



YSOBELLA BLACK

ECHO'S
ANSWER

LACHLAN

A VAMPIRE & STRYGOI WITCHES
COMPANION STORY

5,200
YEARS AGO

CHAPTER ONE



LACHLAN

Lachlan stood on the lake shore, taking a moment to gather his identity around himself. Pretending to be someone else for so long, and so often, made it confusing to figure out who he, himself, was.

Lachlan.

Son of the sea god Lyr and the Lady of the Lake.

Changeling.

Able to slip seamlessly into another man's life — take on his personality and memories to live as him for as long as necessary.

What were *his* memories? It was more and more difficult to sort out which ones belonged only to him.

He stripped to his breeches, left his clothes in a pile on the sand, and waded into the cool, clear water. One deep breath. A second, and he dove, swimming down toward the domain of his mother. The portal at the bottom of the lake would take him to his mother's realm.

Her magic flowed over his skin in a warm tingle despite the chilly temperature of the lake, and left him standing dry and clothed in light blue pants and shirt. The hallways in the main part of the palace were all translucent, allowing him to see through the walls to the surrounding lake.

He wandered the watery corridors and walked onto a balcony encased in a bubble of air to watch otters, selkies, merfolk, and undines dive and twist through the Lady of the Lake's magic.

His mother knew this was his favorite place and would find him here when she was ready. It was bittersweet spending time in his home, knowing he'd have to leave again. The Lady of the Lake always had some errand for him in the human world.

She joined him a few moments later. A long blue gown swished around her ankles as she approached and embraced him, laying her silvery head on his shoulder. "Hello, my son."

"Hello, Mother." He returned her hug, and the two of them stood companionably as water fae frolicked above them. The peace didn't last long.

His mother pulled away and looked up at him, blue eyes concerned. "I know you've only just returned, but I need you to take this message to Ellada." She held up a scroll. "Will you go?"

Disappointment and exhaustion weighed on him. Sometimes it felt like his mother didn't want him around. As soon as he arrived, she sent him away again. "At once, Mother." Lachlan nodded. "Who shall I be this time?"

Whoever he took the place of came to live in his mother's domain for the duration. His mother saw the future, so the man was probably already here in order for Lachlan to blend into that life.

The Lady of the Lake gave him a sad smile. "I'll need you to be many people for me, but for this, be yourself, Lachlan."

Be himself? He blinked. She'd never sent him out to be himself before.

"And I have some gifts for you." She handed him the message and slipped a silver ring onto his finger. "This will protect you from magic of ill intent."

She pressed a bundle of cloth into his hands. "A tent to keep you warm and comfortable at night."

A sheathed blade appeared in her hand and she pushed it toward him. "A sword for the greatest swordsman. Your journey will be a long one this time. I cannot use the pond inside the grove I need you to find. The nymphs and gods of Ellada don't trust outsiders, especially anyone related to the Fae. I don't want to destroy any possible peace negotiations with something they could interpret as an invasion."

He nodded. "I understand."

"Take one of the pwcas and go east."

He straightened involuntarily at her words. The shapeshifters could take many forms and were the Lady of the Lake's beloved tricksters. Pwcas loved to cause trouble for humans and weren't above taking one for a ride. The mission must be urgent if his mother was sending a pwca along.

"A ship will take you to Ellada." The Lady of the Lake turned and led Lachlan down a watery hallway toward the exit. "There, you will have to search for the forest the nymphs live in. They block my magic. Once you locate them, ask to see their leaders. I'm not sure if Maeve and her Krait will still be in charge. If they are not, you must seek them out. No peace will be possible so long as the Krait is not agreeable."

There was a tremor in her voice as she spoke about the Krait. Lachlan tried not to gape. Who was this man who so frightened his mother?

They reached the exit — a portal that would deposit him on shore, dry, and she turned to him, placing one hand on his cheek. "Be careful, my son. The Krait can be... volatile, and he is dangerous. The most dangerous man you will likely ever meet. Do not cross him. Give him no reason to think on you."

"I understand." Part of him was curious to meet this Krait, but a small part dreaded it. He'd never heard of his mother being wary of anyone, and he wanted to meet such a powerful man.

Lachlan loved the sea. That was only natural, considering his father was a sea god, but he rarely traveled so far from home this way. Using her magic, the Lady of the Lake could send him from her Hall of Waterfalls to almost any body of freshwater, no matter how far. He stood on deck gripping the rough wood railing, and breathing in the salty tang of the ocean breeze filling the sails as the ship plowed through the ocean.

He was on strange waters, but the surge, current, and cycle of waves lifting and sending the ship down their backs were all familiar motions that put him at ease over the last few weeks.

Unlike his island home, full of shady green forests and cool blue lakes, the landscapes they passed on this voyage through the human world were parched, brown, and hot. Even if the nymphs trusted outsiders, there didn't seem to be fresh bodies of water anywhere. How many forests could there be in this thirsty land of scraggly trees?

The ship docked, and Lachlan led his pwca, in horse form, down the gangway into the land of Ellada. Dust swirled around his boots and the scorching sun beat down on him.

He rubbed the ring on his finger and patted his pocket to make sure the message was still there — an attempt to negotiate a peace between the Fae and the nymphs, who'd been at war for five hundred years with neither side willing to back down.

The eighth expanse of trees came into view as the sun set on his fourth day of searching. Lachlan brought the pwca to a stop. This forest wasn't like the sparse gatherings of trees he'd come across so far. Thick trunks lined the edges, and a dense green canopy soared overhead.

It also felt different — older and darker, giving him hope. For this many huge trees, there had to be water in there, meaning this could be the place the Lady of the Lake couldn't get into. Even with the sun high in the sky, this forest probably stayed in shadow.

A breeze stirred the air. Or maybe it was whispering. He'd been told rumors of a forest where the trees could talk and speak prophecy. That seemed a likely place for nymphs to live. The air smelled of soil and magic. It wasn't like the forests at home — this magic was ancient, yes, but heavier and earthbound rather than airy.

Entering an unfamiliar forest full of magic at night seemed unwise, especially if this was home to the Krait. Lachlan kicked free of his stirrups and dismounted. He removed the cloth bundle from a saddlebag and unfurled it, watching the tent erect itself. After tending to pwca and letting him wander, Lachlan entered his home away from home.

Inside, a hot bath in a wooden tub awaited. The Lady of the Lake believed in the power of hot baths, and while he'd hated them as a boy, he had to admit, he didn't mind that luxury now. Especially in this dry, dusty place.

A comfortable bed with blankets and pillows, and a pot that conjured food. So far, it made porridge, and he hadn't figured out how to make anything else. But it meant Lachlan didn't have to take time to hunt.

Plus, the pwca liked porridge well enough and could shift into a dog to eat it when there wasn't enough fodder for a horse.

Lachlan stripped and soaked in the bath, letting hot water ease his travel weary body. Water always soothed his pains — physical and spiritual, rejuvenating him. Given his parentage, that wasn't exactly shocking.

As he relaxed, his thoughts drifted toward that looming forest outside. What would be the best approach? Given the Krait's reputation, it wouldn't do to have the man thinking Lachlan was here as some sort of spy or up to no good. Probably better to be open about his presence and walk right in during the day.

Rising from the tub, he dried off, dressed, and rubbed the towel over his hair, leaving it loose on his shoulders. The climate was warm enough. He'd sleep outside to let anyone watching him see he had nothing to hide.

CHAPTER TWO



ECHO

Nymphs raced through the forest, each breaking off to find a hiding place until Echo ran alone. Playing hide and seek with the giants was fun, but sometimes they forgot the count, and started seeking before the nymphs were done hiding. Having fifty heads thinking different things must be tricky. Nymphs didn't like to think of even one thing for very long.

It was hard to find a good place to hide from giants with a hundred eyes. Especially if the trees talked. In Dodona, the trees could speak prophecy, but they were also terrible gossips.

To the left, a stream burred. There were a lot of rocks to hide behind, but she'd have to get wet, and the water sprites had flowing allegiances. They couldn't be relied on to keep a hiding nymph secret.

Echo turned right and headed toward an older part of the grove. In between there and here, it was dangerous, and she had to be careful. The satyrs and fauns liked to lie in wait for unwary nymphs. As long as she didn't stop, she would be okay.

"Eeeecho."

That was Pan! Her blood went cold like she'd hidden in that icy stream, and she stumbled a step. The satyrs rarely bothered her because her mother was Gaia, mother of Nature, and her father Ouranos, the sky-god. And the hundred-handed giants were her brothers. The Furies, her sisters. But Pan was the worst, and didn't fear anyone.

Pipe music lilted through the trees.

He was trying to catch her! The music told her to stop running. Made her feel like dancing as she turned around and followed the melody. Then... then she would disappear. Nymphs didn't come back after Pan caught them. She staggered to one knee.

"Eeeecho."

The music played faster, confusing her feet. Hooves clip-clopped on hard-packed earth. A musty, earthy smell wafted through the air, and a big, horned silhouette loomed in front of her. He was so close!

Desperation pushed her up. She whirled, clapped her hands to her ears and sang a song to herself, voice loud in her head. Echo ran faster as she entered the ancient grove.

"Kahliste!" she whispered, light steps rushing her over soft, shady ground and around the pond where the oldest forest god lived. The trees rustled, carrying her voice. "Let me up!" Her dryad friend would let her hide in the big oak.

Kahliste's tree unfurled some branches and the dryad's head popped into sight from the top of the trunk. "What are you doing here, Echo?"

"I need to hide. Can I come up?"

A branch swept low and scooped Echo into the air, depositing her next to Kahliste. Her long orange and yellow hair matched the leaves on her tree, and her skin was a barky brown. The longer a dryad stayed in her tree, the more she resembled her home. Echo and Kahliste wrapped their arms around one another in a hug.

Pan's music kept playing. Maybe he wouldn't go away until he caught her this time! The satyr came closer. His music grew louder.

Echo trembled so hard she was afraid she'd shake the tree and reveal their hiding place. She and Kahliste clung to one another, arms holding one another tight.

"Don't listen. Don't listen. Don't listen," they chanted in small whispers.

"Eeeecho."

Hooves clip-clopped in an unhurried rhythm.

"Pan, you may as well go. You'll never have Echo," one of the trees prophesied.

Hearing those words gave Echo hope, because prophecy always came true, but Pan's music took on a strident note.

She wanted to close her eyes, but couldn't look away as the satyr emerged from the shadows.

"Eeeecho."

The trees stopped whispering as Pan circled several trunks. He'd never tried to catch her for so long before. His towering, dark form clip-clopped to the edge of the pond.

Shouts from the giants broke through the stillness and music. Her brothers had finished counting and were looking for the nymphs!

The pipe music faded. "I'll find you, Echo. One day, you will be mine." Pan's oppressive presence oozed away until the air lightened. Echo and Kahliste trembled, and the trees remained silent.

Kahliste broke the quiet, laughing as she plucked several twigs and leaves from Echo's tangle of auburn hair. "Your hair always looks like you fell down and rolled in the dirt."

"I almost did fall down." Pan had nearly caught her! Echo clung to her friend, heart pounding wildly.

"Why does he chase you?"

"I tell him no. He doesn't like that."

"Well, Pan's gone." Kahliste shifted to point in another direction. "We have to watch this one now."

Echo squirmed around to look. Trees whispered and lifted their branches to clear the view to a small meadow outside the forest. She stared at the man. All she could see were his head and shoulders sticking out of his blankets where he lay on his side facing the woods, but he was big. His black hair covered most of his face. He looked human, but he had magic. A black horse stood dozing nearby, one leg crooked, head hanging low.

“Who is he?”

Kahliste shrugged. “He came here yesterday and slept outside the forest. No one knows what to make of him.”

“I’m going to talk to him.” Echo’s heart beat fast. Not like when Pan chased her. This rhythm felt like it was leading her to the man, and she wanted to go.

Kahliste scrunched her face. “What if he’s one of those nasty humans? You should stay here with me until the giants come find you. Gyges should be here soon. He’s good at remembering a lot of things, and will look for you.”

But Echo couldn’t wait. She had to talk to the stranger.

CHAPTER THREE



LACHLAN

Women's voices whispered above him, but Lachlan stayed motionless, not wanting to frighten them before he figured out if they were nymphs. Or, if not, maybe they could tell him where to find the elusive females.

The pwca, not as concerned with what anyone thought, ambled over and blew hot, horsey, morning breath into Lachlan's face.

He couldn't pretend to sleep after that, and shoved the big head away. "That's disgusting."

Muffled giggles came from the treeline. Maybe the pwca had helped after all. Moving slowly and obviously, Lachlan pulled on a shirt, climbed to his feet, and stretched.

One woman approached, exiting the dark forest into bright sunshine. Twigs and leaves littered her waist-length auburn hair, and her wide eyes held him in a trance. They changed color from purple to blue to gray, lightened and darkened.

A green dress draped over her body from a strap on one shoulder. The material clung to her round breasts, and ended high on her thighs, revealing long, bare legs and feet stained with dirt and grass.

Growing up with the Fae, and among gods and goddesses, there had never been a shortage of beautiful women, but none made him so aware, or captivated him so he couldn't look away.

Who was she?

The woman stopped a step away and watched him. She looked skittish, like she might flee at any moment.

"Hello." He smiled in what he hoped was a friendly gesture.

She smiled back. "Hello."

"I'm Lachlan. What's your name?"

"Echo."

"Echo, do you live in this forest?"

She glanced over her shoulder, then turned back to study him for a few seconds before nodding. "What is that?" She pointed to the tent behind him.

“It’s a tent. I take it with me when I travel. Would you like to see?” He pushed a flap aside and went in, holding the way open for Echo. “It’s a portable house.” Did nymphs live in houses?

She slid between the flaps cautiously, letting out a delighted cry as she saw the tub. She pulled her dress over her head and dropped it on the floor, leaving herself bare.

Lachlan felt like he’d swallowed his tongue, and went hard at the sight of her nakedness.

She lifted one leg to step into the bath and looked over her shoulder, pausing as she caught his expression. “I’m sorry.” Echo pulled her foot from the tub and turned to face him.

His lungs and brain seized like he’d been struck by lightning.

“Should I not do that?”

He remembered to blink and found his voice. “Please. Help yourself.”

Echo flashed him a brilliant smile and sauntered toward him. “Do you want to take a bath with me?”

Lachlan didn’t move. Did he want to take a bath with her? He couldn’t remember ever wanting to take a bath more.

When she reached him, she unbuttoned his shirt, then ran her hands over his chest, feeling the muscles ripple under her hands. She slipped the material off his shoulders, then reached for the button of his pants, but he grabbed her hands and stopped her.

“I want you.” Lachlan gritted his teeth when she slipped the button free. “Do you know what that means?”

“I want to bloom with you.” Echo shoved his pants over his hips and took his erection in her small, soft hands.

Lachlan sucked in a breath as his body throbbed. The feel of Echo’s curious fingers on him made every nerve taut with pleasure.

He’d never expected her to give herself to him so brazenly.

But he wanted more, wanted her thrashing under him as he drove her over the edge again and again. She woke possessive instincts in him. He wanted her begging, mindless with pleasure, and *his*.

She was going to make him spill too soon. Lachlan scooped her into his arms and carried her toward the tub, climbing in with her.

Echo submerged to her neck, making a happy sound in her throat that hardened him more. Her hair, tangled and full of leaves, floated on the surface. She picked up the soap and sniffed it. “This smells like trees!”

Evergreens, which he hadn’t seen in this forest.

With another of those happy sounds, Echo rubbed the soap over her body. His new, possessive instincts sent a smug sensation through him as he watched her use his soap.

Soap that had last been all over *his* body was now all over *her* skin. She would smell like him.

Lachlan lowered his mouth to hers, brushing her lips in a teasing caress. Echo kissed him back eagerly, her kisses growing more ardent. She chased his mouth as he pulled back, keeping his responses light. Making her come to him.

Echo growled and dropped the soap with a splash as she climbed into his lap. She wrapped her arms around his neck, cutting off any more escapes as she pressed her lips to his.

Her skin was silky and slippery as his hand drifted over her stomach, up to one round breast. It fit perfectly in his hand. He lowered his head and sucked a hard nipple into his mouth, making Echo gasp and dig her nails into his shoulder.

Her sounds of pleasure sent a deep thrill through him. Lachlan slid his hand down until it hovered between her legs, switched his mouth to her other breast, and teased the nipple with his teeth.

Echo arched her back, whimpers of pleasure escaping with each breath. She watched him, eyes full of desire.

His eyes and hands roamed over her body. "You dropped the soap, Echo."

When he slid his finger between her folds, she was wet and ready for him. He circled his finger over her swollen nub, making Echo gasp and spread her legs wider.

Her ever-changing eyes sparkled. "You're looking for the soap?"

He nodded. "We need it. I'll have to search everywhere until I find it."

She laughed. "I don't think it's inside me."

The primal instincts rising inside him were hard to ignore, but he held on, stroking Echo until she thrashed in his lap. Her nails dug into his back, her body shook, and when she tumbled over the edge, she cried out his name.

His name. Not the name of whatever man he was pretending to be.

She knew exactly who he was, and wanted *him*. It was a heady sensation.

He tangled a hand in her hair to hold her in place and thrust his fingers inside her.

"Look at me."

She did, her eyes darkening as she neared another orgasm.

"Say my name."

"Lachlan."

He sent her over the edge again, her channel clutching his fingers.

Again and again he carried her to the edge of pleasure, waited until she called out his name, and savored feeling her pleasure.

Her body writhed and she opened her eyes to look up at him. She wrapped her legs around his waist, and lifted her hips.

He needed no other invitation. With one powerful, claiming thrust, he drove himself into her, completing the connection between them.

Overwhelmed by the pleasure of being buried so deep inside her, he paused, but Echo lifted her hips, taking him deeper, and the last bit of restraint vanished.

Driven by an instinct that was as old as time, he reveled in Echo's welcoming body.