

## The Vampire 52

### Chapter 52 52: Dueling Ground

For half an hour, the group trudged up the hillside in relative silence. No one dared to speak and even the hounds felt increasingly subdued as they approached the hilltop. The only sounds to break the silence were the crunching of leaves and twigs underfoot and the crackling of torches lit by Sir Broll's men.

Ashlynn led the way, keeping the light at her back. After spending more than a month in the vale sleeping during the day and spending the entire night awake, she'd almost become more comfortable in the dark than in bright daylight. With the gifts bestowed by her bond with Nyrielle, her eyes had become even more capable of helping her navigate the forest at night.

"How can she tell where we're going?" one of the men whispered to a companion after Ashlynn diverted them around a deep sinkhole. "Has she been here before?"

"Maybe the Holy Lord of Light is guiding her," another said, making a sign to ward off evil. "Like no harm can come to her until after the trial."

"Then you think she's really..." the first man said, his voice trailing off as he dared not give voice to his suspicions.

"Just because the Holy Lord of Light wants her to live to fight her duel doesn't mean he wants her to win it," the second man said. "She speaks with demons. The Holy Lord of Light may guide her now but it's only so Sir Broll can kill her for her crimes."

"Maybe," the first man said, his eyes fixed on Ashlynn as she navigated her way through the darkness. "But something doesn't feel right."

"Where are you taking us Lynnda?" Sir Broll said, taking several large steps to catch up to Ashlynn. Even if he had come to believe that she was really Ashlynn Blackwell, he refused to admit it in front of his men. "What's that glow up ahead?"

"I sent Harrod up ahead to prepare a space for our duel," Ashlynn said without looking at the knight. "You didn't think I was going to make you fight in the dark, did you?"

"You seem very familiar with demons," he said darkly. "You can't think the Holy Lord of Light will let you triumph when you consort with the forces of darkness."

"I think the world isn't what we were taught," Ashlynn said with a small smile.

A few moments later, startled gasps came from Sir Broll's men and the bloodhounds began to whimper and cower when the group entered a brightly lit clearing atop the hill.

Torches had been set in the ground every dozen feet, creating a ring of flame almost fifty feet across. There were signs that a cookfire had been extinguished and quickly buried to one side of the ring and several places looked like tents had been hastily cleared away to make a clear space for the trial. Only a single tent remained, pitched outside the ring of fire.

What shocked Sir Broll's men, however, wasn't the ring of fire but the collection of people standing at the center of it. The short, horned demon that had initially been with the woman claiming to be Lady

Ashlynn had been joined by five others of his kind. Worse than that, however, were the six figures who towered over the horned demons, standing nearly twice as tall.

"Clawed demons," one of the soldiers said, his hand dropping to his waist and clutching at the mace that hung there. "So many of them..."

"You knew!" Sir Broll hissed, rounding on Ashlynn in fury. "You never intended to fight an honorable trial by combat, you were just luring us into your trap!"

"Captain Lennart," Ashlynn said warmly, ignoring the knight and walking gracefully over the uneven ground to meet the leader of the group. "Thank you for preparing this for me tonight. I'll be depending on you to ensure that no one interferes with my duel tonight."

"Your will, my Lady," one of the bearish men said, stepping forward and kneeling respectfully at Ashlynn's feet.

Captain Lennart, much like Commander Bassinger, was a powerfully built man who was tall enough for his eyes to be even with Ashlynn's when he knelt before her. His fur was a tawny golden color and his eyes were a brilliant yellow that seemed to glow in the flickering torchlight.

"Harrod told me what you intend to do," the captain said. "Is it possible to change your mind? If Harrod cannot fight for you, I can. Or, if it must be a knight, Sir Thane will arrive in a few hours to bring you home."

For a moment, Ashlynn hesitated at the captain's suggestion. While Lennart couldn't fight for her any more than Harrod could, Thane was different. He had been a knight in the Lothian March before he

became one of Nyrielle's progeny. If you ignored the fact that he was a vampire, he did possess the standing to serve as her champion.

As soon as she considered it, however, she dismissed the notion. It felt too much like cowardice to hide behind Thane and it felt dishonest to do so after she'd promised to fight this battle on her own. She'd started this and she was determined to see it to the end.

"I thank you for your offer, Captain," she said, placing a hand gently on the man's broad shoulder. "But I have to do this myself. There are two things that you can do for me."

"Speak the words, my Lady," the hulking man said, lowering his head. He'd hoped that he would be able to convince her. His mission was to see that she was protected until Thane could arrive to bring her home. Seeing her make it this far only to refuse his protection hurt in ways he would never admit to but he was powerless to refuse the orders of Lady Nyrielle's Seneschal.

"Ollie," Ashlynn called, waving over the kitchen boy. "Ollie, stay close to Captain Lennart," she said, reaching out to grab his hand and dragging him closer when he seemed hesitant about coming too close to a member of the Clan of the Great Claw.

"Captain, this man helped me escape," she explained. "No matter what happens, see that he makes it safely back to the vale."

"On my honor, we will protect this man," Lennart said firmly. "What is your second command?"

"I need a blade for this duel. Do any of your men have one I can borrow?" Ashlynn asked.

"Better than that, my Lady," Lennart said, standing and gesturing to the tent. "Sir Thane worried that you might be pursued during daylight hours after reaching us, so he left your blade with us, along with a change of clothing."

"Big brother Thane really does think of everything," she said with a slight smile.

"Sir Broll," Ashlynn called, turning back to face the knight who had formed a huddle with his men, whispering quietly to each other. "I'm going to prepare myself for our duel. I suggest you take this time to make peace with the Holy Lord of Light."

"You still expect me to participate in this farce?" Sir Broll snapped, gripping his ax tightly and taking a fighting stance. Behind him, the soldiers and hunters did the same; the two archers even nocked arrows and prepared to draw.

"I don't just expect you to," Ashlynn said, raising her hand to stop Captain Lennart's men from preparing to fight. "I know you will. On my honor as a Blackwell, if I die tonight, these men will let you go. And if you die, I will still guarantee their lives," she said, meeting the gaze of the men behind the knight.

"You expect us to trust demons?" Broll spat, his eyes narrowing when he saw his men's confidence waver. The odds were already terrible and he'd only just convinced his men to fight their way free.

Not that Sir Broll intended to fight to the death against twice their number in demons. He just hoped that his men would be able to buy enough time before they died for him to escape into the dark of the forest. As long as he survived this night, there was always time to come back for revenge.

Now, however, with just a few words from that woman, his men were wavering again. No wonder Lord Owain called her a witch!

"I expect you to accept reality," Ashlynn said, turning away and walking toward the tent. "Captain Lennart, if they do anything foolish while I'm changing, you have my permission to slaughter them. Otherwise, they're not to be harmed."

"S-sir Broll," one of the hunters said, his voice trembling. "I-I don't want to die tonight. They haven't attacked us yet," he added, kneeling next to the bloodhounds that were cowering behind his legs. "We should give them a chance."

After one man spoke, several others spoke up as well. None of them had ever fought demons before but they'd all heard the stories. A single horned demon could take down three or four men before it was killed and a clawed demon was even worse. Forget being outnumbered two to one, even if there were only half as many demons it was still a fight that they were doomed to lose.

Since that was the case, they'd rather clutch at any hope of survival, even if it was just the words of the strange woman who seemed to be able to command demons. After all, they thought, the alternative was certain death.