

The Duke 561

Chapter 561 - Taking It From Here

"It is the emperor's flag. No question mark. Haha!"

When Sam's voice caressed my ears, I almost didn't believe it. How would someone who was supposed to be in the capital be in here? Even at the sight of knights marching and the raised flag of the imperial knights, I doubted my eyes. Was I hallucinating just because I felt helpless?

My eyes landed on Stefan and, to my surprise, his eyes gradually widened as he looked behind me. Why, Stefan? Why would you look so shocked? Were you having the same nightmares? Out of instinct, my gaze veered towards Zero and he had his eyes narrowed sharply.

'Sam... is he really here? Are we... saved?' I asked myself, trying to suppress the sliver of hope that peeked through the clouds in my heart. 'Did he really...'

TAK!

I snapped my eyes as the time that seemed to stand still for a second returned to its normal pace when an arrow landed near Stefan's feet. An arrow that would penetrate a concrete, causing cracks around it because of the strong force could only be shot by that person.

Charlotte.

I gazed at the arrow as I held my breath. Did they really come? My eyes blurred as tears rolled down my cheeks, turning around to see what Stefan and Zero were seeing it.

There, among the people, I saw Sam squatting down next to Law and Bey. He was wearing a red and gold uniform, fitting for the emperor with the royal mantle draped over his one shoulder. I blinked, wiping my eyes with my arm to get a clearer view of him.

"Fa — Father?" Law gazed at Sam in disbelief, breaking down after a second when he saw Sam grin brightly.

"See? I told you, my son. Just call my name and I will come because I am a hero." Sam boasted arrogantly, grinning from ear to ear as if he was unaffected by the pitiful sight of his son. "You should've called for me earlier, though."

"Father..." this time, Law finally escaped Bey's loosened grip as the latter was shocked at Sam's sudden appearance. My son rushed to his father's embrace whilst bawling his eyes out.

"Father! They are taking away Mother with them because of me! Please save Mother! I don't want her to leave us!"

Sam stroked Law's back, unfazed by the blood staining his uniform. "My goodness, son. Why are you crying so much? I was only absent for a few weeks and you've become a crybaby?"

"Father..." Law didn't mind his father's usual teasing as he tightly embraced the latter's neck. "... please save Mother."

"Of course. I won't let anyone snatch my wife away." Sam planted his hands on Law's shoulder, pushing him lightly to look at him in the eye. "Stop crying now. Your coward of a father will finally let you in my secret. Did you know? I'm actually quite strong."

Law didn't shut him down like usual as he hiccuped. "They killed Mister Fabian."

"Oh?" Sam glanced back in Fabian's direction and sighed. "My... they actually took out his heart."

Unlike my expectation, Sam didn't react strongly to Fabian's death. It was almost impossible for my eyes to believe what I was seeing and hearing. Fabian had served him for a very long time. So, I was expecting Sam to lose his composure, but he didn't. It wasn't an exaggeration to say Sam was rather... indifferent about it.

"It's alright, son." Sam ruffled Law's head and smiled, gazing up at the people behind them and his eyes lingered on Adam. "Father is already here. Put your worries away for I planned to end this fragment of the past for your future."

"Sir Roux..." Bey called in a shaking voice, studying Sam and his clothing. "... why are you... in a royal mantle?"

"Oh, dearest Bey and my wife's friend, is that important?" he chuckled and shrugged. Only then did Law also pay attention to his father's unusual appearance. Although Sam had kept himself neat all this time as Samael Roux, he had never worn something that gave an indicator that he was a man in power.

"The royal mantle..." Law muttered, clutching his hand close to his chest.

"Yes, the royal mantle, because I'm the emperor, you see. Hehe." Sam let out a low chuckle while pointing at himself. His tone was light that one would doubt his claims. Couldn't he reveal that in a more appropriate way?!

"Father..."

"Oh, goodness, Law. Don't think about it too much!" Sam finally grumbled as he patted our son's head, smiling reassuringly. "Use that remaining energy in resting. I'll take this from here, alright?"

Law peered at his father for a moment before he nodded. So Sam smiled and patted his head more.

"Good. Behave now. Let Bey give you first aid while the doctors I brought are on their way." Sam remarked before he placed his hands on his thigh, pushing himself up ever so slowly. As he did so, I held my breath and felt Stefan's grip on my wrist tighten. Was he planning to break my hand?

Sam flung his cape as he turned around, setting his crimson eyes in our direction. My son and everyone behind him gazed at him, wide-eyed. He just stood there, but my heart felt relief. Could my son and those people also feel the same way?

Unlike his gentle eyes when reassuring Law, his eyes that landed on us were sharp and intimidating. He hadn't pulled an aura yet, but I already felt suffocated under his gaze. He had hidden it well in front of Law, but Sam... no, Hell was pissed.

I swallowed down a mouthful of saliva when I considered him as Hell. That gaze that could penetrate one's soul was enough to recognize the difference.

Death.

That was what his eyes told me. My shoulders even tensed up as I fought my shaking knees. I knew Sam wasn't my enemy, but it felt otherwise. Was it because I was standing right next to his enemies? Until now, I had stood beside him and fought alongside him. Hence, I never realized how threatening it was to stand on the other side. This may be a random and out-of-topic thought, but I commended Stefan, who had always stood on the opposing side of my husband.

"Rufus, Dominique, Jayden, Ramin, Charlotte," Sam called calmly, and yet, his quiet voice sounded loud and clear in this stifling silence.. "No one... from the wretched kingdom of Spade and the mainland will leave the Labyrinth... alive."

Chapter 562 - Just What Was Going On?

"No one... from the wretched kingdom of Spade and the mainland will leave the Labyrinth... alive."

I held my breath at the firm orders my husband uttered. Multiple figures suddenly appeared around him, kneeling on one knee with their head hung low.

"Yes, Your Majesty," they replied in unison, standing up ever so slowly and turning around to face us. My eyes dilated as soon as my gaze landed on Dominique and Jayden. Sam didn't mention it, nor did I ask what happened to these two. But to think they ended up serving Sam as his... I studied their black uniform and confirmed it was the emperor's shadow knight's uniform.

Ramin stood a bit farther and didn't stand immediately, planting his fingers on the concrete. I had seen this stance before, and I knew he had set up Labyrinth. Although there weren't apparent changes in the surrounding, that was how Labyrinth works. One wouldn't see it until they tried to escape, only to return to their starting point. It was like being stuck in an endless loop.

I then gazed up as I felt someone's gaze from above the roof. There, Charlotte stood with a bow and arrow in her hand. Coldness and bloodlust replaced her usual cheerful expression; I had never seen her sport such menacing countenance even back when we're part of the third squadron.

Just then, I turned my head in Fabian's direction when I felt a strong and distinct presence. There, Rufus squatted down beside Fabian and stared at it in silence. He didn't have any particular expression, as if he wasn't staring at his dead brother.

And then... there was us. Stefan, Zero, and I.

Neither of us moved or spoke a word, observing the change of the wind with these people's sudden appearance. Sam finally set his eyes back to us and when he locked eyes with me, I felt my heart clench. Although I was relieved that they unexpectedly came, I couldn't face him.

I looked away in shame. Fabian died because of me. Minowa was in such a state and Law's circumstance with Stefan. I was ashamed, and I didn't have the courage to face him.

Suddenly, I saw a pair of boots a step away from me. I gazed up on instinct, only to see Sam already standing in front of me. He kept his chin up, eyes gazing down on me as if studying me.

"Did you really... agree to go with another man, wife?" I froze at the coldness of his voice.

"Sam..." I trailed off when he quirked a brow, gazing at the hand that was gripping my wrist.

"If I didn't come, you will elope with him?"

'No... it's not what you think,' was what I wanted to say, but my mouth only opened and closed, no words came out. How would I explain this situation? Was he angry at me? There was a reason behind it, but... was there a point in arguing? I balled my hand into a fist as I looked away with my teeth clenched.

"Fabian, you better explain this before my heightened jealousy takes over me and I might end up locking her to a place where only I can see her." My eyes dilated and looked up at him on instinct. He cast me a momentary look and the gentleness in it was gone. He was truly pissed and couldn't comprehend the situation.

Hell. That man had returned, indeed.

But wait. Did he call Fabian? But Fabian was... I shifted my eyes in Rufus's direction where Fabian was lying down. I saw him kick Fabian's side lightly as if trying to wake up the dead.

"No, Fabian, he..." I trailed off when Fabian's hand twitched. I blinked twice when Fabian grunted as he pushed himself up as if he didn't have a hole in his chest. What the... hell?

'It's not your fault and... I will not die.'

Suddenly, Fabian's parting words hovered over my head. He said he wouldn't die, but I assumed he simply said that as a metaphor, as his memories with us would continue to live. I didn't expect that he meant it literally! But, how? Zero took out his heart and there was no doubt about that.

Just how come Fabian was still alive? Not that I wasn't relieved to know he was, but... how? Right after I asked myself over and over how Fabian was alive despite having a hole in his chest, an almost forgotten memory hovered over my head.

'Let's just say... Fabian and I got closer because we used to experiment.'

Those were Sam's words in the distant past. I didn't question what sort of experiment, nor did he detail how Fabian and Sam's relationship developed before the present time. Did it have something to do with that?

To my surprise, Rufus suddenly drew his sword and pointed it at Fabian's neck. I was confused at Rufus' sudden hostility towards his brother. I only got my enlightenment a second later when Fabian, our dear butler, raised his head with a wicked smirk on his lips.

Fabian placed his fingers inside the hole in his chest while humming. "Hello there, brother, my lord. Please put that toy away, brother."

Despite the lack of light, I caught something dark resurfaced on Fabian's chest before it covered it. Rufus still had the tip of his sword pointed at Fabian's neck, but the latter was unfazed as he leaned back, palms on the ground.

"Based on Fabian's memory, the young master's life is linked to Stefan's life. The reason the child seems like he fought in the front line himself. Poor child. If only I was the one fighting, I would've killed him so your wife wouldn't have to burden herself." Fabian uttered in a knowing tone, gazing at Rufus with a smile.

Aside from me, it seemed Rufus and Sam and everyone around me weren't shocked to see this drastic change in Fabian. His demeanor, way of talking, and character were all different. It was as if that person wasn't Fabian anymore. What was going on?

"But, it's not really a bad thing, haha! They had broken the seal you put on me, my lord!" he grinned happily, clapping his hand excitedly. "I'm finally free! I'm so happy!"

"Fabi..." I whispered in disbelief, furrowing my brows as I could barely recognize him. It felt similar... to Sam and Hell's situation.

Chapter 563 - [Bonus]Kill Law

"So, that's what happened." Sam nodded in understanding, glancing at me before his eyelashes fluttered when he shifted it to Stefan. "Ian, welcome back, by the way."

"Thank you, my lord." Fabian still smiled until his eyes squinted, but it just looked different from usual. Fabian often smiled politely, but there was no trace of politeness in Fabian's tone. If anything, he sounded like he stood on the same ground as Sam. Also, Sam called him differently; so it was like Sam and Hell's circumstance but a bit different, after all?

"Ru, please put your toy away." He put his finger on the tip of the blade pointing at him, pushing it away lightly. "I won't attack His Grace. After all... I had my eyes on someone else."

Fabian's lips stretched from ear to ear as he cast Zero a look. Whatever Fabian had in mind, I knew it was just something evil. One could tell just by looking at him. Rufus studied him for a while before withdrawing his sword.

"I will keep a close eye on you, Ian. I will end you if you caused a problem in this situation." Rufus warned as he shifted his eyes at Sam, but he ended up locking eyes with me since my husband was staring at Stefan.

Suddenly, Stefan pulled my wrist with him as an arrow nearly shot our hand to separate us. I was caught off guard that I instinctively jumped back to avoid it. But this obviously displeased my husband as his eyes glinted menacingly.

"Stefan, my brother," came out a cold, threatening voice as Sam glanced at our hands. I tried to pull my hand away, but Stefan held it even tighter and glanced at me.

"I won't ask you to let my wife go since I can cut your entire arm, but... I want to ask you something." Sam paused, raising his hand while his fingers cracked as he stretched them. "Did you know about Alphonse's plans?"

I froze as my breath hitched at Sam's sudden question. His eyes remained cold as I could feel he was trying to hold himself back. I was certain he heard Fabian's explanation about Stefan and Law's situation. So why... was my husband unfazed?

"And... are you the one who killed Cassara?" he queried even before Stefan could answer the first question.

Stefan let out a chuckle as he also emitted a stifling aura to battle Sam's. "Do I know about Alphonse's plans? Did I kill Cassara? And why would I be so kind about answering your questions, brother? It's not like you plan on letting me off."

"That's right. I don't plan on letting you live for another day, Stefan. You've lived long enough and suffered. So, I will put you to rest."

"Lived long enough and suffered...?" Stefan chuckled as his grip around my wrist tightened. I tried breaking away from him, but I couldn't. Also, my feet felt like they were stuck on the ground.

Standing in between Stefan and Sam while they pulled an aura on each other was making my body freeze.

"How kind of you, brother."

"Sam, you can't hurt him!" I finally got my voice back as panicked swelled in my chest. "Law will get hurt as well if you do."

Sam raised a brow. "So what?"

My heart sank as my complexion instantly turned pale. What did he mean by that? I thought he was simply trying to act indifferent when Fabian informed him about that. But now that I thought about it, Hell was someone who wouldn't allow anyone to be used against him as his weakness.

Just like years ago, when I was sired with Stefan, my husband... accepted my death. It wasn't easy, but it was the logical course of action. Back then, I was relieved that Sam had that way of thinking. But now... this was different. Law was our son! The fruit of our love.

"Sam... you can't..." I muttered while shaking my head lightly, "Don't do this to our son."

But no matter how I looked at him sincerely, Sam felt unreachable. Instead, he only glanced at me coldly before averting his eyes.

"Ian, kill Law." His order caused my brain to momentarily go blank. I didn't even know that Stefan finally let my hand go as I leaped towards Sam, grabbing his collar with unblinking eyes.

"What did you just say?" came out a dead voice while staring at him with unyielding eyes. "Hey, answer me. Did you just order Fabian to kill my son?"

Sam's expression was unchanging. "Law, your life is being used to make your mother follow these men. Will you allow them to use you and put misery on your Mother?" his words didn't direct to me despite holding my gaze.

"Kill me, Father." Law's weak but firm reply made my heart sink. I gazed in his direction and saw Fabian was already squatting beside Law. Bey looked so shocked to even speak of what they were hearing.

"See? Our son would rather die than let Stefan have his mother. Just like I am, I don't care if you hate me, for you are mine, Lilou. The last thing I want is to let anyone take what's mine."

A scoff slipped past my lips, staggering back while staring at him in dismay, "Sam... how about our son? Isn't he as important as your life? How can you... utter such words — I mean, no. Don't speak another word or I might really kill you."

Until now, I couldn't believe my ears. One more word from Sam and I would take Lakresha and Catharsis out to fight him. I was more than rattled that Sam spoke as if Law's life didn't matter to him.

I hung my head low. "If you hold our son's life with little value, then... this would be the end of our marriage." I lifted my head, suppressing the pained expression from resurfacing on my face.

"I was wrong to even think that you value our son's life more than yours and mine. But it seems... I only deluded myself all this time." I chuckled in ridicule, more hurt by these harsh remarks than it was supposed to. "I'm yours...? How the hell did I think those words are sweet before when it sounded like an owner claiming his property?"

I was a fool.. Be it then or now, that never changed.

Chapter 564 - [Bonus]Stalling

"I'm yours...? How the hell did I think those words are sweet before when it sounded like an owner claiming his property?"

I was breaking apart. My heart, my mind, my spirit... were breaking apart. There were myriads of questions hovering over my head, wondering and questioning everything until now.

Perfect and peaceful life? Was that all superficial? Was my husband truly unable to love even his son?

Was his affection for me was just also an obsession, just like Stefan's? But... why did he have to raise Law all alone in my five-year slumber? If he didn't have a shred of love for Law, then he should've killed him since I wouldn't know.

Why?

"Why did you show you were happy and content these past months? Why did you raise Law all on your own? Why did you say all those promises about our family? It was better if you had shown hostility from the very beginning. If so... I would've hated you," I whispered through my gritted teeth, balling my hand into a fist. "Sam... Hell... why...?"

"Mother, please don't blame Father. I don't want to be used by someone so they can control you." Suddenly, Law voiced out his opinions aloud from his standpoint. Fabian chuckled as he patted his head proudly.

"So cute, young master."

"Lilou, do you trust me?" Sam inquired to get my attention, staring at me straight in the eye. I gulped as I studied his eyes. He didn't reveal the slightest hint of anything, but part of me was hoping for a clue that he had a plan, but to no avail.

This was a matter of trusting him blindly or doubting him. I hung my head low, teeth clenched.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath before I whispered after coming to a decision I might regret later. "Catharsis, Lakresha."

As my weapons took their form under my grip, my eyes glinted at Sam. The affection and bitterness that was filling my eyes gradually disappeared, replaced by coldness like an armor I put on to protect myself. I curled my fingers around my scythe and sword and raised Catharsis up with my left hand.

Keeping my eye contact with Sam, I pointed the blade towards Stefan. "I don't trust you. I will never trust you blindly, Sam. Hear me. If I lose my son tonight, I will make sure you will lose everything, Samael La Crox. That is an oath of a mother who was on the brink of insanity."

My voice was cold as I warned my husband. The only reason I was wielding my swords against Stefan was that he was my enemy and Sam was my husband. If Sam didn't have a plan other than sacrifice Law, then I would burn this empire myself.

"I assure you that, Your Majesty. This empire... will burn to ashes along with everyone."

The corner of my lips curled up into a smirk as he shifted his eyes towards Stefan. "I never want you to trust me blindly. If burning the empire will appease you, then so be it. I promised you we will be at your mercy."

"Lexx, don't you think this kind of hell my husband is now giving me enough entertainment?" I chuckled in ridicule, facing Stefan's unchanging countenance. "He's the most evil person I've ever met and now that I think about it, the torment of spending a lifetime with you paled in comparison."

"Come on, love. Don't be so harsh on me." Sam placed his palm on my hand and put it down gently. "I didn't ask you to fight. All I'm saying is, trust me on this one. You already fought and saved more lives than expected, so... you should rest, wife. I will take it from him."

I glanced at Sam and narrowed my eyes. "Than expected?" I stressed as it sounded like Sam had already known about this beforehand.

No... my mind suddenly went blank as I blinked twice. Did he know about the uprising and purposely left me in the dark? This somehow made me review my memory during Law's birthday. Sam asked me to protect the north and those ambiguous remarks I deemed words that came from worry because he would have to leave.

'Sam, you...!' Sam sported a playful smile as he glanced at me, catching my rattled countenance.

"Sorry, Love. To fool everyone, I should fool those closest to me, don't you think?" he leaned closer and whispered in my ear. "After all, the greatest schemer is always the victor. That's always been our game from then and until now."

I froze as my heart stopped beating for a second, wrapping his words around my head. All I could do was stare at him blankly, unable to distinguish which dominant part of me should take over me right at this moment.

"Get them. I'll join you later after my brief talk with my wife." Sam motioned his hand and waved it in Stefan and Zero's direction. As soon as he did, Dominique, Jayden, Rufus, and Ramin appeared like shadows.

Dominique and Jayden aimed for Stefan while Rufus and Ramin lurched towards Zero.

CLANG!

The sound of metal instantly resonated in the air. Earlier, Fabian and I had to fight two opponents each at once. But now, the situation was reversed. All I could do was gaze at them and notice the arrows shooting at Zero and Stefan. Although the arrows looked as if the archer was simply shooting randomly, one who had sharp eyes would see that the arrows never aimed at her allies.

Charlotte was amazing, as always.

As they fought those two, forcing them to create distance from us, I opened and closed my mouth. If Zero and Stefan already had their hands full, I didn't have anything to do anymore. I looked at up Sam, who stood leisurely beside me.

"Aren't you going to fight?" I asked cautiously, still thinking that he was someone I would kill later if Law was harmed because of his order. I didn't know what Sam was thinking, but whatever it was, he ordered my son's death. That was something I would never forget.

Sam raised a brow. "Why would I? I'm the emperor. All I need to do is order my people and they will carry out my wishes without fail."

I studied Sam's demeanor, and it seemed he truly didn't plan on joining the battle on his own. But that wasn't my real concern.

I mustered my courage while gripping my weapons tightly. "Why did you... say all that?" I hung my head low, as I couldn't understand a thing that happened in a matter of minutes.

"Did you really have to make me question you and drive me to madness?"

"Oh, dear. I don't have a choice." I raised my head at him with furrowed brows, seeing him look ahead. "I needed to buy time."

"What?"

"I needed to stall them." Sam cast me a side-eye. "Stefan and Zero's ally."

I got the gist of what he was saying, but my lower lip still trembled. "And now?"

"It's fine now." Sam smiled as he bent over until his face was a palm length away from me.. "Heliot already arrived."

Chapter 565 - [Bonus]Not Cut Out For It

It was a surprise that Sam invited me to take a walk outside the estate while leaving Law in Fabian's care. Sam told me it was better if I saw nothing to our son. I hesitated, obviously — doubted him even. But... I wanted to believe Sam was being sincere. So, I followed him, walking through the pathway going outside the estate.

It felt strange that despite the matters at hand, he was calm. I glanced at him, catching him staring at the gates with his hand on his back. This was the first time I've seen Sam wear the royal mantle. How? How did he come here so soon? Even if he heard the news an hour after it all started, they would take a few days if they ran like their lives depended on it.

"I didn't stay in the Capital." I snapped my eyes when Sam suddenly spoke, glancing at me and chuckling. "I only stayed there to show my face once and then came back. If they needed anything, I set up a temporary office in the borders between Minowa and the city going to the capital. It's not close, but also it's not too far. Just enough distance not to gather anyone's attention."

"How did you know no one is keeping an eye on the emperor's envoy?"

"There are lots of eyes, wife. That's why I rode using a carriage with no insignia or anything and moved with discretion." Sam cast me a knowing look, giving me enlightenment.

"Then... you've been close for quite some time?" he nodded at my question, so I queried once again. "You also knew that an uprising will happen?"

"Yes, and no. I was uncertain, love. An attack from the west and east. Although that news is concerning, what's even more concerning is how bold it was." Sam peeled his eyes away from me as he gazed ahead. "Zero and Stefan weren't the types of people who will fight me head-on. Although it is smart to attack me from all sides, it's suspicious in itself. What will they gain? Not that they were fighting for honor or for their people since I had been preparing my soldier in marching across Spade."

He slowly cocked his head to me while the side of his lips curled into a smirk. "What those two want is not control over the empire, but my life. And there's only one way to kill me. Do you have any idea what it is?"

"Harming Law?"

"My family," he corrected in a knowing tone, waving his index. "If they harmed Law and you, that is the same as killing me. Although Zero had probably a different motive than Stefan, their desire for my wife is an unchanging fact. Ah... that's pissing me off."

I studied Sam as he rubbed his chin lightly. I bit my lower lip, taking a deep breath as I looked away. There were times I couldn't understand Sam's train of thoughts. He would just do whatever he wanted and even if we're married, he wouldn't tell me everything. Not that I didn't understand his reasoning, but it was... a little unfair.

He had already guessed Minowa would be in danger and yet, he didn't give me a clear heads up. All he had given me was a hint. I was too blinded by the thought of living as a commoner's wife that I didn't dwell on it. Now that I thought about it, I couldn't really blame him, since it was partially my fault for getting blinded by our disguise.

"But I can't believe you will come with Stefan, my wife! Do you still have lingering feelings for him?" he and I frowned at his question, looking at each other dead in the eye. "Just tell me so I can kill him right in front of you."

"I am more appalled that my husband would assume such things than the thought that you will kill anyone I am fond of."

Sam shrugged nonchalantly. "My dearest, I am a simple person. I can't take my eyes off of you for a second because too many men desire you." He then leaned to my side to whisper in my ear.

"You are, after all, the most desirable vampire in the empire."

"Stop it, Sam." He chuckled when I slapped his shoulder lightly. "You're obviously stating that this desirable blood running through my veins is a curse."

"It is a curse!" Sam intoned before tapping his temple. "I told Alexander about it."

This time, I halted and gazed at him. I had forgotten that Sam stole the core from me and the remaining Bloodfang's consciousness was inside his head. That included the consciousness of the Head of the clan and some strong vampires. Now that I thought about it, Sam... was carrying more burden than what it appeared.

My jaw tightened as I looked at him. "It's heavy," came out a whisper, making his brows raise. I took a deep breath, treading carefully as I looked ahead.

"While I was fighting earlier, I realized how hard it is to protect our people. Even if I wanted to protect everyone's lives, I couldn't. Deaths under my command are inevitable — be it enemies or allies, their deaths were all my responsibilities." Sam stopped, but I still sauntered towards the gates. "The second I took up my weapon, I was scared. How will my son see me now? I asked myself just how many more lives do I have to take to finally see the end to it? And things like if only I didn't do something despicable in the past, would this happen in here?"

I paused to breathe, clasp my hand into a fist as I got closer by the gates to see the ongoing battle outside the estate. "All those kinds of things hovered over my head and I realized one thing, Sam."

This time, I halted and pivoted on my heel to face him. Sam had this incomprehensible expression as he raised his brows, gazing at me curiously. I neither smiled nor frown. I just gave him a blank look as I swallowed down a mouthful of saliva.

"I am not someone who deserves the title of the Empress, Sam.. This may sound like cowardice, but... I don't think I am cut out for it."

Chapter 566 - [Bonus]More Than One Heart

"I am not someone who deserves the title of the Empress, Sam. This may sound like cowardice, but... I don't think I am cut out for it."

There was a moment of silence between Sam and me. What I said was selfish and insensitive, since Sam didn't wish for the title of the emperor. However, he still accepted the throne and carried the load the crown offered. So, for me to state such, I would understand if he was upset about it. After all, I was supposed to share his burden.

But this burden... would cripple me. Just the thought of it terrified me already. I didn't want to lie to myself or to him regarding this. I didn't need a title. I was already content with the kind of life we had lived for the past months since my awakening from my five-year slumber.

To my surprise, his lips curled up into a gentle smile, eyes glinting with clear understanding. Just the sight of it felt like a bandage wrapping around my wounded heart, making my vision blur with the tears I was suppressing.

"I know, love. I know." He rocked his head, taking a step forward until he was standing toe to toe with me. "You and I... aren't cut out to lead. I already knew that the second Law was born. Hence, I kept him in the dark about it since he didn't need to concern himself with that sort of thing."

"Sam?" my brows rose, hearing those words again. In the past, I asked Sam why he kept his status from Law and he only told me because there was no need for our son to know. I didn't probe about the matter, as I just trusted that he had his own reasoning.

But now that I was hearing it the second time, it piqued my curiosity. Sam seemed to take notice of what was on my mind, so he chuckled, tapping his index against my forehead lightly.

"I'll explain that to you later, my beloved wife." He smiled as he withdrew his finger, holding his hand behind him once again. "For now, let's deal with the people outside since Quentin and Stefan will be busy. Those in the fort will also be busy dealing with the detestable Heliot."

"Heliot is not detestable." Sam frowned at my correction, casting me a look while scrunching his nose up. "I'm just being honest. You even fooled me just so you can buy him some time. That means you have some level of trust in him."

I stepped aside and faced ahead, shrugging. I felt Sam's gaze linger on my side before he took a step forward and I followed. It was odd that even with the disaster, Sam and I had the leisure to talk and walk in the driveway of the mansion as if we're just taking a walk in the garden after a meal. But just as he said, he didn't need to move since he was the emperor.

If Sam fought, that only meant that his people were far too weak against the enemies or the empire was on the verge of falling. That was the importance of the emperor. The more I thought about it, the more I remembered back when Stefan was sitting on the throne, he also barely made his actions.

All Stefan did as the king was to plan his scheme, and his people would follow his decree. Now, Sam held the same position, so he had more hands and feet to fight for him.

Sam hummed before he cocked his head back. "You're right, my wife. I trust Heliot on these kinds of things, but I don't trust him on other things. He's always been a suspicious character, and he is so fond of my wife he threatened me to snatch you away if I didn't have enough power to protect you."

"In other words, Heliot was the reason we have this leisure time right now amid this chaos."

Sam didn't respond to the other angle I pointed at. I couldn't help but let out a light chuckle as he frowned. My husband might've denied it, but he surely liked Heliot. Although the latter was a person who was hard to read or predict, that was Heliot's charms.

"God... just the thought of seeing his face again aggravates me. I always let Rufus deal with him and the Karo Kingdom."

I shook my head lightly with a subtle smile. "You like him."

"Over my dead body."

A light chuckle slipped past my lips at my husband's denial. Sam could deny it as much as he could, but it was obvious he didn't dislike Heliot. I should invite him for some tea if everything went according to my husband's plan.

As we approached the gates and the yelling along with the metals clashing resonated in my ear, I looked at Sam. I didn't ask earlier as I had a lot of things in mind, but I was curious about one thing.

"Sam? How come Fabian is alive?" I jogged beside him, bending over with my head turned in his direction. "Is he immortal or what? Zero took out his heart, after all."

Sam scrunched his nose up as he scratched his temple. "My love, I told you before, didn't I? Fabian and I had a strange start in our relationship. We only grew close because I let him dissect my body out of curiosity about his fascination with vampires' anatomy.

But he looked he was having so much fun while slicing my stomach open. So, I was curious what was fun about it."

My eyes dilated as I looked at him with a horrified expression. "And???"

"So, I tied him down and played doctor." Sam averted his eyes and whistled to make it sound light. "I was curious if anyone can live with two hearts, so while keeping him alive with my blood and life force, I messed up his internal organs to add a heart. I think he put three inside me to make me a better person, but I highly believed having over one heart doesn't necessarily make the person kinder since it obviously didn't work for us."

"..."

Chapter 567 - [Bonus]We're Saved Now

Ridiculous was the first word that came up to my mind as I listened to Sam's explanation. Did the two of them actually believe that having more than one heart was the cure to fight their evilness?!

I covered my lips with both my hands, looking at Sam with my eyes full of conflict. I had lost all words to utter to him. I didn't even know whether to find it funny how strangely innocent Sam and Fabian to think that way, or pity them that they had to literally open each other up to get that conclusion.

I already knew my husband and our head butler weren't normal. But this information... made me want to think — even if I didn't want to — that they're definitely crazy. Far crazy than I initially believed.

Sam clicked his tongue as he waved. "It doesn't matter now. Since we already proved that a person's personality had nothing to do with the heart, literally. I still thought of a way to make use of those experiments so we don't undergo the same pain of being operated on without anesthesia."

"And what is that?" I reluctantly inquired, a little confused at myself because I surely didn't want to hear more, but I ended up asking for more details.

"An extension for life." He cast me a side-eye as we continued on our walk. "I sealed Fabian's heart and violent tendencies in his other heart. As you don't know, Fabian is someone who took pleasure in death. If Fabian was a knight and was sent to war, he will be a war hero for sure since blood and death thrilled him. But apparently, he isn't a knight. So... he became a notorious murderer instead."

I pressed my lips into a thin line as he didn't have to speak further details, as I already knew about them. Wars were the best place to unleash the hidden beast in someone. I understood that since I also had unleashed my bloodthirst against my enemies and secretly took pleasure in killing them.

On the battlefield, it would look like an act of heroism and valor. But in normal life, it would be considered a crime.

"Anyway, since Fabian had lost his composure, I might send him far away for a while. I'm sure Fabian already knew that since he doesn't know when he will act up and just go crazy." Sam stopped a step away from the battlefield, cocking his head at me. "I'm saying this so you won't get angry at me once the decision is made."

"Well, thank you. You're so considerate."

Sam let out a chuckle as he peeled his eyes away from me, setting it on the disaster ahead. Thanks to everyone's effort, they managed to defend the gates. However, the fight was still raging on and for some reason, our people were more on fire than ever.

'Was it because of the emperor's flag and the knights marching in here?' I wondered as one could see if they paid more attention.

"Lilou, please brace yourself," Sam uttered without looking at me, taking a careful step as he passed through the open gate. As soon as he did, I clutched my chest as my eyes widened.

The second Sam stepped out of the estate, I felt this sudden heavy weight on my shoulder and the suffocating aura that stilled the air. If he didn't give me a heads up and I didn't react on instinct, I was certain my knees would've met the ground at the pressure.

All I could do was set my eyes on my husband's broad back, watching him strut his way on the battlefield. But... the fierce rumble that was going on moments ago instantly paused. The abnormals and undeads stood frozen on their spot, while the people fighting on our side also stopped in confusion.

"Sam..." I called under my breath, pulling an aura to fight the pressure he was emitting before following behind him. When I caught up to him, Sam halted as he gazed at Jaime and the undead trying to take out his heart but stopped.

Jaime's complexion was pale, lying with his elbows supporting him. He shifted his shaking eyes at Sam, who stood beside him. "You — Your Majesty..."

"My god, Count. I am now convinced that evil people truly lived a long life. How the hell are you still alive?" Sam uttered in dismay, crouching down beside him to check the bloody fingers pressing in Jaime's chest. I didn't know what sort of luck Jaime was blessed with, because Sam managed to save him in the nick of time.

"Your, your, your majesty...!"

Sam rolled his eyes as he let out a shallow breath, unfazed by Jaime's tearful eyes. "You're too old to cry." The next second, Sam slowly got up and in a blink of an eye, he used his hand like a sword and swung it on the undead.

The undead's head instantly rolled while Sam just waved to clean his hand. He raised a brow and cast Jaime, who was still on the ground, an indifferent look.

"If I were you, just die, Count. There's no point in surviving tonight since you will get punished in the end." Blunt and straightforward as usual, Sam imparted his wisdom as he turned around to see more people. Some already took advantage of the situation and slewed the enemy, while others — mostly vampires — couldn't move because of the pressure a pure-blooded vampire such as Sam was emitting.

"Do you want to see a magic trick, count?" he asked out of nowhere without even casting Jaime a look. "I'll show you one."

Sam slowly raised a finger and pointed at random undeads while saying, 'dead, dead, dead.' Just as he did, arrows pierced through the undeads' skull while my under-eye twitched. Sam looked back at Jaime, sporting a smug grin.

"See? Magic," he said proudly, but I couldn't help but let out a sigh. What did he mean by magic?! It was obvious Charlotte was paying attention to her emperor! There was no magic in that! It was called skill!

"Haha. I will tell you what's the trick behind that next time." Sam laughed as he resumed his strides to put an end and give these people who defended the estate some rest. He looked so reliable that all I could do was watch him from this distance as he consoled those injured and chat with them whilst beheading the enemy.

"How efficient," I muttered as my husband surely know how to manage his time by multi-tasking. But more than that, I felt relieved. So, relieved I plopped down beside Jaime with a smile on my face.

"Your Majesty," Jaime called in a questioning tone, but I just smiled and glanced at him.

"We're saved now," I said in a weak voice, watching Jaime sported a pained look before he nodded.

"Yes, Your Majesty.. Minowa... is saved now that His Majesty is here."

Chapter 568 - Easy, Brother.

It didn't take long for Sam to wipe out every single rebel in the area — or rather, Charlotte did. He went around, telling everyone to show some sort of magic trick with a bright grin on his face. But the faces of the people were a mix of shock and awe. Even I couldn't stop my jaw from falling.

Sam didn't exert much effort. The rebels were wiped out without a speck of blood spilling on Sam's clothes. Aside from the hand, he used to chop off the first undead he came across.

This was the power of the man who stood at the peak.

I knew that sentence came clear to everyone who witnessed Sam step into the scene. He could wipe out an entire town if he so pleased by simply lifting a finger. Even Stefan didn't look this powerful or this intimidating back when he was the king.

"Amazing," I muttered as I clasped my ripped skirt tightly. If Sam didn't arrive, I didn't even know what would happen in here. Although it was too early to celebrate, as anything could happen at any moment, a dominant part of my heart still felt at ease.

"He should stop boasting, though. That is no magic. It's all thanks to a certain person's skills and hard work." I looked back at the estate and caught Charlotte standing on the roof. Such a small figure and yet so talented. She was still busy backing up everyone as she would shoot powerful arrows constantly.

'They all planned to end this.' I thought, noticing that Charlotte never even smile once. Even from this distance, I could feel her bloodthirst.

My eyes then veered in a direction away from the estate. Sam's people managed to drive those two purebloods away. I couldn't see the entirety of the fight, but I could trace their auras.

'They're really strong,' I thought, noticing that Zero and Stefan were fighting multiple opponents at once on equal grounds. Well, pure-blooded vampires were naturally strong in the race. Hence, it would be a disappointment if Stefan and Zero fell behind.

'How strange,' I thought, knowing that despite what was currently going around me, I felt... peace. I could feel my muscle relaxed for a bit. Just then, I quirked a brow when I sensed that more people joined the battles of the royalties.

"They're here," I whispered, turning my head toward Sam's people, who were currently battling two troublesome pureblood vampires and some unfamiliar auras I never felt before.

"Hmm. Interesting." I glanced in Sam's direction as he intoned, planting his hand on his hips after chatting with Glory and Omar. Sam wiped the corner of his lips, staring in the same direction I was initially looking at.

"So, there were more people they managed to get support from the mainland, huh?" he rocked his head, deep in thought, as if this interest him more than it alarmed him.

After some time, Sam turned his head in my direction and smiled. "My wife, please help your people. I will have to get a closer look at what is going on over there."

My mouth opened and closed, wanting to tell him I wanted to go as well. But considering the situation in this area, it was best to be left behind.

"Alright." I nodded and my husband smiled, winking at me before he sprinted excitedly. A shallow breath slipped past my lips as I watched his figure.

'He's not smiling,' I thought, noticing that his eyes glinted as his smile disappeared the second he dashed away. 'I guess there's more problem that needs his undivided attention. Coming with him would only burden him.'

I knew Sam. Although there was a part of him that was aggravating, he was someone I could rely on in this kind of thing. Suddenly, I looked up and set my eyes on the horizon. The sun was about to peek. There was this slight sense of warmth that enveloped my heart as I smiled weakly.

"The day will give us a clear view of the state of Minowa, but..." I gazed at Jaime as he spoke, staring at the peeking sun about to rise up above. "... we survived, Your Majesty."

"Mhm..." my eyes softened as I shifted my eyes on these courageous men helping the injured. "We did. His Majesty will take it from here. You all fought well."

I glanced back at Jaime, only to see him look back at me with a gentle smile. I nodded encouragingly before assisting myself up to help the men from helping the injured.

It was a long night that felt endless for a moment. But the second that darkfield shrouding the south disappeared, the seemingly endless darkness that clouded our hearts with fear and uncertainty gradually disappeared.

We had already done our best, but the battle was still raging on. Even so, with allies like the emperor on our side, we could finally breathe and see the sliver of hope peeking through the thick clouds of yesterday's woes.

Zero and Stefan stood meters away from each other, gazing at the multiple figures standing in front of them. As they observed their opponents, a group of people appeared behind those two. One familiar face was Luther, Stefan's vassal and political advisor, and Tristan, Zero's chief shadow knight.

"Stefan." Dominique was first to break the silence as he gazed at Stefan coldly. The latter was the person he swore an oath in the past, honing his skills solely for the purpose of being Stefan's sword. But... Stefan betrayed him. Not that he completely swore loyalty to Samael, as he was simply bound by a blood contract.

"Why...?" he asked through his gritted teeth. After exchanging blows with Stefan for quite some time, he finally mustered the courage to ask him. Jayden gripped his sword tightly while staring at his fourth brother. Just like Dominique, Jayden had the same question.

Why did Stefan abandon them?

Was it because he didn't trust them?

Did Stefan deem them useless?

Or... did he foresee their end if they stayed fighting alongside him?

They wanted to know because, to them, they deserve that much.

Stefan snickered as his eyes gloss over their expression. "Luther, keep them busy. It will be a shame if Hell isn't here to join the party."

Just as Stefan dropped those words, every single one of them froze on instinct at the sudden aura that stepped into the scene. Stefan veered his eyes from the source, catching Samael crouching down with his hands up in the air as if he jumped from high ground.

"Present!" Samael grinned brightly until his eyes squinted, setting his eyes on Stefan automatically. "I wouldn't miss the fun, brother dear. After all, I don't want my people to get hurt!"

"Just admit that you cannot sit still when there is a chance to unleash your brutality," Stefan smirked, gazing at Samael, who stood up while shrugging.

"Well, what can I say? You know me too well." The side of Samael's lips stretched from ear to ear, disappearing in a blink of an eye only to reappear beside Stefan. He was too fast that no one — not a single soul standing in the area — could react fast enough.

Samael leaned his face closer while Stefan's eyes dilated ever so slowly. "We had shared quite a strong bond, brother. To the point, we had shared too many likes and dislikes and... obsessions."

CLANG!

Stefan swung his sword at Samael only to get blocked by Ramin's gauntlet, Labyrinth. Samael smiled, unfazed by the deafening sound of metals. He tilted his head, peeking from behind his left-hand man, who was quick to defend him.

"Easy, brother. I just came here to watch.. My people love me so much they restrict me from fighting."

Chapter 569 - Wont Let Them Get Away

Samael shamelessly watched everyone fight on the sideline while lying on his side on the ground. All that was missing was a parasol and some snacks to highlight how relaxed he was in this battle. Some enemies tried to attack him in between, but his people wouldn't give them the chance to land an attack on him.

"Boring...!" he complained as he rolled his eyes, propping his jaw against his knuckles. "I need to see some blood! Oh my goodness! Is this the best you can do? Come on...!"

"Why don't you slice yourself?!" someone on the battlefield yelled back, making him frown.

"Your Majesty, this is not an entertaining situation." Rufus voiced out from a distance while exchanging blows with Zero. The latter, on the other hand, chuckled, as it didn't matter if they were Samael's people or enemies. They all found him a nuisance who just came to complain.

"My. I am never this pissed." Zero laughed maniacally, grinding his teeth. He hated the fact while they were all here fighting for life and death, there was that shameless emperor who had the audacity to complain, despite just watching. Not to mention, his pride took a critical blow, as he couldn't believe he was dancing in Samael's tune and being used as mere entertainment.

"Stefan!!" Dominique yelled as he lurched forward, swinging his sword towards Stefan, which he blocked easily. Jayden followed with the same intensity, but Stefan managed to fight two of his brothers.

"Tch." Stefan clicked his tongue, repelling their swords, and hopped back. Even so, the two didn't give him enough time to take a break as they attacked him simultaneously.

Samael pressed his lips into a thin line as he observed the ongoing battle in front of him. From this point of view, it was obvious who would be the victor. Although Zero and Stefan and their people were fighting his men fiercely, they would never stand a chance. Rufus and Ramin hadn't gone all out yet, same with Jayden and Dominique.

These four remarkable knights had trained earnestly for the past five years. Especially Rufus and Dominique, who continuously sought to become more powerful. Their hard work had borne fruit and Samael could see it. The reason he didn't even bother joining the party was he trusted his people and there was no need to bother.

"I hate being the emperor." He frowned as he complained under his breath. "This is so boring."

Although there were perks to not being on the battlefield himself, he didn't like the lack of action. Samael sat upright, bending his knees closer to him as he crossed his arms.

"Hmm..." He rubbed his chin. "Helping them will be an insult to them, and complaining annoyed them. Should I run back to Lilou or should I check on Heliot?"

'Stay.' A voice inside his mind whispered, making his brow quirk.

"Stay? Why?" he asked with a furrowed brow, but the voice in his head didn't speak anymore. If Alexander told him to stay, that only meant he couldn't lower his guard just yet. The voices inside his head like a built-in council were old wise vampires. They might not be sure that's why they were keeping silent, but Samael was certain they were worried about something.

"Whatever." Samael shrugged as he narrowed his eyes, darting his eyes from Stefan, who was battling Dominique while Jayden dealt with Luther; Zero who was against Rufus while Ramin fought against two other vampires, including Tristan.

"Hmmm. this is..." Samael focused his eyes on them until his gaze was digging a hole in their heads. "... absolutely boring."

His nose scrunched up as the corner of his lips curved down, sporting a gloomy front. Everyone was busy while there he was, just watching. He sort of missed the days where he would do all the work, instead of just watching like this.

"Hm?" Samael arched a brow as he gazed at Stefan and Zero once again. For a split second, he felt something was off, but he couldn't pinpoint it.

If this was in the past, he wouldn't think much about it. But now, if he felt something was off, it would bother him. So, he closed his eyes, trying to sense Heliot's presence somewhere from a far distance. It was easy to detect Heliot since he was a powerful vampire and a Von Stein.

Samael focused and soon caught Heliot's presence. He was on the border with his troops from the Karo Kingdom, facing multiple powerful enemies. He knew Stefan and Zero wouldn't just go in there without a concrete plan. So, it wasn't a surprise to detect more powerful individuals in Minowa.

Suddenly, Samael snapped his eyes open. This time, they were sharp as they glinted, standing up while running his fingers through his hair.

The side of his lips hooked up into a smirk. "Alexander, you're always perceptive. I'm a bit jealous." His eyes snapped as his fingernails grew longer until they were just as sharp as blades.

In a blink of an eye, Samael disappeared from his standpoint and appeared in front of Stefan. Jayden and Dominique instinctively repelled when the emperor suddenly appeared between them. Samael's eyes glowed in deep red, stretching his fingers and swiftly flung it against Stefan's neck.

Time seemed to slow down as Dominique and Jayden watched Stefan's head roll down. Their breathing hitched as they didn't expect Samael to execute Stefan that soon; no, actually, what they couldn't believe was how Samael easily killed Stefan.

"Ra, kill those losers and go to Heliot." Samael's tone was cold and firm, gazing down at the headless body. "You too, Rufus. Dominique and Jayden will clean this up."

Ramin and Rufus looked at each other in confusion but didn't question the emperor's orders. Labyrinth, which was used as a gauntlet, slowly crept up to Ramin's shoulder.

"Captain, you should go see the Prince of Karo. I can handle these two." Ramin spoke without looking at Ramin. By Samael's tone and action, as the emperor's left-hand man, he knew something was up. Hence, between Ramin and Rufus, it was better if Rufus go first to see what was going on.

Rufus also knew this, as he nodded. "I'll leave..." he trailed off as his eyes dilated after they landed on Stefan's head.

It wasn't Stefan.

The face changed and so was the body structure. Rufus didn't think and immediately went to see Heliot as Stefan's schemes seemed to have no end. It wasn't just Rufus, but when Dominique and Jayden witnessed how the face changed, they nearly didn't believe it.

"Hah... I'm impressed, your Majesty." Luther snickered as he didn't expect that Samael would find out. The latter ignored him as he glanced at his brothers.

"Make this quick." That was all Samael said as he raised his hand and spread his fingers. "Darkfield."

His fingers moved randomly as if he was controlling some kind of invisible strings attached to his fingertips. Once again, Minowa was covered with a much darker veil — like a void that sucked the entire south. Without the fires burning across the town, one wouldn't see even if their eyes were wide open.

Samael clutched his hand, and across the south, all those who were against the emperor or bore malice to him all perished. It didn't matter if they were far or near, their hearts all stopped that second. Those who survived were innocent and strong vampires only.

"I won't let them get away no matter what schemes they prepared.." Came out a cold, menacing voice before Samael disappeared to see the real Stefan and Zero.

Chapter 570 - Saved Me The Trouble For Once

"Third Brother! Third Brother!"

Samael peeked through his one eye, resting under the shade of the eternal tree in the Avolire Palace. His eyes caught the young boy hugging a book in his little arms while running in his direction.

"Hmm?" his brow arched as he opened his other eye with a closed-lip.

The young boy, whose ebony hair sprinkled with gold dust as the mid-day sun followed his figure, carried a huge smile. He slumped beside the eighteen-year-old Samael, gazing up excitedly.

"Third brother!" he called once again, just in case his older brother didn't hear him. "I finished the book you wrote!"

Samael glanced at the book he wrote and smirked. "Heh... no, Stefan. I won't tell you if he dies or not."

"I didn't come here to ask that!" The young Stefan, who was around seven, frowned at this heartless big brother. "I came here to ask when will you start penning the next book!"

"Oh..." Samael narrowed his eyes as he studied his little brother, lips stretching even broader. "My dear little brother, as you can see, your carefree big brother had his hands full and writing takes more than just writing."

"But you had been skipping your classes for months now. Even Father is tempted to start a manhunt since you don't show up." Stefan pouted, staring at him with doubt in his eyes. "The Mother Empress had used all the excuses she can come up with to appease Father."

"Tch. Father is a numbskul--"

His words were cut short when Stefan leaped forward and covered Samael's mouth with both his small hands. The little boy looked around cautiously, confirming if anyone heard what his reckless big brother almost uttered. When he was certain no one was around, he heaved a sigh of relief and withdrew his hand.

Samael, who was watching this clever little boy, smirked. "Worried?"

"Third Brother! How can you recklessly run your mouth like that? What if anyone heard you?" Stefan fumed as he glared at his brother — his favorite brother, among his other older brothers. "You're too carefree, that's why you're always in trouble..."

"Aren't you cute?" Samael grinned from ear to ear, ruffling the young prince's ebony hair until the latter complained.

"Third brother, I will get scolded if — " Stefan couldn't finish his sentence as he started giggling when Samael ticked him. "Ah! Third — haha! Stop it!"

Samael also chuckled, as Stefan was so easy to tickle, which also become a way to stop this young boy from nagging him like a mother. His little brother was so sensitive in the ear and the side of his stomach that with just one stroke, he would start wiggling.

"Third brother!! It... haha! hurts...!"

"Alright, alright!" Samael raised his hand to his shoulder level as he drew back, watching Stefan wheeze while wiping the corner of his eyes. "That's your punishment for scolding your dear big brother."

"Ahem! Third Brother, I'm just scolding you because you're too carefree."

"Ehh... I should be the one scolding you for being too strict." Samael clicked his tongue while shaking his head as his little brother assisted himself to sit up. He leaned against the trunk, bending his one knee up where he rested his arm.

"Stefan, you should enjoy your youth. You're still too young to keep on worrying about things you shouldn't."

"If only you become more responsible, just like brother Dyrroth and brother Alphonse, then I will not be worried." Stefan pouted and glared daggers at him. His older brother only responded with a loud chuckle, making him sigh as this third brother of his would just keep worrying him.

"Why do I need to become responsible when I already have two responsible older brothers? We need to keep some balance." Samael argued with a light tone. "Dyrroth is already the crown prince and Alphonse is working hard so he can assist our eldest brother once the time comes. Meanwhile, I will get all Father's attention so he wouldn't be too hard on those two. But in the distant future, I will travel the world for inspiration, paint and write books for a living, and get a beautiful wife."

Stefan scrunched his nose up. If he didn't know Samael's talent, he would consider him as a simpleton. However, this third brother of his and his creation were all phenomenal. It was just that Samael was more inclined in arts than in other things like politics.

"How about you, Stef? What do you want to become or what sort of life do you wish once you grow your beard and get wrinkles on your forehead?" asked Samael teasingly.

"Hmm..." Stefan hummed as he automatically translated his brother's question in to a proper and decent question. He never thought much about it before, so now that someone asked, he carefully pondered about it.

Samael didn't rush him. Instead, he smiled as he indulged at the sight of this matured young brother of his while he thought about what he wanted to do with his life.

"What I want..." Stefan gazed at Samael's carefree smirk. "... I looked up at father, so I want to become someone like him."

"Oh, ho... are you saying you will fight Dyrroth for the throne?"

"Of course not!" the young prince's face flushed as he pouted, thinking that Samael was purposely teasing him. "I want to become as powerful as him so no one can hurt my family."

The young boy looked away to hide his embarrassment, knowing this insensitive third brother of his would laugh at his response. To his surprise, Samael chuckled briefly before a hand ruffled the young boy's hair once again. He slowly set his eyes back to him, only to see the gentleness in Samael's eyes.

"Ah... you just gave me another reason why I should slack."

"Third brother, you will really get in trouble if you keep doing this." Stefan clicked his tongue in irritation. But more than his annoyance at the carefree attitude of his brother, he was more worried.

"Heh. Alright. I get it! I won't slack since I don't like this little pea protecting me!" the young boy's face instantly turned red as Samael grinned until his eyes squinted. "My baby brother, you're too young and yet you're so reliable. I feel so reassured knowing you will survive on your own."

"You're the only one who isn't reliable here."

"Hah! Little brother, I am like this, but I am actually pretty reliable, you see? If you needed me, I will always be there for you! Even Father will not touch the tip of your hair for as long as I am

here!" Samael boasted with conviction, but his little brother was still staring back at him with a frown. "Eh... you don't believe me now, but you will once I save you in trouble."

"Save me from trouble... tch. As if."

"Hah...! This boy... just wait and see." Samael frowned as Stefan had so little faith in him. "Ah, right! How about I will tell you what will happen in the sto --"

"I don't want to hear it!" Stefan's eyes popped open as he covered his ears on instinct, but the corner of Samael's lips stretched evilly.

"So you see, at the end of the..."

"No!! Get away from me!"

Stefan sprung up to his feet and ran away, but Samael also stood and followed him to spoil him about the story his little brother had been following. It was one of those peaceful days during the early time of the Heart's Kingdom. Those days where they had no clue, nor they anticipated, that the following days would slowly change them bit by bit, tearing away the traces of innocence in their hearts.

Stefan let out a short chuckle as he felt a very familiar presence landing meters away from where he sat in the fort. He slowly raised his eyes, catching the man clad in a royal mantle with an aura much heavier than a country.

"Save me in trouble... rather, you did save me the trouble... for once," came out a cold voice as the memories in his head was carefully tucked away in the deepest part of his mind.

"Hell."