

## The Vampire 152

### Chapter 152 152: The Heartwood Clan

Humans referred to these people as "flat-tailed demons." In the stories that Ollie had grown up on, they were voracious beasts with long rabbit-like teeth that could sever a man's leg in a single bite and wide, flat tails that were powerful enough to crush a man's skull in a single swipe.

Such beastly demons were said to be masters of traps, dangerous and cunning. As a child, he'd heard stories of "flat-tailed demons" luring people to their deaths by crushing them with falling logs or flinging them into deep pits lined with wooden spikes before ultimately using human bodies as mortar in the dams they built for their villages.

Marcel had corrected him before they set out. These "flat-tailed demons" referred to themselves as the Heartwood Clan. According to the vampire, they were legendary for their woodworking skills and had once formed a small community within the Vale of Mists.

Far from being fearsome demons, the figures that emerged from the earthen homes struck Ollie as very cute. They were taller than most members of the Horned Clan but shorter than most humans. From a few curious young ones to the wizened elder who emerged from the largest burrow, they all possessed rounded faces with chubby cheeks, long whiskers and buck teeth that protruded two inches below their upper lips.

"Well, well, well," the old woman who emerged from the largest burrow said. She wore a simple homespun dress, but around her neck hung several necklaces of elaborately carved wooden beads and in her hand, she carried a polished wooden cane though she barely seemed to need its support to move.

"If it isn't the merchant of darkness himself," Old Nan said, her face blossoming into a wide smile. "You haven't changed a bit," she said, giving Marcel an evaluating look. "If you've come for the statue again, you still can't have it. Wait till this old woman dies before you try to snatch her best things!"

"Old Nan," Marcel said, putting on an exaggeratedly pained expression. "I would never snatch your things. If you haven't sold it to me yet, it's just because I haven't been able to find the right price for you. This time, I'm not here to trade though," he added, gesturing at Ollie, Daithi and the horned soldiers who accompanied them.

"May we impose for a bit? I didn't bring anything to trade but that doesn't mean I don't have a small gift for you and your elders," he added, producing a small tin box from a pouch at his waist. "I know how hard it is to dry your tea in this damp place, let me at least give you some good leaves from across the mountains and we can drink while we speak."

"Hmmpf," the old woman snorted in disbelief. "From across the mountains? You wouldn't be trying to swindle us with tea grown in human lands, would you? It seems you haven't left your former people entirely behind," she added, giving Ollie and Daithi a pointed look.

"This is Ollie," Marcel said, appearing at the young man's side and throwing an arm casually over his shoulder before he noticed the vampire had moved. "He's a friend of our new Seneschal. The other fellow is Daithi. He's a prisoner, but that doesn't mean he's a bad man. He knows things that you should hear."

Daithi was startled when Marcel mentioned him but as soon as he noticed the elder turning her attention to him, he gave a feeble wave and did his best to look helpless.

When they'd entered the village, he'd been fairly relaxed. He had been working hard since speaking with Lady Ashlynn to accept that the 'Eldritch' people weren't as demonic as he'd been led to believe and so far, everyone he'd met seemed amiable.

When he entered this village, based on Marcel's description and easygoing manner, he'd expected more of the same. The village didn't even have a wall or men to guard it. Surely this was a safe and secluded space.

It was only when the doors opened and light spilled from inside the burrows that he realized how wrong he'd been. While Marcel and Old Nan chatted like old friends, Daithi's eyes found at least three archers, screened by sticks and moss and looking like part of the landscape, all with their arrows knocked and pointing at the vampire.

As a soldier, he'd encountered plenty of traps set by bandits and criminals, and even walked into an ambush he felt lucky to have survived, but no one he'd fought before had hidden so well. If not for a brief reaction from the archers to the flood of light, he might never have seen them at all and he still wasn't sure how many more of them there were, but he was convinced that the number was higher than three.

"A Seneschal? I thought they were myths," the old woman said, holding out her hand for the box of tea in Marcel's hand. "Give it and then you can come inside. Don't think that I'm brewing any of this for you," she added. "I intend to enjoy it by myself, not waste it on swindling merchants who bring gifts of wine just so they can drink it when they visit."

"Old Nan," the vampire said, appearing before the old woman and placing the tin box in her hands with an elaborate bow that would have made Thane proud. "I would never swindle you, or drink the good tea I've just brought you. Haven't you agreed to every one of our trades over the years? When have I ever let you suffer a great loss."

"There's losing and there's losing," the old woman said, turning back to enter her burrow. "Come in, come in, we're letting the light and the heat out and we shouldn't. Everyone else," she added, looking at the several villagers who had poked their heads out to see why they had visitors. "I will explain things to everyone once I understand them. You all can go back to your evenings."

While a few villagers looked reluctant, the youngest of them turned to their parents or older siblings and tugged eagerly on their hands, pulling them back inside the burrows as if there were things they couldn't wait to get back to. If Ollie didn't know better, he'd wonder if they'd interrupted someone's birthday party from how eager the children looked to go back inside.

Once he entered Old Nan's burrow, the former kitchen boy stopped so abruptly that Daithi ran into him from behind. Both men had to stoop to enter through the small doorway but once inside they felt like they had entered a different world.

Elaborately carved wood paneling covered the interior of a large space that crackled with warmth from a quietly burning wood stove far to the back of the home. The scenes carved into the wood panels depicted everything from great beasts within the forests to different types of Eldritch villages and even a carving of the ancient keep, looking like a hand reaching out from the walls of the home.

In a circle around a simple rug, a number of well-made wooden chairs sat around a rustic wooden table covered with hand tools and a half-finished carving of a bird taking flight. Every bit of furniture, though simple and rustic in design, looked like it had been perfectly assembled by a master craftsman, solidly built without the slightest trace of weakness or wobble when Ollie joined the others in taking a seat.

He'd spent enough time setting out tables and chairs for feasts to recognize that even simple furniture needed to be well made if it was going to be placed at a lord's table and when he felt the smooth, almost glowing, polished surfaces of the armrests, he quickly realized that any of this furniture would have met the standards that Owain and his father Bors held for seats at their high tables.

And this was in a simple, small village in the hills outside of the Vale of Mists. Seeing this level of care put into even everyday items, it was no wonder that Marcel regarded them as legends of woodworking.

But if they were so talented and capable of producing something that could obviously sell for a high price, then it made even less sense to Ollie why there wasn't a road connecting this village to the Vale of Mists where their crafts could be sold.

Just what was going on here?