

The Vampire 168

Chapter 168 168: A Shared Meal

"Lady Nyrielle suspected that Lady Ashlynn might want to see a bit of the city during the day," Captain Lennart said when Heila approached him with her lady's request. "As long as we stay in the central districts and bring along a guide from the palace, things should be fine. I'll see to it, Lady Heila," he said, offering the same kind of deep bow that he would have given Madame Zedya.

"You, you don't need to be that formal with me," Heila protested. "I'm still just the same little Heila I always was. Having you bow like that, it, it's too much."

"It isn't, Lady Heila," the bearish soldier said with a smile. "Virve told me about you jumping into the lake to save Lady Ashlynn. For someone who never trained to be a soldier, that's more than heroic enough to deserve some respect and admiration. A few of the young ones might envy you a bit, but no one thinks you're unworthy."

Making preparations took longer than Ashlynn wanted, and Heila insisted that she drink an entire bowl of rich, meaty broth before entering the carriage. When they did arrive at the carriage, however, both women were surprised by the number of guards arranged in their escort. Not only were Virve and Captain Lennart present, but four more soldiers from the Vale of Mists and nearly a dozen from the High Fen ringed the carriage.

"This is a bit much, isn't it?" Ashlynn said as Virve helped her into the carriage. She'd regained some of her strength but still felt rather weak.

"It's an unfortunate consequence of last night," Lennart said helplessly. "High Lady Erna has enemies. After your very public introduction to high society last night, she's worried that her enemies may strike at you in order to force a rift between her and Lady Nyrielle."

"I know you were hoping to treat me," Virve said with a complex expression on her face. "But it really would be safer to stay in the palace."

"No," Ashlynn said resolutely. "I can accept extra protection, but I need to get out and be among people. It's either that, or I need to leave the city to visit farms or somewhere that has more abundant plants," she explained. When Nyrielle fed on her, she didn't only consume blood, she also consumed magical energy.

A walk through the forest would be the best way to replenish that but they'd left the forests behind when they left the mountains. A crowd of people couldn't give her the energy she needed but it could push away the loneliness she felt after waking up alone. If she could at least improve her state of mind, it would be easier to replenish her magic using the energy that was available in the city.

"Leaving the city would be even more dangerous," one of the palace guards said, sliding forward on his serpentine tail. "But if what you need are abundant plants, there is a place you could get a meal and rest in a garden. It won't be fine dining, but the food will still be good."

"Let's do that then," Ashlynn said, sitting back on the soft cushions of the carriage. "I'll just watch out the window for a bit," she added, already feeling the urge to take a nap but not wanting to miss out on the sights of the city.

Seen in the daylight, High Fen City gleamed with a combination of polished marble and stucco facades. Fountains splashed playfully at almost every intersection and people moved about freely with an unhurried pace as though it was an idle holiday for the common folk.

Eventually, they passed through an impressive stone archway and entered a sprawling public park. Ducks swam happily on a large pond at the center of the park and several small stalls could be spotted along one shore where lines of people queued before walking away with skewers of meat, hot hand pies or other dishes that could easily be eaten while strolling through the park.

"Will this meet Seneschal Ashlynn's needs?" the serpentine guard asked as he gestured to the park. "You can take a rest anywhere you like and we can fetch a meal for you."

"This is perfect," Ashlynn said, pointing at a cluster of flowering shrubs. "Heila, let's sit over there."

While they had no blankets for a proper picnic, Ashlynn didn't care, sitting down directly on the grass and running her fingers through the soft blades. The earth beneath her fingers felt like it purred at her touch and the flowers seemed to sigh in contentment when she joined them. It wasn't the same as the deep and robust energy she received from strolling among the cedar trees of the Vale of Mists or the vastness of energy she felt from the Ancient Oak, but to the drained Ashlynn, just sitting here felt being offered a cup of water after walking through the desert.

When the food arrived, Ashlynn wondered if the guards had bought out half the vendors supply for the day. There were heaps of soft flatbread that had been rubbed in butter and herbs paired with skewers of spiced meat and sauces that ranged in color from deep red to bright green or creamy white flecked with bright green herbs.

"Virve, I wanted to treat you to something a little more indulgent, but..."

"My Lady, it's already an honor to share a meal with you," the veteran soldier protested. "The spices here are incredible," Virve said, savoring another bite of flatbread dipped in the bright green sauce.

"After days of nothing but fish and more fish in the High Pass..." She shook her head as if to dispel an unpleasant memory. "The Frost Walkers aren't shy about sharing large portions but, meat, meat, and more meat gets to be a bit much."

"I thought I'd missed fish after leaving Blackwell County," Ashlynn admitted with a laugh. "The Vale has such wonderful vegetables and fruits, but being by the sea, we ate fish or muscles at least once a day. Georg did his best with some river trout but they're not nearly the same as the big salmon and sturgeon you get on the coast."

"Then we reached the High Pass and it felt like fish was all we ate," Ashlynn said with a rueful shake of her head. "At first, I loved it, but by the end, I was really dreaming of Georg's herb gardens."

"It wouldn't have been so bad if the Frost Walkers cooked more of it," Virve said bluntly. "I know they're almost allergic to cooking fires but that much raw meat can't be a good thing."

"I didn't mind the raw bits," Heila chimed in. "When they were sliced thin the flavor was really rich and mild. I still like Georg's tartar better though," she added, looking wistful at the thought of the bearish chef's artfully prepared dishes.

For Heila, one of the best perks of serving Ashlynn was that she frequently got to sample dishes that Georg was working on, or he'd share the leftovers with her after preparing portions for Ashlynn and Nyrielle. If her work didn't keep her so busy, she might have worried about fitting into her clothing after a month of sampling Georg's decadent meals!

"You don't like intense flavors, do you?" Ashlynn observed, pointing at the bits of peppers and intensely spiced meats that Heila had set aside. It had only taken a single dip in the spicy green sauce for the horned woman to abandon anything that was a remotely similar color from her choices.

"My father always said that spicy food was good for putting hair on your chest," Heila said, looking embarrassed. "What woman wants that?"

"Ah, hem," Virve said, taking a piece of flatbread and scooping up a large dollop of the spicy green sauce before wolfing it down and licking her lips. "You were saying?"