

The Vampire 50

Chapter 50 50: Confrontation

Twilight had come to the forest and several hours had passed since Harrod joined Ashlynn and Ollie. With guidance from the horned soldier, they changed direction and headed toward the top of a nearby hill.

The slog through the rough terrain clearly took a toll on Ollie, but Ashlynn found that the more time she spent in the forest, the stronger she felt. Despite going the entire day without a meal other than thin porridge at breakfast, she barely felt hungry.

When they did stop to rest, she found that leaning against one of the trees provided much more comfort than sitting on a fallen log or boulder. It was as if she could feel the roots of the living tree stretching down into the earth, drawing upon the rich soil for strength and offering it to her in her time of need.

She'd felt similar things after crawling out of the grave that Broll and Tommin left her in. Like the earth itself was offering to help keep her alive.

The feeling was different from the sorcery she'd learned from Nyrielle. When she used sorcery, she felt like she was a sponge, brimming with water that would flow if she just squeezed a bit. Too much, however, and she would dry herself out.

The forest felt like floating on a vast sea of water. There was so much energy around her that it felt like it could never be used up. At the moment, however, she didn't know how to swim. All she could do was dip her hand into the water and take an occasional drink.

"No wonder Nyrielle wants to take me to the Mother of Thorns," Ashlynn mused as she leaned against a tree while they took another break. "This is too different from what she knows."

Suddenly, her thoughts were interrupted by a high-pitched whistling sound, followed by a loud -THUNK- as an arrow embedded itself into the tree she was leaning against just a few inches away from her.

"Archer!" she snapped, ducking low to the ground half a breath before a second arrow joined the first, striking the spot she'd been leaning against just a second ago.

"Over there," Ollie yelled, pointing downhill where a group of men had begun to rush toward them.

There were seven men in total along with four bloodhounds who began barking and howling as soon as their leashes were released. Two men dressed in drab greens and browns held compact bows and stood behind a fallen tree or large rock while drawing another arrow to fire again.

Two other men in drab green and brown clothing charged along with two men wearing thickly padded armor in Lothian colors. In their hands, they carried heavy-bladed knives or stout wooden clubs bound with iron.

It was the final person, however, who drew most of Ashlynn's attention. Sir Broll was a mountain of a man who would tower head and shoulders above her if they stood close together. He'd abandoned his heavy armor in favor of a heavily padded gambeson more suited to fighting on foot while trekking through the forest.

Sir Broll's pace was almost leisurely, taking powerful strides behind the other men and allowing them to face danger while he walked behind with a heavy ax propped on his shoulder.

"My Lady," Harrod said, darting in front of Ashlynn and taking a fighting posture with his mace. "You should flee, I'll hold them off."

The appearance of a demon startled the hunters and soldiers enough to break their charge and the dogs stopped in their tracks, whimpering before running back toward the men with bows.

"It's just one horned demon," Sir Broll shouted. "A gold sovereign for the person who kills it and claims its head! Move," he commanded, shoving one of the hunters from behind.

"You can't win this fight, Harrod," Ashlynn said, putting a hand gently on the horned man's shoulder as she stepped past him. "Let me."

"My Lady, what are you..."

"In the name of my husband, Owain Lothain, I command you to HALT!" Ashlynn commanded, standing up straight and mustering every bit of dignity she could manage while wearing a servant's uniform and covered in dirt and loose twigs.

Ollie gasped, his eyes widening in shock. He turned to Ashlynn, his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water as he struggled to process what he'd just heard. Lynnda was married to Lord Owain? How was that possible?

The only thing he could think of was that she and Lord Owain had married in secret. Perhaps the rumors that she was Lord Bors's illegitimate daughter had gotten it all wrong. If Lord Owain had fallen in love with a serving girl and married her in secret then... wouldn't that make his marriage to Lady Ashlynn a sham?

Harrod, on the other hand, tensed, his grip tightening on his mace. He'd known Lady Ashlynn's true identity, of course, but he hadn't expected her to reveal it like this. His face burned with shame that she'd been forced into the open like this.

It should be him protecting her, not the other way around, but when they were so badly outnumbered there was nothing he could do. Helpless to defend her, he moved slightly, positioning himself between the cowering kitchen boy and the soldiers. Lady Ashlynn claimed that the young man helped her escape and that she owed him a debt. If he couldn't defend her, he could at least protect her benefactor.

Confusion stopped the two soldiers though the hunters didn't seem to care and continued their advance, thinking only of the gold reward for killing the demon behind the woman.

"Sir Broll," Ashlynn said, her voice growing stern. "Control your men!"

"Nice try wench," the knight spat. "But Lady Ashlynn is back at the villa with my Lord Owain. You'd have done better if you tried to convince me you were Marquis Lothian's love child like the cook seems to think."

"Everyone else can think that serving girl is Owain's wife," Ashlynn said. "But you, Sir Broll, along with your friend Sir Tommin, you know exactly where you two buried me in the Vale of Mists. Did you think I would forget?"

This time, her words seemed to shock even the hunters into stillness. All heads turned to Sir Broll, waiting to see how he would respond to the accusation.

"Impossible," the knight said, his eyes wide as he looked at the dark-haired woman dressed in a commoner's outfit. In the fading light, it was hard to tell whether or not she could really be the woman she claimed to be. Her height and build matched the Ashlynn Blackwell he'd met several times while Owain was courting her, and her face bore some resemblance but was it really her or just some common girl with a passing resemblance like the woman pretending to be Ashlynn back at the villa.

"Impossible," he repeated more firmly. Whether it was true or not, he couldn't afford to admit what had happened in front of his men. If he did, there was no guarantee they wouldn't turn on him. "Lies and deceit from a woman who consorts with demons. Men, seize her!"

"Do not move!" Ashlynn commanded. If she hadn't exhausted her sorcery when she interrogated Sir Kaefin she might have been able to put some magic behind her words but at the moment, the only thing she had to keep them from rushing her was the image of strength and authority she projected.

If she gave even an inch, she was certain that the men following Sir Broll would overwhelm Harrod and kill her and Ollie on the spot. It was impossible for the three of them to fight off seven men so she did the only thing she could and pressed forward. She took several steps toward the armed men as though she knew they wouldn't harm her.

"Sir Broll should remind your men about the punishment for commoners who assault a noblewoman," she said coldly. "Death by hanging is a mercy. I'm told that my father-in-law still believes in drawing and quartering to set an example. I can't imagine he would look kindly on people who assaulted his daughter-in-law," she said, turning her gaze briefly on the men between her and the knight.

"Sir Broll," one of the soldiers said nervously. "Is, is this woman really, really the Lady Ashlynn Blackwell?"

"Go ahead, Sir Broll," Ashlynn said. "Tell them about how Owain beat me the night of our wedding. Tell them how he commanded you and Sir Tommin to dispose of my body in the Vale of Mists. Or would you like me to tell them stories instead?"

"I could tell them about the time you visited Blackwell County for the Autumn harvest festival," she said, stepping up close to the soldier who had spoken. "Would you like to hear about how seasick Sir Broll was when we took him out to the lighthouse on Beacon Island in the harbor? Or about many silver pennies he lost playing a fishing game at the festival?"

"Sir Broll," the soldier said, turning toward the knight. When he saw the other man's expression, however, he didn't even need to ask whether it was true or not. He could see it in the knight's narrowed eyes and lowered brow. The woman spoke the truth and the knight was furious about it.

"Stand aside men," Ashlynn said calmly. "I'll resolve this with Sir Broll. Personally," she added, stepping around the soldier to face the knight directly.

"Sir Broll, I charge you with the crime of conspiracy to murder a noblewoman and aiding in the attempt to commit that crime. Since there are no lords present of sufficient rank to try you for your crimes, I challenge you to trial by combat!"

"May the Holy Lord of Light bear witness," Ashlynn said with a dark smile. "And may he have mercy on your soul."