

# The Duke's Passion

## Chapter 3 - News That Shook The Duke's Mansion

Meanwhile, in the Duke's mansion, a large group of nobles were gathered in a grand and spacious hall. Women clad in beautifully crafted silk dresses gossiped happily while men upheld their decorum as they broadened their connections with other noble families. Some of those who attended the banquet enjoyed the festivities, but most bore hidden agendas.

The sound of the orchestra playing softly in the background waved alongside the clinking of glasses and smattering of chuckles. The old had long given up on witnessing the Duke's return while the young remained hopeful, constantly stabbing each other in the back in their desire to one day become the Duchess of Grimsbanne.

Rufus stood atop the central plane of a grand, expansive, and very expensive bifurcated staircase. He scanned the bustling crowd of nobles and smiled upon seeing the excitement in their eyes; his family had governed the lands of Grimsbanne for hundreds of years and his presence was akin to seeing a celebrity. Even though marrying the acting Lord of the castle wouldn't grant them the title of Duchess, many of the nobles attempted to gain his favor because to them, land and power were still an appealing prize.

"Greetings, noble families," he said, bowing stiffly, and his booming voice could be heard over the orchestra and chattering nobles. They slowly faded into silence as everyone turned their attention towards him, captivated by his golden hair that shone brighter than the mesmerizing sun.

"I, Lord Rufus Barrett, acting Lord of Grimsbanne, express my delight to every one of you," he said, stretching his arms out before him. "Tonight, we have gathered in hopes that His Lordship will hear our united hearts waiting for his return. Please enjoy your time tonight, we have prepared..." his words trailed off as his eyes locked on the Butler of the stronghold, walking quickly to the foot of the stairs.

Rufus smiled at the waiting nobles and held up a hand, asking for their patience as Fabian, the young Butler, hastily took the stairs two at a time. "My Lord," he whispered fervently, "there is an emergency you must hear at once!" The butler's frantic demeanor caused Rufus' brow to arch.

He kept the same pleasant smile on and said, "Our Castle has worked tirelessly to procure the most exquisite selection of wines. Please, grab a glass and enjoy the handcrafted hors d'oeuvres; I will join you all later." Murmurs of surprise and protest

erupted from the group, but Rufus signaled the orchestra to begin playing to silence them.

He led the Butler to a private room and gestured for him to speak. "My Lord, the coffin..." Fabian trailed off, seemingly terrified to finish the sentence. "What about the coffin?" he asked, jaw tightening as he prepared for the worst.

Fabian wrung his hands together in concern. "My Lord, the coffin is empty," he whispered shakily, "and the Duke is nowhere to be found."

"What?" Rufus asked, dumbstruck.

"We think he is no longer on the Castle grounds."

Rufus' mind raced with horrible possibilities. Lord Samael forced himself into a long slumber before he could tear down the entire estate; there was no telling what mental state he awoke in. Almost simultaneously, they looked at the expansive painting on the wall behind them where a demon stood above piles of corpses, the dread on their faces clear as day. After a long silence, Rufus finally spoke.

"Fabian, protecting the estate is our first priority," he paused, thinking, "and the guests must not know he is gone." Fabian nodded and quickly left to discreetly mobilize the Knights.

Once alone, Rufus began to pace. 'The nobles were meant to be a sacrifice for the Lord when he awoke,' he thought, running a hand through his golden hair. "There has to be a way to bait him in," he said aloud, becoming increasingly frustrated. He slowly balled his hand up until his nails grew longer and dug into his palm. His eyes flickered with excitement and panic, but fear kept him grounded as he whispered, "Who knows what monster now prowls the street."