

A Spirit of Blood

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Content warning: Extreme graphic violence, gore, blood, mild nudity, and necromancy.

The small wolf hung from my right arm. He giggled. I smiled. Another cub climbed my back; I knew from the small fingers digging into my hide through the black and white fur. One otter pup sat in my lap. I used my other paw to gently brush her hair back, chuckling as she took hold of the pad that was just as big as her face, her expression as wide as my shield.

Four or five children around me. And not all of them with their ribs showing. This village was lucky.

“Ms. Badger, marm?” a nearby fox in a straw hat inquired. “We rightfully thank ya for helpin’ us in the field...and for playin’ nice with the kids. Certainly didn’t expect a big gal like you t’be so...gentle. But...”

It wasn’t unexpected. I’d heard this before. Kindness wasn’t expected from passerby in Terracosta. More expected were bandits. Necromancers. Thieves. They didn’t think I could’ve come from their poor country and, even if they had, they’d reach the same conclusion.

“...we just can’t feed ya. Especially not...all eight feet of ya.”

I looked down at the terrified fox, his eyes darting quickly to my back. His young son peeked out from over my shoulder. The man was afraid I’d be angry. That I’d hurt him. That I’d hit his son. But he’d clearly thought me good enough to try being honest. That was nice.

I shook my head, gently plucking the fox kit off my back and lowering him down the couple of feet into the fox’s arms. I tenderly nudged the otter girl out of my lap and stood up from the cracked, dusty ground. The wolf boy dropped as I lowered my paw downwards. With the three that were on me removed, I thumped my way to the nearby stick upon which I’d tied my sack of supplies. I took a grab inside and pulled out a bunch of dry, gnarly roots. I munched on them, cracking and chewing through the withered things with a big smile. The town visibly relaxed. I didn’t. The roots tasted fucking awful.

That was dinner for me in Terracosta, usually. It was a better dinner than many got. High barren ground, a naval blockade stopping most fishing or travel, a kingdom whose coffers had long since run out. This town barely grew enough to get by on their own, and it was a luxury. The spirits must’ve appreciated their way.

They did offer me a place to stay. The next morning, the otter girl told me I was the best bed she’d ever had. I grinned. I mentally added it to my other favorite titles. I might’ve told her

that I did that, but I didn't need to. Kids understood me. I didn't need to try forming words. It's why I like them.

It was a lucky town, but it was an unlucky one too. Their strongest villager, an ox man, took sick four days ago. They'd given him a larger portion of food to keep up his strength and stave off illness, but it hadn't been enough. He was the only one left with enough muscle to pull the plow through the unforgiving, rocky ground. I could hear him moan from a nearby hut, the fever getting worse. I wanted him to get better. The kids needed him to be better. But, in the meantime, I pulled the plow for him.

I'm not smart. But it made sense. Plant small bits, different plants at different times, to try and never give the opportunity for a big harvest. Sustainable farm, but not a big target for raids. Leave the nearby foraging areas for winter. Hope your kids are strong enough. They have to be.

So I pulled the plow again today. They cheered I did it in half the time. I gave them a sweaty smile and wave of my paw. They can't know how the ropes chafe my shoulders, how the spirits latch to my back and tell me of how hopeless this is. These women, children, and ill...they deserve a guilt-free week.

I washed using a nearby stream. It only took an hour there and back. Another lucky bit for this village. I got my roots along the way. I took a leaf of the mint bush I found near the stream, too. Something to remove the roots' dusty taste from my mouth. When I got back, the children wanted up. I let them, grinning all the while. The adults were smiling this time, too. I liked this. None of these adults asked me to help. None of them stopped working while I was here. This was how it should be. A true community. This is why the spirits blessed this place.

I was distracted. The wolf boy pulled on my hand hard. A claw of mine stuck into his paw. I jerked back in alarm as he looked at the drop of blood that welled into a small pool. A woman rushed to bandage it. I shook the other cubs off and marched off to sit at the village edge and huff air out my nose in frustration. They left me alone. They probably saw my hackles. They probably saw the blood in my eyes. They were smart.

I looked to the south. There, a stubborn king refused the demands of the aquatic nation. A king I was supposed to have trained to fight for. There the country died. I didn't blame the king as much as I blamed the ocean-dwellers that knowingly made hundreds of people suffer. They knew what this would do. They didn't care. Scum. Scum of the highest order.

I felt foam tickling at my mouth. I knew what I had to do. I had to give this village something worthwhile in apology. Something that once again showed my spite for the ocean dwellers. The spirits called me.

I walked to the coast. Two days there, two days back. But I knew I'd find a forgotten boat there. I had a net. All I needed was to work, and to tear the throat out of any ocean-dweller that tried to stop me.

The idea felt very good. The spirits liked this idea.

I had found a second stick. I used my bra-cloth for a second sack. I didn't care. They wouldn't either once they saw the fish I got. I was lucky. No ocean-dwellers that day. I still felt a little disappointed.

My bra-cloth smelled of fish. The sacrifices I made for my gift. It would wash out. Eventually. Probably.

Something else smelled as I approached the village. I panicked, thinking it was fire. It wasn't, so I relaxed. But as I approached, I grew more confused. It smelled like flies. It smelled like decay. It smelled like death. But...I'd been gone for less than a week?

Two cloaked figures laughed to themselves. A mass of figures stood and swayed before them. I hastened my pace. They groaned. I felt my heart begin to race. They had traces of blood down their fronts. I huffed in a rising fury. They weren't bleeding anymore. I grit my teeth, trying to resist hearing my own sounds. But I knew what was coming.

There was an otter girl near the front. Her eyes were blank. Her cold body was a mere puppet for these figures. She was undead.

The blood rushed into my eyes, and I was put to rest by the spirit of battle.

The bark and roar of an enraged badger was heard for nearly a mile. Emaire Bres had arrived, and the necromancers spun to face their doom. The cloaked monkey's head went flying, a shred of fabric from his hood cast into the air as the badger's powerful swipe tore the mind who thought of the profane act away from the body that had worked it. His shocked expression thumped against the broken ground, blood spurting from his stump as his last vestiges of consciousness watched his body collapse limply to the ground.

His companion choked on his own tongue. The dog looked into the red eyes of the badger and knew he had no time. He began instructing his minions to attack, but his racing mind couldn't help but process the sight. A bare-chested badger woman, a body covered in bulk that could not be anything but practical muscle, thick black and white fur raised on end in unrelenting hostility, left arm carrying a massive metal plate strapped to it with huge leather straps. And big. There

was no way she could be that big. Twice as tall as him? No, three times. His sense of scale fled as her body eclipsed the sun. Then her claws came down, and his vision split to either direction, massive lines cleaving through flesh and bone as he screamed with agony.

Blood..all he could see was blood. All he could think was blood. His blood. His blood, and the blood in her eyes.

The dog's red liquid fled his body, and his form writhed in obvious death throes. Emaire didn't care. Her claws had more flesh to sunder. She bit through his wrist and tore the blasphemous hand away. She dug open his chest through the gashes she'd made and broke open his ribcage. He probably didn't beg for mercy, but she heard his soul call for it. She did not give it. Organs and viscera were tossed aside, the badger wanting this dog turned as inside-out as the souls he'd messed with.

Something tried to bite her. A mindless chomp onto her metal shield. Emaire turned. The otter girl was chewing at the steel. For a second, the pup's eyes rolled up to look into the blood red ones of the beast she was attacking.

Emaire firmly backhanded the child with the shield, splattering her into the nearby wood of a house and leaving her in a crumpled, unmoving lump.

The badger stood to her full height and roared. The undead villagers approached. She ran forward. She ran forward and baptized the ground with stagnant blood and ichor. The spirit would stop her when she was meant to be stopped.

She was not meant to stop.

She did not stop.

She did not stop...

...she did not stop...

...she...eventually stopped.

I woke up traveling the road north. Night had fallen. My head throbbed. I had two sticks on my shoulder, one of half-grown produce, immature roots, and meat, one of fish. My hands were covered in dried red gore. My body and exposed breasts were covered in dried red gore. I tasted meat and metal on my tongue, and I knew that my face and mouth were covered in dried red gore. I slowly trudged forward, my pace not breaking stride as I came to.

I remembered everything. I had done it, after all. But there was no use mourning. The spirits would know how to handle them. The spirits always did. And it wouldn't serve me better to let it weigh. It was time to move on.

I spotted someone on the road far ahead. They dived into a shrub many yards ahead of me. I continued walking. Then, as his clacking teeth passed on my left side, I paused. I examined the man out of the corner of my eye. A cat on his lonesome, his belt filled with pouches that did not jingle. Seeds. False hope for most of this country. I sniffed the air. He did not smell of others. He was here for himself.

I heard his stomach growl, and I continued walking. Help is only offered to those who are helpless or owed. Help is only offered to a family. A community. Otherwise, what should I care?

He could find his way. Just as I would find mine. There was no other natural way. The spirits taught me this. The spirit of battle puts me to sleep when I forget this. And so I left behind the broken land. If the spirits thought me worthy to help the families and helpless of this land, I wouldn't find it here. Instead, it was once again my own life to preserve. It always ultimately is that. It always has been ultimately that. That is what I hear in the spirits.