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There Is No Escape

 It was a dark and gloomy winter night. The children of the town had retired to the comfort of their warm beds long before, and their parents were slowly dozing off themselves. The sky above was solid black, as if it was a velvet curtain, with just a sliver of the moon dipped into it, not a star to be seen. In the forest that engulfed the back of the town, every creature was silent-not a sound to be heard. The forest was a mysterious place that no one knew anything about except that bad things happened to those who trespassed. Many times in the past, curious and ignorant people had ventured into the forest's luring temptations, only they were never seen again. The forest's dark claws refused to release its prey from its grasp, savagely dragging them in and relishing in its victory of another soul it captured. The townspeople often wondered what lied in the forest that was so ghastly, so treacherous that no one seemed to be able to escape it. It was a mystery that a young girl named Brittany Miller intended to solve.

 Brittany was a young and adventurous girl who often didn't know how far was too far. She was known for her bold, daring nature that led her into unknown places. Brittany was often referred to as trouble due to her curiosity that managed to land her in tough situations that she later struggled getting out of. The previous evening, Brittany decided she would unravel the mystery behind the dark and dangerous forest. Brittany glanced down at her outfit, deciding that her baby blue sweater dress with white accents, black leggings, and black ballet flats would be warm enough for her to explore the forest in. She tied her long, red hair back before marching out the door and heading to the forest, prepared to expect the unexpected from the infamous forest that so many people feared.

 The forest was a shadowy and silent place. The damp air hung as if a supernatural force clung to it and pulled it down so it rested upon a person heavily. Most of the trees were either dead or rapidly rotting while some of the trees housed odd-looking creatures that glared at Brittany, their narrowed eyes full of suspicion. Vines hung precariously down from the trees, waiting to reach out and grab an unsuspecting victim. The ground was barren-there were no footprints in the dirt nor grass on the ground. There were few signs of life inside the looming forest to suggest why so many people disappeared simply by visiting it. Brittany looked around cautiously while she ventured deeper and deeper into the forest's grasps, trying to observe every aspect around her to see what dangers may lay ahead of her path. Her shoes pressed into the soft earth beneath her, leaving footprints in her wake, a clear trail of where she had been. Dead, brown, shriveled leaves crunched beneath her feet, interrupting the deafening silence the forest provided. Brittany looked down at the floor, watching as her feet crushed the leaves when she noticed a large stained patch of red that streaked out for several feet until it reached a large rock. She cautiously bent down to inspect it further. The dried substance looked suspiciously like...*blood? If it is blood, who did it belong to? Is this what happens to everyone who explores the forest?* Brittany wondered to herself, shuddering at the thought. The sudden sound of movement quickly snapped her out of her thoughts. She jerked backwards, her eyes darting in every direction, wondering what had interrupted the usual quietness of the forest that she had grown accustomed to. She whirled around, trying to decipher which direction the noise had come from. *Did whatever cause this red stain come here to give me the same fate as well? Will this be my end? There's so much more I still want to do in life! This can't be the end!* Brittany panicked, drawing in quick, shallow bursts of air, feeling the adrenaline rush through her veins. Her eyes continued to dart around her, searching for threats while her heart rate spiked up, making it feel as if her heart was about to burst out of her chest. Suddenly, to her left, a small red lizard skittered out from underneath a pile of dead leaves, causing the same noise Brittany had heard the first time to reverberate throughout the forest again. Brittany released the breath that she had realized she was holding. *It's just a lizard*, she thought, shaking her head and trying to calm her racing heart. *It's not going to hurt you. I can't say the same for whatever caused this mess though...* she thought, eying the red stain beneath her feet. She inhaled a deep breath before turning back around to continue walking deeper into the forest.

 Suddenly, Brittany screamed at the sight in front of her. Her recently-slowing heart rate picked back up again at an even faster rate than the first time. An incredibly dark, tall, handsome man stood before her. He had deep midnight blue eyes, so dark that they almost looked black, unruly dark brown hair, prominent muscles that bulged through the clothing he wore, a strong jawbone, broad shoulders, and a mesmerizing, powerful, yet dangerous aura surround him. A black leather jacket covered the man's dark grey shirt, which fit him snuggly, contorting to every angle on his defined, muscular chest. His tight, black jeans hung low around his waist, sitting just beneath his hips. The man completed his tough appearance with black steel-toed boots that still looked relatively new. Everything about him seemed dark, yet his skin contrasted this greatly, which was as pale as freshly-fallen snow. It looked as if his skin had never seen sunlight before. Yet what caused her to scream was not only the surprise to see a man suddenly before her, but to also see the dark red substance running from the man's lips to his chin. *That color red looks just like the one smeared on the ground*, Brittany realized in shock. *But why would it also be coming from his mouth?* Brittany stared up at him with wide eyes, slowing backing away. The man stepped towards her for every step back she took while grinning maliciously down at her. "Wh-what are you?" Brittany stuttered, her eyes darting down to the man's mouth due to the sudden movement of him flicking his tongue out and licking away the red liquid, smiling as he did so, showing white, gleaming fangs. "Some call me a creature of the night," he started, his voice velvety smooth, sounding perfect just as his appearance was. "Others prefer more degrading names such as bloodsucker or even leech," he told Brittany looking down at her, disgust clear in his dark eyes. Brittany sucked in a breath of air, her heart feeling as though it had stopped. "You're a vampire...?" she whispered in shock, continuing to back up until she hit the rough bark of a tree behind her, feeling the bark dig into her back through the thin shirt she was wearing. He smirked at her, as if he found her fear amusing. "Call me Darius," he crossed his arms across his chest, a glint in his eyes, challenging her to defy him.

 "Now we're going to play a game," Darius declared, the cunning and mischievous look in his eyes suggesting that it would be anything but a fun game for Brittany. "It will give you a chance to attempt to save your pathetic life," he sneered. "You will run and try to hide anywhere in this forest. If you can survive for an hour, I'll let you leave this forest alive. If I win, well," he chuckled, "you probably can guess what will happen." He licked his lips, a silent reminder to her of what he did to the other people of her town that had disappeared. "The only rule is that you cannot leave this forest and go into the town before the hour is over. If you do, your family will pay for your mistake," he said, finishing his explanation of the game. Brittany looked up at him, shock and confusion clear in her eyes, "But-" "Save your breath, darling. The game has begun. You have five minutes before I search for you. I suggest you run and think of clever ideas," Darius interrupted, officially beginning Brittany's only hope for survival for the next hour to come. Brittany didn't need to be told twice and broke out into a run, dodging trees, rocks, sticks, vines, and everything else that attempted to slow her down. She leapt over a fallen tree log and continued to race her way through the monstrous forest. Brittany decided to take a chance and glance over her shoulder to see how far away she had run from Darius but went flying to the ground, tripping over a warm, solid object. Brittany winced, inspecting her hands and knees to see if the fall had broken her skin. She gently dabbed them, pulling her hand away and finding a small portion of blood left on her fingertips. A low growl behind her snapped her out of her inspection. Brittany froze, slowly turning around to discover what she had tripped over. To her dismay, it was the cub of a mother panther that stood nearby. The cub was whimpering from the sudden impact of Brittany falling over him, causing the mother panther to growl at Brittany, the black, glossy hairs on her hackle standing straight in the air as she strode purposefully over to Brittany. "No, no, no, this cannot be happening," Brittany whimpered, slowly crawling backwards hoping that the panther wouldn't attack her for accidentally harming her cub. Even as Brittany got farther away from the cub, the mother would not stop her pursuit of blood from Brittany. Sensing that the panther would attack her no matter what, Brittany decided to take the opportunity to run. She spun around and stood up, bolting away from the panther, only to hear the panther's paws pounding against the forest floor, following closely behind Brittany. Brittany spotted a nearby tree and decided her best chance of escaping the angry mother would be to climb the tree so the panther could not follow her. She launched herself towards the tree, only to feel the panther sink her teeth deep into Brittany's leg. A sharp, bloodcurdling scream escaped Brittany's mouth as hot tears raced down her cheeks from the sudden sharp pain in her calf. Brittany kicked her unwounded leg out and struck the mother panther, causing her to release her hold on Brittany's leg and fall towards the ground. Brittany used this opportunity to quickly scale the tree before the panther recovered and attacked her again. She found and sat on a sturdy branch near the top of the tree, panting to catch her breath, feeling warm, sticky blood run down her leg. *Great*, Brittany thought bitterly, *even if the loud chase didn't alert him of my location, my blood probably will*. She looked down at the mother panther from her perch in the tree. The panther stared back up at her and snarled, as if warning Brittany to never touch her cub again before leaving to return to her cub.

 "You're going to have to hide better than that if you want to survive," Darius's taunting voice whispered to her. She froze where she sat in the tree. *Is he watching me try so hard to survive? He already knows where I am, yet he's playing with me, watching me tremble and fight as well as I can?* she thought in disgust. "But remember, you can run, but you can't hide. There is no escape from me," he whispered, his voice quieting to a tone almost unable to be heard by human ears. At that moment, a bat flew out from a nearby tree and swooped down in front of Brittany's face, screeching as it flew by. Still spooked by Darius's warning, the bat startled Brittany further, causing her to fall face first out of the tree. Brittany's face smashed into the ground, a sickening crack pierced through the air and Brittany felt her nose break out of place before blood began to pour out of her nose. She moaned in pain, but forced herself up to check to be sure that neither the panthers nor Darius were around before attempting to continue to protect her life. Even though she knew it was a vain attempt to try to survive, she refused to give up without a fight. She stumbled as she put weight on her injured leg, biting down on her lip to prevent another scream from coming out due to the combination of pain in her calf, nose, hands, and knees. She limped further away from the direction the panthers had gone. *What can I use to defend myself against him? Is there any way I can survive this, or is it just a futile battle?* she wondered, feeling energy being drained from her with each step she took. *If the old folklores are true, could I kill him but save myself by using a wooden stake?* she pondered. *Either way, it's worth a shot. It certainly can't hurt anything by trying.* Brittany began looking for a sharp stick that she could use to impale him since she didn't have a knife to sharpen a stick with. She limped to a nearby tree, searching around its roots to see if a branch had fallen off. She frowned in frustration when she couldn't find one, but limped to a different tree further away to search underneath it instead. She continued to repeat this process until she got to the sixth tree, where Brittany finally found a small but sharp and thick wooden stick. *This will have to be good enough to work*, Brittany hoped. She put the stick into her pocket and began to limp deeper into the forest before she let out a loud groan of frustration for what she had gotten herself in to mixed with pain from the searing injuries seeping with blood all over her body. She leaned her weight on the tree she was next to and looked down over her shoulder to inspect how badly damaged her calf was. Dried blood was caked all around the panther's bite mark and fresh blood continued to streak down her leg, making it appear as a grotesque miniature waterfall of red liquid. She could see several layers of muscle tissue exposed and winced at the gruesome sight of her leg and slowly lowered herself to the ground to lessen the intensity of the pain. "Is this the best you've got? I'm afraid I'm already bored with the game," Darius's voice mockingly whispered from around her. "What do you want from me, you sick jerk! Come out and face me rather than hide in the shadows like you always do! Or are you too scared?" Brittany yelled out, her frustration winning over. The searing hot pain erupting from her leg and nose was causing her to lose her patience quickly. "Why do you do this to anyone who comes into the forest? Why can't you just leave us alone? Why can't you just let me go?" Brittany demanded. "If I let you go, you would spread my secret of what occurs in this forest, now wouldn't you? I would lose my prey and my game would be over," Darius's voice whispered into her right ear, his cool breath fanning the side of her head. Brittany whipped her head to the right, only to face emptiness. She suddenly heard his deep, mocking chuckles to her left. She jerked her head towards the sound of his laugher, but was again met with nothing. "Where are you?!" Brittany cried out in frustration, turning her head back forward again. "Boo," he whispered, appearing directly in front of her face. Brittany flinched back at the sight of him so close. "Now, since you've clearly lost the game, I get my winning reward," he said, grinning evilly, watching her closely like a predator does to its prey. Brittany panicked and begged, "No! Please, let me go, I promise I won't tell anyone! They won't even know I came into the forest! Please, if you just-" Darius cut her off stating, "But we agreed to the rules of the game. You can't try to change the rules since you lost," he said in a tone similar to what a parent would use to scold a child. "You knew I wouldn't win. You knew I didn't have a chance," Brittany began, tears freely rushing down her face in streams. "You cheated! Since you didn't play fair, I should be allowed to leave-!" Brittany argued, just to be cut off by Darius again. "I made the game, so I make the rules. Now, my ruling for you is," he paused, glancing down at her with a malicious smile on his face, his fangs slightly protruding from between his lips. "Death."

 He lunged towards Brittany's neck with his mouth open wide, his white fangs glistening in the little light the moon shed. Brittany screamed as she saw his two gleaming white fangs get closer to her throat. She flung herself backwards, ignoring the protest of her leg. She scrambled backwards to put as much distance between Darius and herself as she could. This wasn't enough to stop him though. He threw himself on top Brittany, unable to control himself from the bloodlust he felt towards her. The blood pouring out from her calf, nose, and the small portions of dried blood left on her hands and knees was driving him to the point of insanity. Brittany struggled violently underneath him, flinging her body in every way that she possibly could in hopes of throwing him off of her. Darius grabbed her wrists and slammed them on the ground, reducing the amount of force behind her struggles. Brittany screamed as loud as she could, vainly hoping that someone would hear her and come running to save her. However, Brittany had no such luck. Her screams angered Darius further and he broke both of her wrists with his tight grip. Brittany howled out in pain, the pain in her leg and nose completely forgotten as the new pain in her wrists overpowered them. Darius looked at her one last time before asking, "No one has ever come out of this forest alive. What made you think you were different from the rest? There's no escape from me." Darius leaned down, hovering his fangs over her neck before sinking his teeth into the fragile skin on her neck. She cried out in agony, feeling pain radiate all over her body. She felt him dig his teeth even deeper into her flesh, ripping the muscle tissues and causing more blood to flow out of the puncture wounds and into his mouth. Brittany felt him draining the life from her body, making her feel woozy and causing her vision to black out slightly. She weakly attempted to reach into her pocket to grab the wooden stick that she had found and stashed earlier. Once she successfully got the stick out, she raised her hand in the air and proceeded to shove the wooden stake through his chest using the remaining strength she had. Brittany felt his body go stiff and then fall all together on top of her, his weight crushing her much smaller body. Darius did not move. Brittany shoved him off of her and when he still didn't move, she knew she had partially accomplished her goal-she had killed him so he could no longer play his sick game with the people of her town. However, she didn't have the strength to make it out alive herself. *I guess he was right*, she thought to herself, closing her eyes and allowing the peaceful darkness to consume her. *There is no escape*.