

The Vampire 129

Chapter 129 129: Leaving the Tomb

Several minutes passed while Ashlynn and Nyrielle held each other. Neither of them wanted to be the first to pull away but even sheltered by Nyrielle's dark, feathered wings, Ashlynn found herself struggling in the invasive cold of the underground tomb.

"You never told me you had wings," Ashlynn said, stepping back and looking at Nyrielle's pale, artfully sculpted face. With her dark hair falling in ringlets and the black wings wrapped around them, she looked like a fallen angel that had come to rescue her from the depths of some horrible nightmare.

"I'm not dreaming, am I?" Ashlynn said, reaching out and gently cupping Nyrielle's face. "You really came for me?"

"I'll always come for you," Nyrielle promised, leaning into Ashlynn's touch. "But darling," she purred, leaning close to whisper in Ashlynn's ear. "You can't keep torturing me like this. Finding you covered in wounds, it's..."

"I know," Ashlynn said, lowering her head. "But I'll heal. Andrus... he..."

"I see," Nyrielle said softly, brushing Ashlynn's blond hair aside and lifting her chin to meet her gaze. "It should be dark enough now for Zedya to reach the lake. Let's take you all back to the castle. Lord Ritchel owes us an explanation," she said, her voice growing cold as she directed a dark look at Hauke.

"It was Paulus," the young Frost Walker protested. "He's the one who conspired with the Tuscans."

"Tuscans?" Nyrielle said, raising an eyebrow. "I don't see any Tuscans here. No, I will have an accounting for all of this, including your part in it, little lord."

"Nyrielle," Ashlynn said, pulling the vampire's midnight blue gaze back to her. "Hauke helped to save me. So did Heila."

"I understand, my darling. We will hear it all out and those who must be punished for what happened tonight will suffer for their crimes," Nyrielle promised. "Just like those who rose above themselves will be rewarded," she added, giving Heila a small smile.

"Now, let's go," she said, scooping Ashlynn up in her arms and carrying her back into the tunnel. "You may collect their horns, young Hauke," Nyrielle said as she passed by him. "Whatever they became at the end, they were once your honored ancestors. You may still treat them as such."

"Th-thank you," Hauke said, bowing deeply before dashing to the places where the iridescent horns had fallen. Each of them showed some damage from the recent battle, cracks that ran along their surface, or a tip that had chipped, but all of them still held traces of both power and presence.

They may have been greatly diminished after becoming the... thing that they had been, and the battle had taken its toll on them, but at least something of those honored ancestors still remained.

When Nyrielle and the others reached the low point in the ancestral cave that slipped beneath the waterline, Nyrielle gave Ashlynn an awkward look.

"I'm sorry, my darling, I know you're injured, but I need at least a small trace of your power to leave this place," she said.

"Mmm," Ashlynn nodded, closing her eyes and turning her head to bare her neck. "Take what you need."

"Not that much," Nyrielle said, lowering her head and brushing her lips over Ashlynn's. Her tongue darted out, gliding across Ashlynn's chapped and abused lips, teasing them open before going further with barely restrained hunger. A fang pricked ever so lightly on Ashlynn's lower lip, spilling a few drops of blood that the vampire eagerly devoured.

The wound closed almost instantly, but the kiss lasted longer as Ashlynn wrapped her arms around Nyrielle's neck, running her fingers through the other woman's dark curls and drinking in the softness of her lover's lips. When they finally parted, both Hauke and Heila were awkwardly staring at the wall, neither daring to look until Nyrielle spoke.

"Recede before royalty," Nyrielle commanded, her voice dark and rich with a combination of her sorcery and Ashlynn's living witchcraft. When she spoke, the water level in the cave dropped, rolling away from her as though bowing to her majesty with each step she took.

"Follow closely," she said. "The water is avoiding us, but not you."

Once they stepped outside the cave, not only the water but broken chunks of ice left by Nyrielle's passage moved out of their way, allowing them to climb onto the dry land of the island without so much as their feet getting wet.

Stars twinkled in the clear night sky overhead and an even colder wind blew across the frozen lake than had been present during the day. Once they climbed high enough on the island to be above the waterline, Nyrielle released her magic and allowed water to flood back into the ancestral cave behind her.

"My Lady," Zedya said, stepping out of the shadows. Moving with a practiced ease, the amethyst-eyed vampire draped a warm, heavy blanket over Ashlynn, protecting her from the chill wind. Seeing Heila's bedraggled state, she also removed her own fur cloak, bundling it around the diminutive horned woman and scooping her up much the same way that Nyrielle carried Ashlynn.

"I'm glad you are still alive," Zedya said quietly as she tucked the cloak around Heila. "I hear that you did something very dangerous and very brave. You can sleep for now," she said, her eyes glowing with a faint amethyst light. "Sleep, and know that I am proud of you."

"I, I didn't fail her, this time..." Heila said softly as Zedya's words washed over her. Somehow, hearing that Lady Nyrielle's closest personal servant was proud of her warmed the horned woman's heart more than even praise from her own mother would, carrying her off to a sleep that was soft, comforting, and free of the nightmares she'd just survived.

"No, you didn't," Zedya whispered tenderly before she turned to Nyrielle and Ashlynn. "My Lady, we have a prisoner, Virve is standing guard while we await Captain Lennart and Lord Ritchel's men. Would you like to speak to the prisoner?"

"I would see him," Nyrielle said, "but then I will take Ashlynn back where it is warm. Show me."

Halfway around the small island, Zedya led Nyrielle to a sheltered hollow on the rocky shore where Virve sat watchfully by the Tuscan with a shattered knee. The man had succeeded in crawling over the ice to

reach the island, escaping the fate of his companions, only to be caught almost instantly when Zedya arrived.

Now, faint purple energy could be seen dancing in his glassy eyes as he stared numbly at the night sky. Despite his clear lack of ability to resist Zedya's Mesmerizing Gaze, Virve had still taken the heavy chain the Tuscan used as a weapon to bind his hands and prevent him from trying to escape.

Next to her, the sled they'd set out with in the morning had been stripped of most of its supplies. Instead, a small, wrapped body could be seen, secured to the sled alongside Ashlynn's sword. Strangely, the giant sturgeon they'd caught had also been lashed to the sled.

"My Lady," Virve said, standing stiffly and bowing despite the pain of her wounds.

"You can rest, Virve," Nyrielle said. "You kept my Ashlynn safe today. I will not forget."

"Thank you, my Lady," the bearish woman said, sinking back down to the ground. When she noticed Ashlynn's surprise at the fish, she offered a weak smile. "Andrus hooked it and he landed the felling blow. His family may never feast on it, but if Lady Ashlynn permits, I'll bring them the bones as a trophy of his achievement."

"You can," Ashlynn said, nodding quickly as she blinked away tears that threatened to freeze on her long lashes in the bitterly cold wind. A few hours ago, Andrus had been scampering around the icehouse, boasting about clubbing the fish unconscious and wondering what kind of feast they could make from such a 'monster' fish. Now, as quickly as they'd pulled the fish from the lake, his life and joyous smile had been taken from them.

"But the greater trophy should come from this man," she said bitterly, glaring at the captive Tuscan. "I do not expect we will leave him alive. When he dies, claim his tusks for Andrus. He had the courage to face down a giant nearly three times his size. His family should know that too. I, I hope that they would be proud," she said, her throat growing tight at the thought of Andrus's parents and his seven siblings learning of his death in the cold and frozen mountains.

All her life, Ashlynn had grown up reading about bold heroes winning great victories to leave their names in the history books. She'd also read countless tales of courageous men who made the ultimate sacrifice to protect something or someone dear.

At the time, such tales felt both romantic and tragic, but now, seeing a hero who had fallen to protect her, felt like a knife plunged in her chest and twisted. There was no honor or glory here, even though she would ensure that his family knew about his actions today. There was only bitterness at his loss and a simmering rage at the people responsible for such a senseless death.

"Of course, Lady Ashlynn," Virve said, giving the wounded Tuscan an angry stare. "Without Andrus, we wouldn't have a captive to testify to Paulus' treachery."

"Paulus," Nyrielle said darkly. "It's time that we go. Zedya, stay with them until Captain Lennart arrives, and then come join us. Bring Heila with you," she said before flapping her dark feathered wings and launching herself into the air.

"There will be an accounting for this," she promised Ashlynn as they glided through the night sky to the Frost Walker's fortress. "On that, you have my word."