

The Vampire 109

Chapter 109 109: Honoring Ancestors

"You can actually speak with the dead?!" Ashlynn asked, staring at Hauke in disbelief. Thane told her that the Frost Walkers viewed their horns as sacred and that they kept them in ancestral caves but she'd assumed that it was like a normal graveyard. Clearly, there was much more to it than that.

Around her, both Heila and Andrus took steps back, their eyes wide as if the island was home to ghosts that could prey upon them at any moment. Only Virve seemed unphased by Hauke's statement, shaking her head at the antics of the young ones from the Horned Clan who spent very little if any time among their frosty neighbors.

"I, I don't think 'speaking with the dead' is the right way to think of it," Hauke said carefully after clarifying words with Heila. "More like, we commune with their memories and wisdom. Our departed ancestors aren't ghosts or vampires, they don't learn new things after they die and continue their existence."

"It's more like, everything they were as a person is crystalized into their horn when they die," he explained. "And, if you give them the proper respect, reverence and energy, you can commune with an echo of the ancestor. I've only done it once when I turned ten years old and father brought me to the ancestral cave to introduce me to grandmother," he said, his eyes misting slightly as he remembered the otherworldly voice that had greeted him when he paid respects to his grandmother's horn.

Hauke's grandmother had died when Lord Ritchel was still a child, long before Hauke was born, and stories were still told about her heroic stand against Tuskan hunters who attacked an autumn fishing trip to one of the lower lakes. Despite horrific wounds, she squeezed every last drop of magic out of her body to freeze the Tuskans in place while everyone else retreated off the ice.

In the end, his grandmother shattered the ice the Tuskans were standing on, drowning herself along with them to ensure that everyone else could escape. It hadn't been until spring the following year that her body and with it her horn, could be recovered from the icy lake and brought to the ancestral hall to join the horns of other mighty heroes.

"I see," Ashlynn said. As curious as she was, she wasn't about to disrespect the Frost Walkers by intruding on their ancestral burial grounds. Everyone had their own traditions for the dead and no matter how much they differed from her own, it took something extreme for her to be willing to offend those traditions.

Even Owain, she imagined, would need a proper burial. After all, the Church had traditions for how criminals and heretics should be buried to ensure they never reached the Heavenly Shores. For what he had done to her, Owain deserved at least that much consideration.

"I'm supposed to teach you about Frost Walker sorcery, right?" Hauke said, sensing that the mood had become heavy and awkward. His horn flickered briefly with a pale blue light as he gazed out over the frozen lake. His father told him that he should work hard to form a friendship with Ashlynn but he felt like he'd been stumbling between how much he talked to Andrus on the hike out here and the awkward moment when he told Ashlynn they couldn't visit the shrine.

"Even if you can't visit an ancestral cave, I can still show you a lot. Come with me," he said, tugging on the sled and striding down the hill to the lakeshore. "My grandmother used to spend a lot of time on the lakes helping to protect everyone who was fishing."

"Father says I inherited her talent for creating structures, so first, I'll show you how we make an ice house for fishing," he said a touch awkwardly. "It, it would be a good way to pay respects to our ancestors, even if we don't visit them," he added, hoping that Ashlynn would find it acceptable since they couldn't visit the shrine.

"Icehouse?" Ashlynn asked as they walked out onto the icy lake. In some places, snow had melted before freezing to the ice of the lake, giving the ice a strange pebbly texture, but even when all five of them walked out onto the ice it gave no sign of cracking under their weight.

"The Frost Walkers can form ice into blocks, stacking them like bricks to build a shelter against the storms," Virve offered as they walked. "I've seen them do it when sudden storms show up and they're caught between waystations. You'd be surprised how warm it can become in a shelter built of ice."

The further they walked from the shore, the more the frigid mountain wind tugged at their cloaks and stung Ashlynn's exposed cheeks. The glare off the frozen lake became even brighter and at one point, Ashlynn had the disorienting sensation that she was walking off the edge of the world in a land of pure white until she pulled her fur-trimmed hood lower and shaded her eyes against the light.

The air was crisp and cold in her lungs and she found that, while she could endure the cold while hiking around the mountain, the biting wind pushed her beyond her limits and she had to resort to sorcery to keep the cold at bay as she pulled her cloak tighter around herself.

Once they'd walked far enough out on the lake that Hauke was certain the water beneath the ice was deep enough, he paused, holding up a hand and gesturing for everyone to stop.

"Always respect the ice," he said, kneeling down and tapping several times with a claw. "Even if it's thick, once we put a hole in the ice for fishing, it will be weaker. If the ice is brittle when I pull out a piece, we'll have to look for a different spot."

"It's possible to strengthen the ice with sorcery," he added quickly when he realized that Ashlynn might misunderstand what he was planning to demonstrate. "But it's a waste of energy when we could just walk a little bit further. So, wait just a moment while I make a hole."

While Ashlynn and the others watched intently, he retrieved a large, circular blade shaped like a hoop with a handle in the center a little over half a foot in diameter. Plunging it into the thick ice with all his strength, the blade sheared through the thick ice with a quiet -SHICK- sound.

Twisting sharply, Hauke pulled up on the handle, revealing a smooth, clean cut as he extracted a plug of clear ice more than six inches thick.

"This is what we wanted," he said, popping the plug of ice free and sliding it across the surface of the lake for Ashlynn and the others to inspect. "It's clear and solid all the way through, so we don't have to worry about the ice giving way while we're fishing," he said with a wide grin.

"Now, this is the part I wanted to show you," he said, taking a wide stance over the hole in the ice. "According to my father, this is how grandmother used to do it," he added, closing his eyes to focus as energy began to gather at the tip of his horn.