

THE VAMPIRE & HER WITCH

Chapter 13 13: Tutor Thane

Ashlynn sat alone in the empty dining room, trying to understand whether or not she'd made a terrible mistake. The way Nyrielle had left, turning away from her and leaving without an explanation felt cold and almost wounded.

"This is why I need time," she said softly. Clearly Nyrielle wanted to foster a relationship with her and maybe she'd been looking forward to tutoring her in the use of her powers as a way to do that.

Now, by asking for time, she'd snatched that away without understanding that some things couldn't just be postponed. If that was the case, she could understand why Nyrielle might be hurt, but then why couldn't she just explain?

"Maybe I should ask if we can still have dinner together," she thought before shaking her head and discarding the notion. That would just send a mixed message and it would deprive her of the time she needed to sort out her own heart.

She'd asked for time. Nyrielle had given it. Instead of second guessing herself, she should use the time to come to terms with her new life. Who knows, maybe Nyrielle had granted her request because she needed time as well.

"My Lady," Heila called, opening the door to the dining room. "Are you well? You've been sitting here for some time."

"Have I?" Ashlynn said, startled out of her own thoughts. "I didn't realize."

"Sir Thane awaits you," the diminutive woman said, rubbing her hands anxiously. "I'm supposed to help you change before bringing you to him."

"Well then, let's not keep him waiting," she said, sighing heavily as she was led away from the dining room.

When she returned to her room, the outfit that Heila had prepared for her could almost pass as men's garb. Dark brown loose breeches that tucked into soft soled knee high boots were paired with a loose fitting tunic that laced tight at the wrists.

Everything about the outfit was practical, allowing for ease of movement without getting caught up in decorative touches.

After dressing, she was guided to a small outdoor training yard. The flagstone pavers of the yard had been worn smooth by centuries of weather and footsteps, and the torches surrounding the yard cast flickering shadows across the equipment arranged around the periphery of the yard.

"Welcome Lady Ashlynn," Thane said smoothly when she entered the yard.

When she'd first met him, Thane's figure had been obscured by a dark cloak and she'd been weak enough that she remembered little about him other than his gentle strength and piercing amber eyes.

Now, however, he was dressed in an outfit similar to her own, accented by a dark purple sash at the waist. The laces of his tunic were left loose at the top, exposing a hint of his muscular chest and his long brown hair had been tied back in a neat ponytail where it couldn't distract from his strong, sharp features.

"Sir Thane, I'm sorry if I've kept you waiting long." Ashlynn said politely.

"Not long," he said mildly. Turning away from her, he gestured for her to follow and brought her to a table filled with an assortment of different swords. The weapons ranged from delicate daggers to large, two-handed blades that were generally used by fully armored knights.

What made the blades unique, however, was that all of their blades were made of a dull black metal that didn't reflect the flickering torchlight. When Thane said nothing, Ashlynn reached out to pick up the smallest blade on the table, a dagger no longer than her palm.

"So heavy," she said, lifting it awkwardly. "So this is Darksteel. This collection must have cost a fortune," she marveled.

In the kingdom, Darksteel weapons were highly prized trophies. The strange metal was said to never dull and to be virtually unbreakable. Little was known about how the Eldritch people forged these blades but the Church taught that they were the product of dark magic.

Because of that, while it was permitted to own them and display them as trophies, no one dared to wield the powerful weapons even if they were strong enough to do so.

"Darksteel isn't as rare as you might think," Than said, smiling as she inspected the other weapons on the table. "The difficulty is that even among the Eldritch peoples, few are strong enough to wield it."

"Is that what you're going to be teaching me? How to fight with these weapons?"

"Eventually. First, I want to learn about what you already know," he said, gesturing at the table full of weapons. "I don't know much about the Blackwells. Was your family one where women were also trained in weapons? Do you already have some fighting skills?"

"No, never," she said, her brows raising in surprise. Neither she nor her sister had ever been trained in weapons. In fact, even her father had very little training in fighting. He claimed to have fought one duel in his youth over her mother's honor, but her mother said that the silly fight between boys barely counted as a duel.

Blackwell county was too far away from the frontier to have a need for many soldiers. All of her family's achievements came from several generations ago during the earliest years following the founding of the kingdom. That was part of why her family valued an alliance with the March of Lothian so much. It

would open a door for them to gain new honors that were otherwise out of reach.

"Are there noble families that train their daughters to fight?" Ashlynn asked. "I've never heard of one."

"Maybe the tradition died out," Thane said, tracing his long, slender fingers over an elegant rapier. "My sister was an accomplished fencer in her day," he said wistfully. "She couldn't set foot on the battlefield, but I never once bested her while I was alive."

"You were a noble then?" Ashlynn asked. She knew that Thane was one of Nyrielle's progeny but she had no idea what kind of people her Mistress selected when making new vampires or why she chose them to begin with.

"A third generation knight," he responded quietly. "It was a long time ago. Now, it seems like my sister's dream has become further away rather than closer. If you've never heard of women learning to fight then I can't imagine that there are any women who have become knights."

"Not exactly," Ashlynn said, thinking back over the books she'd read about the Lothian March. "Dame Navaeh was a commoner who was knighted for defending her village heroically when Sir Adrian fell in battle. She used his

sword and shield to protect the common people as they fled. I'm sure there are others like her who have become knights for their heroism."

"But she never returned to the battlefield after that, did she?" Thane said, shaking his head. "My sister wanted to prove that women had a place in battle. She said that just because women couldn't fight the way men could didn't mean they couldn't master their own methods."

"What happened to her?" Ashlynn asked.

"She proved that women can fight," Thane said, lifting the heavy rapier and whipping it through the air to pierce an imaginary opponent. "She killed a baron who tried to force himself on her. The Marquis of the time had her executed for the crime of magnicide."

"Oh," Ashlynn said, putting down the heavy dagger. "I'm sorry," she said, unsure how she should respond when he didn't sound as pained as she imagined she would be if someone had ordered her own sister executed.

"Don't be," Thane said, putting down the rapier and forcing back unpleasant memories before turning to face Ashlynn. "She claimed justice for herself when she killed the man who assaulted her. She died with a clear conscience, and the man who executed her is long dead and buried."

"Now, the important thing is that she taught me things that are useful to you," he said, offering her a cheerful smile. "You'll have advantages she never did, but your stature isn't that different to learn some of the techniques she once used."

"Before you learn to fight, however, we have to rebuild your body. Mistress Nyrielle believes that most of your energy has gone to healing but now that you've recovered, we need to give your body direction to rebuild itself."

"I brought these weapons so you could decide the direction we should build towards," he explained. "My sister trained to fight duels. I first trained to fight against the Eldritch peoples and later to fight against the armored knights and soldiers of the Lothian's armies."

"Does Mistress Nyrielle expect me to fight knights and soldiers like you do then?" Ashlynn asked, looking from Thane to the weapons on the table.

The one thing that she and Nyrielle currently had in common was their desire to take revenge on the Lothians but until now she hadn't given any thought to how she would extract that revenge.

One thing she knew, Owain needed to die. He'd beaten her almost to death just because she was born with the mark of the witch. She refused to let him go on living after that.

But how she would take his life was something she hadn't begun to consider, much less how she would claim revenge on whoever betrayed her by telling him about the mark.

Now, looking at the assortment of weapons before her, she wondered if Nyrielle expected her to hack her way through an army of soldiers and guards to reach Owain. Unlike her, Nyrielle hated the entire Lothian line. Maybe she wanted to see the entire march in ruins before killing its rulers.

As much as she'd studied war and battles, she'd never imagined herself taking part in either. As the wife of the next Marquis, she'd expected that when her husband went to war, she would oversee the march, administering to the needs of the lords and common people.

Now, however, Thane was asking her to choose how she wanted to fight and she had no idea where to begin.

"If I'm going to fight on battlefields," she said, reaching for the large two handed sword after a few moments of consideration. "Shouldn't I learn something like this?"

"Mistress Nyrielle didn't ask me to teach you to fight on battlefields," Thane said, shaking his head. "My sister defended herself from someone who wanted to force themselves on her," he reminded her. "Mistress Nyrielle asked me to make sure you could do the same."

"Whether it's protecting yourself from men like your former husband, or protecting yourself from her," he added. "As long as you can keep yourself safe, then I'll have fulfilled her desires in teaching you."