

## The Vampire 123

### Chapter 123 123: Ancestral Tomb

Hauke's horn glowed a dark blue, illuminating his way as he carried Ashlynn and Heila toward the island in the center of the lake. He didn't know if he would find the thinner ice he was seeking there, but even if he didn't, he felt that it was better to choose a direction and try than to search aimlessly while Ashlynn and Heila were running out of time.

Hauke himself felt very little distress from the cold water beneath the ice. In contests, he'd shown that he could hold his breath in cold water for nearly ten minutes and the combination of his fur and a layer of fat over his muscles helped to insulate him from the cold. Frost Walkers had adapted well to life on the freezing mountain peaks and he was no exception.

While he could endure for a long time, however, his new friends couldn't. Hauke's heart raced as he searched for a crack or weak spot in the ice only to find, to his horror, that the ice seemed to be getting even thicker. For a minute that felt like an hour, he circled the island, using a trace of his energy to bend the currents to his will and propelling him along faster than he could swim even if wasn't carrying two people.

Just when he was about to give up and head for the far end of the lake where the ice broke at the mouth of a stream, he spotted the entrance to the ancestral cave that had been covered by the rising lakewater.

For a moment, he paused as he tried to recall whether the cave led to another exit on the island or not. If there was another way into the cave, it wouldn't have made sense to abandon this ancient ancestral cave.

But, looking at Ashlynn and especially Heila, he wondered if they might be able to pass through an exit that was too small for Frost Walkers. After all, some people still visited these ancient ancestors. Surely there was a way for their voice to reach the ancestors even if their body couldn't, he reasoned.

In the end, he didn't know, but if he was right that the cave led to another exit, or even if there was air in the cave, it was safer and easier to reach than the stream at the far end of the lake. His decision made, Hauke didn't waste any more time as he dove for the cave entrance, pulling Ashlynn and Heila along with him.

Once he entered the cave, for a moment, his world was almost completely dark. The light that filtered through the thick sheet of ice above didn't reach very far down and almost none of it extended into the cave. Only the dim blue light of his horn allowed him to find his way through the underwater cavern.

A few moments after he entered the cave, however, ice crystals along the cave walls began to glow as if recognizing that a visitor had come after hundreds of years beneath the frigid water. Most importantly, the cave sloped upward and a hundred feet from the entrance, Hauke spotted a glowing oval of light that danced and rippled like the surface of the lake seen from below.

"Please, please be all right," Hauke gasped when his head broke the surface of the water. Moving as quickly as he could, he pulled Ashlynn and Heila into the cavern, laying them gently on the ground a few feet from the water's edge.

Both of them looked deathly pale, with skin that had gone cold and clammy. Neither one seemed to be breathing and their lips had turned a shade of blue that Hauke was certain wasn't good. Of the two, Heila looked even worse than Ashlynn, despite the several wounds that were visible on the latter's body.

"Bad Water. Expel. Heila," he intoned, turning the diminutive horned woman on her side as his horn glowed green with gentle, healing light. Suddenly, Heila began to cough and hack as water spilled from her pale lips.

"Thank you, Hauke," Ashlynn said, coughing herself as she finally released her magic. Enveloping Heila in her Death's Deceit had taken so much of her concentration that she could barely move. She'd dimly seen Hauke plunge into the lake before she lost her ability to keep her eyes open in the frigid depths but she placed her trust in him to pull her to safety and from what she saw, he'd done exactly that.

"Th-th-th-thank y-y-you," Heila said through chattering teeth.

"Where are we?" Ashlynn asked, looking around the softly glowing cave. The walls of the cave itself were roughly hewn but it had clearly been enlarged from its original size, likely to accommodate the towering Frost Walkers. Every ten paces, a large glowing ice crystal had been set in the wall, carved in a shape that resembled Eldritch characters but didn't match any of the ones that she'd learned.

"This is the ancestral cave on the island," Hauke said, using more sorcery to pull the water from Heila and Ashlynn's clothing. He couldn't get them completely dry without a source of heat but he could at least help them move from 'sodden' to 'slightly damp.' "I thought there might be a way out the other end of the cave, maybe one small enough for you or Heila to squeeze through even if it isn't big enough for me."

Ashlynn nodded once Heila finished translating for her. The horned woman had to repeat herself several times as her teeth continued to chatter but she pushed through regardless.

"Even if there isn't a way out, Mistress Nyrielle will come for us at nightfall," Ashlynn said confidently. Nyrielle's heartbeat had been much faster than normal when she released her magic but once Ashlynn's

own pulse had returned to normal, Nyrielle's quickly calmed down. Even though Ashlynn wasn't in danger anymore, she doubted her lover would truly relax until they were reunited.

"Virve likely doesn't know we survived," Ashlynn realized. "If we can find a way out, then it would be good, but if we can't, we should wait here for Mistress Nyrielle to come to us."

"This way then," Hauke said, shaking off the water that soaked his fur before offering a hand to Heila. "I'm warm. I can carry you if you want."

"No, I..." Heila started only to falter when Ashlynn gave her a disapproving look. "That is, thank you, little lord Hauke, for helping me," Heila managed to say.

She was still ashamed of how much everyone else did to protect her, but once Hauke scooped her up into his large, furry arms, she realized that it really was warmer when he held her close to his chest. Blushing slightly at being carried like a child, she forced herself to accept it and snuggled even closer for warmth as the group headed deeper into the cave.

The temperature dropped sharply as they moved deeper into the cave and by the time they had gone a hundred paces, the moisture that still clung to their close had begun to freeze. Ashlynn was about to suggest they turn back to the warmer portion of the cave when they began to hear whispering voices.

"Brōþor, Lytle Brōþor," one voice whispered, sounding bright and excited. When the voice spoke, it was accompanied by a light, pleasant tinkling like the sound of wind moving through crystalline wind chimes.

"Not a brother," an older, gravely voice said, echoing as though speaking from somewhere high above even though it sounded like it was in the cave with them. "Descendant. Our descendant."

"Iridescence," a third, more feminine voice said in tones that were as clear and crisp as polished glass.  
"Like us. Like you. Like me."

"Too stillness, too foraldien, too much years," a forth voice, trembling with age and frailty, whispered.  
"Too late. Go way."

"No, don't go," several voices said at once. The urgency in those voices raced through the cavern like a swift wind, wrapping around Ashlynn and her companions and urging them to stay. "Descendant, lytle brother, visit, visit please...."

"Trapped," a final voice said, sounding weak and forlorn. Unlike the voices of the broken spirits lashed to Imnek's tusks that sounded strained as if they spoke from far away, all of these voices felt close and present. The last one, however, pressed down on them like tons of ice, speaking with a heaviness that dragged along the floor of the cave like chains. "Trapped alone..."

In the dim light of the cave, Ashlynn turned to look at Hauke, about to ask if this was what he meant about communing with ancestors only to find the young Frost Walker's horn glowing with a brilliant iridescence, far brighter than than she'd seen from it before.

It wasn't the horn, however, that stilled her tongue and stopped her from speaking. Surrounding Hauke, illuminated by his horn, were five ghostly figures. None of them were complete, several were only visible from the chest or wait up but each and every one of them possessed the same kind of iridescent horn that Hauke did.

When they looked at Hauke, their expressions were pleading or eager and the smallest of them even reached out toward him as if asking to be carried the way Heila was. Their eyes, however, carried a very different feeling to Ashlynn, one she had come to know well since coming to the Vale of Mists.

When they looked at Hauke, the only thing Ashlynn saw in their eyes... was an insatiable hunger.