

The Vampire 197

Chapter 197 197: Heila vs. Jacques

Hours later, well after the sun had risen and Nyrielle retreated to the chambers High Lady Erna had prepared for her beneath the ground, Heila sat outside Ashlynn's bed chamber waiting for her lady to wake.

The late morning sun streamed through the lattice stonework of the tall windows, warming the stone floors and casting dappled shadows on the far wall. Elsewhere, the palace had begun to stir with the sounds of servants going about their daily tasks, but this wing remained peaceful, preserved for important guests like Lady Nyrielle who shouldn't be disturbed.

In truth, High Lady Erna had made extra efforts years ago in remodeling this wing to add underground rooms in the hopes that Nyrielle would visit more often. Most Eldritch Lords who had reason to visit the High Fen would have resided in the chambers Ashlynn currently occupied.

Only Nyrielle and others like her would give up the opulent chambers with their expansive views of the palace gardens and the city beyond to allow another member of their household to enjoy the luxurious treatment in the rooms above ground.

While she waited outside Ashlynn's bed chamber, Heila held an embroidery hoop in her hands along with a brand new silk handkerchief. A rich, coppery thread ran through her fingers as she delicately worked away at the soft, chocolate-brown fabric. Two completed handkerchiefs sat neatly folded next to her, each bearing an elaborately stylized letter 'H.'

Their stay in High Fen City would only last a few days and when Ashlynn included a new set of handkerchiefs in the wardrobe she purchased for Heila, her diminutive lady-in-waiting had insisted that she could monogram them herself.

It was already an indulgence for her to receive so many fine dresses and expensive accessories. There was no reason to spend extra to make an embroiderer rush their work before they left the city for the final leg of Ashlynn's journey to the Mother of Thorns. Besides, embroidery was one of the parts of her job that she found genuine joy in.

That joy, simple as it was, only lasted until the late morning, just an hour or so before midday, when a guest came calling, escorted by Captain Lennart and one of the serpentine palace guards assigned by High Lady Erna's majordomo to keep watch over Lady Nyrielle and her entourage.

"Lady Heila," Lennart said, giving a crisp bow when he entered. After hearing what happened during the masquerade, he wasn't favorably inclined toward their guest but he didn't dare to refuse the man's request for an audience either. He could only ensure that Heila knew she wasn't facing the man alone and hope that things went smoothly.

"Good morning, ma petite flower," Jacques said when he entered the sitting room. Now that the masquerade had passed, the reptilian witch had traded his elegantly embroidered tailcoat for a much simpler long coat worn over a simple tunic, waistcoat, and breeches, all of them in dull browns and yellows that felt comfortable and well-worn.

The only part of his appearance that spoke to his station was the wide-brimmed pointed hat that he took in one hand to use in making a sweeping bow as he greeted the diminutive horned woman. Much like the rest of his ensemble, the hat was dull brown and looked well worn. What made it exceptional, however, were the collection of stoppered vials tucked into the leather hatband and the long, golden feathers that nestled beside them.

Heila's knowledge of sorcery was very limited. She'd begun to receive lessons from Zedya while they traveled but at best she could be considered a beginner who knew a few simple ways to use her very

limited power. When she looked at Jacques hat, however, even her barely trained eyes realized that neither the vials in the hat band nor the feathers themselves were ordinary objects.

"Why have you come here, Sir Jacques," she said politely, setting aside her embroidery and standing to greet the witch. After last night, her impression of the man was fairly poor but at least today he wasn't radiating a thorny aura that threatened to spill blood if someone approached him too closely.

"Ah, it ain't quite time for de midday sun yet, non? But I done come here early to invite your lady for a bit of lunch," the Sandbox Witch said, flashing his toothy grin as he settled his wide-brimmed hat back on his head. "Before we start our travels together, I figured we should get to know each other better, cher."

"Lady Ashlynn is resting," Heila said firmly. "She only went to sleep after the sun rose when Lady Nyrielle retired for the day. I'm afraid that if you want to take a meal with Lady Ashlynn, you've come several hours too early."

"Ah, I see how it is," Jacques said, his tone both disappointed and unsurprised. "She's keepin' vampire hours den? Dat ain't no good for a witch like her. Trees need deir time in de sun, non?"

"This is the best thing for her," Heila refuted. "The days have become very long and the nights are very short. My lady treasures every minute she is able to spend at Lady Nyrielle's side. There are plenty of hours of daylight for her before the sun sets."

"Besides," she added, thinking about the mighty cedar trees that grew in the Vale of Mists where direct sun was less common. "Not all trees demand the light. Some thrive in the cool mist and the shade."

"You ain't just some simple thing now, are you cher?" Jacques said, looking at the diminutive servant with fresh eyes. "Let me make tings right between us. Right now, you're as prickly as I am, and dat won't do once we're on de road together. I spilled my blood to make tings right wit your lady for hurtin' you, but I never said nothin' to you direct. Since your lady gonna sleep late anyway, let me treat you to a proper meal, non?"

"You don't need to apologize to me," Heila said curtly. "My lady already secured your apology. You can return again when she wakes, my place is here until she tells me otherwise."

"Ah, why you gotta be like dat, cher?" Jacques protested. "Mon capitaine," he said, turning to Lennart with a pleading look in his golden eyes and spreading his hands wide helplessly. "Is it really like dis? Dis petite dame, she's bound up in chains till her lady says she can eat? Surely a little ting like dis is permitted, non?"

Being suddenly pulled into the conflict between the two, Lennart furrowed his brow slightly before he schooled his features into a professional mask. He might not appreciate the man, but nothing positive would ever come from offending a witch.

"Lady Heila," Lennart offered. "I can take over the watch at Lady Ashlynn's door. If she requires anything, I'm sure the staff at the palace can help me to fetch whatever is required. This," he said awkwardly. "This isn't an invitation you need to refuse," he said, hoping that Heila understood the message implied by his words.

While Heila might have been a common servant in Lady Nyrielle's castle until recently, she wasn't oblivious to the subtle methods used to communicate around people with power. While Lennart said that this wasn't an invitation she 'needed' to refuse, clearly it was also an invitation she shouldn't refuse.

On top of that, he had gone out of his way to remove her excuse for why she couldn't accept the invitation. If she pushed back now, it would only make things more awkward.

"Thank you, Captain," she said, gathering her courage to leave the palace in the company of this witch.

"Can I trouble you to assign an escort for me?" Heila asked. It might be pointless. Besides Ashlynn, Madame Zedya and Lady Nyrielle herself, Heila doubted that anyone could resist violence from the Sandbox Witch if it came to that. Still, if she could have just one more person watching out for her, it would do a great deal to calm her nerves.

"I'll let Virve know that you could use an escort," Lennart said. "I'm sure she'd be happy to keep an eye out for you," he added, giving a pointed look at the reptilian man.

"Ah, everyone here be so proper, so careful," Jacques said, shaking his head with an exaggerated sigh. "You ain't gonna have no trouble from me, but you do what you need to do, cher. I'll just wait over der till you ready to go, Mademoiselle Heila," he said, offering an elegant bow before he made his way toward a nearby garden.

"I'm sorry, Lady Heila," Lennart said after the witch had left. "Some things are just too difficult to refuse. I didn't think he would invite you out or I would have stopped him at the gates myself. I thought he'd have the sense to leave until Lady Ashlynn was ready to see guests."

"It's fine, Lennart," Heila said, carefully packing away her embroidery. "You did well. I'm the one who's struggling. Thank you," she added, offering a small bow. "For correcting me."

"Of course," the bearish man said. "And, Lady Heila, if he does anything untoward, please, don't hesitate to rush back. Even if it feels like too much for you to bear, it's not too much for Lady Nyrielle to bear and you're under her protection."

"I know," Heila said, though she was grateful for the reminder. "Now I just need to find out what he wants from me."