

The Vampire 148

Chapter 148 148: Hauke's Decision

Much like Ashlynn, Huake spent most of the following day asleep and recovering from events. He took a meal by himself before retrieving five carefully preserved iridescent horns and setting them on a table in his room.

Before the horns, Hauke could only sit on the floor. To do anything else would be far too disrespectful. Both his father and Old Svenja had suggested that one of them take custody of the horns last night, but Hauke refused.

It was a rare act of defiance, normally he was content to follow his father's arrangements and he always listened to the advice of the elders. This time, however, it was different. It was far too personal.

"What was done to you," Hauke said, gazing at the horns with misty eyes. "It was far too cruel. You should never have been left to suffer so long. I'm sorry," he said, bowing deeply to the horns.

The moment he apologized, the horns began to glow with a weak, flickering light. All of them were chipped and cracked and the energy that flowed through them was far from stable, but they clearly weren't 'dead' horns. There was still a trace of the ancestors within them.

One of the horns, shrouded with a white, icy mist, pulsed brighter than the others as if calling out to him. Sitting before them, Hauke struggled with what he should do. He understood, or at least, he thought he did, but the risks...

Taking a deep breath, he shook himself, releasing a flutter of tiny ice crystals from his fur. After watching both Ashlynn and Nyrielle fight, he'd seen firsthand the kind of strength it took to protect people, and he realized that he fell far short of the mark.

Old Fabiene had told everyone how hard Nyrielle fought to build her strength, and he'd watched Ashlynn struggle to learn Frost Walker sorcery. He knew that the strength they held wasn't just something they were born with. Even if they had advantages, wasn't it the same as his iridescent horn?

But he couldn't glide along on that ability alone like he was sledding downhill. He had to put in the work and that required taking risks. If he couldn't manage to take even the first step then he had no business standing in line to be the next Lord of the High Pass.

Moving slowly, he lowered his head until his horn made contact with the horn shrouded in the misty white glow. Instantly, his mind was pulled into a different space. It resembled the lake with the underwater cave, but the lake wasn't nearly as deep and the place he stood on the island was below the entrance to the cave but still above the frozen surface of the lake.

"What was done to us," a soft, feminine voice said. "It wasn't cruel. What happened in the end may be tragic, but we all made our choices."

"Ancestor Ines," Hauke said, turning to look at the lakeshore where the ancestor stood.

Her figure was faded and incomplete, missing much of her once elegant body as she drifted above the surface of the lake, but unlike the version of her he'd met in the cave, this time, she seemed clear-eyed and free of pain.

"Please, my father, Lady Nyrielle, everyone wants to know," Hauke began. "Who transformed you like that? And why?" These were the questions that weighed heavily on everyone last night. If he could obtain answers...

"I do not remember who," the ghostly woman said, shaking her head. "There is very little of 'Ines' left. What little remains has no need of parents or children or many other memories. I do remember why, and that has been enough to serve my purpose. For all of us to serve our purpose."

"Then why?" Hauke asked. If he could at least understand that much, it would help him know what to do next.

"Because we are too fragile," Ines said. "People like me, like you, like the five of us, we are born to be the best of our people, the strongest of our people, but we are far too rare. Generations pass without an iridescent horn, and in those days, the Frost Walker clan had dwindled from four nations to one and it seemed that we would vanish from the face of the world."

"What was done let us guard over our descendants in the generations where they had no other guardians," Ines said, looking out over the frozen lake as though she could see long departed families playing or fishing on its surface. "It was to preserve our power for times when our people needed it the most."

"Did, did everyone with an iridescent horn choose this? Even, even Eugen?" Hauke's impression of the youngest among the ancestral spirits was that he had been a child even younger than himself when he was transformed into a blood golem. If that was the case, wasn't it still far too cruel?

"Little Eugen traded his life to save someone precious to him," Ines explained. "But for a century after his death, people brought the most helplessly sick and injured to see him and receive healing from him."

When things went wrong and we were... corrupted, he tried very hard to heal us but there are limits to all things."

For several minutes, Hauke stood silently looking out over the lake with Ancestor Ines. He tried to imagine the decision they'd made, to live on in the ancestral cave in order to keep using their powers to protect the last nation of Frost Walkers. It sounded both incredibly noble and also incredibly... lonely. Especially after their cave had been sealed. It must have been torment.

"I, I don't think we can restore you to what you were," Hauke said. No one had been willing to ask Lady Nyrielle if she knew the sorcery to make a Blood Golem or not. She said it was her teacher's sorcery but that didn't mean he had passed it on to her.

Even if her teacher had taught her the magic, her description of the ritual was so horrifying that Hauke couldn't imagine his father sacrificing so many lives in order to restore them to what they had been.

"Did I ask you to restore us?" Ines said lightly. "I only wanted you to understand so that your heart would be at peace. Our end may have been tragic, but it was not cruel."

"But, you haven't ended yet!" Hauke protested. "There's still something of you here..." As long as there was a trace of life left in an ancestor's horn, they deserved the worship and respect of their descendants. He felt that he should at least give them that much.

"We are like this for a reason, young Hauke," the ghostly woman said. "Without a way to serve our purpose, we will not linger on much longer. If you wish, you may speak with the others. I'm sure they will say much the same thing. This is our end. We can no longer protect you as we once did."

"Now they have you to rely on," she said, turning to meet his gaze. "Perhaps the vampire who shattered us will offer to do for you what was once done for us when you are ready to die. You can begin the cycle anew. Or perhaps you wouldn't choose to do what we did. That decision is yours alone and has nothing to do with us."

"No," Hauke said, sinking to his knees and shaking his head bitterly. All of those years alone, all of those years of suffering and they were just going to end? It wasn't right. They deserved better.

"Wait," he said as remembered the words Nyrielle had said the night before. 'They could become keys to salvation, or they could become portents of doom.' At the time, he'd thought that attempting to commune with the ancestors would be dangerous but it seemed like the malice that had clung to them was stripped away along with the blood magic that sustained them.

What was left behind was an ancestor who had given more than just her life to protect her people for longer than he could imagine. This... this should be a hope for the future.

"You said that without a way to serve your purpose, you wouldn't linger much longer," Hauke said, firming up his resolve as he met the ghostly woman's gaze. "I am young, weak, and ignorant in the use of my sorcery. There is no one with an iridescent horn who can teach me," he said.

"Can you, and the others, can you at least linger long enough to be my teachers?" Hauke asked. It felt incredibly selfish, but if what they needed was a way to help their people, then even if it was by teaching him, maybe it would be enough. And as long as they hadn't gone, he could search for a way to help them more. Even if he failed, they at least deserved to have someone make the attempt.

"You will have to speak to each of them," Ines said, gliding across the ground to hover at Hauke's side. "But for myself, I will try."