The Vampire 79

Chapter 79 79: The Price of Rapid Improvement

The crescent moon had made its way across the sky but it was still too early for the stars to fade into the morning light when Thane called a stop to their training session.

Ashlynn slumped, leaning against a wooden training dummy and sliding down until she sat on the worn cobblestones of the training yard. Her chest heaved and steam rose from her body in the cool night air. Every muscle in her arms, back, and legs felt like it was on fire and her hands trembled, no longer capable of gripping her sword after so many exchanges with Thane.

A normal warrior, if pushed so far beyond their limits, would take at least two or three days of rest before they were back in fighting condition. Ashlynn, however, had come to realize that the fire she felt now would fade with a few hours of sleep, leaving her once again stronger and faster than she'd been the day before.

This rapid growth wouldn't last forever, but as long as she could take advantage of it, she was immensely grateful to Thane for helping her wring every drop of potential from the opportunity her pact with Nyrielle gave her.

"Thank you," she said, resting her head against the wooden dummy and flashing Thane a tired smile. "Šolir," she said a moment later, correcting herself to speak in the Eldritch tongue.

"Don't praise him too much," Nyrielle said, her musical voice coming from the entrance to the training yard. "I may understand and even agree with the need to push hard, but there are limits," she added, seeming to vanish from the entrance of the training yard only to appear a moment later, kneeling on the cobblestones next to Ashlynn.

"This really is too much," she said softly, brushing a cold hand across Ashlynn's flushed face. "Come with me."

"No, I'm fine," Ashlynn insisted. She tried to push Nyrielle's hand away but found that her arm, covered in armor, felt like it had become as heavy as her sword and even when she tried to lift it, the stubborn limb refused to cooperate.

"What you mean is that you'll recover," Nyrielle said, a hint of warmth showing in her usually cool midnight blue eyes. "So let me help you," she added, gently scooping Ashlynn up in her arms, armor and all, as though she weighed no more than a pillow.

Nyrielle wasn't unaware of the intensity of Ashlynn's training, in fact, she'd spent several minutes watching her darling witch struggle to keep up with Thane's superior skill before making up her mind to do something for Ashlynn.

A few breaths after she'd scooped Ashlynn up from the training yard, Nyrielle carried her into the opulent bath attached to her personal chambers. The water wasn't as hot and steamy as it had been before but it was still warm enough to be comforting and more importantly, to help relieve the tension from Ashlynn's quivering muscles.

"Nyrielle, no," Ashlynn protested weakly when she realized where Nyrielle had brought her. "I'm sorry, but, I don't think I'm strong enough for you to feed on me right now. I, I…"

She wasn't sure what to say or how strongly she should say it. Nyrielle had refused to feed on her more than once when Ashlynn offered, usually because it wasn't the right moment for Ashlynn. Not once had Nyrielle given her the impression that she didn't want to sink her fangs into her tender flesh, but she resisted even when Ashlynn felt like she needed to make the offer.

Now, however, for the first time, it was Ashlynn who was saying 'no.' She felt far too exhausted to offer any of her strength to Nyrielle. If she did, she was afraid that she would spend the last few days of her blossoming period in bed recovering instead of pushing herself the way she felt she needed to. But, would Nyrielle accept her 'no'?

"My silly little witch," Nyrielle teased, her fingers deftly working at the straps and buckles that held Ashlynn's armor in place, carefully removing each piece and setting it aside. "I didn't bring you here to feed on you. I brought you here because you've pushed yourself so hard that you barely have the strength to stand."

While Nyrielle knew that Thane would have helped Ashlynn out of her armor and handed her over to Heila's tender care to see the exhausted witch to bed, doing so would fall far short of the care that the vampire felt Ashlynn needed tonight.

Once the final layer of padded armor was peeled away, Ashlynn felt like she could at least remove her own tunic, only to find that her joints had become stiff and didn't want to move any more than her muscles wanted to.

When Nyrielle lifted the tunic up over Ashlynn's head, the young woman flinched, drawing in a sharp hiss of breath as several spots on her aching body protested the movement. Nyrielle's fingers traced gently over Ashlynn's pale flesh, following the path of long, slender bruises that covered her ribs, upper arms and even her lush thighs.

For a moment, Nyrielle couldn't help but think of the first time she'd met Ashlynn, her body likewise covered with bruises that concealed even worse damage from the savage beating she'd received on the night of her marriage to Owain Lothian.

This time, the injuries weren't nearly as serious. No bones lay broken beneath the green, yellow and purplish bruises that covered Ashlynn's body like the stripes on a tiger. Her breath, though shallow, lacked the ragged wheeze of a punctured lung and her eyes, though they struggled to stay open against the pull of exhaustion, weren't clouded by pain that would overwhelm a weaker woman.

"I'll heal by nightfall," Ashlynn insisted, struggling to meet Nyrielle's midnight gaze as the vampire inspected the marks on her body. "Please, don't blame Thane for these," she added, suddenly worried that Nyrielle would misunderstand.

She'd been the one who insisted on pushing her body and developing her toughness. Thane himself had spent days enduring harsh punishment with an iron rod during his blossoming period for just such a reason and when he'd told her about it she realized that asking him to restrain his blows during practice was denying her an opportunity to harden herself the same way.

Pain, she learned, was a valuable teacher, and once Thane started landing solid hits on her body she grew much better at blocking or avoiding them.

"I'm not upset with Thane," Nyrielle said, flashing Ashlynn a reassuring smile that displayed a hint of her elongated fangs. As much as Nyrielle had no intention to feed, the multitude of bruises on Ashlynn's skin brought blood too close to the surface for her to completely ignore. She only hoped that Ashlynn was too tired to notice or she might misunderstand Nyrielle's intentions.

Taking a deep breath to steady herself and repress the signs of her rising hunger, Nyrielle quickly removed her own dress before scooping Ashlynn back up off the cedar bench.

"I know you will heal," Nyrielle said softly as she carried Ashlynn to the deep, steaming marble pool. "But that doesn't mean you don't need to be cared for. Just because you can recover, doesn't mean you

should suffer through every ache and pain," she insisted as she slowly lowered Ashlynn into the warm, lavender scented water.