The Fancy Pants Club

Julianne Mae F. Vera Cruz

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Introduction

THE FANCY PANTS CLUB

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Genre: Mafia, Romance, Erotic, Reverse Harem, Action, Mystery

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Blurb:

'I seek revenge, Daniella. Sweet, delicious revenge.'

***

Here's Daniella Rosecraft, the only daughter of the Rosecraft Family that owns a famous company that specializes in weddings. A self-proclaimed perfectionist, she aims to show to her mother that she can take over the business flawlessly.

And yes, everything was going fine. Everything was according to her plan, until... 'trouble' came in the form of the President of the Fancy Pants Club, Erik Romano 'the asshole devil' Fancii.

Her beliefs and character were quickly questioned by him thus making the ultimate clash of the history.

With these two polar opposites, the question now is, how will they survive without cutting each other's throats?

And with guns, drugs and the illusions staged by the Club, there remained a question still...

Are their throats the only part that gets the damage or their hearts get a share of it too?

Chapter 0: The Fancy Pants Club Pledge

I ____(state your name)_____ of legal age, and a rightful resident of _____(state your address)_____, do hereby solemnly pledge myself before the Fancy Pants Club President, its Honorable Officers and its Witnesses to practice faithfully my duties as a Member of the Club.

I hold the care of its activities as sacred and I will come to assist the officers with loyalty and honesty. I will not knowingly permit harm to come to my fellow members. I will not partake of, nor administer any unauthorized fancy events or parties without the written or expressed consent of the President.

I will hold all personal matters pertaining to the private lives of the Members in strict confidence. I dedicate my mind, heart, and all abilities to the Club. I shall do all in my power to show in myself an example of all that is honorable and good throughout my membership.

And lastly, I will hold true to anything that is fancy as dictated by the President and its Officers.

Signed and verified by the Fancy Pants Club New Member

~Ms. Daniella Rosecraft~

Signed and verified by the Fancy Pants Club President

~Mr. Erik Romano Fancii~

Stamped and Sealed

And chained forever...

Chapter 1: The One Who is Bedazzled

~ Daniella ~

“Put me down!” I yelled, my voice straining, but my order fell on deaf ears as the stranger continued to lift me as if I weighed nothing and marched down the stairs of the center stage.

I flung my hand in the air and squirmed from his hold, but he tightened his arms even more, insisting the bridal-style position he had put me in.

“Put me down I say!” I ordered again, this time feeling myself in a panic yet in deep blush.

We passed the spacious dance hall, disregarding the look of surprise in my team’s eyes. I gave them a silent look of help, but it seemed they were too engrossed with the drama that they failed to see my desperation.

“Wrap that damn wound of yours with the end of your blazer, woman. I don’t want it dripping blood on the floor, ” he grounded without looking at me.

His face, although fine-looking, was set in a hard scowl. He was angry over something or probably angry with me and that’s the problem because I don’t even know why.

I, however, wrapped my wounded fingers with the hem of my blazer, but I did it not because he commanded me to, but because I was worried seeing the gushing crimson liquid soaking the table napkin that I had temporarily used to bound it.

“And who the hell are you?!” I asked, glaring at him like I had the sharpest knife in my eyes.

Still, he didn’t glance my way. He continued to the nearest exit door of the function hall and there, finally, he released me.

Before my feet could touch the carpeted floor, I jumped out from his hold and stepped back a couple of feet away. My bleeding fingers were nursed by my other hand and pressed against my chest while I clenched my teeth in irritation.

“Sheeshh, you’re so noisy, ” was his calm statement whilst massaging the bridge of his nose. It failed to soften his stone face though.

Swiftly, he reached for my uninjured hand and attempted to pull me towards the hallway leading to the main second floor foyer, but I stood my ground and made myself impossible to be towed.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked with one brow lifted to show my resistance. It was just a facade though for in truth I really was shaking inside. Although he looked like a guest in the chateau I am in, he was still a stranger to me and strangers definitely raise up a red flag.

“Just come with me, ” was his cool reply acting as if he knew me. He pulled my hand again. I quickly stepped back to secure it. It left him clutching air instead.

“Uh no, ” I voiced out, shaking my head. “Thank you, Sir, but no, I will not go anywhere with you.”

You might be a murderer or a rapist or something for all I know!

In my viewpoint, I saw his brow twitch and then he pressed his lips into a hard line as if it wasn’t hard enough in the beginning.

“Suit yourself, ” he calmly replied and then he pulled my arm with force.

With a huff, I remained still and unbending, but in the end, it was pointless for effortlessly, he used his advantageous masculine strength and pulled me again, leaving me stumbling and catching up my balance.

“Unhand me!” I cried out quickly, but he continued to drag me along the hallway, looking determined as hell to complete whatever he had planned on me....

Hold up.

Pause and rewind.

You are probably asking what the hell is going on, right?

Well, just as you have initially guessed, I am being held against my will by a stranger and it all started because of one unfortunate accident that happened minutes ago....

***

“Are you sure you want me to leave, boss?” Ericka, my ever-so-reliant assistant, asked whilst descending the portable metal ladder.

We were in the center stage of a function hall called the ‘President’s Hall’ in Le Chateau de Esclavette decorating for a wedding reception that will happen four hours from now. We are best of friends really but when we are working, she prefers to call me ‘boss’ for purposes of respect and seniority. She was after all my mother’s employee and under my supervision.

I nodded and stood up from squatting. Boxes of elegant decorations were on my feet ready and waiting to be glued and stapled on the stage background.

“Yeah, I can manage Kee, ” I said, using her nickname. “Just leave the buckets in the platform. I’d like to handle the stage decor all by myself.”

She looked at me, unsure, but nevertheless, nodded in surrender. “Alright, ” she took one box labeled ‘table decors’ and stated before walking out of the stage, “Call me if you need anything boss.”

“Thanks, ” I smiled at her and watched as she walked down.

“Oh, by the way, ” she paused and turned to look at me again, “Are you sure you want to wear that loose ring?”

My brows furrowed in confusion and then watched the said object nestled in my ring finger.

Of course, she’d be worried about it. It was bigger than my finger.

This loose ring was given by my mother as the Rosecraft family heirloom. Since I’m the only daughter, I became the undebatable recipient of it. She gave me this during my nineteenth birthday nine months ago. She says it brings good luck, charm on the holder, and untold romance — NOT that I need it. She called it ‘The Emerald Flower’ with diamond petals and an emerald stone in the middle.

“Yeah, you know this is my lucky charm Kee, ” I stated with a lopsided grin.

“It is intended to be that, but will you be able to work properly with it?” she asked knowing that many times in our wedding decorating activities, the said ring had limited me from doing my best.

“Mmmh, you mean managing the ribbons and the glitters?” I clarified.

She nodded.

“Well, I’ll manage, ” I answered, pretty sure of myself.

“Right, ” she said and then turned heels towards the half-decorated tables.

I am an advanced Fine Arts graduate. My eyes are keen on artsy details and decorative styles which kinda suited well with the family business of organizing weddings and other events.

My mother is the CEO and I am the sole heir of our business. Since she thinks that I am of right age to be given a project, she gave me this: as the head of the wedding reception of one of our very important clients: Ms. Elaine Mckenzie, a ten-time Grammy Award Winning actress, and major socialite and her outrageously-rich beau, Mr. Aaron Roslin.

They chose to hold their wedding reception in Le Chateau de Esclavette - my ultimate wedding destination.

For me, it is my crème de la crème of all wedding receptions. My ideal dreamland where the haut monde and elite especially gathers during a party. Picture the interiors of Palace of Versailles, the facade of Hotel de Paris - Monte Carlo, and the Drummond Castle gardens joined in one.

Everyone wants in, but not all have the opportunity to graze its halls. It is owned by the Fancy Pants Club. Only accessed by either its members, or those permitted by the Club council, or if the person or the couple are rich enough to pay for the outrageous rent payments.

Yup! Think about nine and five and add four zeros after it. That's the rent. Outrageous right?

But anyway, it is so worth it. The place is just hands-down magnificent.

The Fancy Pants Club considers the chateau as basically their clubhouse. It is located in Beverly Hills, California and that unfortunately is where my knowledge ends. Since I was born in London but raised in the Big Apple, I have no idea who the members of the club are. All I know is that I just adore their clubhouse ever since I saw it in one of my mother's hanging photos in her Manhattan office.

Now, I am no elite and neither is my family, but because our business is the most sought-after in London and the US, and because my current clients are popular people, we are able to enter the chateau.

I have been here for almost five hours busily setting up the things that are needed during the star-studded party. My team is with me, provided of course by the Company, but on this occasion, I personally chose to decorate the center stage all by myself.

"Alright, here I go, " I uttered to myself before climbing the ladder that was secured against the background wall.

It wasn't high really, just about ten feet. Next to it was a makeshift platform set up earlier with two buckets on top that I instructed Ericka to leave. She had been using these to paint the ceiling cherubs with gold luster dust.

Now, I will do the same, but before doing that, I took out a cutter next to the bucket of glue and trimmed the cherub's ribbons first.

With the loose ring, it took me quite a few minutes to do the trimming. I had thought of taking it out and putting it in my slacks pocket, but I opted to keep it in my hand instead. As I said, it brings good luck which was something that I am praying for in a big project such as this.

I was so intent on doing it right that I lost focus on other matters. What happened next was me feeling a sharp slicing pain in my forefinger and thumb.

"Owww."

The cutter had made a deep cut on them.

I immediately placed the object down and on impulse, shook my left hand vigorously to ease the pain. Noticing my blood oozing excessively and staining my white slacks and cream top, I quickly took a table napkin from my blazer and wrapped it around the wounds.

“Shoot. Oh, God... This is not good.” I winced again, gritting my teeth as I felt the stinging sensation. Tears actually collected in the corner of my eyes but I blinked it out.

‘Why must this happen to me now?’ I cried out loud. I thought the ring brings good luck? Why is it not worki—

Oh no...

A red flag immediately appeared on my head. That’s when I realized that my ring wasn’t on my finger anymore.

Not good.

“Oh God, where is that ring!” On top of the ladder, I was torn between nursing my wounds and finding the heirloom. Panic rushed through me when the thought of my mother’s angry face popped out.

Then, in the middle of my dread, a cold hand suddenly touched my right ankle.

“Shit!” I shouted, jerking in surprise. I whirled around, arms flailing unceremoniously in all sides and because of that I accidentally hit the buckets. The contents in them spilled quickly and guess where it all landed?

In the head of a stranger looking murderously at me. Yup, no biggie really.

He was wearing an expensive-looking suit, well-ironed and not a speck of dirt in its white cloth. (Well, that’s if you don’t count the glitters in his shoulders.) The coat was half-buttoned. He would have been a perfect male apparition if not for the mess I had created on top his head - in his glorious, messy yet stylish brown hair.

He was like a pancake, all sauced up with white glue and topped with luster dust. I wanted to laugh then because he kinda looked funny appearing like a bedazzled Olympian God, but I remained as still as a stone. My mouth just jammed open; unable to produce any words of apology; horrified and at the same time mesmerized by him.

Such magical eyes.

Bluish-green ringed with hazel was their color completing the handsomeness of his face. He was tall; I reckon about six feet? His shoulders were broad, abdomen flat but he was standing ramrod straight with an air of self-importance in him.

That didn't hide the fact that he looked silly though.

Sexily, he combed his hair with his fingers. In the process, his hand greased up with the glue, but he didn't seem bothered at all... or maybe he was just too stoic, too excellent at hiding his expressions. I saw him put something in his pants pocket quickly. If he was hiding it, it was useless because I could see the tiny object protruding in his pants.

He released a sigh, a very long sigh, and as I watched I could detail out an angry twitch in the corner of his mouth.

"Ignorant woman, " he drawled, I arched a brow, "you are staining blood in my expensive carpet."

Toss him in the cliff! Impale him with a pitchfork! Burn him alive! Those were my brain's furious commands. The hell he think he is?! Tsk! Disrespectful bastard calling me an ignorant!

Before I could voice out my callous remark, he pulled my leg out towards him, and me, the comely, refined Daniella Rosecraft, came tumbling down onto his wide arms.

I gasped midair; my heart pounding like crazy and my eyes constricted in fear.

Once he caught me, I thought I was safe, but when I looked into his glittered face, I realized I was nowhere near heaven. This devil was scowling at me....

Pause.

***

And that's how it all started.

Now, focusing on the present, the handsome, but outrageously rude stranger continued the path towards the second floor foyer. His hand was tightly holding my arm while I struggled to keep up his long strides with my four-inch heels.

"Hey, asshole!" I cried out loudly. "I demand to know where you are taking me?! I understand I bedazzled and glued you, and I'm sorry for that. Really. But it was an accident! You startled me!"

My complaint fell on deaf ears again.

Many of the soul's present — mostly staff of the mansion putting up vases of white orchids — gawked at us. They seem to find our fiasco unexpected, but one tall man wearing a red turban and black tuxedo showed quite an opposite expression. He was actually smirking.

The stranger continued to drag me into another hallway to the right and then he turned to a path towards a closed white door. Although confused still, I felt fear start to climb its way into the surface. With his gloomy aura and the psychopath silence, who wouldn't be right?

He opened the door, but before he could push me inside, I raised my free arm (the one with the deep cut), made an iron fist out of it (amidst the slicing pain), and gave him a strong uppercut! (Or at least what I think is strong.)

"Dammit woman!" he spat, touching his chin with his free hand. I bet I did a good blow because I could see him wincing slightly.

Huh! And look at that, a small part of his lovely chiseled jaw showed an early bruise!

I grinned in triumph.

"I said let me go! If you won't, I will punch you again! Stronger this time! I can do that you know!" I threatened, lifting up my fist in between us.

But damn... he didn't even look affected at all with my— (okay, let's face it) my mediocre threat. With my slender, feminine hands, I doubt I can accomplish that and he seemed to see right through me.

"Get inside, " he simply commanded.

"Uhh, no way. Why would I do that?!" I exclaimed, wriggling my arms to try to loosen his grip.

He scowled at me again. "Look what you've done, " he drawled again. What's with him and the drawling thing?! "You are staining the second floor's carpet now. I might have to let you pay on the damages, Wild Woman."

He watched my wounded fingers still dripping with blood and leaned closer to me, ultimately trespassing my personal space. I leaned back; giving him another dagger-like glare.

"Now, go to the nurse and have that bandaged up and disinfected. Don't complain, don't go Super Saiyan on me, and don't do reckless things, or I will glue a six-zero cheque on your sexy ass right now for you to pay later after your client's wedding. Capisce?"

What the— Just who is this man in front of me?

But wait, did he just say nurse?

He released my arm and crossed his arms on his chest, looking at me with a slight curve of his mouth.

With wide eyes, I peeped on the inside of the room and found two females wearing matching white nurse uniforms talking to one another. In their front desk, there was a sign with the words 'Le Chateau de Esclavette Clinica' in bold letters.

My mind immediately registered the facts.

"Oh, " I said, embarrassed with myself. Although it was hard, I gave him a lopsided smile; my only meager way of showing my gratitude.

He raised a glittery brow and said, "You're welcome."

"You could have just told me we were going to the clinic, " I said with a frown, wrapping my fingers with my blazer again, "we could have avoided this...misunderstanding."

"You are the only one who misunderstood the situation, Ms. Rosecraft, " he answered me, now with a blank expression. "I suggest you don't overthink simple things, and next time, do your research. Your temper and ignorance are way too deadly in a place like this."

What are you freaking saying? I wanted to ask that one but decided not to. I instead just simply surrendered and walked inside to the front desk without giving him a backward glance. The nurses inside however when they noticed the man, widened their eyes briefly. Then, as their composure regained, they gave him a low bow which I found a bit odd.

Maybe it was a sign of greeting their guests? Maybe it was.

I heard the door close and realized that he left. Good. My bedazzled stranger is finally out of my sight. I seriously don't want to see that arrogant, acting all-high-and-mighty man ever again.

"Good afternoon Madame, " greeted the older-looking nurse.

"Hi, good afternoon too, " I answered sheepishly.

"What seems to be the problem?" She took out a form and handed it to me.

"Well..." I said and then showed them my bleeding forefinger and thumb, "I just needed this bandaged up and disinfected."

Chapter 2 - When All is Perfect Except One

~ Daniella ~

Oh, God. He knows my name! He knows my name!

Wait. Why does that stranger know my name?

I asked myself that a couple of times already since I returned in my guest suite. After having myself treated inside that clinic -slash- spa, I thought I wouldn't get haunted by thoughts of that manipulative guy, but I guess I was wrong.

God, his glittery face kept on poking at my brain telling me to do this and to do that. What the heck! Who is that man anyway? Why does he boss me around and why does he know my name?

There, I asked it again...

Anyway, I am standing now in front of a full-length mirror assessing myself. Many of my friends say that I am gifted with a curvaceous body. They said to flaunt them whenever necessary and to flaunt them with the right dress. That's the reason why I'm wearing a white lace knee-length dress now. The neckline is low but just enough to provide a small peek of my cleavage... just enough that I look presentable and at the same time glamorous. Since I am the organizer of the reception and not the bride, I chose to be as modestly dressed as I can be.

Why choose white you may ask? That's because it is the color motif of the wedding: all white or silvery.

I wore no jewels except for a thick silver bracelet and stud earrings. As I said, I am the organizer. No one would care to mingle with me at the party which by the way starts thirty minutes from now.

After doing my long auburn hair into a simple braid and twisted it on top of my head with a diamond flower clip, I was ready to do my job. My room was on the third floor, so when I arrived at the second floor foyer through the grand staircase, my mouth immediately dropped seeing the many Stars shining in my eyes.

Really.

There were Hollywood actors and actresses, famous fashion designers, and movie directors all lounging in the spacious area. Some were talking merrily while others helped themselves with the refreshments in the long snack bar my team had set up earlier this morning.

With a deep breath, I strolled into the crowd with my head held high. No one knew me except for the members of my team, so I was lucky to be spared of any awkward conversations.

Funny that with all of these famous people under one roof, there was no paparazzi around. It seems that the Club Council made it sure to make this gathering media-free huh?

Just like me, two people from my team were also star-struck when I saw them at the main entrance door towards the grand ballroom.

Ericka was holding a serving tray with wine flutes on top, while Mason, her hunky beau, was holding a bottle of expensive champagne. They were wearing a matching tux that complimented their genders.

Kee is a straight-A student, but needed income so she applied in my family's company for a part-time job. She met Mason there who is her senior and they became instant friends and eventually lovers. If we aren't busy, we get to spend time during Saturdays relaxing and having fun in our favorite nightclub back in NY.

"Care for a glass of champagne Miss Daniella?" Mason said when I neared them. He tilted the bottle towards the mouth of the flute, attempting to pour the sparkling liquid on it.

"Sure, I would love to taste that, " I said, nodding at him.

"By the way boss, Mr. Ross was looking for you awhile ago, " Ericka informed.

I took the flute from the tray, "Why?" and asked, after sipping on it.

"He said Madame Mckenzie wants you to join the party. She doesn't want you running frantically around the grand ballroom as most organizers do."

"Oh?" I cocked a brow, "did she say that?"

I honestly was surprised. Mr. Ross is Ms. Mckenzie's talent manager and I know for a fact that whatever the star actress wants, the manager grants it. It is only unfortunate that she wants me to join the party instead of doing my job. Yeah, I called it unfortunate because I would rather find myself at the backstage than in a table sitting and chit-chatting people higher than my class.

"Yes, and he said that she said that you should sit in the table near the wedding cake, " continued Ericka.

I gulped hard then. If I remember correctly, that particular table is reserved for the Fancy Pants Club members as their special guests. Why would Ms. Mckenzie want me to sit there?

"I don't think that's a good idea, " I said, but then from behind me, a hand tapped my shoulder.

“It is a good idea, Ms. Rosecraft, ” Mr. Ross said, showing the wrinkles of his face with his old-man debonair smile. He was wearing a moss green tuxedo; his hair brushed up neatly creating a youthful version of him, but seriously, he can immediately pass as my father if need be.

“Mr. Ross! Why are you still here?” I exclaimed, wide-eyed. “You are supposed to be in the sponsor’s table right now. The program will start any minute you know.”

He assessed me with twinkling eyes. “And you, beautiful lady, are supposed to be in your own table too, ” he boomeranged. “The bride insists you should sit there as a temporary companion of the Fancy Pants Club President. Unfortunately, his members didn’t send a confirmation if they will show up in the reception. As all seats are prearranged as you already know, it would be embarrassing if the president sits in that table alone.”

I sighed. “She has a point, I guess.”

No, it wouldn’t be embarrassing, it would be catastrophic! Imagine a powerful man such as the President of the Club alone in a table where around him would be famous people of different stature. The whole of society might think there’s a problem with the guest list or the seating arrangement which I, as an organizer, don’t want to happen.

“Then, I think we should enter the ballroom now, ” said Mr. Ross who quickly slid an arm around my back.

“Wait, ” I raised a hand. “Ericka, don’t hesitate to come to me if there are any problems okay?” I said to my friend before I was whisked away by the talent manager.

Once we entered the ballroom, my breath just paused. I couldn’t believe the place now. It was better than I envisioned it to be. Juliet roses were placed in the right spots — in the pathways particularly — while hybrid white orchids were blooming beautifully in every table, nestled inside every elegant silver vase. The ceiling was lit up with four huge crystal chandeliers while my center stage was completely decorated on time (thanks to my ever-dependable Ericka). I actually texted her earlier to finish it since I was still in the clinic.

“Enjoy the evening, Ms. Rosecraft, ” said Mr. Ross before he left me alone in the Club table.

The lights were dim to create a romantic atmosphere just like what I instructed the Lights Director. Perfect.

The scented jasmine candles were lit in every circular table just as I want them. Perfect.

The table napkins, crocheted doilies, and utensils were in their right motif color and placement. Perfect.

All of the elements of the wedding reception were in their intended places. Perfect. Just perfect.

I subconsciously patted myself on the back. Good job, Daniella. Mom is going to be so proud of you! Right now, no one can ruin my seventh-heaven, nothing can possibly deflate it.

I was smiling from ear to ear observing all of the happenings around me, but then my eyes fell on my own table and I felt a sudden sense of loneliness.

'Sitting alone really is awkward...' I thought to myself.

Where is the President anyway? He is not supposed to be late because he basically lives in this chateau. The program is about to start and yet he is not here!

Scanning the details in the back of my head, I remembered that he is included in the wedding program. He is expected to give a message to the bride and groom before dinner starts.

So, where the hell is he?

On cue, the introductory music played to signal the newly-wed couple's arrival. All of the guests stood up including me as the entourage started their grand march.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome our main celebrants for this magnificent evening, Mr. and Mrs. Aaron and Elaine McKenzie-Roslin, " the voice-over announced.

Many were clapping when they entered with big smiles on their faces. A greeting here, a greeting there, they waved their hands in each of the tables when they advanced towards the right side of the center stage where their presidential table was. Ms. Elaine saw me when she passed by my area and gave me a wink. I nodded back and smiled on her way.

After the minutes long well-wishes and greetings, we all sat down and the program started immediately. First was a doxology dance, then a welcome remark from the father of the groom, and then the highlights of the bride and groom's relationship where the video showed how Aaron proposed to Elaine.

I was beginning to fidget in my chair as I was aware of the program flow. If my memory serves me right, what would come next after this montage of videos is the President of the Fancy Pants Club's message to the celebrants. Since he isn't sitting in his reserved seat now, I seriously hope the stage director had him waiting at the backstage.

Oh, God. I wouldn't be able to handle it if he doesn't show up!

The master of ceremonies, a well-known male T.V. personality, appeared after the video presentation ended. My heart was thumping loudly in my chest as he started to speak; silently praying to the heavens that everything would turn out the way as planned.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is my honor to introduce to you the President of the Fancy Pants Club, Mr. Erik Romano Fancii."

Yes! Thank the heavens for answering my prayer!

A thunderous clap resounded in the room thereafter when a man appeared from a dark corner away from my line of sight and into the stage. The bright spotlight immediately focused him and that's when my jaw dropped.

Like, drop.

In front of me, a couple of meters away, was my bedazzled stranger, looking all fancy and attractive - (no, scratch that) - very attractive, wearing a black tux of the recent fashion. Thankfully, his hair was cleaned off of the glue and gold luster dust.

He smiled a shining smile towards the audience and my heart just leaped out of my chest.

So he could actually smile huh?

As he stood near the mic stand, the audience went silent. If I'm not wrong, I think they were eagerly anticipating for him to speak. I think I was too because I found myself holding my breath.

Even though I am this far from him, I can actually sense the air of superiority in him. His overall bearing commanded full attention and respect in both genders whatever status they were. I believe this guy doesn't joke around at all.

"I won't keep my speech long as I know these two lovebirds here want to escape this wedding reception as soon as possible, " he then said in a panty-dropping voice.

Yes, I said it right.

In a panty-dropping voice.

Similar to those adjectives authors normally put in a romance book such as velvety, sexy, honeyed, husky, silvery, and whatnot. Any girl would certainly do that in front of him (drop their panties I mean), but me?

Well... uhmmm... let's not get into that path, shall we?

Anyway in my head, after hearing him said that statement, I was like:

He made a joke... Right? God, he made a joke! And all of the guests are laughing! Huh! I stand corrected. So, this man is capable of joking around!

"I would like to extend my thanks to Ms. Mckenzie and my friend, Aaron, for choosing the Le Chateau de Esclavette to hold their wedding party, " he continued, looking at the audience with straight eyes. "It is always an honor for the Club to host fancy parties such as this with all of these wonderful people here." He turned to face the newlyweds and said, "Best wishes to both of you, and may you have a dozen kids someday."

And the deafening clap followed.

My hands though were still on my lap. Why? Because I was daydreaming again...

Dozen kids... hahhh... I sighed. I could certainly see myself having kids with him inheriting his beauteous face.

Wait.

WAIT. WAIT. WAIT! Where did that come from???

I straightened myself up and cleared my throat. I think I need a drink to delete those dangerous thoughts out of my head.

Luckily, I still have my wine flute with me so I drank in as much as I could.

I watched the attractive Mr. Erik Romano Fancii approach the bride and the groom and shook hands with them. Then, I saw Ms. Elaine pointed a hand towards my table and that's when it hit me.

Oh, God.

This is the man I am to accompany the whole evening?!

Chapter 3 - Sweet, Delicious Revenge

~ Daniella ~

As I saw him approach my table, I felt heat rush my face. My heartbeat quickened, my back tensed and my feet shot tingles up my leg. The people around me seemed to disappear and all that's left is this man looking at me with an unreadable face.

For a moment, even though the light was dim, I saw his brows twitch and his eyes thinned as he saw me, but it was so brief, so fast that it felt like I was just dreaming it. When he arrived at the table, he didn't care so much as to say 'hi' or 'hello' or even some damn greeting to acknowledge my presence. He just walked straight and sat in his seat that was at least two chairs away from me.

I gulped hard. I wonder if he still remembers me and that incident we had this afternoon.

"Ah, so Ms. Wild Woman is my escort, " he then said without a head's up.

Yup, he still remembers me alright! But of all the nicknames he could pick out, why that?

I hauled a deep breath and bit the inside of my bottom lip before I released a word. Knowing that he is the President of the Fancy Pants Club, I think it is wise that I should act properly and talk to him in a civil manner no matter how infuriated I am inside to be called a wild woman.

He was sitting regally with one arm in the table and his hand pressed in his chin. His face was turned towards the stage but I could feel his gaze riveted on me. His lips were in a neutral line; no hint of a smile whatsoever. Our eyes met and thanks to the close gap that we have, I could see that his were cold and calculating.

This man really puts people in their knees huh? But I am not just any normal person, I am Daniella Rosecraft, and I won't let this man bully me with his mesmerizing blue-green hazel eyes! I shoved my thoughts away, down into the deepest part of my brain, and summoned the femme fatale within me into the surface.

"Mr. Fancii, I do have a name you know. I am Daniella Rosecraft, the event organizer of this wedding reception. I am pleased to meet you and oh, just to clarify it, I am not your escort, " said I with my chin lifted. I chose not to offer my hand to him as a handshake. He didn't seem to mind it anyway.

"Hmmm... still feisty I see, " he remarked and shifted his eyes to look at the stage where the host was announcing the start of our dinner. "I do know who you are Ms. Rosecraft, quite very well might I add, but that is beside the point. If you are not here as my escort this whole evening, then why bother sitting on this table?"

Oh, God, help me. I want to strangle this man! Does he even have girlfriends? Because I don't think any woman would want to be with him with that kind of mouth. His string of words is like a barbed-wire that quickly wraps a woman's frail heart and bursts it open.

The good news for me however is that I consider myself unlike any other woman, and I have a barb of my own.

"First, " I pointed one finger in front and stared coldly at Mr. Erik, "I don't like the word escort. To educate you, the term escort in our generation right now is defined as a woman paid for sex. I believe we have just met and in no way am I going to let you touch me by the end of this evening."

What can I say, I've gotta be honest you know.

"Second, " I raised my middle finger following it and said, "I prefer the word companion because it is proper and it makes sense. Why? Because this evening only, I am your companion for conversation purposes; conversations that might bore you sooner or later I think. I would however prefer to watch the program presentations after our dinner. And third—"

I saw amusement curve in the president's lips then.

"I am sitting in this table because the bride requests me to because apparently, your most-esteemed club members didn't have the kidney to show up at a beautiful party such as this. If you don't like my presence, Mr. President, then I would be more than happy to leave you here alone. It would not be a big deal for me at all."

I was already fuming inside, but thanks to my yoga classes every Tuesdays, I was able to bring them down with just two measured breaths. With all those points I have highlighted on him, I hope he understood what I was trying to say.

"Your mouth is quite full huh?" was his simple reply then. This time he turned towards me; body and face together, and looked deep into my eyes.

I squared myself up, showing no clue that I was one bit intimidated by him.

"It seems Ms. McKenzie was right to make you my companion. I don't think our conversation will bore me at all."

The way he looked at me changed then, it flickered mischief and danger all at once. "However, the first one sounds good too."

What? What first one?

Ohhh, that first one...

My mouth dropped again and my face heated. Is he freaking flirting with me?

Five minutes. He had just sat in this table for five minutes and he is already hitting on me?

“No, Wild Woman, I am not flirting with you, ” was his remark then. Does he read minds or my reaction was too easy to read?

I think the latter is the right answer.

“I am just confirming how much our conversation wouldn’t bore me. See? Look at yourself. Your reaction amuses me so.”

Overbearing bastard! The devil! Why oh why am I sacrificed to this emotionless dickhead?! I so need my lucky ring right now, but where is that heirloom anyway? I hope someone was able to pick it up and submitted it in the Lost-and-Found Section of this chateau. Speaking of which, I need to visit that section tomorrow morning.

Our ‘fun’ conversation was cut off when our very-own assigned waiter approached us with the night’s dinner menu. As I was present when Ms. Elaine and Mr. Aaron decided the food selections with my mother, I knew already what the waiter will serve.

Deviled eggs and mozzarella cheese sprinkled with dried basil leaves and Beluga caviar as the hors d’oeuvre, pear, and pecan salad as the second course, cream of asparagus soup as the third, supreme cheese lasagna for the pasta course, two main types of meat; one beef and the other lamb for the main entrée, and lastly, Guinness Book of World Records most expensive dessert, the ‘Frrrozen Haute Chocolate’ as the last course which is to die for.

The whole time I ate, I was silent and so was the man some few feet away from me. I felt like we were back to being strangers for he didn’t give one damn glance towards my way. Here I am fretting on how to make another good conversation while he was just there, looking all-too-superior even while dismantling the perfectly-grilled lamb chop.

When I noticed him drink his newly filled glass of champagne, that’s the time I grabbed the opportunity for an entry to erase the awkwardness between us.

“I am not ignorant you know, ” I said making a shaky eye contact.

“Come again?” Mr. Oh-I’m-The-King-of-the-World said with a raise of his brow. He placed his glass down and eyed me in confusion.

“I said I am not ignorant, ” I leaned back and crossed my arms in my chest. “It is just unfortunate of me that Google or Wikipedia, or any other God-forsaken website doesn’t provide any information about you and the club.”

“Ah, so you are talking about what happened earlier?” he drawled.

You think? Don’t you remember how you called me an ignorant woman?

I rolled my eyes and released a long sigh.

He leaned back in his cushioned chair too and took his wine flute with him, posing like a proud man that he is. Even though I can't see, I bet he is crossing his legs under the table to add more effect.

"You know Ms. Rosecraft, " he started, I was all ears then. "I and the club members value our private lives. We don't wish for the internet world to boast our life achievements. I certainly can understand you were clueless as to who I am. Worry not."

"You could have just told me you were the President, " I pouted.

"I was rather enjoying your ignorance, Sweet Rose. I like it a lot. And also, I enjoy a sense of mystery from time to time, " answered he before drinking his champagne.

Bastard. If he thinks I am a good candidate in the Big Brother reality game show, then he is so wrong.

I chose not to continue our conversation anymore. If I do, I might create nasty wrinkles in my forehead. Hearing him call me that endearment didn't help at all. For all I know, he was just toying with me.

Acting as if my attention was caught in the sultry songstress, Emily West, singing "Chandelier" on stage, I shifted my position away from him.

The whole time I did so, I am clueless about what he was doing, but I seriously could feel the heat radiating inside me. I don't know why.

God, I hope he is not burning me alive with his eyes.

Then, after the songstress finished her piece, Mr. Erik suddenly spoke up catching my attention, "Quite a plain set-up you have here."

His unfeeling statement gave me chills immediately. I shifted my face to his direction and said with a raised brow, "Plain?"

"A sufficient word, yes, " was his only reply.

That made my volcano erupt.

"Do you know how many months I have prepared this party so that it wouldn't just be called plain?"

I swear, my voice is tuned to the 'angry preset' now.

"I don't know obviously, Ms. Rosecraft, " he said in a clipped voice.

“Then to let you know, it took me five months okay, including countless sleepless nights just to make sure everything goes perfectly smooth.”

“Ahhh, that, is the word I like, perfect, ” he interjected, whilst touching the corner of his lips. He doesn’t seem to notice how flustered I am at all! “Everything in this reception should be perfectly fancy, but it seems that is the one thing you lack the most. This table cloth isn’t fancy. That backdrop isn’t fancy. The flowers are too tacky.”

“Well, excuse me?!” I gritted my teeth. “For your information, those flowers are those lovebirds choices.” I pointed my nail-polished, bandage-wrapped finger towards the newlyweds and frowned. “I don’t have a say in them, and besides, I don’t think they are tacky at all. They are beautiful in every way! You, sir, don’t seem to have taste.”

He snickered. “My taste is for finer things, Ms. Rosecraft. Just look around you, doesn’t that give you a clue?”

I thinned my eyes at him. “No wonder you were so worried about my blood dripping in your carpet earlier, ” I rolled out. For a moment there, I honestly thought he was worried about my cut that’s why he quickly dragged me to the clinic.

He shook his head and awarded me a faint smile (or at least what I think is a smile.)

“The incident earlier is a different case. I genuinely was concerned with your wound that’s why I did it.”

Ohhh...really? It doesn’t seem that way.

“I however didn’t expect a woman like you could be naive, so much so that you thought I would murder you because of what you did to me.”

I didn’t say it out loud at that time. How did he know? Or were my earlier horrified actions too easy to read?

“You mean glittering you?” I said, smothering a laugh. Really. That was a funny memory, for me at least.

He didn’t hold back in showing me his displeasure. “Know that it wasn’t easy for me to get the glue out of my hair, Ms. Rosecraft, and because of that, I wasn’t able to join the grand march. Lucky for you, I was just on time in giving my message to the bride and groom.”

Oh, God. I could see a murderous shadow from behind him!

“I—I didn’t mean it to happen, I already told you about it, ” I said suddenly feeling guilty, but I won’t show that to him. “Why do I feel that you want to prank me?”

“Prank you?” he scoffed. “You must be joking, my Sweet Rose.” He leaned towards me, but I guess it wasn’t enough for he stood up, motioned our personal waiter to take the two chairs that parted us, and place his own chair near mine. “I don’t do pranks. It is not fancy at all, ” he continued after he sat down coolly inches away from me.

My breathing accelerated.

He leaned again and whispered close in my ear, “I however do worse than that.”

“What—what do you mean?” I choked and shivered. Shit! I just showed that I was intimidated by him!

“I seek revenge, Daniella. Sweet, delicious revenge.”

Not good. NOT GOOD! This spells doom for me, totally!

Chapter 4 - The Kamasutra Guru

Sweet, delicious revenge. Sweet, delicious revenge. Sweet, delicious revenge...

The words kept echoing in my head.

Did I just transform into a stereo? Because I swear I turned mute when the president said those threatening words to me. I couldn't say anything. Damn, I couldn't make a caustic comeback! I just sat there, stoned, looking blankly in the stage with my neck tingling due to the closeness of his mouth.

"But don't worry, I won't collect it now, " he said, giving me a false sense of security.

Yeah, right. Like that would make me feel at ease bastard!

"Com'n Ms. Rosecraft, smile. Your face looks constipated."

He pulled away and straightened in his seat. I heard him chuckle lightly then and that's the time I was able to pull myself out of my momentary mute spell. Glaring at my plate, I was battling whether or not I should shove my half-finished lamb chop on his mouth. Or maybe not the lamb chop, but the blunt knife in his cold heart.

I sighed deeply in the end and buried the thoughts away. I am not a murderer.

But I wanted to. God, I wanted to put the lamb chop in his mouth so that his barbs wouldn't infuriate me even more.

As my retaliation, I smiled kindly on his way, but my eyes showed a blaze of willpower.

Bring in on Mr. President! All you've got! I won't back down!

Then, my attention was diverted to a form behind him. It was of a man, definitely not our personal waiter because this man was wearing a yellow turban amidst him donning a white American tux. He didn't say anything. He just pulled out a chair next to us and then sat down.

Judging from the appearance and the way the man dressed, I think he is an Indian. He has short raven black hair, a slender neck, and to-die-for long lashes. He had a five-o'clock shadow trimmed sexily and I bet women swoon over it endlessly.

It didn't have any effect on me though, but I found his brown eyes captivating.

Wait.

If I remember correctly, this man is the one who smirked at us earlier in the second floor foyer!

Mr. Erik seemed to notice his arrival and turned to look at him with a neutral face. Gone was the smugness of it while we were alone.

“Rohan, you enjoy being fashionably late are you?” he asked, tapping his fingers in the rim of his glass.

The unknown man just smiled and shrugged his shoulders. “You know me, ” he said, “I am in demand. I don’t normally join parties like this but hey, there’s something interesting going on in this table that I just had to sneak in.”

Something interesting? What is he talking about?

The president seemed to catch his drift because I saw him pinch the handle of the glass. That made the Indian man grin.

“May I know who this gorgeous woman is, Mr. President?” the man named Rohan said. He tilted his head to the side and glanced at me, showing his white smile.

If I’m not mistaken, I think I just noticed a British accent right there.

My heart immediately fluttered. I think I am going to like this guy. He seems friendly enough unlike this villain next to me.

Mr. Erik though kept himself silent and acted as if he didn’t hear Mr. Rohan’s question. I waited for him to introduce me, but he did not!

Prick.

In order to relieve the awkward situation, I chose to shot my hand across the table and said with a smile, “Hi! I’m Daniella Rosecraft.”

Rohan cocked a brow then. “Oh, of the Rosecraft Weddings and Events Concepts?” he asked, widening his eyes.

“Yes, you are correct, ” I nodded, and then we shook hands, disregarding the fact that the president was in between us. He watched as our hands linked and I could see his jaw clench oddly.

“Well, I’m happy to finally meet you Ms. Rosecraft, ” Rohan said when he withdrew. “I’ve always wanted to see what kind of a woman you are.”

Woah, halt! What does he mean by that? Am I that popular? I know that my family business is, but me? I doubt it very much.

There was a discreet exchange of looks on both of them which I didn’t miss out. There must be some kind of information they have that I didn’t know about and it made me wonder what it is.

“I’m Rohan Yash Maharaj Ambani by the way, Secretary of the Fancy Pants Club and a Kamasutra Guru.”

I blinked like many times. Now, that, I didn’t expect to hear at all!

First was knowing that he is a member of the club and second is him being a guru?

“Kama— did you just say Kamasutra guru?” I questioned. I believe it wouldn’t hurt to clarify things.

“Yes, I believe I did, ” he showed me another luminescent smile.

“Oh, ” I watched him and then to Mr. Erik, who was looking at the stage (or acting like he was), and then back to Rohan. “I’m—I’m sorry for looking stunned, but it’s just that, it is the first time I’ve heard about that. I know about the concepts of Kamasutra, but I never knew there is actually a guru for it.”

I heard him chuckle then. It was melodious.

He took the wine flute our personal waiter had given and drank the liquid in half.

“Believe me, Ms. Rosecraft, ” he then said, looking at me with mischief, “there is and it is in demand...always.”

My throat dried. Wow. I mean, wow! That profession is...interesting.

“I believe this innocent woman here doesn’t want to hear the details of your work, Rohan. You can spare her the awkward moment, ” and the devil spoke.

I seriously thought he was in a silent mode. Well, now at least I know he was listening in our conversation and not acting snobbish.

“Oh, no, I do not believe that at all Erik, ” Rohan said and patted his shoulder briefly. “Almost all people in this age understand the topic of sex and sex positions. I don’t think that this beautiful woman is innocent at all, unless...”

Then two pairs of eyes immediately fell on me and that ultimately placed me in the hot seat. Just my luck, now I can see them getting suspicious of the status of my V-card.

I released a smile, a strained one, and then shifted my eyes towards the stage.

“Ahahaha! Now look at that, I think they will be slicing the cake now.” I redirected their attention away from me into the bride and groom who now descended the stairs and strolled towards us. It was expected since the six-tier wedding cake was a couple of feet behind Rohan.

Good thing these two Fancy Pants men took my bait and turned their attention on the program.

God, I am so grateful the lights are dim, otherwise they would have seen the virginal flush creeping in my cheeks!

We watched as Ms. Elaine and her husband sliced the topmost cake and then took turns on feeding each other with the small slice. The audience applauded again and so did we (except for Mr. Erik Almighty who looked bored watching them.)

Gosh! Show some respect, will you? They are your customers! They pay you ridiculous big bucks to rent the roofing of your chateau!

But I guess, that is just how this kind of president rolls; acting unfeeling and all. It suits him anyway.

"The Rosecraft Company is really good with wedding concepts huh?" Rohan spoke when the newlyweds returned to their table and the program continued with the toasts. "This place is just breathtaking and the program is well laid out. Are you assigned in here Ms. Daniella?"

I focused my attention on him and smiled. He is commending me! Yes!

"Yes, I am, " I answered feeling good about myself, "I am actually the head of their wedding reception."

"Hmmn, I see." He bobbed his head whilst scanning the whole area. "Then, I believe you deserve my praise."

"Thanks, Mr. Rohan, " I said, my cheeks heating up.

See?! See?! This man has taste! Not like the president here who keeps on criticizing my work!

"Please, just Rohan. Or you can just call me Guru if you like, " he stated to me.

I simply chuckled. "Rohan suits just fine. Thanks."

"And as for Mr. Stiff here, " he patted the president's shoulder again and said, "you can just call him Erik or..." he suddenly contemplated something and watched the ceiling briefly, "Honey if you like."

That made me violently shook my head then. "I think I would prefer calling him Mr. President."

It was at least the proper way. We are not in good terms anyway and besides that, we aren't in the friend zone, so calling him that is certainly better than calling him by his first name.

In a heartbeat, I heard the one addressed grumble. He looked at me coldly and stated in a voice so frank, "Call me whatever you like, woman. I don't give a damn."

"Ahhh, " Rohan sighed in an instant, "You should be more careful with your words in front of her, Erik. You don't want her to think of you as a villain."

Huh! Too late now. I already do.

“I thought you were her savior, my friend.”

I pulled my eyes away from the president, breaking our eye contact, and glanced at Rohan.

“What savior?” I asked, “Are you talking about what happened this afternoon? Because I think I never would have fallen in the ladder if he didn’t pull my leg.”

Rohan drank all of his champagne and puckered his lips before replying, “No, I am pertaining to another event where—”

“Shut it, Rohan, ” Mr. Erik abruptly interrupted. He didn’t give a glare of warning towards his secretary, but I could feel the aura of threat projecting towards the poor man.

Just what are they hiding anyway? Now, my curiosity has heightened especially when I saw Rohan raise his hands in defeat.

I would have investigated further, but a female voice appeared from behind me.

“Boss!”

It was from my ever-trusted team member, Ericka. With her presence now, it means there’s a problem with the program flow.

“Ericka, is there a problem?” I asked quickly; my face immediately showed concern.

She eyed me with her own share of worry, but before she answered, she glanced at the two men in the table with surprise.

For sure, she is going to interrogate me at our Saturday night out tomorrow about them.

“Well, yes, ” she answered after regaining her composure, “uhmm… the violinist for the last dance…he can’t be here because he is stuck up in traffic.”

“What!” I exclaimed, realizing albeit too late that my voice was loud enough for the guests to hear.

I watched the people around me quickly and found that they didn’t find my panicked voice odd. Lucky for me. But upon watching Mr. Erik and Rohan, I saw their brows knit in confusion.

“Uh, well… excuse me, gentlemen. I need to fix this problem, ” said I, standing in haste and bowing my head low.

“You go on ahead, Ms. Daniella, ” it was Rohan who said that, “I will accompany the President for you.”

Showing a relieved smile, I said a thank you and left with Ericka tailing behind me.

***

“I told him to be here early! Now, look what happened!” I yelled inside the center backstage as I arrived there. My right hand was pressed on my forehead in desperation while my other hand rested heavily on my waist. I tried to pace along the available space but that didn’t seem to calm me at all.

But, seriously. I can’t be calm right now knowing my original plan of having a live violin play the last dance wouldn’t happen! It was one of Ms. Elaine’s highlighted requests! I can’t have a Youtube violin music play their last dance as an alternative. That just can’t happen! I bet if my heirloom ring is still in my finger right now, I wouldn’t have this kind of problem at all.

“Oh, God, what should we do boss? I don’t think we will be able to replace the violinist on time!” Ericka worriedly expressed. She has hunkered down the floor with her arms crossed in her chest.

The violin we hired is a world-famous musician. I remembered him telling me that he has a show before this wedding reception, but he promised that he would be on time before the last dance starts. It is just so unfortunate now that the Beverly Hills traffic isn’t on our side.

“I don’t know...” I said, “I just don’t know... Uhg, this is so messed up!” Instead of banging the wall to release my anger, I chose to drop on the floor just like Ericka did and wrapped my arms around my chest.

This kind of position actually is soothing. It makes one feel a lot less stressed because of the sense of security the fetal position provides. However, this is just a momentary solution to our problems, and sooner or later, we will have to pick ourselves back up and solve the problem.

I waited for a few minutes just like this, closing my eyes and thinking about how to come up with a solution. Then, I remembered my mom having a long list of contacts on musicians. I bet she could give me a violinist that lives around the area, hopefully... no matter how unpopular he or she is, but I guess it is worth a shot.

Just as I was about to take my Company service phone that Ericka was holding, a man poked his head on the backstage door and said, “Hey.”

I glanced up and gave him a sad face.

“Mr. Ross... I’m sorry but there’s a problem, I—”

He raised a hand to stop me then.

“Don’t worry, ” he said, “someone called for a replacement violinist for you.”

“Really?!” I darted up and rounded my eyes. I saw Ericka did the same. “Who did it?” I asked.

Mr. Ross stepped inside and handed me a piece of paper with a cellphone number written in it. To whose? I don't know, but I have an inkling it is the violinist's number.

"It doesn't matter, " he stated with a knowing smile, "What's important now is that the violist is coming here. This will ultimately solve your problem."

"Oh God, thanks! It will really solve my problem! But wait, is the violist living near the chateau?" was my curious question then. If he is, then he wouldn't be stuck on traffic just like our original violinist, and that he would arrive on time for the last dance.

Mr. Ross shook his head. "No, he is living here."

"What? Do you mean to say he resides here? As in here?"

I couldn't really believe it. If the replacement resides in the chateau then that means...

"Yes, Daniella. He is the Vice President of the Fancy Pants Club, Mr. Vincent Dominico Altair."

My mouth dropped open for the effing eighth time this day, and yes, I actually counted it.

Chapter 5 - Making Friends with Mr. Vice President

~ Daniella ~

I chose not to return to the Fancy Pants Club table anymore. Since Rohan is there to accompany the president, I think my presence and services are not needed any longer. Being away from that man is relieving. It is like being on a beach after a long stressful day in the city. It calmed me ultimately and alleviated my worked up brain. I've noticed since I met the Club president, I have been too racy with my thoughts and...imaginative. I wonder if he gets this kind of reaction with other women.

Well, probably, yes. With that egocentric and aloof attitude of his, it wouldn't be a surprise.

Aside from being away from Mr. Erik, another thing that calmed me is listening to the violin piece being played right now.

It is a romantic piece entitled Allegro Moderato composed by Antonín Dvoiák, a famous musician in Czech. I have heard of this piece countless times when I was small, back when I used to accompany my mom in some of her wedding events. I always loved listening to it.

I didn't tell the violinist what piece he would play. I just gave him the liberty of choosing whatever violin song he wanted to play during the last dance. And so to my surprise, he chose this out of the many beautiful compositions he could have picked.

I watched the whole performance in awe together with Ericka while in the backstage. The violinist was so skillful. His attractive face looked at peace; eyes closed and mouth neutral. I can't honestly describe it well but it felt like he was one with the song. It felt like there were real cherub angels surrounding him as his fingers touched the strings.

He looked good in the stage too, like he was naturally born to stand in it with the spotlight illuminating the soft curls of his shoulder-length golden brown locks. It was tied into a low ponytail but still, it looked majestic.

I had to contain the excitement bubbling inside me. Yes, I just can't believe that this man providing live violin music for the last dance is the vice president of the Fancy Pants Club, Mr. Vincent Dominico Altair.

Listening to him play now, it made me remember our almost-too-personal meeting a few minutes ago...

“What?! The Fancy Pants Club Vice President is our replacement violinist?!” Ericka shouted that when Mr. Ross confirmed it.

I was still dumbstruck silent when that fact was laid out to me. I couldn’t believe it myself, but I guess this is the real thing huh?

Watching my friend now, I could see that she almost popped her eyes out. Mr. Ross bobbed his head again, grinning in delight.

“But what about the payment? I don’t think that this man would accept values lower than four zeros, ” I stated, finally regaining my voice. When it comes to the budget, that’s when I turn serious. Money is always a big deal when it comes to event parties especially weddings.

I saw Mr. Ross open his mouth, but before he could say anything, a man’s voice interrupted us with a soft, “its okay.”

We all turned to look at the source and there he was, our violinist, standing in the threshold holding a violin case.

“What I mean is it's okay. You don’t need to pay me at all, ” said he as he stepped inside to show his full appearance and tall frame. He looked regal even though he was wearing a plain white v-necked shirt under a casual blazer jacket and black slacks.

I gulped unconsciously.

“You are Mr. Vincent Dominico Altair if I’m not mistaken?” I asked, half-smiling, half dazed. This is the Vice President of the Club? He is so...

And then I heard Ericka sigh dreamily in my side. Not the love-struck kind of way, but the adoration type. I know that she always admires beautiful things whether it be objects, humans, or as simple as the change of color in the sky. No exceptions.

“Yes, ” he nodded whilst showing a comely smile, “it is I, Miss...”

I blinked thrice. Realizing he doesn’t know me, I quickly shot my hand and said, “Daniella. Daniella Rosecraft.”

“Rosecraft?” he parroted.

There it is again, the odd searching look similar to that of Rohan earlier when he heard my name. I am quite sure now that it isn’t connected to me being the only daughter of the Rosecraft Family. I believe it is connected to something else... something that they only know about.

“Then, I am so pleased to meet you, Ms. Daniella, ” he gradually said, taking my hand, and instead of shaking, he kissed it.

I was taken aback. Such a gentleman. I wonder if he is from an aristocratic family.

“So am I, Mr. Vice President, ” I shifted uneasily, feeling hot in my cheeks because of the touch of his lips on my skin. Shaking the heat away, I pointed to the two other people next to me. “And this is Ms. Ericka Danes, my right-hand, and Mr. Reynald Ross, Ms. Elaine’s talent manager.”

They all shook hands and smiled. Mr. Ross showed a grateful face while Ericka was blushing. Knowing her, she would probably dance her victory dance later having achieved her goal of meeting a beautiful man.

“You can call me Vincent by the way. I prefer that. Calling me Mr. Vice President is too formal, ” he suggested and we were all bobbing our heads in agreement.

“Then, Vincent it is, ” I was the one who said that. “Thank you by the way for being our replacement violinist on such short notice. Your presence really means a lot to me.”

I eyed the violin case, carefully studying it, and deduced that the stringed instrument inside might be very expensive since the case itself already costs a fortune.

“Just doing what I’m told to, Daniella. No big deal at all, ” was his answer and I was left speechless.

Doing what he is told to? By whom?

“Anyway, ” he cleared his throat before I could answer, “As I said before, you don’t need to pay me.”

“But it is only proper that I have to, ” I immediately reasoned, “The company has allocated a talent fee for the violinist.”

“Hmmm...” I heard him grumble softly. We were eye to eye and because of that, my heart seemed to leap.

Wow... what beautiful eyes. Is there possibly a more beautiful shade of violet in the whole world than the ones I am looking at now?

“You are quite an insistent woman huh?” he said smirking.

I tilted my head. “Part of my job I guess.”

“Then, so be it. If you want to pay me then do it, but not in cash, anything but that.”

I knitted my brows; confused as to what his point was. “How am I going to do that then?”

“You can call it your debt to me.” After putting the violin case on the floor, he took my hand and sandwiched it with his own. My cheeks instantly flamed up. “If I need your help, would you come to my aid then?”

Judging from the sincerity in his eyes, I don't think that he was joking or concocting a weird plan. So me being innocent and knowing that it's a reasonable bargain nodded in affirmation.

"I guess that's simple enough, " I said.

Feeling the heat of his soft hands surrounding mine, I tried to pull it out. Since I have no experiences with men, this was beginning to make me feel uncomfortable...like tinglings and butterflies-in-my-stomach kind of uncomfortable. I failed in the end, however.

"Good, " he stated then raised our hands near his lips. I was wide-eyed when he kissed my knuckles then. The tingling feeling inside me increased. "I'm glad we see eye to eye, Daniella."

"Wait." This time I pulled my hand harder in success, hiding them behind thereafter. "Uhmm... just to make sure, no below-the-belt right?"

I'm sorry. I just had to ask that.

The backstage was instantly filled with an amused yet hearty laugh coming from Vincent. It heated my cheeks even more thinking I had inadvertently embarrassed myself. I watched Mr. Ross and Ericka and they both shrugged their shoulders telling me silently that they were clueless too.

When Vincent stopped, his eyes landed mine with warmth. He brushed a soft curl out of my face and then said, "Yes, no below-the-belt darling."

I smiled in relief after hearing it.

He stooped low and picked the violin case from the floor. "Well then, " he said, "I have to ask, when am I going to play?"

Ericka, after uttering an 'oh', stepped in and informed him confidently, "In a few minutes from now, Mr. Altair."

***

~ Erik ~

I didn't finish the party. I took off and decided to retreat to the clubhouse man cave after calling Vincent. It is located on the third floor of this chateau, in the north wing, where only club members are allowed access.

When I arrived there, I directly went to the wine cellar and took a bottle of champagne the same as the wedding reception offered. I want to enjoy this liquor alone while I lounge on my favorite spot of the room: the billiards area. I have never been a social man.

Here, the furniture is almost modern as opposed to the rest of the chateau that displayed Victorian and Baroque designs. There's a billiards table in the middle of the room as expected and there is a

bar that housed numerous brands of spirit. Most of my members enjoy this very much — a good breather from the Club's so-called activities.

I sat on my usual wingback chair and leisurely drank the sparkling liquid. Watching the glass in my hand, it made me remember that woman: Daniella Rosecraft.

It has been a year since we've met... since that accident happened. My conscience has never allowed me peace after it. I didn't expect that I would meet her again. I didn't expect that she would be alive at all. Meeting her today — just this afternoon to be precise — surprised me to the core...

I was strolling in the main second floor foyer where the wedding reception of the year will be held. It is my usual job as a president to check on the area before the party starts and make sure that the organizers keep the decorations and other elements strictly fancy and perfect.

When I entered the grand ballroom, I was pleased with what I saw. Every detail was beyond perfect.

Exactly just as I would expect in a popular wedding company.

Aside from the fact that the groom, Aaron Roslin, is a client of Rohan and his friend, I allowed the couple to hold their wedding party in the clubhouse because of the company organizing the event: the Rosecraft Weddings and Events Concepts. I knew that this company would keep its mission and goal to hold a royal wedding party suited in a place such as this but aside from that, there was another reason; a reason that was connected to what had happened a year ago.

Now, just as I was about to inspect the center stage, a ring came flying in the air and landed on the floor, stopping near my boot. I picked it up and inspected it. It was a beautiful ring, with an emerald stone in the center surrounded by diamonds. Based on the direction where it flew, it wasn't really hard to know that the ring came from a woman standing on a metal ladder. Since I didn't have the intention of keeping the object to myself, I chose to return it to her.

Once I climbed up the stage, I noticed her worrying over something. She was whimpering whilst looking intently at her hands.

I wondered why then.

Since her back was to me, I decided to catch her attention by touching her ankle. What happened next was what I didn't expect.

Aside from realizing that this woman was Daniella Rosecraft, glue and luster dust fell on top of my head. This situation doesn't really fluster me; I am always good at hiding my thoughts and emotions from other people, but after seeing the deep cut that she had in her forefinger, that had me hurrying to pull her out of the ladder and into my arms.

Explaining that I mean to take her in the clubhouse clinic is only a waste of time so I chose to just dash out of the ballroom with her wiggling in my hold.

I can't really blame her for her noisy outbursts. I can't even blame her that she called me an asshole. I deserved everything she threw at me since I was really acting like a dickhead... a condescending asshole I should say.

But really, her imagination was so impressive. Judging from the expression of her face, she actually thought that I was going to murder her.

I have to give her credit for that though. I agree that my silence and actions could really raise red flags.

When we arrived in the clinic, I was both relieved and amused. Relieved because her wound would be taken care of and amused because I never thought this woman would be this vivacious...

Releasing a deep sigh, I took out the ring that was nestled safely inside my pants pocket and slipped it in my middle finger. I intended to return it to her after the wedding party, but...I changed my mind.

I touched the part where Daniella's uppercut connected — just under the left side of my jaw. It was still sore and I bet it would show a small bruise tomorrow. Anyhow, it is a good souvenir just like the ring since I might not be able to see her after the wedding reception tonight.

Chapter 6 - A Saturday Night-out Surprise

~ Daniella ~

"So who are those men in the table with you last night Dan?" Ericka asked me the moment we were alone in our cubicle. The rest of our friends (my team) were on the dance floor shaking their booties and grinding with other men. Mason, Ericka's beau, went to the bartender station to order some flaming margarita for us. We are in a night club called Lotus Spade in the upper downtown, outside of the fabulous Beverly Hills city.

It is our last day here in the city since tomorrow we will return to New York. Good thing Ms. Elaine granted us an extra day stay in the chateau, all expenses paid by her and her husband. Since it is a Saturday, after taking care of the wedding decorations and flowers for the whole day, we decided to celebrate our successful and trouble-free wedding event last night by coming to this club. It is also timely that it is mine and Ericka's night-out day.

Everything in the reception went as planned (well... except for the violinist but that was already solved thanks to Mr. Vincent Altair). After his *Allegro Moderato* piece, the newlyweds requested another one since they loved hearing him play. After that, two more requests arrived to which Vincent was kind enough to play. The audience was so captivated with his mini-concert that they almost forgot that it was a wedding party. They actually asked for multiple encores in chorus. Luckily, the host was skillful enough to transition to the next part of the program and dismiss Vincent out of the stage without a problem.

I never saw Vincent after that again because he left the area through the other side of the ballroom.

Right after the reception, Ms. Elaine and Mr. Aaron congratulated me. They said that they will recommend me to their friends if they needed a wedding planner. Not that I would need such an advertisement from them since...you know, the Rosecraft Company is already popular, but it is always great to know that through my efforts more credits will go to the company which I will inherit someday.

"Ah, those two?" I gave Ericka an innocent face. The lights of the club were playful. The colorful lasers swayed all over the place. I could see her grooving to the beat, but her attention was still on me.

"Yup," she said whilst throwing a peanut in her mouth, "those two with you in the Fancy Pants Club table."

I pressed my lips as I recollected my time in that particular table. In no way am I going to mention *his* name because it will only bubble up my suppressed irritation. "Weren't you at the

party last night too? I'm sure you know who the man next to me is. He was in the stage giving a message to the newlyweds."

"Uh, na ah," she shook her head. "Remember you assigned me at the entrance door. I never got the chance to see the whole of the program."

My eyes widened in realization. "Oh yes, I forgot."

Ericka then leaned closer to me and gave me a hopeful look. "So? Who are they?"

She really is determined on juicing up information.

"The one with the yellow turban is Rohan," I started after a sigh. "He is the secretary of the Fancy Pants Club."

"Uhuh, I'm listening," Ericka noted.

"And...the one next to me is the president, Mr. Erik Romano Fancii."

I saw her roll her eyes then. "Well duh..." she voiced, "it is a no brainer. Look at the rhyming words. Fancii and Fancy. Get it?"

I chuckled at her statement. She can be a comedian sometimes. I took my glass of tequila and drank it in one gulp. The liquid immediately stung my throat in the most desirable way.

"But he is stiff," I heard Ericka say then. "He needs to loosen up a bit."

"Oh, believe me," I stated, "I so agree with you with that."

She tapped a finger in the corner of her lips and leaned back on the cushioned chair as if she was thinking. "The other one though, Rohan, is that his name? He seems easy to get along with," she remarked once done.

"Yes, he is. Can you believe that he is a Kamasutra guru?"

I don't think it is an information that needed her attention but I guess I was wrong.

"Oh yeah? He is?" she straightened; eyes lighting up. "Can you ask him how much is his fee?"

I gave her a perplexed look. "Why are you asking?"

She bit her lips then and confessed, "Because I'm planning to take Mason with me for a session."

Wow. I never expected this straight-A college student would be courageous with regard to this kind of topic.

"Kee, you know you don't need to tell me that right?" I said feeling my cheeks blush. I so don't need an image of my friends making out or getting hot and horny right now.

"I know," she sighed, "but I want you to feel the *burn* too."

Oh my Lord, I believe the *burn* she is talking about meant *desire*.

"I think it's high time you get a boyfriend, Dan."

There she is again, playing cupid. We had talked about this several times and it always ended up with me saying 'graduate first before love life.' But now, I can't do that anymore since I *have* graduated.

"Hmmm, sorry, I don't plan on having one anytime soon," is what I just replied.

Ericka gave me a skeptical look. "Huh, I bet you'll swallow your words when someone makes a move on you." She tossed another peanut in her mouth and eyed me mischievously. "Like perhaps...the vice president?" she added.

If I'm going to weigh it down, I think the reason why she said that is because of what happened last night; those two kisses in my hands that weren't necessary for a man who I just met. But I believe Vincent is just being a gentleman. I guess Ericka saw it in a different light.

"What? Vincent?" I suppressed a laugh. "Oh...he is too beautiful for me. I think you are aware of that."

She chuckled and then placed an elbow in the table while supporting her face with her hand. "I know right. He is so dreamy and such a gentleman."

Huh, she just took the words right out of my mouth. I scooped my share of peanuts and started eating them whilst contemplating on our subject. Vincent Dominico Altair is a hot man. Like *hot* just like his two other club members. But his type is what women would call a *lucky catch...* a *prince charming*. I don't see him as my prince charming though. I prefer my man...

"How about the president?"

I coughed out a peanut as an image of Erik flashed in my mind.

"Oh goodness Kee, I think I'm gonna puke." The glass of water instantly relieved me as I drank it. "Why would you have that kind of idea?"

She shrugged her shoulders then. "Nothing... just intuition I guess."

"Well, that intuition of yours is messed up. It needs fine-tuning because believe me when I tell you, that man is untouchable with his oh-so-perfect principles in life and his roguish attitude."

She giggled and rolled her eyes Ericka-style. "You seem to know him quite well even just for a few hours together."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "One minute. One minute is all I need to know that *that* man is a no-go."

"Mhmmm, that sounds like a challenge," she nodded towards Mason's way as we saw him approach our cubicle with two salted margaritas in hand. "And I happen to know you love challenges, *boss*."

I rolled my eyes. *God, sometimes her keen sense of things makes me shiver.*

"Oh my God!" she suddenly shouted and stood up, "Is that him!"

"What?!" I scrambled from my seat too; stretching my head to make sure I could see. I could feel my heart pounding like crazy. "Where?" My brain honestly assumed that Ericka was pertaining to Erik, but I think it was just out of panic that it did so. "Wait, who are we talking about?" I crossed my arms in my chest.

"Oh my God, Daniella. Look at your face!" she burst out, then danced in a silly manner, making heart shapes with her hands.

I can't really get angry with my friend, so instead of dissing her because of her prank, I plopped myself back on the sofa and said, "Zip it, Kee. I'm not patronizing this topic about him anymore."

She stopped and smiled evilly on my way. "You're cute," she said, wriggling her brows.

"And you're bossy."

"You are the boss!"

And then we both laughed. Mason, who now joined us, looked confused. "What's this girly commotion in here?" he asked whilst hooking an arm around Ericka's waist.

"Nothing," I said, then grabbed my friend's wrist. "You wouldn't mind me stealing your girlfriend for a date right?"

He raised his hands and said, "No problem at all, boss. Go ahead."

***

A few minutes of dancing together with my girls had me in a great mood. It was fun and at the same time liberating. Because we were in the middle of the dance floor, I could see the whole of the club. It was spacious. There were balcony-type cubicles and private VIP rooms on the second floor, a wide stage in the center that had band instruments set up, and more cubicles on the first where ours was too.

I found that this club has a lot of customers. Probably, I can say that the class of people that come here are in between the middle and high class. Most wore designer clothes and had blings dangling in their necks and wrists.

The dance floor was alive because of the many people crowding up including my team and me. It would have been a normal event for a club but the way the people danced, including those around us, were out of the ordinary. They actually looked like they were in a high.

Weird.

I would have opened this up with Ericka, but before I could tow her out of the dance floor, I felt my cellphone vibrate in my hand.

Now, who would call me at this hour?

After tapping Ericka's shoulder, I shouted in her ear, "I'll go out for a sec! My phone is vibrating!"

"Sure!" she answered loudly.

And there I went, out of the club managing a flight of stairs before passing the tall, scary-looking bouncer with a braided beard.

Unknown number?

My mind blurted out as I checked on my cellphone screen.

Seeing a classic lamppost a few feet away from me, I went there and answered my phone. This location is right. It is enough that I can hear the caller's voice amidst the booming sound of the club music.

"Hello?" I answered anxiously.

"Good evening, Ms. Rosecraft," I heard a man's voice say. It is familiar, but because it is through the phone, I can't discern who it came from.

"Who is this?" I said, hoping it isn't a prank call.

"It's Vincent."

Oh goodness. My heart actually leaped in response.

"Oh hi!" I said, quite dumbstruck that it is him. "You...have my phone number?"

"Yes," was his only reply. In the background, I can hear soft jazz music playing and the sound of billiard balls hitting each other.

"May I know from whom or where you got it?"

I heard him chuckle then. For some reason, I have a feeling that he had our conversation in a speaker. *"Would you get angry if I tell you I researched it in your curriculum vitae?"*

"Uh, no," I answered, "that won't make me angry, but that will give me chills. You have some potential to become a stalker."

I heard him laugh then, the same hearty one in the backstage last night. *"You're hilarious, Daniella. I like you."*

Okayyy. I am not going to think of the word 'like' as something else other than for friendly purposes.

I gulped hard and decided to go straight to the point. "Soooo, what's up? Why are you calling this late an hour?"

"When are you returning to New York?" he asked directly.

"Uhm... tomorrow afternoon, why?"

"I'm just wondering if I can collect your debt to me now."

"Huh? As in, at this moment?" I was taken aback. It just sounds weird to hear him say that.

"No no," he quickly disagreed, "Tomorrow morning, at 10 o'clock. What you are going to do is to pose as a life model for my painting session for just 3 hours."

I leaned against the lamppost, hooking my free hand in my shoulder. There were people passing me, minding their own business as I did mine.

"A model?" I said after my brain ingested the information. "If you don't mind, can I ask where your original model is? I assume you have one."

"Yes, I have, but she backed out because of a family emergency she needed to take care of."

"And you think that I'll be fit to become a model?"

I don't have low self-esteem. I am confident with my appearance and many even tell me I am a charming gal. I just don't think that I am fit to become an art model.

"Yes, of course," he said immediately. No hint of reservation whatsoever. *"So are you in?"*

"Am I going to be nude? Because I will certainly not agree."

I heard him chuckle again. *"No, you just wear whatever you want to wear. Our session tomorrow is all about facial angles and light tones, so I only need your face basically for the club members to paint."*

Club members... My mind spelled out. *Will the president join too?* I wanted to ask that one, but refrained, for I still have a suspicion that I am in loudspeaker. Also, I don't want Vincent to think that I have some unanswered issues with Erik, and by saying *unanswered issues*, I meant his declaration of revenge on me.

"Wow, it sounds amazing already," I answered him even though a chill ran up my spine after remembering Erik's words on my ear.

"I'll see you tomorrow then?" he said.

I nodded although he can't see me. "Sure."

"I'll just text you the place. Don't worry, the class will only be held within the chateau."

That sounds acceptable. I of course don't want to leave the chateau for hours when I know that I'll have my flight soon.

"That sounds good then," I said hoping to hang the phone up. I bet Ericka and others are already wondering why I'm taking too much time.

"Wait, are you in a night club?" Vincent suddenly asked that. I could sense a bit of alarm in his voice.

"Yes, my team and I are in a club called Lotus Spade. Have you visited here? The place is amazing!"

I heard a faint disappointed groan then. I'm not sure if it's from him, but it sounded a bit gloomy. I don't think that prince charmings can produce that kind of unfavorable sound at all.

"You should get out of that place now," was his sudden command. I creased my brows and pressed my lips together.

"Woah, don't sound like a parent now Vincent."

"No, I'm serious, Daniella. You should get out of that night club now. It's not safe."

Now, the tune of his voice turned grave. It almost sounded like Erik in his bossy self.

I heaved a deep breath. I have no intention of giving him a sarcastic comeback as I treated him as a good friend, but still, I don't want to be ordered without any justifiable reason.

"We are having fun here Mr. Vice President and I don't want to become a killjoy on my friends," I clipped, "Tell me... why should I do what you ask?"

I heard a scratching, thumping sound then. Next, a button pressed and thereafter, a voice of a man I never would have expected to hear.

"Because if you won't, I'll come and get your sexy ass out of there," Erik Romano 'the asshole devil' Fancii threatened.

"Erik?!" I shouted in panic. After realizing that I actually said his first name, I immediately covered my mouth.

Oh shit!

"Ahh, I mean...ah Mr. President?!"

"Daniella," he drawled. Dammit, I could actually visualize his stern face looming above me. *"One warning is enough. I don't think you are too dumb to be told over and over again."*

Even though I know he can't see me, I stood my ground and squared my shoulders. "I don't have time for an argument with you Mr. Pre.si.dent."

"Then just get the hell out of there," he ordered again.

I pressed my lips tightly. Finally, my suppressed irritation towards him has boiled up again.

"You know what you *pompous ass*, I will not leave just because you command me to. My friends and I are having fun here. You are not my boss. You are not my mother or my father, and certainly *not* my boyfriend, so you don't have the right to command me just like that."

There, I hope my words pass in that thick head of his.

"Good night, Mr. President."

I hung up the phone not waiting for his reply. I had to because if I don't I am pretty sure he would release an apocalypse of words again. Tonight is mine and my team's night for a celebration party. I don't want it destroyed just because of some overbearing man who wants all of his commands granted.

The words *'not safe'* did linger in my mind though. What could possibly be in Lotus Spade that both Vincent and Erik worry so much? Is it the drunkenness of its customers? Or the prostitutes clearly visible in a corner? Or just because they think that we are too young to party in a high-class club?

After collecting cool air in my lungs, I successfully tuned out the negative vibes I had because of Erik's phone call interruption. I went back inside with the hopes that nothing will ruin this night anymore.

Chapter 7 - Kidnapped by Mr. ____?

~ Daniella ~

Thirty minutes passed by after Vincent's call. When I returned to the cubicle, my friends were already there waiting for me including Ericka and Mason. They didn't ask me what's up and they didn't even show any curiosity with regards to my phone call. They probably thought it was just my mom asking for a report about yesterday.

Different topics were brought up while we drank our margaritas, but most of it was all about the company's possible next wedding events. I can see in their eyes that they love their work. Well... I do too and enjoy it very much. I could never see myself working in another job other than this.

As I look around the dance floor, I saw something very odd. The people who were with us on the dance floor were more hyped up than earlier. Their dance moves were wilder and for me, I think it bordered on ridiculous. I haven't been to clubs that much, so I found these scenes a bit odd.

"Hey, *boss*," Jiezel, one of my prettier team members, caught my attention, "You should try this one. It's good."

She handed me a cocktail glass that contained a cloudy blue liquid. On the rim, there was a slice of peach and watermelon instead of lemon.

"Thanks," I said and sipped on it a little. She was right. The liquor tasted good.

"Did you order this one? What's the name of this drink?"

Jiezel shrugged her shoulders. She looked a little bit tipsy to me, but can still manage her own movements. "No, I didn't order it. The bartender gave me seven cocktail glasses earlier and said that it is on the house. It's called *Blue Lotus*."

"Wow, that's generous of him," I remarked, smiling, and then sipped on the blue liquid again.

"I need to pee," proclaimed Ericka suddenly. She stood up but then tumbled onto Mason's careful arms.

"Hey!" I exclaimed, "Ericka, you're drunk!" She gave me a lopsided smile.

"Mason, I think you need to take her back to the château now. She looks ready to hit the bed."

I'm no older than my friends, but I believe I have a more mature way of thinking. I know when to quit drinking if I feel tipsy and I have an innate sense of what is happening around me. My friends

call me the *voice of reason* in our group not because I'm their boss but because I act as a leader whenever it is necessary — exactly like what is happening now.

"I think so too, *boss*," agreed Mason. "We will just take a cab." Ericka was clinging onto his neck like a koala when he stood up and half-guided, half-carried her out of the club.

"How about you guys? Do you want to leave?" I asked my remaining members once my two close friends left.

"We're still good *boss*," my bespectacled Clarice answered. She looked tipsy too but nevertheless, still can move normally.

"Right," I sighed. Looking at the time on my cellphone screen, it read thirty minutes past twelve o'clock. Most partygoers would probably say that it is still a young night and I couldn't agree more. Midnight is just the start of the party where anything can happen. Anything...

And *anything* for me started with a call on my cellphone for the second time.

An unknown number again? I remarked after glancing on the screen. *It doesn't look the same as Vincent's number earlier. From who is this?*

"Hey guys, I should take this call," I informed them whilst raising my phone.

"Go ahead *boss*," said Jiezel with a smile.

Seriously, if this is a prank call I'm going to lose it. It's not easy managing a sea of people while passing the dance floor in order to get to the exit door you know. I just hope that this call is important; otherwise, I would turn the damn thing off so that it wouldn't bother my momentum of partying.

I was still halfway on the dance floor, trying to wriggle myself out of the dancers all the while my cellphone rang. *It seemed that the caller is a persistent person huh?*

Once I was able to pass by a couple grinding on each other, I suddenly felt a hard object poke on my naked back. Take note, my party attire is a black body-hugging dress with an elegant drape on the back. I wore it because of Ericka's insistence telling me that I might get lucky tonight with it.

I noticed at this moment, the phone call ended.

The object felt like a tip of something. It made me jerk upon the cold contact. On instinct, I whirled around to see *what* was poking me and *who* did it, but as soon as I did so, a hand came up my left shoulder and then a voice whispered in my ear, "Don't move."

Alarmed, I did the opposite and turned to look at my captor.

"I said don't move," the voice said and gripped on my arm tightly to steady me.

My heart immediately drummed like crazy. *I guess my luck had run out.*

The voice was from a man, slightly familiar but I couldn't really tell since we were still surrounded by the loud techno sound.

"Who are you?!" I shifted from his hold, but it tightened even more as a response.

"Act cool and walk straight," was the man's only reply, not even answering my simple question.

Although I was beginning to get scared, I did as he ordered. We walked towards the exit with him behind me and my arms on each side. I could still feel the hard object poking on my back. In my mind, I had a definite clue as to what it is: a gun.

"Good girl," he complimented, but I just rolled my eyes.

"What do you want from me?" I say acting calm, but deep inside I was nervous as hell.

"Continue walking," was his only reply.

My God, help!

This man could be anyone with a degree of Bachelor's in Murder and Rape or even a salutatorian with honors in serial killing. I certainly don't want to be his next victim, but with him holding the deadly object, I don't have a choice but to be obedient until I get a good opening of escape.

We were out of the dance floor and were now managing the narrow hallway towards the entrance -slash- exit stairs. I remember that there was a bouncer standing guard on the opening, so with that in mind, I devised a quick and clever way of escaping my captor.

"Is that a gun?!" I loudly stated just as we were about to pass the bouncer. It was loud enough for him to hear. Surely it would raise a warning in his mind. But...

"Shhh..." I heard the man's snaky response.

"Please don't—"

"Keep your mouth shut or you'll regret it," he threatened.

I did so obediently as the fear of the unknown got through me. My clever plan was subsequently forgotten. When we passed the bouncer, I saw him nod on our way, but I noticed that he was specifically nodding on the man behind me.

Figures. So the scary-man knows who my captor is huh? Are they like partners in crime or something? This was bad news for me. My clever plan didn't have a success rate since the beginning.

As we reached the sidewalk, clean air immediately filled my lungs. It was an advantage for me since I do not smoke. However, being outside didn't calm me at all since my captor was still poking his gun on me and holding my shoulder.

He pushed me into the road where I could see a red Ferrari directly in our path.

Figures again. Most serial killers are known to be awfully rich right?

When I stood right in the passenger seat, I heard him order in a stern voice, "Get in," and this time, I couldn't hold back myself anymore.

Between *fight* or *flight*, I chose *fight*. As I said, I do not want to be this man's next victim even if it kills me with the gunshot wound now (that's if he so luckily pulls the trigger on me, but I'm hoping beyond hope that he wouldn't).

"The hell I would!" I shouted. I whirled around to face my captor ready to make an uppercut (the only self-defense I taught myself) and saw his appearance finally.

The man was tall, like six feet tall. I was only five foot eight, but I'm wearing heels. He was wearing a baseball cap and night sunglasses. If I was far, I wouldn't have recognized him immediately, but our faces were inches apart and his damnable lips were the most obvious telltale sign that this man was the President of the Fancy Pants Club.

"Daniella. Inside. Now!" Erik groaned just as he opened the car door and pushed me inside.

I was stunned speechless of course, but that didn't take long when Erik rounded and slipped inside the driver's seat.

"The hell? You almost gave me a heart attack!" I punched his right arm as strong as I could for I couldn't keep my anger in check anymore. His methods of working with me are just downright unorthodox! Goodness! It would have been better if he had just dragged me out of the club than acting all psychopathic, murdery on me!

"Thank you for being obedient, Ms. Rosecraft." He produced a grin. He produced a sexy grin! He freaking produced a sexy grin! *What the hell?*

"Gods, Erik! Why did you do that? And why do you have a gun?!" I eyed the mentioned object peeking under his black jacket and pointed at it like it had herpes.

"I said I would get you out of that club remember?" he simply stated, then turned the car ignition on.

"By acting like a hostage-taker?" I huffed in frustration. "You sure are weird. Is that gun—"

"The real thing?" he butted in, looking at me under his sunglasses, "Yes."

I arched a brow.

"Seriously, do you think that a gun is the only way for me to do your bidding?"

He smirked then, contemplating something.

I instinctively pressed my stilettos hard on the floor as the car sped at great speed out of the parking space of Lotus Spade. After a minute of silence, he spoke but his eyes were still on the road, "I don't think so Daniella. There are far *better* and *interesting* ways to make you do what I want you to do. I am just bringing a gun for our protection."

"Protection?" I gave him wide, confused eyes.

He glanced at me briefly and released a sigh. "Do you know that I just seriously broke a protocol tonight because of you?"

Hmmm... he doesn't seem intimidating at all with his sunglasses on. Lucky for me.

"What are you talking about?" I say, but then I suddenly remembered something. "Oh, God." I frantically searched for the car lock on my side but found none. "Stop the car Erik and open this door! I'm going out!"

I glanced at him with pleading eyes but I was only awarded an insensitive face. "I'm afraid I can't do that Daniella."

"Hey, I just realized that my friends are still in the club! They will think that I am being kidnapped if they notice that I'm gone too long."

"They are already taken care of by my associates," was his reply and that made me stop fretting. "They'll be kept in a safe house where they will be detoxified."

"Detoxified?" I echoed.

He released a sigh *again,* but one that looked heavy with responsibility and stated in a grim voice, "I'm going to think that you are asking that because you are innocent and *not* dumb, Daniella. Do you know that the blue liquor you have been drinking contains a serious illegal drug?"

My mouth dropped.

"Well, obviously I don't know, because if I did, I wouldn't have drunk it!"

"Now you know," he lashed. The car increased its speed and brought us on the highway.

I suddenly felt very concerned, no, not because of his overspeeding, but because of those people I saw on the dance floor earlier. "Is that the reason why those people there are acting strange?"

"Hmmm..." He released a pleased groan. "It's good that you are observant, milady. It relieves me to know that you are using your head."

I scowled at him. *Yeah, go on ahead. This is definitely a great way to start an argument, Mr. President. Who could actually forget the barb in your mouth?*

"Shit," I face-palmed myself. "Are you kidding me?!"

"No, I'm not kidding you," he answered, still looking at the road.

"I drank half of it in a cocktail glass!" I exclaimed, feeling suddenly puking inside his beautiful car.

"That's why you need detoxification too."

"Then drive me to where the safe house is. I want to be with my friends. They are under my care. My mom is going to be hysterical if she finds out we were drugged!"

And then it hit me again.

"Wait. Oh God. Ericka and Mason—"

"Are also in the safe house," he informed.

"Then take me to them!"

In my desperation, I grabbed his shoulder with both hands. Since we were in the middle of a stop sign, he turned around to face me and although I couldn't see his eyes, I could feel it burning through me. A respiratory pause he did but it is with difficulty. He pressed his lips and I found myself staring at the sinful curves like a child staring at a cake in a display window.

I don't know what hocus-pocus was in between us but I seriously feel like we were both in an *attraction* spell. Or at least that's what I felt. I couldn't read the expression on his face properly since he still had his damn sunglasses on.

But then his right hand touched my chin, *tenderly*. I could feel my lips quake in response. A lightning of delightful tingles shot through me with just that gesture alone and I froze.

This man couldn't possibly be capable of gentleness right? Right?

His lips parted and leaned slowly towards me. Dammit! I can't believe I am actually anticipating his kiss!

A honk of a horn however interrupted us, *luckily*. I cleared my throat and shifted my head towards the side window just as he pulled himself away from me. He immediately drove the car again after seeing the green light.

"No, I will take you to the château," was his reply to my earlier demand.

My heartbeat sped like the Ferrari I am inside. If whatever twisted spell surrounded us seconds ago, I earnestly hope that it would fade for good for I can't see myself getting mushy with a spawn of a devil.

"I am not a VIP you know. I need to make sure my friends are safe," I expressed as I watched the road outside. Judging from the familiar signage on the stores, we were almost in the Beverly Hills district.

"They are safe Daniella, trust me," he said in a low voice, "You will see them tomorrow morning. I give you my word as a president."

That seems fair enough.

So in the end, I surrendered.

"How is detoxifying me done anyway?" I questioned as I didn't have a clue what procedure I am to undergo later.

"Do you hate needles?" he asked straight-to-the-point.

"You're serious?" I blanched.

"I am."

"Oh God," I face-palmed myself *again*. "What have I gotten myself into?"

I don't hate needles. I dread it. I have been subjected to endless needle pricking while I was in a hospital a year ago in Monaco, France, the birthplace of my mother. I was on a ventilator at that time as I almost died due to a gunshot wound on my right upper abdomen. A part of my liver was damaged but luckily, my family doctors were able to salvage it through a long, grueling procedure. Numerous laboratory exams and a cocktail of intravenous drugs were introduced to me. Thank God, I was given a second life, but because of it, I came to fear needles — quite a lot more than with guns.

The detoxification process, *unfortunately*, uses a needle, and because I innocently ingested an illegal drug, I had to undergo the damn cleaning whether I like it or not.

"Vincent and I did warn you earlier, right? We told you to leave the club but you didn't listen," Erik pointed at me, but I was in no mood to argue with that. This time, he had the upper hand. I instead asked him a different thing.

"How did you know about the drug?"

I turned to look at his profile and saw him furrow his brows. "I prefer not to answer that question, Daniella."

"Why?"

"Because it's classified information."

Wow. I gaped. *What is he an undercover spy or something?*

Aware that this conversation wouldn't lead us to an understanding, I just shook my head and went back to watching the houses -er- mansion that we passed outside. Since the château was on top of a hill, we had to pass by curved roads and numerous intersections.

I remained silent for the remainder of our drive. It was a good choice to make since I began to feel woozy and lightheaded, and my eyelids were beginning to fall...

"Hey," I jerked up when I heard Erik's voice.

"What?" Massaging my head, I glanced at him.

"You are starting to feel dizzy and sleepy."

He really didn't have to state the obvious.

"Yeah, I can feel that," I said.

"Your fingers will soon shake uncontrollably too," he glanced at them.

"Are you a part-time soothsayer, Mr. President?" I clasped my hands.

"No, but I know the effects of the drug when ingested. The amount you drank earlier is enough to give you some of its side effects."

My mouth formed an 'oh.' That made me anxious all the more.

"But don't worry, we're almost in the château. You will feel better in no time once I inject you the counter drug. Just close your eyes."

I don't know if I should feel at ease with what he said, but I guess his words were acceptable enough. I just shrugged my shoulders and for the first time ever, I did as he ordered with no coercion, no glaring blue-green hazel eyes, and no gun against my back.

Chapter 8 - Eyes On Me

~ Erik ~

There are things that just go unplanned and unexpected. Like the two things that happened last night because of Daniella's innocence and charm.

Innocence is because she didn't know that the club she and her team had visited is a drug den in disguise. They didn't know that all of the staff there are members of a syndicate and are willing to drug unsuspecting customers with their laboratory-developed power drug called 'Cloud Blue'. It takes one on a high; give grandiose delusions and hallucinations if it is taken in great amounts. It makes the customers think that the club itself is heaven, hence their constant visits, and that means big money for the syndicate.

Because of her actions, I had to break the Club protocol, which is really unexpected of me. Another thing is I always plan things ahead. I can't believe I acted impetuously for her.

With regards to Daniella's *charm*, well... it was that time when I almost kissed her. Her desperation and genuine care for her friends were really commendable, but her worried hazel eyes looking at me was unbearable and it almost tore my defenses down.

'I just had to taste her lips,' that's what my mind blurted out, but luckily a car horn woke me up from my spell. I was relieved yes, but looking at her expression, it didn't escape my notice that she was anticipating my kiss too. Her, Daniella Rosecraft, the ever witty and confident woman, wanted *my* kiss. I had to keep myself from grinning in happiness then.

I was drinking my favorite brandy, lounging in my usual chair in the club man cave when I heard Vincent call Daniella. I couldn't help but hear their conversation since he was a chair away from me and he had it on loudspeaker.

The nerve of him. It seems he was doing it on purpose knowing that I and Daniella had a *past* together.

They were talking about her supposed debt after I asked him to play the violin in her organized wedding reception. I did say that he can't collect payments for it, but it seems he was taking advantage of Daniella's kindness. So now, because of it, she will model in his Arts Class tomorrow, which I will of course join — for the first time. It would be interesting to find out how this woman's quirkiness affects the other club members, and probably, my presence there would be advantageous as I can guard her with Enrique's Spanish charms.

When I come to hear Vincent asking her if she was in a club and after hearing her mention Lotus Spade, that's when I grumbled. I left my chair and stood in front of Vincent, now listening to their conversation more thoroughly.

Vincent had a grim look as he stared at me and it was enough for both of us to know that this woman was in a tight mess.

I couldn't contain my disappointment however when I heard her disagreement so I took the phone out of Vincent's hand and talked to her myself.

When I said I will drag her ass out of the club, I really meant it, but it was a risky move. It might catch the syndicate's attention on me, so I devised a better, low-key plan. *I know for sure she's going to be hysterical because of it.*

"Do you really want to go there?" Vincent said as soon as I gave back his phone.

"Yes," was my answer. I drank the remaining content of my brandy in one gulp and turned straight to the door.

"Wait, Erik." He caught my arm and stopped me. "Do you really want to break our protocol?" he asked in a grave tone.

"I have to." I gave him a sharp look telling him subconsciously that he can't stop me.

"Just be careful then," I heard him say, and for that, I awarded him with a small grin.

"You know I always do."

An hour later, I returned to the château with Daniella with me, or rather, I should say with Daniella *in my arms*. She had already slept in my car before we arrived, probably due to exhaustion and a lesser side-effect of the drug. I had to carry her all the way to her bedroom before I could inject the counter drug in her bloodstream. Suri, the Personal Relations Officer of the Fancy Pants Club, had to help me with the procedure. She and Amano, her boyfriend, who is also a Fancy Pants Club member, are the only persons who know the antidote's exact measurements. They are called our *medicine* couple. Amano is in the safe house dealing with Daniella's friends.

I left Daniella in Suri's care, including the changing of her party dress into comfortable sleeping wear while I went outside the bedroom phoning Amano to check on her friend's status. Fortunately, none of Daniella's team has ingested the drug in a large quantity so they are safe. I can have them brought later in their own rooms so that they can comfortably rest.

With everything in order, I decided to leave her bedroom, but not before checking on Daniella for one last time.

"I will leave first, President," informed Suri, holding with her a tray containing a disposable syringe and a vial. It is sometimes unbelievable to think that this pink-haired, petite woman has a vast knowledge of medicinal plants and drug concoctions.

"Thank you, Suri," I said with great appreciation. She left after we exchanged nods and closed the door of the bedroom.

Now, I was left alone together with Daniella who was sleeping peacefully. I watched her chest rise and fall, watched her eyes twitch for the faintest second, and watch her lips briefly curve.

Ahhh, her lips.

If anything, I feel damned now wanting to taste them.

I shouldn't have allowed myself alone with her if I am this weak on her charm. But move closer I did, with careful, *careful* strides on the edge of the bed. I sat on the mattress, holding my breath whilst silently hoping that the depression of the foam wouldn't wake her. When it didn't, I released a sigh of relief.

She looks so beautiful, sleeping, but I knew inside me I wouldn't be contented with just watching. I just had to taste her lips...

***

~ Daniella ~

I woke up in the morning feeling rejuvenated. The last thing that registered in my mind was sleeping in the president's car and beyond that, I don't have any idea. It was possible that Erik carried me all the way to my bedroom because if he didn't I wouldn't be here in my room waking up on the right side of the bed and wearing my nightgown.

My nightgown...

I would have already panicked thinking that he must have changed me himself, but luckily, a note was left in my bedside table written by a female named Suri Marie Shervert. It said that it was her who attended me while I was unconscious including changing my clothes and giving me the counter drug Erik had mentioned. She also left a reminder that I should take an anti-nausea medication to counteract any possible remaining side-effects of the drug. As if her kindness wasn't already enough, to make things convenient for me, she left a chewable tab of Pepto-Bismol next to the note.

I took it before I rushed to take a bath. It was already a quarter before nine as I checked on the wall clock. Vincent's Arts Class is to start at ten and if I want to look good as his model, I should prepare

myself early. I am to check on my friends' rooms too to see if they are doing alright like me. I would probably be on a guilt trip if they aren't.

Now, forty minutes had passed and I am in the second floor east wing hallway looking for the club's in-house gallery called 'Colores Imaginarios.' I was holding my cellphone looking again and again at the map Vincent had sent me just to make sure I was heading in the right direction. Before here, I dropped by on Ericka's room to tell her about my modeling activity for today. She was sitting next to Mason on a sofa while nursing a hangover. Thankfully, they had no residual side-effects of the drug and were normally moving just like me. She bid me good luck and raised a thumbs up after inspecting my attire.

First off, I didn't know the dress code of the Arts Class, so I took the liberty of choosing a floral midi skirt, an off-shoulder blouse, and lace-up shoes — all with a touch of black — in the hopes that it would be favorable on the club member's eyes. Vincent did say last night that I could wear anything so yeah, this ensemble is what I could whip up in time. Second is my hair. I don't recall him mentioning about the hairstyle, but since he said that their lesson would focus on facial angles, I chose to have my hair done in a semi-ponytail twist. I left some soft curls on my face to add a bit of effect. Third is my make-up. I didn't think that their painting session would necessarily want a subject in heavy make-up, so I only used a light brown shadow on my eyes, mascara to thicken my lashes a little and cherry lipgloss to add color on my already shy red lips.

When I turned in a corner, that's when I found what I've been looking for. I just realized it wasn't that hard to find it since the place was enormous and was walled with transparent glass. A huge carved signage was hung above the front entrance where it wrote the name, *Colores Imaginarios.* Vincent was right when he said it was an in-house gallery. The inside was decorated with frames and frames of paintings probably done by the club members. It showed different mediums from oil, to watercolor, to charcoal and some 3D images that used real materials. Since I am a Fine Arts graduate and a lover of anything artsy, I had to control myself from fangirling once I stepped inside the gallery.

Beautiful. Every frame was just beautiful. What is advantageous on it is that they get to sign their artworks too.

I found some that were made by Vincent — which by the way were masterpieces. I find it unbelievable that not only was he a virtuoso in playing the violin, he was also a veteran in the field of Arts.

Scanning further, there were paintings that were created by Rohan and other masterpieces that were done by club members who I haven't met yet. Weirdly enough, I couldn't find one single painting from Erik — NOT that I was searching for his creation — I was just curious why his

name didn't appear since he was the president and all. Surely, it was his job to become the role model of his members, and showing his talent to them through painting was one way to it.

"Daniella!"

Just as I was turning from one painting to the other, I heard a woman call. I whirled around and saw this lovely, petite woman with hair that looked like cotton candy waving her hand at me. She had a wide smile on her face as she approached me. I don't know why, but I think she was very, *very* happy to see me.

"Uhmm, I'm sorry but have we met before?" I asked as we were an arms-length apart.

"Hmmm, technically, we haven't but anyway, I'm Suri," she shot a hand in between us.

"Oh!" My mind quickly registered the facts. "You're her!" I took her hand and shook it. Now, I couldn't keep myself from smiling from ear to ear too. "Wow. I am pleased to meet you."

"Same here," she chimed. She didn't let go of my hand when I loosened my grip. Instead, she pulled me close for a hug — a nice, warm hug.

It made my heart flutter for I instantly felt a sisterly bond with her.

"Thank you for taking care of me last night," I said when we withdrew.

"No problem. Did you take the medicine on the table?"

She pinched my cheeks lightly and then studied me, turning my face from side to side. If I'm correct, I think she was acting like a doctor assessing her patient.

"Yes, I did," I answered, fighting myself from furrowing my brows. Her actions were weird but I feel cared for by her close inspection.

"Do you feel anything right now?" she stepped backward and released a relieved sigh.

"Nothing at all," I answered with ease. "I feel surprisingly *myself*, like I wasn't a victim of being drugged last night."

"That's good news. Well, I can see that you don't have any rashes and is acting well, so that means somebody can be at ease now."

Somebody? Now that's a vague statement. I would have asked her about it, but another question popped suddenly in my head.

"Are you joining the Arts Class too?"

She nodded and replied, "Yes, I am. I am just waiting for my beau. He forgot to bring fine brushes, so he went back to our room to get it."

"Oh, I see." Now my curiosity heightened. "Is it okay if I ask something?"

"Yes, sure. What is it?" The blue shimmered in her doe eyes.

"Are you a member of the Fancy Pants Club?" I couldn't help but fidget with my fingers. I hope asking her this directly wouldn't give her any weird opinion of me. In my research on a social website, a famous columnist briefly mentioned that gaining one of the Fancy Pants Club member's friendship and trust is advantageous. I hope Suri won't see me as a gold digger who only wants her friendship to gain an advantage with the club.

"Yes, I am," but she just answered with giddiness. There was no hint that her friendliness towards me had changed. *Thank God.* "And my boyfriend, Amano, too. I am the Personal Relations Officer of the Club while he is the Weapo-- er..." She abruptly paused and looked down at her doll shoes.

I found it weird then.

"Ah, just a club member," she continued after regaining her cool and gave me another wide smile.

"I see." I smiled back, taking her momentarily lapse as nothing. "It's nice to meet new members of the club. At Ms. Elaine's wedding, I was actually expecting all of you to attend."

"Oh, no." She waved her hands. "Amano and I were having a vacation during Mrs. Roslin's wedding. We just arrived yesterday morning."

Realization dawned on me then. "Ahh, so that's why."

"Daniella!" We both turned around when a male voice called me from across the hall. It was Vincent who had just exited a door. He strolled towards us and after only seconds, was standing in our midst with his hand grabbing my right one.

"Good morning Vincent," I say once he bent to kiss my hand the way he did in our first meeting. It gave me the same tingling-in-my-skin, blushing-in-my cheeks effect.

"Good morning darling," he said once he straightened, shooting me a handsome smile. I could definitely compare him to anime shows where bishounen's beamed a smile with roses in their backgrounds.

After acknowledging Suri's presence with a gentle nod, he turned his attention back at me. "How are you feeling now?"

I clasped my hands near my abdomen. "I'm good, thanks to Suri's care."

He arched a brown then, one that was pretty obvious.

"Just Suri?" he said, sounding confused.

I was taken aback. “Uhmm, why? Is there anyone else I missed out?”

I maybe unconscious last night but I’m pretty sure Suri took care of me all by herself. So, the credit goes *all* to her.

Vincent produced a grin and shook his head. “Nahh, forget it,” he said, then turned towards the open door. “Come inside the studio. I want to introduce you to my students and the other club members before the class starts.”

Once we were inside, I was quickly guided by Vincent into a small stage where there were soft spotlights in every direction and a single Victorian sofa in the center. I didn’t sit on it though since I am still to introduce myself to everybody inside whose eyes were riveted on me the moment I stepped in.

“Good morning everyone,” greeted Vincent initially. “As you may very well know, today we have a special guest.” He looked at my way and gave me a playful wink. I returned a nervous smile at him. “She is our life class model on this day only. She is the daughter of Mr. Magnus and Evlin Rosecraft, the owner of the Rosecraft Weddings and Events Concepts. She headed the recently-concluded, extravagant wedding of Mr. Aaron and Mrs. Elaine Mckenzie-Roslin. Let us welcome, the beautiful and talented, Ms. Daniella Rosecraft.”

I didn’t think that an applause for me was warranted in an elite class like this but they all clapped their hands, smiling towards my way.

“Uh, good morning everyone.” I waved a hand shyly and bowed my head low.

“We only have seven attendees now so I think it is convenient to name them one by one,” informed Vincent.

“Hey.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Wassup?”

“Good morning, Senorita.”

Were the greetings I received when Vincent introduced each of them.

A short wave, a nod, and a cheerful smile from Suri greeted me thereafter. I was all smiles at them in response. Vincent told me that three of them were his outside students — all from respectable families — while the other four were elite members of the club. Karl Eisengard was the Webmaster of the Club, Enrique Valiencoso was the Head of Security and Amano was — well... just a member as what Suri told me and Vincent backed it up.

"Well, now. Since we have established a connection with our model, let us all begin," Vincent stated changing from his prince charming demeanor to a strict Arts professor.

He held my hand and guided me to the sofa. "Daniella, please sit here," he said as he glanced on the furniture.

"Thanks." I sat down with my legs drawn together and my hands clasped on my lap. It is ironic that I am sitting now as a model when two years ago I was one of those people with an easel and a canvas in front and a paintbrush on hand.

"All you need to do is to sit down like a statue. You can move anytime you want, but you can't change your position. Is that okay with you?"

"Yup, not a problem at all," I nodded my understanding whilst awed by his gentle, accommodating personality.

"Good." He produced a slight grin. "Tell me if you need a break and I will give it."

"Yeah, I will. Thanks, Vincent." I took a deep breath and readied myself on the three-hour painting session.

"Anytime darling," and with that, he turned around to face the awaiting people. "Let's start," he said to them and pressed the timer in his wristwatch. Immediately, the outside students and the club members focused their eyes on me — eyes that are now trained to study the contours of my face.

The whole time of the painting session, I just sat poised and unmoving. I tried training my mind to think of other things — a beautiful scenery, my untidy apartment back home, my Persian cat I left with Mrs. Sofia my family governess or any other memories that I could conjure up just so my thoughts would be diverted to what was in front of me now.

I don't know if it is just me or because of the situation I was in, but I feel like a queen right now. Vincent and Enrique made me feel that way... or at least that's what I think with the way they looked at me the whole session.

Chapter 9 - The Suave Spanish Son of A Duke

~ Daniella ~

One hour and a half later, I am still in my position. My bottom had started to feel sore and my nose had begun to itch, but I remained as still as possible. I didn't want the artists and Vincent to think that I am uncomfortable in my spot.

Actually, I am kinda having fun like this. It is just amazing to think that my face is being copied and immortalized in a canvas. I am honestly excited about what the club members and Vincent's students would create. It would be great if I get to ask or buy at least one of them so that I can have a souvenir during my stay here in the château.

Aside from my bottom and my nose complaining, I have this dilemma right now which I can't seem to shrug off. Have you ever experienced not being able to move yet you have this urge to look at a certain direction? It is a nagging sensation in the back of your head that would never leave you alone. That's exactly what I'm feeling right now and that direction for me apparently is the door of the studio where Vincent had left open. My head was turned away from it so I can't see what was in the gallery that made me want to look.

Surely there's no interesting thing that was happening there. I can't even get a single wave of sound from the airconditioners. But, when a certain man stepped inside the studio, it was only then that I realized the reason for this weird urge of mine.

In the periphery of my vision, I could see Erik in his regal self, one hand tucked in the pocket of his black jeans while the other was dangling in the side. His slim jacket was a royal blue, partnered with a white shirt. It seems that he and Vincent had the same taste of clothing - simple but elegant -, but at this moment, Vincent's jacket was a bit edgier than his.

I don't know why my heart suddenly hammered when I saw him. Maybe because I haven't thought he would attend the Arts Class since he didn't have a painting of his own in the gallery.

No one bothered acknowledging his presence as he entered. Well... except for the three outside students who quickly stood up and bent their heads in his way. I saw Vincent produce a smirk, but it was just brief. The others were engrossed with their work or were just acting the part. I can't really tell.

Erik didn't seem to care for their lack of respect though as he just continued on his way and picked a spot a few feet away from the door. Conveniently, there was already an easel with a canvas and a

spread of oil tubes in a mini table close to his artist chair. When he started setting up the palette, that's when I realized that he intended to paint me.

Me.

As in me. I wondered then how it would turn out.

***

~ Vincent ~

Daniella didn't ask for a break, but I decided to have one. I saw Erik enter thirty minutes ago and thought of one thing: *how predictable*. I had already invited him a couple of times in my Arts Class yet he didn't attend at least one session saying that it would bore him, but now that Daniella is the model, he magically comes here and begins to paint without even a morning greeting to us first.

Well, I have already expected that he would take the bait. I purposely made him listen to our conversation last night. It just amuses me how he begins to unravel that cold-hearted facade when it comes to Daniella. Never have I seen him like this; even last night when he impulsively retrieved her from that dangerous night club.

I knew that he had some kind of attachment to her after that incident last year, but it doesn't mean that because of it, I am just going to stand aside and be an audience. I like Daniella just to make things clear. She is refreshing to be with and her whimsical self is beyond compare. I would have loved to paint her, but I needed to do my job as the Art Instructor and critique my artists' work on-the-spot.

I saw her release a deep, thankful sigh when I called for a break. She rubbed her palms together and then cracked her knuckles in the cutest of ways. She even raised her arms to stretch her upper body in an unladylike manner, but it looked like she doesn't even care a damn thing that she was in an elevated, spotlighted area where all of us could witness it.

Really. She is such an adorable, amusing *kitten*. I just want to pinch that pink cheeks of hers right now.

Suri, who has been gushing over her since this early morning, was quick to hand Daniella a cup of tea, freshly-brewed from her personal, always-there butler. They talked about something and then I saw them share a good, cheerful laugh.

From where I stood in the back of the class, I saw Erik, still holding a fine brush although we were still on break. Suri's butler, Mr. Clyde, handed him a plate of lemon squares, but the blank-faced president just pointed the plate down. I saw the butler offer him a cup of tea and that's when he

willingly accepted it, putting the brush on the mini table. With how serious he looked now, I couldn't help myself teasing him a little.

I left my spot and approached the two young women who were eating the squares with gusto.

"You look a lot cheerful today Daniella," I said, my tone a little bit higher so that Erik could hear, "Did you have a nice dream last night?"

Taking a piece from their plate, I ate while waiting for her answer.

She made a face, one that showed she was skeptical of my unnecessary compliment about her. I expected her to brush off my question, but I was surprised when she answered in a partly-joking, partly-serious manner, "I'm not so sure... but I think I remember my dream having the theme of a Disney princess."

I couldn't keep myself from grinning. "Hmmm, which one?"

She pressed a finger on the corner of her lip and gazed at the ceiling, thinking.

"Hmmm... I think it was Sleeping Beauty. I believe I was kissed by my prince charming."

Then I heard Erik loudly choke on his tea.

Daniella, Suri, and I turned to look at him and we saw the red-faced president, clearing his throat uncomfortably. Some of the tea spilled on his expensive jacket so Mr. Clyde quickly took his handkerchief and wiped the wet parts of the cloth.

"Are you okay President?" I heard the butler say.

Erik raised a hand to stop Mr. Clyde's nervous cleaning. "Never been better," he replied coolly.

I watched Daniella's reaction on Erik's little drama and I saw her brows knit briefly.

"I see," I expressed, determination burning within me. *I wonder what had he done to Daniella last night to make him this...jumpy.* "Well, I think the game is on now."

"Game?" Daniella spoke in confusion. She turned to me and asked again, "What game?"

I only smirked at her. "Ahh, nothing darling. I am just blabbering nonsensically with myself."

She narrowed her eyes at me but didn't ask anymore.

I looked at Suri who seemed to catch what I was talking about but just rolled her eyes. She nudged an elbow at me then and lightly frowned in the direction past my back. When I gave her a questioning brow, I felt a hand rest in my left shoulder.

“Mi amigo Vincent, you never told me you found a charming young woman in Ms. Elaine’s wedding,” said my suave friend and club member, Enrique, all the while inserting himself in our midst with his eyes set on Daniella.

I turned to him and gave him a small smile. “Well, technically, *Erik* found her.”

Highlighting Erik’s name I believe would send him a clear message, but he just continued looking at Daniella like a single Goddess and dismissed Suri and me off.

“No matter, I think I should introduce myself properly to her.”

He took Daniella’s hand, the one who had held the teacup, and kissed the back of it as I would normally do. I saw Daniella look at him with a stunned reaction, then to me and Suri with a bemused face.

Enrique always has a way with women. In all of the male members of the club, I believe he has the most of the fan club since his undeniable charm always radiates like the sun. As a natural-born gentleman, I had expected that he would sooner or later introduce himself to Daniella.

"*Buenos dias* Señorita Daniella. I am Enrique Lancastre Valiencoso, second son of Duque Alvaro and Duquesa Sofia of Aveiro, España. You can call me Enrique for short.”

Daniella’s cheeks tinged with red, but it was just brief. She smiled as expected and nodded on Enrique.

“Enrique it is then,” she said, “I’m pleased to meet you.”

“The pleasure is mine, *mi hermosa mujer*.”

She looked at me and without even saying a word, I knew exactly what her dilemma was.

“He says *my beautiful woman*,” I translated for her. She made an ‘oh’ in her mouth and returned her attention to Enrique who was smiling charmingly at her.

“Can I invite you for a coffee *and* lunch date after class?” he offered. I couldn’t hide a twitch in my eye. He is that smooth on making the first step on women. When I had to pull strings using my Arts Class in order to spend time with Daniella, he gets to use the coffee/lunch trump card.

I gotta hand it to Enrique, he didn’t waste time at all.

I watched Erik in the corner of my eye and saw that he was acting as if sitting bored but in fact, his ears were like a fox, all perked up and alert, listening to our conversation.

Daniella shook her head carefully and gave him an apologetic smile. “I’m not sure, Enrique. I have a flight at four in the afternoon.”

Not dejected at all, Enrique held her hand and kissed it the second time. “I won’t take too much of your time Señorita, don’t worry. I just want to celebrate my first meeting with you.”

Daniella looked sheepish. “Oh, if so, then I guess—” She paused, then looked at me and Suri, an idea forming in her eyes. “Wait. How about you guys? Do you want to join us?”

Suri immediately waved her hand. “No, I’ll have to pass. Amano and I have to go somewhere after class.”

“And how about you Vincent?” Daniella asked, turning her attention on me quickly.

I have an appointment with my dentist after here, but I can always cancel it for her.

“That would be fun,” I said as I formed a smile. I saw Enrique frowned in a split-second, obviously not pleased with my answer.

Now, being a tease and to make things a lot interesting, I turned to look at Erik and asked, “How about you, President? Do you like to come with us?”

He arched a brow, drew his gaze at me, and then to Daniella who released a faint gasp.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he said. “She’d feel suffocated if three *gorgeous* guys would accompany her.”

I want to laugh at his remark but didn’t. Instead, I turned to Daniella and asked her, “Would you Daniella?”

She frowned a little, pinched her thumb and heaved a breath. “I don’t think so.”

I could feel that she was simmering inside, maybe because of Erik’s comment. Well, I am not surprised at all. His *awesome* personality is always a turn down when it comes to women, Daniella included.

Crossing my arms, feeling proud of the progress, I looked at Erik with a smug smile. “Then it’s settled. You are coming with us President.”

“Wait,” Enrique suddenly butted in. “Is there anyone who noticed my distress? I meant coffee with me and Daniella *alone*.”

I patted his shoulder and shrugged, “I guess you should have voiced that earlier mi amigo.”

He sighed heavily. “Clever. Really clever *Vicente*.”

“It’s Vincent,” I corrected, then turned my attention in front of the class. “Let’s continue our session guys. We still have an hour and a half to go.”

***

~ Daniella ~

I can't really say I'm happy going with Enrique for a coffee and lunch later. Probably, it stems from the fact that I haven't gone out to lunch with a guy, and also, I'm not fond of drinking coffee. I prefer to drink lemon tea with creamer. But this is just a minor problem for me. What I'm really concerned about is the fact that I'm going out with three sexy Gods; two of which are fond of kissing my hand and one who has a personal vendetta to me.

Other women would probably drool if they are in my shoes right now, but me? Well, I'm already fretting. My circle of friends is composed of mostly women. Like I said before, I don't have much experience with men. I know having coffee and lunch are just simple things, but with three guys? I would probably suffocate.

It seems Erik was right earlier. I guess I shouldn't have agreed. *God, me and my impulsivity.*

I have just met Enrique for like two hours, but I know already that he is a charmer. He could be easily called a Casanova because of his finely-sculpted face and studly overall appearance. He has thick eyelashes and black hair just like Rohan, but his differs quite a lot since it is highlighted with blue and is curly. Enrique radiates a regal aura just like the other male members I have encountered so far, but he seems to take the crown as he is a son of a duke. For now, I will give him the benefit of the doubt and not tag him a Casanova. To learn more about him through his actions and attitude is better than simply basing it on appearance alone.

Chapter 10 - Pineapple Art Model

~ Daniella ~

The second half of the session had started and here I am making a mannequin out of myself again. I did say that I felt like a queen an hour ago because of Vincent and Enrique's warm gazes at me right? Now, I tell you, I feel like a prisoner with Erik's accusatory and possessive glances. After doing some hasty strokes and weird actions with his brush, he hadn't touched the canvas thereafter. It had been probably fifteen minutes past since he sat on his artist chair, silent, with one finger tracing the fine curve of his bottom lip. It was the middle finger and I would have thought of it as just insignificant if not for the object he was wearing...

The spotlights were really bright but even so, I still could determine a small greenish flare from Erik's direction. Curious, I moved my eyes to see what was causing it. My mouth immediately opened after realizing he was wearing the ring (my RING!) in his middle finger. If I'm not mistaken, I think he was flagging the ring clearly for me to see. I couldn't believe he has my family's heirloom all this time!

I remember when I went to the Lost-And-Found Section yesterday morning before I went to the grand ballroom, the male staff told me that no one had come to surrender the emerald ring. I thought that some random staff in the grand ballroom that was present during our decoration must have found it and probably handed it to the Section, but I guess not. I was dejected, yes. I couldn't possibly return to New York without that heirloom with me.

Mom is going to kill me if she finds out I lost it.

So I pleaded my case to the man. Long story short, the Section manager said they would do a thorough interview and inspection on all of the staff of the chateau for the ring, and before I leave, they would give me a response and I hope it would be favorable.

Favorable, my ass now.

With Erik wearing the ring, I can't possibly see a good future on myself. He still has a score to settle with me and I have a feeling he is going to use that important object to gain it.

"Time's up. Show your artworks please," my thoughts were cut off when Vincent announced to the class.

As expected, nobody groaned in disappointment with the time limit. It seems they were used to it. I saw Suri examining her work and Amano's with a big, pleased smile. I saw Enrique look at his canvas and then to me with a wink. I saw Karl who was silent but immersed with his creation. And

I saw Erik, who, well... never mind. There was nothing to say with that brooding and arrogant appearance of his. Nothing at all.

Vincent sauntered from one canvas to another with not a hint of expression in his face. He was just examining the works silently with his arms crossed in his chest.

I have to say, I admire this side of him. It really shows that he is deeply connected with his craft.

When he arrived in Erik's canvas though, his expression gave way to that of amusement. He covered his mouth and controlled his laugh from escaping.

"Why President," he said as he looked at the nonchalant man, "Your creation is somewhat out-of-subject."

"Is it?" I heard Erik say. I saw all of the artists gather around Erik's back and they suppressed a laugh of their own.

Just what did Erik paint anyway?

"What do you think Daniella?" Vincent, with a brief bob of his head, urged me to look.

Me, being a curious cat, jumped up and walked to them. I furrowed my brows at Erik as I did so and as a precautionary measure, I held my breath at the same time. I didn't want my temper exploding in front of so many people once I see the painting.

I thought something like a caricature or a stick figure of me in the canvas, but after seeing the thing for myself I was like: "A pineapple?! Seriously?"

Yes, seriously, he actually drew my eyes, my nose, and my mouth but with the face of a ripe pineapple complete with details and razor-sharp leaves.

I threw Erik a pointy glare and fisted my hands.

"It suits your prickly attitude, Ms. Rosecraft," was what he simply said.

God, how my volcano had exploded.

"My what?!!"

Vincent immediately raised a hand to stop me.

"Now now, it is a fine artwork," he actually complimented, "very hmm... unique. I think I like to frame it up."

I shook my head vehemently. "No, you can't Vincent!"

Vincent gave me a smirk. “Don’t worry, Daniella. I’ll put it on Erik’s chamber so that he won’t forget you.”

Erik made a throaty grumble, while I heard the other club members snicker.

“You are jesting are you?” I gave him a desperate look, but he just pinched my flamed-up cheeks and said, “Of course, I am.”

He turned to the others and waved a hand. “Now, this ends our class. Thank you for attending guys.”

And with that, all walked out as if nothing had happened with Erik as the first one to leave. I scowled at his back as he exited the door.

Suri approached me still giddy as ever and said she’ll give her and Amano’s paintings to me as a sign of our newly-formed friendship. Enrique followed after reminding me of our lunch date. Although fuming inside because of Erik’s painting, I nodded and smiled at him. Vincent too showed up in our midst and proceeded to remind Enrique that he will join us, but this time without the president.

“Why? I thought the three of us are going to accompany Daniella?” I heard Enrique ask, looking at Vincent with an arched brow.

“It seems he is in a foul mood. Maybe it’s his time of the month,” Vincent replied with a deadpan face.

“Mi amigo,” Enrique rested a hand on his shoulder, “The President is *always* in his time of the month.”

And they both cracked a melodious laugh with me oblivious as to what they were joking about.

Vincent looked at me one minute after and smiled his debonair smile.

There he goes again in his prince charming mode.

“Well, that’s a good advantage for me,” Enrique stated. “I’ll only have you Vincent as my competition.” He looped an arm in my waist and drew me closer to him. I shifted a little, feeling uncomfortable with the sudden closeness.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I looked at them with determined eyes. “Can you tell me where we are eating? I’ll just follow you later. I actually need to do something right now.”

My anger on Erik is still present, but the need to take my ring back won over. My lunch with these two hot guys can totally wait.

"Go ahead, Daniella," Vincent, without asking anything, said to me. I don't know if he was just being kind or if he knows something was up. He patted Enrique's slump shoulder and pushed him towards the door. "Let's go, mi amigo."

"We'll text you the name of the restaurant, my Señorita," Enrique stated as they left. I nodded and waved a hand.

Once I was alone, I hastily took my cellphone on the sofa and dashed to where I think Erik had left earlier. There were two entrance/exit glass doors in the gallery. I didn't choose the one that I went inside; instead, as I was trying to catch up with Erik, I picked the second one that was connected to a narrow hallway.

"Hey!" I shouted the moment I caught a glimpse of Erik's broad back. He didn't turn around or stop and still continued to walk, albeit a bit faster now. I started to run.

"Wait! Mr. President!" I shouted again, but still, he did not stop.

"Erik!!!" This time, not only did I scream like a crazed woman, I used his name. Finally, he stopped and turned around.

"What?" His eyes were arctic when our gazes connected.

"I want to talk to you," I said, half-breathless when I reached him.

"A talk you say?" he made a resting bitch face. "Is it about that painting? Because I think it is already crystal clear that it's you, Daniella."

"Not that!" I snapped. *I am so a millimeter close to punching this guy's face again. He is just so...*

"Then what is it?"

"The ring! The ring in your finger!" I pointed my eyes at it. "That emerald ring. That's mine. It is my family's heirloom."

Now, his expression made a hundred eighty degree turn from being an arrogant ass to being a mischievous bastard.

"Oh really?" he grinned, "Prove it."

I squared my shoulders and looked at him without a nervous blink. "I have *tons* of pictures to prove my words Mr. Fancii, but they are in my apartment in New York. I can't—"

"Then this is mine. Finders keepers." He fitted the ring securely in his middle finger right in my front and then whirled around to continue walking.

"Wait! Erik!" I hastily grabbed his arm and turned him around. I could feel his muscles tense where I touched.

"I know you found it in the grand ballroom that afternoon when we first met. I'm sure of it. Did you not know that it is mine and shamefully kept it for yourself? You have a Lost-And-Found Section. You could have just surrendered the ring there!"

He grabbed my hand and scowled at me. *My God, our faces are inches apart.*

"I care not of any jewelry, woman," his tone turned dark. "Gold. Silver. Fucking diamonds. And even gems are the same to me: THRASH. This ring is thrash too, but I prefer to keep it."

"Why?" I pleaded. *Yes, why does he need to keep it when it is just thrash to him?!*

And that's when he smirked wickedly at me.

"Why you say?" He pulled me close. In an instant, I could feel the warmth of his breath near my ear when he drawled, "Sweet, delicious revenge Daniella. My sweet, delicious revenge."

My heart flatlined and my knees turned weak. "Oh God, no."

Just as I thought.

He loosened his grip, turned with his cold glare, and left me in a state of shock. With this fact, of course, I couldn't question anymore. I couldn't possibly fight him in this kind of revenge, no matter how cowardly it would seem, but I still had a trump card in my hand for emergency purposes and *this*, I consider, is a state of calamity in my life.

"Wait! Please!" I grabbed his arm back to which he narrowed his eyes at me. To hell with my pride now, I have to get the ring back even if it means I will kneel in front of this man. "I need you to return it to me. My mom is going to strangle me if I don't return to New York with it! Whatever it is that you want me to do, I will do it. Please, just return the ring to me."

I placed a hand in my chest just to show that I was really sincere. Almost. *Almost*, my eyes wetted but I blinked it back in. I may grovel at this man's feet but I will never cry in front of him.

He looked at me and I shuddered with the coldness of it. There was no hint of sympathy in it, just pure blankness.

"Then don't leave the château," he finally said and I dropped my mouth.

"What are you trying to say?"

"I'm offering you to become a member of the Fancy Pants Club, Daniella." He stepped closer; I released my grip from his arm and stepped back.

"What?! You want me to become a member?!"

I seriously can't believe he is offering me this. Me, Daniella Rosecraft, a Fancy Pants Club member? He said at the wedding reception that fanciness is what I lack the most. Why the hell would he ask me this now?

"Yes," he replied, "but *you* will have a different position than the others. A special position I have made for you."

My lips trembled. "What is it?"

He cracked a grin. "A maid."

"You are kidding me."

"You know I don't joke around, Daniella."

"And what would I do with being a maid? You have countless employees here. They maintain the château clean and grand. I think one additional maid wouldn't make a difference."

He licked the bottom of his lips. *He freaking licked the bottom of his lips! Someone help me, I'm going to faint!*

"Oh, but you won't be a maid here, Daniella."

I gulped. *The fucking suspense is killing me.* "What do you mean?"

"You will become my personal maid. My slave."

And that's when my cheeks heat up like a magma. *His slave...* I had to toughen myself up just in order to shove not-worthy-to-mention thoughts out of my head.

"When I'm contented with your service, I will return this ring to you. If not, then you are in for an indefinite stay here in the château."

"No," I said sternly. I can't just let him make all the rules if I'm going to say yes to this absurd blackmail. "Give me an exact time. I want a concrete time period, Erik. I am working in my mother's company you know, I can't just tell her that I'll be staying here indefinitely. That's the same as her strangling me because I don't have the ring!"

He released a long sigh. It seems he got my point. "So be it. One year. It would be enough, yes?"

"How about one month? That would be so much better." I crossed my arms and pressed my lips thinly.

"Ten months."

"Three."

"Eight."

"Five."

"Six months and no more," he snapped. "That's my term, Daniella. If you won't accept, then kiss your ring goodbye."

Bastard!

"Fine!" I dropped a heavy foot on the floor. "If that's what makes your insides tickle, I will serve you for six months. After that, you will return the ring to me."

He shook his head and tsked. "You forget that you should please me, Daniella. Working as my slave for six months would be naught if you keep that prickly pineapple attitude of yours."

"How am I supposed to act then? With that contemptible personality of yours, I doubt I'll be able to act like a servile maid like you want me to! I'd rather frown than give you a plastic smile."

He shrugged, "That's your problem, not mine," and turned away from me. "Come with me if you want to sign the Fancy Pants Club Pledge."

I inhaled a breath, the one that my Yoga instructor had taught me, and then followed him from behind. His blackmail was downright dirty, but I have to accept it as I am the loser here.

Please *him*? Yeah, I can do that. I can act the part perfectly, but in no way am I going to get touchy with this guy the whole time of my service. I will make sure to draw this line in my pledge to the club and I will make sure to point this out in that thick head of his.

Yes, skin contact is a no no.

Prohibited.

Forbidden.

Banned.

Chapter 11 - Lunch Date with the Three Gods

~ Daniella ~

The Fancy Pants Club Pledge

I, *_Daniella E. Rosecraft_*, of legal age, and a rightful resident of *_Gracie Mews 401 E 80th Street, New York_*, do hereby solemnly pledge myself before the Fancy Pants Club President, its Honorable Officers and its Witnesses to practice faithfully my duties as a Member of the Club.

I hold the care of its activities as sacred and I will come to assist the officers with loyalty and honesty. I will not knowingly permit harm to come to my fellow members. I will not partake of, nor administer any unauthorized fancy events or parties without the written or expressed consent of the President.

I will hold all personal matters pertaining to the private lives of the Members in strict confidence. I dedicate my mind, heart, and all abilities to the Club. I shall do all in my power to show in myself an example of all that is honorable and good throughout my membership.

And lastly, I will hold true to anything that is fancy as dictated by the President and its Officers.

Signed and verified by the Fancy Pants Club New Member

~Ms. Daniella Émile Rosecraft~

Signed and verified by the Fancy Pants Club President

~Mr. Erik Romano Fancii~

This is my official pledge to the Fancy Pants Club signed with my own signature. In the President's Club office on the second floor of the chateau, Erik handed this to me first to read and then sign. I guess this is for formality's sake which I understood, but when he handed me a second copy of it revised to suit our *arrangements*, I thought to myself that to him, this is more important than the first one.

The first few sentences were expected to be reasonable, I just shrugged my shoulder the whole time, but as I read down to the end I couldn't help inserting a few exaggerated reactions in it and they are as follows...

I, *_Daniella E. Rosecraft_*, of legal age, and a rightful resident of *_Gracie Mews 401 E 80th Street, New York_*, do hereby solemnly pledge myself before the Fancy Pants Club President*(the sole witness of my agreement in this sham)*to practice faithfully my duties as his personal maid*(uh... slave)*. Whatever he wishes, I shall grant. Whatever he tells me to do, I shall do. *(Are you serious?)*

I hold the care of his activities as sacred*(really?)*and I will come to assist him with loyalty*(I doubt it)*and honestly. *(Heck, I'm no liar!)* I will not knowingly permit harm to come to him.*(What is he a baby?)* I will not partake of, nor administer any service to other persons or any of the club members without written or expressed consent of the President. *(What am I a puppet?)*

I will hold personal matters pertaining to the President's private life in strict confidence. I dedicate my mind, abilities, heart, and body to him. *(Are you freaking serious?!)* I shall do all in my power to show complete subservience to the President.

And lastly, I will hold true to anything that is fancy as dictated by the President.

Signed and verified by the Fancy Pants Club New Member

~Ms. Daniella Émile Rosecraft~

Signed and verified by the Fancy Pants Club President

~Mr. Erik Romano Fancii~

So this is how it all ended up. I returned the second paper to him after reading it, sliding it across his mahogany desk for him to pick up. Nope, I didn't sign it because of the two most obvious words I didn't like. It was *heart* and *body*. Erik, who was sitting in his executive office chair, had to raise a bitter brow at me when he saw the encircled words.

I returned the gesture to him just the same, but with crossed arms. "What?" I snapped.

I thought he'd ask to further elaborate my rationale of the encircled words, but he actually didn't and instead, he said, "I am not typing again, Daniella. These corrections are insignificant."

I scoffed and flipped a hand in the air. "Those two words aren't just the only problems in that second pledge. It is basically *it* as a whole. I am no puppet, Mr. President, just to remind you, so I have free will to do anything I want to do even though I am your maid."

"You have free will," he corrected which actually surprised me. "You can do anything you want to do while you stay in the chateau."

"Then what is that second pledge meant for?" I asked, "The first one is just enough. Why do you need to revise it?"

He released a long sigh. "Just sign the damn paper, Daniella." He glared at me and then handed the paper back.

I wasn't intimidated at all, but in order to make things quicker, I signed my name but not before putting a large X on the paper. I returned it to him with a victorious grin, but he just stared at me blankly.

“Suit yourself,” he said after taking it back.

It was already a void copy because of my corrections, but he still handled it with utmost care as if it still had a binding effect. I just watched as he placed it in a safe behind his chair.

“Let’s go,” he said when he turned back to me.

I cocked a brow. “To where?”

“Lunch remember? I’m sure two of your ‘knights’ are already waiting impatiently for your presence.” He crossed the room leaving me scurrying out my seat, but then I paused midway from the doorway after realizing something.

“Huh, that’s it?” I said, looking at his back.

He turned to me and raised a questioning brow. “That’s what?”

“Am I going to sign the pledge only? How about the duties and responsibilities of my employment to you?”

He smirked this time, leaving me wondering what plan he was concocting in his mind. “You don’t need to Daniella. You’ll know when you start working for me.”

“And when is that if I may ask?” I crossed my arms.

"*Now,*" he simply replied. “Come, let’s not keep the others waiting.” And thereafter, exited the door.

I had to blink twice to understand the word in detail.

Really? Effective immediately I am going to start my services to him? No one-day leeway or something?

I hauled a deep breath, closed my eyes, and prepared myself mentally. It is my usual ritual whenever I am to go through a situation that needed courage. However, right now, courage is not what I expected myself to have, but nerves of steel and immense luck to deal with this kind of a man for the whole six months.

Erik used his red Ferrari to drive us to our destination. The restaurant Vincent had texted me was inside Beverly Hills, just a three-minute drive away from the chateau. The whole time I was in his car, I felt nervous because of the silence between us. He didn’t even say a word about my seatbelt and just pointed it to my attention.

I never expected that I would ride on this car again after that incident in Lotus Spade, but I guess I will have to change my expectations starting now since I know I will be working with him for months. Under the bright noon sun, looking at Erik’s profile now and how his hands and feet coordinated well with driving the sports car, I couldn’t help but secretly be at awe with him. He just looked good, and cool, and…

"What are you looking at, my precious *esclave*?" he suddenly said, snapping me out from my fanciful musing. "Liking what you see so far?"

Luckily I understand French, so I was irked with how he called me. I quickly shook my head, gave him a pointed glare, then dragged my eyes away from him to the tinted window. "Nothing, just thinking how *égoïste* you are."

He didn't bother on replying, but I swear I could see a reflection of him smirking at me whilst he continued on driving the car with perfect skill.

I swear, the next time I am going to lose my composure because of this man's lethal charms, I'm going to stop snacking on TJ's Speculoos cookie butter, and mind you, I refuse for that to happen because I love TJ's a lot.

When we arrived in the restaurant, without blinking an eye, I scanned the whole area. This place is just full of romantic elements complete with brick walls, dim light chandeliers, and elegant furniture. When we strolled further inside and into where Vincent and Enrique's table was, I felt Erik's hand slid around my waist like he was my possessive boyfriend. My breath hitched and my hands clasped in response. I seriously want to swat his hand away because like I said before, touching is a no no in our arrangement, but since we were in a public place, these two are the only quick reactions I could make.

"Daniella!" Both of my *'knights',* as what Erik had called, exclaimed in unison. They both stood at attention, but thereafter raised their brows as their eyes steered to where Erik's hand rested. I saw Vincent curve a small smile then, while Enrique stepped forward and approached me.

"I thought you are not joining us, Prez," he said while glancing at my temporary employer.

"I changed my mind," Erik answered, then walked passed us, choosing a seat for himself.

I saw both Enrique and Vincent shrug their shoulders.

"Please sit here, Daniella," Enrique dragged a chair in front of me but Erik swiftly pointed a vacant seat near him.

"No, here," he said, then pulled the furniture out.

I gave the hopeful Enrique a lopsided smile before choosing Erik's seat. I have no choice anyway. He is my employer so I chose him. I just hope that this doesn't cause the two other men vying for my attention any weird ideas (like weird are-you-his-bf or something ideas.)

"What took you so long?" was Vincent's query when we all sat.

I gave him a slightly nervous smile. Right now, I didn't want them to know that I work for Erik because of his stupid-ass blackmail. "Uhm, I had to straighten up some...kinks," I answered after giving Erik a discreet look.

"And these...*kinks*, were they...*straightened* up?" Vincent queried again in a much more deliberate highlight of the words. This made me think that he was suspecting something. He ran his eyes from me to the president, then back and gave a secretive smile.

I dismissed it as just a trick of my mind. "I'd like to believe it had, but it remains to be seen," I answered.

"Oh really?" he pressed two fingers in his chin and watched Erik who acted as if he was reading the menu.

There was an invisible tension between the three of us but luckily Enrique quelled it by inserting himself in.

"We took the liberty of ordering for you, Señorita, but I'm afraid since I didn't know that Prez would join us, we weren't able to order anything for him."

Erik snapped the menu shut. "That's fine. I'll do it myself," he announced then raised a hand in the air calling for a waiter. Just as quickly, one came with a pad and pen in hand. Erik enumerated the dishes and drinks he had chosen. The whole time I was raising my brow because it sounded as if he ordered too much for just himself.

I wonder if he is a glutton in secret. I guess that remains to be seen under my six months service.

Since Enrique and Vincent had already waited for us for half an hour, our order was already served and on our side of the table. An antipasto of fried ravioli for Vincent, chicken parmesan sticks for me, and a cup of espresso for Enrique. For the entrée, I got shrimp scampi with pasta and chicken scallopini, while they both got pork chops Italiano and gourmet mushroom risotto.

Yes, I am good at naming these Italian cuisines quite well because I had so many experiences with Italian weddings through my family's business.

I helped myself with my antipasti first, acting demure and polite in a table full of hot, gorgeous men. However, I couldn't help but be curious about Enrique's unusual choice of drink.

"Do you always grab a coffee during your lunch, Enrique?" I asked, unable to hold myself back.

He looked up and gave me his Spanish blue eyes. "Yes, why do you ask? Is it odd for you?"

I shook my head slightly. "Not at all, but it makes me think you are a heavy coffee drinker."

"He is darling," Vincent butted in, "Because his family owns a plantation of coffee beans in Spain."

"Oh," I gaped. Now that was one fact that caught me off-guard. I guess it is understandable since he is of noble blood.

The waiter interrupted our conversation when he came in holding a tray of dishes for Erik. I saw him straighten in his seat while the man arranged the plates.

"Daniella," he then turned to me after taking a two-in-one plate of beef stew and mushroom risotto.

"Hmmm?" I rolled my eyes at him and then suddenly, I had a premonition that the next words he'd utter would drag me to the seat of embarrassment.

"Eat this," he ordered in a not-so-polite way.

I blinked at the plate before me. "But I already have a plate of my own."

"Then discard that and take this plate. This is better," he pointed.

I looked at both my *knights* and saw them pause from eating to stare at us.

"What's the prob, Prez? She is already eating my order," it was Enrique who boldly questioned that.

"She needs to fatten up. Your order fails to do that," was Erik's simple reply.

And then I heard Vincent smother a laugh. "This is the first time I've heard you care for a woman's appearance, President. That's so...unlike you."

I watched the one questioned with curiosity and waited for his rebut.

"There's always a first for everything, Vincent," he managed to say then inserted the said plate next to my antipasto.

I gathered up my courage to speak since I believe that my final decision would most likely put a period on this unhealthy argument of ours.

"If fattening me up is your goal then I might as well eat all of these," I stated to him. "I can't discard Enrique's order for yours. That's just downright disrespectful."

I expected him to counter a firm order, but he just shrugged me off and said, "Do as you wish."

In the back of my head, I was making a victorious dance. I'm happy that I got my point across him which only means that my free will is still intact. We continued on with our lunch with an awkward silence. No conversations were made and surprisingly, Enrique nor Vincent didn't open one.

Once I was done eating, I felt my belly full (and as in *really* full.) After eating four different dishes, who wouldn't be right? I am not one who wastes food so I tried my best in storing them in my stomach, but damn, I feel like I'm going to throw up right now.

"Could you excuse me for a bit, I need to go to the powder room," informed I to the three men with me. After they nodded, I stood up and raced towards my refuge.

Once there, nope, I didn't throw up, but I did take a lot of deep breaths to organize myself. I was glad that the ladies room provided cushioned seats and a soothing aura, at least I was able to rest myself there for minutes without the need to observe proper decorum. I slumped my shoulders, rested my head back against the wall, and closed my eyes, letting myself get lost on the male Italian bossa nova singer through the wall speakers.

"What are you doing?" without warning, I heard a male voice say.

Yep, a male voice in a female comfort room.

I shot my eyes up and looked at the trespasser standing a few feet in front of me.

"Erik!" I exclaimed as I stood up. "My God, why are you inside? Go out now!" I strained to shout.

When he didn't move, I neared him, then pushed him out with great force on his back. Fortunately, he let himself get pushed along.

Thank God there was nobody inside the lady's room except me.

"Why are you taking too much time in the comfort room, Daniella?" he asked when we reached the small hallway.

"Nothing! I just want a piece for myself after you made me eat all of those dishes!" I wasn't angry at him, just frustrated that he had placed me in this kind of situation.

"Oh, I see," he smirked at me, realizing what my dilemma was.

When he didn't apologize, I placed my arms akimbo and asked, "What's the big idea anyway, Erik? Why bother fattening me up?"

My query was met with silence. He didn't immediately answer, but scan me from head to foot he did, so intense that it made me feel self-conscious.

Bloody hell, I don't like this kind of reaction at all.

"For your employment," he then answered with no intonation whatsoever.

"What's the connection of it?" I narrowed my eyes at him.

He leaned in close to me, so close that his mouth was almost touching my forehead. I had to step back an inch away as a response. "If you're going to be my maid woman, you should be healthy and plump or you won't withstand my chores for you."

Huh, chores. Figures.

"Are you going to make me lift heavy objects, Mr. President?" I twisted my lips.

"That depends," he answered vaguely.

That depends on what? Shit, what is he up to?

I would have asked further, but he ended our conversation by walking away, I bet to return to the table.

If looks could start a fire, probably Erik's back would have been aflame right now. I waited for him to exit the hallway, then counted to twenty before joining them back. When I arrived there, two pairs of confused eyes met me, so I just smiled at them and said, "Sorry for the long wait."

Enrique waved a hand in response, "Not at all Señorita Daniella."

When I sat, I immediately saw a chocolate-dipped, raspberry mascarpone in a small glass container sitting on my side of the table.

"I took the liberty of ordering this dessert for you, darling," said Vincent to me with a smile.

Oh, Vincent. He doesn't even know that my stomach could take no more.

But to show good manners, I smiled at him and said, "Thank you."

Taking a dessert spoon next to the mascarpone, I tasted it and made a pleasing sound, "It's good," I commented whilst looking at Vincent.

"That it is," he replied, lifting a spoonful of his own mascarpone higher.

Enrique had his own share too, so he started eating it. Erik had one sitting on his front but didn't touch it. It looks to me that he is no fan of sweets at all.

"Would you mind if I visit you in New York, Daniella?" Enrique opened up a new conversation, but it instantly placed me in yet another dilemma.

"Uhm..." I shifted my eyes uneasily, "I...ah...I actually changed my mind. I'll be staying in the chateau for...longer than I expected."

"Really?" his eyes twinkled. "That's great news!"

"Why the sudden change of mind, Daniella?" Vincent raised the question then.

To tell you frankly, I don't want to use any alibis or even make a white lie just so to hide the real reason behind my stay. I really wanted to tell them about my arrangement with their president, but I realized it was better to zip my mouth than face the consequences later.

"I have...I have some..." Realizing I was stuttering, I cleared my throat and then ensued, "I have some few issues with—"

"I asked her to be a member of the Club, Vincent," was Erik's volunteer announcement. I tossed him a look of surprise, the same as that of my two *knights*.

"What?!" they both said in unison.

The President sighed. "You heard me."

"Erik..." Vincent drawled in a dark tone. I saw his face darken and his eyes turning into a stormy violet. Preferring his prince charming looks, this kind of expression from him really knocked my air out.

"I know," I heard Erik say, so I glanced at him with confusion.

"We need to talk about this later," Vincent advised, whilst putting the spoon down.

"We will," was the former's sure reply.

To clear the male tension, I had to voice out, "Why? What's the matter? It sounds as if you guys are against me joining the club."

"No, no," Enrique immediately stated. "You don't need to worry about anything, Daniella. We love your company very much. Don't misunderstand our reactions earlier."

I gave him a worried face. "But really, you guys don't need to hide anything from me. If I'm unwelcome, I—"

"Daniella," I glared at Erik, the source of my problems, who so most smoothly interrupted my sentence *again*.

"What?" I bit.

From his mesmerizing orbs, I could see his actions. It rolled from my face down to my cellphone I had placed in my lap. "Your phone is ringing."

Really, I had forgotten about it since I turned it to silent mode during our car ride.

"Oh..." I swiped it up and when I checked the screen, it registered Ericka's number. "Uhmm, excuse me for a bit gentlemen. I'll have to take this call."

My two knights nodded at me.

Before I could stand however the ringing stopped. I paused in my chair to check on a text message she had left and typed back a reply.

Hey, Dani. Where you at? The papers your mother asked are already printed.

Out on a lunch date. BRT.

Releasing a deep sigh, I looked up to the three men who seemed eager to listen to me. "I'm sorry guys," I made a sorry face (to Enrique and Vincent specifically), "I need to go now. I need to sort out some paperwork before my team leaves later."

Knowing that I won't be able to leave with my team back to New York, I will have to sign the paperwork like ASAP. And while I'm at it, I'm going to inform Ericka and phone my mother about my change of plans for the next six months. I bet Ericka's going to fangirl on me when I tell her about my contract with the President, and I bet I'm going to have one heck of a time explaining my alibi (which I badly need) to my mother.

"I'll drive you back to the chateau, Señorita," Enrique immediately offered, standing up before Vincent and Erik could.

I awarded him a grateful smile. "Ah, thanks, Enrique."

After a casual glance on the two remaining men on the table, I managed to say, "I'll go now," and off I stood (rather speedily might I add) before Erik could order me again.

I couldn't explain it thoroughly, but my goodness, I feel as though my back was burning when Enrique and I glided out of the restaurant. I'll bet my sanity that it wasn't because of his hand on the small of my back, but because of something else... something that Erik alone could specifically make me feel: *dread*.

In Enrique's black Bugatti, we rode back to the chateau. I threw him wild praises of how his car looked cool and classy which I couldn't when I was with Erik in his drool-worthy Ferrari, but he just smiled at me and quickly changed the subject.

"Hey, listen," he started, glancing at me briefly. I have a feeling this *is* his serious side. "Don't misunderstand what happened earlier. It's definitely not about you why we questioned the President on your membership. It is another...confidential reason that is beyond your concern."

I curved a small smile and lowered my head down. "I understand. Don't worry, I'm not going to let it bother me."

And then smoothly, he released one hand from the wheel and wrapped it with my left.

"Good," he said.

I glanced at him and saw how his face looked expressive.

“Daniella, since our lunch date is a disaster, can I invite you to dinner tomorrow? And, I mean just the two of us.”

My breath hitched. *Wow, what a way to pick up the pieces, Mr. Noble.*

“That’s so kind of you Enrique,” I gave him an apologetic smile, “but I still need to take care of some matters. I’m afraid my schedule is full for now.”

It was my safest answer since I actually don’t know yet how *full* my schedule was. Since I work for Erik, he alone owns my time whether I like it or not.

Enrique let out a long sigh, “I see,” and then released my hand, but not before kissing the back of it. “Then, I will just patiently wait. Thank you for being honest, Señorita.”

For that reason, I felt we have created a sense of camaraderie even though we have just been introduced to each other for three hours. “Thank you for understanding me,” I said as I felt a blush creeping up my face.

Letting him focus on his driving, I remained silent thereafter. When my phone buzzed a message, I checked on it and found an unknown number. I almost jumped from my seat when I discovered it is the same as that number who called me in Lotus Spade.

I wonder who this is? I asked myself before opening the message, but when I read the name, I choked on my saliva.

Shit.

Oi, go to your room, get your bag and wait for a man called “Ian” to guide you to your NEW ROOM - Erik

Erik?

This is Erik’s number the whole time?!

I rolled my eyes. I guess it was expected since he was the one who pulled that hostage-taker stunt on me last night.

I read his message again after I was over with my initial shock, and then it dawned on me that he wanted me transferred to a new room. *To where?* That was my question, but I guess it seems I’ll find out soon enough.

Chapter 12 - Steady As She Goes

~ Erik ~

“What’s gotten into you? Why would you invite Daniella into the Club?” asked Vincent to me when we were left alone in the table.

This man is notorious for his keen eyesight that’s why we call him the Tactical Operations Specialist. He’d look at say, a blueprint of a castle, and in just an amount of thirty minutes, he could already memorize all of the details in it. My plan, even though it is embedded in my brain, didn’t escape his inquisition. Even though he looks like the combined Shakespeare and Beethoven with his talent in Arts and Music, he is one hardcore killer.

Like me.

The only difference between us is I have killed more damned souls than him, and I enjoy it.

“I have my own reasons Vincent,” I stated whilst shifting in my seat. I stared at the half-finished cranberry juice Daniella had left, specifically the trace of pink lipstick on its rim.

“Yeah right… *reasons,*" he cracked a mocking grin. “I hope it is more important than her safety.”

“She will be safe,” I remarked, addressing it in a different way. I can’t really say that my selfish reasons are more important than her safety, but I can assure myself and the club that she’ll be safe…with me. I have to nail this fact since I can’t make the same mistake again like last year.

“Do tell me how when you know very well that our Club isn’t just *a club.*” He tapped a finger on his clean plate and waited for me to answer, but I didn’t give him one. I just continued staring on the pink smudge; a wave of longing coming over me.

I heard him sigh then. “Really Erik, tell me what she means to you other than sharing one unexpected incident last year. I can’t believe you are doing this, especially now that our goal is going uphill.”

And I can’t believe that this man in my front is nagging at me like an old hag. It made me cringe. It annoyed me. It pissed me off, so much that I announced without a second thought, “She is nothing to me.”

“God, you’re a big fat liar,” just as quickly, he reacted, disbelief stamped in his face, and like the tease that he is, he immediately proclaimed, “If she is nothing to you, then I can court her.”

Somehow, when I saw the determination in his eyes, it made me feel that he wasn’t teasing at all.

Damn, this Altair man.

My blood boiled for some reason.

"President, would you mind if you take that death-like stare away from me, please?" he stated even though he wasn't even looking at me and was focusing on the raspberry mascarpone he took from Daniella's plate.

Not waiting for him to scoop the stolen dessert, I stood up from my seat. "I'm going back to the chateau," I announced dryly.

"Wait!" I saw him drop the spoon then. "I'm coming with you!"

"I thought you used your own car."

He stood up and using his fingers, he raked his wavy hair. "I didn't. I hitched a ride with Enrique earlier, but since he drove Daniella back, I don't have any means of transportation anymore."

I pressed my lips thinly. "Then, keep up the pace," said I as I turned around.

"God, you're so stiff, Erik," he mumbled, scrambling to get behind me.

***

~ Daniella ~

There were two things that I did once I returned to my guest room.

First was I called my mother and informed her of my supposed decision. It was a good alibi; telling her that the Club wanted me as their member (which was true, except in a different way) and needed me to stay for six months to join their Club activities. Of course, my mother was all hyped up about it. She knew that I always dreamed about living in the chateau, and now that it was happening, she was all thumbs up on me without one hint of suspicion.

'Consider it your long overdue vacation,' she told through the phone. I just nodded and made sounds of giggles so that she would think I was happy and excited about it. I am not honestly, but I would have if not for the Fancii blackmail brand stamped on my forehead.

The second thing that I did was to finish packing my bags. I only got one large suitcase and a small personal bag. Since Erik told me to wait in my room for Ian, I did whilst recollecting Ericka's over-the-top reaction when I shared the truth to her a few hours ago.

"Oh my God! Really? Really?! You are going to become his personal maid?" She was jumping excitedly in the center of her bed. I rolled my eyes in response. I was sitting on a sofa near the coffee table; in my front were the papers that I have signed.

“Shhh, keep your voice down! I don’t want anybody to know that secret.” I admonished her.

“Oh. My. God!” She squealed again and dragged her eyes heavenward, dismissing my words. “You and the President. I can’t believe it!”

“I am just his maid, Kee. Don’t think of anything beyond that,” I told her firmly, crossing my arms. Under normal circumstances, I would have rejoiced with her. I’ve had my own share of fantasies you know. I have daydreamed about a man who would sweep me off my feet like the ones I’ve read on billionaire-maid romance books. It is just unfortunate that I don’t see anything other than bickering in between Erik and I, no matter how fucking hot and handsome he is.

“I know, I know...” she sighed and then bit her bottom lip. “I just couldn’t hold myself. You know me, a hopeless romantic, but who knows, maybe this hunch of mine might hap—”

“Okay, stop,” I stood, unable to take in her goading. “I’m going back to my room. Kiss my mom for me when you get back in NY.”

She gave me a cheeky grin and although she was still in the middle of her fangirling, she answered, “Sure, I will, boss. Enjoy your stay here.”

The last thing I did was release an exasperated sigh before leaving her room. I couldn’t help it, she just gave me a silly wink the ones like cartoon Cupids are supposed to do before they shoot an arrow to poor helpless humanity.

At exactly three o’clock in the afternoon, I heard a knock on my door. I immediately thought that it was the man Erik had sent to fetch me. I strolled out of my bedroom to the receiving room and then opened the main door.

“Good afternoon Madame,” a gray-haired man greeted, standing poised but with his head bent. He was wearing a well-ironed uniform similar to those I saw the chateau staff were wearing but he had a brooch of the Fancy Pants Club logo of two golden horses and a crown atop the FP initials. “I am Ian Thacher. The President told me to guide you to your new room.”

“Good afternoon too, Mr. Ian. Yes, he informed me too.”

“Are you ready Madame?”

“Yes, I am.” I opened the door wider and revealed the big luggage stationed in a corner.

He stepped forward and took it. “Let me.”

“Uh, thank you.” I smiled.

My new room, he said, was on the fourth floor which only members can stay, so I expected that we had to manage the third floor staircase going up. When we reached the end of my hallway,

however, he raised his hand and motioned for me to follow him in another hallway that was slightly narrow. We managed a few more twists and turns and then reached into what looked to be a dead-end, but upon closer inspection was actually an elevator.

Mr. Ian pressed the button and then dragged my suitcase inside, leaving me following behind him.

'Impressive' I said to myself. The club members really are strict about keeping their personal lives. They even have a private elevator to bring them to their own floor.

Since my guide was silent, I was silent. I didn't expect him to act like a tour guide for me at all. Anyway, I got an inkling that he most likely swore secrecy on any club information.

When we reached the fourth floor, however, I couldn't contain my voice from escaping.

"Wow," I said whilst scanning the whole area. The foyer was huge and it even boasted an octagon skylight that showed the blue sky. In every corner were Greek statues of women wearing flower wreaths and holding small jars and in the middle was the Greek God, Ares, but with a twist. It was actually holding a freaking life-like assault rifle instead of a sword.

For me, it seemed odd, for everything looked fancy except this.

"This way Madame Rosecraft," my attention of Ares was cut off when Mr. Ian showed me the way.

"Oh, okay." I jogged towards him.

We entered the west hallway wherein the sides geode displays the size of four footballs could be seen. I watched in admiration at them, noticing thick mahogany doors as we passed by. We stopped in a door which was second to the last. The last one was right in the dead-end, colored white, quite different from the previous doors which were maroon.

"This is your room Madame," informed Mr. Ian to me. He opened the door and I went inside before him.

"Wow," again I exclaimed. The room was much, *much* different from the guest room I had. It had more elaborate interior designs with beige as its main color motif. The drapes were damask, very *fancy*. The furniture was Victorian, very *fancy* too. And the crystal chandelier, *wow*, the fanciest of all in my eyes.

Thinking that I would be staying here for six months, I guess lessened my frustration. I am, in the first place, a sucker for all things elaborate and beauteous. But then, when I heard Mr. Ian's statement, I felt myself blanch.

"You are neighbors with the President, Madame. The one with the white door is his chamber."

"What?!" I said although I'm quite sure I heard it right.

"And this is yours." He pulled a small thin box from his uniform jacket and handed it to me.

"A cellphone?" And not just any cellphone, what I had in my hand is the latest model that Apple had developed.

My mouth dropped.

"The President says that you keep it. He had already readied it with applications so don't be surprised why the box seal is broken."

I shook my head slowly. "No, I can't take this. This is just too much," I complained not realizing that I said it to the wrong man.

Mr. Ian gave me a kind smile and stated, "I guess you will have to tell that to President Erik himself, Madame."

"Is he inside his chamber now?" I asked directly, feeling like doing it ASAP. This kind of gift just makes me feel uneasy. In no way am I going to sleep peacefully tonight if this isn't returned to him.

"He is still...out of the chateau, but I believe he will be in his chamber come evening."

I nodded in acknowledgment. "Good. Thank you for the information, Mr. Ian."

"You're welcome Madame," he bowed low. "Well, if you don't have any more questions I will leave you to your comfort. And oh, by the way, how would you like your dinner served, Madame? Are you going to dine in the Club dining area or I will just send your food here?"

"Here is fine, Sir," I replied after realizing that I am not yet ready to meet any other club members who would most likely bombard me with the same questions like what Vincent and Enrique had asked me earlier.

"I see. Then, *here* it is. I will serve it by seven later." He nodded once and then closed the door leaving me with the new phone and a bigger problem to solve.

How am I going to face Erik later?

***

~ Erik ~

Diverting away from our usual Club fancy activities, the members and I had a meeting on the fourth floor this afternoon. All were present except one, Luca Vitalis, my half-Russian, half-American mostly MIA member. It didn't matter anyway if he is present or not, just as long as he gives us the information we needed to go on with our precious facade, that's enough.

I silently thanked myself that I was able to procure Daniella's new cellphone online and arranged it for Ian to give. Otherwise, if I hadn't done it earlier, I would have been uncomfortable sitting in the meeting which lasted for fucking five hours.

I need her to have it now since I plan to ring her early tomorrow morning. Since she is my personal maid, I would need her services the moment I open my eyes.

By the time the meeting ended, I quickly left the board room, crossed the foyer, and glided my way towards the west hallway. I didn't intend it to suddenly pause in front of Daniella's door but I did, debating to myself on whether I should pay her a visit or not. Or maybe I should invite her to dinner.

It probably lasted for ten minutes standing there, but in the end, I didn't have the balls. I'm not like Enrique who could breeze his way into a woman, ask her on a date and get an instant yes.

I continued on to my room instead and in there, I luxuriate myself with the crisp cold air in the balcony and half a glass of brandy in hand.

Although it was a boring thing having no companion while looking at the night sky, I enjoyed it immensely. As I said, I am no social man. This was one of the pleasures I always look forward to whenever another club confidential *activity* was solved. However, when I heard a dull knock on my main door, I raised a brow.

No one dared to visit me at this hour, or rather, no one even dared to visit me in *my* chamber. Unless... my new club member had the audacity to do it.

I grinned thinking that this night isn't going to be a boring night as what I first thought it to be.

"Is there a problem?" I snapped once I opened the door wide. I placed my elbow above my head, against the door frame to look like I disliked her intrusion.

"Yes," Daniella said in a monotone. Although she looked frustrated over something, she still looked beautiful in that simple faded jeans and white tee ensemble. "What is this?"

The new phone I bought for her came to view as she raised it in our front. She twisted her lips and waited for me to reply.

Testing her reaction, I said in sarcasm, "It's a cellphone Daniella. I think you are educated enough to know what that is and how it works."

Her eyes flared. *Gotcha.* "I know what this is! What I want to know is why you are giving this to me?"

Huh, it seems she is a fiery vixen when provoked.

Releasing a sigh, I stared into her beautiful infuriated hazel eyes. “Come inside,” I ordered, turning away, but then she said, “Uh, no way. Answer the question right here, President.”

I paused and looked at her once again. “Daniella, it is only proper that you do what your *master* tells you to do.”

“You’re not my master,” she rebutted quickly.

“You’re my slave,” I retaliated. “You are bound to pass in and out of my room anyway. Why not start *now*?”

I believe she understood my point because she suddenly went silent, ashen, and stiff. It looks to me that she could pass on as a vampire wannabe — the sexy, seductive one.

“Com’n Daniella, look alive,” I managed to say just to lessen the tension. “Come inside, I’m not going to fuck you.”

I heard her release a low grumble, probably dismissing a *certain* word as just a joke and it was, well… at least while she was standing in my doorway.

I walked inside, leaving the door open for her to enter. One minute later, she did, and that, for some reason, made my heart jump and my eyes flare with desire.

“Sit,” I ordered when she strolled near a sofa chair in my receiving room.

My room is custom made to my liking. I don’t like a dull living room so I had the interior designer make one for me that had a minibar complete with blue neon lights on the wall outline.

Needing a quick distraction, I stood far away from her, in the corner of the minibar next to a row of upside-down wine glasses, my hand finding the glass of brandy I had left earlier before I opened the door.

“My number is on speed dial #1 if you need to call me,” I started whilst watching her sit with hands on her lap and feet close together. “But other than that, if I’m going to need your assistance, I’ll ring you through that cellphone. You are expected to answer my call *immediately*.”

I expected her to ask why, but she asked me this in the end, “Are you telling me to bring two cellphones always?”

“Yes,” I smirked, partly amused by her concern.

“That is just too bulky.”

“Then why not transfer your data, your friend’s numbers, and messages to your new cellphone?” I quickly suggested it. I always have a backup plan on different matters, especially hers. “I’ll have Karl, the Club’s Webmaster, do that for you.”

Then, she shot me a questioning brow. “He can do that?”

“He can do anything, Sweet Rose.” I left the bar counter and sat coolly on a sofa opposite her. “Now, what say you?”

I don’t think she would reject my offer. For starters, the phone I bought was the latest iPhone model. No one would dare decline that over an old gadget, *her* included. Two, the phone was better, more user friendly, and with the fact that her old device’s data would be saved in the new one, it was a great bargain.

“Fine,” she finally answered after a long minute of deliberating.

I thought so.

Curving a pleased smile, I said, “We’ll go to his office tomorrow morning. You don’t need to do anything with your old or new phone tonight. Leave it to Karl.”

“Alright,” was her simple reply and then stood up, turning towards the door.

“Wait, where are you going?” I stood up too. Suddenly, I felt a tad bit of panic inside me when I saw her back.

“I’m going back to my room.” Her brows furrowed as if she found my question odd.

“Stay,” I ordered in a firm voice.

“Why? My question has been answered, I don’t think I need to stay here any longer.”

“Warm my…bath first.” I blurted out without careful thought.

Shit.

“Your what?” She looked surprised. “I believe you have a hot and cold shower, President. I don’t think you need my services for that.”

“I don’t want a shower. I want to soak in my tub. It takes minutes for me to prepare it, but I have some work to do, so I’d like for you to set that up for me,” I managed to say without pausing.

Based on her facial expression, she was either taken aback or thought of my order absurd.

Then, I gave her a cold eye. “You are my maid, are you not?”

With that, her normal fiery self returned. “Fine,” she huffed and placed one confident hand in her lovely waist. “Where’s your bathroom so that I can get on with it. The sooner I do this, the earlier I get to leave this place.”

In the back of my head, I was grinning with victory.

"There, past my bedroom," I motioned my head to a white painted door. Inside it is my haven. The only place I can rest and clear my head of the many responsibilities dumped on me. It is also the only place where I dare not think of this woman else I might find myself aching for her in what all men call a normal *desire*.

But how stupid am I now. I am only torturing myself even more by asking her to set up the bathtub. Even her presence in my room is a great problem already, but I knew of this since the beginning... at that moment when I blackmailed her to be my maid.

One thing is just clear right now with all of these mess in my head, it is just that I wanted her to be close to me that's why I halted her from leaving my chamber.

Without saying anything, I watched her open the door of my bedroom and strolled inside as if she wasn't even worried that it was a man's lair. She wasn't even worried that I could pounce on her, bring her to my bed and...

Shit.

"Stop now Erik, or else you'll be in a *tight* mess," I said to myself, releasing a frustrated huff thereafter.

I glanced at the clock, read it at ten past eight. It will be about fifteen minutes before she finishes setting up my bath so for the meantime I will just leave her alone and check on the reports my inside man had sent to me about Lotus Spade's recent activities. In my mini office across the receiving room, I entered, planning to wait until eight twenty-five before I check back on her.

Exactly 8:25 pm. No more, no less.

I quickly stood up from my seat, left my office desk, and raced to my bedroom walk-in closet to change into my bathroom attire: shirtless with loose black pants.

I carefully opened the bathroom door just so she wouldn't jerk in surprise and found her back to me sitting at the third step of my elevated bathtub; one hand was dipped in the almost full tub and the other was under her chin.

She was muttering unintelligible words to herself, but in one moment, I heard her call me a *bastard* clearly. I had to smirk, finding her condition very cute and the fact that she was oblivious of my presence.

Looking at her and how her skin molded with the premium alabaster floor created a vicious tug in my restraints — a restraint that I have been tightening since I left her in a French hospital a year ago.

Shit. I had to clear my thoughts now or else both of our nights would turn out *unfavorable*.

"Are you done?" She speedily stood up and turned with a start at my snappy voice. Her eyes fell from my face to my naked torso and I swear I could see an interested, appreciative glint in there.

"Ye—yes..." she uttered or rather sighed. She was momentarily lost.

I smirked, amused with her obvious reaction. When she saw it, her face blushed furiously. Blinking many times and taking a deep, *deep* breath, she speedily walked past me after dropping a heavy, "I'm leaving!"

It didn't take long when the bang of my main door was heard, *loudly* I should add. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and inwardly thanked myself that my torture is over.

Well, for this night at least...

Chapter 13 - Building A Harem

~ Daniella ~

Here I am my head against the door; hands pressed firmly on my heaving chest, on the verge of insanity just because I have seen Erik in his vulnerable, mouth-watering state.

Oh my God, what was I thinking! With his *'amazing'* personality, I'm supposed to be immune to his charms right? Right?

No, you're not, my subconscious immediately rebutted.

Okay. Okay... I'll admit it. I'm not immune to the President's physical elements and that was already obvious when I first met him. I've always found him sexy, but I never expected him to be *this* sexy! Like he could easily charm his way into a convent, shirtless!

Shit!

Mortified by the realization that I had zoned out the moment I saw him like that, I had to retreat to my room quickly. I couldn't give Erik the pleasure of finding out I admired his lean, hard torso; the sinews, the obliques, the gorgeous valleys of his compact muscles, all of it in the form of him.

Him!

God, the man *is* ripped. He could well become a Calvin Klein model without even undergoing a go-see. From the looks of it, I think he does enjoy a lot of physical activities (gym-related, I presume) while being the President of the club.

Taking deep breaths to douse the heat inside me, I crossed the receiving room, ambled straight to my bedroom, dropped my new cellphone in the bedside table next to my old one, and stretched my body in the mattress.

Tonight I'm not going to let the President's memory fill me in. I am not going to let his half-nakedness trouble me. I'm going to sleep like I baby and forget all about it come morning.

I hope.

The new iPhone Erik had bought me rang a couple of times. I was, unfortunately, taking my morning shower when I heard it. I am an early riser; a routine that I find helpful since I'm beginning my employment as a maid. Maids are expected to wake up before their masters right?

God, I can't believe I'm calling Erik my master now.

In the sixth call, after running with my hair wet and with only a towel to cover my body, I finally answered it.

"Yes?!" I shouted already knowing that in the other line was the President himself.

"You are supposed to answer me immediately, Daniella," was Erik's grim reply.

I twisted my lips. "Mr. President, had it even dawned on you that I'm in the shower?!"

There was a momentary pause and then I heard a rush of air through the earpiece before he remarked, *"Shower huh."*

Wait. Why do I feel that he is grinning against the phone?

"Come here. Now."

"What for?" I opened my closet and stared at my organized clothes; my brows furrowed.

"Maids aren't supposed to ask questions, Daniella. I'll give you twenty minutes to take care of yourself and then come here. We need to go to Karl's office an hour from now."

"Right," I released a sigh. "Twenty minutes is what I just need."

And the phone went dead. He actually didn't reply or give me a parting word.

What an ass.

I raced to clothe myself choosing a black blazer to cover my pink sleeveless blouse, a black skort, and a three-inch gladiator sandal. I'm a fashionista by heart, so I love mixing and matching my wardrobe. Me being a maid doesn't mean that I have to dress in a French maid costume, and besides, Erik didn't mention the dress code so I can say that I am safe with my appearance right now.

Taking a small sling bag with me that had two of my cellphones, I went to Erik's room. When I knocked, he didn't answer, but one of the phones vibrated thereafter. I pulled both out and found that the new model had a message.

'I don't need to help you enter Daniella. The door is unlocked. Feel free to come inside.'

Was what the message told me.

Tsk, lazy dog.

As he said, the door was unlocked, so I stepped inside expecting to see his cocky face, but I found no trace of him in the receiving room.

Odd.

Then seconds later, I received a second message saying that he'll wait for me in his bedroom.

"Are you serious?!" I shouted to myself and then glared at the bedroom door. "What is this man up to now?"

I reached the said door stumping my feet the whole time. I meant to knock on it but then realized it was already slightly open. There was a muffled sound of Chopin's Nocturne in piano inside the room. I smiled, finding the music choice unexpected in a male like Erik.

Stepping into a man's room, I know, isn't a wise thing to do, but since I have no choice, I entered. What greeted me immediately was the President himself wearing black trousers and a white long-sleeved shirt (thank God) but unbuttoned.

"Good," he said looking at me in a strangely casual way, scanning me from head to foot. He lingered in my bare legs and noticed his mouth clench. "You took so long to arrive that I had to prepare my bath on my own. This is your transgression number one. Don't be late next time, Daniella."

What did I say about maids waking up before their masters? This is exactly the reason why.

"But now that you're here, do this for me." He pointed a finger through the length of the buttons and I gaped in response.

"Are you telling me to fix them?" I asked, frowning. Standing some distance away from him is already making me nervous, how much closer to him and doing the task he asked? The fact that his damn abs are also teasing my view didn't help, but I guess continuous exposure on this part of him would probably desensitize me with it.

"Yes, I don't have to reiterate it, Daniella." His face was serious, but why do I feel that he was just toying with me?

Releasing a defeated sigh, I approached him but avoided looking at his face. Without hesitation, I reached for the top button first and then worked my fingertips down the others. My heart quickened its pace the whole time for I felt Erik's eyes on me; studying my every move.

I felt heat surround me; heat that was percolating from him and mine, but I got the sudden chill when his hand palmed my torso, in the right upper abdomen specifically; the exact part where I had a surgical scar.

"Daniella," he strained to say.

My eyes flew to his and I realized right then and there it was a bad move.

His expression was soft, almost bordering on sad and his lips were parted as if to say something. With the way he was acting so rude on me since we've met, never have a realized that he could pull out a face like this. God, it was slaying me.

I took a sharp intake of breath, not understanding why I felt the urge to touch his cheeks.

"That's enough," he said, pulling his hand and taking a step back. "I'll finish this on my own. Take the coat in my bed and pass it to me."

Silently thanking that he ended what was happening between us, I crossed the room and took the said garment. Before I approached him back, I heaved a breath and closed my eyes to calm my nerves.

What was that just now? I have only started working for him and here I am feeling unusual.

"Here," I raised the coat to him; the heat in my body still there but at least I was able to control it.

He took it from me without thanking and donned it on his own.

"Aren't you going to use a tie?" I inquired. Not that I was enjoying being an early morning maid, but it was just my intuition telling me to ask it.

He glanced at me, smiled a cunning smile, and said, "To tie you with? That can be arranged."

And the sly fox returned. Shit.

"I am asking you a proper question, Mr. President. I expect to be answered in the right way," I put my arms akimbo and gave him a disappointed face. I saw a twitch of a muscle in his jaw then.

"No," he answered, "I have no opening speech to make today in any parties so I prefer being this casual, Daniella." He turned around, reached for the remote of his sound system, and after turning the piano music off, he glided out of the bedroom door.

I sprinted to follow him from behind, pissed that he didn't even say anything to give me a hint that we were leaving.

***

~ Erik ~

In the hallway on the fourth floor, I remained silent. In our first elevator ride together, I remained silent too. I didn't want to speak anymore after what happened to us in my room. A little bit more of her charm and I would have mentioned what happened to us last year.

When we proceeded to Karl's office on the second floor of the chateau, I noticed Daniella already fidgeting, no doubt wanting to ask where we were going. I remained silent still and allowed myself the enjoyment of her company, even like this.

I heard her release a relieved sigh when we stood in front of our destination. She had probably read the carved word, *Webmaster,* in the golden plate screwed on the door.

As expected, I didn't have to open the door myself. It opened on its own with the automatic security system Karl had invented for his own office. I just had to press my thumb on the scanner right beside the door frame to access the place. Since contained inside are very important and confidential information about the club and its true nature, a high-security system is needed.

I stepped inside first expecting to see the same features of the receiving room; three working flat-screen computers, other gadgets that were useful to him, and two wide television screens. What I didn't expect however was to see a painting of Daniella hung on top of the room's fireplace.

What the?

I know that Karl painted this himself during the life class but does he really need to put the artwork in an area fit to be regaled?

"Prez!" the man in question finally emerged from his bedroom door. He was fresh from a shower; platinum blonde hair damp with a small towel covering his head. He was wearing a white plain T-shirt and black jeans; his common attire when he isn't planning on leaving his room.

"It's been a long time since you decided to visit here," he crossed the room, smiling wide, "What is it that you want? I am still working on Iopata's new Cloud Blue shipment and I— oh... "

He paused, no doubt seeing the woman behind me. Somehow, I saw him blush. *Tsk.* If I'm right, this woman is building a harem without realizing it.

"I need you to transfer all data in Daniella's old cellphone to her new one, Karl. It's important. I want it finished ASAP." I looked to the side and saw Daniella step beside me. She pulled the two gadgets and handed it to me.

I took it and then glanced at Karl who was still stoned on the spot. I cleared my throat. "Karl."

"Ah, yes, yes. I will do it, Prez," he replied, taking the cellphones frantically. "Uhm, good morning Ms. Daniella."

He paused in front of her and beamed a smile, showing off his dimples most of his fans call 'gorgeous.'

"Hi, Karl. Good morning too," she greeted and from my peripheral vision, I saw her award him a sweet smile.

Tsk.

If I'm correct she might be affected with his boyish charms too. Karl is just a year older than her; they could well be almost siblings, so I think it is understandable.

I hope so.

"I see that you framed the painting," she tilted her head and looked at the said artwork.

Karl sheepishly scratched his head. "Yeah, uhm, I find that it is worthy to be framed and placed in a location that would best fit the model's beauty."

Wow, Karl is like Enrique's younger brother with those damn smooth words.

Daniella giggled slightly, but before she could answer anything, I interrupted, "Let's go, Daniella."

I turned around, grabbed her wrist, and pulled her out of the room. I heard her gasp then, surprised by my actions.

"Erik!" she yelled when we were in the hallway. I didn't bother on stopping and just continued on dragging her until we reached the second-floor foyer. She kept on calling my name and tried to wring her wrist out of my hold the whole time. Most of the staff that had seen us had a look of amazement and it was no wonder since this is the second time I dragged her like this.

"Erik!" she shouted again when we reached the balcony and this time I released her and snapped, "What?!"

She was fighting for air but even so, she still had a string of powerful words to tie me.

"I know that your attitude is so overbearing, but must you be so rude on your member?" She gave me an angry face. "We were talking right there. Do you really have to drag me out so suddenly?"

I clenched my jaw and tightened my hold on the balustrade. "I damn will do whatever I like Daniella."

She huffed and shook her head. "Huh, if I didn't know any better, I think you are acting like a—"

"Jealous man," a male voice finished for her. Daniella and I whirled around to the source and saw Rohan breezing his way towards us from the grand stairs.

I cringed not because of his presence but because of the *jealous* word. Am I acting like one so much so that this Kamasutra guru felt it below our floor?

Shit. I should get my composure ironed better.

"Rohan," I uttered, looking at him coldly when he reached us. He only smirked at me and moved his way to kiss Daniella on the cheek.

"A beautiful morning to you Ms. Daniella," greeted he.

"Rohan, it's been days since we've last met," she stated casually. They have just known each other at McKenzie's wedding reception last Friday yet they act as if they were old-time friends.

"Yes, it is," he nodded. "What timing to meet you here. I was actually on my way to the President's office to ask about you and your status as our new Club member."

It was my cue to answer when Rohan's stare fell on me; sending me a silent message only we could understand. "Vincent and I have already talked about it, Rohan," I informed.

He cocked a brow. "Really now? But you didn't inform all the members about it? I kinda feel left out you know. I just heard the news from Suri who got it from Enrique."

Huh, like that would concern me. "I'll make an official announcement *tomorrow* lunch. You know we will be busy *today*."

Rohan released a defeated sigh. "Of course, but you could have just given us a heads-up yesterday when we had our meeting. No wonder I felt a different vibe from Vincent at that time."

Yes, ever since Vincent found out about Daniella's membership, he had been acting weird... like silent weird, and I know that he isn't the type of man who remains mute the whole course of a meeting. This fact intrigued me of course, and without intention, a memory crossed my thoughts about him and how he announced in my face that he wants to pursue her. We always have a friendly competition with each other, but unfortunately, I don't do *friendly* when it comes to Daniella's welfare. Probably, that's what's bugging him.

"Is this the only thing that you want to say, Rohan?" I grumbled, feeling a certain degree of threat. I can't say that Daniella is charmed by Vincent, but she could be when he makes a serious move.

"Hmmm... let me see," Rohan tapped a finger in his chin and appeared as if he was contemplating. "Since Daniella is our official member now, to celebrate it, how about I invite her for a free session this evening?"

"Excuse me?" the one concerned immediately butted in with brows drawn up.

Then, Rohan clapped his hands like he was having a eureka moment. "Yes, that's it!" He turned to Daniella and held both of her hands. "I would like to invite you to my Kamasutra session tonight beautiful lady."

From the expression of her face, she was taken aback. "I don't think that's a good idea," I heard her say without hesitation.

"Huh, still shy are we?" Rohan leaned towards her. I almost wanted to wring his neck because of it.

Daniella stepped back and managed to say albeit shyly, "I'm just not open to, you know, uhmm..."

"Don't worry," Rohan cut it and I knew immediately what he was about to say, "All participants are *dressed*. We start at six with a cocktail party and then a short seminar about the history and basics of Kamasutra. Mrs. Elaine McKenzie-Roslin will be there."

Daniella's face brightened. "Really? She will be there?"

It looks to me that they are good friends if she had that kind of reaction.

"Yes," I saw Rohan nod, "she and her husband are my regular customers."

Looking at the progress, I thought that she would say yes, but I didn't expect her to say again; her face turning red, "Ah, but still... I don't think I would fit in there."

Rohan patted her shoulder and winked at her. "*Virgins* are always welcome you know," he said whilst beaming a smile.

Daniella immediately waved her hands in the air. "Oh! You get it all wrong! What I mean to say is...I—I don't have the time to go there. My schedule is...full."

She looked at me, not with pleading eyes, but in a way that she was subconsciously asking me if her schedule is really packed since I alone know about it.

"She'll be there Rohan," I blurted without a thought. I saw Daniella open her mouth, no doubt to argue with me, but I raised a hand before she could say anything.

Rohan, however, narrowed his eyes at me. "And you? Are you going to go too, Prez?"

"Of course," was my blunt reply, not thinking of the implications of it. I can't just leave her alone in a building that's full of sexual vibes nor do I want for her to get another man to chaperone her there.

"Excellent!" Rohan smiled at us, rather mischievously I'll admit. "I like it. I really like it. Tonight is going to be interesting indeed."

Rohan is the Club's secretary, but in truth, he is what I call the 'Bombs Expert.' He is a skillful man with regards to explosives; very careful about making them and where to situate them. After our conversation with him, I have the feeling that he'll most likely do well with his position.

I wonder... what *landmines* are waiting for me and Daniella when we get in his building.

Chapter 14 - The Landmines of the Guru

~ Daniella ~

After our conversation with Rohan, Erik sent me back to my room for reasons unclear to me. His only instruction was to stay there until he fetches me later tonight. I, of course, complained about his boring order. I didn't want to stay and be unproductive. Taking advantage of my words, he smirked and gave me my first assignment and that was to memorize the rooms of each floor of the chateau by heart.

In the end, I stayed in my room for four hours; did some internet surfing through the chateau's excellent WiFi on my laptop, learning the map of the floors and its rooms (yeah, by heart), and ate my lunch alone. When afternoon came, however, a knock on my door sounded. It was Suri visiting me with her old-man butler bringing a basket of pastry and tea.

Since the first day I met this sweet angel, I knew already she was a refined lady; wearing European clothes that Vogue would like to put on their magazines and her holding lavish parties and tea times just like what she invited me to do right now. I couldn't say no of course as I was dying for a companion (no, Erik doesn't count) since this morning.

In my living room balcony, we took our time. We talked about a lot of things club-related and she gave me all information about the activities of the chateau and the grand parties that we were invited to as members of the club. She gave me a crash course on how to become fancy (as per the president's tastes) much to my willingness and she invited me on a shopping sometime this week when I'm vacant.

Additional clothes are what I needed since I wasn't able to pack enough. I didn't expect that I would be staying here for six months in the first place so that was already given.

Suri was very accommodating with me, but what I noticed about her is her subtleness on eluding information about the personal lives of the members. She'd change the subject smoothly whenever I ask her about how the club was established and the basic infos on its current members.

"It would be great to know them more at least to establish rapport and trust," I explained to her and she gave me an understanding smile.

"That's an admirable reason Dani and I would have wanted to help you but for now, maybe it's better if you ask permission on the president first," she answered.

Although it pains me to ask any request from that buffoon, I guess I didn't have a choice. If I want to survive here and create friends along the way, I have to do so. "I guess that's safe enough," I murmured and then finished my tea in one gulp.

Time check, it was already twenty minutes past five. I couldn't believe that our conversation had lasted this long.

Mr. Clyde took care of the plates and teacups while Suri and I exchanged air kisses to say goodbye. Apparently, she and Amano are going on a date and she had to prepare herself for it. I too have one (although I wouldn't call it a date) but still, I needed to make myself presentable looking.

"I'll see you tomorrow in your unveiling," Suri stated when we were in my doorway.

"My what?" I arched a brow.

She did the same, probably taken aback. "Didn't you know? You have your own private party tomorrow to celebrate your membership in the club. Since this was first established a year ago, we didn't have any outsiders as members at all, so your presence calls for a celebration!"

Now I gaped. "Huh. Erik didn't inform me at all."

She smiled and thinned her eyes. "Hmmm... maybe he will tonight." For some reason, I got a feeling she was hinting me something, but I just dismissed it and answered simply, "Yes, I think so too."

"Well, I'll see you tomorrow. You better dress up, okay?" And then, she air-kissed me again. *She is really such a cute girl.*

"Yes, I will. See you."

Oh, I will alright. I'll show Erik how I look nowhere near a maid.

I'm no femme fatale, but in the back of my head, I was already concocting a plan on how to unsettle Erik and his oh so self-important attitude. He'll regret that he blackmailed me into becoming his slave.

After an hour and a half, I was ready in my black jeans and white blazer. I had a rose quartz necklace around my neck and a matching bracelet on my right wrist. Donning my hair down with soft curls on the tips, I could say that I'm safe from being called a temptress right now.

Believe me, Erik is the last person I would seduce in my lifetime.

My door sounded a batch of knocks again. It was heavy but for the most part, it was unhurried. Intuition told me that it was the president and after that idea came to me, I suddenly felt my heart jump.

Although I loathe the man for blackmailing me, I can't believe I still have this girly reaction towards him!

I opened the door and yes, I was correct. It was Erik in a new attire of dark green trench coat and slim-fit jeans. *Damn, this man just knows how to be spiffy.* He didn't greet me at all, but he handed me my two cellphones. First, the old one saying: "Discard it." And then the new iPhone saying, "Keep it."

But like hell I would discard my hard-earned gadget. I will just have to secure it in a place where he can't find it.

"Thanks," I said and reached for a sofa table near the door to place my old cellphone, while the other I nestled in my rhinestone sling bag.

"Let's go," he said, walking out without waiting for my reply.

I and the president drove to Rohan's workplace situated inside Beverly Hills just some miles away from the chateau. The whole journey was the same as the others: silent, awkward and suffocating not because we had another small cat-fight (no, it didn't happen surprisingly), but it was because Erik had been brooding over something... work related maybe? or in his case, his tiresome responsibilities as the president? I don't know but he sure looked very tired and spent.

I just rounded my attention on the passing scenery outside and dared not make any conversation at all.

It was probably a fifteen-minute drive before we arrived in Rohan's *workplace*, but what I said about the building being his *workplace* was just an understatement. In truth, the place was more than that.

First, the moment our car entered the premises, I was awestruck by how decorative the iron-wrought gate looked. Picture peacocks, elephants, and lotus flowers made by talented artisans in black and gold colors. Second was the front garden that boasted plants, I bet, came from Asia; partnered with Hindu sculptures and fountains. Third was the structure of the house that I can say is really India's architecture at its best.

A valet awaited us in the front entrance and once we disembarked, Erik handed the keys to him.

"Close your mouth, woman. You might catch flies," said he when we sauntered past the arched doorway of the building.

Tsk. Even though he looked exhausted, his cockiness didn't deplete at all.

I did close my mouth, but not before I frowned at him. Can he just leave me and my silent admiration of the place?

In the spacious lobby, I saw a group of people talking. One of them was Rohan wearing another new colored turban (sky blue), a traditional royal blue kurta that had beautiful embroideries and paired with a white shalwar. When he saw us enter, he quickly excused himself from the group and approached us.

"Great that you were able to come Daniella!" he exclaimed and then without hesitation, planted a kiss on my cheek. I accepted it thinking nothing of the gesture as other than a normal greeting.

"And I am glad that I did. I am really happy to see the magnificence of your abode, Rohan." I smiled up to my ears.

"Good evening Erik," he said once we pulled away. "I almost thought that you'd back out after what happened this afternoon."

What happened this afternoon? What is he talking about?

"When is this dinner party of yours happening, Rohan? I want to get this over with so that we can return to the chateau," Erik stated sounding disinterested.

"Oh no." Rohan shook his head in response and patted his shoulder. "Don't be hasty, Prez. Enjoy the evening. You have to show Daniella that you're a good companion."

Huh, I doubt it.

I saw Erik shift his eyes on me and in my panic, I gave him a fake smile. His expressionless face was all I saw before he walked ahead of us. *What a prick.*

"This way, Sweet. Dinner will be served in the dining room," said Rohan.

It seems Erik had been here before because he knew already where he was going, leading the path and leaving me to fend off for myself. Luckily, Rohan showed me the way which was very kind of him to do so as a host.

"Where is Ms. Elaine, Rohan?" I asked as I didn't see any sign of her in the lobby.

"She'll be here later for her session. She and Mr. Roslin doesn't need to join the seminar since they are already pros," he answered me with a smile but he was looking forward.

Somehow I find his words believable, but I couldn't fathom how knowing as many sex positions as possible could be called a pro.

"Oh," I muttered, feeling my cheeks warm.

In the banquet table, excluding me and Erik, I counted five couples all in all. One couple was wearing traditional Indian attires which fitted the theme of the building, while another couple looked Asian in modern Asian clothes. The remaining ones were recognizable as rich and

high-statured people for they recognized the Fancy Pants Club president immediately. Their attention was glued on him who was acting like a hospitable host himself.

My God. I can't believe he is pulling on that gentlemanly face again!

He was smiling, showing his bright teeth for all to see and answering business questions thrown by Rohan's guests.

I felt a pang of insecurity then. *The hell, why can't he show me the same treatment as them? Why does he act so callous and overbearing once we are alone?*

To show proper decorum, I couldn't frown in my seat, but Rohan who sat on the center chair next to Erik released a smirk, no doubt seeing my silent irritation.

***

~ Rohan ~

The dinner party went without a hitch. I see that my guests have enjoyed themselves and the food, Daniella included amidst showing a slight discomfort of Erik's best-actor composure and inattention of her. It may not be that clear and both of them haven't acknowledged it, but there *is* something going on between these two that I can see as me being a love specialist.

Yeah, I consider myself that since in the first place Kama Sutra is guided by that principle.

After dinner, I directed them to what I call my 'Awakening Room'. This room is designed to be darkly lit since this is where I host my projector-assisted talk and mini slideshow. Another reason for it was so that I can create a romantic atmosphere between my couples. There are no chairs in their private sitting arrangements. Instead, they can sit down in the velvet carpet with plush pillows divided by a tea table set up with aphrodisiac fruits and wine.

I should say this is a well-laid trap for Erik since I know he hates these sorts of things. But with Daniella in his side now, who's to say that he wasn't silently glad inside?

"Here. Sit here, Daniella. I reserved this seat for both you and the President," I said as I pointed the floor seats in the front section.

Daniella, who looked nervous since we entered the Awakening Room, stiffed for a moment. "Do—do we have to sit together?" she asked shifting her eyes to the acting-insensitive president.

I smiled on her way. "Yes, you have to. You are to accompany him right? It's not good for the president to be alone in a place like this. Those couples—" I discreetly shifted my eyes on my rich guests who was talking to Erik earlier, "—might get the wrong idea, and besides where else should you sit if not here?"

***

~ Daniella ~

Where indeed. I asked myself in frustration.

"Looks like I don't have a choice," I grumbled low enough for Rohan to only hear.

"Great! Now, if you may sit down, we will start with the slideshows," he informed and I nodded.

Once I arranged myself in one of the pillow seats, Erik joined me without a word. He heavily dragged himself into a corner where his head can rest against an elephant statue and crossed his legs in a relaxed position. Gone was his gallant act earlier. Since we are alone in our private space and the lights are dim, he can actually act back to the cold man that he is.

I just rolled my eyes and as much as I could, dragged myself as far away from him as possible. Well... at least as far as our private space could give me. I didn't start a conversation with him still, anyway it wasn't going to happen since in the periphery of my vision, I noticed him closing his eyes.

Huh, he really is tired.

Rohan started with a greeting, then a short introduction of his work followed by the Kama Sutra history and facts slideshow.

'Written by Vātsyāyana, a portion of the work consists of practical advice on sexual intercourse. "Kāma" which is one of the four goals of Hindu life, means desire including sexual desire the latter being the subject of the textbook, and "sūtra" literally means a thread or line that holds things together, and more metaphorically refers to an aphorism (or line, rule, formula), or a collection of such aphorisms in the form of a manual. As noted by Jacob Levy, the majority of the book is about the philosophy and theory of love, what triggers desire, what sustains it, how and when it is good or bad.'

After listening to the male narrator, I couldn't help myself but glance at Erik again.

He is...sleeping.

His face was calm. The rise and fall of his chest weren't labored. He looked even childish in his position — his head leaning against the elephant's face and his fingers raking his hair.

Damn... My heart is going to explode because of this sexy cuteness!

I'm glad that he is sleeping though for I don't like to watch this Kama Sutra history (complete with erotic pictures) with him. It won't do well on both our parts at all.

Chapter 15 - Erik on How to Become a Dominant

~ Daniella ~

"Daniella."

A woman's voice so familiar to me called my attention after the slideshow. The light was still dim yet when I turned around to look at the woman, I could clearly distinguish Ms. Elaine's lovely face. She was bending low to look at me with a huge smile on her face.

I stood up immediately and rounded my seat taking note that I won't disturb Erik's sleep.

"Ms. Elaine, how are you?" I strained my voice to say. I gave her a big smile and after which we kissed cheek to cheek.

"I'm good. I'm good." She bobbed her head. "Wow. I can't believe you're here!"

I shyly looked down.

"Actually, I think of you as the type of person that is conservative and virtuous, yet you surprise me by coming here and more so with the President of the Fancy Pants Club!"

Oh, goodness. Here comes the interrogation that I expect from her.

She pointed her eyes on the unknowing Erik and then to me mischievously. "You know only couples come here right?"

"Ye...ah," was my reluctant answer.

"So that leaves me asking, are you a couple? You and Erik I mean."

I almost choked on my saliva.

Giving her a nervous chuckle, I immediately shook my head. "No. No, no. Uhumm, no." I felt my hands begin to sweat. "We don't have that kind of relationship Ms. Elaine. I am just here from a favor of a friend, Rohan, and the President...yeah, tagged himself along."

She arched one of her nicely trimmed brows and squinted her eyes at me. "Hmmm... I see." If I'm not mistaken, I think she disbelieved my claim. "I think I can imagine that, but I guess Erik needs some basics too. As far as I know, he is scarce on experiences such as these."

Me, being a slightly curious cat, had to ask without a second thought, "What are you meaning to say, Ms. Elaine?

Then she gave me a wink and lifted my chin up with her nail-polished finger. “You should find that out for yourself, dear Daniella. In the meantime, I will have to wish you luck!”

Luck with what?

“Rohan is calling for you,” she pointed to where Rohan was in another doorway different from the one we entered. He was looking at us; one hand was gesturing for me to come.

“I think I should go.” I smiled at her.

She nodded and then waved her hand, “Go and good luck on your first session. Might as well ready some condoms tonight.”

When I gave her an eye roll and a shy grin, I saw her wink at me again. God, I can’t believe she just mentioned the C-word in a woman who had never used one, namely *me*. I can’t even believe that she had that notion on both me and the President when I already denied it earlier.

“Where’s the Prez?” Rohan asked when I arrived in front of him.

I shrugged. “Still sleeping.”

“Wow. He got bored huh?” He gave me a not-so-surprised reaction. I just nodded at him.

“Uhm, Rohan, can I ask you a question?” I said when an idea crossed my mind.

A grin, so secretive, so devastatingly sexy, flashed towards me. “Hmm… bring it on. I’m ready,” he stated.

I inhaled and exhaled deeply to gain a bit of courage. “Your sessions. How do you do it?

“Ahh, curious are we?” His grin brightened.

“No, I—I’m just wondering because it seems a friend of mine is very interested, and then there’s Ms. Elaine who is your regular customer.”

He creased his refined brows just as he crossed his arms. “Hmm… I can see what you mean.” For a moment, I noticed his eyes shift past me and a smirk replayed on his lips. “Well, let’s see. How about I give you a quick lesson rather than explaining it?”

Lesson?

“What lesson?” It was Erik’s deep voice that asked that instead of me. I immediately whirled around and found him striding towards us. My heart double flipped. Now, the dragon has awakened. He looked refreshed, energized, and from the looks of things, ready to spit fire on me.

"Ah, Prez! What good timing!" Rohan walked past me and went to Erik's side, touching his back in a friendly way. "Daniella and I were just discussing how I go about my sessions. Why don't you partner up with her now so that she'll understand more?"

This time, I choked on my saliva. I saw Erik arch a brow and look at me; eyes heavy with an unreadable emotion.

"And why would I do that?" he asked.

"Because the lady is curious, Prez. Won't you help her with it?" Rohan's voice sounded pleading.

"You don't have to," I quickly announced. "I mean, I don't want to impose. I just want a quick *explanation,* not a *demonstration.*" I glared at Rohan who seemed to be enjoying his time challenging the president.

"Shhh, that's fine Daniella," he waved his hands. "The president here doesn't want to bring his members down, especially yo—"

"Fine," Erik cut in. My eyes briefly widened.

"Good!" Rohan clapped his hands and strolled past us to open the door. "Now come with me."

And we did without question. I was however uncomfortable deep inside. With Erik as my partner, I bet this wouldn't turn out well in the end. He'd probably criticize me for my timidity and lack of experience. He'd probably toss me on the floor and say how unappealing I am. Or much worse, since he is a man who seems disinterested with all things surrounding him, he'd probably become a statue, unresponsive of the instructions. That would be really awkward on my part.

"This is where I hold my sessions. Quite romantic isn't it?" Rohan informed as we three stood in the doorway.

Yup, romantic was the right word. Not only was there Kama Sutra statues in every corner, but there was also an elegant canopied bed in the center of the room under a red-lighted chandelier. On the ceiling, there were frescoes of nude men and women doing...yeah...doing it in the most sensual ways.

"It is," was my scarce reply, and I had to clear my throat when Rohan said simply, "Well then, let's start with the basics, but first, I want you both to assume your positions."

He strolled inside the room and stopped in the foot of the bed.

"And what position is that Rohan?" was Erik's question. God, I can't believe he asked that nonchalantly!

I saw Rohan smile and said, "The Sitting." He pulled a chair from the vanity mirror and dragged it all the way to the edge of the bed. "You sit first Prez."

My heart was pounding when I saw him strut towards the chair; his face looking disinterested.

"And Daniella, you straddle his lap," Rohan instructed to me after Erik sat.

"I—I can't," was my shaky statement. "Really Rohan, I don't need a demo. Just explain it to me."

Okay, I admit it, I am a coward. I know that I've brought this up on my own and I know that me being a virgin isn't a sufficient reason, but still... I am just not ready enough to straddle that man who so ever tries my patience and thins my temper! Strangle him yes, but straddle? *No way Jose!*

"Daniella, come," Erik commanded with an authoritative voice and I instantly turned meek. My insides jump when I saw how grim his eyes were as he looked at me.

"You heard him," Rohan reinforced. I was left with no other choice.

As I strolled towards him, I almost feel like I am strolling towards my guillotine... to my certain death, or maybe I was just overthinking it, but it sure feels the same way with my lips and hands shaking and my knees buckling.

Placing my arms on the chair's headrest, I cautiously sat at the edge of his lap, almost falling my butt off, but then Rohan pushed my back to urge me forward, closer to Erik.

I gasped silently as I inched closer; my breasts almost touching his chest. Did I dare look at his eyes when I did so? Yes, I did, and I thought it immediately my mistake for I saw his burning stare on me with zero blinkings.

"Good. Now, Prez, put your hands on the side of her waist."

I quickly turned my face to the side to avoid his warm breath but not before I saw a muscle in his jaw twitch for the faintest second.

Erik did Rohan's instruction slowly which was a surprise. All this time, I actually thought he'd be like an uncooperative statue.

"Daniella, wrap your arms around his neck," Rohan said to me. I gave him a glare first before acting it.

I felt Erik's nape heat up and his breathing indistinctly deep. I would have laughed at this unexpected response from him but unfortunately, I was the same, although in my case, all of my girly parts were heating up.

I don't know what had happened but it felt as if we were both in our own world. Eye to eye, skin to skin, chest to chest, locked in a wordless space of sexual tension until Rohan pulled me out when he said, "*That*, my students, is the Sitting Position."

He circled us examining the position we were in and by the looks of his smile, he was pleased with it and how we behaved.

"This arrangement helps the partners explore each other. The man can touch the breasts of his mate, suckle it, play with it. He can also toy with her womanhood in this position with his fingers. This gives better access since she is already spreading her legs for him."

I can't believe I am hearing this with Erik under me!

"For the woman, on the other hand, she can satisfy her man through grinding her wet folds against his erection, wrap her palms around it, play with it, pump it. This causes a pre-delirium feeling on the man and drives him high."

Rohan stopped behind Erik and looked at me seriously.

"You can also do the alternative one if you want Daniella. Using...your mouth."

My mouth immediately went dry. *Rohan, I am so going to strangle you later!*

I felt Erik shift beneath me. When I shot a glance at him, I saw that he was blushing and pressing his lips firmly.

I guess he is just as affected by Rohan's words as I am.

"You can become both submissive and dominant," Rohan continued, circling us again. "And if you ask Prez on how to become the dominant when you are under her, then I'll give you a simple answer."

He paused from behind me. I saw Erik's curious gaze fell on him then.

"Flip," I heard Rohan say.

~ Erik ~

"What?" I said; confusion, curiosity, and a breath of desire filled me in.

I can't believe I am doing this with Daniella. I knew already that Rohan had prepared landmines for us but never have I imagined it to be this explosive.

Shit. Showing a blank, disinterested face was truly difficult when deep inside, in reality, I was at my limit. I was completely rattled.

"I said flip. Flip her towards the bed," Rohan instructed, giving me an I-dare-you grin. From where he stood, Daniella luckily cannot see it. He thinks he can play with me. He thinks I don't have the liver to do it, but that's where he is wrong.

I have longed for Daniella to be under me since our paths have crossed. I will grab this opportunity now.

"Now, do it now," urged he again and this time, without thinking of what her reaction would be, I flipped her over to the mattress.

I heard her loud gasp and then felt her legs tense as I lifted it with both hands close to my waist.

Looking at Daniella now, it really did hit me on the spot. Her hair spread wildly on the bed, her face flushed, her trembling lips slightly parted, and her legs spread for me were elements to bring down my defenses.

"Daniella, relax. Your legs look awkward. Spread them wider," Rohan, as expected of him as the guru, instructed calmly.

I saw her oblige and parted her knees; her face turning even redder. I can only imagine if she wore a skirt. It would have been a lot more awkward for both of us.

"Closer Prez. Bend her knees and press her legs against your torso."

Daniella gasped again when I acted it.

A spell... I don't know, but it seems I am in it when I unconsciously released her leg and ran my hand on her waist to the underside of her breast. I can feel her fluttering heart beneath my fingertips. I can feel her breath hitch.

If this weren't a lesson or maybe if Rohan wasn't with us, I would have already devoured Daniella's mouth.

"That, my friend, is how you become the dominant." Rohan patted my shoulder and smiled at me with amusement. "End of session," he announced and right then and there I extricated myself away from the bed... a safe distance away from the woman who had, for the first time, lit my desires.

***

~ Daniella ~

"So, do you understand it now Sweet?" Rohan asked me when I sat at the edge of the bed. He didn't seem to notice how shaken I was with the whole lesson.

"I can understand why Ericka and Ms. Elaine are crazy about it," I managed to say in a calm manner. I glanced at Erik briefly who had his blank face on when in fact not long ago he had this flustered expression.

"Good," said Rohan and then walked towards the closed door but not before leaving a vague statement to Erik.

"Better embed that picture in your head, Prez. You have me to thank for it."

Vague for me at least.

I furrowed my brows and looked at Erik who clenched his teeth and narrowed his eyes at his Secretary's proud back.

"Chateau," I heard him say. "Let's go back." And then he exited the room after Rohan.

I ended up nodding and standing hastily from the bed. As I caught up with his long strides, I couldn't deny one fact anymore and it was that my body's heat was still there, ready to be doused by a man's touch.

Chapter 16 - When The Aphrodisiac Strikes

~ Daniella ~

Once again, our ride back to the chateau was the same: silent, awkward, and suffocating, but this time it wasn't because Erik was brooding, it was because I refuse to answer him when he apologized for what Rohan did to us earlier.

I didn't want to talk about it. I want to forget all of it especially now that my skin *is* still burning with want... with the need to be sated. If I were to speak to him, he'd notice my trembling voice. He'd notice that I was still affected by the lesson. *And* he'd notice that I was partly irked of his calm demeanor... too calm for my liking. In fact, I bet that's the reason why our God-forsaken ride had already lasted for thirty minutes. Our ride was supposed to be just ten or less. Why was the car so slow?

"Daniella, speak to me," was his order when my silence continued to drag on.

I was looking at my window; my hands were resting on my lap with the rhinestone purse and my feet were close together. What I'm feeling now would be called a double whammy. Because first, I am sure that my body temperature is rising, my blood pressure is increasing and my sensations are heightening. Second, my hormones are acting up and I say not just any hormones. Those damn ones that go on a high whenever I innocently watch romantic (but in truth erotic) tapes with Ericka.

Normally, I cool them down with a simple walk in her house's front porch or binge eat, but now that I'm inside Erik's car, I can't do it.

I seriously feel like exploding right now and I don't know why.

"Are you giving your master a silent treatment?"

I rolled my eyes when I heard the ridiculous word. In the reflection of the tinted window, I saw him look at me, his expression showing irritation. He released a deep breath and returned his slow driving when he got no response from me.

When I felt my nipples suddenly tingle, I pressed my lips and closed my eyes, quickly wrapping my arms with my purse around myself to stifle a...moan?

What is wrong with me?!

"Wait," I heard him say and then I felt a hand touch my forehead. I quickly leaned away and shot him a sharp look but all I can see in him was a big surprised expression.

"Did you eat the fruits in the table earlier?"

Since it was an odd question, I had to answer this time; trying to keep my voice stable. "Yes... and I drank the wine too."

"Shit." He immediately cursed.

"Why? What's the...matter?" Now I feel I was in deep trouble with Erik looking genuinely grim.

"Those were aphrodisiacs, Daniella, and the wine is a special beverage that has the same effect, only much stronger."

What?! My mind blurted out.

"It seems you have a remarkable ability to ingest edibles that contain *unique* components huh?" was his remark hinting me back to the time in Lotus Spade where I took the drug-induced blue liquor.

I don't think he was complimenting me with it so in my defense and irritation, I ranted, "How was I supposed to know?! Rohan didn't tell me. You were sleeping. I had the urge to eat and drink it!"

Then his deep gaze fell on me again. "You must be burning right now," he said straight-to-the-point.

God, it was the truth but I won't give him the pleasure of knowing that. It's just too embarrassing to tell him that I'm feeling hot and horny right now.

"I'll be just fine. Don't mind me," I spat, dragging my gaze back to the window.

"There are only three ways of addressing this *situation* of yours you know," he stated.

"And what are those, do tell me."

Curiosity won although I was trying my best not to start this kind of conversation since I know where it would lead.

"One."

He changed gears and revved his Ferrari.

"You touch yourself."

My mouth dropped. *Goodness, I can't believe he mentioned that!*

"Two."

He looked at me with hooded eyes.

"Allow a man inside you."

My cheeks overheated. *I hope he wasn't talking about himself.*

"Three."

He paused for a moment and then glanced at the dark road ahead. "I do this."

I saw him smile wickedly before he stepped on the gas pedal and off we went, zooming out like we had turbojets attached in the sides.

"Shit! Erik!" I grabbed my seat and braced myself. For some reason, the sensation in my body had flown off and replaced with an adrenaline rush out of fear.

"Hold on. We will be in the chateau in less than a minute."

He swerved to the right, maneuvered the wheel to the left, and stepped on the gas pedal again like we were being tailed by a T-Rex.

"Are you planning to kill me?!" I shouted; my heart racing in a way that was different when in sexual arousal.

"No, I'm not. I'm saving you," he stated, his focus was still on the road.

"How's this going to save me you asshole?! Slow down the car now!"

I closed my eyes and hoped for the best. If we are going to die now, I will make sure I strangle him when he is in Hell's gates.

Then the car slowed down and then it finally stopped. The silence probably lingered a few seconds before I heard Erik say in his stern and unyielding voice, "Go to your room now Daniella."

I opened my eyes and found that we were already in the entrance portico of the chateau. *Thank you Lord!*

"Don't let anybody come inside your room and I mean it. Not even me or else you'll be sorry in the morning."

I don't know if it was guided by worry or he was just threatening me, but his words gave me goosebumps for its double meaning.

I did as he said. I sprang out of the car after a nod and a thank you, and then quickly entered the main foyer to the private elevator.

My heart was still beating fast and I was panting so hard. His overspeeding was a good way to solve my predicament, but unfortunately, it was only a temporary solution. The whole time I rode the conveyor, I looked at myself in the wall mirror and discovered an irrevocable truth. It was that the aphrodisiac's unique properties were still there, and strong.

***

~ Vincent ~

It had been a while since I've seen Daniella. Circumstances related to our Club in and out activities prohibited me so. I really wanted to talk to her and probably ask her how she was faring in her first day of being a club member. I had hoped that Erik had given her the duties and responsibilities suited as a female member and I hoped that he had toured her all over the chateau. If he didn't, I can always volunteer myself.

I was on the fourth floor foyer, just exited the club's secret room, when I noticed the private elevator dinged. Out came Daniella to my surprise. Happy with the turn of events, I greeted her by waving my hands.

"Hey!" I shouted.

She waved back, albeit uncomfortably, and greeted, "Hey, Vincent. Uhmm, good evening."

"Good evening too," I said as I approached her. "Where have you been?"

I noticed her hesitant for a moment, shifted her eyes to her feet then back to me and said, "In Rohan's place. He invited me to attend his session."

"Alone?" was what I asked instantly. I wonder if Rohan did anything to her there for her to look this...unusually uncomfortable.

"No, I...went with the President."

"The President?" Now *that* I didn't expect.

"Yes, uhmm... I probably should go to my room now." She turned in a hurry but then I grabbed her elbow to stop her.

"Wait," I said, "I hope you don't mind me asking, but what happened in your session?"

She shook her head and smiled at me, but in a nervous way, "I really should go, Vincent."

That's when I felt the heat in her skin. "Why are you so hot Daniella? Are you having a fever?" I checked on her forehead and neck with the back of my palm and yes, I was right, she really was having a fever, but why?

"I—don't know," she weakly answered and gave me a blush.

Why would she give me a blush if she was ill?

"Let's get you in your room then." I guided her towards the hallway consequently worried. My right hand was in the small of her back, my other held her elbow. She shuddered awhile ago when our skin contacted and she shuddered again now. It was odd so I had to stare at her, confused.

"Vincent, let her go!" Erik's voice suddenly boomed from behind us. I turned to look at him and saw him scowl like an alpha mate.

I didn't let Daniella go though and just raised my brow at him. "Prez, there you are."

"Let her go I say."

"She is having a fever, Prez. If I let her go, she might stumble."

He strolled towards us and directly grabbed Daniella's other elbow. "I'll take it from here," he said, staring at me with great depth.

I didn't answer, but I tightened my grip on Daniella. *If Erik had staked his claim on her, he might as well do better than this. He should show me that he is worth her heart.*

"Please Vincent, take me to my room now," I heard Daniella' voiced weakly and because of that, Erik clenched his jaw.

"If you'll excuse us, Prez," was my statement but he only gave me a stern, "No."

He blocked our path and threw his gaze on her.

"Daniella, come with me." He offered up a hand for her to take. "Now!"

I know that Erik is such a mess when it comes to his attitude but this is just enough. If I'm right, I think he is treating her like a slave.

"Erik, I'm not supposed to say this since you are the president but I don't think treating her like that would win her trust in you as a Club member."

"Shut it, Vincent." When Daniella didn't take his hand, he made a move himself and grabbed her waist. He pulled her close to him and somehow, she didn't put up any resistance.

"Erik." For the first time ever, I stood my ground. "Stop acting like she's your slave."

"Oh, but she is..." was his calm reply. I saw him grin before he pulled her elbow from my grasp in success. He lifted her to my surprise, but that was the moment when I found her already unconscious.

"What do you mean?!" I jogged behind him when he started to walk; my head jumbled up with three other questions needing to be answered.

What happened to them in Rohan's residence? Why is Daniella acting weird earlier and then feeling ill? And why is Erik acting calm amidst her fainting?

"She is my personal maid, Vincent," he enlightened me when we stood in front of Daniella's door.

He bobbed his head, gesturing for me to open the door. I did but after a frown.

"Is this your way of protecting her Erik? Making her your modern Cinderella?" I asked when we strolled inside the receiving room.

"Yes," was his only reply. He walked passed me and went straight into her bedroom. I followed suit.

"You really are such a hopeless case," I sighed; my anger at his actions earlier dissipating. "I can't believe you made her agree to this arrangement."

"I have my ways," he said whilst arranging Daniella in the mattress.

"Underhanded is what you mean."

"She signed my contract willingly, Vincent."

"Oh really?" Somehow, I was having trouble believing that. "I bet making her a club member is your way of covering this up."

He straightened, pulled out her sling bag from her shoulder, stepped out of the bed, and dropped the thing near her bedside lamp. That's the time when I saw him smirk with amusement. "You are always such an inquisitive man, Mr. VP."

Stepping closer to the mattress, I asked as I raked her sleeping form, "What has happened to her? Judging from her looks, I bet her fever isn't from an illness."

"She drank Rohan's famous wine," he revealed with a huff.

"Wait what?!" I exclaimed. Surely I heard it wrong, but based on Erik's face, he was serious. "Shit. That's bad."

So that explains everything. Erik's possessiveness. His calmness. Daniella's discomfort and her fever.

If I remember correctly, Rohan's wine is imported directly from Egypt. Aside from his teachings, it is because of this wine that's why he has so many clients. He wouldn't tell the club where in Egypt exactly as he says it is a secret. Fancy Pants Club members don't drink this on normal occasions as it really causes quite an effect on the body. It does make the drinker increase his or her libido. Makes one feel hot and if this isn't decreased in one way or another, it results in fainting like what is happening to Daniella now.

I believe fainting rarely happens to the drinkers though for their heat is immediately addressed with their partners. Unluckily for Daniella, she didn't have one, but she could have always tempted a man to do it.

"I know what you are thinking Vincent," Erik pulled me out from my reverie.

I simply released a deep sigh and raked my hair.

"I'm sorry Prez. I can't help it. The last time my date drank Rohan's wine, she begged me to replicate Grey's red room scene."

I saw his brows furrow then. *Really, he always takes my jokes seriously.*

"That's why I suggest we leave her now." He strolled out of the room in long strides. I had to keep up with his pace so that he wouldn't think that I meant to stay with her.

When we were already in the hallway, I couldn't keep myself from asking, "You must have had quite an awful ride going back here huh?"

With Daniella's sex hormones acting up, it was only natural that Erik heard the mating call. Although he hasn't had any experiences with women, he *is* no monk and I'm pretty sure he was burning inside knowing that her body yearns to be touched.

"I opt not to discuss that, Vincent," was his strained reply.

I only smirked at him and remarked, "How chivalrous of you, my friend. How chivalrous of you."

***

~ Daniella ~

I had no recollection whatsoever after Erik pulled me towards him. What I remembered last was him and Vincent arguing about me being a slave. I must have fainted after that and one of these men took me back in my room and placed me here, in my soft bed.

I could still feel my senses sensitive, especially the sense of touch, but at least, it wasn't as super as earlier. My head was throbbing a bit and my eyesight was a little blurry. However, these weren't bad enough for me not to stand and change my clothes.

Take note, I still have my earlier clothes on, the ones I wore in Rohan's residence. Whether it was Vincent or Erik who settled me here, at least he didn't have the thought of changing me into a nightdress. I would have panicked if he did.

Sitting, I reached for my iPhone placed inside my sling bag. Again, whether it was Mr. P or Mr. VP, at least he secured my personal belongings.

As I checked on the time, I noticed a message from Erik with a big red exclamation point near the mail icon.

The time I received it was nine fifty-eight. The current time on my phone *is* one thirty-two at midnight.

I rolled my eyes when I opened the mail, thinking that it could just be a message reminding me to come in his room early in the morning, but when I read his text, my mouth dropped.

'Don't touch yourself.'

Those were only three words but packed quite a powerful punch for me.

'What?'

Complete with a death skull icon, I typed in without thinking or worrying that he might have been already asleep.

A few seconds later, my iPhone sounded. My heart jumped a beat. *Shit. Is he still awake?*

'I SAID, DON'T TOUCH YOURSELF.'

Was his clear message.

In capital letters huh? Asshole.

'What are you talking about?'

I typed back.

'You know what I'm talking Daniella. Go back to sleep now.'

I huffed and crossed my arms. Not knowing what to reply, I pulled out the truth card.

'Well, I believe you're in luck Mr. President for I have never done that even once. You can relax your butt in your comfy bed now.'

'Oh really?'

Came his reply, IMMEDIATELY.

Shit. I bit my lip and typed:

*'Okay, I refuse to talk about masturba*tion topics with you, Erik. Goodnight!'*

I expected a rude comeback from him, but instead, he texted me this:

'I shouldn't have brought you there. It was my mistake, Daniella. Please forgive me.'

I was in shock when I read it. Goodness, the rude president asking for my forgiveness? Huh? What are the odds?

'For you to use that word, Vincent must have hit you huh? Or maybe you banged your head in your bathtub?'

I asked him, feeling confused about the change in his attitude, but then he replied a scarce—

'No.'

I couldn't help but giggle at myself.

'Where's the rude Erik that I know?'

I typed it without a thought and waited for his reply, but seconds turned into minutes and the minutes summed up to ten, so without thinking too much about it, I left the cellphone in the bed. I went to my bathroom, refreshed myself, and changed my clothes to a more comfortable sleeping one.

When I returned to check on the phone, still there was no message.

I released a long sigh as I lay on the bed. *It seems this is his way of answering me huh? Becoming silent.*

For a moment, I thought that we were making a civil conversation, although it was through text messages, at least it was a good development than us bickering.

I twirled on my cellphone, played with its pads for a long time while looking at the unlit chandelier until an idea formed in my head.

Shit, this is going to be my first, but what choice do I have? I am still feeling the residue of the aphrodisiacs!

Slowly, I placed the gadget on the mattress, closed my eyes, and sighed deeply as my fingers went down south. But just as I had inserted one finger inside my undergarment, my cellphone suddenly rang.

I jerked up to sit; my heart feeling like it was coming out of my chest.

I snatched the phone without delay and checked on the screen. Erik's name was registered on it.

Mother of God, I thought he was already asleep?!

"What?" I snapped at him through the speakers.

"Sleep. Daniella. Now!" was his only command and then he hung up.

My mouth just dropped. I blinked twice, thrice just in order to process out what had just happened.

I don't know if he had a CCTV camera set up in my room and he interrupted me intentionally or he just had an uncanny ability to know what I was about to do, but hell, it really fumed me inside.

"Okaaayyy," I pressed my lips thinly, arranged my duvet with heavy arms, and tossed my phone on the other side of the bed. "Sleep it is then!" I shouted as my head hit the pillows.

Chapter 17 - Dodging Cinderella's Duties

~ Daniella ~

As the saying goes, “Take up the challenges of the present and leave the past behind.” Yesterday was a past I would happily leave in the deep recesses of my brain. I won’t allow it now to hunt me especially that today *is* my unveiling party. Still, Erik didn’t mention it last night, but when I checked on my phone the moment I woke up, his message told me the exact information I wanted, but with a different twist.

‘Before you go to your ball at eleven, my Cinderella, clean my bathroom first. My bed needs some attention too so don’t forget to change the linens and pillowcases. I’ll be in the gym with Enrique doing kickboxing, so make sure when I arrive, I have a full-on protein breakfast ready.’

Tsk. Certainly, I feel like I am in a cheap Cinderella movie where I am forced to become a maid to an evil soul. Only the difference is that this remake doesn’t have a mad step-mother but a devil and that devil is in the form of my eager master, Erik Romano Fancii.

Before going into his room, I did my morning routine first. I showered, brushed, did my hair into a ponytail, and wore light clothes of a simple tee and denim shorts.

I was intent on doing everything he wanted (although it was against my will), but then, when I stepped out of my room, Suri was already waiting for me outside wearing a cheeky grin. Behind her was Mr. Clyde, smiling kindly at me.

“Hi, Suri! Good morning. Why are you—”

“Change of plans,” she then said and grabbed my wrist. “Come with me.”

“What the— where are we going, Suri?” I hurried to close the door.

“You are coming with me to a salon.”

“Wait, why? And where exactly is that?” She continued to drag me out of the hallway; her butler following behind us.

“You’ll see,” she gave me a wink. “We will beautify ourselves for the lunch party later.”

Okay, now I feel that she is my fairy godmother. I guess I don’t have to be alone in my plans anymore.

I paused suddenly and pulled my arm from her. “Wait, Suri! My dress! I need to bring my dress!”

Yes, my special, sexy dress that I had brought to wear supposed to be at the wedding reception but then decided not to. It is a blue long-sleeved lace gown, with a plunging neckline and a low-cut back.

"You won't need it, Dani. The salon also has a boutique. We will pick a new gown there," Suri informed.

She pulled me again, but this time she was smiling widely, all giddy with the prospect of playing doll together. "This is going to be great!" she exclaimed when we reached inside the private elevator.

Somehow, her giddiness clung to me. I smiled too and decided to just forget the worry that was lodged at the back of my head. Yes, the worry that I won't be able to do what Erik had ordered me this morning.

I guess I will just have to face the consequences later.

***

~ Erik ~

With what had happened between me and Daniella last night, I needed a good outlet to release my pent up tension... a good diversion and that diversion ended up beating Enrique in our kickboxing practice early this morning.

I feel kinda bad for him, but as the Head of the Club Security, he should have defended himself better than this. He didn't even give me a scratch.

"Well... as expected of you, Prez. You really are good with hand-to-hand combats," he remarked as he stood up slowly from the rubber mat, holding his left shoulder.

That body part is probably sore right now after a roundhouse I gave him. Since he requested me not to mess his face up, I didn't have any choice but to target his limbs.

"We are done here, Enrique. Take care of your injury before the lunch party later."

"Oh, I will." He quickly gave me a wide smile as if he wasn't even wincing earlier. "I can't miss Daniella's party for anything. I can't wait to see her again!" he exclaimed with dreamy eyes. I eyed a small dumbbell on the floor and for some reason, I wanted to throw this at him.

Shrugging off the thought, I took my towel from a table and strolled out of the basement Club gym towards the private elevator. Sweat trickled down my forehead, my neck, and my bare chest, so I used the towel to wipe it off. Looking at the wall mirror, I smiled to myself. *Huh.* He doesn't even know that the woman he adored is in my bedroom right now probably preparing my breakfast.

Excited of the prospect, I reached my chamber quickly when the elevator opened on the fourth floor, but what greeted me in my room was silence and not a single sign of Daniella.

I checked in the bathroom, but she wasn't there. I checked on my walk-in closet and my private office, but it yielded the same result.

"Where is that woman?" I complained to myself, pulling out my iPhone from the bedside table.

Her number was on speed dial number one, so I pressed it. After two rings, she answered my call. I readied myself a string of questions to throw at her yet when I heard another female's voice, Suri's in fact, I fell silent.

'President, why are you calling Daniella?' I heard her say.

For this to happen unexpectedly, I didn't have a contingency plan, so I stammered when I answered her, "I'm—I'm just checking up on her to see if she's rea—" I coughed and cleared my throat, "ready with this noon's party."

'Oh, how cute of you. Well, she is in the washing room right now, a hairdresser is rinsing her hair.'

Hairdresser? I thought they are inside the room?

"Come again?" I managed to ask.

'I dragged her in Alec's Salon, President. We are here now pampering and beautifying ourselves for the party later.'

Oh. Alec. I should have known that Suri can't keep herself from dragging Daniella along there. With a second female now in the club, I understand her giddiness.

"I see." I strolled towards the bathroom and dropped my soaked towel in the laundry bin.

'Do you have any messages for her? I can relay it now if you want.'

I do have one and that is to tell her that she'll pay for being MIA as my personal maid, but then again, I don't want for Suri to berate me for that.

"No, it's okay. Just make sure you ladies come on time later," I told her instead.

'Hmmm, we will. See you later in the Club Hall, President.'

"Yes."

I heard a group of women chuckling in the background before I ended the call.

"Suri..." I sighed.

Now my plan is ruined. I am supposed to escort my Cinderella later but it seems this woman has another plan in mind. With her headstrong attitude, it was no wonder Daniella was successfully dragged in that salon.

It would be interesting though, how Daniella would turn up later. I know that Alec has magical hands when it comes to make-up and hairdos. As a club member, he is what we call the Special Effects Expert. He is the master of prosthetics and disguise. Since I accepted this cover as the President of the Fancy Pants Club, I sought his expertise to cover up my neck tattoo — a medieval cross with a black spade in the center and four red spears on the sides — a sign of high rank on *Iopata Bratva's* circle.

I left myself naked before I stepped inside the shower. Nice. It seems my hand-to-hand combat with Enrique earlier yielded acceptable results. At least the burn in my body had now dissipated. I don't need to worry about pulling Daniella towards my bed and claiming her.

I guess I also needed to thank Suri for dragging her away. If she didn't and if I had found Daniella inside my room fixing my breakfast, I'm sure my kickboxing would have failed its purpose.

***

~ Daniella ~

"You look gorgeous!" was Suri's declaration when I wore the gown she picked for me. Complete with my long hair in soft curls, the accessories that she had readied and the beige bedazzled stiletto that I bought in Alec's boutique, I stood in front of Suri's front like a soon-to-be-bride examined by her maid of honor.

I smiled shyly when I heard it. "Thanks, you look gorgeous too, Suri. I bet Amano would drool when he sees you."

She was wearing a black and silver lace backless gown, quite an opposite to mine which was a nude-beaded gown with a sweetheart neckline. It was backless too, but bolder than hers.

"Well, I think the Fancy Pants single men would when they see *you*."

She gestured to all of me and made a proud grin. If I'm correct, she was in fact very, *very* happy with her choice of gown.

"Especially the President," she mumbled to herself but I heard it loud and clear.

Oh God, with such a wonderful bonding time with her, I actually forgot about Erik and his cleaning orders. Suri did inform me earlier that he called on my cellphone and that he sounded happy and expectant of us in the party. I found it unbelievable though and thought that it was just

him acting his gentlemanly facade. Since I didn't do as he ordered, I probably should expect his angry face on me later.

"Where's Alec by the way? I have to thank him for a good job," I asked, intentionally changing the subject.

"Oh, he'll be here a few moments from now." She sat on the sofa and fumbled on her cellphone. "He'll come with us as he will join your unveiling party too."

"Really?" I beamed a smile. "The party isn't exclusive anymore?"

"No, it is still exclusive to club members, Daniella. Alec can join because he is a member too." She awarded me an understanding smile.

Huh, I never expected this at all. I thought the Fancy Pants Club is only composed of high-statured men and a highborn lady, but it seems they have a unique-gendered member too.

The door going to the second floor which was Alec's living quarters opened and out he stepped wearing a dashing gray tuxedo. From being a tangled mess earlier, his long black hair was now cleanly secured at the back with a band. When I first saw him, he had make-up on with pink lipstick and brown eyeshadow, but now, I don't see any traces of it. His face was smooth and white, like a pearl and he had a diamond cross earring in his left ear.

"Wow," I heard him say the moment he laid eyes on me, "Suri was right when she said you are a Goddess in disguise."

Somehow, the tone of his voice changed from being high-pitched to low, like straight male low. He was supposed to be gay right? Why do I think that I'm looking at a true man instead?

"You flatter me with your words, Alec. Thank you." I felt my cheeks blush. "But you should look at yourself. You sure surprised me of your unbelievable transformation. You look like a beautiful man."

He chuckled then. "I get that a lot, Sweetheart. But believe me, I am all things straight."

"Huh? What do you mean?" I asked, creasing my brows.

"He's pure male, Daniella," Suri volunteered an answer. She stood up and gave me a smug smile.

"What?" To my surprise, I scanned him from head to foot. "I mean, really?"

She went behind him and rested a hand on his shoulder. "He loves to fool others into believing the things he wants them to believe. Heck, he can even make someone think he is a corpse back from the dead if he wants to, or an out-of-this-world alien and easily get away with it."

I blinked in disbelief. "Wow. That's amazing."

"I have a talent for disguises, Sweetheart. It is my passion." He approached me and took my hand to kiss the back of it as Vincent and Enrique do.

"I'm speechless," I said as I watch his gentlemanly action. "I really do think you were a..."

He raised his head and looked at me with mischief. "I can always kiss you on the lips right now to prove it to you."

In my head, an alarm immediately sounded. 'That's not really necessary,' I would have said that but then Suri stepped in and raised a hand to stop him.

"Uh, I'd probably tell you that *that* wouldn't be wise Alec," she said.

He straightened and gave her a raised brow. "Why? She is single right?"

She crossed her arms to her chest. "If you want to die, then be my guest."

For some reason, they were looking at each other like they were talking telepathically.

"Ohhh... I see," after a few seconds, he stated.

She nodded at him. "Yes, so yeah, watch *where* your hands go when we are in the chateau."

I frowned, still clueless of what she was saying.

Alec just smiled brightly and lifted his shoulders. "But that doesn't mean I don't get to have fun right?" He snaked an arm on my waist and pulled me closer to him.

"Why do I feel you guys are opting me out of the conversation?" I dove in, ready to interrogate them on their ambiguous statements. "What's this *fun* you are talking about Alec?"

He pinched a skin in my waist so suddenly that I had to squeak in my inner thoughts.

"Nothing, Sweetheart," he winked. "Let's go now? I'll be your handsome escort for today."

The word made me smother a laugh. "You mean *beautiful*," I voiced out.

Even though his gender identity was already sorted out, my brain still saw him as the ladyboy that he looked like who styled my hair and turned me into this stunning beauty. It would probably take me the whole ride back to the chateau to finally settle the facts in, but anyway, the ending was already clear and that was I have made a new friend in the club.

Amano, who was already waiting for us outside of the boutique, was leaning coolly in the hood of his metallic blue Audi car. He looked gorgeous donning a fashionably undone black tuxedo; quite a fitting color to go along with Suri's gown. He waved at us as we strolled out of the entrance door. Suri beamed a smile and quickly ran towards him, almost catching on the hem of her gown as she

crossed the sidewalk. She clung on his elbow after sharing a quick kiss on the lips and then turned to me and Alec.

“Dani, you’ll be riding with him to the chateau. I’ll be with Amano. Is that okay with you?”

I nodded without complaint. “Of course. There are no problems at all.”

“Then come with me Sweetheart,” Alec spoke, gesturing a hand to show me a car that was parked right in front of Amano’s Audi, a silver Maserati. “We will be riding this beauty.”

Since the boutique was located in Rodeo Drive, we had to use a fit transportation to reach the chateau. I can see that these Fancy Pants Club men seem to have a surplus of these kinds of cars for their usage.

As I rode with Alec, never was a dull moment with him. When I asked about his disguises, he happily volunteered funny stories that went along with it. He also shared to me his many clients who needed prosthetics makeup in their Hollywood movies. I was listening to him attentively, nodding my head from time to time to show my fascination with his work.

“In the club, however, I only got one customer,” told he when we were about to enter the chateau gate.

I raised a brow and looked at his way, “Oh? Who is it?”

“The president,” he answered.

“Really? Why does he need prosthetics makeup anyway?”

“He wanted me to cover a certain tattoo in his neck. He says it is too bothersome if people recognize it.”

I was in awe again not because of the mysterious tattoo he mentioned, but because of how good his work was. I have had enough exposures of Erik to know that not once have I suspected that he had a tattoo in that particular body part. “Now that’s an interesting fact. You say that it is in his neck right? You must be that good to cover it up as if it was nothing.”

He released a sexy chuckle so much so that I blushed when I heard it.

“Thank you for the compliment, Daniella. Mr. Svaneti sure is very lucky to have you.”

“Mr. Svane—what? Who is that?” I shot him a look of curiosity, ready to string him my questions, but then he just shrugged his shoulders and smirked at me.

“No one Sweetheart. Forget about it.”

He turned the ignition off, twisted his key out, and said, “Let’s go?”

How smooth of him to bring the name out to me only to dismiss it quickly. I found it odd, but since I have a present matter to attend to, thinking about it now would be unnecessary.

Shoving the name out of my thoughts, I nodded at him in response.

***

We entered the chateau's main foyer at eleven on the dot. Since my party will be held at a private club function hall on the fourth floor, we had to ride the club elevator. Our stroll towards it was met with venerated stares and open-mouth ogles from the guests and the staff of the chateau. I had to contain myself from rolling my eyes when I saw Alec waving at some maidens in his side of the path.

With this kind of behavior, it was a surprise I still didn't see him as a player. I actually thought of it as playful. Since I stayed in this place back when I was still managing the wedding reception, I knew already that the Fancy Pants Club has a wide fanbase. Alec, I assume, has his own share too, so it was only normal for him to show some attention to them.

When we arrived in the Club dining room, Amano and Alec were the ones who stepped inside first through thick double doors. Suri stopped me before I could follow them by holding an arm.

"Wait," she said.

I gave her a confused brow. "Why? What's the matter?"

"Stay here and wait for my signal. Erik has to make a welcome speech first and I have to do the introductions for you."

"What?" Her informing me this while we were still in the boutique would have helped lessen my surprise, but she didn't, so I am truly at a loss right now. "I don't think that I warrant any grand entrance, Suri. Why must you introduce me?" I asked, feeling suddenly nervous.

"Because that's just how we do things here," she winked and gave me a positive smile before entering the room.

I failed to stop her, so I ultimately surrendered to this unexpected arrangement.

Chapter 18 – Conflicting Emotions

~ Erik ~

The Fancy Pants Club seldom throws a party, but when we do, we *really* throw a party. As the President of the Club, I opt to hold two grand balls. One is done during the month of February which coincides with Valentine's Day (under Suri's suggestion), and the second is on October first, which will happen two months from now. Since the chateau's formal opening a year ago, these two balls had become the talk of the town and because of that, I have received a waterfall of letters by post or by email begging me to invite them in. I am still sorting the guests out with the help of Ian, the club's most trusted attendant.

As agreed, these two parties are the only activity hosted by the club since this *is* the only time we get to gather outside our so-called Club *meetings*. However, on this very day, on this special occasion, all eight of the members are present to celebrate Daniella's admittance into the club. All except Luca of course.

It was supposed to be just a lunch gathering, but Suri turned it into a party with all of us compulsory to wear formal attire.

Now I am standing in a spacious area next to the fireplace making a fool out of myself for having to go through this welcome speech that she asked me to do.

"Good noon everyone. I'm sure you already know the reason why we are all gathered here today. Welcome her as one of our member, but be careful with your words and actions, she…doesn't know."

I stopped there, aware that my members understood what I was saying. I allowed Suri to take over and strolled towards my chair located in the center of the long rectangular table. Vincent was sitting in my right.

"You really are good with speeches Prez," he stated with a smile, but I was having trouble accepting it as a compliment.

I didn't answer him and instead focused my attention on the double doors where behind it stood the woman I have been missing since this morning.

***

~ Daniella ~

My palms turned sweaty as I patiently waited for Suri's signal. Had it not for her efforts and my plan to get back on Erik's blackmail, I would have turned heels and left. In my nineteen years of life, I have not been in this kind of situation where I am the main celebrant. Yes, I had a party during my coming-of-age but it was with my mother and a few of my friends slash co-employees in a family restaurant which catered to an Eat-All-You-Can dinner buffet. It wasn't like this where I had to doll up and wear a gown.

Although I am a perfectionist when it comes to my work, in my own life, I do things simply. Standing here as my new friend and co-member introduced me and my life achievements thus far isn't what I call simple at all. This was way too lavish.

As the door slowly opened to welcome me in, that's the time I realized that this moment is truly happening. No retreats anymore.

"Let us all welcome, Ms. Daniella Émile Rosecraft, our newest member of the Fancy Pants Club."

I heard Suri announce loudly. I beamed a smile then, but it wasn't enough to stop the trembling of my lips.

Mr. Ian, who opened the door, motioned for me to come inside. I did and as I took in the scene of the Club dining room, I almost stopped breathing.

My God, I feel as if I am in bishounen heaven right now.

Picture an otome game where the protagonist has to choose between a number of hot men sitting in a long table wearing tuxedos of different styles and colors. This is what I am experiencing now except for the fact that I am *not* choosing any of them to be my romantic partner.

With my hands on each side, I breezed towards where Suri stood. She gave me a quick hug, "Say something," she whispered, and then she patted my back before leaving me alone in the center of their attention.

I wish she really did inform me about this earlier. I am not a shy girl, but having to speak in front of so many people impromptu really makes me nervous.

"Uhm..." My eyes rested on every familiar face in my front, each of them has different eye colors but the most striking one of all was the President's.

Shit. I just felt a cold shiver down my spine when our gazes connected.

"Thank you for accepting me as one of your own. Being strictly fancy is all new to me so I hope you will understand my errors along the way, but I promise to do my best to uphold the name of the Club with great honor and respect."

That's it. That's the best statement that I could come up with on such short notice. I hope they liked it (and understood it) and judging from the eager claps that they made after my little speech, it seemed so.

Enrique stood up from his seat, approached me with a handsome smile, and took my hand to kiss it.

"You are so beautiful, my Señorita," he spoke when he withdrew. "Come and sit with me."

He gestured to two chairs vacant. It was in the middle of the table.

I smiled at him and nodded. "Thank you, Enrique."

"My pleasure." He took my hand and guided me there like I was a fragile vase on his fingertips. It made me feel cared for; my nervousness consequently lessened.

"To Daniella," Vincent stated right after I sat. He raised his wine flute in the air and waited for the others to do the same.

And they did with smiles on their faces, except for the gloomy one in the center of the table. With a lazy grip on the glass handle, I could see Erik looking like he was in a silent tantrum.

He still eyed me (with dagger glares might I add) and because of that, it made me cognizant of my movements.

I raised my glass too and mouthed a thank you to each one of the members. Suri, who was sitting opposite me, clunk my glass.

"To my Club sister," she said and then drank the burgundy liquid to the bottom.

"To my Club sister," I did the same.

From where I sat, I was in between Enrique and Rohan. Suri seated next to Amano on her right while Vincent on her left. It was actually a good seating arrangement. I was silently thankful that I didn't have to sit right next to my *master*.

Our lunch went on with Sir Ian as our main server. Alec started the conversation when Enrique asked him how he turned me into what I look like now. They were all listening to him, Erik included, but for some reason, he suddenly stood up, took his tux off, and rounded the table towards me.

"Prez, what are you up to?" Rohan asked when he glanced behind me.

Erik ignored him and went on to place the tux in my shoulder. "You'll catch a cold," he whispered so close to my ear that it gave me goosebumps immediately.

I saw Alec, Suri and Vincent hide a laugh, Karl blushing furiously, Enrique in a surprised reaction, and Rohan in an amused smirk.

God, I can't believe Erik had just done this to me, but considering the facts, I think my plan was actually a success. Did I just unsettle him because of how I dressed?

"Th—thank you, President," I stammered a response.

And then I heard him snigger. It felt like it was the end of the world for me instantly. I adjusted the tux to cover my right shoulder, now feeling the real cold.

"That's very thoughtful of you, Prez," I heard Vincent say when Erik returned in his seat.

"Just making sure that all of my members are taken care of," he answered with a shining smile.

Shit, I'm dead. I'm really dead.

"Nice," I heard Alec remark. "I haven't been in the chateau for quite a long while now so it seems that I really missed the changes in here, including your apparent change, Mr. Svaneti."

Erik's smile turned neutral when he glanced at Alec. "Didn't I tell you not to call me that, Alec?" he said, grabbing his wine flute to smell on the content's sweet aroma.

He sure looks composed enough.

"Yeah, you did. Only about a million times," Alec grinned.

Svaneti. Svaneti... That's the name I heard earlier.

"Well, we should enjoy the hot food now before it turns cold," Rohan butted in, effectively taking me out of my thoughts.

"I believe we should," Vincent seconded. They exchanged stares, Erik included. I felt myself out of place again like I had many times when they make this kind of silent action.

There's really something going on with this club, the club members and the President, and I'm already in it to find out.

***

~ Erik ~

If Alec and Suri meant to tease me, I believe they have done quite a great job. I simply am fazed by their creation. Daniella, the moment she stepped inside the dining room, knocked the air off my lungs. She was stunning. I knew she already was but with her slim arms, graceful shoulders, and shapely back showing off her alabaster skin, it made my blood boil with possessiveness. Nobody should have the right to look at her like this but me. Only me.

I hated how my members ogled her, but they were as much as wonderstruck as I am, so I understood it, but to lessen my predicament, I used my coat to cover her.

Twenty minutes later, I am here now in a balcony connecting the dining room. I opted to come here just to rid myself of any company, just so that I can take a breather of my hurtling emotion. I wanted to pull Daniella out of here as soon as possible but with Suri and the others having a good time talking with her, I couldn't do it... *not* until my patience breaks.

"You seem too silent for my liking Prez," my solace was interrupted when a voice behind me said. With the tone of his voice, I knew already it was my ever-efficient Master of Disguise.

"Alec, so bold of you to speak that name in front of Daniella," I admonished him directly after the feat he did earlier. It was a surprise to me for him to mention that name, but luckily I was able to compose myself.

He leaned in the railing next to me and awarded me a smirk. "It's not like she knows your true identity. Why make a big fuss over it?"

"Nikolai Svaneti has been buried a long time ago. I don't want to keep digging that identity up. It only summons unsavory memories."

Yes, unsavory ones with blood and gore unimaginable. Memories that a bastard child like me would be hunted for the rest of my life.

"Yet here we are now formed as a club in order to keep a watchful eye on Iopata Bratva. How twisted is fate huh?" He smoothed a tangled part of his hair caused by a sudden gush of wind.

I have known this man since we were teenagers, back from the time when my existence wasn't acknowledged yet by my own father, the leader of the Bratva. I used to come to their family's shop in order to learn how to create tattoos and since we were about the same age, we became good friends until now. Of all the club members that I have, he knew my dark past well.

I remained silent and continued to bask on the mountainous scenery in front of us.

Alec then lit a stick of Marlboro red he took from his coat pocket and puffed out smoke that instantly irritated my nose.

For an ex-son of a mafia leader who uses cigarettes like it was a mechanical ventilator, it was odd that I hated the smell of it.

"By the way, you should stop by my salon tomorrow. The prosthetics I used in your neck should be renewed," he stated and then turned around to face the inside of the room.

"I'll go when I'm vacant," I told him whilst touching my right neck.

He puffed out smoke again much to my annoyance but luckily the wind was strong enough to clear it in seconds.

"I like this new aura of you by the way. It doesn't scream *dark* on me," he remarked. "You are finally showing your warm side huh? And to a woman whose picture you have been keeping in your office for a year now."

Shit. Even this fact about Daniella's picture he knows. I have retrieved this photo of her from their family's website business a year ago after we had our fateful encounter... after leaving her in the hospital half-dead.

"This is twisted fate Alec," I announced while my mind recollected the memories I had with Daniella when she took a bullet that was meant for me. "If I could, I wouldn't have wanted for her to be associated with me the second time, but—"

"You just can't let her go anymore once you found her again, yeah I know," he finished for me.

I fell silent in the end. Since he didn't need me to elaborate anymore, what use is my effort talking?

"Hmmm..." I heard him chuckle then. "I just took the words right out of your mouth huh?"

Shooting up a glare on his way, I couldn't help but say, "Shut up Alec."

He sighed and went on to puff smoke the third time. "You better act fast before your members start making a move on Daniella. Look at them now. They seem willing to fight with you over her."

I turned around and watched through the closed French doors what was happening inside. I saw Daniella and the others having a hearty laugh while still on the dining table. Her right hand was holding the dessert spoon while the other was clutching the collar of my tux.

"I am already on the move Alec. I already am," said I as I rested my eyes on her innocent face, secretly happy that she didn't take my tux off.

***

~ Daniella ~

Our lunch party was fun, so fun that we didn't realize it was already time to depart. Suri, Amano, and Karl excused themselves first because they had somewhere to go asap. Vincent, after giving me a kiss on the cheek, followed suit. He said that he had another party to attend in which he was already late. Enrique offered to accompany me to my room but then Alec grabbed his shoulder and dragged him out of my front towards the double doors.

I sighed after realizing I am left alone in the dining room, but wait, was I really?

Just then, my iPhone buzzed a message. I took it from the table and read its contents.

It was from Erik (which wasn't a surprise really) stating that he wanted me to return his tux with big letters, N-O-W.

I turned immediately after remembering my last sighting of him strolling towards the closed balcony half an hour ago.

My heart skipped a beat after discovering that he was still there, leaning on the railing and facing the blue sky.

With me still having the issue of skipping my maid duties, I knew that approaching him would be tricky. In my head, I was already seeing his deathlike-glare and his acidic mouth speaking some taunting words.

As I slowly strode towards him, I felt my hands cold and my knees trembling, but I willed myself to be strong since after all, I still looked like a Queen. I still had the ace on disquieting him.

I opened the French door, stood in the threshold for a long minute contemplating how I should interrupt his deep musing, but then he spoke in a rather cheerful way which definitely caught me off guard.

"You caught me in a good mood today, Daniella. Don't be afraid. Come. Stand here beside me." He didn't even glance on my way at all. I just saw his right hand tapping on the railing inviting me to advance.

And I did after a deep breath.

"Here's your coat," I said as I slipped it off my shoulders and handed it to him in one hand. I stared at his profile adored by the sun and from where I stood, I could see a definite curve of his lips.

"You can keep it if you want. Think of it as a gift from your master."

I blinked twice. "I certainly can't," I immediately replied, shaking my head. "I mean, this has no use to me after today."

He faced me and then glanced at the coat in my hand. "I thought you'd decline," he said. "Can you put it for me then?"

He lifted his arms a little hinting me to slide it in them.

I furrowed my brows and stood on guard. "You have hands, why not use it?"

He smirked and replied, "Because I want you to, Daniella."

Surprisingly, he didn't use the *slave* word. He didn't even look smug and just stood waiting for me with warmth on his face.

Feeling my belly fluttering, I didn't have any choice but to do as he requested. With a long sigh, I positioned myself on his back, slid the sleeves carefully in his arms, and adjusted the coat to position.

"Adjust the front collar too," he said, twisting his spine to face me.

I stepped back to open up our sudden closeness. Focusing my eyes on his collar while my hands worked them right, he then spoke with a ring of softness in his voice, "Have I already told you how beautiful you look today?"

My heart, if it managed to cool down earlier, somersaulted into tachycardia. My breath hitched but I was able to voice out a smooth, "No," after it.

"Then, I am telling it now. Daniella, you just take my breath away."

If another woman would have heard his words, her heart would have swelled immediately. In my case, it did, but I quickly stabbed it before it could expand some more.

Okay, that's it!

I stepped back, straightened my back, and eyed him suspiciously.

"Okay, cut the crap Erik," I grounded. "Earlier I could feel your vengeful aura. Where is that now? Don't try to hide it with your deceitful flowery words. I didn't clean your bathroom and I didn't fix your bed as what you have ordered this morning. I am quite sure you want to punish me for it."

He leaned on the railing again and then bested me with a wide grin; the warmth on his face now gone with the wind. "Why thank you for reminding me that, Sweet Rose. I actually forgot all about it."

What?! Did he really forget it? If that is true then I am digging my own grave!

I shot him a frown and instead of replying him, I remained silent in the end.

"Return to your room now and wait for me come evening. That's when you'll get your punishment." He stood upright and readied himself to walk out of the balcony but then I stopped him with a dare.

"Why not do it now? Why wait for tonight when you can just punish me now?" I courageously said, stiffening my shoulders and squaring at his face.

It was a wrong move, however.

Our conversation turned a hundred and eighty degrees when he ran both his hands through my arms and up to my neck. I felt a wave of delightful tingles on my skin then, much to my chagrin.

One hand then squeezed on my waist while the other kept on making circles on my chest down to my cleavage with a finger. For some reason, I couldn't stop him.

Shit, I can't breathe well with this!

"Because unfortunately Daniella, your sexy dress would be ruined," he stated with a drawl, eyeing me directly. "I can't do that. It would be a waste of its beauty."

Although I was blushing furiously, I still managed to give him a frown. For some reason, I feel...

"You sure care for the gown more than me," I stated without a thought, but wait, did I just actually say that? It sounded off. It sounded really off! It sounded like I was jealous of the dress!

I quickly shook my head whilst stepping back. I guided myself to the railing when I realized the rush of my blood into my cheeks made me feel lightheaded.

"Errr do you have an alias or something?" I hastened to spoke (in a squeaky voice), wanting to change the subject. "Svaneti I mean. I heard Alec mentioned that name during our ride going here and earlier when we were dining."

I looked at him expecting a playful grin, but his face turned gloomy as if he was remembering something that was unpleasant. The roguish face that he always gives me was gone.

"Daniella, it is best that you should forget about that surname," he spoke in a monotone.

"Ahh, so that is a surname," I tried to lighten the mood with a giggle. "Then, what's the first name, Erik?"

I saw a muscle in his jaw tense, followed by his hands fisting. "Woman, you are testing my patience. Thread on further and you will suffer the consequences."

In a panic, I raised my hands in surrender. "Cool, cool. Not a problem at all." I turned around to retreat, but then he clamped a hand on my wrist and asked, "Where do you think you're going?"

"I'm—I'm off to my room," I stuttered. "You said so remember?"

For a moment, I saw in his eyes a battle of emotions I still couldn't understand. He shifted them like how the weighting scale shifts from winning to losing and vice versa. I am no psychologist but I feel that it was tormenting him.

On this day alone, he had shown me three sides of him that were unique in its own way; the playful, dark, and warm sides. I don't know if he was just acting or he had a serious multiple personality disorder but it makes me wonder genuinely that there is more to this man than meets the eye.

With a heavy, *heavy* drag of breath, he finally released my wrist.

"Go," he firmly stated, and I, trying to keep my heart from quickly beating to death, walked out of the balcony away from him.

Chapter 19 - A Woman's Art Of War

~ Daniella ~

"Move your body."

"Yes, that's it."

"Up, down, straight!"

"Again!"

"Up, down, straight!"

"Again!"

"Again!"

For about forty minutes, these words were the ones that Erik kept on repeating as I attacked the red punching bag into oblivion... or at least the little effect that it gets from my lady knuckles. This is the reason why they are sore right now and this is the reason why I could feel the burn in my arms and thighs.

Erik said to have a fifteen-minute break so I used this chance to sit on the gym bench, out of breath with my tank top soaking wet with sweat. I drank as much water as I could to feel refreshed while I watched his back muscles flexing under the sleeveless shirt as he delivered powerful blows on the life-size dummy some distance away from me. He didn't even mind taking a break himself.

I wasn't drooling really, but I admired how his physique came to be. It made me remember how he looked like shirtless standing in the bathroom door a few days back when—

Okay, shut the memory away! my thoughts immediately commanded so I shook my head.

Back to the facts, this is just my first kickboxing session together with him. He said that learning how to punch is the easiest of them all so he made me do some rounds on the cylinder bag, but I believe I am having a hard time with it; a really hard time since he was a damn unmerciful trainer.

After staying in my room the whole afternoon and after eating dinner, he called me up to meet me in the basement exclusive club gym. I went there thinking that I'll watch him kick someone's ass, but it seems it wasn't the case. I am the one who is being kicked at metaphorically with his stern way of teaching me.

I don't even know why I agreed to it. Maybe because he initially said that it is in order for me to learn how to defend myself, but as minutes ticked by, I began to think that this is his form of punishment for my transgression this morning.

"Break's done," he paused from hitting the poor thing to death and then went back to the punching bag. "Come Daniella. Don't waste time." He held the bag into place with both arms.

I released a sigh, stood up, and left the bottle and the towel on the bench. Mr. Ian was quick to collect them after me.

"Don't you get tired? You didn't even take advantage of the break you provided," I complained.

Once I did my punching stance, he answered, "I don't get tired."

"Hmf, that's too airy of you," I replied. *Did a tornado just passed by or what?*

From readying himself of my blows, he suddenly straightened and eyed me smugly. "I have great stamina, Daniella. I was brought up this way and I adapt to it quite perfectly."

"Hmm, there's no surprise in that. You like per-fec-tion!" I hit the bag continuously in time with the syllables. They weren't powerful really, but it was enough to swing the cylinder towards him. He caught it just in time before it hit his face.

Tsk. It would have been comedic to see that.

"Exactly," he barked, a brow lifted up briefly. "Now keep your shoulders straight. Don't slump forward. Widen your stance and punch stronger!"

I rolled my eyes and released an exasperated sigh. "Can you remind me of the reason why I am doing this again?"

"For your own good," he answered promptly, displaying no enthusiasm.

I punched again, with greater force this time. He held the cylinder in place. The fact that the muscles in his arms were flexing didn't seem to faze me, well... not yet.

"Hmf, that's debatable," I retorted.

"For you to be fit and healthy," he added.

I punched the cylinder hard. "I *am* fit and healthy!" Scrunching up my nose, I posed like a model in a fashion show. I don't know, either he is blind or his definition of *fit* comes with being plump as what he told me in the restaurant days ago with Enrique and Vincent.

Our gazes locked. He released a long sigh whilst regarding me with depth. "For your...safety Daniella."

"Oh really?" I raised a brow. "Are you sure about that because I am quite certain this is your form of punishment to me." I touched the solid bag that probably weighed five times heavier than my weight and pushed it towards him. I aimed to hit his face again but failed, mentally hitting myself for the defeat.

"And besides, I am no damsel-in-distress. I can take care of myself just fine, thank you very much!"

Fed up, I turned heels planning to leave but I felt a grip on my right wrist then. "Why do you keep on challenging me, Daniella?" I heard him ask before he twisted my arm behind me.

"Shit! Erik!" I cried, wincing a little when the pain of my rotated elbow joints presented itself.

I felt his warm breath fan my earlobe. I felt his chest pressing against my back. I felt his left hand snake it's way into my abdomen. In response to these, my heartbeat quickened its pace.

What is he doing? my thoughts asked. The answer to it came almost instantly.

"Erik!" I shouted when he brought me down the rubber mat. My arms, which had sprung free in the process, shot to block his face from advancing, but he quickly seized and brought them over my head. He eased himself on top me and I was left lying under him with my body secured in between his long legs.

"Erik, what are you doing?!" I glared at him.

Leaning in, he inhaled deeply near my forehead and I can dearly bet my virginity that what he smelt was my workout body odor. Not sexy at all, but who says I want to be sexy *for* him?

"You're right, this is exactly my way of punishing you," he affirmed, face serious. No hint of mischief at all.

"I know! I know! I get it!" I yelled. "Now get off me!"

We met eye-to-eye; mine in panic while his smoldering with an emotion I had always seen these past few days but failed to understand.

"Erik, please get off me!"

My plea was ignored as he continued his ministrations on me. This time one hand was holding both of my wrists while the other started to touch my waist. He slid my tank top halfway up my stomach and paused. I felt my belly flip in response.

"You have been a naughty slave since this morning, Daniella," he narrowed his eyes at me. "First you didn't do what I commanded you to do. Then second, you deliberately wore a revealing gown when you knew already every man in this club, *including me*, would ogle you."

"The gown was not my idea! It was Suri who picked it for me!" I wiggled myself to set free but failed again.

I know... I have been quite a train wreck of failures since this morning and all because of this man.

Erik gave me a brief smirk. "I know that it must have been the case, but still, you have the power to refuse. Didn't the aphrodisiac you drank last night wore out? It seems you are still emitting your sexual hormones up until now Daniella."

He continued to drag up my clothing, collecting it just below the wire of my brassiere. Heck, if he had pulled it up to my neck, I would have called it a strike. He was way pushing the boundaries of our master-to-servant relationship.

"Erik, stop!" I pleaded on deaf ears. Looking at him, I found that his focus was on the task he was doing.

As my lungs hauled deep breaths, his fingertips grazed my skin; my bellybutton specifically and the part where my surgical scar lay which I intentionally got a blue rose tattoo to cover with. He traced its raised edges; his expression oddly in deep turmoil. Maybe he had seen my sufferings there? Maybe he had felt my struggle against pain through it? I have no idea, although I wished I knew. I was unable to care much of it however for at this moment his touch kept the wiring of my brain in overdrive. I squeezed my eyes shut, unable to take the ticklish feeling anymore.

"Erik, please stop..." I whimpered.

But my eyes widely opened when I felt his soft lips kiss the scar and then followed by his moist tongue tracing it. What possessed him to do it, I don't know, but goddammit his mouth was gentle, hot, and altogether a turn on. *Maybe he was right. Maybe the aphrodisiac effects still lingered on me.*

When I thought he was already done, I only yelped and shot a glare on him when I felt his tongue skate across my tummy to my navel. I wriggled again and twisted my spine but he subdued me by pressing a forearm on my thighs.

"President, you will stop this at once!" I shouted, panic and anger mixed in along with the fact that I was seriously battling an arousal from coming to the surface.

He only answered me through playful bites and a sucking motion in that area. A sharp moan escaped from my lips then.

I. Am. So. Ticklish. In. There. Period.

Luckily, he didn't advance his assault for he withdrew after that.

"Your sweat tastes sweet, Daniella," he crooned whilst kneeling before me.

I immediately set myself up, towering above him, and out of reflex, my right hand torpedoed towards the nearest cheek it could find.

“Sweet. My. Ass!” I shouted.

Before it contacted Erik’s face, however, he captured my arm like a handcuff. He used it to pull me towards him. His free hand grabbed a mass of my ponytailed hair and pushed my face to collide with his own after he said these two vague words, “Time’s up.”

I almost...*almost* stumbled over because of the quickness of the events, but his strong arm held me in place. Imagine me stooping low while he was kneeling, our faces connected whilst we shared one unexpected heady kiss.

I fought, damn I did, using my hands to push his face away, but he was quick to suppress them by putting me back on the rubber floor.

Shit.

Our lips never disconnected during the process. Like a frightened deer caught in the headlights, I made a move to escape by pushing his chest. Erik wasn’t a gentleman however for he used his weight to press me down and just like that, I was rendered immobile. His hands kept my head in place.

His warm breath touched the bridge of my nose and my cheek. I tried to keep my mouth shut but he pried it open with his tongue. As he slid the wet muscle inside, I moaned...yeah, *moaned* in protest.

My God, I can’t believe that he is kissing me! Erik Romano Fancii, the President of the Fancy Pants Club, a man whose heart is made of stone, is kissing me. Kissing me like he was branding every fiber of my being!

But punishing, bruising, forceful or any other synonyms you could find in a dictionary, that’s what his kiss was. That’s what his initial kiss felt like until he slowed and moved like he was kneading a special bread or making a fragile vase. His hold on my face loosened a bit; fingers turn relaxed.

With my palms pressed against his chest, I could feel his heart beating as he had just been in a marathon race. It was erratic. It was arrhythmic. It was trying to burst out of his rib cage. *Like mine.*

Languidly, his lips explored my own. No woman could possibly stay still with that, me included. So in the craziest of crazies, I decided to reciprocate his kisses... decided to dip my tongue inside his mouth.

But... he abruptly withdrew before I could fucking make it happen.

I fell dumbfounded.

"Now, you know you can't protect yourself against a man's assault woman." He stood up and eyed me coldly. Half lying in the rubber mat, I was flushed all over and I bet my face showed different kinds of red, but he didn't look bothered with it at all.

"You are a damsel-in-distress as long as you are with me, so do as I say," he stressed. "Learn. Know how to defend yourself. Fight back."

My head thudded in confusion... confusion on what to feel. Anger? Embarrassment? Hopelessness? Or arousal?

The last one I quickly scratched out. I have suppressed it the moment he stood away from me.

"Move your feet under you. You have my leave to go."

He turned around and left without helping me up.

Bastard.

With a forceful expel of air to end my ragged breathing, I scrambled to my feet, enlightened by his words. Boring a murderous look on his back as he punched the dummy again, an idea popped out of my head.

This chateau is a battleground and Erik is my enemy. If he is open to war with me then so be it.

"The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy not with fighting—" I mumbled to myself but Erik seemed to hear it.

"What are you blabbering about Daniella?" he asked although he wasn't looking at me.

I pressed my lips firmly and narrowed my eyes. Then, in long strides, I attacked him from behind.

"Erik," I softly called.

"What?" he snapped and turned around.

"—but with a kiss."

I quickly pulled his head down and without over-analyzing it, clashed my lips against his.

I knew he was taken aback. I knew he was caught off-guard, so because of that, I felt pleased, satisfied, making a victory grin at the back of my head. *This is what you get for toying with me President!*

I am not a pro with kissing. Heck, I even just received my first kiss minutes ago, but in a bold, *bold* move, I thrust my tongue inside his mouth. I sparred with his unmoving tongue, discovered the softness of his palate, tasted him all the while I grabbed a good amount of his hair in my fingers.

It seemed that his initial shock wore off for I suddenly felt his hand eased in the small of my back, pressing me closer to him.

Before he could respond to my kisses though, I wrenched myself free.

Eyes like saucers met mine when I looked at him. Confusion and a mixture of desire were cemented on his face.

“Fight back, that’s what you said,” I announced dryly. “Good night, Erik.” I smirked at him before I made my way out of the gym… before he could order me to stay.

Just when I stepped inside the private elevator, I heard one powerful punch and the sound of metal chain clanking. Before the door closed, I saw the red punching bag lying on the floor with Erik next to it, looking at me with dark, predator-like eyes.

Chapter 20 - When Lips Do the Talking

~ Erik ~

“Time’s up.”

That’s what I said to myself vocally before I kissed Daniella.

True, time is already up on my part. It has reached to zero with me willingly surrendering my self-imposed shackles.

I am done with my charade. I am through with lying to myself that Daniella meant nothing to me when in truth she is everything in my dark-clouded life.

Countless times I am tormented by this bind I have placed upon myself.

For the better... that’s what I always chant in my head, but it turned out to be just my fucked up alibi.

I truly yearned for her, and so after craving her lips for what seemed like an eternity after kissing her while sleeping, I have finally tasted it again. Giving her a sample in her tummy wasn’t enough.

But even with my shackles released, I still had a residual of doubt, especially when she didn’t reciprocate my kisses. With the way I was rudely treating her, I thought she hated what I did, but guess I was wrong...

Now, caught by surprise of what she did to me, I stood staring directly at her as the elevator door closed.

Between running and staying on the spot, I chose the former.

I ran. Ran like a lovesick fool, catching the conveyor before it fully closed.

A little bit of pain lanced through my digits but that didn’t divert my attention on Daniella who looked like a frightened mouse. Her confident face seconds ago disappeared.

Brought by my flaming desire that she ignited by her audacity, I charged towards her, pushed her against the mirrored wall, and fastened a hand on her waist.

“Erik!” she squeaked just before our lips molded once again.

If there’s anything to describe what I feel now, it would be hunger. Hunger for this woman.

I know my kiss would be bruising her lips but it didn’t matter anymore. All I ever desired now was to taste more of her. I am a greedy man anyway. Greedy for her.

Putting my hand on her head, I was able to secure our position. I angled my face to the side to gain more access and to delve my tongue deeper into her mouth. She released a soft moan, mixing it with the elevator jazz beats as we rose up the floor. It was music in my ears.

Her hands, from being frozen in the sides, moved to touch my jaw. I honestly thought she'd push my head away, but she didn't. She surprisingly responded to my kiss, caressing my tongue in hot, slow strokes as did I.

My heart fell in jubilee. Immensely.

I didn't need words to convey that I wanted her. She on the other hand didn't need to whisper her submission to me. Our actions were enough. So, so enough.

But then the elevator dinged, hinting new passengers to come.

Frantically, we pulled ourselves free and stood an arms-length away from each other a little out of breath. I was very, very conscious of her; her flushed cheeks, her shifty eyes, her swollen lips, and the way she placed a hand to cover them.

When the door opened, three persons revealed themselves. Rohan, Karl, and Vincent.

Judging from Rohan's smirk on my way, it was mildly suggestive that he had an idea of what had transpired between me and Daniella inside this blasted elevator.

Judging from Vincent's slight frown, it was safe to say that he was unhappy with whatever thought he had in his mind.

When they entered, it was Vincent who inserted himself in between me and Daniella. Rohan stood next to me taking in much of the space on my right, while Karl shyly stood next to Daniella, blushing in reaction when she awarded him a tight-lipped smile.

"What a nice surprise. We are supposed to go to the gym to see you, Prez, " Rohan spoke first right after the door closed. He looked at me playfully before pressing the fourth floor button.

"I am here now, what is it that you want?" I said, acting cool and composed, but deep inside, my heartbeat was still loudly drumming and I was in heat. No amount of high-temp air conditioner could douse it.

"Karl here has something to discuss with you. Very important, " Vincent highlighted the word, shifting his eyes to the left corner where Daniella was silently lowering her head.

This subtle gesture was enough for me to know that this very important discussion had something to do with our mission.

"I see, " I cleared my throat. "Then let's go to the...club meeting room."

“Of course, ” it was Vincent who said that but the three of them nodded in unison.

“Hi Daniella, ” Rohan suddenly cut in, sounding in his cheerful voice.

She raised her head up and waved briefly at him. “Oh, hi Rohan.” She released a bright smile and then nodded on the other two. “Vincent. Karl.”

They both gave her their own handsome smiles.

“How’s your training with the President? Was everything in order?” Rohan asked, not at all afraid of questioning her even if I was present.

“Did you have any difficulty?” Vincent added abruptly, face contorted with worry.

“Is Prez here a passionate trainer?” Rohan recaptured her attention.

She, in haste, went to look at them with eyes wide.

“Uh, y-yes, yes, ” she stammered. “He is.” And then her eyes fell on me briefly. I felt the suddenness of renewed heat rush over me.

Shit. If these men weren’t here, I would have ravished her again.

“I have just started learning different styles of punches. They are good stuff, ” she explained.

“I hope it is worth a knock-out then, ” Rohan remarked, eyeing me with suspicion.

“It is, ” I supplied to him. My gaze fell back on Daniella where we instantly have our own set of understanding what the word knock-out meant.

“Good for you Prez, ” butted Vincent appearing too casual for my liking.

I played along instead and gave him a refreshed smile. “Why thank you, Mr. VP.”

“By the way Prez, what’s that oily thing in the corner of your lips?” Karl, in his innocent self, asked suddenly. He looked so curious, staring at my mouth without blinking. It was not only him though, Vincent and Rohan were too.

“Lip balm, ” I replied quickly, my heartbeat leaped altogether when I trained my eyes on Daniella’s lips that had a pink dull shimmer.

‘Interesting, ’ I heard Rohan mumble to himself, while Vincent audibly cleared his throat.

We had a short uncomfortable silence before the elevator dinged again, telling us that we have reached the fourth floor.

“Uhm, I will go before you guys, ” Daniella announced looking at all of the occupants except me.

“Go ahead Daniella, ” Vincent answered for all of us.

She nodded then exited the elevator with her arms tightly bound together against her chest.

Once she wasn’t in sight, Rohan asked me with his eyes narrowed, “Now, what did you do this time Prez?”

I smirked at him and answered, “Nothing, ” before stepping out first with a commanding stride.

***

~ Daniella ~

If there is anything I expect from Erik, it would be his text or call, but as the night got older I didn’t receive one message or a miscall from him (not that I was actually waiting), but I found it odd especially after what happened to us.

Knowing him, I am sure he wouldn’t apologize for taking my first kiss without my consent, but there were some instances in the past few days that he slipped and became repentant, so I had some hope to hold onto.

In the end, I had a sleepless night after working my brains out. Series of flashbacks kept popping in my head especially the way that he held me in his arms and the way his mouth molded with mine. The way his soft lips sent me in a feverish state and the way his tongue slid brazenly inside that ultimately pooled desire into my belly.

Both of those events - in the gym and inside the elevator - I could feel his desire on me, palpable through his caress. It astonished me greatly for I thought that an aloof man like him knew nothing of gentleness and passion.

Yet, he potently showered me that and the hickey below my navel was an undeniable evidence of it.

Gone was my confident self. Gone was my dislike of him. What replaced was my willingness to respond to him and with the way it was going, I would have probably surrendered my whole self, virginity be damned.

Vincent, Rohan, and Karl’s interruption had me breathing in relief in the end. It made me realize that what took place was just us in battle, fighting to show who’s the victor. Nothing more... nothing less.

The next day, Erik didn’t make his presence known through the phone, and neither did he check on me in my room. Since I had the freedom to do as I wanted and as a good diversion, I decided to head out and toured the chateau on my own. Suri texted come lunch telling that she wanted to dine with me in the chateau’s five-star restaurant, ‘The Mona Lisa, ’ on the first floor.

We had a great time together once there, eating and talking about our likes and dislikes and other girly things.

“What’s your favorite color Daniella?” she asked after I answered her my favorite snack spread which was TJ’s Speculoos cookie butter.

“Green. Yours?” I replied whilst forking my lettuce.

“Guess it, ” she dared, “It’s quite pretty obvious, you know, ” and shoved a silky lock behind her ear.

I gave her a cheeky grin and said, “Pink.”

“Exactly, ” she nodded, pleased. “How about your favorite flower? And your choice of music?”

“Amaryllis. I love how pure the white petals are and its heavenly scent. When it comes to music, I don’t really have a favorite. Just as long as the lyrics and the beat are good that’s enough for me, but I enjoy listening to songs played by the violin and piano as it had been what I was exposed to over and over again during my childhood years. You know, business-related.”

She nodded again. “Yeah, I can see. Vincent would probably be happy to hear this piece of information.”

I dared not think too much about what she just said about Vincent, but clasped my hands I did when I remembered something. “Oh, right! Since you mentioned him, I gotta say, he is one superb musician Suri.”

“Yes, he is, ” she affirmed. Her voice sounded jovial, but there was a hint of sadness in her eyes when she added, “But he doesn’t play much on public. It is his...personal choice.”

Then, she drank her fruit punch to probably clear her throat.

“That’s why I was shocked when I heard from Rohan that he actually played in Ms. McKenzie’s wedding reception that you organized. But... I guess it was to be expected since Prez pleaded him to do it.”

“Wait, what?” My jaw dropped and my crouton literally fell on my plate. “You mean to say that the President was the one who asked Vincent to play?”

“Yes, didn’t you know?” she blinked her eyes.

“N-no...” was my breathy answer. Never. Never have I expected that Erik would do that for me. He was all rude at that time yet he actually pleaded on my account? Why?

“Shoot, me and my good mouth, ” I heard Suri complain to herself whilst putting a hand on her forehead. It reminded me right then and there about how they were secretive of certain information about the club and the members in general.

“Listen, ” I started anxiously, “You-you guys don’t really need to keep secrets from me.” I placed a hand in my opposite shoulder as if to console myself. “I know I am still new in the club, but you can trust me with anything.”

She sighed and gave me a lopsided smile. “Oh, Dani. I’m sorry we made you feel left out.” Her hand stretched across the table and opened her palm for me to hold. I did and felt the warmth of it, just like how warm her smile was.

“It’s okay, ” I managed to say, dipping my eyes on my half-finished plate.

“I am not supposed to say this, but just think that what we keep from you is for your own good okay? There are a lot of things that can’t be properly explained through words Dani. It is that complicated.”

My sadness was lifted at least because of this. “I understand, ” I gave her a brief genuine smile. “Don’t worry. I will just be patient until then.”

“Thank you, Dani, ” her shoulders relaxed as if a weight had been taken out from her back. Then, her eyes beamed with mirth and pulled my hand up. “Hey, how about we go shopping now? Let’s drown ourselves with shoes, bags, and gowns!”

I released a slight giggle. “Aren’t you supposed to be with Amano now?”

“Uh, no, ” she sank back in her seat and shifted her eyes on the floor. “He is...he is with the others today.”

“Where are they anyway?” I asked, sincerely wanting to know their whereabouts are since so far, starting this morning, I haven’t seen at least one of them (namely the President).

“They are...they are not in Beverly Hills right now Dani, that’s all that I can tell you since it is classified information. I’m really sorry.” She pressed her palms together and stared at me apologetically.

I knew it, this information is restricted, but I have a feeling that it connects to the one they were talking about in the elevator last night.

“Okay, not a problem at all, ” I answered her as sympathetic as I could. I may still be disappointed with this classified information thingy but I can understand her decision to zip her mouth.

“Let’s go then?” she managed to say once I beamed her a smile.

“Yes, yes sure.” I returned to finish my plate and juice before we headed out.

Together with her, I learned a lot about the club rules and the fanciness of it. This was the content of most of our conversation in the remaining afternoon while doing our shopping. When nightfall

came, I took my dinner with her in the club dining room. Mr. Ian was there with us who took the liberty of telling me that I had a kickboxing session to attend to with my personal trainer. Apparently, Erik had hired a female kickboxing champion to train me.

I didn't care to know the reason behind it though. All I thought was that I am lucky to be spared by another awkward training with him.

'It is for the best, ' I told to myself hundreds of times that evening while punching on the dummy he used last night.

After my fruitful session with Armelia (my trainer), I headed straight to my bedroom to rest. I had hoped to have a peaceful sleep this time, but thoughts of Erik and his kiss flashed in my mind again and again and this persisted for a very long time....

***

'Do keep my room clean, Daniella.'

Was Erik's first message to me after three weeks had passed. I repeat, three fucking weeks.

A party will be held this evening in the chateau, of course, celebrated by a wealthy politician for his daughter's debut in society. Suri and I were invited as special guests. Because almost all of the members are absent, especially the President and his Vice, we were the ones who had to sit in for them. In effect with these, we were also left to manage the chateau. I was able to stamp a good name for myself in the Club through this and I feel happy and proud of it.

All dolled up in a metallic green cocktail dress, I was ready to leave my bedroom when Erik's text message interrupted me. Pissed off by the fact that he didn't care to call or text me during the passing days, I pressed my lips firmly and typed my reply with heavy fingers.

'That's all you want to say?'

He immediately replied seconds later.

'Yes.'

The hell is wrong with him? I huffed and furrowed my brows.

'Where are you, Mas-ter?'

I typed back, adding mockery in his title.

'Somewhere you don't need to know.'

And there it goes again. The classified information thingy.

I was beginning to explode with it since this is the usual alibi Suri, Alec, and Mr. Ian kept on telling me the whole fucking three weeks.

'When are you coming back?'

I typed in nonchalantly, never thinking of whatever idea would come in his head, but he only replied with this:

'Don't know.'

What an insensitive bastard.

'Is our contract still binding? Just so you know, I won't allow you to add the days of my services just because you are not in the chateau.'

I sat on the chaise lounge in my receiving room and waited for his reply, which he did but had me gaping in shock.

'I could always tell you where I kept your ring so that you can go back to New York.'

I typed a yes hurriedly but deleted it instead after staring at the word for an unbearable second. If his idea of a joke is this, then I would probably give him a good sermon when he returns, but if he really meant what he just said, then I am in for a lucky day. Our contract would be void. I don't have to work for him for the next five months and I won't have to bear his lofty attitude every single day. But somehow... a part of me didn't like this easy way out. Part of me didn't like to leave the chateau yet.

'You really want to do that? Because I would take the challenge.'

I asked him after thinking about it thoroughly. He replied after I counted to three minutes with a message that spoke of a much deeper meaning.

'Do you not want to see me again?'

The proud smirk that I had been wearing for a long time disappeared. Since he wasn't in my front, I couldn't tell if he was just jesting with me or he was really sincere with this question. Either way, I thought that a safe reply would be better than giving him a yes or no.

'I refuse to answer that question, Erik.'

Was my reply instead.

'Just wait for me. I'll finish killing all these pests as quickly as I could.'

Pests? What does he mean by pests I wonder?

'I am not an obedient servant you know.'

I sent it almost immediately. He replied not a second past.

'I know.'

Taking a deep breath to calm my nerves, I decided not to reply anymore. Since it was already ten minutes past six, I stood up and went towards the main door. Before I twisted the knob, however, I noticed my cellphone vibrate again.

'Daniella?'

For some reason, I imagined him rolling out my name softly...tenderly.

'What?'

I replied, controlling the goosebumps that had threatened to manifest in my arms.

'I'm imagining our kiss right now.'

Shit. Of all things, why that?!

It is good that he's not around; otherwise, he would have seen me blush furiously.

'You mean your sexual assault on your maid?'

I corrected. I leaned against the door and raised a brow. After a few moments, he replied again with words that chilled me because it was true.

'I don't consider it an assault when you yourself was open to it.'

'.....'

'Don't give me ellipses Daniella. Say something.'

I huffed and closed my eyes after I pressed the send button.

'Kissing was never on my maid contract.'

I pointed out.

'It is.'

Was his short but concise reply.

'You are funny...AND blind.'

If he was standing in my front, he would have seen the sarcasm in my face. If I recall correctly, the word kiss was never written on the contract that I signed but defiled with a big X mark.

'I did say that you should please me. Kissing was a good way to do it.'

Came his reply.

'Stop toying with me, Erik.'

I warned. If he keeps on advancing, my heart won't be able to take the damage.

I jerked my spine straight when my phone buzzed with a call that came from him of course, but I chose not to answer it being a confused coward that I am at the moment. His call persisted for about five times until he decided to send me another text message.

'Did you think that the reason why I kissed you back in the gym was just because I was toying with you?'

I hauled a deep breath and typed a reasonable reply.

'Yes. It was your challenge and I accepted it.'

'How can you explain what happened to us in the elevator then?'

My mouth dropped the second time. I can't believe we are having this conversation through the phone! And after three weeks had passed!

'Just the heat of the moment.'

I replied easily, but if I were to vocally express this in front of him, I would have stammered a hundred times.

'Oh really?'

'Yes, really.'

'Wait 'til I get back.....'

I didn't reply anymore. My heart was thumping so loudly, I thought it would almost burst out of my chest.

Had I just provoked him? I hope I didn't but judging from his last text message and the many ellipses accompanying it, it was a threat and a promise of pleasure all at the same time. I shuddered. I really shuddered.

After two deep calming breaths, I tucked in my phone inside my matching green purse. I believe I am already late now, so I chose to push Erik's words at the back of my head and focused more on my Club's responsibility. I twisted the knob open with renewed determination but then I was left speechless when I saw the man in my front.

"Good evening, my beautiful rose. May I be your escort for this evening?"

Chapter 21 - Keeping Up With Shakespeare

~ Vincent ~

“Vincent! Hey!” Daniella exclaimed the moment she realized it was I. With her surprised reaction, it didn’t take me long to realize that she was in disbelief.

I couldn’t blame her really. Returning to the chateau this early in the middle of our mission was unexpected. Circumstances had me deciding to come back here leaving the others to finish the task, most especially Erik since this mission had something to do with Iopata’s Cloud Blue shipment - his old man’s illegal trails.

Of course, Erik didn’t like me returning here. If he could put up a tantrum, he would have done so long ago and I tell you, his definition of tantrum meant putting a bullet in a man’s head. But since we are in the same coterie and I am his friend, he couldn’t do it other than giving me a warning glare to stay away from Daniella.

I knew that something was up between these two since they returned from Rohan’s session. Unfortunately, the guru didn’t give me the juicy details so I was left pondering on my own. I am sure of one thing though, that Erik’s concrete moves on Daniella have already begun.

I guess the fire has already been lit.

Daniella beamed a smile on me just as I took her hand and kissed the back of it.

“You look stunning in green, Daniella, ” I remarked.

“Thank you for the compliment, Vincent.” She shyly looked away whilst showing the beginnings of a blush.

“Let’s go?”

“S-sure.”

Opening my elbow a bit, she looped an arm around with tense shoulders. I didn’t mind it when we started into the hallway but when she remained oddly silent, I decided to ask: “You look like you have seen a ghost, Daniella. Please relax.”

She stifled a laugh then. “I’m sorry. I am just surprised that you are here.”

“Hmm…” I released a throaty grumble. “Were you expecting someone else?” I knew that she is and who this man is particularly but I tested her by asking instead.

“Ah no, no.” She blinked rapidly, looking down on the floor. “I am not expecting anyone. Well, other than Suri and Mr. Ian, but that’s beside the point. Why are you here anyway? I thought you are in some kind of classified work in who-knows-where?”

I raised an eyebrow, amused by the straightness of her answer.

“Oh, you noticed the secretiveness of the club huh?” I said as we entered the elevator.

“I’ve noticed quite enough since I became a member, ” I heard her answer as I pushed the second floor button.

When I returned to her side, I gave her a wink. “What an observant woman you are.”

She smirked at me in response. “So I’ve been told.”

We were silent for a while just as the elevator started to descend down. Thinking about her earlier question, I suppose I needed to give her a good, reasonable answer.

“To tell you the truth, ” I started after a heavy sigh. She looked up at me and waited patiently. “My presence in my classified work, as what you’ve put it, is not needed anymore. I prefer to return in the chateau and help you guys with the activities while Prez is absent.”

Although Iopata men are better off dead, I have sworn off killing for personal reasons, so I chose not to get involved with the gory activities as much as possible.

“That’s so thoughtful of you, Vincent, ” she awarded me an understanding smile. “But hey, I know that it is restricted information but would you mind if I ask where the others are?”

Immediately my thoughts fell on Erik.

“You care that much with him huh?” This time, it was me who smirked.

“Come again?” She gave me a confused face. I don’t know if she was just acting or she was really clueless of what her words meant.

“Nothing, ” I answered quickly as I shook my head. “Bosnia. Erik and the others are in Bosnia right now, Daniella.”

The elevator dinged and opened. The whole time we managed our way towards the second-largest function room where the party was held, I didn’t hear one sound from her other than an audible gasp before we stepped outside the elevator.

“You are silent, why? That didn’t surprise you at all?” I asked genuinely curious.

“It did actually, but I don’t see the point of asking further questions when I know you won’t divulge them anyway.”

“Hmf, wise woman.” I squeezed her arm.

“So I’ve been told. Again.” She looked at me proudly.

“Why not stop this conversation about secrets and classified info, Daniella? Let’s just enjoy this party. What’s the name of the celebrant again?” I asked.

“Irisha Mitchell, ” she answered immediately. “Daughter of a politician.”

I was impressed. “Hmm... I see that you are doing your homework well.”

She gave me a pleased grin. “I have to at least show the guests that I am worthy of being called a Fancy Pants Club member, Mr. VP.”

“And you are, even if you do not try at all. You’re a natural Daniella.” I gave her another wink.

She smiled silently and drew her gaze on the double doors ahead of us. A male retainer was waiting for us to enter, preparing himself to open the doors.

Before we could proceed though, I paused and nudged at her.

“By the way, Suri can’t join us. She tells me to give you a heads up, ” I informed.

Daniella’s brows lifted and asked me directly, “Why?”

I shyly ran my fingers on my gelled slick-back hair - a style that best suited my black Armani suit and glanced at her way. “She needs to...type a report in Karl’s office, ” I replied.

Still, I had to put some degree of confidentiality. I wouldn’t want her to worry about Suri when she finds out that her pink-haired friend is having withdrawal symptoms because of Amano’s absence.

“Oh, I see.” She bent her head down as if contemplating something.

“You’re probably thinking that it is one of those secret information we have right?”

“No, I’m actually thinking that she is having a hard time coping up with Amano’s absence. But your suggestion is not far from my second reason.”

Wow, she hits right on spot.

“How about you? Are you coping up just fine?” I queried, unable to restrain myself. I had to know to what extent Erik had touched her heart.

“What is there to cope up Vincent?” But she answered just as nonchalantly as many other times. I mentally shook my head. This woman. Could it be that she hasn’t had a boyfriend before? Or maybe she is just oblivious of Erik’s specific attention on her?

“The absence of a particular someone perhaps?” I stared at her without blinking. For a moment, I saw her eyes shift uncomfortably but then recovered as if the tension wasn’t there.

“I believe it is time for us to go inside Vincent, ” she abruptly announced.

Ah, what a master subject changer. I grinned at her.

“Then, let’s enter and show our guests the fancy side of the club, ” I informed and then signaled the retainer to open the double doors.

“Yes, I believe we shall, ” I heard her whisper once the spotlights illuminated us directly from the ceiling.

***

With a champagne glass on my right hand, I was left on my own to muse about whilst Daniella stood with the other maidens in the party at the wide dance floor. Earlier, the host called all of them to do a traditional coming-of-age rite where they get to hold a white lotus candle and surround the celebrant. She was included in the group, so I am on my own as of the moment. However, a familiar elderly voice broke my focus on Daniella when he grabbed a chair and sat next to me.

“For a new member, she’s a fine woman Mr. Altair, ” Senator Mitchell remarked and when I glanced, I saw him make a thin smile. “It’s not my business to say this but you too look perfect together.”

With graying hair and reading glasses, a neat haircut, and wearing a white tuxedo, he didn’t look much of a Cupid at all but his words stung me for a split second.

“Really now?” My brow rose as my line of sight caught Daniella again who was closing her eyes and humming a song led by the host.

“I am not kissing your ass at all. What I say is true, ” he added. His gaze fell on her way and even though the lights were dim, I saw a clear pleased expression.

“Then, I believe it is my lucky night tonight, ” I commented with a happy tone. “I don’t get to escort that lady all by myself you know.”

“Because of the other members?” the senator queried.

Erik’s face popped out of my thoughts immediately.

“Hmm... I’d like to think of it that way, Senator Mitchell, ” I announced.

“You speak in riddles, Mr. Altair. You know you can always tell me the truth.”

“The truth is that your daughter is a beauty, Senator, ” I swiftly swerved. Tipping the champagne glass on my lips, I sipped its contents before saying, “My guess is she takes it from her mother?”

“Hah!” he patted on the table. “You are good with changing the subject, but yes, my daughter looks a lot like her mother. She’s your number one fan you know. If you like, I can arrange a date-”

“I’m sorry, ” I quickly butted in knowing what he was about to say, “I will have to decline your offer, Senator.”

He furrowed his brows in a way that showed amusement. “Is it because of Ms. Rosecraft?”

“Yes, it is because of her, ” without hesitating, I affirmed.

“I see, ” he shifted on his seat and then looked at the dance floor again. “Then, good luck to you Mr. Altair.”

“Thanks, Senator.” I left it at that.

While the rite went on, the rest of our talk was all about politics and my status in the club as the vice president. It was only during the last dance with the celebrant that he left my table. It was also during this time that Daniella returned.

“Is there something wrong?” was her first question when she sat.

A waiter appeared from my side and handed me a newly-filled glass. “None at all. Why do you ask?” I replied when the waiter left.

“Because you have been looking at me for quite some time Vincent, ” she looked at me, curious.

“Very perceptive of you darling.” I sampled my glass, but even though my head was slightly tilted up, my eyes were still trained on her.

“Well?” she spoke with patient breaths.

“Well, I was just wondering if you want to have a dinner date with me tomorrow evening, ” I blurted out without weighing the consequences. But with the absence of the Alpha, the consequences weren’t really considered a problem for now.

“A date? Tomorrow?” she looked taken aback of my offer.

“Yes.”

For a moment, she was silent. Her head was bent as if weighing on something my initial guess was Erik-related but she gave me an apologetic face then and answered, “Uh... well, I have a Snapchat appointment with my mother tomorrow evening.”

It was the truth. I’m sure of it because Erik doesn’t ever use Snapchat. He hated the damn thing.

“I see, then how about the next night? Would that be favorable?” I changed the schedule instead.

She beamed me a smile and nodded, “I do have a kickboxing session with Armelia during that time, but I can always cancel it.”

At that moment, I felt a warm feeling on my chest. I haven’t felt this way after so many years, but it was too juvenile, too tiny a warmth for me to say that I was in love with her. Right now, I am just happy that she accepted our dinner date. I like her company. I like spending time with her. And I also would want to know more about this woman who had saved my good friend’s life both figuratively and literally.

“Good, I will pick you up at six. Dress something that is street casual, ” was my instruction.

“I will wait then, ” she declared.

From her side of the table, I took the margarita she hadn’t touched since we came. I lifted my glass higher and eyed her a dare with her margarita in hand.

She took it with a grin and held it up in line with mine.

“Cheers to us?” I said.

“Yeah, to us.”

And we clank our glasses with smiles on our faces.

***

~ Daniella ~

At exactly six in the evening, Vincent knocked on my door. I hurried to open it with me ready overall. Since he told me to be street casual, I chose to wear faded skinny jeans, a white blazer to cover my black tee, and a four-inch sandal. Vincent, as usual, looked his dapper self in brown boots, jeans, and a beige V-neck shirt with a brown scarf and coat.

He handed me a bouquet of white roses which was very thoughtful of him. I placed it on an empty vase and poured water on it in a jiffy, leaving it in my bedside table when Vincent and I continued on our way. He used his personal sportscar, a Maclaren, to drive us to our destination.

Called as ‘The Cliff’, the restaurant really embodied its name. The two-storey building stood next to an imposing cliff that boasted a hundred-foot drop towards the rocky waters. I know I looked silly with my eyes wide and my hands clasping together against my belly when we entered the restaurant. Luckily, Vincent’s reassuring hand on the small of my back gave me an added courage.

“Just relax, you’re with me, ” he said after ghosted me a wink. “Enjoy the place and the view.”

I nodded and hauled a deep breath.

We entered the second floor wherein our reserved table was, in a balcony that overlooked the black ocean beyond. My breath hitched when Vincent guided me to the railing.

“Come and look, Daniella, ” he urged.

I did with a nervous smile.

“Wow, ” was my first expression when I saw the natural beauty that was around us. True that it made me feel nauseous just looking at the drop below, but with the overall beauty of the landscape, I forgot quickly about it.

“This place is so breathtaking Vincent, ” I exclaimed looking forward while the sea breeze kissed my face.

“It is, ” I heard him say next to me, “but you forgot to mention one thing.”

“And what is that?” I glanced at him and smiled.

“Romantic, ” was his reply, a faint curve of his lips appeared. I swallowed involuntarily because of it.

“Oh... yes, the place is romantic too, ” I agreed, diverting my attention away from him.

“The food here tastes great also, Daniella.” He backed away from the railing, disconnecting the little pull we had because of the word, and pulled a seat from our table. “I took the liberty of ordering our entree beforehand. Come, sit here.”

‘What a gentleman, ’ my thoughts commented, and then I felt myself blush.

“That’s quite thoughtful of you Vincent, ” I stated when I accepted the cushioned chair.

He sat opposite me with practiced ease and stared deep into my eyes without delay.

“Please darling, just call me Vince, ” he spoke.

I shied away and brought my eyes down the table. “I think I can’t do that, Vincent. It’s just too informal.”

“But please I insist. I like how my name leaves your mouth. It is like a soft chime played by a tender breeze.” He leaned closer and pressed his fingers on his chin.

I chuckled lightly. “You really are a Shakespearean at heart huh?”

For a moment, he blanked out, blinked a few times, and then cleared his throat. “You...you are the second woman who told that to me.”

"And who is this woman?" I lifted a brow, intrigued. "I suppose a close acquaintance of yours?"

"Hmmm... You can say it like that." He looked away and stared into the black ocean again.

Something was bothering him, I could feel it in my gut. It doesn't take a genius for someone to notice that though since his changing expressions were so clear to see.

I just remained silent and watched as a waitress placed our orders. When she was done, Vincent turned his attention on me again and asked, "Daniella, would you mind if I request something from you?"

I nodded without hesitation since I trusted him. "Sure, anything as long as it is reasonable."

"Can you model for me again? I really want to paint you."

My breath paused for a second. A model? Me? Again?

"Wow, I feel honored with your invitation, Vince." I traced the corner of my wine glass in slow motion, thinking and weighing things down, especially the fact that Erik still owned my schedules. But with him being MIA, I think I can decide on my own. "Would that include being nude?" I thinned my eyes and gave him a suspicious look.

I heard him chuckle then. "No, but if you're suggesting, I am always open for a new perspective."

"Haha, very funny, " I rolled my eyes in mock annoyance.

"So what do you think?" He grabbed my hand, the one that was playing the glass, and sandwiched it with his own. He looked genuinely waiting for my reply with high hopes.

"Yeah, I can be your class model again, " I finally agreed, but then his brows furrowed.

"No, Daniella. Not in the class but my solo session."

"Oh, " my eyes widened briefly. "I...I see." The thought of him and I in his studio alone had my heart immediately leaping for a second, but I dismissed the reaction away as just a simple womanly response. I didn't care to think of it again.

The rest of the evening had us eating the contents of our plates while talking about the painting session tomorrow and some other related topics like his passion for music and arts and my family life. I told him about many things; about my mother being born in Monaco, France, and my father, an all naturale Londoner; about how they met and the fact that I was born in London but raised mostly in my mother's homeland. In connection with that, I mentioned to him about my month-long admission to the hospital a year ago and the reason why I got there in the first place.

Vincent remained silent the whole time, nodding and showing that he was interested in my recollected memories. I, however, didn't dismiss the fact that he smiled at me like he had some

secret - a very important secret. With all the classified information of the club declined to me, I was used to it but somehow this kind of secretive smile he showed felt different. Really different.

Amidst this, in the end, we had a great time. Our friendship had advanced to the next level and I was happy with it and I know that he felt the same way.

***

“Thank you for spending this wonderful night with me, Daniella, ” he said whilst standing in my doorway.

“Likewise, thank you too, Vince.”

He leaned closer and kissed me in the cheek. I allowed him to without putting any meaning to it.

“Good night then.” He winked and beamed a smile while waving a hand.

I waved back, “Yeah, good night, ” and after which closed the door.

After three steps toward my receiving room, my hand found its way into the lock button of my purse. For some reason, I found myself having this unconscious habit of checking on my phone from time to time. While together with Vincent, I never thought of checking it, but now that I am left alone in my room, I am back to this routine.

Nope. There was nothing that showed on my phone except for the picture of an orchard landscape that Erik had already set up on my home screen. There were no calls or even a text message from him that would bother me.

I felt happy with it, but somehow a part of me wanted to have someone to talk to. After sauntering inside my bedroom, that’s when my silent wish came true. Ericka’s number popped out and her ‘Twerk It Like Miley’ ringtone sounded.

I smiled to myself before I pressed the accept button. Yep. I believe tonight we are going to have a long, long chat.

Chapter 22 - Between Truth and Dare

~ Daniella ~

Since I didn't have anything to do and since Erik told me to clean his room while away, I went there with that in mind.

After entering his chamber, I immediately started towards the bathroom where all the cleaning essentials I assume were placed. I scoured the top and down elegant cabinets, determined, and found some rags, a bottle sprayer, cleaning agents, and a portable vacuum machine. Putting them in a plastic basket, I felt myself tipping towards Cinderella.

Now, I feel I am a maid with all of this stuff on hand.

I shrugged my shoulders anyway and continued on my plan, but as I stepped out of the bathroom and into the bedroom, I realized that there was nothing to clean at all. The carpeted floor was cloud-white and fresh-looking, the bed, pillow, and linens were in order, and the cabinets and shelves were well organized and free of dust. The same goes for the walk-in closet, so I charged into the receiving room, hoping to find something to work in there. However, a similar dilemma was brought out to me which included the mini bar being as spotless as ever.

Although confused with it, in the back of my head I knew the person responsible for it: Mr. Ian. He is one damn efficient butler and I respect him for it. However, when I checked on a room at the far end of the receiving area, I found him not as meticulous as I expected him to be.

The door was closed yet I ventured in since there was no warning glued on the front that told not to enter. This room in particular I thought as Erik's personal office with lots and lots of papers scattered in a rectangular desk. Either Mr. Ian intentionally left this place as is or he and the chateau staff missed cleaning this part of the suite, I can't really tell, but one thing was clear enough: I am provided of something to put my hands in good use.

Since there was no dust in view, I parked the portable vacuum in the corner of the door. I proceeded to fix the papers first, choosing to stack them neatly in the edge of the table next to a paperweight. There were pens and markers scattered everywhere too, so I decided to place them in their rightful spots. Opening the table drawers one by one, I familiarized as to where these supplies are supposed to go. It wasn't hard really since everything was well organized. However, when I opened a drawer in the bottom middle of the table, I spotted two unusual objects. First was a pistol lying on top of a thick book. Second, a picture peeking out in that said book.

I disregarded the pistol since I have seen Erik bring one in the Lotus Spade incident. But the picture, nope, it didn't escape my notice. Of course, being a curious cat that I am, I checked on it

without so much as a thought or a suspicion. My jaws dropped however when I saw the face of the subject.

It was me.

Yes.

My fucking younger face when I was back in first year of college. The background was a facade of University College London, back from the time when I was arranged a pictorial by my mother for an article on our business website. I was sixteen back then, the time before I found out about my father's unfaithfulness.

As far as I can remember, the article was taken down ten months ago and all pictures were deleted to provide privacy for our two-person family. How and why Erik got this pic had my mind all boggled up. We have just met and there was no way he could get a copy of this pic through the internet unless he had contact with our photographer which was very unlikely.

I flipped the photo and saw a scribble of my full name in disconnected cursive and a dash followed by the words 'my savior.'

My savior? In what sense?

These questions somewhat became the cause (almost) to call Erik on the spot and interrogate him. However, I stopped midway from pulling my iPhone out of my denim short thinking that it would be proper to ask him this face-to-face instead.

With a determined clench of my jaw, I slipped the photo inside my opposite pocket and continued on my task more confused than ever.

Wearing a black pencil skirt and a pink off-shoulder sleeved blouse, and my hair tied up in a high ponytail, I hurried towards the fourth floor elevator sometime after lunch intending to go to Vincent's studio. I paused from entering the conveyor however when my attention was caught on the statues again, specifically the War God, Ares, proudly standing in the center of the foyer.

Since my room was relocated on this floor, I have since been mesmerized by the lifelike statue, but never had I gotten a chance to view them up close and admire the intricate details.

What I did was impulsive when I approached the statue of Ares and touched the slabs of his abdomen like a faithful would to a sculpture of a saint. I perused the length of it: the wreath on his head, the drape of cloth that covered his genitalia and his naked, perfect muscles until my eyes rested on the rifle next to his left leg. With the rifle upside down, he held it by the muzzle, a thumb covering the exit of the bullet. The handle was positioned near the statue's feet.

Really, when I first saw this weapon, I thought it was odd. It only made my suspicion worse after seeing it up close. Damn the firearm was so real it made me want to touch the trigger out of curiosity.

And in the end, I did after biting my bottom lip.

When I pressed the trigger, that's when all came to a momentary stop: my heartbeat, my breathing, my blinks. I stared straight with eyes wide when a certain part of a wall actually was cut into two and parted sideways to show a secret room.

"What the f... What is this?" I asked myself as I entered the white room.

There was no furniture in it except for a sole gold candelabra sitting on top of the unlit white-bricked fireplace. On each side of it, there were two small red buttons installed on the wall. For what purpose are they for, I don't know, but I pressed the right one without a thought and saw a single-door unlocking on its own to reveal another room. I blinked a couple of times before sauntering inside it.

The room had a manlier interior design. It had a well-polished wood flooring and modern fluorescent lighting in the middle of a large thick oblong table that was surrounded by leather chairs. A projector could be seen attached to the ceiling and two laptops on the farthest edge of the front desk.

Generally, the room looked like a conference room; nothing to take note of so I just left it with a last backward glance when I walked back into the white room.

The next thing I did was press the other button. I actually expected another conference room the same as its predecessor, but when the automatic door opened, I fell stunned speechless.

The room probably is what many would call a media room. Surveillance cameras placed everywhere in the chateau were present. Not only that, but there were also wide screens that showed weird diagrams, maps, and writings about a certain 'Iopata Bratva' in a different language, my guess is Russian.

Of course, I didn't pursue inspecting it since I don't understand the foreign words but check on another room, I did, when I saw a door slightly open.

This time my heart quickened like crazy.

"Oh my God..." I exclaimed, breathless.

In front of me was a room (no, scratch that) a convenience store replica full of — what can I say — ammunition, firearms of different sizes and calibers, daggers, boxes upon boxes of bullets, and gadgets that I have no idea what they are used for.

My mind immediately registered two words: danger and death. Why would the Fancy Pants Club store weapons inside the chateau? What are they for? And why?

Hastily, I went back to the media room and in there, I typed the name of Iopata Bratva in my cellphone Google search. A number of results were listed immediately. I checked on each of them with determination and great attention but found no concrete information about the name other than it is a mafia organization hunted by the Russian and American police since the sixties.

A mafia...

The word lingered on my head over and over again.

Mafia.

Could it be that the Fancy Pants Club is a member of the mafia? Could it be that it works underground alongside it? Or much worse, could it be that the Fancy Pants Club is the mafia itself in disguise?

How about Erik and the others? They have been so secretive with me all this time. Does that mean that they?

I shook my head before I could think of other ridiculous notions. There was only one way to keep my mind at peace and that is to interrogate at least one of them for the truth.

Leaving the rooms as they were, I rode the elevator down the second floor with the intent of asking Vincent the questions banging inside my head.

Are they really?

I was very determined. My breathing was deep and my eyes were sharp when I entered Vincent's studio without a knock on his door.

The last time I was here was when I became a life class model with Erik painting me like a pineapple. I suppose it wasn't called a bad experience for me and in totality, I wasn't traumatized by it, but stepping inside the room with Vincent donning on that sexy plain white t-shirt and faded jeans made me nervous right down to the bone. It made my determination about the mafia topic shrink and wither consequently as another thought crossed my mind; thoughts about Ericka's words while we were talking on the phone last night.

He's into you.

The VP is making a move.

He is hot and dreamy, isn't that a good combination?

Seriously, she really is a hopeless romantic. She didn't waste time pointing me that Vincent is more than boyfriend material.

I couldn't agree more though, but still...still my heart...I don't know, maybe I am blind in love or I am just not ready to open my heart up to someone that the notion of Vincent as my suitor didn't even excite me one bit.

Everything was ready when I entered the studio. The room was lighter probably because he opened the French doors to the connecting balcony. It was also spacious with all the class paraphernalia arranged in the sides except for one large canvas set in an easel, a clean palette, color tubes, and a variety of brushes placed in the small work table in the middle of the room.

"Sit there Daniella." Vincent, after kissing my cheek in greeting, pointed towards a cushioned stool placed right in the threshold between the balcony and the studio.

I gave him a curious brow, finding the choice of location odd.

He chuckled lightly noticing my silent question.

Seriously, how could a gentleman like Vincent be part of an illegal group?

"You'll see. Just sit there and I will explain it to you, " he said.

I did as I was told.

Once I sat, the afternoon sunlight immediately illuminated my face. With hands clasped on my lap, I gazed at him and waited for further instructions while another part of me debated on whether I should ask him about the secret room upstairs.

"As you've noticed, the sunlight hits your face just right. I like it this way, Daniella. Working on natural light is my preference, " he started whilst standing a few feet away from me.

I nodded my understanding.

"The French glass door behind your back adds to the light reflection too, making the brown strands of your hair vibrant."

He strode to the balcony, gave me a wink along the way, and stopped near the marble balustrade.

"The outside scenery is beautiful too. You can look at it anytime so you won't be bored while I'm painting you." He faced me and smiled.

"Ahh, I see. You really thought much of this session huh?" I squinted my eyes at him.

He nodded once and then went back inside the room. "You are correct, " he said.

"Then thank you, Vince. You are really a thoughtful man."

“You inflate my lungs, Daniella, ” he placed a hand on his chest and bowed low. “Now, shall we begin? The sun doesn’t wait for us you know.”

I chuckled at his remark. “Yes, we can start.”

He adjusted the position of the canvas from landscape to portrait. Then, he took a long flat brush and dipped it in the white paint. I watched him as he began to work, stroking in an easy and confident manner and this continued on for about an hour.

What I felt that time in the life class session, I felt it the same now: like a queen in my own world where Vincent’s eyes were the only beholder.

He studied me thoroughly. Marking me, branding me with every sweep of his violet orbs. I was helpless the whole time, trying to be calm and composed but in reality, my heart was pounding.

In a way, I say this was another kind of ecstasy where a woman feels like a woman even without a man’s touch... even without being stripped naked. With Vincent, alone and probed in detail, it felt enchanting, revitalizing, personal...

But then, our painter-to-subject connection abruptly disconnected when I heard him groan in disappointment. He was looking intently at the canvas, brows knitted while holding a thin brush.

“You okay?” I asked, worried.

He glanced at me with eyes that smolder, or at least that’s what I could make from its seriousness.

“Can I change your hair Daniella?” he asked directly and then approached me.

“Yes, you can, ” I answered without hesitation. “You are the artist Vince. You can do anything with me as you please.”

“As I please?” I saw a flicker of delight in his eyes then.

“Wh-what do you want to do with my hair?” I asked, a sudden chill of discomfort ran through me.

He brought a hand up over my head and pulled the tie of my ponytail in one swift motion. “I want your hair untied, ” he whispered whilst looking down at me.

As a response, I felt a ghost of a tingle in my shoulders.

“Untied it is then, ” I murmured, locking eyes with him.

Both of his hands now moved to caress the soft curls of my hair. I thought that he was just adjusting them into the right place that was artist-vision worthy, but then when I felt his hand skim my jaw and cheeks, that’s when I realized that something was amiss.

“Please don’t move, ” he whispered low.

“Vince...” I moved my head slightly back to disconnect his fingertips from the corner of my lips. I looked down and fisted both of my hands. His touch wasn’t really unwelcome, but it came out of nowhere without warning, so as expected I would feel partly averse to it.

He shushed me and continued on his way.

“Vince.” I made my voice sterner. With my brows in a hard line, I gave him a warning glare, but he just ignored me.

“Vincent!” When his thumb pressed my bottom lip, that’s when I snapped.

“Can I kiss you, Daniella?” But he then asked that instead of feeling alarmed of my anger.

“What?!” My eyes widened.

“Let me kiss you, please.”

After cupping my chin in place, he leaned towards me and brought his face down. “Be still, ” he instructed.

The whole time, I felt I was in a slow-motion movie. I pressed my hands in his chest, ready to push him away... ready to tell him, no, but I was too late.

His lips came down soft and moist, pressed into mine, as I trembled at the contact. I smelt his cologne then and felt the light touch of his warm breathing. My eyes were open while his was closed — surely an understandable reaction in a woman that was stunned.

My heart thumped loud and clear though. I felt my senses jump in excitement, but unfortunately, it was not as excited as that when Erik kissed me.

No, don’t ask me. I damn couldn’t explain why.

My lips didn’t part, but his tongue coerced me into opening them. Before he could trespass the boundary though, I pushed his chest with force and stopped his kiss.

“I’m sorry. I...I need a break, ” was my quick announcement. I jumped out of the stool and raced towards the door, but then Vincent captured my right arm and pulled me to face him.

“I deeply apologize, Daniella. I shouldn’t have kissed you, ” was his repentant statement. He looked genuine enough that I could accept.

“What’s gotten into you?” I asked, worried.

He released my arm and raked his hair back. “Honestly, Daniella. I—I’ve been out of myself lately.”

“Then you should fix yourself!” I stated with great force.

“I’m sorry for having you go through this embarrassment. Thanks for slapping me back to reality.”

I ghosted him a smile. I know he said it as a metaphor, but I could always use my palms to make him see reality.

“You’re welcome, ” I said as I crossed my arms.

“Do you really need a break?” he eyed me worriedly. “Can we...return to painting now?”

“As long as you promise not to kiss me again, we can, ” I answered with confidence.

“I promise, ” he said whilst putting his right hand up.

Chapter 23 - Questioning the Club

~ Daniella ~

I didn't have the chance to ask Vincent about the secret rooms during our painting session. He was silent as what an artist should be and I was silent just as what a model should be. It was late afternoon when we finished. It took us five hours all in all, but really a worth-it time as the painting product looked beyond a masterpiece. Well, at least that's what he voiced out when he showed it to me.

He framed it on the spot right after he let me sign my name on the left side, opposite his, and hung it on the Club gallery outside the studio. Right after that, he asked me for another dinner date, but I declined since Suri and I had already made plans to go on another girl bonding time.

Vincent and I parted our ways with me feeling the same as before amidst the kiss he gave me earlier. I wouldn't want our friendship destroyed just because of a moment of oversight in his part.

Yes, early in the evening, Suri and I went to a famous Beverly Hills boutique for gown fittings — gowns that we are to wear in the Fancy Pants Club semiannual grand ball. It will be held a month from now, but she wanted the gowns done early. Her butler drove and accompanied us the whole time, even taking care of our needs when we ate dinner at an outside restaurant.

We had a great time again, but I didn't miss out on how puffy her eyes were, probably due to crying. I didn't ask the reason for it though since I am aware it was because of Amano's absence. I didn't even ask her about the secret room and the Bratva even though I was itching so much to find out about them.

Back in the chateau, since she had other 'classified' matters to attend to, I was left to ride the elevator alone. It was about ten o'clock when I arrived on the fourth floor. Planning to go straight to my room, I immediately turned to the west hallway, but as soon as I caught a faint sound of violin in my ears, I paused. The sound came from the north hallway. To where exactly, I wasn't sure, so I decided to investigate.

There were doors in this hallway too, leading to private chambers I suppose. In one of Suri's discussion about the Club, she mentioned about Vincent and Alec's room being here. Alec had abandoned his room in exchange for his own flat slash boutique outside the chateau, while Vincent stayed and became an official resident just like Erik and the others (except for Rohan who had a mansion of his own).

I managed the hallway going straight into the far end where an anteroom was located. In its connecting balcony, there I saw the source of the violin music: Vincent, playing a song I have never heard before.

He was standing in the center of the balcony, regal and self-assured, with his face looking at the star-flooded sky.

I secretly approached him, silent like a ghost, and stopped just at the border of the anteroom and balcony. The whole time, I listened to his production with my head leaning against the end of the wall and smiling. Even though I seriously wanted to, I resisted the urge to close my eyes and revel on the sound waves.

"That's a hauntingly beautiful song Vince, " I broke my silence when he finished his performance some amazing minutes after.

From a relaxed posture, his shoulders stood at attention quickly and then he spun around to face me wearing a smile and an arched brow.

"Is it?" he said.

"You doubt my words?" I narrowed my eyes at him.

"No, " he answered not a second past, "But I doubt myself. I composed it you know."

"Really? Then you have some serious self-esteem issues."

Vincent is such a talented man, amazingly similar to what a prince should be, but the more I get to know him, the more I see another side of him that is beaten down.

"I'd like to call it unsure instead, " he corrected just as he squat and placed the violin safely in its antique case lying on the marbled floor. "Anyway, the composition is called Eren's Touch."

"Why that title?" I asked, curious.

"It...It's complicated to explain." His head lowered and he looked as if pained on something. That caught my attention. I am no Cupid and I do not have experiences yet on my own, but I am an intuitive woman and I know a heartbroken person when I see one.

"Hey, " I started right after I straightened myself from leaning. "It is none of my business, but you can always tell me your problems. I am your friend. I am willing to lift a little bit of that weight on your shoulders."

He looked at me and beamed a smile; the show of momentary sadness vanished in a blink of an eye. "So sweet of you Daniella."

I suppressed a laugh and crossed my arms. "I prefer...helpful."

“And this is exactly why I like you,” he said so suddenly.

“Come again?” I asked with furrowed brows. My heartbeat immediately raced and my hand turned cold. I refuse to be presumptive, but with how he stressed the word with such confidence, I had a feeling that he was confessing his feelings on me.

Vincent stood up and stepped closer to me leaving the violin case on the floor. His gaze held mine as I waited with bated breath.

“Daniella, I like—”

But before I could fish out his answer, a strong hand grabbed my left elbow and pulled me inside the anteroom. I gasped and turned to look at the source with an angry glare. I became meek however when I saw who it was.

Back against the wall, Erik (yes, he’s back) stood with his jaw clenched and his venomous look on me.

Had he been hiding from us all this time? Was he listening to our conversation? Those two questions immediately jumped in my head.

With his hand still holding me, he stepped forward and showed himself to Vincent.

“Isn’t it a little bit late for the two of you to be discussing nonsense issues?”

From where I stood at his side, I could see how he scowled at Vincent, but the latter acted not at all affected.

“Ah, Prez, you’re back,” he smiled at him.

“That I am.” Erik nodded and then turned to the stunned me and commanded, “You, come with me now.”

He attempted to pull me from the elbow, but I stayed put. “No,” I said, staring straight at him. Quick was my adjustment from my stupefied state, and I had now shown a bit of irritation because of his rudeness.

“Come again?” He leaned closer and studied my face. I, on the other hand, tried to look as determined as I could be with my chin held high.

“I am not done talking with Vince, Erik,” I pointed out.

“Ah, so you are on a nickname basis now huh?” His stare became scorching.

“That’s none of your concern.” I thinned my lips.

“It is my concern because I’m your master Daniella,” he stressed.

His grip on me tightened. It wasn't enough to make me wince, but it did make me realize how serious he was.

"Okay!" Suddenly, Vincent voiced out, catching both of our attention. "Now I'm out of here. You too lovebirds continue bickering."

Lovebirds what?!

"Vince, wait!" I shouted when he passed by with the violin case in hand, but Erik stepped in and grabbed my chin to look at him.

"Pay attention to me, Daniella. On only me." His voice was dark but languorous, full of promise yet charged with threat.

"Erik..." My lips quaked as he leaned closer. Warm was his breathing when I felt it in my cheeks, and his scent, of his personal cologne maybe, when it touched my nostrils, had me in goosebumps.

I was hoping that he would release me, but I stood frozen as he abruptly claimed my mouth. Shots of tingles fired up my whole body then. It was a chaste kiss at first, but when I unconsciously parted my lips a little, he made it needy and deep. I gasped as he delved his tongue inside and because of that, it made me remember the kiss we had shared in the elevator.

From my peripheral vision, I could no longer see Vincent in the anteroom and that made my subconscious feel at ease. Public display of affection — or whatever people might call it — was not my cup of tea.

He grabbed both of my shoulders and pushed me roughly against the wall. I was left incapable of blocking it. Continuing the onslaught of his mouth, he surprised me when he ran a hand from my neck down to my right breast. From there, I felt my belly flutter and my nipples stood erect, especially the one that was touched. I am new at this, yet this kind of feeling... of desire and longing had me all worked up and it felt so good. It fogged my head ultimately, tossing my will, irritation, and any other reasoning aside.

I seriously thought he would proceed to lift my blouse up. Shamefully, it was what my body was begging — to be caressed skin to skin — but then he stopped and wrenched himself away. He stood an unbearable inch of distance and studied me — yes, me with a winded breath and confused, heated face.

"You are mine, remember that Daniella, " he remarked and then twisted to exit the anteroom.

I swallowed hard the remains of our liplock and took a deep breath. Looking at his back, there was this one question that plagued my mind in an instant.

"So you are really toying with me huh?"

He paused and looked over his shoulder. “I am not toying with you Daniella, ” he spoke calmly but refused to look at me.

“Are you certain? Really? Because it doesn’t look and feel that way. You confuse me with your attitude and actions Erik, just like now. How are you going to explain that when you say this is not your game?”

He lowered his stare on the ground, yet still, he didn’t face me, but I saw how tight his fist clenched as if he was battling a war inside himself.

“What is my photo for? I found it hidden in one of the drawers in your office desk. Why did you turn me into a club member? Why blackmail me and keep me here when you know your secrets might be compromised? What is the secret room for? The surveillance room, loads of firearms, and ammunition hidden next to it? What does Iopata Bratva mean? Tell me Erik. What are your reasons? Tell me!”

Obviously, I was on a rampage and it was all brought by this man and the confusion, the suspicion, the attraction, and the sexual tension that he had amassed within me. I wasn’t going to give up until he gives me the answers that I want.

I am hoping that he would though because seriously I am going nuts with this game of his. I might put myself in a psychiatric ward after six months if he doesn’t give me the right answers.

“Where is the photo, Daniella?” He turned to face me finally but for some reason, he looked like a predator ready to pounce on its prey.

“It is in my room and you will never get it back unless you give me answers, ” I stated, feet firm on the ground.

“Ah, so you know how to blackmail me now huh? The master had just been gone for a few weeks yet the servant was able to learn a sly trick.”

He stepped forward, I stepped back. I felt the cold wall instantly and that made me realize I was trapped unless I run out of the balcony.

“Answer my questions Erik, ” I commanded with a stern voice. “Why keep me here when you know your guarded secrets will be discovered? You are mafia, right? The Fancy Pants Club is the Iopata Bratva the international authorities had been looking for.”

He grinned at me, touched his jaw briefly, and said, “Would you care to come with me in my room to find out? I would be willing to divulge the Club secrets if you join me for a glass of brandy in my bar.”

I scrunched up my nose. “I don’t drink brandy, Erik.”

“Then wine perhaps?” he negotiated.

I went silent and weighed the pros and cons of his offer. Going straight into his room was like going straight into a cliff. If he truly is the mafia, then anything is possible. Even death. However, to know the truth now would be better, for my sanity’s sake that is.

Seconds turned to minutes and probably, he was bored of waiting for he suddenly reasoned out, “I am trying to be patient here Daniella. I am trying my best to be as proper as I could be. I don’t want to drag you out of here and force you inside my room, tie you up in my bed so that your tongue wouldn’t wag around the chateau with stupid assumptions. Now, answer me a yes and you will be spared with that treatment.”

I narrowed my eyes at him and answered in the end, “Yes.”

He nodded once, pleased, and turned towards the hallway. “Come, ” he said.

I followed him after heaving a long sigh.

The whole time we traversed towards his room, many thoughts and questions swirled inside me. I was beginning to doubt the veracity of the Club with each swirl, but not my safety. Never my safety.

I may suspect the Club to be a world-renowned mafia organization, but my heart didn’t believe one bit that the members would kill me because I found their secrets. Seriously, all of them have been so good to me and very accommodating. I just can’t see anyone of them murdering someone out of whim. Erik with his Death God aura? Yes, maybe, possibly but I am yet to confirm this when we arrive in his room.

***

~ Erik ~

Daniella sat on a sofa near the main door while I was in the minibar fixing our drinks. From time to time, I watched her movements and ultimately established that she was nervous amidst being so forthright and courageous earlier with her questionings. She really does have a racy mind, but I find it entertaining.

Her assumptions weren’t far-fetched from the truth, however, since I am the only son (a prodigal bastard, might I add) of the head of Iopata, so in effect, I am connected to the mafia organization. Unfortunately, although how much I deny it... no matter how much I sever my ties with my father and swore the downfall of his organization, this is the truth. Nikolai Svaneti is the truth. I just don’t want to face it.

What I aim to do now since she had seen too much of our agenda was to clear the name of the Club and erase the notion in her mind that all of us are blood-thirsty murderers. Well, most of us are, but we do that with bad people — really bad people who deserved to go to Hell instead.

"Take it," I said when I handed her the flute of white wine.

She looked up at me with a bit of suspicion but nevertheless, took the flute and sipped its contents slowly.

"Thank you," she said, then looked down on the floor again.

I smirked and decided to distance myself away from her — for her own good and mine. Honestly, I had wanted to hold her since I returned to the chateau. These past two weeks had been really hard on my part, but luckily, I was able to pour my frustrations out with my father's cockroaches who tried to smuggle their Cloud Blue shipment inside Bosnia.

I chose to sit in a high stool in the minibar and waited for her to calm down.

"Did Suri or the others tell you about the secret room or you just discovered it by yourself?" was my question when she did, but it was after almost five minutes of waiting.

She gazed at me with an expression certain as the clear blue sky and spilled, "No, I discovered it on my own."

I curved my mouth upward. "So you weren't able to resist the urge of pressing the rifle's trigger huh?" I had to ask that since I was really curious.

"What sane mind would put a real thing in a foyer where everyone could see?" she retorted back.

I chuckled and shifted on my seat.

"Apparently, the owner of that sane mind didn't expect that I would invite an outsider to become a member."

"Ah, yes, and that leads me to question why then?" she retaliated with my dreaded question. "Why did you turn me into a member in the first place?"

"Please stay on topic, Daniella," I reminded.

"This is on topic."

"No, it isn't. We were discussing the secretiveness of the club which you didn't hesitate on showing your dislike," I said, diverting the subject back to its original path. I don't want to explain the circumstances of putting her in the Club just yet. Time, perfect timing will come soon for that. For now, I prefer to clear her mind up with this mafia nonsense.

“Then tell me about Iopata Bratva, and explain to me about the many weapons in that secret room.”

“Hmm, so hungry for information huh?” I drank my brandy, but still, my gaze stayed on her.

“So that I won’t go in a mental hospital, Erik, ” she curtly remarked.

After hearing that statement, I broke out into a laugh without intending it.

“It’s not funny!” she shouted immediately.

I stopped and took in a deep breath. “I know, ” I waved my cognac midair and looked at her solemnly. “That’s why I decided to give you answers Daniella.”

“I’m listening, ” she urged and crossed her arms.

I cocked a brow, finding her show of confidence alluring.

“What I am going to tell you is classified information woman. I may be ousted by the Agency because of it, but for your safety and sanity, I will explain everything to you. Listen well. Ask questions later.”

“Go on, ” she nodded.

I placed the cognac in the counter and started whilst looking at her searching, beautiful hazel eyes. “The Fancy Pants Club is designed by the International Security Agency composed of power-player countries all over the world. It was established ten years ago but just recently started its operations last year in public to create a front and to confuse the syndicate. Beverly Hills is the location of choice since it is the closest area to Lotus Spade. Lotus Spade is a sister branch of Iopata, the mafia you are talking about, whose headquarters are in Russia. The Club members including me act as a cushion. We are trained to intercept and initiate certain measures in order to stop the brotherhood’s illegal dealings, especially their laboratory-created drug — the one that got you almost fucked up weeks ago.”

I stopped right there after noticing that I was giving too much information that she couldn’t handle at one time. Deciding to create a comfortable atmosphere, I approached her and sat on a sofa opposite hers. She just studied me the whole time, or probably still processing whatever question she wanted to throw at me.

“The Club is just a cover, Daniella, ” I summarized conveniently for her. “All of us are living a double life. We keep up appearances just to make sure the brotherhood wouldn’t pin us... wouldn’t suspect our involvement.”

“So you say you are secret mercenaries, ” she finally broke her silence.

I smiled at her and nodded. “Or your modern-day Robin Hood.”

“Robin Hood shares all his wealth to the people Erik. The Club however doesn’t. What about the lavish parties inside the chateau and the ridiculous rent that you put on the guests? What can you say about that huh?” she ambushed me with these sets of questions. I find it insignificant, but it was pleasant to know that she was very perceptive of her surroundings.

“This ridiculous rent that you say Daniella all goes to the charities that the Club holds. These charities are made for the victims of Iopata. Although not all, the staffs here in the chateau are also those people whose families were destroyed because of that same group. Mind you, they have operated for twenty long years, creating havoc in every turn. Someone’s got to round them up and this is what we are doing, although secretly, stealthily. Iopata is a wide network of brotherhood. They are no joking matter.”

I saw a glint of fear in her eyes as she gazed at me. I wanted to kiss it away but refrained.

“As for the secret rooms, they are for meeting purposes where we plan our next attack, update ourselves with Iopata’s movements, and organize the Club’s public activities. The weapons you saw inside I reckon you understand already what for, so there’s no use explaining that to you.”

She pressed her lips thinly just as she shifted her eyes away from me. This time, it was not fear that I saw in her but embarrassment. Embarrassed probably because of her false assumptions.

A slow smile broke from my lips as I continued looking at her. “Have I cleared up your mind now Sweet Rose?”

She nodded slightly, but then looked up at me with unflinching determination and said, “I still need to ask you one last question.”

“Then bring it on, ” I shrugged.

“How did you end up keeping my picture, Erik?”

I swallowed. I had an inkling that our conversation would lead up to this point, and I already told myself that once this happens, she’ll learn the reason why.

After releasing a defeated sigh, I stood up from my seat and keenly stared at her.

“I want to be reminded of the person who saved my life — you — that’s why I printed a picture of you from the Rosecraft business website a year ago.”

I brought my right hand up to my neck and pinched my skin or what Alec calls an artificial skin made of silicone rubber and plaster.

Just as I pulled the damn makeup prosthetic out, I saw her breathing paused and her eyes bulged.

Chapter 24 - A Change Meeting

Monaco, France (One Year Ago)

~ Daniella ~

My mother's family has a grape wine business and with that, of course, they have a vineyard. Since I was little, every harvest time I visit here with her for both as a vacation and additional manpower. I enjoy being in France more than I do in New York. I had begged my mother a couple of times for us to settle in her childhood land, but due to our business circumstances, it always ended up with a no.

The time the grapes are harvested is considered to be the émile Family's secret of superb wine quality, and since I am my mother's daughter and an émile, I am shared with this well-guarded secret. At early dawn, when mist still lingers and the vines are at their freshest proved to be the best time where the picker can choose the most promising batches.

Hardworking and excited as I am, I was in the vineyard earlier than the supposed perfect time. There were no workers yet except for two old maids who I can see a few yards away from me. Wearing a coat, boots, and skinny jeans, I let myself get immersed with the surrounding nature as I stood in one of the thousands of vine rows.

The dark sky had the beginnings of a violet and orange tinge. The grey and white clouds were feathery and easy to look at. Fresh cold air flushed my lungs as I inhaled deeply. There were chirping of birds nearby and I would have reveled on the sweetness of their tune if not for the gunfire that suddenly resounded throughout the entire area.

I spun around to where I think was the source, but as I did, a towering shadow of a man bumped into me and threw me off-balance. With a yelp, I fell on the ground with an unceremonious thud on my back. I hadn't had time to collect myself when the intruder's hand quickly shot up to my face and covered my mouth to stifle what had been a supposed glorious scream.

Fear of my safety easily tore right through me. I am not a coward, but under these circumstances, it was natural to feel this way, especially when I saw his face covered with a blood-splashed black motorbike helmet. My heart rate double-worked all the more when my distraught eyes strayed to the man's other hand. It was holding a freaking deadly weapon: a silver gun. The fact that he was wearing an ensemble of black leather coat and pants didn't help at all too. He looked dangerous all in all.

Thinking that this was the gunman, instead of pulling his hand away from my mouth, I collected soil in the palm of my hands and in a flash, threw it in his face.

The face shield was pulled up, so his eyes were the only part that was visible and the only part that I could use to my advantage. Unluckily for me though, he had damn quick reflexes and easily swerved his face to the right to avoid my meager attack.

He held my mouth tightly enabling me to get suffocated and this time, I panicked. I squirmed and thrashed my hands in every direction.

'Unhand me!', 'Let me go!, 'Help! Help!' were the words that clouded my thoughts as I fought myself back to freedom.

His dominating strength came not a surprise when he swiftly pulled me up the ground and situated himself on my back. This position turned out to be in his advantage because it locked me in my place with his strong free arm on my waist.

This time, feeling helpless, stream of tears slipped from my eyes.

"Be still and stay quiet woman, " was his swift decree behind me. It was muffled by the helmet a bit but I could still make out the words just fine.

"Mmmmh..." was my answer but if not for his hand restraining my speech, it would have come out weak, 'Please release me...'

"I will not kill you, I promise, " he stated as if to reassure me, but like hell, I would believe.

I squirmed again, tossing my legs and shaking myself.

In response, with his hand still on my mouth, he pressed my head against his right shoulder and leaned in close to my forehead.

"You are just in the way of my escape, my fiery nymph, " he stated. "I can't have you screaming now and give those who chase me a location. You will be the downfall of me and you, unfortunately, will go down with me since they see you as an accomplice, so be obedient and stay still. I will be out of your hair once I make sure I am not followed anymore."

I didn't nod in affirmation but calm myself a bit I did as he pulled me with him, effortlessly, like I was just a sack of cotton and we took off like a mouse undetected by the cat. He freed me from my mute state and that's the time when I was able to breathe the cold air again.

I dared not scream. It was not like I trusted his words that instant, but with him holding the gun, it was safe for me if I do as what he ordered.

With his right hand holding tightly my left and I following behind him, we eased our way into the rows and rows of grapevines. As we did so, the whole time I heard him grunt in pain and let out a string of native curses I heard way back from my Russian classmates in high school.

I admit he did have an incredibly sexy voice, but then again, I was too frightened to even give much thought.

Why was he grunting in pain was far beyond me, but when I paid closer attention to his gait, I found that he was actually limping slightly. Then, when my eyes caught sight of his left arm that had once cinched me in place, I saw what looked to be a knife slash in his coat sleeve, right above the elbow joint, and blood slowly gushing through it.

As if on cue, another gunfire reverberated in the air a couple of distance away from us, and then I heard my captor growl out a heavy, "Shit!"

The pieces of evidence were enough to tell me that this man was telling the truth. He was on a run. He was trying to escape from whoever was firing the shot. Although holding a gun himself, in that instant, I realized that he wasn't even the bad guy after all.

"Why are you being chased?!" I asked out-of-the-blue when that question popped out of my head.

"None of your concern, " was his clipped answer.

I heard another gunfire very close to where I was. I jerked because of it, closing my eyes as if it would shield me from the incoming bullet. What happened next caught me off-guard. My captor actually pulled me in a tight hug.

"Keep your body aligned with mine. Move when I tell you to move, " he groaned.

My hands which found their way tracing his back felt warm, wet, and sticky.

"Oh my God! You're hit! You're hit!" I shouted.

"Keep your mouth shut woman!" he said through clenched teeth.

"But you're hit! You need to go to the hospital!"

"Do you think that I could do that now?!"

As I looked up, I saw his eyes burning with fury. There was no fear I felt with it because I had great faith it wasn't directed to me. It was directed to the people chasing him.

And again, in the back of my head, I asked why?

"No. No..." I whispered softly whilst blinking my stupidity away. Of course, he couldn't go to the hospital with these men hot on his trail. "I'm sorry for bringing it up."

"Point taken, " his eyes softened and regarded me with an emotion that I couldn't comprehend. I don't know what it was but it got my heart thumping suddenly.

Amidst the lack of enough light, I could see how beautiful his eyes were. Blue and green with a ring of hazel were the most significant colors. It captivated me, but my trance was cut short when he looked up, scanned the area, and then shouted, "Now, move!"

"What?!" I asked, glaring.

"Run woman! Run!"

I didn't know I had the legs of a gazelle for I practically sprinted off to where he pushed me. He was following close behind. Really close for I felt his hand glued at the small of my back.

Like wild animals, we ran into the safety of a medium-sized barn my mother used to call the storage room. Inside, I crashed myself into a rattan chair with my hands gathered on my face, eyes closed, breathless, and with my knees shaking.

I heard him groan again, so I looked up to find him kneeling on the brick floor with his right hand on his left shoulder.

"You really should get that checked out, " I suggested. He still hadn't gotten my sympathy but my worry was inherent to any person with a gunshot wound on their shoulder.

"I will, " he hoarsely replied, looking at me. "But for now, I need to get you into a safe place, away from them and away from me."

"I can just run away from you if you let me go, " I pointed out.

"And let you get caught by them? They spare no innocent souls, woman."

I blinked thrice. Now that just got my attention and sympathy and made me realize that he really was worried about my safety.

But then, when I pieced together his words, my eyes immediately widened.

"Oh no, the workers?!" I voiced.

"Those old women you were with in the vineyard?" he clarified.

I nodded and then gasped. "Are they... Did they...?!"

He didn't reply, but the depth of his eyes seem to answer it all.

"Oh, God." I placed a hand in my mouth in reflex, not realizing that my fingers had already gotten soiled with his blood.

I smelt the metallic odor of the crimson liquid. I got a little taste of it through my lips and because of that, it made me involuntarily retch.

“Pull yourself together!” he grounded and stood up.

As he strode towards me, I gripped the armrests of the rattan chair bracing for whatever he was about to do.

He pulled out a white handkerchief from the back of his pants - the only opposing color from the sea of black he was wearing - and reached for my hands.

“Here, use this to wipe the blood away, ” he said as he started rubbing my fingers whilst half-kneeling in front of me.

He acted as if he wasn’t soiled in blood himself. He acted as if he wasn’t wounded at all... as if his life wasn’t in danger. It was heart-swelling to watch, and yes, I could say that my heart really did swell out because of it.

I don’t know what I was thinking, but I let him do the task instead; never taking the handkerchief to clean my fingers myself. My eyes rested on the silver gun he placed on the ground near his knee and blankly stared at it for quite some time.

“What’s your name?” Out-of-the-blue, he asked.

I glanced up. “Pardon?”

“I asked what your name is.” He shook his head and cleared his throat as if he was disappointed with something. “Or better yet, don’t answer. We—”

“Daniella, ” I cut in. “My name is Daniella.”

We exchanged glances... yes, heavy ones, until my attention was caught on a certain dark figure lurking and eavesdropping us from the barn window.

My breathing stopped when I got a clearer view of what he was holding. It was a gun and its mouth was pointed directly at my companion’s back.

What happened next was me not thinking about the consequences.

“No!” I screamed as I pushed him aside and jumped in front to take the bullet instead.

Pain. Excruciating pain was what I instantly felt in the upper part of my abdomen. With both hands, I nursed the area and felt heat and panic rising inside me when I saw blood gushing profusely into my hands.

In the blink of an eye, a strong tug in my elbow brought me lying down the ground, and then I saw my captor sitting awkwardly in my side with both hands lifted in the air and with the silver gun pointed at the window.

The ensuing events happened so fast, so sudden that the only thing I could make out from my numbing brain was the dark figure being shot at, the barn door opening to admit men in suits, and more gunfires being released.

I guess he won for one by one these men dropped lifeless on the ground. Thank God.

“Daniella. Daniella!” I then heard my captor shout. He scooped me from the ground with both of his arms and lifted me up to meet his face.

From my blurring vision, I saw how painful his eyes looked. Was he sad? Disappointed? I couldn’t make out at all for his helmet was still on the way.

Then, as if he answered my silent complaint, he took off the cursed object with one hand.

I smiled. This nameless man holding me had become my intruder, my captor, and my savior all at the same time.

“Daniella, open your eyes!” he ordered but sadly, I couldn’t comply. My body was so weak I could no longer feel my legs and hands anymore.

The last thing I saw before my eyes closed was this detailed tattoo on his right neck; of a black spade in the center and four red spears on the sides.

Chapter 25 - Contract Be Damned

The Fancy Pants Club Chateau (Present)

~ Daniella ~

"You're...him?!"

Was my first expression when I saw the tattoo on Erik's neck; the tattoo and its details that had lodged in my brain since the incident a year ago. This was the only evidence, or shall I say, remembrance I had after my encounter with my nameless man.

But now, as I stared straight into the black spade and red spears, there was no denying the fact that they are one and the same.

If only my vision wasn't a blur at that time, I would have known Erik was him by first glance, but it was and my loss of blood complications that time added to the problem that's why my memory of his face came out fuzzy.

With mouth agape, I stared at Erik who had a growing smile on his lips — a smile that I would consider to be a proud one.

"Yes, it is me, " he confirmed as he strode closer.

And of course, to nail the facts down, he had to shove his coat to the side to show me the infamous silver gun secured in his holster.

I wasn't afraid to see it or even with him as he continued to approach me. He was my savior for heaven's sake. He didn't leave me in that barn to become a corpse. He had to drop me in the nearest hospital amidst being wounded himself.

All the known irritation I had bundled up for the rude side of Erik vanished and replaced with care and compassion I had collected this whole year for my nameless man.

I owe this man my life. I owe Erik my life. The thoughts lingered in my head as I watched him half-kneel in front of me.

Why the fuck is he half-kneeling in front of me anyway?!

He placed a gentle hand on my knee. It burned immediately with his touch.

"Daniella, you don't know how much I am pleased to find out you are alive. Leaving you in that hospital half-dead had me endlessly worried."

My breath hitched when his right hand held my waist and the other followed suit to bring my blouse up halfway. I could feel my cheeks heat up when his eyes roamed down to look at the blue rose tattoo in my right upper abdomen. Then, my subconscious screamed when he thumbed the scar's edges and caressed it just like the way he did back when we were in the gym.

All my body reflexes could do was to tremble...tremble in the sensation he was giving me. His nearness was already intoxicating since I met him, but now knowing that we shared the same past, it was more potent than ever before.

"My guilt had already eaten me so much knowing that I had involved your innocent soul in such a mess, Daniella, " he continued to speak, languidly, sorrowfully while I was still tongue-tied; my mind still tangled to even make out a coherent sentence. "This scar is a reminder of my incompetence. I will never be at peace until you have forgiven me."

With one swift motion, he bent forward and kissed it. My heart leaped as he did so and all I could do at that moment was stare in astonishment.

"E—Erik..." I muttered and placed a hand on his head when I felt he was lingering too much on the spot.

'Such silky, smooth hair, ' a part of me remarked, but that wasn't the current issue I was to deal with. It was Erik and the truth he had just shared with me.

Slowly, he removed himself, straightening back to meet me face-to-face. "Will you forgive me?" was what he said.

Well, I'll be damned. I never ever expected that he would say that contrite word.

Through his repentant eyes, I saw flashbacks of our past; our chance encounter that consequently ended me in the hospital.

"I—I have already forgiven you, Erik, " I whispered softly, realizing that there was no reason to harbor any ill feelings towards him. "You did keep your promise that you wouldn't kill me, " I added in a mocking tone.

This was my little way of lowering the tension between us, but I guess he just ignored it because he simply closed his eyes and breathed in deeply; a content smile appearing in the faintest second on his face.

"Then I am relieved of my guilt, " he spoke.

When he opened his eyes back, the sadness in it had disappeared and was replaced with an emotion I knew all too well: gratitude. "Thank you, Daniella."

"You—you're welcome." I shifted in my seat, unable to bear the warmth in my upper abdomen that emanated from his fingers. He pulled out a bit enough to give me space, but both of his hands fastened at the armrests, imprisoning me subtly.

"Now tell me, why did you do it?" The tone of his voice had a lilt of curiosity, but of course, I didn't miss out the command in it.

"Do what?" I furrowed my brows, feigning innocence.

"Take the bullet that was meant for me."

I swallowed. Here is the question I dreaded to hear.

What am I to answer him when I don't even know why myself! Until now, I don't understand why I jumped to take the bullet for him.

Maybe it was because of my courageous reflexes? Maybe I was dumb to think that I was superwoman? Or maybe I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong man that I think I could heroically save? I just don't know why and I hope he could see that confusion in my eyes when I stared at him.

"I can't answer...I can't answer that Erik."

I don't like interrogations when I don't know the answer. More so, I don't like him interrogating me with those intense eyes, so I gathered all my balls up and decided to extricate myself from the pressure.

"I'm sorry, I...I think I should leave."

I pushed myself up, but he quickly set me back in place with a strong tug on my elbow.

Then, the mood changed all of a sudden.

I leaned against the back cushion and froze when Erik walled himself on top of me. One leg was on the floor while the other knelt on the sofa. His hand materialized underneath my back and pulled me up to meet him body to body.

Caressing my bottom lip with his thumb, he spoke in a slow, breathy voice.

"You can't dodge me now Daniella. We are not in the elevator, so no one can disturb us. We are not exchanging text messages, so you can't just ignore me easily. Now, answer me."

"Your cellphone is vibrating, " I pointed out abruptly when I felt the vibration of his phone in his jeans pocket.

"Ignore it."

“It must be an emergency.”

“I said ignore it.” He leaned closer as if to kiss me, and me, unable to bear the warmth of his breath, turned my face to the side.

“Answer me, Daniella, ” he sought again. His hand that had caressed my bottom lip earlier now raked my hair.

“I don’t...I don’t know why,” I replied with lips trembling.

“Look at me in the eyes, ” he commanded. I shuddered when he grazed his fingers on my throat sensually.

“Erik, please let me go.”

“Look. At. Me. Daniella.”

I did. Because of the sternness of his voice, I did, but in a sudden bold move, he lifted my back a bit, secured my head in place, and crashed his lips on mine.

As a natural reflex, my hands pushed his chest back, but he only tightened his embrace and pushed his weight towards me so I ended up sandwiched by him and the cushion.

His tongue dipped inside my mouth. I moaned in response.

Then an explosion happened, inside me that is, from these two bombs that I have kept so long in my heart and in my mind since last year.

Erik had kissed me twice, thrice but he had only detonated them now after I knew of the truth. Yeah, and it was because I honestly harbored unexpected feelings for that nameless man who turned out to be him.

Realizing there was no turning back, I reciprocated his kisses, dueled with his tongue for languorous minutes until we were breathless. The force and the heat were the same as that in the elevator and the anteroom, but now the pleasure heightened.

I gasped when he withdrew to trail kisses on my neck. His tongue, oh his tongue, hot and wet licked me where no man had ever done before. I closed my eyes feeling a rush of pleasure flood inside me.

“Daniella...” he breathed into my ear. “Your life is mine. Since the beginning, you are mine.”

“Mmnhh...”

Yes, me, Ms. Daniella émile Rosecraft, after hearing those words, finally succumbed to this man’s touch.

I lifted my chest up to offer him myself. In the back of my head, I wanted him to tear my blouse away and make good with my already aching breasts. He was being a gentleman however and proceeded to slowly, agonizingly suckle at my skin.

I raked his hair with my fingers while he, after devouring my neck, slid lower and lower into the half-exposed valley of my breasts. He ventured a hand under my pencil skirt up to my burning thigh and I would have opened my legs wider if not for...

"ERIK!"

A loud, panicked voice boomed inside the room right after I heard the main door forcefully opened.

The pleasure that collected inside me from Erik's caresses instantly drained and replaced with confusion and alertness.

Who the hell interrupted us?! My mind shouted after he hurriedly removed himself from me whilst I fixed my blouse right.

Briefly, we exchanged glances; mine was of surprise while his was of displeasure.

In a split-second, he took the silver gun from the holster and pointed it at the intruder.

"Son of a— Put that gun down! And don't glare at me, Prez! It is your fault you ignored my call!" I heard the man said and when I stood up from the sofa, I saw Rohan standing at the threshold with Karl behind him who seemed to be catching his breath.

"Oh shit, Daniella is with you?!" he stated watching me with surprised eyes. "No wonder you didn't answer my call."

"What the fuck is it that you want Rohan?" Erik butted in before I could say hi to the guru. I saw his finger shift inside the trigger, ready to fire it, and added, "This better be good or else..."

Rohan visibly cleared his throat. "Well, uhm... Karl!" He turned to his colleague quickly and pushed him into the front. "Karl, buddy. You tell him."

"Ah, h—hi Daniella, " Karl stammered to greet me. I gave him a nod and a small smile, but then Erik, in his rude self, interrupted. "Spit it out, Webmaster."

"Prez!" Karl jerked nervously. He took a deep breath, looked at Rohan warily, and then started in a not-so-calm voice. "Well, uh, Prez... its, you know... the situation...uhm..."

"It's fine, " I heard Erik say. He looked at me with a knowing smile growing slowly in his lips. "Daniella is clear. She knows everything."

"She does?" Both Rohan and Karl simultaneously said.

“Focus on the matter men, ” Erik reminded.

I saw Rohan nudge at Karl and then the latter frowned before explaining whatever situation he was trying to say.

“Iopata... Mr. Sergio Svaneti. Your...your fath—”

“Skip it, ” once again, Erik butted in, but at least this time, lowered the gun down.

Karl, looking relieved, stepped forward and continued, “I tracked his trails Prez and found that he is here...in Lotus Spade, right now for a brief, very brief visit.”

From my vantage point, Erik’s clenched jaw was clear. He placed the silver gun back in its house and looked at me apologetically.

“Daniella...”

“I know, ” I cut in, embracing myself. “You need not say anymore.”

After a long sigh, he closed the space between us and cupped my face.

“I’ll see you later?”

I shook my head gently. “You know I won’t be waiting.”

“Then, I will just have to wake you up.”

I grinned. “We will see then.”

He gave me a kiss. Yep, a kiss in the forehead. One that was chaste but full of promise and of course, it swelled my heart. It swelled as it did back in the past when he held the white handkerchief and cleaned my fingers.

With no more words spoken, the three of them left leaving me alone in Erik’s room. I sat back in the sofa where not a minute ago almost became the witness of our passion and from there closed my eyes and reminisced each stroke of his hand in my skin, each flick of his tongue in my mouth, and each blessed sensation that he bestowed as he touched me sensually.

I almost gave myself to him back then and I know that I wouldn’t regret it if it did happen, contract be damned.

Chapter 26 - The Injured President

~ Daniella ~

“Then, I will just have to wake you up.”

That’s what Erik said but yeah, it didn’t happen really until I woke up in my bed with the early morning sunlight assaulting my eyes.

It’s not like I expected anything to— okay... to be honest, well, I really did expect something to happen to me and Erik last midnight, so I was a bit (just a bit) disappointed that he didn’t visit me at all.

I wondered why as I sat in my bed groaning and massaging my head from a sleepless night, and then it hit me. Karl did mention about Lotus Spade last night and by the mere name of it, it all brought me down to one conclusion — that maybe, possibly Erik and the others went to the nightclub and do what most mercenaries do — attack. And an attack in my head means guns, blood, and more guns.

Hurriedly, I pranced out of my bed and took a quick shower. With a new ensemble of stretchable slim-fit jeans and a plain white tee, I raced to Erik’s bedroom. The main door was slightly opened, unusually, so I grazed inside with my hands involuntarily shaking.

I felt afraid honestly, of what possible things that could have happened. Knowing Erik enough, to break his word was unlike him, so there must be some kind of reason why he wasn’t able to visit me.

The receiving room looked the same, but the minibar didn’t. It was jam-packed with used glasses, some still contained of liquor while the others empty. It had bottles and bottles of Smirnoff exhausted of its contents all grouped in the side of the counter.

I raised a brow when I saw the peculiarity of the mess. Surely, Erik didn’t hold a party here last night, but with all the pieces of evidence, what was I supposed to assume?

“Erik?” I called out tentatively, holding my right hand against my chest. There was no answer, so I decided to proceed to his bedroom.

From there, my suspicion and fears were confirmed. With wide eyes, I gasped as I behold the sight before me.

Suri was sitting at the edge of the bed; her hands were in gloves while she held a bloody gauze. A tray of medical supplies and equipment were near her. Amano was right beside it, standing and

offering her a bowl of water. Vincent was stationed near the balcony looking beyond the early morning sky while Rohan was sitting in a leather wingback chair near the bed with his bandaged arms crossed and a scowl on his face.

While Erik... yes, him, was resting in the bed, topless, with the duvet pulled up to his waist and four big pillows propped up behind him. He had a superficial but nasty-looking burn wound in his left shoulder running down to his wrist, and some two or three small to medium-sized lacerations on the same side of his torso. It was cleanly stapled intact. He seemed to be sleeping; his face blank of any expression.

"Mi Senorita, " Enrique, who I just noticed behind the door, called out to me. He smiled, but it was a feeble attempt. No matter how he beams me his royal smile, it didn't hide the fact that he looked worn out and sad of something. I didn't miss out on the square gauze taped along his jaw, but I decided to ignore it.

"Enrique, " I responded, and with the volume of my voice, all of the occupants in the room turned to look at me.

"Daniella, " both Rohan and Vincent said.

Suri gave me a weak smile, but then returned to attending Erik's wound.

"Wh—what happened Vince?" I asked directly as soon as he came beside me.

He attempted to give me a reassuring embrace, but I pivoted to the side to avoid it. I just placed a hand on his elbow and gave him a confused look.

"We had a few setbacks while cornering the enemy, " he illuminated for me.

I frowned at him and then drew my eyes to the still unconscious Erik. "And him? Why is he like that?" I asked with quivering breaths, but little by little, anger was building inside me. Burning anger directed not to the people looking at me with expectant eyes, but to this unconscious man.

This sly fox was supposed to be omnipotent. Being the President of their elite group, he was supposed to be dripping of badass-ness, to be excellent with his predatory skills, and to exercise caution with their operation. After the incident last year, he wasn't supposed to show me his weak, helpless side but here he was, begging me to come to his side and nurse him.

What the hell happened? I couldn't fathom why their President lay with this burn wound while some of them got only a scratch.

"He...was in the blast radius of the bomb Daniella. He took in most of the injuries."

Injuries? Were there more to these wounds that I couldn't see? God, I hope not.

“And why are you guys here? There’s a building called hospital. That’s where you are supposed to bring him!”

I know I was panicking, but I was also surprised with myself how I raised my voice to my fellow Club members. They seemed not to mind though and even looked that they agreed with me as they nodded their heads slowly.

“We wanted him sent in the hospital Daniella, but he insisted to be brought here, ” Vincent explained. “Don’t worry about this though. Suri and Amano are the Club’s medical personnel. They take care of our injuries.”

“I can see that.” I watched Suri and from there, we exchanged sisterly smiles and nods.

“But what I don’t understand is why? I know that your President is stubborn, but why does he have to insist on staying here?”

“Daniella.”

To my surprise, Erik’s raspy voice came out. I hurriedly directed my stare to him.

I thought he was sleeping or out of sorts?

“Except for you, everyone…” he drawled without even opening his eyes, “would you be so kind as to vacate my bedroom?”

I heard Vincent visibly clear his throat, while the rest of the gang, after exchanging furtive glances, nodded in unison.

“I’ll see you around Senorita Daniella, ” spoke Enrique at my side. I nodded at him and to the others when they walked past me.

Suri, who was the last person to leave along with Amano, stopped before me. She took both of my hands and clasped it. “Maybe you can change his mind, Dani. He really needs to undergo x-ray and scans in the hospital, just to make sure, ” she stated with enough concern in her eyes.

I don’t think I have the power to convince him, but I might as well try.

“I’ll see what I can do, ” I replied. “Thank you Suri.”

After they left and the door tightly shut, I approached Erik without a word but jerked when he opened his eyes and his piercing gaze fell on me.

“Water. I need water, ” he spoke.

My brow flinched a little. “Ah, of course.” I turned around and went to a tray I noticed near the bedroom door. There was a pitcher of water and an empty glass readied along with morphine and paracetamol tablets.

The room’s atmosphere somehow turned heavy. It wasn’t like this earlier when Vincent and the others were present. I don’t know what possibly could have made this but I have a sinking feeling it was because of our imminent contact.

With the glass of cold water in hand, I stood near his bedside, waiting for him to open his eyes again.

He did and said, “Do it for me, Daniella. I can’t lift my arm yet.”

Again, my brows twitched, but I sucked up the hesitation inside me and confidently sat in his side. After all, I am his personal maid. To take care of him while he is indisposed is my duty.

“Erik, ” I spoke once I neared the glass in his mouth. I leaned close to support his weight with a hand on his back; the whole time his stare was screwed on me.

“Stop staring and drink the damn water, Master.”

A slow smile grew in the corner of his mouth before he drank the liquid halfway.

“Thank you, ” he said once I placed him back against the pillows.

“You’re welcome.”

I readied to stand up, but Erik immediately stopped me by throwing his left arm on my lap.

“I thought you can’t lift your arms yet?” I arched a brow.

“Arm Daniella. I said arm…” he drawled. “My injured arm. My left is just fine. It can move it, see?”

Then he grazed a hand on my waist and squeezed whatever love handle he had amassed.

I shot him a cold glare. For an ill man, he sure is still playful.

“Alright Erik, that’s enough! If you’re playing nurse with me, then you better keep that hand of yours to yourself.”

I swatted his hand away and that made him wince a bit.

“I can’t. I’m sorry. I am just hopelessly in love with my nurse.”

“You—” I paused, instantly silenced by the rogue word. We met eye-to-eye, but I ignored the sudden flip of my belly when he looked at me affectionately. “You should go to the hospital then, ” I

continued once I was able to compose myself. Standing up, I paced around the bed intent on returning the glass on the tray.

“I’m not a decrepit, Daniella. I don’t go to hospitals, ” was his reply.

“But that injury of yours sure needs more TLC.” I glanced at him briefly before putting the object in its position.

“This injury is nothing as compared to the others before it. It will heal in one week. And besides, your TLC is enough for me.”

I paused and opened my mouth to fill enough air in my lungs to calm myself.

Cool. Cool Daniella. He is okay. He is fine. He is still the same Erik you know him to be and he was not confessing to you at all!

“Huh, maybe that’s why you insisted on staying here?” I turned to face him and placed a hand on my waist.

“Correct, ” with a straight face, he said.

My heart immediately jumped towards heaven.

Clearing my throat, I ambled back near his bedside and stood there crossing my arms. “Well then, I’m sorry to say this baby, but you’re wrong. Your burn wounds may be nothing to you, but you should get your bones checked. I don’t know why Suri stressed on it, but if the blast you received is as strong as I think it is, then there’s a possibility you have broken something.”

“I didn’t break something, Daniella, ” he stressed. “But if you’re worried, I might as well tell you that mine can stand as good as the Eiffel tower, or even more.”

“Huh.” I rolled my eyes, trying (the best as I possibly could) to avoid looking below his waist and ignore the sexual insinuation he was putting in.

My cheeks immensely heat up though and my throat, with no real reason, dried. It made me think of the subtle promise we had on each other last night about continuing where we left off. If not for this accident, it would have happened, and he seemed to realize it quite clearly as his stare kept on singeing my skin.

“Bones, Erik. I mean bones. Not a muscle, ” I clarified in a gruff.

He grinned at me, although weakly. Amidst the fact that his roguishness was still intact, at least with his weak grin, I know that he was still not feeling his normal self. In the meantime, he becomes my patient and that means I ought to give him TLC in words and in deeds.

“Well now, as far as my first aid knowledge can give me, burn wounds are supposed to be dressed with a low-adherent dressing with antibiotic effect. Yours is still not covered. Do you want me to?”

“No, leave it as is Daniella, ” he shook his head. “Suri had already applied a topical ointment on them. It is her and Amano’s personal medicine mixture which works like magic.”

“It is bothersome to look at though.” I sighed.

“You can’t stomach it?” He arched a clean brow.

“I can stomach it. I am just worried about you.”

From there, he closed his eyes slowly and took a deep breath. When he returned to look at me, I stiffened due to the intensity in his orbs.

“You bless me with your words, Daniella, ” he initially stated. “I wonder what I did to deserve you in my life. You have already jumped in front of a bullet for me. You can’t possibly become a worrywart on my account. You are too precious for that.”

Too much! The swelling in my heart is too much!

“What happened to you anyway?” I jumped into another subject swiftly, unable to keep up with the feels he was giving me. “Erik, why is it that you have most of the injuries and the others—”

“Little to none?” he supplied.

“Yes, why?”

He looked down on his (Holy Mother of—) abs, acting as if contemplating for a moment, but his face turned gloomy all of a sudden.

“Obsessed with bringing a certain man down, I pursued him to the rooftop of Lotus Spade.” I allowed myself to sit near his knees to at least hear his words properly. “As Karl said, this man’s visit was very brief so when we arrived there last night, it was already too late.”

I remained silent and nodded for him to go on when he looked at me.

“When I got there, his helicopter had taken off and one of his bodyguards dropped a short-range bomb on the roof.”

“Hence, your wounds, ” I conveniently condensed.

“Yes.”

I frowned at him a bit and huffed in disappointment. “Is the man really that important for you to be careless like that Erik? I don’t know a lot about you, but I can see you as a cautious man. I believe you know better than to expose yourself easily like that.”

“That man is my father, Daniella.”

I blinked and swallowed.

“What?”

“His nature, personality, and wicked ways are the reason why so many families are broken and left homeless. He is the boss of Iopata Bratva.”

Shit. Everything just turned complicated.

“If you’re his son, then why did he attempt to kill you?”

Confused yet curious, I placed a comforting hand on his left thigh. This was a revelation he somehow doesn’t want to talk about for his eyes turned painful when he spoke, “Oh, but he doesn’t know I still exist, Daniella.”

Chapter 27 - The Touch of the Master

~ Erik ~

Suffering.

That's the only word I know since I learned of my amazing family history.

First and foremost, I knew already that my mother was ra*ped by my father. I knew that before she died of childbirth because of hemorrhage complications, she named me Erik. The Dominican nuns raised me in their convent afterward and all the while I thought I was an orphan. I never knew about my father and his whereabouts, and the nuns weren't open to discussing the topic.

I don't give a damn about it though.

I was content with my life as an innocent errand boy until my father's goons came and took me away by force when I was fourteen.

I was whisked away to a secluded location and subjected to rows and rows of immense torment my tormentor would call a 'preparation' for my eventual life ahead.

Mr. Hyde, as his men mostly called him, taught me how to wield different kinds of high-powered weapons. He taught me how to use a blade and even a mere pen in decapitating the heads of men. He taught me martial arts in the most brutal of ways.

He stripped me bare countless of times in more ways than one. First was through my human emotions, and replaced it with hopelessness, hatred, and anger.

Second was my innocence. He would make me watch how he torments and kill captured government soldiers out of sport.

Third, was the virginity of my mind. He would bring sluts in the hideout and all of them would fuck in front of me. He would order me to ra*pe poor, helpless maidens his men had detained and when I refuse, which I always do, he would force me to watch when they do the appalling thing instead. He had commanded me to jack myself off and take amusement when I do so. It was an abhorring thing to do especially in front of this sick man, but at least this way, I was able to release the uninvited sexual frustration inside of me.

He never missed out reminding me about how great my family lineage is. That my father is the boss of a dangerous, world-renowned mafia organization, Iopata Bratva. That I will become his heir if I pass all of the hurdles thrown at me. That my father named me Nikolai, my Svaneti name, and not just a wimpy Erik. And that I will become a rich, filthy rich man — if I live that is.

Admittedly, these physical, mental, and emotional torments became my ally. It hardened me. Saved me from being nauseatingly fragile. Saved me from turning into a cold, heartless man. Or was I already one?

I have never seen my father in person even once. Even when I turned eighteen and got the Svaneti Family rank tattoo in my neck. Even a call from him or a damn letter, nothing. But it wasn't like I desired a father-figure. My father, for me, is the devil incarnate himself and he deserved to die with no funeral, no coffin, no prayers, and no visitors; just maggots and worms keeping his worthless body company.

He thought me dead this whole time. He never realized that I survived from drowning in the dam after one of Mr. Hyde's sick drills when I turned nineteen.

With my clever wits and resourcefulness, and a passing woodsman who took care of me temporarily, I was able to return to the convent months after. Mr. Armando Fancii, a military general benefactor of the convent took me in his house and adopted me like his own son. He helped me cope up with my past life by sending me in military school. He said that my lethal hands would be useful eventually and I believed it so when I became the Fancy Pants Club president.

"Oh, but he doesn't know that I still exist, Daniella, " I said with a pained expression.

"I'm sorry, Erik. I wouldn't even dare ask why, " was Daniella's comment after I revealed her a slice of truth in my dark life. She extracted her hand away from my thigh and crossed it with the other in her chest.

"Don't, " I shook my head. "It brings too many bad memories, Daniella. You would think me a monster if I tell you."

She looked determined all of a sudden. "I could never think that way with you, Erik."

"Even when you know that I kill people?" I added.

"They are bad men are they not? Your actions are justifiable, along with Vincent and the others."

"Indeed, " I agreed and smiled, feeling momentarily proud of the nature of my job. "But that still doesn't change the fact that I aim to kill my own father." I pointed at her.

She paused for a moment and drew her eyes on the floor. If I wasn't injured, I would have taken the liberty of pulling her face back to look at me.

After breathing deeply, she looked at me again. "If you think that is wise. I am not going to stop you, " she said.

"Don't look at me like that Daniella." Out-of-the-blue I stressed out after feeling the concern in her hazels.

“Like what?” she replied.

“Like you worry about my future. Just as I’ve told you, I don’t like you turning into a worrywart for me.”

“Huh, ” she twisted her lips and glanced at the ceiling. “At least I care for you.”

“You do?” I quickly asked, taken aback by her words.

Her eyes rounded and her mouth dropped. “Wait, did I actually say that?”

“Yes, you did.” My eyes smoldered immediately.

As if she was burned, she speedily stood up from the bed, but I was way ahead of her. I grabbed her left elbow and pulled her back to sit.

“Daniella don’t go!” I shouted, but then sharp pain lanced through my sides where the lacerations were. “Argh!” I doubled-over as a result.

“Erik, stay down!” Daniella chastised. With one knee pressed on the mattress, she raced to put me back against the pillows with her tender hands on my chest and nape respectively. “My God, you’re not a vampire! You don’t heal quickly!”

Her nearness ignited the desire within me then. The pain in my wounds I ignored as the smell of her shampoo and the softness of her skin called to my senses and brought it in a high. My sense of touch — namely my fingers — wanted to take part in it too so I did what I have always wanted to do: touch her.

“Daniella, ” I whispered in her ear once I pulled her close by the waist. She squeaked when I slipped the same hand inside her tee and ran fingers in her spine.

“Erik, ” she breathed, narrowing her eyes at me as if she was slipping out of consciousness.

Mouth just inches away, I whispered, “Let me touch you, Daniella.”

She breathed in my scent with her mouth parted and answered, “You’re injured.”

“Just let me touch you. I want to touch you.” My intentions were clarified when I placed a gentle pressure down her belly, near the button of her jeans.

She gasped when she felt my fingers advancing down without effort.

“Errr-ik...” I smirked when I heard her slurred speech. That was my cue to know that she was indeed blazing inside.

Intending to intensify it more, I lapped on her neck, suck a bit of skin, and twirled my tongue around it. She whimpered in response and pressed herself more to accommodate me.

“Erik, why do you do this to me…?” was her breathy question.

I stopped and pulled back to look at her in the eye. Damn, hers were desirous.

“Because I want you Daniella, and I take pleasure in pleasuring you,” I replied with a serious face.

She bit her bottom lip whilst tracing the seam of my lips with her thumbs. I opened my mouth and took in one thumb to nip it.

“Then touch me…” With eyes closed, she announced. I could see no hint of hesitation in her face at all, only desire — pure, unrestrained desire. “Touch me Erik.”

Obliging to her words, I advanced my fingers further and when it hit the shaved spot, I traced the delicate lips of her virgin rosebud from the front to the back. I acquainted with it. Made a mental picture of it. Claimed it as mine alone, but fuck, she was dripping wet already.

“Mnnnhh!” she moaned and sought my lips at that moment. I groaned when I felt the eagerness of her kiss.

Multitasking myself, I fitted my middle finger in the fissure. Then, a second one followed suit. Then, the third one. She bit my lip in response and then withdrew abruptly and moaned a beautiful one syllable.

What a sensitive woman. I grinned with delight. I alone have the right to see her writhe in pleasure.

I wanted to give her more by kneading her breasts, but since my other hand had a burn wound, I was content instead of giving attention to her womanhood.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t able to visit you last night,” I stated as I watched her close her eyes in bliss.

“It was…nothing,” she answered.

“No, it isn’t.” I continued to slide my fingers in and out of her wet folds. She acted entranced with it. “You don’t even know how much torment you are giving me Daniella.”

Then I pinched her clitoris. She clamped her legs in reaction and let out another glorious moan.

“Ah, Erik!”

“Let me hear you moan Daniella. More! They are music in my ears!”

I rubbed on the sensitive nub vigorously. She grabbed my neck as if to strangle me but then pressed her forehead against mine.

“Erik, shit! What are you doing to me?!”

“Making you come, my fiery nymph. Making you climax for the first time.”

“Oh my, ah!”

Amidst half kneeling in front of me, she was able to arch her back. She sexily whimpered as her juices river out into three of my fingers. The whole time, I stared at her, taking in the lovely scene that was her first orgasm.

Seconds later, after she rode her euphoric wave, she dropped into me like a pancake, spent and panting; her mouth against my neck tattoo.

“Was it good, Daniella?” Shit, I just had to ask.

“It was…” In ragged breaths, she answered. “It was. Fuck. Superb Erik.”

I proudly smiled after hearing it.

For now, I settled on dragging my hands out of her jeans, making a temporary goodbye. I didn’t trespass her delicious cave yet. It can wait. It was made for my c0ck to pierce, not my fingers.

We kissed again and fucked our mouths, penetrating each other’s palate before I told her, “Lean on me, Daniella.”

“But your wounds.” She cautiously placed her head on my chest.

“Don’t bother them,” I said.

She obliged and leaned more on the unaffected side whilst dragging her legs up into the mattress. I looped one arm on her waist, but goddammit, if it wasn’t for my wounds, I would have embraced her tightly together with the other.

“Daniella, tilt your head more for your master. I want to kiss you,” I ordered once my body demanded more of her taste.

When she raised her head up, I was hell-bent on giving her the best kiss of her life, but then she pulled away and glanced at me in confusion.

“Erik, your—”

“Don’t mind it,” I said when her hand unintentionally traveled below my waist. She must have felt the slight tug of the duvet that’s why she knew my eager member was aching.

“It’s so hard and erect,” she pointed out innocently.

I frowned at her. “Fuck, don’t use obvious words woman.”

“How will you answer to that?” Her eyes stared at the tall bulge.

“It will soften eventually.” I dragged in a heavy breath. Damn, this is tormenting me.

“But not before someone comes in and see that your duvet had housed a cobra.”

She crossed her arms and straightened to look at me.

“A cobra huh?” I smirked at her, but then it disappeared when I saw her shove the duvet down my knees.

“Daniella?” I called out to her, my heart thumping loudly.

“I’m returning the favor, Erik.” To my utter surprise, she straddled on my thigh and placed her gorgeous locks on one side. She bent down after giving me a predatory look and from there, all of my body parts, no matter how injured it was, turned haywire.

Chapter 28 - How Deep Can She Go?

~ Daniella ~

Erik's c0ck.

Check all that applies: Veined. Stone-hard. Slick with pre-cum. Smooth. Mouth-wateringly huge.

When I pulled his yoga pants, Erik junior was exactly what I imagine a man's cock would be. It greeted me with a slight twitch and my mouth could have swallowed an eager saliva in reaction.

Such a feat in my life what I am about to do, but it is without hesitation or doubt. I wanted to return the favor on Erik, but I doubt my hands would be enough pumping on his shaft. My mouth was a better way to do it. But honest to goodness, I wanted to taste him too. Although this would be my first time, I felt already daring enough to be this intimate with him.

And I thank Ericka's erotica movies for this.

When I held it, two-palmed, its owner growled in delight in front of me. I looked at him and grinned.

"Shit," he cursed, moving to reach my hands, but was impeded with the pain in his torso.

"Stay still Master," I reproached, giving him an I-dare-you look.

"Dammit Daniella, are you trying to kill me?" he complained, yet there was desire flaring in his eyes. I know that he wouldn't want me to stop.

"T.L.C.," I pointed out as I pumped one hand along his length while my other massaged the inside of his left thigh. He released a guttural growl again; clenching his jaw as he closed his eyes. "You said you need TLC Erik. Relax. You're my patient."

"*Derr'mo*," he cursed and shivered. I found the foreign word sexy in my ears. From my high school classmates, I have learned that this Russian word meant 'Shit'.

I wonder, was he beyond the tipping point that he could no longer keep up with English words?

For him to be this way, it made me feel proud that I could elicit this kind of response from him. It boosted up my confidence and it challenged me even further to push out my non-experienced comfort zone.

Relaxing his back against the pillows, he closed his eyes and released a heavy breath.

I pumped my hand again, and again, and again like a machine gun, locking his sheath like a vice-grip with my hot palm. He'd lift his knee from time to time and curse another string of Russian words, but remained obedient still.

The way he looked putty in front of me — small beads of sweat trickling his lean abdomen and his forehead — it made me aroused again. I felt myself turning wet, aching to share the action, but for now, my attention was on Erik and his pleasure. As I said, I am his nurse and he, my patient, and patients always come first.

And besides, I don't think I am that ready to act wanton and boldly impale myself with his erection. I am still a virgin for heaven's sake. Not only would it be painful, but it would also be awkward and unfair on his part too with him being injured and all.

After squeezing the smooth length and playing with that sensitive vein at the dorsal part with my thumb, I leaned down; lips protruded to give his swelling head a peck. The contact made him ball his fists and his clean-shaven balls jerk.

"Daniella, fuck!" was his erotic cry.

I ignored him and went to brace myself.

One.

Two.

Three deep breaths and I brazenly eased his erection inside my mouth. The sky opened up and proclaimed, 'Hallelujah.'

I heard Erik groan loudly and solidify my name like a tattoo in his mouth. "Daniella. Daniella. Daniella!"

I contained myself from releasing a proud smirk. Never have I heard a man enunciate my name as Erik did.

Wet tongue against his sensitized skin, I pumped twice, down and up, down and up. It made him tense.

His c0ck, if it was even possible, hardened, and lengthened more. I felt its head immediately touch my throat. I pulled back surprised by this kind of reaction and saw Erik's lustful eyes on me.

"You torment me too much, Daniella," he stated, his breathing fast but controlled.

"And you tormented me too much earlier, Erik. What goes around comes around." I narrowed my eyes at him, teasing.

After glancing at his burn wound with regret and disappointment, he turned his stare on me with a dash of naughtiness. “True, so it is only fitting that I relish the banquet you already prepared for me,” he said.

I gulped.

“Yes, it is a tempting offer Erik, but for now, this feast,” I clutched at his now-wet di*ck and drove it once; he tensed again and groaned, “needs to be concentrated.”

I proceeded to work on it again; his increased length a mouthful on me. I licked the sides, the front, the back, and focused on his head and base alternatively.

In reality, I have never seen myself do this audacious act, but this man — this challenging man — was attracting the moxie out of me. Lust and attraction played a great part, but I believe my feelings for him could have added a big share.

“Daniella, you ought to pull away because I am going to lose it!” he commanded, but I didn’t listen.

Continuing my slews with more intent, I didn’t even notice he bent a bit and grabbed a handful of my hair. He didn’t pull them at all as what I have initially expected, but instead tenderly held them amidst in his climax.

“Daniella!” he shouted, coming in powerful waves fit for a King. With three hard thrusts, he ejaculated inside my mouth.

This is my first time doing a blowjob so of course, it was natural for me to be surprised when his milky seed burst out straight into my throat. In reflex, I had to swallow all of it, but I didn’t feel disgusted at all. It was even enlightening.

Once I milked him dry, I straightened myself up, still straddling his thigh. He attentively wiped my lips with his own fingers and stared at me with eyes half-lidded from his post-orgasm.

“You sure know how to handle a gun, Daniella,” he commented breathlessly as I returned his yoga pants to the right position.

“I don’t,” I answered taking it literally as I tucked in a lock of hair in my ear. He contained his laugh from bursting then.

“Okay,” he looked at me darkly, “then I’ll teach you how to handle a gun. I want that you can defend yourself from another man’s advances. Remember that only I can touch you.”

With my right thumb, I wiped the little wet in the corner of my mouth and shied from looking at him. “I’ll remember,” I replied, blushing.

Yeah, I will remember alright. His liquid passion clinging in my throat was enough to remind me of that.

Erik smirked, no doubt pleased.

“How is your kickboxing training by the way my Sweet Rose?”

I blinked with the lightness of the conversation. It’s as if we had a mutual understanding not to talk dirty.

Yeah, because if we did, then we might probably head off to second base, which wouldn’t be convenient at all considering his injured status.

“It’s doing great. Armelia says I am learning pretty fast,” I answered him with cheerfulness.

He nodded once. “Can I test you then?”

Shrugging my shoulders, I scooted in his side. “Anytime when you’re fully recovered, Erik.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” he said. He looped the unaffected arm around my waist and pulled me close to him. Ignoring the fact that I just gave him fellatio, he leaned near me and aimed for my lips but a knock on the door interrupted what would have been his daring kiss.

I darted out of the bed immediately.

“I’m sorry Prez, am I interrupting something?” Mr. Ian’s head peeked in and watched me and his President with concerned eyes.

I cleared my throat to answer, but Erik was quick to fill in. “It’s okay Ian, we are temporarily done. What is it that you want?”

In the back of my head, I was silently taking note of how he highlighted the word temporary. Yeah, this is something that I am going to look forward to in the near future.

Mr. Ian took it as a common response though. He stepped inside, adjusting his suit on the way, and announced, “Mr. Armando Fancii is here to see you, Prez.”

Armando Fancii. Is the man his step-father? I glanced at Erik and gave him a confused face.

He smirked at me and then turned to his aid with a hand gesture. “Then, please let him in.”

The butler bowed in compliance. He opened the door wider to admit a man who I believe is the Armando Fancii.

“Father,” hearing Erik say that only clarified my assumption.

"Erik," Mr. Fancii replied in a deep, gravelly voice. He wore an elegant suit, pretty much the usual that one sees in most businessmen, but he had military badges (four to be precise) hanging in his overcoat. An uptight man — that's my first impression of him.

"Father, please meet Ms. Daniella Rosecraft, the new club member."

"Why, hello to you dear. I didn't know that my son here is occupied. I wouldn't have come instead." He smiled at me widely and opened his arms ready to embrace me. I was taken aback by his sudden jolly disposition and the innuendo he was highlighting, but in the end, I accept his hug of greeting.

Yeah, what I say about him being uptight sounds definitely wrong.

"No, no it is okay Mr. Fancii. I was just leaving," I stated once I pulled out from his embrace. At least this way, he wouldn't feel my nervousness. He freaking doesn't even know that I gave his magnificent son a BJ only moments ago.

"I see." He nodded and then dragged a mischievous eye towards Erik's way.

"Well, uhm, I should go. It is a pleasure to meet you by the way." I gave him my mega-watt smile.

"Same here, Ms. Rosecraft."

Before I exited the room, I turned to Erik and said, "Uhm, I'll be going now Prez."

He smiled at me; eyes curving in amusement. "I'll call you later, Sweet Rose."

My cheeks instantly burned by the way he named me. I had heard him say that countless of times provided my ears were the only witness, but with his father around, it only meant that he didn't intend on keeping our relationship (whatever this is) a secret.

Once I left his bedroom, I went straight to my own room with my heart pounding like crazy. I dropped in the mattress clutching a fluffy pillow against my chest like I was just stricken by Cupid's love arrow.

Erik and I...

Yes, he and I had just discovered a whole new horizon, and I know that this one was opening so fast that I bet I couldn't stop anymore — not that I wanted it to stop.

***

A knock on the door sounded after lunch. Considering the time, I had expected it to be Mr. Ian, but no it wasn't. When I opened my main door, what greeted me was a worry-looking Suri.

"Hey, Suri, what's up?" I asked, standing in the threshold.

"Daniella, uhm, can I come in? I need to talk to you."

Although I found it unusual a bit, I still stepped backward and said, "Sure, come in."

She walked straight into the sectional sofa and sat there with her hands clasped on her lap. I didn't bother about closing the door. I was too engrossed with her concerned face that my attention on basic actions was shut off.

"What's wrong?" I asked right then. Something was really bothering her and I aimed to find out what it was.

"We need to go to New York," was her initial statement. I raised a brow then and kept myself silent, allowing her to continue.

"Vincent says that for our safety, the two of us should go to New York."

"What do you mean safety?" With my heartbeat starting to rise, I sat on the sofa opposite hers.

Then, the aforementioned man, Vincent, suddenly appeared in the open door adjusting my concentration from Suri to him.

"You have to go to New York and stay there temporarily Daniella."

"I get that, but can you at least explain it to me why?"

I was getting nervous by the second. Dammit, in the back of my head what was whirling around were Erik and his wounds, and Erik and us, and the Club and the chateau, and again Erik and us.

"The incident in Lotus Spade last night brought about unsavory consequences. Our main objective on the nightclub was to only do surveillance and make sure that any Cloud Blue shipment from them would be halted. Our main objective against Iopata Bratva was to cripple and as much as possible annihilate the source. That was the reason why we headed off to Lotus Spade immediately after discovering that the boss was there. However, things got nasty, so we had no choice but to blow the nightclub along with their laboratory. It is in ashes now, Daniella."

He paused for a moment and then with a few strides, took a seat next to Suri with his elbows resting on his knee.

"Go on," I urged, feeling that there was still more to the story that he need let out.

"With their laboratory gone, we had a feeling that the Bratva is going to retaliate. They will make sure that the people who are responsible will pay. Unfortunately, this is where we come in. We may have taken measures last night to cover our identities but it is possible that they have other ways to discover who we are. Time can only tell when their intel pinpoints the Club."

"Hence, the concern of mine and Suri's safety?" I asked, scoffing lightly. "Then, how about you guys? Aren't you going to leave the chateau too?"

Vincent and Suri exchanged stares for a moment, then he proceeded to say, “The chateau needs our supervision, Daniella. Anyway, this is just a precautionary measure. Once we confirm from Luca that everything is clear, you two can return here.”

“And I reckon Erik knows about this?” I questioned, crossing my arms.

“Daniella, he was the one who suggested it,” was Suri’s reply.

Oh, yeah, why am I not surprised?

I subsequently released a defeated sigh. But then, a certain name sparked curiosity in me. “Who is this Luca by the way, Vincent?”

I saw Suri grew a smile and then the former who relaxed his back against the cushion.

“Luca Vitalis is the Club’s inside spy, Daniella. He has been working in ISA for ten years as their trusted intel on all things mafia-related in Russia. Just two years ago, he was able to infiltrate Iopata and gained their boss' trust. He gives us all of the updates aside from our own researches.”

“I see,” was my understanding reply. It was a handful of information to process, but at least, I get the gist of it.

“Well now, I take it that you will agree on going with Suri in New York?”

I twisted my lips and looked skyward as if contemplating. “New York,” I murmured. “That’s where I live Vincent. How could I refuse?”

“That’s exactly what Erik expected to hear from you, Daniella. I bet he’d be happy,” Suri butted in.

Family. Friends. My work. A part of my life. My apartment. And my cat. I bet these were the things that Erik had considered that’s why he chose NY to be me and Suri’s temporary hideaway.

It does warm my heart a bit, but a part of me seemed saddened by this news and I know most, most certainly why.

“You will be leaving as soon as possible. This afternoon maybe once Ian confirms the flight schedule. The Club does have a private jet plane, but due to the circumstances, Erik and I cannot permit its use.”

“Okay,” I nodded.

“Once you get there, you have two choices. Either stay with Suri in her family’s townhouse or you return to your apartment. Whatever suits you well is fine with us.”

“Okay,” I nodded again.

“You’ll stay there until we call clearance of the situation, Daniella.”

"You mean, indefinitely. Okay." I bobbed my head in affirmation.

I know I wasn't supposed to overthink things through but I can't help it. With me going back to NY and stay there indefinitely, what strong reason do I have for me to return to the chateau when all things clear up?

Oh, yes, of course. My family emerald ring.

God, I almost forgot that this was the cause why I am stranded in the chateau for six months.

I smiled to myself thinking of it silently. I didn't expect that I would actually forget about it and it is all thanks to the man who turned out to be my savior.

"And oh, Daniella."

I looked up at Vincent with an expectant face.

"Keep everything about the Club a secret." His expression was soft but stern, waiting for my reply.

"You know I would even if you don't ask me to, Vince." I gave him a sly smile.

Suri (I don't know what came over her) nudged at Vincent's torso and gave him an I-told-you-so look.

I smiled at them, finding their comical actions a breather from our serious discussion awhile ago.

Then, as if on cue, Mr. Ian appeared in my doorway and called our attention, especially Vincent's.

"I have the flight tickets, Mr. Altair." He raised a hand midair and showed us the said objects.

"Good," Vincent said. "Give one each on Suri and Daniella."

Mr. Ian did so, and after handing the ticket to me, I immediately read the departure time.

"Three-thirty?" My brows rose up high.

"That's the earliest time I could get as per Erik's orders, Ms. Daniella," Mr. Ian explained.

"This is good Ian," Vincent interrupted. "So ladies, you better start packing now."

He stood up, but before he left, he took my right hand and kissed the back of it just like its predecessors.

"I'll see you soon Daniella. Please be safe in NY."

I smiled at him. "Yes, Vince. I will. Thank you. You guys should stay safe too. Don't go on blowing up things. And just so you know, I haven't toured the whole of the chateau yet."

He snapped his fingers and bobbed his head as if he was in jubilee. “Then I’ll give you my famous tour once you return here.”

I beamed a smile. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Another knock caught our attention and found that it was Amano. Immediately, Suri scrambled to her feet and went to his side.

“I’ll see you at the foyer by one-thirty Daniella,” said she before she stepped out of my room.

I nodded and waved at her.

Mr. Ian then cleared his throat loudly. Vincent and I looked at him, silent and waiting for what he was about to say.

“Uhm, Ms. Daniella. The President wants to see you in his room by the way.”

Then, as if on cue, I heard my cellphone ring inside my bedroom. It was a ringtone I had personally set-up for the one and only Erik, complete with vibration and a very loud volume.

“I better take this call,” said I as I stood up.

“Yeah, I think you should,” Vincent replied with a knowing smile. “I’ll leave you to it.”

“Thanks, Vince.”

After giving me a wink, he exited my room with Mr. Ian following behind. Once the door closed, I entered my bedroom and directly went to grab my still-ringing cellphone.

“Erik,” I answered almost breathlessly.

“You’ll be leaving soon, I want to see you one last time,” he spoke with a surprisingly calm voice. “Come to me, Daniella.”

“Ye—yeah… I’ll be right there,” was my reserved reply.

***

I went to Erik’s room with new clothes fit for travel: a Burberry trench coat with the same white tee and a new black legging. It was my sound choice since the stretchable jeans I wore this morning was…yeah, drenched.

When I stood in front of Erik’s bed, my cheeks burned because of two things. First, was his blatant perusal on me from head to foot. Second, was the fact that he was still shirtless.

“You look like you are excited to return to NY, Daniella,” was his first statement, looking partly distant.

A single twitch in my brows appeared finding his behavior unexpected. If I'm correct, I think he was displeased with my leaving.

"Considering the last-minute announcement, I didn't have that much time to be excited Erik," I told him the truth. "But you seem to behave badly about it even though you are the one who suggested it."

I narrowed my eyes at him, coaxing him to spill the beans. I am definitely not a psychiatrist so I am not good at reading his reverse actions.

A deep breath he released through his nose. It was loud enough for me to hear; enough for me to know that he was really in turmoil.

"You're right, I don't want you to go," he said, eyeing me intensely. "But I need to set aside my needs and wants and focus on my priorities, Daniella. You and your safety is my topmost priority."

I acted as if I wasn't celebrating upon hearing that; acting calm and composed when in fact I was dying inside to embrace him because of his words.

"Tha-thank you, Erik. You have my gratitude forever."

He smiled at me and then said, "Gratitude is easy to acquire Daniella. You have however the one thing I desire the most. I want it forever too, but since you are going away temporarily, I want to get that when you come back."

"What's this? A guessing game?" I stated, putting my hand on my right hip. I was damn confused with his riddle that it irked me a little.

"Partly, it is," he affirmed.

Prick.

When I didn't answer, he took something out from under his duvet and raised it up to show me.

"Here take this," he said as I stared at the medium-sized box wrapped in a fancy paper complete with a red ribbon in the center.

"What's inside that Erik?" My heart suddenly jumped out of excitement of the unknown.

He gave me a smirk and shook the box a little. "You'll know when you open it in New York." He raised it higher with his uninjured arm tempting me again. "Come and get it, Daniella."

But I held the temptation back (at least temporarily) and said, "You are not fooling around with me are you?"

"No. It is my gift. You'll find it really precious, I assure you."

With the way he looked at me, serious and all, and the fact that I was beyond my limit of backpedaling myself, I gave in and approached him with an outstretched arm.

As soon as I got a hold of it, I expressed my gratitude with a "Thanks," but Erik seemed not pleased with it for he quickly grabbed my elbow and pulled me in for an embrace.

My world of butterflies appeared once again just like earlier when he touched a sensitive part of me.

"Daniella, please be safe," he whispered near my left ear, softly, carefully, damn affectionately, and all other promising adverbs that ended with 'ly.'

Closing my eyes to inhale his scent, I answered with trembling lips, "I will. And you too Erik."

I fear for the chateau. I fear for the club members. I fear for the staff. And most especially, I fear for this man. Whatever made him decide that I and Suri should leave the chateau, I can only hope and pray that it won't be the cause of anyone's injuries or much worse, death.

Oh God, how I wished that this word didn't exist.

His heartbeat was in a marathon race with mine. I can feel them pounding against our chests. If it was even possible to join two heartbeats together, then ours would be the first in the line.

After hauling a heavy breath, he pulled away to cup my chin. Not waiting for him at all, I initiated our last kiss first wanting to take advantage of the time, and he eagerly reciprocated it holding nothing back.

We kissed. Yes, we kissed. We kissed like there was no tomorrow for both of us, which in a way...was the truth.

Chapter 29 - Between Distance and Hallucination

~ Daniella ~

“Mi hija!”

Mrs. Sofia, my family governess, said out aloud with wide eyes once I stepped inside my two-storey modern apartment. Wanting to surprise her, I didn’t use my apartment keys in order to get inside. I let her open the door for me and as expected, I got the right response — with a warm hug that could suffocate the life out of me.

“Tia Sofia! Oh my God! You look good!” I stated giving her a once-over when I was able to pull away. I never thought that my month-long absence could change the way I see her. There weren’t many wrinkles in her forehead at all, and the white hair that she used to tie into a bun was now replaced with a vibrant burgundy color in a short bob. She still wore the usual granny clothes though, but it was a welcoming sight for me.

“How have you been my child?” was her instant question, disregarding my observation of her.

“I’m doing great,” I beamed her a smile. “I see that you fed Paris well.” I stared at my Persian cat with great pride as it padded all the way into my feet.

“Of course, I would,” she nodded and smiled. “Your cat is just too precious to just be ignored.”

I crunched down and scooped my pet with both arms. “Hello baby,” I cooed, making silly puckered lips. “Are you behaving while I’m away?”

My cat meowed as if he was giving me a big, fat, honest yes. I saw Tia smirk at Paris’ response and touched one pointed ear.

One thing to note of my cat was that he never, ever behaves, so I know well that Tia was just teasing me.

“You must be famished dear. What do you want me to whip up?” she asked after I placed my cat on the floor.

“I had dinner while on the plane Tia, but it would be great if you could make me my favorite. I really miss it.”

She awarded me a proud smile. “Triple chocolate and Speculoos cookie butter pancake coming right up then.”

After giving her a cheeky grin, I dragged my luggage and headed for the second floor staircase.

“I’ll be in my room, Tia. Just bring my snack there.”

She nodded once and waved her hand. “Sure, I will.

I didn’t have the urge to arrange my packed clothes inside my closet. All I wanted to do was to fight a bit of jet lag off my head. Yes, no matter how short my flight was, I still got the post effects.

I dropped face down into my mattress not caring to change my clothes at all. With the softness of the bed and with me being so tired, I dozed off for a little while until I heard my phone ring inside my shoulder bag of Ericka’s ‘Twerk It Like Miley’ ringtone.

“Hey, Boss!” she spoke immediately after I pressed the answer button.

“Ericka, what’s up?”

I have already informed my mother of my departure from California five hours ago and she replied with a ‘Have a safe trip’ message. I guess Ericka found out the news about me returning to NY through her that’s why she immediately called me.

“Goodness me, are you really in New York like what your mother said?”

I guess my assumption was correct.

“Yup, I’m in my apartment right now.”

“Wow, then we should celebrate your arrival. How about we go to our favorite hang-out huh?”

My thoughts immediately fell on the club members. It would be unjust of me to party and ‘celebrate’ when in fact the reason I am temporarily deported here was because of the Club’s possible endangerment.

“I don’t think that would be proper, Kee,” I answered with that in mind, sounding sorry.

I heard her disappointment through an audible groan and then she said, “Aw, com’n. Don’t tell me you still need to ask permission on your Master?”

Erik’s face popped out of my head consequently and the recent thing we did together. Shit.

“Ahaha, no, no, no.” I waved my hand in the air as I felt my face heat up. “That’s not needed at all, Kee. He— I...I don’t need to ask permission from him.”

“Hmm, what’s keeping you then?”

I paused for a moment, weighing things down.

I definitely don't want to explain the complications of the club to her so, in the end, I yielded to her demand, and besides, I honestly missed my night outs with her and the rest of the group.

"Alright, we'll go, but can I bring someone with me? She's a Fancy Pants Club member," I asked after I released a defeated sigh.

Suri, before we departed at the airport terminal, offered me stay in her townhouse. I refused, explaining that I needed to take care of my apartment and some office matters that I have disregarded while I was away. She understood it and we parted with the promise of keeping in touch and updated from time to time.

"Really?!" If it was possible, Ericka screeched. "Of course, you can Dani!"

I bit my lip from giggling. I do believe that Suri would love to have some night out girl bonding time with me and my other friends. "Thanks, Kee, what time then?"

"Jiezel and I will pick you up two hours from now, probably ten-thirty. Do you think you can manage?"

"Uh-huh, yes, I can. I'll see you later then."

"Good! And don't forget to wear something sexxxy, Boss. Make this night count," she stated, pronouncing the word sexy like a snake.

In response, I rolled my eyes heavenward. "Nice of you to remind me that."

When we were done, I speedily dialed Suri's number and told her about the plan. She squealed (the first time ever that I have heard her) and gave me a resounding YES.

Since her townhouse was just a convenient short distance away from my building, I offered to fetch her there, but she declined and stated that she will just meet me at our destination and have Mr. Clyde drive her there. I agreed in the end.

If not for this last-minute decision, I would have been soaking myself in the tub and relax the whole night. I guess I will have to defer my R and R time by tomorrow.

Tia Sofia knocked on my door after my call with Suri and left the freshly-cooked pancakes in my coffee table. Alongside the square porcelain plate, there was a hot chocolate mug placed. I took a sip of the content to warm my belly and devoured two pancakes before I changed my clothes into a sexier get-up.

After I slipped on an elegant and not slutty party bandage dress of the white, black, and red mixed colors, I heard my cellphone ring again. It was a message this time and not a call.

'Are you in the apartment now?'

Were the words written by Erik himself. I replied not a second longer with a single word:

'Yeah.'

He replied in the same amount of quickness with another single word, 'Good', and I honestly waited for him to have a follow-up message but then, he didn't send one.

I didn't think much about it after. Erik was always a man of scarce words when it comes to texting. I am not his girlfriend to actually root for him to text or call me every single damn hour.

However, what we just did this morning wasn't just something to be taken lightly right? It was mostly what boyfriend and girlfriends do when in the throes of passion.

Then what are we? What was the status of our relationship other than a master and servant? Or a president and club member? Or a savior and damsel-in-distress?

I chose not to answer it this time. Maybe when I return to the chateau, yes, but as of now, I can't, especially when Erik wasn't here to confirm it.

Like any other nightclubs, 'Crescent Moon' had all of the amenities and machines to provide a very lively party. There was a center stage with strobe lights, pulsating neon bulbs, fog machines, and a DJ mixing hot beats. There was also a second floor with railings crowded with people, a wide dance floor that had the same jam-packed guests, and a circular bar right at the base of the dance floor to serve customers drinks.

The reason why Ericka and I loved this place however was because we are loyal patrons and that we get to have free use of one of the VIP rooms on the second floor. This was where the four of us (Ericka, Jiezel, Suri, and I) spent a good amount of time drinking low-content alcohol cocktails, dance our assess off, and converse with silly topics.

Ericka and Suri synced instantly right after I introduced both of them. They all agreed with me that we were destined soul sisters always ready to lend a helping hand and become a shoulder to cry on.

Crying wasn't in our list of activities as of the moment though, so we spent the rest of the late evening partying like the free women that we are.

"Oh jeez, we're running out of ice," voiced Suri after a few minutes. She was sitting on my right side holding an empty glass. She wore a really elegant black tube dress that accentuated her figure. Her hair was untied (all of ours were) and she had this really charming necklace that had an initial A on.

During our flight, she told me that this was Amano's gift to her as a good luck charm. He gave it before we boarded the airplane. It was placed in a box and wrapped in a fancy paper.

And now that I think about it, Erik did give me one before I left his room.

As I stared at Suri's necklace, I spaced out. She waved her hands in front of my face and I immediately snapped my attention at her.

"Ah, yes, yes! The waiter I had ordered earlier must be busy, so I will just go down and ask the bar for a bucket."

I stood without waiting for them to answer and waved my hands in the air.

"You guys just wait for me here."

"Flaunt your ass Boss while you're at it." Under the dim blue light, Ericka winked at me.

I gave her a grin and then proceeded to my task.

With the empty ice bucket in hand, I managed the winding stairs down to the first floor; rolling my eyes from time to time when I came across couples and couples and more couples grinding their bodies against each other.

Finally, I reached the circular bar that housed six male and one lady bartender.

"What do you need Sweetheart?" asked the lady in front of me.

"Hi! I just need a bucket of ice please." I gave her my sweetest smile just so she could give me what I needed without the waiting time.

"Right," she nodded and took my bucket from the counter.

As I waited, I felt nervous suddenly. There was this nagging feeling inside that someone was watching me from afar. Call me crazy, but I felt eyes examining the slightest changes in my position.

I released a long breath, twirled my fingers in the counter, and focused on the techno music but my uneasiness didn't disappear. Tired of the feeling, I decided to look around to see if I was in fact being watched. And there I found, with the sea of people as the background, a lone man stood looking directly at me, wearing a white flannel shirt. He was hunched forward in the counter of the bar; dark orbs fixed, mouth neutral but when our eyes met, I swear I saw a faint curve from the corner of his mouth.

Amidst the pulsating neon lights and the dimness of the place, I could still define his features, and when I was able to, my breath was caught in my throat.

"Erik..?" I murmured, astonished by his presence.

"Here's your bucket Sweetheart," the lady bartender said, interrupting me successfully from calling Erik again. My focus momentarily stopped on her and I said, "Thanks," before taking the bucket.

When I looked back at him, he was no longer there, and dammit I couldn't zero him out from the dancing people in and around the dance floor and the bar.

"Suri, when did Erik arrive in New York?" was my immediate question when I arrived, practically racing, to our room. I didn't even bother to sit back on my seat and just crossed my arms whilst acting like a detective in front of my girlfriends.

She furrowed her brows then. "Huh? What are you asking Dani?"

"I just saw him standing at the other side of the bar a few minutes ago."

"What? Are you serious?" She narrowed her eyes at me as if she didn't believe a word I said.

"Yes, I am. I'm not joking at all."

"Huh." Shrugging her shoulders, she tapped a pointy finger in her lips as if thinking. "That man probably was just his look-alike, Dani," she then said. "I am not aware that he would follow us here. He's still solving the problems in the chateau as we speak, you know that."

"But I swear it was him, Suri," I shook my head in disbelief. "We even made eye contact."

"And were you able to talk to him?" was her inquiry.

I blinked and looked down.

"No... No. He disappeared before I could approach him."

"You should contact him maybe? If he is in NY, then he might reply to your message or answer your phone call."

This time, I eyed my phone on the table and weighed her words. I would love to do it actually, but...

"Ah, I guess, I made a mistake," I stated after remembering a piece of detail. "On second thought, the guy did have a lighter shade of hair."

"What do you mean light shade?" was Suri's clear confused response.

I sighed.

"Platinum blonde. A bit like Karl's but much silvery."

"Hmmm, then it's official. That man you saw is not him," Suri confirmed, while the others all but nodded. "Prez disliked coloring his hair. He had kept his natural dark brown shade since time immemorial, or that's what at least Alec told me about."

Huffing, I sat down on my seat. “Maybe that’s the case,” I said, but a certain second memory had me thinking the latter; a memory of the man’s neck tattoo, exactly just like Erik’s. I chose to hide this information from Suri instead, thinking that maybe…just maybe it was really just a random man who looked creepily a lot like Erik and had a neck tattoo of spears and spade.

“Hey, Boss. Stop thinking about men and enjoy the night instead! You are a free woman!” Ericka butted in, effectively cutting my deep contemplation.

“Alright,” I said and then beamed all of them a smile.

I was in the party mood all over again.

Chapter 30 - Birthday Party for Two?

~ Daniella ~

As the song goes, “The sun still shines, the sun still sets,” so I had no excuse not to be productive this day.

After what happened last night, I developed a hangover. I remember we partied hard. We were more than tipsy when it was time to leave but Mr. Clyde (thank God for his impeccable timing), drove us to our respective abodes.

Although my head felt like it was being hit by a raging bullet train, I pushed myself to stand up. First things first, I needed to freshen up; take a long warm jasmine-scented bath, eat my breakfast downstairs, and prepare for my day at my mother’s office. She did invite me to lunch today reasoning that she missed me and that we needed to catch up on things, business-related. Not to mention that she wanted some juicy details while I stayed in the chateau.

I did the first two lists in one and a half hours. Tia Sofia really is an indispensable woman when it comes to cooking my favorite dishes. I ate a raspberry cookie butter-dipped waffle and partnered it with freshly squeezed orange juice, both of which were simply heaven. Aside from the food, she also helped me prepare the bathtub where I soaked myself peacefully for an hour.

Peacefully, was an understatement though for my mind from time to time wandered off to different matters, and when I say different, I mean Erik-related, especially his look-alike I saw last night at the bar.

Probably, it would be better if I will talk to Suri about the man and the fact that he had the same tattoo on the right side of his neck, pretty much the same as Erik’s. I might get some new insights if I tell her this since she has worked with Erik for years. Maybe she knew something about the tattoo too.

After taking a bath, I stood at my bedside looking at two different designs of dresses. My mom isn’t a fashion critique, but I thought that I could at least show her that I still look like a human after my short time with the Club members.

I choose the black pencil skirt with a pink off-shoulder blouse in the end.

After I put them on inside my dressing room, my eyes caught a glimpse of a reflection in the mirror. It was the bedside table and on top it was my shoulder bag a.k.a. my travel bag where my passport and other personal items were placed, including the medium-sized fancy box Erik had given me.

My memory immediately lifted, remembering Suri's necklace given by Amano.

"Oh my," I uttered as I marched out of the dressing room.

As soon as I was within reach, I took the bag hastily with my heart pumping hard.

Shit. Erik couldn't have possibly...

I opened it but it didn't show what I expected to be an expensive necklace with his charming initial letter E as the pendant. No, it was far from that.

It was my family heirloom.

It was my emerald ring.

My mind turned a hundred and eighty degrees confused.

"What is the meaning of this?" I asked myself with furrowed brows.

Speedily, I took my cellphone from my bed and dialed Erik's number. It rang one time but then it disconnected. Frowning and with my thumb shaking, I pressed the call button again.

This time, it wasn't disconnected. It was much worse.

'The number you dialed doesn't exist,' was the automatic operator's statement.

What the F?

I sank at the edge of my bed looking at the cellphone screen.

Why Erik gave the ring back to me was beyond my understanding.

As the contract states, I am supposed to finish my six months service before he gives the ring back. I am yet to enter my second month of work, so why?

And why didn't he pick up my call? Why did his damn phone number suddenly go in incognito mode?

Answers. I want answers, and there was only one person that could give them to me: Suri.

I dialed her phone number, but it was unavailable.

What the?

"What is happening?" My hands trembled and my breathing turned deep. After slipping on a comfortable sandal, I sprinted out of my room with my shoulder bag in hand. The whole time I managed the stairs, I dialed and dialed Suri and Erik's number alternately, all of which returned the same results.

I know I am overacting but I felt the start of panic inside. Something wasn't right and I needed to find it out immediately.

The moment I reached my living room though, I received another call. Glancing at it, I found it was from my mom.

"Daniella, are you leaving now?" she asked.

Oh, great. I almost forgot that I am supposed to meet my mom.

"Ye-yeah... I am on my way to the office Ma," I answered amidst the hesitation at the back of my head. In truth, I really wanted to go to Suri's townhouse and see what was going on.

"Good, now I want you to be here as soon as possible because I want you to meet a very important new client."

I raised a brow. "Why the sudden business meeting?"

"Oh, that's because he specifically chose you to set-up the birthday party, Daniella. Considering that you might return to de Esclavette anytime soon, I am taking advantage of your time here. And other than that, Mr. Startsev has other business matters to attend to. His time is very essential."

"Mr. Startsev?" The name definitely screamed Russian. "Fine, but I need to know exactly why he specifically chose me."

"Yes, the details we will talk later Sweetie, so be quick in coming here."

I nodded whilst exiting the front door and waving a hand on Tia Sofia's way when I passed her. "Alright, I'm on my way."

A sky-blue Porsche was parked in the street right in front of my apartment. After shoving the cellphone inside my bag, I stopped a few inches away from it and grinned.

God, how I missed my baby.

I hate taxis so this was what I used going to my mom's Manhattan headquarter.

"Mom," I uttered once I stepped inside her office.

"Daniella!" She stood up immediately from her seat, smiling from ear to ear. Her face, even though already in her early fifties, was still a picture of beauty and grace. With hair tied up into a bun, a cream-colored office uniform, and in red high heels, she approached me with arms wide open.

"Oh Sweetie, I missed you!" she spoke whilst squeezing me to death.

I made a lopsided smile. "It is just one month, you know."

When we pulled away, she gave me her signature puckered lips. “Your talent is really valuable in our business, do you know that? I was beginning to have problems with new wedding decoration ideas!”

“Oh, I’m starting to think that it is my service that you miss Ma, not me,” I stated with arms akimbo and teasing brows.

She became frantic and pinched my cheeks like she always does when I was still small. “Of course, I miss you too, Sweetie.”

“Ow, cut it Ma,” with a big smile, I ordered. When she did, I felt my cheeks burn immediately.

She gave me a wink and rounded back to her office chair.

“Where is this Mr. Startsev by the way?” I asked after noticing that there wasn’t at least one soul present sitting in her sectional sofa behind me.

She looked up after taking her pen and said, “Things have changed dear. Mr. Startsev invited us on a business lunch later, so by eleven after your work, come back here so that we can go together in the restaurant.”

“Oh.” My brows arched. “I will be in my office then.”

“I’m sure you want to take your time there,” she gave me a grin knowing that I wanted to update myself on our current list of clients. “But be mindful of the clock.”

“Yeah, I will. I’ll see you later.”

She nodded before I exited the door.

Inside my junior office which was just right next to my mother’s, I stayed and waited for the time. I used it not to update myself of the business, however, but to ring Suri and Erik back. Again, it yielded the same results with Suri’s phone out of reach, and Erik, nonexistent.

I felt the same wave of panic and confusion rush over me then, and if it wasn’t because of my mother’s presence and the sense of responsibility, I would have already gone out to Suri’s townhouse.

When it did strike eleven though, I went back to her office. The sadness in my face, I wiped it off and replaced with an eager, happy one. I can’t show my mother I was worried about something. We are going to a business lunch meeting, so the least that I could do was to show proper decorum and put on a business face.

She was already in a black coat and holding her handbag when I stepped in.

“Are you ready?” she asked and I consequently nodded.

"Yes, I am," I answered showing a fake smile.

To Harland Gustave, a restaurant near our building was where we went with me driving us there. There wasn't any traffic, luckily, so we arrived just on time, but when we were directed to the reserved table for three, Mr. Startsev wasn't there yet.

"Is he really coming Ma?" was my first question when ten minutes passed by after we sat in our seats.

"He will, Sweetie. Like I said, his time is essential. All businessmen are busy." She took a sip of her ordered lemon juice and smiled at me.

I shrugged. "Why did he specifically request me anyway? Were you able to ask?"

It does sound unusual and creepy that a client would especially request for me. As I said, I am not at all popular just like our family business, and I have been keeping a low profile since my mother and I were left by our father.

There was only one possibility present for me to believe why this Russian man wanted me and this was because of client referral. Maybe, some of our previous wedding clients or Ms. Elaine herself referred my name specifically to him.

"Mm-hhh, I did, since it was rather odd that he would," was her wise answer.

"And that's because?"

"He was referred by an old client of ours Sweetie."

Figures. I knew it.

"I figured it was because of that," I stated whilst looking at the perspiration of my own glass of grape juice.

"That, it is." She nodded at me. "This is a good sign though. Our business would be in good hands with you as the soon-to-be CEO."

For as long as I can remember, it always gave me the chills whenever I hear this acronym. It was my ultimate desire to take her place and bring the business to new and greater heights. But for some reason, right now, I don't feel anything other than the longing of returning to the chateau.

"Ye-yeah," was my only reserved answer. Brief was my smile on her way and after which I turned my attention on my glass again.

"You don't seem ecstatic like the usual, Daniella," was her sharp observation then.

I glanced back at her and from there I saw affection and kind understanding in her eyes.

“I wonder what has changed your heart.”

Not what, but who.

“I just…” I choked. The feeling of panic and sadness crashed altogether inside me again when I remembered the emerald ring and the lack of connection on Suri and Erik through the phone. “It’s just that I had made friends with all of the club members Ma. Being in the chateau, it felt like I was at home. I miss them truly.”

I miss him…

“Mhmm, I see.” She took my hand and caressed it with her fingers. “Then return if that’s what your heart yearns for.”

I…can’t, at least not now.

“I will when everything in the club is sorted out,” was my audible response. Although she is my mother, I can’t tell her the circumstances of the club. It was a no, no. She wasn’t bothered by my lack of explanation anyway.

What I said to her however was true, I will return to the chateau if I can’t find Suri in her townhouse, and that was whether I am in danger or not.

“Right.” She pulled one of my hands and kissed the knuckles with slowness.

This gesture always eases me and she knew it.

I smiled at her, this time showing a sincere one and nodded.

“Now, focus on the present and deep breathe because I believe our client has arrived.”

Just as she said that she released my hand and stood up, waved once, and looked at the restaurant’s front door.

“Is that him?” I asked.

My heart, for some reason, pumped a lot harder.

The man that was gliding on our way looked dashing with a black businessman suit. He didn’t wear a tie yet he still looked the part. Once a couple of inches away from our table, he stood stiff but cracked a small grin. Overall, his aura commanded attention and fear at the same time.

I was tongue-tied for a greeting but luckily, my mother was there to fill up the silence.

“Good noon Mr. Startsev,” she stated, sticking out her hand for a handshake.

Our client took it swiftly and shook once before letting go.

Cold, blue eyes met mine before he could respond to my mother with the same greeting.

“Good noon Madame Rosecraft and oh, please just call me Mr. Hyde,” he spoke with an easy Russian accent and pulled a vacant chair to sit. “I had some business matters to attend to. I hope you didn’t get bored while waiting.”

He acted composed like a gentleman no matter how menacing he looked like with that long, thick, bad scar on the corner of his left eye.

Damn, I know it wasn’t proper but God, I can’t take my eyes off of that!

“Not at all, Mr. Hyde,” my mother shook her head to dismiss his apology, or what I think was. She didn’t even look shaken with the sight of the scar!

I just remained silent while they exchanged smiles, but then my mother touched my left shoulder and said, “I’m sure you already know, this is my daughter, Daniella.”

“Yes,” he straightened and looked at me with what seemed like brief predator-like eyes until it turned soft. “I am glad to finally meet you, Ms. Daniella.”

I raised a hand to do a handshake to which he accepted without so much as a pause. “I feel honored Mr. Startsev.” I didn’t use the name he suggested. “May I know the details of the party I am to organize?”

He looked taken aback. “Ah, so you want to go straight to business huh?”

God, his voice was even dark and raspy. It gave me the chills.

My mother rolled her eyes at me and gave me a raised brow.

I know I sounded hasty. We had just met and here I am already demanding the candies. But what was I supposed to do? I wanted to go to Suri’s house as soon as possible.

“Yes, if that is suitable to you,” I answered with a composed smile.

He nodded and made himself comfortable by crossing his legs and putting an elbow in the table. “How convenient of you. Well, I am in a hurry anyway.”

I saw my mother’s shoulder relax. “Okay, let’s start with the basic details, shall we? Like the name of the celebrant, where and when it will be held, the theme and the number of guests,” she started.

From my handbag, I produced a black pen and a small notebook I took from my office.

“I want to throw a birthday party for two very good friends of mine,” Mr. Startsev stated whilst staring at me.

I cleared my throat and bend my head to look at the notebook, acting as if I am the transcriber, which basically, I was.

"One celebrant is named Nikola Aristov, the other well...will be announced on the day of the party."

I raised my brow at that but didn't look at him. A surprise double party huh?

"Both of them will be turning twenty-six a month from now, exactly October 9."

I wrote down the information, while my mother, as I noticed from my peripheral vision, just nodded at him.

"The party is going to be held at the Le Château de Esclavette."

My jaw dropped. Wow, isn't this convenient? My mind blurted out.

"Wow! What a coincidence!" my mother grabbed my hand and beamed a smile at me. "My daughter here is a member of the Fancy Pants Club Mr. Hyde. You do know that this Club owns the chateau right?"

"I am aware, Madame," was his simple reply. I couldn't put my finger on it, but there was a short glimmer in his eyes when he glanced at me. "Although I find it advantageous, I won't ask for any rent discount with your daughter over here. I pay well and I pay in full."

"Ah, I don't think I have the power to give you a discount anyway," I voiced out. "Only the President of the Club can do that Mr. Startsev and I believe it would be a conflict of interest in my part if I give you one--*if* I have the power."

Right then, his chuckle, deep and throaty, erupted. Mom and I stared at each other clueless of what seemed to be a funny statement.

"Indeed, Ms. Rosecraft," he spoke a few seconds later. "Anyway, back to the topic, the party will be at dinner. I don't prefer a theme, but I do know that Nikola prefers the color silver, so keep that in mind when you set-up the table. He hates flowers and basically anything that is sparkly and cute, so steer clear of those."

I jotted them on the paper whilst nodding. "How about the other celebrant? What are his particulars?"

"Nothing," he answered quickly and with a clipped tone. "But, do prepare towels for him."

"Towels?" This time, I raised my head and I saw a hint of coldness in his eyes. That was an odd request.

"He'll need it I assure you," he continued, but other than that, he didn't add anything specific.

"O-kay..." was my hesitant answer.

"What about the food Mr. Hyde? What dishes do you want?" my mother butted in, acting as if nothing was odd. "We would also want to know the exact number of guests."

"Russian dishes are preferred with lots and lots of beverage, Mrs. Rosecraft," he let out. "Guests would be just a handful, about ten to fifteen, all male, but cater to up to fifty people. We might have some gate crashers on that night."

Weird. This is better called a stag party rather than a birthday party.

For a moment, I spaced out looking at the highlighted notes. This would be my first time to host a party like this. It may be odd but it was a challenge I liked to take.

"Any questions Sweetie?" My mother's voice broke my wanderings then.

"Uh, nothing. Nothing for now." I eyed her and then Mr. Startsev who was observing me keenly, a smirk on his lips.

He then straightened from his seat and pulled out a wallet from the back of his slacks.

"Here, take this."

He gave me a black business card. I took it and read his name and employment status in haste.

Mr. Yuri Startsev, CEO, Security Holdings Incorporated

"Call me whenever you need to ask something. And here."

He pulled a gold credit card and handed it to my mother. "Input the amount that I am to pay for your services."

Our mouths dropped.

"I'm sorry Mr. Hyde but a cheque is just what I needed," she hastily said. "It is the protocol of the Company. You don't really need to give us your gold card."

"Nonsense," the man waved a hand in the air. "Money is money no matter how it is represented." Swiftly, he took a lighter and a Cuban cigar from the pocket of his overcoat and lighted it. I couldn't help but gape in response.

A gold card means that one can purchase anything no matter how expensive it is. It also means one can spend or use any amount without the need for approval or signatures.

He was one wealthy man, I give him that, but it doesn't mean that he had to wave it right in our face.

My mother looked defeated as I eyed her. “I’ll return this to you once I swipe the amount in my office. Considering the humble set-up of your surprise birthday party, the Rosecraft Weddings and Events will not charge much.”

“Do what you want, Mrs. Rosecraft.” He puffed out smoke after he answered. “Well now, I must leave. Just keep in touch with me whenever there are problems along the way.”

My mother and I both nodded in unison as he stood up and left.

After a few seconds of watching his back retreat, I voiced out what I had wanted to say the whole time, “Wow, that was…new.”

“To you, that is,” was my mother’s response. I gave her a confused brow and she only further explained, “I’ve been in this business for quite some time Sweetie. Over the whole course, I get to meet different kinds of people with different attitudes, characteristics, and background. Mr. Startsev isn’t a new experience for me but I was startled when he gave us his gold credit card as if it is just candy for him.”

“Aren’t all businessmen with shady businesses like that?” I questioned.

She frowned. “What makes you think his business is shady?”

I crossed my arms against my chest and sighed. “Well, for starters, he has a nasty scar in his face.”

My mother broke out into a small laugh. “Okay, you have a point, but as I told you many times, don’t judge people by what they look like.”

I took a deep breath and shrugged my shoulders.

“I think I should go Ma,” I announced, wanting to stop backbiting my new client.

“Where to?”

“I need to see a friend of mine. She is a fellow club member,” was my answer while I returned the pen and notebook inside my shoulder bag.

“Ah, I see.” She tapped a finger in the table and then continued, “But before you go, we should eat lunch first. My treat.”

She gave me a wink.

I resigned, in the end, to stay for another hour in the restaurant. We dined heartily, talked about a lot of things and we concluded our break with a peck on the cheek while we were standing at the restaurant lobby.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” was her statement before she slipped inside the taxi.

“Yeah, see you Ma.” I waved.

The taxi drove away and after it turned around a curb, I went to my Porsche which was parked just a few feet away.

Once I got inside, I did what had been bugging me the whole time of my lunch: call Suri and Erik again, and yeah, as expected, I got the same results.

This time, I was hell-bent on speeding my car to her place.

Chapter 31- Meeting the Crabby President

~ Daniella ~

“So, how was your visit with your fellow club member, Sweetie?” my mother broke my blank, lifeless state with a tap in my shoulder. I was in the pantry of the office making a morning coffee for both of us when she stepped in and ask that question.

I know I had been acting like a zombie since I left Suri’s house, not to mention mute, and it seems my mother noticed it.

“It was okay,” I answered her but honest to goodness, no, it wasn’t.

I turned to face her with one mug of coffee in hand. Although I didn’t offer it to her, she took it with a raised brow.

“Okay?” she parroted in a questioning tone.

I took mine and sipped a little of the warm liquid.

“Yeah,” was my scarce reply.

“O-kay,” this time she stated it with a roll of her eyes. I just ignored it. “You know you can tell me anything right?”

I smiled weakly at her. God, I shouldn’t make her worry.

“Yeah, thanks for worrying Ma, but I’m okay. I just needed some time to think of what Suri meant in her letter.”

Yes, a letter. I drove like crazy to get to her house only to find out from the caretaker that Suri and her butler left early in the morning. To where, he didn’t know, but I have a suspicion they returned to the chateau. I was disappointed of course, but it was at least lessened when he gave me a letter from Suri.

The letter didn’t have much information though, just a vague explanation that she needed to leave asap as ordered by Erik and an instruction that I should patiently stay in New York until further notice. ‘For your safety’ that’s the last words in her letter that got me to deeply sigh in surrender.

I get it, I know. She still needed some degree of secrecy when it comes to the club activities, but the least she could do was to inform it to me in person.

“Alright, I’ll give you space.” My mother walked out of the pantry after giving me a kiss in the cheek while I stayed in there with my mug on hand.

It pains my heart...

It saddens me...

It pisses me off that I can't get a hold of them through the phone. If not for Suri's instructions, I would have already been in the chateau by now (safety be damned) asking Erik questions and possibly sermoning him for acting distant.

Sitting at a cushioned chair, I watched my cellphone resting on the table. The person I had been expecting to text or call me stayed MIA and it bothered me a lot.

"God, I shouldn't let this bother me," I voiced out after putting the mug out of the way and me leaning with my forehead pressed on the table.

I stared at the emerald ring now safety worn by my ring finger. Whatever the reason why Erik gave this back to me, I have to wait to know it when I return to the chateau. As to when it will be, I don't know, but I hope it will be soon.

Soon enough that my patience can bear.

And soon enough that I wouldn't have to worry too much about their safety and welfare.

"Three weeks," I grumbled to myself. "Three fucking weeks, dammit!"

I stood from my bed with a stomp on the floor. It was early in the morning, but not a beautiful one since my sour mood immediately surfaced the moment I woke up.

This day would be officially the twenty-first day that I still haven't got any message from the Club members or from Erik.

And yes, I actually counted them.

It was hard for me to live day-to-day when all I could think about was them. Especially Erik. I was able to act and work in the office normally yes, but my mind definitely preferred to wander around and think about the welfare of the club members. Especially Erik.

Many questions clouded my head. Especially Erik-related.

How are they doing? How is he doing? Did the Bratva find them? Did his father find him? Are they still alive? Is he still alive? Is the chateau still operational?

God, I'm going crazy.

I tried my best to research about them these whole twenty-one days, yet I couldn't seem to catch any news from the net about the chateau's status and theirs. If there was, it wasn't even updated.

I was at wit's end and it took a toll on me. I couldn't deny it, I did have bouts of crying for about eight days feeling sad, afraid, and restless. Mr. Startsev's surprise birthday party plan that I should have already completed was affected too. I mean I was able to finish the planning. I just didn't feel positive and confident about it. Especially the fact that the location was still pending.

If the chateau was indeed attacked by the Bratva like what Erik and the others feared, I guess the birthday party location would be changed.

However, I cared less about this. What I only cared about was the Club's safety.

Many nights, I have dreamed about my time with Erik; our encounter in the vineyard, bedazzling his head, that time in Lotus Spade when he acted as a hostage-taker, and our kiss, er kisses. It would have been a good night's dream if not for the ending. Yes, the ending where it always showed me leaping in front of him just like what I did in the barn a year ago, but with a different twist. This time Erik was the one who was bloodied all over.

Granted that it was just a dream, it still didn't take my fear away. The feeling of dread still ran through my nerves.

In the end, I prayed.

I prayed a lot that it wouldn't be a premonition of the future.

Last night, thank God, I didn't have the same dream, but the memory of it was enough to trigger my final decision.

I will go to the chateau. Screw Suri's instruction. I will go there to find out once and for all the state of the Club.

After hastily packing all of my clothes and personal necessities in two bags, I took a shower (the quickest that I could) and dressed in travel clothes of jeans, a cotton blouse, and an overcoat.

I texted my mother and Ericka of my decision, both of which replied back with a 'good luck' and 'have a safe trip' message.

They knew that this would be my decision, in the end, so they didn't bother to stop me at all.

I kissed my cat goodbye and Tia Sofia too, who turned briefly emotional as I went out of the front door.

The moment I turned to the street though, I gasped in surprise. Standing before me clad in black slacks and white trench coat was Vincent himself with a sorry expression on his face.

My heart sped.

"Vince-nt!" I shouted, a little out of breath.

“Good morning Daniella.” He gave me a smile but it lacked warmth as compared to his normal ones.

“You’re here! Why are you here?!” Without overthinking, I dropped my bags on the ground and crossed the distance between us to hug him.

He embraced me back with enough tightness in his arms. “I missed you,” he whispered.

He is alive! He is alive! Thank God he is alive! My thoughts celebrated.

I held myself from crying in joy. If he is alive, then that means that everyone else is too. Especially Erik.

God, I hope so.

I pulled back and looked at him, confused.

“Hey, answer my question! Why are you here?”

He tilted his head to look at what was behind me and said, “I see that you are ready. Good. We need to go now.”

“What?” I shouted just as he grabbed my arm.

In haste, I took one lighter bag while he took the heavier one and we crossed the sidewalk to the awaiting taxi in the street. Once we were inside, I threw him one very important question.

“Are we going back to the chateau?”

He kept silent but nodded at me whilst looking beyond the taxi’s window.

Somewhere in my heart, I was very happy, but a big chunk of it was still confused.

“What happened Vincent? Why—”

He raised a hand to stop me. “Everything will be explained in the chateau, Daniella. Right now, keep your questions to yourself since I am not the right person for you to ask that.”

I did, although it was hard for me.

We used the private airplane of the Fancy Pants Club on our way back to California. The whole time of the travel, I was silent as Vincent requested. He was doing the same, but I can’t help but notice how his forehead creased, looking as if in turmoil over something.

When we arrived in the chateau, it was already after lunch. As soon as we entered the main foyer, my jaw dropped upon seeing the definite change of its interior.

Fancy decorations beautified it. Fresh flowers from new brass vases adorned the grand staircase and every hallway that my eyes could see.

I looked at Vincent with confused eyes and he only scratched the back of his head and said, "Uhm, it is the Club's semiannual ball tonight Daniella."

Of course, as Suri told me, the second ball of the year will be held on October first.

Today is October first.

Figures.

"You will host a ball amidst your enemy possibly attacking you?" I asked, thinking how absurd it was.

Vincent just pressed his lips briefly. "That's not our concern anymore. We have already confirmed from Luca that Iopata is clueless of our actions."

My brows furrowed. "You mean to say that the chateau and the Club are safe?"

He nodded.

"When did you find out about that Vincent?"

I had to ask since dammit I kept on thinking about their safety for twenty-one days!

"Two days after you left, Daniella," he answered sheepishly as if he was guilty of my suffering.

Tsk.

"And you didn't inform me this? You guys just let me stay in New York without an update? It drove me half-mad thinking whether you guys are still alive or not! I thought I was supposed to return here when everything is safe?" I felt my cheeks burn. Anger was beginning to bubble up inside me and Vincent noticed it.

He cupped my face tenderly, looking in torment.

"On behalf of the Club Daniella, I apologize for our actions, but it was Erik who ordered us not to call you. He ordered Karl to block your number and he told us that you will not be returning in the chateau anymore."

"Why?" that one word came out strained from my mouth.

He shook his head. "I'm sorry. It is best that Prez answers you that, not me."

"Then tell me where he is, Vince. I want to talk to him now."

Indeed I was itching to rant in front of Erik and I know that Vincent was aware of it too, but instead, he told me this: "No, you mustn't. Not now." His voice came out stern.

"And why is that?" I crossed my arms.

"You need to meet Suri and Alec first."

He turned his back to me and then pulled something out from his coat pocket. It was his phone.

Before pressing the button, he winked at me first. Gone was his troubled face earlier. That's the time when I realized that something was off.

"Hey, Suri," he said, turning away from me again. "Yeah, we're here..." I thinned my eyes, finding his actions suspicious. "Yup, she is clueless."

What? Clueless?

"Right, we will go to the guest room now."

When he was done, I quickly asked him, "What the hell was that Vince?"

He grabbed my shoulder and the heavier bag next to me and then pulled me towards the grand staircase.

"Come Daniella. We should go. You are not supposed to be seen by Erik until later."

"What?"

I let myself get dragged along in silence until we reached the second floor. In the farthest hallway of the west wing, there Vincent took me. We entered in a guest room with him stepping inside first. When I followed, my jaw dropped seeing Suri and Alec inside, already waiting for me with make-up paraphernalia set-up in the vanity mirror and two gowns and one grey tuxedo hung on the clothes stand near the mattress.

"Oh Dani, I'm sorry I left you in NY!" was Suri's immediate apology then.

She raced to hug me. I just welcomed her with a smile.

"It's okay, but I am not going to forgive you if you won't tell me what is going on here."

She, Alec, and Vincent looked at each other with mischievous grins on their faces.

What the hell?

"Well, the plan was for you to dress up for the ball later," Alec started. He pointed his eyes on the beauty products with great pride.

"Okay. What else?" was my reserved response.

“Erik doesn’t know that you are here.” It was Suri who said that.

“Yeah, I realized that,” I said as I glanced on Vincent’s way, standing on my right side. He just gave me a knowing smile.

“We plan to surprise him because he is being an ass about your absence,” Suri continued.

“We miss you a lot Dani, and we know that Prez too. He is being snappy at us and the staff since…you know, since you left,” Vincent expounded.

I couldn’t be more surprised by that.

“Isn’t he already snappy and rude since then?” I stated, remembering the Erik that I first met way back.

“Well, much worse. If you know what I mean,” was Alec’s response.

Briefly, there was a chill in my spine. I’ve seen and experienced Erik’s crabby attitude many times, and if Alec says it is much worse, then I can only think it to be scarier.

Silence stretched for minutes as they waited for me to speak.

They looked expectant though.

“Alright, I’m in with your plans,” I answered tugging up a wicked smile on my face. Erik has a lot of explaining to do, but before that, I need to see him drop his jaw.

The three of them somehow lightened up. I heard Suri’s audible sigh of relief and I saw Vincent close his eyes in satisfaction.

Alec moved forward and picked up a bath towel hanging in one of the sofas. He tossed it to me and said, “Then, you better go and freshen up Sweetheart.”

I caught it cleanly. “I think I should if you are going to turn me into a Goddess again, Alec.”

Suri clapped her hands and squealed a big YES as I walked into the bathroom.

“Hmm, this sure is going to be interesting,” I heard Vincent say before I closed the door.

Chapter 32 - Flaming Stares

~ Daniella ~

If I'm in a movie, I would consider myself in the film Cinderella with how I looked like wearing an almost similar royal blue ball gown. Imagine this was what Suri demanded on the designer for me to wear. The design was tweaked with a plunging see-through neckline that showed a bit of my cleavage. I didn't need to wear any jewelry on my neck for it had a pseudo-necklace that was made of the same glittering fabric. I could easily say that I definitely looked like a Goddess now; a Goddess looking for some damage — in a certain man's heart that is.

Suri had her own gown, but it was her preferred mermaid style in gold beads and an empire cut neckline. It was definitely a different design as compared to mine, but a majestic creation nonetheless.

My knees felt like jello when I stepped inside the President's Hall, the one that held Ms. Elaine's wedding reception. That was two hours ago. Vincent was with me, steadying my balance. He wore a black suit with a bow tie, looking even more handsome. I had expected that he would be one of the most eligible bachelors on the crowd, but because of his steady left arm around my waist, not one maiden tried to approach him. We almost looked like we were a loving couple because of it, but Vincent and I knew better.

He was actually giving his own President a test on how much he'd be able to hold his temper and patience which, in my own opinion, was actually working.

Erik had been sending us death glares every second for the whole one hour and that's after he briefly showed a jaw-dropping shock because of my unexpected appearance. From the time he saw me step inside the hall, to the time Vincent led me to the Club table, and to the time I stayed there while the Master of Ceremony talked, he showed a scowl — the closest jealous expression I could compare.

I sat in between Enrique and Suri. Amano was next to her, then Rohan and Karl. They were equally in their favored modish tuxedos.

Yes, we were the host of the party, but imagine us actually looking like Olympian Gods and Goddesses sitting in a golden rectangular table in a sea of gaping mortals. VIP guests sat in their round tables that were set-up like a horseshoe. It was a plated dinner, but refreshments and pastries with two servers were stationed in each corner of the hall, drawn against the painted black damask wall where all guests can choose freely.

The ballroom hall was magnificent in its entirety. It was totally different from how I decorated it in Ms. Elaine's wedding reception. There were dim lights of different colors directed to the dance hall. The ceiling was basically draped in white, silvery linen attached from the grand golden chandelier to each of the arched doors. Amaryllis flowers, white and blood, and a combination of the two, bunched up in bronze vases stood on each side of the entryways. Round tables were dressed in white gold (what looked to be Persian) table cloths. The dining wares had the same matching colors and designs. Laid in the centerpieces on each table were three-tiered excessively rhinestoned cakes — or what looked to be rhinestones.

Our cake at the Club table wasn't like any of the others. It was special. Four-tiered, rhinestoned, and had a golden arch at the top that housed the symbol of the Fancy Pants Club. Macarons of different colors adorned the sides too.

We were situated in the elevated part of the hall. Directly below us was the dance floor while at the right side was the center stage where the host stayed.

I was in awe with all of the presentations and secretly, I was happy that I got on time to attend the ball. No thanks to Erik by the way.

But speaking of which...

My jello knees were long gone. It turned stiff with his visible ogling.

He kept a constant heavy-lidded eye on me over the passing hours. Even when he was asked to make an opening statement for the party; even when he was asked by many VIP guests for a dance (which he constantly declined); even when he ate; even when he was conversing. He observed my every move. Observed my eating, my breathing, my blinking. He observed me as I became the hottest ping-pong ball, passed down to every man who asked a dance from me starting with Enrique.

I saw his conspicuous furrowed brows every time and it made me feel cold to the bone.

I wasn't intimidated really. It was just a natural bodily response with me being human and all and not a true Goddess. It didn't erase the need to confront and blast him a string of whys though. It was still there waiting to explode.

The good thing about all of these developments was that I was able to unnerve this insufferable man who made me worry for damn three weeks. I believe this was what Suri, Alec, and Vincent were aiming for, and me of course, so we can possibly say that our revenge was a success. I was able to see his jaw drop for that matter.

However, as the night went on, I found myself uneasy about his withdrawal.

Of all the guests and the Fancy Pant's Club men that approached and flattered me with their words of praise, Erik was the only one who didn't. He kept a strict distance away from me — in the farthest seat of the Club table, next to Alec and Vincent.

Not like I would care.

But wait, I did, and it pissed me. Pissed me a lot. I tried my hardest not to show it in my face though. I kept on smiling to everyone, acting like I was having the time of my life.

What the fuck. He acted as if he didn't even know me. He acted as if I have leprosy that to even make a simple contact would be detrimental to him.

The fiery stares he was tossing may have inflamed me in more ways than one, but still, I longed for him to approach me.

I hoped, but that hope continued to drag on until the late final hour where the guests have grown weary from dancing.

I had grown weary too and full due to downing a couple of glasses of fruit punch hoping to douse the fire that Erik had lighted inside me and hoping to cancel the embarrassment I felt from the trio's constant teasing of our silent war.

"I think I should go," I heard Suri say after she placed the wine flute on the table.

Amano was quick to place a hand in both of her shoulders and asked her if she was sure.

I had the same question when I glanced at her.

"Yeah, I'm tired. I don't think I can dance anymore," was her weary reply.

I smiled at her and then diverted my attention to Amano.

"Go, I'm fine here."

He nodded and then gently picked up his girlfriend who gave me an apologetic face.

"Don't worry, I'll accompany Daniella here," was Alec's announcement before they left the table.

Rohan had already left early reasoning he had a client appointment scheduled. Enrique was busy talking to Senator Mitchell's daughter, Irisha, and Vincent was out in the painting gallery, discussing with a prospective buyer.

While Erik...

Well, he was nowhere to be seen which was a big leap already. I thought he'd never resign on his job being my 'CCTV camera'.

"You know, for a Star of the Night, you look lonely. Why so?"

Once again, Alec teased me the moment he sat on Suri's chair. He didn't need to elaborate it for I know exactly what he meant.

I arched a brow at him and gave a wry smile. "I don't think I look lonely at all with all those men asking me for a dance, Alec. Look at what happened to my feet, it aches a lot."

Dipping my head, I touched one leg, right above the protruding kneecap, as if to prove my point.

"Hmm... Really?" I could hear his dripping disbelief. "I wonder... Are your feet really aching or your...heart?"

Slowly, I dragged my eyes back to him. He gave me a lopsided smile and at that moment, he looked like a gay best friend I have always wished to have.

I smiled back, although weakly, and sighed. With the slow violin music still playing, it reminded me of the emptiness in my heart; an emptiness that Erik had caused because of his deliberate avoidance.

Now I feel that karma just found me.

"Both," was my sure response. I didn't even care what Alec would think of it. Right now, I just felt that I needed to vent out my mixed emotions.

But grin he did and then stood up, leaving me frantically glancing up at him.

"Shall we dance then, Sweetheart?" he asked with a sincere face.

I shrugged my shoulder at him and replied, "I did say my feet are aching."

"Yes, but at least I can get to distract you from your aching heart. Com'n, think of it as my second dance. You know I was cut off by Vincent on my first earlier."

And distract he did, successfully.

I chuckled at his remark after I remembered the drama an hour ago. Both of them almost looked like two little boys fighting over a candy bar in the midst of a crowded space.

"Okay, if you say so," I said as I took his proffered hand and stood up, ready to dance my loneliness away.

We rounded the long table and trod down the steps towards the dance hall. I was ready for my last dance of the night and I think so was Alec, but before we could make the last step out of the stairs, I felt a hand slid around my waist. My breath was caught in my throat when I was quickly pulled out of Alec's hold.

“A second dance would be deemed too much, Alec. Let me,” I heard Erik say just as I raised my face to see his glower.

Shit.

Alec didn’t struggle at all. He even looked as if he expected this to happen. With a grin, he stepped backward and gestured his hand towards the dance hall.

Shit again.

“Go ahead Prez, the floor is yours,” he stated whilst bowing in surrender.

I squeaked mentally when Erik squeezed my waist.

“Direct your attention on me, Daniella,” he spoke when I gave him a shooting glare. He wasn’t affected with it though as his face sported the same sullen one. “Come, my dance is long overdue.” He half-pulled, half-guided me to the awaiting spacious hall that now had cleared of dancers except for three couples doing a sweet dance.

I was speechless at first being that I was thoroughly stunned by the suddenness of our contact. Hours ago, I was silently thinking of how I go about approaching and interrogating him. With how he avoided me like the plague, I did not expect that he would actually initiate our meeting first.

When we were halfway to the center of the dance floor, I cleared my throat in preparation for my quick snide, but I was silenced when he voiced out first in a clipped tone.

“Why are you here?”

I was taken aback, but nevertheless, pissed off of his question. The hell.

“I’m a club member, I have the right to join the ball, Erik,” I answered.

He released my waist. I was relieved, but I realized he did so because he was attempting to position me in front of him. We stopped just a few feet away from a dancing couple. He took both of my arms and I let him without a fight, putting it over his broad shoulder. His hands followed inserting it around my back. Then he stepped to erase what little space between us. With our chest-to-chest contact, my heartbeat jumped and my breath hitched.

A small pleased smile appeared from his face, but it vanished as soon as it came. Just like a sick ghost.

Then he swayed and took me with him. Right and left. Back and forth. I swayed effortlessly amidst the ballgown’s length.

“This ball is insignificant. I’m asking you why are you here?” he started again, keeping his eyes on me.

I bit the inside of my cheek. “Damn Erik. I am the one supposed to ask you questions! Why—”

“You’re stunning in that dress, Daniella,” he cut me off.

I shot him a questioning look. “Are you bipolar?”

“No,” was his quick answer.

Still dancing, he guided me to step backward with outstretched arms, then he pulled me back in.

I hastened to sling him my reply. “Then don’t change the fucking subject.”

“Exactly.” His stare became hard as he drew me again, chest to chest, tightly. “Then answer me, why are you here? You are supposed to be in NY. You shouldn’t be here.”

Oh, good, just the confrontation that I am looking for.

I gave him a frown. “I’m here looking for an explanation of your own questions Erik.”

He attempted to push me backward since the violin tune had crescendoed but I stood my ground, pressing my forehead closer to his cheek.

“You have ousted me from the Club without my knowledge. You have cut off my communication.”

I knew I stung him there for I noticed his jaw clench.

“You basically sent me to NY with a fucking assurance, but here now I discovered that you had abandoned me!”

Now, I felt like breaking as I remembered our time the day I left the chateau. I honestly felt that we have the same feelings. Was he just acting then?

“Why the hell is that Erik?” I spat out after I swallowed a good lump in my throat. We still swayed but this time, it was deliberately slower, almost as if we were just standing in place.

“I have already given you back the emerald ring. You don’t have any reason to return here,” he grounded, but although still related, it wasn’t really the answer I wanted to hear.

It sank my heart real good.

I lowered my head, braving back the tears that had suddenly threatened to slip in the corner of my eyes.

What more pain is there than to be rejected by a man you had come to care with? Or even worse, possibly love?

The feeling of being unwanted... shit, it definitely sucks.

"You're right, I don't have the reason to return anymore," I whispered impassively, diverting my gaze to an open double door where it was cramped up with exiting tired guests.

Oh, how I wanted to run towards it now.

My arms dropped from his shoulder and then I clenched my fists as I stepped away from him.

He grabbed my elbow hastily though and that made me look up at him. "Daniella," he whispered, eyes showing a complex struggle.

I dismissed it.

"Unhand me, Erik. I'm going home."

With force, I pulled my elbow, but he didn't let go.

Yes, with my sinking heart, I wanted to throw a litany of curses at him, but keeping my mouth shut seemed to better fit the situation. I'm done with him. I'm done with the Club. Whatever reason he had why he doesn't want me here, I don't care a damn to know anymore.

"The song is not yet done. Let us finish it first."

"What for?" I cried out. "It is already clear that you don't want me, why do we need to torment each other just to finish a song?"

God, how my lips just quivered.

"Please Daniella," was his solemn request.

With my cheeks burning, I heaved a breath and fell silent, and that silence stretched on for minutes (or at least for me amidst the background violin playing) as I thought of a good response.

Erik tugged at my elbow. As opposed to his earlier possessive action with me and Alec, he was being a gentleman now asking for my answer.

With a huff, I squeezed my eyes shut. I felt him pull me against his hard chest then. His drumming heart was what I immediately noticed, more intensified now than before.

"Why are you doing this to me, Erik?" I asked as we continued our calculated swaying.

Nothing. He answered nothing.

The only sound I could hear from him was his deep and unsteady breathing. I opted to remain silent in the end and focused on the rhythm of the music.

We swayed, turned, and dipped over and over again until it was time to let go.

The moment the violin stopped, I felt my world stop too.

Over.

We are over.

I released my hands on Erik's shoulder and stepped away from him, but his steadfast hold on my waist remained. He pulled me back against his chest (yeah, for the third time), and from there, he lowered his head to whisper in my ear.

"Stay, please stay Daniella."

It was pained. Shit, it was pained.

"I thought you don't want me here," I answered, trying to sound as cool as possible in the midst of my ear and neck tingling.

"I want you here."

I swear electricity just shot throughout my body when I heard it.

"Then why did you—"

"I don't know how to handle goodbyes, Daniella," he interrupted. It had my heart jumping in an imaginary trampoline.

"I ordered Karl to block your calls because I was afraid Iopata would locate you through open lines. If there was a possibility that they knew of your connection to us, they might hurt you too."

He kissed the crown of my head. I felt tingles coming down the whole of my body from there.

"For your safety, I did it. Even if it pains me, I decided to let you go. Maybe not now, but sooner or later, Iopata would discover the Club and I don't want you standing in the middle while we exchanged bullets. You already did that the first time we met. I can't possibly let that happen again. You are not safe here Daniella. I realized that although it was already too late, or maybe...no."

He shook his head vigorously.

"Certainly. Yes. I knew since the beginning that you are not safe with me... that it is better you return to NY. I just chose not to face that fact. Yet you are here again...in my arms. You returned to me even when you have the ring."

I watched as the said object sparkled when I lifted my ring finger close to my hips. I opened my mouth to speak my point, but then Erik continued.

"Daniella, I'm certain you will be in danger if you stay here, but—"

He abruptly stopped. I lifted my head to look at him and saw him appearing lost for a moment. Then, his cold eyes sparkled with something akin to determination.

“But what Erik?” I struggled to ask amidst my clashing breath.

“I’m too greedy...too selfish to let go of you now.”

Then he dipped his head, he cupped my chin, he raised my face to meet his for a kiss.

For an earth-shattering kiss.

Long wanted.

Long-awaited.

My heart swelled.

I couldn’t be happier and I don’t even care that we were standing in the dance floor, vulnerable to people’s stares.

Chapter 33 - When He and She Gets In

~ Erik ~

(Half an hour ago)

"A man in love who allows his woman get touched by another man is the loser of them all," Rohan aired out like a philosopher standing near a balustrade under a moonlit sky. I was a few feet away from him, arching my brow of his brainy quote.

I have seen Daniella get passed on by different men again and again just for a stupid dance. This had me fuming inside so I decided to cool myself in a balcony that connected the ballroom hall.

Damn this night.

Damn this ball.

Damn Vincent for bringing Daniella back here.

And most especially, damn me for being so complicated.

I should have stood by her side the moment she walked inside the hall. I should have guarded her with all of these wolves. I shouldn't have been so stiff.

Now I am regretting my stupid actions.

"She seems to be enjoying being fawned over though," I remarked quietly. Although I didn't use Daniella's name, I have a feeling Rohan knew who I was talking about.

He crossed his arms to his chest and threw me a look of disbelief. "Are you blind President?" he said.

I thinned my lips and watched blankly at the twilight sky before us.

No, I am not blind. Just out of my mind because of these two conflicting problems I am faced with: my desire to keep Daniella versus her safety.

"Both of you have been exchanging glances. Can't you see the confusion and worry in her eyes?"

I heaved a breath and swallowed. "She does look that way."

"What?" Rohan's eyes widened, and then he shook his head just as he pressed a hand in his forehead. "God, you are so hopeless, Prez."

I raised my chin. "You were able to dance with her earlier, did she ask anything about the Club?"

“You mean about you?” he retorted.

I looked at him sharply, but sighed in the end and nodded.

“She didn’t ask anything other than stealing glances at you while we danced Prez. I did offer to bring her to you but she shook her head vehemently saying that it wasn’t the right time since you looked like you were about to murder someone. It was after a few minutes when I realized it was me she was referring to who you wanted to kill.”

A slow grin appeared from my lips. I was actually relishing that thought awhile ago.

“You know it gave me shivers right?” He clutched his elbows tightly and showed me a pretend tremble of his shoulders.

“Yeah, I’m aware of that physical response Rohan. Those who touched Daniella get that a lot,” I mocked at him.

“You still are the loser you know.” This time he was the one who grinned, changing back to his confident, cool side.

Trust Rohan to rub me with my faults without fearing for his life.

“I know,” I answered quietly and diverted my attention away from him to the crowded lights of the city below our mountain.

“Then, what will you do? Do you want to keep yourself away forever or just let loose and claim your woman?”

I clenched and unclenched my fists.

My woman… my precious Sweet Rose… my Daniella. Mine alone.

With my Club members aside, the memory of the many men who danced with her reminded me that I am not immune.

Three weeks ago, I have sworn to myself that I will not be swayed by my feelings for her. I have concluded that it was her safety that was more important and not my selfish desires, but after seeing her with all those men, I finally realized that I am not that strong. I could never keep myself away from her.

Never.

“I will claim my woman,” was my final resolve and with that, I swear I saw twinklings stars and blooming roses circling around Rohan’s head.

“Huh,” Rohan straightened from the balustrade and patted my shoulder. “Then you should act quickly Prez. It seems Alec is asking for another dance with her.”

I followed his gaze through the open glass door and saw Alec bowing and offering a hand to Daniella.

***

~ Daniella ~

“Stay. I want you. I need you. Please stay.”

That’s what he softly whispered to me when we withdrew. I looked at his eyes, his ethereal bluish-green orbs, that bespoke of affection and my insides flipped again, just like what it did when we shared a long, passionate kiss.

He wants me. He needs me.

“Then please teach me how to use a gun as soon as possible Erik,” I answered whilst tracing the rosy pink smudge in the corner of his lips. “That is so that I can take care of myself.”

He sighed. He must have seen my point in requesting it.

“Yes, tomorrow,” he answered, leaving me grinning wildly, but before I could give him a peck in the cheek, he added, “But you might not need the gun because I will protect you Daniella. With my life.”

He held my hand that boasted the emerald ring and kissed it. He kissed the emerald stone too and locked my gaze with such adoration.

“Thank you, Erik.”

I felt my stomach just released butterflies — the colorful ones. Erik created that, no matter how black his past life he claimed it to be.

“You don’t need to thank me. It is what I wanted to do, my Sweet Rose. I can’t lose you,” he stated.

“Then don’t,” I answered softly just as I ushered my nose near his button-down collar to smell his signature scent. There wasn’t a sign of his neck tattoo (most likely because he had Alec put prosthetic make-up on it for this ball) but anyway, I was relieved. I wouldn’t want to think of that silver-haired man back in the Crescent Moon club. Right now, I wanted my focus on him and him alone. “Let me stay here Erik. I want to be with you with or without blackmail.”

Except a pleased groan from deep his throat, he didn’t reply after that. We just silently excused ourselves out of the dance floor with my arm looping around his ready elbow.

Guests still observed us, but afterward turned to their own agendas when they saw us round towards the Club table.

Erik had asked me to join him in the balcony, but like I said before, I was already weary, so I told him I needed to retire in my room. So instead of sitting back in our seats, he happily guided me all the way to the fourth floor and take note, it was with a possessive hold on my waist. The whole time of it, I was completely flushed and nervous.

I'd be lying if I tell you I don't know where my stay would lead to... where this night would lead to.

No loud words were needed to know what we wanted right then and there. We both knew it and it was readable through our desirous eyes. It was already overdue three weeks ago and it was just that we fulfill it.

But to my utter silent surprise, Erik bid himself goodbye, albeit with a strained voice, and walked out of my front without a hitch. Well, except for a very, very sensual kiss in front of my doorway but that was that.

I pressed my forehead against the door right after I closed it. My heart was hammering inside, my cheeks burned like the bottom of a kettle, and my breathing was close to hyperventilating. The memory of Erik's stormy, desirous gaze on me right before he left kept replaying in my head. It was going to be my only companion in my sleep tonight but I have no regrets about it.

Although I know it would torment me to a sleepless night eventually.

After a deep sigh and a clench of my jaw, I strode to my bedroom. At the foot of the bed, my cellphone was already placed. Next to it, on the floor, were my two bags.

I chose to check on my phone before changing my dress so I approached the bed and picked it up.

What came into view was Alec's alert message. He wished me luck with my gown zipper since apparently it was very hard to manage.

I texted him back with a 'thanks' and assured him that I would be okay. However, when I stood in front of my vanity mirror and tested my confident capabilities of unzipping the gown, realization hit me.

I couldn't do it.

The back zipper jammed right on the top. I was able to zip down a few inches in the nape but it wasn't enough for me to slip out of the magnificent gown.

Huffing loudly, my thoughts crossed on Suri who could possibly help me with my dilemma. However, since she was dog-tired and with Amano with her, I can't phone her and ask for help.

Vincent and Enrique came to my choices, but they weren't a good choice to make in the first place and so were Rohan and Karl.

Then, three continuous knocks came in my main door as my choices zeroed in on Erik.

My heart jumped for a second. My God, could it be him?

Slowly, I went to my receiving room and opened the main door. A stiff Erik welcomed me, standing in front now wearing a white linen shirt and loose drawstring pants. His feet were bare to my surprise so I gave him a questioning look.

"Uhh, I received Alec's message," he started, averting his eyes. It must probably be hard on him to be back standing in my doorway. It was hard for me too, especially remembering how we ended the night earlier. "He said that you...would need some assistance on your gown."

I gulped when I felt a sudden dryness in my mouth. The ending of having him unzip me could be fatal and it seems that he was aware of this too since he suddenly blushed intensely.

Well look at that, Mr. Erik Romano Fancii actually blushing.

"Yeah..." I answered, smiling weakly at him.

His stiff shoulder relaxed a bit.

"May I?" he stepped once, but then paused and knitted his brows. "I mean, if you are fine with it."

I shook my head slightly and blinked a couple of times. "Yes, it's fine Erik," I reassured. Whilst looking at his relieved expression, I stepped backward and opened the door wider. "Please come in."

And he did, cruising inside as I closed the door.

Heat immediately flooded through me when I faced him. His stare changed. It was stormy and deep, the same as earlier when he left. He made no effort to mask it when he examined me from head to foot as if it was his first time seeing me in the gown.

I cleared my throat, acting as if I wasn't affected, and sucked in a breath before striding closer to him.

"Uh, here, this is what Alec was talking about." I stopped just an arms-length away and then turned to show my back. My nape was in full view when I shoved my curled hair in my right shoulder.

"Beautiful..." I heard Erik say quickly in a low husky voice. I know it sounded too cliche, but I swear my breathing just stopped.

Hard-pressed on not looking at him, I kept my eyes shut, dipping my head down as I waited for him to do the job.

He caressed my arms first with his warm palms, running it up from my elbow to my tensed shoulders. I paused from breathing. His touch was like lava testing my skin and I know that I had melted from there. Whatever he would do, I'd be welcoming to it. There was a growing ache in my belly that made itself known since we parted. It had dulled maybe when I was alone in my room, but now it came back, even worsening with this contact.

"Daniella," he drawled; his husky voice was like bell chimes in my ears.

"Hmmm?" I bit my bottom lip.

I felt his hand shift to my dress, exactly where the zipper lay. There was a short tug at first, then an upper pull. I heard Erik curse quietly from there.

"You're zipper is jammed with a tiny pin. You can't possibly remove it on your own."

I frowned when my mind drifted off to Alec and the possibility that he did it on purpose.

Damn you Alec.

"Then it is good that you are here," I muttered; my cheeks burning. My sense of touch, smell, and sight were more than active; they were in hyper mode, begging for something I was aching.

Then, I felt his hands gripped at both ends of the dress. He released a throaty groan first and after that, instructed me, "You should have this repaired after because I am going to rip the damn zipper off."

"No!" was my quick cry. I stepped forward and pivoted to look at him with concerned eyes. "No, Erik you mustn't."

From there, I wished I didn't face him for in Erik's bluish-green orbs, there wasn't desire only, but torture too that flickered.

Why then would he have that?

For a heavy second, he clenched his jaw, closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Then how do you suggest I take you off that gown?" was his question; with a hint of tremble might I add.

"You—you use a scissor perhaps?" I answered with a hopeful face. In no way am I going to let him tore this beautiful creation just like that.

"Okay, where do you keep your scissors?"

“In my room,” was my almost inaudible answer, but I guess he still heard it since he raised a good brow at me.

Without asking, he proceeded into my bedroom like a confident owner. I followed him behind with my mouth slightly open. I don’t recall an instance that he actually stepped foot inside my bedroom, but watching him do it now, I can easily say that he was a welcomed (very welcomed) trespasser.

“Uhm, the scissor is in that lower cabinet,” I pointed out when he stopped near the vanity mirror.

He flashed me a small grin before rummaging the said cabinet. Seconds later, he found what we have been looking for and sauntered to where I stood just four steps away from my bed.

“Turn around,” was his order, but even so, he slipped a hand in my waist and guided me to turn. I felt the tingles all over again.

And it was good. Damn.

“I like this gown you know,” I stated trying to create a comfortable atmosphere.

“Yes, I know,” he answered from behind me as he worked his tender way on my zipper.

“Suri had to boss the designer a bit just to create this design,” I added, giggling at the memory of her sweet face nagging at the man.

“Yes, and she is right to boss him. If he didn’t deliver, he’ll have his nose as my punching bag.”

“Erik!” I shifted my face to the side to look at half of him in my peripheral vision. “Don’t joke! You can’t possibly do that!”

I felt him lean against my back; his hands still holding my gown and from there, warm breath fanned my right ear. I closed my eyes, feeling blood rushing up my head.

“Yes, worry not Sweet Rose. He is safe. He delivered more than I expected.”

I swallowed. I am not sure what to think of it but it seems partly he was complimenting me.

In a swift snip of the scissor and then an easy run of the zipper down my waist, his task was over and done.

A cold draft immediately followed when my back was exposed. I shivered with that but then my shivers worsened when I felt Erik’s fingers run down my spine.

“There, there. You’re good to undress,” he stated.

My knees trembled.

"Tha—thanks, Erik." Tightly, my hands kept the top gown from slipping off. I turned to face him just as he stopped doing damage on my spine.

"You're welcome, Daniella."

Still, there was desire and torture combined in the way he looked at me. It made me want to touch him more to ease him... to relieve him of whatever he was second-guessing, but I restrained, still preoccupied with my own virginal responses.

"I better go to the dressing room to change," I proclaimed, biting my lower lip.

"And I should go. I'll see myself out," he stated; his gaze directly on the lip that I had bit.

With a suck of air, I turned heels towards my walk-in closet, still clasping my gown. Before I closed it though, I took one last look at him hoping he was still there staring at me, but he was walking out of my bedroom too, his back to me. I was relieved at the sight, but deep inside me, there was a nagging disappointment I couldn't ignore.

Pressing my lips together, I continued to the closet and there I undressed with my heart none the lighter.

Since the closet was directly connected to the bathroom, I went there and took my time immersing myself with the bathtub's warm, soapy water. It was a good way to calm my erratic heartbeat. It was a good way too to lower down the yearning I had towards Erik.

Damn, I would have given myself to him had he advanced, but he didn't and the thought of that in the end made me frown.

He was so eager, so willing to touch me three weeks back. Heck, he even knew me intimately already amidst the lack of the defining moment, but now, he pulls back. Why? Why won't he touch me?

Groaning, I flipped my head up and gazed at the ceiling. Trying to understand his earlier actions, I thought of the possible reasons why he wouldn't from him being the President to me being a virgin, to him turning celibate, and to him just restraining himself, but I ended up being riled up all the more.

I stood up from the bathtub realizing that my soaking didn't help much of my mood. With a heavy stomp on the tiled floor, I raced to get my towel and black knee-length bathrobe.

"I will just have to seduce him then," I muttered to myself as I felt a new sense of courage. I was bold enough to give him a kiss that time in the gym. Heck, I was even bold enough to give him a blowj0b. Seducing him to get the answer won't be any different.

Damp was my hair and so was my bathrobe when I exited the bathroom and entered the walk-in closet.

To change quickly with fresh new clothes was my first intent when I got there, but when I caught sight of an outside reflection in my mirror, I stopped dead in my tracks.

A male figure was standing outside my small bedroom balcony. Although his back was to me and his form was blurred a bit by the sheer white curtain flowing together with the breeze, I knew exactly who it was: Erik.

I thought he left my room already?

With my heart pounding severely against my chest, I ambled towards him not caring that I was completely naked under the robe.

"You—you opened my balcony," was my first soft statement. I stopped in the entryway when I saw him turn to look longingly at me. "I thought you left. Why are you still here Erik?"

"Daniella," he raked me, looking first at my naked legs, then to my cleavage and then up to my face. My stomach twisted like the virginal sacrifice that I am. "Come to me."

He lifted his right hand and just as it was midair, I took it without hesitation.

Credits to my new-found courage.

"Erik..." I whispered when he pulled me against his frame.

The stars must have rejoiced for us since they twinkled like diamonds when I saw them amidst the vastness of the sky.

"I'm selfish," he whispered in my ear. "Are you appalled with that?"

Although he couldn't see, I frowned.

"If you think of yourself selfish because you are keeping me here amidst the danger then you're wrong." I grabbed his shirt by the neckline and pulled it down his chest almost to the point of tearing it. "Like I said before, it is my choice to stay here. It is my choice to be with you. Although I don't want you to risk your life for me, I greatly trust that you will protect me."

I felt him heavily inhale. Then, he pushed my head further to bury against his left shoulder.

"Daniella, I will protect you, but I can't protect you from me. Shit, I want you, badly so."

I don't know, but my heart just seemed to explode from his words.

"Then do it Erik. Take me." Out-of-the-blue, I planted a small kiss in the exposed part of his chest. He flinched and withdrew just inches in response, probably surprised of my action.

I raised my head up to look at him; my eyes firm and resolute.

“Touch me again like you did that faithful day Erik, and more.”

He gripped at my shoulders and pointed out, “You are untouched. A virgin.”

“Both of us are,” I corrected.

Initially, his eyes widened, surprised that I knew of this little fact. Then, it narrowed and darkened.

“I’ll only cause you pain.”

“A pain blessed by the Heavens,” I countered.

Tipping my toes, I raised my head up to brush my lips along his tensed jaw. He responded by running a hand through my damp hair.

“I’ll demand your heart, Daniella. Mine. It will be mine alone. Are you okay with that?”

I grinned. “I have already given it to you, Erik,” I pulled away and saw his eyes flicker, “since last year.”

And it was probably my confession that snapped him because his struggling expression lightened.

“I love you Daniella.”

My mouth dropped.

He ran fingers in my face, from my forehead down to my jaw as if he was painting a picture in his head of my features. I was too stunned to answer anything be it through words or through actions. I just fell silent.

“I’m saying this because I’m already too messed up to deny it. I’m done fighting Daniella.”

“E-rik…” I breathed.

God, if he would be any sweeter, I might think that this would be just a dream which I definitely don’t want it to be.

Erik doesn’t do sweet. A rough man; crude, rude, calculating, and volatile, that’s what his entire persona consisted. Although it pissed me off quite a few times in the first month, I wouldn’t want anything better.

I pressed my breasts to him wanting it noticed and it seems that he did because his expression changed to that of desire only. Gone was the torment in it.

Mouth just inches apart, he placed two hands in my waist.

“Let me hear you moan my name Daniella,” he said; his warm breath filling up my nostrils.

“Then make me, Erik. Make me,” I answered without delay, closing my eyes as he lifted me up from the ground.

On instinct, I wrapped my legs around his waist and we kissed like hungry souls willing to devour each other.

Chapter 34 - Bed on Fire

~ Erik ~

Dark was the room Mr. Hyde had placed me in one day. I had huddled myself in a corner for probably half an hour confused and feeling lost. I don't know why he placed me here, but I believe the reason wouldn't be any better. He and his men had been my companion for a year since they spirited me away from the Dominican convent. I knew of their criminal ways. I knew of his psychotic tendencies. Not one instance had I seen good in them... good in him.

Probably half an hour of staying, the door swung open to let in light.

Finally, my suffering in this deserted room ends, I thought to myself, but when a person stepped in, and not just any person, a woman in fact, I realized Mr. Hyde's twisted game had just begun.

The woman, most likely in her early twenties, sobbed as she cuddled herself in a makeshift bed. I don't even know there was a bed until she sought protection in it.

But I doubt a thin foam would protect her from what was to come.

I knew that Mr. Hyde and his men capture women in a nearby town to ra*pe them. I knew that this was going to be her fate. Unfortunately.

I wished I had the ability to save her from it, but I was helpless myself.

From the little light that passed from the open door, I saw her flushed face and wet, swollen eyes. She noticed me and her eyes flickered with mutual understanding. She must have thought me a victim too, which I think I was initially until Mr. Hyde came in and ordered me to ra*pe her on the spot.

Her face quickly changed to dread and she shouted a high-pitched no.

When I refused, that's when he snapped and did the appalling thing himself in front of me.

I saw the woman writhe in pain. I saw her kick, fight, and flung her hands in despair. I tried to close my eyes shut to block out the images but her screams tear through my ears. It was deafening me.

I heard her beg a million times but he was deaf to it, too engrossed with the carnal lust in his twisted mind.

That was my first exposure to such a horrid act. I thought it was my last but Mr. Hyde kept me exposed every single day since then. It had poisoned my mind and eventually, it dulled my desire to touch a woman.

Until Daniella came into my life.

I poured a lot of strength in my upper body and arms as I lifted her towards the mattress. Our lips were still locked in a heavy French kissing and it seemed neither of us planned on breaking it when we left the balcony. My hands groped her shapely bottom and needless to say, it awarded me with its softness.

Shit, she was already naked under the robe.

She, with her constricting legs around my waist, made my erection grew harder. It flinched forward touching what I had no doubt were pinkish pads between her legs. What was left was for me to pull my junior out and drive deep into her, but I restrained, wanting to savor our time together. I am no clone of that man. I don't ra*pe, I make love.

From raking my hair, Daniella's hands then wormed their way on my shirt, slipping eagerly under to touch my hard abdomen and chest. I shuddered with the contact.

We broke our kiss when I stopped at the foot of the bed. Carefully, I climbed up with my knees and I arranged her as modest as I could but she spread her legs apart and looked at me with eyes glazed with desire.

"Erik..." she breathed, pulling me closer between her legs. This position rendered me unable to escape but as if I wanted to escape with this fiery muse begging to be touched.

From her waist down, she was completely exposed. From her waist up, there was only one full breast that peeked. The only thing that ultimately covered her from my lustful examination was the black robe and its bind. I stared at it hoping that it would incinerate but it didn't.

Fuck, such a nuisance.

"You're making me go crazy, Daniella," I whispered and thereafter I leaned forward to maul her mouth again. She welcomed me freely with a tongue thrust.

Shit, for a virgin woman, she sure knows how to light me up.

I fumbled to untie the bind with my right hand while my other palmed on her peeking breast. When it loosened, I quickly tore the bathrobe open.

I withdrew to take in the splendid sight before me and I tell you, it was enlightening. The past memories that poisoned my mind were quickly thrashed away and replaced with Daniella lying flushed, panting, and desiring me with half-lidded eyes and hair in a beautiful spread.

“Erik, don’t stare please,” was her sweet request. I couldn’t help but grin.

“I want to stare at you for as long as possible, Daniella. Let’s make our first slow… wonderfully slow.”

I traced my fingers from her swollen lips to her cleavage; outlined the two smooth breasts in a figure-of-eight; proceeded thereafter along her tattooed scar to her navel, and then went down south just right at the top of her slit where I lingered there making an invisible doodle.

From under the yellow dim light, I registered each and every response I elicited from her starting from the faint clench of her jaw, to shutting her eyes, to deepening what was already her red cheeks, to her languid moans, and to biting her lips. The last one undid me so I leaned back, placed my hands on either side of her face, and bit the said lips myself, slowly, agonizingly that she bucked her hips up towards my waist.

With that, my shaft’s head which was still in the confines of my pants touched her groin and I groaned darkly at the torture.

I stopped our kiss and grounded, “Stay still Daniella or this will be over too soon,” whilst giving her a pointed but teasing glare. In a swift motion, I pulled my shirt out.

Disregarding my order, she sat up and drew my pants down for me. I shook my head and tsked. “Let me Sweet.”

She retracted her hands and bit her lips again as she watched as I got myself out totally from the burdensome garment.

My stone-hard c0ck saluted her as it broke free. She lifted a hand to touch it, but I stopped her midway with another shake of my head.

“I’ll embarrass myself if you do that, Daniella,” I stated. “With how erect this is, just a simple touch of your fingers could spurt out its collection.”

She burst out a soft giggle and with that, I launched myself towards her.

I did another rousing graze of my fingers all over her chest, belly, and hips as I tasted her lips. I intentionally avoided her sweet spots as it was mine to fondle for later but then she groaned and grabbed my hands, stopping me from my caressing.

“Erik,” she whispered, “my breasts.”

“Hmmm, what of it?” I dipped my sights on the pink globes with another grin growing on my lips. I was of course aware what she wanted to happen.

“My nipples, Erik. They are too hard.”

She looked at me with begging eyes. I cupped both of my hands at her breasts but didn't squeeze it.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Suck it," was her sure demand.

I raised a teasing brow at her.

"Suck it, Erik, please."

With a delighted face, I bit her lower lip again and answered, "I will, but after this."

"Hmmhh!" she let out a half-squeak, half-gasp when I wrapped two fingers around her hardened nubs. I could see that she was very sensitive in these regions because she wildly threw her head up from side to side and arch her back.

I wanted to pour attention to it more. I wanted to knead on it, playing my fingers with it, but I decided to end her agony.

I covered my mouth on one erect nipple.

In response, she grabbed my hair and pressed my face more against her globes.

Eager and willing, I massaged them with my hands, lapped on the pinks with my wet mouth, and sucked on them until Daniella gasp a series of louder ahs.

Without warning, she bucked and grabbed my hard, throbbing erection with her right hand and tugged at the head.

"Behave..." I grounded, fanning my breath in her cleavage, "Behave my Sweet Rose," and I then pushed her back to lie down.

"I'm burning up..." she whimpered with breathing a lot heavier than before. "I'm burning up!"

"And I am too."

I left one breast to seek dominion over her wet folds. With one slide of my finger at the slit, she looped her arms around my neck and pulled me in for another tongue-dueling kiss.

I felt myself the submissive that instant. I wouldn't mind it though, but I still like it being the dominant, so to counteract her actions, I started slewing my finger in a rough motion.

"Shit, Erik!" she broke out next to my ear. I lapped on her neck, made a few kiss marks here and there whilst doing damage on her folds.

"You are ready," I proclaimed, feeling the slippery wetness of my middle finger.

She raised her chin up to caress my jaw. "Then claim me," she stated with an uneven breath.

With nothing on my mind but to make love to her flesh to flesh, I kissed her, darted my tongue inside her mouth just as I pierced my hard-on inside her untouched cave. Damn, she was so tight. So, so tight that it made me lose my head for a moment.

But then, I heard her pained gasp and that's when I realized that I just made a mistake.

"Shit, I hurt you."

She shook her head violently and replied, "No, you didn't Erik."

"I did."

I moved to cup her face and held her gaze with fear and guilt. I was ready to end our tryst that moment, ready to unsheathe my c0ck, but she stared at me sternly and said, "Move."

I would have thought it the other way if she hadn't grabbed my waist and pushed my bottom towards her center. Yes, we both responded to it with a simultaneous gasp.

"Please move Erik. You would hurt me if you won't."

She looked at me again with pleading eyes and with that, I surrendered.

"Daniella," my voice strained when I withdrew halfway up and then pushed back down. I knew I caused her pain again, but her hands on my back urged me to move further, harder, deeper.

I did again and again until I found my master rhythm.

"Ughh, shit."

Wanting more skin contact, I pulled her up to sit in my lap. She gasped with the new-found deeper feeling of the position and so did I. We kissed again, tongue sparring against tongue, and rocked faster.

She gave me thrusts of her own that stole a heavy groan from me from time to time.

Her moans, fuck, her moans coupled with breathless shouts of my name were the best sounds that I have ever heard in my entire life.

She was heavy with ecstasy and I was too.

For the first time, it surprised me that I wasn't that early to come. I was able to hold it in until we became frenzied in our rhythm.

It was exhilarating and dizzying as we climbed up to our climax.

I wanted to heighten it so I placed her back in bed and devoured her breasts whilst thrusting to the hilt inside her.

“Erik... I’m going to... I’m going to,” she whimpered, looking at me flushed and panting.

I stared at her with lust-filled eyes.

“Yes, show me, Daniella. Show me how you come.”

I stepped up the pace, pistoning inside her, and she, without delay, came first, spilling too much of her orgasm all over my c0ck and in the printed sheet. I followed her thereafter, clenching my teeth while spilling my own sperm-filled semen inside her.

And yes, safety be damned, I guess it was already too late to actually think of condoms now.

***

~ Daniella ~

As a newly-fucked maiden, instead of a man’s eager touch, a loud thunder woke me from a lovely slumber. The sun didn’t shine but I knew it was already morning when I groggily sat up with my hand securing to cover my breasts with the bedsheet. Well, early morning that is as the digital clock on my side of the table showed a time of exactly five twenty-eight. The room had a gloomy atmosphere considering no lights were turned on. I couldn’t make out much of the details but I was aware I am all alone.

I found Erik absent in bed when my eyes immediately scanned for him. Although that would have disappointed me, I was relieved actually. Finally, I am able to take care of my biological needs.

Last night, Erik was tender to me after we did it. He kept me in bed the whole time with his arms wrapped around me. I never expected him to be a cuddles-kind of guy, but he did that, tightly even as if he was afraid that I would vanish on the spot.

I didn’t mind it though. In fact, I relished being cared for and treated like a treasure. Even though we were butt naked together.

He was still sporting a semi minutes after we climaxed. It was clearly poking at my side but Erik was sensitive enough to ignore it and cuddle me to sleep instead.

My black bathrobe was already conveniently folded near the clock (most likely by Erik) and so I took it and covered myself when I stood up.

But that’s when everything went clearer to me. I shot a look at the clock and gaped in surprise.

No, my bedroom doesn’t have a digital clock at all. It had a grand clock opposite my bed.

Scanning the whole area, I realized finally that I was in another bedroom, in Erik’s to be exact.

"When?" I uttered whilst trying to remember the moment he transferred me here. I couldn't recollect anything though other than a faint memory that I was floating in my dream.

Just how did he do it? I have no idea, but it was definitely a surprise for me.

The glass door from the balcony of his bedroom suddenly opened making me turn with a start. I had thought of it initially as just an effect of the strong wind but then my eyes immediately caught sight of a dark shadow stepping inside the room.

"Erik?!" I gasped when it was his face that I recognized.

From his head down to his feet, he was wet, very wet, and it looked as if he took his time with the pouring rain outside. He was wearing the same drawstring pants last night, but this time it had clung in his long legs. I diverted my eyes away as the clear bulge of his pants beckoned me to stare.

"You're awake," Erik's voice reverberated throughout the room amidst the sound of the rain overlapping it.

"Yeah," I answered shyly and drew my gaze on the ground.

Memories of last night replayed in my mind right then and there and it heated up my cheeks once more.

"Did I wake you?" he questioned worriedly.

I shook my head, looked back at him, and smiled. "No, Erik. You didn't. It was the thunder."

He smiled too, but only a little, and then strode towards me. My heart quickened its pace.

I know we had just made love only last night and it should have lessened a few of my virginal responses towards him, but still, it was there ready to wreak havoc with my feelings.

Even with the overall coldness and wetness of his body, without hesitation, he embraced and kissed me, hard and hungry. He slipped on his tongue to which I had no trouble welcoming. I reciprocated with the same intensity, sparring with it and molding my mouth with his as if it was our first time kissing.

He looped an arm around my back and lifted me slightly up to press my breasts to his chest. I felt hot and wet all over again.

"Erik..." I breathed, shutting my eyes and feeling for his warm breath fanning my face when I withdrew.

"I'm sorry," he sounded apologetic, "Now we are both wet."

I chuckled, “It seems so,” and then raised my head to meet his gaze. “Why did you bathe in the rain anyway?”

He looked at me with intense eyes that I almost felt like I was his prey. “The cold helps me keep myself in check. I certainly don’t want to bother you while you sleep just to make love a dozen times with you over the course of the night.”

Although his words were crude, I found it heart-warming and a turn-on.

“Oh,” I heaved a breath. “I’m the one who should apologize then for letting you suffer.”

His sexy chuckle immediately muted the sound of the rain. The whole time, I relished listening to it.

He pushed a lock of hair from my shoulder to my back and stated, “Don’t worry. You don’t need to.”

“Why not?” I arched my brow.

“Because you will come with me to shower, Daniella.”

I paused and stared at him dumbstruck.

Chapter 35 - Reaching the Big 'O' Together

~ Daniella ~

In one scoop Erik lifted me up bride-style from the ground with his strong arms. I yelped of course with the suddenness of it but nevertheless surrendered myself with his subtle demand.

As he strode to the bathroom, I combed the locks of wet hair out of his face and pulled the prosthetic make-up out of his neck tattoo.

He didn't protest with it and even allowed me to trace the edges of the spade.

"What's this tattoo mean, Erik?" I asked once we arrived in the bath area that was connected to the first section of the bathroom.

This area had a different atmosphere.

Why? Because it literally had no concrete roof except for a skylight that showed the pelting rain. The walls were covered with groovy tiles of Mediterranean art. There was a countertop some stretch away from us and a full-length mirror beside it. From each side, there were silvery green plants that towered all the way to the walls. Vines crept close to it that added to its tropical feeling. What caught my breath more was the mini Jacuzzi at the center. It boasted three wide steps down the cerulean water, all set-up with smooth blue tiles.

I gaped of course because this was my first time seeing the existence of this area.

Back in my first day of being Erik's personal maid when he ordered me to fill in his tub, I didn't exactly expect that the door farther to the right was actually the portal to this oasis.

Goodness me.

And now, Erik and I are to bath here together! And naked!

My head screamed when he placed me down and swiftly untied my bathrobe. A glint of pleasure showed in his eyes right before tossing my robe in one of the rattan chairs available.

I whimpered a little when he ran a hand in my flat belly, to the underside of my breasts and to the edges of my blue rose tattoo. It set me in flames again.

"Dip in first, I'll follow you after," he instructed.

I did as he told, managing the three steps of the Jacuzzi to sink in the water. The water was warm surprisingly, just at the level of my nipples when I sat. Considering that we had just entered here, I expected it to be freezing cold, but it wasn't.

At the center, with my arms stretched sideways, I stopped to observe Erik. His movements reflected of eagerness when he opened a wall-bolted metal box near the countertop and pushed something there to turn on the Jacuzzi bubbles.

I squealed a little when I felt pressure in between my legs and in my back. Erik looked at me and grinned; that particular grin that showed he was beyond delighted of my reaction.

I thinned my eyes and puckered my lips, but it was only momentary because it immediately dropped when he pulled the wet pants out and stood in all his naked glory in front of me.

Swallowing an imaginary pool of drool in my mouth, I continued to stare and stare real good, examining and analyzing to myself how in the world his major general fitted inside me last night.

I am no longer a virgin but still, I feel that I am when he joined me in the water and stretched his arms wide.

“Come here, Daniella.”

My heart sped up double-time as I slid close to him, putting myself in between his lean legs.

He welcomed me with an embrace at the back. His arms held tightly around my waist and then he pulled me closer against his chest. I could well feel his warm breathing passing through my right ear.

“You had this place setup for you alone?” I asked deciding to start a good conversation.

I heard a low pleasured growl in his throat before he answered, “I enjoy life’s pleasures every now and then Daniella, but mostly, this area helps me relax after a tiring mission.”

By mission, he probably meant Iopata-related so I decided not to pursue the topic.

“And now you’re sharing the space with me,” I stated matter-of-a-factly with a little smile on my face.

“Hmmm, it is,” he answered behind me, “One of my best ideas so far.”

“And I bet another one of it is you blackmailing me into becoming your personal maid and turning me into a club member.”

I shifted to look at his profile and saw the mischief in his smile. “I am at your disposal Daniella,” he stated, “You can take revenge on me for what I have done.”

I held my laughter at bay.

“Revenge? That would be tempting Erik, but I prefer not. However, I do would like to forgive you if you answer my question earlier.”

He raised a brow for a moment and then something dawned on him.

“You sly vixen,” his stated playfully, “You want me to talk about my tattoo?”

I nodded while keeping my mouth zipped, trying to give him puppy-dog eyes.

I wasn’t sure if it was intentional but he heaved a deep, really deep breath before started answering me.

“This tattoo shows my rank in my father’s Bratva. It shows that I am family and basically his eventual successor if I hadn’t escaped.”

Cool and calm, that’s what I have told myself when I sought to find out more about his past.

“Is your desire to bring him down the reason that you cover it up?” was my follow-up question whilst touching the art of our discussion gently with my lips.

He shivered, I felt he did, although faintly as the pensive mood he was suddenly in overpowered it.

“I am embarrassed of my family roots Daniella. People, especially those who knew about Iopata might recognize this so I chose to hide it. It lessens complications. It also hides my real identity to my father. He thinks me dead remember?”

I nodded once with that. “I see.”

Then, I took out his left hand from his embrace and joined it, palm to palm with my own.

“But I fear for you and the others Erik. This…agenda you are in with the Russian brotherhood is unhealthy and unsafe.”

I pulled my hand out but his fingers quickly interlaced with the spaces to keep me from retracting. He brought them up near his mouth and pecked each of my digits.

“It is what we do Daniella,” was his answer after the batch of kisses. “Such is fate. Who else would if we wouldn’t?”

And by that I remembered his remark about the Club being a modern-day Robin Hood. True, who else would actually help the poor and helpless affected by the machinations of a mafia if not them?

“You have a point,” was my initial answer. From my contemplation, a second truth was brought up to me and this was our bumping into each other in the vineyard. “I am not going to complain much though. After all, your circumstances exactly bridged our meeting.”

He probably remembered our past too because his face lightened up. “Indeed.”

Not that I was complaining but I shifted to the left a little when I felt a certain bulge poke at my behind. It reminded me about the now and how stimulating our position was at the moment.

“Why did you bring me in your room Erik?” I asked taking into account that I really did want to know the reason. “I remember we were still in my room yesterday night.”

I felt his chest vibrate with unsound laughter. He ran the tip of his nose to the helix of my ear and played with it for a few seconds before answering.

“I want us undisturbed Daniella. I would really like to keep you here for as long as possible but I know other matters would keep me from doing it. The whole day today would be the best that I can get us.”

“A whole day?” Even though he can’t clearly see, I arched my brow. “You really plan on confining me here?”

“Do I hear trepidation in your voice, Hotness?”

Oh yes, especially when he suddenly slipped one hand down my fluttering belly, just below my navel.

“A little maybe…” I answered with a gentle exhale.

“Then I’ll promise to keep you occupied as much as possible to take your mind off of that.”

From there, he advanced lower and lower until he reached the favored spot.

“Erik…” I breathed out when he skated one finger inside my sex.

“Open your legs wider Sweet Rose,” he requested to which I did so with much enthusiasm. “Good, now offer yourself to me.”

I almost loudly gasped when he focused on pinching my circular spot. His fingers, oh his fingers, created sensations inside me which I have just been introduced last night. I was in rapture that time and no doubt I am about to experience it again this moment.

“Erik-hhh.” His name definitely came out lewd when I said it.

He was probably turned on with it because one finger bore a second and then a third all the while causing a complete delicious mess against my walls. His free hand released from embracing me. I thought he would use it to restrain my hand from grabbing his bottom but I was wrong. He actually used it to cup my left swelling breast that was aching for attention too.

“Ah!”

I gasped again but this time as loud as I could when I felt myself reaching to that world of blissful swirls.

“Go on, come for me Daniella,” he urged darkly against my ear.

Forcefully, he went on and on for probably minutes, making waves in the water with his working arm together with the bubbles of the Jacuzzi.

“Shit! Erik!” I blindly shouted with head pressed against his tensed shoulder as I reached the explosive climax.

Before I knew it, he lapped on my exposed neck, adding more to my heightened sensations. I shuddered; fuck, how I shuddered. And whimpered; whimpered like it was the only sound learned in my voice box.

“Erik...” My head spun for minutes.

He withdrew from caressing me but didn’t say anything, so once my lightheadedness ceased, I looked at his profile and saw, straight in my line of sight, his relaxed jaw and pleased curving mouth. He was already looking at me; eyes flooding with genuine affection.

“Such a sight. I want that embedded in my mind forever,” he stated.

I felt myself blush.

“You don’t seem to have difficulty putting me in that scene Erik. I think your fingers have an immense power hoarded in them.”

“Only because my victim is so willing to be loved,” he replied with ease.

I thought that he was going to release me and continue with his Jacuzzi bathing. I thought that he was done with his attention on me, but no he wasn’t. Not at all. Without warning, he lifted me up from the water and brought me to lie in a nearby lounger chair.

It was a huge furniture that can easily fit two people lying, but right now, I have a feeling that lying wasn’t what was on Erik’s mind.

Just as my bottom hit the thin cushion, he leaned down and covered my mouth with an all-time best passionate kiss ever. His slithering tongue overwhelmed me but who’s to say that I can’t catch up with his actions?

I plunged my own inside his mouth and that made him groan distinctly.

With how we were positioned, I could feel his erection growing longer and thicker. Damn.

I really thought he’d pierce it inside me right then and there because (you know) we were naked and that we both yearned for each other but no. No, no. Erik had another thing in mind.

“I’d like to taste you, Daniella,” he said when he withdrew; eyes boring deep into mine. “I’d like it very much. Please nod if you want me to and I really want you to.”

Being new to this act and all, it was a good course of action to deny him tonguing me, but I'd be damned if I didn't nod. Shit, in the back of my head, I wanted it to happen.

So I nodded.

"Excellent," he uttered.

He stooped low right at the middle of my open legs and smirked sexily at me before launching down to contact his tongue with my quaking cli*t.

"Ah Erik!" I shouted, or more like mewled.

He stopped after a tongue sweep at my gratified protrusion and groaned sexily, "Such a nectarine taste you have Sweet Rose." Then he licked the corner of his mouth.

"Erik..." I watched him through half-lidded eyes.

He hooked my knees with his elbows and spread me even wider to gain more access.

I felt a pang of embarrassment when that happened but when he devoured my puss*y with such gusto, the feeling went flying out of the skylight.

Throwing my hands near the sides, I sought to find something to grab onto, but there was this only thin cushion below me. It was so meager that it was unable to support my careening emotions. I grabbed my own breasts instead.

Closing my eyes and arching my back, I felt his tongue whip, flick and slide like a loyal dog venerating its master's feet. He is no dog and I am not his master, but he certainly did the task with flying colors.

I felt myself climb to that orgasmic bliss again.

But then, he stopped. Fuck, he stopped.

"I want you again Daniella. Shit, I crave for you," was his statement when he pulled himself up. Love charged with lust overflowed in his eyes as he regarded my lying, weak state.

"What-what is stopping you then?" I answered breathlessly, lusting for his c0ck in that moment.

He stooped again and aimed for my neck, skating his hot, wet tongue along the area and down to my navel. Then, he attacked one of my breasts, doing amazing lapping motions with it, before suddenly ramming his ace inside me.

Both of us groaned in unison with the completeness of our union.

"Shhhit, fuck you're so tight! You're insides are clenching me, woman!"

Satisfaction painted my face.

I undulated my hips towards him and ran my hand along his chiseled torso. He closed his eyes and clenched his jaw in response.

“You’re doing things inside me Erik - delicious things,” I proclaimed. “Being this tight is my way of reacting to you. Well, apart from the fact that you had just deflowered me last night.”

His chest swelled from my praise.

“Ah!” I gasped when he pulled and pushed his erection inside me without warning.

“Is this what you meant by delicious?” he teased.

Shit, and I just licked my own lips in reaction.

“Yes, ah!”

Again, he plunged inside me, the feeling of which I can’t exactly find the right words to describe, but picture your favorite food in a year-long fasting of it and then you get to eat it again. That’s how I feel now, only much, so much better.

With his divine hands, he titillated my breasts again but it was only momentary because he swiftly straightened me up from lying and then instructed against my forehead: “Turn around for me, Sweet.”

Although confused, I did as he told without asking any questions, pulling myself away and terminating temporarily our union. He hooked one hand around my waist just as my back pressed against his chest. Then, his free hand ran palm-down along my spine and I shivered with the ticklishness of it.

“I’m going take you from behind. Please tell me if I’ll hurt you.”

I frowned.

“No, you’ll not.”

He pressed his lips on my nape and I shuddered.

“Just tell me Daniella. Please.”

With how pleading his voice sounded, I released a sigh in the end and then nodded. “I will.”

I wondered how he could give me pain when all he had given me was pleasure and orgasms after orgasms. When he entered me in one gentle push though that’s when I realized why he had to say that. With how we were positioned, my back against his chest and his erection like a nail inside me, I felt its head hitting my cervix.

I gasped loudly.

“Am I hurting you?” he asked, worry dripping in his voice.

“No, no...” I answered with a quick shake of my head. Nope, I am not lying. It was the truth. The feel of him buried deep, so deep inside me was beyond imagination. Pain was easily forgotten. “It feels so good Erik.”

He chuckled behind me and then started to move.

Shit.

My head spun like crazy... my senses mashed up into one big ball of nuclear bomb ready to be detonated.

He delivered smooth, quick succession of thrusts, putting our bodies into a perfect rhythm.

I heard him groan in time with my moans, banishing the thought that he was a cold, insensitive bastard of a President. Well, that thought had already been expelled from my mind long ago and I doubt I would believe that ever again now that I had seen this side of Erik.

Just like last night, we finally burst out together, clutching each other’s arms as we rode our wave of orgasm. His head fell on my shoulder, heavy and wet in sweat and rain. My own fell back on his shoulder too, but I pressed my cheeks to his jaw, letting him hear the deep breaths I was making.

“Erik..?” I panted.

“Yes, Daniella?”

“This is the second time you didn’t use a condom.”

“I’m aware.” He paused and kissed the back of my right ear. “Are you safe?”

“No,” I replied quickly, but weird, I don’t feel one bit of panic at all.

“Good,” he announced and that made me turn slightly to look at him with half-amused, half-confused eyes.

“Erik, what are you trying to say?” I asked.

He only planted a sweet kiss on my nose and replied, “You will have to stay with me forever, My Love.”

Chapter 36 - Needing a Knight-In-Shining-Armor

~ Daniella ~

A whole day.

That's what Erik told me and true to his word, we really did stay for a wondrous whole day inside his room.

He had instructed Mr. Ian through a phonecall to leave our breakfast, lunch, and dinner meals including snacks outside the main door. He also issued all club matters directed to the Vice President and even those that pertain to Iopata set aside for the next day.

Weirdly enough, not one of the club members called or texted him. I am not so sure if it was intentional or if they knew of my presence in their president's bedroom, but the zero bothers made me feel at ease. As of the moment, I don't want to think about how Suri and the other's had reacted to the advancement of me and Erik's relationship.

I doubt that they would be surprised though. I have an inkling that they knew something was up between the two of us right from the start.

Erik and I discussed a lot of things during our stay. If we were not busy moaning and groaning that is. The topics were common ones like my family, our business, the vineyard that we first met last year, and me in general. He discovered many things about me by forcing me to confess. Some of these are my craziness about cookie butter, my inability to swim in deep waters, my fear of koalas, and my advanced college degree.

I on the other hand learned little about him other than his allergy to peanut butter, his hate for puppies, and him being certified and a black belt in all martial arts-related courses. He mentioned about his childhood life, about being an orphan since birth and raised by Dominican nuns, but that was that. He never added more to it and I didn't dare delve deeper as the sudden cold, lifelessness of his eyes was clue enough for me to stop.

There was only one word to describe Erik during our whole-day stay and it was: robust.

I tell you, as expected of a man who just got ripped from his celibate life, he sure took advantage of it. We made love on all corners of the room and for crying out loud, he almost caused my voice to sound hoarse from shouting out too much. He made me feel like a Goddess hallowed by a lowly

man. As opposed to his rude and insensitive attitude a month ago, he was sensitive to my needs and took care of them like he was my servant.

My heart, if it wasn't swollen enough, swelled again and again and because of that, he almost, *almost* choked out the coveted three words from me in our twelfth lovemaking.

Late in the morning, the next day was the time I was finally able to return in my own room. Erik, although against his wishes, left me to take care of an urgent matter that he received through text message early in the morning from Vincent. It said that Luca Tristram, their inside man in the Bratva, had arrived since yesterday.

He left me in front of my door still wearing the overused black bathrobe and after a soul-searching, heavily passionate kiss. Yeah, we almost made love right in front of the door for that matter.

Everything was just as I remembered to be in my room. Even the royal blue shimmering gown remained in its same position: in a hanger hung inside my walled closet. Since I already bathed together with Erik in the Jacuzzi, I went straight ahead to dress with a pink off-shoulder sleeved blouse and black slacks.

Once done, I strode towards my bedside table to check on my phone. There was a message in it coming from Suri telling me to have lunch with her in a restaurant near Alec's boutique and to bring the gown with me. Smiling, I typed in a 'Yes' and a 'See you two hours from now' reply.

Her response came quickly with a 'Looking forward to it' message complete with a cute smiley.

From where I stood, the queen-size bed beckoned me to look. I did and my breath immediately hitched when I saw what was in front of me. I placed a hand in my chest as I stared at the rumpled white sheet wherein the evidence of Erik's conquest of my virginity lay, reduced to a dark, dull red stain.

Pain and pleasure mixed together were what I could remember at that moment and it made me feel warm inside having remembered how gentle he was that time with me.

I hastened to pull the sheet out and dropped it in the laundry basket grinning to myself. Surely, the chateau laundry staff would have wild imaginations tonight.

I went back to my bedroom and stood in front of the vanity mirror. I've heard about stories that women change after their first night with the man they love. In a physical or emotional sense? I don't know, but the answer made me curious.

A change after their first night... I'm not so sure about this since I am now standing in the mirror after my second night with Erik. Other than my backside sore, my energy slightly drained, and my

muscles overworked (including the one below that had received thorough attention), there was nothing significant to say that I really have changed.

A change after their first night with the man they love... Now, that made my insides clench.

“I love him...” I whispered softly as I watched my glowing reflection. Eye-to-eye with myself, there was suddenly a realization inside me and that was the irrevocable truth of my feelings for Erik.

“Yes, I love him!” I said it loudly and clearly as if trying to nail it inside my heart.

But I don’t know why two rogue tears fell from my eyes then.

Maybe because I regretted that I wasn’t able to tell this to him when we were still together. Maybe because my heart just swelled with it so much that I wanted it released. Maybe because I was dying now to tell it to him!

With a deep breath, I nodded at my reflection with newfound determination. I will tell him. I will tell him the three overflowing words this instant!

I speedily strode out of my room leaving my cellphone behind, but without any idea where to find him, I went back inside to get the gadget.

Along the west hallway, I pressed his cellphone number with a quick thumb to call him instead. No, not to confess on the phone, but to just ask where he was.

After a few rings, he accepted my call.

“Daniella,” his husky voice filtered through my ears, “are you okay?”

On impulse, I bit my pinky finger like a high school girl and squealed silently in my head.

“Ah, if you mean I’m-in-love-with-you okay, then yes, I’m okay,” I blurted out suddenly and after realizing what I have just said, I bit my bottom lip enough to cause soreness.

I heard a quick, short inhale and then a long release of breath before he answered me softly, “We will talk about this later, is it fine with you? I am surrounded by willing ears and I am too selfish to share this moment with them.”

Then I heard a disappointed groan from someone. It sounded like Rohan.

“Ye-yes,” I stammered, “Okay, later then.”

Partly, my shoulders slumped of disappointment. It seems that Rohan wasn’t the only one feeling it. I was so intent on telling him my feelings that his sudden ‘talk to you later’ slapped me to the ground.

Partly, however, I was relieved. Of course, I also don't want to share this precious moment with others. This was me and Erik's alone.

With a deep sigh, I ended the call and returned to my room. For an hour, I stayed there fixing my hair into a ponytail and adding light make-up in my face. Then, a knock came at my door. It was unhurried but demanding attention nonetheless.

At first, I thought it was Erik, so I readied a shy smile, but when I opened the door, a man pretty much as tall as Erik stood with a bored expression. One hand was dipped inside the pocket of his black jeans while the other was dangling at the side. He wore a white v-neck shirt, covered by a black leather jacket.

My ready shy smile disappeared.

Not my Erik, was my first thought as I stared at his bad-boy bearded appearance.

"Uh, yes?" I spoke, confused about his presence.

His pale green eyes regarded me from head to foot, then back to my face. He smirked then; one that I find a tad bit irr— no, *really* irritating.

"Adequate enough," was his confusing answer. His voice had a slight touch of a Russian accent in it.

I raised one brow and crossed my arms to my chest. "What was that again? I didn't catch your name, Mr?"

"Luca, Daniella. Luca Tristram. Register that in your brain."

I wasn't sure if I should be surprised by his unexpected appearance or with his spiky command, but either way, it left me stunned enough to fail to see his following actions.

That one hand that was dangling earlier suddenly reached out and grabbed my left arm. With one forceful pull, my face landed against his chest. The other hand that was hiding in his pants pocket cupped my chin and raised my face up.

I didn't have time to do anything when my pupils constricted.

Shit.

The asshole just kissed me! He fucking kissed me!

I immediately felt the contents of my breakfast together with Erik traveling up my throat.

His lips melded with mine as soft as any other men's lips, but it was definitely not the same as that of Erik! Not similar at all!

Summoning strength, both of my hands pushed his face away in success. Then, with the right hand up, I quickly targeted his cheeks for a powerful slap.

It connected.

He hissed in response and nursed his affected cheek with the palm of his hand. I can bet my passport that it was throbbing in pain.

I glared at him; anger and irritation evident in my eyes, while he... the bastard, just looked at me with amusement.

“It seems you taste as good as you look: torturously sweet with a dash of fire. He is going to like you.”

What the hell?

I narrowed my eyes just as I wiped the wetness off of my lips with the sleeve of my blouse.

“Are you mocking with me, Luca? Last time I checked, it was Erik who bagged that award!”

His amusement increased a thousandfold. “Ah! And with a sharp tongue too!” he shouted in mock celebration. He stepped closer to me and placed his elbow against the door frame. “Great! Now, I’m certain he will love you.”

I stepped backward and clenched my teeth.

“Why did you kiss me? And who, for God’s sake, are you pertaining to?”

Certainly, this ‘he’ he kept on mentioning doesn’t include one of the club members.

He shrugged his shoulders and returned to his original bad-boy bored look. The amused expression had vanished in his face.

“I will have to keep you guessing, babe. See you outside.”

He waved a hand and then strode away from my door.

I was left with my mouth hanging open.

No wonder the Iopata boss accepted him, he has a loathsome attitude. A man like him definitely suits well in a mafia group. No doubt about it.

After quickly closing the door, I decided to calm myself, so I went to my balcony and sat there for another half an hour.

I thought about Luca’s words and how it could be nonsensical and significant at the same time.

Probably, he was just messing around with me, but on second thought, there could be something behind his words. I am no detective but for all I know, he was dropping clues.

I thought about his actions and the fact that he kissed me and deliberated whether I should tell this to Erik or not.

Before I could find a good conclusion though, another knock came at my door and this time it was coupled with the muffled voice of Suri saying, "Dani girl! Come! Let's eat!"

Suri and I first dropped the gowns in Alec's boutique, leaving them with one of his assistants to take care because he was at the meeting with Erik and the other's back in the chateau. Apparently, Alec wanted to keep the gowns for us since he had a technique on how to store and preserve their beauty.

Right after that, we continued to the restaurant located across the boutique. It was a French restaurant that Suri and Amano have been frequenting since the Club was established.

When Suri was all prim and proper since we left the chateau, now she was attacking me with intense giddiness just like Ericka would when talking about my love life.

"I knew it! I knew it that Prez has feelings for you!" she exclaimed whilst clutching my hand with her own across the table we were in.

I had to look from side to side just to make sure she didn't bother the other customers with her jubilant voice.

"Shhh, Suri keep your voice down," I stated with a half-pleading, half-shy stare.

"Ooops, sorry," she dipped her head in apology and then beamed another smile at me. "But seriously, when I found out that he had bumped into a woman in the middle of a mission and that he had been keeping a picture of that woman in his office, I knew that he was head-over-heels in love with her. And when I found out that that woman was in the chateau," she then pointed her nail-polished pointy finger at me and grinned, "specifically you, I was ecstatic!"

My curiosity flag was immediately hoisted up. "Are you saying that you knew all along about our past?"

"Pshhh, duh," she gave me a goofy smile. "All of us knew about that particular early morning, in a vineyard barn, where a woman just jumped in front of our Prez to save his less-than spicy life."

"Wow," I felt myself blush. "That's why Vincent and Rohan had been dropping hints on me when I first came in the chateau."

“Dani, all of us are happy for you and Prez.” She gave me a warm smile that was quickly overlapped by a guilty-sorry expression. “And I am not going to lie that we were relieved that his tyranny will be over because he has found you.”

“You guys are so sly,” I thinned my eyes and then smiled at her.

“Well, we support our beloved Prez to the moon and back.” She winked at me and then ate her strawberry shortcake.

The rest of our conversation contained about the success of the ball, about upcoming celebrity parties, about the Club while I was away, and my three-week unexpected stay in New York. I mentioned to her about my current birthday party project for a man named ‘Nikola Aristov’ sponsored by my client, ‘Mr. Hyde Startsev’ and that it was going to be held in the President’s Hall of the chateau. I told her that it was my personal project but I had my friends/workmates do most of the other details and the reservation of the hall.

She listened and nodded her understanding the whole time, but then asked something that got me choking on my orange juice.

“By the way, have you met Luca Tristram yet?”

I watched her with my brows arched higher than the usual.

“Huh?”

“He is one of the club members remember? He just arrived yesterday from Russia bearing important Iopata news for the Club. You should meet him, he is a charmer, but not as charming as your man.”

She then winked at me.

“Ahh, ha ha.” I rolled my eyes playfully.

I don’t want to lie to her so I kept myself silent and let her assume that I haven’t met the man. Although I would want to tell her about the stolen kiss Luca got from me, it was better this way that she didn’t know. As I said, I had already erased that bothersome memory away, and to tell her about that now would invite unwelcomed questions from her... and an unsavory scowl from Erik.

“Hey, Dani, I want to tell you something,” she then stated after a few minutes of silent eating.

From being comfortable earlier, now she suddenly released the utensils and fidgeted with her fingers.

“What is it, Suri? Do you have a problem?” I asked, quickly worried with her. I placed the glass on the table and focused my attention on her.

"Well, you see, Amano and I, we..." Her cheeks then blushed a deep red. Her stare shifted from mine to the floor and continued, "We are getting married."

"Seriously?!" I squeaked in excitement. I almost stood up from my seat out of happiness. I grabbed her tensed hand and gazed at her with big eyes. "Wow, Suri! That's great news!"

"I know right?" Her stiff shoulder then relaxed. "This is the ring that Amano gave me."

I dipped my gaze on the blue sapphire ring that sat royally in her ring finger. I have noticed it since she fetched me in my room, but thought of it as just an anniversary present. "Wow, congratulations Suri. I'm so happy for you!"

But then, my happiness was short-lived. Why? Because there was suddenly a black van that crashed inside the restaurant's glass wall.

Our table was not affected by the crash, thank God, as it was situated at a far corner against the brick wall but it still elicited a shriek from us.

As five burly men in black masks disembarked the van, Suri and I just sat in our seats too stunned to run for safety. I felt her grip my hand under the table as one of the men pulled out a 0.45 caliber handgun from his black trench coat and released two bullets straight to the ceiling.

"Nobody move or else the next bullet will be inside your head!"

I heard the other customers wail in panic after hearing it, but a waiter near us stupidly did the opposite. He ran towards the back door but the armed man gunned him down in the head just like he promised. He lay dead on the aisle near us.

Another wail from mostly women came instantly and I swear I heard myself join in with them whilst staring at the lifeless body.

Breathing unevenly, I pressed myself against the brick wall and acted like a statue. Suri did the same and I was aware her pulse and breathing were just as fast as mine.

Then my jaw dropped as I looked at her.

As opposed to my horrified expression, hers was with determination looking at the commotion in front of us. God, she looked as if she was Scarlett Johansson ready to kick ass a mad man.

Certainly, she's not thinking about fighting them?!

"Suri?" I strained to call her.

"You stay still, Dani. Just stay still," she grounded without looking at me. Whatever sweetness she had on her was gone. She looked like a badass chick staring at a bully ready to cut his pe*nis. "They will not harm us if we just stay still. Let them rob this restaurant to their heart's content."

Oh but apparently, money was not what the men wanted. It was me, and I realized that when I saw the armed man gliding directly towards me.

Chapter 37 - Turning the Cards

~ Erik ~

“How is she?” I immediately asked as soon as Amano stepped out of the private hospital room. Four hours had passed since the abduction of Daniella and I am yet to find out the details from Suri who had sustained a gunshot wound in her left thigh.

I am extremely fidgety and itching to ki*ll someone right now, but since I needed to ask Suri first, I stayed the whole four hours in the waiting area.

“Suri’s doing fine, Prez,” Amano replied with relief in his eyes. Just a few hours ago, he was beyond containment insisting on being by Suri’s side during the operation. Vincent had talked him through it and he had calmed down a little bit since then.

“The bullet that had lodged in her thigh has already been taken out. She is recovering now.”

Good. Now I can go on asking her.

“Can she talk?” I said, drawing wrinkles in my brows. “Is she allowed to? I need to ask her all that had happened in the restaurant.”

He sighed and made a faint smile.

“Actually, she needs to rest, but you can talk to her now. The surgeons said she’s been asking for you even before the operation started.”

Huh. That’s Suri alright.

With a quick nod, I pushed the white door to enter.

Suri was lying on the bed with two pillows propped up behind her. Intravenous line was attached to her left hand while the injured thigh was elevated with a pulley. She was looking at me already, eyes expectant and overshadowed with sadness.

“Prez...” she uttered weakly.

I strode to her side and sat on a vacant chair; my hands clasped on my lap. “I want you to tell me everything,” I ordered without preliminaries.

She nodded once and started in a raspy voice.

“Men wearing black masks took her Prez. I’m sorry. I really am. I wasn’t able to save her.”

"You did your duty," I stated, assuring her that my anger was not directed to her. "Now tell me about those men."

She drew her eyes to the ceiling as if recollecting the earlier bullet-flying scene. Then, she took a deep breath and looked at me with certainty.

"Their actions were coordinated, Prez. They weren't there to rob the restaurant or the customers. It looked to me that Daniella was their target since the beginning."

I remained silent and took in the information with great control. I had a suspicion this was the case. I only want to hear it from Suri firsthand to confirm it.

"Prez, I am not so sure about this, but I have a feeling that this is the work of Iopata," she continued and my mouth hardened into a thin line.

"Iopata doesn't know her," I supplied. "I don't see any reason why they would target her. She may be a club member but she is harmless."

"I think you know the answer to that, Prez," she looked at me with enough depth to say that she knew of my attachment to Daniella.

"It can't be," I clenched my fists. "I don't think they know about our relationship."

"There's always a possibility for everything especially when it comes to your father," she asserted.

A sense of dread rushed through me.

Closing my eyes, I realized that Suri had a logical point. The possibilities are endless when it comes to my father. But how? They don't know the Club existed to exterminate their brotherhood. They don't know that I am still alive. I had made sure of that. They don't know about Daniella. So how? How did they found out?

"Has Daniella said anything to you?" I asked another question once I looked at her again. "Maybe something that you can find weird?"

Suri shook her head weakly and answered, "No, she didn't. We mostly talk about common things, Prez, but she did say something about a birthday party project that will be held in the chateau this coming October nine. I don't consider it weird, but I'd like to know if you heard about it from her?"

"No," I quickly replied, "she said nothing to me about that."

Her brows furrowed and she would have commented something about it if not for the sudden opening of the door.

"Prez!"

Karl quickly entered the room with Amano and Rohan following behind him.

“We have news!” he said a little winded.

I bolted up from the chair and stood almost growling at him.

“What is it? Tell me!”

He eyed Rohan first and then back to me and said, “Luca said that Mr. Svanetti will be in NY today for a meeting with another drug cartel.”

I arched a brow finding that Luca himself didn’t report this information to me.

But to hell with it. I don’t even care at all about this big news.

“I don’t want to know that!” I shouted which had them taken aback. “What I want to know is Daniella’s whereabouts! Who kidnapped her and where did they take her!”

Karl looked down on the floor with saddened eyes and inhaled deeply. “I’m sorry Prez. I’m still working on it. Her cellphone was left in her bag and the bag is now kept in the police station for evidence purposes. The traffic cameras of the Land and Transportation Department that I’ve hacked didn’t show enough angles of the crime scene and their getaway. I’m still monitoring the 911 line for any telltale signs of the black van.”

“Then double-time Karl. I need results ASAP,” I reminded him darkly.

If anything happens to her, I don’t know how I will be able to manage it.

“Prez,” Rohan stepped in and asked for my attention.

“What?” I huffed.

“In the meantime, I think it is wise that we should increase the surveillance of Iopata. For all we know, they are the ones who took Daniella.”

He looked at me without blinking. Probably, if I wasn’t in a fouler mood, he would have teased me about the fact that Daniella and I spent the whole day yesterday together in my room.

My shoulders relaxed a bit at the thought of it. Daniella... My precious Sweet Rose... My fiery nymph writhing in pleasure under me....

“You and Suri have the same thoughts, Rohan, and I reckon all the other Club members share that,” I stated after keeping my wild thoughts at bay.

He cleared his throat while the other two diverted their eyes away from me.

I am yet to announce that Daniella and I are official, but it seems they were aware of it already.

"Okay, up the surveillance of Iopata Karl," I ordered after a deep breath.

"Ye-yes Prez!" he frantically replied as I walked past him and out of the room in quick strides.

Driving my Ferrari like a mad man, I arrived in the chateau for less than five minutes. The information Suri told me about the party project Daniella was organizing seemed to catch my attention more than usual. When I reached the second floor, I immediately went to Vincent's studio hoping to catch him there.

He wasn't, so I dialed his cellphone just as I marched to my club office.

"Vincent, where are you?" was my immediate question.

"I'm still here at the Beverly Hills police department, Prez. Why?"

Of course, I remembered that he volunteered to go there to get some firsthand info about the investigation of Daniella's case.

"I need to ask you something."

"What is it, Prez?"

"Have you authorized a birthday party to be held here six days from now?" I asked, almost arriving at the door of my office.

He was silent for a moment and then replied, "Uh, yes, Prez. I have authorized one that will be at the President's Hall. It is organized by Daniella and her team."

"Where's the request form?" I pushed open the door with my free hand and strolled directly to my executive chair.

"I placed it on your office desk. Why? Is there something wrong?"

I didn't reply. Instead, with great focus, I checked on the forms that were pilled up in front of me.

"It is sponsored by a Mr. Hyde Startsev to his friend, Nikola Antov, Prez. I haven't heard about their names but it seems they are wealthy people."

My scanning of the papers stopped abruptly.

"What did you say?" I stated just as I found the form that I was looking for.

"I said it is sponsored by a Mr. Hyde Startsev to his friend—"

"Shit," I cut in. My jaw clenched as I read a certain familiar name in the client box.

"Prez, what's the matter?" Vincent's voice broke out through the receiver.

"That Hyde Startsev, Vincent, is a henchman of my father," I announced through gritted teeth.

It had probably dawned on him a little bit late because when he did, after several seconds, he exclaimed, "No, Daniella!"

Just as I expected, he had the same conclusion as me.

Still holding the phone in my ear, I strolled out of the office with angry strides.

"Leave that place, Vincent. You'll find no development in there other than your time wasted," I instructed him, knowing that the police have no clue that they are dealing with the Russian mafia.

"Are we going to New York, Prez? Luca says your father is there."

"No," was my clipped reply, "You stay here and lead the others."

"Are you saying that you will go there alone?!" There was half-panic, half-disbelief in his voice.

I pressed the button of our private elevator and just as the doors slid open, I answered with a determined voice, "It's time to resurrect the Nikolai Svanetti name, Vincent."

I heard him gasp through the mouthpiece and yelled, "You are showing yourself to your father?!"

I sighed.

"I don't have a choice. If Hyde is putting Daniella under hostage because of me, it won't be pretty. He can do appalling things to her before this day is through!"

"But Erik!"

There, with him using my name, I knew then that he was serious.

If he was here with me, he would have probably looked at me darkly with those stormy violet eyes - the same ones in his bloodthirsty past.

I stepped inside the lift and just as the doors slid close, I told him this: "You know what to do Vince. Do your job and I will do mine."

***

~ Daniella ~

I woke up quickly sitting straight and gasping for air amidst the spacious and properly ventilated room. My hands were pressed against my burning chest and my dry mouth open as I let in a large volume of air into my lungs.

"Suri... Suri!!!" I yelled in panic, my eyes widening as flashbacks of memories replayed in my head from the time when Suri fought like a trained Amazon warrior against the two masked men and

from the time when she lay limp on the ground with a wounded thigh, unconscious due to the hard blow she received from the supposed leader of my abductors.

It hurt to remember her like that and just as expected, tears pooled in my eyes.

“Suri... oh God, I hope you’re fine!” Clasping my hands and keeping my eyes shut, I prayed silently until I heard a familiar voice from the right side of my bed.

“You’re awake already?”

Glancing at the source with a surprised face, I saw a man sitting in a solo sofa; his features unrecognizable because of the wetness of my eyes and the dimness of the room lighting - specifically the fire burning in the hearth.

If I remember correctly, the rooms in the chateau were modernized, ridding all of the outdated fireplaces and exchanged with a heater. If there was one in front of me, then that means I am not in the chateau anymore.

Fear rose in my throat.

“Who are you?!” With a shaky breath, I asked on impulse, knowing that the familiar voice came not from Erik or any other club members.

I remember clearly that I was abducted by the masked men. I fought on my freedom but failed right after they forced an injectable blue liquid on my vein, looking similar to that Lotus Spade drug I had inadvertently ingested. I lost consciousness minutes after that, but it was enough for me to realize that these men might be connected with Iopata Bratva.

“You forget me that easily?” he asked sounding really disappointed amidst the tone of surprise. He stood up casually from the chair and then stepped into the light.

From there, I saw who he was and my mouth dropped open.

“Luca?!”

“Ah, there!” his eyes seemed to twinkle against the firelight. “It makes me happy that you acknowledge my presence.”

He crossed the little space that distanced us, but before he could come nearer, on instinct, I stood up. I immediately found that I can’t step further away from him though. Why? Because my right wrist was loosely on a handcuff, connected to a long thin chain attached to the headboard. I didn’t even realize that I was in restraints until now.

“What’s this?” I asked, finding the handcuff weird when I am not Luca’s prisoner.

“Precautionary measures. The boss doesn’t want you escaping or attacking him,” he answered, standing inches away from me and wearing a slight grin.

“What are you talking about?” Confused, I arched a brow, but then after a moment of scanning the room and putting the facts together, my eyes rounded. “Oh no... Are you one of them?!”

And like the bored man that I think he was, he just shrugged his shoulders and asked, “What do you mean one of them?”

I hissed. “Don’t toy with me Luca,” I grounded. “Iopata. Have you changed sides?”

As much as it was nauseous to think about it, I had to. The safety of the Club was at stake here!

“No, I simply transferred to the group who pays better,” he answered me nonchalantly.

The bastard.

“But the Club trusted you!” I yelled at his face. “They fucking trusted you!”

“Then they shouldn’t have!” he abruptly retorted. He leaned close to my face and continued, “Trust is very valuable when one is living a dangerous life, Daniella. They shouldn’t place it in a man who had been an Iopata dog for years.”

“But you were spying Iopata! That’s what you are supposed to do! Not be part of them!” I clenched my teeth in frustration.

“Survival of the fittest babe, or in my case, the survival of the cleverest. I am supposed to be a spy, but the boss found out about me. Of course, so that I wouldn’t be killed, I had to switch sides and give him information about the Club and your President.”

“No... you bastard!” I spat out and glared at him fully.

He grabbed the chain that shook with my anger and pulled it along with my wrist. His free hand reached for my waist and pulled me close against his chest. I pushed back but he yanked the chain down. I came along with it, clashing back into his chest, face first.

“Hmmm, still feisty even when handcuffed huh?” he breathed above my head. I scowled at his neck, daring not to lift my head to see his traitorous face and risk being kissed again. “Let’s see what will become of you when you meet the boss.”

“I am in no mood to meet Erik’s father!” I proclaimed, putting one hand in between us.

“Oh? So you know already his true identity?”

His free hand grabbed my jaw and raised my face to see his amused expression.

Instead of answering him, I gritted my teeth.

“Ahhh... as expected of the President’s wh*ore.”

I am not a wh*ore! my thoughts immediately reacted. The tears that I had held back because of the memory of Suri now flowed easily down my cheeks. I was crying not because of the word he used to name me, but because of the helplessness I was feeling.

Most likely, the Club didn’t know that Luca was a traitor. I wanted to tell them about it, but I was already in a hopeless situation.

“Erik will find out about this and when he does, you will be sorry!” I announced attempting to lift my spirits and ruin his.

But then, he just released me (my butt hitting the mattress in the process) and chuckled confidently. “Oh yes, I’m looking forward to it babe. I’m looking forward to it.”

I would have answered sharply back if not for a short thud on the door demanding our attention.

“Ahh, it seems the boss has arrived,” I heard Luca say just as I drew my eyes on it.

“Show some respect if you don’t want anything to happen to you,” he advised as if I needed one, but on second thought, it might do me good to remember it when facing the most wanted mafia boss that was Erik’s father.

When the man stepped inside though, my mouth dropped a lot wider than earlier. I expected the boss to be a tall, menacing old man with a beard and sideburns but no. The person gliding towards me was the complete opposite of it. He was tall, young, and darkly handsome.

“Hah!” I gasped and stood up straight as if he demanded me to do so through telepathy.
“Er—Erik!?”

Chapter 38 - Twisted Game

~ Daniella ~

Clad in a well-ironed suit, Erik stood before me. He had an amused grin on his face, barely visible, but still there and he studied me from head to foot as if it was his first time seeing me.

If it wasn't for the chains that stopped me, I would have leaped into his arms and embraced him right then and there. I instead just stood still with my left hand pressed against my bounding heart and my right hand restrained by the cuff. A part of me was relieved that it was him, but a part of me was confused too.

"You're the boss?!" I exclaimed with furrowed brows, but I bit the inside of my lip thereafter when I thought that maybe my question came out wrong.

"Wh-what is the meaning of this?" I inquired the second time. A tornado of questions attacked my head as I waited with bated breath for his answer.

What came out from his mouth however cleared all of it in just a snap.

"Daniella is it?" Erik's voice weirdly sounded different and the same all together; like it was a pitch lower yet in the same quality. "You're more beautiful than I imagined. No wonder my twin brother chose you."

He highlighted that one word and that one word immediately racked my logical thinking.

"Twin...?" was my shaky response.

"Oh?" he cocked a brow this time, "He didn't tell you? Now that's...unfortunate."

My gaze drifted from his face to his neck tattoo and of course, it was clear to see. As oppose to Erik with his black spade and red spears, this man who claimed to be his twin had blue spears.

"No," I breathed out, unable to believe what I was seeing. "It can't be. Twins?!"

He grinned. "One and the same, *mishka*."

I wouldn't even pretend that I know that Russian endearment, but as I stilled, something in my lodged memory clicked into place.

"You're the man I saw in Crescent Moon!"

"Took you long enough to realize," the twin immediately expressed with a rough Russian accent.

From my peripheral vision, I saw Luca sit in the earlier seat near the wall chuckling at our exchange. I ignored him and chose to focus my attention on the mirror of Erik, scanning him from his messily styled hair to his black well-polished shoes.

I give it to him, they have the same self-important aura radiating out of them just by standing. Stoic and stiff in the shoulders, apathetic and has that intense gaze that reflected of darkness and all things horrific. Well, that was before I acknowledged my feelings for Erik and saw the good side of him.

Does this twin have one too? Is he an ogre who just has a layer of emotions that he hides?

“Your hair was silvery white then,” I recollected, cutting off myself of the uninvited thoughts.

“Yes, but I decided to dye my hair back to brown in preparation for my reunion with my brother,” he answered directly with quiet menace in his voice.

The icy coldness of his stare made me shiver from head to foot. The way he spoke what should have been a warm family term was charged with enough threat to make me think twice. It seems he wasn’t intending to reunite with Erik under normal circumstances.

“No... Erik...” I breathed out shakily when blood and death popped out of my head. “What are you planning?! What are you planning to do to him?!”

I felt a sudden sense to protect the man I love. On impulse, I stepped forward and launched towards him wanting to hit his chest with my fist, but the chain pulled me back.

Judging from the little shift in his stance, I can say that he was taken aback with my sudden outburst, but it was just brief for he snickered, likely amused that I am helpless in my restraints.

“For a whore, you care that much for him?”

I gave him a pointed glare. “I am not a whore!”

“Oh? You’re not?” he stepped a feet closer, but it wasn’t close enough for me to use my punching skills I have learned from my kickboxing training with Armelia.

“You entered a Kamasutra-inspired building with him and I can only guess what you both did there isn’t virtuous. You ride in his car more than a normal club member would too and that makes me wonder... what else do you ride other than his car huh?”

There was a mischievous glint in his eyes as he pointed those at me, but I wasn’t affected by it. What got me more focused on was the fact that he knew about Rohan’s building and my simple, harmless car rides with Erik. Was it possible that he was spying on us?

“We got pictures of both of you, miskha,” he conveniently provided the answer as if he knew what I was thinking. “Although all of them were taken outside the chateau, those were enough to tell me that you are his whore.”

I clenched my teeth and fists, overheated with anger. “If I am just his whore, why did you abduct me then? What use do you have of a woman who gives the best blowjob in the world?!”

I’m sorry. I just have to be crude with this guy. Although I’m not so sure that my BJ was the best, I can only guess that it was based on Erik’s pleased grunts from back that time.

The twin chuckled along with Luca’s irritating snicker.

“Hmmm, for fun of course,” was his clear answer, but it got me arching my brow.

“Fun?”

“Yes, for fun. I want to take everything from Erik starting from the woman that warms his bed.”

He stepped closer to me. I stepped back and positioned myself in a defensive stance. Without warning and speedily at that, he looped one arm around my back and pushed me against his chest. His other hand grabbed a fist full of my hair and I yelped feeling the pulling pain in my scalp.

He disregarded my alarmed voice and went to bring my head to meet him eye to eye.

“Don’t think that I don’t know that you are the first woman he is attached to, Daniella,” he grounded through clenched teeth. “Don’t think for one second that I consider you only his plaything. We will see. When he stupidly barges in this house and demands for you amidst the threat in his life that only means that you aren’t just his whore right? That only means that the man has fucked up feelings for you.”

Erik does have fucked up feelings for me and I, to him, but I won’t give this Mirror a pleasure of knowing it.

“Why do you do this?” I asked through trembling breaths. Two beads of tears started to form in the corner of my eyes amidst my commitment not to cry in front of him. “You are family! You are supposed to- ha!”

I gasped when he strongly pushed me to the floor. My back hit the frame of the bed and it immediately felt sore. I ignored it though and went to gather myself into a fetal position. With my mouth in a hard line and my despised eyes set on him, I readied my elbow to hit his groin just in case he’d attempt to slap me in the face.

“Why do I do this?” Erik’s twin crouched down to my level; his eyes burning with intense hatred. “That is because I want him to suffer.”

Suffer. The word gave me instant visions of Erik beaten to death and that made my pooling tears spill down my reddened cheeks. That told me that he wasn't a kind ogre who just had layers of feelings locked up. No, he is one bad man at its best. No layers. No hidden emotions. Not at all like Erik. He is simply an uncaring, unsympathetic man who is synonymous with the devil.

"You see, *mishka*, I am the favorite of my father," he started, aware that I was listening amidst my detached state. "Always have been for fourteen years. I was showered with everything! Attention, care, and love that any boy wanted from a father. Trained me into becoming a suitable Svaneti. Trained me into becoming his heir someday until I became sick."

He paused for a moment and pulled me up from the floor holding my ready elbow and let me sit in the mattress. I was lost with his kindness for a moment until he started again, now with tightened fists.

"My weak state meant that our father needed a plan B, and that plan B was my twin, Nikolai -your Erik- who he had initially left with the Dominican nuns' care simply because he was the older twin newborn who was sickly."

He eyed me in disgust, but I had a feeling that it wasn't really directed to me. It was directed to Erik.

"Ironic isn't it? Twins really do have a special bond with each other when it comes to illnesses."

"And emotions," I added, with my eyes slightly dried of tears. "Twins believe in the same principle of goodness."

"Huh, goodness," he remarked with his brows cringing. "Don't you know that your precious man was trained with all things monstrous?"

I didn't nod or shake my head. I only gave him a blank stare.

"Well, you should know, mishka. Nikolai was sent to one of Iopata's hideouts and there, he was taught all terribly unpleasant things just like me. And of course, during that time, my hatred developed because father had his eyes set on him into becoming an heir. And you know what, he would have been if it wasn't for his death in one of Hyde's special trainings."

He paused once again and that gave me the chance to evaluate the aforementioned name: Hyde. Surely he wasn't pertaining to my client, Mr. Hyde Startsev?

Realizing it was possibly true, I swallowed a big lump in my throat.

"His supposed death that is..." he continued with his eyes turning stormy. He raised a hand sideways and with a flick of his finger, gestured something to Luca.

The said man, who was still watching us, stood up and approached him.

“If it wasn’t for Luca here, I wouldn’t have found out that my beloved twin brother is alive and even the leader of an organization who aimed to bring down my father’s mafia.”

This time, it was I who stared at them in disgust.

“My father doesn’t know that he is alive though and I want that to remain as is until I suck out all the blood in his body. There’s only one boss that Iopata Bratva will name and it will be me!”

The fear that I have felt since earlier had doubled after hearing him say it. He really means to kill Erik. Oh, God, he really means it!

“You are a greedy bastard,” I stated acidly; glaring at him like I was the God of Death myself but with fresh new tears flowing from my eyes.

With a flick of his hand, Luca left the room without a word, but I swear I saw the haughty expression in his face finding my situation amusing.

“Daniella,” Erik’s twin captured my attention just as the door slammed close. “Hmmm, you know what, if I were you, I should probably be worried about myself. You are after all very vulnerable.”

He then closed the gap between us in three slow strides with his predatory eyes on me.

My breath deepened the whole time, feeling suddenly uneasy with the change of his rigid behavior. I quickly lifted my arms in a protective stance, but he easily shoved them away with one hand and pushed me to lie on the mattress.

“Don’t you dare put your hands on me!” I snarled, my right hand surprisingly able to grab his slender neck when he moved on top me.

His face reddened with how tightly I pressed my fingers against his throat, but he seemed unaffected with it.

He only grinned in enjoyment.

“Oh my, my, my,” he strained to say, one hand pressing on my right shoulder while the other suddenly slipping in his back. “You see Daniella, there are other ways to rile you up without using my hands.”

To my horror, he took out a pistol from his back and pointed the muzzle at my forehead.

That’s the time that I shakily loosened my grip on his neck and another fresh batch of tears rolled down my eyes.

He pressed the mouth of the weapon against the skin of my forehead making an indentation in it and mimicked the sound of the glock in a threatening tone, “Bang.”

In response, I shut my eyes tightly.

“Oh, you’re crying already?” was his mocking statement.

I dare not open my eyes and just kept my tears from flowing.

Then, I heard him chuckle slowly and stated after, “Hmmm, it’s amazing how a gun tames everyone.”

I felt his weight shift to my left side just as the feel of the cold metal of the pistol disappear.

“Daniella, look at me,” he said in a low voice, but feeling stunned still, I didn’t open my eyes.

“Look at me!”

With his booming voice, I did as he told with a deep, shaky breath. I stared at him with no emotion other than loathing. No fear. No sadness. Not even pleading for my life.

“Luca says I will love you and I think he is right. I’m definitely loving you now, especially that rebellious eyes of yours.”

He cupped my cheeks with his free hand, feeling for the smoothness of my face. Then, his thumb grazed my quivering lips and pried it open. The remaining four digits pressed my jawline on top of my throat and that made me gasp in pain. He groaned something of pleasure when he then inserted his thumb inside my mouth.

Psychotically, he played with the moist walls, swept my teeth, and grazed the tip of his thumb along with my tongue.

I put up no resistance aware that the gun was still near my head, but I honestly felt sick with it. So, so sick that I wanted to vomit.

Unfortunately, that feeling increased even more when he quickly replaced his thumb with his mouth.

With the alarm bells sounding in my head, I speedily shot both of my hands in between us and pushed him back. He answered by weighing his body down and scooping my back to restrain me.

Using a tongue thrust, he deepened his demanding kiss, coaxing my own into submission. I didn’t and tried my best to move my face side to side. I moaned in disapproval and I would have bitten his tongue off if it wasn’t for his hand keeping my jaw open.

I heard him make a pleased groan then, something that fucking sounded like Erik.

Oh, God. Erik!

The twin withdrew just as two hot tears streamed down my eyes. “Hmmm, sweet like nectar,” he remarked, eyeing me with lust.

Such a nectarine taste you have, Sweet Rose. Erik’s previous statement then suddenly replayed in my mind that it had my heart aching quietly. God, I miss him so much! I really do!

“Indeed, I am going to enjoy you,” he produced a grin.

“Don’t you touch me!” I exclaimed and slapped his left hand who attempted to push my pink off-shoulder blouse down. He easily gripped both of my wrists and pinned them above my head.

“I wonder… Are you acting rebellious like this with Nikolai or do you whimper under him?”

He stooped down right near my neck, but before he could touch his lips on my skin, the door sounded a series of hard knocks.

In response, he released a long sigh.

I felt immediately relieved when he pulled himself away and stood facing the door.

“Come in,” was his cue just as I sat on the mattress with my arms on a guarded position.

The door opened and Mr. Startsev, my apparent client, stepped in to my surprise.

“Nikola,” he started right after eyeing me with a wicked smirk.

“Hyde, what do you have that it needs to ruin my night with this woman?” Erik’s twin secured his gun back under his suit jacket and drew his mouth into a thin line.

“We have a problem,” was Mr. Startsev’s announcement.

It immediately elicited an arched brow from Nikola.

“What is it?”

“Your brother,” he eyed me again and then to the twin and then proceeded, “Nikolai, had reunited with your father in New York.”

“*Blyad*!” I heard Nikola curse quietly. I’d expected him to kick something out of spite, a table or chair may be, just to add effect of his apparent rage, but he didn’t. He remained calm amidst the heavy breath he released.

I, on the other hand, was agape. Erik? The real Erik had reunited with their father? What does that mean?

“Big Boss wants you to meet him in the safe house an hour from now,” Mr. Startsev added.

Nikola eyed me with burning depth and after a pregnant pause, remarked, "You're lucky. You're very lucky. I expected my brother to come barging in here with a gun and a life to sacrifice for you, but it seems he turned the tables to his side."

"Bring me to him!" I ordered confidently to which the two immediately shook their heads.

"No, no. Not yet," was Nikola's statement. "You'll meet him soon enough, but as of now, you will have to stay here and wait for me because I am certainly not done fucking you."

I paled at his remark.

With a last threatening glance, he left the room leaving me all alone with Mr. Startsev who had his arms crossed in his chest.

"How are you faring Ms. Rosecraft?" he asked as soon as the door closed.

"You..." I uttered, feeling suddenly like a fool. "Huh! Of course, with that bad scar in your face, I should have known that you are one of them."

"Quite right," he smiled, but it didn't give off any sunshine.

"What about the birthday party you reserved? Was it a hoax then?" I asked, remembering the project which I now believe is a trap for the Club.

"Oh, no no. The birthday party is real," he answered. "Nikola and Nikolai will be the celebrants. Do you like it?"

I sneered at him, "Are you planning a blood bath Mr. Startsev?"and clarified after remembering that he specifically requested towels for the other celebrant which I just found out to be Erik.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, that was the plan at first, but since Nikolai stepped in and revealed himself to his father, I guess the blood bath will have to wait. Let's just see then what happens during their reunion."

"You're sickening."

"I appreciate the compliment, Ms. Rosecraft," he grinned and then pulled out something in his pants pocket. It was a key.

"Here, let me make things easier for you."

He approached me and then reached for my right hand that was handcuffed. I resisted at first but his strong hand grabbed my arm like a vice-grip.

"An order from Nikola: I'll free you with this cuff but not in this room."

I snorted. Huh, like that would make me happy.

He inserted the key through the hole and with one twist, it was done.

Escaping quickly was my first choice, but I remained sitting still, unable to move because of the man's grave threat: "Escape and you will die, believe me."

I thought of giving him a caustic comeback, but a sob escaped from me instead.

With a snappy turn, he strode towards the door and before he could close it, he said, "Enjoy your stay, Ms. Rosecraft."

And with that, he left me to drown in the silence of the room. I dropped in the mattress, back first, and covered my eyes with my forearm to hold back the tears.

I wasn't given a chance to dry them up though when the door opened again and in stepped Nikola wearing a sly grin. I furrowed my brows.

"On your knees, *mishka*. I changed my mind. Today, you will meet my father as my fiancée. Let's see then what Nikolai's face will be."

CHAPTER 39 – Inside the Lair of the Enemy

~ Daniella ~

The car ride going to Iopata's safe house was a silent one. Of course, as expected of the son of a mafia boss, it wasn't just a car ride. It was a limousine ride complete with goons wearing black suits as our bodyguard. There were four of them escorting us riding in a different shady vehicle, all armed and ready in case there's a threat to their boss' life. Mr. Startsev and Luca were nowhere to be seen, but I had a feeling I'll be seeing them at our destination later.

Sitting far to the left away from Nikola, I kept my mouth shut, not wanting to argue with his plans anymore.

Earlier when he said that he will introduce me to his father as his fiancée, I vehemently opposed him and did it by not standing from the bed. Guess what he did after that? He pointed the same gun at me and threatened to fuck my lifeless body after I die. I was of course frightened to the bone and stood up as quickly as I could. I saw a sinister smile broke from his lips then, drawing out a violent lurch in my stomach.

That feeling in my stomach had now subsided, but not the fear, especially with the presence of the gun still tucked in his back.

Twin or not, no words could express how I hate this guy. No wonder Erik didn't mention him to me. But I wonder, does he even know that he has a twin?

The interior of the limousine proved to be from the finest and most expensive materials. I wasn't impressed with it though, especially when the inside's environment was cigarette smoke-filled. Nikola hadn't ceased from puffing since we slipped inside half an hour ago and it irritated me very much since I am not a smoker.

"That acidic mouth of yours, you should restrain it when in front of my father," he stated without a head's up, effectively breaking the war of silence I had waged in between us.

I glanced at him, still covering my nostrils with my forefinger, and saw the brief swirl of smoke that surrounded his face.

"You don't need to tell me you know. I realized that with your foul attitude, there must be a source of it, and I believe that your father is that one," was my blunt and bitchy remark.

He snorted and smirked but didn't reply anymore. I used this opportunity to ask him a question that had been bugging me since we left his hideout.

"Had you met him?"

From the corner window, he drew his eyes back to me and arched a brow. "What?"

"Erik," I continued, "Have you both met before?"

"No," was his clipped reply. He didn't even shake his head.

I was taken aback. Really? After all these years, they haven't seen each other? They are twins for God's sake!

"You mean to say—"

"I don't see any reason why I should show myself to my rival, *mishka*," he cut off. I narrowed my eyes.

"But you do live in the same roof right?"

"No, we don't," he replied with not a hint of regret.

I arched my brow in response and he must have seen the confusion in it because he continued: "We never did. He was kept in Hyde's hideout while I was bedridden. During that span of time, Father has kept an eye on him instead of me - his sick son, so you can imagine how that made me feel."

In a fraction of a second, I saw the side of his nose crinkle in displeasure. Then, he stared back at his window and didn't add any more.

My mouth was stuck open, unable to give him a reaction as I was too surprised to hear his more-than-necessary sharing. I didn't expect him to do that at all, but it was good. It was a sign that I had made progress in getting through his stony attitude. I did feel something when he mentioned being left out of his father's attention, but it wasn't sadness, it was hatred and jealousy. It was clearly pulsating in his tone of voice.

"I guess this would be the first time the three of you would meet huh? What does that make you feel?" I asked without a second thought and before I knew it, his head snapped back to me and scowled, no doubt pissed of my question.

He leaned close to the side of my seat and stared at me with blood-lust eyes.

"I feel the need to kill him, *mishka*," he spoke darkly, increasing my fear of Erik's safety even more. "Punish him. Make him suffer and painfully. This unexpected development may have postponed that but it would be a reality in the near future. For now, I will settle in enjoying tormenting his heart."

I let out a shaky breath. No. And once again, tears threatened to slip through my eyes.

“Then would you—” I paused and sought courage by clearing my throat, “Can I bargain for my life with his?”

I love Erik and this love had given me the audacity to do the stupidest of all.

“Please,” although I abhorred it, I uttered the word with pleading stares, “You can do whatever you want with me if it means his safety.”

“You love him,” he dropped suddenly.

There was no expression in his face that I could say that he was touched with my tender show of affection. He only pressed the stub on the cigar ashtray in his front and relaxed on his seat thereafter.

“I do, and I am not scared of telling you,” was my reply.

I saw him look at my elbow as if he was planning on grabbing it so I consciously shifted to the right to press it against the back cushion.

“What makes you think that your bargain would be tempting for me?” he produced a grin then. “You know I can always fuck you now if I want to. I don’t need your consent at all. Sex with you and his death — I can get both without even bargaining anything.”

An unwelcoming chill ran through my body. My God, why did I even try to reason with him?

Muted by his words, I decided to drag myself on looking outside the window. My heart ached so much knowing that I had no ray of hope anymore. Bargaining with him was my trump card. It was my only way of saving Erik and the Club.

This time, tears did fall down my cheeks, but I discreetly wiped it away with the back of my hand.

Nikola somehow noticed this and asked in a mocking tone, “Are you crying?”

“No,” I answered almost instantly, taking a deep breath and adjusting myself in the seat.

“Good, because I want you to look at me like a lovesick bitch when we meet them, not a woman mourning her own funeral.”

I dulled my senses. I tuned out every single emotion flaring inside me. It was hard. It was really hard, but with my upcoming meeting with the boss of Iopata and Erik, it was my only chance of protecting my already broken heart.

In my peripheral vision, I saw him reach for another roll of Cuban cigarette. I groaned quietly, readying myself with another assault of my lungs.

A few more minutes of silence later, we arrived at our destination. The ominous-looking black gate seen in my side of the window said so.

When Hyde said safe house, he was understating it. The safe house was in fact an enormous mansion surrounded with well-maintained gardens. If not for the fact that it had a stretch of beach readily seen in my view, I would have thought we were still in Beverly Hills. This side of the world, I'm not sure if it's in the US still, but calculating the amount of time they had abducted me and up to now, I think we hadn't gone far away from the chateau.

As we entered, pale yellow light from rows of lamps greeted us. It illuminated the concrete road that we passed, but I tell you, it was a far cry if compared to the spotlighted white mansion awaiting us.

Is this really a safe house? my mind quickly shouted.

The vehicle stopped in the front portico and just as expected of a mafia abode, a man in a black suit opened the door for us and another three in the same-colored suits stood on guard in the entrance doorway.

Nikola helped me out, but I think it was just for show. After all, he did say he will introduce me as his fiancée.

The moment I stepped out of the limousine, my heart skipped huge beats. It wasn't because of the touch of his cold, murderous palm in mine, but because it reminded me that I will soon see Erik again.

Erik...

I have only just been abducted this noon yet it feels I've been gone for years. I missed him badly. So, so badly.

"Big Boss is waiting for you inside boss, in the drawing room specifically," I heard the man say.

Nikola nodded and entered the towering door with me dragged along by the elbow.

"Remember what I told you," he reminded whilst looking at our path ahead.

I lifted my chin, not to affirm him but to strengthen myself. "I'll shut my mouth if that is what you mean."

"Good," he remarked and glanced at me with a grin, "But you do know your meeting with my father is not what I'm looking forward to."

I shot him a brief glare. He was talking about me and Erik.

Then he chuckled. "This is going to be fun."

When we entered what looked to be a drawing room on the second floor, I saw two manly frames in the open balcony. The younger one stood ramrod straight against the balustrade while the older one was hunched forward, sitting in an upholstered dark green chair. Soft blue light from the garden below spotlighted their bodies. Wine glasses fully filled were in their hands.

From where I was, I can already see that the younger man was Erik amidst his back to me and the bearded old man sitting as the Iopata Big Boss — their father, looking somewhat happy judging from the smile on his face.

This is it. This is really it.

With my heart crazily pounding, I sucked in a breath as we strode closer to them.

Nikola's hand rested on my waist like a possessive boyfriend would to his girlfriend. I attempted to shove it away but this only encouraged him even more.

"Do that again and I will make sure your hands get tied up in my bed's headboard later," he stressed making me flare my nose.

He adjusted his hand again and this time, I didn't budge.

The first to notice our presence was their father, who quickly stood up amidst with shaky knees, and signaled us to come.

"Ah! Nikola! Come here boy!" his gravelly voice sounded.

He stretched his arms and my fake fiancé, acting like an obedient son, left me and hugged him heartily.

I stopped abruptly in my tracks, unable to take one more step to join them in the balcony. One hand was pressed in my chest while the other was clenched into a fist on my side as I watched not the father and son exchange but Erik who turned around to face us.

"Erik..." I burst out, low enough that only I could hear.

He ignored his family in front of him and drew his eyes directly to me.

For a moment, I thought it would show relief. Relief that he had seen me. Relief that I am at least for now safe and alive. Relief that we were together now. But no. His eyes and including the whole of him showed nothing. Blank. Lifeless. Cold.

Colder than the first time I saw him in the chateau. Colder than I had ever seen him before.

Why?

Knowing that I was in the lair of the enemy, I restrained myself but God, I truly wanted to embrace him and demand an explanation on his fuck-up barren reaction. Instead, I nailed myself on the floor and waited for the two men to withdraw.

"*Otets*," ("Father,") Nikola spoke when he did and looked at his father with warmth.

That immediately told me that he was loyal to his old man but as soon as the latter gestured his hand towards Erik, the warmth in Nikola's face plummeted down to nil.

"Nikola, meet your twin brother," was Mr. Svaneti's words.

"Of course," he replied and I saw him turn with pained slowness on Erik's way. "Nikolai," he managed to speak without spitting, but in his eyes (which were hidden from his father's view) was charged with hostility.

Erik, if he was flaming inside, didn't show it. There was only a little twitch on the corner of his mouth (a meager one that I could compare to a smile) and then said in a strained tone, "Nikola."

Now that they were in one spot, I could definitely see the differences in them aside from the neck tattoo. Erik's hair proved to be a dash lighter. They have the same short cut but Nikola had it styled gelled back. He had two stud piercings in the left ear, while Erik had none.

They were really twins because they were of the same height, the same built and the same broad shoulders and lean torso. They had the same angular features, the same well-trimmed brows, and perfectly full lips. The fact that they were wearing similar black suits didn't help too.

No wonder their father didn't have a hard time accepting the return of his long lost son amidst all these years.

The twins didn't even embrace. Not one of them showed the will to do so, but their father didn't seem to mind it because he suddenly shifted his attention to me.

"Nikola, who is this woman with you?" he asked, slightly arching his brow.

"Ah, she." Nikola quickly approached me, grinning, and looped an arm around my back. I had a feeling that it was to irk his brother.

"This is my fiancée, *otets*. Daniella Émile Rosecraft," he announced almost giving me a heart attack. He really meant what he said earlier.

I inhaled sharply and discreetly watched Erik's reaction, but I found none. Again. No faint twitch of his brows. No wrinkle of disagreement in his lips.

What the hell is wrong with him?!

“Fiancée?” Their father sounded surprised. “I don’t know you are a family man, Nikola, but this is good. This means that our bloodline will continue. No more casual sex for you now.”

I paled.

Lifting his arms again, their father then smiled at me and stated, “Come here, my soon-to-be daughter.”

I froze on the spot without even intending it.

Nikola’s quick push on my back had me stepping towards the Big Boss and receive his embrace.

When he did, I stilled, unable to return his welcoming affection. For a mafia boss, the man was acting surprisingly kind. Quite a contrast of both of his son’s attitude.

“Hmmm, let me see,” he stated when he withdrew and scrutinized me. He cupped my chin and moved my head from side to side. “Fiercely beautiful,” he remarked initially and then went on to study my unwavering gaze. “With eyes that house strength, elegance, and fear, but what’s this Nikola?” He glanced at his son and wrinkled his humpy nose. “Did you frighten your bride on the way here?”

I swallowed.

“Hmf, in more ways than one, otets,” he answered from behind me. “We will have many children, her and me, and you will become a happy grandfather.”

“Ha!” Mr. Svaneti chortled, allowing me to see the layer of flabs under his bearded chin. This and the statement Nikola had released, sickened me to the bone.

I would rather die than bear his children!

“This is good. This is good! With two of my sons with me and future grandchildren, my empire will even grow!” he went on and that’s when I saw greed replacing the warmth in his pale hazel-green eyes.

“Congratulations on this momentous occasion Big Boss,” someone suddenly stated from behind me. I whirled around to see and there, next to Nikola, Mr. Hyde Startsev stood.

Unconsciously, I glanced at Erik and saw something flash in his eyes, but it was so brief, so fast I was unable to name it.

“A momentous occasion indeed,” Mr. Svaneti replied catching my attention. “Now, I’d like to hold a feast for this. Call everyone in the strata Hyde. Inform them about the party the whole day tomorrow.”

“Yes, Boss,” Hyde affirmed in a snap.

The old man turned to Erik and then patted his left shoulder.

“Nikolai, will you stay here for that?” he asked and I waited with focused attention to hear his answer.

“I will stay, otets. My business in the US hasn’t ended.”

Business? What business? What alibi could he have created in order to gain his father’s trust that short amount of time?

He didn’t look at me. He just stared back, eye level with his father as if he wasn’t hiding anything. As if he wasn’t the leader of a group made to exterminate Iopata. As if hatred didn’t run in his veins. As if he wasn’t aiming to kill his father at all.

In disbelief, I shook my head mentally.

“Good, now let’s go to the dining hall. I’m famished.”

Chapter 40 - Mask of Indifference

~ Daniella ~

Mr. Svaneti strode first out of the balcony with us following behind him. He had a noticeable limp in his left leg and he supported it with a metal cane engraved with the symbol of Iopata.

As an old man, he wasn't really someone to be feared with in terms of physical strength. It was possible that all the admiration, respect, and submission under his rule came from his previous conquests in life. I don't second guess his capacity to kill someone though, and I don't second guess that he'd even feel guilty after it. No matter the warmth he showed me earlier, Mr. Svaneti as the Iopata Boss meant that he was the one responsible for all the misfortunes of many people.

If I am to contemplate on it, his sons, yes, his sons were better fit to be feared by many. Not only do they have the blood to wreak havoc, but they also have the youth, strength, and intelligence to do so.

It is just fortunate enough that the world has at least one on its side - Erik specifically - who doesn't have an evil will like Nikola.

Or does he? With how Erik acted uncaring earlier, I'm beginning to think otherwise.

Apparently, the second floor had a dining area for we only crossed the drawing room and out to a connecting door to reach the place. The whole time we did so, Erik was right beside me, an arms-length away while Nikola's possessive hand rested on my back.

I seriously contemplated kicking Erik's balls for his apathy. How dare he act as if he doesn't know me. How dare he show no concern while I was under his brother's hold. But I played the temporary obedient fiancée instead, keeping my fury to myself until I had the right time to unleash it.

In a rectangular table, we sat. Sergio Svaneti was on the head of the table while his two sons were on each side. Of course, I seated next to Nikola while Hyde sat next to Erik.

All courses were readied. The table setup was too. And we were just about to start eating when without warning, Nikola started throwing a question on Erik.

"By the way, you mentioned something about business, brother. Care to enlighten us about it? You don't look like a businessman to me."

I paused from spooning the corn soup and watched the one asked with a quickening beat in my heart.

Nikola and I have similar sentiments. I also would like to know how Erik fabricated the alibi, but I am worried about how he was going to deliver it to all of us. If he misses a beat, it would be detrimental to him. Sure Nikola knows that he was just lying to their father and there's a possibility that he was just waiting for a prime opportunity to reveal everything to him.

But then, Erik cocked a brow at him and smoothly replied, "Guns, Nikola. I sell guns."

"We met in a meeting in NY, son," their father butted in, looking at Nikola. "Apparently, he supplies quite an extensive armory to drug cartels in New York."

"Oh?" was Nikola's disbelieving reply. "It is amazing that Iopata doesn't know of your significance in that city. Otherwise, if father knew of you being alive and even supplying to his associates, he would have had you back in the family circle by then. How did you elude us until now?"

I widened my eyes. It seems Nikola made it sure to place him in a tight spot.

"I used my alias of course," was Erik's flawless reply and in reflex, my mouth dropped when he continued, "'Erik Romano Fancii', that's my alias since I prefer to be discreet in my dealings."

Nikola suppressed a laugh. "Of course you did."

"I have told father of my reason for showing myself now after all these years. Maybe you want to ask him for it?" Erik continued, bringing me to the edge of my seat. Now that I remember, Erik doesn't know yet that the Club had a traitor in their midst - Luca.

I saw Nikola exchange glances with the silent Hyde and then to his father.

"Yes, I'd like to know, *otets*. Was it just a bad case of amnesia from drowning in the dam?"

Their father shook his head and snickered.

"Nothing like that, son. Nikolai here was too caught up with his new life that he didn't see the need to show himself to us."

I almost nodded in agreement. The reason was fair enough but that didn't seem to convince Nikola.

"That easy huh?" he asked, tapping a finger in the table as if impatient.

"In the meeting, I of course recognized him and ask that he return to the Svaneti roof," Mr. Svaneti furthered. "I thought that with the connections he has here in the US and his business, the benefits are endless."

"Your empire is already in full force, Father. We don't need him," was Nikola's urgent, clipped reply, dismissing his laid-back tone earlier.

“I need him as the heir to the Svaneti name, Nikola, and as the heir to Iopata. Older brothers have that right,” Mr. Svaneti reasoned.

Since I was near him, I saw Nikola’s jaw tense as he murmured, “You don’t seem to think of that when you preferred me over him when we were born.”

I blinked a couple of times, stunned.

“Nikola, enough,” their father growled. “I don’t want to deal with sibling rivalry now. You two are old enough for that.”

“But he can’t just waltz in here and take what I have worked hard for!” his shoulder’s stiffened as he grounded.

I swallowed hard. The Nikola I was with earlier and the Nikola now looked different. He had lost his cool. It was as if he was trying desperately to win the favor of his father.

“Boy, we will discuss this after dinner,” Mr. Svaneti expressed, looking red-faced.

“No bother, I lost my appetite for food,” he declared and with that, he grabbed my left elbow and pulled me to stand.

I squeaked audibly, throwing a cold, confused look at Nikola and then a pleading look to Erik.

The latter speedily stood up, all traces of apathy gone, looking at me in alarm.

But then we were stopped by the booming voice of their father, “Nikola!”

Clenching his jaw, my fake fiance turned to look at him.

“Father, we will go now,” he strained to inform.

“No, let your woman go and sit this instant,” Mr. Svaneti ordered. When I looked at him, his face even turned redder, eyes swirling with anger of his son’s disrespect.

Nikola slowly released me and hesitantly sat back on his chair. I took a quiet sigh of relief. Erik too seemed to relax but didn’t sit back.

“Eylena!” their father boomed again and quickly, there appeared an older woman wearing an apron.

“Boss,” she mellowed.

“Bring Nikolai to the east wing. Have him choose any room he likes and have the staff send his dinner there,” he enumerated.

“Yes, Boss,” was the woman’s reply, coupled with a bow.

“Father,” I heard Erik say and saw him hesitate putting a hand over his shoulder.

“Leave us for now, Nikolai. I need to straighten your brother’s head,” he snarled, looking directly at the stern-faced twin.

“Yes father,” Erik said and without glancing at me, left the dining room with the old woman leading the way.

“Carlos!” Mr. Svaneti strained to call again.

In less than a minute, in came the man I saw earlier who had opened the limousine door for us.

“Boss,” he bowed low beside him and waited.

“Take Nikola’s fiancée to his room and the same goes to her dinner,” said he and dismissed him with a wave of a hand.

Carlos rounded the table and approached me. Before he could reach me though, Nikola speedily stood up and grabbed Carlos’s arm.

“Keep your eyes glued on her,” he whispered sharply and stared at me in warning.

“Yes, Boss,” the man nodded.

“I mean it. Guard my room, Carlos. Don’t let her get out and nobody gets in,” he highlighted. It made me frown at him, but I understood his predicament. With Erik in the same roof, who’s to say he won’t try and rescue me?

“Yes, Boss,” I heard Carlos’s reply. Nikola released his arm and looked at me without blinking as I turned away.

I exhaled heavily the moment I stepped out of the dining hall. Finally, I can take a breather from all things mafia. Well, at least temporarily.

Carlos led the way, motioning for me to come and follow him with just the dip of his head. I did whilst clasping my hands and keeping myself silent.

The hallway that led to Nikola’s room seemed to swallow me, but the thought of the possibility of bumping into Erik seemed to lighten my anxiety, no matter how he acted cold earlier.

“Uhm, Carlos?” I blurted out after careful deliberation.

Still walking, he turned to look at me and said, “Yes, Miss?”

“Is this hallway leading to the east wing?” I asked, happy that I had a favorable response from him. Back in the dining hall, Mr. Svaneti mentioned about putting Erik in the east wing. If this was

where we were going, I had better chances of seeing him without the need to escape from this man.

“Yes, Miss,” he nodded and turned to look at the path ahead of us. “All family rooms are located in the east wing. We will be arriving in Boss Nikola’s chamber shortly.”

Family room? I thought this was a safe house?

“Right,” I left it at that and focused on following him.

Moments later, we reached a room that had a carved wooden door. Carlos didn’t need to inform me that this was Nikola’s chamber. It was obvious that he owned it. Aside from the fact that life-size statues of two nude maidens stood sentry on each side, it was the only red-painted door that I noticed as we passed by other rooms in our way.

“Go in Miss,” Carlos urged gesturing his hand to the front. “I will stay here and guard you just as Boss ordered.

I watched as the door mocked me with its redness. I am not a superstitious woman but I hoped this color meant nothing in the future. God, I hope.

With a deep breath, I nodded once at Carlos and admitted myself in.

The first thing I noticed after closing the door was how the room was dark. So, I did what any natural human would — flick the light switch on.

Luckily, the said switch was conveniently bolted against the wall near the opening. I reached for it and in a second, Nikola’s chamber came into clear view. Yeah, the receiving room mainly and along with it, the man I had least expected to be present in a place like this — Erik. I gasped and widened my eyes.

“Eri-”

Quickly, I covered my mouth when he placed one finger in his lips to shush me.

Oh, God. He is here! He is here!

My heart seemed to explode of happiness.

I wanted to run to him and embrace him but then the door sounded three continuous knocks. I turned with a start and looked back at Erik with alarm.

If I open the door now, the person (whoever he or she is) would see him, and I know it wouldn’t yield good results.

But then Erik said smoothly without a hint of concern, “Open the door.” I arched my brow at him making certain that he wasn’t mistaking and he added, “They are just delivering your dinner, Sweet Rose.”

I nodded and after a deep, controlled breath opened the door slightly with a smile on my face.

“Your dinner Miss Rosecraft,” informed a young female maid.

“Yes, yes. Thank you. Please let me,” I motioned to take the tray from her, and luckily, she gave it without a hitch. The door opened wider and for a moment, I was concerned that Erik would be seen. The maid didn’t seem to catch him though for she just stepped back out of the opening without a word.

“I’ll be getting the tray later Miss. Enjoy your food,” she informed.

“Yes, uh thank you,” I gave her another smile and watched as she turned heels away from me.

“Let me close the door, Miss,” Carlos offered and I nodded as quickly as I could.

When I turned to look at the spacious receiving area, my smile faltered when I saw no sign of my unexpected visitor. I quickly placed the tray in a nearby table and searched for him.

“Erik?” I kept my voice down as much as I could and scanned the surrounding area.

In the far right, there was a connecting room with its double doors flung open. There, I strode in and found it to be as dark as the receiving room earlier.

Naturally, my hands sought for the switch and flicked it on.

The moment light spilled, Erik appeared before me fresh from his hiding. Behind him showed a huge four-poster bed, cabinets, glass shelves, and a grey chaise lounge.

“Daniella,” he uttered; his voice laced with deep longing. Without blinking, he gazed at me as if I was his most prized possession.

I was taken aback. He was so insensitive earlier that I almost thought he had switched sides, but now... now since there were no eyes trained on us, his usual self surfaced.

“Erik...” I breathed out shakily. All confusion and questions whirling inside me earlier vanished. His loving look was enough for me to know that he was just acting in front of his father and brother.

With two quick strides, he pushed me against the wall and enveloped me in his arms. Immediately, warmth flooded inside me. I felt myself well up in tears again.

***

~ Erik ~

“Daniella...” I whispered, desperately trying to get as much skin contact with her as possible. My hands wormed their way into her back; my body in line with her, making a note of how her frantic heartbeat synced with mine.

“Erik, how did you—”

She attempted to pull away, but I tightened my hold.

“Stay. Let’s stay like this for just a little while,” I requested, dipping my head further against the crook of her neck and allowed myself get drowned by her scent. Of course, with that, I whiffed a faint smell of cigarettes from her hair no doubt from Nikola’s doing but I decided not to focus on it for now.

“I miss you...” I expressed, eyes completely shut. I had longed to tell her this since we were in the balcony, but with my family present, I restrained, putting up a mask of indifference so that they wouldn’t see how much Daniella means to me.

I am aware that my father is clueless, but Nikola? No. I knew that he was observing my interaction with her. I knew that he was just waiting for me to feed that crumb of clue that he could use against me.

Luckily, Daniella had wisely restrained herself too, but I didn’t miss the confusion in her eyes and how she was let down of my cold shoulder treatment.

“I miss you too,” she replied gently but then I felt her hands clutch the back of my collar, “But Erik, how? Why? You’re so stupid! You showed yourself to your father!”

I smirked at that. “I have no other way to save you, Love.”

“But no, Erik...” The shakiness and care in her voice cut straight to my heart. How could she think of my welfare when she was in a tight mess herself?

“I can’t just leave you here with them,” I uttered. “Hyde, my twin brother, father - they are all capable of tearing you to pieces.”

“Who’s to say that they won’t do the same to you?!” she stressed.

I straightened and backed away enough to cup her face and look at the uncertainly in her eyes.

“They won’t because I’ll do that to them first. Don’t you trust me?”

She blinked her tears out. “I trust you, but I’m afraid for you. God, so, so afraid for you.”

Using my free hand, I held her trembling right hand to ease it and then kissed the knuckles tenderly. She responded by relaxing and closing her eyes.

“Daniella, what have I done to deserve you?” I asked but the question really wasn’t directed to her but directed to myself. Indeed, what have I done to deserve this lovely creature?

I pressed my forehead against her own and waited for her to speak, but she didn’t. Instead, she opened her eyes and looked at me filled with desire.

In one swoop, she grabbed my neck and captured my mouth with hers. It broke all my defenses down. I answered by drawing her closer and palming her face. I groaned in approval of our union, taking into account that my desire for her only flared even more.

Our lips crashed with an intensity like that of a suicidal airplane hitting the ocean. It was explosive. It was fiery. And even though she was the one who initiated our long-overdue kiss, it was I who slipped my tongue first, colliding with her own and tasting her wet walls.

She moaned, but it seems it wasn’t enough for a big chunk of me wanted her to cry out my name - being in Nikola’s room didn’t even deter it. Yeah, screw him.

I hoisted her up in my waist. She didn’t delay hooking her legs around me. With my strength and the support of the wall, I devoured her mouth and made a trail of kiss marks on her neck and a small part of her chest.

Yes, let these be a reminder that she’ll forever belong to me.

“Erik...” I heard her pant and felt her fingers rake my hair.

I looked up and saw her flushed and wanting.

“Make me forget, please. Make me forget Nikola’s touch.”

“What did he do to you?” I growled like a predatory lion, my desire deflating for a moment and replaced with the will to kill my twin.

“Nothing other than kiss me and graze his hands on my skin, but God, he wants to ra*pe me, Erik. He wants to ra*pe me!”

Her voice broke off and in a heartbeat, I saw the suffering in her eyes.

“I will not allow that to happen,” I underlined and then took her mouth again, this time with so much hunger I feared I would have drawn blood on her lips. But she didn’t seem to mind. She raked my hair again and pressed her face even closer to me.

“I want you, Erik,” she breathed in between our kisses, “I want you inside me.”

My pride inflated. “Then let’s bring passion in the cold bed, my Love.”

Chapter 41 - In the Enemy's Bed

~ Daniella ~

With Erik with me, I didn't care much where we were. Even the fact that we were in Nikola's bedroom. His bed. His sheets. His all. It didn't affect me and it seemed Erik didn't mind too.

My legs still looped around his waist when he crossed the space and guided us to the foot of the bed. There, he laid me, but I didn't climb up. I just stayed at the edge, lying but with my knees bent and legs spread to receive him.

With one knee forward, he joined me, lining himself on my body and stooping low to lap on my heaving chest.

I shoved aside his suit jacket and slipped my hands inside his abdomen to feel those hard, flexing muscles. Yes, I would have wanted to make love with him totally naked, but we were still playing with fire, under the enemy's roof, and in the enemy's cold bed. In just a push of the door, we could be found out and I know it would be a bloody result.

So, I just set myself contented with feeling for his body amidst the pants, the tie, and the shirt. But Erik, oh no, he couldn't be more dangerous. He wanted me stripped because he suddenly straightened me up and pulled my off-shoulder blouse in one motion.

"Erik," I wanted to complain, but he looked at me with eyes that bore no regret in what he had done.

"Did he touch you here?" he asked darkly, brushing past the tip of my brassiere with his knuckles where my nipples lay.

I shivered at it and my tits, oh yes, they hardened automatically.

Shaking my head and biting my lip was the only thing I could give him as a response.

"Good, because these breasts are mine. Your body is mine. All of you are mine," he proclaimed and then pushed me back to lie on the mattress.

We kissed again, exchanging a ceremony of tongue twists and turns until we were breathless. Along with it, Erik's hands crawled up my brassiere and unhooked the front clasps. My awaiting breasts spilled free, pink, and full for him to take.

And he did, first palming them with both of his warm hands and then with his eager mouth, licking it, wetting it, biting the tips.

I arched my back and although I wanted silent sex, a delighted moan escaped from my lips.

“Daniella, louder. Moan for me,” he ordered against the valley of my breasts without concern that someone might hear; without concern that we will get caught.

I bit my bottom lip again and looked at him with half-lidded eyes.

“Erik, please don’t torture me,” I expressed, completely flushed.

He smirked. “You know I am not.”

“Ah!”

I shouted as I felt him thoroughly suckle the whole of my nipple.

A delirious wave of sensation came over me. My head felt light, my limbs felt limp, and I felt myself turning into a big ball of fire.

And this wasn’t even the best part yet.

His hands moved down from my breasts to my waist. He worked on opening the zipper of my slacks just as he worked his mouth on sucking the sister mount.

I was so engrossed with his titillation that I didn’t notice the garment stop at my ankles. Goodness, he didn’t even have a hard time pulling it down.

I shook both legs twice and the slacks fell on the floor without a problem.

Erik straightened himself up, pulled the jacket out, threw it above my head, and unbuttoned his shirt just as we held our desirous gazes.

“Your underwear is dripping,” he announced, making me blush my deepest red.

With the little strength in my arms, I pushed myself up and brought my face to level his neck, “Don’t state the obvious, Niko--lai,” I slurred the last syllable of his name and smirked at him.

He smirked back, darkly, and continued on taking out his tie and unbuttoning the last of the buttons.

When his torso came into view, I couldn’t help myself but press my hands on them. It was a delightful contact, especially when my fingers molded well with his pecs.

Erik truly is the most beautiful male specimen I have ever seen.

He let out a deep groan when I traced and licked one dusky nipple.

“Suck on it, Sweet Rose,” he commanded and it couldn’t have been sexier.

With my tongue darting out, I enveloped one taut peak and sucked on it just as he said.

He released another deep groan, closing his eyes as I observed his blissful face.

Unabashed, I sought for his manhood, wrapping half of it around my right palm and tightening.

It seemed it was beyond his limit because he suddenly swooped down, pushed me lightly, and claimed my mouth.

I whimpered when he, without warning, dipped two fingers inside my underwear.

Tingles fired all over my body when he specifically played with the center bud. In response, I grabbed his pants' button and opened it in one go, spilling free his rigid c0ck.

Erik released my mouth and trailed kisses on my neck again.

"Ride me," he whispered against my ear. I automatically whimpered a "Yes."

He helped me out of the underwear first, sliding it out of one leg before arranging himself on the mattress; his black pants half-pulled on his knee.

I felt a sense of dominion when I straddled him, legs spread, and his erection in full view. We have done this before, yes, yesterday, in his chamber, but not like this. Definitely not like this when danger was just standing a door away.

Worry was the last thing on my mind though. At the moment, impaling myself with his c0ck, meeting him thrust for thrust, and riding our wave of orgasm together was my only focus. The issue of Nikola and his father can be dealt with later.

Once again, I palmed his erection with both of my hands. He reacted by releasing a throaty groan.

"Come," he said, drowning me in his passionate gaze.

Biting my lip, I shifted up and aligned myself on the twitching head. He secured me in place, putting his hands on my waist and then guided me down south.

I cried. He cried. We both cried as we felt the fullness of it.

"Fuck, fuck," he cursed, not with displeasure but with delight.

"Erikhhh," I bucked and met his euphoria-painted face as I undulated my hips once.

He squeezed my behind and helped me start the rhythm.

"Yes, that's it. Lovely," he complimented against my forehead and then swooped in to ravish my mouth.

We did this for many gracious minutes until I inhaled sharply when he pinched my swollen, nerve-ending loaded bud.

“Erik!” I cried, narrowing my eyes at him.

He grinned and then in a sudden move, brought me to crouch on the mattress with my palms and knees pressed on the bedsheet.

The absence of him inside me was disappointing, but it was just temporary for he inserted it again with much force.

“Ah!” I gasped.

He brought me upright and pistoned again.

“Ah!”

“Easy, Sweet Rose. You’re going to strain your voice,” he chuckled behind my ear.

“Ni-ko-laiii...” I gritted my teeth in mock anger.

He ignored it, making a sexy chuckle before locking his mouth on my nape. Then, he drove again, and again, and again; hitting my insides agonizingly slow but fucking deliriously hard.

I was breathing deeply as he groped a hand on my right breast and the other focused on playing the walls of my pus$y. I could hardly care if someone really did hear us. Erik was that too good to muddle my sense of reality.

When we reached our climax, it was earth-shattering, no matter how cliché the word would sound. It consumed us. It seared us. It brought us to Seventh Heaven and back.

He huffed and panted behind me as he pressed his mouth on my right shoulder and his arms enveloping me. I was the same too, weak-kneed and all lightheaded, overlapping my arms on his as I relaxed against his chest.

We were silent for a while; just catching our breathing when all of a sudden, worry seeped inside me. “Do you think that the guard heard us?” I asked.

“Let him, I don’t care,” was his clipped answer. His semi-erection was still embedded inside me and right then and there, I felt it twitch, the only evidence that he wasn’t concerned if Carlos really did jump inside. “He’ll be dead the moment he steps inside anyway.”

From my peripheral vision, I saw the silver gun tucked inside his jacket. Figures.

“Thank you, Daniella,” he then whispered tenderly near my ear.

I arched a brow. “For what?”

By this time, my pulse had calmed down, my breathing had partially returned to normal, but I felt a semi orgasm when he slowly pulled his c0ck out of my walls. Shit. The feeling was just sinfully good.

He raised his head and moved to kiss my temple. “For this. For making love with me.”

My heart instantly swelled. “Erik, I’m yours,” I said without hesitation.

“I know,” he answered quietly. “But this means a lot to me. It’ll be war soon. Your love is all I have to keep me safe.”

I swallowed a good lump in my throat thinking of what’s ahead of us. “Erik...”

Would it be a happy ending? Or would it end in tears? The thought made me shut my eyes and inhale deeply. God, I dearly hope the former.

“Marry me.”

Rapidly, my lids fluttered open.

“Huh?” I turned to my right and looked at him in confusion. Did he just ask me to marry him?! Oh my God!

“I know that Nikola made you his fiancée in order to rile me up, but before any man can truly ask you this, I’m proposing first. Daniella Émile Rosecraft, will you be my bride?”

Since we were already kneeling, there wasn’t a need to do the traditional, but picture this: we were in post-coital bliss, his fly was down revealing his member, he was shirtless and downright sexy. I, on the other hand, had my white underwear still looped in my left ankle, my breasts free and exposed, my hair unkempt and my lips were swollen red. Is this the best situation ever for a marriage proposal? I don’t know, but I couldn’t ask for any other.

However, something about all of this didn’t sit on me well.

With my lips trembling, I shifted to face him and palmed his cheeks.

“Erik, I love you,” I said it finally and in response, he curved a smile. “Of course I want to be your bride, but don’t do this.”

“Do what?” he seemed worried suddenly.

“It is as if you’re going to leave me a lonely bride,” my voice quaked, thinking of how bad the timing of his proposal was.

Oh, why do I have to ruin the moment now?!

“Daniella, don’t you shed your tears,” he stated, consoling me by kissing my forehead. I closed my eyes and basked in the gentleness of it.

I wanted him to promise me that everything will be okay. That we will pass this big of a hurdle in front of us and come out alive. I wanted him to do that but God, no. I don’t want to hear the words ‘undying love’ and ‘til death do us part’ with it. No, no.

My lips trembled so much that I had to shift my face away from him, but he cupped my chin, raised my head, and kissed me. Kissed me with the same passion as those many others we had before but now, it was filled with an unspoken promise of our life ahead.

It was enough to calm my uneasy heart.

“Come, let’s get you clothed. We will escape from here,” he stated when he withdrew.

“Right,” I wiped the little tear that had escaped from my eye and sat on the edge of the bed.

Erik gathered my clothes for me while I righted my underwear.

Obviously, it seemed that no one actually heard my moans earlier because Carlos didn’t show himself and Nikola didn’t barge in with a gun.

If fate had granted us luck, I hope that it will continue until the end of this night because we seriously needed it.

“Vincent and the others will be here soon,” Erik informed in front of me while he adjusted his suit jacket. “This house will turn into flames then, so make sure you stay close to me.”

I shivered, not only because a vision of this grand mansion on fire popped out of my head but also because I felt the iciness in his voice. This side of him I know would only surface whenever the situation commands it. This situation we are dealing with right now is life and death for us, so it was only fitting.

“Oh! Oh!” my eyes blinked a couple of times, suddenly remembering something of value to him. “Erik, there’s something I have to tell you!”

“What is?” he cocked his brow and helped me up.

“Luca, he is a traitor!” I proclaimed.

I actually thought that he would show a surprised face but he didn’t.

“Yes, I figured it as much,” he replied, setting his lips in a hard line.

“You do?” I was taken aback.

"Yeah, since he disappeared this morning. Something didn't add up with everything that has happened in the Club so far. It felt like someone was pulling strings. Luca fitted the exact bill on all my suspicion."

"But the others, do they know?" I asked to which he only gave me an uncertain expression.

"I'm hoping they noticed it too. I wasn't able to tell them about my conclusion because I hurried to reunite with my father for you."

"Oh God," my stomach lurched. This was all messed up.

"Come, Daniella. We only got little time left."

Hand in hand, we hurried out of the bedroom and into the receiving room. The whole time we did so, a question nagged on me so I threw it to him before we reached the main door.

"Erik, how? How were you able to enter here?"

He smirked, somehow finding my question amusing. "I was able to fool my guide earlier," he started. "First, I asked her where Nikola's chamber was and when she pointed it to me, I picked the bedroom that was closest to it. When she left, I sneaked in and waited for you."

"Oh," was my only reply. So convenient for him.

Then, he placed a finger in his mouth to silence me and gestured to the door.

Of course. First things first, we had an immediate obstacle to pass and it was Carlos.

"Stay here and be silent," he instructed near my ear, placing me against the wall near the door while he continued on with his plan.

I nodded with my heart beating fast and my hands tightly clasped on each other.

Slowly, he turned the knob open and moused behind the buff Carlos who looked as oblivious as a pig to be butchered.

In my line of sight and hearing, I saw the man fell down with just one sweep of Erik's leg. I heard him groan in pain then when he also twisted his neck.

I blinked hard.

Two things chilled me to the bone upon seeing it. First was the fact that it was my first time seeing a murder and a man dead. Second and the more alarming of the two was the heartless expression in Erik's face. He looked as if he enjoyed every second of taking the man's life.

Is this why he termed himself a monster? Oh, God.

He dragged the lifeless body inside the room by the ankles. Then, he straightened and looked at me with apologetic eyes.

“I’m sorry you need to see that,” he said and my heart sank, pitying him.

“Erik, it's fine. I’m okay.” I strode towards him and gathered his hands in my chest. “Your hands give me warmth. Your hands give me pleasure. Your hands protect me and keep me safe. Don’t worry, I don’t see you a monster at all.”

His expression lightened. “Thank you, my Sweet Rose.”

I nodded and smiled, reaching for his face then so that I could give him a maiden’s kiss of gratitude.

***

~ Erik ~

Being in a huge mansion, there was no way that we’d be able to escape the premises without finding ourselves lost first, so with that in mind, I had no other choice but to try the main hallway directly.

Surprisingly, it was devoid of any goons, allowing us an easier run, but as we neared the drawing room that we had been earlier, we slowed and cautiously hid.

“What’s this? The prodigal son gets to have all the honor?” I heard someone say. It was from my twin. Although I wasn’t like a prodigal, I knew he was referring to me. Peeping on the open door, I saw him and Hyde’s back to me while Sergio -my father- sat on a wingback sofa; his body semi-facing the doorway.

The room was lit with the chandelier’s yellow light - quite a stark contrast to the dim hallway we were in - but it was more than enough for me to see that they were in a serious mood.

“Don’t think of it that way, Nikola. You will still head the rest of our brotherhood,” Sergio stated, his hands resting on his cane like a King would with his sword.

“But I want Iopata! All of it! I don’t want to share it with others, especially with my twin!” he raged. This displeased the old man judging from the firm scowl he produced.

“You really are a stubborn man,” he muttered and went to stand up.

“Don’t you think that I didn’t notice?” Nikola continued, allowing me to revel on their argument.

“Notice what?”

“Since you had your men abduct Nikolai in the convent, you had your eyes on him. Don’t think that I don’t know you prefer him over me.”

I grinned. Of course, I noticed this too. Although Sergio didn't show himself throughout my training with Hyde, I felt that he had a soft spot for me. It was Hyde who told me the fact that I had a twin, Nikola, and he used to tell me that I was better than him. That I was faster, stronger, nastier, and has more potential for destruction - something that my father liked.

Wisely, when I showed myself to Sergio as the long-lost Nikolai Svaneti, I used his soft spot for me to work my way into his trust. I never expected that this would irk my twin. I never expected that he would harbor a personal vendetta to me.

Tsk, like I would care.

"You are twins, I have no preference," my thoughts broke off when Sergio said that, but I knew this didn't convince his fuming son.

"Nikola, just tell your father about Erik," Hyde stepped in and patted his shoulder.

"Huh!" I saw Nikola shove the hand away. "Even if I did, it wouldn't change a thing," I heard, and from my line of sight, I saw him grab something in his back.

"Son, you should understand that Nikolai has better potential to—"

And bang.

The sound of gunfire resounded in the air. Daniella gasped together with it and I felt her hand tighten in mine. I gave her a quiet shook of my head and released a deep breath.

"Shut the fuck up old man," was Nikola's furious statement.

And then I heard gunshots again. Four of them, continuous. I may not know what body part it was pointed but I had great fate it was meant for Sergio Svaneti still.

I saw Daniella cover her mouth to stifle another gasp. I clenched my teeth. This must be really traumatic for her.

"Rid of the body, Hyde," I heard Nikola instruct, voice absent of any emotion, and when I peeked again, I saw the limp form of my father still sitting on the sofa but bathed in blood.

"Yes, but was that really necessary?" Hyde commented, somewhat sounding lost.

"I'm done with him. It's my rule now. I won't let my brother take it away from me," my twin answered without remorse. He turned to the side and I saw his profile lit with hatred and anger.

"Huh, if only your father had seen you now. All this time, he thinks of you as a softie," Hyde scoffed.

“Then he was mistaken,” Nikola raised the gun to his face and in his twisted moment, licked the barrel slowly.

I saw Hyde smile with full wickedness at this.

“I’m done here. Next is Daniella and my brother,” my twin stated whilst tucking the gun in his back. “Get Nikolai from his room and have him tied up in the torture room. Let him wait there because I need to fuck that woman first.”

My hand holding the silver gun tightly clenched when I heard it.

Hyde stood at the back of Sergio’s seat and remarked in surprise, “You really had taken a liking with Ms. Rosecraft huh?”

Nikola snorted audibly. “You know what they say, twins always love the same woman.”

I wrinkled my nose in displeasure and glanced at Daniella who gave me a worried face. She heard it all. She heard what Nikola planned to do.

In an attempt to soothe her, I brought our clasped hands near my lips and kissed the tips of her fingers.

“I won’t allow him to touch you, I swear,” I whispered low.

She opened her mouth to speak but before she could, I raised my gun to stop her. Footsteps were coming our way and I was sure it was Nikola’s.

Daniella gave me a look of alarm then and in her orbs, I saw two options. Either I fight my twin the moment he steps out of the door or she and I retreat in another hallway.

I chose neither though because as if on cue, a loud explosion coming from the north face of the mansion sounded.

I smirked, knowing it came from Enrique’s helicopter short-range missile.

Inside the drawing room, I heard Nikola cuss in Russian.

Tightly, I locked my hand with Daniella’s own and sprinted towards the grand staircase before he or Hyde or his men could reach us.

Chapter 42: In Memory Of

~ Daniella ~

Fire.

A thick wall of it in the main foyer welcomed me and Erik when we reached the grand staircase. A quarter of the north wing facade had been destroyed leaving me to catch a glimpse of the garden wreck outside. Black smoke belched out from the rubble and whipped like a tornado in every direction. The atmosphere turned hot because of it. Very hot and it screamed a promise of suffocation.

Panic climbed up my throat just seeing the situation before me, but Erik looked unaffected. He gripped my hand even tighter and pulled me to manage the stairs.

He must have gone out of his mind, but with Nikola and Hyde possibly seeing us when we passed the open door of the drawing room, it was understandable. There were no other options available but to move forward.

With my free hand, I covered my mouth to block out the thick smoke. Erik seemed too engrossed with getting us out that he didn't care doing the same.

For a moment, I had thought we were onward to freedom, but when we were halfway in the stairs, an echoing sound of Nikola's voice halted us.

"Not so fast, brother."

I looked up and saw him pointing the familiar gun at us. This got me all terrified and went to shot a look at Erik who, in his most calm way, sneered at his twin.

"Nikola," he gritted his teeth just as he moved to shield me. He raised the silver gun up and pointed this to Nikola as if they had an unfinished duel.

In my line of sight, Hyde emerged behind him, pointing another gun at us. From that, it was clear that Erik and I were outnumbered.

"I'll hand it to you, you really know how to make things work. You are such a fucking good actor," Nikola smiled in a sinister way.

"Envious?" I heard Erik retort, showing no hint of fear, but his twin just scoffed.

"Not at all, but I do would like you to hand over Daniella to me. I am greedy."

I gulped hard and pressed my palm against Erik's back.

"What's makes you think I'll do that?" I heard him say.

"Oh, simply because you are surrounded with that wall of fire your Club created and hmm, oh yes, my men are pointing their gun at you."

Men? What men? I mentally asked and consciously scanned the whole area to see.

At the base of the stairs, two goons appeared and on top the west side of the landing, three were standing all in the same hostile stance.

Seeing that Erik stayed silent, I decided to make my own thoughts known.

"I'd rather die than to be with you!" I shouted, stepping out slightly from Erik's back.

Nikola's immediate unearthly chuckle drowned out the roar of the flames.

"Oh, we can arrange that, mishka. You know your corpse won't stop me from making good with you." He smiled like a devil which by the way could be more than true considering the angry-red fire ahead of us reflecting his eyes.

"You're despicable!" I spat.

"Oh, I am," he snorted and in a heartbeat, he proclaimed to his goons, "Gun them down!"

Erik speedily embraced me.

What I heard next wasn't actually the sound of guns firing, but another explosion from on top us; in the roof specifically. This stunned me, along with the men that cornered us. In a fleeting moment, I saw them including Nikola and Hyde shield themselves as the skylight shattered.

"Daniella, cover your head!" Erik shouted whilst covering me with his suit jacket. I took it, keeping it in place with my right hand while my left clasped with Erik as we ran down the base of the stairs.

One of the two goons who were awaiting us cowardly ran for cover while the other pointed his gun at us shakily.

Erik released me in a fraction of a second and jumped to the man like an eagle swooping down its prey. Before the man could pull the trigger, Erik kneed him in the midsection, drawing out blood in his mouth. The man recoiled at first and then lost consciousness.

"Daniella!" Erik bellowed when he turned to me and stretched his hand. I took it after blinking fast.

Shards of glass, splinters of wood and metal beams fell continuously on our way. I got two cuts on the exposed arm and another in my cheek, but it was nothing compared to the gashes Erik received in his face, shoulders, and arms. The white collared shirt that he had worn was tainted with his own blood.

Realizing that the flaming main exit wasn't an option, we turned heels to an arched opening in the hopes of getting to safer ground, and yes, we did amidst the fact that it was a short narrow hallway slightly blurred with smoke. In there also, we met a comrade who I have never expected to see: Rohan.

"Prez! In here!" Rohan shouted when we were but a stone's throw away. He wore combat clothing of all-black starting from his neck down to his boots. He almost looked like an unmasked ninja minus the samurai sword and shuriken. In his left arm, a long firearm of some sort hung loosely while in his right, he held an assault rifle.

"Rohan?" I muttered just as Erik shouted his name.

"Come this way!" Rohan motioned for us to follow and we did, but when he was about to turn to another doorway, Luca emerged from it with a long knife in his hand.

If Rohan was me, this would have raised a warning flag in my mind considering I knew Luca to be a traitor, but Rohan, judging from his lack of defensive stance when he saw Luca, didn't know the truth.

"No! Rohan!!!" I cried out in a hoarse voice, all color drained in my face when I saw Luca plunge the knife in his chest.

Rohan looked surprised for a moment and then his eyes darkened. From his rifle, bullets came out but unfortunately, it didn't hit the traitor.

I felt Erik's hand on mine loosen. Then, in a blink of an eye, he was upon Luca who had just disposed of Rohan's limp form on the marbled floor.

I staggered towards the wall as I watched them fight each other; each on their own skills and strength. Why Erik didn't use his gun in the first place to kill Luca was beyond me. Maybe it was that he wanted for the man to suffer. Maybe it was because a bullet to the head was too much of an easy way out.

Erik kicked him in the head, so fast, so powerful that Luca fell past the hallway to a connecting room.

Realizing that they would be fighting there until death, I inched my way to Rohan who was bleeding profusely in the chest.

"Oh God, no... Rohan," I shook my head as I knelt beside him. My lips, cold and trembling, couldn't form any other word. Blood trickled down the corner of his mouth while his eyes looked at me with dullness.

My hands shook as I realized what needed to be done. In my years in college, I had been trained as an emergency first responder but never got the chance to apply it. At this moment, I would be able to do what I have learned, but as I watched Rohan fight for his life, I realized that being one never is easy.

After taking Erik's suit jacket out of my back, I readied myself with the task.

"Daniella... no," Rohan, without warning, rasped. "Leave me. Save yourself."

Tears quickly spilled from my eyes, dripping fast on his pale cheek.

"No, damn you, I can't do that!" I complained.

"Go... Don't worry about me. I'll be fine..."

"Rohan, I won't!" I shouted stubbornly. Damn him for saying that. Damn him for acting so peaceful!

Then, I jerked, squeezed my eyes shut, and covered my ears as five continuous gunshots sounded in the room Erik and Luca were in. In my mind, I was fervently praying that those didn't hit my beloved.

When I looked at Rohan again, his eyes were closed and his chest no longer moved.

God. No, no, no!

I heaved a breath, felt myself choke upon the realization that a friend of mine had just passed away.

"No..."

Then, from the doorway, Erik emerged, his eyes arctic and murderous; the silver gun tucked in his waist. Sprays of blood not his colored his black pants and boots.

"Erik..." I uttered, my voice breaking. "Rohan... He is..."

I couldn't bring myself to finish. With another deep breath, I stopped right there.

Erik just looked at me with an unreadable face. Then, his focus transferred on his comrade with lips thinly pressed.

Without a word, he strode towards him and pulled the knife out of his chest. I almost vomited at the sight of it, but I kept myself intact. He reached for the jacket near my knees and clumped it in Rohan's wound as if it would even bring back his life.

In one lift of Erik's shoulder, he gathered Rohan up and then turned to me.

“Follow me, please,” he stated in a calm but edgy voice. “Don’t stray. I don’t want to lose you too Daniella.”

I heard another explosion far away from us and after that, the ground beneath us shook. A loud rumble followed and then blasts after blasts stemmed coming from inside the mansion.

“Erik...” I grabbed his tensed shoulder.

“Let’s go!”

It didn’t take us long to flee the burning mansion. After managing two quick turns of the interconnected narrow hallways, it brought us at the back where a long stretch of shoreline greeted us.

Surprisingly, a helicopter in landing position was there. Someone waved at us in the cockpit - Enrique - from what my eyes could gather, making me realize that he was here to rescue us.

We reached him in just seconds, fighting off the sharp wind that whipped our face.

When we climbed in, I saw Enrique turn and looked at the lifeless body of Rohan.

“Prez, what happened?!” His worry was all too clear amidst the slapping wind and the deafening sound of the helicopter. My stomach lurched again.

“Enrique,” I muttered when Erik didn’t reply, seemingly busy with arranging Rohan on the metal floor.

Fresh new tears rolled down my cheeks as Enrique stared at his dead friend.

He looked lost. God, they both looked lost.

“Rohan,” I notice him mouthed and then returned to his task of bringing us in the air.

Despite my sad state, I consciously squatted on the floor and grabbed a metal railing on the side, but this seemed not enough for Erik because he swiftly pulled me in and looped a hand on my waist. In that moment, I felt secure and warm in his chest.

Once we were in the sky, I chanced a glimpse at the scene below us and true enough, the mansion was half damaged and half on fire. Oddly, no goons were seen on the grounds or even on the shoreline. This had me wondering why, but a part of me wished their bodies burned along with Nikola’s, Mr. Svaneti’s and Mr. Startsev’s.

“Where are the others?!” My attention diverted to Erik when he shouted.

In my blurry vision, I saw Enrique push two control buttons first before answering, “Vincent and Alec are on the speedboat Prez! They will tail the helicopter once they spot us!”

He pushed some few more and a lever before turning to face us.

“Prez.” This time, the noise of the helicopter mellowed allowing me to hear my own quiet sobs and Enrique’s sorrowful voice clearly.

“Luca. He did this,” was Erik’s reply whilst looking at Rohan’s body in front of us.

“Fuck,” Enrique cursed and fisted his gloved hands. “I’ll make him pay.”

“No, I already did. Five bullets in his head,” I heard Erik coldly say.

I didn’t know what had caused it but it seemed my head started to spin. I pressed my head against Erik’s chest even more and this caught his attention.

“Daniella…” he squeezed my waist. “Are you alright?”

I drawled my eyes at him and slowly shook my head.

“No…”

And then, all that was in front of me blurred. Erik’s face. The helicopter roof. The stars.

“Daniella!”

His voice was the last thing I heard before I fell unconscious in his arms.

Dark was the room that I was in, lying half-naked in a bed that was unfamiliar to me. I had just woken up from a very long slumber when Erik’s face popped out in my front.

He was hovering above me; his eyes affectionate and his lips stretched in a small smile.

“You’re awake,” he stated, cupping my face and pressing his thumb against my bottom lip.

“Yes,” I uttered, slightly flushed with his intimate treatment.

“Good because I’ve been dying to make love to you.”

I blinked fast, taken aback. What? Now? For a man who had just lost a close friend, he sure acted too cool and calm.

But my sense of reasoning became foggy when he dipped his head in my neck and skated his tongue on my skin. It sent me high immediately, tingles shooting up like small missiles in the sky.

I closed my eyes and all the memory of what had happened in the Iopata mansion and Rohan’s death blurred.

“Mhhm, Erik…” I breathed out, unable to keep myself silent with how good his large hands felt on my bare breasts.

"I want you Daniella. Now."

He snaked low, down to my navel with his tongue and up again, stopping in my still-slumbering pinks. He coaxed them alive by pinching them, wetting them and sucking them.

My reaction was all a tangled moans of pleasure. Deep inside me I knew that he was acting hastily with his ministrations, but I cared less about it. He was that good in licking fire in the pit of my stomach - me being recently asleep or not.

I raked his hair and traced the flexing muscles of his shirtless torso. When he shifted his weight, a slight brush of his exposed rigid c0ck made me bit my lip. I lifted my hips to feel more of it. Erik in response settled one leg in between my own.

"Spread your legs wider, Sweet Rose," he instructed, withdrawing from my breasts and I, completely weak under him, opened up like a blooming flower.

I whimpered when one hand trespassed under my cotton knickers.

Erik stretched the inner lips with his two fingers and eased the third one on top of my aching bud.

"You're wet already," he proclaimed, grinning and looking at me with concentrated lust.

"You're torturing me again," I replied through half-lidded eyes.

"Hmm, I think I am."

"Ah!"

The fingers inserting my inner walls felt so good that I had to arch my back. I grabbed his neck and pulled him closer to me.

"Erik..."

With my nose pressed against his neck, I was able to whiff a certain smell. It was different. Different from Erik's usual ocean and spicewood scent. I had to cringe my nose with the unexpected assault of it.

Erik didn't notice my brief displeasure though because, in one hard thrust, he entered me fully. I gasped. He didn't even bother about taking my underwear out. He just swept the cotton to the side and entered me.

It was certainly a change from his tender side. It was a hundred and eighty-degree turn from his long and delicious foreplay, but still, it got me hot.

When he rocked and penetrated me even deeper, I clung to him like I was falling in a cliff. It was so mind-blowing that I didn't care how crude he was at first.

But then, he spoke.

He spoke in a slightly different tone of voice and as I listened, the heat in my body fell below zero.

"You're delicious when you writhe like this, *mishka*."

I froze, staring back at him wide-eyed.

"Happy birthday to me," he continued and gave me a wicked smile.

"Nikola!"

***

"Daniella..."

An all-too-familiar voice woke me up from my dream - no, my nightmare. I blinked hard, trying to adjust to the warm yellow light of the room. My hair fell loosely on my back while the duvet fell on my lap as I slowly straightened to sit.

Erik's face greeted me when my eyes adapted revealing his mesmerizing orbs settled in mine worriedly and his brows furrowed. His lips were pressed into a thin line as he waited for me to speak.

"Erik," I mumbled, looking at him with relief. Good, he is dressed.

He wore a V-necked long-sleeved shirt and black pants whilst sitting at a chair at the edge of the bed. This fact made me realize that my dream didn't return for a redo.

In a heartbeat, I scanned the whole room and saw the unfamiliarity of it. It wasn't my bedroom or Erik's or any of the guestrooms because this one had huge stacked monitors across the bed, settled in a rectangular desk. Next to it was another desk covered with scattered papers and folders. Its executive chair, stopping sideways to almost face me, was absent of an occupant, but I can bet my aching limbs that the said occupant was Erik himself.

"Nightmare?" he asked, cupping my face with his warm hand.

I nodded meekly. "It was."

"Come here."

He stretched his other arm and joined me in bed for an embrace.

"Where am I? What time is it?" was my inquiry as I snuggled in his chest.

"In the chateau," he answered initially, kissing the crown of my head. "In my underground office. It is already ten in the morning. You'll stay here until everything is clear."

And when he said everything, memories of last night came flooding down on me.

“Ohh, Rohan...” I choked.

The sight of Rohan’s dying form was crystal-clear in my head. His dull eyes. His bloody chest. The long knife embedded in it. It made me sob and cry.

“Daniella, I know what you’re thinking. Don’t blame yourself,” he released one arm in my back and moved it up my head to smooth the tangled locks.

“It can’t be helped, I—”

“Silence,” he interjected.

I shook my head. “Erik, I can’t—”

“Silence!” he boomed and this made me squeeze my eyes shut, letting more tears overflow.

“It pains me too. All of us in fact, but this is how our work is!” he reasoned, dropping every word like a bomb.

I remained silent whilst clutching the neckline of his shirt.

“Death revolves around us whether you are here or not, Daniella. This is what we signed up for. We already know the hazards of it so don’t fucking blame yourself.”

He kissed my head again. I couldn’t bear to see the hurt in his eyes so I just stayed on the safety of his chest.

“What now?” I whispered breathlessly, genuinely not knowing what to do.

“The mansion was burned to ashes, but the California State police had found many evidences in a basement vault of Iopata’s dealings all over the world most of which pertains to Cloud Blue,” he provided in a calm tone. Although this wasn’t what I wanted to hear, it was still a good information to digest.

“ISA and The Fancy Pants Club will coordinate with them with the investigation, capture, and incarceration of the persons involved. We are yet to find the footprints of Nikola and Hyde though, so for now, we will keep our eyes open for any possibility of an attack.”

“In the chateau?” my voice trembled.

“Possibly,” he replied.

A twinge in my heart got me inhaling sharply.

“Erik…” This time, I pulled out from his embrace and looked at him with my brows drawn up in worry. “I can’t—I can’t deal with more deaths especially to the people I care about. Vincent, Suri, Amano, Karl, Enrique, Alec, and you… I don’t want to lose all of you.”

Erik broke the stream of tears in my eyes with his fingers and kissed the bridge of my nose.

“Daniella, Love, have more faith in me and the others.”

Chapter 43 - Calm Before The Storm

~ Daniella ~

Nikola, if he somehow survived the mansion's explosion and fire, must have been bidding his time. For five consecutive days, not one news of him or Iopata arrived. It was as if the man never existed. Karl had been constantly on surveillance with Iopata's associates, but nothing significant came to the Club's attention. With Sergio Svaneti gone, it was possible that Iopata had gone down too, six feet below the ground with its evil and destructive ways.

But amidst the lack of threat, Erik's recent possessive attention on me had quadrupled. Well, he was already one before but since the events in the Iopata Mansion, he had not let his guard down.

Just as he said, he made me stay in his underground office, which by the way was an understatement. The office looked like a bachelor's pad complete with everything a normal house needed. There was a kitchen equipped with the necessary materials and appliances for cooking. There were two bedrooms that housed two huge bathrooms. The room that I am in that had four stacked big flat-screen monitors is Erik's bedroom slash workspace. A workspace that was Iopata related to be exact.

We had made love a couple of times in there and in other places of the underground hideout. A good routine to help us momentarily forget the issues of reality - one of them being Rohan's death.

Aside from our intimate interactions, Erik and I underwent constant kickboxing spars. Vincent told me once that if it was karate, I would have been a red belter now, enough for me to defend myself from robbers and/or kidnappers. The mafia however was another story and so Erik had taken it upon himself to teach me more.

Learning all of these, I guess, comes from being a Club member and Erik's lover. I am not complaining though and I even imposed it on myself especially the handling of a gun.

Bang.

On one hand, I pointed the glock to the right.

Bang.

And then pointed it to the left.

Bang. Bang.

All bullets hit dead center in both targets - the dummy head.

A swell of pride coursed through me. This would be my fifth night in gun training here in the chateau underground hideout of the Club. Erik had been a very good trainer that my confidence in holding the gun and shooting needed only four days. I had a couple of misses from time to time but on this very day, I felt the kicks of aiming right.

"Excellent," I heard Erik say behind me. I turned to look at him, grinning.

Standing up from his chair, he strode towards where I stood and took the heavy glock out of my grasp.

"But 'tis enough for now. You'll strain your elbow."

"Okay," I agreed, feeling the slight burn of the said body part from almost two hours of shooting, "but wait."

I snatched the gun back, adjusted the safety lever, and pulled the magazine out almost like a pro. Erik observed me the whole time, looking proud leaning against the cubicle's glass wall.

"As you said, the shooter must see to it that everything is in place after practice," I stated and then placed everything down in the desk.

"Such a diligent student you are," he remarked and cupped my chin.

I anticipated his kiss by tilting my head up and closing my eyes.

His other hand pulled me in and after that, our mouths molded.

I could never get enough of this intimacy of ours and I believe, Erik feels the same way judging from his actions. When we are in public, he always steals a kiss from me or two, and if when we are alone, he'd turn me into jelly through lovemaking.

And speaking of jelly, my knees are turning into one right now.

Erik left my lips and peppered kisses in my neck. I opened up by angling my head to the side, raking his hair, and making pleased soft moans.

"Looking at you for two hours was torture you know," he murmured near my ear. "You look like a temptress with a gun."

A small smile grew on my lips. Of course, I would look like one since I am clothed in a black mini skirt, striped grey long-sleeve blouse, and a matching black ankle boots. I hadn't really thought of wearing this to tempt him, but if this does the trick, then so be it.

"I bet this is one of your crazy sexual fantasies Erik," I managed to say whilst feeling his hot mouth on my skin.

“Maybe,” he breathed into my neck, “or maybe not, but I sure am tempted by you.”

In one move, he shoved the gun and its magazine to the right side of the desk and lifted me by the waist to sit there.

My breath hitched.

“What are you doing?” I feigned ignorance, arching one brow.

But I already knew he would attempt to seduce me after failing it this morning. I woke up early because of a phone call from my mother. She was checking the status of the birthday party that my supposed client, Mr. Startsev, had sponsored. It was supposed to be held tomorrow evening, but since unexpected circumstances happened, I postponed it. I didn’t want my team to leave the chateau with less experience so I had set them up with another client, a friend of Alec’s, who will be having a bridal shower on a five-star hotel outside Beverly Hills.

What I failed to do was to inform my mother about the postponed event. Rohan’s death, my mourning, and other Erik-related conditions stopped me from doing so.

Since she didn’t know anything about the Club, Iopata, and who Mr. Startsev really was, I gave her a good alibi saying that he canceled it. She understood but only after a few more questions about the expenses. Apparently, the amount that my mother had swiped in Mr. Startsev’s gold credit card had been suspended which was of no surprise to me.

This is exactly the reason why no one should enter a business deal with the mafia. Their blood money, whether in credit or in cold, hard cash, disappears without a trace.

When we ended the call, Erik was already on his black suit, ready for a Club update meeting. Before he left, he kissed me and promised to accompany me in my shooting practice later.

Which would lead us to the now.

“Seducing you,” he replied in a sultry voice, positioning himself in between my parted legs and grazing his hands on my shoulder blades.

I held myself from flushing even further. My palms landed on his chest and felt the quickness of his heartbeat the same as mine. “Then I am all yours my fiancé, but aren’t we going to get caught?”

He grinned. “No, we will not, but on second thought, let them. In that way, they will know you are mine.” And then launched himself down to meet me lips to lips.

My anxiety on his statement came flying out of the door.

It would be the first time that we would be making out in this area of the chateau. I felt kinda nervous, but it was all erased and replaced with thrill and excitement when he started his foreplay - pulling up my blouse and exposing one of my breasts from its confines all for his ravishment.

In response, I spread my legs wider. He groaned, no doubt pleased with it and pushed his groin closer to my center. I felt the tight bulge under his black slacks then.

“Daniella, I want you now,” he murmured against my nipple.

Consciously, I glanced at the hallway leading to our bedroom. It was a short walking distance - a very short walking distance - but with how our bodies craved for release now, it would be a long, taxing thing to do, so with that in mind, I nodded at him. “Then take me, Erik,” I urged; my mind reduced into a dizzying haze of desire.

After cracking a grin, he caressed me, kissed me, and made me into a wet mess for minutes before he freed his erection from his zipper and shove my damp underwear to the side.

I gasped and held his neck for support when he penetrated deep inside me. My back was pressed against the glass wall so hard that I thought we would shatter it.

“Ahh, so tight,” he groaned.

I opened my mouth to reply but all I could make out were incoherent sounds of pleasure from the majestic, electric sensations shooting up inside my core.

With our clothes still on, he pounded and drove hard inside me many, many times; my senses turning upside down with each glorious invasion. My voice came out hoarse and weak after moaning too much.

After what seemed like forever, swirls and swirls enveloped my head when I reached my tidal wave of orgasm. I flung my hands to the side; palms pressed against the cubicle glass wall like in the Titanic movie, while my legs greedily hooked his waist.

Erik groaned, dropping his head on my shoulder heaving and concentrating on his own heaven when he followed me with his raw and powerful climax. I felt his seed flow inside. No boundaries, no nothing but only skin against skin and liquid mixing against liquid.

All were deposited, including the little spurts from his junior that he freed with the help of his short, quick hip thrusts.

Panting, I pressed my nose against the collar of his suit; the tip of it moistened with the little sweat that escaped from his forehead.

We stayed still for a moment just embracing each other until I felt his erratic heartbeat and breathing turning to normal like mine. It is in serene moments like this that I wanted to tell him how much I love him... to tell him the three overflowing words but damn, Erik beat me to it.

“I love you,” he whispered out-of-the-blue but saying it with so much passion it made the butterflies in my stomach fly wildly.

But as much as I like hearing it though, I cringed my nose. “I love you too Erik, but there you are again, giving me this foreboding feeling.”

In reply, he squeezed my chest with his arms. “I apologize. Trust in me that I will never leave you.”

I smiled. “Apology accepted and yes, I trust you.”

I felt him reach for his pants pocket and pull out something from there. He raised it in between us with a tiny mischievous smirk on his face; our little debate instantly all forgotten.

I blinked many times. “You sneaky fox,” I expressed, narrowing my eyes.

In his right hand was a black piece of cloth of some sort - well, an underwear specifically.

“Let’s get you changed, Sweet Rose.” Slowly, he pulled his semi-erect member from me and I whimpered a little from the sudden absence of it.

“Gods, Erik.”

“I know,” he lifted my chin up, half-lidded with desire too. “This is just the start of our night together. I’ll fill you up more and more.”

I bit my bottom lip. “With you holding that, it makes me think you are planning this from the very start,” I eyed him incredulously.

He helped me down the desk whilst chuckling, “You know me, I am very good with tactical operations.”

“Oh really?” With a playful hum, I swiped the underwear from his hand and sashayed out of the cubicle into the path of the lady's room.

Amidst the wonderful night with Erik, the next day felt like being choked tightly by a neck brace. Why? Because on this very day, Rohan’s body will be laid to rest, cremated, and tossed into the ocean.

Every club member had an advance directive instructing as to how they will be buried when they come to pass. It was Rohan’s request to cremate his body but only after six days have passed. In his will, he reasoned it was because he wanted his clients to get a good view of his handsome features in a casket.

Really, even when he was thinking of death at that time, he still had the silliness to joke.

As instructed, Rohan's body stayed in his own residence guarded by two Hindu priests. Erik and I, and the rest of the club members visit there every single day and stayed as long as we could if not occupied with Club matters. Suri, since she was still recuperating in the hospital of her gunshot wound, had Amano set up a Skype live stream.

I remembered we had a therapeutic sisterly cry when I first visited her the next day after our escape in the mansion. She was really relieved that I was safe, sad at the same time after discovering of Rohan's untimely demise. She, just like Erik, comforted me, saying it wasn't my fault. It was Luca and his traitorous actions.

Clad in an elegant knee-length black dress with a low cut back and a matching black blazer to cover my low neckline, I rode together with Erik in his Ferrari to Rohan's residence.

"You okay?" he asked as he clasped my left hand with his right, mindful of my saddened state.

I nodded once and gave him a tight-lipped smile. "Yeah, don't worry about me, Erik."

He drew back his focus on the road but didn't release my hand. "Together, you and me, and the rest of the members, we will get through this," he stated.

"Yes, we will." This time I gave him a genuine smile.

"Do you want to go somewhere after this?"

"Huh?" I raised a brow.

"Bahamas, the Mediterranean, Hawaii, anywhere. What do you say? Just to unwind and take a break from all this-"

"But Iopata?" I interjected, feeling like he was trying too much on making me feel at ease.

"Will be dealt with by Vincent and the others if they are still functioning," he answered directly.

"And Nikola?" I had no intention to, but the thought of him still alive somehow made me tremble, but Erik didn't notice this because he shifted to look at me with a dead-set frown.

"Why do you ask for him? He is dead," was his cold answer.

"You can't be sure," I rebutted, shaking my head.

Then, he let go of my hand.

"Stop it, Daniella," he lashed and stepped on the breaks abruptly. We were in the middle of the city road, in the middle of a go signal yet Erik wasn't worried at all of breaking road rules. He looked too angry to even care but I threw him a look of worry.

“Erik, move!” I ordered and luckily, after narrowing his eyes at me, he ran the car again.

“It makes me think that you care for my twin,” he murmured, tone dark and with a hint of jealousy. I realized that the subject of his twin brother made him like this.

“What?! No!” I immediately answered, straining my voice. “Erik, there’s no care I feel for your brother. I loathe him, you know that. I just think that going in a vacation won’t be a good time for now.”

“It is a good time,” he cut in just as he steered the wheel to the right where the road led to the gates of Rohan’s residence. “I want to unshackle you from your involvement with the Club, Daniella. Refresh you, if that’s the right word. I don’t want you drawn deeper into our dealings as that would only endanger you more.”

“I am already into deep Erik, you are aware of that yourself. I am tied up with you. No amount of resurfacing, refreshing, or unshackling could be done to save me from the danger. I am already involved. Nikola has made that clear when he abducted me.”

“And I am making it clear that you will take a break from all this,” he grounded, set on putting a period in our conversation. It is not like we haven’t argued before over the course of my stay in the chateau, but this would be the first time ever in our relationship as lovers.

Love isn’t just a bed of roses, I know that, and ours, though special, is expected to experience it too.

“It wouldn’t be fair for the others Erik,” I quietly added; my thoughts settling on Vincent and the others, especially Suri and Amano who are set to marry soon.

I drew my gaze on my feet, clasped my hands, and waited for him to speak, but in my peripheral vision, I saw him sigh deeply and clench his jaw seemingly in mental torture.

“I don’t want to keep you forever in the chateau Daniella. You have a life of your own. Heck, if it wasn’t for me, you would have lived it safely without thinking of possible threats lurking in every corner. I just want you to unwind, let your mourning of Rohan pass, let yourself enjoy life without any Club-related issues or any worries about Iopata.”

As opposed to his earlier scowl, his profile had softened when I regarded him. If it wasn’t for the fact that we were inside a car and him driving, I would have placed kisses on this precious man’s face.

In the end, I just smiled and calmed myself down.

“You would be coming with me if I go on vacation?” I touched his lap.

He responded by engulfing my hand with his again. “I had made that clear awhile ago. Of course, I will come with you. I don’t want to lose you. I will protect you, Daniella. Tell me once you decide on a place. I will wait. I will be patient.”

He looked at me briefly, eyes full of warm emotion, and squeezed my hand. I smiled at him whilst blushing in different shades of red because of his statement.

“Erik, thank you for thinking about my welfare.”

I drew our clasped hands near my lips and kissed the tip of his fingers.

“Anything for you, my Sweet Rose,” he answered.

I didn’t notice that we have already arrived in the Ambani residence if not for the complete stop of the Ferrari.

He kissed my hand the similar way I did before letting go and said, “Now let’s go. The others are waiting for us.”

I nodded and then slipped out of the car myself.

Though I have exhausted my tears days ago, as I stood some distance away from Rohan’s casket, my eyes started to water again. Still, I could not accept that he was gone for good. Still, it squeezed my heart thinking of his last moments with me.

Luckily, Erik was present to support my shoulder. He had a stern look on his face. His lips were pressed together in a hard line and his jaw tightly clenched. Those who didn’t know him would have thought that he was scowling but I knew better. I knew that deep inside, he was hurting too. I knew that deep inside, he was praying for Rohan’s peaceful rest.

Maybe a vacation would do him good too. Not just me.

Well, actually, all members of the Club should take a break. They deserved it, needed it even.

The last prayers of the priests ended and so was the rite of passing. The casket was placed inside a white van while we waited in the main foyer.

As the van drove out of the premises, Erik and I, the other Club members, and Rohan’s clients convoyed going to the cremation building some few blocks away from the residence.

It was a peaceful ceremony all the way. I still had a few tears here and there together with Suri, but at least my heart wasn’t as heavy as before.

The place the Club chose to scatter Rohan’s ashes was near a cliff that faced the vast blue ocean of California. It was in high noon when we did it; the sun glaring at us like it was expected to.

Erik and Vincent did the honors of tossing the ashes since apparently Rohan had no family or relatives left. The other members - Alec, Karl, and Enrique - were busy with assisting in the ritual, while Amano and Suri had gone back to the hospital since she was given only a two-hour pass from her attending doctor. Alone by myself, I watched in the sidelines together with the other attendees, silent and stifling a sob.

However, never had it crossed my mind that at this very moment my safety would once again be tested.

“I missed you, mishka,” Nikola’s voice emerged from behind me, clear as the bright noonday.

I gasped and stiffened.

“Silently step back and follow me else I will rain bullets in your precious Fancy Pants Club members on the spot.”

I felt the familiar mouth of his gun discreetly pressed against the small of my back. It was a threat that he would likely do happily if I refuse so I had no other choice left but to do as he told.

Chapter 44 - Fancy Redecorating

~ Erik ~

Death had circulated my life since I was born. First was my mother, second were the strangers that Hyde had killed, and third was the Iopata dogs that I killed during our Club operations. I had known of death, too acquainted with it even that seeing a lifeless body unaffected me.

The death of Rohan as expected didn't have that much impact amidst him being a good friend of mine, but it reminded me greatly about what Daniella, my precious Sweet Rose, would soon face if she continues to get tangled up with the dealings of the Club.

She was already drawn into danger because of Nikola. Experienced a considerable amount of trauma due to what happened in the Iopata Mansion and Rohan. I don't want those to happen again.

Shit. I don't want her to suffer or get hurt again.

That exactly is the reason why I kept any news from her regarding Iopata and Nikola. I had instructed Karl, Vincent, and the others to keep everything a secret from her especially my twin's recent notice of threat.

How he got my number was beyond me but I believe it was because of Luca's existing reports about me and the Club. He called one day after the incident in the Iopata Mansion and told me about his desire to steal Daniella away, make her his slave and sex toy as a way to make me suffer.

In response to that, I had kept Daniella in the underground hideout, increased security, and kept a watchful eye on her. I had also ordered our Club associates to secure the safety of her mother in New York; discreetly guard her twenty-four seventh so that Nikola wouldn't get any chances of using her as bait.

All went well to date and so far, I had calmly kept all of these from Daniella. I had acted as if nothing was wrong, but every night, as we lay together in bed, the guilt of keeping her caged like an animal unsettles me.

Although all of this means her safety, still she needed to live her life normally; work, travel, and relax without fear of the dangers ahead.

Vincent's suggestion of going on a vacation together was approved by all of my Club members while I thought it a good idea. Daniella, of all people, needed the respite since she was the one who saw the heartbreaking final breath of Rohan. Aside from that, I needed to get her away from the Club too while my twin brother remains at large thinking that she'll be safe away.

However, I have never thought that in a peaceful gathering like bringing Rohan's ashes in its final resting place would be invaded by him.

When the prayers and the throwing of ashes were done, I turned to return in Daniella's side who I expected to be standing with the crowd; standing beautifully with her unshed but gleaming tears.

The expression in my face was already cold. When I found her absent in the spot where I left her, it turned even arctic.

She may have gone to some other spot to shade from the sun's rays, that's what my mind thought at first, but something in my veins called out an alarm.

I immediately scanned the available area; right to left, the front, and the back of the crowd but she was nowhere to be seen.

That's when a reflection of a car's hood caught my eye.

"Shit!" I cursed loudly, my eyes trained on Daniella's fragile form inside the front-seat of Nikola's Bugatti Chiron. I saw red immediately and felt a strong craze to slice my twin's throat.

I noticed Vincent beside me tense. "Daniella!" he shouted and then looked at me in alarm too.

They were parked a lengthy distance away from where we were. Nikola, who stood in the driver's side saluted me with a grin and then he slipped inside just as I scrambled to my feet and shouted his name in anger, "Nikola!"

"Enrique, the copter!" I heard Vincent yell instinctively.

In the hopes of catching them on time, I pushed and rammed into the mourning people in my way, hissing the whole time when I saw the Bugatti leave.

"Prez! I'll help you!" Vincent voiced out when he reached my side.

"Take care of Daniella for me! I'll kill the bastard this time!" I gritted my teeth and willed my feet to take flight towards my Ferrari.

I got there just in a matter of seconds, but it was enough for Nikola to speed out of our sight.

"Fuck!" I cursed again, gripping the wheel tightly just as I stepped on the gas pedal.

***

~ Daniella ~

Crying won't help me one bit, so I fought back the salty liquid that wanted to fall since I followed Nikola to his getaway vehicle.

The glock he had used awhile ago was lying on his side of the dashboard. I had contemplated many times on snatching it, but many times also I refrained. With him having the upper hand, I knew it wouldn't be the wisest thing to do.

But.

How I wish I had my own gun right now, my mind had chanted over and over again willing more than ever to kill him on the spot just to end this twisted game, but Erik decided not to arm me with it for the reason that it wasn't necessary. He stated that it was his duty to protect me but who would have known that his cowardly twin brother would strike in the middle of Rohan's funeral rites?

My hands curled into a tight fist in my lap as he curved and turned the car towards who-knows-where. I remained silent, refusing to make a conversation with him or to plead my release.

"You are not thrashing, why?" From the driver's seat, I heard Nikola say. Caring not one bit, I didn't glance at him. I just positioned myself facing my side of the window. "I hoped you would give me a bit of challenge, mishka."

I clenched my jaw and ignored him still.

"And you're not crying, but that's good. I want you to save it for later. We will go to the chateau directly. Hyde is there waiting for us. It is me and my twin brother's birthday today you know. I have prepared a special surprise for him."

By the mention of surprise, I felt blood rush down my face. Nothing is good news when it comes to this man. Nothing at all. And though he used the word surprise and birthday together, I knew there aren't good intentions in it.

Finally, I decided to drag my eyes on him.

"So this is the purpose of Mr. Startsev's so-called surprise birthday party huh?" I spat, remembering the time in New York when Hyde discussed with my mother and I the particulars of this said birthday party. I never expected that it was their grand scheme against Erik and I never expected that the second celebrant would be him.

Him. Erik.

Oh, so today is his birthday.

I clenched my hands even more.

He never told me about this. Why? I would have greeted him a happy birthday this morning, would have given him a special gift if I knew.

“Yup, I hope you were able to set-up the venue well, mishka,” my thoughts were cut off when he answered and winked at me at the same time.

I cringed. “I postponed it,” was my immediate reply. “You will find nothing in the President’s Hall except stacked chairs and empty tables.”

“Oh?” Whilst looking at the road, he raised a brow. “But those aren’t needed, Love. Nikolai doesn’t need a grand party for his eventual death.”

By the mere mention of the word, I inhaled hard.

I know he aimed to kill Erik. He had expressed that to me countless times, but with the thought of it now and the possibility of succeeding because he will use me as bait made me strengthen my resolve.

I will not let that happen and I am willing to sacrifice my life to ensure that!

With great courage, I positioned myself to launch into him. Two scenarios were inside my mind when I did. First, if I grab a hold of the steering wheel, I will steer the car to any solid material - a wall, a lamppost, or a building - anything, just so our ride to the chateau would stop. Second, if I swipe his gun, I would shot him point-blank in the head.

Or I could just improvise and mix the two if worse comes to worst.

But my plan was all forgotten when I saw Nikola hiss and turn to look at the back of the car. I felt the car sped in triple then. Without any seatbelts on, my hands scrambled to hold the sides of the seat in response.

“Blyad!” I heard him curse just as he swerved the car to the right of the coastal road.

My lungs felt like it had jumped out of my chest when he did. I gave him a glare, but my brows changed into that of confusion upon seeing his apparent distress.

Why was he in distress?

When I glanced at the back window of the Bugatti, relief, and happiness bubbled up inside me.

I recognize the red Ferrari car tailing us behind and although it had a black tinted window, I was sure that Erik was the one driving it.

Speeding next to Erik’s side was a silver sports car. I couldn’t see who was driving it but I can confidently bet he was one of the Club members.

A car chase, just like people see in a Fast and Furious scene, that’s what I am in right now. Although the thought of each car ending badly in those scenes, I was still happy that I was within Erik’s reach... within the safety of his arms.

“Don’t celebrate just yet, mishka,” Nikola, who was gripping the shift knob, remarked. Anger and the evil look of any murderer were etched on his face. “Nikolai won’t be able to catch up with us, I assure you that.”

I eyed him then, sending enough hate that I could muster up in his profile. For the first time since he captured me, I see a ray of hope, but then again, I refuse to be a damsel-in-distress. Although I needed the rescuing, I am determined and set to help ease the process.

My safety be damned.

“They won’t if I won’t do this!” I shouted and then made true with my plans earlier. I launched at him, one hand gripped at his steering wheel while the other reached for the gun. Nikola, judging from his frantic shift of the wheel, didn’t foresee my actions. With that, our car made an abrupt turn to the left of the road bridge.

Tires screeched at first, followed by white smoke surrounding the back and sides of the car. We were spun many times and in one moment, I felt the car floated. Then, slam after slam of both the roof and the belly of the car occurred. I felt sick and aching the whole time. The last thing that registered in my dizzy mind was how forceful the car’s hood rammed into a metal barrier.

The series of blunt blows to my chest, back, and limbs were ended with a strong impact of my head against the dashboard. Nikola experienced the same too, but the events were so fast and fleeting that I wasn’t able to determine which got the worst treatment: me or him.

My head throbbed like hell though and my consciousness faded in and out. The last thing I remembered before I blanked out was my fingers loosening the hold of Nikola’s gun.

***

~ Erik ~

To my horror, I saw my twin’s vehicle wildly turn a hundred and eighty degrees onto the opposite road just as they were nearing the middle of the coastal bridge. It spun, it rotated and it flipped, every motion uncontrolled and powerful that I felt the surge of fear knocking out the wind in my lungs.

My worry for Daniella’s safety increased a hundredfold.

“Daniella!” I shouted with force; my feet stepping on the breaks immediately.

My hands went cold and clammy upon seeing the Bugatti’s hood collide against the metal barrier that marked the boundary between safety and death. It was a good thing they were thick and bolted securely else the car along with Daniella would have been plunged into the rocky beach below.

But it didn’t lessen my worry as I watched the scene through my windshield.

Curling my hands into a tight fist, in haste, I stepped out of my car and ran towards the smoking crash site. My focus was on Daniella alone, but once I was inches away from the car, I turned heels directly on Nikola's side of the door, planning to beat him to death.

I didn't need to open the car door to get the bastard out for it was already detached from the string of slams earlier. I too didn't need to pull my silver gun out as I expected him to be weak and most likely bloody, but once I reached him, Nikola's snickering face met my stern expression.

I cursed inwardly. The mother f*ucker.

He was sitting in an awkward position in the driver's seat, panting. One bloody arm was on his stomach while the other held a gun that was pointed at Daniella's forehead - my precious Sweet Rose - who was unconscious, leaning against the dashboard with her soft curls partially hiding her face.

"Say goodbye to your woman, brother," he hoarsely spoke. I didn't have enough time to pull my gun out or punch him in the face when I saw his finger move in the trigger.

"No!" I shouted with dread etched in my face.

The fire of a gun resounded in the air, but as I watched with my fingers trembling, blood didn't trail down from Daniella's forehead.

Nikola's hold on the gun loosened. It fell on the cracked floor of the car with not a sound.

How? How?! my thoughts cried out.

Then, from the corner of my eye, I saw Vincent holding his revolver; its mouth aimed towards Nikola.

Relief washed through me, but it was just brief.

In one move, I pulled the limp Nikola out of the car by the collar of his shirt. I threw him on the sidewalk where I poured out my rage and punched his fucked up bloody face again and again.

He didn't fight at all. He didn't so much as lift his arms to block my knuckles.

"Prez! Stop it!" Despite my vengeful state, I heard Vincent speak loudly. "He is dead. Daniella isn't. Let's get her to the hospital. NOW!"

He was already holding Daniella in his arms, standing a couple of feet away from the now-flaming car.

I nodded but before walking away, I took out my silver gun and released five bullets in Nikola's head without caring that random drivers in the bridge would witness it.

Contentment washed through me.

I can finally say that Daniella is safe now. From danger. From Iopata. From my twin.

In the same hospital where Suri was in, Vincent and I brought Daniella. I would have wanted to stay and wait for news regarding her status but Karl arrived and informed me of another problem: Hyde.

Apparently, he was able to slip inside the chateau while we were at the funeral, together with a number of goons at his side. Surveillance cameras showed that they had been there waiting since mid-morning.

I had a feeling that this was his and Nikola's plan all along. The surprise birthday party project that Daniella was in was meant to bring the Club down, but no. They got it all wrong. They had underestimated what the Club can do.

I stood up from the hospital bench with my hands itching for a fight. A small smile grew on my lips then. Vincent saw it and I knew from the way he smiled back that he understood what I was thinking.

"Prez," both he and Karl spoke in front of me; their faces waiting expectantly for my orders.

"I guess it is time to change the carpet in the President's Hall, huh?" I asked, thinking of something crimson red and sticky staining it soon.

"Yes, Prez. I believe so," was Vincent's reply.

I nodded. "Then, let's go and do some fancy redecorating."

Chapter 45 - Somewhat of An End

~ Daniella ~

It was the second day in the hospital when I opened my eyes. The first face that greeted me then was my mother, holding my hand that was free of an intravenous line. She sobbed quite vigorously. I had to try to calm her through a squeeze of my fingers on her flushed cheek. We talked after she quieted down and I was informed of everything with regards to my condition.

Miraculously, I survived the car crash without any fatal injuries aside from some glass lacerations in my legs, bruises, a broken left wrist, and a head concussion. The doctors wanted to make sure everything of my body processes were stable so they needed me on hospital bed rest for the next two weeks together with my scheduled wrist surgery.

I was fine with that and stayed as per recommendation, but as the days passed by I noticed something was missing.

Not one Club member visited me.

No Erik, Vincent, Karl, Alec, Enrique, Amano, or Suri stepping inside my room.

I got confused and at the same time worried.

Because of this, I asked my mother how she learned of my situation but she only just shrugged her shoulders and answered that some hospital staff had called her about my unfortunate road accident.

I asked her if she met any of the Fancy Pants Club members upon arriving at the hospital and she answered that she hadn't met at least one. Apparently, no one had visited me since she arrived.

I had trouble believing it of course. Erik and the others wouldn't just abandon me like this unless something happened to them. I wanted to know the truth but since I was still on bed rest, I had my mother check on the chateau and the Club the following days.

What I learned paled me even more.

She said that the north side of the chateau was burned down. Due to this, the staff had to shut all operations indefinitely. No news about the Club and its Club members were released except for the state of the chateau's north side, in the President's Hall particularly, wherein bullet holes decorated the walls and charred human bodies were seen lying with firearms in their sides. The media was all over the spectacle and for that, I borrowed my mother's laptop to search.

My hands went frigid after confirming my mother's accounts. Although I fought it, tears dripped in great amounts down my cheeks.

There were various theories from the media explaining the popular Fancy Pants Club's sudden disappearance. It ranged from them dismantling the Club, a party gone wild and disastrous, and an altercation with some not-yet-confirmed mysterious syndicate. The last one was probably what the public had been tuning on considering an amateur video leaked showing Nikola's Bugatti crash and Erik's apparent rampage on his brother.

I was in the video too, the unconscious me, and because of that, I had to spill out everything to my mother that pertained to the Club, to Iopata and to my lover, Erik, and our past.

Surprisingly, she was all thumbs up with my relationship with him amidst the dangers that went along with it. She was even happy that I have finally found someone to care for and even a Fancy Pants Club president at that. I could see how she was worried though, so I had to reassure her that everything was fine, now that Nikola and Iopata had been eradicated.

Or at least that's what I was hoping for.

I didn't want to think that Erik and the others are dead. I didn't want to think that those burned bodies in the President's Hall were them, but what else am I to think? I was out cold those first two days. It was possible that Nikola survived the crash too and together with Hyde made their plans of bringing down Erik and the Club a reality.

God, no.

But as the days went by, no good news arrived in my doorstep, or even familiar faces that I considered my friends or even my lover who my heart yearned for.

It saddened me and because of this, it affected my recuperating process. Luckily, my mother understood my situation. She tried her hardest to cheer me up and accompanied me the whole hospital admission amidst our busy business demanding her.

What was meant to be two weeks of hospital admission became three. When I was cleared of my doctors for discharge, at my mother's insistence, I decided to leave with her for New York. I asked her to give me at least one day to check on the chateau though and she gave me that.

I needed evidence - evidence that would clarify and answer everything: why Erik and the Club didn't visit me, why they suddenly disappeared, and if...if they were truly gone.

On my day of visit in the chateau, I was allowed entry even though it was prohibited. The front guard had recognized me being one of the Club members so he let me in. I didn't miss out on how he seemed to be too calm after seeing me though.

Once inside, I found the place in a standstill. I caught a faint smell of burning wood and paint and I immediately connected it to the said fire three weeks ago.

Out of the two hundred and thirty Iopata victims serving as employees maintaining the chateau, not one soul was present. Most of the lights were turned off including that of the front desk and the customer service counter. Fresh flowers that were supposed to be changed every other day were in the process of wilting. The finest Persian carpets that were supposed to be vacuumed clean showed signs of dust collection. Even the chandeliers in the main hall, in the second and third floor foyers, and the light fixtures in every hallway exhibited the beginnings of cobwebs.

I was at a loss for words. This was evidence number one.

What came out of my mouth were gasps and quiet sobs especially when I checked on the burnt President's Hall at the north wing. True enough, signs of its ultimate fate were clearly seen.

There was a gaping hole that welcomed me once I stepped inside the double doors. It was supposed to be where the center stage and backstage stood. The view of the outside gardens could be seen right through it. This was evidence number two.

The dance floor was cleared of any debris, but I can bet there were glowing embers and ashes in it from that time. The ceiling was black as opposed to it being creamy white while the enormous chandeliers that once hung beautifully on it, looked disfigured.

The walls were charred, chapped and as reported, full of bullet holes - my evidence number three. The red carpet didn't look like a carpet anymore. It was a dirty mess and if I stare at it thoroughly, bloodstains could be seen. This was my evidence number four.

My heart sank upon finding the once-great splendor of the President's Hall reduced to a wreck but my heart sank even more upon realizing the worst.

How? How?! That single word kept popping out of my head.

Tears did fall down my cheeks upon remembering Erik and the others and the possibility of this place becoming their last stand against Iopata, and the possibility of this place becoming their burial site.

I cried and cried and sat, holding myself close against the frame of the double doors. If true that they are gone, if true that Erik is gone, I wouldn't be able to recollect myself. I would forever be damaged. Forever thinking of the love and friendship the Fancy Pants Club had given me. I would forever hate myself for being helpless, for sleeping in a hospital room while they were here fighting for what was right.

I had cried so much that it made my body weak, but after an hour, I willed myself to stand and I willed myself to leave the godawful hall, aiming still to proceed on my checking while I still had the courage. I knew then that if I see the fourth floor, particularly me and Erik's rooms, I might breakdown again thinking of my blessed memories with him. I couldn't have that.

God, I couldn't.

But, I had to. Yes, I had to. For closure and for my sanity. And so that I wouldn't regret it in New York thinking of what-ifs without looking for the evidence myself.

When I walked up the hall leading to the private elevator, I wrapped my arms around in a way of comforting myself. I flinched feeling the radiating pain in my repaired broken wrist fitted inside a cast, but it couldn't compare to the amount of pain in my heart.

Silently hoping that the lift still works, I stood inside and pressed for the fourth floor button. I thanked the heavens when it started moving up.

Seconds later, it pinged open and I stepped out.

The foyer's light fixtures were still unlit, but the sun's rays passing through the octagon skylight lighted the entire area instead.

No changes were seen in this part of the floor. The statue of Ares was still in the center along with the rifle in his hand. I had to pull the trigger just to see if this still opens the secret room and yes, it did.

Drying up my tears with the back of my hand, I cautiously approached the room. Once there, I pressed on the two buttons, opening the two more secret rooms of the Club. In what I call the conference room, I found it still the same. Nothing to take note of and no signs of a living soul inside. Proceeding, I checked on the second I called the media room and received the same results, except of course discovering the ammunition and firearms that were once stocked inside gone. The surveillance cameras of all the parts of the chateau were turned off too and the desks that once were full of weird diagrams and maps were cleaned out.

Though I found it weird, I just ignored the changes and proceeded to my chamber.

My hands trembled the whole time when I did thinking that I might find further evidence there, evidence that would tell me a life without Erik has come.

With the door unlocked, I entered. I felt myself choke when I passed by the receiving room towards my bedroom.

In there, nothing significant can be noted. Yes, nothing at all, except for the suspicious-looking fold of paper right in the center of my mattress with my emerald ring weighing it down. I remembered that I just kept this heirloom in a black box in my travel bag when I returned here from New York. After losing it once, I figured that wearing it wouldn't be a good idea, so I just kept it in a safe place.

But now, why is this here? I asked myself in a gasp.

In a hurry, I strode towards the bed, sat on it, and picked the two objects up. The emerald ring I slid easily in my ring finger and the folded paper I opened while I held my breath.

'My Sweet Rose, I am deeply sorry to have caused you pain.'

I sobbed. I really, really sobbed once I read the first sentence. He knows that my heart is in pain due to his absence.

'I wanted to be with you in the hospital. Care for you. Be with you all the way. But I needed to end my battles with Iopata. For you. For your safety. If I am not present to apologize myself, something must have probably gone wrong, but know that I will always love you. You are my life, Daniella. My life. Everything is complete with you. I am sorry, I truly am, for leaving you like this. I love you forever.' ~ Erik

And that did it for me. Continuous tears fell from my eyes. I felt my chest constrict, feeling like it was trampled over by elephants and a herd of buffaloes.

This was my last evidence proving the death of Erik and the others.

I shook my head and crumpled the letter.

I can't accept it! I can't!

They couldn't be dead! They are trained! They are specialists! They are good at what they do!

I threw the damn paper away, towards the door, towards where I want Erik to be, standing with his arms wide open waiting for me.

Standing...standing with his arms wide ready to envelope me.

To comfort me.

To tell me that everything was okay.

To tell me that their battles have ended.

To tell me that he is not dead!

And kiss me.

Kiss my tears away....

But as I looked, Erik wasn't standing in the door. He wasn't smiling back at me with a comforting smile, and I knew deep in my heart that he will never be there. Ever.

Falling on the mattress, I curled myself up and let my tears fall without hindrance. I shouted for his name in my heart...

In my head...

And shouted more with my strained voice again and again, hitting my chest so hard that the pain in my heart would numb.

“Erik... no...”

I wished myself to die too. A life without him would be nothing.

I wished.

And wished.

And wished for death.

Until the exhaustion of crying pulled me in for a deep sleep.

When I woke up, I found my muscles aching. I found my eyes still wet with tears. Fresh tears. I found my throat dry. So dry.

Yet, I was confused.

How am I in the President’s Hall still instead of my bedroom? How am I still sitting and leaning against the frame of the double doors instead of lying, curled up in my mattress? And how was it that in my front stood a man with his back to me, wearing a white crisp shirt and black slacks - a rather explicit contrast of the charred mess surrounding him?

How?

How?!

I shook my head when the man in my front turned to face me; the warmth of his expression feeling me up with deep longing.

“Daniella,” he called, locking eyes with me.

I gasped.

Is this an apparition? A mirage? Or a ghost hallucination of Erik?

I shook my head again.

“Erik,” I uttered, softly, hesitantly, still confused and in doubt.

How?!

When he strode towards me, my heartbeat jumped loudly against my chest. I curled my hands into a fist.

Fuck. If this is just a dream, I wouldn’t want to wake up!!!

Although faint, the scent of his cologne filled me up, making my head go dizzy as he stooped low to round his arm on my waist.

I blinked twice, thrice as he helped me up; my knees wobbling in the process.

How?!

"Erik...?"

"My Sweet Rose." His voice, oh his voice, filled my ears like the sweetest music.

This and the warmth of his hands on my back, and the hard chest pressing against my own, and the solidness of his shoulders against my palms, and the hypnotic eyes raking at me, I knew then that this wasn't a dream. That this was real.

That the one I had in my bedroom was the dream. That it was just my imagination created by my crying.

And because of that realization, I feel like being reborn again.

"Erik!" My eyes widened. I palmed his face, his head, his neck, his shoulders, his chest - stopping there to feel the regular bounding of his heart - and exclaimed, "Oh my God, you're here! You are really here! You are alive!"

He smiled at me warmly and said, "I have to be alive in order to love you, Daniella."

***

~ Erik ~

In an act of desperation, a wounded Hyde released a specialized hand grenade in the air when I closed in on him after a shootout with his goons. The grenade exploded in the center stage creating a big flaming hole as a result. I was lucky enough to survive and so were my fellow Club members, but really, we almost thought we were dead meat at that time.

After this successful last stand with Hyde and his men, we even furthered our operations in Russia together with the local army to destroy their base once and for all. This was the reason why the other Fancy Pants Club members and I never got a chance to visit Daniella these past few weeks.

So that Daniella won't be alone, I had the hospital staff call her mother. I met with her the day she arrived at the airport and explained everything there: the nature of the Club, the problems we were facing, my feelings for her daughter, and my will to make her my bride soon.

I asked her to make our meeting a secret and to act as normal as possible. I knew it wouldn't be the right thing to do, but it was in order to give Daniella a peace of mind. She had worried with all of us too much and I don't want her worrying even more.

Although I know that it's in her nature to worry and overthink a lot of things.

When her mother called me two days before their discharge and informed me that Daniella wanted to visit the chateau, I immediately set out for a return flight to Beverly Hills.

ISA and my fellow Club members didn't need to stop me anymore. Iopata and its base had now fully been destroyed.

When I arrived in the chateau, I immediately went straight into the Club's underground hideout - to my chamber specifically - and pulled out a certain blue velvet box in my safety deposit box.

In haste, I looked for Daniella then. Surveillance cameras in my room showed that she had just entered the north wing so I went there.

What I saw when I arrived crushed me really good. Daniella was nestled against the frame of the main double doors, sleeping serenely yet tears in her eyes streamed down her face.

I had the urge to wake her up. I had the urge to lift her, bring her in my bed, and press her head against my chest in order to comfort her.

I wanted to do that but I was afraid she might jump out of my hold in surprise, thinking I was Nikola.

I decided to stand a couple of feet away from her and wait, wait for my lovely Sweet Rose to wake up and see me.

***

~ Daniella ~

I couldn't hold back the fresh new batch of tears from falling when Erik cupped my chin and held my gaze with so much passion.

"I apologize I couldn't be with you in the hospital," he said, putting a thumb against my bottom lip. "I was in Rus-"

I placed a finger in his lips to stop him. "Let me guess, Iopata related isn't it?" I asked with a little sob.

He nodded and made an apologetic face.

Gods, this expression just doesn't fit him well.

"Stop that Erik, I like you more when you are scowling at me," I teased, but I must have been a sight to see, teasing and crying all at the same time.

He lifted my chin up. "Are you going to marry me still?"

My heart swelled with that. “Of course, I will.”

“Then, I’d like you to wear these for a start.”

To my surprise, he pulled out a blue velvet ring box from his pants pocket and opened it for me.

I gaped.

The contents inside were a sparkling green and blue.

Green for my emerald ring and blue for the sapphire stone set in a silver band, surrounded by exquisitely-cut teardrop diamonds.

“Oh, Erik…” I felt my chest constrict with utter happiness. He was smiling when he took out both rings and slipped them side-by-side in my ring and middle fingers.

“You are mine forever Daniella, always remember that,” he uttered in a possessive yet husky voice.

“I am. Yes, I will always be yours forever.” I nodded at him; my broken heart slowly healing from the pain the nightmarish dream had made.

He brought me chest to chest again and without further waiting, devoured my lips passionately for almost a breathless minute.

Fancy Pants Epilogue

~ Daniella ~

“Come guys! It is a group picture now!” Standing beside the podium, I shouted, straining my voice enough so that all Fancy Pants members could hear. Hired by Suri and Amano to be their wedding event coordinator, I had contacted a famous photographer in L.A. to capture the video and photos during the private event. The line-up of picture taking starting from the small entourage, parents, and relatives had just finished. Now, it was the Club’s turn.

Vincent, Karl, and Alec were already in the dais, congratulating the newlyweds while Enrique was busily talking to one bridesmaid who was Suri’s distant cousin.

Erik was sitting in one of the front pews in the chateau chapel, silent and rather too relaxed. Of all of the members, he was the one who hadn’t stood up and expressed his greetings. Well, at least not yet as Suri and Amano had been continuously surrounded by the jovial crowd.

I straightened and rested a hand on my waist, one Jimmy Choo-wearing foot forward, while I gave him a raised brow, silently sending him signals of lifting his butt off the wooden seat. He ghosted a smirk then and stood up with his debonair aura clothed in the latest Armani suit.

"Yes! I've been waiting for this!" exclaimed Alec who I didn't even notice was already standing beside me.

"Come here Dani," he stated giving me a cheeky grin. He pulled me in by the shoulder and pressed us side by side.

I would have given him a slight playful nudge had it not for Erik's sudden interruption. He shoved Alec aside and inserted himself in between us.

"Ah Prez!" Alec shot him a confused, pouting look.

"You stand together with Karl, Alec," muttered Erik with a clear glare on his way.

"But Prez, I want to stand next to Daniella!" I heard him complain. I had to keep myself from giggling as I watched their little argument.

I bent a little to see Erik's reaction and true enough, it was what I expected. He glared even more - exactly his signature don't-mess-with-me look - towards his Make-up and Prosthetics Expert.

Alec looked defeated. He raised his hands up and stepped inches away rather comically. "Okay, okay. Karl it is then," he sputtered.

Everyone lined up in their chosen places. Amano and Suri were a stair down from us, right in the middle. I, wearing a floor-sweeping Venus cut light pink dress, stood directly above them and being towered over in between Erik and Vincent. Enrique dashingly stood beside him, in the far right. Alec, although disappointed, stood next to Erik, and followed by Karl.

It would have been a better scene if Rohan was around. I had to breathe hard to free myself from the heavy burden in my chest when his memory crossed my mind.

I knew that in every Club member, that was what they were thinking, but at least this joyous occasion reduced that sadness a bit. It has been a month since his death. Each day was difficult, but the Club members helped each other cope with the loss.

Under the Fancy Pants Club supervision, the Le Château de Esclavette's daily operation returned. ISA had stated that the Club had served its purpose well and for this, the members were given a chance to choose their own future endeavors in life, be it to continue being an undercover agent, or to proceed with a normal civilian danger-free life.

Amano and Suri, of course, had chosen the latter. To build a family was what they have dreamed ever since. Alec, Enrique, and Karl decided to serve ISA further, preferring to stay in the chateau while there were no operations being done yet, while Vincent, he stated he will have to lay low on being a Tactical Operation's Specialist as of the moment, citing that he needed to take care of some 'matters.'

Erik, on the other hand, was left to care for the chateau. Since his battle with his family and Iopata had ended, he decided to make himself my personal bodyguard/master/lover - until such time we wed of course. As the President, he had appointed me as the Head of Public Affairs of the Club and by that, I meant the head of all fancy parties being held inside the chateau. Since the renovation of the President's Hall and the return of operations, invites, expression of interests, rents, and guests of the chateau had skyrocketed. My mother was more than happy to assist me through the Rosecraft Weddings and Events Company.

She told me the truth by the way, of how she first met Erik and how he asked for my hand in marriage in the middle of the busy California airport terminal. She was all thumbs up and giddy at the same time, demanding us immediately for many, many, many grandchildren and as a result, Erik seduced me into bed many, many, many times. A football team of Little Eriks and Little Daniellas roaming around the chateau gardens, that's what he told me. And yeah, I had to agree with that else he'd make me even sore than I am.

"Hey, show some teeth," I stated just as I nudged Erik in the ribs. His firm expression reminded me of how I will have a hard time teaching my Little Eriks on how to smile. Surely, they would inherit their father's rude and edgy side.

"Hmm, I'm showing it," he replied, looking down at me.

I twisted my lips playfully and narrowed my eyes. "Wider Mr. President."

He did, about a millimeter more.

"Wider," I added again, not content with how constipated it looked.

For a moment, he battled between giving in and spouting at me, but then he smiled so widely I had to blink a couple of times.

"Yes, that's better," I remarked, nodding my head, pleased.

But then his beaming smile turned into a grin in a heartbeat.

"Come here," he said and then pulled me close by the waist.

"Erik!" I exclaimed, putting my palms up against his chest.

Much to my distress and embarrassment, he launched himself down and kissed me. I didn't have time to push him away (nor do I want to in the first place) when he slipped a hot, wet tongue inside my mouth.

Naturally, I gave in and reciprocated. Our tongues dueled probably for just a few seconds yet it felt like we had been lip-locking for hours.

“Okay smile!” Somewhere in the front, the photographer shouted.

In response, Erik loosened his grip on me and stopped our kiss. I saw him smile a genuine wide smile to the photographer just as I showed mine in a blushing daze.

Five snaps followed all the while his arm was around my bare shoulder. When the photographer gestured his thumb up, I pulled myself a little and looked at Erik with a frown.

“Goodness, why did you do that?” I asked, feeling like we stole half of the wedding guests’ attention on us.

“I want to see you all flushed up in the picture,” was Erik’s simple remark.

What?!

Although feeling flustered about what he did, I instead gave him a smile and another nudge in his ribs. “Then, I believe you were successful Mr. President.”

He grinned at me and then leaned in to peck on my forehead.

“Hey, get a room you two,” complained Vincent who noticed our little bubble of teasing.

“Oh, we will Vincent,” I heard Erik say whilst hooking an arm around my waist. That just got me even redder.

“Don’t mind him, Vince. He is just too jealous of Suri and Amano now,” I stated, shaking my head and glancing briefly at the two who were again congratulated by their many well-wishers.

“Yes, come to think of it. When will be your wedding?” Vincent asked, looking back and forth on me and Erik.

“Don’t ask me,” I shrugged, “Ask him,” and pointed my eyes on my fiancé.

Both Vincent and I gave Erik an expectant face.

“What?” he stated, acting clueless.

Hmmm, as if he can fool me, I giggled at myself.

“Your wedding Prez, when is it?” Vincent inquired.

Erik looked at me first, giving me his appreciative, twinkling eyes and then back to Vincent. “As soon as possible once you start playing the violin again,” he answered swiftly, obtaining a quick blink from me.

“Ah yes! I haven’t heard you play it since that time in the balcony Vince,” I interjected.

Vincent blushed momentarily and directed his eyes down on the floor. “Don’t worry, it won’t be long,” he murmured. “I have...an inspiration now.”

“A woman perhaps?” Erik quickly hinted.

The latter didn’t show any sign of refusal at all that I had to arch my brows.

“More like it. Her...her name is Eren,” he answered, looking back at Erik.

“Like the Eren in your violin composition title?” I butted in, awed by this little but excellent piece of information. The name made me remember that time in the balcony where he played the violin like he was playing in front of a Goddess in the night sky. It was one of the best memories I had with him.

“Yes, Daniella. I’m surprised you remembered it.” Vincent smiled at me.

“Oh, of course, I would. As I said, it is a beautiful piece,” I smiled back with no malice at all.

“Then, I suggest you be quick Mr. VP,” Erik stated. “I don’t want any other violinist playing on mine and Daniella’s wedding aside from you.”

I nodded at this.

“Huh, you are inflating my lungs Prez,” Vincent proclaimed.

“Good luck on courting her Vince,” I said and then winked at him.

He smiled a lot wider this time. His eyes mellowed and warmth radiated from it. It was as if he was thinking of the lucky woman right then and there.

“Hey, Vicente! Come here!” called out Enrique suddenly, cutting our conversation. He stood at the bottom of the stairs with two women with him. One was the bridesmaid earlier while the other was a beautiful half-Asian, half-foreign woman who I have just seen.

“I should go there,” Vincent informed as he turned to us.

“Go ahead,” Erik answered with a nod. I shooed him off too by flipping my hand and giving him a cheeky grin. Not that I am acting like a matchmaker, but I have a big gut feeling this new woman with Enrique was the one for Vincent.

“Daniella.”

My attention on the said woman was abruptly cut off by Erik’s voice. I looked back at him and raised a brow, confused.

“Come with me.”

Leading the way, he held my right hand tightly and pulled me down the dais.

“Hmmm, we are not going to your room now, are we?” I teased, giving his delicious broad back a quick study.

He stopped just as we were at the base of the stairs and pulled me chest to chest.

“No, but that will be next after we go to the art gallery,” he stated with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“Art gallery?” I asked, ignoring the sexual insinuation in his words. “Why there?”

“There is something I want to show you.”

I narrowed my eyes at him and grinned. “Hmmm, I wonder what.”

Hand in hand, we trekked up the second floor east wing where the art gallery, Colores Imaginarios, was located. The place looked the same when I first entered some months ago. Nothing had changed at all. There were still frames after frames of paintings made by the Club members hung on every wall and dividers.

Silently, Erik led me to a space a few feet away from Vincent’s studio door. I gasped when I saw a painting that was hung on a white-gold wall. It was his creation, the one painting that he did in his entire life that looked like a cross between a pineapple and my face.

“Oh, Erik, you framed it!” I shouted, embracing him with all my might.

I heard his throaty chuckle then before answering, “Yes, I did and I asked Vincent to hang it here.”

“Then this would be your first ever art donation to this gallery?” I pressed my forehead on the crook of his neck and examined the painting again, smiling from ear to ear thinking of the fond memories it bestowed.

“Yes, it would,” he answered, holding me in place by the shoulder.

“Hmmm, Erik, why did you paint me like this by the way? Why a pineapple?”

Although I already knew the answer, I just had to ask again.

“I told you didn’t I?” His finger curled under my chin and lifted my face up. “Your attitude and the pineapple fruit are the same - prickly.”

I pouted at him. In response, he grazed a thumb on my bottom lip and smirked.

“But I painted you like this because I was very jealous of Enrique and Vincent that time,” he continued. “They had your attention. I hated it.”

This made my heart flutter.

“Hmmm, what are the odds, the President, jealous,” I teased.

His playful gaze turned stormy - filled with combined lust, desire, and love.

“I have always been jealous, Daniella. It is just that my rudeness covers it well. I loved you since the first time we met in the vineyard. I have never forgotten about you since then.”

“Oh, Erik...” I lifted my hands up and traced his jawline. He let me, but I felt his other hand press tighter on my shoulder, drawing me in even more.

“Then, we feel the same way,” I added, planting a chaste kiss on his jaw.

This didn’t seem to satisfy him because he swiftly swooped down and captured my mouth for a heady, soul-searching kiss.

Time and tide we have kissed and expressed our feelings for each other. Who would have known that a simple but dangerous collision in a French vineyard under an orange and violet dawn sky would yield to this kind of love. We may have undergone numerous battles during the process, but it was worth it in the end.

“Hey, remember you once asked me where I like to go for a vacation?” I stated once we regained our breathing.

Erik nodded and eyed me expectantly. “Yes, have you decided now?”

“Yup, I would like to go to France. In my family’s vineyard where we first met,” was my sure answer. I had thought of Hawaii, Coron, and the Bahamas, but I believe the vineyard would be my best choice ever.

Erik seemed to agree with this for he smiled and answered before devouring my mouth again, “Then we shall, my Sweet Daniella.”

The End.

Author’s Note: Thank you for reading, my dear readers. Join my Facebook Group, JMFelic Awesome Readers, for updates regarding my books. Take care! ^_^