

The Vampire 199

Chapter 199 199: What Do You Know of Love?

"He's really doing this just to show off for a woman?" Heila said, looking at Jacques in surprise. "If he's badly injured, even if she loves him, she won't be happy."

"Different people prove their love in different ways, cher," Jacques said after giving their order to one of the nearby servants. Since Heila didn't seem to be interested in the dishes he ordered an assortment of things for her. "Some fight wit' swords, some wit' words, but dey all tryin' to show what's in deir hearts, non?"

Heila gave Jacques a puzzled look when she heard his answer. Not long ago, she'd fancied another young servant who worked in the soldier's quarters but nothing had ever come of it, especially when she began to serve Lady Ashlynn and her station changed drastically within the hierarchy of servants in the castle.

Later, she'd felt a glimmer of attraction to Andrus while they had been fishing but... she drew a deep breath and chased away her thoughts about how things had ended there. Even if she tried to ignore it, the events on the lake still left a strong impression on her.

Fighting should be a thing reserved for defending your life and the lives of your loved ones, shouldn't it? Fighting like this, to produce a spectacle in the arena as if it proved how much someone loved the person who had caught their heart, it just didn't sit well with her. If someone were going to fight for her, she didn't want to see them rushing to their deaths in pointless battles, they should only fight when it truly mattered.

Next to her, Jacques watched quietly as a range of emotions played across the young horned woman's face. It seemed like the young man on the stage had struck an unexpected chord with the young lady-in-waiting.

"How much do you know of love, ma petite?" Jacques asked lightly. "You have someone special to you? Maybe someone back home in de Vale?"

"No," Heila said, shaking her head vigorously enough to send her long brown curls flying around her face as she blushed furiously at how clearly the witch seemed to have seen through her thoughts. "Maybe I never will. I'm dedicating my life to Lady Ashlynn. There may not be opportunities to find love."

"Ah, der you go again, chained to your lady," Jacques said with an exaggerated sigh. "But I suppose she's the same as you, trapped in a life without love now dat she's done bound herself wit' Lady Nyrielle."

"She's not trapped in a life without love," Heila said fiercely, restraining herself from saying more only because servants had begun to arrive with several platters of roasted meats and vegetables alongside a veritable rainbow of sweet, savory, and spicy-smelling sauces.

"It's all right, cher," Jacques said, leaning back on his soft lounge chair and dropping a saucy piece of meat into his mouth as he watched the fight play out on the stage below.

The young man with the sword and shield seemed to be struggling to fend off his opponents' rapid thrusts and he bled freely from several minor cuts to his forearms and the lower third of his tail but from the determined look in his eyes, he didn't consider himself to be anywhere near defeat.

"I know how de vampires are," he continued. "I spent some time with Mademoiselle Zedy when she learned under maman's roof. Ain't no love in a heart dat's dead, cher. What de vampires do, dey's pretending like they feel but ain't nothin' of substance underneath the act."

"You're wrong," Heila said, her small hands clenching into fists beneath the table. She ignored the food on the table to focus on the conversation instead. The meal didn't hold any real interest to her in the first place and the fight below held even less, but for Jacques to suggest that Lady Nyrielle didn't love Lady Ashlynn was an almost heretical statement in the young woman's eyes.

"You may have spent some time with Madame Zedya," she said firmly. "But I lived my whole life with her, Sir Thane, Sir Marcell, Lady Nyrielle, and the others. Their hearts aren't dead, just cold. They still feel when something is important enough and nothing is more important to Lady Nyrielle than Lady Ashlynn."

Heila had seen things that few people ever would. She'd seen the bite marks on Ashlynn's skin before they healed, even when they appeared in the most intimate places on her body. She'd seen the way Nyrielle became softer and vulnerable when Ashlynn was around and she'd seen the fury in the vampire's eyes when something threatened to harm Ashlynn.

If what Nyrielle and Ashlynn felt for each other wasn't love then Heila didn't think anyone knew what love was. The idea that someone could pretend like that was so ridiculous that she would have laughed in their face if it hadn't been a powerful witch who was making the suggestion.

"So you say, cher, so you say," Jacques said. He wondered whether the young woman's words were really true or not. He'd spent too little time with Ashlynn and Nyrielle during the Masquerade and what little he'd seen made it hard to distinguish between genuine affection and performative possessiveness.

Vampires were long-lived creatures with centuries of experience mimicking the emotions and actions of mortals. They could appear charming, lovestruck, bitter and vengeful, even pious and humble if it served their purposes. The only true face of a vampire, according to everything he'd been taught, was the empty emotionless mask that revealed how dead their hearts truly were.

If Ashlynn was being manipulated into believing that a vampire loved her, Jacques and the Mother of Thorns would need to do everything in their power to help her understand the truth before she became a victim of Nyrielle's schemes. But... if the love between them was as real as this young woman seemed to think, then that would change things substantially.

"De food really is a treat," Jacques prompted when he realized that Heila seemed to have no intention in joining him in eating. "I ordered sometin' of everytin'," he added. "Should be sometin' you like der, no?"

"It's fine," Heila said, turning away from the witch to watch the fight on the stage below. "I wasn't expecting to take a meal until Lady Ashlynn woke up and broke her fast. You didn't need to get me anything," she said.

He'd ordered for her without asking what she wanted. Was she supposed to just play along and act like they were on a date? The idea struck her as far too strange. She'd come along because she had to but she still didn't like the reptilian witch, especially when he suggested that Nyrielle was somehow incapable of loving Ashlynn. As far as Heila was concerned, the sooner she could return back to Ashlynn's side and get away from this man, the better.

"Your loss, ma petite," Jacques said, helping himself to another portion of saucy meat. It was a shame that the young woman wasn't willing to lower her guard around him and just enjoy the meal but the meal wasn't really the purpose of bringing her here to begin with.

The important part would come later. Until then, everything else was just a way to pass the time. If the time passed pleasantly then that was good. If it didn't, then that was regrettable but it wouldn't be the end of the world. As long as he accomplished his purpose in coming here then he was certain that everything else would work out in the end.