

The Vampire 180

Chapter 180 180: The Masquerade

In a different part of the palace, performers lined the road leading up to the entrance of the great hall where the masquerade would be held. Some juggled fire while others danced with long flowing pieces of silk that caught the light in brilliant flashes like the scales of fish beneath the water. Near the statues of heroic figures, a few musicians could even be heard, singing songs about ancient glories and great victories.

A long line of elegant and decorated carriages stretched all the way to the palace gates as more and more notable people arrived at the grand event. The palace itself blazed with light as every available lamp seemed to have been lit for the occasion. Large iron firepits ringed the statues and fountains in the grand plaza, burning with bonfires that cast a flickering golden glow over the entire square.

From one carriage, a powerfully muscled member of the scaled clan emerged with one beautiful woman on each of his arms. All of them wore brilliantly polished masks made to resemble helmets worn by gladiators in the arena and their outfits glittered with jewels like drops of sweat on a warrior's skin when they made their way toward the great hall.

From another carriage, a distinguished gentleman from the Clan of Painted Masks emerged in an elegantly tailored ensemble. A long black coat with tails fluttered in the breeze and in his hand he clutched a walking stick carved to resemble an assortment of wild animals marching in a spiraling line up to the fist-sized piece of polished obsidian at the top of the cane. On his face, a dark mask shaped to resemble an eagle covered the markings of his own 'mask' completely leaving onlookers guessing about who he might be.

Inside the great hall, the formal space had been transformed even more dramatically than the spectacle occurring outside. Massive crystal chandeliers hung from the towering arched ceiling, each one scattering hundreds of motes of bright light across the floor below.

Elsewhere, the giant marble columns supporting the ceiling had been wrapped in flowering vines that gave off a subtle, intoxicating perfume. Some attendees who recognized the scent avoided the columns lest the fragrance lower their inhibitions more than they heady alcohol would while others sought it out as if to find extra 'courage' to let loose during the masquerade.

The hall itself had been divided into distinct spaces that flowed naturally into one another. At its heart, the main dance floor spread out beneath the largest chandelier. The polished stone surface reflected light like the surface of a midnight lake giving the illusion that dancers were floating on water as they swept across its surface.

Around this central space, several intimate alcoves had been created using artfully arranged silk curtains and living, potted plants, offering guests places for quiet conversation away from the press of the crowd.

Musicians had been arranged on several elevated platforms throughout the hall, allowing the music to flow seamlessly as guests moved from one area to another. Some performers played music that was slow and even a touch somber at the edges of the hall while others were more boisterous or lively.

It could easily have resulted in a cacophony of discordant sound, but instead, the careful use of dividing curtains muffled both music and conversation enough to allow each space to develop its own mood as guests found their way to places that suited them.

Servants wove through the crowd carrying trays laden with delicacies: fresh fruits dipped in crystalized sugar until they resembled gleaming gemstones bursting with sweet flavor, tiny pastries dusted with gold, and glasses of wine that seemed to change color as they caught the light. At one end of the hall, a fountain flowed with a thick, sweet liquid that people dipped everything from fruits to pastries in, while elsewhere a similar fountain bubbled forth with a rich creamy cheese, waiting to be scooped up by small pieces of bread or bits of meat on small wooden sticks.

The guests themselves added to the spectacle. No one with the status to attend a masquerade at the High Lady Erna's palace lacked in status or wealth and their costumes and masks reflected the extravagance and varied artistic tastes that could be found across the High Fen.

Members of the Scaled Clan seemed to flow like liquid metal in their silver or golden gowns, while the Clan of Painted Masks had outdone themselves with outfits that played tricks on the eye, in some cases making it impossible to tell where the mask ended and natural markings began. The Glass Eyed Clan moved with their characteristic grace, their long necks adorned with at least a dozen necklaces that caught and reflected light in mesmerizing patterns.

Several smaller rooms opened off the main hall, each with its own theme and atmosphere. One mimicked a frozen garden complete with ice sculptures that never melted, while another recreated the warmth and spice of a desert oasis. The variety ensured that guests could find spaces that suited their nature and comfort, though most seemed drawn back to the main hall where the dancing would soon begin.

When Ashlynn and Nyrielle entered, most people immediately made way for the alluring couple. With masks on, no one was gauche enough to greet them by name but several whispers could be heard at the edges of the hall about the arrival of the Blood Princess.

"Every time I think that I've adjusted my expectations," Ashlynn said softly as her eyes swept the grand event. "I see something like this and I feel like I've only seen a tiny fragment of what the world has to offer. This is..."

"This is something that you should enjoy to the fullest," Nyrielle said, reaching out to gracefully capture a pair of crystalline champagne flutes from a passing servant and offering one to Ashlynn. "Though, perhaps you should drink less than you did on our first night here," she teased.

"Would you like to dance?" Ashlynn said, gesturing at the dancefloor where a few people had begun to pair up and take their places for the first dance of the evening.

"Not yet," Nyrielle said with a playful light flickering in her midnight blue eyes. "There will be time for you and me when the masks come off. Until then, you should take this as an opportunity to enjoy yourself. Meet others, listen to the concerns of the people on this side of the mountains and their unfiltered thoughts."

"I see a few people I should greet," she said, gesturing with her champagne flute in the direction of several muscular gladiators. "But I'm sure that there are different conversations that would interest you more. You might even find a historian or two among the guests, or at least people who have studied history on this side of the mountains more than I have. Seek out those opportunities," she encouraged.

"In that case," Ashlynn said, stretching up on her tiptoes to give Nyrielle a brief peck on the cheek. "Then Heila and I will take a stroll around the perimeter and see if anything catches our attention."

"If you want me," she added, whispering into the vampire's ear. "Find me anywhere. I'll be waiting for you to pull me onto the dancefloor."