I Thirst for You

Julianne Mae F. Vera Cruz

STORYPDF

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Introduction

I THIRST FOR YOU

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Blurb:

"They say enemies are the best in bed. Let's see if that's true."

~ 0 ~

Amanda, after witnessing a murder, was placed by the police department in the Witness Protection Program. It would have sounded good, yes, until she found out she was staying inside a mansion filled with vampires and owned by a vampire master with enigmatic eyes.

Chapter 0 - Prologue

“Blood type O positive. Donor number XZ-09-2024.”

The Master of the Vitalis House tapped a finger on his right temple as the butler servant recited.

Sitting on his throne-like chair fronting the grand hall never had been this painful. Parched, very hungry, and almost at his limit, he waited for his servant to finish. The wine flute that contained the delicious crimson liquid was just within his reach.

Just. Within. His. Reach.

Yet he didn’t move a muscle and just waited for the servant to hand it to him.

“Milord, this is the blood that you have been waiting for,” the butler noted, lifting the silver tray nearer.

Amidst seeing nothing other than entire darkness in his front, a small smile grew on his lips.

“At last,” came his reply and with ease, he straightened in his seat and managed to take out the flute from the tray without tumbling it down.

The cold contact of the glass against his *warm* fingers was a great welcome. It reminded him of the feeling he had in a similar wintry season last year when he held the same container with the same blood flowing with life.

As much as he wanted to drink such precious liquid every day, he couldn’t as the supposed donor opt a yearly donation only, in a blood bank where his butler gets to purchase it. He doesn’t even know whether the donor, who stayed on the opposite side of the world, was a male or a female, but as if *that* mattered to him.

He smelt it first, tipping the rim of the glass close to his nostrils and instantaneously caught the faint smell of the jasmine leaves mixed inside.

Ahh, what an aroma, his mind confessed and right then and there, ghosted another smile.

He, of all the living and nonliving beings under his wing, was the only one who preferred to have his meal like this - in a wine flute and mixed with jasmine leaves. Atypical for a dark creature like him, yes, but this was the only leisure that he ever preferred since he disliked feeding directly from the humans.

“As indicated in the Red Cross database, the donor decided for two bags this time so you have two days’ supply of the blood Milord,” informed the butler as he watched his Master sip leisurely. One

hand was now on the forehead of a fully grown black panther, making doodles while the big cat purred and nudged its cheek against the armrest.

“Good to know, Jerome,” the Master stated with a small nod; his voice in equal parts soporific and velvety. “At least I have two days before my fasting begins again.”

"*Right*, and I believe you are doing that on purpose?” came out a male voice behind the throne. Immediately, the panther stood on guard, hissing, and growling as it locked its feline eyes on the trespasser.

To give some privacy, the butler dismissed himself, walking out of the dais into a closed door where it led to a huge kitchen.

Though it was without warning, the Master wasn’t at all surprised. He knew exactly who the trespasser was just judging on the sound of his gravelly voice and the foul-stench of dried up blood in the corner of his mouth from a very recent feeding.

“I don’t need to explain myself to you,” was his cool and composed answer. He continued sipping and acting nonchalant all the while his cousin snorted and inched forward in his side.

“Of course, you don’t need to. You are too high and mighty for that,” the man replied, not scared with the black beast at all. He scrunched up his nose and bared his teeth towards the cat momentarily.

The panther didn’t budge. It stayed in a guarded posture and remained standing on all fours.

“You are the Master of the House oh my dear cousin, and I, just your lowly relative,” he continued with a tight smug on his face. “But from what I heard from the rumors, you hate biting the humans. You prefer to drink from blood bags ever since that was invented.”

He paused and strolled in front, waving a hand near the blindfold-wrapped eyes of the Master in the process. When he got no response, he let out another arrogant smug.

“And not only that, you seem to favor one certain source. That makes me wonder *why*?”

From beneath the blindfold, the Master felt the initial process of regaining a precious faculty owing to the blood he had just ingested. He felt tiny pinprick sensations in his eyelids and then a sharp shooting pain in both the back of his eyes.

Although his cousin couldn’t see, there was a blue glow in his eyeballs that appeared, followed by flashes of gold. By the time it subsided, the Master of the House of Vitalis was restored of sight, but he chose not to pull his blindfold out.

What for when the effects of the miraculous blood wouldn’t last anyway? Why bother fancying oneself of borrowed sight when it was just only temporary?

"Go and wonder other things, Trace. Don't include me with your childish agendas. I'm not in the mood for that," he answered coldly just as he usually does to all those around him.

The man named Trace grinned and wrinkled his nose. "Oh, but you are *always* not in the mood cousin," he rebuked.

The Master, through the black silk cloth, shot his cousin a murderous glare. "Get out or I'll throw you where the hellhounds dine," he ordered whilst curling one fist on the armrest.

The panther growled louder, feeling the Master's burst of anger.

"Huh," Trace scoffed. "As if you can do that *oh Unseeing One*." He climbed down one step from the dais and gave the Master and the pet a wide grin.

Definitely, it was a mock of the Master's dire situation but as if *that* would get him to start a fang fight with his cocky cousin. Instead, he just ignored him and continued on sipping the honey-like blood - a perfect blood he first discovered six years ago.

Luckily, Trace left after a long silence, and with that, finally, he was able to dine in *peace* - a much-awaited moment indeed.

Chapter 1 – The Empress Hand

The Formula One tires screeched against the asphalt as it swerved to the right of the practice track. Then, the same thing happened when it made a hard turn to the left. It became a known cycle of ear-splitting sound for at least ten minutes - a time most car racers deem lengthy for a test drive.

Although it was a cold, gloomy evening, thick, white-to-gray smoke could be seen coming out under the engine of the race car. It wasn't an alarming sight for the spectators, however. No one wasn't concerned when they knew who drove the said vehicle. They just watched in awe in the sidelines, watched with complete adoration on the driver pulling the shots.

After about two laps of run, the race car finally stopped directly in its inspection area and out came the one who did it all: a woman, wearing a black full-face helmet and loose jumpsuit of red and white.

The NASCAR mechanics call her, "The Empress Hand, " owing to her skillful and sometimes believed to be magical-works on busted car engines, but her family normally names her, Amanda Caitlin, a twenty-four-year-old independent, sociable, and health-conscious only daughter of the O'Malley Family.

Whether in or out of her dear stepfather's company, many admire her not only for the comely, exotic beauty she exuded but also for her activeness in extreme sports and her uncanny knack for all things related to masculine work - engine troubleshooting included.

Had it not for this reason, she would have been in New Zealand still where her stepfather's main office specializing in motorsports was located. And, had it not been for her gay best friend's insistence to visit his hometown, she would have been in her apartment, eating her home-made dinner and cuddling her white Persian cat.

"Red Panther is good to go, " announced she pertaining to the highly-prized vehicle of slick red paint. She took out her helmet and tossed it inside the driver's seat.

The Head Mechanic, Robert, who directly stood near the engine side nodded. He had a graying hair, an overgrowth of beard and wrinkles in his forehead that was expected of a forty-year-old.

"Yes, many thanks Cait, " he stated with a pat on her back. "You really have talent on fixing engines."

"Hmm, that's the reason why I'm here after all Rob. It's my job." She winked at his way and strutted out of the restricted area leaving the man sheepishly tilting his head. It was more of an effect from

her charms that's why he did so, and not because he felt slightly belittled that she did better than him in the mechanical aspect.

"I'm glad we requested the boss to let you travel with us to Spa, Belgium," another man said with a hint of an Italian accent.

He stood at the boundary line waiting for Amanda to cross. He was about ten years younger than the Head but has his rightful place in the Company being that he was the Vice President, second to her stepfather, Mr. Arnold O'Malley.

With a copper short hair brushed up neatly to the back, a perfect five o'clock shadow beard, and striking masculine features, he could easily pose as Amada's boyfriend - if she was even open to the prospect of having one.

"Yeah, and you should thank Noman too because he is a major contributor of me coming here," replied Amanda as she unzipped the back of the jumpsuit in the man's front not caring that many pairs of eyes were still glued on her, his included.

The Vice President, who was named Matteo Nikos Threvelli, cocked a brow. "Where is that gay best friend of yours by the way? I thought he wanted to tour you in his hometown?"

Amanda finished pulling the uniform out of her ankles and stilettos before answering him. She balanced herself against the metal railing not wanting to ask for his help with regards to this aspect. But Matteo was very much willing to if only to play gentleman in front of her. So, without waiting for her to say anything, he helped keep her balance intact by slipping a hand around her waist.

Amanda was unfazed by the intimate contact. She merely owed it to his gentlemanly behavior as had always been for about two years of knowing each other.

"Well, he did, yesterday, immediately after he gave me just four hours of sleep after my twelve hours of flight," she answered finally and made a cheeky grin. She handed the uniform to him who in turn handed her the brown leather jacket he had been keeping before the start of the test drive.

"Thanks," she said, easily forgetting about the contact of his hand on her waist.

"You're welcome," he nodded appreciatively.

"And now he is in an anniversary party probably grinding his ass off. He wanted me to come saying that this party is one of the most awaited parties every year in this country, but as you can see," she paused and gestured to the heavily-spotlighted surroundings of metal benches, race tracks, unused tires, and parked race cars with a wave of a hand and continued, "I'm here, tending to my stepfather's prized Formula Ones."

Matteo chuckled at her subtle remark of disappointment.

“Hmm, I can sense that you want to join in that party, ” he cited.

Amanda shrugged her shoulders and adjusted her white V-neck tee. “Well, who wouldn’t be? As per Noman’s claim, it would be a fun night of debauchery.”

The man cocked a brow again. “I thought you disliked such stuff. I don’t see you as a happy-go-lucky woman.”

Amanda puckered her lips and grinned. “Of course I am not like that, but it sure would be interesting to see how it plays out on him.”

“Ha! You really are one of a kind Cait.” His eyes glinted with warmth - a rather quick change from his friendly light earlier. “So, I take it you can have dinner with me tonight? I don’t want to have you returning to your best friend’s unit and eat alone on the couch.”

The latter wasn’t taken aback by his smooth intro of a dinner date. She just gave him a playful brow lift and said, “Hmm, let me se—”

But then her answer was cut off when her cellphone rang and vibrated inside her jeans pocket.

She held a hand up near the face of this six-footer dressed in impeccable clothes and continued, “Wait, I should take this first.”

Matteo nodded and observed her take out the gadget.

“Caitlin O’Malley speaking, ” she answered as soon as the phone touched her ear.

The curve of her smile was clear at first, but then it changed into a thin line. Her brows knitted and she remained silent the whole time the caller reported about her best friend’s state of inebriation.

“Where is that place?” she asked, a sense of urgency coming over her.

The man with a raspy voice on the other side of the line answered concisely including the address and the instructions on how to get there. He even called her ‘Madame’ as if he was like someone of the olden days.

“Alright, I’ll be there in twenty minutes, ” Amanda replied, sure to herself, amidst the fact that she was unfamiliar with the Belgian streets.

“What happened Cait?” asked Matteo as soon as she cut the call.

Amanda huffed. “This is a world record. Noman just found himself already intoxicated early in the night!”

Matteo’s deep chuckle followed. “Wow. That is not a surprise.”

“Oh com’n Matt, give my best friend some credit, ” she slapped his shoulder playfully. “He ain’t that stupid to be in that situation easily.” She tucked her cellphone back in her pocket and raced to leave the grease-splattered waiting area.

Matteo followed closely behind her.

“Let me drive you there, ” was his immediate offer, hoping she would agree. “I don’t want you riding a taxi.”

Amanda stopped and turned to face him. “So kind of you Matt, but do you know where the place is?”

“What’s the name and address of the house?” he inquired instantly.

“House of Vitalis, Libree Road, ” she answered, crossing her arms over her well-endowed chest.

Matteo smiled wildly. “Then, there’s no problem. People who had been in Belgium before knows where that castle is, I myself included.”

“Wait, what? A castle?!” Amanda’s eyes widened.

“Yes, a castle Cait. I haven’t been inside because it is a restricted place, but every year the Vitalis Family opens up their doors to invite the more esteemed of the population for an anniversary party.”

“Wow, that’s typical, ” she commented and rolled her eyes, thinking of Noman and how he pulled strings to be able to get inside. He wasn’t exactly included in the ‘most esteemed’ part of the society being that he was just a budding professor of a famous university in New Zealand and the youngest of a family of teachers. He wasn’t exactly in the super-rich and famous list.

“Now, should we go?” Matteo grabbed his car key from the pocket of his slacks and drew it up to their front.

“Yes, yes, I think we should, ” Amanda bobbed her head, “but only if you tell me what you know about this Vitalis Family.”

***

And so Matteo did, during their travel to Libree Road, which specifically consisted of zero. He admitted to his inadequate knowledge about the Vitalis Family and reasoned because the family was just too private of their lives. No one knew actually of the Vitalis Family history except those who were close to them and by close, meant the family members and first-degree relatives themselves.

Instead of this topic, Matteo took advantage of the opportunity and rushed to cultivate more of Amanda's love life. The latter however kept herself reserved and eluded the man's questioning rather skillfully explaining she was just too busy to even welcome suitors.

Once the second topic was dropped, Amanda diverted her attention to the landscape seen through her side of the window.

It was a beauty. Trees after trees were everywhere looking like one mass of black clump against the moonlit sky. This part of the region, many called provincial-looking, and Amanda could very well guess that riding a taxi coming here would be utterly difficult.

"Thank you by the way for accompanying me, Matt, " she expressed whilst looking at him and noticing how adeptly he drove his newly bought black Aston Martin.

Matteo curved a smile. "No problem, Cait. It is my pleasure." Although a little bit let down of the way his wooing of her went, he still cherished the fact that they were together.

"We are here, " he announced, gradually slowing his car to a narrow road that led all the way to the enormous castle stonewall.

"Wow, " was the only expression Amanda could make as she stared through the windshield.

There lacked a moat, standard towers, and a drawbridge but calling the building a castle was correct in every aspect. It looked like two massive white mansions joined in one.

They drove inside the front courtyard, passing through the already open thick iron-wrought gate.

Amanda's sense of sight underwent a fiesta whilst looking at how the colorful strobe lights sliced through the darkness of the night. It danced all the way to the cloudy sky in time with the loud, head-thudding techno music.

Metallic, sequined, fluffy, lacy, feathery, and almost all manners of clothing and appliqués could be seen everywhere worn by different races and genders of guests around the mansion; dancing, eating, or whatever hullabaloo they were doing.

It was a real sight to see.

And to think this was just the courtyard alone. How much more the inside of the castle?

A number of valets awaited them as the car neared. All of these men had tidy, brushed-up hair and ramrod straight backs, standing on top the wide marbled stairs of the front arched portico. In their middle stood the oldest man, donning on a complex piece of butler outfit complete with white gloves and a tailcoat.

Though she had a few words popping out of her mind, Amanda was just too dumbstruck to even audibly comment on how staged and stiffly-organized the whole welcome scene was. She eyed Matteo with one brow lifted and the latter just gave her a lopsided smile.

Both had seen high-class parties in New Zealand and in other parts of the world during their car race travels, but not like this one that was too over-the-top.

“Here we are, ” he announced, putting the Aston in a complete stop.

“So it looks.” Amanda resisted rolling her eyes.

Swiftly, two men descended from the stairs. One man wearing a gray tux accepted the car key when Matteo handed it to him after he disembarked the car while another man wearing the same look of uniform assisted Amanda out of the vehicle.

“Thanks, ” she said but was cut off with her planned intro speech when the same raspy voice from before greeted.

“Welcome to the Vitalis Estate, Madame O’Malley.”

Chapter 2 – Crimson Red

Amanda stared at the one man different from the rest with enough wonder.

“I am Jerome Gagllaher, Head Majordomo of the Vitalis Family, at your service.”

The man perfected a regal bow in front of the two as if he was a master of all things related to subservience.

Amanda, in effect, attempted a poor half-body bow and said, “You must be the one who called me earlier.”

“Yes, Madame, it is I, ” Jerome answered when he straightened, looking at her and then to Matteo who just briefly dipped his head on his way. “Come and follow me. I shall take you to Mr. Asghar’s quarters now.”

Amanda cocked a brow, surprised.

“You placed my best friend in a guest room?”

The Head Majordomo nodded. “It is imperative that we do so, Madame. Your best friend’s state might cause worry to the other guests.”

“Oh, I don’t think that being drunk causes that, ” Amanda rebutted just as she climbed the wide stairs.

“True, ” was his clipped but rather secretive reply, and because of this, she couldn’t help but feel something was amiss with his sudden lack of explanation.

The butler turned around and gestured for the heavy oak entrance doors. “This way please.”

Amanda just nodded, letting the oddity of his words slip away.

“Noman is just fine Cait. Probably he just had too much to drink, ” Matteo assured, patting a hand on the small of her back on their way into the main foyer. At least this way, he was able to tell her that he was still by her side, accompanying her and not just a silent audience.

Amanda smiled fleetingly at him and answered, “Oh God, I hope so, Matt. I really hope so.”

“Why did the butler call you instead of his family by the way?” Matteo inquired as they stepped inside the castle.

“Well, Noman has an emergency calling card in his wallet. My phone number is conveniently supplied there, ” she answered and then released a sigh. “And besides, his parents are in Pakistan

for a vacation and what little family and relatives he has in this country, he didn't add their numbers in the card. He probably doesn't want to bother them especially just because of a simple reason as getting drunk. We have both each other to take care of during these times of...wow," Amanda trailed off and gaped openly at the spectacular sight before her.

The main foyer looked otherwordly. It was huge and spacious, boasting high ceilings and towering white marble columns. Six massive Murano glass chandeliers were hung to enliven the pearl white ceilings. Black smooth tiles were set as flooring. One grand staircase was visibly carpeted with maroon and gold cloths. Its curvaceous balustrade separates and branches into two more wide staircases of the same carpet towards the upper floor.

Furniture of largely Victorian designs could be seen, used by some guests lounging in this part of the castle. Tapestries of the Vitalis coat of arms were hung on the walls. It looked like a cross between a lion and an eagle, with the sun and the moon as its background and a sword and spear to accompany it. Paintings and pictures were hung too, of landscapes and possibly faces of the members of the super-rich family.

Amanda had not seen such extravagance like this one ever before, even for a woman who had been through a lot. Everything just bordered on the ridiculous.

"Wow," Matteo followed her expression too, awed by the sight as they continued their way up the grand staircase. "No wonder everyone wants to join this party."

"And you will be welcomed to join too, Milord," the Head Majordomo chimed over his shoulder, "Once the matter about Madame O'Malley's friend is taken care of."

Matteo immediately shook his head not because he wanted to correct the given appellation but to refuse the servant's good-natured invitation, "Ah, thank you for the invite but I will have to pass Mr. Gagllaher. I still have other business to attend to this evening."

The butler nodded once and turned his sights on Amanda. "And Madame O'Malley too?" he asked. "You will be most welcome to stay."

The one addressed gave a sure shake of her head. "I'm here for my best friend first, Sir. His welfare is my priority."

"Of course Madame, I understand," the butler resigned.

In one of the rooms in the east wing, they entered after a five-minute walk along the spacious corridors of the castle. This part of the building seemed off-limits since there weren't any guests lounging around.

Leaving Matteo and the butler near the room's chaise lounge, Amanda quickly went to her best friend's side when she saw him unconscious, sweaty and red-faced, lying on the queen-sized mattress. His metallic purple long-sleeved shirt was open to the belly, tiny bruises of red and blue-violet could be seen in his chest and neck, and an unusual black discoloration was clear on his left wrist.

He reeked of alcohol, strongly, and some other substance Amanda could only guess was a party drug.

"Goodness, you really have outdone yourself this time now huh, Dom?" she whispered as she brushed a curly lock from his mass of blacks.

Noman's well-shaved brows flinched as if he knew of his best friend's presence.

Amanda produced a tiny smile, relieved that his state wasn't as bad as she feared it was.

"I reckon I have new guests in my house, Jerome?" a voice so silvery, so low sounded from the bedroom door without warning that all of the occupants of the room turned an immediate ear.

Matteo shot a look at the intruder and so did Amanda who, for some reason, felt a sudden chill at the soles of her feet upon seeing the man.

It was the Master of the castle - the Vitalis Master - standing with an aura of superiority. Together with him was a black panther who took a guarded stand near him, looking every bit a hungry predator to Amanda and Matteo.

The Head Majordomo swiftly executed another perfect bow, lower than earlier, as if he wasn't at all concerned with the beast. "Master Cord, yes, you do have two. These are Mr. Asghar's friends here to take care of him, " he responded with great care.

"Hmm, I sense it so, " was the Master's cool reply, but Amanda thought it odd.

Sense?

She diverted her attention from the animal to him and unconsciously gulped, feeling this new man's eyes nailed on her amidst the fact that he wore a blindfold.

Her heartbeat sped, not because of his presence, but how intimidating he looked, holding a heavily engraved silver cane and wearing a white half-open button shirt, black slacks, and black trench coat.

This man is the Master of the House?

He looked an inch taller than Matteo. Self-assured, aristocratic-looking, with a body built and facial features five times better. He had a sexy unkempt hair of dark brown to black that Amanda

would have thought it cut short if not for a long rattail kept loosely with a thin band and draped on his broad shoulder. Better. Better than any other man could pull off. He seemed to be Matteo's age, or maybe even a year older.

While shamelessly ogling, she saw a brief twitch from the corner of his mouth and then followed by a clench of his jaw.

"I apologize for the circumstances that had befallen on your friend, Miss..."

"Amanda Caitlin O'Malley, my liege, " the butler supplied thoughtfully.

"Yes, Amanda, " the Master continued, highlighting that one name only. "My relatives have thrown this party. I permitted them to do so under the understanding that no one shall be harmed under the roof, yet here is Mr. Asghar, all wasted...in more ways than one."

His face dipped briefly to the unconscious man as if showing that he knew where he lay even with the blindfold on.

Amanda's cheeks burned, not in anger but in disappointment of how strongly he affected her just by saying the disliked name.

Yes, she hated being called 'Amanda', but she couldn't say that to him, unfortunately.

"People get drunk, Mr. Vitalis, that is a known fact by all. You don't need to apologize at all, " Amanda confidently answered.

"Yes, that is...true, " the Master replied. "But considering the circumstances, I suggest Mr. Asghar stays in this room until the morrow. I do not want you or your friend bothering his sleep just to bring him home. Let the man rest."

Amanda lifted a brow. "Kind of you to offer that, Mr. Vitalis. You care too much for a drunk man. I can't help but think there is more to my best friend's story than your butler initially reported, " she stated, no hesitation at all. Of course, the bruises in Noman's chest and neck looked alarming but she could always connect it to hickeys. The discoloration in his wrist seemed unusual, however, and that was what made Amanda question the story.

The Master didn't look bothered by her words at all. If anything, he stayed still and composed and even smirked a little towards her way.

Amanda felt unusually violated by that.

"You could always ask your friend once he wakes up, " was his simple reply.

"And she will, Mr. Vitalis, " Matteo cut in, making his presence known. "Good evening by the way." He dipped his head still even when the Master didn't look his way. "I am Ms. O'Malley's

friend, Matteo Nikos Threvelli. On behalf of her and Noman, I would like to thank you for your show of concern, but I believe it is up to Caitlin if she wants for her best friend to stay the night here."

"That is not a topic worth contemplating over, Amanda's friend, " the Master stated, not even using Matteo's given name. "My relatives' guests are mine too and it is my responsibility to see to their needs. Let Mr. Asghar stay here. I don't accept objections." Then, with a lift of his cane towards Amanda, he continued, "You can stay here too if you so wish."

"I will, " was Amanda's quick reply. "For my friend and not for the party."

"Of course, " the Master's smirk widened, "such a thoughtful friend you are."

If Amanda didn't know better, she would have thought that he was pleased with her staying inside the castle.

"Do you think it wise Cait?" Matteo inquired, walking towards the mattress. "I can always drive the two of you back to the apartment."

"No, " Amanda shook her head, "it is convenient this way. It is less hassle and Dom gets to sleep straight. You know how cranky he is when his sleep gets cut off."

Matteo sighed in defeat and eyed the Master and his butler who both listened to their conversation.

"Very well, " he announced, "but call me in case you change your mind."

"I will, " Amanda awarded him a grateful smile.

"I will prepare a room for you then, Madame O'Malley, " the butler offered, but Amanda quickly raised a hand up.

"No, please, don't bother. It is obvious that this castle can accommodate hundreds of people, but I prefer to stay by my best friend's side, to sleep next to him that is."

"As you wish Madame, " Jerome answered. He dipped his head briefly, placed an arm near his belly as any butler would, and waited for his Master's command, but he didn't get any.

"A pleasant evening to both of you. I will be on my study, Jerome, " the Master announced, turned heels, and then ambled out of the threshold waiting not for any response from those addressed.

The panther however didn't follow him. It had another plan in mind. It sprinted forward and crossed the space towards Amanda's feet.

She, together with Matteo and the butler, gasped. The Master quickly turned his head on her way sensing what the animal had just done.

“Shhhsh...shhh, easy boy, ” Amanda expressed with shaking lips and her hands high up in surrender. She was downright afraid that the predator neared her. She honestly thought it would attack, but to her surprise, it just nudged its head against the underside of her thigh, groaning and purring.

“Shall I pull the panther out Milord?” Jerome offered intuitively, looking at his Master’s way.

Cord squeezed the head of his cane. “No, you don’t need to. She won’t be mauled. My pet likes her. Surprisingly.”

Amanda, after hearing that, slowly placed a hand on the panther’s forehead. “This is...unexpected, ” she remarked, growing a small smile on her face.

Matteo just stood still, but ready to jump if and when the animal would turn against her.

“Come to me...” Cord muttered and with that, the panther immediately left Amanda’s side to her and the others’ relief. “Once again, I bid you good night, ” he stated and went out of the room with, finally, the animal in tow.

Amanda inhaled deeply and for the third time, raised a brow.

“Your Master doesn’t have a human being to accompany him while walking? Only a big cat?” she inquired once the receiving room’s door closed, slightly intrigued by this rich and powerful man’s circumstances.

“No Madame, he doesn’t need one, ” the Head Majordomo answered, still standing near the threshold. “And the panther is just his pet. It isn’t his aid. He is...more than capable of walking by himself even with his blind state.”

“Wow, what a resilient man. He seriously should give an inspirational talk to blind and disabled persons.”

Jerome suppressed a chuckle. “I assure you, Madame, he wouldn’t fit that because my Master is no disabled man.”

What he meant by that, Amanda couldn’t piece out. She just shoved all conversations in the back of her head once he and Matteo left an hour later after their dinner.

Yes, dinner.

Even though they were there for a different reason, the butler still invited them to sample the party’s cuisines and wines.

Although reluctant, Amanda agreed, knowing that they had a long day in the race circuit. To dine and relax a little wouldn’t hurt, especially when it was a well-deserved one.

But during her time eating in the garden, Amanda couldn't help but feel uncomfortable. It was as if she had captured someone's attention more than just the sense of sight alone. She had experienced men ogle her countless of times and for various reasons. She cared none of it. This time however was different. It affected her so much it brought a tremble to her bone.

Unluckily for her, it persisted until she lay in bed next to her still-asleep best friend.

To remedy it, she opened the only balcony Noman's chamber had to let in the noisy techno sound, just so it could drive the unwelcomed feeling away.

And it did, temporarily, until sleep beckoned her.

Chapter 3 - Aching Fangs

“Cord, your lip is bleeding.”

A white-haired man informed, staring at the sliced bottom lip with worry. He inched forward and took out a handkerchief from his jacket in the hopes of wiping the dripping blood from the Master’s chin but he only waved him off.

“No, leave it, ” the Master answered as if he saw his right-hand’s intent. Blood continued to trickle down his chin and because of that, he swiped a finger along it and licked clean the sticking liquid with his tongue. “My fangs are behaving badly. Shit, it wants to sink in that woman’s flesh.”

“Hmm, you had already restrained yourself for many a year, why break that now? What changed?” the man stepped down the dais, tucked back his handkerchief inside his jacket, and lowered his body to sit in a sofa provided for him.

“What changed is that woman’s blood, Calvin. She is the owner of those blood bags I crave so much, ” Cord’s tongue darted out and swept the wounded lip in one go.

The one named Calvin lifted a brow. “How can you be so sure?” he asked, enjoying the sight before him. It was not always that he gets to see the Vitalis Master agitated and hassled. He had perfected a poker face for over a millennium, to see a little bit of unraveling was a rare sight to say the least.

“Her scent and how I feel our blood boils in sync, that’s how sure I am, ” Cord replied. “Even now...” he trailed off, lifting his chin and inhaling deeply, “with her this near me.”

The throne-like hall was located on the same floor as where Noman and Amanda stayed. A few twists and turns of the hallways may be present, but it was still close enough for him to catch her honeysuckle scent of blood. It was intoxicating his sense of smell.

“Woah, now those are words I hadn’t heard from you ever. Do you feel a strong connection with her?” Calvin dug deeper, lighting a cheroot already secured in between his lips with his personal lighter.

“No. Why would I?” Cord immediately replied with his brows knitted. “But her blood, fuck, it sings to me.” He clenched his fists against the armrest and controlled the fangs from extending even longer.

Calvin grinned. “From the looks of things, you really are restraining yourself cousin.”

“True, ” Cord nodded once. “I almost crawled on her last night... Almost tasted her flesh.”

The latter shrugged his shoulders. “Sounds like a typical vampire dilemma.”

“I am no vampire, ” Cord corrected.

“In denial again? Huh!” Calvin puffed out smoke from his nostrils and shook his head. “How many times have I heard those words?”

The Master clenched his jaw, irked. “Why do you use that wretched name anyway? Vampires are mere imaginative creations of humans based on an inconsistent bloody tale. We are nothing like them.”

Calvin shrugged his shoulders and crossed his leg on the other. “I use that word because it’s cool and because humans got at least two about us right, ” he answered initially. “And those are that we drink blood and we fear the sun. Well, except a certain someone that is, ” he hinted. “And oh! Don’t forget about humans calling us beautiful creatures, ha!”

The smugness in Calvin’s voice produced a twitch in the Master’s cheek.

“Calvin, you better return to your coffin now. It is almost dawn, ” he reminded, daring him. It was after all every vampire’s fear - to be greeted by the sun and die - but to Cord, he was immune to it. One of the many reasons why he still denied his dark nature.

“Ugh, I don’t sleep in a coffin, you know that, ” Calvin scrunched up his nose, the thought of even lying in one repulsed him.

“Neither do I, my cousin, ” Cord smirked.

And so, the latter stood up. He dusted the cigar ashes that had clung in his stylish coat and raised his head up. “You know what, a piece of advice, ” he started, “if you don’t want to revert back into your old self, get that woman away from you as soon as possible.”

Unconsciously, the image of Amanda flashed before Cord: her soul-searching brown-violet eyes, her long, sun-kissed beach hair, and the slenderness of her limbs and neck - most especially her neck. It got him on edge, but he cleared his throat and stated without missing a beat, “I will. That’s not a problem at all.”

Calvin grinned, believing him without hesitation. “Have a great day, cousin, ” he said and left the hall and its Master with bored strides.

On his way out of the double doors, he met another ‘vampire’ he knew so well: Trace, not because he was a cousin of Cord in the father’s side, but because he spelled of everyday trouble.

They acknowledged each other eye-to-eye, but neither of them dipped their heads or made a smile.

The double doors closed and Trace approached the dais.

“It is almost dawn, do you really have to call for me?” he stressed when he stopped near the sofa. He looked disheveled: his black shaggy hair tousled in every direction, kiss marks blotting his porcelain skin, and his dapper clothes uneven from partying the whole night in the courtyard.

Of course, Cord couldn’t see those, but Trace’s voice was enough to crack a look of displeasure from him. At least with his cousin’s arrival, his fangs have retracted and allowed the bleeding of his lip to stop and the wound to heal.

“Trace, do I have to clean up every mess you make?” Cord stated, his voice a little more of a growl.

“I don’t make a mess, ” was the other’s nonchalant answer.

“Oh, and what of that gay human?” the Master rebutted.

Trace let out an amused burst of laughter, remembering Noman. “Hmft! The squealer?”

Cord’s expression remained neutral, unreadable, but in truth, he was fuming inside. “You know that was not just a case of drunkenness. Do you really have to harm that man?” he asked, keeping acid in his words in the safe limits.

“He struggled when I bit him, ” Trace flipped a hand midair. “Almost alarmed the other guests. I couldn’t stand it so I had to do drastic measures.”

Though Trace couldn’t see, under the blindfold, Cord pressed his eyelids a little harder, angered by his words.

“I permitted you and your family a party. If you want to wallow in mortal blood, fine with me, but do your fucking business elsewhere! I can’t have a corpse in my estate. It raises suspicions which I - no - we can’t afford!”

And then it happened, Trace’s shadow and the nearby ones in the dais and sofa created by the excessive candle-lit chandeliers reacted in an unearthly way. Looking like blank ink with a consistency of oil, they crawled up to Trace’s legs and incapacitated him. Electric shocks like lightning severed his veins and this made him kneel on the marbled ground like a repentant sinner.

“Shit, argh!” he cried out, a sound, which for a greater part, Cord had delighted once upon a long time. He heaved and struggled to put air into his lungs, not because he wanted the life-sustaining oxygen, but because he wanted to block the pain.

Yes, pain. Dark creatures like him actually experience pain amidst a walking corpse.

And yes, air. Dark creatures like him actually still required to breathe.

In a heartbeat, the shadows disappeared along with the torturous sensation. Cord lifted it, remembering this one simpleton of a man as still his relative.

“Lucky for you, Calvin was there to stop you. Otherwise, I won’t take your transgression lightly, ” he said.

“I know! Fuck, I get it!” Trace strongly spat out, lifting his face up and giving the Master of the House unconcealed murderous glares.

“Get out, ” Cord ordered through clenched teeth to which Trace immediately did but not without shouting in his head.

“Tsk, fucking blind bastard!”

To stop his palms from trembling, he clenched them fully and hurried out of the hall without ever looking back.

In the throne-like chair, Cord released a deep breath to free all the pent up stress his cousin had caused. Such punishments were bound to happen, he knew that for a fact, but all this time, he had refrained from doing that. Since he had thrown his old self aside, he had taken upon himself to be as indifferent as possible... for his benefit and for the others.

The welfare of that woman’s friend didn’t matter to him really. Heck, not one bit of care sparked in him towards that gay human.

But the woman...

Amanda.

Throw her into the equation and his carefully-erected mask cracks.

“You really know how to cause a ruckus, my cousin, ” Cord whispered to himself. He heard the double doors tightly shut and then followed by another one opening on his far left - the servant’s door particularly.

“But then again, actually, I should be thanking you for doing what you did last night.”

He then pressed his index finger on his bottom lip and ghosted a dark smile knowing that his wine flute full of Amanda’s donated blood was on the way, brought by his most loyal butler.

“Otherwise, I wouldn’t have found that woman.”

Chapter 4 – A Tormenting Presence

The blind Vitalis Master really intrigued Amanda, but to dig deeper on that wasn't in her list when she had a best friend to take care of.

She had had a very good sleep the entire night, well... much lesser if she had to count the gnawing feeling that she was being scrutinized inside out while asleep. She tossed and turned and almost hit Noman in the groin for being so damn uncomfortable for the first few hours of shutting her eyes.

Noman's incessant complaint first thing in the morning was what woke her up.

"Shit my head." Still closing his eyes, he massaged his temple and groaned audibly.

Amanda blinked twice and adjusted to the dots of morning light that came through the thick curtains.

"Hmm, Dom? You're awake?" she turned to the other side with her left elbow supporting her weight and caught sight of her best friend in still the same clothes he wore last night. She had hers too, minus the brown leather coat and dark blue jeans, only wearing her V-neck tee and a gray boy short panty.

Noman popped one eye on her way. "Yeah, I am, and I would have squealed after seeing you with me in this bed if not for this hangover headache."

He winced again, clenched his teeth, and hardened his temple massages. "Urgh, hey, we didn't have sex last night right?"

Although beet red, Amanda's expression turned one of exasperation.

"Idiot! Of course, we didn't!"

She pulled a nearby pillow from the headboard and hit Noman with it.

The latter timely blocked it and commented with a gagging action in his mouth, "Oh good, because I'd surely vomit if we did."

"Do you remember what happened to you last night?" Amanda, after rolling her eyes, changed the subject completely.

Still sleepy, Noman looked at her and grinned. "Pshhh, well, yeah! I joined the flippin' greatest party of my life!"

Amanda straightened and sat against the headboard and stacked pillows, acting confident amidst her lack of clothing in front of Noman. The duvet stayed low, covering her ankles and toes.

“Yeah, I know that already, ” she said and then twisted to pull his right wrist, “but this?” she held it up, “and those?” she pointed her eyes towards the visible bruises in his chest and neck with suspicion and continued, “What do you make of it?”

Noman, now fully wide awake, examined the telltale signs of his escapade last night and awarded her a sloppy smile, “Uhh, these are nasty kiss marks? And this…” he wriggled his wrist and went from being sure to confused, “I…really don’t know.”

Amanda narrowed her eyes at him and released his wrist. “That’s weird, ” she said, her suspicion increasing, “but you do feel fine right?”

Noman slumped back on his side of the mattress, closed his eyes, and massaged his head again. “Give me Advil and a glass of orange juice and I’ll be fine.”

“Hmph, you know I can’t bring you those right?” Amanda questioned, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Huh? Why so?”

“Because, my dear Professor, we are still in the Vitalis Mansion, ” she informed.

“Oh my God, what!?” The surprised Noman shot up with an open mouth and wide eyes. He scanned the room, from the mattress they were in to the intricately designed walls and furniture.

Amanda giggled. “Huh, you really are still disoriented if you can’t even notice the differences between your room back in the apartment and this…princess chamber, ” she remarked haughtily.

“Oh goodness, Cait! What are you waiting for?! Take a picture of me in this bed now!” Noman hurriedly grabbed his cellphone protruding in his pants pocket and shoved it in her chest.

Amanda lazily took it and swiped the screen.

He righted his garments, poised like the Vogue model, Candice Swanepoel, and puckered his lips.

Click. Click. She photographed in an angle like how he taught her months ago.

“And there, take a picture of me there!”

Noman jumped out of bed and posed, doing a leg split in the chaise lounge a few feet away from Amanda.

But before she could capture a photo, his eyes popped, sprang to his feet, and ran all the way from the chaise to the other side of the room where it led to the closed balcony area.

“What? This room has a balcony too?” he exclaimed, shoving the thick curtains to the side. Light instantly spilled from the outside, dispersing some of the shadows of the room.

Amanda winced from the sudden light change.

“Take a picture of me there too, Cait!” Noman pointed outside and then left the glass door towards where Amanda sat, snickering, and pulled her right hand up to his cheeks.

“Oh God! Pinch me! I am not dreaming am I?” he asked with hopeful eyes.

Amanda tried to hide her laughter. “No, you aren’t Dom. Not at all.”

“Ohh…” his eyes, if it was possible, even widened with that fact. “Oh yes!”

“Hmmm, I see that you are well and good, Mr. Asghar?” that molten-hot voice that Amanda knew so well even in just overnight sounded through the door.

Swiftly, both she and Noman turned to the source and saw the Master of the House already one step inside from the threshold of the bedroom door; a step closer than he had been last night, but a safe distance still. And once again, he had his pet with him.

How? How could they have not noticed him? How could they have not noticed the opening of the door? Or was it even closed in the first place?

“I…I…” Noman stammered, looking rather ashen. He shot Amanda a silent plea and then quick as a wink, jumped behind her.

Amanda understood Noman’s cowering state. Although an animal lover, she was well aware he was afraid of the Master’s pet panther looking every inch a predator.

But this wasn’t her main concern at all.

She, who was still sitting in bed, felt cognizant of her state since, after all, she was still in her boy shorts. Her slender legs looked mighty fine against the sheets; her fair skin complementing the fabric like she was meant to stay there.

Although she felt the beginnings of a blush, she blinked fast and inhaled deeply, realizing her feeling of embarrassment unnecessary when in fact the man was blind. He wouldn’t be able to see just how sexy she looked in her morning hair and lack of clothing.

“He is Mr. Vitalis, ” came her courageous voice, “but you are scaring him.”

Cord lifted a brow, taken aback. “I am?”

“Yes, you are, standing suddenly in that opening without even so much as a knock on the door or a sound of your boot. And of course, with your pet beside you.”

Not to mention your eye-catching blindfold and wearing your ominous black trench coat so early in the morning, she wanted to add those but refrained. To test the patience and hospitality of the host wouldn't be a good attribute.

Cord this time lifted his chin and curved a little smile directly on her way. "I am the Master here, I do as I please."

"So it looks, " Amanda rebutted, flushed.

Just as she did last night, she oddly felt he was looking right through that bloody hell of a blindfold, straight to her... straight to her inviting form in a mattress that needed a blessing of moans, grunts, and mixed heavy breaths.

"Excuse my interruption Master Cord. I have what you ordered, " and cue in the butler. As always, he perfected a low bow, clad in his well-ironed suit.

Amanda, realizing another man, though old, had entered the chamber, clutched the duvet immediately, and hid her waist and legs under.

"Give it to Mr. Asghar, " ordered the Master, his face still locked on Amanda.

"As you wish, " Jerome answered in a soft voice and then gestured for an old maid in his side to hand over the silver tray.

"What is that?" asked Amanda when he entered the room and approached the still-silent but observant Noman.

"It is Advil and a glass of orange juice, Madame O'Malley, " informed he.

"Wow, amazing, exactly just as what I said earlier, " Noman stated just as he reached for the two objects in the tray. He looked at his best friend and sent her silent eye signals of surprise. "Uh, thank you, Mister..."

"My apologies, " the butler cut in, "I hadn't introduced myself. I am Jerome Gagllaher, Head Majordomo of this castle, and the personal butler of the Master of the House."

He moved his right hand sideways and gestured for the blindfolded man.

"The one standing near the threshold is Master Rexco—"

"Pleasantries is not needed Jerome, " Cord interjected swiftly. "Bring in their breakfast so that they can get on their way."

Without a thought, Jerome bowed his head and left after saying, "As you wish, Sire."

Amanda didn't know where the courage came from, but this made her strike a blow. "You in a hurry to kick us out of your mansion, Milord? We are commoners after all. Too much of a bother to you. I don't mind leaving without breakfast, and I think Dom has the same sentiment. You, accommodating us for the night is already enough."

Noman's mouth dropped.

Cord's neutral lips curved upward again. "Hmm, such a spitfire you are." He succeeded a step closer with his cane wanting to bask in her scent more but halted. Abruptly. He clenched the gold handle of his cane with a quarter of his unnatural strength and continued, "But yes, I am in a hurry to kick you out of my house, but not for the reasons you think."

Amanda clutched the duvet even more. This time, now, she felt naked in front of him.

What was he saying anyway?

"You're presence...torments me, Amanda, " he confessed.

Her heartbeat double worked making her furrow her brows. She disliked such a reaction he had aroused in her.

"Ho-how so...?" despite her boldness, her voice stammered.

"Crimson red, " was the only words he could make before turning around to face the door and pausing, "Goodbye and have a pleasant day ahead."

Frowning, Amanda watched him leave with the stride of a man born with unquestionable command and power. She didn't answer anymore. She stayed silent until he and his panther were no longer in sight. If they were playing charades, she would have accepted his vague words, but shit, it left her hanging. Empty in the end.

Again. What the fuck was he talking about anyway?

Jerome entered the bedroom again with two maids in tow. In their hands, they held two silver trays full of food and drinks. In a nearby coffee table, they set those up while Jerome stood at the foot of the bed.

"Any other things you need Madame? Mr. Asghar?" he asked, mindful of their needs.

"No, we are good Sir Jerome, thank you, " was Amanda's composed answer. She glanced at Noman who in turn nodded at her.

"Master Cord has arranged for a vehicle to drive the two of you to your destination. It will wait in the front portico, " he informed.

“That isn’t really necessary, we can always call Uber, but tell your Master that we are grateful, ” she answered again, gone was her spunk earlier. Why would she stay on guard when her source of threat had left?

“I will Madame O’Malley. Enjoy your breakfast, ” Jerome replied, made another bow, and turned around to leave.

The moment the bedroom was vacated, Noman jumped out of the mattress again and approached the coffee table. He placed the half-finished glass of orange juice in one of the trays and sat on a square-shaped sofa.

“Damn, I’m hungry, ” he declared whilst picking a silver fork to pierce a generous-sized Hungarian sausage.

Once done, he narrowed his eyes at the silent Amanda and bobbed his head. “Uhh, what was that just now?”

Amanda arched her brow at him. “What? The butler?” she asked, genuinely innocent.

“No! The butler’s Master!” Noman shouted. “That hot male specimen!”

“Hmm, what about him?” She stood up and joined him, sitting opposite on another square-shaped sofa.

“Uh, hello Cait? Short-term memory again?” he flagged the half-eaten Hungarian sausage in her front. “Your presence torments me. Crimson red, ” he echoed, mimicking the rich voice of the Master. “Does that ring a bloody virgin bell?”

“Oh, that, ” Amanda dipped her eyes on the large piece of bacon and buttered baguette, hiding the brief red hue in her face.

“Yes, that!” Noman proclaimed. “There is something going on between the two of you. I need details. Now.”

“Nothing is going on between the two of us, ” she replied point-blank, now chewing on the bacon. “I just met the rude guy last night because of you.”

Noman pursed his lip and lifted a diva brow. “Spill the beans, Cait, or I’ll stuff this Hungarian sausage in your mouth, full!”

No one could ever calm a thrashing Noman and Amanda knew that. She knew that he would never drop the subject, ever, so she raised her hands up in surrender.

“Okay! Okay! Not the Hungarian please.” She gave him pleading eyes.

“Talk. Now, ” dictated Noman.

Amanda sighed.

“He is blind, ” she started, bringing her attention back on the baguette.

“It looks to be so with that cane and blindfold, but what’s your point?” Noman decapitated on his poor sausage again, all ears on her.

“It feels that...he keeps on looking at me even with his disability, ” she continued. “I have never felt this observed so much in my entire life, even with those men who have perfectly healthy pair of eyes.”

“Even with Matteo, ” Noman chimed in, giving her a cheeky grin.

“Psh, yeah, even with him, ” Amanda confirmed. She knew of Matteo’s apparent infatuation with her. She knew he was slowly making his move however subtle it may be. She liked the man, but not in a way he desired from her.

“Wow, that’s weird. What else?” Noman remained reserved of his comments.

“My body boils whenever he is nearby, and I tell you, we just met twice, last night and this morning, yet I feel so strongly towards him, ” Amanda poured out.

“Explain thoroughly, ” was what Noman directed just as he drank his fill of orange juice.

Amanda inhaled again and closed her eyes. It would have been better to forget those feelings for good, but for her best friend’s sake, she will have to relive it again.

“I hate the man, ” she started, keeping her eyes downward on her plate. “I hate how he makes my insides clench. I hate how he brings the soles of my feet cold. I hate how he curves his mouth into a smirk. But I am fascinated with him too. I... Shit, this is all messed up.” She shook her head. Silently, she wished the walls of the Vitalis Castle possessed no ears. Oh how embarrassing would it be if they do have spies and report this to that difficult man.

Noman seemed unaffected with her predicament though.

“Other women must feel the same way when in front of that kind of man. Heck, I even feel my testicles tingle every time I gaze at his blindfold, ” he remarked and this made Amanda cringe.

“Ewww, Dom, your disgusting.”

The latter laughed and wiped a rogue tear from his eye.

“Seriously though. You’re just experiencing the normal responses of attraction. This is new to you since you basically have zero experiences with men in your abundant lifetime.” He swept a thumb under his clean-shaven chin and smiled. “Think of it as sort of an incentive for being my bestest friend. Oh! What am I saying? I haven’t thanked you yet for coming to my rescue!”

He stood up, reached across the table, and gave her a tight hug. Amanda welcomed it.

“But next time, when you’re drunk, please make sure you remember what happened to you,” she stated, happy that her best friend was well and good with no side effects from last night’s partying.

“I will, pinky promise,” Noman replied, showing her his pinky finger.

Chapter 5 - Becoming A Witness

Cord burst into his study, unable to take it anymore. Why did he tell the woman that? He had no obligation to explain himself to her, yet he did and rather too honestly!

He gripped the head of his cane and threw it on the floor, the action of which made a loud metal thunk and then a smash of a glass he most thought from the vase next to his work desk.

Owing to his ability of hypersense and how he knew of the castle spaces by heart, he crossed the unlit room and shoved the thick curtain aside. Contrary to what the humans believed, the Vitalis Master, him, wasn't even burned by the sunlight when it contacted his skin. The light unsettled him though, being that he was too attached with the shadows, but the discomfort wasn't enough to halt him from approaching the casement window.

Although he couldn't see, he sensed that the woman and her friend were leaving via the car he had arranged. He felt the boiling of his blood waning and so did hers, disconnected gradually as the vehicle moved towards the castle stonewall.

It emptied him consequently and he loathed the feeling. However, it was better this way. Better than making a mess of himself if he were to chain the woman with him.

Yes, chain and claim her. That was what his instincts told him the moment he felt her presence nearing the castle last night.

But he controlled himself, painstakingly, and he was proud of himself now that he had surpassed the hurdle.

She will be gone for good. Gone. And the only thing that will keep him sane was the belief that she will continue on donating blood to the Red Cross Organization in New Zealand, where his butler had actually been contacting these past few years.

Her blood bags, that will be his lifeline, but a wild thought crossed his mind again: what would it actually feel like if he were ever to sink his fangs on her skin?

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Amanda was all smiles all the way to Noman's apartment where she temporarily stayed during the Belgian Grand Prix two-week long activity. This day was day two of it.

During the travel, Noman mostly supplied their conversation with the mutual understanding of not mentioning the events in the bedroom and the Vitalis Master. He talked about his experiences at the party, the grandeur of it, and the famous celebrities he had seen. It was a safe topic to discuss.

One that was both friendly and savory in the ears of a driver who may have expressed loyalty to his Master.

Amanda was at the same time busy texting Matteo who left five miscalls in her phone and three messages of concern. The last message he sent was the information about another test drive of six more Formula Ones their Company owned and this was the message that she didn't deliberately ignore.

Yes, I am fine. Dom is fine. I will take a shower and change my clothes first before I go there, she texted.

A few minutes later her cellphone rang.

Noman pulled a goofy look at her. "You should answer that, " he said. "Your boyfriend might become impatient Cait."

"He isn't my boyfriend, " Amanda corrected, shaking her head, still deliberating if she should answer him.

"He will be if you accept his advances, " he added. "The man's so besotted with you. He would have been already my fiancé if I were in your shoes."

Ha! No surprise in that!

"I don't like to marry, you know that, " she reminded with a huff, "And besides, he can get a different woman. He won't have a hard time. He has the looks."

"Yeah, but not like that man back in the mansion, " he pointed, and with that, Amanda easily avoided the topic with a press of her answer button.

She gave Noman a glare before answering - a sign that she wanted his mouth zipped.

"Hi, Matt!" A soft smile appeared on her face. She listened intently on the voice from the other line and bobbed her head.

"Yeah, you read it right. I'm on my way to Dom's apartment."

Then, she paused and listened again.

"Of course, he is with me. Why would I leave him in the castle?"

She looked at her best friend with a grin and bit her bottom lip.

"No, the Vitalis Master maybe Dom's type, but the man is unachievable."

Noman narrowed his eyes at her and puckered his lip like he was scrutinizing their conversation.

“Let’s not talk about that man shall we?” Amanda requested, disliking where the conversation strayed.

She nodded again and smiled. “Alright, I’ll see you in an hour.”

“Un-achievable huh?” was Noman’s quick remark the moment Amanda cut the call.

“Yeah, because that man for sure has royal blood in his veins, ” she answered with a serious face. “He also holds a status we commoners cannot achieve. And he owns a bloody castle with bloody uniformed servants and a freaking butler. Does that make my point?”

Noman suppressed a laugh and crossed his arms over his chest, amused by her sudden outburst.

“Yes, you did. You very well did, my beautiful best friend, ” he answered.

Amanda smirked at him and remained silent.

After twenty minutes, the luxury car they were in stopped right at the entrance of Noman’s apartment. They disembarked and headed straight to his fourth floor unit.

In there, Amanda readied herself: showering, applying little make-up and slipping in her chosen clothes of faded jeans, a quarter-sleeve striped blouse, and a white scarf.

By nine-thirty, she was all dressed up and ready. By quarter to ten, the Company driver arrived to get her leaving Noman all to himself, checking his students’ essay papers online.

When Amanda stepped out of the Company van in the clubhouse entrance of the Circuit some minutes later, Matteo was already standing there, all smiles towards her.

“You look beautiful, ” he commented when she approached him. He bent and kissed her cheek like he always does, but a lot more lingering than the previous others.

“Thanks, Matt. You look dashing yourself, ” Amanda remarked, eyeing him from head to well-polished shoe - sporting white pants, a blue coat, and a gray shirt under.

He really was a fine male his age, handsome, charming and she would have kept him as a basis for a perfect male model if not for the Vitalis Master who just messed up her understanding of the word handsome. Shit, that guy was just downright a threat to humankind with his unnatural beauty.

“How’s your night at the Vitalis Castle?” Matteo asked, giving her a broad smile. He slipped a hand on the small of her back and led her to the back of the clubhouse where the race cars were kept.

“Pretty much normal, ” Amanda answered, making a mental note of not giving too much away.

“Hmm, you didn’t have any weird dreams most people experience when staying in a building like that?” he pressed on.

“Ah, no. Luckily.” She shook her head and gave him a tight-lipped smile.

“Good to hear, ” was all Matteo could make.

“So what’s the status?” Amanda asked, remembering his text message earlier. They passed through a narrow corridor and then turned to an opening where it led to the mechanics' area.

“Six race cars for a test drive, ” Matteo answered, now in a business tone. “You have to pick two to complete the race list.”

Amanda nodded. “I see, then leave this to me.”

She pulled the scarf out of her neck and handed it to Matteo. The latter cheerfully threw it over his shoulder.

After opening a large metal cabinet of uniforms, Amanda pulled one that suited her - a black and pink jumpsuit - that screamed ‘drive expert.’ She disappeared into the changing room and appeared moments later clad in it with her hair tied into a high ponytail.

***

“You done for the day?” Matteo asked as he stood in the same viewing area yesterday.

Amanda nodded once. “Yeah, ” she said and raised her arms over her head for a stretching exercise.

She finished checking the six race cars their Company had acquired, engine wise, and it covered for seven hours of hard, backbreaking labor and some very exhilarating drives. The sky had the beginnings of an orange and violet hue with feathery clouds completing it. A gentle cool breeze surrounded the area, something that she enjoyed in New Zealand too.

Matteo handed her the white scarf and she took it without delay.

“How about dinner with me now?” he asked, smooth on bringing it up.

Amanda shook her head lightly and gave him an apologetic face. “I’m sorry Matt, but I promised Dom we will have a night out tonight.”

“Oh, I see.” Although disappointed, Matteo still gave her a smile. “Let me drive you to the apartment then.”

“Sure, ” Amanda agreed. “You can get the car. I will go to the lady's room first and wait for you in the clubhouse exit.”

Matteo grinned. This confident side of her he admired so much. “Good enough for me.”

They each walked a different path. Matteo on the left, while Amanda on the right side of the more than spacious parking space lined with metal benches and unused tires.

The path she chose lead to a comfort room - a one-storey building detached from the main clubhouse and other storage areas. The landscape around it was nicely maintained, with grass and ornamental plants placed on the sides.

Inside, Amanda attended to her needs: answered the call of nature, slipped out of the jumpsuit, and arranged her hair down with the scarf rounding her neck. These she did in just five minutes tops.

She exited the building, humming slowly to herself, feeling relaxed, but that all too soon changed.

Her ears caught an eerie sound of gurgling and whimpering noise and then, a strangled squeak.

Amanda's heart picked up a beat. Surely, it was just nothing? But it sure sounded too weird and dangerous and very near her.

She advanced on, hurrying her steps, but instantly jerked in surprise when the corner of her eyes caught two shadowy frames, just a few paces right of where she stood. This side of the building lacked light and what blaring clubhouse spotlights available overhead didn't reach them.

The two men stayed under the shadow. One was back against the wall of the building. He was in a guarded position, both hands clawing the other man's back who was much taller than him.

That tall man's head covered in a baseball cap dipped so closely next to the short man's neck that Amanda thought they were having a lover's tryst. Until she noticed red. Blood. Tainted in the short man's white long-sleeved shirt.

"Oh shit!" she jumped upon seeing red eyes glowing at her and two sharp teeth, like fangs, on display.

This tall man reacted surprised like her. In a heartbeat, he pulled out a revolver from his black coat and shot his victim straight in his neck, right in the carotid artery where two pinpoint wounds once lay.

The short man dropped like a sack of potato unattended. Dead.

Amanda's mouth dropped, hands trembled, feet solid cold, eyes wide upon witnessing an on-sight murder. In that instant, she feared for her life, but she squared her shoulders and clenched her fists. She ain't a cowardly woman. She'll fight if circumstances demanded it.

Unluckily for her, at this very moment, it does when the culprit turned for her, orbs still aglow.

Amanda thought he'd use the same gun to silence her, but she was wrong.

He advanced towards her with purposeful strides, grinning, until he halted just before he could step into the light.

"Cait!" Matteo's voice along with his Aston Martin engine revolution snapped Amanda's attention.

She whirled around, saw him stare at her from inside the car with confusion, and blinked.

"What's wrong?" he asked, but Amanda didn't answer for she immediately returned her attention to the scene of the crime.

The culprit, to her dismay, had now disappeared.

"Somebody...somebody just died," she announced, her breath breaking. "He was murdered!"

Matteo, who was oblivious, scanned the area behind her and saw the unknown man sprawled on the ground against the wall.

"Merda! Stay there! Don't come near the dead!" He quickly fished out his cellphone from his pants pocket and swiped the emergency hotline. "I'll call the police!"

Amanda did as he told. It was not like she wanted to go to the man's side anyway. It was clear to see that he was dead. With that wound in the neck, who wouldn't be? But something came out unusual for her as she stared at the body.

There was no blood freshly gushing from the wound. No puddle of blood even in the cement.

None at all.

It was like he was drained of it.

She thought about the tall man and how unusual his eyes were. It was her first time seeing such. It frightened her, yes, made her feel unsafe, and because of that, it made her want to protect herself at all cost.

***

"We have taken her statement, Mr. Threvelli, so your girlfriend is good to go," announced the female Chief of Police where Amanda and Matteo were temporarily detained.

After calling the authorities, Matteo grabbed Amanda away from the murder scene, into the hood of the car. He embraced her protectively there, especially after realizing that the tall man he noticed walking hurriedly into the back of the building was the murderer.

To Amanda, his embrace was a short comfort, something that she didn't really need, but calmed her nerves nonetheless. She had seen many deaths in the television, some from her past, but never like this odd one.

It took the police hours scouring the whole of the Circuit to trace the culprit but he was not seen again. The body was taken into custody for examination and Amanda too for her account of the murder.

“No, he isn’t my—” Amanda butted in, but Matteo raised a quick hand to stop her.

“Thank you, Chief Moretti. We will be heading our way now, ” he said, tipping his head in gratitude. He stood from his chair, his elbow touching the desk nameplate of the Chief in the process. The metal nameplate spelled her complete name, Irisha Moretti. The only woman who was able to enter the police force owing it to her strong values in law and quick wit.

She was a beautiful woman, in her early forties, looking every bit strict like Julianne Moore in the Hunger Games. She looked polite and easy to approach though with a ready smile on her face.

“Yes, ” the Chief cleared her throat. “Well, we have the security camera of the Circuit to verify everything and to hopefully pin the culprit down, but if we needed additional help, we will call Ms. O’Malley.”

“Yes, please do that. I am willing to help in your investigation Ma’am, ” Amanda affirmed, standing up herself from the chair.

They exited the police building and headed straight to their parked car on the road. Matteo like a gentleman opened the door for Amanda while she gave him a grateful smile.

“Are you sure you will be okay?” he asked when they had settled inside.

“Yes, don’t worry. I’ll be fine. I am strong enough to stomach those disturbing memories, ” she replied, feeling confident.

Matteo’s chest swelled with pride. This woman just fascinates him every single time. “Yes, just as I know you would be, ” he commented.

Once in the apartment, Noman demanded an explanation with regard to her tardiness. She gave him what he asked, the same one testimony the Chief of Police heard. He gawked and blinked many times, surprised, but this didn’t change the party mood he had built for the night.

“Let’s go or we will be late!” he demanded to Amanda who had just finished putting her yellow party stilettos on.

Chapter 6 – The Jealous Master

Two days passed with Amanda having the same routine. She worked on the three Formula Ones for the grand race to be held in the second week. She was together with the other mechanics of her stepfather focusing on the wiring, engine performance, and the fluidity of the run. Matteo as usual drove her home while Noman, nursing two more hangovers, entertained her with his set of Originals and The Tudors DVD.

On the third day, she, having preregistered in an international mountain climbing club back in New Zealand, traveled to the province's highest mountain with Noman and Matteo tagging along. This was one of her most awaited activities during her stay in the country.

"Alright, we are here, " announced the athletic, dreadlock-haired Club leader, Kenneth.

They left the van in a clearing surrounded by many trees and shrubbery some distance away and trekked in a narrow rocky path to where they stood now - in front of an intimidating red and gray, close-to-vertical rock formation with its summit reaching to as high as ten floors. The other side of it was a slanting land, easy for them to trek back to the van.

The sky was a beautiful blue. Clouds were present but they were white enough to hint no rain to come.

"Is he seriously going to expect us to climb that?" Noman whispered on Amanda's left ear. He stared at the megalithic rock formation and cringed.

Amanda only grinned at him. "Yes, that's the purpose of this travel Dom."

"I don't think I can do that, " he added, putting his index finger against his bottom lip and biting it.

Amanda gave him an Are-You-Serious look. "Then why did you come along with me?"

Noman rolled his eyes and smiled at her impishly. "Uggh, hello Cait? To check out men!" he replied and true enough, it was his plan all along considering he just wore cardigan pants and a button-up shirt exactly a complete contrast of Amanda and Matteo's sports attire.

She shook her head in disbelief and nudged at her best friend on the ribs. "You really are silly Dom."

"I for one would like to climb that, " Matteo, who had been quietly listening to their conversation, cut in. He examined the towering land formation with sparks in his eyes and continued, "Nothing could compare to reaching the top of that with Caitlin next to me."

He gazed at her, warmth radiating on the way he looked, and this caused Amanda to lower her head and Noman to wave his hands in front.

“Okay, then be my guest Matt, ” he said rather cheerfully. “I’ll just be here waiting for the two of you to come down.”

Both Amanda and Matteo smirked.

“Let’s go?” she said, readying her backpack in one arm.

Matteo bobbed his head, easily accepting her silent challenge. “You bet I will.”

He wasn’t one who loved mountain climbing but he enjoyed sports and getting in shape. With Amanda an added bonus, he didn’t hesitate daring himself.

With all the equipment set up, seven climbers started including Amanda and Matteo. They started at exactly thirty minutes after ten. An hour later, half of the climbers reached the summit including the Club leader, his girlfriend Macayla Miller, a Caucasian male member, and Amanda.

“Wow, breathtaking, ” she expressed, gazing at the beautiful sight before her. She inhaled and exhaled, wiped her sweat off her forehead, and made a victory pose.

“Yes, almost there Matt!” she then shouted, looking down to where Matteo was. “Wait ’til you see this view! It is worth it!”

Amidst the difficulty, he looked up and smiled brightly on her way.

“Hey, Cait!” Macayla, a woman with fiery red hair, patted on her shoulder. “You see that peaking roof over that mountain?” She pointed past a mountain ahead covered with a sea of leaves. Solid shapes of rectangle overlaying one another were clearly seen emerging from it.

Amanda turned to look and nodded. “Yeah, what of it?” she said.

“That’s the Vitalis Castle, ” the latter replied, knowing very well the popularity of the Family.

“No kidding…” Amanda blinked many times.

“Yes, I’m not messing with you. This whole area you see including this mountain we are standing is owned by the Vitalis Family.”

Amanda gaped some more. “Wow…” she uttered, completely flabbergasted on the fact laid out on her. After staying a night in the castle, she knew immediately they were wealthy people, but she didn’t expect they were this outrageously wealthy.

“Truly, wow, ” Macayla echoed whilst staring at the landscapes too.

Amanda, for minutes, gazed at the peeking roof. She had never felt so drawn to such a building like this before. Maybe because it was the design of it. Maybe because of the sense of mystery in it. Maybe...anything really as long as it wasn't because of the man that Mastered it: Cord Vitalis.

Remembering him, she immediately shook her head and pursed her lip.

God, why did that man just slip into her thoughts without an invitation?

She trained her eyes in a different part of the scenery, eager to relieve unwanted images of him. She didn't intend it, but she chose to look at a couple of massive sequoia trees on her left side. What she saw there though made her gasp.

A mirage? An illusion?

She couldn't really be sure, but a silhouette of a man in a black trench coat stood in one of the fat branches in the tallest tree, looking at her way. His hand rested in the bark, but Amanda didn't think it was to keep himself from falling. Heck, the man looked at ease with his surroundings, confident even, like he could sprout wings on his back anytime when needed.

But that wasn't her problem. What unsettled her was how he looked exactly like the Vitalis Master, minus the blindfold. If it weren't for the distance, she would have been so sure then that it was truly him.

A gust of wind passed by and this made Amanda clutch her hair to keep it from getting tangled. Then, a hand patted her right shoulder.

"Hey, I'm up!" proclaimed Matteo, smiling from ear to ear. He inched closer to her looking every bit a sexy man who just came from a long, hard gym training.

"Took you long enough, " Amanda stated, smirking at him in order to hide the fact that she had just forgotten about him for that one particular moment. Her eyes betrayed her and glanced back at the tallest sequoia tree, expecting to see the man still, but to her astonishment, he was nowhere in sight.

"Wow, " exclaimed Matteo in awe.

"Exactly, " Amanda took a long, deep breath. Probably, the arduous task of getting into the summit took a toll on her sense of reality? Surely, a human can't disappear just like that right? Unless the man fell from the tree, but that was highly unlikely without them hearing a cry for help.

"I'm glad I tagged along with you, " Matteo stated, oblivious of what troubled her.

"You're welcome Matt, " she replied.

Matteo opened his mouth to continue on, but whatever topic he had in mind was instantly lost when they both heard loud, jubilant cheers of their fellow climbers.

“Wooohoww!”

“Yeah!”

“Way to go dude!”

Both Amanda and Matteo turned to look behind.

“Oh, how sweet, ” she commented once finding the reason for the climbers’ elation.

The club leader, Kenneth, and his girlfriend were actually lip-locking with so much passion and without any shyness, their arms entangled in their bodies.

“Look at that, they seem to see the romantic side of this place, ” Matteo remarked as he smoothly slipped a hand on Amanda’s waist.

Caught unaware, she felt instant goosebumps all over her arms.

“Yeah, it seems so, ” she whispered and shifted a little to loosen his grip.

It failed miserably.

“Cait, there’s something I want to tell you, ” Matteo continued, eyes burning with an emotion Amanda had seen in him countless of times since they first met.

“What is?” she asked, tipping her brow up acting as if she was unaffected, but an immediate blush came to her cheeks - for the very first time - owing to the change of atmosphere on top the rock formation they were in and how he gazed at her with such adoration.

“Is there a possibility for you to...welcome me in your heart?” He turned to face her, chest to chest, not at all hesitating.

Amanda had foreseen this question coming so when Matteo asked this, she wasn’t at all surprised. She wanted to say a direct ‘no’ but out of respect and in order to protect his male ego, she answered him instead, “There is but—”

“Stop, ” Matteo quickly inserted, pressing a firm finger over her mouth. He shook his head whilst closing his eyes, pulling off a serene look of contentment. “That’s all I want to hear Cait. Just give me a chance.”

“Matt, I don’t want to entertain any suitors, ” she furrowed her brows. He knew this well, surely he can understand it.

“I am not your suitor Cait. I am your future husband, ” was what Matteo answered with confidence oozing up.

“So sure of you to say that.”

“You don’t believe me? Then how about we experiment?” Matteo pressed himself more on her.

Amanda didn’t answer but she narrowed her eyes at him, calculating him.

“I’ll kiss you now, ” Matteo continued. “The sparks that you will feel then will become the answer.”

Up for the challenge, Amanda grinned, confident enough that she’ll be immune to this man’s lips.

“Go ahead and try, ” she stated, raising her face higher for better access.

Matteo’s chest rose with pride. His free hand moved to caress her chin slowly, leisurely, until it trespassed her bottom lip with a light press.

“I’ve yearned to kiss your lips for such a long time, ” he stated, wetting his own lips in preparation for the contact.

Amanda merely stayed still.

When their lips touched, the climbers shouted in glee. Many congratulated. Others just whistled, but to Amanda, those sounds were muted.

For her, the only thing that captured her focus was Matteo’s soft lips on hers, the way he held her in his arms like she was a valuable object, and the way his heat radiated on her.

Surprisingly, his kiss didn’t repulse her. As her first time, she honestly thought it would be because she didn’t love the man, but she was wrong. It felt good and damn, she felt little sparks appearing in her closed eyes just as what he mentioned.

She didn’t expect this at all.

“Matt...” she whispered once able to break a little to catch a breath.

Matteo, raking her hair, didn’t withdraw. He continued to steal quick kisses on her lips. “Cait, you taste of wild honeysuckle, ” he groaned.

But his voice was muffled when a sudden splitting sound of wood resounded in the air.

“OH SHIT!” one male climber bellowed and this made Amanda wrench herself out of Matteo’s hold.

“Oh my God, that tree over there!” Macayla cried out, pointing at the now torn-into-half sequoia tree. “How did that happen?!”

Chapter 7 - Enigmatic Eyes

The hardwood fell uncontrolled on the earth, creating a loud, rumbling sound in their ears. Birds of different species flew away from the affected site, some of which flew directly past the climbers.

Amanda, watching with eyes rounded, knew the tree as not only the largest but also as the one that that illusion of a man appeared. She felt her blood chill as Macayla's question lingered on her head.

Yes, how did the tree split into two?

"The van!" Kenneth shouted. He hopped in one of the lower areas of the rock formation and waved his hand. "Guys, let's go! We need to check if the van was hit!"

"Cait, " Matteo interlaced his fingers on her and kissed her forehead.

She pressed her lips together, but other than that, she didn't show any other response to his intimate actions.

"Come, we should go down too, " she stated, making sure to be as neutral as she could be.

"Yes, we should, " Matteo answered.

On their way down, Amanda stole a few glances of the destroyed tree. It actually got split to the roots which looked weird and scary. Many smaller trees got hit during the process; their trunks and branches severed and strewn across the forest floor.

Some of the climbers commented about it being too old to hold its weight. Some commented it was because of its height.

But to Amanda, it was neither. Although it sounded crazy, she believed what had recently occurred wasn't a natural phenomenon. She had this nagging feeling that the man from earlier caused it.

The answer as to how though remain a mystery.

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Luckily, the van was spared from the brutal destruction. The club leader, being a hardcore believer of superstitions, decided to cancel the whole camp activity and return instead to the city.

While on travel, many climbers talked about the tree, Noman included. Amanda remained silent, listening to the active conversations and so did Matteo, but he had his hand on her lap acting like a possessive boyfriend.

Amanda, still feeling the effects of their kiss, refused to look at him in the eye and that went on for an hour of travel.

When they arrived in the city, it was already two in the afternoon. Matteo invited the two of them for a late lunch at a famous Italian restaurant. Noman was happy to accept. Amanda just nodded and ghosted a smile.

In the restaurant, they ate and drank merrily with Noman the main leader of the discussion. It wasn't until Amanda's cellphone rang that he paused from talking.

"I need to get this, " informed she, looking at the unknown number on her cellphone screen.

Matteo and Noman simultaneously bobbed their heads.

"Go ahead Cait, we will be fine here, " said Noman.

Amanda pressed the answer button after she had fully exited the restaurant.

"Hello?" she said, pressing the cellphone against her ear.

The caller answered and thereafter informed her of a certain important issue.

Amanda just nodded the whole time, her mouth a thin line, and by the time their discussion finished, she was partly sad and partly disappointed with it.

"Who called?" was Matteo's immediate question right after Amanda returned to their table.

"It is Chief Moretti, " Amanda supplied. She placed the phone in the pocket of her sports capri pants and drank her lemon juice straight.

"The Chief? Why did she call?"

"She said I needed to be under the witness protection program."

"What?" Both Matteo and Noman spoke in unison with their brows completely furrowed.

Amanda sighed and gave them a shrug. "She says that since the man who died was an important board member of NASCAR, I needed to be protected. I am the only one who saw the murder and who the man looked like. The security cameras didn't yield good results since the spot was too dim."

"I thought you didn't see the man's face because of that same reason, " Matteo questioned.

Amanda nodded. "Yeah, you're right, but still she said the department won't take any chances. The dead man's got bad issues going on around him. Swindling and gambling cheats to mention some. It's possible that he angered some mafia or a loan shark."

“Oh, that’s bad news Cait. Totally.” Noman looked worried.

“I guess so. I’ll just have to do what they tell me to for now, ” she answered, her eyes looking distant.

Not that she didn’t want to cooperate, but this was her supposed vacation. Being placed in a witness protection program and sent to a safe house wasn’t included in her list. No. Not at all.

“Won’t that affect the grand race next week?” Matteo inquired.

Amanda was silent for a moment. She looked at her empty plate and then smiled confidently. “I don’t think it would. I’m certain the three Formula Ones are in perfect condition. You won’t need me in the grand race at all.”

“I’m relieved to hear that, ” he remarked, sounding like every worried Vice President in a large company.

At four in the afternoon, the group left the restaurant. Since no one brought a car, Noman and Amanda took a cab to the apartment. Matteo, giving Amanda some space to think about their growing relationship, kissed her in the cheek as a goodbye. Noman waved a hand, but with a definite mischievous smirk on his face.

By the time the duo arrived in the apartment, to their surprise, there were already two police officers stationed in the front door of Noman’s unit. One informed about having to relocate Amanda ASAP to which she of course vehemently refused.

“I thought I’ll be given until tomorrow to pack Chief Moretti?” was her fuming question over the phone.

The other end of the line explained the necessity of transferring her into the safehouse stat.

Amanda, in the end, surrendered.

“I can’t believe this is happening, ” she complained as she packed her clothes back in her luggage.

Noman helped. He gave her a sad face and pulled her in an embrace.

“I know. Did the Chief say where you will stay? Because I will certainly visit you every day.”

Amanda calmed for a moment and leaned on his shoulder. “She didn’t divulge it saying it is confidential, but she says a car will pick me up an hour from now.” She checked on the wall clock and frowned. “Or more like ten minutes from now.”

“I hope this witness protection program ends before you return to New Zealand, ” Noman released a sigh.

“Yeah, I do hope so too. We still have one hell of shopping to do before we return.” Amanda giggled.

When it was time to leave, they exchanged goodbyes in the street. The two policemen flanked them on each side as normal bodyguards would do.

“Well, where is that car the Chief said anyway?” Noman pointed, standing and looking ahead on the road. By this time, the sun had some early hints of setting. Violet and orange painted the sky. The air was cold, but both he and Amanda wore thick coats for it.

“It’ll be here, ” she answered, holding her personal bag in one hand. Her luggage was next to her feet, all stocked with her vacation belongings.

“Yeah, I don’t doubt it at all, ” he replied.

Without anything to do, they stared at the passing cars. One vehicle in particular caught their attention. It was a limousine and it was driving towards them.

“Whew, ” Noman whistled, “Look at that shine.”

The limousine was ebony black, smooth, and slick enough to have undergone constant polishing. The tires looked brand new and damn, it screamed fancy and pricey.

Amanda, being an automobile lover, relished the sight too, momentarily forgetting about her situation until the limousine stopped directly in front of them and out came the Chief of Spa Police, Chief Moretti, all clad in police uniform.

“Ms. O’Malley, ” she bent her head and proceeded, “this is your ride to the safe house.”

The woman must be joking if she meant the limousine as her ride but she looked serious enough for Amanda to believe.

“Where’s the destination to, Chief Moretti?” she asked, hoping she would divulge but still she didn’t.

“I’m sorry, but it is confidential. Just go inside the car. You will know soon enough, ” the Chief answered.

Amanda and Noman looked at each other and sighed.

“Text me when you arrive okay?” Noman stated, hugging her once again.

“Yeah, you know I will. Do tell Matteo of this too. He’ll be angry that I didn’t inform him.”

Noman nodded.

“Yes, I will. Stay safe.” He released her and gave her a fly-away kiss.

Amanda smiled and slipped into the car without really checking on the passengers inside, thinking that she was alone, but as soon as she turned her attention on the left side of the car, her mouth dropped.

Apparently, the one sitting there was the Master of Vitalis, Cord, and he looked as dangerous and strikingly enigmatic as he was two days ago.

Chapter 8 - The Straightforward Master

"Mr. Vitalis!"

Amanda's eyes rounded. A surge of something that could be called a mix of alarm and excitement filled her whole body. Goosebumps erupted in her forearms and unconsciously, she pressed her personal bag closer against her abdomen in an attempt to halt the twisting of her stomach.

She didn't expect someone to be inside the limousine with her, more so she didn't expect him to be the one sitting.

Cord, though still in a blindfold, looked at her way like it was a casual thing for a blind man. With his left hand, he squeezed the handle of his cane when her scent filled the enclosed space. It tortured him immediately but he had already expected this when he decided to fetch her himself.

It was a torture he was willing to receive forever, or at least while his charade lasts.

"Good evening Amanda, " he stated, managing his voice to come out smooth and relaxed.

Amanda's eyelids fluttered fast. "Why are you—"

"I'm the one tasked to keep you safe, " he butted in.

"You must be joking, " she shook her head. "I don't think you are employed like this by the police department." She felt the car move, a sign that they were onward to their destination.

Cord released a throaty groan. "No, they didn't employ me. I volunteered myself."

Amanda's brows lifted. This man right here volunteered himself? This blind man? This damn handsome blind man?

"Why so?" she asked, almost sputtering it with a sarcastic tone.

Cord didn't shift in his seat. He remained as still as possible, unaffected with her undue interrogation. "My reasons are my own Amanda. You don't need to know them."

She attempted to contain herself from scoffing but failed. "Huh, quite helpful of you."

"I'll take that as a compliment." Cord's mouth moved upward ever so slightly.

Amanda didn't miss it. She furrowed her brows more and shouted in her mind, 'what the hell?' She really wanted to know why, but it was safe not to press on especially when the man was so uptight in giving her information.

Instead of focusing on that, Amanda decided to mull on other things.

“So, ” she cleared her throat, “I presume we are going to the Vitalis Castle?”

“Correct.”

“And I’ll stay there because it will keep me safe from a threat that’s possibly after me?” She stared at him, making a mental note of his little expressions which consisted of - drum roll please - nil.

“Correct, ” Cord answered the same.

“And you are wearing that trench coat because you dig it?” Amanda’s eyes roamed from his head down. The man was as expected impeccably dressed for a Master, but he seriously had some fashion stagnation issues. Why prefer trench coats when there were other men’s clothing to wear? Like a suit perhaps. Or even a modern button-up shirt. But hey, she can’t deny it, he still looked extremely good in trench coats.

“Correct, ” was still his scarce answer.

She would have left it at that but then he added with a tilt of his head, “You amuse yourself of my fashion sense?”

She grinned, widely, taking note that he couldn’t see. “Honestly? I believe I do.”

Why the hell that she just said that? Why the hell she just let her guard down? The man was a stranger. She was supposed to not feel comfortable around him, but she did, momentarily.

“Then laugh all you want, ” Cord remarked, no tone of anger or rudeness at all. “I want to hear the sound of your happiness Amanda.”

And with those words, Amanda turned stiff and speechless. She blinked many times and diverted her attention to the landscape that the limousine passed. There was no way in hell she would comment on such a dangerous statement. Many in her exposures with men had she seen this kind of subtle flirting — if it was even called one for this man — and like any other, she had successfully eluded it by turning silent.

She leaned on the couch, rested her head, and closed her eyes hoping that he wouldn’t speak but blast it, he did, to her dismay.

“You became mute, ” Cord stated noticing the stillness of the air around them.

“I’m tired, ” Amanda answered. “It is a long day for me. If you may, can I take a catnap?”

He didn’t nod, but turn his head to the window he did and answered, “You do as you wish. I am not preventing you.”

Oh, thank God! her brain screamed.

“Thank you, Mr. Vitalis.”

“Cord. You can call me Cord.”

Subtle flirting hint number two.

Amanda checked it in her mind. She couldn’t really say if he was doing the ‘moves’ like men usually does, but it was safe to assume he was. In that way, she’ll guard herself better. Better than she did with Matteo. Or all men who attempted to trespass in her life.

She refused to use his first name though. No way.

But like she would tell him that vocally.

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It was already dark when they arrived at the castle. It looked the same as it did when Amanda first visited, but this time, it didn’t have the colorful searchlights and the booming techno music.

The castle grounds sounded as dead as a graveyard, but this was a good welcome for her. She always loved music but preferred the silence of the night more.

“In here, you will be safe. No soul will harm you, ” Cord informed as the limousine neared the huge front portico.

Amanda couldn’t help herself but mentally laugh.

What a play on words indeed. No soul will harm her he said, but what if ghosts lived in the castle, what of them then?

Surely, there could be one or two, or more...just judging from the castle age itself. Heck, the grand abode looked like it had seen the dawn of the dinosaurs if she were to exaggerate it, but really, the castle looked like a thousand years old, so it was possible ghostly entities resided here.

Not like she was afraid of them though. Growing up without her biological parents, she had toughened herself. That’s exactly why she decided to learn men’s work. But still, ghosts especially when turning up unnoticed would give her a scare and then some if it exists to exact vengeance on a poor innocent soul like her.

“Still I don’t see the reason why you enlist yourself in my witness protection program case, ” Amanda stated, looking at him and crossing her arms to her chest. No, she won’t let it go easily if that’s what he thought earlier. “You did say that it is none of my concern, but for a man like you, who most likely owns this country, it makes me wonder why?”

Cord’s expression still remained neutral.

Reasons.

He had a lot.

A main one and a few others that he painstakingly convinced himself as trivial.

But she'll never know any of those. Not in a million years.

"I'll tell you when I see the need," he lied. There was no need at all. "Right now, you just have to live patiently in the castle." For the first time ever, he cracked a mischievous grin and added, "I'm sure you won't get bored. You can browse the rooms to your heart's content except for the ones I forbid you to. If you break this, I'll make sure to exact punishment, but more on that when we eat dinner later."

Goosebumps erupted on Amanda's skin for the second time. He just sent her a sexy-ass grin while threatening her. And good heavens, she just learned she'll be dining with him later! Can't she just have her own peaceful dinner alone? Without him? Without this Vitalis Master who just made her well-constructed immunity to men crack in little fissures?

"Huh, very straightforward of you Mr. Vitalis," she painstakingly filtered the trembling of her voice. She glanced outside of the car which by now had the very efficient Jerome reaching for the car door.

"I am. Very," Cord replied, taking note of the faint whoosh of air from the door opening. "See you later," he added which made Amanda release an inaudible scoff just as she disembarked the vehicle.

See you indeed, she voiced in her head which was pretty much a ridiculous statement at its best. The man was blind for crying out loud.

"Good evening, Madame O'Malley. Welcome back to the Vitalis Castle," the Head Majordomo greeted.

Amanda acknowledged him with a nod and answered, "Same to you Jerome." She pressed her personal bag in between her arm and waist, expecting he would offer to carry it.

"Let me carry the bag for you," and he did, reaching palm open to her.

Amanda instantly shook her head. "No worries Jerome. Please give me a chance to carry it on my own."

"As you wish Madame," he bowed his head. "It is good to see you again by the way."

"Thank you," was all she could say. She stepped forward allowing the Vitalis Master to disembark next.

When he did after a short moment, he gestured for his butler to come closer. He whispered something in the servant's ear thereafter.

"Yes, Sire. I will, " was what Amanda heard before the butler turned to her direction and added, "Follow me to your room Madame. You only have little time to prepare for dinner."

Amanda slightly frowned at Cord when she heard this. The damn Master wasn't joking at all when he said they would dine together.

"Then lead the way, Jerome, " she stated, her feet climbing up the first stair as she wrenched her gaze from him.

To Cord, he just listened to every sound of her heels hitting the marbled stairs. Though her scent lingered, at least it wasn't as strong as earlier. Finally, this time, he was able to relax. Well, at least for just a moment.

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"Any leads on who that bastard biter is?"

Biter.

That's usually what Cord calls anyone of his kind, preferring it than what humans popularly dubbed as 'vampire'.

Like Calvin advised, he planned to avoid the woman for good, but unfortunately, the murder that she had witnessed involved a biter.

This biter had been his problem since three years ago, acting rogue, draining the victim's blood without remorse, and then shooting the neck leaving no traces or clues. Clues for the police officers that is but for Cord, he knew exactly it involved one of his relatives. His fucked up relatives.

It was certain that this freak would be after her any day from now, so he decided to act in haste. It was better to confine her in his residence, endure her enticing presence than to find her dead.

He didn't want for that fuck biter to leisurely drink her promising blood. He was that protective of her, of his meal rather, as Amanda was basically his cursed body's only nourishment. Solid foods didn't content him amidst being able to down some inside his stomach.

And besides that, it would also be a waste if he couldn't wring her out of what she exactly saw during the time of the murder. He didn't have an enough evidence to pin the culprit down, but with Amanda as a witness, he hoped he'd get one soon. What she saw may become his only magic piece of solving the three-year-long puzzle.

Chapter 9 - The First Dinner

While sitting in the head chair, he sipped on an aged wine in a flute, colored like the blood of Amanda's, and waited for his right-hand to answer. Since he had already finished the two blood bags, the aged wine became an inadequate replacement - something that he had learned to accept for years.

The one questioned - Calvin - shook his head once. "Nothing, but worry not cousin. I am doing my hardest to get to the bottom of this murder."

"Then why are you here?" Cord, setting his jaw firm, asked. He didn't actually need to know where his cousin stood. Prior experiences told him he was leaning against the door frame just a few feet away from his back — the opening where Cord expected Amanda would soon emerge.

Unlike any of Cord's relatives, Calvin was the only one who had the audacity to interrupt what was supposed to be a peaceful dinner. He had done this many times, but this time he had a better reason.

"Nothing, I just want to check out who this lady is that you seem fascinated with, " he answered, to which awarded a quirk in the corner of Cord's mouth.

"Leave. Now."

"Oh?" Calvin raised a brow and straightened from leaning, "Aren't you gonna introduce us? From what I could gather she'd be staying with us for quite some time."

"She is none of your concern Calvin. Just finish what I asked you to finish."

"She's that woman right? The one whose blood—"

"Yes, " Cord interrupted. He scrunched up his nose, not liking the way his cousin blabbered.

Calvin smirked. "What's this? Is destiny messing with you?" he said, pertaining to the gradual interweaving of events.

The wine flute that Cord held cracked from the handle up to the rim. "I'm going to rip the head of that biter for putting me in this position." It was just a tiny displacement of his anger — an anger he wanted released so much but chose not to.

"Oh, say no more." Calvin immediately held his hands up. "I'm going to find the culprit for you. Relax and enjoy your dinner date."

Cord hauled a deep breath upon hearing the ridiculous word.

“Go. I can hear her heartbeat approaching.”

With a nod, Calvin did, walking out of the corridor and then past the grand stairs just as Amanda descended it narrowly missing him.

She was accompanied by a young maidservant of ebony black hair and pale skin especially ordered by the Head Majordomo to attend to her needs.

“This is the dinner room Milady, ” the servant informed, bowing her head low as she stopped right in the threshold.

“Thank you Dayana, ” Amanda placed a hand on her shoulder. “Go, you are excused. I don’t really need a personal maid.”

The servant vehemently shook her head. “No Milady. Sir Jerome said I should always stay by your side. I can’t break that rule.”

Amanda sighed. She certainly understood that. “Well then, if that’s the case, go and relax while I dine. I can sense that you do not like to step into a room with your Master in it.”

The girl’s eyes lit up. “Oh? Is-is my trembling shoulders that— oh, I’m sorry Milady, ” she paused and lowered her head in embarrassment. “If-if that’s your wish, I will.” She curtsied and then walked out of the corridor without looking back.

It had been just a few minutes past since Amanda met the maidservant, but she already knew the girl was either afraid or intimidated by the Master of the House. Her trembling shoulders and unsteady, hesitant gait was clear to see when they managed the second floor hallways. Though Amanda wondered about the reason behind it, she still understood the girl’s feelings since Cord really was a man who had a perpetual gloomy look.

She’d wondered how he would look like if he smiled a genuine smile, not the sly or mischievous smirk he had been throwing at her lately on their abrupt meetings.

“Come in Amanda.”

She jerked with a start when she heard his voice inside the room. Sticking her head in the door frame, she saw him already sitting in the center chair, his back to her, and various courses were laid in the rectangular table together with lighted candelabras, utensils, and plates in his and a vacant chair in his right.

“You already know that I arrived?” Amanda stated once she stepped inside, her heart punching out of her rib cage.

“You backbiting me could be heard all the way here, ” Cord answered, sharply listening to her nearing footfalls. “You should choose your words carefully Amanda. I should warn you, the walls here aren’t friendly.”

A stray thought crossed her mind, a memory with Noman and her the morning after the Vitalis anniversary party, and how she expressed her litany of reasons why she hated the man. Surely, no one heard her confession right?

Shaking that thought away and hoping that it still remained a secret, Amanda shrugged and bluntly replied, “I’m just stating the obvious Mr. Vitalis. The girl is clearly uncomfortable with your presence.”

“I make everyone uncomfortable. It is a known fact to all those who reside in the castle, ” he quickly answered, “including you.”

Amanda’s skin hair rose. From looking at the vacant chair, she shot him a guilty, surprised look.

Shit. She’s caught.

She silently cleared her throat and thanked the Gods that he couldn’t see the trouble in her eyes. “I don’t reside here. I’m just a guest, ” she pointed out whilst pulling the cushioned chair out and sitting, trying to keep her shoulders squared.

Cord softly grumbled. From there, he produced a faint smirk and rebutted, “Point taken, but still… I know I make you uncomfortable.”

Amanda blinked a couple of times. She did not expect he would be this insistent!

“You can’t even see me, how are you that sure?” Consciously, she made her voice a little bit sterner to hide the trembling in it.

It was an epic fail though because she saw the corner of Cord’s lip tug upward to give a soundless answer.

She slowly gulped, unnerved by it.

“Please. Eat Amanda. Before the food runs cold.” He flipped a hand midair. “And once again, to remind you, call me by my first name. I’m not old. I don’t like being addressed as a Mister.”

“Thank you, but I would have to decline.” Amanda took a fork from her table set-up, momentarily admired the intricate designs carved in it, and continued, “Is there any other way to address you than your first name?”

“Master Cord would do, ” he suggested quickly but to Amanda, it was a dare.

“I’ll think about that, ” she replied, taking her eyes off of him and into the heavily prepared feast in her front.

She started eating. Cord did the same. And their dinner went on for about twenty minutes silent, awkward, and a torture.

Cord didn’t touch much of his food. It wasn’t because he couldn’t basically see the courses in his front, but because what for?

What’s the use of eating human food when the one he wanted to eat was sitting near him?

Amanda was enjoying her share though and by the time she drank empty her glass of water, Cord voiced out as if on cue, “Was the food to your liking?”

Amanda nodded at him. “Yes, your chef cooks delicious grub.”

“That pleases me.” He brought his elbows up the table and interconnected his hands against his chin. “How do you find your room? Is it to your liking too?” he furthered.

Amanda gave him a neutral look. “It’s the same room my friend got when you let us sleep here.”

“Yes, it is. Do you like it?”

“It’s fine. Thank you.”

“I figured it would make you feel comfortable since basically you made a mark on that room.”

Amanda suppressed a laugh - a sarcastic laugh. “Funny of you to say that.” She thought he’d continue but he changed the subject all too suddenly.

“Now, on to business, ” he said, shifting in his seat to sit upright against the back cushions, his arms on each side of the armrests.

“Business?” Amanda arched a brow.

Cord lifted a hand near his mouth and ran a slender finger through the bottom lip.

“Can you recount to me everything you saw that night of the murder?”

His voice now, to Amanda, sounded odd. It had a ring of sleep in it. Like a hush and an echo. She blinked many times, feeling her eyes burn as if she had watched a marathon of movies.

“As to my understanding, you are not a police officer, ” she answered initially, refusing to look at him. “You are just the benefactor of my witness protection case, why do you need to know?”

“Did you see anything abnormal to this culprit perhaps?” Cord went on, disregarding her question.

The same lulling effect hit Amanda through a wave of dizziness, but she successfully shook it away.

“Check on the police files if you want to know. I will have to refrain from answering you since I’ve been told by Chief Moretti to keep my mouth shut about it, ” she replied, this time feeling vexed by his constant pestering.

“Tell me everything, Aman...dahhh...”

And another wave of dizziness came. Cord, this time, used the full force of his beguiling ability — the same ability he had used to coax the Chief to place Amanda in his custody.

Surely, the stubborn woman would relent, but to his surprise and utter disappointment, Amanda didn’t.

“No.” She stood up, slapping a hand on the table. “Why are you so damn rude? You make a conversation one-sided. You’re cutting me off and you order me as if I’m a servant. I understand you are the Master and all but hey, a little bit of respect wouldn’t hurt right? I’m a special guest am I not?”

Cord shifted again and clenched his fists from under the table.

Fuck. The woman had an iron backbone. But no bother...

He raised his head directly to where Amanda’s face was beautifully highlighted with the candelabra.

This simple action once again made her feet ran cold.

He was staring at her as if he could see.

“You baffle me, woman, ” he announced whilst easing his clenched fists. “I apologize for my...rude behavior. It will not happen again.”

“See to it that it won’t, ” she advised. “Respect begets respect Mister Vitalis. You may be my landlord but you still need to earn my trust.”

“Indeed, ” Cord replied.

“I’ll go back to my room. Thank you for the meal.”

“You’re welcome.”

Amanda walked out as soon as he said that. There were so many emotions that whirled inside her. She wanted them expressed, but as of this time, it was better she retreat to her room. It was after all her ‘day one’ inside the castle. She believed this interaction with the Vitalis Master wouldn’t be her last.

Chapter 10 - Trespassing Her Chamber

“Com’n, tell me where you’re staying now.”

Amanda heard Noman whine through the earpiece. She was comfortably lying belly down in front of the laptop screen while the Skype app was turned on. The first thing she did after leaving the dining hall was for her to get in touch with her best friend as was agreed. She needed someone to talk to, needed an outlet to vent out her frustration on the turn of events and he was the perfect person for it.

“I can’t, ” she shook her head. “You know I can’t. The Chief briefed me not to.”

“Ugh, at least open your video feed so that I’ll see you’re not in some shady house.”

Amanda watched her friend make a puppy face through the video screen. This was one of Noman’s backup card in order to make someone do his bidding. Apparently, it was working with her.

She smiled and contemplated for a moment.

“Okay, I’ll put myself on live, but don’t you scream.”

She reached for her mouse and clicked on the live button. The moment the screen opened, Noman’s eyes turned wide.

“Oh shit! Oh my God! Are you serious? You are in—”

“Yes, ” Amanda immediately cut in and rolled her eyes. “Now keep your mouth shut especially to Matteo. Don’t tell him this or I’ll be in trouble.”

Noman saluted at her. “Noted boss, but really, how are you faring there? Have you seen…” he paused and wiggled his brows, “Him?”

By him, Noman meant the Vitalis Master.

But the hell? Why did he immediately jump to that topic?

Amanda huffed. She pushed herself up and changed her position to squatting.

“Yes, I dined with him tonight, ” she answered just as she righted her nightwear of an oversized t-shirt. Under it, she only wore another panty short.

“Where? In his bedroom?” Noman grinned, sending a different kind of meaning to the word ‘dine’.

Amanda somehow understood this. “Dom! You’re crazy you know that!” she shouted.

“Uh huh, I know already, ” he admitted without delay. “Now, tell me the juice.”

Amanda sighed, drew up her right knee, and rested her chin against it. “We just talked about normal stuff, but mostly it was a silent and awkward dinner.”

“Pshhh, sounds like him alright, but you’re not giving me all. Com’n, give me more details.”

“Nothing really Dom, but there was one time he acted all of a sudden different.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like weirdo different.” Amanda bit her lip. “Well, yeah, he is already a weirdo but there’s something different about him. I can’t put my finger on it.”

In response, Noman rolled his eyes. “Darling, he has a wild animal for a pet, that is already one finger. You want me to enumerate four more?”

Amanda knitted her brows. “I’m not pertaining to the visible things. I’m pertaining to those that I can feel. His aura, it is so dark.”

Noman gasped and covered his mouth.

“Oh God, I almost forgot you have this psychic thingy in you.”

“Psychic thingy huh?” She chuckled. “You better learn the right words, Dom.”

“Well, all I can say is that be careful there.” He raked a hand through his hair. “If you think he is bad news for you, then avoid him. Though, it would be awfully a waste not to taste that delicious ass of his.”

Amanda crossed her arms over her chest. “Dom, I’d gladly change positions with you.”

“How I wish sistah, how I wish, ” he mused. “But I am not fit to be chased by mobsters and whatnot. At least you get to stay in that castle like a princess right? Enjoy your time there. Don’t feel pressured about the murder case. Everything will come out fine in the end.”

“Oh Dom, you are the best ever friend anyone can have, ” Amanda sighed again.

“And you’re damn lucky to have me.” He smugly smiled at her. “By the way, what happened between you and Matteo on top of the rock peak this morning? I noticed you were silent the whole time when you came down and it seemed Matt was too.”

Amanda went silent for a moment. Her eyes fell on the partially opened balcony of her room and the way the white gossamer curtain swayed together with the cool breeze. It gave her enough time to replay the moment they had together in that summit, the kiss specifically, and Noman was kind enough to wait for a reply.

“We kissed, ” she then informed after a minute.

Noman just shrug his shoulders and released a relaxed breath.

“Mmhh, I thought so, and how was it? What did you feel?”

Amanda, before answering, changed positions again. She lay sideways, bringing her legs together, and placed her right hand under her head to support her weight. Her face was still clear in the video screen, an advantage for Noman because he could see the sad expression as she confessed to him.

“I felt some little sparks, Dom. Little, stomach-floating sparks, but that was it. It died out the moment we withdrew. It didn’t linger. It didn’t stay in my heart at all.”

On the video screen, Noman’s shoulders dropped.

“Well, that ain’t good news for Mr. Vice President.”

“I know, ” Amanda whispered. “He has been doing his best to woo me.”

“You are just such a hard-to-get lady, Cait. Any chance you’d change your mind about having relationships? Maybe if you do that, you’ll be more open to the advances of men.”

“I can’t, ” she shook her head. “It’s better that I don’t. You know that already Dom.”

“I know. That’s why I feel sorry for Matteo.”

And right on cue, Amanda’s cellphone placed right beside the laptop rang and vibrated. Matteo’s name instantly popped out of the phone screen.

“Oh no, ” she uttered.

“What?” Noman straightened from his seat and scrutinized her space through the feed.

“Speaking of him, he is calling me now, ” she informed, bringing the cellphone in front of the monitor for him to see.

The latter twisted his lips together. “Well, good luck to you on that! Answer him now Cait. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Great way of cheering me buddy, ” she muttered and sighed.

Noman pressed his palms against his mouth and blew invisible kisses on the monitor.

“Flying kisses! Mwahhh! Bye!”

And his Skype activity turned off.

Amanda grinned and then stood up from the bed before pressing the answer button.

“Hey Matt, good evening, you’re not sleeping yet?” she said after she leaned against the glass French door of the balcony.

“Yeah, I kept thinking about you, ” the other line replied. “What are you doing now?”

“I just finished talking to Noman.”

“Is he in some shit again?”

“No, ” she answered, smiling slightly.

But I am.

“He just wants to chat Matt. You know how he is.”

“Ah, I see. Well, anyway, I’ll pick you up tomorrow? I told the Company driver already to take the day off and take a tour around the area.”

This made Amanda squeeze her eyes shut and inhale silently.

“Uh, about that. Remember about the witness protection program Chief Moretti said?”

“Yeah, what of it?”

“I am already in it right now. She relocated me to a safe house this evening.”

“A safe house? Where?” Matteo’s voice, a decibel higher, instantly sounded worried.

“Eh, that’s the thing, ” Amanda bit her lip. “It’s confidential. She said it is for my safety.”

She thought he’d react rather negatively about it, but then she was surprised when she was met with only silence and then a simple reply after a minute.

“I see. I’ll talk to her tomorrow.”

“Please don’t mention this to my step-father. He might freak out.”

She heard a dark chuckle from Matteo then.

“Don’t worry. I won’t.”

“Thank’s Matt. I owe you a lot.”

“Don’t mention it. You are my responsibility while we are in this country after all. Mr. O’Malley is going to sue my *culo* if he finds out about your current situation now.”

“Yeah, geez, ” she exhaled deeply and stepped back to close the glass door.

“Hey Cait, about this morning, I…”

“Oh shit!” Amanda cursed loudly. She was all ears to what he was about to say, but unintentionally cut him off when she saw an unexpected guest inside her bedroom by the time she turned around.

“Wh-what? What happened Cait?” Matteo, with his deeply concerned voice, asked.

Amanda sucked in a breath and blinked many times. She could not believe that the Master’s pet was already lying comfortably in her bed.

“No-nothing. There’s just a big cat that decided to enter my room, ” she stated.

If anything, she would have felt afraid then, but remembering how the beast eagerly jumped into her days ago, she realized she didn’t need to feel frightened at all. Despite its looks, the animal was damn a friendly one.

“A big cat?” Matteo echoed, sounding confused. “You are not afraid of cats.”

“Yeah, well, uhm, I got to go.” She moved to her bed and climbed on it with her free hand stretched over to the panther’s forehead. “I need to shoe this cat out of my bed. Let’s keep in touch Matt!”

“Wait, Cait!”

“Bye!”

And she hung up.

She tossed the cellphone in her head pillows and released a deep sigh.

“Oh God, you just saved me boy, but why are you here?” Amanda rubbed the panther’s chin and looked sideways, front and back, and almost all of the corners of her bedroom for good measure. “Is-is your Master with you?”

The animal only silently closed its eyes, giving Amanda no answer at all.

She, in return, frowned. “You mean you snuck out all by yourself?”

Still, there was no answer.

“Ah, good. That’s better actually.” Amanda continued to rub its chin. “I don’t think I’ll be able to compose myself if he is here after that little argument of ours at dinner.”

The panther opened its eyes and drew its head down to her lap. He purred and made a mewling, delighted sound.

This made Amanda giggle.

“You know, unlike your Master, you act contrary to the way you look. You are such a softie, Mr. Panther.”

“His name is Bagheera.”

Oh, sweet mother of!

Amanda quickly looked up, her heartbeat shooting like rockets in the sky as she heard Cord’s voice.

Good Lord. He is here!

He let himself in again and this time, he was standing a lot closer to the bed than he had been the last time he visited.

But how? How again was he able to enter without her noticing? Was she too engrossed with petting the animal that she didn’t see? Or was he really this sick, skillful stalker ready to pounce on her more than his pet would?

Amanda attempted a respiratory pause. Deep breath. In and out. Shit.

She felt inappropriately dressed for a moment.

“Bag-Bagheera huh, ” she spoke and acted naturally by continuing to pet the still-relaxing animal. “Like the movie, The Jungle Book?”

“Yes, equivalent to that, ” Cord answered with ease as if he wasn’t aware of the surprise registered in the woman’s face. It amused him because instead of her demanding the reason for his abrupt presence, she just went with the topic at hand.

Amanda refrained from looking back at him. “I don’t see you as a children’s movie-type-of-guy, Mister Vitalis. Especially that you just trespassed in my room once again like a ghost moving undetected.”

“I am not a children’s movie-type-of-guy, ” Cord cleared. “It so happens that I fancy the name when I adopted that traitor of a beast.”

“Traitor?” Amanda lifted a brow.

“Yes, traitor, ” Cord answered with less acid than he expected he would spat. “I don’t like it when that animal sneaked from me to be with you. That’s why I’m here, to get him back.”

Amanda, to her dismay, couldn’t subdue a giggle. She quickly cleared her throat and breathed deeply. “Hush, he isn’t a traitor.” She ran a palm on the beast’s shiny fur. “He is just a friendly animal.”

Cord carved a small smile in response. “Huh, you should see his treatment with the others who live here.”

Amanda raised her head and furrowed her brows. She looked at him straight without any reservation and said, changing the subject, “You know, sometimes when you suddenly appear, it makes me think that you are not blind at all. It makes me think that you are wearing that blindfold for other purposes.”

“Other purposes?” he echoed, amused.

“You know like, uhm, kinky stuff.”

She wasn’t sure why she opened that up, but hell, it was already too late to backpedal now. Thanks to Noman and his adult-content stories, she just sputtered a nonsense word that she wasn’t supposed to mention to this kind of man.

Cord in reaction inched forward and stopped just a few feet away from the edge of the bed. He towered her. She felt like a dwarf in front of him.

“Do tell, Amanda. Explain about this...kinky stuff you talk about.” His voice turned darker, deeper, huskier and Amanda felt a sudden chill hearing it.

“You’re-you’re crazy, ” she commented, slightly out of breath. She was supposed to be immune to this kind of attack on the senses. She made sure of it. But why now? With him?

Cord somehow took her word to heart. “Oh, believe me, Amanda, crazy isn’t a suffice adjective to define me.”

Amanda stole a deep breath and straightened her back. “Uhm, maybe you should go now Bagheera.” She moved her lap and pushed the animal’s head up. “Your Master needs his beauty sleep.”

Cord chuckled lightly and fuck, it made Amanda’s heart jump out of her chest. That’s a melodious tune!

She looked at him and he looked at her, or at least that’s what it looked like with him still in that damn blindfold.

There was a magnetic pull. That’s what she felt and so did he. As if a strong chain bound them.

Though to other women, it would have been a good romantic sign and a call for happiness, but to Amanda, hell, she hated it. Really hated it. She didn’t like for men to come into her life. It meant trouble for her. Meant heartbreak. Exactly just like what her mother experienced towards her biological father.

The panther climbed down the bed and as soon as it did that, Cord turned around to leave, cutting their little, heavenly moment.

“Have a pleasant sleep, ” he said and nothing more.

“Same to you, ” Amanda answered, hiding an uninvited blush by dipping her head towards the floor.

When he was about to cross the threshold, Amanda looked up and stared at his wide back, making holes there if it was even possible. To her shock, she realized he wasn’t even using a cane amidst in his fragile state.

Weird. Now, her suspicion of him not blind doubled.

She heard the main door shut hinting the two trespassers full exit of the room. With a sigh of relief, she raced to close her bedroom door. She wasn’t going to take chances now and risk another trespasser especially with her just in a nightwear.

She turned the lights off, crossed the room, pulled the laptop plug out, and dropped onto the mattress leaving a soft light from the lampshade in her bedside table.

“Cord Vitalis....” she whispered, closing her eyes. “Who are you?”

That night, Amanda dreamed of the color red, of an amethyst pendant, and of pins and needles pricking her skin.

On her neck specifically.

Chapter 11 – Touring the Mansion

Amanda woke up early the next morning feeling refreshed. With her nightclothes on, she stood up and neared the French door of the balcony. The outside showed the cheerful sky of light blue and yellow-orange. She inhaled deeply and smiled.

She may be in the witness protection program, but that didn't mean she can't tour the castle grounds freely.

Taking an early bath was the first step to it so she did that in a classy bathroom accessible just a few strides away from the bed. By the time she finished and exited with a towel wrapped around her body, breakfast was already laid in the coffee table, the bedroom door was open, the thick curtains were drawn to the sides, and the early morning light shone through.

There was a new maid busily fixing her bedding, but she seemed to be immersed with the rock music in her headphones.

"Uh, good morning?" Amanda stated, standing near the bathroom door and looking at the maid with brows drawn up.

The young lady in a clean ponytail didn't respond.

Amanda tried again but this time, she neared the maid and waved her hands.

"Good morning?"

The maid, wide-eyed, almost immediately pulled her headphones out. "Oh shhi...eez, I'm sorry, I didn't notice you, Madame O'Malley. Good morning too."

She lowered her head and attempted an ill-timed, unpracticed curtsy.

Amanda just smiled at her and tilted her head. "Just call me Caitlin please and don't be formal. I prefer you to act normal Miss..."

"I'm Arissa. Arissa Lee, Madam-ahh...Miss Caitlin, " the maid corrected quickly.

Amanda raised her hand for a handshake to which the latter accepted, albeit hesitantly.

"Don't be stiff. Loosen up. I'm no guest in this castle."

"Uh, you are Miss Caitlin, " Arissa stated, "As per Sir Jerome's words."

Amanda crossed the space and went to her luggage lying on the floor next to the vanity mirror. She squatted and opened it, careful not to spill the contents.

"Yes, speaking of him, where is he by the way?"

The maid seemed taken aback. "Oh? He didn't tell you?"

Amanda cocked a brow at her. "No. Why? Where is he?"

But then a knock on the door sounded catching both of their attention.

"Good morning Madame O'Malley, " greeted a pixie-haired woman wearing a below-the-knee pencil skirt, printed blouse with ruffles, and a thin-framed reading glass. She had visible wrinkles in her eyes, most likely of old age, but she didn't look senile at all. She admitted herself in the room and bent her head by the time she was a couple of paces away from Amanda.

"Uh, good morning too, " Amanda replied after standing up. "But please, do call me Caitlin."

"I'm sorry, but I cannot do that Madame. You are, as per Jerome's instructions, a special guest of the Family. I am permitted only to be formal with you."

Amanda sighed. "I see. May I know your name please?"

"Lady Varsha Granger, at your service." She bent her head again.

To Amanda, this submissive action could only mean one thing: the woman may be the next-in-command, second to the Head Majordomo. Her overall aura actually was a giveaway clue for it.

"Jerome isn't available for the time being, so I'll be the one to supervise your stay here, " Lady Granger informed. "Since Master Cord failed to brief you about the rules of the house last night, he ordered me to tell you now. He said that you may be his guest here, but you are still expected to respect and follow the rules."

Amanda crossed her arms over her chest. She was still in her bathrobe, her hair still damp and she literally had no knickers on, but to get it over with, she sat at the edge of the bed and said, "Enumerate them then."

Lady Granger gazed at her from head to bare feet and said, "I suggest you change first Madame. I can tell you then while you're eating breakfast."

This produced a wide, relieved smile from Amanda. "Thank you."

She pulled out a comfortable get-up to wear from her luggage: a denim shirt, black jeans, and black ankle boots and for ten minutes, she readied herself inside a walk-in closet connected to the bathroom. She applied light make-up and tied her hair up in a high ponytail for a clean look - something that she had been accustomed to doing on normal days.

She settled in front of the coffee table for her breakfast and the governess didn't waste time enumerating all that she needed to discuss with her.

"As the Master mentioned, he forbids you to roam around unaccompanied." Lady Granger stood up straight in front of Amanda, no note in hand, only a mental list of the rules of the castle having known it by heart.

Amanda quietly drank her cranberry juice.

"You are not allowed to enter the Family wing and that is the North wing of this castle Madame. You shan't wander around the castle at night. You shan't wander in the gardens at night too. Basically, stay in your chamber at night unless summoned by the Master."

Amanda's brow drew up. What does she mean by that? Another daunting dinner with him perhaps?

"When you need something, call for your maid-in-waiting, " the governess continued and then gestured for the one mentioned standing close behind them.

"This is Arissa, your new companion, as Dayana is...indisposed of as of the moment."

"Hmm? Why? What happened to her?" Finally, Amanda broke her silence. She had just met the sweet girl yesterday night yet she already felt a strong sisterly connection with her.

Lady Granger shook her head and pulled a firm expression. "That's also one of the rules Madame. You aren't allowed to question the comes and goings of the people here. As much as possible, keep your observations to yourself."

Amanda wasn't let down with the warning. "I just want to know if she is fine."

"She is fine, " was the latter's only answer.

"Oh, then that is a relief to hear." Amanda felt rudely cut-off but didn't linger on it. She diverted her sights on the fresh bowl of blueberries, picking one and then slipping it inside her mouth.

The governess smiled, contented that Amanda didn't push through with the Dayana topic.

"Anyway, I will leave Arissa to take care of you. Do you have anything else you need from me, Madame?"

Amanda looked up and smiled at her. "Nothing at all Lady Granger, but I want to ask if I can tour the interior of this castle and its gardens? It would be a great way of killing the time since, you know, I'm practically imprisoned here."

Lady Granger bent her head. "No problem at all Madame. Arissa here will accompany you."

“Right, ” Amanda nodded on the maid’s way.

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The governess left thereafter. Amanda finished her breakfast and after checking her cellphone for messages or miscalls, she left with the maid by her side. Matteo texted her informing about his intent on talking with Chief Moretti. Amanda only replied a good morning and a thumbs up icon on him. Noman also texted, but only greeted her a good morning and a heart emoticon. She sent him back the same.

“I work here as a part-time maid, day-shift. I needed the money for my college fees soon, ” Arissa answered when Amanda asked about her employment status inside the castle. They strolled out of the second floor hallway and into the grand staircase, intending to reach the main foyer where they will start their tour. “Actually, all staff you will see today are day-shift employees of the castle. We have night-shift maids too, chefs, and utility personnel. They take care of the castle matters during the night.”

“During the night? What do you mean by that?” Amanda cocked a brow.

Arissa stared side to side, looking cautious before replying, “The Vitalis Family seems to prefer doing their activities in the evening, Miss Cait. They don’t like the sun. My co-workers said they are allergic to it.”

Amanda released a quick amused breath. “Allergic?” she parroted.

Arissa drew her brows up. “Yeah, weird right? Maybe that’s one of those diseases most people of royal blood gets like hemophilia.”

“Maybe, ” Amanda answered, noting the word that the maid just used. “So you think they are royals huh?”

Arissa instantly nodded. “Yes, I’m one hundred percent sure of that Miss Cait. I haven’t really seen all of the family members but the ones that I had a lucky chance of catching a glimpse like Master Cord, Master Calvin, Master Trace, Mistresses Heather, and Pamela are extremely beautiful people. They have faces that only those of royal blood have.”

“Wow, ” Amanda stopped and looked at her playfully, “Are you a royal fanatic perhaps?”

“Ah, no, ” the latter shook her head. “I believe that there are many things more important than looks and popularity Miss Cait. I’m just a little bit awed by this family since I started working here four months ago.”

“Mhm, I see, ” Amanda replied and then went to divert her attention on the grand staircase. “So, where are you going to tour me first?”

“What are you interested in Miss Cait?” Arissa fired back.

Amanda contemplated for a moment. “Books, ” she answered initially, “I like reading books. Thrillers and Sci-Fi specifically. I also love extreme sports. Mountain climbing, skiing, kayaking to name a few. I do some fencing too. I enjoy eating more than cooking, but I’m at my giddiest when inside a kitchen. But why are you asking me this Ris?”

“Well, it’s my way of evaluating where I will take you first, ” Arissa replied with a chuckle. “As you can see already, the castle is surrounded by mountains. A few miles away from here, there’s a raging river, so I can take you there when we have the time since you like kayaking. With regards to fencing, we have a gym in the first basement where you can try different kinds of sports. We have a basketball court, tennis and badminton court too and of course, the fencing ground.”

Amanda blinked, surprised by how the maid became a lively chatterbox.

“I can take you to the grand library on the third floor later, but since you mentioned the kitchen, I can show you the state-of-the-art kitchen that this castle boasts!”

She grabbed Amanda’s elbow and then pulled her towards another hallway of the second floor — the thought of going to the main foyer forgotten.

“Where are we going, Ris?” Amanda shouted in her front.

“I’ll show you the best kitchen ever. It is located at the back of the throne room, ” Arissa replied as she continued to walk, her face looking ecstatic.

Amanda’s mouth dropped. “There is a throne room here?”

But of course, there would be. This is a castle for heaven’s sake.

“Yes, there is, ” Arissa informed in her carefree voice, ” One that Master Cord always stays.”

By the mere mention of the Master’s name, Amanda stiffened. Since last night, she concluded that it was better to avoid the man as much as possible, but by going straight into the throne room, there was a big possibility she’d be running straight into him.

“I...I think we shouldn’t go there, ” she murmured as the pace of her steps slowed.

The maid just shrugged her shoulders and continued to pull her by the arm. “Don’t worry Miss Cait, it is not prohibited at all.”

“Er, that’s not my concern. I think it is better we go to the library first.”

But it was already too late. Arissa released her arm and skipped playfully to stand in front of two imposing doors.

“Here we are!” she announced, smiling from ear to ear.

Amanda gaped at the sight of it and felt the beginnings of heat in her face.

The maid turned and grabbed the doorknob intending to open it, but she frowned.

“Oh, it is locked. Weird.”

Amanda grabbed this chance. “How about we—”

“Let’s try the servant’s passage Miss Cait, ” Arissa interjected. She hastily grabbed her arm again and said, “Come!”

There must be a good reason why the maid was this persistent of bringing her in the throne room kitchen, so Amanda just sighed and decided to let herself get dragged along.

They passed by a spacious corridor lined with picture frames on the wall. Oddly enough, for a servant passage, there wasn’t anyone present.

By the time they entered the kitchen, Amanda was quick on expressing her admiration.

“Oh wow.”

She scanned the whole space of the room, examined the efficient, functional, and high-tech appliance readily available, and traced the corners of the luxury granite and marble countertops.

“See? Isn’t this kitchen A-MA-ZING!” Arissa exclaimed behind her.

Amanda smiled and nodded on her way.

“Yes, it is, but where are the staff?” she asked, finally having the commonsense to bring the subject up.

“Oh, them?” Arissa leaned against one of the wall-mounted fridge, picked a walnut from a basket full of it behind her, and popped it inside her mouth. “Only the night-shift maids, the chef, and Sir Jerome get to come here. Master Cord only comes in the throne room at night. It is morning, so they aren’t here. Oh! Do you like some juice Miss Cait?”

While chomping the nut, she speedily turned around and opened the fridge she had leaned earlier.

“Ah, no, no. Thank you.” Amanda shook her head, ultimately dismissing the thought of the Vitalis Master and how he was currently in a different place other than the throne room. She stared at the contents inside the fridge and caught sight of something weirdly different from the rest of the bottled liquids.

“Wait. What’s that?” she asked, pointing her eyes straight into the perspiring hourglass-shaped container.

Chapter 12 - Honeysuckle Sweet

Arissa went to look at it and scrutinized its contents.

“I don’t know, ” she shrugged her shoulders. “A semi-liquid filling perhaps?”

“It is crimson red, ” Amanda pointed, remembering how the Vitalis Master used to mention the color in their second meeting days ago.

“Yeah, speaking of which, ” Arissa straightened and then closed the fridge. “The Family loves the color red. Almost all interior of the rooms here has that shade of color.”

It sure looks like it, Amanda voiced in her thoughts. From the carpet to most of the wall painting, and to every piece of furniture, the red shade was ever-present.

“That’s probably their Family color, ” she surmised audibly to the maid.

“I think so. I still have a lot to learn actually. They are one very secretive family if you ask me.”

Amanda smiled at her and decided to scan the room again.

“What’s that door for?” she said when her eyes fell on the heavy-looking black wood.

“Oh, that?” Arissa stepped forward. “That’s the door to the throne hall.”

Amanda couldn’t help but stare at the inanimate object more. Something was pulling her there. She just didn’t know what it was.

“Can I? I mean, if it’s not against the rules.”

Arissa waved a hand.

“You’re silly Miss Cait. Of course not! Here, come!” she urged her forward, smiling.

When she opened the black intricately carved door, she let Amanda step in first.

They admitted themselves inside amidst the lack of lighting save from the small dots of soft sunlight piercing through the stained glass windows. There were colossal chandeliers of the best workmanship hanging in the ceiling, unlighted. Due to this, almost all corners of the hall were dark including the audience side of it and the dais.

Most especially the dais.

Still with this, Amanda and the maid went forward. They stopped beside one of the hall’s massive pillars and continued to gawk.

“Magnificent isn’t it?” Arissa asked.

“Yeah, like a real throne hall, ” Amanda whispered. There was so much pride in the maid’s eyes that she could easily see and understand. This castle really was one-of-a-kind.

“It is a real throne hall, Miss Cait, ” the maid corrected. “Master Cord just doesn’t admit audiences in here except for his family. It is a shame he doesn’t hold parties in here.”

“This would be more beautiful if sunlight touches the floor. This place needs that as it is too gloomy looking, ” Amanda commented.

“Maybe you can suggest that to Master Cord, Miss Cait.”

“Huh, ” Amanda released an airy laugh. “I’d rather not. The man’s too uptight with his preferences.”

And then there was a loud clearing of a throat successfully catching both of the women’s attention.

“Didn’t I tell you about choosing your words carefully Amanda?” From the shadow-consumed dais, Cord’s voice sounded.

Both Amanda and Arissa turned with a start.

As if magic, the shadow dispersed and a beam of sunlight shot through directly towards the dais spotlighting the one who sat in the throne seat.

“Oh sheeznits, ” muttered Arissa, feeling embarrassed and at the same time frightened after seeing her Master.

She attempted a curtsy quickly, looking at Amanda in the corner of her eyes hoping she would do the same but she didn’t.

Amanda just stood stiff on the spot. Her breath caught in her throat and her eyes locked on his grand state.

“Leave Arissa, ” Cord ordered to which the maid speedily granted after mumbling an ‘excuse me’ on Amanda’s way.

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Silence was the first thing that greeted the two occupants after Arissa closed the door.

After inhaling a good amount of air, Amanda was able to get the courage to ask him.

“You’ve been here all along?”

Cord, still sitting comfortably in his throne, placed a finger under his clean-shaven chin.

“I was sleeping until your voices woke me up, ” he informed, partly annoyed.

Where? Where was he sleeping? The thought crossed Amanda's mind. She couldn't believe that he was asleep in his chair. She couldn't even believe that he was present inside the throne room when in fact she didn't notice him at all earlier.

But even so, she knew that she was the trespasser, so there was no other way she could do than to be polite.

"My apologies, " she said, bowing her head even though she hadn't done it ever in her life to anyone. "I'll leave too so that you can resume your sleep."

She stepped to the side, aiming to exit the hall as soon as possible, but Cord stopped her.

"No, stay, " he said, his voice giving off authority.

Amanda had no choice but to oblige. She was still, after all, his guest.

"I'm awake now. I'd like for a morning drink of something honeysuckle sweet if you may."

The corner of her eyes flinched upon hearing it. It was almost a demand.

"I'm not your servant, " she announced. "You know I can't fetch that Mister Vitalis. Do you want me to tell Arissa instead?"

"No, you don't need to, " Cord stated and then ran his finger along his mouth's opening lightly touching something there. Something hidden. Something white and pointed. "Because what I want to drink is here in front of me, " he added without a thought as his gaze fell on the length of Amanda's neck. "I want to drink you, Amanda."

"E-excuse me?" Amanda's voice stammered. She lifted a brow, showing her feisty self, but deep inside, her nerves trembled. What did he just say again? Surely, she heard it correctly. Surely she did!

Cord cleared his throat subtly. Instead of repeating what his stupid, stupid, traitorous mouth had just blurted out, he decided to admonish her. "You, woman, are treading on dangerous grounds. Had Lady Granger already told you about my castle rules?"

Amanda narrowed her eyes at him, calculating him. She heaved a breath and shoved his earlier words at the back of her mind. "Yes, she did, but she didn't mention about not touring the throne hall."

Cord sighed and closed his eyes briefly.

"Yes, of course. I should probably add that in the list."

Amanda released an amused short laugh. "So I'm right. You really are an uptight person."

Cord cocked a brow, his blindfolded eyes trained on her and her alone. “What else do you think I am?”

“You’re a recluse.”

“Hmmhh…” He gestured his hand for her to go on and Amanda did, having the courage to be frank.

“You like keeping info to yourself. You are a secretive guy.”

“That’s a given. It runs in the family, Sweetness. What else?”

This time, he stood up, and even without the support of his cane, he was able to manage nearing her with fluid, sure strides.

Amanda, for some reason, didn’t move. She felt her feet nailed on the floor.

“You-you have a ridiculous taste for pets. Hey! By the way, where is that panther?”

A curve of what looked like a smile appeared in Cord’s mouth.

“Hunting. Hungry like his Master, ” Cord replied. “What else Amanda? What else do you think of me?”

He continued closing in on her.

“And a ridiculous taste for clothes, ” she went on, with her voice in the borderline of trembling.

“I’d be willing to strip naked if that’s what you want, ” he suggested nonchalantly. “Maybe when you see what I look like under this coat, you’ll find it more…pleasing to the eye.”

Amanda immediately shook her head and blinked many times. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

“I know, ” Cord whispered.

When he was just inches away from her, she didn’t move. He didn’t know where she stood. He could always pass her by and walk straight towards the massive pillar behind her.

But.

But to her surprise, his right hand shot straight to her back and stayed there firmly as he pushed her against his chest.

Her breath hitched.

“Take your hand off me, Mister Vitalis, and step away, ” she ordered without missing a beat despite the hammering of her heart. Her hands remained in the sides, rigid, afraid to push him back. Afraid to touch him.

The muscles of Cord's jaw tensed. Shit. The contact of their skin brought bolts of delightful electricity throughout his entire body. It fucked up his senses.

Could she feel this too? A thought crossed his mind.

Their eyes locked in an unblinking duel — or at least only on Amanda's side for she was without a blindfold. She could feel his orbs trained straight on her though and this created so many unwelcomed emotions no man of proper eyes had ever done before.

He inhaled and exhaled, the warmth of his breath tickling Amanda's face. She shuddered because of it.

He inhaled again, this time moving his nose a little towards her exposed neck. Shit. To him, the torment was unbelievably real.

He opened his mouth but it was not to welcome his stretching fangs. It was to respond with clarity, "I will, but promise me next time, please let your hair down. Cover that bewitching neck of yours."

As quick as his hand came to slip around her back, it was the same when he released her. He turned around and urged himself back to the safety of his seat.

Amanda felt relief immediately wash through her, but she asked, "Why? What's wrong with my neck?" genuinely innocent, and this made Cord pause abruptly from his walk.

"It'll be the cause of someone's downfall Amanda, of insanity, of all things fucked up, " he answered over his shoulder.

"Oh, you love to speak in riddles huh?" she stated, taken aback by his choice of words. What did he mean by those, she didn't know and she had no plan on finding out.

She watched him climbed up his regal seat as if it was normal for him. As if he wasn't even blind at all.

"Go, Amanda..." he paused, - before I lose myself - "Before I tie you up against one of this hall's pillars as punishment, " he continued after choosing his words correctly.

She felt the burn in her cheeks then.

How could he say that?!

This time, as promised, he wasn't acting rude, but he was threatening her like any Master would do to his subjects.

This got her all riled up.

With a huff, she stomped her foot and turned around. “No. Don’t worry, I’ll see myself out, ” she said without looking at his way.

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Cord listened to her quick footsteps as she retreated. By the time the door of the servants’ kitchen slammed shut, he released a breath. A long, deep one.

As what his hands had been aching to do, he finally touched the woman for the first time.

For the very first time. And fuck, it felt so good.

His fangs extended, cutting his bottom lip twice. Blood trickled and he licked it clean without delay.

He palmed his face, his blindfold, his mouth and cursed under his breath, “Shit. Why did I touch her?”

Chapter 13 - Tension and Temptations Rising

To Amanda, the contact of their bodies, though brief, felt like acid and fire. Of the good and bad kind.

Bad - because she swore she felt like he was killing her with his touch. Bled and dried. Tortured and stolen of her essence.

Good - because she felt complete. Revived. Replenished of energy. Her nerve endings felt charged with desirable electricity - an electricity that she could well be addicted too.

And because of these conflicts inside her, she realized that staying in the Vitalis Castle could be more dangerous than being chased by drug lords and loan sharks.

She needed to leave the place ASAP, but how will she explain this to Chief Moretti then?

She can't say that the Master of the House just threatened to tie her up in the pillar. That's just too embarrassing of a reason. She might have the Chief think they were experimenting with BDSM.

She can't say that she can't stand the personality of the Master. It would be downright a disrespect if the Chief was loyal to him - which was very likely.

And she can't say that she felt unsafe inside the castle, when in fact, it was keeping her from the danger.

Amanda ran out of possible reasons to help her in her predicament. She thought that this could wait though. What was important as of the moment was for her to get away from the Vitalis Master as fast as possible.

She hastened her steps out of the kitchen speaking nothing as Arissa followed behind her.

The maid called and called, and asked what happened, but Amanda remained silent. She was too flustered to explain the events in the throne room.

By the time she covered half of the west hallway, she paused, turned around, and asked the maid, "Can you lead me to the gym Ris? I'd like to busy myself with anything I could get my hands on."

Arissa was taken aback.

"S-sure, no problem Miss Cait." She righted her uniform and smiled on her way. "Well, if you like, I can show you the indoor pool too so that you can try it."

Amanda nodded. “That would be great.”

They managed the twists and turns of the hallways, from the second to the first floor, and down to the gym basement Arissa had talked about.

As expected, Amanda was agape of the facilities available. The gym was mainly for the use of the family members, but they were kind enough to let the servants and guests use it too.

She stayed there the whole day, changing from her denim shirt and black jeans into more comfortable gym wear that Arissa had taken from her luggage.

She tried all sorts of equipment there. She used the treadmill, did some dumbbell liftings, played on her own in the tennis court, and fenced with a mannequin all without checking her phone that she left in one of the snack tables.

She didn’t want to be bothered. She didn’t want to also entertain whatever Matteo was going to offer to her. Surely, he had talked with Chief Moretti just as he said and probably got the same ‘classified information’ response.

She didn’t want to hear him urge her to spill out where she stayed. She didn’t want any nuisance. She just wanted the peace and quiet position she was in.

The last she did was swim in the rectangular turquoise pool wearing a silver one-piece backless bathing suit from her wardrobe. It was past six in the evening when she did that. Nearly almost dinner if she’ll base it on her time with the Vitalis Master last night.

So far, no one, not even the Head Majordomo or his female counterpart, Lady Granger or Arissa informed her that she’ll be dining with the Master again. Not like she anticipated it, but it relieved her knowing she wouldn’t have to see the man again - or at least for the day. Once was already enough.

Arissa waited at the edge of the pool, standing right on top of the tiled pool stairs. Ready was the white towel on her arm when Amanda surfaced out of the water.

“Thanks, Ris, ” she said, smiling.

“You’re welcome, Miss Cait. By the way, Sir Jerome wanted me to inform you about something.”

“What is, Ris?” Amanda asked, walking out of the pool area.

She was relaxed, feeling refreshed from her swimming, but deep inside, if she were honest with herself, she felt nervous expecting the maid to inform her about a pending dinner with their Master.

“He said he wanted you to be inside your chamber this instant as per Master Cord’s instruction.”

Oh, good. Not the one she expected, but she let out an amused breath while she patted her hair dry. "Why? Are there ghosts here that I needed to hide in my bedroom *ahora mismo*?" she dared to kid.

Arissa quickly shook her head. "I don't think so Miss Cait, but there'd be consequences if you don't do as Master Cord ordered. You remember the rules Lady Granger told you about right?"

"Yes, I do, " she confirmed, "but that makes me wonder why he is so particular of confining me at night."

"Er, I'm sorry Miss Cait, " the maid looked sheepish. "I have no idea myself. I don't work here at night remember?"

"Yes, right, " Amanda concluded. She didn't need to cultivate deeper. Didn't need to know the reason why. After all, she wasn't going to stay in the castle forever. It was theirs to keep.

"I have no choice but to oblige, " she added.

"I'll take care of your gym clothes and bathing suit Miss, " Arissa offered just as they entered the changing area. "You can just leave them in the basket."

Amanda dipped her head in acknowledgment. "Okay, thank you, Ris."

At least through spending the whole day inside the gym, she was able to block out the problems she faced presently. The problem with the murderer, the problem with her safety, the problem with Matteo, and the problem with the Vitalis Master.

Most especially the Vitalis Master.

Once she finished changing to her earlier denim and pants, Amanda walked out of the gym, but before she could fully exit the place, she bumped into someone in the doorway. This, someone, wore black cycling shorts and a skull-printed tank top. She had her iPod headphones in her ears, listening to rock music whose drums and guitars Amanda could easily hear from where she stood.

She had a unique beauty, one that was a cross between the innocent, sultry and playful: very light freckles under the eyes, thick lashes, full red lips, well-trimmed brows, soft brown curls that ended to her waist, and rosy pink cheeks - or so it would look like after Amanda realized the woman wore a light make-up.

"I'm sorry. I didn't see you there, " Amanda apologized just as the woman pulled her headphones out.

"No worries, " she said, showing a bit of sparkly white teeth.

Amanda felt blatantly perused by her then, from the foot up to the head.

“Wait. Who are you? It’s the first time I’ve seen you here. Are you a new servant?” the woman, appearing young like she just had her eighteenth roses, asked.

“Uh, no. I’m a guest here, ” Amanda replied, shaking her head.

“Really?” The woman cocked a well-trimmed brow. “I didn’t know my cousin has a guest. He didn’t inform us.”

“Cousin?” Amanda parroted.

“Rexcord Vitalis, or should I say, Cord Vitalis. He likes being called that way as he claimed the first name is too out-of-date.” The woman paused and bit her bottom lip. “Er, ancient as per his exact words. Are you his *deontóir fola* perhaps?”

“What?”

It was a queer word for Amanda. She had heard of the Irish language in her Company travels, but she hadn’t come across this ever since.

“Blood donor, ” the woman translated. Then, when Amanda still gave her a confused face, she cleared her throat and said, “Oh, my apologies. It seems you don’t know huh?”

Amanda arched her brows. “You mean to say blood donors in the Red Cross Organization? I am one for six years now. Donating my blood for those who needed it.”

The latter stifled a laugh. “No, not that kind.”

She leaned forward, nose ready, and sniffed a little in Amanda’s way.

“It is a shame. You’d make for a delicious meal if you are one. Your scent is enticing.”

“Heather, move.”

Amanda, despite her efforts of not being obvious, gasped when she heard Cord’s voice emerge from the door. Tingles shot through her nape, one that felt hot, and she immediately remembered the memory of his arm around her waist. She blinked fast, saw him step forward, and into their view wearing the same clothes this morning minus the trench coat.

The woman standing next to Amanda stepped forward. “Ah, there you are cousin! I happen to bump into this lovely thing. Won’t you care to introduce us properly? You never said you have a guest.”

Cord grumbled and gave her a straight face. “She is irrelevant. You don’t need to know her. Best be on your way cousin.”

The one called Heather clutched her chest mockingly. “That hurts my feelings you know.”

Feeling vexed by Cord's insensitive treatment, Amanda inserted herself in their conversation.

"You are probably the rudest person I have ever met, Mister Vitalis, " she said, giving him a frown.

Then, she faced the stunned Heather and shot a hand in between them. "Hi, I'm Caitlin O'Malley by the way. It's a pleasure to meet one of the family members."

Heather smiled at her, wider this time, and shook Amanda's hand. "Heather Ferguson, honey, and I'm telling you now, I am going to like you. I've never seen a woman courageous enough to be frank in front of the Master."

Amanda's heart flipped for a moment when she noticed Cord's lips twitch.

"Ah, they say my sharp tongue is a gift, " she blurted out wittily.

Heather immediately released a loud, heartfelt laugh. "Alright! It's official, we are best buddies now. I like you a lot."

She embraced Amanda, tiptoeing a little due to her lack of height, and then shot a smart grin on Cord's way.

"You should keep this one cousin. She is a rare human, " she remarked when she withdrew.

Amanda raised a brow upon hearing this.

Cord, once again, grumbled. He squeezed the head of his cane - the only one action he had done quite many times since the appearance of the bewitching woman - and ordered, "Leave Heather, before my patience-"

"Oh no, " Heather interrupted, putting her palms up. "And now he is threatening me. See?"

She looked at Amanda who just remained smartly silent and then continued with a childish stomp, "Fine. I'll go." She walked forward, inside the gym, with a twist of her lips and a wave. "See you when I see you, Caitlin!"

"Yeah, nice meeting you too, Heather, " Amanda stated as she watched the woman's well-toned back.

She must be one of the family members who always go to the gym. Her short but athletic physique was a good clue for it.

With Heather's exit, a short silence enveloped the area. Amanda felt widely cognizant that Cord's attention was directed to her. She remembered his words this morning, about letting her hair down, and for this reason, she immediately pulled her elastic band out.

Gorgeous and effortless wavy locks fell about her shoulders to her waist. It framed her heart-shaped face. It made her more seductive and striking. But most of all, it covered the neck that the Master had been utterly tortured with.

“Arissa, ” Cord spoke after a subtle twitch of his lip that almost looked like a pleased smile. Despite blind, he knew that the maid was just nearby, watching their interaction earlier.

Amanda turned from behind her and saw the maid standing there bowing her head.

“Yes, Master Cord, ” Arissa replied.

“Escort Miss O’Malley to her chamber now, ” he dictated straight-to-the-point.

“Yes, Master Cord.”

Amanda saw the maid signal her to follow with a jerk on her head. She obliged but didn’t say anything when she crossed the threshold and passed by the Master. She chose not to speak to him. After how rudely he acted on his cousin earlier, he didn’t deserve her wish of goodnight at all.

Cord didn’t speak too, but as she passed him, his nose flared when her scent breezed in.

***

“Is he always that brusque to the people around him?” Amanda asked once they were a couple of paces away from the gym room.

Arissa rubbed an arm and shook her head. “Uh yeah, I’m not supposed to comment on that Miss Cait.”

Amanda sighed. “Oh, I’m sorry. He is your employer after all.”

“No worries, ” the maid smiled. “No offense taken.” She glanced from side to side cautiously and then continued, “Well, all I can say is just be patient with him Miss Cait. Everyone here does. He has been like that ever since I was employed here or ever since the oldest day-shift employee started to care for this castle and mind you, Mrs. Schaffer has been working here since she was fourteen. She’s eighty-two now.”

Amanda’s eyes fluttered, surprised. “Wow, that’s quite a long time, but…” she trailed off and gazed at the floor, thinking, “Isn’t there any discrepancy in your words Ris?”

The maid tilted her head. “What is Miss Cait?”

“Well, if Mrs. Schaffer had been working here since she was young, would that mean that Mister Vitalis hasn’t been born yet?”

Arissa contemplated for a moment, digging details in her head for her to use. “Oh yeah, now that you mention it, that is almost all of the day-shift employees are asking. I did hear a rumor that Mrs. Schaffer is just too old to bring facts down. They say she might have dementia, so yeah, what I just told you about maybe silly talk.” Then, she giggled, dismissing the mistake just like that.

But Amanda mulled the information in her head. She would have wanted to ask more about this Mrs. Schaffer when Arissa added without malice, “I’ve heard of talks too that the Master hasn’t had a woman for such a long time, so probably that’s one of the reasons for his spiky demeanor.”

“Hmf, ” Amanda, taken aback by this, let a mocking breath out. “Oh Ris, do you think that the company of a woman would change that chronic problem of his?”

“Uhm, Lady Granger and Sir Jerome do think so. Especially Sir Jerome, who believes your presence will—”

“Alright, I’m not going to touch that issue anymore, ” Amanda didn’t let the girl finish. “That is for this castle to endure.” Talking about a maiden changing a beast’s attitude like that of the famous fairytale ‘Beauty and the Beast’ just left an aftertaste in her mouth. The bitter one.

“Right, ” Arissa replied, still not offended. She smiled, one that showed an understanding of Amanda’s words. “Do you need anything before I go Miss?”

The latter shook her head, “Nothing really, but my dinner would be nice.”

“Ah, I believe Dayana has already set that up in your room, ” Arissa informed.

“Dayana? She’s feeling fine now?”

“I believe so. She is on the night-shift.”

“Oh, I see. Well then, you are free to go.”

Amanda waved a hand on her way, dismissing her just as they were about to turn to her room’s hallway.

“Thank you, Miss Cait. See you tomorrow.” The maid bent his head low and smiled.

Just as Arissa said, there was indeed already a dinner course for Amanda. It was placed in a round table, set up outside the balcony lit with a golden candelabra like that in the dining room. Fresh dark red orchids adorned the center table, placed inside a transparent glass vase.

The maid, Dayana, greeted her with a perfect curtsy. Amanda greeted a ‘good evening’ back but after she crossed the door, she gasped after seeing the black panther already lying at the foot of the bed. It raised its head up immediately, looked at her, and released a low, friendly growl.

For Amanda, this meant a problem.

If the pet was here, there's a big possibility the owner would soon come to fetch it. She had already had enough exposure with the Vitalis Master for one day. To conclude her evening with another one meant she'd face another sarcastic blow-by-blow exchange with him.

But the black panther was too cute and cuddly, so she couldn't in her life just kick it out of her bedroom.

"Hey, why are you here?" Amanda mumbled, kneeling in front of the animal when they met halfway of the room.

The panther just growled again and pressed its snout against her palm.

She petted the animal, played with it for a while much to the dismay of the maid.

"It's the first time I saw the Master's pet get friendly with another person besides him, Miss Cait. What did you do to get the trust of that wild animal?" she asked.

Amanda shrugged her shoulders. "I didn't do anything, " she whispered, "I haven't got a clue as to why Bagheera is this friendly with me. Why? What does he do with the other residents here?"

Dayana pouted. "Well, it's either he ignores them just like what he did to me before you arrived or he pounces and uses his sharps claws to wound any poor staff. He exposes his sharp teeth and growls like he is ready to bite you in the ass."

It was a typical prime predator behavior but still, Amanda's mouth dropped.

"Wow, " she uttered and rubbed the forehead of the panther, "I see that you've been a bad pet huh?"

The animal just growled low.

"Hmm, anyway, you are your Master's responsibility. I guess I am this lucky to have your good side."

Amanda stood up and then waltzed into the bathroom.

"I'm going to wash my hands first before I eat Dan, " she informed the maid.

Dayana bowed her head and watched as the panther entered the balcony and settled under the dining table.

Dinner went on without any problems. At one time, there was a knock on the door. While Dayana answered it, Amanda's heartbeat sped thinking that it might be the Master present to fetch his pet, but to her instant relief, it was Sir Jerome who did it.

He went inside, greeted her a pleasant evening, and then signaled the panther to leave.

The animal, just as normal, growled low, but it had a tone of dislike in it. It slunk to the doorway, but not before wrapping its long tail on Amanda's ankle.

"Master Cord would like to dine with you tomorrow evening Madame. He says he wants you to tell him this time about the murder case since he got Chief Moretti's permission for you to disclose it."

Why does he want to know anyway? was Amanda's question then. She didn't ask this to the butler since he may not even know the real agenda of his Master. Instead, she just nodded and said, "Alright. Tomorrow night it is then."

"Good. I will relay your answer to him." He stepped backward after bowing and then exited the room.

Amanda sighed thereafter.

Tomorrow.

At night.

Dinner with him.

What can possibly go wrong aside from her heart in threat of exploding?

Chapter 14 - Tasting the Flesh

Right after dinner, Amanda positioned her laptop in the mattress just like what she did last night. Noman was the first to pop in complete with a clear video feed of him in a moon-printed shirt. He waved a 'hi' on her way and Amanda returned a 'hello' back.

Just as he was about to start his daily interrogations about her experiences in the castle, Matteo's number flashed on her cellphone screen, registered as his eleventh attempt to call for the day.

Amanda sighed and picked up the gadget lying next to the laptop.

"I better take this call, Dom. I have been ignoring Matt since this morning, " she said while sitting in her mattress, Indian style.

Noman nodded. "Yeah, you should. I'll just wait. I won't log-out."

Amanda pressed the answer button and right then and there, Matteo's worried but stiff voice flowed. "You didn't answer my calls Cait."

She genuinely looked guilty upon hearing it, but she lied instead, "Yeah, I'm sorry Matt. I left it in my room this morning."

"Why? What were you doing all throughout the day? Where did you go?"

He pretty much sounded like a jealous lover, and Amanda somehow didn't like it.

Knitting her brows, she released a deep breath to calm herself.

"Matt, why did you call?" she asked instead.

"I talked with Chief Moretti in her office this lunch, " he informed.

"Yeah, and what happened?"

"Before that, remember that Vitalis Master we met days ago?"

Amanda silently cleared her throat. Why was their conversation leaning towards that guy again?

"Yes, why? What about him?"

"He was there before me. Talked to the Chief for whatever issue he had. It made me wonder what."

"Hmmm, " she mumbled whilst watching blankly at the now-closed balcony door. Right after dinner, she had asked Dayana to close all entrances of her bedroom just to drive away all manners of unexpected visitors - animals and blind, handsome men included.

"You know what was weird?"

"What?" she asked, suddenly curious.

"He didn't act like he was blind at all. No one assisted him in and out of the office. And another thing, the Chief looked dazed after he left. She wasn't answering my questions for at least a minute."

Her brows furrowed. "Really? Maybe she was just stressed out."

"Hmm, maybe so, but anyway, when I asked her about you, she didn't tell me where you are kept. She said it is classified info."

Amanda breathed a sigh of relief. "See, I told you so."

"I know, but I tried to beg her to tell me. I want, no, I need to see you Cait. We have so much to talk about."

"Well, we are talking now. This doesn't satisfy you?" Amanda frowned a little. She heard a long sigh and then he answered.

"It's much better we talk face-to-face. I miss you Cait. I miss your lips and the way you taste."

Matteo's voice through the other side of the line was heavy with emotion. Amanda could easily imagine his face looking at her with love and longing, and his eyes, intensely burning of desire. Though selfish about it, she silently thanked that they weren't talking in person just like he wanted to. She'd prefer to avoid such confrontations as much as possible.

"Matt..." she whispered, her voice soft and understanding.

"No, don't worry, you don't need to answer me. I want to hear your words not through the phone. I'll wait until this case is over and I hope it will be soon before next week."

"W-why? Is there a problem with the Formula One's?" For a moment, her thoughts strayed on the work she had left in the Circuit.

She heard a clearing of a throat and then a shuffling of clothes nearby - his probably.

"You could say that, " Matteo replied. "Actually, your stepfather will be coming on the race day."

"What?!" Amanda immediately straightened her legs. She darted out of bed and paced along her bedroom space. "Why didn't he tell me that?! I didn't get a call from him or a text!"

"Well, he wanted to surprise you."

"Oh no, this is a big problem." She paused from pacing, pinched the bridge of her nose, and clenched her eyes shut.

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep tabs with the murder case and ensure the police department will find the culprit fast before next week.”

Though it was unlikely considering all murder cases in the provincial district were piling up fast, Amanda still nodded and said gratefully, “Thank you, Matt.”

“You’re welcome. Just be safe wherever you are right now.”

She smiled and sat at the edge of the bed, a lot calmer now. “Yes, I will.”

“Cait?”

“Hmm?”

“I need you to know that I am just waiting for you. Waiting for you to bloom free. I have been tirelessly patient. A little wait now wouldn’t be a problem.”

Amanda dipped her eyes on the floor, a quirk on her brow briefly appeared. “What are you talking about Matt?”

Riddles. Why do most of the handsome men she had come across give that?

“Your mother said that I’ll just need to be patient, ” Matteo replied in a sure tone.

“Hmf, you are bluffing now. How can you meet my mother when I am just twelve when she died?”

There was a moment of pause. Amanda was smiling at first but then it disappeared when she realized something of value. Something that was highly unlikely but still plausible.

“Matt, have you met—”

“I’ll explain everything when we see each other again, Cait, ” Matteo interrupted. “I’ll see you next week.”

Though feeling cut off, Amanda didn’t pursue the subject.

“Y-yeah, fine, ” she replied, knitting her brows. “See you.”

***

From the live feed, Noman stared at Amanda with a giddy smile on his face.

“Oh my God, that was epic! What did he say? Why did you mention your mother and you being twelve?” he asked once she placed the cellphone down.

Of course, Noman was the only one who knew about her family and their not-so-normal tree. Heck, he even knew about her true nature being that he was the only one that Amanda trusted. That was since they met ten years ago and since she saved his life from a catastrophic accident.

“Nothing. I think he was just messing around with me, ” she answered, smartly avoiding the headache-causing subject.

“Huh, killjoy, ” Noman pouted. “If you don’t want to talk about Matteo, how about the Vitalis Master then?”

A memory flashed on Amanda’s mind; the ones that happened in the throne hall and his threatening words of bounding her in the pillar with ropes. She scrunched up her nose and fought off a blush.

She didn’t want that to be the topic of the night. Especially with Noman who would no doubt add spice and color to it.

“Oh Dom, I’m tired, ” she said, “Can I talk to you tomorrow? I want to sleep now.”

Noman narrowed his eyes at the monitor screen.

“You, lady, are trying to dodge the subject, but no worries, I’ll let you off this time.” He leaned back on his swivel chair and crossed his arms above his head. “You are lucky you have a friend who understands you so much.”

“Yeah, I know.” Amanda grinned. “Talk to you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. Good night Sleeping Beauty, ” Noman greeted with a wave of a hand.

“Good night Elsa, ” she greeted back, and Noman’s live feed turned off after he blew her an invisible kiss.

Amanda brought her knees up and rested her head against it. She clicked close all her applications and then shut the laptop down.

Once done, she stood up again and crossed the room to turn the chandelier light off. She did this too with the lampshade before she climbed up the mattress.

Darkness wasn’t really her problem. Heck, it was even a welcoming condition for her especially when sleeping. To her, this creates a calming environment to relax the mind, but as soon as her head hit the pillow, she realized this wouldn’t help her at all.

She recalled the words that Matteo released. Without intending it, it lingered on her mind for more than necessary. Although she wanted to think of it as just a joke, deep inside she believed he was hinting on something. Something immensely important.

He was a happy-go-lucky man since she met him two years ago. A typical businessman. Him being like this serious was rather new to her. He even dropped some weird comments about her mother

as if he had seen her before. But that was unlikely. Very unlikely for such a reclusive woman like her mother. Unless he did meet her in the past.

Considering his words carefully, he might even know something about her original family - the Roand Family, and their deepest, most guarded secret.

As she lay in bed, she squeezed her eyes shut and inhaled deeply.

She hoped to find out soon what Matteo Nikos Threvelli knows, preferably after her stay in this castle. Once the case will be solved. She wasn't going to take just hints alone and she wasn't going to leave it just as it was - a riddle.

***

That night, Amanda was in a deep sleep, but her head tossed from side to side, disturbed on something. Her breathing was beyond normal. It was ragged.

Her room was dark, save from the full moon's light that shone through the French glass door; through the slightly opened curtain.

Her bed had become a stage as the moon's light had turned into a spotlight, highlighting her form under the bed covers.

To some, it may have looked like a beautiful apparition, but to her, it brought about an unsavory circumstance. It gave her a nightmare.

Flashbacks after flashbacks of memories not her own rallied in her mind. Of blood and gore. Of numerous white, gleaming fangs. Of death and destruction. Of an amethyst pendant again. Of her mother and father and how they loved and lost each other. Of her name, Amanda, and how her father, Marquess Ellis Roand, calls her by that fondly. Of her being left alone. Alone.

"No..." Amanda uttered amidst in her sleep, unable to take the heaviness in her heart. "Stop please..."

Her hands clenched tightly while tears rolled down her eyes.

"Please..."

To the rescue, a liquid shadow, the consistency like ink, covered her entire bed. It formed into a dome sealing her inside. It cast away the moon's light. It instinctively drew the curtain shut.

In response, Amanda's breathing turned calm. Her tears halted from leaking. Her knitted brows, tense mouth, and fingers that clawed the bedsheet returned to a relaxed position.

Without switching on, the lampshade's light flickered and stayed still, softly illuminating Amanda's sleeping form.

“Who are you, woman? Why do you react to the moon like so?” a shadowy figure voiced out from the foot of the bed. It was the Master of the House in his half-opened white shirt and black slacks. “And why do you have such blood?”

Without a blindfold on, his eyes were a glow of red, but still, he couldn’t see. Only white outlines and grey shades that were unnaturally prominent than any normal blind man could make out. He had perfected this many thanks to his bountiful living years. Many thanks to the shadow ability he had acquired from an unlikely source.

Amanda, oblivious of his presence, shifted to the right side. Her knee flexed, opening the bed cover and exposing her slender legs.

It was a sexy sight to see. One that Cord would drink to behold, and the impulse to do so, he didn’t so much as question.

He inched closer, near her outstretched arm, and bent low to do the damnable.

Using the liquid shadow, Amanda’s right hand was lifted up to level his face — his mouth.

He supported her wrist by placing a naked palm under it. The action of which almost brought him in a frenzy after feeling for her pulse bounding against her skin, making a rhythmical sound of life.

Tenderly then, very carefully, his mouth opened freeing his protruding fangs.

But Cord came across a wave of hesitation for a moment.

Why would he do this?

He was a Master. He was a master killer. He once bled dry many maidens without asking for their permission or even sneak into their beds. He had seen women in their sexy form, naked and wanting for his touch. Why would he bring himself down like this just to sneak a peek on this woman’s full-colored form? Why would he break his centuries-long commitment of not piercing a human’s flesh?

Oh, but it wouldn’t be just any human’s flesh. It was hers.

And yes, he won’t pierce his fangs deep. It will be just a nick. What harm can a nick do? And besides, he cared less about the answers. He just wanted to bask at this moment — her serene face, her careless sleeping form, her finger, and a taste of her blood.

With a determined breath, he inched his mouth closer and received her index finger inside his mouth. One fang hit her skin and instantly droplets of blood escaped from the surface. He tenderly sucked it dry, his cold tongue wrapping around the wounded digit.

Fuck. It was more than heaven. Better than anything he had tasted before. Better than her blood in a wine flute mixed with jasmine leaves.

He wanted to suck on it more. Wanted to draw out as much blood as he can but he held back. He, despite his hunger-stricken state, fucking held back.

Straightening up, he let his shadows ease her victimized hand down. The finger showed no drop of blood in it. Not one bead at all. The wound sealed itself just like the other wounds he had created when he didn't drain his victims of blood. It wouldn't leave any clue of his moment of weakness. It wouldn't leave a clue of his uninformed nightly visits.

He sighed. Good thing she was a heavy sleeper, just like him.

What little of the crimson liquid he received gave him enough chance for a temporary sight.

His red eyes turned greenish-blue and it transfixed immediately on Amanda. All of her, from her spaghetti-strapped yellow nightdress to her black boyshorts, as the liquid shadow fully pulled the bed cover down.

Her curves, the faint veins branching every inch of her body, her glorious locks, and her pristine face - everything in full color - was...

"A sight-for-sore-eyes, " Cord commented, face still neutral, but his orbs gave way to more emotion than he permitted out through words.

It screamed of deep longing.

It screamed of desire, and shit, right then and there he knew he was a goner.

He clenched his jaw.

Now, he regretted being able to see her. Now, he regretted stealing a drop of her blood. He shouldn't have given in to the temptation. Now, he'll have to face the consequences and harden himself more.

He'll just have to find the culprit fast so that he could rid himself of this dangerous woman.

Leaving the lampshade on, Cord disappeared into the shadows of the room, eyeing her, committing all of her to memory, until his greenish-blue orbs turned red, his sense of sight stolen once again just like it was dictated to be.

***

Late in the morning the next day Amanda woke up, feeling unrested. She straightened in bed but remained sitting there, looking blankly at the ready breakfast in the coffee table. There was

something that weighed heavily on her heart, something nagging at the back of her head but she willed not to think about it much.

She reached for her slightly puffy eyes and traced very faint tracks of tears there.

“Last night was a full moon huh?” she murmured to herself. “God, when will my nightmares stop?”

She closed her eyes and massaged her neck, but weird now, for she felt a pulsating sore in her right index finger where no visible signs of redness or laceration could be found.

“Good morning Miss Cait, ” greeted Arissa with a cheerful smile as she stepped out from the bathroom with a fresh towel in hand. “I placed your clothes in the walk-in closet. Would you like to bath or eat breakfast first?”

Amanda blinked twice, cutting her melancholic state.

“H-hi Ris, good morning too. Uhm, I’d like to bath first if that’s okay.”

“Of course, Miss, ” the maid replied, now standing at the edge of the bed. “I also readied the bathtub for you just in case you want to immerse yourself before showering.”

Amanda awarded her a smile. “Yes, I think that would be a good idea.”

“Mistress Heather said to give you this by the way.” Arissa pulled a white envelope from her apron’s pocket and handed it to her.

“Heather?” Amanda cocked a brow momentarily confused. After recalling yesterday’s events, that’s the time she remembered about the spunky woman she met at the gym.

“It’s an invite, ” Arissa noted, only looking at the envelope and not the brief confusion in her guest’s face. “She would have wanted to dine with you tonight but since you are already occupied with Master Cord, she’ll have to make do with tomorrow. You’ll dine with her in the rooftop garden of the castle.”

“Oh, I see, ” Amanda muttered. She stared at the white envelope that contained the message and without reading it, decided to accept the invite.

“Send her my answer then. Tell her I’ll come. It would be great to dine with another family member other than the Master, especially someone of my gender. Although...I’d like for Dayana to accompany me since I don’t know where this rooftop garden is.”

Arissa brightly smiled, pleased, and then bowed her head.

“Yes, Miss Cait. I’ll inform both Dayana and Mistress Heather about it before I leave the castle tonight.”

“Mhm?” Amanda immediately arched a brow. “Why do it later? Why not do it now while I take a bath?”

The maid’s forehead creased. “Uhm, I am not allowed in the North Wing of the castle Miss Cait, where Mistress Heather resides, and I think Dayana is sleeping right now. It would be rude if I wake her up. Also, day-shift and night-shift employees aren’t allowed to mingle unless necessary.”

“Whoa, what strict rules you have here.”

“True, ” Arissa replied.

Amanda, after sighing, stood up from the bed and took the proffered towel from Arissa.

“Thanks, ” she said. “Well, if that’s the case then tonight it is. For now, can you give me a tour around the castle garden and the library after my breakfast?”

Arissa nodded. “Of course, Miss Cait, it would be my pleasure.”

With a turn-away smile, Amanda walked into the bathroom with the towel in hand. She checked her reflection in the classy mirror first before stripping herself of her nightclothes.

“Huh, ” she breathed out.

She looked exactly the same. The same Amanda Caitlin Roand - now O’Malley - she knew herself to be despite the passing of time.

But if she were honest with herself, she’d rather be normal like everybody else. She’d trade in her family’s unusual genes just to be able to live and love freely. Free from any worries just like her mother. Free from being alone.

And if that were possible, maybe then, she’ll come to accept Matteo’s advances or any other man for that matter.

Chapter 15 – Making the Master Happy

'To hell be this morning, ' Cord cursed as another day greeted him complete with the morning sun blaring against the castle rooftops. He wore no blindfold on, sitting in his throne chair with a lazy posture, enshrouded by his liquid shadows. He expected a peaceful rest to overtake him, but the contrary happened.

Dammit, the woman was like an alarm clock to him.

Every sure beat of Amanda's heart was like a lullaby, but it wasn't an invitation to sleep, it was an invitation to listen more along with her footsteps all over the hallways.

She must be having another tour with the maid, he mused. Would have been better if I did it.

But of course, he couldn't. Wouldn't.

After his moment of weakness last night, he promised to harden himself and he was damned sure to do just that.

Not like he wasn't already doing it.

Since Amanda occupied the room where Noman had used in the night of the anniversary party, Cord didn't sleep in his master chamber.

Why?

Because it was located directly above hers. On the third floor.

Being the only heir of a wealthy, aristocratic couple, he preferred to be as secluded as he could be. He'd taken in residence of the upper west wing where only the grand library and the unused music room as his neighbors.

The North Wing of the castle was where his family relatives stayed. They made a mark there. Invited in willing blood donors they had chosen during the party and feasted there. Cord let them be. He cared less of it just as long as no corpse ends up in the hallways or in the Libree road. Or anywhere for that matter. It was his one strict rule.

Now that the woman sleeps directly below his chamber, he decided to relocate himself in the throne hall. But even there, her scent and heartbeat still affected him.

And bloody hell, what a complete torture it was.

It was enough to keep him from his overdue sleep.

“You know it is already morning cousin, can’t you wait for tonight to summon me?” Calvin waltzed inside the throne room, clad in a grey suit. His white mop of hair looked messy; the collar of his shirt smudged with pink lipstick.

Cord gave him a once-over and thereafter landed his sights directly on the discoloration, staring at it with mild amusement.

“If you weren’t so busy feeding and fornicating last night, I wouldn’t have called you now. What’s the update on the murder case?”

Calvin sat on the sofa chair already prepared by Jerome and answered, “Huh, you are so impatient with that. Is it because of the woman?”

Cord snapped a frown at him.

The latter just smiled smugly. Since Amanda’s arrival, Calvin knew talking about her would irk him. But feeling an immediate spiking sensation in between his toes, he realized answering the Master now would be a safer action, just to drive the electric-charged liquid shadows away. “Nothing still, ” he sighed and wiggled his toes. “It is difficult to get answers when our rogue vampire is this sneaky.”

“Three years of sneakiness, playing with me, ” Cord growled low and so did his pet who was just sitting comfortably near his boots, quietly clocking Calvin like a prey. “The gall of him when he knows I’ll still win in the end.”

“Well, he must be this desperate.” Calvin, ignoring the animal, just shrugged his shoulders.

“Hell, why would he when I have already given all in this castle?” Cord clenched his jaw. “Freedom. Food. Luxury. Is it not enough?”

“You know I can’t answer that, Cord. I’m not the culprit, ” Calvin replied, showing him a look of confusion. “But do you think it is one of the staff and not one of our relatives? You know, probably just to spite you.”

“Huh, spite me…” Cord muttered. “I have already suffered so much. I have atoned for my father’s mistakes more than all of you and now you say it is to spite me?”

“Well, you are the curse in the first place, ” Calvin voiced out without hesitation. “You are the reason for our centuries-old predicament. Every one of us here who breathed inside this castle during that night became like this because of you.” He raised his hands up and gave him an assured smile. “But don’t get me wrong cousin, I don’t hold a grudge against you. Although I wouldn’t be able to walk under the sun and am doomed to drink blood for eternity, I enjoy my immortal life

now. I'm just saying that what if there are those who can't still accept what had become of us? Who were just innocent? Who was thrown into this mess just because of what your father did?"

Cord shifted in his seat and released a throaty grumble. He clenched his eyes shut and took a deep breath. "Let's not stray away from the topic Calvin, " he said, unable to rebut his womanizing cousin's logic since he had a big point there. Even he himself still cannot accept turning into a blind creature of the dark. Unlike his relatives who took advantage of their situation, he still denied being a 'vampire' - as what human's normally call it.

This was the sole reason for his rampage during his early years as a vampire. This was the reason why he had killed so many souls - both innocent and guilty. He couldn't accept what he had become then, just like how he couldn't accept it now.

What happened to him then might be the same thing for this culprit - on a rampage, unable to take the damnable darkness of what the curse had designed.

"Alright, " Calvin's voice snapped the Master out of his thoughts. "How about that woman? She's the sole witness, right? Maybe you can get something from her?"

"Yes, " Cord replied after clearing his throat. "At dinner tonight, I am to interrogate her again. I already gained approval from the Chief yesterday - through beguiling her of course. Maybe this time Amanda will tell me everything she saw."

"What?" Calvin raised a brow, surprised. "Why just use your persuasion on her?"

Cord silently exhaled, pissed off a little. "I did that on her first night of stay here, but the chit was hard to break. I can't seem to get through to her."

Never. Never had he come across a human like her before. Normally, using his ability wouldn't have been a problem. He just needed to stare at them, make his voice soft and lulling, and spill his invisible waves of beguiling energy to tempt his victim. To Amanda, this ability turned useless. Utterly useless.

With this fact, her blood and her reaction to the full moon, had him thinking that the woman was of special breed.

"Well, that's new for just a normal human, " Calvin commented after lighting a cigarette he clamped in between his lips.

"I don't think she is just a normal human, " Cord pointed out.

The smoke of the cigar scattered all over the immediate space as Calvin snorted. "Huh, the way you said it, it makes me want to see this woman more."

And because of his words, Cord unintentionally chipped the edge of his armrest from the strain of his hands.

Calvin saw this and realized he just spewed a dangerous sentence. The Master was just too sensitive when it came to her.

To lessen the invisible tension, he cleared his throat and changed the subject instead, "What if it turns out there's no clue in her testimony? What then?"

Cord remained silent for a moment and contemplated well and hard.

What if it was the case indeed?

Yesterday, Chief Moretti recounted to him what Amanda had reported. It comprised of only just seeing how the murderer and the victim seemingly embraced each other, the former's mouth buried on the latter's neck, blood making a river down to the collar bone effectively soiling their shirts. She added how the criminal used a gun to shot his victim dead, how he turned to her with a promise of death in his stance, and how tall and confident he was.

Aside from the red glowing eyes, there was no other account that told of anything significant with the man. Significant enough to pin him down.

"I'll use her, " Cord finally said, his eyes lingering on his fingers were he felt the pulse of her wrist last night.

"Use her?" Calvin parroted, confused.

"As bait, " the Master added. "I'm going to lure that bastard out. I know he is just bidding his time, but that doesn't mean he isn't trembling in fear. He will come for her soon. All I need is to allow an avenue for that."

"Huh, it sounds that you have planned this all out cousin, " Calvin remarked, puffing out smoke from his mouth like a cigar aficionado that he was. "May I ask how are you going to do that?"

"Let her leave the castle, " Cord started. "The bastard biter won't try to lay a finger on her while she is under the protection of this roof but once she gets outside, I know he'll strike."

Although it would go against the entire witness protection program's goal, the Master had no choice. Better try the trump card now than to wait for another dead body to drop. It was not like he'd leave the woman a sitting duck. He'll protect her with all his ability. Mayhap even walk under the sun for her just to ensure her safety once she leaves the castle. Or maybe even become her unseen bodyguard during the night.

"Cleverly planned cousin, but are you sure you want to put her in danger? The last time I checked, you looked smitten by her."

Cord, in effect, silently grumbled. “That’s irrelevant, ” he said, putting up a stern face for his cousin to see, definitely not willing to show what he had just thought seconds ago.

Calvin snorted. “Huh, irrelevant...”

He stood up, already expecting the Master to order him out. He puffed out smoke again and thereafter saluted with a parting word, “Until then, I’ll continue my investigation. Enjoy your dinner tonight cousin.”

Cord dismissed him with a lazy wave of a hand. He didn’t say thanks nor did he smile on his cousin’s way. He just waited for the double doors of the throne room to sound shut before he continued whatever he was doing earlier: No. Not trying to sleep. Not trying to plan for tonight’s dinner. Not trying to think of a way on how to unmask his rogue biter even.

It was just mainly listening.

Listening to a certain musical heartbeat that he so wanted to claim.

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Enormous was the castle library - that was what Amanda immediately thought first when she stepped inside the room. Four marbled columns towered above her, supporting the whole place as it lived in a world of its own. Shelves after shelves of leather-bound books lined up as much as Amanda’s eyes could see. Surprisingly not a sign of dust and web collection was visible. And surprisingly, book titles and where to locate them were easily known through the computer when Amanda asked for it.

Arissa, being a tech-savvy person, guided her through the process. They stayed there for over half a day before descending to the dining room for Amanda’s lunch and heading to the castle gardens thereafter.

Nothing untoward happened during Amanda’s second tour really, except for her gut feeling that someone was watching her. Twice or thrice she was able to shake it off, turning to the flowering shrubs along the cobblestoned pathway of the garden, but once she shifts to face the facade of the castle, there it was again, and more convincing than ever before.

The only time the feeling disappeared was when Amanda returned inside. She went directly to her chamber and stayed there for what seemed like an eternity, waiting for her dreaded dinner with the Master.

At one time, she stood up from lying on the sectional sofa of the receiving room. She hadn’t bothered to turn the flat-screen TV off when she waltzed to her bedroom’s walk-in closet.

This morning, Arissa had informed her that she placed all her clothes inside. Now, that every article was hung neatly, she was able to scan which dress to suit her best. But midway from grabbing one pink cocktail dress, a wrinkle in her nose formed.

"This is absurd, " she murmured and bit her still-sore finger, "I can't believe I am debating on what to wear. It is just a damn dinner for heaven's sake!"

Forcefully, she banged the closet door to a close and huffed.

"Just a dinner..."

She strolled back to the receiving room, grabbed the remote control, and pressed the volume button to a high. The voice of the famous actress, Sheena Dextré, in her popular 'Chase and Run' reality TV show, enveloped the entire space. She tossed herself back into the sectional sofa and lay there until her flustered state weakened.

But of course, someone just had to sound a knock on her main door.

Amanda immediately straightened to sit and glanced at the wood when it opened.

"Good evening Madame O'Malley, " Lady Granger stepped inside, cast a wary look at the TV screen first, and then to her, "I suppose you are readying yourself for tonight's dinner?"

Amanda cocked a brow, her heartbeat suddenly spiking up. "Why? Do I have to wear a gown for it?"

The governess stifled a laugh. "No, you don't need to Madame, but you will be dining with the Master. It is imperative that you look your best."

Amanda shook her head and tried to reason. "I don't think that is necessary Lady Granger. I had already dined with him on my first night here, he didn't mind what I wore that time."

"True, but still you should change." Lady Granger glanced at the door's opening and signaled for someone to enter. "Dayana here will assist you."

The said maid entered and to Amanda's surprise, she had a big blue box together with her.

"The dress is your size I believe. It would suit you perfectly."

Dayana beamed a smile and settled the box right in front of their guest, in the center glass table. She opened it and with care pulled the delicately sewn fabric out.

The whole time, all Amanda did was gawk. "Ah, you-you really shouldn't have Lady Granger." Though uneasy, she managed a small smile. "I have a couple of dresses with me you know. I can always choose one of them if you really insist on me changing."

The governess grinned as a mother would to her daughter ready to attend prom. “This dress is better. I insist you wear it.” She turned around thinking her work was done and said to Amanda as a parting message, “Enjoy your dinner Madame. Do make the Master happy.”

Chapter 16 - Control is the Key

A blush crept on Amanda's cheeks.

The woman just played like a bloody fairy godmother to her! Not to mention, playing cupid! What the hell?

And why would she hook her up with their Master?

Their Master?

She must have her screws loose.

Cord Vitalis wasn't a man up for the sweet and romantic. Amanda wasn't up for it either. They simply weren't the cereal and milk for it.

But then, she remembered a passing memory about Arissa mentioning the Master's lack of female company and how the Head Majordomo and the governess believes she fits the bill to remedy it.

Surely, they weren't serious?

"Are you ready to change, Miss Cait?" Dayana asked, still showing a cheerful smile.

"What?" Amanda blinked, lost for a moment.

"To change. I will fix your hair for you. We only got an hour left before Sir Jerome arrives to fetch you."

Oh my God.

"Do I really have to change Dan? I mean it is just a simple dinner right?" Amanda looked anxious, but the maid just dismissed it with yet another bright smile.

"You have to Miss Cait. It is not always that we get to see the Master dine with someone. He prefers to be alone you know. You, dining with him, is a cause for celebration."

Amanda swallowed. Truly, she was in a predicament where there was no chance of escape.

***

Partnered it with a skin-tone stiletto, Amanda descended to the dining room wearing the red cocktail dress. The length was above-the-knee, just enough to create an air of sexy sophistication. The fabric was silk-like and stretchy. The design was within her taste of clothes. But of course, whoever decided to set her up with their Master had to choose this.

An off-shoulder.

A freaking off-shoulder.

They couldn't be more obvious.

At first, Amanda was wary of wearing it. How would the Master react? What would he say when he sees her like this all dolled up? How would she even act in front of him? But after remembering that she'd be dining basically with a blind man, she surrendered to her fate. He wouldn't even see her appearance from her hair down.

The Head Majordomo silently guided her throughout the hallway and stairs but paused just before they entered the dining room.

"This is where I'll leave you, Madame. Enjoy your dinner with the Master." He bent his head and strode out after Amanda gave him a forced smile and a squeaky 'thank you.'

Not knowing how to announce herself, she decided to sneak a peek in the dining room just to see, and there she found the Master already sitting like he had been the first time they dined. With his shoulders pressed comfortably onto the backrest and his right hand holding a wine flute, it almost looked like he was enjoying himself alone.

A thought crossed her mind then. What if she'll retreat to her chamber and feign sickness?

Maybe that would be better.

But of course, cowardice wasn't one of the proud traits of any Roand woman. So with a deep breath and a clench of her fists, she urged herself forward.

"Good evening Amanda, " the Master's voice breezed through her ears just as she was halfway to the same overly prepared table. Saliva instantly lodged in her throat.

"Go-od evening Mister Vitalis, " she managed to greet back after swallowing hard. What sharp hearing he had.

The room was met with silence again. Amanda continued her way into her seat, expecting no one to pull the chair for her like before, but to her shock, Cord quickly placed the flute down and stood up.

She stiffened on the spot and held a breath.

Was he going to do the same thing he did in the throne room? Was he going to lock an arm around her waist and pull her close to smell her neck?

Those were her quick questions as she observed him.

The answers to them came unexpectedly when Cord walked past her and reached for the crest rail of her chair.

“My apologies for not doing this the first time we dined, ” he said, showing a regretful expression for a fraction of a second.

Amanda blinked fast, surprised still that he acted like a gentleman with normal set of eyes.

“You don’t need to apologize, Mister Vitalis. It is the past. But thank you for doing this despite your...uh...”

“My condition?” he supplied, tilting his head and grinning a little on her way.

“Yes, ” was Amanda’s embarrassed answer. The man had the gall to act amused by his disability.

With the chair already drawn back, she stepped forward and claimed her seat. She mumbled a ‘thanks’ to him with which the Master immediately answered with a clear, ‘You’re welcome.’

She straightened her spine and watched him return to the center chair with sure strides, narrowing her eyes to further study how he handled himself without tripping.

But really, it wasn’t because she was curious about his lack of sight.

To be honest, it was because she wanted to ogle him - the one thing that she didn’t get to do amidst their numerous engagements since she stayed in the castle.

Even in his signature trench coat, Amanda could outline his broad back. A traitorous thought crossed her mind of how manly he’d look like underneath, rippling torso and all. He probably has strong lean arms and thighs, eye-catching dimples on top his buttocks, a delicious looking V where it led to his better half as an excellent member of the male specie. He probably has one long, sturdy—

“You look stunning in red, ” Cord announced, effectively cutting Amanda out from her wayward thoughts.

She awarded him a small smile, acting as if she wasn’t embarrassed inside, and answered straight-to-the-point, “Under normal circumstances, I would have said thank you for the compliment, but you basically can’t see me. How accurate of you to say I look stunning in red.”

Cord traced the corner of his bottom lip and grinned. How accurate he was indeed. “I was told that my subjects ganged up to doll you up just for me.”

Huh, just as she suspected.

“They did say that you prefer to dine alone and me dining with you is a cause for celebration, ” Amanda answered. “Although I think this is unnecessary.”

Cord almost tempted to reach for her victimized finger and do what he did last night just so he could prove her wrong, but he controlled himself.

“Still, you look beautiful and I appreciate it, ” was his calculated answer.

This made Amanda smile, the growing tendrils of anxiety lessening. They were, at last, acting civilized with each other.

“You kept your word, ” she muttered.

Cord cocked a brow. “My word?”

“Of not being rude, ” Amanda followed. “You do however need to respect your family more. They are all you’ve got aside from this castle.”

By family, she meant the woman she met at the gym - Heather. She was a friendly gal, easy to get along with. She definitely didn’t deserve to be treated like a stranger.

“Hmmm, ” a low sound reverberated in Cord’s chest. He wasn’t offended with her words, but still, he stated, “You do realize you are in no position to tell me that right?”

Amanda was taken aback. Unconsciously, she clamped her hands together under the table and answered, “Ye-yes, I apologize. It is unsolicited advice.”

Her cheeks grew hot, almost the same as having a fever, and she immediately felt uncomfortable with it. His family matters were off-limits - she knew that. She was after all just a guest in his castle. But still, a bit of friendly advice wouldn’t hurt, right?

Not like she treated him as a friend.

But still. It wouldn’t be a stain in his reputation if he’d show a little bit of an open mind.

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Cord tipped his head once. “Apology accepted, ” he said and waited for her to reply. Waited until he realized she wasn’t going to talk anymore.

This got him concerned.

“I’m sorry. It seemed I have unintentionally overlooked your good intentions.”

Amanda, from looking down at her empty plate, glanced up at him, her brows high above her forehead.

“Heather is just a family friend. She isn’t a Vitalis, ” he reasoned.

“But she calls you cousin, and you to her, ” Amanda pointed out.

“Correct, but that’s just an appellation we decided to use after centuri—” he abruptly paused and cleared his throat, realizing he almost mentioned his years of existence as an immortal. “After she became a resident of the castle, ” he amended.

“Oh.” Amanda dipped her head briefly, debating on whether she should continue her council.

Whether be it a friend or family or the employees, it still doesn’t mean he had the leave to be rude. More so that he was the Master of the House. He should set himself a good role model.

“Amanda, ” Cord broke off her train of thought.

She stared back at him.

He did the same but with the bothersome blindfold of course.

He shifted forward, his abdomen touching the table, and positioned his nose to capture her enticing scent.

He inhaled deeply, a wave of longing threatening to drown him.

“You turning silent like that make me wish I’m not blind, ” he started and to Amanda’s surprise, he pulled the black cloth out of his head.

Reddish green eyes immediately welcomed her.

What odd color of eyes, she thought as she blatantly inspected it with her mouth agape and her fingers itching to comb out a rogue lock of hair sticking in his forehead.

“I want to see you, Amanda, make no mistake in that, ” Cord continued. “I want to see how your forehead wrinkles when you cringe. I want to see your laugh lines. I want to see how that red dress shines in your skin. I want to see how you look like with your curls down. I want to—”

Shit.

He swallowed and quickly leaned back against his seat.

Control. Control. He chanted in his mind.

“Uh, forget about what I said. Let’s just eat, ” he urged, the table seemingly becoming smaller as he heard Amanda’s heartbeat increase its workload.

“Ye-yeah, I-I think we should, ” Amanda, after blinking many times, hurried to pick up her spoon and fork.

Chapter 17 - Piercing His Fangs Deep

Silent.

Awkward.

And as usual, a torture.

Their second dinner could be summarized like that. Again.

The Master said nothing more after that illustrious admission of his. Amanda remained smartly silent, acting as if she enjoyed the meal when in truth her stomach felt like it had just turned upside down.

Who wouldn't be when this kind of a man just revealed what he thinks about her?

Amanda knew the purpose of this dinner was to be interrogated about what she witnessed during the time of the murder. She didn't expect it would turn out a confession as well.

It consequently placed her in a hot seat.

Especially in addition to another predicament of hers: the Master's uncovered eyes.

During dinner, she felt like a mouse trapped in a cage.

Why?

Because he kept on drilling a hole through her with his secretive stares. As if... As if he could really see. In full color. In real dimensions. Every detail of her body. Her small gestures. The minute expressions of her face as she keeps herself painstakingly calm and collected.

It would have been better if he wore the cloth. It wouldn't have made her feel damn conscious.

He was even acting normally while eating. He didn't bump his hands on the candelabra. He knew where the cutleries were placed. He was even sure where to find his bloody choice of food however specific and pint-sized the meat cuts were.

He damn knew which glass contained water and which held the blood-red wine.

The Head Majordomo really was right. The Master could take care of himself. He wasn't disabled.

And because of this, Amanda felt a twinge of apprehension and excitement.

Apprehension - because he wasn't someone to be fooled. She'd have to be careful with her actions in front of him.

And excitement - because this virile of a man was basically invincible.

She hadn't come across someone like him ever before. What other surprises was he keeping for her to discover? Surely, there was still more. More that would make her interest in him even grow stronger.

"Did you enjoy the food?"

That's the very question the Master asked once Amanda sampled the strawberry shortcake dessert.

It was sudden. Fast. No preliminaries whatsoever. No clearing of a throat or a simple cough.

It startled Amanda for a second, but she was able to collect herself quickly.

She shifted her head up to look at him, her forehead creasing briefly when she found him unfazed by their earlier conversation. He'd probably won an award for being the best actor with his hard mask on. Any other man would have unraveled and exposed his desire to her through his eyes or facial expressions. Like Matteo for example. But him? No. Not one clue.

"Yes, as always. Like I said before, your cooks create delicious meals. They are a pro," she answered, making a mental note of shoving his confession earlier in the back of her mind. It seemed to her that she was the only one still thinking about it.

Cord sharply exhaled. "That's good to hear," he said and then rose to his feet. "Well, I will leave first. If you are done with your dessert, you can return to your chamber."

Amanda blinked thrice. What did he just say?

"Aren't you going to ask me about the murder case?" she asked, stopping him from leaving the table.

Cord had to subtly clench his fist that held the black cloth. This was asking too much. Way too much.

He had already kept himself in tight check during dinner. He would have wanted to bolt out of the table after his traitorous mouth once again sputtered nonsense words, but he held back in respect to the beautiful woman in his front. He decided to finish their meal, no matter how trying it was, and thought he'd bail out the moment she'd touch her dessert - murder case be damned.

Her innocence. Does she know she was attacking him below-the-belt with it?

"It's not necessary anymore," he replied in a low voice, his face slightly positioned away from her. "Chief Moretti had told me your testimony already. I don't need you to retell it."

Amanda shook her head slightly, confused. "Although I find it a bit odd, but I thought you wanted to know badly?"

“Do you have anything to add other than what you gave to Chief Moretti?” the Master asked, his expression turning grave when he glanced at her way.

“Uh, no. No... None at all, ” Amanda trailed off. She dipped her head to look at her lap and remained silent. She couldn’t be sure why she was pushing it when in fact she should have been relieved that he didn’t pursue unearthing such dreaded memory.

“Then, there’s no need for me or you to stay here. We can save ourselves the suffering.”

Cord took a step sideways as quickly as he could but once again Amanda stopped him with a question.

“Suffering?” She crinkled her brows. “Suffering of what?”

And that’s when Cord’s patience snapped.

He huffed, placed the blindfold back in the table, and strode slowly towards Amanda’s seat. Each step was heavy and calculated. Each blunt sound of his boots against the floor tiles a promise of closeness.

Amanda couldn’t be more heated up. Her heart, if it was overworking earlier, tripled even more. But truly, as uneasy as she was the whole time of their dinner, she didn’t know what he meant by his choice of word.

She momentarily forgot how to breathe when Cord stopped an inch away from her. She honestly thought he’d request her to stand up but to her shock, the contrary happened.

With one swift move, he easily pulled her chair to face him as if it didn’t weigh anything. As if she didn’t weigh a hundred pounds.

The thick legs scraped against the floor, carved wood against polished tile, creating a rough sound in their ears. Amanda gasped along with it.

Though she wanted to recoil and run to her bedroom, she steeled herself, gripped the armrests, and tilted her head up to look at him.

“Don’t tell me you don’t suffer while in my company?” He leaned forward, placed his hands at the end of her armrests, and jailed her in place. “You aren’t intimidated by me at all? You aren’t affected by my words earlier? You don’t...feel anything?”

Distinctly boxed in, all Amanda could do was to swallow. Hard.

“Uh, Mister Vitalis. Please, you don’t need to trespass my personal space, ” she pointed out, leaning back to add more space between their faces. Her chest rose higher, spilling free her cleavage, and for this she blushed, feeling cognizant.

Cord smirked and straightened. He stepped again, moving from the front to the right side of the chair, and ran his fingers along the bareness of her shoulders to her neck, the beautiful waterfall of golden-brown locks all but shoved away.

“You don’t suffer this?” Cord asked languidly, eliciting an eruption of goose flesh from Amanda.

She clenched her eyes shut, unable to bear the feeling of his sensual fingertips tickling her.

Suffering - she was indeed feeling it, but it wasn’t an ordinary one. It wasn’t what regular humans experienced.

Hers was more concentrated. The ache in her belly down betwixt her thighs was agonizing. It was setting her on fire. Similar to how she felt when their bodies touched in the throne room. Only the good side of course. The addictive one.

But she hated the feeling. Such was only a hassle and she didn’t want to welcome it.

“No, ” as much as she did suffer, she lied in the end.

Cord lifted a brow. “Oh?” he replied, clearly in disbelief. He didn’t need for Amanda to answer. The spiking of her heartbeat was enough for him to know she felt the same way.

Attraction.

Desire.

The need to sever the magnetic pull but the longing for more.

Only an additional difference for him was that he wanted to wound her. Pierce her skin. Taste her blood. Bled dry her body.

By the mere thought of it, his fangs ached once again, wanting to free itself, but Cord successfully drew it back.

“Alright, let’s make this night interesting shall we?” he stated, choosing to temporarily drop the subject for his own sake, but it took him all his will to wrench his fingers out of her skin and place it above the head of her chair. “Let’s not talk about the murder case. Let’s talk about you. Tell me Amanda, who are you really? You are no ordinary human for sure.”

How? How did he know? Amanda’s eyes bulged. She wanted to clench her hands into a tight fist, but with him now standing behind her surely observing her every move, she relaxed them.

Like she had concluded earlier, even with him blind, she had to be more careful with her actions.

“What makes you think I am that Mr. Vitalis?” she asked managing to cover the shaking of her voice.

This, in response, earned a snort from Cord. What clever way of avoiding it, he thought out loud.

He traced back his steps earlier and positioned himself in Amanda's front with his arms jailing her in the chair once again.

"Cord. I told you to call me by my name, " he answered, voice edged with authority.

Amanda frowned at him.

"I will have to politely ask you to move back, Cord."

With this, the Master rejoiced silently, showing a very, very faint and brief curve of his lips. How wonderful it was to hear her tongue say his name.

"No. Not until you tell me who you are, " he answered.

"First attacking me with your rudeness, next threatening me, and now this, blackmailing me?" She squared her shoulders and refused to be affected with their closeness and the warmth of his breath tickling her forehead.

"Just so you know, amidst me being the Master of this House, nobility isn't my quality traits Amanda, " he answered in a monotone.

"Then, let me ask you the same, " she spat back. "Who are you too? What is it in you that screamed of caution and all-things danger in the back of my head? You don't act blind at all. Either you have overdeveloped senses or you have superpowers. Which would be it?"

Cord grinned upon hearing the first half of her questions, but after that, it disappeared. Instead, it changed into a thin line. Displeased where their little battle of wits led to, he extricated himself, released his hands from Amanda's chair, and straightened.

As much as he enjoyed interrogating her, he didn't approve when it came to him.

"I like it that your mind is sharp, but unfortunately, I will just have to keep you guessing."

He stepped backward, away from her, but halted when she said: "Aww, don't retreat now. We are just getting started, Master. My secrets are my own to keep, but with proper push, I might consider telling you. You are after all my most gracious host."

She didn't exactly know what made her this brave. Maybe it was because of the wine? Maybe because she was already fuming inside with his hot-and-cold bullshi*t treatment? Or maybe because she was fed up with the way he made her feel?

Whatever it was, she was sure as hell dying to know his secret too. And she wanted to get this over and done fast, so braving herself in front of him was the best choice.

A muscle in Cord's jaw twitched. He inhaled deeply, holding it for such a time while staring straight at her and said, "Don't tease my patience, Amanda. I only got a fine thread of it left before I snap. And you wouldn't like the bloody side of it."

"Huh, bloody, " she scoffed, "You sure like that metaphor."

The woman was really digging her own grave, Cord mused, and him being likened to the Grim Reaper, relished the thought.

"Shall we try it then?" His hard stare was set on her. He was fucking ready to reveal himself. Screw the consequences later. "If you agree, you'll see who I really am."

"Bring it on, " Amanda encouraged, narrowing her eyes, more determined than afraid.

After that, Cord swiftly wrenched her left wrist out from the armrest and positioned the smooth, pulsating side of it directly in his mouth.

His fangs protruded out of his lips, cloud white and squeaky clean, the tips of it brought a sure promise of pain.

He studied her for a moment and saw her face turn pale. Her eyes bulged, her lips trembled, parting to form what he expected to be a word to halt him, but without waiting for her to say it, he pierced his fangs deep.

Amanda, with the foreign object embedded in her flesh, turned lightheaded. Flashbacks after flashbacks of the same memories formed a tornado in her mind. It was with so much force that she consequently fainted.

Chapter 18 - The Dark One

Although drinking her blood was his precise plan, Cord had just tested her at that moment to see how brave she was. He expected her to refuse then, but to his stunned reaction, she accepted. His fiery little butterfly actually accepted. That got him encouraged even more to proceed with biting her wrist.

And now, this happened.

Surely not of blood loss.

Cord replayed that sentence in his mind over and over again when he saw Amanda faint. Her body sagged like a sack of grain against the chair. A curtain of her hair covered her neck - to his relief - while most of her face was pressed against the back cushion.

Painstakingly, he pulled his mouth from her flesh and stared at her with hooded eyes, hints of passion managing to spark from it before he had them snuffed.

Blood continued to come out from her wrist in beads but he didn't mind licking it clean. Hell, the blood could wait. Her well-being couldn't. Try as he might, he couldn't shake off the intense concern filling his dead heart for her.

He recalled what happened seconds ago. Of how wonderful his lips felt like against her skin. How it almost placed him in a blood lust when her crimson liquid passed down his throat. His tongue, and the way it latched onto her flesh, was wickedly glorious. He couldn't want anything anymore other than her. Not the blood bags. But her alone.

Although he so, so wanted to, he didn't suck much of her blood, so surely blood loss wasn't the reason for her fainting.

The question that came to mind now was what?

What caused her state?

Probably because of the shock to find him a vampire? Probably because he pushed her to the limits? Made her afraid too much?

Whatever the reason, he didn't linger on it. The one thing that Cord paid attention most was to bring her to her chamber. ASAP.

"Jerome!" his voice boomed all over the dining room.

Without delay, the one called raced inside and came to a halt before him, bowing his head with perfect execution.

“Master, your orders?”

“Where is Dayana?” Cord asked, now covering Amanda’s slowly healing pinpoint wounds with his thumb. The smell of fresh blood could trigger a want from not only his relatives but also from the staff, especially the night-shift who had shared the dark fate with him. Although he had great belief the Head Majordomo, who was a vampire too, wouldn’t try and sample the woman, he didn’t want to take any chances.

“Inside Madame O’Malley’s bedroom Sire, readying the bathroom and her mattress, ” Jerome answered.

“Good, ” Cord said, pleased, “Go there and open the door for me.”

“Right away Sire, ” he answered, not at all surprised of the change in the color of his Master’s eyes from a glassy red-green to a greenish-blue. He had seen this color before, when the Master was still human, before he was turned into a creature of the dark.

As the butler left the room, Cord stared at the unconscious lovely creature again.

She may be a special human but still, she was as frail as the rest. Easily broken. Quick to disappear. And because of that thought, a surge of something akin to protectiveness pass through him.

Could he actually let her leave and make her a bait to end his three-year-long battle with his rogue biter? He couldn’t be sure now.

Carefully, he brought her wounded wrist down, placed it on top the other, and then with one easy movement, lifted her up bridal style.

Her weight, in all honesty, was a delight. He’d never lifted a woman before. Never. Not even to or from his bed. So this arrangement brought a good change for him.

And her warmth too when her body pressed against him. Such was it that a wicked grin crossed his face when a wild, unexpected but not unwelcomed thought surfaced.

She would make for a good cuddle under the bedsheets indeed.

With her face resting under the crook of his neck, her scent wafted through his nostrils strongly. His fangs ached again, wanting to sample more, but he scolded it, clenching his jaw shut to push the misbehaving enamels back.

Her welfare - that’s his top priority for now.

He passed the halls, the foyer, the stairs, the whole time of which he kept a close watch on Amanda for any sign of awakening.

As expected of a Master with the ability to wield the shadows, he moved about undetected by his subjects and relatives, even those who had sharp senses. What a bother it would be if they were to see him with a woman, and much worse a human.

At one point, during his travel to the west wing, Cord noticed Amanda cringe, her brows almost meeting hinting she was in discomfort. Her lips pressed thinly too and he heard her whimper in pain.

Whatever the cause of her unconscious reactions, he was damned sure it wasn't good. Like the time when he found her in chaos amidst in a deep sleep, bathed in the full moon's light.

What was she in turmoil of, he wanted to know. Badly. And to find that out was through questioning her again. This time, he expected her to answer. After all, she was indebted to him. He did show her his true self. Now it was time she do the same. A truth for a truth.

"Leave us, " was Cord's directive once he entered Amanda's chamber.

The two servants did so without question. Dayana, sensitive to her Mistress's needs, left a nightgown for her to wear folded neatly at the foot of the bed. Jerome closed the bedroom door for privacy but dutifully stood at the hallway, a shout away, just in case his Master needed him.

Cord arranged her in bed carefully, gently, taking special attention to placing her head on two stacked downy pillows. Tendrils of her hair immediately framed her face. He would have wanted to shove them up the pillow, but opted not to in the end as in doing so he'd fully expose her neck - something that he didn't want to happen. He didn't want his vampire side to take over and ruin this special moment. No. No way.

He sat at the edge of the bed, positioned himself to face her, and relished the scene before him.

With the chandelier's soft light, Amanda's disarming sleeping face illuminated with more clarity, especially with his eyesight temporarily restored. Her brows, nose, lips, even her ears; her hair, neck, arms and legs, shoulders, perfect collar bone; her cleavage which he sensed swelled for him earlier, her trim waist - every fucking detail he drank all in and made a precise drawing in his mind.

Everything was better than what his gray and white outlined imagination provided. So much better. And with this, he groaned internally suddenly feeling the faint stirrings under his pants. Blast it, a muscle just misbehaved.

He stood up frowning, not liking how it progressed.

Was he so long without a woman that he had this strong effect? Lust and sex wasn't always his problem before. He had plenty of that in his first years as a vampire. And even when he decided he'd abstain, choosing to avoid temptations in and out of the castle, he had survived for centuries with a hard resolve.

But now with Amanda, his male physiological response wanted to be sated.

Shit.

He clenched his fists and shook his head, battling on whether to remain in her room or not.

"Sleep well, Amanda. Let's see what happens tomorrow," Cord whispered and after a deep conflicted sigh, he disappeared into the shadows, deciding for a very cold shower.

***

"We may not be bound by blood, but we are family because we will it. Because we live in a common belief and we share the same ancient bond. We are connected. All of us."

Amanda's mother used to tell her that when she was small. It was the one lesson that was inculcated in her mind. To the bone. To every fiber of her being. She knew what it meant and how it signified the state of their life back then, in hiding, and how it signified her current state of life now, free.

Those words were the very last thing she remembered when she woke up gasping for air in the middle of her dream, or more like flashbacks of what she calls 'family' memories.

She had dreamed of them countless times before, but only now were they this graphic and detailed. Each agonizing wail, each blood splattering in the ground, each horrid bite marks in the neck were as real as the mattress she lay. The memories of anger too, sorrow, anguish, despair, and fear were remembered, and it pained her heart real good.

"Oh God," Amanda whimpered as she straightened to sit in the mattress, crinkling her brows and trying with great effort to haul in as much oxygen into her lungs. She palmed her face as tears already present when she slept dripped further from her eyes to her cheeks, making a small river down to her chest. It wet the top of the red dress instantaneously but that didn't bother her.

What bothered her most was the throbbing sore of her healed wrist from what she recalled as Cord's bite. As she drew her injured arm up for an examination, everything that happened last night came down to her like heavy rain.

His lips on her skin. All of her blood, from her head to her feet, draining and concentrating in that two pinpoint openings. The instant euphoric feeling she felt because of it. And the sucking motion of his tongue that felt so divine.

She wanted to cherish it. Keep it as a treasure.

But of course, she couldn't.

She couldn't just forget the promise of danger and death his fangs held.

His bite was the reason why the flashbacks were so vivid. His kind was the reason why she was left alone. His nature was the very thing that her mother warned about to avoid at all costs.

"He is a vampire..." she uttered with a shaking voice. "God, he is a vampire." And her eyes widened in fear with the stark realization. "He is a dark one!"

How could she have not known? With his hypersensitive senses, his night-shift/day-shift employees, the little slips of words that he spoke, the semi-clotted blood in the throne room's fridge, they were enough to tell her something wasn't right. Why was she so blind?

And to top it all, the murder case itself. The culprit and his victim. It wasn't just a normal criminal case of the police. It was a supernatural one. No wonder the Master was so adamant about fishing out information from her. And no wonder the culprit used a gun to shot the victim dead in the neck. He may not want to raise suspicions and advertise to the world that vampires weren't just imaginations of man.

Could it be then? Could it be that the two - the Master and the murderer - were working together? She had great belief that they were. Vampires always, always look after their own kind.

"I have to leave this place, " Amanda murmured to herself.

Though wobbly, she stood up, clenching her fists. At first, she wasn't sure where she was but upon careful inspection of the surroundings near her - from the coffee table to the laptop she placed in the bedside table - she realized she was in her bedroom.

How thoughtful was the person who brought her here, she thought, but she didn't have time to thank him or her for doing it. What was solely in her mind was to escape, leave the castle, and fast. Very fast.

Sighting her white sneakers, she hurriedly slipped them on and dashed out to the balcony forgetting everything: her laptop, clothes, cellphone, and other necessary items. They weren't as important to her any longer if her safety was on the line.

She was greeted with a gloomy early morning when she opened the glass door. Angry, black clouds effectively hid the smiling sun. The wind gushed so strongly that her hair whipped from side to side.

But the atmosphere didn't concern her nor did the height of the drop from the balcony to the garden below.

Yes. She was going to jump to escape and nothing, not even the fear of cracking her leg bones would stop her.

After climbing up the balustrade, she counted to three before jumping, and when she did jump, her legs didn't give way. It was as steady and sturdy as it was before.

With her heart pumping fast and fear already climbing up her throat, Amanda sprinted like a gazelle. She didn't risk a glance when she crossed the back garden and felt a looming stare from one of the castle windows. She just moved forward, passing a man-made pond, towards a grassy clearing, but stopped short when suddenly she saw a shadowy figure ahead.

Her heart even spiked up a bigger beat.

Whoever this was, she knew it not the Master of the House. Although this unknown man had a lesser dark aura than Cord's, he was still someone to be concerned with especially knowing that she was in a vampire's lair.

His stance, one foot forward, hands clenched, and his eyes a glow of red, were more than enough to give her a red flag.

Amanda stepped backward, hitching a breath, and blinking fast. He reminded her of the flashbacks she had. A shadow lurking first and then, the attack. Next, blood splashing everywhere, followed ultimately by the neck getting slashed open. Despite her being a strong woman, this and the other gruesome memories that linked to vampires told her not to clash with them. It always, always ended up with death.

"No..." she murmured, lips trembling, "Leave me alone!"

The man continued to advance on her way, stepping in a steady, relaxed fashion as if he wasn't in a hurry. Although the environment was dark, Amanda could still make out a pointy grin from him and damn, it was enough to sink her heart.

She stepped backward again and again, closer to the pond, not knowing what to do. She couldn't return to her room and she couldn't shout for help. Clearly, she was in a checkmate.

***

"I was told that you invited Ms. O'Malley to dinner later, " Cord asked whilst sitting in his throne. He had his right hand on top of his panther's forehead while the other rested on the armrest. The way he sat, it looked relaxed and without worries, but deep inside he knew better.

He just had to find a way to occupy himself, make him forget the impulse to return to Amanda's room until his blindness returned.

Summoning his so-called cousin, Heather, and berating her would be one good way for it.

“Yes, what of it?” the one asked replied, looking tired from after a feeding and a gym session. Her right hand perched on the sofa’s head while the other on her hips.

“Cancel it, ” Cord stated point-blank, staring at her direction even though he now wore the blindfold.

Heather’s brow immediately lifted.

“Hmm, I knew you would order that but no, I’ll have to decline, ” she said.

Cord sighed, putting his impatience at bay.

“Heather, she isn’t a blood donor.”

“I know. She is your most valued guest. Rest assured that I won’t harm her. I just want to befriend her.”

“You mean, you just want to play with her to get to me.”

“Oh com’n Cord, ” she twisted her lips and rolled her eyes. “You know my hatred for you had been doused long ago. I accept what I have become now. I enjoy it even. More than when I was still human. I just like the woman’s attitude. There’s something in her that drew me in.”

“I know, ” Cord replied in a hush and this earned a grin from Heather.

“I know you know. You are our vampire master after all. Cursed as you are, you have the finest of senses. You-” she stopped and stepped backward, taken aback when Cord suddenly stood up, looking alarmed.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” she asked, confused.

“Amanda...” Cord trailed off.

He tuned Heather out of his attention and directed all of his focus on Amanda’s erratic heartbeat. The continuous thunder may have muffled them a little but still, he was able to locate her and once he realized she was no longer inside the castle, he, throwing out his mask of indifference, immediately panicked.

“Shit!”

Chapter 19 - In the Master's Chamber

Using his ability, Cord disappeared from the throne room and materialized to where he felt Amanda's weakening presence. Liquid shadows first enveloped him, from the foot to the head, and it dispersed, the moment he touched the grassy ground.

He scanned from side to side, trying to find any traces of the woman: her golden-brown locks maybe or just a silhouette of her body, but he found none.

Seething in anger, he directed his focus on her heartbeat again. He found it somewhere near the vicinity, very faint and decreasing, but the exact location of it was a mystery to him.

Where was she?

The biter who had the audacity to attack her had already fled. Cord couldn't feel his presence anymore. But he would have wanted for the biter to stay, just so that he could exact revenge and tear his neck apart.

Aware that time was ticking, Cord continued to scan the area. His blindness didn't even deter him. He looked and looked, making outlines as clear as he can until he found an oddness in the pond.

Little waves disturbed its peacefulness and from its murky waters, he noticed a discoloration in it. He couldn't really say what color it was, but he had great belief it was red. Blood.

Clenching his fists, he raced towards the pond, hesitating not a second before he plunged into ten feet of water.

Once under, Cord found the woman he was looking for. Amanda's backside hit the bottom. Her face was angled up, hands and legs were in a stiff position, devoid of any signs of life. No pockets of air could be seen clinging in her nose. No clues that she was still alive.

Cord wondered where the red came from and there he saw it, in Amanda's left shoulder, two wounds which oozed her precious blood. At first, it looked to be a laceration, but upon closer inspection, there were pinpoint marks at the end.

His jaw muscles twitched.

Strongly, he propelled his legs towards her and in mad desperation, he stretched his arm to grab her elbow.

There was a quick pang of guilt in Cord when he felt the rigidness of Amanda's body. Whatever happened to her earlier, she didn't deserve it.

Why was he too lax? He was the Master of the House. He was supposed to give her the ultimate protection. But he failed in that aspect big time.

Temporarily shoving the thoughts aside, Cord embraced her, pressed her chest firmly against him with one arm and the other guided them towards the surface.

"Breathe Amanda. Breathe for me," he stated through clenched teeth once he lay her on the cemented part of the pool. By this time, heavy rain had indeed poured down the land. The wetness was enough to stain red the surrounding ground due to Amanda's bloody wound. It was never a good situation when inside a vampire estate, but to hell be it, voiced Cord in his thoughts.

He just had to save this woman's life, and quick.

Kneeling beside her, he straightened his arms and placed his palms on top the other against her chest, ready to do a basic life support maneuver for the first time.

He did five cycles, putting enough pressure in his palms, the whole time he shouted for her to breathe, but when he still got no response from Amanda, he hissed.

He pulled his blindfold out, eyes immediately glowing red, and in one swift move, pressed his mouth against hers.

Such was the feel of her lips. Plump. Soft. Full of life. But Cord didn't linger on the thought. It was just improper considering their present situation.

He pinched her nose, tilted her chin, and with one exhale, gave her the breath of life. He did this twice and thereafter proceeded to pumping her chest again.

"Come on Amanda, breathe!" he shouted.

Miraculously, Amanda coughed, spitting out water and breathing hard. She opened her eyes for a moment, locking it with Cord's worried ones. There was a flicker of fear at first, then anger, and then a rare emotion Cord had yet to understand for himself.

"Co...rd," she spoke, weak but still clear.

He brushed her wet cheeks and opened his mouth to respond, but then stopped when he saw her lose consciousness.

***

"She is doing fine Milord. Thanks to you, she was able to survive the drowning," Lady Granger explained as soon as she emerged from the other side of the room. Her neatly tied bun was slightly in disarray, the sleeves of her blouse were drawn up to the elbow and her eyes showed a little bit of weariness.

It had been six hours of nonstop labor since the Master burst into the kitchen door of the servants with Amanda on his arms. Luckily, the governess was there doing her early morning routine. Cord didn't need to issue commands. Lady Granger and her team of servants were quick to do first aid on her and that included changing her damp, blood-soaked cocktail dress, sponge-bathing her with warm soapy water until dirt and grime disappeared, monitoring her, and providing her a warm, comfortable bed to lay.

And that said bed was in the Master's chamber.

The governess didn't even question or think twice placing Amanda there. It was their Master's stern command and it warranted no explanation.

"And the bite wound?" Cord asked, setting his mouth into a grim line thereafter. It was imperative he ask that. His kind, when they successfully drain their victim's blood, leave bite marks. It doesn't heal, unlike when they just take an enough fill in their bellies.

"It is now healed, " Lady Granger answered, cognizant of that fact. "It seems the biter wasn't able to suck her dry. She must have stopped it on time. She's a fighter, Milord."

Cord released a relieved sigh. "That she is."

He stepped inside his bedroom wanting to see the woman's condition for himself, but stopped abruptly and turned to face the governess again, "For now, you are dismissed. I'll see to Amanda's needs. I'll ring the bell when I need something."

"Noted, Milord, " the governess bowed. "Are there particular things you want us to do?"

Cord nodded.

"Yes, and that is to be vigilant. Keep an eye on all the biters in this roof, especially Trace. I don't want to sound prejudiced, but his previous troubles led me to think he is the one who attacked Amanda. Report to me anything that is odd."

"As you command, Milord." Lady Granger did a curtsy and thereafter left the receiving room.

Cord reached for the double doors and closed it. He turned around, directed his sights on Amanda, and found her sleeping comfortably under his duvet, using his white pillows, and inside his four-poster bed that was lavishly dressed with semitransparent black drapes.

Deep inside, he wanted her like this. Just last night, as perverted and ungentlemanly as it would seem, he had fantasized about her pinned down in this very mattress, his hands steadying her face for his passionate kisses while his erection thrust deeply inside her. He imagined her writhe in passion, moan his name, and bite his lips like a fiery woman that he knew her to be.

He would be a fucking happy man if they were in that circumstance - ready to release passion and untold pleasure under the sheets - but she was injured and possibly in threat of fever and infection from ingesting unclean water. Such thoughts of entwined legs and ragged breaths just weren't proper.

So, with a long sigh, he ceased the stirrings under his pants for the second time. After all, the reason why he chose to situate her in his bed was to ensure her safety and not to ravish her.

Striding closer to the edge of the mattress, Cord surveyed the damage visible in her left shoulder. Like Lady Granger had said, it has now healed. There was just a purplish discoloration left from the two pinpoint marks and a blue streak in the lacerations. It looked obviously different from the red, fresh ones earlier.

With the back of his palm, he felt for her body temperature. It was normal. Good. To his relief. But only for now. There was no telling the future. She might climb into a high fever later, or convulse just like any normal human he knew.

His fist tightened again realizing this.

"I apologize for not rescuing you on time. I shouldn't have left your room last night, " he whispered to the unconscious Amanda. "But why were you in that place?" he followed, confused as to the circumstances that led to her attack. "Were you dragged there? Were you taken out of the room? Or did you...try to escape from me?"

The last question came out dry, but it somehow pierced him well. It was a good possibility. A plausible one. She wore her sneakers after all. If she were indeed forcefully taken out of her bedroom, the biter wouldn't have the common sense to let her wear the damn shoe just for hygiene purposes. Amanda must have gone out of the castle on her own.

"Although I can't blame you if you did try to escape from me." There was a hint of sadness in his voice. "I showed you who I truly am. Even though you have a backbone of iron in you, you wouldn't want to be associated with me - a monster in disguise."

He brushed a stray strand of her hair gently and released a defeated sigh.

"Just help me find your attacker and unmask the rogue biter in the Circuit and I will free you from me, Amanda. Just do that. Just...do that."

***

Two days passed and still, there was no sign of Amanda waking. She had whimpered in her sleep, managed to get out a few syllables like 'no' and 'stop' but never really able to open her eyes wide. At least, however, she didn't hit a fever. Or any other downside of getting almost drowned.

This was what Cord held for hope. He wasn't one to worry, never had worried for others even since he was still human. Although he disliked it, Amanda, in all her loveliness and life, somehow managed to make him that and he, seeing no point in struggling, surrendered himself to it.

It was on the evening of the second day when Cord heard a rapping of the door. He didn't request for assistance nor was he expecting an audience so he wondered who could it be?

"Come in, " he bade whilst sitting in his high back chair. He had occupied this furniture for the same count of days, preferring to sit than to lie next to Amanda and risk his few strands of control. He had tried that once, last night, but it didn't bode well with him.

Her weight on his mattress was just too much to bear. It was taunting him to get closer and touch her, feel her warmth and steady pulse. And kiss her. Really kiss her. Feel her lips once again. For the very first time, no thoughts of biting her emerged, which was already a miracle for he was after all a vampire. Just seeing that she was slowly regaining her health was enough.

"Excuse my interruption Sire but a friend of Madame O'Malley is here, " the Head Majordomo informed right after he opened the double doors.

"A friend?" Cord's brow rose. Instantly, he thought of that Threvelli man, aware that he had romantic feelings for Amanda.

"Mr. Noman Asghar, Sire. He has been demanding to see her since twenty minutes ago."

A small smile crossed Cord's lips, pleased that it wasn't the suitor.

"Then let him in. I'll entertain him in the drawing room."

"Right away Sire." Jerome closed the doors and left.

Cord stood up, sighing, but before he left, he had his shadows envelope the four-poster bed with Amanda inside.

***

"Alright, " Noman, standing and with his arms akimbo, shot a stern look at Cord when he waltzed inside the room with a cane in hand and sat on a solo sofa chair near the fireplace.

Though the black panther was present beside him, Noman didn't cower at all. His resolve was just unbreakable.

"I know something happened to my friend and I demand to know right now! She hasn't contacted me for two days and she's not logging in her Skype account. I hadn't received text messages and calls from her and she hadn't replied to my messages."

Cord, although amused of Noman's rant, shot a curious brow at him. "You know where your friend is housed?" he said, knowing that Amanda's whereabouts were supposed to be a secret.

Noman sighed and rolled his eyes. "I know, she told me in one of our video chats days ago."

"You could get a scolding from Chief Moretti if she finds out about this you know, " Cord pointed out, intimidating him.

"So don't tell her, " Noman suggested. "I just want to see my friend. I'm worried. What has happened to her?"

"She was...attacked, " carefully, Cord enlightened.

"Attacked?!" Noman's eyes widened. He stepped forward, closer to him, but stopped abruptly when he heard the panther growl.

"Yes, she was attacked by a...drunkard." Cord's voice thinned to a whisper. He, of course, didn't want his unexpected visitor to know that he was inside a vampire den.

"Pshh, a drunkard?" Noman held his tummy to stifle a laugh. "That sounds about right. Your castle just has a lot of booze lying around. But, you don't have good security? Why was she attacked? I thought you are her knight-and-shining armor?"

Now that's a name he hadn't been called since he walked the earth.

Standing up, he huffed and tapped his cane against the floor. "Well, do you want to see your best friend or not?" he asked, opting not to answer his questions.

Noman smiled. "Yes, of course, I would."

***

With the pet tagging along, they traveled the length of the hallways to the Master's chamber on the third floor. It was supposed to be off-limits to all, only chosen people were allowed, but this time Cord made an exception.

Once there, he stayed in the receiving room and summoned back his shadows before letting Noman enter the bedroom.

Noman, in the other hand, showed a great deal of determination but felt nervous inside, taken aback of the grand surroundings he was in. Questions began to fill his mind as to why Amanda was placed in the Master's chamber when in fact she was just a guest. He didn't have difficulty conjuring up an answer to this, however.

He basically assumed that the two - the Master and his best friend - had already shared an intimate time together.

Which had him grinning in giddiness.

His grin however was short-lived right after he saw his best friend lying unconscious in the mattress.

“Oh, Cait...” he stated and rushed to her side. “You sure know how to attract danger huh? Look at us. Isn’t this ironic? You first came to this castle to check on my welfare and now, I’m doing the same to you.”

He brushed her soft curls that fanned the pillow and sighed. He didn’t expect her to answer but hoped she’d be able to sense his presence.

“She has no fever or any colds. I believe she is just resting, ” from the door, Cord informed. His blindfold was still on but he abandoned his cane in the receiving room. “The...drunkard managed to push her in the castle pond.” Or so he imagined. “I had to save her from drowning.”

Noman’s forehead creased whilst looking at him. “But she knows how to swim.”

“Even so, ” Cord replied. “Let’s wait for her to clarify everything. We can’t just assume for ourselves.”

Silence punctuated the room after that. Both he and Noman watched the rise and fall of Amanda’s chest, wondering what really happened during the attack.

After minutes had passed, it was Cord who broke the silence first, cognizant of the time.

“Well, I’ll leave you to your goodbyes. You can stay in the castle, but I can’t have you sleeping here. This is my chamber after all.”

Noman inwardly giggled, a wild thought popped in his mind of how romantic the Vitalis Master was. Surely, he was head-over-heels for his best friend. “Yes, I know. Just give me five more minutes to have a one-sided chat with Sleeping Beauty, ” he stated and tilted his shoulder up.

Cord didn’t nod but he left, allowing five minutes before he could have the woman alone for himself again.

***

“You sure are lucky, damn you, ” Noman stated once they were alone again. “First Matteo and then, the Vitalis Master.”

He stared at her whilst grinning and then shifted his butt up to take out something from his coat pocket.

It was a cylinder-shaped box, thin and wrapped in violet suede.

"By the way, I have this gift from Matteo. He gave me this just in case you'd be permitted to drop by the apartment. I guess it is timely that I visited here."

He opened it and pulled out a necklace.

The chain was thick, made of silver, and it had minute engravings of weird shapes in it. What was striking the most with the jewelry was its pendant hanging in the center. It was an amethyst stone.

"Well, ain't this pretty?" he asked, looking at the stone. "This would compliment you a lot, Cait. The stone's color is the same as half the shade in your eyes."

With a snort, he bent and hooked the necklace in her neck.

"There, beautiful."

The amethyst settled neatly in her cleavage. Its color showed a stark difference from her white nightgown - a swirl of magical purples, blue and white.

For a moment, Noman saw a quick spark from it and then a slight change in color to a red, but he shrugged his shoulders thinking that it was just the flame's effect from the fireplace of the room.

"Well, I hope to see you tomorrow Cait. Rest well tonight."

After planting her a kiss in the forehead, he stood up and then walked out of the bedroom.

"You done?" Cord asked when he sensed Noman's presence. He was sitting near another fireplace of his chamber with Jerome standing behind him.

"Yep, " Noman nodded, putting one hand in his hips.

"I'll have Jerome assist you to your room. Would you want another one or would you like to occupy Amanda's which was yours before?"

"The previous one please, " he answered, "I like it there because she has a laptop I can use for my tweeting."

"Very well, " Cord replied and then flicked a finger midair, a signal for Jerome to take. "Have a pleasant night, Mr. Asghar."

"Same to you, Mr. Vitalis."

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Once both of the men left, Cord went back to his bed chamber, pulling his blindfold out. He saw the necklace around Amanda's neck but didn't bother on taking it out. He just stared at it and found that for a stone, it emitted a bright swirling shade in the center, but he couldn't determine what.

Thinking nothing of it, he proceeded to his chair, returning to his earlier duty of guarding her.

Strong was the temptation to lie next to her this evening. With the possibility of her waking up tomorrow, he expected that this would be their last night together. He would have wanted to take advantage of that, slip his arm under her waist and cuddle her close, but extinguished the idea before he could even execute it.

It'd be better to avoid the woman, he thought. Try to create as much gap as he possibly could.

But that night, when he was surprisingly in a deep sleep for a vampire, Amanda awoke and tore that gap down.

She left the mattress and climbed up his chair to straddle him, her face just inches away from his. Both of her hands were pressed flat against his chest for some time until they climbed up to his neck and assumed a strangling position.

Chapter 20 - A Most Dangerous Position

Hypnotized?

Under a spell?

Or tied on invisible strings?

That's what it somehow looked like when Amanda stood up and strode towards the sleeping Master.

Her eyes were a deep violet - the brown shade in them gone. There were swirls of red in the center appearing alive just like the waves in the sea and the clouds in the sky.

She had no mission in mind. Nothing at all except to....

"Kill him..." she voiced in her thoughts as she stared at Cord with anger. "I'll kill him..."

Like a cat undetected in the night, she moved fluidly, kneeling and drawing her legs apart to sit on his lap. Her weight, surprisingly, didn't even wake him.

She placed both palms against his heart first feeling for a steady beating there but found none. This didn't stop her. It only made her narrow her eyes at him and poised to lock her hands on his neck.

"Rexcord Alexander Vitalis, I'll bestow on you the gift of death," she declared - her voice creating a lulling echo - and then tightened her grip.

She yielded a choked response from Cord upon waking. Surprise was clearly visible in the reflection of his eyes once he saw her straddling and strangling him.

In reality, the lack of air doesn't actually kill a vampire. They didn't even need oxygen in the first place. But there was something in Amanda's fingertips that screamed of danger. Something caustic, like holy water in a demon's flesh, or something electric charged, like a nuclear plant in the middle of an explosion.

Her strength was surprisingly beyond what was expected in a woman. She held onto his neck like a vice-like grip all the while Cord attempted to subdue her.

He grabbed a hold on Amanda's wrist and yanked them away from his neck. It failed though.

She fought back, pressing her weight even more onto his lap and locked her knees against his thigh.

“Aman...da, ” Cord managed to breathe her name. He clenched his teeth and stared up at her with the same amount of anger in his eyes. “Ama...nda!”

“Don’t struggle Rexcord, ” Amanda replied, pressing her forehead against his. Her aura spilled of sensuality. She looked like a vixen with the straps of her nightgown down and her cleavage in full view. A vixen not to give pleasure to a man though, but to offer a vindictive death.

She licked the bridge of his nose - tasted a little bit of his sweat in the process - and pressed her fingers deeper into his throat, making permanent indents on it. “For everything you have done, you deserve to die!”

But the Master was fed up.

Using his supernatural strength, Cord quickly stood from the high back chair and flipped them both onto the king-sized bed. Holding her waist, he pushed her against it, and though she still clutched his throat, he was clearly at an advantage.

Amanda, seeing this, retaliated. Hissing, she wrapped her legs around his hips and turned them around, this time with her above him, straddling him again. The nightgown bundled up in her hips, slender legs making a bountiful show. It would have looked like they were having a heated fuck*ing to an untrained eye, but no. No.

“Die!” she shouted, eyes welling up with mixed tears of anger and an unknown emotion. Her thumbs found his Adam’s apple, constricted it, and heightened the caustic energy on her fingertips.

Black tendrils began to take form along the neck veins of Cord. It traveled slowly to the surrounding areas, leaving a trail of what looked like his petrified skin. She wickedly grinned at the progress of it, released a succubus-like throaty chuckle, and licked her bottom lips in pleasure.

Cord, witnessing this, would have had a hard-on. Heck, in all honesty, he was already having a hard-on just being like this with her, but sensing real danger, he responded by hurling himself up and shoving Amanda under him again. He secured her shoulders with his hands, did the same on her legs with his knees. He brought his weight down to her, body to body until her nipples touched his chest, only but his shirt and her nightgown of flimsy fabric stood as an obstruction.

“Aman...da!” His voice sounded raspy and choked. He looked at her with eyes glowing red, trying his best not to summon his shadows to effectively incapacitate her.

It would have been easy for him to do that, or to throw her into the window and out the castle, but he didn’t. Even though his immortal life was at threat, he still was cognizant of her health and safety.

But why was she behaving like this in the first place? he asked himself.

The answer to that came as a surprise to him.

The necklace.

The swirls of red inside it somehow coordinated with the swirls of red in Amanda's eyes. In Cord's blind point-of-view though, those reds were a bright white that he knew weren't normal.

So, without waiting or looking for more evidence, Cord released her shoulder, grabbed the chain of the necklace, snapped it once, and threw the object on his left - making a clicking sound when it hit the wall.

Instantly, the red in Amanda's eyes vanished, and the shade returned to her normal violet-brown. She inhaled deeply and released her grip on Cord's throat - her hands turning into fists in between them.

"Get. Off. Me, " she ordered with quiet menace. Her eyes, though normal it was, still emitted half of the immense anger she showed seconds ago.

Cord set his mouth in a hard line.

"Not until you explain to me exactly what had just happened."

Amanda snorted. "Mister Vitalis, just so you know, I don't take orders from a vampire."

"Hmmm, you were so pliant on calling me by my real name earlier, what happened to that?" he stated, a sparkle of teasing happened by chance in his eyes. He could never forget how she just called him his full name when in fact nobody knew of that except his long-deceased human parents. "And just so you know, this vampire in your front saved your sexy little ass in the pond. I should expect a better show of gratitude from you, not repaying it by attempting to kill me." He tried to brush a finger along her flushed cheeks, but Amanda awarded him a pointed glare.

He stopped midway, but only to quickly grab a hold of both her wrists and place them above her head.

"No!" she squealed and squirmed under him, but his bulk above her and his strength practically was like a jail made of iron bars.

"Tell me what you are now or so help me, I'll do so many things to you, you'll only moan in pleasure under me, " he commanded, the sexual innuendo in his words didn't sound like a tease. His glassy reddish-green eyes lingered on her face first, until he couldn't keep it from dipping down to her free show of breast. It was at times like this that he wished he wasn't blind. He'd definitely love to see how pink her nipples were.

To Amanda, she didn't even notice that one hard nub peeked, not until she saw it in the reflection of his eyes. She shifted, arched her back to successfully hide the delicious view under her nightgown, and threw Cord a look of disgust.

"You're despicable!" she spat, clenching her teeth. "All of you!"

"All of us?" Cord's brows twitched. "Care to explain that please."

"You!" she widened her eyes at him. "Vampires! Dark ones! You use us. Make us love you. And then kill us! Take our life essences!"

She pertained to her 'family' and the past memories she recalled from her nightmare. It was already an obvious clue for Cord to discover what she truly was, but it seemed that he missed it.

"I'm the Master of all your so-called vampires, Amanda. As far as I know, I prohibited killing humans a long time ago, " he answered, misinterpreting her words. "That's the reason why I've been trying to ask you about the murder you witnessed in the Circuit. It involves one of my kind. I want to punish him. End his worthless immortal life and make it an example to others."

"You?" Amanda's voice rose a decibel higher, clearly in disbelief. "Huh! You'd actually do that? You said so yourself you are their Master. Aren't you supposed to look after your own? Don't lie to me, Mister Vitalis. I know for a fact that the culprit is conspiring with you."

"Conspiring with me?" Cord grinned. "Don't make me laugh Amanda. It doesn't mean because I'm a dark one, I'll do atrocious things or command it."

In the back of his head though, he knew he was lying. He had done cruel, savage things back in his first years of being turned, especially when he was still on a rampage, cold-hearted and merciless. But that was then. Long-buried in his treasure of regrets. He had changed now. Or more like mellowed down, done with being a vampire.

"I'm different, " he continued when Amanda remained silent. "I saved your life remember? If I don't-" he paused, trying to pick out the exact word before freeing it, "care for you, you would have been six feet under by now, drained of blood because of your attacker."

"My attacker..." Amanda echoed softly. For a moment, there were pictures that flashed in her head, scenes of that dark gloomy morning in the pond, but she blinked them out of her consciousness, rather too distasteful to even remember. She frowned and snorted.

"Don't expect me to thank you, " she said. Vampires didn't deserve her gratitude from the start.

Cord merely grinned again.

"No, I won't. What we are doing right now is already good payment for me, " he cited. One hand gripped her wrist even more when Amanda unconsciously shifted.

Their bodies were just too close. She could feel his breath touching her face, while Cord could no longer deny the heat that moved in between their contacting legs.

“You’re blushing. You like this position huh?” he asked, mildly teasing, which produced a sneer from Amanda.

“Don’t jest.”

“Ahh, but Amanda. I like how you lay in my bed, under me.”

“Let. Me. Go, ” she replied, highlighting every word.

But Cord shook his head and tsked.

“Like I said, not until you tell me who you really are.”

Amanda, fed up, rolled her eyes, and released an exasperated breath. He had shown her the truth about his nature, it was now time she does the same, and she was clearly aware of that. After all, she did agree with his dare.

“It’s not what I am, but what my ‘family’ once was, ” she started with eyes showing mild anger and sadness. “My family had been in hiding because of you - the dark ones. You killed them, one by one, take their life essences. They were forced to act like normal humans and stay like that for all eternity. My mother always told me to avoid your kind, but she never had the chance to teach me how to spot one. Hence, probably, my oversight when it came to you. Dammit, I should have known you were one of them and even their master.”

After that, Cord’s eyes widened for a fraction of a second.

“Don’t tell me you’re-”

“Yes. I am, ” Amanda interrupted, lifting her chin up to at least show pride instead of fear. There, he had finally known what she really was. What would happen now then? Would he drain her life essence too? Take whatever ability she had that she herself doesn’t know of?

“Huh, that probably explains your reaction to the full moon and my inability to beguile you, ” Cord calculated. “But still, that doesn’t answer why your blood had an effect on me.”

And speaking of blood, his thirst came alive again, wanting to be sated but he successfully ignored it.

“Beguile me? My blood’s effect? Full moon?!” Amanda shouted in panic. “Had you been fucking with me all this time?!”

Cord smirked, relishing her choice of word.

“To put it bluntly, yes, ” he answered with honesty, “But I’d prefer a different definition of the word fuck, Amanda.”

Once again, his eyes wandered on her generous bosom, ripe and ready if so he wishes to dip further his head and claim it.

Amanda saw this. Though she knew he was blind, it didn’t take away that nagging feeling that he could see. That he was undressing her with his damned eyes.

“You’re despicable, ” she uttered low.

“Oh, but that’s already established, Sweetness. What else do you need to say to me?”

“You’re a vampire. You can never be trusted. Let me go and I will leave this place immediately.”

A memory crossed in Cord’s mind after hearing this.

“Hmmm, just like what you did two days ago?”

“Two days?” A flicker of disbelief appeared on her face. Had she been out that long? That couldn’t possibly be.

“As I said twice now, I rescued you from death, ” Cord supplied, stamping this on her head as much as possible. “I swam into the pond to retrieve you, Amanda. And most probably, your attacker left you unfinished, in haste, because of me. You should thank me for it. But if you hadn’t left your room that night, we wouldn’t be in this position now.”

Amanda clenched her teeth. Hating that she was now indebted to him, she huffed out loud, “Thank you, okay? There! I said it, so now, let me go!”

“No, ” Cord grounded easily. “You’ll stay here.”

“Are you mad?! This castle is infected with vampires! You! My enemy! You would have me turn to a meal?!”

“No, I won’t allow it. You’re min-” he paused, cleared his throat, and smoothly picked up where he left, “You are my guest. They won’t harm you.”

“And you wouldn’t?” Amanda managed a mocking smile. “Even though you saved my life, you still have that vampire savageness in you.”

Cord’s brows twitched. Clearly, she had hit a nerve there.

“Hmmm, point taken, and I reckon you wouldn’t try to kill me too? Just minutes ago, you were so bent on doing that.” He bobbed his Adam’s apple, feeling for a sore there still. Though the petrified skin had already disappeared, it left a numb sensation on the affected area.

“That’s-” Amanda aimed to reason, but stopped. Her eyes flitted down to the healing indents on his neck, looking lost whilst remembering all she did to him in clear detail, and the charged energy she undeniably felt that time. “I...I can’t explain it myself.”

“Huh, then I suggest you better ask your best friend how he got that necklace for you.” He pointed his eyes at the aforementioned object, staring at it with curiosity as the swirls disappeared.

Amanda did the same, turning her head to the side, but her reaction was different from his. It was one of surprise, realizing it was the amethyst pendant in her dreams.

“You weren’t yourself when you wore that, ” Cord stated, pulling Amanda out of her surprise.

“I’m...I’m aware of that Mister Vitalis, ” she answered.

“Cord, ” he corrected, and like a bipolar, his mood suddenly shifted from that of a serious man to a playful, teasing version of him.

And just the same, Amanda’s rage returned.

“Get off me then and I will use that name, ” she bargained.

The corner of Cord’s mouth curled upward.

“You know, I’m too lazy to stand up, ” he declared, lowering his body on her.

“Then, I will have to shove you with all my might!” she hastily replied whilst squirming, but she was already too late.

“Cord!” she gasped, realizing he had just pressed his mouth on her neck. Her heart picked up a faster beat. She clenched her eyes shut and tightened her jaw.

“If you’re going to bite me there, then so help me I’m going to do everything I can to kill you, ” she promised.

Goosebumps immediately erupted in her skin when his wet tongue grazed the plane of her neck. It was sensual at first - shooting pleasurable tingles in her belly down to her womanhood, purposeful the next, and then it abruptly stopped. Because of this, there arose in her a conflict of liking it versus loathing it.

“You licked the bridge of my nose earlier, ” he reminded, whispering it in her ear. “I’m only returning the favor. But worry not, as much as I wanted to, I won’t bite you. You don’t know how much you worried me that time, Amanda. Thinking that you were almost drained of blood. I’d be too heartless if I’ll suck what remained in your body even though I know you are still recuperating.”

It wasn't Amanda's expectation, but yes, Cord shifted again, released his hold on her wrist, and embraced her tightly - her body arching up in the process.

Her breath hitched.

"But really, all quarrels aside between our kind, I'm relieved to see you still alive."

Chapter 21 - A Disaster On The Way

Amanda and Cord had basically dueled for dominion earlier, trying to be the person to get on top of the other. Skin contact was already established.

She should have known then that he was different from other vampires, but only now, when Cord embraced her, their bodies pressed so close no gap was visible, that she noticed one pertinent detail about him.

Contrary to popular belief, Cord actually felt warm.

Warm.

He was as warm as she was and damn, it actually felt good.

She hadn't been embraced like this before. It was with so much passion that it weakened her anger. She couldn't deny that it tugged a string in her heart, no matter how she trained it to be as dead as possible.

She knew that vampires always, always weren't supposed to be trusted, but with the Vitalis Master, she wondered if she could make an exception.

"Cord, you-you can let go of me now, " Amanda stated, her hands stiffened midair, deliberating on pushing him.

The latter inhaled deeply, probably basking on her scent, she mused. He had done this many times, only now did she realize it was a vampire pattern.

"I will, " Cord answered, though he still tightened his embrace, "but stay, Amanda. Stay in my bed. Sleep here until the sun greets you."

Amanda's mouth partly dropped after hearing it. "I have my own bedroom, you see."

"I know, but I take it upon myself to protect you." He released her finally and went to stare at her with grave eyes. "I'm sure you already know it, but your life is in danger. Your attacker might come back to finish you."

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "I don't think that staying in your bed protects me from that."

Cord sighed. "True, but you together with me is."

His gaze fell on her lips, two luscious mounts that he wanted swollen with his kisses. He wandered to the dip of her neckline too, which under the moonlit night showed just how much of a bewitching woman she was. Her delectable curves just made him crave to run his hands on them.

Amanda felt aware of his perusal. She cleared her throat and unconsciously darted her tongue out, wetting the bottom.

With this, Cord hastily climbed down the mattress and diverted his face onto the drapery above his head, counting to three to control himself from kissing her lips.

“My shadows around you keep danger at bay, ” he continued, his tall frame towering her.

“No, ” Amanda shook her head. “I can’t possibly stay in your chamber forever, Cord! I have a life to live too. You can’t jail me here. Me staying in your castle is already enough!”

“Just for this night, please, ” he negotiated, looking at her once again. “Just so that this argument would end. Don’t worry, I’ll be staying in the receiving room. I won’t crawl on you.”

Amanda suppressed a laugh. “Huh, sounds very reassuring.” But like him, she was also tired of arguing, so she surrendered, reaching for the duvet and arranging it to cover her legs.

She thought he’d exit then. They practically didn’t have any more issues to discuss for the time being. But when she looked up again, he was still on his spot, staring intently at her.

“What? Have you changed your mind?” she asked, suddenly hopeful.

Cord shook his head and half-smiled. “Clever of you to say that, but no.” He turned around and stalked to the doorway. “Have a pleasant dream, Amanda.”

She flashed her teeth to mock him. “Sorry, but I won’t say the same to you. You basically lack dreams.”

“Hmm, says who?” Cord paused in the doorway, looking at her over the shoulder. “Those humans who weaved false stories about us?”

Amanda shrugged her shoulders.

“We aren’t undead, Amanda. Just lack of heartbeat. We can still dream or...even have nightmares.”

And just like that, Cord left with a soft shut of the double doors leaving Amanda speechless.

How much truth does the popular belief of vampires hold? She now questioned every single one of them. It would be great to use this knowledge to her advantage. Hold this as leverage if and only if she’d face another precarious situation with one of them, like her attacker for example. That day in the pond may have been so gloomy and the man moved so quickly, but she knew, she knew he was a vampire. Her healed but sore fang marks in the shoulder were considered undeniable evidence.

With Cord out, the bedroom somehow looked barren. Amanda couldn’t be so sure if she was happy or not with his exit. True, his presence made her feel uncomfortable, but like many of their engagements in the past, he also made her utterly complete.

She could never tell why but hoped that he could.

Another truth for another time, she thought and lay supine in the mattress whilst releasing a deep sigh and closed her eyes.

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Sitting in his throne was a better option than staying in his bedroom with Amanda still inside. Cord promised not to crawl on her, but after staying for quite some time in the receiving room just hearing her calm heartbeat, he began to regret his words.

So, in the end, he commanded his liquid shadows to protect her, make a dome around her again whilst he left his chamber for a much-needed respite.

He summoned one biter there, waited for a couple of minutes until that biter waltzed inside the throne hall with a hard expression on his face.

“Where were you when my guest was attacked?” Cord directly asked once Trace stood at the bottom of the dais. His voice was steely; his face the same; his patience beginning to dwindle as he tapped his well-trimmed fingernail against the hardwood of the throne, looking down on his troublesome cousin.

Though with now the blindfold on, Cord could still see the sneer his cousin produced for him, showing that the man undoubtedly disliked his entire person. He knew of this, for long a time, but he just stayed silent, allowing his cousin and all of the other biters under the castle roof to do as they please.

It was his obligation to give them that. He was after all the reason for their misfortune, having become a creature of the dark the moment he did as he turned thirty-one.

“I was feeding, ” Trace answered, pausing for a second and pointing his eyes on the floor before continuing, “Not in the castle. In an amusement park.”

“You lie, ” Cord grounded, his brows set in a firm line. Without warning, his liquid shadows materialized along his cousin’s sleeved arms.

“Ahhh shit!” Trace instantly shouted, feeling for the charged electricity there. He knelt on the ground and writhed in all fours, with his palms curling into a tight fist. He had been at the receiving end of the Master’s ire since the beginning but never had he felt such powerful volts like this before.

The Master must be that desperate.

“Okay, okay!” Trace raised up his hands in surrender, wanting the envious energy out of his system ASAP. “I’ll tell you the truth!”

Cord lifted it and waited, ears focused on him.

“I was outside the castle when it happened, but I swear I didn’t attack the woman!” Trace confessed.

“Tell me more Trace, or you’ll get it, ” Cord threatened, his jaw tense.

“What I just saw was the last part of it!” he breathed in deeply. “Her attacker was a man. His back was to me so I wasn’t able to see his face. He had a built that’s common; tall, broad-chested. His hair, a shade of black. The woman managed to fight him off, I don’t know how, but I saw the man’s shoulders ossified or to use a better word, it turned into stone. He pushed her in the pond from there and then you came.”

So I wasn’t the reason why the attacker had fled, Cord mused grudgingly, it was Amanda’s unexpected retaliation, and from there another thought crossed his mind.

He unconsciously cleared his throat and shifted in his seat.

The description Trace just provided seemed to resemble what he experienced hours ago with Amanda’s hands: petrified skin like a stone and it damn felt numb and raw, and it stung big time.

Trace pulled himself up and staggered a little before continuing with little pants, ” I swear that’s all I know.”

“Then why did you lie to me?” Cord asked, this time mellowing a little of his rage. The information his cousin had told him was an important clue of Amanda and her attacker and he should be thankful for it.

“I wasn’t, ” Trace shook his head, not guilty. “I’m just trying to avoid your prejudiced idea of me. If you haven’t noticed, you already condemned me before you had me summoned. I know you know that I hate you, but I’m not that desperate to rouse your anger. I’ve experienced too much of your shadows Cord and they weren’t pretty.”

“Hmm, it’s good that we have that same conclusion, ” Cord smirked a little, pride flowing in his veins. “Leave Trace, you are done.”

He flipped up a hand, lazily so to say, and shifted his focus on stroking his pet’s forehead.

Sneering, Trace stepped backward, happy that he was free, but stopped abruptly and looked back at Cord. “Honestly though, who is that woman Cord? She—”

“Is none of your business, ” Cord finished, instantly irritated. The armrests of his seat chipped further, deeper than the damage he caused after Calvin roused his ire two days ago. “Leave, now.”

“Hmf, ” the latter scoffed, turning heels towards the massive double doors whilst frowning.

Once alone, Cord contemplated on the data he collected so far. First of was Amanda's attacker. He had black hair, tall and broad-chested. How many relatives and family friends who turned to a vampire had that color of hair? Many. And he had a handful of employees who fitted the description too, the Head Majordomo included, but he was out of the picture. Jerome was just too loyal to him to do that.

So now, he was at a stagnant end. He couldn't just base the attacker with hair and body built alone. He needed more concrete proof.

Secondly, was the woman who thought of him as an enemy, Amanda, and as sure as the stars seen through his throne tinted glass windows, he believed her right. The Vitalis family had haunted her own kind to gain their abilities causing their supposed extinction. Who wouldn't be angry with that?

What was left now was to gain her trust, again. A deeper one. Well, he couldn't be sure if she had already trusted him prior to their revelations, but he wouldn't mind trying again.

"She'll just have to trust me if she wants her life preserved, " he concluded, sighing and took out the amethyst necklace from his trench coat pocket. He stared at it through the blindfold and though he only could see white and grey shades, he knew that it wasn't just a normal stone. It somehow was connected to Amanda and her true nature.

***

"You told him your secret?!"

That's the first reaction Noman sputtered after Amanda entered her bed chamber first thing in the morning. She didn't want to waste time staying in the Master's room. What for?

For protection?

Nope. The vampires inside the castle were most likely sleeping already, in their coffins Amanda presumed, and thought she'd be safe to exit Cord's lair.

Amanda hadn't found him when she woke up, and even when she passed by the receiving room where he said he'd be staying. It wasn't a surprise for her though. He was after all a vampire and was expected to sleep by sunrise. To where? She didn't care, but there was a nagging feeling that she did. To her displeasure.

But it still relieved her that he was absent, at least she'd be able to dodge an awkward time with him, as enemies, and risk her heart exploding from his constant perusal and her perusing him back.

“Cait, why?” Noman added whilst a piece of bacon was stuffed in his mouth. He was eating breakfast when she walked in and giddily, he asked her to join and inquired about her night with the Master.

“I...I don’t have a choice, ” Amanda answered, feeling guilty all of a sudden. Her eyes diverted on the floor, replaying the embarrassing scenes with Cord. “He forced me to confess. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have released me. He is one persis-” She looked back at her best friend and abruptly paused. “Hey! Wipe that grin off your face, Dom!” She frowned, seeing Noman grinning like a bobcat.

“I’m sorry I can’t help it, ” he replied, shrugging his shoulders and zipping his lips, trying his best not to laugh.

“I thought you were surprised that I told him about my true nature, ” she lifted a brow, whilst crossing her arms over her chest and hitting her back on the sofa like a child on a tantrum.

Noman bobbed his head to affirm. “Of course I am, ” he said, “but other than that, I am more surprised that you, ” he pointed his finger on her groin, “and him, ” he followed by pointing another past the ceiling where he knew the Master’s chamber was located, “are hitting it below the belt now. That’s quite fast for you Cait, but I salute you.”

“What. Are. You. Talking about?” Amanda narrowed his eyes at him.

“Ah-ah-ah, ” Noman whipped one finger from side to side. “Don’t play innocent with me, woman. I know you’re in bedsheet names with the Master.”

“No, we’re not!” Feeling flustered, Amanda immediately denied, but a memory flashed in her mind again, one that showed how they battled for the top dominion looking like they were really doing the deed. “Like what he told you, I was attacked by a...drunkard and...” she trailed off.

“Let me guess, he placed you in his bedroom to assure your safety, ” Noman continued. “In his bed. For two nights.”

“Yes, for my safety, ” she confirmed.

“Yet, you tell me now that he and you didn’t...” he lifted an inquisitive brow, leaning his face towards her.

“Of course not, why would I? With him?” Amanda quickly shook her head in dismay.

“Okay, I’m just going to act like a fool and believe you.” Noman stood up, raced towards the bathroom with Amanda following behind like a deflated puppy.

“Oh, come on Dom, it’s all the truth!” she said.

“Yeah, yeah, ” he flipped a hand in the air, disappointed that his best friend didn’t hit homebase. He turned to her when they arrived in the bathroom counter and continued, “So now, back to our topic, you seriously told him that you’re a...”

Amanda sighed and nodded. She leaned against the tiles and crossed her arms over her chest. “Well, basically he was quick to piece all of my words and guessed it right.”

“Huh, no surprise in that, ” Noman stated. “He’s the Master here, and a one hot ass of a Master for that matter. But why would you do that? You could always lie you know.”

“Yes, I thought about that, but he forced me to because of a certain event.”

Noman was all ears now.

“Juice. Give me all the juice, ” he urged.

“I may....have...attempted to take his life, Dom, ” Amanda twisted her brows as she looked at him. She expected he would flip out and just like that, he did.

“What?!” Noman grabbed her shoulder. “You mean, you-you tried to kill him? How? Why?!”

Amanda sighed again and thoroughly faced him.

“That’s what I want to ask you. You gave me a necklace last night right?”

“Yes, and hey, speaking of that, where is it?” Noman examined her neck but found the said object absent there.

“Yeah, ” Amanda’s forehead wrinkled. “The last time I saw it, it was lying on the floor in Cord’s bedroom, the chain broken. He probably took it for safekeeping, I don’t know. Where did you get that necklace anyway?”

Noman stared at her, serious all of a sudden. “I got it from Matteo. He told me it is your early birthday present. Why? What’s the connection with the necklace and you trying to kill the Vitalis Master?”

“Well, ” she sighed again, hitting her hips against the counter. “I actually don’t know.”

Noman instantly groaned. “Don’t tease me, Cait. Come on, spill it out!”

“I really don’t know Dom. But what I do know is that when it was still around my neck, I felt my anger with all vampires amplified. I badly wanted to kill one at that time. Cord was the easy target since he was sleeping in his chair, close to my bed.”

“Wow, that’s some serious shit Cait, but why would you attack the Master? It’s not like he is...”

Amanda nodded and twisted her lips, giving Noman an unspoken yes.

“OhmyGod!” he immediately squealed and jumped to grab both of her shoulders. “Like Lestat and Edward?!”

“Dom, please, don’t romanticize them. I expected you to cower in fear, not jump like a bloody old lady in her first sex.” Amanda frowned.

Noman, in response, slapped her bottom. She winced.

“You’re so harsh, Cait, but I’ll forgive you! You are my best friend after all, but seriously though, the Master is a vampire? No wonder he is an eye-candy. So, the popular rumors about vampires are true. They are hot bitches. I wonder if they drink blood as well.”

“Of course they do silly!” Amanda slapped his bottom back and released a sigh, rolling her eyes heavenward.

“Wait, hearing you say that, have you been the target of their appetite this past few days?” he asked, genuinely curious.

The latter shut her eyes and hissed, remembering the Master’s fangs lodged in her flesh. “It’s easy to say that I am, to Cord probably, since I haven’t met his family who may be creatures of the dark too. I think he thirsts for me. My blood can feel it.”

“Huh, you are taking the threat to your life lightly, Cait, ” Noman remarked. “Is this because you fantasize about the Master’s fangs?”

Amanda shot a glare and growled at him.

“Here, let me screw your head tight, ” she said.

She reached for his head and pushed her knuckles against his scalp.

Noman laughed and put up his hands in surrender. “Oh! Oh! Come on Cait, I’m just joking!” he cried, ducking his head to stop her knuckles from connecting.

Amanda stopped, groaning, and leaned herself against the counter again. She couldn’t believe she was this sensitive with regards to the Master.

Noman paused for a moment to calm himself. He leaned against the counter too and placed both palms on top it. “But hey, all threat aside, don’t say you aren’t thinking about it? You said so yourself you are fascinated with him.”

“Please, Dom, let’s not stray away from the topic.” Amanda gave him pleading eyes.

In reaction, he pouted and mumbled, “Hmmm, clever little witch.”

“Could you ask Matteo to come over though?” Amanda stated, changing the subject. “I know that I’m prohibited to divulge my safe house and that Chief Moretti would scold me if I did, but I don’t want to talk to him through the phone. I want to see him, make sure he explains all that there is with regards to the necklace.”

“Sure, Beautiful, I’m your errand boy, ” Noman nodded, not at all afraid to break the rules. “I’ll tell Matteo your message when I leave. But first, retrieve that thing from the Master. Otherwise, Matteo would suspect something’s wrong.”

After hearing that, Amanda face-palmed herself and pressed her lips thinly.

“Oh God, this is going to be a disaster.”

Chapter 22 - The Taste of Her Lips

“Excuse me, Miss Cait, Mistress Heather is here to see you, ” Dayana informed an hour after Noman reluctantly left. He and Amanda had discussed many things while he stayed. One of which included his first party in the castle where he mysteriously fell into an inebriated state with unexplained bruises on his wrist and chest. They had deduced that it was because of a vampire, but couldn’t be sure then.

Another was the murder case and how long it will be resolved. They both knew she couldn’t stay in the castle anymore longer. Her life was at stake even if the Master promised she’d be safe. To solve the case would be the best chance she’d get in leaving.

The third topic they discussed was the real attack Amanda experienced two nights ago. Noman knew it was just caused by a drunkard. She had to explain that it was a vampire attack and make him feel less...scared with it just as she was trying to be. Aside from her luckily protecting herself, she avoided getting deeper into the subject. It was an unsavory memory she decidedly buried in her mind, along with the cold feeling the attacker gave her when his fangs pierced deep into her flesh and sucked in almost all her blood.

The last they did was brainstorm on how to retrieve the amethyst necklace. They considered for her to request it from the Master politely, coercion wasn’t needed when it was hers to keep in the first place, but if worse comes to worst, Noman urged her to do it, with the help of a little bit of seduction of course.

“Right, I’ll be out in a few, ” Amanda answered just as she placed her cellphone in the mattress. She conveniently received a call from Matteo a few minutes after her best friend left and they managed to agree on meeting each other in the Vitalis castle.

He was happy of course, but Amanda had to giggle when Matteo called himself a fool for not realizing she was in fact under the Vitalis Family’s care.

“I’ll inform her then, ” Dayana said whilst bowing. She left with Amanda following behind and as soon as she stepped out of her bedroom, Heather quickly stood up from the sofa and opened her arms wide for an embrace.

“There you are!” she said, smile widening and showing the telltale signs that she was a vampire too.

This made Amanda stiffen on her spot for a moment.

“H-hey, Heather. What’s up?” she said when the woman gave her a warm and friendly bear hug.

Surely, she isn't a vampire? Amanda questioned in her mind. But she did ask me if I was a blood donor so...possibly she is.

"I'd like to apologize for our canceled dinner, Cait. Cord made me do it," Heather stated once they withdrew. There was a little bit of frown in her face when she mentioned the Master's name.

Amanda half-smiled. "Well, I was out of commission during that time, so no worries really."

"Then, would you like to reschedule it? Tomorrow maybe?" The vampire woman pulled an expectant expression, but it deflated immediately once Amanda answered.

"Er, I'm sorry, I already have an appointment with someone tomorrow."

"Urgh, I hope it isn't Cord," Heather rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest. "He doesn't like me dining with you in the first place, but I tell you, he'd do everything in his power to keep you from dining with anybody."

"Uh, no, no," Amanda shook her head. "It is a friend. He is the vice president of my father's company. He is coming over here tomorrow."

Heather smiled and nodded. "Oh, I see. Then, how about today? We will just grab a quick bite."

By the mere mention of the word bite, Amanda cleared her throat. Surely, this woman doesn't plan on biting her too?

"Get to know each other more. No pressure at all," Heather continued as if she heard her thoughts.

Although Amanda would have wanted to decline, the jolliness and the easy attitude of Heather made her reconsider.

"Well," she started, smiling brightly this time, "that sounds goo-"

"No." From the unopened main door, a male voice said.

The three women immediately looked to see and found the Vitalis Master standing tall, no cane, no blindfold, still in his trademark trench coat, and with a thin, displeased mouth. "Amanda is occupied this evening."

"Urgh, here comes the killjoy," Heather murmured, loud enough that he could actually hear.

This made Amanda hide a chuckle, but it didn't stop her from feeling conscious and block the loud thumping of her heart. The last time they saw each other was last night, in his room, after their steamy battle.

"Good evening cousin," Heather greeted first, nodding once on his way.

"Heather," Cord nodded back, but his glassy reddish-green eyes were still glued on Amanda.

“Amanda, get inside your bedroom now, ” he directed which earned a quick lift of her brow.

“I have nothing to do tonight, so why don’t I join Heather for dinner?”

Cord grumbled under his throat. “No, you will dine with me tonight and every night as long as you’re here.”

Heather, after hearing this, scoffed and placed her arms akimbo. “Well, what do you know... You are now acting like a possessive boyfriend, cuz. And to think, you haven’t marked her yet.”

“Heather, silence, ” Cord directed a glare at her. “Or in this modern time, I think I should say, shut-the-fuck-up.”

Heather, together with Amanda and Dayana, dropped their mouths.

“Ho-how about the night after this then?” Amanda cleverly stepped in and doused the tension by showing her smile in Heather’s way. “Does that sound good? I honestly need a better eating companion.”

Heather narrowed her eyes on Cord’s way, licked a finger, lifted it up midair, and produced a hissing sound. “Owww burn, ” she stated, grinning. “She just ditched you, Cord!”

She doubled over for a hearty laugh, a spectacle that silenced Cord and Amanda until she was done.

“Alright, the night after tomorrow it is then, ” Heather stated, wiping jolly tears from her eyes.

“Yeah, that sounds good to me, ” Amanda nodded.

“Well, since that is settled, I think I better go now. I feel a rather hostile aura from your man, Cait.”

Heather gestured her head towards Cord who just remained silent.

Amanda, too occupied to notice the meaning in her words, only added more gas to the flame. “Ah, no, he’s not my-”

“OK!” Heather quickly interjected, not giving her a chance to finish. “See you the day after tomorrow Lovely Cait!”

Amanda, although taken aback, still waved a hand. “Yeah, well, see you.”

***

Cord and Amanda watched as Heather exited the receiving room with Dayana meekly tagging along. Once the main door closed, the easy atmosphere inside the room fell down.

“Who is coming over tomorrow?” Cord, without delay, asked, striding closer to where she stood just a few paces from the bedroom door.

Amanda was taken aback. How did he know when he wasn't present when she told Heather this? Maybe another one of his vampire abilities? Just like how he could come in and out of her bedroom without opening doors? "You-you heard our conversation earlier?"

"Yes, " Cord answered directly, now stopping a few feet away from her. "Who is coming here?"

If he had heard them, then there was no point in answering his question but still, she answered anyway. "Matteo." She stepped backward, feeling her face flushed with their nearness. "He is a good friend of mine. I need to talk to him."

"May I remind you that you aren't supposed to accept visitors, " he cited, looking down on her. "It is a risk to your safety."

"Huh, " she snorted and shook her head. "Your so-called safety has already been breached after my attack, Cord, and after you confessed to being a vampire. It doesn't count anymore."

"I prohibit you to see that man Amanda, " sternly he proclaimed, but instead of making Amanda angry, she only lifted a brow up and rest her palms in her hips.

"I thought you wanted to know about the necklace? He is the one who gave me that as an..." she paused and bit her bottom lip, contemplating on telling him. "As an...as an early birthday present."

Cord's eyes minutely shined with the discovery.

"He asked Noman to give it to me. If there is someone who knows something about that necklace, it would be Matteo, " Amanda continued and successfully kept her ground. "But wait, where is that necklace by the way?"

"I'm keeping it safe, " he informed.

"I want it back."

"I don't want you choking on my neck again."

Amanda scoffed. "Huh! You think the necklace causes me to be violent against you?"

"Yes, and I'm precise about that."

She blinked many times, remembering the uncontrollable anger she felt while she wore the necklace. "I guess I can't argue with you with that one."

"Good." Cord smirked.

"But I still want it. I need to show it to Matteo when he visits me, " Amanda insisted, looking at him with pleading eyes just as Noman instructed.

"You will tomorrow, " he answered stiffly, diverting his eyes past her. "In the meantime, have dinner with me now."

Amanda sighed. At least she made progress. She certainly didn't want to resort to seducing him. "As a Master, you really are asserting yourself huh?"

"It's an advantage Amanda and I don't want to hear you refuse," he answered whilst turning around for the main door.

The latter huffed, recalling the last time they dined where it ended her wrist as the dessert. "Dinner with my enemy? Huh! What can go wrong?"

***

And nothing untoward happened really. Their dinner remained lifeless just like its previous two predecessors. But Amanda noticed him opening and closing his mouth a few times, seemingly debating on establishing a good conversation just like her.

It was in the middle of their meal when she finally gained the courage to break the silence, but before she could open her mouth, a female stepped into the room and waltzed towards Cord's side.

"Is this the special guest you had been so preoccupied this past few days Cord?" she asked, pointing her attention to Amanda, but remaining a gloved hand on the Master's left shoulder.

"Pamela, " Cord said in a low voice and tilted his head.

"Just a nod?" she stated, making a displeased face. She sent a wink on Amanda's way and continued, "Aren't you going to invite me to sit down and have dinner with you?"

Amanda aware as just how rude Cord can be towards his subjects quickly cut in, "Uh, please, we would like your company. Come and sit."

She gestured a hand towards a seat opposite hers, but Pamela, grinning, rounded behind Amanda's chair and claimed the empty seat next to hers.

"Such a polite human you are, " she whispered, eyeing Amanda's turtleneck, long-sleeved blouse to her black jeans and beige stiletto. "The North Wing residents have grown curious about you, you know. Like me, so that's why I'm here, to see for myself what's all the fuss about."

There was a displeased groan heard from Cord's way after this, but both women disregarded it.

Pamela's voice was a siren lulling a sailor to sleep. It was pleasing to the ears and no matter how Amanda thought herself an enchanting woman because of her bloodline, she still found herself captivated with this new vampire's beauty who had lips, a blood-red, an hourglass figure dressed in a bandage dress with green crystal beads, and an angel hair of fine white and gold.

“I’m sorry, we aren’t properly introduced yet, ” she stated and then offered her right hand up for a handshake.

“My, my. Silly of me, ” Pamela stated, glancing at the silent Cord whilst smiling like a seductress, and then pulled the black glove of her right hand.

Amanda, seeing this, thought it odd.

“I’m Cord’s cousin, and unlike Heather who you met first, I’m related to Cord by blood, ” Pamela informed.

“Good to meet you then, ” Amanda, no matter how hostile she was against vampires, summoned a beautiful smile from her lips, “I’m-”

“No need, ” the woman raised a French-tipped, flower-tattooed hand and stopped her, “I know everything about you.”

“Excuse me?” Amanda’s forehead creased.

“Pamela has an ability to learn the person’s characteristics, attitude, feelings, and experiences through touch Amanda.” It was Cord who enlightened her.

She watched him with grave eyes and then back to Pamela and said, “Wow, that’s...”

“Great, I know, ” the female vampire interrupted. “I happen to acquire this ability by drinking the blood and taking the life essence of one of your kind, Amanda.”

“You-you know already who I am?” Amanda almost stood up from her seat, taken aback.

“Well, I touched you didn’t I?” Pamela cited, her seductive grin making a comeback. “And not only that, I happen to know that you are the owner of the blood bags Cord always and solely drinks every year.”

Busted. Cord glared at Pamela.

Amanda, in response, sent a questioning eye at him.

“I know about your suffering when your father died, ” the vampire woman continued, “and how your mother remarried for your safety’s sake. I saw how you cried when your mother breathed her last in front of you.”

A pricking sensation threatened to surface in Amanda’s heart, but she successfully blocked it out. Pamela had no right to look into her memories like it was just some free show in a movie house and for that, she shot a cold look at her, the previous revelation about the blood bags quickly forgotten.

Undaunted, Pamela still continued, taking advantage that none of her audience objected audibly, yet. “And I also happen to know your deepest, subconscious secret, Amanda.”

“And what is that?” Amanda asked, inhaling, swelling her chest so that she’d appear not intimidated by her, which, well, she was, slightly. What possibly had this vampire discovered when their hands touched? The first one may have been a shock to her, and the second, almost made her cry. What was in the third that she herself doesn’t know about?

“You are attracted to a certain someone, but you just don’t want to acknowledge it, ” Pamela started, her eyes never leaving hers. “Same goes to…” Him, she mouthed and drew her eyes on Cord who was just intently listening to them.

“You are talking nonsense, Miss Pamela, ” Amanda stated, lifting her chin and tightly clenching her fists under the table. This, to her, was the limit.

“Oh please, just call me Pam. You, me, and Heather will become best buddies. You don’t need to think of us as enemies anymore.”

Amanda scoffed.

“Unfortunately, that’s quite hard to do. I’m possibly the last of my kind. Who’s to say you won’t take whatever ability I possess?”

“No, you're protected by Cord’s rules, Lovely, and besides, ” Pamela pointed a finger at her chest. “I don’t feel any power in you. It’s as if it is blocked by something. I can’t seem to get through that slice of information in your brain.”

“Huh, at least there is something I have privacy about, ” Amanda pointed out.

Pamela only gave her a slow nod, somehow pleased with the progress of their first meeting.

“Well then, I guess I am overstaying here, so I will leave now.” She stood up and smiled on Cord and Amanda’s way. “Enjoy the remainder of your dinner lovebirds.”

Amanda hissed. Cord clenched his jaw, but they both remained silent until their intruder left.

“She’s a matchmaker too?” she asked, frowning at Cord, once Pamela was out of sight.

“No, but her readings are always accurate, ” he answered and just like that, his look on her changed. From cold, uninterested ones to eyes softening and then transforming into orbs lit with yearning.

Amanda intentionally ignored this and proceeded to ask still riled up with the words Pamela released, “And you believe her?”

“No, ” Cord replied, shaking his head.

This would have relieved her a bit until Cord added, “But I sense in you an undeniable attraction, Amanda, directed to me.”

Amanda’s breath hitched. She quickly pulled her gaze away from him and into the half-finished plate.

“I’m full, ” she said, taking her napkin out of her lap. “I’d like to return to my room now. Have a pleasant evening Cord.”

She hastily stood up, not waiting for him to reply. It may have been wrong of her to leave him like that but their conversation was getting absurd by the minute and she just needed to get away. Fast.

It may have been cowardly of her to do that too, but she did it to preserve her dignity. Her sanity. She couldn’t just admit she felt something to the Vitalis Master and not feel guilty at the same time. They were enemies for heaven’s sake!

When Amanda reached for her unlit bedroom panting and all, she thought she’d be safe from him, but to her surprise and dismay, she felt a hand ran along her spine and before she could react, she was pulled and pinned against the carved wood helplessly, her arms and body boxed in by this male’s large frame.

“Why do you run away?” Cord asked, his mouth mere inches away from the bridge of her nose as she looked up.

Inhaling as if her courage was air, she answered with a stony voice, “I’m not.”

“Then acknowledge the desire you feel towards me.” Cord caressed her waist to the underside of her breast and she squeaked, closing her eyes. “I desire you too, Amanda.”

“No! You will not beguile me like this!” she shouted with teeth gnashing and eyes popping open with angry fire.

Oh, but Cord, instead of riding along with her anger, cupped her chin and whispered close to her lips.

“I wish I was beguiling you Amanda, but I’m not. That ability doesn’t work on you. You are feeling it on your own; your blood boiling in sync with mine, the burning in your skin, the yearning to be touched, to be kissed, to be one with me.”

“Stop it, ” Amanda ordered, seething. The pounding of their hearts against each other’s chests, his hand burning her, lighting flames in between her loins, and his face close to her were just too much. Too much!

“Mean what you say, ” he fired back, daring her.

She inhaled again with determination, looking at him without blinking and replied, “STO-”

But Cord didn’t let her finish.

Hard, bruising, and in total dominion, he mauled her lips to stop her words from coming out.

Chapter 23 - Sweetly Cruel

Amanda used all of her strength as Cord continued his onslaught. She tried pushing him away, his face the first target, and then his chest with both a failure.

He reigned over her. Cord chained her wrists with only one hand, pressed them in between their chests while the other grabbed her head to keep it from moving.

He didn't encounter any difficulty with these, unlike Amanda who was slowly losing hope.

Mouth on mouth, she couldn't clearly breathe enough to shout the word stop. A couple of letters managed to escape:

"Co-"

"Cor--"

"--rd"

But never his full name.

How could such a kiss from an enemy feel like this? she thought. The wanton. The craze. The hotness of it. Her one-kiss experience with Matteo could never compare to it. Cord's kiss was just so, so sweetly cruel.

He moved with skill. The wetness and softness of his lips and the movement of his tongue inside her mouth urging her to reciprocate, his taste, his wild but tender caress - madness.

They were all madness waiting to bring her into forbidden gates but as sure as she was with this, she asked herself what if?

What if she'll reciprocate him? His kisses?

Would it be worth it?

The answer to that came as a moan from deep in her throat. Cord pressed her face further, steadied her head to suck on her severely swelling bottom lip.

Yes, it will be worth it.

But before she could return his kisses, she gasped when she felt his hand release her wrists and slid under her blouse, contacting their skin and lighting fireworks there.

"Amanda..." Cord whispered whilst leaving wet trails on the corners of her mouth. "Your body is quaking for me, do you feel it?"

Trying to hold herself from losing control, she answered with a shaky breath, "Ye-s..."

Ah, yes, she could most definitely feel it, but not only hers, his too. The carnal desire she could feel throbbing against her abdomen, hardening only for her, was unmistakable.

She clenched her eyes shut, unable to bear the truth in her front.

He wanted her and she wanted him. That was clear. Their desires were compatible. In harmony. Certain and real. Not just a machination of the mind.

"Then lose yourself to me. Kiss me back, " he urged and his hand glided to cup her left breast, knead it, claimed it - the brassiere she wore somehow felt thin in that very moment.

"Mhmm..." Again, a moan escaped from Amanda, but realizing it wasn't supposed to be, she clamped her mouth shut and shook her head.

Cord groaned, displeased.

"I can sense it in the beating of your heart that you want to kiss me too. Open your mouth, Amanda, " he ordered against her cheek.

There was no denying it. Clearly, he was right, but instead of accepting him, she recoiled back.

Why?

Because she felt the sudden light scrape of one fang on her face consequently eliciting pain and drawing blood.

She heard Cord hiss as he extracted himself quickly a good meter away from her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to, " he said, eyes casting downward.

Amanda, in reflex, touched her cheek and felt the sticky liquid there. She looked at him with equal parts fear, betrayal and surprise, never expecting that even during such a wondrous intimate moment, his true nature would surface.

But instead of questioning him of his control, she, in her confusion, then asked, "What has happened with your eyes, Cord?"

From a glassy greenish-red she normally would see in him when not wearing a blindfold, his eyes now turned to a blue-green. It may be as normal as any other human eyes, but it was the most captivating blue-green orbs she had ever encountered and because of this, the feeling of fear and betrayal that surfaced from inside her disappeared.

Cord lifted his head and for the first time since they met, their gaze locked on each other in full color.

“You can see?” Amanda inquired again.

It was an absurd question, yes, but directed to a vampire who had supernatural abilities, it was understandable.

“Because of your blood, I can, ” he answered, his gaze never leaving hers.

“My blood?” she clarified, still touching the wound in her cheek.

Cord, unable to restrain himself, strode to her front, pulled her hand away, and stooped low to lick on the wound he inadvertently caused.

Amanda froze the whole time, her heart jackhammering against her chest. The warmness of his tongue and the firm grip he had on her shoulders did just that.

“Yes, your blood, ” he proceeded after he licked her clean, establishing eye contact once again without blinking. He held her bloodied hand with his and felt the crusts of dried blood there.

“But unfortunately, I don’t know why this is happening. I am hoping you’d be able to explain why, ” he continued.

Amanda blinked thrice, feeling inadequate of herself.

“Huh, I don’t think I can do that Cord. I don’t even know why myself.”

Cord released a defeated sigh then. “I see, ” he said, “but my best guess is, you have a healing ability. That’s why your blood can cure me of my...blindness.”

Amanda shrugged her shoulders. “It could be, but why are you like this in the first place? Vampires aren’t supposed to be blind.”

Cord stepped backward, releasing her hand from his grip. “It’s none of your-” but he paused, seeing how genuinely Amanda wanted to know. Not wanting to rudely cut her off again, he decided to say in the end, “It’s a complicated story to tell, Amanda. Right now, I just wanted to focus on you, and how you look more beautiful in full color.”

He examined her from head to foot and then a little curve of his mouth appeared as a smile. “Damn, I’ll have to register this in my memory.”

With his words, Amanda felt consequently conscious. She had forgotten that they had locked mouths earlier.

Not only were her lips still swollen with his stolen kisses, she was also breathing hard - her chest rising and falling so clearly that she’d bet he can count them, and not to mention her face, so flushed up because of him, he’d probably deem her a relative of a baboon’s ass.

What a great picture to show indeed.

“You are cleverly changing the subject Cord, ” she stated, focusing on this fact instead of her body’s traitorous response. She moved away, towards the bathroom and continued, “Well, if there isn’t anything else you want to say. You can see yourself out, now.”

Instead of feeling offended, Cord just grinned and walked towards the door. “Indeed, ” he said, looking at her for one last time, “Good night, Amanda.”

“Good night Cord, ” she replied and just like that, she saw him vanish, leaving a thin trail of black smoke in the spot where he stood.

Sighing, she dropped in the bed and touched her lips. Everything would have turned out normal if it wasn’t for that Pamela-woman’s sudden appearance. Amanda would have buried the attraction she had for Cord, and he wouldn’t ever know of it. Ever.

It was hard for her to realize that she was attracted to the man. It was pretty much a sin against their kind. But it was even harder now realizing that with his absence, her blood, body, and all of her screamed for more.

More of him.

She truly desired him.

***

The next day, Amanda occupied herself inside the library with Arissa. She may have been reading quite meticulously with her chosen book, but in reality, she felt sleepy, and it was all because of having a sleepless night. The thoughts of Cord and their shared kiss mostly did that, and the feeling that he was watching her from somewhere. Somewhere in the dark of her room.

She dismissed it at first as creations of her mind, but with her inside a vampire lair and with him able to teleport wherever and whenever she realized that it could be possible.

“Are you trying to protect me from another attack Cord?” she asked one time when she couldn’t control herself anymore. She straightened from the bed and stared directly at one dark corner. She waited and waited, but his answer never came.

Amanda pulled a disappointed face and went to lay back, covering her body from the bedsheet as much as possible. “Hmf, sure! Suit yourself. Be silent. But I can sense you, you know.”

Again, there was no answer.

Not a single sound of his breathing.

Amanda closed her eyes and after straining her ears for more than an hour, she finally fell asleep.

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“Madame O’Malley, Mr. Threvelli is waiting for you in the drawing room,” informed the Head Butler after he waltzed inside the first floor library sometime later in the evening.

“Yes, thank you for informing me Jerome,” Amanda answered whilst shutting the book and putting it on the coffee table. “I also received his text that he just arrived.”

“Dayana here will accompany you to the room, Madame,” Jerome gestured behind him where the maid obediently stood. She smiled at Amanda and the latter smiled back at her.

“Refreshments and your dinner will be served there,” he continued.

“Yes, I’ll take note of that Jerome, but before I go, I need to get it now.” Amanda stood up and opened her palm in front of him.

“It?” Jerome lifted a brow, acting innocent.

“Yes, it,” she echoed back. “The amethyst necklace. Where is it? I thought your Master would return it to me.”

“Ah, I thought you’d forget about it Madame,” the Head Majordomo replied. He smiled rather sheepishly and pulled out the object in his coat pocket.

Amanda tsked. “I imagine your Master would be pleased if I do. Now hand it to me, Jerome.”

And he did, placing it in her palms, pendant first.

“Thank you,” she stated, but right after her hand contacted the necklace, something inside her sparked briefly.

Of a negative emotion: anger. Intense anger. Her eyes changed from its normal color to bright violet.

Jerome noted it and stepped backward, suddenly feeling afraid. His Master warned him about this and instructed to call him immediately.

“Is something wrong?” Amanda asked, looking at the butler with confusion.

Jerome found that in a blink, the color of her eyes returned to normal.

“No...ahh, nothing Madame. Everything is fine,” he replied with a shaky voice.

“Right.” She smiled, looking a lot friendlier than earlier. “Now, I think I should go.” She walked past him and tucked the necklace in her jeans pocket as if nothing happened.

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“You are on time, ” Amanda announced as she walked inside the drawing room. “As always.”

“Cait, ” Matteo turned from the fireplace, smiling widely, and quickly crossed the room to embrace her. “I missed you.”

“Matteo...” She embraced him back, feeling no malice at all after sharing a kiss with him many days back. “You look different now. Have you?” She withdrew and stared straight into his face. “Oh, your hair is a lot longer now. Odd. How has it grown so long in just a matter of days?”

From a short cut, Matteo’s copper hair grew three inches longer, with soft waves coming out from its edges. It was a new look that she found attractive and sexy. His stance too changed. That of a man holding so much power similar to the Vitalis Master - well, not like she was trying to compare them in the first place.

Matteo observed her with adoration. His smile, Amanda found, was like that of a man looking at his soon-to-be-wife.

“I figured that I should show my real self to you now, Cait. It is time, ” he said.

Amanda narrowed her eyes at him and crossed her arms over her chest. “You are so cryptic. Mind if you explain more?”

Matteo chuckled. “Let’s go out into the balcony first, shall we?”

“Right.”

They strode past the fireplace side by side. Amanda observed some personal distance between them, but Matteo closed in, brushed his elbow against hers, and hooked an arm around her waist.

Amanda felt cognizant of this, but truly not as much as the effect the Master gave on her.

“I didn’t expect you’d be staying here Cait, ” he said when they stood near the balustrade.

She shrugged her shoulders, “Well, Chief’s orders, ” she said and then glanced at the east scenery ahead that showed trees blanketed by the early evening darkness.

“But in the Vitalis mansion?” Matteo drew his brow up. “They are rich people, Cait. You should suspect something fishy going on here.”

Amanda’s heart skipped a beat. Could it be he knew that the Vitalis Family members are vampires?

“Wha-what are you talking about, Matt?” she asked, shifting her eyes from him and back to the scenery, trying her best to keep calm.

“I’m talking about politics. You think the Vitalis Master wants to control the whole country?”

Politics. Amanda felt relieved. It seemed he doesn’t know.

“That’s a weird idea Matt, but a possible one, ” she smiled at him briefly. “Anyway, why are you stalling?”

“Stalling?” Matteo feigned innocence. “Me?”

“You do know why I invited you here Matt.” She crossed her arms over her chest again. “And also, you need to explain to me those cryptic words you said earlier.”

Matteo paused and stared at her before answering, “Hmm, just as I thought, nothing gets past you Cait.”

Amanda pulled out the necklace from her pocket, chain first, and then showed it to Matteo, the stone swinging like a pendulum.

“Tell me, Matt, what do you know about this necklace? And how did you possess this?”

Matteo leaned back on the balustrade, sighing.

“It was given to me by your mother.”

“My mother?” Amanda’s brows twisted. “But-”

“We met a long way back Cait, ” he cut in. “A long, long way back. You didn’t exist then.”

“I’m confused, ” she said, wrinkling her forehead.

Matteo released a throaty chuckle. “Don’t be, please.” He took out the necklace from her hand and stared at the stone resting in his palms. “Your mother, the day she gave birth to you, entrusted your safety to me.” He gazed back at her with longing and her lips, with desire, before continuing, “She is one of the most powerful in your kind, but with her life energy already drawing to a close, she requested me to protect you and along with a promise, she left me this necklace to give you on your twenty-fifth year of life.”

The corner of Amanda’s mouth twitched, drawing her eyes to the stone whilst recalling her mother’s words before she died.

‘I’ve lived too many lives, my darling. You, however, haven’t. You deserve to live normally. Love normally. Make friends. Be merry. Free of worries and fear. But with vampires still in this world, I can’t just leave you alone. That man is going to protect you, Amanda. He will be your guardian for the rest of your life and possibly even more...’

Could it be that she was talking about Matteo?

“She says it is a special amulet, ” Matteo’s voice pulled her out of her recollection. She blinked twice and looked at him again.

“It holds the many memories of your ancestors: their feelings, experiences, and yearnings. It will guide and help you see the truth, ” he added.

“Feelings? Experiences?” This time, Amanda couldn’t contain herself anymore. “No wonder I felt so much hatred during that time...”

“That time?” Matteo quickly parroted to which she, in haste, shook her head.

“Ah, nothing Matt. It is just that the first time I wore it, I felt a surge of anger filling up inside me.”

And nearly killed the Master because of it, she added in her thoughts in a huff.

“I see, ” Matteo replied, seemingly calculating her every word. “And, oh yeah, this necklace boosts up your abilities too.”

He handed the jewelry back to her with which Amanda immediately took.

“I don’t even know if I have abilities myself, Matt, ” she said, “But besides that, with all of these things you tell me now, I’m curious, who are you exactly? For two years, I thought of you as a friend and the Vice President of my step-father’s company.” She squeezed the pendant and looked at Matteo now with serious eyes. “It seems you know what I am and it seems you know so many things that I don’t, so tell me, who are you honestly?”

Matteo took her free hand, kissed the knuckles before he interlaced their fingers tightly.

“Yes, you’re right. I know who you are Cait. I know you have a blood of a witch.”

Amanda’s chin lifted as if a thorn lodged in her person was just pulled out.

Witches, because of their spells, lived for vast amounts of years. Sometimes centuries. Along with it though, they needed to keep their true nature a secret from the humans to safeguard their kind and to hide from the vampires that haunted them.

They used spells to hide their true age from the attention of humans. They used spells too to avoid unnecessary questions and curiosity.

Amanda, apart from Noman, kept this as a secret from everybody, even to her stepfather. She grew up with witch blood in her veins. But now, for the first time ever, someone slapped this truth on her face.

“And yes, I know a lot of things you don’t, Cait, ” Matteo continued, still holding her hand. “Because I’ve lived for hundreds of years together with your kind.”

He bowed his head regally in front of her. Amanda just watched him with calculating eyes, wondering what he would do next.

When Matteo straightened, he extended his other hand and produced a beautiful crystalline white rose out of nowhere.

This surprised Amanda greatly.

“I am Lord Mage Nikos, at your service. Your guardian. Your protector. And like your mother promised, ” he paused and smiled serenely at her, “You, my beautiful Cait, will be my bride.”

Chapter 24 - Enemies As Best Partners In Bed

Amanda lifted a brow. “You are joking right?” she said, casting him a look of disbelief. If she weren’t in a house full of vampires, she would have thought this as the most incredulous information she had received.

“No, I am not Cait, ” Matteo answered, raising the crystalline white rose to prove his point, and to add to his claim of being a mage, he changed the shape of the long-stemmed rose.

From his right palm, there appeared a soft yellow-bluish light. It enveloped the whole rose and in a blink of an eye, it changed into a ring - a jaw-dropping one complete with diamonds on its band and in the center, the crystal white rose.

Amanda’s jaw didn’t drop, however. She controlled herself from doing it and instead stepped back, acting unconcerned with the tantalizing object that may or may not be an engagement ring to seal her mother’s promise.

“All this time, ” she started, breath catching up in her throat, “you just posed as a normal man?”

“To protect you, yes, ” Matteo answered, curling his fingers with the ring inside, “and I have done a great job with it as you can see.” He looked at her from head to toe and smiled, pleased with how she had turned into a desirable woman. “By tomorrow, on your birthday, you will become a prime witch. A full-pledged one. Your ability will fully surface and you will be able to protect yourself from any harm and from the vampires that haunt your kind.”

A little bubble of happiness escaped from Amanda upon hearing the facts of her witch hood but quickly, it popped.

“That’s great news but Matteo...me...?” she pressed a finger on her chest and let out a huff, “as your bride? You aren’t going to take my mother’s promise seriously right?”

“Why not?” Matteo reached for her elbow and held it tightly as if afraid she might become a runaway bride. “You have been mine since the beginning Cait. Promised or not, I want you. I have only been keeping myself low, observing you from afar, and trying to be as patient as I could be since your mother wanted you to live a normal life.”

He pulled her close in a heartbeat, chest to chest, something that Amanda wasn’t expecting. She leaned her head backward, out of his breathing range, as he continued.

“By tomorrow, your normal life will be gone. You’ll leave this place and be mine. Forget about the murder case. Forget about this silly protection program. These are just matters for humans to fix.”

“Matt…” Amanda’s brows creased considerably, “this is…this is a lot to take in. I think we should slow dow-”

“Cait, I want you, ” he interrupted intentionally, telling her this for the second time. “Be with me. I’m done with waiting. I’m done with doing things slow.”

He bent his head lower, closer to her face. Amanda had to avoid him by angling it to the side.

“Matt…” she whispered, feeling uncomfortable now. Her body warmed, her breathing the same, but not because he brought her on fire. No. Not because of his touch. It was because of her anger simmering on the surface. She wasn’t just some damn chip to be bargained!

Insensitive, Matteo pursued his plan of kissing her. With his free hand, he pushed her back to him.

“Matt!” Amanda, not ready to feel his lips, shouted. With her palms, she pushed but couldn’t get enough safe distance from his face. “Stop this now!” she cried.

But Matteo continued.

“I said stop it!”

Finally, she was able to pull herself out of his embrace and gave him a frustrated glare.

Matteo was surprised at first, his hands frozen midair, but then his eyes thinned. He stared straight at her - at her flushed, angry form - and said with quiet rage in his voice, “You are hesitating, why?”

“I need space to think, ” she answered, not meeting his gaze.

“No, you don’t need it.”

“Yes, I do!”

“No, you don’t Caitlin!”

“Yes, she does, ” came a low voice from the inside of the drawing room.

All heads quickly turned to the source and right then and there, Amanda’s eyes widened.

“Cord…!” she cried in her thoughts.

***

“Mister Vitalis?” Matteo stated in a question, eyeing the imposing man who still wore a blindfold just like in their first meeting, holding - to Amanda - a useless cane, and with his pet panther tagging along.

“I believe your visit is long overdue, Mr. Threvelli, ” Cord announced, his voice heavy with authority.

“Says who?” Matteo threw back, scowling.

“Says the rules of Chief Moretti, ” Cord supplied, voice turning lower and colder and sterner. “You aren’t even supposed to be here in the first place. To protect the safety of the witness, visitors aren’t allowed, but since you are here already, I have no choice but to impose a time limit.”

Matteo snorted. “You sure act your landlord part pretty well, Mister Vitalis.”

“All for the witness’ safety, ” Cord fired back, clutching his cane tightly all of a sudden. He could feel the irritation burning inside the man because of his sudden intrusion, but he just had to interrupt them. The measly human was about to kiss his -er- the woman dammit! He couldn’t let that happen again. He’d witnessed them share a kiss in the mountain summit some days back, he couldn’t bear to see another.

He then lifted his chin and called over his shoulder, “Jerome.”

Amanda, remaining wisely silent, saw the servant approach his Master and bowed low.

“Would you mind as to escort Mr. Threvelli out of the castle, please? He, ” Cord paused and shifted his head as if to look straight into Amanda’s way, “is done visiting.”

Audibly, Matteo hissed.

“No need. I’ll see myself out, ” he stated but before exiting, he looked at Amanda again and gave her a soft but half-pained expression. “Cait, advance happy birthday.”

***

Amanda nodded once and smiled a little. “Thank you, Matt. I’ll call you tomorrow?”

“No, ” Matteo quickly replied. “I’ll be the one to call you. We aren’t done discussing our wedding.”

Amanda’s breath hitched. Without realizing it, she glanced at Cord who showed a zero expression except for his jaw tightening, and then to Matteo with eyes wide. She now noticed him looking at the Master with a considerable amount of hostility, something she didn’t expect at all.

Why would he? It wasn’t like Cord Vitalis could become his rival. It wasn’t like he wanted to marry her too.

Right?

Matteo walked out with long, confident strides and with the Head Majordomo close behind him. When they fully exited the drawing room, that’s the time she realized she needed to exit too.

With hasty strides she passed Cord, her eyes drawn downward and her breath intentionally held. She slipped the amulet conspicuously inside her jeans pocket, afraid that he'd confiscate the thing again.

"Where are you going, Amanda? Dinner is ready," she suddenly heard him say.

Her heart spiked up another beat as she paused from walking.

What to do now? It was obvious they'll have another heated discussion if she joins him in dinner. It was obvious he would interrogate her about Matteo and the topic she knew he had sneaked in to listen to. She wouldn't want that to happen. She wasn't ready at all, but turning him down meant turning his ire up.

"I'm not hungry," she mumbled a good excuse, "I think I'll pass, but thank you for the invitation Cord," and did as much as she could to make her voice soft and pleading.

It probably was a good idea because Amanda didn't hear his answer even after she completely left the drawing room.

She raced to the second floor stairs and made her way in her room in just half a minute in what would have been a two-minute walk. After taking a deep breath, she closed the bedroom door hoping to find some peace there. She certainly would want to piece all the facts together, make a good conclusion out of it, but what she didn't expect was what happened next.

Someone stopped her on the spot with a firm grip on her left elbow. Instantly, she knew then who her intruder was.

Guess some peace and quiet no longer exists.

"We need to talk," was Cord's swift directive, "and I don't want you saying no."

Amanda awarded him a frustrated stare and huffed.

Seriously. Can't a woman have her alone time?!

"Fine. What do you want to talk about?" she asked whilst pulling her elbow out of his hold. She, unfortunately, failed in that department since Cord's grip was unrelenting. Just so unrelenting.

"Who is that man to you?" he asked, the tone of his voice somewhat different than the usual, and if Amanda didn't know any better, she would have thought of it as a tone of a jealous man.

"He's my friend," she answered nonchalantly.

"Friend?" he echoed, lifting - to Amanda - a disbelieving brow.

"Yes, friend and don't ask me why he claims to be my fiancé. I know you eavesdropped on us earlier. I know you heard my mother's ridiculous promise to him." She wrenched her elbow once again, but to no avail.

Cord, in response, pushed her against the door. She gasped.

"The question now is, " he paused and longingly watched her mouth open, "would you marry him?"

Amanda's forehead wrinkled. What an absurd question coming from a vampire.

But instead of avoiding answering him, she instead asked with a little bit of sass, "Why do you want to know? You want to be my wedding sponsor?"

It was a wrong move then.

Cord growled low and as quick as a wink, he wrapped an arm around her waist and pressed her chest against his own.

Amanda yelped in her thoughts. A wave of sensations flowed through every nerve of her body, both the good and the bad, but with his warm breath so close in her ear, the bad was all forgotten. Sweet tingles in her skin where his mouth almost touched were more noticeable and unmistakable and arresting, and it was enough to keep her wanting despite her better judgment.

"No, " Cord answered, blowing hot air into her skin at the same time, "I'm just clarifying it Amanda because I certainly don't sense in you a desire to tie a knot with him."

Amanda scoffed. "You do now do you, " she stated, gazing at his glassy eyes void of the blindfold.

"I do, " he answered low.

"And what do you sense in me now?" she thinned her eyes, analyzing him. "You know, just to make things clear." She tried her best to control her voice from getting breathy than it normally should. Her fingers, although trembling, trailed along the collar of his coat. It was her boldest move, wildest even, playing a temptress impulsively and maybe even her unconscious invitation for him to advance.

Cord indeed took it as a much-welcomed invitation.

"I sense you are still afraid of me, but at the same time, you are yearning for my touch."

Amanda grinned. "Sounds like a bipolar to me."

"Then we are both the same, " Cord fired back. His right hand released her elbow and proceeded to sensually touch the border of her bottom lip. He smiled, pleased that she didn't move her head away.

“Kiss me, Amanda, ” he continued, “I can sense that you want to do it.”

She really wanted to, oh how much she wanted to, but in a passing second, she backpedaled.

“Let’s end this night Cord, ” she said moving her head away and clenching her jaw, “We are playing with fire we aren’t allowed to play.” She stepped sideways to escape his hold, but Cord tightly gripped her waist.

“Who says so?” he groaned.

“We are enemies.” She gave him a matter-of-a-fact stare.

“Ah, but enemies could also become allies, Amanda.” His mouth lowered near her ear again and continued suggestively, “The best ones.”

Amanda’s breath hitched. Her palms, in between their chests, pushed him lightly away. “Leave me be, please, ” she begged, making a strained face.

Cord’s jaw tightened. “No, I don’t want to. If I do, you’ll think of that man.”

With this Amanda was taken aback. “Are you jealous?” she asked before she could filter her words.

“I may be a dark one but I can still feel Amanda, ” he answered vaguely. His nose breezed along her forehead, basking on her scent, and Amanda all but froze, feeling like floating with the clouds.

“You...you should go, ” she stated, voice trembling. “I promise I...I won’t think of him.”

Cord lightly shook his head. “Too late for you to say that, Sweetness.” Then, the inevitable happened.

“Co-!” Amanda squeaked but was ultimately cut off when his mouth crashed on hers for the second time.

Slowly, he massaged her lips; leisurely claiming every inch of it, skimming the edges and sucking it full until his tongue entered.

Amanda released a pleasurable sound under her throat. This was the same as their first kiss. The only thing wrong about that was her not reciprocating him. But now, she could. She definitely could.

“Kiss me back, ” Cord groaned against her chin. His hands now moved to steady her head both in the back and front. “I know you want to, Amanda. Kiss me back.”

Tired of fighting off her desire, Amanda finally did, wrestling his mouth with great intensity.

Cord rejoiced.

For over a minute, they were like that, tasting, feeling, and exploring each other. This was what they wanted all along. This was what they always longed for. It was a glorious moment that made them whole. It was an attraction beyond lust.

Their kissing ended them in bed. The foam dipped as their weights joined. Cord locked her in place with his knees and hands. Amanda, with her arms to the sides and her head surrounded by many pillows, cared less of being a prisoner.

“Moan my name, Amanda, ” Cord urged, his mouth now lapping her neck. He sensed her body close to erupting a collection of delightful sensations - sensations that he was proudly responsible for.

One thumb felt for her erect nipple under her worthless brassiere, under her worthless cotton blouse and this made her gasp.

“Ahhh..!”

“My name. Say my name, ” he, with his control waning, urged again. He felt for the opposite nipple, titillating it, arousing it to elicit the same hardness as its sister.

With this, Amanda could no longer hold herself. “Cord...” she breathed, her face turning even redder. “Cord, fuck! I...I hhh...ate you. I hate you!”

Definitely not the right words to say during a heated moment, but they were Amanda’s way of releasing the pent-up tension inside her.

She clenched her teeth, but not because of anger. It was because of embarrassment and the fact that she hated how he made her feel so good. Offering herself to her enemy may not be the best possible way for an attack, but hell, it felt right. So, so right.

Cord chuckled sexily, his lips grazing the tip of her nose. He liked just how feisty she was, acting tough and rebellious yet so responsive and accommodating under him.

“They say enemies are the best partners in bed, my witch, ” he stated, advancing one hand up to the tip of her blouse zipper. “Let’s find out if it is true.”

Chapter 25 - Fangs of Pleasure

POV: Amanda

I felt him tug the front zipper of my blouse. I didn't stop him. Well, what for when I myself yearned for us to be one. Maybe it'll be a wrong move in the end, but heck, I couldn't care less of the consequences after. Aside from Cord's presence making me feel complete, his touch and kisses were just too good to pass. Too delicious not to taste.

Though I'm inexperienced with the desires of the body, yes, I knew that my body wanted him. Not any other man, but only him. I'm probably the craziest witch right now for allowing the master of vampires to bed me, but to hell be it. My decision was already cemented and threaded in every fiber of my being. Our status as enemies all but set aside.

My blouse finally opened, showing the valley of my breasts quaking for him. My lacy brassiere had the color of black and yellow. I highly doubt he could see, but by the looks of the upward curve of his mouth, I knew then he was pleased.

"Cord..." I moaned, arching my back to give him a sign that I wanted the restraining material out of the way. It didn't fulfill its intended function anyway since it wasn't able to cover up my hardened nipples earlier.

He seemed to understand that then for in one unhooking motion of his thumb and forefinger, my brassiere came loose from the front.

"Hmmm..." I heard him groan, no doubt pleased again.

I felt heat creep up my face.

"Say something," I urged in a breathy fashion, "If you don't, I'm going to have to curse you for staying silent."

His chuckle enveloped my dark room in response. His eyes glowed a deep red, not of anger or hunger but of lust and desire. The concentrated sides of it.

"Amanda, you are one unexplained mystery. I can't wait to explore and solve you."

"Then explore me now," I suggested, my patience already gone.

Expecting that he'd kiss me again, I opened my mouth. When he did, I threaded my fingers along his thick mass of hair. At one time, I, in my burning state, had pulled too much of his hair. I thought he'd wince but he didn't. He instead returned the favor and grabbed a handful of my soft curls, pressing my face even more to him.

It was a turn-on.

I felt his tongue sweep my bottom lip as if to ask for entry. I allowed him that by boldly thrusting out my own tongue to meet his.

He groaned. Again.

I felt his erect member twitch against my groin and because of this, I found my subconscious side grinning, not at all afraid of the male caliber amidst me being untouched.

His left hand wormed its way into opening my blouse fully. A cold draft met my anticipating breasts when he did so. I gasped, but not because of the coldness of it, but because of his hand consequently cupping me skin on skin. Massaging me like I'm some fine dough of pastry.

His divine thumb acted like a maestro. It made me go insane as he stroked them rough against my nipples.

Maybe... just maybe.... I might be sent to a psychiatric institution after if he uses his mouth to pleasure this part of me. Not that I am wishing Cord would, but with his mouth already making wet trails along my neck and chest, I don't doubt my nipples will wait any longer.

"Cord..." I moaned again as he removed his right hand from my hair to snake inside my jeans. Three warm fingers consequently met the garter of my underwear.

I heard him release his usual groan, no doubt frustrated with the obstruction but excited of what lay ahead.

All I did after pulling his hair was to feel for his thudding heart - or the lack thereof - with my palms. But in the end, I wanted some skin contact too, so I shoved his trench coat back and unbuttoned his shirt hastily.

By the time I reached the second button, I felt his fingers advance. Advance down south. I bucked as new sensations filled me.

Fuck.

Cord was touching me there, and all I could do was whimper and pant and look at him in the eye with overflowing want.

"Amanda..." he breathed out. Right then and there, I felt the button of my jeans pop and the zipper slide down. "I want to see you."

That didn't need much explanation.

"Then bite me," I answered, setting aside any logical reasoning that came along with my answer.

Yes, I do know what he meant when he said he wanted to see me. I know my blood was needed. And by blood meant that he'd have to bite me, which further meant I needed to runaway considering I'm a witch. A delicacy to them.

But I didn't want to.

Hell, my body ached to be sated too much that any thoughts of leaving were just gone with the wind.

"Where?" he asked, his fingers still doing havoc on my wetness.

"Anywhere," I whimpered. "Anywhere Cord."

I heard him release a growl. His eyes brightened even more with red, but this time I sensed it was hunger and lust combined.

Yet I still didn't run.

"Neck. I want your neck, Amanda," he stated, his hot breath now grazing my ear.

I felt goosebumps erupt at the back of my neck.

"Would...would it be painful Cord?" I asked, never paying much attention that it was a silly question.

"No," his voice lowered. "I'll make it so that the only thing you'll ever feel is pleasure. Intense pleasure, Amanda."

I sucked in a deep breath. Now that's downright sexy.

He moved a little, enough for me to see through my peripheral vision the lengthening of his fangs. It was beautiful. Exactly the same pearly white beauty I saw when he first bit me in the wrist.

When he lowered his head, I braced for impact.

This is it. This is actually it! And I can't believe I'm actually eagerly anticipating it.

I clutched the collar of his coat, closed my eyes tight and I would have held my breath if I wasn't panting already because damn, his fingers were still creating magic in between my thighs.

"Cord...! Ah!" I felt one finger easily slide inside my womanhood just as his fangs penetrated my skin.

White-hot pain shot through me. It was so intense that the only thing I saw when I fully opened my eyes was minute twinkling stars and not the ceiling.

I felt the solid enamels lodged in my flesh, felt his tongue flick, and heard him make a sucking motion against my neck.

Again, I should have been running away for my life but I didn't.

Heaven strike me now, but I didn't.

Cord was right. I didn't feel any pain at all. When he continued to suck my blood and fuck me with his finger, all I felt were complete and utter ecstasy. Out-of-this-world if I may add.

Noman would probably throw a fiesta when he finds out I'm in this stage of intimacy. And he'd probably make that last for weeks when he finds out I've done it with Cord - a man he had approved so much.

Now, back to the subject, as if it wasn't already glorious, one finger joined the other and continued to thrust deep inside making me delirious. I arched my back, but not too high for Cord's weight on top me was restricting it.

"Cord... Cord...." I whimpered and decided to close my eyes again.

My hands left his collar and proceeded to palm his chest, expecting I'd find no beating heart there, but to my mute surprise, there was one, thudding faintly against my fingertips.

How?! How?!

I stared at Cord again, wanting to ask him how and why, but I was cut off of my intent.

He plunged in and out, slick with my juice, building up walls after walls of arousal until I finally reached it.

"Ahhh!"

Climax.

A damn good, solid one.

But he wasn't finished. His two fingers continued at a ridiculous pace.

"Sh...it," I groaned. "Shit! Cord!"

I grabbed for his neck, but I didn't strangle him. I just placed enough pressure that kept him from turning blue.

He made a low growl in response.

Those stars that I saw covering the whole ceiling seemed to rain down on me. Every brightness, every shine was the embodiment of what I felt when I orgasmed.

And come to think of it, this was still his fingers doing the fucking, how much more his...?

Truly, this was only the beginning.

Cord finally released his fangs on my flesh, but he didn't sit up like a dog done with his meal. Instead, he caressed me. Passionately.

His tongue made wet swirling motions down my collar bone. Considering that the wetness meant a mixture of blood and saliva, surprisingly, I wasn't repulsed by it. I loved it.

"Amanda..." he whispered as he withdrew.

I watched, panting, as his eyes brightened and turn into a familiar human-like bluish green.

His mouth, smeared a little with blood, curved into a really dashing smile. My heart might have just died and revived at the sight of it.

"I can see you now. I can see your swollen red lips," he cited, his free hand running along my chin.

I stayed silent and still, too weak from my post-orgasmic bliss to move.

"I can see your hazels glazed with desire I always knew you had for me," he continued, and then made a doodle down my chest.

"What healthy, captivating pinks you have." He traced my left nipple, making a new wave of delicious sensations there. "Beautiful. So, so beautiful. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to see you in full-color Amanda."

I couldn't help but smirk when his eyes darted down to his very wet right hand, particularly his two fingers which had momentarily made me insane.

"This is the juice of your desire for me," he pointed out as he held his wet fingers up. "I certainly want to drink this soon."

"Cord, you're crazy," I gulped, my throat turning dry in an instant.

"Ah, but I told you before," he leaned down to meet me face to face, "crazy isn't an enough word to define me."

With our breaths already mixed, he captured my mouth. I scrambled to rake his hair and push his head more to me. I felt his tongue sweep past my bottom lip again. Boldly, I coaxed it in with an answering sweep of my own. He advanced, our tongues creating their own battle as a result.

The pressure of his weight on mine lifted. For a moment, I thought he would withdraw, but I felt the shuffling of his coat and shirt and I realized he was undressing himself.

Probably it took him only half a minute because he was already hovering half-naked above me.

“Sit down for me, my witch,” he requested when he stopped our heady kiss. “Let me undress you.”

I did, without a second thought, pulling myself up in one strong move.

My breasts bounced free in the process. When I looked up, Cord was already venerating me with his eyes.

“You are trying my restraints, Amanda. You don’t even know how much I want to drive inside you now, hard and rough.”

I blinked many times at the crassness of his words. It was fucking sexy.

“But we are going to take this slow,” he grazed a hand on the underside of my breast and continued, “I consumed enough of your blood to last my sight until dawn. You taste so good Amanda, do you know that?”

“You make it sound like I’m your meal Cord,” I half pouted, half smirked.

“Ah, but you are my meal,” he agreed, “and I am going to devour you inside out. I am going to claim your heart and soul. I am going to do that and you will want no other man than me.”

He stripped my blouse away and tossed my brassiere on the floor.

“This twisted game we are playing, I don’t know why but I can’t back out,” I stated, leaning back down on the mattress while he pulled my jeans out.

“You are already in too deep to back out,” he answered and then aligned his body. “You can’t retreat anymore. You are mine.”

I didn’t notice him taking his own pants out, so I gasped when I felt his wicked length touching the front of my juice-soaked underwear; teasing me with its gleaming head.

“Cord…” I breathed out, throwing him a look that told how much I wanted his cock inside me.

He responded by lowering his head and suckling my right breast.

“Ahhh…” I moaned, feeling the exquisite sensation there.

Both of his hands twisted the garter of my underwear. I didn’t think twice lifting my hips up to give him ease in pulling it out.

But the unexpected happened.

He tore my underwear into two.

Huh! No surprise in that!

He stopped from suckling and straightened a bit to look at me. A ghost of a smile, or a smirk, or a sexy grin appeared then.

I sucked in a sharp breath when he stroked my swollen clit. I bucked and unconsciously closed my legs. Cord's free hand swiftly stopped it.

"Asking permission to enter, Amanda," he said, his eyes burning with want. The burning want that I am feeling too.

I couldn't help but chuckle.

"How gentlemanly of you to ask for my permission." My eyes were half-lidded, my head already in a daze, but still I managed to register every detail as Cord knelt in between my legs, his erection thick and drool-worthy. "Enter me, Milord Vitalis."

With a short nod and an awfully suggestive grin, he proceeded.

He tested my wetness first, sliding two digits against the walls of my slit. I moaned at how sensual it was. Sparks traveled from there to my belly just like when he finger-fucked me. It felt euphoric.

Then, his cock's head followed. I bit my lip in response. It was complete, sweet torture.

My arms were limp in the sides, my legs already spread wide for him when in a split of a second, he filled me, and fuck it was to the hilt.

Pain and pleasure mixed together. I gasped, but it was cut off abruptly by his mouth.

He thumbed my clit again, rubbed it vigorously, and because of that, my virgin pain abruptly disappeared. What was left was the intense pleasure of our joining.

Mouth to mouth, I whimpered, feeling his cock moving inside and out. My whole body shivered at the pure intimacy of it.

Damn, I never knew that making love to a vampire could be this good.

"Amanda, my beautiful Amanda, shout my name," Cord, having stopped our kiss, ordered in my ear in time with his pushing.

"Cord!" And I did when his free hand cupped my breast and kneaded it.

Even with the darkness of my room, I still can see just how much his hard abdomen tightened in every plunge, see how his muscles flexed, see just how much he was making these small faces of pleasure. His vampire nature aside, he was beautiful in every way, and he was right, I really want him.

And the fact that he was dominating me in our union made me want him more.

For all this time, I was afraid of making a connection with a man. I had seen how my mother broke down, piece by piece, after my father died. She was a strong woman, a strong witch, but loving a human became her downfall. I was afraid that I would end up like her too if I were to enter a relationship. Being able to live longer than normal humans and having to see them die before me wouldn't be a savory thought to treasure. But with Cord as a vampire and an immortal one at that, had my perspective actually changed?

Good heavens, I think it did.

He aligned himself again, chest to chest close to me. His pleasant warmth was enough to pull me out of my thoughts. I exhaled slow and welcomed him with my arms thrown over his back.

"I want to feel your body quake, Amanda. I want to feel your heart quiver when we release together," he said, and I couldn't be more than happy.

This thing we are doing wasn't just a normal fucking for him. I could feel that it was so much more.

My nipples touching his chest created so many rounds of fireworks. Fireworks that exploded straight in between my thighs. I felt lightheaded, seemingly like floating in the sky when he rammed his hips some more. And more. And more. And fucking more with me introduced in at least three new marvelous positions.

It could have been minutes, maybe half an hour of foreplay, I couldn't really count, but when we reached our peak, I knew it was it.

"Ahhh!" I gasped in time with his coarse grunts.

Cord's legs tensed, spurts of his seed filling me inside. My walls clenched, milking him dry and yes, at that very moment, I fucking didn't care about condoms.

Could vampires actually produce heirs? Modern vampire books said they won't but probably I should ask him that later just to be sure.

"Amanda..." Cord gritted his teeth, lowering his head so that he could claim my mouth again.

Boldly, I pressed my palms lower than his waist and felt for his backside. Cord had one smooth, sexy backside that's for sure.

"It seems enemies really are the best in bed," I proclaimed, a little humor mixed in my voice. I eyed him without blinking, expecting to see him smirk down at me.

And he did.

"Beyond best," he corrected, "worthy for a second round." He licked my chin first, traced little kisses along the seam of my lips before he fucked my mouth again.

POV: Rexcord

Beds.

I hate them.

That's why I preferred to sleep in my throne.

Beds reminded me of my human life before that cursed night happened. Before I turned into a creature of the dark. Though soft and wide, beds never gave me a good hell's sleep.

But there's always an exception.

Especially when that exception was sleeping next to me, trying to re-energize after our second union.

Or fucking.

Or making love.

Whichever I want to call it.

Amanda's hair was tossed haphazardly in the pillow, in my chest, covering a little of my face, but it was a welcomed mess. Her skin against mine felt so damn good, more so her breasts pressed against the side of my chest and her ivory-toned leg flexed across mine.

I felt myself hard again, but I sensitively controlled it for her sake. After all, she had just been deflowered by me. Surely, she was sore and needed time to rest.

The fact that I knew I was her first didn't help my case but blast it, I just had to control my urge.

With so many damned years of solitude, I realized now that it felt better to have someone, a woman specifically, sleeping by my side. Especially a woman who can contend with my appetite.

Both of my appetites.

Aside from the ability I can get after I drain them, I knew witches have fine blood. I never expected they'd be good in bed too.

Ahh, but Amanda isn't just a witch. She is my witch.

I watched as she continued to sleep peacefully, her guard finally broken down.

There must be something, something that tied us down. As per her words, we are enemies, and I definitely second that. I am just yet to fully understand as to why we have an undeniable attraction, why we can't seem to avoid each other.

I had expected us to bicker incessantly. I never expected us to end up in bed, share the most mindless of orgasms, and snuggle like how we are now.

My eyes.

The longing to see her was too strong to just ignore.

I was surprised that Amanda allowed me to bite her at that time. Surprised but ultimately pleased. After ingesting her blood, aside from my sense of sight returned, I swear I turned to a human with a beating heart. I swear I was able to breathe oxygen again for the purpose of nourishment.

But I kept these two discoveries to myself. Otherwise, if I had told Amanda this, surely she would freak out and run for her life. Maybe, one day I'll tell her. There's always the right time and right place for the truth.

Her, aroused, might be one of the reasons why she gave in for a bite, but I'd like to think that she had finally opened up to me. That she had finally saw me as a friend and not a foe. That she had finally realized I'll care for her more than that bastard mage.

And speaking of mage...

That man actually had the gall to claim Amanda as a bride. Just judging from the way she acted last night, I'm sure he already sensed she didn't approve of being betrothed. Why would he push himself to her then?

Surely, not because of love.

Fuck, I hope it wasn't that because I certainly do not understand that emotion. It would bring me to a disadvantage.

I only know desire. Lust. I only know suffering. Darkness. I only know of despair. Loneliness. I only know that I'm attracted to Amanda. Only know that I care deeply for her.

Amanda stirred as that last thought came to mind. I curved a small smile as I watched her change position, showing her bare back to me. This was one of those moments that I am glad I can see.

Her skin was blemish-free, save for two faint moles near her nape, and at the crest of her shapely, half-covered buttock.

My hands twitched, wanting to squeeze that seductive part of her, but I, painstakingly playing a gentleman in bed, refrained.

Another brown that had caught my interested eye was this birthmark of some sort perching just above her left shoulder. It looked like an ancient symbol. There were two crescent moons standing opposite each other while in the middle, a perfect circle can be found. I swear I had seen this symbol before, but I couldn't really pinpoint where with all the centuries I had lived.

Probably, I will ask Amanda about this and hopefully, she'd answer me with all honesty.

One thing's for sure though, I know that this symbol wasn't in her skin last night. It was after midnight that it appeared, slowly, gradually, while she slept. I had kept a close watch on this ever since and it really twisted my mind.

It must be a witch thing. Especially that she had just turned twenty-five on this fresh new day.

Like I said before, she was a woman full of mystery, and I certainly planned on discovering every bit about her. I would have wanted to start my day with that, but I groaned in displeasure when I felt a rush of wind along the long strand of my hair towards my nape.

Calvin.

For much of the time, this was how he announced his presence or informed me that he needed my urgent attention.

I ran a hand along Amanda's bare shoulder, brushing off some loose chocolate strands during the process, and inched myself to whisper on her ear.

"Amanda..."

Her eyelids moved a little.

I hated it that I had to leave her.

"Amanda."

"Hmm?" she mumbled, half still in sleep.

"Something came up. I'll be in the throne room."

"Hmm..." she replied, but I highly doubt she registered my words.

"Stay here. I'll return. Happy birthday."

I gave her a chaste kiss in the neck, cheek, and in the smooth round prominence of her shoulder before I sat up.

I watched her again and committed to memory every detail of her since surely, the next time I come back, I'll be blind again.

Who knows if she still wants me to bite her then?

Chapter 26 - Commit to Memory

“Gross.”

Calvin cringed as he watched the Vitalis Master walk into his throne after he materialized in the middle of the hall. He expected the same stony face from Cord even at five in the morning. Never had he thought that this would meet him: Cord, in his usual sharp eyes and dapper clothes, but his aura was a little...lighter and he had an interesting grin on his face.

“You look disgustingly happy this early morning, Cord. What happened huh? You got a boner?” Calvin inquired once the Vitalis Master sat with his back too relaxed.

Cord shot him a glare and as if he had just noticed the change within himself, he straightened from his seat and squared his shoulders.

“Hell, Calvin. Please don’t break my good mood,” he growled low.

“Tsk. You did get a boner,” Calvin muttered to himself, grinning widely. He sat on the sofa down the dais and continued once he settled, “Is it finally with Am-”

“What urgent news do you want to tell me?” Cord abruptly cut off. He clenched his jaw and released a long, nasal sigh.

The shadows at the back of the throne shifted, creeping slowly towards Cord’s hand and because of this, Calvin dashed to get the folder placed on top of the glass table near him, afraid that the shadows would advance on his poor person.

“Here. Here! Take a look at this.” He stood up and handed the material to Cord with which the latter accepted. The shadows froze back in their original places, too dependent on the anger of their Master.

“You did instruct me to search and refine the residents of this castle by hair color, body built, ability, and health,” Calvin stated. He bobbed his head at the direction of the folder and continued, “That there is my result. Five people, all vampires. Two are servants of this castle, one is your cousin in the father’s side and two are family friends.”

Cord’s face turned expressionless. Gone was the merry look earlier.

“Are you sure about this?” he said, looking up at Calvin with a lift of one brow.

“I checked it six times,” Calvin assured. “Six times.”

Glancing back at the folder, Cord opened it and read the list of names he had known by heart through centuries of living together in one roof.

“Mathew Vitalis. Hans Enocian. Radford Christellan. Garett Ferguson. John Laudette.”

All had the youth and vigor, had the propensity for violence or the possibility to go against the rules of the castle.

All were easy to distinguish but hard to pinpoint.

“Do you want me to call them one by one?” Calvin offered. “Interrogate them probably?”

“And risk it?” Cord shook his head. “I know the culprit is still staying in this castle. Protection and unlimited source of blood is the advantage here. He’ll know in an instant that we are making a move if we call them one by one. He might well escape if that happens and I do not want that. I want this pathetic piece of trash beaten at his own game. He thinks I am too lax with regard to his case considering I didn’t do anything over these past three years, and that’s good. We have the element of surprise. We should take advantage of it.”

“But what if the rogue biter has an ability like me and you? Or Pamela, Aunt Mary, Uncle Ron, or Stephanie? In my research, none of those five have any abilities. But what if, the culprit just hid the truth for himself and has the element of surprise too? What then?” Calvin, for the first time, looked worried.

Well, not for the sake of Amanda. It was for the sake of the castle and the certain Vitalis family members he had just enumerated. Most especially Pamela who he had a romantic connection even if they were siblings.

Whatever ability the rogue biter might have, it could cause dire problems for the family. Whatever vendetta he had, he could use it against them. It could mean the discovery of their secret. It could mean the end of their long life of peace. Of grandeur and luxury. Respect and admiration. It could mean the end of their unlimited source of blood and easy protection.

Calvin didn’t want that.

Much so Cord who, especially, had just found his life with Amanda.

“Let him have whatever ability he can use against us, I don’t care. I’ll still have the upper hand,” Cord stated bluntly, oozing with confidence, and somehow Calvin understood it. He was the Vitalis Master after all. He always held the ace card.

“And that’s where that rogue biter failed to see,” he commented, eyeing Cord with new-found respect.

“In the meantime, let us go over the list. Read your report to me, Calvin. I’m too lazy to do that,” Cord stated, relaxing back in his chair and closing his eyes.

Calvin grinned and held his hands up in the air.

“Say no more. I already knew that. You just had the best night of your bountiful life and you had exhausted a lot of your sperm. You’re certainly feeling low on energy right now for trivial things such as reading.”

“And your point is?” Cord cracked one murderous eye at him.

“Nothing. I’m reading. I’m reading.” Calvin hastily snatched the folder out of the Master’s hand, clearing his throat at the same time. “Sheesh, you’re no fun to tease.”

***

It was exactly six thirty-five when Amanda opened her eyes. Soft morning light filtered through the French glass door of the balcony welcoming her. Normally, the light would have been stopped by the thick curtain Diana would pull before she sleeps, but because of the unexpected events last night, the glass door was left uncovered.

She winced a bit, letting her eyes adjust to the light and letting herself adjust to the little ache that caught her attention once she straightened to sit in bed.

Shit, she taught on impulse as last night’s memories immediately flooded her brain.

“We just did it,” she muttered to herself, blushing and blinking fast. At first, she thought of the memories as just a dream but with her naked under the covers, feeling a little dizzy, and seeing kiss marks staining her cleavage, she realized it was real and beyond the point of denying.

She bit her bottom lip and hit the mattress again, touching the part where Cord’s fangs pierced her skin. Quickly, a shiver ran down her spine but it wasn’t because of fear. It was because of excitement. Excited that what his fangs brought wasn’t actually pain but pleasure. Pure pleasure. Totally the opposite of what she believed before they did it.

A knock on the door sounded before Amanda could muse some more. She glanced at the door and saw Arissa enter with a huge smile on her face.

“Good morning, Miss Cait,” the girl greeted, bringing along with her a tray of sumptuous breakfast.

Amanda couldn’t help herself but blush again. She was after all still naked.

“Uh, good morning too Arissa,” she sat up with the bed sheet pressed against her chest.

“I brought your breakfast,” Arissa rushed to the coffee table. “Would you like to eat first or-”

"Shower," Amanda cut in. "I'd like to shower first."

If anything, it wasn't because she wanted to rid of Cord's traces on her skin. She just wanted to shower and feel fresh, maybe... maybe in preparation for his return. He did say he would return. He whispered it in her ear while she was still in a sleepy state. And along with it was a promise of a blissful heat under the bed covers. Again.

Not that she looked forward to it. But still, it was enough to create little bubbles of excitement within her.

"I will prepare the tub then," said Arissa, walking towards the grand bathroom after she arranged the food on the table.

She said it was a tub, but of course, it wasn't just a tub. It was a mini jacuzzi fit for two people customized to create a romantic atmosphere.

Unlit candles of different sizes and thickness were all over the place. A glass chandelier hung right above the tub could be seen. There were bronze flower vases that housed long-stemmed tulips that Arissa or Diana usually changes every two days. Creamy white tiles as flooring and pale blue and gold tiles as walls. And lastly, a large glass enclosure for showering.

Noman used to say that the bathroom was fit for a princess. Fit for her. And probably, he was right.

Minutes later, Amanda stepped inside the bathroom, a white towel wrapped around her body. As Arissa had said, everything was ready so she went straight ahead to the tub full of bubbles.

She relaxed there, enjoying the time she had whilst thinking of the memories last night with zero guilt. Maybe it was crazy getting intimate with a vampire. Maybe it was an act of treachery on her kind. And maybe her mother, if she was alive, would even scold her, but it was the right decision. Deep inside her, she knew it was the right decision. Something that her heart and mind both agreed.

And accepting the attraction between them just made Amanda feel lighter, freer than ever before.

"Um, excuse me, Miss Cait," Arissa, who stuck her head on the bathroom door, interrupted Amanda's musings.

Amanda raised her head a little and looked at Arissa's way, bubbles popped when her chin lightly touched them.

"What is it Ari?" she asked.

"You have a call, Miss. This had been ringing for quite some time." Arissa opened the door further and strode to where the tub was. She handed the phone right after Amanda dried her left hand.

"I wonder who this is," she muttered to herself but was quick to widen her eyes when she saw who the caller was.

Matteo.

"Uhm, thanks, Ari. I will take this call," she announced after making an uneasy smile.

The servant left with a short bow and closed the bathroom door.

"Hey, Matt." Amanda's heartbeat quickened when she answered. She pressed her eyes shut and listened intently on the man who absurdly claimed himself as her fiancé.

"Cait, good morning," Matteo replied, sounding the gentleman that he was.

"Yeah, good morning too." Amanda smiled a little. Thoughts of her passion with Cord last night came to the surface but she quickly pushed it back.

He mustn't know, that's what her subconscious mind had said.

"Happy birthday," he greeted, his voice soft and warm.

"Thanks," Amanda replied. Though they were miles apart, she could see him look at her with love in his eyes, could definitely feel the caress of his lips on her cheek.

Could it be then? Could it be that he used his mage power to reach out to her? The question came to her like a blow. She shook her head and inhaled.

Or maybe she was just getting paranoid.

"What are you doing now?" Matteo asked.

"I'm taking a bath."

"Hmmm."

There was a pleased hum then.

"Good, because after that, I want you to pack your things.

"What?" Immediately, Amanda popped her eyes open and blinked fast.

"Cait, like I said last night, it's time for you to leave that place. You don't fit there."

In response, she clenched her teeth. "Matt, I'm not just someone you could order around. You can't honestly expect me to break the Chief's rules."

Matteo groaned over the phone. Amanda could easily visualize a scowl marring his face.

"Screw the Chief," he said, "I want you by my side, Cait."

“Matt, you’re acting stubborn. Are all mages like that?” she herself now produced a frown.

“Only to their mates,” Matteo replied point-blank.

“I am not your mate,” and Amanda did the same.

“Yet,” he corrected.

With this, she heaved a deep sigh and massaged her temple.

“Look, let’s keep things slow. It’s my birthday today and I don’t want any arguments between us. Why not just come here, visit me again, bring Noman along, and let’s eat dinner just like the old times.”

There was a pause.

Amanda heard a shuffling of clothes first before Matteo replied with a defeated voice.

“You really are good with bargaining huh?”

“You know it’s my specialty.” She grinned knowing very well she won, but that grin just plummeted down when the bathroom door flung open revealing the Vitalis Master with only his black pants on.

Amanda cleared her throat feeling as if her breathing had stopped. Her eyes, after dueling with his glassy ones for ten long seconds, raked every bit of him, from the head to his torso of ripped muscles and a lovely V, down to his bare feet whilst trying her best to listen to Matteo’s answer.

“Okay. I’ll do what you asked but know this. I am not letting go of my plans. You will come with me whether the case is solved or not.”

Shit. She couldn’t even process his words right as her attention was magnificently cut in two and so, the only thing that she could make out as a reply was, “Matt…”

Hell, that one word didn’t even help her case when Cord’s mouth thinned into a displeased line. She saw him advance like a predator to his prey and all she could do was wait and be as still as possible. She was naked under the water for crying out loud and to top it all, under the bright yellow chandelier light!

“I’ll see you later Cait.” Matteo voiced out, unknowing of Amanda’s dilemma.

“Yeah.”

When Cord stood directly above her, Amanda thought he would continue on giving her death glares but she was wrong. She hurried to gather her feet, almost to the point of jumping out of the water and squealing when Cord, in silence, joined her inside the tub.

“What time is dinner?” she heard Matteo ask.

“Huh?”

This time, with desire-filled eyes, Cord closed in on her and went straight for her earlobe. He licked it first and then nibbled it, the sensual gesture making Amanda stifle a gasp.

“I said what time is the dinner?” Matteo asked again.

“H...uh?”

Cord hit another pleasure spot when he ran his tongue along her neck to her jaw. Amanda, shaking her head, pushed him aside with her free hand but this only fueled the vampire master more. He sucked at her skin, just right below her ear and this made Amanda close her eyes to silently pray for the heavens.

“Cait, the time. Dinner. When is it? What’s wrong with you? You suddenly spaced out.”

Under the bubbles, Cord’s hands now cupped her breasts and massaged them with vigor. Amanda arched her back in attention.

“Ahh, I’m....ah...I’m sorry, I’m...in bath remember? Seven! Ah, seven. You can come here at seven, Matt.”

“Noted. See you there then,” Matteo replied, sounding a little worried.

“Yeah, bye,” Amanda voiced out as still as possible.

“Wait, Cait-”

But it was already too late. Cord’s patience was at its limit. He took the phone out of her hand, pressed the off button, and dropped the gadget without care. A dull thud was heard when it hit the cushioned side of the tub.

“I expected to find you dressed, ready to hit me for taking your virginity away last night, but it never crossed my mind that I would find you here, bathing, naked, with a cellphone in one hand talking to another man other than me.” He tsked. “Don’t waste time with nonsense calls, Amanda.”

“Cord,” Amanda whispered, heat filling up her face even more. She dragged her butt into a higher part of the tub and Cord followed. Her nipples that were submerged in the water earlier now came into better view. Cord’s mouth showed a pleased grin then.

“You are already in heat. Shall I proceed?” he said, his hands making contact with her waist.

Amanda's attention fell on his thick leg under the water pressing against her groin. It was teasing her, making her remember how powerful his thighs moved last night. "You are torturing me," she declared in a low, aroused voice.

"Hmmm..." he simply chuckled. "I find that that is what I'm good at, Amanda."

He bent low to kiss her forehead and then proceeded to caress every inch of her neck.

Amanda, with all thoughts of Matteo gone, offered herself to Cord's ministrations.

"Now, answer me, my witch," he spoke against her ear, "Shall I proceed?"

Chapter 27 - Beating Heart

~ Rexcord ~

"Mmmh," Amanda answered and I took it as a yes.

Without delay, I claimed her mouth, ravished her lips that were craving for my attention. Our tongues danced, twisted, and curled against each other like what Mother Nature designed.

No hesitation. No awkwardness. Nothing.

Boldly, she inserted her hands in between us to palm my chest and probably to feel if I had a heartbeat hiding there.

Unfortunately, there was none. That faint muscle working last night had died the moment I regained my blindness. A rather surprising development that needed answers, I know, but for now, I'll have to defer asking it.

I had a more pressing matter to do and that was to give her my birthday gift. *What that would depend if she'll spread her legs.*

I hope she'll spread her legs.

I didn't like the distance between my chest and her breasts so I took her hands out and placed them in the sides.

"Be a good woman and stay still for me, Amanda," I said, parting a little from her lips. "It's your birthday today. You deserve to be treated like a queen."

Amanda moved to trace my jaw with kisses.

"You had your way with me last night, Cord. You don't expect me to be still and not explore you."

Her hands escaped my hold. One hand rushed to feel the hardness of my abdomen, the other wandered down to feel my erection.

I groaned. What an assertive young witch she is.

"In due time, you will," I said, my eyes landing on her flushed form with lust. "I just want to give you your gift."

"Lovely." She grinned and stared at me with caution. "What is it?"

I smirked at that.

“Here, let me show you.” I fastened one arm on her back, the other, I hooked under her knees and as if she was weightless, I lifted her up to the cushioned platform of the tub without a heads-up. She gasped, surprised, and hurriedly tossed her arms over my head, afraid that she might fall.

“Cord, what are you-”

And then I claimed her mouth again. I couldn’t get enough of her lips, couldn’t get enough of her in totality. I might well call myself a vampire under her spell, under her charms. I might well call myself a hopeless case for craving such a woman like her.

I had sampled many women before. Centuries ago. An experience that I cannot boast for those acts were all lust and hunger of blood alone.

With Amanda, I feel enlightened. Complete. Always on a high. I feel human again with her, figuratively speaking and maybe, in literal terms too because I really did turn into a human last night. Right after ingesting a good volume of her blood.

Again, it was a discovery that needed answers, so I made a mental note to ask her that later.

Once settled, she moaned against my mouth when I ran my fingers in between her thighs. I parted the lips of her pussy and immediately encountered wetness there.

Just the fucking effect that I wanted.

“Spread your legs wider for me, my witch,” I requested, leaving her mouth with a bite in the bottom lip.

She did, making room for me to position myself in the middle, my knees now submerged in the bubble-filled sitting area of the tub.

“This is crazy,” she expressed breathlessly, looking at me with a little bit of hesitation. “Arissa, she’s in the next room. She’ll know.”

I paused, looked at her, and chuckled. “Don’t worry, I sent her away. Or more like, she sent herself away the moment I entered your chamber.”

And cue in Amanda’s adorable rolling of eyes. She always pulled this off whenever she was with Noman. Such a rare sight to see. I wouldn’t have witnessed this if I wasn’t observing her, just hiding behind the shadows of the rooms she went like the library, the gym, her chamber, and the gardens. Cunning of me, I know, but she didn’t need to know that little secret of mine. Yet.

“Huh, and I can only imagine how that worked well for you,” she said, brushing my hair with her slender fingers.

I, continuing where I left off, glided my nose to her cleavage, smelling and basking in her sweet scent.

"It did," I answered, voice low and hypnotic. "I want you by myself, Amanda. No one wouldn't want to cross with me." Then I paused and thinned my eyes. "Or...you can just control yourself from moaning so that nobody could hear."

Biting one taut nipple, she let out an erotic gasp. "Ahhh!"

"There, see?" I said, putting pressure on my biting and licking and sucking.

"Hell, I can't...I can't Cord." She shook her head and bit her lips once again.

Her answer pleased me. I would want for her to moan, shout, whimper my name, and sing praises of it as I pleasured her. I want to hear her voice since my damned sight kept much of the fun away from me.

Moving further, I moved down where her bundle of pleasure-filled nerve-endings converged.

"You are so sensitive here," I said as my fingers played with her wet walls.

She arched her back and pressed her head against the tiles.

"You..hh...you think?"

I leaned low and using my elbows, I spread her legs wider.

The cradle of life, I've heard many humans say that when they refer to a woman's pussy.

Right now, as I stared at it in awe under the bright yellow chandelier light, I definitely could agree with them. Holy fuck, I felt reborn again.

And with my fingers touching it, the scene looked even perfect. Enough to make me almost cum.

"Let's see how you sing when my tongue touches this," I said and without a shit's delay, I plundered Amanda in her raw form.

"Ahhhh! Cord!" she voiced out, her hands grabbing my head as if to push me away.

But I held my ground. "Easy now. I am just getting started, Amanda."

"Fuck," she scowled, but a scowl mixed with an erotic face.

I grinned at this. I'll make it so good that she'll get addicted to me.

Continuing my intent, I nibbled on her swollen nub, licked it up and down, side to side, and for the final touch, stretched my tongue longer to dip inside her.

“Mhhmm…” she whimpered, breathless. “Shhh…it, for a blind…man…you sure know wh…hh…ere…my pleasure spots a..hhh..re.”

“It’s a talent,” my voice came out a bit muffled, but she still heard it right.

“A talent not wasted,” she answered.

With a hungry growl, I violated every inch of her, ravished her walls, and drank her honey spill. All she did was moan and protest and moan again, her words rich with a string of curses I never expected would leave from her mouth.

Shit. Fuck. Holy fuck. Holy mother of vampires. And, “Ahhh!”

Such a noisy witch, but I enjoyed every decibel of it.

Especially when she cried out more, her voice overflowing with orgasmic notes when she finally hit the peak.

It was melodious to hear.

Slowly, my mouth climbed up to her navel, sticking my tongue out to leave a trail of tingling sensations. Amanda panted hard, her belly moving up and down fast. I heard her heartbeat, it was wild against her chest, pounding so hard I was in a split-second afraid it would burst.

“I want to fill my cock inside you,” I declared, unable to control myself anymore. The tightness in my pants was just too much to bear.

“Shit, are you asking permission again?” Amanda replied, and if I wasn’t mistaken, I think she just pulled a displeased look.

Really, such a straightforward woman she is.

I chuckled.

“Just playing the gentleman.”

“Then drop it, Cord.” She hooked her arms around my neck and pulled me in for a kiss on my throat. Goosebumps immediately erupted in my arms. I never thought that she’d elicit such an effect on me.

Dammit! What had she done to me?

I groaned and on impulse, nudged my bulge against her center. “I’ll fuck you hard then,” I announced.

“Do it,” she, in a breathy fashion, replied.

Not a second more, I ordered my shadows to dissolve my pants away - a skill that I just found very convenient.

Without guiding the head, I rammed my cock inside her. We both gasped in unison at the feel of it.

So full.

So tight.

We fitted perfectly.

“Fuck, you’re eating me whole, Amanda.”

“More,” she groaned, her eyes in pure ecstasy.

My right hand moved to support her waist, while the other stretched up against the tile to assist my second thrust.

“Ahhh!” she gasped, her head tossing back.

A clear view of her neck got my attention then. My fangs immediately stretched, but I clenched my teeth and controlled it. Blast it, I can’t bite her just like an animal without her expressed permission. I’d prefer to starve myself for years than take her blood by force.

“Cord, more...” she whimpered, and that erotic voice took my focus away from her neck.

I thrust hard into her again, and again, and again, all the while she shouted for another string of curses and ahhs.

Her fingernails scratched my chest and back, left a little sore line on it, but it didn’t bother me. Heck, it was one that I welcomed even.

We kissed again, mouths molding into one. I fucked it good just like I fucked her core.

Hard.

Very hard.

Until we both reached our climax.

Amanda tore her mouth away and cried out her passion, so loud that I bet the cleaning staff in all four corners next to her room could hear.

I myself grunted and groaned, ejaculating everything inside her, my hips straining in the process. Condoms weren’t needed since vampires couldn’t procreate, but a wild memory crossed my mind in a second, and it was what happened last night.

Shit. Could it be possible then? I did turn into a human and that lasted until her blood's effect wore off. Safe sex was the last thing on my mind at that time. Even now.

Maybe it's possible that...

Dammit.

No.

I shook my head to clear my uninvited thoughts. I don't want to entertain that notion for now. Let time be the judge of it. Something that I and Amanda have for both being unnatural. I, a vampire, and she, a witch.

And speaking of that...

Honestly, I never imagined that Amanda would let me have her again. Last night, we may have been clouded by our uncontrolled desire that we weren't able to stop, but now, our minds were clear to see the consequences ahead of us. Darkness didn't hide our faces. It didn't hide the emotions in our eyes. Yet, we both didn't stop. We risked it again.

"I thought you'd bite me, but you didn't," Amanda stated as she pressed the tip of her nose against my cheek.

Her heart was a little calmer, her breath slowly turning even after a full minute of just staying silent, savoring our post-orgasmic bliss.

I pulled myself apart, including my semi-erection despite not wanting to, and cupped her face with both of my hands.

"Know that it wasn't easy to control myself, Amanda. I wanted so much to bite you," I answered in all honesty.

"Do you want to bite me now?

I sensed her stare on me, on my blind eyes; it was with so much yearning that I asked, "Are you asking me to bite you?"

She nodded. "I want to confirm something Cord."

"Hmmm," my curiosity meter shot up, "what is it?"

"I want to see if your dead heart would beat again."

Her answer made me arch my brows, stunned. I know she meant it in a literal way, but dammit, for the first time ever in my abundant life, something inside me changed. Something warm and good and human-like. It was refreshing.

My eyes softened as I looked at her.

“Amanda...I...my...heart...”

But...

I paused and instead hissed silently.

My dead heart had already started beating even without your blood.

I wanted to say that but refrained. I’m no cheesy man. I’m not a romantic too. I’m no poet. I don’t even know how to use metaphors. I’m not even sure if they were the right words to say. They were what I believed to be the right words to say but holy shit, I’m not even sure if I should believe myself.

Fuck. Am I even making sense?

“I...I want to confirm it too,” was all I said in the end.

“Bite me, Cord.” She angled her head to the side and gave me a clear, unobstructed view of her neck; her wet, sticking hair all swept at the back.

I watched as her pulse throbbed against her skin. It was tempting me, calling me and so, without delay, I gave in to the temptation.

I bit her for the third time.

The back of my eyes felt hot the moment her sweet, addictive blood touched my tongue. I sucked and sucked, drawing out the crimson red liquid from her system.

She shifted under me, moaning, her legs clamping on my waist as the euphoric sensation made itself known. This always happens whenever a vampire bites his victim. The first bite gives pain, but I and Amanda had passed that. I helped her cross that ordeal last night with flying colors and wet fingers.

Mixed with the grays and white outlines in my cursed eyes, bluish sparks appeared. Then, it changed into gold for a split-second and consequently turned clear.

My normal vision followed.

It was my cue to stop. Stop from taking too much of her blood. If I don’t, I’d probably make her comatose.

Her arms around my back loosened and so did mine from her head and shoulder. We withdrew a few inches away and gazed at each other with renewed longing.

“Cord...”

She placed a hand against my chest where that important muscle lay and felt for a sign. A beating sign.

I did too, but I didn't close my eyes. I chose to relish the vision of her still naked, sitting in the tub platform, open for me.

Minutes later, our expression turned sour, disappointed that the beating never came.

"No," I ground out.

"How come?" Amanda looked at me in confusion.

I inhaled and stared at the healing wound on her neck.

"It must be because the blood I took wasn't enough," I answered, raising my right hand up to touch the faint pinpoint blemish.

"Then, drink more," she urged. I frowned when she, without hesitation, angled her face again.

"No." I shook my head immediately, clenching my teeth and holding my fangs back. "No, Amanda. I can't. I won't. I already took a lot of it last night. You'll die of anemia if I were to do that again."

"But I want to feel your heart Cord," she rebutted.

"My heart doesn't matter."

"But to me, it does!"

My human eyes rounded when I heard it. Heck, I'm not going to assume anything. I am not going to assume that she...with those words...that she's feeling that certain emotion for me.

I moved back to submerge half of my torso in the tub, but my attention was still glued on her.

Face flushed with determination, Amanda then went on. "Cord, what happened huh? Tell me. I want to know. I want to know how you became a vampire."

Chapter 28 - A Witch's Curse

Castle Vitalis, Province of Liège, Belgium

(Year 1012)

“Don’t...you...touch me,” a woman sitting in a cushioned chair stated. It was with so much disgust that the man standing in her front gave out a pained expression.

“Léa...” He reached again, aiming to touch her shuddering shoulders but stopped when she yelled.

“I said don’t touch me!” Her eyes bore a look of hate, of anger, and disappointment to the man who just betrayed her trust. “Don’t you dare put your filthy, adulterous hand on me!”

Tears rolled down from her eyes and probably the millionth time that night after hearing of her husband’s illicit affair from a family friend.

“I made a mistake.” The man knelt in front of her, scooping up her trembling hands and kissing it softly. “Please forgive me, darling. The woman is a witch! She cast a spell on me! She charmed me!”

“Si...lence,” her voice came out weak, so she sucked in a deep breath and shouted, “Silence!” Pulling her hands away from his mouth, she cast him a pointed, but wet glare. “How could you, Bernard. How could you do it? What about our family? Your son! He looked up to you!”

“Léa...” the man inhaled, shutting his eyes as if to show how sorry he was. The flames in the hearth were the only audience of their drama, dancing wildly in time with the chaos in their hearts.

Then, a knock on the door sounded, followed by an older voice of a man, “Excuse me, Master Vitalis.”

Both of the occupants in the stone-walled room turned their heads to look at their servant.

“A woman outside insists that she see you.”

The Vitalis Master quickly shook his head and stood up. “No. No! Don’t let her in!”

But it was already too late.

A woman stepped forward when the door opened wider.

“Bernard...” her soft voice emerged.

The Master was speechless at first. His eyes bulged, his mouth parted.

The same happened to his weeping wife, but quickly it changed into rage.

“Eloise…” his voice broke. From acting a contrite man earlier, his overall persona now changed. His face softened for a millisecond. His eyes locked gazes with the interrupting woman with passion and longing. He looked almost, almost in love with her.

Eloise, the supposed witch, and his lover, truly looked lovely even when wearing a simple ankle-length dress common at that time. She was a natural brunette with its length up to her waist. Her hazel-violet eyes looked normal, but as the flames continuously flickered, it reflected a mint green shade.

“That’s her?” Léa spoke up first, standing next to her husband in a guarded position.

Her presence was enough to make Bernard realize he was in a tight spot. A very tight spot.

“No, Léa, stand back,” he ordered, tossing an arm out to stop her from walking, and probably to stop her from strangling his untimely visitor.

“I’m the wife! Why should I stand back?!” Léa shouted, her hands curled up into a tight fist. She shot both of them a scathing look, but it was the supposed witch who had the audacity to grin in response.

“I told you she’s a witch! She might harm you!” Bernard reminded. But in his subconscious, he knew he wasn’t supposed to say it in front of his lover but what else was he to say? Comforting his wife first was his top priority.

Eloise shook her head and clucked her tongue. “But you didn’t seem to care about that when you had me, Bernard.”

“Eloise stop,” Bernard managed to send her a glare. “Leave, please. I’ll talk to you later.”

“No, you will not!” Léa cut in. She held onto his arm as if it was her lifeline and added, “Bernard, if what you say is true then don’t go to her!” Tears streamed her cheeks again as she glanced at the enchanting woman. “For me. For our family! For your son. Please.”

“But then what about me?” the other woman interrupted. Her gaze never wavered on her lover, confident that he would not leave her like what the wife subtly ordered. “You promised me a family too! You promised me while your penis was still inside me!”

“Quiet Eloise!” Bernard boomed.

But she was persistent.

“And your unborn child!” she touched her belly that was yet to show a baby bump and continued, “What about her? Do you not care for her?”

Bernard shook his head. It was a good blow to find out the witch was bearing his child, but a girl?

In a time where there were invasions here and there, nobody wanted a girl for a child. *Him* included.

“I care more for my son,” he gave her a cold shoulder. “My son.”

And this ultimately made the witch angry.

She lifted her chin up and snorted, her eyes shooting daggers on the Vitalis couple.

“Then, care you shall for he will pay for your trespasses against me,” she stated in an unearthly tone.

Bernard, realizing what she was about to do, shouted, “No! Eloise! Don’t do this!”

“Kill that witch now!” Léa yelled beside him.

The fire in the hearth died out and the whole room turned dark and gloomy.

Léa yelped, gooseflesh of fear broke from her skin as she clutched her husband’s shoulder.

Bernard on the other hand stood silent, cold and immovable as he stared into the deep glowing violet eyes of his ex-lover.

“Listen and listen carefully, I sayeth to you,” Eloise began, her voice having a distinct, screechy echo. For a witch in the middle of casting a curse, she wasn’t floating or even spurting electric currents from her hands. She just stood there, on the threshold, feet on the ground and her eyes aglow. “Your son will grow, yes. To become a man of stature and power. He’ll be like you, bold and handsome.” She paused and licked her bottom lip. “A hit among the ladies.” She giggled low, succubus-like, before continuing, “Overflowing with authority no one can contest. But his heart. Ohhh, his heart will turn like a stone. He’ll never learn love or even understand it. And in his thirtieth year, he’ll pay for your mistakes. His heart will stop beating. Same goes for the people under this roof tonight. He’ll lose his sight and will be damned for eternity feeding off blood. Human blood.”

“No! No! Eloise, please. I beg you. Give me a reprieve. Cast a curse on me. Not my son!” Bernard threw himself on her, holding her knees, so fast that his wife had no choice but to stand still out of sheer fear.

The witch cocked her head sideways and grinned. “You’re too late to beg, Bernard, but don’t worry. There’s a way. There’s a way to end all of this.” She petted his head, something that a master would do to his dog, and clenched her teeth, her sore heart not healing upon the sight of him groveling.

“Thank you. Oh, thank you!” the Vitalis Master said, hope visible in his eyes.

"You, your wife, your son, or those people that got cursed in this night," she paused and looked at the terror in Léa's eyes, "Can. Kill. Your. Selves. Let Death embrace you."

"NO!"

"No!"

Both Bernard and Léa bellowed.

Eloise cackled; clutching her belly and doubling over, pleased with the sheer terror she saw from their faces. She loved the man, she really did, but to cross paths with a witch's temper meant death. It was wrong of him to lie, wrong of him to hide the truth that he was married. And it was wrong of him to make her believe she was precious. The only one.

In a rage, Bernard pushed her to the floor. His hands shot straight up to her neck and strangled her with all his might.

Eloise didn't fight back. Her grin only widened as she continued to speak amidst the tightness in her throat.

"This...shall be my...curse! Let my soul be...damned in Hell if it...means your family's destruction!"

Shadows enveloped her body then. Little by little, parts of her body disappeared. Bernard, upon seeing this, hurriedly bashed her head against the ground before this too would disappear.

"You cannot escape you hear me! You will not reign over my family like this!"

"Too bad you didn't choose me or our daughter," Eloise answered, the corner of her mouth dripping with fresh blood. She gazed at the Vitalis Master with pure hate, then to his wife with contempt. And lastly. Lastly. With coldness to the boy of twelve years old who just stole a peek from the outside of his father's window.

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Castle Vitalis, Province of Liège, Belgium

(Present)

"But to me, it does!" Amanda declared, but quickly, she reevaluated her words when the realization hit her like a bullet train.

Oh God, why did I just say that?

Why indeed did she say that when in fact all she wanted was to confirm if her blood truly had a potent effect on him. She just wanted to know if a witch's blood could actually cure a vampire of

his dark eternal judgment. She wanted to see if this was the second reason why vampires hunt her kind.

But in a slip-of-the-tongue, she meant the words in a different way. In a rather personal way that included her caring for him more than she should.

His heart.

His unbeating heart.

Heck, it affected her so much that it mushed her brain.

Subtly, she cleared her throat just as he moved to submerge his body on the water.

He looked stunned himself, and somehow speechless, so to immediately divert his focus from her careless words, she changed the subject.

“Cord, what happened huh? Tell me. I want to know. I want to know how you became a vampire.”

In response, he released a long sigh.

“It’s complicated to tell.”

Amanda, too naked already to hide herself, just joined him in the tub, sitting opposite him with her knees gathered to her chest.

“Hasn’t it dawned on you that I seem t to attract complications? I mean, look at me and you. We are complicated enough.”

“Touché.” Cord grinned.

He leaned a little, swept a stray strand of her hair out of her cheek before starting:

“It all began with a witch.”

A witch?

Amanda was all ears then.

“My father was a well-known nobleman. The most powerful among his circle. When I was still small, a human to begin with, I admired him so, but that all crumbled down when my mother and I found out his affair with another woman.”

Amanda swallowed expecting where his story led to.

“And not just a woman, a witch.”

Cord’s eyes changed into stony, cold ones.

“He tried to come clean and blamed her for his mishaps saying she cast a love spell on him when in fact, he truly was lusting on her.”

Amanda shifted a little, feeling too conscious of the way he strongly emphasized the word.

“In our time, witches were known as Soldiers of Darkness. It is unknown where they get their magic and abilities. It is unknown how they cast spells. But most believe they obtained it from the bowels of Hell. Over time, I dismissed the curse as false. I reasoned that such a woman could hold no power over my family. I believed it so, but many of our servants didn’t, including some of my relatives, a few of my friends, and my parents - all of which were under the Castle Vitalis roof, celebrating my birthday. They feared the curse, so they killed themselves. I thought it was an act of stupidity. For someone to actually believe in the supernatural, fear it to the point of seeking Death just as the witch dictated. Huh, it was totally absurd. However, it was my mistake. I did not realize how powerful that witch was until her spell worked on me the moment I turned thirty.”

“That’s when you became a vampire,” Amanda filled the gap, her voice thinning to a whisper.

Cord snorted. “Amanda, vampire is just a word, a name to call us dark ones - a flaw of nature.”

“But you drink human blood in order to survive,” she cited.

“Just like that woman’s curse dictated.”

“And you fear sunlight.”

He shook his head.

“My subjects are, but not me. I’m immune to it. I have my shadows to protect me from the sunlight.”

Shadows.

“Cord, are you saying that you got that shadow ability from a witch?” Her voice climbed up a little higher. It was only then that she thanked the heavens for the water submerging her hands for they began to shake.

“That happened so many years, Amanda. When I was still hell-bent on killing them, slaughtering them, one by one, in an act of revenge.”

She couldn’t be so sure, but she saw a glint of evil in his eyes. Death. Hatred. Anger. Sure anger. It instantly strained her breathing. She shifted again, but alas, it was an inch away from him, not closer.

“I can sense dread in you, Amanda. Your heartbeat is increasing and I am not even touching or kissing you.” Cord’s concerned eyes were upon her. “Talk to me.”

“Cord, they were of my kind,” she expressed, lips slightly trembling.

“I know.”

“They live and love too.”

“I know, and I already expected you’d feel a little bit different about me when I tell you this truth.”

Amanda broke eye contact with him, bending her head, feeling partly guilty and partly - no - maybe...maybe fully afraid.

“Do you repulse me now? Do you regret that you gave yourself to me?” Cord moved a little, reaching for her right wrist, suddenly feeling possessive.

“No...no.” Amanda, despite still processing and sorting out what she truly felt, shook her head.

“Talk to me, Amanda. This is a consequence that we should face as enemies.” His grip turned like steel cuffs.

Amanda raised her head to look at him with worried eyes.

“I just...I just don’t understand what I am to you, Cord.”

Was it even the right words to say? Did she phrase it well?

She couldn’t be certain, so she hastily added:

“I mean my blood...why? It seems to have an effect on you. We seem to have a connection. My mother didn’t tell me the history of your kind, only that they were vile creatures that should be avoided. Yet, I can’t. I wasn’t able to avoid you.”

“Yes, true. We seem to have a connection,” he agreed, “So don’t be afraid of me. I’m not going to suck you dry.”

Was that promise even a genuine one? Oh, he knew that it wasn’t for before they even shared a bed, he dreamed of sucking her dry.

But a little white lie wouldn’t hurt now, would it? Especially when he wanted to ease her fears. Keep her close. Chain her inside the castle. Or maybe in his bed.

“That’s you, but how about the others in this mansion?” Amanda pointed out. “How about that rogue biter then? Does he know? Does he know that I have healing blood?”

Or at least that’s what her blood seemed like to her.

“Amanda, worry not about him. He’ll not harm you again,” he guaranteed.

But to Amanda, this wasn't enough. Heck, him already gripping her wrist way too much was already scaring her.

"Cord, I'm...I'm sorry. I need...space," she voiced out weakly.

To Cord, this was a fatal blow.

He inhaled, sharp and quick, and studied the uncertainty in her face.

"Then I'll give you that." He released her wrist and straightened his spine. "I'll give you time to think. A day or two if it's a must, but you have to know that you cannot and will not leave my castle."

Amanda refused to look at him even though she had an urge to do so. She wanted to object. She wanted to say no, but instead remained silent; her face so hot amidst half of her body immersed in the now-cold water.

"Not with him," Cord continued, a little hint of worry mixed in there.

Amanda curled her fingers and raced to cover her breasts with her arms. She suddenly felt conscious of her nakedness.

"You're mine, Amanda. Put that in your head."

And that was the last thing she heard him say when she sensed him disappear. She stared at the area where he sat and right then and there realized, with his absence, the spacious tub didn't hold much appeal anymore. It was barren. Empty.

And so was the feeling in her heart.

Chapter 29 - The Attacker

Birthdays.

Birthdays, being a joyous occasion should be celebrated with a smile, but to Amanda, it never came.

Well, it did, when Arissa, Dayana, Lady Granger, and Sir Jerome greeted her a 'happy birthday' later that evening, but her smile didn't reach her eyes. It was dull. Incomplete. Lifeless.

She managed to thank them one by one, putting a face that masked the disturbance in her heart; showing as if she was excited for the coming visit of her friends, Noman and Matteo, and a group dinner with Pamela and Heather. And somehow, she seemed to fool them.

She had mauled on the facts after her little quarrel - or if it was even called one - with Cord from morning 'til afternoon. Mauled on it over and over again, but as a result, it only gave herself a headache and another batch of questions.

Who was the witch that cursed his family? That cursed him?

Was there another way for that to be broken?

And considering her blood had an effect on Cord, was she the key to that then?

Why were they unable to steer clear from each other despite knowing they were enemies? What was she even feeling towards him? How about him? To her?

She knew for sure that desire was one of them. Attraction. The need for their skin to touch. But was there another emotion on the mix?

In the end, she felt defeated, unable to find the answers to her questions.

Maybe then, when Cord decides to show himself to her, that she can ask the questions, but that's if he has the answers to it, or that's if he even wants to answer them. She was grateful he was honest to her that time, but somehow she wished he hid the truth. At least it would have spared her conscience from grilling her.

As she stepped outside of her room, she experienced a little bit of enlightenment. Much of the residents of the castle were unjustly cursed together with the Vitalis Family. They didn't deserve it and for that, she felt a sense of pity on them. However, that part of her that feared them didn't die out. She was after all a witch. A witch that held not only an ability that they desired so much but a special blood that may or may not be their key to salvation. Heather, Pamela, Diana, and Sir Jerome were vampires but they seemed safe enough. She just didn't want to take any chances.

“Oh my God, Cait! Happy birthday!”

Noman was the first one to talk when they saw each other in the main foyer. Matteo was behind him but he remained silent, nailing his eyes on Amanda who accepted Noman’s big hug.

“Thank you, Dom,” she said, smiling a little, and then her attention drifted on his back.

“Hello, Cait,” Matteo spoke, walking closer to her and then opening his arms for an embrace.

“Matt…” Amanda accepted his warm hug as she did with Noman, but of course, there was a bit of awkwardness there.

“Happy birthday.”

“Uh, thank you.”

They both withdrew and immediately, Matteo raised a brow, confused.

“Where’s your present?” he said.

“Present?” Amanda parroted, genuinely clueless. She looked at Noman who just shrugged his shoulders.

“The necklace, you didn’t wear it,” Matteo reminded and for that, Amanda’s mouth parted a little, realizing she had actually forgotten all about the amulet.

“Uh, it’s…it’s in my room. I’ll wear it later.”

Matteo bobbed his head. He pulled a silver box no bigger than a matchbox from his pants pocket and handed it to her.

“Then you should take this too so you can wear both of them together.”

Amanda didn’t need to ask what was inside it. It was already obvious and for that, her heartbeat spiked up realizing he was subtly reminding her of his proposal.

“No, that’s not really necessary Matt,” in haste, she cooked up a reply.

“Take it Cait. I insist.”

Matteo’s eyes were cold and unyielding all of a sudden.

Noman, although clueless of the content in the box, saw the tension between the two so he wisely shoved himself in between them and expressed:

“All right! All right! It is way too early for that Matty. We should have dinner first and celebrate!”

Amanda silently thanked his interruption. She nodded and grabbed Noman’s right elbow.

"Ye-yeah...please let's go."

"Excuse me, Miss Cait," Dayana saw the opening to announce herself, "Mistress Heather and Mistress Pamela are waiting for you in the south wing rooftop garden."

Amanda smiled at her. "Yes, please lead the way Dayana."

As they climbed the grand staircase, Noman leaned towards Amanda's ear and whispered:

"You know what, I was just about to invite you for some booze in this castle's garden to celebrate your birthday, but oh my, I was surprised when Matteo told me about your invitation this morning."

The said man was following them, silent, but Amanda swore she could feel his steely gaze on her.

"I'm glad that you seem excited about my birthday Dom," she expressed with a sigh whilst watching the stairs ahead.

Without warning, Noman gripped her waist. "Wait," he said and he would have paused from walking to stare at her face if not for Amanda pushing him forward.

"Oh no," he expressed, shooting rounded eyes on her profile. "Something is bothering you, I can feel it."

Amanda remained silent, but look at him she did, coupled with a deep breath.

"Sweety, don't you dare give me that look," Noman pointed his French-tipped finger at her. "Let us discuss what's bothering you after dinner."

For the first time that day, Amanda's gloomy disposition lifted.

"Right. As always, I can't hide anything from you, Dom," she said, giving him a grateful look.

Noman scoffed and lifted his chin with pride.

"You are damn right with that!"

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By the time they arrived in their destination, Noman again was the one who exclaimed first.

"Wow. Now, this is a rooftop garden!"

He released his hold on Amanda's arm and quickly surveyed the area, stepping forward to see more of the view. Bushes of roses of different colors, blood-red cherry, and lemon trees were seen everywhere, planted on specific locations near the cobblestoned pathway. There was a white roofless pergola in the middle with wisteria vines climbing on its beams. Soft yellow lampposts

lighted the whole area and specifically on each side of the pergola which aided Noman's delighted examination.

Amanda was in awe too, but that soon disappeared when she felt a hand snake its way into her waist.

"Matt..." she voiced out, breath hitching in the process.

Matteo intentionally brushed his hand up and down her waist and pressed himself close to her, no gap visible anymore.

"Had you prepared your luggage?" he said, looking ahead of the pathway where two women appeared, sitting awhile ago in the pergola.

Amanda hid a scowl. She wanted to step forward, out of his reach, but Matteo's hot hand on her waist prevented that.

"It is not the right time to talk about that, Matt," she replied.

"Then, when is it?"

"After dinner."

A pleased sound emerged from behind Matteo's throat.

"Sounds good to me, but make sure Noman doesn't take much of your time. He seems so hell-bent on interrupting us."

Amanda dipped her eyes on one blooming red rose, a hint of regret showing there. "I can't blame him, Matt. You have changed. A lot."

Matteo's mouth opened to reply but was cut off when Heather shouted some distance away from them.

"There's the birthday girl!"

Amanda quickly wore her happy mask again.

"Heather."

"Happy birthday!"

They embraced each other: Heather being the first one to initiate while Amanda for a second hesitated.

"Thanks," she said when they withdrew. She threw a smile once again but still, it lacked luster.

"Hello, Sweetling," Pamela stepped in and gave her a cheek-to-cheek greeting.

“Pamela,” Amanda moved backward, away from the ungloved hands of the vampire woman.

“You have visitors. May I know who these gorgeous men are?” Pamela studied the said men, first Noman with a grin and then Matteo with a lift of one brow.

“Uh, sure.” Amanda silently signaled Noman to move closer. “Here is my best friend.”

“Err, correction,” Noman abruptly cut in, “The bestest best friend.”

Amanda rolled her eyes. “Yes, well, uhm, he is Noman Asghar.”

Then, she patted a hand on Matteo’s shoulder and continued, “And here is the Vice President of my father’s race car company, Matteo Nikos Threvelli. He is also my fri-”

“Fiancé. I’m Amanda’s fiancé,” Matteo was quick to fill in. He lifted a hand in between them for a handshake.

Both Amanda and Noman’s breath hitched, but it was the latter who had a more audible effect.

Noman looked at his best friend who in turn looked at him with worried eyes.

Pamela dismissed their odd reaction, too busy gazing at Matteo’s handsome smile. “Fiancé huh?” She lifted a curious brow and then reached for his proffered hand.

Amanda’s eyes widened, remembering her ability to read a person’s feelings and experiences through touch. She quickly cleared her throat and examined Matteo’s face that showed just a normal reaction.

Couldn’t he sense the vampire woman in his front? He was a powerful mage after all.

“Forced, I guess?” Pamela’s question was directed to her the moment she released Matteo’s hand.

Amanda, in response, cleared a lump on her throat.

“Excuse me?” was Matteo’s immediate reaction. “What do you mean forced?”

Pamela only answered him with a sweet smile.

“Well, uhm, let’s eat guys. Let’s bring all the conversing in the table,” Heather wisely suggested, moving in to drag Pamela by the elbow.

They all walked into the pergola; the vampire ladies leading the way while Amanda, Noman, and Matteo walking close behind, silent and observing the scenery.

When they sat on their chosen seats, Noman touched Amanda’s left wrist to catch her attention.

“Are we missing one?” he asked, serious with his eyes.

Amanda blinked and inquired, “Who do you mean, Dom?”

“Master Vitalis. Isn’t he joining us?”

By the mere mention of Cord, Amanda’s focus broke.

Why the hell did he have to ask that?

“Pfft, I don’t think that man likes to mingle,” Heather released a sarcastic laugh. She reached for her wine flute that contained a transparent red liquid and sipped on it.

“Oh, but he wants to,” entered Pamela. She stared at Matteo and then to Amanda showing a hint in her eyes that meant trouble. “Maybe he’ll come up later.”

Heather flung her hands in the air. “Not to worry, cousin. He won’t be missed,” she expressed and then turned her attention on the birthday girl sitting in the center chair. “Anyway, I have someone who likes to meet you Cait. He is my brother. He’ll probably be here any moment now.”

“Can we eat dinner anyway? I’m starving,” Noman could no longer hold his patience. Amanda, as a response, kicked his boot under the table and glared at him.

The latter only snickered.

“Sure! Sure! No problem at all!” Heather replied, not at all offended with Noman’s frankness. “Let’s dig in, please.”

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And yes, they all ate for the next two hours. Most of the conversation came from Noman and Heather who instantly clicked because of their cheerful and bold personalities. But, at one time, Noman asked why she and Pamela almost didn’t touch their plates. The two were able to conjure up a reasonable answer, but because of this, Noman was awarded again with another kick on the boot by Amanda.

Matteo chose to be silent, but that didn’t mean he refrained from observing Amanda as much as he could. He was, after all, sitting near her. He threw a hundred fleeting glances on her way that it brought Amanda feeling conscious and Noman grinning.

“This sure looks interesting,” Pamela commented after the topic of Matteo and Amanda’s betrothal was brought up by Heather. “You informed her that she’s your bride just last night right?”

Amanda stiffened in her seat, feeling uncomfortable with the subtle hints the vampire woman was bombarding her.

“Wait. How did you know?” asked Matteo with furrowed brows.

“Err,” Amanda quickly butted in, “I...I somehow...mentioned it to her.” She couldn’t be more obvious with her attempts on taking control of the conversation.

“But you didn’t mention it to me, Cait. How could you? I thought we were bestest best friends?” Noman interrupted, acting as if he was hurt, clutching his chest and pouting.

Amanda glared at him again and kicked his boot for the third time. “I will tell you everything later,” she grounded.

Noman rolled his eyes and grinned. “Suuure.”

“Does that mean you will be leaving with us tonight?” Matteo was smooth to ask. He looked at her once again, the longing in his eyes more prominent.

“Leaving?” Heather echoed, puzzlement filling her expression. “You Cait? You’re leaving tonight?”

Amanda swallowed. What was she to say now? “Uhh...mm...it’s not what it-”

“I’m pretty sure Cord would be furious when he finds out,” Heather inserted, a comment that made Amanda’s heart explode.

Oh, God.

She glanced at Matteo who in turn thinned his eyes at her.

“Cord? Do you mean the Vitalis Master? As long as I can remember, he is just your temporary landlord because of this stupid witness protection program. Why would he be furious, Cait?”

Matteo waited, both hands drawn to his chin. Noman waited too, his breath catching up in his throat.

Amanda saw that all attention was directed to her. She suddenly felt herself being interrogated, forced to confess each and every bit that happened to her and the Master. She saw how calculating Matteo’s eyes were. She knew he was beginning to suspect something was amiss with her, the castle, and everyone living inside it. He was an intelligent man and even a mage for that matter, it was easy for him to read between the lines if she’ll show a crack in her mask.

“Uhm... he...” she started, aiming to tell him an alibi, but to her relief, Pamela spoke up.

“By the way, Heather, where is your brother?”

Amanda couldn’t be sure if it was deliberate but she was thankful the topic now was diverted on another person.

“Oh my, I almost forgot about him,” Heather shifted in her seat, slightly turning to face her left side.

"I thought he was supposed to arrive here early," Pamela stated.

"Yes, yes, he did." Heather nodded. "He just didn't want to interrupt our meal so he just stayed behind the shadows."

Then, she fully turned her head to a part of the garden where it was bathed in darkness.

"Am I right, Garett?" she said, and immediately all eyes were focused on that particular area.

To Amanda's point-of-view, she saw first this Garett's clothing. He was wearing pants and a button-up shirt, black, with a full print of an inverted cross in the right chest area. Then, she noticed his nose - Roman, symmetrical, as expected of any male living in the Vitalis Castle; eyes that were a striking blue; pale lips that faintly curled upward; and then, followed by the rest of him that screamed of vampire.

Or a hot vampire in Noman's mind.

"Yes, it would be disrespectful of me if I crash your joyous party, so I decided to hide for the meantime. And besides, I'm not hungry for food. I'm hungry for something else," Garett spoke, his eyes landing on none other than Amanda.

When he arrived in their table, he bent low to kiss his younger sister in the cheek. It was a sweet gesture, a non-threatening one, but to Amanda, her blood immediately boiled. What she saw under his shirt, near his collarbone, was a tattoo of two inverted crescent moons. A significant clue she couldn't just dismiss. She clenched her fists to stop its sudden shaking and slowly stood up.

"I'm...I'm sorry..." she stuttered a little, trying her best to act calm and composed. "I'll retire first. I..." She looked at the man again and locked eyes with him for a second. At that moment, she was certain she glimpsed wickedness there. The wickedness that she saw in her attacker's eyes that night in the pond. The same ones that she saw in the Circuit murderer too. "I don't feel...well. Please, enjoy the rest of the evening."

"Cait, wait!" Matteo shouted when Amanda bolted out of the pergola without looking back.

Noman stood up wanting to follow her but Matteo shot an arm to stop him and said, "No, let me. I'll talk to her."

Amanda moved as fast as she can, passing through the pathway of the garden and into the hallway connecting the rooftop. She didn't care how rude she was with her friends, leaving them behind with only a meager explanation. All she wanted was to get away, create as much distance from the man she recognized as her attacker.

Yes, attacker.

And realizing that made every nerve in her body tense, her breathing irregular and her heartbeat erratic.

Memories of that night in the pond flashed in front of her - the lightning movement of the vampire's attack, how tight he held her shoulders as he began to sink his fangs into her flesh, the freezing feeling as he began to suck on her. It caused so much haze in her mind that it blocked her focus on the path ahead.

Then, she bumped into a hard chest. One hand shot to capture her waist while the other reached to secure her left wrist.

"Amanda."

"Caitlin!"

Cord and Matteo called out in unison.

Chapter 30 - Free of Chains

Castle Vitalis Garden Pond

Five days ago

A crack of lightning appeared some distance away from where Amanda stood. It was so strong and loud, but it didn't divert her focus on the man that continued to close in on her.

Steady were his footsteps, simply bidding his time, just like some sick old lion stalking its prey. But to Amanda, it was an advantage. It gave her enough time to plan her escape. It gave her the time to evoke the witch blood within her.

Her mother always told her that their kind had natural abilities. Powers that they can use even though they haven't reached their twenty-fifth birthdays yet. Unfortunately, her mother didn't get the chance to teach her how to summon it. A sure disadvantage indeed.

Though Amanda still doubted she had an ability, it was her best choice to fight off the man who certainly eyed her like a piece of meat. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, evoking whatever power she could use.

But then, the unexpected happened.

The angry sky flashed another batch of lightning again and this time, the man used this to his advantage.

Literally lightning-quick, he was upon her, large hands secured on her shoulders to halt her escape.

Amanda's breath knocked right out of her lungs. Her heart, she swore, could have just jumped out of her chest.

"No!" she yelled, pushing his chest away and in the process, shoved a little of the collar of his maroon long-sleeved shirt. There she saw the tattoo, or a mark, peeking itself; two inverted crescent moons she knew were supposed to be for the use of witches only. Her mother created one for her father - her soulmate. Her only lover. If the man had one, then that meant...

Could it be that he had a witch lover too?

That was the ultimate question that swam in her mind.

She stared at the man's face, just to see who he was, but she was already too late. The man was already lowering his head directly into her neck; white fangs gleaming in her peripheral vision.

"Let me go. Let me go!" she ordered, but he ignored her.

"Hmm, you smell so good just like before, woman. I certainly want to taste you." He inched nearer, his grip tightening on her shoulders.

Frantically, Amanda fought to save herself - pushing his face and kicking his groin, hoping he'd feel some pain there. It was successful. Well, sort of.

Her neck at least was spared.

But a bite was still a bite, even in the shoulder. It still hurt fucking big time.

"Ackhhh!" Amanda flipped her head back to scream in agony. She squirmed, but the man only pressed himself, jailing her using his body. She felt her flow of blood change. She felt her veins collapse. She heard the sucking noise of his mouth, his pleased groans as he took all of her.

At that moment, she remembered Cord. Remembered how delighted she felt as his fangs pierced her wrist.

Shit.

His fangs were nowhere near Cords. His felt like a jagged arrow dipped in poison. Felt like barb wires drenched in acid. But maybe, it was expected. Her blood didn't sing to him. It sang and favored the Vitalis Master.

Tears from Amanda's eyes rolled down her cheeks. She wasn't a crier but considering the current circumstances, she was disappointed with herself for not being able to fight back.

Yes, fight back.

And then, she remembered her ability. Or the possibility that she might have one.

Before her eyes rolled back and heart shut down, she gathered her will and summoned whatever ability she had.

No! I will not die like this! she cried.

Inside her then, Amanda felt the beginnings of heat. Caustic heat. She clenched her fists and there she found her fingers hardening, spewing off energy currents.

Without waiting, she grabbed the nearest body part of the man she could find - his elbow. Quickly then, the man's arm and shoulder petrified - turning gray and fossil-like.

There was a pained gasp before the attacker wrenched himself out of Amanda's flesh, glaring, and in haste, pushed her into the pond.

Amanda would have seen his face then, but sheer fatigue and loss of blood eased her eyes shut as she fell into the depths of the murky water.

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Castle Vitalis

Present

Boreal eyes versus arctic ones landed on Amanda as soon as she heard Cord and Matteo's voices.

She stared at Cord and saw that at least he looked worried enough for her as oppose to Matteo who appeared jealous. Really jealous. An almost punch-to-the-face jealous. And Amanda somehow knew why, but she was too shaken, too disturbed of the appearance of her attacker and the flashbacks she had to even care about the two men's obvious tension.

"Are you alright?" she heard Cord ask, voice low and with a hint of concern.

"She isn't, it's pretty obvious," Matteo scoffed, moving forward to stand some few feet away from them.

Cord ignored him. He didn't so much as raise his head or eyes to look at him.

"What's wrong?" he continued. He gripped her left wrist tighter, urging her to answer.

Amanda released a shaky breath. When their eyes met, she felt a sense of safety instantly.

"Cord, my atta-"

"Cait, you don't need to answer him. It's none of his business," Matteo interrupted.

The Vitalis Master still ignored him but produced an impatient huff he did.

"You feel cold, Amanda," he pointed out.

Much to the alarm in her eyes, Amanda then felt another hand grab her right arm.

"Let her go. I'll warm her up if she feels cold," she heard Matteo say.

This time, Cord glared at the man, showing the same amount of anger his competition was showing.

"Are you a walking kettle, Mr. Threvelli? A heater perhaps? I think not. So fuck off," was his blunt remark. Speedily, he pulled Amanda by the waist and turned heels. "Come with me."

But Matteo was insistent himself. "I believe I'm supposed to say that." He pulled her arm and ordered, "Amanda, let's go."

"Unhand her. Now." Cord stepped in.

"No, you do that. Not me. I'm her fiancé. It's my duty to see to her needs," Matteo voiced out, heat filling his face. "You, on the other hand, meant nothing to her. So you fuck off."

The air was thick. The tension even thicker. With how ready the two were with punching each other's faces, Amanda's state of shock died out. The issue of her attacker was important, but these two hormonal Alphas were even more.

"No. Both of you. Unhand me," she grounded, fed up with being treated like an object.

Yet, Cord and Matteo didn't.

"I'm not going to say please nor will I ask you the second time."

"Amanda." It was Matteo who voiced out first. He pulled her again but Amanda jerked her arm free.

"Stop it, Matt. Just stop it." She gritted her teeth, sending him a small frown that didn't perfectly represent the maelstrom of different emotions inside her.

Matteo, because of this, fell silent, feeling defeated, but he still looked at the Master with hate in his eyes, disliking the fact that Cord's hand was still resting on her waist.

Amanda's attention then moved to a small group behind him. Two were the vampire ladies watching them like some sort of sick T.V. drama, the other was Noman who stared at her with confusion and the last was Garett, standing behind Heather wearing a smug grin on his face.

"Cord, lead me away from here, please," Amanda stated just as she turned to look at him.

Was the Vitalis Master the lesser evil if she were to choose from the group? Maybe. Well, Noman wasn't evil so to speak, but she didn't want to drag him into her mess.

Cord was the best option. Although the fear within her that was caused by his honesty was still present, she knew he was the right choice.

The one chosen, pleased, moved to hook a possessive arm on her back, but before they could step forward, Matteo complained:

"What's the meaning of this, Cait? Why do you choose him over me?"

Amanda shut her eyes and controlled her breathing, counting to three. "I'm choosing no one, Matt."

"Then stay with me."

She shook her head and looked at him with a grave face.

"I can't. It's complicated."

"No, you don't say that."

"Just give me this night, please. There's just something I needed to fix. Urgent. It's very urgent." Her eyes wandered unconsciously on Garett and saw him still looking at her with wickedness. She clutched the back of Cord's coat in response and continued in haste, "I'll tell you everything tomorrow. You can stay in this castle if you want. There are plenty of rooms here."

"Then I'll stay," Matteo agreed although it was with a heavy heart.

Though with trembling lips, Amanda smiled a little. "Noman will accompany you for now."

She turned to face the opposite hallway, intent on leaving the area asap, but then Matteo grabbed her arm again, pulled her, and called:

"Cait."

"Ma-!"

It was an unexpected move.

His lips then clashed on hers like a flash flood on the rooftops. He held her tightly, putting an arm around her back, the same back that Cord had just claimed earlier. Their faces were so close that Amanda couldn't tear herself away.

Noman gasped, putting a hand over his mouth.

Heather showed a partly shocked, partly amused grin. The same went for her sibling.

Pamela, on the other hand, raced to shake her head, sticking her sights not on the kissing couple but on Cord, who certainly was fuming inside, showing as if he was ready to throw his deadly shadows at the audacious fake fiancé.

'No,' Pamela, the ever-wise, ever calm vampire, mouthed at him.

Cord saw the message. He wasn't one to throw a scene, especially one that came from a jealous man, so he took a sharp inhale and clenched his fists in the end. Seeing them kissing was utter torture for him, but at least, as a small incentive, she looked slightly upset. Just slightly.

When Matteo was done, he grinned and darted his tongue out to lick his bottom lip.

"I'll visit your room later," he stated, sounding as if he had just won a petty competition.

"Right," was the only word Amanda could say or was the only word her battered brain could fish out. She turned to Cord, stepping out of Matteo's hold and said, "Let's go."

Cord followed, but he inwardly cursed, displeased of what took place.

They both exited the hallway connecting the rooftop. Amanda, by this time, looked at Cord, wanting to ask where he was leading her. But in all honesty, she cared less where they were going. Just as she was away from her attacker that was enough.

Cord turned to another hallway on the left side of the third floor foyer. Amanda silently followed, but prior castle tours with Arissa told her that they were headed for the Master's chamber.

No. Not there.

Amanda opened her mouth to object, but Cord beat her to it.

"I'm confused," he said, suddenly pausing on his tracks.

She stared at him, puzzlement showing in her face amidst the anxiety she was feeling.

"I'm confused as to which issue I should tackle with you tonight," Cord elaborated and then pushed her against the burgundy wall. His left hand lifted to press it, putting an invisible barrier to keep her in. "Should I ask what made your heartbeat drum with fear or should I stick to my anger and interrogate you about that stupid man?"

"Mat...Matteo is anything but stupid," Amanda pointed out, instantly flushed with how Cord caressed her chin.

"Oh really? The way you said it makes me want to choose the second option. Interrogate you."

Amanda, with eyes not meeting his, pressed her lips thinly. "There's nothing to interrogate Cord. He is my fiancé. You're already aware of that."

"Ah, so you are acknowledging that now." He released a noise that could be compared as an annoyed sigh. "He's going to be ecstatic."

"You're acting like a boy." Her knuckles whitened, trying her best to control the trembling of her fingers.

"Hmm," Cord mumbled, "That may be so but I am a boy who worries for you. He may not have noticed but I knew, before you left the pergola, there was an instant fear in your heart. I felt it in my veins. I felt it in the blood I took from you."

"My attacker. He is here." Amanda finally admitted, but Cord only nodded once.

"I know that he lives in this castle, Amanda. I just needed you to pinpoint him for me."

"Garett," she breathed out, still not looking at him. "Heather's older brother. It's him."

There was a pause and then followed by Cord's audible nasal sigh.

"Calvin," he spoke, ice and fire mixed in his voice.

Amanda appeared lost for a moment. Who was this Calvin? She braved a glimpse at him who was staring at her with stormy orbs - his blindness not at all a hindrance.

“Calvin. Calvin. Calvin. Calvin. Calvin. Fuck, Calvin, come here this instant.”

Upon the mention of the last word, a man appeared from a dark corner of the hallway connected to narrow stairs.

“Shit, you don’t need to be so whiny,” Calvin muttered, stepping out into the light with his brows furrowed. Then, he flashed his pearly whites towards Amanda and waved a hand at her, “Hello, Amanda.”

The one greeted wasn’t able to answer as Cord swiftly inserted without even looking at him, “Garett. That’s our culprit. Chain him this instant.”

Calvin executed a low bow as if to tease him and said, “As you wish, Master Vitalis.”

Like any other vampires, he vanished, blending in with the darkness of the area.

When they were left alone again, Cord grinned and caressed her bottom lip with his thumb.

“Now, where were we?”

Amanda clenched her teeth, trying to hold back a thrilled moan. His precise attention on her was enough to make her swoon, enough to create tingles all over her body, but for now, she had to painstakingly keep them in.

“Aren’t you going to attend to my attacker first?” she asked, her line of sight landing on his lips, err...his neck.

“He can wait. He has plenty of time to spill his guts. But you, don’t. I don’t want to leave you when that Threvelli man is in my land.”

“I’m not a damsel-in-distress Cord,” she reasoned, well at least not now. “And come to think of it, I should be safer with Matteo than with you. You are, after all, my enemy. As per your words, you slaughtered my kind, exactly just like I have in my dreams.” She knew they were painful words, but she had to spill them outright. She wanted to test him.

“Those were in the past Amanda. The past!” Cord’s voice rose higher.

“But it happened still! Now tell me, tell me a good reason why I shouldn’t be afraid of you!”

This time, their eyes met - hazel-violet orbs to greenish-red ones. A raging flame of challenge versus a burning iron of purpose.

“I promised not to suck you dry didn’t I?”

“Inadequate,” Amanda hissed, disliking his choice of words. “You want to keep me in this castle. You don’t want me to leave. Wouldn’t that scream odd for you if you were in my shoes? I am not an object Cord. I am not your pantry. I am a human. I have a life outside of this place.”

She pressed a finger on her chest as if to prove her point.

But was it even her true point?

Or was there something else she wanted to tell him? Like words that opposed her previous statements?

Because yes, in all honesty, she hated herself. She hated herself for feeling for him. She may not care to admit it but yes, she just wanted to be locked in his castle, in his embrace, bathed in his warmth that made her complete and free. Free than being outside his castle.

How twisted was that? A woman lying to herself. But she couldn’t say that to him. She couldn’t tell him the truth. At least not audibly.

“Is Fate playing with me?” Cord released a resigned sigh, stepping a meter away from Amanda and opening a space for her to escape. “I’ve killed too many witches, hated them with all my dead heart, but now, I’m drawn to you - who is probably the last of your kind. Are you Fate’s answer to torture me?”

“I’m not torturing you,” she objected without delay, not moving on her spot.

Cord simply smiled, but it was one without weight.

“You are, Amanda. Standing there, acting like I have a disease, and accusing me of my past transgressions. Do you think I didn’t atone for that? I’ve lived for far too long. Guilt and darkness had been my constant companion, and because of that, sometimes it made me wish I was human again just to die and end my suffering.”

“I’m not torturing you,” Amanda uttered again, looking down, unsure of how to answer him.

Cord’s stare on her deepened.

“Then kiss me,” he suggested, “Kiss me like you did before I poured my past to you. You standing there is torture enough.”

Amanda was taken aback. What a great suggestion indeed. But she refused to move.

The corner of Cord’s mouth twitched.

“Come to me,” he said.

But Amanda kept her feet still. She lifted her head to meet his gaze, daring him to act out his command instead.

Cord's patience broke. "Shit. Such a stubborn woman you are." In a swift move, he seized her waist and pressed her body against his. His mouth collided against hers and so did her back against the wall. He moved to steady her face, one hand on her nape while the other palmed her cheek.

Amanda's moan escaped in response. She would have been alarmed with this, but somehow, it made her happy. By the heavens, it was far better for that released than confined. Her hands found the collar of his coat and boldly, she gripped them tight, pulling him closer in the process.

Their tongues dueled, igniting their desires the same as what they felt last night. And more. More. It was enough to replace the dangerous words they hid within themselves.

But in a distant area of the hallway, away from view, one didn't approve of their union: Matteo, who curled his fingers into a tight fist, blood almost draining out of his palms.

"Spy them and see for yourself how your witch got tempted by the Vitalis Master," the words of Garett rang again and again in his mind.

Chapter 31 - The Mage in His Glory

Amanda's fingers weaved their way into Cord's thick locks. She accepted him with no hesitation, making herself available for his ministrations.

Guilt may have poked her again, but she didn't let that deter her. Surrendering to her need for him was more important than her apprehension or any other matter.

Had she trusted him more because he poured himself to her?

Yes. Because he looked sincere enough while mentioning he had atoned for his sins.

Aside from immortality, with the wealth, social status, and power vampires held, no one would actually want to become human again. But Cord was willing to, just so that his suffering would end.

And hearing him share that, truly changed Amanda's perspective of him. She was no longer afraid and Cord knew that to his joy. He of course didn't want the woman he cared about fear him for what he had become. For what he had done. Yes, he had a darkened heart, he could accept that, but with her, it was always bathed in light.

"Cord..." Amanda managed to whisper once their lips parted. A burning ache inside her had started to present itself and it was hard for her to ignore.

"Come with me in my chamber," he stated. He ran the tip of his nose along her flushed cheek, her scent he had loved so much since the day they met, and to be able to bask in it without limitation now was pure bliss.

"Yes, I'd like to come with you," Amanda answered. She met his gaze and smiled at him, knowing full well what will happen there once she lies in his master bed. What happened to them last night in her room had been in her mind at a constant pace, though overlapped with her momentary fear, but still there, ever flaming. Ever needing.

Cord, if he could, would have teleported them using his shadow ability, but his shadows could only teleport their Master - him, so that meant they had to walk the rest of the hallway to get to his chamber. And that meant some difficulty considering he was aching to touch her again.

Before moving, he kissed her in the forehead, trailed it down her swollen lip, and devoured her again like a glutton.

But that would have continued all the way to his chamber if not for another interruption: Calvin.

"Cord!" his voice erupted in the air like a siren call.

Naturally, the two stopped their kiss, but it was a difficult process. Cord immediately glared at his cousin while Amanda cleared her throat.

“Fuck, what now Calvin?” he growled.

The one glared at sighed but wasn’t guilty of his interruption at all.

“Garett. He is gone,” he then informed.

The latter, in response, hissed, while Amanda gasped in shock. They looked at each other and it was Cord who immediately saw the tinge of worry in her eyes.

“Stay in your room. I’ll put my shadows there to protect you. Understand?” he instructed.

“What about Noman and Matteo? They have blood too. They could become targets or used as pawns in order to get to me.”

Amanda straightened her spine. Amidst feeling the threat in her life, she was ready to run where Noman was and protect him. But Cord had other plans.

“I’ll have Calvin secure their safety, bring them to your room if its a must. Just please don’t leave. I don’t know yet what Garett is capable of. I don’t want the pond incident to happen again.”

Cord pressed his palm on her cheek, gently, surely, assuring her as much as he could.

Amanda felt grateful for the sense of protection he was giving but somehow a part of her wanted to prove she was not a burden to him.

“I am not that helpless Cord. I’m a full-fledged witch now.”

“Yes,” he agreed, “But you don’t know yet how to use your ability - whatever that is, and besides, I love protecting you.”

Amanda blushed at this. Using the L-word aside, who knew that a vampire would actually protect a witch from another vampire?

She remained speechless so Cord used this to kiss her on the lips again. It wasn’t a kiss of goodbye really nor was it a good luck kiss. To Amanda, it was just him taking advantage of the situation.

And then, after a long minute, he pushed her to the side and said, “Now, go.”

Amanda nodded and turned heels, aiming to get to her room as fast as possible. Memories of her attack in the pond surfaced again but this time, it didn’t rattle her hard. She had two backups after all. One was her growing confidence in protecting herself due to the ability she held and two was Cord’s protection on her.

She had Matteo on her side too, who was a powerful mage, but that's if Calvin will find him asap. For now, she had to stick to what she had and hoped for the best.

When she arrived in her bedroom, the light fixtures were off. Light from the garden outside was the only form that illuminated her room.

It didn't hinder her to see her visitor though.

A man was standing at the center of her furniture set, one hand in his pocket while the other was coolly dangling along the side. Amanda's heart leaped once when she saw him, thinking it was Garett, but upon closer inspection, it was Matteo.

"Matt! I'm glad you're safe!"

She smiled, relieved, but as soon as she flicked the switch on, her mind took a hundred and eighty-degrees turn. She saw her best friend sprawled in the sectional sofa like an unconscious drunk man.

"Oh my God, Noman!" She raced to his side and carefully inspected for a bite mark in his neck. Luckily, there wasn't, but it made her feel even cautious. "What happened to him, Matt?"

Matteo, staring down at her, just ran a hand through his hair smirking, and said, "He is bothering too much, Cait. I didn't like it so I put him to sleep."

Amanda blinked twice, not registering his words at first, but as soon as she did, she stood up and consciously stepped an inch back from him.

"What's going on?" she asked, but Matteo just shrugged his shoulders.

"You know, I just realized how stupid I am for not noticing, since the very first day we stepped in this place, that this is actually the lair of vampires. Your enemy, Amanda. How could I have let this slip my attention."

"Matt..." Amanda's face heated, feeling guilty of not telling him since the beginning.

"Also, how stupid of me to toss you into their Master." His eyes turned an icy blue. "I'm supposed to guard you, but I failed. However, I didn't actually expect you'd give in to his temptation. I thought you were strong, Cait, seeing that you shove my advances for these past two years. "

"Matt, I-" she inserted, but Matteo brought his hand up to stop her.

"Uh, no. You don't need to explain it." He shook his head and glanced at the floor.

From there, Amanda saw the glint of pain, disappointment, and possibly, anger in his eyes.

"I saw it Cait, you kissing him fervently. Heard it with my own ears, your conversation earlier."

Amanda's breath hitched, stunned to know this tidbit.

"Aren't the strategy of vampires like that? They lure you into their world, make you love them, worship them, and then drain your blood and ability. Aren't these the reason why your kind is now extinct?"

She knew that. Knew it from the bottom of her heart, but she also knew that the Vitalis Master was different from the others. He was the exception.

Matteo curled his fingers, shot her a displeased look, and continued, "You know, you, as a young witch, are their last hope for justice, but it seems you are not taking your family's side."

"Justice..." Amanda sputtered, tightening her hands as well, "Where's the justice in putting a dreadful curse in a family? If that witch didn't create it, then our kind's extinction wouldn't have happened!"

"Ahh, so he had told you his past. That confirms my suspicion that you've been intimate with him." Matteo's jaw tightened.

Amanda inhaled and lifted her chin.

"Who I choose to be with is none of your concern, Matteo. I didn't agree with the betrothal. It was my mother's silly promise!"

"Silly yes, but I honored the bargain. I protected you. Made you invisible to vampires these past few years of your vulnerability. And I want you, Amanda. I love you."

"No." She immediately shook her head. "We are not going to that path. You are not using the L-word on me."

The L-word.

Yes. That.

Somehow, when Matteo used it, it didn't sound palatable at all.

In response, Matteo clucked his tongue feeling disappointed. "I can't explain more if you're not in your right mind to listen." A corner of his nose creased, seemingly disgusted of a sudden fact. "Have you given him your blood? I hope you didn't, but if you did, then your brain now lacks the blood to properly understand what I am saying."

"How dare you talk to me like that?!" Amanda scowled at him.

"No. No." He raised a hand again and gave her a pale smile. "Let's not argue Caitlin. Especially here. Let's leave this place first."

"No." Amanda, without hesitation, answered.

Matteo's lips twitched in displeasure. "Huh, I know you would say that and I know that Cord's shadows protect you, so I brought along a new friend to help me whisk you away from here."

Friend? Amanda somehow felt uneasy with the word.

"I've just known him see. Just this afternoon. He informed me of the nature of this house and it's residents and what you have been up to."

Amanda unconsciously cleared her throat. She may not be sure but she had great belief that this friend hated the Vitalis Master. Probably even have a personal vendetta against him.

"The shadows of Cord are powerful stuff, Cait, so I needed him to nullify that to get to you."

By the mention of him, two hands immediately embraced Amanda from behind, caging her arms in place.

Amanda caught a strong scent of spice and wood, something she had ignored ever since the attack in the pond, but now, this was the very clue that told her about the man in her back.

"Garett!" Her eyes widened.

"Hello, birthday girl."

On impulse, Amanda wriggled, trying to free herself, but Garett only tightened his hold on her, making sure she wouldn't touch any part of his body again to avoid getting petrified if she so wishes to use her ability.

"Stay still. You're just wasting your energy," Garett murmured near her ear.

"Fuck you!" she spat. "Matt!" she turned her attention on the man in front of her and shouted, "This man is the murderer in the Circuit! Why enlist his help? What could you possibly get from this mad union?!"

"Oh, we aim the same ending, Cait," Matteo answered whilst tilting his head to the side, acting unconcerned of her plight. "Garett and I, we want the Vitalis Master dead. But not just any kind of death, we want him to suffer."

Amanda's rate of breathing increased. "Why? What is your reason?! Tell me!"

"Because I want you of course, and he is my obstacle to getting you," Matteo replied. He then cocked his head towards Garett and continued, "He however has his own reasons which are his to tell."

The man in question released a wicked grin and pointed his eyes on the exposed skin of her shoulder.

“I just want him to suffer. See to it that he pays for his sins. Badly.”

Amanda huffed. “Huh, I’d probably expect you to say that, but you Matt, you’d go through great lengths just to get me? I’m not some damn prize! I have a will too!”

“I don’t share my possessions, Caitlin, put that in your head.” Matteo frowned at her.

Amanda, feeling helpless, gnashed her teeth. She shot Matteo a fiery look, hoping beyond hope that he’d turn into ashes with it. But he didn’t, so the next thing that came to her mind was to threaten them.

“Cord will know of this! He always does! Maybe he is even on his way here, now, as we speak!”

But her blood ran cold when Matteo just laughed out loud. Garett joined too but it was with an overconfident throaty chuckle.

“I don’t think so, Caitlin,” Matteo stated once his sick humor settled. “I had cast a barrier in the whole of this room to fool him.” He gestured a hand towards the ceiling, pointing to something invisible, and showed a smile full of pride. “This shrouds us from his ever keen attention on you, enough that we can leave in time.”

“I will never go with you!”

“Oh, but you will.” Matteo stepped forward and pulled out the amulet in his pants pocket. “Wearing this, you will.”

“No…” Amanda this time showed an alarmed face. She wriggled again, but the damn vampire was just too strong.

“Hate that man like you are supposed to. Sever any intimate ties with him. Come with me. Love me.”

It was as if Matteo was casting a spell. Every word made Amanda shiver. She tried to block them out of her hearing but with Garett behind her, securing her, she failed.

She shot Matteo a cold look just as he slipped the necklace into her neck. There were two tears that fell then, one on each eye, being unable to hold them anymore.

“I cared for you. I trusted you. How could you do this to me?” she asked, voice seemingly thinning.

“I want your love, Caitlin. Not your care.”

And after those words, Amanda's eye color changed. From hazel-violet ones, they now turned into pure swirling amethysts. She seemed to be in a trance though, her body still and her face expressionless.

"Leave us or you'll be her first victim when the amulet wakes the past memories of her ancestors inside her. You are a vampire after all," Matteo voiced out, aiming them at Garett who speedily released Amanda and stepped out of reach.

"It's a pleasure doing business with you, Lord Nikos," Garett grinned and bowed his head low in mock respect. "With the power of that amulet controlling her, Cord's shadows won't be a problem anymore."

"Good." Matteo bobbed his head.

One second was all it took for Garett to vanish on the spot. When they were left alone, Matteo studied Amanda from head to toe with lust and licked his bottom lip.

"Now, let's get out of this place."

There was a bright circle of light on the floor right below them then. Matteo reached for Amanda's waist and pulled her in; their bodies slowly disappearing just as Cord's pet panther, Bagheera, burst inside the room, growling a mad sound.

Chapter 32 - Under The Mage's Control

(Minutes earlier...)

The moment Amanda was out of sight, Cord bobbed his head towards where Calvin stood aware that he was listening to their conversation earlier.

“Go,” was his only command and with a short nod, the latter disappeared into the darkness in a blink.

Cord, in the same spot he stood, then closed his eyes and summoned the shadows around him. Right before he took this ability in a particular witch three decades back, he had a difficult time controlling them. But now, he had perfected this ability and it proved to be easy after he became their Master.

He always thought this ability useful in any situation.

Like now. Using it as a GPS to locate Garett.

It took his shadows awhile, combing the crevices of his estate until he finally declared that his rogue vampire was indeed gone. He then adjusted the coverage over a hundred-mile radius, going through the streets and structures of the city province, but alas, no result came.

He made a disappointed face then.

“What are you doing?!” a shrill voice of a woman took Cord’s attention by surprise.

It was Pamela, and she was scowling at him, pressing her mouth into a tight line, and putting her arms akimbo.

Cord snapped his eyes open and saw her standing in front of him.

“Locating Heather’s stupid brother,” he answered.

Pamela wrinkled her nose.

“You fool!” she expressed. “He isn’t the one you are supposed to be looking for! It’s Amanda’s friend!”

Cord lifted a brow. “Noman? He is harmless.”

“No!” Pamela released an exasperated sigh. “The other one! Matteo! I saw his past and felt his obsession with Amanda. That man is an ally of witches! He is a mage and a very good one. He loves Amanda just like you love her.”

A mage... Now, that's news he hadn't expected at all, but instead of mauling that fact, his focus was diverted on that one single word his cousin uttered.

Love.

She must be joking.

"Have you forgotten about the curse?" he stated, frowning at her. "I don't know love so I don't love her. I only care for her."

Pamela hissed.

"You're so stupid you know that? That care you are feeling is love. You now know how to love. It is the effect of you drinking her blood through bags since this past six years!"

Cord looked genuinely lost. "What are you saying?" he asked.

"When I touched her," Pamela began after releasing a heavy sigh, "I saw a glimpse of truth. I may yet understand why but her blood is the key to breaking your curse. Our curse! But hell, why are we talking about you?!" She then gripped his arm and shook it in alarm. "You should be looking for Matteo!"

With how panicky she looked, Cord relented. He pulled his arm free and then closed his eyes again. "Give me a moment to locate him."

Pamela nodded and after half a minute of waiting, she heard Cord's displeased groan.

"Shit," he voiced out loudly in time with the snapping of his eyes.

"What?" Pamela arched her worried brows.

"I can't feel him anywhere. Just like Garett."

"Oh, no," she shook her head. "Then that only means they are after the same person."

As if on cue, they both heard a loud bang and then a resounding growl of a predator animal: Bagheera.

"Amanda!" Cord immediately shouted.

In a snap, he left Pamela and materialized in another room: Amanda's, and in there saw his pet panther growling towards a certain bright spot. He found no sign of a human there but he knew deep within his gut that the damn mage just took his woman away.

He growled too, clenched his jaw and hands in anger.

Pamela and Calvin arrived together moments later and stood at the doorway of the receiving room with their mouths agape.

“Cord!” Pamela shouted. His back was to them but the siblings knew their Master was in the tipping point of uncontrolled rage.

“Calvin, find that vampire and bring him to me. Surely, he hadn’t gotten far.”

Calvin nodded in effect. After a short glance on his sibling’s way, he stepped backward and blended with the shadowed area of the hallway.

“Pamela, round up all the vampires in this roof. Do not let at least one leave this place. Touch all of them. See if there are any clues you can find about Garett and his plans,” Cord continued without looking back.

“I’ll try my best,” was Pamela’s reply. She inhaled a deep breath, trying to calm the shivering of her lungs, feeling afraid with the Vitalis Master whose thirst for death now resurfaced.

***

“Good morning, Beautiful.”

Those were the first words that Amanda heard when she woke up that same evening, or the next day or the second afternoon - she really can’t tell since the room she stayed in was bathed in an unusual iridescent light. There was no wall clock hanging in the walls of the enormous white room nor there was a chance to tell time with the unusual atmosphere around her.

She squinted her eyes though, finding the colorful lights too overpowering at first sight.

“Matteo…” she glanced at him and curved a small smile while elbowing herself up, “uh, good morning?” Her smooth locks that were now a little tangled fell on her back and some on her bare shoulder. The chemise that she wore looked slightly crumpled but nevertheless, pleasing to look at.

Matteo released his usual debonair smile, looking down at her as he stood at the edge of the bed. She looked beautiful in his eyes, exactly like how he expected her to be when waking up in bed - his bed.

“I made you breakfast.” He reached for the tray in the table behind him and placed it right on her linen-covered lap. “Here, dig in.”

Amanda acted stunned of course but nevertheless accepted.

“You really shouldn’t have, but uh…thank you.” Amanda consciously took the perspiring glass of water and emptied it in half. She then picked a fork and stabbed one of the diced apples in the bowl. Before she ate though, a question formed in her mind.

“Hmmm, mind if I ask where I am?” she voiced, her probing attention on him.

Matteo sighed first and then sat at the edge with half his body facing her.

“In a beach house.”

Amanda’s brow lifted in disbelief. “You own a beach house in Spa?” Maybe then, when she gets to tour the place, she might see the white sands and the blue waters but as of the moment, all she could find around her was a grand room with the usual grand furniture and fixtures and waves after transparent waves of the said iridescent lights around the walls and in the ceiling.

The atmosphere was almost magical in nature. But who was she kidding? Matteo was a mage. He could basically create a fake world easily if he so wishes.

“I didn’t know that you own any real estate in the province,” Amanda added.

Matteo shook his head then. He watched with fervor as the dice-shaped apple slipped into her mouth. “No, I just rented it for the meantime.”

“Hmf, what for?” Amanda threw him a genuine no-idea face.

Touching her chin, Matteo studied her for a moment taking note of the blush in her cheeks, the thick, curly lashes he admired so, and the fullness of her lips. He smiled in pleasure suddenly and then his attention drew on the amulet around her neck. In his trained eye, it was whirling inside with the colors red and violet, showing that it was indeed doing its magic on the bearer.

“As a sanctum,” he started, putting his hands on his lap. “Around the house, I placed a barrier where only the people I permitted to enter can pass through. This helps us keep unwanted visitors away.”

As to whom he was talking about, Amanda couldn’t guess, but she could sense some anger there when he mentioned the word visitors.

“Ah, I see,” was all she could say and started to fork another diced apple.

Matteo however wasn’t done. He grinned and touched her leg.

“This is also where we will spend our honeymoon, Caitlin. We stay here until the Grand Prix is over.”

Right. Amanda almost forgot about that one. It was understandable that Matteo would still be interested in that human activity. He was after all the Vice President of the company and he needed to maintain that facade. Amanda was the main mechanic of their team, not to mention her step-father as the owner of the company, so they were both basically expected to be present on the big day.

But that realization didn't hit her as much as the former one though.

Honeymoon. Marriage.

Amanda's breath ceased momentarily. Her eyelids fluttered having remembered something but couldn't get the drive to pull it out of her subconscious. What stayed on the surface was him proposing marriage to her in a specific balcony. She remembered not declining him but didn't understand why she refused to give him a yes that time when in fact Matteo was a husband material that would suit her. "You are serious with marrying me huh?" she asked, disbelief in her voice.

"Yup. No other woman is worthy, Caitlin. Only you." Although she wasn't finished, Matteo pulled the tray out of her lap and placed it in her side. He cupped her cheek then and leaned to bestow a kiss on her lips.

Amanda anticipated the contact, saying nothing and doing nothing, but a sudden shooting headache got her attention.

"Ughh, my head feels like it is breaking into half," was her immediate comment as she looked down and massaged her head.

Matteo ignored her actions and just sighed. He pulled away, grinning, confident on something.

"It's a normal reaction when in a parallel dimension," he reasoned whilst looking at his handiwork in the ceiling. "Well, anyway you will return to your optimum health in no time. That's why you should eat now."

Amanda nodded and glanced at the tray again. "This is so kind of you Matt."

"Taking care of you is my job as your fiancé, Caitlin."

Reaching for her right hand, he then lifted it up and showed the crystal rose ring around her finger.

"Here look at this."

Amanda's eyelids fluttered. "Oh, Matt..." she watched as the crystal rose reflected the ceiling's colorful light in its petals. "The ring is beautiful, but...I don't remember you putting this in my finger."

Matteo just shrugged his shoulders. "Well, you have it now. It suits you." He kissed her hand; his lips lingering there for a minute before he withdrew.

"T-thanks..." Amanda said, feeling flushed on the gesture. But there was something poking in her heart, trying to tell her a message that was still vague, still indecipherable.

"Now, start eating." Matteo stood up and righted his shirt with both hands. "When you're done, I'll tour you around the house and the place where you can practice your newly-acquired ability."

Amanda reacted with a snort.

"Well, that's a relief. I thought I'll be stuck up learning my ability on my own."

"That's why I'm here. Your mother wanted me to train you. Learn to control your anger. Your hatred. Teach you how to harness those powerful emotions in order to destroy vampires or defend yourself against them."

By the mention of the V-word, Amanda's eyes turn hooded.

"Vampires..." she whispered, making a mental picture of those white, pointy canines and the blood dripping in a victim's neck. Then, a blurry flash of a face appeared one that tapped a sensitive part of her heart. She was lost for a moment, blinking heavily, until Matteo pulled her out from it.

"Yes, them, vile creatures of the dark," he followed.

Amanda looked at him with a sudden burst of hatred, not for him but for those vampires that murdered her kind. The magic of the amulet was working - something that Matteo was happy about.

"I want to kill them. All of them," she declared in a stern voice.

Matteo grinned again. "I know you do, Cait. I know you do."

***

Two hours later, they were outside the house, standing side by side with their feet touching the sandy shore. Small waves hit Amanda's toes, much to her pleasure. At least she could feel the sand, wind, and water amidst the sky bathed in another roof of iridescent lights, looking fake.

"Channel all your energy in your hands. Feel the burn. Feel the ancient light of the moon touch you," Matteo instructed, sounding like a seasoned trainer. He guided Amanda's left hand up, touching her elbow with a finger. Where their skin connected, a purplish neon glow appeared.

"I can feel it," announced Amanda. She had her eyes closed, her legs pressed and her other senses opened. Even though the sun was blaring on them, there was this ancient energy flowing in her veins. It was the moon that Matteo mentioned perhaps.

"Good. Now, touch my hand."

Amanda peeled her eyelids open.

"Are you sure?"

Matteo nodded.

“Yes, don’t worry. I’m not a vampire. The effect on me is lesser.”

“But you’ll hand will still petrify,” she expressed with caution.

“Any suggestions then?” Matteo stepped in front of her, ready to press his chest on her palm just in case she refuses.

Amanda saw this and his ability to be stubborn-headed.

“None,” she muttered.

“Then, touch me.” Urging with his steely eyes, Matteo offered his right hand up.

Amanda then did, first carefully caressing the bony prominence of his knuckles and then continued with his forearm.

And just as expected, a discoloration appeared. First, it was blue, then turned to dark violet. It was followed by the cracking of his skin and then whitish patches were seen.

Matteo groaned, his face turning pale.

“Matt, are you okay?” Amanda asked, her expression full of worry.

“I’m fine, go on,” he replied, putting up a lighthearted smile.

Amanda warily did, now focusing on her deadly touch. The white patches grew bigger, covering his whole arm, petrifying not only the skin’s surface but also his flesh within - veins, capillaries, and even his flowing blood. Her eyes glowed, the tips of her hair floated and it would have continued on if Matteo’s knees didn’t buckle.

His balance swayed, causing him to kneel on the sand. This snapped Amanda’s focus and she followed him, kneeling too.

“Matteo!” she shouted, alarmed.

“In…interesting…” he spoke with his eyes squinting.

“What?” Amanda probed, looking lost but concerned.

“You just acquired the full strength of your ability yesterday yet I feel as if it had grown beyond its limit.”

He lowered his head to look at his now solidly-petrified right arm nursed by his other hand.

“Your arm!” Amanda gasped in shock as if she had just seen the effect of her ability.

"It's...it's fine. It will heal once I block the spread."

Then, Matteo murmured something unintelligible, something ancient, and right then and there, the cracks stopped from spreading to his shoulder.

"Let's go inside Matt. I'm worried for you," Amanda stood up and assisted him to do the same - the threat of her hands now gone. The amulet necklace dangled in between them though and this stayed as a reminder of what powers she can exploit.

Matteo, still kneeling, held her gaze like a gentle caress; his attention only on her.

"Caitlin..." he spoke and this made Amanda's pulse quicken. She remembered the first time they shared a kiss. The way he looked at her then was the same now, with warmth.

"If only..." he continued, but then paused and shook his head, smiling to himself. "Ahh, nothing. It's just that I feel so blessed to have you with me. Please don't leave ever."

Amanda released a small amused laugh. She rolled her eyes heavenward, unsure about what he was blabbering about.

"You sound as if I have another place to go."

She pulled him with both hands, surprised herself of the strength she held.

"Hmmm, just thinking out loud," Matteo chuckled.

By the time they were both standing, Amanda felt his uninjured arm slip around her back.

"Matt..." she said, her eyes examining how close they were suddenly.

"Steady your head. I'm going to kiss you." Matteo leaned closer towards her face - an act that somehow alarmed Amanda to her confusion. Why would she be alarmed? This man was her soon-to-be-husband! This man was the love of her life!

Right?

"Wait, Matt!" Her breath was caught in her throat when Matteo secured her nape.

"No, I can't wait to make you mine, Caitlin."

His eyes burned of need, of longing that she sensed she alone can satisfy. It somehow frightened her.

"I'm already yours, Matteo," she pressed her hands in his chest, subconsciously making a wall in between them, "I'm your bride remember?"

"Yes, but I want all of you, Caitlin. I want to make love to you. Now."

With that said, in a heartbeat, their lips connected.

Amanda's eyes widened, her mouth was frozen at that moment.

Matteo successfully pried it open with a quick thrust of his tongue.

"Mhhmm..." A little sound came out from Amanda, part of it in protest, part of it in pleasure. She felt his growing desire poking at her abdomen, stiff and confident - very confident, and she realized then he was serious of bedding her before their wedding.

"Ma...Matt, no...stop...your arm," she cried under their connected mouths.

Matteo pulled an inch away and gave her a smirk.

"You think I can't make you cum with just one hand?"

Her cheeks immediately burned.

One hand.

Why does it sound reminiscent of something so good? Something - a memory - that she treasured in her heart?

"No, it's not that," she shook her head and gave him an apologetic face. "My head still feels clogged. I'm yet to recover. Can I return to my room and rest?"

Matteo's face darkened with her subtle refusal, but nevertheless, nodded. "If you feel that way then I'll give you time. I'm not some crazed dog looking for a boner, Caitlin. I'm just a man who wants to feel your warm body pressed up against mine."

Amanda swallowed. Such a smooth way for him to say that.

"Thank you, Matteo."

She smiled at him, reaching up to cup his face and bestow a feathery kiss on his jaw.

"You go on ahead. I'll stay here and continue nursing my arm."

"I'm really sorry about that."

"No, don't be. It's part of the training." Amanda saw him strain a smile.

"Right. I'll see you at dinner."

When Amanda left, Matteo directed his attention to the ocean, specifically where his barrier met the waves.

He clenched his free hand and tightened a muscle in his jaw, thinking of the one man that still managed to seep into Amanda's consciousness despite him casting a locking spell.

"Fuck, I'm going to kill you, Cord. I definitely will for it is the only way she will completely forget you."

Chapter 33 - Unlike the Master's Hand

“This must stop! It has been almost twenty-four hours! We are not guinea pigs here!” a man whose hands were curled tightly and face flushed in anger, yelled right in front of Calvin.

He was a tall man, as tall as the one getting the complaints but his bearing and the way he dressed in regal, fluffy clothes showed he was behind his years. He was a well-respected vampire and a gentleman during his time; a politician when still human and a close friend of the Vitalis Family, so he was the one who stepped up to what he thought was unfair treatment.

Calvin, despite his noisiness, just leaned against the throne hall double door with his eyes closed, arms crossed and head cast down.

“I am done with waiting for his order! Master Vitalis owes us a carefree life! Locking us up in the mansion and making us starve is the opposite of it!” the man continued. He stepped forward and began to shove Calvin out of his way, but before his hand even contacted his shoulder, Calvin stepped to the side and gestured for the door.

“Well, how about you complain that in front of him huh?” he said, lifting an impatient brow.

The old vampire hissed. “Oh, I will!”

“Then be my guest. Enter, Sir Alfort.” Calvin twisted the brass knob, but before he could fully push the door open, his eyes turned grave.

“I want to warn you though. The Master isn’t in his sane mind right now. He might not listen to your wails.”

Sir Alfort snorted. “Might not listen?! He owes us. We wouldn’t be suffering like this if it wasn’t for his family’s curse!”

“Right, yet I doubt he cares about that now.” Calvin just shrugged his shoulder. “Just be prepared. The pain his shadows inflict isn’t the usual. Take that from Trace’s experience.”

And by the mention of Trace, Calvin’s eyes landed on the one who stood just a few distance away from where they stood, together with the other irate vampires Sir Alfort called as his worthless back-up.

“Tsk! Cocky bastard,” the old man muttered, gnashed his teeth, and looked at Calvin with disdain. “I’m done here.”

He then walked out of the hallway with heavy footsteps.

Calvin, seeing this, slipped a confident grin. “Coward bastard,” he spoke, voice low enough for only him to hear.

Trace and the others followed suit, but not before giving the double doors and in effect, the ‘guardian’ a glare.

***

“Cord, I found no clue from all the vampires I touched,” Pamela informed as she reached the base of the dais. One ungloved hand gripped the head of the sofa - her subtle way of assisting herself from losing her balance. She was after all working nonstop, using her ability to read the many vampire thoughts under the Vitalis roof through touch.

Calvin opposed it, asking her to rest, but judging from how their Master looked murderous and all when she left him that night in Amanda’s room, she didn’t spare a single minute of rest.

“Then they are a useless bunch of fuckers,” Cord grounded, saying it through his knuckles that covered his mouth. His arctic eyes never left the floor even though his cousin was just in front of him. A muscle in his jaw twitched, along with a nerve in his temple. Anger was the most prominent emotion surrounding him and it showed clearly by the way his shadows moved about in death-like stillness.

“Maybe Matteo is using his powers to hide himself and Amanda,” she deduced.

Cord shifted a little in his seat and finally dragged his eyes towards her way. “And Garett? What can you say about him?”

“They are working together,” she confidently replied and then hauled a deep breath. “When I shook Matteo’s hand last night, I saw a vision. I saw a glimpse of a man hiding behind a wall. But they were talking, planning on something that I, unfortunately, wasn’t able to capture. My guess is, that was Garett with him. I believe he is being protected by the same barrier that made Amanda invisible.”

A shadow coming from behind a column emerged and it showed Heather, who looked repentant and distressed. “If only I knew about my brother’s motives, I would have told you, Cord,” she stated.

Cord remained silent so it was Pamela who answered for him. “He has been in and out of the castle this past few years and he doesn’t seem to have a motive as to why he did this. So, no one could really guess him as the traitor.”

“Or maybe I’m just too lax on all of you,” Cord butted in. The two women turned their attention to him with confusion on their faces.

“Maybe I’ve been too detached with the north wing residents that’s why I didn’t have a clue. Maybe I should have been fucking strict.”

“Well, you were already strict,” Pamela retorted.

He scoffed. “Hmf, I highly doubt it.” Straightening in his seat, he placed both hands in the armrests and lifted his chin. “Leave you two. Get out of my sight.”

Heather swiftly nodded and stalked out of the throne hall, eager to dodge the Master’s ire. Pamela however didn’t. She studied her cousin who looked like a normal man without his blindfold on and asked, “You’ll scour the land with your shadows again for her?”

The latter inhaled long and hard, and then answered with his fangs aching, “I’ll find her soon. I know I will.”

***

That night, Amanda dined alone. Food was already prepared but she had no one to share it with much to her confusion. Matteo was nowhere in sight. She tried calling for him in every corner of the house and even scanned the shoreline and the surrounding garden, but he was nowhere to be found.

Whatever the reason was, it must have been that important for him to leave her alone in the house.

It was a welcomed change though. She could at least now use the time to ponder on the passing days which somehow seemed blurry to her. Bits and shards of memories were there, of her time with Noman and her responsibility in the Circuit, not to mention the kiss she and Matteo shared in the mountain summit and his growing attention on her, but there was this empty gap that managed to disconnect all of them.

She couldn’t pinpoint what it was but it held a strong section in her brain. And most of all in her heart. In the end, she didn’t eat that much. Overthinking seemed to do that to her.

When she left the kitchen after washing the dishes, all her time was spent pacing the balcony of her room - or correction - Matteo’s room. Why was she placed in here instead of being provided a private room for her?

Her cheeks reddened at the question.

Maybe she could request a room for herself when he arrives. Maybe he’d be a gentleman and give her privacy. But they were engaged. And getting engaged meant getting intimate, which somehow was what he was trying to do since this morning, kissing and touching her freely.

"Come on, Dom, answer the damn phone," Amanda complained under her breath. Her cellphone was pressed up against her right ear, her face showing the beginnings of anxiety and impatience. She would love to have some advice with her current situation - her disconnectedness on reality and her speeding relationship with Matteo - and Noman would have been the right person for it - if he picked up his phone - but he didn't so that led Amanda into feeling a little bit left out.

"Where the hell are you? Why are you not answering me?" she muttered to herself before cutting the call. With a heavy sigh, she crossed the space and sank into the master bed with her arms stretched out and eyes direct into the ceiling.

"Alright, I guess I'll just have to drop you a visit tomorrow. What have you been up to now?"

***

It was at ten in the evening when Amanda groggily felt a hand graze her chest, fingers making little circles from her neck down to her cleavage. She wore one of Matteo's V-necked t-shirt having been the only suitable garment for her to wear while sleeping. It wasn't an item of clothing that screamed sexy and sex though, but it seemed it was enough for the man's hand continued its way down to her sheet-covered belly.

Amanda shifted in her sleep, one leg parting from the safety of the covers giving an instant view for the visitor to take advantage of his desire-filled eyes.

Matteo cracked a grin. One that was very promising knowing he'd about to score.

"Amanda..." He continued his attempt, starting from leaning forward depressing the side of the bed even more, whispering into her ear and letting his right hand roam along her waist. "Open up for me."

"Hmmm," Amanda mumbled. Some of her consciousness returned, but it wasn't enough to open her eyes.

Matteo continued, aiming to lock lips with her.

He darted a wet tongue at the seam of her lips and murmured a command again, "Wake up. I want to make love to you."

Amanda let out a small gasp when Matteo's hand felt for her underwear under the sheet. She didn't have her belongings in the beach house, so she thought of using her own jeans to sleep but after an hour of lying in it, she realized it was too constricting. Without a second thought, she pulled them out of her legs giving no care at all, but at this very moment, with Matteo's hand cupping her sex, she realized she should have cared about it earlier. She just didn't expect him to be this bold.

Subtly, she shifted her legs to avoid his fingers. It was successful.

“Matt, you’re here,” she expressed in soft tones, poking one eye at him, seeing his handsome visage under the dim lampshade.

Matteo seized this moment to join her in bed, hover on top her with both knees spread apart.

“I’m sorry for keeping myself away from you earlier. I didn’t want you to see me pathetic-looking, still nursing on my petrified arm.”

Amanda’s attention was now fully on him. Her heartbeat sped, her lips trembled upon the thought of them naked and joined - which would happen any minute. “See, I told you so. You shouldn’t have volunteered to be my test subject,” she managed to answer without stuttering.

Despite trying not to, her cheeks turned warm, reddening, with how intimately close they were.

Matteo drew out a soft chuckle. “Well, I had recovered now. I think it’s time I give you my full attention.”

Amanda swallowed. A tingle in between her legs presented itself, but weird, it wasn’t that much arousing.

“Matt,” she started, probably to encourage him to reconsider, but she was cut off when Matteo placed a finger on her mouth.

“Shhh, let’s stop talking and start feeling. I’ve been craving to do this with you, Caitlin.”

Amanda’s mouth parted and her head buried against the pillow when Matteo lapped on her neck. His tongue skated along the skin, leaving hot wetness in its wake. She felt his hands snake into every part of her body - her legs, buttocks, arms, face, belly, and settled finally on her chest. One hand pulled the t-shirt up while the other seized her bra, pulling it away without even unhooking it.

Yeah, the advantages of being a mage, she thought out loud.

“Your nipples are asking for me,” Matteo bluntly declared as he eyed the said sensitive part with hunger.

Amanda only moaned, closed her eyes, and did nothing more.

When his mouth claimed one breast, she felt a sudden urge to shout.

And she did, arching her back to put up more pressure with his swirling tongue.

“Matteo, ahh!”

It was a sweet sound the latter had always longed to hear.

“Go on, my bride, go on. Shout my name,” Matteo urged, his breath fanning her skin.

He continued on and on, working diligently with Amanda's stimulated nipples, making her feel good. Her hands somehow found their way into his naked back, but Matteo quickly grabbed it and tossed them over her head.

"Stay still and let me show you how much I am better."

Better? Amanda wasn't even comparing her with another man yet he somehow said that. Why?

With the pleasurable sensations bombarding her, she continued to close her eyes and moaned again and again.

When Matteo's free hand shoved the sheet aside, parted her underwear, and inched down to feel her slit, she honestly expected she'd moan louder, but another sound broke out from her mouth.

A cry.

A cry of desperation.

"Ah...no!"

Shooting a surprised glare into the ceiling, the only thing that played on Amanda's consciousness was of a man. A man with fangs. And this man had touched her there, better...better than Matteo planned to do.

Amanda recoiled, but that didn't stop Matteo. He continued with plundering on her sex, dipping two fingers to rub on her clit all the while he pressed his lips on her groaning mouth.

"Mhhnnhh!"

Amanda couldn't really distinguish if the sound was of pleasure or the opposite.

However, as Matteo continued to finger her, the only thing that her brain could digest was the flashing memories of this man on top of her, doing the same but far skilled and far to her liking. This man with a blurry face seemed to treat her special - the tenderness he had bestowed and the way he venerated her body was enough evidence.

Yet who was this man?

Who...

"Mhhnnnhh!!" This time, Amanda cried out when she felt a finger past her entrance. She could tell she had been violated there in the past but it was a welcomed one with a shot of pleasure all throughout her body.

This time, however, didn't and as a result, she tore her mouth away from his.

"Matteo, no!"

She pulled a few inches away, up to the headboard whilst righting her t-shirt into position. It wasn't her intention really, but for the first time ever, she gave him a disgusted look.

Matteo stiffened seeing this, but after a second past, a frown appeared on his forehead. He straightened and sat at the edge of the bed, his body turned to her.

"What happened?" he asked straight to the point, but he knew what Amanda was undergoing as of the moment. She was remembering that fucking man.

"I'm sorry... I don't know what came over me."

Chapter 34 - The Meeting of Two

A lie.

Yes, it was but at least it would guard Matteo's pride.

Amanda looked anywhere but him. She didn't want to see how he would react. He had already passed first base, and to suddenly cut him off was a sure blow.

"I see..." he sighed, but there was a tinge of annoyance mixed there. He stood up and sported a very hard erection clearly visible under his loose pants.

Amanda, not expecting this to greet her, blinked thrice, unable to take the view.

"I am your soon-to-be-husband Cait. You should be more willing next time. I certainly don't wish to ra*pe you."

His eyes were cold, lifeless, and because of this, Amanda shuddered. She tried to muster up a reply, but failed, feeling her throat truly dry. It left her a feeling of dread.

Seriously? He wasn't considering that right? They were just starting this relationship. They were just starting to know each other intimately. Was he that impatient?

"Oh no, Cait," Matteo swiftly sat again, depressing the mattress but this time, even closer to her. He cupped her cheek and looked at her with a partly repentant face, his mage senses telling him she was afraid. "I'm sorry. That didn't come out right."

"No, it didn't," Amanda agreed bluntly, shooting a bitter look at him.

"I'm sorry. Ra*ping you would never be on my list."

"Yet you said that still."

"Because your earlier actions say you don't want me to touch you anymore."

"Because of these pictures in my head!" Amanda rebutted, giving him a helpless look. "It's too much Matt. Who is this man? Why do I have these visions?"

Matteo painstakingly evened out his breathing. He was all ears on her, but his focus was set on the vampire master wanting to kill him right then and there. Even though the necklace was around Amanda's neck and even though he had cast a locking spell on her memories, the damn vampire still managed to leak into her consciousness.

“Forget about those visions, Cait. Forget them all. They are just useless attempts to make you confused. You’re here with me. I will guard you. You don’t need to trouble yourself.”

He kissed her on the lips, putting pressure on it with his tongue hoping she’d relent and allow him to continue with his ardor, but Amanda didn’t kiss him back. She pulled her head away just as he withdrew.

“I better get my own room, Matt.”

“No, stay here,” was Matteo’s answer after a barely-audible growl. “Until you’re ready, I won’t force you. But Caitlin,” he paused and traced her bottom lip, looking at it would solid obsession, “make it fast. We will wed after the Grand Prix, three days from now, and when our vows are made, I won’t stop.”

Amanda felt a lump in her throat forming. He was this serious and she understood it. At least he gave her time. Maybe by then, she’d be open to his touch.

“Go back to sleep. I’ll be in my study.”

Amanda cautiously nodded.

Matteo kissed her again, one that was chaste and short, and afterward, he left the room without a backward glance.

“God, what is happening to me?” Amanda murmured to herself right after the door slammed shut. She tucked herself in bed again, but this time the action didn’t give her much comfort. Looking at the ceiling, she continued to probe on the void in her heart and how it all connected to the visions in her head. After a while, no answer appeared but she sure felt as if these were not just random pictures, they were a memory of a past.

“Who...who are you?”

***

By morning, Amanda was greeted with a flash of lightning. Despite the barrier surrounding the premises, she knew there was a large storm brewing in the sky. She straightened, turned to look at Matteo’s side of the bed, and found that he was indeed lying next to her last night judging from the fresh crease of his pillows.

It relieved her somewhat that he kept his word. He allowed her space and that pretty much touched her heart.

She got up and went to the bathroom. There she found fresh new clothes folded in the counter with a handwritten note.

'For you, Cait. I'll see you downstairs.'

She was elated to see that Matteo got them for her. At least she'd be able to look presentable again.

Thirty minutes later, she was out of the room wearing the attire Matteo prepared - a knee-length black dress with sleeves and a good V-dip in the neckline. The amulet was still around her neck. She never took it out even when showering as per Matteo's stern instruction yesterday during the tour. She of course asked him why, but he just left it as it was, saying it would protect her from the vampires.

She proceeded silently to the kitchen counter and watched Matteo who was working something in front of the gas stove. His back was to her so he never realized she had arrived until she audibly cleared her throat.

Unexpectedly, a bluish light appeared where Matteo stood and in a split of a second, he disappeared out of her view.

"Good morning Caitlin."

To her surprise, Matteo was suddenly behind her, his arms wrapped around her waist so tightly that she could only twist a little to see his smug profile.

"Matt!"

"You slept well last night?" he asked.

Amanda contemplated on it for a while. Maybe she did if she didn't count how late she returned to sleeping after he woke her up. Not to mention how she had gone over and over again about the man in her visions. But he didn't need to know that.

"Uhm, yes I did," she lied.

"Good," Matteo placed a kiss on her temple before rounding the counter and continued working on his bacon-and-egg breakfast.

"Let's eat. I know you are starving."

***

Amanda forked on her vinaigrette-sprinkled lettuce and watched Matteo do the same with his fresh cucumber. She waited until he chewed on them before releasing the words that had been bugging her since last night, "Noman isn't answering my calls, Matt. I'd like to go out and see him. Check what he has been up to. Maybe he is just in the apartment."

Matteo's reply came as quickly as Amanda expected it to be, but it was unfortunately a negative.

“No. You can’t Cait. Not without me by your side.”

She sensed he’d be too possessive of her. Why would he create a barrier around the beach house if he didn’t? But she was undaunted.

“Then, can we go there?” she asked with hope in her eyes.

Matteo gazed at her and shook his head. “I’m expecting a guest today, so we can’t go there yet.”

Of course, he couldn’t say that he placed a sleeping spell on Noman the other night. It was probable that he’d still be in that state, especially that he was just a human. Humans get affected for days, even months.

“Who is it?” Amanda’s curiosity spiked up. She didn’t expect him to have a guest, let alone allow someone to enter beyond the barrier. It definitely got her asking who this visitor was.

But Matteo just smiled on her way and tipped her chin with his finger.

“His visit doesn’t concern you so you don’t need to know who he is, Cait.”

Amanda, although disappointed deep inside, just shrugged her shoulders.

“Right,” she murmured and continued on picking at the contents on her plate.

Matteo noticed her unusual behavior so he straightened in his seat and dropped his fork.

“Caitlin, please don’t be disappointed.”

Amanda dragged a good look at him and answered straight to the point, “I’m not. It’s just that I’m not a prisoner here Matt. I have the right to do things my way.”

“You have the freedom to do anything. Just, you are not allowed to leave the beach house without me.”

Amanda frowned. “Since when have I become a kid you needed to babysit?”

“Caitlin…” Matteo sighed and leaned close to their table, his eyes glued on her, “You are my bride. I don’t want to lose you.”

“You won’t,” Amanda assured. “I’ll be here forever with you Matt. You already own me. Where could I possibly go if not with you?”

There was a smile that broke from Matteo’s lips after hearing this. Truly, it made his heart warm after hearing her say those words, but still, he couldn’t take any chances.

“Later, Cait,” he said, “we will discuss this again later.”

"Alright, later it is then," Amanda agreed, but feeling her appetite gone, she stood up from her seat taking her plate with her. "Go tend to your guest. I will just be in my room until then."

Matteo stood up too and reached for her shoulder. "Yes, wait for me there," he said and then planted a kiss on her lips - a kiss that Amanda didn't reciprocate.

***

It was in a corridor going to her second floor room when Amanda tried calling her best friend again. Her thumb pressed heavily on the touchscreen only to receive the same response.

"Noman, dammit, why are you not answering my call!" she cried after the screen showed the disconnected call. It wasn't like him to leave her hanging. It wasn't like him to not check on her.

There was something wrong and Amanda was determined to know what it was.

"I don't need Matteo to chaperone me," she murmured under her breath, pausing in the opening of another hallway going to her room. She glanced at a connecting stair ahead, an alternative route going to the back of the house.

"I will see Noman whether he likes it or not."

With determination, she waltzed forward going to the stairs, not planning on telling Matteo of her decision. What for when she knew she'd be stopped on the spot.

The barrier in the back garden looked like mercury in rainbow colors up close. She gaped at it the moment she arrived, admiring the energy it was showing. She then tried to touch it, hoping it wouldn't send an alarm signal to its creator. Luckily, it didn't. It even surrounded her hand like it was trying to be petted.

With a deep breath, one foot stepped forward through the barrier and then another, until Amanda was fully out of the beach house vicinity, out of the cobblestoned pathways, green grass, salty waters, and sand. She smiled at the success of it and mentally patted her back.

From where she stood, she saw concrete roads up ahead and moving cars going to wherever their destination was; their headlights on since the atmosphere of the sky was basically gloomy.

"Yup, I'm in reality alright," she cheered with a nod of approval. "Now, to find Noman."

With a stretch of a hand, a taxi immediately drove to her spot.

***

"Oh, Caitlin! You're finally back!" exclaimed a middle-aged woman with a short bob. She smiled widely at her, so Amanda returned the favor.

“Hi, Madame Margot, well uhm, yeah, I’m back,” she replied whilst stopping at the base of the winding stairs. “Is Noman inside his apartment? I can’t get a hold of him and I seem to have lost my card key.”

The landlady shook her head. “Well, I haven’t seen him this morning and yesterday too, so I can’t really say. But you’re welcome to check his apartment. Just wait, I’ll give you an extra key.”

She disappeared into her room and came out after a minute with the said object in hand.

“Here, don’t lose it this time.”

Amanda gave her a sheepish smile. “Right, thanks, Madame.”

“It’s good to see you again, Cait.”

“Yeah, it’s good to see you too Madame.”

Amanda climbed up the stairs into the second floor, her heartbeat speeding up. She reached their room number and swiped the card key on the machine. When the apartment door opened, Amanda’s first instinct was to call for him.

“Dom?”

She stepped inside and scanned the readily available living space after turning all of the lights on. There was no sign of him, however, just some unfinished and rotten pack of cheese sticks in the coffee table and a bottle of empty Heineken.

“What the… where is he?” She continued in his bedroom leaving nothing unchecked. She even went to her own room just in case but Noman was absent on both.

“Dom, where are you?” Opening up her sense of hearing, she listened and listened intently for any sound, anything at all to say that he was inside the apartment, but no sound could be determined, except for the ticking of her wall clock and a sudden swoosh of the wind.

But weird, the windows were closed and she didn’t turn on the ceiling fan, so why was there a feeling of cold wind hitting her skin?

“Hey, if you are hiding from me, you better show yourself now because I’m not in the mood to play games.” Amanda walked to her bedside table and placed the card key, cellphone, and coins next to the unlit lampshade. “I am totally worried for you, Dom. You basically didn’t answer my calls and- holy shi…” Amanda’s speech was cut off when she turned and saw an intruder before her.

But not just any intruder. A man.

And this man was not Noman. He was a stranger. A stranger. Yet to Amanda’s wide-set eyes, he was familiar. Very familiar.

Amanda sensed an aura of superiority leaking out of him. She gave him a once-over, but a once-over that turned to a deeper examination of his features. He just stood there, tall and cool, with a long coat that touched his ankles and a metal cane in one hand. Clean-cut, aristocratic jaw. A face that was symmetric, handsome - really handsome - but pale. His eyebrows were well-shaped. His nose was well-defined. His haircut seemed off though, having an uneven cut in the bangs and long strands tied into a low ponytail, resting on his right shoulder.

What disturbed Amanda the most was his eyes, red ones that seemed to penetrate her soul and yet having an ability melt her. They were looking at her with such depth, such longing that Amanda couldn't understand.

Amidst his unexplained presence in the room, she thought of him not a threat until she felt it.

Strong darkness surrounding him.

In an instant, her pupils constricted and her nerves stiffened.

"Amanda..." Cord whispered, stepping one foot cautiously towards her. "I finally found you."

"You... you!" Amanda's nose flared and in a split-of-a-second, both of her hands were wrapped around his neck.

Chapter 35 - Hungry for Her

Swirls of purple and red coated Amanda's irises. Her teeth were like a wolf's in an attacking mode. Some strands of her hair floated, seemingly alive on their own. And her face was devoid of any other emotion except for hatred. Pure one.

Those were what Cord could detail out amidst seeing just whites and grays in his perspective. But he expected this. He expected this right after noticing the damn amulet around her neck.

Maybe, he could have acted cautiously when he materialized in her apartment, but after he sensed her while still in the throne room, his control snapped and his shadows immediately transported him to where she was.

The strength of her grip on his neck could never be denied though. It was truly suffocating him despite not needing oxygen to breathe. He gnashed his teeth and in reflex, held her elbows to stop her.

His back hit the wall in the end. It was so hard that a landscape picture fell down - the frame and glass broke in the process.

"Ama..n...da!" Cord managed a broken shout. Her fingertips dug deeper into his flesh, discoloring the alabaster skin there with blues and blacks. This alarmed Cord, aware that any minute she could use her witch petrifying ability.

Knowing that this was Amanda even in a trance-like spell, he should have surrendered and left the apartment, teleport away, and return in the safety of his castle, but he wasn't one to back out in a fight. Especially one with a lethal grip that he could easily avoid - if he uses his shadows.

It was truly a dilemma. To hurt or not to hurt. But in this situation, he valued his life and his life with her, so in the end, he relented.

He summoned the incorporeal blacks, ordered them to surround and immobilize her on the spot. The shadows did as they were told.

"Ackkk!" Amanda cried out, voice straining with the amount of pain that shot through her body. The shadows changed the surface color of her skin into inky black, frozen, without giving her a chance to move. "Rex...cord, I'm goi...ng to kill yo...u! I swear I- ahhh!!!"

His shadows seeped into her skin pores, tightening her nerves and delivering pain there. As a consequence, Amanda shouted again in a complete sound of pain.

Cord saw a look of dread emerge in her teary eyes. It was the usual thing. A usual effect when he turns serious and murderous. He used to savor this in his victims many, many years past but hell, this was Amanda, the woman he lov- care for, and hated watching it in her.

He successfully wrenched himself out of her deadly grip and stepped an inch away out of her reach. With a long, deep sigh, he massaged his neck, feeling the sore there - evidence that she was really strong, almost at par with him.

"Unfortunately my witch, I can't let you do that." He stood still and studied her from head to foot, examining specifically her face that still scowled at him.

It had just been two days yet he missed her so. Made him insane and snappy towards his subjects. Made him...well, not like himself.

His eyes landed on her lips, those plump flesh that he wanted devoured. He studied the creases in her forehead too, those unwanted lines that he wanted wiped out with a heady kiss. Her eyes, they were sending him cold daggers, but he planned to change them into looks of pleasure.

Those were thoughts not fit in a quarrel or in a battle. Or even in an ailing woman. Yet, Cord did, and after pondering on them for no later than two seconds, a decision was made.

With a growl as a form of warning, he brought her to bed with a rough shove. Amanda gnashed her teeth when her head hit the mattress. Then, he joined her there - his arms and legs jailing her body.

"Re...lease me!" Amanda shouted, voice mixed with displeasure and pain.

"No," was Cord stern reply. He touched her cheek for a moment, grazed his hands gently there, and then, like a meteor on sea impact, he claimed her mouth in a sizzling, brutal fashion.

His tongue shot out and danced, guiding and harassing Amanda's own without giving a heads up. He hoped that she would reciprocate, but on instinct, she bit down on his lip.

Cord growled under his breath, but he didn't withdraw. In actuality, he loved the pain it elicited, and it drew blood - blood that he graciously welcomed.

"Re...lea...se me!" she demanded again in between his tongue strokes, but Cord was deaf to it.

He continued his attack, this time suckling heavily on the skin of her neck, creating a nasty kiss mark there. He hungered for her. All of her. Not just her blood, but everything that consisted of her. Flesh. Body. Heart. Soul. And with the way everything was taking place, he didn't plan for it to end anytime soon.

But, his captive was in danger.

"Ahrg!" Amanda let out another wail as the shadows penetrated her nerve fibers. It tensed her, made her turn like a stone. Made her heart quiver into what seemed like the path to death. "Ahhh!" she screamed again, extreme pain clearly audible.

It was an unfortunate reaction that immediately lost Cord's focus. It would have been great if that syllable was born out of pleasure, but pain? Oh, how could he ignore it when his woman was crying in pain? Turning into a body with no life?!

Without contemplating further, Cord summoned his shadows back, releasing Amanda from his hold. He watched her expression ease - her brows turning relaxed, her mouth beginning to soften and her closed eyes less of creases. Her breathing too was getting normal and he expected those to continue.

But that didn't happen.

Amanda's strength returned. Her eyes popped open with the same hate that doused Cord's hope. Despite the shivering of her hands, she immediately pressed her palms against his chest, not to push him away, but to inject her retaliation. Petrify his very existence. "I'll fucking kill you!" she shouted.

Cord felt her legs scissor around his waist. He would have delighted in this position if they were making love, but with the burning feeling in his chest, it was the opposite.

"Shit."

It was a scant word to embody the dilemma in his mind.

What to do? What to do? He couldn't just summon his shadows into her again. He didn't want to hear her wail in pain the fourth time.

And then, it hit him.

The amulet.

With a clench of his jaw, he reached for the God-forsaken object in her neck, aiming to tear it away from her just like what he did days ago, but it was unsuccessful.

Amanda used her strength to bring him down the mattress, throwing her weight on top of him and in effect straddling him. Her palms still connected on his chest - the solidification of the surrounding area in the process.

Cord gritted his teeth, feeling a hot pain starting to surround the area. With his hands immediately on her wrist, he groaned and shot her a pained look.

“For all those witches that you killed, you deserve to die! You deserve to die!” she announced, but surprisingly now, Cord saw continuous tears in her eyes. It dripped into his cheeks like a mourning rain.

“I know... and I’m sor...ry... I really am...” was all Cord could say. The look of hatred in her eyes and the salty tears wetting his face was condemning him. It was roasting his guilt to the core.

Such were the circumstances of their relationship and he hated it. Hated it with all his being. Why can’t he just care for a woman without being enemies with her? Why can’t she be a normal human and him the same? But the truth in his front was real and he cannot just ignore it anymore even if her intense hatred was just born out of her amulet’s memories.

Maybe then, it was for the best. To pay for all his mistakes.

Revenge was never the answer, but he still carried it out on her kind without remorse. And now, he was paying for it. Paying for it real good. He could never be worthy of this woman. This woman that he, with all of his fucked up existence, care - no - loves.

Yes, he could finally say that he loves her. He was done denying it. True to what Pamela had revealed, he was in love with Amanda. And he was willing to accept her judgment. He was willing to cease existing if it meant her peace.

So, still caged in bed, his hands released her wrist and rested on each side, deciding not to fight Amanda anymore. He remained still, choosing to shut his eyes for he didn’t want to see her cry. Her, crying, definitely won’t be a good memory in his final seconds in life.

“Go ahead, kill me, Amanda,” he urged with a low, lifeless tone.

She didn’t reply except for a pained groan.

More female tears dripped down his cheeks. He could feel it cold despite the growing hotness of his chest.

But then, suddenly, that hotness stopped.

“But I don’t want you to die...” were the blessed words that Cord heard before he snapped his eyes open.

He couldn’t be so sure if he was happy and relieved but here she was, one hand on his chest while the other held the crushed stone - a cloud of purplish smoke evaporated in the air from it.

“Cord, I don’t want you to die...” Amanda stated again through clenched teeth. “I refuse to kill you.”

“Aman...da? My God-”

Despite the crushing stony weight of his chest, it swelled of relief and pride and desire. A desire for her.

He palmed her wet, flushed cheek, savoring the feel of her underneath his fingertips. Their eyes connected and both showed the longing in each other.

“You broke your own spell...” he pointed out, touching the corner of her wet eyes that had now changed into her normal hazel violet.

Amanda’s mouth curved into a small smile and let out a sigh of relief. “I’m not that weak, Cord. One thing Matteo doesn’t know about me is that I’m not this easily controlled. I may have some failures during this past two days, not being able to remember you, but the pain in your shadows made me see reality. It was like a fucking defibrillator.”

Cord smirked as if their battle earlier was nonexistent. “A defibrillator huh? How about you move. Get the hell out on top of me. I want to crush my weight on you.”

Her heart was still healing, but Amanda snorted and gave him a smug smile.

“With the stony damage that you have in your chest, I bet you will,” she said and then slowly climbed down off him.

But then Cord, shot out a hand to stop her. “On the contrary,” he straightened and inched his nose on her neck, “I like this position more. I have more access.”

With both hands, he caressed her décolletage. He accessed more skin with a hook of his finger in her dress neckline.

“I thirst for you Amanda,” he continued. His tongue stuck out and licked her neck.

Amanda let out a low moan. She raised her head for better coverage and Cord delighted on this.

“Drink my blood then. You’ll heal quickly if you do right?”

“Correct.”

And with that, his fangs pierced deep in her flesh.

“Ahhh...” Amanda parted her lips, letting out a soft scream of delight. Shutting her eyes, she felt wave after wave of tingles all over her body, most specifically in her veins where her excited blood coursed through. She grabbed his coat collar and held it tight for support.

Meanwhile, Cord sucked and sucked, relishing her blood’s taste and power - her power that had immensely tripled. He had felt this kind of energy before, from a witch he had killed, the previous owner of his shadows. Feeling this again now made him toss a quick question: where they somehow related?

If he was greedy like in the past, he would have bled Amanda dry just to get her life essence and ability, but he wasn't now, so as an ending, he eased his embrace, retracted his fangs from her flesh and withdrew a little to caress her again.

"Amanda, I want you."

"Mhmmm," Amanda moaned as an affirmation. She peeled her eyelids open and stared deep into him, her hands cupping his face.

"Then take me Cord. Fill me in. Right here, right now. My body is craving for you." She searched for those familiar eyes of his, the greenish brown ones, and saw them appearing, a sign that he was indeed reverting to his human self because of her blood.

Cord's chest swelled again. His right hand found her brassiere-covered breast, groped on it and asked in a stern voice, "Had Matteo touched you?"

Amanda slightly nodded.

"Yes, he kissed me, touched me, but he wasn't able to penetrate me."

A quick look of anger appeared from him towards the blasted mage, but with Amanda's swift kiss on his lips, it was immediately replaced with a firm resolve.

"Then I'll erase all traces of him."

Chapter 36 - Breathless Desires

~ Amanda ~

Not caring for the aftertaste of blood in Cord's mouth, we lip-locked as if it was a mandatory thing to do, which in our case was. It had been a long grueling two days. A painful time away made our longing grow and mature. I felt empty during those days, never had Matteo made me complete, but being with Cord now meant that I am and more.

I don't even fucking care if Matteo was looking for me at this very moment.

I wanted Cord to erase all the traces of that mage in my system and to start that of, Cord knew he must focus on my mouth first.

Our tongues twisted and flicked, exploring each other as if it was our first time. I grabbed his head, threaded my fingers through his hair, and pressed his face more against mine. Cord didn't seem against it for he groaned deep within his throat, clearly satisfied.

He felt for my breasts, but it was still confined in my dress and brassiere so he started pulling them off. This black dress was given to me by Matteo earlier this morning. I don't know if he meant to give me this because he was planning on seducing me, but I had to hand it to him, it made for a smoother process of me getting naked by Cord.

With my breasts spilling free, he groped them fully. He squeezed them tight that I had to exhale sharply. The contact felt wondrous, I could have sworn I wanted his hands there forever.

Then, he withdrew from kissing and proceeded to focus on them.

"Your nipples are so hard and eager to be pleased, Amanda," I heard Cord say just as he enveloped one with his tongue.

"Ahhh!" I let out a gasp, tossing my head back, and started grinding against his crotch. "Cord...they missed you so." I couldn't contain myself from saying that.

Slowly, he hooked one arm on my waist, turned to the side, and arranged me on the bed. I would have wanted to grind more on him, but this position we were in now was also perfect.

My dress bundled up in my waist. My underwear was still blocking the way but Cord didn't touch it yet. I just melted in him, offered myself up as he continued on suckling each of my breasts, and cleavage and my belly button and once again to my nipples for good measure.

His hands... oh his hands were delightful. His fingers were skilled with foreplay as he grazed them on all of my curves.

When he licked his way down on my waist, I felt him tear my underwear apart. I gasped out of surprise and tossed him a wide-eyed look.

“Cord!”

“You're in your room. I bet you have another one for me to tear later,” he spoke, not at all apologetic. His chin rested on the pad of my pussy. You could only guess what he was planning to do when he positions himself there.

“Come back here, I want to kiss you,” I demanded.

With a sly smirk, Cord did. He hovered on top me face-to-face in an instant and we kissed again. It was a long, precious one that was flamed up when he suddenly slipped two of his fingers in between my sex.

“Mmmhh!” I hummed in exclamation.

He tore away and grinned at me.

“Now, let me make you cum.”

“Shhhit...” I mewled, closed my eyes, and braced for impact.

With my legs already spread apart, he had my approval to do anything he wanted with me there.

His fingers disappeared and were replaced with something more delicious. His tongue. Yes, the sinful thing.

It swept on my slit first. Up and down, tasting my dripping juice. God, I immediately felt a shot of a cannon there. I lifted my hips and in response, Cord groaned and chuckled.

Yeah... He was enjoying this as much as I am.

Next, he advanced on my clit, putting pressure to open my pussy more. It bombarded me with scream-worthy sensations, but the only reactions I could make were to arch my back and bit my lip. When he swirled his tongue round and round, fireworks lit inside me.

“Oh my God! Ah!” There goes my control.

Vampire aside, he was one superb licker.

“Cord! Fuck!”

Then, his lips enveloped that swollen bud and sucked on it. Hard. So hard I swear I could have suffocated him when my legs instinctively pressed his head in between.

“Ahhh!!!”

And I fucking came with a motherload of juices.

My eyes rolled white, my breathing accelerated and my head froze against the pillow. The orgasm I had was the same as those Cord gave me. It was addictive. It was exactly what I wanted. And I know he'll be giving me another one minutes from now.

With his cock.

When my orgasm subsided, I opened my eyes to see him grinning down at me.

"What?" I asked, giving him a calculating look.

"Orgasm looks good on you. It blesses my blindness away."

I rolled my eyes heavenward and kept myself from smirking.

"Shut up and fuck me now."

He shook his head playfully at me. I thought he was giving me a no, but then I noticed him pulling out his coat and the garments underneath.

To quicken the process, I straightened to sit and helped him.

"Let me undress you, Master Vitalis," I mocked at him.

His eyes thinned, no doubt seeing me as a sly sprite, but then he smiled, his white fangs - or what used to be his fangs - displaying itself.

"Then, be my guest, my witch."

It was fun acting out, really, especially when his hands kept on groping my breasts, kneading them while I worked my way down his pants. His mouth joined on the play too. It lapped on my neck and created more kiss marks there.

Finally, we were both naked and ready for the next stage. Cord moved to claim my mouth again and I, as willing as I could be, let him do as he pleases.

My hands found their way on his stiff cock poking at my belly. I wrapped it with one hand and it twitched like living steel. The head and its veins along his shaft felt great underneath my fingertips. I couldn't be happier that this was Cord's I am boldly holding and not Matteo's.

"Shit, if you continue groping that Amanda, I might blow myself on you," he painstakingly expressed, lifting his head up from my cleavage.

I bit my bottom lip. "How about you blow them inside me now, huh? You'd prefer that right?"

His eyes turned stormy as my words hit him.

“I would have loved to prolong the moment more, but if you insist.”

I yelped when he hooked my leg up, putting it over his shoulder. I found the position new but hot, and damn, I couldn’t deny my excitement for it.

Then, he pointed his blunt tip on my sex. I felt it right in my entrance.

“Push it,” I urged, staring at Cord with enough authority.

His lips curved into a small smile and then, his thrust came. One move was all it took for us to be joined in one.

“Cord! Shit!”

“You’re swallowing me whole, my witch. Are you sure you’re not using your spell?” he threw me a playful look.

I threw my other leg over his free shoulder and pressed my bottom against his groin. “Damn vampire, I’m not.”

“Fuck, Amanda. I’m going to pummel you rough.”

“Do it,” I dared and without a second thought, he willingly accepted.

He unsheathed his shaft and pushed inside me again. First, it was sweet and tender. Second, it was the same. Then, the third made me scream out loud for fuck, it was swift and brutally rough.

The unsheathing and thrusting was a constant cycle for the next minutes. It was the right movement for me to turn into jelly under him. The rhythm he was building up was undoubtedly the best in a man. It was turning both of us delirious. I had to clutch the bed sheet in order to stabilize myself.

I heard him grunt, groan, curse in Latin and Greek, and clench his jaw from time to time if he wasn’t catching his breath. I myself had to close my eyes to relish the feel, but at times when I peeked at him, our eyes would meet and we’d bask on each other’s view. It was lewd, yes. But it was the romance and passion that we knew best.

“Cord...” I breathed when he arranged my legs down and started fucking me the traditional way.

“Let’s cum together,” he said just as his thumb pressed on my swollen clit, his shadows joining in by enveloping me and titillating every inch of my body.

“Oh God! Oh God! Cord!” I felt a new burst of sensations inside me. They were unreal. They were beyond heaven. They were what I craved for.

He continued assaulting my clit, pressing and rubbing it greedily. With his cock and his thumb, I could say they were a great tandem.

"Ahhh!" I shouted when my climax finally came. I gripped on my pillows and pinned my head there. I heard Cord join in with a powerful groan of his own. He continued his invasion inside me, hitting my wet pussy from the outside with his superb thrusts.

I milked him dry inside. Every drop of his semen didn't go to waste. If he has turned into a human now, and I, in my fertile time, I wouldn't care at all if his seed inside me would grow.

A little Amanda would probably be a good reason to decline Matteo's marriage proposal.

"What are you thinking about now?" Cord asked when he collapsed on top me, still breathing heavily.

I smiled at him and shook my head. "Nothing, just a wild thought about you getting me pregnant. But I know it's unlikely considering you are a vampire."

Cord must have been unprepared for his expression showed one that was taken aback. But not later than three seconds, it actually lightened and a small smile grew on his lips.

"I'm human now."

I scoffed at it. "A temporary one so to speak." I pressed a palm against his chest right where the beating was clear and pointed that to him. "This beating heart won't last long. If I'll get pregnant because you intentionally didn't use a condom, then it will be a miracle."

Cord pondered on this for a moment. He gave me a breathing space by lifting his head up and ogled at my still flushed form. "Argument taken," he finally said and then captured my mouth again.

"Oh n...o, Co...rd," broken were my words, but I needed to express it to him that instant.

He removed himself from me and gave me an arched brow. "What is it?"

I blushed like a damn virgin when I felt his cock twitch again. "You-your..."

"My what?" He smirked at me this time, no doubt aware what I was about to say.

"It's solid again and erect. Very."

"Hmmm." I had goosebumps when his mouth neared my earlobe and licked the shell of my ear before continuing, "Why not we address this shall we? You are the only woman who can solve my dilemma."

I dug my nails at his back and pressed my lips against his jaw. “Go on, Master Vitalis. Go on,” I whispered in sensual tones.

In a sudden move, he flipped me prone and attacked my nape. His cock, fuck, I could feel it pressing at the cleavage of my buttocks.

“Mmmhh! Cord!” I gasped at his weight on my back.

“Shhh... Don’t worry. I’m going to take you from behind and you are going to like it, Amanda.”

His hands fluidly ran along my spine, creating a torment there for the only thing I could do was feel the blessed sensations that it created.

“Cord... you sly vampire.”

“You’re beautiful Amanda. All of you. I own you alone. No man is going to take you away from me.”

“Yes, and I- ahhh!!!” Whatever I was about to say was thrown at the window when I unexpectedly felt his large shaft slide inside me.

His second entrance, because of his previous burst of seed, came down as smooth-as-fuck. I bucked and parted my mouth into a big scream. Again.

“Ahhh!”

Such was the fullness of his cock inside me in this kind of position. It was hitting my cervix real good.

“Cord, oh God!”

“Go on... moan for me, Amanda.”

“Shit. Shit! Ahhh!!!”

He guided me up, arranging my buttocks in the air and then pumped hard on my pussy.

“You.”

He thrust into me like a mad man.

“Are.”

Then he groped at my breasts from behind and pulled me to kneel straight up in line with him.

“Mine.”

Then we both groaned and moaned as our climax came.

“You…are…mine, Amanda, forever,” he whispered into my ear mixed with his heavy, punctuated breathing.

“Yes. Yes!” were the only words I could say. His message was clear as day. He drilled that hard into my brain using the best back-fucking any woman could receive.

“Good,” he stated and then eased out of me, his semen spurting out as he exited.

“Cord, we…need to take…a shower,” I commented breathlessly and angled my head to see him nod.

He did.

“Yes, and maybe have some shower sex while we’re at it.”

We both grinned at the thought of it.

Shit, if Matteo was looking for me now, he might be probably on his way to my apartment. What would he actually do when he finds me and Cord all tangled up?

Chapter 37 - The Day of the Abduction

Madrid, Spain, Apartamento de Meijia

Year 1820

"By blood they were cursed, and by blood it shall be undone," a woman lying naked side by side with a man said. Her head rested on his shoulder while a contemplative look on her face showed. She was a beautiful woman, hair of curly brown with gold highlights on the tips, plump lips, and creamy skin.

She straightened after a heavy sigh and elbowed herself up to see his handsome visage. "That's what my mother said," she continued.

The man beside her twinkled hope in his eyes and smiled. "I see. Then, does that mean your blood will heal me? Turn me into a human again? We could finally spend time together without fear or reproach?"

He cupped her face with both of his hands and thumbed her pinkish cheeks he admired so much. He waited for her to answer, expecting she'd give a good response, but the woman threw him a sad smile.

"Oh, Garrett. I'm afraid not." She traced his lips with her own thumb and glanced at the witch mark she created in his left lower neck before continuing, "Whether you take from me, you'll still be a vampire. Your Master, the boy who was cursed, is the only person who can do that. And he'll have to drain me in order to lift the curse."

Garrett's expression hardened and a disapproving groan appeared from deep within his throat. "No, I won't let him drain you. You won't die. I'll keep you safe, Arianna. I am willing to stay a vampire forever if it means we get to be together."

The woman named Arriana sighed and pressed her head against his bare chest again.

"I know you will protect me, Garrett. I know you will."

***

Present Day

Amanda was the first person to step out of the bathroom door. She couldn't really be sure how much time she and Cord spent there, but it seemed quite long after noticing her wall clock chiming in at twelve noon.

When she left the beach house, it was still eight. The rain had poured quite heavily then and it was still doing the same now. She could hear the rumbling sound of thunder and the strikes of lightning some distance away. It was a gloomy day truly, but it didn't bother her at all. Maybe, it even helped with masking her trails. Matteo may not have known where she was and the thought of it relieved her.

However, that relief disappeared too soon the moment she stepped inside her walk-in closet.

"I knew I'd find you here," Matteo's voice broke the silence.

Amanda's heart leaped and she gasped, palming her chest in the process and backing an inch away. "Matteo!"

Matteo didn't give her much time for he quickly jumped into her personal space and covered her mouth from behind.

"Hmph!"

"Shhh...don't scream Caitlin. It's just me." His voice was low on her ear. He was close to her. His chest pressing against her wet hair and damp bathrobe.

Tinglings of fear shot through Amanda and her face immediately felt hot. Her arms stretched out on instinct but only to be seized by Matteo with one strong hand.

Upon being captured, Amanda's first thought was Cord. Could he have heard her shout? If so, then she wished he would come to her aid for she definitely felt something different on Matteo at the moment. Something that could be likened to jealousy and death.

"I just arrived, but you know what, I honestly didn't expect you'd greet me like this."

Matteo eyes dipped low on her cleavage, admiring the beads of water making a runnel down her chest. One leg was partly exposed too, a sight that made him grin and lick his bottom lip. She was wearing underwear. It would have been better if she didn't, but this one was still sexy for his eyes to behold.

"As a gentleman, I think I should have given you time to dress up first before announcing my presence, but I kinda liked the view now."

"Hmmph---!" Amanda struggled to speak, but his palm was too tight against her mouth.

"Is the Vitalis Master with you inside the bathroom just now? I'm sure that's him, yet a bit different. His energy feels frail. Vulnerable. What changed huh?"

"Lemmughoo!" were Amanda's garbled words. She wiggled under his hold but Matteo was undaunted.

“No, I will not let you go, Caitlin. We need to go somewhere. We just need Cord to find you first. Now, move.”

“Mnnmh!”

They turned towards the door with Matteo guiding her forward but when they faced the doorway, they were immediately greeted by a very angry human wearing nothing but his black pants.

“Let her go, Mr. Threvelli,” Cord’s voice was like a sharpened blade, cold and edgy. His gaze locked on the mage, studied him eye to eye, and then dragged his sights on the alarmed Amanda. His heart sank with concern for her.

“Ah, there you are, Master Vitalis!” Matteo exclaimed, mocking him with the appellation. “I was beginning to think your senses had dulled. But you sure came too late. Maybe Caitlin’s blood affected you too much just like what Garrett had told me. You sure look more like a human now.”

Cord growled. “I said, unhand her.” If he had his vampire shadows now, he would have immobilized the bold mage on the spot, but all he could do was to clench his fists and tighten his jaw. He didn’t like how powerless he was as of the moment. He didn’t like it at all, but he didn’t regret tasting Amanda’s blood. It was a sheer pleasure that’s worth turning into a frail human over and over again.

“No. I refuse to do that,” Matteo spat out. He pressed one cheek against Amanda’s head when she tried to squirm again and threw in a confident smile. “But let’s get us all to the castle now, shall we? Your subjects have gathered and are waiting for you, oh master of vampires.”

Then, a bluish neon light appeared on the floor covering the three of them. Amanda felt the beginnings of a magnetic pull and so did Cord. When they realized it was an opening of a portal, it was already too late.

“Cor---!”

“Amanda!”

Both of them shouted. Cord’s hand stretched out in an attempt to secure her, but they all disappeared on the spot.

***

“Where?”

Amanda blinked thrice to clear the blurry pictures in front of her. There was a ringing in her ears at first but that soon faded when her panic rose after seeing the reality of her situation.

No, she wasn't in some spacious hall surrounded by vampires. She was in a closed room, lying inside a four-poser bed specifically with Matteo hovering on top of her.

"Cord! Where is he?!" was Amanda's immediate question. She tried to stand up, shoving Matteo in the process, but he brought her back against the mattress with a quick push of his own.

"I said where is he?!" She pounded at his chest with clenched fists and snarled at him.

The latter easily subdued her by locking both of her wrists on the sides.

"Hush now, Caitlin. I've sent him somewhere he wants to be."

"Then send me to him! Send me to him now!" Amanda shouted, arching her back and throwing him a demanding look.

Matteo's patience snapped. His grip on her wrists tightened and his nose flared.

"Now that's the reason why!" His voice thundered all over the antique room. "That's the reason why I want him to suffer! You care for him, don't you? You love him!"

Amanda's chest swelled and she locked eyes with him. What's the point keeping the truth now when in fact, it was already obvious judging from the way she acted.

"I do!" Her voice reverberated, a strong emotion riding with it. "I love him! And I don't want to be parted from him!" She breathed in deeply and tried to mellow her voice to at least make her point known. "So please...Matt, let me go to him."

Matteo shook his head and there was a coldness in his eyes when he said, "No. You are mine, Caitlin."

Swiftly, his head dipped and his tongue darted out to lap on her neck. His right hand released her wrist but only to explore her vulnerable curves under the bathrobe.

Amanda's legs parted, trying to knee him on the groin but it was a failure. "No! Matt! Please, no!" she pleaded but the latter ignored it.

He continued to savagely caress her jawline and neck, created nasty kiss marks on it, until he withdrew and shouted, "Why can't you just surrender to me, Caitlin?! With me, you will be safe! I will shower you love more than that vampire has given you. I will give you warmth. Family. Everything!"

Amanda's eyes welled up in tears. Her heart quickened at the boldness of her thought. Yes. She didn't want to break Matteo's heart, but she couldn't stand his aggressiveness anymore.

"I will never surrender to you," she started in a broken voice. "I will not become your bride, Matteo. Never."

A tick in Matteo's jaw appeared. He paused for a moment and acted as if he was contemplating, and then his eyes thinned at her.

"Then, so be it... So be it. I will have to use force to possess you!"

Amanda snarled at him knowing he meant to ra*pe her.

"Do it and I'll kill you," she said. Her hands warmed up and stiffened, ready to touch whatever part of his body to petrify it.

Matteo grinned in response. "Not if I tie you up first."

A glow around Amanda's wrists appeared and this turned into invisible chains. She felt it weigh down her arms.

"Matteo! Arghh!" Amanda pulled her hands up, but she failed. The invisible force on her wrists was like handcuffs secured on steel poles.

Matteo continued his attack, roughly kissing first her open mouth. Amanda bit on his lips, but he was quick to stop it with a hand on her jaw. Then, he moved to her décolletage, raining another batch of kisses there. His free hand made its way into her bottom, hooking the garter of her underwear and started sliding inside.

Amanda tossed her head from side to side, feeling waves of guilt and disgust hitting her. She wanted to cry, but controlled herself, not wanting to come out weak and helpless.

But her lips quivered and her knees trembled with every trespass Matteo made. They were just his kisses and fingers, no penetration at all, but they were all too foreign for her. All too unwelcomed. They weren't Cord's.

She groaned - the only word she could make out at the moment with Matteo's hand securing her jaw. She then pressed her eyes shut, hoping that by some unexpected miracle he'd stop.

And stop he did when an intruder appeared.

"I'll have to kill the fun, Mr. Mage," Trace's voice halted him.

Quickly and with a disappointed grunt, Matteo turned to the source.

"What's this? What's another vampire bothering me?" His eyes raked at the man standing a few distance away from the bed. Being inside the Vitalis Castle, Matteo knew he'd be surrounded by vampires, but he couldn't just teleport to another place and enjoy Amanda there. He wanted for Cord to hear her shouts and moans. He wanted to see him suffer and die as what he and Garrett agreed.

But this vampire right here somehow brought an unexpected change.

"The witch is needed in the north wing," was Trace's answer.

His back was so straight, Amanda thought he was Cord, until she focused on his face and saw too many differences with the Master's. They may have the same height, but his hair color was different, his nose was crooked, his eyebrows weren't perfectly symmetrical and his lips weren't the same as Cord's. Clearly, it wasn't him, but it was the help that she wanted still.

She would have gathered herself up and cover her exposed chest if it weren't for the invisible chains that secured her in place. Now, the only thing that she could do was to witness the two's exchange.

"This isn't what Garrett and I agreed, so fuck off," Matteo lashed at the vampire. With a final angry glance at his way, he turned back on Amanda and started undoing the ties in her robe.

Trace released a rough sigh, pulled something out of his back, and voiced out, "He said you'd say that so..."

And then a sudden gunshot was heard.

Blood splattered across the mattress and some on Amanda's chest when the bullet hit Matteo's right flank.

"Oh my God! Matt!" she exclaimed, her mouth dropping out of surprise.

Matteo slumped forward, grabbed the gunshot wound quickly and turned to the vampire.

"You son of a b*tch!"

"He knows you mages are vulnerable when hit in the liver," Trace scoffed. "It's like an Achilles heel right?" He licked the mouth of the silver gun loaded with silver bullets and grinned at the mage.

Matteo's blood-stained teeth gnashed. "Fuck....ing traitor...how-how did he..?"

"None of my business to know, so I can't answer you with that," Trace shrugged his shoulders and then tucked the gun on his back. "Anyway, adieu Mr. Mage. Thank you for restraining the witch for me. It really makes my work easier."

He stepped forward onto the other side of the bed and pushed Matteo out onto the floor head first. Amanda gasped and even though Matteo was acting like a prick earlier, still there was a pang of worry inside her heart for him.

Then, Trace joined her in bed, pulling her out of it by hooking an arm around her waist.

"You said you want to go to where Master Cord is," he said, staring at her with gleam in his eyes.

"But not with you. Release me!" Amanda demanded.

Trace managed an amused smile.

“Hmmm, feisty one. No wonder the Master is so besotted with you.”

He then hauled her up, taking extra care on her hands, making sure it didn’t hit any of his pale skin, and then pushed her into the door.

“Come, let’s get you there. He’s going to be so happy.”

Chapter 38 - The Awakening

“Amanda!” Cord’s voice resounded on a dimly lit spacious hall once he materialized in it. There was no one around except for the empty furniture sets and empty balconies above him. The chandelier lights were turned off, the lamps in the coffee tables were the same and the only thing that kept the place bright were the lightings that broke out from the sky from time to time passing through the uncovered floor-to-ceiling windows.

“Where?” he muttered to himself as he took in the room he was dumped in.

This room somehow was familiar. In fact, very familiar to him.

The first clue was the foul stench of blood in every corner and every space. Second clue was the blood-red carpet his bare feet touched. Third was the gloomy darkness of the place, the same theme in all rooms of his castle. And last, were the sinister silhouettes lurking behind the shadows. He may not clearly see them due to his temporary human eyes, but there they were looking at him with solid curiosity.

His damn biters.

“Good day, Master Cord,” a male voice emerged from one of the dark corners.

“Master Cord.”

Then, another.

“Master Cord.”

A female one sounded.

“Master Cord.”

Then, many more, in groups and in different genders.

A muscle in Cord’s face strained. His eyes thinned and he stood squaring his shoulders. Even with only his black pants on, he still looked intimidating, Godly, full of authority. His ripped torso and hard, fine-cut muscles were just an incentive of his overall stature. Human now as he was, he was still their master and one that commanded over them without question.

“Why are you all here? I didn’t summon a meeting,” he spoke. Hard as a boulder. Cold as an iceberg.

Another lightning appeared and this time, it showed that the silhouettes were now closer to him than before. Not anymore hiding behind the pillars, but standing at the edge of the balustrade.

“Behold! Our master has finally returned!” Then, one voice emerged from all the rest. It was with so much confidence and boldness that Cord immediately knew to whom.

“Garrett, you bastard. What is the meaning of this?” He looked at a particular corner, right straight to him, and stared at it long and hard before seeing the snickering buffoon stepping out into the little light.

“It is what you see. You are in the north wing. The place where you have tried so hard to ignore,” Garrett answered.

Cord didn’t need to examine the room again. He knew this all along.

“And what are you gathering about? Don’t tell me you’ve thrown another soirée without my permission?”

“Nope. This isn’t a party.” Garrett shook his head and a smug smile appeared in his face. “They have all come here to listen to your side of the story.”

All?

It didn’t seem so for Calvin was nowhere in sight. His sister too and Heather. The servants he deemed loyal to him were absent. The vampires that stood around him now were those that lavished and enjoyed their life as being a vampire.

“Story?” Cord parroted, shoving his deduction on the situation at the back of his mind, but only temporary. What story could he possibly share? They knew about the curse. They couldn’t have taken interest in his mundane, close-to-a-hermit life, have they?

“You see, your loyal vampire subjects…” he waved a hand all over the room and grinned, “have grown anxious because of your recent activities with a certain woman.”

Then, his hand stopped, pointing to an open balcony just on their left side.

Cord jerked and his eyes rounded after seeing Amanda restrained by Trace. Her hands were on each side, but they seemed to be immovable. She had a cloth wrapped around her mouth and still was wearing the bathrobe she used after their precious time in the bathroom. Their eyes met, effectively showing the turmoil in each orb.

“Aman--” Cord started but consciously, he cleared his throat and stopped. It was unwise to show his emotions in front of his subjects, much so when it was because of a woman, so he stared back at Garrett, clenched his fists, and controlled his anger from seeping. “What of her?”

“Don’t play dumb Master, please.” Another voice emerged from the group in the balcony, but it was from an older man: Sir Alfort. “We only need to know the truth.” He stepped into the light, showing the frills and laces of his old-fashioned clothing.

"Is she a moon witch?"

Deep inside, Cord wanted to rip the man's throat. The hell he knew... Who could have told him the truth?

Then, his sharp eyes rested on the answer: Garrett.

But how could he have known?

"I only know that she is a witch," was Cord's clipped answer.

Garrett smirked at him, looking somehow amused.

"Then we believe that you'll kill her then?" Sir Alfort followed. "Like her ancestors? Take her witch ability and avenge the curse that befell us?"

Cord sneered at him. It was like opening wounds. Wounds that he had already healed with Amanda. On impulse, he glanced at her and although it was faint, he saw fear growing in her eyes.

"You do not ask me questions, Alfort," he managed to say after ripping his attention away from Amanda.

And then, Garrett cackled. It was so loud and confident that everyone's attention was on him.

"Really?" He ran a hand through his hair and shook his head in disbelief. "That's the best you can do? Avoid the subject?"

Cord remained silent, but deep inside he was already planning on a thousand ways to destroy this traitor.

"Now, you avoid this," Garrett continued and then started circling Cord. "Don't you know my fellow vampires that our precious Master here stands before you as a mere human? It is what you see. It is what you hear. He has a beating heart. He has color in his skin, life in his cells, and the same human eyes just like before."

His sights rested on Amanda, who in turn, threw daggers at his way despite how helpless she looked.

"He has ingested the blood of that witch." Garrett pointed at her. "The same blood in a family of witches who cursed him - no, us - in the first place."

There was a throaty groan that surfaced from deep within Cord. "Family? I do not know what you are talking about," he said.

"Fuck," Garrett's nose wrinkled. "For a Master, you are so clueless, so allow me to explain." He started circling again, making sure that everyone heard his short storytelling. "That witch there is

the answer to your curse. By blood you were cursed, and by blood it shall be undone. By taking all of her blood, you will be lifted, and in effect us too. We will turn into human again."

But of course, Cord didn't know about this. It was the one truth that he wanted to discover. But how did the damn traitor know all of this? Again, who told him about it?

"And you knew about this, how?" Cord raised the question.

In response, Garrett's chest swelled with heavy regret and as if it wasn't enough, there was a flicker of pure hate that appeared in his eyes directly to Cord.

"Let's just say I have loved a witch who knew about your curse. The one witch that you killed and drained. The one that owned your shadows originally. She is Amanda's cousin, Arriana."

Cord's eyes widened at the realization.

The shadow witch Arriana.

Hell, what a twisted fate.

"But anyway, that's not the point," Garrett then cut off, not wanting to remember how he failed to protect his lover from Cord's past rampage. "What I'm trying to say is that your subjects here are worried, Master Cord."

"We do not want to turn into a human again, Master Cord," Sir Alfort butted in. "We love being a vampire, so we don't want you to drink her blood. We want you to kill her. For us. Because you owe us. She isn't special to you, right? You...do not love her, right?"

What a mess. Of all the questions, why that?

Cord inhaled a sharpened breath. With clenched fists, he looked at Amanda, eyes devoid of emotion, and then replied, "Have you forgotten what the curse states? I don't know love."

For a moment. Just for a moment, Cord swore he saw her brows flinch and a flash of purplish light appeared in her wet eyes. He hoped then that that didn't mean anything.

"Great! Then, let's get it on, shall we?" Garrett interjected. He neared Amanda, stood right in her front, and gestured for Cord to do the same.

Only that he didn't.

"But you don't get to order me what to do," Cord spat out. "I am the Master here. You obey me, not the other way around. Give that witch some decent clothes and lock her up in the dungeon."

He then turned around and walked to the exit with heavy steps.

But then, Garrett called out. "What for? Why not just kill her? Right here, right now?"

Cord paused and turned to look at them.

“She’s my plaything and I alone decide her fate.”

He looked at Amanda once again and this time, saw purple coating her eyes. He knew that he had hit a spot. He knew he may have broken her heart with his words, but what else was he to say? If he showed emotion. If he showed his true feelings to them, then the worse would certainly befall on her.

On Garrett’s point of view though, it irked him. Displeased him. He didn’t like how things were going so without a second thought, his game plan changed.

“I don’t think that’s a good decision, Master Cord,” he stated and upon seeing Cord attempt a step towards them, he pulled Trace’s silver gun out and pressed the muzzle onto Amanda’s head.

“Ah. Ah. Ah. Stay where you are. You wouldn’t want this woman’s head blown into pieces right? I know you are powerless right now, so just be obedient and do what I say.”

Cord hissed and glowered at him. “Garrett, I know you’d drop that pathetic act sooner or later.”

Garrett snorted and so did Trace.

“I know right. It seems you just have an uncanny ability to tweak every plan I make,” he said, running the muzzle on Amanda’s carotid pulse. “But unfortunately for you, now I have the upper-hand. I’ll make you suffer. I’ll make you feel the pain you gave me when you took Arriana’s life away. Now, I’m going to avenge her death by killing your lover.”

He pressed the metal more against Amanda’s neck, but somehow this didn’t elicit any response from her. Her eyes even were snapped shut, her brows in a relaxed line, and her breathing was even as if she was just sleeping calmly during the whole exchange. Garrett and Trace somehow found it odd, but to Cord, he knew exactly what was happening.

In the periphery of his vision, just some distance away behind Trace’s back was the sudden appearance of the wounded Matteo, kneeling with one limp hand nursing his wound while the other was lifted directly to Amanda, a blue glow on his fingers appeared.

“Harm her and you’ll be sorry,” Cord announced, eyeing Amanda with intensity.

Garrett chuckled. “Huh! Your threats lack luster when you stand there powerless, Cord.”

But then, Cord shook his head.

“No, it is not me that you should be worried about,” he said, readying himself of what was to come, “But her.”

When Garrett turned to glance at Amanda, she was already released from the invisible cuffs. Her eyes were snapped open, bathed in a purplish glow, and she was baring her teeth to him.

Or particularly, to Cord.

Chapter 39 - A Promise of Forever

Somewhere in a Moroccan Region

Amanda, at age 10

"Mum," Amanda softly called, tugging at her mother's coat to catch her attention. Her mother looked down at her and smiled, the coldness of the air around them was visible through their breaths. "You let me come with you to this old cemetery to visit a tomb, yet it has been so many years now and you still haven't told me who is lying in it."

A lush forest of green surrounded them, but they weren't lost. On their way was a stone path going to an abandoned cemetery styled in the Victorian Age. Statues of angels and cherubs stood sentry on each tombstone, but there was one that didn't have any. The one that both of them were going.

Her mother, Eloisa, pursed her lip and sighed. "Hmm, such a curious daughter you are." Her eyes glinted with mirth under the ray of the sun but a little share of sadness could be seen too and Amanda, even with her young eyes, didn't miss it.

"Is it a he or a she?" she questioned as they entered the rusted cemetery gate. Truly, this dead person must have been very important since they came all the way from New Zealand just to pay their visits.

It couldn't be Amanda's father for being the Marquess of Loulé, he was buried in his homeland, Portugal. So, who might this dead be? Amanda always wondered about it since she first visited the tomb back when she was six.

"She's your aunt," her mother replied finally, and this made Amanda arch her brows.

"My aunt?" she echoed. "You mean to say we have an extended family outside us three? You, me, and father?"

Her mother chuckled in response.

"Of course we have, silly." She patted the head of her daughter, paused from walking, and stooped low to kiss her forehead. "It is just that, I chose not to mingle with her anymore. Eloise is my twin sister." She straightened and then fixed her eyes on a lone tombstone a yard away from them. "She…she is bad company. And she…died long before you were born."

There was a break in her voice that Amanda deemed out a usual occurrence. Sadness was a probable cause for it. She had seen her mother at her weakest times, especially during the death of her father and she knew her mother was trying to be strong, trying to gather herself up for her.

But it was also in these times that Amanda always remembered the one source of her mother's problems: vampires. Them.

"Was it because of the dark ones?" she voiced out loud. Unconsciously, her grip on the bouquet of roses tightened. She may not be too knowledgeable about these creatures, but she was sure as hell knew they were long-time enemies of her mother, and in effect her too.

Her mother sighed again, one that was long, deep, and filled with unexpressed emotions.

"Yes, it was because of the dark ones," she affirmed. "I guess...the curse she placed on that family became her downfall."

"Curse? What do mean Mum?" Amanda was all ears then, but her mother hid her worry with a fake smile.

"Oh, Amanda dearest," she bent to meet her daughter at eye level and continued, "You are so eager to know, but I'm afraid you are too young to process all the truth. Let's take it one step at a time shall we?"

Amanda twisted her lip and crossed her arms to her chest.

"You always say that, Mum. How am I supposed to defend myself from the dark ones if you just keep on giving me crumbs of truth?"

Those words left her mother taken aback. For a girl who hasn't even reached puberty, she was wise and very perceptive.

Eloisa ruffled her daughter's bangs and this time smiled a genuine smile.

"In due time, Amanda. In due time, you will know. Just, for now, enjoy your life being normal. It is the only treasure I could give you."

She kissed her forehead again and then proceeded to the tombstone with her hand guiding Amanda's back.

Amanda, on the other hand, kicked a medium rock out of her way. She believed her mother and trusted her fully considering she had lived for over centuries. She had a good amount of experience and knowledge to decide what was right. Anyway, so far, no one knew they were of witch blood. No one knew they were in hiding. Even her new step-father. So far, this kind of method worked well for them. Worked well with preserving their life against the dark ones that hunted them.

"Here, flowers for my aunt," Amanda spoke the second they reached the front of the tombstone.

Her mother nodded at her. "Thank you, Sweety," she said and then took the bouquet from her hand. "Let's pray shall we?"

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Present

Being taken hostage wasn't what Amanda expected after Matteo's failed attempt of defiling her. At most, she was relieved someone stopped him. Hell, she wouldn't have forgiven herself if Matteo successfully claimed her.

But.

She never thought that the vampire would end up bringing her into the north wing of the Vitalis Castle, become a damsel-in-distress, and become one of the audiences as her beloved vampire Master gets interrogated by his own subjects.

And.

She never expected she'd hear of her family's truth from a vampire's mouth.

Arriana?

Of course, she had heard of that name before. Her mother used to tell her that she had a twin sister who bore a child. A daughter. And that child was Arriana.

An unwanted daughter of a noble family.

And true to what the vampire traitor said, it was her cousin.

The twin sister was an ancient witch and a powerful one at that. However, she used black magic in order to get what she wanted. It was totally the opposite of Amanda's mother who was a moon witch. A good witch.

Maybe that was the reason why her mother never really talked about her twin sister. Maybe that's the reason why she had cut all ties with her. They were opposites and clearly, never in harmony.

Yet, under a vampire's thirst, that didn't matter. Whether good or bad witches, to them, they were all the same: food and a source for their superhuman powers.

Now, after learning about the curse and how to undo it, Amanda's heart broke. As cliché as it sounded, but it did break into a thousand pieces. She wanted to help Cord lift the curse but how would she be able to do that if her life was at stake?

Moreover, what would Cord actually do? She knew he was done with being a vampire. She knew he'd want to undo his blindness. He had a duty to his subjects too, especially to those souls who were just tied up unwillingly with the curse.

What would he actually do after knowing the truth?

However, the answer to her questions came unexpectedly.

He...he doesn't love her? She was just his plaything?! Those words rang in her mind over and over again.

Surely, her ears must have mistaken, but she heard it straight from his mouth. Seen the lack of emotions in his eyes. Felt the coldness of his actions as he turned towards the door.

It broke her heart real good, but those were enough for Amanda to face the facts head-on. They were enemies and enemies, no matter how good they were in bed, are meant to tear each other apart.

So, an emotion seeped out. Anger. Real anger. And the hatred that was purely coming from her alone. Not amplified by the amulet and not supported by the past hatreds of the dead witches. It bathed her eyes in glowing purple. It magnified her witch power times ten.

She was going to kill the Vitalis Master this time and she was going to do that before he could even drain her blood to lift the curse. To hell with her feelings for him.

Now, she doesn't even know how, but when she felt the invisible chains in her wrists released, the first victim of her wrath was Trace. He was the one nearest to touch, so with that, she grabbed his elbow from the front and injected the petrifying spell on him.

It took only two seconds before he turned to stone.

Then, in the middle of clearing his throat, Garrett was next. In a panic, he tried to sprint away from her but Amanda caught the end of his coat. She used this to pull him back and slam him to the ground, creating large cracks on the floor.

There, she grabbed his ankles. Garrett didn't even have the chance to plead when the crystallization of his skin took place.

"You bitc-" he yelled, but wasn't able to finish.

"Vampires... hell," Amanda's lulling voice emerged. With gritted teeth, she snapped her sights at Cord, eyes filled with rage, and then bellowed, "You all deserve to die!!!"

She pressed her hands together onto the carpeted floor and then, upon contact, a white purplish light appeared and coated the whole room in a heartbeat.

Those vampires present whose reflexes were slow met the same end as Trace and Garrett. Cord, although still a human, escaped the stony judgment with the help of Calvin.

Just in the nick of time, he appeared and raced to pull his Master out of harm's way using his ability of wind manipulation and flight.

“Fuck, you’re late,” Cord stated as he eyed the whole room below him turn to calcified stone.

“Sorry. I hadn’t really realized the drama would be here until Matteo appeared in the balcony,” Calvin spoke mid-jump from the rooftop. “Did you kill the mage? I can’t hear his heartbeat anymore.”

In response, Cord shook his head. He had seen him drop to the floor in time with the release of Amanda’s restraints and he never really bothered worrying if he was alive or not after that.

Calvin scoffed at the scant reply and decided to change the subject, eyeing his Master once again while making a disgusted face, “You look like human shit Cord. It doesn’t suit you at all.”

With his hair flapping to and from his face, Cord groaned and gave him a bored look. “Turning human, for the time being, has its perks.”

Calvin quickly shook his head. “Well, you better return to your vampire self before it’s too late. As you can see, Amanda is on a rampage. Only you can restrain her with that shadow of yours.”

“I know,” was Cord’s only reply. He would have wanted to, but since her blood was still in effect, he couldn’t turn into his dark self. Well, at least not for the next thirty minutes.

When they both landed on the south wing balcony, Calvin released a relieved sigh. He truly thought they’d be safe, but only then did he realize they were not when Amanda stepped out of the balcony door as if she was just waiting for them there.

“Shit!” Calvin exclaimed. Even though he didn’t mean to, fear shot through him like a lance.

“Go,” was Cord’s immediate command. He stepped forward, blocking his vampire cousin out of Amanda’s sight. “I’ll take care of her.”

“You aren’t invincible in your current form, you know that right?” Calvin pointed out through trembling breaths.

The latter sighed and bobbed his head a little. “Yes, I know.”

“Largely suicidal, but thanks. I hope to see you again in flesh, not fossilized,” was the last words of Calvin before he leaped out of the balcony, out of Amanda’s vengeful attention.

Cord tsked.

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When both were left alone, Amanda was the first to move. Every step she took, even though she floated above an inch in the air, made the floor crack and turn to crystal.

This was enough a sign for Cord to flee but he didn't. He was the cause for her rampaging state and he knew he needed to address it head-on.

Her hair floated in gentle waves and the same went with her bathrobe, showing off her slender legs and black lacey underwear. Cord relished at the sight, but it was only for a moment for when he met her eyes, his heart broke.

"Amanda..." Cord gently called out.

She was ultimately lost. Wherever she was. There was no soul seen in her eyes except for the purplish shade and the emotion of hatred.

Hatred because of him.

He did say those damnable words to her and he reckoned, he'd never be able to amend that mistake. Ever. But he just have to try.

"What a sick twist of fate," Amanda started with little echoes on her voice, "Me? My blood? Your salvation? Your curse's cure?" She ended it with a little chuckle from deep within her throat.

Cord's brows tensed.

"Know that I am genuinely lost with it, Amanda. I never knew," he uttered.

"Ohhh, but now we do. So now, tell me? Will you use me? You did say you were bored with your immortal life. You did say I'm your plaything." Her teeth showed but it wasn't because she was smiling lovingly at him. She was sneering.

Cord's knuckles whitened. A slow, heavy exhale passed through his nostrils, something that he could appreciate for the first time along with his pants and grunts earlier this morning during their trysts. Being a vampire, it never occurred to him that he needed air in his lungs, but right now, it was a useful element to calm the disorder of his emotions.

"You know very well that that's not what I meant, Amanda," he answered while giving her a hard nailed look.

Amanda only scoffed at him.

"Then what is, Cord?" She stepped forward, closer enough that their breaths mixed, and then her finger lightly, very lightly, grazed along his tense jaw. "Answer me properly else you'll suffer the same as those wretched vampires wanting me dead. Make your words count."

"I can't show my biters any emotions that they can use against me and against you," Cord replied, looking straight and unflinching to her. "Most especially you. I don't want them to hurt you. I don't care what happens to me, Amanda. I only care about you."

"Care..." Amanda echoed, bitterness riding together with it. She stepped backward once, feeling scorched by his gaze. Feeling rather conscious for someone who was done with her feelings. "That's a fucked up word for a vampire to use. Especially one that is my enemy."

"I will not drain your blood. I already told you that right after we met. Before I even knew you are my curse's answer."

He has a point. You know he has a point. There was a small voice that told her. It at least snuffed out a little of her anger.

"And what about those sub...jects you have?" Amanda's voice broke a syllable. She didn't like it so she took a deep breath and started again. "Those who were innocent. They have a life too. They deserve to live a normal life free of darkness and suffering. You owe them. You have the responsibility to give them peace."

Cord slowly closed his eyes. Her statement brought facts that needed careful thought but he didn't really need to do that when he already knew the answer.

"I can't use you. I can't...lose you," he said after looking straight at her again. "I love you, Amanda."

Those three deadly words were finally said.

Amanda would have rejoiced upon hearing it; dammit, she had longed to hear that from him; but she didn't. Instead, her anger grew more.

"You lie..." she said, quiet rage and a mixture of confusion roped her voice. Then, the vengeful energy that surrounded her further increased. It tossed her hair wildly from side to side. It even moved her bathrobe up and down. If it weren't for the tie on her waist, she would have given him a hell of a view.

Cord didn't like the unintended exposure of her legs and cleavage though but what else was he to do? He wanted to touch her, embrace her, but she was unstable. She could turn him to a statue with just a touch of her finger.

"You don't know how to love remember?" Amanda continued, her voice hitting an octave higher. "Those exactly were your words!!!"

Then, her glowing purple eyes leaked tears. Fresh tears. Tears that showed the chaos in her heart.

And Cord saw it and he grieved it.

"Amanda..." he said. It sounded so low, like a whisper, but the genuineness of it echoed through her heart. "I hoped you'd see past those words. I hoped you'd see the pain I felt as I said that."

“Shut up.” Amanda clenched her jaw. Her breathing increased in front of him, hyperventilating almost.

“I love you.” Those fucking words again.

“Shut up!”

“I love you, Amanda.” This time, Cord stepped forward. He wanted to close the gap but in haste, Amanda stepped backward, vehemently shaking her head. The energy that surrounded her weakened. Her floating hair eased and her bathrobe righted itself into position.

Tears still trickled down her eyes. Cord hated seeing it, but he just had to make his point known.

“I lov-”

“Shut up, please…” Amanda finally pleaded, breaking into sobs as she dropped onto the wet ground, her knees hitting the concrete. “Lie to me, please. Lie to me! That would be easier than to face this truth we have!”

Truth? Ah, yes, the fact that he had to kill her in order to lift his curse.

But Cord erased that dilemma in his head.

“Cord!” Amanda gasped in time with his next action.

Swiftly, he joined her on the ground, took both of her palms, and placed them cleanly against his chest. Then, he embraced her. Tightly. Very tightly so as she wouldn’t be able to escape.

“No, stop! Let me go!” Amanda frantically cried out.

Cord in response pressed his face closer, his mouth hitting the crook of her neck.

“If this eases your agony then I’m willing to sacrifice myself,” he whispered. A biting cold immediately shot through him, starting from his chest and spreading to his shoulders and back. “Turn me to stone. Erase my curse, Amanda.”

“No…” Amanda breathed out. “No!” Looking at the gloomy sky, she shook her head and cried out all her affliction through her tears.

She squirmed under him, but Cord didn’t want to release her.

“Let me go!”

“No,” he answered. “Petrify me Amanda. This is the only way you’ll be safe from me.”

“No…Cord, please. Please…” she finally broke. Their precious moments together flashed in her mind. His gentleness, his protectiveness of her, and how he made her feel treasured in bed and out.

Those superseded the hatred in her heart. She could never hate him. Never. She could never forsake her feelings for him.

“I can’t…Cord, please. I can’t kill you. I don’t want…I don’t want to lose you too,” were her words when she closed her eyes and buried her face against his shoulder, sobbing weak.

“Amanda…”

That instant, the calcification of his flesh stopped. The biting cold he felt earlier ended. It was replaced with warmth coming from Amanda’s palms. He could breathe properly this time and even move, but he didn’t withdraw even an inch.

Instead, he stayed as is, embracing the life of her.

“I’ll find a way. I swear. You won’t die and I won’t let you die. But I’m not going to release you, Amanda. I am selfish and greedy. You already know that. Put it in your head that you are mine.”

Amanda cleared her throat. With her blurry eyes, she raised her head to look at his handsome profile, her heart mending gradually.

“You…are going to chain your enemy forever?”

A quirk in Cord’s lips appeared. He looked at her stern and serious, and said, “Yes, I will, and you can’t object that.”

Amanda pulled a small smile. “I…I wouldn’t even think of doing it.”

Chapter 40 - Epilogue

“Sire, everyone is gathering in the throne hall,” the Head Majordomo announced the moment he was given permission by Cord to enter in his bed-chamber. His head was bent low; eyes cast downward giving his Master and Mistress some privacy.

Cord retracted his hand from Amanda’s flushed cheek. She was but sleeping soundly, too tired and spent because of the energy she consumed while on a rampage, and because of this, he was able to study her, from her smooth face down to the curve of her lashes. He kept a mental picture of her, the colorful one, before his time for blindness returns.

“I will go there now, Jerome,” he sighed and then stood up, but not before planting a kiss on her forehead. “Have Arissa and Noman stay by Amanda’s side until I return.”

“Yes, Sire.” Jerome nodded. “They are just waiting in the receiving room. They will come inside once you leave.”

When a foot away, Cord took something from Jerome’s offered palm, something black, and tucked it inside his coat pocket. Then, he left his bedroom with his butler in tow.

Moments later, Cord materialized in his throne, standing beside the regal chair with his eyes now wrapped in a blindfold. His shadows surrounded him, all mixing with the dark corners of the hall, but he ordered them to stay there, not wanting anyone to feel uneasy.

He stepped forward, his head positioned straight to his subjects before him - or what little subjects left after Amanda ossified most of the biters - those ones that were present in the north wing hall; those ones that wanted her dead.

“I would assume you all know what transpired thirty minutes ago in the north wing,” he questioned.

Everybody present nodded silently, all red eyes on him. But reds that weren’t filled with anger or treachery, but reds filled with worry and confusion, and sympathy for their Master.

“Then, you all know why we are gathered here,” Cord cleared his throat and then attempted to inhale, at least to lessen the seriousness of the moment, until he remembered, he wasn’t a human anymore.

Bagheera suddenly slipped under him, pressing his furry body against his knees and purred low. This made Cord tug a small smile, feeling at ease a bit because of the cat.

“Centuries had passed,” he started with determination, closing his lids from behind the blindfold, “and yet I hadn’t asked for your forgiveness on behalf of my family… my father’s mistake.”

Calvin, Pamela, Heather, Jerome, Diana, and the rest of the Vitalis Castle servants and a few family friends focused on listening. All of them somehow were taken aback when they heard their Master mouth those words. They had known him to be reserved, keeping his feelings to himself, but now, he seemed to be spilling his emotions free for them to see.

“I admit that I acted like a coward for not facing the problem head-on. I destroyed your life. I destroyed your chance for freedom. I erased your chance for a normal life. And for that, I’m sorry. I…truly am.”

Pamela covered her mouth, keeping herself from sobbing, and then Calvin comforted her with a hand on her back.

“I know…” Cord paused and cleared his throat again. It’s unnatural for him to act like this, but he just had to do so for Amanda. For the love of his life. “I know I don’t deserve to ask this of you, but I’m begging this now.”

He then placed a hand on his unbeating heart and continued, “I love Amanda. I love her with all my heart, or…” he managed a small smile, “or what’s left of it. I can’t sacrifice her life in exchange for undoing our curse. I can’t kill her.”

The tension in the room somehow lessened. Gone were the accusing eyes of some of the vampires. Gone were the confusions that rode together with the murmurs.

“I know this is a selfish act but I hope you understand. And I hope you would forgive me for deciding this on my own.”

Silence punctuated the air for a while. Cord wondered if he had expressed his emotions right. He waited and waited, watching his subjects through his gray and white outlines, and hoped that somehow someone would speak.

“Sire,” to Cord’s relief, somebody did, and this somebody was his head butler. He stood in front of the group, his gloved hands on each side.

“We are loyal to you forever,” Jerome announced, true to his heart. “Whatever you decide, we will respect it. Our lives have come and gone. Our loved ones have died centuries ago leaving us, but you have found yours now and it is as new as the call of Spring. We can’t blame you on the curse that wounded us. You are a victim too. We want you to be happy. We want you to love freely.”

“Jerome…” Cord spoke, gratitude filling his voice.

"We will respect your decision, Master Cord," Heather stepped in and then looked from left to right, on Diana who nodded and some other female vampire maids who smiled at him.

"Heather, Diana, everyone."

The remaining vampires nodded too, confirming the majority's decision.

"Thank...you," Cord spoke and out of relief, he sank in his chair, palm against his face. "Really, thank you."

For now, this solution would do. If he couldn't find an alternative answer to the curse, at least Amanda was safe from the burden and guilt. He of course would never allow himself to drain her blood just so all of them would be free. He was willing to be cursed forever if it meant she'll live, and live by his side.

If he could cry, then he would have done it seconds ago, but he can't so all he could do was to stay silent and relished the feeling of lightness inside him.

He was free, maybe not from the curse, but he was free to love, care, and live his immortal life with meaning.

Finally.

And with a woman whose blood sings to him.

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It was a few minutes past when the throne hall was vacated except for Jerome, Pamela and Calvin staying. Cord still sat on his seat but with his arms relaxed on each armrest. His head rested on the cushioned headboard while his lids were pressed together.

"You have something to ask, I bet," Cord remarked as Pamela and Calvin neared him with expectant eyes. He didn't even have to look at them to see that they were standing at the bottom of the dais.

"Yes," Calvin spoke first, "we want to clarify something Cord."

"Speak then," was the Master's reply. His eyes were still closed.

"As per Garrett's words, and you yourself know, the owner of your shadows was the witch Arriana, right?"

"Yes," Cord confirmed.

"But Arriana..." Pamela, this time, inserted herself. She watched as the Master straightened his head and looked at her direction. "And Amanda, they have the same blood of witches coursing through their veins. Why wasn't the curse lifted when you drained her blood years ago? Didn't you feel it?"

"I didn't," quickly, Cord replied. "Nothing changed inside me." He paused for a moment, remembering himself as his fangs sank into her flesh. "But the moment I bit her, I discovered she was my half-sister." One side of his mouth lifted into what looked like a cocky smile but it disappeared in just a blink of an eye. "Hmf, you can only imagine how happy I was to get my revenge in full at that time."

Calvin and Pamela looked at each other, knowing exactly what their Master had said. It was just unfortunate that one of their vampires, Garrett, had fallen in love with her. Maybe it was by mistake. Maybe it was because she used him as a shield against the other vampires. Or maybe she was truly in love with him, but no matter. All was done now and fixed. To ponder more on it was useless.

"But," Cord then continued, furrowing his brows as he watched the pouring rain through the stained glass windows above his head. "What I felt when I drained her of blood was evil. Pure evil."

Calvin's jaw dropped a little. "Was that it then?" he said, realization hitting him. "The reason why the curse wasn't lifted?"

It wasn't Cord that nodded but Pamela in response to his question. "Good always triumphs over evil, Calvin," she stated, placing a hand on his right shoulder. "How would a curse created by darkness be undone by darkness too? There should be a balance."

"And Amanda was that balance," Cord finished. "She is my light. My salvation."

"I see, but," Calvin inserted, disbelief in his tone, "Are you really serious? You want to stay forever as a vampire?"

A small smile grew from Cord's lips as he answered, "I'm beginning to like the term, Calvin. A vampire. And besides, being immortal isn't painful if Amanda is with me."

"Huh." Calvin combed his hair with his fingers and stepped backward. "Well damn me. Does that mean I can still use my wind powers on poor unsuspecting ladies in the streets?"

Cord remained silent but rolled his eyes he did underneath the blindfold.

But on Pamela's point-of-view, a brow quickly shot up while she ungloved her hands and made a tight fist, "If you want me to crush your face, then go ahead. You can," she icily remarked.

Calvin rushed to put his hands up. "Aww, little sister, you know I am joking."

Pamela thinned her eyes at him. "Right."

With how the siblings acted as if Cord wasn't even on their front, he decided to give them privacy. In a snap, he disappeared from the throne hall and transferred to a place where he had always wanted to be.

In his bedroom.

***

"I am just glad you're alive," Amanda stated as she stared at Noman grinning at her like a bobcat. She had been sitting in bed for half an hour with pillows stacked behind her back. On her lap was a wooden tray with a bowl of mixed fruits and a pineapple juice, readied by Arissa just before they entered the Master's chamber. At one time, she had thought that Matteo killed Noman before abducting her from the Vitalis Castle. She just felt happy now that her best friend made it safe and sound.

"And I am just glad you returned to normal," was Noman's retort whilst standing just a few feet away from the mattress, "Not to mention taken."

Amanda didn't miss his hint and so for that, she picked a blueberry from the bowl and threw it to him. Noman chuckled, dodging the said fruit successfully.

When Amanda woke up earlier, Noman refrained from jumping into her to share an embrace. He reasoned that he didn't want to spoil the bed that she and the Master had shared, and will be sharing together soon. He just instead gave his best friend a small peck on her forehead and a thumbs up indicating he was pleased with the progress.

Meaning Amanda and Cord's relationship.

She didn't really need to tell him the details for being in the Master's chamber was evidence enough for him.

"How are you feeling now?" Noman inquired as he sat on a rectangular cushioned stool.

"I'm feeling energized," Amanda smiled at him. "Like I had just unlocked a treasure of Gatorade and drank them all."

"Huh, quite a fitting example, Deary, but seriously, after what happened in the north wing," he paused and carefully chose his next words, "Don't you find anything unusual on your body?"

Amanda contemplated his words for a moment. Then, she sighed and gazed at the droplets of rain visible through the balcony glass door. "Well, my mother once told me that when I turn into a full-fledged witch, I'll have a mark of a witch." She then raised her left shoulder and glanced at it. "As you can see," she pointed out. "I have crystals sticking on my fingertips too if that's what you

mean by unusual." She raised her hands in the air and studied them. "Although, they are too minute to see with the naked eye, they are there just waiting for my order."

Noman released a smile filled with pride. "Oh gosh, you are so badass now. It's like you're Medusa, but a version of her that turns people into stone not through sight, but touch."

"At least I can control them." Amanda puckered her lips. True, that this made her feel stronger, capable, and more confident. It was a sure change from her normal life. A normal life that her mother always wanted for her.

A new chapter of her life had come though and she was willing to embrace it with her beloved.

With Cord.

"Well, you should, because I certainly don't want to turn into a statue whenever I hug you," Noman complained.

Both of them then laughed, Arissa smiling to herself as she watched them, but those carefree sounds were stopped abruptly when Noman's cellphone rang inside his pants pocket.

"God, finally!" Noman expressed, making a roll of his eyes heavenward. "Someone finally remembered my existence other than you Cait. Seriously, I'm beginning to think I am just a supporting character in a vampire story. Sheesh. Can't I have my own man who worries about me?" he paused and then fished out the gadget from his jeans. "Hello?" he said after pressing the answer button.

It was an unknown number.

Then, his brows twitched and wrinkled.

The voice from the other side sounded familiar.

"Err... It's for you Cait," Noman handed the phone to her with confusion in his eyes. He wanted to ask something but he deferred it instead.

Amanda arched a brow and squinted her eyes at him, "Who is it?" she asked.

"I can't say. I'm not sure. You should take it now." He shoved the cellphone to her chest and so, Amanda frantically took it.

With a last pointed glare on his way, she then pressed the phone on her ear and answered, somewhat unsure, "H--ello?"

"Hello Caitlin," the hoarse voice from the other line said.

Goosebumps erupted in Amanda's arms straightaway.

“Matt--eo?”

A faint chuckle was audible right after Amanda said the unexpected name.

“Yes, me,” Matteo replied.

“You’re alive.”

In Amanda’s front, Noman’s jaw dropped. He may not really know the whole detail of his two friend’s disordered situation, but he sure can say that Amanda was trying to hold back from trembling, judging from her tight grip on his cellphone.

“Yes, I am.”

Amanda swallowed.

“God, I thought you were-”

“Dead?” Matteo finished. There was a hint of amusement in his tone of voice that Amanda couldn’t ignore. It was truly him. The Matteo that she remembered. But he also sounded like he was in discomfort as if undergoing pain. “No, Cait,” he continued, “but I am recuperating. I have...suffered quite a fatal blow from that vampire’s bullet.”

A flash of that memory appeared in Amanda’s head when he said that. It was an unpleasant and unwelcomed memory that she didn’t want to remember, but it was already too late.

“Oh, Matt... I’m sorry,” Amanda broke out. Despite how villainous he acted, she truly worried about him.

“No, don’t be. I don’t need your pity. I just need you, Caitlin.”

“Matteo, please...” Amanda snapped her eyes shut. “Don’t start this again.”

She was over and done with his obsession. Why can’t he just move on, stay with her as friends, and find a woman who can fill his need for love?

“I won’t. Don’t worry,” was Matteo’s reply in the other line.

This at least made Amanda feel at ease, but still, there was this nagging feeling at the back of her mind that he wasn’t truthful with his words.

“Uhm...” She didn’t know what to say after that. Thank you? Take care? Or are you sure? Hell, she really didn’t know what.

Luckily, it was Matteo who spoke again.

“Goodbye, for now, Cait. I’ll see y-”

Without warning, the cellphone was swiped out of Amanda's hands. With round eyes, she stared at Noman who immediately pressed the phone to his ear and yelled, "You fool! Be a man and owe up to your mistake! Whatever you did, apologize to Caitlin now!"

A light scoff was heard in Matteo's side and then, the line went dead.

"Shit," Noman cursed, his teeth gnashing. "Matty just hung up on me. Stupid son-of-a-bachelor."

With this, Amanda inhaled, and then, out of nowhere, she laughed, covering her flushed face.

Noman and Arissa were confused with her reaction.

"Thanks, Dom," Amanda said, combing her hair back from her face.

"What? What did I do?" Noman crossed his arms to his chest.

"Well, you just lightened the anxiety I was just in."

Noman grinned in response, understanding what she had exactly said. To some, it might have insulted them, being interrupted in a phone call, but to Amanda, it was welcomed. More than welcomed. He just saved her from an awkward situation.

"Here," he then placed one knee at the edge of the mattress and then stretched his hand to her ribs, "let me lighten you more."

"God, Noman stop!" Amanda giggled as he tried to tickle her worry away. She doubled over, then pulled out a pillow from her back, smashing the downy material into Noman's face.

Then, they stopped upon hearing a loud clearing of a throat.

Arissa, who was standing near the bed, scurried to take the tray away and lowered her head, while Amanda and Noman froze on the spot.

"It seems I'm unwanted in my own bedroom?" Cord stated, his blindfolded eyes fixed on his woman.

Noman quickly pulled himself away and shook his head.

"Nope! Not at all, man. Not at all. Go ahead. Take your Mistress. Arissa and I will-" He craned his neck just as his eyes turned into saucers, "Hey Ris! Wait for me!"

Amanda chuckled low just as Noman and the maid raced to leave the room.

The wooden door eased shut on its own, or rather, Cord's shadows did it for them.

He waltzed into the mattress and stopped just a few feet away from where Amanda sat; his focus on her smiling form.

"Are you sure Noman isn't my rival in disguise?" he asked whilst pulling the blindfold out of his head.

Amanda bit on her lower lip, her heartbeat hammering against her chest. "No, don't worry. He won't even compare to you."

Cord chuckled. He pulled a metallic object from his coat's pocket right before joining her in bed. "Well, that's a relief," he said and then secured her wrists with his hands, placed it over her head against the headboard, and then locked them with the chained handcuffs.

"Cord!" Amanda blinked fast and wiggled underneath him. "What the? Are you literally going to chain me?!"

He broke into a wide grin. "It's just a precaution," he said, watching her vulnerable form with delight.

"You...you sly vampire," Amanda lifted herself, just high enough to meet his face.

Cord lowered his head and whispered in her ear, "Why? Don't you like it?"

Amanda inhaled, feeling herself getting intoxicated with his male scent. Whether a vampire or a human, he was still himself, the man who had jumbled up her senses in more ways than one.

"I...I like it, Cord."

She parted her mouth and not less than a second, he covered it with his own.

The End.

*

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Or so it seems.

Author's Note: Thank you for reading my dear readers. Join my Facebook Group, JMFelic Awesome Readers, for news about my books. ^_^ Take care!