

## The Vampire 184

### Chapter 184 184: A Prickly Moment

When Ashlynn and the strange reptilian man stepped off the dance floor, she felt refreshed and welcome at the masquerade in a way that she hadn't before. While Nyrielle gave her leave to mingle and encouraged her to take advantage of the masquerade to meet others, her obvious human ancestry made her feel like an outsider even at an event where everyone wore masks.

This gentleman, however, felt like an old friend she was encountering after years apart. His touch was gentle and more respectful than any of the young or older lords she'd ever danced with at her father's events and even when they had nothing to say to each other, the silence between them still felt comfortable.

Before she could thank him, however, the echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat within her chest grew still and Ashlynn turned in the direction she felt her lover approaching from, wondering what could have caused her such distress.

There was already a visible bubble of people who wouldn't approach the masked man who currently stood with Ashlynn holding his toned forearm. When Nyrielle strode toward them, however, Ashlynn felt like her lover was parting a sea of people through presence alone.

As soon as Ashlynn's emerald eyes met Nyrielle's midnight blue gaze, a chill wind seemed to flow across the room, pressing back against the prickly aura that radiated from the reptilian man. To most attendees of the masquerade, the chill wind was a mixed blessing. When it met the spiky, prickly aura, the latter began to fade as if it were a rose left to wilt without water or daylight.

The chill wind, however, carried a touch of the grave with it, a feeling of things long dead that should have been left properly buried. The closer Nyrielle came, the more oppressive her aura felt, leaving many to wonder who dared to provoke the Blood Princess and draw her displeasure.

"My Love," Ashlynn said, letting go of the man's arms to glide across the floor to Nyrielle. "Is something the matter? You look..." her voice trailed off as she realized that rather than her, her lover's gaze was locked on the man she'd been dancing with.

"Are you well?" Zedya asked, stepping up to pull Ashlynn to the side. "Do you feel any sharp pains anywhere on your body?" As Zedya spoke, she carefully examined Ashlynn, amazed that she didn't notice a hint of the rich, woody, and coppery aroma unique to Ashlynn's blood.

Zedya actually had to check, carefully inspecting Ashlynn's icy blue and white lace dress for any telltale dots of red before she would believe that Ashlynn had endured the man's fierce aura without suffering so much as a pinprick.

"I'm fine," Ashlynn asked, confused by what had caused the fuss. "Is there something wrong with that man? The look on Mistress's face..."

"Ah, Blood Princess," he said, sweeping into an elaborate bow. "De night, she's still a bit young, non? I wasn't plannin' to pay my respects 'til much later, ya know."

"If you knew that you should have waited to speak with me," Nyrielle said coldly. "Then you should have waited until then to approach my love. If I didn't know better, I might suspect that you intended to whisk her away without me."

"Now, now, ma belle fleur de minuit," he said, flashing a wide grin that displayed his rows of gleaming teeth. "Your petite treasure here, she was wastin' away wit' all dat idle chatter, so far beneath her

station," he added, casting a disdainful glance at the women who'd been hovering at the edge of the dance floor.

Clearly, they'd only belatedly realized her status and they had taken to hovering like mosquitos, waiting for a chance to latch on to Ashlynn for the remainder of the evening in the hopes of siphoning off some of the attention that would gather on her as the night went on. Every time he had spotted them as the dance continued, his prickly aura flared, pushing them back just a little bit further but they never seemed to take the hint.

Persistent mosquitos, he thought.

"My darling has no regard for a person's station," Nyrielle said, holding her head up high and smiling in pride. "She discovers gems wherever she goes, plucking talents from castle kitchens and laundry rooms alike. Her ability to see a person's true worth may well be unrivaled, which only makes me wonder. What did you do, for her to see any worth in someone as forward as you?"

"What if I tell you it ain't nothin' at all?" he said, spreading his arms wide in a helpless gesture. "I am what I am, cher, and she is what she is. Dere's a natural pull between us, but I give you my word, ain't nothin' improper about what we feel between us."

Instantly, whispers exploded among the crowd as if a powder keg had been lit.

"Who is this fellow? Is everyone from the Ancient Clan so arrogant that he thinks his charm as a man is irresistible to any woman he desires?"

"It goes beyond that," another voice whispered. "Only the Ancient Clan would have the hubris to think that it's natural for their own charms to overwhelm someone's commitment to their partner. As if cuckolding others is only a natural consequence of women encountering him."

"Is anyone taking bets yet? I have a few gold tails to place on the Blood Princess," another man said, eagerly looking around the crowd for someone to make a wager with. "By the end of the night, I'm sure that all whatever is left of this man can be mopped into a small bucket."

"Mind your words," Nyrielle said fiercely, moving to stand beside Ashlynn and wrapping a protective arm around the younger woman's waist. "People might misunderstand you if you don't name yourself quickly."

"Looks like we come to dat moment," he said with a regretful shake of his head. "Ma petite, I was hopin' to make my proper introductions when de masks come off, but it seems like fate's got other plans tonight," he added, treating the disruption of his careful timing like some great tragedy of the theater.

"Cher can just call me Jacques," he said, removing his rose petal mask and executing a deep, formal bow. "But most folk, dey know me as de Sandbox Witch," he continued, straightening up to flash Ashlynn a wide, toothy grin. "My maman, de Mother of Thorns herself, she sends her regards and hopes you'll have a safe journey wit me when you come to visit our home."

"I mean your lover no harm, Lady Nyrielle," he said, returning his gaze to the imposing vampire. "I'm not so foolish as that, you know."

While his aura couldn't withstand the pressure she directed at him, his prickly nature diminished it to such an extent that it wasn't difficult to stand up to her, at least, not for a few minutes. If she remained this hostile toward him over the next several days, he was certain that he would crumble long before he returned to the safety of his mother's home.

"I would have preferred that your mother send the Thistle Witch if she was going to send an escort at all," Nyrielle said coolly. "Since you do not seem to understand propriety, you should leave the masquerade for the evening. High Lady Erna has gone through a great deal of trouble to prepare such a luxurious welcoming event."

"I would hate to ruin it with bloodshed," the vampire added darkly.