

## Chapter 16 - Death by Tattoos

"You..." Solene's eyes rounded and her mouth hang low when she saw her visitor enter. The old woman was right. She indeed knew her from way, way back when she was fourteen years old. This was the woman who created the tattoos and helped her survive the accidents. This was her grandmother's so-called friend from a faraway country.

And now that she thought about it, did they mean Portugal that time?

Dressed in an attire akin to an office suit, the old woman exchanged stares with Solene. Her lip was tipped upward, showing a little bit of friendliness and a little bit of reservation. She had an air of sophistication and elegance, but Solene could also sense strictness from her just like before.

"You were a teenager back then when we first met," the old woman said, carefully nearing her in fluid strides.

"Are you part of the Rantzen Family?" Solene asked, moving closer to the foot of the bed.

"I am one of the elders, yes. I'm Lady Ursula Rantzen-Leopolds. My husband died five years ago so I am now a widow. I chose to return and live here to supervise the...new recruits."

Solene noticed the subtle pause, but she ignored it, choosing instead to ask:

"What is my grandmother's relationship to you?"

"We are good friends. She used to work in this household you know."

"My grandmother?" Her hands clenched.

"Yes, if I remember correctly, she was the head governess in this household thirty years ago," Lady Ursula stated with ease.

She didn't think it was a big secret worth keeping.

"She...never mentioned that," Solene remarked quietly. Her eyes lingered on the floor, trying to remember if there was a time her grandmother Riza talked about her younger years. There was none.

"May I see the tattoos, future Head Mistress of the Household?" Lady Ursula pulled her out of her musings. She actually used an unusual title to call her and that made Solene uncomfortable.

"Please, just call me Solene," she requested.

Trusting the old woman already, she shoved her robe to the side and lifted her gown up to show the left flank tattoo. Despite both of them females, a little blush crept up her cheeks, feeling uncomfortable showing her skin and the lacy maroon boyshort she wore.

"It isn't as clear as to when you first created it," Solene stated while Lady Ursula stared.

"I already anticipated this would happen," the latter replied. She neared Solene and gently touched the edges of the black wings. "And the second tattoo? Is it the same?" she continued.

"Yes," Solene nodded, knowing already what she had to do.

"Spread your legs," the old woman ordered as she watched the former sit at the edge of the bed. Once this was done, she knelt on the floor in front of her and began to examine the ankh.

It was an awkward position, yes, but Solene was used to it already. They did this same position back then when the tattoos were first created.

"It has always bothered me since the day you drew the tattoos," Solene muttered as she watched the ankh nestled firmly on her inner leg. "Is there a reason why you specifically chose these images?"

Lady Ursula nodded.

"Yes, there is."

"What do these images mean, Madame?" Solene asked with bated breath.

"They are symbols owned by The Deliverer."

"The Deliverer?"

Lady Ursula glanced at her and gave her a proud smile. "Also called, Master Grim Reaper. The Angel of Death. Whichever suits your fancy. Or you may accurately refer to him as the...Demon of Death."

Solene didn't have the intention to, but gulped hard she did and her chest tightened after hearing this information. Based on her past experience, she knew better than to think of the grim reaper as just a fictional character in books. She knew this entity was real. She literally saw it stand next to her father as he lay bloody on the grassy ground and fighting for his life.

God knows how much she disliked the grim reaper—that man especially with the dark blue hair and piercing reddish-green eyes.

How ironic it was that she needed its power to keep her safe.

"The accidents that had befallen you since you were young could have killed you," Lady Ursula went on, choosing to trace the edges of the ankh. "It would only be fitting to offer your body to the Demon of Death himself."

Solene hoped that the old woman was speaking in metaphors, but she was aware she wasn't. Judging from Lady Ursula's expression, there was a high possibility she had seen that same entity too.

"What if I do not want its protection?" Solene stated, her voice filled with conviction. "What if I want to erase these tattoos for

good?"

She didn't like the idea of relying on the grim reaper's powers to keep her safe from harm. She wanted to avenge her father's death and to rely on the tattoo's protection would only undermine that purpose. She wanted them gone. Erased. Destroyed. Out of her skin. Poof.

Lady Ursula chuckled in response. "Darling, you don't need to erase them. As you can see, they are already disappearing. What you should concern yourself is how you can survive without the tattoos."

Solene was taken aback for the second time. The old woman had a point.

"I will survive," she answered without hesitation. "Maybe this is the reason why my family wanted me wedded to the Rantzen Family...to...to their Master specifically. I may not know yet what you guys do—if your family is a cult, or the mafia, or a family who uses black magic—but I know, Henri will protect me."

Lady Ursula smiled widely this time. "You catch on pretty quick. I like you. You're no dumb woman."

Solene hissed. "I only put two and two together, but seriously, could you give me a clue as to your family's—"

Lady Ursula suddenly cut her off with a raise of a hand. She lowered her eyes on the floor, then angled her head to the side as if she was looking for something. It bewildered Solene for a moment.

"Don't just stand there, Henri. Come closer if you want to see the state of your future wife," then Lady Ursula voiced out.

Solene's heartbeat suddenly quickened and her eyelids fluttered fast. Did she mean her groom was somewhere around the room?!

In haste, she scanned the whole area until her eyes rested on the door towards the balcony. It was left ajar and staring past it, she saw a shadow move.

Henri stepped inside to show himself—the process of which seemed surreal for Solene as he actually looked like he was one with the darkness with the black cotton robe he wore paired with dark loose pants.

“He...Hen...ri...” she muttered. Her cheeks quickly reddened at the sight of him shirtless. It was the first time she had seen him like this—or any man for that matter—and it affected her so. The rigidity of his abdomen, his slender waist, the compactness of his muscles, the V dip...

She swallowed hard and focused on more pressing matters.

There he goes again, suddenly appearing without prior notice. What was he doing outside my balcony and how did he get there in the first place? And why was he shirtless for Heaven's sake?

But, her mind couldn't get a good grip on the questions as his continuous stare distracted her. She was in a provocative position after all and she ultimately felt embarrassed.

On instinct, she moved her legs slightly to cover herself, but then Lady Ursula admonished her.

“Spread your legs wider, Solene, I am not done yet.”

Solene bit the inside of her cheek. She glanced at Henri again and found that he was still staring at her—or more specifically at the two tattoos on her skin. She noticed a slight grin form his lips, but it was so brief she couldn't put any meaning to it.

Her body heated up. Her skin felt as if it was burning under his gaze, but all she could do was to allow Lady Ursula to continue whatever she was doing.

"It seems the incantations I placed in both tattoos are just enough to make it through to the wedding," the old woman finally stated after a few minutes of silence. She stood up and faced Henri with a grave expression. "Beyond that day, it will be your duty."

Henri scoffed. "It has always been my duty, Ursula," he said, nearing her. "I gave you the incantations haven't I?"

Solene's brows furrowed. What were they talking about?

When she realized she was still in an embarrassing position, she quickly arranged herself and righted her gown and robe to the right position.

Lady Ursula glanced at Solene with a spreading smile.

"Of course, you did," she answered and then bent her head low. "I'll leave you two to 'catch up.' I'm sure your bride has a lot of questions."

Henri and Solene stared as Lady Ursula exited the bedroom. When the old woman was fully out of her chamber, it was Solene who broke the tense silence first.

"I do have a lot of questions, but I know you won't answer me still."

"Patience is a virtue, Solene," he answered, looking down on her as she continued to sit on the bed. "Mind if I look at your tattoos up close?"

Solene was definitely taken aback. "What...uh...I don't think..." she paused and looked down on the floor trying to quickly weigh the situation. "Okay, fine, but be quick with it," she replied after realizing she didn't need to act coy in front of him.

She lifted her gown again to show the black wings and slightly shifted her left leg to the side to show the ankh.

Henri, like Lady Ursula, knelt in front of her, but this time, Solene

felt a new set of emotions blossoming inside her. It wasn't awkwardness and embarrassment this time. It was more of excitement and arousal, and these two were so tangible and raw, it made her whole body burn stronger than earlier. She had to divert her eyes away from him and concentrate on the soft glow of her bedroom lamp just to keep her composure intact.

Henri traced the edges of the wings slowly and gently. He noticed her tremble, but he knew it wasn't because of fear. With a slow smile, he allowed his fingers to linger on her skin for a few seconds until he withdrew and gave out a satisfied hum.

"The symbols look good on your skin, Solene," he stated, his voice carrying a soothing effect on her ears.

Solene managed to keep herself alert.

"If it wasn't for the purpose of protecting me, I would have gotten them erased," she answered, still not looking at him.

Henri glanced up and tipped his head to the side.

"Why would you think that?" he asked.

"I am not fond of desecrating my body over tattoos, Henri." Solene righted her dress again and sensibly closed her legs.

But Henri, seeing this, quickly stopped her. He held both of her knees apart, pressed his body against hers and then reached up to cup her face.

"They are not just tattoos, my bride, and they don't only serve to protect you. They also serve as a proof and a reminder."

"A proof and a reminder?" Her brow arched. Reading Henri's body language, Solene expected he was going to kiss her. It would be sensible enough to try and stop him but she didn't have the plan to. She wanted to taste his lips again.

Henri smirked, pleased of her openness. "A proof and a reminder that you are mine," he said and in a heartbeat, covered

her mouth with his.