

The Vampire 91

Chapter 91 91: Unruly Rival

For a moment, when Torsten demanded that Ashlynn reveal her mark, no one moved or spoke.

A layer of frost formed over Hauke's fur as he trembled in a mixture of humiliation and rage. By standing between him and the witch, Torsten had all but shouted that Hauke was too weak to defend himself from Ashlynn while at the same time declaring that he was strong enough to face her in Hauke's place.

Then, he'd gone even further, insinuating that Ashlynn was a fraud, perhaps one of the human 'miracle workers' who had come with some kind of nefarious purpose. The notion should have been ludicrous yet when Torsten said 'Show us your mark', several of the other Frost Walkers nearby began to echo him!

"She should prove that she's really a child of the earth."

"There is no vampire to vouch for her, we need to see the mark!"

"This mountain is sacred, no human should defile it."

A faint whirlwind of icy crystals began to swirl around Hauke's feet and pale iridescent light flickered in his horn as he clenched his fists, a sharp rebuke forming on his lips. It was impossible for the Seneschal of a True Vampire to accept the insult Torsten had just made and it was doubly so for a Child of the Earth and Hauke intended to make it clear just how far out of line Torsten and his lackeys had stepped.

Before he could make a move or say a word, however, the human witch held up a hand and turned back to the glowering soldiers and servants from the Vale of Mists.

"Heila," Ashlynn said in the common human tongue, seemingly unperturbed by Torsten's icy spear floating menacingly in the air. "Please come translate for me. I do not wish there to be any misunderstandings."

"Yes, my Lady," the diminutive servant said, ducking her head and racing forward as quickly as her cloven feet would carry her. For a moment, she wondered if she should retrieve Ashlynn's sword from her carriage, but the weapon was heavy enough that even if Ashlynn had requested it, someone like Captain Lennart would need to carry it.

"I promise to repeat my Lady's words accurately," Heila told the gathered frost walkers, her gaze flickering between Hauke and Torsten before settling on the latter.

"Heila, did I understand correctly that this man wants to see my mark?" Ashlynn asked. While she hadn't caught every word he'd said, most of it was familiar enough for her to have a general understanding. When Heila nodded, she turned back to the glowering Torsten with the look one might give a disobedient child or an unruly teen.

"Heila," Ashlynn said, keeping her emerald eyes fixed on the Torsten's icy blue eyes. "Ask this Torsten if he has a woman and if she's present."

"My lady?" Heila asked, her heart pounding in her chest.

"Do it," Ashlynn insisted. "And make sure that I expect them to know the difference between the person who speaks and the person who translates for the speaker. If my words upset them, I will protect you," she added with a brief glance and a warm smile at Heila.

After Heila translated, the atmosphere turned strange and frost crystals began to form on Torsten's bushy eyebrows as he glowered at Ashlynn.

"My woman is no business of yours," he spat, raising his icy spear up higher as though he were about to hurl it at Ashlynn. "If you're truly a Child of the Earth, then prove it by showing your mark."

"Of course," Ashlynn said sweetly after Heila translated. "After you bring your woman here and strip her naked before all our men," she said, gesturing to Captain Lennart and his anxious-looking soldiers. "Once they've inspected her naked body, I'll let you inspect mine."

"My Lady," Heila said, her eyes wide with fear. "I, I can't. I can't say that," she said, shrinking down and lowering her head in shame. The spear hovering in the air glittered in the fading daylight and loomed large in Heila's vision, and behind it, the figures of Torsten and his lackeys seemed to blot out the darkening sky itself.

"Come back to the carriage little Heila," Captain Lennart said, flexing his claws as he strode forward. "I can speak for Lady Ashlynn."

"I'm sorry Heila," Ashlynn said, reaching out briefly to stroke the short woman's horns affectionately. "I shouldn't have put you somewhere dangerous. You can go back."

"My Lady," Lennart said politely, positioning himself slightly in front of Ashlynn. "I can repeat your words if you're certain."

"I am," Ashlynn said. Of all the things she expected, of all the things she'd discussed with Nyrielle, she'd never expected a demand to reveal the mark that lay next to her most intimate of areas and to do so in front of a crowd of men.

As is, she'd held herself back considerably but if it had been one of the young men who made rude remarks on her or her sister's body during one of the few banquets she'd attended, she wouldn't have hesitated to slap the words from the offending lord's mouth.

No, that wasn't entirely accurate. The woman she'd been then might have endured it with a polite smile or run off to hide behind her mother's skirts, but the woman she'd become since Owain tried to kill her would never accept such bald-faced abuse.

"She said that if you want to see her mark," Captain Lennart began in Eldritch, his eyes watching the shifts in Torsten's fur for the slightest violent twitch. "First bring your mate before my men, strip her naked, and allow us to inspect her fur with fingers."

The words he used weren't quite the same as the ones Ashlynn had used but the rage boiling in his chest matched or exceeded what Ashlynn must be feeling right now and he believed that the slight changes better reflected her intent than a literal translation would.

"You dare!" Torsten roared, his arm shooting into the air to hurl the icy spear forward.

As soon as his arm moved, Ashlynn moved as well, leaping into the air with a speed that no human could match.

"Mist Walker. Dance," Ashlynn breathed softly, power flowing within her as her feet stepped off empty air twice, leaving behind faint puffs of mist in the frigid air before she arrived beside Torsten, standing on nothing with her head slightly above his.

In the blink of an eye, her hand shot out, sliding through the Frost Walker's soft, frigid fur until her fingers found the leathery flesh of his ear. Pinching with all the strength she'd gained from her blood bond with Nyrielle, Ashlynn twisted sharply, the same way her mother had once disciplined her as a young child and pulled downward with all her might until her feet returned to the barren, frosty ground.

"You. Will. Learn. Manners," she said in halting Eldritch, her voice pitched loud enough to carry all the way to the fortress gates.

Hauke stared open-mouthed, his hand raised halfway to restrain Torsten. All around him, the Frost Walkers' looks of disbelief mirrored his own. They'd all been taught from a young age that sorcery was the only power in the High Pass. Witchcraft harnessed the power of life itself but in this frozen land, nothing grew to give strength to a witch.

The men who had backed Torsten started forward, power gathering in their horns as a layer of frost collected on their soft fur. They stopped a moment later, however, when Captain Lennart strode forward, followed by the rushing footfalls of half a dozen of his soldiers who formed a wall between Ashlynn and any of the frost walkers other than Torsten and Hauke.

Further back, the drummers and torchbearers shifted uncomfortably, uncertain what they were supposed to do when chaos erupted during what was supposed to be a simple ceremony. Martial

discipline held many of them in place but a few toward the back shifted uncomfortably, their eyes glancing at the gate as they tried to decide if they should run to alert Lord Ritchel to the disturbance.

"Let, me, OW!" Torsten howled as Ashlynn twisted harder, pulling up on his ear and dragging him forward until he couldn't keep his balance and fell to his knees.

Shaking off the frost that had collected on his fur, Hauke took a deep breath and stood up as tall and as straight as he could. Despite everything that had happened, he didn't believe that things needed to go any further. Besides, seeing Torsten brought low like a misbehaving child put a grin on his face that he didn't bother to hide.

"Seneschal Ashlynn," he began, stepping forward while trying to ignore the hostile look directed at him by Captain Lennart's men. "I..."

"Sir Hauke," Ashlynn said in the best Eldritch she could manage, flashing him a grin of her own as she twisted harder on Torsten's ear. "This should be proof enough, yes?"