

The Vampire 54

Chapter 54 54: Captives

The six men who had followed Sir Broll cowered as they looked at the bloody sword in Ashlynn's hands.

They thought, when they set out in the morning, that they were hunting a fugitive kitchen girl. A dangerous girl who had killed Sir Kaefin for assaulting her to be sure, but only dangerous because she'd encountered Sir Kaefin when he was defenseless.

Now, looking at her standing over the rapidly cooling body of Sir Broll, the knight who had always seemed invincible and invulnerable when he protected Lord Owain, they didn't know what to think or feel.

She was the Lady Ashlynn Blackwell, or at least she claimed to be. The most religious among them believed that she was. She'd invoked a trial by combat and killed Sir Broll in the name of the Holy Lord of Light. That should make her a blessed woman, chosen by the Holy Lord of Light to claim justice against a man who wronged her.

Others in the group weren't so sure. She consorted with demons and her strength seemed strange and unnatural for a woman of her size. Sir Broll had repeatedly called her a witch and they were starting to believe it.

Now, whether they believed one thing or the other, all eyes were fixed on Ashlynn.

"Captain Lennart," Ashlynn said slowly, trying to hide how much she was trembling now that the fight had finished. She barely had the strength to keep her sword pointed at the humans who had pursued her but she dared not relax until they surrendered.

"These men are my prisoners. They are to be taken to the castle in the vale where I will discuss their fate with Mistress Nyrielle," she said.

"Goodmen," she added, her emerald eyes meeting each of the gazes of the humans. "If you resist, these men will kill you where you stand. Drop your weapons and submit. And Ollie," she said, turning to the young man who fled with her.

"Me?" Ollie said, pointing at himself in confusion. "What, what does your ladyship require of me?" he asked, now fully convinced that she was who she claimed to be.

"I'm sorry, but I have to ask you to take on a responsibility. The bloodhounds," she said, pointing at the dogs who whimpered and cowered behind the hunters. "They're frightened by the scent of Captain Lennart's men. I need you to care for them in the days to come until they forget their fear."

"O-okay," the young man said, walking on unsteady feet over the uneven ground until he reached the hunters. "Um, mister, you should pass me their leashes," he said hesitantly to the hunters who held the hounds.

The men exchanged uneasy glances, their faces pale in the flickering torchlight. One of the hunters, a grizzled man with a scar across his cheek, spoke up hesitantly after passing over the leashes he held.

"My lady," he said, his voice trembling slightly, "what... what will become of us when we enter the Vale of Mists?"

"We, we won't be sacrificed to your demon friends, will we? Or, or to the Demon Lady of the Vale," the younger of Sir Broll's soldiers, cut in. As someone who'd grown up in the Lothian March, he'd heard countless horror stories about the Demon Lady who ruled the Vale of Mists and he couldn't help but wonder if they were being spared now so that the ruler of the vale could drink their blood and feast upon their flesh later.

Captain Lennart growled low in his throat, flexing his powerful claws and glaring at the group of captives. The men flinched and huddled closer together. Every one of the Eldritch people present, whether they were from the Horned Clan or the Clan of the Great Claw, bristled at the way the man referred not only to them but to their honored Eldritch Lady Nyrielle.

The insult was almost too great to tolerate!

"You will be treated fairly," Ashlynn said firmly, holding up a hand to stop Captain Lenart's men from advancing. As tired as she was, she'd fought too hard to preserve these men's lives to lose them now over misunderstandings.

"But I will give you a word of advice," she said in a tone that had clearly run out of patience. "The Eldritch do not like being referred to as 'demons.' They have names, you should learn them and use them."

Sir Broll's men, confronted with the overwhelming strength of the demons surrounding them, slowly lowered their weapons. They might not entirely believe Ashlynn's promise of fair treatment, but she'd made one thing abundantly clear. She was in command and at the moment, she didn't want them harmed.

It was a thin thing to put their hopes on, but right now, it was all they had.

"Captain, I leave you in command," Ashlynn said, turning toward the tent where she had changed into her current outfit. "I'll await Sir Thane in the tent."

If the towering man said anything in response, Ashlynn didn't hear it. Now that she'd said everything that had to be said and done everything that had to be done, all she wanted was a moment to herself.

When she entered the tent, she dropped her sword and sank to her knees, her body trembling uncontrollably.

Twice today, she'd taken a life. Part of her insisted that they deserved it. She'd done nothing wrong. Lords, and ladies in the absence of a lord, held the power of both high and low justice. She had seen her father sentence men to die and somewhere, in the back of her mind, she thought she'd prepared herself to do the same.

Drawing in a shaking breath of cool night air, followed by another, deeper breath, she struggled to compose herself. There was a difference between dispensing high justice, determining guilt and pronouncing a sentence, and killing a person with her own hands. She thought, when she prepared herself to claim vengeance, that she'd made peace with that, but now she wasn't so sure.

For nearly an hour, she sat quietly in the tent, breathing the cool night air and trying to steady the beating of her heart. Listening to the slow, steady echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat in her chest helped her to steady herself.

"I should talk to her about it," she realized. Nyrielle had ruled for more than a hundred years. The vampire had likely come to terms with killing others long ago. But, after so long, would she still understand what Ashlynn was feeling now?

"Or maybe I should talk to Thane," she thought.

"Oh, talk to me about what?" A deep, rich voice said from behind her.

"Thane!" Ashlynn said, standing up and turning to find him standing just inside the tent. In an instant, she flung herself at him, wrapping her arms around the vampire and clinging to him like a log in a storm tossed sea.

His body was as cold as the night air and there was no warmth in his embrace when he wrapped his strong arms around her to comfort her, but to Ashlynn, that didn't matter. A month ago, he'd offered to be her older brother and now, she needed one more than ever.

"I would hold you till the sun comes up," the former knight whispered, gently stroking her hair. "But I have to bring you home first and there's barely enough time."

"I know," she whispered into his broad chest. "Please, take me home."

Gently, he scooped her up in his arms before stepping back out of the tent and sweeping her off into the night. Thane hadn't hidden his arrival, in fact, he'd already spoken to Captain Lennart about the events of the night. When he departed with Ashlynn, however, he wrapped them both in darkness and mist.

She'd fought hard to establish herself as a warrior and leader and he refused to share her moment of vulnerability with anyone who hadn't earned the right to see it.

"Tell me about what happened," Thane said softly as he carried her into the night. "Tell me what's troubling your heart."

"I-I never killed a man before," Ashlynn said softly. "Now I've killed two. You, you must think I'm silly," she added, finding it awkward to talk about now that she brought it up."

"No, I don't," the vampire replied. "Tell me about it and I'll listen," he said.

As the cool night air whipped around them with the speed of their passage, Ashlynn slowly began to talk about Sir Kaefin... not about what she learned from him, that could wait until later, but starting from the moment he 'caught' her until the moment she fled.

Slowly, as she spoke and he listened, the weight on her heart began to lighten, melting away into the darkness of the forest. Talking about it didn't remove all of the hurt, but somehow, knowing that Thane knew and that he understood, helped to dull the sharpness of her feelings.

Soon, they would return to the vale and she could finally rest. There would be time to work out the rest of her feelings after that. For now, once she'd finished telling her tale, all she wanted to do was fall asleep in Thane's arms as he carried her home.