

BLACK PUDDING

CHAPTER 35

Earlier...

A few hours shy of dawn.

“Please, don’t do this! I’m begging you, please, let me go,” wailed a pitiful peasant girl.

Lord Demidicus had no patience for the sniveling pleas of the weak. He had more pressing matters to attend to. He had initiated the summoning ritual for the third time this night, which wasn’t even counting the previous nights. That wretched demoness should have snuffed the life out of the body she inhabited by now, permitting him to resummon her. What could possibly be causing such a delay? The Grand Elder’s frustration mounted with each agonizing moment.

The vampire cast a disdainful gaze at the pathetic human at the center of the summoning ritual. She was a sorry sight, clad in tattered rags, her hair a tangled mess, and the stench of filth emanating from her. She appeared to be nothing more than a child. Perhaps in her late twenties or possibly even her late forties – estimating the ages of short-lived races was always challenging for the ancient vampire. Conversely, Elves were easier to gauge; their true age was reflected in their eyes.

Abruptly, an overwhelming concentration of mana filled the room, snuffing out the candles one by one. At the same time, ice materialized along the summoning circle. The girl at the center, her pleas escalating, wailed and sobbed as she implored for her release. Lord Demidicus grinned malevolently from beneath his shadowy cowl, for his most devoted servant had finally returned to him.

The freezing of the very air persisted as more ice materialized, inching its way toward the girl, whose cries carried on. Eventually, she abandoned her futile pleas and resigned herself to her fate, curling up on the ground in an unseemly fetal position. It was always the same with these girls, never possessing the dignity to face death standing tall. Lord Demidicus found the sight repugnant. Yet, the ice pervading the room wasn’t due to ice magic emanating from the summoning ritual; it resulted from the summoned entity siphoning all the heat and mana from the surroundings.

The extinguished candles blazed back to life in an instant, sending flames soaring toward the crypt’s stone ceiling. A sudden, sharp intake of breath from the girl marked the halt of the encroaching cold. As if animated by an otherworldly force, the girl rose to her feet, her gaze locked onto the ancient vampire, her grin dark and sinister. Her skin turned a ghostly gray, and her hair lengthened and transformed into a vibrant pink hue cascading down her lower back. A sinuous tail emerged, swaying seductively, while a pair of wings unfolded behind her hips. A crown of horns sprouted from her head, completing her metamorphosis. To the vampire’s twisted pleasure, her

body matured unnaturally as her breasts increased fourfold. Though still clad in the girl's tattered rags, Lord Demidicus eagerly awaited the demoness's change into the preferred leather attire he had prepared.

"My Lord, it's a delight to find you well," Niamh purred.

Despite his carnal yearnings for the wicked demon, Lord Demidicus had more pressing concerns to address. "Report, demon," he commanded.

"Last I saw, your daughter was making her escape," the succubus responded, her grin laced with malice.

"Not that. What of the abomination she summoned?"

"Oh, that thing... The Black Pudding survived the trials, My Lord. Its power has even increased, and it can now assume a human-like form."

"Curse that goddess! So, she's the Crone's Champion?" the ancient vampire hissed.

Niamh's smile only became more sinister, "it appears the monster lost the trial."

"What?! How does it still live?"

"The Crone has taken her as one of her daughters instead."

"Gods damn that wretched goddess!"



Beneath the warm caress of the third-afternoon sun, the vampires of the western coven nestled into their dark sanctuary, indulging in leisure and bewitching slumber. All seemed to bask in delight, for the arrival of a new Grand Elder had ignited a fresh wave of political scheming. Where most races detested the intricate dance of political machinations and the manipulations that accompanied them, vampires reveled in it. Oh, what a pleasure it was to indulge in secret deals, rejoice in betrayals, and experience the exhilaration of bartering favors for increased influence in the coven! Unlike the eastern covens, known for mingling with other undesirable species, the western covens were the domain of the most deviously clever and ruthlessly ambitious vampires. Indeed, it was a good day to dream of wicked delights, for they compensated for what they lacked in age with boundless ambition.

Everyone had heard of Lord Demidicus and, even more so, his daughter Aurelia. Tales abounded that the cold-hearted ancient vampire had exchanged his own daughter's soul for a more merciless one. Oh, how he would fit seamlessly into the sinister depths of the western covens. Yet, the murmurs and whispers about the fate of his daughter's original soul persisted. Many within the coven shared hushed speculations, some even claimed to know the truth, but none dared to speak too loudly. For they knew that unseen eyes and ears lurked within the shadows of their crypt, ever watchful.

Unfortunately, all pleasant dreams must end. The vampires of this coven found themselves rudely awakened from their delightful dreams of political intrigue when the crypt's enchantments flared

to life, signaling an invasion! In a frenzy, they bolted from their chambers, converging at the Grand Hall in the heart of the crypt. There, they beheld a most peculiar scene as lesser beings from all manner of species surged through a tiny opening that had appeared. Like lambs to the slaughter, they streamed in. The vampires present deemed it wise not to intervene as their unwitting sustenance continued to file through the breach, one after another.

At that moment, Lord Demidicus and his pet demon sauntered into the chamber, trailed by a small entourage of vampires and three Elders who had accompanied him to the west. The recognition in those gleaming red eyes, visible beneath his cowl, did not go unnoticed. It could only mean one thing: the Grand Elder knew the origins of these tantalizing blood bags. The vampires who caught on to this understanding hid their annoyance, careful not to reveal their emotions to others. Nonetheless, the succubus's smug expression managed to raise a few eyebrows.

The chamber filled with hundreds as more kept creeping through the portal, some cried in relief, and others cried in terror as they noticed the vampires licking their fangs as they gazed at them. Still, a notable figure of dark elf lineage clutching a young beastkin of hare ancestry stepped forward.

"I am the Crone's Dark Priestess and speak on her behalf. We have come here to seek sanctuary from the Kingdom of Slaethia. Under the alliance of the dark gods, you must accept us," the Priestess declared with an air of confidence. However, it was apparent that she was merely echoing the words whispered into her thoughts by the goddess.

The venerable Grand Elder advanced, with the vampires in the chamber observing keenly, anticipating the unfolding drama. Any indication of weakness would provide them with another bargaining chip to scheme against Lord Demidicus. Even though vampire law dictated that the eldest vampire was deemed the rightful leader of any coven, he remained a foreigner to them. They only needed to patiently wait and conspire with those who harbored similar sentiments. The challenge, however, lay in the fact that no vampire would dare expose their true desires or objectives to another.

"By the laws of our dark gods, we shall grant sanctuary upon these lands, but not within these walls. Furthermore, the western covens are devotees of the Serpent, not the Crone." Lord Demidicus turned his back on the Priestess and bestowed a discreet nod upon his demonic pet.

Niamh's smile broadened as she raised her elongated, clawed fingernail towards the Priestess. "Escort her to the dungeons, along with the other five who accompanied her during the trials. Should the Black Pudding appear through the portal, eliminate it without hesitation."

Outraged cries echoed within the Grand Hall of the western coven as vampires emerged from the shadows to seize Heather, Yua, Sophia, Jeremy, and Rob, only to be silenced just as swiftly. Meanwhile, Jason skillfully slipped into the shadows before anyone could capture him. Despite all they had been through, even the dungeon inhabitants held back their complaints. The atmosphere was now punctuated by the stifled sobs of those who found comfort in their newfound sanctuary. And of the quiet footsteps of the last few stragglers who came through the portal.

The last few stragglers seemed to have made it through. Yet, an uneasy sense of anticipation lingered among those present as if they expected the enemy to follow. Suddenly, Aurelia came hurtling through the portal as if forcefully thrown. Landing on the ground, she sprang to her feet with a ferocious cry, charging back toward the portal. But just as she was about to vanish through it, the portal collapsed, leaving her trapped alongside them in her new dark sanctuary. Lord Demidicus suddenly appeared beside Aurelia before anyone had noticed him move. However, every vampire present couldn't help but notice the crimson droplets trickling down her cheeks, a blatant indication of vulnerability that could be exploited.

The Grand Elder's broad smile revealed his gleaming fangs beneath his dark cowl, "Ah, daughter, it is good to see you still alive."

"Father, we must reopen the portal and counterattack our enemies," Aurelia declared, her skin crawling at the very word 'father.' But her love for her beloveds' souls overrode her disgust.

"Absurd," he retorted, his tone icy. "I raised you better than that. The Kingdom of Slaethia is on the other side of the continent, and they will have to go to war with the other kingdoms before even considering attacking us. Not to mention, it would risk diminishing their air fleet, leaving this entire moon vulnerable to outside invaders. No, we shall not be fighting with them any further," he declared, his words dripping with finality.

"Father, the Crone's daughters are trapped on the other side," Aurelia pleaded.

Lord Demidicus snapped with a ferocity that made the room tremble, "**ENOUGH!** We have pledged ourselves to the western covens and their dark god, the Serpent. Any further worship of the Crone is strictly prohibited! Am I understood?"

Aurelia's mouth twisted with contempt. "You can't be serious."

"Child, do not test my patience," Lord Demidicus warned, his voice laced with venomous malice that made those within the chamber shiver. "Or I may have to consider replacing your soul with a more agreeable one."

With a dark expression, she met his eyes with a defiant stare, her posture radiating fierce determination and lacking any hint of fear. Despite Aurelia's resolute stance, Lord Demidicus noticed the absence of the ring he had given her. His face twisted into a sneer as his fingers curled in rage.

"Where is the ring?" he growled, his eyes ablaze with fury.

The vampires in the room watched in tense silence, unsure of how the situation would play out.

Aurelia stood her ground, her voice unwavering. "I lost it," she replied, her tone firm and resolute.

Aurelia knew that she had to stay strong and never show weakness. She refused to cower before her father, no matter how cruel or unforgiving he could be. Lord Demidicus's face contorted into a mask of rage, and he raised his hand to strike Aurelia. But before he could make contact, she caught his wrist with lightning-fast reflexes.

“Don’t you ever lay a hand on me,” she hissed, her eyes flashing angrily.

The opportunistic vampires in the room shifted and stirred uneasily, like a pack of wild dogs scenting fresh prey. The other vampires in the room watched in stunned silence, their eyes wide with surprise. They had never seen anyone stand up to an ancient like this before.

Lord Demidicus turned away from his daughter and to a towering figure who made the other vampires seem puny by comparison. His grin promised agony and terror. “As you can see, Duke Lysander, I have kept my end of the bargain.”

Duke Lysander stepped forward, his eyes glinting with sadistic pleasure. “It’s an honor to finally meet my future bride.”