

The Vampire 108

Chapter 108 108: Cultural Exchange

The hike out to the lake itself took almost an hour as they crunched through snow or scrambled over rocks. Several times, early in the hike, Hauke attempted to be helpful and offered to carry Ashlynn over a rough bit of terrain, only to be surprised as she effortlessly hopped from one rock to the next, crossing the treacherous ground with ease.

"Thane insisted I learn to do this," she said, landing lightly on a boulder before leaping to another rock outcropping. "As a method of avoiding trackers and hunting dogs. I didn't realize it would be so handy for avoiding mudslides though," she said, looking back at Hauke and Virve as they carried the sled of supplies over the thick gray mud and slush of melted snow.

"Lady Ashlynn is just missing a set of horns to pass as one of us," Andrus said, matching her movements and hopping from one stone to the next with his powerful legs.

For much of the hike, Andrus had chatted eagerly with Hauke, asking about life in the High Pass. His questions seemed almost random, covering topics from how the Frost Walkers traveled when the weather turned bad to which fish were best to eat.

"So you hunt alone?" Andrus asked, his hazel eyes wide as he bounded from rock to rock. While he looked playful as he moved and his tone was light, his eyes constantly roamed over the terrain for anything that might be a threat.

If anything were to threaten Lady Ashlynn, he made sure that he was close enough to help protect her from it, even if he thought she was strong enough to protect herself.

"Even in winter?" Andrus said, pausing to glance back at Hauke.

"Most hunters do, most of the time," Hauke replied, carefully picking his way through the soggy slush with Virve until they passed the mudslide and he could start dragging the sled again. "The cold doesn't bother us much, and prey is easier to track when you're not part of a large group. I, I haven't earned the right to hunt alone yet though," he said, his horn dipping as his head hung low for a moment.

"I've been following other hunters to learn though, and I join the fishing parties every autumn," he said, shaking off the moment of gloom. "When winter is close, we need to stock up in case the weather turns bad enough to keep us indoors so we'll form into large groups to fish all the lakes nearby. The rest of the year, though, most people hunt and fish alone."

"That sounds so lonely," Andrus said, shaking his head and turning back to follow Ashlynn further up ahead. "Back home, we did everything together. Many hands make quick work," he said, mimicking his father's tone and upright posture. "When I was little, I was never alone, even if I wanted to be. There's nowhere to hide when you have seven siblings."

"Seven siblings? What's that like?" Hauk asked, struggling to imagine how crowded things would become if he had to share space with seven other hulking Frost Walkers. The rooms and corridors of the ancient castle were all large enough for people to spread out, even in gatherings of hundreds of Frost Walkers like last night, but if he multiplied that by seven, he felt like no one would have any space to breathe much less move around.

"It's noisy," Andrus laughed. "Warm too. We all sleep in the same hut around the fire in the middle. I have a sister who's the same age as me and she always snuck under the blankets with me when the fire went out and it got dark," he said, his voice softening with obvious affection.

"I miss them sometimes, but I'm glad I left the village because now I get to come to places like this," he said with a toothy grin, gesturing at the frigid landscape around them.

"I've never shared a room with anyone," Hauke admitted, quickly catching up to Ashlynn and Andrus in a few strides of his long legs. "Even if I had a brother or sister, they'd have their own room once they were old enough to leave mother's room."

"Your mother's room?" Ashlynn asked, pausing for a moment. "Doesn't she share a room with your father?"

"No," Hauke said, furrowing his bushy eyebrows in confusion. "How could they stay married if they had to stay together day and night? Everyone needs space, even when we live together."

"That... I suppose that makes sense," Ashlynn said. She hardly had room to say otherwise. She and Nyrielle had rooms in completely separate wings of the castle. After spending the night with her last night, in a pitch black room with no windows, she better understood why Nyrielle had never tried to force her to 'move in' even though they were lovers.

Something as simple as the natural rhythm of a sunrise and sunset was a fundamental part of Ashlynn's 'normal' life and it was something that could never intrude into Nyrielle's resting place.

From there, the conversation turned naturally to other topics. For the most part, Ashlynn was content to listen to Heila's translations of the conversation, soaking up the information like a sponge without needing to ask things for herself, though from time to time, Hauke would ask how life was different in the lowlands where Ashlynn grew up as he tried to understand not only how people like Andrus lived in the Vale of Mists, but how humans were different from the Eldritch people.

After an hour of working their way around the mountain, however, they finally arrived at their destination, a vast frozen lake on the side of the mountain. The lake itself was shaped almost like a key, round and wide on one side with a small island in the center, then tapering off on one end where it became jagged as it narrowed into a stream that flowed down the mountain.

Most of the lake was covered by a sheet of ice and snow, and only the narrow end seemed to refuse to freeze as melting snow from the hillside trickled in and chunks of ice broke off to tumble down stream.

"It's beautiful," Ashlynn said, pausing to admire the lake that was unlike anything she'd seen in either Blackwell County or Lothian March. "Is that a building on the island?" Ashlynn asked, holding up a hand to block the bright light of the sun and peering at what looked like several weathered stone pillars on the small island.

"It's a memorial shrine," Hauke explained. "Long ago, this island held one of our most important ancestral caves, but the water is much higher in the lake than it used to be and the entrance to the cave is under water now so it's impossible to visit those ancestors. The memorial shrine is where people go to pay respects to their oldest ancestors, but not many people can trace their lineage back over a thousand years, so it's rarely visited."

"I see," Ashlynn said, looking at the island in the distance. It was hard to imagine something that happened so long ago that the place where it happened had been swallowed by rising lakewater.

In Blackwell County, the oldest buildings were at most two hundred years old, but since many of those had been torn down to make way for newer construction, even those sights were rare. To visit a grave that contained an ancestor from over a thousand years ago was all but incomprehensible.

"Can we visit the shrine? I'd like to pay my respects," Ashlynn said. Even if they weren't her ancestors, they were the honored ancestors of her allies. As Nyrielle's Seneschal, she felt that she should at least offer a moment of silent respect for the dead and if the shrine needed any tending, she was happy to do that as well.

"This," Hauke said awkwardly as he searched for the words to explain. "The honored ancestors have earned their rest. We shouldn't disturb their slumber unless we have great need. It would be one thing if you were related, but outsiders shouldn't intrude unless you need an answer that only the ancestors could provide."

"Need an answer?" Ashlynn asked, puzzled by the way Hauke had phrased it. "So you come here to pray for guidance?"

"No," Hauke said, just as confused by Ashlynn's lack of understanding as she was by the concept he was trying to explain. For a moment, he glanced at Heila, wondering if things were getting lost in translation but that didn't seem to be the case.

"We can commune with our ancestors," he said, tapping his horn. "They leave behind their wisdom in their horns. For our most treasured ancestors, we prepare a special block of ice that gives them the power to commune with us directly. Other ancestors who didn't have great accomplishments in life aren't as easy to commune with in their ancestral caves."

"You mean," Ashlynn said, her eyes wide. "You can actually speak with the dead?!"