

The Duke 151

Chapter 151 - The Tit For Tat Answer

In the end, I had to eat with an audience. My appetite gone under these intense gazes on me.

Please look away! Was what I wanted to say, but I kept silent. Hanging my head low, as I sliced the piece of meat discreetly.

"By the way, Silvia, did you know what my sister said to Yul?" As I ate in silence, Dominique broke the silence. "She told him to get lost! Ah... no wonder Hell had taken a liking on her."

"You should eat, Dom. You might not know when's the last." Yul clapped back calmly.

"Haha! Why? Will you kill me later?"

"I can do it now if you like."

"Then, why don't you..."

As Yulis and Dominique bickered, getting on each other's nerves, I peeked at them. What a close relationship they had. They loved each other so much they wanted to kill each other.

Was this how they show their affection to each other?

Gradually, all attention shifted to the two of them. Hence, I could finally eat in peace.

I barely ate during lunch and breakfast. Although I still had no appetite, I need some source of strength. I need to be prepared at all times.

"You'd been staying with Alistair until recently. Did he teach you that kind of rudeness?" Pissed, Dominique scorned, playing with the fork between his fingers.

"..." Yulis didn't reply anymore as he continued to eat.

"I'm talking to you, little bro." This time, Dominique's tone sounded less interested. But Yulis didn't respond again.

Clang!

I jolted upon the sudden clatter of plates breaking against the table. Slowly, I raised my gaze — wide open.

There, across from me, Dominique stood behind Yulis. He was pinning the back of Yulis' head against the plate, causing it to shatter with the foods on it.

The latter held his cutlery on either side of him. Yulis didn't move a muscle.

"Ahh... really. This is annoying." Dominique clicked his tongue, ruffling his hair in annoyance.

Instinctively, I gazed at the other individuals around the table. The princesses were eating with grace, as if they couldn't care less about the current occurrence.

Meanwhile, the other princes were still eating, but their eyes on Dominique. None of them seemed they wanted to intervene — as if they already knew it was all for naught.

"You're more annoying, Dom." Silvia finally broke her silence, wiping the corner of her lips with a cloth.

"Sivi, this is why —"

"Silvia." Silvia corrected as she raised her pair of sharp eyes.

"Hah. She can call you Sivi and I can't?" Dominique scoffed as he glanced at me.

I wanted to look away and avoid his gaze. However, I instantly froze and just stared back.

"Oh no, Dom. Don't tell me you're jealous?" Unfazed by the growing tension filling the air, Silvia chuckled in mockery.

Sivi, are you really just my temporary ally? Dominique will surely divert his displeasure towards me.

I bit my tongue secretly. I'm having a terrible premonition after this dinner.

It was just one after another royal family. So far, my conclusion was Silvia was a hypocrite. Cassara was a spoiled princess. Yulis was the male version of Cassara. Dominique was a hot-tempered fellow. And the rest... they're just neutral for now.

They would be my in-laws. Hah... And they tossed me in this grandiose asylum.

'I think I really need to eat more.' I thought internally, eating in silence as I watched everything unfold before me.

"Get your hand off of me." Suddenly, Yulis muttered.

However, Dominique's grip tightened as veins protruded under his skin.

"You just stay there if I were you. Or I'll really crush your head. I'm starting to have a terrible mood." Dominique advised coolly. His eyes on Silvia.

"Say, Silvia, did you have a loose screw in your head? Just not so long ago, you're begging me so you can drink my blood."

He added, sounding appalled at Silvia. Dominique didn't sound like he was lying. In fact, I felt his honesty with his words.

Alas, Silvia snorted upon his remarks. Her eyes glistened with ridicule, sullyng Dominique's mood even more.

"So?" Silvia chuckled. "Did you get your hopes up?"

Aren't you two siblings? It sounded as if there's some kind of love affair gone wrong.

On the second thought, why am I even surprised? They're vampires and this... was their life.

"Hopes up? Haha! Silvia, how cute!" Unexpectedly, Dominique's response was not what I expected.

I thought he'd flipped or attack Silvia. But it seemed he wouldn't.

Honestly, though. If I'm just watching them, they're quite a sight to behold. Everyone was beautiful, albeit crazy.

But if I'm involved in this conversation, I didn't think I had the confidence to eat. Regardless, it was better that they were arguing by themselves.

At the very least, they seemed to forget my existence. This was better.

"Huh..." Silvia smirked after scoffing.

If I remembered correctly, Sam told me about his siblings sneaking behind their partners. Sometimes, with their cousins or other siblings. Was Silvia and Dominique had some sort of relationship?

Before I knew it, I had this strong urge to pry. Fortunately, I stopped myself before I raised my hand to raise a question.

Just then, I furrowed my brows. Was the table shaking? The second I asked myself, cracks suddenly appeared on the surface of the table.

Instinctively, I grabbed my plate away before it split in half. That very second, I held my breath as I froze.

The table broke in half! And in the middle of it, Yulis glided down — face first.

Was he dead? I gasped as my eyes widened.

"Ahh... my apologies." Dominique apologized halfheartedly, gazing down at Yulis.

My eyes slowly set on Dominique. He was pinning Yulis' earlier. Was it because of him this long sturdy table broke in half? Just like that?

Taking notice of my gaze, Dominique raised his gaze at me. As soon as our eyes met, he raised his brow. He gazed at the plate in my hand before a subtle smirk turned up on his lips.

"Now, that's cute, sis." Dominique chuckled in a low tone. His comment invited their eyes on me.

"Fufu! The Remington weren't lying, after all."

"I should invite sis to one of my tea party."

"..." One after another, their passing comments reached my ears. I... it was just my instinct to grab my plate away. It was a taboo for me to waste food.

"Silence." Silvia slowly assisted herself up. "I warn each and everyone of you. Don't even think of touching even the strand of her hair."

She gazed at them one by one. Her eyes warning them to forget what they were thinking. Silvia was a little overprotective. It felt reassuring.

I gulped down, biting my lower lip. I then glanced down at Yulis. My impression of him remained the same. However, was he alright?

"Lilou, let's g..." Silvia trailed off as a man's voice suddenly came in from the hallway.

"Oh! I'm a little late for our little family dinner, aren't I?"

Before I could turn my head to who it was, my brows furrowed. Silvia's complexion suddenly paled as I noticed her ball her hands into a fist.

"Hanz." Silvia hissed, making my brows furrowed even more.

To appease my curiosity, I turned my head in the voice's direction. From behind me, a man with an eye patch and a long scar; from his cheek across the side of his lips, smirked at me.

"Lilou..." His deep crimson eyes glinted with blood lust as soon as our eyes met. "Nice to see... you."

And before I knew it, Yulis was already standing before me. His back facing me.

'What... ' My eyes full of confusion and shock gazed Yulis' hand, holding Hanz's wrist up. The latter's fingers wiggled in excitement.

'Did he just attempted to attack me...? He's fast... if not for Yulis, I could've...'

"What do you think you're doing, Hanz?" Yulis tone grew colder as the temperature felt frosty.

"Tit for f*cking tat, Yulis. I'll pluck her eyes out just like what that damn Hell did to me."

Chapter 152 - Let This Be A Dream

"... do what Hell did to me." Hanz hissed as he tilted his head.

His crimson eyes that were akin to flames held my gaze, almost scalding my soul. I felt that weight of his words on my shoulders.

Tit for tat... I heard Sam said the same thing not long ago. Did that mean Sam plucked Hanz' eyes?

How? When? Where?

"Calm down, Hanz." Yulis muttered huskily. Even when I couldn't see his face, I could tell how intimidating he looked by his tone.

"Yul, get out of here."

After putting up with them quite nicely, this was where it would end, huh? But why was he so mad? Didn't he cross the line first?

I nearly died back then. If not for Lara, I wouldn't wake up.

"Hah..." I scoffed under my breath.

This atmosphere felt so familiar. I looked around. I knew it. Thus, before my emotion could take over me, I picked up the last piece of meat on my plate and munched it.

Under this situation, yes. Not because I'm still hungry, nor did I consider it was my last meal. I just thought it would be a waste not to eat it.

Silvia said, think just like them. It actually meant to be a little more crazy. The crazier I would, the more chances I'd survive here.

Why? Because they won't touch me... just yet. And even if they do, I'd fight them to death.

"Aren't you going to eat?" I asked as I languidly chewed my food down.

I glanced to my side to see Silvia's stunned expression. Dominique smirked, as his eyes glinted in amusement. Meanwhile, Yulis was still lying on the floor — face first.

It was an illusion, just as I thought.

Slowly, I turned my gaze to the person in the hallway. The illusion of Hanz and Yulis in front of me already disappeared.

"I don't fall for the same trick twice, your highness." I expressed with a subtle smile.

I didn't know if the illusion of Yulis was part of his plan. After all, it took me a while to realize the circumstance I was in.

If Hanz just attacked me in that illusion, there would be repercussions in reality. So, I wondered why he used Yulis to stop him.

"I like her." Suddenly, Dominique snapped his fingers as a grin turned up on his lips.

I ignored him. Instead, I fearlessly stared back at Hanz.

If that scar and that eye patch were caused by Sam, good for him. He should be thankful he's still alive.

"Sly little wench." Hanz sneered, seeing the subtle smirk plastered on my lips.

"Do you want to test how many lives you have, my dear sister-in-law?"

Slowly, I reached for my neck. Holding lakresha vigilantly just in case he would suddenly attack me. These people wouldn't stop him, would they? I couldn't rely on any of them.

Hanz licked his lips as his fangs let itself known. He stretched his neck from in a circular motion, producing loud cracking noises.

I glanced at his feet, sensing the pressure on his foot. He would surely attack me.

"La..." I trailed off before I could call for lakresha as a voice suspended the tension in the air.

"Hanz." A low and level voice of a man suddenly echoed across the entire dining hall.

It was neither Dominique nor Yulis. I glanced at the other princes, but they were staring in another direction.

Instinctively, my gaze followed the direction where they were looking at. From the other entrance of the dining hall, a figure approached.

His every step resonated across the hall; until he slinked out of the shadows. As soon as he stepped his foot on the dining hall, everyone beckoned a slight bow.

Shining ebony hair...

That man... I've seen him somewhere. I furrowed my brows, recalling when and where I've seen him.

"What do you think you're doing?" The newcomer asked.

Just then, the familiarity of his voice struck my realization. It was him — the person who held a funeral for me as a welcome last night.

It was too dark last night. Hence, I could only see what he really looked like clearly now.

Based on their reaction, it must be him, the king. I thought he could be a prince because of his simple attire, but his aura felt different. It felt more intimidating and authoritative.

Moments later, his deep crimson eyes caught my gaze. I flinched slightly, gritting my teeth behind my lips.

"Brother, I mean, your Majesty." Hanz clicked his tongue in disinterest. "I just want to greet my new sister."

'Greet me? By trying to kill me?' A faint ridiculing scoff slipped past my lips.

"Is that so?" His Majesty, the king, nodded in understanding. He then glanced at the broken table.

"Yul, wake up."

Yulis slightly moved upon hearing the order. Yulis dragged himself to sit, looking around in confusion.

So, he just fell asleep?

"Ahh... Dom. I was waiting for you to stab a knife in my nape. I fell asleep while waiting for it." Yulis yawned as he gazed at Dominique.

There were sauces on his face, wiping it with his sleeve. Yulis, he was also quite a character, huh?

Dominique sported a smug grin. He's much calmer now.

"Why would I do that, brother? I'm not as heartless as all of you!" Dominique magnanimously exclaimed.

"I will escort Lilou to her chambers." Silvia spoke, aiming her words towards the king.

"Silvia. Are you trying to monopolize my little doll? I'll do it." Dominique raised his hand slightly, volunteering on escorting me back.

"Dom." Silvia's eyes glinted as her fangs slowly grew. "You won't touch her."

"Hah, Silvia. You're showing your fangs now too? How interesting!" The corner of Dominique's lips curled into a sly smirk, showing his little canine tooth.

I didn't have a good feeling about this.

"I... I'll..." go alone. But my words failed to roll out of my throat.

"Don't bother." The king uttered. His eyes fixed on me as he slowly raised his hand.

"Come here, Lilou."

No! Over my dead body! I wouldn't...

Despite my clear objection internally, my feet moved against my will. I strode towards him, taking his hand.

'No... what am I doing?' I asked myself, dumbfounded by my actions just now.

"Lilou..." Silvia called out under her breath, similarly baffled, just as I am.

Not just Silvia. But Yulis also frowned. Dominique only narrowed his eyes and kept his silence. While Hanz just scoffed — as if he was the only one who wasn't surprised.

"Let's walk in the garden, Lilou." The king muttered as he gazed at me calmly.

No!

"Yes." I held my breath upon hearing my answer.

For a moment, we stared at each other. Our eyes reflecting each other.

My mind buzzed upon seeing myself smiling at him. He smirked as he patted my head lightly.

"Good girl."

"Stefan!" Silvia yelled abruptly. "You...! What did you do to her?"

"Hahaha!" Hanz laughed out loud before the king, Stefan, could answer. "Ahhh... it worked. I thought since the dead got herself involved, my sacrifices are for naught."

What was he saying?

"Silvia, I think you need rest." Stefan advised in the same calm tone. Silvia's complexion was as white as the clouds.

"Shall we?" He then turned to me with a slight smirk.

No!

"Yes, my king."

No, no, no no! Let this be a dream! Despite my protest inside my head, I followed his lead, and we walked away.

Chapter 153 - Way To Survive The Hellhole

We waltz through the hallway in silence. I glanced at his side, gritting my teeth in secret.

What did he do to me to obey him? No matter how I tried to scream internally, I felt helpless. My hand in his grip wouldn't bulge, no matter how I want to pull it away.

"This is ridiculous," I muttered through my gritted teeth.

I shot him a glare, scoffing in ridicule. It was truly ridiculous.

Stefan glanced at me indifferently. "Is it?"

"Let me go," I demanded, shifting my gaze to his hand that was holding mine.

I thought I already had enough for today. The thought of Hanz being the worst encounter for today proved me wrong.

This King, Stefan's appearance, was the worst. I was obeying him against my will. Was this what sired means?

To smile at someone without my knowledge, to speak the opposite I wanted to say and to act against your will. It was... terrifying.

"Ohh... so that's how it is." Stefan nodded in understanding.

What was he saying?

"Stop —" My breath hitched as he dragged me with him. Being pushed at this point, I had no other choice.

"Lakre —"

Unfortunately, Stefan guessed my plans. Before I could call for lakresha, he pulled me firmly.

In a split second, I winced as my back crashed against the wall with my wrist pinned above my head.

"I thought you're a little smarter." He smirked as his eyes as bright as bright rubies glinted. "Why are you so eager to die?"

Unlike his calm mien moments ago, his mood instantly switched. His gaze was so sharp it felt like it was piercing into my soul.

I gulped, not giving away from his intimidating gaze. I'm not eager to die, but I'm eager to survive.

"Using lakresha takes a lot of life force. Do you believe you have many lives to spare?" He cocked his head to the side, scoffing in mockery.

"How ungrateful of you. This is the third time I saved you and yet, you're glaring at me. Lara really tried to undo the effects, huh?"

Lara? Saved me? What was he saying?

"You abducted me, Your Majesty," I stressed, as I panted for air.

Stefan tightened his grip on my wrist as his smirk grew broader. "I planned to talk to you in the garden to... reminiscence. Alas, you'll wield your weapon at your king? Did you think you can slay me with the meager power you have?"

I clenched my teeth as my heart hammered against my ribcage. Every breath I took suffocated me.

More than that, more than this uncomfortable position, I hated myself. I'm truly naive to think I could survive by just trying to make a false front. I realized it too late.

That was not how I would survive this hellhole.

I could fight them with words, but that's all I could do. It was clear that before I could defend myself, my head would roll immediately.

Having Silvia, whose intention was unclear on my side, was not enough.

Each and every one of them had their own motives. They might be easy to read at first, but the more I thought about it, they all had hidden faces beneath their exterior.

Yulis, Hanz, Silvia, Dominique, Stefan, Sam... were all different individuals. However, they also share similar tendencies.

They show what they wanted you to see. If I wanted to survive, I had to think and act just like them.

Soon, my stiffed shoulders eased as my eyes drooped. I stabilized my breathing, watching as my soul slowly put on a mask.

If that's what they want... so be it. I'll have my own multiple faces and truths. If I couldn't fight them by sheer force, I had to have my other means.

"I know you're quick to realize it and adapt," Stefan mused, nodding as he slowly let me go. He then stepped back, smiling, as he watched me in amusement.

'Are you so happy to see me suffer?' I wondered internally, keeping my emotions in check.

"Mister Fabian told me the same," I replied, breathing out through the gape of my lips.

I raised my hand to him, staring at him straight in the eye. I'd do it on my own accord before he could command me, and I'd feel the guilt of acting against my will.

I won't let them have it their way.

"Will you take me to a stroll, your Majesty?"

"Do you hate the feeling of being sired with me that much?" Stefan unhurriedly took my hand.

"That hurts, though."

Disgusting.

"Do you prefer it when I act because you ordered me to?" I asked, tilting my head to the side.

"Of course, not. I don't like forcing people," He humored, escorting me towards the garden.

Silly, I thought. Sam also said the same thing to me back then. But the feeling was different.

My eyes glinted as I looked ahead, hearing our footsteps across the silent hallway.

'I'll survive in here and have the last laugh. This hell that tormented Sam and me... I'll burn it to the ground.'

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Meanwhile, in the Crawford Mansion training grounds.

"My lord, Lord Noah is here to see you," Fabian announced solemnly, gazing at Samael, who had been standing in the middle of the training grounds while staring at the starless night sky.

It was the training ground Lilou had spent all day on training.

"Greetings, your Grace." Noah greeted as he stepped forth. But there's still no response from Samael.

"We found your Catharsis being sold in the black market, so I brought it with me. I also heard what happened to Lady Lilou."

Noah kindly spoke, gesturing his knight to hand over a small box containing Samael's divine weapon. However, the latter didn't even flinch.

The wind whistled, sweeping the dust, making the leaves dance in constant harmony. Noah's eyes softened as he gazed at Samael's back.

"Your Grace, shouldn't you go to the Capital now that Catharsis is back in your hands? Lady Lilou..." Noah wanted to console him with his subtle words.

But Samael intervened.

"Noah," Samael called out softly as he pivoted on his heel and faced him. "You're rich, right? How many residences does the House of Remington own in the Capital?"

"Eight, your grace," Noah replied despite his bafflement.

Samael nodded in understanding, rubbing his chin before he spoke, "Give them to me."

"Pardon?"

"I need a place to stay in the Capital," Samael explained in a knowing tone. "I'm not staying in that damn palace."

"I don't have a problem handing the ownership of the eight residences the House of Remington owns in the Capital as we're indebted to you. However, may I know the reason why do you need all of them?" Noah inquired, as he furrowed his brows in bewilderment.

"Why?" Samael pondered as he rubbed his chin. "So I can burn them instead of burning the palace?"

"..."

"Anyway, dig up Klaus and tell Cameron to protect that damn child with his life. My bride has taken a liking to it." Samael waved his hand nonchalantly, walking towards Noah as the corner of his lips curled into a smirk when he brushed past Noah.

Noah shuddered upon sensing the aura exuding from Samael. "Are you planning to overthrow the king, your grace?"

"There will be a truce, Lord Remington," Samael uttered as he cocked his head back in Noah's direction. "Even though my feelings for my bride were remnants of Sam, I need to see why I like her in the first place."

Samael uttered, throwing his hands on the back of his head as he whistled while walking away.

"He... I can't believe he really went back to his old ways," Noah murmured in disbelief as Samael's aura felt different from the last time he was in Whistlebird.

Chapter 154 - I Am His Human

I always wished for Sam's arrival. But I'm glad he has yet to arrive.

Knowing how being sired to someone and experiencing it felt very different. It was a hundred times more dreading to act according to someone's will.

"Don't stray away from me. The flowers here, although beautiful, they are deadly." Stefan gazed at me as we arrived in the garden of Avolire Palace.

I pursed my lips, gazing back at him. It was amazing how fast his mood switched.

"Yes, Your Majesty," I said, withdrawing my hand from him as he loosened his grip.

The last thing I wanted was to feel was the superiority of his words on me. I'd rather balance my compliance and disobedience; giving what he wanted and keeping the last shred of what was mine.

I had to be careful of what and what not to give. Hence, I had to put on a lot of masks to survive in this place and be practical.

"Aren't you going to ask me anything?" He asked, cocking his head at me.

Why would I if I already knew about his intentions?

"How dare I? Your Majesty?" I replied coldly, staring at the red rose standing out as the moon shone upon it.

"What's this? Treating me so coldly?" Stefan walked in front of me, tilting and lowering his head to meet my gaze. "I didn't know you'd be this obedient."

"Pfft—!" I bit my lower lip, covering my lips with the back of my hand. Suppressing my ridiculing laughter from slipping past my lips.

Just as I thought. These people are ridiculously comical in their own way. Did he forget he sired me? He just pinned me against the wall to obey his orders moments ago.

How was he surprised?

"Ahh... that's better." Stefan grinned as he pointed at me, nodding approvingly at my reaction.

"Your Majesty, don't you want me to obey you?" I asked, tilting my head to the side.

"Hmmm. Depends." He hummed, rubbing his chin. "There's no thrill if you just obey me all the time. I like you because you're interesting, assertive, and smart."

"So, His Majesty likes someone who speaks their opinions boldly?" I raised a brow, smirking as I watched him take a few steps back.

"I like it like the second time," He replied, baffling me.

Stefan slowly turned around, trudging away. He stopped when there was a good distance between us and then he turned around to face me.

Silence.

The wind whispered in my ear as my hair flowed along with it. Under the soft moonlight, his ebony hair stood out. Half of his upper face hid under the silhouette of his hair, highlighting the smirk plastered on his lips.

My heart thumped loudly against my chest, sounding overly loud in my ears. I breathed in and out heavily as memories rushed inside me, filling in the missing part of my memory.

That night three months ago... that man... was him.

"Hah..." I scoffed in disbelief as I shuddered uncontrollably. "It's you..."

I clasped my skirt tightly. My eyes glinting with killing intent as my breath hitched.

I could remember everything. From the time I went to the maze garden in the Crawford's residence, searching for Sam. To the time I met this man and succumbed to the illusion he was Sam.

My breathing grew ragged, recalling and feeling everything vividly. I raised my hand to cover my lips with my palm, feeling sick to the point I wanted to throw up.

Now that I thought about it, Hanz's abilities felt similar to that night three months ago. That was the reason I recognized it was an illusion earlier.

"Oh, sweetheart. Why do you look so shocked? Didn't we enjoy ourselves?" Stefan humored, marching slowly towards me.

I wanted to take a step back, but my feet wouldn't move. Was this what he wanted to reminisce about?

This sick bastard!

"It's still a shame that demon-like human Fabian interrupted us." He lifted his hand, reaching for the tip of my hair, and twirled it around his finger as he locked his gaze with me.

"You're too naugh... ty"

"Don't touch me!" I exclaimed through my gritted teeth, slapping his hand away from me. "Don't..." I glared daggers at him as I ground my teeth, catching my hand that slapped his.

No wonder I had this strong urge not to go to the Capital yet. I remembered everything; even Lara's real intention. She was trying to undo the despicable thing Stefan had cast upon me.

But since Lara was already dead and only part of her lived in lakresha, her progress of healing was slow. I would've fallen deeper in this wicked ordeal and lose the entirety of my will if not for Lara's help.

'Still, it's not enough, Lara. His words still have power over me.'

"Is this what they call shame?" Stefan chuckled, peering at me in awe. His eyes glinting in amusement as the corner of his lips stretched broader.

"It's disgust." I blurted out, due to overwhelming disdain. "But it is partially my fault to get tricked by you. I must have tainted you, Your Majesty."

I took a step back, turning my back on him. Staying with him for another second felt so suffocating. This was too much for me to handle for a day. I needed some time alone.

"A mere human squeezing herself in this world..." I halted upon hearing Stefan's words behind me. "... you baffled me, sweetheart. Do you even have any idea the real face of the man you've been dying to marry?"

I clenched on my skirt as my jaw tightened. It was funny; I thought. Those words uttered by him had left my lips long ago as well.

I took a deep breath, breathing out through my gaped mouth. He could be more creative if his intention was to kill my spirit.

"A mere human?" I scoffed, barely setting aside the emotions overwhelming my heart.

Slowly, I turned around to face him. I smirked upon meeting his gaze.

"Your Majesty, I am not just a human," I stressed, not shying away from his gaze. "I am His human." I asserted before I turned around and walked away.

So get lost.

Chapter 155 - This Is Nothing

The walls in my chambers witnessed how I broke down that night. I cried my heart out as I soaked the pillow with tears.

It angered me to the core that vampires were far too superior to humans. They were gifted with abilities and strength, only to use it for their personal interest, while humans had to succumb to fear before them.

Meeting Stefan shredded my heart, my beliefs, and my hopes into many pieces. There's no more faith to put in this kingdom reigned by him.

He had blown away the little fire I had for this kingdom's growth. The little faith and hope that someday this kingdom would care for its subject — regardless of their race — vanished, just like that.

"This is the 18th time you stepped on my foot." I snapped back to the current lapse upon hearing Yulis' toneless complaint. "Stop spacing out."

"Oh." I bit my lower lip out of habit, taking foot my away from his feet. "Sorry."

"We'll take a short break for. You don't look good." He said, letting me go as he took three steps away.

I watched Yulis gestured and ordered Mildred to bring us tea and snacks. It surprised me a little — but not to the extent of disbelief — when he came in here, informing me he was the instructor Silvia sent for the dance lessons.

"What are you doing?" Yulis arched his brow, sitting on the chair around the round table near the window.

He crossed his arm, resting his leg over the other as he cocked his head towards the seat across from him. I nodded and strode towards the seat, perching in silence.

"I heard you're attending the debut of the eldest daughter of the Thornhart," Yulis uttered, breaking the silence which made me gazed at him.

His expression and tone remained indifferent, but I didn't expect him to start a conversation with me. What did he want?

"Sivi gave me an invitation," I answered calmly, easing my tensed shoulders as I rested my fist on my lap.

"Don't go there." He advised, so classic of him.

"Why not?" I replied with disinterest. "If you don't want me to attend, why did you come here to teach me how to dance?"

My eyelashes fluttered ever so slowly. Keeping myself calm despite the pressuring gaze of his deep azure eyes.

Yulis tilted his head to the side, arching his brow before he spoke in a knowing tone. "You're tossing yourself in a banquet full of vampires."

"Pfft—" A snort immediately escaped from me. "Is it any different from my current situation, your highness?"

Yulis frowned as his eyes dropped. He didn't reply immediately as he stared at me in silence.

"I appreciate your concern, your highness. I won't embarrass her royal highness if that's your concern," I said, upon receiving no response from him.

"That's not it. I'm just saying anything can happen in a banquet as large as that one. We're more restrained compared to those greedy nobles." He explained calmly.

"Even so, I can still lose my life within the palace walls if I didn't act accordingly." I argued, expressing my thoughts calmly but not warmly.

Yulis frowned even more as he stared at me straight in the eye. "It's still safer here."

"Safer? Are you saying if I press a nerve... or cut myself to bleed right now, I'd still be safe?"

Silence dawn upon us once again until Mildred came back with the tea and snacks.

"I brought the tea and snacks for his highness and the lady," Mildred announced politely, before she started serving the tea.

As the servants helped set up the table, Yulis and I stared at each other. When the servants were done, they stepped away, standing in the corner without saying a single word.

"I'm aware that your highness dislikes me," I muttered, stretching my arm as I picked up the cup of tea. "But I'm a little confused that what you said just now contradicts the first words you told me yesterday."

My eyes sharpened as I held his gaze before I took a sip. I didn't have a death wish, but it was better to speak my mind since he didn't he had an interest in murdering me right now.

Yulis extended his arm, picking up the teacup to his lips. "Why?" He asked in a low tone instead of giving me an answer.

"I'm fairly lacking in many areas, your highness. So, forgive me if I don't understand your vague question," I expressed as I placed the teacup back on the saucer.

"I'm asking you, why are you still here? Is being tormented every time you breathe in this place better than dying?"

My breath hitched upon his question, but my exterior remained the same. I pursed my lips and sighed faintly.

"Well, of course," I replied calmly, moving my gaze towards the window.

Breathing in this place was a constant reminder of what I promised myself last night. If I'm dead, I wouldn't do anything, would I?

I kept my thoughts to myself as I set my eyes back to him. The corner of my lips curled into a subtle smile.

"I've gone through worse, your highness. Back when I was living the life of a peasant, I used to stare at the sky with my mouth open, hoping that it would rain so I can drink. The thought of hugging myself wearing nothing but rags during winter, eating rotten foods to fill my stomach, and..." I paused as I gulped down.

Yulis was listening in silence. He might not relate to me, nor would I get a shred of his sympathy from him, but he had to understand. I've been through worse.

"... and sleeping beside the rotting corpse of my father because I couldn't bury him. I lived through it, your highness. So, thank you for your concern, but this is nothing compared to that."

My grip on my skirt tightened before it loosened, eventually. My shoulder also eased as I exhaled deeply.

At one point in my life, I had gone through all that. If not for the people in the field, hearing about the passing of my father, he wouldn't get buried properly.

"I... see." He muttered under his breath, nodding as he picked up the teacup, took little sips, then put it back on the saucer. "That sounds tragic."

"It's all in the past now, your highness." I smiled subtly. "Now, I get to eat to my heart's content, share a tea with your highness, and experience more life can offer."

"No wonder you eat well," Yulis commented as he gazed at me intensely.

When I felt awkward at his long stares, I raised my brows. "Your highness?"

Yulis fluttered his eyelashes ever so slowly and asked tonelessly, "Do you want me to give you Hanz's head to make you feel better?"

"Pardon?"

Chapter 156 - Gaining An Ally Is Better Than None

"Pardon?"

"Hanz. Do you want his head?" Yulis inquired sincerely.

My mind buzzed momentarily as the corner of my eyes twitched. Please tell me I misheard him?

"Ah, I think I misheard you, your highness," I replied, along with an awkward chuckle.

"You didn't. I said what I said. I'll give you his head or his other eye if that will make you feel better," Yulis affirmed, nodding at me encouragingly as he looked at me straight in the eye.

Wait.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, propping my elbow on the armrest as a sudden headache struck me. A sigh slipped past my lips as I grasped what he meant by that.

Was he proposing this because he felt bad for judging me unfairly? He would kill his brother as an apology?

"If you do that, wouldn't you be in a predicament?" I queried in distress, casting him a look.

"Does that matter?" He tilted his head to the side, furrowing his brows innocently.

It was a tempting offer, honestly. However, I didn't want to get indebted to him or cause him trouble. And even if I agree, my problem remained the same; I'm still sired to Stefan.

Fighting amongst themselves was an entirely different case. But if Yulis murdered Hanz because of me, what punishment would I have to bear?

"Your Highness." I inhaled sharply and released it from my mouth. "I appreciate your offer. But there's no need for that, really."

"Are you sure? This is once in a lifetime offer." He frowned, resting his jaw on his knuckles. "I won't apologize for what I said before if that's what you want from me instead."

A vein on my temple protruded under my skin upon hearing his last remarks. It was easier for him to act in violence than apologize. Really... Sivi should've told me I had to throw rational reasoning out of the window as well.

"Yes. You don't have to do that." I replied, sporting a forced smile.

"Well, if you say so." Yulis shrugged as he sprawled his arms to reach for the teacup. "But then again, Hanz will surely lure you into one of his illusions. I can't protect you if I'm not around."

Yulis elegantly sipped tea in silence. His demeanor was just as proper as Fabian's. But that wasn't the reason I was staring at him. What he said just now piqued my curiosity.

"Your highness," I called out when he placed the teacup back on the saucer.

He arched his brow, slowly raising his eyes to me as he leaned back. "Hmm?"

"About what you said, are you saying that illusion of you last night is not part of Hanz's plans?" I asked, raising both my brows as I anticipated his reply.

"Yes. Why would he stop himself if he sincerely wants you dead? That doesn't make sense." He answered, tilting his head, sporting a genuine wonder. "If you're wondering how I entered the illusion, I did what Hanz' did. I entered your subconscious mind."

Do you mean you invaded my subconscious mind?

"Hanz can still harm you, even if it's just an illusion if I didn't stop him," Yulis added in the same indifferent tone.

"But, you weren't you sleeping that time?"

"I am." Yulis raised his forefinger, tapping his temple as he clicked his tongue. "But I'm subconsciously awake."

I kept quiet momentarily. That's how it happened; the same as that night three months ago.

"What will happen if I died in that illusion?" I perked up and blurted out. I pursed my lips in a thin line as I raised my hand to cover my lips.

"You'll be trapped in it, obviously." Yulis didn't mind answering my question, fortunately. "And if you're trapped in it, you'll eventually wither away in reality. It's a slow, painful death."

Yulis added indifferently. It was as if such a thing didn't terrify him.

In other words, if I died in that illusion, it would be my reality without knowing I was asleep all along. I would eventually die as my body deteriorates without proper care.

"Then..." I raised my gaze once again and set it on him. "What will happen to Hanz if I fight back?"

"You mean if you fight back and defeated him?" Yulis raised a brow, gazing at me with mockery in his eyes. He didn't have to say what he was thinking, as it was written all over his face.

"If you defeat him, it will affect him a little. Because putting up an illusion and fighting in it are two different cases. To put it simply, it's exhausting." He lectured in a knowing tone, waving his forefinger at his side.

"Ohh..." My lips formed in a circular shape as I nodded in understanding.

"Won't you going to ask why Hanz wants you dead?" He asked, as if he had been waiting for me to ask about it all along.

"He already said it; tit for tat," I answered, as I furrowed my brows. "That means Sam did some... thing. Come to think of it, how did Sam do it?" We've been in Cunningham for the past three months.

"You only realized that now?" Yulis let out a faint scoff. "How can you not appreciate the abilities of your groom?"

"..."

"I don't know if you already know this, but Hell holds the purest blood among us. In other words, he is that strong and precious. That's why it's an insult that he wants a human as his bride."

"Huh?"

"I mean, even if he's in Cunningham, if he wants to pull someone inferior like Hanz into an illusion, Hell can do it from that distance. So, sometime three months ago, Hanz pluck out his own eyes and blindly caused a ruckus."

Yulis explained, adding his comments in between. The side of his lips curled in amusement, as if talking about something commendable.

"Hanz... did it?"

"He did and did not. Hell's illusions are real hell. Hanz plucked out his eye, probably as a ticket to leave the illusion." Yulis shrugged, sounding unsure of the actual cause. "Anyway, tea time is over."

Yulis snapped, brushing his lap with his palm before he stood up.

"Ah." I raised my head, blinking as I gathered my thoughts. "Alright."

Yulis walked to my side, offering his hand for me to grasp. I raised my brows in confusion, darting my eyes from his hand to his eyes.

"Let's start over again, sister," He said, smirking at me. "I won't apologize to you, but I have to admit I misjudged you. Although we don't trust each other, I'm certain we're on the same both."

I stared at him straight in the eye. "You have a point, your highness," I said as I placed my hand on his.

"Until our interest conflicts, let's be ally for now," He uttered as he escorted me in the middle of the room.

"Until then." I performed a curtsy and added as I raise my head, "I'll trust you."

Chapter 157 - You Look Ugly As Ever

Days had passed in a blur, and it was the day of the banquet. I barely recalled what I did for the past days as they were the same; dance practices with Yul, attending classes for palace etiquette, dinner with my in-laws, and stare at the ceiling until I fall asleep.

I didn't meet Stefan again since that night, making my adjustments faster. Meeting him just so he could ridicule me was the least I wanted right now.

"My lady, her royal highness is here," Mildred announced from behind me, bowing politely.

I glanced up, setting my gaze on her reflection from the full-body vanity mirror in front of me.

"Send her in," I whispered, smiling faintly as I shifted my gaze back to my reflection.

"Well, my, sister." Silvia's voice caressed my ears, along with the soft clip-clop of her heels. "Are you trying to provoke everyone by putting your hair up, highlighting your neck?"

A soft chuckle slipped past my lips as I turned around. "Greetings, your royal highness," I greeted, tilting my head down as I performed a curtsy.

"Your aura drastically changed since our last tea time." Silvia giggled as she fanned herself, gazing at me from head to toe.

The last time I saw Sivi was my first dinner with the royal family. She didn't visit me or joined dinner after that, so I had spent most of the time with Yul since the other royalties didn't pay me attention.

Not that I care, really. It was better to receive less attention while I adjust myself in this suffocating environment.

"I'll take that as a compliment, your royal highness," I replied, linking my hands before me.

"My, I like the change," Sivi chuckled as she covered her lips with her hand fan. "Then, shall we head out? Yul is waiting outside the carriage."

"Yul?" I raised my brows, surprised to hear Yul would come along. I remembered him saying banquets never interest him.

Sivi let another wave of soft chuckles as she stared at me over her hand fan. "Well, it seems my little brother is finally maturing, my sister."

Maturing? I doubt. I commented internally as we headed out of Avolire Palace. When we reach the carriage, Yul was standing before it, sporting an annoyed look.

He didn't have to prove his unwillingness so obvious.

"You look gorgeous as ever, Silvia," Yul complimented, as he offered his hand for Sivi to grasp.

Sivi smiled as she gracefully took his hand as a support for her to enter the carriage. "It's my first time seeing you look so fine, Yul."

Yul only bowed slightly before he turned to face me. His disdain immediately flickered across his eyes as our gaze met.

"And you," Yulis muttered, scrutinizing me from head to toe with the usual ridicule in his eyes. "You look the same."

'You look as ugly as ever,' was the real meaning behind his words.

The corner of my lips twitched. Not that I was expecting a compliment from him.

"Thank you," I remarked sarcastically, sporting a fake smile.

I held my skirt up as I didn't expect him to offer help, but he suddenly laid his hand out. I arched my brow, raising my gaze at him, narrowing my eyes suspiciously.

"Even if you're like a walking lump of meat, you're still a lady. Her royal highness is waiting," Yul remarked sarcastically, scoffing faintly as he rolled his eyes.

He didn't have to force himself to do it if he didn't want to. But regardless of his reluctance, these were the small opportunities to get back at him.

"You're right," I replied as my lips turned up into a smug grin. I put all my weight on my hand, gripping him, hoping to break his fingers.

"Thank you, your highness," I expressed once I perched safely inside the carriage and turned my attention to him.

"You hold on to me as if your life depends on it," Yul commented, casting me a glare as he got in.

"I'm just afraid of making a mistake and cause trouble for her royal highness."

"So, you don't mind being of trouble to me?" Yul pursed his lips as it stretched broader, but it didn't reach his ear. He looked so annoyed, but we always bickered for the past four days and I'm still alive. So, I'm used to it.

"Do you prefer me troubling her royal highness instead?" I asked, feigning innocence as the carriage set off.

"Really, I should've cut that tongue..." Yul trailed off upon hearing Sivi's waves of chuckles. We instinctively paused as we shifted our attention to her.

"Pfft—!" Sivi was covering her lips with the back of her hand, letting out muffled chuckles. "I didn't know you'd grow this close in a brief span of time."

She pointed out in between her chuckles. If only Sivi knew we'd been stepping on each other's feet during our dance practices.

"Don't jest, Silvia." Yul frowned as he let out a sigh. "I will never get close to this walking lump of meat."

"That's right, Sivi. Just the thought of it makes all the hair on my body raise!" I nodded with a smile, feeling the intense glare coming from Yul.

"Hahaha!" Sivi laughed louder as she clapped her hands, filling the carriage with her harmonious peals of laughter.

I watched her, and my tensed shoulders eased. I glanced at Yul and caught him glancing back.

"Sivi, is there's something wrong?" I asked when her waves of laughter subsided. Although I didn't trust them fully, I still see them as the only ally on my side at the moment.

Sivi froze upon my question, but she didn't lose her composure as she cleared her throat and slowly faced me.

"I'm just glad to see that you and Yul are getting along really well." She reached for my hand, squeezing it lightly as she nodded to reassure me. But I felt otherwise.

"Sivi..."

"Silvia, what happened during your absence?" Yul inquired solemnly, not buying her weak reassurance.

Sivi let out a faint sigh, gazing down as her eyes glistened with bitterness.

"It's nothing. I just met someone I haven't seen in a long time." Her tone was soft, yet full of bitterness and regret; as if that person she was talking about brought neither pain nor joy, but longing.

"Who the —"

"Sivi, that's alright!" I exclaimed, cutting off Yul's obvious threat as I placed my other hand on hers. "Let's have fun at the banquet and forget about it; we're partners, aren't we?"

I wouldn't understand Sivi's longing if I didn't yearn for Sam. But I completely understood her as I was in the same situation.

Sivi raised her gaze at me as they softened. The corner of her lips curled up into a subtle smile as she nodded in agreement.

"Yes, let's do that," Sivi whispered as she raised her other hand, patting my head gently before she added, "You make me want to snatch you away for myself."

Chapter 158 - Who Will Decorate The Wall?

The banquet hosted by the Thornhart's had exceeded my expectation. It was more grandiose, decent, and bustling than I thought. Unlike how I imagined it as a slaughterhouse with a hanging carcass of humans around.

"Greetings to her royal highness." A noble lady performed a curtsy in front of Sivi. "The house of Thornhart is honored to have you in our humbled banquet."

Humbled banquet? Everything sparkled in my eyes. How was this humble? I pursed my lips as I stood behind Sivi and distanced myself a little. She had attracted a lot of attention.

"Please, rise." Sivi gestured as she sported a kind smile. Her tone and movements exuded elegance. It was not hard to notice.

"The House of Thornhart had always supported the royal family..."

Sivi's voice faded in the indistinct chattering spreading in the air as I looked around. Sivi was not the only one who attracted the attention of noblemen and women, but Yul as well.

Yul told us he would get some drinks for us, but now he was trapped around noble ladies. It was a surprise he hadn't snapped and made a fuss. Instead, he was politely smiling as he conversed with the ladies.

'Two-faced,' I commented as I giggled internally upon meeting Yul's glare before I averted my gaze.

I held my wrist, biting my inner lip as I gazed down. Being in this banquet of vampires accentuated my disposition as someone who's not part of the high society or their world.

What did I expect before coming here? Be accepted and mingle with noble vampires? No. I expected this much, and I'm not even sad about it.

I'm just bothered that ever since we arrived here, I felt like I'm being watched. Hence, I was being careful and had been trying to distance myself from those two.

"Lilou," I snapped back to the current lapse upon hearing Sivi. "Come here, dear."

Sivi held her hand towards me as I sported a forced smile and nodded. I trudged towards her and stood beside her.

"Greetings, Countess Thornhart." I curtsied, applying all the lessons I learned back in the palace.

If Sivi didn't send me a proper instructor to learn the palace etiquette, I would have done what Fabian taught me. I didn't want to judge Fabian's lessons, but I believed the palace was slightly more meticulous in this area.

"I heard a lot about the future duchess. It's a pleasure to finally meet the lady who captivated the heart of the Duke of Grimsbanne," Countess Thornhart remarked, smiling, while discreetly studying me.

"Lady Lilou is a precious sister to me. I hope you will be more accepting of her in the future." Sivi chuckled as she linked arms with me, startling me with her action.

Sivi, I don't actually plan to be accepted, were the worlds tempting to escape my mouth, but I bit my tongue to stop myself. I only sported a smile and kept my thoughts to myself.

"Fufu! I see your royal highness had grown fond of Lady Lilou."

"The Avolire palace had more colors and life when Lilou came. Even the aloof ninth prince favored her~!" Sivi exclaimed proudly, chuckling while covering her lips with the back of her hand.

Sivi's claims attracted the attention of nobles around us. I bit my lower lips, discreetly tugging Sivi's arms to stop her. She's purposely doing it.

"Oh, my! No wonder the ninth prince who never attended any banquet even once is here! I must thank Lady Lilou, then," Countess Thornhart humored as she laughed along with Sivi.

I never thought Yul's attendance was more than just rare. No wonder the noble ladies fawned around him with such enthusiasm.

"Oh, my, sister!" Suddenly, a familiar arrogant voice of a woman came from our side. "I didn't know you'd be attending as well. I didn't believe the rumors about her royal highness attending as someone's partner."

I turned my head in the voice's direction and saw her prancing her way towards us, fanning herself elegantly. Cassara.

"Greetings to her royal highness." Countess Thornhart greeted as she performed a curtsy. I instinctively did as well.

"My, sister. It's good to see you," Sivi said with a smile. "You're as beautiful as ever!"

Cassara smirked, nodding approvingly before shifting her sharp gaze at me. "I see you had slowly adjusted to the Capital."

(How dare you act like one of us?) were the direct translation that registered in my head from her remarks.

"It's all thanks to her royal highness's guidance. Although I'm still lacking and inexperienced, I will do my best not to disappoint her," I replied politely, bowing my head as there was no reason to argue with her.

I'd rather let her insult me now and leave me alone immediately. It was already hard to put a front before these many people. Did she think I'm enjoying this?

"Oh?" Cassara arched her brow as she lifted her chin up. "Is that so?"

That was quick for her to concede. I didn't expect that.

"Pfft—!" I glanced at Sivi, who let out a restrained chuckle, covering her sly smirk with the back of her hand. "Sister, you don't have to feel disheartened. I know Lilou will understand that you are busy so you didn't have spare time to spend time with her."

"I am, indeed, preoccupied because of the recent events," Cassara replied calmly with a nod. "Speaking of which, can I have a moment with you, sister? And Countess?"

I furrowed my brows as I scrutinized Cassara. I thought she'd lose her cool and act arrogant after Sivi's mild provocation, but she didn't.

Sivi narrowed her eyes as she exchanged eye contact with Cassara, and then nodded.

"Alright," Sivi agreed and cast me a look. "I will leave for a moment. Will you be alright with Yul?"

"Yes, your royal highness. You don't have to worry about me," I replied politely, as it seemed it was something important.

Sivi only gave me a warm smile before they walked away. Now that Yul and Sivi weren't here, the sense of dread I'd been stomping down crept up to my heart. I'm all alone.

I discreetly walked back and stood near the wall, keeping my chin up. I looked around, and Yul was nowhere to be found. I'm fine being alone and not gathering attention, but I felt like the more I try, the feeling of being watched gets stronger.

"This banquet is more enervating than I thought," I murmured under my breath, sighing, as I just wanted to get home.

"Sister, what are you doing here all alone?" Suddenly, Dom's playful voice reached my ears before I sensed his figure beside me.

I slowly raised my head and faced him. "I just thought that someone should be left to decorate the wall."

"Haha! If you say it like that, it's quite upsetting to hear." Dom chuckled, his hand carrying a glass of red wine. Was it really red wine, though?

I only offered him a smile to end a conversation with him. I never had many interactions with Dominique in comparison with Yul. So, his presence brought discomfort to me.

"Are you waiting for Yul?" He asked.

"No, your highness."

"Is that so?" Dom nodded in understanding. "How about I accompany you? You can't be alone here, you know the reason."

I wanted to refuse his offer, but he had a point. "If it's not a bother, thank you, your highness."

"It's alright. I don't plan on taking home a noble lady tonight," He replied with a nonchalant shrug.

"Anyway, there is an event, the Thornhart prepared for entertainment. Do you want to see it?"

Dom held his glass to his lips, keeping his eyes on me.

"A separate event?" I murmured as I knitted my brows in intrigue.

"You can say it's more like a sport," He said, handing his hand for me to grasp. "You'll know if you come with me."

"You won't lure me out to a quiet place to kill me, right?" I blurted out, covering my lips as soon as I realized it.

"Haha! You have quite the imagination, sister! However, even if I have that intention, I won't just admit it." Dom chuckled mischievously as he shook his head. "Fret not. You might not believe me, but I had no plan such as that. Stefan will torture me for life without killing me," He humored as the corner of his lips stretched into a grin.

I studied him for quite some time before I took his hand. "I will die anyway."

Little did I know, the thing he was talking about was something that would prove me how little my imagination was.

Chapter 159 - Cross The Line

Dominique escorted me to one of the balconies. The gleeful chuckles and cheering from the other side of the balcony turned my stomach. Below the surface where Dominique and I stood were men fighting each other to death.

"Isn't it amusing?" Dominique leaned his arms against the marbled railing as he gazed at the small arena.

"Amusing?" I repeated sarcastically. "It is for you, I guess."

"Of course, it is. They kept coming back on their feet even though, they can barely move."

Dominique mused as he watched two determined humans fight for survival.

I bit my lower lip as hard as I could, wincing every time blood spilled on the ground. Dominique then added nonchalantly, "If one of them just surrendered, they wouldn't have to go through all this, you know."

Surrender? They wouldn't go through all this in the first place if they didn't bring them here.

I took a deep breath, resting my trembling fist on the railing. "If you put yourself in the same shoes, won't you fight back, your highness?" I asked as I gazed at the two fierce warriors battling to death.

"Depends on the opponent. If I know I wouldn't stand a chance, I'd rather enjoy my last drink and wait for my end. Why should I struggle if I know the outcome?" He replied indifferently as he cast me a quick glance. "Human's mind are interesting because you don't think the same, right?"

Silence dawn upon us as I didn't reply immediately. I watched until the match came to an end, with one of them collapsing.

"It's human instinct, your highness," I muttered, watching the victor raised his fist up before pounding his chest to celebrate his victory. "Since humans are born weak, all we can do is try. You can call it foolishness or bravery, but it is what it is."

"Instinct, huh? What a strange way to put it," Dominique replied as he nodded in understanding, before setting his eyes on my side. "Is that why you're putting up with everything? Instinct?"

I slowly faced him, much calmer now than moments ago. "I don't understand what you mean by that, your highness."

"About your marriage, I mean," Dominique uttered, as his eyes glinted with sincerity. "You don't know the type of vampire you want to marry."

"Even if he's the cruelest, it's my decision," I affirmed as I looked away and set them back to the two new contenders entering the small arena.

Dom remained silent as I noticed him turned his attention back to the arena. "Don't misunderstand my intention. You believe Stefan is the bad guy and I'm not interested whose in the right or wrong. What I can tell you is Hell is not who you think he is."

"You may not see him in the same light as I do, but this is a futile attempt to change my mind, your highness." I huffed. "I love him."

"And because you love him, he's the most righteous one in your eyes? Do you even have the slightest idea that the reason this kingdom had fallen in dystopia is because of him?"

I slowly shifted my eyes to his side, a bit taken aback at his remarks. Dominique had almost similar playful traits as Sam, but I only see this stern side of him now.

"What do you mean?" I asked, without looking away from him.

"What I mean is, because of him, a kingdom that put the law above everyone else lost its power when Hell came to age," Dominique explained solemnly as he set his eyes on me. "Rules? They are created so someone can break them, were the words that will come out from Hell's mouth whenever he breaks one or two."

He paused as he turned around, propping his back and elbows against the railing. "Hell is the type of person who enjoys crossing the line. Do you think Hell truly loves you? Are you so certain it is genuine love and not just another rule he wants to break? A line he is tempted to cross?"

My lips parted, but no words came out. I wanted to argue with him, but I couldn't think of words to say.

"I'm telling you this because I don't have those petty prejudices about humans." Dominique cocked his head to me, his eyes glinting as he arched his brow. "Those warriors you pity, can't you see their ardor while they fight? Do you think they're victims?"

I moved my gaze down below. The battle was over, and I fixed my eyes towards the victor. He was grinning as he gazed at a certain balcony. I followed where he was looking at, catching a group of noblemen who raised their glass to him.

"Unlike what you think, humans have a place in this kingdom."

"A place..." I whispered in dismay as if hearing the most ridiculous joke I've ever heard in my life.

"Of course you won't believe that because you came from Grimsbanne. After all, Grimsbanne was like a small kingdom inside this kingdom," Dominique snorted in mockery.

"Impossible," I scoffed as I couldn't trust anything that came from the mouth. "So, you're saying the monarchy abandoned Grimsbanne just because it's Sam's land?"

"We didn't abandon it, he forced us to. Why did you think we never touched Grimsbane?" His voice thundered, making me hold my breath. "There's only one La Crox who can freely enter Grimsbanne, and that's the King. What do you think Stefan had been doing for centuries while your beloved Duke sleeps?" He paused as he straightened his back and faced me.

"Stefan had reached out to Rufus many times, but none of Hell's people wants to cooperate. Just like you, they all see us as villains when in fact, our only desire is for humans and vampires to co-exist."

"Co-exist?" Ridiculous. There's a limit to comedy as well.

"I speak no jest, sister." His eyes glinted in utter seriousness. "There are always multiple answers to some questions, but this is our truth. Whether you believe it, or get blinded by an uncertain love, you're the one who suffers in the end."

Silence befell us as I pursed my lips in a thin line. My chest moved in and out heavily, reminding me to take his words with a grain of salt.

"I'm telling you this because I don't think you deserve to be in such a complicated situation." Dominique languidly stepped forth back inside.

He stopped when he was by the door. "Also, because I'm a bit jealous of your relationship with Silvia. I always wonder how it feels to have a sweet sister. All of them are just dull. Let's go in."

Chapter 160 - His Majesty, The Emperor

Dominique's words lingered in my head even after we went back to the banquet hall. 'No, I shouldn't let his words bother me.' I told myself as I shook my head, shutting my eyes closed.

'He's Stefan's people. I can't trust anything he said.' I convinced myself, but the thought of the word "co-exist", was what got me hung up. It was a word I never heard before.

"Are you alright?" Yul asked, furrowing his brows. "Did Dom say something stupid?"

When Dominique and I went back, Yul approached us. They nearly had another confrontation if not for someone who came up to Dominique and whispered words that made him leave us.

I gazed up and sported a subtle smile before nodding. "I'm alright. It's nothing."

"Don't listen to whatever he told you. He may look stupid, but he's cunning and manipulative."

Manipulative? I wanted to agree, but when I recalled the expression Dominique had earlier, and it didn't seem so.

"By the way, Sivi hasn't come back even though Cassara is already there." I diverted the subject when I caught Cassara's figure mingling with the noble ladies not far away from our vantage point.

Yul shifted his attention to where Cassara was. "I heard His Majesty is coming. Silvia will probably welcome him."

I froze that second as my breath hitched. 'Stefan will attend?' I flinched when I felt Yul's hand patted my tensed shoulder.

"It's fine," He said, offering a subtle smile as I looked up at him.

'How is that fine?' was my subconscious reply.? "Ye — yes... it's should be fine." My voice shook as my heart beat anxiously.

"Pay respect to His Majesty, the King!" The announcement of the king's arrival pierced my ears.

Men bowed with their hands across their chest while women performed a curtsy — Yul and I were not an exception. The orchestra playing in the background also stopped at once as silence embraced the entire banquet hall.

I bit my lip as my grip on my skirt trembled. My last encounter with him left a bitter taste on my tongue. After giving our respect, we raised our heads and remained silent.

"Proceed with the banquet, Count Thornhart." Stefan magnanimously ordered, and the orchestra resumed providing a beautiful melody for everyone to hear. Stefan and Sivi stood side by side, conversing with the host of the banquet, together with the debutant.

A sigh of relief slipped past my lips as I patted my chest. 'It seems he hadn't noticed me yet.'

"You seem relieved." I flinched when Yul leaned close and whispered in my ear. "Is it that bad to be sired to him?"

"No," I said, leaning back as I cast him a look full of disdain. "It's worse than that."

"I see... but, you know, you won't be like that if the dead didn't interfere."

"Are you saying it was better to lose my will completely and submit? Just like that?" I arched my brows as I lifted my chin up.

"I'm saying it'll be easier for you since what you do for him will just feel right." Yul shrugged nonchalantly as he relayed his insensitive thoughts like usual.

I shook my head, already used to his insensitivity. "Are we even on the same boat? How can you say it like that as if it's nothing?"

"Well, you can take my words with a grain of salt," Yul replied indifferently, as he sincerely believed that method was fine. But it wasn't.

"How can I face Sam when I cling to another man and blame it for being sired? If I put myself in Sam's shoes, I don't think my heart can take it," I argued as I gazed down, smiling bitterly. "To see him looking to another woman... that will break me for sure."

For a little while, Yul and I didn't speak as the chatterings and music spread across the banquet hall. I let out a sharp exhale and gazed up at Yul. To my surprised, Yul's expression was strangely solemn as he stared in nothingness.

"Yul?" I tilted my head, waving in front of him. When he blinked, I clicked my tongue.

"I never see you space out just like that. Is that a new way of sleeping?" I asked, genuinely baffled.

"Don't mind me," Yul replied without looking at me. I knew there was something wrong with him, but I decided not to pry.

"Yul, can we go back now? I mean, Sivi will be busy with His Majesty's presence," I suggested, almost desperately pleading, as I had a sudden hunch something would happen tonight.

Yul furrowed his brows, pressing his lips before smacking his lips. "You haven't danced yet. That Dominique purposely took you outside so no one can ask you to dance."

"Well, if that's the case, I should thank him," I replied, clenching my hand up as I owed Dominique if that was the case.

I only attended dance classes because I had to, not because I was expecting someone to ask my hand for a dance. Why would I decorate the wall all this time if not for that?

"Lilou." A chill crawled up on my spine upon hearing Stefan's low and cool voice reach my ear. I slowly shifted my eyes in his direction, gulping upon meeting his gaze.

Stefan stretched his hand in my direction, not saying anything. However, I sensed that everyone's attention turned to him and then to me.

'Goodness... is he out of his mind?' I clenched my teeth as I clasped my skirt tightly.

"Don't go if you don't want to," Yul advised on my side.

I relaxed my stiffed shoulders as I took deep breaths, shooting sharp glares at Yul. "As if I had a choice." and then I marched towards my hell.

As I marched towards Stefan, I instinctively glanced at the people around. They were all staring at me with such intensity, making me hold my breath, but I ignored it.

"Give respect to His Majesty, the Emperor!"

I froze on the spot upon hearing a very familiar voice I've longed to hear. It was as if time stopped itself, hearing every beat of my heart as I finally heaved a sigh of relief for a long time.

"Sam," I whispered and looked in his direction, only to feel my heart drop to my stomach.