

## The Vampire 155

### Chapter 155 155: Entering the High Fen

Ashlynn's next several days after departing the High Pass were oddly relaxing for days spent traveling through frigid mountains in a carriage. As before, additional horses had been arranged to allow the group to move both day and night.

Unlike her trip to the High Pass, however, Nyrielle all but forbade any additional training or studying during these days and nights.

"You worked hard to be ready for the High Pass," Nyrielle said on the first night of their journey. "The High Fen isn't like the High Pass. You don't need to prepare the same way and if you throw yourself back into intense study, you'll only exhaust yourself. Take these days to rest and recover from what you have just been through."

As much as Ashlynn wanted to protest, Nyrielle was adamant. It didn't help that the vampire took advantage of the close confines of the carriage to have her way with Ashlynn at every opportunity.

Whether it was the hollow of her hip next to the witch's mark, the subtle spot where her delicate neck met her rounded shoulders or the ticklish spot behind her knees, there was no part of Ashlynn's body that Nyrielle neglected during the nights of their journey.

The nights were becoming even shorter, but each time Nyrielle slid her slender fingers along Ashlynn's creamy thighs, teasing at her most intimate places while her lush lips feasted on Ashlynn's mouth, the young witch found herself helplessly melting into her lover's embrace.

A few days after setting out, the carriage finally began to descend from the mountains on the far side of the pass. The barren, snow-covered landscape gave way to sparse, hearty trees that quickly became thicker when they entered a mountain forest.

"Are those... the Clan of the Great Claw?" Ashlynn asked Heila as they followed the ancient road out of the mountains. In the forest, she saw several of the bearish men felling trees and clearing away any brush that had grown too close to the road.

In the kingdom of Gaal, this kind of work, keeping the king's roads from being swallowed by nature, would be done by convicts or bondsmen but when Ashlynn looked around she didn't see any jailors or chains on the men working. In fact, they seemed rather... happy.

"They are," Heila said with a complicated expression on her face. "There are lots of people from the Horned Clan here too, further down the mountains. A long time ago, when the Vale was attacked, most people ran away. Only a few, like my family, came back."

"I see," Ashlynn said, watching the men work as the carriage passed by. In Blackwell County, it had been hundreds of years since humans drove out the original Eldritch inhabitants. People could point to seven generations of ancestors who had 'always lived there.' No one thought much about where the 'demons' went when they were driven from their lands.

In the Vale of Mists, people like Nyrielle still remembered the wars that drove her people across the mountains. It had been more than a hundred years, but even if Heila didn't have any grandparents who had been affected by those wars, her grandparents likely grew up on stories told by people who lived through them. Maybe Heila even had distant family members on this side of the mountains who refused to return to the Vale when Nyrielle retook it from the Lothians.

Memories were longer for the Eldritch in general and even more so for Nyrielle. In Blackwell County, people seemed to focus only on the most recent events of the past, with far more concern for the events of the present and the opportunities for the future. Among the Eldritch, however, she felt like she was constantly walking through layers of history that stretched back for hundreds of years.

As they left the narrow pass, Ashlynn was greeted by a sweeping vista. Bright blue sky with puffy clouds seemed to stretch endlessly to the west over vast fields of gently swaying grasses. Birds and butterflies danced through the air and small villages could be seen in the distance, dotting the landscape as if they'd been dripped onto the earth by an artist's brush.

"This... it's beautiful," Ashlynn breathed, all but leaning out the carriage window as she watched the sights rolling by. It wasn't that she'd never seen open fields or farmland before, she'd seen several different types of farms when she traveled between Blackwell County and Lothian March.

What struck her this time was how abundant and alive the land felt when they reached the High Fen. The trees on this side of the mountain were tough, tenacious things that thrived in the rocky soil and eked out a life made of at least fifty percent stubbornness. The feeling those trees gave off was very different from the welcoming, inviting feeling of the forests in the Vale of Mists.

It wasn't until they were traveling through the open fields of the fen that she felt the land reaching out to her, like a distant relative greeting her first arrival. The air smelled moist and peaty and after so many days spent in the dry cold air of the High Pass, every pore on her body sang in joy as she breathed in the damp, warm air.

The further the carriage traveled, the more new sights greeted her. She recognized both members of the Clan of the Great Claw and the Horned Clan among the local population, but she also spotted several new Eldritch clans she hadn't seen before.

"The ones with the long necks and legs are called the Glass Eyed Clan," Heila said, pointing at several tall individuals with stick-thin legs and swan-like necks who were wading through one of the many streams that crisscrossed the High Fen. "They can see through even murky water as though it were clear as glass and they're said to have no blind spots when they take up weapons."

As she watched, Ashlynn had to suppress a shudder when she saw members of this clan twist their necks to watch the carriage as it passed. Not only were their eyes set very wide on their angular, birdlike faces, but their long necks allowed them to look in any direction without turning their bodies.

"What about the ones on the boats?" Ashlynn asked, pointing to a group of figures pushing a flat-bottomed boat along another stream. These individuals were broad-shouldered with large bellies and thick limbs. Their skin held a greenish hue and looked thick and leathery while their eyes seemed to glow a yellowish color whenever they caught the light.

"They're called Muckin," Heila said, hiding herself behind the curtain as she peeked out at the men on the boat. "No one likes them. They're loud, obnoxious, drink strong ale, and look for excuses to start fights. They, um, they have very long tongues that can grab things and they'll eat anything. You, you should stay away from them."

"You said no one likes them, but they seem to be getting on well here," Ashlynn said, pointing to several of the Muckin who were conversing with people from the Glass Eyed clan. The conversation looked lively and no one seemed to be acting distant from anyone else.

"I meant no one likes them outside of the High Fen," Heila said, continuing to hide. "They like to snatch things... and people. Women especially. Not everywhere is like the High Fen. I hear that some Muckin travel around other nations, snatching people to fight in the High Fen's arena. They're very scary."

"Humans say that all Eldritch people are very scary," Ashlynn reminded her new lady-in-waiting. "They make up all manner of lies about the Horned Clan and the Clan of the Great Claw. I used to believe those things. I don't anymore."

"I, I'm sorry," Heila said sheepishly. She was supposed to be helping Ashlynn learn more about other Eldritch people, but Heila had never left the Vale of Mists herself. She'd met the occasional visitor from across the mountains when they came to the Vale to trade and she knew a little bit about the people of the High Pass and the High Fen, but she had to admit that her knowledge wasn't vast and much of it was second hand.

"I think, if you want to meet anyone, Lady Nyrielle can help you know who you should talk to and who to avoid," Heila said. "Once we reach High Fen City, there will be more than a dozen clans present, plus everyone who's visiting from somewhere else. It's really much bigger than our little Vale of Mists."

"I'm looking forward to it," Ashlynn said with a smile. "But, I don't think Mistress Nyrielle intends to stay for very long. Perhaps I'll only get to meet with a few people."

"Per-perhaps," Heila said, nodding her head quickly. Visiting the High Fen was very different from visiting the High Pass after all. The size and scale of this place could swallow the current Vale of Mists and the High Pass combined and the people might not even notice that they'd gained new neighbors. There really was too much happening in this place to experience much of it in a brief visit.

Only, Heila knew that Nyrielle was planning something special for Ashlynn when they arrived. While Nyrielle herself had kept Ashlynn occupied at night, Heila had spent her evenings on the carriage driver's seat alongside Zedya.

There were some things that Zedya would do for Nyrielle once they arrived but other surprises required the help of someone who could be active during daylight hours. As Ashlynn's new lady-in-waiting, Zedya hadn't hesitated to bring her new diminutive peer into the conspiracy.

As the carriage rolled on, a small, secretive smile spread across Heila's face. Once they arrived in High Fen City, Ashlynn was in for a number of surprises, and Heila was filled with a sense of anticipation to see how her friend would respond to all of them.