

## The Vampire 94

### Chapter 94 94: A Servant's Troubles (Part Two)

When Ashlynn's echoing footsteps stopped, the rest of the group stopped along with her, each one of them staring at the massive block of ice and the things frozen inside it.

Within the ice, Ashlynn could see several strange and powerful looking creatures she'd never seen before. Their massive shapes were frozen in fierce poses as though they were moments away from unleashing their fury on anyone foolish enough to stand before them and only the thick ice stopped them from feasting on Ashlynn and her companions.

The first one looked like a giant cat, larger than the work horses from the stable, with giant fangs as long as her forearm. Next to it stood an even larger beast with two wickedly sharp teeth protruding from its rodent like face and ending in a wide tail that looked powerful enough to crush wagons. The ice was so clear that she could make out individual strands of fur, preserving the trophies perfectly for who knew how long.

"Is that, is that really a beaver?" Ashlynn couldn't help but ask, staring at the giant buck toothed creature. "I've seen smaller ones in the rivers in Blackwell County, they're hunted for their fur, but this..."

"This is a capraba," Hauke said proudly. According to the engraving on the ice, it had been slain by his great-great-grandfather Egon. "They used to live in the forests at the edges of the tree line, but none have been seen in these mountains in over a hundred years."

"Their meat is tough and stringy," Nyrielle said. "But their pelts are very warm. When the humans attacked the nations along the mountains, many nations were forced to flee into the mountains if they wanted to survive. Caprabas were hunted in droves so that broken nations could survive the winter and cross the mountains to the safety beyond."

"Ha ha," Hauke laughed awkwardly. "I forget, sometimes, just how long Lady Nyrielle has lived. I'm sure our High Pass would have been overrun by humans if not for your defense of the Vale of Mists."

"True, but my people wouldn't have survived the aftermath of Cellach's war if it wasn't for the High Pass taking in our elderly, women and children while we fought off his armies," Nyrielle added politely. "The vale will never forget that the High Pass protected us in our hours of need."

Hauke grinned in pride, flashing his sharpened teeth while the iridescent light within his horn seemed to brighten. After spending a few more moments admiring the beasts preserved in ice, the group continued on their way to the banquet waiting in the grand hall.

The air grew noticeably colder as they progressed deeper into the fortress, and Ashlynn found herself drawing on her magic to ward off the chill. She noticed small ice crystals forming in the air with each breath, and her lungs felt tighter each time she drew in a fresh breath of the thin, chill air.

This clearly wasn't a place that humans were ever meant to live, much less thrive. The only thing missing to make the place feel less hospitable was a frozen human soldier, captured in ice alongside the capraba and the giant tiger.

Still, Hauke's gentle hospitality helped to blunt the chill in the air and Nyrielle's presence beside her helped remind her that while this place may not welcome humans, that didn't mean it didn't welcome her. As a witch, she refused to let the natural elements of this place overwhelm her as she strode deeper into the icy fortress.

Three paces behind Ashlynn and Nyrielle, Zedya leaned over slightly as she walked to speak with Heila. Ever since presenting herself for punishment, the diminutive woman's shoulders had slumped and her head hung so low that her chin nearly rested on her chest.

"Failures are opportunities, little Heila," the vampire whispered. "If we never fail, we never rise up again. It's better for you that this happened so soon. Now you have the chance to make yourself better much, much earlier."

"I, I don't know if I can, Madame Zedya" Heila whispered back. "I'm just a maid. I, I never thought I'd be involved in a battle..."

"Eighty years ago, I was just a maid," Zedya whispered back, her voice almost drowned out by the sound of boot heels echoing off the stone floors in the vast corridor. "But even a maid can be powerful if they want to. The question is, is there something that matters to you enough to transform yourself from 'just a maid' into someone that Ashlynn can treat as one of her most reliable pillars of support. What matters to you, little Heila?"

"Is it wrong if I say 'my family'?" Heila asked, looking up at Zedya to see her reaction. Instead of a reaction, however, she saw only a cool and impassive mask that held Zedya's enchanting amethyst eyes. What the vampire thought of her answer, she couldn't say.

"They'll do for now," Zedya said after a moment of thinking. "But they're not enough. You have several brothers and sisters to care for your parents and grandparents, who have even more grandchildren than your siblings," she pointed out. "If you weren't here to support your family, they would still live well."

"Think on it, little Heila," Zedya said, turning away from the horned woman. "Think about what is uniquely important to you, and what you would do for it. Weak convictions won't help you become someone that Lady Ashlynn can depend on."

"Then, are you saying that Lady Ashlynn needs to be the most important thing to me?" Heila asked.

"No, not at all," Zedya said, a slow smile spreading on her thin lips. "When Mistress Nyrielle found me, my most important thing was the destruction of everything Baron Gilmore loved and cherished. I might have been 'just a maid', but I turned myself into a curse that brought his family constant misfortune even before Mistress Nyrielle found me."

"That's why I'm saying that you need to find something that truly matters to you if you want to transform yourself into something more," Zedya said. "There's a reason that Mistress Nyrielle doesn't turn anyone who grew up in the vale into her progeny. Most of you have been safe in the vale your entire lives. Wars haven't breached the walls in generations. Some of you have lost family in battle but none of you have seen your homes burned down, your siblings defiled or anything close to the horrors the nobles of Lothian March visit on their own common folk."

"None of you hate enough to give up life for something more important," she said, her gaze becoming distant. "That's why you have to find something else to drive you hard enough that you won't back down, even when Ashlynn asks you to insult a powerful warrior to his face because she doesn't yet know the words."

Heila stared at the vampire servant with wide eyes. It was the first time Madame Zedya had ever spoken so much to her and also the first time she heard that it had been a grudge with a human nobleman that turned her into the powerful woman she was today.

As she followed Lady Ashlynn down the vast corridor, Heila struggled to understand Madame Zedya's perspective. The vampire was right that few in recent memory had lost people the way she spoke of. Not since the great war more than a hundred years ago had any human army breached the defenses of the Vale of Mists. Lady Nyrielle refused to allow such a tragedy to occur again.

But, there had to be something other than tragedy that Heila could draw strength from... she just didn't know what that something was.