

## The Vampire 49

### Chapter 49 49: Hunter and Hunted

The sounds of baying hounds filled the spring air as Ashlynn and Ollie raced through the forest. Twigs snapped underfoot as they ran and countless small bushes and ferns caught at their legs as they raced past.

Several hours had passed and both of them looked considerably worse for wear after trudging through the woods for so many hours. Ashlynn's blouse and skirt, already stained from work in the kitchens and the spray of Kaefin's blood, now sported a number of mud stains alongside twigs and leaves that had snagged on the coarse fabric.

Ollie looked little better and in fact, even more mud covered his breeches and tunic after crashing down a hillside into a small puddle. The young man was moving stiffly from a combination of bruises and the fact that his simple cloth shoes weren't made for trekking over rough terrain.

Neither of them had eaten since the morning and they'd only taken a few brief stops to rest and drink at streams as they passed them. Whenever the baying hounds came closer, Ashlynn dragged Ollie along, pushing him to increase his pace until the sounds of dogs faded in the distance.

"Thane was right," Ashlynn huffed as they sat to take another rest by a swiftly flowing stream. "Dogs are worse than archers. They just don't stop."

"You should leave me," Ollie said, splashing into the stream to take a deep drink. "I can tell. I'm slowing you down."

He didn't know how it was possible, the short woman looked delicate, like she should be weaker than him in every way. Yet, compared to her, he was slower, clumsier, and wore himself out much faster than she did.

The cold stream helped to wake him back up, but his stomach growled, reminding him that he was working hard on what had been a very meager breakfast without so much as a pint of ale to sustain himself on while they slogged through the dense underbrush.

"Stopping is dying," Ashlynn said. "Trust me, you don't want to die at Owain's hands, it's not pleasant."

"You've seen him kill before?" Ollie asked, shocked that Lynnda would have seen such a horrifying thing.

"He tried," Ashlynn said, flashing a smile that looked too white against her dirt-stained cheeks and pointing at herself with a thumb. "Broll and Tommin dumped me in a shallow grave. Compared to that night, this isn't so bad."

Ollie's eyes went wide as he tried to imagine what could have led to his lord trying to kill a simple serving girl like Lynnda and sending his knights to bury her. Were the rumors true, he wondered. Was she really the illegitimate daughter of Marquis Bors Lothian? Then, that would make Lord Owain her half-brother, and he'd tried to kill her!

"Whatever you're thinking, it's not..." Ashlynn started, only to cut off and spin around, looking uphill in the direction of a rustling sound in the bushes.

In her hand, she clutched a small stone, suitable for throwing. For what felt like the dozenth time since fleeing the villa, she wished she had been able to bring a knife, dagger, or better yet a sword during their

escape but she hadn't thought of it before Otis scattered embers on sacks of grain. At that point, her only thought had been the need to escape.

"My Lady," a light, masculine voice called moments before a short figure emerged from the brush. The man wore a midnight blue padded overcoat, belted at the waist where he carried a long-bladed knife and a heavy mace. His short and curly brown hair matched his curled horns and his breeches stopped at the knee to reveal furry limbs and cloven feet.

"H-horned demon!" Ollie exclaimed, splashing in the stream as he scrambled to put distance between himself and the armed man. This was it, he thought, they really were doomed to die at the hands of the demons in the forest!

"How rude," the horned man said. "My Lady, is this man troubling you?" he asked, drawing the heavy mace from his hip as if to beat some sense into the gangly youth.

"Ollie, stop," Ashlynn said sharply. "I told you I had friends in the forest, didn't I? This is one of them. I'm sorry," Ashlynn said, turning to the short soldier. "I don't recall your name."

"Harrod, Lady Seneschal," he said, offering a short bow. "Captain Lennart sent me to look for you since we moved our camp to avoid the hunters who were prowling the woods yesterday."

"Good, good, lead the way," she said with a relieved smile. She'd been heading in the direction of the place where they were supposed to camp but with so many hunters in the woods, she wasn't surprised to hear they'd moved. "The sooner we join the others, the better I'll feel. Come on, Ollie, before the hounds catch our scent again."

"But, but he's..." Ollie started, his eyes wide and trembling when he looked at the horned figure descending from the hillside to join them.

"He's here to help us escape. Now come on," Ashlynn said, setting out alongside Harrod.

"I feel like I don't have much choice in this," Ollie grumbled as he got to his feet and joined them, being careful to keep Ashlynn between himself and the horned demon called 'Harrod.'

Looking at Ashlynn, he didn't know what was worse. The fact that she seemed to be friendly enough with the demons to converse with them or the fact that the horned demon was leading them to even more demons who were supposed to help them escape.

Just what had he gotten himself into?

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A short time later, two men emerged from the forest, each one holding the leashes of two hounds. Their brown clothing and green cloaks blended easily with the forest and each of them carried not only a long knife but a bow slung across their back with a quiver full of arrows on the hip opposite the knife.

"They rested here," one of the men said, pointing to the depressions in the mud along the stream where Ollie had knelt to drink from the stream.

"There's a problem," the other man said, pointing at the hounds who had gone from straining at their leash to shaking with their tails tucked between their legs. "They've caught the scent of a demon."

A few moments later, both men stared at a pair of footprints, one cloven and the other clearly human, both moving in the same direction.

"Moving together or one following the other?" the first man asked.

"If one's following, it's the demon," the second one said, kneeling by the tracks to look at them closely. "The mud's still fresh," he said, feeling the soil between two fingers. "Less than an hour ago. If they're being hunted by the demon, it'll catch them before we do."

"Wouldn't that be lucky," the first man said. "You keep going, I'll go back for Sir Broll. If there's a demon here, we should hunt it too."

"You're mad," the second man said. "We don't have armor to resist demon claws, let's just find the girl and get out of these woods before demons find us."

"Coward," the first man said. "If I see a demon, I'm taking my shot and I'll keep the gold sovereign for myself."

"Your funeral," the second man said, giving a sharp tug at the leash and prompting his hounds to continue their pursuit. The scent of a demon made them more reluctant but as long as they were more afraid of the man holding their leash than they were of the things they smelled, they'd continue to lead him in the direction of the fleeing girl.

