.

“Someone with a crush on Annette must have secretly left them there. Ha, I don't know who.......Annette?"

Annette, who was staring at the bouquet in a daze, suddenly turned around and ran out onto the street. Ryan didn't have time to catch her.

Her low-heeled shoes followed the gentle descent. Her speed gradually increased. The sea breeze rushing in from the horizon ruffled her hair.

*It was you.*

Annette ran frantically down the hill. She was starting to run out of breath. The hem of her skirt wrapped around her legs and prevented her movement. Still, she kept running.

*It was you.*

When she was young, she wondered for a very long time. Who was it that left this bouquet by the window? Who listened to her performance like a thief and disappeared?

The bouquet, which was similar to the color of her eyes, was given by a gentleman who knew romance.

*“I---I have been.......... for a long time."*

*"For a very long time ---............."*

*“I've been thinking about you for a long time."*

The waves crashed into the shore from afar. The deepest part of her chest was repeatedly pushed out with the current and back in place. She closed her eyes and opened them.

At the end of the hill, she could see his back.

His shoes tread along the path. Being an alert person, she thought he would notice her presence right away, but he simply walked forward.

Annette took a deep breath.

“Heiner!”

Then, between choking breaths, she exhaled his name. The wind that carried her voice trailed downhill.

The waves crashed once more.

The gentleman in the black coat looked back.

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# Chapter 109

Heiner looked back.

A woman in a white cardigan was standing on top of the hill.

His gaze moved slowly from her toe to her head. The low heels tapping the ground in intervals, her white ankles, and the fluttering hem of the skirt wrapped around her legs.

Blue eyes of the sea, disappearing and reappearing between eyelids, long lashes shining in the sunlight, golden hair fluttering in the sea breeze, the whole series of scenes unfolded before his eyes.

Suddenly a strong wind blew.

As she came down the hill, she stopped.

Her blonde hair scattered in the wind. Annette stared at him, breathless. Heiner looked up at the woman standing far above his eye level.

At this moment, it seemed that only he and her were left in the whole world.

They stared at each other for a while without saying a word. They were as far apart as they were close, scanning each other from head to toe.

Her halted steps continued again. The sound of heels echoed faintly. One step, two steps, slow but without stopping.

The woman came to him, following a long descent.

The view from where they stood was not as great as the view from the top of that high hill.

But the sun was still shining brightly, and he could hear the wind blowing and the waves crashing. Annette came close and stood looking up at him.

Heiner stared at her face, half stunned.

She slowly opened her mouth.

"...You're back."

"..."

“Why are you leaving already? You’re not coming in."

"...I’m leaving…”

"You’re here, come home."

"I didn't come here to…”

Unbeknownst to him, it came out as a ridiculous denial. There was no time to think of a proper excuse. But, as a spy with the highest operational success rate among spies from Padania, Heiner quickly recalled the various plausible lies.

It was not difficult to pick out the most logical and rational one among them.

*So the house I gave you as alimony is one of the properties I have here. I have several other houses in Santa Molly in addition to that house.*

*I had to check those properties in person at one time or another, and now that I have just returned, it is the right time, and incidentally, I just wanted to see what the house I gave you was like...........*

But the excuses that went on in his head only evoked a sense of shame. It was truly the height of stupidity.

In the end, Heiner couldn't spit out any of them and only moved his lips. It really was all a mess in front of her.

Annette kept looking at him, as if she could see the gears moving in his head.

"...Heiner, as you know - as a child I was a pretty terrible romantic with a yearning for destiny."

Heiner was silent, not knowing why she was suddenly bringing up this subject.

"My philosophy teacher once said something like this: 'There is no such thing as fate in the world. The moment one accepts the inevitability of past coincidences, one only comes to interpret them as fate."

"..."

"So I thought we could never be destined. Because, at least as far as I knew, there was no such thing as coincidence between us that I would interpret as destiny. Because it was all planned from the beginning."

"..."

“But then, was it coincidence or inevitable that you left a bouquet of hydrangeas and stachys by my practice room window?”

Heiner's eyes shook violently at her question.

He never thought the bouquet would reach Annette. No, even if she got it, he could not imagine that she would have remembered it.

And what kind of flowers they were.

Because a bouquet of flowers would have been a very small gift to Annette. She would have received countless bouquets that were much bigger and flashier than the unappealing ones he had given her.

*“So, I guess I was nothing to you---.”*

Heiner's face went blank. It was as if he had been hit in the head. His fingers twitched briefly.

He didn't believe in fate.

But if she was right, their beginnings had all started by chance. It could be interpreted as inevitability.

More than one, he went to the marquis' mansion; more than one, he stepped into the depths of the rose garden; more than one, the time coincided with her practice time; more than one, the performance was a melody that came from the music box.

"............ if it were inevitable that I wanted you.”

*Because you are so precious and beautiful.*

“It was a fate that should never have begun.”

Heiner muttered in a broken voice. The coincidences and inevitabilities that he alone had created and interpreted on his own were piling up like sins at the end of this hill.

As if to shatter those sins into pieces, a long wind suddenly blew.

Her blonde hair fluttered and covered her face. Heiner involuntarily reached out and tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear.

Her face appeared clear again, a gentle smile on her face. Annette's lips moved softly.

“There is nothing we can take back. We can only make way for the future. Just as you gave me that bouquet again."

"..."

“Thank you for the flowers. They are very beautiful."

"..."

"Then and now."

Heiner lowered his eyes, unable for some reason to look straight into that beautiful smile. His gaze, which had been wandering aimlessly through the air, suddenly stopped in one place.

It was on her white cardigan.

On the upper left chest of the cardigan was a purple brooch. It was familiar. Heiner soon remembered it.

*“Wishing you a warm holiday season, Annette Rosenberg.”*

It was a Princess cut diamond brooch that he had purchased as her end of the year gift but had to be given after the divorce.

He felt his heart swell that Annette had kept it. Something warm and soft seemed to be rising up inside him.

And at the same time, Heiner remembered what he had failed to protect. He hesitantly opened his mouth.

"...... Annette. I have something to say. Actually, the scarf you gave me..........."

“The scarf…?"

"I wanted to wear the scarf when I saw you again...but I lost it while evacuating from an air raid. I'm sorry.”

Heiner struggled to finish his words. His voice was filled with guilt.

Annette, who was listening to him with her eyes wide open, laughed as she quickly sighed. It was a laugh that didn't sound like much of a laugh.

“What are you talking about?” (A)

A bit of tension relaxed from Heiner's tense shoulders. Annette spoke in a soft voice.

“You’re safe. That’s all it matters. I will make you another scarf. If I start now, I can probably finish it in the spring.......... hmmm, it’s spring again."

The last time Annette gave him a scarf was also in the spring. So she had to wait until winter again to do the scarf.

Annette said mischievously.

“I will have to wait for the coming winter. You must be sure to show up with a scarf then."

“The coming winter.”

Heiner repeated her words.

Annette was talking about the winter they would be together. So he had at least a year of future ahead of him.

In the letter Annette spoke of their inability to move forward together. But at the same time, she said she wanted to live in the same world. They would confirm and encourage each other's progress.

“...... Annette."

*If that's the case, wouldn't it be possible to extend life forever?*

“I will return the happiness and good fortune you gave me.”

*For as much as she designates, so little by little, I will be able to keep living.*

“I do not need those things. Even without happiness and fortune, I will create a better world for you. So ...... even if it takes a very long time............"

Heiner hesitated for a moment, unable to finish his words. He was afraid that she would reject him. To put an end to his fear, Annette replied.

“I'll be waiting.”

Then she added,

"Forever."

Heiner's face hardened for a moment. He just opened his mouth and closed it again, as if he had forgotten everything he was going to say.

Annette locked eyes with him and smiled brightly. Heiner's eyes quivered faintly. A brief moment later, his lips moved, creating a small smile.

“I'm glad you're back.”

Annette whispered. Heiner could hardly hear what she said, but he could read her lips.

The current rushing in from the horizon and crashing against the rocks. The waves, broken with foam, returned to the sea and created a dazzling wave.

Heiner held her with trembling hands. Annette pressed her head against his chest.

“Really, I'm glad you’re back.”

The scattered whispers could be heard this time from the vibration she created against his chest.

Heiner embraced his life where he returned.

It was not the perfect positioning. It was not the origin of a perfect relationship. It was just finally arriving at an out-of-place position after too long and painful a time.

But he finally came back.

To the place where his whole world began.

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# Chapter 110

After the Continental War, the international order underwent a major wave of change.

A peace conference was held in Lancaster, the capital of Padania, to resolve the postwar problems. The main purpose of the peace conference was to announce the beginning of a full-scale peace exchange.

However, the foreign ministries of the victorious countries participating in the conference devoted all their energies to territorial cessions, reparations issues, and other conflicts of interest.

In response, Heiner Valdemar, Commander-in-Chief of the Padania Military Department, submitted a peace petition to the Consolidation Conference. The petition urged efforts to prevent the recurrence of such a war and to achieve the main objective of world peace. The petition was published in national and international newspapers and gained the support of people all over the world.

Meanwhile, the discussions on a plan for cooperation between the negotiating countries led by Heiner Valdemar came to a successful conclusion. The League of Nations was founded and Padania language was recognized as an official language at this meeting.

Despite the chaos, times passed.

Military trials for war criminals still continued. The French soldiers involved in the Huntingham massacre were all sentenced to life in prison for mass murder.

They were transferred to a prison camp on the island, where they had to labor for the rest of their lives. They were not eligible for parole or special pardons. The citizens demanded the death penalty as this was not enough.

The anger was not limited to soldiers who had directly participated in the fighting. After the revolution, the forces of the restoration of the Padania monarchy, which had been exiled to France and installed in enemy territory, also collapsed completely.

The retro forces, including the Ansgar Stetter, were called national traitors and were greatly criticized. Strictly speaking, since they were exiles, their actions were not acts of treason, and therefore they were not legally punished.

However, they had completely fallen socially to the extent that recovery was impossible. Comparing only the current atmosphere, it was comparable to the hostility directed at Annette Valdemar right after the revolution.

Ansgar Stetter retired to the small provincial town of France with a small fortune. If only he differed from Annette in one respect, he did not have the shelter of the Commander-in-Chief's official residence.

Harassed by the press, Ansgar Stetter eventually moved again. And when people's attention waned, he ended his life by shooting himself.

Everything was gone. He had nothing to live for. All that was left was to make way for the future.

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“Ansgar Stetter.”

Annette straightened the business card, which was crumpled at the edges. In one corner of the card was his contact information and the address of his hotel.

It was the business card she had received when she met Ansgar at the official residence. Heiner had taken it with him and returned it to her when she left the residence after the divorce.

She had simply accepted the business card, kept it, and never contacted Ansgar again. With downcast eyes, Annette peered at the name on the business card.

She thought he would live a rich life somewhere else. They would leave the past in their memories and go their separate ways.

If she had known it was going that way, he would have contacted him as a friend at least once.

She should have asked him once if he was safe.

[............ Annette?]

She heard a worried voice over the receiver. Annette finally came to her senses and answered, placing the business card on the table.

“Ah, yes. I'm listening.”

[His estate will be returned to the former retro faction, I was told. Also, Ansgar Stetter left you a letter. I was asked to convey it to you…”

“A letter for me from Ansgar?”

[Yes. I’ll read it as it is.]

His distinctive low, insensitive voice continued quietly through the telephone line.

[Dear my old friend Annette. I write now in the hope that the person who delivers these words is not your only salvation. I'm sorry. For many things. But I was not lying when I said I wanted you to be happier.]

*"Take my hand, Annette." (Ansgar in the past)*

[Did my missteps still remain in the past? Ours was a time of chaos and upheaval, so my descendants will judge if my life was ultimately a mistake].

*“You will be happier." (Ansgar in the past)*

[Annette, you've come a long way. I hope that the world you will see in the end is beautiful…..Ansgar Stetter.]

The dry but neat voice ended.

Annette remained motionless for a moment, holding the phone.

Her close friend's suggestion to go with him to France seemed so old. Annette looked out the window quietly, chewing on Heiner's voice that lingered in her ears like a lingering aftertaste.

She still wasn't sure if the world she would see at the end would be as beautiful as Ansgar had hoped. Perhaps she would never see it in her lifetime.

Whether that world would be beautiful or better than before would be for their descendants to judge, as he had said.

[---What are you thinking?]

Heiner asked cautiously, perhaps the long silence made him feel nervous. To which Annette lightly joked.

“Nothing.”

[Lie.]

"Yes, it is a lie."

[Why don't you admit it right now?]

“Should I have gone to Ansgar’s funeral?”

At the sudden question, a short silence crossed the phone line. Eventually, Heiner responded calmly.

“No need to give the reporters extra fodder.”

“...... yeah?"

Annette smiled bitterly. It wasn't comforting, but it was a practical answer. She changed the subject in the heavy atmosphere.

"By the way, what is Joseph doing?"

[He should be in his room.]

“Put the child on for me.”

[No, I can't. He's doing his homework.]

“Homework? What homework?"

[The teacher told him to write some sort of analysis of his favorite book.]

"Why analysis...?"

What's the point of analyzing something when you can just read it for fun? Annette, worried that the child would be needlessly stressed by the study, said with concern.

“Go and help him with his homework. Tell him to ask if he has any difficulties, and check his grammar.”

[Homework is to be done alone.]

“Don't you remember my language homework, which you did for me?"

Heiner used to help Annette with her foreign language homework from time to time during their dating days. Sometimes it was at the level of dedication to the sun, rather than help.

While Heiner, who had nothing more to say, kept his mouth shut, Annette urged him again.

“Go quickly."

[............ okay...]

"..."

[...]

“You're not going?"

[...I'm going.]

“But why don't you hang up?”

[You are not hanging up either.]

“You hang up first.”

[No.]

"..."

[I miss you.]

Annette blinked quickly at the sudden outburst of confession and burst into low laughter. She said with a laugh.

“Heiner, spring is coming. What do you mean?"

[My scarf is coming.]

“By the way, do you have time to come to Santa Molly?”

[Even if I can’t go, I have to go.]

“What are you talking about? If you don't have time, don't come."

[But the scarf............]

“Why do you insist on coming when you should be in the capital? Look at your schedule and come if you have time, okay? Or I will kick you out. Then hurry up and check Joseph's homework."

Annette, who had said everything before he had time to say anything, added briefly.

“I miss you too….”

Then she immediately hung up after that. After hanging up, Annette touched her cheek, feeling somewhat embarrassed. Her face was slightly flushed.

She took a sip of coffee and then went out the front door. Opening the door, she saw a gate surrounded by white hedges.

Heiner had sent someone to build it. Annette took out the newspaper and letters from the mailbox and went back inside the house. She sat at the dining table and read the newspaper while drinking the rest of her coffee.

On the front page of the newspaper was an article on the progress of the peace agreement and the official recognition of Padania language as an official language.

She read the article carefully, then turned to the next page. Annette's eyes, which had been looking at the second page in its entirety, were fixed on the right. It was because she spotted Heiner’s name in the title of the article.

Annette checked the title and lifted her coffee cup. And at that moment, the hand holding the glass stopped.

Her eyes widened as she checked the title again. The misplaced coffee cup hit the coaster and made a loud clunk.

A large splash of coffee spilled onto the table. Annette grabbed the newspaper with both hands and began to read the article.

The newspaper crumpled in her straining hands. When she had read the last word, she raised her head absentmindedly and looked at the title again.

{Commander-in-Chief Valdemar was spotted at Hearing Rehabilitation Center.}

\*\*\*

Heiner knocked twice on the child's room door, waited a moment, and then opened the door.

Joseph, who was slumped over on the bed doing his homework, looked up. Heiner said as he sat down on the edge of the bed.

“You have to sit up to do homework.”

Joseph shook his head. He didn’t know what the problem was.

Heiner tilted his neck to check Joseph’s homework. There was something written in large letters all over the notebook.

“What was the homework, exactly?"

Joseph held the notebook out to him. Heiner read it over.

1. Who is the main character?

William.

2. What does the flower of happiness mean?

Happiness.

3. What hardships did the protagonist go through to find the flower?

Climbing a mountain, swimming in a river, being cold, being hot---.

Some of the answers were strange, but Heiner didn’t bother to point it out and passed on. Except for the last question, all the others were answered. He read the tenth question.

10. Why did the protagonist return home without taking the flower of happiness?

\*\*\*

# Chapter 111

".............ask me if anything is difficult or unclear." (H)

If Annette had been in the room, she would reprimand him for his blunt tone.

At his words, Joseph pointed to the tenth question. It was the most difficult question of all. Heiner agonized deeply over the contents of the book he had read to Joseph.

William the Rampant finally found the flower of happiness on a snowy mountaintop. However, he could not bear to pick the flower that bloomed so beautifully and returned home again, which was the end of the story.

Heiner imagined William finding the flower at the highest point of the white snowy mountain.

The young man stared at the beautiful flower that he dared not touch, and then finally turned around and came down the mountain empty handed.

“He must have come to love the flower…."

Heiner murmured in a low voice. Joseph tilted his head as if to ask what he was talking about.

"All the time William was looking for the flower, he was already in love with it. He just didn't know it. And the moment he saw the flower, he realized what love was."

Usually, love entails lack.

“That’s probably why he couldn’t break it. Maybe…”

William loved the flower to compensate for lack. And paradoxically, he lacked because he loved the flower.

That's why William realized the moment he saw the flower.

“He didn't want to hurt the flower he had come to love ......."

He knew that he had actually come to love such a beautiful flower. That even if he broke that flower, he would never be able to fill this lack.

When one tries to fill the solitude and loneliness through other beings, one is inevitably broken. It is a legacy that we must carry until we die.

Joseph still looked uncomprehending. The child wrote something in a notebook and showed it to him.

[If I love it, I would want to be with it.]

Heiner chuckled as he checked the notebook. Joseph’s words were not wrong.

Indeed love is like that. Love makes you aware of your lack, throws your life into emptiness and loneliness, and yet in the end you cannot stop wishing for it.

“….some love hurts the other person."

Heiner explained to the child in a deep voice.

“There is love that makes you want to be with the other person no matter what, and there is love that makes you want to leave it be. Just as William never picked the flower."

[So that’s why Annette isn't with Joseph?]

“That's right. You are very quick to understand.”

[But I don’t feel hurt when I’m with her.]

He seemed to mean that he wanted Annette to take him with her. Joseph seemed to understand what Heiner meant, but his expression was that he did not know exactly why.

Heiner was not confident that he could explain this to the child accurately. Because it took him a very long time to realize this.

However, Heiner could fully understand Annette's choice.

No matter how much time had passed and the public perception of her had changed, the past was still in its place.

Annette's last name was Rosenberg, and if some people were still hostile toward her, Joseph would someday learn of past events.

He did not know how that past would affect the growing child. Even if the children themselves said they were fine, the hurt they would receive from the world was not within their sphere of control.

Annette wanted to prevent such a future from the very beginning.

Just as they were now.

He simply reached out and gently stroked Joseph’s small head. A low but soft voice flowed from him.

"...When you are a little older, one day you will understand."

Currently, several adoptive homes for the child had been selected. The final decision would be made after Joseph met them in person.

The child enjoyed Heiner's touch with his eyes closed. Her slightly wiry hair slipped through his fingers.

He felt the warmth of the young child. Heiner couldn't help but smile thinly. The child would grow up happy and healthy. In a better world.

\*\*\*

As soon as Heiner returned to his office, he was greeted by the news in the newspaper.

With downcast eyes he read the newspaper that his aide had left behind. It seemed that the reporters had eventually caught on to his comings and goings at the rehabilitation center.

Actually, he knew it could happen at any time. It was just a little earlier than expected.

He didn't care about the blow this would take or what people would say. The only point that bothered him was still Annette.

As usual.

Heiner looked away from the newspaper and turned his head. His face was reflected in the mirror on the wall. On the outside, he seemed perfectly fine.

On the outside….

With a small sigh, he folded the newspaper and punched it into the left corner of his desk. A dull thud came from his right ear.

Heiner's face scrunched up somewhat nervously.

His current condition was not a good one to talk about. His left ear had lost most of its hearing, and his right ear was functioning less well than before.

The doctor said it would be difficult for his hearing to return. For now, he said, the only thing he could do was to manage his rehabilitation and have hearing aids made and worn to prevent him from getting any worse.

In other words, his condition was the best it could be today.

That was why he did not tell Annette. She said she would wait for him forever, but Heiner was not sure of his future condition.

So, he couldn't tell her.

Heiner picked up his pen again and flipped through the papers. But the contents were not connected in his mind, and it was broken in pieces. A sentence in familiar handwriting floated across the printed type.

[Dear Heiner.]

It was a sentence he had seen and seen again countless times and now memorized completely.

[Heiner, after I left you, I really thought a lot. About the past we have walked through and the future we will walk into.]

It brought him from death to life.

[But, Heiner, the conclusion I came to after a long struggle is that we cannot move forward together.]

They would not move on together. This was her decision, but it was also his.

[The fact that we cannot stay together really comes with many reasons. Our past and our future, our political and social problems, and even the essential issues that litter the space between you and me.]

They would no longer be near each other, but would simply live their lives where they were.

[Nonetheless, Heiner. If there is one last greed allowed to me.

I'll be waiting.

Forever.]

He just wanted to be with her today, tomorrow, and the minimal future they were promised to each other. Even if they were in different places.

Heiner did not know the distant future. Whether his condition would improve, whether her words about waiting would still be valid after a long time, whether they would be able to overcome the past.... nothing was certain.

He just had to live his best present.

Hoping that she would be there for him tomorrow.

His loose fingers tightened. The angle of the pen was reestablished. His eyes were black and dark, as if swept away in time.

Soon, the crisp sound of the pen's nib filled the quiet room. The sun was slanting down, slowly pushing the shadows out of the room. He thought about how long that light had traveled to reach here.

As the world sank into darkness, a little evening shower fell. A steady drizzle tapped on the window. The rain stopped a short time later.

It was that night that Annette called again.

\*\*\*

The evening sun had ceased to set and night fell.

Annette sat for a while in front of the phone. She ate dinner, inspected her sheet music, and organized her thoughts as she watched the rain pattering outside the window, and before she knew it, it was already time.

It had been quite a long time since they divorced. But still they didn’t have a perfect ending. Perhaps they still needed more time.

So, what kind of ending should they give?

There was nothing that could be undone. It only makes the way forward. They just had to make way for the future.

Before making a path, they had to decide what path to make. And before deciding, they also had to share their thoughts and minds with each other.

However, there was still much that Heiner had not told her. The past, the present, and the future.

Despite his cold exterior, he was evasive and defensive about building a relationship. Annette finally learned that fact.

She did not want to be angry with him because he had not told her the fact that he had become disabled. This was not a problem that could be solved quickly.

He had been alone in a cold, lonely world for a very long time.

Perhaps they needed at least that much time.

Her mind became a little clearer.

Annette reached out and picked up the receiver. Then, as she was accustomed to doing, she moved her fingers and turned the dial. The line connected and the ringtone followed. Soon a low, deep voice came on the line.

[This is Heiner Valdemar.]

\*\*\*

# Chapter 112

She had heard the voice countless times, but once again it seemed unfamiliar. But it was by no means unfamiliar in a negative sense.

They were getting to know each other a little better every day. Even though they had spent two years together as lovers and four years as husband and wife, it was as if they were starting anew from the beginning.

“This is Annette.”

[---- you haven't slept yet?]

“Thinking about you.”

[Is this a lie again?]

“It’s true this time.”

He was silent for a moment. Annette wished she could see the expression on his face now.

She wondered for a moment what to say. In fact, Heiner must have already been aware of the fact that the article about him had been published. Or why she had called him at this time of night. Then.........

[I’m sorry.]

Annette stopped at the sudden apology. She asked in a soft tone.

“Why are you apologizing all of a sudden?”

[I didn't tell you in advance that I was injured.]

“Yes, I found out this morning. I saw it in the newspaper."

[Your voice is kind, but the content is confusing, like it isn't.]

He sounded a little depressed somehow. To which Annette gave a faint laugh.

“Actually, I was a little upset. I felt like I was always hearing about you in the newspapers. Like when you were shot in Huntingham. Besides, you never replied to my letters."

[Annette, you know in Huntingham, at that time I didn’t intend to see you anymore. I was going to let you go. I didn't think there was a need to let you know my situation…]

“Then why didn't you respond to my letters?”

[............ because I wasn’t sure of anything at the time.]

"But you could have told me how you were and if you were safe.”

[Annette, if you're angry, be angry. It’s even scarier when you say it like that.]

“I am not trying to be angry."

[Lie.]

“Really.”

A small sigh was heard. He seemed genuinely troubled.

“It's true I got a little angry when I read the paper, but I'm not angry now. Really."

[No, Annette, you can be angry.]

“You act like someone who just wants me to be angry.”

[Because I think that would be better…]

“Heiner, we have virtually nothing to do with each other and you are under no obligation to tell me everything. So you don't have to be sorry.”

Her words sounded cold at first glance, even if she did not want him to feel sorry. Annette concluded matter-of-factly.

“If you want to tell me that much, I suppose that's as far as we go.”

[I didn't say that because I thought we had gone that far. Annette, I just…]

The end of his words became slightly slurred. His hesitation seemed to be transmitted over the phone line. After hesitating for a moment, Heiner finally spoke up.

He explained everything from his current condition to his uncertain predictions for the future, including the fact that if his hearing were to deteriorate further, in the worst case scenario, he could lose it forever.

Annette's hands trembled thinly as she listened. She gently bit her lips.

After reading the article, she had expected his hearing to be a problem. But she didn't know it was this bad.

Until the last time they had met they had conversed without great difficulty. He had concentrated on reading her lips and occasionally questioned her back, but not to the point where it seemed too strange.

“You hid this from me......"

The end of her voice cracked slightly. Annette cleared her throat once and continued speaking.

“Because you thought I would leave you if I found out?”

[............more than that.]

“More than that?"

[I was afraid you won’t leave because of that.]

Annette choked on her words at the unexpected answer.

[As I said, I can't assure you of my future condition. Even if I'm okay now because I can manage my daily life, what if my condition worsens later? What if you still remain by my side.........]

The wording went up and down gradually, as if he was trembling. Heiner almost cried.

[Annette, I can let you go from me, but I can't stop you from coming to me. Just as you did at the Portsman Hospital. That is the limit of my patience.]

"...."

[I can't refuse you, you know that.]

His voice sounded somewhat bitter.

Annette suddenly remembered their marriage. The many nights she went to his bedroom with foolish hopes, and he had never rejected her once.

[I don't want to make you unhappy anymore because of me.]

His words sounded as if he himself were unhappy.

Annette stared blankly ahead and slowly dropped her head. Only one yellow light was on in the dark house, illuminating the woman with the phone.

The sound of waves crashing in the wind drifted through the open window. For a moment they said nothing. The silence dried up like a dry sandy beach.

After a while, Annette parted her lips.

"...............You said you couldn't come to my composition presentation, right?"

Her composition presentation was on February 27. However, he had to inform her that he wouldn’t be able to attend because of the overlap between the presentation and the major meeting schedule.

Heiner was terribly sad and apologetic, but Annette sincerely didn’t mind. It was a small, not famous presentation anyway. She only attached significance to the fact that it was the first time she was officially presenting a piece of music.

[Yes. But I ordered a bouquet of flowers for you….]

“Not necessary. Instead, if you have some time in March… Can you stop by Santa Molly's for a minute?"

Heiner did not readily answer, as if he was trying to guess her intentions. After a few seconds, he replied in a suppressed voice like he was trying to hide his anxiety.

[I will.]

Only then did Annette let out a light sigh as the tension finally dissipated.

“Very well. Then I'll see you in March."

“Are you going to hang up----]?

“I have to stop. It’s too late."

[It's not even midnight yet.]

“Normal people go to bed before midnight.”

[I don't.]

It seemed they had had this conversation before. It was when he pointed out her habit of playing with her food.

“It's a wonder you get up so early. But I am not as strong as you. I am tired."

[・・・・・tired?]

"I am tired."

[Then it can't be helped.]

Heiner spoke ruefully.

[Good night, Annette.]

His voice, transmitted through the receiver, sounded especially clear in the dark silence. Annette replied with a faint smile.

“......Good night to you too.”

\*\*\*

Time passed quickly and it was nearing the end of February while Annette concentrated on perfecting her song for the competition. Throughout the winter, Annette lived in music.

So much so that Ryan, concerned about whether she was alive or dead, visited her to check on her.

When her mind was overly complicated or her heart felt stuffy while working, Annette came out to the cliff and watched the sea, taking in the breeze.

She loved the moment when the waves crashed against the cliff. Watching it, she felt as if something frozen inside her was melting away.

No matter how rough the waves were, they were not worn away. She liked that.

The sunset swallowed the cliffs of Sunset Cliff each day and repeatedly disappeared beyond the horizon. Exactly that many dates had passed.

Then, on February 27, Annette presented a piano etude at the Bauer Composition Presentation. The piece had no subtitle.

Her piece was a C minor etude for *right hand arpeggio*. The score looked simple at first glance, but there were quite a few complicated technical orders.

The overall mood of the piece was somber. However, it ended with Picardy cadence (Tierce de Picardie) in the major key, which left a strange sense of hope and lingering emotion.

The relevant composition presentation was only a small presentation for new composers. However, Annette's first piece became a hot topic.

Partly because of the frank and low-key interest that followed the name Annette Rosenberg, but also because of the buzz about the piece itself.

Her piece, composed mostly of arpeggios, was praised for being a good piece for legato practice.

Many also commented that despite being an etude, the tonality was very beautiful, and that they would like to hear her play it again at a slower tempo in a lyrical performance.

Annette did not give the songs titles, but treated all of them as numbers. Her songs were nicknamed "Etude for Forging" or "Winter Waves."

In addition, Felix Kafka, a pianist and music critic, recently gave a short assessment of her songs, calling them ‘the aesthetic of a pianist's sensibility’.

After the composition presentation, Annette received a large bouquet of roses with a congratulatory card. The flowers were as red and vibrant as those in the rose garden at the Rosenberg residence.

Time flowed like a stream. The sun stayed on the cliff longer and longer.

In March, the last winter wind crossed the seasonal page.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 113

On an idyllic afternoon in the spring sunshine, Heiner climbed the hill to Sunset Cliff. A series of colorful roofed houses flanked the cliff and one road.

Heiner spotted the sky-blue-roofed house immediately among them. He took the key she had given him from his pocket and unlocked the door.

His shoulders were tense with tension as he opened the door. He had come here as soon as March arrived, as he had promised Annette, but he did not know what she wanted to talk about.

Would she want to stop everything going on between them?

Would she want them to live as complete strangers?

Or would she say everything is fine?

He was going to do whatever Annette said. If she wanted to break up with him, then so be it. If she didn't want to see him for the rest of her life, he would not appear before her forever.

The rambunctious William in the fairy tale eventually had a happy ending, despite giving up the flower. But reality was no fairy tale.

He would never have a happy ending.

The white gate opened with a click. The sound was like a final sentence, and Heiner took a short breath. The belated wish followed like regret.

But he still wanted her to tell him that everything would be okay. That everything would be fine..........

He entered and closed the gate. His black shoes followed a small path between the lush green grass.

Within a few steps, Heiner stopped abruptly. He lifted his head and looked into the air.

A faint but familiar melody was carried in the wind from somewhere.

Heiner listened. Convinced that what he had heard was right, he opened his mouth and let out a small sob. His pupils shook in disbelief.

It was that song.

It was the melody of that music box.

Heiner took another step, as if possessed. When he finally reached it, the piano melody came from the backyard.

It was played at a slightly slower tempo and the notes were strangely broken, just like that time the little girl had played it. Heiner realized after a pause that this was the fault of her injured left hand.

Suddenly he remembered their childhood days like an old dream.

A building so white that he dared not even touch it. Melody flowing through curtains fluttering in the wind. Grass gently trodden underfoot.

Little hands moving back and forth the large piano keys in the open window. A white dress and braided blond hair. A girl who was as fragile and beautiful as a sugar doll...............

Images that had possessed him for a very long time.

Every night he imagined her face he had never seen up close. He imagined the voice he had never heard, and then imagined it again.

He even had a silly desire for the girl’s blue eyes to pass over him just once.

He also had an unbelievable wish to have a long talk with her. The piano song became a little clearer the more he headed toward the backyard.

He quietly approached the window. He could see curtains fluttering in the open window. A woman in a white dress was sitting in front of a large piano.

The woman sitting by the window in the bright sunlight was dazzling, as if she had been painted with light all over. The figure looked more precious than a saint, the holiest of all human beings.

Heiner stared at her profile, transfixed. It was as if he had cut straight through a dream as beautiful as a fantasy and was looking at an image illuminated by a section of it.

So ...... beautiful. So chilling. It was like going back to childhood. It was as if he was seeing something he wasn't supposed to see. He involuntarily backed away.

Snap.

Branches were stepped on and crushed underfoot. Heiner took a deep breath quietly. At the same time, the sound of the piano stopped. The sun shone on the windowsill.

The whole bright field of vision turned white like an afterimage. The woman turned her head. Instinctively he stopped, trying to hide himself.

The piano chair was pushed back gingerly in the room. He heard shoes approaching the window.

Instead of running away, Heiner stood there and stared blankly into the square window.

*‘Ah......’*

In the dimly flickering scene, a little girl was walking toward him. The surface of her golden hair shimmered in the sunlight.

The distance between them grew closer and closer. With each step, the little girl grew larger and larger. From a child to a girl, from a girl to a young woman, and from a young woman to a fully mature woman.

His blurry vision became clearer at a certain moment. The man and the woman stood facing each other across an open window. Her blue eyes contained him completely.

“Heiner."

She smiled dazzlingly in the light and called his name.

At that moment, Heiner felt the distant memory that had dominated his life like a shadow take a step back.

For a brief moment he forgot every word, every thought, every memory. Only the woman who existed before him was as vivid as a still life.

The woman asked.

“Why are you there instead of coming through the door?”

“Performance............"

The man who was once a boy fidgeted and opened his mouth.

"I like it."

Then he spat out the words he had wanted to say for a long time. Annette brushed her cheek with embarrassment. Then she spoke shyly.

“Well, my playing is a mess................ This is one of the etude pieces I played the most when I was young. When you're actively learning playing techniques, you usually start practicing with etudes. I played it so much I got sick of it."

“Isn't the genre of music you've just competed also an etude?"

"Yes, so I'm trying to play the pieces I played as a child again."

He knew most of the songs she had played when she was younger. Even if he didn't know the titles of the songs, he was confident he could recall them all if he heard it.

Heiner impulsively confessed.

“It was when you were playing that song….”

“What?"

“That was the first time I saw you.”

Annette's eyes widened at his words. She looked up at Heiner in surprise and gave him a small smile.

"...I see."

She asked, mumbling to herself.

“Heiner, do you know the title of this song?"

"...I don't know."

Heiner deliberately did not look for the title of this song. Because the time when he admired the Rosenberg young Lady was a memory he wanted to erase from his past.

"This etude is one of a suite of several smaller pieces called 'Love Atypicals.' It's quite old music, in the classical style."

He did not know music, for the music box was broken anyway, and the girl who was holy like a Saint was gone, and the melody that had warped his life was just loathsome.

So he was not looking for the title of this song.

“My Beloved Oppressor."

And he went a long way to get an answer.

"That is the title of this song."

The gentle voice put an end to his old question. Heiner stared absently at her lips and murmured accordingly.

"............ my beloved oppressor."

The title seemed as if it were inevitable. Perhaps his fate had been sealed from the moment he happened to hear that song in the Rosenberg rose garden.

Annette stepped back from the window and opened her mouth.

“Heiner, I played my etude for you to hear. I know it's messed up because I can't use my left hand as flexibly............ but still."

Two steps.

“If you can't hear me from afar, why don't you just stay close? Even if you can't hear at all…you can see my hands pressing the keys. So stay close to me.”

Three steps.

“That's my answer."

Annette slowly sat down in the piano chair. Her long, slender fingers pressed the keys. She smiled at him and then began to move her hands.

The performance began.

The notes continued in a slightly slower beat. A gentle, soft melody rose and fell between them. Heiner stood with one hand on the window and listened to the performance.

There he was her only audience.

Just as she was his only pianist.

The beautiful melody gently enveloped him. It was a moment that seemed like an eternity. Heiner's lips trembled faintly as he laughed and cried. The depths of his chest shook helplessly.

*Annette.*

*When this life falls apart, you will be the only remains left. My whole life has been you. And it will be you.*

*Annette.*

*You are there and I am here. There are still a few steps between us, but we can see each other and hear each other. That’s how you become my precious once again.*

*Annette, the punishment of my life.*

*My beautiful shackles.*

*I love you with all my heart, with all my life.......*

*My beloved oppressor.*

Annette, who had been playing, suddenly turned her head to look at him. Their gazes met. Heiner struggled to suppress his intense emotions.

Then he smiled brightly at her.

The wind blew from the distant horizon. Waves broke white from the cliff and returned to the sea with the melody. The newly formed waves glistened in the sunlight.

The performance went on like that for a long time.

\*\*\*

*~End~*

Hopefully side stories will be released soon. Until then…

# Chapter 114

## side story 1

\*\*This chapter takes place right after the divorce when Catherine took Annette to her home from the park.

AU 720, winter.

Tick ​​tock.

Heiner slumped in his chair and watched the second hand of the clock tick. His eyes were blurry, as if wrapped in a translucent membrane.

Tick ​​tock.

The sound of the second hand grew louder and filled the room. Obviously the clock was constantly moving, but it felt like time was not passing.

It was truly strange.

That his breath continued regardless of his will.

Heiner's gaze fell downward. Signed papers lay crookedly on the desk. It was the divorce papers.

Those few sheets of paper were the result of his long and difficult life.

Haha. Heiner laughed briefly. It was an empty laugh. The laughter that had flowed out a few more times like someone who had gone mad was abruptly cut off.

Heiner slowly closed his eyes.

The dark world was filled with silence.

In the end, he was left alone within the walls he had built over the course of his life to imprison the woman. Heiner never knew how to get out of this place.

If he couldn't get out, he had to wait for her to come back. But he knew that those who left would not return.

As his friends did, as did those he killed.

Blood was gradually spreading on the floor, centering on where he was sitting. Heiner looked at the red floor with his head down.

Those who had long since departed stood on it. Ethan, Hugo, Deon, Anne, comrades in arms, comrades in the Revolutionary Army, royalty and nobles, even the Rosenberg family...

Suddenly, Anne's high voice whispered softly.

*“Scared?”*

*“No, I'm afraid.”*

*"Why?”*

*“I broke everything. I ruined everything. All I have left now is…”*

*“Isn't that what you wanted? They say that if something important can't be completely hidden, it's better to destroy it.”*

Drops of Anne's blood were dripping onto the floor. Her boots were soaked in blood and mud. Anne said in a breezy tone,

*“That woman is precious to you.”*

Heiner blankly raised his head.

At that moment, those who surrounded him disappeared like a mirage. There was no one left by his side. Then a dull realization came.

That woman was important to him.

It was not a waste to spend his entire life waiting for her, he could walk into ruin with her, to life and death with her.

No, actually, he just wanted to touch her once...

She was very precious.

Was the word always this familiar?

Knock. Knock.

Someone knocked on his door. Heiner didn't even answer, chewing his delusions and thoughts over and over again. It felt like something in his head was broken.

When there was no answer after knocking several times, the door was carefully opened. A slight frown appeared on the butler's face when he saw Heiner was sitting there.

“I’m sorry. I thought something happened.”

Heiner's gaze was still fixed on the edge of the desk. The butler coughed low.

"Um... Your Excellency. I don't know if it's right to report this, but I think you should know..."

The butler hesitated and got to the point. As the butler's words continued, Heiner's blurry eyes returned to focus.

With a half-fazed face, he leaned against the desk as if he would jump up at any moment.

"What......?"

\*\*\*

Unlike the one-month journey to the main building where her residence was located, Heiner hesitated for a moment before visiting.

When he opened this door, it seemed that she would be sitting there as usual.

She seemed to be looking at him, tired and pale.

With eyes that seemed to let go of her life at any moment...

When he reached that point, Heiner unconsciously opened the door. In an instant, the air was so cold that his body shivered.

There was no one in the room. Only a few paper envelopes were left unattended on the bed.

Heiner walked over and opened the envelopes. Inside were the agreements and certificates needed to find alimony from the bank.

Annette didn't seem to have any intention of taking it in the first place.

For an instant, his eyes seemed distant. Even after hearing the butler's words, he couldn't believe it, but when he saw it with his own eyes, he felt as if someone had hit him on the head.

He turned and frantically searched the room. It was to check what Annette had taken.

But the room was absurdly the same. Even the meager amount of cash, let alone items of value, lay there.

Only the woman, she alone, had suddenly disappeared.

Opening the last drawer under the desk, Heiner frantically took out the items. At that moment, something tumbled to the floor.

Shards of worn glass and shells that had escaped from the cloth bag were rolling on the floor. In the silence, the pieces that had been rolling, making a sound, eventually stopped.

These were things Annette had picked up on the beach in Glenford.

In the light of the yellow lamp, the surface of the shard of glass shone faintly. Heiner stared blankly at them for a moment, then he suddenly jumped up.

He hurriedly left the building, grabbing the papers lying on the bed. He didn’t even put on a coat.

Heiner crossed the garden and reached the entrance of the residence at once. The guards guarding the entrance were startled and saluted him. He shouted ferociously.

“Disperse immediately and search the surroundings! My wife….”

Heiner paused his words for a moment. Taking a short breath, he commanded.

“… Locate Annette Rosenberg immediately.”

"Yes, sir!"

"Also check if there are any bodies washed up in the river..."

His voice trembled terribly as he said that. Heiner turned around without even listening to the guards' answers.

The bitter cold of midwinter bit into his neck. He wandered frantically, with the vague assurance that she might still be around.

With vague certainty, with vague hope, with a fragile wish, and with such certain despair and anxiety..…

*Why?*

Like a flash of lightning, questions shook his brain. The papers in his hands were crumpled.

*Why?*

*Why?*

*Why?*

*Why didn't you take this? Why didn't you bring anything? Where the hell are you going?*

The documents lying untouched on the bed clearly showed that Annette had no desire to live the rest of her life.

His lips trembled. He couldn't tell if it was because of the bitter cold or something else. Heiner continued to walk, cutting through his frosty breath.

The strings of reason began to break moment by moment. His vision kept blurring. Even so, he moved aimlessly like a person who has been possessed by something.

After wandering around the area for some time, Heiner realized belatedly that waiting for a report from the official residence would be much more efficient than this.

He brushed his cold, frozen face. He was doing something stupid. What a fool... His breath flowed out with a sigh.

The winter wind shook the dry branches. It sounded dreary and desolate. Soon, his large strides changed direction.

\*\*\*

The clue to Annette's whereabouts was caught at the train station. It was said that she had bought two tickets to Cynthia with a woman.

After a chase, Heiner found out that Annette had gone to Catherine Grott’s house. As soon as he heard this news, the first guess that came to his mind was, of course, revenge.

Catherine Grott couldn't possibly have good feelings for Annette. Perhaps she was trying to finish an unfinished vengeance her brother couldn’t complete.

Annette wouldn’t have known. Whether his guess was correct or not, the fact that she obediently followed Catherine was proof that she still had no regrets in her life.

Shortly thereafter, Heiner ordered the Cynthia Police Department to mobilize and connected the phone to Grotto’s. Before long, a strange voice came from the other side.

[…Hello. Catherine Grott..….]

“This is Heiner Valdemar. Is Annette there now?"

Catherine was silent for a moment at the question, which omitted all of the preface. During that short silence, Heiner felt his throat burn.

A few seconds later she spoke with a sigh.

[It's my negligence that I didn't think it would cause misunderstanding.]

“I asked if she was there.”

[Yes, she’s up in her room now. She’s probably resting.]

It was an issue that had not yet been confirmed, but Heiner was at least relieved by those words. But he could not completely abandon his doubts, and he spoke as if to warn.

“Soon the police will visit to check.”

[Please. Could you tell them to keep quiet? Your ex-wife wouldn’t be very happy if she knew that you were looking for her by mobilizing the police like this.]

Heiner was speechless at Catherine’s calm voice.

Annette might really despise him if she found out that he had followed her after their divorce.

*'No, it would be better if she despised him… .'*

Silence flowed over the phone line. They lingered for a while without asking any more questions or hanging up the phone.

After a while, Heiner opened his mouth. A slightly hoarse voice came out, like someone who hadn't spoken for a long time.

“Why? Why did you take her….?”

[It just seems like she has nowhere to go….]

“… ”

[She didn't seem to want to go anywhere.]

Clank. The sound of dishes colliding came through the receiver. Very ordinary and extremely simple, but the clear and peaceful sound left a slight ripple in his heart.

Heiner lowered his eyes at the unknown pain.

\*\*\*\*

# Chapter 115

## side story 2

*Heiner stood with his back to the hallway and looked into the cold room. A long black shadow stretched across the doorway.*

*There was only one lamp burning in the room. Pieces of glass and plastic glowed faintly on the floor. These were the things that fell out of the cloth bag while he was searching through the drawer earlier.*

*Heiner slowly entered the room. He then bent down and picked up the cloth bag that had fallen on the floor.*

*Cling.*

*At the same time, there was the sound of something tumbling down. He checked the bottom of the pouch. He was too distracted earlier so he didn't notice it, but the lower part was frayed and torn.*

*Heiner stood there silently holding it. Then, suddenly, he turned around and left the room.*

*Before long, a long shadow appeared at the door again. In his returning hand, he held an expensive leather looking pouch.*

*Heiner knelt down on the floor and picked up all the fallen items one by one. A small stone with thin lines engraved like tree rings was held in his hand.*

*A conch with a broken shell, glass with a rounded end that had been cut and worn countless times, and small pieces of plastic moved from his hand to the leather bag one after another.*

*Heiner closed his eyes and opened them. Suddenly, his hands came into view and were shaking slightly. He clenched his fists with strength, but the tremors did not easily stop.*

*“… Ugh."*

*He brought his clenched hand to his forehead and let out a suppressed moan. The glass bead in his fist was cold and hard.*

*Everything, everything was just useless beach trash. That's why when he found these in the inn he threw them in the trash.*

*Because Annette had lived with precious and beautiful things. Because he couldn’t make the assumption that a woman like that could value such useless things.*

*If he made that assumption, if he thought that woman might be such a person. Everything he had ever believed in, had confidence in, and thought with conviction…*

*All of that...… .*

*Heiner coughed low. It was a cough that sounded like he was gasping for air due to lack of breath. He hunched his shoulders and tried to breathe.*

*It felt like there was a huge hole in his chest. As soon as he took a breath to live, all of it flowed into it.*

*His upper body was hunched like an animal huddled in the cold. It was almost like praying to God. His head was hot, as if it was on fire.*

*Annette.*

*Annette.*

*Annette.*

*What on earth did you have in mind when you picked these up?*

*With what kind of mindset did you manage to get back the things I threw away?*

*Heiner took a deep breath and let it out. Something kept coming up from the back of his throat like nausea. Something that had been building up inside him for a very long time.*

*So, that was probably words.*

*He always knew deep down that he had to say these words. But Heiner could not voice it.*

*Because he knew it was too late to say those words.*

*This was because he was also aware of the fact that there was nothing he could turn back now.*

*“I don’t hate you.”*

*A calm voice filled his mind as if it had consumed all his thoughts. He lowered his head shakily.*

*“I don’t blame you.”*

*His voice continued like an endless echo. In the midst of the scattered fragments, he held the small, useless objects and let out a silent groan.*

*“I don’t hate you.”*

*Now Heiner knew what those words meant.*

*He did not even deserve to say them.*

*The cold air enveloped the man. He knelt for a long time, swallowing and swallowing the words he couldn't say.*

\*\*\*

\*Present at the house in Santa Molly.\*

Heiner was heading for the kitchen to get a drink of water when he stopped.Someone was lying on a sofa in the dimly lit living room.

He muffled his footsteps and approached the sofa. There was an open book on the table, hands hanging loosely, and golden hair disheveled on the cushion.

She was curled up on the sofa. She had one cheek exposed to the yellow light. Heiner quietly bent down as if approaching a very sensitive animal.

When he put his right ear close to her face he could hear her soft breathing. Her closed eyelids did not move at all. She seemed to be in a deep sleep.

Often, when she was tired, Annette would fall asleep on the living room sofa, like she did now. This was one of the new things he learned about her while staying here in Santa Molly for a few days during his summer vacation.

In the past, this would have been unthinkable to him. In the past, Annette only slept in a bed with a perfect sleeping environment.

Once again, he felt her in the present.

Heiner looked at the sleeping woman with his sunken eyes. Her face had become thin and gaunt after going through a difficult life, but she still seemed like the girl he had seen the first time.

Suddenly, her wrist hanging on the sofa came into view. There was a clear scar on her wrist that was so thin that he was afraid to put any force into holding it.

He felt a chill in his chest. Heiner reached out to touch it, hesitated for a moment, and finally took it back.

Suddenly, Annette's brow furrowed. Startled, he straightened his body. She turned her head slightly, as if in pain, and then curled her body even more.

A somber silence fell. His sunken gaze roamed over her closed eyelids.

Was she having a nightmare?

What painful memories were bothering her?

At times like this, Heiner would think about what he had taken from her. It wasn't just a question of revolution.

The revolution must have occurred, and Rosenberg must have fallen. This was different from his choice to help the revolution for her alone.

All of that was bound to happen. It's just a matter of timing.

Because of this, the problems he revisited ended up being limited to something between the two of them. Therefore… The worst choices he made at every crossroads in their relationship.

*If only I hadn't approached you with lies in the first place.*

*Or, if I had told you all the facts and asked for your cooperation.*

*If only I had asked for understanding and forgiveness right after the revolution ended.*

*If only I had stopped the stones the world throws at you.*

*If only I could have sympathized with your loneliness and sadness even a little.*

*Then would you have been in less pain than you are now…?*

Whatever it was, it was all in the past.

Suddenly, Annette's expression became more peaceful. Heiner placed one hand behind her neck and one under her knees and gently picked her up.

Her slender body entered his arms, and her slightly bent head leaned against his shoulder. She was still in a daze, as if she hadn't noticed anything.

Heiner walked quietly so as not to wake her. That whole series of actions was familiar, like a habit.

Her quiet breathing rose and fell near the nape of his neck. Heiner climbed the stairs, suppressing his desire to hug her as tight as he could.

He loved this moment.

The moment when she released all her strength and leaned completely on him. This defenseless moment, as if there wasn't a single reason to push him away.

This moment when even the lines drawn between them and the minimum distance become meaningless...

This was why he never once made the mundane little suggestion that she should go to her room to sleep. He wanted to cherish this moment, which had no intention or meaning and was therefore nothing more than a brief illusion on his part.

Because of such petty greed.

Heiner laughed to himself and dropped his gaze. In the dark of the night, a particularly pale face came into view.

He kept checking Annette's breathing and heartbeat. Although he was happy to embrace her, he was also extremely anxious.

She was alarmingly light, but Heiner felt as if he lifted the world.

Soon he reached her room. With his careful hands, he placed Annette down on her bed and the moment he was about to take his hands away, she stirred slightly.

“Ugh….”

Heiner watched her, all his movements still, like a sniper whose position had been revealed to the enemy.

Annette's eyelids slowly opened. Between them, blue eyes were revealed. Her eyes were still half asleep.

Heiner was at a loss, but gently withdrew his hands. Then some light returned to her eyes. Annette muttered in a faint voice.

“Heiner……?”

"Yes."

“Is that you?”

Heiner nodded his head. Then she lifted her lips gently.

“It’s you.”

Annette, smiling with a face full of sleep, was very pretty. He felt as if his chest was being squeezed.

“I had a dream.” (A)

"A dream?" (H)

He asked back in a gentle voice and sat down on the edge of the bed.

“When I first met you.” (A)

“You mean in the garden?” (H)

“Yes. But… was the dream a little different from reality, or did I not notice it…?” (A)

"What?" (H)

“In my dream, you look like you have eyes that are in love.”

She had a sad face, as if she was still half in a dream. Heiner laughed low.

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# Chapter 116

## side story 3

“It would have been like that in real life too.” (H)

“It’s a lie. You hated me back then.” (A)

“I wanted more than I hated. When I first saw you in that garden...” (H)

He stretched out his words slightly as if reliving that moment.

“Do you know how hard I tried to carry on a conversation with you? Any moment you say, ‘I enjoyed our conversation.’ Then I'm afraid you’ll say 'bye' and leave."

“For something like that, your expression was scary.”

“You were scared?” He frowned as if he had heard something very unexpected.

Annette reached out and pressed his brows. “Look at this. It’s scary.”

Heiner excused himself, taking her hand and placing it on his lap.

“I was nervous.” He said.

“Were you nervous?”

“Of course. It’s our first time meeting, how can a person not be nervous?”

“I just thought you were a really hard person.”

“It was a disaster from the first impression.” Heiner sighed.

Annette laughed out loud and shook her head. “I thought you were cool from the beginning.”

"......Really?"

"Really. Ah, I'm not that good with soldiers. Even though I thought that I looked forward to meeting you again. I was so excited every time I ran into you, did you know?”

“At our first dinner together, it seemed like you had a certain crush on me.”

“Mr. Heiner, you approached me knowing that I had feelings for you?” Annette playfully glanced at his eyes and tried to pull his hand away.

Heiner squeezed her hand and spoke in a muttering tone. “I really thought it was just a casual crush. And anyway—”

His words did not continue. Annette looked at him in confusion, but he just lowered his eyes as if hesitating. The words he couldn't say faded away in his mouth.

“What anyway?” Annette blinked rapidly and urged him on.

He thought about a different answer for a moment, saying finally, “Anyway…I’m still trying to win your heart.”

“My heart already belongs to you.”

Heiner, who was momentarily speechless, only pursed his lips.

Annette asked, gently stroking his fingers with the hand she held in his. “Still don’t believe it?”

“I...I believe it.” Heiner responded quietly, removing the hair that was sticking to her cheek and putting it carefully behind her ear. “Your eyes are full of sleep. Go to sleep.”

"And you?"

“I will stay by your side until you fall asleep.”

“I am not a child—”

Even as Annette said that, he didn't seem offended. She spoke with her eyes closed as if recalling a distant memory.

“You know, I was a very sensitive baby. When I was held, I slept quietly, but when the nurse put me down, I woke up and cried.”

“No wonder, you were sleeping quietly when I picked you up earlier, but you woke up as soon as I laid you down.” Heiner was thoughtful.

“I can sleep anywhere now. I can even sleep on the floor.”

Annette said it with a hint of pride, but he somehow felt bitter. Heiner was reminded of how she must have slept on the cold ground and on the iron bed in the poor field hospital.

He hesitated for a moment before suggesting. “If you want, I will hold you and put you to sleep again.”

“It’s okay.” Annette laughed quietly, and said in a hushed voice. “Just stay like this.”

Heiner gently patted her small hand and waited for her to fall asleep. Until her still breathing became long and slow.

A calm and peaceful air hovered between them. Heiner stayed by her side for a long time.

Now Annette can sleep without medication. She still had nightmares from time to time, but not for long.

Everything was getting better little by little. Everything—

*“You still don’t believe it?”*

Her question suddenly came back. Heiner looked down at their clasped hands for a moment.

His answer that he believed was not a lie. He didn't want to push anything away from Annette anymore. Because they had already come too far for that. But—

Heiner muttered his unfinished words into his mouth.

*Anyway,*

*Your heart can't beat my heart anyway.*

*No matter how much you give me your heart, it will never be mine alone.*

This was not some self-deprecation or resigned thought. It was just a matter of calmly facing the facts.

Annette was sharing her heart with many people in the world. With music, Joseph, Bruner, Olivia, Ryan, other neighbors, and even the Rosenberg family and Catherine who had already passed away.

If someone asked Annette if she would trade Heiner for all of this, she would be distressed. That was the difference between her and him.

Heiner was learning, little by little, to give his heart to something besides Annette. But that was all. Nothing could compare to Annette.

His world was still all about her.

But Annette still couldn't fully accept him. His deceptive marriage to her left her deeply scarred. She still feared being bound to him by the institution of her marriage.

Perhaps it was natural. Because while he also said he trusted her heart, he did not think it was perfect.

This was their relationship.

Heiner believed throughout their time together, they would not be able to let go of their distrust of each other. The past may become dull or faded with time, but it would still exist.

Everything flows.

There was nothing that could be undone. Just creating a path forward.

After Heiner confirmed that Annette was fast asleep, he carefully stood up. With quiet steps he closed the door and walked out and down the stairs.

The room Annette gave him was located on the first floor. Of course, Heiner didn't expect to be in the same room, but he felt bitter because that choice somehow seemed to signify the distance between him and her heart.

Heiner opened the door and entered his room. Lukewarm darkness enveloped him. He stared into the dark room with a new feeling.

Suddenly, Heiner realized that he was no longer afraid of dark, confined spaces.

\*\*\*

Morning sunlight was shining on the window. When the fog cleared at dawn, the landscape was brightly colored with the light of a clear summer day.

The bathroom door on the first floor clicked open. Heiner walked out from inside, a towel draped over his shoulders. The ends of his hair were still wet.

The house was quiet. Heiner walked into the kitchen, drying his hair with the towel. Putting water in the kettle with familiar hands, he ground roasted coffee beans in a coffee grinder.

The sound of boiling water and grinding coffee beans dispelled the silence. Heiner put the ground coffee beans in the dripper and poured boiled water little by little over them.

Brown water trickled down into the fogged glass teapot. While waiting for the coffee to be brewed, he took out a hearing aid wrapped in a cloth, cleaned it, and put it on his left ear.

Originally, Heiner did not enjoy coffee. To be precise, he only drank coffee served in business or social situations, and he never personally sought it out.

However, at Santa Molly, he made coffee as a daily habit. As soon as he opened his eyes, he put water on the kettle for Annette, who loved coffee.

It was one of his favorite routines to make coffee for her ahead of time, sit across from her at the small table when she had just woken up, and talk to her while sipping her glass.

Heiner poured the finished coffee into a cup. The fragrant scent of coffee was rising everywhere. He looked at the two glasses on the table with satisfied eyes, then turned his gaze up the stairs.

*'You woke up a little late today.'*

Annette's waking time was generally the same. By this time, it was time for her to come down to the first floor after washing her face.

Heiner climbed the stairs to wake her up. This had happened to her a few times before, and he also loved waking her up.

He stood in front of Annette's bedroom and knocked twice on the door. But there was no sign of anything inside.

“Annette?”

There was no answer to the call. Heiner knocked once more and opened the door. An empty bed was visible through the opening of the door.

The woman he was looking for was not on the bed with the blanket neatly arranged. He left the room and checked the bathroom, but it was also empty.

The silence that filled the house suddenly became heavy. He stepped back in front of the bathroom. His heart sank.

Heiner hurriedly walked down the stairs. He knew he was being overly sensitive, but he couldn't help it.

Because the silence in the house reminded him of ‘that day’.

That day. The air was strangely quiet and cold, and there was no answer when he called. Hazy steam flowing out with a strong rose scent—

“Annette!”

As he came down the stairs, Heiner called her name loudly. But the house was still quiet.

Heiner went through the entire first floor, including the living room, small room, bathroom, and kitchen, and went into the small storage room attached to the kitchen.

He looked outside through the window in the warehouse and was quietly relieved. There she was—sitting in a corner of the backyard, in front of a small vegetable garden.

His heart, which had been shaking, finally found its proper place. Heiner immediately came out of the warehouse and opened the door leading to the backyard.

The bright light of a summer day poured down. He frowned slightly. After a brief glare, the scenery of the backyard came into view.

A woman wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat was crouching in front of the garden. She looked like a little girl, observing her vegetable garden with her arms resting on her bent knees.

Heiner stood still for a moment and looked at her. Perhaps because the sunlight was so bright that his vision was blurred, everything felt like a piece of a dream.

Annette turned her head as if she sensed his presence. Annette, spotting him, blinked her eyes a few times and smiled slightly.

At that moment, the dream became reality.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 117

## Side story 4

As if wiping off a fogged window, the world became clearer. Heiner walked over and stood to her left. A tight voice came out with a slight tremor.

“...I didn’t know you were here.”

“Ah, I woke up early today, and the weather was nice, so I came out for a bit.”

Annette answered casually and pointed to one side of the garden.

“Look at this.”

Where her fingertip pointed, there was a chamomile with flower buds. Annette said, looking happily at the little flower buds.

“Isn’t it so cute?”

“The flowers are about to bloom.”

“They say the tea tastes best if you brew it two or three days after the flowers bloom.”

“Are you going to cut it?”

“Don’t talk like I’m slaughtering some kind of livestock.”

Heiner stared at the chamomile that was just about to bloom with disbelief. He wondered how much effort he had put into seeing this flower …

Staying at this house all summer vacation, he devoted himself to tending the garden. In fact, he had no intention of being completely obsessed with it from the beginning.

The reason this happened was because of Ryan Progue.

He came and went to this house a few times because his nephew was temporarily indebted to Annette. At the same time, it seemed to have contributed somewhat to the initial settlement process.

Ryan not only repaired the house and helped rearrange the furniture, but also repaired the fence in the garden and planted seedlings. Annette was very grateful to him.

“I had only seen plants, but it was my first time growing them, so I was very confused. Farming is more labor intensive and difficult than expected... Still, I was fortunate that Ryan helped me a lot.”

Along the way, Heiner began studying garden farming. He purchased all kinds of good fertilizers and nutrients, and installed the supports himself.

His efforts paid off more than expected.

Just as Annette said that she had no talent for farming, the plants she grew were very small. However, when Heiner began to take care of it himself, the plants grew at an alarming rate.

Annette was happy and amazed when she saw this. At her reaction, Heiner felt as proud as when he heard the news of victory in battle. Moreover, he also felt some affection for this small garden.

Heiner muttered a little helplessly.

“… “I don’t think there’s any need to pick flowers.”

“Then it’s not worth raising it.”

Annette spoke casually, stood up, used a pump to draw water, and put it into a watering can. Immediately afterwards, Heiner stopped her.

“I told you not to do this yourself.”

He stood in front of the pump with a calm expression and drew water.

Annette took a step back and looked down at his bowed back. With his tanned skin, large build, and light shirt attire, he looked exactly like a farmer from the South.

Throughout his stay at Santa Molly, Heiner never let her do anything too hard. He was in charge of most of the gardening and household chores, including fetching water.

Thanks to this, Annette didn't do anything heavy and just leisurely looked at the plants growing well in the clean house.

Smiling half gratefully, half sighing, she squatted down next to him.

“If you keep doing this, I’m going to have bad habits.”

“Just let me do it. What are you doing?”

“After you leave, I have to do everything anyway.”

“So, one employee…… .”

“I live alone, so I need someone to help me.”

“Even if you do, don’t accept his help. Call me if you need anything.”

“His?”

“Ryan Progue.”

Annette looked up at him in bewilderment.

“Why is Ryan suddenly here?”

“Because he keeps coming in and out of your house.”

Heiner did not hide his grumpy expression at all. Even so, there were many complaints about this issue.

At his words, Annette opened her eyes and shook her head.

“It’s never like that.”

“I know it’s not like that. It’s not that I don’t trust you, it’s just that I don’t like him.”

“What did Ryan do to you?”

“Nothing….No, it’s just wrong. He comes and goes to your house like his own, knowing what your relationship is.”

“At that time, Ryan's nephew stayed here so he came here quite often, but now we hardly ever see him. While you’re at it, fill up the bucket too.”

Heiner countered by obediently dragging a bucket to draw water.

“I thought I heard some time ago that you were planning to visit his house soon. Am I mistaken?”

“Well, you know, Ryan’s mother knows a lot of people in Santa Molly, so she helped me a lot in one way or another in settling down here. I have to visit her at least once.”

There was nothing wrong with what Annette said. That extroversion may have been in the family genes, but the entire area was going to know it.

It was also true that Annette, who came to Santa Molly alone, was given a lot of help. It was largely thanks to the Progue family that her neighbors here accepted her without much resistance or distance.

Even though he knew everything, Heiner still couldn't shake off his anxiety.

Although he hated to admit it, Ryan was a good man. His unique positive and cheerful personality

could even cover her pain and wounds… Unlike Heiner himself.

Moreover, Ryan was a well-to-do man who grew up in a healthy and loving family environment. Heiner couldn't help but compare himself to the training camp graduate.

“He is a good friend. I can’t suddenly break off the relationship.”

“Annette. I'm not telling you not to make friends. But it's true that Ryan cared about you. That may still be the case…”

“I settled here alone. I’ve received help from his family over the years, but now you’re telling me to pretend not to know?”

“I’m just saying there’s no need to get too involved.”

“But you also see Miss Annallie often.”

Heiner's eyebrows rose at those words.

“Why is Miss Annallie here?”

“Same reason you mentioned Ryan.”

“It’s a completely different case.”

“Well, since there’s been talk of an engagement, your side is a plus. It’s overflowing.”

Heiner looked down at his feet at Annette's point. As he thoughtlessly drew water, the bucket was already full and overflowing.

Heiner straightened his body with a sigh. Then he reached out his hand.

“The sun is hot, so let’s go inside. As you know, I declined the engagement. Besides, meeting Miss Annallie is for public reasons.”

Annette stood up holding his hand and responded coldly.

“I’ve never thought of Ryan as the opposite sex either.”

“Is there any guarantee that this will continue to be the case?”

“What is it, childish?”

“I remember that among the people you briefly met in the past, there was someone you were originally friends with?”

“I remember in the past, when we were dating, we made a rule not to bring up the past?”

They argued all the way out of the backyard. Heiner opened the back door and let Annette in first, then entered himself and closed the door behind him.

Annette said, facing him with her arms crossed.

“If we talk about the past, do you think I have nothing to say?”

“Try it.”

“When I was locked up in the church building at Huntingham, Elliot asked me, ‘Aren’t you curious about your ex-husband’s women?’ Not a woman, but women.”

“It was just part of the operation. I never gave them my sincere heart.”

“Aha, really? You gave them your body, but you didn’t give them your heart?”

“I didn’t even give them my body!”

Heiner hastily made an excuse as if he felt unfair. He roughly brushed away his flowing hair and let out a sigh.

“Let’s stop talking about this.”

“You said we talk.”

“You’re beside the point. So you’re saying you’re going to keep seeing that man?”

“Stop spinning around and tell me. What do you want? To cut off my relationship with Ryan?”

“Yeah, be honest. I don't want you talking to someone else. Are we done?"

Then Annette laughed as if she was shocked.

“Why don’t you just say you want to be the only one left in the world with me?”

“I didn’t say that, but you know it well.”

“You are so selfish.”

"I know. I figured it out so I didn't say anything else. It's just... can't you understand me to some extent?"

“I don’t know why it matters who I date. You're the one I like right now."

Annette glared at him slightly, as if she was frustrated. Their faces were so close that their breaths could touch each other.

Heiner twitched the corners of his eyes. She could see his jaw tightening. He spoke in a stubborn tone.

“Have you forgotten that I used to be a spy? It doesn’t work in the beauty world.”

“No, I just saw it. What…”

“Anyway, unless it’s really necessary, don’t meet him alone.”

Heiner came to his own conclusion and turned away from her. The sound of footsteps, heavier than usual, pounded on the floor.

His shoulders were stiff as if he were angry. Annette looked at his back with a bewildered expression.

Suddenly, Heiner stopped his steps for a moment. He turned his head slightly so as not to show his face, and spoke in a blunt tone.

“I made some coffee, so drink it.”

Then he added,

“It must have all cooled down.”

\*\*\*

# Chapter 118

## Side story 5

Santa Molly was a maritime city famous for summer tourism. It was well known not only for its beautiful sea, but also as the production area for Garpel beer, which was made with high-quality groundwater.

The area where Annette lived was located a little far from the center. However, tourists often visited this area to see the cliffs at sunset.

In particular, this year's Santa Molly was more lively than ever due to the holiday season and the beer festival.

Meanwhile, Annette was sitting at the piano as usual. She pressed her keys, glaring at the sheet music in front of her.

*'I'm so shocked... ’*

The sound of the piano followed the scale of the score. However, it was a slightly slower performance than usual.

*'Is that really something to fight about? It's okay to say it in a positive way, but why did he bring up stories from the past again?'*

Without realizing it, her fingers tightened. The sound became dull, but Annette paid it no mind and played her piano with a bit of annoyance.

*'If you think about it, it was like that even when we were dating. He kept wondering who I met in the past... and he lied and hid everything from me.’*

Her crooked fingers made a deviating sound. At the same time, the playing stopped. Annette sighed and gently massaged her slightly sore left hand.

All day today, she couldn't get any further from this third verse. Perhaps it was because of the noise of the festival coming from afar, or because of what happened in the morning, but she couldn't concentrate.

She really had no idea that she would be fighting over something like this at the age of 30. How could you tell that that childish man was the cold and strict commander-in-chief of Padania?

After the argument, they were in a cold war all day. Annette stayed in the practice room all day, and Heiner also seemed busy with his own work. Or pretending to be busy on purpose.

It was their daily routine to drink coffee together in the morning, but today they even skipped that.

As Annette recalled the day, her anger did not subside but rather grew. She thought over every word he said that morning.

*‘It’s not that you don’t trust me? lie. How is that any different from saying you don't trust me?'*

She had a vague idea that Heiner did not completely trust her heart. But she never thought to say it out loud.

Because she was like that too.

There were many reasons why Annette could not trust his heart. Of course, their past problems were the biggest, and another thing besides that was…

*‘No skinship.’*

You might think it was a childish reason, but it was a problem she couldn't help but care about. Annette sat down at the piano and thought seriously.

Heiner did not engage in any physical contact other than light hugs or holding hands. She was perplexed. That's something you do between friends.

*‘How can this happen when we stay in one house? It was the same when we were married, and it is the same now. Is he saying he doesn’t want to do anything if I don't approach him first? When we were dating, he tried to kiss me every chance he got, it was all an act, right?'*

As her thoughts continued, her doubts grew more and more suspicious. Her pride, which had been trampled on by going to his room first throughout her marriage, also played a role.

*‘No way, this person……doesn’t he have the desire to do it anymore….?’*

As soon as her thoughts changed to this point, she felt exhausted for a moment. Annette covered her face with both hands in a feeling of self-destruction.

*'Why am I thinking like this.. … ?’*

She knew that it was not a matter to be trifled with. At least when it came to physical intimacy, Annette understood him. Heiner had a reason to be reluctant.

Even if she already knew everything about him, they were both cautious to bring this issue up again.

A sigh was scattered beneath her palms. The hands that were covering her face slipped away.

The exposed face was much more determined. Annette straightened her back, her head, and placed her hands on the keyboard again.

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Beads of sweat flowed down sharp lines and hung on the tip of his chin. The sweat drops followed the movement of his body and fell, unable to bear his weight.

His upper body, which had been hardened for a long time, repeatedly moved closer and further away from the floor (he’s doing pushups). The veins on one hand that was resting on the floor were bulging.

His swollen forearms and back were covered with all kinds of scars. The appearance was reminiscent of a carnivore that had finally won control of its territory after countless battles.

The simple action of bending and straightening one arm was repeated over and over again. Even as the number gradually increased, his posture did not change at all.

"Ha…. ”

Finally, a long breath exhaled out of his mouth.

Like a jaguar stretching its upper body flexibly, Heiner stood up from his position with his back straight, with his hands on the ground. It was a smooth movement like flowing water.

As soon as he got up, beads of sweat fell. Heiner brushed his chin with the back of his hand, grabbed his towel and clothes, and walked into the bathroom.

After taking off his clothes, he paused in front of the bathroom mirror. A muscular, scarred torso was reflected on the glass surface.

Heiner stared at the mirror with an expressionless face. The surface of the tattoo stamped in the middle of his chest was so distorted that the original spelling could not be recognized.

A few months ago, he underwent scarring surgery at the doctor’s office. In fact, it couldn't even be called a procedure. It was because the burns were simply treated after burning the surface of the scars with fire.

The intention was to make it look like a normal burn mark rather than a branding mark.

*“It is difficult to remove the scar because it is so old and extensive, so this is the best, but even if we use anesthesia, it will still be very painful.”*

*“It doesn’t matter.”*

Anyway, the pain was nothing. Heiner underwent the procedure without hesitation, and considering his original purpose, the results of the procedure were good.

In fact, there were many opportunities to eliminate this branding type at any time. He just left it alone.

He didn't want to show this to anyone, including the doctor, and he thought he would never have to show it anyway.

Also, this branding was a break for him.

Every time he wanted to throw everything away and chose only her love, every time he wanted to embrace her as if the past never happened, he became aware of his reality.

*‘No, maybe...?’*

His quiet gaze rested on the tangled scars. Suddenly Heiner remembered the reason he had not been aware of for a long time.

He hoped she knew.

His desire to reveal everything about himself to her someday was overwhelming. Even though he was trying hard to hide his broken and distorted appearance... he actually wanted her to know.

*‘Could you have loved me like this? Would you have wanted to bring me, this blemish-filled person, into your perfect life?’*

*Even my floor, which is nothing but debris...*

His gaze on the glass slowly strayed. Heiner turned away from the mirror, scooped up water, and poured it on his body.

Cold water ran down his mottled skin.

\*\*\*

Heiner came out of the bathroom and stopped to dry his head with a towel.

The faint sound of a piano was coming from Annette's studio located in the corner of the first floor. It was a much earlier work time than usual.

*'The light didn't turn off until late last night... … ’*

Her temper was that once she got immersed in something, she had to see it through to the end. She was the kind of woman who would open a book to the first page and read it to the end right then and there.

This time too, it was obvious that she would have worked until dawn, then taken a nap and started working again in the morning.

Heiner lingered in front of the studio door for a while. From yesterday morning until today, Annette was confined to her studio. It seemed like she had no intention of talking to him.

Heiner let out a small sigh and walked towards the kitchen. He then started grinding the cocoa beans, filling the kettle with water as per his usual routine.

The soft sound of the piano and the light scent of coffee enveloped the air perfectly together. He made coffee while listening to the vaguely audible song.

He was happy that he was the first person to hear Annette's music. Unfortunately, he missed the first song last time, but he was definitely going to stick to it from now on.

At some point, the piano sound stopped. He poured the concentrated coffee into two glasses, mixed it with an appropriate amount of water, and then slowly sipped it. Today, he was worried about whether the coffee tasted good.

After finishing the tasting, Heiner placed the coffee cup on the table. Then he crossed his arms and glared at the table, as if he didn't like something.

While he was thinking about it, he opened the cupboard and took out two coasters that he had never used. He placed the coffee cups on the saucer and adjusted the position and angle of the cups perfectly.

Even the tablecloth was laid out flat and wrinkle-free, then he straightened as if satisfied.

The performance was still not going on. Heiner walked to the front of the studio and hesitated for a moment, standing behind the door.

In a few days, his summer vacation would be over, and he had to return to Lancaster. He couldn't let the little time he had left with her pass away like this.

Heiner took a deep breath and knocked on the door with a straight posture.

Knock. Knock.

“…Can I come in?”

The answer didn't come right away. That brief moment felt like eons to him. Just when his mouth was dry, he heard a voice telling him to come in through the door.

Heiner sighed in relief and opened the door.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 119

## Side story 6

The interior of the studio was simple. There was only a desk with piles of paper and a piano. The small trash can next to the desk was filled with seemingly discarded papers.

Annette was sitting in front of the piano with a neat posture, staring at him quietly. It was a face with unknown emotions.

Heiner opened his mouth slightly hesitantly, like a schoolboy who was awkward about giving a presentation.

“Did I disturb you?”

"·····It’s fine. Why?"

The question “Why?” sounded like a way to just say business and get out of the way quickly. Heiner became impatient and blurted out words.

“The coffee…”

His words stopped momentarily. He quickly pondered the rest of his words. Have you had your coffee yet? Don't you need coffee? Would you like to drink coffee together?

Nothing went on. When there was no conversation for a while, Annette tilted her head and asked back.

“Coffee, what?”

“Well, I made coffee… ."

The words he blurted out were poor.

There was silence for a moment. Heiner felt like punching himself in the mouth.

Annette had an expression in her eyes as if she was wondering what to do. Before she could open her mouth, Heiner immediately continued his next words.

“You get tired if you don’t drink coffee in the morning, right?”

“… ”

“It looks like you slept late last night.”

“… .

"Therefore… you must be tired.”

“… ”

“...I did everything wrong.”

“… .”

“I was sensitive, Annette, and I think I interfered too much with your personal relationships. Unless you two see each other too often... So, not just the two of you, but if it's a gathering where everyone meets together... Of course, this is just my opinion... … … … .”

The more he spoke, the more miserable it seemed. Heiner, who tried hard to control it, eventually shut his mouth. Silence came again.

The two looked at each other blankly. He didn't even know what to do with this atmosphere. Annette looked up at him blankly, and suddenly burst into small laughter. The sound her laughter broke the silence.

She covered her mouth with one of her hands and giggled. Heiner, who was staring dumbfoundedly at that scene, suddenly laughed.

Their eyes met again. Annette's blue eyes had a much warmer glow. Only then did Heiner notice that his mind had relaxed a little.

“… is it so."

Annette answered in a laughing voice. “Let’s drink together.”

\*\*\*

The cold war that started yesterday morning ended the next morning. It was a long and short Cold War.

After a conversation over a cup of coffee, they reached an agreement.

"I know what you care about, and to a certain extent I understand. I won't meet Ryan alone unless it's really necessary. But everyone in his family is precious to me, and I want to continue the relationship as much as I can. I’ll make sure to clarify the relationship. Is that okay?”

Heiner also agreed to this. In fact, he wasn't completely satisfied, but it was fortunate that her anger was relieved. It seemed like the war was finished like that.

However, even after they reconciled, they could not even have lunch together.

Annette had to finish up unfinished work, and Heiner had no choice but to take time off because there were parts of work that needed his guidance.

After spending most of the day, each person's work was completed. And in the late afternoon, they decided to go down to Santa Molly Market and do some grocery shopping together.

Annette wore ivory short sleeves that slightly exposed her shoulders and a pale green skirt that reached her knees, and her blonde hair was neatly braided and pinned up. She also took out her low-heeled booties that had been stuck in the closet for a long time.

After finishing her preparations, she stood in front of the mirror and checked her appearance. Although she was just going to the market, she felt excited because it was her first time outing with him.

Lastly, Annette wore a narrow-brimmed hat. It was a gift he gave her this summer for her love of wearing hats.

When she changed her shoes and came down to the first floor, Heiner was standing there holding a shopping basket. He glanced at Annette coming down the stairs and said,

“You look pretty today.”

“Just today?”

“You’re usually pretty, but you look little more today.”

Heiner answered calmly without taking his eyes off her face. If anyone heard it, it seemed like he was reading a script aloud rather than giving a compliment.

Annette smiled, her cheeks blushing slightly. There was an awkward feeling between the two. Heiner sheepishly rubbed the back of his neck, then pressed the gray peaked cap he was holding in his hand.

Annette didn't bother covering her face here. But it was different when she accompanied Heiner.

People in the know knew about their relationship, but there was no benefit in revealing it.

“Am I covered well?”

“Would you lower your head?”

"Like this?"

“Bow down and let me take a look.”

Heiner obediently bowed his head. She got on her tiptoes and stretched out her hands to fix his hat.

"Done."

Heiner lifted his head slightly. At the same time, their eyes met within a stone's throw distance. Annette realized too late that she was too close to him.

Their gazes were intertwined. She stood still for some time, forgetting to blink her eyes. She felt like she was imprisoned by his gaze. Heiner, who was staring at her, slowly parted his lips.

“… “Are you busy today?”

A deep voice came from him.

“Oh, no.”

“What about work?”

"Hmm…… I finished the part I was stuck on. why?"

“It’s just that my vacation is almost over and I want us to spend time together.”

“If only you weren’t busy...”

“I’m free.”

Under the shadow of the hat, his dark eyes slowly glanced over her face. From eyes to nose, nose to cheek, cheek to lips... … .

Annette unconsciously stiffened her shoulders. A strange feeling of tension ran down her spine. It felt like a very long time had passed.

But after she blinked once, his gaze was withdrawn. Heiner straightened his head and took a neat step back. Then, with a gentlemanly attitude, he opened the door.

“Let’s go.”

Annette absentmindedly mumbled a thank you and walked out the door. The afternoon sun was shining brightly. However, she felt somewhat empty.

\*\*\*

Perhaps because of the beer festival that coincided with the summer vacation period, the Santa Molly market was particularly lively today.

Garpel beer was seen everywhere in the market. People passing by were also holding bottled beer in their hands.

Annette looked at the beers in the ice basket with curiosity.

“Ordinary people also like beer. I thought only soldiers drank a lot.”

“It is the most common alcohol among the public. Have you ever tried beer?”

“No, just wine...… .”

Nobles usually only dealt in fruit wine. It was believed that alcohol made from grains, such as beer, was enjoyed only by workers. It was a similar reason to insisting on pipes, saying cigarettes were frivolous.

“Even in the Grott family?”

“Neither Catherine nor Brunner drank alcohol. They are both very devout religious people.”

"Right."

In Annette's case, then, she would never have had the opportunity to drink beer before. Heiner had seen soldiers drinking it like water on the battlefield.

After hesitating for a moment, Heiner cautiously proposed.

“If it’s okay with you, it might be a good idea to try it. Garpel beer is world-famous.”

“… ”

“… Of course, you don’t have to do it if you don’t feel like it.”

Heiner added, looking at her eyes. No matter how many hardships she had experienced, Annette was from a noble family. Also of royal lineage.

She was still hesitant with a serious face. Heiner guessed that the high class was reluctant to drink alcohol.

Just as he was about to change his words, Annette opened her mouth in a rather serious tone. The question that came from her was completely unexpected.

“Will it be delicious?”

"......yes?"

“I don’t like bad alcohol…”

Annette stared at him as if asking him to make a decision.

The sound of children laughing rang out. The clear laughter soon died down behind the commotion in the hall.

Heiner forgot his answer and stared blankly at her face.

Suddenly, a calm voice was heard from inside the store.

“It’s delicious. Try it.”

It was an old woman sitting on a simple chair and fanning a fan. Annette smiled and asked back.

"Is it so?"

“If you live in Santa Molly and don’t try Garpel beer, you’ll be bitter. Hey, you’re the lady who lives on the hill, right?”

“Do you know me?”

“I know. The lady who plays the piano.”

Annette just smiled quietly without any sign of disgust. It wasn't uncommon. People in the area, including Mayor of Santa Molly, knew that Annette Rosenberg lived on Sunset Cliff Hill.

“You look pretty. Is your lover next to you?”

"Yes? Ah yes."

The old woman fanned her fan with a friendly look on her face and glanced at Heiner.

“Oh my, if you’re going to cover it, you should cover it properly. Everything is visible from underneath.”

It was as if she knew everything. Heiner, who was very tired, pressed down his hat deeply. Annette hurriedly asked.

“Um, how much is a bottle of beer?”

“Two pennies a bottle. Buy four bottles, 7 pennies.”

“I’ll take four bottles. Please give me the coolest ones.”

“Okay, then. I’ll give you the coolest ones.”

The old woman asked as she touched the beers in the ice water.

“You want to go to the beer festival?”

“Oh, no. I’m not going to cover it.”

“Why aren’t you going? All the young people are going crazy over it.”

“Wow, it’s crazy just thinking about it. I'm just going to rest at home. Grandma, are you going to the festival?”

“It’s fine for me too. Yes, it's complicated and crazy to go there, right? I heard there's fireworks or something going on at night, so I'm going to see it. The lady's house is on a hill, so you can see it clearly. Now, here.”

The old woman handed them the beer. Heiner put them in the basket and paid.

"......thank you."

"Thank you. You two look good together. Standing there like that, you look like newlyweds.”

The old woman said, fluttering her fan. Annette and Heiner exchanged a slightly embarrassed look and then laughed softly.

\*\*\*

# Chapter 120

## Side story 7

After returning home, they gathered the ingredients and prepared dinner together. Heiner made beef stew and Annette made pumpkin pie.

Although she found out later that it was true, Heiner's cooking skills were quite high. He said that he had been moving from place to place for a long time and that it had grown on its own.

In comparison, Annette's cooking skills were terrible. She was subsisting on recipes she learned from Catherine, and pumpkin pie was one of them.

Heiner trimmed the meat and vegetables with skillful hands. The soup, made with tomatoes and white wine, had a sweet smell.

When Annette put the pumpkin pie dough in the oven, the beef stew was ready just in time. Heiner scooped up the stew on a plate and placed it with a spoon, then poured beer into a glass.

Annette asked, tilting her head.

“Aren’t you drinking the bottle?”

“You can drink it from the bottle or pour it from a cup, there is no set way.”

“But everyone drinks the bottle…………….”

“You don’t have to copy what the soldiers do.”

“Well, there were no glass cups there.”

Convinced, Annette held up a glass with beer sloshing around. She clinked her glass lightly with his, then lightly brought it to her lips and tasted it.

"How is it?"

“Well, it’s not sweet, but it’s not bad. It’s okay.”

“You’re a good coffee drinker, but your only drink is sweet.”

“Strangely, I like sweet alcohol.”

“Are you good at drinking?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never drank much. What about you?”

“Well, I guess I’m not weak.”

“I think so too.”

“How do you know?”

“Have I seen you drinking with my father once or twice? It was always just him and the other officers going out.”

Heiner smiled slightly, lifted his beer cup to his mouth, and muttered.

“…If drinking capacity is hereditary, you would be weak.”

Annette scooped up the stew and tasted it, then her eyes widened and she let out a small exclamation. It tasted better than expected.

“Woa, you can be a hired cook.”

"Hmm?"

“Anyway, I want to hire you.”

“… I think you have a unique way of giving compliments.”

Heiner placed his chin with one of his hands and raised his eyebrows.

“But it’s good for me. It’s much more attractive than the position of commander-in-chief.”

“I don’t have money, so I can’t pay much.”

“Let’s replace the salary with something else.”

“What do you replace it with?”

"Well… .”

He shrugged his shoulders as he scooped up his stew.

“I’ll replace it with seeing your face every day.”

“That’s very expensive. I work and pay.”

They looked at each other and laughed. The delicious smell of pumpkin pie baking in the oven filled the kitchen. The first glass was quickly emptied, and Heiner opened the second bottle of beer.

When the atmosphere was getting warmer, the phone suddenly rang. Annette stood up with a puzzled look on her face.

“I have no one to call … .”

She entered the living room and answered the phone.

“Yes, this is Annette Rosenberg, ah… Yes, yes.”

There was a short pause.

Annette soon returned to the kitchen with a slightly ambiguous expression. She raised one eyebrow in confusion.

“Heiner, the call is for you.”

\*\*\*

Annette stirred the stew with a spoon. Inside, the sound of conversation continued. The currency was dragging on and on.

It was a call from Major Eugen, and it seemed like there was something that needed Heiner’s instructions. Even though Heiner was on vacation, there were many people looking for the military chief.

When Heiner came to Santa Molly, he brought a lot of documents with him. Although she understood, Annette couldn't help but feel a little sad when she saw him doing his work from time to time.

*'Why are you free today?'*

As she was sipping her beer alone, the second bottle quickly emptied. Annette opened the third bottle of beer and poured it into a glass.

Bored eyes turned out the window. It was already dark outside. Her fingers tapped the glass. Annette blinked her eyelids slowly. With the slight alcohol intoxication, random thoughts came to mind.

*‘…..Wasn’t it time to kiss earlier?’*

When they made eye contact up close after fixing his hat, a strange atmosphere was evident. But Heiner walked away cleanly, as if he had no self-interest.

*'What is it really?'*

She would have been embarrassed if she had even closed her eyes. Annette, whose pride was hurt for no reason, drank her beer with a gloomy face. During their dating days, Heiner would hug or kiss her whenever he got the chance. Whenever he stared at her, Annette would naturally anticipate his next words.

“Can I kiss you?”

That was the last time they were dating. After marriage, he was so busy that he didn't have time to date properly, and after the revolution... well, there was nothing to say.

'Was it really all an act? Are you someone who doesn't really have that kind of desire?'

Annette became depressed at the speed at which the glass was emptied. She also attributed it to the fact that yesterday's fight had not yet been completely resolved.

A faint feeling of intoxication came over. When she was about to grab the fourth bottle, Heiner’s hand suddenly appeared and snatched the beer bottle away.

“What are you doing?”

Annette lifted her head, frowning at him. Heiner stood there with an expression of bewilderment.

“Did you drink all this by yourself?”

“Look at this, you’re taking it away again.”

“What did I take away?”

“Don’t you remember? Long time ago, at the Belen Hotel. When Felix Kafka came, you took my drink away too.”

“Because you keep emptying your glass back then.”

“What do you have to say when you leave me alone? So what do I do there if I don’t drink?”

“That’s… Annette, I’m sorry about that.”

He apologized obediently.

“I know I hurt you back then.”

“I’m still confused about you. Are you sure you love me?”

After those words, there was silence for a while. Annette dropped her gaze with an upset face. Although she was under the influence of alcohol and was spitting out random words, she knew that she shouldn't just blame him.

His body slowly lowered. Heiner knelt down on one knee and tried to make eye contact with her. He looked at Annette's appearance and asked in a soft voice.

“Annette, did I do something wrong again?”

Despite her sudden resentment, Heiner tried to confirm his mistake without the slightest embarrassment. Annette became even more upset at that attitude.

She couldn't find the answer he deserved and she hesitated. Heiner did not urge her to do so.

pop.

Suddenly, the sound of something exploding echoed outside. It was the sound of firecrackers.

At the same time, Annette's shoulders trembled. Starting with the first fireworks, colorful fireworks began to decorate the sky one after another.

It was a firework announcing the festival. However, the two did not turn their heads out of the window. Blue veins appeared on the back of her hand.

Annette closed her eyes tightly and plugged her ears. pop. A loud bursting sound filled her ears. The sound of large fireworks overlapped with the sound of bombing that filled the world like a nightmare.

Even in the hospital, during the evacuation, in the trapped church, and in the collapsed rubble, that sound continued to haunt her ears.

Even if she covered her ears, the sound of the bombing continued to be heard. Annette’s shoulders shrank as if they were being crushed by something. The next moment, a great warmth enveloped her.

It was a firm embrace that seemed to take away all her pain and suffering. Annette endured her nightmare with her face buried in his arms.

pop. The sound of the fireworks sounded muffled, as if a layer of glass had been broken off. He kept his arms around her until the fireworks display ended, and long after it ended.

The world became completely quiet. After a while, Annette slowly removed her hands that were covering her ears.

The tremors in her shoulders soon subsided.

The embrace covering her withdrew slightly. Annette raised her head. His faintly twinkling eyes were looking at her.

“...When I found you among the collapsed rubble.”

Heiner quietly opened his mouth.

“I thought I would let you go once and for all. And as I followed the train leaving Portsman Station, I decided. I would keep you forever.”

“… .”

“I will be your unbreakable fortress and your ally in every moment you have to face. Wherever you are, wherever you want to go, wherever you need to go… I want to be with you.”

He made eye contact with her as he spoke, capturing his emotions one by one.

“It doesn’t matter if you don’t believe in me for the rest of your life. Because I can tell you all my life. I love you."

Annette's eyes wavered.

“Annette, I love you more than my life. I was always nothing.”

In a childish complaint that used drunkenness as a weapon, he made a confession that was heavier than anything else. Annette moved her lips a few times, but no words came out.

“If there is anything about me that is untrustworthy, please tell me. I'll fix it... ……I’m so stupid that I don’t know unless you tell me.”

“You are not stupid.”

“Then please tell me quickly. What offended you?”

Annette hesitated, unable to answer readily. It felt like a very insignificant reason for her to say out loud.

"just… ”

"just?"

“… I feel like you don’t really want to touch me.”

“Me? With you?”

Heiner looked as if he had heard something very unexpected. Annette was rather dumbfounded by that innocent expression.

“…You didn’t say anything wrong.”

“So which part?”

“Compare it to when we were dating. You don't do anything other than hug or hold hands..."

“You’re the one who doesn’t want to.”

This time Annette was confused.

“Me?”

“Isn’t that why you gave me a separate room?”

“That’s because it’s definitely more convenient to have separate rooms… … ”

“I know you don’t completely trust me. I won’t do it if you don’t want me to.”

“No, I mean... it was always you who didn't want it. So, not so much with me... I want to do it.”

The end of Annette's words sank in. Heiner frowned as if he had heard all sorts of strange noises.

“What do you mean?”

\*\*\*\*

# **Chapter 121**

## Side story 8

Annette was embarrassed even though she was the one who brought up the issue.

“Don’t you remember? During our marriage, I was always the one who visited your room.”

“How can I go to your room after ruining the relationship with my own hands?”

“I hope you found it well.”

“I’m talking about at night. It’s not like I’m some sort of nymphomaniac, but I can’t come to you just for sex in that situation. And in the first place.”

Heiner took a moment to catch his breath, as if he was embarrassed to say such a thing, and then spoke in a suppressed voice.

“Why do you think I didn’t send you back when you came to visit me?”

The nape of his neck was slightly red. Annette looked up at him in confusion, and she answered without thinking deeply.

“...I don’t know?”

“Yeah, because you don’t know, you’re probably thinking something ridiculous like I don’t want to be with you.”

Heiner seemed truly dumbfounded. Annette, who was reflecting on his words, hesitated and asked.

“Then…do you want to do it with me?”

Heiner's face went blank for a moment. He closed his mouth and roughly rubbed his face with a soft sigh.

“… .You are too honest sometimes. You were like that in the old days too. The words you casually threw made me feel like I was crazy... ”

Heiner suddenly stopped speaking and stared at her. In the sudden silence, their eyes met. Annette waited for his next words with wide eyes.

For a moment, time seemed to stop.

Heiner, who quickly cursed under his breath, approached her. He bent his head and swallowed her lips in one go.

It was significantly different from past kisses that always started with a polite question. This was impatient and rough. It was a kiss that felt as deep as desire as well as affection.

Surprised, Annette stiffened slightly, closed her trembling eyelids, and carefully placed her hand on his shoulder. A large hand supported the back of her head. The kiss deepened. The sensation of lightly sucking and pulling on her soft lips and the feel of his tongue skimming her mouth caused her to shiver.

He kissed her from different angles. The wet sound continued. Annette could barely breathe through the gaps.

It was only when her breathing became difficult that his lips slipped away. She gasped, not even able to open her eyes. ha. Hot breaths mingled.

“Let’s take this opportunity to make it clear.”

He whispered against her lips.

“I’ve never not wanted you…in any way.”

Before Annette could answer, he pressed his lips against hers again. His tongue tangled. The longer the kiss lasted, the more her upper body bent.

Annette couldn't tell if the dizzying sensation of

her having no balance was due to the heavy kiss or her precarious posture.

Annette quickly pushed him away and turned her head. His wet lips brushed the corners of her mouth and cheeks and then fell.

Heiner looked at her, his brow furrowed slightly, like a child who had been robbed of his candy. She muttered an excuse without realizing it.

“I feel like I’m going to fall…… ”

Heiner let out a small moan, then stretched out his arms and picked her up. Annette took a deep breath and hugged his neck.

"Where are you going?"

“A place where you won’t fall.”

“I have legs too.”

“I can’t wait for your walking speed.”

“How can you say you can’t even wait until now?

Before she could finish speaking, Heiner opened the door on the first floor. He strode into the room, whipped off her slippers, threw them away, and placed Annette on the bed.

Annette sat against one wall and caught her breath. Without any time to spare, he immediately climbed onto the bed.

The man's large body suddenly got closer. The field of her vision was all about him. Heiner placed his hands on either side of her head and kissed her again as if pushing from above her.

Annette was pinned between him and the wall and he kissed her passionately. The faint moans that came out were all swallowed up in his mouth.

The breathing she had barely regained quickly became a mess. She was struggling with her strength and her legs were shaking. At that moment, something hard touched her toes.

At the same time, Heiner's body stiffened. Finally, he placed his lips on hers, kissed her lightly, and then withdrew.

His face was slightly frowning as if he was in trouble.

She belatedly realized what it was and sighed softly.

"......oh."

Annette hastily removed her foot from his inner thigh. Suddenly, an apology popped out.

“I’m sorry.”

“No, you have nothing to be sorry about...”

The atmosphere became awkward. Annette carelessly touched one cheek with the back of her hand. She felt her face heating up. She muttered absentmindedly.

“Actually, I thought you might not have much desire.”

"......what?"

A stupid question came back. Annette smiled humbly. Heiner asked in bewilderment.

“Would I have done that in our marriage if I didn’t have the desire?”

“You had no choice but to do it because I went there first.”

“If I had no choice, I would have done it once and sent you back.”

After hearing it, Annette realized he wasn't wrong, but Annette was silent. Heiner sighed as if confused.

“There are a lot of misunderstandings between us that need to be resolved. I’m scared of what more there might be.”

“...Not anymore. Maybe."

“Listen, Annette. I get turned on just by holding your hand.”

"What?"

“It’s the same even if you stare at me like that.”

“… .”

“...Don’t look at me like an animal so much.”

“No, that’s not it… If you keep doing that… what should I do?”

“What should you do? Alone......."

Heiner, who answered with a frown on his face, must have thought that this wasn't right, so he closed his mouth. But Annette, who had already gotten the answer, quietly nodded her head.

“Well, that’s right.....”

Silence came. She tried not to look at his nether regions and pursed her lips as if she were about to say something more.

...Heiner."

After some hesitation, her small voice came out. Heiner recognized it as his name by the shape of her mouth, and made eye contact with her.

The room was dark except for the light streaming in through the open door. Annette swallowed her saliva once, then hesitated and placed her hand on his.

Heiner's body stiffened. She looked up at him with her trembling eyes. After a brief pause, he let out a low growl-like moan and he pressed on her lips again.

His warm hands traced her waist. Her indoor dress, which was fastened with laces, was easily undone with a simple tug. In an instant, the front buckle became loose.

His deeply lustful gaze moved downward. He could see her beautiful white breasts rising and falling rapidly through the gaping front flap.

Heiner frowned at the feeling that his lower body had turned into steel. It was her body that he saw properly for the first time. Because their intimacy had always happened in the dark.

Perhaps sensing what was going on in his mind, Annette took the initiative to make a suggestion in a cautious tone.

“It’s okay to turn off the fire.”

Heiner paused for a moment at those words. She spoke softly.

“You don’t have to show it if you don’t want to. but…you don’t have to hide it from me anymore.”

“… .”

“Everything is fine.”

The moment she said that, he felt like everything was okay, like it was a dream.

If you think about it, it's always been like that. Even when he was building their relationship on lies and deception, when she talked about a happy future, it felt like that future would really come.

She said that when she talked about God, it seemed there was really a God, and when she talked about love, it seemed like there really was love.

It was the same.

It was really like a fantasy.

Heiner hesitated for a moment and placed his hands on the hem of his shirt. He slowly took off his top, holding her between his legs as she sat against the wall.

The scarred and mottled upper body hidden under the hem of the clothes was revealed. A dim light illuminated his scarred chest.

At the same time, her eyes widened.

"That......!"

Annette grabbed his forearm. The atmosphere instantly froze, like a crack in a window.

“W-what is it?”

Annette asked with a trembling voice.

"Therapy… Did you do it? But this is so… ."

His large body was turned against the light streaming in from outside. But her eyes, accustomed to darkness, could see the scene before her.

While serving as a nurse, Annette saw many wounds and scars. Even though she was not at an expert level, she was able to guess why and how these wounds and scars appeared.

This was a large burn scar.

Blue eyes were colored with astonishment. She could tell without even hearing how the branding on his chest was erased.

In response to her reaction, Heiner spoke as if making an excuse.

“It’s just that you might be reluctant, so I think it would be better to get rid of it…………….”

“Why….?”

Annette suddenly raised her head. She opened and closed her mouth several times, then let out a shaky breath. And then she confirmed.

“You didn’t do it for you, you did it for me.”

“… .”

"Huh?"

"......yes."

“What should I do? It must have hurt...”

The muttering voice was faintly wet. Annette pursed her lower lip and bit down with an upset look on her face. Her trembling fingertips gently touched the burned surface.

He could see the corners of her eyes twitching. Heiner was startled and touched her cheek.

“… “Are you crying?”

\*\*\*Heiner had a branding “RENT BOY OF PANDANIA” on his chest. He got it removed by burning the skin surface.

\*\*\*\*

# Chapter 122

## Side story 9

When he looked up close, the blue eyes were full of tears. Heiner groaned as if he was in pain. As soon as he could see her wet eyes, tears fell from the corners of her eyes.

Heiner was sad and wiped away her tears. It was a clumsy touch. Even if he tried to wipe them away, the tears kept falling and he didn't know what to do.

Annette, who had been shedding tears for a while, opened her mouth.

“Heiner, I don’t mind anything from you.”

“… ”

“So don’t ever say that again.”

His eyes shook violently. He looked down at her blankly, and slowly nodded his head. Annette quietly buried her face in his arms.

Heiner held her still in his stiff arms. The warmth of the tight contact made his heart flutter. He squeezed his eyes to push back his own tears that were threatening to fall.

*How?*

*How did this person come into my life?*

*How did this person's heart reserve for me?*

*I have longed for this since I was young. I hope that at least once, just once, such a ridiculous moment will come to me.*

*The woman I had dedicated my whole life to have walked into my life, and even though she knew my life was so ugly and shabby, her heart was saved for me… Such an absurd moment.*

Heiner hugged her tighter. Unbelievably, the miracle he had longed for was not a fleeting moment, but became a reality.

He used to doubt this reality with ignorance. One day, when he woke up, it seemed like all of this would disappear like a dream on a summer night.

This doubt would probably not go away until he died. So he had no choice but to live like this.

*If it's a dream, I hope I don't wake up... .*

Heiner pressed his lips to her forehead. Small kisses followed her wet eyes, cold cheeks, small nose, nape of her neck, and even the top of her breasts.

He raised his head. Their lips overlapped again. Annette stretched out her hands and wrapped them around his neck as if responding.

Heiner took off the hem of her dress from her shoulder and kissed her. Unlike before, it was a soft and slow kiss.

A hard, calloused hand cupped her breast. Annette's body trembled slightly. The air surrounding them quickly became stale.

“… Heiner."

Suddenly, Annette opened her mouth. Heiner stopped moving and raised his head. She said with a face that still had traces of crying.

“The pumpkin pie…”

Heiner looked puzzled at the sudden mention of the pumpkin pie.

“I forgot to take it out of the oven.”

“… You can think about that later.”

“I made it…… ”

Having nothing to say, he pursed his lips. Eventually, Heiner let out a light sigh, and he mumbled, rubbing his lips against the nape of her neck.

“Annette, please save me. I might actually die physically.”

Although it was disguised as a joke, Annette let out a small laugh at the voice that was full of sincerity. A feather-like kiss landed on the back of her neck.

Heiner took a long time to caress her. Like slowly warming her fragile glass with just body heat, over a long period of time and delicately.

He didn't want to hurt this woman one bit. In the past, she had always been too much for him, and she would be even more so now. His hot lips and hands traveled all over her body. Annette let out a distant moan. Her mind was clouded like a damp pane of glass.

Blue veins stood on Heiner's temples. He let out a heavy breath as a heavy desire surged through his body. He made a low hissing sound. Heiner mumbled, kissing the corner of her eye as she gasped softly.

"You’re driving me crazy......"

Annette looked at the man on top of her with slightly watery eyes.

His face, cold enough to look gloomy, was distorted and disheveled with want. It seemed safe to say that it resembled pain more than that low level of pleasure.

“You...think that I have no desire... … … You need to realize how crazy that sounds.”

The voice, which was cracked and rough, sounded fierce at first glance.

Her entire body's senses became more sensitive, as if they had been awakened. His mind was shaking so much that she felt scared. Annette held on to him with her eyes tightly closed.

“Annette.”

Annette faintly opened her eyes at the sound of her name. She could see him through her blurry vision.

“Annette… … .”

He repeated the same words over and over again, as if his only purpose was to call her name. Annette blinked. His large hands cupped her cheeks.

They made eye contact at a distance so close that their breaths were intertwined. His gray eyes were full of her. Perhaps her eyes were like that too.

At this moment, it felt like the only thing they had left was each other.

Annette opened her eyes with difficulty and looked at him. His face was full of desire, passion, and... affection. Suddenly, love poured out from somewhere.

Riding that wave, the dull nightmares receded. Everything, even the by-products of the past that had accumulated for a long time like dust on a bookshelf.

For some reason, she cried again. Annette buried her face in his hand cupping her cheek. The hand was rough and hard, but warm.

Hot breath poured into her ear. Suddenly, she felt like all the sensations in her body were flowing backwards through her veins. Blink blink. Her mind flashed.

Eventually, white broke before her eyes like a wave hitting a cliff.

\*\*\*

A thin light came into view. The dimly lit light gradually expanded in size. Only then did the sight before her eyes become clearer little by little.

Annette blinked her heavy eyelids. The scenery above the bed and inside the room caught her eye. As she tried to turn over, she let out a faint moan without realizing it.

“Oh…. ”

Her whole body was sore and throbbing, as if she had been exercising vigorously. She came to her senses from the pain. Eventually, memories of last night came rushing back to her.

*'oh my god.’*

She couldn't tell when she fell asleep and fainted. She hesitantly lifted the blanket and checked her body. She looked well devoured as expected.

She almost chuckled at the past when she guessed that Heiner might not have much desire. She thought that the intimacy they had during their marriage was a bit strained, but it must have been something he had refrained from doing back then.

If last night was average... Heiner’s self-control was indeed worthy of praise.

After Annette groaned for a long time, she was barely able to get up from the bed. A faint sound of boiling water could be heard outside. It looked like he was making coffee.

As she was about to get out of bed, she was stopped by a sticky feeling between her legs. A new awareness followed.

Yesterday they were using birth control. There were no contraceptives available in the first place... There was no need to do that anyway, so Annette quietly rubbed her flat stomach.

She remembered a little life that came to her briefly one fall.

A child who came into the world without anyone's congratulations and left alone without anyone's condolences, a child who could not even be named.

Because the child was sent away without even knowing whether she existed, it was difficult to discuss things like love or maternal love.

However, whenever she thought of her child, she would suddenly feel empty and lonely, as if her heart had a hole in it. Could this be her feeling sorry for her child? Or was she just lingering over something she could never have again?

She couldn't figure it out. However, if she ever met that child again somewhere... she wanted to say hello. She wanted to wash her face and hands with warm water, dress her in soft clothes, and read a book to her while they sat in a sunny, breezy place.

Then she finally wanted to say goodbye.

The quiet morning sunlight shone through the window. Annette stared at the small fragments of light floating slowly in the sunlight, and then slowly turned around.

She put on the dress she had taken off yesterday and left the room to wash her body. When she opened the door, the fragrant scent of coffee wafted out.

Heiner was pouring water into the dripper. He was shirtless. He didn't look behind him, as if he hadn't heard her presence.

She saw the hearing aid sitting on the table. Annette walked towards him, deliberately making the sound of her footsteps. When she got quite close, Heiner turned his head towards her.

Their eyes met in the bright morning.

Annette folded her eyes and smiled shyly. Her cheeks were flushed with sunlight. Heiner stopped pouring water and looked at her with a tender expression. He belatedly put down the kettle and opened one of his arms. As Annette came up against his bare body, his strong arms wrapped around her.

Annette raised her head and looked up at Heiner. He was smiling softly.

It was a smile like the sun rising from the horizon.

It was a summer's day when she was just beginning to feel the heat.

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# Chapter 123 (End)

## Side story 10 (End)

The short summer vacation was coming to an end. After packing, Heiner left Sunset Cliff and headed toward Santa Molly Station.

It took five hours each way to get from Santa Molly to Lancaster by train. It wasn't a place one couldn't come and go, but it wasn't a place that was easy to come by often either.

Arriving at Santa Molly Station, Heiner bought a first-class ticket to the Lancaster terminal. And Annette was in the seat next to him.

Glenford Station, along the long South Sea, was located between the southern small town of Santa Molly and the capital, Lancaster.

They chose the coast of Glenford as the last place to spend their summer holiday together.

The train ran along the tracks and headed to Glenford. The dazzling South Sea was spread out on the right side of the car window the whole way.

Arriving at Glenford Station, they took a carriage and went to the hotel they had booked. Annette, who was looking around the hotel lobby, said playfully.

“Did you choose this hotel on purpose?”

“...This is the closest and best hotel to the sea.”

This hotel was where Annette had stayed when she impulsively came to Glenford Sea. Even though four years had already passed since then, the building remained the same without any changes.

After unpacking in their room, they had lunch at a famous seafood restaurant nearby. Both people commented that Santa Molly was better when it came to seafood dishes.

After eating, they looked around the museum in Glenford, bought trivial things at a souvenir shop, and got a couple’s ring fitted at a jewelry store they happened to visit.

Her left ring finger, which had been slightly thin due to constantly wearing her wedding ring, had almost returned to its original state over time.

Heiner put the ring on her finger again. Before the sun set, they went out to sea and walked along the shore. Everyone took off their shoes and held them dangling in their hands.

Annette said, looking wistfully at one side of the sandy beach.

“Originally, there was a street vendor selling paintings and drawings. Did they go somewhere else?”

“Street painters tend to wander from place to place.”

“I guess so… … … … ? That's too bad. I want to meet him again.”

“I guess you liked that person’s drawing.”

“That’s also true, he actually drew me at that time. I was wondering if there was that picture... of course it’s been so long, though.”

"Why…Didn’t you buy that painting back then?”

“Well, I don’t know. At that time, I just... I didn't really want to keep anything about myself. I was disposing of all my belongings, and now I can’t believe it’s my painting.”

Annette said lightly, “It wasn’t a live-action film anyway.” Heiner hesitated for a moment, then looked at her and opened his mouth insinuatingly.

“… If you want, I can get you the painting.”

"Yes? Ahaha, no. How do you find it? Someone must have already bought it.” (\*I think Heiner had bought it)

Annette laughed it off as if it was ridiculous. The sea breeze blew, pushing the current. Under the increasingly reddish sunset, the sand shone white.

They had almost reached the end of the Glenford coastline. Just as the horizon and the bottom of the sun were touching, Heiner suddenly stopped walking and turned to face Annette.

“Annette.”

Annette stopped after him and raised her head.

“Back to you…I have something I want to say.”

His large body, bathed in the sunset glow, stood as if blocking the rays. Heiner continued speaking in a calm tone.

“I know our relationship is still incomplete. That you cannot completely trust me, and that we cannot fully understand each other.”

“… .”

“But Annette, I promise you this for the rest of my life.”

His face was expressionless at first glance, but tension could be seen in the slightly trembling corners of his eyes and the slightly stiffness in the corners of his mouth.

“I will be your unbreakable fortress and your ally in every moment you must face. Wherever you are, wherever you want to go, wherever you need to go, I will be with you.”

“… ”

“I love you more than my life. So much so that I become nothing without you.”

His black hair blew in the sea breeze. Annette looked at him with wide eyes.

“I don’t have a proper ring, I don’t have flowers, I don’t have anything… … wanted to tell you before I go back to Lancaster.”

“… ”

“So, Annette, if it’s okay with you, I’ll officially come back later… ”

“Heiner.”

Annette cut him off gently. He paused. They were submerged up to their ankles in cold sea water and then pushed out. She said calmly.

“I am a remnant of the past that must disappear.”

It meant rejection.

Heiner's shoulders stiffened. However, his gray eyes were shaking in a way that could not be hidden. Annette continued her words in a quiet tone.

“I am of Rosenberg blood, and you are the commander-in-chief from the revolutionary army. A lot of time has passed since the revolution, but because so much has passed, we are even more vulnerable. You can’t be with me now.”

“… .”

“Not now, Heiner.”

Annette added. There was silence for a moment. Heiner, who had been listening to her with a stiff face, belatedly blinked his eyes. He opened his mouth without even hiding his urgency.

“Annette, if I understand correctly—.”

“You promised me and Joseph. You will create a better world. Padania still needs you.”

Annette smiled sweetly.

“I told you, Heiner, that I would wait forever for you.”

"......really?"

"Really. I know you don't completely trust me either. But... do you remember what I told you before?"

Annette took a step toward him. Overwhelmingly beautiful eyes, resembling the sea, were looking straight at him.

“I would still love you if you showed me everything about yourself. That statement is still valid now.”

Two thin hands reached out towards him. Annette touched his cheek, pulled him in, and kissed him long.

“I love you.”

“… .”

“No matter what you look like, I love you.”

Heiner looked at her in disbelief, his eyes shaking. He pressed his lips to say something, but no answer seemed to come out easily. Annette urged.

“Tell me you know.”

"......I."

“I love you.”

"......I know."

She smiled faintly at the answer she was thirsty for.

Yes, maybe they would never fully trust each other or fully understand each other until the day they died.

But it was okay. Because loving someone meant embracing all of those things.

*I will devote the rest of my life to loving this person.*

*We will make countless eye contact, talk, and walk through hills, beaches, and fields while holding hands in order to get to know each other a little better.*

*From the cliffs where the beautiful sunset shines, we will watch the waves crashing endlessly together. I will love this person like that.*

“I love you, Heiner. To the point where I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

Annette put a complete end to her confession. At the same time, his face began to fill with passion. It was an intense feeling, as if it would overflow if touched.

Heiner tilted his trembling head forward towards her. Their foreheads touched each other. When they met him up close, his eyes were a little wet.

Blue waves, tinged with sunset, rushed to the feet where they stood facing each other. Whoosh. The sound of wet wind flowed in the distance.

The sandy beach, which held things like seashells and glass beads like treasures, sparkled as if it would last forever. The lights swimming on the sea and the love in his eyes seemed like they would last eternally. Heiner smiled brightly as the sunset colored the whole world. And he answered without hesitation.

"I know."

\*\*\*

*[To my beloved Heiner,*

*I am writing to you on the first day of November. The wind must have become much colder in the capital by now. It's not that cold here yet.*

*You wear warm clothes, right? I saw your pictures in the newspaper. They all had the scarves I gave you . I saw a gossip article trying to figure out what brand of scarf the Commander-in-Chief wears every day. Please take off that scarf right away.*

*(Omitted)*

*I'm glad Joseph seems to be doing well there. I heard that Joseph’s adoptive parents donated a large amount of money to establish this special school. Heiner, this may be presumptuous, but I hope you pay attention to this.*

*Joseph seems to be looking forward to entering the school, so I feel excited along with him. Not long ago, I received an invitation to his entrance ceremony enclosed in a handwritten letter. I guess I should attend his entrance ceremony. Are you coming?*

*By the way, I was recently introduced to a female composer through an acquaintance. Her name is Anita Cummings. Since we are of similar age and live close by, I think we will be able to rely on each other a lot.*

*She is very passionate about expanding the base of female composers. She suggested that I join the Women Composers' Club, but I’m still thinking about it. I'm not sure if I can do anything there. Still, would it be better to experience it myself first? What do you think?*

*(…………omitted.)*

*Olivia has always called me 'Anna', but recently she finally called me 'Annette' properly. Hurray! Olivia is very shy, but she really likes good-looking people. I guess that face wasn't that face. I asked if Olivia liked you. (First of all, I like your face.) Heiner, actually, it’s because I miss you.)*

*From the moment I wake up in the morning and make coffee, I think about you. When tending the garden, cleaning your room on the first floor, going grocery shopping, or watching the waves crash on the cliff in front of the house.*

*I always think of you and you are still here.*

*And it will be here.*

*Always.*

*With eternal love,*

*Annette Rosenberg.*

\*\*\*

720 AU. The commander-in-chief and his wife divorced.

721 AU. The Winter War broke out, signaling the beginning of the Continental War.

In 722 AU, the Cheshire Fields War broke out. During this war, the Huntingham Church Massacre occurred, which enraged the entire population of Padania.

January 723 AU. The end of the war was declared.

AU February 723, the Viche Peace Treaty was signed, and the League of Nations was founded under the leadership of Commander-in-Chief Padania.

724 AU. Padania's first public special school was built. Key figures, including the Commander-in-Chief, participated as speakers and expressed their hope that the blind and deaf receive equal educational opportunities.

March 725 AU. Padania's first female composers' association was founded.

August 725 AU. The first regular presentation of the Padania Women Composers Association was held at the Lancaster Recital Hall. In this presentation, senior female composers as well as new, next-generation female composers participated.

A ceremony was held to commemorate the 3rd anniversary of the end of the war in AU 726.

727 AU. Heiner Valdemar resigned as commander-in-chief.

……

728 AU. A small wedding was held at the village church in Santa Molly.

<end of="" side="" story=""> ❤️❤️</end>

\*\*\*The novel is finished you guys, it has been quite a journey and this couple is definitely in my top three favorites. I’ll miss them so much.