

THE VAMPIRE & HER WITCH

Chapter 15 15: Little Things

For the next hour, Ashlynn poured out her grievances. Not about her treatment at the castle but about Owain, her work to prepare for the wedding, the way he dismissed her interests in letters... All of the things that had burdened her heart she spilled like wine from a broken bottle, soaking the shoulder of Thane's tunic in the process.

"I'm sorry," she finally said when she felt like she'd vented out even her pettiest of grievances. "Thank you for listening."

"Feels better, doesn't it?" Thane said with a slight smile. "You might not have died, but you came close enough. I don't know anyone who has died that didn't have a belly full of unspoken grievances they needed to vent out after dying."

"So, what now?" Ashlynn said, smiling along with Thane. She'd grown up on stories of vengeful ghosts with grievances but now it seemed that she'd become one herself. Having company who understood though, it wasn't as bad as she'd have thought.

"I've wasted so much of the night," she apologized. "It will be sunrise in a few hours and you'll need to rest for the day."

"Listen to an explanation and then we can plan a solution," Thane said simply. "Tonight we plan and tomorrow we start to take action, though perhaps you could stay up for a few hours after dawn to get a few things done. It's up to you really."

"You're in control," he said, giving her shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

"All right," she said, blotting away the tear streaks on her face. "Start with your explanation."

"Originally, I thought we should decide how you would fight and then determine how to bring out your strengths to suit that fighting style. Now, we'll go about it the opposite way," he began.

"The key to developing your powers over the next month is to push yourself beyond your current limits again and again. A thousand years ago, vampires were shaped by their circumstances. Vampires who were relentlessly pursued

by hunters after becoming a vampire developed speed, endurance and skills at hiding."

"So if the circumstances were different, their powers developed differently?" Ashlyn said. "Then a vampire who was confined might develop the strength to break free of their shackles, or one who was kept in darkness would develop better sight at night?"

"Exactly so," Thane said, ruffling her hair affectionately. The more time he spent talking to her, the more he felt that she resembled his sister in some ways. Not enough to ever mistake her as his lost sibling, but enough to be more relaxed around her.

"Now, we're more deliberate when a person becomes a vampire. I mentioned Marcell earlier. He works as one of Mistress Nyrielle's scouts and spies. We worked hard to train his speed and agility and helped him develop his senses as well. Now, he's deadly with a bow or a pair of knives and he comes and goes like the wind."

"You mentioned the next month," Ashlynn said. "Is there a time limit?"

"Yes and no. We never stop growing, but like human children, the way we develop early in life shapes how we can grow later in life. At the next new

moon, any areas where you haven't developed at all will become much more difficult to develop. If you don't train your strength between now and the new moon, you may never wield a Darksteel blade."

"The new moon after that ends your period of rapid growth. After that, its slow gains over the decades and centuries."

"That's why you were in such a hurry to push me," Ashlynn said, finally understanding. "You don't want me to miss out on any of my growing period."

"Now you get it. So little sprout," he said warmly. "Where will we plant you to flourish? You have limited time, it's impossible to improve everything, but we can work to make sure you don't lose any opportunities."

"If I said I wanted to become strong enough to wield that giant sword, what would you have done with me?" Ashlynn asked. She didn't truly intend to master such a massive weapon, but just lifting it felt so impossible that she wondered how Thane would have helped her to make it possible.

"Do you see the stacks of iron balls along that wall," he said, pointing at several lumps of iron that ranged from the size of a hen's egg to the size of a small melon. "There are a variety of uses for them. Holding them in your hands with your arms stretched out until your arms feel limp and then doing it

again with heavier ones. Throwing them at targets and working up in weight and distance and so on."

"It isn't very interesting but actual fighting lessons wouldn't begin until after your blossoming period. The important thing is the pushing," he emphasized. "Your body will recover quickly and each time you hit your limits you'll recover to be stronger than you were before."

"You're right," she replied, nodding along with his explanation. "You've refined the process into an organized system of strengthening and reinforcing. It must have taken hundreds of years to refine things so well but when you live for hundreds of years, one person can develop much more knowledge without needing to find a successor to carry on their research. It's, it's really impressive," she said softly.

"So, do you really want to wield that big sword?"

"Maybe not that big," Ashlynn said, her face heating as she remembered the look on his face when she dropped the sword. "But when I kill Owain, I want to do it with my own hands," she said fiercely. "And if he's wearing armor, I want the strength to cleave through it."

"I can help you with that. What else?"

"It doesn't matter what I do so long as I exhaust myself and push past my limits, right?" Seeing Thane's nod, she continued. "Then I want to spend some time training with Georg in the kitchens."

"You, you what?" Thane said, blinking in disbelief at her suggestion. "Why?"

"Because Georg has a delicate touch and makes amazing food," she said. "To do that, his senses of touch and taste must be extraordinary. His precision and small movements should be very refined."

"A kitchen is full of all manner of sights and smells. Sounds too. One of the cooks at home could tell if the oil was too hot by listening to the sound it made when he put food in the oil."

"So you want to use time in the kitchens to train your senses," Thane said.

"It's unusual but I don't see why it would hurt to try. That isn't the only reason though, is it?"

"I want to choose what I eat," she said. "I know it seems very small, but I want to have a hand in at least some parts of my life."

Hearing the resolution in her voice, Thane reached up and gently stroked her pale blond hair before giving her shoulder another squeeze.

"Then how about I add some endurance training tomorrow. We'll go on a very long walk. You haven't been into the town yet," he pointed out. "You want to choose what to eat, you also want to choose what to wear. Muireann used to drag me all over the place to shop for things. By the end of the day, I felt like my legs were on fire and my arms ached from carrying everything."

"So you want to do the same to me?" Ashlynn said in mock indignation. "Bully," she added, punching his muscular shoulder. "Will you help me redecorate my room too?"

"As long as it isn't too close to sunrise. Mistress gave you a room with a magnificent view but I prefer my chambers without windows."

"It's a deal then. Let's go see Georg," she said, standing up and dusting herself off. "I hope he doesn't mind me in his kitchen."

"I think you'll give the poor man a fright," Thane said, already imagining the panicked expression on the bear's face. "But after that, I think he'll be glad of your company."

Above them, at a window overlooking the training yard, Nyrielle watched the pair leave the yard to put their plan into action.

"You're taking so many things from me Thane," she said softly. "But this is good too."

"Zedya," Nyrielle called, turning to the second oldest among her progeny. "I have something to attend to for the next several days. See that I'm not disturbed. If Ashlynn asks after me, tell her that she's free to do as she pleases as long as you or Thane approve."

"And during the day, Mistress? We cannot watch over her while the sun is up."

"Heila can tend to her," Nyrielle said, walking in the direction of her own chambers deep within the ancient castle. "But it's better if you and Thane leave her too exhausted to do much during the day, just to be safe."

"Your will, Mistress," Zedya said, dropping into a deep curtsy as her Mistress vanished into her chambers.