

## The Vampire 234

### Chapter 234 234: A Promise Between Warriors

"What?!" Ollie said, turning to stare at Thane in surprise. He tried to pull back, to put a little space between himself and the older man, but the vampire's grip on his shoulder held firm. "I, I'm not a knight," he protested. "I've barely started to learn how to fight and I don't know the first thing about leading a village. Would the people even accept my leadership when I'm not a real knight?"

"You will be soon enough," Thane said, his amber eyes losing a touch of their mirth. "Ollie, you said you wanted to step up and become one of Ashlynn's protectors. That means taking on more than putting on a suit of armor and learning how to fight. If you're going to stand at her side, you have to shoulder some of the responsibilities that come with the position of authority she intends to put you in."

"I'm sure she would have done this eventually," Thane said. After all, he'd spoken with Ashlynn more than once about her notions of claiming her vengeance on the Lothians by installing herself as the Marchioness. She would need capable men at her side and since Ollie had volunteered, the things she needed to rely on him for would only grow over time.

"But right now, she's not here, and neither is Mistress Nyrielle, so you'll have to make do with me instead," Thane said. "I know, living under my rule is a fate worse than death, but since I don't have permission to turn you into one of my progeny, you'll just have to accept the burdens of knighthood instead. Only the rain will ever know how many tears you shed for this honor," he teased, slapping the young man on the back.

"Whether I'm a knight or not," Ollie protested. "I still don't know anything about running a village. I've been struggling just to manage the kitchens and keep everyone fed!" There had been so many crises that needed to be solved each day.

Whether it was a shortage of meat or the sudden discovery that a group of children from the Clan of Painted Masks had made it a game to steal food as extra snacks and treats for their friends, he'd found himself constantly working to solve one problem after another that had less and less to do with simple cooking each day.

"You'll learn, and quickly," Thane said firmly. "I said this was a bad time and I meant it. Solstice is almost upon us. Marcell and I don't have very many hours of the night to work with between sunset and sunrise. This is why vampires like Mistress Nyrielle need a Seneschal to see to matters on their behalf during the day. I don't get a seneschal, but I do have you, and I intend to put you to work."

"I know I'm asking a great deal of you, Sir Ollie," Thane said, holding out a hand toward the young man and addressing him like the knight he was certain to become. "But will you take up this burden? If not for Mistress Nyrielle and I, then for Ashlynn?"

Standing in the flickering candlelight of his personal office, Thane suppressed a momentary twinge of guilt as he held his hand out to Ollie. The problem of how to handle the influx of refugees was one that he'd wrestled with for an entire evening, debating with Jakob, the Marshal of the Vale, and Commander Bassinger until close to sunrise.

Owain's savagery had been greater than anyone anticipated and the frightened response of the outlying villages, while understandable, produced a crisis of a much larger scale than they anticipated. Moreover, according to the Marshal, after passing through the Vale's many layers of defensive fortifications, very few of the refugees were talking about returning to their villages after the crisis passed.

In the end, it had been the Old Goat who suggested involving Ollie. The young man's earnest pleas and complete lack of guile in persuading villagers to find shelter in the Vale before Owain's hunt reached their village left a strong impression on many. When they arrived to find him tirelessly working to feed and care for everyone who arrived, the red-haired human quickly became the most well-known member of Nyrielle's household among the refugees.

Now, as Thane addressed him as 'Sir Ollie', he knew that he was preying on a lifetime of boyhood dreams and idle fantasies to pressure him into accepting this difficult task. And yet, if he didn't, then it would fall to Marshal Jakob and Commander Bassinger to relocate the refugees and find a way to permanently settle them.

While both men were capable of the task, in Thane's opinion, the results would be much poorer. They were each grounded in the traditions of the Clan of the Great Claw and the Horned Clan, but what did they know of the needs of the Heartwood Clan or the Night Weaver Clan? How often would they attempt to do things as they had been done in the Vale for more than a hundred years, forcing those ways on people who had resisted rejoining the Vale for just as long?

Ollie had both the respect of the refugees and a complete lack of preconceived notions in how to resolve problems. What he had demonstrated with his growing kitchen, however, was a talent for seeking out practical solutions to immediate problems and getting people to help him make those things happen. It wasn't enough to succeed, but with the right help, Thane was certain that Ollie could do a good job of it, at least for the next few months until Thane himself had more time to step in and help.

Ollie was completely oblivious to the thoughts running through Thane's mind as he stared at the vampire's outstretched hand. Perhaps, to a former knight like Thane, taking up responsibility for a single village really wasn't a great challenge. After all, the former knight was close to a century old if the gossip in the ancient castle were to be believed, and he served as Nyrielle's second in command until Ashlynn became her Seneschal. To him, maybe one village was really a simple thing.

To Ollie, Thane's outstretched hand felt almost like a viper, ready to sink its fangs into his tender flesh. Part of him yearned to say yes. He wanted to say that he would do anything for Ashlynn. He owed her so much for the life she'd given him after escaping the Summer Villa together and he still felt like he'd done nothing to pay that back. His few words to the villagers and a handful of days cooking for refugees couldn't compare to the rapid elevation in status and quality of life she'd given him.

But, just as heavily as her favors weighed on him, the notion of failing her expectations was even more dreadful. So far, he'd only volunteered to do things he was confident he could do. At the very least, he wouldn't make anything worse. But if you asked him to assume responsibility for so many people's lives... that was something else entirely.

"What, what if I'm not up to the task?" Ollie asked, his eyes still fixed on Thane's outstretched hand.

"Then we learn where you've fallen short, and we provide help," Thane answered. "No one expects you to do this alone. Jakob will help, and Bassinger will loan you a few men as well. You can still come to me and the others for advice."

"I won't say that you can't cause trouble with a great blunder," Thane said. "We're talking about hundreds of people now. Their lives will become your responsibility. If they turn into an angry mob within our walls because you have made their lives a hellish nightmare, we'll struggle to defend our own people from so many enraged newcomers."

"I would never do that!" Ollie said instantly, horrified at the notion. Even if he had to crawl on his knees to beg, he would surrender his notion of becoming a knight along with any responsibility he'd gained long before such a tragedy could come to pass. "I just..."

"You're just worried because you've never faced this kind of challenge before," Thane said, placing both of his hands on Ollie's shoulders and giving the younger man a very direct look. "I don't believe that you won't make mistakes," The vampire said.

"But I don't believe that you'll make a mistake so bad that we can't remedy it before it becomes a catastrophe. By the time the frost comes, Mistress Nyrielle and Lady Ashlynn will have returned," Thane reminded the young man. "If being the knight of a village feels too overwhelming, then consider yourself

the chief foreman in charge of constructing the village and organizing the refugees to help build it. Everything after that is a problem we can resolve later, all right?"

"When you put it that way," Ollie said after several moments of thought. "I promise to do my best," he said, extending his hand toward Thane. "I owe Lady Ashlynn at least that much, if not more. The rest... we can talk about it when she comes home."

"Good man," Thane said, clasping Ollie's forearm to seal an agreement between warriors.

It took Ollie a moment to respond in kind, Thane's gesture had faded from common use decades ago, replaced by a simpler handshake, but after a moment, Ollie realized that this was Thane's way of treating him like a peer. Even if Thane occupied a position high above him, right at this moment, they were both knights, and they had a job to do and people to protect.

"Now," Thane said, guiding Ollie back over to his desk and unrolling one of the maps on it. "I have a few thoughts for you..."