

The Vampire 135

Chapter 135 135: Getting Answers (Part Two)

"You have something to share, commander?" Nyrielle's words might be phrased as a polite inquiry but her tone left no doubt how little she would appreciate it if the man's words held no value. Still, Jannik hadn't become the commander of the warriors in the High Pass by backing down from powerful foes and he wasn't about to cower before an ally.

"I do have something to share, and I think my fellow councilors will find it worth listening to," the dark-furred Frost Walker said. Turning to his soldiers by the door, he gave his next commands. "I am responsible for the men who patrol all of our territory within a day of the fortress and I have sent questions to everyone who was on duty today," he explained.

"Bring me a map so I can show everyone where our people are expected to be," he told one of the servants. "From what our hunters and trackers have learned, the Tuscans approached from the north side of the lake and snuck onto the island to draw close to little lord Hauke's fishing party."

"Two people were responsible for guarding along that approach," Jannik explained. "The first is a capable and reliable veteran named Malte, and the second is a young and powerful warrior known to many for his strength - Torsten. Have both of them brought here immediately."

As soon as Hannik said 'Torsten' it was like an icicle had fallen from the roof to shatter against the floor. Whispers started immediately and several more suspicious glances fell on Paulus. After all, while many knew Torsten just the way Jannik had described him, as a strong and capable warrior, no one in this room forgot the rest of his identity.

Torsten was Hauke's most direct opponent in becoming the next lord of the High Pass. That alone gave him a motive to conspire against his rival. More importantly, however, he was also Paulus's grandson.

More eyes fell on Ashlynn as they considered what Jannik had said. Hadn't Seneschal Ashlynn said that Paulus worked through others? If his grandson was in on this plot...

No one wanted to say it, but around the hall, everyone's fur rose slightly and ice crystals began to spread across the floor as people struggled to contain their emotions. There were some in this hall who had still felt that Torsten could be an adequate next Lord of the High Pass. Not brilliant, perhaps, but stronger and more mature than young Hauke.

Now, all of them considered what it would be like if they'd put a man on the throne who would conspire with Tuscans, just to eliminate their rivals. The notion was the same as asking a heron to guard a fishing pond. It might scare off some predators but you would still lose half the fish you needed to survive.

Now, the looks that turned to Paulus were even more unfriendly than they'd been just minutes ago. Just how deep did the rot go?

It didn't take long to fetch both men to the hall. Of the two, Malte possessed the demeanor of an experienced soldier, standing politely at attention and awaiting orders. Torsten, on the other hand, cast a brief glance at his grandfather before puffing himself up, attempting to look down his nose at the seated councilors, as though he had come to judge them and not the other way around.

For his grandfather to be surrounded by soldiers was a concerning sight, but what did this have to do with him? He had made no mistakes. As long as he stuck to his lines, no blame would fall on him at all. After all, he wasn't the one who had conspired with the Tuscans. He had only followed his grandfather's instructions. If someone was to suffer today, it wouldn't be him.

Perhaps he felt that he looked grand or somehow superior. To the gathered elders, however, he suddenly looked much younger and much less capable than they'd taken him for before. Here he stood, proud, arrogant, and looking down on them, and yet what accomplishments did he have?

Compared to little lord Hauke who had returned from battling against Tuscans but still spoke respectfully to the councilors, Torsten looked much, much less capable than he had just a few days ago.

Once the two young men were present, Jannik set out a map for everyone to see and looked at the two warriors who should have intercepted the Tuscans. He never would have expected two young men to stop four Tuscan hunters, but they didn't need to stop them, they needed to sound an alarm. Since they hadn't, something had clearly gone wrong.

"Torsten, where were you commanded to patrol today and did you see any signs of Tuscans there?" Jannik asked.

"Here, Commander," Torsten said, casually gesturing to an area of the map. "North of the lake and down the slope. I never saw any Tuscans," he said confidently.

"And you stayed in this area the whole time?" Jannik asked, raising a dark, bushy eyebrow at the young man.

"No, I received instructions to move upslope and to the west to check outsiders," Torsten said, glancing briefly at his grandfather. The glance lasted only an instant, but it hinted to many of the observers where those instructions had come from.

"And you Malte?" Jannik asked pointedly. "Where were you supposed to be?"

"Between the lake shore and Torsten's position," Malte said. "But, as I mentioned to your messenger, Torsten came up the slope and asked for my help in tracking down outsiders who had camped on our mountains. He told me the orders came from you."

Several gasps rippled through the crowd and even Paulus put on a show of being vindicated at the moment. Jannik, however, wasn't willing to let people misunderstand for long.

"I never sent those orders," Jannik said. "Torsten, who gave those orders to you?"

"I, I received those instructions from Grandfather," he said, putting on an act of looking betrayed. "He told me that you were concerned after seeing suspicious fires after last night's dinner and that I should meet with Malte to seek out the source of those fires. I, I didn't know that he was lying!"

"You wretch," Paulus spat, his fur-raising and his horn glowing with frosty outrage. "You deserted your post and you're trying to make it look like it's my fault! You dare!"

As the two Frost Walkers glared at each other, Ashlynn began to clap slowly, interrupting them before they could speak further. These two... The grandson had no loyalty to his grandfather and thought he could cast all the blame upward and escape while the grandfather thought his grandson would follow every instruction no matter how bad the results of doing so might be. Truly an admirable pair.

"Thank you, Commander Jannik," Ashlynn said politely before she looked at the other councilors. "I'm sure these two would spit accusations at each other for hours if we let them. Torsten will hold himself up as a blameless patsy, maybe Elder Paulus would say that he was misunderstood and gave no

instructions but only mentioned worries... ah," she said, noticing Paulus flinch. "I can see he was planning on it."

"This act is too clumsy," Ashlynn said, shaking her head at the pair. "In my father's court, I have seen this act played out between everything from squabbling merchants over the price of grain to lesser lords arguing over who moved a border post between their lands."

"As long as the issue wasn't large enough to warrant an Inquisitor, people would attempt to muddy the water with half-truths and vague statements until no one appeared blameless. Ultimately, it is a strategy of the guilty," she said, shaking her head as though she was embarrassed to see such a display in a place like this.

At the mention of an Inquisitor, several people fidgeted nervously. After last night's story, everyone had gained a measure of fear of the Church and their strange magic, especially the ones who could summon fire with ease. The idea that such people would be called upon to resolve disputes sounded terrifying and made many of them wonder just what sort of measures Ashlynn's people used to avoid being caught when confronted by such wicked sorcerers.

"The Frost Walkers I've come to admire are as solid as ice and fierce as the wind," she praised, gaining approving nods from many of the gathered Frost Walkers. "These two stand up under pressure as well as wet fur. Perhaps in the High Pass, there is time to allow acts like this to play out, but Mistress Nyrielle cannot wait for the sun to rise while these two waste our time. Zedya, you know what to do."

"Yes, my Lady," Zedya said, smiling darkly as she rounded on Torsten. Marcell had his methods to gather information as did Thane. Hers might be slightly more circumspect than Thane's Voice of Command but no one who had seen her work would deny her results.

Several elders looked like they were about to protest. After all, one of their own was being subjected to the sorcery of an outsider. Lord Ritchel, however, shook his head before anyone could raise an objection. In this, he was in complete agreement with Lady Ashlynn.

Left to their own devices, a Frost Walker council discussion could move with the speed of a retreating glacier. Since Lady Nyrielle had progeny who could cut through the delays, he saw no reason not to make use of her. The faster she produced answers, the sooner he could tear the horns from the heads of everyone who dared to attack his son!

Slowly, power began to swirl in Zedya's eyes as the whites turned dark and her amethyst irises seemed to bleed inward to pupils that were so deep and dark they could swallow the spirit of anyone who fell into her gaze.