

The Duke 751

Chapter 751 Love yourself

The rest of the day went by with each of them preparing for their departure and before they knew it, the night of their departure was a few hours close. All this time, Lilou had been preparing and stepped out of the estate to the garden to breathe some fresh air. Lilou sat down on the bench in the garden, looking up at the young night sky. She drew a deep breath, cocking her head back and closing her eyes. "If you want to say something, just say it." Her voice had a tinge of exhaustion while opening her eyes ever so slowly. "Just don't stare at me from a distance. You know I can feel your gaze, right?"

Lilou looked back. Her eyes instantly fell on Stefan, standing several steps away from the bench. Stefan chuckled dryly.

"May I join you?" he requested and smiled when Lilou shrugged. She then moved to the side while Stefan advanced in her direction, sitting beside her, leaving a safe gap between them. When both of them were sitting on the bench, Lilou stared at the dark garden. Since it was temporary accommodation, they didn't have the leisure to decorate it with lamps. Fabian would have, though. If they stayed longer.

"Back on the mainland, we had this enormous garden." Lilou's calm and soft voice erupted in the air, keeping her eyes ahead. "I forgot how many times Fabian had to close his eyes every time I and Charlie try to add something in it to make him happy. Obviously, it just annoys him."

"He sounds like he owns the house."

"He owns the house," she corrected and laughed weakly. "He's very efficient in housework and everything. I used to live all alone in my humble shack, but after meeting Sam and everyone, I can't imagine living that life again."

"I'm not saying the life of a peasant, but the life of being all alone," she continued, lowering her eyes. "It terrifies me. That's why I was grateful that after the regression, you came for me."

Stefan lowered his eyes and smiled subtly. "I... initially planned on abducting you and hogging you all for myself," came out a confession, which didn't surprise her at all. "I thought, what if... I keep my mouth shut and let the guilt devour me bit by bit? Even if it's just a short while, I want to live normally with you and delude myself that we are a couple." His tone had a tinge of bitterness and regret. "Before the regression, I had always asked myself with the 'what ifs?' What if I didn't erase her memories? What if I was just as selfish as Hell and kept you by my side regardless of the dangers? Will we be happy? What would it be like?"

"Can I hold her hand just like how he holds her? Exchange vows with her? There were myriads of what-ifs that came into my head. I did my best to wrap things up, promising myself I'll show up in that shack again and pursue you," he added, smiling bitterly as deep sadness pooled in his eyes.

"But plans rarely go my way, don't they?"

"Hell suddenly woke up from his slumber and harassed you. Eventually, he captured your heart and married you, regardless of the dangers."

"He didn't harass me." Lilou bit her tongue when he cast her a cursory look and said, "he didn't?"

"Well..." she trailed off when he let out a low chuckle. Stefan looked at the nothingness ahead. "I was getting impatient and paranoid that I asked Hanzel to make an illusion to meet you. When I saw you standing in front of that window, good lord... I missed her so much. That's what I told myself."

"I was so excited to see you up close and talk to you after years that I forgot the condition of the illusion. Only when you called me using a different name did I realize that illusion will make you see the person you love and trust the most." Stefan took a pause, recalling that time in Cunningham when Lilou fell into an illusion. "I was angry, but also selfish. I blamed others and didn't want to take responsibility."

"I took things further and further, getting more desperate to get what I believed was mine." He leaned back, stretching his legs forward. "Even though I know you were never mine, to begin with. It had always been Samael. From the start, you mistook me for him."

Lilou remained silent as she listened to his voice, which still left a pang in her heart. "You're right," her voice came out after a minute of nothing but silence. "I mistook you as Sam at first, thinking you're that person who had always made me feel warm. I mistook you for someone who never made me feel alone," she continued in a somber tone. "However, I did like you at one point. How deep, I don't know. But what I am certain of is that I liked Lexx for what and who he was... even though he was cruel and nurtured the monster in me. I liked him. He was my family."

"Was there a chance that we could've ended up together if I didn't leave you in Banse?" he asked. "What do you think?"

"I don't know." Lilou shrugged. "And I don't want to think about it. I'm with Sam now, and we had children together. I love him... more than myself and I can't imagine my life without him in it. I'd die."

Stefan smiled bitterly. But he had seen that answer coming. He was all alone in those feelings and was the only person who had such questions. Even after the regression, he would never get her answers because with or without her memories, Lilou had always known there was already someone who had a strong hold of her heart. And that wasn't Stefan. "But I meant every word I said before." Lilou snapped her eyes ever so tenderly, setting them to his side profile. She waited for him to look back at her before she continued. "I had always liked you, Lexx. It might not be the same as what I feel for my husband, but I never hated you. Be it then or now, regardless of the bad blood between us, I can never hate you."

The side of her lips curled up as she rocked her head encouragingly. "How can I? If, at one point, I can understand why you were antagonizing us. It made me angry, yes. Because I had always understood your heart, I just cannot condone it and clashed with you head-on. Hence, I never hated you when you were alive and even when after your death."

"Lexx." Lilou mustered her courage and reached for his hand that was resting on his lap. "If you truly love me, don't search for your happiness from me. Channel that love or emotion to yourself. Love yourself. That's my only wish."

Stefan observed the slight smile on her face, but her encouraging words didn't encourage or discouraged him. It only tore his heart because what she was wishing for was devastating for him. "You're really cruel." He held her hand with his thumb, pressing it mildly. "But I will try, Lulu. I will try... to be happier without you. Maybe that's the best revenge I can do."

The two of them looked at each other, exchanging a subtle smile. They didn't say much, but that was enough for them. A small talk without arguing. It somehow left this relief in their hearts. And they were grateful for this chance they had never had in the past.

Chapter 752 A disgrace

As planned, Stefan, Klaus, and Fabian would leave first. Stefan had already ordered his people to retreat and return to the Heart's Kingdom, telling them to be discreet but leave traces for the enemies to get the hint. The main point was for the enemies to think the Grimsbanne was all on their own; they might doubt it and think it was part of an elaborate plan, but they won't completely rule that out. "Will they be fine?" Lilou asked, watching Klaus and Stefan prepare their steeds from the room on the second floor of the mansion. "Of course," Samael answered nonchalantly. "Don't forget that's Stefan. He gave us a hard time in the past."

She looked back, facing Samael, who was sitting on the divan. Tilly was on the armchair while Fabian was standing near her. Fabian, although he had another mission, would need to leave separately and with discretion. They couldn't allow the enemies to know Fabian had parted ways with them. "Tilly, do you have any idea where Sunny is right now?" Lilou inquired, walking back to the divan where Samael was sitting on. When she sat down beside her husband, she looked at Tilly squarely. "Just tell me she's safe."

"I don't exactly know where she is right now. However, I can feel that she's still alive."

"That is not enough, Tilly." Lilou clutched her skirt tightly. "I need reassurance! That's my daughter you left out there."

Tilly pursed her lips into a thin line, observing the water coating Lilou's eyes. She didn't feel sorry for Samael before, but with Lilou, it was an entirely different case. Lilou was a mother and even if their children would reach adulthood, they would always be her children. "Madam, Lady Tilly already sent Leon to the little miss. We'll surely hear from him soon," Fabian jumped in politely, smiling reassuringly at Lilou. He didn't want to tell her they were all worried about Sunny; that would surely anger Lilou. After all, they couldn't compare their worry to a mother's worries.

"Lilou." Samael reached for Lilou's hand, brushing her knuckles with his thumb. He looked at her straight in the eye, offering a subtle smile. "If Leon didn't meet Sunny, Fabian will. Don't you trust Fabian?"

"Now? I don't." Lilou cast Fabian a look before looking back at Samael. "However, I trust his capabilities. Still, we can't tell if Fabian can even reach my daughter alive!" She breathed out, massaging her temple mildly. "I'm sorry. I can't help but worry about Sunny. Knowing I can go myself and see her right now, but I shouldn't is pure torture, Sam."

"Sunny will be alright." Samael squeezed her hand mildly, smiling at her when she raised her head. "She's our daughter. I'm certain she will find a way to survive. "

Lilou bit her inner lower lip. Both of them knew that wasn't enough to reassure her; there wasn't any word that would reassure the two of them that Sunny was alright. However, they had to deal with their current problem since they might lose their children permanently or the people they love if they acted on impulse.

"Mhm?" Fabian blinked, setting his eyes on the window. Without a word, he approached it and opened it wide. Lilou, Samael, and Tilly silently watched Fabian as the butler stared outside. "What

is it, Fabian?" asked Lilou curiously, but Fabian didn't respond. She only realized the reason Fabian opened the window when a raven landed on the windowsill. Her brows knitted, curiosity filling Lilou's eyes. She glanced at Samael and then at Tilly. The two looked curious before setting her eyes back on Fabian's vantage point. The butler was already taking the letter attached to the raven's foot delicately. "What an interesting creature." Fabian smiled at the raven until his eyes were squinting. "You should stay —"

Fabian halted as the raven spread its wing and fled. However, as it ascended, it kept its eye contact with Fabian as if to remember the butler's face. "Take care." Fabian waved, watching the raven fly away. When he faced the three sitting around the coffee table, Fabian sauntered towards Samael to hand over the letter the raven delivered.

Samael's brows furrowed, accepting the letter curiously. Seeing the ring seal wrapped around the rolled letter, he narrowed his eyes. "This seal... where did I see it?" he wondered, shaking his head as he didn't want to dwell on it. Samael pulled the ring that had a seal away, raising his eyes at Tilly and Lilou, only to see the anticipation in their eyes. "What is it?" Lilou asked, gripping her skirt tightly. Deep in her heart, she wished it was good news. After all, Tilly sent Leon — Samael's cousin from the mainland — to find Sunny. It had been months. Hence, she was hopeful Leon had finally reunited with her daughter.

"Read it, Sam," urged Lilou, perking up at him. "It must be Leon. I don't think that's Heliot's seal. He doesn't have any reason to send you a letter in broad daylight."

"Alright." Samael rocked his head in understanding, opening the letter to read its content. His expression, however, contorted as soon as his eyes landed on the content of the letter. "What is it?" Lilou asked, gripping her skirt tightly. Deep in her heart, she wished it was good news. After all, Tilly sent Leon — Samael's cousin from the mainland — to find Sunny. It had been months. Hence, she was hopeful Leon had finally reunited with her daughter.

"Uh... I don't know?" Samael tilted his head to the side, passing the letter to Lilou. "Read it."

Lilou frowned but accepted the letter. When she gazed down, she instantly understood Samael's remarks. "What is this?" she mumbled, glancing at Samael, only to see him shrug. She then cast Tilly a look and the latter tilted her head to the side. "Tilly, care to explain?"

Lilou stretched her hand over the coffee table, waiting for Tilly to accept it. Tilly bent over, taking the letter from Lilou. Tilly slowly gazed down to read the letter. It says:

[If you're reading this, know that I'm looking at you as if you're a disgrace. Yes. You. A disgrace.]

While Tilly was reading the letter, Fabian had already stood behind her seat. He bent over, chuckling as soon as he read the content. "Sunny is safe." Tilly smiled subtly as she raised her eyes up at Samael and Lilou, who was sitting across from her. "What?" Lilou and Samael furrowed their brows. Tilly raised the paper and read it again. "It seemed Leon's letter was altered." She then pointed at the ring seal in Samael's hand. "That's where they were."

Samael raised the ring seal and kept it in between his thumb and index. "I don't recall which empire or kingdom this coat of arms was. It looks fancy."

"It's the Grimsbanne," Tilly answered, only to hear Samael's dull response.

"I know it looks like the family seal of the Grimsbanne. However, this person who sent this is obviously not on the mainland."

"Right..."

"Sir Knight might know." Fabian raised a finger, still smiling ear to ear. "He was once the emperor and your heir, my lord. I'm certain he can be of help."

Chapter 753 Don't run amok

Fabian's suggestion wasn't bad. Unlike Samael, who had deleted all political affairs when he moved to the mainland and became a normal family man, Rufus was different. Rufus had a strong sense of justice and knowing how hard working he was, he would've memorized most coats of arms from different empires and noble families that were noteworthy. After Fabian's suggestion, Lilou and Samael rushed to where Rufus was. Obviously, they found him in the backyard where he was training his sword with Law. They could've just summoned him, but the husband and wife didn't want to bother Rufus since they also need to break a sweat to keep their joints moving. "So?" Lilou looked at Rufus in anticipation. "Do you know where it came from?"

Rufus was holding the ring seal in between his thumb and index. He rolled it around, tilting his head, staring at the coat of arms on it. When he raised his head, Lilou was looking at him wide-eyed. Samael's expression might look relaxed, but his eyes told Rufus he needed an answer.

"Haimirich Empire," said Rufus, breathing out heavily. "I remember attending the World Summit and meeting the emperor. Anyone in power would know this coat of arms, since seeing their flags means war. The Emperor was a tyrant."

"You met him at the World Summit?" Rufus rocked his head. "He's one annoying guy, but he's cunning and dangerous. He didn't feel like a vampire, though," he explained, furrowing his brows. "Was the Emperor a part of Quentin's scheme?"

"No." Samael took the ring seal from Rufus. "That Emperor... what's his name?"

"His name..." Rufus twisted the wooden sword against the ground as he recalled the name. He wouldn't remember if the said emperor didn't leave an impression on Rufus. After all, that tyrant in the world summit had pressed Rufus' nerves a couple of times during their time at the world summit. "Eustass Silvestri Abel Bloodworth. That's his name," Rufus answered with certainty.

"Abel..." Samael whispered while Lilou looked at him. "Is that Tilly's brother?" she inquired, making Rufus' brows furrow.

"Lady Tilly's brother?"

"Tilly had a brother named Abel. He could be that person. After all, he sent a letter with that seal on it," explained Lilou, keeping it short and clear for Rufus to understand.

"But his name..."

"He could've changed it," Samael mused, raising the seal up, and keeping his eyes on it. "What sort of person is he, Ru? Not what sort of ruler he is, but a person."

Rufus drew his lips into a thin line, staring at Samael, who was appraising the ring seal. Lilou was standing beside Samael, staring back at Rufus. "He is... anything but average," was what instantly came out of Rufus's mouth. "I don't know him as a person, but based on the amount of time I interacted with him, there's only one thing I can tell about him."

Samael looked back at Rufus when the latter paused. "What is it?"

"If Fabian is to marry, he would propose to him."

"..." Lilou's face contorted at Rufus's last remarks. She had thought of many things Rufus would tell them, but that last one didn't cross her mind. Meanwhile, Samael arched a brow as he looked back at Rufus. "Fabian will like him?" he asked, watching Rufus nod. "When I was with him at the world summit, I remember telling myself I don't want to be in the same room as him again. It's the same with Fabian. I don't want to be in the same room as Fabian," explained Rufus, making whoever would hear him wonder if he was joking. However, knowing Rufus, he was being truthful. Rufus had the longest patience among them. For him to say such things to a person meant there was something in that person who Rufus felt uncomfortable with. Fabian, for instance, looked like a normal butler, but if one had gotten to know him, he could make others' hair raise in horror. "Was he really Lady Tilly's brother?" Rufus inquired, resting his palm on the end of the wooden sword. He glanced up and rocked his head. "If he changed his name, I think he's Lady Tilly's brother."

Samael arched a brow. "You think so?"

"Yes, my lord. They might have a difference in appearance and demeanor. Matter of fact, there were many things that don't connect them. However, if you meet him and Lady Tilly, you'll understand." Rufus bit his tongue as he looked at Samael. Actually, he didn't only base his assumption on Tilly and this tyrant of an emperor. Rufus also considered Samael, since Tilly and Samael might not look alike, but anyone could tell they were family. It was strange, but that would be everyone's initial assumption. "I see..." Samael rocked his head, snapping his eyes to a distance as Law returned with Fabian. His son went to have some snacks when they came; Fabian helped Law, while Lilou and Samael questioned Rufus. "Fabian." Samael tossed the ring seal in Fabian's direction when they were closer, which the latter caught on instinct. "Haimirich Empire. That is the coat of arms of the sovereign."

Fabian gazed at the ring seal for the second time today. "Fancy," he commented, keeping his classic smile as he raised his eyes to them.

"I will hasten and meet with our little miss."

"You know where Sunny is?" Law perked up at Fabian, and then at Samael and Lilou. His mother squatted down in front of him and smiled.

"Tilly's brother had sent a word. Sunny is safe," she said, but deep in her heart, she still had a lingering worry. After all, the content of the letter was too vague, and there was nowhere it says Sunny was there or her daughter was safe. But Lilou wanted to trust Tilly. The latter wouldn't give them false hope... she wished. "That's good." Lilou's heart softened when relief fastened in Law's eyes. "I'm glad Sunny is safe."

"Fabian, make sure to send us the letter once you meet with Sunny," Samael reminded solemnly, giving him this warning look as if he didn't want to receive another altered letter.

"Yes, my lord. I won't disappoint this time." Fabian bowed, keeping his polite smile. With that being said, Lilou, Law, and Samael went back inside while Rufus and Fabian were left in the backyard. The Barrett brothers stared at the family of three silently until they were out of sight. "Take care," said Rufus to Fabian, snapping his eyes ever so slowly at his brother. "I heard a lot of things about that empire. Don't run amok there."

Chapter 754 Show you something amazing

"Take care. I heard a lot of things about that empire. Don't run amok there."

Fabian chortled with his lips closed. "I'm looking forward to this person you think I would get along with."

"If he was, indeed, a Grimsbanne, don't put the young miss in danger." Rufus let out a deep exhale. Although Fabian's eyes were squinting into mere slits, Rufus could see the excitement swirling underneath those eyelids. "He is an unpredictable man, and there's no telling what he can do. Master will kill you... no, I will end you if you put the young miss in danger, whatever the reason was."

"Don't worry, Sir Knight. The young miss is like a daughter to me." Fabian gazed at Rufus from head to toe, keeping his polite smile. "Why don't we spar, Sir Knight? Since I assume I would wield Maleficent more than I had ever in the following months."

Rufus remained silent, sizing up Fabian's figure. The latter was standing at an arm's length; still pretty close. When another second passed, Rufus instinctively kicked the dirt off the ground to slow down Fabian's attack as the latter suddenly called forth his dark spear. Rufus jumped several steps back, holding a wooden sword. His eyes glinted dangerously, staring at the silhouette behind the thin dust from Rufus's action and Fabian's assault. "Well... I don't think a spar with you isn't a bad idea," Rufus muttered, gripping the wooden sword, unfazed by the fact he was wielding a wooden sword and not his actual sword. "Fighting you as a warm-up will immediately set a higher standard. The rest... were easier to deal with."

His breathing slowed down, keeping his focus on Fabian's figure. As the smoke thinned out, all Rufus saw was Fabian's ear-to-ear smile, with dark mist shrouding his grip around his dark spear Maleficent.

"It will be the same for me, Sir knight," Fabian mused, raising his arm to the side. "Having you as my warm-up... the rest who will come after will be just as vulnerable as ants."

CLASH!

The second the last syllables slipped past Fabian's lips, both of them lurched forward. Despite using a wooden sword, Rufus went head to head with Fabian's Maleficent. And thus, the start of a fierce sparring battle between the Barrett brothers before they parted ways.

Meanwhile, as the night fell deeper, Claude stayed on the rooftop of the mansion. He was staring at his hand, holding this pocket watch since an hour ago. Claude had watched Stefan and Klaus leave the mansion. He had nothing to say to Stefan, who was his adoptive father in papers. But he had many things he wanted to tell Klaus. However, the latter had been busy sparring with Rufus the second they agreed to part ways. Not that Klaus was intentionally ignoring his nephew, but Klaus was never this focused in the past. He wanted to do his task flawlessly, using his little time asking the Barret Brothers to spar with him. Therefore, Claude didn't want to ruin Klaus's rhythm and stayed away even when his uncle left. "He wanted to correct it," Claude whispered, staring at his own divine weapon, Auron. "I wish he doesn't do something crazy."

Claude raised his head at the night sky. The moon hid from the thick clouds, only to peek out a tiny silver a moment later. From his vantage point, he could still hear the clash resonating from the

backyard where Fabian and Rufus were sparring. "Mister Fabian is amazing," he muttered. "There are only a few hours left before he would depart, and yet, he was still sparring with Sir Rufus."

A subtle smile dominated Claude's face as his eyes softened. Suddenly, his brows elevated as he heard a faint thud on the side. He turned his head, only to see Samael and Tilly standing on the corner of the roof.

"Uncle?" he called, and then shifted his attention to Tilly. "Tilly? What are you doing here?"

"Tilly said she would show me something spectacular," explained Samael nonchalantly as he approached Claude's vantage point. The latter rose to his feet on instinct, tilting his head to the side.

"Something amazing?" Claude's brows furrowed, darting his eyes between Samael and Tilly as the two stopped at arm's length. Samael shrugged, tipping his head at Tilly. "Come on, Tilly. You told me we can fly," urged Samael. "And that Claude and I had a higher chance of doing it."

"Fly?" Question marks hovered over Claude's head as he tried to make sense of his uncle's remarks. "You mean... jump high?"

Samael scrunched his nose up and cast Claude a look. The latter pressed his lips and shrugged at the insulting look cast upon him. "This is Tilly, Uncle," explained Claude in a knowing tone. "She tends to exaggerate things. No offense."

Samael's mouth opened, and then he frowned. "By flying, did you mean... jumping so high you feel like flying? Tilly, don't waste my precious time. I would rather cheer on Rufus to lacerate Fabian than learn how to jump high. I can jump high. It is almost like I'm flying."

"Me too." Claude agreed as he might've felt useless the past half a year, but he was still a skilled knight in his own right. "You two break my heart." Tilly blinked, showing zero sign of emotion to back up her claim. "What makes the Grimsbanne different is because of many things."

She peeled her eyes away from them, setting them ahead. She looked up at the sky, waiting for the thick clouds to move until the moon was glowing on them.

"Aside from the immeasurable power of the Grimsbanne, what makes them different from the rest was... we had wings." Her eyelids drooped as her naturally dull crimson eyes glowed soothingly. What Samael and Claude heard next was the sound of bones breaking. Both of them instinctively gazed at Tilly's back, only to see something from under her clothes bulge. They gulped, eyes wide open, watching something gnaw a portion of Tilly's dress until two featherless wings spread wide.

"Holy shit..." Samael's jaw dropped, eyes studying the wings that grew directly from Tilly's back. Not just him, but Claude was also dumbfounded at the size of her wings which were even bigger than Tilly's.

Chapter 755 No, you won.

The sound of bones breaking sounded unnerving, as if something were crawling under their skin. Watching something protruded from Tilly's back and witnessing how it slowly ripped the fabric of her clothes was mesmerizing and equally staggering. In a blink of an eye, two gigantic wings spread free. But unlike what most people knew about wings, Samael and Claude studied the ones on her back as Tilly faced them squarely. Using one word, it looked like it was gigantic bat wings. But on a closer look, Samael's brows furrowed. The tip of her wings was sharp and pointy, but what confounded him was that instead of feathers, her wings were made out of flesh. It was as though

Tilly simply broke her spine apart and wrapped her flesh to make it look like wings. "Did it hurt?" was the first question that came out of Samael's mouth as he set his eyes back at Tilly. "That thing... how painful was it?"

Tilly pressed her lips into a thin line. "I didn't measure," her voice bore the usual dullness. "But I remember screaming for the first time when I unleashed them the first time."

"Is this a part of your spine?" asked Claude as he finally understood Samael's question after studying Tilly's wings for another minute. "It looks painful."

"It's in all of us," Tilly explained, glancing at her right wing. "Those higher-ups on the mainland knew about them, but we had never spread them open. This thing... set us apart from everyone. If we're not vampires, not a wolf, and not humans... where does the Grimsbanne stand?"

She slowly set her eyes back to the two of them. "If you have one, you can force it out of your body and use it to get into places."

Samael ran his tongue across his inner cheek while Claude let out a deep exhale. The latter planted his hands on his hips, keeping his eyes on the gigantic bat wings that had no skin and were made out of flesh and bones. "Is that the only thing it can do for us?" asked Claude after a minute of silence. "Flying is convenient, but at the same time, it brings more things to consider. This stagger even us, who were born vampires and carry the blood of Grimsbanne. I can imagine the reaction from those humans."

"Being able to spread it means acknowledging the blood running in you." Tilly looked away, setting her eyes up at the moon. "It will open your mind and soul to a power you might grow to despise. Standing at the top had always been lonely — lonelier than living in a house all alone."

Her eyes softened as her expression relaxed. Yet, she neither looked sentimental nor boastful.

"I'm not telling you this now, so you try to spread them on your own," she continued in the same soft tone. "I'm simply letting you know lest I forget, and also, to give you another card on your sleeve."

"A part of me feels like things will only grow complicated from this moment on," she added. "It was good that my brother had reached out to us, but that also means he was in a complicated situation. Hence, he'll wait for us until we take down the limbs of our enemies."

Enemies... yes. Who and how many there were was still unknown to them. What they only knew was that Quentin Moriarty was a part of it. Tilly moved her shoulders and her wings folded. Her jaw tightened as if to suppress the sudden pain. Her brows rose, stretching her neck to look over the roof. "Wow..." Rufus withdrew his hand over his brows when Tilly turned and looked down at them. "I have never seen such a hauntingly beautiful pair of wings."

Fabian chuckled giddily. "How ironic. They said angels had beautiful wings and vampires were creatures of the night who originated from evil. Yet, the Grimsbanne has wings like angels." His squinting eyes slowly cracked open.

"I'm starting to doubt the lores of the church," he added, lips curling into a dangerous smirk. "Since when did you believe in the homily?" Rufus arched a brow, looking at his brother in dismay. Fabian peeled his eyes away from Tilly to Rufus.

"Sir Knight, lest you do not know, I had a time when I stayed in the convent. I was once a sacristan." Deep lines appeared in between Rufus's brows at Fabian's claims. Fabian's smile stretched into a bright grin, telling Rufus what his brother was about to say was no good. "My time as a sacristan opened opportunities for me to venture on the spiritual edification and their doctrines," Fabian explained nonchalantly, tilting his head to the side. "I'd say it was a fun phase of my life."

"And it was proven staying in the church change nothing."

"Sir knight, of course. I came there out of pure curiosity, and it was too late for their righteousness and sacredness to bend me. However..." Fabian's lips stretched even wider as a glint crossed his eyes. "That doesn't mean nothing had changed. Since they couldn't change me nor convince me in the slightest, I had to convince them about my ideology of faith."

Rufus's face contorted, imagining how his brother tainted the sacredness of the church. But that didn't surprise him anymore. If Fabian came in there to change, but they 'failed' him, Fabian would surely teach those people how to bend others' beliefs.

"I cannot believe you..." Rufus shook his head in disbelief, uninterested in listening more to his story. He waved, turning on his heel. "I lost in the spar. You won. Now, go rest and prepare for your departure."

Fabian watched Rufus walk away. His eyes fell on the wooden sword in Rufus's grip.

"He had become stronger," he whispered, smiling subtly as he heaved a sigh of relief. That wooden sword Rufus was carrying was the weapon he had from the beginning to the end.

Rufus didn't lose; Matter of fact, he won. After all, Fabian's goal was to break that wooden sword, but he failed. "Now I'm at peace, leaving him for a while." Fabian glanced up at the roof one more time, catching Samael, Claude, and Tilly still discussing something. His smile stretched before he walked away silently.

Chapter 756 Questions that were answered and not

Meanwhile, in the Royal Palace of Karo...

"You might not remember it, but you've been a great friend to me. Eli, I'm really glad to see you again. I might not know what you did, but I still remember every word you said in the last letter you sent me."

"This time, I will protect you."

Heliot was sitting behind the desk. His hands were linked in front of him, staring at the floor silently. After his last visit to that mansion, Heliot had withdrawn the order for their attack on the Spade Kingdom. Instead, he sent a secret order to the only people he could trust with his life to create a small squad to assist the Grimsbanne. However, whenever he was alone, just like right now, he couldn't help but recall Lilou's parting remarks to him. It bothered him. Her words were uttered with that intensity of sincerity and authenticity, paired with those determined olive eyes.

It left a gigantic question mark on his head.

Why?

Why would Lilou say she would protect him when he never needed one? Why would she smile at him and spew promises so easily? Right... they knew each other. Or rather, Lilou claimed they were friends before the regression. Still, what was their relationship? What sort of friendship did they have?

Honestly, Heliot knew all the answers to that. He wasn't dense not to put two and two together. During his last meeting with the Grimsbanne, they had said all the relevant things and Heliot simply needed to put the pieces together. But despite that, he couldn't understand because he doubted everything. Heliot knew himself more than anyone and friendship? There was no such thing that existed in his lexicon. Even if Lilou was a woman worthy of admiration, Heliot doubted they would become friends, especially since her taste was low for becoming Samael's wife. He would never be friends with the La Crox. 'I should... stop thinking about them,' he told himself — more like convincing himself. 'I did the end of the bargain. All they needed is skilled people to help them, and they will do the rest. Whatever relationship I had before the regression... I don't need to learn more.'

Heliot rocked his head, convincing himself of what was relevant. His brows rose when a faint knock caressed his ears, watching the door open from the outside. "Greetings, Your Highness." His trusted aide saluted with a bow, standing several steps from the prince's desk. "Your Highness, the princess had woken up and was looking for you."

Heliot furrowed his brows. "Was she alright?" he asked, not moving an inch from his seat. His aide kept his mouth in a thin slash. "Yes, Your Highness."

"You hesitated." Heliot pointed out.

In Karo, when a person with a higher status or authority asked someone lower than him a question, the answer needed was mostly yes or no. Some required explanation, especially in court trials. However, Heliot was the type who didn't want an explanation right off the bat unless he asked for it. He only needed a yes or no answer, and then decide on his own. "The princess was overall fine, Your Highness. The physician reassured us she simply fainted from shock, but she was alright," the aide explained monotonously. "However, ever since the princess had woken up, she was rather quiet. She only asked for you, and didn't speak after that."

"Is that so?" Heliot furrowed his brows, considering what could have happened to his sister, Florence. Since he didn't want to jump to a conclusion, Heliot planted his hands on the desk to push himself up. He gazed at his aide and ordered, "lead the way to the Princess."

"This way, Your Highness."

Heliot followed his aide to the royal infirmary where Florence was being monitored. The servant knocked for the prince for courtesy before they opened it. Heliot remained silent as he stepped in, glancing over his shoulder. The servants immediately understood the prince's orders as they stayed outside.

As they closed the door behind Heliot, he marched inside. He stopped several steps from the bed, eyes landing on the young lady sitting upright on it. "Are you alright, sister?" he asked monotonously, taking the armchair beside the bed. When he raised his head, his brows knitted. Florence was still sitting upright, staring at the open window silently. She didn't give him a look or tried to greet him like she would use to. Florence was a model of good decorum and even if she was sick, she wouldn't show she was enduring any sickness or pain to maintain her and the royal family's image. So it was odd that she ignored Heliot. "Did that man... hurt you?" Heliot's voice

pierced the silence once again but to no avail. He frowned, waiting for another minute for her answer. Florence kept quiet and didn't move a muscle. "Princess, if keeping your silence is your way to retaliate, then I hope that would make you feel better," said Heliot, pushing himself to stand. "I would be in my way. May you recover quickly."

With that being said, Heliot turned and sauntered off. He didn't want to waste time since for him, as long as she was safe and alive, that was all that mattered. He had already done his job as the 'acting' patriarch of the royal family. "Why?" Heliot stopped in his tracks when Florence spoke. "Why did you do that?"

His brows knitted, looking back at her. To his surprise, Florence, the princess who always had a smile on her face, was looking back at him coldly. "I'm afraid I am not following your statements, sister." Heliot faced Florence. "What did I do to deserve such malicious glare from you?"

Florence balled her hands into a tight fist, clutching the quilt that was over her lap. Her eyes sharpened, glinting with anger that words weren't enough to explain. "You always act cold, apathetic, and rational..." she breathed out heavily. "Why... did you send me to the Heart's Empire, brother? Why did you send me to another land while you... and everyone in Karo, died? I cannot understand."

Chapter 757 The night of the regression

[Flashback: The night of the regression]

Florence was fuming as soon as she reached her chambers, still clutching her skirt tightly. A loud shriek escaped her mouth as she recalled the humiliation she had met tonight. All her life, Florence had been the good girl. Despite being a young princess, she was always mindful of her reputation. She would put up a smile even when her feet were bleeding with the heels she was wearing. Her smile would never leave her face in every banquet, and no amount of inner turmoil could take it off. Even as the Empress of this great empire, Florence never showed the slightest vulnerability. Her emperor had broken her heart many times; every time Rufus would look at Silvia, a piece of her heart would fall. Yet, no one knew about it. However, the audacity of that butler! "How dare he defile me?" her voice shook as her entire body trembled in anger. Florence bit her lower lip to numb the lingering sensation Fabian left.

"Ughh!!!" Florence stomped her feet towards the bed and threw herself on it. She reached for the pillow, burying her face to muffle her screams. She had been angry before, but not to this extent that she wanted to explode. Perhaps it was also because of the piled-up anger towards the emperor, Rufus, and Fabian's shamelessness was simply the last straw. Either way, Florence felt like exploding. She wanted to detonate for real. "Hah...!" she breathed out, peeling her face from the pillow to breathe. Her face contorted as her eyes felt hot, while tears formed in the corner of her eyes.

"How dare they..." her voice cracked, clutching the pillow. "Why are they so cruel?"

Florence had suffered emotionally during her entire marriage with Rufus. She did everything she could; she did her best but to no avail. Even though Rufus was overall kind and considerate to her, Florence simply wished to gain his affection. They were husband and wife, after all. They didn't have any dispute in this political marriage and there were many reasons for them to try. However, even though Florence was willing, Rufus wasn't. His heart was shut and the most painful of all was

that Florence would always catch him staring at another woman lovingly. She might've turned a blind eye or she could've turned mean to Silvia, but she couldn't. Silvia was a wonderful lady and Florence couldn't blame her if the emperor was in love with her. The only consolation Florence had was that she knew the emperor was suffering just as great as her. After all, no matter how deep Rufus' love for Silvia was, Silvia was married and in love with another man. They were both miserable in this marriage. Still, they could've prevented it. If only Rufus knew how to let go and tried his best to look in Florence's way, they might actually become happy. Sadly, Rufus didn't and Florence couldn't force him. A tear rolled across her nose bridge, chewing her lower lip. 'That's right...' she thought. 'What did I expect?'

Florence sniffed hard as she allowed her tears to overflow from her eyes. The anger she felt for Fabian, who kissed her without consent, wasn't what truly disappointed her. It was Rufus' reaction. "He's right..." came out a shaking voice, recalling Fabian's advice. "... he's a bad husband. It's a good thing I mustered my courage to propose a divorce."

Deep in her heart, she wished the divorce process would soon be over. Since Rufus and Florence had a good relationship as partners, she was certain Rufus wouldn't mind letting her return to Karo. Florence cried silently for the next hours until her eyes were puffy. She didn't know how long she had been crying, as the night was usually long for her. All she could tell herself was that everything would be fine soon. She wouldn't hurt anymore and once she divorced, she would be free.

She might not meet a man who would accept her, but what was important for her was to stay away from Rufus. Even though she loved him, she wanted to leave him. She couldn't stay in this place longer. Knock! Knock!

Florence flinched when she suddenly heard a knock on the door. Widening her swollen eyes, she pushed herself to sit upright. "Your Highness, it is I... returning after your orders..."

She sniffed hard as she raised her brows, hearing her servant from the other side of the door. Because of all the crying all night, Florence took a minute to recall what sort of order she had given this servant. When she realized what it was, she hastily flung her legs out of the bed. Standing in front of the shut door, Florence cleared her throat. She opened the door slightly, slipping her hand.

"Hand it over," she ordered with a coarse voice, embarrassed to present herself in front of the servant in such a wrecked state. "Your Majesty, are you alright?" asked the maid, warranting an irritated response from the empress.

"Just hand it over!" Florence's breath hitched upon realizing she raised her voice. "Just... give it to me and don't bother me anymore."

The servant worriedly gazed at Florence's hand and sighed. Being the empress's maid for years, she already knew that the empress disliked showing her vulnerability. And that crying was considered one. "Your Majesty, we received a letter earlier than expected. It came from your friend in Karo. It seemed it was sent days before you sent your letter," reported the maid as she placed the letter that was meant for the empress. "If you need anything, I will be right outside."

"No need," was what Florence said, closing the door as soon as she clasped the letter. Florence rested her back against the door, biting her lower lip, holding the letter tightly. A deep exhale slipped past her lips, gazing down while raising the letter in her hand. "A letter..." she whispered. "... right. I thought it was a response to my previous letter regarding the divorce. But it seemed a letter from Karo was on its way before I sent mine."

Another deep exhale slipped past Florence's lips, hoping this letter from Karo wasn't bad news. She would feel terrible if the letter was a bad one, and then her letter would arrive in her home country, only to know she was divorcing the emperor. Little did Florence know, the letter wasn't just bad news. It was horrible to the core.

Chapter 758 The night of the regression II

Florence had thought long and hard about the divorce even before she brought it up to Rufus in tonight's shared dinner. She was an Empress and divorce was scandalous. However, she believed because she had an outstanding record, serving the empire that wasn't her home for years was enough.

Still, Heliot's opinions mattered to her. Hence, she sent a letter days before she brought up the subject to Rufus. If her calculation was correct, the letter she sent would've just arrived in Karo today at the earliest. To receive a letter from Karo, she could already expect it was something important. She didn't have that sort of 'normal' relationship with his siblings that they would exchange casual letters. Myriads of things hovered over her head before opening the letter. She had considered all sorts of content to expect, mostly regarding politics, since she was an empress. However, never in her imagination did she consider the content she had read. "Hah..." Florence dropped the letter as her hands trembled. Her knees soon gave way, landing on the floor with a careless thud. "What..." she covered her lips in horror, eyes shaking, staring at the opened letter. Her gaze caught the blood smeared on the side. Even from this distance, she could see how clumsy the handwriting was, as if the person's hand was shaking.

"No, no, no." Florence crawled to pick up the letter, reading it again without blinking. Her heart stopped as her breath hitched until her neck turned taut. "What's going on?" she mumbled in a shaking voice, shaking her head, reading the letter repeatedly. The letter says;

[To Her Majesty,

If you received this letter, that meant I successfully relayed His Highness Heliot's message. Forgive me for writing hastily, for I am running out of time. Please... bear with me. Your Highness, do not... return to Karo at all costs.

Several years ago, the people from the mainland had threatened our land, forcing His Highness to execute the Duchess of Grimsbanne. His Highness had followed their requests but was unable to take the life of the previous empress of the Heart's Empire. In exchange for not fulfilling His Highness's end of the bargain, he had sacrificed his life...]

There was a long space on the letter as if the person writing it was interrupted. Or maybe the sender of the letter had to move to another place to hide. Whatever the reason there was, the following content was even more direct.

[They betrayed him. They didn't plan on letting Karo go, even if His Highness succeeded. Now, the land of Karo is on the verge of ruin. Your Highness, His Highness's last order was for you to stay away from Karo. Do not return to Karo at all costs! And stop His Majesty La Crox from marching in Karo.

Please... Your Highness... you are our only hope. Stay safe.]

Florence's brain went blank for a moment after re-reading the letter for the umpteenth time. She couldn't understand it and her heart was racing each time she would try to comprehend it. "What's

going on?" her lips quivered, shaking her head to get herself together. "This can't be happening. No. Karo... won't fall just like that."

Florence crumpled the paper in her hand, her other hand clutched her skirt as she tried to stand. But alas, her knees were shaking uncontrollably, and she subsequently fell back onto the floor. She clenched her teeth, punching her thigh to stand up.

How could a pureblooded vampire like her be this weak? "Stand!" she yelled, forcing herself to stand up. After several tries, she managed to stand. Her body was still shaking and her heart was still racing. The adrenaline rushed to the ends of her nerves. However, instead of giving her the rush to sprint to the emperor's chambers, Florence stood in front of the door motionlessly. She took a deep breath, releasing it through her lips. She couldn't afford to panic — not for the sake of her reputation or image. Florence needed a clear mind since rushing things would do nothing. Much to her dismay, when she took another deep breath, the pungent scent of blood wafted her nostrils. Her back instantly stiffened, staring at the door wide-eyed.

Florence took a careful step back, clutching the letter close to her chest. The scent of blood grew stronger, making her cover her mouth. Despite not seeing what was going on, she knew in her heart that right outside this door, a massacre was occurring. But what was even more dreadful was that... she could barely hear the faint thud each time a body fall on the floor. There were no other noises that could be heard; no wonder she didn't notice it until now since she was crying and too preoccupied with her feelings. 'Will I die here?' she wondered, taking more steps back. Not long after, blood crawled from underneath the gap in the door. Florence looked back at the window, thinking if she should jump from there. However, Florence was a coward. Vampires were strong and fast. Jumping from this height wouldn't be a problem. But not Florence. 'I'm scared...' She clenched her teeth, looking back at the shut door. She took another step back cautiously, barely making a sound.

As she stared at the door, Florence began hearing footsteps. They were careful and heavy footsteps, and each time that soundless tap of shoes caress her ears, her heart would skip a bit. At this moment, Florence could only think of one person.

Rufus. 'Your Majesty...' Florence covered her mouth, looking around her chambers. When her eyes landed on the closet, she looked back at the door. With clenched teeth, she tiptoed towards the closet and hid inside. Inside the darkness, she kept her hands over her lips while listening to the footsteps approaching her chambers. She wanted to shout for help, but the pungent scent of blood told her that was a stupid thing to do.

The Imperial palace was under siege. Her breath hitched when she heard a loud creak that sounded louder than usual. Coldness washed over her body, seeping deep into her bones when she heard the footstep growing louder and louder.

Florence kept her wide eyes on the shut doors of the closet, holding her breath, praying. She prayed and prayed, hoping whoever was outside would go away. But alas, her prayers weren't heard... or so she thought because a second later, the doors of the closet opened from the outside. She looked up ever so slowly, and her heart sank, seeing a familiar man she just met tonight. Fabian.

Chapter 759 The night of the regression III

A part of Florence wished Rufus would save her for once. In her heart, even though she was angry at him, she hoped he would value her in times like this. She was his empress and he must've known that despite being a vampire, Florence... was scared of many things.

Her heart stopped beating as the footsteps came closer, and it dropped to her stomach, almost jumping when the doors of the closet flew open. With shaking, wide eyes, she gazed at the man looking down at her dangerously. Right then and there, her brain went blank as her entire body was frozen on the spot. She knew this man. This man... claimed her lips without her consent. He was that person who pressed all her buttons and got away with a smile. He had this smile on his face that looked so annoying for reasons she couldn't understand. However, that smile was absent. All she could see was a man with blood on his face. His clothes, although she didn't pay attention, were also soaking with nothing but blood. He reeked of blood and death. Turning her stomach in a way, she felt like throwing up.

Three seconds... that was just how long since their eyes met, but for her, it felt like it was over three days. The dread that felt like gnawing under her skin reached her heart, clenching it tightly until she couldn't breathe. Her mouth fell open, about to let out a loud scream. But alas, just as her lips parted, a bloody hand grabbed half of her lower face. Her eyes instantly went huge as her screams were shoved back down her throat, nearly choking her. Fabian placed a finger in front of his lips wordlessly, staring deep into her shaking, wide eyes. His finger still had fresh blood.

"Quiet," he whispered, making her gulp nervously. "If you want to live, then don't make a sound. Understood?"

Tears shone in her eyes, nodding out of fear at this guy. There were many questions in her head, and one of them was: 'would he kill me?' Fabian was Rufus's brother, but it looked like this man was the villain and not the hero. Fabian's eyelids drooped as a dangerous glint flickered across his eyes. He stared at her for several seconds before withdrawing his hand from her mouth. "I told you." He smirked. "I will visit you tonight."

Florence lowered her head and snuck a look at him. Her brows furrowed, seeing him narrow his eyes as if he was mulling about something. "Is there... do you know something about it?" she blurted out when over ten seconds had passed and he was still silent.

"No... but some things I heard from those nightwalkers seem to make more sense now." He breathed out, snapping his sharp eyes ever so tenderly. He then offered his hand to her. "We should go, You."

Florence held her breath as her teeth clenched, gazing at his hand which was still dripping with blood. Her brows furrowed. "You're injured?" she looked up, wide-eyed.

"We should go," he repeated, this time stressing his remarks. "But —" Florence bit her tongue and clutched his hand. When she loosened her grip, she clasped his hand and allowed him to assist her out of the closet. To her surprise, the second she laid her eyes upon her chambers, multiple corpses were scattered on the floor. Blood had tainted the broken walls and floor, severed flesh everywhere she looks, and just a complete disaster. Florence covered her mouth as her stomach turned, feeling sick at the sight she wasn't ready to behold. Noticing this, Fabian snapped a finger in front of her to get her attention. When she looked up at him, he asked;

"Do you need a distraction?" "What...?" her eyes went wide as he suddenly bent over. Florence held her breath, frozen on the spot, inhaling his deep breaths that were hitting her upper lip. "Do you need a distraction?" he repeated; his face and lips were only an inch apart from hers. "No – no."

"How unfortunate." Fabian drew his head back, smiling until his eyes were squinting. "Now, shall we?"

Chapter 760 The night of the regression IV

Florence covered her mouth the second they stepped outside her chambers. Her chambers were a disaster in a matter of minutes, but outside was not any better. Her heart skipped a beat as her stomach turned, catching her servant — the one who handed her a letter — sitting against the wall with her head on her lap. It was gruesome, making Florence turn to Fabian.

"It wasn't me," Fabian clarified, sensing the cautious look on his side. He then perked his chin at the corpse in the other corner. "It was him."

Florence glanced in the direction Fabian pointed and caught a corpse in black clothing. He was wearing the same clothing as those who were left dying inside her chambers. She was quick to realize the difference in the sound of footsteps she initially heard before Fabian's. "How did they get inside?" she blurted out as her body shook again. "And how come the royal knights hadn't done anything yet?"

"I didn't know Her Majesty was this pitiful." Fabian set his eyes on her, looking at her with genuine pity.

On normal days, Florence would take this as an insult, but she didn't have the leisure to even argue with this man. Fabian still saved her at the end of the day — intentional or not.

"Forgive me for being slow-witted, brother." She spat out through her gritted teeth, clutching her hand into a ball. "I am too rattled to use my head."

"I won't, sister. Follow me."

Florence clutched his wrist tighter, keeping her lips in a tight, thin slash. A shallow breath slipped past Fabian's lips after staring at her for several seconds. Without a word, he peeled her fingers from his wrist, only to hold her hand. "Did that make you feel better?" he inquired with a tinge of impatience. She noticed the faint pressure in his tone, but she ignored it and nodded. "Come."

And with that, the two of them fled the Avolire Palace. As they run through the silent hallway, her grip around his hand tightened. They had passed by several marshals in charge of the security of the said place, and they were all silenced. Some servants' bodies were also left lying in their own pool of blood. But the gruesome sight that tainted the glorious Avolire palace didn't deter them from moving forward. Even when Florence realized the inner palace that was connecting all the palaces shared the same fate as the Avolire Palace, they continued to sprint to the emperor's palace. Although there was less blood in the inner palace, it seemed some of them were simply knocked unconscious. When they were minutes closer to the emperor's palace, Fabian's steps slowed down until he halted completely. Florence, who managed to keep up with him, gazed at him curiously.

"What is it?" she asked in a panic. "Are there enemies ahead?"

Florence studied his expression, and unlike his usual smile, Fabian's expression was blank. He gazed in the direction ahead, eyes glinting dangerously. He released her hand, making her eyes

dilate in confusion. "Stay here, Your Majesty," he instructed, only to her head quick and loud, "no!" Florence flinched when Fabian set his sharp eyes on her. "You said you won't leave me alone," she reminded him through her gritted teeth. "If there're enemies ahead, I swear I won't hold you back — I'll hide! Just... just don't leave me alone here."

"Please!" she then hurriedly held his hand with both her hands, eyes still fixed on him. "I know I'm annoying and pathetic, but I'm begging you. I can't... I don't want to be left alone."

There was a moment of silence that descended upon them as they looked at each other in silence. Florence had already swallowed the little pride she had out of fear. She had seen everyone in the places they had been, and she was certain that being alone was the last thing she wanted right now. Her chances of survival would be closer to none. "I... don't like you," he muttered, narrowing his eyes, looking at her in utter dismay. "Do as you wish, but I'm telling you... I might hurt you too if you came close."

Her breath hitched when Fabian peeled his eyes away from her and sauntered off. Florence stayed in the same spot as he walked away, staring at his back with genuine dread in her eyes. For some reason, she felt the murderous intent shrouding his back as he walked towards the emperor's palace. 'He's going to kill someone,' was what her subconscious mind told her... and Florence was certain Fabian was going to the emperor's palace to kill someone and not just meet Rufus.