

## The Vampire 107

### Chapter 107 107: Going Fishing

After a night spent tangled with a cold and trembling Nyrielle, Ashlynn woke to an empty bed and a disorienting lack of awareness of time. The room, located deep in the castle in a place without windows, had become so perfectly dark that it was impossible to say whether it was early morning or if she'd slept until midday.

A knock sounded at the door, quick and sharp in a pattern that Ashlynn had come to associate with Heila.

"My Lady," the diminutive servant's voice called. "May I enter?"

"One moment," Ashlynn said. She briefly conjured a mote of light, just enough to locate the lamp on the bedside table and light it before banishing her sorcery. The night spent under warm furs had helped to replenish her energy after the previous evening but with her plans for the day, she had no intention of wasting energy on light when a practical, if mundane, solution was available.

Once she'd pulled a dressing gown on, she padded across the cold stone floor and let Heila into the room that she and Nyrielle had occupied for the night. A small oil lamp burned on the tray Heila carried, illuminating a simple breakfast of fresh baked bread smothered in creamy cheese and topped with smoked fish.

"Bless you, Heila," Ashlynn said, sitting on the bed and devouring her breakfast. While it might not meet Georg's standards, she was certain that Heila or one of the other servants traveling with them had been responsible for baking the loaf as the Frost Walkers had little interest in anything that wasn't meat.

The feast last night had been sumptuous and Ashlynn had indulged in the many different ways they prepared fish, but by the end of the meal, she deeply missed Georg's balanced dishes.

"How late did I sleep?" Ashlynn asked around a mouthful of the firm, almost nutty bread. "It should still be fairly early, shouldn't it?"

"The sun is only a handbreadth above the mountains," Heila said, bustling around the room and setting out an outfit for Ashlynn to wear today. With plans to spend the day fishing on the ice, she opted for the practical breeches and tunic that Ashlynn would typically wear when training with Thane, along with a heavy quilted coat and a fur cloak to wear over that along with practical, soft leather boots that came up over the knee.

Once she'd finished breakfast and dressed, Ashlynn took one last look at Nyrielle's darksteel lined daybed. No matter how many times she saw the ornately carved box, it still reminded her of a coffin.

Nyrielle's perfect stillness while sleeping and the way she didn't even breathe made it all the more... unsettling. Despite the fact that she knew Nyrielle was sleeping in the box just a few feet away, only the echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat in her chest and the closeness of their bond let her know that someone else was present in the temporarily converted storeroom.

When Heila led her out of the room where Ashlynn was momentarily surprised to find four guards from the vale standing directly outside the door. Further, two more guards were standing at each end of the hallway, their backs straight and their weapons held at the ready.

In the ancient castle in the Vale of Mists, there were two guards posted at the entrance to the portion of the castle where no natural light entered, and that was as close as a guard ever came to Nyrielle's bed chamber unless there was a reason to disturb her.

When visiting a place like this, the guards posted at the end of the hallway should have been sufficient, but it looks like Captain Lennart had a different opinion of what was required to protect Nyrielle in this place. Ashlynn wondered if the obvious hostility from Paulus at the banquet was responsible for the change but whether it was or not, she trusted that he'd made the right decision.

"Virve and Andrus will be accompanying us on the trip today," Heila said, introducing two of the guards who had dressed warmly for a trip outside the castle's shelter.

Virve was a tall, broad-shouldered woman from the Clan of the Great Claw with dark brown, almost black fur that had begun to turn silver around her eyes and nose while Andrus was an energetic and young-looking man from the Horned Clan with soft, curly locks that fell haphazardly around his thick curled horns. Both of them bowed to Ashlynn as soon as Heila introduced them.

"I'm sorry to be taking you out in the cold so early in the morning," Ashlynn said to the two as they began to walk through the icy castle. "Did you two draw the short straw to get stuck with me instead of guarding Mistress Nyrielle where it's... not as cold?" She'd almost said 'warmer' but it was hard to refer to a place that was so cold that ice wouldn't melt as any kind of 'warm.'

"I volunteered," Andrus said brightly, his hazel eyes twinkling. "This is my first time leaving the Vale and I don't know if I'll get another one so I want to see as much of it as I can."

"Andrus," Virve chided, in a voice that was surprisingly light and gentle for a woman so large. "Remember your duty. We're here to protect Lady Ashlynn, not to sightsee."

"Then, have you been outside the vale before?" Ashlynn asked.

"I've guarded the waystations between here and the vale several times," the bearish woman said simply. "I grew up in Orava Village."

"Then you're used to the mountain and the cold," Ashlynn said, nodding at the older woman. "I'm glad to have you watching over me."

Once they exited the dark, inner reaches of the icy fortress, Ashlynn got her first look at the splendor of the castle during the light of day and the sight was so bright that it was almost dazzling. It wasn't only the great hall where they'd had their feast the night before that made extensive use of crystal clear ice in place of a stone roof, but throughout the fortress, large panels of clear ice allowed light to fill the fortress from every angle.

The castle was located high enough in the mountains that it stood above the clouds, bathed both directly in sunlight and in the bright light reflecting off the pure white snow that covered neighboring peaks.

In the courtyard, Hauke stood eagerly next to a long sled piled high with supplies for their outing.

"Good morning," the young Frost Walker said, waving enthusiastically as Ashlynn emerged from the castle. "It's a long walk," he said, eyeing the heavy darksteel falchion that hung from Ashlynn's waist. "Are you sure you want to carry such a heavy weapon?"

"It's not that bad," Ashlynn said, resting a hand on the sword's pommel. "And Mistress Nyrielle is very insistent that I keep it with me. I'm sure nothing will happen, but, just in case," she said, spreading her arms helplessly.

Much like her possessive public displays of affection, Ashlynn had come to accept Nyrielle's fiercely protective habits. She doubted Hauke would do anything rash on this trip, but much like the guards that followed her, she found comfort in knowing that she could protect herself if anything did happen.

More importantly, it was a small thing that let Nyrielle rest with greater confidence that Ashlynn would be safe and that alone was worth something to Ashlynn, especially after the previous evening's sharp reminders about the progeny Nyrielle had lost.

Thankfully, no one had suggested she don armor for the trip. Not only would it have been heavy and a little cumbersome, but the idea of wearing that much metal in the cold mountain air sounded like an invitation to frostbite. A reasonable amount of precaution was fine, but wearing armor on a fishing trip would have felt almost paranoid.