

The Duke's Passion

#Chapter 1 - PROLOGUE - Read The Duke's Passion

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Year 1830

The air was chilly and brought with it the faint but distinct scent of blood. The lanterns from a long procession of carriages cast the only light in the cloudy darkness as the troupe slowly made its way towards the Duke's mansion. I watched the carriages clumsily amble up the dirt road on the side of the mountain, but could barely make out the noble's insignias from my vantage point atop a distant hill.

"Why bother when the Lord has been asleep for hundreds of years?" I murmured, shaking my head as I looked away from the parade and started the quick trek back to the shack I called home.

It was no secret that the "Lord of the Mountain" had been asleep for centuries. Even peasants like myself knew this and yet the nobility gathered every year to foolishly make the long, arduous journey up the mountain, all because they believed in the prophecy of His Lord's return.

I kicked a stone off the dirt path in irritation as I thought about how I used to ogle at the lavish carriages and elegant dresses of the nobility as a child. However, as I grew older, I became more and more familiar with their heartlessness and cruelty. I once had the misfortune of tripping into the way of an oncoming carriage and only after I narrowly avoided getting crushed did I notice the telltale insignia on the back as it sped away.

That was just the mildest case. I had witnessed the worst that happened to others, sometimes just because they smelled bad or they got too close to the nobility. They may be beautiful, but they are wicked and rotten on the inside.

I stopped a few feet away from my front door and sighed. The full moon had come out from behind the clouds and barely illuminated the roof with a bright ray of pearly white and blue. It was pretty, even if my home was severely lacking in appeal.

I made my way to the front door and unlocked it, "I'm home," I whispered to no one, smiling bitterly as I knew only the silence would welcome me. The habit was hard to break, even after all these years.

I was young when my father died and have been living alone ever since. His physical body may be gone, but his kindness will forever live in my heart.

I counted my steps towards the table where I left the lamp this morning, "One, two, three..." I whispered and after six steps I found myself in front of a sturdy oak table.

The glass of the lantern was cold on my fingers and gave me a chill. I felt around for the matches I normally kept right beside it but couldn't find them, "What?" I whispered, irritated.

A sense of dread crawled up my spine but I squashed it, "It could have been the wind from the open door when I left this morning," I said out loud, trying to reassure myself. I put the lantern back in its spot on the table and knelt on the ground to find the matches.

I sighed in frustration when I couldn't find them anywhere near the table. "Fine," I huffed, "I'll just go without light tonight."

Slowly, I got back on my feet and rested my hand on the table. To my surprise, I felt the rough, rectangular box of the matches under my palm. I straightened and looked around. My eyes were slowly adjusting to the moonlight filtering through the windows of the kitchen, but it wasn't enough to make anything out.

'Is it possible I missed them the first time?' The feeling of dread came back again but I stomped it down. 'It's dark and the dark does silly things to the human mind,' I told myself.

Determined not to lose them again, I kept the matches in one hand as I fumbled for the lantern with the other. It wasn't there.

I started to panic, "it was just here!" I yelled, absolutely terrified now. The feeling of dread and the chills up my spine intensified until I was nearly hyperventilating.

"I haven't eaten much lately and the malnutrition is affecting my brain. That must be it. Short-term memory loss is a real thing. It must be here somewhere I just forgot exactly where!" I managed to calm myself down enough to find the lantern but it was just out of my reach. I was able to grab the handle on my tiptoes and with both the matches and the lantern clutched in clammy fingers, I shakily lit a match.

Each spark brought on bubbles of manic excitement in me until the scent of sulfur wafted to my nose as it ignited. The flame was a beautiful mix of orange and red, and I looked away as something caught my eye.

I froze. I wasn't alone.

A figure sat a mere two feet away from the table. The match was quickly fading and my brain was telling my body to run, but I stood still, unblinking and barely breathing.

I glanced frantically at the door, screaming at myself to make a run for it but my knees were shaking and I could barely stand, let alone run. In this world ruled by vampires, I

was surprised I had made it this long. Peasants would always be nothing more than livestock and as such, no one cared if one among hundreds of them died. We were constantly sacrificed and used to sate the hunger of those bloodthirsty monsters. My death would shock no one.

The light and youthful tone of the figure shattered the silence of the dark night, "Aren't you going to light that? I've seen them used at home, it's quite interesting how they work." The stranger's voice sent a chill down my spine and I could feel my heart hammering against my ribcage.

I instinctively perceived his comment as an order. Did he want to see my face before he sucked me dry? I lit the lantern and held my breath.

"What an interesting invention!" He exclaimed, nodding at what he had witnessed. The lantern shook in my grasp and caused shadows to dance along the man's face. I couldn't look directly at him, my traitorous feet still frozen to the floor.

Would he devour me in one sitting or save me for seconds? Was he the type to torture and play with his food? My thoughts grew more and more negative as what felt like years went by before he asked, "You look frightened, why?" with genuine wonder in his voice.

Was this man dense? "If you're going to kill me just get it over with already," I whispered, too afraid to talk normally.

"Hmm?" He seemed confused.

"Aren't you here to kill me?" I asked, getting more brave, or more stupid, the longer I was still alive.

"What gave you that impression?" I saw him lean on the edge of the table from the corner of my eye. "I came here because it's peaceful. My house is rather bustling and I prefer quiet."

Peaceful?

"I... I see." I nodded, barely understanding his motives. If he wanted quiet there were many other places in the forest than my house.

One last struggle, Lilou. Just one last struggle. I chanted inwardly, convincing myself to fight for the last time.

However, just as I glanced at the door again, I heard him let out a devious chuckle and he smiled when he said, "Of course I came here for a reason."

I figured.

Taking one last deep breath, I tossed the lantern away and rushed towards the front door. The intelligent part of my brain screamed that I was screwed, no human could outrun a vampire. The desperate part of me needed to try.

He must have been toying with me because as soon as I felt the rough wood of the door, a large, cold hand clamped down around my wrist and spun me around to face him. He was holding the lantern I had dropped, and I instinctively looked up and was met with a pair of crimson eyes.

A flash of lightning illuminated his brilliant silver hair and a roar of thunder crashed down around us as he smiled ear to ear and asked, "Don't run, silly. Won't you marry me?"