

## The Vampire 92

### Chapter 92 92: Young And Old

"Seneschal Ashlynn," Hauke said, offering a polite bow. "You never needed to prove yourself to begin with. Lady Nyrielle's messenger arrived days ago to announce your arrival. There was never anything to prove."

"He seems to think otherwise," Ashlynn said after listening to Captain Lennart's translation. "As did some of your men," she added with a frown at Torsten's lackeys.

"Not my men," Hauke said quickly, scowling at the others. "Apologize for offending the Seneschal," he said in a voice that would have sounded more commanding if it hadn't broken partway through his statement.

Hauke was still young, only fifteen years old, and the only true authority he held in the High Pass was the authority his father gave him. He had yet to complete a great hunt, had yet to face his rivals in formal challenges, and had yet to demonstrate that he had the strength to protect his people.

When he spoke, his young voice lacked the power to compel obedience without the icy shadow of his father, Lord Ritchel, behind him. And yet, so long as Lord Ritchel ordered it, most of the Frost Walkers in the High Pass would obey without question. Only a few stubborn holdouts like Torsten, his lackeys, and some elders who supported them would resist Lord Ritchel's arrangements.

"I suggest you listen to your little lord," Captain Lennart added, scowling at the men who still wore surly expressions on their faces. "Before Lady Ashlynn decides to offer your friend to Lady Nyrielle as an appetizer."

"You, you wouldn't dare!" Torsten cried, resisting the urge to struggle in Ashlynn's grasp. A strange magical energy washed over her, warming the air around her and turning the frost that clung to his fur into rivulets of icy water that dripped from his fur.

The heat wasn't great enough to do damage but it was even more terrifying than the pain shooting through his ear as Ashlynn twisted mercilessly to keep him off balance.

"I'm sure the agreement our messenger brought included hunting rights," Ashlynn said coldly, giving Captain Lennart a grateful nod for thinking of the threat. "But I think she might find your flesh distasteful," she added, letting go of the ear and giving Torsten a shove that sent him sprawling on his backside on the frozen ground.

"Sir Hauke," she added, turning away from Torsten. "You said you had a place where Mistress Nyrielle could exit her carriage. We shouldn't delay. Whether these people apologize or not doesn't matter. I'm sure there will be consequences for their actions," she added pointedly.

In truth, Ashlynn was disappointed. Compared to the complex schemes of the merchant guilds in Blackwell City that entangled the interests of powerful parties on both sides of the ocean, Torsten's attempt to force her into an embarrassing position felt genuinely juvenile.

His sorcery felt powerful and if he'd succeeded in throwing the spear of ice at her she might have been hard-pressed to defend herself, but she didn't believe for a moment that the belligerent youth would actually throw it. He meant to intimidate and bluster and he had no idea what to do when she didn't back down like a helpless human.

She'd come expecting a challenging duel or a contest of sorcery that brought genuine jeopardy and instead, she found youthful posturing. Still, if this was the extent to which Lord Ritchel's High Pass

intended to test her, she wouldn't complain too much. As is, however, it was so underwhelming that she found herself waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The sooner Nyrielle could rejoin her, the better.

"You three," Hauke said, looking at Torsten's lackeys. "Take him to Old Amila for healing. He's not to appear at the banquet tonight and neither are you."

"But, we didn't," one of the hulking Frost Walkers started only to wither under the combined glares of Ashlynn, Hauke and Captain Lennart. "Yes, lord," he said, bowing deeply before walking in a wide arc around Lennart's men to retrieve Torsten.

At Hauke's gesture, Ashlynn walked beside him while the remainder of the wagons began to follow across the long, icy bridge. The torchbearers and drummers that lined the bridge provided a welcome barrier between the frost-covered bridge and the deep chasm that surrounded the fortress.

At the same time, the bright light of their torches made the black depths of the chasm appear even darker, as though the entire fortress was on the edge of being devoured by a beast with an icicle-lined maw.

Unconsciously, Ashlynn stepped closer to Hauke, reaching out to place a hand on his thick, furry arm as if to steady herself against the sudden gusts of wind that threatened to tear apart her warming magic.

"It's not far," Hauke said in reassuring tones, surprised to see a vulnerable side to the woman who had been so fierce just moments ago. "We have a stable waiting with curtains thrown over all the windows,"

he added, hoping to distract her from the height of the chasm-spanning bridge. "Will that be sufficient for Lady Nyrielle?"

"It should be fine for her," Ashlynn said. "Even now it is almost dim enough for her. It's Zedya who is more vulnerable."

"Then you can inspect things for her to make sure that it's acceptable," Hauke said, stepping off the bridge and holding out a furry paw to escort her to the courtyard inside the castle walls and the waiting stables. "This way, please."

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High above the castle walls, in a tower with a view of the bridge, Lord Rtichel turned away from the window to regard the other man in the room. At nearly ten feet in height Lord Ritchel wasn't just the strongest of the Frost Walkers in the High Pass, he was also the most physically imposing, even if the luster of his fur had begun to dull with age and deep lines crisscrossed his leathery face.

"I told you, Paulus," he told the shorter but even older Frost Walker in the room. "Torsten is mighty, physically, and he's a capable enough hunter, but his mind is too weak and simple to stand up to Lady Nyrielle's Vale of Mists."

"It doesn't matter," the older man said, shaking his head. "The Vale of Mists will spend the next hundred years fighting the humans, just as it has spent the past hundred years. Torsten's horn will stand among his ancestors long before we ever need to contend against the Vale as we did in my great grandfather's time."

"What we need," the old man insisted, "is someone who can hunt the invaders who threaten our ancestor's slumber. Hauke isn't blooded yet. Torsten is. I will rest easier knowing that Torsten is protecting my horn in the years to come."

"You don't see far enough, old man," Lord Ritchel said, leaving the window to begin descending the broad spiral steps down from the tower. "The humans are greedy for Airgead Mountain. Lord Jalal has been depending on Lady Nyrielle and High Lord Dirar to keep the humans from overrunning his domain but if he falls, the humans will enter our mountains."

"At that time, we won't be worried about a few dozen invaders seeking our ancestor's horns," the aging lord said. "It will be armies of humans with their miracle workers covering our slopes. Hauke is a better man to build and maintain the alliances that will protect us when we cannot protect ourselves."

"You speak as though a time will come when we cannot protect ourselves," the older man snorted, following behind his lord at a respectful distance. "The humans will die in a single winter on our slopes. They cannot face the cold."

"I don't think you know the humans' limits as well as you think you do, old friend," Lord Ritchel said, shaking his head sadly. "Tonight, you should talk to Lady Nyrielle's new Seneschal. I'm told she comes from one of the human's great ports and that she has spoken to many humans from across the sea. Perhaps you will no longer feel the same after listening to her speak."

This was an old debate between the two men and Lord Ritchel had long given up on convincing Paulus to change. He only hoped that the old man's eyes weren't so firmly fixed on where to rest his horn that he couldn't see the threat building in the lowlands.

The humans wouldn't stop. Whether it was in the next decade or the next century, they would come eventually. And when they did, every Eldritch Lord abandoned by their peers would be an ally they'd mourn the loss of in the days to come.

It was a lesson that Paulus may never need to learn but if the Frost Walkers of the High Pass didn't learn it before Ritchel lay his horn to rest, he could only hope that the next person sitting on his icy throne could teach it in his place.