

The Vampire 17

Chapter 17 17: Settling In

Four days had passed since Ashlynn's dinner with Nyrielle and in that time several things had changed in notable ways.

Thane had been true to his word and the very next night he escorted her through the small town outside the castle walls. It was her first time leaving the castle since she arrived and her first time truly seeing the place where she'd been living.

The innermost parts of the ancient fortress had been carved into the rock of a towering cliff by the first Eldritch Lord of the Vale of Mists, more than a thousand years before Nyrielle was born. Since then, the simple stone fortress had been expanded again and again until it extended outwards from the cliff face with five towers of different heights surrounded by an outer wall more than thirty feet high.

To Ashlynn, the towers resembled the fingers of a hand, as though the cliff itself was reaching out to pull people into the deep tunnels where Nyrielle, Thane, and the other vampires made their homes.

The castle was so deep in the Vale that the River Luath was little more than a stream running past the castle walls and through a small town that lay between the castle's walls and a shorter outer wall.

"I know that there isn't much here compared to a city like Lothian or Blackwell," Thane said when he brought her into the small town. Low buildings lined both sides of the river, many of them constructed as shops with stout stone walls for the first story and a wooden framed home above topped by a thatched roof.

"One thing that you won't find in Lothian or Blackwell, however, is this," Thane said with a grin that revealed a hint of his fangs, taking her into a large communal building where several villagers had set up tables to barter and sell goods.

"Before humans came, the Vale of Mists was one of the best places to begin a journey across the mountains. People used to trade all manner of things at a great bazaar here."

"Now, the original town was burned to the ground by Caun Lothian but the tradition remains, even if there's much less to trade," he said, walking over to one table attended to by a gray-furred woman from the Clan of the Great Claw.

"Old Esme," Thane said warmly. "Where's Peadar? Why is your son making you work when you should be taking your ease?"

"Sir Thane, you shouldn't be calling me 'old' when you're older than I am," the old woman teased. "Peadar is still waiting for the snow in the high passes to melt. In a month or two, we should have plenty of new silks and jewelry. I'm afraid I don't have much to entice you with today."

"It's fine," Thane said, stepping aside and pulling Ashlynn forward. "Ashlynn is new to the vale and she's never seen anything made across the mountains. I'm sure you'll have something to catch her eye."

The experience had been eye-opening for the young woman from Blackwell County. She was no stranger to the trade of exotic and foreign wares. Blackwell County traded extensively with nations across the sea and many strange and exotic goods flowed through their lands on their way further inland.

This, however, was her first time seeing things made by the different Eldritch nations. While the selection of foreign-made goods was limited, she still returned home with a new sash and scarf of emerald green and a richer purple than she'd ever seen before.

Elsewhere in the bazaar, she was able to purchase more practical skirts than the ones that had been provided for her along with tops that she wouldn't require assistance from Heila to lace up. While the clothing that Nyrielle had selected for her was beautiful and even fashionable, it reflected the sensibilities of nobility who were accustomed to dressing with the help of servants.

While Ashlynn was a noblewoman, to hide her mark, she'd never had the privilege of relying on someone to help her manage the intricate layers and array of laces that couldn't easily be reached. Instead, she preferred more common garb that was comfortable to spend long hours wearing while she studied in the library.

The rest of her life experienced subtle shifts as well. Georg not only welcomed her eagerly into the kitchens, he conspired with Thane to find ways to sharpen her senses while she worked alongside him in the kitchens.

The pot-bellied bear took great delight in preparing dozens of delicate dishes, each one no more than two or three bites in size and then asking her to identify the ingredients or methods he'd used to prepare them.

Under his watchful gaze, she found the dark and misty world of the vale becoming richer and more vibrant every day. It was as if she'd had cotton in her ears, gauze over her eyes and mittens on her hands for all her life and suddenly they were ripped away to reveal a more vivid world that she hadn't fully experienced before.

During the day, Heila helped her to explore the castle's interior, showing her not only the multiple gardens and formal areas but the areas used by the soldiers who trained rigorously against the day when humanity decided to launch another of their periodic assaults on the people of the Vale.

While powerful fighters like Thane and Nyrielle herself could have a substantial impact on the overall battle, it was impossible for the few powerful figures to be everywhere when the Lothians brought thousands of soldiers to assault the vale.

When that happened, the brave soldiers from the various Eldritch clans donned their armor and manned the walls in much the same way a human army would.

The greatest treat for Ashlynn, however, was the discovery of the ancient keep's library. Row upon row of shelves holding tomes dozens to hundreds of years old called to her like a siren luring sailors at sea. Her only frustration was that most of the books were written in Eldritch languages that she wasn't able to read.

"You can help me with that, right Heila?"

"I'm sorry, My Lady," the horned woman said. "I don't read much, only the most common words used to label things or write out important lists. I can help you find the books that you can read though, I'm sure there are several that you haven't seen before. Maybe her ladyship can help you with the rest."

Mention of Nyrielle pulled a brief pang of regret from Ashlynn's heart. Even though she'd asked for the time apart, it was hard to forget the way they had parted after the tension-filled dinner.

She still felt that she'd been right to ask for time apart and the progress she was making at adjusting to her new life seemed to support her decision.

Of course, it wasn't all wondrous. While helping with mundane tasks in the kitchen helped to rebuild her body in some ways, there was a limit to what she could achieve through normal activity.

After two days of making adjustments to her life in the ancient castle, she returned to Thane's training yard for four hours every night to build her strength, agility, and flexibility.

"I have a sword in mind for you," he said one evening, showing her a curved and heavy bladed falchion. "Small enough to be worn on the hip and carried most places, large and heavy enough to pierce or cleave into an armored knight should you need to face Owain in battle. What do you think?"

Reaching out for the darksteel weapon, Ashlynn still found it to be incredibly heavy but unlike the two-handed sword, she was able to lift it off the table and hold it upright as long as she used both hands.

"You think I'll become strong enough to wield this?"

"I know you will," Thane said, taking the heavy weapon from her. Turning around, he swung the sword in an arc almost too fast for Ashlyn's eyes to follow, cleaving through a target dummy wearing a full coat of mail as cleanly as Georg's knives cut vegetables.

"You're stubborn like my sister was," he said, turning back to her and placing the sword in a leather scabbard before passing the heavy weapon over to her. "As long as you have a goal, you'll do whatever you need to in order to make it happen."

Like this, Ashlynn began to slowly adjust to her new life among the Eldritch. For four days, Nyrielle respected her request to be left alone, giving her the time and space she needed to adjust to her circumstances without confronting the complexities of their delicate relationship.

Several times, Ashlynn felt the presence of the second heartbeat within her chest growing faint when Nyrielle left the ancient castle in the middle of the night. Logically, it shouldn't have troubled her. Nyrielle was not only incredibly powerful, she was her own person, free to do as she pleased.

Ashlynn was sure that there was a reason for the vampire to be leaving the vale every night, but when she became certain that Nyrielle was going far enough away to reach the nearest human settlements, she couldn't help but feel anxious until she felt the other woman's presence drawing closer again.

As Thane had reminded her, vampires, even ones as powerful as Nyrielle, weren't immortal. They could be killed, and in the frontier, virtually every village and town had at least one priest of the Holy Lord of Light. While the common knights might not be a threat to Nyrielle, any priest who could call upon their holy magic certainly would!

It was those four days of increasing anxiety that made her relieved when, as the sun set on the fifth day, her door opened to reveal the alluring figure of the powerful vampire.

"Ashlynn, my sweet," Nyrielle said, her voice carrying with it a hint of strain. "I need you to come with me tonight."