

## The Vampire 112

### Chapter 112 112: Concerning Trends

"It's fine," Ashlynn said as Hauke struggled to find a way to explain Formless Ice. She reminded herself that despite his size, Hauke was still more than five years younger than her. Learning something well enough to use the knowledge was one thing, but even she recognized that it took even greater knowledge to teach it to someone else.

"You said there were seven kinds of sorcery your people practice," Ashlynn said, offering a way to get the conversation back on track. "Is Formless Ice the one that convinced your father to invest so heavily in teaching you differently or is there more?"

"Right, seven," Hauke said, relieved that she wasn't going to press him for an explanation. Lady Nyrielle had asked him to teach but now that he found himself trying to explain things to someone who hadn't grown up around snow and ice their whole lives, he was finding it much harder than he thought it would be to do so.

"When we're born, every Frost Walker has a bit of talent for at least one form of sorcery," he explained, pointing at his horn. "It shows up as the primary color at the base of the horn. Pale blue for Formed Ice, milky white for Drifting Snow, and so on. People who have only one color are said to be very unlucky unless their talent is so overwhelmingly strong that it makes up for the lack of versatility."

"But, your horn doesn't look like it's any one color, or even two or three colors," Ashlynn said. "It even feels like it changes color depending on how the light hits it."

"That's why Father insisted I study so much," Hauke said. "Because I have all the colors. I can use all seven kinds of sorcery. It, it's very rare," he said, his shoulders slumping slightly. "No one has had an iridescent horn in more than two hundred years. But everyone who has had one has been a legendary Eldritch Lord or Hero."

"That sounds like a lot of pressure," Ashlynn said, handing her fishing pole to a surprised-looking Andrus and getting up to rest a hand on Hauke's furry arm. "Do you want to be the next Eldritch Lord? Or do you wish you could just study your magic and do something else to help your people?"

"I need to be the next Eldritch Lord," Hauke said, his voice growing firm. "Father is right that change is coming whether we want it to or not. Even our mountains are changing. The lakes are getting deeper and the glaciers are smaller than they were in my grandparents' time."

"Some people are excited because there are more fish than ever before," he said with a heavy sigh. "And only the elders remember having lean winters where we ran out of supplies before the pass began to thaw. But Father is worried about the milder winters. He's afraid that the mountains won't protect us as well as they used to."

"And humans are coming," Ashlynn said with a heavy sigh of her own. "It's the worst time for the weather to change. It makes you vulnerable right when a new enemy is preparing to attack. Wait," she said, a sudden thought occurring to her.

"I've been thinking about the pass between the Vale of Mists and the High Fen, but what about Airgead Mountain? Is there a route from here to there that's affected by the change in weather?" Ashlynn asked.

"There is," Hauke said, pulling on his fishing line for a moment and then relaxing when he didn't feel the resistance he expected. To his practiced fingers, it felt like there was still bait on the hook, but whatever had tugged on his line hadn't taken the bait.

Opposite him, Andrus watched his motions carefully. Part of him was excited to have a chance to catch something on his own. With so many older siblings, he'd never been able to do more than watch the bucket full of his older siblings catch or help them with a net once they caught something.

At the same time, he almost hoped Lady Ashlynn would take the pole back before he caught one of the monster fish that he was certain was lurking somewhere down there beneath the ice.

"There's a ridgeline trail wide enough for an ox cart or small wagon," Hauke said. "It's usually a muddy mess even when it's not covered in snow, but with the snow melting earlier..."

"Which is why your father said that if Airgead Mountain fell it would be a danger to the High Pass. And yet, Paulus isn't worried about humans because, in his era, the weather would have kept you safe, even if the trail was open because an invading army couldn't send many troops down it very quickly. But not anymore. Your father recognizes that and Paulus doesn't."

"That's why I have to be the next Eldritch Lord," Hauke said, a layer of frost forming over his fur as his emotions stirred. "Last year, I spent the summer taking measurements with my tutor from High Fen."

"We marked out how much smaller the glaciers seem to be getting each year and how much deeper the lakes are," he said, meeting Ashlynn's gaze with worried eyes. "Unless something changes, then in another fifty years, people will be able to get through the pass all year long unless there's a sudden storm."

"You know, you're pretty impressive, little lord Hauke," Ashlynn said warmly. "I always loved books and learning things but I never had to do what you're doing. I've never heard anyone say that they're worried about the weather in fifty years before, but you're thinking about it now, recognizing how it's going to affect your people and I bet you're starting to think about what you'll do to be ready for it."

"I am, but... all that time studying means I'm not as good at hunting or fighting as other people my age," he said, his horn dipping low. "That's why Torsten is such a problem. He and others like him know that they can defeat me in a challenge so they don't listen to what I have to say. They don't see knowledge as strength."

"In that case, let's work together," Ashlynn said, giving him a wide smile. "You studied math and engineering. I studied history, governance, and law. I might not be able to help you grow stronger, but I can help you learn to manage people and apply justice."

"We can strengthen our magic together too," she said with a smile. "You may not feel very strong, but if I was as strong as you are when Owain..." she started, then stopped, drawing a deep breath before she continued.

"What I mean is, we both have people we need to become stronger than," she said. "And I'd like to visit after my trip to the Mother of Thorns so we can keep helping each other grow stronger. Maybe you could even visit the Vale of Mists in the winter?"

"I, I'd like that," Hauke said, flashing a wide grin. "I'd like that a lot. Talking to my tutor, I get the feeling that he thinks of Frost Walkers as simple people compared to everyone in the big cities to the west, but..."

"Um, what do I do?" Andrus interrupted, digging his cloven hooves into the ice and pulling hard on the fishing pole that had bent like a drawn bow. "I think I caught one of those monsters!"