

The Vampire 254

Chapter 254 254: Cowards

"Milo," Ollie said gently after several moments of uncomfortable silence. For a moment, he wished Ashlynn was here with them. She always seemed to know the words to say and the right way to say them too. She was noble, educated, and incredibly thoughtful.

Ollie was none of those things, but he was the person who had brought Milo to this place and he wasn't going to run away from his responsibility to care for his new friend.

"Would you like to visit Old Nan's home together?" Ollie said, placing a hand on the archer's shoulder. "You don't have to do this alone. I may not be part of your clan, but if it helps, you can lean on me whenever you need to."

"Please," Milo said, his voice cracked and hoarse. His tail quaked with shame and his whiskers hung low but no matter how hard he tried to move, his feet remained firmly rooted to the ground, as though the mud had turned into cement around his boots that wouldn't let him take one step closer to the ruins of the village. "You must think me a coward, but I can't..."

"It's fine," Ollie said with a soft smile. Everyone, he supposed, had things they were afraid to face. Seeing that the powerful archer who had stood with just a handful of men against five columns of Owain's soldiers and just as many knights reveal a timid side to himself suddenly made it much easier to relate to the other man.

"I'm a coward too," Ollie said ruefully, thinking back on the shameful sight he must have presented during his escape from the Summer Villa with Ashlynn. "Just ask Harrod."

"Sir Ollie," the horned soldier protested. Ollie's comment took him by surprise and he had no idea how he was supposed to respond to it. "I've never once said you're a coward. You weren't trained to fight but look how much progress you've made since Lady Ashlynn brought you to the Vale. You'll be a proper warrior in no time, I'm certain of it."

"See?" Ollie said, trying to sound light-hearted to dispel a bit of the gloom that had settled over the group. "He's being so polite about it, he isn't even mentioning the way I fell to the ground on my backside and cowered behind him when Sir Broll caught us escaping the Summer Villa. Actually, I think I fell to my behind and cowered behind Lady Ashlynn when I first met Harrod too," he added sheepishly.

"It's okay to be afraid of what you might find," he said when he realized his comments seemed to have shaken Milo free of his paralysis even if he still looked haunted by the sight before them. Giving the shorter man a slight push, Ollie matched his pace to Milo's and led him toward what remained of Old Nan's home. "But if we're cowards together, at least it's not so bad."

Behind them, Harrod shook his head before waving for the other soldiers to split up and start searching for anything that might have survived the fires. Ollie was, perhaps, the strangest man he'd ever met in a position of command. A soldier would have denied that Milo was a coward, reminding the Heartwood archer of his acts of valor fighting the Lothians and the terrifying Inquisitors.

But Ollie was different. He accepted Milo's assertion that he was a coward and then claimed to be a coward as well. To a soldier, it should have been humiliating and shameful, but when Ollie said it, somehow, it made it easier for the refugee to face the ruins of his village. He might be afraid of what he would find, but at least he had company.

Old Nan's burrow had been hit harder than most. When Owain's men discovered the wooden statue of Nyrielle, complete with her feathered wings, they immediately judged Old Nan's home to be the center of demonic worship and doused it in twice as much blessed oil as they used on other burrows.

The front entrance completely collapsed as if to entomb any 'demonic' presence that might still lurk in the home that held such an important statue. Because of that, the only way in was through a hole in the ceiling that had been roughly dug by the Lothian raiders to ensure that the fires didn't run out of air to burn.

The smell of smoke and ash assaulted Ollie's nose as soon as he entered. Wrapping a damp cloth around his mouth and nose helped but nothing could keep out the stench of char that filled the space. Milo barely had time to subdue Old Nan herself and drag her away from their home. All of her possessions, everything from cooking spices to clothing, had burned in the fire, creating an acrid stench unlike anything Ollie had smelled before.

After a few moments of fumbling Ollie lit a small oil lamp, bringing a soft glow to the blackened space. Dark shadows danced around the room but even in the dim illumination of the single flame, Ollie could tell that much of the burrow had collapsed while it burned.

"I think we're going to need to dig," Ollie said when Milo joined him in the ruins of Old Nan's home. "But this could be good news," he added, kneeling at the edge of a small mudslide where one of the supports had given way during the fire. "The earth from the cave-in would have smothered the fire."

"But, by the time the walls collapsed, everything carved into them should have burned to ash," Milo said heavily. He stood unmoving in the center of what had once been his mother's living room. On the ground beneath his feet, the scorched remains of a rug that he had played on as a child could still be seen, but as soon as his feet touched it, the blackened fibers crumpled under his boots like charcoal.

When Ollie proposed coming back to try to recover things, Milo had thought only of the dim hope that they could recover something, anything, that had been carved by his grandfather or great-grandfather who founded the village all those years ago. His desire to help his mother heal had overwhelmed every other thought as he chased after the hope offered by the red-headed human.

Now that he stood here in the middle of the ruin, seeing his family's treasured memories reduced to little more than soot stains... Ollie's support had brought him this far. All last night, he'd imagined entering his mother's home to find that things hadn't been that bad or that one of the back rooms in the burrow had escaped completely unscathed.

They were unlikely scenarios but the possibility they could be true, no matter how unlikely, had kept him moving forward. Now that he stood among the rubble, his fantasies of something miraculously surviving had been burned to ash along with the treasured carvings they'd come to retrieve.

"Hey," Ollie said, interrupting the archer's thoughts as he noticed the older man sinking deeper into a dark mood. "Let's get to work," Ollie added, pressing a shovel into the other man's hands and pulling him toward the mudslide. "I'll be right here beside you," he promised.

There weren't words that could make things better right now. Or if there were, Ollie didn't know them. But as long as there was work to be done, if Milo could join him in the digging, then at least there would be something to distract his friend from the ache of loss that hung in the air like smoke.

A few minutes later, a second oil lamp had joined the first, and the sounds of digging filled the air. The chances of finding anything were minuscule, but neither man would leave until they used every minute they had to search through the rubble. If anything carved by Milo's ancestors survived, they intended to find it.