

The Vampire 173

Chapter 173 173: A Place of Refuge

In the Vale of Mists, Ollie stood at the center of several cookfires that were only a short walk downhill from the ancient roadway and the outermost gate that it passed through.

Originally, when Ollie had volunteered to help receive the people fleeing from Owain's assault on the Eldritch villages outside the Vale of Mists, he fully expected to fall under the command of a more senior and experienced soldier or member of the castle staff.

Things would have worked out that way if the cook's assistants that Georg sent had any idea how to feed an incoming tide of refugees. With a capable and experienced chef, many things became very simple. Unfortunately, it had been well over a decade since the people of the Vale had been on any kind of war footing and even then, Bors Lothian had never directly assaulted the Vale of Mists in the last war, his focus had been on plundering the wealth of Airgead Mountain.

Ollie wasn't used to fighting wars or feeding refugees either, but he was very accustomed to feeding a large number of servants as quickly and as cheaply as possible before they scattered to their duties in Lothian Manor or the Summer Villa.

Seeing the number of people arriving in ones and twos or small groups of five or six on a near-constant basis, Ollie started by making a few suggestions before the horned servant who was officially in charge turned to him and asked for help.

"Sir Ollie, I'm sorry I misunderstood," the gray-bearded man said. "Clearly Chef Georg was grateful for your help because you have skills better suited to this than we do. My brigade is at your command, give us orders and we will not argue."

For a moment, he wanted to protest. He was just a kitchen boy after all. He'd never been in charge of a kitchen. But before he could back down from the responsibility, he heard Ashlynn's voice, reminding him that 'from now on, you're not just a kitchen boy, you're my friend.'

If he was going to be a real friend to her, he couldn't shrink back behind the label of 'just a kitchen boy' anymore. So, after taking several deep breaths, he began to give instructions to the other cooks.

"We don't have time to make anything fancy," Ollie said. "Let's start with a batch of All-Day-Soup. Fill two large pots a third of the way up with the roughest cuts of meat and plenty of bones - shoulders, shanks, anything that has to cook for a while, get that started now with enough water to cover the bones and meat. Once it's boiled for a while, we can add more water, vegetables, and barley to the soup..."

All-day-soup was a kitchen staple in the Lothian Manor. It started with the pieces of meat too tough to be served to the lords, the stump ends of vegetables, and all sorts of other kitchen trimmings. As the day went on and the staff consumed the soup, more trimmings would be added, more water, more barley, and so on until the soup was either finished off at the end of the night or what was left was banked on the coals to start the next day's pot of soup.

In addition to the All-Day-Soup, Ollie ordered one of the massive pots to be dedicated to producing a thin oat porridge that could be served up all day long, along with a cook fire dedicated to turning out simple flatbread.

The combination of soup, porridge, and bread did more than just ensure that every arriving refugee received something to eat. They received something that was warm, easy to digest after a day of trekking through the wilderness, and most importantly something that felt comforting.

Ollie knew too well what it was like to suddenly find yourself a resident of the Vale of Mists. While it wasn't a bad place to be, and he even preferred his life here to the life he lived before, it was still a shock to be suddenly uprooted and sent somewhere else to live, perhaps for the rest of your life. Giving people in that situation something as normal as a warm meal could go a long way to easing the fear and uncertainty that came with the sudden move.

While he was inspecting his supplies and trying to think of a way to provide something that could be considered a 'treat' to the dozens of children who arrived looking lost and forlorn, a commotion at the gate distracted him.

"Did I hear that right?" Ollie said, looking at one of the other cooks. "Did they say the Heartwood Clan's village had burned?"

"Sounds like it," the cook said, pausing his work for a moment finding himself surprised yet again by this strange red-haired human. The expression on the young man's face was pensive and... sad? For the loss of a village that he'd likely only seen once? For Lady Ashlynn to care about the Eldritch people might be considered normal, she was a Child of the Earth and the Seneschal of Lady Nyrielle. But to see so much concern from this young human was truly surprising.

"You should go take a look," the cook said. "We can handle things here now that we've got the system worked out."

"I think I will, thank you," Ollie said before sprinting up the hillside to the gates where a small crowd had gathered. When he arrived, he found the easily recognizable figure of Old Nan carried in the arms of a younger man from the Heartwood Clan.

Old Nan's clothes had been torn and singed in places and her head bore a large bruise and a shallow cut across her brow that made it look like she'd received a beating before the younger man carried her

away. The young man himself had singed fur and a broken-off arrow protruded from one shoulder as he curled protectively around the old woman.

"Old Nan," Ollie shouted as he made his way forward through the crowd. "What, what happened to her?"

"You, human," Milo said, looking at the red-haired human in surprise. His voice was thick with fatigue and his eyes were haunted. For the past day, he'd told himself that they would be safe in the Vale of Mists, that if he could just reach the walls, he could put down his burdens and they would be safe.

Now, seeing a human in this place after watching his village burn... it twisted the knife in his heart that had been buried there since his brother's death. And yet... this was the human who pleaded with them to come to safety in the first place.

Because Ollie had suggested sending away the people who couldn't fight, Milo's wife should be somewhere in the Vale of Mists, safe and waiting for him, along with many of his friends and neighbors. Only the most stubborn residents of the village had stayed to defend it. Milo himself would have preferred to leave but neither he nor Lako could abandon their mother and so they'd stayed to fight as well.

If they hadn't...

"You were right, human," Milo said as tears he hadn't been able to shed finally spilled from his eyes as the dam within him broke at last. "Can you, can you help her?" Milo asked, lifting his unconscious mother. "She was... stubborn."

"Of course, I can help," Ollie said, stepping in gently and kneeling beside the wounded pair. "Let me take her to the healers. You two," he said, pointing at a pair of nearby horned soldiers. "This woman is a friend of Marcell's, and this man is...?"

"Her foolish son, Milo," he said, his tail hanging limply on the ground as he spoke. Now that he'd finally arrived, he felt hollowed out. He'd staggered through the forest all night while carrying his mother and he had to subdue her when she tried to rush back to the village the first time she'd woken. It broke his heart to do so, but much like when he knocked her unconscious to pull her from their home before the humans arrived, he couldn't bear the thought of leaving her to die for nothing. Now that they'd arrived, however, he didn't know what he was supposed to do next.

"Milo," Ollie said gently. "These men will help you to the healers. I can't imagine how strong you must be to go so far with an arrow in your shoulder, but you need help and so does Old Nan. Once the healers have tended to you, I'll bring you both something hot to eat."

"All right," Milo said numbly. The human's mention of food prompted another thought that broke through the fog in his mind. "My wife, Juni, and... and Cetna. Did they make it?"

"I don't know," Ollie said as he began to carry Old Nan to the healers. "But if they did, I'll go look for them. I'm sure they'll be glad to see you made it too."

After helping Milo and Old Nan to the healers and finding Juni and Cetna, Ollie returned to his makeshift kitchen with a heavy lump in his stomach. What Owain and his men had done to the Heartwood clan was far too cruel and he was powerless to have stopped it.

The hollowed-out look in Milo's eyes and the wounds on Old Nan's body told him how important their homes had been and that they'd lost far more than just their homes. And for what? So Owain Lothian could hang another trophy on his walls?

At the moment, there was nothing he could do to stop Owain's rampage through the outlying villages, but one day, he thought, his hand dropping to the hilt of a fighting knife at his hip. One day, he wouldn't be so powerless.

For now, all he could do was return to his kitchen and make sure that none of the refugees went hungry. When the day started, he'd felt proud of himself for at least offering some comfort to the people who had lost so much but after seeing Milo, that pride withered as he focused mechanically on arranging their supplies and preparing the next batch of All-Day-Soup.