

The Vampire 198

Chapter 198 198: The House of Iron

Clearly, Jacques had no plans to fail in his desire to share a meal with Ashlynn or if not her, then her closest attendant. The carriage ride, once everyone was in place, lasted only a few minutes before they arrived at a large building that occupied almost an entire city block.

Marble statues of heroic warriors adorned the exterior of the blocky four-story building and well-dressed men and women from a number of Eldritch clans queued up at the front entrance to the building. The sign emblazoned over the door read 'House of Iron' in an elaborate script that looked like it had actually been formed of carefully shaped wrought iron.

When the carriage bearing the glyph of the High Lady Erna's palace rolled up, however, people quickly got out of the way while several onlookers craned their necks for a better look at who was arriving from the palace.

"Hop on down now, ma petite," Jacques said after stepping out of the carriage and placing his wide-brimmed hat on his head. He held out a four-fingered hand to Heila and bowed as deeply as any footman would despite his extraordinary status.

When Heila moved to step out of the carriage, she hesitated for a moment, uncertain about accepting his hand. His prickly aura had been so completely withdrawn that she didn't sense the slightest threat from him and yet she couldn't shake off the memory of how painful it had been to approach him the night before when he took Ashlynn to the dance floor.

In the end, the presence of so many watching eyes left Heila feeling like she couldn't be blatantly rude and reject his hand. At the same time, she barely put any weight on his hand as she hopped out of the carriage, giving him only the briefest touch to maintain appearances.

"That, that's the Sandbox Witch! If he's helping someone out of a carriage, it must be Seneschal Ashlynn," someone in the crowd gasped. "The next Mother of Trees has come to the House of Iron!"

"I thought the Seneschal of Lady Nyrielle was human?" another person countered, doubting the first man's claim. "This woman is from the Horned Clan."

"You weren't there last night," an elegantly dressed serpentine woman said. She held a lace fan in one hand and hid her smile behind it as she watched Heila exit the carriage with none of the grace one would expect of a person of high status. In fact, given the scale of the carriage and her own diminutive stature, she seemed almost childish even though she was clearly a full-grown woman.

"That woman is a close friend of the Seneschal," the woman explained. "Last night at the masquerade, the Sandbox Witch injured her and Seneschal Ashlynn demanded three drops of blood from him as an apology."

"No, I don't believe it," a nearby man said. "If someone demanded blood from a witch at the masquerade, we'd have heard about the destruction of the great hall by now."

"Believe it or not," the serpentine woman said, her eyes twinkling as she watched the diminutive horned woman accompany the witch into the building. "But I'm going to find my opportunity to speak with her today if I can. Today isn't a day to sit in the cheap seats."

Once they climbed the marble steps and entered the building, Heila was greeted by the sight of a grand foyer with rich tapestries on the walls and a graceful fountain splashing in the center of the room.

Within a few heartbeats of entering, a member of the staff wearing a steely gray livery rushed over and bowed deeply to Jacques.

"The House of Iron is pleased to welcome a visit from the Sandbox Witch," the man said formally. "And your guest is?" he asked, clearly surprised at Heila's appearance. When Jacques visited earlier he had mentioned that he would be bringing a guest but the diminutive horned woman accompanying him didn't match with the woman he'd been told to expect.

"Ah, dis here is Mademoiselle Heila, she, eh, now what did you say your title was cher?" Jacques asked with a puzzled look. Every Eldritch Lord had their own customs in organizing their house and most notable servants but Lady Nyrielle borrowed from so many human traditions in organizing hers that it still felt very strange to the Eldritch witch.

"I am Seneschal Ashlynn's lady-in-waiting," Heila explained to the man from the House of Iron, all but ignoring Jacques. "You can think of me as her personal assistant and confidant."

"Der, you see? Cher isn't so simple as she looks," Jacques said with a wide grin that revealed a long row of sharp teeth. "Seneschal Ashlynn is still keeping vampire time and couldn't attend today. My table should still work for the two of us, non?"

"Of course," the man said, bowing deeply. "If you'll follow me," he said politely before leading the way up several flights of carpeted stairs until they arrived on the top floor of the building.

When they stepped from the interior hallways onto the outdoor terrace level, Heila gasped in surprise at the sight that greeted her.

Rather than a great hall or grand entertaining space, the House of Iron was built like a hollow cube. On the bottom level, a raised stone platform played host to a group of men dressed as gladiators, fighting for the entertainment of the people sitting around the platform.

The first level seemed to be stadium-style seating, long benches had been raised one behind the other to let people have the best view possible while they ate their meals. The food on the lowest level seemed to be similar to what Heila had eaten in the park with Ashlynn on their first day in High Fen City, grilled meats in rich sauces heaped on flatbread that could easily be eaten by people watching the fights.

The levels above that were increasingly luxurious. The second floor offered long tables that were shared by many where servants passed large platters of meat, vegetables, and flatbreads for people to help themselves. The food wasn't much different from the floor below but the experience and the view were certainly better.

The third floor offered a truly private dining experience with individual tables for each group of patrons, decanters of wine and ale for each table and a servant who moved from one table to the next to ensure people's needs were met.

The top level where Heila and Jacques had arrived, however, was the only one to provide an experience that could be called luxurious. Simple chairs and tables had been replaced with padded lounge chairs and comfortable sofas.

Each small seating area hosted several servants to attend to their patron's every need, including charming women holding large fans whose only job appeared to be keeping patrons cool as the sun moved across the sky and the sun fell more directly on some patrons than others.

The lowest level seemed to be the most raucous with people cheering and stomping to encourage fighters on the stage. As Heila's gaze ascended the levels of the House of Iron, she realized that the clientele of each level was not only wealthier and more refined but they seemed more reserved in their appreciation for the spectacle below.

"De food here be somethin' special, cher," Jacques told Heila as they took their seats. "You like de spicy tings? Or is de Horned Clan more for eatin' grass? I see so few of your people down south, my mind fails a bit on de details," he said, smiling and tapping his temple with a clawed finger.

"We eat meat," Heila said, shaking her head. She didn't believe that someone as important and well-connected as Jacques could actually be so ignorant of the customs of the Vale of Mists and the people that lived there, especially not when Zedya had lived in the Briar for a time as the Mother of Thorns' student. Which meant that Jacques's offhand forgetfulness was deliberate, but why? Just to provoke a reaction from her?

"So, this is the legendary arena?" Heila asked, trying to shift the topic. "The place where Lady Nyrielle fought night after night to find champions to help her reclaim the Vale?"

"Dis? Non, dis ain't nothin' like dat arena," Jacques said with a rich laugh. "Dat arena, she be much grander dan dis little stage. Non, cher, dis just be a place where folk come to eat and watch de fights."

"Although," he added, gesturing toward a flight of stairs that wrapped around the interior of the House of Iron, leading all the way from the top level where they sat to the entrance to the fighting area on the ground floor. "Some folk like to show off a bit for deir friends too."

As he spoke, a young serpentine man separated from his companions receiving several cheers and words of encouragement as he descended to the arena. When he reached the stage, an attendant

guided him onto the platform where he selected a heavy curved sword and buckler for himself from an assortment of weapons.

At the opposite side of the stage, a fighter from the Clan of Painted Masks stepped onto the platform, holding up his slender blade to scattered applause from the lowest levels of the venue.

"Adonia," the young man who had descended from the third level shouted, looking up at a golden-scaled woman among his companions. "I dedicate my victory to you!"

"Brat," the young man's opponent said, brandishing his slender blade in a blur of motion. "Don't you know it's bad luck to dedicate your victory to a lady before you've claimed it? Now your love is doomed."

"Doomed if I lose, and blessed if I win," the serpentine man said with a predatory grin. "But now that I've said it, I can't lose!"