

The Vampire 74

Chapter 74 74: Ollie's Choice

"I think I know what I want," Ollie began. "I just don't know if I'm strong enough to succeed."

"Oh?" Ashlynn said, giving him a sideways glance. "Since you said 'strong enough' and not 'smart enough', I'm guessing you won't be holing yourself up in the library and learning to read?"

"Hey," the young man objected. "I didn't say I wasn't smart. Just, maybe, maybe not as smart as you, but if I wanted to learn to read I'm sure I could!"

"But you don't want to," Ashlynn countered with a light, musical laugh. "I'm not making fun of you. Words matter. If you're going to spend more time around me, you need to learn to listen to the words people choose because they'll tell you about what someone isn't saying as much as they tell you about what they are saying."

"That's a thing for nobles," Ollie said dismissively. "Common folk speak their minds and mean what they say."

"That doesn't mean that common people don't tell you more than they intend when they choose their words," Ashlynn said. "Since you said 'strong enough', I'm guessing you want to train with Commander Bassinger's men? You want to become a soldier?"

"I want to be useful to you," Ollie admitted, kicking a stone as they walked. His face heated and he tried to look everywhere but at Ashlynn while he explained. "The vale has plenty of farmers and people who

work the land. And I can't read... even if I spent years in the library studying, I bet you could read in a day what it would take me a week to read. I'm no help to you there."

"But, there are people trying to hurt you," he continued. "People like Sir Broll and Daithi and his men. I, I probably won't ever be strong like Captain Lennart is," he said in a voice that was very small. "But against other humans, I can help keep you safe."

"Besides," Ollie added. "I was thinking that, one day, you might go back to Lothian or elsewhere in the kingdom. And, if you do, you can't take Captain Lennart or Harrod or any of the other Eldritch Folk with you. But, if I was strong enough, you could take me."

"You know I'm pretty strong myself," Ashlynn said, pausing on the trail to turn Ollie's face toward her. "You don't need to do something dangerous for me. I already got you in enough trouble at the Summer Villa."

"I know it's dangerous," he said. "But so what? Didn't I already do something really dangerous? And what happens when Lord Owain or Marquis Bors brings an army to the vale? At that time, Justus was saying that even the servants in the castle might need to pick up weapons to fight off the Lothians and their armies."

"So, if that happens, I want to be more than just a kitchen boy who picks up a spear and a shield," he said resolutely. "I, I don't want to be as helpless as I was when Sir Broll's men caught us."

The memory of the encounter burned in his heart like a searing brand. Harrod only stood tall enough to come up to his chest but he'd still put himself between Sir Broll's men and Ollie, protecting the kitchen boy with his own life while Ashlynn stepped out to disarm the enemy with her sharp wit and perfect words.

And Ollie? He'd cowered behind them both, hoping that none of the hunters would shoot him with an arrow if things suddenly turned violent. Of all the things he'd done wrong in his life, nothing had ever left him more ashamed of himself than that night.

If he tried to become a scholar, hiding himself away behind the fortress walls in the castle, he would be safer than anything else they'd offered him. Even if he chose to become a farmer, he could choose a plot of land deep in the vale, far from the walls where the armies would attack.

But both of those choices felt as shameful as cowering on the ground the day they'd fled the summer villa and he refused to be that kind of person. If Ashlynn could be so brave, fighting a knight who was bigger and stronger than her in single combat, then why couldn't he be brave and fight by her side? That was the kind of man he wanted to be.

Ashlynn looked at the gangly youth, clenching his fists and trembling with a hot mixture of emotions. She might not understand everything that was driving him, but his determination was sincere and she could understand the desire to gain strength after feeling helpless. The same fire burned in her heart when she thought of how easily Owain had beaten her on the night of their wedding.

"All right," Ashlynn said softly, placing a hand on the small of Ollie's back. "I'll talk to Thane tonight about finding someone to learn from. You might not be strong enough to fight with a darksteel weapon, but you're taller than any of the soldier's from the Horned clan so we'll have to figure something out."

"Darksteel weapons?" Ollie said, blinking rapidly with shock. "They, no, we have darksteel in the vale?"

"It's not as rare as you think," Ashlynn said, resuming their walk. "In times of war, soldiers from the Clan of the Great Claw will wear darksteel gauntlets with blades that fit over their natural claws. It's why they have a reputation for being able to tear through armor."

"Most of the Horned Clan are too weak to handle the weight of darksteel, but some of the strongest among them will use a darksteel spear tip to pierce through armor," she explained. "You might be able to do something like that, but a spear isn't the best weapon to take if you're going to accompany me into human territories. You want a sword if you're protecting me in the city."

"Then I'll learn the sword," the young man said, thumping his chest with a fist and grinning broadly.

"That's why I'll talk to Thane," Ashlynn said, matching his smile with one of her own. "The only problem is, Thane can't teach you very much. The days are getting longer, and that means he has less time at night to spend on his duties. Right now, he's already very busy tutoring me and preparing the vale for the summer months when Mistress Nyrielle and I will be gone."

"You mentioned that before," Ollie said, changing the topic. "You said you're going across the mountains to meet someone and that's why you needed the wand. How long will you be gone?"

"Nyrielle said we'll come back before the pass freezes over in winter," Ashlynn said, running her fingers over the branch in her hands and thinking about the shape of things to come. "I don't know much more than that."

"The wand is supposed to help me gather power from the environment," Ashlynn explained, waving the branch through the air like it was a net for catching butterflies. "Nyrielle translated part of an old book for me that talked about how wands are made and why they're important but it didn't say much about how they're used. That's part of why I need to visit the Mother of Thorns."

"So, she's another, um, witch?" Ollie asked.

"She is. She taught Zedya a few things about sorcery in exchange for a gift that requires Nyrielle's unique magic to make," Ashlynn explained. "Zedya says that the Mother of Thorns is like a spider who weaves a web covered in barbs, but she's also very intelligent and Zedya's sorcery improved a great deal in just a year of lessons. I hope I can learn enough in a few months to be ready for the Lothians next year."

"So, you think the Lothians are going to start another war next year?" Ollie asked nervously. He wanted to become strong enough to fight with her but a year wasn't very much time.

"I know they want to," Ashlynn said, her voice heavy with several conflicting emotions. "It's why Bors Lothian wanted me to marry Owain and why my father agreed to it. The Lothians want the Blackwell family's support with the guilds to make and transport supplies for the war. They want to launch a bigger campaign than any single Marquis or Duke has launched outside of a Great Crusade."

"If they come," Ollie asked in a small voice. "Can we win?"

"I don't know," Ashlynn admitted. "That's why I want to stop them before it gets that far. But to do that, I need to be like you," she said, reaching up to ruffle his curly red hair playfully. "I need to get stronger. Strong enough to walk into Lothian City and disrupt their plans. That's why the trip is so important. Without it, I won't be very useful to Nyrielle."

Looking at the blond noblewoman, walking through the forest carrying a tree branch like it was the most important treasure she owned, most people would struggle to hold back their laughter at Ashlynn's words.

Ollie, however, realized that she really was just like him. He wanted to be stronger for her, and she wanted to be stronger for Nyrielle. Once he realized that, Ollie felt like the vast gulf between them had shrunk a bit.

She was still the powerful Seneschal of the vale and he was still a kitchen boy who didn't know how to fight. In that respect, they were still people of two very different worlds. But they both wanted to grow stronger to help someone who had rescued them, and when Ollie thought about it that way, it was much easier to see Ashlynn as the friend she'd been when they worked in the kitchens together instead of seeing her as an unreachable idol.

It might be a small change, but for him, it was enough to feel like he'd picked the right reward. It wouldn't be easy to learn how to fight like a soldier, but he didn't feel like he'd be doing it alone anymore. Even if Ashlynn wasn't training with him, they were both pursuing the same goal together and that made all the difference in the world.