

## The Vampire 205

### Chapter 205 205: Departing High Fen City (Part One)

Whether Jacques intended to woo Ashlynn or had some other intention in mind, it was impossible for anyone to say. His behavior was odd, but even among the Eldritch, different clans and nations had their own ways and rituals. While some interpretations of his actions felt more likely than others, in the end, it was impossible to be certain.

By the time night fell, the horses and carriages had been prepared, everyone had gathered in the courtyard, waiting only for Nyrielle and Zedya to emerge before the caravan of carts and carriages set off again.

Lady Erna hadn't been stingy when directing her staff to help with the preparations. The carts had been filled almost to bursting with sacks of flour, barrels of pork, beef and even pickled fish when she found out that Ashlynn had a taste for the briney delicacy.

Beyond that, she seemed to be concerned that her teacher wasn't traveling in sufficient comfort. Two additional wagons were joining them, and unlike the practical goods carried by the carts from the Vale of Mists, these had been loaded with a large, luxurious tent and enough silk carpets, goose down pillows and soft satin blankets to cover the interior of the tent.

Ashlynn didn't have the heart to explain that they intended to move rapidly and likely wouldn't set up the tent more than once on the trip. A High Lady's good intentions weren't to be refused after all. Besides, when Ashlynn took a peak in the second wagon, she found that it held a wooden soaking tub along with an assortment of pleasantly scented soaps and lotions.

Perhaps, she thought, she could convince Nyrielle to pause for a few hours on one or two nights. Surely her lover would appreciate the opportunity to snuggle when they had both had a chance to wash the dust and grime of travel from their bodies, wouldn't she?

"Your visit was very brief," High Lady Erna said to Ashlynn as they awaited Nyrielle. "The next time you pass through, perhaps you can stay longer. Maybe even share a bit of my teacher's time with her poor neglected student?" she teased.

"High Lady," Ashlynn said, bowing slightly. "It wasn't my intention to monopolize Mistress Nyrielle, but her intention to monopolize me. Your High Fen City has too many amazing sights to see in so little time. Perhaps, if you wish to spend more time with her, you could visit us in the Vale of Mists instead?"

"Ha ha, no," Erna said bluntly after a short laugh. "If the Vale of Mists once again becomes the domain of a High Lady, it might be possible to visit without causing misunderstandings. As is, leaving this place, crossing the High Pass and entering the Vale, even if it was a harmless visit, would create too many misunderstandings."

"I understand," Ashlynn said. Undoubtedly, there were people in the High Pass who would see High Lady Erna's visit to the Vale of Mists as a precursor to expansion. A close alliance between the High Fen and the Vale of Mists would put Lord Ritchel in an awkward position. Even if High Lady Erna expressed no such intentions, other people in the High Fen and the High Pass would believe more in what she did than in what she said.

It was the same among humans. Rumors swirling among people who knew only a fraction of the truth could turn into a widespread belief that threatened relationships, industries and more. It was one of the reasons that her father had emphasized that appearances and the appearance of action could, at times, be as significant as actions themselves.

"Whether I am an Eldritch Lady or a High Lady, the title counts for little," Nyrielle said as she glided across the courtyard with a gait that gave her the appearance of floating over the cobblestones with the hems of her skirts barely brushing the ground.

"What's mine is mine," she said, looping an arm around Ashlynn and flashing a smile at the distant figure of Jacques. While the reptilian witch would be traveling with them, he was polite enough to keep his distance while Nyrielle and her party said their farewells.

That distance was something that Ashlynn worked hard to maintain. Even now, when he was dozens of paces away, she could feel a trace of his prickly energy dancing across her skin. Just like the night they met, it wasn't hostile, rather, it felt comforting and protective. If it hadn't been for the events that occurred while she slept, she would have felt tempted to lean into it or to keep him close to her.

Now, however, when she thought that he might be treating her as an object of affection, or rather, like a prize to be captured, she found that the comforting energy felt different... like a thorny seed that had become caught on her stockings. As long as she ignored it, it was fine, but brushing up against it, even if it didn't hurt, felt uncomfortable.

"The Vale of Mists will always be mine," Nyrielle continued, returning her gaze to High Lady Erna. "You're welcome to visit it any time you'd like, Little Snake. Perhaps in the near future, you'll even have an opportunity to join me in real slaughter."

"Perhaps," the High Lady said, being careful not to make commitments where others might overhear. Now that she had ascended to her father's throne, it wasn't impossible to send reinforcements to her former teacher.

But, now that she had ascended that throne, she had to consider whether doing so was the best thing for the High Fen. Sending away a significant portion of her standing army to fight in distant lands might satisfy her own sense of honor, but if it left the High Fen vulnerable to their neighbors, then sending soldiers to Nyrielle could be the end of her reign in the High Fen.

On this side of the mountains, the treat posed by humans was understood differently depending on which Eldritch Lord or Lady you asked. Some felt like the nations that had fallen to humans over the past three hundred years deserved to fall. The strong devour the weak, it was a law as ancient as time itself. The Eldritch Lords of the lands east of the mountains had fallen, therefore they were too weak to hold their territory and deserved their fates.

The people who held those beliefs struggled to believe that the Eldritch Nations who had fallen were just as powerful as they were. To admit that would mean admitting that they would fall to the humans as well if the humans ever came for them, and that was something their pride would never stand for.

Other lords were more practical about it. They understood that the humans presented a looming threat and they were willing to make some preparations to face human invaders if the day should ever come. Most, however, would go no further than fortifying their own domains. Very few would send soldiers to fight a war to defend a neighbor's nation, even if doing so was arguably in their best interests.

The problem for people like Lady Erna lay in convincing the advisors around her along with the military and financial leaders of the High Fen that lending aid to the Vale of Mists was a better strategy than simply working to fortify their own lands. If only it was as easy to do as it was to say...