

The Duke 171

Chapter 171 - Thank You <3

Since my clothes were ripped, revealing my undergarment, I had to change before we set off. I only realized that when we were by the door and Mildred gave me a surprised look.

The maids who were helping me change were obviously trembling as they carefully took off my clothes until I'm in my chemise. Our audience, who was sitting on the divan, surely intimidated them.

"Your Highness, you may go first. This will take a while," I said, and also wanted to add how awkward it was to change before his presence, but decided not to.

Sam just rolled his eyes. "Nonsense."

I cast the maids an apologetic smile. Poor them. They seemed as if they would lose their lives if they did even the slightest mistake.

"Are you going to dress her forever?" Sam said impatiently, and they hastened a little bit, albeit still being careful. "My bride's body is too thin it can break at any moment. Now I understand the reason! You dress her too long she doesn't have time to eat."

I turned to Sam. "Your Highness, that's because you're scaring them." I must have lost my mind for a moment, but I already opened my mouth before I could think.

"I have done nothing to them, though." Sam scrunched his nose as he defended himself.

"Not yet," I corrected. A sigh slipped past my lips as I caught the brief stunned gazes from the maids. Please don't look at me like that, I thought. I'm also treading on eggshells.

"Make sense." Sam bobbed his head. "Don't get scared and hurry up. Mind where you touch as well." A closed-lipped smile flickered over his lips and then gone, "I'm not in the mood to kill."

He's definitely in the mood, I thought. I could only pity the maids as they had to hasten while keeping skinship as minimal as possible.

Once I was fully dressed to dine with the royalties, a maid whispered reluctantly to me, "Your Highness, about your hair."

I gazed at the other maids, who peeked at me, conflicted. I couldn't blame them as Sam clapped his hand as he crowed, "Let's go!"

"Your Highness." I sighed as I faced him, sporting an awkward smile. "I'm not finished yet," I said, keeping myself from stuttering as I shared the same fear with the maids.

"Uh." Sam closed his eyes and opened them. His eyebrows quirked before he said, "Not finished?"

My anxiety rose and crept into my heart. I knew he wouldn't kill me, but the maids had done nothing wrong.

"My hair!" I blurted out. "We need to redo my hair, see? It's a little... tangled."

I twirled a strand of my hair around my finger, showing it to him as I smiled. There was no trace of emotion on his face, so I added in panic, "I don't want to look ugly and embarrass you!"

'Really? Since when did you care about that?' My subconscious mind sassed in dismay, not even convinced I could save a life or two with this lame excuse. Well, Sivi said not to give 'cheap' mercy, but I wanted to try.

"Who said that?" To my surprised, Sam furrowed his brows as he strutted in my direction.

I panicked but fought the urge to step back. "No — no, it's not that..." a meek and tiny voice came as I averted my gaze.

"Hmm." He hummed with a heavy exhale, scanning me from two steps away.

"Who said it?"

"Pardon?"

"Are you daft? Or deaf?" His expression darkened as he frowned.

Although it was not entirely a lie, I didn't want to cause another problem with something so petty. After all, it was not just one or two who called me ugly, but the majority of the royal family.

"What gave you that impression?" I asked, mustering my lifetime courage as I raised my chin. "I just want to look pretty in your eyes!"

Great! Another lame excuse! What's the point of attending so many classes if the only excuse I could come up with in real-time was like this?

"You don't look ugly," He said, making me gaze up at him in surprise. "I never thought you are. Oh, it never even crossed me even when you were snoring last night."

Moved, I pursed my lips as I held back my tears from falling. I'm melting as I pulled up my knuckles to cover my lips.

"Too sweet!" I muttered, blushing so suddenly as his words magically washed down the anxiety in my heart. It felt as if for a moment, all the problems didn't even exist.

Sam knitted his brows, clueless at what made me act like this. But he said nothing about it as he took a step, brushing my hair with his slender fingers.

"Just put your hair down like usual," He uttered as he brushed the stray hairs back in their rightful place. "Hand me a hairpin," Sam ordered as he handed his hand.

The servants were quick to react as a maid passed a clip crested with small rubies. Sam clipped the side of my hair as it tucked behind my ear. I blushed and bit my lower lip as he did my hair.

"Done!" He clapped as he took a step back, planting his hand on my shoulder before he slowly spun me in front of the mirror.

Sam bent down as he whispered, "See? You don't need to go through that hassle."

I gazed at myself, touching the clip before I shifted my attention to him. "It only looked good because you're the one who put it on."

"Oh, love. Don't mention it." He grinned, taking my honesty as a compliment.

I stared at him through the mirror for a moment before I turned to meet his gaze squarely. I took a shallow breath and pressed my lips together. Sam quirked his brow as he tilted his head, baffled at what I was planning.

"Ahem." I cleared my throat and gathered my gratitude before standing on my tiptoes and planted a brief kiss on his cheek. "Thank you."

That caught him off guard as he touched his cheek before gazing at me. I grinned and suggested, before tickling his sexual desires. "Let's go?"

Chapter 172 - It's Not That Bad

"I don't want to look ugly!" she cried out in panic.

Samael froze for a moment before he asked, "Who said that?" and he strutted towards her, stopping when she's within his reach.

He couldn't understand the strange fury that surged in his heart with the sheer thought of her thinking that way. He never felt that — not before or now in this fickle state — she was an embarrassment... if anything, this unfamiliar sense of shame stabbed his gut.

"No, it's not... that," she answered, barely reaching his ears. It's definitely that, he thought.

He had seen it, just moments ago, how Cassara raised her hand at Lilou. It would be more strange to him not to figure out that everyone in the palace shamed her. And yet, she was trying to come up with an excuse to not cause any more trouble. And he was letting her. (For reasons he couldn't understand himself.)

"Hmm." It frustrated him he had to keep his cool, scanning her as she tried to protect others... or him. Samael didn't know, but in his eyes, Lilou definitely knew a problem would arise if she mentioned a name.

But Samael wanted to try his luck for the second time, so he repeated. "So, who said it?"

"Pardon?"

"Are you daft? Or deaf?" He frowned, displeased at her excessive concerns and worries. She only needed to tell him to burn everyone, and he would. Forget about everything, and just leave the damn kingdom.

"What gave you that impression? I just want to look pretty in your eyes!"

'This false bravado of hers is aggravating but...'. His thoughts trailed off momentarily. '... part of me thinks it's not a mere front.' And he found it admirable.

"You're not ugly," He said as she was the prettiest and purest flower in this hell. "I never thought you are. Oh, it never even crossed me even when you were snoring last night."

Samael never thought of working on his tone in his existence until now. It could be nice to sound a bit more gentle.

But to his surprised, her face flushed in red as a muffled, "Too sweet!" came out from her lips.

She puzzled him. He took a step forward as the strong urge to touch her — the only light in this grey world — overwhelmed him.

Usually, when prey meets the predator, they would flee for their lives. But this prey didn't run away, but instead walked around him while gazing at him with those strong, earnest, and curious emeralds.

'A leash I never needed,' He thought, brushing just a few strands of her hair, afraid she'd wither away if he came off strong.

"Just put your hair down like this." He commented as looked pretty whether she put her hair down or tie it up like last night. "Hand me some hairpins." And the maid immediately handed out a pin crested with rubies.

'What am I doing?' He wondered as he clipped the hairpin on the side of her hair. 'Thinking how she'll look like if I put something on her hair?'

A quick, subtle smile flicked on his face, seeing how the hairpin clung to her hair. "Done!" he exclaimed as he spun her around for her to see the beauty he was seeing.

"See? You don't need to go through that hassle." He whispered, wanting to add, 'because even the rubies paled in comparison with your natural allure,' for clarity, but decided not to.

The way she touched the clipped while smiling pleased him more than when he releases his fury through violence. He liked it... somehow.

"It only looks good because you're the one who put it on."

"Oh, love. Don't mention it." He grinned as he thought she could just ask him next time, since he had done a better job than the maids.

Lilou just stared at him through the mirror, catching his attention while tickling his curiosity about what was on her mind again. He studied her, but wouldn't come up with proper reasoning behind those olive eyes.

He quirked his brows when she faced him squarely. 'What was she planning?' He wondered as he tilted his head to the side.

"Ahem!" She only cleared her throat once before she suddenly stood on her tiptoes and planted a kiss on his cheek.

Samael's back stiffened for that second. 'What...' It was brief, but he heard his heart throb loudly against his chest, resonating in his ears.

He touched his cheek when he recovered. He could still feel the softness of her lips against his skin, and couldn't lie about how it felt nice.

"Thank you," she said, which made him raise his gaze, and was thrown in a daze at how pretty and bright her smile was.

'How could she... smile like that?' He wondered, fully aware of their situation and the hell they were currently stepping on. She could be just foolish, but her bright aura was too... contagious.

For someone like him who had taken the form of cruelty and heartlessness, her light was almost blinding. Was this, perhaps, the reason a part of him wanted to kill that light? Samael had zero ideas.

He didn't hate it, though. If anything, her light felt more refreshing. No wonder Samael fell for her the first time he laid his eyes on her. Lilou's aura was just different.

Right now, he couldn't say he felt anything more than curiosity and obsession. But Samael knew he was falling deeper... in hell. And in hell, he never thought he'd ever desire to be someone else's personal hellhound.

'Really... she will drive me crazy.' He muttered helplessly in his head before she grabbed his hand, and suggested, "Let's go?"

And all was left in his memory was the warmth of her palms and her hair flowing back as she dragged him to quench her growling stomach.

'Ah... why did I even decide to shut off my emotions?' He wondered, forgetting the reasons he was driven to such a decision. However, there was this tiny part of him that felt that it was not that bad.

Being accepted even at his worst... it didn't feel that bad.

Chapter 173 - We're Getting Married

I didn't know a simple kiss on the cheek would shock him into silence, but that was better as we smoothly approached the dining hall without a problem. Unlike usual, almost all the seats were all occupied, as the lively chattering resonated across the dining hall.

When we came in, the liveliness suddenly died down as all eyes were on both of us. Sam strutted in with an air of confidence. While I kept my manners whilst ignoring the awkwardness from their odd gazes.

"Gree—" I was stopped in performing a curtsy as Sam tugged my arm and whispered to my ear, "No need."

A frown resurfaced on my lips as I gazed at him suspiciously. He could be the rudest individual in here, but I can't. I couldn't afford to offend more royalty. I have a neck to save!

"You're terribly late, Hell!" Dominique clapped as he broke the silence. "Why don't you two sit down? It's been a while since His Majesty had seen all his brothers and sisters during dinner!"

I made a quick scan around the table before my gaze fell on Stefan. He wasn't saying anything, as he drank his wine elegantly.

"Then, is His Majesty indebted to me because I reunited his beloved siblings?" Sam humored as he escorted me to a seat before he sat down. "You're welcome, Your Majesty."

'If this was not challenging the authority of the king, I don't know what is,' my subconscious mind crooned.

I wanted to tell Sam not to push it too far, but I admit I liked his sarcasm towards Stefan. I couldn't just forgive Stefan for what he had done, even though the situation had changed.

A shallow sigh slipped past my lips as I instinctively set my eyes on Yul. He seemed to be in a terrible mood... or just being himself. Sivi was also strangely quiet.

Was this because of Sam? Or Stefan? It could also be both. But that was not my concern. I let another weak sigh as I remembered my own current problems.

'Should I start listing my problems and my survival plans?' I asked myself, and my subconscious mind answered, 'Yes, you should or you'd end up... dead.'

As if my subconscious mind wasn't convinced I understood that well, it repeated mockingly. 'Dead, dead, dead, haha!'

'I should stop listening to my inner voice. I didn't even remember since when did I pick up this habit again?' I mentally shook my head to shrug my thoughts away as the servants served the dinner.

My stomach growled upon getting a whiff of the savory aroma of the meat served before me. I gulped, watching my manners as I didn't want to embarrass myself.

Hence, I picked up my cutlery and started slicing the meat. I could've just gobbled it up without slicing it thinly, to be honest.

"You have a good eye patch, Hanz!" Sam clapped, and I flinched before I raised my gaze at him. "It looks good on you!" He added.

Was Sam trying to pick a fight? It was already a surprise that Hanz kept quiet all this time.

"A compliment coming from a bugger. This dinner is surely fascinating." Hanz scorned as he leaned his arms against the smooth edge of the table.

But Sam was unfazed by the insult, as the side of his lips stretched wider.

"I couldn't disagree, my brother! After all, this table..." Sam trailed off as he scanned the people around the table and smirked. "... is filled with people supporting different kings."

"Insolence!" Hanz slammed his palm against the surface of the table... and I took my first bite.

I've been keeping my manners to not tarnish whatever reputation Sam had. Who am I deluding? What sort of reputation did he even have to begin with? Sam didn't even care about it.

My stress started to build up, and I unconsciously ate more. Was dinner not to their liking as they kept arguing whenever they eat?

"Oh, come on, Hanz! How can you be so hot-tempered even after centuries?" Sam chuckled playfully, obviously pleased at his brother's reaction. "Are you that scared of the sheer thought I've finally had an interest in the throne?"

"Hah!" Hanz scowled as the air suddenly thickened. "That arrogance of yours really ticks me off."

My expression grew sullen. Sam should stop teasing Hanz, honestly. Who would want to eat in such a suffocating atmosphere? Even the other royalties had stopped chatting as they watched the two.

The question 'would they end up dueling?' flickered across their eyes. Sometimes, I felt like this palace was just a fancy version of an asylum. The royal family was full of different levels of lunatics.

"Hehe. You're always fun to tease, Hanz." Sam giggled with a change of tone. There he was again, shifting in different moods faster than a blink of an eye.

"I'm in the good mood, so I'll let you off," Sam added as he leaned back. "I actually had a detailed plan ready how I would discipline my little brother for pulling that trick three months ago."

So Sam already knew about that too? I frowned as I wondered, since when? And how much did he know? Did he know about... my shoulders stiffened at the thought of Stefan's involvement.

"Haha! Hell, I wonder what puts you in a good mood?" Dominique chimed in, almost sounding jolly if not for the strange awkwardness in his voice.

Was Sam really in a good mood? I couldn't tell, and I couldn't even guess if Dominique was joking right now. Well, compared to last night's event, Sam could be in a good mood.

Now that I thought about it, I wondered why no one was talking about the occurrence last night? A lot of heads rolled, and blood flooded the floor of the banquet hall. How could they be so relaxed? Those people were nobles, after all.

'I should've asked Fabian,' I thought as I didn't ask about it because their lives didn't matter to me. 'I've also grown cruel, in a way, huh?'

"Oh, now that you've asked, I'm glad to share the good news with you," Sam exclaimed excitedly before I flinched as he turned to me. "We're getting married."

"I see. A wedding after we settle everything would be a good sign, not just for the kingdom but also for the duchy!" Dominique nodded happily, but Sam suddenly intervened.

"Tonight." His eyes were still on me before he reached for the tip of my hair and played with it. "We're getting married tonight."

And a long, suffocating silence ensued.

Chapter 174 - The Wedding Is Final

"Tonight. We're getting married tonight."

My mind short-circuited momentarily. Did I hear him correctly? He had already said it earlier, but I didn't think he truly meant it!

"Come on, brother." Dominique was the first to recover as he chuckled. "How can you get married with no plans? Even your bride is surprised!"

"You're getting married knowing the circumstances? Aren't you playing so much?" Another prince chimed in with mockery and awkwardness.

"Your Majesty, you can't just approve this marriage." Someone voiced out. "Hell needs to prove that he is worthy for this marriage that breaks the tradition of our family."

"Brother, even if you really want to marry, you should have talked to your bride. My, it is already devastating to marry a demon, she couldn't even enjoy her wedding!"

All the other comments from the princesses and prince went past my ears as I stared at Sam. He had this unusual gentleness flickering in his eyes as he played with my hair.

"You'll marry me, correct?" He asked, nonchalant by the royalty's opinions.

I pursed my lips and gazed down. "Yes."

That was always the plan, to get His Majesty's approval and get married. However, why am I not that happy? I couldn't even understand the mixed emotions in my anxious heart.

"Hell, a woman only gets married once." After a while, Sivi finally spoke with the same elegance in her voice. "It's a memorable event for a lady, consider how Lilou will feel."

"What do you mean once?" Sam chuckled as he slowly set his eyes on Sivi. "I can marry her every day. But then again, I have to pass all my other obligations to Rufus. I'm sure he wouldn't mind, though."

Rufus would surely mind, I thought. I flinched when Sivi dropped her cutlery, and then her voice thundered. "Are you so selfish to only think about yourself?"

"Why are you so riled up, Silvia?" Sam arched his brow before switching plates with mine.

I gazed up at him in bafflement and he just smiled before saying, "Eat more."

Did he figure out I needed to eat more because of stress? I appreciated his gesture, if so.

"Your Majesty," Silvia cajoled after realizing there's no point in arguing with Sam. "I'm in no position to question your decision, but did you really approve this?"

Sivi, I thought we're allies and Hell was your king. Why do you sound as if you truly oppose this marriage? Well, I guess her blood told her that a human shouldn't taint his king. I mentally rolled my eyes at the thought.

"Hell," To my surprise, Yul, who had been quiet, also broke his silence. He faced Sam squarely. I couldn't guess what's going on behind those cold azure eyes.

"Can't it be postponed? At least, until you had your emotions back?"

My brows furrowed at Yul's solemn tone. I didn't expect him to say such words...? no, I didn't expect him to speak at all.

"First, you people gave me trouble in marrying my bride and forced me to shut off my emotions. And now, you're telling me to wait until I get them back?" Sam jeered. His tone was cold, which sent a shiver down my spine.

But Yul was unfazed. At least, that was what his exterior looked like. "Political views and public opinions aside, you should at least think about the human you're dragging in the pits of hell."

"I never thought you really care about such things, brother." Sam clapped as he nodded in mirth.

"I'm not saying this because of you, but for your bride."

And that got Sam's attention as he leaned forward and asked, "And since when did you start caring about my bride?" His tone contained a mix of amusement and menace.

"Since the time you dragged Duke Delholm in the banquet last night." Yul's answers never faltered while staring at Sam straight in the eye. It was something I'd applaud Yul's guts for.

I couldn't assume Yul was trying to challenge Sam. It sounded more like how Rufus and Fabian give advice to Sam.

When I met Yul's eyes, I flinched a little, before he diverted his eyes. 'What was that?' I wondered. There was something in Yul's eyes... it was the same expression he bore last night before Sam appeared.

"Why?" I whispered and my breath hitched when all eyes turned on me.

Their eyes glowing as they waited for whatever I'd say. I turned to Sam, and he was also staring at me, tilting his head while his eyelashes fluttered ever so slowly.

What were they hoping to hear with those eager eyes? Some of them seemed they would devour me if I spoke wrongly, while others were just simply concerned.

Without thinking, my words slipped past my lips. "Why... do you always argue when eating?"

Silence. I even froze when I realized the words I had said.

'That was so out of topic, dear.' My subconscious mind commented in disappointment. 'They're talking about your marriage! Stick to the current matters at hand!'

"Hahaha!" Dominique's loud laughter startled me back to my senses. "That's right! It's rare for us to eat together and all we did was argue! Goodness! My sister is hilarious!"

"That's right. My dear Lilou couldn't even eat now because of Hell. Please, practice table manners." Sivi nodded in agreement, while Yul just quietly sipped wine.

"My love, I should've known better." Sam sighed as he shook his head. "I knew how revolting these people are and still let my guards down. Please forgive me."

"Haha! Aren't you the one whose bare presence more revolting?" Hanz scowled as he ground his teeth.

"Oh?" Sam quirked a brow as the side of his lips curled into a smirk.

The sinister smirk on Sam gradually affected the air as it thickened. Not good, I thought.

"Sam," I called out helplessly.

'Everyone had just calmed down, just please let it go,' were the words I failed to say. But he seemed to understand as the dark shroud around him eased back to the depths of hell.

Such raw domination wouldn't come from anywhere else but hell.

"The wedding is final and everyone here tonight will attend and congratulate our brother..." Stefan broke his silence. His voice was cold and calm, but his fiery eyes were on me.

"And we will all welcome a new member of the family."

Chapter 175 - Expectation VS Reality

I had imagined what our wedding would look like many times. Held on a beautiful, cloudless day, I envisioned myself walking down the aisle, holding a sheaf of wheat and chaplets of beautiful flowers on my head.

If I had a veil, behind it was a smile as I looked to my left. There, I would see Old Olly, the children, and others smiling back at me. Maybe Old Olly would cry, as she had been a mother to me.

My heart would warm up as I hold back my tears of happiness. And then, turn to my right to see Fabian and Rufus, along with everyone in the Duke's residence.

As usual, Fabian would smile from ear to ear, while Rufus would keep his stoic expression. I'd then giggle if I see Fabian gazing at Rufus to tell him to hide his boredom.

After that, I would look ahead. What I would see was a gorgeous man, with his bright argent hair matching his white suit.

He'd smile at me lovingly, and I would smile back. He would then extend his hand to me — the hand I would hold forever — and I'd clasped it.

We would both stand in front of the altar, promising a love of a lifetime, in sickness and in health, for better, for worse, till death do us part. And then, he'd lift my veil slowly and I'd see how his eyes marveled once our eyes met.

He'd smirk, I'd smile.

We'd be then husband and wives, sealed with a simple, yet magical kiss. Applause from the back would resonate as they would congratulate us happily.

It was a pleasant daydream, but reality always differed from expectation.

My wedding, the real one, wasn't what I expected it to be. It wasn't held in the clear sunny day, but in the middle of the night. My guests weren't people who wished us well from the bottom of their hearts, but those who opposed this marriage.

I held the bouquet of poisonous flowers, which only bloomed in Avolire Palace. If I raise it to smell it, I'd be dead. My hand trembled. If not for the gloves I'm wearing, I'm not sure what could've happened to my hands.

Although the wedding dress was beautiful — exceeding my imagination — it was not enough to soothe my anxiety. After all, what's in front of me was a shut door.

Gazing at it didn't fill me with anticipation. Instead, I felt like I was standing at death's door, that once it opened, it'd be eternal damnation.

A wedding held in hell. What did I expect?

'Are you disappointed?' My subconscious mind asked.

"Disappointed...?" I whispered as I smiled bitterly. "More like terrified."

This wedding didn't feel like arranged out of love. It felt more like a wedding held out of convenience.

I didn't know the exact reason, but I had these strange, ominous gut feelings. My feelings for Sam never changed; I loved him, I still do and would always do. I would marry him even if it's pouring rain or even if it's the end of the world.

However, I had been bothered by how Stefan agreed to it so easily at that. I'm worried about how Sam got his blessing. Did Sam threaten Stefan? I didn't think a threat would budge the king.

After what Sam did last night, I didn't think a threat would faze Stefan. Unless they had made a deal... a deal, huh? I wondered what could it be if that was the case.

"It's alright," I murmured as I mentally shrugged the negativity in my head. "I shouldn't think like that. This is still my wedding. It wouldn't be that bad, right?"

"And what made you think like that?" I jumped upon hearing a voice from my side.

"Yul?" I called out in disbelief as I faced him. "What are you doing here?"

"Checking on you, isn't that obvious?" Yul said sarcastically as he gazed at me from head to toe.

"Don't do this."

"There you go again," I said, shaking my head. "Why do you always give me warning without an explanation? It's not really nice, you know?"

My last remarks came out as a murmur as I gazed down. I never thought of backing out, despite how reality ruined my expectation for our wedding.

"You said..." Yul trailed off, and I looked at him in puzzlement. "... you'd break for sure if you see him looking at another woman."

I frowned upon hearing my words last night coming out of his mouth. "Are you saying my groom will cheat on me?"

"No," Yul replied calmly as he leaned his back against the door's jamb, crossing his arms as he looked at nothingness. "I just thought, if you break over such a trivial thing, you'd still break at one point."

"Are you concerned about me?" I teased, feeling a little consoled by it.

"You can think of it however you like." He shrugged as he cocked his head to me. "I'm not even sure myself."

I smiled as my eyes softened. "Yul," I said, as I averted my gaze back to the door. "In the past, Sam told me that no matter how strong a person is, there's always a breaking point."

The anxiety in my heart slowly subsided, but not completely. But it was enough to calm me a little, and accept things as they were.

"I didn't agree to this thinking whether it'd break me or complete me. I'm standing here right now because I love your brother, for better, for worse, I will at least abide by that." The corner of my lips curled into a subtle smile.

"You're a fool who only thinks about food." Yul scoffed as he straightened his back and was about to walk away. "What did I expect from a fool like you but to say nonsense?"

I almost giggled at his reply. I would find it annoying on normal days, but it felt somewhat warm now. It was as if those words came from a friend.

"Yul," I called out softly, and he halted. "Thank you for checking on here."

Yul said nothing as he resumed in his strides while I smiled. It wasn't much for him, but his genuine concern — from the person I expected the least — eased my worries.

"The wedding..." I took a deep breath and my eyes sharpened as the door slowly opened. "... will now commence."

Chapter 176 - The Wedding

I walked down the candle-lit pathway leading towards the altar. Red petals that were akin to drop of blood on the floor, intense pairs of crimson eyes that vibrantly glowed like rubies in this barely lit palace chapel... what a wedding.

At the end of the aisle stood the man I had imagined marrying countless times. But unlike the loving and gentle smile I had expected, Sam was... it felt like the devil itself was smiling at me.

It didn't give me a bit of excitement, but I didn't hate the thought of marrying him. Perhaps it was just the eerie and thick atmosphere. Or maybe because of the poisonous flowers in my hand?

I had no idea.

'Strange, isn't it? You love him, but you feel restless.' My subconscious mind whispered. 'Hmm... like, as if you're marrying the wrong person?'

I stomped down the voice that had been talking nonstop inside my head. The wrong person? Sam was never the wrong person. I could never imagine a life without him.

I didn't know why that thought instantly riled me up inside. But it was truly frustrating.

For reasons unknown, my eyes shifted to the other man standing in the middle of the altar. The man who would facilitate this wedding, His Majesty, the King, Stefan La Crox.

My heart ached as soon as our eyes met. Hence, I immediately averted my gaze.

'Why?' I wondered, as my steps felt heavier each time I walked forward. 'Was this because I'm sired to him?' It must be.

I gritted my teeth as the bouquet of beautiful yet deadly flowers trembled under my grip. There's no other answer why I was feeling utterly guilty marrying the love of my life, to the point I had the urge to run away.

But this guilt... was growing stronger because I felt bad for Sam. This was supposed to be our special day, night. But my heart was aching because of another man.

'What kind of torture in this?' I scoffed internally, holding my anger in. 'It's your wedding... calm down, Lilou.'

"Lilou," Sam startled me back to my senses just in time I arrived in front of him. I just smiled under the veil and hooked my arms with him.

I flinched when he whispered, "You look guilty, my bride." His voice was cold, mixed with restrained anger.

Who wouldn't? I was angry with myself for having such thoughts. That's why I could understand where he was coming from.

As we stood before Stefan, I couldn't stare at him straight as my grip around Sam's arm trembled. It was as if once I meet his eyes once again, I wouldn't be able to continue.

The eyes behind us were watching, observing even how my shoulders moved whenever I breathe. It felt suffocating.

"Calm down," Sam whispered as he patted my hand that was clinging onto his arms. But his pats only gave me a sense of dread. It didn't soothe me at all.

"Samael Vaughnn Caecilius La Crox..." Stefan trailed off as Sam suddenly spoke.

"Who the f*ck is that?"

I bit my tongue as all the anxiousness that was creeping inside my heart was slightly forgotten. It reminded me how I also got confused when Sivi mentioned his full name.

"Hell," Stefan said in a warning tone. "Please."

"Right, manners." Sam nodded before he added in sarcasm, "Please, tell me who the fuck — I mean, who is that?"

If I was trembling earlier, that was because of the strong anxiety I had been feeling. But that was now replaced as I held my hysterical laughter in.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty. This groom is merely trying to make my bride laugh a little." I turned to Sam, and he offered me a slight smile.

This subtle gesture of his seemed truly charming, especially after hearing the intention.

"Thank you," I whispered, as that surely took off a bit of my nervousness away.

"Don't mention it." He cocked his head to me playfully.

"Will you, Samael Vaughnn Caecilius La Crox, son of night, swear by the blood that fills you, to devote yourself completely, eternally, without a question or doubt, to this mate? To hunt with..." Stefan paused, which made me look up at him and notice his hesitation.

"... No. To shield her with your life, give her impossible warmth, and choose her life over her blood because you love her? And if she is taken from you, will you stay with her ashes until yours coalesce with hers?"

Stay with my ashes... I pursed my lips at the thought.

"I will," Sam answered in a low yet stern tone. I smiled at the conviction in his voice.

"Will you," I flinched as I faced Stefan squarely, feeling the strange pain in my heart.

Stefan continued, "Lilou Roux, daughter of the glowing sun, swears by the life granted to you, to spend your days protected with his arm? To quench his..."

I tilted my head, as it was obvious Stefan never facilitated a wedding. Or maybe he never facilitated a wedding between a human and a vampire?

"To spend your days protected with his arm? To feed him from your own veins until he is quenched? Because you love him?"

Unaware of time, I stared at Stefan, who seemed to look at me straight in the eye despite the veil covering my face. The pain in my heart... why? No, I won't submit to the power of his blood over me.

So, I opened my mouth and answered, "I will."

Sam and I faced each other, exchanging rings while Stefan uttered, "May the glow of the moon protect you as you start this journey together and shall not end until the end of time."

"You may now kiss the bride."

Sam slowly lifted my veil, only to frown as his eyes glinted dangerously upon seeing me. "You're crying."

My breath hitched as I realized the tears rolling down my cheek. But I kept my surprised inside as I blurted out.

"Out of happiness."

He smiled, but almost bitterly. "My wife," Sam whispered as he leaned in and kissed my lips... before biting it, which made me wince.

"Liar," He muttered under his breath and his eyes glinted menacingly as he drew away.

Chapter 177 - Battered Wife?

Normally, applause would resonate across the hall once we seal our marriage with a kiss. However, no one clapped upon sealing our marriage with a bite. My lip felt numb as it immediately grew swollen.

The smile on his lips didn't reach his eyes. The anger blazing in his bright, menacing eyes was clear.

"Will you finally kill me tonight?" I asked as we stood unmoving, gazing up at each other. "If not, how painful would I be in? How many of my bones will you break?"

"You quite have a risqué imagination for our first night as husband and wife, love." Sam mused as he chuckled. But it sounded so cold.

"I need to know so I can mentally and emotionally prepare for it," I replied, getting braver or more foolish now that we're husband and wife.

Sam didn't reply, as he only stared at me. With his current state, it was hard to read him, no matter how long I stare at his eyes.

"It's upsetting if you put it that way, wife." Sam offered his arm, and I unhesitatingly hooked mine around it as we made our exit. "Are you saying you'll just grit your teeth? That is really upsetting."

Well, crying wouldn't help. I might as well grit my teeth if he was so mad and ended up hurting me.

'Are you a lunatic?' My precious subconscious mind asked me in dismay. 'The wedding ceremony just ended and you're basically embracing to be a battered wife!'

"If it upsets you, don't hurt me," I whispered as my grip around his arm tightened. "I'm also upset that I had other emotions rather than happiness on the day I daydreamed countless times with you."

We didn't speak after my last remarks. Since there were no other celebrations after that wedding ceremony, Sam and I headed back to his quarters in utter silence.

"Congratulations, my Lord, my Lady." Fabian congratulated us with a bow when we reached Sam's quarters.

"Thank you, Mister Fabian," I replied, concealing the sadness in my voice. "It'd be nice if you were there."

"I'm honored for you to think like that, my Lady."

"Fabian," Sam chimed in, bearing the same indifferent tone. "How do I quench my anger to avoid hurting my wife?"

My brows quirked as my shoulders stiffened before I slowly turned to Sam. He was staring at Fabian dead in the eye, utterly serious about his question.

Fabian smiled harmlessly, as usual. "Shall I bring Klaus?"

"He's too feeble and a waste of time."

"Then, shall I ask Sir Rufus to spar with you?" Fabian asked, seemed pleased by Sam's insult towards Klaus.

Did he hate Klaus that much? Wait... Klaus was still alive? I wondered if how he had gotten out of that grave. No one would help him in Cameron's residence, so it's only possible he crawled his way up. Such determination to live.

"Rufus is already dealing with a lot of things at the moment." Sam shook his head calmly. "I need my life to be in danger... I think?"

"Very well. I can spar with you, my Lord," Fabian suggested confidently.

My mouth slightly fell open as I stared at Fabian's confidence. Sam and Fabian sparring? I wanted to see it for myself.

Before I knew it, both of them set their eyes on me.

"Stop sparkling," Sam snapped as he raised his hand and blocked my gaze. "You're giving me a reason to kill Fabian."

"Please, my Lady. Have mercy on me." Fabian begged in nonchalance. I frowned at their reaction.

"I just want to see Mister Fabian and my husband spar," I murmured dejectedly, forgetting our little banter moments ago. "My husband had high regards in Mister Fabian's skills, so... I'm curious."

I shrugged and sighed while looking away.

"I don't deserve such praise, my Lady. However, it's your first night as husband and wife. It'd be best to stick to the tradition for now." Fabian politely voiced out.

Our first night as husband and wife, yet he would spar while I wait for him? That surely stung, and I felt a little demanding. It felt frustrating.

"The servants had already run a bath for you to prepare you for our wedding night. I'd be back." Sam declared as he escorted me towards our bed chambers while we left Fabian outside.

"Alright." I nodded as I sat down on the divan. "Have fun."

"Don't you want me to go?" He asked, planting his hand on his hips. I gazed up at him, blinking.

"No," I answered softly. "That's not what I mean. If you're angry, I'd rather you release it by sparring with Mister Fabian than having my bones get broken on my wedding night."

"If you see me as that evil, why won't you fight back?" Sam inquired as he tilted his head, batting his eyes nonchalantly. "You have Lakresha with you. You baffle me, wife."

I only pursed my lips and didn't answer. Did I truly see him in that light? I didn't mean it that way.

"You're the one who baffles me," I murmured. "I'm certain you want to kill me right now or just break everything you can touch. And yet, you're doing neither of that."

There weren't any specific emotions in his eyes. If anything, it seemed he was also baffled, himself.

"Sam," I called out under my breath, getting up to my feet as I took a step forward to him before I reached for his hand. I carefully guided his hand to cup my cheek, and I leaned closer to warm his cold palm.

"Even if I have Lakresha, its sole purpose is to protect you," I said, staring into his deep crimson eyes that were drawing me in. "Even if you hurt me, I would never do the same to you. But that doesn't necessarily mean I won't fight back if it's others."

He frowned and asked, "Why?" His thumb caressed my cheek as his eyes darkened. "Why would you do that if I pose the same threat?"

Was he seriously clueless about it? I chuckled at the thought.

"Why are you laughing?" He asked impatiently. "Are you mad?"

"No." I shook my head as I took another step forward. My arms slowly circled around his waist, leaning the side of my head on his chest.

"If I asked you the same thing, will you fight me to death if I wield Lakresha to you?" And his silence was enough for an answer for me.

"That's why I said I'll grit my teeth," I whispered, tightening my grip around his waist as I pulled him closer. "Because even if you hurt me, the one who will be in more pain will be you."

Chapter 178 - Do You Want To Spar?

Sam didn't hug me back, nor did he push me away. He just stood there like a statue until the maids arrived. Sam and Fabian proceeded with their plan while the maids bathe me and prepared me for my wedding night.

However, what the...

"You want me to wear... that?" I barely managed to speak after a long silence, as my nightdress was shockingly revealing.

Although I had nothing to hide from Sam anymore, imagining myself wearing something that could purposely incite his... hunger felt embarrassing. The heat of my face just looking at it while the maid held it up kept increasing.

"Your Highness, it's your wedding night! Of course, you must wear it." The maid encouraged excitedly.

"Lena," I sighed as I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Can you bring me something like my old nightdress? I don't think my human morals can bear wearing that."

"But, your highness," she frowned, looking so dejected by my request.

This girl... I remembered just a few days ago, Countess Souton introduced me to the new personal maid assigned to me. It was Lena, a young vampire girl who was full of energy and enthusiasm.

At first, I was wary of her, thinking she was a spy sent by the king. I tried to get her trust first if her intention was to get mine. But the more I get to know her, the more I realized Lena was just someone who was perfectly suited to keep me company for me to adjust in this fancy asylum called the palace.

Lena just had this bright attitude and carefree nature. It was hard to picture someone like her as a vampire, as she sees me on equal grounds — even regarded me higher than that. Still, I couldn't fully trust her. No, I couldn't fully trust anything in here — even myself.

"Just take that thing away." I sighed as I remained adamant. "Wearing something conservative or revealing doesn't matter to the third prince. So, I might as well wear something I'd be comfortable with until then."

"Your Highness," Lena blushed as she covered half of her face with the revealing nightdress. "I suppose your highness is right."

Uh... I said too much, huh? Another sigh slipped past my lips as I waved, and Lena got me another nightdress for me to wear. Once I changed into a sleeveless chemise (with Lena thinking I should still show more skin), she started brushing my hair in front of the mirror.

"Well, even if I'm the prince, your highness is too stunning in everything she wears!" Lena exclaimed, praising me to the heavens like usual.

I brushed my hair over my shoulder. "Lena, if your purpose is to boost my morale, there's no need."

"But I'm stating the truth, your highness!" Lena pouted as she clenched the hairbrush up. "I've never seen a human to bear such regal aura like you!"

Regal... a word I'm so familiar with, but something that also left a bitter taste in my mouth.

I stared at myself in front of the mirror while Lena kept chatting excitedly behind me. Half a year ago, I was nothing but skin and bones. A dirty peasant who couldn't even dream of ever living life in comfort — what more, a grandiose life.

But now, I'm here, staring at myself, with my personal maid cheering me up with everything she could, in an old yet classic bed-chamber of the third prince, after marrying a royalty. From a peasant, I'm now part of the royal family.

It sounded like a dream... but that didn't feel like it. I wasn't in cloud nine to enjoy the luxury. But rather, I felt like I've coveted a position I shouldn't even dream of having. Now, I'm being punished.

"Your highness," I blinked back to reality after hearing Lena's concerned voice. My eyes searched for her worried expression in the mirror before I smiled gently.

"You may go now. Thank you for attending to me," I expressed as I slowly turned and faced her.

"Your highness, you mustn't worry too much," Lena muttered with genuine worry in her voice. "The man who cherishes your highness will always protect you. You can worry less and rest tonight."

My heart warmed up as I reached for her hand. "Thank you, Lena. But you shouldn't refer to the third prince as 'the man'."

Lena just gave me a slight smile before she excused herself quietly. For reasons unknown, Lena would always have a brief sadness in her eyes. At first, I thought she just held the same prejudice against Sam, so she kept referring to him as 'the man'.

Tonight felt a little different, but I didn't dwell on the thought. The only man who loved me was Sam, my husband. He may be eccentric and a bit... well, he's twisted, but I loved him deeply.

I walked towards the window and slid the curtain aside for me to see the moon. It was shining especially bright tonight.

"I wonder how Sam and Mister Fabian's sparring is faring?" I murmured while staring at the cloudless night sky.

"My lord, you've died for the 20th time now," Fabian announced, pointing a sword a centimeter away from Samael's throat. "Did you even want to spar?"

"Fabian, I said, I need my life to be in danger," Samael imparted as he cast Fabian a bored look. "I could've died twenty times, but I didn't. I should've asked Rufus to spar with me instead since he'd surely want to kill me after all the work I passed to him."

"My lord," Fabian drew the sword away and took a step back. "Can I ask you a question?"

Samael quirked his brow as he tilted his head. "Did you purposely bore me so you can ask a question?"

Fabian just smiled so Samael continued, "Are you, perhaps, curious how I got Stefan's approval so easily? And why Stefan seemed overly concerned towards my wife? Or why does my wife look at him with such pain in her eyes?"

Fabian didn't speak as he sensed the killing intent shrouding Samael.

"Male —" Before Fabian called forth Maleficent, he halted as he turned his gaze towards the figure approaching them.

"Your Majesty," Fabian bowed with his palm across his palm.

"I came out here to relieve some stress." Stefan held his wrist, massaging it as his hand made a slight circular motion. "But it seems I'm not the only one."

"Stefan." A manic smirk resurfaced on Samael's lips. "Do you want to spar?"

Samael turned and met the murderous glint flickering across Stefan's eyes. and then, they both whispered,

"Catharsis."

"Lancelot."

Chapter 179 - Lancelot And Catharsis

"Catharsis."

"Lancelot."

Two legendary swords clashed, causing a strong force distorting the peacefulness and quietness of the night. One glowed in bright red, while darkness shrouded the other.

"The flames and darkness of hell colliding," Fabian murmured as he watched the sparks each time their blades heavily crashed against each other. "Lancelot."

His eyes fell on Stefan's long sword, Lancelot, a long sword, glowing in deep red, thirsty for its enemy's blood...? and life. The expression in Fabian's eyes flickered with thrill, as if watching something magnificent.

"Lancelot. A legendary sword wielded by the first king. It is said that Lancelot chooses its owner... to think it chose him." The corner of Fabian's lips stretched wickedly as he barely blinked, afraid he'd miss anything.

There weren't many people who had seen Lancelot and Catharsis. Fabian has only once seen Samael used Catharsis. That was centuries ago before the Duke of Grimsbanne entered his slumber.

"Even after centuries, just its aura alone prickled my skin." Fabian's hands trembled as his thumb caressed his skull ring. "A spar like this..."

He trailed off as he cracked his neck from side to side. A spar like this was awakening his ardor in death, soul, and blood.

"Fabian." A hand suddenly landed on Fabian's shoulder, squeezing it to calm him down. "Don't."

Fabian turned his head at Rufus, who appeared beside him out of nowhere. "Thank you, Brother."

"So, this is?" Rufus inquired as he shot his gaze back to the two monsters clashing, destroying their surrounding.

"A spar."

"A spar?" Rufus jeered. "A spar, and yet, it's obvious they were trying to claim each other's life."

Rufus' eyes glinted, prepared to intervene once things go awry. Samael shouldn't kill Stefan yet, considering Lilou was sired to him. Same goes to Stefan. He shouldn't kill Samael since the matters of the Undead haven't been resolved.

"Just what are those two thinking? Did they lose their mind completely?" Rufus muttered as this 'spar' aggravated him the most. He had been working tirelessly and hadn't had a wink of sleep for days, but those two fools were trying to kill each other.

"I don't know." Fabian shrugged, caressing his ring with his thumb. "But stopping them would be easier since they also came."

Fabian jerked his chin towards the people in their opposite direction. Rufus moved his gaze, seeing some princes came to check what was going on.

"Is it?" Rufus inquired as he studied the two devils fighting. "That aura they exuded... it's anger, domination. I don't think there's a single soul who dares comes close would leave unscathed."

"Isn't that what's makes things fun?" Fabian humored with a harmless smile, but people who knew him knew what lies behind that smile.

"Fabian, fighting them right now is not the proper time, especially with the matters at hand." Rufus frowned as he glanced at Fabian before setting them back to those two. "Enemies are lurking, waiting in the shadows, ready to take their chances if either of them died."

"My, brother. You should be the king!" Fabian humored as he chuckled.

"Don't speak such insolence. I'm just tired of dealing with them. I couldn't even attend my lady's wedding."

"It's good you didn't."

Rufus faced Fabian squarely, his expression quizzical. "Did something happen?"

"Nothing much." Fabian shrugged. "You'll only feel bad for the duchess to experience such a depressing wedding ceremony. Even a funeral is not that depressing."

"Well, I supposed that can't be helped." A sigh slipped past Rufus' lips, recalling Lilou's determined and kind words the last time they talked.

"Indeed, it seems this wedding was already been set in stone the moment the King invited them to the Capital."

"The power of foresight," Rufus muttered. "What a troublesome ability, just like that kid's ability."

There was a long silence between them as the heavy sound of clashing of the swords and the strong winds brushed past them. Samael and Stefan seemed to plan to start a tornado with the intensity of their sparring.

"My brother, do you know what kind of deal His Grace had with His Majesty?" Fabian broke his silence as he watched the two. "And, do you have any idea of what sort of connection did the duchess have with the king? It's been bothering me ever since the Duke turned off his emotions."

Rufus didn't answer immediately, as he shared the same concern.

"Unfortunately, I don't have any answer for your latter question." Rufus' eyes glinted as they sharpened. Samael kept glossing over his words with vague answers, throwing them all in confusion.

"As for the former question? His grace had a deal with His Majesty?"

"It is..." Rufus trailed off as he massaged his stiff neck. "... it's about the matter of the Undead. His Grace will lead the case."

"A war will break out?" Fabian furrowed his brows as he shifted his attention towards Rufus. He studied his brother's side profile and immediately understood what those sharp eyes were telling.

"It seems the Spade Kingdom was involved with this. We're still unsure, but considering the history of both kingdoms, it's possible. I'm still looking into it." Rufus summarized, as he knew Fabian needed to know this much. "That's why those two should stop acting like kids."

Rufus fumed as he saw this incredible battle as a childish quarrel. In his eyes, those two should know better that the best course of action was not to kill each other now.

"They are just testing each other, brother. I'm sure..." Fabian trailed off as his eyes slowly widened as he immediately called forth, "Maleficent!"

Moments before that...

"Aren't you a little rile up, brother?" Samael jeered through his gritted teeth as he launched another heavy attack which Stefan blocked. "Ugh... it feels nice to relieve some stress this way."

Stefan countered Samael's attack as he seethed, "I should speak the same, Hell."

"Are you that angry, Stefan?" Samael inquired as he returned the attack and leaned forward. "Is the thought of how she will moan my name and beg for more..."

Stefan's eyes darkened as he pushed Samael back, hopping several steps away.

"Hell," Stefan stretched his neck in a circular motion as he closed his eyes. "I'll kill you. Bloodfield."

"Great, I also don't like to share." Samael laughed maniacally as he planned to end him. "Bloodfield."

Chapter 180 - Good Memories To Keep Moving Forward

"They have not transferred all my belongings yet," I murmured as I let out a sigh. "It would be nice to read while I wait for Sam."

"Happy thoughts, Lilou! Let's think of happy thoughts only!" I marched towards the divan, sitting down as I gazed at my foot. "My feet look nice now."

Yes, this should be a good thing to notice. It looked nice now that I looked at them. My toenails were clean of dirt, wiggling my toes, which made me smile.

"They looked like feet of a... noble lady." I frowned as I sighed. Something about Lena's words mentioning looking regal made me feel a little self-conscious.

"Nevermind!" I shook my head as I spread my fingers in front of me, flipping them from front and back and I studied them. "My hands! They look nice and clean. Although, they're still a little rough, they're better."

Of course, there was still evidence of hard labor from the past. It didn't look that obvious now, but up close, the minor scars were still here.

"Even my complexion looks good now," I added, nodding with a little satisfaction. I'm still a woman, so looking pretty would still give me even the slightest confidence in my appearance.

"Goodness." I slapped my cheek lightly, keeping my palm still as I blushed. "Tonight is our first night as husband and wife... wife."

I bit my lower lip as I suddenly felt silly with all my ridiculous thoughts. It was because I've been alone and it's my wedding night. Even though Sam and I had shared what husband and wife do before, I could not help but feel the manic excitement bubbling up in me after being officially married.

"Wife." I smiled, shaking myself, as I didn't feel the need to hide my happiness. "Since we're only thinking of happy thoughts, let's see..."

I leaned back, pulling my legs up to fit the divan while I rested my side on the armrest.

"The wedding..." I trailed off as I pouted. "There's nothing happy to recall during the wedding ceremony as it was more like torture and then Sam and I had a minor argument... if that's even an argument."

I didn't blame Sam, though, as it was truly frustrating. Even though the thought of being his wife was the only thing that made me happy during the entire time, I hated I felt something painful in my heart.

"It's that Stefan's..." I trailed off in surprise, covering my lips as it felt natural to call his name so casually. It was because I was sired to him, right?

I clicked my tongue as I pouted, my eyes glaring daggers at the door. "It's all the king's fault."

If not for the king, who pulled all that trick, I would have enjoyed even the slightest moment of getting married to my man. "I hate him."

There's no way I wouldn't hate him. My feelings for that person may fall into the category of just feeling annoyed — no more or less than that — I still believed it was because I was sired to him. Otherwise, I'd hate him to the core, to the point I'd commit treason.

"This is annoying," I mumbled under my breath, getting depressed again after telling myself to only think about happy thoughts. "Did Sam kill Mister Fabian? Or did Mister Fabian bury my husband alive? If so, which garden should I retrieve my husband?"

I shrunk myself for my entire body to fit the divan. It was great that I had a fast metabolism that I didn't gain too much even after just eating.

"Yul is right. All I think and do is eat. How lazy," I mumbled as I laid on my back, staring at the high ceiling for a long time.

Now that I thought about it, this room was where Sam spent most of his time as a child. "Sam as a child..." my curiosity was suddenly piqued as I imagined Sam as a mischievous boy.

"He must be so cute." I giggled, cheering myself up while I wait for my husband. After a while, I raised my hand. The shadow of my hand from the sconce danced as I moved it.

My eyes fell at the scar on the back of my hand, making me furrow my brows as I pulled my hand back for a closer look. The scar was near my knuckles; it wasn't long, nor was it noticeable.

"However, whenever I notice it, I can't help but stare at it," I murmured, tilting my head to the side. "It reminds me of the time I tripped in the way of an oncoming carriage of a nobility."

That day was the time of the year nobles' journey up to the duke's mansion. I really thought I'd die that day as I foolishly watched the horses galloped towards me.

The fear that crawled up to me at that time froze not just me, but also time itself. I couldn't move as I waited for myself to get crushed. If not for a good samaritan who pulled me up in the nick of time, I had faced my untimely death.

"Fortunately, I didn't." I smiled as I clasped my hands and held my fist closer to my chest. If I died back then, I wouldn't meet Sam. No, Sam would be so lonely without listening to me during his slumber.

"That was seven years ago." I nodded, remembering it correctly before I smiled. "Time sure is fleeting. Twenty-four years of nothing but a series misfortune, but at least, I have Sam now."

So, even if things go south in a blink of an eye, I had wonderful memories to keep. Those memories would be my reason to move forward.

To return to those peaceful days in the duke's mansion, with Sam and I playing cat and mouse, passing by Fabian who would keep a harmless smile as he gazed at the trail of dirt on the hallway, and then Rufus who would slam the dining table whenever we ran in circles around the table while he eats. Not to mention, a peaceful stroll around the dukedom and we'd watch everyone from afar.

"Those are wonderful memories, Sam," I whispered as my eyes softened as they felt a little heavy.
"Do you remember the — ah!"

I jolted up as I felt a scalding pain in my chest. "Lakresha?" I held my necklace, Lakresha, and my heart suddenly throbbed painfully.

"Sam." Before I knew it, I grabbed a night robe and draped it over my shoulder before I dashed out of my room. "Mildred!"

"Your Highness," Mildred, who was outside the room, bowed and followed behind me.

"Where's my husband?" My voice thundered without faltering in my steps.

"They're on the training grounds, Your Highness."

"Take me to him!" I snapped.

"But your highness, his highness said..."

I stopped and gazed back, my eyes glinting with murderous intent as I clenched my teeth. "Are you not my lady-in-waiting? Or Sam's? You should know better whose authority takes precedence."

Mildred flinched as she gulped before she bowed. "Please, forgive my insolence, your highness. I'll lead the way."

'Sam...' I whispered in worry as this awful anxiety shrouding my heart slowly devour it.