

Chapter 12 - Death by His Scent

Silently, they walked side by side along the hallways and stairs with Patricia following behind them. When they reached a ten-foot double door located on the second floor of the mansion, the Lord offered his elbow for her hand to slip into. Solene did so whilst trying to calm her pounding heartbeat. She wasn't really into parties, but she could hold herself when she was in one. All her anxiety stemmed from the fact that she'll be seeing all members of the Rantzen Clan as per Patricia. This party was not just a welcome party, but an initiation to officially include her into the Rantzen circle.

"Master Henri Rantzen of the Rantzen Clan with his fiancée, Miss Solene St. Fair, of the St. Fair Household," announced the Head Butler of the mansion, Norman. His chin was raised high and a proud smile crossed his face.

Henri and Solene stepped forward past the double doors, their heads held high, commanding attention. However, for Solene, she couldn't keep herself from gasping internally when she saw the area they were in. For the most part, it looked like any other hall with tables and chairs, chandeliers in every corner of the ceiling, and a dance floor. However, the extent of the guests was enough to drown out the available space of the hall. Solene knew the Rantzen Clan was big. She just didn't expect it to be this big.

Were all these guests really members of the family?

Henri loosened his arm from her grip and stepped forward, looking down the stairs where all the bodies have gathered, their attention all directed to him.

"To my family, a pleasant evening," Henri stated, bowing on a few elderly people in front of the line. "I extend my humble

thanks for attending this intimate gathering to finally welcome my fiancée, Solene St. Fair. Help me make her transition into our household comfortable and smooth."

He turned to her and tipped his head low, signaling her to step forward.

"Solene? Let them hear from you."

Solene held her breath for a second. This was a surprise. He certainly didn't inform her that she'd be talking in front of these people.

However, she was a flexible person. With a short nod, she neared him and stared down into the many awaiting eyes scrutinizing her.

"I won't deny it," she started, confidently letting out the first words that had come to her mind, "I consider this marriage arrangement...unusual, out of date and definitely not my will." She paused as she saw some spectators smother their chuckling. She didn't intend to make her words humorous, but she was happy it had that effect. "But thank you," she continued, "since these past few hours, I had been treated with nothing but luxury and kindness. I couldn't ask for more."

"She has fire. I like her," one elderly female commented loudly.

"As expected of the future Lady of the Household," another elderly female voiced out. Solene noticed her and was dumbstruck after realizing this was the woman she met when she was fourteen; the woman who basically created the tattoos to protect her from the accidents.

Her mouth gaped. She wanted to walk down the stairs and talk to her that instant, but the audience quickly erupted with a jubilant sound.

"Cheers to the union of the Rantzen and St. Fair Family!" Mr.

Reynold cried out somewhere in the crowd. Everybody vigorously nodded and clapped their hands and that went on for about a whole minute until their Lord stepped to the front again.

Henri held a hand up to silence them, and just as expected, the audience did within a millisecond. Solene was amazed at their swift obedience.

"The night is still young. Be merry. Drink. Eat. Celebrate."

With Patricia's help, champagne glasses were given to Henri and Solene. Solene gladly took it, raised it up to clink glasses with him, and then drank it straight up.

"Careful," Henri whispered, noticing her action, "I'd rather take you drunk and all to our wedding bed after our wedding and not now when you are still a Miss."

Her cheeks heated.

"Well, you said to be merry, drink, celebrate," she quipped. "Am I exempted in that order?"

"Not at all," he answered, an amused expression coloring his face. "Go ahead. You're free to do whatever you want."

But what he said as 'free to do anything she wanted', Solene took it literally. After some introductory talks with a couple of VIP members of the family and looking for the elderly woman who had become MIA, Solene decided to leave the hall and retreat to her chamber. Patricia intended to follow her but the latter requested to be left alone, wanting to have a quiet time inside her room.

Thirty minutes later, however, a visitor came to see her.

"I was hoping to get my first dance with you, but you left the party already," stated Henri as he appeared from the shadows of Solene's balcony.

Solene, startled, quickly turned around and gave him a confused glare.

'How?' her mind stressed. Was she that too preoccupied with watching the stars that she didn't notice him enter her bedroom?

"I...didn't see the need to stay an hour longer," she answered, scrutinizing him from head to foot. He wasn't in his dapper clothes anymore. In fact, he was wearing black yoga pants, a fitted black shirt and yes, another black robe. He was hopeless with the color.

In response, Henri nodded once and neared her, stopping only when he was a few feet away.

"Well, you were uncomfortable in the very beginning so I expected you'd likely leave early," he leaned against the marble balustrade and crossed his arms over his chest.

"You're pretty observant, Henri." Solene raised a brow. She caught a whiff of his scent again. It was teasing her sense of smell. Painstakingly, she controlled herself from biting her lip. This man was going to be her husband soon... Probably letting herself get acquainted with his smell would help her dilemma.

Henri nodded again and grinned. "Yes, I am. Very."

"I hope you're honest too. Can I ask you a question?" Solene shot back.

"I'll try my best to answer. Ask away."

"This arrangement of ours, why?" There, she finally found the right time to ask him again. "Since my father died, my mother spoke nothing other than I was already promised to the Rantzen Family. To their Lord. Well... to you. She kept reminding me of it. But, why?"

Henri stared at her for a moment, his lips pressed into a thin

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line. A tick on his brows appeared then, but it was so brief Solene could hardly read it as an expression of displeasure. Then, he straightened his spine and faced her squarely.

"This is a surprise. I actually expected you'd know already why you were betrothed to me," he stated, eyes hooded with an unreadable emotion.

She huffed and this time, she was the one who had her arms crossed.

"It appears my family had been keeping secrets from me. The question is why? Will you answer me then and enlighten me?"

She stared at him without blinking, showing just how serious she was, but Henri just shook his head, his eyes not a single hint of mirth.

"And take your family's right to break the news to you?" he questioned. "I think that's unwise. If they hadn't told you the truth then I see no reason to tell you too. Let them break it to you first and I'll fill in what's left."

He stepped forward and touched her face past the disappointment that marred it.

"I like this side of you though," the Lord stated. "You're still innocent. Fiery, but innocent. I'd love to keep it as is until your family's revelation."

"Should I take your words as a compliment?" Solene moved her head back and away from his touch. It wasn't really a sign that she detested his touch, but a natural reflex. No man had actually touched her that intimately.

Henri considered her words for a second. He glanced up at the full moon of the sky and then cracked up a knowing grin.

"You would realize it is a compliment when you finally open your eyes to your surroundings. Everything is not always as

they seem, my bride.”

Solene grinned back and scoffed.

“I’m not as innocent as you thought me to be. I studied Psychology with special consideration to Thanatology for a reason, Henri.”

“And what may that reason be, Solene?” he asked, sounding genuinely curious.

She was an honest woman, but on this occasion, she couldn’t tell him that seeing an otherworldly entity back as a child was the reason why she studied that special discipline.

“I won’t give you the satisfaction to know,” she dodged, giving him a smooth alibi instead. “You failed to enlighten me after all.” She walked towards her bedroom door, looking as if leaving but then she stopped right on the threshold, turned around and looked at him again.

“Let’s call it a night. I’m sure you’re tired too from the flight. Good night, Henri.”

It was obvious. She didn’t want their conversation continued, but instead of taking offense, Henri just walked towards the door, an upward tug on the corner of his lip evident.

When he stopped right on the threshold too, Solene’s heartbeat spiked up. She wasn’t quite sure what had made it, but she actually anticipated he’d give her a kiss goodnight.

He stood now inches away from her, too close for her comfort. As a reflex, she stepped back but then she steeled herself and considered, why does she need to be coy with him when he would become her husband soon? Everything was inevitable. Even a goddamned goodnight kiss.

Henri extended his arm and touched her cheek. He thumbed her cheekbones slowly, tenderly whilst they made eye contact.

Solene didn't want to blink, seeing the simple act of blinking would show she was intimidated. Plus, his gaze held her still. It was as if he had power over her that she couldn't quite understand.

"Unfortunately, I have an unending work waiting for me, so I can't say I'll be resting anytime soon, but I'll leave you to your rest, Solene." He pulled back whilst his stare turned deeper. "Have a good sleep, Little One," he added, gave her a parting smile and then left.

Solene remained silent as she watched him go. Weird of him to call her that, but the subconscious part of her told her she had heard that pet name in the past.

Oh yes, she did.

And it was particularly on that faithful night when her father died.