

The Vampire 77

Chapter 77 77: Intense Preparation

Time passed quickly within the Vale of Mists as Ashlynn prepared for her trip to visit the Mother of Thorns. The moon, high overhead, had dwindled to a thin crescent. In a few days, the new moon would mark the end of her 'blossoming period' and the accelerated growth she enjoyed from her bond with Nyrielle would come to an end.

Intent on doing everything they could to prepare her for her upcoming journey through Eldritch territories to reach the Mother of Thorns, Thalien substantially increased the intensity of her training, bringing her to the practice yard for at least half of his waking ours every night.

"Ūsëkan lë'kâ!" the vampire said, swing a heavy two handed sword in a rapid arc toward Ashlynn's head.

For a moment, Ashlynn blinked in confusion, turning to her right to defend against the attack only to realize she'd misunderstood and the attack was coming from above.

Thane's blade whistled as it cut through the cool night air, the sound barely registering before it crashed against Ashlynn's steel helm. The ring of metal on metal reverberated through Ashlynn's skull, the force of the blow sending vibrations down her spine as she staggered from the impact.

Her muscles burned with exertion, and her sword clattered to the ground, falling from a hand that went limp when her vision began to swim. The metallic taste of copper filled her mouth – she'd bitten her tongue during the impact.

For a moment, she thought it was a shame that Nyrielle wasn't here. The vampire was never one to shy away from a kiss mingled with the metallic taste of Ashlynn's blood. The act had become so common that Ashlynn's heart started to race before she shook off the foggy feeling enveloping her mind and reminded herself that her love wasn't here to savor the taste and she had no intention of letting Thane fill in in Nyrielle's absence.

"Ūt qàuyrez?" Thane asked, pausing as he watched the young witch struggle to regain her balance.

For her training sessions, Ashlynn had donned a full suit of mail armor over a thick, padded gambeson with a steel helmet, bracers and greaves. The armor served two purposes. First, the weight of the armor helped further train her strength and speed, pushing her well beyond the limits of what a human of her size should be capable of.

Second, and most important at the moment, it protected her from accidents as Thane increased the intensity of her lessons. The blade he used might have been blunted, but it was still a powerful weapon capable of crushing the skull of an unprotected human if he didn't restrain himself in time.

"I'm fine, I'm," Ashlynn began, holding up a hand before she corrected herself. "Ite, no, ita, klit ktta biktem," she said, hoping that her pronunciation was clear enough to be understood.

That was another part of her training that Thane oversaw. While training with the sword, he spoke to her almost exclusively in the Eldritch tongue. He would give warnings, advice, or comment on completely irrelevant matters and he expected her to reply correctly, even as she worked to defend against his sword.

To the side, Ollie marveled at Ashlynn's ability to keep up with Thane's brutal training. Since making his decision, he'd begun taking lessons on the very basics of combat with Harrod but compared to Ashlynn he felt like an uncoordinated child to say nothing of Thane's obvious skill.

Several times during the lesson, Ollie had found himself picking up a wooden training sword, mimicking their movements only to realize how difficult it was to coordinate the movement of his sword with the position of his feet if he tried to come anywhere close to the speed with which they moved.

Now, seeing Ashlynn rapidly shaking off the impact that Ollie was certain would have been strong enough to cleave his skull in two, he couldn't help but wonder if he'd ever reach a point where he could be useful to her. He knew that she'd had less than two months to train but already the distance between them felt like an uncrossable gulf.

"You can take more than a minute to rest," Thane said, reverting to the common tongue. "Sit, let me take a look at your head," he said, putting his sword down and appearing at Ashlynn's side to remove the steel helm and pull back the mail coif and padding underneath it.

The night air was crisp and chill but Ashlynn's brow was slick with sweat and steam rose from her body as she struggled to catch her breath. As soon as the armor had been peeled away from her damp hair, she wanted nothing more than to shed the rest of it and bask in the cool night air but she knew that her lesson wasn't over yet.

"Looks like you're fine," Thane said with a smile. "You might have a knot on your head by the time you go to bed but it should be gone by tomorrow night."

"What, so you can give me another one?" Ashlynn teased, giving the vampire a playful shove. "Maybe I should run to Mistress Nyrielle and tell her you were too rough with me."

"Don't lie," Thane said with a broad grin. "You don't need to lie to her, if you want her to kiss it better I'm sure she'll oblige. She dotes on you, you know."

"I know," Ashlynn said, her face turning red in a way that had nothing to do with her exertion in the cold night air. "But she's been so busy lately and so have I. I haven't even taken a meal with her since Broll's men arrived."

"That's your fault," Thane said bluntly. "I know you're hoping that they'll integrate into life here but you can't force things. They need time to adjust and they're taking too much of yours as is. You should leave them in Captain Lennart's capable hands and be done with it."

"I will," Ashlynn said, waving Ollie over to join them. "But I only have so many days before I leave for... however long this takes. I want to set them up for as much success as I can before I leave. Him too," she said, pointing at the former kitchen boy.

As much as Ashlynn tried to put her focus on the journey ahead, there were some worries she found it difficult to put down. Soon, her sister would arrive at the Summer Villa but she would be gone before that happened. Even if she wasn't, it would be impossible to visit her, no matter how much she wanted to see her family again.

Ollie was another worry she found difficult to put down. She still felt responsible for him after snatching him away from his relatively safe life as a cook in Owain's kitchens. Now, he was one of the only humans in the Vale of Mists and she wouldn't be around to protect him if anything went wrong while she was gone.

Inviting him to watch her training sessions with Thane had been her idea in the hopes that it would accelerate his own learning when he practiced with Harrod and the others. Seeing him struggle to imitate her movements, however, she was afraid that the invitation was doing more harm than good.

"Thane, I'm worried about Ollie," Ashlynn said, turning her gaze to the handsome vampire. It wasn't until she saw how much her young friend struggled that she realized how much her bond with Nyrielle had helped her.

It went beyond being faster and stronger, her mind had become sharper, easily recalling information and rarely needing to see something demonstrated more than once in order to remember it.

Ollie, on the other hand, was just an ordinary young man. He had no special talents nor any special gifts. And still, he came out every night to watch and try to learn even a few little things from her sessions with Thane.

"You can't rush everything," Thane cautioned. "He's already doing well for someone who grew up in a kitchen. His knife skills are very good, at least, as long as his target isn't moving. We just need to spend the next several months honing that foundation."

"Unless... you have something else in mind?" Thane said, raising an eyebrow at Ashlynn.

"Maybe," Ashlynn said, her mind starting to think more clearly now that her head was no longer ringing. Something that Thane had said gave her an idea and a slow smile began to form on her lips. "Maybe what we should do is a different kind of training..."