

The Vampire 105

Chapter 105 105: Sharing Grief

While arrangements had been made to ensure that they were comfortable, the room that Ashlynn and Nyrielle retired to after the banquet clearly spent much of the year as a storeroom in the back of the fortress.

Carved from the rock of the mountain itself, the room met all of Nyrielle's requirements. There was only one door in, there were no windows that could let sunlight in, and a heavy bar could be thrown across the door from the inside to ensure she was undisturbed during daylight hours.

As a place to store a chest of clothing and her daybed for a few days' visit, it was more than adequate on those points alone. As a place for Ashlynn to stay, however, their hosts had taken additional steps to make the room comfortable.

A large feather bed had been brought in with four posts hung with heavy curtains to keep warmth close to the bed in the chilly castle. Luxurious furs had been heaped atop the blankets to ensure that even on the coldest nights, she could sleep comfortably and two oil heaters burned in the corners of the room, though from the aroma, Ashlynn assumed that there was a fishy component to the oils being used.

"Nyrielle," Ashlynn said softly, capturing her lover's hands after she closed the door. The vampire hadn't objected when she sent Zedya and Heila away for the night without letting either of them prepare them for bed, but in truth, Ashlynn wasn't sure she'd even noticed.

"It's okay," she said softly, wrapping her arms around Nyrielle's waist and pulling her close. "They don't know how hard tonight was for you, but I know. You don't have to hold it in anymore."

Nyrielle's heart shook and her body trembled in Ashlynn's embrace. For a moment, she couldn't move, didn't know how to move when Ashlynn wrapped her arms around her. How long had it been, since someone came to comfort her? More than a hundred years. Long enough to lock away the feeling of a mother's embrace or a father's calloused hand ruffling her hair. Long enough to bury even the furry, crushing hug of her grandsire Torbin.

"Come, sit with me," Ashlynn said, feeling her lover's awkwardness. Gently, she pulled Nyrielle toward the bed and sat next to her, never letting go of the other woman's hand. "You've been so very strong for me when my world fell apart," Ashlynn whispered, gently stroking Nyrielle's back. "It's my turn to be strong for you. For the rest of the night, you don't need to be the Lady of the Vale anymore, you can just be my Nyrielle."

Sitting next to Ashlynn, Nyrielle's heart beat faster and her breathing became shallow as a sob struggled to free itself from her chest. To Paulus, and perhaps to all of the Frost Walkers, Nyrielle's progeny were nothing more than powerful warriors who gained the strength of a vampire on top of their own Eldritch gifts.

To Nyrielle, however, each of them carried a piece of her within their own heart. To turn a person into one of her progeny was to slice away a tiny part of herself and give it to someone else so that they could defy death. Each time she made a new vampire, she needed at least a month to recover, but it was better for her to wait a year.

Yet, in the days after her parent's murder, she'd sliced away forty-seven pieces of herself in the span of just ten days. Worse, she flung them directly into war with the Lothians, without giving them the time they needed to fully grow into their powers. When Paulus called her cruel for letting so many of them die, it was hard to argue that she hadn't been cruel... she was cruel to them from the very beginning.

And when they died, when each one of them finally fell from the knife's edge between life and death, it tore that piece of her away again. No vampire ever spoke of it to outsiders, doing so would expose far too great of a weakness, but she felt each and every one of their deaths as though the wounds heaped upon their bodies had been inflicted on her.

"It wasn't fair to them," Nyrielle said softly between sobs. "If I hadn't been so impatient, if I'd given them time to grow..."

"Then how many of your people would have died instead?" Ashlynn said softly, pulling Nyrielle into an embrace and resting the vampire's head on her full bosom. "I could never make the choice you did. No one could. People like Paulus who never had to have no right to make you feel bad for what you did."

Thane was the oldest of Nyrielle's current progeny. When Ashlynn spoke to him about what Nyrielle was like a hundred years ago, she almost didn't recognize the cold, haunted woman he described.

Thane had said that with each new progeny she made in the decades after him, it felt like Nyrielle became a little more human and that she walked a bit further out of the nightmare she'd lived in since the death of her original progeny, but it was clear to Ashlynn that much of Nyrielle was still trapped in those dark days.

"Is that why you waited for me to finish growing?" Ashlynn prompted. "Because it was time you couldn't give to them?"

"Mmm," Nyrielle said, clutching tightly to Ashlynn. "Until tonight, I thought I was the last one who remembered them. I didn't think I'd meet someone who saw me the night I took them in. I didn't think Paulus would stoop so low," she added, her eyes flashing with a hint of darkness and her fingernails sharpening into claws until she forced herself to relax.

"I'll deal with Paulus," Ashlynn said soothingly. "Lord Ritchel is an honorable man, but the Frost Walkers are simple when it comes to politics. They're too isolated to practice much. You can let me worry about them. Right now, I want to help you."

Shifting on the bed, Ashlynn began to unlace Nyrielle's dark dress, exposing her bone white skin to the cool air of the room. Gently, she peeled off the layers of Nyrielle's outfit until her lover lay bare before her on the soft furs of the bed.

"Tonight, until the sun rises," Ashlynn said, shimmying out of her own heavy winter dress. "Come under the blankets with me. I'll hold you, all night long," she whispered, pulling Nyrielle close as she threw back the blankets and furs to slide into bed.

"Then, if you'd like, you can tell me about them," Ashlynn said. Nyrielle's skin was colder to the touch than Ashlynn had ever felt, as though she'd been buried in the snow for hours before coming into the room and Ashlynn wrapped herself around her lover from legs to arms until they were pressed close enough together to feel each other's heartbeats through their skin.

"I wasn't there to know them," Ashlynn said softly. "But if you tell me, then I can remember them with you."

The moment Ashlynn said that, Nyrielle's eyes flashed open, a pinkish tear spilling from her eyes.

"You, you don't need to bear their tragedies," Nyrielle said, shaking her head. "It's enough that you'd make the offer."

"All right," Ashlynn said. For a moment, she considered insisting. Nyrielle had taken on her burdens but she didn't feel like she'd taken on nearly enough of Nyrielle's. Their relationship still felt too unequal.

But, as she held her trembling lover, Ashlynn realized that this moment of vulnerability was already greater than anything Nyrielle had ever shared with her. As much as she wanted Nyrielle to unburden herself further, this moment was already a large step forward.

Neither of them spoke further as Ashlynn shared her warmth, tangled together under the pile of furs. By the time dawn approached, however, when Nyrielle finally slipped out of the soft bed and into her coffin-like daybed, her heart felt lighter than it had in longer than she could remember.

Perhaps one day she would tell Ashlynn about the forty-five who died in those terrible wars. Perhaps one day, she would even ask for Ashlynn's help to save the two who hadn't. But at the moment, that day wasn't today, even if it felt like it might be possible... someday.