

The Duke 671

Chapter 671 A hell of a ride

When night fell, the uninvited guests in the royal palace gathered in the Avolire palace. Thanks to Silvia, who allowed them to use her space, which Fabian requested, they didn't have to sneak around like rats.

Silvia looked at the people coming into the garden of the Avolire palace. She had ordered everyone to leave the palace, but she somehow regretted her decision. Coming into the garden from all directions were familiar faces and new ones. Her eyes landed on the petite woman with very long silver hair, which she assumed would sweep the floor if it wasn't tied up. Still, the faint ringing of the bell attached to her ponytail somehow left an impression on Silvia.

From the opposite direction was a child with the same white hair. He looked to be around ten, a little younger than her nephew, Claude. In just one glance, Silvia immediately caught the uncanny resemblance of the child to her brother, who stood in the middle of the garden.

Silvia's eyes fell on the people in the middle. Stood on the landscape were Samael and Rufus while Cassara stood right in front of Fabian. Discomfort and reluctance dominated her sister's face while Fabian was still smiling politely.

"Just what is going on?" she hugged herself, having an uncomfortable feeling creeping into her heart.

Fabian didn't tell her much, but he told her they needed to recover Fabian's memories. He even voiced his dismay that Silvia's ability was the complete opposite of Cassara's since Silvia's ability was to erase and rewrite while Cassara was to retrieve.

More than all that, Silvia was getting more concerned about Samael's awakening from his slumber. Staring at Samael, Silvia's eyes couldn't help but move to the person standing next to her brother. When she did, her breath hitched when she caught Rufus's eyes looking back at her.

However, there wasn't any hint of emotions in his eyes as he averted them from her to Fabian and Cassara. Silvia bit her inner lip before she shifted her attention to those two.

"Do it now. I don't have forever," Samael urged coldly, natural sharp eyes looking back at Cassara, who cast him a side-eye. Cassara ground her teeth as she clicked her tongue, still against helping them.

If this was in the past, Cassara would've stayed stubborn. But she had grown, and she wasn't so stupid as to die just like that. If Samael said he didn't need her alive to bring back Fabian's memories, then that was the truth. Cassara was just starting to enjoy her second chance in life, so she didn't want to waste it on something so stupid.

Cassara raised her eyes to Fabian and scoffed. "Just in case you don't know, I hate you," she spat out through her gritted teeth, eyes full of contempt at this notorious lunatic standing at arm's length.

"I don't want you to be part of my life," she added, balling her hand into a tight fist. "I hope you die."

Fabian simply smiled politely as he tilted his head down slightly. He had served Samael for a very long time to understand the royalties' abilities. It also meant he knew each ability had its downside.

By recovering Fabian's memories, Cassara had to see all those memories from his perspective herself.

In other words, his memories would be hers to carry. Cassara might have a strong will, but seeing other people's memories and perceiving them as her own was a double-edged sword. That was how her mother lost her mind. By uncovering people's memories, she got so confused in discerning which were her real memories and those intrusive ones.

"Of all people..." she whispered as she took a step forward, already getting a gist of what sort of horrible memories she would unlock. Fabian was a lunatic, after all. If there was someone who was worse than Samael, then that would be Fabian.

"I'm sorry if I am the one who needed help, Your Royal Highness." Fabian shrugged mildly while Cassara stopped at arm's length in front of him. "I will be forever grateful to you."

"As you should."

Cassara extended her arms and reached for his head. Holding either side of his head, she took a deep breath with her eyes closed. When she reopened her eyes, Cassara huffed and looked him straight in the eye.

"This will be a hell of a ride," she whispered, and Fabian smiled.

"Enjoy the ride."

As soon as the last syllable escaped his lips, her eyes dilated as her grip around his head tightened. And in a blink of an eye, Cassara was pulled to the memories of this man since he was a child. First, all she saw was a child crying in the stable with blood and an umbilical cord attached to him.

The memories then skipped to the time he was a petite boy; dirty, malnourished, and weak. His ragged clothes were enough to discern he was born from mud poverty. He was gazing at the other boys ganging up on him after beating him, leaving him all black and blue.

When one of the boys raised his foot to kick him in the head once again, a loud yell came from his side. The young and poor Fabian turned his head only to see his older brother holding a stick and a stone, yelling, running to rescue him. With this admirable boy who often comes to his rescue, all Fabian could do was watch Rufus chase the bullies away.

His brother was the bravest person he had ever known and also the kindest. Rufus had always defended him and protected him. However, because of that, the next memory showed Cassara how Rufus has almost been beaten to death. Those he chased away came back to him with a larger group and with adults.

Beaten black and blue, Fabian could only stare at his brother slumped on the ground with blank eyes. Rufus was barely breathing and even though he survived that life and death situation, a promise rose in Fabian's heart.

He wouldn't allow anyone to hurt his only family anymore... even if he had to sell his soul to the devil.

Chapter 672 She had seen too much

Fabian was a normal young peasant, barely surviving at a young age. When his mother passed and their abomination of a father, who only thought of himself, all Fabian has was his older brother,

Rufus. His older brother stood like his parents, working manual labor at a young age to raise his little brother.

But life wasn't fair.

For these boys, no matter how they tried to live morally, it was never enough. Thus, Rufus, who thought working hard was the way in life, had to resort to stealing to feed two mouths, risking his young life day by day just so the two of them survived.

Things weren't particularly good, but they were surviving. Until years passed and Fabian became the target of bullying. When life was hard, people tend to unload their anger on those weaker than them. Sadly, Fabian wasn't as strong, brave, and capable as Rufus, and was a victim of constant beating for no reason.

The reason Rufus had to step up his game. Rufus, a teenage boy who only thought stealing was the gravest sin he would commit, used his fist to protect his only family. He became a ruffian, constantly involved in brawls only for the sole reason to teach everyone who touched his little brother a lesson.

Their life was a cycle of beating people up or getting beaten. It was a vicious life. Thus, when Rufus was beaten to the point he nearly died, Fabian swore he wouldn't let his brother worry about him anymore. That he wouldn't be the main reason for those bruises and scars.

But Fabian, who believed Rufus' life would be a little peaceful if he leave, was wrong.

Rufus had already fallen into the abyss and their life was something that wouldn't be reversed easily. Just like how Fabian found beauty in blood and death, Rufus' only way to survive was to stand tall.

Unknowingly, the Barrett Brothers created each other.

Rufus became a ruffian who ruled the Mock Town, which was now called Grimsbanne, even though when the only person why he became a rogue left on his own. Meanwhile, Fabian became a lunatic, bathing with vampire blood for research, even though his initial reason for leaving was for Rufus to lead a better life.

Both didn't mention it to each other even at the present time, but they had constantly wondered; what happened?

When Fabian returned to Mock Town, Rufus was no longer the leader of the gang in the said land. Instead, everything had changed because there was a particular vampire who claimed the land. The moment he met the infamous banished prince, Fabian instantly knew that the man was someone he would serve.

However, the term "serve" was something Fabian wasn't fond of. He had slaughtered vampires and humans alike for his own reason. Never once had Fabian bow his head to anyone when he left his brother. There was no way he would do that, but what life had in store for him was different.

Samael, Rufus's master, was a remarkable man. Not because he was bored enough to rebuild the neglected town, nor was it because he was a royalty. Samael was different and had his way into people. This vampire, who was strong enough to fight the current king, accepted Fabian.

It didn't matter how dark and twisted Fabian was, nor did Samael flinch when he came to know how Fabian was unable to control his violent urges. Instead, Samael accepted and helped him.

"If you go out of control, then I'll beat the crap out of you until you regain your senses."

Those were the words Samael uttered with a bright grin, unbothered by the bruises across his face and the blood oozing from his body Fabian inflicted on him. It wasn't an exaggeration to consider Samael as the Barrett Brother's light.

Therefore, to calm himself down, Fabian agreed to a blood contract that bound his life to Samael. A contract where Samael's words were absolute and had more value than his own. Samael had also sealed Fabian's corrupted heart, which was caused by creating Maleficent.

Maleficent. A dark spear that trapped and devoured souls. Although it was an object, it was more or less alive. Something that only those who were strong enough to control it could only wield, or else it would devour its holder. It was a double-edged sword.

How it was created? Only a few individuals knew.

Fabian did not solely create maleficent. In fact, he simply took part in it and wielded it, bathing it with countless blood and life. The very person who helped Fabian create it was... a witch.

Fast forward to the time Fabian had become a head butler in Samael's manor, who somehow gained the title of the duke with the restoration of Mock Town. As Samael occasionally visited the capital, Fabian noticed Rufus' inclination toward a particular royalty.

Silvia.

Everyone knew Rufus and Silvia's past and their story. It was no secret that their love for each other was strong, but it wasn't strong enough to last with all the problems that arose. However, there was more behind the story of Silvia and Rufus, and everything that had happened that no one else knew aside from Fabian... and now Cassara.

"You!" Cassara's breath hitched as she abruptly retrieved her hand from his temple, jolting back at the memories she had seen. However, she wasn't quick enough as Fabian suddenly grabbed his jaw to silence her.

"How amusing," he mused with a sly smirk, gazing down at Cassara's pair of dilated eyes.

"Fabian, let go of her." Samael darted his eyes to Fabian and Cassara indifferently. "Do you now remember everything?"

Fabian smiled politely, casting Samael a side-eye. "Yes, my lord. It was a little... strange."

"Fabian, I know it's strange, but let go of her," Rufus chimed in with his classic emotionless voice.

"He can't." Before anyone could respond, Tilly's voice caressed their ears. Samael arched a brow as he glanced at Tilly, while Rufus furrowed his brows. Meanwhile, Fabian kept Cassara under his grip with a subtle smile on his face.

"She had seen quite a lot of my memories, My Lord. How can I let someone like that go?" Fabian tilted his head to the side, raising his hand until Cassara's feet left the ground. Her protest was muffled, holding his wrist and digging her nails into his skin.

'Let me go!' were her repeating muffled screams.

"Let her go." This time, Samael's voice grew colder. "That is not how you thanked the person who retrieved your memories."

Fabian's eyes glinted, keeping them at Cassara. He held her for several seconds before he eventually let her go, and she landed on the ground with a thud. While she was coughing and catching up to her breathing, Fabian's eyes drooped until they were partially closed.

"One word and I'd slit your throat, Your Royal Highness. Don't even think about opening your mouth."

Chapter 673 What did you even see in me?

"One word and I'd slit your throat, Your Royal Highness. Don't even think about opening your mouth."

Fabian's warning took everyone off guard while Cassara ground her teeth, glaring daggers at him. They stared at each other for a moment before he raised his chin up.

"I'll gather my thoughts for tonight, my Lord." He tilted his head down and without waiting for Samael to respond, Fabian already turned around to leave. As he did, he gazed at Tilly, who was standing still in her spot.

"You better," Tilly whispered, staring at Cassara as he walked past her.

"I will."

Tilly glanced over her shoulder before setting her eyes back to Samael and everyone. She could understand their surprise since Fabian rarely threaten someone bluntly. He was the type to just do things in a roundabout way. So, witnessing him threaten Cassara obviously raised questions in everyone's head.

"What's wrong with him?" Rufus frowned, staring at Fabian's retreating back.

"He dislikes someone invading his privacy." Unlike everybody else, Samael didn't care much as he shrugged. "Thank you for your help, sister. I promise this is the last time I will ever bother you."

"The last time?!" Cassara mocked, shifting her glares at him. "Do you think even if you don't show up in front of me, that abomination won't bother me?! How are you certain he won't come to me, hah?! Just what will it take you to stop using other people to achieve your goal? Just what did I do to you that I deserved this?!"

Samael kept his mouth shut while Cassara got so worked up, screaming her remarks at the top of her lungs. Normally, no one would wonder why she was throwing a huge fit. This woman was Cassara. She would throw a huge fit over the pettiest things.

But now... she was angrier than she ever was.

"You didn't deserve this, I know. However, as I said, I'm not playing either. People want to mess with me and I had to decide. It's either other people or my family." His tone was icy and didn't have the slightest remorse in it. "My answer is obvious. I don't care if I used everyone in this world or gain their hatred, so long as to keep my family safe. And I'm not sorry for it."

Cassara scoffed, watching Samael turn around. He didn't even look back as he strutted away, heading towards his son's vantage point.

"You..." she ground her teeth, clutching her hand until her fingers were digging into the ground underneath the grass.

Law looked at her worriedly before following his father, causing her to let out another scoff. She then shifted her eyes to the other woman they were with. Tilly simply looked at her; her expression unreadable before she also followed Samael and Law.

Meanwhile, Rufus stayed in his spot, wondering if he should help her get up or not. He only decided when Cassara glared at him.

"Scram! This is your fault!" she spat out through her gritted teeth, pushing herself up, fighting off the tremors in her knees. When Cassara stood up, she raised her chin, angrier the more she stared at Rufus.

"I hope you die!" she cursed, lifting her skirt as she turned around. The second she did, her breath hitched as she caught Silvia's figure from a distance. She glanced at her sister and snapped her tongue in irritation.

"Serves you right. I hate you all."

With that being said, Cassara stomped her feet in the opposite direction from where Samael had taken. She was grumbling while walking away, leaving the avolire garden with only Rufus still standing in his spot.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, staring at Cassara's back. Rufus had served Samael for a very long time. Therefore, he knew Samael didn't mean to do the extreme. But just like what he said, people were scheming to take their life. If Samael hesitated even for a second, the consequences would be dire.

Between his family and others, Samael didn't mind becoming the devil himself if that was the only way to protect the people dear to him. It wasn't a noble act, but Rufus understood this because, at one point, he was also in the same situation, and he also had to make a choice.

His eyes veered in Silvia's direction. The two of them looked at each other for a moment. His jaw tightened before he forced himself to turn around. However, just as he did, he halted.

"Wait!" Silvia called, rushing in his direction. "Ru, what is going on here? Who are those people, and why did Cassara —"

"It's something that is not worthy of your concern, Your Royal Highness." He cut her off as he faced her squarely. "We would set off tomorrow or the next day, so I would take this opportunity to thank you for your help on behalf of His Grace. He might not have the time to express his appreciation with the matters at hand."

As usual, Rufus only spoke of those that were important as he tilted his head down. But he hadn't turned around when Silvia laughed in ridicule.

"It's not something that is worthy of my concern?" she scorned, looking at him in disbelief. "My brother is obviously not alright, and even though I didn't have a good relationship with Cassara, she's still my sister. You let people — outsiders inside the palace, and you are telling me this is not something that I shouldn't concern myself with?"

"Am I a joke to you, Ru?" she added, shaking her head mildly. "It doesn't mean I loved you and still love you, don't necessarily mean I had to put up with this. You always say things like this — things... you always think you can decide for me."

Silvia looked at him with utter dismay, shaking her head as she took a step back. "What a shame. Why did I even like you in the first place?" she wondered before turning around to leave. But after taking several steps away, she stopped.

"I also wonder, Via. What did you even see in me?"

Chapter 674 His heart had spoken

"I also wonder, Via. What did you even see in me?"

Silvia's breath hitched at his question. It had been a very long time since Rufus called her like that. Rufus only called her by her name when things between them were still good. However, after that, never once did Rufus address her without honorifics.

"Why are you wasting your time on someone who thinks he can decide for you?" she turned around as he continued, only to see him looking back at her with utter bitterness in his eyes. "What we had is something I was grateful for. However, it's not worth dwelling on it anymore. You and I... we already knew it will never work between us. Even if you still love me and I..."

Rufus trailed off as he bit his tongue. He knew he shouldn't be spewing things like this and leaving things as they were. But he had already opened his mouth. Then again, they would leave the Capital tomorrow or the next day. Once they did, they wouldn't return until things were settled.

He balled his hands into a tight fist as he mustered the courage to express his heart for once. Just this once, he thought, he wanted to tell her the things he wished he had told her. Because once things were over, he believed they would all return to their life and there was no other chance to say this to her.

"... I loved you, Via. I still do." Her eyes dilated as she held her breath, doubtful of the words in her ears. "There was a point in my life that I thought if I could reverse the time, I would do better. To keep you, to have you again, and to love you correctly."

Rufus took a step forward until he was standing in front of her. He looked at her face gently, raising his hand to cup her face. As soon as his trembling palm touched her cheek, he smiled bitterly, feeling his longing for her increase.

"You don't have any idea how many times I thought of you, of holding you, being with you, and doing everything with you. Even right now, I still longed for you. I wanted to be selfish and delude myself we can still be happy — you and I," he continued, staring into her eyes while tears shone in them. "I can't, Via. I can't be with you again."

"Why?" she asked under her breath, holding his hand that was cupping her cheek. "I still love you and you still feel the same. There's no one who will stop us this time. I promise I will do it properly, Ru. Let's not yearn for each other anymore and just be with each other, hmm?"

His lips were pressed into a thin slash, staring at her deeply. He caressed her lean cheek with his thumb, treasuring every second he could. This was probably the only To her dismay, he shook his head. Seeing his gesture, her heart instantly sank as her lips quivered.

"Why?" she whispered. "Why would you suddenly say all that? Are you perhaps thinking it'll be fun to watch me hold on to the sliver of hope only for you to take it away? Why, Rufus? Why?"

His lips were pressed into a thin slash, staring at her deeply. He caressed her lean cheek with his thumb, treasuring every second he could. This was probably the only time he had to look at her this close and without concealing the desire in his eyes.

"Because... you're not mine anymore." Her brows furrowed, and before she could argue with him, he continued. "There will be a point in your life where you'll be happy with only your company and have someone who will love you the way you deserved to be loved and valued. I can't take that away from you."

Because at the end of the day, even when Yulis and Silvia couldn't remember their story, Rufus remembered. He witnessed it with his own eyes, watching the love of his life, let go of the shackles that bound her with him.

Rufus was not doing this for Yulis or for Samael or for himself. That would be hypocritical.

If he was going to be selfish and choose himself, he would've taken advantage of the situation to get a different ending. However, even if he deeply wanted to, he couldn't cheat Silvia. He couldn't take her happiness away just because he couldn't let her go.

Silvia was happy and content with her life before the reversal of time. She didn't voice it out frequently, but he could tell since he had been watching her from a distance. She had rebuilt herself from scratch and he didn't want to ruin that.

"Are you predicting the future again?" came out a disbelief voice, watching him shake his head mildly.

"No." He forced a smile on his face. "I just know because you're Silvia."

"Hah... that again — don't make me laugh."

"Silvia," he called and let out a deep exhale, waiting for her to look him straight in the eye. "Please let me go. Let yourself go."

Her mouth opened and closed, but her words were stuck in her throat. She couldn't understand him and his reason for stirring her emotions, only to break her heart once again.

"You're so cruel," came out a muffled voice, suppressing her tears from escaping her eyes. Silvia bit her lower lip, pounding her fist against his chest weakly.

"Why...? If you don't plan to heal me, then why would you say things you know will ruin me?" her voice cracked and before she knew it, hot liquid rolled down her cheek. "You're selfish... I hate you... I hate you..."

Rufus let out a shallow breath as he let her punch him weakly, but he didn't take his words back. In the end, although he didn't selfishly take her back, he was still selfish for expressing his heart, knowing it would only hurt her.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, warranting a snicker from her. "I'm really sorry."

"Shut up!" Silvia clutched his chest, grinding her teeth, glaring daggers at him. Her bloodshot eyes dug into his eyes, letting him see how he could ruin her with mere words so he would know how his very existence devastate her.

"Don't... ever show your face to me ever again," she expressed out of spite, clutching his chest tighter before loosening her grip. "You asked me what I saw in you? Honestly, I also wonder what I like about a bastard like you. If only I knew... I wouldn't be like this."

Silvia took a step back and huffed, shaking her head in disappointment, eyes on him. She scoffed once again before she turned around, leaving him behind without ever looking back.

Meanwhile, Rufus stayed still and watched her leave him all alone.

'It's better this way,' he thought, mentally nodding in agreement. 'We won't be able to see each other, anyway. I'm sorry, Via. I really do.'

Rufus stayed there for as long as he could remember. When he turned around to leave, he heard something from within shatter. Although he had closure with Silvia before the reversal of time, it was more or less Silvia's closure. Rufus never got to express his heart and only now did he muster the courage.

Although the timing wasn't perfect and he had hurt her once again, Rufus had more reason to put things back in their rightful place. His eyes glinted with determination, enduring the striking pain in his heart.

'I'll make sure your pain will not last for years, Via.'

Chapter 675 My bad

Silvia rushed to her chambers and cried a river. Her pillow was drenched with tears, hating Rufus for messing with her heart once again. She hated the man, but deep in her heart, she knew she didn't hate him to the point she didn't want to see him.

She just couldn't understand it. Rufus had kept his sentiments to himself all these years, but suddenly, he would spew all that. Despite that, Silvia didn't have the luxury to dwell deeper into his remarks as she bawled her eyes. Her tears continued, face buried in the pillow.

As the night fell and only her sniffles filled her room, Silvia hiccuped. Slowly, she pushed herself up and looked around the dark bedroom. Her eyes fell on the armchair near the bed, narrowing her eyes at the silhouette of the man sitting on it.

"What are you doing here?" she asked and hiccuped. Silvia endeavored on his face, but she couldn't make up what sort of expression he had on his face, aside from knowing he was looking in her direction.

"Are you here because of your brother again?" she continued. "If you are so concerned about him, don't go to me because, between the two of us, he was the one who was hurting me. Not the other way around, Fabian."

"I came here because your miserable state makes me feel better." His voice was low but nonchalant. "It makes me think there is someone who is even more miserable than I am. Thus, please continue."

"Hah..." she laughed in disbelief, shaking her head mildly. "Just what did I do to be tortured by you two? The other one gave me a sliver of hope only to take it away, while the other enjoys watching me wallow in misery. Really... what a joke."

Fabian remained silent while Silvia laid down once again.

"I hate you two," she whispered, expressing her contempt towards the Barrett Brothers. "You shouldn't have shown up in my life."

"That's my wish as well, Your Royal Highness," Fabian replied after a minute of silence. "You shouldn't have appeared in my brother's life."

Silvia glanced over at him and snapped her tongue. Her mouth opened and closed, but she decided not to respond.

"Go out. I'm not someone who should entertain you just because Cassara retrieved your awful memories." She waved as she tossed on the bed, ready to continue what she had been doing. "Leave me alone."

She stayed silent for minutes and then hours, but Silvia didn't sleep. Neither did Fabian leave her chambers. She didn't know why Fabian was suddenly inside her room, but she didn't want to engage in a conversation with him again. Silvia didn't have the spare energy to even ask him to leave the second time.

"You will marry someone else," Fabian spoke after hours of silence but received no answer. "You'll forget about him..."

"Never." He trailed off when she argued, but Silvia kept her position with her back facing him. "I will never forget. You can say whatever the hell you want, but I know my heart better than anyone else."

Slowly, she pushed herself to sit upright, facing Fabian with her swollen eyes. Although she couldn't see his expression, she was certain he was looking in her direction.

"Right now, all I feel is pain, and I'm not saying you should understand my circumstance. However, even if you say there will be a time in the future that the pain wouldn't hurt as much as it hurts now, you have no right to tell me I will forget because I knew I will never forget." Her voice was low, but full of certainty. "I may love and yearn for another, but Rufus... he is someone I will never forget. If only I can, I would've done it already. I would've unloved him so I wouldn't be in this pain. If only I can use my abilities to myself... hah! Never mind."

"You have no idea of the things regarding the matters of the heart, Fabian. Therefore, you have no credibility to lecture me," she added solemnly.

Fabian, whose face was hidden behind the thick darkness, lowered his eyes. In contrast to her, he could see her clearly because of the light coming from the window behind her.

"Maybe you were right," he admitted. "Perhaps I'm not credible to speak about the matters of the heart. But I will still put my hand in my heart and swear it's for the better."

"For the better?"

"That you and him... and the things that happened that eventually led to your parting." Fabian planted his palms on the armrest and pushed himself up. "When I said you shouldn't have entered our life, I meant it literally. This is the last time I will allow you to hurt my brother, Your Royal Highness. The next time..."

Fabian halted in his tracks as he glanced over his shoulder. "The next time, you'll pay," he warned. "But this time, I will make sure you won't emerge from it."

Silvia frowned, watching his figure leave the chambers until the soft click of the door reached her ears. She had known all along what sort of person Fabian was. Both of them nearly became in-laws, so Silvia sort of had a close relationship — although it may sound presumptuous to even use that term.

"What did he even mean by that?" she grumbled before collapsing on the bed to wallow in her sorrows. But alas, after Fabian's visit, her attention shifted to the strange remarks Fabian uttered. Yet, no matter how deep she dwelled in it, Silvia simply met a dead end.

Meanwhile, the second Fabian exited Silvia's chambers without a sound, he halted. He looked to his left and his eyes instantly landed on a small and petite figure leaning against the wall.

Tilly raised her head and gazed at him, her crimson eyes glowing in the dark. "Your seal is broken."

"It's been broken for a long time, Lady Tilly." Fabian sported a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I thought a simple erasing of memory will fix it. You shouldn't have agreed for Her Royal Highness to retrieve the things I forced to erase."

"It can't be helped." Tilly retracted her back from the wall. "I'll resign to bed. Have a good night."

As she walked away, she heard him whisper. "You came here because you thought I will kill her?" She continued and only answered under her breath.

"My bad."

Chapter 676 Not an easy fix

"There's something wrong with Mister Fabian."

Samael looked down at his son as he tucked him into bed. Law's eyes were full of concern, just as keen as his father to detect something was off.

"His problem is not an easy fix, but he's Fabian and he has his ways to settle things down on his own." He sported a smile, brushing his son's forehead with the back of his hand. "Rest for tonight. We'll set off before dawn and see your mother."

Law pressed his lips into a thin line as he nodded, closing his eyes to force himself to sleep even when he didn't feel like it. He was already grateful that despite his father could feel very dangerous at times, he still tried to be a father to him.

As he watched his son sleep, Samael sat on the edge of the mattress. His legs spread open, resting his elbow on his thigh, and buried his face in his palm. A deep exhale slipped past his lips, hearing a faint creak coming from the door. And yet, he didn't raise his head to check who was standing in the corner, looking at him in silence.

"I told you it's a terrible decision," Tilly spoke after several minutes of silence. "He'll never get the peace he wants with your sister, retrieving the memories you erased from him."

Samael pulled down his hands, only for his eyes to look at Tilly. He glanced over his shoulder, checking if Law was already asleep. Despite his son's chest moving up and down heavily, Samael pushed himself out of the bed and walked towards the terrace.

"Not here, Tilly," he said, glancing at her. He didn't invite her to come with him, but Tilly followed him until the two of them were on the balcony.

She stood by the door, staring at his back as he leaned his arms against the railings. There was a long and thick silence between them and all she could hear for minutes was his continuous, deep sighs.

"I had no choice." He broke the silence with his incredibly low voice, gazing at the heavy darkness from afar. "I erased his memories with our blood contract, but I knew one day he would be able to regain them again. It's just a matter of when. All I can hope is Fabian being able to deal with them after years without them."

the idea. I need Fabian, Tilly. The Fabian before he became the butler and the holder of Maleficent. We need him, I need that Fabian."

"If it's that easy, he would've dealt with them without your help."

"I know... but it's been so long ago." Another sigh escaped his mouth as he ruffled his tousled silver hair. "Fabian had lived differently... he lived far better than when he was my father's henchman. I'm certain his will was no longer Fabian's."

"If you were that certain, you wouldn't be sighing continuously like this."

"But if I was a hundred percent uncertain..." he paused, turning around to look at the only person who knew things more than what she appeared. "I wouldn't even propose the idea. I need Fabian, Tilly. The Fabian before he became the butler and the holder of Maleficent. We need him, I need that Fabian."

Tilly opened her mouth, only to close them once again. Her eyes studied his eyes, and all she saw was desperation to use everything and everyone at his disposal to settle this situation. She couldn't blame him — his wife, son, and daughter were at stake and if he didn't step up on his game, he would lose them.

"What Fabian did for my father, and for that witch — Alphonse's mother — doesn't matter. I accepted him and fulfilled his wish to forget to let him live." Samael pivoted on his heel once again and turned his back against her. "It's time for him to embrace those things after years of running away from them."

"I don't think that's the only problem," Tilly voiced out. "Fabian was the cause Silvia had to sacrifice Rufus's men, subsequently putting an end to their story. It would've been better if he didn't feel the slightest guilt for his brother's misery, but he was."

There was a long silence between them, knowing this part of the story that even the people involved didn't know. It was a complicated detail of the past — a past that should've been long forgotten. A part of the past Fabian ran away from instead of facing them and leaving them behind settled.

"This reversal of time... is forcing us to face the matters in the past that we thought we had settled," Samael mumbled, thinking of all the things that had happened so far after the reversal of time.

Just like Fabian, who used to be one of the people who worked for the previous king — Samael's father — in the shadows, Cassara also had to face this confrontation she tried to ignore before her untimely death. Like Rufus, who had to express his heart while he could, knowing he wouldn't be able to in the future, Stefan also chose something that differed from his original decision.

It was neither good nor bad. Some could call it finding closure, others might consider it as something to make up for their regret. But Samael simply considered it as a mess.

"People's heart... and an inner turmoil is the worst enemy of all. Having enemies to fight is easier than being your own enemy," he added under his breath, closing his eyes to rest them for a bit. Meanwhile, Tilly remained silent as she walked towards the railings and stood beside him.

"Although I said it's a terrible decision, I didn't stop you because I believe in Fabian." Her voice was low and soft. "I'll monitor him closely."

"Thanks." He cast her a side-eye, only to notice the faint spark in her eyes. "What is it?"

"Since I will be busy with Fabian's condition, you'll have to carry a heavier burden on your shoulder." He frowned at her remark but kept silent. "Claude... there were two Claude in this lifetime. The younger and the older one."

Tilly slowly set her solemn eyes on him. "To put it simply, there should only be one that is alive in this lifetime. Samael, that also means..." his eyes dilated as he listened to her conclusion as he felt this heaviness placed on his shoulders that nearly caused his knees to tremble at the weight of it.

Chapter 677 Not all questions meant to have an answer

Another month passed and Lilou's life had always been the same as the previous months. Or rather, almost been the same aside from Stefan teaching her how to read and write during his free time.

"This feels weird," she mumbled, keeping the tip of the quill on the parchment as she raised her head to her side. Beside her, sitting around the round table, was Stefan. His arm was resting over the backrest of her chair, arching his brows as he waited for the continuation of her remarks.

"What weird?" he quoted when she didn't speak.

"Writing." Lilou gazed at the name she wrote herself. Although she knew a little bit of writing and reading, she wasn't well-versed in more than the stories she was told.

"Reading and having to comprehend... it's weird." She set her eyes back to Stefan once again. "It feels like I already read this before."

"Because maybe you did?" he tilted his head to the side. "Do you think the future empress wasn't a person who cannot read or write?"

"But I feel like my heart wants something else."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Err..." Lilou took a deep breath as she stared at the small pool of ink on the parchment. She tilted her head to the side, putting the quill back in its holder. Stefan simply furrowed his brows as he watched her carefully dip her finger into the drop of ink.

"Like this," she said, smearing the ink on the paper as she drew what looked like a flower. It was more like a child's doodle, but Stefan understood what she meant by that.

"It feels like I am more into drawing things," came out a mumble, staring deeply at the flower she drew as if she was expecting something. What she was expecting? Lilou didn't know, but she felt like she was waiting for something.

"It's weird. I feel like I am expecting something, but I don't know what it is.."

In other words, despite the reversal of time, there were some things that would never be forgotten. Especially if something was engraved deep in one's heart.

His lips pressed into a thin, tight slash. He studied the genuine wonder in her eyes, letting out a shallow breath.

"It's probably an activity you used to do." He shrugged, noticing that there was some mannerism that Lilou's body remembered, which her brain couldn't. He knew Lilou even before she met Samael before the reversal of time, and even though he didn't choose to make a monster out of her, he noticed the things she would do and would not do.

In other words, despite the reversal of time, there were some things that would never be forgotten. Especially if something was engraved deep in one's heart.

"My brother... he is an artist," he continued after a momentary silence, forcing a smile. "He enjoys painting and penning down the stories he had in his head. He's good at it, so I think that's that."

She frowned. "Is everything I do have to be related to your brother?"

"Well..."

"I don't like it, Lexx," she continued, peeling her eyes away from him to the flower she drew. "It makes me feel like all the decisions I made were because your brother told me to. Is he that detestable to control me?"

"No, it's not like —"

"Not like what?" she cut him off, facing him squarely. "Lexx, I understand you are keeping me at arm's length. I get it. However, I dislike it when you think everything that I do is because of your brother. I feel like I don't have an identity of my own and it's a little... disappointing."

The rest of her words came out as muffled, lowering her eyes to hide her disappointment.

"I told you. I live in the present. For you, this is the past, but for me, it's my present." Lilou smacked her lips and faced him once again. "Stop connecting everything I do to your brother. I don't even know him; what he looks like, what his voice sounds like, and what sort of character he had. Give me some slack, will you?"

"Alright... I'm sorry." Lilou sighed as she looked back at him once again at his admittance. "I'll try, alright? It's just... I don't have other answers to clear everything other than that."

"Not all questions are meant to be answered. If they were, then we would've known the meaning of life and death. Why would we live if we'll die, eventually? Why eat if you'd digest and excrete it?"

Lilou's questions ran on and grew even more ridiculous and negative, rendering him speechless as she kept a straight face. After some time, Lilou let out another deep exhale. She propped her elbow against the edge of the table and coiled her body to face him.

"If you don't know the answer, just say you don't know. Don't pressure yourself to answer everything — no one will figure out this world no matter how long you had lived." She shrugged and smiled, moving on from her disappointment previously. She raised a finger and smeared inked on his cheek, but he simply frowned at this mischief.

"That's what my father said," she continued knowingly, flashing a beautiful smile. "That's why instead of wondering about the things that are out of our control, let's focus on the things we can."

The reversal of time is out of our control and it already happened. The memories I was supposed to have over the duration of over ten years are gone, but that doesn't mean I can't make new ones."

Stefan stared at her smile, and his eyes softened. Surely, she had changed a little bit. Or rather, instead of the dark part of her dominating her, it was the little light she held onto slowly grew within without his interference — his bad influence.

"You're right —" he turned his head in the window's direction when he heard a light knock. His brow arched as he pushed himself up, seeing a bird on the windowsill.

Lilou followed his figure with her gaze and tilted her head, observing how he untied the letter from the bird's feet and skimmed through it. She furrowed her brows when Stefan looked back at her with a solemn expression.

"Heliot is inviting us to the palace," he announced in a low voice. "They're here."

Chapter 678 Just about time

Stefan had taught Lilou how to read and write, but also made her read books for her to learn about etiquette and the sort. Still, never once since she came with Stefan, did she ever dress up luxuriously — at least, not this luxurious as to wear a grand dress adorned with sequins and pieces of jewelry that illuminated the sparkle of the chandeliers hanging up in the banquet hall.

It was more of a little upgrade as she didn't have to wear ragged clothes and she could bathe because Stefan was a "little" concerned about her hygiene. But after he received that letter — an invitation — three days ago, things had spiraled to a 'concerning' turn, as the two of them had been busy preparing.

Well, mostly, she was busy staring at the dress that arrived Stefan procured without her knowing, while the latter was preoccupied with something else. Stefan often stayed in the study and barely made time for her until the last day before tonight.

Lilou looked around, staring at the lavished dresses and suits, through the mask concealing half of her upper face. It was a masquerade party hosted by the royal Von Stein family. Thus, they got in easily just by showing the invitation by the knights outside the vestibule.

"Nervous?" she flinched when Stefan leaned to her side, making her shift her eyes at the twinkling luxury filling the banquet hall to the man walking beside her. "Seems so."

"I feel a little... out of place," she admitted under her breath, laughing awkwardly as a failed attempt to shrug off her nervousness. "If not for this mask, I would've fainted."

Stefan chuckled and put her hand around his arm. "You'll be fine."

"I wish!" she raised her brows. "But I'm certain things like this are something I will never like."

He laughed because even ten years later, Lilou disliked banquets and tea parties as well. She was a woman who grew up in the street and even if her life would change significantly, she was more inclined to other things but banquets.

"I'm here." He tapped the back of her hand that was clinging to his arm. "You don't have to mingle with everyone since we came here for another reason."

"Right..." she sighed, glancing at the hand that was patting her hand. Somehow, his gentle hand calmed her slightly, before she noticed they were walking through the crowd on the side. "So, where are we going?"

Just before he could answer, someone in his formal suit approached them. He walked beside Stefan, keeping his voice low only for Stefan to hear.

Lilou saw the latter nod before she heard him say, "lead the way." He then turned his head to her, leaning toward her.

"To meet the prince," he answered her query, making her nod.

The two of them didn't particularly stand out, since everyone was wearing masks and lavish dresses to suit the occasion. She held onto his arm, eyes at the person's back, who was leading the way. Unlike the brightly lit banquet hall where they came from, the hallway leading to the chancery was rather dark and gloomy; there weren't also people they bumped into.

Their light footsteps echoed as Lilou was nearly tiptoeing to match these two trained men — Stefan and the one ahead of them — feather-like footsteps. She even heard her own swallow before the person leading the way stopped in front of the door.

"He's waiting for the two of you inside." The masked person motioned his hand towards the shut doors. He tilted his head down when Stefan nodded.

Without any more words uttered, Stefan walked towards the door and unhooked her hand around his arm. He shot her a look briefly, seeing her raise her brows before he smiled meekly.

"Let's head in," he announced, opening the door before standing on the side. "After you."

"Such a gentleman..." she mumbled, as it was unlike his usual character, but she didn't dwell on it as she entered the lodging room. Lilou stooped midway, her eyes falling onto the towering figure standing in front of the window. His back facing her.

She kept her eyes on his figure, watching the man turn around and faced her. At this point, Stefan already walked past her and approached the set of settees to the side. Just as he was a few steps away from the long settee, Stefan looked back at her, only to see Lilou staring at Heliot. He glanced at Heliot's figure on instinct and saw him looking back at her.

"What?" he broke the silence, causing Lilou to snap her eyes. "Haven't you settled your arguments the previous time?"

"No." Lilou shook her head and marched in his direction.

"Apologies." Heliot also expressed, trudging forward to join them. When he perched on the host seat while Lilou and Stefan sat down on the long couch, he rested his leg over the other and set his eyes back on Lilou once again.

"I was simply a little taken aback as your partner for tonight is... quite stunning."

"Lilou had always been..." Stefan furrowed his brows, turning his head to where she was perching on, only to see her hang her head low. He knew Heliot, so he was aware he was the person who would express his thoughts honestly; regardless if they would be misunderstood. But also, Stefan knew Lilou and her body language caused him to narrow his eyes slightly.

"It seems she's a little uncomfortable with the compliment, but it is well appreciated." He sported a smile at Heliot.

"Apologies if my honest thoughts brought her discomfort."

"It's alright." Stefan waved. "So, where are they?"

"By 'they', you mean..."

"My brother and his entourage." Stefan didn't beat around the bush, knowing it was better to delve into the matter instead of idle talk about Lilou's appearance. "You said in your letter that they've entered the Karo Kingdom."

There was a moment of silence that fell into the room. The longer Heliot remained silent while tapping his fingers against the armrest, the more Stefan furrowed his brows. Lilou, on the other hand, kept her head hung low, staring at her fist on her lap.

"I did say they entered — intruded the Karo Kingdom." Heliot broke the silence but his tone was laced with danger. "Although we kept a neutral relationship with the La Crox, His Grace had led a horde of enemies in our land, Your Majesty."

His eyes glinted dangerously, not concealing his slight displeasure at the trouble Samael had brought with him. "I respect you as the king of your own nation. However, I don't think I can have a friendly relation with His Grace and his explosive and devious logic." He paused, keeping his pair of solemn eyes at Stefan.

"We'll arrest him and if you opposed it, then our deal together will be null. I hope you understand, Your Majesty."

Lilou slowly raised her head, keeping her mouth shut. She darted her eyes between Stefan and Heliot, assuming this was a situation that Stefan wouldn't like to be in. Much to her dismay, Stefan nodded.

"It's alright. Seize them if that is what you think to protect your land. I have no power over Karo, but I appreciate you for informing me." She scrunched her nose up, wondering if Stefan sold his brother out just like that. "I'm glad that our deal will proceed."

Heliot nodded in satisfaction. "I, as well —" he looked up at the door when someone suddenly knocked and entered. It was the person who guided Stefan and Lilou, stopping beside Heliot's chair and whispering to him.

Lilou tilted her head, seeing that Heliot's dashing face sported a dark expression. "Just about time," he muttered which somehow sent a shiver down her spine.

Chapter 679 I feel lost

"Is everything alright?"

Lilou hastened her steps to keep up with Stefan's tracks. Apparently, their meeting with Heliot was short since he had to leave — duty called. So, the two of them had to return to the banquet hall, which slightly confused her because it seemed Stefan and Heliot had this nonverbal agreement.

"Yes." Stefan slowed down after noticing her hastened steps. "Everything is alright."

"You don't look convinced, though."

He snapped his eyes after he stared at her, setting his eyes ahead in the dimly lit hallway. "It's better to blend into a crowd. It's harder for people to find you."

"What?" her brows knitted. "Lexx, hold on."

Lilou held his arm and stopped in her tracks, causing him to pause as well. She faced him, raising her chin up.

"Don't leave me in the dark, Lexx," she urged airily. "I don't like surprises. What do you mean by that?"

When she received no answer from him, even after a full minute, she let out a deep exhale. But Lilou pressed his arm, tugging it lightly.

"Is there something I must know, Lexx?" she asked adamantly, hoping to have the slightest idea of this unknown restlessness in her heart. "Please, Lexx. Stop keeping me in the dark. You know I prefer knowing the problem beforehand instead of getting caught off guard. I might not do anything to stop it, but at least I know what is coming."

Her grip around his arm tightened, hinting to him she was overthinking right now. Stefan stared at her before he breathed out, taking a step forward and he bent over.

"Lulu, your husband — I mean, my brother didn't just enter the land of Karo, but he trespassed. There's a difference, and if you were listening, you'd know that my devious brother didn't travel as quietly as possible and brought his enemies with him."

Her frown grew worse, as she already had a vague idea of that. She was listening... more like she was listening to Heliot's voice since she didn't have a choice. The man's voice was cold in the ears and somehow very soothing. It calmed her down slightly.

"Heliot is not pleased about it since he doesn't welcome any disruption that causes disharmony in this peaceful land." His voice was utterly low as if to make sure no one else would hear him, even if someone was listening. "Hell had always had his grand ways of dealing with things, so... it'll be a little chaotic for a while, but it'll be fine."

He nodded reassuringly, letting her stare at him until she was sure it was as he claimed it was. Lilou nodded while pursing her lips.

"Alright." He sighed in relief at her agreement, patting her head. "Stop patting me like that. I'm not a child."

"I know — alright, let's head back and enjoy their delicacies." Stefan offered her a grin, knowing the food was something that could comfort her. "Free food," he stressed.

"Free always tastes the best." She chuckled and shook her head. Stefan pulled her hand to his arm as they head back to the banquet hall.

Just like what they expected, their brief disappearance from where everyone had gathered didn't make a difference. A group of ladies and gentlemen were dancing in the center of the hall, moving in sync, something that was new to her. Even though Stefan had seen the traditional dance in Karo, seeing it once again truly made him realize he was once again alive.

Both of them stood on the sidelines before he and Lilou headed to the food pantry, where they nibbled bits and pieces of the snacks on the long table. The two of them exchanged giggles as if nothing had ever mattered; just Stefan, Lilou, and the free food.

"I take it back." Lilou stood beside him, holding a wineglass in her hand that she hadn't drunk, afraid she would feel stuffed once she shoved any liquid down her throat. "I like banquets."

"Because of free foods?"

"Yes, why else would I like it if not for the food?" She giggled, face relaxed as she never felt this full in her entire life. "Although you've been feeding me, I can't deny foods in banquets were ten times better."

He cast her a side-eye before he shoved his hand inside his suit, only to take out a handkerchief.

"Wipe your mouth."

"Why do I need to?" Lilou licked her lips, but still reluctantly took the handkerchief, afraid of a round of scolding. "It's such a waste to wipe the food when you can just lick it," she mumbled, pouting while wiping the sides of her lips.

"Am I starving you?"

"I was a peasant, so even if you feed me a daily feast, I'll still eat every crumb of it." She put down the handkerchief and looked up at him. "Even if there's a little or half of it is dirt, I'll still eat it. You know the story of my life."

Bitterness flickered across his eyes because, just as she said, he knew the story of her life and even the part that was taken away from her. He felt sorry. But before he could make her feel better — or himself, by trying to console her — someone approached him.

Stefan's eyes glinted, setting them on Lilou. The latter tilted her head to the side, wondering what the masked person was whispering in his ears.

"Lulu, will you stay here for a while?" he asked. "No, I mean, I'll take her with me."

"But His Highness said it's important and dangerous," whispered the other person and this time, Lilou heard it.

"It's alright, Lexx." She flashed him a smile, looking around the jovial atmosphere. "I can stay here and eat a bit more. What could possibly go wrong if you leave for a moment, right?"

There was hesitation in his eyes, but she simply nodded encouragingly. If not for the fact this was important and Heliot said it was dangerous, he wouldn't even think about taking his eyes off of her.

"Stay here," he stressed. "I'll be back as soon as possible."

"Don't worry. This place just became my safe haven." Lilou waved, urging him to go as the masked person's body language showed signs of urgency. Stefan looked at her for a moment before he reluctantly followed the masked person.

Lilou kept waving as he looked back at her after several steps before marching away. As they squeezed through the crowd, Lilou looked around. The more she did, the more little and intimidated she felt. She thought she was alright, but deep down, she only ignored the strong sense of being left out, and Stefan distracted her.

"I feel lost," she whispered, taking a small step back only to bump into something sturdy behind her.

When she turned to look at what it was, her brows furrowed as she raised her head at the towering figure of a man. As soon as she did, the first thing she noticed was those pair of burning crimson behind the mask and his bright silver hair that was neatly brushed back.

"Me too." Her breath hitched when his low yet slightly youthful voice caressed her ears, making her heart race for reasons she couldn't understand. She fought her desire to lean back as he bent over until his mask was a palm length away from hers.

"I also feel lost."

Chapter 680 I feel homeless

"I also feel lost."

Lilou held her breath as she stared into those pairs of burning red. Even with the mask, she could see the condensed emotions pooling in his eyes. She bit her inner lower lip out of habit, staying quiet at the slight pang in her heart.

She felt sad for reasons she couldn't understand. Whether it was because the man's voice was depressing or she felt a little out of place, all she was certain of was this ache gripping her heart.

"Do you also feel out of place?" she blurted out, hiccuping when she realized it. But the man smiled subtly.

"No. I feel homeless," he answered under his breath. "Nameless and empty."

Lilou pressed her lips into a thin line, taking a step back to create distance between them. She cleared her throat, sneaking up a glance at him.

"That sucks," she returned, huffing as she gazed in the direction where Stefan went to. This place was a banquet of vampires and she was left undetected until now because Stefan concealed her scent. But that still meant this place was a dangerous place for her.

In her mind, she didn't want to get noticed. So, she purposely cut her conversation with this stranger. Who knew what he wanted from her?

"Are you waiting for someone?" she turned her head to the stranger once again when he raised a question.

"Yes." She nodded. "I'm waiting for my husband."

"Your husband..."

"He'll come and fetch me soon." Lilou sported a smile to hide any vestige of deception.

To repel any person who was showing interest in her, using the excuse of being married, was something she thought was effective. Vampire's love for their spouses was intense that they would literally split their hearts if their partner needed it. In other words, if she said she had a husband, this stranger would definitely know that a vampire's jealousy was something he wouldn't want.

"Your husband is here to come and fetch you," he whispered that barely reaching her ears.

"Pardon?"

Samael fluttered his eyes ever so tenderly, gazing at the love of his life. He knew she was simply being smart to repel him, but he was hurt. Not because she was thinking of another man as her husband, but the look in her eyes cut his heart like sharp daggers.

Lilou... his beloved wife, the love of his life, the mother of his children, and their home... look at him as a stranger. He knew his wife and she would usually smile if she saw him, even from a mile away. But now, even with this tiny distance, he felt like the distance between them was akin to heaven and hell.

"Your husband is —"

"Oh! There he is!" he was cut short when Lilou suddenly perked up. He slowly turned his head in the direction where she was looking and waved nervously.

"Darling~!" Lilou called louder so the stranger would leave her alone, but her brows knitted when she saw Stefan pause in his tracks. Despite the mask concealing Stefan's reaction, she was keen enough to see how his eyes slowly dilated, as if he saw a ghost.

"Le —"

"Come with me." Lilou's breath hitched when the stranger suddenly grabbed her wrist and before she could grasp the situation, he dragged her with him.

"Wait — Le—" she looked back in Stefan's direction on instinct and through the crowd, her heart sank, seeing him standing still as if he didn't see her being dragged away. Confused, Lilou kept her eyes in that direction with blank eyes until people blocked Stefan's figure.

"Wait, Lexx... why —"

Lilou was too confused at Stefan's action that she unknowingly let the stranger drag her outside the banquet hall and into the quiet and dark garden. When she felt the breeze whispering in her ears, she finally snapped out of her trance and gazed at the didn't feel any menace from him. She felt even more threatened and intimidated by prince Heliot.

man's back.

"Wait!" she yelled, tugging her hand until it came loose. "What the!"

Lilou panted for air as he held her wrist. Fortunately, the man wasn't holding her too tightly, and it only took two pulls to retrieve her hand. Her eyes sharpened, filling with disbelief as she watched the man stop in his tracks and turn around to face her.

"Are you out of your mind?!" she harrumphed, taking a step back to create distance between them.

"Why are you dragging a lady without her permission, huh? Do you have a death wish?!"

His lips parted, but only a shallow breath came out. When his hand reached for her, Lilou took three hurried steps back vigilantly.

"Don't go near me!" she warned, alarmed by this man's presence, although she oddly didn't feel any menace from him. She felt even more threatened and intimidated by prince Heliot.

"Lilou." When he called her name in a low voice, her breath instantly hitched, wide-eyed.

"Goodness... you make me sad."

She watched him raise his hand behind his head and slowly took off his mask. When it came off, a bewitching face instantly caught her eyes; sharp red eyes, narrow and long nose, thin upturned lips, and defined jaw.

He was beautiful — a fatal beauty.

If Stefan's face looked gentle and dignified, and Heliot looked decidedly cold and aloof, like an untouchable god, this man's beauty was dangerous. It was deadly, but the expression plastered on his face was somehow painful. If only he were sneering, she would think the devil crawled his way up to the surface to terrorize people.

But no, he wasn't. It was as though he was the devil who simply wanted to go back to where he belonged. To hell? She didn't know. But his remarks previously, "I feel homeless," were justified by the emotions in his eyes.

He wanted to go home. He was tired and on a brink of reaching his breaking point. And that... somehow created this frustrating tension in her throat.

"Who... who are you?" she asked with great difficulty, clutching her hand closer to her chest. "How did you know my name?"

"Because —"

"My lord, Prince Heliot's people are hunting you down."

Suddenly, a figure appeared to their side out of nowhere, causing Lilou to jump in surprise. When she turned her head at the unknown figure who appeared, her eyes gaze from his muddy boots up to his distinctly broad shoulder under his cloak, up to his eyes.

He was humongous.

But before Lilou could think of anything else, he heard the stranger speak. "Take her with you. I'll go see that useless Heliot first." She set her dilated eyes on the silver-haired man, only to shudder in fear when she noticed the glint in his eyes.

"I already said sorry, but he's so stubborn sometimes."