

## The Vampire 237

### Chapter 237 237: Why Us?

It was one thing to propose a trip to the destroyed village, but actually making the trip took a little bit more planning than Ollie realized. Nothing was difficult, and Commander Bassinger even agreed to send him two soldiers from the Clan of the Great Claw to help carry back anything they managed to salvage.

Still, by the time he'd given his instructions to the cooks running the kitchen for refugees, gathered supplies for his own trip, and taken care of all of the other little details, it was nearly mid-day when they left the Vale of Mists to return to Old Nan's village.

At this point, it would be impossible to reach the village, search for surviving carvings, and return in a single day. Given that, Ollie decided that they could risk a single night in the wilderness, camping near the ruins of the village. They would begin their search the following morning and return to the Vale of Mists before night fell the next day. He wanted to promise Milo that they would stay as long as it took to recover as much as possible, but Commander Bassinger had put his foot down.

"I understand that you feel this is important," the bearish commander had told Ollie. "That's why I'm willing to spare a few men for you. But whether Owain is still out there or not, he isn't the only threat you need to be on guard against in the wilderness. Besides, even if this is important, there are hundreds of refugees waiting for you to organize this village. Don't spend so much time on the first step that you fail in your larger mission."

The older man's tone was firm, but there was a touch of friendly warmth to it that made it easier for Ollie to accept his advice. Bassinger was right, after all. There was too much to do, and he couldn't spend days on this at the expense of other important tasks.

"Thank you," he told the bearish commander. "It's already more help than I had any right to expect. We'll be back by nightfall tomorrow, no matter what happens." Privately, he also promised himself that,

if they discovered more things that could be salvaged than they could carry back, he would organize another trip in the future. Just because he couldn't do something right now didn't mean it couldn't be done at all.

And so, with each man in their party carrying a personal pack for spending a night in the wilderness, they set out in the direction of what had once been a vibrant village. Ollie had no way of knowing how extensive the damage was, it was impossible to know before they arrived, but he hoped there was something to salvage, even if they were only small things, each carving they recovered could have great significance to the family it belonged to.

"Why are you doing this?" Milo asked as they made their way along narrow trails through the cedar forest that covered the hills outside the vale. He carried his bow at the ready and his eyes were alert, constantly scanning the wilderness for any sign of a threat. "Why risk anything to try to recover a few of our carvings from the ruins?"

"Because I need your help," Ollie said frankly. He never intended to hide things. It wasn't his way to make the other party feel indebted before revealing what he needed from them. As far as Ollie was concerned, if he wanted to ask for help, he needed to show the other party that he would help them too.

"Sir Thane has asked me to gather everyone together and build a village," Ollie explained as he ducked under a low-hanging branch. "When I thought of all the villages we visited with our warning, I kept thinking of your village."

"I don't know anything about running a village," the young man said bluntly. "But I thought that Old Nan had so much experience and, if we had to build a whole new village, I thought it would be good to have her help. All of your help really," he admitted.

"Why us?" Milo asked, his whiskers twitching in confusion as he looked at the flame-haired human. "There are plenty of village elders from other villages who are sheltering in the Vale right now. Why come to us?"

"Sir Thane suggested it," Ollie said. "I think he's right, but I didn't like his reason so I thought about my own. I don't know if it's any better than his," he said, pausing to give the shorter man a defeated look. "But it's the best answer I have."

"What did Sir Thane say?" Milo asked. He'd figured out by now that Ollie was an important human in the Vale of Mists, but he didn't seem to occupy the same level of authority as Nyrielle's progeny, nor any of the other leaders in the Vale like Marshal Jakob or Commander Bassinger.

That made it hard for Milo to put much weight behind Ollie's words. The young man was working hard to be helpful, but could that help be relied on if he was just doing what Thane or one of the other vampires ordered? Since Ollie had mentioned that Thane had his own thoughts, Milo was more interested in hearing about what the Vale's leadership thought of them than the young man who happened to be helping at the moment.

"Sir Thane said that the other villages are still standing, at least for now," Ollie said as they walked through the forest. Now that they had left the vale, the mists had faded to be replaced with dappled summer sunlight filtering through the branches above. It should have been a beautiful day but knowing where they were headed, it was hard to enjoy the scenery.

"Sir Thane thinks that, if there are no other attacks in the coming weeks, many people will choose to return to their villages outside of the Vale. But you and Old Nan," Ollie said, his voice trailing off as he reached the unpleasant part.

"We have nowhere to return to," Milo said bitterly. "I suppose I should expect cold reasoning from a vampire. He's not wrong," the archer said, his tail drooping almost enough to drag on the ground as they walked. "So, you said your reason was different. Why did you come to us if not because we have few other choices?"

"Because I remembered your beautiful homes," Ollie said just a moment before he lurched to a stop. Harrod grabbed the young man's shirt, forcefully pulling him backward and stopping him from leaping over a fallen log that blocked the trail.

"Sorry Ollie," the horned soldier said, looking a touch embarrassed by the rough way he'd treated the young man. No one had given Ollie an official position yet, but it was clear to Harrod and everyone else that he was being groomed to join the leaders of the Vale of Mists. Treating him the way he'd have treated a new recruit on their first march wasn't really appropriate, but...

"On top, then over," the horned soldier said, demonstrating with his own actions as he hopped onto the log before looking at the ground on the other side. It didn't take more than a breath or two of time before he hopped down on the opposite side and turned back to Ollie with an explanation.

"Redhead snakes like using fallen logs that lay across game trails as places to lurk for prey. It couldn't eat you, but its venom is potent."

"Right," Ollie said as he followed the horned soldier's example, looking around the trail for any signs of snakes. "Sorry, I didn't even think about snakes..."

"The venom of a redhead snake is less dangerous the larger you are," Milo added. "I imagine they're the most deadly to Harrod and his kind out of all of us. But Ollie," he said, refusing to let a moment of distraction derail them from their conversation. "You still need to tell me about your reason for turning to Old Nan for help."

"I did though, didn't I?" Ollie said, looking puzzled. "It was because your homes were so beautiful. I thought, if we just built quick houses, whether they were Horned Clan style round huts or the long log houses that the Clan of the Great Claw prefers, they would just be houses."

"You might laugh at me," Ollie said as they resumed their march. "But I thought, if Old Nan and others from the Heartseaker clan could add a few carings or some artistry to the houses we're going to build, then they'll transform from houses into homes."

"A barren house isn't much better than the tents people are in now," Ollie said. "No one wants to stay in a barren tent for very long, and an empty house won't feel welcoming either. So I thought, maybe the Heartwood clan could help us create a place that was more than just a collection of brand new empty houses."

"But you can't," he added. "Not if you feel like orphans when you move into them. That's why, before I talk about making new carvings for a new village, I thought I should come here with you. To see if we can find anything from your old village to help make the new one something more than just a house."

"I see," Milo said. "Here, we're getting close, let me show you a better way to approach the village now that the old trail is washed away," he added, moving to the front of the group to lead them toward a side trail.

Or at least, that was the reason the archer gave them. In reality, he didn't want Ollie and the soldiers from the Vale of Mists to notice the mist that had collected in his eyes. He only hoped that his tail didn't give away how much his heart trembled when he heard Ollie's reason why.

Maybe... maybe the Vale of Mists really could become a true home for them after all.