

BLACK PUDDING

CHAPTER 18

Alrighty, here I am, squished down to tarantula size like some arcane joke, with my gooey, tar-like body stashed away in Stellar Void—sounds fancy, but who the heck knows how it really works? Not me, that's for sure. It's like reliving my awkward twelve-year-old phase all over again. Ugh, the horror!

As the final glimmers of sunlight vanished beyond the horizon, the camp plunged into an eerie darkness, save for the flickering lights of the fire pits. In that dim glow, the shadows seemed to dance like mischievous performers, concealing my movements as I slipped through the camp like a stealthy spider on a mission. My goal was crystal clear—to unearth something, anything, that would sow chaos, confusion, and anarchy like wildfire.

Ah, wouldn't you know it? It didn't take long before I stumbled upon the tent, probably where they're holding poor Aurelia hostage. Of course, nothing is ever straightforward, and that's exactly why I was certain this was the right spot. Twelve armored bastards were standing guard—six strutting around in their fancy-ass plate armor, and the other six playing dress-up as Conan and Red Sonja wannabes straight outta Comicon. *I swear, you can't make this shit up! Let's see what fun we can stir up with these fucks, shall we?*

“Seriously, why are half of these soldiers prancing around half-ass naked?”

“My brilliant hypothesis is that the more skin someone bares, the better they can toy with ambient mana for spellcasting,” I proudly declared to my astounded self, drawing on the limited knowledge at my disposal.

“Guess?”

“Yes, I guess!” I retorted to myself, a hint of annoyance in my tone at my own lack of appreciation. *“And you know what? It might also clarify why I'm so damn skilled at it—after all, I'm practically naked all the time!”*

“What? I am not naked—wait! I suppose I am. Hmph, but no. I've got my silk face and shoulders. That should count as clothing!”

“Your face? First off, it doesn't count. Spider silk is a creation of our body, so it still counts as part of me. Because of that, it shouldn't interfere with ambient mana manipulation. If anything, it might help.”

I mentally groaned, *“Ugh, whatever!”* Arguing with myself was utterly draining, like a never-ending loop with no clear winner or loser. Well, I guess, in my case, that wasn't entirely true.

Getting back on topic! The mixture of nudists and knights was spread out like butter on toast, guarding every inch of that tent like their lives depended on it. I'd love to play whack-a-knight and take 'em all out, but then the whole camp would be on high alert. Not exactly ideal for a rescue mission. And don't get me started on the overkill. If Aurelia's in there, I can't risk putting her in more danger.

"What we need is to locate where these assholes stash their stockpile of boom-boom shit!"

"No! That's a stupid idea. No, scratch that—it's a really stupid idea!"

"Sometimes the worst ideas are the best 'cause nobody ever sees them coming!"

"That's the dumbest reasoning I've ever heard!"

"Yeah, but do you have a better idea?"

"..."

"Thought so!"

Two hours into my epic search, I felt as useful as a stripper at a funeral. Ha! Ah, memories of my ex-girlfriend at my grandfather's funeral... Anyways! My brilliant plan was turning into a never-ending egg hunt instead of a genius strategy. Despite my lack of success in unearthing their magical weapon stash or the artillery for those damn catapult thingies, I did manage to map out the entire camp. Yeah, that's progress, I guess. I even pinpointed Gimona and Anlyth's tents like a boss. But no luck in finding that Dumbledore-looking piece of shit, Craycroft. He was playing hide-and-seek like a pro, and it was pissing me off.

However, I did notice knights stumbling in and out of that shabby village. So, only one place left to explore before putting my Plan MM for Mass Murder, all ninja-like, into action! Other me was against it, of course, saying we'd get caught. *Blah!*

As I scaled the rickety wooden walls of Elsternwick, my keen eyes caught sight of a familiar figure. It was that hulking brute I'd spotted earlier, the one clinging onto Anlyth as they made their way toward the town.

"Well, well, well, look who we see," I cooed in sinister delight.

"Aurelia first! We can deal with him later," my more cautious side advised.

"But come on, he's all alone and important to the bastard who killed Wartie. I want him dead! And don't forget, Olin needs a new body. One I can thoroughly enjoy torturing!" I retorted, eager for some payback.

"Can't we just leave him and focus on the elf after we've blown this place to bits?" the more reasonable part of me suggested.

"Yeah, yeah, we could, but that's not enough for me. I want to strip that bastard and his pals of everything before finishing them off. And you know what would be epic? Shoving a lich's soul

inside that hulking brute! Can you imagine Olin landing the final blow on the elf? Anlyth's face right before his doom would be priceless! Ha-Ha! Nope, we're taking him out. Now!"

Stalking through the crumbling and decaying wooden ramparts of Elsternwick's outer walls, I kept my eye on the big guy below, like a cat eyeing a juicy mouse. And let me tell you, this village was way bigger than I thought—buildings hiding like secrets within a bowl.

From up on my perch, I couldn't help but chuckle at the sight below—more soldiers and knights than you'd find at a, umm, freakin' knight convention – festival? You know what I mean! Anyways! They were stumbling around like drunken fools while the villagers treated them like conquering heroes. *Ah, the joy of impending horrors I'm about to unleash upon these clueless numbskulls.*

I fixed my gaze back on my target—the big brute himself, strutting into a dark alley like he owned the joint. *Time to pounce! Wait, what's this?* Two soldiers guarding a door like it's Fort Knox or something. “General, it is good to see you!” they stated, offering some strange chest-slapping salute to the big guy as he strolled past them and through the door they guarded.

With a smirk that would make the devil jealous, I slinked across the ramparts and clung to the building like some creepy crawlies do. Turns out, Anlyth's little love interest is a real VIP in this hellhole. My form shifted and twisted, my spider legs morphing into sinuous tentacles, ready for some deadly dance. I left a trail of corroded stone in my wake as I crawled because why not add a touch of style to the whole monster gig?

After a night of debauchery, the air reeked of piss and puke, a sweet perfume that got my murderous mojo going. The unspeakable horrors I was about to unleash had my goo pumping with excitement. General Conan-wannabe disappeared behind that creaky door, and I slithered down like a pro hitman, all tentacly and badass. The two guards? Pfft, they were like toys to me. Surprise, motherfuckers! My tar-like embrace smothered their faces, silencing their muffled screams before they even began. Oh, the thrill of the kill, the exquisite taste of terror! Their desperate kicks and thrashes were like a symphony to my ears. But I had a few more items on tonight's menu, so I stored their headless bodies in my void for a later feast.

You have defeated 2 [Soldiers].
<u>LEVEL UP!</u> You are now level 46.
Do you wish to [Absorb] [Soldiers]? Yes / No

“Well, shit! It's about damn time we leveled!”

“Let’s rock and roll, baby!” I shifted back into my human form, sly grin in place, and reached for the doorknob like a master thief. With a rusty screech, the old door swung open, and yeah, I may have flinched inwardly from the unintentional noise, but who cares? I was still ready to party! Oh, and as I did, I mentally clicked, “*Hell, yes!*”

[Absorb] Unsuccessful.

[Soldiers] did not have any skills.

“So much for them being skilled soldiers,” I groaned, rolling my eyes. *Pathetic.*

“Seriously!” I answered back with a hushed whisper.

With bated breath, I peered around the door and found a spiraling staircase leading into the unknown depths of a seemingly bottomless black abyss. Tiptoeing past the door, I crept down the stone steps. The voices of a heated conversation reached my ears, growing louder with each step. My curiosity was piqued, and I couldn’t help but wonder what secrets I would uncover. But, damn it, my frown deepened as I realized that what I had mistaken for a friendly chit-chat was, in fact, an interrogation—a brutal one at that.

“Where has your lord sought asylum?!” A harsh slap echoed up the stairwell, “OUT WITH IT!” Another slap sound rang out. “NOW!”

The thought of them torturing Aurelia stirred up a tempest of boiling rage within me. Peeping ‘round the edge of some hefty pillar, I got an eyeful of the General and a couple of muscle-bound bruisers doing a real number on a guy with a face that looked like a toad. Somewhere in the recesses of my mind, a dim bell of recognition rang for the poor bastard, but hey, I wasn’t about to lose any sleep over him.

His frantic squawks were drowned out by the steady thump of fists and the snarled demands of his tormentors – not that he had a snowball’s chance in hell of answering ‘em. The boys seemed more invested in their savage dance than milking any useful info from Toadface. And you know what? There’s a twisted sort of honor in that. *I can respect that!*

One of the interrogators turned to my prey, his eyes sparkling with sadistic glee. “General Ezad,” he growled, “permission to start severing limbs? Let’s see if that’ll loosen the wretched freak’s tongue.”

Ezad, the so-called General, grunted out a pleased sound as one of his interrogators spun on his heel and made tracks for the stairs, sauntering past me with a greedy look smeared across his mug. If only he knew, I was far more ravenous than him. With a casual shoulder roll, bam! Eight thrashing tentacles sprang from my back.

Next thing I knew, I was hoisting my butt up the wall and lurking above the staircase, invisible to the untrained eye. No time at all passed before my soon-to-be snack strolled underneath me, and before Ezad and his remaining bruiser could react, I’d given the poor sap’s neck a savage twist and sucked his lifeless body into me... right into my cosmic hole – Stellar Void! *Ah, damnit!*

“Ha-ha!”

“Oh, shut up!”

“What? That wasn’t me. That was you laughing at yourself!”

“...”

Casting a sneaky look back to where toad-man was getting worked over, his pitiful whines hitting my ears like a sweet lullaby. A handful of jail cells caught my eye, snuggling up against the walls. A quick sweep with my [Thermalsense] turned up nothing but chilly emptiness in ‘em, like all warmth had been gutted out.

The General appeared to be getting annoyed as he cast his gaze back toward where the other interrogator had vanished, but thankfully, he remained unaware of my presence. I had carefully spread my Mana Sight evenly across my entire body. Which helped avoid the telltale orange glow that would give away my position. This made it easier to remain unnoticed, using only a sly tendril from my body to peek around the corner, keeping a watchful eye on them.

“Soldier! What’s keeping you?” The General bellowed, his frown deepening as no response was offered.

“It’s no use, human. You’ll be dead before you make it back to your pitiful Slaethia,” purred a seductive voice as sweet as honey from a cell that, just a moment before, I was certain had been empty. “My beloved will make sure of it.”

Hearing that voice, my heart missed a beat, and yes, I meant that metaphorically – again! Of course, I don’t have an actual heart, nor blood – unless you consider my corrosive and poisonous secretions to be my blood...or saliva? *Meh*. The point is, I was riding cloud nine, knowing that I’d finally tracked down Aurelia!

“Uh... if Aurelia’s here, what was in that tent at the camp?”

“No clue, but I don’t think it’s a big deal anymore!”

“...I suppose.”

The General’s laugh was low and mean as he sidled up to the cell. “Brave words for one who’s been captured. We stole the dungeon core from beneath your ruins without one of you monsters noticing. Most of your coven has been either slayed or scattered in the wind. So, tell me, dark princess, who’s left to save you now? You’ll be in Slaethia by the month’s end, where King Thunderleaf’s finest will see to your proper integration. Until then, sit back and savor the sounds of your fellow captives’ screams.”

“Like, I would allow that to happen.”

“Nope, not when we have far grander plans in store for Aurelia!”

“Tentacle Hentia?”

“...”



Vorigan, a vampiric monstrosity with amphibian-like features, was not blessed with the fangs of his kin. Instead, his frog-like face housed a maw lined with miniature, fish-like teeth. He lacked an intimidating presence of any kind. The cruel joke was not lost on him, as even his tormentors now saw him as nothing more than a mere plaything, fit only to be toyed with and abused. Vorigan felt like a lamb led to the slaughter, dreading the impending impalement that was closing in once the two elves were done. And he really didn't want a wooden pike shoved up his ass, or did he? No, he most certainly did – not...

The two sadistic elf interrogators, despite their relentless efforts to beat out the information from him, had come up empty. Neither his loyalty nor lack thereof kept him from answering their questions. Nor was it a lack of determination on their part. Vorigan simply was as ignorant as they came. Yes, Vorigan was truly a fountain of nothingness, but that was proving to be a blessing in disguise.

The sound of heavy footsteps echoed through the chamber, causing the interrogators to pull their ruthless leers away from Vorigan in surprise. Descending the stairs was a towering figure, a behemoth of a man who Vorigan recognized as the General who had decimated his kin. Vorigan's heart raced as he gazed upon the leviathan-like figure, his skin as dark as sin and his muscles rippling like stormy seas. The amphibian could only pray that the man was about to join in the sickening depravities. The two elves gave respectful nods to the General before returning their full attention to Vorigan, ready to pick up where they had left off.

“Where has your lord sought asylum?!” A harsh slap across the face dazed the amphibian, “OUT WITH IT!” Another slap sound rang out. “NOW!”

Vorigan had already pointed them in the direction of the west. Still, the whereabouts of the coven Lord Demidicus had vanished to remain unknown to him. If he had known, the amphibian would've offered the information four sunsets prior, especially after witnessing the gory spectacle of the first vampire ruthlessly impaled. The image of his fellow creatures of the night being brutally held down and stripped nude before being skewered with a wooden stake still haunted Vorigan's mind with recurring lust – dread! They didn't even have the courtesy to spit on the tip. The thought of experiencing that same cruel fate filled him with such...elation!

The relentless barrage of violence carried on, each blow landing with the force of a blacksmith's hammer. Vorigan was battered, bruised, and bleeding but took it all in stride. If only his tormentors had known about his amphibian physiology. In that case, they might have been taken aback by how their blows only stoked his stiffening perverse desires. No, this was not torture, this was a pleasure, and Vorigan would have told these two hunky elves anything they wanted to hear, just to keep the beatings coming. To Vorigan, life was one long, sickening masquerade of pain and pleasure. And this, this was his idea of a royal ball! He only hoped they could keep the dance going.

One of the interrogators stopped his wonderous beating to face the big brute. “General Ezad,” he growled, sounding more like a purr to Vorigan, “permission to start severing limbs? Let’s see if that’ll loosen the wretched freak’s tongue.”

“Oh, so sorry, but my tongue is a little too stiff right now,” Vorigan thought with such glee.

Vorigan appeared to be a spineless wimp, always avoiding confrontation. It was all just a rouse, a cunning act of playing hard to get. He basked in the moment’s thrill as he sat bound to this chair, vulnerable to the whims of his three hulking tormentors. The mere thought of losing a limb sent shivers of euphoria to his groin, a reaction his interrogators misinterpreted as trembling fear. But what did he care if they hacked away at him! After all, he was not only a vampire but also of amphibian lineage. He could regrow any amputated limb in mere moments. Vorigan could only hope that they’d started with his manhood.

Sadly, it was not meant to be. Vorigan felt a retching mix of relief and annoyance as he stared on as one of his tormentors sauntered past the stairwell to retrieve a gleaming butcher knife. But before the elf could lay his hands on it, a tendril of darkness shot out like a striking viper, snapping the elf’s neck with a stealthy crunch. And before the lifeless body could even hit the ground, it was snatched up into the stairwell, out of sight. The General and the remaining elf interrogator remained blissfully ignorant of the gruesome act that had just robbed Vorigan of one of his toys.



Aurelia lay within the confines of her prison cell. Her enemies were wise enough to know to drain her of her blood, or she would have slaughtered all of them. The thirst was almost maddening! And how she longed for Bowen or his new incarnation as Blake. But how she dreaded him seeing her like this, drained of blood, and appearing no better than a mummified corpse, such a horrid sight. Vorigan had avoided the same treatment, most likely since so few considered him a vampire. Oh, how appearances can be misleading.

Her time in captivity was nothing short of tedious, filled with utter boredom. The only downside was the blood they siphoned from her. Despite it all, she was a captive audience to the never-ending beatings Vorigan endured. Little did anyone know, except for Aurelia, that the frog-faced fiend was in a state of ecstasy. He had successfully concealed his depraved desires. But if there was one thing Aurelia was known for, it was her perceptive nature. That’s why she was shocked that she hadn’t noticed the disappearance of one of the interrogators. This thirst was seriously dulling her senses!

“Soldier! What’s keeping you?” The General bellowed, only further souring Aurelia’s mood. But to everyone’s surprise, there was no response from the missing man.

A sinister smile spread across her worn face, exposing a glimpse of the monster slumbering within and the unabated thirst. But relief was near, for she had spotted a tiny tendril of darkness slithered out from the top of the stairwell, a sneaky little spy that only vampiric eyes could easily detect. Sadly, she had missed the murder of the elf, lost in her daydreams about her beloved, but she was wide awake now.

Aurelia had made attempts to conceal her emotions for Blake from the coven, a futile effort. But now that the coven was no more, along with The Dark Order, a sad collection of refugees seeking asylum in the shadows, there was no longer a need for her to maintain the pathetic rouse.

“It’s no use, human,” she teased. “You’ll be dead before you make it back to your pitiful Slaethia. My beloved will make sure of it.”

General Ezad Anlyth and his wife, Vanya Anlyth, were renowned as an unstoppable pair. Vanya, in particular, was a fierce paladin for the Kingdom of Slaethia, and Aurelia longed to take her down in front of Ezad. The mere thought of their suffering brought her a dark satisfaction, soothing her mind from the constant pain of her insatiable thirst. But nothing could compare to the eager excitement she felt at this moment, not only to be reunited with her beloved but to see what he would do next.

Ezad pivoted towards Aurelia’s cell with a smirk, but little did he know, her smile was far more sinister than his own. The other interrogator ceased his relentless assault on Vorigan and cautiously approached the stairwell. Despite their ignorance of Blake’s presence, the sudden silence aroused suspicions.

The true terror began as the second interrogator approached the table that held the knives and other torture instruments. A writhing mass of inky tendrils and tentacles descended upon the elf, who let out a scream of terror and pain that chilled the very air. General Ezad spun around, his face contorted in horror and fury as he charged forward, his massive fists raised to deliver punishing blows. But before he could intervene, a goopy tendril of tar-like substance snaked around the elf’s lower jaw, wrapping it in a web of sticky tentacles, and yanked.

With a ghastly tug, the jaw was ripped free and hurled toward the oncoming behemoth. With a flick of Ezad’s hand, he swatted the detached jaw out of his way, only to be pummeled over as the still-screaming elf was thrown right at him. The two tumbled in a tangled heap, with the elf’s howls of pain bellowing out from the depths of his throat and throughout the room. The General shoved the wailing elf off him and surged to his feet, but it was too late. A tentacle had already wrapped around his neck and pulled him close.

The only sound heard over the elf’s horrid howling was Aurelia’s laughter!

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There I was, giving Anlyth’s sweetie the ol’ squeeze play, my arm coiled ‘round his neck, not quite offing him, but enough to make him about as useful as a screaming toddler. The guy was throwing punches and clawing at me, but every time he scrapped off a bit of my gooey black sludge, it just filled back in. I started morphing back into my drop-dead, chiseled self – Ava had been all for us giving them the surprise of their lives with my natural look, all sinuous, squiggly appendages waving around like a mad octopus. *Good call, me!*

Bam! Before you could blink, I was back in my sultry human form, rocking the hell out of my dark and deadly goth outfit and skin as smooth as satin. My eyes flickered on again, shooting an eerie orange light that splashed all over the General’s face. The second he caught sight of the lady behind



the monster, his wrestling act took a nosedive. He just fixed me with a stare that could freeze lava. I was totally eating it up. The only downer was the blubbering elf, who seemed to have misplaced his jaw. Scratch that – I was totally getting my kicks from that too!

“What manner of abomination are you?” Ezad snarled.

Aurelia cooed out from the depths of a dark prison cell, her voice as alluring as I remembered it. “Well, well, you’re a woman and a gorgeous one at that! General Ezad, allow me to introduce you to our Dark Champion.”

“Hi’ya,” I stammered, my mouth unusually dry for being a Black Pudding.

*“Hi’ya?! Are you kidding us? This is it? Our moment to shine, and you come up with that?”*

*“Cut us some slack. I’m nervous, okay!”*

*“Ugh!?”*

“Uh... I may not have exactly emerged victorious from the trial,” I added.

*“Fuck, me! You’re messing this up big time!”*

“No matter,” Aurelia chimed in, almost soothingly, her tone hinting at a touch of relief. “You’re still alive, so the Crone must have taken you in as one of her faithful.”

“Not exactly,” I corrected. “The Crone more or less adopted us as her daughters.”

“Us?” Aurelia repeated, her voice a mere whisper.

“WHAT?!” The frog man, bound to a chair, roared out.

The General’s eyes blazed with fury as he spat out, “I don’t give a fuck who or what you are. My wife will avenge me! And I’ll see you within the veil, you monster!”

“Wife? I thought you were with Anlyth, that paladin-looking guy. I saw him clinging to your arm earlier.”

“What? Vanya is a woman,” Ezad shouted at me.

“Huh, I did not see that coming,” I replied before snapping Ezad’s neck.

*“We should haul that screeching elf to Aurelia’s cell and chuck him in there with her,”* I mentally suggested to myself.

*“One step ahead of you,”* I thought back.

Getting a good grip on the inquisitor’s leg, I started dragging him over to where Aurelia was caged up. The guy was a hot mess, howling his head off – well, what was left of it after his jaw had taken a hike. I was tempted to just scarf him down right then and there. But I knew Aurelia needed his blood way more than I needed a snack.

The cell looked like something ripped right out of a history book like it belonged in the 1600s or something. I slapped my hand on the rusty old bars, letting my acid flesh do its magic and melt down that hunk of iron. A piece of cake, really – the door crumbled in a few seconds flat. Then, with a cheeky twist of my hips, I chucked the elf into the cell. Waiting for him? One seriously ravenous vampire.

Once that elf skidded to a stop in the cell, my dear, starved vampire pounced. Oh, what a sight! At first, in the inky black, I couldn't make out Aurelia. But the moment she got hold of the elf, all hell broke loose. He was all over the place, kicking and flailing as she dug in for her meal. She was practically a mummy when she started, but as she fed, she filled out. Those curves that drove me wild slowly came back. It was like watching a great white during chow time, but a thousand times better. And me? I was so wrapped up in her, so caught up, I couldn't tell if I was in love or just lusting after her like crazy. Yeah, it's messed me up before, but right now? I was just captivated by her raw, wild beauty. *She's amazing!*

*“Dibs!”*

*“Screw you!”*

*“That's the goal, isn't it?”*

*“...I hate you.”*

As I was totally vibing on this moment, frog-face had to go and break my trance. “Um, can you unstrap me from this chair?” he croaked.

I took a peek at Toadface, not exactly thrilled. “Yeah, just hang on a sec. Got a little something to take care of.” With that, I fished out the phylactery from my void, the one that was holding Olin's annoying soul.

Aurelia started to step out from the shadows of the cell, her sharp red eyes honed in on the object in my grip. As she moved, I couldn't help but get caught up in the sway of her hips, her queen-like stature, and those killer good looks. Oh, and let's not forget the sexy-as-hell blood still running down her beautiful face.

“And what do you have there?” Aurelia hummed.

*“Dibs!”*