

## The Vampire 56

### Chapter 56 56: A Moonlit Meal

Nyrielle entered the garden shrouded in darkness, moving like a whisper across a grave, one that dared not disturb the peace and tranquility of the garden's only other occupant.

A table had been set with high-backed chairs and softly glowing candles, but it was the woman beside the table who completely captivated the vampire.

Ashlynn stood under the pale light of the full moon, her gentle curves caressed by the golden candlelight beside her. The contrast between the flickering candle flame and pale moonlight gave her an appearance that was simultaneously warm, glowing, and vibrant while also being cool, pale, and a touch melancholy.

The young witch had worn one of her finest dresses, a flowing green gown trimmed in black lace with a plunging neckline that accentuated her generous assets. On her neck, an emerald necklace glittered in the soft evening light, shining almost as brightly as her deep green eyes.

Just as Nyrielle ignored the dinner table, covered in fine porcelain dishes and crystal goblets, Ashlynn paid it no mind, focusing instead on the plants in the garden. In a few weeks, spring would erupt into full bloom, filling the place with an assortment of rich and varied colors.

At the moment, however, everything felt like it was just starting to wake up. Folded buds could be seen on countless trees and bushes in the garden, each one filled with the promise of something beautiful to come. The soft moonlight and twinkling stars reflected in the dewdrops on the plants like jewelry waiting to be draped on a slender neck or slid onto a delicate finger.

"Even if you're silent," Ashlynn said, her full lips curving into a gentle smile. "I still know you're there. I can feel you," she added, placing a hand on her chest and turning to face Nyrielle.

In an instant, the vampire stood before her, appearing from the darkness between one blink of the eyes and the next.

Like Ashlynn, Nyrielle had chosen one of her finest dresses for the evening. Black lace covered much of her lithe body revealing glimpses of alabaster pale skin just beneath the lace. Her skirt hugged her slender hips before flaring wide at the knees and ending in a ruffle just above her delicate feet.

It was a dress that no human would dream of wearing on a chill spring night but Nyrielle showed no sign of discomfort at the cold as she stepped close to Ashlynn, savoring the other woman's warmth like a fine wine.

"I can feel you too," Nyrielle whispered, tracing her slender fingers over her chest before placing them gently on Ashlynn's, directly above the other woman's heart. "You woke me during your escape, every time your heart raced, you filled mine with worry."

"I worry too," Ashlynn said, wrapping her arms around Nyrielle's slender waist. "Just after I came here, I'd feel you going far away every night. I know you don't need to tell me where you go, but..."

"Shhh," Nyrielle said, not wanting to talk about the time she'd spent hunting for someone who could take Ashlynn's place in the shallow grave. "We're together now. Let's enjoy it," she added, stepping back from the other woman and pulling her toward the table.

"Tonight, I'm going to give the entire night to you," Nyrielle said after ringing a bell to summon the first course of their meal. "You've been through a lot in a few days, so, whatever you need of me, just ask."

"Then, would you listen to me?" Ashlynn asked. "I, I have some questions but I want you to hear it all first."

"Of course," Nyrielle said, resting a hand gently on Ashlynn's while their first course was served.

The chilled baby spinach and mint soup that Georg had sent to start their meal was so bright and fresh and such a strong contrast with the food she'd eaten recently that Ashlynn was completely absorbed in her food for several minutes before she finally began to talk about her experience at the summer villa.

She started from the beginning, integrating into the kitchens, through Kaefin's arrival, the feast with Owain, and everything that happened afterward. As embarrassing as it was to describe her conversation with Samira or skulking about in the cellars, she left nothing out, right up until the end of her duel with Sir Broll.

"So, did I... do well?" Ashlynn asked when she finally reached the end of her story, sometime after the soup had been replaced with succulent herb-crusted lamb and whipped parsnips.

The stark contrast between the rich, heavy dishes with exorbitant portions that she'd prepared for Owain's feast and Georg's far more delicate dishes helped to provide a layer of emotional separation from the events in the villa, like it had happened in a different time and place entirely.

"Is that the question you really want to ask?" Nyrielle asked with a raised eyebrow. "If you're looking for a grade on your work from a tutor, shouldn't you ask Thane or Marcell? They can tell you about where you performed well and where you could improve just as well or better than I could."

Ashlynn took a deep breath, trying to gather enough courage to ask the questions she'd been keeping bottled up. She hoped to ease into things but it was clear that Nyrielle saw through her.

"When you killed Cellach Lothian, after what he did to your parents," Ashlyn started, looking up from the bones that were all that remained of her dinner to meet Nyrielle's sapphire eyes. "What did that feel like?"

"At the time?" Nyrielle asked rhetorically. "Or now? The more time that passes, the more your perspective will shift on matters of revenge. The heart can only burn with the fires of hatred for so long before either everything that fuels your hatred is consumed or your heart itself is."

"At the time," she continued, her eyes growing distant as she stared at the stars above. "I felt like a bucket of cool water had been poured over the fire that burned in my chest ever since my parents died. Finally, there was relief."

"After that, I was hollow for a time. I didn't know what to do once I'd claimed Cellach's life so I returned to the vale to lick my wounds and help my people recover from the war we'd fought. Time passed," she said, taking a sip of dark red wine and swirling the remnants in her goblet.

"Are you, are you glad that you did it?" Ashlynn asked, fidgeting with her own wine glass. She wasn't certain that was the right question but it was the only way she could think to phrase it.

"I don't think glad is the right word," Nyrielle said, returning her gaze to the woman across the table from her and offering a gentle smile.

"But if I hadn't done it, I would have been consumed by it to the end of my days. In a way, I could have claimed victory simply by watching Cellach die of old age, but I would have hated myself for letting him live a comfortable life after what he did. Does that help?"

"I guess it does," Ashlynn said, setting her wine down. "I thought I would feel more after killing Broll but mostly, I feel a small measure of relief and greater confidence that I can finish what still needs to be done."

"The fire you described," Ashlynn said, clenching one hand into a fist. "It's still there. I don't think it's any smaller. After seeing Samira, the fire is even hotter. But, it's not blocking my vision as much as it was before. I feel like I can see things ending and..." her voice trailed off as she forced herself to relax, unclenching her hand.

"I feel like there's something to look forward to after the fire is out," she said, reaching out to capture Nyrielle's slender fingers in her own. "Something that is more important than Owain's death."

"You don't have to wait until your revenge is settled to enjoy the things that bring you happiness," Nyrielle said, leaning over the table to caress Ashlynn's cheek softly. "Just because I was alone until I obtained revenge doesn't mean you should learn from me."

"Unlike me, your revenge is your own," Nyrielle said. "I would have felt guilty for enjoying life before I killed the man who murdered my parents. At the time, I didn't think their souls could rest until Cellach was dead. Any joy I had while he still breathed felt like an insult to them."

"But you, you should enjoy life," she whispered, pulling Ashlynn close enough to rest her forehead against the other woman's. "Let living well be part of your revenge."

"Show me," Ashlynn said, looking into Nyrielle's large, sapphire eyes from inches away. "I lived my life before in a cage, afraid of being exposed and hunted. I wasn't unhappy, but I was never free."

"So, show me," she whispered, placing all of her hopes and dreams in the vampire's hands. "Show me what it's like to be free to enjoy life."

Nyrielle's midnight blue eyes flickered with an intense light, a mixture of desire, hunger and a trace of tenderness. She stood slowly, her movements as fluid as water, and extended a hand to Ashlynn.

"Come with me," Nyrielle said, her voice low and rich with promise.

As Ashlynn took her hand, Nyrielle pulled her close, their bodies pressing together. This close, Ashlynn could feel Nyrielle's quickening heartbeat directly, perfectly in time with the echo of a heartbeat within her own chest.

"Oh, my darling Ashlynn," Nyrielle whispered, her lips brushing against Ashlynn's ear. "Tonight, I will show you what it means to truly enjoy life."

Moving slightly, she caught Ashlynn's earlobe with her teeth, biting too gently to break the skin but enough to draw a gasp from the witch in her arms.

Ashlyn's arms wrapped around Nyrielle, her hands sliding over the black lace of the other woman's dress and clutching at her slender shoulders for support when the vampire's bite turned her knees to jelly.

"Tonight, you are mine," Nyrielle whispered directly into Ashlynn's ear, her arms enveloping the young witch in a tender embrace. "And I am yours."