

# The Vampire 201

## Chapter 201 201: Sending A Message

Nereida nearly choked when she heard Heila's instructions to the servant. Five portions of five deserts for just the few women gathered here? Did the young horned woman have any idea what things on the top level of the House of Iron cost? With that many portions, most of it would likely be wasted after just a few bites. But then, seeing the look in Heila's eyes, she realized that this was the diminutive woman's way of striking back at the Sandbox Witch.

It might be small and petty but when you were faced with an opponent with overwhelming physical and magical might, what else could you do? Heila might not be able to slap the thorny witch for offending her but she could take a bite out of his purse and clearly she intended to do just that as a way of making her displeasure known.

"In that case," the serpentine woman said. "I'll have the mountain cherry tart. I think the cherries should be very fresh this time of year and everyone can enjoy their subtle brightness while we watch the fights below."

When the desserts arrived, the table transformed from something that resembled a carnivore's feast in a brutal arena into a display of delicate and colorful culinary artistry that drew admiring glances from nearby patrons. Even those who treated themselves to a confection or two opened their eyes wide at the parade of servants carrying tray after tray filled with exquisite confections.

Nereida's mountain cherry tarts arrived still warm, the bright yellow-red cherries nestled in delicate pastry shells and topped with crystallized honey that caught the light like amber. A light dusting of expensive cinnamon completed each tart, its spicy warmth perfectly complementing the bright tartness of the cherries.

The spring berry trifle prepared when Heila requested 'something sweet with berries' was a masterpiece of decadent layers. Fresh cream whipped until it formed soft peaks, dotted with tiny wild strawberries and blueberries that had been gathered from the mountain forests. Between the layers of cream, delicate sponge cake soaked in sweet wine provided a rich foundation, while crushed hazelnuts added texture throughout.

The final dessert, surprisingly ordered by the veteran soldier Virve, was perhaps the most striking and delicate of them all. A rose petal and elderflower fool that combined the delicate sweetness of spring flowers with fresh cream. Each serving was decorated with candied rose petals arranged to look like an opening flower, with threads of spun sugar creating the illusion of morning dew on the petals.

"Virve," Heila said smiling when she saw the look of delight on the bearish soldier's face after the first bite. "After the way you devoured spicy things on our first outing, I didn't think you'd have the ability to taste such a delicate treat anymore."

"Just because I live in the barracks doesn't mean I don't enjoy a pretty thing every now and then," Virve protested, her face heating in embarrassment. "This looked like something I've seen Georg make for Lady Nyrielle, though he always uses lavender for her. I thought... it always looked so pretty, it would be a shame to miss a chance to give it a try."

Once the desserts arrived and everyone began to sample the wide array of sweets, Heila found Nereida and her group of friends to be surprisingly easy to converse with. They didn't talk about anything serious. In fact, Heila mostly talked about Georg and the delightful things he prepared for Nyrielle and Ashlynn, but food made for a comfortable topic that let all of them get to know at least a little bit about each other.

That casual conversation was interrupted when Jacques strode out onto the fighting platform below, his scaled hide catching the midday sun. While he still wore his wide-brimmed hat, he'd shed his coat and shirt to reveal a body built much like his namesake Sandbox tree, thick with muscle and displaying rows of bony spikes that ran down the length of his back, parallel to his spine.

Somehow, despite his solid build and thick, bark-like hide, he gave the impression of explosive movement waiting to be unleashed. The vials in his hat band glittered the light like deadly jewels, and the golden feathers in the hat seemed to drink in the light of the sun, as if they were soaking up the heat of the late spring day to further strengthen the already powerful witch.

Opposite him, five gladiators entered all at once. As soon as she saw them, both Heila and Virve frowned at their appearances.

"Is something the matter?" Nereida asked when she saw Heila's mood change.

"When a patron comes to a place like this to fight," Heila said, clenching her tiny hands into fists beneath the table. "They have some ability to select the kind of fight they're going to have, right?"

"Yes, they do," the serpentine woman said. "The House of Iron won't let someone request a fight with people they are clearly stronger than. Fighters should be roughly equal to each other in order to produce a good and entertaining fight, though patrons may enjoy some advantages."

"That's what makes the House of Iron different from the arena," she explained. "In the arena, everyone is a professional fighter. At the House of Iron, while they employ many skilled fighters, the matches are fought between patrons and the staff of the House of Iron. It's a way for people who don't dedicate their lives to fighting in the arena to have a taste of what that life is like and to find a smaller portion of glory for their deeds on this stage."

"Then, this selection is likely not random," Virve said, glaring at the witch on the fighting platform.

Heila's new companions looked between the veteran soldier and the diminutive horned woman before nodding in agreement. Once they thought about it, the selection was clearly too precise to be a coincidence. Two bearish warriors from the Clan of the Great Claw and three fighters from the Horned Clan, a perfect mirror of the Vale of Mists' most prominent clans.

The message couldn't have been clearer if Jacques had spelled it out in a hand-delivered letter. This demonstration was meant specifically for Heila, or, perhaps more accurately, meant for the woman Heila served.

The two gladiators from the Clan of the Great Claw were heavily armed and armored, each wielding large, heavy swords and wearing full coats of mail over thick padded armor. It wasn't the style of a gladiatorial fight that they'd been prepared for, rather, they were dressed in a very similar fashion to Virve herself, as though they were ready to march to war.

In front of them stood three lightly armored fighters from the Horned Clan, each one armed with small spears and carrying small shields. Here again, they mirrored soldiers from the Vale of Mists where lightly armored fighters from the Horned Clan fought as fast and agile harassers more often than they fought as soldiers holding the defensive line.

"Pay attention now, ma petite!" Jacques shouted up to where Heila sat. "I gonna show you what real strength looks like today. You make sure you see it all, de kind of strength your lady don't have at her side."