

The Vampire 114

Chapter 114 114: Shattered

In the icehouse, Hauke hung the enormous fish from a large metal hook and quickly bled the fish into the water beneath the ice while Virve listened to Andrus' excited retelling of the battle to catch the 'monster fish', including his heroic -BONK- between the fish's eyes.

"It is impressive," Virve admitted. "Have you thanked Heila yet for keeping it from pulling you into the water?"

"Oh! No, Heila, I'm so sorry," the young soldier said, blushing to the base of his horns in embarrassment when he looked at the servant who had already begun preparing a space on the sled for them to place their fish for the hike home.

"It's fine," Heila said, her ears heating when she thought about the way she'd wrapped her arms around the strong young soldier to stop him from being pulled under the ice. For a few moments until Ashlynn wrapped the line around the ice spike, her entire torso had been pressed up against Andrus and even through his thick coat, her hands felt the power in his muscles as he strained against the fish.

"I'm supposed to go unnoticed when I'm going about my work," she added, turning away from Andrus before she noticed the way she'd looked at him. "So it's not a problem."

"No, it's," Andrus started to say, only to be interrupted by a loud -CRACK- as a rock the size of his head crashed through the dome of the ice house, sending shards of ice flying before it landed on the frozen lake surface at the opposite side of the ice house.

The bitter wind that the dome had kept at bay rushed in through the breach, stealing their breath away as the temperature plummeted. Ice crystals formed in the air, stinging their exposed skin and eyes as they swirled through the newly formed hole.

"My Lady!" Virve bellowed. "Get down!" As she spoke, the bearish woman stepped between the hole in the icehouse and Ashlynn moments before a second and third rock slammed into the dome, skittering across the ice and collapsing a portion of the dome.

Ashlyn crouched low behind the stool she'd made of ice, her cold hands fumbling for the hilt of her sword as she inwardly cursed at the numbness that had spread to her fingers from the cold, wet gloves. Despite all of her practice to quickly draw a sword when attacked, Thane had never taught her anything that would help her fight with hands that felt half frozen.

For a moment, the blade nearly slipped from her hands until she forced herself to stop rushing. As much as her racing heart clamored at her to do something, anything to protect herself, if she was careless, things would only go from bad to worse. Once she had a firm hold on her sword, she peered around the ice stool she'd crouched behind to see what was attacking them.

Outside, through the gaping hole in the icehouse, she got her first look at the attackers. Mammoth was the first word that came to mind as she looked at the giant figures striding across the ice, loading head-sized stones into giant slings to hurl at the ice house as they made their slow, inexorable advance across the ice.

Each one of the four figures would tower over even Hauke, the shortest of them easily matching Lord Ritchel's ten feet in height while the tallest stood head and shoulders taller than that. Long, shaggy reddish-brown hair covered their heads and exposed arms and their bodies were wrapped in long, sleeveless tunics and breeches made of sewn together pelts.

Most striking of all, however, were the long, bone white tusks that protruded from their mouths, extending all the way to their waists before curling upward and outward to wicked points. A long flexible trunk hung from the middle of their leathery faces and large, droopy ears fluttered in the frigid wind along with their shaggy hair.

"Tuskans," Hauke breathed, his eyes wide in shock. It shouldn't be possible for anyone hostile to reach this lake. Not only was it deep in the territory claimed by the Frost Walkers, but as the home of an ancestral cave, even one that was no longer accessible, the area around it was constantly patrolled by a number of soldiers. That protection was part of why his father had recommended this lake to take Ashlynn to when they discussed it at the banquet the night before.

"Hauke, fix wall!" Ashlynn snapped, pointing at the hole in the wall as another rain of stones came crashing through the hole in the ice dome.

One of the stones narrowly missed Virve, crashing through the opposite side of the ice dome. A second one slammed into the hanging fish, tearing through its flesh and crushing bones while a third smashed the sled that carried their supplies, knocking Heila off her feet as she tried to move out of the way.

"Water. Flow. Freezing. Shield!" Hauke intoned, snapping out of his daze and summoning a spout of water to form a thick curved shield between his companions and the advancing Tuskans. Fixing the dome would be pointless if the rocks could just keep crashing through other parts of it but the shield he created, even though it was shorter and narrower, was much thicker and curved in a way that should help deflect the force of the boulders.

"My Lady," Virve said, ducking behind Hauke's shield a moment before Andrus arrived beside her. "You and little lord Hauke should run. Andrus and I will hold them here."

"No," Ashlynn said, joining her two guards behind the ice shield as more rocks slammed into it, careening off the shield and falling onto the frozen surface of the lake at the edges of the ice house. "I'm fighting with you. Besides, we'd never escape those rocks if we ran."

"Heila," Hauke said, reaching out with a large, furry hand to grab the diminutive horned woman. "Stay close to me," he said, conjuring a second ice shield to protect the two of them from the boulders.

Heila nodded, her hands clutching at the skinning knife she'd retrieved from the broken supply sled. It seemed like a small and feeble weapon against foes as large as the Tuskans, but she refused to be helpless, even if her chances of doing any real damage with the small knife were low, it was better than cowering behind the shield and waiting to die.

"Virve," Ashlynn said. "You're in charge. What do we do?" She'd stripped off her wet gloves and her hands clutched tightly at the leather-wrapped hilt of her darksteel falchion. It wasn't ideal, but given the choice, she preferred to be without the cumbersome mitts. Thane's lessons had covered many things and she was an even better fighter than she had been when she fought her duel with Broll. Still, that didn't mean she could keep up with professional soldiers like Virve in a pitched battle and she needed every advantage she could get right now.

"We need to even the odds," Virve said, peeking around the edge of the ice shield. The Tuskans had exhausted their supply of stones to hurl but they seemed in no hurry, continuing their steady march across the ice as they brought out other weapons.

The two largest Tuskans carried heavy mauls with heads that tapered to a point on one side and were blunt on the other. A third Tuscan wore a loop of heavy chain draped over his shoulder that was half again as long as he was tall while the final man carried a club that looked like it had been carved from a tree trunk before being covered with sharpened iron nails and...

"Are those, are those Frost Walker horns in his club?" Andrus asked, blinking in disbelief as he looked at the glittering icy spikes protruding from the club.

"They are," Hauke said grimly. "Look," he added, pointing at the Tusks as their flexible trunks retrieved wide leather cuffs from pouches at their waists before slipping them over their curved tusks. Each cuff had been set with several iron spikes to make the wicked natural weapons even more deadly, but in addition to the iron spikes, they contained between one to three more Frost Walker horns, carved into blades that emanated an icy aura.

"That's what they do when they hunt one of us," Hauke said with a heavy gulp. "They tear out our horns..."

"And turn them into weapons," Ashlynn said, a chill running down her spine. "How do we fight that?"

"Would you look at that, boys," the largest of the Tusks said, grinning as he watched Ashlynn and her companions cowering behind their ice shields. "Old man Paulus didn't lie to us after all. He really does have an iridescent horn. Save our trophy for last, kill the rest!"