

Post Chapter Seven - Belladonna

Phina was an ambitious fledgling. Belladonna had given her a few jobs since she had been turned, and she had eagerly accomplished them all. The vampire was quickly climbing the ranks, but Belladonna didn't put as much stock in that as she may have when she was younger. Fledglings looking to climb rank that quickly, often times, were not to be trusted. Bella had been one of those fledglings once, and had absolutely done abhorrent things in the name of service.

Sitting behind her desk, she stared at the woman now, her red hair thick and curly in an effort to appease to Bella's style. When Phina had first been turned, she had been blond and her hair had been in a bob. Bella wondered who her stylist was to take her to such a different change in a matter of a few moons.

"Are you pleased, m'lady?"

Bella looked down at the notes that the woman had filed with her. The other courtesans had not been pleased about having to write up their reports for Belladonna's jobs, but Phina had taken to it without question. If she kept this up, she was going to be promoted to one of her top women within the Pleasure District.

"Monsieur Contraria has plenty of demons in his closet," she murmured. "Does he trust you?"

"I believe he does, ma'am. He wants to marry me," Phina giggled. "Says he will take me away from this life."

Belladonna rolled her eyes. "They all say that, my dear. Do not believe a single thing that a silver tongued client says. Especially when their pockets are deep."

She scanned her eyes over the information that the girl had written down. It would come in handy later when they needed to blackmail the man. She didn't know what she would need to blackmail the man for, but Belladonna had never run her business by need. She always stayed three steps ahead, gathering information about everyone, and pulling it out as needed. Sometimes the dividends didn't pay off for years to come. But they always paid. Individuals that frequented the Pleasure District more than for the occasional itch were rarely ones that stayed out of trouble.

Setting aside the paper, she looked at Phina. "You've done well. Are you ready to take on more clients?"

Phina clapped her hands excitedly, bouncing in the chair. Her breasts were on the smaller side, but they jiggled just right. Belladonna could

appreciate a woman who worked with what they had. "I can take on two if you need me to."

"No need to spread yourself thin, dear," she said. "Let's start with one more." Reaching into her drawer, she pulled out a file. "I need you to—" but she cut off short. A sharp pain shot through her ribs, as if one of them broke and twisted in on herself. For a minute, she couldn't breathe. Her head swam and the breath, that she didn't need, was lost to her.

"M'lady?"

Belladonna held up a hand to stop Phina from coming any closer. The woman was hovering, staring at Bella with wide brown eyes, and looking equal parts worried and as if she was going to have the opportunity of a lifetime.

"I am fine," Belladonna said. "No Baronhood for you today."

Phina took a step back. "M'lady, I wasn't even thinking of—"

Bella sat up a little straighter, taking deep breaths. "You were. Just as I would have. There is no shame in it. But do understand that if you try anything, I will kill you."

"Yes, m'lady."

Something was wrong. She needed to get to her heart. Belladonna knew she shouldn't have allowed them to go out into the Outlands on their own. The place was a vast wasteland of grotesque opportunity and while Bella knew that Night could handle it, it was the fact that there were so many others willing and hungry to take advantage of even the slightest misstep.

"I'm afraid we are going to have to continue this conversation later," she told Phina.

"Are you going to find your lover?"

Bella's eyes twisted sharply to her. Apparently, she had not kept her personal life as quiet as she should have. "Courtesans do not love," she told her firmly. "Remember that when you think that you have someone. It is nothing more than a lie."

Phina averted her eyes. "Yes, m'lady."

Bella left her office, motioning to Gadora to escort Phina out. Meanwhile, she took the stairs down to the main level of the cathedral, her thoughts turned to love. She was a vampire. A courtesan. A woman of the night. She was not meant to love. It was a weakness that she never should have had. Someone for the enemy to use against her. Therefore, a liability. Clutching her side, she leaned against the wall for a minute, feeling dizzy.

“Love is weakness,” she whispered to herself, perhaps trying to convince herself of it. She didn’t love. She refused to.

And she was dying because of it.

The pain had returned. It was such a deep hunger that it consumed her at times. She had tried to quell it. An entire district had perished in her ravenous hunger. But there was nothing that sated her. Ash coated her tongue each time, and the life that was lost by her hands felt like nothing more than a used handkerchief. There used to be honor in taking a life. Reverence. It had been the strongest high she had ever felt. Now, it was simply just a nuisance.

She had of course tried different. Tried to eat animal. Drink others vampires. There were fledglings, flush and full, lining the walls of the cathedral and waiting to be picked by her. It had always been such a heady sensation, knowing that at any given moment, someone would give their life to hers for just the chance to nourish her. And in return, she would make them slip away while feeling so fucking good.

But even that had lost its luster.

She grit her teeth together, trying to gain control. The concave of her stomach was something fierce now. She didn’t know how much longer she had left. And when thinking of that, she knew that the time she had she didn’t want to spend looking through men’s illicit secrets or having other vampires grovel at her feet. She wanted to spend it with the only individual that meant anything to her.

Bella sighed. ‘I’m going to the fucking Outlands. This is ridiculous.’

Straightening, she sucked down the pain, pushing her hair over one shoulder. She was going to find Night. She was going to be by their side. And if she died in the process, then she would come back once again, better and stronger. The world didn’t know hunger yet and what it could do to a person.

But Bella did.