

## The Vampire 132

### Chapter 132 132: Different Customs

When Hauke finally reached the front gates of the fortress, he moved stiffly with a bone-deep weariness. Captain Lennart had offered to pull him most of the way on a sled, but the young man had his pride. Unlike Ashlynn and Virve, he'd suffered no real injuries beyond the strain of his encounter with the ghosts of the ancestors. He refused to be carried when he was capable of walking.

When he reunited with Ashlynn in the small gatehouse, however, he was surprised to see how much she had changed in the time it took for him to return with the others.

Ashlynn had traded the comfortable and practical clothing she wore to the fishing trip for an elegant green dress trimmed in luxurious black furs. Her long blond hair had been styled into an elaborate braid that included a long strand of emeralds and a second strand of sapphires as if to provide a subtle reminder of how closely she was entangled with Nyrielle.

The most shocking part of her appearance to Hauke, however, was how refreshed she looked. While he moved slowly and stiffly with fatigue, she stood with her back straight and the elegant grace of a refined noblewoman. His fur hung limp and heavy with frozen lake water while she appeared fresh and ready to attend another banquet.

"Zedya," Ashlynn said, turning to the vampire servant standing attentively nearby. Despite Heila's willingness to return to Ashlynn's side tonight, Zedya insisted that the diminutive horned woman rest her body after their ordeals. For tonight, Zedya would take Heila's place as both attendant and translator.

"Please help Hauke the way you helped me," Ashlynn said before turning to the little lord. "Hauke, appearances are important for what's about to happen. We will have justice tonight," she said firmly.

"But to obtain it, we need to arrive like a thundering lion, not like a pair of drowned cats. Do not resist Zedya's help."

"Your father sent men with a change of clothes for you," Zedya said, her amethyst eyes beginning to glow as she stepped around Ashlynn to address the young Frost Walker directly. "Before they help you change, I need you to listen carefully to my words."

"Carefully," Hauke repeated numbly, nodding at Zedya's instructions while his eyes reflected her amethyst glow.

"You have great strength," she whispered to him, placing a hand on his chest and looking deeply into his eyes. "Your mind is clear, your body is free of aches and pains. You have slain Tuscans and faced an unspeakable horror, you can stand tall and proud in your victory."

As she spoke, Hauke's demeanor shifted subtly. His body no longer troubled him and his fatigue melted like ice in the summer sun. By the time she was done, he felt better than he did after a full night's rest and he had begun to radiate a faint aura of a victorious warrior.

"It's important that you remember that the way you feel now is false," Zedya cautioned after her eyes stopped glowing. "You still have wounds that have not healed and your body is still very drained. Do not attempt to use sorcery or fight right now, you will overdraw yourself if you do."

"The next battle will be fought with words," Ashlynn added, placing a reassuring hand on Hauke's furry arm. "For a battle of words, appearances are like weapons. Your father's men will help you clean up while Zedya and I make the rest of our preparations."

"Thank you, Madame Zedya, Lady Ashlynn," Hauke said with genuine feeling. As much as he dreaded it, he knew that a venomous traitor like Paulus couldn't be allowed even one more day to inflict more damage on their nation but the entire trip home, a growing ball of dread had formed in his stomach as he imagined the coming confrontation. Now, after just a few words from Zedya, his fears had been replaced with determination to see justice done.

When Hauke emerged from the gatehouse, his fur had been neatly combed and he was wrapped in a fresh great kilt made of rich, royal purple fabric and adorned with silver embroidered snowflakes along the hem. Now, even more than he had the night before, he truly looked like a future lord of the high pass.

"I dislike this tradition," Ashlynn was saying to Zedya as she stood over the litter on which Andrus's body had been laid. The shroud that covered him had been removed and his cold body had been placed with care on a wood and leather litter to be carried by Virve and Captain Lennart. Behind him, the corpses of the Tuscans had been tied to similar frames, though it would take two fully grown Frost Walkers to carry just one of the fallen Tuscans.

"I understand, my Lady," Zedya said gently. "If you wish, you can still burn the body of his killer to light his way to the Heavenly Shores, but this is the Eldritch way. You must bring him to the local Eldritch Lord and demand justice in his name. Tonight, Andrus will see justice done."

"You've explained it, but I still dislike it," she said, placing a hand lightly on the litter beside the small figure of the horned soldier. "It feels like we're using his body as a prop."

"In a way, we are," Zedya acknowledged, though she didn't look bothered by it. She had left the faith of the Holy Lord of Light behind long ago and over the years, she'd come to see the sense of many Eldritch traditions, even if they had once seemed savage or barbaric to her.

"It is too easy for a lord to dismiss the lives of their common subjects when they aren't confronted directly by the consequences of their decisions," Zedya said. "It is much harder to make light of a man's death and give way to political expediency when the dead are in attendance. An Eldritch Lord should never sit comfortably on his throne and this tradition helps prevent them from sweeping a man's death under the rug to protect their friends and allies."

"Then let's get this over with," Ashlynn said, seeing that Hauke had emerged from the gatehouse. Her emerald eyes flickered from Andrus's broken body to the bodies of his killers and the people who had gathered to carry them.

From the Frost Walker warriors in their ceremonial outfits to the armored figures of Lady Nyrielle's guards, no one made light of the events unfolding tonight. Several Frost Walkers couldn't help but cast pensive glances at the bodies of the fallen Tuscan giants and more notably the glassy-eyed Tuscan who stood in chains at the back of the procession.

The contrast between the four Tuscans and the single diminutive horned soldier who had died was just too overwhelming of a sight. Several of them had looked down on the Vale of Mists for being suppressed by the weaker humans for so many years, but now, seeing such a small group from the Vale defeat so many of their fiercest foes brought to mind Ashlynn's history lesson' from the night before.

Had they been wrong all these years? They had believed that the Vale of Mists had grown weak since High Lord Torbin's death, especially since Nyrielle could no longer claim the title of 'High Lady', but perhaps the Vale was much, much stronger than they'd thought. In which case, what did that say about the level of threat the humans represented? None of them were comfortable with the answer to that question.

"The sooner we claim justice," Ashlynn said, taking her place alongside Hauke at the head of the procession. "The sooner Andrus can finally rest."