

Chapter 13 - Death by Mazes

The next day, Solene had just left the bathroom from a morning bath when the maid, Patricia, walked in and greeted her. She handed a pocket-sized notebook bound in a coil that was actually placed inside a silver tray and said, "From Master Henri, Milady Solene. He instructed Mrs. Su to give this to you on your second day of stay here, and so here it is."

With a raised brow, Solene took it and opened to check its contents. Flipping the pages, she found that this notebook was a planner. It had names of the months of the year with the month, October and November, particularly stacked with schedules. November was her birth month, while October was their wedding month, and if she wasn't mistaken, the Rantzen Master had clearly planned all her schedule from today down to the day after her birthday.

"This schedule is quite a lot to take in," was all she said to Patricia. She couldn't help but inwardly sigh. What a way for her to feel restricted so early in the morning.

"The Master has made that for you, Miss Solene," Patricia stated proudly. She didn't notice the dislike on Solene's face.

With the planner still on hand, Solene walked towards the vanity mirror and placed it on the desk.

"Tell me, Patricia," she started and turned towards her. "Is your Master always this...organized?" She had to use a subtle word. The maid was head-over-heels loyal to her Master after all.

"Yes, Miss," Patricia nodded and smiled as if it was good news. "His organization skills are quite superb and you'll find that the Rantzen Clan has flourished because of it."

"Oh, I see..." Solene sighed and looked down the floor. Guess the hope of bargaining her way out of the schedule went down the

drain in that instant. "How about his work? I take it his office is somewhere inside the house?"

"The Master is a busy man, Miss, he always goes to his office, and as weird as it sounds, it is located in his chamber. He stays there always, sometimes for days on end. His assistant, Sir Reynolds, does all the paperwork and meetings for him."

"That's workaholic of him to bring relaxation and work together in one room," Solene mused. "When did he become the Master of the House, Patricia?"

"If you want to know more about me, you should ask me directly instead," Henri voiced out just as he stepped inside Solene's bedroom.

Patricia immediately bent her head low in deference to him and excused herself out.

Solene was taken aback with his sudden entrance but nevertheless didn't mind. She picked up the planner and greeted him as casually as she could.

"Good morning, Henri."

"Good morning, Solene," he was quick to reply.

"I do want to know more about my future husband," she began whilst checking him out from head to foot. As usual, he looked incredibly dashing with his black ensemble and the leather glove covering his hands. "These past twelve years would have been a good way to learn more about you, but you basically didn't show yourself to me."

"What do you want to know?"

It was an unexpected answer coming from him, but Solene was happy to have heard it. She grinned and cast a sharp look at him.

"Let's have a fast talk then?" she offered, thinking now would be

a great time to dig up his shit. Whatever it was he was hiding.

"I have a better idea," Henri grinned back. He neared the French glass door of her room and looked at the outside sunny environment. "You can ask me anything during the tour of the estate, but only when you see this symbol."

He drew the number zero on the glass pane with a single line running across it all the while Solene silently stared.

"Theta? The Greek symbol for death?" she stated. As a student studying Thanatology, she could recognize that symbol everywhere.

"It's the Rantzen Family's crest and seal," Henri nodded, pleased with her knowledge.

Solene bit her lower lip and placed her arms akimbo. His offer wasn't what she had planned, but she'll have to take it. It was a good start.

"Okay, I'm in," she stated.

Henri guided her out of the room, choosing to tour her first on the third floor, west wing, where they already were. Together with Solene's room were a few more bedrooms, unoccupied it seems, and an open receiving area where a refreshment bar was stationed.

Down the hall, past the bar, was another hallway leading up to a dead-end, or so it would seem. Henri pointed to a ten-foot double door made of carved mahogany.

"My chamber," he said whilst looking at Solene.

The latter glanced at it and continued with her impassive expression. It was a feat really, especially after her insides tickled, knowing now where her husband-to-be slept. She was expected to share his bed after all in the very near future.

"How old are you?" she then asked after seeing the theta carved

right on top of the Master's doorway.

Henri, expecting this, smirked at her.

"I'm...twenty-nine." There was certainly a pause there, but Solene didn't mind it much. She studied his face; the young, handsome and alluring look of his features quite fitting for his age, but she also couldn't pass out a thought that he was giving off a vibe of a seasoned man who had seen too much of the world.

"Let's move on," he urged, deciding to take his private elevator instead to go down the second floor. Solene followed him and during the elevator ride, none of them opened up a topic. None cared to comment on the mirror walls surrounding them or the sweet, enthralling violin music playing softly on the speaker.

Solene kept herself silent, but God knows how her nostrils flared up again at the wonderful scent her husband-to-be was emitting. She couldn't help but lean a little to bask more on the aroma, to actually get lost in it, to savor...

"Don't worry, you'll have all the time you want when we're married," Henri suddenly stated.

Pulled out of her trance, Solene cast a look at his reflection. He was smirking at her, clearly enjoying the vulnerability she was showing and this made her blush furiously. "I didn't mean to do it."

"I preferred you rather mean it, my bride," he boomeranged.

Her lashes fluttered, taken aback with his bluntness. She didn't know what to reply, but luckily, she didn't need to for the elevator pinged and the door opened on the second floor of the mansion.

"Ladies first," Henri motioned.

Solene stepped out with her head held high, but deep down all

sorts of emotions battled inside: confusion, embarrassment, and curiosity. The last one was the most significant. She was truly curious about this man and with that, she couldn't wait to find another Rantzen crest on the wall.

Twenty minutes later, they were outside the mansion, on the estate's lush front garden. To Solene's surprise, she hadn't seen the family crest on the rooms they went earlier. The grand hall and the dining area would have been great places to put the crest, but much to her disappointment, it was absent. Another thing, she expected to see it on the entrance to the main foyer of the house, yet there was none when she checked it.

She began to suspect something wasn't right. She itched to call his attention but decided to defer it. The man seemed to look like he was enjoying acting like her tour guide. It wouldn't be right to ruin the moment.

They entered a garden maze that had vertical hedges taller than them, made with flowering but thorny shrubs. Solene wasn't concerned with this. She had always wanted to be in a maze since she saw the garden labyrinth in Villa Pisani in Venice featured on television.

Because of her enthusiasm, instead of Henri guiding her, she decided to try the maze all by herself. She walked and walked with Henri trailing behind, enjoying her burst of curiosity on every dead end they encounter.

"Aren't you going to help me?" Solene asked when she realized she was getting lost.

Henri shrugged his shoulders. "You're almost there. Don't give up. I could have led you directly to the center earlier, but you decided to change our route. I won't blame you though. I was having fun."

Her eyelids fluttered upon hearing his words. She was having fun too almost to the point of forgetting about the family crest, but of course, she couldn't say that out in the open.

"Okay," she muttered, "I could use some clue though."

Henri chuckled. "Try that route." He cocked his head to the right and signaled to an opening that looked identical to the others, but the way he confidently looked at her told her this was the right route to take.

Solene smiled widely. "Thanks." She hurriedly walked there, leaving Henri to once again follow behind her.

Once Solene rounded to a corner, she was welcomed by an opening and beyond the opening was a spacious cobblestoned ground. Her attention was directly caught at a megalithic structure of none other than the theta made in black Carrara marble, functioning as a fountain in the center of the grounds. Surrounding it was another symbol used as a catch basin for the water sprinkling down. This symbol was the triskelion, a Celtic symbol for eternity. For creation, preservation, and destruction. For life, death, and rebirth.

Solene found this odd, but quite interesting. She turned to her groom with a proud grin and quickly stated, "Here's your family crest. I get to ask another question again."

Henri nodded once, urging her on.

"When is your birthday?"

"I have two birthdays, Solene, one is June 1, 1987."

"And the other?" she speedily asked, furrowing her brows. How could he say he had two birthdays? What does he mean by that?

"Hmmm, you will have to wait until you see another family crest," he stated whilst stepping forward and standing beside

her. He watched the flow of the water from the theta's top, acting as if he was clueless of the laser vision Solene was giving him.

"But I only saw two crests in our entire tour of the estate," she complained.

"That's because there are only two crests inside the estate, my bride," he answered, still looking at the water flow.

Solene bit the inside of her cheek and arched a brow. "How will I ask more questions about you if there's only two?"

"Then, you should have used your two questions wisely."

"Huh! How clever you are. You never wanted me to know more about you from the very start."

Hearing that, Henri looked at her with depth.

"No, Solene," he replied, moving his face closer to her. "I see no use asking me questions when you could learn more about me yourself. You are a bibliophile. I am an open book. You can read me anytime, any day. You have forever as my wife to do that. You could even start now."

Solene scoffed.

"If you're a book then you must have the thickest cover ever under lock and key."

Henri carefully studied her, especially the displeased wrinkle on her face. "What makes you say that?"

She stepped backward, creating a bit of distance between them. "You are full of mystery, Henri. It's hard to read you."

A little pleased rumble of his throat was heard before he replied again. "Hmm, you're already learning, Solene. But please, not too fast. Like I said last night, I want to savor this innocence of yours while I still can."

Erasing their distance again, he reached for her right hand and brought it up to his mouth. His lower lip brushed the back of her hand first, then his full lips made complete contact with her skin, effectively planting a chaste kiss.

Solene, watching this unfold, felt her body suddenly heat up. The feel of his lips on her skin was more than desirable. It was electric. It was enlightening. Fully reminding her that she was a woman not at all immune to a man's advances. Especially his. Was it because of the fact that she knew already he'd become her husband? Or was it simply because he was a fine man with enough influence and commanding presence to make her feel all sorts of good?

"You...you sound pretty messed up to me," was all she could say to lighten the moment. She was undecided about whether to pull her hand away or let it stay cocooned with his surprisingly comfortable gloved hand. Luckily, Henri saw her predicament. He withdrew just in time the butler, Norman, appeared from the exit portal and called out their attention.

"Excuse me, My Lord, Madame Solene's wedding team is here," he informed whilst bowing his head low.

Solene cast Henri a look and stated, "My wedding team? What for? The wedding is in two days from now. I thought you already took care of everything?"

Henri shook his head.

"I may have researched about you, Solene, but I can't possibly know everything, your dream wedding for example. You'll have to put your own take on what you want in our wedding," he said most calmly. "The sky's the limit."

Once again, her eyelids fluttered, feeling too blessed with his generosity. "This is quite thoughtful of you Henri," she remarked. Probably, if it were another woman, she may have

thought that she just hit the jackpot, but for Solene, this was another inconvenience. If she was truly honest with herself, her dream wedding would look simple, but with all her beloved family and friends gathering and cheering for her and her groom. There would be no paparazzi, no unknown faces inside the church, no bodyguards even – well, at least that’s what she expected in a wedding with a Rantzen Lord.

“Anything for my bride,” Henri answered. “You go ahead and have fun.”

With this encouragement, Solene left, taking the same route they had earlier with him staring at her long, shiny platinum hair glinting against the morning sun.