

The Vampire 96

Chapter 96 96: If We Can Feast Together

Paulus grinned, displaying a wide row of sharpened teeth as he watched the young human's wide-eyed stare at the dish in front of her. Frost Walkers were pure carnivores with powerful jaws that could crack bone to harvest marrow. They wasted very little from anything they hunted, even when bones made it difficult to reach the most succulent pieces of meat on an animal.

Technically, as the guest of honor, the dish that shocked Ashlynn had been placed directly in front of Nyrielle, however, that didn't stop the young witch from marveling at the giant head of a fish with a long snout and whiskers that almost seemed to be staring at her from atop the giant platter.

"You may have noticed that there is little grass so high up in the mountains," Paulus said as Ashlynn stared at the fish while the fish stared back at her. "But there are several mountain lakes that are well stocked with fish. Since we have to carve a hole in the ice to fish during much of the year, each fish is a treasure and no part of it should be wasted. I hope that Seneschal Ashlynn doesn't look down on us too much for this," he said in a tone that was intended to be cutting.

"Nyrielle," Ashlynn said, turning away from the fish head to look at her lover with shining, eager eyes. "Have you eaten this before?"

"Not the head, no," she said, frowning at Paulus and his barbed tone. "But I assume that you have?"

"Since you haven't, then you get the first piece," Ashlynn said with a wide smile. "Assuming Lord Ritchel doesn't object?"

"I've yet to see a human crack open a fish skull," Ritchel said with a hearty laugh. "By all means, show us how humans would eat the head of a great sturgeon," he said, leaning forward with an elbow on the table to rest his chin on his fist while he watched Ashlynn work.

"I don't know about cracking the skull," Ashlynn said, retrieving a slender knife from the center of the table. "But where I grew up, we consider the cheeks to be a delicacy," she said, gently slicing into the flesh of the fish head until she retrieved a small morsel of meat the size of a hen's egg.

"Mistress," she said politely, placing the delicate piece of cheek meat on the table. "Wait just a moment longer," she said, extracting the second piece of meat for herself before nudging Heila to bring her the crock of creamy goat cheese a little further down the table.

At this point, several people stared as she topped the succulent and tender cheek meat with a small dollop of goat cheese before spooning a tiny portion of cured sturgeon eggs atop the cheese. Had she been in Georg's kitchen, she would have added a touch of fresh herbs, dill or chives, but neither was available at this carnivore's table so she made due and presented the dish to Nyrielle without the herbs.

"So this is what you've learned in your time with Georg," Nyrielle said, her lips curving into a warm smile as she picked up the tender morsel to savor Ashlynn's creation. The rich flavor exploded over her tongue, rich, meaty, creamy, tart, and a touch salty from the cured eggs on top.

Chewing slowly, Nyrielle's eyes drifted closed as she indulged in not only the decadent flavor but the care and affection that Ashlynn had put into assembling a perfect bite for her. The Frost Walkers might not understand, but to Nyrielle, Ashlynn hadn't just given her a piece of food, she'd shared a memory of her home and that was even more precious than the delicacy itself.

"Delightful," Nyrielle said, opening her midnight eyes and gazing affectionately at her Seneschal. "I see why you treasure it."

"You, you are accustomed to eating fish eggs?" Paulus said, his eyes wide in disbelief as Ashlynn devoured her own fish cheek, savoring it almost as much as Nyrielle had.

"The word we use for the eggs of this fish is 'caviar,'" Ashlynn explained after Heila translated for her. "But this fish can't be caught in the waters near Blackwell County. It has to be brought over from the territory of Marquis Kuusik who claimed the northernmost territory in the Kingdom of Gaal."

"In the winter, they pack the fish in ice before it's taken by ship to Blackwell Harbor at great expense. This is a very rare treat for me," Ashlynn said, smiling widely. "At banquets, the cheeks would usually go to my father and his most distinguished guest. Thank you, Lord Ritchel, for honoring Mistress Nyrielle and I," she finished, offering a slight bow from her seat.

"Since you know this fish," Lord Ritchel said with a hearty chuckle. "Do you also know how to enjoy it raw?"

"Sliced thin," Ashlynn said, smiling widely as she found a platter containing several slices of raw fish. "Though I'm afraid I can't manage the portions that Lord Ritchel's people can."

"Nyrielle," Ritchel said, turning his attention to his most important guest. "I like this Seneschal of yours. She doesn't look down on us at all! I hadn't expected you to find a human like this. The few we've captured for sneaking into our mountains are never so... cultured," he said.

"You see, Paulus?" Ritchel said, turning to his aging advisor. "I told you, if we can feast together and drink together, then we can hunt together and trade together. Seneschal Ashlynn, I have an idea for

you, during your stay here," he said, turning back to Ashlynn and ignoring the dark glower forming on Paulus' leathery face.

"I'm happy to listen to any suggestion that Lord Ritchel has for our stay," Ashlynn said politely, filling her plate with steamed fish, thin slices of raw fish, and a bit of grilled fish from a type she didn't recognize that looked both fatty and oily with crisped skin.

As much as she wanted a pile of fresh greens or a piece of crusty bread to go with the feast of fish, so many of the flavors before her brought back memories of home that she could hardly complain.

"My son knows our territory as well as any hunter," he said, slapping Hauke heavily on the back as he spoke. "There is no fish more succulent than the one you pull from the water yourself, so tomorrow, let Hauke take you to one of the lakes that is still frozen to fish on the ice. We can have a smaller dinner tomorrow night and feast on your catch."

"As long as Mistress Nyrielle approves," Ashlynn said, looking to her lover for a nod before continuing. "Then I would be delighted to spend the day fishing with Hauke."

"I know just the place," the young Frost Walker said eagerly. After the blunder outside the gates, he was eager for any opportunity to make up for what had happened. Now, his father had given him the perfect opportunity, as long as he could ensure that they caught something, he was certain that the events at the gate would quickly be forgotten.

"I have a condition," Nyrielle said, looking up from Ashlynn's plate. While she could have served herself along with everyone else at the feast, she'd found a special delight in stealing a bite or two from each of the dishes that most excited her Seneschal. "While you two fish, I would be pleased if little lord Hauke could speak with my darling Ashlynn about ice sorcery."

"Ice sorcery?" Paulus said with a frown. "Is Lady Nyrielle hoping we'll divulge the secrets of our warriors to your Seneschal?"

"Don't exaggerate things," Nyrielle said, her thin brows lowering as she glared at the aging Frost Walker. "My Ashlynn is a Child of the Earth. The magic of all nature flows through her veins. In the Vale of Mists, we have flowing rivers, soft earth, mighty trees, and misty air. We don't have fierce chilling winds, heavy snow or piercing ice, but these things are all as natural as our trees and rivers."

"You don't need to share any secrets with me," Ashlynn emphasized, looking at Hauke rather than the dour Paulus. "But if you can share some general thoughts or observations, it would help me to gain a feel for a different kind of natural magic."

"Lady Nyrielle has never been stingy about sharing magic with us," Ritchel added, tapping the place in his sash where he'd placed the box of Blood Vitality Crystals. "Hauke can share his thoughts on sorcery. Remember what I said, Paulus, the stronger the Vale of Mists becomes, the thicker our shield against the humans grows."

"Of course, my Lord," Paulus said, his shoulders slumping slightly before another idea struck him. "Since we're talking about fighting against the humans, perhaps now would be a good time for Old Fabiene to regale us with her stories of the Blood Princess of the arena? I'm sure it would be a delight for the young ones to hear."

As the others nodded in agreement, a calculating gleam entered Paulus's eyes. While the others seemed eager to hear tales of Nyrielle's thrilling victories in the arena, the aging advisor had something different in mind.

While he was still a few years too young to have witnessed those days, Paulus had grown up hearing the story from people who had lived through it and he was quite familiar with the story. Nyrielle's accomplishment was a legend and likely deserved to be.

It wasn't the story of her deeds in the arena, however, that he was most interested in having told, but what happened after that interested him at the moment. Lord Ritchel seemed to want to emphasize that Nyrielle was a good ally, but how would his supporters feel when they heard about how many Nyrielle sacrificed after her victory?