

The Vampire 179

Chapter 179 179: Preparing for the Masquerade

The weapons that Artificer Erkembalt promised to craft for Ollie and Heila would take at least several weeks to complete. For Nyrielle, however, he promised to do his best work and to personally deliver them to the Vale of Mists if they weren't complete by the time Ashlynn returned to the High Fen on her way back home.

After returning to High Lady Erna's palace, Ashlynn and Nyrielle parted reluctantly with a chaste, bloodless kiss. The evening, practical as it had become by the end, might not have been as romantic as Nyrielle had desired, but it did a great deal to restore the balance and closeness between them after coming so close to a dangerous point.

The following day, Ashlynn and Heila slept late before preparing for the Masquerade Ball arranged by High Lady Erna. According to Heila, the first part of the evening would be spent in masks and it was expected that even if attendees knew who the person behind the mask was, they would pretend that they didn't until the 'unmasking' halfway through the event.

"Why do it that way?" Ashlynn asked while attendants massaged sweet-scented oils into her body, releasing the tension from her flesh in preparation for a night of dancing and small gatherings with few opportunities to sit. "Why wear masks at all if you can tell who the person behind the mask is? And what's the point when everyone is going to remove their masks halfway through anyway?"

"Everything is relaxed while wearing masks," Heila said, enjoying the opportunity to receive the same lavish treatment as Ashlynn as a servant worked away on her body. Not long ago, she might have contested with the staff at High Lady Erna's palace for the right to attend to Ashlynn's needs personally.,

Now, as the attendant's strong hands pressed along her hips, Heila felt her resistance to enjoying her new station melting along with the aches from her body. She still had much to learn from Zedya about

how to balance her greater responsibilities, but just being able to attend the masquerade as a participant was a privilege she hadn't dreamed she'd be bestowed with on this trip. The pampering that preceded was exactly what she needed to relax rather than being consumed with anxiety before the grand event.

"Rules of etiquette are relaxed while wearing masks," Heila continued. "So are expectations about keeping to your own station. There will be gladiators from the arena attending, wealthy merchants, skilled artisans, and more. No one who attends an event like this is unimportant but not everyone attending is the same sort of important."

"So, if a gladiator encountered someone like High Lady Erna during the masked portion of the dance?" Ashlynn asked. "They could meet as equals?"

"Ahhhh," Heila moaned as a particularly stubborn knot in her lower back finally released, bringing relief from a pain she hadn't realized she'd been carrying after several days in a carriage. "Yes, that's it exactly. It's a time to relax. Relationships that form during a masquerade can cross the invisible lines that keep people apart in daily life."

"And when the masks come off, those lines come back," Ashlynn said. "The fact that the masks come off before the night ends probably keeps everyone in line as well. No one will step too far out of accepted norms because they know that even if they weren't recognized, they would be once the masks come off."

"It's good that you recognize this," the serpentine attendant said lightly. "Seneschal Ashlynn will most certainly stand out tonight, as will your lady-in-waiting. Few from the Horned Clan will be in attendance but the only people who were once human will be yourself and Lady Nyrielle's progeny."

"I wonder if Mistress Nyrielle will unfurl her wings tonight," Ashlynn mused. It seemed that her decision to maintain her winged form while sitting in judgment over Paulus alongside Lord Ritchel was born of more than mere convenience.

By maintaining such an otherworldly appearance, she clearly set herself apart from her human lineage and established herself in the minds of the audience as a powerful being with an unquestionable right to rule. Would she do the same tonight?

For this evening's masquerade, Ashlynn had chosen to depart from her usual dark greens and black lace. It was a masquerade and she wanted to do something different. She also expected that Nyrielle would continue to cloak herself in layers of darkness, rich purples or midnight blues where she didn't wear pure black. With that in mind, she chose something she felt would present a beautiful contrast to her lover's usual tastes.

Shimmering ice-blue silk spilled from her hips in a tiered skirt pooled around her like a frozen fountain. Spills of white lace draped over the blue silk, resembling icicles that glittered with reflections and refractions from hundreds of tiny crystals set into the shimmering dress.

Above the waist, she surrendered herself completely to local fashion. There was enough silk in her bodice to provide some structure to the garment but otherwise, her entire torso had been covered with layers of crisp white and icy blue lace.

An intricate net of silver chains set with midnight blue sapphires that reminded her of Nyrielle's eyes draped over everything, adding an elegant touch of opulence that made her feel like the queen of a vast frozen kingdom.

Her mask for the evening bore similar icy themes, shaped like the points of a snowflake and crafted from a thin sheet of silver covered with glittering crystals in elaborate patterns that must have taken a skilled jeweler months or even years to complete.

As the attendants dressed her in the ice blue silk and white lace, each layer felt like part of a gift she was wrapping for Nyrielle to unwrap later. The midnight blue sapphires in her jewelry were carefully chosen to match her lover's eyes, a not-so-subtle message of devotion that she hoped other attendees would recognize at a glance.

This gift was meant to be unwrapped by one person alone and anyone else who had intentions to cross the line with her tonight should understand the limits to which they could indulge in the anonymity of the first part of the evening.

Next to her, Heila's warm, coppery dress gave off a subtle, earthy feeling. The simple spills of gold lace combined with a leaf-shaped mask to make her feel like the forest itself had come to life, offering up a diminutive denizen filled with innocent charm and grace. Even her horns had been elaborately decorated, painted with copper leaf that made her horns resemble sculpted works of art rather than natural parts of her body.

Finally, not long after the sun dipped beneath the horizon, Nyrielle and Zedya swept into the room where Ashlynn and Heila were putting the finishing touches on their hair and jewelry for the evening.

Zedya glided into the room with an inhuman grace that left one wondering if her feet touched the ground at all. Rich, royal purple contrasted with brighter amethyst on a gown that had been covered in midnight blue and pale lavender embroidery shaped like a swarm of butterflies taking flight. As she moved, gemstones set in the embroidery sparkled, creating an illusion that the butterflies might lift off from her elegant gown at any moment.

As enchanting as the vampire-servant's appearance was, however, anyone could be forgiven for failing to notice her when she followed behind the star of the evening's gathering.

While Nyrielle's ensemble for the opera gave the impression of a glamorous gladiator goddess ascending far above the bloody sands of the arena, her current appearance reveled in her title as the famed and feared 'Blood Princess.'

Deep crimson lace draped in layers over sumptuous vermillion silks gave the pale-skinned vampire the appearance that she had emerged from a pool of blood and formed it into a gown fit for royalty. Rubies and garnets sparkled from every angle of the dress and the mask she'd donned was shaped into a brilliant gold tiara set with some of the largest rubies Ashlynn had ever seen. Gold chains set with even more rubies hung down from the tiara like a veil, revealing only hints of the perfectly sculpted features behind the glittering jewels.

"The icy blue suits you surprisingly well, my darling," Nyrielle whispered when she approached her lover. "It's an excellent reminder that others will never know the warmth from you that I know," she said, brushing her fangs across Ashlynn's neck.

Nyrielle's breath sent shivers down Ashlynn's spine and she quickly placed her hands on Nyrielle's slender hips when she felt her knees go weak.

"I'm sure I'll dance with others tonight," Ashlynn said, brushing aside the strands of jewels that obscured her lover's face. "But at the end of the night, I'll only melt for you."