

## The Vampire 147

### Chapter 147 147: The Fate of Traitors

When Zedya arrived outside the icy prison cell that held Paulus and Torsten she was both surprised and slightly dismayed to find an exhausted-looking Captain Lennart standing outside the prison.

The Frost Walkers had sent their own guards, of course, and from the look of the men sent by Lord Ritchel, they were refreshed and had only recently come on shift. By contrast, the bearish captain's rounded ears drooped with fatigue, and his relaxed posture leaning against the wall concealed how much difficulty he was having just standing at the post he'd assigned himself.

"Little Lenny," Zedya said, gliding across the floor to him before reaching up to cup his cheek. "What are you still doing here? These men won't escape. It would have been fine to allow one of the wagon drivers or someone else to watch and report if my instructions weren't followed."

"Hm, hm," Lennart could only chuckle in response. Among all the soldiers in Nyrielle's army, the number of people who would still call him 'Lenny' likely amounted to no more than five. But before Nyrielle's progeny, none of them could escape their embarrassing youth.

"Isn't it the oath, Madame Zedya?" Lennart said lightly, pushing off the wall and saluting respectfully. "When she sleeps, we carry her will. Anyone could watch, but if one of those Elders came to cause trouble, could any wagon driver stand up to represent Lady Nyrielle's will?"

"And?" Zedya asked lightly, her amethyst eyes moist with concern. He had lost a soldier but instead of taking the time to grieve, he was standing guard over their captives. If this wasn't punishing himself, she couldn't think of any other reason for him to be here. Or perhaps, as a good commander should, he was standing here so others under his command could grieve. "Did anyone come to cause trouble?"

"He didn't cause trouble," the bearish soldier said with a shake of his head. "But Commander Jannik still wanted to ask questions of Elder Paulus. He wanted to understand why his old friend would betray them so badly. I gather that Jannik lost a nephew to Paulus's schemes a few years ago."

"Then take a message to him," Zedya said, turning her gaze to the prisoners. "Tell him that Paulus believed that fewer people would die this way than if he let the Tuscans rampage without control. Tell him that Paulus wanted to choose the most 'expendable' people in his nation so they didn't lose any treasures like his own grandson. Tell him that Paulus thought he would be remembered as a great man one day when people understood that this was better than fighting the Tuscans openly."

Beside them, the Frost Walkers standing guard all stared open-mouthed at Zedya's words. None of them had been present for the explosive revelations the night before and they had only half believed what they had been told when they started their shift this evening.

Shock only lasted for a moment before the guards turned toward the prison cells, their horns glowing with icy light and their fur rising in barely suppressed rage.

"Gentlemen," Zedya said calmly before any of them could take action. "They are dead men. Don't waste your anger on them. If you have lost loved ones because of them, consider them avenged. If you know others who have, spend the energy you would spend on hate to console your loved ones instead."

"Dead men?" One of the guards said fiercely while pointing at the two prisoners. "Then why do they look so comfortable? I thought this was preferential treatment given to the elder but..."

A dark smile blossomed on Zedya's lips as she looked at the two Frost Walkers in prison cells. Her instructions had been followed quite well. They had comfortable beds, abundant food, and drink, and

even fine wine and delicacies. Their spirits could be said to be at rest and their hearts were completely unburdened.

"Little Lenny," Zedya said, standing close to the fatigued captain and looking at the captive Frost Walkers. "Do you know why it's so difficult to obtain a weapon crafted from the horn of a Frost Walker?"

"Because even outside of the High Pass, every nation that respects Frost Walkers considers such things an abomination," Lennart said, looking at Zedya in confusion. "Or am I mistaken?"

"It isn't just that it's considered an abomination," Zedya said. "It's that harvesting Frost Walker horns is a very difficult thing to do. From young Hauke's retelling yesterday, the captured horns used as weapons by the Tuscans still carried a remnant will that turned on the Tuscan leader as soon as they were no longer suppressed by his sorcery."

"But these two," Zedya said, giving a pointed look to the horrified-looking guards. "I will make sure that they have no lingering resentment left in their bodies before I rip the horns from their heads."

"More than that, I will spend tonight stripping away their sense of self," she explained. "I didn't have much time before the sun rose last night, but already they have forgotten their names. Look at them," she said, pointing at the glassy-eyed elder and his rebellious grandson.

"They don't even realize that they're prisoners," Zedya explained. "They have forgotten that they are sentenced to die. Before I can harvest their horns, they will forget that they were once living, breathing people. They will become blank slates that only exist as repositories of their sorcery. By the time their body dies, the people known as Paulus and Torsten will have long since ceased to exist."

Hearing her description, the Frost Walker guards took several steps away from the harmless-looking vampire servant. Tearing a person apart and grinding their horn to dust was one thing, but this...

Suddenly none of them felt like the traitors were getting off easy. There was dignity in an execution, even in the ritual destruction of a horn there was a final sense of respect that recognized the deceased as a person. This... this was treating them like livestock to be... harvested.

"What, what will you do with their horns?" One of the guards couldn't help but ask, reflexively touching his own horn as if to reassure himself that it was still there.

"This incident has given Lady Nyrielle reason to fear for her Seneschal's security," Zedya said simply. "Their horns will be made into weapons for Lady Ashlynn or her close protectors to use. Despite the taboos, there are a number of people in the High Fen who are capable of doing such work."

Hearing this, the guards exchanged uneasy glances. Many of the elders had spent years decrying the weakness of the Vale of Mists, insisting that the Vale was lucky to have what little support they were given in the fight against the humans. Now, they suddenly felt very small and very vulnerable.

They'd been told that Lord Ritchel was allowing the Eldritch Lady of the Vale to do as she pleased with the prisoners. He... he couldn't be ignorant of this, right? And there were people in the High Fen who dared to work with Frost Walker horns? If that was true then... then just how safe were they from the Eldritch nations on either side of the pass? None of them had answers to those questions and that terrified them even more than what was about to happen to Paulus and Torsten!

"Little Lenny," Zedya said, patting Captain Lennart gently on the arm. "Lady Nyrielle's fears don't reflect poorly on you or your soldiers. She's very proud of both Virve and Andrus and she doesn't fault you. It

was unthinkable for such a close ally to fail us so badly," she said, giving a pointed look at the nearby Frost Walkers.

"This is as much a lesson to them as it is a punishment for those traitors," Zedya said coldly. "Now, please go eat. Rest. You don't need to worry about this anymore tonight. Speak to Commander Jannik in the morning if you choose to, or not if you don't. You've done all that has been asked of you and more. You can leave the rest to me now."

"It seems that after all these years, I still need to rely on Madame Zedya's help at the end of the day," Lennart said with a tired laugh before he turned to leave.

"Perhaps," Zedya said quietly. The lost boy who had once stumbled into her chambers in the darkest part of the castle had turned into quite the man over the past thirty years. Even then, he'd been unwilling to give up as he stumbled through the dark, trying to find a way. Now, he was no longer lost, but he was still every bit as persistent.

"But back then, you could only rely on me," she said in a voice that carried to his ears alone. "But now, I also rely on you, all day long."

When he heard her whisper, Lennart nearly stumbled as he walked down the hall. Then, he shook himself and continued on, his back a little straighter and his steps a little lighter than they'd been before.