

Chapter 899 Fangs

Ilea deactivated her Fourth Tier when she got close to the moving relic. She slowed down, his speed not quite that of her charged wings, but faster than her regular ones without Reconstruction.

Despite their ridiculous speed, the massive storm didn't seem to change in size nor had it shifted much.

She started to notice a difference some time later, their journey over the ice and snow covered landscape continuing westward. Erik led them closer to the storm, letting her know he intended to pass it to the north.

They soon reached the mountainous terrain riddled with arcane storms bordering the Frozen Wasteland to the north. The storm now lay to the south, towering up towards the sky like an insurmountable wall.

On any other given day, Ilea would've been interested in flying in there, but considering her recent time in Erendar, she could do without massive storms for a long while.

Erik slowed down after they were past the high northern terrain, the storm still visible in the distance, but now behind a few more mountain ranges. Here, the terrain remained mountainous and mostly topped with snow, but there were no flashes of arcane lightning, nor the audible torrent of an earth shattering cyclone.

"We're in vampire territory now," Erik spoke when she reached his side. He took in a deep breath and smiled.

Ilea tried to detect or see something nearby but all she found were snow covered mountains.

"Another illusion if you will? They have rather perceptive scouts," Erik said.

"Two random human adventurers arriving in their territory?" she asked. "Wouldn't that raise questions?"

"Maybe, but it's not too implausible," Erik said as he cast his spell.

Ilea felt another wave of magic wash over her.

"We should fly lower, and not nearly as fast," Erik said.

"Why not just land and talk to them the way we are?" she asked.

"That is an option, yes," he said and looked at her. "But terribly blunt and boring, don't you think?"

She raised her brows.

"Besides. I think it would be beneficial for you to get accustomed to their culture. If you plan to not get thrown out as quickly as you landed," he spoke. "If they can move you that is. Hmm. Yes, maybe your approach would work fine actually. With your attitude. But let's be a little more considerate, shall we?"

"Why do I feel like you enjoy this type of infiltration?" Ilea said.

He didn't reply, but the look on his face more than confirmed her suspicions. She wouldn't be surprised if he had known about her and the Accords long before his appearance in the chapel.

"You're the one who knows these lands," Ilea said, holding Aki under her arm. "I'll follow your lead, relic."

"Ancient relic," he murmured and started flying down with a slower pace.

Ilea followed, the two continuing their travel over the snow covered peaks until the suns started to set.

"We're getting close," Erik said as they crossed another mountain.

A vale sprawled below, fewer mountains now in the west. Most everything lay covered in snow, the evening suns casting long shadows over the forested landscape. Dark firs reaching high, dense forests and steep mountain sides above. A single dirt road led through the center of the valley, just barely visible from where Ilea flew.

She glanced up when she spotted movement in the distance, just for a split second and on the other side of the vale, near the top of a mountain. A group of humanoid individuals had appeared, then vanished again. At least to her eyes.

"Guards, I think," Erik said, then pointed.

She saw them too. On the dirt road. A set of black carriages pulled by massive horned oxen, the drivers clad in long black leather coats, their faces hidden behind what looked like helmets from the distance. They didn't move fast, the road it looked like, covered in snow and ice.

"Are they going where you want to go?" Ilea asked.

"You want to try and join them?" Erik asked, his amusement obvious.

"Not a good idea?"

"Oh no! It's a splendid idea," he said.

Ilea didn't miss the slight smirk on his face, and the spark in his eyes. "You want me to talk, don't you?"

He shrugged in a guilty manner.

She smiled. "Alright, Erik. I'll indulge you with my endless charm. What level does your illusion show us at?"

"Around the mid two hundreds, to make a story of us being outsiders believable, but not too interesting or threatening," he said.

"Fair. How does Aki look?" she asked.

"Oh he shouldn't be visible at all."

"Nice trick," she said and started flying down towards the carriages, not trying to hide in any way. She did occasionally move her head to check the surrounding mountains, acting more vigilant than she really was. She flew towards the road and landed a hundred meters or so before the first carriage and to the side of the road.

Erik joined her as she waited, the man lighting his pipe before he shuddered and pulled up his coat.

“You can’t possibly feel cold,” she sent, deciding not to lean against a tree for obvious reasons. She did walk around a little to get used to the ground and her weight again after the flight. It still felt a little strange but compared to a few days earlier, she felt far more in control.

“Reginald is,” Erik sent back.

“Reginald is,” Ilea repeated, out loud and with a smile. *“Sure.”* She waved at the carriage that now drew closer. A massive thing, sleek and black, made of steel and wood, decorated with carvings, steps leading down from the carriage door, glass windows set into the sides, dark red curtains within preventing anyone from seeing inside. Enchantments cut off her domain. She could feel more than just that however. There were strengthening enchantments too, and something offensive she couldn’t place.

The driver snapped the reins, the two large near black oxen moving to a stop. The beasts were larger than most of their kind Ilea had seen before in Elos.

[Kran Oxen – lvl 120] – [Fed]

Ilea didn’t know how she felt about the additional tag, knowing in what kind of territory they were in. She had encountered a starved vampire in the Descent, a beast with regeneration on par with her own. Back then that was. Trian had called himself a Vampyr, but most notably, she knew of them from Kevan. He himself had been a vampire, in need of blood, had called it a curse apparently given to him. But that was far away, and different kinds of magic existed here. The Queen of Rot. The Werebear at the altar of some god she had forgotten the name of.

Varah? Something like that. Blood magic too, she thought when a voice cut her thoughts short.

“Greetings, travelers,” the driver spoke, his voice slightly muffled and with an accent. His helmet was made of steel and delicately crafted, flowing around his head with two wing like extensions rising up, talons and wings were molded into the metal. It looked like something a general would wear, more ceremonial than practical. His coat looked heavy, made of leather and clean.

[Blood Mage – lvl 283]

“Greetings to you. I’m glad you speak Standard. We finally managed to get past that massive storm. Dark Ones of the North spoke of vampires, and settlements in the area. Are you a vampire, sir?” Ilea spoke. She tried to sound excited. Not too difficult with her real interest in the beings. So far, the driver looked like a man, though she couldn’t look past his mask. The eyes she glimpsed below were black.

“You are not of these lands? Now that is peculiar,” he spoke and gave them a long look.

One of the windows opened, the head of a woman popping out. Pale skin, silver earrings, blonde hair and deep red eyes. She hissed and went back inside.

Ilea glanced at Erik, then back to the carriage where a long black thing was moved out of the window, then opened to reveal itself as an umbrella.

The woman looked back outside. *“What is the holdup?”* she asked, glancing at Ilea and Erik before looking up towards the driver.

“My Lady, these two claim to be travelers from beyond our lands. They were in search of vampires,” the driver spoke, his voice neutral, professional.

“Oh,” the woman spoke, then closed the umbrella and went back inside. A moment later, the carriage door opened and she stepped outside, opening the umbrella yet again. *“Evening suns.*

Terribly unpleasant,” she said and walked closer, her step casual, twirling her umbrella as she smiled.

She was a little taller than Ilea, wearing a plated dress of black and red, made for both a ball and a battlefield. Leather boots and silk gloves, her arms delicately exposed. She was white as the snow.

[Blood Mage – lvl 385]

Ilea smiled when she saw the level. Wider when she saw the two pronounced fangs that came with the woman’s smile.

“You’re a vampire,” Ilea said.

“I’m far more than a vampire, human,” the woman said and scoffed, twirling her umbrella. “I am Isidelia Vermont, Court of Blood. And who, pray tell, might you be? You two rough looking adventurers?” She licked her lips.

Is she going to eat us?

Erik took a slight step back. Isidelia smiled.

Ilea smiled as well. *If only you knew. Vampire lady.*

“I’m I... Valery,” she said before pointing at Erik. “And this is Reginald. We’re Shadows from the far east.”

“The Plains claimed by human kingdoms and empires. Shadows of the Hand. It is most rare for anyone of that far east to make it here. It must have been a long journey,” Isidelia said. “Though I understand our reputation remains... tainted, in your lands?”

“Yeah,” Ilea said and smiled. “Starved monsters of blood magic that kill and suck people dry of their blood and life.”

Isidelia looked at her for a long moment, then burst out laughing.

Another vampire now looked out from the carriage, his body hardly fitting out of the door. “Isidelia, what’s taking so long?” he asked, his voice deep, face large, a well groomed black and gray beard, long hair going down his neck. He wore a leather coat much like the driver’s, though links of silver showed between, and metal clinked when he moved.

[Blood Mage – lvl 419]

Ilea saw his blue eyes, confirming that not all of them had red ones. *Which means the driver is likely a vampire too. And they’re not afraid of silver? Or does it just look like silver? Wait, was silver for werewolves or vampires? Or both?*

“Berrick, darling, there are two humans reep for feasting. Are you in want of blood? We could... slaughter them here, and consume their very souls,” Isidelia said, one of her black silk gloves covering her mouth before she giggled.

The other vampire sighed and went back inside.

“Oh, he’s such a bore,” Isidelia said. “I suppose you came here because you didn’t exactly believe such ruinous reputation?”

Ilea raised her brows. “Oh, no, I wanted to come because of that reputation. The fact that you haven’t attacked me is honestly quite disappointing,” she said. “Although, maybe it’s better... seeing your high level,” she added, almost as an afterthought. Her words were honest enough.

Isidelia smiled and walked closer, twirling her umbrella before she stepped close to Ilea, leaning slightly forward until her face nearly touched Ilea’s. “Oh, we can fight, if that is what you wish,” she said and delicately removed one of her gloves, revealing sharp nails below. She touched Ilea’s cheek and smiled. “Would you offer a taste? To a starving vampire?”

Ilea smiled.

“*Bad idea,*” Erik sent.

“*Aw, why? Is it such a bad curse?*” Ilea asked.

“*I’m not worried about you,*” he said.

Ilea reached up to touch the woman’s hand. “I don’t think I’m quite ready for such an intimate gesture.”

Isidelia stepped back. “That is quite alright. Though I must offer for you to travel with us! You are fortunate. For the closest settlement and hence our destination, is none other than the oldest city of the Courts. Marrindayne.” She curtsied as she said the name and smiled yet again.

“Would strangers from the east be welcome at all?” Ilea asked.

“Oh of course. All beings are welcome, as long as you abide by the four rules of the Courts,” Isidelia said and started pacing along the snow covered road. “First. You do not kill the citizens of the Courts, or their guests. Second. You do not take or restrict the freedom of another. Third. You contribute,” she said and pointed. “And last, but perhaps most importantly,” she said and paused for emphasis. “Be not, uncivilized.”

Ilea raised her brows. *That’s it?*

“*Still the same rules,*” Erik said, his voice almost sounding wistful in her mind.

“Now come, you two. Let’s get out of this dreadful sunlight,” Isidelia said.

Ilea would’ve thought it a bad idea to enter the enchanted carriage of two high level vampires. If she wasn’t a four mark herself.

The inside was rather spacious, in spite of the massive gentleman now sitting across from Ilea. Isidelia sat next to her, unglowing her hand and touching Ilea’s thigh. She smiled and stared at her, perhaps like a hunter would look at interesting prey.

Ilea instead looked at the large man, his demeanor far less enthused.

He stared back at her.

Ilea stared at the thing on his lap.

He tapped it.

She smiled and looked at his eyes.

A spark.

“Is that...” she murmured. *A shotgun.*

“A Charrison V, second edition, eighteen infusers, enchantment mantelling and blood charge. It fires seven slugs in close proximity,” he spoke, giving her a glance. The corners of his mouth moved up ever so slightly when he noted that she was still listening, eyes wide open. “Three modes,” he said and flicked one of the silver bits on the massive weapon that looked more like an ornamental cannon than anything else. “Short range,” he flicked it. “Mid range. Lower spread,” he said and flicked it again. A smile. “A single slug. Explosive blood rupture enchantment.”

Ilea nodded. “Where, kind vampire sir, or lord, may one such as I, acquire such a device?”

He laughed and Isidelia hissed, the woman having turned away after the first two words out of his mouth, no longer touching Ilea and instead looking at Erik.

“There are weaponsmiths of great renown in Marrindayne, I’m sure you will find something that suits your purpose, and your frame,” he said and looked at her.

Ilea grinned ever so slightly. “I’m sure I will,” she said. “How much did that one cost? And how do you trade?”

“In our lands, we pay with silver, gold, or blood,” he spoke. “I am Berrick Grainwyld, Court of Flow.”

Ilea smiled. “Nice to meet you, Berrick. I’m Valery, that’s-”

“Reginald. I heard,” Berrick said and smiled. “You are mercenaries of the Shadow’s Hand. How did you manage to traverse the northern lands and elven domains?”

“Lots of time,” Ilea said. “Through hundreds of crevices and tunnels in the North. Found a few scavenger settlements of Dark Ones, towns under the rule of the Dark Protector,” she said. “We didn’t see any Elves.”

“That is fortunate for you. They have a tendency to kill before they talk,” Berrick said. “Impulse driven beasts.”

“All of them?” Ilea asked.

Berrick gave her a long look. “No. Not all of them. Those that remain in their domains are far more dangerous than the young who seek challenge. Wiser, but stubborn and uncivilized nonetheless. They see beings weaker than themselves as a mere source of food and entertainment. More alike to cats than us, but then cats are far too graceful for such a comparison.”

“You’ve fought Elves before?” Ilea asked. “With that?” she nodded to his silver enchanted blood magic shotgun.

“I have. Though it has been a few years since last one of theirs has reached my lands. And as of late, there have been fewer of their kind, so far west and north,” he said.

Ilea nodded. *No mention of the Taleen. Do they not know? Or does he not know? Might just not want to tell an outsider.*

Ah, I want him to shoot me with that thing.

Ilea smiled. “Sounds dangerous.”

“Far worse out there than Elves,” Berrick said.

Right you are, Vampire.

“What brings you to Marrindayne?” Ilea asked instead. “More weapons?”

Berrik chuckled, then nodded to Isidelia.

She lit up, her posture changing to something more alert. “Oh, darling. You don’t know the half of it!”

It was true. Ilea didn’t know the half of it. But by the time Isidelia was done, the suns were mostly set, and she knew not only all of it, but a few other things as well. The vampires had balls, grand ones, hosted in the seven major cities of the Courts, of which there were three. The Court of Blood, of Flow, and of Healing, all present in all cities, with Lords and Ladies, and quite a few other titles that Ilea most certainly wasn’t going to memorize.

On one such fateful ball, exactly five weeks past, a certain Glain Warrington, Court of Flow, was heard speaking ill of the Lady Vermont’s nightly attire. A dress fit for a serf, had apparently been the words, confirmed by three separate sources. And thus an offense that could not be ignored, according to Isidelia.

“So you’re coming here to fight him? To the death?” Ilea asked.

“Oh, sometimes I would wish such upon him, but the four rules prevent such actions. So I must content myself with ripping out his limbs, spilling his blood, smashing in his teeth, and punching his genitals down his throat.” She glanced at the red ceiling of the carriage, a bump in the road making the entire thing shake slightly. “Perhaps killing would be too easy, wouldn’t you think? He should suffer for what he said. And the pain he has inflicted.”

“*She is absolutely nuts,*” Ilea sent to Erik, nodding along with the woman. A glance to Berrik suggested his thoughts weren’t too far off her own. She wondered why he came along at all. Perhaps an excuse to upgrade his Charrison V.