

SPELLBOUND 21

Chapter 21: Bullseye

Evie forced herself to go to bed after the maids left her. But no matter how hard she tried; she just couldn't calm down sufficiently to drift off to sleep. Her mind was occupied with a lot of things, mainly, about Gavriel. She didn't want to think about him, but it was impossible for her to ignore what she had just managed to glean from her maids. It was just a rumor she repeated to herself, but according to all the things she had observed in the imperial palace – the royal family's reaction towards him including all the vampires present in the ball, all told her otherwise. Moreover, appearances do not lie! The difference was pretty obvious and having Gavriel being the only one with such distinct appearance says it all.

Burying her face into her pillow, Evie let out a deep sigh. She never would have thought something like this was going on in the vampire's empire. Back home, the human's main and biggest problem was nothing else but vampires and there were no major issues among the royals. Of course, the royal bloodline was always at an utmost importance but there were just too many princes and princesses it was unthinkable for anyone to worry about the possibility of the royal bloodline ending.

Thinking about this made Evie realize that perhaps, this was one of the reasons why the vampires agreed with the ridiculous truce the humans had offered. Who would have thought that they were actually hiding a bigger problem within their midst? She couldn't help but feel a little anxious because she knew that a battle between Gavriel and the royal family could just be triggered anytime soon. Could her husband have a chance against them? Would everything be alright?

Squeezing her eyes tightly, Evie's forehead creased even more. She realized the irony in where she was almost similar to Gavriel. Only that she was not born male. She was the only child of the Dragon keeper. If her mother could not produce a son, the Ylvia's bloodline would...

Evie's eyes opened wide, shocked at her own thoughts. How could she even bear to think of such a terrifying thing? Her mother would give birth again to a healthy son very soon! She screamed to herself as she shook her head because if that happens, Evie knew that humanity's only hope would crumble to pieces and they would forever remain in the mercies of the vampires.

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The sun was already shining bright when Evie woke up. She immediately looked to her side, expecting to see her husband lying there, asleep beside her. But when she saw that side of his bed empty and cold, Evie felt something inexplicable. She looked outside the window and the sun was already high. It's supposed to be late for the vampires already, right? So why was he not back in their room yet?

Evie's mood was dark and gloomy for the rest of that day. Her maids brought her out to view and enjoy the garden and showed her around the vast and breathtaking castle. She tried her best to feel better but no matter how much she smiled, it never quite reached her eyes and the emotion on her face never truly came from her heart.

"My lady, are you sure you're alright? Are you feeling unwell or perhaps you are homesick?" Fray asked tentatively as they sat on one of the benches in the middle of the sprawling and beautiful garden.

"I..." Evie could not answer immediately. "Yes. I miss my mother," she said. She did miss her family, her home, and her life back home, but she couldn't fool herself and deny that her homesickness was in fact overshadowed by something else – something unwelcomed yet incredibly strong.

The maids looked worried. "Do you have something you want to do, My lady? I mean, do you have a hobby you loved doing...while back home?"

Seeing how much the maids were trying to cheer her up since morning, Evie sighed and then smiled. "Hmm... my hobby..." a small spark glimmered in her eyes and she stood. "Do you think you can find me a bow and a quiver of arrows?"

Fray and Gina looked at each other and then looked at her with wide eyes. "Arrows?!"

"Yes. My father used to teach me archery when I was young and I'd say I fell in love with it." For the first time that day, the maids saw a real spark in her eyes and it hyped them up.

"Stay with Her Highness, Fray. I shall go and bring a fine bow and some arrows. I'll be quick!" Gina said as she ran off with her task.

When the energetic red-haired maid returned, Elias was with her. The butler that Evie haven't seen since the night he was introduced up till now looked worried as he approached her, holding a fine bow in his hand.

"My Lady, you... you asked for a bow and arrows?" he asked.

"Yes." Evie didn't waste a moment and stretched out her hand to take the bow from the butler.

Elias swallowed as he hesitantly and carefully handed the bow over to her. He was not sure if this was the wisest past time activity the Lady should be doing. "Uhm... my lady, isn't it dangerous for you to..."

Evie smiled at him and Elias froze. "Don't worry. I think I should be competent enough in this." She took the bow from his hand, even tugging it when Elias held onto it and refused to let go.

"Please prepare something for me to practice with." She told the butler and Elias nodded at the maids. "This bow is amazing. My bow back home is heavier than this." She examined the bow with awe flashing through her eyes.

And then, she stretched her hand towards Elias again, asking for the arrows.

The expression on Elias became even more worried and anxious as he gave her an arrow. "Please be careful My Lady. I can't let you get hurt."

"Geez. You're being such a worrywart Elias. I said I'm fine." she gently yanked the arrow from the poor butler again. "No one's going to get hurt. It's not like you're sending me to a battlefield or something."

Once the maids had set up a shooting range for Evie, she positioned herself.

She took a deep breath before lifting her bow and pulling it taut, to eye level. Evie could tell that Elias and her maids were anxious like cats on a hot tin roof. She could even sense Elias' alertness. He had his eyes turn red as he was more than prepared to come to her rescue any second.

Evie steadied her hand on the bow and focused her aim on her target. She realized the bow – though lighter than her bow back home – and the way it was strung seemed tighter.

When she finally released the shot, she ended up missing her target by a fair bit. The maids clapped looking very excited and happy for her. Even Elias looked like he was impressed.

Ignoring them, Evie focused on her target and shot again and again, getting used to the feel and pull of the arrow. As she took shot after shot, her emotions were starting to boil inside her. Her family's faces began to appear in her mind. She missed them. Were they missing her too? Were they worried about her? Were they also thinking about her now?

Evie sighed and when she looked at her target, she smiled bitterly when she saw that she didn't even manage to land a single bullseye. But she couldn't stop yet because she knew that doing this was better than her going back into the room that she and Gavriel shared and end up sulking there.

However, as she silently aimed, she heard faint sounds coming from her maids. When Elias spoke, Evie didn't know why but the first thing she heard was Thea's name, and then... he mentioned her husband's.

Suddenly, Evie got furious. Her grip on the arrow tightened and something hot and tight seemed to be blocking her throat. Thea? So he wasn't home because he was with his fiancée?!

The next series of Evie's shot all flew true and fierce as they pierced the bullseye, that Elias and the maids had their mouths gaping open in shock. They couldn't even react immediately and just stood there staring in disbelief – between their 'delicate' Lady and the target.

No one spoke even when Evie's hand dropped, and her breathing was a little more ragged than earlier. Someone then started clapping from behind her and when she heard the voice that followed, her body stiffened.

Chapter 22: Predator

"Never would I have thought that my wife is such an excellent archer." Gavriel's proud and gentle voice echoed, but Evie didn't move to even glance at him. She simply stood there, tensed, as her heart suddenly began to thud fast inside her rib cage.

She could hear the maids and Elias greeting him. She knew that courtesy required her to offer him her greetings too. But Evie was utterly overwhelmed with the emotions that were surging tempestuously inside of her – the anger, the homesickness and the... unwanted feelings that blazed even stronger in his presence. Why? Why was she feeling like this? What did he do to her that his mere presence could shake her to her core?

Slowly, Evie steeled herself and when she turned towards him, he smiled at her. She stiffened at the sight of that heartbreaking smile that haunted her since last night and then the whole day too.

Rigid, Evie didn't move nor said anything. She couldn't. But when he took a step towards her, she took a step back automatically even before she realized she had done so.

The prince's brows creased slightly, and his smile faded at her reaction. However, he still continued stepping closer to her. This time, she managed to root her feet to the ground and stood firm. Uncontrollably, her heart hammered even faster inside her, and she found herself growing more nervous. Her body just kept reacting in a way that she neither recognised nor like.

But he stopped just three steps short of reaching her as if he had sensed someone's presence. Levy landed behind him, causing him to turn away from Evie.

"What is it?" he asked in a quiet tone, returning his gaze back to Evie again.

"Your Highness, General Alcan and his daughter are here." Levy said and Gavriel seemed a little surprised.

It was silent for a moment, but Evie felt like a secret conversation was going on between the men that the rest of them are not privy to.

When Gavriel faced her again, he looked at her practice target. "I think you've played enough, wife. You should have a rest now. I'll see you again at dinner."

After saying those, Gavriel immediately left. A general visiting the prince's castle at this hour... if they were humans, this hour was considered near dawn. That General Alcan must be a very important guest to cause Gavriel to leave in such a haste, she thought.

Letting out a sigh, Evie silently faced her target again. She was so nervous when he was here but when he left, she almost called out and said 'wait'. Gripping her bow, Evie picked up another arrow and then took a stabling deep breath.

"Is..." she started. "Is General Alcan an important ally of His highness?" she asked and the maids' silence made Evie stop her shot and glanced at them over her shoulder.

"No milady. The truth is..." Fray paused hesitantly. "General Alcan is known to be the emperor's most loyal subordinate. He's Lady Thea's father."

Evie's eyes widened and quickly, she hid her face from them. Again, she felt her pulse beating at a furious tempo just like before Gavriel arrived. Only this time, it was far graver. She was glad she wasn't facing them because she could no longer keep her face serene.

"Sir Levy said he's with his daughter. He only has one daughter and that's lady Thea, right?" Fray said to Gina in a soft voice.

"Oh no, could it be that he's here to insist on His Highness marrying his daughter?" Gina replied.

"But the general is loyal to the emperor –"

"What if the general swear his loyalty to prince Gavriel now once His Highness marries his daughter?"

"Oh my, now that you mention it... that is possible, His Highness really needs an ally after all –"

Suddenly, the maids gasped as they looked at Evie. Their faces were apologetic and worried. They tend to gossip like this all the time before their lady arrived that they had forgotten their lady was with them and could hear them discussing it clearly.

"Uhm... my lady... that –"

"Fray, Gina..." she cut her maid off. "I'd like to go into that little forest. I could hear birds singing from there, I think I can hunt one with this bow." Evie's voice was unusually calm.

The maids looked at each other.

"I'll shoot one first before I return to my chambers," she continued as she picked the arrows and then, squaring her shoulders, she walked off and headed to the nearby small forest inside the castle's premises that she mentioned about previously.

"You two please wait here. I don't want the birds to be startled by so many people and end up running away so don't follow me. I'll be back as soon as I catch one." Evie's voice was light and seemingly cheery. However, Fray and Gina didn't know why but they felt her expressions were odd.

Fray and Gina looked at each other again but they eventually bowed obediently to her as they watched Evie enter the forest. They were a little hesitant at first but seeing that she seemed to be alright, they sat on the grass and waited.

How could she? How was it possible for her to feel this way? Their marriage was never a love match. She didn't even spend much time with him yet. It has only been a few days since their wedding!

Evie buried her face into her palms. The feelings she had felt that moment frightened her and at the same time, invigorated her. The worse thing was she didn't know how to handle such strong emotions she had never felt before.

She leaned the back of her head against the tree and kept her eyes closed and regulated her breathing to calm her chaotic mind. Her fists at her sides were clenched so tightly as she wished desperately for absolute strength to mightily shut her own stupid, mindless and rebellious heart.

When her breathing became even, Evie filled her mind with the faces of the terrifying vampires she had met before. She relived that time when the vampires attacked her carriage and she saw those dead bodies of their own soldiers, mutilated and torn apart. And then she pulled out that one memory in time when she witnessed their soldiers coming back home tattered and bloodied because they had lost the war against the vampires. She remembered how she felt that day when she saw just how many of the lively and confident soldiers who had left before then came back marching home like walking dead. That time, Evie had asked her mother how they could stop this from happening again and she had been told that the only way to stop such tragedy was to annihilate the vampires.

Evie flinched at the thought of annihilation and all of a sudden, the faces of the vampires in this place that she had seen and met invaded her head. She pictured all their smiling faces; she saw them eating and dancing peacefully – carrying out their daily lives, just as if they were no different from humans and she gritted her teeth.

Aware that her thoughts were drifting dangerously towards something she didn't like, Evie closed her eyes and let out a shaky sigh. She grabbed her bow and arrows and looked up. She realised she was feeling angry again – angry with herself.

A beautiful bird unexpectedly flew into view and she remembered what she told her maids. A bitter smile curved on her lips and she raised her bow and aimed at the beautiful bird singing joyfully. And she started to tremble. She couldn't even shoot an animal. Even when she was back home, she knew that her skill in archery was useless because she couldn't put it to use. She could only shoot a non-living target.

Evie suddenly felt like crying. She stood there, alone and lost in her dismal thoughts. She didn't even realize that it was already twilight until she felt a chill that crawled through her spine – one that was not caused by the cold but by something else.

She whipped around behind her and her eyes slowly widened in alarm.

A wolf was staring at her.

Evie froze in fear. She immediately remembered the beasts Gavriel had killed in the dark valley. This wolf wasn't as huge as those beasts, but it was definitely bigger and scarier than the normal wolves she usually encountered and had seen back home. It took a step towards her and bared its fangs. With the next step, it was snarling at her and its red eyes were fixed on her.

When the wolf moved without taking its eyes off her, Evie's eyes trailed its every single movement. She was overcome with fear, but she realized she was holding her bow arrow and they were ready to be shot. Her survival instinct kicked in and she lifted her weapon and wasted no time in aiming it at the wolf.

She didn't know how she managed but it seemed like her body knew what needed to be done. Her hands were trembling, her body so stiff but with the weapon aimed and locked onto the wolf made the animal still for a moment before it started to circle her. Evie followed its every move, never letting herself get distracted even though she felt sweat trickling down her back. She didn't know what else she could do. She doubted the use of her screaming for help after thinking through for a bit. Screaming would not be of much use as she was quite certain that the wolf would most probably get to her before her maids could even reach her.

One wrong move and she was done for. And her hands were still trembling. She was aiming for the area between its eyes, but could she hit with her current condition?

Evie nearly smiled in both fear and utter disbelief. She couldn't believe what was happening. She was prepared to deal with the vampires and rescue herself against them. But that did not involve rescuing herself against a wild animal.

The forest became so eerily quiet. Evie could no longer hear anything but the heavy thumping of her heartbeat and the sounds of her feet moving so slowly as she continued the same circling motions, following the predator that was circling her. Was it truly her fate to come to a foreign land and die in the jaws of an animal?

Evie choked back on her tears and somehow, the shivering in her hands settled a little. However, the wolf that was growling menacingly suddenly stilled and warning bells rang in Evie's head. It's going to attack now!

Evie's trembling started again as she carefully took a small step back. No! Don't!

The next moment, the wolf made a move. Time seemed to stop and before she knew it, the wolf was leaping towards her. Her lips opened and she didn't know why she uttered Gavriel's name as she released her arrow.

Chapter 23:Terror

Inside a luxurious receiving room, Gavriel was sitting across the general and Thea.

The general had been formal and polite but Gavriel would never forget the look in this man's eyes every time this exalted general turned his gaze on him when Gavriel was still young, until before he left the empire. Like all of the other high-ranking officials, this man was another thick-skinned hypocrite who only knew how to judge based on outward appearances and political gains.

Time had gone by and yet, the general was still babbling on about things Gavriel did not even care about. Anyone could tell that the robust and huge general was beating around the bush, perhaps trying to appeal to the prince's good side or elicit a positive reaction from him before finally landing on his real purpose. But Gavriel never spoke. He looked as if almost all expressions were wiped off from his good-looking face. Except for that cold expression his men knew so well – the adamant one that meant it was easier to move a mountain or kill a dragon than to change his mind about something.

Elias had just entered the room when finally, the general stopped beating around the bush.

"Prince Gavriel, I came to speak with you about your engagement with my daughter, Thea. You are the most intelligent young man I have ever met so I believe I need not state the very obvious reasons why I intend to hasten your wedding with my daughter. Even though you had just married the other day..." the general continued speaking, not knowing that his words had already turned into a background noise to Gavriel the instant Elias entered the room.

The prince had met Elias' eyes and his first question was to ask him whether or not Elias had escorted his wife back to her chambers. When Elias told him that the Lady insisted to continue hunting a bird in the little forest, Gavriel's face darkened.

"So, you're telling me she's still there until now?" he asked the butler through their eyes and when Elias nodded, the prince abruptly rose, causing the General be a little startled and to stop talking.

Gavriel's gaze fell outside the window and when he saw that it was almost twilight, he grabbed his jacket and without a word, he stormed out of the room as if nobody and nothing else mattered, leaving the general dumbfounded, with his mouth hanging open.

"Your Highness, where are you going? Did you even hear what the general had just said?" It was Zolan who had chased after him. "You can't just leave the general like that. He'd be a huge help to you. What you need most right now is an ally ..."

Zolan let out a defeated sigh because as soon as they reached a window, the prince jumped down and disappeared without a word. It seems like his only choice now was to go back and entertain the general until Gavriel finishes whatever was it that caused him to rush off like that. Although, at the back of his mind, he is almost a hundred percent certain that it could only be her.

Meanwhile, at that very moment, in the little forest, Evie was on the ground, frozen in utter horror. Something filthy and cold and dark had been splashed on her pale skin and hair and over her dress. Her already marble-like pale face became even whiter as if all her blood was drained from her face.

The beast had been shot precisely in its left eye. Her arrow flew strong and was now buried deep in its eye socket as some dark viscous liquid that appeared to be its blood was gushing out as the beast growled thunderously while shaking its large head violently in front of her, hoping that the movements would make the arrow dislodge and fall out on its own. The bone-chilling sound, the bloodied beast, and the dark blood splashing everywhere... Evie had never experienced such primal fear.

She felt as though her lungs had stopped working and her breathing was on a strike since that moment the beast leapt towards her. Her whole frame was shaking, as if there was no part of her body that was under her control now.

If it was a normal wolf, it should have been dead by now, and yet, it was still standing. It somehow seems as if it was going to heal itself soon – not dissimilar on how vampires heal themselves whenever they get wounded. Evie's instinct and adrenaline kicked in not a second later, despite the fear that had consumed her. As her trembling body moved and crawled blindly on the ground, she could not even bring herself to open her mouth to scream.

Evie's pounding heart and the sounds of the beast in pain was all she could hear now, still unable to take her eyes off away from it. Her body seemed to know that the moment she turned her back to run, the beast would attack her from behind. When her pale trembling hand had touched one of the many arrows she had taken with her, Evie frantically prepared her weapon and lifted it again, aiming for a crucial spot on the beast.

It was as if the beast had sensed another source of danger, it suddenly stilled, and its one remaining eye burned darkly as it looked at her. Evie felt as though she was staring at the gates of hell. The terror that ran through her was too much for her to handle.

Another arrow flew without warning and because of the uncontrollable tremors, the arrow hit the beast's legs instead of hitting the mark at the middle of its forehead. Evie frantically picked another arrow without taking her eyes off the beast but before she could even get it notched on her bow, the beast snarled in anger and it leaped. Towards her.

Her heart froze as though fully encased in a block of ice. The next thing she knew, she was looking up at the huge beast airborne and about to land a killing blow on her. She did not know how possible was it that she could still move but she felt her hands clasped the arrow in the event she get the chance to stab it into the beast once it reached her. That probably was a futile move, but she was out of other options.

Funnily enough, the beast didn't seem to land when she expected it to. The wolf had been hit by what seemed to be a sword that had been used as a spear mid-air and disappeared in a blur from her sight. There was then sound of a tree falling coming from the direction where the wolf's flying body disappeared to.

Before she could wrap her head around what had happened and another heartbeat had passed, she was firmly lifted up from the cold ground that she was sitting on. Something solid, warm, and exuding the feeling of safety held her close.

"Evie!" she heard her name called out in a suspiciously frantic tone and when she blinked and saw Gavriel's worried face filling her vision, she just spaced out and stared until he called her name again. "Evie! I'm here now, I've got you."

Her heart seemed to finally resume beating again but this time it decided to make up for the pause from earlier and started racing too hard, too fast – causing her chest to ache from the strain of her breathing. "G-gav..."

"Yes. I'm here, wife."

"T-t-take me away from h..."

Immediately, her feet left the ground, and the feeling of being cradled and enveloped in something comfortable all at the same time. She clutched her frozen fingers into his clothes, not knowing why there was that feeling as though she was being strangled.

"Evie. You're safe now, love." his lips curving gently against the cold rim of her ear as he whispered. She didn't even realize that Gavriel had already lowered her down onto the grassy meadow just outside the forest as he cradled her. His hands were moving swiftly over her bodice and hastily unhooking her corset.

She felt like her lungs were about to burst and no matter how hard she breaths, she could not seem to get enough air. And then his voice suddenly sounded as if it was coming from a great distance before everything suddenly turned dark.

Chapter 24:Outburst

When Evie finally regained consciousness, it was already morning and there was a sliver of bright sunlight streaming in from the small opening in the curtains. Gavriel was already inside the room when she came out from the dressing room. However, she simply threw him a glance and refused to look at him after politely thanking him for saving her.

She had donned on a mask of irreproachable serenity and proceeded to inform her husband very formally that she wished to be left alone when the man tried to strike up a conversation with her. Still, he never glared at her neither was he angered by her sudden coldness towards him. But one could see the surly look in his eyes as he stared longingly at his wife.

Even during meals, Evie continued to act indifferent towards Gavriel. Her gaze never lingered longer than a second and she answered all his questions as curt and as monotonous as possible until Gavriel stopped talking to her as well. When she told him to leave her alone the third time, her husband never came to their chambers again.

And then, three days went by so fast. That was probably the most torturous days in her life. She had blamed herself and her heart for being so easily and quickly enthralled by him. She had put herself into that nightmarish event and nearly died because of being ridiculously jealous. She believed that it was all her fault for being so stupid. And she even thought that that was probably a warning sign for her that falling for him would only bring about her disaster. She had known that all along. True, legally he was her husband, but at the same time, he was also her enemy. When that day comes and her father would rescue her and attack the vampire kingdom with his dragons, she and her husband would be forced to go against each other.

She could not imagine what would happen if that day came, and she was already deeply and madly in love with him. Falling for him would earn her nothing but a shattered heart and hell and damnation in the end. Because there would be no way she can ever betray or turn her back on her family and the entire human race for him. So, all she could do now was to shut herself inside her own walls and harden her heart, if that was what it takes – even if it ends up killing her.

"Have a goodnight, milady." Fray and Gina curtsied, and she nodded listlessly at them. She had turned her gaze towards the window and sighed so deeply when they were gone.

Clad in a pure white sleeping gown, Evie rose and was about to walk towards the window to get a better view of the moon when she felt rather than heard the door open. She thought her maids had forgotten something but when she turned around to look, a pair of silvery moon-lit eyes met hers.

She stood frozen, as if just by the sight of him would paralyze her. He was clad in all-black garments and his hair was tussled very attractively. She couldn't help but remember the sight of him when he was standing in the middle of the pile of dead beasts back when they crossed the Dark

Valley. The only difference this time was that his garments weren't splattered all over with those black and green unidentified liquids and his eyes weren't blood red. The worse thing for her was that the roughening of his looks made him look even more breathtakingly stunning in her eyes. There was a niggling curiosity at the back of her mind, wondering where he had been for the last three days that she did not see him.

Evie had to clench her fists and inconspicuously press her fingernails into her palms to distract herself from dwelling on useless thoughts when she began to think that he must have had spent his days with his fiancée and was busy with whatever arrangement they had agreed on with the general.

"I'm back," he said. His voice tender and soft compared to his dishevelled, roguish look.

He took a step closer to her, but Evie remained rooted to her spot, unmoving and just following him with her eyes. Taking off his coat, his eyes briefly surveyed her. "Are you alright now, wife?" he asked gently, a glimmer of genuine concern flashed in his eyes.

She clenched her fists even tighter. Why? Why was he so nice to her? How could she even...

Gritting her teeth, Evie frantically thought about what she should do. She could not hold her ground if this continued. His kindness and her traitorous heart would erode her will in standing firm in her decisions of not having feelings for him.

"Yes...Yes, I'm fine. But I still wished to be left alone."

A deafening silence followed as Evie begged him silently in her heart that he would quietly leave the room again. But this time, he didn't. A long and deep sigh escaped his lips.

"Forgive me but I'm not going to listen to you this time, wife. I never believed it was a good idea to leave you alone. Let's talk, Evie." His voice softened as he bent closer to her while she took a step back. However, her reaction no longer stopped Gavriel in his tracks like before. He stepped forward, maintaining their close distance as he kept speaking in a hoarse but gentle tone. "Tell me what's wrong. Did I do something wrong? Tell me, Evie."

Evie swallowed hard. She could feel the hot sting of tears just behind her eyes, threatening to spill over at the first sign of more care and concern on his part. His scent and the warmth of his breath went through her like the most delicious of wines and it took all she had just to step back and retreat. Warning bells began to ring in her ears, and those walls that she had built around her heart so painstakingly with blood, sweat and tears were already threatening to crumble. She knew it would only take a little more push and her defences would come crumbling down like a deck of cards downed by a puff of air. The fear, the calculations, the promises, the thoughts, and determination were all starting to tremble like dandelion seeds about to be scattered with the wind, threatening to leave nothing but the full brunt that this man had on her senses.

The panic of giving in to him forced Evie to burst. "There is nothing wrong Gavriel! Just ignore me and go to your fiancée and spend as many days there with her as you wish!"

Gavriel stilled, obviously shocked with her words. "You think..." he paused. "You think I was with Thea the last three days?"

"What made you even think –" Gavriel was shocked at the pain that was reflected in Evie's eyes and the obvious distress he heard in her voice that he could not continue his train of thought.

"While I was in the forest all alone – homesick and hurt – what were you doing? You were merrily sitting there with her and the general, talking and planning out your lovely marriage! But it's okay. I don't care! You can go back to her right now and marry her immediately. Since she's the woman you love and need after all! So just leave me alone. I'm sure three days is not enough for you."

The outburst of her fury lingered in the air, like a palpable thing, waiting to be addressed. She had just thought about provoking him so that he'd leave her alone again. That, and also to stop him from moving closer to save her walls from crumbling down. She didn't expect herself to end up revealing all the pain and distress welled up in her heart and uttering it all with real resentment. It had all come out before it even registered in her mind. Evie herself, was surprised at the depths of her own feelings and grudges that she did not expect the things she had said to resonate so profoundly within her.

A heavy silence reigned between them. Evie was silenced at the sight of his eyes and his offended expression. His eyes suddenly looked like they were frozen, and this was the very first time he had let his eyes turned that chilly while looking at her.

Chapter 25 - When That Day Comes

Evie swallowed.

"I never even saw her shadow, nor had I planned to meet up with her within the last three days, Evielyn." Came his firm voice and Evie could only bit her lower lip. She suddenly knew that she was wrong in judging just according to his expressions and reactions alone.

"I... I... that..."

As she stammered, Gavriel stretched his hands suddenly – too suddenly – and slammed them on either side of her, against the wall that was somehow behind her. She stumbled backwards in surprise, finally realizing that she had stepped back from him for so long she had already reached the wall.

When she looked up at him, their faces almost collided and she pulled her head back as far as she could without slamming her own head into the wall. However, when she saw the creases between his brows and the intensity of his glittering eyes that held hers, Evie found herself unable to either pull her gaze away or make a sound.

However, she realised very quickly that her reactions were not out of fear. But it was because she recognised that in his eyes, there was still a soft liquid glitter as he looked at her, despite the quiet anger that radiated from his body and the bruised expression on his face he could no longer conceal.

The room went painfully quiet for a while before Evie's heart began to thud almost audibly. The next moment, she felt his warm breath touching her ear as his body tensed. "The talk about marriage with Thea had no chance of even happening because I left them to look for you that twilight just at the moment the general was ready to start talking about it. When I carried you back into the castle, I had already sent them away without even seeing them off and that was the last time I saw that pair of father and daughter, Evielyn." He explained slowly, his struggle to keep his voice soft was apparent and she could tell his breathing wasn't quite even. "Now you're telling me Thea is the woman I want and need?" his voice hardened at that last statement before he pulled away to look down at her.

His quicksilver eyes were so intense she felt like her brain was going to malfunction and suffer a meltdown.

"You... damned... woman..." she heard him curse her for the very first time and it seemed he said those words with so much struggle. And then his breath snagged. "How could you be so clueless?" the hardness of his voice softened but his whisper this time was hoarse and deep as if they came from the darkest chamber of her mind.

'No! This cannot be happening!' she screamed within the confines of her mind because Evie could feel her carefully constructed walls that she spent so long building around her heart and mind began to crumble and she was becoming more and more helpless to her husband's 'attacks' on her fortress.

It seemed she could not hold her ground any longer. In the past three days, when her anger towards herself had begun to subside, her mind similarly started to gain clarity. She remembered how he came to rescue her, even held her so gently at that moment and took care of her to no end like he was so worried about her. She realized he had never raised his voice at her nor scolded her. Her traitorous mind also brought up the memory on how he had tried his best to speak to her, asking her many times if she was alright and even coaxed her many times that he will never let something like that happen to her ever again. And all she did was sent him away coldly, despite knowing that she could be dead by then if he didn't come to her rescue right at the moment that he did.

The emotions she went through those past three days without him were too much that if she honestly admitted to herself, she almost felt like breaking down. She hadn't let anyone console her after that period of horror she had just gone through. She never did open up to her maids nor to Elias either, just so she would not fall into the temptation of asking about him and his whereabouts. She had sent her maids away almost immediately after their job was done and she knew the maids and the butler were starting to worry and even probably thought badly of her ungrateful attitude – not that she would blame them. She truly was horrid in her behaviour! However, she could hardly consider the feelings and thoughts of the maids and the butler at that time as she was too engrossed in her own stubbornness, thickening and strengthening her defences and fighting against everything that had been haunting her.

And it was... maddening for her. Because he had haunted her endlessly and mercilessly even when he was not there. Though she did not admit it earlier, but she knew deep in her heart that her walls weren't strong enough to repel a man like him so she had tried her very best, giving all sorts of excuses to herself, until... she could no longer...

"There is no woman in this universe I ever needed and wanted more than you!" he growled passionately, those silvery eyes shining intensely at her and all her walls evaporated faster than the mist in the face of the noonday sun. "If I have had the luxury to spend three days with Thea... I would rather spend every waking minute of that time with you. Do you want to know what I'd have done with you...to you in those three days? Evie? I would spend every minute and every second to please you, to show you how much I wanted you, how much I long to finally be allowed to touch and enjoy my own wife. I would do everything to make you feel safe with me and then worked as hard as I could to gain your trust until you will finally trust me enough to... to let me hold you, to permit me to touch you. And when that time comes..." his voice turned into a ragged whisper.

"When that day comes, I would do my best and would be as gentle or as wild as you want me to be. First and foremost, I would hold you close to me and feel your warmth against mine, make you comfortable in my arms. I'd brush your hair gently, worship every inch of your skin, hold your waist

against mine and then... I'd kiss you. I'd kiss you passionately and then when you open up for me, I'd slide my tongue inside your mouth. I would invade your mouth ... lick every corner of it until you moan for me. I'd tangle my tongue against yours and then suck and lick yours until we're both breathless and hot and aroused. I'd kiss you again and again until your lip swells from my loving and then... my tongue will travel downwards. First along your jaws... I'd lick them like they were the most delicious thing..." his hot breath followed his words, blowing against her jaws and then downwards as he continued.

"I'd lick and kiss and suck the hollow of your neck and below your ears while my hands roams around your body. I'd suck your skin and leave a mark as I take off your dress, and then... I'd put my hands beneath your breast..." Evie let out an embarrassing gasp, her head feeling faint from all that intimate description. Her face flushed red as she looked at him with wide-eyes, unable to speak.

His eyes flashed a fierce glint as he groaned low, pleased by her reactions and continued with an even more alluring voice. "I'd ravish your mouth again while I knead your breasts until you wriggle beneath me in heat. And ... when you're ready, I'd lift your breast to my mouth...I would kiss them, Evie, suck them gently, nibble them until they are wet and so hard..." another gasp sounded, accompanied by a needy moan echoed in their ears and Evie's hand flew to her mouth in shock.

Chapter 26 - Safe Place

The so-called firm resolve, and iron will that Evie had so long and painstakingly built did nothing at all to shield her from all the words that left Gavriel's lips. It was as if his words were fiery arrows. It did not pierce through her shield with force. However, they came like molten lava and they melted her shields, dissolving them down into a puddle of jelly along with her bones.

And she was helpless – utterly helpless, unnerved, and shocked. How could mere words bring about such great effect to her heart, mind, and body? She felt as if a spell had been casted on her – a lethal spell that made her body react in ways she had never felt before.

"Evie..." his head bent closer to hers. And since her hands were now covered over her mouth, he inclined his head, and she felt his breath against the rim of her ear. Another jolt. An even stronger one travelled like electricity in her every nerve. "I want to kiss you... let me taste your lips. Say yes, Evie."

His voice was so warm and husky and unbelievably sensual she felt like he was bewitching her. Desperation and desire seemed to be roaring under his breath. She never knew a desperate man sounded that seductive. Could anyone blame her if she surrendered? After all, he is her husband, right?

Evie felt the fire that had melted her shields now began to work its magic on her heart. And she almost heard her heart cracking open. The hands that were covering her lips started to loosen from its tight grip. She wanted to taste those lips too, would it feel even hotter than his breath?

She was shocked at that thought. How scandalous! Did it even come from her? And what was even more shocking was when she noticed that her hands were already partially down and no more putting up any resistance to Gavriel. She suddenly felt him jerk back and she slowly lifted her eyes to look at him, her heart thumping so hard that her brain felt light-headed from all the shock, sensations and emotions flooding her all at once.

But to her surprise, he was not looking at her. She realized he had jerked back to look at the door thanks to someone knocking on it.

A low exasperated groan came from him before he turned to look at her. Their eyes met and Evie's breath hitched. And then, he lowered his head while his hands were still stretched out against the wall behind her. He sighed and she noticed that his arms were trembling a little, as if struggling to control something within him.

"There seemed to be another serious trouble," he muttered after heaving a sigh, "so I'm sorry but I have to leave again."

His gaze smouldered over hers before they fell on her lips. But another knock echoed, causing his jaws to clench, hard. Then too soon, he pulled back and whispered. "You go rest first. I'll be back as soon as I can."

And with that, he unexpectedly but gently picked her up and laid her on their bed, after which he just spun around and left.

Silence crawled in every corner of the room as soon as the door was shut, and Evie slowly sank back into the luxurious bed. She absolutely could not believe what just happened. Somewhere in the chaos of her mind, she realized how easily he had seduced her, causing her to come undone. He did not even need to touch a single strand of her hair and yet... how could she...

She could only bury her feverish face in her palms and groan. She could still feel the remnants of the fire he had induced in her skin and the flicker of turmoil that he had awakened low in her belly. His bewitching deep voice still echoed and those... she didn't even know what to call the kind of words he had said to her. And then she remembered her response when he asked her to let him kiss her. She had relented. If that interruption didn't come that moment, she was certain she'd said yes. Because she was already prepared to do so and even already brazenly wondered how it would have felt to kiss him.

"Mother..." she uttered, helplessly. "What should I do? I can't seem to... I can't seem to hold on any longer... It's impossible. He's just impossible. What should I do?"

Everything still had a crazy feel even when Evie finally stretched herself out and properly covered herself with the blankets on the bed. Though outwardly she was fine except for a hot blush still adorning her cheeks, her thoughts were a complete mess. She tried so hard to stop thinking, she was tired, exhausted with all the thoughts that were like demons in her head. They said there was an angel and a devil on either side of one's shoulders fighting against each other to take control. But why was it that Evie felt that there was no angel but just devils whispering in her ears, eager to push her to fall into temptation?

...

A long while later, Evie finally dropped off to sleep. It was most probably due to exhaustion from all the overthinking and roller-coaster of emotions in the last few days and especially from everything that had happened in that short time Gavriel had appeared.

As the night deepened, Evie began to dream. She dreamt about Gavriel climbing onto their bed. He was bent over her and started to whisper the same words he had said before he left. Only this time, he had paired everything that he said with his actions. He brushed his mouth against hers over and

over and did those things to her lips until she opened her mouth and let him in. And then, she was startled awake from her sleep, breathless and hot with shame.

She ran her hands over her face and sat on the bed for an interval until she had calmed down and the heat in her face has sufficiently subsided. When she looked towards the window, she realized it was already dawn. She eased back on the bed again and curled herself into a fetal position. How could she resist a man who could seduce her and make her feel all those things even in her dreams? Wanting her to resist her husband who oozes male sexuality when he puts his mind to it would be asking the impossible out of a normal lady such as herself.

Closing her eyes, Evie let out a shaky breath, realizing that she wasn't spared from him even when asleep.

But before her mind could descend into chaos again, she felt someone's presence in the room. Her heartbeat sped up and she whipped her head towards the door nervously.

"It's me," Gavriel's voice echoed and then he was right next to the bed.

Evie breathed out a sigh of relief, but she gasped when he suddenly reached out and lifted her into his arms.

"I'm sorry, wife. But we need to leave now." His voice was calm but urgent. "You need to get dressed quickly. Wear the thickest clothes you can find." He had brought them both into the dressing room as he was informing her on what to do.

"W-why? Where are we going?" she managed to ask while he was already digging around for the thickest coat in her wardrobe.

"Start dressing Evie, I'll explain to you later." He urged and Evie frantically obeyed, sensing the seriousness of the situation. "Here's the coat. Put it on."

The moment he turned to her to give her the coat, Evie was still wearing her night gown. "I..."

Realizing the look on her face, Gavriel ran his fingers through his dark hair and turned. "I'll wait outside." He said but without the tone of annoyance Evie had expected.

She hastily removed her night-dress. She was clumsily putting on her dress as she was not accustomed to dressing up without the help of the maids.

"Evie, do you need help?" she heard his voice just as she realized she needed some help to do up the buttons of her gown. As if he had read her mind, his voice came again. "I'm coming in." he warned.

He then entered through the door of the dressing room. Evie blushed but his speedy actions did not give her any chance to dwell on the shame she felt. He finished the job swiftly and with care. Once he was done with her buttons, he wrapped her with the thick coat.

"Wear this too." He said as he handed over a knitted pair of gloves as he pulled the hood of the thick fur coat over her head. Evie was surprised but she couldn't bring herself to ask for more details just yet for she could sense that they seemed to be in a massive hurry and have no time to spare.

He bundled her with another thick cloak and then the cloak that she had worn during their trip to imperial palace. The clothes were heavy but before she could ponder should she move with all these weight on her, Gavriel lifted her like she weighed a mere feather and then headed to the window.

Without a word, Gavriel pulled her hood further down until she could see nothing. The next thing she knew, she was clinging onto him for dear life. Her face buried in his strong chest; she could feel a very strong wind blowing all around her. Even with the many layers of coat that Gavriel piled onto her, she could still feel the chill on her skin. It was as if they were passing right through a violent storm. She could not even turn her head to the front because aside from the ruthless wind, Gavriel's palm was pressing her head against his chest.

She could only cling to him, unable to think. Because as time went by, it was getting colder and colder. She finally understood why he had wrapped her with all these thick and heavy clothes. It felt as though they were passing through a roaring icy blizzard this time.

More than an hour probably went by and the blizzard seemed to have let up somewhat. No. It seems that Gavriel had finally slowed down his travel pace.

"Are you okay?" he asked her, his palm which was cupping the back of her head loosened up a little but still not allowing her to turn around for a look. "Just a little while longer, wife. It's snowing so I can't let you look yet."

"Where... where are we going?"

"To a safe place. In Dacia."

Chapter 27 - Dacia

Dacia, the northernmost City of the vampire's empire was not an unknown place to Evie. A few months ago, Evie had taken a look at the map of the Northern Empire and this place named Dacia had caught her interest. It was because it's the only place in the entire empire that seemed to have nothing there, but an abandoned land covered with ice.

When Evie asked her father if anyone lived in that place, she was surprised when her father told her that it was probably the most formidable place in the whole vampire empire. He had told her then that they had no other detailed information about this place as no human had ever set foot in it. She had understood then that the reason why the estate was a blank canvas on the map was because of the lack of intelligence the humans had about it. Lucius had thought out on multiple worst-case scenarios and had considered Dacia as a place they needed to take seriously, probably more so than the vampires' imperial capital, because he had the sneaking suspicion that it would be the last area which they had to conquer in order to destroy the vampires' empire.

Hearing Gavriel mentioning Dacia as a safe haven had Evie swallowing hard. She remembered what one of the human generals had declared about the place. He had mentioned that the vampires could be hiding something in it. Something they could only call as a horrifying secret and that was why all these years, no human had ever set foot on that land. She had also heard that none of the spies who tried to infiltrate into the city of Dacia hundreds of years ago and even until now had ever returned alive.

The reminder of that thought made Evie subconsciously tense up and her heartbeat suddenly picked up. She was wondering what made him call a place no human had ever seen a safe place for her. What could it be that was hidden away there?

Gavriel seemed to have felt the slight changes in her and he halted. Carefully, he put her down and she found herself sitting on something hard. He pulled her hood up to get a clearer look at her face.

His hair was wet, and it looked as if he had just wiped his face off with the hem of his sleeve. His wavy raven hair and the velvety coat he wore provided a vivid contrast against the snow-white background, making him look unbelievably gorgeous and not unlike a divine being.

"What is it? Are you feeling uncomfortable anywhere?" he asked, searching her face for something to give him a hint.

Evie blinked. She struggled to look away from him and looked around. "I'm fine... I'm just. I just don't understand why we're leaving, no... why do we seem to be running away from something...or someone?"

Gavriel tussled his hair as if to dry it. He then turned on that devastating smile on her. "Yes. We're running away."

He leaned forward, narrowing the distance till their faces were only a few inches apart from each other. "My castle in the capital isn't safe for you anymore so I have to take you away."

"W-why?"

Reaching out, he held her hood as he looked in her eyes. "Be good. I'll explain everything to you once we get there, Evie." He said before pulling her hood down again to cover her head and face fully before swiftly picking her up. He then started leaping, a little slower than before. "Don't worry, Dacia is a safe place. Much safer than the capital." He added but Evie was still unconvinced.

"But... but I heard humans are not allowed there." She murmured and Gavriel halted for a moment but then leapt again.

"Yes. Humans are not welcome there." He lifted her higher until his lips seemed settle near her ear. "But you're an exception, Evie."

She jerked away, not caring that they were currently mid-air. Her eyes round and wide with questions.

"Why?" Gavriel tilted his head slightly the moment he landed on the ground. "Because you're my wife." He answered as a matter of fact before continuing leaping forward again, leaving Evie speechless.

"Hold on a little longer, I'm going speed up now. We're almost there." He pulled on her hood again and placed his large palm against the back of her head. And then, she felt like they were passing through another storm again.

By the time Gavriel stopped, Evie was shivering non-stop from the extreme cold. It appeared that this place was colder than the Dark Valley because the same thick clothes she had worn previously around her was now not quite able to shield her from the cold, apart from protecting her from the direct contact of the ice and snow around them.

"We're here." She heard him say. He had put her down, but his hand stayed firmly on her back. Evie lifted her face and what welcomed her was a gigantic fortress that seemed to be made of black stones. It was so tall and huge she could not even see the top of it.

While she was in awe at what she was looking at, a light thud coming from behind them pulled her attention. When she turned to look behind, Gavriel's men were also there.

They looked dishevelled. As if they had just returned from a bloody battle. The only thing was that they did not have any injuries on them.

Gavriel looked into their eyes in silent communication before the gate swung open for them.

The vampires who welcomed them had the same air around them as that of Samuel. They all emitted strong and scary auras which could be felt very clearly. All of them seemed to be the fortress guards. Any human trying to infiltrate this fortress would surely be cut down or crushed within seconds in the hands of these strong creatures.

It appeared that Gavriel came unannounced and that was why the vampires were slightly panicked. But Gavriel settled them down and told them there was no need to call on the authorised official to acknowledge his arrival.

"I need to bring my wife inside the castle now. Samuel, I'm leaving the rest to you." He said and with that he gathered Evie and leapt again.

It did not take long before he let her down on her feet. "Elias, tell the maids to prepare a hot bath for my wife." She heard him say and then he pulled back her hood.

Evie would have gasped in surprise at the sight of the luxurious room she was brought into, but she was too cold to pay any attention to her surroundings at the moment. As Gavriel helped her remove the heavy coats, it seemed as if some commotion was happening behind her. The maids were moving so fast, and she realized they weren't humans.

Gavriel also pulled off her gloves and held her hands between his. His large palms were warm against her cold hands.

"Let me warm your hands while you wait for your bath to be ready," his large, warm hands were rubbing against her hands, trying to create more friction. When he blew on her hands, Evie almost flinched. He looked at her through his dark and long lashes. "No?" his voice suddenly sounded deeper than usual. And Evie couldn't respond.

He blew on her hands while gazing at her, rubbing her hands at the same time with care. And she felt the ice melting.

"Everything is ready, Your Highness." A voice broke the silence and Gavriel innocently stopped, but still not letting go. He nodded at the maids and then gazed at Evie.

"Evie..." his voice was now soft. "There's no human maids here to attend to you." His gaze on her was probing, as if trying to discern what she was feeling through her facial expressions and body language.

When Evie tensed up, he seemed to have understood immediately and upon glancing at the maids, all of them left the room.

The thought that vampire maids would attend to her was... it was something Evie could not even begin to imagine yet.

"It's alright." He coaxed her. "I know you won't be comfortable with them. Don't worry, I'm here."

Evie blinked at him, feeling the tempo of her heartbeat increase. 'He couldn't mean what I think he's saying, right...?' her mind was screaming on the inside.

"Since there's no choice," he said as he started removing his coat. "I'm the only one left to assist you."

Chapter 28 - Slow

Evie's eyes flew wide at Gavriel's statement as her cold cheeks suddenly burned hot. She could not quite respond to that and was stunned to her core. And before Evie could say a word, Gavriel reached out and began undoing the front fastenings of her gown.

Her heartbeat quickened, and the blood very quickly heated up in the veins she thought were frozen.

When his fingers moved rapidly to free the row of buttons, Evie felt like her heart was going to burst. And yet, no objections came tumbling out of her lips. She was still shivering with cold, and she felt like her toes had gone numb. Maybe, at that moment, her brain had gone numb as well due to the cold and was the only explanation why it was not screaming at her with its endless protests anymore.

Gavriel's hands paused before looking into her face, regarding her thoughtfully for a moment before finally freeing the last button. Something gleamed in his eyes as her gown loosened but when her shoulders shivered even harder, something seemed to have hit him, and he resumed his task with careful haste.

He felt her frail hands clutch at him for balance as he pushed the loosened gown down over her hips.

And then, he leaned down to remove her shoes.

Evie looked down, barely realizing that she was standing over him only in her undergarments. Her gaze locked on the tussled dark hair that looked thick and soft while allowing him to remove her remaining shoe.

The next moment, she felt his hand moving under her chemise and her frozen nerves seemed to have jolted awake. Her eyes were large circles as she stayed motionless while looking down at him. Even her breath seemed to have hitched and got caught in her chest.

When she felt his fingers touch the garter cinched around her thighs, her pulse raced so hard she began to feel slightly dizzy. The brush of his fingers against her skin sent a hot ripple through her and she shuddered as her breath rattled out – it was as if his fingers were the triggers to the latch that was keeping the air imprisoned in her lungs.

The thing that hit her the hardest was when Gavriel looked up and their eyes met, she felt like she was going to collapse due to the sudden weakness she felt from his earlier ministrations and those pair of deep seductive eyes.

"I'm taking off your stockings, wife." He spoke. Those words seemed to be a normal warning, but his voice resonated in her ears deeper and huskier than usual. It was all she could do to just hold herself up, much less respond physically or verbally.

He rolled it down, efficiently and carefully and... maddeningly slow, Evie's hand suddenly fell on his dark hair, clutching it.

Gavriel immediately stiffened. His eyes dilated and glimmered so vividly like the eyes of a predator ready to pounce on its prey as a strong and fierce and hot tension charged like a lightning bolt seemed to be running between them.

Warning bells ringing at the back of her head, Evie quickly yanked her hand from his thick silky hair and crossed her arms across her front, subtly feeling the gooseflesh that had spread and covered her skin.

His gaze fell and the tension seemed to break. "Take your bath now, wife. The water will warm you." He managed to say and when he stood, she realized he had already finished removing her stockings. "You can manage now, right? Or should I..." he lifted his hand as if attempting to take her chemise off.

Chapter 29 - Walking Temptation

"I... I can manage now. Thank... thank you... for your help." She replied, stammering. "I can definitely do it on my own now."

"Be careful. If you need help, just call me." He said and when she nodded, he tactfully turned and left the room.

The moment the door was closed, Gavriel raked his hand through his hair and exhaled shakily while leaning against the bathroom's door, feeling his legs as unsteady as a new-born foal's. His suddenly stiff fingers fumbled with his cloak and yanked it away as if it were causing him to suffocate from heat.

A muffled groan escaped his lips followed by a curt curse. His control was barely hanging on by a thread. When she grabbed his hair and he looked up to see those dazed pair of amber eyes, only the devil knew how much he had to draw out his legendary iron control to stop himself from grabbing her legs and parting them wide for him so he could... he could indulge and ravage her there and then. He was always a man of control when it came to women, treating them casually and with relaxed ease. He was never the type to pounce on a lady like a starved beast but at that moment he was about to do just that. He was more used to having the ladies throw themselves at him than the other way around. This was really an eye-opening experience. He was certain he wouldn't have managed to stop himself if he didn't feel how ice-cold her toes were and saw her bluish lips and the goosebumps all over her legs.

He realized that the longer he was not allowed to touch her, the more he wanted her. He was literally dying – burning up – just to have her.

"Elias." His voice, deep and dark, echoed out and the bedroom's main door opened. When the butler emerged, he immediately ordered for new sets of clothes while taking off his shirt.

His attention was fully focused on the sounds coming from the bathroom. He had asked Elias to bring him clothes and decided to change his wet clothes by the bathroom's door because he didn't want to leave even for a moment.

He had just put on a fresh and clean trouser when he heard her soft gasp. Whipping around, Gavriel grabbed the door handle, pushing it open.

"Evie! What's wrong? I'm comin –"

Evie's eyes were wide like saucers. She was still in the tub, enjoying the hot bath that was finally melting her frozen nerves.

Her face flushed red like cooked shrimp at the sight of him barging into the bathroom, half naked, and also at the fact that she was naked. Gladly, she realized she was immersed in the hot water and the slightly scented and billowy steam produced from the bath covered her sufficiently. "I'm fine. I just dropped the soap, th... that's all." She stammered and Gavriel forced himself to drag his eyes away from the extremely tempting view and look at the soap lying innocently on the floor.

He approached the tub and silently picked the soap up and handed it back to her. His eyes quickly swept over her before stubbornly locking onto her face and ears slightly reddened.

"I am only not allowed to touch without your permission, Evie... so I'm allowed to look whenever I want." He said, even smirking at her wickedly that Evie couldn't help but drop her jaw in utter surprise.

But then he chuckled in amusement at her dumbfounded reaction and Evie found herself relaxing, suddenly feeling the urge to grab the bar of scented soap back from his hands to chuck it at him for laughing at her. But she just left it as her imagination and took the bar of soap from his hand and looked away shyly.

"Are you certain you don't need any help?" he asked a little hopefully and Evie nodded like a rattle, wanting him to finally leave so she could continue enjoying her hot bath without him in here, the breathing, walking temptation.

"Yes. I'm really doing good, I'll... call you if I need help." She said to make him leave and to her relief (and maybe slight disappointment which she convinced herself must be a mistake), he finally left.

Gavriel leaned against the door again and took another deep breath. He seemed to be taking more calming and deep breaths since his wife came back with him from the human world. His ears remained vigilant while he finished dressing up.

"Your Highness, if you're that worried, you shouldn't have sent the maids away." Elias told him through silent conversation when their eyes met.

"She is not comfortable with vampires yet, and... those maids wouldn't know how to handle a human. I'm afraid they'd hurt her before they even realize they did."

Chapter 30 - Greatest Temptation

Elias couldn't deny his reasoning, but he also could not agree with his master offering to assist his wife like a maid! "You might be right, but you can't just offer to take over the job of a maid like that. You're not a bloody maid Your Highness! Please think of your position."

"I'm her husband. And that is not an issue. Helping my wife out is my responsibility." His gaze sharpened, causing Elias to sigh, knowing that it won't be a good idea for him to say more. 'Good Lord,' he could only think inside him.

"Go prepare something for her to eat." He ordered and Elias immediately moved.

A deep sigh escaped Gavriel's lips as soon as Elias was gone. Crossing his arms in front of him, he leaned his head back against the door.

"Evie?" he called out a long while later when he thought that his wife had taken too long.

"Yes. I'm almost done." He heard her soft voice and he finally pushed himself away from the door. He walked towards the foot of the bed and sat there as he waited for her to come out.

Evie was already dressed in a royal blue gown when she emerged from the door. She was as beautiful as always, the colour of her gown a breath-taking contrast against her porcelain skin. And her... and her long silvery blond hair had darkened, wet and tangled. Her cheeks flushed as their eyes met before she immediately looked away.

"I... I told you, I can manage to bathe and dress myself." She said a little proudly, her eyes wandering around the room and then stopping on the mirror. She moved a little awkwardly, obviously so conscious of his presence and sat on the little stool in front of the mirror.

She picked the brush and when she gathered her damp hair to her side, her back came into view. Gavriel stood, approaching her.

Evie saw him approaching through the reflection on the mirror and she straightened. Blinking, she watched him bent behind her. "Let me," came his pleasing voice and she felt his fingers button up the ones she missed on her dress. She gasped almost at the same moment her brush snagged in her hair.

She deliberately yanked harder to free it and also to pull her attention away from him. As she did that, she winced at the slight pain on her scalp.

But suddenly, Gavriel's hands covered hers. "Let me," he said again as he stared into her eyes through the mirror. Before her mind could work, her body reacted first by releasing the brush and she dropped her hand.

The moment Gavriel fingered a strand of her hair, Evie's heart thudded hard. Her body became stiff as she chewed the inside of her lower lip and telling herself she should protest. He wasn't her maid... he was a prince... he was her...

Gently, he pulled the brush through, so painfully careful, as if her hair was some precious and fragile thread that he was afraid to damage. The protesting voice in her head was shoved away into the darkness as her eyes fell to the mirror and watched him taking on his task so seriously. She could see his enviably long and thick lashes curling from currently hidden smouldering eyes and the strands of his velvety black hair touching his forehead. And she found that she couldn't tear her eyes off him – not that she wanted to. And that thought shocked her more than her inability to stop staring at him.

The little devils at her shoulders were whispering her to just sit back and enjoy the feel of her husband's fingers against her hair, her scalp and against the nape of her neck. The feeling was unbelievably soothing she felt like she was dreaming. She never thought she'd be feeling this way just by him merely brushing her hair.

Before she knew it, every thought and reluctance banished and she actually sighed and relaxed. This was probably the most relaxed moment she ever had ever since they met...no, ever since she found out she was marrying a vampire prince.

"Why... are humans not allowed in this place?" she heard herself ask.

When Gavriel lifted his gaze, a slight smile curved on his lips at the sight of her relaxed face. She had her eyes closed and she seemed to like what he was doing. It pleased him, so incredibly.

"Because the vampires here vowed never to treat humans as their food or slaves." He started. "Since the beginning, this place is secluded for that reason. Vampires here never fed on human blood. And they even passed a law since a long time ago to ban any human from entering this city. So even with the rampant slavery that is happening in the entire empire, there would not be any reason for the vampires here to succumb to temptations of drinking human blood."

The explanation shocked Evie in a good way. In all the possible reasons she, her father and their comrades had come up with, this was not one of the possibilities they had even considered. She suddenly felt ashamed of herself. "R-really? So that's the reason why..." she looked at him and their eyes met.

"Yes. Human blood is addictive to the vampires. It only needs one taste and the craving for it cannot be erased. Here, human blood is treated as dangerous as an addictive drug. That is why it's forbidden and illegal. And that's why you're safe here, Evie." He assured.

"But... won't my existence here become a temptation to them?"

His hands on her hair halted and a slow smile curved on his lips. He caught his lower lip between his perfect white teeth, and something gleamed in his eyes that made him even more terrifyingly magnetic and even more tempting to Evie.

"Yes. That's why I don't have a choice but to send those maids away and stay with you at all times."

"But... you're a vampire too. Won't you also be tempted to..." Evie trailed off, rendered speechless by her own words and silenced by the look in his eyes.

Gavriel bent closer, his lips near her ear as his gaze locked onto hers through the mirror. "Yes, you'd be the greatest temptation to me... but it's not your blood, Evie... it's simply you ..." his whisper trailed off, evoking tiny shivers that started at her neck and travelled down her back, leaving pleasurable tingles.