

## The Vampire 137

### Chapter 137 137: A Legacy of Blood

Old Svenja's words swept away the growing tension between Nyrielle and Ritchel like a bucket of ice water thrown on the floor. The entire council turned to stare at little lord Hauke, curious about what Old Svenja sensed in him.

"Old Svenja," Hauke said slowly, uncertain how he should speak of what happened. "I..."

"Stop," his father interrupted. "Old Svenja, I will accept your wisdom. Lady Nyrielle, do with these traitors as you please. So long as their horns never reach our ancestral caves, I no longer care."

"Wise indeed," Nyrielle said, leaning back on her icy throne with a slight nod of approval to the old woman.

"Everyone else, leave this place," Ritchel commanded. "Matters of the ancestors should not be spoken of lightly."

"My Lord," Commander Jannik said, standing and giving a salute to Ritchel. "I still have questions for Paulus. We don't know why he betrayed us or...."

"It doesn't matter why," Nyrielle interrupted. "It will do you no good to understand the motives of a traitor. He gave up the sons and daughters of others to preserve his own life. That is all you need to understand about him. Anything else that he says, any rationalization he presents, any noble justification of his actions is nothing more than a delusion manufactured by a desire to see himself as somehow righteous."

Hearing Nyrielle's words, Ashlynn frowned. A person driven to preserve their own life could often be forgiven when they were forced against their will and from Torsten's words, that had been the case, at least at the start. What happened after, however... she struggled to imagine anything that could justify it. Perhaps Nyrielle was right that it didn't matter, but she understood Jannik's desire to understand why a person he thought he knew well had betrayed them so badly.

For a moment, Ashlynn considered asking Zedya to help Jannik find his answers, but in the end, she said nothing. Matters had already escalated beyond individuals. The honor and pride of both the High Pass and the Vale of Mists were at stake in this hall tonight. Since Nyrielle had made her statement on the matter, it would reflect very poorly on both herself and Nyrielle if she offered a different opinion on the matter.

If it was important, Ashlynn believed that she would still speak up, even if doing so angered Nyrielle. But just to satisfy the curiosity of Commander Jannik and the other Frost Walkers.... It wasn't worth it to create an appearance of discord between a Seneschal and her Mistress.

As brave as Jannik was, he could tell that he would have no support if he chose to press matters with Nyrielle and so he, along with nearly everyone else, left the great hall until only the two Eldritch lords, Ashlynn, Hauke, and Old Svenja remained.

"Son," Ritchel said, trying to relax the atmosphere now that the council had left. "Your story stopped when the last Tuscan was slain, but you didn't explain what happened after Seneschal Ashlynn fell under the ice. Will you tell us the rest now?"

"Hauke saved me," Ashlynn said, sensing the heavy atmosphere. "He saved Heila and I both by bringing us to a cave underwater. Without him, we might, no, we would have died. Whatever else he may be guilty of, he really did save our lives."

"Young one," Old Svenja said with a slight smile that was missing several teeth. "I have not said what he did was wrong. Only he knows that. It may be a good thing. Let him speak first."

"My darling," Nyrielle said, beckoning for Ashlynn to join her. "Sit with me. I will translate for you if you have questions. I am most interested in what little Hauke and young Ritchel have to say about this."

"You just want an excuse to whisper in my ear," Ashlynn said under her breath as she took a seat beside the vampire on the massive throne. Sitting close to Nyrielle in this guise, with her dark eyes and black wings felt strange to Ashlynn.

On the one hand, the power she felt from Nyrielle wrapped around her like a soft, welcoming embrace that offered protection from the cold. At the same time, even when Nyrielle touched her gently, she didn't see any warmth in the vampire's expression.

Nyrielle had once said that, unlike her parents, she had never been human. Now, seeing Nyrielle in this state, she was starting to wonder if she was finally seeing the other woman's true appearance. Those questions, however, would have to wait until they were alone. For now, she put her attention on Hauke as he recounted their terrifying encounter in the ancestral cave.

"So it's true," Old Svenja whispered after hearing the tale. She sat heavily in her seat, clutching at the armrests in a futile attempt to stop her hands from trembling. What Hauke had described sounded like a cruel and unending torment inflicted on some of their greatest heroes. If a fate like that awaited her, she felt like she would rather have her horn ground to dust than have it enter the ancestral hall.

"The oldest ancestors spoke of great protectors who would always guard the High Pass. After hearing this one speak last night," she said, pointing a cracked claw at Ashlynn. "I consulted the ancestors to know if we had reason to fear an invasion by humans."

"The oldest ancestors said that we should rely on our greatest ancestors," Svenja said, looking at Ritchel with glassy eyes. "The younger ancestors said we can only rely on our own strength. They would not tell me why."

"This is a matter of great shame," Ritchel said after several uncomfortable moments of silence. "It is a story told to each new Eldritch Lord by the one before him, written in the tomes kept in the lord's library. The text is so old and the story has been told so many times that I have wondered how much is truth and how much is misunderstanding."

"Father, do you know what was done to those ancestors?" Hauke asked. "They, they kept saying that I was like them. Am I, is that what I will become if my horn is placed in an ancestral cave?" Hauke asked, his voice cracking at the end. He could see an echo of his own fears in Svenja's sightless eyes. The sense of torment he'd felt from those ancestors would likely leave him with nightmares for months, if not the rest of his life.

"The records are not clear," Ritchel said, shaking his head. "They say only that those with an iridescent horn can become a great guardian or a terrifying scourge for our people. Their horns are to be treated with great care. No one has had an iridescent horn in generations and the last one to appear," Ritchel sighed deeply, shaking his head. "Losing that hero to a battle with Tuscans started a war that lasted a dozen years and didn't end until the humans attacked the Tuscans and gave them other troubles to worry about."

"The one thing that I do know is that the lake was flooded by a previous Lord of the High Pass," Ritchel said. "The memorial atop the island exists so that we may pay respects, but every Eldritch Lord is instructed by his predecessor that the ancestral cave on that island must never be opened and those ancestors are never to be disturbed. Now, it seems we know why."

"You have nothing to fear, little Hauke," Nyrielle said in a voice that was surprisingly gentle. "Whatever ancestor you had who performed that rite, they departed the High Pass long ago. For better or for worse, you will never have guardians like that again."

"You sound very sure of this," Old Svenja said. "Could it be that you know what was done to make these ancestors so different from the others?"

"I recognized the sorcery that shaped them," Nyrielle admitted. As she spoke, she pulled Ashlynn close, holding her as if to comfort herself. "I admit, I never thought of using it on Frost Walkers. Freezing blood like that, in caves where ice can never melt, it turns something that is already powerful and cruel into a true horror."

"Were our ancestors profaned by this sorcery?" Old Svenja asked. The oldest ancestors spoke of these powerful guardians as if they had received the highest honors, but perhaps it wasn't as simple as that.

"I didn't say that," Nyrielle said carefully. "Perhaps they were willing to be transformed in this way. Lord Ritchel, my grandsire was not born a vampire as I was. He was the progeny of another vampire who was himself descended from the Jaws of Death. Do your records mention any lords of the High Pass that were vampires?"

"None," Ritchel said flatly. "Why? Is this sorcery unique to vampires?"

"Perhaps it can be practiced by sorcerers who aren't vampires," Nyrielle said, her gaze growing intense. "But this magic belongs to the True Vampire who taught sorcery to me. There is no True Vampire older than him and if the person who used that sorcery on your ancestors was one of his progeny..."

"Which True Vampire is it?" Lord Ritchel asked, color draining from his face. If a former lord of the High Pass was the progeny of a true vampire, then it was possible that they were still alive, or that they had left those twisted ancestors behind for some other purpose.

Nyrielle's visit had given him several reminders that Vampires were among the longest-lived of all the Eldritch races. The way she thought about time spanned generations of rulers. Suddenly, Ritchel was afraid that they may have offended an incomparably old and powerful ancestor without even realizing that he could still be alive to seek retribution.

"I was taught by the Fangs of Death," Nyrielle said. "Though you might know him as the Great Lord of the Black Wood. "I'm afraid that if he has sunk his fangs deeply into the Frost Walkers, he will not easily let you go."