

## The Vampire 151

Chapter 151 151: Ollie's Changes

Outside the Vale of Mists in the forests of the western mountains, a small group moved steadily along a trail that was barely visible in the late-night gloom. No torches burned to light their way, but for most of the group, this presented little difficulty.

Ollie, however, found himself deeply envying his traveling companions as they trekked through the forest at night. Marcel had offered to carry him to their destination, however, Ollie stubbornly refused.

It might look very romantic to some people when a vampire like Thane swept Ashlynn off her feet and carried her through the forest at night, but the notion of Marcel treating him the same was more than Ollie could adjust to. Besides, from the wicked smile the vampire had given him after making the offer, Ollie felt like Marcel knew he would refuse and just wanted to tease him.

Since coming to the Vale of Mists, Ollie found himself constantly changing his expectations and adjusting to different ways of thinking about things. He'd finally reached the point where the appearances of the Eldritch no longer startled him and he'd removed the word 'demon' from his vocabulary completely.

He was also beginning to think of himself differently than he had before. He wasn't just a kitchen boy anymore. He was Ashlynn's friend and he was starting to think of himself as a warrior, though he had yet to fight any real battles.

Ashlynn's suggestion that he obtain a darksteel knife had drastically shifted his training. It hadn't taken long for Thane to pass Ollie over to Marcel's tender care to learn the fine art of fighting with knives. Now, two large knives hung from his hip and as each day went by, he felt more and more like they belonged there.

Marcel believed in starting from what was familiar and for Ollie, that had been kitchen knives. He couldn't deny that it had been a good place to start. The darksteel butcher's cleaver that hung from his left hip might be as heavy as a sword but in his hands, it felt very familiar, and the long, slender fighting knife on his right hip felt to him like a combination of a boning knife and a general cook's knife. It wasn't made of darksteel but according to Marcel, it was better that it wasn't.

Harrod, the diminutive horned soldier he'd first met with Ashlynn during their escape from the Summer Villa, had been watching Ollie's transformation up close. Marcel was far too busy to teach the former kitchen boy every night and as the nights grew shorter, he handed over more and more responsibility for Ollie's education to Harrod and Justus, the valet assigned to care for Ollie in the ancient keep.

After so many weeks of training, just when he had been settling into his new life in the Vale of Mists, Marcel had surprised him with an invitation.

"My spies just sent news that Owain is going to lead knights, templars, and an Inquisitor on a hunt in the outer forests," the vampire said. "Thane wants us to carry a warning to the outer villages. Why not come along and see the sights while you do?"

"Outer villages? Are they the ones close to the walls?" Ollie asked, though his mind was only half on the answer. The rest of him was thinking about whether or not he needed to pack.

"No," Marcel said, shaking his head and sending his raven locks tumbling with the motion. "'Outer' means that they're outside the territory currently claimed by the Vale of Mists. It wasn't always that way. Long before I died, Mistress Nyreille's predecessor ruled the forests from the ancient keep to the foot of Airgead Mountain. All of the villages we're going to visit would have belonged to her if things had been different."

"What happened?" Ollie asked. He'd already heard a number of surprising stories about 'the old days' from Thane, but Marcel never gave him the feeling of being an 'ancient' being. More like, he was a young grandfather who was occasionally nostalgic as opposed to someone who remembered being present for things others could only learn from history books. It made the younger vampire more approachable and Ollie liked to think that they were starting to become friends.

"You noticed the three walls on your way in, right?" Marcell asked rhetorically. "Those were built at different times to use the geography of the Vale of Mists to create good defensive positions to hold off the Lothian Army. Instead of building a giant wall around her entire domain, she built a narrow one in the places where the Vale of Mists form bottlenecks naturally."

"Ordinary people can take refuge behind the walls," the vampire continued. "It's just, not everyone wanted to leave their homes and villages behind. If they're outside the walls, Lady Nyrielle can't promise protection to them but that doesn't mean she doesn't care about them."

When Ollie asked for more details about the villages, Marcel just taunted him with a 'you'll see when we get there' answer. More importantly, he warned Ollie that he might need to speak to the villagers about what things were like among the humans now. That wasn't Ollie's primary reason for coming though. That responsibility fell to the other human trudging through the dark with them.

Daithi had been a soldier long enough to be accustomed to moving through dark forests in order to catch bandits unprepared or accomplish other tasks that couldn't easily be done in full daylight. He might not be able to keep up with Harrod and the other members of the Horned Clan as they moved through the night, but he was able to avoid embarrassing himself as they worked their way to ward the first village.

After several hours spent hiking through the night, Marcel seemed to vanish into the darkness, appearing again a few minutes later with a smile on his face.

"I've let the people at Yarrin know that we're coming," he explained. "Olli, Daithi, don't expect a warm greeting. Turning up unannounced in the middle of the night is enough to put most folks out of sorts and these folks... well, you'll see."

The first thing Ollie noticed when they approached the village was a very faint smell of woodsmoke and the sound of running water. When they came closer, however, he realized that the village had been in view for a while and he simply hadn't noticed.

Each small house in the village had been built into the hillside with only small wooden structures protruding from the earth to indicate that someone lived there at all. Each one had been cleverly concealed with fallen branches that caught loose leaves or layers of moss growing on top of them, making them look like natural formations unless you looked truly closely.

If he'd been in a hurry, unless he stopped at the flowing stream and large pond in the center of the village for water, he might have been able to pass by it even in daylight without discovering it. Even the dam constructed across the stream looked more like something built by beavers than something built by a village of people.

Unlike every other village he'd seen in the Vale of Mists, this one was completely open. No defensive wall surrounded it and there were no roads leading to it, only a few well-worn narrow trails created by animals that came to drink at the pond.

Compared to the villages he'd seen in the Vale of Mists, this village, as cozy as it might be, struck Ollie as an incredibly lonely place. In the Vale, well-maintained roads formed a network between all of the villages, and people came to the castle town every day to trade the products of their village or purchase supplies from others.

Here, however, there were barely even paths between individual houses. It looked like the villagers barely interacted with each other, much less the world outside their village. For someone who had grown up in the bustle of the Lothian Manor, it struck him as very... lonely.

The villagers themselves were another surprise entirely. He'd become accustomed to the appearance of people from the Clan of the Great Claw like Georg the cook back at the keep, or Harrod, Justus, and the other members of the Horned Clan he'd come to know. But this was his first time seeing someone who looked like this...