The Vampire 139

Chapter 139 139: Nyrielle's True Face

When they reached the windowless room in the depths of the castle, Ashlynn found that several changes had been made. Several oil heaters had been lit in the corners of the room, raising the temperature to a level that felt like a sauna after so much time spent in the icy cold even though it was little warmer than a late spring day in the Vale of Mists.

Beyond that, dozens of candles had been lit around the room and soft fabrics had been draped on all of the walls, trapping the heat and filling the room with a softly flickering golden glow. This much open flame in the Frost Walker fortress would doubtless be considered rude by their hosts but Nyrielle had ceased to care when they failed to keep her precious Ashlynn safe on a simple fishing trip.

Once they were alone, Nyrielle did something completely unexpected. After setting Ashlynn down on the bed, the ancient vampire knelt on the cool stone floor and bowed her head low.

"My darling, Ashlynn," she said softly. All traces of her domineering and commanding presence had vanished from her voice, replaced by a slight tremble that started in her voice and spread along her arms to the tips of her fingers.

"I should never have trusted others to keep you safe. Today, I nearly lost you," she said, looking up at Ashlynn with her dark, inhuman eyes. "And it would have been my fault. Please, forgive me," she said, searching Ashlynn's face for a trace of what her young lover felt.

"You cannot protect me from everything," Ashlynn said, reaching out to caress Nyrielle's sharp features with the tips of her fingers. "If you did, I would be no different from a violet grown under glass. Beautiful, fragile, and unable to be touched. You don't want that," Ashlynn said firmly. "And neither do I."

"Still," the vampire said, capturing Ashlynn's hands and holding them gently like a captured dove. "It was too soon. I will keep you closer in the High Fen. Once you have learned from the Mother of Thorns, perhaps my heart will be at ease even when I am not by your side."

"And will you be like this in the High Fen?" Ashlynn said, looking over Nyrielle's altered figure and her dark, feathered wings. Seen up close, she realized that far more had changed about Nyrielle than just her wings, fangs, and eyes.

Her entire body felt… longer. Her fingers were longer, more slender, and ended with long, sharp nails. Her legs had grown longer as had her arms and torso and in the process, the bones of her body felt sharper and more prominent as if her pale skin had been stretched to accommodate a longer, taller frame.

Her face looked even sharper with higher cheekbones and eyes that weren't just dark, they felt like they'd sunken deeper into the sockets of her eyes. It was a transformation that made her look fiercer, hungrier, and more inhuman than Ashlynn had ever seen her before.

"Is this," Ashlynn began to ask, biting her lower lip as she sought the words. "Is this the real you? The 'vampire' version of you? Is the face you usually show the world just a mask?"

"It's not like that," Nyrielle said. "This is real. That is also real. I should have told you sooner but I didn't want you to…" I didn't want you to be afraid of me. She couldn't bring herself to say it but she felt it to her bones. She'd shown Ashlynn early on what it looked like when she fed on others so that she would understand but she'd never shown her this side of herself.

"My savior," Ashlynn said, leaning in close and bestowing a kiss on Nyrielle's forehead before she pulled the other woman into bed with her. Up close, the vampire's presence was even more otherworldly and overwhelming but Ashlynn refused to flinch from this side of her lover.

"You're beautiful," Ashlynn whispered, tracing her fingers along Nyrielle's cheek, down her neck and along the scoop of her dark lace dress just under the clavicle. "Like a raven swooping out of the darkness to snatch me back from the brink of death and disaster. My heroine."

"You don't mind?" Nyrielle asked hesitantly. "I don't frighten you like this?"

"You said that this is real, and so is the face you wore when we bound ourselves together," Ashlynn said. "I just need to get to know this face too. Your wings," she said, reaching out and tracing gently along the soft, black feathers of the graceful wings that Nyrielle had folded close against her back. "What do they feel like?"

"Sensitive," the vampire said, her face heating involuntarily at Ashlynn's intimate caress. "When the wind flows through my wings I can feel every feather, like fingers through my hair but when you touch them, it's…" her breath caught as Ashlynn's exploring fingers found a particularly sensitive spot. "It's like you're touching the ridge of my hip or the skin of my thigh, it's very…."

"Should I stop?" Ashlynn asked. This was a side of Nyrielle that she hadn't seen before. Uncertain and vulnerable in a way that was different than what she'd seen the night before. It was as though she'd expended her dominance on outsiders and what was left when they returned was a version of Nyrielle that was just as fragile as Ashlynn herself had been.

Part of her wanted to scoop the vampire into her arms and offer her gentle comfort. They had both been through a great deal and simple touch alone would be comforting. A different part of her,

however, wanted to go further than simple touch. To reassure Nyrielle with unmistakable actions that she accepted this version of her lover as well as the face she showed the world more frequently.

"It's dangerous if you go to far when I'm like this," Nyrielle said, capturing Ashlynn's hands again even though she wanted nothing more than to drown in the other woman's touch. "It's much, much harder for me to hold back when I'm like this and you're far too intoxicating."

"You mean that I'm too weak to stop you when you're like this," Ashlynn said, a trace of bitterness coloring her voice even though she tried to suppress it. "We're still too unequal, you and I. Will I ever catch up to you? Or will you always be impossibly far ahead of me."

"Oh, you will catch me, I have no doubt," Nyrielle said, pulling Ashlynn into a tight embrace and folding a wing around them. "You've worked so hard, come so far, so fast. Some day, I may be the one feeling that things have grown too unequal between us. When that day comes, you must make sure to dote on me," she teased.

"Then, then you have to dote on me more until I'm the stronger one," Ashlynn said, a twinkle forming in her emerald eyes. "I'll only spoil you as much as you spoil me."

"Then prepare yourself, my darling," Nyrielle said, her dark eyes beginning to return to normal as she withdrew much of her power. Her sharp features seemed to soften and she gasped as her wings visibly shrank before withdrawing back under her snow-white skin, leaving behind two faint red lines that ran down her finely sculpted back.

"I will not feed on you tonight," she whispered, brushing her lips over Ashlynn's ear. "But that doesn't mean I won't devour you…"