

The Vampire 99

Chapter 99 99: The Reality Of Fighting Humans (Part One)

"What happened to the last forty-seven allies who joined your war against the humans?"

Paulus' question hung in the air, heavy like the snow after a blizzard. Throughout the hall, forks and knives froze, suspended over dishes as the Frost Walkers attending the feast dared not make a sound. The air itself seemed to crystalize, as though the already cold room had entered the depths of winter.

Moments ago they had been exhilarated by Old Fabiene's tale of Nyrielle's heroic stand on the arena sands. Now, one of their elders had stood to speak out against her, dumping a bucket of ice water over the warm fires the stirring tale had built in their hearts.

"Old Fabiene, thank you for sharing your tale. You are a treasure and I am honored to hear that it helped you face your own struggles," Nyrielle said, gently removing Ashlynn's hands from where her Seneschal had offered a comforting touch and turning her attention to the belligerent elder.

The moment Nyrielle turned her attention to Elder Paulus, Fabiene slumped gratefully in her chair. She'd been honored to tell her story but she had no desire to become embroiled in whatever conflict Elder Paulus was beginning to stir. Beside her, other guests at the high table reached out with comforting hands, gently stroking her fur to comfort her and thank her for sharing what she had. Meanwhile, most people turned their attention to Lady Nyrielle.

"You've fought the humans, haven't you, Elder Paulus? It doesn't matter whether a person's struggles are big or small," Nyrielle added, looking out at the gathered Frost Walkers for a moment before returning her gaze to the Elder.

"As long as a person respects the challenges others face, we can all strive together. But when you speak out to disparage others, I have to start by asking my own question," she said pointedly. "Why don't I remember seeing you on the field of battle, slaughtering humans with your own claws to keep your High Pass safe from human invaders?"

"Ridiculous," Paulus spat. "I wasn't even born when Cellach Lothian died. That's why I'm asking you to account for the people who followed you in that war. What happened to your forty-seven progeny?"

"Paulus," Lord Ritchel growled, his fur rising with icy energy as his hands balled into fists. "Sit down. You're out of line." Lord Ritchel wasn't stupid, he'd heard the same tales that Paulus had, but at this point, the battle against Cellach was all but ancient history. The events of those days hardly mattered in his eyes when compared to the threats before them now.

"Am I out of line?" Paulus said, glaring at Lord Ritchel and refusing to back down. "You tell us again and again to trust the Eldritch Lady of the Vale, to put our faith in the True Vampire to act as our shield against the humans. But do not think we're blind to what is happening here."

"Lady Nyrielle is a vampire, yes," Paulus conceded. "But she is also human! Her eldritch progeny are nowhere to be seen but her human progeny have visited us many times. Now, she comes before us with a human Seneschal," he said, pointing a frost-covered claw at Ashlynn.

"They say that the Eldritch tongue isn't even spoken by the youth in the Vale of Mists," Paulus continued. "Yes, Lady Nyrielle is brave and strong, but she is also insidious and cunning, destroying..."

"Silence, old man," Nyrielle commanded. Her eyes had turned completely dark with only a trace of midnight blue rings glowing in the center of the darkness as her power swirled around her. A wind, unfelt by anyone else, tugged at her long lace sleeves and skirt as she stood to confront the old man.

Paulus' eyes went wide as he tried to speak, to protest, to do anything to resist but when Nyrielle commanded that he stay silent, he found that he couldn't do anything to make a sound. Even the thought of banging on the table to vent his frustration felt so abhorrent that he didn't dare make a move that would break the silence he had been confined to.

Beside him, Lord Ritchel looked for a moment like he would protest before settling back into his high-backed chair. For many years, Paulus had been one of his most trusted advisors but they had grown increasingly out of step over the years. Now, the old man had dug his own grave and he refused to rescue him from it.

"It's true that Paulus wasn't alive to fight against Cellach to help retake the Vale of Mists from the Lothian armies," Nyrielle said, turning away from Paulus to face the gathered Frost Walkers. "So let me tell you what it was like to fight in those days."

"You might know the Lothians for their strong knights and vast armies," Nyrielle began, looking briefly to Ashlynn. "My Seneschal has studied the history of the Lothian family more than some people born into it. My darling, what is it that humans called the last war the Lothians fought against the Eldritch peoples?"

"The War of Inches," Ashlynn said, standing next to Nyrielle and speaking so the entire room could hear, even without the use of sorcery. "They named it that because, by war's end, the borders between the Lothian March and the Eldritch Nations had barely moved. At best, Bors Lothian raided Airgead Mountain, pillaging gold, silver, and many jewels from the mountain."

"If you've only ever heard of how the humans fought during their 'War of Inches,'" Nyrielle said, resuming her tale. "Then you do not understand the horror of fighting the humans at their strongest. In the last war, we fought the Lothians and their subordinate barons but little more than that."

"When Cellarch brought his armies to avenge his father's death, he brought with him a force of Inquisitors and Templars," Nyrielle said. Her voice was smooth and calm but her hands clenched and unclenched, her nails lengthening into wicked claws as she spoke.