

## The Vampire 236

### Chapter 236 236: Orphans

Standing outside a simple tent, Milo put on a feeble smile when he saw the flame haired human approaching the tent he shared with his wife Juni, his mother, and a younger woman named Cetna who would have been his sister-in-law if not for...

"Good morning, young Ollie," Milo said, trying to keep his tail from drooping as he waved to the young man. "I didn't expect you to come visit us, especially so early."

"How is she?" Ollie asked, with an expression on his face that Milo had come to interpret as concern. It was hard to tell with humans, especially young ones like Ollie who lacked even the shortest of whiskers on their faces, but the eyes seemed to say much for humans of all ages and Ollie's looked... clouded.

"She drinks the broth you made for her," Milo said. "I don't think she even tastes it. I just put it in her cup and she drinks it instead of water. It, it's not enough," he said, his whiskers twitching in frustration. "It's not your fault, I just don't know what else to do after..." After his brother died.

Even now, several days later, he still found it hard to say the words. At least, once he'd arrived in the Vale of Mists, Juni had been here waiting for him, grateful beyond words that he'd survived. His mother, on the other hand, had cursed and spat at him when she woke in the healer's tent.

"You should have let me burn with our home," she'd spat with eyes that burned with resentment. "I had memories there. I could still feel my father's touch in the wood of our walls and mother's claw marks on every piece of furniture. Now I have nothing to touch to feel them. I didn't want to be an orphan!"

"And I didn't want to raise a child without a grandmother!" Milo shouted back at her. "Your claws are still sharp, mother. Your bite is still fierce! You can leave more marks behind in the years to come, so why can't you stay with us? Or do you want to make me an orphan with no home and no past?"

Things had only gotten worse after that. She hurled insults at him but Milo pressed his tail to the ground hard enough that his body shook and refused to hear the hateful words she said. She didn't mean them, not really, and without trees to remember her words, he wasn't about to recall them either.

But now that several days had passed, he was at a loss for how to help the woman who had once been the pillar at the center of their village. Her roots had been eaten away and she'd come toppling down but he didn't know how to stand her up again.

"I came to talk to her," the flame haired human said, pulling Milo's mind back to the present. "Do you think she would listen to me?"

"I don't know if now is a good time," Milo started to say, only to cut himself short. His whiskers drooped and his tail hung low. Would there ever be a good time? "Juni and Cetna have gone to fetch breakfast. The lines are getting longer in the morning every day. Maybe now would be a good time for you to speak to her."

When Milo pulled back the door to the tent, Ollie did his best not to look startled at the sight of Old Nan. Her once lustrous dark brown and silver fur had lost its shine and now looked rough and unkempt. She sat on a simple stool, hunched over in a way that a person could mistake for being asleep if not for the slow, steady movements of her hands and the fixed gaze of her eyes.

In her hands, she clutched a small cedar log. A pile of cedar shavings littered the ground beneath her, filling the air of the tent with the smell of fresh cut wood that almost masked the underlying scent of damp canvas and unwashed bodies that permeated the air everywhere in the refugee camp.

As Ollie watched, her claws moved with delicate precision, shaving away one thin shaving of wood after another, as though she were slowly revealing the figure of a cloaked archer trapped within the wood. Other than the sound of her claws scraping over the wood, not a sound disturbed the early morning stillness in the tent.

"Old Nan," Ollie said, breaking the silence as he slowly entered the tent and knelt on the ground in front of the old woman. "It's Ollie. Do you remember me? We met a few nights ago..."

For nearly a minute, the old woman said nothing, still fixed on the task in her hands. Perhaps, Ollie thought, it wasn't good to interrupt. When she paused to adjust the carving, moving on to a different area entirely, he tried speaking up again.

"Old Nan," he said, a bit louder and more firmly than the first time. "Can you talk to me? Just for a few minutes."

"Please don't be offended, young Ollie," Milo said when several minutes passed without a response from his mother. "She doesn't even speak to me. It isn't personal. Maybe you should come back another time."

"Is that Lako you're carving?" Ollie asked gently, ignoring Milo as he focused on the old woman in front of him. "Milo said that he was very brave."

"Too brave," Old Nan said in a voice that was hoarse and rough from days of drinking little more than a few cups of broth. "Braver than me. He can watch over his brother and his nieces and nephews when I'm gone," she said, her voice gaining a bit of strength and determination.

"This way, Milo can't complain that I've left him an orphan, and I can finally go," she said, never once looking up from her carving as she spoke.

"Orphan?" Ollie asked, confused by what she meant.

"Even if you ask two of us to carve the same thing," Milo explained. "No two carvings are alike. Everything we carve holds a trace of who we are at the time we carve it. Our skills, our feelings about the carving, or just the things we're feeling at the moment. They're all left behind in the wood, long after we're gone. When we lose the carvings of our parents and our grandparents, then we have become orphans, with no way left for us to touch their hearts."

"I always thought your homes were beautiful," Ollie said, his eyes going moist as he listened to Milo's explanation. "I didn't realize that they also meant so much. No wonder you didn't want to leave," he said, shaking his head as he stood. "I'm sorry that I didn't understand."

"You listen though," Milo said, placing a hand gently on the taller man's shoulder. "That counts for something. At least it does to me."

"It's not enough though," Ollie said, turning to look at the worn and haggard looking archer. Every day when Milo came to the kitchens, Ollie had watched the strain mount on the other man's shoulders. He'd made it back from fighting against Lord Owain, but his brother hadn't. Worse, Old Nan resented him from tearing her away from the home where she had intended to die.

Ollie had no idea what it must feel like to stand in Milo's shoes. The former kitchen boy had lost his home, and more importantly, lost contact with his parents, but as far as he knew, they were still alive

and well in Lothian Manor, continuing to serve in the house of Marquis Lothian. One day, he was sure he would see them again.

Now, however, he felt like he came a little bit closer to understanding the sort of trauma that the people from the Heartwood clan were enduring after Owain burned their homes to the ground.

"Harrod," Ollie said, turning to leave the tent. "We should go. Milo, can I have a word with you outside?"

"Of course," the archer said, stepping out of the tent along with Ollie and the horned soldier Harrod. "I'm sorry you wasted your time coming all the way here so early in the morning," Milo said. "Maybe in a few days, she'll be better."

"She won't be," Ollie said, shaking his head. "Actually, I'm a little afraid that the longer we wait, the worse she'll be. But this wasn't a wasted trip, not at all."

"What do you mean?" Milo asked, his flat tail bouncing slightly with curiosity.

"I have something to do, something important," Ollie said. "But talking to you and seeing Old Nan made me realize I was going about it the wrong way. So, I'd like to ask for your help. Can you guide me back to your village? There shouldn't be any danger in returning so many days after Lord Owain and his men left."

"I can," Milo said, his whiskers twitching in confusion. "But why? The Lothians and the human priests put everything to the torch. There's nothing left."

"Never say that until you've had a look," Ollie said, placing a firm hand on the shorter man's shoulder. "I've scrubbed out too many hearths over the years to think that one good fire destroyed everything. There's always a lump of wood somewhere that was covered by ash, or starved of air and didn't burn the way it should."

"There might not be much left to find," he said. "But maybe... maybe we can stop a few people from becoming orphans. If we can, isn't that worth a trip?"