

The Vampire 51

Chapter 51 51: Challenge Accepted

As soon as Ashlynn said the words 'trial by combat' the entire gathering went still. Only noblemen and the Templars possessed the right to trial by combat and the trial of either for any crime was so rare that choosing trial by combat was virtually unheard of. Yet neither the Church nor the king had ever suggested stripping people of this right in the hundreds of years since the Kingdom of Gall was first established.

"This is madness," Sir Broll said once the moment of shock passed. "Men, apprehend her for impersonating a noblewoman, slandering a knight and the murder of Sir Kaefin. She will hang for her crimes by dawn!"

"Consider carefully, goodmen," Ashlynn said, never taking her eyes from Sir Broll's sweating face. "If Sir Broll is right, you'll suffer no consequences and reap great rewards for following his orders."

"If I'm not lying, however," she said, meeting the gaze of each of the other men, "then you'll be the ones who hang for assaulting me. You don't need to make a decision," she added, returning her gaze to the knight and smiling at him.

"A challenge to trial by combat has been issued. The Holy Lord of Light will witness the duel and then the decision will be made for you. Just act as witnesses and any decisions can wait until after the duel," she said.

"Even if you are Lady Ashlynn," Sir Broll said. "We cannot have a trial by combat here. There is no one who can stand for you as a champion unless you're going to insist that a demon is somehow qualified to stand as your champion before the Holy Lord of Light," he said smugly.

"My Lady," Harrod said, stepping forward as soon as Broll spoke. "I will stand as your champion if you require it," he said, kneeling at her feet and holding up his mace in both hands. "Speak the words and I will kill this man for you."

Ollie sat down heavily on the ground, his eyes wide and his jaw slack. At this point, he no longer knew what was truth and what was falsehood. Lynnda claimed to be the Lady Ashlynn Blackwell and that the woman in the villa was an imposter.

Moreover, she was challenging a knight to a trial by combat. It was like he'd become wrapped up in some kind of tale sung by a minstrel, something so fanciful that he half believed that he was dreaming. Any minute now, he was certain to wake up in his straw bed in the villa to find Otis yelling at him for oversleeping again.

"Harrod, I appreciate your valor and your loyalty," Ashlynn said with a gentle smile at the horned man. "But you cannot be my champion. Only a knight or nobleman can fight Sir Broll to prove out my accusations. Since there are none here, I will fight him myself."

As much as she would have loved to allow Harrod to defend her, under the laws of the Kingdom of Gaal, even if he wasn't a member of the Horned Clan, a commoner couldn't be a champion. If she was in the Vale of Mists, where the kingdom's laws didn't apply, she wouldn't be doing any of this.

Right now, however, her dubious status as a noblewoman and her insistence on following the ancient laws and customs was the only thing keeping the six men with Sir Broll from attacking her. Since that was the case, she had to see it through to the very end.

"This isn't a suitable place to fight," she said, looking around the group of men. "The sun is setting. We should be able to reach the hilltop by nightfall. You men can escort us there."

"You're stalling," Sir Broll said, his brows wrinkled in a frown. "Whether I fight you here or there, it won't change anything. You'll die all the same so why bother with this farce?"

"If I'll die all the same then it makes no difference," she said with a slow smile. Turning on her heel, she began to walk up towards the top of the hill where Captain Lennart and his men were supposed to be camped.

To the men who had come with Sir Broll, despite her common clothing and dirty appearance, she looked every inch a regal lady, walking up the hillside as though she was ascending a throne.

"Sir Broll," one of the soldiers said, making up his mind when he saw the way the young woman conducted herself. He'd never met Ashlynn Blackwell but he'd served in the castle of the Marquis Lothian long enough to see several young ladies and he recognized the bearing of one in everything from her posture to her speech.

"We'll escort you to the dueling ground," the soldier said, glancing briefly at his companions for support. "If it turns out there's any trick or trap, we'll fight our way out with you."

"You lot really believe her," Sir Broll sighed. "Fine. Let's go put an end to this nonsense," he said, resting the haft of his ax on his shoulder. "But don't think that I'll forgive this when we return."

Slightly further up the hill, Ashlynn stopped to offer Ollie a hand getting up.

"Come on," she said. "You don't get to see something like this every day."

"Are, are you really the Lady Ashlynn?" Ollie stammered as he got to his feet without taking her hand. Knowing that she was a lady, a proper noble, he didn't dare to touch her the way he had been throughout their escape.

"Whether I am or not, you'll know soon enough," Ashlynn said. "Harrod, go on ahead and prepare a space for us to fight."

"My Lady?" the horned man asked, raising a bushy eyebrow at her. "The hilltop?" He knew that Captain Lennart would have his men waiting there for his arrival, he'd blown a signal whistle hours ago and received a reply.

He thought it was a stroke of brilliance that she had convinced the humans to follow her all the way to his captain's camp where they would outnumber the humans accompanying Sir Broll almost two to one, but if at that point, why fight? Why not just allow them to kill the humans and be done with it?

"I've already killed one person who didn't need to die today," Ashlynn said quietly. "And several others may have been harmed in the fire that helped us escape. These men with Sir Broll, they've done nothing to me to deserve death. After I defeat Sir Broll, we can take them as captives and return to the vale."

"But, my lady," Harrod said. "Can you defeat him?"

Ashlynn didn't reply to Harrod. She couldn't. The odds of her defeating a trained knight in a fair duel were very, very small. But, much like when she set out on this mission in the first place, part of her stubbornly refused to consider any other way to resolve this problem.

She was still a human being and she would resolve this using human laws in a battle against another human. At the moment, that meant almost as much to her as the opportunity to kill Sir Broll with her own hands.

"Just go," Ashlynn finally said. "Make sure things are ready so there are no mistakes."