

The Duke 641

Chapter 641 - [Bonus] The Recipient Of The Third Letter

"Have you found her?"

Rufus sat on the oak chair, eyes on Heliot, who also sat down across from him as soon as they entered the emperor's tent. The latter glanced up at him. His face remained expressionless, like always.

"How was the empress?" he inquired, instead of answering Rufus. "Do you find her to your liking?"

"She is a good empress."

"That is reassuring." Heliot nodded in understanding, keeping his lips closed.

"Apparently, I can't track her down. She used to be the late emperor's shadow knight. Hence, she is elusive."

"I don't mean to overstep, but was it necessary to find someone like her?"

Dominique inquired, standing on the side of the table near Rufus.

"It is best to eradicate the forces who supported Quentin and Stefan," Heliot replied, not minding Dominique jumping into their conversation. "The organization that Quentin supported was still active. Even though those two had perished, everyone believed His Majesty ended them along with the previous emperor. Thus, revenge is a huge possibility."

"Prince Heliot, are you afraid those losers will invade the Karo Kingdom?"

"They may try, but they won't succeed for sure. However, prevention is better than cure. I'd rather stop that before it happens. Unnecessary deaths are troublesome."

"I received a word from Monarey this morning about a certain organization lurking in Monarey." Rufus leaned forward, hands linked in front of his lips.

"Although the earl guaranteed me he was already on it, considering how the organization moves, they might reach La Lona with no one knowing."

There was a moment of silence inside the tent. Although Rufus was confident Claude and Klaus would subjugate the Nightwalkers, he couldn't be complacent.

He was the emperor, and he had to worry about these things, no matter how capable his people were.

"Shall we inform Silvia about this?" asked Dominique, eyes on Rufus's rear. Heliot also set his focus on the emperor.

One would wonder why Rufus was discussing this with Heliot. But, for obvious reasons, Heliot was someone he could trust. Especially on matters about the empire since Heliot had been very involved in it. Well, they were in-laws now too.

"I'll let her know after the hunt." Rufus rocked his head lightly. "For now, we must focus on finding that woman. My gut feeling told me... it is not over yet."

Heliot tilted his head slightly. "Aren't you too much worried, your Majesty? Have you considered that this was probably something to make you overthink?"

"Aren't you?" Rufus raised a brow. "If you think my gut feeling is the product of my stress, you wouldn't search high and low just to appease me."

"There's no harm in looking. Although their strongest followers died in Minowa, a part of me can't also shrug what last game they had for us." Heliot smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "They already knew their chances of surviving are slim. I don't buy their reason for returning, although I sincerely hoped it is as simple as that."

Rufus let out a deep exhale while listening to the clever prince. "That's right. It's been so peaceful recently, but out of nowhere, their followers were trying to make themselves known. They even dared enter the empire."

There was a long silence in the tent as neither of the three talked once again. But it was clear to them that there was something they should anticipate. The cunning Samael wasn't in the empire any more. He was already living a carefree life as a painter and a poet.

Rufus didn't want to bother Samael about these 'trivial' matters anymore. That was why he had to resolve this brewing worry, whose source was unknown. Aside from the Nightwalkers, one person's name had been bugging him.

Lena.

Yes. Lena. Lilou's personal maid back when she was the duchess. Lena was the maid Stefan planted to Lilou in the past, and she turned out to be Stefan's shadow knight. That woman was still alive.

Not that Rufus was obsessed with eradicating everyone who supported Stefan. Unless they do something that would catch his attention. That was what Lena did.

Although the woman in question didn't pull any destructive skit, she sent Rufus a letter. A letter Stefan wrote. Rufus could still remember his hair raising after seeing Stefan's handwriting. In it says;

"To Rufus Barrett,

How are you, Sir Knight? Or shall I call you, Your Majesty now? Knowing my irresponsible older brother, I was certain he would do anything to pass the throne. I do not judge him.

Between Hell and you, you are a better ruler. That brother of mine was simply too easy to hate and he would bring destruction to the empire if he reigned longer. He was born that way.

But that... gave me the upper hand. That personality of his was what made him predictable in a way. And that was his mistake. To leave everyone in charge.

I left three letters, Sir Barrett.

One was for the lady in the mansion on the mainland.

The second one was for my beloved sweetheart. My Lilou.

And the third was for you, Rufus Barrett.

The first two letters had hidden riddles. If this letter didn't alarm you, then that must mean they had cracked it. But if it did, then it was overlooked.

I am not heartless, Sir Knight. Thus, just in case it was overlooked, I will give you explicit instruction.

Find Lena, my trusted shadow knight, and the messenger of this letter. Once you read this letter, your time begins. If you found her, you could've saved everyone the trouble. But if you didn't... expect for the worst.

You would not wish for that, would you? Personally, I do not wish for that as well.

I am not your enemy. Time was.

I wish you luck, Rufus Barrett. I truly root for you and I leave our fate in your hands. Whatever the outcome was, I would accept it wholeheartedly.

Best regards,

Stefan."

Rufus closed his eyes and took a deep breath. As he did, the sound of the horn, indicating that the hunt was about to start, reached his ears. When he opened his eyes, a glint flickered across his eyes.

"After this hunt, we'll look for that woman no matter what."

Chapter 642 - Her Realization Living In The Empire

Your Majesty, are you alright?"

Silvia finally broke her silence while staring worriedly at Florence. The hunt has already begun, but the two of them were simply riding their steed leisurely in the forest lane.

"Yes." Florence glanced back at her and smiled. "It's just... I hadn't seen His Majesty and His Highness. I wanted to talk to my brother about something."

"He said he will follow us. I'm certain Prince Heliot will find us, no matter how deep we are in the forest."

Florence pressed her lips into a thin line. "Is this your first time participating in the hunt?"

"Huh?" Silvia's brows furrowed. "No, Your Majesty. I usually come to the capital during this time of the year to join the hunting season."

"You're not the type who enjoys the banquet?"

This time, Silvia chuckled. "Before, yes. But after experiencing things... I appreciate these activities more than attending a banquet."

Once again, silence descended on them as Florence remained silent. The sound of the horse's hoof resonated along with the rustle of the leaves.

"Your Majesty..." Silvia called, getting more and more worried every time the empress remain silent.

"Lady Silvia, what is the late empress like?"

"Pardon?"

Florence turned her head in Silvia's direction. "The late empress, His Majesty's mother. Was what she like?"

"Ah... well." Silvia scratched her jaw with her index. That question was not the one she expected.

"To be truthful, the late empress was... selfish."

"Selfish?"

Silvia looked around as if she was scared of her life. "I mean, even though she was the empress, she didn't actually sit on the throne. Understandable since she was in a long slumber when the previous emperor ascended the throne. However, when she awoke, she barely did the minimum work."

"But she is well-loved and popular. Wasn't this season means to remember her all about?"

"It is." The side of Silvia's lips curled up into a subtle smile as her eyes softened. "The late empress didn't like social gatherings. She didn't socialize in high society or acted as a role model. However, everyone loved her and respected her because... she is not perfect and she didn't try to be."

The late empress is capable; she had proven that when she was still a duchess. Even so, her negligence to her duties as the empress was overlooked, not because of that. Her negligence was overlooked because of her actions.

What is it to be an empress? Was it how she handle the high society? Her wits in politics? Or how does she appear?

Before her, we all see an empress as a mother who will take care of the nation. Someone who was noble and beautiful, fitting to stand beside the emperor.

But Lilou... for her, being the mother of the nation means protecting it even at the cost of her life. She didn't do it because she was the empress. She did it because she loved her soil and was proud of it. And that... is enough to touch her subject's heart."

"She sounds like an amazing person." Florence smiled subtly, gazing at Silvia's rear. The latter's eyes were full of affection and admiration. For a former queen such as Silvia to speak about another empress with such respect spoke volume.

"She is." Silvia set her eyes on Florence. "But so was you, Your Majesty. I don't know why you are asking about the previous empress, but you can do things she couldn't. If she is here, she will say the say. Trust me when I say she will admit she isn't fit with the title."

"That makes her even more amazing." Florence took a deep breath, looking ahead. "Someone who isn't afraid of not being perfect. Someone who is free from the restrictive rules that bind us to our titles..."

Silvia pressed her lips into a thin line. This was the first time she had seen Florence look so lonely. Although the empress often looked sad, she usually hid it behind her understanding smile. But now, she wasn't even trying to conceal it.

She couldn't help but see the older version of herself. How Silvia was so lonely despite being crowned as the queen. Not because Stefan couldn't love her, but because of many things. Aside from treading on eggshells, afraid to make a mistake that would stain her forever. Silvia could also understand that this title, the crown, was heavier than what one could imagine.

"You know, Lady Silvia. In our Karo Kingdom, we were born and raised to always think logically. A lot of the nobles decide what will benefit them the most. Love? I have seen no one in my home country bear the same affection in their eyes when describing that word." Florence paused as her eyes narrowed.

"I even believe no one in our Karo believes in love. Who would believe in such an intangible thing? It often made me think I wasn't normal. That maybe, my imagination was just too vast, that I want a happy marriage. A marriage that is bound by love and not just mutual interest." She glanced at Silvia, bouncing every time her steed take a step.

"After seeing you talk about your husband... and after seeing Duchess and Duke Remington, it made me think maybe I wasn't defective. The people in the Great Heart Empire were free to marry out of love or convenience," she continued with a weary smile. "You can say I am a bit sentimental since my relationship with the emperor is the latter. But deep down... I hope he can look in my way. Maybe I am asking for too much since he hadn't brought a mistress, but I just can't seem to get close to him."

Florence released what had been draining her bit by bit. She kept telling herself not to expect from her emperor, but she couldn't help it. Especially earlier, when Kristina and Noah were being lovey-dovey. The two looked so happy; not just them, but also young noble ladies giving their trinkets to their chosen knights.

She also made a trinket for Rufus. Unfortunately, she couldn't give it to him because she couldn't approach him earlier. Also, she didn't have the courage.

"Your Majesty..."

Florence looked at Silvia again and sported a smile. "Don't worry. It's not like His Majesty hadn't made it clear in the beginning."

"He made what clear?" Frustrated, Silvia furrowed her brows and inquired without a second hesitation.

"Not to expect anything from him other than having an emperor."

"That jerk..." Silvia ground her teeth, gripping the reins tighter. "I'll beat him senseless until he gets into his senses."

"You sound very close to him." Florence chuckled seeing that Silvia seemed she was ready to snap the emperor's neck. Her remarks brought Silvia to her senses, though.

"Ah, that..."

"It's fine, Lady Silvia. You and everyone had gone through a lot together. So, it is understandable that you were close to him." As usual, the kind Florence shook her head, not asking for any explanation. "Anyway, you don't have to accompany me. You want to hunt, right? I will --"

"I will stay." Silvia frowned. "Accompanying you is more important for me than winning the contest. Please don't misunderstand. I am not doing this as your lady-in-waiting. I want to stay with you because I like it. I enjoy talking to you."

Florence's heart slightly warmed up at her words. "Thank you, Lady Silvia." There was a long list she wanted to thank Silvia for, but an entire day wasn't enough.

"Your Majesty, how about..."

Silvia trailed off upon hearing a horse's loud neigh and hasty footsteps. She looked back, eyes dilating seeing a horse running rampant.

"Out of the way!" yelled the knight, riding it, waving at them.

"Huh?" Unlike Silvia, Florence had a slower reaction. When she turned her head back, the galloping steed was already close.

"Your Majesty!"

THUD!

Chapter 643 - The Lesson He Wanted To Teach Her

Florence didn't have the time to react to what was coming at her. All she could do was stare at the galloping horse coming at her while her breath hitched.

"Your Majesty!"

Silvia didn't think twice as she leaped from her steed to Florence. Everything happened so fast that she simply acted out of instinct. With her arms securing the empress's head, both of them rolled on the ground while their own steeds ran away after getting startled.

But Florence's steed ran over Silvia, who used her body as Florence's shield. Silvia could only grit her teeth as the pain didn't come instantly. Instead, all she could think about was whether the empress was safe.

As the dust ambled up by the galloping horses, Silvia drew her head back. She was under Florence, which to her relief.

"Your Majesty, are you alright?"

Florence grunted, feeling a bit sore from what had happened. However, she was overall safe and inflicted minor injuries, thanks to Silvia. She tried to push herself up, a bit confused at the sudden turn of events.

"Ye — yes, I am," came out a weak voice, getting off of Silvia.

"Thank goodness..." A sigh of relief slipped past Silvia's lips, gazing at the canopies shading her face.

"Lady Silvia, are you alright?" Worried, Florence studied Silvia before she sniffed. "You're bleeding."

"Oh, it's nothing." Silvia laughed before she winced, feeling something on her back. "What is important was you're alright."

She propped her elbows on the ground, pushing herself to sit up. As she did, she shut her eyes as her vision shook.

"Lady Silvia!" Florence stopped from touching her as blood trickled down on the side of Silvia's head. "You're bleeding..."

"It's fine, Your Majesty." Silvia opened one of her eyes, touching her temple. She didn't dwell on the physical pain too much as she turned her head to where the horses went.

"What happened?" she wondered under her breath, brows wrinkling. "How can a horse run rampant like that?"

While Silvia wondered about the source of the incident, Florence was staring at her. The latter bit her lower lip, feeling sorry that she was hurt protecting her.

"Lady --" her eyes fell on the ground behind Silvia, wide-eyed. Blood was starting to pool on where she was sitting, following the trail, and noticed the huge rock that had blood on it.

She wasn't stupid to put the pieces together. Silvia hit her head while protecting her. The bruises on her arms and the footprints on her clothes gave away that the horse ran over her.

Before Florence could panic or get out of her shock, she heard the sound of galloping horses approaching them. She turned and saw Rufus and Heliot galloping towards them. For reasons unknown, Florence clutched her hand close to her chest as soon as she saw the dark expression on her husband.

"Silvia!" called Rufus, making Silvia snap her eyes in their direction. She narrowed her eyes, vision slightly blurry.

"I think I hit my head a bit hard," she grumbled, massaging her temple as her head throbbed.

It didn't take long when the emperor and his entourage came close. Rufus instantly jumped from his steed, rushing toward them. Heliot also did the same while the rest came after the horses that were on the loose.

His eyes dilated upon seeing Silvia up close, pupils constricting as he squatted down. "Silvia, are you alright?"

"Uh, yes... Your Majesty. Just a bit dizzy, but..." Her body swayed. Fortunately, Rufus held her shoulders. "... I hit my head a bit, but I'm fine. Why is that horse running like crazy?"

"Don't think about that for now." He breathed out, staring at the blood trickling down on her. His gaze fell on the ground before catching the huge rock that was stained with blood.

Florence instantly caught how Rufus's jaw tightened while his eyes exuded murderous intent. And yet, every time his eyes landed on Silvia, there was a hint of genuine worry and concern. It was as if Silvia was the only person in his eyes.

'She's injured, so of course, he is worried,' she told herself, making sense why her husband looked at another woman — a married woman — like that.

"Your Majesty, are you alright?" she snapped her eyes, peeling them away from Rufus to Heliot. "Are you hurt?"

"No, Your Highness. I am alright thanks to Lady Silvia."

"Prince Heliot, take the empress back to her tent and call for someone to look after her," Rufus ordered without casting his wife a look. "Via, come. Yulis will throw a huge fit if something happened to you."

He assisted herself up, holding her shoulder while Silvia was clinging on to his sleeve. Since she was a little dizzy, as if her brain just rolled thousand times inside her skull, she just accepted the helping hand reaching out to her.

If she was in a better state, there was no way Silvia would accept his help. Not because she had lingering bitterness left for Rufus, but for Florence's sake.

"Wait, wait. Slow down..." Silvia clutched his shoulder, getting even dizzier by the second. "I'm..."

And she collapsed. Thanks to Rufus' fast reflexes, he caught her body in time.

"Prince Heliot," he called, raising his head and darted his eyes from Florence to Heliot. "I entrust the empress to you. I will take the marchioness to safety."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Heliot tilted his head down. He watched Rufus carry Silvia in his arms as he hitched his steed, and galloped away as if she would die. Seeing this, Heliot set his eyes back to his sister.

"Your Majesty, shall we?"

"Why?" Florence inquired, eyes glued on Rufus's steed. "I am not hurt, I know. And Lady Silvia saved me from danger whilst risking hers. Obviously, His Majesty will be more worried about her. But... why?"

"Your Majesty."

This time, she set her eyes on him. "Why did you choose me to marry him, Your Highness? To marry someone... who will never give me affection."

There was a long silence between them. His eyes studied the millions of unspoken words in his sister's eyes, but he was unfazed by it.

"That's why." He pointed at her. "You are smart, Florence. You should let go of your ridiculous fantasies and just live as a Von Stein. You will not survive this world if all you can think about is being a wife."

Cruel as he was, Heliot didn't feel sorry for telling her the truth. This world was far more cruel and Florence... was too kind for it. Seeing that no matter what she would do, it would not move the emperor was enough to teach her a lesson.

Not about love, but about herself. That there were certain things one could never have.

Which led to the present time...

"Let's divorce, Your Majesty."

Chapter 644 - Not Everyone Is Cut Out For Marriage And Thats Ok

Year 1842 — PRESENT TIME

"Let's divorce, Your Majesty."

Rufus raised a brow while he drink, eyes on the woman on the other end of the dining table. He carefully put down his glass of wine, tilting his head to the side.

"I want to step down as the empress," Florence added.

"Do you know what will happen if you stepped down?" he inquired in the same distant tone. "Once you gave up the position, you get banished from the empire. The least of your concern is the people in here. But... it will surely incite anger from the Karo Kingdom."

Florence laughed weakly. "Is there any difference?" she asked, almost in a mocking tone. "It is only been one year since I became your empress, but everyone is already blaming me for not bearing an heir."

"So, that is the problem?" Rufus rocked his head, keeping silent for a moment.

"Then I will go to your chambers tonight."

Florence gripped her cutlery tighter, eyes on him. Until now, there wasn't any progress in their relationship. They dined together but barely spoke a word. Sometimes Rufus would go to her to share a cup of tea in silence.

He had done that for the empress' reputation and because she requested that from him months ago. Even so, Rufus's treatment for her didn't change. He still treated her like his colleague, no more, no less.

But the funniest joke was, even creating an heir was treated as part of their duty. She already gave up at this point. She had tried to prove to Heliot that Rufus could also see her as his wife, but she lost, miserably.

"Why... can't you let me decide for that?" she inquired, lowering her eyes. "I've been quiet, Your Majesty. I did everything to be the empress you needed. But... I had enough."

"Enough?"

She raised her head, feeling all the pent-up frustration that accumulated through the year reach its peak. "I can't do this anymore, Your Majesty. I never request anything from you aside from giving me some face by drinking tea with me. But it is not enough."

"Empress." This time, Rufus's voice grew cold and even more distant. "Is there any other reason for you to request such a thing? If there is, why don't you express it right now so we can address them properly?"

"Can you love me?" she asked without beating around the bush. Her eyes were also icy, unlike the usual emotion she carried when she arrived in the empire. Her question instantly silenced him.

"You can't, right?" Florence laughed weakly, putting down her cutlery as she looked at him straight in the eye. "Your Majesty, can you be honest with me? Do you love Lady Silvia?"

"She is one of my people. Thus, I value her."

"As a man, do you love her?"

Silence. A stifling silence descended on them while they were looking at each other.

"Lady Silvia is a married woman who loved her husband dearly." She broke the silence after a minute with her bitter voice. "She is amazing and I can't seem to

hate her even when my husband looks at her with affection. I envied her, even tried to hate her and blame her... but I can't."

"I also hated you when I realized you will never open your heart to me. I wanted to blame you for not even trying, for looking in a different direction when I am just right beside you," Florence continued, unable to stop the words that she bottled up without a problem. It was just that the surge of emotion flowed out as soon as she mustered the courage to ask for a divorce.

"But alas... I really can't hate you or Lady Silvia. I can't also blame you for not opening your heart to the empress you had to marry just because you had to. You already made it clear to me in the beginning. But I... still expected something." A weary smile dominated her lips as she raise her gaze at him once again. "It's my fault for hoping for the impossible. So please... fulfill this request for me. I am tired, Your Majesty. I'd rather get stripped off of my title and live as a commoner for the rest of my life."

After speaking her mind and heart, there was this sort of relief she felt. To her surprise, she was able to smile genuinely at him.

She didn't love Rufus; she hoped she did since they were husband and wife, but she couldn't nurture that feeling. Was it something to thank him for? She was uncertain. What was for sure was that she didn't hate him.

If anything, being the empress made her strong. She was able to value herself when no one else does. She also made friends, Silvia and Kristina, for example. The reason she mustered the courage to free herself from something that was hurting her even in the slightest.

Rufus studied his empress's expression and noticed the clarity in her eyes. A shallow breath slipped past his lip. He couldn't see the same hope in her eyes — the kind of hope whenever she looked at him in the past. Not that it was a bad way.

"Is that what you really want, Empress?" he inquired in a calm voice.

"Yes."

"You know the consequences if I approved of this."

"Yes."

"The wealth, the comfort, the security..."

"I don't need any of those, Your Majesty." Her smile remained as her eyes softened. "I just want to live. Feel alive, I mean. That's all."

Rufus rocked his head lightly. "Then, I shall make preparation. It won't be easy, but you can use this time to prepare for your departure. The only thing I can guarantee you is that you will leave the empire safely."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

"No. Thank you." Rufus looked at her straight in the eye, unsmiling. However, she could feel that he didn't feel so distant, like always.

"And I apologize for not being a husband to you. I guess I am not cut out for marriage." His gaze lowered. It was not like he didn't want to try. There were days he wanted to be a husband and try to open his heart after getting nagged by everyone.

He just couldn't. Because his heart... only wanted another woman. Although she was already married and being cherished by another man, his heart still yearned for his first love and surely his last love.

Upon hearing his short yet sincere apology, Florence could not help but smile. "I really appreciate the apology, Your Majesty. It means a lot to me."

The two of them looked at each other before they smiled. Although they agreed to go on separate ways, there was no pain in their heart.. If anything, both of them felt... free from guilt.

Chapter 645 - Participating In Her Brother in laws Research

After their dinner, Rufus stayed in the dining hall alone. His eyes were on the other end of this long table where his empress usually sat.

'*Fail,*' he whispered in his head, reaching for the decanter to pour himself a glass of wine.

Florence reminded him of Silvia. Yes. She was like the younger version of Silvia. Her eyes brimmed like the woman he fell in love with. Full of hope, expectations, and positivity.

The main reason Rufus shut his heart instantly, giving no room for any development for this marriage. Why? Because deep down, he knew that if he fell in love with Florence, it wouldn't be real. It would only mean he fell in love with his first love's ghost.

That was unfair to Florence. Therefore, he immediately drew the line. If Florence stayed, then she stayed. If she wanted to go, then he wouldn't hold her back.

"How pathetic," he muttered mockingly, holding the glass of wine. *'She's already married and yet... I still secretly hold on to her. When, in fact, I am the one who pushes her away in the first place.'*

Call it karma or whatever, but Rufus knew he didn't have any right to love Silvia. Or rather, he could only love her secretly. Loving her could be his way of atonement or just helpless love. But what was for sure was that he wasn't cut out for marriage.

Unless it was Silvia, of course. But that was impossible now since she was deeply in love with Yulis.

"I guess Heliot had seen this coming." Rufus tilted his head back, eyes on the chandelier. "Since he told me he wouldn't meddle in any of the empress's affair and decision. I guess he is not a bad brother who simply sold his sister for benefits."

A chuckle slipped past his lips, a bit amused by Heliot's personality. "He always acts as if he doesn't care about anything but his damn Karo Kingdom. But it seems he also cares about his family in his unique way."

Rufus idled there, enjoying a drink, unable to distinguish if the drink was to celebrate Florence's enlightenment. Or to wash down the sorrow of realizing how he was still madly in love with his first love.

Either way, he didn't dwell on it. He was married to the career he was passionate about. And he still had to track down Lena, who was still as elusive as ever.

'Now that I think about it, how long is the time limit?' he wondered, thinking that it was almost a year already since he received Stefan's letter. At this point, he was unsure if Stefan was simply giving him a scare since nothing had happened yet.

But Rufus couldn't be complacent. So the search for Lena was still ongoing, with Dominique and Heliot leading the case.

Just as Rufus was enjoying his drink, he suddenly paused. His eyes instantly sharpened upon sensing a very familiar aura. It was faint but very distinct. There were only a few people who could ring the bells in Rufus's head.

One of them was his brother dearest, Fabian.

"What is he doing here?" his voice was brooding, putting down a glass of water before heading to where he could sense his brother's presence.

"Who are you?"

Florence clutched her hand close to her chest, eyes on the person standing not far away from her. After her dinner with Rufus, she wanted to take a walk in the garden. Since she felt a little festive for speaking up, she told the servants to leave her alone.

Who would have thought she would regret that? Now, no one was around to protect her if this person harm her.

She scrutinized the person several feet away from her. He wasn't wearing a knight suit or foreign clothes. Instead, he was wearing a butler uniform.

Fabian tilted his head to the side with narrowed eyes. "Are you the empress?" he inquired as the side of his lips curled up wickedly.

This alarmed her. "N — no. I mean, what if I am?" Her voice shook, taking a careful step back.

She was a pureblooded vampire, and yet, this man's presence could shake her to the core. He was dangerous, and she was certain he definitely was. Even the emperor couldn't shake her spirit like this.

But this man... who was *'posing'* as a butler, could alarm her even without trying. He reeked of the scent of death.

To her surprise, when she blinked, Fabian was already in front of her. She stumbled back, only for Fabian to still her waist.

"I don't mean to harm you, Your Majesty. Don't be scared, I'm friendly." Fabian smiled until his eyes squinted into slits. "His Majesty's wife is so beautiful, especially up close. Will you take part in the research I am conducting?"

"Huh?"

His smile remained before he bent over and planted a peck on her lips. Florence's eyes popped out of their socket. Her mind instantly went blank at his insolence and audacity.

"Well, thank you for your cooperation. That's a very helpful data." Fabian laughed as he drew his head back, keeping his signature smile. He slowly let the empress go, holding her shoulder until he was certain she wouldn't fall from shock.

"What... why... you..." Florence blinked countless times, gazing up at him. Her unfinished questions caused his eyes to open a bit, revealing a pair of sharp eyes. Her breath hitched as soon as she locked eyes with him.

He was... hypnotizing.

"Are you asking why I kissed you? I thought you were very beautiful and fit for the research I am conducting," he explained in a light tone as if he didn't do something to his brother's wife. "You taste nice, don't worry. It a pleasant experience."

"..."

Fabian laughed, seeing that it seemed that surely surprised her. "Anyway, it was nice meeting you, Your Majesty." He tilted his head down before walking past her as if nothing happened.

As he walked away, Florence blinked twice while recollecting her thoughts. Just now, someone kissed her, right? And his reason was that she was beautiful? How ridiculous was that?!

"Do you kiss every woman you think is beautiful?!" she turned around and raised her voice, fuming at this man's audacity. She had never felt true anger until now.

"Well, yes!" Fabian looked back with a misplaced innocence in his eyes. "I cannot gather enough research data to prove a certain point if I don't conduct trial tests."

She scoffed in disbelief. "Test...?" Even Rufus didn't insult her like this. At least, her husband knew to hold back.

"Oh, aside from that, it is also helpful for you, since my brother didn't even flinch when I kissed you. You know what that means. He's a bad husband and you should leave him." Fabian laughed before he resumed with an evil smile plastered across his face. "Thank me later."

Florence furrowed her brows while staring at his back. "Brother...?" she whispered. "Are you...!"

"Your brother-in-law!" he answered even from that distance, waving at her without looking back. "Let's kiss again if you're free. Got to go."

"..." A gigantic question mark hovered over her head. Brother-in-law?? And did he just ask her to kiss again as if he was simply asking her to meet again?!

Chapter 646 - The Answer To An Unanswered Question

"Uh. Is she my sister-in-law? We're not brothers anymore since you're a La Crox now, Your Majesty."

Fabian stopped by the entrance to the palace from the garden. He slowly turned his head to his side, eyes landing on Rufus's figure leaning against the pillar.

"Ian, what are you doing in here?" Rufus's eyes glinted as he cocked his head back, eyes on Fabian. "And why did you do that to the empress of the empire?"

"Well, I was ranked as the least desirable back in the mansion. I am proving that is not the case." Fabian faced Rufus squarely and then smiled until his eyes were like two lines. "If the empress is the noblest woman on the continent, then if she fell in love with me, that means the game is rigged."

"You... what?"

"In the mansion, we had a poll on who was the most desirable and the least. The Madam obviously won the first spot by a landslide. I cannot accept that Master is ranked above me," Fabian explained, basically summarizing the source of his actions. "That is why I am proving my point. So far, there were at least thirty noble ladies who blushed by being kissed or complimented. I think Her Majesty is a bit easy, too."

"She's not an easy person."

"Then that means more fun."

"Ian, I don't care what kind of ridiculous ranking the people in that mansion have. Don't go around kissing people like a creep." Rufus let out a shallow breath, shaking his head sideways. "The empress had already suffered enough with our marriage. Showing her unnecessary attention will not benefit anyone."

"It will benefit me."

Rufus closed his eyes as he took a deep breath. He thought Fabian had already got it together after all these times. But it was obvious Fabian was unstable. The only good thing was that he wasn't doing anything crazy other than kissing strangers to feed his ego.

"Anyway, why are you..." Rufus trailed off when he heard Florence's voice.

"Hey!" she panted for air, glaring daggers at Fabian. "Where do you think you're going?"

Fabian raised his brow as he cast her a look. "Will you look at that? Your Highness, did you come to me to ask for seconds?"

"Se — seconds?" she scoffed in ridicule, staring at him from her to toe. "How did you get into the inner palace? I don't remember having a brother-in-law like you."

"So you called the knights to arrest me?" Fabian didn't beat around the bush. The side of his lips curled up wickedly, making Rufus narrow his eyes.

'He wants to fight.'

He thought, knowing his brother so well. *'Just why is he here?'*

A shallow sigh slipped past Rufus' lips. He had to take Fabian away and spar with him before his hand itched and fight anyone else. So Rufus retracted his back from the pillar and walked for a bit to show himself.

"So what if I —" Florence's breath hitched as soon as she caught Rufus appear from behind the pillar. "Your Majesty?"

"Apologies for my little brother's impudence. I will surely discipline him." He snapped his eyes as he looked past Fabian and then glanced over his shoulder. Knights were rushing to them. They all stopped when Rufus raised a hand.

"Don't touch him if you value your life," he warned sternly, eyes glossed over Fabian's countenance and then at Florence. "Empress, I apologize on this man's behalf. It will never happen again."

"It will happen again."

"Fabian." Fabian zipped his mouth as soon as Rufus's eyes grew cold. "Assist the empress to her palace. I will handle this person."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

As the knights acknowledged the emperor's command, Florence darted her eyes from Rufus to Fabian. Unlike the emperor's unchanging and distant countenance, the latter was smiling from ear to ear. Fabian even waved at her, mouthing, *'see you later.'*

She clutched her skirt, feeling the hair behind her neck raise. *'See me later?'* her teeth clenched. There was just something in Fabian's smile that was annoying. It was like no one could read what was behind that smile.

'No, that isn't what's important. So they're really brothers?' she wondered before the knights approached her. "Raise the security in the Avolire Palace. Don't let that man enter my quarters."

Florence huffed as she turned her back on them and stormed away. As she did, Fabian chuckled while staring at her back.

"How cute. She should ask her husband to sleep in her chambers if she truly didn't want the monster under her bed to visit her."

"Fabian." Rufus exhaled while bearing a poker face. "Don't tease her like that. Follow me. Let's spar."

Fabian pressed his lips with both sides curved down. Rufus was already walking away without looking back at him.

"Spar... is it friendly? I won't indulge with you if it is." He muttered as he followed Rufus' tracks.

Rufus led Fabian to the emperor's training grounds. It wasn't that far, so they reached it shortly after. Standing several feet away from each other, Fabian tilted his head to the side.

"A wooden sword?" he asked, seeing that Rufus only brought a wooden sword instead of wielding his sword. "I'm not interested in friendly fights. Master and I always spar with our lives on the line."

"Do you think I need to wield my sword to kill you?"

"I like the enthusiasm, but just so you know, I actually didn't come here to fight you." Fabian slid his hand inside his suit before tossing something to Rufus. The latter instantly caught it by instinct, brows furrowed as he opened his palm.

"A pocket watch?" he frowned, raising his eyes at Fabian. "What is this?"

"My wedding gift, obviously. I got it from the infamous Nightwalkers."

"What?"

"The crime organization in the north. I asked them kindly to give it to me and they wholeheartedly gave it to me since we're friends."

Rufus narrowed his eyes. "You don't have friends. And you came from Monarey?"

"Yes. Madam and Master were still there. Oh, I think --"

"What? Who's in the empire?"

"Madam and Master?"

This time, it took Rufus several seconds to process Fabian's words. Lilou and Samael were back in the empire? Why? They told no one about it.

"Oh, don't worry. I went ahead before them. They will probably drop by in the capital to get me. I just hope you defend me just in case since I used the earl's name as my disguise."

"Ian, what are you doing in the empire?" asked Rufus to understand the situation. "Is there something wrong? Did something happen?"

"Oh, no. Please do not panic, Your Majesty. We were simply traveling because of the Grimsbanne blood. To make the story short, Master and Madam were going paranoid because of Lady Tilly's vague statements." Fabian laughed briefly, waving his hands to calm Rufus down before he panicked even more.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, definitely."

Rufus narrowed his eyes, studying Fabian. Knowing his brother, he wouldn't lie about something like this. Even so, this alarmed Rufus. It reminded him of the letter from Stefan and Lena.

"Ian, can you answer my question clearly and honestly?" Fabian arched his brows and tilted his head at Rufus' request. "How did you cut Stefan's link with Law?"

Fabian blinked many times before a blunt answer slipped past his lips.. "I didn't."

Chapter 647 - He Had Done It

"I didn't."

Rufus furrowed his brows as he looked at Fabian in confusion. What did he mean by that? Didn't Law get that scar because you opened him up with maleficent?

"I did open him up because it was fun to see healthy organs."

"Fabian."

Fabian chuckled playfully. "What I'm saying is, I opened him up, but there's nothing to do. Stefan had already broken his link with Law when I opened him up. I believed that was the time when he was already fighting Master." He shrugged, but then rubbed his chin while his eyes narrowed.

"Hmm. Now that I think about it, there was this faint blood link left in the young master to strengthen the core of his blood," he added while nodding.

"Did maleficent feel something suspicious?"

"Nothing. I would've done something about it if I did." His eyes suddenly flickered, which was left unnoticed. "Now, can you answer my question? What is the sudden interest in the dead? It's not like you thought of wanting to get along with me by talking about it?"

"Nothing. It's just I received a letter a year ago. Stefan wrote it, and we're now in search of his surviving shadow knight, Lena. It's a little eerie letter." Rufus shrugged indifferently as he gazed at the pocket watch in his hand. "What is it about this pocket watch that you're giving it to me?"

"Hmmm. It looks interesting? The organization values it a lot. So, I thought it's really important."

A laugh escaped Rufus's mouth as that was something Fabian would do. "Thank you." He slid the pocket watch inside the pocket of his trousers before raising the wooden sword.

"Enough with the idle talk." The side of his lips stretched from ear to ear. "I won't let you walk around this place with that bloodlust leaking from you."

Fabian smiled until his eyes squinted into mere slits. "I'll take this as a payment for that pocket watch."

In a blink of an eye, the two clashed. A wooden sword and maleficent. Even though it was simply a wooden sword, it clashed with maleficent without breaking.

All night, Rufus and Fabian just sparred as if there's no tomorrow. In the middle of the duel, Fabian forced Rufus to wield his sword through his vicious attacks. The sound of their clashes was so intense that some people rushed to the training grounds to see what was going on.

One of them was Dominique.

The duel lasted until it was dawn. The result? Draw. Both inflicted minor injuries, but they were too numb to wallow about them. Since Fabian released his itch for blood, Dominique assisted him to the guest's quarters.

Meanwhile, Rufus went back to his quarters to bathe and sleep. Laying down on the bed with his arm as his head cushion, Rufus held up the pocket watch Fabian gave him. A subtle smile appeared on his lips, staring at the watch hovering over him.

"This is the first time he gifted me something decent." He chuckled, thinking that the only gifts he received from Fabian were human remains. "Although he stole it, it is highly appreciated."

Rufus closed his eyes, holding the pocket watch close to his chest. A spar with Fabian was surely exhausting. He has almost forgotten what it felt like to be exhausted that he had to catch up to his breathing.

'Master and Madam will come in here,' He thought before he succumbed to sleep. *'I should make sure no one will see them. They tend to cause trouble anywhere they go.'*

The night was oddly silent, and before he knew it, Rufus already succumbed to the darkness.

*

*

KNOCK KNOCK

Rufus grunted and touched his head as it throbbed. He peeked from one of his eyes, looking at the door that creaked open. He clicked his tongue when he saw Fabian pushing a trolley inside.

"Fabian, just what the hell are you doing?" he grumbled while ruffling his head. For some reason, his head was throbbing so badly, as if he was experiencing hungover.

"You slept in, which you rarely do. So, I brought you some soup."

A deep exhale slipped past Rufus as he blinked. "That is so kind of you, but put it away. I don't know what poison you've put in it."

"My lord, what are you talking about?" Rufus furrowed his brows at what Fabian addressed him. He slowly set his eyes on Fabian, who was standing beside the bed near the trolley tray.

"I do not dare put anything harmful in your food..."

His voice sounded distant in Rufus's ear as the latter studied his brother. Fabian looked a little young, or rather, at peace. It was almost like they were back to the time Fabian's mental state was still tranquil. That time when he was just a full-time butler in the duke's mansion.

Rufus's eyes veered to the wall behind Fabian. They narrowed instantly before a sudden surge of panic crept up to his spine. Rufus looked around and the more he did, the wider his eyes got.

"What...?" he trailed off and his heart suddenly pounded against his ribcage. "... is going on?"

This room... Rufus knew this room very well. It wasn't the emperor's chambers, but the chambers he used back in the mansion. His breathing gradually grew heavier and slower. As he did, he suddenly felt the pocket watch.

He gazed down at it. It was still in the hand where he held it, but the watch was broken. The hands inside were moving in the same number.

"Fabian, what year is it now?" came out a question that naturally came out of Rufus's mouth without going through his thought process.

"Huh?" Fabian furrowed his brows but still answered. "It's the year 1825, my Lord."

"18... 25?"

"Yes."

"And His Grace?"

Fabian frowned because Rufus's questions were nothing but strange. "In his dwelling."

As soon as Fabian answered, Rufus suddenly sprung up to the bed and bolted to Samael's dwelling. The Duke's dwelling during his hundreds of years of slumber.

Meanwhile, in the Grimsbanne Mansion, on the mainland...

Tilly suddenly stopped drinking her tea as she gazed at the terrace. Her eyes narrowed slightly, but her expression remained the same.

"Tilly, are you alright?" asked Law because Tilly just stopped suddenly.

"We need to go," she whispered, peeling her eyes away from the terrace to Law across the chair.

"Huh? Where?" Law tilted his head to the side, baffled at Tilly's remarks.

"The Heart Kingdom," she answered in the same tone, but her eyes were glinting. "Ramin, Charlotte are gone in the mansion. Your mother too."

"Tilly, I think I am slow-witted. I don't understand."

"Claude had done it." Tilly breathed out heavily as her eyes darkened. "He had reversed the time. A time when you and Sunny aren't born yet.. And the dead are back to life."

Chapter 648 - What Was Happening?

Rufus rushed to the underground dungeon where Samael's coffin was kept. He ran like a madman, ignoring everyone who was asking him what was wrong. There was no doubt that the place and the very hallway he was sprinting through was the duke's mansion.

But why? Was he inside an illusion? All sorts of negative thoughts hovered over his head until he finally reached the underground dungeon.

"My lord, are you alright? Why are you suddenly acting strangely?" Fabian, who was following him behind, inquired as soon as Rufus stopped. The latter didn't answer, eyes on the closed coffin in the middle of this empty dungeon.

"What is going on...?" he wondered.

This time, Rufus took careful steps as he approached the coffin. His hand trembled as soon as he felt the concrete lid.

"My lord? What are you..."

SCREECH

Rufus ground his teeth as he slid the lid open. His heart sank almost instantly upon laying at Samael's pale face inside the coffin.

"No..." he staggered back, running his hand through his hair. "This illusion is too vivid."

As someone who had experienced all types of vampire abilities, Rufus could discern an illusion and reality. Hence, those abilities don't work for him. Even so, he couldn't believe he went back in time. It just didn't make sense.

But just when Rufus was racking his brain on what sort of situation this was, he froze. Something suddenly hovered over his head.

Stefan's letter.

"Find Lena..." he mumbled, recalling the words written in that letter. "Not my enemy... time was... expect for the worst... leave our fate in my hands...?" His heart stopped beating for a second as his eyes dilated.

Rufus was still unsure about most things, but his gut feeling told him this was it. This was the last game Stefan had in store for them. How did it happen? Rufus didn't know, but that was not important to him right now.

What was important to him was... Samael wouldn't wake up in the next five years. Then Lilou...

"Fabian, tell all the knights to search for a woman named Lilou in the town of Banse," Rufus ordered with his eyes on the coffin.

"But my lord, today is the annual gathering for the duke. The nobles will come in here today and..."

Fabian trailed off when Rufus turned around. His expression was wicked, eyes darkening as they glinted.

"I don't care about them. Find a peasant named Lilou!" Rufus' voice thundered across the dungeon, making Fabian flinch. "I'll join the search."

With that being said, Rufus stormed away in a hurry to find Lilou. If he truly went back in time, Rufus had to find Lilou at all costs. This was five years prior to Samael and Lilou's first meeting. If he remembered correctly, this was also the time when Lilou and Stefan were acquaintances.

He didn't know if they already knew each other or not yet. But that didn't matter. What alarmed him was that... Stefan might've come back with memories of the future. It would be easier if Stefan was just like Fabian, unaware of what was going on.

But if that wasn't the case, then things truly went from bad to worst.

'I truly hope that isn't the case,' Rufus prayed deep in his heart, trying to be an optimist about the situation. But to no avail. He couldn't. His gut feeling told him... Stefan had known all along this would happen. Because... he had seen the future.

[At the same time in Monarey]

Claude was cradling a woman's body in his arms. Kneeling on the grass at the castle's garden, his grip on the woman's body tightened.

"Auntie Lilove," he whispered through his gritted teeth, rocking his body while securing her in his arms. "You will be fine... you will be fine... it's alright. Uncle will be here soon... he should be here."

His eyes welled up, heart constricting. He mustered his courage to look at her to check whether her complexion was better after reversing the time before all this happened. But to his surprise, when he checked the woman in his arms, it wasn't Lilou.

"Penny...?" he whispered, feeling his heart sink. He raised his trembling hand, touching her cold cheek.

"Penny, why..."

Then it hit him.

The woman he saw lying in her pool of blood wasn't Lilou. It was Penny. Claude's mind went blank momentarily before the scene flashed before his eyes.

Last night, Penny told him to meet her in the garden. How she had access to the castle was because she was one of the earl's people. Claude didn't know the reason Penny asked to meet, but that was just how Penny was. So he went.

What welcomed him as soon as he arrived at their meeting place was a woman lying in her pool of blood. With Claude's increasing headache and hallucinations, when he approached, her hazel hair that was damped in red made him freeze.

That very second, while staring at the hazel hair, his mind only showed one picture. Lilou. Even when he checked, it was Lilou's face he saw and not Penny's.

Claude didn't have the luxury to wonder what happened or where was Samael because he was too busy shouting for help. But alas, she was already dying. No, she was already dead.

Desperate, Claude estimated the time of her death. He had never messed with the time for so long, but he wanted to reverse the time for at least one hour. Because of his determination to bring her back to life, he did.

Unbeknownst to him, while he was reversing the time, the blood of Grimsbanne unlocked in his veins. Hence, reversing it for more than a decade.

He didn't know that yet, though. All he could think of was that... he probably overdid it and extended it for a day. Aside from that, Claude's mind was blank seeing that Penny was still dead.

"Right..." came out a whisper, lips quivering. "... she isn't affected by my ability."

Suddenly, as Claude was trying to make sense of everything, knights surrounded him. Yet, he didn't look up from Penny's pale face.

"How did you get inside the earl's castle?!" The knights started interrogating him, but their voices sounded distant in Claude's ears. Until... he heard a familiar voice.

"You, what are you doing here with a corpse?"

Claude looked up, and his breath hitched. Before Claude was the previous earl of Monarey, Alistair La Crox. His uncle was looking down on him, brow arched.

"How... are you... back, Uncle?" he whispered, making Alistair's brows furrow.

"Uncle? I do not recall having a grown-up man as my nephew." His voice was the same, and he appeared to be truly alive. "However, I can smell something strange from you. Seize him."

The knights instantly executed the order, approaching Claude and dragging him by his shoulders. The confused Claude barely blinked as he tried to process what was going on. When his eyes fell on Penny's corpse, he snapped his eyes.

"No!" he roared, flinging his arms, which tossed the knights away. His actions slightly surprised Alistair, but his eyes instantly darkened.

"Who are you?" Alistair inquired in a brooding voice.

Claude clenched his teeth as he had one conclusion in his head. He reversed the time more than the time he planned. Instead of answering Alistair, he disappeared from his standpoint, only to reappear to pick up Penny's body.

"My lord!" a knight yelled at Alistair when Claude picked up some dirt and threw it at him. When the dust subsided, Claude was gone.

"Search Monarey and look for that intruder. I don't like the aura exuding from him..." Alistair uttered under his breath, eyes on the spot Claude vanished to. "... I can smell a La Crox. Did he come from the mainland?"

Chapter 649 - Epilogue

Hours before the present time...

Samael and Lilou made a stop on the outskirts of the capital to rest. Laying on the open field without a care in the world, both of them were staring at the night sky full of stars.

"Sam?" she called without taking her eyes off of the sky. "Do you believe in heaven?"

"Hmm... now? Yes." He cast his wife a side-eye. "She's right here."

Lilou chuckled as she turned her head to him. "I'm saying the heaven where the dead go once they leave the world."

"Well, I don't know, my love. Be it then or now, I think the concept of heaven and hell is life itself. Some live a good life, while others live a living hell. Heaven and hell are just people's beliefs that extend their lives beyond their grave." Samael shrugged, using his arm as a head cushion. For me, once you're dead, you're dead. That's it."

She smiled subtly while listening to his remarks. "That's so you, but I believe in heaven and hell. I want to believe that those who are good go to heaven and are living the best. No more worries or hardship. Just pure paradise." Her eyes softened, thinking about her father that she had loved so much.

"It gives me peace thinking Father isn't being tortured somewhere else."

"Do you think you will go to heaven?" he quirked a brow, staring at his wife's side profile.

"If I think like that, then I wouldn't be afraid of dying, Sam." Lilou rolled to her side, propping her temple against her knuckles. "I am certain I will go to hell for the sins I had committed. But until then, I'll enjoy the heaven I am currently living."

Her lips stretched into a big smile, poking the tip of his nose with her index. Samael was her safe haven. With him, she was at her best. There would be good days and bad days, but she felt like she could do everything for as long as her husband had her back.

"Lilou," he called under his breath, caressing her cheek with the back of his hand. "Come here, love."

Lilou crawled to him, resting her head on his chest. They were simply lying on the grass, but it didn't matter since their comfort was each other's warmth and affection.

"We came a long way, don't you think?" she whispered softly while he was patting her back. "We've been through a lot, and whenever I think about it, I can't help but be amazed and sentimental in a way."

"Mhm... we did."

"Being back in the empire brings back good and bad memories," she added.

"But here we are. We're freer than ever."

She smiled in peace. "Mhm. Never been this free. I love you, Sam. I really do."

"We should make out," Samael suggested as he rolled so he was lying on his side, facing her. A playful grin dominated his face, while Lilou suppressed her laughter.

"Not in here." Lilou clicked her tongue. "We're in an open space."

He frowned. "So what?"

"Have you forgotten why we're lying in this field? We're tired!" she brushed the apex of her nose against him while his frown grew worse. "How can you have the energy to make out all the time?"

"I always reserve my energy, duh?"

Lilou chuckled while watching the disappointment in his eyes. It was not like she was bothered making out with him out in the open. But she simply wanted to preserve this simple memory that was full of intimacy without going further. Another memory that they could prove they didn't need sex all the time to keep this marriage strong.

"Fine..." his frown remained while cupping her cheek. He stared at his wife's face as if etching it deep in his brain.

"I love you more, Lilou," he whispered. "Everything I did and all that I went through... I will go through them again just to be with you."

"Oh, Sam..." Lilou smiled and slowly closed her eyes as he bent down to claim her lips. Her hand on his shoulder blades tightened, smiling against his lips.

Meanwhile, Samael also closed his eyes to indulge in the warmth of her lips. Slowly and carefully, he drew his head back and opened his eyes.

However, when he opened his eyes, darkness welcomed him.

Samael blinked countless times, thinking he suddenly went blind. But nothing. It was just pure darkness. His mind went blank momentarily when he heard a very

familiar voice.

"Hey, Hell." Samael froze as soon as he heard Stefan's voice. "How have you been, brother? Surprised that you're back in that coffin?"

'What the...?'

Samael trailed off as panic struck him. *'... how are you... no... what the hell?'*

"Don't be surprised, brother." Stefan, who was standing near Lilou's father's burial mound at the back of her shack, laughed. He felt another strong gust of wind, taking it as Samael's responses, eyes on the duke's mansion.

"I will summarize what happened. Have you ever wondered why I took Claude in and didn't kill him with Lucia and Dyrroth? I kept him because I knew he would come in handy in the future," he explained calmly, holding his hand behind him. "Although that is the initial plan, I truly didn't want this to happen. I sincerely hoped Lena and the Nightwalkers will fail, so I can tell myself I did my best, but my best isn't good enough."

"But it truly seemed you had grown complacent just because I was dead already," he continued and shook his head lightly, feeling that the wind blowing past him was growing stronger. "Anyway, don't worry too much. I am just as tired as you. Just hope that Law will manage to help you since I chose him and gifted him the future. Until then, let me borrow your wife."

Stefan slowly turned around and faced the person clad in blood. A subtle smile appeared on his lips as his eyes softened.

"I told her I wished to never see her in my next life... because I don't know what I'll do if we did," he whispered, seeing the young Lilou look at him in surprise. There was no pity or hate in her eyes anymore. Just pure surprise and desperation after her first vampire kill.

"It's you?" she asked him, just like the question she uttered in the past. "You came?"

Unlike in the past, Stefan didn't speak. But the course of events followed through. Lilou rushed to him, clutching his cloak, and marveled at his breathtaking beauty.

She rested her forehead against his chest, looking down with soft eyes. "I'm sorry I'm late. Something happened on the way, but I'm home now," she whispered, almost on the verge of tears. "Don't leave me now, hmm?"

"I won't," he said under his breath, guiding her chin up to look at his dangerous eyes. "Not in this lifetime, sweetheart."

"Not in this lifetime, sweetheart."

Samael held his breath while listening to this conversation for the second time. Although Lilou uttered the same words before, Stefan's reply and aura were different.

"Stefan...!" he shouted, grinding his teeth as he forced himself to wake up but to no avail.

Chapter 650 - Epilogue II

Rufus rushed to the little town of Banse to look for Lilou. He didn't waste a second, heading straight to Lilou's shack. But when he arrived, no one was there anymore. She wasn't in the town or in the field with the farmers.

"Where did she go?" he wondered, standing in the middle of the shack with his hands on his hips. "Should I wait for her?"

He didn't want to believe Lilou had already gone with someone. Deep down, Rufus prayed the worst had yet to come. However, that faint hope instantly disappeared when he noticed a parliament placed on the table. For a small place like this shack, a parliament lying around was something one wouldn't expect.

Rufus approached it with eyes glinting dangerously, taking off the rock over the folded parliament. He immediately picked it up to read it. As his eyes scanned the brief letter, Rufus's eyes darkened.

The letter says;

"To Sir Knight,

What a surprise, Sir Knight! I didn't think you will also return with memories of the future. Well, I guess the Nightwalkers and Lena weren't completely successful. But wasn't that interesting?

Anyway, I will keep this short since I am in a hurry. If you're reading this, then that means Lilou and I were gone to a place where I only know. I will borrow her... permanently.

I am saying so as a warning. Don't come after us if you don't want to meet the swift release in this world."

Rufus crumpled the piece of paper until his fist trembled. The worst had already happened. Stefan had already taken Lilou with him.

Where?

"My lord...." he ground his teeth as he stormed outside the shack, stopping several feet away and turning his head in the mansion's direction. The wind was unnaturally strong. Samael was conscious and Rufus, who had been with him for a long time, could tell the duke was furious.

His fingers slowly curled into a tight fist, jaw tightening. *'Fabian remembers nothing that already happened and it seems only a few retained their memories. Stefan and I were a given, but who else? Who else in this empire remembers?'* His heart was thumping loudly against his chest. There were just too many questions, and he had no answer. Rufus resumed and rode his horse, Bella. He galloped back to the duke's mansion while dwelling on the next steps.

What would he do now?

Samael was still in his slumber, and Stefan took Lilou with him. If he could wake up Samael, he would've done it. But Samael didn't even know how he awoke from his slumber in the past. He just did when his seal weakened. And that would happen five years later. Could they all wait for that long?

Was he all alone in this problem? If Lilou was gone, what would happen now? What sort of change did Stefan seek? Whatever it was, one thing was for sure. If Lilou gets attached to Stefan... it would be the end for them.

Samael would lose it, literally.

"My lord."

Rufus loosened his fist, standing in front of Samael's coffin in the mansion's basement. He remained silent while taking careful breaths, still cooling his head down after frantically searching for Lilou. Even now, there was a search party for her, looking into every nook and cranny to find her.

He knew Lilou wasn't in Grimsbanne, though. Knowing Stefan, they probably hadn't gone that far. But he also knew that even though they're probably close, it would be harder to retrieve Lilou all on his own.

Who would believe him? At this point, Rufus believed Lilou didn't have her memories as well. Even if he successfully meet Lilou, would she come with him? The problem didn't just come one after another.

It came all at once, like usual. Driving them into the corner once again.

"My lord, if you are listening... then this humble subject will have to set off to the capital." Rufus' voice was low but determined, eyes on the closed coffin. "It may be foolish of me, but I have to do everything I can to get a hold of the Madam."

He paused, taking a deep breath, which he released through his mouth. "I need to gather people on our side who maintained their memories. Although I am not hopeful... I could not think of efficient methods to resolve this matter. So please... wake up." Once again, he balled his hand into a tight fist until they trembled.

Rufus stayed in the basement in silence for a long time. When he finally turned his back against the coffin, a glint flickered across his eyes while walking away. Rufus already knew that once he leave Grimsbanne, he could only expect the worst.

The reason he steeled his heart at every step.

'We will fix this...' he took an oath internally, listing down all the people that possibly kept their memories. *'I wondered if Beatrix and Heliot were able to keep their memories...?'*

"Fabian!!!" As soon as Rufus left the basement, his voice rang across the entire mansion. "Fabian! Come with me! Stop playing butler... I need Ian."

Meanwhile, in the borders between La Lona March and Monarey, Claude stood in front of a burial mound he created deep in the woods. He clenched his teeth, eyes on the burial mound he made for Penny.

"Penny..." he whispered, balling his hand into a fist. "... what happened?"

In his heart, Penny was an important person. Actually, Claude thought they had something going on. That after bickering at every turn, he had gotten closer to Penny. However, he couldn't even grieve at this point because of the situation.

After fleeing from Monarey and Alistair, the current Earl of Monarey, Claude was certain he reversed the time more than he meant to. Also, it seemed Alistair didn't recognize him. That must mean Alistair was unaware he already died at the hands of Klaus.

"Penny..." he hung his head low. "...just what the hell did I do?"

Claude remained silent as he stood still for a long time. Time passed by and he only raised his head when a soft gust of wind blew past him. He looked up at the tangerine sky, eyes full of regret.

"I need to go, Penny..." he whispered, jaw tightening as resolution filled his heart. "... Tilly will surely come. For now, I have to make sure we don't miss each other."

In the fort of the mainland...

"Tilly." Law held Tilly's hand, his worry dominating his face. He squeezed her hand, making Tilly look down at him.

Tilly kept her stoic expression, saying nothing as she turned around to see the people that came to her. The members of the La Crox clan on the mainland.

"Matilda," called a man in his deep baritone voice. "What do you mean, you will leave the mainland?"

"Look after this child." Tilly glanced at her other hand where she was holding Sunny. "Law and I will have to fix something."

"Tilly, don't leave me." Sunny, an adorable little girl with chubby pinky cheeks, cast her puppy eyes. She then turned to Law worriedly. "Big brother... don't leave Sunny."

"Sunny..." Law pressed his lips into a thin line and looked up at Tilly. "Let's not leave Sunny, Tilly."

Tilly let out a shallow breath, darting her eyes between Law and Sunny. They were pitiful, she thought. However, leaving the mainland was dangerous for these children.

"Sunny." Tilly planted a palm on top of Sunny's head. "You will stay here. It's too dangerous for you to go. Don't worry. We will come back with your parents and Fabian."

"But..."

"They will be worried. Do you want that?" Sunny frowned but then shook her head, making Tilly nod before setting her eyes at the people before them. "Leo, I will need your help. I do not know how to sail with a child."

Leo, the person who had been sending Tilly eggs, and also the person in charge of the intruders in the land, gazed at Tilly solemnly. It was no secret that Tilly was the last pureblooded Grimsbanne who remained on the mainland.

"Then I will assist you, Lady Matilda."

Tilly nodded as she pushed Sunny to her relatives lightly. She looked at the little girl before turning around, eyes on the sea. Her eyes glinted sharply, looking at the horizon.

"We have to move before it's too late," she whispered, squeezing Law's hand. "Samael... he is in danger."

With the past becoming the present, and the past changing, their future once again became uncertain. From here on out, things would change. And Tilly was aware of the worst change that could happen when the law of the order was broken.

Tragedy.

As the hourglass was flipped, every single one of them was at the risk of danger. No one was safe. No villains or protagonists. Just... death. Hence, the originals must step in before this entire world would be stuck in a time loop.

"Leo, once we reach the Heart's Kingdom, you must go to this particular place in the world." Tilly's voice remained solemn. "I need my sister and big brother's help. You must seek them."

— End of Epilogue II —