

## The Vampire 53

### Chapter 53 53: Trial By Combat

In the tent, Ashlynn found the soft leather boots, dark breeches, and white puff-sleeved tunic that she'd worn when training with Thane. She also found a rich, emerald green sash that he'd added to her outfit along with a note.

Keep yourself safe until I come for you.

Thane's words were simple, his handwriting neat and elegant, and it instantly brought a smile to her lips.

"I wish I was as strong as your real sister," Ashlynn whispered. With only two weeks of intense lessons to prepare for her mission, she felt far from confident, but one way or another, things would be over before he arrived.

"Wish me luck," she said, clutching the note briefly to her chest before cleaning herself up and changing into fresh clothes.

The sword that Thane left for her was a simple steel falchion, though it was thicker and heavier than most, it lacked the weight of the darksteel weapon he expected her to eventually master. The heavy weight and rough leather-wrapped hilt were a welcome comfort after such a perilous escape without so much as a knife to defend herself with.

Emerging from the tent, Ashlynn paused beside one of the large cedar trees of the forest, kneeling at its roots as if in prayer.

"I don't know how this works," she whispered, placing her fingers on the thick bark and taking a deep breath of the rich cedar fragrance. "But whenever I've been in danger in this forest, I've felt like it's helping me. Like you're helping me," she told the tree.

"Please, right now, I need your strength," she whispered, closing her eyes and trying to feel the energy of the forest.

A breeze stirred around her, rustling through the needles of the cedar tree and bringing the energy she felt in the forest almost close enough to reach out her hand to scoop up. Then, a feeling like being showered in warm rain enveloped her as needles dropped from the tree, bringing with them a small measure of the tree's ancient strength.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Praying won't change anything," Sir Broll said, mocking her from the center of the ring of fire. At the insistence of Captain Lennart, he'd stripped off his padded armor and wore only a simple, sleeveless tunic above his breeches.

While fighting without armor was supposed to make the fight 'fair' since Ashlynn had no armor to wear, one look at the thick, cord-like muscles of Broll's arms was enough for anyone to laugh at the notion that this fight would be 'fair.' Combined with the heavy ax that rested across his shoulders, none of the humans thought a woman as small as Ashlynn had the slightest chance of victory.

"I assume you've already said your prayers," Ashlynn said, standing and brushing the cedar needles off her breeches. Drawing her blade, she strode confidently into the ring of fire, stopping only when she was within a few paces of the much larger man.

"Enough of this, let's get it over with," the knight said impatiently. "Kitchen boy," he shouted, picking the only human that could be considered a remotely 'neutral' party, even if he considered the boy to be a traitor. "You say the word to start the fight."

"Me?" Ollie said, a panicked look on his face.

"Go on lad," Lennart said, placing a furry paw on the boy's shoulder. "No one will harm you for it."

"Last words?" Ashlynn asked, taking a fighting stance with one hand on the spine of the blade and the tip pointed toward the earth.

"Die, witch!" Sir Broll spat.

"Fight!" Ollie cried, his voice breaking in the chill night air.

Broll wasted no time, swinging his ax in a wide arc overhead before bringing it crashing down toward Ashlynn's head. It was a simple and direct killing blow that should have split her in two like a piece of firewood.

-CLANG-

Instead, Ashlynn received the blow directly, using both hands on her sword to block the powerful blow. A shiver rang through the blade, stinging her palms and her feet sank into the soft soil with the force of the impact but the blade of the ax stopped well short of her head.

For a moment, both fighters were perfectly still. The soldiers who had seen Sir Broll train or who had practiced with him and felt the strength of his blows stood with open mouths and wide eyes and even Ollie blinked several times in disbelief.

How could she block such strength?

The moment didn't last long. Broll pressed harder, trying to break down her guard with physical strength alone only for Ashlynn to deflect his ax aside before thrusting at his face.

What followed after was a much more tentative exchange of blows as both fighters took each other's measure. Despite its weight, Sir Broll's ax moved with surprising speed, striking out with the blade on one face and a spike on the other. His reach was much greater than hers and he used it mercilessly to keep Ashlynn on a constant retreat.

Ashlynn on the other hand, kept Thane's advice in mind. Every block was an opportunity to target Sir Broll's hands or wrists. She knew she couldn't get past his guard to pierce his chest or reach his neck, but without heavy gauntlets, his hands became very exposed.

"Damn it woman," Broll snapped, snatching one hand out of the way a hairsbreadth before losing fingers to her sword and nearly losing his grip on his ax with the other hand in the process. "Fight with honor!"

"Honor?" Ashlynn sneered. "This from a man who kicked a helpless woman and dumped her in a grave."

"You were dead!" Broll shouted, taking another heavy swing at her. "A dead witch!"

"But I wasn't," Ashlynn taunted, evading his swing and slicing at his forearm as the swing passed. A thin line of blood blossomed on Broll's muscular arm but if it hurt, he showed no sign of it.

"Proof that you're a witch," he bellowed, slamming his ax down in another brutal overhand blow. This time, when she blocked, he followed up with a powerful kick to her body, knocking her back several feet and sending her sprawling to the ground.

Pain exploded in her chest and the air was driven from her lungs by the kick. When her back struck the ground, lights exploded in her vision and for a moment, she could neither see nor hear what was happening around her.

Desperately, Ashlynn rolled to the side, tumbling over the rough ground and narrowly escaping a follow-up strike from Broll's ax as she stumbled to her feet. By the time her vision cleared, he was on her again, swinging the spike of his ax at her feet to pull them out from under her.

When the ax struck her ankle, however, her foot remained rooted firmly to the ground, as though she had become a mighty cedar tree defying the touch of an ax.

Too late, Sir Broll realized his mistake when he tugged on his ax in an attempt to drag her down. In the next moment, Ashlynn's falchion bit deeply into his wrists, severing both hands in a single blow.

A spray of hot, red liquid splashed across Ashlynn's face and the forest floor, but Thane had taught her to never assume that one blow was enough for victory. Dropping to one knee, she swung again, this time slamming the blade of her sword into the side of Broll's knee and severing the ligaments that allowed him to stand.

Broll's vision spun, pain exploding in his wrists and knee before he twisted and tumbled to the ground. Torches and trees swam past his eyes before his head crashed to the earth, momentarily stunning him.

"If I was a cruel woman," Ashlynn's voice said, sounding distant and echoing in his ears. "I would bury you like this, free to dig your way out of your own grave if you had the strength and the courage to."

All around the clearing, every human held their breath, still stunned at her victory when they heard her next words. Two of the hunters even turned away, unwilling to watch any further. Half of them expected her to order the demons to retrieve shovels and begin digging now.

The Eldritch, on the other hand, watched with smiles on their faces. Though none of them would admit it to her, many of them had clutched weapons, ready to charge in and rescue her at the last moment if things went badly.

They were certain that they'd be disciplined for it afterward, maybe even die for defying their Seneschal's orders, but none of them forgot how much Lady Nyrielle valued Ashlynn. Far better to offend Ashlynn and rescue her than to allow her to die at the human's hands in this duel.

"You're lucky," Ashlynn said, placing the tip of her blade on Broll's throat. "Just because you have to die, doesn't mean you have to suffer," she said before pressing firmly and driving her blade through his neck and into the earth below.

"Now," she said, lifting her head and looking at the remainder of Broll's men. "About the rest of you..."