

The Vampire 93

Chapter 93 93: A Servant's Troubles (Part One)

The stables of Lord Ritchel's fortress was much smaller than Ashlynn would have expected until she recalled how little use the Frost Walkers had for horses. Unlike a human fortress, there were neither knights nor cavalry, and even horses for messengers and carriages were unnecessary.

Instead, the stable held a few of the largest horses Ashlynn had ever laid eyes on with dark, thick coats and long manes that likely pulled carts or... plows?

"Why are there plows?" Ashlynn asked, struck by the strangely structured plows that didn't resemble any she had seen before, whether in use by humans or the people in the vale of mists.

"To clear snow from the bridge and roads after storms," Hauke explained when he saw her curiosity. "Now may not restrict our movement much, but if too much of it piles up it becomes impossible to leave through the gates without digging out. Better to clear it away before it grows that deep."

"I see," Ashlynn said, turning her attention back to the carriages where members Clan of the Great Claw were lifting the heavy, darksteel lined daybeds out of their wagons before knocking politely to advise Nyrielle and Zedya that they had arrived.

"My Lady," Heila said, kneeling on the cold ground of the stable in front of Ashlynn with her head bowed. "Today, I failed you. Please punish me as you see fit. I, I've brought a lash if you wish," she said, holding up a coiled lash that belonged to one of the carriage drivers.

"Get up, Heila," Ashlynn said, frowning at the diminutive horned woman. "I will not whip you. You did nothing wrong. What I asked you to do was too much, it's fine that you couldn't do it. It's my fault," Ashlynn said, feeling guiltier the more she spoke.

Torsten's demand to see her mark was both humiliating and infuriating but that didn't excuse forcing Heila to translate her own barbed comeback. While she was certain that she could have protected Heila should Torsten have tried to take out his anger on the messenger, she couldn't truly guarantee her servant's safety.

"My Lady," Heila said, shivering as she knelt on the cold ground. Ever since Lady Nyrielle gave her the opportunity to serve as Ashlynn's personal servant, she'd tried her best to be worthy of the honor. Sometimes, Ashlynn's requests were a little odd, like her insistence on styling her own hair most days or her demands for clothing that she could put on herself without the help of a servant, but she never asked anything that was beyond Heila's ability to do.

Until today. Today, Lady Ashlynn had been deeply insulted and demeaned before dozens of people and she'd asked for Heila's help to respond to the insult... and Heila had failed. It didn't matter that Torsten was more than twice her size or that he'd summoned a spear made of ice and sorcery. It didn't matter Ashlynn's words were sure to provoke his rage in retaliation.

All that mattered was that, When Lady Ashlynn asked her for help, she'd been too terrified to do her duty.

"My Lady," Heila said again, mustering up the courage to speak the words that terrified her almost as much as Torsten had. "If you will not punish me, then I will report my failure to Lady Nyrielle and allow her to assign my punishment."

"You!" Ashlynn said, grinding her teeth in frustration. "Fine. If you demand a punishment, then I will punish you," Ashlynn said, snatching the lash from Heila's hands.

For a moment, the young horned woman flinched, her head dropping even lower as she prepared to receive the beating she knew she deserved.

"For as long as we're in the High Pass, and even when we're in the High Fen," Ashlynn said sternly. "You will not leave my side. You will translate for me any time that I am with Lord Ritchel's people and you will accompany me wherever I go while we are here. You will not refuse again or your punishment will be worse," she said, her voice as firm as she could make it.

"My Lady," Heila gasped, looking up at Ashlynn who seemed to have no intention to use the lash. Rather, she'd tucked it behind her back while she regarded Heila with a complicated expression. "My Lady, I will go wherever you desire and I will not leave your side but, but this isn't punishment..."

"In that case," Nyrielle's voice drifted over as the vampire herself moved toward them, gliding with an inhuman elegance as though the stables around them were a fine ballroom in a king's palace. "If you fail her again, you will be exiled from the castle to live out the rest of your life in a village, never to enter the castle city again."

"What my darling Ashlynn needs," Nyrielle said, coming to stand in front of Ashlynn and smiling. "What she needs is someone who can be loyal to her, even in the face of danger. I heard everything you know," she added, giving Heila a pointed look. "Do not fail her again."

"Of course not, my Lady," Heila said, dropping into the deepest curtsy of her life and lowering her gaze to the floor.

"Little Hauke," Nyrielle said, turning her attention to the towering figure of Lord Rtichel's son. "You've grown a bit since my last visit. Your command of your father's men, however, is sorely lacking," she said sharply.

"Lady Nyrielle, I apologize," he said, his fur trembling and the glow in his horn diminishing under the intensity of the vampire's gaze. "You won't have a problem like this again, I promise. Please, my father has prepared to receive you, I can lead the way."

Despite his proper words, Hauke clearly felt the pressure of standing in Nyrielle's presence. His knees bent slightly and his back curled as if he felt the need to make himself smaller in the powerful vampire's presence.

As they started walking, his eyes darted constantly to Lady Nyrielle, hoping to see a look from her that indicated she was satisfied with his apology or at least with his efforts to be a respectable host. What he found, however, was only a cold, impassive mask and icy midnight blue eyes that revealed nothing about what she thought of this evening's mishap.

Once they left the stable, they were led into the grand halls of Lord Rtichel's castle. To Ashlynn, the most impressive part of the castle was the sheer size and scale of everything. Even the smallest of corridors boasted a ceiling at least fifteen feet high and the polished granite floors were wide enough that four armored knights could ride abreast through the hallways if they wished.

In place of torches, blocks of ice had been cut to resemble multi-faceted gemstones larger than a person's head had been set into the walls, each glowing with a pale blue-white light that brought light without warmth to the great hall.

Along the walls, colossal statues of Frost Walkers loomed over them, each standing atop a block of ice that bore their name and title. Many were previous lords of the High Pass but some were great heroes, famed for their victories in battle or hunting.

Some of the statues were carved from gleaming ice that never seemed to melt, while others were made of the same dark granite as the floors. Each statue stood at least twelve feet tall, their crystalline horns catching and refracting the light from glowing crystals embedded in the walls.

Between the statues hung ancient weapons of impressive size - massive ice axes with heads larger than Ashlynn's torso, spears that were half again as tall as Hauke, and swords that looked as though they could cleave a house in two. Each weapon was adorned with a collection of words carved in Eldritch that Ashlynn vaguely recognized from the oldest books in Nyrielle's library about sorcery.

Each thing she saw as they walked through the frozen castle was more impressive than the next, but when they rounded a corner, Ashlynn's feet slowed to a halt and her eyes went wide at the site of a giant block of ice as long as three sailing ships and as thick as they would be wide.

It wasn't the block of ice that brought her to a stop, however, but the things contained within it...