

Chapter 22 - Death by Truth

Meridith handed her a wrapped box while Solene sat in her receiving room's couch. She gave her mother a questioning look and asked, "What's this, mom?"

"Open it, Solene, and you'll see," she simply stated.

Furrowing her brows, Solene unwrapped the box and found its content to be rather surprising.

"This is father's book," she muttered and glanced at her mother in awe.

"Yes," Meridith nodded just as she looked at Riza.

"That book is called the Book of Death, Solene," the older woman stated.

"But your father prefers to call it a grimoire," Meridith added. "It is time I give it to you."

"Is this a wedding present mom?" was Solene's question. She remembered holding this book back when she was still six. She found it on the last day of her father's wake and though her juvenile mind couldn't understand it yet, she easily felt a connection to it.

Meridith slowly shook her head and sighed. "No, Solene. I am giving this to you because it is the right time for you to keep it and safeguard it."

"Grimoires..." Solene uttered whilst checking the book's front and back covers which consisted of zero letters or words, just weird markings that her study of Thanatology couldn't decipher yet. "What I know about it in my studies is that it possesses spells of different kinds. Spells of creation, death, and life. How to summon a demon. How to vanquish one. How to become its master and more..."

"That is true," Meridith verified. "Your father is a conjurer. The best in our world and in the spirit realm."

"Spirit realm..." Solene uttered again, trying to process this information calmly. "You never failed to tell me that this realm is real, yet you kept the truth about father from me since his death."

"It is a must, Solene. Your father and I wanted you to live normally," Meridith explained.

This time, that simple word triggered Solene's anger.

"Normal?" she pointed out, her voice a decibel higher. "There is nothing normal about our family. Everything revolved around death, its principles and beliefs. I took Thanatology as a special course for crying out loud! I have an ankh tattoo on my leg! The distance between me and my grave is this thin with all the accidents I had been having!" She pressed her index and thumb together trying to show her point. The distance was only a hairsbreadth away, something that she was truly worried about.

Her face heated up. She wanted to cry; her pent up disappointment, fear and sadness almost in the brink of exploding, but she held her tears back. She couldn't break down now. Not in front of her family at least.

"Oh, Solene..." Meridith knelt in front of her and sandwiched her daughter's hands with hers, "we feel your hardships too. You are not alone."

Solene bit back a sob and stared sharply at the grimoire now resting on her lap.

"Tell me about the Rantzen Family and why did father betrothed me to their so-called Master?"

Meridith nodded. She opened her mouth to speak but was quickly cut off by Riza.

"Meridith," the old woman stepped closer and gave her a solemn look, "I'll take it from here."

Solene watched as her mother sat next to her and directed her attention at Riza. Her grandmother on the other hand seemed to summon her courage by taking a deep breath. Solene couldn't help but knit her brows.

"My name is Ophelia dela Forte, sister of Marius dela Forte, the governor of Madrid, Spain," Riza started. "As you already know, I worked as the governess of the Rantzen Family in the past before I was sent to the St. Fair family to take care of you."

Solene's brows knotted harder at the gravity of the information.

"Your real grandmother, Riza St. Fair, had since died due to stroke when she was thirty-five, Sweetie," Solene's grandfather announced, choosing now to break his silence. He sat adjacent her, nearest to the fireplace that housed angry red embers. "Ms. Ophelia posed as her ever since," he added with caution.

"I apologize for the deception, my dear," Ophelia voiced out and joined her

on the couch. "In truth, I never saw you as my charge. I saw you as my true granddaughter."

Solene continued to process the information. True, she wanted to shout at them for deceiving her all this time, but she also understood the possible reason why they had to do it.

"Were you sent to protect me because of the accidents?" she asked.

Ophelia awarded her a small smile.

"I was sent to guide you under the family's order. To see to your needs as you grow. Ensure that the future Mistress of the Rantzen House gets the best in her growing years. But part of my job was also to oversee your safety. That's why when the accidents became dangerous enough to threaten your life, I had to enlist the help of the family."

"And Lady Ursula came," Solene filled in for her.

"Yes," Ophelia nodded.

Judging from the year that happened, Solene figured Henri must have been in his twenties, probably still training to be the Master of the clan. It was still a mystery why he didn't show himself that time, but she was certain he was aware of her condition if his words the other day was proof enough.

'It has always been my duty, Ursula. I gave you the incantations, haven't I?' were his exact words.

What he meant by that, she didn't know, but she made a mental note to ask him about it and this time, she expected he'd give her an answer.

"The accidents that you experienced, my dear, were not just accidents," Ophelia continued. "They were caused by demons and spectrals which wanted you dead."

Demons... Spectrals... Ghosts...

She knew they were real, but just didn't understand why they wanted her dead.

"Why?" she voiced out, her brows furrowing further.

"You are your father's daughter," Ophelia answered grimly. "You inherited his abilities as a conjurer. You possess powers of creation, life, and death with the help of that grimoire. Demons and other entities are after you for

that reason, Solene. They wanted you dead. Your body will be useful to them to cross over to the human world. Alternatively, you can also give them life with the help of the grimoire, summon them and transfer their souls to a human vessel."

Solene remained silent as she shot the book a hard look. This was her father's memento. This was a part of him. She would cherish it for the rest of her life, but wouldn't look at it the same way ever again.

"This is exactly why your father chose to marry you into the Rantzen Clan," Ophelia went on. "He didn't specifically request a Rantzen heir to marry you, but Master Henri took this promise seriously and desired to marry you."

Solene was taken aback by this revelation. Somehow, she could now piece together his blunt words in the past: 'In return, I get you.' He wasn't actually bluffing that time and somehow, this moved her heart.

"The Rantzen Clan...is a unique family, my dear. Their main purpose of living is to assist the spiritual realm in collecting souls mainly from dead humans. They train talented people into becoming Soul Collectors...or Grim Reapers in order to fulfill this purpose. They battle with demons too and exorcise them when necessary. To put it simply, they are the only family that can keep you safe and protected from these entities that had plagued you since Jacob died. He knew right from the start you would be like him. He knew you were special."

Meridith held Solene's right hand and squeezed it. She gave her a gentle smile and Solene was sensitive enough to reciprocate it.

"I hope you understand now why we had to do this, Solene," Meridith continued. "Marriage is sacred. Marriage should be between two people in love. This is a lifelong commitment and there is no escaping it unless one of you dies. I was against the idea ever since your father mentioned it to me. But know this, Sweetie, you wouldn't need to undergo this marriage if only we had another way to save you."

"Thank you...for telling me all of these things mom, grandma, grandpa," Solene muttered as softly as she could, "What a magnitude of truth indeed..." She clenched her jaw, rerouted her gaze on the book, and said, "But I...I need a moment. I need to process this. Please, ex...excuse me."

Cradling the book against her chest, she hurriedly went out of her room

and walked away with no destination in mind. She just wanted some distance where her family couldn't easily see her cry.