

# The Duke 311

Chapter 311 - [Bonus ]The Journey Back To Grimsbanne

The journey back to Grimsbanne was silent. Traveling during winter surely added this nostalgic feeling to my nonexistent heart. Not only it was unbearably cold being out, but it was also undoubtedly a hassle.

However...

For the people who were numb to the pain of defeat, for our loss, for the deaths of something within while we're alive, this cold weather and silence felt nothing. Like defeated soldiers returning from a lost war, we were... pathetic.

"Should we make a stop in the Crawford's estate?" Yul inquired, snapping me out of my trance.

I snapped my eyes, staring at the window while we passed by the empty street of Knotley, Cunningham.

"No," I muttered. "Let's continue."

"But Marquess Cameron sent a word and prepared your room..." Yul trailed off and just went silent while gazing at me. "Alright. Let's just continue. The faster we arrive in Grimsbanne, the better, right?"

"Mhm."

Just as I said, we didn't make a stop in Cunningham. The place where Sam and I spent a long time before the Capital. I had grown fond of this place, but I didn't have the energy to make stops. We had been traveling continuously, setting up tents to rest for a few hours and then continue.

Despite the frigid weather, it didn't matter to us. It didn't even faze us, as if we've all grown numb from it.

My eyes softened as my eyes landed on the area where I met Claude. The day I met Claude was the same day I was abducted to the Capital. However, more than the terrible memories of that day, Sam and I had a good time.

"He was so dashing that day." I smiled bitterly, and I felt Yul, who was from across me, gaze at me. "His hair was brushed neatly to his back, and unlike his usual unbuttoned shirt, he looked good in that cravat on him. His hands that day didn't have a speck of stain, although they felt rough to the touch, they're the warmest thing I had held."

"Sis..."

I kept my smile as I could envision those times upon seeing that spot. That day, Sam held my hand as we walked in this very street. His lips would shift from smirk to smile, and how he looked at me made me feel like the most beautiful lady in this world.

But unlike that day, the snow had blanketed over the suburban.

It made me want to cry, but I couldn't because... until now, Sam was alive. That was what I wanted to believe. In my head, he just went somewhere far, and he would return to me one day.

"We will surely do that once he returns, Yul." I peeled my eyes away from the window and set them on Yul. "We will walk freely without a care in the world again... someday."

"Lilou." Yul's eyes flickered with pain. I wanted to tell him to stop looking at me like that, but I ignored it. "Yes, someday... that's right."

He sounded sad and unconvinced, but I still smiled. "Someday... for sure."

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Our journey continued, and we exited Cunningham without a problem. Because of the weather, we had to spend more time on the road before we reached Whistlebird. I didn't have many fond memories of this place.

Aside from having my first argument with Sam. He also massacred those corrupted members of the Remington Clan and sat Noah as the new Duke. Compare to Cunningham, there weren't many memories I shared with Sam in this place. However, I had a ton of memories with Stefan in here — that was why I dislike this place.

"Lord Noah is still on the run, so his brother took charge of Whistlebird," Yul informed me of what I had missed. "Although the entire House Remington wasn't stripped off of their titles, Stefan had them on close watch. Lord Noah probably knew that the second he step foot in this land, those who were lurking around Whistlebird will seize him..."

Yul's voice faded in the background as I looked outside the window. He had been trying to cheer me up every once in a while... or rather, he had been trying to keep me distracted whenever he has an opportunity. I let him, though; it was useful information.

My brows creased a little as I tilted my head to see far ahead. There were people lining up in this cold winter. It made me wonder what was going on. When our carriage got closer, I froze momentarily as I recognized this establishment.

"Yul, let's make a stop here," I requested without looking away from where I was looking at. "Tell everyone... we will dine in."

"What... alright?" There was a slight hesitation in Yul's voice, but he still agreed. Yul told the coachman to make a stop and the knight under Rufus, who managed to stay alive throughout that ordeal in the Capital to inform everyone.

As ordered, we did a stop like normal travelers. Yul stood outside, offering his hand to me. I gave him a smile, accepting his hand, and he assisted me outside the carriage. My eyes instantly veered at the people flocking the establishment.

"Is the food here so great? The place seems pack from the in and out." Yul muttered as others had a bowl of soup while eating outside the establishment.

"It's not that," I said, and someone familiar who was serving the people outside turned his head in my direction. His eyes dilated as soon as he recognized me and rushed towards me.

"Your —" Mister Teddy Brown, the owner of the restaurant where Sam and I ate, stopped when Yul raised his arm to his chest.

"Do you have an idea who is the person you are trying to approach thoughtlessly?" Yul's tone was cold, gazing down at Teddy Brown. The latter awkwardly stepped back, holding the tray in his hand while the other scratched the back of his head.

"My apologies, Your Grace." Teddy Brown apologized with a bow. "I was suddenly caught in the moment that I forgot my place."

"Yul, it's fine." I glanced at Yul and let out a chuckle. He reluctantly lowered his arm and stepped aside.

"Mister Brown, it seems your business is flourishing that people still come even during winter." I glanced at the establishment behind him.

"Ahh, haha! No, it's not like that, Your Grace." Teddy Brown chortled bashfully as he turned his head back. "It's free food. We feed everyone who comes in here hungry."

"A charity...?" Yul sounded appalled, staring at Teddy Brown with doubt in his eyes. "This only supports everyone to be lazy. You must be wealthy to do this kind of thing."

"Haha! I do not have wealth to leave to my offsprings, but our clan made a promise to a remarkable man and we're simply upholding that man's legacy." Teddy's eyes landed on me and he smiled gently. "Your Grace, it is presumptuous of me to invite you to our humble abode. Our food isn't as lavish as what Your Grace deserves, but I hope it can give you even the slightest warmth in this cold weather."

By the looks of it, Teddy Brown already heard the news about Sam. However, he said nothing and just offered me food.

Food made of goodwill, food that was not made to make a profit, food created by a promise. How dare I refuse?

"Thank you, Mister Brown." I bowed my head lightly, moved by this change Sam did in a place where money moved.

The corner of his lips stretched into a wide grin as he beckoned us to enter the establishment. I glanced at Yul, and he smiled in relief upon locking gaze with me.

"He is really amazing, isn't he?" he whispered to my side as we followed Teddy.

My eyes softened as I gazed down, chuckling in a low tone. "Don't think highly of Sam. All the good things he had done were... unintentional."

"And that's what's makes him more amazing." Yul humored, making me chuckle as he had a point. "I heard a lot about Whistlebird... but it seems it is not as bad as what I had heard."

Whistlebird, a place where money was more important than race.. Sam made this change in this tiny area of Whistlebird, but it slowly changed everything; from this land where everything was all about money to a land where everyone unite through thick and thin.

Chapter 312 - [Bonus ]The Journey Back To Grimsbanne II

Since the restaurant was packed. I assumed there wouldn't be enough space for us, and I was correct. Surprising, the people inside were kind enough to spare us some tables and space. I told them we could eat outside just like the rest, but the townsfolk insisted for us to stay inside where it was warm.

Why, you ask? Why was this kindness suddenly?

I smiled and gazed down, staring at my hand on the table. The reason was simple; everyone in here saw my husband as their hero. If not for him, the Brown's, the Remington's, or rather, this Whistlebird wouldn't change. Sam changed one person's perspective, and it spread across the entire city.

Not that Whistlebird had a total reform, but they were... making progress. It made me a little proud.

"Your Grace, I hope the soup will be to your liking." I snapped out of my thoughts when Teddy served a bowl of soup on the table, making me gaze up at him and smile.

"Thank you."

Teddy just smiled and distanced himself, but I could still feel he was looking, waiting for our reaction. There were also other eyes that were on me. I glanced at them and I saw some men and women, even children, studying me.

"They were the people behind this charity works, huh?" My eyes grew softer, peeling my eyes away from them and then set them to Yul, who was sitting across from me.

"Don't be ungrateful." I reminded, knowing Yul was a picky eater and had this problem with his expression.

He frowned and cast me a look. "Do you really see me in that light? The food might look bland, but I appreciate the kindness."

Yul picked up his spoon and started eating. I watched him take that first sip, and the way his brows creased made me chuckle a little. He was trying to control his expression, and I knew he didn't like the food. However, Yul said nothing and continued to eat.

Just when I was about to take a spoon, I turned my head to the table not far away from us. Klaus was eating fast, asking for more. My eyes fell on the table, and there were already two empty bowls on it.

"Did I starve them?" I wondered under my breath, seeing that Silvia, who also sat at the same table as Klaus was eating like crazy. No, not just them, but everyone who was with me ate at the same pace.

"Don't mind them." Yul wiped the corner of his lips with a handkerchief. "They are eating like that not because they are hungry."

"Are they feeding their greed, then? Because it's free?" I cocked my head to the side, staring at Yul to get some answers.

Yul didn't speak for a moment but stared at me and smile. "Why don't you listen?"

My brows arched and veered my eyes around my people. The loud sound of cutleries hitting the bowls slowly faded, listening to their muffled, indistinct mumbling as they ate.

"More! We need to eat more, so we get stronger! We need a source of strength. One more bowl, hoy!" Klaus raised another empty bowl, catching Teddy's attention, which the latter acknowledge in a hurry. "Faster, you!"

After Klaus asked for seconds, some knights and even Silvia requested another bowl. My eyes softened as a gentle smile appeared on my lips.

"These people are obsessed with getting stronger. Their logic is the more they eat, the stronger they get." Yul sighed, shaking his head helplessly. "But... I think we all share the same ideals."

"Yul."

"Sis, we will protect you just like how you protected us." Yul smiled, reaching his hand to mine and squeezed it lightly. "We will get stronger, so you don't have to worry about us. So, please, rest assured."

Sam left, but the people he left had truly loved and respected him. That was why I wanted to protect them and keep my husband's spirit alive.

"You, people..." I let out a weak chuckle, gazing at the bowl of food, and scooped a spoonful of soup to my lips. As the slight heat went through my tongue down my throat, I smiled.

It was... bland. I got used to the food in the palace that this soup felt tasteless. However, no dish in that hell had ever touched me, yet this soup... gave me a sense of comfort.

"Thank you for the food," I whispered and continued eating without wasting a drop.

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We ate to our heart's content. When it was time to leave, Teddy had escorted us to my carriage.

"Ahh... what a bland food," Klaus commented as he walked outside with a toothpick clipped in between his lips.

Silvia scoffed and glared at him. "Have some sense of shame, will you? Don't forget you downed ten bowls!"

"So, what? That doesn't mean it tastes good!" Klaus held his hand behind his head as the two walked back to their carriage.

"Please don't mind him." Yul sighed, apologizing to Teddy as we had heard their conversation from our position.

Teddy just chuckled, shaking his head. "No offense is taken. We are already honored that Her Grace and Your Highnesses dined in our humble restaurant. It is an honor that our future generations could brag about!"

"Mister Brown, I appreciate your kindness. The food is good... and I'm certain many people will survive this season." I expressed in a soft tone, smiling at him.

"Your Grace." Teddy smiled gently, glancing at Yul as if asking him if he could approach me. Yul said nothing nor did he give a signal of his approval, but Teddy knew that Yul not giving him a signal was the signal.

My brows raised when Teddy took a step forward — he was close, but not too close. Just enough distance so his words could only be heard between the three of us.

"Your Grace, if you ever need anything, our clan, the Remington's, and the entire Whistlebird will do everything for you," he said in a low yet sincere tone, his eyes on me. "Those were my, the

Remington's, and everyone who is fed by this restaurant's words. We will be happy to assist Your Grace if you ever need us."

"Anything, Your Grace — even if it's our lives," he added.

I see... so the Remington expected we would pass through in here, so they left a word.

"Thank you, Mister Brown." I smiled, appreciating this kind gesture and offer. "However, your deaths are not what I seek."

"Yes, Your Grace." A bitter smile resurfaced on his lips, but I ignored it and turned around. Just as I did, my smile faded.

"I will keep in touch," I said and then resumed my steps.

"I will wait, Your Grace." That was what I heard Teddy said, and I knew he understood I would need their assistance in my future endeavors.

They never directly said a word about Sam, but Teddy was clear that he owed Sam a debt. It was not my imagination when I saw how the people looked at me. It was neither pity nor sadness.

What the eyes of those who ate in this place and Teddy's were filled with suppressed rage. Vampires or humans, everyone knew Sam's death wasn't the end of everything.

Just like how I noticed the fire in their eyes, they surely noticed the flame of hell burning in mine.

Chapter 313 - [Bonus ]The Day I Returned To Grimsbanne

Strange, wasn't it? We left Whistlebird with a full stomach, but the emptiness inside me remained unfulfilled. We camped on the road that night and then continued our arduous journey before the crack of the day. Just like in the past days, we traveled in silence. Yul would constantly talk to me, but I barely replied with a hum.

"We're almost there, Your Grace." Yul broke his silence once again after a half-day of quietness.

"I can see that," I replied, staring outside where I could see the borders of Grimsbanne. The sight of it gave me this mixed emotions; emotions that were thrice as intense as what I felt when we left Whistlebird.

"We're really back..." My breathing grew heavier and so was my body. It was as if the second we entered this territory, a gigantic rock was placed on my shoulders.

"I received a word from the duchy that some knights were waiting for your return. The townsfolk also wanted to welcome your return, but were told to stay inside their houses as per your request." Yul informed me as we met a knight that was left to protect Grimsbanne to give us a message halfway through our journey.

"That's good." I nodded in appreciation. "They don't need to welcome us and the ashes of my husband. Holding a public mass is better than standing outside in this cold season."

"Yes. They had arranged it for tomorrow." Yul cleared his throat. "Are you sure you don't want to rest first? We had a rough journey. Your people will surely understand if you postpone it for a day."

"It's alright. I can't delay the grieving hearts of his people."

"Lilou," Yul let out a deep sigh. "You're grieving too. Among everyone, you are the most who is in pain..."

"I am in pain, but I'm not grieving, Yul." I slowly peeled my eyes away from the road to him. "To me, Sam is alive somewhere. I am merely fulfilling the wish of his people and respect what they believe... regardless of what I believe."

"You can't!" His breath hitched as his chest moved out, then back in slowly. "You can't keep denying his death, sister. You have to accept it... not now, but you have to consider accepting it." Yul gazed down in worry as his tone lowered.

"If I accept it... I will die, Yul," I murmured, clasping my skirt tightly.

Denying it was just my defense mechanism to keep moving forth, because accepting my husband's death and that he would not return to me was a slow and painful death. Sam's death was not the most painful of all. What was the most painful of all were the days that had passed by without him.

"It was already hard for me despite tricking myself." I paused and took a deep breath, swallowing down the tension in my throat. "Don't speak about this again, Yul. I'm calm now... but I can't guarantee what I'll do the next time."

"I'm just worried. You know that." He sighed heavily. "But if that is what you truly want, then so be it."

"I don't blame you," I uttered after a brief silence. "I just decided to keep my heart and eyes closed, and my mind open. Sam told me that before... and it helps, barely."

Silence dawned upon us once again as we didn't talk even when we reached the little town of Banse. We made a brief stop as some knights escorted us from the entrance of Grimsbanne, and Yul talked to them while I remained inside.

"Your Grace, everything had been fine in here. The knights will escort us all the way to the estate." Yul reported as soon as he returned to the carriage.

I remained silent momentarily, gazing outside with my eyes in a certain direction. "Let's go there."

"Your Grace?"

"Over there," I said, staring at the route heading to the field. "Let's make a stop there first."

"Oh... but — I mean, alright...?"

Just as I requested, our carriage headed towards the place where I used to work. Some of us headed straight to the duke's mansion, while I kept only a few knights and Yul with me. It didn't take us long enough to reach our destination. We stopped from a distance and went on foot since I didn't want to catch everyone's attention.

"This is where you work before?" asked Yul, gazing at the empty field which was now covered with thin snow. The very few knights that were with us kept their distance while we stood near the field.

"Mhm." I nodded, recalling those times where everything was simple. "It's not a good life, but compare to now, life back then was more bearable."

"I beg to disagree. You can eat now to your heart's content and have the power to make a change."

"You're right." A bitter smile resurfaced on my lips as he had a point. "But even so, I'd choose that life in a heartbeat over the life I have now. It may be superficial, but if I can stay like that version of me for even a second... I would."

Because the past me was just frustratingly ignorant... but she was happy. The present me was just an empty shell.

"Lilou? Is that really you, Lilou?" Suddenly, I heard a woman's very familiar voice from our side. Yul and I instinctively turned our heads to her, only to see Old Olly and a group of elders with her.

"Oh, goodness!" their eyes brightened up in relief as soon as our eyes met, while I was frozen on the spot. "It's really is you!"

Old Olly and the rest immediately rushed to me, surrounding me while Yul backed away. She held my hand, her hand trembled as she looked at me teary-eyed.

"You child! Where have you been all this time, huh? Do you know how worried we were?" nagged Old Olly and then followed by the rest.

"The children had been asking about you even until now! A lot of things happened! Where have you been?"

"Goodness! Thank the Lord you were safe! We almost died out of worry!"

"How have you been, Lilou? Have you been well?"

They berated me with a series of nagging, but their eyes were welling up. My mouth opened and closed, no words came out. So, I took a deep breath and sported a weak smile.

"Why are you all out in the cold?" I asked as I didn't have the energy to lie and tell them I was alright. They would figure out if I did.

"Oh!" Old Olly snapped and then frowned, casting everyone a look. "We tried to send the flowers we made with the children to the Duchess. We heard she will arrive today... and we want to comfort her."

My eyes fell on the garland in their hands. It seemed they failed, seeing their mood suddenly turned grim. However, this gesture moved me.

"There were many people who sent gifts and condolences to the Duchess, so they couldn't accommodate us." Old Olly cleared her throat as she tried to stay positive. "We will give it to her after the public mass tomorrow. They told us that she will join... Lilou?"

Old Olly's expression suddenly grew worried as she looked at me. "Are you alright? Why are you crying?"

I didn't realize that the tears that failed to spill from my eyes suddenly fell without restriction. It just fell like waterfalls, staining my cheek as I bit my lower lip as hard as I could.

"Goodness, child." Old Olly glanced at the others. They look all worried.

"Were are you hurt?" they asked with the purest sincerity in their voice.

I nodded, almost choking. "It... it hurts," came out a muffled reply, and I clutched my chest.

"Here... it hurts here. I feel like dying."



"Oh, child. Come here." They didn't ask me a single question, but they consoled me with a warm embrace.

And just like that, I bawled, cried my heart out until my knees gave way. All I could remember was I cried and cried, screaming while clutching my chest as if my heart would stop at any moment.

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Yul watched Lilou cry like how a wife should be for losing her husband. He gritted his teeth, balling his hand into a fist as he looked away. The elders who were consoling her didn't raise a question, and just rubbed her back and wept with her.

'You finally cried, sis...!' he took a deep breath and walked away, giving Lilou a space with these people. These people who had nothing in their name, but carry the power that none of them had.

A heart to touch Lilou and a voice to reach her.

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"So, she knows how to cry too, huh?" Klaus muttered as they watched Lilou from the distance. "Tell everyone to close the area."

He didn't even turn back to the knights who accompanied him from behind them. The knight bowed and executed the orders without questions asked.

"Is it really necessary to close the area just because Lilou is crying?" Silvia asked, standing to his side with her eyes on Lilou and those peasants.

"We don't know who is watching, Silvia." Klaus cast her a side-eye before setting them back to Lilou. "Lilou had given us the freedom to mourn for them and even after that, that frail-looking woman faced Stefan without fear, nor did she show any sign of weakness."

Klaus deliberately paused, rocking his head lightly. "I will keep it that way... I'm sure she will not appreciate it if someone sees her other than those people breakdown."

"You sound like a proper knight now, Klaus." Silvia chuckled, shaking her head as it seemed they had all matured overnight. "But you're right. We have to be her walls, just like how she stood like a wall for us to lean on."

The day she had mourned was also the day the Lilou they had all known died.

-- END OF VOLUME 4 --

Chapter 314 - [Bonus ]Welcome To Hell's Den

— WELCOME TO VOLUME 5 —

PROLOGUE

It had been seven months since we returned to Grimsbanne. There were a lot of adjustments at first, keeping everyone in the duchy busy for the first four months. But now, everything had settled down — even I got used to my duties as the Duchess.

I dipped my body in the cold lake I had discovered in one of my morning runs. The water was cold, especially now that it was nighttime, but I liked the view and quietness in here. I gazed up to see the moon shining brightly above.

"How pretty," I adored, smiling amusingly. "It always looks pretty every time I bathe in here."

My brow arched upon hearing a footstep approached me. "It is rude for you to intrude when someone is bathing, Zero."

"Haha! How did you know it was me?" he chuckled, standing not far away from me. "Also, I was simply taking a night walk, but lost my way. I didn't mean to peek at you while you bathe."

"How pitiful. You must've marched a long way to reach Grimsbanne from the Spade Kingdom." I turned around ever so slowly, looking at him in a foreign uniform.

"Marching by that distant is worthy." He gazed down, smirking seeing my exposed shoulder. "Shall I join you, so you don't get bored?"

"Haha..." I shook my head, calmer than ever. "It's been a while, Your Majesty."

"It has been, Your Grace." He smiled brightly. "Although, please tell your people to stop aiming at me. I have a frail heart, it's been racing anxiously."

"How keen. I thought you didn't notice."

"How can I not sense the bloodthirst of the fifth prince?" Zero humored back, glancing in a certain direction. "Although, it makes me wonder if they had been watching you bathe all these times... I'm envious."

"You'll be surprised how obstinate my people are." I raised my finger and crooked it down, signaling those who were aiming at Zero from the distance to drop their weapons.

"Mildred, bring me my robe." My voice was low, but I knew a lot of people were listening to my orders. My people were just around, waiting for orders, or just guarding me from a safe distance.

It didn't take long when Mildred, my lady-in-waiting, appeared with a robe draped on her arm. She glanced at Zero, performing a curtsy as she greeted him with respect.

"Shall I turn around, Your Grace? Although that will dishearten me for this golden opportunity to glimpse upon your body." Zero smirked, and I replied with a smile as a warning shot was fired near his foot.

"My... your people seem they do not have long patience," he added, cocking his head back as Silvia pointed a sword over his shoulder; the blade an inch away from the side of his neck. "It is nice to see you, Your Highness."

"How dare you step foot in where the Duchess bathe?" Silvia's eyes glinted as she lifted her chin up. "Even if your head rolls over right this instance, it is just."

"Silvia, please don't scare my distinguish guest like that." I raised a hand, and Silvia only huff as she withdrew her sword before taking a step back. "His Majesty had an arduous journey in coming here. Please treat him with respect."

"How sweet." He chuckled and cast Silvia a look to taunt her.

"Your Grace, I will..."

"It's alright, Mildred. The waters are cold, and I don't want you catching a cold." Without a second hesitation, I stood up from the lake, not a bit embarrassed to walk naked with all the eyes around.

Zero smirked as he narrowed his eyes, not even concealing his enjoyment of what he was looking at. I let him, raising my hand and Mildred helped me wear the robe.

"You have a nice body, Duchess." He sized me up from head to toe, licking his lips as he raised his eyes back up on me. "Now I regret being able to see it because I can't touch it."

I chuckled, unlike Silvia's reaction, who obviously had to use a lot of restraint not to slay Zero. "That's too bad to hear," I smirked as I hook my damp hair out of the robe.

"Well, anyway, can this regretful one greet you formally, at least?" Zero walked towards me, extending his hand for me to clasp.

"How dare I refuse your greeting, Your Majesty?" I raised a hand and clasped his hand.

A smirk appeared on his lips, smirking as he bent over, eyes burning on me. "It is nice to see you again, my duchess," he said, placing a brief peck on the back of my hand.

"The pleasure is mine, Your Majesty," I smirked as my eyes glinted viciously. "Thank you for coming after receiving my invitation."

"Your invitation is quite unique, my duchess." He let my hand go, studying my face. "You've become stronger."

"Are you threatened by what kind of woman I had become?"

"Who knows?" He smirked, raising a brow as he tilted his head back. "But surely, the rumors about you aren't just hearsay. I can tell in a glance you've changed."

"I hope you liked the change... just like I do." I turned and marched away, but stop and glanced back at him. "Shall we head to my humble estate, Your Majesty?"

The smirk of his lips stretched wider. "I won't refuse that offer," he said, walking towards me as we head back to my den.

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Meanwhile, from a distant hill from the lake, Klaus stretched his neck in a circular motion. As he did, someone clad in all black appeared not far away from him.

"Seize everyone who is lurking in the shadows." He ordered, stretching his arms up and then tilting his body from one side to the other. "Her Grace ordered that every single rat from the Spade shall be served tomorrow morning."

"Yes, Captain." The man, who was akin to a shadow, immediately disappeared without a trace.

As Klaus stood alone, he gazed at the surrounding from the center top of the hill — the location of Lilou's shack that was now a school — and smirked.

"Welcome to Hell's Den, Quentin.." His smirk grew sinister as the mild wind blew past him.

Chapter 315 - [Bonus ]Beauty Is A Weapon

Yul squinted his eyes into slits as he welcomed us by the door. He knew that Zero would come, but he probably didn't expect to see him tonight.

"Welcome to our humble estate, Your Majesty," He greeted formally, bowing before facing us squarely. "Forgive us if we are welcoming you in such a poor state. We aren't aware."

"Haha. Oh, ninth prince." Zero chuckled, planting his hand on his hip. "You are too formal, unlike the rest I had met so far. But, do not worry. It's my fault that the messenger I sent didn't seem to arrive in here safety."

"Yul, take His Majesty to the drawing room." I chimed in and glanced at Zero. "I will join you there while they prepare us dinner, Your Majesty."

"My, how lovely." He chuckled, casting me a smirk before he followed Yul's lead.

"Your Grace." Mildred cast me a look of worry, but I smiled.

"Help me get changed, Mildred. Don't look at me like that."

"Yes, Your Grace." She bowed slightly, and we headed back to my chambers.

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"This jewelry will suit your dress, Lil." Silvia raised a necklace, staring at the emerald pendant shining in front of her.

I glanced at her, who sat on the Divan inside my room comfortably. "Sivi, I don't see you dressing up lately. You don't have to join Klaus tonight since you've been exhausted with volunteer works in the town."

"I'm bored, and this change of lifestyle brings me back to the good old days. I like it." Silvia tossed the necklace and caught it midway before tossing it to me. I caught it out of instinct.

"Careful, you!" I pouted, checking the necklace. "This is worth an entire estate. We need money."

"Just exploit all your suitors to give you more," she humored with a smirk, making me giggle as I passed the necklace to Mildred. "Those bastards just don't know when to stop."

"Grimsbanne is benefiting. I don't see any reason to stop them." Mildred started putting the necklace around my neck while I cast Silvia a look. "Although, I feel bad to Yul since he had to deal with them."

"Yes, poor him." She let out a deep sigh, feeling sorry for the title Yul had in the high society.

"Good thing everyone is terrified of Klaus, so they don't run their mouths thoughtlessly."

"Klaus is very reliable. He never fails to surprise me." I smiled, thinking that the reason my 'personal' affairs don't spread out of the high society was that Klaus would surely cut their tongues. He had made a few examples in the first four months. Some were even executed just by speaking ill about me.

It was not something I would tolerate — or so what I thought. Being the head state and a woman who had to keep her status, I learned to be twice ruthless as others. If I wanted to keep my status, I had to let everyone know I don't give mercy to those undeserving, and hell was guaranteed if they get on my bad side.

"Well, he seemed very exhilarated." Silvia shrugged, leaning back comfortably. "He had been very bored since everyone was too scared to even think of plotting behind you."

Another wave of chuckle slipped past my lips. Silvia raised a brow and let out a shallow breath.

"Anyway, good luck in humoring the king of Spade. It was surprising how he rushed in here after sending him an invitation." She whistled faintly, looking up at the ceiling with genuine wonder.

"Of course he will rush in here." I smiled and Silvia set her eyes back on me. "Don't act as if you don't know the reason."

"Heh." Silvia grinned mischievously. "I'm surprised, but I didn't say I'm ignorant."

"Anyway, I can't keep him waiting." I gazed at myself in the mirror, checking at how I looked.

"Why are you checking yourself?" Silvia raised a question, narrowing her eyes suspiciously. "You don't do that — never."

I pursed my lips into a thin line. "You know... Zero is handsome and..."

"Bullshit, Lilou."

"Haha!" A gleeful laugh escaped my mouth, turning my head to Silvia, whose expression was utter disgust. "I jest. Beauty is a weapon, didn't you say that, Sivi?"

"But you don't even need to try. You're already beautiful, my sister."

"Even so, I want to make an effort." A sly smirk appeared on my lips, casting her a knowing look. "I still have roughly around five months before my agreement with Stefan starts. I need Zero's power."

"As aggravating as it sounds, I agree."

"Don't worry, Sivi." I winked at her, smiling sweetly.

"Who said I was worried?" Silvia raised a brow before she pushed herself up to stand. "For seven months, you made it clear that worrying about you is useless. I'm more concerned that I have to bid farewell to my life as a teacher. I've grown fond of the people here, after all."

Silvia walked towards the door, waving at me without looking back. But she paused in her tracks and turned her head back.

"By the way, I forgot to tell you that your favorite suitor, Prince Heliot, sent you a letter. Shall I get it for you?"

"Oh?" I raised a brow, as it piqued my interest. "I haven't responded to his previous letter, and he sent another?"

"Well, you're quite the beauty." She humored with a grin before resuming in her strides.

"I will get it myself, Sivi. You know how I am so fond of him." Silvia didn't respond as she closed the door, while I smirk at the thought.

"Your Grace, you look beautiful." Mildred, who remained silent throughout my conversation with Silvia, praised me.

I gazed at her, smiling. Mildred came in here a month after I arrived in Grimsbanne. Apparently, the House Souton were ostracized by nobles and even received death threats. The reason was that she stood up for me when she overheard a conversation regarding Sam and me.

"Thank you, Mildred." I expressed, standing up and wave. "I will be late tonight."

My eyes glinted as I walked away to meet my distinguished guest from the Spade Kingdom.. A smirk appeared on my lips, as I couldn't wait to show Zero my gift of appreciation.

Chapter 316 - [Bonus ]The Best Is Yet To Come

"And here I was wondering what had taken you so long, my duchess!" Zero exclaimed as soon as I entered the drawing room. "Turns out you dressed up! I might assume you did all this for me!"

"You don't have to assume, Your Majesty." I smiled, tilting my head a little before taking the chair across from him. "I dressed up for your eyes to see."

"Goodness, are you seducing me?"

"Well, if I can charm you, why not?" I raised a brow, smirking coquettishly. "You are not a bad partner, after all."

Zero chuckled once again, leaning back, legs over the other, while his arm was on the armrest. "Your flirting had improved. I guess this is one of the skills you had honed in a mere seven months."

"That mere seven months for you is already a long time for me, Your Majesty," I replied almost instantly, leaning back and raised my chin. "The problem with vampires is, they have a lot of time to waste. That is why humans' progress is fast because we need to make the most out of our short lives."

"Make sense." He nodded approvingly. "Humans always fascinate me."

"They do?" my already arched brow raised, even more, seeing that he grinned.

"I will correct it. You always fascinate me." His grin stretched even wider before he took his leg from the other, leaning in with his arms on his thigh. "It was amazing how you got so much power in the span of seven months, and uncovered secrets that no one knew."

He narrowed his eyes. "Just how? Is there some sort of secret? Or were you just naturally cunning?"

"Secret? Well, I was..." I paused deliberately, studying his expression, and noticed the menacing glint flickering across his eyes. "... bored, Your Majesty. You see, to cope up with my husband's death, I had to think a lot and move a lot, or else I might go insane from the sadness."

"Haha." Zero chuckled, but this time, it sounded threatening. "Your Grace, I do not appreciate that I am being used as a mere entertainment."

"Well, I didn't mean to." I shrugged nonchalantly as my eyes drooped, indulging in the dangerous aura he exuded. "But alas, I probably had fallen in love with you, since I can't get you out of my head. So, I tried to catch your attention."

"How sweet, my fiance." He let out a brief scoff, gazing down while shaking his head lightly.

"Where is he?"

Zero raised his head, and his usual playful expression was gone. That was more like it, Zero. Now he was showing me his irked expression with eyes burning with madness.

'Hah! I love it!'

I took a deep breath, pressing my lips together as I averted my eyes away. "I don't know what you are talking about, my fiance."

"Lilou." He stretched his neck in a circular motion, closing his eyes as if trying to suppress his anger. "I didn't become a king for no reason. Don't mess with me."

"Goodness, what's the rush? Am I keeping you bored?" I pouted, unfazed by the alarming aura suspending the inbound breeze.

"You don't want me to become your enemy, my fiance," Zero warned in a low and menacing tone. "There is also a limit of how much I play. Don't push your luck too far."

"Fine!" I rolled my eyes and let out a heavy exhale. "I will take you to him."

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As promised, I escorted Zero to an underground prison. Holding a lamp in my hand, we stayed silent as he walked down the steep stairs.

"Please do not misunderstand, Your Majesty," I said, breaking the silence as we came near to a certain prison cell. "I merely kept him here, so he doesn't run away. It is so dangerous outside. I had to protect him, you know."

"Shut your nonsense."

"Pfft—!" I pressed my lips together, suppressing the hysterical laughter that was tempting to escape my mouth. "I just don't want you to misunderstand."

He said nothing anymore after that as we walked in silence once again. Soon, I stopped in front of the prison cell, moving the lamp close to the metal bars that brought light to the person inside.

"You..." Zero ground his teeth as the veins in his temple protruded. He fixed his eyes on the person locked up inside with hands bound by a chain on either side and a chain around his neck. My prisoner was in a terrible state, as there was not a single area of his body that wasn't bruised and wounded.

"He is quite wild, you see," I muttered, making the prisoner inside raise his head. He was barely recognizable with that mangled face of his. It nearly moved me to tears!

"Your Majesty..." the prisoner's voice was rasped, letting everyone know he barely had a drink.

"You!" Zero faced me, his eyes bloodshot as he immediately grabbed me by the neck and lifted me up. "I will kill you!"

He seethed, fangs growing as his grip around my neck tightened. I couldn't breathe, but alas, I laughed hysterically. It wasn't a fake laugh. I was truly gleeful as seeing Zero lose it was worth it.

"Oh, Zero!" I coughed in between my waves of laughter. "The best is yet to come! Hahaha!"

This time, his grip tightened even more, as if to silence the echoing chuckles across the underground prison. "Yes! Kill me, Zero! Because I'm just starting!" I grinned maniacally as I felt suffocated not long after.

"Your \*cough\* Maje... ty." Zero snapped his eyes as he turned his head back to the prison cell, letting me go abruptly. As soon as he dropped me, I gasped for air, groping my neck as I nearly died. Goodness, what a crazy experience.

"Tristan, why —" His breath hitched as he immediately squatted down, holding my shoulder as he glared at me. "What did you do to him?"

I didn't reply immediately as I gasped for air, coughing while he rocked me. "Lilou Bloodfang, what did you do to my son?!"

## Chapter 317 - Heliot Is Not Hell

I smiled until my eyes were squinting, loving every second I could see the anger in his eyes. It was a surprise to me as well upon discovering this knowledge. Tristan, Zero's chief shadow guard, was his son. No wonder a person like Zero, who wouldn't even trust anyone to make him tea, trusted Tristan.

"It was a wrong assumption to think you are heartless, Your Majesty." My response caused him to grip my shoulder tighter, but I ignored it. "Because if you are, you wouldn't keep the bastard you had with a turned vampire."

His pupils dilated, hearing my remarks. "Surprised that I know about that too?" a smirk resurfaced on my lips. "I was wrong on thinking you are not passionate, Zero, because you surely are."

"Let him go." He hissed, and I could tell he wouldn't hesitate on killing me if I pushed him too far.

"Of course, I plan to let him go. I told you, I only kept him here so he wouldn't get hurt outside." I smiled gently, letting out a shallow breath as I reached for his collar. "You are, after all, still an ally I will need."

Zero squeezed my shoulder tightly before he let me go. "What do you want?"

"What I want... is rather simple, Your Majesty," I smirked, withdrawing my hand from his collar.

"An alliance between you and me, not between you and my clan. It's simple, isn't it?"

"You want a blood contract with me?" he asked, eyes burning, but I chuckled, shaking my head.

"No, I would be foolish to think you will easily agree on an unfair blood contract just like that one." I glanced at Tristan, whose life was connected to me through a blood contract. Thanks to my experience tagging along with Stefan in the past, I applied all the experimenting knowledge I learned from it.

"Hah..." Zero chuckled in ridicule, staring at me like a beast staring at its prey. "Then, are you telling me this alliance will hold a middle ground of simple trade?"

"Yes. You've been in constant dispute with Stefan and everyone knows it is only a matter of time before a war between Spade and this kingdom will break out. I will support you and you will support me." My smirk stretched wider. "Marriage and blood contract aside, isn't this what the plan all along?"

"Hah... I guess you are not afraid of betrayals for wanting an alliance without the reassurance of blood pact."

A chuckle slipped past my lips as I assisted myself to stand up. I walked towards the cell, unlocking and pushed it open. "Do not worry, Your Majesty. I will make sure you and I will trust each other. Tristan, dear, break those chains, can you?"

Tristan's eyes glowed in red, gnashing his teeth as he pulled the chains with all his might. Blood spurted from his wounds as he struggled, making me smirk at the sight of it. I felt Zero stand behind me. His aura felt more alarming than ever.

"Trust, huh?" his gaze lingered on my back. "You've really changed, and it gives me mixed emotions about this."



"I didn't change, Your Majesty." I turned and faced him squarely. "The Lilou you've met first is the changed one. I just returned to how I was."

We stared at each other, listening to the sound of Tristan's hissing along with the chains he was struggling to break. I felt no remorse in doing this, nor I was afraid of Zero's retaliation later on.

"I hope you will find your stay in my estate pleasing, Your Majesty." I performed a curtsy, not waiting for him to speak as I left him with Tristan. Before I turned to leave, I looked back and saw him enter the cell. In the end, Zero still had to help Tristan with the chains.

I smirked. Of course, Tristan wouldn't be able to break those chains on his own. Zero knew Tristan would be either choke to death or lose his limbs if he wanted to escape the chains. I made sure that would be the outcome without anyone's help, after all.

'I'm just starting, Zero.' My eyes glinted as I trudged away. 'The best is yet to come.'

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When I exited the underground dungeon, my brows furrowed upon laying my eyes on Yul. He was just standing outside the entrance, wearing his usual poker face.

"Were you worried?" I asked as I continued to walk away while he followed me from behind.

"I will always worry about you, Your Grace."

A weak smile resurfaced on my lips. "How funny. Sivi said she doesn't worry about me anymore, but you always worry about me."

"I trust you just like how Silvia trust you, but worrying about you simply comes naturally," Yul replied in his same stoic tone. I was used to his stubbornness at this point — not that I found it displeasing.

"Will you resign to bed now?" he asked when I didn't respond to him. "Or, you..."

"I will have to check my mailbox," I answered without beating around the bush. "Prepare Bella for me."

"You're going yourself again?"

"Of course. Since when did I let any of you receive his letters?" I cocked my head back, casting Yul a knowing look. He sighed, frowning as he had been displeased about my ambiguous movements regarding Prince Heliot.

"I don't know why you are so interested in Prince Heliot that you always bother receiving his letters personally. Not that we will peek at it." Yul complained and clicked his tongue.

"I didn't mean to make you feel that I don't trust you, Yul." I stopped in my tracks and faced him. "If there is a person I entrust my life with, that would be you."

"Then, why are you like this with Prince Heliot?"

I pursed my lips and smiled weakly. Yul's frown grew more gloomy.

"You don't like him, do you?" he asked the question he had been restraining from asking me all this time. "Lilou, Prince Heliot is not Hell."

"Yul, please prepare Bella for me." I cut this conversation upon his last remarks. "I had a long day, and I wanted to end it in a good mood."

Yul's eyes flickered with sadness as he hung his head low. "Yes, Your Grace."

With that being said, Yul left to prepare my steed. I watched my brother's back as he walked away, feeling sorry for him.

'Heliot is not Hell... hah, of course, Yul.. No one can replace Sam.'

Chapter 318 - Hidden Shadows That Only She Knew About

As ordered, Yul prepared my steed for me while I changed into a more comfortable outfit. I would leave Zero behind, but that didn't worry me in the slightest. He wouldn't recklessly touch my people while I was away.

"Stay safe, Your Grace." Yul bowed, his palm across his chest as I mounted Bella,

I smiled at him, holding the reins. "Don't stay up late, Yul."

"You're telling a vampire that?"

"Oh, please, when do you resign to bed?" I humored as Yul seemed he doesn't sleep at all. He was up in the morning, and even late at night.

"I should be the one asking you that, sis." Yul clicked his tongue, making me realize I had the same hectic schedule. "Anyway, even though Grimsbanne is your territory, it won't bring you harm if you act more cautious."

"Yes." I maneuvered my steed as it gaited toward the gates. "I am always cautious, Yul."

"Please, don't lie," was what I heard from him, making me chuckle before I left, galloping away from the mansion to the town.

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Seven months ago, the people of Grimsbanne had wept for the loss of its Duke. However, since Sam had been sleeping for a long time, no one truly took it to the heart. What the people worried about wasn't the death of the Duke, but rather, what would happen that the lord of the land would be his wife. It was a rough first four months with all the other nobles meddling with me, trying to get me wrapped around their fingers and make me their puppet.

That was to be expected and not a surprise, though. It was a good thing that Sam had already cleaned up those corrupted nobles when he woke up. So, the nobles that were left in Grimsbanne weren't annoying to deal with. When they realized that they couldn't use me, their attitude towards me had changed drastically.

It took me four months to unify Grimsbanne and get all the nobles to acknowledge me. Be it by means or foul, I made it clear to them that being on my good side was the best option than being on my bad side.

Now, seven months later, Grimsbanne was my playground.

Of course, behind the peacefulness in Grimsbanne, there was this lingering fear behind. But everyone knew that they only need to embrace that fear if they had done something wrong.

If one's conscience was clean, they were no need to live in fear. That was my golden rule.

"Duchess!" I heard some townfolk called me as I galloped through the street of Banse. My eyes glanced at the people who were still outside, offering them a smile, but didn't stop at my pace.

Yes, this was the new Grimsbanne.

My people loved and fear me, and I've given them the privilege not to fear the dark... because I had consumed the darkness in this land and became one with it.

"Duchess! Take care!" I heard some yelling from the background and that made me smile, as this had become a norm in here now.

My people seeing me galloping through the street alone, and yelling things people wouldn't dare do in the past. Funny, though. Everyone who would see me wouldn't also speak a word of seeing me if someone was searching for me. That was why Klaus learned not to bother with the townsfolk whenever I disappear.

Soon, I reached a deserted area not far away from Banse. There was this small forest in the area and I entered it without a second hesitation. After getting deeper, my steed finally came to a halt.

"Thanks, Bella." I bent over, petting its neck, before dismounting. I tied its strap to the closest tree before walking in a direction alone, stopping in front of the small house after a long walk.

"You came?" someone from my side suddenly appeared, making me turn my head to him.

"Of course," I replied with a smile until the person who approached me stopped several steps away from me. "Are you waiting for me, Ramin?"

His nose scrunched up, casting me an eye full of dismay. "Why would I wait for you? I was busy training with my Labyrinth."

I chuckled, and we headed inside the house. As the light from the house hit his bare top, I noticed the scars and fresh wounds on his body — mostly around his shoulder, down to his sleeve.

"You can't still control Labyrinth?" I asked, casting him a look.

Ramin gazed down at his palms, slowing down at his pace. "I can control it now, but not that long. It's still hard since it seemed some power restrained my weapon." He clenched his hand into a fist.

"How long?" I questioned, knowing that it was huge progress that Ramin could control the power of Labyrinth.

"An hour maximum." Ramin and I stopped at the doorstep, facing me. "If I used it more than that, I'll be crippled."

"I see..."

"You look disappointed?"

"Haha. I'm not. I expected it to be ten minutes at max." I chuckled, patting his shoulder lightly. "Just be patient. I'll increase your intake."

"Save your blood. I don't need it." He frowned as he had been disliking my methods of helping them get stronger.

"But I need you." My eyes sharpened as I stared at him dead in the eye. "If I want to win against Stefan, I need more power, Ramin. Sacrificing a drop of my blood is just a small sacrifice. In five months, I will have to fulfill my promise to Stefan. Until then, I need to prepare."

"Damn it." Ramin clicked his tongue in irritation, ruffling his hair, and placed his hand on the door. "The taste of your blood is annoying, do you know that?"

"You mean, it's addictive?" I raised a brow, and he only cast me a look before pushing the door.

As soon as he did, an arrow came flying towards Ramin. Thanks to his fast reflexes and the power of Labyrinth, Ramin was able to stop the arrow by grabbing it.

"How shameless to present yourself to the Duchess half-naked! Get dressed, you disgusting pervert!" Charlotte's loud complaints immediately rang in our ears, making Ramin grind his teeth.

"Is that the only reason you're shooting me, huh!? What can I do when Labyrinth just tears my clothes apart whenever I train with it?!"

"Kyahh! Get out!" Charlotte pulled three arrows, shutting her eyes as soon as she saw Ramin's bare top. She didn't even hesitate to release those three arrows at the same time with her eyes closed.

Despite that, her arrows only aimed at Ramin, and it never went in my direction. Ramin grumbled as he grabbed all the arrows, but one arrow grazed his shoulder.

"Charlie, stop that." Suddenly, a voice from the side reached my ear. I turned my head to see Kristina walking out of the room. "Ra, go and wash up."

"Yes, Ramin. You should wash up before dinner." Another voice of a man came in and I shifted my eyes to him. "Will you dine in here again, Your Grace?"

"I would love to eat your cooking again, Lord Noah." I smiled back and gazed at everyone who was in here.

The former members of the third squadron and Lord Noah, who was on the run... were now my hidden shadow guards that only I knew about.

### Chapter 319 - [Bonus ]Prince Charming

The story of how this team was formed wasn't a long story. When Sam died, these people knew Stefan wouldn't let them off that easily. Although they considered that Stefan wouldn't kill me just yet, they had to flee so they could do what they should to help me out of the palace.

However, since I had an agreement with Stefan days later and Sam was proclaimed as a hero who lost his life on duty, things had made an enormous turn. Not just that, but also taking Silvia, Klaus, and Yul with me was not what they expected.

So, instead of trying to take me away from the palace, these three waited for the right time to approach me. That perfect opportunity was when I was out to receive a letter from Heliot. These four ambushed me and now we're here.

No one, even Yul, knew about their existence, nor I had the plans to let anyone know about them. I need to keep some secrets that even my trusted people shouldn't know about. In this case, even if they ended up meeting an unfortunate encounter, not all my plans would be spoiled.

"Fuck you." Charlotte spat out in dismay at Ramin, who sat across from her.

Ramin chewed his food, stabbing the meat with his fork as he set his eyes on her. "Do you want me to fuck you so you shut up?"

"Manners, please." Kristina rolled her eyes as she cast them a warning look.

"But this guy is so shameless! The Duchess rarely comes here, and he had to talk to her first before me! He's not even wearing anything, flaunting his garbage of a body!" Charlotte pouted.

I was glad that Charlotte returned to her usual self because back when they ambushed me, her eyes were full of abhor. Although... she had been too clingy and overprotective of me now. Maybe because of my blood.

"Gar — ahh... this girl is really testing me." Ramin stretched his neck in a circular motion, irked by Charlotte's remarks.

"Is the food to your liking, Your Grace?" Noah inquired, ignoring the two who were bickering nonstop. He was sitting at the other end of the small rectangular table, smiling at me gently.

Noah Remington. Although the House Remington had kept their noble status and wasn't charged with an offense as the enemy of the kingdom, there was a manhunt for Noah. Even Noah didn't know the reason, so he ended up tagging along with them instead of returning to one of the Remington's estates.

"Yes. I am never dissatisfied with your cooking." I smiled, as I didn't know Noah had this hobby in cooking. No wonder he and Teddy Brown had become friends in the past.

"I'm glad to hear that." Noah heaved a sigh of relief. "Anyway, I felt the presence of the king of Spade Kingdom enter Grimsbanne."

When Noah dropped those words, Charlotte and Ramin stopped bickering as they shifted their attention to me. Kristina also had her eyes on me; silence filling the air.

"Well," I leaned back, done eating as I already emptied my plate. "It is about time that we need to talk to him."

"So, that guy is truly his bastard son?" Kristina arched a brow as it was truly hard to believe it.

"Well, if he came after receiving that guy's finger, then that's probably that." Charlotte chimed in with a shrug. She was the person who delivered it, shooting the letter from the distance in that foreign land straight to Zero's bed chambers.

It was the version that only the people here knew. Silvia and everyone knew an improvised version of how I sent the letter.

"People are really full of mystery," Ramin murmured, shaking his head. "Who would have thought that a person who was known of slaying his kin would keep his bastard son as his chief shadow knights."

"Either way, that only means we have him under control since Tristan Willow-Moriarty is in a blood contract with Your Grace." Noah voiced out, making everyone nod in approval.

I smirked as soon as Noah mentioned that word: blood contract. As I had said, I've been experimenting. Since Zero and Stefan had desired my blood so much — plus Heliot's words — I had experimented to see what I could do with it to use for my advantage. I discovered a lot of

interesting things that this blood of mine could do, that included the power to sire a vampire (not a pureblood) and forming a blood contract.

Although there were repercussions, the risk was worth it. As long as I used these powers in moderation, I won't die.

"For now, we won't have a problem with Zero, unless he accepts that my death also means his son's death." I took a deep breath, placing a hand on the table, tapping my fingers lightly against it. "And even if he disposes of Tristan, he will have to reconsider the advantages of working with me."

"But what if he disposes of Tristan and declared his opposition with you?" asked Ramin.

"Then that would be a shame. I will have to dispose of a good card."

There was a long silence that enveloped us as they only stared at me. They had already grown used to my heartlessness and coldness, and how I value those people — Zero, for example — as a mere card I could throw away once I couldn't use it.

"By the way, the letter is in your room," Kristina informed me, breaking the silence. I looked back at her, nodding, closed-lipped.

"I'm getting suspicious of your actual relationship with Prince Heliot," she added in a knowing tone. "You know, no one will blame you if you had fallen in love with a charming prince."

"Charming..." A weak smile turned up on my lips. "He is, indeed, charming."

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Inside this small house, I had my private quarters where I kept some important documents. I walked towards the desk, picking up the letter that had the seal of the Royal Family of Karo Kingdom.

I glanced back at the shut door before setting my eyes back on the letter. "Fall in love with a charming prince, huh?" came out a ridiculing whisper as I opened the letter and read its content.

"Heliot..." my eyes glinted after skimming through the letter, crumpling it. "... you don't have to remind me."

Just like I said, there were secrets that should be kept hidden from my trusted people. I kept the third squadron and Noah's existence from Yul and the rest, and my agreement with Heliot from everyone.

I planted my fist on the desk, spreading them as I hung my head low. A smirk turned up on my lips.

"After all, what you want is also what I want, Heliot."

Chapter 320 - [Bonus ]I Missed You

Just like the past seven months, my night was cold and silent. Everyone was used to my habitual late returns, and I would hate it if they had to wait for me. Hence, I just went home with no one nagging me and went to bed after changing.

"Two hundred and sixteen nights, Sam," I whispered, raising the cross earring over me. "I've been spending the night alone for that long now."

My eyes softened at the necklace I always kept with me. "And it still hurts."

Actually, I yearned for him even more now. People thought I had recovered, and that I was getting better — I wasn't.

'I was getting worse and worse...' and that wasn't a secret to myself. I told Zero the reason I was doing all this was out of boredom. It wasn't a complete lie.

If I stopped and rest for even half a day, the pain of what happened seven months ago would devour me whole. That was why I had gotten drunk, of all other things, to distract me.

"I missed you... so, so, bad." I held the necklace close to my chest, rolling to my side as my body curved into a ball. "If you don't come to me... I will go to where you are."

Because the longer I wait, the more days and nights that had passed without you... the crazier I get.

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Morning came, and it was as if the sentiments I had last night hadn't happened, staring at the crates in the inner bailey of the mansion. I snapped my eyes when I felt Zero's presence from behind.

"Good morning, my duchess," He greeted and stopped beside me, gazing down at the crates. "And what are these this time? I can see that's a lot of blood leaking."

"As I've said, I will make sure that you and I will trust each other." I turned my head to him, and he looked back, eyebrow raised. "Open them."

As soon as I raised my hand, several knights came to open the crates. I studied Zero's expression as he squinted his eyes into slits, staring at the horrific content of the crates.

I took a deep breath, peeling my eyes away from him. "Usually, Klaus brings home hearts. However, I want you to recognize these people and confirm if they were yours."

"Haha... and how the hell do you think this will make me trust you?" his tone was calm, but he exuded danger. "You massacred my people, Duchess. MY people and you are telling me to trust you? Your words don't add up to your actions — how funny."

"I invited you in my fief and if I recall correctly, I only allowed just a few people to enter my territory. However, it is you who didn't uphold this and had taken my words lightly." I paused and faced him once again, and continued when he set his sharp eyes on me. "The only people that can enter Grimsbanne are the people I allow to, Your Majesty."

There was a long silence between us as we stared at each other. Unlike yesterday, Zero seemed he had collected his thoughts and returned to his usual self.

"So... this is the power of the person who will usurp the throne?" he asked, breaking the prolonged silence between us. "Grimsbanne and the Capital are not the same, my duchess. You can do this to Grimsbanne, but it will take you some time to apply this to the Capital."

"Who said I will do this to the Capital?" I tilted my head, appalled.

His eyes narrowed. "Are you saying Grimsbanne will be the new capital?"

I smiled, not giving him a clear answer. But the smile on my face made him nod in understanding, close-lipped.

"The Capital... the place where my husband died will be a cemetery," I uttered calmly, gazing down at the severed heads inside the crates. "In five months, I will return to that damn place."

"You agreed to bear his heir, and you called off our engagement... my duchess, aren't you afraid I will switch sides and choose Stefan instead? What I had witnessed thus far is something a mad queen, a tyrant, will do." The atmosphere between us grew thick as we both stared at the crates as if we're merely staring at the fallen rose petals in the garden.

"Showing me your power and what you can do..." He added, giving me a brief look. "At this rate, I will rather ally with Stefan than with you."

"And why would a cunning man such as yourself hold on a rotting rope?" my brow arched, causing him to chuckle.

"Sometimes, the person who is the strongest shall be eliminated first, my duchess."

"You will not consider me the strongest if anyone can just eliminate me," I replied almost immediately. "I had considered which card must I show you, and I'm certain you had realized I had more cards up in my sleeve, Your Majesty."

"Heh... you make me want you more, my duchess." Zero pivoted on his heel, facing me squarely. I did the same with a smile plastered on my lips.

"I won't refuse your feelings if you show me your sincerity, Your Majesty." My smile stretched broader, but it still didn't reach my eyes. "However, it will be a challenge since I have suitors lining up, promising me the world."

"How foolish of them, then. You can take the world if you please."

"You flatter me, Your Majesty."

Zero stayed quiet for a minute, staring at me with glints flickering across his eyes. "I stand on my ground, duchess. A marriage in exchange for power. Hearts and Spade will become one only through it."

"I see... so you will dispose of your son?"

"It was saddening that my son will end like that. However, I had reached this far for disregarding my personal sentiments to things." He took a step forward, raising his hand, and tucked a few strands of my hair behind my ear.

"I am the type of man who can dispose of my useless cards in exchange for the better ones. Right now, you are a great card I can benefit from... and I am a card you will need, as well." His eyes drooped as a smirk resurfaced on his lips.

This was unexpected, but not surprising. It would be more out of his character if he held onto Tristan longer, knowing his son would just hold him back.

"We had reached this far, indeed." I nodded. "But a marriage... hmmm, we will discuss it once I see some results, Your Majesty."

"Haha. I expect you to refuse, but you, agreeing makes me more doubtful."

"I hope it also gave you the thrill." My smile remained while the corner of his lips stretched wider.

"It sure did."

Zero and I smiled at each other, having ulterior motives in the back of our heads. We didn't say it, but we both knew that marriage was impossible and one of us shall die in the end.



That won't be me... at least, not until I reach my goal.