

THE VAMPIRE & HER WITCH

Chapter 2 2: The Lady of the Vale

In the years before humans began to conquer this continent, the Vale of Mists had been one of the few passes between the lush lowlands of the east and the arid lands west of the Umber Mountains. Countless streams converged in the Vale, joining to form the river humans named the Luath.

Lightning rippled across the sky above and rain continued to fall, washing the dirt from her dull blonde hair and soaking through the stained bedsheet that clung to her skin.

It had taken her far too long to reach the roadway that ran alongside the river, staggering from tree to tree through the forest until she emerged like a ghost in the night.

Now that she arrived, however, she had to make a decision about where to go. More than anything, she yearned to follow the roadway downriver, returning to the March of Lothian where she could eventually make her way home.

There were a number of small villages along the river where she might be able to beg for clothing and a place to shelter from the storm. From there she could... could what? Write to her parents? Beg for help returning to Blackwell County?

Owain might believe she was dead but someone had betrayed her secret. As much as she wanted to deny it, it could even have been a member of her own family. She doubted that it would have been her father, he was the one to arrange her marriage to Young Lord Owain in the first place.

But what about the others in her family? She hated the thought that her mother might have, but in recent years her mother had devoted most of her time and affection to her younger sister Jocelynn. Or perhaps it had been Jocelynn herself?

Ashlynn didn't want to believe it could have been either of them. She would much rather believe that it had been one of their retainers or servants who had discovered her secret and revealed it when they arrived in the March of Lothian.

No matter who had betrayed her, if she revealed herself to her family now, without knowing who it was then she risked falling into a trap prepared by the traitor.

The alternative, however, was even more terrifying. Deep in the Vale of Mists, demons lurked and with them a ruler humans called the Demon Lady of the vale. Ashlynn had read a few accounts of the battles fought between the Lothian family and the demons of the vale and they frightened her to the bones.

According to the records, the demon who ruled the vale feasted on the blood and flesh of children and the elderly, snatching the most vulnerable in the dead of night. She was a demon capable of tearing through a knight's armor with her clawed hands to rip out their still-beating hearts.

Turning to the demons should be a death sentence for a human but... was a witch really human? The Church didn't think so, or at least, it taught that witches were humans who had been overtaken by the magic of demons.

To the Church, witches might as well be demons even when they were born to human parents. If that was the case, she might be able to find a home with them.

It was impossible to know. Alone in the dark, cold and wet, covered with nothing but a dirty bed sheet, there was no answer to her questions about traitors or demons.

"If I could d-die either way," she said through chattering teeth, her body trembling in the cold. "I'd r-rather be killed by demons than by my own kind." At least, she imagined, it would hurt less to be killed by an enemy than the people she thought of as her own people.

Turning resolutely upstream, she returned to the edge of the forest, her bare feet sinking into the soft damp soil as she shuffled her way from tree to tree, huddling for shelter against the persistent rain. The smell of damp earth and cedar filled her nose as she stumbled her way through the night.

How she managed to keep moving after suffering such an extensive beating was something she didn't entirely understand. Strangely, each time she felt herself flagging as though she couldn't push on any further, ready to sink to the ground under one of the great trees of the forest, a few deep breaths of the tree's rich fragrance would drain a portion of the fatigue from her body and give her the strength to make it a few trees further ahead.

Unfortunately, the process couldn't go on forever. Each time it felt like she was able to purge less and less of her fatigue. Eventually, after what felt like more than an hour of walking, Ashlynn sank to the ground against the trunk of a

mighty cedar tree, wrapping her arms around her trembling legs that refused to carry her any further.

The rain had finally stopped and the clouds began to part, revealing a starry sky and a slender crescent moon.

In the distance, she thought she heard the clatter of horses on the ancient roadway but she dismissed it as wishful thinking. How many times since she started trudging towards the demons had she imagined her family coming riding up in the night to rescue her from her fate?

It was wishful thinking born of dire circumstances. Her toes and feet had become numb with cold after slogging through the damp soil and she could no longer feel the tip of her nose or her fingers. The pain of cracked and bruised ribs forced her to take shallow breaths and her blood thundered in her ears with every step she forced her abused body to take.

Yet now that she'd stopped walking, the sound of horses became even louder, accompanied by the creak of a carriage racing along the road. The sound came from downriver, in the direction of the March of Lothian.

For a moment, hope flared in her chest, giving her the strength to raise her head and look at the roadway in the direction of the sounds. Had her family

really come to her rescue? Perhaps Owain felt regret for his actions and had come to retrieve her body?

When the carriage finally pulled into view, however, Ashlynn's hopes were crushed beneath its wheels.

The carriage itself was large enough to carry four to six people in relative comfort and the windows of the carriage had been fitted with expensive glass and dark lace shades, marking it as something fit to carry the most prestigious of passengers.

It was the door of the carriage, however, that sent chills racing down Ashlynn's spine. On any carriage in the kingdom that served a noble house, the doors would be adorned with the noble family's coat of arms.

Demons, however, didn't use anything like human heraldry. Instead, their carriages, banners, and other emblems were marked with a glyph that represented the name of their demon lord. Ashlynn had never studied demon heraldry but in preparing to wed the future Marquis of Lothian, she'd learned the glyph that represented the Demon Lady of the Vale.

It was the very same glyph she saw now on the door of the carriage that had just come to a stop when it reached her. Ashlynn's heart raced as a cloaked figure descended from the driver's seat of the carriage to open the door.

For a moment, when the door of the carriage opened, Ashlynn felt like she was staring into an infinite abyss of darkness. The world around her fell away until she couldn't hear anything but the motions of the occupant of the carriage. She couldn't feel anything as though she'd come adrift from her own body and even the sound of her own heartbeat in her ears felt dull and distant.

Then, as if a rose had blossomed in darkness, Ashlyn watched a pale figure emerge from the carriage. Far from the hideous monster that she'd feared, the woman who stepped out of the carriage was the most beautiful person Ashlynn had ever seen.

Dark hair fell in soft curls to frame a delicate face with skin as pale as polished alabaster and lush lips painted a dark plum red. Ashlyn's breath caught when her emerald eyes met the woman's midnight blue eyes that sparkled like they held the stars of the night sky.

"It seems like this trip isn't a waste after all," the beautiful woman said in a voice that was rich and musical. "You don't need to fear me, Child of the Earth," she continued, drifting forward with an inhuman grace.

"Come with me," the mesmerizing woman whispered, her voice sounding like it was right next to Ashlynn's ear even though the woman had yet to step off the roadway. "Let me help you. You don't belong among people who would torment you for the gifts you were born to."