

BLACK PUDDING

CHAPTER 33

Vanya's head thudded against the dark, damp wooden interior of the Airlight Pod, her body tensing in anticipation. Suddenly, a deafening explosion rattled her bones, signaling the commencement of the airships' bombardment with their arcane arsenal. The putrid scent of vomit invaded her senses, betraying the anxiety of the young squires preparing to spill blood and unleash their magical prowess for the first time.

Beneath them lay the Grotto of the Betrayed, a legendary dungeon shrouded in mystery and swallowed by the overgrown forest. Its remnants, a once-mighty fortress, now lay in ruin. Vanya had skillfully navigated the treacherous subterranean passages to infiltrate the dungeon and seize its core – an immense treasure for her kingdom. Dungeon cores were a rare commodity. The Kingdom of Slaethia possessed a mere two. Claiming a third would have been a monumental victory.

However, fate had other plans. The vile Aurelia recaptured the pilfered core and claimed the life of Vanya's cherished husband, General Ezad Anlyth. Driven by fury and the desire for retribution, Vanya volunteered to join the vanguard in the first wave of Airlight Pods, despite the disapproval of her comrades Gimona and Craycroft. Choosing to bide their time, they remained aboard the Swift Sentinel, accompanied by High Priest Neizar.

“Ah, sure, I do be lovin' this part!” Einarr, one of the two Champions aboard, declared with a grand smile, twinkling amidst his impressive red beard. His enthusiasm drew a few chuckles from the seasoned knights around him.

Observing Vanya's stern visage, Orlaith tried to offer comfort. “Pay him no heed, Paladin Anlyth. He's always had a penchant for the excitement of battle,” Orlaith said, exhaling. Her presence felt intense, like sitting near a dragon radiating an aura of fire magic.

Glancing at the other Champion, Vanya admitted, “Normally, I'd share Champion Einarr's enthusiasm, but this battle holds a deeply personal significance for me.”

The resounding snap of metallic fasteners filled the pod as they detached from the airship. Vanya's stomach lurched violently, and she felt the gut-wrenching sensation of freefall, plunging her into a maelstrom of adrenaline-fueled chaos. As they hurtled toward the ground and the menacing creatures below, Vanya steeled herself for the grueling task ahead, eliminating the vampire responsible for her lover's demise. The wooden frame around her creaked and groaned under the strain of their descent.

As they neared their destination, Vanya detected a barrier forming around the ruins below. She felt the magic of several Airlight Pods vanish from her perception, likely colliding with the barrier. Yet, a multitude of other pods successfully penetrated the protective shield in time. The

unsuspecting creatures below were in for a surprise, Vanya mused as she glanced at Einarr and Orlaith, the two Champions aboard her pod. Extending her senses, she discovered Galen, the mightiest among them, had already flown down and was waiting at the surface, ready for the impending clash.



The barrier sprang to life as I stepped back from the Dungeon Core, my thoughts swirling as if intoxicated by the air itself. Aurelia assumed control, bending the core to her whims and forging a portal for our escape. I smiled tenderly, observing her handiwork while I nestled my chin on her shoulder. I encircled my arms around her waist and pressed my chest to her back.

“Umm, you have forgotten to reform your face,” Sophia teased.

I can't tell if I like her or want to kill her.

Perhaps a combination of the two?

I released Aurelia with a pouted lip before allowing my Spider Silk to weave over my gooey flesh. Naturally, I had started to do this for my entire body, excluding the portion that formed my dress. I relished the sensation of exposing my dark form, and moreover, I admired its appearance. To onlookers, my attire seemed like a sentient creature from the darkest recesses of the abyss—a tar-like substance yearning to consume them whole. Truthfully, I favored the putrid taste of rotting meat over fresh ones. But I didn't mind feasting on the living, particularly their delicious intestines. Regardless, I digress. My ivory silk face and skin were reconstructed, so I dismissed Sophia and resumed resting my cheek against the nape of Aurelia's neck as she labored. My murderous impulses remained at bay in this tranquil moment, nestled against her.

“I've just noticed, but each time you reconstruct that form of yours, there's always a subtle change. It might be your hair length, the style of your dress, or even your facial features. Observing the transformation is something else to see,” Sophia prattled on.

Oh, how I yearned to eradicate them all, but I was well aware that these former rivals of mine were untouchable, lest I upset my foster mother. However, I couldn't help but wonder if a severed limb or a pilfered kidney would be permissible since it wouldn't quite equate to killing them, right?

The portal materialized as minuscule sparks flitted through the air. In no time, a tiny opening emerged, barely larger than a pocket mirror. It became glaringly apparent that expanding the portal to accommodate a regular-sized person might take some time. Of course, I had faith in my ability to slip through, but never without Aurelia. The thought of cramming her into my Void crossed my mind, but I quickly dismissed the idea as I couldn't risk harming her. What I needed was a test subject to experiment with. To make matters worse, the nagging discomfort in my stomach escalated from a mere annoyance to unbearable cramps, further complicating the already tense situation. A cacophony of shouts and frantic voices filled the chamber, diverting my focus from the portal and, above all, from Aurelia as I shifted my gaze to the uproar.

Amid the clamor, a chilling phrase surfaced, reverberating through the chamber like a grim harbinger, “Knights have breached the barrier!”

My heart swelled with a perverse mixture of thrill and wickedness as though an enticing opportunity had presented itself, urging me to partake in my most sinister cravings. I recognized I was no match for them in a direct confrontation, but who said I had to play fair? Moreover, I had to secure as much time as possible for Aurelia. It was evident that daylight diminished her strength, and I vowed to do whatever it took to shield her. Curiously, neither Ava nor I could pinpoint the reason for our fierce devotion to her. Sure, I had dated countless women and even a few men in my past life. Still, besides a few horrible exceptions, I never had the urge to do much more than cook them breakfast and bid them farewell. The thought of being attached to anyone or anything made my skin crawl. After all, why be burdened by sentimentality when there were much more entertaining things to do? And yet, here I was, willing to die to protect Aurelia...

With a sense of amusement and annoyance brewing within me, I took a deep breath even though my lack of lungs made it unnecessary. I moved away from Aurelia, knowing she was too preoccupied with the portal to stop me. The clamor of shouting and fear suddenly ceased, and all eyes fixated on me as I made my way out of the Grand Hall. However, some insignificant person I didn't recognize had the audacity to block my path.

A small, green-skinned boy with tear-stained cheeks whimpered, "Mummy, please don't go." My mind raced as I struggled to recall who he was. Had I encountered him before?

Who the fuck is he?!

Don't ask me. I don't recognize him either.

Did he just call us mommy?

The goblin kid had a resemblance to Wartie, but he lacked characteristic warts and stood slightly taller. Regardless, it hardly mattered to me, and I shrugged off any further thought of him as I strode past him. The hell if I was going to be anyone's mother! My attention was consumed by the thought of the knights I intended to kill, a craving that made my mouth water with corrosive and venomous anticipation.



Vanya advanced alongside her fellow knights of Slaethia, each step on the viscous black floor evoking a repulsive sensation beneath her boots. Her emotions were turbulent with a fierce anger that propelled her forward, focused solely on one objective – slaying Aurelia. Countless others have pursued this goal over the past century. They had come tantalizingly close, even managing to imprison her for a brief period. But it proved to be a fatal mistake. If they had executed her, the present turmoil would never have transpired. No, they should have ended her life when they had the chance.

Taking a sweeping glance around, Vanya observed that, remarkably, the fortress ruins had withstood the airship's bombardments well. While the exterior lay in unrecognizable rubble, the interior remained surprisingly intact, save for some scattered stones and dislodged bricks. Yet, despite the seemingly untouched facade, an unsettling presence loomed as if they were being scrutinized by an unknown entity.

Champion Gale abruptly halted, instantly setting the entire group on edge. It was as though he had detected the same cryptic aura as Vanya, yet neither could identify its source. The sensation reminded her of a fear spell she had once encountered, but such spells were typically reserved for monsters. Abruptly, a stifled cry pierced the silence, sending the party into a frenzied whirlwind, anticipating a lurking foe. Yet, to their bewilderment, no one was present, not even the scream's source.

The unaccountable incident had the small company of squires quivering within their armor, the metallic plates clanging ominously. Nevertheless, the group mainly comprised seventy or so skilled knights and battle-hardened elites. Most were equipped with varying degrees of mana abilities, some sporting lightweight fabrics, while others wore minimal armor. A force of several thousand should have been in tow. Still, the impenetrable barrier foiled their efforts, forcing this elite unit to proceed alone. As for Vanya, she donned her Paladin armor, a fusion of white and gold plate mail. Although she was not a Champion, her proficiency in holy magic made her a force to be reckoned with.

Orlaith advanced, her eyes aglow with raw magic, gleaming like molten iron primed for the forge. The Champion extended her hand down the corridor they had recently traversed, and without uttering a word or spell incantation, a searing inferno surged down the path, the intense heat incinerating everything in its wake, melting even the solid stone. The magnitude of such a formidable spell could only mean that the creature responsible for abducting one of their own had been utterly obliterated.

The relief and satisfaction of having vanquished their enemy were swiftly eroded by the sound of a thunderous voice. "Has anyone seen my squire?" barked the first knight with a sense of urgency that rippled through the group. "Nessa, step forward! Nessa?!" The palpable anxiety in his voice hung thick in the air.

A second knight's voice quickly joined in, his tone equally fraught with concern. "Talia?! My squire is missing as well," he bellowed with growing frustration. The missing squires cast a cloud of doubt over the group's confidence, a foreboding sense that something dark and sinister was lurking just beyond their sight.

"Form a battle circle, with the squires at the center. We're dealin' with some feekin' opportunists goin' after our weakest first!" Champion Einarr roared, his eyes blazing with rage and determination.

"Surely you can't be serious, dwarf," Orlaith retorted with a hint of disbelief. "Nothing could have survived my flames."

"By the gods, Aric?!" cried another knight in agony.

"I'm very serious, aye," Einarr replied with a firm tone.

As Vanya fell into formation with the knights and elite soldiers, they quickly formed a tight circle around the group of squires, shielding them from any potential harm. Bringing the cream of the crop squires to the battle was standard procedure, a way to mold and forge the finest knights

through combat. Losing a squire was an unfortunate reality of warfare, but the benefits of battle-hardening them far outweighed the risks. Nevertheless, the enemy's calculated targeting of the squires felt like a despicable tactic. Their unknown foe lacked any shred of honor that one would expect from knights or warriors, let alone vampires or necromancers. Whoever was behind this ambush had stooped to a new low, a heinous act of cowardice that only fueled Vanya's righteous anger.



I chuckled to myself, relishing in the thrill of the moment. They were all so oblivious, so easy to manipulate. They hadn't budged for the past five minutes, too caught up in their futile attempts to anticipate our next move. Did they really think that murky, black puddle was just another innocuous part of their surroundings? How blind they were to the danger lurking beneath the surface. But we knew, oh, how we knew. Ava and I had been shadowing their every step, waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike. And when that moment finally came, the inferno that erupted from that woman in red's spell was nothing short of exhilarating. One direct hit, and we'd be goners, but thankfully, Ava and I hid beneath their vary boots, reveling in the madness of it all. Now, it was time to regroup and retreat back to the Grand Hall before they realized our sole purpose was to slow them down.

As I staggered into the hall, an unexpected wave of delight coursed through me, followed by a fit of maniacal laughter that echoed off the walls. But then, the joy transformed into something sinister, and my hand flew to my stomach, gripping it tightly as if trying to contain the inexplicable agony that writhed within me. I dropped to a knee, the grotesque sensation intensifying with every passing moment. Something was happening to me beyond comprehension, and it was only getting worse.

The portal had finally opened large enough that those within the Grand Hall started to shove their way through it, and I couldn't help but cackle with a twisted delight at their desperation. But as those rushed forward, I couldn't resist the urge to stand back and watch as I clutched my stomach, feeling a sense of twisted glee as they scrambled like frightened mice. My mind played cruel games with me, urging me to leave them all behind and take the core and portal for myself. Still, the thought of their screams, the crying children, and their pathetic pleas for help only fueled my excitement. The opening was barely the size of a car door, and I knew not everyone would make it through in time. However, if anyone was going to make it through, I would ensure it was Aurelia. The knights were closing in, and the fear in the air was electrifying. But it was just another chance to bask in the chaos for me.