

BLACK PUDDING

CHAPTER 21

We all sprang into action when the Crone finished her decree, splitting into two groups. Wartie – My. My... The Crone’s new grandbaby – *Seriously! What the fuck?!* You know what, I don’t fucking care! Anyhow. The kid led the five dipshits back into the dungeon to present the Crone’s offer to restore the dungeon folk’s lost magic and powers. They just had to swear their devotion to the dark goddess. After the dungeon core was stolen, the dwellers lost everything. It was apparent that they were desperate for a way to regain their magic.

The second group consisted of me, myself, and Ava. Oh! And Jason, the new sucker–champion! He wouldn’t have come on his own accord without my new foster mama commanding it. *I love being the Scion of the Crone!*

So here I am, nestled deep in the heart of a forest, keeping a wary watch on the holy knights’ camp just outside the charming town of Elsternwick. That’s if a few crumbling houses huddled behind a dilapidated wall was considered charming. Then yeah, it’s charming! The Crone’s proclamation still resounded in the back of my mind as I scouted the knights’ movements. Oh, and I was alongside my mother’s worthless champion. *Mother? Ha!* It’s strange how fast I’ve accepted I’m her so-called Scion or daughter! The cold shoulder Jason gave me was almost amusing. Too bad that occasional glare he threw at me was a bit aggravating. If he continued doing it, my new foster mother might have to search for a new sucker–champion. *Not it!*

Locating Elsternwick was a cinch, with the army’s trail laid out clear as day, leading right through the forest. Jason and I arrived outside the encampment in no time. My heart dropped at seeing vampires bared naked and impaled upon wooden spikes, Vlad the Impaler-like, still living as they slowly roasted beneath the blazing sun. The once-fearsome creatures of the night were reduced to squirming in agonizing pain! Their skin bubbled, blackened, and blistered, their piercing screams of torture echoing through the air, met with jeers and laughter from the holy knights. If the roasting vampires weren’t supposed to be my allies, I would probably take a bite or two. I was grateful that Aurelia wasn’t among them. Still, the thought of Aurelia suffering set my tar-black blood blazing with rage as I gazed into the camp, desperate to find her.

Ava, would you consider a vampire a living or undead?

Undead, I think, but I’m not entirely sure. Why? Oh – Oh! I like where your thoughts are going! That may just work. But what about the other non-vampires that have been captured?

I’ll improvise!

“What’s the fucking plan?” Jason growled out. “Because I’m not risking my ass against those fuckers!”

“Remain here until I need you. Then let loose and create mayhem at my signal, or you hear a commotion from within the camp – either or! You’ve got that shadow walker thingy. Oh, and just so you know. I’m still pissed about not stealing that spell from you!”

Jason’s face was a mask of frustration and anger as he crossed his lanky arms to glare at me. “I’m not your fucking pawn. I need a real, solid plan, not a suicidal one, you crazy bitch!”

I shrugged at Jason before giving him a twisted dark smile as my body liquified, shifted, and deformed like a Wicked Witch splashed with water. Ava once told me where all my extra mass had disappeared. Using that knowledge, I, or Ava, one of us, tossed my extra mass into Stellar Void. Following Ava’s lead, I found that magic was all about feeling and sensation, much like a waltz or salsa. I must let go of my inhibitions and let my body flow to the beat. Don’t think about the steps. Just move! I could only pray that I didn’t stumble at a key moment of the beat – like during a fight! Once, my body had shrunk to the size of a Trounce Spider, my first nemesis. I took off scurrying in a mad dash towards the military encampment, leaving a pissed-off sucker–champion behind!

“What the fuck!” I heard him hiss.

As dusk descended, the sky was awash with orange hues, casting the knight’s encampment into a labyrinth of haunting shadows. The camp was much larger, nearly four times than Elsternwick, and being near so many knights gathered in one spot was a bit nerve-wracking. *How the fuck am I going to pull this off?* As a mere tarantula in girth, I continued on in my demonic scurrying amidst the encampment, taking full advantage of the darkness as if it were a shield because it was!

I was overcome by the shock of seeing all elegant armor, or lack thereof, on half of the knights... Barbarians? Soldiers? *Whatever!* Those that wore armor were in white and gold plate mail, befitting a stereotypical holy knight. But! The other half’s uniforms, or lack thereof, made Heron, Conan, and lingerie appear conservative, leaving very little to the imagination. What’s more surprising, they were equally spread among the genders.

Seriously, what the hell?! What is this, some sort of raunchy cosplay convention or an S&M hookup? Unbelievable! Ava, what’s going on?

Honestly, I’m not sure... I feel like I should, but I’m coming up blank.

The approaching night was overcome with boisterous laughter of knights bellowing!

“Hey there, Gimona! Glad to see you lot made it out in one piece!”

I froze, my tiny legs halting as that name repeated like a cruel mantra in my ears, like a funeral hymn. Wartie’s horrified face flashed in my thoughts, digging that name deeper into my already enraged psyche!

“Ah, ye know it to be true! And I hear tell that yer fight against them blood-suckin’ vamps and necros went as smoothly as a lady’s bosom. Did they suspect that the core was gone missin’?”

“Ha! Those vile fuckers never saw it coming! Their magical barrier collapsed like a wizard’s tower made of sand without their siphon into the dungeon core. It only took but a gentle push!” The knight let out a hearty laugh.

“Mercy of Gods! Tis about time! And what of those black-hearted elders? Death too good for ’em, I say!”

“Their leader or grand shit stain slipped away with a few of his followers, but we got that vile fuck’s daughter. Many of us, I included, offered to spike the bitch, but the General refused. The General is treating her like some fucking VIP, last I heard, intent on handing her over to Slaethia for interrogating. A bunch of bullshit if you ask me! We should strap the bitch down and let the boys spike her! And just be done with it!”

Gi mona let out a wholehearted laugh filling the camp. “Ha! If that little vamp is goin’ to Slaethia, she’ll be wishin’ the General ye lads be done with it! Did they drain the lass, at least? Vamps can be a real beast if they’re not. Ye know!”

“Ha! Last I heard, she’s bone dry!”

Blake, how many of them do you think we can kill before anyone notices?

Aurelia first, Ava, murdering after!

I peered around the corner of a tent. Easily spotting the dwarf as she lost herself in laughter and ale amongst a gaggle of knights, her five o’clock shadowed jawline on full display. My eyes continued to roam the crowd, searching for the rest of the dwarf’s companions. *No sight of the wizard...* Still, my true prize was the one approaching a tent. Anlyth, the elf fuck that killed Wartie, arm in arm with a burly, bald behemoth of a caramel-skinned man, built like a seasoned blacksmith or a rampaging linebacker.

There’s Anlyth, but who’s the man he’s clinging to?

Aurelia first, Blake, murdering after! She might be held in a tent at the center of the encampment. There’s also a chance she’s in a secure location inside Elsternwick. But I doubt that shithole has a secure enough location to hold her.

Then to the center, we shall go!

I went unseen as I crept through the camp, using the ever-growing shadows of the descending sun beneath the horizon. The last rays of light barely illuminated the tops of the trees, casting the rest of the camp in black and gray shades of darkness. Meanwhile, the knights reveled in their victory, drowning themselves in drink and jubilation. Some even pranced about in the flickering light of their campfires. Laughter rang out like a chorus as the haunting cries of impaled vampires withered with the dying of the light.

As I slipped my way into the central portion of the encampment, I found rows of steel cages strung about, like those of a dog kennel. And yet, they were all crammed with crying and sobbing people of various races I could not identify. Worse, not a single person within those cages appeared to be from the necromancers’ fortress – base – ruins...lair? *Whatever!* I didn’t see much of who dwelled among the vampires and necromancers. These prisoners had a different demeanor than the necromancers. These were families!

Ava, do you think these are random families the knights rounded up along their way here?

I think so...

Since reincarnating into this twisted reality, I now call home, I've never cared much for others. In my eyes, everyone was food to me. By preference being that of decomposing flesh, but people were still food. Well, besides a particular vampire who's somehow caught my deep fascination and longing, it was almost like love at first sight, if such a thing were real. No, I knew what it was. I was in lust, like some naïve lovestruck girl. But all that aside, what I bore witness to now was wrong – children caged like fucking animals! I mean... I may occasionally want to devour a child here and there, Wartie mostly, but I've never done it.

Blake, do you see that tent over there?

Amidst the pitiful wails and cries of those caged, loomed a bulky tent straight out of a renaissance fair with six knights standing guard, including six savages, nudists, I mean barbarians. *Honestly, why are they dressed like that?* I needed an opening, a way past them, if I hoped to get to Aurelia, but to my dismay, there was none. These fucks were dedicated, unlike their fellow soldiers drowning themselves in booze as they rejoiced and reveled in their conquest.

Sweeping my sights over the cages, I spotted a young child who had to of been no older than six, with fluffy white bunny ears and her precise pink eyes wide and watery, peering at me with a quivering lip. She had to believe I was some dangerous spider that wandered into the encampment. She wasn't wrong. I was dangerous! If I had a heart, it would have shattered into a million pieces. But a funny thing about me, I had become a heartless bitch in this twisted reality. And yet, I couldn't bring myself to abandon the poor thing. My reasoning was not self-righteous or anything like that bullshit. No, I just wanted to inflict as much pain upon those who had taken my Aurelia as I could. And one of those ways was robbing the holy bastards of their captives.

Hey Ava, got any bright ideas?

Not any good ones! We could try corroding the locks on the cages, but I'm sure we'll get caught. Or, we could pull the cages into Stellar Void, but we would have to do it one at a time, and besides getting caught, I don't think we can pull living people into it.

Wait a minute, what the hell happened to you knowing everything about magic? What's changed?

I-I don't know. I can recall what I've told you and the stuff we've done, like casting magic, but other things are getting harder to remember. Since we awoke on that altar, I've had a harder time recalling the she-who-shall-not-be-named fragment of knowledge.

Well – Shit! This isn't the best of times to be having a mid-mind crisis.

Ha! Yeah, tell me about it.

Ugh! We need a distraction that won't alert the entire drunken camp.

Do you think they have a munition or weapon tent like earth militaries? Blake, can you imagine what a magic depot explosion would look like? You saw the carnage they left in their path to this camp. They must have something big that goes boom!

Ava didn't I just say we don't want to alert the entire camp?!

Yes, Blake, but hear me out. They're all beyond shitfaced right now. It just might work! We'll make it look like an accident!

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