

BLACK PUDDING

CHAPTER 14

Aurelia's Desire

Britannia

“Flee, Aislinn, my love,” Bowen cried out, his voice trembling with fear and urgency. “The Romans are closing in, and we must make haste.”

The winter solstice had brought naught but woe to their tribe, for the Romans had come to conquer all. Aislinn and Bowen were two of the few who had escaped the wrath of the invaders, but the fear of capture still weighed heavily upon their hearts.

The forest winds carried the mournful cries of their fallen kin, and the spirits of the trees raged in anger, a blazing inferno consuming all in its path. In the shadows of night, the branches of the trees reached out like blackened claws, seeking to ensnare them as they fled. The roots of the ancient spirits lay hidden beneath the snow, waiting to trip their steps. Aislinn stumbled and fell, a sharp pain shooting through her leg as it gave way beneath her.

“Broken, I fear,” Aislinn whispered, her voice choking on the bitter taste of pain and defeat.

But Bowen, her love, her strength, was at Aislinn's side. Her tears shone like diamonds in the frigid night. Bowen's father, the druid of their tribe, had promised prosperity and joy upon the solstice. What a beautiful lie that is now all but lost. He lifted Aislinn to her feet. As Aislinn leaned upon Bowen, her pain a distant whisper in the face of her love. Together, they let the spirits guide them through the snow and ash toward a future unknown.

Even now, the stars shone with a brilliance that Aislinn had never before appreciated. An icy breeze blew the freshly fallen snowflakes back into the air like fairies upon the wind. Despite her awe for a world she was only now appreciating, Aislinn moved forward, each step sending shudders of pain through her body. Yet, all she could feel was Bowen's warmth as if it were the last time.

Then it happened as she landed on her knees. It came quietly with a gentle push against her back and a slight pinch in her chest. She peered down, bewildered, at the arrowhead sticking out of her chest. She heard a rage-filled battle cry but knew it was not her own as she swayed on her knees in a haze. Pulling her eyes up, she saw Bowen struggling against five Romans. They had surrounded them, but Bowen had refused to be taken without a fight as he punched at them. Another Roman soldier appeared, but instead of grappling with Bowen, he came for Aislinn.

With a powerful push, she was sent tumbling to the ground. The sound of the arrow in her back snapping echoed in her ears, followed by a small cough of blood leaving her lips. The darkness was closing in, her vision fading, as she tore her gaze away from the soldier rifling through her clothes. She was relieved as the end approached, numbing her pain.

Aislinn's final words were a vow, spoken with a tenderness that defied even death. "I shall find you in the life beyond, my dearest love," she whispered, and with that, she let go of this world and set her sights on the next.



Through the Veil

"Lord Demidicus," spoke Olin, "it is not too late to return your daughter's soul to her body."

"I have made my decision," replied Lord Demidicus. "My daughter's soul was too weak-hearted for her own good. Aurelia's new soul should be less disappointing. And, if this experiment is a success, she will be an unstoppable leveler."

"Yes, my lord, though, as I have insisted, the souls beyond our veil are extraordinarily powerful. But, it is not a certainty she will be a leveler."

"Then reach back into the veil and retrieve my daughter, a different soul," demanded Lord Demidicus.

"I apologize, my lord, but the damage to the veil has already been mended. If my calculations are correct, we won't be able to summon another soul from there for another millennia or two. That said, my lord, I can guarantee she will be powerful regardless of what she becomes."

"You best ensure she is a leveler, Olin, or I'll turn you into a worthless ghoul," warned Lord Demidicus.

The sound of voices drifted into Aislinn's ears like a warm breeze, and upon opening her eyes, she was met with a horrifying sight. She found herself in a large stone chamber surrounded by armored skeletons, and two pale figures in black robes stood above her. One was a younger man with red, beady eyes, a sharp nose, and a fading hairline. The other was a hooded figure whose face was mostly shrouded in darkness but whose eyes blazed with a demonic red light from beneath his hood.

Olin, the younger of the two pale figures draped in the blackest of robes, declared, "She is awake!"

Aislinn was overwhelmed with a feeling of pure elation, despite the warmth of her tears streaming down her face. She felt more alive than ever, even though her body should have been wracked with pain. To her shock, she discovered that there was no wound or arrow on her bare chest. As she wiped away her tears, she saw the gleam of blood on her fingers and realized that her tears had turned to blood. The most disturbing thing was the unfamiliarity of her hand, as pale as the moon, untouched by the sun's warmth. Her nails, long and sharp, colored red that faded into black like blood and midnight.

"Am I dead?" she whispered.

"Not anymore, my daughter. Not anymore, my precious Aurelia," replied the hooded figure.

Aislinn's mind was consumed by a single, all-encompassing thought. Disregarding everything else that had transpired – the Romans, the last moments of her life, her awakening in this strange and

unknown place. Aislinn had one question that dominated her thoughts, and she voiced it with longing and concern. “Where is Bowen?” she asked, as all that mattered to Aislinn was finding her beloved.



42 Years Later

The grand hall was cast in flickering candlelight, the eerie sounds of mournful cries and clanging chains echoing through its chambers. But this was not a night of mourning. No, it was a night of revelry and celebration! Lord Demidicus held high a freshly severed head of a holy priest. Its lifeless eyes locked in terror as his fellow brethren were shackled to the walls, watching on in horror. “My malevolent creatures of the night,” Lord Demidicus bellowed, his voice booming through the grand hall. “Vampires, Harpies, Wraiths, Ghouls, Succubi, Incubi, and even our own Necromancers among the fairer races, gather around. For we celebrate my daughter’s ascension and welcome her into our fold as an elder of this great coven. Let all tremble at the sound of my dark princess’s name, for her reign of terror shall know no bounds.” With that, he sank his teeth into the neck of the head. The grand hall erupted in a chorus of cheers and applause.

Nearly half a century had passed, and Aurelia’s name still felt unfamiliar in Aislinn’s ear. But such trivialities were of little concern in the wake of the horrors she had wrought. With her undead skeletal army, she had decimated the Kingdom of Slaethia and risen to become a necromancer of immense power. Lord Demidicus had initially been disappointed when she failed to become a leveler, but Aurelia reveled in proving him wrong.

Her thirst for power was not what drove her, however. The fanciful tales of legendary power, of the coveted abilities of a leveler, held no allure for her either. No, her ultimate goal lay elsewhere, but to reach it, she needed to attain the rank of elder within the coven. Lord Demidicus slid the coven’s ceremonial ring onto her finger, symbolizing her newfound status as a leader and devotion to the coven. However, she knew all too well that true power still lay in the hands of her so-called father. Aurelia thought darkly; at the very least, the ring carried a powerful enchantment. Nevertheless, with this declaration came the right to make a request of the coven, a means of reshaping her destiny, a desire all vampires within the coven sought. And Aurelia had a very specific desire in mind.

“Speak your desire, my daughter,” Lord Demidicus said, carrying the weight of centuries, “and if it is within the coven’s power, it shall be yours.”

The grand hall was hushed as all eyes and ears were fixed upon the newest vampire elder, eager to hear what she would claim for herself. Some would ask for wealth and riches, using their reward to establish their own covens. Others sought more sinister pleasures of the flesh. The non-vampires in attendance understood that this ceremony marked the start of new alliances being formed. The coven members whispered amongst themselves, curious as to what the daughter of the grand elder would desire.

“My yearning is to delve into Olin’s prior research.” Aurelia added the word “father,” slipping it out from her lips with a false sweetness at the end of her declaration, masking her loathing. She was all too aware of the strategic value it held in these specific situations.

The grand hall was filled with a cacophony of hushed shock that would reverberate for years to come. With her fearsome reputation, no one had anticipated the vampiric princess to request what was considered a trivial and failed experiment. It had even led to the downfall of Lord Demidicus’s former right-hand, now a mere ghoul.



Another 134 Years Later

The fateful hour had arrived, and the resurrected Kingdom of Slaethia was at the gates of the vampire coven’s castle, determined to eradicate their kind. The siege was long and arduous, but the outcome was certain. The holy knights of Slaethia, wielding the power of the divine, would not be deterred in their quest to rid the land of the dark creatures. With a relentless barrage of attacks, the magical barrier that had long protected the vile abominations finally collapsed. And so, with a mighty last blast, the ballista bolts shattered into the castle walls.

The barrier crumbled and fell as the sun reached its zenith, leaving the vampire coven exposed and vulnerable to the holy knights’ wrath. Too few familiars and undead remained to repel the holy warriors. With their victory within reach, the knights of Slaethia forced their way into the castle. They were determined to claim the heads of every last vampire as their trophy.

“Aurelia, for the love of the dark gods, what are you doing?” Vorigan, the frog-faced necromancer, cried out with urgency. “You must stop your research and leave this place immediately before it is too late.”

Aurelia’s laughter echoed through the chamber as she twirled in delight. “Oh, but do you not see, Olin’s research was mistaken! It’s not two millennia before we may delve into the veil. For us, it’s two millennia on the other side of the veil where time flows differently. It bends and folds upon itself. Can you not comprehend it?”

Olin made his way towards the frayed tapestries and parchments that hung within Aurelia’s chamber, gathering them as he rushed to make their escape. Despite the turmoil that raged around them, with the castle quaking from the unceasing rain of ballista bolts and trebuchet shots, the ghoul resolutely declined to admit the error of his former research. Meanwhile, his mistress of the past one hundred and forty-three years whirled about in mirth, her laughter ringing out as the castle shook and dust rained down from above.

Vorigan gazed in disbelief for a moment. Olin agitatedly gathered his mistress’s notes. And Aurelia laughed on with inexplicable happiness as their entire world crumbled around them. He then regained his composure. “Lord Demidicus has arranged for us to take refuge in the catacombs,” he informed them. “From there, we shall make our way through the deep roads to the ruins of the Grotto of the Betrayed.”



An Additional 9 More Years

“Aurelia, I understand your aspirations,” Lord Demidicus scolded, “but for the champion of our goddess, only one soul is needed. I cannot take the risk of losing everything for your fixation.”

After a hundred and eighty-five years, Aislinn had grown accustomed to her life as Aurelia. It was who she was now, yet she still balked at calling Lord Demidicus “father.” Now that her research had finally borne fruit, he dared to impede her progress. No, Aurelia would not be deterred!

“Lord Demidicus,” Aurelia argued. Her voice tinged with a sophisticated rage, “it stands to reason that more than just one of our revered dark gods would require a champion. My research has shown that I can retrieve multiple souls from the veil every century, a vast improvement over Olin’s prior efforts. Why settle for summoning a single champion when we could bring forth several for our gods?”

“The Crone alone requires a champion,” Lord Demidicus declared firmly. “There is no need for any additional souls. My decision is final! We don’t have the resources for your obsession. At the Crone’s behest, we shall summon the soul that best serves our needs.”

Aurelia was filled with frustration at the thought of having to stoop to her last resort. Still, it had never failed her before, and her determination to achieve her goal remained unwavering.

“Father,” Aurelia spoke the word like ash on her tongue, “I propose a solution. My research shows that we have the ability to summon up to seven souls from the veil while the gateway is open. Why not allow each coven elder to choose a soul they believe will best serve the Crone and have them compete for the privilege of being her chosen champion?”

“The Crone would never permit such a thing,” Lord Demidicus declared. Still, his statement was cut short as a chilly gust of wind circled around them, bringing with it a sinister whisper before dissipating. The grand elder exhaled heavily, “It seems you have prevailed, my child. Now, go ahead and make the necessary arrangements.”

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## Blah! Few More Months Later

“My lady,” Olin’s voice was filled with unease as he approached, his current undead form visibly deteriorating before her eyes. This was the third time he had taken on a new body in the past year, and his rate of deterioration was only accelerating. Aurelia knew she needed to find a suitable phylactery for his soul soon or risk losing him to the ether forever. “He won’t remember you,” Olin continued, his voice heavy with sorrow. “His soul has lived through hundreds, if not thousands, of lives in a never-ending cycle of reincarnation. He may not even be a he anymore!”

Aurelia’s fists came crashing down onto the table, her voice ringing out with frustration and determination. “I don’t care about that!” she declared. “It will work! Whether he remembers me or not, I will have him back. Nothing else matters!”

“My mistress, I stand by your side, no matter what may come,” Olin declared with conviction. “But how do we find just one soul in the vast and endless sea of others?”

Aurelia's grin was sly and full of promise as she revealed her elongated fangs. "With a beacon, my dear Olin," she replied. "A beacon that his soul will instinctively be drawn to, like a moth to a flame, my own soul."

"My lady," Olin's concern was palpable. "This is too reckless! You are risking your very soul on a gamble."

Aurelia's voice was melodic yet ominous as she replied, "Then we must hope that the concept of soulmates is not just a fanciful tale." She twirled with delight, humming a beautiful yet deadly tune, for the moment she had once vowed at death's door was finally becoming a reality.

"My lady," Olin spoke up, his worries still evident. "If you succeed in retrieving his soul, what about the trial? Lord Demidicus seems to view this as an unhealthy obsession, and I fear he may try to sabotage your efforts."

"And so, I shall pray," Aurelia's voice was filled with steely resolve as she concluded her joyful waltz. "Not only to the Crone and our malevolent gods but to any neutral deity that may deign to listen. In my quest to reclaim Bowen's soul, I shall leave no stone unturned, no obstacle unheeded. Even if it means facing the other candidates or Lord Demidicus himself." Aurelia's determination was palpable, her words spilling forth between her tightly clenched jaws, a testament to the fire within her.



#### At Last, The Ritual's Eve

The other elders had each called forth their chosen from beyond the veil, and now it was finally Aurelia's turn to do the same. She stepped into the ritual room. The air in the room was thick with the scent of incense and the flickering light of green flames, casting eerie shadows across the stone walls. Despite the trials and tribulations of the past, Aurelia's eyes were fixed on the altar, where her final goal lay within reach. The once-grand vampire coven had been reduced to a group of refugees, huddled together amongst the other various races hiding in the shadows and calling themselves the Dark Order. The Dark Order, a name that lacked any originality or flair. The vampiric princess could not help but sneer at the uninspired moniker.

But she was not here for the name of her kin. Aurelia was here for Bowen, her beloved, who lay beyond the veil, waiting for Aurelia to claim his soul. Regardless of the memories, or lack thereof, her beloved would surely have lost. Aurelia was determined to reignite that passion. The trials and tribulations of the past and the sacrifices she had made would be worth it if she could finally hold Bowen in her arms once more. Having a second chance to fall in love with her beloved again filled Aurelia with such joy.

With a shiver of anticipation, Aurelia began binding her soul to the ritual, a beacon for Bowen to find, her heart aching with longing. She was certain that if their love was real and Bowen truly was the missing piece of her heart, he would come to her, no matter what mortal form he was trapped in. The thought of it, of finally being reunited, was the only thing that kept Aurelia going. But there was fear deep in Aurelia's heart, a fear of failure – no, she was determined to succeed! Bowen's

soul would find its way to her! Even if soulmates were a myth, Aurelia's desire was too great to be denied! The beacon of her soul would burn bright in the ether, calling out to her lost love!

"Our reunion is near, my beloved," she whispered with a longing grin, her fangs glinting in the green light.

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A Week Later...

"Did's its works, m-mistress?" Olin asked, the ghoul appearing worse for wear.

"Another failure, I'm afraid," Aurelia replied with a sigh.

Despite the setback, Aurelia was still elated. She had finally found her beloved's soul and plucked him from the other side of the veil with loving care. But now, she faced the challenge of finding a mortal vessel to contain the soul. Her desperation grew, but her determination did not waver. She held her beloved's soul close, cradling it near and dear to her heart. All she had to do was hide her joy from Lord Demidicus. The presence of the seductive succubus that always accompanied him made a task even more difficult.

Despite Lord Demidicus's declaration that there could only be one champion and the rest were a waste of their precious resources, Aurelia was not overly concerned. She was aware that the Crone was known to take in those she deemed valuable, and thus, she was not swayed by her so-called father's idle threats. In her mind, the goddess would ultimately make a different declaration.

She was consumed by the mystery of why Bowen's soul refused everything she offered. In desperation, she had resorted to even using everything from men, women, and children to random monster corpses, but to no avail. It was as if a higher power had its own design, and the thought irked her, but she knew it was to be expected for dabbling in the worship of gods other than her own.

"What're wents wrongs, m-mistress?"

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A Few Horrible Hours Late!

"My lady, I still can't understand why you tossed your beloved at Niamh," Olin said, now possessing the body of a young boy and looking much improved. Although Aurelia knew the improvement wouldn't last long, his body would rapidly decay.

"I cannot risk exposing my bias in front of the other elders," Aurelia sighed. "To my delight, Bowen, or Blake, was gifted with a remarkably valuable skill. I cannot say for certain which deity has answered my prayers, but someone has, Olin. The act of dispatching Niamh not only gave my dear love a slight edge in the trial, but it was a delight to witness the succubus's shocked expression." She twiddled the ceremonial ring on her finger.

"Lord Demidicus must not have been pleased, my mistress."

Aurelia gave Olin a reassuring smile as she let out a warm laugh, “There’s no need to fret, Olin. Lord Demidicus can summon his pet again, so there will be no damage to The Order. It was merely a small hiccup.”

Everything was going according to plan and unfolding just as Aurelia had envisioned! All she had to do now was wait. It didn’t matter that her beloved was trapped within the shell of a Black Pudding. Aurelia was confident that her beloved would eventually return to her and be crowned the champion. The anticipation was almost too much to bear.

Vorigan burst into the room, the amphibian-like features of his frog face twisted in fear. “The Kingdom of Slaethia has discovered our hiding place!” he shouted, his voice reflecting the fear upon his face. “They’re at the gates!”