

The Vampire 131

Chapter 131 131: A Traitor Among You (Part Two)

Inwardly, Ritchel seethed, consumed more by fury than fear. 'Say nothing,' the messenger had said. 'There is a traitor on the council. Hauke is alive and Lady Nyrielle's men suffered losses protecting him.'

The report was brief and brought both immediate relief but the relief was consumed by a fury colder than the peak of the mountain in winter. Clearly Nyrielle didn't possess enough trust to pass the identity of the traitor to him via a messenger but there were only a few possibilities that stood out to the Eldritch Lord.

Paulus had been outspoken in suggesting that they groom Torsten as the next Lord of the High Pass. That, combined with the fact that the attack had put Hauke at risk placed the aging Elder at the top of his list of suspects.

More concerning, however, was the notion that Jannik intended to challenge him for leadership of the nation again. Both of them were growing old but neither of them was willing to yield to the next generation yet. While Ritchel had confidence that he could defeat Jannik in a fair fight if they were to duel again, he had little confidence in resisting the full might of the army Jannik had trained.

While the other elders each had their own long held grudges and petty disagreements with Lord Ritchel and his decades of rule in the High Pass, none of it stood out to him as significant enough to provoke a genuine betrayal.

Of all the elders gathered, only Old Svenja remained inscrutable. As the oldest living elder, she spent much of her time tending to the ancestral caves. In council meetings, she spoke for the honored dead and had learned more from them than anyone else in this room. Her eyes had gone milky white with age and a young girl stood constantly at her side to tend to her needs, but no one would call her feeble or frail.

The idea that Svenja had betrayed them in some way terrified Ritchel more than anyone else on the council. If she felt it necessary to make a move against him then it was as good as a condemnation from the ancestors in which case he could only pray for a clean death.

Time passed far too slowly in the grand hall. The arrival of fifty armed warriors dressed in resplendent blue and silver tunics to pay respect to the honored dead came as a cold comfort. If Jannik had betrayed him then summoning so many of his soldiers was as good as placing a knife against his own neck, but if the traitor was anyone else then they would be the first line of defense against further treachery.

The tension in the great hall grew thicker with each passing minute. Guards shifted uneasily at their posts, hands never far from their weapons. While the words hadn't been spoken in the great hall, Lord Ritchel's instructions had been to come 'dressed for a funeral and prepared for battle.' While none of them dared to speak, their fur stood on end and their ears strained for the slightest hint about what was about to happen.

Among the council members, whispers passed like winter wind through empty canyons. By this point, all of them had heard a few bits of news from their subordinates outside the great hall, but none of them had enough information to know what was really going on.

"My hunters say they found traces of a Tuscan camp, close enough to be within sight of the castle," one elder muttered to another. "Something that close to the keep, Commander Jannik's men should have seen it."

"Silence," Old Svenja snapped, her milky eyes somehow finding the speaker. "We await the honored dead and the ones who will speak for them. Now is not a time for idle gossip."

When she spoke, even the other elders with dull fur and faded horns became as mindful as children before their tutors, none daring to speak further. On the opposite side of the half circle of councilors, Commander Jannik lowered his horn briefly in thanks, though if Old Svenja saw it, she gave no indication.

Paulus kept his expression carefully neutral as he observed the others. Hearing that the Tuscan camp had been discovered was a surprise, but if that was the case it likely meant that everything had been successful and Imnek had already departed with their prize. Even better, suspicion was already starting to fall on Commander Jannik. He would just need to nudge things along in the right direction when the time came.

Out of everyone present, Lord Ritchel's wife, Odette, showed the greatest signs of strain. At the moment, she wanted nothing more than to move to her seat next to her husband, to find out if he knew anything about the fate of their son. It didn't escape her attention that he called for a very large honor guard for the dead and her heart shook with the idea that she may be preparing to witness her only child's funeral procession.

Another hour passed before the doors to the great hall opened again. This time, however, rather than admitting another soldier or messenger, when the doors opened, the lights dimmed and a dark hush swept over the room.

Last night, they had seen a version of Nyrielle that looked very human. She dined with them, humbled herself to honor one of the longest lived members of their community and even flirted with her Seneschal in front of the entire banquet before the night was over. It was easy to dismiss her as someone who was only strong enough to rule the Vale of Mists because it had fallen so far from its days of glory under her grandsire Torbin.

The Nyrielle who entered now, however, appeared like an avatar of death descending into their council chambers. Dark shadows flowed across the cold stone floor, swirling around her feet and blending with her dark, feathered wings. Her fingers were tipped with wickedly sharp nails nearly two inches long and no whites were visible in her dark, world devouring eyes.

When Nyrielle ascended to the throne next to Lord Ritchel, a few of the guards in the room dropped their hands to weapons, afraid that her deathly aura would harm their lord just by sitting next to him.

This, they realized, was the true face of the Eldritch Lady of the Vale of Mists. The polite face she showed last night had been a courtesy to a group of carnivores who considered themselves to be the apex predators of the High Pass. Now, in the presence of death itself, the assembled Frost Walkers felt for the first time in their lives like they had become prey.

"My Ashlynn has gone to join little lord Hauke at the gates," Nyrielle said. When she spoke, her voice was no louder than if she was speaking to Lord Ritchel next to her yet it sounded to the people in the room like she'd spoken from just a few inches away from their necks.

"Today, there is blood between the Vale of Mists and the High Pass," Nyrielle said, fixing her gaze on the assembled council before turning to the man next to her. Despite standing several feet taller than her, even he felt pressured and small next to the domineering True vampire.

"Lord Ritchel, there will be an accounting for this blood debt tonight," she said in a dark tone that accepted no argument.

"There most certainly will be," Ritchel promised her before turning his own gaze on the assembled council. "Blood has been spilled and lives have been lost. The night will not end until those responsible have suffered the same!"