

The Vampire 21

Chapter 21 21: Walking in the Dark

Thankfully, things went smoothly with the second offering from the village. Nyrielle stopped herself before the young woman showed any discomfort and they left soon after.

"Will you walk back with me?" Nyrielle asked. "Or Thane can walk you back if you prefer."

"Hold my hand," Ashlynn said, looking down the dark trail to avoid meeting Nyrielle's gaze.

"Oh? You want me to escort you through the forest like a knight escorting his lady?" Nyrielle teased.

"I can't see as well in the dark as you can yet," Ashlynn said. While her senses had improved over the past several days, she was still far short of Thane or Nyrielle's ability to move freely through the dark.

At the castle, where the mists of the vale were thin and there was a clear view of the night sky, she was confident in her ability to move about outside, even without torches. In the forest of the vale, however, the evening mists grew thicker and it was hard to see the sky through the branches, turning the forest into a maw of darkness, ready to devour her as soon as she left the lights of the village torches behind.

"I'll walk back with you, but you have to help me," she said.

"If my darling needs my help, then how can I refuse?" Nyrielle said, wrapping an arm around Ashlynn's waist and pulling her close.

Holding out a hand, Nyrielle's eyes began to glow as she softly whispered a string of words in a language Ashlynn didn't recognize. As she spoke, the mists swirled around her feet until three balls of mist began to glow like small lanterns, floating up and slowly circling around the two women.

"Will these do?" Nyrielle asked.

"It's perfect," Ashlynn said, watching the drifting balls of glowing mist with wide eyes.

The light produced by Nyrielle's conjuration wasn't bright enough to draw attention from other creatures that lived in the vale but gave off enough illumination to see the trail a few feet ahead, allowing her to avoid roots, stones or other hazards she might trip over in the dark of night.

"Thane, tell Georg we'll have dinner in an hour."

"Of course, Mistress. My Lady," Thane said, turning to Ashlynn. "Do you have any requests for Georg?"

"I still miss fish," Ashlynn said, thinking over the conversations she'd had with the cheerful cook the past few days. "If he managed to get the trout he mentioned yesterday, that would be wonderful, otherwise, he can surprise us."

"I'll be sure to tell him," Thane said with a smile, bowing to both women before he vanished into the darkness.

"Here I thought I was sending you to him in order to study," Nyrielle teased. "I didn't think you were the one training him," she said.

Mist swirled around them as they walked, combining with the soft soil to dampen the sound of their footsteps in the darkness. Even the sounds of the village quickly faded away, enveloped by the blanket of fog.

"It's not training," Ashlynn said, her voice quieter than she intended as if to respect the stillness of the forest at night. "It's just that I want to make some of my own decisions. Here, everything moves as you want it to, everyone does as you wish. They'll even stand there while someone dies because they won't defy your will," she said softly, thinking back on the scene at the village.

"But you'll defy me. You raced out to save that young man, while everyone else watched."

"That's not defying you," Ashlynn said, shaking her head. "That's helping you do what you wanted to do at a time when you couldn't. Besides, wasn't it my fault you were so hungry? How could I let you kill that boy when you didn't really want to."

"If he died, it would have been his own fault. You understood what he was trying to do."

"And you would have felt guilty about it," Ashlynn said, squeezing Nyrielle's hand gently as they walked. "You would have remembered the boy who died because you were too hungry to stop himself."

"You think I would blame you for that?" Nyrielle asked, pausing to look at Ashlynn's face, worried she'd see more fear in the young woman's eyes. Had she misunderstood her young Seneschal? Was it just self-preservation that caused her to act in the village?

"No," Ashlynn said, pulling Nyrielle along as she continued to walk. "I've talked to people at the castle and in the town about you. And I remembered what you said about Georg and Heila's families. You talked about how they'd served you for generations and you even knew all their names."

Ashlynn paused, taking a deep breath to steady herself before she continued.

"You've lost control of your hunger before, haven't you? You've killed people you didn't mean to. That's why you wouldn't touch me even when I offered myself to you on the way to the village," she said.

"You also remember everyone. I don't know what that feels like," she said, her voice growing softer. "But, if I asked you to, I'm sure that you could name everyone you killed that you didn't mean to kill."

"You're kind," she said, stopping and turning to face the vampire, reaching out and cupping her cheek. "Even when your nature makes it hard for you to be. I didn't want you to carry the hurt of another person's death."

"In just five days, you've come to know me so well?" Nyrielle said, leaning into Ashlynn's tender touch.

"I can feel you," Ashlynn whispered, her hand sliding down from the other woman's cheek to rest on her chest, directly over the vampire's heart, feeling it beat through the soft, velvet fabric of the other woman's dress.

"I can feel your heart beating in my own chest. I'm starting to understand, at least a little, how it feels when you're worried, or angry. Or relieved because you didn't hurt an innocent boy, even though it was his own fault."

"And what does my heart feel like now?" Nyrielle asked. Gently, she wrapped both arms around the younger woman and pulled her close, her slender fingers tracing over the rougher fabric of the blouse Ashlynn bought for herself.

Ashlynn's breath caught as Nyrielle's touch sent shivers down her spine. The vampire's fingers left trails of tingling sensation even through the fabric of her blouse. She could feel the softness of Nyrielle's velvet dress against her cheek, the subtle scent of lavender mingling with the earthy dampness of the forest.

Nyrielle's hands stopped at the hem of Ashlynn's skirt and curled slightly as though she had to hold herself back from venturing further.

Ashlynn trembled slightly when Nyrielle's fingers stopped, feeling Nyrielle holding herself back from going further. Her own heart raced, its rhythm echoing the double beat she felt from Nyrielle.

They'd come far enough away from the village that the warm torchlight no longer reached them. Darkness and the scent of damp earth enveloped them while thick mist swirled around their feet, cool tendrils caressing their ankles.

The glowing orbs of mist cast a soft light across Nyrielle's features, highlighting the sharp angles of her face and the depth of her midnight-blue eyes.

The entire world fell away, leaving just the two of them, together in the darkness. Ashlynn could feel every point of contact between them - Nyrielle's arms around her waist, her own hands resting on the vampire's shoulders, their bodies pressed close in the cool night air. She could feel the rise and fall of Nyrielle's chest and hear the beat of the vampire's heart, matching the echo within her own chest.

"You're worried," Ashlynn whispered, closing her eyes and resting her head on Nyrielle's chest. Just an hour ago, when Nyrielle had carried her, the other woman had been as cold as the night air, but now, flush with warmth after feeding, she felt just as warm as any living person should.

"You're worried about me."

"You've been afraid of me," Nyrielle said softly, reaching up to gently stroke Ashlyn's hair. "Tonight..."

"Tonight you gave me a look at another side of you. A side I might be even more afraid of," Ashlynn said. "And I am afraid. But I'm not afraid that you'd ever choose to hurt me. You're too kind for that. Even when I offered myself, you still wouldn't take me because you might have hurt me."

"You put a lot of trust in me for five days," Nyrielle said. "Are you sure you know me well enough for that?"

"No, not sure," Ashlynn answered, pulling back to meet the other woman's midnight gaze. "But I want to trust you. Tonight, you helped me understand you better. You didn't hide the frightening part of yourself, you showed it to me instead."

The image of Nyrielle's face, tormented by hunger as she pressed her up against a tree flickered through Ashlynn's mind but she firmly pressed it down. Frightening as it had been, she reminded herself that despite the hunger, Nyrielle had still refused to harm her or place her in danger. If Nyrielle could fight off her hunger for her, then she could suppress her fear for Nyrielle.

"So, tonight, I'll stop hiding from you," Ashlynn said. "You said there were things you wanted to teach me," she added, tugging on Nyrielle's hand and pulling her back onto the trail. "I think I'm ready to learn."