

BLACK PUDDING

CHAPTER 6

My fingers danced across the surface of the centipede-like exoskeleton, fascinatingly tracing the outlines of its massive chitin plates. The thought of what this creature must've tasted like in its living days had me salivating. As intriguing as the exoskeleton was, the true peculiarity lay within its gaping maw, which revealed a glimpse of seats nestled within. The undead creature's rib cage was being utilized as a form of transportation – a subway hidden deep within the bowels of the sewers. It was both amusing and ridiculous, and I couldn't help but find it all rather delightful. And there, seated amongst the bones, was a curious little creature... *A boy? No, wait, a gnome!*

I turned around to ask Faelwen about the creature, but she was nowhere to be seen. I guessed she had had enough of me and her undead hubby, or rather Olin possessing her hubby's corpse... *Typical. She's probably just sick of us.* I shrugged it off, knowing she wasn't much help anyway. She was our guide to this so-called necromancer, but as I looked back inside the centipede, I realized we had found our target. However, as I gazed at the gnome, I wasn't exactly getting the vibe of an evil necromancer. I mean, with those suspenders holding up his coveralls and goggles resting on his head, he looked more like a steampunk mechanic than a sorcerer of the dead.

"You're holding up the Skelepede Express... no, no, wait, the Bone Bug Bullet Train? Or perhaps Necro-Express?" he muttered, seemingly unable to decide on a proper name for this bizarre undead locomotive.

"Are you Kaida?" Olin asked.

I arched an eyebrow in confusion, "Who?"

"The necromancer," Olin clarified.

"How do you know the necromancer's name?" I inquired, my interest piqued.

Olin let out a weary sigh, "Faelwen screamed it before stabbing me in the neck."

"Oh, right," I murmured. My attention turned back to the gnome. *He looks rather scrumptious and bite-sized too.*

"Do I look like some kind of evil Skeletor overlord? No way!" the gnome exclaimed, clearly offended. "Kaida's place is just two stops away, but we'll never get there if you don't get aboard the Rib Cage Rail," he added, a hint of pride showing at his naming skills.

"In two stops? Well, thanks for the heads up, Orko," I replied before stepping inside the undead centipede's gaping maw.

Olin trailed behind me as we entered the spacious belly of the centipede train, the seats made of bone that would've been uncomfortable for a less cushioned behind. But luckily for me, I had just

the right amount of padding... well, technically, I was all pudding. I looked around, taking in the eerie green gleam from the glowing stones that illuminated the interior. It was the perfect ambiance for a horror ride, and I couldn't help but grin in delight.

The gnome was staring at me with a perplexed expression as if he wanted to say something but was too tongue-tied. Frankly, I didn't care what he had to say. The thought of eating him did cross my mind, but I decided against it. If he was friends with this Kaida, there was no need to make enemies with a potential source of future meals, especially since the necromancer might have an ample supply of rotting corpses for me to savor. Besides, it's not like I have no self-control – and I needed allies if I ever wanted to get off this freaking rock.

Without warning, the skittering of thousands of tiny legs propelled us forward, hurtling through the putrid sewers. I couldn't help but chuckle at the irony of it all – riding a train made of bones in a place that was practically one big toilet. We passed by murky pools of waste and discarded debris, but the ride was surprisingly smooth. I figured I would be bouncing all over the place with so many legs, but it was smoother than a car ride. Staring out into the dark, murky sewer beyond, I couldn't help but feel a twisted joy in the bizarre situation. Who would've thought riding an undead centipede skeleton subway train could be so thrilling?

My eyes darted around the train, still taking in the gnarled bones that composed the interior. It was then that my gaze fell upon a plump rat scurrying along the floor. In a blur of movement, I snatched it up for a quick snack. My face and mouth may have been for show, but the real thing was anything on me that was pure black – in this case, my cute little summery dress. I hid the rodent in my lap, concealed within the folds of my attire, as the gnome's suspicious eyes watched me. The thrill of rat-snacking sent a wicked smile across my face as I savored the flavor as it slowly dissolved. The gnome's confusion only added to my amusement. *Let him wonder.*

I noticed Olin glaring at me, but I dismissed it with a shrug. He's probably just jealous of my gourmet taste in food. I decided to be generous and offered the rat tail to him, but I couldn't help but notice a slight look of disgust on his rodent-like face. It was strange – I mean, the tail was the best part! But then again, not everyone could appreciate the finer things in life, I suppose.

You have defeated a [Minor Sewer Rat].

After a few mere moments, the monotony of the ride got to me, and I couldn't help but notice the incessant blinking of a system notification in my periphery. Most of the time, I ignored them – they were like pesky flies buzzing around me. Maybe I should take the time to sort through my notifications, but honestly, I just didn't feel like it. I treated my notifications like I handled my junk mail – let them pile up on the kitchen countertop until that pile got big enough to toss them into the trash. It wasn't the most efficient method, but it was better than dealing with the constant annoyance.

Every so often, I noticed the gnome's gaze lingering on me, that curious look never quite leaving his face. Part of me wanted to ask him why he was staring, but I found a perverse enjoyment in the torment it seemed to cause him. *I'm definitely a sadist.* At long last, the train came to a halt. We

had only been riding for a few minutes, but it felt like an eternity. My restlessness demanded movement, and I couldn't wait to get off the damn thing.

As I rose to my feet, the little gnome finally spoke up, "It's the next stop."

I let out a dramatic sigh as I plopped back down onto the seat, glancing over at Olin. Was that a hint of a smile on his face? Strange. My focus shifted to the gaping mouth of the dead centipede as an odd assortment of individuals boarded the train – it was like a cross between a furry and a cosplay convention had come to life. My gaze lingered on them momentarily, taking in their various fantasy costumes and accessories. Surprisingly, I was the only one that looked remotely human. What had once been a sparsely populated ride with just Olin, the gnome, and myself, was now packed with people. And they kept streaming in until nearly every seat was full.

The train car suddenly shook as a massive warthog-like brute approached Olin and me. "Razzle, what the hell is your traitorous tail doing down here, and with a fucking round ear no less?!" His growl caused a surge of joy to ripple through me. *This is going to be fun!* I couldn't help but smirk as I looked over at my undead rodent companion, reveling in the chaos that was about to happen.

Olin sighed, his voice tinged with annoyance as he tilted up to look at the warthog. "I'm not Razzle, just using his corpse," he explained, almost as if he wanted to avoid any trouble. But I couldn't help but beam in excitement – the situation was too entertaining.

The warthog's bellow filled the train, "You can't talk your way out of this one, you damn traitor!" My grin grew wider, even as his eyes flicked over me. "Why are you smiling? You're about to share this traitor's fate! Don't you know, your kind isn't welcome down here?"

"Bacon!" I exclaimed with childlike glee.

"What?" he stuttered, taken aback by my sudden outburst.

I replied with a sense of excitement, "Bacon!" The word rolled off my tongue like a delicious morsel of crispy, salty goodness. The gnome's confusion only made my joy all the more delicious.

"Pork belly," the little steampunk gnome muttered, almost to himself. "I think she's planning to eat you."

The warthog's eyes flicked back and forth between the gnome and me, taking a subtle step back as he gazed upon the wicked grin etched onto my face. Maybe he could see the yellow, acidic saliva forming in the corners of my lips.

"We're not done here, Razzle," he blubbered before taking a seat as far away from me as possible. I couldn't help but feel a twinge of disappointment.

As we neared our stop, I couldn't help but relish in the discomfort of the other passengers. Their uneasy gazes and shifting postures only fueled my amusement. As Olin and I stood up to exit the train, I was surprised to see the little gnome climbing down from his seat to join us. He looked like a toy come to life, standing at knee height and resembling an adorable baby doll with a head too large for his body. I thought of devouring him, but something about his childlike appearance gave me indigestion. *Ugh! What's wrong with me?*

“Do you know the way to the necromancer from here?”

“The way to Kaida’s? Oh, I know it like the back of my hand,” the gnome exclaimed, pointing to a solitary door in the stone wall. As he turned back to me, I couldn’t help but notice the hesitancy in his expression. He clearly had something he wanted to ask me.

“Thanks, Orko!” I smirked at the little guy. I approached the door to Kaida’s, eager to see what awaited us inside. With a hard knock, the hinges rattled as if the whole door was about to collapse.

“Wow, easy there, Shera!” the gnome said.

My body went rigid as I turned to look back at the little gnome, who was now staring down at the ground, his baby boot scuffing against the rough stone of the sewer floor.

“What did you just say?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper as if I couldn’t believe what I had just heard.

The door loudly creaked as it swung open, revealing a skeleton adorned in a tattered purple dress. “Who dares beat at my door at this ungodly hour?” The skeleton’s raspy feminine voice echoed throughout the stone walls of the sewer. Then her empty eye sockets landed on the gnome, “Nikola! It’s so good to see you!”

“Nikola Tesla?” I repeated with a raised eyebrow.

The gnome simply shrugged in response, “It’s better than Lenny.”