

Excerpt:

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How to Be Attacked by a Vampire

“A Slayer must be combat-ready at all hours of the day, even when within the range of protective wards. The forces of black magic never falter. Neither do we.” —From the *Nwoma*, a collection of Abomofuo teaching and histories passed through the generations

TAKE IT FROM ME: A mom lecture is 1,000 percent more terrifying when she’s holding an ax. “Again, this is a one-time thing,” says Mom as she dangles the throwing ax in front of my face. The weapon is nearly as long as my arm, with three razor sharp points designed to inflict some serious damage when thrown correctly. “One. Time. As in, never happening again, *ever*.”

I nod along, too focused on the ax’s curved blades to really hear her. I still can’t believe she’s letting me train with it. I’ve had my eye on this baby ever since we picked it up during a raid on some adze down in Memphis a few months ago, but every time I asked my parents if I could even touch it, all I got was a *no* or a *no but with hysterical laughter* in response.

But it’s my birthday this week, and it’s a family tradition that the birthday person can have whatever they want for seven days straight. (Within reason. Dad’s still bitter that his request for all of us to binge *The Crown* last year got shot down.) That’s why for the first—and probably last—time in my admittedly short life, my request to use the ax was actually accepted, and now here we are.

Mom continues, “If I ever see you near this without me or your father present, I will suspend your training indefinitely and confiscate your crossbows—*all* your crossbows. Do you hear me, Serwa?”

“Yes, ma’am!” I say, giving her a mock salute. I reach for the ax, but Mom suddenly swings it over her shoulder, not even flinching as one of the sharpened points comes dangerously close to leaving her earless and hacking off several inches of her shoulder-length twist bob.

“Actually, the ax is too dangerous.” A line forms between her eyebrows, and I fight back a groan. I know that face. That’s her *Will doing this make me the worst parent of the century?* expression.

“Maybe we should start you off with something safer. Like a throwing knife. Or a mace.”

“Mom, you promised!” I cry. My parents will have these random moments of overprotectiveness, as if our family’s lifestyle wasn’t dangerous with a capital *D* generations before any of us came along. Why did they spend all this time training me if they’re going to act like I can’t handle myself when it really counts?

A loud chuckle cuts into our argument. Dad is knee-deep in his flower garden, his comically large sun hat pulled low over his brow. Bright pink begonia petals litter his dark brown skin as he digs up the tubers so he can store them before autumn starts. “Just let her take one swing, Delilah, or we’re never going to hear the end of it.”

I give Dad a mental high five as Mom narrows her eyes at him.

The water of the lake laps gently near our feet, and I imagine how hilarious this whole situation would look to an outsider— a grown man and woman debating over letting their daughter handle a magically enhanced weapon while they all stand beside a lake so blue it looks ripped from a postcard.

The line in Mom’s brow deepens. “Akwadaa boni,” she mutters with a kiss of her teeth. That means *troublemaker* in Twi, our native language. We mostly speak English around each other ever since we moved from Ghana when I was five, but she’ll slip into Twi whenever she feels any strong emotion, good or bad.

Just when I’m sure Mom is going to say no again, she tosses the ax to me, handle first. I grab it at the last second. Carved into the side of the blade is a square filled with crisscrossing lines almost like a checkerboard—nkyimu, the Adinkra of precision. The magic imbued in the symbol hums through the weapon, making it steadier and more likely to hit its target.

“Keep both hands on the handle and the top point straight,” says Mom, and I readjust accordingly. “Nkyimu will help you hit your target, but not if you aren’t actually facing it. Adze move fast, so you always have to calculate your throw for where it’s going to be, not where it is.”

As Mom kicks my feet apart to fix my stance, I close my eyes and imagine an adze—first as a firefly, floating through the air like any other harmless bug, then as a hulking, insect-like monster with razor-sharp wings and blood dripping down its fangs. The vampire in my mind screams at me, and I mentally lop its head off with one swing, feeling a lot like Thor must have when he showed up in Wakanda to save all the other Avengers’ butts. Oh yeah, this is *definitely* an upgrade from my janky old training ax.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Dad shaking his head.

“Girls and their weapons,” he chuckles as he pulls out another begonia tuber and places it gently in a little bag. I stick out my tongue at him, and he sticks his out at me. My dad’s been involved with the Abomofuo, the organization that hunts adze and other creatures of black magic, even longer than my mom. But though he knows his way around a battlefield, he’s not a big fan of combat. He often jokes that if he had his way, he’d trade all his swords for knitting needles. Whenever he says that, Mom pretends to barf.

It’s been so long since the three of us hung out at home like this. Only last night we got back from a three-month mission in Georgia, tracking down an adze that had sucked the blood out

of the entire city government of Savannah and turned the mayor into a zoned-out husk. The whole time we were there, we stayed in this motel off Interstate 16 and survived almost entirely on Chinese takeout and Dunkin' Donuts.

I love a good hunt, I really do. There's nothing better than weeks of planning coming together as you rush into battle to free someone from the vampire that's taken over their minds. But being on the road all the time can get tough. We move safe houses every year or so, but this little blue one on the lake is my favorite yet. I've missed sleeping in my own bed and using my own bathroom. I've even missed that one floorboard on the stairs that cracks like a firework when you step on it. The only house I love more than this one is my grandma's compound back in Kumasi, where we lived until I was five. But we haven't been back to Ghana in years, and we probably won't be seeing it anytime soon.

Mom twists my shoulders so I'm facing away from Dad and toward the lake. Even without the ax, she's still armed to the teeth with daggers at each wrist, stakes in a utility belt across her chest, and her trusty akrafena, Nokware—*truth* in Twi—in its bead-bracelet form on her wrist. My mother wears her sword more often than most people do underwear. With Nokware at her side, Mom's become one of—no, *the* best adze slayer in the world.

Which means if I'm ever going to be the best adze slayer *of all time*, I should start by being at least as good as her. "Hey, Mom, heads up!" That's all the warning I give before I launch at her, ax swinging. Dad yells in surprise, but Mom doesn't even flinch. She whips out one of her daggers from its wrist sheath faster than I can see, and our weapons crash together with a *clang* that ripples across the lake. "Is that all you've got?" she taunts as she dances out of range of my weapon, black twists trailing behind her. "You're going to need more than that if you're coming for the best." I grunt and pull back, pivoting on my left foot to put more power into my next swing. But Mom counters with a swipe to my right, followed by an elbow thrust to my gut, sending us both tumbling back into the garden.

Dad jumps to his feet with a shriek as we roll by. "My begonias!"

"Sorry!" Mom and I both call out, but the destruction of Dad's flower garden isn't enough to get us to stop. Mom taught me everything I know about fighting, from the best way to dive into a roll to how to get adze gunk out of your armor. I'm good, but she's better, and before long it starts to show. She matches me blow for blow, at one point switching her dagger to her left hand as if to prove that even fighting with a disadvantage she's still better than me.

Sweat is pouring into my eyes and I'm panting like a dog, while she has this huge smile on her face like she could take on ten more of me before getting tired. Sometimes I swear my mom is some kind of demon, because that's the only way she can fight as well as she does.

Mom ducks down, and I see an opening for me to dive for her neck, pin her down, and end this. But as soon as I commit to the maneuver, she feints behind me. In less than a heartbeat

she knocks me off-balance and wrenches the ax from my grip. She tosses the weapon to the side, then begins to tickle me mercilessly. “Surrender!” she demands.

“Never!” At that, she tickles me harder, and there are actual tears in my eyes now, but the good kind. Finally, it becomes too much and I yell, “Okay, okay! I give up!”

Mom lets me go and we both collapse onto our backs. My chest is heaving, Mom is cracking up, and Dad is shaking his head at both of us, but the huge grin on his face makes it clear he’s not mad.

As far as birthday weeks go, this has been a pretty great one. Now that the Savannah hunt is done and our mmoatia have sent the official debrief to the Compound, we have nothing on our roster for at least the next several weeks. Today’s lunch is jollof rice with a huge serving of powdered bofrot and ice cream on the side, and in two days, for my actual birthday, we’re going to go camping up in the Adirondacks. Thanks to the protective Adinkra wards my dad draws, the safe house is completely safe guarded from adze.

Soon enough, the Okomfo who run the Abomofuo will send us another mission. Slayers don’t get any say in where they’re assigned—if the priests tell you that you’re needed in Budapest, then you’d better practice your Hungarian, because you’re going to Budapest. That’s part of the Okomfo’s job—keeping their old, wrinkly thumbs on the pulse of supernatural happenings all over the globe. Eventually, they’ll dispatch us to whatever corner of the country needs our vampire-slaying expertise, but until then, we’re free to do whatever we want.

After she finally finishes laughing at my expense, Mom rolls onto her side, facing me, and props her head on her fist. Everyone says we look alike, but I honestly don’t see it. She’s got these high cheekbones and one of those smiles that always make her seem like she knows something you don’t, but when ever I try to replicate it, I just look like a serial killer. We do have the same skin tone, though—dark cherry brown—and the same kinky, coily curls, though right now mine are in box braids I usually wear in a high ponytail.

“You’ve got a couple more days left in Birthday Week,” says Mom. “Do you want anything else besides the camping trip?” My eyes fall to the blue-black lines of the tattoo peeking over the top of her shirt near her collarbone.

What I truly want—what I’ve wanted as long as I’ve been old enough to want things—is that tattoo. Or more specifically, what that tattoo represents: status as a full member of the Abomofuo.

The tattoo itself is abode santann, the All-Seeing Eye Adinkra. It’s one of the most powerful Adinkra of all, as it’s the one that represents the Abomofuo. Our organization has gone by many names over the years, but Abomofuo—*hunters* in Twi—is the truest one. The abode santann marks you as someone who has dedicated their life to protecting people from the adze

and other creatures of black magic. Dad has the same exact tattoo in the same exact spot, though I can't see it now beneath his gardening gear.

Once I have my own abode, I'll no longer be just Serwa Boateng, daughter of the two strongest prodigies the Abomofuo have seen in generations. I'll be Serwa the Slayer, someone who has her own story outside of her parents. But my mom can't simply give me the tattoo. No one can. I have to earn it, and the only way to do that is to pass the Initiation Test.

We've had this conversation so many times I already know what Mom is going to say before she says it, but that doesn't stop me from blurting out, "Instead of the camping trip, what I'd really love is to take the test this year."

Mom's smile flattens into a thin line, just like I predicted it would. "We've already discussed this, Serwa."

She says *discussed* when the reality is that she and Dad made a decision, and I have no choice but to go along with it. Potential Slayers can take the Initiation Test at any age, though any one under eighteen needs their guardian's permission. But you can only take the test once—if you fail, that's it. No retakes or second chances. Your dreams of being a full-time vampire hunter? Poof, gone, bye-bye forever.

But I wouldn't fail. I know it.

"Dad took the test when he was younger than I am!" I don't say what we both already know, which is that my father was also the youngest person ever to pass the initiation, when he was only nine years old. As if I didn't have enough pressure already. "And you're always saying I'm just as good as he was when he was my age. Unless you're lying about that."

"I'm not. You've taken to training better than we ever could have hoped. But this isn't about your skills."

"Then what is it about?" *What do I have to do to prove myself to you?* is what I want to say, but I've already pushed enough as it is without throwing whining into it.

"It's about . . ." I wait for her to continue, but Mom trails off with a strange look on her face. She gets like this sometimes.

One second she'll be here, the next she'll be staring into the distance at something only she can see. She usually acts this way when I ask about her childhood, which, from the little I know, wasn't great. I try not to bring it up too often, because it clearly pains her. But we're not talking about her life right now. We're talking about mine.

"I believe what your mother is trying to say is that we'd feel more comfortable if you took the test after you turned eighteen." Dad's come over now, probably having sensed that the fake tension from our sparring match has shifted into the real deal. He squeezes my shoulder but sits beside Mom, making it clear that this is a two-on-one conversation, and I am not in

the majority. “You have the whole rest of your life to be a Slayer and only a handful more to be a regular kid. We don’t want you to look back one day and regret rushing through this period.”

But I’ve never been a regular kid, and I don’t want to be one. Sure, our way of life isn’t always easy, but I don’t know what I’d do without my training or magic. I *am* a Slayer, like my parents before me, and their parents before them. All I need is to pass the Initiation Test so I can prove it to everyone else, too.

“Let me take the test, and I’ll never ask for anything ever again,” I beg. So much for my “no whining” plan. “The answer is no, Serwa.” Mom is back from whatever corner of her mind she wandered into. “You can take the test once you’re an adult, and not a moment before.”

It’s clear from the hard edge in her voice that I’ve pushed up to the limit of her patience. I say nothing else, just nod with my own mouth in a tight line to keep myself from blurting something I will most definitely regret. Mom and I stare at each other, and a hot and syrupy feeling swirls through my stomach. I scratch behind my ear, and the sensation immediately goes away.

Mom breaks our staring contest first, closing her eyes with a sigh. “You can’t take the test. But surely there must be some thing else you’d like for your birthday?”

Not to further annihilate a dead horse, or however that saying goes, but there really is nothing else I want. I mean, yeah, a phone might be nice, although what do I need one for when the only two people I talk to regularly are with me basically twenty-four seven? And maybe for the briefest moment yesterday, when I blew out the candles on my third birthday cake of the week, I wished I had someone my own age to share it with. . . . But those are small desires in the grand scheme of things. If your biggest complaint in life is that you’ve never had a party at Chuck E. Cheese, things are going pretty great for you.

I shake my head, and suddenly Mom’s face gets so sad it makes me forget my own disappointment for a second. I reach up to hug her, but she jumps to her feet before I can and plasters on a smile. “Come on, go inside and wash up before lunch. I know you didn’t think you can walk into my house covered in all that outside mess.”

She offers me a hand, and I’m seriously considering another sneak attack on her when something catches my eye. It’s the smallest movement—not a flash of light, but a steady yellow pulse, like a glowing heartbeat. It’s so subtle that most people would have missed it, but I’ve been trained to spot things most people would miss.

It’s a firefly. Fear freezes me in place.

“Mom, behind you,” I whisper as loudly as I dare. She scoffs. “You can’t really think I’d fall for—”

“Look out!”

My warning doesn't come fast enough, because before the words are out of my mouth, the firefly screams.