

## The Vampire 203

### Chapter 203 203: Different Perspectives

"Men like him, they can't be defeated by normal soldiers, can they?" Nereida said, staring in shock at the way nothing seemed capable of even scratching the powerful witch. Again and again, he deflected attacks with his thick forearms, snatched blades with his bare hands, or slammed into his opponents with enough force to send them flying across the platform, landing stunned or at the very least disoriented.

"In the Vale, we train for this," Virve said flatly. She wasn't boasting, nor was she confident in victory against someone like the Sandbox Witch, but it would be foolish to think that she had no practice in fighting people like him. "Sir Thane has a method that he teaches for fighting people like Lady Nyrielle's progeny or the Templars of the human's church."

"First, the swords are getting in the way," she said, pointing at the heavy weapons wielded by the bearish gladiators. "They should be closing to a distance where they can work with their own claws. Only with bare hands can you successfully entangle your foe. They need to use superior size and weight along with grasping attacks to pin him in place for the spearmen to exploit the opportunity."

"Instead, they're doing things backward," the veteran soldier continued. "The spearmen are trying to act as distractions and harassers, setting up for a 'killing blow' from the swordsmen. It won't work against someone like the Sandbox witch. He isn't threatened by those timid spear thrusts at all, he can ignore them entirely if he wants, which means the heavy swords have no chance of landing a blow that he hasn't seen coming."

"Does Sir Thane's method work?" Nereida asked as she watched the fight unfold below. Already, Jacques had defeated all but one of the spearmen and one of the swordsmen and both of his remaining opponents bled from countless small wounds inflicted by the witch's magical thorns.

"Sir Thane says that if we're lucky, the sacrifice of four or five men can create an opening to kill the enemy," Virve said flatly. "You have to remember, human knights like the Templars wear layer upon layer of armor. Plate over a gambeson with mail covering their heads, necks, and other vulnerable areas."

"You have to pry that off them," she added, flexing her wickedly sharp claws in front of the serpentine woman's eyes. "The first soldier or two to grapple with a Templar might manage to pull them from their horse, or to tear at the buckles holding some of their armor in place. It takes a second and third person to cause enough damage to the armor that a spear thrust by a fast, mobile soldier from the Horned Clan has a chance of hitting a vital area."

"That, that's horrible," Nereida gasped. "How many people have to die just to kill one of your enemies? If battles are like that, how could you ever win a war?"

"Raaaaa!" Jacques shouted, shattering the shield of the last spearman with a heavy blow from his tail while he grappled with the swordsman in front of him, pummeling his helmet until the man sank to his knees.

In the lower levels of the audience, people roared along with Jacques. Several shouts of "Knock him out!" could be heard and some people stomped their feet in time with every powerful blow that rained down on the last man's helmet.

On the upper levels, a few women with more delicate sensibilities hid their eyes in the shoulders of their male companions and a few mothers reached out to cover the eyes of their children. Violent bloodsport was one thing, but this final display of strength and dominance felt too savage when they were certain that a single blow would have ended the fight.

On the fighting platform, Jacques raised his arms in celebration of his victory, taking a moment to savor the cheers of the crowd before he turned to the highest level, looking to meet Heila's gaze and see her reaction to the battle.

When he did, however, he was shocked to see a look of... pity. Her look seemed to say 'only this much?' Or was it that she too disapproved of the way he'd finished the match? With her earlier comments that seemed to be disdainful of combat on the stage, he felt she would appreciate a more ruthless finish to the fight... wouldn't she?

At the table, Heila turned to her new friend, looking away from the confused Jacques to answer Nereida's question.

"This is just a show," she said. "When it's real, even if someone will die, you don't have a choice to do otherwise. Isn't that right, Virve?"

"It's true," the veteran soldier said, placing a large paw on Heila's shoulder and giving her a reassuring squeeze. "The ones who die so others may live are the real heroes. This... this isn't much different from the Opera that Lady Nyrielle and Lady Ashlynn attended on their first night in High Fen City."

"No," Heila Heila. "That was a beautiful show that was enjoyed by everyone who came to see it. I enjoyed it. This... I don't know who was supposed to enjoy it, but it certainly wasn't us."

"Nereida," Heila added. "You and your friends might want to depart before our host returns. There's no need for you to get tangled up in this."

For a moment, Nereida considered staying. She'd taken a risk to forge this friendship but once she'd made that decision, she intended to see it through. What kind of friend would run away at the first hint of danger? While it was true that she was looking to forge a good relationship with the future Mother of Trees, that didn't mean she wanted her friendship with Heila to be fake. A real friend should stay, shouldn't they?

"It would really be good if you left," Virve added, returning to her place standing guard behind Heila. It had been nice to be included as just 'one of the girls' for a little bit, but once Jacques returned, she would have a job to do. "We're unlikely to stay for long after this... demonstration."

"In that case," Nereida said, leaving her chair and giving a slight bow to Heila. "We'll take our leave. But, the next time you're able to, I hope you can come and visit us."

"It would be my pleasure," Heila said. "I don't know when it will be, but I'll ask Lady Ashlynn when the opportunity next presents itself. Perhaps she can join us next time... without the presence of unwelcome guests," she added, looking down at the fighting platform.

Down below, the weapons and broken shields had been cleared away. Jacques, however, refused to leave the stage, calling over each wounded man and using gentle healing magic to treat their wounds. Only when he'd finished with the last man did he exit the stage to even greater applause than when he'd ended the fight.

The applause, however, meant nothing to him. This demonstration hadn't been for the crowd. There was no need to impress the common people or even the wealthy patrons on the third and fourth levels. The only person he needed to make an impression on, at the moment, was Heila.

So just why did it look like she felt sorry for him after the end of the match? Just where had he gone wrong?

