

The Vampire 204

Chapter 204 204: What Did It Mean?

When Jacques returned to the highest level of the House of Iron, he was surprised to find the table he shared with Heila was now covered with several portions of uneaten confections and the woman herself was poking at a custard-like dish that smelled heavily of vanilla, though she seemed to have only taken a small bite or two.

"So dat's what de problem was," he said, putting on an affable smile. "You jus had a bit of a sweet tooth first ting. I shoulda ordered you someting a bit different den, cher."

"It wasn't just the food," Heila said, shaking her head and giving the arena stage a pointed glance. "But if I've seen what you wanted me to see, then I should return to the palace. Lady Ashlynn should be waking soon and I want to be there when she does."

"So long as you've seen," Jacques said politely. "You jus' need to tell your Lady. Dis whole journey to da briar, Jacques be right der by her side. No matter what, ain't nottin' going to stop dis witch gettin' to her. You understand?"

Jacques didn't care for the crowd's approval today at all. All that mattered was that Ashlynn got the message - if she needed to escape because the vampires held her hostage, he had the strength to help her escape.

Once they reached the Briar, there wouldn't be a chance to demonstrate what a witch could do against people like her current guards, or captors if that's what they were. She might feel that when Nyrielle returned to take her back to the Vale of Mists, she had no choice.

He had to take this time to make sure that she understood - even if she hadn't gained the strength to stay free of their fangs yet, he and the Mother of Thorns could help her stay free.

The carriage ride back to the palace felt strangely awkward, despite Jacques's attempts at small talk.

"Dat was quite de assortment of sweets, ma petite," he said while the carriage trundled across the cobblestone streets, weaving its way through the crowds that packed the roads during daylight hours. "You had some friends join you?"

"Some acquaintances from the masquerade," Heila said, her gaze firmly on the scenes outside the window as though she refused to meet the witch's eyes. "You referred to them in the past as 'bloodsucking mosquitos.' I'm sure you wouldn't have wanted to meet with them so they left before you returned upstairs."

"Ah," the reptilian witch said awkwardly. "So dat's how it is." When she put it like that, he was left at an utter loss for how to respond.

He'd already paid a price in blood for hurting Heila to keep social leaches away from Ashlynn. Now, was Heila trying to tell him that they preferred the company of such shallow people? Was he supposed to let anyone come close to the next Mother of Trees, just because they wanted to? Preposterous.

Thankfully for both of them, the ride back to the palace was short, and Heila was able to excuse herself to return to Ashlynn's chambers without an escort from Jacques. As a gentleman, he'd offered but with the palace guards hovering nearby, it was hard to insist that his presence was required to keep her safe.

"She hasn't been up very long," Captain Lennart said when Heila returned with Virve in tow. "Her breakfast was just delivered. Is everything all right?"

"It's complicated," Heila said with a frown. She didn't know if she'd handled everything the right way but she wouldn't feel better about her encounter with Jacques until she had a chance to explain everything to Ashlynn. "We may want to consult with you soon," Heila said as she strode toward Ashlynn's bed chamber.

"Heila," Ashlynn greeted warmly when her diminutive Lady-in-waiting entered. "I heard that you had to accompany the Sandbox Witch because I was sleeping. I'm sorry. Tell me how it went. There's plenty to eat if you'd like something," she said, gesturing at a seat across from her.

A generous breakfast covered the small table in her room and even if she had two stomachs there was no way Ashlynn could consume so much food. She was afraid that she'd given them the wrong impression the day after the opera when she had to recover from Nyrielle feeding on her. Ever since then, the palace staff seemed to feel like she needed three people's worth of food at every single meal!

"I'm not hungry," Heila said. "Maybe in a little bit. I ate too many sweets. But Ashlynn, about Jacques... He wanted to send a message but Virve and I aren't comfortable with what we saw today. I'd like to bring her and Captain Lennart in to talk about it, is that okay?"

"If it's that serious," Ashlynn said, pausing to consider. "Help me get changed so I'm presentable and then bring Captain Lennart and Virve in. I'll eat while you explain, but unless it's urgent, I'd rather not receive company in my night dress."

Half an hour later, when everyone had gathered in Ashlynn's room and listened to Heila and Virve's retelling of events, Ashlynn frowned deeply in thought.

"Nothing's going to stop him from getting to me," Ashlynn repeated back. "He said those words?"

"I think that was his meaning," Heila said, looking to Virve who nodded in agreement. "He seemed very clear about wanting you to understand that you didn't have anyone strong enough at your side to stop him."

"That's only true during the day," Lennart pointed out quickly. "At night, Madame Zedya is likely enough to contain him to say nothing of Lady Nyrielle. The problem is that the nights are close to reaching their shortest. If he aims for Lady Ashlynn during the day, it's possible that he could snatch her away from us. I just don't understand why he'd want to."

"Virve," Ashlynn said as she thought through the problem. "You've seen me fight against the Tuscans and you've seen Jacques fight in the arena, even if it was a mockery of real combat. How well do you think I stand up against him?"

"Physically?" Virve said, her brows lowering in an uncomfortable frown. "Maybe you could be his match. He's very strong and his hide is very tough, but you're very fast and your blade is very sharp."

"I can hear the large 'but' even if you don't say it, Virve," Ashlynn said with a heavy sigh. "You don't have to worry about offending me. His witchcraft is so many leagues ahead of me it's not even a contest is what you're saying, right?"

"It's not just that, my lady," the bearish soldier said, lowering her head in embarrassment. "You might match him for strength or speed, but he's better at using his strength than you are. He's very controlled. I think... I think my lady has as much of a chance at defeating him as you do of defeating Sir Thane," she said.

"Which is to say none at all," Ashlynn admitted. "Well, he's made his point. Without Mistress Nyrielle or Zedya to even the odds, there's nothing we can do to stop him if he makes a move against me."

"I thought that we were coming together as allies," Captain Lennart said. "Why is he taking such an aggressive stance toward a fellow witch? I would have thought that a disciple of the Mother of Thorns would be more... well, maybe not," he said, interrupting himself.

"I almost said 'welcoming' but perhaps it's in their nature to be a bit 'thorny.' Could this just be an expression of their magic? Perhaps he just wants to send a message that things won't go smoothly if you underestimate him."

"I don't know," Ashlynn said. No matter which angle she examined Jacques's actions from, they didn't make sense. Why did he feel the need to make such direct threats? He'd approached her with much greater courtesy during the masquerade.

While her impression of him had soured when she discovered that he'd injured Heila, she was willing to accept his apology and treat it as a misunderstanding. Now, however... he almost reminded her of Owain. Her ex-husband had behaved in similar ways when he visited Blackwell County, looking for contests of strength as if to prove that he was the most capable and therefore most worthy man to receive her hand in marriage.

"It couldn't be," Ashlynn whispered, her hand rising to her mouth as her mind started making more and more comparisons between Owain's actions and Jacques's behaviors. Each parallel clicked into place like tumblers in a lock.

Whether it was the over-the-top displays of strength, the forceful attempts to isolate her, or the need to prove himself superior to her other protectors, they were all things that she'd seen from Owain in the years between their betrothal and marriage.

"He isn't trying to court me, is he? Does he think he can woo me away from Mistress Nyrielle?!?"