

## The Vampire 169

### Chapter 169 169: A Nation's Wealth

Seeing Virve devour a heaping portion of spicy sauce and stare challengingly at Heila, the entire group descended into laughter and good natured teasing while they continued to sample their way through the different dishes. Ashlynn had several questions for the members of the Scaled Clan that accompanied them about the various dishes.

Some were rich and herbaceous while others had a deep, fiery heat that left her eager to gulp down the sweet fruity drink provided by a vendor who seemed favored by the children in the park.

The cuts of meat may not have been the best, much of it had actually been ground in order to form into meat balls on skewers, and the vegetables clearly weren't the best of a harvest, but the flavors were new and exciting and the gentle atmosphere was a better sauce than anything poured over the savory flatbread.

"I've noticed something," Ashlynn said after finishing what must have been her tenth skewer of meat. The combination of plentiful food and gentle, nourishing energy from the earth was doing wonders for restoring her mood and she was starting to feel like she'd recovered from Nyrielle's intense feeding. "Is this a place that's only visited by the wealthy?"

"The wealthy who desire places like this keep their own gardens," one of the scaled guards said, tapping the point of his tail on the ground in confusion. "Why would you think that this is a place for the wealthy?"

To the guards from the palace, this was a very ordinary public park, though perhaps it could be considered nicer than others as it was fairly close to the central district and the palace. Still, many of the people eating, playing, or relaxing in the park were common folks with jobs in the central district rather than people who lived there.

"Perhaps not the elite of the city then," Ashlynn said, looking around the park with sharpened senses that captured every detail. Far beyond the strength and speed she'd gained as a result of her blood bond with Nyrielle, she valued the results of her training with Georg to sharpen her senses, greatly increasing the number of things she was able to observe at a glance.

The children splashing in the fountain weren't just well-dressed. Their clothing was recently made, lacking the patches from wear that were so common when children were young and rambunctious, and also lacking the fraying at the hems that was common when they only possessed hand-me-downs from older siblings.

Beyond the clothing, their cheeks were round and healthy, their limbs strong, and their laughter carried the carefree joy of those who had never known true want. Even in prosperous cities like Blackwell or Lothian, it was common for ordinary folks to suffer the hardship of lean years, yet these children bore none of those signs.

Near the pond's edge, several elderly men hunched over well made game boards. The few of them with hair wore it neatly trimmed and the few with beards even had polished silver or elaborately carved wooden beads braided into their beards. Even their canes showed signs of wealth that Ashlynn wouldn't have expected to see from common folk. Intricate patterns had been carved into the polished wood and the canes were capped with brass or silver.

"But certainly these are successful merchants and landowners," Ashlynn continued, looking at the watching mothers who all wore simple but elegant jewelry. From delicate chains of silver or copper to small earrings set with gemstones that caught the light, every one of them resembled the wives or well kept mistresses of Masters from the powerful guilds Ashlynn had grown up around.

"Or are you telling me that everyone in High Fen City dresses so well?" Ashlynn asked, feeling that it was a bit exaggerated. It couldn't be that even common folks enjoyed such plentiful luxuries here, could it?

When she thought of the markets she'd visited in Blackwell County, even successful merchant families carefully maintained one or two good outfits for special occasions. Here, mothers wore clothes that would suit a merchant's wife at a formal dinner while watching their children play. The difference was just too striking.

At her statement, several of the guards from the palace adopted awkward expressions while Heila and Captain Lennart looked at the ground in embarrassment. Even Virve, who had demonstrated herself to be quite blunt once she realized she could speak freely, seemed hesitant to respond to Ashlynn's question.

"Ashlynn," Heila finally said, fidgeting as she spoke. "Our Vale of Mists is considered somewhat... very poor by the standards of Eldritch lands. We have to be more self-sufficient than places like the High Fen. A few merchants make trips across the mountains but mostly we trade for necessities that can't be obtained in the Vale."

"But, the Vale never struck me as lacking anything," Ashlynn said, wrinkling her brow in confusion before understanding dawned. "The Vale has fallen to a level closer to human settlements," she realized. "Eldritch lands are generally much richer than I'm used to, aren't they?"

"If you wander around the Vale of Mists enough," Lennart said slowly. "You can still find some of the traces of the original Mist City and some of the other settlements that were destroyed by the Lothians. Some of the old roads too. Only Lady Nyrielle remembers what things were like in those days, even Sir Thane isn't old enough to have seen Mist City at its height, but it should have been as large as High Fen City."

"I see," Ashlynn said, dusting her hands off before standing up and offering a hand to Heila. "We must look like country bumpkins to the locals," she said with a light laugh. "Let's fix that. There's still enough

daylight left in the day," she said, glancing at the position of the sun as it sank toward the horizon. "Let's do a little shopping."

"Um, Ashlynn," Heila said awkwardly. "Lady Nyrielle intended to take you out to the night markets tomorrow night..."

"That's fine," Ashlynn said with a wide smile. The opera had been lovely but she wasn't sure that she was up for another night like the one she'd just experienced. A shopping trip would be much better. Or at least it would be much easier to keep her desire under control.

She doubted that Nyrielle would feed on her again so soon but they'd both lost control last night and she wanted to take a few days before she risked a repeat of what had happened. She managed to regain her senses and pulled back from the abyss before she fell too deeply but until she understood what happened, it felt better to play it safe.

"I'm not really shopping for myself," Ashlynn said, holding Heila's hand as she led the way back to the carriage. "I'm shopping for you. You're my lady-in-waiting and you should look the part," she said with a smile. "You've done so much for me, let me repay a portion of that and treat you to a few new pieces for your wardrobe."

For a moment, Heila wanted to protest. She really didn't need anything and she already felt privileged to be so close to Ashlynn, but... seeing the look on her friend's face, she knew protesting would be pointless. Since that was the case, wasn't it better to accept graciously?

"In that case," Heila said, turning to their serpentine guide. "I'm told that the Scaled Clan is known for pieces with elaborate embroidery. Do you know where we might be able to buy some?"

"For you, I can think of a few," he said with a smile. Lady Nyrielle wasn't the only Eldritch Lord to visit High Fen City with powerful servants, but of everyone he had encountered so far, this pair of Seneschal and 'lady-in-waiting' seemed to put on the least airs and to have the most respect for the people around them.

Had it been some other Lord's favored servant, he wouldn't have hesitated to lead them to places that charged three or four times what a piece was worth, just for the privilege of buying something 'exclusive.'

Such people with more money than sense who relied on the strength of their master to intimidate others deserved what they got if they lacked the personal strength to cow unscrupulous merchants into doing honest business.

This Seneschal, however... he couldn't bring himself to be so petty to a woman who was willing to sit in the grass with the common folk and eat street food like it was a refined delicacy. For her, he'd show them a side of High Fen City that rarely welcomed outsiders.

Meanwhile, Ashlynn was looking forward to the outing. When it came to the matters of merchants, her sister was far better trained and much more experienced. Not only was Jocelynn more interested in matters of fashion and jewelry, but their father had worked to extensively cultivate her relationships with the various merchant guilds in Blackwell City, training her in matters of commerce while Ashlynn studied things related to governance.

That was what made the next part of the day's adventure so exciting. Part of her deeply wished that Jocelynn was here with her to experience this place and the countless new and exciting shops. Another part of her, however, was reveling in the idea that she was finally free to experience parts of life her sister took for granted.

One day, when they finally reunited, Ashlynn hoped that today's events could be one of the things she shared with her sister. She'd changed a great deal in a very short period of time and she was afraid that things right now would be almost as hard on Jocelynn. The only solace she could take was that, at least for the moment, Jocelynn wasn't in any immediate danger. With Owain around her, however, who knew how long that would be true?