

The Duke 31

Chapter 31 - Knowledge Is Power

Briefly after our ridiculous 'good morning' exchange, the maid servants knocked and checked if I was awake. After that, they helped me bath and get dressed to look fancy.

From just across the door where Samael went in, there was another door leading to a small room. Now that it was morning, I could see everything clearer.

Once I'm done and again staring at the stranger I've been seeing last night in the mirror, one of the maidservant said politely,

"The Duke summons you to join him for breakfast, My Lady."

"Uh... alright." I nodded, and they led the way.

When we arrived at the grand dinner hall, they already served various dishes on the table. Maidservants along with Fabian were standing not far away from the table.

I pursed my lips upon setting my eyes on the man sitting on the end of the long, rectangular table: Samael. I saw him smile as he slowly stood from his seat.

Once I got closer, Samael beckoned me to sit while he was standing behind the high-back chair.

"I'm doing what a gentleman should do. Sit." He said.

I glanced at him and cleared my throat.

He winked with a knowing smirk on his lips, I instantly looked away. How could he act like nothing happened this morning? Not that something life-changing occurred, but still...

I sighed. With his help, I adjusted the chair closer to the table before he jogged back to his seat.

"Dig in and enjoy!" Samael said, resting his jaw on his knuckles.

Because of how our morning concluded, I felt somehow ungrateful for not feeling excited seeing the dishes on the table. I felt full and empty; it was strange.

As I glanced at him, he yawned. I furrowed my brows and unconsciously looked at everyone.

Samael told me last night this was a vampire's turf. Then does this mean everyone was vampires?

If so...

Again, I glanced at Samael as he yawned once again. When he glanced at the window that granted us light, I witnessed how he clicked his tongue in annoyance before he looked away.

"Why aren't you eating? Don't you find the food appetizing?" He asked.

"Milord, do you normally sleep during daytime?" I ignored his inquiry and asked back instead.

For me, being awake at this time of the day was normal. But considering they were creatures of the night, daytime was their night, right?

"Yes? Why do you ask?" Samael furrowed his brows while nodding.

"Then, does this mean, everyone here should sleep now?" I queried back immediately.

"Uh... obviously?" He tilted his head to the side, confused at my sudden series of questions.

"Then..." I trailed off, shifting my gaze to the maidservants and then to Fabian.

"I think My Lady is asking His Lordship why we're awake if we should rest now." Fabian guessed politely.

I pursed my lips and shifted my eyes back to the duke.

"Isn't it obvious?" Samael frowned. "We have to adjust to your body clock. How else would they serve the duchess if they don't adjust?"

Samael explained in a knowing tone. He shrugged before casting Fabian a glance.

"Our Lordship is correct, My Lady. Though we appreciate your concerns." Fabian beckoned a bow.

Unconsciously, I bit my lower lip. Everyone here was adjusting to my natural habits as a human. I'm not even the duchess yet.

Am I troubling them too much? I gazed down at the thought.

"Are you worried about them?" Samael asked, which made me raised my head again.

I didn't nod, nor did I deny it. I don't want them to misunderstand my intention. They were making efforts to adjust their time. I didn't want to offend them.

"Hmmm. Everyone who is having difficulty adjusting to this abrupt change can rest."

After some time, Samael ordered. His gaze still on me as if he had read my thoughts.

"My Lord, we dare not rest knowing our lordship is awake." Fabian informed with his usual polite tone.

"Yet, you dare worry her ladyship?" Samael arched his brow and gave Fabian a side eye.

"Certainly not, my Lord." Fabian was quick to respond.

"Then, rest." The second Fabian answered, Samael ordered immediately. "If My Lady is worried, I would worry about her too. Don't be a hindrance in the duchess' peace."

"Yes, my Lord." Fabian didn't argue further before he glanced to the other servants.

"Thank you, My Lord, My Lady." They spoke in unison, bowing before they leave silently.

I watched them leave and glimpsed at the reliefs in their eyes. A subtle smile resurfaced on my lips. They were tired, I knew it!

"Happy now?" As the maidservants left, Samael queried.

I returned my eyes to him and smiled.

"Thank you, milord." I expressed, doing a neck bow with my hands on my lap.

"My pleasure, my Lady." Samael returned my smile with a magnanimous smile.

I almost felt moved by his action and forgot how he tortured my eyes this morning. However, his generous smile which gradually changed into an evil grin reminded me of his true nature.

"Now, I have you all to myself today since no one will show you around and educate you!" Excited, Samael clapped his hands as he chuckled evilly.

The smile on my face immediately died. My heart sink as my hearing malfunction.

"Huh?"

"As the future duchess, it is not a surprised that you must learn things. You may be physically weak, but knowledge is power, sweetheart." Samael explained as he shrugged.

I blinked my eyes as I processed his words.

Learn things? Knowledge was... power?

The thought of learning more in this world brought a tremor of excitement in my blood. However, was it necessary for the duke himself to teach me?

Subconsciously, I scrutinized Samael's suspicious-looking grin. I didn't want to judge, but... in my eyes, he was radiating with malice? My gut was telling me Samael was concocting other wicked plans that were beyond my imagination.

Could I truly trust him?

"Fret not, My Lady. I believed the Duke wouldn't have the time to tutor her ladyship. I, Fabian, will be at your service."

Suddenly, just when I thought everyone left, Fabian chimed in.

His voice brought life into my eyes as I turned to him. Fabian's palm on his chest, bearing a kind smile.

"What? Fabian. As the Duke, I am worried about your well-being. You should rest as well!" Samael exclaimed, sounding overly magnanimous.

"I appreciate your concerns, My Lord. However, I couldn't let her ladyship down." Fabian argued, albeit politely.

"Tsk,"

With Fabian's help, the corner of my lips stretched wider, relieved. Fabian seemed more knowledgeable and harmless.

Therefore, I would prefer being tutored by him instead of this perverted duke.

"Thank you, Sir Fabian." I expressed, grateful for his generosity.

"Fabian, My Lady. This humble one is undeserving to be regarded higher than her ladyship." Fabian corrected and smiled.

That very moment, an instant connection sparked between me and Fabian. A spark that ignited light of hope to my dim future.

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Meanwhile, as Lilou and Fabian were exchanging smiles, Samael glared at Fabian.

"What does a butler know the duke don't?" He mumbled, snapping his tongue as he shoved a piece of pea inside his mouth.

As soon as he ate the pea, Samael stuck his tongue in disgust.

"Gross."

Chapter 32 - You Made Me Proud, Lil.

When the breakfast ended, Fabian gave me a thorough tour around the mansion. From the great hall, we headed towards the closest room, which Fabian called the buttery.

Then each led to another. From the kitchen, pantry, larder, and cellar. Fabian toured every corner of the mansion.

He showed me even the lavatories and bathrooms; empty guest rooms, solar, and a boudoir where I could spend some time alone!

It almost felt exhausting just touring around, but the excitement within me was overflowing. I've never stepped inside a proper home. Every thing was new to me and it was amusing how the halls, quarters, and rooms had different purposes.

"This is a cabinet or a study, My Lady. Usually, it is used by Lord Samael, but he granted us permission to be off used by her ladyship." Fabian beckoned.

As I stepped inside the cabinet, the scent of old wood wafted my nose, albeit smelled strangely pleasant. I looked around, amazed at the shelves filled with books.

It was furnished with works of arts hanging on the wall; a table and chairs in the middle, inks and pens, piles of books and materials on the table's surface.

"In here, you'll be tutored ethics, politics, social studies, etiquette, and everything a duchess must know." Fabian informed.

I walked around, Fabian's voice fading into the background. My hands caressed the polished edge of the table.

Then I walked towards the bookshelves. I could not help but smile as my fingers trailed the books as I walked.

A great sense of ardor enveloped my heart. This room instantly became my favorite; by its pleasant incensed scent mixed with dried paint, its aesthetic, and the power of knowledge inked into million words.

I loved it.

"But before we proceed to all our lessons, I have a question which I hope it may not offend you, My Lady."

"Hmm?" I halted as I slowly faced Fabian.

As soon as our gaze met, Fabian's eyes flickered inexplicably before it immediately returned to normal.

He cleared his throat, "Do you know how to read and write? I don't intend to offend you, My Lady. Please don't misunderstand."

Fabian bowed his head slightly, expressing his honesty. I just smiled, trying to contain my overflowing excitement.

"If not, I have to teach you how to write and read before we proceed on our planned lessons."

Fabian sounded as if he wasn't surprised and already knew the answer. I couldn't blame him.

I'm a peasant who was more or less lucky to be chosen by the duke. To blend in in the upper echelon and not bring shame to tarnish the duke's name, I have to be educated.

The thought was mind-exhausting, but I love the fact I would get the chance to learn more than I was born to.

"I already had a lesson plan I wrote last night on ways I could teach you how to read and..."

"I can, Sir Fabian." Before he could finish, I smiled and replied in a low tone.

A glint of surprised flickered across Fabian's eyes. His brows furrowed.

"My Father had a few books which he read every night. I wanted to write one, so he taught me how to read words and write them."

I explained. My eyes softened at the beautiful memories I cherished dearly.

"Your father?" He asked. I nodded.

"My father told me he doesn't have wealth to leave me. Teaching me how to read, write, and count was the only inheritance he left me with, in which I would forever be grateful for."

"And your father was a farmer?" asked Fabian and again, I nodded as a response.

Momentarily, Fabian remained silent as his lips parted, but no words came out. He then nodded.

"I see. Then, that's good if you already know the basics, My Lady. Shall we begin our lesson?"

"Yes!" I instantly replied out of excitement.

Fabian smiled, and he assisted me to sit.

We spent a long time in the study, Fabian taught me the basics of each subject. I listened to his every word carefully, not missing even the smallest detail.

Still, I had difficulty understanding everything. Hence, our slow progress.

Fortunately, Fabian was a patient and a brilliant teacher. I didn't even notice the sunset was approaching until Fabian lighted the candelabra around.

"It is almost time for supper, My Lady. We can continue tomorrow." Fabian informed.

But I was glued to writing notes. I was still struggling, holding a pen and writing decently.

Fabian said my writing was readable, barely. But I would get the hang of it with consistent use. That's why he made me take notes.

"My Lady?"

"Yes?" I replied, but still had my focus on writing the conclusion of today's lesson.

"It is..." Fabian trailed off, which didn't intrigue me a bit.

After a moment, Fabian spoke again as he laid a book on the table. His action finally caught my attention as I slowly looked up.

"This is a book written by a renowned poet which I would personally recommend. You may take it back to your bed chambers for you to read tonight, if you please."

My eyes twinkled, staring at Fabian's kind smile. What a kind soul I wanted to cry!

I already had that request at the back of my head the first time I stepped into this room. But Fabian's initiative moved me beyond words.

"I can?" I tried to suppress my enthusiasm but failed, miserably.

"Certainly. All the books in this cabinet are here to serve the duke. And now, the future duchess." Fabian explained. I bit my lip to stop myself from grinning.

"Thank you." I expressed, nodding. And then I finished my writing before putting back the pen and inkwell back to its rightful place.

After that, I picked up the book Fabian recommended me and followed him to the dining hall. When we arrived, Samael was already drinking wine.

As soon as I saw him, I hurriedly skipped in his direction. My happiness for today's lesson was too much for me to bottle up.

I needed to share it with someone. And unconsciously, that someone... the duke was the first person that came into my mind.

"My Lord!" I called out energetically.

Samael furrowed his brows as he drew his head back. "My Lord? Where is that funny 'milord?'"

His eyes scrutinizing me, flickering with a mix of surprised and a rare curiosity.

"Sir Fabian is a great tutor, My Lord." I praised.

Fabian told me I've been addressing the duke wrong. It was understandable, as I was a peasant. However, if I wanted to sound educated and proper, Fabian corrected my wrong habit.

"Tsk," Yet, Samael snapped his tongue as he glanced at Fabian.

"You are rather energetic than I assumed you'd be like after Fabian's terrible teaching!" Samael sassed, arching his brow while carefully twirling the wineglass in his hand.

"Mister Fabian is not terrible, My Lord. He even lent me a book to read tonight." With a proud grin, I raised the book with both my hands for him to see.

"Her Ladyship had surpassed my expectations. She's a quick-learner, my Lord." Fabian chimed in as a faint chuckles followed.

"Oh?" Samael raised his brows, just staring at me before he glanced at the book's cover.

It was clear he didn't enjoy his day as much as I did. However, since mine was great, I wanted to share this small milestone in my life with him.

After a beat, Samael let out a brief chuckle before he rose from his seat. Walking towards me, I pursed my smiling lips.

Usually, I would instinctively take a step back whenever he approached me. But this time, deep down, I was seeking for something else.

"Did you have fun?" Samael asked, and I instantly nodded.

"Good." Pleased, Samael nodded. His hand reached out to me and patted my head.

"You made me proud, Lil." He said with a subtle smile.

Upon hearing his compliment, I could not help but grin like a kid getting an acknowledgment. Yet, instead of my shying away, Samael's cheek suddenly bore the colors of the rose.

Chapter 33 - Falling

"And then, for arithmetic, I..." I trailed off, realizing I've been talking nonstop.

I pursed my lips and glanced around quickly. When my eyes landed on Samael, he was smiling subtly.

With a wineglass in his hand, his jaw resting on his knuckles, he raised his brows.

"For arithmetic...?" He asked with interest.

"Sir Fabian taught me addition." I dropped my gaze to my plate.

Since the dinner started, Samael started asking me questions, and I answered them. I didn't realize that the more he asked, the more I detailed everything enthusiastically.

Talk about etiquette. I failed to apply the tact Fabian taught me.

The realization was akin to a tight slap. I still have a lot to learn to become a proper lady.

"Ah... is My Lady shy now? Why, though? I want to hear more." Samael urged.

I glanced at him as he leaned closer to the table with a smile.

"That's all, My Lord." I offered an awkward smile. "How about you, My Lord? How was your day?"

I asked to divert his attention. Since I almost told him about my day, I wondered what did the duke do?

Fabian told me the Duke had political affairs to study. It has been hundreds of years since the Duke went into slumber. Hence, Samael had to catch up to the current situation of Grimsbanne and the entire kingdom.

Now, I'm curious about how it went. Perhaps, he could share more interesting facts and important knowledge for everyone to hear.

After all, I assumed everyone in here already knew the basics I've just boast about. Not that I was afraid to be looked down upon — I'm used to it.

"Me?" He asked. I nodded and looked at him with anticipation.

"I slept. I used the book as my pillow hoping my brain could miraculously absorb all the boring details." Samael lazily shrugged, rolling his eyes as if he had a terrible day.

"You... slept?" I failed to conceal the dismay in my voice.

"Didn't you want everyone who can't adjust their body clock to take a rest? I merely didn't want to worry you, My Lady."

Samael argued with a shrug. I glanced at Fabian and he, too, sighed heavily and shook his head.

"Uh..." I trailed off, failing to think of the right words to speak. "Did it work, My Lord?"

"Obviously, it didn't! What a waste of time!" Samael quickly replied.

"Ah..." I awkwardly nodded, and silence ensued.

I never thought the duke was lazy. No. Perhaps he already knew a lot, that's why it bore him? Am I the only one who's enthusiastic about learning? Or rather, did I only enjoy it because it was my first time learning things I've never known before?

I didn't want to conclude and judge the duke immediately. He said knowledge was power; he probably had enough power for that.

Suddenly, Samael broke the silence. "Knowledge is power, so was brute force."

I raised my gaze. My face unconsciously sported dismal in his remarks. I heard everyone sigh in unison that one could discern their disappointments.

Meanwhile, Samael was just grinning proudly. So his power was brute force, huh? I smelled hypocrisy from his previous statement this morning.

Soon, the dinner ended. The maid servant offered to help me bathe and change clothes. However, Samael insisted on walking me back to our bedchambers.

With the book I held on my left, I glanced at the Samael's back. Neither of us spoke. Walking in the long hallway leading to the bedchamber.

When we reached our destination, Samael faced me while I kept a safe distance.

"If you need anything, there is a bell on the table. Ring it and Fabian would come." He said with a subtle smile.

I nodded, holding the book closer. Just then, he took a step forward towards me. Surprisingly, I didn't step back like usual.

I stared at his sharp crimson orbs, blinking ever so slowly. I watched as the side of his lips tilted into a charming smirk.

"See? Knowledge is power." Samael uttered. I pursed my lips.

"Huh?"

Instead of giving me clarity, Samael leaned closer. Before I could get a good grasp of what was going on, his body blanket over mine. He buried his face in my shoulder.

In an instant, my body froze. But somehow, I didn't feel terrified like usual. I didn't know, but when he squeezed me lightly in his embrace, I sensed something that was beyond my understanding.

"You... you're okay, My Lord." Before I could think twice, my comforting words slipped past my lips.

My hand already patting his back gently. I didn't understand my words or my actions, but subconsciously, I thought I must do it.

"I never said I'm not, silly."

Oh... how could I assume. Way to go, me!

"For years, I've depicted myself listening to your little achievements in person. I've been wondering what expression you wear when you recall your day — the gestures you make." Under his breath, he explained.

"Was she pouting? How wide is her smile? Does her eyes sparkle just like her voice? I want to wipe her tears... I felt helpless. She's been my sanctuary; my salvation, but I was never physically with her."

I pursed my lips, hearing about his thoughts before he woke up from his slumber. His sincerity... it was as if he was watering the seed he planted in my heart. What kind of seed it was: I won't know until it fully bloomed.

"That's why... I want to express my gratitude and wants you to know and feel you're not alone anymore."

Samael added with the same tone. As soon as I heard his last remarks, I bit my lower lips as hard as I could.

I'm not alone anymore...? I tightened my jaw, holding back the tears that were tempting to fall from my eyes.

When my father died, I tried to be optimistic and kept our memories alive in my heart. However, I knew I was holding on to memories I would never experience again. No matter how I treasured my habit, I was alone.

Being alone with no one aside from yourself was... depressing. But the duke... Samael had been alone for hundreds of years. No wonder he was half-crazy, half-sane.

Perhaps I've judged him too soon just because he was a vampire. Maybe, if I look at him like father —

"Also, I'm hugging you just to clarify that I don't have an intention to be looked as a father figure."

I coughed, nearly choked with the built up air in my throat.

Slowly, Samael loosened his grip as he took a step back. With two steps gap between us, his eyes searched for mine.

When he caught my gaze, I instinctively looked down. I couldn't stare at him right now. Staring at him felt like chasing the moon without realizing I'm at the edge of the cliff.

And before I'll know it, I would fall from a height my fragile soul would never survive.

Suddenly, I felt his gentle fingers caress my jaw, down to my chin. His thumb then held onto my chin, guiding it up.

"I haven't been truly serious in my life, nor did I find other valid reason aside from entertainment purposes." Samael's eyes didn't leave mine, stressing his words with utter sincerity.

"Until you." My lips trembled, breathing heavily for no apparent reason.

"I may be flawed, but you have my word. I will protect you, and you'll never be alone again. You can learn and pursue anything; I'll be with you every step of the way. Even if its against my instinct, I've would never see you as my prey. So, don't be afraid."

I don't want to look at him in the eye. But I couldn't look away despite being aware I was standing at the edge of the dangerous cliff.

Look away, Lilou. Look away or else...

"I won't hurt you because... what I want is the same as yours, sincerity."

Upon his last remarks, I felt myself taking a step forward towards the cliff and fell... not in love, but something far more dangerous than death.

"I'll be busy tonight. Don't wait for me. Goodnight, My Lady." Samael took a step back and guided my hand towards his lips. With his flaming gaze locked with mine, he left a soft peck on the back of my hand.

Chapter 34 - The Davidson's

As I closed the door behind me, I let out a weary exhale as my trembling knees gave way.

To be truthfully honest, I haven't got the good grasp of everything. I felt like a child being thrown into the ocean. A child who couldn't swim and could only float along the waves to survive.

It felt like everything I've done and said until now; accepting this marriage, learning, trying to adapt to this new environment as soon as I could was to survive.

Slowly, I bent my knees closer to my chest and hugged them.

"Don't be afraid...?" I mumbled, recalling his previous words in my mind. "How can that be if my body naturally trembles before him?"

I rested my chin on my knees.

His words moved my heart, but my instincts as a human still existed within me. Before a vampire, especially someone like the duke, terrified me.

Even if he gave me his words, and even if I convinced myself, I should enjoy my remaining time in this world, deep down, I couldn't. There would always be a part of me that wouldn't forget facts.

I may forget my situation momentarily, but I could never change reality. It may be easy for him to talk about love and life, but for me, it was never that easy.

"Lilou... we already talked about this." I mumbled. "But, it just felt very complicated now."

I added, talking to myself. As I buried my face on my knees, Samael's various expressions when he was nonchalant, dignified, or just silent flashed across my head.

How could he talk about sincerity if he couldn't show me which side of him was the real him? What conflicting emotions he had left me with.

"My Lady? It is time for your bath." Suddenly, from the other side of the door behind me, I heard the maidservant's voice urge.

Yet, I didn't move a muscle. I embraced myself tighter, clasping at the dress.

Am I truly stupid for not understanding this abrupt change? Just a few days ago, I was living the life of a peasant. But now, I was being treated as a noble lady.

Not that I wasn't grateful for this wonderful experience. However, I just couldn't understand it.

Samael told me he was granting me power to make a difference. He was marrying me because of those ridiculous reasons he uttered last night.

I was aware I'm partly at fault. But no one would understand the constant fear I've endured my entire life.

That's why... that's why the second I sensed his fear of something I didn't know about, I knew he would need me. It would be easier if he was keeping me, because it was convenient.

But his actions and words told me otherwise, confusing me, and I'm now in such a state.

"How despicable..." I whispered under my breath.

"My Lady? Are you alright?" Again, I heard the maidservant call out from outside.

But I remained silent and negotiated with myself. In the end, I forced myself to stop thinking about it.

It was a waste of energy to dwell on it longer. I've done a good job on my first day in the duke's mansion.

I just had to keep it that way... right?

After a long time, I stood up. I massaged my cheeks, slapping them lightly as I let out a deep exhale.

"My Lady, we're going in..."

Before the maidservant could finish, I opened the door with a smile on my lips.

"I'm here. I'm alright."

The two maidservants whose eyes full of worry scrutinized me from head to toe. When they were certain I'm an alright, they heaved a sigh of relief.

"Don't worry. I won't let anyone dig their own grave because of me." I reassured, knowing their reason for treating me well despite being undeserving and a human.

Just like last night, the maidservants helped me wipe my body, change my dress, and brush my hair.

After fulfilling their duties, they left after saying the exact words they've said last night, "We will be outside if you need us, My Lady."

I stared at the ceiling while I lie on the bed. Such heaviness in my heart made me feel I'm sinking deeper in the bottomless ocean.

"Ah..." I closed my eyes as I took a deep breath.

I shook my head lightly before I opened my eyes. Again, I dragged myself up to sit.

I couldn't sleep. Even if I wanted to, so I could escape and forget, I just couldn't.

Unconsciously, I shifted my gaze towards the book Fabian lent me. With a sigh, I crawled my way out of the bed and picked up the book.

I might as well just read until I fall asleep. It was a shame if my enthusiasm to read tonight would be affected because of unnecessary sulking.

With that thought in mind, I trudged towards the table near the window. Carefully, I placed the single candleholder on the side and then the book.

"Instead of thinking of the things I won't get clear answers, I better just read and forget." I mumbled, raising my brows briefly.

Since I was used to the darkness my entire life, this room, shrouded with bare lighting from the candelabras, was nothing. Hence, I could read without a problem.

The corner of my lips slowly tilted as I gaze at the book's cover. Smile and do as I'm told; enjoy my time while I'm at it.

Enjoying it means learning. I would read as many books as I could. So if death had come, I would have tons of story to tell to Father.

With that thought in mind, I shrugged all negative thoughts out of my head. Yet, deep down, I wondered what he was doing.

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Meanwhile, at the Davidson's mansion, a noble family in Grimsbanne.

In the grand hall of the mansion, all members of the said noble family trembled. Their eyes on the silver-haired duke sitting on top of the pile of lifeless bodies.

"Why are you doing this, My Lord?" A middle-aged man with a blanched hair knelt. His complexion pale, watching Samael lazily crossed his arms with his foot swaying back and forth.

"If you needed our blood, we would gladly offer it to his lordship. Why would you kill my son, use him as your cushion, and humiliate your loyal supporters? My Lord?"

The middle-aged man inquired. Samael arched his brow, smirking as he watched the man's shoulder trembled in fury.

When the old noble vampire raised his head, his fangs glinted.

"I wonder too..." Samael slowly rose from his sit and trudged towards them ever so slowly.

He walked around them before he squatted down in front of Mister Davidson, the head of the clan.

"After all, I don't recall having such prestigious clan in my domain before my slumber."

Samael raised his hand with nails akin to a claw and placed it on the middle-aged man's shoulder. He smirked as his hand traveled ever so slowly to the latter's neck.

"You should calm down, Mister Davidson. Blood never lies." Samael said, his fingers wrapped around Mister Davidson's neck.

"If you kill us, His Majesty and my entire clan in the capital wouldn't sit still as you wreak havoc again. Please, don't make hasty decisions."

Mister Davidson gulped. Even though they were both vampires, he knew they wouldn't win if they fight Samael head-on.

Samael was still a pure-blooded family. Against him, a noble vampire stood no chance.

Thus, he only hoped to talk sense into him.

"Oh? Is this how you tamed Rufus? Using the King's name?" Samael chuckled, his eyes glinting with bloodlust.

"Mister Davidson, you came here after I went into my slumber. That's why, I don't blame you for not knowing what kind of duke governing this land."

He added, exhaling. Samael then clicked his tongue as he withdrew his hand.

As he walked back, Samael paced back and forth in front of Mister Davidson.

"Right... you don't know me yet, nor you know Rufus well. So, as the duke, it is only proper to introduce myself to my guest, isn't it?"

Samael rubbed his chin, casting Mister Davidson a quick glance. The latter sensed the ominous aura emanating from the duke. He breathed heavily, keeping his composure together.

"Mister Davidson, my brothers used to tell me I'm a terrible teacher. My ways were too... soft! But they're wrong."

Upon saying so, Samael halted as he faced Mister Davidson. His eyes glanced at every family member, and their eyes filled with dread caused Samael to smirk.

"It's not being soft. It's being efficient. I'm lazy, and I'd rather get the job done in one go." Samael explained, sighing as a memory in the past flashed across his memory lane.

"Thus, as a proper introduction to everyone, giving justice for tormenting Rufus for hundreds of years, and for the sake of Grimsbanne..."

Samael spread his arms, his eyes droopy, as his smirk appeared more evil.

"Can my loyal supporters shed blood for the Duke's sake?"

Samael's last cynical remarks, followed by his peels of chuckles, resonated across the great hall.

"We had seized the treasury and found the farm where the Davidson kept their human slaves, My Lord." Suddenly, Rufus appeared and informed.

Upon hearing Rufus's reports, Mister Davidson's eyes widened in fear as his gaze met Samael's.

"Well then, Rufus, I entrust them to you. Don't kill him, though. Execute him publicly and set him as an example to those arrogant children that thinks my land is their playground."

Samael ordered as he clapped his hands.

"My Lord!" When Mister Davidson figured words wouldn't save his life, he sprung up from his feet.

His fangs grew sharper. Mister Davidson's action incited his family members to show their fangs, ready to fight them head-on.

"Samael La Crox, I, and my entire clan, will kill you!" Mister Davidson threatened.

However, their actions only made Samael chuckle loudly.

"Goodness... this is why I told you, you don't know Rufus that well. Anyway, Rufus, don't have fun too much. I'm going back."

Upon dropping his reminders, Samael waved, glancing at Mister Davidson nonchalantly and smirked. Without another word, Samael trudged away from them.

"What humiliation... Do you think this lowborn knight would kill us?" One of the clan member hissed.

In a blink of an eye, Mister Davidson's son attempted to go for Samael's neck. However, before he could reach the duke, his arm tumbled off.

"Davidsons, my apologies for we are all lowborn before the duke. Fret not, I had fantasized about your death with my sword for hundreds of years. I will no longer indulge myself with it. I will make this quick."

Rufus reassured as he impaled Mister Davidson's son in his chest. Slowly, he withdrew his sword, and the body collapsed with a thud.

"You... Samael! Why are you doing this?! Aren't we the same kind?! The Davidson had pledged loyalty to the La Crox — how could you betray us?"

Through his gritted teeth, Mister Davidson yelled at the retreating Samael. The latter halted, but didn't look back.

"Why am I doing this...?" Samael muttered and scoffed. This time, he glanced back with a smirk.

"Sincerity, Mister Davidson. To show my sincerity to my people..."

Samael explained before he retrieved his gaze and resumed in his steps.

"... and to her."

As Samael walked away, they shed blood. The entire Davidson clan fought the acting duke they've pressured for hundreds of years.

Blood may not be enough to pay for their crimes. But the blood they would shed tonight would be the first and last noble act they could do for Grimsbanne from hereafter.

Chapter 35 - Sam

In the middle of the night, I woke up. I fell asleep on the table, on top of the book I was reading.

Slowly, I pushed myself to sit up. As I did, a quilt over my shoulders cascaded down, which I caught before it landed on the floor.

I furrowed my brows. I'm certain I just fell asleep while reading. How am I...

Subconsciously, I raised my head. My gaze instantly caught the figure sitting across me.

Samael was staring outside the window. His jaw was resting on his knuckles, seemingly in deep thoughts as he hasn't noticed me.

I pursed my lips. Our previous conversation surged inside my head, which made me clasp my hands on my lap.

This was another side of him I haven't seen until now. He was just staring outside the window, his expression solemn.

I wonder what he was thinking? To have such expression...

To be honest, Samael may be sitting across me. But, he felt so distant; so far, he was beyond my reach.

Am I even reaching out, though?

"I learned something tonight."

I jolted upon hearing him speak, breaking the still silence between us. He knew I woke up?

Yet, his eyes were still on the window. Samael appeared as if nothing could distract him. Who knew he was still aware of his surroundings?

"Did you, My Lord?" I cleared my throat.

"Mhm. You drive me crazy." Nonchalant, as ever, Samael uttered.

I furrowed my brows, frowning. What did I do this time? I just fell asleep while reading.

"No, that's not right. It's my desire to have more than I should drive me crazy. I'm never patient; I want to pin you down, explore you, shower you with affection to prove myself." He paused, letting out a sigh as he slowly shifted his eyes on me.

"But I don't want you to hate me. It's frustrating."

Samael added. He shook his head before leaning down, resting his chin on his arms on the table. I could see his repressed desire flickering across his crimson eyes.

Here he was again, saying unnecessary words that were too confusing for me to comprehend. I pursed my lips, mimicking his stance.

With my arms on the table's surface, I rested my chin on them. My eyes still on him.

"I don't think my life is worthy, nor you should take my feelings into consideration. Don't say such things that can be more hurtful than death, Sam."

Before I realized it, my thoughts slipped past my lips. My eyes instantly widened, pushing myself up abruptly as I covered my lips.

As if he noticed I didn't intend to speak aloud, Samael chuckled.

"Haha. You call me Sam in your head?"

He's not mad? I scrutinized his relaxed front and slowly lowered my hands.

"Not all the time. Just now, My Lord."

I answered honestly. I never called him Sam in my head. But, perhaps, because I have been thinking a lot lately, I unconsciously shortened his name.

"No one had ever called me Sam."

"I'm — I'm sor—"

"I like it. Sam." Before I could apologize, Samael abruptly interrupted me and smiled.

Huh?

"My name... I like how it sounds when you say it." He blinked his eyes ever so slowly as the corner of his lips stretched subtly.

Seeing him cast me a gentle look with his sharp yet delicate features made me clasp my hand even tighter. Stop... looking at me like that.

"You're just across me," He muttered, raising his head as he reached his hand over the table.

"Yet, it feels like the more I try, the more I chase after you, the faster you run away. Now, you think its more painful than death."

Samael added bitterly. Staring at his hands that didn't reach me. He extended his arm. Yet, there's still this safe gap between us.

What was he doing?

His fingers curled as I glanced at the bitter smile on his lips.

"You will never reach out and meet me halfway now, will you?" Slowly, he retrieved his hand and rested his head on his arm again.

After that, Samael didn't speak again. It was just silence; a deafening one.

I furrowed my brows, tilting my head to check if he fell asleep. When I narrowed my eyes, his eyes were closed.

He fell asleep? But, it's night?

I cleared my throat aloud to disturb the silence. But he wasn't moving.

"My lord?" I called out softly, but nothing.

After taking a deep breath, I stood and carefully tiptoed my way to him. Leaning down, I immediately drew away. The scent of redolent alcohol was too violent for my nose.

Was he drunk all this time?

I pursed my lips. No wonder he was acting odd; it must be the alcohol.

Again, I let out a heavy exhale and trudged back to my seat. I picked up the quilt and walked back to him.

Why would he drink so much? I wondered, as I carefully placed the quilt over his shoulders.

"I'm not a monster, Lil." He murmured, still fast asleep.

My heart instantly clenched hearing his muffled words. My hands that were holding the quilt halted.

"I..." My breath suddenly hitched.

Our brief conversation... it made me realize he was not beyond my reach. It was me who was beyond his reach.

From day one, he already extended his hand, waiting for me to take it. However, even if I believed I took his hand, I merely placed my hand over it.

I haven't fully held on to him. He was holding me, but I wasn't. Perhaps, because of my fear, I was unconsciously looking at him as a monster who would take my life away.

"No, you're not." I murmured, biting my lips. "It's just... right now, your human has a heavy heart filled with confusion. I just need time, Sam."

For the first time, I could safely say I expressed what my heart genuinely felt. And it felt as if it lifted the heavy load of burden out of my chest.

No matter how I denied it, deep down, I already knew he was a good man. I'm just using lame excuses to save myself and my heart. Maybe, just maybe, when I had enough courage, I would meet him halfway.

"Goodnight, Sam."

Chapter 36 - Knowing Bits And Pieces Of Him

Sleeping on a proper bed was truly amazing. It was as soft as those clouds in the sky, bringing out the child in anyone's heart. But when did it get firm?

I squeezed myself into it. Indeed, the bed somehow felt harder. But it still offered comfort and... warmth?

Slowly, I opened my eyes. Opening and closing them until my vision grew clearer.

Huh?

I blinked and blinked. After a snap, my eyes widened as my brain fuzzed.

"Oh, morning, fuzzy bunny." Sam greeted sluggishly. He only gave me an indifferent look, his fingers casually stroking my back.

I stiffened. My spine shivering.

Who wouldn't? I woke up with my head on his shoulder, my arms over his chest, and my leg wrapped around his waist!

Was this a nightmare...?

"You should sleep more. It's too early." Samael urged, staring at the ceiling with little to no emotion in his tone. He wasn't moving, letting me cling onto him in my sleep.

I finally came out of my shock in time to sputter, "My Lord! I — I — I'm sorry!", springing back to my side of the bed.

How could I take him as a hostage in my sleep?! I could tell with how I held him, securing him when I woke up!

"For?" Slowly, Sam pushed himself up by his elbow, bending and crossing his feet as he tilted his head to the side.

"For... that." I trailed, fidgeting my arms from him to me.

Lilou, what are you doing? This was embarrassing!

Sam blinked his eyes innocently. Slowly, his brows furrowed as he narrowed his eyes.

"Can you not deny me?" He asked.

"Ah?"

"You know I like it. So, there's no need to feel sorry for it. You're making me feel bad." He explained in a knowing tone.

I pursed my lips. Looking down on my lap.

Obviously, deep down, I was aware of that. However, I didn't want to give him mixed signals. Until I'm fully prepared to take responsibility.

After all, our conversation last night and his words were still fresh in my memory. My mind and heart were unstable.

"You don't remember?" Amidst my thoughts, Sam snapped me back with his question.

I raised my gaze and furrowed my brows. Remember? Our conversation last night?

"Remember... the conversation we had last night?" I pried.

"Huh?" This time, Samael cast me a baffled look. "Last night when I laid beside you."

Last night when he laid beside me? What happened?

I remembered after telling him goodnight; I went back to bed. It didn't take long until I fell asleep and now I woke up.

As if he read my thoughts by my expression, he let out a sigh.

Why?

"Did I do something horrible, my lord?" I asked awkwardly, sporting a conflicted look as I studied his face.

"Here." Sam stretched his neck and pointed to the side of his neck.

I narrowed my eyes. Because of his pale skin, the dark red mark on his neck was noticeable. It looked like a bruise.

"Did I strangle you — no? Did I hurt you? My Lord?" Aghast, I asked a series of questions.

How could I leave a bruise like that? Although it didn't look like I strangled him, it still left a bruise. I haven't seen such a strange bruise before. It looks painful.

"Haha!" Yet, his response was a brief chuckle.

Why? Why was he laughing?

"My... lord?" I called out, puzzled by his reaction.

"Nothing. Forget about it. It's nothing." In between his chuckles, he waved and brushed his silver hair back.

Nothing? But why does it feel like it was not nothing?

Out of habit, I bit my lower lip. However, it felt numb. Instinctively, I touched my lips and furrowed my brows.

Was it swollen? Did I bump it somewhere last night?

"Heh,"

Upon hearing him smirk, I gave him a look of suspicion.

"You want to remember? Come here." He winked, his smirk grew evil, patting the vacant space beside him.

However, his expression and his eyes only made me crawl back a little.

Come to him? Why would I go over there if all I could sense was danger?

I'm not saying he was an evil man. But, somehow, I felt like something would happen if I accepted his invitation?

"You don't want to?" He queried. Without thinking twice, I shook my head.

"Well, that's too bad! Regardless, I still enjoyed it." He winked as he dragged himself out of the bed.

I arched my brow. What did he enjoy? Why does it feel like I was forgetting something very important?

"What a splendid morning!" Sam exclaimed, followed by his waves of laughter. He trudged towards his private room, connected to our bedchamber.

I watched him as he walked in high-spirits, as if the man I talked with last night was a different man. I could not tell if he was pretending or not.

"Forget about it." When he left, I shook my head. "It's nothing."

Under my breath, I convinced myself. After a while, the maidservants came in. Like in the past days, they helped me get everything done. From helping me bathe, get dressed, brushing and fixing my hair.

I could still remember the scalp tugging process when they first got my hair done. I couldn't hold the pain that they had no choice but to let it down.

It may look like a bedhead that was decently brushed down. I prefer it like this, though. Not that I had to look pretty in front of the duke. Also, it seemed he didn't really care.

Once they finished, I joined Samael for breakfast. As usual, Sam just spoke nonsense, teasing me every so often, then conversing with Fabian about the duke's inconsideration for consuming a barrel of wine last night.

Meanwhile, I ate in silence. Sometimes, I would glance at Sam. Mysteriously, whenever I do, he was also looking at me and then he would just wink and smile.

What a strange man, I thought. Yet, those small actions oddly made my heart flutter. I bit my lip, resisting myself from smiling.

"My lady?" Suddenly, Fabian's call snapped me back from the current lapse. "You've been in a daze. Are you alright?"

He asked. His brows furrowed, looking at me worriedly. I smiled and nodded.

After our breakfast, Fabian and I headed straight to study. However, my mind could not help but recall how my morning was nothing like yesterday. It was rather calm, if I forgot the little riddle about the bruise on Sam's neck.

"Mister Fabian?"

"My lady, just Fabian." Again, Fabian corrected. However, I didn't plan on changing how I addressed him.

"What kind of person is the duke?" I inquired, unhesitatingly.

Fabian briefly raised his brows, as if he didn't expect my question. Well, I tried asking my attendants earlier, but they told me I should ask the duke. That's ridiculous, though. Sam would just brag about himself... I assumed.

"Hmm." Fabian hummed a low tune, leaning back as he rubbed his chin. When he thought of an answer, he gazed back at me.

"He is kind."

I narrowed my eyes. Fabian didn't believe his own words, did he?

"The duke's action unintentionally made him appear a kind and reliable ruler. Although his reasons differed from others, the outcome helped the weak and the land he governs benefited from it." Fabian explained.

I listened in silence. I recalled Sam telling me he does things for fun. Whether he was unintentionally helping the people of Grimsbanne. Then, I guess that's good?

"Although, it surprised me the duke had taken a fancy to you." Fabian added with a polite smile.

Upon his last remarks, my cheek burned up. "You're mistaken." I denied as I sported a conflicted look.

"It's alright, my lady. Everyone was aware of the duke's fondness for you and this may surprise you, but I think it's for the better." Fabian chuckled, which made me raise my head.

"For the better?" I queried with a furrowed brow. "Mister Fabian? What was the duke like before he went into his slumber?"

Fabian sighed upon hearing me address him the same after countless of corrections. Still, he didn't bother correcting me this time, as if he already gave up.

"The Duke before his slumber..." Fabian trailed and let another sigh. His change of expression made me anticipate his answer even more.

"He was rather... I mean, far different from his current temperament. As you know, the duke hates restrictions. His constant defiance and brutality forced his father, the late King, Victor La Crox, to cut ties with him." Fabian paused as he smiled. It seemed he was recalling a beautiful time in the past.

"I remembered when the duke was banished from the capital, everyone in the capital celebrated."

What? He was that... detestable? That his misfortune incited celebration? My gaze narrowed at Fabian. He seemed he wasn't recalling a terrible memory, though. That's odd.

"The Duke celebrated with them." Fabian said.

"huh?"

"When the late king cut his ties with his son, the duke even stole a few barrels of wine from the palace and threw a large celebration." Fabian chuckled as he shook his head.

Oh... I didn't expect that. I imagined Samael celebrating his misfortune with everyone, and it made me smile. Did I assume too soon? Perhaps it wasn't his misfortune, and the people grew fond of him. Were they happy he finally got his freedom?

Sam... he was truly a strange man.

"The duke had always wanted to travel the world. Visit other kingdoms and not just those neighboring kingdoms." Fabian continued.

I felt like the more he spoke about the duke before his slumber, the more I got to know the man I'm marrying. And I... could not help but think I've judged Sam too soon.

Before we know it, Fabian and I tackled about the duke instead of our supposed lessons.

"Did he see the world outside?" I asked, interested in his answer.

"For a hundred of years, yes. Although the duke said the world outside was too vast that even after a century, it was not enough for him to see everything."

"Then, why did he come back?" I asked, cupping my cheek as I tilted my head.

Fabian glanced at me momentarily and smiled.

"The late king had perished. And the duke didn't set out anymore, for his own reason. That's when he claimed a lawless land abandoned by the kingdom and named it Grimsbanne."

Chapter 37 - A Pact

Fabian didn't detail how Sam established this lawless land, abandoned by the monarchy. But, he said Sam was a natural ruler and his ruling made this hopeless land flourish into a peaceful land.

The tales of how Grimsbanne stood in the past sounded like a dream. However, my father used to tell me that Grimsbanne was akin to such a dream-like place that was far better than the Capital city.

Everyone was almost equal. There were no nobles who could abuse their power. Although poverty never died, everyone was satisfied.

Hearing it from two different people made me think there was legitimacy in it. After all, the duke went into his slumber. He was the person who balanced this land, and without him, it just went downhill.

"Well, that concluded our lesson today." Fabian smiled as he glanced at the window.

"But it's still early." I tilted my head, glancing outside. The sun hasn't set yet, and we barely tackled anything aside from Sam.

"The duke instructed me not to overwhelm you. We can take it slowly, so you can enjoy some time for yourself, my lady." Fabian explained.

Upon hearing his reasons, I nodded. Sam... he should pay me less attention.

"Can I take this book again? I haven't finished reading it." I said, raising the book Fabian lent me yesterday.

"You can read it as long as you can, my lady. After reading it, just take another one whenever you please." Fabian offered a smile, and I could not help but smile back.

"Do you want some tea and read in the garden before dusk?" He inquired, sounding more like he was suggesting.

Read in the garden? My eyes instantly twinkled at the thought.

"I can take this book and read it in the garden?" Excited, I perked up, which made him let out a chuckle.

"Yes, my lady. The duke's mansion is her ladyship's home as well. You can go anywhere freely and even read in the garden, or spend time alone in your boudoir if you don't want anyone bothering you."

"But that doesn't apply to Sam, I mean, to his lordship?" I muttered, and Fabian only offered a kind smile.

I knew it.

"Garden is fine." I said. Fabian nodded and offered.

"Then, shall I ask your attendants..." Before he could finish, I interrupted him midway.

"It's fine. I want to have some time alone in the garden. Maybe, to read or think about other things concerning my heart."

I didn't know, but just spending days with Fabian made me trust him more than anyone. Fabian just gave off an aura that I could tell him about everything, like a friend.

Not that I don't trust Samael. It was just that... my heart beats differently to the duke.

"My lady, don't you like the duke?" Fabian sported his kind smile. His tone told me he would understand my answer.

"Uhhh." Still, I hesitated on answering right away. "It's not that I don't like the duke. To be honest, he was the kindest person I have known who treated me more than a peasant deserved."

I gazed down. The side of my lips curled bitterly.

"It's just that..." I carefully trailed, finding the words to describe it properly.

"It's just that it's too good to be true?" Fabian guessed, and I raised my head.

"My lady, you've grown and lived as a peasant before his lordship. Thus, I can understand, deep down, you are only aware of the brutality of life." He continued, pausing as he moved his gaze towards the window.

"Hence, receiving kindness and respect from someone out of the blue feels like an illusion."

He added. I couldn't disagree with him. He just worded my feelings accurately, and it felt good he understood it.

"The duke had always been like that. I am also a lowborn, living in a lawless land where only the strong survive. Believe me, my lady. I've also had doubts at first, but his dukes had always been sincere and never turned his back on us."

Slowly, Fabian returned his gaze back to me. His smile grew gentler. I could feel his sincerity in his voice.

"You're a lowborn...? But, aren't you a vampire, Sir?"

"I'm not a vampire, my lady." Fabian chuckled.

I knitted my brows. A bit confused at his recent remarks.

"You were a human before?"

"And still a human, my lady."

I gasped, leaning back in disbelief. I think we had too much talk that the information in my head was getting mixed up.

"Haha." I shook my head and chuckled. "I think I misheard you. How silly of me."

"No, you didn't, my lady. I am still a human." Fabian chuckled.

This time, I stared at him in stunned silence. I blinked my eyes countless times, trying to make sense of his last remarks.

Fabian... he was still a human? How could a human life last that long?! Also, he wasn't aging?

Unknowingly, I cocked my head to the side as it slowly leaned deeper. I had so much question, but all my words were stuck in my throat.

I saw him chuckle once again.

"My brother and I had a blood pact with the duke. Hence, we don't age just like vampires. However, we don't inherit the strength of the vampires. Only their long span of life."

Fabian explained. However, my mind had difficulty processing his explanation.

Blood pact?

"To put it simply, when we agreed to a pact, we more or less share the duke's life. If he dies, we would die and age as well. However, if we died, nothing would happen to the duke."

"Huh? Isn't that unfair?" I blurted out, barely grasping the additional information he was feeding me.

"Whether you want it, you had to protect the duke to survive as well. But, he didn't have to protect you?" I added.

"My lady, a blood pact can only happen by mutual agreement. We are aware of that, but we swore to live and die for his lordship." Fabian uttered, still bearing that harmless smile.

"Also, we are strong to protect ourselves. Yet, the duke had protected us even though he shouldn't concern himself."

"..." I pursed my lips as I studied Fabian's expression.

In my eyes, Fabian had devoted his life to the duke and had trusted Sam without a shadow of doubt.

"Mister Fabian, you said you had a brother. Did he..." I trailed off. If the duke had in his slumber for hundreds of years, there was a high possibility that Fabian's brother had perished.

I don't see anyone who looked like him, after all. It was quite a news to hear that Fabian has a brother.

"Did he die? Is that what you're asking me, my lady?" Fabian chuckled.

"He is well and very much alive. It may not look like it, but Sir Rufus is my older brother."

Chapter 38 - The Day I Opened Up My Heart

I looked at Fabian blankly. Momentarily, my state of mind came to a standstill.

Fabian and Rufus...? They're brothers?

"Like... actual brothers? With the same mother and father?" I asked before I could realize my words slipped past my lips.

"Yes." Again, Fabian chuckled, as if he found delight in my reaction.

How could they be brothers? They don't share any resemblance, nor their personalities are alike. I have had little interaction with Sir Rufus, but I didn't have a good impression of him.

The world was truly a strange place, huh?

"My brother may annoy you, but he only does things for the goodness of his lordship. He is a kind person. The long slumber of the duke had put a lot of pressure on him. Thus, I apologize on his behalf if he offended you."

Fabian expressed and beckoned a neck bow. I pursed my lips and bit my lower lip.

Such a nice brother Sir Rufus had.

"No, there's no need to apologize. I'm a bit surprised, though. That's all." I waved and let out an awkward laugh.

After that, Fabian escorted me to the garden. I heard him instruct the maidservants to keep their distance and to not bother me.

I really appreciate him for everything. With that being said, I trudged further into the garden and looked around.

It was pretty; surrounded lush green with added colors of pretty daffodils, daisy, rose with different colors, and other variety of flowers.

Trimmed trees in different shapes added character to the garden. I had gone in here my first night, but only now I got to adore its beauty.

"My lady, I found you a suitable spot where you can read and enjoy some tea. Follow me." Fabian approached and beckoned me to follow him.

I nodded and did as I was told. He led me to one of the tree around the garden.

There was a quilt on the lush grass, a tea and a pot on a tray beside it. I smiled as I gazed up. The canopy was shading the spot perfectly.

"If you need anything, just ring the bell and the maidservants will come to you." Fabian offered a smile as I faced him.

He added, "Enjoy your time, my lady."

"Thank you, Mister Fabian." I expressed with a soft smile.

I saw his lips parted, but he pressed them together and said nothing further.

When Fabian left, I excitedly found a comfortable spot under the tree. My back resting against its trunk, feeling the soft wind brush past me.

"How serene," I whispered, scanning the area with a smile.

I felt at peace. I couldn't recall such a laid-back day in my life.

"Well," I giggled, picking up the book. My eyes flickered with glee, excited to read a book in such a serene atmosphere.

Thus, I read it. Unlike last night, my brain absorbed all the words I've read and had a full comprehension of its message.

I got immersed as my imagination took me to a beautiful place within the poet's mind. I didn't notice time, constantly enjoying a sip of the tea without taking my eyes off the book.

As I read, Sam's sudden interruption snapped me back to reality.

"Hay... yesterday, I want to become a butler. But today, I want to become a book." He said, as he suddenly laid his head on my lap — on top of the book.

Surprisingly, I didn't flinch. Or any of the sort. I just blinked, gazing down at him on my lap.

"My lord, you're using the book as your pillow. I can't read it like this." I muttered, more concerned about reading the book instead of Sam using my lap as his pillow.

"Tsk." Yet he snapped his tongue annoyingly before lifting his head.

As if on cue, I pulled the book away, and he rested his head directly on my lap. Once I made sure the book wasn't creased, my gaze went back to him.

He had his eyes closed.

I didn't know where I got the courage or how I stared and study his face without shying away. But I did.

From his long eyelashes, to his fleek brows, narrow pointy nose, lean cheek, and thin plum lips. To be honest, Sam's facial features had already made him look wickedly and dangerously charming.

His personality was like the paint that gave colors to the raw sketch.

As I stared at him, Fabian's previous words crossed my mind. If Fabian was saying the truth... there's nothing I should be afraid of, right?

Perhaps, if I put bits of my trust, I could fully trust him just like how everyone trusted him.

"My lord, can I ask something?"

"Mhm?"

"Am I being afraid of nothing?" I mustered my courage, bearing Fabian's advice and Sam's words from last night with me.

"Hmm." He hummed a long tune. "No, you have all the reasons to be afraid of me."

Slowly, his eyelashes fluttered as he opened his eyes. That instant, his gaze caught mine and my heart suddenly skipped a beat.

"I get that a lot. But as long as I can prove I'm sincere, I don't mind." Upon saying so, he smiled.

But his words just made my heart clench. Was there a time where he wasn't judged by his race? Did he have to prove himself to people all the time?

"Let me rest for a bit. Rufus is torturing me with all these duties. He might as well just kill me." He added in a complaining tone and closed his eyes again.

I bit my lip again. Between me and him, who was the veritable monster? A born vampire who did nothing to me but treat me well, or a human who deemed him as a monster without knowing him?

I reached for his naturally white hair. Each strand shone like a beautiful thread. Halfway, I held my hand, hesitant.

Again, I glanced at his closed eyes and gritted my teeth.

One step at a time, Lilou. I told myself, taking a deep breath as I resumed.

Soon, my fingers stroked his hair. His hair was soft underhand. The side of my lips curled into a subtle smile.

Simultaneously, Sam opened his eyes. This time, it was me who caught his gaze first.

"Rest, my lord. I will wake you up when I see Sir Rufus nearby."

"Goodness..." Under his breath, he whispered, as if surprised at what he was seeing.

But it didn't take long when he grinned and moved his head, finding a more comfortable spot on my lap. As I stroked his hair, it soon became a casual petting.

I realized he wasn't as frightening as the first time.

Soon, I resumed reading the book while he rested on my lap. With the serene air brushing past us, I'm glad to share this moment with him.

We weren't talking, but I'm starting to like his presence around me.

'No rush, Lilou. Slowly but surely.'

Chapter 39 - What Is A Date?

Weeks had passed since I first stepped into the duke's mansion. Time sure was fleeting.

Under the shade of my favorite tree in the garden, I smiled. Since that's day, I never missed a day without reading in here.

Every day, I got to learn new things from Fabian and from all those amazing individuals who had inked their knowledge into words. I owed them, and I'd be forever grateful.

My fear of the unknown, my fear for my life, my fear for being devoured... I never got to think about them anymore. In fact, I don't fear them at all.

Knowledge was indeed power.

Even if my life ended now, I've got no regrets... or I may do have a few. My struggles in the past were worthwhile, nevertheless.

"Uh... Gorgeous, I'm dying! I think I need some energy. A kiss sounds good. What do you think?" I heard Sam groaned before he laid on my side.

Slowly, I moved my gaze to Sam. He was lying on his side, his hand propping his temple, his gaze locked with mine.

Spending weeks with Sam trained me with his usage of vulgar remarks. Thus, I got used to it.

Ever since that day, Sam also never missed to join me in here for a while. Until Rufus comes and drags him away.

It was odd to see the duke being dragged by his right-hand man. Still, it was a silly sight to behold, which never failed to amaze me.

"My lord, if you're that tired, rest. I'll wake you up when I see Sir Rufus approaching." I said, before shifting my attention to the story I'm reading.

"Rufus won't come. Let me adore you some more." He chuckled.

I glanced at him, furrowing my brows upon catching his grin.

"I'm free today." He explained with a shrug, enlightening me.

Still, I didn't understand what he truly meant. Yet, I stopped myself from prying.

"I see." With that in mind, he nodded and grinned.

Meanwhile, my eyes search to the words where I stopped. I'm near the ending of the story, that's why I had to take a deep breath and absorb reality.

Another book finished and I've yet to prepare my heart to fill that empty void it would leave me with. Just the thought of it made me sigh.

How I wish all these stories never ends.

"Well, look at you." Amidst my thoughts, Sam caught my attention. I turned and looked at him, my brows furrowed.

"Several weeks ago, you are a nervous wreck whenever I'm around! Now, you're just... nonchalant."

Several weeks ago, I'm scared, confused, and cautious. But now, I'm not. I held back on saying those words.

"I don't know if I should be proud like a father for how lovely you've matured, or feel like a dejected husband for the lack of affection." He sighed.

Right. I had almost forgotten that I had to marry him. We never had a talk about our marriage for the past several weeks, nor did he mention anything about it.

Thus, I subconsciously threw it at the back of my head. Worrying about it would simply hinder me from embracing and enjoying the present.

"But, I'm proud of you." He smiled. My heart instantly skipped a beat and then warmed up.

Sam was always like this. He would speak his blunders but chip in some meaningful thoughts in between. I believed I'm slowly getting the grasp of his antics.

"Thank you." I pursed my lips, resisting myself from smiling too much. "My lord."

"Tsk." Dissatisfied with how I addressed him, he clicked his tongue annoyingly.

"Anyway, I came here not because I want to rest."

"Huh?"

"Let's go." He urged, but didn't budge in his position. Yet he raised his brows, casting me a knowing look.

I narrowed my eyes, knitting my brows in confusion.

"Where to, my lord?" I asked, tilting my head.

"Out. On a date." With the same tone, he informed.

"On a... date?" I whispered, and pursed my lips.

I've read a variety of books for the past weeks. One of my favorite was romance stories that made me root for the characters unbending love for each other.

Now that I think about it, I'll be marrying him. And a date... what kind of date does he truly mean?

I could not help but wonder. Sam may be kind and very considerate. However, I figured he had a different meaning in some things. Especially when it comes to romance.

"Like a proper date? Walking together? Looking at beautiful scenery? Eating and speaking flattery?" I asked, pursing my lips as a sudden realization struck me.

If that was the meaning of date, then does that mean we're dating every day? Sam would often walk me back to the bedchambers — sometimes we'd take a walk after dinner in the garden.

Wasn't this garden a beautiful sight to look at? Not to mention eating together. I never ate alone because Sam never let that happen.

"What are you talking about?" He inquired as he arched his brow, tilting his head to the side, confused.

"Nothing, my lord." I let out an awkward, short laugh. "It's nothing."

I know these romance novels were captivating. But I shouldn't let them get over my head. Keep it together, Lil.

"You'd been here for quite some time. Don't you want to go out?"

"Huh?" I blinked as I watched him sit up.

"Let's go. Out." He urged in a knowing tone.

"Out...?"

"Hmm! Outside. I heard you've inquired about those children in the field recently. Let's go visit them."

Sam cocked his head a little. I slowly absorbed his words, processing them properly if I heard him correctly.

When my slow thought processed realized his offer, my eyes brightened up, surprised and elated.

"Really?" I asked. "We will visit them?"

Samael smirked, pleased at the reaction he was seeing. But I ignored it. He then nodded sluggishly, his eyes drooping.

"Really." He nodded before he sprung up to his feet.

When he stood on his feet, he offered me his hand. Slowly, I gazed at his hand and raised my gaze to him.

"Come, my lady. I'll show you something better than those romance novels you'd been using as your reference for our marriage." He humored with a smirk.

My mind automatically ignored his latter remarks and only took in his first sentence.

"Yes, my lord." I hid my urge to grin, but to no avail.

Chapter 40 - Teach Me

Samael had told me he and I would travel alone. He also asked the maidservants for me to have a change of clothes in a much simpler dress.

Yet, as a born peasant, there's nothing simple in these clothes. Well, it looked a bit plain, unlike the dresses I had been wearing.

But they were still pretty. Perhaps, in the eyes of the nobles, they're simple? I still couldn't understand what was the norm among nobles.

Not that I had encountered one aside from Sam.

"What are you thinking?" I snapped back when I heard Sam inquired.

We were currently riding a horse at a very slow pace. Sam holding the reins while I sat in front of him; my feet on the horse's rear.

Slowly, I looked up at him.

"I was thinking how come this dress is considered simple." I replied.

"Because the price is different." Sam glanced down at me briefly before he looked ahead.

"Huh?"

"The clothes you usually wear were made of finer silks. Hence, the price was higher. As for that flat dress on which I can say simpler to tear apart if I wanted to, the price was close, but it gave you a look of those middle-class ladies."

Sam explained without batting me an eye. Was that other part necessary to his explanation? But it, indeed, required fewer layers of inner clothes.

"Don't think about it. I simply don't want you to stand out too much — although I knew you would, even if you're covered with mud."

He added. I furrowed my brows. A peasant never stood out. However, I took his words as wearing those clothes would make me stand out in a field where peasants live.

"Also, if you can, don't tell where you were and who you were with for safety purposes."

"Huh?"

"I offended a lot of noble families lately. They might touch you." Again, Samael cast me a brief glance and smiled.

"Touch... me?" I didn't understand the severity of his claims as he smiled.

Was he serious or not? I could not tell. Sam... he was like a puzzle who made me often believe I already solved, but not really.

"You never seen me mad?" He queried with his eyes ahead.

I bit my lips. There was this distinct feeling in his tone, which sent a slight shiver down my spine.

How long has it been since I felt this kind of fear again?

I stared at him, wondering if I truly know this man? Sometimes, he was gentle and considerate — affectionate, if I may add.

However, there were times... times I mostly ignored, that he still scared me. Not that I fear him; I fear that I'm turning a blind eye just because it was him.

I don't think fear was the term anymore. Rather, he worries me.

I barely have a vague idea of what Sam had been doing for the past weeks. But there were times he appeared exhausted and in distress.

I never asked him. I pretended not to notice. But, I wondered... was avoiding to raise a question helped?

Now that I think about it, I never helped him. He had changed my life; provided me education, dress me, fed me, and kept his words.

But what did I offer in return? Nothing. He never asked me for anything, either.

Just... why was he marrying me?

With every book I read, it made me question my purpose as well. The more I learned, the more I questioned myself, and the more I wanted to help.

But how? How could I be useful?

"Do I look that good to be stared at for a long time?" He said, snapping me back from my depressing thoughts.

"I would appreciate it if you look at me with lust, though."

He added. Sam slowly gaze down and smirked.

"How would I look at you with lust if I haven't known or felt it?"

Normally, I would ignore his nonsense blunder. I didn't know what gotten into me to ask such an odd question.

Perhaps it was the will to help him in some sort of way.

Suddenly, Sam pulled the reins, causing me to hold tightly on his chest. When it halted, I slowly raised my curious gaze.

Sam was narrowing his eyes in disbelief at what he had heard.

"My lady, did you know I'm faster than this horse, even at full speed?" He asked.

I furrowed my brows at the sudden and out of context question. "huh?"

"We can come back to the mansion in no time. I'm saying, you shouldn't tease me like that." Sam solemnly uttered under his breath, his eyes blazing with desire.

But... I'm not teasing him. I'm merely curious.

Yet my thoughts remained in my head as I nodded. Sam rocked his head back and forth lightly.

"Goodness..." Sam let out a heavy sigh from his mouth. He tilted his head back, looking up.

"Are you alright, my lord?" I asked, seeing him breathe heavily.

"I was," He paused as he slowly gazed down. His fiery gaze instantly locked with mine.

Slowly, his thumb and fingers held my chin.

"Until you gave me some sort of idea." He huffed huskily. "Look at me."

Sam stilled my chin, his gaze drawing me in. Deep crimson eyes... dangerously mesmerizing.

I couldn't look away. Not that I wanted to. Deep down, I wanted to know what those eyes were telling me all this time.

"This is how you look someone with lust." He stressed, and I gulped.

"But, you always..." I trailed as I bit my tongue.

"Exactly. Even if I purely adore you, I'm still a man and had primal needs."

Sam added in the same airy tone. Out of habit, I bit my lower lip lightly.

"Was lust a primal need?" I asked, that came out as a whisper.

I saw him take a deep breath, as if he needed to calm himself. Why?

"Lil," After a long inhale and deep exhale, Sam called. "Even if it is, don't fret about it."

He added, staring deep into my eyes. When I heard that, I clasped on his chest tightly.

I gazed down. Biting my lips to remind myself to think twice of what I was about to speak.

"But... I want to help." I replied timidly. I just wanted to help him and be useful to him, no matter how little it was.

"You don't know what you're talking about, silly."

I might not, but I'm willing.

"Teach me." I tugged him lightly, raising my head. Firm resolve flickered across my eyes as my tone determined.