

The Vampire 153

Chapter 153 153: Return to the Vale? (Part One)

With everyone gathered in Old Nan's burrow, Marcel didn't waste any time on pleasantries. The nights were getting even shorter and there was too much ground to cover before they could find a place in the wilderness to hide.

If it were up to him, he wouldn't have come out on a mission like this with such a low chance of success. There had been plenty of time for the outer villages to make their decisions. Those who were willing to return to the Vale of Mists had done so. Those who hadn't returned likely never would.

But Thane knew Mistress Nyrielle better than any of them. He had been with her longer than any of her other progeny and when Nyrielle wasn't within the Vale of Mists, Thane ruled in her stead. Hearing the information Marcel's spies gathered, Thane had decisively ordered the younger vampire to take on this risky mission.

To Marcel, any number of arguments could be made against this foolishness. Throwing good money after bad, or in this case, throwing good money in a wishing well and calling it a business plan. No reasonable merchant would do such a thing, yet here he was, making the attempt anyway.

"Old Nan, I'll be direct," he said. "This latest Lothian ruler is flexing his muscles and trying to make a name for himself. He suffered a loss recently and two of his knights died. He's bringing more soldiers and even men from the Church into the mountain forests to hunt for anyone he can get his hands on."

"We didn't have anything to do with killing his knights," Old Nan said, frowning deeply. "Our village is well hidden. There is nothing that will lead him to us here. You didn't need to waste the trip."

"Its worth wasting the trip if it saves a few Eldritch lives," Marcel said, fighting to suppress the exasperation in his voice. Even he knew Nyrielle well enough to know that preventable loss of life would grind away at her. Even though these people were no longer her subjects, she would still feel a sting at their deaths.

"Think of it this way," Marcel said, keeping his tone light and pleasant. "Come to the Vale as our guests. Stay until Owain Lothian and his men give up their hunt. Then, since your village is so well hidden, you can return to it when the time is right."

"You can't swindle me that easily, old merchant," the old woman said, twitching her whiskers in disapproval. "All this isn't easy to keep. If we don't manage our dams well, sudden rains and floods can wipe all of this away in a season. The rains are still upon us and will be for weeks."

"This place is our home," she said, thumping her cane on the wooden floor for emphasis. "You may not think much of it, but my grandfather built this village for us after the humans burned down everything in the Vale of Mists. If we leave it now, even if the humans don't come, we will lose it to the rains."

"Maybe I shouldn't speak," Daithi said slowly. "But, your homes can be rebuilt. Lives, once lost, cannot be restored. I know Lord Owain Lothian. He will set fire to the forest just to flush you out as long as he believes you are close. If he sees your children hiding in your homes, he will set fire to those too."

"Yes, we understand human cruelty," Old Nan said, glaring at the human soldier. "You do not need to remind us that your kind does not differentiate between soldiers and children. You cannot conquer, only eradicate."

It had been one of the greatest shocks that her grandfather spoke of in encountering humans and the way they waged war. Eldritch Lords feuded frequently and the Vale of Mists had changed hands several times before Nyrielle's grandsire Torbin began a reign that lasted more than a century.

The difference was that when a new Eldritch Lord came to power, they took responsibility for the people living in the lands they had just conquered. Lands without people to work them were worthless. A nation without people could not be called a nation at all. No Eldritch Lord would engage in the senseless laughter of carpenters and farmers because it would bring no benefit to their nation.

The humans were different. They saw the Eldritch people as 'demons' and slaughtered them regardless of age or occupation. Even healers would be put to the sword or burned alive at the hand of the human savages. It wasn't war that humans fought and it wasn't conquest, it was annihilation that they worshiped, like members of a crazed death cult.

"The humans have fought many wars against your Vale of Mists," Old Nan pointed out sharply. "They have not brought their soldiers so deep into the forests that they could find trouble with us. Not when they have your walls to batter themselves against."

"This time is different," Marcel said. "This time, they aren't trying to fight a war with the Vale or Airgead Mountain. They believe that they were attacked by the outer villages and they intend to strike back."

"Bah, they can hunt all they like, they will not find us," Old Nan insisted. "But if they do, I will tell my men to prepare more traps to stop their men well short of our village. We are not defenseless here."

"What about the cooks and the children?" Ollie asked suddenly. "Why not let them visit the Vale of Mists while everyone else fights?"

"Cooks and children?" Old Nan asked, staring at the red haired human strangely. "What do cooks have to do with this?"

"Anyone can cook if they know a little bit," Ollie said simply, as though it explained things. "But soldiers don't do their own cooking because they have to do the fighting. Every year, when the Summer Villa opens up, the first people who go there are soldiers and cooks because the soldiers won't cook for themselves."

"If anyone ever attacked the villa, what would happen to the cooks who don't know how to fight back?" Ollie asked. "They can't stand on the walls with bows or fight at the gates with swords. If the soldiers fall, the cooks will die too because they're stuck in the fort with everyone else."

The more Ollie spoke, the more confidence he gained but the stranger the looks directed his way became. To the Eldritch, killing the cooks after killing the soldiers was senseless, but this truly was the way humans treated others so perhaps they expected to be treated that way in turn.

"Your homes are very beautiful," Ollie said, standing up and walking over to one of the elaborately carved panels on the wall. He had to stoop a little to avoid hitting his head on the burrow's low ceiling but it let him both see the carvings up close and even reach out to touch them.

He couldn't imagine how long it had taken to cover an entire house with such elaborate decorations and he didn't know if any of them had special meaning, but anyone could appreciate their simple, rustic beauty.

"I wouldn't want to leave my home if it was this beautiful," he said, turning to look at the old woman. "I didn't want to leave my home when Lady Ashlynn took me to the Vale of Mists and I especially didn't want to go there when I learned that it wasn't a place for humans," he admitted.

His voice sounded almost bitter to Old Nan's ears but 'bitter' wasn't what Ollie was feeling at all. Frustrated was a far more accurate word to describe how he felt right now. He knew how scary it was to be hunted by Owain's men, but these people didn't know what it was like when the dogs were chasing after you and they kept getting closer no matter how much you ran.

He could tell them, but would they even believe him? This place looked so beautiful and they'd worked so hard to make a home for themselves here... He had just been a kitchen boy. He didn't have very much to leave behind. But these people? This place was their everything.

Marcel had told Ollie that it wasn't his job to convince people, but if he didn't at least say something, if he didn't try... He hadn't done anything to earn the luxurious treatment Ashlynn secured for him in the Vale of Mists.

Deep down, part of him felt like, if he could just help these folks understand a little, he'd have done something to pay her back. She might even feel a little proud of him when she returned.