

The Vampire 171

Chapter 171 171: Holy Magic

Milo and his younger brother Lako crouched behind a sodden and decaying log, watching the column of human soldiers sort themselves out before resuming their march deeper into the forest.

The bodies of the slain humans were quickly wrapped in their own cloaks before they were taken up by the unarmored humans following in a second group behind the first. Looking at the faces of the ones gathering the bodies of the slain, they seemed indifferent, as though they were harvesting vegetables or hauling garbage rather than retrieving the remains of slain kin.

"They still haven't turned back," Lako said, his flat tail thumping the ground lightly in agitation. "Do they care nothing for the lives of their soldiers?"

"They only care about the knights and the priests," Milo said, pointing at the men with elaborately painted shields or wearing the robes of the Church. "The rest of their soldiers might as well be arrows to be fired from a bow. Good if they survive to be used again, but clearly they shed no tears for their deaths."

"It's hard to deal with the knights," Lako said as he prepared to move again. "I can't punch through their armor at more than fifty paces but they cover that much ground too quickly."

"Keto is luring them toward the third line of traps," Milo said with a heavy sigh. "If we can't make them pay a high enough price there, the village is likely lost."

"Mother..." Tears formed in Lako's eyes before he forcefully blinked them away. What kind of sons were they if they let humans tear apart the village their family had built over four generations? Old Nan wouldn't abandon their homes, no matter what which meant that Milo and Lako had to stop these humans, no matter what.

"Come," Milo said, tugging on his brother's cloak. "We'll stop them at the next line. Since the knights are hard, we should target the priests."

"You're right," the younger man from the Heartwood clan said. "Maybe if their slave drivers fall, the soldiers will have the freedom to retreat."

Despite offering the suggestion, Milo had no expectation that killing the priests would produce the effect they wanted. The human commander seemed too ruthless to give up because the people under his command died and the man with the glowing sword who fought beside him was far too powerful.

Those too alone were already a deadly threat to anyone who confronted them directly. If they couldn't catch them with traps, it was unlikely that any arrow would claim their lives. To the men of the Heartwood clan, it was madness to press on when so many soldiers had been slain.

It was no different than hunting a maddened beast, the only time to sacrifice so many lives to stop such a foe was when it was upon your doorstep, yet these humans spent the lives of their soldiers like copper coins even when there was nothing to be lost by retreating.

It made no sense, but no one ever said that an enemy like the human lords would behave rationally.

At the third line of traps, the two brothers quickly scaled a tree, each one moving out onto a different limb behind an array of ropes that strained under the considerable force they held in place.

Unlike the first and second lines of traps defending the village, these traps weren't intended to affect an advancing enemy directly. For things to reach this point, almost anything could be sacrificed to safeguard their village and the homes they had built there over the past four generations.

"Ready Lako?" Milo asked heavily.

"As soon as Keto flings their nets, I'll cut my line," the younger brother confirmed.

A few minutes later, the column of human soldiers once again entered their view, led by a pair of knights dressed in the colors of the Church of the Holy Lord of Light.

"They're in the trees!" Diarmuid shouted.

After enduring withering casualties on their march toward the village, Diarmuid's heart seethed with a venomous rage. Owain refused to allow scouts to move more than an hour or two ahead of the main body of the troop, as though he just needed a single report from a scout to give them a direction to charge in.

Because of that, they'd fallen victim to several traps that the scouts had no time to discover. Privately, Diarmuid believed that they'd only lost so many scouts because Owain's orders for haste forced them to act carelessly.

Seeing Owain lead a charge side by side with Sir Tommin, however, forced Diarmuid to reevaluate the young lord. If Owain could be chastised for ignorance, then it was an ignorance of the gap between his own competence and that of his men. For Owain, perhaps it really was as simple as charging ahead and crushing the enemy beneath his boot.

Now, if Diarmuid wanted to preserve the lives of the soldiers with them, he would have to push himself even harder and prevent battles from dragging out longer than necessary. The longer a battle was allowed to last, the more people these devious flat tailed demons would murder. Since that was the case, he didn't hesitate to use every divination available to him and the priests under his command to search for their enemies

Neither Milo nor his younger brother knew how they'd been spotted so quickly and from so far away but the priest followed his words with a strange invocation of his god before fire wreathed his hands.

"Cut it," Milo snapped, his hands already moving to saw through the ropes in front of him.

"But Keto..."

"Demon. Burn in the cleansing flames of the sun!" A thundering command from the Inquisitor interrupted the men in the tree.

Suddenly, flames exploded in one of the nearby trees, seeming to appear from nowhere and enveloping the man in a tree who had been preparing to cast a large net over the advancing soldiers. His anguished cry echoed across the damp forest moments before the burning body of their friend tumbled from the branches of the tree.

Lako's brain struggled to process what had happened to his friend even as his hands moved to saw through the ropes. This was the sorcery wielded by human priests? There was no chance to dodge it or take shelter behind one of their hunting blinds, just flames that appeared from nowhere, enveloping a dear friend and reducing him to little more than a pile of seared flesh and bones.

"Flames of purification. Encircle and arise!" the group of under-priests chanted at Diarmuid's command. Unlike the inquisitor, they weren't capable of pinpoint destruction of demons, but what one person could not do with precision, five could achieve with brute force. A moment later, a second explosion of flames rocked the forest, and this time it was several times larger than Diarmuid's precise sorcery.

They lacked the precision demonstrated by the man in red and gold robes but the effect was no less devastating as the tree occupied by Keto's companion, Osev, was engulfed in flames from the base of its trunk all the way to the slender branches that formed the tree's crown.

As tragic as Keto and Osev's deaths were, however, Diarmuid had made a critical mistake in selecting his targets. By focusing on the men who only sought to trap them on the narrow trail between two gentle slopes, they missed the opportunity to prevent Milo and Lako from completing their work.

"You'll die for what you've done," Milo said, a dark grin forming on his lips as he and Lako finished sawing through the last of the ropes.