

## Vampire Civil War Epilogue

Deathspeaker Aeradon, perched high on a balcony over the assembled crowd of Sect Elves, watched the bone-fire burn on the sands below. For nearly ten minutes he'd listened curiously to Deathspeaker Spider's screams above the din of the roaring crowd, but now he couldn't hear any more protests from his nemesis, which suited him fine. The Order of Uhlrik was no more, extinguished by Vladd's mastery in the Death Pits. Now, with Uhlrik's best warriors slain, their leader Rax Coldstone reduced to ash, and Deathspeaker Spider burned alive atop a pyre of his fallen warriors, Vladd's control over the military hierarchy of the Sect was nearly absolute. The remaining Uhlrik warriors were scattering out of the Sect as quick as they could ride, and would likely be no longer of any serious concern to him by the end of the year.

An excellent night, and one that would undeniably pave the way for the Order of Vladd to become unstoppable in the years to come. With the appointment of Darq the Corrupt as the general of his personal armies, and command of the Order of Vladd falling to the hands of the capable Death Merchant, Ribhan Crag, things couldn't be better. Aeradon sipped at his marrow wine, savoring the rich, meaty taste with his withered tongue. Soon, the pyre would gutter and flicker out, and then a series of brutal pit-fights would begin, with all of Spider's Nightblades and pit-warriors fighting for the right to be acquired by new masters. The bloodshed would likely be quite memorable, as the threat of lost station to an dis-owned Nightblade always lent more to their desire to please the death-hungry crowd with spectacles of destruction.

Sipping at his wine, pleased with his train of thought, Aeradon began formulating a plan for conquest.

Ribhan Crag looked up from the edge of the bonfire to the balcony high above the arena, where his master distantly watched the flames from the edge of shadow. The battle in the Death Pits had been swift and bloody, but Ribhan had managed to cut the life from Rax Coldstone before his counterpart could return the favor. His appointment by Aeradon as the new leader of the Order of Vladd had been of no surprise, and Darq the Corrupt's placement as the head of Aeradon's personal army a logical step. But with Darq the Corrupt conducting a secret mission to the west, there was a very small chance that Darq would fall. If he did fall, then Ribhan would rise to take his place as Aeradon's bodyguard, and would become untouchable by his enemies once and for all.

But deep down in his heart, above all else, above all the games and intrigues of the Sect, his dear Mikala was avenged. Rax had invaded Ribhan's personal quarters, attacked his lover, and taken his pet Amazon Queen's head as a prize. While Mikala's head would likely be retrieved from Spider's tower by his agents, and he could certainly have her head reattached, the walking corpse could never have the intelligence, the fire, or the fury that had been so appealing to him. Now he would be alone, forever, and Mikala would not

be by his side when he finally ascended to true power in the Sect, when he could finally lay down his chipped and pitted sword and live his life without fear.

While Mikala's would likely be retrieved from Spider's tower by his agents, and he could certainly have her head reattached, the walking corpse could never have the intelligence, the fire, the fury that had been so appealing to him. He wanted more than just physical pleasure, but the emotional pleasure that Mikala had inspired in him, that no other Sect female had even come close to providing. Now he would be alone, forever, and Mikala would not be there with him when he finally ascended to true power in the Sect, when he could finally lay down his chipped and pitted sword and live his life without fear.

Vengeance is mine, Ribhan thought to himself, coldly, feeling the tears well up in his eyes. But have I lost myself in the bargain?

Across from where Ribhan knelt by the pyre, the Nightwitch Nyx directed her gaze up at Deathspeaker Aeradon's shadow-shrouded balcony, then down at the kneeling Death Merchant below. Of the four warriors that had escaped the Death Pits with their lives, Ribhan appeared to have suffered the most. The spring seemed to have left the warrior's step, and Ribhan's fury had cooled too soon for the crowd's liking. Compared to his other exuberant, celebrating Vladd warriors, Ribhan seemed to be on the edge of destruction, on the edge of a black pit he might never return from.

Nyx had spent the last hundred years cracking castles for her masters, and now she was ready for something new. She was ready for power rather than service, to hold the reins rather than to be driven by them. And on the pit floor below, crouching by the fire in reverence to his master, was her means out of the cycle of destruction, and into the vaunted halls of power above.

He will be the perfect tool, she thought to herself with a smile. And I will be the perfect one to seduce, bind, and use in order to get myself close enough to Deathspeaker Aeradon to usurp his power. She stood up from her seat, and began to make her way through the crowd towards the arena's exit, where she hoped she could stop him, make her introductions, and begin the process of capturing Ribhan's burdened soul.

Goltusep scuttled from Spider's abandoned tower, shuffling forth as quickly as he could in his characteristic gait. Ever since the experiment failed more than two hundred years ago, he'd traded much of his magic and his physical prowess in exchange for strength and eternity. But now, with the knowledge stolen from Spider's private library, Goltusep had all the spells he would need to learn to create his own Vampires, to create his own Vampiric Order that would rival even the great Order of Vladd.

But his nemesis, Digger Khep, was still out there somewhere in the Land, gathering his own knowledge for his own bid for power. Digger Khep, his one-time prized student and pupil, had sabotaged Goltusep at the moment of

his greatest achievement, and left him a decrepit Zombie instead of a god-like Vampire of power and unstoppable magical capability. Goltusep knew that he would have to deal with his old student first, long before he made his bid for power in the Sect, but that was going to take resources, warriors, and a great deal of gold to take care of. Only then could he begin to conduct the research, gather the materials, and construct the magical devices necessary to the creation of one of his special Vampires.

Goltusep smiled. Looking up at Aeradon's tower, then down at the assembled books in his hands, the Zombie knew that he had everything he needed to barter for Aeradon's favor. But there was one problem amongst all of it - Darq the Corrupt, campaigning somewhere far to the west. Darq knew Goltusep, and knew what he was capable of, and would never let him gain power anywhere in his domain.

Then Darq will have to die, Goltusep thought to himself, and it will have to be at the hand of one he would never expect.

Rax Coldstone opened his eyes with a start, peering frantically into the darkness. His body felt mangled, but intact, and there was no trace of the sword-wound that Ribhan had cored through his throat. I'm alive, Rax thought desperately to himself. I was on the pyre, burning with the rest. But where am I? I've been resurrected. But by who?

A light blossomed forth in the cramped cave. Above him, an undead Draconum moved into his vision and looked down upon Rax's helpless body, with a look of utter remorseless hatred on its face. In one hand, the Draconum held a wicked black knife, its blade glinting in the torchlight.

Rax screamed as the Draconum began to cut.