

The Duke 221

Chapter 221 - Labyrinth

Meanwhile, Rufus' eyes glinted, staring ahead as he walked Kristina back to her quarters.

"What do you know?" he asked in a low, menacing tone.

Kristina gulped, taking a deep breath as the pain within her slowly subsided. Samael's presence was too strong for bearers like her and not attacking him as per her weapon's wishes had a painful repercussion.

"I know nothing, sir," she answered under her breath.

Rufus let out a shallow breath. "I suppose you already know the reason his grace never visited the Order."

"Yes, sir." Kristina gazed down, staring at her feet as they walked through the hallway. "Duke Samael is still a threat to this kingdom... his aura reeks with desire for this nation's fall."

"So why did you resist to your instincts?" he asked without giving her a single glance.

Kristina went silent and only their slow, pattering footsteps enveloped the two of them momentarily. Why did she resist in assaulting Samael? For a bearer, protecting the kingdom from potential threats was absolute. Disobeying it would bring excruciating pain.

"I..." Kristina trailed off as she sported a weak smile. "It's impossible for her grace to not be in pain if she is around the duke."

Rufus nodded ever so slowly, as they had already known that. She slowly raised her head and cast Rufus a side-eye.

"It makes me wonder if our divine weapons have remained pure over the years." Kristina stopped in her steps when Rufus suddenly paused.

He turned his head in her direction. His expression unreadable.

"Careful," He said, checking their surroundings before his eyes landed on her. "Whatever you said, never speak about it to anyone, but never forget."

"Do you know something we should know, Sir?"

Rufus didn't answer her question, but stared at her straight in the eye and warned. "Don't pry on things too much. Let it flow on their own for now. This is an order as your current captain."

Kristina pressed her lips in a thin line, staring back into his glinting eyes, before she nodded. She wasn't stupid not to understand that this was a warning to keep herself safe. Prying too much in the royal palace could cost anyone their lives. Samael proved just now how strong the La Crox was. The entire Order had to unite just to bring down Samael alone if they had to.

"Good." Rufus nodded, and he resumed in his steps. Kristina followed from behind.

"From now on, His Grace's visits will be frequent since he will personally train the entire third squadron," Rufus informed, catching Kristina off guard as she gazed at his side, wide-eyed.

"The more you resist, the more your Mace will bring you pain. His Grace is strong. He will not take a reckless decision if he was facing the previous bearers. So you do not have to worry."

Kristina's jaw tightened. Samael was an older generation vampire, and he was stronger than anyone. Before him, the new generation of the Order was nothing but children.

"Is there a reason the duke decided to train the people who can slay him someday?" she asked out of plain curiosity.

Rufus glanced at her briefly. "Duties, Lady Monroe." His simple and short answer tossed her in a lake of confusion.

"Answers are not always given, figuring it out yourself will give you a deeper comprehension," Rufus added, and they soon reached Kristina's quarters.

He turned and faced her squarely. "If you have time, you might want to visit the garden in the west wing."

"Are you trying to flirt with me after pulling an aura on me?" Kristina cocked her head to the side, wondering why Rufus would suddenly give her an invitation.

Rufus just faintly smiled, closed-lipped. "The air in the west garden is more refreshing."

Kristina stared at him for a moment before she nodded. There must be something in the west garden, she thought.

"Rest well." Rufus beckoned a neck bow before he turned around to return. Just as he took three steps, he paused when Kristina inquired;

"About Lilou." Kristina paused as she swallowed down a mouthful of saliva. "Is the reason the duke is exerting this effort is that he wishes we protect Lilou?" her eyes remained on his back.

The corner of his lips slowly curled into a slight smirk. He looked over his shoulder, eyebrow raised.

"He is doing all this, so you won't burden her," Rufus answered before continuing on his strides.

All she could do was stare at his broad back while his words hovered inside her mind repeatedly. Being with Lilou for half a year, Kristina knew Lilou was quick-witted and could easily adapt to her surroundings.

"Is it possible she's stronger?" she murmured to herself. "Well, she's a wielder of one of the three holy weapons Lakresha." Kristina shrugged as she pushed the door and went inside her quarters.

"Is that all the three of you can do?" Sam gasped in disbelief, staring down at us with disdain written all over his face.

Meanwhile, the three of us were on the ground, panting. How could he be this strong? He hadn't even broken a sweat!

"Damn it!" Ramin cursed through his gritted teeth, disgruntled by this one-sided fight. "This is unfair! You broke my wrist!"

"This is frustrating!" Charlotte also voiced out, annoyed that none of her attacks grazed Sam.

I only panted for air, keeping my silence as I fixed my eyes on Sam. It was truly frustrating that Sam barely lifted a finger to stop our attacks.

"Come on, bearers." Sam crooked a finger, taunting us to attack him again. "How can you be so weak when the nation lies in your hands?"

His words felt like a tight slap in the face, as that was true. If Sam wanted to wreak havoc right this very moment, the Order could only buy some time.

"Fuck!" Ramin cursed once again, punching the ground as we were all aware of our difference in strength — Ramin was all about strength, so this was an insult for him, especially.

"How is this a training!?" Charlotte complained, fuming in anger. "You're just insulting us!"

Sam ignored Charlotte as he fixed his attention towards Ramin. "You." Pointing a finger at him. "Don't fight with only brute force. Use your slightly used brain and study your opponent! Don't insult Labyrinth like that."

Ramin ground his teeth, prompting to attack but winced in pain instead. Sam clicked his tongue continuously, shaking his head as he walked towards Ramin and squatted down in front of him.

"Let's see your Labyrinth." Sam requested nonchalantly, while Ramin gazed at him. "I need to see it," he urged, nodding in encouragement.

Ramin's eyes glinted with reluctance, but he still lifted his hand in front of him. The silver bangle around his wrist slowly took form, shrouding his hand with a black and red mote of dust until it turned into a gauntlet.

"Hmm," Sam hummed, pressing a finger on top of the back of Ramin's hand, hindering it from grabbing him. He narrowed his eyes before raising them to meet Ramin's. "This is not Labyrinth," Sam said, making Ramin, Charlotte, and me furrow our brows. What was he saying?

Chapter 222 - Labyrinth II

Ramin ground his teeth, offended. "How dare you question my Labyrinth?!" he growled, kicking Sam, which the latter dodged as he sprung back like a grasshopper.

"This is not Labyrinth?!" Ramin roared as he slowly stood on his feet. "Who the hell are you to doubt my Labyrinth's legitimacy?"

I could feel the air around him thicken, making me unconsciously step back. I understood Ramin's anger as he was a proud Bearer of the Divine Order, and Sam's words were just a direct blow to that pride and ego.

"Have a taste of the Labyrinth you are mocking!" As Ramin's voice thundered, he bolted towards Sam with his fist aimed directly at Sam's face.

I held my breath as Ramin was too fast; I never saw him this agile. Sam didn't dodge this time. Instead, he caught Ramin's fist with his bare hand, clenching it tightly until the latter's fist trembled under his grip.

Ramin's eyes dilated as he gnashed his teeth, but his fist didn't move an inch. He stared at Sam's pair of lazy eyes as if defeat itself were staring back at him.

'I'm not sure if Sam was just that strong or we're just too weak,' I mumbled internally, closing my hands into a fist, as this was truly humiliating.

"Ramin, is it?" Sam spoke, batting his eyes languidly. "The previous owner of Labyrinth, Alfie, is a man I truly respected. I didn't mean to question your Labyrinth's authenticity."

His expression was the same as he tightened his grip, leaving cracks on the gauntlet until it shattered, turning into powder. The dust, glimmering with black and red, slowly wrapped around Ramin's wrist until it returned to a bangle.

"Labyrinth boosts its user's strength, but it offers more than that trinket. Do you know why it's called Labyrinth?"

Sam let Ramin go, and Ramin staggered back. His Labyrinth was forced back to its bangle form without exchanging blows with his opponent. Now, all the words he had said just became empty words, making a fool out of himself. So, it was understandable he was a little out of it.

"Ramin," I whispered, feeling apologetic, as he was still my colleague and he might be playful, but he was always kind.

Ramin slowly raised his head, revealing his pale, lifeless expression at Sam as the latter explained.

"labyrinth means a path in which it is difficult to find one's way. It might not make sense to you, but Labyrinth almost shares the same philosophy." Sam raised his hand, spreading his fingers as he held it in front of Ramin.

"You don't just throw your fist with Labyrinth, Ramin. Your weapon is not just a glove for an impactful punch, but essential for grabbing." Sam crooked his fingers but didn't close it entirely. "They said, once you enter a Labyrinth, getting out of it is impossible."

Ramin seemed appalled and even I am was a little baffled. Labyrinth was not for punching, but for grabbing? Did he mean... just like a maze, once something entered the grasp of the weapon Labyrinth, it was impossible to get out of its grip? That was how I understood Sam's words, but I was unsure.

"Right now, it's you who is insulting Labyrinth and its previous owner, my friend, Alfie." Sam's voice grew colder, his eyes still on Ramin as they glinted. "I've seen Labyrinth's beauty, and it's not merely that cheap-looking gauntlet. That Labyrinth can cover its bearer's hand up to his shoulder; it's beautiful and powerful."

Ramin's lips parted, but no words came out. Sam sounded as if he was truly training him, giving Ramin important pointers to remember. I've seen Labyrinth a couple of times, but to think it had another form... Sam didn't seem he was lying — there's no point, even if he was.

"More than the strength of your weapons and your individual strength, the real meaning of being a bearer is having a deeper understanding of your weapons." Sam's eyes darted from Ramin to Charlotte and then to me.

"Only when you truly understand your divine weapons, can you awaken its true powers and bring it to its full potential." We remained silent as we pondered about his words.

A bearer's understanding of our weapons? I unconsciously held onto my necklace, Lakresha. I moved my gaze back to Sam when he took out something from his waist. My brows furrowed while he put on an earring with a cross design.

"What was he doing?" I wondered under my breath.

Sam waved at Ramin. "Step aside. I'll show you an example," he said, and Ramin mindlessly created distance from him.

Sam raised his hand, whispering, "Catharsis," and something black formed under his palm. It swirled, causing gusts of wind around the training ground.

What a strong force, I thought, putting all my weight on my feet, so as not to get blown away, until the gust of wind subsided, and a thin sword appeared. Sam grabbed the thin, black sword and cocked his head to Ramin, and then to Charlotte, before casting me a brief look.

"This is Catharsis first form," He said, swinging the sword a few times. "Right now, your Labyrinth is like this Catharsis form."

Sam set his eyes back to Ramin, smirking. "And this is Catharsis real form." He swung his sword forward, holding it still as the thin sword slowly took a larger form that seemed it could slice a human in two!

My mouth fell open as Catharsis' aura right now felt... threatening. Lakresha slowly heated up but cooled down when Sam casually ordered his weapon to return and it returned to his earring.

"Do you three understand the difference now?" Sam inquired with a nonchalant tone.

My eyes instinctively fell on Ramin, and his initial lifeless expression was replaced with awe and excitement. I didn't even need to look at Charlotte as she excitedly screamed,

"Your Grace! Your Grace! How about my bow and arrow?!"

The hostility in the air at first gradually changed as those two listened to Sam like little children. A faint smile turned up on my lips, holding Lakresha.

'Lakresha, have I ever understood you?' I wondered, thinking that I never tried to understand Lakresha's will as I merely focused on taming it. But deep down, after seeing and having a feel of Catharsis' aura, there was something within me that bubbled with excitement.

Chapter 223 - Your Husband Is Really Amazing

Since the Bearers couldn't help but react to their weapon's wish, Sam's training centered on killing him. Yes, my husband had to face assassination attempts whilst telling — those same people who wanted him dead — about the strong point of their divine weapons.

"Uhm." I awkwardly raised my hand, catching Sam's attention while he was in the middle of blocking Charlotte's surprise attack. "You haven't taught me about my Lakresha, sir," I said, raising my brows cluelessly.

This had been the third day Sam started training the third squadron, and he had been very focused on honing Charlotte and Ramin's skills; Kristina was tasked with a special mission under Rufus' orders. Meanwhile, Sam only told me to observe first. His advice gave me these mixed emotions. Was he going easy on me? Because I'm his wife?

Sam smiled until his eyes squinted into a curve. "Just observe first." I frowned at his reply, it was the same response just like the past two days. I didn't move from my spot on the side of the training grounds.

"Your Grace! Are you giving Lilou a special treatment?!" Charlotte hollered, swinging her bow like a sword which Sam blocked it with his wooden sword. As her bow trembled against the wooden sword, Charlotte whisked out an arrow from behind her and shot Sam at a close distance.

"Wa... it." I trailed off as I held my breath. Charlotte's movements were quick, and her quick-thinking and fast reflexes had grown increasingly unpredictable. However, even though she caught Sam by surprise, Sam unhesitatingly bit the arrow, breaking it with his bare teeth.

Sam spewed the residue of the arrows from his mouth, licking his teeth. "Not bad, Lotti," He said approvingly.

Charlotte hopped back, eyes glimmering in awe. "Your Grace! That's amazing! I really thought I succeeded!"

My brows twitched, cringing. Succeeded in what? Killing my husband, who was also your instructor? A sigh slipped past my lips as this setup was strange no matter where I look at it.

"I'm not giving my wife special treatment," Sam answered the question asked previously, casting me a look and smirked. "She just needs to observe first," he added before shifting his attention back to Charlotte.

"Is Lilou strong?" Charlotte asked, holding her bow on her shoulder, not beating around the bush. "I just don't understand, your grace."

Me neither, I thought. I asked Sam about it the previous night, but he only said it was best for me to observe for now. I wondered if this had something to do with the increasing exhaustion from the nightmares I've been having.

"Girl, you only need to act on your instinct, or you'll hurt your brain." Sam sassed at Charlotte, inducing aggressive and continuous attacks from her.

"Come to think of it, why is his grace fine with Charlotte acting out of instincts while I had to rack my brain?" I turned my head to the side, my eyes landing on Ramin, who was told to recover his wrist first.

Although he had been very aggressive for the past two days, his worsening injury granted him ease from his Labyrinth's will. A bearer and a weapon's understanding between each other, the reason Ramin could relax, feeling no itch to assault Sam.

"His Lord said to use your head, you should use it now." I shrugged, as I had no idea as well.

Ramin turned to me, his nose scrunching up as his eyes flickered with disdain. "My head hurts already trying to figure out a lot of things. Do you have any idea how distressing it is to have no answer, but the questions in my mind just kept on increasing?"

"Believe me when I say I can relate," I murmured as I peeled my eyes off of him and cast my gaze at the two in the middle of the training grounds. "Myriads of questions and no answer... it's mentally exhausting."

Sam and Charlotte sparred until the sun was already setting and the latter couldn't move a muscle anymore. Ramin and I just had to watch them, analyzing every attack and how Sam blocked, deflected all her attempts.

My brow slightly raised. 'Charlotte's attack looks more aggressive than ever, but it was a little... strange. I could barely trace any killing intent from her, unlike her first encounter with Sam.' I thought, mentally shaking my head.

Maybe it was just me, and I glanced at Ramin, who was nodding approvingly, pleased at something.

"That's interesting," He said as the corner of his lips curled into a grin. "I think I just answered one question."

His tone was proud, piquing my curiosity, so I blurted out, "mind sharing it with me?"

Ramin looked up at me, still bearing the same grin. "A pattern."

"A pattern?"

His grin broadened. "I always wondered how his grace can deflect our attacks. I thought he was reading our mind or some sort." He paused, clearing his throat as he shifted his eyes back to Sam, who was squatting down in front of Charlotte.

"I figured that's not the case. He is simply studying his opponent's pattern, so he can guess what would come next."

I raised a brow, staring at Ramin, almost surprised. I couldn't believe Ramin was actually having deeper thoughts! Not that I was undermining him, but I've spent half a year with them, so I knew Ramin was more of the emotional type.

"We are unaware of it, but we unconsciously fight with a pattern." Ramin gazed down, staring at his palm. "If our opponent understood our weapons more than the bearers themselves, losing, or death, is our only option." He clenched his hand tightly until it trembled. His tone sounded full of resolve.

"I think I'm slowly getting the hang of his grace's words."

Ramin raised his head and shot me a look. A subtle smile replaced his proud grin.

"Your husband is really amazing, Lilou." He said, taking me by surprise as it felt as though he regarded Sam with the highest respect he could give to a person. "I don't know why he only asked you to observe, but if he says that's the only thing you need to focus on, there must be an important reason."

I pursed my lips in a thin line and let out a shallow breath. "You're changing, Ra."

"Well, I'm a bearer. A proper Bearer had to swallow his pride and ask someone I want to defeat for guidance." Ramin shrugged nonchalantly as he slowly retracted his eyes away from me. "Pride will not make me stronger, nor it can save this kingdom in times of peril."

The side of my lips slowly hooked into a subtle smile. "That's right," I whispered, nodding lightly. It was only three days since Sam started training us, but he was already changing our mentality. What was more surprising was, he seemed to really turn us into proper Bearers of the Divine Order.

"Sam is really amazing, indeed," I whispered under my breath, making me more determined to do better.

Chapter 224 - Downright Satanic

At the same time...

"Garden in the west wing," Kristina whispered, walking through the quiet hallway leading to the garden in the west wing of the palace.

For the past three days, Rufus ordered her to survey the town of Libira, an outskirt in the capital, and she only had returned now. Rufus' words had intrigued Kristina, so she headed in the west wing as soon as she was done reporting.

"The west palace is more deserted than I thought." She looked around without pausing in her steps, eyebrow raised. "I haven't bumped into anyone since I came in here."

Not that it was strange, as this was the area of the cold palace.

"Nevermind." She shook her head, heightening her senses instead, just in case of possible danger. Her steps slowed down when approaching the garden as the air from it was thick... too thick that she instinctively held on her trinket, Mace.

Kristina cautiously entered the west garden, her eyes scanning the surrounding, and soon caught a figure. Her breath hitched as she scanned the person standing not far away from her, his back facing her.

"Who..." she trailed off, studying the man's towering and lean stature, wearing a butler suit. 'Mister Fabian?' she thought, recalling Lilou's description of the most notorious psychopath in history.

Fabian was holding a watering can, staring at the newly dug spot with his other hand inside his pocket. He seemed strangely at ease, but the air around him felt... eerie.

'Why would Sir Knight tell me to come in here?' she wondered, taking a cautious step back, but froze when Fabian glanced over his shoulder. There was an instant chill wave that ran down her spine, even though she didn't meet his eyes.

"Hey!" Kristina jumped when a man's voice snapped in the eerie silence. She moved her eyes in the opposite direction, making her brows furrowed.

'Isn't that his highness the fifth prince?' she wondered, studying Klaus's annoyed face as he stormed towards Fabian. The latter only cast him a quick look of disinterest before continuing on in watering the ground.

To Kristina's surprise, a child was walking behind Klaus. She heard about this child, Claude. A pure-blooded La Crox and also the bearer of Auron. Although she hadn't met him before, despite being both bearers, her Mace recognized Auron's dominant presence.

Claude halted in his step and set his doe eyes on her, blinking adorably without saying a word. As she locked gaze with that adorable child, Kristina swallowed down the little saliva left in her.

'They said the bearer of Auron is strong, but his aura felt really different in person.' She thought, evaluating the difference between her strength and Claude.

"Fucking Fabian! I heard you nearly murdered Hanz?!" yelled Klaus, catching Kristina's attention and saw Klaus grumbled in front of Fabian, pointing a finger at him. "How dare you try to kill my brother!? I told you he is mine to butcher!"

Her attention towards Klaus didn't last long as Claude inquired, "Mace, what are you doing here?"

"Uh." Kristina snapped her eyes, clearing her throat, as this was not what she expected to see in the west garden. "Sir Knight told me the air in the west wing is refreshing, so I came here for a walk," she explained, afraid they would misunderstand her intentions.

"I see." Claude nodded, and an awkward silence instantly befell the two of them.

"I," Kristina cleared her throat for the nth time, thinking Rufus probably didn't expect that these people would be here. "I should go," she said and Claude nodded.

Just as she turned around, fear crept up to her spine as she sensed someone's gaze.

"Where are you going?" asked Fabian, blinking ever so slowly as he watched her turn her head back at him. When their eyes met, he added, "If Rufus told you to come here, then that only means you're invited to the party."

"Invited?" she furrowed her brows, darting her eyes from Fabian to Klaus, and then to Claude. "What... were you people planning?" Kristina asked, as it seemed Rufus led her to a path with no ticket to return.

Fabian smiled, his eyes squinting like usual, but she felt a sudden sense of dread behind it. "Gardening and cleaning party, Miss Monroe," he said in a light tone. "Just some simple chore, nothing special."

"Careful with him," Klaus whispered, which didn't seem it was meant to be a secret. "Else, he will bury you alive!"

"No," Claude chimed in, staring at the ground Fabian watered. "Just don't be stupid like my uncle Klaus and you'll be safe," He added in an emotionless tone.

"Child, do you want to die?"

"Uh..." Kristina recoiled when she saw a finger from the newly covered pit. "Someone..." she pointed at the finger, but Fabian only offered her a smile before he answered.

"The sprout is just growing. Please don't mind it."

Kristina's face twitched. "Is it the..."

"It's not Uncle Hanz," Claude answered, even before she could complete her sentence. "It's just some mice sneaking around."

"Ohh..."

"Fabian, can you stop burying people? This is a garden, not a cemetery!" Klaus clicked his tongue, irritated that everyone got to be buried alive, so they struggled until the very end. "Your sadistic methods are just wasting our time!" he added.

"Sadistic?" Claude tilted his head to the side, genuinely appalled. "Uncle, I think Mister Fabian is just downright diabolical."

Kristina resisted from having face spasm with their conversation. For hell's sake! The person they were talking about was just standing an arm's length away from them!

She cringed when Fabian responded with a calm, "I'm giving them the opportunity to breathe life into the earth." Fabian shrugged as he squatted down, picking up the grass shears, then cut the finger as if he was merely cutting the grass!

Her mouth fell open, staring at the severed finger, and then Fabian casually brushed more soil on the small hole the finger caused to cover it! What more shocking was that Klaus and Claude didn't even bat an eye, already used to Fabian.

'I heard a lot about him, but...' Her thoughts trailed off as she gulped. 'I didn't think he actually lives up to his notorious reputation. Just what was Sir Knight thinking? No, just what kind of trap did I step into?'

Chapter 225 - Driven Into Madness

After our training, Sam and I walked back to the third prince's quarters. On the way, I glanced at him, who was walking right beside me.

"Husband," I called, and he raised a brow before casting me a look. "How long do I have to observe? I understand you must have a reason, but can you tell me what it is?"

"Even if I tell you, it will only confuse you, my wife."

I frowned and let out a shallow breath, shifting my eyes ahead. "Is that so?"

Sam's gaze lingered on me for a while before setting them forward. We walked through the hallway in silence until he cleared his throat and broke the ice.

"Don't be impatient, wife. I have a lot of things to teach you, but you need to have dominant control of your thoughts."

His voice was low, catching my attention. My brows furrowed as I unconsciously snuck a quick look at him.

"Are you saying this because I'm still inside the clutches of the power of sire?" I asked, and I exhaled. "The king guaranteed you that..."

I didn't get to finish when Sam abruptly cut me off. "Are you certain Stefan never used that on you throughout our stay in here?"

Silence befell us as I gazed down. I couldn't respond. There was one time I could remember, but that was months ago. I avoided all places where I could meet Stefan after that.

"Wife, although your situation with Stefan doesn't sit well with me, that's not the only reason I'm telling you to control your head," Sam uttered calmly as we came close to our chambers. "I just don't want you to hurt yourself."

"Hurt myself...? Why would I hurt myself?" I wondered with my brows furrowed.

"Hurting yourself doesn't mean you have to inflict physical pain on you." Sam shrugged nonchalantly, and we stopped upon reaching our bed chamber. He added, "there are more things that can be harmful than a sword, love."

I faced Sam squarely, my hand on the surface of the door. "Like?"

"The truth." He smiled, closed-lipped. "Go in. I have matters to attend to, so I will join you later."

He jerked his chin towards the door while he stared at me. Sam deliberately diverted the subject, and that only means I wouldn't get an answer to which truth he was talking about.

"Being kept in the dark is a very unpleasant feeling, Sam," I said as I pushed the door open. "I'll see you later."

Sam was left behind, standing outside the door. I could feel his gaze on my back until the door shut closed.

"The truth..." I let out a sigh, dragging my feet towards the divan, to where plopped my butt down.? "... not knowing and knowing it both gives me pain, husband."

If he would just let me know of what was going on behind the peaceful surface of the palace, it would be much better. But it seemed that was too much to ask.

I tilted my head back, staring at the high-ceiling, and my eyelids felt heavy. I raised my arm and rested it on my forehead.

"I don't want to close my eyes," I muttered under my breath. "I will only go back to that nightmare... it's exhausting."

My eyes still slowly shut closed despite fighting the urge to sleep, and soon, I fell into another exhausting slumber.

Just like how previous dreams, it started with me squeezing myself through the crowd just to get pushed on the road and get saved by a stranger. It continued on until the time I was walking back to my shack and met that vampire.

"Blood... give me... blood..."

A shiver ran down my spine as he inhaled heavily on my nape. My body shivered under his grip as sprout roots seemed to grow under my feet, stilling me on the ground.

"...blood."

My eyes snapped as I heard him gasp and the aura of his fangs prickled my skin. Adrenaline rush surged deep into my bones as I flailed my arms, struggling to break away from his grip. This seemed to take him by surprise as I escaped his clutches and lurched away from him.

My eyes fell on him, holding my hand closer to my chest. His skin was wrinkled and almost gaunt, and his chest moved in and out heavily, gnashing his teeth while staring at me.

"Monster..." I stammered with my lips trembling, taking a step back. "Go... away."

"Blood," He uttered through his gritted teeth and his drool dribbled down from the corner of his lips. "I need your..."

I didn't wait for him to finish whatever he wanted to say as I made a run for it. Was he really a vampire? All the vampires I've seen from afar looked ethereal, but this appeared as though he had crawled his way up from hell.

"Kyah!" I shrieked when he pounced on me from behind, causing me to stumble down, face first.

Everything happened so fast and I could barely remember how I desperately struggled while he was on top of me. After a long struggle, I ended up lying on my back. My hands forcing his jaw away from me.

"No!" I screeched. "I won't give you my blood!"

The vampire suddenly grabbed my wrist and pinned them on either side of me. He didn't waste a second as he bent over, sinking his fangs into my shoulder.

Pain.

"Ahh!" I shrieked and choked, writhing underneath him at the excruciating pain slicing through my flesh as if I was being bitten by a beast.

I kicked my feet, wiggled my hands, tiring myself, but nothing. All I could do was listen to his every large gulp, and each time, I felt hope slipping away from my hands.

'You can't die here, Lilou.' I told myself, 'you have to fight!'

Fight? How could I stay optimistic at this point? I stopped struggling, and he loosened his grip. He probably thought I wouldn't struggle anymore. Well, even if I did, what's the point?

'I will di...' my thoughts trailed off as cocked my head to the side, catching a glimpse of a hand-size tree branch just almost within my reach.

I gritted my teeth, enduring the pain as I carefully reached for it. My fingertip touched the branch, but I had to move just a tiny bit more so I can grab it, so I did. He was too busy sucking me dry, so he didn't notice my slight movements.

A faint bubble of hope resurfaced in my heart when I gripped the branch.

"I will... kill you!" I screamed and gritted my teeth, not thinking twice as I stabbed his ear with the branch.

Chapter 226 - Drowned With Self-delusion And Blinded By Desperation

"I will... kill you!"

Blood splattered on me, and the side of my lips curled into a brief smirk. However, that was not enough to kill him as he slowly drew away, touching his bleeding ears.

He seemed surprised, gazing at his palm after touching his wounded ear. I crawled away from him, pushing myself back with my feet.

I winced when he suddenly stuck his tongue out and licked his palm ever so slowly. This disgusting monster... he had really lost his mind because of his hunger.

My shoulder stiffened as soon as his gaze landed on me. "Come close, or I will kill you," I warned, clutching at the branch tightly.

His response was a diabolical smirk, sending waves of fear in me. Although the fear in me was great, my will to survive was far greater. I knew taking a person's life was a sin, but that didn't matter to me at this moment. This was a matter of who would die between us, and that was definitely not me.

The vampire slowly stood up on his feet until he towered over me. I forced myself to stand, but my knees felt weak and all I could do was look up to meet his gaze. His steps towards me were slow, making the crisp sound of withered leaves under his foot louder.

"Don't..." My voice shook, couldn't conceal my terror.? "... come close."

"Kill..." he hissed and pounced on me, flinging his hand and broke the branch in my hand. My heart instantly dropped to my stomach as he grinned maniacally.

"Kill."

His mouth parted, baring his fangs, but I instinctively grabbed him by the hair, tugging his head back.

"No!" I screamed at the top of my lungs, my voice echoing across the hill. He hissed, but I gripped at his hair, knowing that letting him go was akin to letting go of my lifeline.

The struggle lasted for a long time and I didn't know where I got all the strength to stop him. My hand slowly crept over his face, and I placed my thumb on his eye, while he suddenly wrapped his fingers around my neck, choking me to death.

My breath hitched, slowly getting suffocated, but that didn't stop me. I ground my teeth and yelled as I decisively pressed my thumb inside his eye.

'It bled...' I froze for a second, but his grip around my neck loosened as he shouted, so I continued. My thumb sunk deeper, feeling the soft flesh of his eyes around my thumb.

"Ahh!" he screamed in pain while covering his eye. I pushed his chest away, and I crawled away.

The vampire screamed, howled, hunching in pain with his hand on his wounded eye while on the ground. I watched him in horror and shock before my eyes snapped when I noticed his back trembling.

'End him!' my mind yelled in panic. 'He will kill you once he recovered!'

'That's right,' I thought, and I mindlessly looked around, crawling on the ground as I mustered my strength to run.

'No, he will catch you soon! Kill him!' my subconscious mind whispered, making me pause as soon as I took a step.

"If I don't kill him..." My eyes fell towards the huge rock which I thought I could carry. "... he will kill me for sure."

"Ahhhh!" I glanced back at him, gulping down the little saliva left in me, and decided.

I ran towards the rock and picked it up with all my might. While he was writhing in pain, I dragged my feet while carrying the rock towards him. My eyes were cold as I gazed down at him.

'I have to do it.' I convinced myself, clenching my teeth as I lifted the rock, and I shouted when I? unhesitatingly pounded it against the back of his head.

I crushed his head over and over and over until parts of his brain spurted around and blood splattered on me. I only stopped squashing his head when I couldn't lift the rock anymore.

"Hah..." I exhaled through my mouth as I gazed at his crushed head and the blood and flesh around. "...hah." My breath hitched as my entire body shook.

"I did it..." I muttered, having mixed emotions of relief and dread.

Everything that just happened and what I had done didn't register in my head immediately. Only when I raised my hand and stared at my palm covered with blood, I realized I took someone's life.

"Hah..." The beating of my heart drummed even faster as I hyperventilated. Tears formed on the corner of my eyes and they unhesitatingly rolled down my cheeks.

"Ahh... ahh!" I grabbed my hair, screaming, crying, standing on the fine line between sanity and insanity. It was too much for me to handle. I felt like something in my mind broke.

"Ahhh... hah... hahaha!" my screaming gradually grew into hysterical waves of laughter until my throat rasped, losing my voice temporarily and my mind went into a blank state.

In the end, I stayed there for a very long time, staring listlessly at the lifeless body these hands had taken. I didn't know what got into me, but I dragged his corpse somewhere and dug a pit all night with my bare hands, where I buried his body.

**

At the crack of dawn, I dragged my feet back to my shack. My body felt heavy, but I managed. When my shack came to my sight, I turned my head to the side.

"I should've listened to Old Olly," I mumbled, staring at the sun peeking over the horizon. "Why did I even want to go back here?"

The answer was obvious. It was because I felt like someone was waiting for me to come home.

"It was just your delusion that someone is waiting for you, Lilou," I told myself, letting out a low chuckle full of bitterness. I shook my head and dragged my feet towards my home, but instead of heading inside, I went directly to my father's burial mound.

On the way, I halted as my jaw tightened. That warm air and aura from the burial mound were blowing past me as if the wind were whispering words of worry in my ears.

"I... I'm sorry," I whispered and took a step forward. "I was busy." And I headed towards my destination with my eyes on the ground.

When I reached the back lot of my shack, I paused in my steps as I slowly raised my head. My eyes landed on a towering figure of a man wearing a cloak with his back facing me.

"Who... are you?" I murmured and watched him slowly turned around. The feeling of dread immediately crept into my heart but subsided when another gust of wind blew past me.

"It's you?" My feet stepped forth towards him as he gave me the same feeling as that wind that had comforted me. He looked a little puzzled, but stayed on his standpoint until I was a step away from him.

I slowly gazed up at him, recognizing his breathtaking beauty. "You came?" my hand clutched on his cloak tightly, afraid he'd leave if I let him go.

"It's you again?" he asked in a low, menacing tone while his eyes narrowed. "How did you..." the man trailed off as he noticed the blood on me.

The corner of my lips curled into a subtle smile as I hung my head low, resting my forehead against his chest.

"I'm sorry I'm late. Something happened on the way, but I'm home now," I muttered under my breath, ignoring the different aura he exuded. "Don't leave me now, hmm?"

Drowned with self-delusion and blinded with desperation, I mistook someone just because he saved me once... and I have to pay a heavy price for it.

Chapter 227 - A Role I Never Thought I Would Willingly Take

I opened my eyes slowly and met with the pair of crimson orbs hovering over me. Having those recurring dreams almost every day and night slowly numbed me, although they were still as exhausting as usual.

"Dreams again?" Sam asked, brushing the strands of my hair away from my forehead and added, "You're handling them well now."

"Was I out for a long time?" I furrowed my brows, as I didn't expect to wake up on his lap after a nap.

Sam smacked his lips for a moment and answered, "Yes. For ten days."

My mind short-circuited for a second, processing his words to make sense out of them. Did he Say ten days? How was that possible? I gasped and only then I realized he was toying with me as he snickered.

I clicked my tongue as my expression died down in an instant. "I hate you."

"Oh, I'll accept anything from you, love," Sam smirked, and I pounded my fist against his chest, but he held my wrist. "There's always a fine between everything, so as long as I'm not on that fine line, it's fine."

"You're standing on that fine line, young man." I rolled my eyes at him and assisted myself up while he chuckled gleefully.

As soon as I sat upright, I instinctively gazed at the window to see how dark it was outside. My stomach also grumbled at the same time, making me rub it.

"I'm hungry," I faced Sam, pouting as it seemed I skipped dinner.

"I know. That's why I came to pick you up."

My eyes narrowed suspiciously, eyebrows knitting together. "You don't always do this. Is there something wrong?"

"This place is always wrong. What are you talking about?" Sam shrugged nonchalantly. "But it's been a while since we dined with everyone."

"By everyone, you mean your brothers and sisters?"

"Who else?" he cocked his head to the side, sporting an innocent look. "Klaus and my other brothers arrived in the Capital, so a family dinner is a must."

"Klaus?" My eyes dilated a little. I had almost forgotten about that fifth prince's existence. Remembering Klaus also made me remember someone who was I with before I got abducted to the palace.

"Husband, do you know what happened to the child we dine with?" I gasped as I totally forgot that we were with a child when I was abducted!

"Huh?"

His puzzled expression was expected, so I clarified. "Claude. The adorable child who was abandoned by his uncle? Don't you remember him?"

"Ahh..." Sam nodded in understanding, making my eyes marveled hoping Claude was alright. "I took care of him."

A sigh of relief slipped past my lips. "That's good," but my relief didn't last for a second as I narrowed my eyes at him skeptically. "By 'took care of him', you mean you took care of him in peace, right?"

The corner of his lips slowly curled into a smile that reached his eyes while my eyes sharpened.

"Sam."

Sam chuckled as he raised both his hands. "Of course. I asked Marquess Crawford to take care of him. How can I touch a child whom you're so fond of?"

So if I wasn't fond of him, he'd do something else?

I studied his expression carefully and only when I was certain he wasn't lying, I truly felt relieved. It was good that Cameron sheltered the child since he was pitiful. If only I wasn't abducted at that time, I would love to play with him a bit more.

"Do you really like that child so much?" Sam's question snapped me out of my thoughts, making me set my eyes back on him. "But, you don't even know his origins."

"Do I have to know someone's origins to like them?" I frowned as cast him a look of disdain. "Even if he is the son of the devil, the child is always innocent! Will you like it if our child gets ostracized just because his parents were human and a vampire?"

Sam's eyes briefly dilated as he froze for a second. Did I say anything wrong? I reviewed what I said and realized my remarks were a little... too straightforward.

"Oh, right..." I said awkwardly, scratching my jaw with my finger. "I said something..."

I trailed off as Sam responded with a cold. "I'll just kill them all."

"Pardon?"

"If anyone tried to debar our child, I'll kill those children and their parents, or perhaps, annihilating their entire clan is better." His response sent a piercing chill down my spine, feeling sorry for our child, as it seemed finding genuine friends would be hard for him.

"What's with that look?" Sam asked with a furrowed brow. He looked annoyed for reasons unknown.

I shook my head lightly. "Nothing, husband. I'm just surprised that you didn't close your mind with the idea of having a child, and at the same time, I'm worried that our child will find it hard to have real friends because his father is an... intimidating man."

"That doesn't make sense, love," Sam replied, and I raised my head at him. "With me as the father, only those who bore no malice will have the gall to approach our child. Unless they want to meet their untimely death. To simply put, my presence alone will narrow down the people who will approach him with an ulterior motive."

"Please, stop, my lovely husband. You're making me more worried about our child's future."

Sam slightly gasped, insulted. "Why would you, love? Am I not reliable? That breaks my nonexistent heart."

"I didn't mean to break your heart." Another heavy and helpless sigh slipped past my lips. "I just wish our child to at least have a normal childhood."

"And what is normal for you?"

I pondered for a moment. "A childhood... where he can look back and only see good memories?"

Sam nodded his head in understanding of my response. While staring at him, I could not help but smile.

This was our first time talking about our roles as parents comfortably. It brought this strange joy to my heart, as I wanted to believe having a family with him wasn't impossible.

I sprawled my arm and reach for his hand. Sam arched his brow at my touch as he set his eyes on me.

"Is it possible, Sam?" My eyes softened, squeezing his hand lightly. "Us, having a child... is it possible?"

He stared at me for a moment and smiled faintly. "Once we return to Grimsbanne, I will work harder to have at least ten."

"Huh?" That response was so random.

"Ten children, Lilove. Once we return to Grimsbanne, we will fill the mansion with more children than an orphanage." His smile grew into a cunning smirk as he raised a brow.

I gasped in disbelief and instinctively slapped his shoulder. "What am I to you? A baby-making beast?!"

"What's the purpose of your training if you can't bear as many children as we can?"

My jaw fell down as I stared at him in distraught. Did he agree for me to train for the past half a year for that reason?!

"Haha! I'm not serious." Sam laughed, pleased to see my reaction before he leaned in, closing the gap between us. "Kidding aside, I think if it's with you, I don't mind having a child or taking a role I never thought I would accept."

"Sam..." my heart warmed up as my eyes softened.

Sam placed a hand on top of my head and smiled. "For now, let's eat because the monster in your stomach is screaming."

Chapter 228 - The Child Abandoned By His Uncle

As planned, Lena helped me get changed while Sam said he would be back so he could escort me to the family dinner. We agreed he would return once I finished.

"Can we skip the corset?" I glanced at Lena as she cinched my waist.

Lena stopped and shifted her gaze at me through the full-body mirror. "Your highness, should I just prepare your training outfits instead?"

"Oh!" I intoned. "That's an excellent suggestion! Let's do that."

"Your highness..." Lena sighed helplessly as the corner of her eyes welled up. "You've been wearing your training suit for the past half a year. You don't doll up anymore, and it's worrying. This is the only time you will wear a dress again. How can you dine your his and her highnesses wearing your training suit?"

"Lena, I'm a Bearer, so honing my strength and skills is a must."

"But you just got married!" Lena pouted, puffing her cheek. "His Grace, the Duke, shouldn't let you hold a weapon."

"Lena." I stared at her reflection, and the corner of her lips curved down even more. "I understand your concern, but this decision is mine and my husband is merely honoring it."

"But... you're growing thinner and you look more exhausted every day."

A sigh escaped from my lips as I couldn't deny that, but she wouldn't believe me if I say it was because of my dreams. So, I offered her a kind smile as I took a deep breath.

"Don't worry, Lena. Just tie the corset." I caught her cast me a look before she nodded and proceeded to dress me up.

Lena did everything from fixing my hair and dressing me up, to putting on light makeup to cover up my exhaustion. We didn't speak until she was finished and Sam came back.

As usual, when we arrived in the dining hall, the other princes and their first wives and husbands were already present; the king wasn't there yet, and Silvia wasn't present as well. Sam escorted me to sit before he sat right next to me.

"Yul," I called that almost sounded like a whisper, catching his attention. Yul was seated a few seats across from us.

Yul cocked his head to the side, arching a brow. "What?"

"I just want to say hi," I said, almost complaining at his cold tone. "How can you be so cold?"

Yul had also been busy recently and our schedules had been conflicting with each other. So, we barely met for the past half a year and the last time I talked to him was around two months ago.

"Since when did you start thinking I'm warm towards you?"

I cringed and clicked my tongue. "Until when will you continue to aggravate me? Goodness. Is saying 'hello' will cost you a fortune?"

"It can cost me my life." Yul also clicked his tongue as he jerked his chin towards the person next to me.

I turned my head to Sam, seeing him a little distracted as he was staring in the opposite direction. He snapped to reality when I called him.

"Sam?"

Sam slowly turned his head to me, eyebrow raised. "Hmm?"

"Are you waiting for someone?" I asked, curious as he seemed a little... leery.

"Fabian," He answered and smiled subtly. "Don't mind me. Just aggravate Yul for now."

"Brother, how can you say that?" Yul's tone was full of disdain, which caught my attention, so I shot him a glare.

"Do you hate talking to me that much?"

"What gave you that impression?" Yul scrunched his nose before he lifted his chin. "I merely wanted rest since you're not the only person who is exhausted."

"What? Are you also training?"

"What do you think I've been doing? Drinking tea and walking around the Avolire Palace?" he didn't even conceal his sarcasm with his response.

"No wonder your mood had gotten worse," I grumbled, inducing glares from him, but I didn't care.

Although Yul and I bickered at every turn and chance we got, I started believing that this just shows how we had gotten close. Aside from Silvia, Yul wasn't close with his other siblings. Silvia even told me Yul only speak more with me, which didn't sound like a compliment. After all, even though he spoke more, they were mostly insults towards me.

"And you look more gaunt. Can you even lift a fork?"

I took a deep breath and calm my nerves, smiling brightly at him. "I can even carry two Lakresha. Do you want to see it?"

"Pfft—" Yul snorted and shook his head, making my expression fade completely. "You? Did you hit your head when you were training?"

"Really now..."

I reached for my cutlery so I could throw it in his throat, but before I could, I heard a familiar cocky voice of a man. My eyes searched for the figure and immediately caught the entering figure with his arms spread open.

Klaus.

"Brothers and sisters! It's been a while!" Klaus had this broad grin as his eyes traveled across the table. "I didn't know my absence will bring longing to your shallow hearts..."

Klaus continued to speak his sentiments despite receiving glares and unpleasant snickered from his other brothers and sisters. I didn't pay attention to him and I was about to look away. However, my eyes caught a figure walking behind him, causing my eyes to dilate in disbelief.

"Claude?" I gasped under my breath as I watched the adorable kid walked in our direction. He stopped, perched on the seat next to me, turned his head, and met my eyes.

"Nice to see you again, Auntie Lilove."

My mind short-circuited momentarily as he looked and sounded like the child abandoned by his uncle. Just then, my mind snapped at the word Uncle as I shifted my eyes towards the boasting Klaus, and everything seemed to fall into the right timeline.

Klaus's appearance in Crawford's mansion, Claude's words, and Sam's words from earlier.

I snapped back to my trance when Claude uttered, "I didn't mean to deceive Auntie Lilove, but you got abducted that time by Father, so I didn't have the chance to introduce myself properly."

Claude hopped out of his seat, pushed the chair away before he stood to my side.

"I will introduce myself again. My name is Lucas Claude Third La Crox of the La Crox royal blood and the successor of Auron, one of the three holy divine bearers of the Order."

I stared at the child thoughtlessly, rendered speechless, as this wasn't what I expected. The poor child I was pitying... turned out to be royal blood and a bearer as well?

Amidst my shock, I heard someone announce the king's arrival and Stefan's voice instantly tickled my ears.

"Lilou, sit here."

Chapter 229 - Atypical Family Dinner

"Lilou, sit here."

His voice prickled under my skin as I winced, turning my head towards Stefan, who sat on the host's seat. Did he just invite me to sit next to him?

"What's wrong?" asked Sam, and I turned my head to him, baffled.

Didn't he hear Stefan's invitation? I studied his expression, and it seemed that was the case.

"No — nothing." I shook my head lightly, sporting a forced smile to reassure him.

Sam narrowed his eyes suspiciously but didn't probe about it as he nodded. A sigh of relief slipped past my lips as I averted my eyes.

'Is it just my imagination?' I wondered internally, trying to shrug it off, but it lingered in my mind.

Except for my defiant husband, we greeted the King with a curtsy or a bow fitting for how a king should be greeted before we all settled down with our seats. Stefan gazed at everyone around, but somehow, his eyes lingered in my direction a little longer.

'What was he doing?' I thought as I avoided his eyes by drawing back, my back fusing with the high-back chair.

"It's been a while since we all gathered for dinner, and I'm pleased that each of you accepted my invitation," Stefan remarked in a calm and light tone. "I hope you will enjoy tonight's simple banquet I prepared for everyone."

Stefan gestured everyone to dig in with a smile, which everyone happily did. It didn't take long enough when the air was filled with their indistinct chattering, waves of laughter, and Klaus' boasting.

'This is unexpected.' I thought, a little surprised that this family dinner was not like the previous family dinners.

It was strange to say this, but they looked just like a normal family. It made me feel a little warm, but I wondered if things were a bit different?

By different, I mean, how nice would it be if what Klaus was talking about was his interesting journey away from the Capital instead of the things he had learned to torture someone. It would also be nice if Dominique, who also returned from the cold north, was giving out real souvenirs to them instead of tossing a person's eyeballs to his brothers. Hanz seemed offended, though, so it was a spectacle to watch.

Yul also seemed irritated as an eyeball rolled in front of his plate. While I watched them in silence, my eyes met Silvia, who arrived with the king.

Silvia offered me a kind smile as she raised a glass of wine, a gesture for a toast. I hastily grabbed my glass and raised it as well, but before I could drink it, I checked if it was water — it was, so I drank it without hesitation.

"Auntie Lilove." Claude snatched away my attention as he called me. "I heard you like chocolates, so bought you one."

Claude took out a small box from his pocket and presented it to me. I still had mixed emotions about Claude's identity, but it was not like it was his fault entirely.

I smiled and placed a hand on his head. "Thank you, your highness."

"Auntie, haven't you forgiven me?" he asked and frowned. "Why would you address me so formally?"

"Please, don't misunderstand." I shook my head lightly, chuckling sweetly as I patted his head. "Even if I'm your uncle Sam's wife, I still have to address you properly."

"I see. So, you will call me by my name if it's just the two of us?"

"Of course, your highness." I grinned, pleased to see how his expression brightened with his cheek coloring in red.

Claude was too adorable. It made me wonder what my child would look like with Sam's genes and mine combined.

"Eat well, alright?" I said as I retracted my hand away from him. Claude nodded and resumed eating. I watched him happily as he ate well.

"Lilou."

My shoulders suddenly stiffened when I heard Stefan's voice once again. I didn't avert my eyes from Claude, and it seemed he didn't hear it.

'Can he speak in my head now?' I wondered as I slowly turned my eyes and set it on him. Stefan was drinking wine, enjoying his own company.

"Lilou."

I flinched when Stefan's voice suddenly rang in my head once again. Stefan did nothing, but I kept hearing his voice in my head.

'Lilou, don't do this.' I massaged my temple as my head suddenly throbbed painfully. 'Keep your head together.' I told myself, taking deep breaths

"Wife." I jumped when Sam suddenly whispered in my ear. Fortunately, his arm was around my waist, stilling me on my seat.

"Are you alright?" Sam asked, knitting his brows and inching closer to inspect my face.

I cleared my throat as nodded. "Yes, I'm just a little... lost in thought."

"Do you want my help so you can focus?" he asked, and I furrowed my brows before my breath hitched.

Sam squeezed my waist lightly as the corner of his lips curled into a playful smirk. Only then I realized the sensual aura he was exuding from his touch.

"Sam," I called in a low tone, slapping his thigh lightly. "Behave."

"I am behaving." Sam shrugged as he removed his arm around my waist and used it to caress my shoulder by the back of his hand.

"You have nice skin." He commented as he stared at my shoulder before slowly raising his eyes on me. "Can I take a bite?"

I only gazed at him, hiding the fact that just his gaze alone could make me feel hot. I don't remember Sam seducing me, but now that he was doing it, my throat felt parch.

"There are so many people, Sam," I whispered in panic while my trembling hand reached for the glass to my mouth. "Behave yourself."

"People?" Sam intoned before he leaned closer and whispered in my ear. "Then, shall we take this somewhere private?"

I turned to him, and he was wiggling his brows, smirking. My mouth opened, but words clogged in my throat while Sam sipped wine with his eyes on me. Until now, I had to admit it was still hard to keep up with his stamina.

'It was not like I wanted to reject him. We can't just sneak out while the king is still here.' I thought, staring back at him and mouthed, 'Later.'

Sam read my lips as he nodded. A smug grin resurfaced on his lips. "We're not that patient, aren't we?" he offered his hand for me to grasp.

"Hand," He said, and I hesitated to take it, knowing him, but I still did. "Good girl," he said as his fingers wrapped around my hand.

Chapter 230 - The Past That Chased Us Like A Shadow

"Hand," He said, but I hesitated to take it, knowing him, but I still did. "Good girl," he said as his fingers wrapped around my hand.

Please, Sam turned his head in Stefan's direction. "Your Majesty, it seemed that my wife is not feeling well."

Stefan cast me a brief look, making me grip Sam's hand tightly.

"Is that so?" Stefan nodded in understanding. "Should I send the royal physician to your quarters?"

"There's no need. Just a little rest will do."

"Alright, take care of your wife." Stefan approved, surprising me a little as to how easily he approved was suspicious in its own way.

"You don't have to tell me that," Sam replied bluntly before assisting me up. As he did, my attention shifted to Claude as he held my hand while looking up at me.

"Little crumb, my wife needs rest," Sam uttered in a slightly annoyed tone. I nearly elbowed him, as he needed to be more soft talking to a child.

"Auntie Lilove, you will leave already?" Claude inquired dejectedly, ignoring Sam as his eyes were fixed on me.

I smiled and patted his head lightly. Claude was such a cute child and had this innocent aura which was hard to come across in this place.

"Auntie needs to rest, but I will see you tomorrow, alright?"

Claude pursed his lips and only nodded in response. I then picked up the small box he gifted me and thanked him once again.

"I will savor every bite," I reassured, and that seemed to make him feel a little better.

"Let's go?" Sam cocked his head as he guided my hand around his arm. I nodded in response and he took the lead.

"Hell, the duchess needs rest," Klaus yelled, and I instinctively turned my head in his direction. "Don't exhaust her too much."

I frowned as part of me didn't like his remarks on top of not liking Klaus entirely. The memory of his visit to Cunningham had etched in my mind and it won't be forgotten easily.

"Hold your tongue, Klaus," Sam warned after glancing at me and noticed my displeasure. Klaus seemed to understand Sam's tone, so he zipped his mouth.

With that being said, Sam and I walked away. However, as we did, my eyes instinctively glanced at Stefan and our eyes instantly met. My shoulders tensed up as I immediately averted my gaze.

'What's with that look?' I wondered internally, finding it hard to describe the emotions glinting across Stefan's eyes. It was neither calmness nor madness, but something else.

I unconsciously pondered about it, as I couldn't think of any reason Stefan would look at me like that. It was too complex and inexplicable. Come to think of it, Stefan also looked at me like that during our wedding ceremony.

'He's really someone who I can't figure out.' I shook my head, and stopped in my steps when Sam halted in the middle of the hallway. I turned my head to him with a furrowed brow.

"Sam?"

Sam slowly faced me, staring at me intensely, and suddenly cupped my cheek. "You're always lost in thoughts, love."

I pursed my lips in a thin line, feeling a little guilty about it.

"I was just thinking about a lot of things." My answer wasn't a lie as there was more going on inside my head, which had been giving me a headache.

"Like?" His thumb caressed my cheek as he tilted his head to the side. "Mind sharing what was inside your mind, Gorgeous?"

"I... I'm just thinking why the King —" I couldn't finish my sentence as he suddenly bent over, his lips crashing against mine, shoving my words back in my throat.

I instinctively held on to his chest as I shut my eyes, feeling his strong arms circling around my waist. He stepped forward, making me step back until my back was against the wall.

His kiss was a little aggressive, with him biting my lower lip. I pounded his chest lightly, letting out a protesting moan.

"Sam..." I whispered when Sam started trailing kisses on my jaw down to my neck. "... we're still in the hallway —" My breath hitched when I felt his hand lift my skirt and his hand grabbed my thigh up.

"Sam...!" I slapped his shoulder, but he wouldn't budge. He seemed angry so suddenly and I'm growing anxious as we're still in the hallway, keeping my eyes alert. Any second, anyone could come in here and witness this debauchery.

I froze when Sam suddenly grabbed my bottom and I squeezed his shoulder tightly. My breathing growing slower as every kiss with his tongue flicking against my skin heightened my sensitivity.

Despite that, I could feel my body surrendering to him. I gasped and my mouth fell open as I felt his fingers gliding up on my thigh.

"Sa... ah..." I bit my lower lip, finding it hard to fight the urge to moan. "... not here," came out a whisper as I felt more restraint doing it here instead of continuing behind closed doors.

Sam slowly withdrew his head away from my collarbones and held my gaze. His crimson orbs were glinting fiercely, as if there was fire burning behind them.

"Lilou," He called, and I gulped, panting as I unconsciously tightened my grip on his shoulder.

"Yes?"

"This is exhausting," he said, confusing me with his statement before he added, "Don't think of another man around me, or even with my absence. What else do you want me to do just so you can live in the present?"

"Sam?" My heart thumped loudly against my chest as he gnashed his teeth. "What are you saying, husband? I'm just... just..." I couldn't continue as my lower lip trembled to see him hiss helplessly.

Why did he look so heartbroken? My heart ached as Sam was obviously angry... and helpless, but still restrained himself.

I reached my hands to him, cupping his cheek as I placed soft pecks across his face.

"Don't cry," I muttered, uncertain for the reason I said that, but that's what I felt. "I'm sorry, love. I'm sorry." I placate him with as many kisses as possible until he rested his forehead against mine.

"Don't leave me, Lilou," Sam muttered under his breath, wrapping his arms around me as he buried his face in my shoulder.

"Because if you do, I won't be able to stop you."

I had never seen Sam feel so terrified, but right now, he was vulnerable. As if the impregnable walls around him suddenly collapsed and it was just all too sudden. All I could do was pat his back and say a few words;

"I will never, ever do that."

Little did I know, I would soon understand his fear of the past that continuously chased after us like a shadow and finally catching me by the foot.