

## The Vampire 164

### Chapter 164 164: A Night at the Opera

The carriage that awaited them wasn't Nyrielle's usual, heavy carriage meant to be pulled by a team of six horses on cross-country journeys with windows that could be shuttered against the threat of sunlight. Instead, it was a brilliant white and gold carriage with large panels of glass set in large windows that covered nearly a third of the carriage's height.

Emblazoned on the doors was a glyph that represented the High Lady of the High Fen, and the two white horses waiting patiently for a command from the driver had been draped in tabards bearing the same glyph.

"My ladies," a Glass Eyed footman said, stepping down from the rear of the carriage to open the doors for them. "The ride shouldn't be longer than ten minutes. Would you prefer refreshments for the ride?"

"No," Nyrielle said, stepping into the carriage and offering Ashlynn a hand up. "The only drink I require is this beauty."

"Charmer," Ashlynn said softly, her face heating at the compliment.

Despite the impressive scenery and the company of both Zedya and Heila, Ashlynn and Nyrielle only had eyes for each other. No words were required as Nyrielle laid her head on Ashlynn's chest, listening to the heartbeat that echoed within her own chest while they held each other for the ride.

Ten minutes later, they arrived at a grand theater, taller than any Ashlynn had ever seen. Marble statues depicting musicians with their instruments or singers posed as though they were serenading the heavens lined the entrance to the glamorous building.

At the sight of a carriage bearing the glyph of High Lady Erna, the crowds of people approaching the theater parted, giving way to Ashlynn and Nyrielle. Many in the crowd whispered, wondering which visiting dignitary had earned the High Lady's favor to arrive in her personal carriage.

"I do not know their clan," one woman said softly as she strained to get a better look. "Could they be Western Simians?"

"Do you think they could be forsaken ones, from across the mountains? They shouldn't be here, much less honored like this," another man said with a deep frown. While the wars against the human invaders were a distant thing, that didn't mean he could ignore the number of clans that had been exterminated by the strange people from across the sea. If some of them were starting to consort with the High Lady, that would be a troubling sign for things to come.

It wasn't until a burly man with a bull's horns and a wide, flat face stepped forward and saluted that people learned who these women were.

"Hail to the Blood Princess!" he bellowed, thumping his fists on his chest. "The arena remembers!"

"Hail to the Blood Princess!" echoed several other muscular men and women in the crowd.

"They recognize you?" Ashlynn asked, batting her eyes at Nyrielle who offered a salute of her own to the warriors who saluted her.

"You've seen the traditions of the High Fen," she said, pointing at the marble statues that lined the plaza. "Do you think they wouldn't have erected a statue of me near the arena?"

"Show me later," Ashlynn said, pressing up close against Nyrielle as they entered the theater. "I want to see how well they captured you in stone."

"Perhaps Heila can take you during the day," Nyrielle said. "I have no desire to visit the arena with you on this trip. We have better things to spend our time on," she said, giving Ashlynn a brief kiss and leading her up several flights of winding stairs.

At the third floor of the theater, both Zedya and Heila retreated, finding their way to seats on one of the upper balconies. On the fourth floor, Nyrielle led Ashlynn into a cozy private box with a luxurious overstuffed sofa and private buffet filled with small bite sized confections and two bottles of chilled sparkling cider.

"Tonight, I will serve you," Nyrielle said, pouring a crystal goblet full of cider for Ashlynn before pouring one of her own. "All you need to do is relax and enjoy the show."

"What is all this?" Ashlynn asked, walking over to the railing and looking at the rows of seats below them, which were filling with people. At the opposite end of the large open space, a large stage stood in front of a deep pit filled with even more seats, though it made no sense to Ashlynn why people would choose to sit beneath a stage to see a performance.

"I've seen human plays in Lothian City," Nyrielle said. "This is similar to that, but the story is told through song. The pit is filled with musicians who will play to accompany the actors on the stage."

"That, that's too many musicians," Ashlynn said as she began to count seats. "There must be more than fifty! I only had a dozen musicians for my wedding. Father rarely had more than eight for even the most extravagant feasts."

"It's called an 'orchestra,' darling. Now come sit," she said, tapping a space on the sofa next to her. "We have some time before the show begins. Let me tell you the story so you can listen to the music when the time comes."

"This is an old story," Nyrielle began. As she spoke, she selected a delicate puffed pastry filled with sweetened cream, teasing Ashlynn's full lips with it until Ashlynn took it from her, capturing Nyrielle's slender fingers with her soft lips in the process.

"If you keep teasing me like that," Ashlynn said, licking a stray bit of sweet cream from her lips. "I'm going to bite you for once," she teased.

"I might enjoy that," her lover responded, selecting another pastry, this time filled with a thick red jelly. "The story is about a man named Sindila who fell in love with the High Lord's daughter, Mira" Nyrielle explained, continuing her story. "The High Lord, Aspar, didn't approve and forbid Sindila from seeing his love, so Sindila kidnapped Mira and fled the city."

"I'm sure that didn't go well," Ashlynn said, reaching beyond Nyrielle to select a treat to feed the vampire. "What happened when they fled?"

"Mira's fiancée, a soldier named Ervig, captured them back," Nyrielle said, savoring the rich buttery pastry filled with chopped nuts and honey. "The marriage might have been arranged for political ends

but that doesn't mean Ervig was heartless. He agonizes over what to do with the man who kidnapped his bride-to-be. If he kills him, his future wife will hate him, but if he lets him go free, High Lord Aspar won't forgive him."

"Eventually, Sindila is captured alive and thrown into the arena where he must claim a hundred victories to regain his freedom," Nyrielle said, her eyes growing distant as she recalled her own days on the sands. A hundred victories would be impossible to most warriors, but to her, it hadn't been nearly enough to gain the number of progeny she needed to retake the Vale of Mists.

"As he fights, Mira sneaks into the arena to visit him," Nyrielle continued after a brief pause. "During the day, she cheers for him, and at night, they share forbidden kisses between the bars of his cell."

"What happens in the end?" Ashlynn asked, now completely caught up in the tale. "Does he win his way free?"

"There are two endings," Nyrielle said, gently stroking Ashlynn's pale golden hair. "In one, Sindila is plotted against by High Lord Aspar and his Ervig. A champion from a distant nation is sent to kill him on the arena sands. Mira swears vengeance and kills Ervig on their wedding night before killing her father, Aspar, and claiming the throne for herself as the next High Lady. She remains unmarried till the day she dies, though in some versions, she gives birth to the child of her fallen love after his death."

"That's tragic," Ashlynn said with misty eyes. "What's the other ending?"

"The plot is much the same, but Sindila defeats the champion, gaining his freedom," Nyrielle said. "In this version, he slaughters Ervig for plotting against him and challenges High Lord Aspar for the throne. He loses, but only barely, winning Aspar's respect along with Mira's hand in marriage."

"Do you know which version we're going to see?" Ashlynn asked, looking eagerly toward the stage. Listening to Nyrielle's retelling, she couldn't help but feel torn about the two different endings. Part of her identified deeply with Mira, trapped in her marriage to Owain and rescued by her beautiful love, Nyrielle.

Another part of her chafed at Mira's fate in both endings. Ashlynn had resolved to claim her own vengeance with her own strength. The first version's ending suited her desire to kill Owain and Bors Lothian, claiming the Lothian March for herself. Only, why did Mira have to lose her love in order to find the strength to do what had to be done? That kind of tragedy was too sad.

In the other ending, Mira felt greatly diminished. She enjoys a 'happy ending', but it isn't because of her own strength. Perhaps a younger Ashlynn who hadn't been through what she had would find it romantic to think of a strong hero who could rescue her and win her father's favor, but that version of Ashlynn had died when Owain's knights dumped her body in a shallow grave.

Her thoughts were interrupted when the lights in the theater suddenly dimmed. Musicians filled the pit under the stage and several bright lights aimed at the curtains on the stage, creating a pool of light just waiting for someone to step into it.

"We'll have to wait to see," Nyrielle said, taking Ashlynn in her arms and holding her close. "But if I were fighting for you, you know there's only one way the story would unfold," she said, whispering into Ashlynn's ear as the curtains raised on the performance below.