

The Vampire 200

Chapter 200 200: Making Friends

The fight on the platform finally came to an end when the serpentine patron managed to catch his nimble opponent's ankle with his tail, pulling the other man's feet out from under him and claiming victory with the point of his sword pressed against the fallen man's neck.

Cheers erupted from the group of people the young man had been eating with and the woman he had called out to raced down the steps, rushing to the fighting platform and nervously examining the man's wounds.

"Jus' like dat, you see, cher?" Jacques said, pointing at the couple on the stage and grinning widely. "De gentleman done proved his love. Ain't dat a sweet ting?"

"I don't think that fight proves anything," Heila said, shaking her head. "Real battles aren't like that," she added, frowning in thought. The duel might not have been scripted but there were clearly limits in place. Each man fought hard to subdue his opponent but they clearly weren't fighting to the death.

"Virve," Heila said, turning to the woman who had stood silently at her shoulder since their arrival. "What do you make of the fight?"

"As my Lady says," the bearish veteran soldier said. "Real battles are different from this. I've watched fights in the main arena as well," she added. "Things are more serious there than what we've seen here."

"Oh? So dis, in your eyes, don't count for noting' much," Jacques said, giving both women an evaluating glance. While the guardswoman who accompanied Heila seemed both competent and experienced, Jacques wondered where the little maid servant formed her opinions about what real battles were like.

He knew that Zedya, despite being a lady's servant, carried heavy blades that she could fight with in a pinch but this serving girl carried nothing more than a simple two inch blade at her waist. Useful as a tool and for cutting food but hardly the sort of thing that could turn her from a lady's maid into a hidden bodyguard.

"Still, de gentleman at least done right by his lady, non?" the witch said, raising a scaly brow at Heila.

"At the very least, he didn't fail her," Heila reluctantly agreed. If he'd gotten himself severely wounded or even died in a match that served no purpose, Heila would have considered that a great tragedy and a betrayal of whatever feelings the woman might have for him. "But I don't think that's the same as doing right by her. If this is all there is to see here, I should return to Lady Ashlynn's side."

"Why so hasty, ma petite? But since you're so reluctant, maybe I can find a way to hurry things along," he said, standing from his padded lounge chair and walking over to one of the nearby servants. After exchanging a few quiet words, the witch looked back at Heila with a charming grin.

"Jus' sit here a spell, I'll check on tings' down below," he said, following a servant back into the interior of the building before Heila could make any comment about it.

"Virve," Heila said once Jacques had left. "Should we just go? Would it cause more trouble?"

"I understand wanting to leave, my Lady," the veteran guard said. "But, for the same reasons that Captain Lennart suggested you come, it would be bad to leave abruptly. Please endure a bit longer."

"I wish Lady Ashlynn could have come," Heila said a touch petulantly. "She's better at dealing with people like him."

"Excuse me," a light, feminine voice called as a richly dressed serpentine woman followed by a small group of other women approached Heila's table. "I couldn't help but notice that the Sandbox Witch left you all alone up here, would you like some company?"

"I may not be Seneschal Ashlynn," the woman said, lowering herself in a show of modesty. "But I like to think that I can hold up my end of the conversation and we didn't get a chance to speak much at the masquerade."

"Oh?" Heila asked, trying to place the woman before her. "You were at the masquerade?"

"I was," the woman said, smoothly taking an open seat at the table and gesturing for the women following her to do the same. "My name is Nereida, these are my friends Eusebia and Delmatia. We spoke briefly at the masquerade about pearls," she added, hoping that Heila would remember.

It had been a very brief conversation and one that she handled badly, but it was also the only connection she had to the future Mother of Trees. Encountering Heila at a place like this was a second chance to make a better impression and it wasn't one she intended to miss.

"Oh, I remember," Heila said. She'd been targeted along with these women when Jacques tried to keep people away from Ashlynn. "Please, join me, you're welcome to any of the food you'd like," she said with a warm smile.

Normally, she would have no interest in playing host to random strangers she'd only met once, but since Jacques tried to keep them away from Ashlynn, in Heila's mind, that was already a reason to make friends with them.

"Is the food not to your taste?" Nereida asked. "I'm not familiar with the Vale of Mists but I've been told that you take things more..." she paused, looking for the right word that wouldn't cause offense. "Rustic?"

It sounded complimentary, or at least, Nereida hoped it did. In truth, what she'd heard from her husband was that the Vale of Mists had fallen into poverty and lived like simple villagers. As someone who made their fortune trading in luxury goods, the Vale of Mists hadn't been a place worth visiting for a very long time. Were it not for Lady Nyrielle's legendary status in the arena, most people in High Fen City would likely have forgotten that the Vale exists.

"I didn't order any of this," Heila said simply. "The Sandbox Witch ordered for me."

"I... see," Nereida said carefully. After seeing what happened at the masquerade, she understood that things weren't entirely settled between Heila and the Sandbox Witch. That created an opportunity to become friends but also presented a risk as getting involved in any lingering dispute could draw the ire of a powerful witch.

"If Madame Heila would prefer something else," one of the servants said, stepping forward politely. "We would be happy to oblige."

Seeing that Heila was about to waive the servant off, Nereida steeled her resolve and decided that it was better to take a chance than to sit idly by. Besides, even though he was powerful, she felt that the chances of forming a connection with the Sandbox Witch were negligible after the way he'd treated her and her friends at the Masquerade. With Heila and her Lady Ashlynn, however, the odds were much better.

"If I can offer a suggestion," Nereida said. "Men like the Sandbox Witch know how to gorge themselves and fill their bellies with meats and savory things but they don't often have a palette for the finer things in life. The House of Iron understands that even delicate ladies will come out to enjoy the show from time to time and they have quite an assortment of cakes and confections. Would you like me to order one or two of my favorites for the table to share?"

It was a hard offer to make. Not just because she was drawing a line between herself and the Sandbox witch but because Nereida usually wouldn't have come up to the top floor at all. Her purse wasn't so lacking that she would have trouble paying for a treat or two, even after paying the fees for a table on the top floor, but unless she could convince her husband that this had been a worthy expense, she wouldn't have any pocket money left for at least a month or two after being so extravagant.

"That wouldn't be right," Heila said, a dark smile blossoming on her face. "You should each order your favorite," she told the group of women before looking at the servant. "Whatever each of them wants, please send five of that dish. Virve," she said, turning to her protector. "You're joining us as well, so if you want something, add it to the list."

"This way, we can all sample everyone's favorites and no one has to be polite about not taking too much," Heila said. "Since the Sandbox Witch told me to order whatever I wanted, then he can treat me and my new friends to some dessert. I'd like something sweet with berries, what about the rest of you?"