

The Duke 101

Chapter 101 - The Lost Memory

In a knowing tone, Lara explained. I remained silent and listened to her carefully.

"What — what happened to me?" I stammered.

"Why don't you try to recall it yourself?" She offered me a gentle smile.

Lara then laid his hands on the side of the table. She spread her hands, waiting for my hand.

I glanced at her palm and then to her bright smile. Nothing bad would happen, right? Hesitantly, I still slid my palm in her hands.

They're really soft and cold.

Slowly, Lara wrapped her fingers around my hand.

"Be at ease."

Upon hearing her advice, I stabilized my breathing. Closing my eyes as I gathered my scattered thoughts.

Lara's beauty was too much of a distraction. I didn't want to look at her right now so I could concentrate.

As my breathing and shoulders eased, my mind drifted to what happened to me.

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It was true that I went for a stroll with Lord Cameron in the vast open garden. However, we headed back and shared supper, just discussing random subjects about Cunningham.

After that, we went into separate ways. Lord Cameron urged me to rest after our long journey. He even apologized for what happened earlier that day.

When I was at the guest chambers, I couldn't sleep. So I went out. I bumped into Fabian. He asked where I was heading at this hour.

Obviously, I answered him with honesty. He offered to accompany me, but I wanted to have some time alone.

Being in the chambers alone... it felt suffocating and dreary. I got so used to Sam's presence all the time that I felt restless without him around.

So, I strolled alone once again. I made sure not to go far — I didn't want to burden everyone if I lose my way.

However, when I decided to go back... I saw Sam. He was walking into the maze-garden near to the open area of the garden.

I called him, and he looked back. Sam smirked at me before he turned around and resumed in his strides.

His action baffled me, but I ignored it, and I followed him. But he just disappeared — just like that.

That's why I thought I missed him so much that I'm seeing things. Thus, I returned to my chambers to rest.

Or... did I really return?

My memories were all over the place. Although I was certain I went back, why did it feel I didn't?

What did I...

As I wondered, forcing myself if I remembered correctly, a recent memory appeared.

Back in that maze garden, when I turned around to return to my room, a figure was already standing behind me. Taken aback, I slowly raised my gaze.

Dark, dark crimson orbs matched with dark hairs waving along the dreary night breeze. I couldn't see his face clearly under the dim lights of the moon.

However, his crimson eyes were shining brightly... and dangerously. When a twisted smirk appear on his lips, I saw his fangs glinted.

It was as if he was telling me a foolish prey took the bait.

My breath hitched as he suddenly appeared in front of me, bending over, his hands on his back, tilting his head to my side, scanning me. I froze.

I couldn't move a muscle. I'm scared to even think of breathing, running, or screaming for help.

There was just something in his aura that suppressed me to do anything. All I could do was tremble under his scrutinizing gaze.

When I breathed a little, the scent of death wafted my nose. He reeked with the scent of blood and death.

This scene felt familiar and not. The night Sam appeared in my life, I was also frightened out of my wits.

But there was a distinction.

This man was out here, with malicious intention. He would kill me. He was enjoying at the sight of me trembling in anxiety before him.

"Are you scared?" He asked under his breath.

As soon as his low, deep voice tickled my ears, I couldn't control the shiver down my spine. Was he asking? Or confirming?

"Are you mute?" Again, he asked.

But this time, he raised his hand, revealing his nails were akin to sharp claws. Using the tip of his finger, he traced my jaw.

His eyes locked with mine. His smirk remained.

"You..." I gulped down a small portion of my fear. "You already know the answer. So, why are you asking me? Are you stupid?"

I just wanted to answer politely, afraid he'd kill me if I didn't answer. However, my words just went off on their own.

I'm dead. Sam... I'm so, so dead.

"Feisty..." He smirked as he let out an airy, yet short, chuckle. "... or not?"

Please don't kill me. Was what I wanted to beg him. However, begging him to spare me was what he wanted.

He didn't say it, but I could feel it. If not for the time I've spent with Sam, I would never distinguish his reasons.

Let me borrow his courage; bid my time until Sam arrived. He would know, right? But even if he do...

Instinctively, I raised my gaze and stared at the man straight into his eyes. His eyes had the same dark shade of red like Sam.

I knew Sam was strong — I never questioned that. But this man, deep down, my guts were telling me he's just as strong as Sam.

If Sam arrived here, there would be a confrontation. My groom had nonexistent patience. If that happened, I'm uncertain about the outcome. We still have to go to the Capital.

The Capital... a place that unprecedented situation occurred. The center and the most dangerous place in this kingdom.

I couldn't let Sam get injured after what happened in Whistlebird.

"You stare a lot, sweetheart." He muttered, snapping me back from my thoughts.

"Now that's puzzling. I'm certain you're scared until now. But alas, your mind still wondered elsewhere."

He added with a tone of fascination. Before this man, I couldn't even pull out a fake bravado. His eyes made me feel like he could see through me.

"I'm bidding my farewell in my mind." I muttered tonelessly. "You will kill me, right? I might as well say my last words to my loved ones even if its just in my head... am I not allowed?"

Chapter 102 - The Lost Memory II

His reaction was the opposite of what I had expected. His smirk stretched wider, making it look more twisted.

"Of course, you are." He replied in delight.

I'm shaking, terrified, and just wanted to crawl away. That's a fact. However, Fabian didn't exhaust himself coming up with lesson plans he had to write all night for me.

Sam had granted me a life so beautiful. He had granted me powers; knowledge.

This man before me who made me feel so little... I'm aware I couldn't fend him off with sheer force. Even if I put on all my might and push him to make a run for it, it'll all be for naught.

That's silly.

What I need to do was to use my mind. I had to get out of here. I don't know how, but I had to think of a way.

"Hmm..." As I thought of a way to get out of this situation alive, I heard him hum.

The man leaned forward. Instinctively, I wanted to draw my head back. Alas, I couldn't.

He studied me up close while I limit my breathing.

Go away. Was what I wanted to say. I didn't like this small gap between us. It felt... degrading.

"You look average, nothing special. Very human." He nodded in understanding.

I'm aware of that. Hence, I didn't take it to the heart. It's not that his opinion mattered; the only opinion I want about my looks was Sam.

"Are you here just to insult me?" I asked, still staring at him. "You're wasting your time. Be more creative than that to get through me. If you want to kill me, just do it. Why are you stalling?"

Honestly, my soul had been attempting to leave my body upon saying those words. I'm barely holding onto it so it won't go away completely.

Mister Fabian, was this kind of provocation truly work? Remembering my tutor's lessons in etiquette. Yes, he added these types of lessons.

He even taught me how to hide a body in our extra curriculum lesson: gardening. Plant endangered flowers over it so no one would dig it up since that was illegal.

Until now, I truly thought those were just a more thorough topic. Advanced lessons; Fabian's exact words.

When I saw him smile, I bit my inner lip. Surely knowledge was power.

I thank Fabian for his flawless teaching. If I made it out here alive, I would never question his lessons again.

"I see..." The man nodded again, snapping me back from bowing to Fabian to express my gratitude in my mind.

"You don't look bad when smiling."

When he mentioned that, only then I realized a subtle smile resurfaced on my lips. It immediately died down, though.

"You smile even when you are cornered. You don't seem to be afraid of death. Aren't you interesting, sweetheart?"

Suddenly, his tone grew more wicked as his smirk grew twisted. He's having fun — not mad, but he found it amusing...

In a very diabolic way.

I couldn't pinpoint it, but I had this very ominous feeling about his remarks.

"It's no fun if you don't value your life. Hmm..." He muttered, drawing back, crossing his arms, and then scratching his chin.

"Also, I changed my mind by ripping your head apart with my bare hands. I wouldn't get through you with just that, would I?"

I flinched at his last remarks. So, he had planned to behead me just by his hands?

I thought of it sent a shiver down my spine. My knees were trembling, but I fought it from giving away.

"I need more creativity, huh?" He looked at me, as if contemplating what he would do to me.

Also, I couldn't see him properly. I could only sense his demonic aura emanating from him. Whatever he was thinking, my guts were telling me it won't do me any good.

How could I leave here in one piece? Should I strike a deal? But what would I offer him?

I had nothing to offer.

"Heh." He chuckled shortly. "You're sharp, I give that to you. Thinking that if your groom will come to your rescue right now, the results of our confrontations are unknown."

Did he read me all this time? My eyes slowly went wide.

I stood rooted to the ground. I could only watch him take a step forward, approaching me, closing our already limited distance.

When the tip of his shoe touched mine, he stopped. Since he was tall, he bent on down.

I had to look away. It's dangerous to look at him in the eyes further.

However, I couldn't. I felt myself being drawn to his crimson eyes.

"You don't care for you life, but you care for someone else's? Aren't you too simple?" He smirked.

"However, since you changed my mind, I'll be more creative from today onwards, sweetheart. That's my token of appreciation for making this visit a little... interesting."

Those were the last words I remembered. And then, I was back in my bed chambers where Sam jumped from it and we...

We...

I trailed off, realizing it was not... Sam. He might appear like Sam, but the way he smirked... they're the same as that man's smirk.

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Slowly, I opened my eyes and Lara's pair of shining emerald eyes welcomed me. She sported a bitter smile upon seeing my reaction.

"What... have I done?" I stammered under my breath, feeling dirty and violated.

Yet, tears wouldn't come out. No, I didn't even know what to feel. I'm just too shocked.

"Lilou." Lara squeezed my hand lightly. "It's not real. It's just an illusion."

She muttered, shaking her head lightly. However, even though it wasn't real, it felt very vivid.

"Are you... not real, too? Are you just an illusion as well, Lara?" I asked through my gritted teeth.

She went silent. Be it illusions or not, I could only assume this was a vampire's abilities.

It didn't happen in real life. But I could never deny it never happened to me.

I'm angry, but not at him. But to myself. I provoked him, and he really figured out how to insult me in the worst possible way.

"Who was it...?" I asked, before I let out a mocking scoff. "Who would I do even if I knew?"

"Lilou," Suddenly, Lara called me out firmly. "I have little time left. But, listen to me carefully. Once you wake up, find Cameron and tell him about Lakresha."

I furrowed my brows as I stared at the sincerity in her eyes. "Lakresha?"

"It's my son. I'm passing it to you. If it accepts you, the entire Crawford will be in your hands. But, don't go to the Capital... just yet."

"Why would..." I trailed off upon hearing those familiar words, 'just yet'. They were the same voice I heard before.

As if reading my jumbled thoughts, Lara smiled brightly.

"Please forgive me for that. I just want to talk to him even for a short while." She explained with a smile.

Talk to... who? Sam...? No, that's not important. Did she say she's giving her son to me? And the Crawford's?

"Just. Don't. Go. To. The Capital. Just. Yet." Lara stressed her words as if desperately wanting me to listen.

"Lara..."

"If you go now, Hell will lose. I won't forgive you if that happens, Lilou. I will kill you now if you're going to deliver him to his death." Her expression grew more solemn.

"Give me your word." She urged.

My thoughts had been jumbled, and I didn't even have a time to explode from anger. However, Lara was staring at me, waiting for me to give her my words.

I gulped down, hearing my swallow as I nodded. Lara immediately smiled upon seeing it.

"If you go that way, you'll wake up." Lara then pointed in a certain direction.

I glanced at it before returning my gaze to Lara. "Why, Lara?"

"Hmm?"

"Why are you helping me?" I muttered. But deep down, I already knew the answer. It's not me she's wanted to help, it's Sam.

"It's not for you. It's for my unrequited love and you, owning Lakresha is my selfish way to stay by his side." Without a slight reluctance, she confessed teasingly.

"But I've grown to like you as well, even for a short while. And I root for you."

Were the last words I heard for her as she faded with a bright smile on her face. Lara loved Sam — genuinely and deeply. So, how could she give me her blessing selflessly?

How did you die, Lara?

Chapter 103 - Grow Some Muscles

The bed chamber fell into nothing but silence. Only the crisp sound of wood burning into ash from the fireplace resonated in the air.

I only told Sam what I recalled. My time meeting with Lara, about Lakresha, and about giving her blessing. Some of our conversation faded. Maybe because I was in shock.

Still, I could remember someone portraying as Sam. Although I couldn't remember most parts, what I remembered was Sam's impostor, drinking my blood until I collapsed.

(A/N: READ AUTHOR'S NOTE IF THIS HAD CONFUSED YOU.)

After telling Sam about Lara, I raised my gaze to him. Sam had calmed down. I did as well.

But I couldn't deny this fury continuously building up inside me. It was as if I missed something important. Something like the actual cause of this anger within me.

As I studied him, my eyes softened as my anger subsided. I've never seen him stay so silent this long.

Lara had loved him; I could tell because I've seen her. However, she said it was unrequited.

But the way I see it... I didn't want to know. I liked Lara, I really do. Yet, I'm not interested to hear the entire story about the two of them.

I didn't even have the gall to ask Sam what he thought about Lara. I wanted to respect Sam's history. Still... it affected me. I'm not a saint.

Sam and Lara, if I painted them together, they were like matched made in heaven.

They were both extremely good-looking. She's kind and reserved. Sam was an... unostentatious gentleman. Both in the same kind; both nobilities, strong, and capable.

Was it silly of me to even think that a lady like Lara was easy to love? She had a likable character.

It's just impossible if Sam didn't feel the same way. If she didn't die, they would be a great couple.

Why do I even felt like it was my fault? That, as if I've coveted someone else's position?

A sigh slipped past my lips as I look down. My hands on my lap, clutching the quilt.

I nearly died in my sleep. I let someone drink my blood just because I failed to discern if he was real or not.

Yet, here I am, concerning myself about unnecessary things.

Was it, though?

Were my emotions really unnecessary? What a hypocrite, Lilou.

I had to focus on something more important. Like how to satiate this anger continuously building up within me, consuming me slowly.

'Lakresha, huh? Am I going to become a second mother to Lara's child?' I wondered, recalling Lara's words before we parted ways.

How could she give her son to me like it was a toy? Another sigh slipped past my lips as I gazed at Sam.

Even though I finished telling him everything, he's been silent. I guess that's the effect Lara had on him...

Erase! Stop thinking about it, Lilou! Important things! Important...

For the nth time, a sigh escaped my lips. Wasn't Sam important, though? He's the most important to me.

But... how could I get jealous of someone who was so kind? Someone who was also dead?

I haven't matured, huh? Just one situation, and it rattled me to the core. I felt like sulking. I'm very disappointed with my progress.

I couldn't protect myself. I couldn't distinguish if the people around me are real. I couldn't even truly accept Sam's affairs in the past. And instead of being thankful, I'm getting jealous about the person who was trying to help us.

And even now, I'm self-pitying. It's embarrassing.

"Damn... the missing parts will be the death of me."

Suddenly, I heard Sam hissed. I raised my head and saw him ruffling his hair in frustration.

"Huh?"

Sam shot me a look. I nearly jolted back, seeing his pair of desperate eyes. He leaned forward, resting his arms over his spread legs.

"Try to recall more, Lilove. I've been trying to fill in the blanks of your broken memory." He urged, nodding encouragingly.

He's been... what?

"You were thinking about the missing parts of my memory?" I muttered in a questioning tone. Sam nodded, arching his brow.

"Why else would I concentrate if not for that reason?"

"About Lara..."

"Tch. That evil woman." Sam clicked his tongue in annoyance. "I could imagine her laughing evilly when you accepted her Lakresha."

He shivered, his face scrunched up as if he could recall a terrible memory. I should be happy, right?

That Sam didn't seem to see Lara romantically. However, I'm not happy... not even the slightest.

And that's just made me a more terrible woman.

I felt so ashamed of myself.

"Love?" Sam called out as soon as I hung my head low.

Soon, I felt Sam perched on the side of the bed. His hand holding my hand and I stared at it.

"Lilove, look at me." Sam guided my chin up so he could look at me in the eye.

"I'm sorry you have to go through this. It's my fault for leaving you in a place you didn't know yet. I was complacent knowing no one would dare touch you here."

His eyes flickered with bitterness, regret, and angst. I could see how he was desperately bottling his rage. But because of me, he's stopping himself from taking immediate retaliation.

I should apologize to him for doubting him. Apologize for thinking he was silent because of Lara. Apologize for getting jealous easily, for waning, for being weak, and for everything.

However, that's just... even more pathetic of me. I shouldn't keep apologizing if I would do it again.

I know, I would say these "I'm sorry," again for the same reason. Until Sam and I would get used to it.

Words of apology mean nothing if I know it would happen again. Whether or not I wanted to. I didn't want to lose those words' value.

Slowly, I shook my head sideways.

"It's not your fault, Sam. I wouldn't end up like that if only I can tell the difference."

"Lilove." He sighed. "You don't —"

Before he could finish his sentence, I cut him off.

"That's why, I want to get stronger, Sam." With eyes full of resolve, I stated. "Even just a little. I want to learn how to defend myself."

I can't be this pathetic forever. Words of apology weren't genuine apology without actions.

Hence, to show my sincerity to Lara, to Sam, I would own up to it by becoming strong. Instead of self-pitying, I had to gain confidence that I'm worthy of this love.

This jealousy, this insecurity... even if Sam loved me dearly, it would never go away. Not because his love was not enough, but because the problem was me.

Lara was an exceptional woman. And she's my love rival even if she's dead. However, as a respect to my love rival and to my friend, I should also have some redeemable traits.

I can't continue being just a mere human. I can't continue like this. If I do, not only I would burden him, I'd send him to his death.

"What did you...?"

"I want to grow some muscle, beat the hell out of your brothers, and have the confidence polishing a sword in front of you when I get jealous." I explained firmly.

"I can't continue being just mere human." I paused, biting my inner lip. "Because I'm your human. Let's not go to the capital... just yet."

Chapter 104 - Lakresha

After that talk last night, Sam had called Cameron and Fabian. He had announced that we would return to Grimsbanne.

However, for reasons unknown, I insisted on staying in Cunningham instead. This had taken the three of them by surprise.

I'm uncertain of the reason, but deep down, I felt that once I left Cunningham, everything would be futile. Hence, I sincerely asked Cameron if we could stay in Cunningham.

Fortunately, despite Sam's threat and his previous actions, Cameron was kind enough to accept us. After that, I explained to them what happened and meeting Lara while I was unconscious.

Obviously, it surprised Cameron. He even cried. He must have looked up to Lara. Well, she's a brilliant woman; I could tell she's an amazing person despite our brief interaction.

"My lady," I snapped back to the current lapse as Cameron approach. I refocused my gaze on him before me. Cameron had led me to a small chapel inside the Crawford's castle.

Just Cameron and I... and Sam, who was not far away.

"This is Lakresha." He said, holding a small silver box with both his hands.

Slowly, I gazed down and furrowed my brows. Lakresha was a small box?

I was truly prepared to become an adopted mother — I mean, have an adopted son. Sam teased me last night and told me 'you'd find out', when I asked about Lakresha.

"If the founding leader of the Crawford gave Lakresha to you, I and the entire Crawford will gladly hand it to you." Cameron muttered, holding the small box with an engraved crow markings above it.

"Please accept it, My lady."

Such words that sounded heavy with responsibilities. Just what was Lakresha meant to them? Cameron held it as if it was the most fragile object in the world.

I didn't know, but it felt like I was receiving a gift I didn't deserve.

"Lakresha is our clan's treasure. The only person who can yield it is the founding leader and her successor." Cameron explained as I stared at the box in his hands.

"Then, why aren't you using it?" I asked, slowly raising my gaze at him.

Cameron sported a subtle yet bitter smile. "After our founding leader, all the leaders that followed, including I, cannot yield it."

Huh?

"So we kept it safe with all our lives until this very day."

Cameron added. Staring at him as he uttered such words made me realized they had sacrificed lives to protect Lakresha.

But the question remained: why can't anyone in the Crawford Clan can yield it?

Suddenly, Sam chimed in and explained, along with his approaching footsteps.

"It's because that woman is a selfish lady who enjoys being in power. So much so that she used half of her life, just so no one, aside from her choosing, could yield her precious Lakresha."

Upon ending his remarks, Sam stood beside me. Instinctively, I glanced at him. He was gazing down at the box emotionlessly.

"Your Highness, you don't have to put it that way." Cameron muttered awkwardly, but didn't deny Sam's blunt explanation.

"Accepting that thing means the Crawford will pledge their lives to you. It comes with great power, but bigger responsibilities, and a much bigger threat." Sam's tone was icy, moving his sharp eyes towards Cameron.

"I wonder... why would she give my bride such a damned thing."

Sam didn't mention it last night. But, I had already noticed his hostility when I mentioned lakresha. I stared at Sam's side profile. He looked entirely different whenever he bore this solemn and breathtakingly intimidating expression.

"It's because of you." I whispered, biting my lower lip. But since there's only three of us inside the chapel, even a drop of a pin could be heard.

Sam and Cameron shifted their attention to me. Their brows furrowed as I missed telling them this part.

"Because of me?" Sam arched his brow, intrigued.

Although I saw Lara as my love rival, I didn't want to steal this merit from her. I didn't want to borrow the strength she was generously giving us and discredit her.

I might be losing my mind for telling Sam this, but I wouldn't make a progress hiding in fear. I had to stick in my resolve.

Slowly, I moved my gaze back to Cameron. I extended my hand towards the box and took it carefully from him.

"She told me this is her way to stay by your side." Surprisingly enough, a subtle smile resurfaced on my lips upon relaying Lara's words.

"That..." Sam trailed off, sounding surprised.

I carefully opened the box, and my smile stretched a little wider. It's a necklace with a small crescent moon pendant. "It's beautiful."

"Even after death, that woman still wants to harass me!" I heard Sam gasp and click his tongue. I could not help but chuckle.

Sam seemed oblivious to Lara's feelings. I'm uncertain. But did Lara hide her feelings by annoying him?

I raised my gaze, and Cameron was smiling at me. It seemed Cameron had already realized that, but feigned ignorant.

"Lord Cameron," I called out, ignoring Sam's whims. Slowly, I took a step forward.

Cameron slightly widened his eyes, but stood still. When I raised my hand, I glimpsed at the puzzlement in his eyes.

"You did well." I muttered softly, smiling upon seeing how Cameron held his breath. "She said."

I patted Cameron's head gently. Lara didn't verbally say that, but I knew she's proud of this young vampire for leading their clan.

"My lady..." Cameron bit his lower lip as hard as he could.

I was right. Cameron appeared like a youth because he's still young. He might be hundred times older than me, but in their world, he's still young.

To shoulder the responsibility as the current clan leader, having to deal with the royal family, and follow the orders of the founding leader without question... I am proud of him. Lara would be as well.

I glanced at Sam. He had his arms crossed, giving me a proud smirk. I smiled back. He saw through my white lie, but said nothing.

Chapter 105 - The Perfect Tutor

After that, Cameron went to his knees. He placed his hand on his chest, bowing.

When he looked up, he reached for my hand.

"My lady, please accept me—"

"Stop." Sam interrupted. Both Cameron and I turned our heads to him, and Sam's face bore a look of disdain.

Sam pointed at the hands that were holding mine. "How dare you?"

His last remarks made us freeze. I knew Cameron would swear his loyalty to me as I shamelessly accepted lakresha.

I knew the responsibilities I had to bear wearing it. I knew how strange it was to have a vampire swearing their loyalty to a human.

It was all strange — even for me.

However, the rage within me was still here. I'm merely bottling it.

"Sam," I only called him, and subtly smiled before turning to Cameron.

Slowly, I pulled my hand away. However, to placate both Cameron and Sam, I squatted down.

"Even though I accepted lakresha, I didn't think I have the capabilities to lead the Crawford. However, I will call for you when I needed help."

I grinned brightly, thinking that Cameron was like a little boy.

"And when you need us, we will come to aide you. I mean, he will. He's really strong, you know that, right?"

I pointed at Sam, using him as my leverage to get away from the other responsibilities. Receiving lakresha meant accepting the Crawfords.

I didn't want that. Not only I am a human, I was a peasant before all this. I couldn't accept to lead the people and deliver them to their death just because I was foolish.

The only reason I accepted it was because of Lara's will. They said Lakresha was a powerful weapon yield by a strong pure-blood vampire.

It might come in handy in the future. Although, I don't put all my faith in it.

"My lady..." Cameron's eyes twinkled as his lips parted, but no words came out.

"I'm already grateful that Lord Cameron is kind enough to let us stay here."

To my surprise, Cameron suddenly bowed until his forehead touched the marbled floor. For a vampire — a pure-blooded at that — to bow down like a humble peasant still surprised me.

Earlier, he knelt down on his one knee like how a knight swear his loyalty to his master. But now, it was like a peasant begging to spare his life.

My face distorted. I felt like I'm sinning for letting this honorable one act like a peasant.

"My lady, I understand what you meant, but forgive me for I cannot accept your refusal!"

"But —"

"So! Let our clan worship you and serve you while you're here until you acknowledge us!"

I scratched my temple lightly. Worship, eh? I glanced up at Sam, whose face didn't even conceal his disdain.

I can't ask for his help just by looking at him. He had bullied them all in the past; I could imagine Sam's way of getting rid of them.

"Alright, then." I reluctantly uttered.

When I saw Cameron's face brighten up, my heart warmed up. Well, I think it was not too bad, right?

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After the ordeal in the chapel, we returned to the castle's great hall. I had noticed everyone we passed by bowing their heads. I tried to ignore it.

Now, in the great hall in front of me, stood Sam, Cameron, and Fabian. They were aware of my request last night.

Since we didn't know the effect of lakresha if I yield it now, we decided to train my body first. However, with the three of them wanting to train me, we were in a dilemma.

"So, how will I get strong?" I wondered, rubbing my chin as I gazed at the three in front of me.

Sam and Cameron tilted their head to the side. I even heard their spine cracking as they cocked their head in puzzlement.

The corner of my lips instantly twitched. These two vampires didn't know how? Right. They're naturally strong.

So... why did they insist on teaching me and berated Fabian if they had zero clue? I smiled, but my vein on my forehead protruded in annoyance.

I breathed in and out as I shifted my gaze to Fabian. My savior.

"Since my lady is not used to yielding weapons, I advised you should start on focusing on strengthening your stamina. You should condition your body enough to train with wooden swords."

As expected from Fabian. He's the only one I could rely on. I wanted to weep for having such a reliable human around.

"Oh!" Sam knocked the bottom of his fist against his palms. "Right. My Lilove should start running laps!"

"Ahh..." Cameron nodded in understanding, grasping the fact that I am a human, unlike them. "How about you run a lap around the entire Cunningham, my lady?"

I take it back. Cameron didn't grasp the idea.

I helplessly moved my gaze to Fabian, who offered me a chuckle.

"To get stronger, one should have a proper training. If the training is incorrect, it can just hurt your body, my lady. Thus, hire a proper instructor, your grace." Fabian suggested, turning to Sam and then to Cameron.

Fabian was smiling like usual. His eyes squinting into a thin line as he spoke politely.

"My knights can probably..."

"Forgive me, Marquess Cameron. However, as far as I know, the knights under the Crawfords were vampires."

Slowly, Fabian opened his eyes. It's rare to see Fabian's eyes as he always smiled all the time.

"I'm afraid instead of helping my lady, she'd fall ill from the intense training that vampires usually do."

I gulped down a mouthful of saliva. Fabian's tone was too solemn. It was quite intimidating.

"Fabian, do you hold a grudge against us?" Sam frowned as he suspiciously narrowed his eyes.

"As for His Grace, the reason you're not suited to train her ladyship is because..." Fabian's eyes glinted. "You'd distract her."

Sam's lips slightly fell down, speechless. It was as if Fabian's words were a direct hit in his heart.

Yes. Sam and I would surely do a different training.

"So you're saying you will train my bride alone?" Not pleased at where the conversation was going, Sam raised his chin.

"No, my lord." Fabian returned to his usual smile. "Last night when my lady said she wanted to grow some muscles, I had contemplated over it. What happened last night is a blessing in disguise as it showed us that the royal family is already one step ahead."

Fabian glanced at me briefly before he stared at Sam straight in the eye.

"Since, we're not yet faraway from Grimsbanne. Last night, I sent a letter to the person who I think the best to tutor my lady."

Silence ensued after Fabian's explanation. The perfect tutor to help me...? He didn't mean it was...

"Yes." Fabian nodded as he set his eyes on me. "I sent a letter to Sir Knight Rufus."

Chapter 106 - Lilou's Training

Back in Grimsbanne, although I interacted little with Sir Rufus, meeting him was inevitable. After all, Sam would join me in the garden daily, and he would get dragged away by Rufus.

That had been part of my daily life in the duke's mansion.

So, while I was with Fabian, I would sometime ask him about Sir Rufus. I asked just because I didn't want to get on his bad side, as he was always wary towards me.

But Rufus' story and how he ended up being Sam's knight was an interesting story to hear. At least for me.

It was said that, back when Grimsbanne was called Mock town, a place that was abandoned by the monarchy and a lawless land, a man ruled it.

Rufus.

They said that even though he was a human, his strength could par with those vampires. Thus, he gained the moniker as the strongest human in the Heart's Kingdom.

Until, one fateful day, a vampire came to challenge him. Staking their lives and who would rule mock town, the human and the vampire fought fiercely.

They fought day and night without rest. The duel had lasted for days, that even the people watching them felt tired for them.

In the end, the vampire lost. It was an outcome that everyone didn't and expected. Because that's just how strong Rufus was. Half believed he'd lose, half believed he'd win.

However, unexpectedly, instead of stepping on the vampire who was lying flat on the ground, Rufus bent down on his knees. He swore loyalty to the vampire before he collapsed to his side.

It turned out that the vampire fought him fair and square. Without borrowing his abilities as a vampire.

No one knew how Rufus suddenly had a changed of heart — even Fabian. However, what was certain was, during their fight, the vampire had touched Rufus, which led him to today's title as the strongest knight in the heart's kingdom.

A knight who left the royal castle unscathed, despite refusing the king's proposal to serve him. A knight who was considered the strongest who only serve the Duke, who had been asleep for hundreds of years.

Now, that knight...

"Tell me if you can't take it anymore, my lady."

I panted for air as I continued to run around the Crawford's castle. Now, that same knight was trying to cripple me by making me run ten laps around the Crawford's manor.

I'm dying. It had been three days since my training started. I started with one lap under Fabian's orders during my first day. I did it easily, thanks to my experience being a peasant.

On my second day, I ran two laps, and it barely made me gasp for air. But on that same night, Rufus finally arrived with his horse, Bella. When I saw him that night, I knew my days had come.

Now, on my third day was the day my instructor officially started training me strictly. I hadn't spoken a word yet, and the first thing he told me was to run ten laps!

I'm barely on my sixth lap and my lungs were constricting. I'm dying. I knew getting stronger was difficult, but at this rate, I'd die!

"Lilove, do you want water?" On my side, Sam furrowed his brows, worried.

I only glanced at him and shook my head. Goodness... the only reason I made it to sixth laps was because Sam would run with me.

Just looking at him gave me a boost of motivation to keep going. He's that beautiful.

Yet, while I was struggling, Sam was barely jogging. He's not even sweating!

"Hey, Rufus! Are you trying to kill my bride before our wedding?" Sam growled as he shot a look of daggers at Rufus.

Rufus was following me from behind while riding his horse, Bella. He secretly told me he'd run over me if I stopped running.

What was Fabian thinking when he sent that letter?

Now, my only option was how to die. Would I die from exhaustion or die by getting run over by Bella? I chose neither!

"Don't you trust her, my lord?" Rufus replied blankly.

Even when I'm not seeing his expression, I could feel his diabolical intention. I could imagine him smiling evilly, seeing me run towards my death.

"Wow. What a cunning way to put it." Sam clicked his tongue in annoyance.

I knew the reason Sam didn't fit to train me. He's too soft on me. He would kill and threaten others without batting an eye like a devil. But to me, Sam would cheat on his own training.

If not for my willingness about this, Sam would have carried me to finish this torture. But if I let him, I'd have no progress.

All that big talk would just be empty.

"Seventh..." I muttered under my breath as I passed by the starting point.

'Just three more.' I whispered internally as I decreased my speed a little. Even if I'm exhausted, there's a part of me that felt relieved I've reached this far.

If I decrease my pace, I could make it. Hence, from sprinting, my pace gradually turned to jogging.

I thought Rufus would scold me or shout, "faster!". But he didn't. Hence, I kept this pace.

I could feel Sam's gaze who was jogging on my side. But he said nothing. That's why I snuck a glance at him for some motivation.

As soon as I did, Sam was smiling subtly. His smile alone touched my heart, as if it told me how proud he was.

I didn't know if my face was heating because of running, or because I was blushing. Either way, Sam's presence was a great help.

Soon, even before I realize it, I made it. Ten laps! Around this spacious castle!

It was tiring to the point my knees wobbled, and I dropped to my knees. My palms on the concrete ground, catching up to my breathing.

It was exhausting I thought I was going to die. However, it also felt rewarding. The thought of overcoming something I thought impossible made me feel accomplished.

That's why no matter how pitiful I appeared at the moment, I was grinning widely.

"Water?" In front of me, I saw a pair of shoes before a slowly gaze up.

Sam.

He squatted down, beaming at me with a smile. He offered water in a silver cup and a towel to wipe my sweats.

"You make me fall for you even more for doing this for us." He muttered happily.

"Thank you."

Sam expressed sincerely. The soreness in my body felt nothing as the reasons for all this were worth more than this.

While Sam and I smiled at each other, Rufus just ruined it. His sadistic tone sent a shiver down my spine.

"Rest for a moment, my lady. Our training is just starting. I'll see you on the training grounds."

This was it. I'm really going to die.

Chapter 107 - A Tit For Tat

My body felt sore even when I try to deny it. I could barely move a muscle. However, I had to follow my instructor's orders.

I even refused Sam's offer to carry me all the way to the training grounds. Alas, why were they following me?

I looked back. Sam, Cameron, and Fabian were walking behind me. They all bore worry in their eyes, as if they were looking at a pitiful, wounded bird.

It made me feel as if that was the only thing they could do while I walk towards my death. Was this my funeral?

A sighed escaped my lips as I dragged my feet forward. I'm doing this as a preparation for the capital.

I was too na?ve to think nothing dire could happen. It was foolish to even consider the King would just permit us to get our happily ever after that easily.

We're just halfway through our journey, but I nearly died without spilling blood. That ability alone terrified me.

Considering Sam was strong, they would target me first. I'm the easiest target.

It was obvious they didn't care about the outcome. The purpose was to hurt Sam. If he lost control because of it, I'm afraid he wouldn't just sleep for hundreds of years.

Sam would probably just enter eternal slumber.

Whenever I recalled it, my heart clenched. Cruel. They disgust me to the bones.

That's why no matter how hard this training was, I had to make them regret trying to use me against Sam. My eyes glinted as my resolve grew firmer.

Ignoring the soreness of my muscles, I reached the training grounds. To my surprise, Rufus was already in the middle, checking a wooden sword.

I stood still momentarily. My eyes fixed on towering Rufus' figure.

He was merely holding a wooden sword up, caressing its blunt edges. But Rufus made the wooden sword appear like a real sword.

When he raised his gaze to me, his eyes glinted as the side of his lips curled into a smirk.

Huh?

Before I knew it, the wooden sword flew past me. It didn't graze me, but I felt how close the sword's edges were from grazing my cheek.

If this was before, I would've trembled and collapsed to my knees. However, I couldn't even sit properly without aching.

If I went to my knees now, I wouldn't be able to stand. Also... the effect of his action surprising gave the opposite of what I would usually feel.

I didn't feel fear. It... excited me, instead. That precision... he's the man I would learn from.

Suddenly, that same wooden sword went past me again from behind. This time, I stiffed at the dangerous aura from behind me.

Despite the fast speed of the flying sword coming at Rufus, he stopped it by clipping his fingers in between it. Rufus didn't even bat an eye, nor did it appear he exerted effort from stopping it.

Slowly, Rufus put the wooden sword down.

"What the bloody hell are you thinking, Rufus?" From behind me, Sam's words were hundred times colder. It was as if he was talking to an enemy.

So Sam was the person who caused the wooden sword to fly back at Rufus? Heh... what was Sam saying, though? Didn't he do the same?

"I'm just showing her what to expect in the Capital, my lord." Rufus politely explained. "If it is one of your brothers, it wouldn't be just a wooden sword. And it wouldn't miss as well."

"So what? I'd just had to sever their arms even before they can lift it."

"Why haven't you done it yet, my lord?" Rufus was quick to respond.

Silence. The tension between Rufus, who was ahead of me, and Sam, who was behind me, grew thicker.

Uh... I discreetly stepped aside, darting my eyes from Rufus to Sam. The two stared at each other in silence. It was as if at any moment they'd engage in a fight.

Strange, I thought. It seemed Rufus was challenging Sam with his gaze. What was he so displeased about? Am I just seeing things?

Was Rufus that mad he had to leave Grimsbanne for a short while just to train me? Well, it must be.

"I haven't done it yet...?" Suddenly, Sam's tone lowered as the side of his lips tilted into a twisted smirk.

"Are you sure?"

I shuddered at the sight of his small canine tooth. I gulped down at Sam's aura.

"No, my lord. I'm just confirming it." Rufus backed down as he beckoned a neck bow.? Rufus then shifted his head to me. I nearly jolted upon meeting his gaze.

"My lady, shall we start with your training?"

"Oh..." I awkwardly nodded and glanced at Sam.

Sam was smirking proudly, darting his eyes from Fabian to Cameron. The two were looking at him suspiciously.

"Hah," I'm relieved and quick chuckle slipped past my lips. I guess only Rufus knew Sam too well.

Rufus and Sam had their own language that only the two could understand. Should I see Rufus as my love rival as well?

Even with that thought crossing my mind, I smiled. I'm just glad that there's one person who truly understood Sam.

It might not be me. But that's alright. I'm still in the process of understanding Sam's layers.

"Here, my lady." Rufus tossed me the wooden sword.

I caught it with both my hands and smiled. "Thank you?"

Rufus just shot me a distant look and turned around. Yet my smile remained.

To earn Rufus respect would be an achievement. Hence, I stared at his broad back with a grin.

My first target was the strongest knight and human in this kingdom, Rufus. If this man before me acknowledged me, that only meant I'm ready to face Sam's family.

Obviously, I knew no matter how easy it was to say; it was hundred times harder doing it. But I had set my mind on this.

While Lilou was busy receiving instruction with Rufus, Samael had a smug grin on his lips.

"Your Highness?" Cameron called out awkwardly. "What did Sir Rufus..."

"My lord, isn't that a little reckless? I didn't consider it since you said you didn't want to be misunderstood."

While Cameron was puzzled, Fabian's words sounded as if he knew what Samael did.

"My brother humored me. Isn't just right to humor him back?"

Sam's grin grew more evil; rather pleased that Rufus now exposed his secret in the open.

"Don't worry. How would the King misunderstand a very harmless joke? I only did what they did in here. A tit for tat — my brothers will understand that."

Chapter 108 - Thank You

When the training ended, I couldn't even lift my arms. I just collapsed on the ground, not caring about the dust as I laid my back flat against it.

I thought I'd die today. No, I just cheated death today. I actually thought it's not just a training, but a torture.

After swinging the sword left and right, getting scolded by Rufus by holding it incorrectly, and Sam's interference whenever Rufus got close, I'm beat.

Yet, my heart felt full as I stared at the tangerine sky because of the sunset. How pretty and satisfying.

My body was exhausted and aching. But, I could not help but smile.

Today, I learned how to hold a sword properly. It was not much of an achievement, but it felt good.

It felt just as satisfying as fulfilling my curiosity. I'm happy to make such a decision.

Suddenly, something blocked my view. A towel landed on my face.

"Do you want me to carry you?"

It was Sam. I smiled behind the cloth covering my face.

Slowly, I pulled the towel down to my lips. "No. I want to see the sky a bit."

Sam smiled as he squatted down on my side. I shifted my gaze to the sky.

"I'm tired." I muttered, but the smile on my face remained.

"I know. Instead of rushing to my arms, you just laid here. I'm a bit... sad." Sam poked the tip of my nose lightly. He didn't mean it.

"I sent them away since I don't want them seeing you lying here."

I glanced at Sam. I believed him, but by now, I realized he had an ulterior motive. He often had other reasons aside from the good and rational ones; the primary one. It didn't matter, though.

"Say, Sam." As I returned my eyes back to the sky, the corner of my lips curled subtly. "Aren't mad at me?"

"Huh?"

"Because I didn't recognize it's not you when someone appeared wearing your face." Slowly, I raised my hand as its shadow shaded my face. My arms ached, but I want to see the clear sky before the sun set.

"I want to hear the truth, not just the mask that's hiding the face of the truth."

"Hmm..." Sam hummed a long tune.

Even before he could answer me with words, I already figured his answer. Sam was not perfect. He might not tell me, but I could tell.

"I'm disappointed, honestly."

A subtle smile resurfaced on my lips upon hearing his answer. I'd rather hear the truth than comforting lies.

It was ironic. But it felt more relieving to know that he was disappointed.

"Illusions are easy to break if you're aware it is one. But, since it's your first, I can't really blame you for it. I'm partially at fault too for leaving you behind." Sam clipped my finger with his and guided it down.

Instead, he used his other hand to shade my eyes. I shifted my gaze to him.

"Though, I hoped you saw the difference no matter how much we looked alike."

He added with a sigh. Staring at him from this angle, I'm relieved. The Sam that sunk his teeth into mine... they would never trick me again.

This Samael La Crox I'm with had emotions, and he was not afraid to show it. That impostor... he had none. He could imitate Sam's demeanor, manner of speaking, and all.

But he could never be Sam. I've learned my lesson in a hard way and I would never fall for the same trick again.

"I'm sorry for that." I expressed without looking away from him. "It might happen again, but I won't fall for it."

Sam smirked upon hearing my apologies. It's my first time apologizing to him after three days.

He never demanded for it. But, only now I had the courage to apologize just because I'm confident.

Lara had demanded me to give her my words, as if my life depended on it. Hence, only then I realized one must value their promises.

"That's a promise then." Sam's pinky finger hooked around mine gently.

"Mhm." I hummed, nodding at him.

We stayed like that until the breeze cooled down, and the sky was about to welcome the moon. I cocked head to Sam.

He had been squatting down on my side, just gazing at me. Even when I closed my eyes earlier, I could still feel his gaze.

"What?" I asked after a long time, curious about what he wanted to say.

Instead of answering immediately, Sam stroke me head.

"I'm just relieved, silly. Don't sound so annoyed." He chuckled in a low tone.

"Relieved? That I didn't die?" I humored.

"No." His tone gradually sounded solemn as the moon's rays revealed itself.

The whistle of the wind whispered in my ears. His crimson eyes glowing over me.

"I'm relieved that you're still smiling. That night, you didn't cry or tell me how it terrified you. You are just... angry. I was worried for the last three days because you barely smiled after that incident."

A sigh escaped his lips. His eyes softened bitterly as he stared at his thumb and finger playing with my hair.

"I was questioning myself if it was too selfish to keep you close or to even wish to have you? Was it right to bring you to the Capital despite knowing the dangers? We're just halfway through our journey, and yet, you're losing your smile. It pains me to see the gradual change."

My breath hitched upon hearing his thoughts for the past three days. He had been doing his best to cheer me up, but my reply were always short because I was eager to get strong.

"So, I'm relieved that you're smiling like this. Deciding to be get stronger already made you strong. And I'm proud that you're doing things the way you wanted to."

I bit my lower lip out of habit. That night, it filled me with rage and resolve I thought I could kill.

But now, talking to him like this, tears started falling from the corner of my eyes. The anger within me... it overwhelmed me I didn't admit how scared I was until now.

The source of the rage building in my heart remained unknown. It was slowly consuming me. I'm forgetting someone far more important.

My lips parted, but no words came out. I felt numb that night. My emotions kept slipping through my fingers.

I used the excuse of being stronger so I wouldn't be a burden to him. But there was always an underlying reason, and Sam saw through it.

Only he could see through me and get through me.

"Sam..." I chewed my lower lip, covering my eyes with my arm as tears kept falling from my eyes.

"It's alright." Sam cradled me in the safety of his arms. "Let it all out. No one will see you."

He whispered in my ears as I sobbed in his chest. I poured all my disappointments, my worries, my exhaustion, and how frightening it was. I let it all out of my chest. Crying like this in his arms... I felt a heavy burden weighing my shoulders down was finally lifted off.

Chapter 109 - Spar

Time sure flies so fast. It felt like yesterday; I was dying on my first day of training. But it had been three months since then.

I remembered feeling sore during my first week. But Rufus... that damn instructor was too strict. I wanted to beat him at least for once.

But, I'm grateful. That Rufus was the one who trained me. If it was someone else, I wouldn't make this tremendous progress.

"I bought some refreshment." Sam snapped be back.

I gazed at my side. Sam was eating a slice of watermelon while he jogged with me.

Sam would always accompany me. But recently, he would just sit idly on the tower's window and watch me from there.

This was the first time he was joining me to run after a week. Not that I mind.

"Later. I still have to finish one lap." I kept my response short and precise.

After excessive training for three months without having a day off, I learned that having a short break in the middle of my training would make me lazy. Hence, I'd join him after my morning run.

"Rufus is not even here." Sam mumbled.

That's right. Even without Rufus, I'd start conditioning my body. It's a discipline Rufus had taught me.

So, during dawn, I'd start running and meet Rufus once the sun was up.

I ignored Sam and kept my eyes ahead. I could feel his gaze from my side. He's running with his eyes on me.

"You should look ahead, my lord." I muttered without casting him a look.

"Why?" Sam asked. "My goal is not ahead."

The side of my lips curled upward. I knew Sam was strong. But after training, the extent of his strength came clear to me — it's immeasurable.

Even if I trained for life, I wouldn't be able to scratch him. What more? If I had to face his brothers. They might be just as strong as him.

Despite that painful reality, I trained harder. I'm doing this so I could defend myself and not be helpless, waiting for someone to save me.

I might as well put up a futile attempt to fight back if necessary.

"Want to try some?" Again, Sam offered me the watermelon he was eating.

Instead of answering, I shook my head. He hummed, catching my attention. Thus, I glanced at him.

What was he thinking? When I glimpsed upon his smirk, my brow raised.

"Do you want to race?" He offered with a smug smirk.

Race? I would never beat him. Even after training for three months straight, I'd still sweat profusely. But Sam wouldn't.

He would start sweating if he probably run around the entire Cunningham hundred times. What was he planning?

Sam added, even after receiving no response from me.

"I'd spar with you if you win."

My speed decrease. "Really?"

I had been trying to ask him to spar with me for the past month. I'd been sparring with Rufus and I never won once.

Still, despite losing repeatedly, I wanted to assess Sam's strength. Although I never heard of Sam wielding a weapon, I'm curious.

"If you... win." His smug grin came clear. "That's your reward. But if you lose..."

A shiver run down my spine. This didn't look good. He had planned ahead of me.

"If I lose?" And yet, I still asked the consequences.

Well, it was more plausible to know the consequences since I already know the outcome. I wouldn't win against Sam head on.

"If you lose..." He hummed, pondering over which reward he wanted the most.

"A kiss? A day with Lilove? Rufus' fingers? Fabian's eyes? Cameron's shaved head? Which one should I choose? Hmm."

That... that escalated quickly. The corner of my lips kept twitching, hearing his solemn mumblings. I knew Sam had dark thoughts, just like I do. However, his thoughts were just too random and terrifying.

Goodness gracious. I'm grateful I'm not one of his enemies.

Sam had thought of it for a long time as we run. Soon, he had decided.

"Oh! I know! A day doing nothing with Lilou? How is that as my reward?" Sam enthusiastically announced.

Was that his reward? Or mine?

"If you finish your tenth lap before me. You win. If not, you lose."

Sam sounded so proud and happy. I could not help but smile. Smile, not because of his enthusiasm.

"No problem, my lord." It was now my time to offer him a smug grin.

"Then, that's a deal." He said.

Slowly, I halted. Sam raised his brows as I faced him.

"You've been thinking too long, my lord. I just finished my tenth lap." Proud, I opened my arms proudly, tapping my foot on the starting point.

The smile on his face immediately died down. Sam gazed down, and then moved his gaze around.

He was too focused on thinking about his options. He didn't notice. This wasn't even considered as something I should be proud about, but a win was a win.

"Lilove, your smile is scary." Sam took a step back when I took a step forward.

"Love...?" He called out awkwardly.

He wanted to run and not acknowledge our deal? So, before he could flee, I grabbed his collar with a sweet smile.

My eyes squinted into a thin, curved line. I could see his expression change inexplicably, but I didn't let him go.

"How about we spar before my instructor wakes up?" I chuckled evilly.

I won't let this chance slip. While I was training so hard, Sam enjoyed his time leisurely.

Imagine seeing him having a parasol not far away from the training grounds, with a cold refreshment on the side? He'd been so relaxed.

Not that I held a grudge to him. He's strong... no. I held a grudge every time he waved at me leisurely with a cold beverage in his hand.

"Lilove, this is cheating, right? How about you run another lap and —"

"Let's go, Your Highness." Before he could touch my conscience, I dragged him by the collar.

Chapter 110 - Lakresha's Form

On the training grounds, while I was checking the wooden swords, I glanced at Sam. He was sulking in the corner, drawing circles with his finger.

I could not help but smile. Sam was not the type of person who would scheme.

His methods were too straightforward. If he kills, he kills with or without an audience. That's why he lost.

He's not the type who planned ahead like the king because he's strong. But because of that, that incident happened.

Though, if that incident didn't happen, we would just blindly step foot in the capital. A land full of vampires — Sam's enemies, at that.

I felt a little guilty for agreeing with his offer, knowing I'm steps away from the starting point. However, I wouldn't have this golden opportunity ever again.

"Get up, my lord." After picking up two wooden swords, I tossed the other one to him.

The wooden sword perfectly landed to his side. Sam gazed at it as dust from the ground took wing.

"You!" I raised my voice, challenging the sulking duke. "Spar with me!"

The side of my lips stretched from ear to ear. Holding a wooden sword as I pointed it at him.

Slowly, Sam raised his head. His lower lip thrust forward as he lazily picked up the wooden sword.

"Lilove," He muttered, dragging the wooden sword up and used it as a cane. "I don't like it when someone is wielding their swords at me. I had this disease getting triggered when someone challenges me. All people who wielded their swords at me... I used their throat as the alternative for their sheath."

He complained with a sigh. By now, I'm used to his words. My brows furrowed.

"But, we're just sparring." I argued, tilting my head.

"I'm not fond of sparring too."

"We had a deal." I muttered. Was he trying to get away from our deal? Not a chance.

"I mean I dislike sparring with wooden swords. There's no thrill." Sam shook his head and raised his hand.

His finger pointing at me. Directly pointing at the necklace around my neck.

"I want you to wield that."

"Huh?" I blinked and gazed down. "Lakresha?"

"Lakresha is not a sword so it won't be pointing at me directly. Also, I want to see it."

Huh? I blinked my eyes. Sam's demeanor suddenly changed as his eyes glinted.

"I want to see you wielding it. So I know if I'll let it stay with you or just break it. I can sell it and make a fortune too."

I studied Sam for a moment. I'm certain Sam was dead serious with everything — as in everything he said just now.

He wanted to see if I could wield Lakresha? Wait... did Sam purposely get defeated?

No. That's not the case. He already thought of seeing me wield lakresha. Was he holding back all this time?

"But..." I trailed off, biting my lip out of habit.

"If you want to spar with me, wooden swords will just break. Also, by this time, you should start taming it." Sam explained in a knowing tone. "I mean, tame lakresha."

"Oh..." I nodded and unconsciously grasped the pendant. I caressed it gently, my eyes fixed on him.

"... but I don't know how."

"Oh..." Sam just realized this dilemma. He rubbed his chin lightly.

"I forgot how she does it."

"I didn't know you're already here, my lord, my lady." Suddenly, Rufus' voice reached our ear.

I immediately turned my head in his direction. Rufus approached us leisurely. His eyes glanced at me and then to Sam.

"Are you here to spar with my lady, my lord?"

"Rufus, I don't like it when you call my love your lady." Sam replied blankly.

"Should I call her by her name then, my lord?" Rufus raised his brows briefly, keeping his usual tone.

Sam blinked his eyes and pondered in silence. "Should I cut his tongue? He's getting on my nerves."

"Have mercy, my lord." Rufus beckoned a neck bow before turning to me.

He eyes gazed at my hand, holding the sword. He then scrutinized me as if checking if I cheated my morning routine.

"She can't just yet, my lord." Out of nowhere, Rufus uttered and faced Sam.

"Why?" Sam cocked his head.

"Lakresha wants her life. Will you risk it?"

What were they talking about? Was wielding lakresha that dangerous? Not that I planned to wield it, I only accepted it because Lara gave it to me.

Also, it's beautiful.

But, if wielding it would help me, I should at least try, right? At the very least, I'd have something hidden in my sleeve as my last resort.

"Risk it?" Sam slowly moved his gaze to me. I nearly jolt upon meeting his gaze.

"Do you think my bride is a feeble woman, Rufus? Now, that's an insult."

I bit my lower lip upon hearing Sam's remarks. Deep down, I knew I am weak.

However, Sam never doubted me. Neither did he get in my way nor did he treat me as an inferior species ever since we left Whistlebird.

"Certainly not." To my surprise, a subtle smile resurfaced on Rufus lips.

That's... new.

"Why don't you try, love?" Sam perked his chin up. "Hold the pendant, and call lakresha to come. Summon it like you mean it."

Sam smiled at me proudly. There was not a single trace of doubt or worry, as if he trusted me with all his heart.

Goodness... my heart felt like it would explode. How could I not love this man?

I held on the pendant lightly. My breathing slower as I gazed at Sam.

"Lakresha..." I called under my breath.

Nothing.

I bit my lower lip in disappointment. I glanced at Sam and he was just staring at me.

He didn't seem disappointed. He looked... puzzled.

"Lakresha... are you there? Can you come?" I whispered, puzzled what I was summoning myself.

Suddenly, Sam appeared beside me. "That's not how you summon it. Don't just knock on the door, kick it open." He leaned in, wrapping his hands around my hand that was holding the pendant.

"Give me your hand." He said, as he guided my hand away gently. My eyes on his solemn side profile.

"This will hurt a little. I think you can't summon it without this."

I winced as I felt a prick on the tip of my finger. I instantly shot my gaze at the drop of blood.

Sam smeared it on the pendant before guiding my finger in his lips. He licked it gently, his eyelids dropped, covering half his eyes.

From this perspective, staring at him made my jaw fall. He's breathtaking. When was the last time I stared at him like this?

"Now, hold lakresha." His breath tickled my ears, snapping me back from my brief impure thoughts.

"Ye— yes, sir." I stammered. He raised his brow, making me gulp. "I mean, Sam."

I shook my head lightly to shrug my thoughts away. Stabilizing my breathing and closing my eyes as I attempted to summon lakresha.

"Lakresha." My voice came out above a whisper.

Suddenly, I felt this strong force wrapped around my hand up to my arm. It snapped my eyes open which made me gasp.

I watched as red mist covered my surrounding before my eyes. The mist slowly took its form into something enormous.

Before I knew it, I held my hand up as I gripped at the gigantic scythe up. My breath hitched as the red mist disappeared into thin air.

It was bigger than me. But it didn't feel that heavy.

"Wha — what..." Even I was scared at the weapon I was holding.

"See, Rufus? My Lilove can —" Before Sam could finish his proud statements, my arms moved on its own.

My arm flung, swinging this gigantic scythe at Sam. Its blade hooked around his neck.

"My lady!" Rufus yelled at my actions.

Help... I whispered internally as I watched its blade approached his neck.