

THE VAMPIRE & HER WITCH

Chapter 14 14: Transcending Human Limits

"Defending myself against Mistress Nyrielle?" Ashlynn said, her eyes open wide in disbelief. "Maybe in a hundred years but I don't think I'll be a threat to any of you any time soon. I've seen the way you move and you carried me like it was nothing."

"Besides, even if I was strong enough and fast enough, there's no way I could become skilled enough to be a threat to her."

If Thane had stopped at the notion of protecting herself from men like Owain, she would have found it credible. She might even have been enthusiastic about it. But Thane, with his casual grace and the way he easily handled the Darksteel weapons told her that he was far beyond men like Owain.

"We're not invulnerable, you know," Thane said gently. "We're durable, but that doesn't mean we don't feel pain. We don't age but that doesn't mean we can't die."

"Besides," he added. "Defending yourself doesn't always mean killing the other person. I don't genuinely think that Mistress wants you to kill her some day," he said with a light laugh.

"I can't speak for her desires, but, in her own way, I think she's trying to give you the ability to do something that none of her progeny can do. She wants to give you the ability to tell her 'no.'"

"Can't I already do that without learning this?" Ashlynn said, gesturing at the table full of weapons. "It's not like I'll have one of these monster swords with me at dinner," she said, reaching out to the two handed sword to make her point.

When she attempted to lift it, however, she was only able to raise the hilt a few inches off the table before it slipped from her grasp, dropping back to the table with a loud thud.

"See? It's not realistic at all," she said, her shoulders slumping in helplessness.

"That's because you haven't developed your gifts yet. Come, sit with me," Thane said, turning away from the tables and bringing her to the opposite side

of the yard where several straw wrapped posts stood to be used as practice targets.

Sitting on the ground and leaning against the post under the moonlight, Thane momentarily looked more like a young lord out for an evening of mischief than an imposing vampire. Gesturing for her to take a seat against another post, he plucked a long piece of straw from behind his back and twirled it in his fingers as he spoke.

"Before the night is over, I need to assess your current physical state and give you methods to train yourself during my sleeping hours. Before that, it feels like you need to learn about the blessings that can come with your bond to Mistress Nyrielle."

"She told me that I would become stronger and my senses would become sharper," Ashlynn said, comfortably sitting on the flagstone ground and resting against a post of her own.

For a moment, she tried to sit properly as a lady should before remembering that she was wearing breeches and Thane didn't seem to care about what was 'proper.' Instead, she copied his relaxed posture and looked at him for an explanation.

"Let's start from the very basics then," Thane said. "Vampires like our Mistress have a number of gifts that are common to all vampires. This includes strength, speed, durability and physical senses that transcend human limits."

"There are others besides those. Our Mistress is gifted at mesmerizing others, the practice of sorcery and more. When she creates progeny, however, we don't inherit all of her gifts. Instead she's able to bestow one of her specific gifts on her progeny along with the things that are common to all vampires, though the strength of those gifts varies."

"Wait," Ashlyn said, holding up a hand. "Just how many different powers does Mistress Nyrielle have?"

"Several," Thane said, a wide grin forming on his face that flashed a hint of fangs. "It's not my place to tell you about all of them, I'm sure she wants to surprise you. We should come back to the things you need to know."

"No, wait," Ashlynn insisted. "At least give me an example of what you mean when you said she passes on one specific gift so I can understand what those gifts are like. What gift did she give you?"

"Would you like a demonstration? I promise, it will be harmless," he said, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

"Why do I feel like you're going to trick me? If you can't just tell me then never mind," she said, refusing to be drawn into whatever trap he was trying to lay for her.

"You will come to learn one day that small amusements are like bright sparks in the darkness of long decades," he said, puffing his chest up and wagging a finger in a mockery of a wise old man.

"Mistress gave me the Voice of Command," he said proudly. "It's the power to compel another person to act so long as they hear and understand your words."

"It's not absolute, it can be resisted by those with strong wills and the more opposed a person would be to following a command, the harder it is to force things through," he said, a grin forming on his lips that displayed a hint of fangs. "I wouldn't use it to hurt you but I'm fairly certain I could have made you cluck like a chicken."

"You, why would you do that to me! That's the silliest waste of a power like that I've ever heard," Ashlynn protested.

"Because it would have made you laugh, like you're doing now," Thane said, his grin growing wider. "My Lady, I started from the wrong place entirely. I thought that you would be eager to take revenge on your former husband and that you'd jump at the opportunity to learn weapons but that isn't you at all, is it?"

"I don't know," Ashlynn said. "All I ever wanted to be was a good wife and a good noblewoman. Mother told me that I'd have to do twice as much good in my life as a normal person to earn redemption from the Holy Lord of Light and I tried so hard to be a good person."

"Owain didn't care about any of that. He didn't just trample me, he trampled everything I'd worked for, all the studying I did, he threw it all in a shallow grave along with me," she said bitterly. Tears spilled from her eyes and her voice grew sharper as she spoke but she was far from done.

"Now, everyone is telling me what I have to do. I'm alive and I'm grateful," she said, giving Thane a quick glance to make sure he didn't take her words as an insult. "But I haven't chosen one thing for myself since I got here."

"Someone picked the clothes in my closet for me. You even told me what to wear to my lesson," she said with an accusatory glare. "It doesn't even matter that it's the right outfit for practice, or that I enjoyed Georg's cooking, or any of

the rest of it. Even when they're the right choices, I didn't get a say in it... I didn't choose... this," she said, throwing up a hand helplessly.

"Eat your vegetables," Thane said with an understanding look. "Wash behind your ears. Don't spoil your dinner by sneaking rolls from the kitchen...It feels like we're treating you like a child doesn't it?" he asked gently.

"I've been thinking," Thane continued when he saw her nod. "I was remembering how hard it was for me to adjust after I became a vampire."

"I accidentally crushed things because I didn't know my own strength. I even ran into a wall getting out of bed because I moved too quickly," he said with a self deprecating chuckle.

"All of these things were hard for me, so I thought I'd help you the same way I helped Marcell when he became a vampire. I didn't think about the fact that you're different from us," he sighed.

"I can't stop the changes that you'll go through, but let's start over on what we're going to do about it. I'll explain the concerns I have, then you can tell me how you think we should address it. It may not always be a good idea but I can at least explain why and if there's no harm in trying, you're welcome to prove me wrong."

"Thank you," Ashlynn said, wiping the tears away on the billowy sleeves of her tunic. "I know I'm young compared to all of you but you're right, I was starting to feel like I was being treated like a child. Mistress even apologized to me with sweets," she said with a laugh.

"Sir Thane, I promise to be a good student. I just need to be able to make some choices for myself as we go."

"You don't need to call me 'sir,'" Thane said, shaking his head. "You don't need a tutor, you need a big brother. I'm sorry if it's rude, but... my little sister is long gone and I know you've been torn away from your family too. So, if you want, you can lean on me instead."

"I'd like that," Ashlynn said, sliding across the stone ground to sit next to Thane and leaning on his shoulder. "I'd like that a lot," she whispered.