

The Vampire 161

Chapter 161 161: Has Nyrielle Changed?

Ashlynn and Nyrielle talked with High Lady Erna late into the night. Their host kept a near endless supply of bite-sized dishes flowing, accompanied by more varieties of wine than Ashlynn had ever sampled in a single sitting. Each time she thought she'd learned to anticipate the strength of Eldritch wine, a new variety would appear that tasted of berries or honey but hit her like an anchor dropped into deep water, pulling her under faster than she realized.

"Mistress Nyrielle," Ashlynn said with intense concentration, trying very hard to form proper words. "Your wings are very beautiful tonight. Did you know they're made of feathers? And they're the best blankets. You should wrap me up in your wings like a gift that you can unwrap later when you want to unwrap your best gift," she rambled, snuggling up close to the vampire and reaching out to caress wings that weren't there.

"I think perhaps my darling has had enough wine," Nyrielle said, unable to suppress her smile as Ashlynn's usual composure dissolved into earnest affection. This close together, the combination of flushed cheeks and a quickened pulse gave her lover an innocent, defenseless charm that was difficult to resist taking advantage of.

"I haven't had enough of you though," Ashlynn declared, attempting to look stern but instead managing to look like a kitten trying to intimidate a lion. "I never have enough of you. Even when you're right here, I miss you terribly." She paused, blinking slowly. "It's the sun's fault," she added, turning to glower at the night sky. "It takes you away from me."

"I, I shouldn't, should, stop. Here," Ashlynn said with some difficulty and a great deal of embarrassment as she saw the amused expressions on both Nyrielle's and Erna's faces. Never in her life had she drunk to such an intoxicated state and to do so in front of the High Lady of the High Fen... she only hoped the other woman didn't take it as any kind of insult.

"Heila can take care of you, my favorite morsel," Nyrielle said, leaning in to steal a kiss from Ashlynn's lips. "Little Snake and I still have things to discuss."

Erna's unblinking eyes twinkled as she watched Nyrielle's gaze soften while watching her Seneschal's clumsy affection. The Blood Princess she remembered would never have been so tender or unguarded but somehow, the gentle affection on her refined features looked even more fitting than the cold distance she was accustomed to from her former teacher.

"I can't have me," Ashlynn told Nyrielle sternly. "I belong to the most beautiful vampire in the world and she doesn't share!"

"This way Ashlynn," Heila said gently, turning Ashlynn in place and giving her a gentle shove in the right direction. "Let me help you get ready for bed."

"Quite the Seneschal you've acquired for yourself, Auntie," Erna said as she watched the diminutive horned woman leading the tipsy witch away.

"Mmm," Nyrielle said, licking her lips and savoring the lingering taste of Ashlynn's kiss. "I've never seen her let go this much before. Your welcome was wonderfully effective at helping her to lower her guard."

"Is she usually more defensive? She seemed very open and eager, even if she struggled a bit with the Eldritch tongue," Erna observed, reclining on her overstuffed sofa and gesturing for one of her servants to bring over a different dish. As delightful as the meal of small bites had been, she wanted to finish off her evening with something more... lively.

Moments later, a servant appeared with a small silver cage that contained small pudgy mice. These particular mice had been fed a diet of milk soaked grains until their bodies took on a flavor that was rich and fatty. By the time they were deemed ready for consumption, their bodies had grown too round for their feet to reach the ground but to Erna, this was the best way to enjoy a delicacy that had been rendered utterly helpless by its own gluttony.

"My Ashlynn is young," Nyrielle said, unbothered by her host's choice of mignardise. The bodies of the men Nyrielle had fed on earlier in the evening had long been cleared away and in truth, Nyrielle was impressed that Erna had waited so long to include a live course in their tasting meal. "She's only been free from human dogma and control for a few months now."

"She needed this," Nyrielle added, twirling a wine goblet between two slender fingers. "Young Ritchel let his council of elders get out of hand. One of them conspired with Tuscans and attacked my Ashlynn while she was on an outing with little Hauke."

As Nyrielle spoke, a trace of shadowy energy lifted from her hands, wrapping around the goblet and instantly corroding the silver before she suppressed the flare of irritation and set the goblet aside.

"Auntie," Erna said, sitting up straight and staring at Nyrielle in shock. "Do you... do you have real feelings for this woman? You aren't just mimicking affection for her benefit?"

"It would seem it's not impossible," Nyrielle said with a smile. According to the True Vampire who tutored her, any progeny she made would experience a gradual death of emotions. Contentment was supposedly the first to die, followed by irritation, enjoyment, anxiety, surprise until eventually they lost even jealousy, anger and love. Death was like a millstone, grinding away the ability to feel.

True vampires, however, never had feelings to begin with. That which had never been alive couldn't know the passions and agonies that came with life. Instead, her tutor insisted that True Vampires could only mimic the emotions they'd seen in others.

For Nyrielle, this hadn't seemed to be true at all. As much as she respected her teacher, she constantly reminded herself that vampires, true or progeny, existed at the edge between life and death, neither alive nor dead. Her heart knew how to feel but it took much, much more effort for anything to stir her heart, whether it was to love or to hate.

She'd lost herself in hatred when her parents died. Her blood burned too hot for it to be anything else. Now that she had Ashlynn... she couldn't deny that her heart had been stirred again. More than that, when things related to Ashlynn, she found it easier to feel other things. Pride, anger, and a host of other feelings, both good and bad, stirred within her when things were related to the witch she'd bound herself to.

"No wonder you seem so different from before," Erna said, devouring another mouse and washing it down with half a goblet of wine. "I never thought the ruthless Blood Princess I adored would become a pure-hearted woman in love."

"Hardly pure-hearted," Nyrielle said with a dismissive snort. "I thought that emptiness was the best I could hope for after avenging my parents and grandsire. I was still very numb when we first met. I never gave you the praise I should have. I'm amazed you don't resent me for the way I treated you back then."

"I never expected praise or affection from you," the serpentine woman said. "It was enough that you taught me how to be strong. How to eliminate my enemies and my opponents. Father told me that I would have to find pride in my victories and to treat that pride as a gift given by you. I didn't understand then, but I did eventually."

"And now, you have all this," Nyrielle said, gesturing to the opulent gardens and the vast city beyond. "Was it worth it?"

"A thousand times over," Erna said without a trace of hesitation in her voice. "Inheriting father's legacy wasn't easy. The throne was hard to hold in my first few years. There were constant challenges. I did as you said, their deaths were public and pitiful. The challenges stopped eventually when people understood the message."

"I'm proud of you, Little Snake," Nyrielle said, leaning across the table to gently cup the serpentine woman's face. "I couldn't say it then, but I can now. Not that you require my pride or acknowledgment. You've come this far with your own strength."

"I don't need it," Erna agreed, relaxing into Nyrielle's hand. "But I've still craved it. Thank you."

"You're not that different from my darling Ashlynn," the vampire said, lightly stroking the other woman's scaled scalp "A shame that Ritchel and the other boys aren't so easy to handle."

"Do you want my help with Ritchel?" Erna asked, her unblinking gaze turning serious. "If he's out of line..."

"Ritchel has been handled," Nyrielle said, waving off the notion. "But I will need your help with other matters. The Lothians are finally preparing for another Holy War. This time, I may need help to keep them from crossing the mountains."

"I see," Erna said, frowning at the news. "Tell me what's been happening. Your letters contained very little information. Once I understand where things stand with you and the others who are holding the line, we can discuss ways the High Fen can lend its strength..."