

The Vampire 119

Chapter 119 119: Broken

For the first time since beginning this hunt, Imnek felt the icy grip of fear on his heart. Two of his fellows were dead, one had fallen and retreated, and they'd only managed to kill one pathetic horned soldier in return. When Paulus warned him about the witch, he had dismissed her because she was cowering behind an ice shield. Now, he realized that she wasn't cowering, she was a hunter herself, choosing her time to spring a trap.

Five years ago, he'd left the frozen islands of his homeland in search of a trophy worthy of a hunter who could bear the mantle of leadership. For too long, the Tuscans had cowered in the safety of their islands, protected by the treacherous frozen seas. But if he wanted to change any of that, he first had to prove that he was strong enough to lead.

When Paulus told him about a Frost Walker with an iridescent horn, he thought he'd finally found that trophy. Now, however, facing the human witch, he realized that he'd set his sights too low. If he could survive this deadly hunt, returning with not only the iridescent horn but the skin bearing this woman's mark of the witch, no one would question his capabilities as a hunter!

A cold fire blazed in his eyes as Imnek twisted as much as he could with his legs frozen in place, hurling the wounded woman who had barred his path directly at the oncoming witch. Virve sank her claws deep into his trunk as he threw her, tearing long and bloody rents in his majestic trunk but Imnek had no time to care.

Ashlynn threw herself to the side as Virve came hurtling toward her like a giant furry boulder. It wasn't chivalrous or knightly and part of her felt like she should have tried to catch Virve and break her fall but one of the many lessons Thane had drilled into her was that acts of 'valor and heroism' on the battlefield often resulted in losing a fight you could have won. If they survived this, she would apologize to Virve afterward.

The time Ashlynn spent avoiding Virve slowed her charge just enough for Imnek to smash his maul into the ice covering his legs. He couldn't clear all of it and his movements were slow and stiff compared to before, but he was able to turn enough to meet Ashlynn's charge head-on.

The sound of steel colliding rang across the ice as Ashlynn's darksteel falchion met Imnek's heavy maul. Far from being a clumsy brute, Imnek wielded his maul much like a soldier would use a halberd or billhook, combining powerful thrusts with heavy swings and strikes from the butt end of the weapon to keep up with Ashlynn's terrifying speed.

Their clash of weapons was echoed in a clash of sorcery. The sharpened Frost Walker horns lashed to Imnek's tusks glowed in colors that ranged from dark blue to icy white, conjuring icicles that flew at Ashlynn like thrown daggers, shrouded in flurries of snow in an attempt to obscure her vision.

The wind swirling around Ashlynn intensified, clearing the snow from the air and deflecting the icicles enough for her to evade them without disengaging her blade from Imnek's maul. To Heila, watching from behind Hauke's ice barrier, it seemed like Ashlynn had completely neutralized Imnek's sorcery.

Hauke, however, realized that even though the giant Tuscan's sorcery never directly harmed Ashlynn, the pressure it exerted stopped her from using her Mist Walker Dance or any other sorcery that could help her gain an advantage in this fight.

"Can you do anything to help her?" Heila asked with pleading eyes.

"It was hard to interfere when Virve was fighting him," Hauke said, shaking his head slightly without ever taking his eyes off the fight. "Seneschal Ashlynn is far too fast for me to attempt anything," he added bitterly.

If his skill was greater, he wouldn't be so powerless now. The fact that the hunters had come for his iridescent horn only made him feel worse as he looked at the blood-splattered ice around their fishing hole. All of this, he felt, was happening because of him, yet all he could do at the moment was to hope that Ashlynn could overcome the last of the Tuscan giants.

"You're no witch," Imnek spat, his trunk dripping blood as he and Ashlynn continued to clash. "What are you?"

Even though she understood him, Ashlynn didn't bother to respond. Superior strength and speed could make up for a lack of technique and training but only to an extent. Right now, it was taking every ounce of concentration and focus she had to keep up with Imnek's deceptive attacks and the flurry of icy sorcery that flowed around them.

Worse, Ashlynn was rapidly depleting her energy. While the freezing wind bolstered her strength, it wasn't as easy for her to draw upon as the energy of trees or the earth. In the process of using the icy wind as a weapon, she was slowly freezing herself from the outside in.

Her mind worked furiously to find a solution before she ran out of strength. Imnek had too many advantages. He was much taller, had longer reach, greater skill and more weapons to use than she did. Even if she evaded his maul, he still had his horn studded tusks to fight with, and if she ever allowed herself to be caught in a bind with his maul, the tusks immediately sought her flesh. Speed and power alone weren't enough to overcome so many disadvantages.

"Heila," she said as she arrived at the only conclusion she could think of under these circumstances. "If I fall, you take Hauke and Virve and you run, you hear me?"

"My Lady, no!" Heila shouted.

"What, what did she say?" Hauke asked. As much as Ashlynn worked hard to master the Eldritch tongue, Hauke hadn't spent any time doing the reverse and when Ashlynn and Heila spoke in the human tongue, he quickly became lost.

Before Heila could answer, however, Ashlynn made her move. Without the advantage of mobility, in a frontal collision with the giant Tuscan, she was doomed to lose a battle of attrition as the fight wore on. Instead, she stopped using the winds to resist the icy assault of Imnek's sorcery and channeled her energy elsewhere.

"Mist Walker. Dance," she said softly. The instant she shifted her focus, she dashed away to the side in the hopes of escaping at least some of Imnek's icy onslaught. Hail the size of walnuts and icicles as sharp as daggers pelted her body leaving behind countless bruises and half a dozen shallow cuts. Blood froze as soon as ice tore her flesh and piercing cold pain penetrated deep into her arms, legs, and chest.

For a moment, Ashlynn's vision went red as the pain threatened to overwhelm her concentration. Biting her lower lip, she pushed through the pain and dashed through the air, soaring above Imnek to attack him from behind. Though she aimed for his neck as she passed, he was quick enough to turn, denying her a fatal strike but suffering a deep wound to his shoulder as she passed.

Imnek's trunk trumpeted in rage, splattering more blood across the ice as he rounded on the human witch. Ashlynn, however, had already made her next move, this time coming from the opposite side and thrusting her sword deep into his chest from underneath the ribs.

Too late, Ashlynn realized her mistake. Before she could wrench her sword free, Imnek brought a massive arm down, clapping her on the back, knocking the wind from her lungs, and pinning her against his hairy, pelt-clad body.

Blood spurted from Imnek's mouth, flowing down his tusks and even more blood flowed from his wounds. Along his tusks, swirling ice blue, pale white, and even dark blue energy began to pour from the sharpened Frost Walker horns lashed to his tusks, rising around him like mist above a grave.

"No, no, you can't!" Imnek cried, his eyes trembling in fear. Ghostly voices of Frost Walkers long dead whispered in his giant, floppy ears and cackled gleefully as they pulled free of his control. Frost spread rapidly up his tusks as two phantom Frost Walkers advanced inexorably toward his face, impaling themselves on his tusks much as he had impaled them so many years ago.

Dark blue apparitions latched onto his open wounds, plunging icy hands into his body and freezing his blood as they seeped into his flesh until their icy hands gripped his still-beating heart.

White mist flowed outward from him, surrounding both Imnek and Ashlynn with a fog that pulled the warmth from their bodies and poured it into the ice below. Cracks reverberated across the frozen lake as the ice weakened and shattered under Imnek's feet. Beneath the cracking sound, early drowned out by Imnek's dying roars, laughing voices celebrated as the owners of his trophies finally claimed their revenge.

"My Lady!" Heila cried, darting out from behind Hauke's ice shield as the ice beneath Ashlynn and Imnek gave way, plunging them both into the frigid watery depths below.