

The Vampire 235

Chapter 235 235: External Pressures

Not long after first light, Ollie made his way from the castle to the sprawling collection of tents where the refugees had settled. His conversation with Thane the night before hadn't lasted more than an hour before the former knight sent him to bed for some much needed rest.

As much as he needed sleep, however, thoughts about his new responsibilities had plagued him, leaving the young man to restlessly stew in his worries until late into the night. Once the sun broke above the hills to the east, he'd wasted little time in preparing for the day. The sooner he could take action, the better he would feel.

Trailing a few feet behind him, the horned soldier Harrod followed like a dutiful shadow. While the future knight wasn't sure when it had happened, it was clear that someone, either Thane or perhaps Commander Bassinger, felt that it was best for Ollie to have a capable warrior at his side when he moved about the Vale of Mists.

At first, he'd thought the notion was silly. Here, behind the vale's many layers of defensive walls, what could he possibly need to fear? Some of the refugees, however, hadn't reacted well to finding a human waiting for them when they arrived at the place that was supposed to be a safe haven.

The refugees could accept vampires like Thane and Marcell. Vampires were no longer human, even if they retained a human appearance. Ollie, however, had too much in common with the very people who had come to destroy their homes. So far, the hostility directed at the young man had never risen above muttered words and dark looks, but if it ever did, he was glad to have Harrod along with him.

The camp where the refugees had settled sprawled over a hillside not far from where Ollie had set up his field kitchen. At first, the kitchen had been kept separate from the camp for logistical reasons. Within

a few days, however, it had become necessary to station a few of Commander Bassinger's soldiers near the kitchens to keep things orderly and prevent occasional attempts at theft.

"Sir Thane was right," Ollie said to Harrod as they entered the sprawling camp. "This can't go on, and there are still people arriving every day. I never realized how many outlying villages there were."

Since arriving in the Vale of Mists, Ollie had become accustomed to the appearances of the Horned Clan and the Clan of the Great Claw. They no longer felt strange or threatening to him. Since contacting the outlying villages, however, he'd come face to face with even more Eldritch clans, some of whom had been the subject of his nightmares as a much younger boy.

'Spider demons' and 'snatching demons' who lurked so deep in the wilderness that most humans who dared to hunt them simply never returned. The legends claimed that a spider demon could envelop a grown man in a cocoon of spider silk and would slowly devour them alive, starting from the feet and using dark sorcery to keep their prey alive until they reached the heart.

Snatching demons were said to be just as fearsome, capable of taking a man's weapons and armor away from him, even while he was still wearing it. The mask-like markings across their face were said to be a brand bestowed by the Holy Lord of Light so that the entire world would recognize them as thieves and criminals on sight.

Now that he'd met with the Night Weaver Clan and the Clan of Painted Masks, he'd begun to shed his preconceived notions of what these Eldritch clans were truly like, but the first time he'd seen a man with four additional spider-like limbs and strange eyes that held multiple pupils, it had given him quite a fright.

Now, as he moved through the camp, he raised his hand in greeting to a few of those people he'd first considered frightening. Some of them, he'd come to know well enough to place a name to a face, even if he wouldn't call them friends, they were at least no longer strangers.

Others still glared as he walked by. It was hard to blame them, especially when he had been one of the people who convinced their elders to abandon their homes, but just because he didn't blame them for their resentment didn't mean that it was easy to endure. An itch formed between his shoulder blades, as if someone was staring at his back with a murderous intensity, but when he turned to look, he couldn't see anyone specifically looking his way.

The sheer variety of people in the camp still took him by surprise. While he'd heard of most of the clans he encountered, some, like the group of slender people with long, flexible necks, belonged to clans he'd never heard of in any human folk tales.

On top of their unusual appearances, they all had their own unique traditions and customs, leaving him wondering sometimes if he was really a target of animosity or if he was just misunderstanding the way some clans conducted themselves.

"Just how many different clans are out there in the outlying villages?" Ollie asked as he looked around the camp, still unable to identify the source of the feeling that he was being watched. "Are there still others who haven't come yet?"

"Before humans came, the Vale of Mists was home to hundreds of thousands of people," Harrod said, looking around the camp with alert eyes. Just because no one had made trouble for Ollie yet, didn't mean that no one would, and if someone did, it would likely be here, where the crowds were largest and the number of people grappling with their change in circumstances was the greatest.

"Lady Nyrielle once said that more than half the people from the Vale of Mists who survived the Lothian attacks fled across the mountains," Harrod continued. "But many of the rest found places in the hills outside the Vale where they could escape the conflict between the Lothians and the Vale. Those are the people who are coming here now."

"Do you think they'll keep coming?" Ollie asked, trying to imagine how he could build a home for so many people before the weather turned foul at the end of summer. The task felt almost overwhelming, just with the people who had already gathered here.

"Commander Bassinger thinks they'll taper off for a little while when no one attacks for a week or two," the horned soldier replied. "But he's worried about things after the Solstice. Once the human's holy festival ends, things may get worse."

"Why would they get worse?" Ollie asked as they navigated their way through the sprawling camp. The tent he was looking for was one of the first pitched in the camp, when only the nearest villages had begun to arrive, along with the survivors of Owain's attack.

"The Dunn family," Harrod said. "Baron Dunn and his son Liam are both very aggressive about expanding their territory. Every year, they're probing the edges of the wilderness, looking for weaknesses to exploit and forcing the outlying villages to pull back a little deeper into the hills."

"But this year, many of those villagers have come here," Ollie realized. "Anyone who stayed won't have as many neighbors to defend them, and in some places, the Dunn's can advance unopposed."

"That's what the commander is afraid of," Harrod said with a nod. "And if the Dunns advance further into the wilderness this year, then they'll be closer to the Vale next year."

"Is he going to do anything about it?" Ollie asked, pausing for a moment to look at Harrod with a deeply concerned look on his face. "Is Sir Thane?"

"I don't know," the shorter man said, hanging his head low. "I just know that Commander Bassinger told all of us that we should expect this to be a difficult summer. That's also why he thinks this village you're going to organize is so important."

"Right," Ollie said, his expression growing grim. "If we have troubles within the vale and attackers outside it...." He couldn't make himself complete the sentence. Both men understood. With a single terrifying attack, Owain had disrupted a balance that was far more fragile than anyone realized.

If the humans learned how truly fragile things were in the Vale as a result of just one massacre, the consequences could become truly dire.

"Well, whatever happens outside the walls, it doesn't change what we have to do inside of them," Ollie said, firmly pushing worries about Liam Dunn and his family's ambitions to the back of his mind.

"Come on, Harrod," Ollie said, having finally spotted the tent he was looking for and a somewhat familiar figure standing outside of it. "Let's see if she'll listen to us..."