

BLACK PUDDING

CHAPTER 20

I reclined in the dreary and foreboding depths of my consciousness, mesmerized by Ava's spellcasting. Her movements were as fluid and graceful as the sweeping arcs of a symphonic conductor's baton. I was spellbound by her mastery, but I would never grant her the satisfaction of knowing how deeply I was entranced. Olin's soul still clung around his body, even after his skull had been shattered beyond repair by a massive battle axe. And yet, thankfully, Heather, our new Dark Priestess, or Priestess of Darkness – whatever – had the power to mend the ghoul's head with ease. But it would not be enough to bring him back to life, or un-life, which was where the phylactery came into play.

Ava had explained to me that healing magic shouldn't work on the undead, but being on the dark side had many benefits. All that remained was Ava's mesmerizing spellcasting as she wove Olin's soul into my last remaining phylactery, a bitter waste, but I was desperate for answers. And yet, amidst the spellcasting, a nagging feeling gnawed at the back of my mind. I felt as if I had forgotten something important. Still, I dismissed it with a mental shrug.

Before long, Ava's spellcasting was complete, and the phylactery took over the final phase of weaving the soul. A sense of familiarity washed over me as I regained control of our body and hoisted the ghoul over my shoulder. I pressed on with my search, heedless of the gnawing feeling in the back of my mind.

"He's a lich now," Ava declared. "And that nagging in your head, Blake, it's Wartie. He's still trapped inside the Stellar Void."

"What? I couldn't hear you," I replied, feigning ignorance.

"You... You didn't actually forget, did you?" Ava accused. "You're just trying to avoid dealing with him!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," I protested, my tone heavy with sarcasm, a wry twist of my lips as I sought to deflect her accusations.

"Let the poor kid out!"

"Ugh! Do I have to?" I whined.

Sophia leaned over my shoulder, a look of bemusement on her face. "You know, it's sort of creepy listening to you argue with yourself like that," she said with a smirk.

"Umm, Sophia, please don't tease the man-eating monster that's already killed three of us," Yua interjected, her tone wary.

“Five,” I replied a glint of amusement in my eyes. “I’m counting the cave-in as my victory.” I grinned, reveling in the memory of beheading Rob and Heather and ramming my tentacle down Jason’s throat.

“I’m pretty sure the cave-in counts as Jeremy’s win,” Rob added. His words struck me with bitter annoyance. The grin faded from my face, replaced by a scowl as I glared at him.

“Do you want me to remove your head again?”

“No, ma’am!” Rob blurted out.

As I made my way through the twisting labyrinth of corridors, I felt a sense of unease grow within me. Carrying Olin, I was trailed by a group of simple-minded followers. It wasn’t long before I stumbled upon a familiar path that led to the massive chamber where Aurelia had tossed me at that delicious succubus. The mere thought of Aurelia shoving me into Niamh and devouring her sent delightful shivers through me. I couldn’t help but be consumed by the desire to murder and consume that succubus while Aurelia watched.

You know, Blake, even if you’re not speaking your thoughts out loud in our head, I can still feel those dark cravings that linger within you. Pervert!

Oh, shut up, like you’re any better.

...Shouldn’t you worry more about finding Aurelia than thinking about our urges?

“Our urges?” I mouthed. My heart was filled with dread at the thought of discovering Aurelia’s lifeless body within the labyrinthine corridors. “Excuse me, Ava, if my mind wanders when I’m nervous,” I added with a hint of sarcasm as I tried to mask the shaking. “Shouldn’t we have saved that phylactery in case we find her body?”

“Blake, I know you’re worried. I am too,” Ava breathed, her voice soft and hushed like a whisper carried on the wind. “Don’t stress about the phylactery. If we find Aurelia, we can always get rid of Olin’s soul and reuse it. And, oh yes, our urges!”

I stepped cautiously into the chamber, the delicious stench of death and decay filling my senses. The massive cathedral-like space loomed above me, towering, vaulted ceilings and pillars stretching endlessly into the shadows. The flickering green light of the few remaining cauldrons cast an eerie glow, illuminating the crushed remains of countless skeletons strewn across the floor. Amidst the sea of death, I spotted the bodies of necromancers and other dark creatures, all fallen in a final last stand. The thought of Aurelia being among them sent shivers of sorrow through my body, and I couldn’t help but feel lost. I walked aimlessly through this place of despair, hoping I wouldn’t find Aurelia among them.

“Ava,” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper, “if she’s here, do you think we can turn her into a lich?”

Ava shook our head, her voice equally hushed. Her words struck me like a knife to the heart, leaving me feeling hollow. “I don’t know, Blake. If her soul still remains near her body, it’s possible. But I don’t sense any lingering souls in this chamber.”

“What happened here?” Rob’s voice boomed out through the solemn cathedral of death.

My flock of lost sheep began murmuring amongst themselves as I searched through the grisly aftermath of the battle. To my immense relief, I could not find any trace of Aurelia’s body amongst the pile of crushed skeletons and fallen dark creatures. But then, I felt Olin shifting about on my shoulder, and my heart raced. Olin was stirring, awakening much faster than Wartie had. I speculated that it was due to his previous existence as an undead. The time had come to extract some answers, and with a cold and callous heart, I tossed the little shit to the ground as I loomed over him.

Olin’s eyes opened wide in shock and confusion as they met mine. Before he could speak, I transformed an arm into a massive tentacle and slammed it beside his head, causing the former ghoul to tremble. Olin attempted to speak, his lips forming a word. “Bow—,” but my voice blasted through the chamber like a clap of thunder, silencing him.

“**WHERE IS AURELIA?!**” I growled, my eyes blazing with a harsh, orange light that cast a sinister glow upon the quivering figure before me. However, whether the voice had been, mine or Ava’s was unclear, as the air around me seemed to thrum with dark and ominous energy. I could have been mistaken, but I thought I had seen a few purple sparks.

“The last time I beheld my lady,” Olin spoke, barely above a whisper. “That bastard, Demidicus, was dragging her towards the portal chamber, with the surviving elders in tow, in a bid to escape.” The fear and trembling in his voice faded, replaced by a look of determination in his eyes as he stared up at me.

“Where would they have gone?”

“There is another coven located far to the west of these lands, along the coast,” Olin replied. “If they went anywhere, it would likely be there. However, I highly doubt they would stay for long. The Grand Elder is not known for sharing power and holds little sway on that side of the continent.”

“And after that?”

“I cannot say for sure,” Olin admitted. “This place was our final resort in Demidicus’s eyes.”

“Ugh! How do I find Aurelia?!”

“My guess is she will find you.”

“That’s not much help,” I snarled. “If you’re not going to be useful to me, I might as well eat you.”

Olin’s gaze darted towards the others, a look of surprise crossing his face before returning his attention to me. “I thought the other candidates had perished during the trial?”

“We all did,” Ava answered. “But the Crone chose to keep us.”

“Did she choose anyone to be her priestess?” Olin asked, a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

“Heather, get your ass over here!”

“C-Coming!” Heather shrieked back as she stumbled over, with Yua protectively by her side and the other two following closely behind.

“Meet Heather, our Dark Priestess,” I announced with a hint of sarcasm as I gestured toward her.

Heather stood stiffly, fear evident on her face, as she nervously waved in Olin’s direction. “H-Hi,” she stammered.

“Excellent! No, remarkable! You are her voice in this world,” Olin said to Heather, his eyes alight with excitement. “If you seek answers, you must pray to our goddess.”

Heather looked around, bewildered until Yua offered her a gentle nudge of encouragement. My interest, however, was piqued by the other roles in this twisted little group of ours. Something to worry about later!

“W-What exactly should I p-pray for?” Heather stammered.

“Pray for where we may find Lady Aurelia,” Olin instructed, his eyes shining in eagerness. “It may take several hours to respond, but do not stop praying until she answers.”

“Remember that sexy vampire woman we caught a glimpse of before the trial began,” Yua whispered into Heather’s ear, her voice carrying clearly through the silent, cavernous chamber. I felt a longing desire that I couldn’t explain as Ava nodded in agreement.

Do you think Aurelia has a thing for twins?

Shut up, Ava! ...Maybe?

“Which one of you is the champion?” Olin asked, his gaze fixed on me as if waiting for me to claim the title for myself.

I gave a nonchalant shrug, “We left the fool in that room filled with altars.”

“You’re not the champion?” Olin muttered to himself.

“Nope.”

“Interesting,” Olin said, his brow furrowed in thought. “My mistress was so sure you would come out on top.”

“Well, these things happen,” I said, a smirk playing on my lips.

“Wait... You said the room with the altars?” Olin’s expression darkened.

“That’s right,” Sophia confirmed.

“So, all of you really did meet your end down there?”

“I’m not entirely sure I did,” I chimed in, my arms folded behind my back as I swayed innocently, “but I can vouch for the death of the others.”

“Some of the old scriptures I’ve found stated that if a leveler fell in a dungeon. Their spirit would be returned to the fold. To a place known as the Respawn Point. So they may fight again,” Olin mused, his eyes distant and his demeanor contemplative.

“But wouldn’t the dungeon’s core be necessary for that to work?” I asked with a hint of skepticism.

“Indeed,” Olin replied, nodding his head in agreement.

“Funny thing,” I added with a wry smirk, “the core was taken a month or two ago.”

“What? That’s not possible... Unless the Crone intervened on your behalf,” Olin gasped.

“Well, that might explain why Rob’s body vanished,” Ava interjected. “But it doesn’t explain why Sophia’s body was left lying there when Blake started the trial.”

“...When Blake started it?”

“Don’t worry about it,” I replied with a dismissive wave of my hand.

“Perhaps the goddess wasn’t involved at first and left Sophia’s body there until we, or rather, until Blake started impressing her,” Ava theorized.

“Are you talking to yourself in the third person?”

“She does that,” Sophia teased with a smirk. “You’ll get used to it.”

I turned my gaze to Olin, an expression of curiosity on my face. “So, these respawn points only work for levelers, and are they limited to dungeons?”

“As far as legends go, they only talk about them working inside of dungeons for levelers,” Olin replied, a look of contemplation on his face. “There’s no written evidence of them working outside of dungeons.”

“Did you know this?” I asked Ava.

“No, surprisingly,” Ava admitted, my brow furrowed in thought. “My knowledge seems more limited than I had previously thought.”

“I’m concerned...” Olin muttered, his features etched with worry as he fixed his gaze upon me.

“And you should be,” I said with a nod. “But for now, shush.”

Heather let out a startled breath as she eyed me with fear, “S-She... Umm, the Crone, goddess? Your mother! S-She, says the King-Kingdom of S-Slaethia cap-captured her.”

“Oh, no!” Olin uttered.

I fixed Olin with a steely, intense gaze, my voice tinged with the fury that boiled within me. “Which way is the Kingdom of Slaethia?”

“To the southeast,” Olin answered his expression a tempest of conflicting emotions. “D-Did the priestess refer to the Crone as your mother?”

“Scion of the Crone,” I replied, but there was no humor or taunting behind my words. My thoughts were solely focused on retrieving Aurelia, and the burning fury within me was overwhelming. I did not heed the others as they proudly announced their titles to Olin.

“S-Scion?!”

I felt a strong urge to plunge a tentacle into Olin’s eye socket, but despite my rage, the sight of his small, childlike form held me back. *Stupid kid face!* However, a wicked idea struck me as I glanced around the room at all the dead bodies.

“Ava,” I inquired with a menacing tune, “is it too late to transplant his soul into another host, or is he stuck in that body until his soul adapts?”

Ava’s reply was a low, sinister coo. “Since he was already undead, the answer is no, it’s not too late.”

My four idiots went silent as Olin’s eyes bulged in terror as he realized his fate. But before he could even utter a single plea or protest, Ava ruthlessly severed his phylactery from his current vessel, leaving him silenced. *I need warriors, not children. And tormenting him without feeling that dreadful sensation, guilt – Blah – is just a bonus!*

“Did you just kill a child?” Rob asked, his face filled with concern.

“He was already dead,” I replied, my tone flat and unemotional. Ignoring the look of disbelief on their faces, I reached into the Stellar Void. I retrieved a tiny, irksome goblin clutching an orb no larger than a softball as if it were the most special thing in all of existence.

“Where? What? Who?” Wartie stammered, his eyes darting around in disbelief as he came face to face with four of his sworn enemies. I gently patted the goblin’s head, calming him down before he could act recklessly. He gazed up at me, his mouth opening and closing as he tried to speak, but no words came out. Then the little pest attached himself to my leg like a frightened child... *Ugh!*

“Heather,” Ava proclaimed, her flowing with determination, “ask our mother if she will restore the powers of the dungeon dwellers in exchange for their undying devotion to her.”

Heather remained silent, merely inclining her head as she resumed her prayers. As I furrowed my brow in confusion...

“Mother?”

“Don’t play dumb, Blake,” Ava scolded. “She’s already referred to us as sisters, so you’re stuck with me, like it or not.”

“**This is where the fuck you guys went!**” Jason yelled as he walked in, wearing some scavenged armor he pillaged from some random corpse, blood stains still evident.

Wartie let out a low growl, but a gentle hand on his head calmed him. Surprisingly, I noticed Jeremy trailing behind Jason, also wearing pilfered armor. I had expected that jagged-toothed fucker to have killed him. Still, perhaps that devastating lightning spell of Jeremy’s had kept Jason in line. *Whatever!*

Heather let out a sharp gasp as she suddenly started levitating off the ground. I turned toward her, noticing her eyes had become as dark as a moonless night.

“Listen well, my dears,” spoke the Crone with an ethereal tune, “for I doth proclaim, that I shall take the dungeon dwellers into my fold, if they swear their devotion to me and mine, unyielding and bold. And with thy faithful followers, my dear daughters,” continued the Crone with a sly grin upon Heather’s face, “ye shall have the makings of an army, a force to be reckoned with, so begin. But beware, my dears, for if they should stray, they shall feel the wrath of my daughters, cruel and kind rolled into one.

“And now, my dears,” declared the Crone with a nod, “my Priestess hath received my command, with my beloved grandchild in tow, he and ye three, my Paladin, Sentinel, and Assassin, shall go with my Priestess to the dungeon folk, to offer my kindness. With my offer, they shall join our cause, and my daughters’ army shall grow, for ye must be ready, for what is yet to come, so go and make ready, my dears, I bid thee go.

“Now for ye, my daughters, I know what it is ye seek, and know this well, if ye act with haste, ye shall rescue that which ye desire, within Elsternwick to the east, before night doth waste. Take my champion with thee, and when ye return with your love, lead my flock to the covens of the west, for the holy knights shall chase close at thy crest.”

Heather’s dark elf irises returned to their normal purple and pink hue before she collapsed into Yua’s embrace. I turned my gaze to Jason and saw a look of anger and disdain on his face.

Oh, joy – wait, did she say, grandchild?