

The Duke 61

Chapter 61 - How Love Feels Like

I pursed my lips, clasping my hand on my lap. Sam had been staring at me across the table, cupping his cheeks.

I've never recalled being in this study room with Sam, alone. The room where I've been spending most of my time with Fabian.

It was odd to be in here doing nothing or just being with the duke, discussing nothing. I moved my gaze around.

When my gaze landed on the paintings around, I cleared my throat. Fabian said they were the duke's precious collections. I've been amused by the art and beauty of the paintings, but because of my studies, I didn't have the chance to ask Fabian more about them.

"My lord?" I called out softly.

Sam raised his brows and hummed. He blinked his eyes ever so slowly, but he never left his gaze from me.

"The paintings... they're pretty, aren't they?"

"Are they?"

What was this short, disinterested response?

"Why..." I deliberately paused as I cleared my throat once again. "Why are some of them aren't hanging on the wall?"

Lame.

What a lame way to distract ourselves with a lame discussion? I secretly bit my tongue, knowing the topic wouldn't be engaging enough.

Sam remained silent. I knew it. He probably found my query foolish.

I didn't know the reason, but ever since yesterday, I had this urge within to please him. I didn't want to bore him and part of me didn't want him to get... exhausted of me.

The fear of my life was gone. However, new fears resurfaced in my heart. Especially in this silence between us, those fears grew profound and distinct, shouting in my ears.

I'm in cloud-nine for having my feelings reciprocated. Still, the deeper the feelings were, the more intense these fears.

I've never thought about it last night or even this morning. But now I had the chance to think, I sort of hate this anxiety creeping into my heart.

I'm scared.

"Of?" I snapped back from my thoughts upon his query.

"Huh?"

"You're scared of?" Sam blinked his eyes, tilting his head to the side.

Right. He could still hear my thoughts.

I bit my bottom inner lips slightly. Hesitant to speak my mind, but well...

"That... this is all a dream." I gulped, smiling bitterly. "That after all this, I will wake up to the sad reality that you're not real. That none of this is real. I fear the thought that once I wake up, I — I'll lose you."

My grip on my lap tightened as I looked down. Before, I had nothing to lose. But now, I had so many things to lose, including him.

I didn't mind going back to being a peasant and continuing my life as one. However, the thought of falling in love with a character I made with my imagination terrified me.

Why? Because I'll never be with him. No matter how I fantasized myself in his embrace, it just wouldn't be the same.

That scared me.

After a while, I sensed him perched on the seat beside me.

"Look at me." Sam instructed. I slowly raised my head and turned my head to my side, to where he sat.

As soon as I did, Sam flicked my forehead lightly.

"Aw..." Instantly, I rubbed my forehead, frowning with a furrowed brow.

"Did you know? If I keep flicking your forehead, it'll crush your skull and you'll die?" With a deadpan expression, Sam uttered his trivia.

I widened my eyes, my jaw slowly dropped, as I blinked my eyes countless of times.

What?

"Do you want to try —"

Upon seeing him try to flick my forehead once again, I instantly drew back in panic.

"My lord, are you trying to kill me?!" I gasped in distress, in disbelief at what he was trying to do.

"Pfft—!" Alas, the corner of his lips stretched into a grin. "Are you awake now?"

"..."

"Didn't I tell you? I'm here, I'm real, and I'm in love with you? I'd be the first person who'll set this world on fire if someone wake me up in this dream." His grin gradually turned into a reassuring smile.

Sam raised his one hand out, brushing the stray hair from my side.

"I was never terrified, I never had a reason to be." He mused, twirling the tip of my hair between his thumb and forefinger.

"But now, I do."

My breath hitched. Sam's voice was low and heavy. It was as if he lifted the mask he had been wearing for a long time.

"I'm afraid that someday you'd wake up and wouldn't want me anymore. That someday, you'd hate me. That... you'll leave me someday. And the long list goes on. I'm terrified."

I bit my lip as my heart melted instantly. How selfish of me to only think about myself?

Obviously, Sam had been transparent with his feelings towards me. He remained consistent despite all the suspicion and restraint I had before.

He'd been patient and kind to me. He might have unique ways with his words and actions. But that only made him even more remarkably unique.

I reached for his hand, leaning my cheek to feel his warmth and coldness battling in his palms. But these feelings were certainly real; my heart could feel its legitimacy.

"It's me who thinks this is all a dream." He muttered. A smile turned up on my lips.

"I'm here. I'm real. And I would go through even fire and brimstone just to be with you even for another second." I muttered with eyes closed and a subtle smile.

When I opened my eyes, Sam was staring at me lovingly. Even if this was a dream and wake up, I'd slit my throat if that means going back in this beautiful dream.

Going back to him.

I may not be immortal, but my love for him would be timeless. That, I'm certain.

I couldn't imagine living life without him anymore. I'm hopelessly, hopelessly in love with this vampire.

"Fabian, can you not interrupt me and my lady? Can't you hear us having a sentimental moment?" Suddenly Sam spoke.

Although his eyes were still locked with mine, his words were not for me. I glanced at the door and Fabian was smiling at us.

I flushed instantly.

"My apologies, my lord. But her ladyship had eaten nothing since this morning, that's why I rushed in here. We will return once you've finished."

Fabian prompted to leave. However, just as Fabian turned around, Sam stopped him.

"No, it's fine. My lady needs some nutrients, she'll need it to keep up with me." Sam smirked. I looked away, blushing as I guessed what he meant.

"Also, bring my tools. My hands are itching to sketch my next work."

I furrowed my eyes and shot a look at Sam. Instinctively, I glanced at Fabian, who sported a surprise expression on his face.

Chapter 62 - The Memoir Of The Duke's Passion

They served the meal. Sam insisted on eating inside the study.

As I ate my meal, Sam didn't touch his food. Instead, he stared at me while Fabian placed a parchment on the table.

I darted my eyes from Sam to Fabian. The latter stood on the side, like always. I didn't know Sam had some artistry in him.

Well, now that I think about it, he shouldn't be surprising since he had collections of paintings and books. These novels and paintings were all masterpieces of art.

"Uhm..." I cleared my throat after gulping the food down. "Aren't you going to sketch, my lord?"

I inquired. Sam said his hands were itching to sketch, but why hasn't he started yet?

"Because it's been awhile since I've last used these hands to create something and not destroy something." Sam explained. "I'm doubting if I have enough skills to give justice to your beauty."

Huh?

"Don't mind me." Sam picked up his canvass and dragged it closer to him. He pushed his chair back by his feet, creating a distance from the table.

"Oh... alright?" I nodded in understanding.

Although I'm curious how he would do it, it's probably better to respect his personal space. Hence, I ate while Sam picked up a piece of charcoal.

His eyes would constantly land on me. I stiffened every time.

Surprisingly enough, I ate more than usual. It was as if I had this bottomless appetite. I couldn't satiate easily. But I ignored it and kept on eating.

When I finished half of the extra dishes served, I finally felt full. I raised my gaze and Sam's attention was on his canvass.

His hands moved gracefully around the canvass. It was as if he was playing an instrument, as his hands moved in a consistent rhythm.

What a sight to behold.

His hands black, tainted from the charcoal; sleeves folded up to his elbow, flexing his taut muscles with every movement.

He looked so beautiful, having his full attention on something. I could watch and admire him work all day.

Instinctively, I shifted my gaze to Fabian. He was smiling brighter than usual.

Fabian seemed fascinated and full of enthusiasm. As if a father watching his son do something remarkable.

I want to see...

I frowned. I wanted to see Sam's work. I wanted to watch this process of creation from start to its end.

"Are you done with your meal, my lady?" Fabian came to my side, his voice above level than a whisper.

"Mhm." I nodded as an answer. "Mister Fabian, can you tell me about the Capital?"

I asked, whispering. Since Sam was preoccupied, I didn't want to disturb him, despite wanting to. We were setting off tomorrow. By the looks of it, Sam wouldn't have time to brief me what to expect to the place we're heading.

Fabian glanced at Sam before gazing back at me.

"Follow me, my lady." Fabian nodded. Yet, I bit my lower lip as I snuck a glance at the duke.

As if figuring out my unspoken concern, Fabian offered a subtle smile.

"The Duke won't hear you with his current state, my lady."

Sam won't hear me? My forehead creased. So, why are we whispering?

"I will always hear my bride, Fabian. Though, I hate to hear your voice along with hers." Suddenly, Sam spoke, which made me flinch slightly.

Still, Sam didn't leave his eyes from the canvass. He barely gave us a portion of his attention.

"My apologies, my lord." Fabian tilted his head down a little. Sam didn't respond as he carried on.

When Fabian beckoned me to follow him, I did. I looked back at Sam when I was by the door. As soon as I did, Sam's hand stopped as he turned his head to me and smiled.

"I'll join you later, love." Sam reassured.

I've never seen him so focus on something. Thus, I ought to respect it. I merely nodded before following Fabian.

Fabian pushed the rolling serving tray. I treaded behind him. I stared at Fabian's back, hesitant to ask — but asked, anyway.

"Mister Fabian? Will the Duke be alright?"

"Yes, my lady. The duke will be fine if he finished it before dawn."

"Huh?"

Fabian chuckled hearing my confused hum. "In the past, the Duke had a passion for art. One of the many reasons he went out to travel the world was to paint the world out of this kingdom."

I remained silent, gazing down while listening to Fabian.

"If you have noticed, we don't normally see the images of each painting in this kingdom; a vast ocean, a sky illuminating a variety of wonderful colors, a dragon, and so much more."

Fabian added. I recalled all those paintings. Waters that seemed to spread across the world with a mesmerizing horizon, a mystical creature in the sky, a party of colorful lights in the night, and so much more.

The study room had many of those kinds of magnificent paintings. I assumed it was the artist's imagination of the world. But Fabian sounded as if they were all painted by one person?

"The Duke called his creation as his collections." Fabian stopped, turning around to face me. "But I call them the memoir of the Duke's passion, my lady."

Memoir of the duke's passion?

"It's been hundreds of years since the Duke's last creation."

"Which piece was it?" I blurted out.

Fabian smiled. "This town. Grimsbanne."

I was momentarily stunned. Did I hear what I just heard? The Duke's last piece was this town, Grimsbanne?

"As I've said before, Grimsbanne used to be a lawless land abandoned by the monarchy. Just like an old, rotting canvass, it was hopeless and had no life. However, the duke's hands dared touch it, gave it colors, and life."

Fabian turned around and resumed in his steps; I instinctively followed.

"Grimsbanne had flourished more than any major cities in the kingdom. Until they summoned the Duke to the Capital and things went downhill."

Suddenly Fabian's tone grew solemn. I furrowed my brows as I scurried closer to him.

"Went downhill?" I queried, intrigued by this piece of information I haven't heard until now. "What happened to the duke, Mister Fabian?"

Fabian remained silent for a moment. When he glanced at me, my breath hitched.

"A massacre ensued in Grimsbanne."

Chapter 63 - The Prodigal Son

On the way, Fabian passed the rolling food tray to the maidservant. We remained silent as we headed to the garden to continue our discussion.

As silence enveloped us, my anxiety grew intense. Fabian's last remarks lingered in my head repeatedly.

"Massacre..." I whispered, clasping my dress tightly.

A massacre ensued when the duke was summoned to the Capital? Why? How? For what reason?

Myriads of questions rose in my head; I'm worried. Now, the Capital sounded more like a scary place and we're setting off later to go to that terrifying place.

When we reached the garden, Fabian turned around, his hands behind him, and offered me a smile.

"Fret not, my lady. Those times were the tumultuous years as the late king entered his eternal sleep."

I pursed my lips. That didn't make me less worried.

"The crown prince, the rightful heir of the throne, chose..." Fabian made a deliberate pause as he cleared his tone. "The previous crown prince chose love over power. Hence, he made a thorough plan to elope with the first daughter of the late king before she got married off."

I heard about that. I raised my gaze as I stared and listened to Fabian in silence.

"Obviously, a marriage between pure-blooded vampires, whether they were siblings, cousins, or a distant relative, is normal. However, the king had promised to marry his first daughter off to show his gratitude and to simply keep an eye on another pure-blood clan: The Bloodfang. In simple terms, the crown prince's and the royal princess' act were perceived as treason. Not only they defied the royal order of the king, it also incited anger from the other clan."

So it was a much bigger issue than what Samael made it sound like, huh? Although I couldn't fully grasp how politics works — I'm certain it was more chaotic than I could imagine.

"Obviously, with two pure-blooded clans in the country, the peace in this kingdom had always been... precarious. At any given time, the brewing dispute throughout these centuries between the two parties could explode. Hence, to avoid that from happening, the late king and the Bloodfang's clan leader agreed to a marriage. In that way, they'd be family."

"But it didn't happen." I blurted out under my breath.

Listening to Fabian had granted me a vague idea of the sequence of events after that. Fabian nodded, solidifying my conclusions.

"Indeed, my lady. A war took place; it split the noble families in half. With two pure-blooded clans waging a war against each other, the noble vampires had to decide. A tricky decision that could be their best decision they'd ever do or the worst one."

"I see..." I nodded in understanding. But then I furrowed my brows. This didn't add up.

If I remembered correctly, Fabian told me Sam returned to this Kingdom when the late king perished. After that, Sam claimed Grimsbanne and governed it.

"You seem perplexed, my lady." Fabian took notice, snapping me back to the current lapse.

"I am, Mister Fabian." I raised my head, seeing him raised his brows, intrigued.

"I don't understand. The timeline didn't match. You said the duke returned from his journey because the late king had perished. So, if the war begun when Grimsbanne was already established, doesn't that mean the King died before it?"

A proud smile turned up on Fabian's lips. He seemed satisfied with my query. Why?

"You have an excellent memory, my lady." He praised. "And good at paying attention to details. I'm honored to be at your service."

"Uh..." I pursed my lips in a thin line. His sincerity in his voice somehow made me feel a bit shy.

I don't think I deserved such praise.

"Indeed, the king had died long ago, before all this occurred. The crown prince's and princess' had already fled before the late king entered his eternal slumber." Fabian gazed at the faraway distance ahead.

"However, the person who took the throne, now the current king, concealed all that from the public. Even from the nobles."

"Huh?" My brows instantly furrowed. "Why would the king do that?"

Before I realized it, my words slipped past my lips. Not that I wouldn't ask that, anyway.

The king was the most important figure. His death was something to be known to the public, as we were still their people. Despite not thinking about us.

Unless... I gasped slightly at the idea that crossed my mind.

"You're quick to catch up on, my lady." Fabian chuckled, sounding proud at his student. "It is such a waste that you had to live all these years in the field."

"The king already planned to exterminate the Bloodfangs?" I ignored Fabian's praises as I asked without beating around the bush.

"Yes, my lady." Fabian nodded, pleased that I guessed it right.

"The current king knew he would never secure his position if there's another pure-blood clan lurking around his turf. Not to mention, a clan who strongly publicized their demurrals about the late king's other sons."

Fabian's tone grew solemn as he took a deep breath.

"Although the Bloodfangs were left unaware of the previous crown prince's treason, they only approved of him as the next king. The reason may sound shallow, but they held high respect to the previous crown prince because of that reason."

I held my breath, waiting for Fabian to continue. Even though he was merely telling me a deeper and detailed history, I felt like I'm learning more than I expected.

Learning about what the current was like, and the unbelievable conspiracy within the castle walls. The power struggles, and what to expect to the place we're setting off to.

However, unlike my stifling anticipation, Fabian let out a scoff that sounded more as a quick chuckle.

"The reason is that the third prince, the infamous prodigal son, and now the feudal lord of Grimsbanne, joked about taking the throne if someone else sat on it."

Fabian turned and faced me. He immediately caught the dumbfounded expression that resurfaced on my face.

"It's — it's because of a prank?" I gasped in disbelief.

Chapter 64 - The Prodigal Son II

"It's because of a... prank?" I gasped in disbelief.

Unbelievable. Incredibly beyond belief!

Fabian chuckled because of my tone and expression. I'd laugh as well if I were in his shoes.

"It was a joke that could possibly be a threat, my lady. The Duke may be a bit... blithe, but he is not someone to be taken lightly." Fabian said with a smile.

Deep down, I'm aware of that. The Duke wouldn't get so much recognition and respect from his people if he was to be taken lightly. I respected him, not just because he'd be my husband, nor because of the title in his name.

I respected him because of his noble actions.

"If only the Duke vied for the throne, he would be the King despite any opposition." Fabian affirmed, which caught me off guard.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked. Sam? As the king?

I wouldn't say that would be a terrible thing with how Grimsbanne now. However, just thinking of such an ambitious thing felt... appalling.

"Before they banished the Duke from the capital, they were talks about the third prince being the perfect candidate for the throne. Despite having a crown prince, the princes could challenge the crown prince if they see themselves fit for the throne."

Fabian explained, enlightening me about the complex rule of the monarchy.

"In terms of strength and wits, Lord Samael didn't pale in comparison with the former crown prince. We can all say, Lord Samael was gifted with natural abilities that perfectly suited for a king."

"Even if Sam, I mean, the duke didn't want to be the king, why are the nobles wary of him?" I asked out of curiosity.

Fabian smiled once again. "No one wants an unpredictable ruler, my lady."

Oh... why, though? I couldn't understand what were the nobles thinking, really. They're too complicated to comprehend.

"An unpredictable ruler is like the constant change of the weather." Fabian looked up at the clear blue sky. "One moment, the sky was all calm and benevolent; and then, in a blink of an eye, it was all woollen grey. No one can control it."

Fabian then retracted his gaze from the sky and shot me a look. I flinched slightly upon meeting his gaze.

"My lady, the Capital is not the same as Grimsbanne. It is a far different environment that may surprise you beyond words." Fabian smiled.

Upon hearing his remarks, I bit my lower lip. I could hear my heart pound against my chest.

I already figured after hearing all that. Still, Fabian didn't clear up one thing.

"About the massacre..." I trailed off carefully, raising my brows, hoping he would understand my hint.

"Right." Fabian chuckled, mixed with a sigh, as if he regretted ever mentioning that.

Did he regret telling me something he shouldn't?

"The current king didn't let the public know about the late king's death for his own many reasons. Aside from his plans, he was waiting for someone to return."

"The Duke?"

Fabian nodded slightly. "Yes, my lady. When the duke returned, the news about the king's death was known to the public. Within the castle walls, the current king also informed the Bloodfang of the crown prince's defiance."

He paused as he recalled the correct sequence of event. Fabian continued.

"Still, with the Duke's return, the Bloodfang had to take a step back and make a thorough plan."

"Sam is that strong? I mean, the duke?" I blurted out, surprised at Sam's impact on the other pure-blooded vampires that weren't even wary of the current king.

"Haha." Fabian chuckled and nodded once again. "Yes, my lady. What I'm saying, although the Bloodfang took a step back, their grudge towards the royal family grew deeper. So when the time came, they officially challenged the monarchy."

Oh... I nodded, as that was to be expected. Now, the timetable made sense. Sam had built up Grimsbanne while the Bloodfang schemed.

"With this brewing war, the king had summoned his supporters — including Lord Samael. However, amidst the war, Grimsbanne, which was far from the battlefield, was attacked. Obviously, it was a trap from the enemies to split the duke's attention."

As Fabian looked down, I furrowed my brows and murmured. "What a foul and desperate method to win."

"There's no fair or foul method in a war, my lady. So, despite the current king's disapproval, the duke rushed back to Grimsbanne to save whatever he could."

My heart ached, imagining Sam's desperation and determination. Sam truly loved Grimsbanne; he had turned his back on the monarchy.

"When the duke reached Grimsbanne, everything was on fire and he..." Again, Fabian paused. But this time, it was rather long.

I tilted my head a little to the side to peek at him. To my surprise, Fabian sported a conflicted expression in his eyes.

"The duke had lost control upon seeing that they massacred his people."

When Fabian continued, I felt the heaviness of his words on my shoulder. I couldn't imagine the shock and pain Sam went through during those times.

Sam...

"The results were quite uncanny. The duke wreaked havoc. The numbers of the corpse in Grimsbanne piled up, scattered everywhere in this very land. Yet, even after annihilating the enemies, the duke's blood lust couldn't be satiated. Hence, he returned to the Capital." Fabian sighed, shaking his head.

"I heard the numbers of casualties tripled as he attacked both sides. No one knew the details of how the duke returned to his senses aside from the Duke and those who had witnessed the end of the war. But after that, the Duke returned to Grimsbanne, rebuilt it, and entered his slumber."

"We all knew that the duke would wake up one day. Thus, we held a banquet annually just in case he would return as the Lord who built Grimsbanne or someone else."

Fabian ended, clarifying the question I had from the very beginning. We remained silent momentarily; neither of us talked.

I gazed down at the lush grass under my feet. Back then, I asked Sam why he slept for hundreds of years. He told me because it was tiring.

I remembered feeling very disappointed at what I heard. But now, I understood that his reasoning was not even close to shallow.

"What if the Lord returned as someone who wreaked havoc?" I asked, sounding almost like a whisper.

"You're truly amazing in details, my lady." Again, Fabian praised my attentiveness. However, I believed I only paid attention because it was about Sam.

"We would follow the Duke's last orders before his slumber."

I raised my head, blinking, waiting for him to enlighten me. The corner of his lips curled into a bitter smile.

"We would have to kill him ourselves."

Chapter 65 - Paintings

What...?

I furrowed my brows and narrowed my eyes slightly. Did Fabian say they would kill the duke? And that's the Duke's last orders before he entered his long slumber?

Usually, my heart race or drum against my chest. But now, it beat slower than ever as my breathing grew heavier.

Sam... I couldn't imagine what he felt during those years that led him to such a decision. Just hearing it was akin to a stake stabbing me right into my chest.

Slowly, Fabian faced me with a smile on his lips.

"Thus, we thank you for refraining us from doing that, my lady."

"Huh?"

"Because of you, his lordship returned to us as the duke we all loved and respected." Fabian clarified. But it still rendered me confused.

"I don't think I deserve the credit, Mister Fabian." I smiled awkwardly. "The duke returned on his own because of his love for Grimsbanne and his people. I'm..."

I looked away and stared ahead. I believed in Sam and his passion and love for his people. He entered his slumber to protect it.

I didn't know how I came to that conclusion. But, deep down, I believed there's a far deeper reason behind it.

"So, if you're going to thank anyone, that'd be the Duke's will alone." I added with a subtle smile.

It may sound a bit foolish and arrogant of me to refuse Fabian's praises. However, I didn't like that this was being credited to me instead of Sam. All of this, from the second he awoke and until now, Sam did everything because of his own reasoning — not entirely because of me.

Fabian beamed at me with a subtle smile as he nodded.

"You're too humble, my lady."

"I'm not. I'm speaking facts." I shook my head lightly before gazing at him.

Fabian was already looking at me with his smiling eyes.

"Then, shall we tackle about the environment in the Capital?"

Fabian proposed. I remained silent momentarily before I shook my head once again.

I saw the slightly surprised expression resurfaced on Fabian's face. I smiled in response.

"I already had a vague idea of the Capital and the people inside the King's castle." I paused and took a deep breath.

"I realized that's enough for me."

Fabian raised his brow, casting me a suspicious look.

"What do you mean, my lady?"

"I'm saying it's not the King or anyone else that I should know more about." The corner of my lips stretched wider as I inhaled and exhaled deeply.

"It's the duke. So, thank you for telling me more about it. I felt I got closer to him more than ever, Mister Fabian."

Upon stating so, I lifted my dress and turned around. The smile on my lips remained, walking back to where we left my passionate vampire.

"Are you certain, my lady?" I stopped upon hearing Fabian.

I didn't look back, but I smiled. "After hearing everything, how can I stay here and do nothing? I have no power over the past or change it... but there are things I could do now." And then I resumed in my tracks.

I already said it I wanted to be Sam's safe haven. Just like how he made feel secure, I wanted to make him feel the same. This was the least that I could do.

The Capital and the King might sound like a scary place governed by a complicated vampire. However, I realized it was not the King who I needed to know more about. I wouldn't live with him or marry him.

It was Sam whom I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. Hence, I wanted to get to know more about my groom instead of another man.

Knowing Sam more would grant me to know things on a much more interesting process, and through his own perspective. It's the perk.

Lilou didn't look back as she headed straight inside. Fabian watched her back and smiled brightly.

"My lady is truly a smart and wise lady. It is not difficult to see why the duke is enamored of her." Fabian chuckled, pleased and fascinated at how Lilou had grown.

Back when Lilou came into this mansion, Fabian had the same opinion as everyone else; they were against about the Duke and Lilou's marriage.

A human and a vampire? Unbelievable. Not to mention a peasant.

However, since he was merely a butler, he kept his thoughts to himself. He still followed the Duke's order to give Lilou education she deserved.

From that moment on, Fabian found himself being amazed at Lilou's enthusiasm, quick adeptness, and humble character. Her hunger to learn was akin to a deprived beast.

If vampires sucked life forces, Lilou would squeeze out every last bit of a person's knowledge.

Yet she remained humble and honest. Lilou never acted arrogant, despite having the power to do so.

The reason she unconsciously gained the respect of every single one in this household. She hadn't realized it yet, but they had already accepted and saw her as the legal lady of the house.

"The king had another person to watch out to." Fabian whispered as a chuckle slipped past his lips.

Carefully, I opened the door and peeked my head in. Sam didn't pay me attention as he continued working on the canvass.

With that, I pursed my lips and discreetly tiptoed my way in. I didn't want to disturb him. Hence, as much as possible, I didn't make a sound.

There's already a finished canvass laid on the table. That's fast. Was he working on the second one? Already?

When I came close to the table, I stretched my neck to see the canvass on the table. Strokes of black were all over the canvass. It amazed me that, from charcoal; he created an image.

Out of curiosity, I glanced at Sam once again. Upon confirming he was too preoccupied to notice me, I walked closer to the canvass.

As soon as I stared at the finished work up close, my breath hitched.

Was this me?

Without thinking twice, I reached towards the canvass and held it up. Although it was painted using charcoal, its different shades of black to gray were surprisingly amazing.

On the canvass, there was an image of a girl, smiling. She looked so pretty despite the lack of colors. The way he painted her smile was enough to give vibrancy and life.

"Amazing..." I murmured.

It looked like me, but not entirely? I don't think I'm this pretty and... flamboyant.

Still, my heart softened. I bit my lower lip, resisting myself from grinning like a fool.

Sam...

I pursed my lips, slowly putting down the canvass. Then I turned my head to him.

He seemed more serious than when Fabian and I left him. I wonder what he was working on to make him not notice me.

Momentarily, I hesitated to disturb him. But after seeing the first finished work, my curiosity intensified.

Therefore, I discreetly dragged my feet towards him. When I was closing in, I tiptoed, my hands on my back, stretching to get a glimpse of his work.

However, as soon as I did, my eyes slowly widened as my jaw dropped.

Chapter 66 - Paintings II

What am I seeing?

I blinked my eyes countless of times, closing my mouth. Alas, no matter how I blinked, his work didn't change.

"Was that me?" Out of shock, I blurted out.

"Yes." Sam answered flatly, as if what he was putting on his canvass was something I'm merely over-reacting with.

"Goodness..." I gasped, leaning in to see it clearer. "And I'm naked?!"

Finally, Sam's hand stopped, raising his head to see my appalled expression.

"It's... art." With his same flat tone, Sam explained.

I took a step back, gazing at him from head to toe. The first canvass turned out incomparable.

But this one, although it was beautiful. Why am I naked? What if other people see it?

"Is it bad?" Sam pressed his lips together, furrowing his brows, seeing my reaction.

"Definitely, not!" I instantly denied. "It's beautiful, my lord. But, don't you think it's... indecent?"

"Is it?" Confused, Sam gazed back at the half-finished painting he's working on.

"How? I clearly drew your breast just like how perfect they are."

He added, tilting his head to the side. I gasped at his lack of understanding.

"What if other people see it?" I asked, biting my lower lip. "I don't..."

I trailed off, clearing my throat as I looked away. My next words came out as muffled.

"I don't want anyone seeing me except you."

How could he not understand that? My fingers fiddled against each other, gazing down on the floor.

Although I'm certain no one would take interest of a woman's naked painting. Still, it'd be very uncomfortable knowing people had seen what lies beneath this dress.

"Heh," Sam chuckled briefly, catching my attention. "Why would I let anyone see this? It's mine; mine only. If anyone set their eyes on it, even by accident, I'll gouge their eyes out, mash their brains, and crush every bone they had."

Huh? Now, it was not only indecent but also a deadly weapon?

"Come here, silly." Sam extended his arm, asking me to come closer. "Fret not. I'm kidding."

After seconds of hesitation, I still trudged towards him. Sam pivoted on his seat, pointing at me to sit on his lap.

I did. I perched on his thigh, my legs in between his legs, my hands on my lap.

Once I looked up, I saw him evade his hand so not to taint my dress. Not that I mind, I used to live wearing clothes filled with mud.

"Are you really joking?" I asked, not dwelling on his actions.

Sam's eyes moved to the side and nodded. "Yes..."

Lies.

How could he lie without even trying to make it seem believable? I felt helpless, losing words to reason out.

"But, I'll keep it in a safe place. I just want to paint every angle of you." Sam reassured, resting his head on my shoulders, smiling genuinely.

A sigh left my lips as I glanced at the unfinished work. It looked amazing, though.

"Don't get mad, come on." Sam urged sweetly, fluttering his eyelashes coquettishly. "You still love me, right?"

"Obviously." I gasped at the last question he dropped. "A naked painting of me wouldn't change my feelings. They're not that shallow."

"Hehe." He giggled, raising his hand, and then wiped his forefinger on my forehead.

Even without seeing it, I knew he left a mark of the charcoal on my forehead. I didn't care, though. Why would a peasant get mad having dirt on them if we were born and raised covered with soil?

Still, I pursed my lips in a thin line. "My lord, did you know a peasant is immune to any dirt?"

"I know." Sam replied, but his furrowed brows told me my words puzzled him.

"So, why are you evading your hands from me?" I felt like shrinking down at my query.

His eyes fastened with amusement. Slowly, the corner of his lips stretched into a smile. His other hand in the air carefully rested on my back.

"I don't know too." Sam humored, followed by a chuckle.

Silly. But I could not hide the smile resurfacing on my lips.

"Do you want to join me, love?" Sam inquired, tilting his head to meet my gaze.

"Join you? Paint?"

Sam nodded without a word. I hesitated. I didn't know how to paint and I might just waste resources.

"Silly. Just be yourself in front of the canvass." Sam shook his head with his smile plastered on his lips.

"Wait, I'll set up your materials."

Upon saying so, I stood up from his lap and watched him prepare a seat and a canvass right next to him. Sam asked Fabian to set his materials for him. But now, Sam was personally setting mine himself. It may be small, but I find it sweet.

"Sit here, my muse." Sam beckoned, pointing his chin towards the stool right next to him.

As instructed, I did what I was told. I observed him picking up a variety of brushes and paints.

"I didn't use brushes in some of my paintings, only if I need minor details. You can use brush or your fingers to have a feel of the canvass..." Sam explained as he kept putting a small portion of colors on the oil paint palette.

I listened to him carefully. My eyes never left him as he explained how to paint. He made it sound easy, easing my worries.

"Here. Try it." After a while, Sam offered me the color palette. "Come on."

I nodded and took it. Sam then explained a bit of the basics. Could I make it?

"Silly. Why do you look so nervous?" In the middle of his explanation, Sam chuckled. "Painting is simply expressing yourself. We're not competing. I just want your work alongside mine."

Sam grinned, pinching my cheek that left a charcoal stain on it. With his enthusiasm, I took a leap of faith and put the first color on my canvass.

Mysteriously, that first color gave me a sense of glee. Before I know it, I added more colors, thinking of making a gigantic and colorful daisy.

In the middle of our work, I glanced at Sam. I ignored the naked woman on his canvass and focused on him.

Biting my lip, I raised my brush and stroke his cheek to get his attention. It worked.

Sam furrowed his brows and turned his head to me. I hid my urge to giggle seeing his expression and pointed at my canvass using my brush.

"Look, Sam. I made a giant flower."

Chapter 67 - Yes, I Want Your Flower.

"Sam, look! I made a giant flower!" I raised my brows, proud of my creation.

I've never seen such a colorful daisy in my life. Hence, I thought that my imagination was slowly getting broader.

Painting, huh? It's difficult, but I like it.

Sam slowly scanned the gigantic flower I painted myself. It was too big it occupied almost the entire canvass. It's enormous, indeed. And I'm proud of it!

"That..." Sam smiled before casting me a pleased look. "How are you so talented?"

I blushed, hiding the urge to grin. Hence, I bit my lower lip and cleared my throat.

"I'm merely expressing myself." I reasoned out.

Not that I'm overly confident. But when Sam praised me like this, I feel like jumping. Sharing something important for him felt like an achievement.

"I didn't know you like lotus, my lady." Sam praised, poking the tip of my nose with his blackened finger. "A rainbow lotus at that."

I frowned. Sam furrowed his brows upon seeing my reaction.

"Why?" He asked.

"It's... not a lotus, my lord." My shoulders lowered, sighing. "It's a rainbow daisy."

"Oh," Sam nodded. His lips parted, but no words came out.

I sighed as I glanced at the rainbow daisy. I made sure it would appear as close to a daisy; the flower was easy to draw.

How could he see this as lotus? Well, some tip of the leaves were a bit pointy. But I don't think it was as sophisticated as the lotus.

"It's so good that I thought it's a lotus." After some time, Sam laughed out loud and clapped his hands together.

The sound of his laugh didn't even back up his claims. I didn't know the duke completely, but I could tell he's trying to cover it up.

Goodness... he didn't need to lie.

I clicked my tongue, facing my canvass as I raised my chin up. Regardless, it wasn't a competition. So, I thought this flower was not bad. No, it was not at all!

It's unique as each petal bore different colors.

"Ay..." Sam clicked his tongue, letting out a heavy sigh as he leaned closer. "It's not bad, my lady. I'm actually happy you had expressed yourself."

"I didn't say it's bad, my lord. I believed it's unique." I cast Sam a brief side glance.

Sam grinned, pleased with my last remarks. Well, I used to have no talent in these areas before. I never even dreamed of touching a brush and paint before.

Hell. Not even in my wildest imagination that I dreamed of living the life I had now.

All my life, I was raised to be mocked, looked down, and barely survived day by day. Even if someone insulted my lack of skills in art or my entire existence, I wouldn't even bat an eye.

I'm immune.

"What's important is not whether this painting looks good or bad. The memory of how this is created matters the most." I mumbled.

When I realized I spoke my thoughts aloud, I pressed my lips together. Instantly, I turned my dilated eyes towards Sam.

Sam's smile grew brighter, leaning forward slightly. He rested his arm on his leg, his eyes fixed on me.

"That's right." Sam nodded. "Goodness... your straightforwardness will be the death of me."

"Why?" I blurted out.

"Because," He paused, rocking his head back and forth lightly. "You make my heart go 'thump thump pew pew' with your words."

I furrowed my brows, tilting my head to the side. Thump thump pew pew?

How strange it was to elaborate on the beating of his heart like that. Unconsciously, I placed my hand on my chest just to check if my heart also make that strange sound.

"Haha." Sam chuckled, catching my attention.

Slowly, I raised my gaze, baffled. Why was he laughing? I wondered.

"Did I explain it incorrectly?" He asked.

Sam then raised his hand, carefully putting my hand away. I didn't mind how dirty his hands were. I let him put his palm on my chest.

As soon as his palms came into contact with my chest, I held my breath. Simultaneously, the normal beating of my heart grew frantic.

I looked away to hide the heat building up on my cheek. Why does my body react strangely with just one touch?

Just then, I recalled what happened last night and this morning. I immediately bit my lower lips as hard as I could.

Having these thoughts just made me more flustered. Sam might think I'm being too demanding.

Goodness! I think I'm losing my mind! It's... frustrating.

"My... how I wish I can still hear your thoughts." Sam's remark snapped me back to my senses.

"Ah?"

"I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy listening to your internal mumblings." Sam let out a brief chuckle. But his crimson orbs that were akin to fire never left me.

His palm remained on my chest. When it made its movement, slowly but surely, going down as he hooked his finger in my bodice.

My throat dried up, understanding what his actions were telling me.

"You've become naughty, my love." Sam teased with a smirk.

"I —" I choked before I could deny it. How was that... being naughty? More like... needy?

"You don't say no, and I can tell by your temperature you also want it." Sam breathed, his eyes drooping as he set his gaze on my chest.

He slowly slipped his finger deeper into my bodice, pulling it down. "You'll really be the death of me. I think I'm losing my mind. All I can think of at this moment is your face underneath me."

I gulped down a mouthful of my saliva. The shiver running down my spine caused my heart to beat frantically.

When he raised his eyes and instantly caught my gaze, I flinched slightly.

"Lilou." He called out under his breath. The glint in his eyes intensified.

"Should we..."

"The flower!" Before he could propose the idea of what I assumed he would, I exclaimed.

"Yes, love. I want your flower."

Chapter 68 - Off To The Capital

"Yes, love. I want your flower."

"*Cough*"

Normally, I wouldn't understand what he meant. However, after deflowering me, I couldn't feign innocent about the meaning of his words.

Still, this story wouldn't progress if we kept doing it the whole day.

After clearing my throat, I sported an awkward smile. Failing to speak of something to divert the subject, I raised my brush and stroke its tip on the apex of his nose.

Sam narrowed his eyes. "Are you trying to change the subject?"

"I want to make you a flower!" I blurted out.

"You want to paint on me?"

"No!" That was definitely not my intention. "I can see my reflection in your eyes and I had this charcoal all over my face. It's not fair!"

Where did I adapt this talent to find excuse? Regardless, it sounded strangely believable.

"But you said you don't mind."

"Now I do!" I hurriedly argued back.

Again, Sam squinted his eyes suspiciously. The next moment, Sam nodded as he shifted his attention to the charcoal.

Sam picked up a handful of charcoal, crashing it in his hands and then rubbed it around his hand, making it blacker than ever.

"If that's what game you like, I don't mind playing, my love." Without looking at me, Sam urged calmly.

"Huh?" I furrowed my brows. I didn't know what got into me, but suddenly extended my arm and brushed my brush on his cheek.

"Really, now..."

He stopped, tilting his head back. The side of his lips slowly stretched wider.

Run.

Following what my instinct told me, I ran. I dropped my brush as I raised my skirt. Without looking back, I ran for my life.

"Lilou!" I heard him yell my name. "If I catch you, I will make you my canvass for sure!"

I gritted my teeth. What has gotten into me?

"Oh, my la —" On the hallway, Fabian appeared.

Swoosh!

I didn't stop. Like a bolt of lightning, I passed by him as fast as a could. I never thought I'd run as fast as this.

Was this because I had been eating so well? So I had too much energy?

"My lady!" I heard Fabian called out before hearing him say, "Oh, my lo —"

Swoosh

I looked back. It puzzled Fabian as we both ran past him.

"Goodness, Sam! Can you run slower?" I shouted through my gritted teeth.

Did I dig my own grave just now?

"I am." Sam whispered behind me.

A chill instantly ran down my spine upon feeling his breath behind my ear. But I didn't stop. I kept on running with no destination.

I run and run, passing by several maid servants without a word. Just like Fabian, they didn't finish their greetings as I passed by them with a swoosh.

When Sam's presence behind me disappeared, I looked back. To my surprised, Sam was still jogging behind me. He smirked the second our gaze met.

"I'm sorry!" I hollered, but didn't stop in my tracks.

It seemed Sam liked this cat-and-mouse game. Why did I even run? No, that wasn't the question.

Why did I dig my own grave?

Soon, we reached the dinner hall. From there, Rufus was having a meal alone. There were servants standing on the side, as usual.

Seeing Rufus, my eyes lit up. I ran towards him as fast as I could. When Rufus raised his head and saw me approaching, his brows knitted.

"My la... dy." Rufus called out, but I immediately held tight on the back of his chair, hiding.

"Oh ho! My lady, you ran quick!" Sam commented as soon as he appeared at the dining hall.

Sam stood across the table. His knuckles on his hips.

"Come —" As he gestured me to surrender, I backed away, using Rufus as my shield.

"Oy oy. Rufus is eating. It's not proper to —" When Sam leapt from across the table, I hid behind Rufus.

At the same time, the dishes on the table produced a clacking sound from the impact.

"My lord, how can you do that to Sir Rufus' meal?" I mumbled, peeking at the spilled food on the surface of the table.

"You..." Sam scoffed, his eyes glinting with amusement. But, above all, I felt his firm sense to capture me.

I gulped. Why am I resisting so badly, anyway? I did not know. Just some gut feeling, I think?

"Stay right there, my sunshine, my moon, my lover, my bride." Sam warned.

But instead of obeying his orders, it only gave me more reason to run. I held my breath, watching Sam carefully take a step.

But after a beat, I sprung away as he leapt over the table.

I give up! Don't kill me, Sam!

"Lilou!" Sam yelled, as I run without looking back.

Sam and I ran around the mansion. When I had nowhere to go, I headed outside. Once I reached the garden, I looked back to see if Sam had followed me.

As soon as I confirmed he wasn't, I slowly halted. Goodness... I gasped for air, resting my palm on my shaking knees.

I never ran as fast as I could until now. And for the reason I didn't know.

"Ah, goodness..." I breathed in distress. "Did he give up?"

I muttered as I raised my gaze at the door. I'm aware I could never outrun a vampire. But because he enjoyed the cat-and-mouse game, he let me run around. Like a predator watching his prey struggle.

"Why did I even run, anyway?" I murmured under my breath.

"Same question: why did you run? I wouldn't hurt you." I instantly froze upon hearing Sam's voice from behind me.

"But, in any case, I enjoyed the little exercise. It helped me get some unnecessary things out of my head."

Slowly, I turned around and Sam was nodding approvingly. When our eyes met, he smirked.

"Now, now," Sam trudged towards me.

My knees couldn't run anymore. My chest felt so tight after running that fast.

Soon, Sam pulled me by my waist to him. He tilted his head a little to the side, and then used his three fingers — from his forefinger to his ring finger — and wiped it on both my cheeks.

After doing so, Sam grinned and chuckled. "I don't know if you look like a cat or a mouse."

Huh?

"Either way, you're the most beautiful cat or mouse to ever exist." He grinned before leaning down.

Our little game of cat and mouse ended up with both of us rolling on the grass, sharing a passionate kiss. The lingering worries I had for the upcoming journey disappeared as well.

When Dawn came, the Duke's Mansion was livelier than ever. Torches giving light around. Knights and their horses were in a proper arrangement surrounding a carriage.

"Are you worried?" Sam cocked his head to me.

I looked at him and smiled. "No." I answered while shaking my head.

"I'm with you. Why would I?" I slid my hands through his fingers.

Sam chuckled, raising our intertwined hands up. His eyes on me, glinting with resolve.

"I'll be honest with you, my lady. The Capital and the King's castle is a dangerous place. But, I assure you no one can hurt you as long as you're with me." Sam kissed the back of my hand.

His tone solemn. Telling me the place we're heading was a place not to be taken lightly.

I'd go through hell if that was meant staying on his side. Was what I wanted to say. But I kept my thoughts inside me and nodded.

"I trust you. Once we return here, I can finally be your wife." I cupped his cheek and stared directly into his eyes.

Sam smiled and nodded. Once we return to Grimsbanne, we'd become husband and wives. So, no matter how dangerous the capital could be, our goal was worthy to fight for.

"I already considered you as my wife, silly." Sam humored, and we both chuckle.

Deep down, I'm aware this journey would be a long path. I'm not an optimistic person, and I had already thought of the worst-case scenario. Still, whatever happens, I believed we could go through that together.

"Let's go?" Sam beckoned.

With our hands linked, we headed inside the carriage as this rocky journey starts.

-END OF VOLUME 1-

First volume ended. Watch out for volume 2 as you have to meet new characters :)

Chapter 69 - Whistlebird

We set off at dawn and only at dusk; we reached our first stop: Whistlebird. I peeked out to see the town from a distant.

"Wow..." I mumbled, excited to see what kind of town we'd be sleeping tonight.

"You seem excited." Sam's voice came from across me.

Slowly, I retracted my gaze from the window and leaned back. Sam was sitting across me. A smirk turned up on his lips as he tilted his head to the side.

"It's my first time going out of Grimsbanne. I'm excited to see what kind of town was the closest to Grimsbanne." I smiled out of excitement.

I didn't know Grimsbanne was that far from other towns. Hence, my curiosity gradually intensified.

"Tsk tsk." In response to my enthusiasm, Sam clicked his tongue while lightly shaking his head.

I raised my brows and blinked. "Would I get disappointed?"

"Haha." Sam chuckled. "Maybe, maybe not."

He shrugged nonchalantly. What kind of response was that? I could not help but furrow my brows.

"How do I put it..." Sam rubbed his chin, pondering for a simple explanation.

I pursed my lips, my hands on my lap, perking up while waiting patiently for his clarification. When his gaze landed on me again, I leaned forward in anticipation.

"What?" I urged.

"I've been asleep for hundreds of years, but back then, Whistlebird is..."

"Is?"

To my dismay, Sam's next words strayed from what I expected.

"Do I get a free kiss if I tell you?"

The smile on my face died down instantly. Blinking just to be sure, he asked me that question with a straight face. He did.

"Whistlebird is a complicated town, my lady." From outside the carriage, Fabian's voice reached my ear.

As soon as I heard Fabian's voice, I turned my head towards the open window. Fabian was riding a horse, pacing at the same pace of the carriage.

"Complicated?" I muttered, furrowing my brows.

"Fabian, can't you see I'm exploiting..." Before Sam could intervene, I glared at him.

Sam immediately pursed his lips into a thin line. Fortunately, Fabian accompanied our journey as my personal attendant. He'd be here to answer my questions, like always.

"Whistlebird is... how do I put it?" Even Fabian had to think twice about how to describe the town.

Was it that complicated?

"It is governed by money." After a quick contemplation, Fabian finally got the words he was looking for.

"Money?"

"Yes, my lady. Wealth matters the most in Whistlebird. There's no middle ground in that town. You'd be either rich or poor." Fabian explained.

I remained silent momentarily. Back in Grimsbanne, social statuses weren't new. I'm not an expert, but there's always those nobles, middle-class, and peasants.

"So in Whistlebird, there's only nobles and peasants?" I queried for clarification.

However, Fabian only smiled, not denying or agreeing with it.

"There's only one noble family in Whistlebird, love. The Remington's. The rest were just... rich people and poor ones." Sam chimed in, followed by a chuckle.

That second, I gazed at Sam with eyes full of surprise. "Just one noble family? Just one vampire clan?"

Again, Sam chuckled. He shook his head and cocked his head to the side — in the direction where Fabian was.

When I gazed back at Fabian, the corner of his lips curled into a subtle smile. His attention fixed ahead.

"There are many vampire clans in Whistlebird, my lady. But they did not consider all other clans as nobles after being stripped off their titles." Fabian explained.

Now I understand Whistlebird was indeed a complicated place.

All my life, I thought being born as a vampire automatically granted them to be aristocrats. My knowledge of the world was indeed very limited.

Vampires not being noble? That's new to me.

"Wait." As I pondered about my limited knowledge, a question rose from my head. "Does that mean they can respect humans in Whistlebird?"

"Respect is earned, my love." This time, Sam answered. "But in here, they can be treated right..."

Sam paused, resting his jaw on the back of his hand. I gulped down upon seeing the inexplicable glint that flickered across his eyes.

"Money is everything in that land. As long as you have money, be it vampires or humans, they get treated right. So right they maltreat and discriminate others mercilessly."

Upon dropping his remarks, the atmosphere inside the carriage sullen. Race didn't matter in Whistlebird, huh?

In retrospect, I thought if race difference didn't matter, the world would be a better place. But somehow, the restlessness in my heart intensified despite knowing race was not an issue in Whistlebird.

"Are you scared?" Sam asked.

Slowly, I raised my head and shook my head.

"No. You're with me."

Sam smiled upon hearing my response. I'm telling the truth, though. He then reached his hand to me.

Once he held my hand, he guided it to him as he leaned down. Sam kissed my knuckles. His eyes fixed on my eyes.

"That's right."

Like magic, his kiss washed away my worries. I smiled subtly, inhaling and exhaling heavily.

*

Soon, we reached Whistlebird. Unlike Grimsbanne, night time in here was akin to a day. The town was bustling, merchants selling goods and food. People thronged the heart of the town.

It was a lively town, but the air...

I never felt this ominous air in my entire life. Grimsbanne was a dangerous place, especially at night.

But in here, it reeked with a pungent scent of... death and sufferings. Was I over thinking? I wondered as I scanned the place where my eyes could see.

"Do you want to walk?" Suddenly, Sam inquired.

I bit my lower lip. "Can we?"

"Fabian, me and my lady will take a stroll. Maybe, find a place to eat while we're at it." Without answering, Sam ordered towards Fabian, who was outside the carriage.

The carriage stopped. Sam hitched outside.

"Come, love." Sam offered me his hand for me to clasp.

I took a deep breath and reached for him. With Sam's help, I went out of the carriage. However, as soon as my foot landed on this land, I leapt closer to Sam.

I felt like I'll get lost if I didn't stay close to him. Sam gazed down and grinned mischievously, but said nothing.

"Then, I shall find a place for you to stay tonight, my lord." Fabian already stood beside us.

"Find? For me?" Sam arched his brow. "How silly!"

He added as the side of his lips curled into a smirk.

"Tell the Remington's to find a place for them to stay for tonight."

Chapter 70 - Whistlebird II

After Sam gave his order, we went to our separate ways. Still, his words remained in my head.

What did he mean by that? I wondered internally. I didn't want to hop into a conclusion, afraid I'd get the wrong idea. Sam had his own dictionary, after all.

"What are you thinking?" Sam snapped me back from my trance.

I blinked, shaking my head. He then slipped his hands through the gaps between my fingers and squeezed it lightly.

His action made me bite my lower lip. Walking while holding hands, without a care of anyone around us... it felt good.

"Nothing, my lord." I shook my head and offered him a smile.

Sam clicked his tongue, but said nothing. As we walk, I looked around. Everyone was smiling, as if there was no problem in the town.

It made me want to believe the restlessness in my heart was just because I'm over-thinking. Maybe I was. Just then a pleasant aroma wafted my nose.

"What's that?" I muttered under my breath, sniffing sharply.

I looked in the direction where the pleasant aroma came from. My eyes landed on a fancy establishment.

"Oh, that seems like an excellent restaurant." Sam exclaimed as he turned to me.

"A restaurant?"

"You've never been into one, huh?" Sam nodded in understanding. "Let's go!"

He added with a grin. Before I could stop him, Sam dragged me inside. My anxiety immediately shot up to the heaven as soon as we went inside.

I discreetly made a little step closer to Sam's back. The restaurant was oddly silent. I glanced at the guest on each table, their attention ahead. They were sighing and shaking their heads.

Huh?

Slowly, I peeked out my head from behind Sam's back. As soon as I did, my eyes widened as I covered my lips with my palm.

"What in the world...?" I muttered under my breath.

"How dare you show your fangs on me!?" A red-haired man bellowed, pivoting his heel against the back of another man's head lying on the floor.

The man on the floor was already bleeding too much. He was already too weak to fight back. And yet, the red-haired man seemed he wasn't satisfied.

"My lord! Please spare him!" A woman pleaded as she knelt down. Desperation came clear on her face.

"I will do anything you ask! Just please..."

"Do anything?" The red-haired man raised a brow. Slowly, he retrieved his foot away.

The woman who pleaded for that man's life sobbed. Even from the distance, I could see her affection to the other man.

I bit my lower lip, feeling sorry for her. They must be lovers. The man on the floor weakly raised his head, shaking it as if pleading for her not to do anything.

But the woman had decided. I could tell just by staring into her eyes.

"Strip then." To my surprised, the red-haired man requested with a smirk.

The complexion of the woman immediately grew pale. Her lower lip trembling, looking around at the eyes who either enjoyed watching this or those who pity her.

Still, no one helped her or wanted to get involved with this. It was always like this.

I gritted my teeth as I balled my hands into a fist. I could understand being in that situation as I've been into one many times.

However, I had no power. I couldn't do anything to help anyone. That hard truth was akin to a stake stabbing into my heart.

"You said you'll do anything. So, strip." The red-haired man cocked his head to the side. His eyes remained on the beautiful lady.

I saw her jaw tighten as she slowly stood on her feet. As tears rolled down her cheek, she used her trembling hands to remove her clothes.

Seeing this, the corner of the red-haired man's lips stretched into a smirk. Cheers from men who enjoyed this cruelty rang in the air. While those who pity her could only look away.

Cruel.

I looked down at the floor and whispered. "Sam? Can we not eat... here?"

My words trailed off as I slowly raised my gaze. While I was focused on watching the cruelty ahead of us, Sam was busy about something else.

"Come on. Give me a special seat for the newlyweds." Sam elbowed the male server lightly.

"But they were already occupied, Sir." The server answered apologetically.

Sam clicked his tongue in annoyance. By the looks of it, Sam hadn't noticed the very noticeable scene not far away from us.

"You're telling me this is the best restaurant when you can't even serve your special guests." Sam sighed, shaking his head as he raised his displeased gaze at the server.

"My apologies, Sir." The waiter bowed to express his sincerity.

"Serve us the food that I asked. I'll find us a seat myself. I can't trust you to find my wife a pleasant spot to eat." Still, Sam decided to dine here, regardless.

After that, he turned to me, smiling as he leaned closer.

"I asked them tons of food. I didn't want to ruin your healthy diet."

"My lord..." I breathed, biting my tongue. Sam seemed too enthusiastic that it made me hesitate to tell him I already lost my appetite.

Sam then raised his head and looked around. He didn't even bat an eye at what was happening ahead.

"Oh! That table seems special!" Sam grinned mischievously. "How dare that server tell me all special tables were occupied? Tsk!"

Slowly, I followed where he was gazing at. As soon as I did, I furrowed my brows. Was he referring to the table behind the red-haired man?

Before I could speak, Sam dragged me excitedly towards the chaotic scene.

"Wait, Sam...!"

Shortly, Sam stopped and looked down at the man lying on the ground. I gasped in disbelief and tugged his sleeve.

"Sam," I called out under my breath and looked around.

The lady stopped herself from taking off her clothes. The red-haired man had his brow raised. And then everyone looked at us with surprise.

"What a strange floor decoration." To everyone's — including me — disbelief, Sam commented before taking a large step over the man.

"Excuse us."

"..."