

## The Vampire 189

### Chapter 189 189: Keeping Secrets

For Ashlynn, the end of the masquerade couldn't come fast enough. At first, it had been interesting to see so many different people and hear their unfiltered thoughts as they spoke from behind their masks.

When Jacques first made his appearance, Ashlynn allowed herself to be swept away by his combination of charming words and the feeling of resonance between her magic and his. It felt like she might have found a genuine friend in the midst of the masquerade.

That feeling didn't last and even after reprimanding him for harming Heila, she didn't know how to feel about the strange witch that would be accompanying her on her journey to meet the Mother of Thorns. She deeply wanted to develop a friendship with the strange reptilian man from the Ancient Clan but the guarded and hostile way that both Zedya and Nyrielle responded to him made it difficult to do so.

More than that, Jacques had all but said that he had come to protect her from Nyrielle, something that Ashlynn felt was utterly ridiculous and Nyrielle found to be deeply offensive. And yet... a lingering kernel of fear that she hadn't dispelled since the night after the opera left her wondering if there might be something she would need protection from.

As the hours of the masquerade slipped by, both Nyrielle and Ashlynn made the rounds politely, greeting prominent gladiators, notable merchants, and other powerful or well-connected people in High Fen City who felt it might be worth exploring additional opportunities in the Vale of Mists.

The work she and Nyrielle did was important, and Ashlynn did her best to say the right things at the right times but she knew that without Heila's help, she would have blundered through the evening. Her heart wasn't in it and if you asked her afterwards to name the people she'd spoken with, she'd have struggled to come up with more than one out of five names.

Finally, after hours of mingling with the powerful and well-connected people of High Fen City, Ashlynn, and Nyrielle managed to retreat to Ashlynn's room for a few hours alone together before the sun would rise, tearing them apart again.

The sounds of the masquerade still echoed faintly through the palace halls. Faint strains of music, bursts of distant laughter, and the soft shuffle of dancers' feet growing gradually quieter as more and more revelers made their way home through the cooling night air. In the distance, the sounds of numerous carriages clattering across the flagstone plaza could be heard as they whisked away tired and mostly content attendees.

In Ashlynn's luxurious chambers, only the gentle crackling of the fireplace and the whisper of silk against silk broke the silence as she wrapped her arms around Nyrielle from behind.

The heat from the fire couldn't quite chase away the predawn chill that crept through the stone walls. Ashlynn pressed closer to Nyrielle, savoring the coolness of her lover's skin through the layers of crimson silk and lace. She rested her head against Nyrielle's back, breathing in the familiar scent of night-blooming jasmine that always seemed to cling to the vampire's skin.

"Nyrielle," Ashlynn said, softly, finally gathering the courage to bring up things she'd wanted to ask since Jacques's appearance at the masquerade but hadn't been able to because of the press of people. "You haven't told me almost anything about the Mother of Thorns, and neither you nor Zedya ever mentioned this Jacques fellow. Now that he's here... is there something I should know?"

It wasn't quite the question she wanted to ask, or at least, it wasn't the way she wanted to ask it. But, even though she knew that Nyrielle kept things from her, she'd never felt that it was important to know those things. She still had so much to learn, Nyrielle couldn't possibly share everything with her. But now, for the first time, she felt like her lover might have held back something important.

"There are things about witches and vampires that you should know," Nyrielle said, folding her arms over Ashlynn's arms and gently stroking her lover's hands as she spoke. "I haven't told you much because... because I don't want to taint you."

"I don't understand," Ashlynn said, turning Nyrielle around in her arms so she could meet Nyrielle's gaze. It didn't help that the vampire's face had returned to the impassive mask that revealed so little of what she felt.

From the echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat within her chest, she felt a pensive sense of anxiety but everything beyond that was fuzzy and indistinct. It was as though her lover had placed her emotions behind a thick cloud of fog and Ashlynn could barely see anything through it.

"At first, you were uncertain about me," Nyrielle said. "Remember our first dinner together? You were afraid that I was only using you."

"I remember," Ashlynn said, closing her eyes and thinking back to that night. She'd been so off balance that her mind hadn't caught up to her circumstances at all. In the span of a day, she'd gone from her fairytale wedding to Owain to a brutal assault and a shallow grave. Then, Nyrielle had snatched her back from the brink of death with a ceremony that was even more intimate than a wedding.

By the time Ashlynn sat down to dinner with Nyrielle, she didn't know what she should think or feel about the woman who rescued her, but the closeness between them that flowed from the pact of blood they'd formed was very real. It left Ashlynn wondering if she'd discovered true love. Hearing that Nyrielle saw her as a way to break the stalemate in her long-running war with the Lothians... it spoiled a dream with a cold, hard reality.

Looking back, she'd been foolish to be hurt and Nyrielle had been nothing but honest with her. And yet, after Owain's assault and coming to understand that someone within her father's household had betrayed her... she'd been very guarded against Nyrielle.

"We're closer now," Ashlynn said, pulling Nyrielle close so she could rest her head on the other woman's chest and listen to her slow, steady heartbeat. "I like to think I understand you better. That you understand me better. So, if you couldn't tell me then, why not tell me now? Are you still worried about 'tainting' me?"

"I am still worried," Nyrielle said, lightly stroking Ashlynn's hair. "What I have to say, you may find it uncomfortable to hear. You may hear things differently from the Mother of Thorns. Originally," she said, pausing to tuck Ashlynn's head under her chin. "Originally, I intended to let you hear things from a fellow witch first. Someone you could trust not to have ulterior motives."

"The person I trust the most in this world is you," Ashlynn whispered. Nothing between them was perfect, but when things weren't perfect, they were at least open with each other and discussed it. They fumbled, they frightened each other at times, but every time they came back stronger.

If there was one thing in this world that Ashlynn was certain of, it was that Nyrielle would protect her, and that she had no desire to harm her. That didn't mean that Nyrielle wouldn't borrow Ashlynn's growing strength.

They were, after all, not just lovers, but a True Vampire and her Seneschal. There was a portion of their relationship that would always have a sense of hierarchy and an imbalance of power. But, as she grew, that imbalance kept shrinking and every time it did, Ashlynn came to trust Nyrielle a little bit more.

"Very well then," Nyrielle said, scooping Ashlynn up and carrying her over to the soft, feather bed. "I'll tell you what I've been holding back. About me and what it means to be a True Vampire, and then about you and what the blood of a witch can mean to vampires."

"If," Nyrielle started, hesitating slightly and biting her lower lip before she continued. "If, after hearing this from me, you would prefer to make the trip to the Briar without me, I'm sure that Jacques can bring you there safely. Or, if you just need time, I can stay away from you while we travel to give you the time."

"What you're about to tell me," Ashlynn said, reaching up to cup Nyrielle's face and looking deeply into her midnight blue eyes. "Does it contain the words 'I don't love you, I never loved you, or I will never love you?'"

"No," Nyrielle said, giving Ashlynn a weak smile. "I was once told that it is impossible for a True Vampire to love, but I loved my parents until the day they died, and I love them still even after they're gone."

"After they died, I thought I'd never love again, but," her voice trailed off and she let her eyes say the rest. It was still hard to speak the words, but if there was anyone in this world she could feel love for, then Ashlynn was that person.

"In that case, there's nothing you can say that will make me want to run away from you," Ashlynn promised. "So tell me, what is it that you've been afraid to say before? We still have an hour or two before the sun rises. If that's not enough time, we can pick up where we leave off tomorrow night."

"Very well," Nyrielle said, her tone becoming somber. "First, we have to speak of death..."