

The Vampire 133

Chapter 133 133: Explosive Accusation

Nyrielle hadn't moved since taking a seat on the icy throne next to Lord Ritchel. To the assembled Frost Walkers, it felt like a goddess of death sat among them, waiting for someone to make a wrong move to give her an excuse to fall upon them and reap their lives. Drinks and half-finished meals sat forgotten and the councilors kept their movements to a minimum lest they break the delicate silence that had descended on the great hall like a fresh blanket of snow.

They didn't have to wait long, however, before they began to hear the steady beat of a pair of drums. The drumbeats were low, slow, and punctuated at regular intervals by a sharp slap on the body of the drum.

Odette tightened her grip on the arms of her chair as she recognized the sound of a funeral march. Silently, she counted the beats, four heavy -THUMP-s followed by a sharp -CRACK- and then the drum beats resumed. Five people, one death.

Her eyes flicked to Lady Nyrielle in the hopes of seeing something on the other woman's face that would give her the answer she badly needed to hear. If only one member of Hauke's fishing party had died...

The odds were that her son had survived, particularly when the Eldritch Lady of the Vale had said there was a blood debt to be paid. When she looked at Nyrielle's face, however, she saw only a cold, expressionless mask with eyes that looked past the councilors to the great doors behind them.

As the procession came closer, Paulus frowned, barely resisting the urge to turn and look at the door. The footfalls were measured in time with the drum beats and they were very heavy, but why was he hearing the clank of chains? It made no sense for a funeral procession to carry heavy chains, unless...

Unless Imnek was sloppy or hurried, Paulus realized. All Imnek cared about was taking his trophy. If he had torn the horn from Hauke's head but left the young man alive, surely they would need to bind him with chains to prevent him from going completely out of control. One dead, likely the vampire's pet witch, and the other driven insane by the loss of his horn. Just the idea of it made it difficult for Paulus to keep a grin from forming on his face.

The doors opened with a forceful -BOOM- as if they had been struck by a powerful force rather than simply being pushed open. Other than Ritchel and Nyrielle who remained seated, the gathered councilors stood, turning to bow respectfully to the fallen.

No matter what they may have suspected, however, nothing could prepare them for the entrance of Ashlynn and the procession that followed her.

Paulus' eyes went wide as he realized that both Hauke and the witch, Ashlynn, were alive and well. The body carried on the litter belonged to a nameless horned soldier, a nobody in the grand scheme of things whose name Paulus had never bothered to learn.

Of the two guards carrying the body, only one of them looked to be injured with bandages visible on her arms and wrapped around her head, but otherwise, no one even looked hurt. Ashlynn and Hauke moved with purpose and grace without so much as a limp or a flinch to indicate injuries covered by their clothing. How was this possible?

More distressing than the survival of Hauke and Ashlynn was the sight of two Tuscan corpses, hauled behind the funeral procession like hunting trophies. The sharpened Frost Walker horns had been removed from their tusks, but Paulus had met with them often enough to realize that neither body belonged to Imnek.

Perhaps the leader of the group had escaped? If that was the case, then all would have been well if not for the even more troublesome figure at the very back of the procession. Paulus had never bothered to learn the names of the Tuscans other than Imnek but the glassy-eyed stare of the bound and chained man who had been dragged into the great hall sent a shiver down Paulus' spine.

His mind began to work rapidly as he tried to think of a way out of the trap he felt springing shut around him. The fact that it wasn't Imnek was a good thing, this lower level hunter likely knew less than the leader of their hunting band.

Moreover, he was clearly under the spell of the amethyst-eyed vampire and her Mesmerizing Gaze. He could likely be commanded to say anything, Paulus would just have to demonstrate that the captive was a puppet and not a reliable source of testimony. Sweat froze on his fur and his hands clenched and unclenched as he began to plan his next moves. Never in his life had things looked so grim but he refused to believe they were hopeless!

Visible relief had just begun to spread through the other councilors when they realized that Hauke had survived the ordeal and even returned with both slain enemies and a captive prisoner. To many of them, it was a sign that their little lord had taken his first step on the road to inheriting his father's mantle and truly possessed the strength to be a Lord of the High Pass.

To Odette, it was much simpler. Her son was alive and from the way he stood, he was completely uninjured. As a member of the council, she had many fears and concerns about what it meant to have been attacked so close to their home, but as a mother, her heart knew only joy.

Those warming expressions froze when Virve and Captain Lenart stepped forward to place the litter bearing Andrus's body in front of Lord Ritchel and Lady Nyrielle. Ashlynn stepped forward and spoke in slow, slightly accented Eldritch.

"Lord Ritchel," she said, her voice rippling with an icy power that was both familiar to and distinctly different from anything the Frost Walkers had experienced before, as though when she spoke, she spoke with the voice of the mountain wind.

"Andrus gave his life today to defend against men who attacked us to harvest your son's horn," she said, her emerald eyes flashing as she met the Frost Walker Lord's gaze. "I have come to you for justice."

"If he protected my son, he is a hero to my family and he will be remembered as such," Lord Ritchel promised solemnly. He knew there was more to come, but the councilors didn't. Some expected him to say more, heaping praise on the fallen hero, but when Lord Ritchel said nothing further, their gazes returned to the human witch.

"Thank you, my Lord," Ashlynn said formally, offering a slight curtsy before she continued. "But Andrus demands more before he may rest. His killer is dead, but the person who sent murderers after your son is still alive and stands in this chamber."

Audible gasps rippled through the councilors, many of whom began to eye each other in disbelief. Commander Jannik's gaze roamed over his soldiers clutching their weapons, his expression growing dark as he looked at Lord Ritchel. Was he suspected? Is that why so many soldiers had been summoned? Not as an honor guard, but to subdue a traitor?

"If someone in this room betrayed us to the Tuscans," Ritchel said, glaring at the assembled councilors. "You will have your justice. Tell us what happened and who is responsible for this crime?"

"Lord Ritchel," Ashlynn said, turning to face the assembled Frost Walkers. "Though he accomplished some of his schemes by commanding others, the man most responsible for this tragedy is Elder Paulus," she said, pointing directly at the scowling elder.

"A life has been lost," she said, turning her gaze back to the Eldritch Lord of the High Pass. "In return, I claim his life and horn as forfeit!"