

The Vampire 256

Chapter 256: Kindling

"Mother," Milo said, walking quickly to kneel at the feet of the old woman. The pile of cedar shavings at her feet had been pushed to the side and the half-finished carving of Milo's deceased brother was still clutched firmly in her hands, but he barely noticed either of those things as he reached into his tunic to retrieve a small wooden box covered in intricate carvings of flowers and butterflies.

"This... this is..." Old Nan said, reaching out with trembling fingers to take the small wooden box. One of the feet on the left side had snapped off and the finish had been ruined by ash, but the rest of the box was in remarkably good condition.

"Father," she whispered as her claws traced the delicate carvings of moonflowers. They were her mother's favorite along with the butterflies that clustered around them in the spring. The feelings of love and affection he'd poured into each scrape and gouge could easily be felt as she turned the box over in her hands.

Inside a faint clink of earthenware bottles made it clear that not only had the box survived, but the small collection of pigments and stains her mother treasured had survived as well.

"Sir Ollie has something for you as well," Milo said, stepping aside to let Ollie take his place.

"Sir Ollie?" Old Nan said, blinking several times in surprise at the way her son addressed the human. This boy wasn't one of the vampire rulers of the vale, so what exactly had he done to earn such respect from her son?

"I was only able to retrieve one side of the bookshelf," Ollie said, unwrapping an intricately carved plank of wood nearly two feet in length and two handbreadths wide. "The other end was crushed with the walls collapsed, the splinters... they weren't, weren't very large," he said, looking away in shame.

He knew very well why this piece was so important and once he found the first half intact he'd spend an entire hour digging through the mud to see if the other half had survived. The runners between the ends had been lost but they were the least important part of the whole piece. If both ends survived, he was certain that Old Nan would be able to restore the treasured piece. In the end, his efforts had been wasted and they'd run out of time to search for anything more.

"Grandfather," Old Nan whispered. For a moment, she seemed lost, uncertain what to do. Then, for the first time since she began carving a likeness of her fallen son, she turned to Milo and held the carving out to him. "Can you hold this for me? Please, I..."

"Yes, Mother," Milo said, reverently taking his mother's half-finished carving in his hands so she could retrieve the end of the bookshelf from Ollie.

For several minutes, no one said anything while Old Nan traced the tips of her claws over what might be the last surviving remnant of her grandfather's work. Unlike her father who relished in carving flowers, butterflies, birds, and playful animals to delight his wife and young daughter, her grandfather celebrated the natural world they lived in, carving the sides of his bookshelf to resemble the Ancient Oaks of the Vale of Mists.

To Old Nan, every whorl of bark and veined leaf felt like it contained a deep sadness and sense of loss for the Vale he no longer felt safe to return to. She had been born in the village, but her grandfather fled the Vale when it became clear that the Lothians would never stop targeting the vital strategic entrance to the High Pass and the rich lands beyond.

Despite his choice to flee, his heart held a deep and enduring love for the trees of his first home and he carved many of them into the furnishings of their burrow. Old Nan had always taken it as a sign of his commitment to not return to the Vale of Mists. He created something to remember what he lost, but he never intended to return there. But as she sat there tracing her claws over the delicate lines of his work, she wondered if she'd missed something even deeper in his heart that she couldn't truly understand until she'd lost a home of her own.

"Harrod has a few more pieces as well," Ollie added, looking at the women in the room. He wasn't entirely sure which was which, though from the radiant way one of them was looking at Milo, he guessed she was Juni, which made the other one Cetna.

"Milo wasn't certain if the carvings we recovered from your home were made by your father or someone else in your family but..."

"You were able to recover something from my home?" Cetna said. Her eyes misted almost instantly and her steely demeanor crumpled for the first time Juni had seen since they fled the village. "There was something left of it?"

"I found a chest full of old clothes and blankets," Harrod said, stepping forward and pulling out a badly singed blanket that had once been made of bright yellow fabric with soft lavender embroidery, but was now stained almost beyond recognition. It hadn't been large to begin with, suitable for infants and small children, but it had protected carvings that were just as old.

"This was inside," he said, pulling out an old and well-worn rattle carved with small squirrels and rabbits chasing each other around the handle of the rattle. "There was also a set of small spoons," he added, pulling the stained blanket back further to reveal a small set of spoons that could be used to feed a small child.

Having visited the village before the Lothian raiders put it to the torch, it was hard for the diminutive soldier to feel proud of the few scraps he'd been able to recover. The village he'd visited was vibrant and steeped in generations of their craft. For this to be all he could hand someone, he could only hang his head in shame, unable to meet the young woman's gaze as he held out the few things that had survived the destruction of her home.

"M-mother," Cetna wailed, dropping to her knees in front of the short, horned soldier. Her tail hit the ground with a heavy thump and her fingers trembled, hovering just above the wooden relics as though she was afraid to touch them. She had never known her mother, but she had felt her mother's love in the things she carved for her when Cetna herself was just a kit in her mother's belly.

"I know it's not much," Ollie said, hanging his head low. "But we tried to bring something from every house that we could. We'll do everything we can to make sure they find their way to the right people."

"Why?" Old Nan asked, looking at Ollie through misty eyes. Dirty, ragged, and exhausted as he was, to her, the young man possessed the halo of a hero. "Why go so far for us? For just these few useless items?" To her and the members of the Heartwood clan, they were priceless artifacts but to anyone else, a pigment box and a broken bookshelf could hardly be considered useful.

"Because they're important to you," Ollie said honestly. "And because I want your help, Old Nan. But... You needed help first. This was more important," he said. The words were awkward and he wasn't quite sure if he was expressing his sentiment the right way but... he meant it. She needed help to heal whether she helped him or not. When he saw how stricken she was by everything she'd lost, helping her became the most important thing.

"Mother," Milo said gently. "I've spent some time talking to Sir Ollie about what he wants help with. I think you should hear him out..."

"All right," Old Nan said. "I, I can't make promises, but for what you've done, I can at least hear you out," she said.

As Ollie began to explain what he needed, how he had been directed to oversee the construction of a village for the refugees and his desire to make the place feel like a new home rather than simply a collection of houses, Old Nan clutched the box and bookshelf end to her chest and listened to every word.

The carvings from her father and grandfather were more than just artifacts of her ancestors... they were the kindling that had lit a fire of hope in her heart. Years ago, her grandfather had called the Vale of Mists home. Perhaps, with help from this strange human, she could do the same.