

The Vampire 90

Chapter 90 90: Arriving in The High Pass

After saying 'goodnight' to Nyrielle, Ashlynn clutched her fur-trimmed cloak tightly around her shoulders, shivering slightly as a sudden gust tugged at her cloak, threatening to rip it from her shoulders and piercing through the fabric of her dress like icy knives.

Today, the air was even more chill and Ashlynn had to ask Heila to bring in a small oil burning heater for the carriage to ward off the persistent chill that seeped in from outside. Snow lay in large drifts to the side of the ancient roadway and there were no longer any plants growing on the cold, rocky ground.

Whenever the road was exposed to the winds, fierce gusts shook the carriage and in one instance, the group had to stop when one of the wagons carrying supplies for Captain Lennart's men was blown into the deep gutter that ran alongside the roadway. Ashlynn herself volunteered to help pull the carriage free, using strength that would have stunned anyone who knew her as a shut-in who rarely left the library at home.

As the sun began to set, however, the train of carriages and wagons rounded the final bend of the ancient roadway before turning off the road and taking a steeper one that led to an imposing fortress overlooking the pass.

When she saw it, Lord Ritchel's castle immediately took Ashlynn's breath away. All thoughts about the cold and the treacherous mountain road were driven from her mind as she looked at the towering fortress that had either been carved directly into the face of the mountain or shaped from ice that refused to melt even in direct sunlight.

Some elements of the fortress were familiar to her. A deep trench had been carved outside a towering curtain wall and a long bridge crossed high over the trench to enter the fortress itself. All along the wall,

thick spikes of ice jutted out from the wall like icy nails ready to impale anyone who dared to scale the walls.

Human fortresses that used the concept would have used iron spikes but such works were prohibitively expensive and rarely seen. Here, however, it seemed so natural that Ashlynn found it hard to imagine the Frost Walkers creating a fortress without cladding it in an armor of icy spears.

Other elements of the fortress, however, were much stranger, serving no purpose that Ashlynn could understand. In several places, long platforms jutted out from the fortress, like icy fingers stretching out to grasp intruders or half-finished bridges to nowhere, glittering in the fading light with their own icy blue aura of dormant sorcery.

At the moment, more than twenty of those long platforms were lined with the bulky shapes of Frost Walkers, each of them holding a burning torch aloft in the growing gloom of the approaching night. Their crystalline horns caught the torchlight, reflecting and refracting it into hundreds of motes of glittering light.

The bridge itself was also lined with torch-bearing Frost Walkers, but Ashlynn's attention was fixed on the men between them standing behind drums so large that Ashlynn wouldn't be able to wrap her arms around them.

Each drummer held perfect posture, their cloth covered drumsticks poised above the taunt skins of their drums, and from the brief puffs of steam rising from them, even their breathing was tightly controlled and in perfect unison with the others in their group.

When the carriage approached the bridge, the drums began to sound, beating out a steady rhythm not unlike the beating of a heart. With each beat, the bridge beneath their feet trembled, shaking away the

loose snow that had collected on the bridge and triggering the soft sound of icicles cracking as they were shaken free from the ancient stone bridge.

The closer they came, the louder and faster the drums sounded until they drowned out the creak of the carriage, the sound of the wind tugging at cloaks or the crash of icicles falling into the dark chasm that ringed the mighty fortress.

As the drums reached their crescendo, a gate formed from a solid sheet of ice melted away, revealing several hulking Frost Walkers, wrapped in garments that seemed to be a single long piece of fabric, looped and tucked around their bodies until it formed both a long skirt and a half tunic that covered the chest and one arm, leaving the other arm bare.

Ashlynn's emerald eyes widened as she got her first look at the Frost Walkers. The shortest one in the delegation at the foot of the bridge stood over eight feet tall and the rest were a full head taller than him. Pale icy blue fur covered their bodies and their arms hung down below their knees.

More striking than their height and fur, however, were the glittering crystalline horns that stood out from their brows like the horn of a narwhal made of ice or glass. Beneath the horns, the Frost Walkers sported long, bushy eyebrows that hovered over a dark, leathery face and a mouth that seemed to be filled with sharp and pointed teeth.

The group of Frost walkers strode across the bridge with steps that maintained perfect unison despite the difference in their heights, each one falling in behind the shortest one who carried himself with an almost regal air that Ashlynn would have expected to see from any of the knights or young lords that attended her father's court.

The only difference was that this young lord carried not only an aura of physical power and poise but also left a trail of glittering frost in the air behind him as he moved. If Ashlynn had wondered before how

the future lord of the High Pass had been chosen, just seeing the overflowing energy that radiated from his crystalline horn was enough to make it clear that this man was special among his kind.

"I am Hauke, son of Lord Ritchel," the shortest figure bellowed when the carriage pulled to a stop. "In the name of my father, we welcome Lady Nyrielle and her Seneschal Ashlynn to the High Pass."

Behind him, the largest of the Frost Walkers glowered, his dark eyes glittering with a hint of malice toward the shorter lord. The expression on his face vanished, however, as soon as Heila arrived beside the door to the carriage, opening it and setting out a small step for Ashlynn to descend.

"Warm, Aura, Cloak," Ashlynn whispered, using a small amount of sorcery to surround herself in a barrier that kept the chill at bay and protected her from the cold energy that rippled through the air. If she needed to use sorcery to warm herself in the carriage, she'd have exhausted herself hours ago, and with a heater in the carriage, there was no reason to.

Now, however, first impressions were important and she refused to allow the Frost Walker's first sight of her to be of a woman shivering in the cold and clutching at her cloak. Instead, when she emerged from the carriage, she allowed the wind to catch her cloak and skirts, sending them snapping in the stiff breeze.

"My name is Ashlynn Blackwell," she said in carefully practiced Eldritch, her heart pounding in her chest. "Child of the Earth and Seneschal of Eldritch Lady Nyrielle of the Vale of Mists. We've come to visit with open hands and a gift for Eldritch Lord Ritchel. By your grace, may we enter the keep?"

Seeing the young witch standing in the cold, surrounded by the soft glow of her own sorcery, a smile blossomed on Hauke's face, displaying his many sharpened teeth.

"You are our honored guests," Hauke said, thumping his chest twice in time with drum beats from the row of drummers behind him. "I have prepared a closed chamber for your lady to exit her carriage. Please," he said, stepping aside to gesture to the bridge. "Have your men follow me."

"Thank you," Ashlynn said, walking carefully across the icy ground until she reached Hauke's side. "We'll be in your care."

"NO!" A powerful voice roared, coming from the largest Frost Walker in the group. With a powerful stride, the man stepped forward, placing a hand on Hauke's shoulder and pulling him back and away from Ashlynn. "My lord, you cannot let this, this human come so close to you!"

"Torsten, what is the meaning of this?" Hauke asked sharply, stumbling slightly on the icy ground as the larger man positioned himself between Ashlyn and Hauke. "They are our guests!"

"She walks in the daylight," Torsten growled, his pale blue fur rising up against the wind as an icy aura enveloped him, coalescing into a spear of solid ice hovering beside him, its wickedly sharp tip pointed directly at Ashlynn.

"She is no vampire of the vale," Torsten continued. "She claims to be a Child of the Earth. Before she's allowed in she should prove who she is. Show us, witch," he snarled, his voice booming above the sound of the wind. "Show us your mark!"