

The Vampire 124

Chapter 124 124: Forgotten Guardians

"A-ancestors," Hauke said, his voice trembling as he saw the translucent shades of the five figures arrayed around him. Without a conscious thought, he dropped to one knee, just as he had when he visited the ancestral cave with his father so many years ago.

"My name is Hauke," he said, staring at the icy ground of the cave, unable to raise his head to meet their heavy gazes. "In the name of my father, Lord Ritchel, I apologize that no one has visited the ancestors in so long. There is no excuse," he said, lowering his head in shame.

Since his first visit to the memorial atop the island, he'd been taught that these ancient ancestors were to be respected and revered but never disturbed. All his life, he'd thought that it was all but impossible to visit them, but here he stood and they sounded so very alone.

"Good descendant," the gravelly voice said. The shade of his body was more complete than any of the others, extending from his waist to the tip of his head and including both of his arms. "The son of the current lord," it mused.

"Your father," the clear, feminine voice said. Her figure stood strangely on one leg but half of her body was missing, as though something had cleaved her in two from shoulder to waist. "Iridescent? Like you? Like me? Like us?"

"No," Hauke said with a shake of his head. "I, I'm the only one."

"Only one," the bright, crystalline voice said, sounding confused. The voice came from an apparition that appeared even younger than Hauke and was little more than a floating head and shoulders. "But, if Lytle Bröþor is only one, then..."

"Silence," the frail-voiced apparition said, interrupting the younger one. The figure speaking was stooped with age, paler, and less visible than any of the others with one hand that clutched a ghostly cane. "We decide not. He commands, we only follow," she said, pointing the tip of her cane at the tallest, most complete apparition among them.

"Impossible," the weary, heavy voice said. Unlike the others, this one seemed to possess all four of his limbs but had no torso to connect them to his floating head. "Too young, too weak, impossible."

"This little lord is under my protection," Ashlynn said, stepping between Hauke and the ghost who seemed to be in command. She didn't like the hungry gleam in their eyes when they looked at Hauke and the more they spoke, the less she liked what she heard. "If you have requests for him, state them plainly."

Hauke stared at Ashlynn with eyes wide in horror while Heila translated her words for Huake and the apparitions.

"Who are you," the frail, aged ghost asked. "To extend your protection?"

"Insolent," the gravelly voiced ghost said, glowering down at her from high above. "To say he needs protection from us!" As he spoke, the horns of all five apparitions glowed brilliantly and the temperature plummeted.

In Hauke's arms, Heila shivered and burrowed as deeply into Hauke's chest as she could. Still, she refused to look away and hide from these specters. Ashlynn needed her or the specters would misunderstand and she refused to fail again.

"She is Lady Ashlynn Blackwell," Heila said without waiting for Ashlynn to speak. "Child of the Earth and Seneschal of Eldritch Lady Nyrielle of the Vale of Mists." She didn't know if the ghosts would understand the significance of those titles but she hoped that, even if they didn't, they at least sounded impressive enough to give Ashlynn some respect.

"And she's my student," Hauke added, feeling the need to stand up for her. "At least, at least for today, I'm teaching her ice sorcery."

"Lytle Brōþor under student's ward is?" the youngest ghost said, cocking its head in puzzlement. "Lytle Brōþor coward is? Weakling is?"

"Seneschal," the bodiless ghost said, stepping forward with a halting stride as though each movement had to overcome resistance. "True Vampire's servant," he added, giving a pointed look at the other hovering specters. "Bring little Hauke to us."

"Why?" Ashlynn asked. "Why should I bring him to you?"

"We require his help," the feminine ghost said, lowering herself to stare directly into Ashlynn's eyes. "We are Iridescent Guardians. We protect against great danger. He is like me, like us, like him," she said, pointing at the looming ghostly Frost Walker.

"We need. He needs," she said, pointing at Hauke. "We know, he doesn't know. He must learn. He must help. Required. Owed," she said, her voice growing firmer at the end.

"Lady Ashlynn," Hauke said hesitantly. "I think I understand. I think that they're the ancestors who were like me. They've been here, all this time, ready to use their powers to protect us. If we help them, they might be able to protect us from the humans."

Ashlynn frowned at Hauke's speculation. If they needed the help of such a young sorcerer, could they really help against the Lothians and the Church behind them? How much power did these ancestors really have? It didn't sound quite right to her.

"Besides," Hauke added. "I'm the only one," he said, pointing at his horn. "But they're like me. They said I don't know. Maybe there are powers I don't know how to use because there's no one like me that I can learn from. Please," he said. "You don't need to come with me, but I think I need to go."

"No, I need to go with you," Ashlynn said. "If there are things you can learn from them then it's fine. But you," she said, rounding on the young apparition. "You don't insult my friend. You don't call him a coward or a weakling. He's already shown his bravery in battle more than once today. For that alone, he's owed a measure of respect."

"Respect," the stooped ghost said in a rasping tone that seemed to find the word somehow amusing. "Yes. Respect, young hero. Come. Come help..."

As the old ghost spoke, all five ghosts seemed to fade away, drifting deeper into the cave before vanishing from sight, leaving nothing behind but icy footprints on the cold stone floor of the cave.

"Hauke," Ashlynn said, stepping close and whispering directly into the kneeling Frost Walker's ear. "You don't have to do this. Your ancestors have waited a long time already. They can wait a few minutes longer until Nyrielle arrives."

"No," the young Frost Walker said resolutely. "My ancestors have summoned me. I have to go. Making them wait would be disrespectful."

"They didn't respect you," Ashlynn pointed out. She hated seeing them manipulate him by calling him a coward and weakling. It was a cheap goad but it preyed directly on Hauke's own insecurities and she was afraid that it was working on him.

"They're ancestors," Hauke said. "They deserve my respect or they wouldn't be honored in this ancestral cave. I haven't done anything to deserve their respect," he said, lowering his head. "But I will. I'll go alone," he added, moving to set Heila down. "You don't have to follow. You've already done so much for me, you don't have to do more."

"Fine," Ashlynn said, even though it wasn't. "We'll go now, but we'll go together. You understand?"

"Yes," he said, flashing the first smile he'd shown since the Tuscans attacked their icehouse. "Together."