

## The Vampire 122

### Chapter 122 122: Beneath the Ice

Ashlynn only had a brief moment to realize that the dying Tuscan intended to drag her down to death with him. The next moment, she was overwhelmed by the sensation of falling and the rush of cold water flowing over her. A single gasp of air filled her lungs before she plunged beneath the icy surface of the lake.

Ice enveloped Imnek's body as the lingering malice of long-dead Frost Walkers radiated outward from his tusks. As Ashlynn struggled to free herself, that same ice locked her in place, unable to get free of the dead Tuscan's grasp.

On the surface of the lake, Heila skidded to a stop at the edge of the hole in the ice that Ashlynn had fallen into. Dimly, she could see Ashlynn struggling to free herself even as Imnek dragged her further down. More concerning, however, was the lingering icy energy that had begun to refreeze the lake in the space where Ashlynn fell.

'Find something that truly matters to you if you want to transform yourself into something more,' Zedya's words echoed in the diminutive horned woman's mind as she stood at the edge of the hole in the ice, watching Ashlynn struggle. 'Do not fail her again,' Nyrielle had said when she was too frightened to translate during Ashlynn's confrontation with Torsten.

Standing at the edge of the ice, shame burned deep in Heila's heart, overwhelming reason. Andrus had died fighting, and Virve had nearly died to the same Tuscan that wouldn't let go of Ashlynn even in death. Hauke, young and inexperienced as he was, had done his best several times to use his magic to keep her safe and defeat the Tuscan hunters.

More than anything, Ashlynn, who should have taken shelter while her guardians fought to protect her, had stormed the frontlines, slaying three of the four hunters herself. During all that time, while everyone else fought, Heila had done nearly nothing herself to help.

"No more," she said, taking a deep breath and leaping into the hole in the ice. She couldn't be a bystander anymore. She couldn't live with the shame if she did nothing to help when there wasn't even an enemy to face, only the frigid water and spreading ice.

The Horned Clan weren't known to be good swimmers. Their cloven hooves were ideal on the steep mountains and river valleys of the Vale of Mists and she could kick powerfully off of the ground to traverse over the most treacherous terrain. Underwater, however, very little about her compact body was suited for swimming.

Instead, as soon as she plunged beneath the surface, she slid under the thick sheet of ice and placed her feet against it, kicking off with all of her might and shooting through the water like a spear hurled by a fisherman.

Ashlynn's eyes opened wide in shock as Heila arrived beside her in a flurry of bubbles. The horned woman wasted no time in adopting the same approach she'd used to reach Ashlynn, placing her cloven feet against the Tuscan's body and wrapping her arms around his arm to move the frozen limb enough for Ashlynn to shimmy free.

On the surface, Hauke took several seconds to process what had happened before he scrambled out from behind the ice shield. By the time he arrived at the hole in the ice, however, it had already shrunk to half the size it was when Ashlynn fell through it and it continued to grow smaller before his eyes.

"Ice. Melt. As I will," he said, pointing at the shrinking hole in the ice. Dark blue energy flowed from his horn and danced along the edges of the circle, but the moment his magic touched the ice, dark whispers filled his mind as though blown from somewhere impossibly cold and far away.

"He belongs to us," the voices hissed, each one distinct yet speaking as one. "We've waited so long for this," a single voice said, his words filling Hauke's mind with a sense of the passage of countless unbearable years.

"Forget the outsiders," another voice whispered, cold as winter frost and dripping with disdain. "They are all the same. They will turn on you for your horn, let us save you from their greed."

If Hauke had been rested and at his full strength, it would have been impossible for the revenants of deceased Frost Walkers to challenge his sorcery. Now, however, as he struggled to force his remaining dregs of energy to obey his will, the whispers grew more threatening.

"Big Brother," a child's voice sang, somehow sounding both innocent and cruel. "Please don't fight us or the others will take you too. Please Big Brother, don't make them hurt you!"

"You're tired, little lord," another voice said. "Too tired to fight us. Just let the ice close. Let the water have them all."

"Shut, up!" Hauke roared in frustration. As the voices tormented him, all he could manage was to slow the rate of the hole's closing, and with each passing moment, frost began creeping up his legs as the vengeful spirits pressed against his weakening magic.

Beneath the water, Ashlynn's lungs burned and she could feel herself reaching her limits. The combination of cold and lack of air was turning her vision black at the edges and struggling free of Imnek's frozen grasp had drained much of her reserves. Beside her, Heila looked even worse. Without the strength granted by Ashlynn's bond with Nyrielle, the diminutive servant was in no condition to survive in the frigid waters.

'Death's Deception,' Ashlynn thought, focusing as much as she could while she wrapped her arms around Heila. It was a spell she'd learned from Marcell in the days leading up to her infiltration of the Summer Villa, one that would allow her to convincingly 'play dead' if she ever needed to do so to escape captors.

The spell slowed her heart rate dramatically, beating only a few times a minute. More importantly, however, it allowed her body to use the energy she would normally use for sorcery to remove her need to breathe. She couldn't sustain this state indefinitely, but as she borrowed the cold, soft energy of the water in the lake, she found that she had enough strength not only for herself but for Heila as well.

Looking into the dark water of the lake from above, Hauke's magic faltered and failed as the six remnant wills of slain Frost Walkers demanded that the ice entomb Imnek for his crimes.

"They won't make it," he breathed. "But if we can get far enough..." Taking a deep breath, Hauke plunged through the hole in the ice mere moments before it became too small for him to fit through. Nearby, he could feel other lingering resentful presences, likely trapped in the sharpened horns mounted to the tusks of the other defeated hunters.

Kicking his powerful legs, he descended to the point where Ashlynn and Heila hung limply in the water. Both of them appeared so still as to be dead but Hauke had lived long enough in the mountains to see people pulled from icy water revive, even when it shouldn't have been possible. As long as he could find a patch of ice that was thin enough to break through, he was confident that he could rescue the two women.

That is, as long as nothing else conspired to keep them trapped beneath the ice. But what choice did he have? Scooping Ashlynn and Heila into his large furry arms, he kicked mightily through the water in search of a place where they could break through the ice before he ran out of air and doomed himself along with them.