

The Vampire 253

Chapter 253 253: Among the Ashes

The sun rose early outside the Valley of Mists, casting a soft golden light over a scene of devastation that stood completely at odds with the serene sound of birds chirping to welcome the dawn.

Ollie, Milo, and their companions arrived near Milo's late the night before and built a simple camp on an adjacent hillside so they could search the village for any surviving carvings first thing in the morning. Despite Ollie's excellent cooking and a comfortable camp, none of them had slept well that night.

They'd deliberately chosen a spot far enough from the village that the smell of ash and char wouldn't reach them on the evening breeze. Still, the knowledge of what lay less than a mile away had kept them tossing and turning beneath their blankets. Milo had spent most of the night sitting beside the campfire, his tail curled protectively around his legs while he stared into the dying embers long after everyone else had gone to bed.

When the first hints of dawn began to paint the sky, they broke camp without speaking. There was nothing to say, even during the simple breakfast of bread and cheese that Ollie passed around.

Breaking camp didn't take long and by the time the sun had begun to rise above the eastern hills, Ollie, Milo, Harrod, and an additional pair of soldiers sent under Commander Bassinger's orders greeted the rising sun with somber expressions as they surveyed the remains of Milo's village.

The burned husks of several pyres littered the area near the center of the village. Charred bones could be seen among the remnants of the great fires, though whether they were human or Eldritch was difficult to say from this distance. The ash had settled into a thin gray blanket that stirred with each breeze, carrying the acrid scent of burned wood and something worse that none of them wanted to name.

The once clear pond that had nurtured the village had drained almost completely away when Milo and his brother shattered the dam. Now, all that remained was a murky, muddy puddle at the bottom of a muddy basin that curved around the village. Dead fish dotted the shoreline, their silver scales dulled by a coating of silt, while broken pieces of the village's dam poked up from the mudslide like ghastly arms trying to free themselves from the muck.

The burrows of the Heartwood clan, once elaborate works of art buried almost completely underground, stood out like black, smoldering pits, as though a giant flaming hand had poked holes in the soft earth, burning anything it found within. Here and there, the mouth of a burrow still released thin wisps of smoke, suggesting that deeper within, embers might still be consuming the intricate carvings that had made each home a priceless treasure to the people living within it.

Fragments of everyday life lay scattered everywhere. Near one of the pyres, a child's doll had been reduced to little more than charcoal. Elsewhere, the shattered remains of a cart used to haul firewood into the village from deeper into the forest lay near a pyre constructed of its final load of timber. At the edges of the village, pieces of storage baskets that had survived the flames only to be crushed underfoot by the raiders greeted Ollie's group like a mockery of welcome mats.

"Ollie," Milo said, his voice pained and distant. His whiskers and tail drooped low and his eyes swam with unshed tears as he surveyed the devastated ruins of the place he'd once called home.

Nothing, not even the rope swing hanging from a tree near the dam where he'd played with the children of the village as a child or the benches at the pond's edge where old ladies sat to feed ducks swimming on the pond's surface, not a single bit of it had survived the destructive hands of the Lothian butchers.

"Do you really think there's anything left here?" Milo asked, turning his gaze to the flame-haired former kitchen boy. "This, there doesn't seem to be any way anything could have survived."

"Don't give up hope," Ollie said, resting a hand gently on his companion's shoulder. "There may not be much we can save, but even a scrap of food is better than an empty belly," he said, repeating one of his father's favorite phrases any time things had been lean for their family.

It was that phrase that had convinced Ollie to beg for the opportunity to become an apprentice in the kitchens instead of following his father into service in the stables. The few scraps that fell his way as a young man scrubbing pots had been enough to get by which meant there was more left for his parents when they received their meals from the castle.

The punishments for stealing food from the kitchens were harsh, but no one cared about the half-burned bits that were stuck to the great cauldrons. In fact, many of the things Ollie ate, whether it was porridge made from three-day-old bread crusts or the soup made from chicken feet, were considered so far removed from 'proper food' that even if he'd been caught by the guards of the manor, they would only have mocked him instead of delivering the flogging a thief should suffer.

To most people, those things had been remnants little different from trash, but to Ollie, they had been precious treasures that helped him get through the lean years. Now he hoped that in the devastation that looked like it couldn't hold anything but trash, there might be a few treasures they could bring back to the refugees in the Vale of Mists.

"Look at the burrows," Ollie said, shaking off his memories to focus on the task at hand. While the days were long, they only had until midday to work before they needed to return to the Vale. "It's been several days but they're still smoking and smoldering in places. That means there's still something to burn other than ash."

"Just be careful not to burn yourself," he added, thinking of the number of small burns on his hands from times he'd thought the hearth had completely burned itself out only to conceal embers beneath the ash. "Things may still be hot."

The warning seemed redundant. It should be obvious that things that were still smoldering might be hot, but Ollie was at a loss for what else he should say. Milo had grown increasingly solemn as they drew closer to the abandoned village and this morning, he'd displayed none of his usual awareness of his surroundings. The skilled archer even stumbled over a tree root as they entered the village.

No one said anything about it but it was obvious that the sight of the village's destruction had broken down what little strength Milo had been holding onto in the days since his brother's death and Owain's destruction of his home.

It had been an impulsive decision to bring Milo here in the hopes of retrieving the carvings that meant so much to Old Nan and the other members of the Heartwood clan. Now that they were here, Ollie felt responsible for helping Milo face the deeply personal demons lurking in those ash-covered ruins. The question was how?