

The Vampire 47

Chapter 47 47: Into the Forest

Dragging Ollie along with her, Ashlynn sprinted down the rocky hillside, grateful that the Lothians at least thought to keep a herd of goats on hand to keep the grass and underbrush in check around the villa.

As the pair sprinted for the forest at the base of the hill, sweat ran down Ashlynn's back while her ears strained to their limits for the sound of an arrow whistling through the air. Thane had made it clear to her that one of the two most dangerous things she would have to deal with if she had to escape was an archer who could strike at her without even running her down.

Thankfully, the men who normally manned the walls at this early hour of the day had abandoned their posts to fight the fire that rapidly consumed the stores in the kitchen. Thick black smoke rose like an inkstain on the early morning sky and even as they fled, she could smell the mixture of woodsmoke and burning kitchen oils that made the fire so dangerous to fight.

Briefly, a chill seized her heart with worry that Otis had become trapped in the fire but she shoved that worry down firmly and pulled at Ollie to run faster. Otis had started the fire, surely he'd gotten clear of it in order to sound the alarm. Even if he hadn't, there was nothing she or Ollie could do for him now.

"Slow, slow down," Ollie panted next to her as he struggled to keep up with the fleet-footed Ashlynn. He was already exhausted after staying up so late to clean after the feast, now he could barely keep up with the shorter woman who ran over the rough terrain like a mountain goat with wings. "I can't..."

"Yes you can," Ashlynn insisted, keeping her eyes locked firmly on the forest ahead. "We can slow down in the forest," she added, tightening her grip on his hand and pulling him along with her.

They were already halfway down the hill and she had yet to hear any shouts about their flight from the castle but that didn't mean they hadn't been noticed. Tree cover, Thane had taught her, was one of the most important things to maintain while evading pursuit.

The forest would deny archers a long-range shot and it would prevent horses from running her down as she fled. If she could force her pursuers to chase her on foot, the odds became slightly better, even if they were still stacked against her.

When they finally reached the relative safety of the forest, Ollie stumbled to the ground, his chest heaving and his body shaking as he gulped for air. Even Ashlynn's chest burned and her heart pounded in her chest loudly enough to drown out the steady second heartbeat that had grown faint with her distance from Nyrielle.

"Come on," Ashlynn said between deep, steadying breaths. "We need to keep moving." They had managed the most dangerous part of the escape, fleeing the villa itself and reaching the forest, but they were still a very long way from being safe.

As much as Ashlynn wanted to give herself time to rest, she knew that this time, when Owain's men were distracted by the fire, was far too precious to waste. Once they put the fire out and took stock of what had happened, she was certain that he'd try to hunt her down.

"Moving. Where?" Ollie gasped, looking up at Ashlynn through short curling locks of tousled hair. "There's. Nowhere. To run."

The gangly youth still couldn't believe that they were running at all. Didn't Lynnda know that it was impossible to escape from a lord who wanted to capture you? And even if they did escape, it was impossible to survive in the wilderness so close to the places still infested by demons.

They might have bought a few hours by running but one way or another, they were doomed. He just didn't know why Lynnda didn't seem to understand that.

"Yes there is somewhere we can go," Ashlynn insisted, offering a hand to pull Ollie up from the ground. "I have friends in the forest," she said, lifting the young man to his feet before she turned and hiked into the woods without offering more of an explanation than that.

A moment later, she smiled slightly when she heard Ollie's footsteps crunching through the undergrowth along with her. She knew at least a little bit of what must be going through the young man's mind at the moment. It hadn't been that long since she'd made the decision to turn toward the vale of Mists instead of trying to find shelter in human villages.

Now, compared to her desperate flight through the woods on the edge of death the night of her wedding, this didn't feel so bad. Ollie just didn't know how lucky he was that they already had allies waiting for them and she knew how to find them.

Commander Bassinger had sent a dozen men to camp in the woods during her mission and they kept close enough to the summer villa to see it from one of the nearby hilltops. Now, with a dark plume of smoke rising from the fortress, she was certain that the men waiting for her would be alert and looking for her movements.

"What kind of friends do you have in the woods," Ollie asked, his long legs allowing him to catch up to the fleet-footed Ashlynn. While he wasn't entirely sure he believed her, it was better to think that there was help in the forest than to think about the alternative. "Are they outlaws? Freeman?"

"You'll see," Ashlynn said, offering no other explanation as she worked her way deeper into the woods. While Ollie might have been relieved if she told him a story about a band of rugged freemen who lived beyond the authority of lords, or a fierce group of outlaws who could fight off Owain's men, she refused to lie to him.

She wasn't willing to tell him the truth yet. They were still too close to the castle and she couldn't risk him running back to the villa with word of 'demons' in the forest. She hadn't believed the truth about the Eldritch people until she met them and she was certain that he wouldn't either.

She would just have to wait until they reached Commander Bassinger's men and the protection they offered. By then, if Ollie had objections, it would be far too late to do anything about them. He might not appreciate her hiding the truth from him, but she could live with his resentment.

What she couldn't live with was the idea of him dying at Owain's hands because he'd become involved in her mission. As long as they escaped, she would find a way to make it up to him, but first, they needed to escape.