

The Vampire 125

Chapter 125 125: A Frozen Barrier

Ashlynn walked slowly behind Hauke as they followed the icy footprints deeper into the ancestral cave. The air had grown chill enough that she could see her breath, but the chill went much deeper than simple cold. There was no wind in the cave yet the fine hairs on her neck stood on end as if icy fingers brushed up against her skin.

In Hauke's arms, Heila struggled to stay awake. The day had taken a great deal out of her and she hadn't eaten since breakfast. By now, they were supposed to be feasting on the fish they'd caught but instead, the icy cold pressed down on her body and her mind until she could barely keep her eyes open.

It didn't take long to reach their destination. The cave opened into a larger space though it was impossible to tell how large the cavern truly became. Ten paces beyond what now felt like the end of the tunnel and the beginning of the larger cavern, a giant sheet of ice blocked their way.

The wall of ice stood over fifteen feet tall and stretched twice as wide. At the bottom, ice piled up knee-high as though it had built up layer by layer over countless years. Along the ceiling, dozens of icicles hung down like a row of teeth about to descend on anyone who approached the wall of ice.

"Lytle Brōþor, weakling isn't," the light and tinkling voice said as the phantoms emerged from the wall of ice. "Brake free, can. Lytle Brōþor, strong is, yes?"

"Visit us," the clear, feminine voice called as the specter beckoned with her single arm. "Like us. Join us. Join and learn. Visit, iridescent kin."

"Help us, descendant," the gravely voice said as the specter hovered high above them. "You must come to us."

"Help him, Seneschal," the bodiless apparition said, dragging himself across the cavern to loom over Ashlynn. "Help your friend to help his ancestors."

"This ice," Hauke said, reaching out to touch the frozen barrier. "Why is it like this?"

"Too old," the stooped ghost said, shaking its head. "Too long. Has been here since long ago. No one can visit."

"No wonder they had to build a memorial on top of the island," Hauke whispered. "Even if the lake was drained, they still couldn't get through this. If someone tries to melt through the ice with White Water sorcery, it will just freeze as fast as it melts. Formed and Formless Ice aren't enough to do it either," he realized.

"Lytle Bröpor, smart is," the young voice said with a light laugh that echoed off the cavern walls like the sound of shattering glass. "Only you can."

"I can't," Hauke said, shaking his head. "I'm willing, but I've done too much today. I need to rest, to eat. I can come back in a few..."

"No," the gravely voice said from on high. "You can. You will," he said, descending from his position high above until he hovered above Hauke at a height that matched Lord Ritchel's height. "Help your ancestors, descendant," he commanded.

Ashlynn frowned as the spirits cajoled and coerced Hauke into breaking down the ice wall. She hesitated to interrupt them but when the leader descended on Hauke, she felt she had no choice.

"He's right," she said, speaking in the best Eldritch she could manage. Heila was barely awake in Hauke's arms and even if she wanted to help translate, it seemed like her body had given up on her. "Too much sorcery. He needs rest."

"No! He is able, he will help!" The gravely voiced ghost said. Before Ashlynn could protest again, it brought its face close to Hauke's, touching the tip of his iridescent horn to the tip of the young Frost Walker's.

"No, don't!" Ashlynn cried, realizing too late what the ancient ghost intended. Nothing she could do, however, would stop the process that the ghost had begun.

As soon as the phantom horn touched Hauke's, energy swirled around the cavern, like a vortex pulling toward the tip of Hauke's horn. All five spirits lost their shape as a wind felt only by them pulled them inward like smoke on a breeze until they flowed into Hauke's horn.

"Let him go," Ashlynn said, her emerald eyes flashing with murderous intent. "You cannot abuse your descendant like this!"

"Not abuse," a clear, feminine voice sounded from Hauke's mouth. "He is us, like us, will join us. You will see. He belongs, we belong, all together now."

"You will help him," a darker voice said, sounding like it had been pulled from deep within Hauke's chest. "Or we will hurt her," it said as Hauke's hand moved stiffly to place a claw at Heila's neck.

"Earth Childe, strong is," a light voice spoke next. "Help him will. Help us will."

"You!" Ashlynn trembled in rage, both at the ghostly Frost Walkers for taking her friends captive and herself for being unable to stop it. There had been so much for her to learn in the past two months and she'd focused entirely on things that were immediately useful. She had no idea how to expel spirits who had seized control of her friend.

"Will not harm," an old, frail voice said from Hauke's mouth. "Not if he helps."

With halting steps, Hauke strode across the room, kicking out with his foot to break off a piece of ice before returning to the center of the room. His horn glowed brilliantly, shifting through several colors as the gravelly voice began to speak in a form of Eldritch far older than Ashlynn had seen or studied.

The ice in Hauke's hand melted before forming into two frozen glyphs, each one radiating a swirling array of blues, whites, and even a hint of pale green.

"Stand here, Earth Child," the gravelly voice said imperiously, pointing at a spot underneath one of the floating glyphs. "Your friend is nearly spent. You will give us energy to work."

"I'm also spent," Ashlynn said. Even if she wasn't struggling to resist her own exhaustion, she would have told the spirit the same thing. Seeing the icy glyph before her allowed her to recognize that there were several similar glyphs carved into the wall of ice.

The passage of time had piled up icicles and the heaps of ice at the base of the wall, making it look almost natural, but beneath those more recent additions was a smooth sheet of ice that had been formed by sorcery rather than nature.

Whatever was on the other side of that wall, someone had placed the wall there to keep it sealed away, and from the way these ghosts had possessed Hauke and used Heila as a hostage, Ashlynn was convinced that sealing them away had been the right thing to do.

In her chest, she could feel the echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat growing closer. It was too early for true night to have fallen, but the sun was surely beneath the horizon by now. In the Vale of Mists, this much would have been enough for Nyrielle to wake and move about the underground regions of her ancient castle. Now, however, it seemed like she was pushing herself to reach Ashlynn as soon as physically possible.

Looking at Hauke's controlled body holding a claw to Heila's throat, however, Ashlynn was afraid that she couldn't wait for Nyrielle to rescue her. She would have to find her own way out of this or Andrus wouldn't be the only one who died today.