

THE VAMPIRE & HER WITCH

Chapter 1 1: A Shallow Grave

Cold rain poured from the sky, turning the ground soft and slick as a battered woman struggled to pull herself from a shallow grave. Bloody hands clawed at the earth clutching at the root of a nearby tree as she struggled to pull her head above the damp earth.

Inch by inch, Ashlynn Blackwell emerged from the sodden soil, gasping for breath the instant her head emerged from the earth. Around her battered hands and arms, faint green light flickered, flowing from her body to the tree roots she clutched.

Slowly, moving at a speed that felt slower than a snail, the roots of the tree bent and twisted, wrapping themselves around Ashlynn's arms. Pain flared in her shoulders and all along her battered body when the tree began to pull her from the shallow grave her husband's knights had dumped her in.

As Ashlynn fought to escape the sodden earth, her thoughts were mired in the conversation she'd had just twelve hours ago when her mother tried to reassure her that this wouldn't happen.

Ashlynn had paced nervously in the bridal suite, dressed in the most beautiful white gown and wearing the finest jewelry her family could adorn with her as she prepared to wed Owain Lothian, the eldest son of the Marquis Bors Lothian.

"Mother, what will I do if he sees the mark?" Ashlynn asked the only other person in the room as she fidgeted nervously with the lace at the ends of her sleeves. "How can I hide it when we, we..."

"Just do as I've taught you," her mother sighed, crossing the room to take Ashlynn's hands in her own. "Dim the lights in the bridal suite and slip into your bed before you remove your shift. It's your first time, he won't be suspicious if you're overly shy about showing him your body."

"Once you bare your chest to him, he'll be too eager to ravish you to bother looking closely at the rest of your body," she said, sounding confident and experienced in front of her blushing daughter. "The important part is to bear him a child as soon as you can," she emphasized.

"Owain is a good man," her mother reassured her. "He won't kill the mother of his child, even if she bears the mark of a witch. Once it's too late, he'll keep your secret."

"But, what if I just tell him? I've never used my powers, I haven't even learned anything about witchcraft," Ashlynn insisted. "Shouldn't I be honest with my husband if we're to spend our lives together?"

Back at home in Blackwell County, things had felt so much easier. She'd made it to her twenty-first birthday without anyone ever discovering her secret. Admittedly, she'd spent most of those years rarely leaving her family's estate, content to leave responsibility for social functions to her younger sister while she spent her days in the family's vast library.

Now, however, she'd come all the way to the frontier of Lothian March. The handsome lord she'd only met at a pair of formal balls was about to become her husband for the rest of her life.

For two years they'd written letters to each other every month but how well did he truly know her? The love they'd built felt too thin and fragile to support the weight of her secret. Now, on the day of her wedding, she was afraid that it would all come crashing down around her.

"My dearest daughter," her mother said, placing a hand gently on her daughter's cheek. "If you tell him tonight, before he consummates the

marriage, things may go very badly. Lothian March is much closer to the demons than Blackwell County."

"Young Lord Owain and his father have fought the demons personally so the fear they have for witches is even greater than back home. If he thinks that you're the same as the demons he's fought then he won't hesitate to execute you," she said, her voice becoming cold.

If her daughter failed here, if she confessed before securing a future with Young Lord Owain, it would spell doom for more than just Ashlynn. When she saw understanding in her daughter's emerald eyes, her stiff expression softened and she continued.

"It's only through having his child that you can escape that fate. I've done the best I can to prepare you," she said in a softer tone. "Now, calm yourself. Your father will be here soon to walk you down the aisle and you mustn't let him see you anxious," she said.

Just twelve hours ago, the sounds of wedding bells had filled the air as she walked down the aisle before all the lords and ladies of the March of Lothian and their guests to marry the man of her dreams. She stood before the High Priest as he read the rites and her heart soared when Owain slipped an antique ring on her delicate finger.

Even six hours later, after the feast and the ball, she could still feel the touch of his lips on hers as she prepared herself for her first night with her husband. Her mind was filled with dreams of laughing children and a loving family. She was ready to give all of herself to Owain.

Once he entered the bedchamber, however, her dreams had been torn away along with her bridal undergarments.

Someone had told him. Somehow, he knew. It could only have happened after they said their vows. It might have been during the ball or at the feast, she had no way of knowing. Whenever it happened, the words someone whispered in her husband's ears had sealed her fate.

The Owain that entered their bedchambers was like a man possessed. The smell of strong wine clung to his breath as he shouted at her, demanding the truth from her. Hot tears spilled from his eyes even as spittle flew from his lips.

When she protested, he turned violent, pinning her to the wall and tearing the clothing from her body until the truth was revealed.

There, on her hip, in the shape of an ash tree, lay the Mark of the Witch. As an infant, her father had attempted to cut away the mark, even attempted to burn it away with a branding iron, but the mark always returned.

From her earliest memories, her mother had insisted that she never show anyone the mark, going so far as to bathe her child personally instead of allowing servants to attend to her.

It wasn't until years later that she realized what the mark meant. When she was old enough, she swore to her parents to never become a witch, to never usurp the power that belonged to the Holy Lord of Light.

She'd done everything she could to be a dutiful and devout daughter, dedicated to her family and she was prepared to offer the same devotion to Owain on the night of their wedding.

Yet no matter how she sobbed, no matter how she pleaded, Owain wouldn't hear it. Blow after blow from his powerful fists rained down on her body when he saw the birthmark on her hip. When she fell to the ground, punches turned into kicks and stomps as Owain vented his feelings of hurt, betrayal, and rage on the body of the woman he'd taken as his bride.

To Ashlynn, it felt like the beating lasted for an eternity filled with sharp pains and bitter sobs before Owain summoned two of his knights.

"Take her away," he commanded fiercely. He turned his back to where Ashlynn lay on the ground in a crumpled heap as though he couldn't bear to witness what he'd done with his own hands.

"Take her body into the Vale and burn it there," he said hoarsely. "I will not have a witch buried on my father's lands. Scatter her ashes to the winds and crush her bones. Leave nothing that could haunt us later."

"Shouldn't we bring her to the High Priest?" Sir Tommin, the older of the two knights, asked his lord. "The Church..."

"The Church will launch an inquisition if they find out that I married a witch," Owain spat, rounding on his loyal retainer with fury he thought he'd fully vented when he beat his wife to death.

"You do this quietly and you never speak of it again or you'll find a place beside her in the Vale," he hissed, barely holding himself back from shouting loudly enough to be heard by others outside the bedchambers.

What could the knights do but agree? Within a decade at most, the old lord would retire and pass the rule of the march to Owain. Defying him now would not only doom them but their families as well.

Ashlynn was quickly wrapped in a bedsheet and taken from the lord's manor. The knights loaded her into a cart and raced down the ancient road along the river until they'd passed beyond the borderstone and into the lands still ruled by heathen demons.

The night was cold and moonless and rain that had been a slight drizzle when the knights left the manor had turned into a downpour by the time they reached the forest of the vale. Now, no matter how much they doused Ashlynn in lamp oil, they couldn't strike a spark to burn her unmoving body.

"She's already dead," Sir Broll told his companion, giving her body a fierce kick to prove his point. "Let's just bury her and be done with it."

That one moment of negligence proved to be Ashlynn's salvation. Despite the terrible beating she'd suffered, a dim flame had begun to burn in Ashlynn's heart.

It can't end like this, she thought. She couldn't let it end when she didn't even know who betrayed her. More than that, she refused to die without taking Owain with her.

She couldn't. She refused. Stubbornly, she clung to the last glimmer of life within her chest while she was jostled along the road in the cart. She did nothing as she was kicked and beaten before the knights dumped her into a shallow grave. Even as they began to cover her in damp soil, she did nothing until minutes had passed since she felt the last shovel full of earth dumped on her body.

When she finally began to struggle her way free of the earth she clawed at the earth with more than just her hands. Fueled by hurt and anger, she tapped into the long-dormant power slumbering in her chest, forcing it outward with her struggling hands.

She didn't know how to properly use that power. At the moment, her mind was too clouded by pain and soul-wrenching grief to think clearly about what she wanted her power to do. All she knew was that she had to escape this grave, and the trees responded to her desires, using their roots to help pull her from the earth.

Now, free of the shallow grave, Ashlynn clutched at the dirty bed sheet she'd been buried in and staggered towards the ancient road. She wasn't sure

where she was going or how she would survive but she knew one thing and she repeated it over and over again in her mind as though it were a magic spell.

She wouldn't die tonight. She wouldn't die tomorrow. As long as there was breath in her body, she refused to die until she dragged the people responsible for this night into a grave along with her.