

The Vampire 183

Chapter 183 183: Jacques

"A turn on the dance floor sounds wonderful," Ashlynn said, extending a hand and allowing the reptilian man to lead her away. As they moved, the invisible bubble followed them with people moving quickly to get out of their way as they walked across the great hall toward the dance floor.

"I can tell your aura is powerful," Ashlynn said, resting a hand lightly on the man's well muscled arm. "Do you have a fearsome reputation in the arena for people to avoid you like this? Or is it something else?"

"Eh?" he said, raising a scaled brow ridge in surprise. "I thought you were jus' puttin' up wit' my thorny nature, yet here you stand like it's nothin' at all. How you find dat comfortable, cher?"

"Putting up with it?" Ashlynn asked, genuinely confused by the notion. To her, she felt almost as safe and secure in the presence of the reptilian man as she did when she was with Thane or any of Nyrielle's other progeny.

It wasn't just the aura of power and barely restrained violence that he radiated. People like Ritchel and to a lesser extent, Hauke, were capable of unleashing such a threatening presence that it was clear they had powers far beyond physical skill to wield against anyone who opposed them.

Even Owain, for all of the brutal violence he directed against Ashlynn, couldn't compare to the Eldritch sorcerers she'd encountered for presenting a feeling of imminent danger. Only a few highly placed members of the Church gave Ashlynn a feeling that came close to what she felt from men like the one escorting her to the dance floor.

"I don't feel any discomfort from you," Ashlynn said honestly, following his lead and allowing him to place a scaly hand on her waist as he guided her onto the dance floor. "If anything, the feeling you give me is like I've been surrounded by competent guards with their spears facing outward. Others might have something to fear if they approach too close, but..."

"But you know I wouldn't harm you, cher," he said, flashing a genuine smile. Some might have seen the row of wickedly sharp teeth revealed in that grin as a threat, as if he could open his jaw wide at any moment to devour her, but to Ashlynn it somehow gave her the feeling of the grinning face of a loyal guard dog.

"Is this a unique sorcery of your clan?" Ashlynn asked, tracing her hand down the embroidery on his chest as they danced. The feeling he gave her went far too deep for someone whose name she didn't even know, yet she couldn't resist the comforting pull of his presence. "Are you bewitching me?"

"I's not doin' a thing," he said, stepping back to lead her in a twirl. The other dancers on the dance floor had moved to the edges of the dance floor or left it entirely, creating the illusion that the musicians played only for the pair of them and that no one else could intrude on this magical moment.

Despite his size, the man's movements were smooth and elegant, his touch gentle and never once inappropriate. Ashlynn's gown for the evening revealed a deep valley of cleavage and with the advantage of his height, he could be forgiven for taking more than the occasional lingering glance. But his eyes, whenever he looked at her, never strayed from her own emerald gaze, meeting her eyes without the slightest hint of lust or desire.

"Most folks, dey find me a bit too sharp for their taste," the man said with a rich, rolling chuckle. "But you, ma petite sapling, you might be one of the only people in 'dis whole world who would find my presence e'en a bit comforting. It's... a pleasant change, non? Just nice how different it is from how most folks react to me," he said, giving a strained look at the people moving cautiously at the edge of the dance floor.

He hadn't been sure when he left home to come all the way to the High Fen just to meet this woman, but it turned out that Mother always did know best. The woman in his arms was shorter than him, weaker than him in almost every way, and yet she gave off a feeling of welcoming comfort that only his mother and siblings could rival.

To Ashlynn, he felt like a sharp defensive barrier, wrapping around her to keep her safe from anything that could threaten her. To him, Ashlynn felt like a tender sapling that would one day stretch across the heavens, offering shelter to him and anyone else searching for a place beneath her mighty branches.

She felt solid, dependable, with roots that were deeper than they should be and the strength of an Ancient Oak to hold up the sky. As the two moved across the dance floor, he found it harder and harder to resist her pull and the desire to place himself completely under her command. A first meeting was precious and intense and he knew that these feelings wouldn't last, but while they danced he slowly surrendered himself to the feelings sparked by her magic as her expansive aura enveloped and strengthened his own.

"You never answered my question," Ashlynn pointed out gently as she took another twirl. After the twirl, the man pulled her in even closer, until there was so little space between them that she could feel the body heat radiating from his powerful chest along with a rich scent that reminded her of mulled wine and pine sap. "Is this a unique sorcery of your clan? I've never met anyone like you before."

"Non, non, it ain't nothing to do with ma clan, ma petite sapling," he teased as they glided across the dance floor in time with the music. "If you really want to know," he whispered, leaning in close. "You'll have to wait till dese masks come off, cher."

Elsewhere in the main hall, a flustered Heila approached Zedya having finally located both her and Nyrielle spectating on a wrestling match between a pair of gladiators. A small area had been roped off by brilliant crimson velvet ropes and the gladiators, while clearly exerting themselves, were attempting

to subdue each other through a contest of strength and skill rather than attempting to batter their opponent into submission.

Nyrielle seemed fully absorbed in the competition, but Zedya turned her attention to Heila as soon as the younger woman approached.

"Where's Lady Ashlynn?" the amethyst eyed vampire asked, her eyes flickering briefly over the crowd in the area without finding a trace of the other woman. "You should remain by her side."

"That's just it," Heila protested. "I can't. Someone came to take her to the dance floor and no one can get close to them. When I tried, I felt like my skin had been pricked by dozens of pins and when I pressed closer," she said, rolling up her sleeve to reveal a collection of tiny wounds, smaller than the head of a pin. "Just coming within ten feet of him pricked me enough to bleed."

If Ashlynn had just stepped onto the dance floor with a gentleman or even another woman that she'd met at the masquerade, Heila wouldn't have been so panicked. It was a masquerade ball. Dancing with new acquaintances was expected. It was the way the man seemed to use a form of sorcery to keep other people away from Ashlynn that Heila objected to.

More than that, the way that Ashlynn looked at him, as if she was greeting a heroic knight out of one of the human stories, it seemed unnatural. The combination of that and the strange prickly aura made Heila suspicious that the man was doing something unscrupulous to influence her friend while keeping others from stopping him and that, more than anything else, sent her rushing to find Zedya.

"I see," Zedya said with a heavy sigh. "Was it a tall man? A member of the Ancient Clan with a voice as smooth as silk and a tongue that drips compliments?"

"I, yes, I suppose," Heila said, frowning at Zedya. "You recognize this man?"

"I do," Zedya said, stepping forward and whispering softly to Nyrielle. "My Lady, it appears that Jacques has arrived...."

"So I heard," Nyrielle said, a hint of darkness flowing around her as she turned away from the wrestling match. Some of these men had promise. If they could be convinced to leave behind the staged brutality of the arena for the far more dangerous combat of real war, they might be worth entertaining but it seemed like her attempt to recruit fresh talent for the Vale of Mists was about to be interrupted.

"Someone should tell him that it's not polite to approach another person's lover without getting permission first," Nyrielle said as she swept toward the dance floor. "It seems like a lesson is in order."