

The Vampire 172

Chapter 172 172: Shattered Dam

A loud -TWANG- reverberated through the woods, followed two hard beats later by a second one and the tree the brothers occupied lurched like it had been shaken by a giant. More than a thousand pounds of tension was unleashed in an instant and the sound of crashing filled the air as a battering ram swung through the forest, aimed not at the invaders but at the dam that formed the central pond in the Heartwood clan's village.

When Cellach Lothian burned Mist City to the ground and scattered the original inhabitants of the Vale of Mists, many members of the Heartwood clan had sought out a place they could shape to their liking, deep enough in the wilderness to escape the attention of even the most expansionist humans.

The result had been a network of artificial dams that helped to establish a thriving village around a pool that, while it couldn't be called a lake, was large enough for dozens of the flat tailed Eldritch people to swim in at the same time. For four generations, that pond had given them everything from water for their homes to a place to escape the oppressive summer heat.

Now, that pond became their weapon of last resort against the invaders who sought to destroy their homes.

More flames sailed through the air and this time it was Lako's turn to scream in pain as fire hot enough to melt metal enveloped his body. The stench of burning fur and cooked meat filled the air for an instant before Lako tumbled from the tree, crashing into several branches along the way.

Milo flung himself after his brother, scampering down the tree at a pace that could only be described as a barely controlled fall. By the time he reached the ground, humans were already beginning to move in his direction when the ground began to shake and tremble.

Tens of thousands of barrels worth of water surged from the broken dam, sweeping aside fallen branches, loose stones and a tremendous quantity of soil. The muddy water turned into a torrent that swept along the shallow hollow between hills where the human column advanced toward the village.

"High ground! Get to high ground," Owain snapped, abandoning the advance to scramble out of the way of the oncoming flood. These demons were mad! It sounded like they were ready to bring the whole mountain down on top themselves, just to kill a few more humans. This wasn't like fighting an army, it was like fighting the forces of nature themselves.

Sir Tiernan the Blackhammer cursed savagely as he scrambled up the soft soil of the slope, discarding his prized warhammer to latch on to a spindly tree in the hopes of withstanding the surge of water.

He'd warned them, several times, that it wasn't wise to provoke the demons high in the hills, but even the people who listened to his warnings didn't realize what it meant to fight demons who mastered their environment the way these demons had. Now, they were all paying the price for it.

Sir Hugo fared much worse than the veteran knight, losing his footing in the scramble before the water crashed into him with the force of a charging horse. Brown water, pale sky and solid earth tumbled through his vision interchangeably before he crashed into the trunk of a tree. His vision swam turning red at the edges but he stubbornly clung to the tree like it had become the most beautiful woman in a brothel.

At the base of the tree, Milo smiled in dark satisfaction as he watched the column of soldiers fall to disarray. Too many of them, and especially too many of the knights, had escaped death to save their village but at least Keto and Osev wouldn't be the only ones to perish on this battlefield.

"Come, brother," Milo said, gently pulling Lako's arm over his shoulder and preparing to hoist his brother up off the ground. "That should buy us a little time to..."

"Put me down," Lako rasped. One of his legs had broken when he hit the ground and he was certain that several ribs had cracked or broken in his fall. Every inch of his flesh burned with an agony that couldn't be described in words and his heartbeat had become irregular and feeble. "Leave a quiver for me," he said, spitting out a mouthful of foamy pink blood.

"Brother, you can't..." Milo started only to stop when he saw the look in his brother's eyes. What flame still burned there was like the last ember of a dying fire, flaring up before it was extinguished forever.

"I still have fingers," he said painfully. "To draw a bow. I can stall. Long enough..."

"It's fine," Milo said, drawing his own bow and lining up a shot on the human soldiers struggling to escape the surging water and the torrent of mud that accompanied it. "I can go with you."

"No, mother..."

"Mother won't give up our home," Milo said, shaking his head sadly. They'd argued this point until Milo and Lako had worn divots in the ground with the thumping of their tails but it had done nothing to change her mind. She'd carved out a home with her own hands and she intended to protect it until the day she died. "This is the end..."

"Make her," Lako insisted, clutching desperately at Milo's hand and stopping him from shooting at the humans. If he loosed the arrow, he had no chance of escaping, but if he didn't...

"Leave me your arrows," Lako said again. "Run now, or mother will never see her grandchildren." Milo's wife, at least, had been among the people who choose to seek shelter behind the walls of the Vale of Mist. Even though their homes would be lost, she would survive this tragedy.

Milo had always been the best of older brothers, constantly shielding Lako from trouble and even helping him search for a place to build his own burrow when he was ready to propose to a woman.

Clearly, Milo intended to die together with his brother, but Lako couldn't let him. At least one of them needed to make it out of this, and of the two, Lako thought his brother was more deserving. It was just nice that it worked out this way, he just had to help his brother come to the same conclusion.

"Damn it," Milo spat, shrugging off his quiver and dropping it at his younger brother's side. Of all the times for his brother to be sensible, why did it have to be now? "Kill that priest, brother, or I'll come back and do it myself," he said before he turned away and fled into the forest.

Behind him, Lako watched his brother run with a sad smile on his face. He had no strength to draw his bow and his vision had grown too dark to see the priest even if he could have pulled a bow. It didn't matter though. As long as his brother believed that he would make a final stand, he'd allow him the dignity to do it and maybe... maybe he could convince their stubborn mother to flee before it was too late.

"I'm sorry, Cetna," he whispered as the world went dark around him. "I won't be the one to build you a home afterall."