

## The Vampire 80

### Chapter 80 80: Gentle Care

For a moment, Ashlynn hissed again when her bruised flesh made contact with the warm water but by the time Nyrielle helped her into a sitting posture in the luxurious tub, the pain had faded away. In its place, she felt a warm, drifting sensation that didn't come entirely from the water but also from a trace of Nyrielle's magic.

"You are my darling Ashlynn," Nyrielle said softly as she began to caress the young woman's tender flesh with lavender-scented soap and a soft brush. "You can ask me for help like this when you need it."

As Nyrielle began to help Ashlynn wash, steam rose in delicate wisps, carrying the gentle scent of lavender that seemed to seep into her very pores. The smooth surface of the marble pool felt cool against her back, a pleasant contrast to the water's warmth that also spoke to how recently Nyrielle had decided to make use of the pool.

Ashlynn's previous bath with Nyrielle had been something the vampire planned enough in advance to keep the entire pool piping hot with warmth that seeped into the carved marble benches under the water's surface. This time, however, it felt far more spontaneous in a way that warmed Ashlynn's heart as much as the water warmed her body.

Nyrielle's fingers, usually cool to the touch, felt almost warm as they glided over Ashlynn's skin, leaving trails of silky soap bubbles in their wake. The soft bristles of the brush whispered against her flesh, each stroke melting away another layer of tension. In the quiet of the bath chamber, Ashlynn could hear the faint lapping of water against the tub's edges, taking on a rhythm that nearly matched her own steady, relaxed breaths.

"But you're so busy getting ready to leave," Ashlynn said. Her voice was quiet and her eyes struggled to stay open as Nyrielle washed away her aches and pains along with the sweat and grime of her intense training session. "I shouldn't take you away from important things."

"You are an important thing," Nyrielle whispered, tapping Ashlynn's nose with a soapy finger and leaving a collection of bubbles behind on the tip of the young witch's pert nose. "An important person. Someone I can make time for almost any time."

"Preparing for the journey is important but it is neither urgent nor a crisis," she said, her soapy arms sliding around Ashlynn's trim waist and pulling her onto her lap in the tub. Her hands slid upward, gently cupping Ashlynn's full bust as she pulled the other woman close enough to whisper in her ear.

"Whether it's an hour or an evening, it makes no difference to our journey," Nyrielle whispered. "But it can make a vast difference to the health of your body and your mind. So, rely on me, and let me ease the pain that comes from your struggle."

"In that case," Ashlynn said softly, leaning back in the vampire's embrace and placing her hands on top of Nyrielle's, welcoming her intimate touch. "Can I stay here with you? Just for a little while. Until the sun is about to rise."

"Of course," Nyrielle said, shifting slightly so she could gaze into Ashlynn's exhausted emerald eyes. "Let me take down your hair," she said, giving Ashlynn a brief peck on the cheek before pulling her hands back and gently loosening the braid Ashlynn wore her pale golden hair in while training.

"It's fine if you fall asleep," Nyrielle added, seeing how much Ashlynn was struggling to stay alert now that her body had the opportunity to relax. "Just drift, let me take care of you tonight."

"I can't sleep," Ashlynn protested weakly. "I have to take my morning meal with the captives first and..."

"Let them go a day without you," Nyrielle said, a touch more sharply than she intended to. "You give them too much of yourself already. If you don't take some time for yourself, you'll be too worn and frazzled when we reach Lord Ritchel's territory. Just rest, and you can start again tomorrow evening."

"But my darling," Nyrielle whispered. "As proud as I am of you for pushing yourself, I don't want to see you this worn again. Tomorrow, I will collect you again and bring you here. Consider that this too is part of training yourself if you need to," she said softly.

For a moment, Ashlynn's emerald eyes opened wide in surprise. She'd been pushing herself so hard because she was afraid of... of too many things. Afraid of the danger that came with being Nyrielle's Seneschal in a world where strength defined a person's standing. Afraid of falling short and disappointing the woman who came to mean as much to her as the family she'd been born into.

More than anything, she was afraid that if things went badly on this journey, it would be because she wasn't good enough. That she would fail because she hadn't worked hard enough. Hearing Nyrielle's words, however, untied a knot in her chest she hadn't realized had grown tight enough to constrict her heart.

Now that Nyrielle insisted she rest, however, it was as though the vampire had tugged the loose end of the constricting knot, unraveling it and allowing the wave of exhaustion it held back to wash over her.

Any response Ashlynn might have had was lost as sleep overwhelmed her, pulling her into a world of drifting, floating relaxation where her troubles and tensions melted into the water.

Nyrielle smiles when she saw Ashlynn's eyes drift closed, gently stroking her cheek before she finished helping her wash. She hadn't been able to bring herself to say it, but this time that she spent with Ashlynn, when they were close enough for their hearts to beat in unison, pressed up against each other with nothing between them...

This time spent together and the gentle moments were almost more precious to Nyrielle than the intoxicating taste and overwhelming pleasure she felt when drinking the young witch's blood. Their bond was mystical, a product of blood magic and ancient sorcery, but the tender moments of vulnerability couldn't be created by any magic and that made them even more valuable than the potent blood of a witch.

"Ashlynn," she whispered to the sleeping woman. "You're changing me." As much as she cared for each of her progeny and all of the people in the Vale of Mists, Ashlynn was coming to occupy a place in her heart that had been vacant and hollow since the death of her parents.

So many pieces of Nyrielle's life, whether painting or dining on refined delicacies, had become ways to fill the long passage years with moments of brightness. She treasured them, but she wouldn't shed any tears if she lost them.

Even her treasured progeny, Thane, Marcell, and all the others, couldn't come close enough to her heart to brighten her life the way Ashlynn did. She had lost a few of her progeny over the years, both to Lothian plots and to conflicts with other Eldritch Lords.

Each of those losses hurt like a cut to the bone, but the idea of losing Ashlynn filled her heart with dread that she hadn't felt in decades or longer.

"It's been so long since anyone came this close to my heart. So please, take care of yourself. I can't lose anyone else who can touch me the way you do."

"I'll protect you from anyone who tries to harm you," she promised softly. "But I can't protect you from yourself. You have to..." she whispered, her voice trailing off as she couldn't find the words to express what she felt.

That was fine though, she thought, gently stroking Ashlynn's hair. She still had time to find the words, and when she did, she promised herself that she wouldn't hold them back.