

## The Vampire 175

### Chapter 175 175: Boundaries and Finding Balance

After concluding her own outing during the day, Ashlynn's second 'date night' with Nyrielle involved a more subdued visit to a musical performance that the vampire referred to as a 'symphony.' There were even more musicians than at the opera but thankfully for Ashlynn's troubled heart, the performance lacked a distinct narrative. Beautiful music could be enjoyed for its own sake.

The dinner that followed was luxurious but even Nyrielle could tell that her lover's heart wasn't in it. Their previous evening had been too intense and they were both holding themselves back from going too far tonight.

For Ashlynn, the memory of teetering on the edge of a dark abyss as Nyrielle fed on her was far too fresh. For Nyrielle, it had been even worse. As Ashlynn had once surmised, there had been times in the past when Nyrielle lost control while feeding and killed people she hadn't intended to.

Last night, after her close call with Ashlynn, the dreams that haunted her were recollections of the people she'd lost to her hunger because she failed to restrain herself. By the time she woke this evening it took her several minutes to regain her composure before seeing Ashlynn again.

"You should take the rest of the night to rest," Nyrielle finally said at the end of their meal. She had other plans but dismissed them when she realized that they wouldn't bring Ashlynn any joy.

"I'd hoped that this place would revitalize you more. You deserve to enjoy the finer things in life and I've given you far too few of them. It seems I've misunderstood, my darling," she said, tracing a finger gently down Ashlynn's cheek.

"No, I," Ashlynn started, only to stop herself short so she could choose her words with more care. Nyrielle had a way of making her lose her composure and while she never felt that she said things that were untrue or hurtful when Nyrielle left her flustered, she did feel that she wasn't always clear when she needed to be.

"I love you," Ashlynn said, stepping closer and wrapping her arms around Nyrielle's slender waist. "With all of my being. And I'm afraid of you sometimes," she added hesitantly. "More like, I'm afraid that loving you isn't as simple as ordinary human love. Last night was dangerous. I think, if I didn't pull back, I could have gotten hurt. It would have been an accident but still..."

"And that makes you fear me," Nyrielle said, her voice trembling ever so slightly. Her hands froze just short of wrapping around Ashlynn's shoulders as she hovered uncertainly on Ashlynn's words.

"It makes me hate myself," Ashlynn said softly. "Because I'm not strong enough to match up to you yet. I'm putting all of the pressure on you to be perfect. To know the limits, to never harm me... It's not fair to you."

"I never asked the world to be fair to me," Nyrielle said, crossing that last invisible line and enveloping Ashlynn in a cool embrace. "I can bear the burden of keeping you safe."

"But I can't bear the burden of making you do it all the time," Ashlynn said, pulling back and staring deeply into Nyrielle's midnight blue eyes. "Will you let me be willful?" she asked with a teasing smile forming on her lips.

"When haven't I allowed you to be willful? Whatever your heart desires, you know I'll work to give it to you," Nyrielle said, relieved to see a smile on Ashlynn's face.

"You planned romantic things for us to do together," Ashlynn said, holding on to Nyrielle's narrow hips as she spoke. "You wanted me to see a side of Eldritch life that I'd never have thought to ask about. It was very, very sweet," she said, standing up on her tip toes to bestow a light kiss on the vampire's nose.

"But you didn't ask me what I needed or wanted," Ashlynn pointed out. "So, while I regret nothing from last night, by the time we got to tonight... I enjoyed the music and I enjoyed dinner, but what I wanted was something else. So, whatever you have planned tomorrow, I'd like you to discard those plans and replace them with something that we plan together."

"That.... I cannot do," Nyrielle said with a heavy sigh. "Or at least, I can't do it easily or without paying a price that you wouldn't wish me to pay. I am a visiting Eldritch Lady, certain formalities must be observed. Tomorrow there will be a banquet and masquerade ball," she said with an ironic smile.

"I see," Ashlynn said, nodding in understanding. "There are moments to enjoy but also moments of obligation. I won't be so willful as to demand you insult Lady Erna by missing the masquerade."

While the Eldritch were very different from humans in some ways, in others, they were surprisingly similar. Visiting dignitaries always resulted in a certain amount of festivity where wine would flow and barriers between people would lower enough for politics to intermix with the event. While Ashlynn wanted to be demanding, she wasn't about to be demanding to the extent of creating trouble.

"We still have the rest of this night," Nyrielle offered. "What does my darling wish to do?"

"I heard you were planning to take me to the night markets to do some shopping," Ashlynn said, thinking carefully about how she wanted to phrase her request. "I want to go jewelry shopping. I want you to let me pick something out for you. You've given me countless things but I've given you nothing in return. Let me pick out something for you."

"That's not true," Nyrielle whispered, pulling Ashlynn close and gently brushing her lips against the younger woman's neck. "You've given me all of you and I've savored that gift many times over."

"You," Ashlynn said, clinging tightly to Nyrielle's hips as the vampire's breath on her neck made her knees go weak. "You know that's not what I meant!"

"I know, but your face turns a lovely shade when I remind you," Nyrielle whispered with a light laugh.

When they finally left the restaurant, Ashlynn asked to explore jewelers that were more common. All of the truly noteworthy artists in the central districts of High Fen City were people who worked on commission and would take months to prepare a piece that would be worn by someone as important as the Eldritch Lady of the Vale of Mists. That defeated the purpose of a spontaneous gift all together.

Instead, Ashlynn delighted in finding something that was more appropriate as a gift between young lovers. Refined and elegant to be sure, but much less grand than the jewelry that High Lady Erna had loaned her.

"I like this one," Ashlynn finally said, holding up a silver pendant shaped like a large tree. There were many items shaped like serpents, herons, and other local animals, but none of them quite suited Nyrielle.

"It reminds me of the Ancient Oak we formed our pact beneath," Ashlynn said, wrapping her arms around Nyrielle to secure the pendant in place. "That moment changed my life in ways I never imagined," she whispered, leaning on Nyrielle and listening to the slow, steady beat of the vampire's heart. "I'm so glad you found me."

"The tree reminds me of you too," Nyrielle whispered, inhaling the faint evergreen scent that always accompanied Ashlynn no matter where they went. "I'll treasure this."

"There's still time before we need to return to the palace," Ashlynn said, pulling back from Nyrielle. "Now that I've been willful, was there anything else you'd planned that we can still do?"

"It may spoil the mood a bit," Nyrielle said after hesitating for a moment. "It's not what I would have ended the night with, but it is important. Zedya, you have the horns and tusks in the carriage?"

"Yes, My Lady," Zedya said, bowing slightly as she stepped forward. "If we didn't get to them tonight, I intended to entrust this to little Heila, but it's better if we go ourselves."

"I agree," Nyrielle said, turning to Ashlynn. "You've had a chance to meet with Frost Walker sorcerers and learned a bit about their magic. Now, are you ready to meet with an artificer? Even if we didn't have a request to make, I promise you, it would be worth the visit."

"Horns and tusks," Ashlynn said softly. "You mean...?"

"You claimed the lives and horns of Paulus and his grandson as forfeit when you asked for justice for Andrus," Nyrielle reminded her. "Zedya harvested their horns in a way that will allow them to be used in the creation of artifacts without the consequences that haunted the Tuscans. Come," Nyrielle said, holding out a hand. "This is something you should see through to the end."