

## The Vampire 255

### Chapter 255: Separate Grief

In one of the many tents in the Vale of Mist that hundreds of refugees had come to call home in the days since Owain Lothian's massacre, Milo's wife Juni knelt on the ground beside Old Nan. Juni's rich brown fur had lost its shine but she still did everything she could to look after herself and her husband's ailing mother as well.

While their possessions were meager, Juni did her best to keep the small tent tidy, washing blankets and clothing, cleaning up after meals, and turning small pieces of wood into everyday items they'd left behind in the hurry to leave.

At least half of it was simply to help her stay busy in these idle days while they waited to find out what the rulers of the Vale of Mists intended to do with them. The important thing was that she stayed close to her mother-in-law while Milo was away.

"Mother," she said gently, calling out to the woman who had fallen asleep while working on a carving of her lost son, Lako. "Mother, I brought you something to drink," she said, holding up a cup of broth that had been thickened with ground oats. In the days since arriving in the camp, her mother-in-law had barely left the chair she sat in while carving. When Milo was here, he was at least able to encourage her to drink the thickened broth but now...

Everyone in the camp was grieving to different extents. Juni considered herself among the luckiest. She'd lost the home that she and Milo had only just begun to carve for themselves as they prepared to start a family of their own, but a home could be rebuilt. Both her parents escaped along with her brother who was so young that he had yet to start an apprenticeship.

Compared to Old Nan and the other families who had lost husbands, wives or children, Juni's losses had been so minor that she barely considered them worth dwelling on. The people around her were in much, much more pain than she was.

In some ways, it made it easier for her to care for her husband and mother-in-law. It was easier to be strong when she hadn't lost as much. In other ways, she felt a wall between herself and the members of her village who had lost more. She was one of the 'lucky ones.' How could she understand what they were experiencing when she'd lost so little?

It was foolish, but also very, very natural for people to think that way. She could ignore the occasional sideways glance or unkind words uttered by people who were hurting. They didn't intend to be cruel to her and she knew it. But just because she understood didn't make the wall between her and her suffering clansmen any thinner, and no one had put up thicker or higher walls against help from others than her own mother-in-law.

"You need to keep your strength up to finish Lako's carving," Juni told Old Nan, hoping that mentioning the project she'd put so much importance on would give her at least a little motivation to care for herself. After she said it though, a twinge of pain pierced her heart and she cast a guilty look at the other woman in the tent.

After all, Old Nan wasn't the only person grieving Lako's death. She'd lost a son, Milo had lost a brother and Cetna... Cetna had lost the man who wanted to become her husband.

Cetna was barely old enough to call herself an adult, but she already possessed more strength than a young woman her age should. Her mother passed not long after giving birth to her, leaving her father to raise her alone. The solitary hunter did his best to raise his daughter but it seemed like she'd taken responsibility for her household as soon as she was old enough to tend to the burrow without supervision.

Her father had taken years to recover from the loss of his wife. As Cetna grew older and came to resemble her mother more and more, the aging hunter felt the pangs of grief that years of time had dulled grow sharp again.

Recently, however, things began to change and he'd come to take a special joy in seeing his daughter find the kind of happiness in the company of a young man that he'd once seen on his departed wife's face when he courted her. He'd even begun carving a pair of ravens to give the young couple when they began building their own burrow.

Now, however, he would never see his daughter wed to the man of her dreams.

If Old Nan's heartbreak at losing her son could be understood, Juni could only marvel at Cetna for enduring the loss of both her father and the love of her life in the same battle. By rights, she should have been crushed by the loss and grief, yet whenever Juni looked at the younger woman, she saw a steely resolve that faced each day without flinching.

When Juni had asked her about how she could endure so much, Cetna's words had been both simple and profound.

"Father and Lako spent their lives to buy me a chance to live the rest of mine," she'd said. "I wouldn't dare to waste a moment of the time they bought me." Now, when Juni looked at her with a guilty expression for bringing up the carving Old Nan was making to process her own grief, Cetna just shook her head.

"It's not your fault," Cetna said gently. Moving slowly so as not to disturb the sleeping Old Nan, she came to Juni's side and helped the other woman to stand. "Maybe she'll respond to Milo when he gets back. She doesn't seem to see anyone else."

"I know," Juni said, setting the cup of fortified broth aside. "If I'd realized she'd be like this, I might not have let him go. He said it would only be for two days, but I'm worried that something will happen. Maybe I should have kept him home..."

"But if you'd kept me home," an exhausted voice interrupted. "You'd have missed a miracle."

"Milo!" Juni exclaimed, her excited voice startling Old Nan awake. "I'm glad you're home," she said, her tail thumping the ground several times in excitement. Reflexively, she took a step toward her husband only to stop when she saw his dirty and ragged state.

Milo, with Ollie and the short, horned soldier, Harrod, behind him, looked like they'd been dragged behind horses through the mud before being rolled in the burned-out remains of a cook fire. Dark grey ash and mud clung to their clothes and even Ollie's red hair seemed to have turned black with soot.

From the way the trio supported each other, it was clear that they'd pushed their bodies hard yet nothing could mask the sense of triumph that radiated from the trio. Their faces were covered with soot and ash but all three men wore bright white grins on their faces as they entered the tent.

"Were you," Juni started to ask, her whiskers twitching with a storm of emotions. Anxiety, anticipation, and hope all flickered across her face as she glanced back at Old Nan before looking back at her husband and his companions.

"Were you able to recover anything from Mother's home?"