

The Vampire 97

Chapter 97 97: The Blood Princess (Part One)

Along the length of the high table, voices stilled and all attention turned to the stoop-shouldered figure of the oldest Frost Walker at the high table. Before Old Fabiene could speak, however, Lord Ritchel stood and walked over to her seat halfway down the table from him.

"My people," he said loudly, his voice echoing off the icy walls and vaulted ceiling. "Tonight, Old Fabiene will regale us with a tale of Nyrielle's triumph in the arena of the High Fen, the day she earned the title 'Blood Princess of the Arena.' Please, give her your attention and your respect."

"Ice. Resonant. Chamber. Fabiene," the Lord of the High Pass intoned, summoning a brilliant gleam of icy blue and pale white light from his horn before touching it gently to Fabiene's much duller horn. "Now, just speak normally. Your words will echo through the hall. There is no need for an old woman to strain herself so we young ones can hear," he said gently.

Mist gathered in Old Fabiene's eyes as she stood under the watchful eyes of everyone present. Her entire life, she'd been a fairly ordinary person. She had worked as a maker and mender of nets and spears used for fishing, like her mother before her, and she'd taught her daughters to do the same. Only her grandson's rise to fame as a hunter had given her the opportunity to attend tonight's banquet.

Now, she stood before the greatest hunters, warriors, and sorcerers of the High Pass and Lord Ritchel himself used magic to amplify her voice. And all this, because Lady Nyrielle spoke up for her, calling her childhood memories a treasure.

"It was a horrible year," the old woman began. "Ash from fires in the vale fell on our slopes like snow. Lord Torbin fell to the human 'miracle workers' and his people fled into the mountains. I was too young to know how bad it really was, but when the snows came, my mother took me to High Fen City."

As she spoke, Nyrielle went still, her face becoming an impassive mask while her midnight blue eyes grew distant. That year, her city had burned. Ancient oaks had burned. Only a fierce and early winter had saved the people of the Vale of Mists from the Lothians and the Church, but the winter came too late to stop Cellach Lothian from lashing her parents to the stake and burning them alive.

"I was small, even smaller than Seneschal Ashlynn's maid," she said, smiling at Heila as though remembering what it was like to be young and tiny. "I didn't understand why my father couldn't come with us. Why he had to stay in case the humans attacked the High Pass next. I cried and wailed and smashed my mother's mirror. I was a brat and a handful, and my mother took me to the arena to distract me. After a few days, Lady Nyrielle arrived."

Ashlynn, took Nyrielle's hands in hers, feeling the other woman's heartbeat slowing as she fell into distant memories. In her eyes, Ashlynn saw a smoldering flame dimmed only by years long passed.

Nyrielle remembered her entry into High Fen City. She'd gained a promise from the Frost Walkers to shelter her people for the winter but no longer than that. Further, the Eldritch Lord of the High Pass at the time refused to lend her soldiers to expel the human invaders from her Vale of Mists and so she'd gone to see High Lady Kristel in search of aid.

Instead of aid, however, the ruler of the High Fen told her that she was welcome to the services of anyone she could defeat in the arena, so long as they submitted to her rule, she could take them away as she wished.

"Lady Nyrielle shocked the world," Fabiene said, continuing her tale. "She offered the title of 'Lord of the Vale of Mists' to anyone who could defeat her in the arena. She swore to serve that person until the day they died, even if the vale couldn't be retaken. And then she stood there, all alone in the middle of the arena, waiting for the first man brave enough to fight her."

In the crowd, several of the warriors began to mutter softly, some poking their neighbors asking if they were brave enough to fight a true vampire for her territory, others marveling at the courage it must of taken to issue the challenge in the first place. None of them, however, could imagine the desperation and loss that drove her onto the arena sands that night.

"The first man to challenge her was from the Scaled Clan, with a tail as long as I am tall now and a curved sword in each hand," Fabiene said. "He was strong and fast and when the fight started I thought he looked like a whirlwind with darksteel blades."

"He must have cut Lady Nyrielle a hundred times or more in less time than it takes me to tell the tale," she said, looking at Nyrielle and shaking her head in wonder. "But none of it stopped her. Four times, she knocked him down, and twice she tore his blades from his hands but he refused to surrender, slamming his tail into her, flinging sand, and using any trick he could to regain his weapons and continue the fight."

"I thought she was doomed because she couldn't injure him," the old woman said. "I was very, very wrong. It was a mercy, wasn't it, Lady Nyrielle? You wanted him to admit his defeat without suffering horrible wounds?"

"I wanted him to fight for me," Nyrielle said, her voice echoing off the icy walls even without the aid of Ritchel's magic. "I couldn't destroy a man I hoped to win for my cause."

"But he wouldn't submit," Fabiene said. "Even until the very end, he forced you to kill him rather than admit defeat."

Next to Nyrielle, Ashlynn reached up to gently cup her lover's cheek, watching the ghosts flicker through the vampire's eyes. She couldn't help but remember what she said to Nyrielle the first time she'd seen her feed, imagining how many people she'd killed that she hadn't wanted to because of her hunger. Now, she couldn't help but feel that the list of names of preventable deaths was even longer than just the ones caused by uncontrollable thirst.

"It was what happened next that earned her the name 'Blood Princess of the Arena,'" the old woman said. "Before he died, she fed from him until all of the cuts and wounds on her body healed. She stood there, covered in his blood and hers, and she asked who was next."

Nyrielle closed her eyes, sinking into Ashlynn's gentle touch as a parade of figures marched through her mind. More men of the Scaled Clan, short furry men from the Clan of Painted Masks, and even Frost Walkers and the northern Tuskans had come to fight for her title. None had surrendered easily and far too many died rather than submit.

"She fought ten more men before the first chose to submit rather than die," the old woman said. "From sunset to sunrise, Lady Nyrielle never left the sands. Her dress was torn and tattered and stained red from head to toe but no man could defeat her."

The look that the Frost Walkers gave Nyrielle was filled with awe, respect, and a small measure of fear as they imagined the carnage Old Fabienne described. They had already been shocked when they heard that she fought ten men in a row, without rest in order to have a single man surrender, but when they heard that she spent an entire long winter night on the sands of the arena, even the Frost Walker's blood ran cold.