

## The Vampire 138

### Chapter 138 138: A Complicated Legacy

"A Great Lord," Ritchel said, his shoulders slumping. "Why would a Great Lord involve himself with us? We're so far away from the Black Wood, why would he even care?"

There hadn't been any Eldritch Great Lords east of the mountains in hundreds of years, if not longer. The strength required to control such a vast territory was nearly unheard of in the modern era.

In years past, the High Pass stood between the High Lord of the High Fen and the High Lord of the Vale of Mists. It was a safe and protected space between two powerful lords, neither of whom wished to claim the cold and barren lands that the Frost Walkers called home. For centuries, the people of the High Pass had been able to thrive here because of the protection granted by their neighbors.

Now that humans had invaded, the Vale of Mists had fallen and Lady Nyrielle was only an Eldritch Lady though seeing her as she was now, Lord Ritchel had no doubt that she was far stronger than he would ever be, perhaps as powerful as High Lady Erna in the High Fen. But a Great Lord... that represented a level of power that Ritchel struggled to imagine.

"This seems like something that happened long ago," Ashlynn said. "Perhaps he had reasons at the time that no longer apply?" From everyone's account so far, this had occurred long before humans arrived on the continent. Much had changed in the years since the Kingdom of Gaal was founded and humans began to conquer their way westward.

"My darling is right," Nyrielle said, gently running a hand along the curve of Ashlynn's back. "Matters of long ago may no longer apply. He... he takes a very long view of things. It could be that one of your ancestors impressed him and he took them as one of his progeny as a reward."

"Lady Nyrielle," Old Svenja said, turning her glassy eyes to the vampire. "You do not need to coddle us. We may be young to you, but we have our pride. Do you truly think it was that way?"

"No," Nyrielle said, shaking her head gently. "It is more likely that he found you to be a useful tool. To create frozen Blood Golems, it must have had a purpose beyond protecting your people. He is not kind enough to expend so much effort to keep your people from perishing. It isn't his way, or his purpose."

"His purpose?" Ritchel asked. "Can you tell us what he might have had in mind in creating such powerful... Blood Golems?" he asked, unfamiliar with the term.

"It isn't important for you to know about his purpose," Nyrielle said. "If you want to understand his intentions, you should rely on little Hauke," she added, giving the young Frost Walker a pointed look.

"Me?" Hauke asked. "Is it because of my horn?"

"Not directly," Nyrielle said. "You retrieved the horns of your ancestors, didn't you? If you want to know why they were transformed the way they were, then you should ask them. Perhaps enough of them still remains to find some answers."

"The Ancestors did more than commune with young Hauke," Old Svenja said, frowning at Nyrielle. "They invaded his body and controlled him as a puppet. This is a thing that should never be done. Those horns... perhaps they should be ground to dust."

Both Ritchel and Hauke stared at the old woman with open mouths. No one treasured the ancestors more than Old Svenja. For her to suggest grinding their horns to dust felt like hearing a fisherman saying he should burn his poles. It was unthinkable.

Just as Ritchel was thinking that she might be right, that the horns might represent a distinct danger to both his son and the remainder of the nation, it was Hauke who protested.

"Father, we can't," Hauke said, jumping to his feet. "Those ancestors, they waited all alone for so long. They suffered for so long. We can't just grind them to dust and forget about them. That, that's not right!"

"It's good that you wish to honor your ancestors, even after what they did to you," Ritchel said. "But son, if they are no longer sane and if they are a danger to you and to all of us... We were lucky that Lady Nyrielle was here to defeat them. If they were to rise again, I do not have the confidence to say that I could defeat them."

"They will not rise again," Nyrielle said calmly. "Not the way that they were. At least, as long as no one constructs a frozen Blood Golem for them again."

"Is that even possible?" Ashlynn asked, turning to face Nyrielle. "Their bodies have long turned to dust. They have no blood to offer up anymore now that you've destroyed the original golems, right?"

"My darling, a single person's body does not contain enough blood to create a Blood Golem," Nyrielle said, giving Ashlynn a sad smile. Her darling Ashlynn was learning but she was still far too naive about some things.

"Each one of those frozen Blood Golems required the sacrifice of dozens of lives," Nyrielle said, looking from Ashlynn to the Frost Walkers to make sure everyone understood. "A Blood Golem can only be formed with living blood."

Hauke's eyes went wide as he began to understand what had been done to create the abomination that his ancestors had become. Even Ritchel looked uncomfortable when he heard the truth beyond what was written in the ancient records. What kind of leader, he wondered, could do such a thing? What would drive them to do so?

"Every person who dies to give rise to a soldier that fights beyond death must remain alive while they are drained to feed the growing golem. If they die before it awakens, their blood becomes poison and the ritual fails. It often takes many failures before one succeeds. That's why I said that it was very cruel sorcery."

Ashlynn felt Nyrielle's arms tighten around her protectively, as though the vampire feared someone might try to use her beloved in such a ritual. They both knew quite well that the blood of a witch was a potent tool for any sorcerer, but it was even more potent in the hands of a Vampire.

The thought made Ashlynn shiver and she snuggled deeper into Nyrielle's embrace. Her lover had taken her with honor and respect, raising her up and treating her with care. But what if she'd encountered the kind of vampire who created those Blood Golems? The kind of person who could see her as nothing more than an ingredient?

"This," Old Svenja began but she couldn't describe the words to express the horror she felt. These ancestors had been preserved at the cost of dozens of lives? And this had been done not just once, but at least five times? Just how many had been sacrificed to this cruel sorcery?

"They weren't cruel," Hauke insisted. "At least, not when they were alive. They were heroes. They wanted to protect us, I know it. Lady Nyrielle, you know I'm right, don't you?"

"No, I don't," Nyrielle said. "But I do know that a person who continues to exist after they have died may change in numerous ways. You are right to say that they were very different in the end from what they were in life."

"I have told you what I needed to," Nyrielle said, standing up from the throne and taking Ashlynn in her arms as she stood. "I hoped that you knew more about my teacher's intention, but since you don't, there's no reason for me to discuss this further."

"Little Hauke," Nyrielle said, turning her dark, midnight gaze on him. "A word of advice. There is knowledge to be gained from the dead if you continue to commune with them, but the closer you become to the departed, the more of their burdens you will bear. If you are not strong enough to bear those burdens, the day may come when you share their fate."

"But I might also be able to learn from them," Hauke said, a look of cold determination forming in his eyes. "The humans are coming, aren't they? If I don't risk myself to learn more and become stronger, do my people have a chance of surviving when the humans come?"

"No one can answer that for you, young lord Hauke," Nyrielle said, changing the way she addressed him. It seemed like he was finally willing to take a step forward that few people acknowledged existed. Without taking great personal risks, it was impossible to develop great personal power. "But it's good that you're considering it."

"Think carefully about what you do with those horns," Nyrielle advised as she carried Ashlynn from the great hall. "They could become keys to salvation, or they could become portents of doom. If you do not think yourself brave enough or strong enough, it is best to do as Svenja says and grind them to dust."

