

The Vampire 134

Chapter 134 134: Getting Answers (Part One)

"I claim his life and horn as forfeit!"

For a moment, Ashlynn's words shocked the assembled council, soldiers and servants into complete silence. The ones who had carried the fallen Tuscans here already regarded Ashlynn and Hauke with deep awe, and a bit of that even spilled over onto Virve, though no one believed that the greatest credit for the battle went to the veteran soldier.

It would take more than skill at battle to defeat an almost equal number of Tuscans. The Frost Walkers believed that victory had been achieved due to the combined powers of their little lord with his iridescent horn and the vampire's Seneschal with her witchcraft.

Because of this admiration, they were sympathetic when she asked for Andrus' heroics to be recognized, even if his accomplishments were minor. Nothing, however, could prepare them for the accusation leveled by the woman whose strength they had just come to recognize.

"Preposterous!" Paulus shouted, standing up and looking aggrieved. "This human woman is slandering me over our disagreement last night! Shameful! Shameful human deceit! I would never do such a thing," he protested.

"Guards," Jannik said, giving his soldiers a stern look. "Apprehend Elder Paulus. If he resists, use force."

On his icy throne, Lord Ritchel smiled as Jannik took action without the need of orders. He might be insulting the dignity of an elder by doing so, but perhaps Jannik had reasons of his own to find the accusation credible.

"My lord," Paulus protested as he was surrounded by armed soldiers. "What proof is there other than this woman's words? You cannot do this to me without evidence of a crime! I have done nothing wrong," he insisted.

"Seneschal Ashlynn," Lord Ritchel said, leaning forward and carefully regarding the witch before him. She seemed much colder than she had the night before, and firmer as well, as though they had been baptized in the icy waters of the mountains and gained a measure of their frigid strength.

"I will listen to evidence, but you will not speak first. You may take a seat among us," he said, gesturing for the servants to bring in additional chairs for both Ashlynn and Hauke. "We will hear the evidence first from my son. Tell us, Hauke, what happened during your fishing trip."

"Lord Father," Hauke began, bowing deeply to Ritchel before turning to face the council.

Hauke kept his retelling simple from the beginning to the end. He explained their trip to the lake and that they saw no signs of Tuscans. He told them about the ice house and their time spent fishing and the lesson he gave Ashlynn on ice sorcery.

When he spoke of the boulders hurled by the Tuscans and that there had been four, not three, who had attacked them, several of the councilors found themselves leaning forward, their fur twitching with anxiety as they imagined the scene unfolding.

He stopped his story with the defeat of Imnek, saying that his body had been lost to the lake along with the sharpened horns that turned against him in the end. At the end, Hauke directed an accusatory stare at Elder Paulus.

"They boasted of receiving Elder Paulus's help in locating the best 'trophy'," he said, his iridescent horn flashing brilliantly in barely contained fury as he looked at the confident-looking elder. Even surrounded by guards, Paulus looked like he had everything in control. "Without his help, they never would have found us at the lake."

"That's it?" Paulus sneered. "A few Tuscans mention my name and you believe I'd betray our people? My Lord," the elder said, turning to face Lord Ritchel. "Your son fought bravely, but we all know that Tuscans are deceitful savages who will say anything to break the spirits of the people they're hunting. They could just as easily have given your name as mine."

"We should stop here and mourn for the dead," Paulus said, sounding old and wise as he spoke. "This matter of Tuscans slandering me can be forgotten about. It isn't the fault of the young that they believe these lies when they hear them. Tuscans are good at breaking spirits as well as bodies. We should be celebrating your heroic son's victory, not hunting for traitors where there are none."

"You forget," Ashlynn said after hearing Zedya's translation. "We have a prisoner. Zedya, please question our captive so everyone can hear his answers."

Of course, Zedya had already asked many questions when she first brought the prisoner under her spell, and Ashlynn was aware of what she'd learned. Right now, this wasn't about discovering the truth, it was about revealing it to everyone else so Paulus's treachery could be fully understood by everyone present.

"More lies and deceit," Paulus said, shaking his head as though he was disappointed. "The mesmerizing prowess of Madame Zedya was spoken of even in my youth, but her prisoner will say whatever she tells

him to say. My Lord," Paulus said, putting on an act of sounding like he was exercising great patience with the young ones.

"I admit to my disagreements with Lady Nyrielle and Seneschal Ashlynn last night, but there is no reason to carry on with this sham, is there?" Paulus said. "If an apology is owed for last night, then I will give it. Before that, we should put this wounded beast out of its misery. Commander Jannik, have your men kill this beast before it sows more dissent in our halls with its poisonous lies."

To many of the councilors, Paulus' words sounded both humble and wise. He admitted disagreement where it existed, offered apology if needed and reminded everyone that the Tuscans could be dangerous with not only their physical might but their poisonous words. This, they thought, was why his voice had been valued on the council for so many years.

"You think one of my progeny would stoop so low as to force this beast to lie?" Nyrielle said, her voice instantly silencing the approving murmurs that had begun to echo in the great hall after Paulus' wise-sounding statements.

It was only when she spoke that the councilors remembered that she was still present. The vampire lady sat with such quiet stillness that once they had begun to listen to Hauke's harrowing tale of survival and valor in battle, they had ceased to notice her presence.

Now, however, they felt like the windows had somehow blown open to let in an even colder wind than the ones that descended from the mountaintops. The room dimmed and shadows lengthened as if the sun were setting only instead of lengthening in one direction, every shadow seemed like it was being pulled toward Nyrielle.

"Lady Nyrielle," Jannik said, stepping forward and bowing politely. "I am very interested in what the prisoner has to say and I believe that Madame Zedya would never tamper with a witness," he said

quickly. "But perhaps, before we hear from him, since Elder Paulus has cast doubts, you would let me remove those doubts from the minds of my fellows on the council."

"Oh?" Nyrielle said, a dark eyebrow raised slightly. "You have something to share, commander?"

Around the council chamber, all eyes fell on the dark-furred commander. It took courage none of them possessed to step in front of Lady Nyrielle's terrifying gaze and even more courage to suggest he could do a better job at resolving the council's doubts than one of her progeny could.

Now, everyone looked at Jannik expectantly, wondering what insight he could have on Paulus' supposed treachery that would be worth risking drawing the ire of a powerful Eldritch Lady.