

Chapter 24 - Death by Walking Down the Aisle

For Solene, everything came in a rush the next morning. First, she was awakened by Meridith and Patricia with silly smiles on their faces and stacks of boxes behind them obviously full of her wedding outfit. This made Solene blush and remember that this was the day she was getting married.

Second, after a short, peaceful bath, she was pulled quickly by Armand's team to do the hair and make-up. Solene was silent the whole time, only answering and smiling whenever it was necessary. She recalled her talk with Henri last night and the parting words he gave her before she went back to her room with the book.

"I'll make sure you won't regret marrying me, Solene."

She was more than certain he wasn't bluffing at all when he said that. He had been doing an excellent job as her betrothed since the very beginning and so, surely, as her husband soon he would do even better.

Third and the last of all, Armand's team assisted her as she wore the wedding gown. She didn't really touch this subject back when they were preparing. She already had an inkling this was one of the specific details a family like the Rantzens would ascertain beforehand. After all, it was expected the image of their bride mirrored their high-caliber reputation.

However, when her mother mentioned that she and Riza contributed to the bride's wedding gown design, Solene felt teary-eyed. At least this time, she could walk down the aisle whilst feeling one with the dress.

Basically, it screamed her classic tastes: ivory white satin fabric, long-sleeved, mermaid style with only two meters of train, and a lace veil with elegant swirls and flowers. It had an open cut at the back that reached her waist and the neckline and hem were sewn with transparent crystal beads and diamonds. The half-exposed back wasn't her taste, but she didn't totally dislike the idea at all.

At two in the afternoon, she rode alone inside the six-door black limousine going to Basque's age-old church, the Basilica de Santa Ana. Once there, she was assisted out of the vehicle by one of Armand's female associates.

The sun was high up in the sky and not a single rain cloud could be seen. It was partly windy though, but it was just enough to give Solene some cool

air as she stood in front of the closed double doors of the church.

Somehow, her fingers shook as she held the bouquet of white tulips. Wedding jitters had finally caught up to her, but she took a deep breath and gave herself a pep-talk, "I can do this."

Lowering her head on the floor, she recalled how she looked in the full-length mirror earlier. She was indeed a beautiful apparition, almost like a saint or a holy angel of light with platinum white flowing hair curled into beautiful waves.

From inside the church, Solene heard the start of a beautiful aria. The mellow sound seeped through the cracks of the doors and teased her ears.

Then, the double doors opened. White light passed through her veil and filled her vision. She let her eyes adjust to it first before she started walking.

To her surprise, there were no pews visible in the corners, just a sea of white smoke that covered the ground. The church was dimly lit but she could clearly notice the absence of any audience in the sidelines. There were no cameras pointed towards her or even cellphones and this made her wonder where they were.

The white carpeted path leading to the altar was adorned with pillars of silvery vines and chandelier flowers, and just like what she asked, white tulips jutted everywhere she looked. Directing her eyes ahead, she saw the breathtaking altar. It was a sight to behold despite the lacking statues of saints as it sported stained glass masterpieces of angels, cloudy skies, and fleur-de-lis's. The warm blue and white spotlight only added to their radiance.

Just as Solene expected, the altar was occupied by two men. One was the vicar dressed in a red and green ceremonial robe while the other was her handsome groom, Henri Rantzen, wearing an overall black tuxedo and an asymmetric cape with gold trimmings. His dark hair was brushed back. His stance was high and proud. His face was a picture of content as he regarded her.

And yes, something more...something deeper captured her attention. She couldn't describe much less understand it, but it certainly made her heart skip beats again and again.

And again...

"My bride," he softly spoke just as he welcomed her below the altar.

Solene accepted his proffered hand and gave him a reserved smile under the veil. "My...groom."

Hand in hand, they both climbed up three wide steps. The vicar didn't waste any second and started with the ceremony. He happily raised his arms up and proclaimed on top of his lungs, "We are gathered here today to witness the union of two souls in holy matrimony: Master Henri Rantzen and Miss Solene St. Fair. If anyone of you believes that these two shouldn't be married, speak now or forever hold your peace."

Solene held her breath and stiffened remembering the many times she rehearsed this scene in her head back when she was a teenager. She couldn't accept her fate then and actually relished in the idea of objecting at her own wedding.

Now, she couldn't do that for not only she understood her father's will but also she renewed the contract herself with Henri. It was a win-win so to say.

"Alright, we shall now proceed with the vows," the vicar continued when no one emerged.

Solene gulped upon hearing it. She knew vows would be said, but she actually didn't prepare anything for it.

As if sensing her distress, Henri squeezed her hand and slowly whispered to the vicar, "We prefer our vows heard over closed doors, Monseigneur Palma. Let us move on with the symbols instead."

Solene tossed Henri a surprised look to which the latter just responded with a faint grin.

"Well now, I call upon the bearer of the rings, arras, candles, veil, and cord to come forward."

In her periphery, she noticed bodies move closer to them. First was Riza and her grandfather who tapped her shoulder before putting the cord over their heads and around their shoulders as a symbol of unity. Solene gave them a sweet smile before moving her attention to another individual. It was her mother, bringing with her the veil as a symbol of the single roof they would soon share. Solene wanted to embrace her mother thereafter

but refrained from doing so. They exchanged happy smiles instead.

Aras and candles were brought respectively by Lady Ursula and Lady Charlie while the rings were brought by Solene's adopted brother, AC, and Henri's younger brother, Lloyd.

Seeing this, Solene held back tears that had threatened to fall. Due to the dim lighting of the church, she couldn't determine if her family was present, but after seeing them now, she could finally feel at rest. Above all the extravagance and mystery, she wanted to experience her wedding with them.

AC and Lloyd, cute as they were dressed, held up the red pillows that housed the two wedding rings. Henri picked up Solene's diamond-encrusted ring and took her right hand. Upon closer inspection, it had the initial 'H' inside the band.

"Wear this ring as a sign of my everlasting commitment to you, Solene. I said it before and I'll say it again: death will not break us apart. You are mine forever and I will be yours for eternity."

Solene's heart managed to leap again. It was crazy and impossible, but something about his words made her feel like believing him. Something about him made her feel profoundly complete. Her protective walls had started crumbling in the past few days, now it still continued and it was damn crumbling fast.

"Take me as yours, Henri, and I'll take you as mine. This ring will be the witness of our beginning. It will be a symbol of my trust, loyalty, and admiration to you," Solene stated as she slid the platinum ring around his finger. It was engraved with the letter 'S' and the infinity symbol.

"Take this chalice and drink thy contents as a symbol of your unified blood," the vicar continued with the two boys now out of the altar.

Henri dutifully did as instructed and when it was time for Solene to perform the ritual, he lifted the veil over her head and handed her the chalice.

By then, their gazes connected. Now free of any obstacles, Solene saw just how deep and enthralling his eyes were. His gray-greens had somehow glowed and Solene was quite certain it wasn't because of the spotlight.

"Drink from it, Solene," Henri reminded, cutting her reverie. She cleared her throat and lifted the chalice to her mouth.

Once done, the vicar flashed a smile.

"All present here will be the witness of this beautiful union!" he cried out. "The heavens will open and the angels will sing in glory. They will rejoice with us! The ground of the Underworld will shake in happiness as its queen has finally come to bless its dark skies with light!"

Deafening applause reverberated all over the church surprising Solene. It consequently took her attention away from what the vicar just said.

Just then, the lights of the church fully illuminated showing the audience in the second and third balconies.

With this, Solene's mouth dropped at the grand scale of the people present. She tossed Henri a wide-eyed look and the latter just gave her a small smile.

"You are now the Mistress of the Rantzen Clan, Solene. Wave to them and give them a blessing."

She did as he told and waved a hand for the audience. Henri joined her after a few seconds and the crowd erupted in cheers again.

"You may now kiss your wife," the vicar reminded.

It wasn't new to her anymore, kissing him...but this time, as his official wife, she couldn't deny the excited feeling thrumming inside her chest.

Without delay, Henri faced her, looped an arm around her waist and lowered his head. Solene welcomed him halfway and just like that, they shared their first kiss as husband and wife.