

The Vampire 113

Chapter 113 113: Caught

Heila flung herself at Andrus as soon as he cried out, wrapping her arms around his torso and setting her cloven feet wide apart on the ice as he fought against the pull of whatever had taken the bait.

"Ashlynn," Hauke said quickly. "Wrap the line around the ice spike," he said, pointing at a thick spike of ice he'd conjured near the hole in the ice. "Pull slowly!"

"Got it," Ashlynn replied in Eldritch without waiting for Heila to translate since the diminutive horned woman had her hands full keeping Andrus from being pulled into the hole in the ice.

Reaching out, she captured the trembling line as it danced at the end of the fishing pole, pulling slowly but firmly on the line to prevent any sudden motions from snapping the line or dislodging the fish. Working carefully, she looped the line around the spike several times, transferring the force of the pull from the fishing pole to the thick shaft of ice anchored to the frozen surface of the lake.

"You can let go of the pole now," Hauke told the struggling Andrus. "Lady Ashlynn, just keep doing what you're doing. Pull in a bit of line and loop it around the spike, then pull in some more."

"Andrus, well done," Ashlynn said with a smile as she steadily worked on hauling in the fish. The line shook and trembled in her hand as the fish thrashed on the hook, desperate to escape, but Ashlynn wasn't about to let up on it.

Andrus stared nervously at the hole in the ice, both eager to see what he had caught and frightened of the monster that might emerge from the ice. His right hand dropped to the mace at his waist and lifted the weapon free, ready to club the fish monster into submission if need be.

"Use this," Hauke said, retrieving a smooth stone cudgel from their supplies and handing it to Andrus. While it fit as conveniently in Hauke's large, furry hands as a butcher's knife, to Andrus, it was just as large and heavy as his steel mace. "This is smooth and blunt. When the fish is pulled to the surface, hit it between the eyes."

"Between the eyes? Is that the monster's weak spot?" Andrus asked, feeling the heft of the stone club in his hands.

"You can think of it that way," Hauke laughed. "It will stun the fish so we can bleed it out. It's kinder to the fish to die that way."

"Why do we have to be kind to the fish monster?" Andrus asked, never taking his eyes off the hole in the ice as Ashlynn slowly hauled in the fish.

"It tastes better that way," Ashlynn said. There wasn't much line left and the fish was fighting harder than ever. Her gloves had become soaked with icy water from handling the line but she ignored the chill creeping into her fingers as she focused on bringing in their catch.

"I was going to say it's respectful to the fish," Hauke said with a slight frown. "But it also tastes better. If it's stressful when it dies, it can sour the meat. And it's not a monster, just a fish. Probably not very large," he said, noting how easily Ashlynn seemed to be hauling in the fish.

Standing next to the hole in the ice, Andrus held his stone club at the ready while Heila took several steps back and hid herself behind the sled of supplies. It wasn't that she was afraid of the fish, she told herself, just that she didn't want to be in the way.

Finally, the water in the hole began to churn and splash as a giant sturgeon's head emerged from the water, its eyes unblinking as it thrashed about on Ashlynn's line.

"Now, hit it!" Hauke said, his eyes wide at the size of the fish on Ashlynn's line. From the way she'd pulled it in so easily, he'd estimated it at maybe a hundred pounds or so, but seeing the size of the head alone was enough to make him wonder if the fish would fit through the hole in the ice!

Andrus, to his credit, didn't move as soon as Hauke shouted for him to hit the fish. Taking a deep breath, he waited until Ashlynn had looped the fishing line around the ice spike again before bringing the club crashing down on the fish, right between the eyes.

In an instant, the fish went limp, dropping back into the water as the line slipped from Ashlynn's hands with the force of Andrus' blow.

"Perfect," Huake praised. "Little friend, you have very good aim," he said, returning to the sled to retrieve more tools.

"I have to be good at something," the horned soldier boasted. "Getting a position on Captain Lennart's squad isn't easy."

"Well done," Ashlynn praised. "I'll tell Captain Lennart you helped so you can join us when we feast on this fish," she said, reaching out to pat him on the shoulder before gripping the line again and pulling the fish up out of the water.

Much to Hauke's chagrin, the hole in the ice turned out to be too small for the fish that Ashlynn had hauled in but a few moments work with an ice ax expanded the hole to nearly twice its initial size, allowing them to retrieve the fish that was almost as long as Hauke was tall.

"Just how strong are you, Lady Ashlynn?" Hauke asked as he looked from the fish to the short woman who had hauled it in. She hadn't once asked him for help, even when it thrashed against the line, rather, she'd made it look almost effortless.

"This is the strength of Mistress Nyrielle's gift," Ashlynn said, collapsing onto her misshapen stool and drawing several deep breaths. As easy as it had looked, hauling the fish in had been several times more difficult than wielding her darksteel falchion.

If it hadn't been for Thane's additional training with heavy weights during her blossoming period, she would never have had the strength to do what she just had. As is, the muscles of her arms, back, and legs all trembled with the aftermath of her exertion and her back was slick with sweat under her warm winter clothing.

"Virve, Virve, come inside," Andrus called, ducking his head out to wave at the bearish woman who was still taking her turn in the icy wind when they'd caught the fish. "You have to see the monster we caught. I helped subdue it!"

Taking one last look around the icy lake, Virve chuckled at her young companion's enthusiasm. They weren't supposed to be fishing, they were supposed to be protecting Lady Ashlynn while she fished, but

from what little she'd heard of the excitement within the icehouse, they had asked Andrus to help so she could hardly fault him.

"All right," she said, stepping in through the open doorway of the ice house. "Let's see this 'monster' of yours."

A few hundred feet away from the icehouse, on the lonely island that held the Frost Walker memorial shrine, a hulking figure smiled as he saw the last person enter the icehouse after a bout of excitement.

It had taken hours longer than expected to reach the lake, but the route Paulus had provided was as good as he claimed and avoided all of the places where Frost Walker soldiers or hunters patrolled the area.

Standing up from the place he'd lain prone to watch the group on the lake, the shaggy-haired man turned to his companions further down the hill with a wide grin forming around his gleaming white tusks.

"It's finally time, boys," he said, lifting an enormous maul and resting it on his shoulder. "Today, we claim the rarest trophy of all - an iridescent horn!"