

## The Vampire 106

### Chapter 106 106: Arrangements in Darkness

In the great hall, while the children laughed and celebrated Lord Ritchel's gift of ice cream and Nyrielle teased Ashlynn with a variety of flavors, Paulus took the opportunity to leave the hall without joining in the revels.

The sight of Lord Ritchel and Hauke, laughing and indulging in sweet treats with the vampire and her pet human, had turned his stomach even more than the sight of children forming convictions to grow into warriors that would fight in the vampire's endless wars.

His feat carried him into the deepest part of the castle, past the neatly carved corridors and halls, deeper than the cellars that held enough supplies to last through even the most bitter winter, until he reached the natural cave the entire fortress had been erected to protect.

His horn glowed dimly in the cavern, illuminating a sheet of ice more than ten feet thick that protected the cave from foreign invaders. Even if the fortress walls were breached, passing through the final sets of barriers would be almost impossible unless the Eldritch Lord of the High Pass or one of his Elders led the way.

"Descendant. Pays. Respects," Paulus intoned formally, slowly descending to one knee despite the pain in his joints before pressing his horn against the ice. The moment he did, energy surged in his horn, reflecting and refracting through the ice like a snowstorm of blue and white lights before a tunnel seemed to melt through the barrier, just tall and wide enough to allow a single Frost Walker to pass through.

On the far side of the ice wall, the cave opened up into a vast chamber, large enough that thousands of Frost Walkers could have assembled without even pressing together. Instead of a gathering of the living, however, this place belonged entirely to their most honored dead.

As Paulus stepped out of the tunnel and into the chamber, a wave of bone-deep cold washed over him. Even his thick fur and tough hide did nothing to keep out the cold that penetrated all the way to his core. His breath crystallized instantly in the frigid air, forming delicate ice crystals that tinkled like wind chimes as they fell to the ground.

The sound of his footsteps echoed through the chamber, each step producing a -CRUNCH- as the ancient ice beneath his feet protested his intrusion. When he entered the chamber, for a moment, he could hear whispers, like dozens of voices speaking in tones too faint to make out individual words, but those whispers stilled the moment he fully entered the room, leaving a silence broken only by his movements.

The cave had been carved into three concentric steps, each one a hundred feet wide and fifty feet deep. On the highest step, ice statues of revered Frost Walkers stood proudly atop blocks of ice that bore their names and deeds. The statues had been carved with exquisite care to reproduce every detail of the honored person's appearance. Atop the statues' brows, the horn belonging to that Frost Walker had been carefully mounted where it glowed faintly in the dim light of the cave.

The highest step belonged to the honored Eldritch Lords of the High Pass and there were less than twenty such statues. The step beneath that, held similar statues, though the blocks of ice they stood on were smaller and the carvings were less detailed, the honored heroes who sacrificed their lives for the High Pass were all honored here.

It was the third, and lowest step, however, that Paulus walked towards when he entered the ancestral cave. Here, small blocks of ice not more than five feet tall and a foot wide in either direction contained an illusory representation of noble servants who had dedicated their lives to the people of the High Pass. Atop each block, a horn gleamed, like a spire extending upward from the ice.

"Father," Paulus said, coming to a stop before one of the icy blocks. "I am afraid. I have seen the human Child of the Earth. She will drag us into the vampire's war. Ritchel praises her and Hauke seems to worship her. As long as they rule the High Pass, we will never escape war with the humans."

For several minutes, Paulus sat still, staring at the image of his father as a much younger man, lost in the memories that seemed to flit through his fingertips like snowflakes on the breeze. He never knew a time like his father did, before the humans attacked the vale. All his life, he'd seen the threat come and go like waves lapping at the lakeshore.

Now, as an old man, he heard the warnings again. The humans are coming. This time, this time it's a threat to us. This time, we should send our young ones to fight and die beside the vampire and her disposable progeny. He'd heard it before, but the humans had never come.

"Father," he finally said after several minutes. "I'm afraid they will not allow my horn to rest next to yours. What I'm about to do, they will not understand. They will call me a traitor. They are too focused on the danger beyond the mountains to see the one breathing down our neck. I will show them, but they will cast me out for it."

Light shimmered from his father's horn to the illusory figure trapped in the ice beneath it before a faint, frail voice sounded.

"Look to the row beyond me, my son," the voice said. "Do you think they waited patiently for a place on the Step of Servants? Do you think they did as they were told?"

"Father?" Paulus said, his eyes misting at the sound of the voice that spoke to him so rarely in the years since his father's death.

"Do what you know is right," the voice said, before the light began to fade. "Let the results speak for themselves."

"I, I understand," Paulus said softly, reaching out with a hand made stiff by age, gently tracing a claw along the ice before he bowed low, touching the tip of his horn to his father's horn. "They won't understand now, but they may thank me one day. As long as they don't grind my horn to dust, it can always be moved here later."

Striding out of the ancient chamber, Paulus restored the barrier before slowly ascending the spiral stairs of the northern tower. By the time he reached his destination, the feast below had long ended and the stars twinkled high overhead while clouds rolled in below the mountaintop.

Staring out over the frozen mountain tops, Paulus spent several minutes in silence before finally setting to work. His horn glowed with a bright ice blue light as he carefully constructed an ice lantern, heavily frosted on all but one side to prevent light from spilling out where it shouldn't go.

When he finished, the lantern flashed with a brilliant purple light, once, twice, and then several more times before he withdrew his magic from the lantern. Minutes later, on the slopes of the mountain on the opposite side of the pass, an answering orange light blinked into existence, pulsing several times before it too winked out as though it had never been there.

"I'm getting too old for this skulking about," he said, shaking his head as he began to descend the spiral staircase of the tower. "Torsten had best finish growing up to relieve me of these burdens," he muttered.

Paulus knew that he hadn't been shaped into the form of a hero. No one would sing his praises for diligently managing supplies, reviewing agreements with foreign merchants or balancing the end of year

ledgers. But his grandson was strong and fierce, moreover he was fearless in the face of danger and bold enough to take great risks.

It should be a man like Torsten, who would fight for his own destiny, who should take the throne when Ritzel retired. Not some fawning lackey in the making like Hauke. But if no one could see the truth of that, then he would take the decision out of the hands of fools who were blinded by their fear of the humans.

After tomorrow, they would no longer have the option to allow Hauke to become the next Lord of the High Pass, and they had only the vampire and her pet witch to blame.