

LeBlanc's steps barely echoed in the halls below the Immortal Bastion, steps hidden among the buried dead. She made her way through long vacant corridors, their winding paths bore deep below the capital, the ancient bones and forgotten veins of the sprawling city above.

At the corner of her eyes, she noticed the trails of many tiny skittering spiders crawling along the walls beside her. Smaller tributaries of the beasts coalesced together as they moved as one towards their destination further down the path. It was how LeBlanc knew she was nearing her goal, and she wondered at the bothersome nature of it all.

Even before she entered the crypt, she could smell the stench seeping through the cracks of the half-closed stone doors, and grimaced slightly at the scene she knew she would find. Inside the reek of rotting blood and spilt poison hung heavy in the air. There were many robed cultists strewn into various places around the crypt, but the largest mass of crumpled bodies lay near its centre. There the bulk of the devotees laid, a bed of twisted offerings set before the idol of the Spider God.

The temple was lit by the barest of candlelight, reflecting off the rounded body of the Spider Priestess as she rested from above. Suspended just above the corpse pile by her threads, she swung slowly and indolently, bloated as she was from her meal.

LeBlanc picked her way carefully past the corpses as she made her way through to the centre. Elise still hung silently above her, her legs curled at her sides, her many eyes dimmed as if asleep.

"Satisfied, are we?" LeBlanc queried, looking up at the monstrous black and scarlet spider.

The Spider Queen unfurled each leg leisurely, clacked her jaws as if to savour the lingering taste of her previous prey. LeBlanc kept the model of polite patience, silently examining the corpses at her feet. Their faces were portraits of terror, drained of blood and filled with venom.

"My dear Matron, you have caught me at a most unseemly time."

Elise landed directly in front of LeBlanc, righting herself onto her legs in a movement that seemed unnaturally fluid for such a large creature. LeBlanc considered the crimson eyes before her, the Matron's own expression implacable save for a small spark of ire in her own eyes. The spider clicked her jaws again, but this time in anticipation.

"Weren't these devotees bound for the Shadow Isles," LeBlanc began, gesturing at the bodies surrounding them, "Or did you feel peckish before the trip."

A chuckle rose from the spider, an unsettlingly mesh of laughter and sibilant whispers.

"These... 'devotees' ...did not truly give their hearts and souls to the Spider God." She raised a single leg and pierced the chest of one of the bodies nearby, "Unworthy offerings all. None ready to give themselves entirely to me."

LeBlanc regarded the creature nonchalantly, drumming her long fingers against her chin, "Perhaps your charms are finally failing after all these years."

The spider's rage was immediate, it reared and shrieked at the slight as LeBlanc remained unmoved, with the barest effort to suppress her smirk.

"What's done is done." She continued soothingly, "Now discretion is needed to clear your mess."

Elise spoke with a breath thick with fury, "Advice on discretion from the likes of you?" The creature shook with laughter, but it resembled more of a growl, "Your predecessor understood far better the art of 'discretion' and 'subtlety'."

The great spider took a step forward, and still LeBlanc remained motionless. She eyed Elise carefully, the grip on her staff just slightly tightening.

"Why did you come here so swiftly, Matron," Elise purred, "None that entered this chamber have left to tell the tale."

"Surely, you are not surprised that I would know the fates of even my lowliest fellows." LeBlanc responded in kind.

"Oh? Such *consideration* for such simpleminded worshippers," With a swift flick of her leg, a blade of shining metal clatters forward, stopping just before the Matron's feet.

"Perhaps that is why you kept them all so very well-armed!"

The ravenous spider lunged at the pale woman before her, but a quick unmistakable grin flashed across LeBlanc's face as the beast closed in on her. Elise felt her jaws snap shut against each other as they met thin air. As she attempted to search for her prey, she found her legs bound by golden and ethereal chains that began to manifest into view.

"My dear Elise, it appears your eyes are going as well in your old age." LeBlanc cooed, reappearing just a few steps away from the struggling spider, "We truly need to provide some better offerings. Otherwise, what use are you?"

The Matron strode past Elise as she headed towards the crypt doors, "The Black Rose will continue to provide the fattened to you, as long as we no longer question the quality of the artefacts we receive in turn."

"Ah, I see," Elise again laughed, and LeBlanc paused without turning, "A fair trade. But I have many little eyes of my own. They spied that broken raven, 'fallen' into your thorns. Is that where you are rushing to now?"

Without turning to meet the spider's gaze, LeBlanc continued to the doors speaking not a word in reply. As her palms press up on the doors to leave, the chains binding the giant spider dissipated. Once again, Elise reared and pounced at the retreating form of the Matron, only to again find nothing as her face met sorely against the stone.

In her study, LeBlanc returned to her true self. Her staff lay cradled in her arms, its power no longer needed to project her illusions. She thought briefly, of tiny spiders that saw too much, but a familiar stride approaching her door drew her back to the present.

As his knuckles rapped politely on the frame, she called out with a smile, "To what do I owe the pleasure of this visitation, Jericho?"