

The Duke 361

Chapter 361 - The Misfits

Upon our arrival, we didn't dwell in that spot, as we had to have a real meeting. Hence, I simply told them to close their mouth and follow us inside the house. As soon as we entered, Noah, who was by the kitchen, dropped the pot he was carrying as soon as he saw the people I entered with. I didn't idle and just told him to follow us to the meeting room.

We waited for them for quite some time before they all rushed inside. A series of questions immediately bombarded the room, but I told them to take a seat and calm down.

Now everyone was seated while I stood in front of them.

I scanned their faces as they darted their eyes from Sam, who sat on one chair around the table, to Rufus, who was standing and leaning on the corner of the room, and Fabian to the opposite corner. I had expected such a reaction from them, but it was still hilarious to see it. At the very least, I wasn't the only one who couldn't believe what was going on.

"I know you have a lot of questions and...."

"How?" Yul cut me short as he raised a question. "No, I mean, what are you planning on having people to pretend as if they were alive?"

"Lilou, we know your pain, but..." Kristina's breath hitched as she cast her eyes towards Rufus. "... you can't do this. No matter how desperate we are, we shouldn't insult them like this."

"For once, I agree with her." Klaus nodded. I noticed how his shoulder stiffened because of how tight he was clenching his hand.

"Your Grace, are we in trouble for you to come up with such a decision?" asked Noah, shifting his eyes from Sam to Fabian. More question followed their questions until they quiet down.

The side of my lips curled up into a weak smile, scanning their faces and taking notice of the confusion flickering across their eyes. I knew it was hard to believe it; we all mourned and grieve during their funeral.

"First of all, it's not what you all think." I took a deep breath, clearing my throat as I mustered my courage to explain it without overcomplicating things. "I didn't hire people to pretend as them. I would never do that — not to Fabian, not to Rufus, definitely not to my husband."

"Then, why?"

I bit my lower lip, casting Sam a look. He slowly raised his feet on the table, leaning back comfortably.

"Because, first of all, no one will believe it and second, it's dumb. Who is in their sound mind would want to take the kind of life we have?" Sam cocked his head to the side, catching everyone's attention as all eyes shifted to him. "Even if someone had the ability to copy a person, why the hell would they want to inherit the enormous hate people had on me? That doesn't make sense."

"It doesn't," Fabian chimed in because even a lunatic had to have second thoughts about stealing Fabian's identity.

"We didn't die... I mean, we did, but not really." Rufus delved into the primary subject. He looked at me and I nodded lightly.

"If you want to know the details, I will tell you." As soon as I said those words, everyone turned their head towards me. I sported a smile and took a deep breath before I explained what truly transpired. Sam and Fabian would correct me every so often — which didn't help, as it only highlighted their vicious nature.

Overall, I explained everything, leaving nothing behind. From start to finish.

"They... you didn't die and were in slumber all this time?" Silvia's voice was laced with disbelief, setting her eyes to Rufus, who nodded in response. "Why should we believe you? It sounds so convenient and... too good to be true. How can we make sure we can trust you?"

Rufus pressed his lips into a thin line before cocking his head in my direction. "If Her Grace believes us, isn't that enough?"

Again, silence ensued as I returned their intent gazes. I sighed, only to see them let out heavy sighs.

"I got depressed for nothing then." Klaus pounded the bottom of his fist against the table lightly. "Damn Fabian. I thought I missed the opportunity to kill you myself."

"Oh, I don't think you can easily kill Mister Fabian, though. I think he is the one who stopped my arrow a week ago." Charlotte giggled, cupping her cheek as she smiled brightly at Fabian. "Mister Fabian, can we spar some other time?"

"Little girl, you will have to train for the next hundred years for that." Klaus scoffed, gazing at Charlotte with ridicule.

"I'm glad to see you again, Your Grace." Ramin, on the other hand, faced Sam and bowed politely.

"It looks like you've mastered Labyrinth, eh?" Sam offered a smug grin, making Ramin chuckle bashfully. But Sam's peace was disrupted when Noah stormed to his seat.

"My lord! How can you do this to me? To us?! Didn't you trust me...?!" Noah continued to interrogate Sam, almost like he was about to weep while Sam covered his ears in irritation.

Watching them from this point warmed my heart. I had expected a lot more questions from them and how to convince them I wasn't making all this up. I was mentally prepared to prove that not because I longed for Sam, that I believed these three. However, none of those happened as it seemed they had accepted it already.

"They're your people." I snapped my eyes, turning my head to the side to see Rufus standing next to me. "It's not that they believed it blindly. They just trust you and your judgment. You were an outstanding leader, Your Grace."

"You think too highly of me."

"You underestimate yourself," He argued back, gazing at the people around the table while they make a fuss. "They're not His Grace's people anymore. They're yours. You should credit yourself more, Your Grace."

I pursed my lips. My eyes softened as I smiled. "How can I do that?" came out a whisper as I let everyone absorb the situation first.

Now, this was what we all call peace and relief. It might look like a mess, the misfits, but the atmosphere was light and the hostility from earlier slowly vanished.

Chapter 362 - Can You Carry The Weight Of The Crown?

"Alright, since everyone had settled, let's all delve into important matters." I clapped, catching everyone's attention. My eyes traveled across the room, making sure I got all their attention.

My gaze lingered a bit longer at Yul. "We need to change plans. But before I propose the plan I had in mind, I want to apologize to all of you."

Silence dawned on us as they looked at me with confusion. There were a lot of things I had to apologize for, and I didn't know where to start.. However, I had to get through this — we have to get through all this.

"To win against Stefan, I know I had been copying their vicious methods of doing things. I had no excuse for that, nor I am remorseful about doing so." I paused, clapping my hand, but then loosened my grip as my shoulders relaxed. "I had believed that fighting them in their own game was the best method; it was one of the methods, but is not the best."

"Our original plan was to depose the king and sit a deserving one. You all know that I planned to take the throne for myself... I didn't." I continued, studying their grim expression upon my confession. "I had been exchanging letters with Marquess Cameron. Having the throne for myself is never my plan and even if it was, it won't happen. So, I told Marquess Cameron about it."

"By 'even if you want, it won't happen,' what do you mean by that?" asked Yul in a solemn tone. I knew that tone. He was simply wanting to confirm his guesses.

"Heliot." I cleared my throat, taking a step forward as I planted my palms on the edge of the table. "I had a trade with Heliot. He will support my plans and supply me with everything that I need in exchange for... my life."

I heard a gulp from someone as the light atmosphere gradually turned heavy. Yul let out a faint scoff while the rest had this conflicted and disapproved look in their eyes.

"I never recovered from Sam's death. I will never be. It was selfish and I understand if you are all disappointed in me. However, living day by day, telling myself the pain will pass and time will heal the wounds, is more enervating than looking forward to my death. So, I came to this decision and kept you all in the dark." I continued, chuckling bitterly. "So, I'm sorry for that."

"When you said you want to live..." Ramin voiced out, clearing his throat. "You mean it, right?"

"My husband and his confidante are alive." I shrugged, finding it ridiculous how 'shallow' my reasoning was. "It might be too late to change the plans we had been working on for the past eight months for something so shallow. However, I ask all of you to trust me again... to do this properly together."

"Lilou," Silvia crooned, smiling gently at me. "It's not shallow, and we have no right to question you for thinking like that. Among all of us, you are the one who was in the most pain, and yet, you stood up and put us all behind you to protect us."

"It was saddening and selfish, but how dare we hate you for seeking your own peace?" Noah chimed in, making me look at him to see his understanding smile.

"It's still unfair, though," Charlotte commented with a pout.

"It's unfair, but we all know that you've built Grimsbanne to greatness so it can shelter us all." Kristina sighed, casting everyone a glance. "How can we blame you and feel disappointed when all you think is keeping us all safe, and providing us a place we can call home before delivering yourself to death?"

"We had prepared for eight months. Although four months is a short time, I know we can all figure that out." Ramin nodded, gazing down on his spread finger before clenching them.

"I'll always be with you, Your Grace. Whatever decision you make, I, we, will respect it. We're already glad that you fought for us until now." Klaus voiced out, exchanging nods with the rest as if he forgot he nearly clashed with Kristina.

A subtle smile resurfaced on my lips as I looked at them, looking back at me with the same subtle smile. How could I not see how they all protected my back?

"Thank you," I gazed down, biting my lower lip. I knew they were smiling because, for the first time in a long time, I felt vulnerable.

"My goodness. My wife makes me so proud. I never made my people obey me like this." Sam sighed dejectedly.

"That is because you just do whatever you want, Your Grace," Rufus answered him, causing the former to scoff in dismay.

"But my wife also did what she wants! Everyone in this room didn't know my wife's suicide mission!"

"Even so, Her Grace had made her intentions clear. Your intentions are never clear. They're suspicious, brother." Klaus clicked his tongue, gazing at Sam with disdain.

"I'm never good at leadership." Sam frowned, casting Rufus and Fabian a look. "How can I make you two obey me without pressing my nerves?"

Fabian smiled until his eyes squinted. "Don't worry, my lord. I will always be loyal to you."

"Fabian, that's the scariest part. I said obey me without pressing my nerves, not be just loyal to me."

"I'm also loyal to you, my lord." Rufus sported a smile that didn't reach his ears.

"What will I do to get you two off of my back?" Sam grumbled before setting his eyes back to me. His expression instantly brightened as he locked eyes with me, cupping his cheek.

"So, my wife, since you're the one calling the shots now, what's our new plan?" Sam inquired, and everyone's eyes were back on me. "Do you still have to fulfill your deal with Stefan?"

"Yes."

"What?" I could see the confusion in their eyes as Sam frowned. The only ones who didn't react strongly were Rufus, Klaus, and Yul.

"I had to," I said, taking a deep breath as my eyes sharpened, gazing at every single one of them.

"We had to change our plan, but not entirely. The will of our clan wants to put things back in their rightful place."

Silence ensued as their brows knitted. My eyes slowly veered to Rufus, noticing the puzzlement in his eyes as he tilted his head.

"Can you carry the weight of the crown?" I asked solemnly. "Rufus?"

Chapter 363 - That Would Be A Good Ending

There was a long silence as my question caught everyone off guard — even Sam seemed perplexed. So, taking advantage of the silence, I summarized the tales of Soran and the lost history of this kingdom.

"I can't see my husband playing as King; the kingdom and its people are done for if that happened." I cast Sam a look, and he shrugged nonchalantly. "Same thing will happen if I sit on the throne. I am not qualified. Among everyone, Rufus had shown all qualities of a wise king."

Again, silence ensued as I turned my head in Rufus' direction. He hadn't said a word, arms-crossed.

"I approve of this." The silence broke when Fabian raised a hand, catching everyone's attention. "I don't want to move to the capital permanently.."

His reasoning may sound shallow, but a mutual agreement was what we needed. I didn't want to shock everyone, as my people had been pushing me to take the throne.

"Soran, huh?" Klaus mumbled, scratching his chin. "He sounds like the combination of Rufus and Fabian."

"This is a lot," Sam voiced out, placing his hand behind his head as he rocked his chair. "But I think we can all agree that we will follow whatever my wife wants."

"Well, pushing someone who doesn't want the throne is proven a hassle and stressful." Silvia shrugged, casting Sam a knowing look. "That is the lesson we learned in a hard way, right? Hell?"

"Correct." Sam nodded approvingly.

"I will support Her Grace and Captain." Kristina chimed in, gazing at the third squadron. "What do you think?"

"Well... I think I should start sucking up to Captain." Charlotte commented, cupping her cheek as she smiled.

"It's something I didn't expect, but it's not actually bad. The captain is a good leader." Ramin spoke, shrugging his shoulders as if he didn't have a choice, anyway.

"The Duchess' decision will always be my will. So, I have nothing to say about this." Yul also relayed his thought about this. "I'm already glad that we are being informed about the entire plan beforehand."

"I think we all agree with this." Noah cleared his throat, setting his eyes on Rufus. "What about you, Sir Knight? What do you think about it?"

All eyes veered to Rufus, waiting for his answer. Rufus' lips parted, gazing at me intently. I knew what he was about to say; the answer was written in his eyes.

"You don't have to give us answers now, Rufus," I said even before he could refuse. "We had to face tons of enemies — dangerous enemies and tricky situations. This won't be over easily. Until then, please consider it."

"No rush, Captain. Whatever your decision, we will all respect it. We still have Marquess Cameron, after all." Charlotte giggled happily, keeping the atmosphere in the room light. Everyone nodded in agreement with her, including me.

"We will figure it out once this is all over." I smiled at Rufus.

"Alright. Since that is settled, why don't we have an outdoor banquet?" Noah clapped, grinning from ear to ear. "We should celebrate the return of His Grace and Sir Knight."

"How about Mister Fabian?" asked Charlotte, but everyone feigned ignorant of her question.

A deep sigh slipped past my lips as I glanced at Fabian. He was smiling despite that no one wanted to celebrate his return. They must've feared him more than they hate him. Well, I knew Fabian wouldn't take this to the heart and it would only annoy him if they all acted sweet towards him.

"Sir knight," I called, strutting towards Rufus, who was sitting on the short stair in front of the house with a drink in his hand. "Can I join you?"

Rufus nodded, creating a space so I could sit beside him. He had been silent even after the meeting and kept his distance.

"I can't," he said, making me look at him while he peered at Klaus and Ramin, who were singing around the bonfire. "I had overseen Grimsbanne for a long time, but compare to your accomplishments, mine only kept it stagnant. You've lived the life of a peasant, and you know more than anyone how tough it was to live under my rule."

"I know."

"So, why?" his eyelashes fluttered, turning his head to me. "Why do you think I should sit on the throne? Is it because of Soran?"

I shook my head, chuckling lightly. "Soran had nothing to do with this decision. I only mentioned it because it gives you more right to fight for it. Good stories don't die easily."

"Hah..." he chuckled, giving me a brief look.

"Rufus, you kept Grimsbanne stagnant because that is what you want, isn't it?" The side of my lips curled into a weak smile, staring at the people around the bonfire. "You were afraid to touch, to change, or to overstep because you wanted the people to wait for Sam to return."

"I won't lie that living as a peasant was hard, but that is just life. There is not a perfect ruler. Even if we say Sam didn't go into his slumber, my life would still be hard either way." I continued in the same gentle tone, setting my eyes to his side profile. "The more I think about it, the more I believe you are the best person to rule this land. After all, if not for you, Stefan would have conquered Grimsbanne long ago. However, all he could do was pressure you for years. That alone is enough to let others see you're not someone to mess with."

"You had honed your choice of words. It's scary, Your Grace."

"I'm simply stating facts. You fought for Grimsbanne in your own way, and I fought for Grimsbanne in my own way. I had resources, you don't." I shrugged nonchalantly.

"That didn't make you less worthy, nor was it enough to discredit your accomplishments. You had turned Grimsbanne into a metropolis, and that is something no one can deny."

"I'm not saying I am less worthy, nor I am denying it. I'm saying you will do better if you have the same privileges and support just like what I had," I replied in a knowing tone. "The decision is yours, nevertheless. We still have to stay alive so we can hear your decision, after all."

"Hah..." he chuckled, keeping that subtle smile on his lips. "What a day."

"I know, right?" I laughed weakly as I set my eyes on the ruckus around the bonfire. Sam and Fabian were tying Klaus to a large stick to roast him over the bonfire — or what it seemed. Had they become cannibals? It didn't surprise me when Klaus managed to escape by brute force, and chaos ensued.

"They're like children," I mumbled as my eyes softened. "But... it's been a while since they all looked so laid back."

"I hope it would last forever," Rufus whispered, and I glanced at him to see the gentleness flickering across his eyes.

"We will do this again, Sir Knight." I set my eyes back to the bonfire, seeing that even Noah had joined the party. "Someday... once this is all over, we will throw a large outdoor banquet."

"Mhm. That would be a good ending."

Chapter 364 - Drunk In Love

The banquet was a disaster, but not the bad kind of disaster. Everyone had drunk until they dropped. I worry about the food storage of the third squadron as every single one of them held their liquor for too long.

"Do you remember the time you came to me drunk?" I asked, turning my head to Sam, who was walking towards me. Sam raised his shoulders, sitting beside me on the small porch.

"Hmmm. Maybe?"

A weak chuckle slipped past my lips as I gaze ahead. "That time, you are so drunk you spouted all that nonsense."

"I don't speak nonsense, my dear."

"Just how many barrels of wine did you consume that night to get drunk?" I asked, ignoring his last remarks.. "I'm pretty sure you drank just the same amount as them, but look at Ra over there. He couldn't go back to his room and just dropped."

I jerked my chin towards Ramin, who was lying where we had the party. He looked pathetic, but I was glad that he had finally had some fun, as he had been training tirelessly.

"Well, I'm too old for those youngsters to get me into that state," Sam replied arrogantly. "If you're talking about that time you barely entered the manor, well, I didn't have that much."

"Then why were you so drunk that time? Were you faking it?" I turned my gaze back to him. Sam pressed his lips into a thin line, cocking his head at me.

"I was intoxicated with love... if that is what you call it. I mean, I like you that time and love you even more now, but I couldn't grasp that foreign emotion." Sam carefully raised his hand, staring at

his palm. "It is a feeling I never felt before, and I didn't know what to do with it. So, instead of doing something that might make you hate me, I drowned myself with alcohol to quench that seemingly insatiable desire to have you right there and then."

"I was in danger and I didn't know I was."

"You are always in danger as long as I'm with you." Sam cocked his head back to me. "You got to live with it. I don't plan on letting you go just because I didn't want you to get tangled up in more problems."

I chuckled, rolling my eyes. "I am the problem. My origins were."

"Exactly." He nodded. "Even so, I want you to stay with me forever."

"I will stay with you forever, Sam." I pursed my lips, moving closer to him as I rested my chin on his shoulder. "Just don't leave me again."

"I won't, never." He shook his head, tucking my hair behind my ear. "But still, you can't stay with me forever... at least, not as a human."

His last remarks silence me because it was the subject we barely touched before. Was my deal with Stefan bothered him?

"For you to bear Stefan's heir, he will have to turn you into one, Lilou." So it bothered him, I thought. "If I woke up a little late, will you let him turn you into a vampire?"

"Jealous?" I drew my head back a little.

"Of course." He shrugged. "Grimsbanne already reeks of your blood. And you don't have any idea how I've been restraining myself smelling your faint scent in these people."

"Restraining? Why are you restraining yourself?"

Sam's eyes glinted as he leaned forward to my side and whispered, "Because I can't blame you. I was asleep, and you did what you did to protect everyone. However, I don't know how long I can restrain myself, Lilou."

"But I had to give them my blood," I replied as he drew away, staring deep into his eye. "It's not that I don't trust their strength, but I need them."

"To deceive Stefan?"

"To annoy Stefan, but there's one person I had to deceive, Sam." I raised my hand, cupping his jaw as my eyes fixed on him. "I think you can guess who are the actual threats in here."

"Alphonse?" he raised a brow, and I nodded. "I'll give them my blood, save yours. You're already pale."

"Sam, if you can smell my scent in them, do you think your brothers won't recognize yours?"

"What do you mean?" he tilted his head to the side, pointing at his black hair. "Aren't you curious how the hell Klaus didn't recognize me despite all that blood I shed last week?"

My brows furrowed, as that didn't occur to me. I was so busy the past week, and so I didn't have the time to dwell on it.

"But I need to make them smell like me, Sam." I still argued back because that was crucial for me.

"Well..." Sam sized me up, brushing my jaw with the back of his finger. "Just a drop."

"A drop?"

"My blood doesn't have a smell. Klaus didn't know that, but Alphonse will get suspicious if blood doesn't have a scent." Sam explained, nodding in agreement. "Why don't we... share our blood? A drop of blood from you as a fragrance."

"You're saying I can still give them my blood?"

"As I've said, just a drop. I will only allow it and share you until this ordeal is over." His tone grew solemn, leaning a bit as he looked at me in the eye. "Your blood is good, but letting them have mine is better."

I pursed my lips into a thin line as what he said could be true. However, how would I know it wouldn't strain him?

"The second slumber helped me recover," Sam explained, taking notice of the doubt in my eyes. "It's been two years, Lilou. I just want to return to our menial life together, and that is now very clear to me."

A weak smile resurfaced on my lips as Sam rested his forehead against mine. I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath, and nodded lightly.

"Let's unleash all the craziness now and return to that life, my wife," he suggested under his breath. "Once this is over, let's start a family."

A family... that was what I had always wanted. The way he had said them now was enough for me to recognize the fuel of his motivation.

"Let's do that," I whispered back. "We'll do all that."

"I'll make sure we will," he promised, cupping both my cheeks. "I won't disappoint you this time."

Just like that, time had passed in a blink of an eye and it was almost the start of winter once again.

Chapter 365 - The Tale Of How The Great Me Become A Good Boy

[WARNING: MATURE CONTENT AHEAD. PROCEED WITH CAUTION.]

A day before my promised return to the Capital, we had almost completed our preparations. I opened my eyes for another busy day in Grimsbanne and my gaze instantly landed on Sam lying beside me.

A subtle smile appeared on my lips, sprawling my hand to brush his hair lightly. Until now, I couldn't believe that my husband was alive. It still felt like a dream.

"Good morning," I greeted in a low tone as he slowly opened his eyes. "You came back?"

"Mhm. I missed you." His voice was rasped, moving closer as he pulled me into his warm embrace.. Sam planted a soft peck on my head, stroking my back.

"Sleep more," he said. "You've been working hard. No one will condemn you if you get up a little late."

"Mildred will be here soon."

"I'll just kill her."

"Sam."

"Kidding." He let out a low chuckle. "She won't go in here. I told Yul to keep everyone away from your chambers."

I looked up at him slightly. "You came prepared."

"Of course. I am your secret lover and we can't be found out until the right time, correct?" Sam pulled me closer to him while I chuckled.

He had been very understanding about our setup. Since there were rats that were reporting to Stefan, Sam, Rufus, and Fabian had to keep being dead. In other words, Sam could only sneak inside his own house just like today. I didn't even know he went to sleep here last night.

"Thank you, love," I expressed, melting into his embrace. We had all been busy that I could not help but appreciate this idle morning.

I closed my eyes to rest for a bit more. My brows knitted when I felt his hand on my back gliding down slowly.

"Sam." I sighed, snapping my tongue once.

"What?" he feigned ignorance, squeezing my buttocks lightly.

"You told me to rest. I'm pretty sure where this will lead contradicts that suggestion."

"But..." Sam drew away, bending down and planted soft kisses on my neck and shoulder. "... you will just lie down there like a dead tuna."

My brows furrowed, pushing his shoulder away. I caught him off guard as I swiftly changed position; me on top of him, tilting my head to the side.

"Excuse me?" I raised a brow, staring at his wide eyes. "Lie like, what?"

The corner of his lips stretched from ear to ear, staring at me in delight. He bit his lower lip seductively.

"I guess I was wrong," he admitted with mischief in his eyes. "Goodness. I can't keep you under me anymore."

"My husband." I placed my palm on his firm chest, batting my eyes ever so slowly. "You have to admit that you find it more arousing when I'm on top of you, isn't it?"

"Well, not all the time, but I liked how you catch me off guard like today." He winked.

I bent over, brushing the apex of my nose against his nose with our lips barely touching. Sam bit his lip, clicking his tongue at the teasing.

"Please, don't tease me like this." He sighed, trying to kiss me on the lips, but I kept drawing back.

A giggle escaped my mouth. "You just have to lie down there like a log, my husband. What's the rush?"

I kissed his lean cheek, his jaw, going up to nibble his earlobe. Sam let out a frustrated grunt as he stroked my thigh gently.

"Goodness. Since when did you get so good in seduction?" he inquired as my lips travel down his exposed chest, leaving my marks on him.

I paused momentarily, looking up at him in disbelief. "There is this culprit who wouldn't let me off every other day. Which makes me wonder what the hell is he doing by traveling back and forth."

My eyes veered to his nipple, biting my lower lips lightly before pressing my thumb on it. Sam furrowed his brows, watching me crawl to his nipples before nibbling it.

"Oh, oh." His body flinched as he gasped, surprised at his body's reaction as well.

"Tickles?" I asked, raised brows.

"Yes, surprisingly."

The corner of my lips stretched into a smug grin. For the past four months, we had shared many passionate nights... and day; I discovered Sam had quite a few sensitive parts he didn't know about. He had also learned new techniques and areas I was sensitive to which gave each love making a fresh experience.

"Do you hate it?" I licked his teat sensually, seeing how his mouth fell open.

"I hate nothing you do." Sam brushed my hair back, smirking as I resumed.

My lips planted kisses from his upper abdomen, going further down to the firm muscles in his stomach, and then his navel. He shivered slightly. I loved it when Sam pin me down and feeling his weight over. But, there was just this unique satisfaction whenever I take charge.

There was just something whenever I feel his body shiver slightly upon my touch. Seeing his anticipation in his eyes made me feel so powerful and playful.

I stopped when I reached his abdominal v-line, gazing up to see him looking back at me. Sam was panting, raising his brow knowingly.

"Be my guest." He smirked, wriggling his brows playfully.

"I'm not asking for your permission, Sam. I am looking to see whether I stop or continue." I smirked back, casting him a knowing look.

He gasped in disbelief. "You're not planning to leave me hanging, do you?"

"Well, maybe if you asked nicely." I shrugged as I giggled.

"Ugh... please, my wife. Don't do this to me --" His voice hitched as I stroke his bulge against my palm. "You're a dangerous woman. Please don't play with my fragile heart."

"Lucky you. I'm not simply playing with your heart." I bit the waistline of his slacks, pulling it down. "Why would I leave you hanging if you didn't deserve such punishments?"

"Gracious. This will be the tale of how the great me became a good boy." His reply made me chuckle as his man's jewel let itself known.

My fingers carefully wrapped around him. "I should ink that story," a teasing voice came out of my mouth as I bent over, brushing my hair to one side to have my breakfast.

Sam hissed in satisfaction, flinching as he ran his fingers through my hair and held it up.

Chapter 366 - Thank Me Later

"Lilou..." he called me in his warm baritone voice. I felt his thigh stiffen as his toe curled.

"Come up here," he requested, while I drew back. His phallus erected before me.

Sam gazed down at me, gesturing for me to come over. I raised my brow, tilting my head as I licked him with my eyes on him.

"Ah, shit....!" he clenched his teeth, letting out a suppress grunt as I licked him from his knackers up to his tip. "I can't hold it anymore."

His eyes glinted menacingly, pulling my shoulder up to him. Even though his action was abrupt, it didn't hurt as he switched positions.

"Oops!" I giggled, biting my lower lip as his pair of glowing red eyes hovered over me. "Sam, I --"

I couldn't finish my sentence as he abruptly bent over, thrusting my words back in my throat as he claimed my lips. His kiss wasn't like the usual gentle ones. This time, it felt more dominant.

He tranced my hand, holding my wrist down as he broke his lips from me and nibbled on my neck. His hot breaths, along with his deep kisses, were enough to raise my body temperature.

"Sam," I moaned as he nibbled on my collarbone, running my fingers through his hair. "Don't leave a mark. Yul had — ah!"

Sam bit me before he stopped, raising his sharp, narrowed eyes at me. I pursed my lips, raising my brows.

"Yul always takes credit with the marks on my body. Let's give him some slack, hmm?"

"Well, that's what he gets for acting as my wife's lover." He shrugged, bending over, but I placed my hand on his shoulder.

"Cut him some slack."

"Sure, sure." He nodded, then continued on tracing kissing on my shoulder.

"Sam." A defeated sigh escaped my mouth. "Yul had been a great help by putting his life on the line and tainting his reputation. It's our last day in Grimsbanne, so, can you please?"

"Exactly." Sam drew his head back once again. "This is our last in Grimsbanne, which also means I had to be extra cautious after this day. I'm not doing this because I don't appreciate Yul's help. I'm simply taking what I can since approaching you once you arrive in the capital is tricky."

I pursed my lips, nodding. "If that so, I'm sorry. I over assumed." Kissing him on the lips as an act of apology.

"If I don't know better, I will assume you're trying to ruin the mood." Sam clicked his tongue, running his fingertip to my jaw as he bent down. But before our lips touched, Mildred's voice from the outside reached our ears.

"Your Grace, the twelfth prince, had arrived in Grimsbanne with an imperial carriage to escort you back to the Capital."

Sam ground his teeth in irritation, pounding his fist against the mattress. I was surprised by this sudden news, but I still had a day to spend in Grimsbanne.

"Tell him to wait and do not disturb me again. If anyone comes in here to disturb me, I will not be lenient."

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Oh? You're staying?" Sam raised a brow as the side of his lips curled up in amusement.

"It's our last day in Grimsbanne. Of course, I can't let anyone disturb our time together."

"That's more like it." He chuckled, bending over as his lips smashed against mine. I chuckled in his mouth as Sam whispered a naughty joke in my ear.

Sam and I idled, rolling around the sheets without a care in the outside world. I must admit, though. Ever since Sam woke up from his second slumber, his stamina increased. One or two orgasms were not enough for him — even four consecutive wasn't enough. It was like he had this unlimited source, while I felt sore all over.

"My wife, aren't you afraid you'd get pregnant?" he asked, cocking his head at me while I drew circles on his chest.

"Why would I?" I looked up at him. "We had been making love before too but I never got pregnant."

"Are you thinking one of us is infertile?"

I shook my head. "I just think a vampire and a human can't have a child unless you turn me into one."

"But your blood is special, Love."

"I'm still human." I shrugged nonchalantly, resting the side of my head on his chest again. "Also, I don't think this is the best time to have a child."

"Right... I shouldn't have jerked inside."

"It was not like it was the first time. I'm safe, don't worry."

"I'm not worried about that." Sam caressed my back gently. "I'm just thinking I had recovered my strength and even if you miraculously got pregnant, I don't think I will be a good parent."

I pulled myself up, propping my elbow as I looked at him. "You will be a great father. You don't have to worry about that now, though."

"I know," Sam muttered, brushing my cheek with his thumb. "This feels crap."

"What feels crap?"

"Having to leave you and entrust you to Yul in that place. I still don't know why Yul was so overprotective towards you. Does he like you?" he inquired, batting his eyes slowly.

I pursed my lips, realizing I hadn't told him about Yul. I had a talk with Yul about his origins before and he told me to not bother as it was unnecessary.

"Well, Yul is a Bloodfang," I confessed under my breath. I studied Sam, and he didn't have any reaction to it. "Did you already know about this?"

"No. I wouldn't ask if I do." Sam cast me a knowing look.

"Then why didn't you react strongly about it? Or ask me more questions?"

"Am I supposed to be shocked and ask more questions? It changes nothing. Yul is still my brother." He shrugged nonchalantly. "Although I think I should be nicer to him."

A subtle smile resurfaced on my lips as I looked at him. I knew the reason Yul didn't want to let Klaus and Silvia know about it. He was afraid things would change. He grew up with them and literally lived as one of the La Crox.

"Yes, be nicer to him. He is very important to me," I whispered, closing my eyes.

"I will protect every single one of you this time," Sam muttered, brushing my back. "You should bring a lot of winter clothes. It'll be a cold journey."

"Mhm."

"If you need anything, just call my name. I will surely come to your rescue like a knight in shining armor." He nagged under his breath, making me giggle. "If things go haywire, you promised to retreat, alright?"

"Yes, Sire."

"We don't plan on dying this time, so you have to be careful. I may not stay by your side at all times, but I'm always there for you."

Sam continued to nag me for an hour, reminding me of things I should remember. I couldn't blame him as I would return to the capital.

"Sam," I called, stopping his nagging as I looked at him straight in the eye. "We left Grimsbanne to the Capital with no other plans than get Stefan's approval. We might've started over, but we're starting over with experience. I'm prepared; we've prepared for this."

"I know. I just can't help but worry about you."

I smiled. "I'll be fine. Catharsis and Lakresha will be with me. You should be more worried about yourself since Catharsis disowned you."

"I had always had this love-hate relationship with Catharsis, but it seemed only hate remains." Sam shrugged as his weapon didn't respond to him anymore.

"It's because you don't take care of it. First, you sold it off in the black market. If not for Noah, you will never find it again. And then you died and left it behind. I guess Catharsis already had enough."

"I don't care about it." Sam spat out, making me shake my head helplessly. "Anyway, let me tell you a secret about it before you leave for the capital."

Sam leaned over as I lend my ear to him. My brow raised as I looked at him in disbelief.

"Thank me later," he winked as his grin stretched broader.

"I will thank you now," I whispered, leaning closer for a kiss that led to another round of love-making.

"You sent the twelfth prince too early. The duchess will not sacrifice a minute of her freedom if the twelfth prince arrived a day earlier." Beatrice lied on her side, propping her temple against her knuckles as she set her eyes on Stefan, who was wearing his clothes.

"Doesn't matter." Stefan cocked his head, casting her a brief look. "I only sent him just to make sure she wouldn't run away."

"My... showing this kind of affection to another woman in front of your wife is surely brutal." Beatrice chuckled as Stefan never changed.

"We are fucking, Beatrice. But none of your children will become my heir. I won't even let them live." Stefan sported a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Don't be too spoiled."

"Ouch. You better treat your wife better, my king." Beatrice raised her brows as Stefan paused and looked at her. "I mean, my emperor."

Stefan nodded approvingly and said nothing as he draped his coat over his shoulder. Beatrice fixed her eyes on his back, smirking as the door shut behind him.

"Lilou... I can't wait for your return."

Chapter 367 - [Bonus]The Death March

I spent my last day in Grimsbanne just doing what I usually do while everyone else was busy. Yul argued with Jayden, the twelfth prince, because they want us to depart a day before scheduled. We didn't mind, though, but my authority was at stake. If I let them dictate us what to do, it would put a strain on the authority I held. So, in the end, Jayden didn't have a choice.

"Is everything prepared?" I asked, looking over the entrance of the mansion where everyone waited for me in this freezing weather.

My eyes first landed on Silvia, in her knight winter uniform. Beside her was Klaus. Their steed was awaiting them not far away from their standpoint. Mildred, along with the servants and a few knights, lined up to the side. Then Jayden and the people of the king.

A subtle smile appeared on my lips as I turned to Yul, who stood beside me.. "Shall we?"

Yul only smiled back, offering his hand, which I clasped. We marched towards the carriage in silence. It was quite the ceremony, almost like a death march.

When we reached the carriage, my eyes shifted to Jayden. He bowed slightly without a word.

"Thank you for your consideration, Your Highness," I said, only to receive silence in response.

I looked back at the mansion's entrance. My eyes softened. This felt like de javu.

Almost two years ago, I was in this same position. I also looked back, just like right now. But the difference was distinct; the people around me, the intention in my heart, and even myself. I wasn't that hopeful young maiden anymore.

"This will be the hottest winter I will ever experience," I murmured, staring at the mansion a little longer before turning around. "I will miss this place."

"Don't worry." Yul offered me his hand as I hitched inside. "Grimsbanne will wait for you."

I smiled at Yul's remarks as everyone already dispersed. Mildred should ride with me in the same carriage, but I preferred having Yul as my company. He was my lover, and spending the entire journey with him would only make sense.

Our journey started when Yul hitched inside the carriage. Klaus and Silvia would travel by their steed to secure my ride and to keep a close eye on Jayden.

We had an arduous journey and traveling in winter was proven a hassle. But with experience, we avoided simple problems we encountered last year. It didn't take long when we reach Whistlebird.

"Yul," I called under my breath, staring at the window and the people outside. "Goodness. This looks like a funeral march."

A chuckle escaped my mouth as the townsfolk in Whistlebird were standing on the pavement. It was as if this was a parade.

"How bold." Yul chortled lightly. "The king will surely hear about this."

"Teddy Brown had grown bold over the year." I humored.

I kept in touch with Teddy Brown as he became my other informant. His people had become my eyes and ears inside the country. There was a lot of trade going on in Whistlebird, so it was helpful. I was kept up to date about the current state of affairs.

"I didn't think they will give you such a walk of honor. You're not making a sacrifice." Yul let out another chuckle, and I kept my eyes outside.

My eyes caught Teddy Brown standing outside his establishment. Our eyes met, and he took a bow while I smile subtly.

"This winter is quite warm, don't you think, Yul?" I asked, peeling my eyes away from the window to Yul.

He was staring outside, smirking. "The fire in their eyes kept the cold weather bearable."

"Let's not underestimate our enemy, Yul. Just like us, they had prepared for our return. Stefan will not let me go easily this time."

"Even so, he didn't have a choice." Yul slowly set his eyes on me as they glinted. "If he held on too tightly, he will lose an arm."

"We'll start from there." I smiled brightly. "But before that, you should be careful, brother. I won't lose my life even when I ran my mouth, but I'm certain he wouldn't let my lover go. You might lose an arm before him."

"I might cut my ears myself before that if you keep calling me your lover." Yul scrunched his nose up in dismay. "Give me a day of peace without being called your lover."

"I'm sorry." I raised my hands, chuckling as he glare at me.

"I will have to live my entire life being the duchess lover." He sighed, shaking his head dejectedly.

"I'm sorry, Yul. The good side of it is, a lot of men is chewing their handkerchief for having such a title."

"And the downside is they all want to kill me." He rolled his eyes, making me chuckle loudly.

I didn't mind his complaints. Yul just accepted everything I threw to him in the past, so hearing his complaints brought this strange relief to me.

"I will make up for you in the future." I smiled gently, seeing him look at me with a frown.

"You better not die or else, my efforts will go in vain."

"I won't." I shook my head, taking a deep breath. "This time, I'm serious — cross my heart."

Yul gazed at me for a long time before letting out a weak sigh. His eyes spoke a million unspoken words, but he simply just smiled and nodded.

"I will hold on to those words," he said under his breath. "This is a burden you must carry, sister, and I felt no remorse in reminding you that. If you die, every single one of us will die as well."

"Just trust our preparations."

"It's not whether I trust our preparations or I had doubts. I just know you and that person. You're too unpredictable and we might not catch up with your pace."

"You will." I asserted, grasping the hint of who was the other person he was talking about. "Don't doubt your instinct, Yul. You know me better than I know myself, and it sometimes scares me."

"I doubt."

"You will understand me someday." I offered him a smile before shifting my focus onto the road. Yul might not understand it, but there were many occurrences that he had read me accurately but simply turned a blind eye to it.

And just like that, we exited Whistlebird with Yul and me talking just about anything to kill boredom.

Chapter 368 - [Bonus]The Dinner In Cunningham

The last time we journeyed the same way as this wasn't a long time ago. It was only a year since we returned to Grimsbanne with a heavy heart. But this journey back to the capital felt the complete opposite.

We had prepared for this. The last time, we were like defeated soldiers, but now, we're akin to determined soldiers going into the frontline of the war.

"Your Grace, Marquess Cameron sent a word." Klaus trotted beside the carriage, looking at me through the window. "Shall we take a rest in the Marquess Estate? He said he would be disheartened if you refuse his invitation once again."

"How can I refuse him twice?" I chuckled, glancing up at Klaus. "We will take a rest in the Marquess Estate tonight. It will also be better for everyone."

"Yes, Your Grace." Klaus bowed, closed-lipped, before trotting away to inform everyone.

"That's surprising." Yul voiced out as I covered the window with the curtain. "I thought you didn't want to make a stop in Cunningham and go straight to the Capital? Also, why did you close the curtain?"

"To spice everyone's imagination?" I shrugged nonchalantly, only to see his face distort. "Kidding."

"No, you're serious." He sighed, massaging his nape in irritation. "And I understand you want Stefan to have lots of things to think about. I should sleep as much as I can since it seemed I won't have any once we reach our destination."

Yul crossed his arm as he leaned back, stretching his feet towards me. He tilted his head back and closed his eyes to rest.

I felt bad for him, but I couldn't just stop this 'affair' now. All I could do for him was to protect him and keep him alive, no matter what.

"Thank you, Yul," I whispered, and he didn't respond. I let him sleep as he deserved a rest.

Yul rested until we reached the Crawford's estate. As expected from Marquess Cameron, he welcomed us with a grand entourage. Yul assisted me outside the carriage and Cameron bowed politely as soon as I stepped out.

"Welcome back to our humble abode, Your Grace," Cameron greeted politely. "I wanted to say more formality, but in this cold weather, I will invite you inside first."

"Thank would be better, Marquess." I smiled and followed Cameron into the manor.

As we walked with the people tailing behind us, Cameron and I could only talk about unimportant things. It was a good thing I had already sent him a letter about some important details he must know.

"Your Grace, you must be famished. We had prepared a banquet for you and for your entourage." Cameron faced me squarely with a smile.

"I appreciate your effort, Lord Cameron." My smile remained as he escorted us to the dining hall.

I couldn't expect anything less from Cameron's hospitality. He surely had prepared a banquet for everyone. He assisted me to sit on the host seat, while he remained seated on my right side.

One after another, my knights had also taken their seats. The king's knights just stood guard on the side, so I ordered them to dine with us. They didn't have a choice but to eat with me.

As usual, the knights around the table didn't eat in peace. They were loud, but it was just what I preferred. Cameron and Yul had also conversed with me every once in a while, but nothing was important.

My eyes landed on Jayden, who was staring back at me. I reached for my cup of wine, raising it to him as I smiled. That guy the king trusted... a person who was always present, but no one noticed.

Yul told me Jayden wasn't as remarkable as his other brothers, but not any less than them. His character had piqued my interest the first time I noticed him, and this curiosity only increased when Heliot mention it in passing.

I asked Klaus and Silvia about Jayden as well, but they said the exact words Yul told me. I knew Jayden was more than that. It could be either he was concealing his strength for a reason, or I was wrong. The latter was more unlikely.

THUD!

A moment later, one knight suddenly fell unconscious — his face fell on his plate, but the chattering continued. The corner of my lips stretched broader as Jayden furrowed his brows.

It didn't take long when every single one of the king's knights fell unconscious one after another. The chattering also subsided as we all watched Jayden fight to keep his consciousness.

"Klaus," I called calmly.

"No problem." Klaus planted his hand on the armrest, pushing himself up.

"What are you..." Jayden forced himself to stand up, only to stagger back and stumble down.

"Don't worry, little brother. We won't kill you." Klaus stopped a step away from him, squatting down. "We just want you to rest early."

As soon as those words escaped Klaus' lips, he beckoned a chopping move against Jayden's nape, which knock him unconscious. He checked his breathing and nodded approvingly before he stood up and faced in my direction.

"What now, Your Grace?" he inquired as he spread his arms. All eyes slowly shifted in my direction.

"Confiscate all their weapons." My tone was firm and cold as I set my eyes on Cameron. "You know what to do with them."

"Yes, Your Grace."

I nodded approvingly. "Silvia, erase their memories and rewrite them. Make them believe the dinner went smoothly, and we all went to rest."

"Sure. You can count on me." Silvia winked, cupping her cheek with a smirk on her lips.

Pleased that everyone seemed they already knew what to do, I returned my eyes back to Klaus. A glint flickered across his eyes as the corner of his lips curled up into a smile.

"There were more people trailing us, but they are already being handled. Go back to Whistlebird and meet Teddy Brown. Make sure to come back before sunrise." I ordered him, and Klaus bowed his head.

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Good." My smile grew brighter as I clapped and faced Yul. "How's the illusion barrier holding up, Yul?"

"No one notices it, so I guess it's good?" Yul shrugged nonchalantly, as he had already put up an illusion the second we entered Cunningham.

"Wow, wow, wow!" Suddenly, a voice from the end of the dining hall reached our ear. "Cameron is always the best!"

I turned my head in Sam's direction, smiling at him as he strutted his way towards us.

"I didn't know you will come up, Your Grace." Cameron greeted politely as Sam reached my seat, picking up a piece of meat from my plate to his mouth.

"My wife had arrived, Lord Cameron. What do you expect me to do?" Sam grinned and then cast me a knowing look. "Alphonse is just around the corner. You should double the illusion barrier, Cameron."

"As expected, he is also here." Cameron nodded calmly. "I had been feeling this strange and pungent smell."

"Worry less. We have reliable people." Sam winked and then cocked his head to me. "Do you want to see the dungeon?"

"Is he there?" I perked up, batting my eyes.

"He was a pleasant company." The side of his lips curled up into a smirk, making me smirk as well. "He killed my boredom while I wait for you."

I set my eyes back to my people. "Let's get moving," and everyone had gone to execute their orders, while Sam and I headed to the underground dungeon to meet an important person.

Chapter 369 - [Bonus]Call It A Hybrid

Sam had been staying in Cunningham, as this place was the perfect hiding place for him. Cunningham was a place to keep people they wanted to keep hidden from everyone. I could imagine the shock Cameron had when Sam suddenly showed up in front of him, but I would hear it later.

Shortly after our quick journey towards the underground prison, Sam and I stopped in front of a cell. I raised my lamp, extending it to see the person inside. My eyes instantly landed on the person chained inside, littered with wounds and blood dripping down on the damp concrete.

"Good to see you, Baron Martin." I smiled, watching him raised his head. His disheveled hair dangled down in front of him, but the way he gnashed his teeth was obvious he had recognized me.

"How have you been?" I asked, tilting my head to the side.

"Tch! I had underestimated your theatrical skills.." He spat out, unyielding despite his current state. "I will never swear my loyalty to you, Lilou Bloodfang. Once His Majesty hears about this, he will surely kill you."

"Oh, my! Such loyalty... it makes me want to weep." A low, ridiculing chuckle escaped my mouth as I squatted down. I slid the lamp inside through the gaps of the bars.

"Alas, do you think Zero will care about you?" I tilted my head to the side. "I played with his chief shadow knights just like you, but here I am, alive. Unless you can benefit him more than I can, your death will not matter, Baron."

"What an arrogant woman," He spat out with deep hatred. I couldn't blame him. He was in such a pitiful state, after all.

"I know you hate me, Baron. But, I don't." I lowered my tone, holding on to the bars. "Your life and death will not matter to Zero, but it will matter to me."

"Haha! How shameless! After putting me in this state, you're telling me I matter?"

"It's ironic, I know, but I mean it." I nodded, shrugging my shoulders indifferently. "How long have you been in here, Baron? How come no one had found you yet? Do you think it was because your allies simply lacked the talent to find you? Or... they just didn't to look for you?"

He clenched his teeth. Normally, he would spat out his argument or go hysterical, but he just let out frustrated grunts while pulling the chains. The sound of the chains clicking against each other resonated in the air until he stopped struggling.

"Baron, what I want is something you and I can benefit from," I spoke once silence ensued. "You are loyal and placed your faith in the wrong people. Being stuck in here and meeting me despite having the King's escorts is proof I can do more."

I deliberately paused as I studied his expression. He still looked enraged, but he was listening.

"If you allied with me, you will still reach your goal. The only difference is the person you will swear to obey." He still didn't respond as I stood up. "I hope you will make a wise decision."

I turned and faced Sam, patting his chest. "Good work."

"Don't mention it. I enjoy being bossed around by you." He humored as we walked away, his hand resting behind his head.

The night passed just like that. The king's knights awoke from their chambers with each memory replaced by Silvia. None of them suspected a thing. Klaus had also returned, and everything went according to plan.

"Your Grace, I appreciate you want to visit the clan leader's grave before you go." Cameron expressed as we walked through the stone path. "The late Marchioness will be pleased."

I glanced at him to see the subtle yet candid smile he wore. "You really look up to her, huh?"

"Well, she is just as amazing as you, Your Grace. It's still a surprise that she had a child with no one knowing."

"I'm not her direct child." I shook my head as I felt his brief gaze on me.

"Your blood says otherwise. Especially now, you smell..." He trailed off, causing me to arch my brow.

"Not human?" I continued in a matter-of-fact tone.

"I will call it a hybrid." He turned to me, raising his brows briefly. "It's not a bad thing, Your Grace. I'm also glad to be your kin."

"Strange story, isn't it?" I cocked my head to him as he chuckled.

"The twist and turns make me dizzy." He humored back.

We soon stopped in front of a tombstone. My eyes fell on the name inscribed on it.

"Lara," I whispered as my eyes softened, reading her name on it. Cameron gazed at me and I saw his smile in my peripheral vision.

"The last time I talked to her, I told her I didn't want to meet her again," I spoke, breaking the brief silence. "I had said a lot of mean things to her as well, but she just laugh it all off."

"She is someone who wouldn't get annoyed easily. Only Lord Samael can bring out the worse in her." Cameron reminisced in a gentle tone.

"She must've liked him so much."

"Maybe, maybe not." He shrugged, chuckling softly. "She is someone who is hard to figure out and very unpredictable. But one thing is for sure, Lara is the kindest and the most selfish person I had ever known."

We remained silent once again, letting the soft voice of the wind whisper in our ears.

"Do you think my decision will make her happy?" I asked, breaking the ice after a long time. "Will it give her the peace she deserved?"

Cameron didn't reply immediately as he took a deep breath and exhaled it sharply. "I'm certain whatever your decision, be it death or life, will give her peace. She's peculiar, and it was hard to explain, but she's like that."

"As long as you voluntarily chose that decision, she will be happy for you." He added, facing me squarely. I also turned to face him, only to see his kind smile plastered across his face.

"If she is alive right now, she will surely say 'what I think or feel doesn't matter because that is your life and your decision'." His eyes glinted with utter gentleness, with a touch of bitterness. "You might think she is being understanding, but she is not. As I've said, she is selfish, and she just didn't want to carry the burden."

"It seems you have many things to tell to her."

Chapter 370 - [Bonus]Back To Hell

"It seems you have many things to tell her."

"I do, but she died before I can berate her." Cameron shook his head as he gazed at the tombstone once again. "She chose death because she knew the clan council will nag her. Until the end, she is selfish to the bones."

"No wonder she gets along with Sam." I chortled, recalling what was Lara like. "Do you hate her, Cameron?"

"I do." His answer was quick, but there was not a trace of malice in his voice. "I just wished she could've stayed a little longer, or let us know what she had planned instead of dying just like that."

"You love her.."

"She is like a mother to me... of course, I do."

I glanced at Cameron, sprawling my arms to him as I patted his shoulder. "She is very proud of you, Cameron."

"Thank you for saying that, Your Grace." Cameron faced me squarely. "Lara had died selfishly. I won't let history repeat itself."

"Sam is alive and I'm not planning on dying."

"But we still have Prince Heliot and the clans coming after you from the mainland." His soft eyes suddenly sharpened. "You have more enemies ahead and this is just the beginning, Your Grace."

Even if His Grace is with you, from today onward, things may or may not go according to your plan."

I nodded, patting his shoulder lightly. "I know that. But I will correct you, Marquess. Sam is not the only one on my side." My lips pressed together as I withdrew my hand, shifting my eyes back to the tombstone.

"I have more people who will risk a limb for me, and I would risk my life for them. We are still playing by the rules of the game, but just a different strategy."

"I wish you the best, Your Grace."

"Thank you," came out a sincere whispered while I squatted down. I placed my hand over the tombstone.

"I will be gone for quite some time, but I will make sure to visit you again..." A subtle smile appeared on my lips as my eyes softened. "... I promise, Mother."

We stayed there for a while until Klaus came, telling me we should depart. I left a few notes to Cameron as he sent us off.

We traveled for four days without making stops. This was the fifth night as the sky slowly grew darker.

"We're almost there." Yul pointed out, stretching his neck to see the gates of the capital. "After a year... we're finally back in here."

"Mhm." I hummed. I couldn't explain the bubbling emotion in the pit of my stomach.

"Nervous?" his question snapped me out of my trance. "Scared? It's fine if you feel all that even though you've prepared yourself for this day."

"I'm not." I shook my head lightly, taking a deep breath as I cast my eyes outside. "It's just... it's already a year. I feel like it was just yesterday when we left this hell. It seemed it also changed."

"Mhmm. It looks more like hell now. Imperial Capital, hah... who would have thought."

"You should watch what you say from now on, Yul." I glanced at him, eyebrow raised. "The imperial capital is not Grimsbanne anymore."

"Right... it's the hell that the devil manages, right?"

"And sadly, that devil you're talking about is someone who is obsessed with me. You will have a hard time." I shrugged and Yul rolled his eyes. His rest would surely be limited, as he had to look over his shoulder at all times.

"Yul," I called, standing up as I sat beside him. He raised a brow, arms-crossed. I looked him straight in the eye.

"Promise me you will survive." My brows raised, nodding encouragingly. "Among all of us, you will be in the most terrible situation. Call for my help if you need me."

"Don't treat me like a child, Lilou. I know the dangers when I agreed to this setup."

"Still, it won't hurt if you rely on me, just like how I relied on you."

Yul pressed his lips together. I knew what those eyes wanted to say, but instead, he let out a sigh as he nodded.

"I will ask for your help if it's necessary," he said, but I knew they were lies. He was simply saying the things I wanted to hear.

Only now have I realized that I was actually a little nervous. Not for me, but for the lives of those who had sided with me. I wouldn't simply lose my life in this place. My death was the last thing Stefan wanted.

But not them. Stefan could dispose of them if he so wished.

I couldn't let that happen. I kept my thoughts to myself and stayed silent. Stefan was watching as soon as we entered the capital. I couldn't trace where he was, but I knew he was watching.

"Yul." I turned to Yul, offering him my palm. He looked at me for a moment before sliding his fingers in between the gaps of mine.

"I will protect you," I expressed under my breath, but he said nothing. Instead, Yul assisted my hand to his cheek, closing his eyes.

"I can imagine a lot of people chewing their handkerchief," he murmured, making me chuckle as his acting was always on point.

Despite his disgust at acting like a lover to me, he never failed to hide his personal feelings about this at the perfect time. This action was basically his way of diverting most of the attention to him.

I felt sorry for him. "Are you cold?" I asked, only to receive a low hum. "I'll keep you warm tonight, then."

Meanwhile, in one of the towers of the palace, Stefan narrowed his eyes. The second Lilou's carriage entered the capital, a subtle smile appeared on his lips as he had finally set his eyes on her after a year.

"You're back, sweetheart," he whispered, but his smile immediately vanished when she held hands with Yul and acted intimately with him.

"Yulis..." Stefan's voice was low and menacing as his eyes glinted. "... you are still bold to touch what is mine in the land I owned."

The corner of his lips curled into a smirk as he turned around and walked away.

"I will kill you."