

Assumptions

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-- Thanks to LightedDark for being my proofreader, and for letting me 'borrow' her vampire. :) --

Rhiannon of Lyonesse sighed, running her hands through her tangled hair. Father would have a fit if he could see me now. 'Lady of the Keep,' indeed. She quickly braided her hair and tied the end into a knot. It would do.

"Cyr," she called quietly. Her warhorse had been her only company for this entire hunt. She had tracked the vampire and its minions this far, she would track them further. When I am done they will not -dare- threaten any in this realm again. And I will have earned my place. She had tracked a vampire that had been responsible for half-a-dozen bloody murders, followed it for many leagues. It had quickly become clear that the murders were only a cover for something far darker, the specifics of which the young Bretonnian knight honestly didn't want to know.

Pulling on the underpadding for her chain shirt, she sighed. She had been tracking this particular vampire for a while now, and her efforts had brought her to where she now stood, a windswept plain looking out upon desolate lowlands. A few small buildings dotted the plain; shelter for the creature, maybe?

A whinny from Cyrdan jolted her out of her reverie. "I'm here." Wherever -here- is. "Lets see if we can find that bastard, hmm?" Pulling her chain shirt into place, she packed up the last of her simple camp, pulled her helmet on, and started off. The more I dawdle, the farther away that creature and its minions get. And I can't have that.

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It was twilight. The grey clouds had taken on an eerie green glow from Morrslieb's tainted light. It wasn't just the wet wind that made Rhiannon shiver. But whatever physical discomfort she might be feeling, she pushed it aside. She had found her task.

She and Cyrdan stood at the swell of a small hill. In the distance, she could see the outline of a small set of buildings, the lamplight flickering in windows seemed oddly comforting; strange to see in such a desolate land. The only sound she seemed to hear was the wind whispering through the pale grasses. Was there actually anything alive in this land?

Between the young knight and the village stood the vampire. It was a tall, slender figure, dressed in reds and black. The vampire turned, and Rhiannon saw a pale-white face and fire-red hair.

The Bretonnian knight spurred her horse onward. You -will not- threaten my people again!

The ground -moved- ahead of her, like a wave of water. Shambling corpses, remnants of the dead, were lurching their way out of the ground. She lowered her lance, sending her and Cyrdan right into the morass of undead.

Some of the zombies were trampled by Cyrdan, others fell, skewered by Rhiannon's lance. The young knight broke through the zombie horde, the lurching members that were not trampled or injured were completely unable to keep up.

Where is that bastard! Rhiannon glanced around. If that's its only defence, then – Her gaze caught a flash of red fabric. There it is.

This time, it was skeletons. They assembled themselves from the bones of the dead; forming a wall between the vampire and the knight. Rusted swords and shields fell into formation. Hiding behind minions won't save you. Coward.

Cyrdan didn't need any urging. He was still going strong. She dropped the lance and pulled her sword; the grey-green twilight shimmering along the sword edge.

The impact when she and Cyrdan hit the skeleton lines scattered several of them. She blocked a sword-blow on her shield, lashing out with the sword to take the head off of a skeleton. It crumbled to dust and another stepped forward, raining blows on her and Cyrdan. She heard bone snapping beneath Cyr's hooves.

A second blow was blocked on her shield, and a blow came through, landing on her chainmail. It would hurt later. She took off the offending skeleton's wrists, her backstroke went right through it. It too crumpled to dust.

And then there was a moment of silence.
The skeletons were gone, crumpled to whatever dust they had been made from.

The vampire turned to face Rhiannon properly for the first time. The Vampire's hands were outstretched; the black fur of her cloak thrown back to reveal a long red skirt and long, braided red hair. Her pale hands were glowing with a black aura.

From behind the vampire, four figures appeared, mounted on black horses. Their armour was black with no heraldry, no house. Their armour was made of beaten black metal. Their horses made no sound, no noise as they lowered their lances.

Rhiannon gripped her sword tight; and rode into the charge.

She ducked under the first lance-tip; and the second aimed low. The third caught her in the shoulder; sending her flying from the horse. Her sword flew from her hand; thudding to the ground; it could have been leagues away.

As she hit the ground; she tried to roll; but the pain was too great, the world too distorted. Something struck her head; and the twilight faded to darkness.

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"Did she survive?" It was a woman's voice.

"Yes." The voice sounded like it was at the bottom of a deep well.

Rhiannon felt the blades of grass tickling her cheek. I'm not dead?

"So what does this fool of a knight think she's doing?" The woman's voice was cold and angry. "Here, on -my- land?"

The young Bretonnian knight slowly opened her eyes. The vampire stood a few paces back, tall, proud, arrogant, pale against the dim sky. Her red hair was braided elaborately around her head and the hood of her black fur cloak had been pulled back. Her eyes glowed bright in the dimness.

Everything hurt. Her arm was useless; and there was blood on her armour. Her shield and helmet were gone. There was a ring of the black-armoured soldiers on either side of her, swords pointing down. If she moved, she would likely be killed where she lay.

"Perhaps the dragon was larger than you expected." There was a teasing note in the vampire's voice now. "Why does it always take them so long to answer?" The question was not addressed to Rhiannon, but to one of the armoured figures. The vampire stepped back, out of Rhiannon's field vision.

“You rattled her brains too much.”
The mocking humour came back in the vampire's voice. “Don't hit them quite so hard. They loose what little sense they have.”

Rhiannon slowly pushed herself up, the armoured figures watching cautiously.

The vampire sighed. “Tie her up.”
Her tone was sharp, impatient.

“Wait!” Rhiannon sputtered out.
“Why did you leave me alive?” She was afraid of the answer. “I won't be one of your experiments!”

The vampire turned back towards her, brilliant eyes blinking in surprise. “Experiments? On the living? What kind of foolishness is this?”

“You took people from their homes, butchered them.” She slowly tried to find her footing, both physical and mental, working through the pain of her shoulder and her shaking legs.“And the ones you killed were the lucky ones.”

“What are you speaking of, child.”
The vampire was dismissive. “I know of no such thing. Is this your quest? To slay this 'monster'?” She was circling Rhiannon outside the ring of sentinels now.

“I need a reason to hunt down a

murderer?" Rhiannon could taste blood on her lips.

"No, you Bretonnians never do. You'll charge across -anything- without looking first. Your foolishness is always your undoing." She sounded almost amused. Rhiannon finally, slowly and painfully got to her feet. There was no trace of Cyrdan. "You Bretonnians are all the same. You pretend to protect your people, but you trod on them like dirt. Spending their life's blood to buy a few pretty baubles – or worse yet, your vaunted honour!"

The pain forgotten, Rhiannon took a step forward, the black swords barred her way. "At least we -have- honour!" the young knight snapped, "Unlike --"

"Ever so useful!" The vampire snapped back. "When the winter storms come, what does your honour do? People shiver to death, and freeze, and you think nothing of it as long as your fire does not go out!"

She shook her head and regretted it as the world spun. "That isn't true! And --"

"Isn't true?" The vampire was almost laughing. "You're mad at me for, as you would probably say, desecrating the bodies of the dead. But in the end, all I ask of my people is that they know that their dead will never stay dead. They will defend their people at the end of their life. And in exchange, my people have food, shelter, warmth, the best my coin can buy. What can you say to that?"

"What of things that -cannot- be bought with coin? What of friendship, duty, safety?"

"And my people are denied these things? How?"

"To you, humans are only what — cattle?"

"I'd repeat my question to you, but there are more important matters." Her face was cold, her red lips set in a thin line. "Why are you on my land?"

Rhiannon was swaying on her feet. "I was hunting a murderer. One of your foul kin."

"So you've said, but you've given me nothing and how do I even know this man is kin to mine — if he is even a man. If I were looking for a knight, what would I say? That there is an idiot wandering around in a tin drum?"

It was surprising to hear one of these foul creatures speak even limited sense, even if that sense was hidden in yet another insult. The shock from the blow, and now this, was enough to keep her from knowing what to say, what answers to give to this — was it truly a vampire? Or maybe something more heinous.

"Have you swallowed your own tongue, girl?" Rhiannon scowled, only Elric had ever called her 'girl'. "Come, you seem to think that charging across my lands gives you the right to slay whoever you please. Standard Bretonnian thoughts." And now she insults us. "Come, you want your murderer, then tell me something more than he was just a murderer! Does he have black hair, does he wear black clothes! Think, girl! How do you

find something!"

"He -did- have black hair." Rhiannon admitted grudgingly, glancing around for Cyr. Still no sign. I don't even know if he's alive.

"Ah, at last!" The vampire clapped her hands together dramatically. "A sign, words, words I can use. Perhaps your brain is not totally addled after all."

"What?"

"Or maybe not." The vampire leaned towards Rhiannon, "A description, child. How am I to tell you of this person if you do not tell me anything. Black hair could be thousands."

"He was a vampire!" Rhiannon cried out in frustration. On that, the witnesses had been sure.

"Ah, yes, and there is but one vampire in the world." The vampire shook her head and turned to one of the black-armoured soldiers. "She is no threat. Make sure she doesn't do anything foolish, but I do not think we will need those." The vampire's posture loosened, her hands fell to her side.

"And you wouldn't try and avenge your own?" Rhiannon asked. Her legs were trembling.

"How am I to know this is even kin of mine? You have not --"

"No," Rhiannon shook her head and stumbled back. "He killed -my- people. I have a responsibility to avenge them. To bring him to justice."

"But will justice feed them?"

"Better that than to have a murderer to prey on them." Her legs finally gave way, and she fell to the ground, catching herself on her good arm.

"You are too young for this. Far too innocent. I can guess who you speak of. He will be dealt with, but not by you. Go home. Go be a good Lady to your people." She turned her back on Rhiannon. "Perhaps, there is one Bretonnian with salvaging."

"I can't 'go home'." She spoke through bloodied lips to the vampire's back, pushing herself back up, her vision blurred. "Lady, give me the strength to see this through. If you -are not- the one responsible, than I must find the one who is."

"Honour. What a useless word." The vampire turned back around. "Fine child, you want to go forward? Defeat -him- in single combat." She motioned to one of the armoured figures. He stepped forward and stood beside the vampire. There was a whispering of orders, and Rhiannon looked around for where her blade went.

The other figures stepped back; one extended a sword to her, hilt-first. At first, she was not going to take it; but then she realized that he was carrying -her- blade. Even in her off hand; the grip was familiar.

Her opponent brought his sword up in salute, surprising her with almost Bretonnian courtesy. Surprised, she did the same, the tip of her blade quivering in the night.

She blocked a blow from his blackened sword that send her stumbling back several paces. Her vision was blurring, as his second blow caught her sword and pulled it from her hand. He smashed his shield into her chest and she fell hard to the ground, pain exploding through her. I'm sorry, Father.

As the world spun into darkness, she heard the vampire's voice. "Good. I will see to her."

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Rhiannon opened her eyes to daylight and warmth. She was laying on a blanket, with another wool blanket pulled over her bare shoulders. What- -

There was a familiar whinny, and she blinked and sat up with a yelp. There was Cyrdan, looking quite pleased to see her. Her shoulder and side had been bandaged and her arm was in a sling. Beside her bedroll sat her pack, seemingly untouched. A little bit over from where she was sleeping was the smouldering remnants of a fire.

I'm not dead. . . She had to stifle a chuckle amidst her confusion. I seem to be thinking that a lot, recently. But -where- am I? And why am I still alive? Her armour, damaged and spotted with her blood, sat in a heap with her sword. Why did they spare me?

"Perhaps, there is one Bretonnian with salvaging." The phrase stuck in her mind. Had the Vampire meant her? But why?

"Cyrdan?" She was a little tentative as she came slowly and painfully to her feet. Beyond her body feeling like an entire mass of bruises, it didn't seem like anything was seriously broken, beyond her arm and shoulder, and even that seemed to have mended at least somewhat.

Cyrdan came over to her and nuzzled her cheek. It seemed too real, too bright after the events last night, the events of which now seemed unreal. "I don't suppose -you- know where we are?" She put her good hand on the side of his neck, taking comfort in his stability and warmth.

She had been left in a forest clearing. There was a river or spring nearby, she could hear the sound of running water. On three sides, her clearing gave way to the rough underbrush you would find in most Bretonnian forests. On the fourth side, a cart path cut through the trees and brush. Well, at least I got left somewhere reasonably nice. I suppose thank the Lady for small favours.

It was a bit of a trick packing everything up one-handed. Her armour would be useless until she got it mended, though she did get it as clean as she could. However, there was one thing she found that wasn't hers. Pinned to the top

of her pack was a rough map. Rhiannon recognized the borders of Bretonnia sketched out in rough; and didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I lost it, and I lost my chance. There was no hope of tracking the creature down now.

"Well. . ." She didn't want to say it, but it seemed like she had no choice. "Come on, Cyr. Let's head home."

There was an unfamiliar feeling hanging over Rhiannon of Lyonesse, as she headed for home. It was not her failure that nagged at her, nor the fear of disappointing her father and Sir Elric.

It was a question. Why did they let me go? And it was one she couldn't answer. Why am I still alive?

Someday, she vowed, she would find out that why.

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