

## The Vampire 146

### Chapter 146 146: Lady Heila

For Ashlynn, the final hours she'd spent with Nyrielle before sunrise had been among the most tender that the two women had yet shared. It seemed impossible for the vampire to restrain herself completely from sampling Ashlynn's blood, but this time around, the blood seemed secondary to her desire to help Ashlynn heal.

From her toes to her head, Nyrielle's lips slid up Ashlynn's body, pausing whenever there was a wound that broke the surface of the skin. This time, Ashlynn's injuries had been frighteningly severe with dozens of cuts from shards of ice, including one gash that ran almost the entire length of her thigh.

Ashlynn's own healing powers were considerable, any normal human would likely have succumbed, not from the injuries directly, but from being plunged into icy water and forced to endure everything that had followed her battle with the Tuscans.

When Nyrielle's lips encountered one of Ashlynn's wounds she bit the tender flesh softly, just enough to stimulate the flow of blood before gently kissing the wound. A vampire's bite healed in hours instead of days. Spreading her power to other wounds would allow Ashlynn to return to her full strength within a day or at most two.

The two women hadn't stopped at intimacy that fueled healing. Both of them craved the touch of the other after Ashlynn's brush with death on the frozen lake. That night, it had been Ashlynn's nails that tore at Nyrielle's flesh, deeply marking her lover as she clung to the most important person in her life.

It was only when dawn pulled them apart that Ashlynn realized how drained she was. The darkness of the room combined with the soft furs and warm bed pulled her directly to sleep. Her dreams that night were strange, filled with visions of Nyrielle at glorious balls where the two danced the night away or

quiet moments spent in Nyrielle's chambers where she kept her lover company while Nyrielle painted the scenery of the Vale of Mists.

The dreams felt more real, clearer, and without the random feeling occurrences that so often intruded in dreams. When she woke, her memories of the dreams faded quickly, leaving her with a warm and cozy feeling like she had spent the day sleeping in Nyrielle's arms even though her lover had retreated to her darksteel-lined daybed and would remain there until the sun set.

Now that she was awake, she had to resist the urge to seek out Hauke or Lord Ritchel to discuss the happenings last night. From the revelations about Paulus's treachery to the strange blood magic used on the Frost Walker ancestors, there were many things that could be discussed while Nyrielle still slept.

Unfortunately, Nyrielle had forbidden it. Lord Ritchel's people had lost much of her trust when it came to keeping Ashlynn safe during the day so instead, Ashlynn washed and dressed herself before asking the guards outside the door to fetch her a meal.

It was a surprise, not many minutes later, when Heila arrived with freshly baked bread and a delicate fish soup for her breakfast.

"How is it that you're up and about already?" Ashlynn asked between mouthfuls of soft, fluffy bread. She hadn't noticed until Heila brought food for her but it had been more than a full day since her last meal and she was truly ravenous. "Shouldn't you be resting after yesterday's ordeal?"

"My Lady," Heila said awkwardly, having a hard time meeting Ashlynn's eyes. If it was before, she could still laugh and joke a bit with the strange human who had become an increasingly important part of her life. Now, however, her heart hung heavy with shame after watching helplessly as first Hauke and then Ashlynn both had to rescue her.

"Madame Zedya already gave me the whole night to sleep when we returned," Heila said. "After you did so much yesterday, I couldn't bear it if I wasn't here to help you once you woke."

"Oh, Heila," Ashlynn said, kneeling down next to the diminutive horned woman. "You rescued me too yesterday. Without you, I might have been pulled down to the bottom of the lake. You were very brave and I'm very lucky to have you helping me, but you shouldn't push too hard."

"I know," Heila said bitterly. "I know that I'm weak and I can't fight. I know you don't need me to protect you, just like Lady Nyrielle doesn't need Madame Zedya to protect her. But, compared to Zedya, I'm much too useless. So, at least I can do these small things for you," she said. Her eyes turned misty and drops began to fall from her eyes as she stared at the cold, stone floor.

"Hey, look at me," Ashlynn said gently, reaching out and lifting Heila's chin until their eyes met. "You aren't like Zedya. Of course, you can't do what she can do. But you still do so many things that I count on you for, and not just fetching meals or helping me dress."

"Ever since I came to the Vale of Mists, you've helped me to understand countless things," Ashlynn said. The Eldritch people had so many different customs to learn and the Vale of Mists had been like a whole new country to her. In many ways, Heila had been just as much of a tutor to her as the scholars she learned from at home. "I'd be very, very lost without you, so don't go looking down on yourself now."

"Then, you're not going to have me replaced?" Heila said, her lower lip quivering. She'd replayed the events of that day countless times and she kept thinking that someone like Virve suited Lady Ashlynn much better. Someone who was older, wiser, and dependable enough to fight back when their enemies attacked.

"Heila, you are my first friend in the Vale of Mists," Ashlynn said firmly. "You should get the same level of treatment that Ollie does with a nice room down the hall from me. This is my fault," she said after a few moments of thinking. "I've let you continue on like one of the other servants when that's not what you are to me at all."

"But, my Lady," Heila said, confused by what Ashlynn was saying. If she wasn't a servant, what was she? "I've been a servant in the castle since I was tall enough to scrub the floors. If I'm not your personal servant, then what am I?"

"Heila," Ashlynn said, her tone becoming very solemn. "I've vowed to kill Owain Lothian for what he did to me, but killing him isn't enough. Since he dared to marry me and then betray me, then I will take what is mine from him. I will become the Marchioness of Lothian March. As a Marchioness, I'm allowed to have my own knights. Maybe one day, Ollie will be 'Sir Ollie.'"

"At the same time," Ashlynn said with a smile blossoming on her face. "I'm allowed to have my own ladies-in-waiting. I still need to rely on you for all the things you do now, but also much, much more. So, will you be my first lady-in-waiting? Lady Heila?" Ashlynn asked.

"I, I can't," Heila said, stepping back and bowing her head deeply. "I'm not reliable enough, I'm not worthy, not after..."

"Heila," Ashlynn said, reaching out and scooping the horned woman into her arms. "I'm not a proper witch yet. I'm not a very good Seneschal yet either. But I'm learning to be both of those things. You may not be ready yet, but after yesterday, I know you can be. If you want to."

"Please," Ashlynn whispered, gently stroking the horned woman's hair. "Let me be a good Lady who's worthy of your service. Let me take care of you a little and recognize you for what you're becoming. A

servant can only come so close, but a lady-in-waiting can also be my friend. You've been that for a while now, so let me tell everyone else. That way, they'll know they have to respect my friend too."

"Is, is it really okay?" Heila asked, pulling back to look at Ashlynn with a watery gaze. "Will Lady Nyrielle allow it?"

"After yesterday, I'm sure she'll let me be this willful," Ashlynn said. "Now, stand up, the floor is cold. I'm going to ask one of the men outside to fetch another portion because I'm very hungry. If you're hungry too, I'll have him fetch one for you as well," she said decisively. "It would be nice, after yesterday, to have a meal with a friend, wouldn't it?"

"Yes," Heila said, nodding her head eagerly. "It, it would be nice to have a meal together... Ashlynn," she said, smiling for the first time since she'd woken early in the morning.

She hadn't entirely understood Zedya when they arrived, but after facing life and death together with Ashlynn, she felt like she finally understood why Zedya would give so much for Lady Nyrielle. She knew that she still had much to learn to be worthy of the trust Ashlynn was extending to her but she promised herself that even if she wasn't worthy of the title Lady Ashlynn was extending to her now, she would live up to it soon enough.