

## The Vampire 130

### Chapter 130 130: A Traitor Among You (Part One)

In the great hall of the Frost Walker's fortress, tension hung thickly in the chill air. A night ago they had feasted on delicacies and listened to ancient tales of heroism, sacrifice, and war. The mood hadn't always been joyful, but Frost Walkers survived in the bitterest, coldest, most barren places in the world. They didn't expect every celebration to be filled with nothing but joy. As long as stories ended in triumph and feasts ended with full bellies, Lord Ritchel's people would be content and even happy at the end of the night.

Now, one night later, the festive decorations had been removed along with the long banquet tables. A half circle of high backed chairs flanked by small tables had been arranged facing the elevated dias and Lord Ritchel alone occupied his icy throne as he stared at the men and women he had summoned here after speaking with Nyrielle before the sun set.

For a lord to be summoned within his own fortress was an insult few could stomach but when he saw Nyrielle's ragged state as she resisted the effects of waking before the sun had set he swallowed his pride and listened to what she had to say.

When she told him that her Seneschal was hovering near death his stomach sank and his fur twitched with worry about the future of the High Pass if the Vale of Mists blamed them for Ashlynn's loss.

When she added that she wasn't sure if Hauke or any of the others were still alive, however, he felt like someone had pressed a hot torch against his chest and all thoughts of politics vanished from his mind as if consumed by a raging inferno. If Hauke had fallen along with Ashlynn, nothing would stop him from personally painting the ice red with blood as soon as he could lay his claws on the person responsible.

Now, he had summoned his closest advisors as well as the commander of his warriors to a late-night council meeting. Normally, the smaller, slightly more delicate throne next to his own would hold his wife, Odette, however, it currently sat empty while his wife joined his other advisors in the seats below.

No one sat idle. Commander Jannik, a striking black-furred Frost Walker who had once contended for the position as Lord of the High Pass, passed a number of orders to his soldiers and received a steady stream of reports as people returned with information.

Even Odette, as Mistress of the Castle, received reports from across the castle about their readiness should the High Pass come under siege. Beyond that, she ordered a small meal to be served to the advisors while they awaited word.

No one looked comfortable while they ate, and a few even grumbled that they didn't understand why they couldn't return to their own chambers until it was time for discussions to begin. A pointed look from Lord Ritchel, accompanied by a menacing dark blue glow surrounding his horn silenced the grumbles but did nothing to diminish the anxiety or discontent that was mounting in the hall.

Paulus did his best to wear the same grim, concerned face as the others. At the moment, Lord Ritchel had only announced that Hauke's fishing party had been attacked, their life and death unknown.

Paulus, however, had great faith in Imnek and his band of hunters. This was hardly the first time that he'd provided the Tuscan with an opportunity to complete a hunt in the High Pass. One day, perhaps people would understand that sacrificing a few of the least important members of their community had saved the lives of many others, but he doubted it.

Some secrets could never be told, even if they pertained to great deeds, because the common people would never understand the sacrifices demanded of true leaders.

Now, as Paulus received reports from some of the most studious Frost Walkers in the castle about the foreigners who had entered the past recently, he schooled his expression into one of great concern as he considered if any of those outsiders could be blamed for bringing the Tuscans into the High Pass.

An hour after full dark, a grim faced soldier entered the great hall and spoke in hushed tones to Lord Ritchel. The more the soldier spoke, the darker his expression became. His fur lifted in agitation and frost formed along his horn as he clenched his fists in both distress and obvious anger.

"Husband," Odette said anxiously after Ritchel gave his own orders to the soldier who departed at a run. "What word?"

"Commander Jannik," Lord Ritchel said. "I want fifty of your strongest warriors in this chamber within the hour and another hundred lining the way from the gates to this hall."

"My Lord?" Commander Jannik said, his dark brows lowering in worry. There were very few reasons he could think of to need so many guards in the great hall during a council meeting and none of them were good.

"Is the news...?" Glancing at the Mistress of the castle, the veteran warrior paused, unable to bring himself to ask the question that hung on everyone's lips. How could he ask if his lord's only child had died during what was supposed to be a simple fishing trip when the child's mother was sitting just two seats away from him? Frost Walkers might be cold, but none of them were heartless.

"An honor guard is required to receive the bodies of the slain," Ritchel said. His words fell like stones into the silence of the great hall. Servants stopped in their tracks and the few elders who were eating very slowly set down their food as they struggled to process the news.

Odette's sharp intake of breath drew every eye in the room. The Mistress of the Castle pressed one fur-covered hand to her chest while the other gripped the arm of her chair until her claws gouged deep grooves into the armrest.

"Not a word more will be said until they arrive," Ritel added, his voice carrying the bitter chill of a winter storm. As he spoke, his horn began to glow with a dark, menacing blue light that made several of the gathered elders shift uneasily in their seats.