

## The Vampire 154

### Chapter 154: Return to the Vale? (Part Two)

"So why did you go, boy?" Old Nan asked the red haired human, her whiskers twitching in genuine curiosity. She'd known Marcel for a very long time and she'd become all but immune to compliments that flowed from his lips like water from a leaking dam. He was a merchant at heart and his words always sought advantage.

This boy, however, seemed surprisingly genuine when he praised the carvings on her wall. More than that, the look in his eyes when he looked at her and her home seemed almost... sad. Perhaps the merchant didn't understand an attachment to a home. She had heard that humans bought and sold homes freely. But this young man seemed like he understood, at least a little bit.

"I went because Lady Ashlynn was right," Ollie said firmly. "If I didn't go, then Lord Owain would have killed me. I don't know what it took to build and make all this," he said, gesturing at the interior of the burrow. "But I understand wanting to stay to keep it safe."

"But does everyone need to stay? Or just your soldiers? What about the cooks, the carpenters and the children? Can they visit the Vale while everyone else protects your homes from the rains?"

"And give them to the Vale of Mists to use as hostages?" Old Nan spat. "Child, I knew humans were cruel, but saying that to my face..."

"Old Nan," Marcel interrupted. "Ollie doesn't think that way. Neither does Lady Nyrielle. She isn't even in the Vale right now," he said, feeling helpless before this old woman. Some things couldn't be bought or sold at any price. While he felt like Old Nan was overvaluing something as simple as a home, Ollie had reminded him how much work the people of the Heartwood clan put into their homes.

Asking them to leave this place wasn't just asking them to give up a hut that kept them warm in the winter and dry in the rainy season. Each burrow represented lifetimes of effort to transform their home into a living work of art. Ollie might not know what it took to make this place, but Marcel did.

The oldest carvings here had been added by Old Nan's grandfather, then by her mother. The most recent ones had been carved by her sons, two of whom were standing outside with bows trained on the entrance to the burrow right now. It was just too precious to lose.

Ollie's proposal made a lot of sense to an outsider. Send away your children while a war is being fought. Only, to the Heartwood Clan, it was seen as pulling their future and the continuation of their legacy into the jaws of a trap, using them as bait to get the rest of the clan.

"Mistress Nyrielle would mourn your loss," Marcel said, standing to leave. "But she cannot send men to defend every one of the outer villages. Young Ollie's suggestion isn't bad to save at least some of your people while the rest fight to protect your village. It would be better though, if all of you came."

"If Lady Nyrielle isn't in the Vale," Old Nan said, her whiskers twitching in confusion. "Who is making this offer and why? What is it you want from us?"

"It comes from Thane," Marcel said simply. "He doesn't want to see Lady Nyrielle pained over the loss of your lives. Summer is coming. It's already hard for me to come here to deliver a warning, but I came. You can at least think about it."

"Do you know when the humans will enter the forests?" Old Nan asked. She still wasn't convinced that they needed to flee but she wanted to know how much time they had to build additional defenses in the forest. Whether setting traps or constructing blinds and hides for their warriors to use, all of it would take time.

"Owain is in a hurry," Marcel said. "He's leaving for the Summer Villa in the morning if he hasn't left already. Once a few people in his party are there, the rest will head into the forests in search of anyone they can get their hands on. He doesn't really care who killed his knights. As long as he can return home with horns or claws or tails as trophies, he will achieve his goals."

"That's why, this time is different," Marcel said, gesturing for Ollie and Daithi to join him. "I still have a few more villages that I will try to warn. I can't stay to argue. We've told you what's coming. You can seek shelter in the Vale of Mists and return when it's over or even move your entire village there and we will find a place for you."

"Or, you can remain here," he said, opening the door to leave. "In which case, I can only hope that you're right and that the humans won't be able to find you."

Old Nan didn't stop them from leaving. She'd heard what they had to say and she'd made her own stance clear. There was no reason to haggle with a merchant who was clearly reluctant to make this sale when she herself wasn't looking to buy. The red haired human boy, however, looked deeply troubled when he left, which told Old Nan more than any of Marcel's words had.

Several minutes passed before the door to her burrow opened and two men entered. Both wore large, wide brimmed hats and heavy ponchos that had been covered with bits of moss, twigs, and fallen leaves to help them blend into the forest around the village.

"Mother," her eldest son Milo said as he removed his hat, revealing a face that was full of youthful energy with whiskers that were barely long enough to extend beyond his cheeks. "The visitors have left. Lako and I watched until they passed the traps but nothing missed the merchant's eyes."

"No, it's very difficult to hide things from the Merchant of Darkness," Old Nan said, shaking her head. "Lako, go follow them. I want to know which other villages they visit and if any of them take this offer of sanctuary from the Vale of Mists."

"Yes, Mother," Lako said with a light chuckle. He hadn't even taken his hat and boots off and already he was being sent back out into the night. It was hard being the youngest. "Mother," he said, pausing to look over his shoulder at Old Nan. "We're not moving, right?"

"I don't know," Old Nan said, thinking carefully and replaying every word that had been said during her brief meeting. "I learned a long time ago, that merchant never lies, but the truth you hear isn't always the truth you thought it was. This time he was unusually direct. He didn't even ask after the statue this time or play any of his usual games."

"If Lady Nyrielle was strong enough to protect us, we wouldn't need to move," Milo said, frowning at his mother. "If we go to the Vale of Mists, we won't just lose our homes, we'll become a burden in their vale. If the other villages send people, can the vale really feed so many of us? The Horned Clan and the Clan of the Great Claw already hold the best land in the vale, what will be left for us?"

"I don't know if they can care for us or not," Old Nan said with a deep sigh. Her long, flat tail twitched, thumping softly against the wooden floor as she thought. "But that which is best for the other clans may not be what is best for us."

"Find out what the others are doing. I don't want to leave," she emphasized. "But Milo is just married and hasn't even given me a grandchild yet. As much as I want to see his children carving on our walls... I have to see them born first."

"Mother," Lako said, looking deeply wounded. "Am I nothing but air to you? Are you sending me into the night because I haven't found a good woman yet?"

"Hah," Old Nan laughed. "Milo should get back to his wife. When you have a wife to stay up late and worry about you, I'll pick on someone else's child. Now go before they get too far away. It's fine if they spot you but don't make things awkward if you're discovered. The important thing is to learn what the others will do."

"Yes, Mother," Lako said, stepping out into the night and closing the door behind him. Within a moment, he had vanished into the underbrush, following along behind Marcel and the others. The vampire might notice him, but no one else would, especially not the humans.

Hopefully, he thought, the other villages would see reason and hold their ground. The humans hadn't found them yet and he didn't believe they were about to. Besides, he'd just started working on his own burrow in the hopes of catching Cetna's eye with a place that had a good view of the waterfalls. He didn't want to lose his home along with the chance to woo a beautiful woman just because someone in the Vale underestimated their ability to protect themselves.