

The Vampire 157

Chapter 157 157: High Lady Erna

As the carriage trundled through the city, Ashlynn continued to marvel at a variety of sights in the bustling areas of the city. After several minutes, they reached a second set of gates where much more imposing guards inspected every carriage or party passing through. Seeing the sharp, angular glyph on the side of Lady Nyrielle's carriage, the guards bowed deeply and waved them through.

The city beyond the gate was much quieter and less festive. Stately manors sat behind elaborate iron gates on large plots of land interspersed with exclusive-looking shopping districts, most of which had shuttered for the night. When they arrived at their destination, however, Ashlynn was stunned at the sight that greeted her.

High Lady Erna's palace rose from the heart of the city like a dream of gleaming marble and reflected moonlight. Unlike the imposing fortresses of human lords or even the mighty fortress built by Frost Walkers, this was a palace built to celebrate power and flaunt wealth more than a military fortification built to defend it.

Graceful columns soared skyward, supporting elaborate archways adorned with carved serpents that were so intricately detailed that they seemed to move in the flickering lamplight of the courtyard, as though they could come to life at any moment. A few of them even carried traces of sorcery that made Ashlynn wonder if the giant pythons could actually come to life.

Opulent fountains dominated the sprawling courtyard, their waters cascading through elaborate tiers where larger than life statues of the Scaled Clan's greatest rulers stood like silent guardians defending the palace from would-be attackers.

These weren't the stiff, formal statues Ashlynn knew from human lands. Each figure was captured in motion, their serpentine lower bodies coiled with lethal grace while their human torsos twisted in poses

of attack or defense, as though they were locked in eternal combat. The aura of mystic energy that clung to them was even greater than what Ashlynn sensed from the carved serpents.

"Those statues," Ashlynn whispered, pointing at an imposing male figure with perfectly sculpted musculature raising a spear high overhead as though he was ready to impale their carriage. "Are they like the Blood Golems? Preserved protectors of fallen warriors?"

"The Scaled Clan celebrates their heroes and rulers like this," Nyrielle said, smiling as she noticed the most recent addition to the courtyard. "It's true that they are more than simple decorations, but they have no connection to the dead. A living sorcerer must connect with them in order to direct their actions."

"I see," Ashlynn said, as she continued to look around the courtyard. At first, she hadn't seen it as being a well-defended fortification but it seemed like her notion of 'fortification' was far too simple for the Eldritch clans on this side of the mountains.

The palace itself spread outward rather than upward, its wings embracing the courtyard like the coils of some great serpent. Warm light spilled from countless windows, and everywhere Ashlynn looked, she saw little details that spoke to the Scaled Clan's nature.

In some places, she noticed scales worked into the marble columns, or serpentine motifs in the decorative metalwork. While it never went as far as to resemble a literal snake, the curved walls and flowing direction of the paths nonetheless exuded a certain serpentine feeling to the entire building.

"The Scaled Clan believes beauty and power go hand in hand," Nyrielle said softly as their carriage approached the palace entrance. "Each ruler adds their own touch to the palace and it's grown significantly over the years, but no one dares to remove what came before. It's a palace, but it's also a living monument to a thousand years of pride and glory."

"What about that one?" Ashlynn said, pointing at the newest statue that Nyrielle had smiled at. "You seemed to like that one."

"High Lord Luka was High Lady Erna's father and someone I considered to be a good friend," Nyrielle said with a wistful smile tugging at her lips. "His statue wasn't complete the last time I visited but whoever made this one clearly remembers his days in the arena. Even his scars are captured faithfully and that look on his face, like he's laughing at his opponent... It's very accurate."

"So how close are you with High Lady Erna?" Ashlynn asked.

"That's hard to say," The vampire said honestly as the carriage came to a stop. "It's easy enough to send letters but you can see how difficult it is to visit. The last time I visited, she had yet to claim the throne from her father and all nine of her siblings were still alive."

"I'm sure she's faced her share of hardships to secure her throne and that can change a person drastically from the little girl she was into the ruthless ruler she must be," Nyrielle said. "Perhaps she barely remembers the time we spent together when she was young."

"I don't think anyone could forget you," Ashlynn said, wrapping an arm around Nyrielle's slender waist and giving her a gentle squeeze.

Exiting the carriage, they were joined by Zedya and Heila as they approached the palace. By the time they had reached the foot of a long ramp leading up into the ornate palace entrance, rows of uniformed servants spilled from the elaborately carved gates and formed into neat lines to welcome the Eldritch Lady of the Vale and her companions.

At the front of those servants, a powerfully built man slid across the ground on a golden serpentine tail. He wore a shimmering, pleated skirt held up by a pair of leather belts that crossed over his sculpted, muscular chest. Seen up close, Ashlynn realized why the statues in the courtyard had been so disconcerting.

The Frost Walkers had been the least similar to human members of the Eldritch peoples that she'd met so far, but their faces still had enough similarity with human faces to feel familiar. The Scaled Clan, on the other hand, felt like they were... half finished.

The muscular servant that greeted them was completely hairless with a pattern of gold, yellow and orange scales that started like the point of a spear between his wide, unblinking eyes and expanded as it ran back over his smooth scalp. His heavy brows were completely hairless and his face lacked a true nose though there were two small slits above his thin lips that seemed to serve the function of a nose.

"Greetings, Blood Princess Nyrielle," the man said, his forked tongue flickering to taste the air when he came within a few paces of them. "High Lady Erna has been eagerly anticipating your arrival. If you'll follow me, these others will attend to the remainder of your party."

Following the serpentine servant, Ashlynn was no longer surprised to find the interior of the palace to be even more lavish than its exterior. Statues gave way to intricate paintings, rich tapestries and ornate pieces of furniture that seemed almost too beautiful to use. Large crystalline chandeliers hung from the ceiling and every surface of the palace had been cleaned and polished until it gleamed.

After the reception they received in the High Pass, Ashlynn expected a similar greeting in the High Fen, however the servant led them away from the main, more public areas of the palace until they reached a lush and secluded garden in one of the rear wings of the palace.

Fires burned in several bronze firepits in addition to a number of lamps and plush, comfortable looking couches ringed a low table covered with dozens of small, bitesized dishes. While a few servants dressed similarly to their guide stood nearby, the only person waiting for them in a seat was a stunning woman with dark black and gold diamond patterned scales and a lithe, muscular body above her long, serpentine tail.

"Auntie," High Lady Erna said, sliding smoothly off of her sofa as soon as she saw Nyrielle and her companions enter the garden. "You finally came to visit," she said with a cheerful smile that revealed a set of wicked, scimitar-shaped fangs.

Before Nyrielle could respond to the greeting, the powerful woman darted across the seating area, her arms spread wide as she flung herself into a fierce hug. All around the garden, servants stood with their mouths open as the fearsome woman who ruled like a tyrant instantly shed her majesty and dignity in front of the visiting Eldritch Lord.

Several of them had been curious about how close the relationship between their High Lady and this distant Eldritch Lady truly was. To receive someone in the private gardens rather than the great hall was already a strong declaration of friendship but wasn't this a little too excessive?

"You've worked hard, Little Snake," Nyrielle said, gently caressing the scales of the other woman's head with a nostalgic smile on her lips. If Erna had wanted to, she could easily draw herself up to seven or eight feet in height with the length of her tail but she'd approached Nyrielle with a lower posture and greeted her the same way she had so many years ago. Compared to their arrival in the High Pass, it couldn't be better.

"Zedya, I remember," Erna said, pulling back to look at the people who had arrived with Nyrielle. "But who is this one," she asked, turning her gaze to Ashlynn. With the speed of a striking snake, she stood before the young witch, her tongue flickering in the air as if she could taste the magical energy surrounding Ashlynn.

"She's very woody, isn't she?" Erna said bluntly, rapidly circling Ashlynn like a predator circling their prey. By the time she had completed her circuit around the young witch, her unblinking gaze had lost its kindness, turning into an intense stare that seemed to radiate hunger.

"But Aunty, this aura is so thin and weak," she said in a tone that was both sweet and menacing. "How can you take in someone like this as your Seneschal? If you needed someone strong to take a place at your side, let me host an event in the arena to find you a fitting champion."

"Only a champion bathed in the blood of dozens of challengers could be worthy to stand at the side of the Blood Princess," she said, as though it was common sense. "Allow me to devour this one and I will find you someone better."