

The Duke 351

Chapter 351 - Simple Fool

'That guy knows how to talk and it makes me forget the important question.' I let out a sigh, walking through the hallways to Yul's quarters. 'I will ask him tomorrow if I had the time.'

Heliot might be a strange man who acted and decided logically. His straightforward personality was something that made him a little more trustworthy. So, I knew he had his own reasons.

Shortly after, I reached Yul's chambers. I took a deep breath, knocking on the door, and waited for it to open. Heliot wasn't wrong when he said I kept running away. Keeping too many secrets all at the same time, especially from Yul, who had been there for me, was unfair. Not that I planned to tell him everything, but.... I don't know. He was really upset.

The door slowly creaked open from the inside. Yul peaked through the inch gap from the door.

"Uhm... can we talk?" My brows raised as I sported an awkward smile. "Yul?"

"Is that an order?"

"If you don't want to, I will go. But, I really want to talk to you."

Yul stared at me for a moment before letting out a deep sigh and opened the door. "People had been talking about how I lost your favor because of Prince Heliot. In their eyes, I'm a pitiful soul who was tossed away by his lover."

"But that reduced the people coming after you, right?" I gazed at him as I entered his room, seeing him shrug nonchalantly before closing the door behind me. Yul gestured me to take a seat at the round small table near the window.

When he perched from across from me, our eyes instantly met. Yul's nonchalant demeanor never changed, but he had been showing more emotions lately — especially whenever I was involved.

"Yul, I... I'm sorry about earlier." A deep exhale escaped my mouth, knocking my knuckles against the table lightly. "I know I shouldn't have..."

"I know what you've been doing is for our sake. But if you can't tell me, just don't lie to me, please." Yul cut me off, delving into the matter. "I'd rather get hurt with the truth than being comforted by a lie, sis. You know that."

"Yes, that's why I'm sorry." I sighed, extending my hand over the table and spread my palms. "I was wrong. No matter what, I shouldn't have said what I said. I wasn't thinking, and I was selfish and yet, you've always been there for me. You, Klaus, and Sivi, you'd always been there for me."

Yul averted his eyes, so I requested. "Can you hold me?"

"I swear if this is just another way of manipulation, I won't forgive you." Yul reluctantly tapped his large palm on top of mine, making me smile subtly. My eyes studied the back of his hand, caressing it with my thumb.

"You know, this reminds me of how your hands used to be so flawless and soft," I muttered, shifting my eyes back to him. "But because of me, you worked hard day and night to assist me. Grimsbanne wouldn't be stable without your help."

"Now that I think about it, I never get to thank you for everything, Yul." I continued, smiling, close-lipped. "Thank you for helping me and Grimsbanne, and for being my brother."

I couldn't imagine if Yul wasn't my kin or think of another person to have this role. This twist of fate had always been one thing I would be grateful for forever. Yul gazed down, wrapping his fingers around mine slowly.

"The first time our eyes met, I thought to myself, 'how come you have such clear eyes?' and I was annoyed because what I think at that time is, you don't have an idea that you are stepping into a place you shouldn't." He paused, smiling bitterly as he squeezed my hand lightly. "The palace doesn't need a person like you, it doesn't need another person to ruin."

"I thought if I treated you even more terribly, you will realize you don't belong there. However, the more I spend time with you, the more I realize my judgment that time... was correct." Yul raised his head, locking his gaze with me. "Sometimes, I wonder if Silvia and I treated you more terribly. Will you choose to leave as soon as possible? Will you ask Hell to run away before things got more complicated?"

I bit my lower lips, staring into his eyes. Yul would always give me this look, and only now I realized what it truly meant. It wasn't a look of pity, but a look of wonder and what-ifs.

"You shine the brightest, sis. It is blinding, and I knew the Capital — the palace doesn't need that ray. I've always known that the more you stay in that place with us, it will slowly devour that light and change it into a ray of pitch black. I was correct." He squeezed my hand once again. "I'm sorry. Although, a bit late. I think I understand my real purpose for why our clan threw me in that devil's den. But I failed you. I failed our clan."

"Yul," I cajoled, placing my other hand on top of his. "It's not your fault."

"It's my fault. I should've made sure that you stay as far away as possible from the palace — from the La Crox. It was a wrong judgment to believe you must claim the throne you didn't even want." He shook his head, taking deep breaths. "If I realized this sooner, you wouldn't have to go through this ordeal."

"You're wrong, Yul. Whether you treat me terribly or treat me with kindness, the outcome will be the same. It will only delay things from escalating, but I know this will happen, regardless." My eyes softened, thinking about all those tea times with them.

"So, I'm really grateful that you and Sivi made my stay in that hellhole a little more bearable. More than my loss, I also had my gains. Friendships, family, unbreakable bonds... I am surrounded by good people, Yul. And if I had to go through it again, no matter how painful those losses were, I won't do it any other way. I know Sam thinks the same."

"You're a simple fool."

"I know and because of that, I hurt the people I love unintentionally." A smile resurfaced on my face, patting his hand gently. "I promised to protect you and give everyone a chance to dream and fulfill it. Have you ever thought of a dream, Yul?"

Yul remained silent, pursing his lips into a thin line as if that question came up so abruptly. It made me chuckle, shaking my head.

"You had lived within the palace walls all your life, and even in Grimsbanne, you barely had time to rest. I wished that someday, you will live for your own sake, for your own happiness." I cleared my throat, smacking my lips. "I will be there to support you, Yul. This simple fool will make sure no one can hinder that."

"Don't say it like that. You sound like you are dying."

"I won't." I shook my head, staring at him straight in the eye. "Trust me."

Yul watched Lilou leave his chambers, staring at the shut door. His eyes softened before shifting them to the window.

"Liar," came out a whisper, hearing her promises in his head repeatedly. "You are a terrible liar and cruel, sister."

Chapter 352 - Secrets Are Corrosive

Another two days had passed since that talk with Yul. There wasn't much of anything unordinary that happened. It was the same, just like the past eight months.

"You're leaving?" I asked, gazing up at Heliot as I came to send him off. He glanced at the carriage behind him, and then eyes back at me.

"I had a great stay, and it is all thanks to you, Your Grace." A smile that didn't reach his eyes resurfaced on his face. "I feel renewed during my peaceful stay in here.. If fate may allow it, I would like to come back and have a vacation."

"Vacation... that sounds so strange coming from you." I humored, shaking my head lightly. "Anyway, I hope you have a safe journey, your highness. If you plan to visit again, please let me know. You're always welcome in Grimsbanne."

Heliot raised a hand for me to clasp, which I did. "I will remember that." He bent over, planting a kiss on the back of my hand with his eyes on me.

"I will see you in a few months, Your Grace. I hope everything will go according to your plan." He remarked in a deep voice, straightening his back. There was a glint that flickered across his eyes — and my eyes.

"Don't hope, Your Highness. I will make sure it will go according to my plan." The corner of my lips curled into a smirk. We stared at each other for a moment before Heliot bid me his farewell. I watched the carriage gallop away until they were out of my sight.

"That's right. I will make sure things will go according to my plans... although there were changes now.' I took a deep breath as my eyes sharpened, turning around as I walked back to the mansion.

"Call Yulis, Klaus, and Silvia. Tell them to come with me to a picnic and prepare my steed." I ordered to the butler who was standing by the doorstep.

"Yes, Your Grace."

Heliot's visit was the last thing that I had looked forward to before going back to the capital to fulfill my deal with Stefan. From today onwards, we could now focus on my return to the Capital.

I promised to be that person's karma... as Karma, I would feed him his own virulent medicine.

Meanwhile, before Heliot's delegation reach the exit of Grimsbanne, he slid the curtain open. His eyes fixed on a certain direction — the direction of the hill where Lilou lived in the past.

"She is a strange woman," he muttered, thinking that Lilou didn't end up asking how he found her. A smile appeared on his lips for no apparent reason.

"But I am more strange to feel a little dishearten leaving this place." His eyes softened as her words previously still sounded appalling for him. To be happy for no reason, and sad for unknown reasons... things like that don't make sense to him.

However, there was this minor part of him that was curious. What would it feel to be alive?

"I wonder... if she feels alive now that he had returned." His smile remained, withdrawing his hand from the curtain as he leaned back. "It was an interesting stay."

"Your Grace...? I believe we have a lot of things to do and this is not the time to have a picnic." Yul voiced out, casting me a look with eyes full of dismay.

I turned my head back while petting Bella's neck. "It's a good day for the four of us to bond. The servants had already prepared lunches. We can't waste their effort, right?"

"This is... too sudden," Silvia commented awkwardly, gazing at the baskets the servant prepared.

"Can you, at least, tell us if we're about to assassinate someone?" Klaus queried, narrowing his eyes in suspicion.

I could not help but laugh at hearing their queries and seeing their faces. I had been thinking about this for the past two days and decided.

"I swear we won't do such a thing. Grimsbanne is clean — sort of. So --" I paused, mounting Bella and gazed down at them. "There are no people to kill in here, but they are a lot in a place I know."

"You don't mean to tell us we will..."

"No, Yul, no! The last thing I want to do is go to the capital." I clicked my tongue, checking the reins slightly. "If I were you, mount your horses or you might not catch up."

I cast them one last look and smile. "I'll let you three in a secret." and without further ado, I galloped away from them.

"Your Grace, wait — ah, shit!" Klaus yelled, and I knew he had hurriedly mounted his steed to follow me.

During the entire week, I had been thinking about this and my talk with Yul made me reconsider it. Since Heliot was gone and time was fleeting, I came to a realization that I needed to cook more alternative plans with everything laid on the table.

'Secrets are corrosive... Heliot is right.' I should've known it from the beginning, but I never regretted keeping these secrets. After all, another person also told me that to fool your enemies, you must fool those closest to you.

'But that tactic will come to an end now.' My smirked stretched broader, eyes glinting as adrenaline rush kicked in.

Meanwhile, in the royal palace of the Capital, Stefan gazed up at Dominique, who stood across from his desk.

"Heliot left Grimsbanne?" he inquired to confirm.

"Yes, Your Majesty. There were also reports that..." Dominique trailed off, hesitant to relay the reports he had received.

"That...?"

"That the Duchess of Grimsbanne and Prince Heliot are having an affair. It was said that they saw the Duchess with full of skin lesion."

Stefan let out a low chuckle, leaning back. "She plays around with Yul, and now with the Von Stein..."

"She will still have to fulfill her deal with you."

"Of course." Stefan chuckled once again. "Once she returns here, she won't need those people anymore."

There was a long silence between the two. Stefan gazed at Dominique once again, his eyes fell on his empty sleeve.

"Don't strain yourself too much, Dominique. You only need one hand to yield a sword. You are dismissed."

Dominique just bowed and left, but when he was by the door, he halted. "Cassara had been throwing a tantrum, looking for Princess Beatrice."

"Oh?" Stefan nodded with disinterest, while Dominique left a second later. Deafening silence immediately pierced his ears, looking at the window.

"Lilou... you really know how to piss me off."

Chapter 353 - I Like Myself More

"You'd been quiet, Kristina." Kristina turned her head to the side, shrugging her shoulder as Noah sat on the stairs of the porch she was sitting on. "Ever since that day... is there a reason?"

"Reason... well, nothing in particular." A sigh tagged along with her remarks, taking a deep breath. "Just... yes, it's nothing.."

Kristina hung her head low, fidgeting with her fingers. She couldn't just tell Noah that the person she chased and had a confrontation with a week ago reminded her of someone who was already dead.

Noah studied her for a moment, parting his lips, but sighed deeply. "Do you truly think I will believe it is just nothing, Kristina?"

"Just pretend you believe it."

"I wanted to, but whenever you're this distracted, the reason is always him."

The side of her lips curled up bitterly, raising her head to look at Noah. This man knew them from inside and out, just like an older brother.

"Sometimes, I wish that you'd stop acting like a nosey big brother," she remarked, shaking her head while he chuckled. "It's annoying when someone can read me."

"My apologies for being nosey."

"Forgiven. It might be annoying, but it's not that bad." She peered at the woods ahead, smiling bitterly. "Actually, it feels nice... it makes me think that you somehow care."

Noah chuckled briefly, taking a deep breath as he stared ahead. "Because I do."

There was a brief silence between them, just looking at the woods. Deep in their own thoughts and just simply enjoying the humid breeze.

"There was also a point in my life that I wished I can be heard." Noah broke the silence, making Kristina gaze at him. "That one time when I asked 'why do we have to do this?', a part of me hoped my brother bothered to make up any lame excuse; or when the time I requested an audience with my father, asking 'what did the Browns' do wrong, I wished he told me any reason instead of just saying 'that's just life'. If they did, I might, just maybe, think my voice mattered."

"Good thing they didn't or you'll be just like them."

Noah let out a bitter yet short laugh. "Is it really a good thing?"

"What? You want to be just as cruel as them?" Her brow arched, facing him squarely. Noah smacked his lips, shrugging nonchalantly.

"More than to be just as cruel as them, I want to be a part of them." He faced her, sporting a forced smile. "They're my family, after all. I wanted to be a part of the family — even when I think the Remington's are twisted to the core, I wanted them to think I am their family."

Kristina studied the suppressed pain in his eyes before looking away. A part of her could understand him.

"Until the end, they didn't acknowledge me, and ever since, I gave up on trying. However, for the past eight months, I..." Noah trailed off as his eyes softened. "... I finally feel I belong. Strange, isn't it? I feel an outcast in my own blood kin, but have this sense of belonging with the people who I didn't have a choice but to be with."

"Well, blood isn't the only indicator of family."

"That's right. That's what I learned in the past eight months." Noah nodded in agreement, bumping his shoulder against her. "That's why even when you feel annoyed, I'll keep being a nosey big brother."

"You're annoying." She rolled her eyes but chuckle, shaking her head lightly.

"Do you hate me for annoying you?"

"Well, Charlotte and Ramin always pressed each other's nerves at every chance they get, but I don't think they hate to the point they will kill each other."

"Isn't that's how a family is like? You annoy each other to death, but when faced in a crisis, they stick together."

"Do you actually think we will stick together when faced with a life and death crisis?" Kristina set her eyes on him once again, while Noah just looked ahead.

"Even if you don't, I will stick with you all."

Kristina chuckled weakly, averting her eyes from him. "You're quite noble. Which part of your reputation as the snotty brat of the Remington, real?"

"Please don't bring that up."

"It's a harmless question!" She laughed, seeing Noah closed his eyes in embarrassment. "You know gossips in the high society. I might be able to defend you if you tell me about it."

"It's all fake."

"Even the fact that you threw a huge fit when you found your lover fucking your brother?"

"Ouch." Noah frowned as he faced her squarely. "You're being a jerk now, Kristina. It's not funny."

"Oh, I'm sorry for rubbing salt on your wounds. I thought you've healed already." Kristina patted his shoulder, smiling brightly as teasing Noah was quite fun. Her brows arched as she gazed up, baffled by the sudden intent gaze from him.

"What?" she asked, tilting her head to the side. "Do you want to kiss me? I don't think you build the perfect mood, though."

"Apparently, that's not what I look at you. I'm just glad you are... alright." His voice went deeper and solemn, raising his hand to pat her head. "I'm very sure he will be very proud of the three of you."

"I'd prefer it if you just tried to kiss me." She brushed his hand away, looking away. "I might forget him if you like me enough."

"That's cruel, but I think I like you enough to respect that you will never look at me in that light."

"So, you do like me, huh?"

"You can say that." Noah shrugged as he didn't feel the need to hide his slight attraction to her.

"However, I like myself more."

"Hah... that's also what I told myself back then." After Kristina's remarks, silence enveloped the two of them once again. They stared at the woods ahead, and then shortly after, their brows furrowed.

"Her Grace is coming?" she wondered, narrowing her eyes in the direction she could hear the footsteps of the galloping horses.

"She's bringing someone along?" Noah murmured as the two of them slowly stood, eyes in the direction of the incoming visitors. "Kristina, be prepared if these people weren't Her Grace."

The two of them raised their guards as their eyes sharpened. But, their brows furrowed when Lilou came to their sight and behind her... those three were equally shocked as Kristina and Noah as soon as their eyes met.

"What the hell...?" Kristina murmured.

Chapter 354 - Please Don't Mind Me And Continue.

"No fucking way..." Klaus mumbled as they stood in front of Noah and Kristina. My eyes shifted to Silvia and Yul, who bore the same appalled expression.

"You two are here? In Grimsbanne? All along?" he queried in disbelief, setting his eyes back to me.

I raised my hands, raising my brows briefly. "I told you... to let you in a secret."

"Your Grace, why did you...." Noah's breath hitched, balling his hand into a fist. "This is dangerous."

"What do you mean, it's dangerous? It's already dangerous that you people are being sheltered in Grimsbanne. This place might be clean, but there are still rats that were walking down the street of Banse." Yul's eyes darkened, not pleased at meeting them. Well, he wasn't very fond of them, to begin with.

"And you think you three staying in Grimsbanne will make it less dangerous?" Kristina scoffed in disdain, taking a step forward with her chin up. "The King had pardoned you three because Her Grace sacrificed her own. Do you really think the king will just let it go? He might keep quiet all this time, but I think you're all aware he is not the type to let things go."

"We are aware of that, but even so, he knows that we're here. You're all branded as the enemies of the kingdom, and if anyone got wind of this? Stefan will have a reason to set his foot in here." Silvia argued back, taking a step forward.

The air between them thickened as their enmity against each other increased. A heavy sigh slipped past my lips, standing in between them while raising my hands.

"Can you all calm down?" I gazed at Noah and Kristina, then to Klaus, Yul, and Silvia. "You are all here because I want you to be here. Like it or not, you are all important people to me and you must set aside your personal whims... that is, if you truly wish me and all of us to survive."

I studied their expression before they dropped their guards and looked away from each other. They were like children, but I understood their reasons. The third squadron, including Noah, still saw the three as La Crox. The latter still see them as failures as they were bearers of the Order, but couldn't stand up to Stefan.

"So, this is your secret?" Yul was the first to break the silence, peering at me. "You kept these people under your wing in secret?"

"They are my people, Yul. The third squadron did nothing wrong."

"They killed Hell." Silvia chimed in with a bitter voice. "If they did their job properly, Hell wouldn't die... and so is Rufus."

"Same goes to you, Your Royal Highness. If you just fulfilled your duty as the king's wife, he wouldn't probably seek another woman's embrace." Kristina clapped back, making me pinch the bridge of my nose in distress.

"You..." Silvia hissed as the tension between them returned.

"Stop it, Kristina." Noah suddenly intervened. "Arguing right now no matter how we dislike each other will do us, nor Her Grace no good. We are all in the same boat, so if we all wanted to survive and attain the things that we're fighting for, let's be more open."

Noah widened his eyes to Kristina, and the latter rolled her eyes. Meanwhile, Silvia just looked at Kristina but didn't speak anymore.

"Thank you, Noah." I smiled, closed-lipped. "I actually planned a picnic. Why don't you all set it up so you all get to know each other?"

"You got to be kidding me," said Yul, but I shook my head.

"I hope I am, but I'm serious. Get Chalie and Ra..." I trailed off, casting Charlotte a look, who was exiting the house.

"Charlotte, I plan to have a picnic. Come help us and call Ramin too." I called, waving at her as she raised her head to us. To my puzzlement, Charlotte scanned everyone and furrowed her brows.

"Noah... what are you doing here?" she asked, blinking in disbelief, which baffled every single one of us.

"What do you mean, what am I doing here? I'm always here." Noah's voice was laced with confusion as we all studied her shocked expression.

Instead of answering us, Charlotte suddenly kicked the door open, yelling. "Ramin!"

As soon as the door opened, I caught Ramin's figure and another figure whose back was facing us. There was another person... my eyes widened at my realization.

"Oh, Charlie. What's..." Ramin trailed off, tilting his head to see us outside. His eyes lingered on Noah, which made it slowly widen.

"Oh... I think I got busted just right before it gets cooked," said the intruder, reaching for something to wear and cover his head with a beaked mask. He slowly turned his head and faced us, bowing.

"My apologies. I do not have enough utensils to cook for tonight's dinner. Hence, I came here hoping I can prepare something decent for once." he explained calmly, rendering us all speechless.

It didn't seem he came with an ill intention. However, for him to intrude on this place without being noticed alarmed me. It even seemed he was having a friendly conversation with Ramin! This had shocked us all, as we couldn't somehow react like usual.

"Anyway..." He raised his hand and took a step back. "... please don't mind me and continue with your plans about the picnic."

And with that, he sprinted away, using the back door. I blinked my eyes as neither one of us came running after him. Instead, we just looked at the back door like fools.

"Oh, right, you can have that one in the pot. I'll be taking these sandwiches. They look like proper foods." As if he hadn't shocked us enough, his voice came from behind us, making us all turn in his direction. He had carried two baskets, raising them at us before leaping away.

The whisper of the wind whistled in our ears and only then we realized the situation. I blinked my eyes, hearing Klaus yelling to go after him, but I stopped them.

"It's fine, Klaus..." I raised a hand, staring at where the man wearing a beaked mask left. "They must be famished as well... the food he was cooking smells good."

"What?! We will just let him get away?! Just like that?" Klaus' complaints started to fade in the background as I chuckled weakly. The smell of the food and the man's voice... even though he was trying to change his voice, I discerned the familiarity of his voice.

Fabian.

Chapter 355 - I Want To Live

After the initial shock wore off, Yul and Klaus, even Kristina, insisted on following that man. However, since I kept reassuring them, Noah and Silvia helped me out to convince those three hot-blooded vampires. The hardest one to convince was Charlotte since Ramin had to stop her from going after that thief — she was always stubborn.

"We don't even know if this is poisoned." Kristina gazed at the pot the man cooked before raising her head to us, who were gathered in the small living area.

"Picnic and a thief. I guess this picnic we had been looking forward to is..."

"No, Yul. We won't cancel the picnic." I forced a smile, facing Yul, whose sarcasm had manifested in him.. "Noah is a skilled cook. I mean, yes, he is, but you all need to help him prepare, alright?"

"Really?" Kristina scoffed, gazing at the La Crox. "Your Grace, I'm sorry if I'm overstepping, but this won't work."

"I agree with her. We can work together, but we will never get along." Klaus nodded in agreement.

"Instead of having a picnic, we will probably enjoy a manhunt." Ramin voiced out.

"A manhunt with you four?" Klaus scoffed, shaking his head lightly. "Right... you'd been working in the shadows, so I guess you can do that without being noticed."

"Yes, you're right. We'd been working in the shadows and kills with no one noticing about it. So, if I were you, you better shut up. You don't know when it is your time." Ramin took a step forward, chin up, taunting Klaus.

"Ramin, spouting threats won't help anyone." Noah let out a deep sigh, gesturing Ramin to stop. "If Her Grace wants a picnic, then let's just prepare sandwiches and refreshments. Can you help me, Charlie?"

"Will I get more sandwiches?"

"Just don't eat everything." Noah sighed helplessly while Charlotte sprung up and skipped her steps to follow him.

"I'll go and help Noah." Kristina patted the dining table, following Noah and Charlotte outside. She didn't wait for our response, nor did she look back and just left, saying nothing further.

Silence enveloped the house as Kristina stepped outside. I studied their expression, and it was obvious that Klaus, Silvia, and Yul weren't truly happy. Meanwhile, Ramin kept quiet and just observed.

"Are you sure there's no need to come after that person?" Silvia queried, breaking the stifling silence in the air. I nodded as a response, rubbing my palms against the armrest.

"It's fine. You can say they were... one of my secrets?"

"Just how many more secrets do you keep from us?" Yul let out a hiss, peering at me in disbelief.

A sigh slipped past my lips. "Yul, I'm keeping secrets, not because I don't trust you. It's just..."

"We don't need more protection from you, Your Grace." This time, Silvia voice out her thoughts. Her voice was laced with bitterness as she gazed at me. "We had done our best for the past eight months to protect you just as much as you protect us. Your secrets are yours and letting us in is your decision we must respect. However, you'd been taking too much risk whilst keeping us in the dark. So things like the last incident took us all off guard."

"It's either you trust us or not at all, Your Grace." Klaus chimed in solemnly. "Either way, we will still follow you and your orders without question asked."

"I'm sorry." I took a deep breath, smiling sincerely at them. "It was too much for me, and I know it's the same with you. I... I don't have an excuse. So, I'm trying to rectify it."

They remained silent, staring back at me. If not for that recent incident, I knew I wouldn't let the three La Crox know about the third squadron's presence in Grimsbanne. There was already a plan I meticulously concocted; giving each person their own task without the need to know who were the other people involved.

The Bloodfang way; like a puzzle, each piece had its own purpose and, if done correctly, one would see the entire picture if put together.

I cleared my throat as I raised my chin, tapping my palms against the armrest to get their attention. Their expression grew solemn as soon as they saw the change of my expression.

"By rectifying it, I planned to be honest with everyone. There is a major change in my plan and that's the reason we're all in here." My voice imposing, examining their expression. "However, I had to confirm something before telling you all about the entire plan. I wish you will be patient until then. We only have a short amount of time before I return to the Capital... we all know that once I'm back in that hellhole, Stefan will take you all out one by one."

"I can't let that happen. I'm not losing any of you," I added as my eyes sharpened, feeling the suppressed rage in my heart pounding against my ribcage. "The freedom he had granted me, us, is a mockery for me to realize that no matter what I do, I would never win against him. I don't want any of you to die."

Another wave of silence engulfed. I noticed how Yul hung his head low, keeping his thought to himself. He was my brother, so I knew what he was thinking. Not just him, but everyone here was aware that their lives mattered more to me than my own.

"I don't want to die," came out a whisper, making Yul raise his head while their pupils dilating. "I know you never heard that from me, but I sincerely don't want to die... now."

Not until I proved that Sam was not Sam. But there was this part of me, this dominant part of me that believed my husband was alive. If he was, there was no reason for me to die. Even if I had to face Heliot, I wouldn't give up the chance to be with Sam.

"Sis..." Yul's voice trembled, pursing his lips as his chest moved in and out heavily. "Did you really mean that?"

I smiled, nodding. "I want to live, Yul. Klaus, Sivi... Ra. Let us all survive and come back to Grimsbanne."

There was a moment of silence after my remarks before they took their knees, bowing, followed by a determined, "Yes, Your Grace."

Chapter 356 - Darling, It Was Fabian's Fault!

After that sentimental discussion, I diverted the subject, and Ramin walked them through the missions I tasked them with for the past eight months. Kristina, Noah, and Charlotte had also returned, walking around the kitchen as they prepared the food. Silvia helped them.

"Anyway." I rubbed the leathered armrest, slapping it loudly as I stood. "I got to run."

As soon as I said those words, everyone stopped in what they were doing and set their eyes on me. I chuckled because even though they just looked at me, I knew they all share the same question: 'where are you going?'

"I had an important arrangement I've been looking forward to," I explained vaguely.

"How about the picnic?" asked Charlotte with a frown.

"I will join you next time.."

"Next time... I won't be doing this again," Yul mumbled, rolling his eyes as he shook his head.

"We won't do this again unless you will do the preparations." Ramin spat out in irritation as he also helped to make sandwiches, but Yul and Klaus didn't even bother.

"Over my dead body," Klaus muttered coldly.

"Sir Chief Knight, do you know you shouldn't talk badly to the people who are touching your food?" Charlotte giggled, catching Klaus' attention. "You might regret it."

"Hey, don't you dare put anything in my sandwich."

"If you're so afraid, why don't you two get up and help us out? We obviously need extra hands here." Silvia commented with disinterest, exchanging gazes with Kristina momentarily.

"We can see that, Silvia. However, I don't think the kitchen can accommodate more people. This is a fucking hut." Klaus spat in dismay as the people preparing the foods surely needed some space to move around freely.

"It's a bungalow."

"They're both small. It's just the same."

A chuckle escaped my mouth, as it seemed I didn't need to worry about them. "Have fun, you guys. I'm out."

"Won't you tell us where you're going?" Noah inquired in urgency.

"I will be inside your head if I need help." I winked, walking away while feeling their gazes on my back. So, I looked back and smiled at them. "Don't worry about me. Just wish me luck."

"Good luck, Your Grace!" Charlotte cheered, waving happily.

"Just... take care. We will come and find you if things get awry." Klaus let out a deep sigh, reluctant to let me go all by myself. They all voiced out their comments until it sounded like they were all nagging me. It was funny, in a way.

"I will keep all your reminders in mind," I said, resuming in my steps. I stopped when I was by the door as Noah spoke.

"Don't get hurt, Your Grace." His last note made me smile, but I said nothing as I departed the place.

When Lilou departed, there was a long silence inside the house. Neither one of them talked, staring at the shut door.

"She looks happy." Charlotte was the one who broke the ice, smiling subtly as she recalled Lilou's smile. "She is glowing differently... just like how she had glowed before His Grace's death."

Again, silence ensued after Charlotte's comments. It was not just her who noticed this change, but every single one of them. After that incident, there was this slight change. It was barely noticeable as Heliot was still in the duchy, but now they were certain about it.

Something... changed her.

Lilou looked more alive and free, unlike how she was in the past eight months. All she cared about was revenge and was mostly nonchalant about most things. It was refreshing to see a candid smile on her face — it was as if the Lilou they had all known returned.

"Did she really think we will have this happy picnic without her?" Yul mumbled, shaking his head as a brief chuckle slipped past his lips. "What was she even thinking?"

"You've been with her almost every minute of every day in the past eight months, but it seems you don't know her that much." Ramin smacked his lips, making Yul frown. "I don't intend to insult you. It was just that, it was obvious."

"What obvious?" asked Charlotte, causing Ramin to sigh.

"Charlie, just because you didn't receive training in observing people doesn't excuse you to be this dumb."

"Hey, watch your tongue if you don't want an arrow in your throat!"

"Just tell us, Ra." Kristina sighed heavily as she didn't also understand Lilou's reasoning.

Ramin scrunched his nose up. "Kristina, even you?"

"Apparently, it seems she wants this picnic for this sole reason." Noah chimed in without stopping from slicing the sandwiches diagonally.

"She wants us to bicker nonstop to keep us busy," Klaus explained in simple words to those who didn't grasp the situation. His eyes instinctively fell on Ramin, who was staring back at him in surprise.

"I see. Because if we are busy arguing, we won't have time to snoop around." Silvia nodded in understanding. "Make sense."

"If she doesn't want to tell us, then we should be patient." Noah shrugged, raising his head.
"Anyway, until when should we stick together on this awkward picnic?"

And they all went silent. Not a single one of them obviously wanted this, but they had to keep an eye on each other. Why? Because if not, their curiosity would just take over them and look for Lilou.

"We stick together until in the middle of the night!" Charlotte suggested happily. "Let's have a bonfire! I don't think Her Grace will return tonight, anyway."

"Why so?" Ramin raised a brow.

"Tch. She sheltered you for a long time and yet, it seems you don't know her well, unlike what you claim." Yul smirked arrogantly. "I don't intend to insult you. It's that just her smile clearly told us she won't be returning unless something goes wrong."

"This will become the most frustrating picnic that deserves to be recorded in the books," Kristina mumbled, foreseeing how they would all banter at every turn. "We haven't even started and I'm already exhausted."

Meanwhile, at the top of the hill where Lilou's shack stood before, Samael laid flat on the grass while chewing a sandwich.

"You're the best, Fabian." Samael grinned, turning his head in Fabian's direction. The latter was sitting on the corner of the bungalow, back against the concrete wall.

"It's still a shame I didn't get to eat a hot soup."

"We can all sneak inside the mansion later for that," Samael suggested, making Fabian nod, as that wasn't a bad idea since Heliot left the duchy.

"Fabian, may I ask, where did you get these sandwiches?" Rufus, who was standing on the other end of the house, leaning his back against it, wondered. "Did you steal it from a noble house?"

Fabian continued eating, feigning ignorant. So Rufus narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

"Fabian?"

"I stole it from the people who wouldn't report this incident," Fabian explained vaguely, and because of that, it only confused Rufus.

"Whatever, Rufus. Fabian saved us. If not for him, we would be eating grass right now!"

"Thank you, my lord." Fabian smiled as Samael defended him without question.

"Your Grace, how can you trust Fabian even after..." Rufus trailed off as he raised his gaze to the person who was galloping her way to them. Samael and Fabian also looked in Lilou's direction.

Lilou's eyes were glinting with fire as she hopped out of the steed, even though it was still moving. Stomping her way towards them, making Samael spring to his feet in a panic.

"Fabian? By the people who were unlikely to report this incident, did you mean the people in hiding? For example, the third squadron?" Rufus inquired, cocking his head in Fabian's direction. Samael heard that, so he shamelessly yelled.

"Darling! It was Fabian! You know how crazy and stubborn he can get. I was about to scold him! No, he should be punished! How can he steal your sandwiches!"

Chapter 357 - My Pain Wasn't Fake

"Darling! It was Fabian! You know how crazy and stubborn he can get. I was about to scold him! No, he should be punished!"

'I had more respect to him when he was in his slumber.' Rufus thought, cringing at how easily Samael sold Fabian to save his own skin. 'My lord, I promised to respect you more once you wake up from your long slumber, but do you have to make it so difficult?'

Meanwhile, Fabian didn't care much about Samael selling him out. He had long mastered the art of expecting nothing from his lord. He had actually expected such an outcome.

"Please don't hurt me — " Samael shut his eyes when Lilou entered his proximity, hands raised, expecting a slap or a punch. But nothing. He peeked through one of his eyes to see her staring at him intently, panting for air.

"Is it.... really you?" Her bottom lip trembled, raising her hand to reach for him. "Sam?"

"Sam?" I reached for him, but clenched my hand midway and withdrew it away. My eyes shifted to Fabian with a basket lying next to him, and then to Rufus, who simply cocked his head to the side.

I rubbed my eyes as hard as I could and then looked at the three once again. I wasn't imagining things. There was no doubt these three looked just like them. But how?

"Tell me." My voice shook as the tension in my throat felt like strangling me.

"Of — of course, Love." Sam took a step forward, but I instinctively stepped back. He froze at my action, clenching his hand as he looked at me in the eye.

"Give us some privacy. Make sure not a single rat will come in here." He ordered without taking his eyes off of me, and those two disappeared like shadows. "Love, why don't we sit and talk? I will explain..."

"Explain now."

"But --"

"Now." This time, my tone was firmer. "I want to hear how are you still alive, Sam. I want to know what happened, how did it happen, and just... everything!"

The wind whistled in our ear as we stared at each other in silence. Obviously, I should be happy as I had been looking forward to this. However, I didn't know what to feel... or what to do. I just... didn't know.

"Alright." Sam let out a heavy sigh, nodding as he staggered back. "As I've said, our death is all part of the plan. What you've seen is a premeditated ending to get them off of our backs..."

Sam explained everything from the beginning until the end. He told me about the undead and Alphonse's participation in the turned vampires. Sam was the type of person who had a straightforward and brutal way of dealing with things. But because of more enemies lurking in the shadows, he had to change his game plan if he wanted us to survive.

That was why Sam refused to drink my blood to appear weak. If he fought with underlying conditions and mobilized the undead in that state, no one would question his death. Instead, people would expect such an outcome.

It was smart. Instead of painting himself as a formidable villain, he wanted to paint himself as a pitiful soldier going into war alone. The last desperate struggle. His death would mark the death of Fabian and Rufus, two thorns that everyone also wanted to get rid of.

And then... me. The death of my husband would also be my death; the death of the person whose existence shouldn't have existed. If everything played according to his plan, we would've lived in the shadows. Whether we plan to make a move against Stefan or just live like that, that depended on our decision after their brief slumber.

"I know it's not your fault," he said while I hung my head low. "You know nothing about the plan and... I should've told you instead of expecting that you will understand and trust me."

"You think I didn't trust you?" I bit my lower lip, balling my hand into a fist. "I had trusted you, that's why I followed Fabian. However, you know I won't trust you blindly."

I raised my head and faced him squarely. More than happiness and relief, I was... disappointed. I was hurt. I was angry.

"Everything I've seen, everything you said, everything... was all fake?" I scoffed, laughing through my tears as I took a step back and ran my fingers through my hair.

"Love, I'm sorry. I know you're disappointed that..." He took a step forward but stopped when I raised a hand.

"Stay where you are." I cautioned, pacing back and forth to absorb all this information. "I know I should be glad, relieved, but Sam, my pain wasn't fake."

"Love..."

"Sam! I grieved for you. I died every time I breathe, knowing I killed you — my negligence, the trust, the love... those killed you, Sam, and there's not a single minute I didn't blame myself for that." Each word bore weight I had been carrying for a long time. "There's not a single day that passed that I didn't ask myself what if I trusted myself and stayed longer? Not a single night I wished you will be there to comfort me."

Sam opened and closed his mouth while I tried to stomp the frustrating tension in my throat. "It was devastating, Sam. What I had gone through was hell... and that is not fake."

"I... know."

"You know? Of course, you do! But you never felt that, right? You just know, like always! You just fucking know, Sam. You know you love me, trust me, want to marry me; your mind knows, but does your heart understand it?" My voice pitched as I could hear my voice echoing in the air, but I didn't care. I wanted to shout so much louder, curse to fill an entire book, and just let it all out.

"Even right now, I am the one to blame because I didn't listen. If only I obeyed Fabian, we wouldn't be in this situation, right? Sam?" I choked, my lungs constricting as my breathing grew shorter by the minute. It was suffocating.

"No, of course, it's not --"

"You haven't thought about that?" I cut him short, stomping towards him, and grabbed his collar. "Can you really say that to my face? That there is not a single moment you didn't think it was my fault? Look at me in the eyes and tell me you didn't consider that, Sam. That if only your wife listened, everything will be perfect."

"Can you really say that while looking at me in the eye?" I paused, eyes on him. "That it was not me who put myself in this hell?"

There was a brief silence between us as I clenched my teeth. I knew it was my fault for not listening. If only I listened, I wouldn't be in that devastating situation. His plans were perfect. I couldn't deny that. Therefore, it was... much harder to accept how futile my attempts were.

"Fabian is the strongest and the person I trusted the most, who will do my order no matter what." His voice was deep, holding my wrist down. "I wouldn't give him the task of getting you out of the palace if I didn't know how deep is your love for me. I know you will come back for me. That my wife would rather die fighting alongside me than save her own skin. That's why I entrusted Fabian to get you to the border by means or foul."

Sam sported a bitter smile, cupping my cheek as he lowered his head to my eye level. "There is not a single moment I blamed you — it didn't even cross me. The pain you went through is not the product of your stubbornness; it's the product of my selfishness, resulting in a devastating outcome."

A hiccup escaped my closed-lipped as my fist trembled. Sam pulled me into his embrace, caressing my back gently.

"It's all my fault. I had no excuse and I don't plan on making one up," He whispered, voice shaking. "I'm sorry, Love. I fucked up."

Chapter 358 - To You, My Home.

There was a long period I just cried and broke down. All the emotions: rage, frustrations, pain, relief, disbelief, and just as many others, all came clouding my heart. The last time I broke down like this was the time I returned to Grimsbanne. I told myself back then it would never happen again.

But deep down, more than all those, I was relieved. Sam and I laid on the grass, staring at the clear sky I hadn't gazed at, and adored its beauty for a long time.

"So your reason you didn't tell me is...?"

"I was scared." His voice was deep, staring at the sky. "I trust you, but not the will of your blood.. The thought of losing you once the Will of the Bloodfang manifested in you terrifies me."

"It terrifies you because you don't know what is it?"

"They had promised that fucking Quentin marriage." Sam turned his head to me, and so did I. "I know the Bloodfang, and they always keep their words. I was terrified that once you know that, you will... leave me."

"You doubt me?"

Sam stared at me before setting his eyes back on the sky that was slowly painted in tangerine. He remained silent for a moment before he spoke once again.

"I doubted myself."

A bitter smile resurfaced on my lips. "You're not mistaken, though. There is this voice in my head that tells me Zero's importance. I mean, there's not just a single voice in my head, they're a lot."

"How are you fighting them?"

"I don't." A weak chortle slipped past my lips. "I just let them. At first, they drive me crazy. But now, I'm used to it. Not that the entire plan of my clan is bullshit — it just needs a few tweaks to work in my favor."

"It must be hard hearing unwanted voices in your head."

"It is, but I thank Stefan for that." I felt his gaze from my side, while I adored the beauty of the sunset sky. "If not for Stefan's meddling, I wouldn't be the dumb Lilou. He refrained me from using my head and common sense, and because of that, I learned to think through my heart,"

"Right... your brain is slightly used."

"That sounds like an insult." I turned my head to him, seeing him bit his lower lip to shut up.

"Instead of following the voices stuck in my head, I listen to my heart."

"I don't have one, so I don't know."

"You always say that, and it's not really nice."

Sam frowned, and I furrowed my brows. Now that I thought about it, he had always mentioned not having a heart. I believed it was a metaphor, but did he mean it literally?

"You don't mean..." My eyes narrowed into slits, and Sam chuckled as he peeled his eyes away from me.

"It's more complicated than that. How the hell did you think Fabian and I got closed?" Sam cast me a knowing look. "He enjoys playing doctor, and his skills intrigued me. So we played as doctor and patient for quite some time and let him dissect me. I don't even know what else is missing."

For a moment, I lost my voice, as this sounded so strange. I guessed there was more history I hadn't heard about. How funny to know these things now.

"I guess there's more story I must hear about you, Rufus, and Fabian," I humored, making him nod.

"Those two are my brothers. I was born into the wrong family," Sam admitted, taking a deep breath.

"Even so, I can't turn my back on my biological brothers. I hate them to the point I wanted to kill them, but I just... couldn't bring myself to."

"It was not your fault your relationship with your siblings turns out like this." I gazed at him, noticing the bitterness in the corner of his eyes.

"It is my fault, Lilou. Your pain and Stefan's pain... everyone's hardship is my fault because I was selfish. If I simply accept the throne and play king, this problem wouldn't get dragged until now. But I passed the burden and my brother had to carry its weight all alone."

"What happened to us eight months ago... I won't say it's not your fault. It's our fault, Sam." My voice was soft, smiling as I set my eyes back on the sky. "I can say the same about you and Stefan. You made a decision and Stefan also made his. This situation is simply the outcome of those decisions."

"We could've been great allies."

"I know. But going easy on him was simply an insult, Sam. I may sound like a devil saying this, but you always go easy for your brothers, to Klaus, to Hanz, to Stefan." I shrugged, thinking how Sam often let things slide, no matter what his sibling had done to him. "They don't see the goodwill behind that, though."

"Yes, you sound like a devil, indeed." He chuckled, keeping silent for a moment before he added, "But it's not goodwill, my wife. There's a reason I always let things slide. I'm strong, and proving it to everyone is an insult itself."

"What a brag." I humored, thinking Sam had never won in a battle throughout the entire story. "You always lose, so this might just be a cover for that. I'm starting to think you're not as strong as you claim you are."

"What do you mean, I always lose? I won your heart, just that made me the champion."

I chuckled, shaking my head lightly. "Whatever." We went silent after that, enjoying the silence and breeze.

"How clear," Sam muttered from my side, making me smile subtly. "The weather had been good; it's peaceful and relaxing."

"It is." I took a deep breath, closing my eyes just to feel the soft blows of the wind along with his soothing voice. Even his faint breathing reached my ear, calming my unstable heartbeats.

"I thought I like this place, but I was wrong." My eyes slowly opened up as he spoke. "I've been here for the past several days, and I realized it was not the place I like. It's you that I like."

I turned my head to him, only to see him staring at me. Our eyes glistened with relief as the corner of our lips curled up into a smile.

"I realized I will like any place as long as you're there." Sam rolled to his side, supporting his temple with his knuckle. His other hand poked the tip of my nose lightly.

"This is where I belong." I chuckled as he bent over, planting a brief kiss on my lips. "To you, my home."

"Welcome home." I smiled at him, staring into his eyes. "You're real, right?"

Chapter 359 - [Bonus] Let's All Work Together

"You're real, right?"

My hand raised, pinching his lean cheek to make sure he was real. He felt real, but I was doubtful. So, I withdrew my hand from him to pinch myself.

"Oopsie." Sam suddenly grabbed my wrist and smiled. "You will not hurt yourself, but I am real. If you want me to prove that, then, by all means, touch me to your heart's content."

I giggled as he bent over, planting kisses on my lips until it slowly deepened for longer kisses. He was real. This was my husband — not a hallucination, not a dream, not an illusion — there's no shadow of a doubt this was all happening. My heart vouch for it.

"Ahem!" I snapped my eyes upon hearing Rufus clearing his throat to get our attention.

Sam clicked his tongue as he reluctantly drew away. "Can't you read the mood? My wife and I are having a good time."

"Please forgive me, my lord. However, I think since Her Grace had forgiven you, we have to delve into other important matters." Rufus gaze down at us and then bent down to his knees as if looking down on us bothered him. "The problem remains, after all, and we are running out of time."

"We have all the time in the world..."

"Captain is right." I patted Sam's chest, causing him to frown as he reluctantly got off of me. He handed me his hand, which I clasped, pulling me to sit upright.

"As much as I wanted to just roll around the grass with you, we can't drop our guard." I smiled at my husband, whose frown growing deeper. "Time is also our enemy and we only have around four months before I return to the Capital."

I gazed at Sam and then at Rufus, who was kneeling to our side. A deep exhale slipped past my mouth, smacking my lips.

"I had a plan." I paused, seeing that Fabian came back as well. "Before that, can I ask you a question, Captain?"

"No, I was not of their plan, Your Grace. If you want details, I can tell you how His Grace gave me a special mission only to get me knocked out and get abducted by my brother." Rufus explained in one go as if reading my mind.

"I figured." I nodded. Sam said 'Fabian and my plan', which only meant Rufus was also kept in the dark. I felt bad for him for he probably believed he had died, but only to wake up in confusion.

"I asked just to make sure that Sam and Fabian aren't good at scheming." My remark caused Rufus to nod while Sam gasped in disbelief.

"What do you mean? It was perfect! Fabian screw things up!" my husband complained, and Fabian nodded in agreement. Just how accepting Fabian could be?

"It's perfect, I know, but..." I trailed off, taking a deep breath as bit my lip momentarily.

"It was perfect but selfish, my lord. It's not a surprise if you do that, but I don't think Her Grace will be able to live guilt-free knowing your people died because she turns her back on them. Isn't that right, Your Grace?" Rufus cast me a knowing look, arching his brows.

"That's right. Honestly, although I was hurt, I'm glad that your plan failed." I looked at Sam, forcing a smile onto my face. "If we all died, Yul, Klaus, Silvia, Noah, the third squadron, Grimsbanne... they will all die. Eight months is a long time, and we don't know if we can salvage anything once you all wake up."

Sam let out a sigh while Rufus nodded in agreement. As for Fabian, he kept his distance and didn't have any particular emotion plastered on his face, but I knew he was listening.

"When you all died, Klaus, Silvia, and Yul were determined to fight to their deaths. If I didn't intervene, they will all die the same day. The third squadron fled, but their heart was filled with rage that can explode any minute which can lead to a foolish decision." My voice lowered, growing solemn as I briefed them on how those people fought in their own way for the three of them.

"That's why... although I was hurt, devastated, I'm relieved that your plan failed." I scanned the three of them once again, and I knew Rufus agreed with me on this. "We can't turn our backs on our people — I can't. I might have had such thoughts, but I knew I wouldn't get to die in peace if I did."

"So, what should we do?" Sam cocked his head to the side, arms crossed. "Since our initial plan failed, it's now your turn and Rufus' to call the shots."

I nodded, taking a deep breath as I faced Rufus. "Secrets are corrosive."

I deliberately paused and scanned their faces as they waited for my next words. This idea didn't occur to me until Heliot imparted his wisdom. I hope Heliot would have a safe journey.

"I don't want to keep secrets... at least to the people I trust and trust me." I smiled, swallowing down the tension in my throat. "We can't keep playing the rules laid by our enemies. Those people play with hidden agendas and were allied because of a common goal. I don't want to take that path — at least, not anymore."

Rufus sported a weak smile, pleased to hear my decision. Meanwhile, Fabian and Sam just shrugged, which I already expected. I couldn't expect anything from these two.

"I already had a plan in mind, but after a lot of thinking... we have to start over once again." My hand balled into a fist as I mustered all my courage to do everything correctly. "Let's do this right and in our own way."

My eyes scanned them once again, raising my brows. "Let's fight them... together."

There was a brief silence that enveloped us. Fabian was the first to speak, trudging towards us, and went on his knees beside Rufus.

"I agree with Your Grace. I'm in." Fabian sported his usual smile until his eyes squinted into slits.

"This is far better than deceiving your people." Rufus chimed in, nodding.

My heart warmed up, and we three turned our heads in Sam's direction. Sam raised his brows, tilting his head to the side.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he inquired with genuine wonder in his voice. "Whatever my wife wants, even if she wants us all to hang ourselves together, I'm always in."

The corner of my lips stretched into a bright smile. We all looked at each other, smiling and nodding encouragingly. We might have to restart, but this time, we're starting over with experience. I knew, deep down, if we all worked together, we would achieve our goal.

Chapter 360 - What A Lively Picnic

Meanwhile, in the location where there were people having this strange picnic, the air surrounding them grew thicker by the minute. Although they weren't saying anything, their eyes held contempt, glaring daggers at each other enough to build the tension between them.

"This is annoying..." Charlotte grumbled as they all sat down under the big tree, having safe distances between each other. "... are we being punished or what?"

"This is a punishment, that's for sure." Klaus nodded, taking a large bite of the sandwich. "Hey, this tastes weird! Did you put something in here?"

He chewed a bit more, feeling something burning inside his mouth.. Charlotte just glanced at him nonchalantly.

"I put some hot chilis inside a few sandwiches and see who is the lucky one. I guess you're lucky."

"You — ah, shit!" Klaus hastily rummaged through the basket to drink a beverage.

"He's not a fan of spicy food," Silvia commented, watching Klaus wash down the burning sensation in his throat. "This is why I told you to help. I can't trust these people to touch my food."

"By the looks of it, he is truly not a fan of spicy food." Ramin chuckled in glee until his nose scrunched up, feeling something burning in his mouth. Now, there's two of them who were drinking all the beverages without a care for others' ration.

"I guess those two are lucky people," Charlotte mumbled with disinterest. "You will live a very long life."

"Did you mean a short life?" Yul arched his brow, checking the inside of his sandwich so as not to share the same fate as those two. "Well, those two will die anyway, even if these snacks won't kill them."

"I don't think we can all survive this picnic. I'm not even looking forward to the barbeque for later." Kristina murmured. She hadn't touched her food yet, as she didn't have an appetite to eat.

"I'd rather scout Grimsbanne and see what are those rats are doing," she added, sighing heavily as this picnic was more suffocating than the palace.

"This is the reason we should stick together." Silvia cast Kristina a knowing look. "You're not the only one who is curious about what Her Grace is up to. We have to watch each other before we break the trust she gave us."

"As much as you hate being stuck with us, we abhor it as well. However, Silvia has a point and Lord Noah had already prepared the party." Yul backed up, still checking his sandwich meticulously.

"I said the rats we all let walk around Grimsbanne, who was reporting to your damn brother. I never probe on Her Grace's movements and I respect her decisions."

Silvia and Yul snapped their eyes, shifting it to Kristina. The latter shrugged nonchalantly, as what she said was true. Stefan was their brother. Even if they weren't on the same side, the blood that ran through their veins was the blood of the La Crox.

"You are right. The king is our brother, that is why we are going against him because we know he is in the wrong." Silvia's tone grew colder. "Don't misunderstand. We don't hate you four, but I still think, for Her Grace to keep your existence a secret, the problem is obvious."

"Kristina, that's enough," Ramin commented, as he had noticed how Kristina, who was often mature enough to stay unbiased in an argument, verbally attacked them at every chance she got.

"Inciting an argument will not change the fact that we will have to work together," he added, wiping the sweats on his forehead, still feeling the slight burning in his mouth.

"Inciting an argument?" Kristina scorned, shaking her head lightly. "Is it wrong for me to be hostile to them? I mean, what did they do?"

Her eyes scanned the three La Crox with contempt in her eyes. She slowly stood up, raising her finger, moving it to the three.

"You three, what did you do to deserve a life?" she asked, brows furrowed. "How come they are dead and you three are alive? I mean, this world will be a better place without the La Crox in it."

"Hell is a La Crox." Klaus also stood up from the opposite direction, facing her squarely. "Are you saying his death is just?"

"Klaus, calm down." Silvia looked up at his brother, but the latter didn't take his eyes off of Kristina.

"I don't care what is the true source of your grudge against us. However, you're not the only one who lost someone important." Klaus's tone dropped, raising his chin. "You're a hypocrite. Don't act as if you've done something to prevent their deaths as well."

"I know I did nothing to prevent his death. That is why I don't want to make the same mistake." Kristina smirked, pulling an aura on him. "I will never trust Her Grace's life to any of you."

"We don't need your approval, Miss Monroe. Even if you think having us on her side is wrong, Her Grace's safety is what we also want. Same with you, I can't entrust her life to any of the Bearers of the Order. Especially now that your weapons were corrupted by the King's Will." Klaus also exuded a stifling aura as silence ensued.

The air between them told the others that a duel could happen any second. However, neither of them made a move. The rest of them also stood up, creating distance as they prepared to stop the two of them clashing.

"Labyrinth," Ramin whispered, darting his eyes from Klaus to Kristina. He had to prepare to stop these two from killing each other at any second he felt they would attack.

"Mace," Kristina muttered, while Klaus held on his sword and the ground underneath him cracked.

Just as Kristina's and Klaus' eyes glinted and took a step forward, they froze upon hearing Lilou's voice. Not just the two of them, but everyone froze before shifting their eyes toward her voice.

"I knew this would happen. Goodness, how can I leave you all without getting worried you will kill each other first before our enemy does?" Lilou chuckled, walking into the scene.

"Your Grace, it's..." Klaus trailed off as his eyes veered towards the three figures walking behind her. That second, he unconsciously dropped his sword — same with Kristina dropping her Mace, while the rest dropped their jaws.

"What a lively picnic," Fabian commented, smiling from ear to ear.