

Chapter 20 - Death by Eating

Solene was led inside the Master's chamber that evening by Norman and Patricia. The entire time she traipsed the hallway, her thoughts swam to the idea that not only was she about to have a dinner date with Henri, but she will be entering his room once again.

The very room where she woke up this morning and the very room she will be sleeping tonight.

This was good practice for her future married life with him, she thought, but still, that didn't mean her heart wasn't pounding like crazy, especially when thinking about their intimate session in her room. It was highly likely it would happen again in the very near future.

Once Norman opened the double doors, she entered and gaped. Truly, the Master's room was a house of its own. Apart from a cooking area, everything was present: the receiving space, study, dining area, and the bedroom. Solene wasn't able to take note of these sections earlier this morning as she left in haste.

Norman guided Solene past the receiving area to another section of the room: a balcony garden and this was located behind tinted French double doors. He stood facing it and lowered his head.

"My Lord, Lady Solene is here," he informed. After opening the doors, he gestured for her to enter. She did so after a single nod.

Once inside, Solene found the place to be arresting. The balcony was of a decent size enough to house a number of plants specifically shrubs and vines. Overhead, thick wood beams with grapevines served as roof. There were grapes visible hanging loosely easy for her to pick and the fruits were a dark red to black color.

A few paces away, she noticed a table set-up and found that her groom was already in his seat, coolly drinking wine. His overall aura was laid-back, but his gaze was devouring her.

Henri stood up with the tip of his mouth curled upward and neared her.

"You look beautiful, Solene," he stated whilst he took her right hand. "This shade looks good on you."

Solene's breath paused when his lips touched the back of her hand. The

black cocktail dress she wore seemed to catch his attention—something she expected when she chose the dress earlier. It wasn't revealing, but it had a good dip in the neckline enough to expose a bit of her cleavage.

"I should say the same to you, Henri. You really love black, don't you?" she stated, unashamedly checking him out from head to foot.

The man was damn wearing a slick tuxedo that was partly unkempt in a way. He didn't add a bow tie and he left his black shirt unbuttoned down to the second button. This created an effect that made Solene's belly tingle. He didn't use his signature gloves this time and that was good. She would love to feel his skin if they were to hold hands—not that she expected them to.

"It is the only color I am accustomed to," Henri answered.

Solene peeled her eyes away from him and redirected it to the table near them.

"This is a nice set-up you have going here," she pointed out, looking particularly at the intricate candelabra at the center of the table and the short-stemmed red tulips that circled it. She also directed her attention at the beautiful pinkish moon above them and mentally smiled.

"Yes," Henri hummed. He walked past her and went to pull out a chair for her. "A dinner date with you would be best under the moon. Those beautiful locks of yours and your eyes would glow. It's magic to me," he added.

Solene claimed her seat and just as she sat, Henri caressed her hair. She stiffened for a moment and grabbed the armrest. Tipping her head up, their eyes locked suddenly. Solene found it hard to breathe all of a sudden and this was all because his fingers wandered into her neck where his freshly created hickey lay.

"Are...you always this poetic?" she hastily recollected herself. "Not long ago you were throwing rude comments at me in the library and the cafe."

Henri flashed a secretive grin and went back to his chair.

"My personality is interchangeable, Solene," he started, again in his laid-back position. "I could be poetic now, but cruel the next. I could become harsh, silent, and cold. I could do gentle and I could also do romantic. I could be this now, but that the next, and I could also be both at the same

time. I am a man of different flaws and strengths, Solene. A pandora box all for you to find out."

She chewed his words and considered the meaning behind them. It was a riddle, a damn grand one, but it was also the answer all at the same time.

"You sound like you have a dual personality," she pointed out.

The air around them was briefly filled with Henri's chuckle. "Hypothetically speaking, would that frighten you then?" he asked, the way he looked at her made Solene believe that this wasn't a hypothetical question at all, but to what extent? She couldn't be sure.

"Depends if this cruelty of yours hurt me," she stated frankly.

"Never would I hurt you," swiftly, he answered. Then, he leaned forward onto the table and reached out for her hand. "I am anything but, Solene, especially when it comes to you. This marriage of ours will only be filled with pleasure. You may be wedded to me for a different reason, but I'm going to make sure you get what you rightfully deserve as my wife."

His more-than-honest words created warmth in the pit of her stomach. Could she trust him with these words as basis? She knew she could, but only time will tell if he stays true to his promise.

"Tha...nk you, Henri. That's very reassuring to hear," she muttered. "All this time, I always ask myself if marrying a complete stranger would be a good decision."

Her hand that Henri held curled up to cocoon his fingers.

"I guess, it's safe to say it is now."

"You are an intelligent woman. You could always back out on the agreement, so why didn't you?" Henri asked, relishing the feel of her hand interacting with his.

"I love my father and I respect his decision," Solene answered. "I want...to keep his promise to your family even if it cost me my freedom."

"Very commendable of you." Henri's smile widened.

"I am just happy you were not what I thought you to be," she went on. Their fingers now intertwining made her nerve endings spark like crazy.

"Hm? Care to expound on that?" his brows furrowed.

Solene bit her inner lip first, lowered her eyes, and then stated, "I secretly

wished my groom wouldn't be an old man."

Henri's hold on her hand tightened. Her confession could have made him laugh, but he knew better. "Oh Solene, you don't know what you are talking about," he spilled with double meaning in his words.

"What do you mean?" she quickly asked, knitting her brows. Her groom had been dropping words on her that she could only consider as unusual. She wanted this cleared, clarified, explained, but she knew she had to stay patient still.

Henri looked at her with depth, silently pointing out that fact. When Norman and Patricia arrived with a trolley in tow full of food, he withdrew his hands from hers and returned to his laid-back position.

Silence between them reigned until the two servants finished laying the courses and left the balcony.

"Let's start eating shall we?" Henri told her.

Solene took a gulp of air and gave him a solemn look.

"Henri, I take it you don't want to spill all your shit now, but please, when we're wed, be as truthful to me as possible," she expressed.

Henri picked up his dinner knife and stared at it with gravity.

"I'll indulge you when your eyes fully open, Solene. Worry not," was his answer.

Solene cleared her throat and straightened her spine.

"Right, I'll take that as a promise."

Their dinner came to be peaceful all throughout, but Solene sensed the thick barrier between them. This wasn't what she thought of as a romantic dinner date but then again, her husband-to-be was a man full of reservations and surprises.

And damn secrets.

A book for her to read; a Pandora box for her to discover—that's what he said. And this was a challenge she was happy to accept.

"How are the wedding preparations going?" Henri asked after gulping the last of his wine.

Solene, whilst staring at her now-empty plate, recollected the final

changes earlier this morning with Joyce and Armand and answered, "Smoothly I should say."

"Excellent. And the training?"

"Better than expected," she voiced out. Though she was aware Anklet was going easy on her, she still thought their spar earlier taught her better self-defense techniques.

"Tell me, Henri, was the hostage incident yesterday the reason why you want me to learn how to fight?" she asked, curious as to his answer.

"Partly, yes," he replied, "and a preparation for the what-ifs." The spark in his eyes dialed down, turning to what Solene thought as anger. "This world is full of danger, Solene. Both seen and unseen. Sooner or later, you'll face with the decision to fight and defend yourself."

"Huh," she gave out a short laugh. "Are you trying to scare me, Henri?"

He leaned forward again and held her gaze. "No, my bride. I'm just conditioning you. In the very rare event that I can't be present to save you."

"You are mafia, aren't you? Or you have a family that undergoes illegal transactions with bad people?" Solene exclaimed. This time, a burst of fear, anxiety of the unknown, and anger of her being clueless gripped her. "I can defend myself when needed, but I can't in my conscience step foot in a lifelong pact when my groom and his family are 'that' kind of people."

"Solene, I'm going to be honest with you," Henri speared her with his intense gaze, "I'm not mafia, but I certainly do transactions with different people both good and bad. However, the dangers this work entails equals 'nothing' to the danger you are already bringing to me and to the Rantzen Clan."

"Are you talking about my ability to attract accidents?" she quickly pointed out. Might as well get it out in the open.

"Accident' is only a relative term, my bride," he simply stated. "Tomorrow, when your family explains everything, you'll see a wider definition to it."

He stood up and faced the balustrade. With this, Solene saw only his profile but she could definitely see some sort of twisted excitement in his eyes.

"Of course, that is not to say that I can't handle these 'dangers' you mentioned. I welcome them wholeheartedly and in return, I get you."