

## The Vampire 182

### Chapter 182 182: Conversation Partners

After fetching two mugs of chilled juice, Ashlynn and Heila continued their circuit around the perimeter of the masquerade ball. With her first night in the High Fen as a lesson, she was trying to be conscious about how quickly the alcohol that seemed to flow freely could get to her head and opted for less intoxicating drinks whenever the opportunity presented itself.

As the ladies moved around the great hall, they avoided the pockets of conversation that seemed deeply rooted in local events or discussions about Nyrielle's visit to the vale. She couldn't participate much in the former and she'd heard more than enough of the latter.

Instead, she sought out lighter conversations. A group of ladies had gathered to admire and compliment each other's dresses and jewelry. While it was more the sort of conversation that Jocelynn would have delighted in, Ashlynn still found it interesting to hear how much planning had gone into some of these outfits or how far away some of their materials and jewels had come from.

The picture that began to form in Ashlynn's mind of the lands beyond the mountains was one that was incredibly vast with rugged terrain, dark forests, more mountains even further west and at the farthest reaches of Eldritch lands, another sea.

Trade networks seemed to stretch across the entire length of the continent, from places like the High Fen in the east to cities she found difficult to pronounce in the west. Some people even wore furs taken from beasts in the frozen northern sea or carried walking sticks crafted from exotic woods found only in the humid swamps to the south.

"Honestly, I don't know how you manage it," a woman from the Clan of Painted Masks said, addressing the serpentine woman who seemed to be dominating the conversation "We're hundreds of leagues

from any of the seas, and yet you show up with a necklace of shells and pearls, and rings to match. I could never..."

"I tried once," a slender woman from the Glass Eyed clan wearing a mask painted in intricate gold and silver patterns said. "It took a year just to transport the shells all the way here and when they arrived, half of them were broken. Within a year of wearing them, all of them were chipped badly enough that I was too embarrassed to take them out of my collection and wear them in public."

"The key," the woman said, fingering her exquisite necklace of miniature conch shells and pearls delicately. "Is that you can't just bring shells and pearls from the sea. I hired a skilled jeweler from the Dancing Water Clan to come all the way here, just to care for the treasures my husband brought back from his trip."

"Pearls are challenging," Ashlynn added, sipping her chilled fruit juice. "I've never seen them strung with more common shells like that. The pearls are so delicate that it's easy to mar their surface if they rub against anything with a sharp point like the tips of those shells. I couldn't bear the anxiety of wearing such a piece of jewelry."

"You've worn pearls before?" the serpentine woman said in surprise. "They're a very difficult treasure to obtain. Very few jewelers are even capable of working with them without cracking or shattering them. Who designed your jewelry for the evening," the woman asked, trying to find a way to reclaim some of her edge. "Perhaps I could loan them my jeweler to craft something with pearls for you."

"Truthfully, I know very little about any of it," Ashlynn admitted a touch bashfully. She had been slowly noticing that the specific craftspeople involved in creating an item could matter as much as the item itself but this wasn't something she was really prepared to discuss.

"I was fortunate enough to borrow the jewels from High Lady Erna's collection, and a woman named Aleydya helped me to select a dress for the event," she explained. "But we didn't spend much time discussing the makers of any of the items or the sources of any of the materials."

All around her, the gossiping women stilled. The serpentine woman from the Scaled Clan felt utterly defeated. Events like this where she could truly flaunt her husband's success were rare and she'd spent the entire day transforming herself into a semblance of a sea-serpent just to impress her peers at the gathering.

She'd thought that she held the high ground in this little conversation until Ashlynn inserted herself in the discussion. After all, who else among these women could obtain unbroken shells or rare pearls from the western sea?

But to be allowed to borrow jewels from the High Lady Erna's collection... Instantly, everyone in the small gathering began to revise every opinion they held about the relationship between High Lady Erna and Lady Nyrielle from the Vale of Mists. Ashlynn's accessories for the evening were too stunning and receiving them, even if it was just a loan, marked her as a person of great importance to the most powerful person in the entire High Fen.

Before the serpentine woman could react, however, a prickly swept across her scales, becoming more uncomfortable by the instant as someone with an incredibly powerful aura approached their gathering. Not only her, but all of the women and even Heila began to unconsciously withdraw as the feeling of being pricked by countless needles spread across their tender flesh.

Only Ashlynn seemed unaffected by the approaching menace. In fact, rather than menace, she felt that the sharpness emitted by the approaching individual was almost... protective.

When she turned to face the direction of the approaching aura, she first noticed a visible wave of people moving out of the way of the man walking toward her. It seemed that no one wanted to be within ten feet of the man and many seemed to only feel comfortable after he was at least twenty feet away from them.

His frame was bulky, boxy, and incredibly powerful. At seven and a half feet in height, he was shorter than even Hauke, much less powerful Frost Walkers like Lord Ritchel, yet when Ashlynn compared the presence of Lord Ritchel to this man, she found the former to be sadly lacking.

The long tail coat the man wore was a rich, mossy green, double breasted with rows of silver braided cord looping around the buttons in a way that seemed to strain to hold the garment closed across his powerful chest. The mask he wore seemed almost feminine, patterned after the petals of a rose and silver embroidery of leaves and thorn covered vines ran down his sleeves before stopping at turned back cuffs.

From his gleaming golden eyes to the thickly scaled hands, everything about the man shouted 'reptile' and the thick, heavy tail behind him seemed strong enough to crush skulls or anything else unfortunate enough to be battered by the powerful appendage.

"Pardon the intrusion, my beautiful damsels," he said sweetly, flashing a row of wickedly sharp teeth as he smiled and bowed politely to the gathering of women. "Mademoiselle, I would count it as the highlight of my evening if you would join me for a turn on the dance floor," he said, extending a four fingered scaly hand to Ashlynn with an elegant flourish.

"Of course, if you prefer to withdraw to somewhere more private," he added with a roguish look. "I'd be happy to do that as well."