

The Vampire 78

Chapter 78 78: The Power of Darksteel

"I'm fine, I don't need any extra training," Ollie protested when he saw the look that Ashlynn gave him.

He'd accepted Ashlynn's invitation to watch but Thane had made it clear that he wasn't ready to join in yet. His own fumbling attempts had made it abundantly clear how right the former knight was when he told Ollie that he wasn't ready.

Perhaps by the time Ashlynn returned he would know enough to serve as a basic sparring partner for her, but even if he trained himself at a brutal pace, he would still possess purely human strength against the witch who had already left human limits behind.

"That's not what I meant," Ashlynn said, reaching out to ruffle his curly red hair affectionately. "Thane," she said, turning to the vampire. "When I first started training with you, you let me try to pick up a darksteel dagger. I wasn't very strong then, but Ollie is stronger than I was. Do you think he could carry something like that, just in case he needs to protect himself from the other humans?"

"Are you worried about them?" Thane asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I don't know," Ashlynn admitted. "I overheard some muttering from a few of the hunters about him. They're captives and they don't like the fact that Ollie is different from them. They don't dare to fight any of the Eldritch people because they know they'd be overpowered, but I'm worried that if I'm not around, they'll take out their resentment on Ollie."

"I won't give them a chance to hurt me," the young man said firmly. "Even if I can't fight back yet, I can stay around Harrod or Justus or one of the others. As long as I'm not alone, they won't dare to do anything."

"They shouldn't dare to do anything even if you are alone," Thane said with a dark look. "If they think they can harm someone that Ashlynn values and survive doing so, they're sorely mistaken."

"I know," Ashlynn said, placing a hand on Thane's arm. "But sometimes people do things without thinking them through. We've tried to be kind to those men, but the longer they're here, the more I fear they'll take advantage of our kindness, mistaking it for weakness. If I'm wrong, nothing will come of it. But if I'm right, I'd like to make sure Ollie has a way to protect himself."

"I can find him an appropriate dagger," Thane said. "But you know that using a darksteel weapon isn't as simple as mastering its weight. You want me to teach him sorcery while you're gone?"

"Sorcery?" Ollie blinked. "What does sorcery have to do with darksteel? Is it, is it really an evil, cursed weapon?"

"No, it's neither evil nor cursed," Thane said, a mischievous glint in his amber eyes. He picked up Ashlynn's falchion with a graceful flourish, the blade coming alive in his hands as though it was his partner in an elegant dance.

"Darksteel is very dense," he said, flipping the blade over in his hands to present the long hilt to the young man. "But that's because it's formed of thousands of layers of metal, arranged in patterns that imbue it with its power. Here," he said, dropping to one knee to present the weapon to Ollie with a dramatic flourish.

Hesitantly, Ollie reached out with one hand only for Thane to pull it back.

"Use two hands," Thane suggested, giving Ashlynn a knowing look before he extended the blade toward Ollie again.

This time, using both hands, Ollie managed to take the sword from Thane, though he quickly sat down to rest the sword across his legs rather than trying to lift the weapon that felt heavier than the cauldrons he'd hung over cook fires in the kitchens.

"Look at the surface of the blade closely," Thane said, moving to the side to allow the light of the torches in the training yard to fully illuminate the blade. "See the pattern that looks like wood grain?"

"I do," Ollie said, squinting at the blade in the dim light. The pattern Thane was pointing out was faint and the lines of the 'wood grain' were so close together that he almost thought he was imagining it. If it wasn't for a few places where the lines seemed to bend and twist like wood grain around a knot, he would have thought he was imagining it.

"To wield a darksteel weapon requires that you supply it with a portion of your life energy," Ashlynn explained. "That's what makes it sharper than any steel forged by human hands, and it's how you can move it quickly without the weight of the blade throwing you off balance."

"There's another way to supply a darksteel weapon with power," Thane added, taking the sword back from Ollie and passing it back to Ashlynn with the same effortless grace he'd displayed when he offered it to Ollie.

"When you spill the blood of your enemies," Thane said, his amber eyes losing their playfulness. "The blade can 'drink' a portion of their life energy, reducing the amount of your own energy that the blade consumes."

"Without spilling blood, it's impossible for most warriors to fight with a darksteel weapon for very long," Thane explained. "People like Ashlynn and Mistress Nyrielle are different because they're gifted sorcerers. People like you and I, however, we have to make every cut count or we'll quickly exhaust ourselves."

"It drinks blood," Ollie said slowly, looking from the blade in Thane's hands to Ashlynn and then back to the blade. "But it's not evil."

"No more than Thane is evil," Ashlynn pointed out. "Or Mistress Nyrielle, or any of the other vampires you've met."

"No, no, I understand," the young man said. "It's just. When you told me that you're a witch, I thought that magic didn't have anything to do with me. Now, you're saying I can learn sorcery to use darksteel?"

"Only if you want to," Ashlynn said, reaching out to hold his hand. "I won't force you, even if I think it's a good idea to learn."

"You don't have to decide now," Thane pointed out. "I still have to find you a suitable dagger. The one I showed Ashlynn is part of Marcell's collection. I'm sure there's another one in the armory, we just have to make sure it's suitable for you."

"I'll learn it," Ollie said decisively. "I want to be useful," he said to Ashlynn. "I won't be as strong or as fast as you or Sir Thane, but, maybe, with the right weapon, I can be dangerous enough to be a good protector for you."

"Good lad," Thane said, giving the young man a solid clap on the shoulder. "Now, since you've decided to learn to use a darksteel blade, watch closely."

"My lady," he said, making an elaborate bow, extending his hand to Ashlynn as though he were at a nobleman's ball inviting her to dance instead of helping to her feet to continue training. "Do you think you can go a few more rounds?"

"Whether I think I can or not," she said, pulling the padded armor and mail back over her head.. "I'm going to," she added, smiling at the handsome vampire and offering her hand delicately, the way her mother had once taught her, ready to join him in a far more dangerous dance.

"Good, then prepare yourself," Thane said, retrieving his own blunted weapon. "Nok yæi!" he announced, lunging at Ashlynn in a blur of motion.

Sparks flew as their blades clashed and the sound of steel ringing on steel filled the air.

There were still a few days left before Ashlynn would depart the vale, and she intended to use every minute of it to prepare.