

## The Vampire 233

### Chapter 233 233: A Knight's Duty

In the Vale of Mists, while Ashlynn and Heila were making their way toward the Briar and preparing for the multitude of changes their journey would bring, other adjustments were occurring at home.

With the complete destruction of Old Nan's village and the brutal way that Owain's men hunted down anyone attempting to escape, a ripple had spread through the outlying villages. Arguments broke out among many village elders and even between members of the same family.

The humans had sent raids into the hills outside the Vale of Mists before, but those raids rarely breached the defenses of a village. More often than not, after a skirmish or two in the wilderness, both sides retreated while licking their wounds, each one hunkering down and swearing that the other side would pay a greater price next time.

This kind of wholesale slaughter and destruction happening so deep in the wilderness hadn't been seen since the days of Bors Lothian's father or even longer ago, during the era of Four Brothers when the church had dispatched dozens of Templars and Inquisitors to beat back the Eldritch people still clinging to their ancestral lands.

Now, more and more people questioned the wisdom of holding onto the homes their mothers and grandmothers had raised them in. Hearth and home were sacred to many, but land, once lost, could be reclaimed. Lives, once lost, were gone forever.

Days after Owain Lothian and his men returned to the Summer Villa, refugees continued to pour into the Vale of Mists. Ollie had run himself ragged, growing his humble field kitchen to four times the size and enlisting the help of fleeing villagers whenever there were people who seemed both capable and willing to do the work. Still, the solution was temporary at best and no one knew what the human's next move would be.

Two nights before the Summer Solstice, a weary Ollie climbed the stairs of one of the oldest towers in the ancient keep. Thane's summons had caught him by surprise as he was preparing to sleep. Ever since Owain's attack on the Heartwood Clan, Ollie had been far too busy to keep up with his training, though he had the distinct impression that Thane and Marcell were every bit as busy as he was, if not more.

"Ollie, thank you for coming," Thane said when the young man entered his office. While there was a large wooden desk covered with seemingly endless reports, maps, and half-written instructions to respond to the dozens of issues occurring within the Vale of Mists, the vampire himself seemed to disdain the use of his desk unless necessary, preferring to lounge in a bench seat built into a windowsill where he could gaze out at the night sky.

"Sir Thane," Ollie said formally, bowing as he entered. Despite the vampire's leisurely appearance, he'd learned early on that the older man's amber eyes missed nothing, even when he didn't seem to be paying much attention.

"You look tired," Thane said, turning away from his view of the vale to regard the former kitchen boy with greater scrutiny. "But by all accounts, you're making a very real difference," he said, vanishing from the windowsill and appearing behind his desk in a movement so quick that Ollie missed it when he blinked.

"Do you have any idea how many of the refugees mentioned your pleas as the thing that convinced them to give up their homes?" Thane asked. "Some of those villages have been stubborn about maintaining their independence for years, but they listened to you, despite the fact that you're human."

"I don't know what to say," Ollie said, shifting uncomfortably under the vampire's intense amber gaze. "It's just... No matter where you go, there are always some little people who don't have a say."

"And, I feel like the little people, in the kitchens and the stables and everywhere else no one wants to work," Ollie continued, his voice gaining strength as he spoke. "Those people don't have as much to cling to as the people in the big houses with all the fancy things have. I just thought, maybe the little people deserved a chance to run, even if their leaders didn't want to."

"You know, it's not as bad among the Eldritch as it is in human households," Thane said. As he spoke, he turned from Ollie to look at an antique suit of armor standing in one corner of his office.

The light from the candles and the hearth barely reached the dark corner, and yet the armor gleamed as though it had been recently polished. On the shield, the emblem of a sheaf of wheat crossed with a wood cutter's axe could still be seen, even though the colors were no longer as bright as they'd once been.

"Still, you're not wrong," Thane said with a sigh. "Without an Eldritch Lord to rule over them, each village has to make their own way and they tend to value age and wisdom over strength in their leaders. Sometimes a strong person rises who can take control of the village, but they keep control long after they should have handed it off to the next generation."

"When an aging village head is sending young men off to fight, it's too easy to spend someone else's lives on a fight they know they themselves couldn't win," Thane said, shaking his head. "Cowardly old men and ambitious young men like Owain are the two plagues that afflict human communities. The Eldritch should be better than that, and yet somehow... here we are."

"It's fine though, as long as someone can step in to do the right thing, isn't it?" Ollie said hesitantly. He might not be a kitchen boy any longer, but such lofty ideals were still far above his head.

He knew all too well that the people in charge didn't always do the right thing, but from what he'd seen, Thane, Marcell, and all the people of the Vale of Mists were working to do the right thing, even if the villagers from the outlying villages didn't ask for their help. As long as they kept stepping up to do right, whether or not the villagers accepted the help.

"Yes, that's it exactly," Thane said, appearing beside Ollie in a blink and throwing an arm around his shoulder. "I'm glad you understand. Since you know, I'm sure I barely have to tell you anything and you'll step right up and do all of the right things," he said with a warm laugh, pulling Ollie over to the desk as he spoke.

"You know, Ollie, when I was still alive, it was a tradition that a knight would be appointed as the local lord of a village," the vampire said, giving Ollie's shoulder a tight, almost painful squeeze. "Is that still the way of it in Lothian March? One knight per village, to oversee between twenty and a hundred farms, a thousand head of livestock, and all of the other ordinary business of a village?"

"I, um, I guess so?" Ollie said, running a hand through his flame-red hair and scratching his head in confusion. "At least, at formal events and feasts, any knight who isn't the son of a lord is always announced with the name of his village, so I guess they all have one. I don't know anything about how many farms or heads of livestock they have though."

"It doesn't matter," Thane said, brushing aside the details. "What matters is that it's a very normal thing for a knight to organize and administer a village. And so, Sir Ollie, I need you to build a village where the newcomers can settle and build real homes."

"You won't be asked to swear a knight's oath until Lady Ashlynn returns," Thane added. "But as far as I and the rest of the vale is concerned, you've proven that you have what it takes to be a leader in this place, and right now, we desperately need you to take up this burden."