

# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 1

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### SPIDERS & ACID

“Dreams are like the stars, infinite and ever so beautiful as they sparkle in the dark of night, forever out of our reach. So, it is incumbent upon us to forge our own stars.” ~ ME

I had always heard that your entire life flashes before your eyes in the moments before death. Yet, as I faced that moment now, it wasn't my past that returned to me. Instead, I dreamt of a realm bursting with magic.

“Did's its works, m-mistress?”

“Another failure, I'm afraid.”

As my beautiful dream dissipated, I became aware of two individuals conversing nearby. One voice was grating, reminiscent of a nasal-infected elderly man. In contrast, the other was intoxicatingly seductive, as if Elisabeth Hurley herself were whispering sweet nothings into my ear. I've always had a thing for accents. Oddly, their voices were all I could focus on as I realized I couldn't see. *Oh God, am I blind?*

Confusion clouded my mind as I struggled to understand what was happening to me. *Am I alive or dead?* My body felt like it was suspended in thick, murky water, each nerve and limb tingling with numbness. Panic threatened to overwhelm me, but I forced myself to focus. Something was definitely off. *My mind has to be playing tricks on me!* The thirst that burned my throat was almost unbearable, and I longed for a nurse to bring me water. But when I tried to speak, no sound escaped my lips. Fear crept in as I tried to grasp the true extent of my situation.

“What're wents wrongs, m-mistress?”

“The body was inadequate to hold the summoned soul. Olin, bring the children's remains back to the farmlands from whence they came. We cannot afford to have the elves or humans wandering too far into the forest in search of them, potentially discovering our hidden dungeon ruins. If Lord Demidicus fails to do so, The Order will certainly entomb me for a century or two as a consequence of jeopardizing this location. Take the other remains as well, and stage it to look like a griffin attack. Also, Olin, procure me some more bodies. Ideally, not children this time. Their vessels are too fragile for my purposes.”

“What're abouts ones of those's g-goblins, m-mistress?”

“Regrettably, Olin, we will encounter the same problem. The necromancy ritual I'm employing seems to shatter the vessel from the inside as if the gods themselves are forbidding it. I need a more resilient body, preferably that of a skilled adventurer or the like. Oh, the delight of sinking

my teeth into a sorcerer or healer and using their remains! I might even be able to transform my—the summoned soul into a powerful lich if only we had a phylactery, but those are too difficult to come by. Mmm, the wicked deeds we could do together.

“Even better! Olin, take Vorigan and Niamh with the skeleton army and raid Elsternwick to the east. Bring me their remains and any living prisoners you can capture; I feel a little famished. And Olin, ensure it appears as if it were a border skirmish from the south.”

“As’s commands. And’s m-mistress, wheres the’s s-summons soul is?”

“WHAT?!”

My mind buzzed with questions. *What the hell were they talking about? This must be some cruel joke! Where am I? What’s going on?*

The cacophony of chaos intensified, with metal and wood colliding against stone and glass. *God, I wish I could see what’s happening!* Before I could process my thoughts, a sensation gripped me, unlike the numbing cold I had been feeling. It was as if something guided me upward, like a rollercoaster’s ascent, followed by a sudden jerk as though I was being thrown. Everything came to an abrupt halt with a sickening splat.

As I crawled through the murky fog of my new reality, a solid surface scraped against my back. I tried and failed to stand, but at least I could move, even if it meant awkwardly wiggling on my belly. Every inch forward felt like a battle, with the numbness and darkness conspiring to create a sensory deprivation chamber around me. The sensation was distant yet strangely familiar, evoking memories of wiggling beneath my childhood bed during games of hide-and-seek.

Bewilderment clouded my thoughts as I grappled with the surrounding chaos. Harsh words filled the air, accompanied by the discord of metal clashing with wood and the shattering of glass and stone. Completely disoriented, my senses faltered, unable to help me decipher the unfolding pandemonium. An unrelenting yearning to witness the events tormented me, yet I remained confined to a realm of darkness.

[POISON] RESISTED

*What the—?!*

Pain engulfed me, and my thoughts spiraled, leaving me feeling as though I’d been run over by a freight train. And to top it all off, I couldn’t tell if I was seeing a system notification or hallucinating. *This is what I get for reading too much manga!* Gratefully, the pain began to ebb as the numbness rolled back in.

Panic surged through me as I grappled with my bewildering predicament. *Poison? What the hell just happened?* Desperation clawed at my psyche, urging me to flee from this nightmarish situation.

A flicker of relief ignited within me as I felt something large enough to climb on. If death was stalking me, I refused to meet it lying down! I clutched at what was nearby, mustering every ounce of strength to hoist myself up. Yet, as I began my ascent, the object under me disintegrated as if made of cotton candy, dissolving at my touch. At first, the sensation was akin to sinking into a

plush beanbag chair or a fluffy cloud. However, the texture rapidly transformed, becoming granular and sweet, coating my senses with an unsettling sugary taste.

*What is happening?*

I couldn't make sense of the bizarre circumstances, but I knew I needed to keep moving, to fight for my survival. A primal urge to escape coursed through my veins. With determination fueling my every motion, I refused to let the sugar-coated snare drag me under.

YOU HAVE DEFEATED A [TROUGH SPIDER]
<b>LEVEL UP!</b> LEVEL 1 <u>UNLOCKED</u> <b>[ABSORB]</b>
DO YOU WISH TO [ABSORB] [TROUGH SPIDER]? YES / NO

An odd sensation enveloped me, and for a fleeting moment, I reveled in the warm, comforting embrace. However, the respite was ephemeral, as a tide of dread and disbelief washed over me.

Rendered speechless and blind, my body felt peculiar, as if bereft of limbs. Regardless, I still managed to crawl. The spider beneath me had dissolved, and the mere thought sent shivers down my spine. The situation was a conundrum, a puzzle demanding resolution. *What am I?* Desperation clawed at me, praying I wasn't some mimic chest, or some other grotesque monstrosity spawned from hell's abyss.

*This can't be happening. I must be dead and stuck in some twisted version of hell.*

Although, the scenario was too surreal, too ludicrous. I had longed for a new life, a fresh start in another world. And yet, here I found myself, a minuscule entity that had inexplicably consumed a spider. I drew upon my life experiences, scrutinizing my circumstances in search of a clue, a glimmer of hope. I needed to understand my new form and my capabilities. And then, a revelation struck me—every RPG had a character sheet. With a surge of hope, I wagered that perhaps I had one too. With unyielding resolve, I harnessed every ounce of strength and channeled my focus on a singular goal. I mentally shouted out, [STATUS]!

NAME: BLAKE
RACE: BLACK PUDDING
CLASS: DUNGEON MONSTER
LEVEL: 1
<u>TITLES</u>
NONE

<u>RACIAL SKILLS</u> [ <b>ABSORB</b> ] [ <b>CORROSIVE</b> ]  <u>SPELLS</u> <b>NONE</b>  <u>ABILITIES</u> [ <b>VEIL POLYGLOT</b> ]	<u>VULNERABILITIES</u> [ <b>FIRE</b> ] [ <b>HOLY</b> ]  <u>IMMUNITIES</u> [ <b>ACID</b> ] [ <b>DARKNESS</b> ] [ <b>DISEASE</b> ] [ <b>POISON</b> ]	<u>UNIQUE</u> [ <b>RESTRICTED</b> ] [ <b>RESTRICTED</b> ] [ <b>RESTRICTED</b> ]  <u>SELECTABLE</u> [ <b>STELLAR VOID</b> ]
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A crushing wave of despair washed over me as the full weight of my predicament became apparent. My humanity had been stripped away, leaving me transformed into a creature of slime—a Black Pudding, to be exact. This repugnant entity, a manifestation of dread and darkness, was the loathsome variety of slime if my tabletop gaming memories served me right.

Regret seeped into every thought as I mulled over my former life, wishing I had taken more chances, and lived more boldly. Perhaps then, I could have escaped this nightmarish destiny. It felt like the universe was punishing my reclusive disposition, ensnaring me in this revolting form.

“Ugh! Olin, check the soul crystals on the shelves over there! The summoned soul couldn’t have gone far.”

“Y-yeses, m-mistress.”

As the sound of footsteps drew closer, my heart raced with fear and anticipation, and I strained to hear any other sounds that might give me a clue about my surroundings. But all was silent except for the steady beat of my own heart—or perhaps that was the approaching footsteps. *Do I even have a heart?* In desperation, I turned my thoughts to the Absorb notification that still floated before me, willing myself to click on it despite my deep-seated aversion to spiders. With a mental push, I clicked “Yes,” and the sensation of absorption washed over me, leaving me feeling slimy and disgusted. But even as I recoiled from the feeling, I felt a glimmer of hope that maybe, just maybe, this would give me a way to escape the darkness that had become my constant companion.

The cotton candy taste in my mouth intensified, and I pondered if that was even a mouth I was tasting with.

[ <b>ABSORB</b> ] [ <b>TROUNCE SPIDER</b> ] SUCCESSFUL
<u>SELECTABLE</u> [ <b>MANA SIGHT</b> ]

My mind swirled at everything that was happening, and yet I clung to this newfound sense of purpose, determined to make the best of my situation, even if it meant facing impossible challenges and obstacles. I felt like a mad scientist, experimenting with a new ability, and pushing the limits of what was possible. But deep down, a part of me knew there was a darkness within me, a side that craved power and destruction. I was playing a dangerous game, and I couldn’t help but wonder if I would lose myself in the process. But for now, I reveled in the rush of this newborn life, slightly scared and delighted.

“M-mistress, these’s crystals are’s empties.”

“Ugh, get Niamh. It makes me loath to admit I need that soul sucker and her Astral Insight. Losing my—our Dark Champion is not an option if we are to survive this era.”

“Ates once’s, m-mistress.”

My heart sank as I heard the words “Dark Champion” and “soul sucker” thrown around. I scanned my status sheet again, looking for any skills or abilities to help me in this strange new world. Despite my confusion, I knew I had to keep my wits about me to stay focused on the task.

As I scoured my status sheet, Mana Sight caught my eye, offering a glimmer of hope in the darkness surrounding me. With every passing moment, I longed to regain sight and understanding of the world around me.

[**MANA SIGHT**]

ACQUIRE THE CAPABILITY TO APPREHEND THE ENVIRONMENT THROUGH INHERENT SORCERY.

TYPE  
**SPELL**

ACTIVATION  
**PASSIVE**

UNLOCK?  
YES / NO

My anxiety raced excitedly as I mentally clicked on the Mana Sight option, desperate to regain some semblance of sight. A quick notification popped up as I selected it, but I only gave it a quick once over. The thought of being trapped in perpetual darkness was unbearable, and I longed to see the world again.

As the ability took hold, the world erupted, revealing every detail in a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree panorama. The rush of sensory input was overwhelming, like a barrage of fireworks going off at once. Colors and shapes blurred together in a dizzying whirlwind, like a mad carnival ride that never slowed down. My excitement immediately gave way to nausea.

*Ugh, do I even have a stomach to throw up with?*

I had sworn off carnival rides and theme parks after a particularly harrowing experience, choosing to avoid any activity that involved spinning or sudden movements. And yet here I was, trapped in a body that felt like it would collapse at any moment. The weight of my new reality bore down on me, the frustration and anger building with each passing moment. I loathed my new life and hated the endless sensory input that threatened to overwhelm me at every turn. But despite my despair, I knew I had to keep moving forward, to push through the discomfort and uncertainty and find a way to survive in this strange, new world.

[**POISON**] RESISTED

The profanities flowed through my mind like a raging river as I attempted to concentrate on the venomous spiders that had just attacked me. Despite my best efforts, the pain continued to overwhelm me. I surveyed the area, watching the arachnids' approach with their many legs scurrying like a horde of sharp blades. But my vision was hazy, the world around me like a poorly lit circus tent, still whirling and spinning out of control. I struggled to focus on the spiders, to determine their number, but my sight kept shifting, refusing to remain still. And then, I became aware of the black sludge that seeped from my body, akin to tar from a damaged road. Every twitch of my muscles sent blobs of the vile, sticky liquid flailing like writhing tentacles, leaving me feeling repulsed and sickened with myself.

A wave of nostalgia washed over me as I thought back to my previous life, to the person I used to be. I had never been the typical pretty girl, always the short and curvy girl with a permanent resting bitch-face, sunless skin, green-dyed hair, black lipstick, and a plethora of tattoos. But now, I felt like a monster. I longed to go back in time and be Blake Lyanna Jefferson again. But deep down, I knew there was no return to the past, that I was trapped in this new reality, a Black Pudding in a world of magic and monsters.

[POISON] RESISTED
[POISON] RESISTED
[POISON] RESISTED

In a panic, I tried to scramble away, crawl, run, or do anything to escape, but it was too late. Three massive spiders had already launched themselves at me, their legs propelling them forward with terrifying speed. As they landed on top of me, I felt a surge of panic and revulsion, my mind screaming to fight or flee. But then, like before, I felt a strange delight, a sweetness flooding my pores with the taste of cotton candy at the county fair.

Despite their size, the spiders were no match for me, dissolving into nothingness as they touched my tar-like body. But their remaining comrades were undeterred, leaping forward to take their place. One after the other, they came at me, each disintegrating into my body like cotton candy in water. The sensation was overwhelming, like a drug that I couldn't resist. But with each spider I consumed, a part of me felt like I was losing my humanity.

*What's happening to me?*

My mind was a chaotic mess of emotions, ranging from euphoria to disgust, and I struggled to come to terms with what I had done. Not only had I become a monster, but I was also becoming one, as in mentally embracing it, a cannibalistic entity that fed on the creatures around me. The realization sent shivers throughout my core, and I couldn't help but wonder what other horrors this new existence would bring.

I couldn't cry, not with my current lack of eyes and tear ducts, but the urge to weep was overwhelming. The thought of what I might become next was almost too much to bear. I was eating spiders and enjoying it, trapped in this monstrous body with no hope of escape. It was a nightmare beyond imagining, and I was living it every moment.

<p>YOU HAVE DEFEATED 9 [TROUNCE SPIDERS].</p> <p><b>LEVEL UP!</b> <b>LEVEL UP!</b> <b>LEVEL UP!</b></p> <p>LEVEL 4</p>
<p>DO YOU WISH TO [ABSORB] [TROUNCE SPIDERS]? YES / NO</p>

Without an ounce of hesitation, I mentally clicked, “Yes!”

<p>[ABSORB] [TROUNCE SPIDERS] SUCCESSFUL</p>
<p><u>SELECTABLE</u> [SILK WEBBING] [SPIDER WALK] [VENOMOUS]</p>

As I stared at the notification, frustration and anger boiled within me, and I suddenly realized something odd. *I'm glaring at the notification!* My sight fixed on it with an intensity that belied my lack of physical eyes. It was strange to focus so intently on something despite my vision being a nauseating, all-encompassing blur. But the more I concentrated, the clearer the notification became, until it was almost as if I could touch it with my gooey body.

A sense of relief washed over me like a cool breeze on a hot summer day, dissipating the waves of nausea that had threatened to overwhelm me. Although my three-hundred-and-sixty-degree field of view remained unchanged, I found that I could now hone in on what I wanted to see. It was as though I had a selective tunnel vision, zooming in on specific details while the rest faded into obscurity. Or perhaps it was more like a phone camera, with the edges of the frame blurred out and only the central focus in sharp relief.

It wasn't perfect, but it was a welcome relief from the overwhelming chaos of my surroundings. I felt a sense of calm wash over me, knowing I could now navigate this strange new world more easily and precisely.

“M-mistress, eyes are's r-r-r-returned's wishes Niamh's.

“Slow down, Olin. Don't rush yourself when speaking. I would hate to replace you so soon.”

“Y-yeses, M-mistress.”

“Niamh, if you would.”

“Aurelia, if I would, what?”

I didn't need to be a genius to realize that they were on the hunt for me. The sound of their conversation sent chills along my gooey skin, but as I tried to inch my way to safety, I realized that

I had nowhere to go. *Perhaps there's a mouse hole nearby, like in those old cartoons?* Strangely, however, I didn't need to move to survey my surroundings and determine that there was no hole in sight. At least now I knew I was under a set of shelves, not a bed. It was a small victory, but a victory, nonetheless.

Peering out from the edge of the shelf, I spied on the trio above. The first creature appeared to be a zombie or a ghoul, with various stages of decomposition on display. The stench was almost overwhelming, and I couldn't help but feel a strange sensation. It was disorienting and yet fascinating. *Am I salivating? What the hell is wrong with me?* Shaking off the strange feeling, I averted my attention to the other two figures. Despite standing on opposite sides of the room, I found myself staring at both of them at the same time, as if I couldn't decide where to look first.

The woman in black and red robes was breathtaking. Her long black hair, pale skin, and red eyes made her look like a ghostly apparition of beauty. Her robes shimmered like silk in the candlelight, and I couldn't help but be drawn to her. *That must be Aurelia.*

The other was like a sexual nightmare coming to life. She was stunningly sexy, but something in her gaze made my pudding crawl. Her attire was like something out of a fetish club; she had wings, horns, and a tail, like a creature from mythology. And those breasts, holy hell, they were practically bursting out of her leather bra. But despite her allure, my eyes drifted back to Aurelia as if under a spell.

“Niamh, would you be so kind as to use your oversized snout to sniff out a wandering soul?”

I couldn't help but feel the tension between the two as they glared at each other with seething anger. It was as if they wanted nothing more than to rip each other's throats out. I could sense their desire to keep their distance, each remaining on opposite ends of the room. Suddenly, my sight was drawn to the subtle movements of the zombie-like creature, inching his way back toward Aurelia as if he were her loyal dog. Seeing him intensified the salivating sensation, and I had to remind myself that I wasn't some mindless beast. I needed to focus on remaining hidden and staying alert.

I could hear the teeth grinding a moment before the demoness spoke. “And why tell, is this soul so important, Aurelia? It's not like you to give a damn about a lowly soul.”

“Niamh, that is unimportant.”

“Oh, but it is, seeing as it's currently observing us. I do have to admit, that's an interesting vessel you've chosen for it. So, Aurelia, what's stopping me from devouring your little pet?”

“YOU WOULDN'T DARE!”

“Oh, but I would if I'm not given a reason not to.”

The air around me became heavy and thick as ominous darkness seemed to creep into the room, causing the flickering candles to dim. A palpable aura of energy descended upon me, causing a sharp, stabbing pain that felt like a thousand needles piercing my skin at once. It was as if the very fabric of reality was being distorted, and Aurelia was at the epicenter of it all.

[DARKNESS] RESISTED



“Your reason is your life. Harm that soul, and I’ll be feasting on demon blood this night!”  
“Hahahaha! You’re so cute when angry, Aurie. Don’t worry about that pretty necromancer head of yours. Your pet is below that shelf there. But do be careful. Its vessel is so very tiny. Ta-ta.”

As Niamh sauntered out of the room, her hips swaying seductively with her laughter echoing behind her, though I found myself shifting my longing sights back to Aurelia. And then, suddenly, her gaze locked onto me with an intensity that made me feel like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car. *Oh, shit!*

“Well, what have we here?”

Aurelia’s voice was like honey, sweet and alluring. I could feel the weight of her gaze upon me, sending jitters of fear and lust coursing through me. Her eyes held a mischievous glint, and her lips curled into a smirk as she spoke. I couldn’t help but feel drawn to her, like a moth to a flame. But I knew better than to let my guard down.

Despite my inner turmoil, I couldn’t deny that Aurelia was stunning. She was dressed in a tightfitting robe that hugged her curves in all the right places, and I couldn’t help but notice the way it shimmered against her porcelain skin. Her black hair cascaded down her back like a river of silk, and her red eyes sparkled in the flickering candlelight.

I was captivated by Aurelia’s gaze as if she had me under a hypnotic spell. Despite the urge to escape, my body refused to budge. It was as if a part of me wanted to stay with her. I fought against the feeling, trying to shake my thoughts free, but it was a losing battle. Panic clawed at my mind as I realized I had no escape. I was trapped beneath the shelving, yet a perverse joy overtook me. It was like I had found my rightful place.

“Ah, don’t worry. I’ve gone through a lot of trouble to bring your soul from beyond the veil. The last thing I want to do is hurt you. However, I must admit, I didn’t expect your soul to cling to a slime and pudding of all things, especially after I collected so many promising corpses for you. It must’ve been fate or a god being mischievous, but we’ll work with what we’ve got. Let’s see what we’re dealing with, shall we? [APPRAISAL].”

A spark of light emanated from Aurelia’s ring, and a tremor ran through me, causing any thought of hiding to vanish. Instead, I felt exposed and defenseless, as if all my barriers had been stripped away. Well, in a way, I was stripped bare since I had no clothes on this new form.

“I can’t tell you how long I’ve waited for this moment. Oh, Olin, be a dear and retrieve, my be—our champion, would you.” She ordered the decomposing ghoul to retrieve me with a single wrist flick.

*This won’t end well!*

My instincts screamed for me to flee. Aurelia’s lips twisted into a sinister grin, and a chill ran through my body like ice water, as if my very soul was freezing.

“Y-yeses, m-mistress.”

The ghoul commenced with his rigor mortis shuffle as he hobbled toward me as I lay beneath the shelf. The funny thing, I was overcome with a desire I had never experienced. It was as if I were a lioness preparing to pounce upon a carcass.

*Ew! Eww! Don't do it, Blake!*

A deep and primal hunger seized hold of me as a hazed-over cataract eyeball came into view. I felt my body contort and writhe, my form shifting and undulating with a grotesque fluidity. Disgusted with myself, I tried to hide, to fight against the urge, but it was like trying to hold back a tidal wave. The ghoul had gotten on his hands and knees to peek beneath the shelf at me. Before I knew it, I was lunging toward the ghoul, my body moving on its own accord. I couldn't stop myself from pouncing!

*NO! No! No—oh... Oh god...this tastes amazing!*

Olin let out a shriek of pain as he began to roll on the ground, scratching his face as he futilely attempted to peel me off. However, I refused to let go as I slid past his clawing fingers into that hazy eyeball and into the depths of pure warmth and deliciousness. The ghoul writhed and clawed at me, but I refused to let go, lost in the euphoria of this new sensation. It was unlike anything I had ever felt before, an intoxicating pleasure that left me drunk with ecstasy.

*Oh yes, this feels better than sex!*

“Olin, I command you to stop resisting!”

The undead ghoul let out a deafening screech of defiance, his body writhing in what appeared to be an act of rebellion against Aurelia's orders. But before I could make sense of the situation, he slammed his head against the cold, unforgiving stone floor with a sickening splat, leaving a pool of gory mess in his wake. The sound of the impact echoed through the chamber.

YOU HAVE DEFEATED [UNDEAD MINION]
<p><b>LEVEL UP!</b>  <b>LEVEL UP!</b>  <b>LEVEL UP!</b>  <b>LEVEL UP!</b>  <b>LEVEL UP!</b></p> <p>LEVEL 9</p> <p><u>UNLOCKED</u>  <b>[THERMALSENSE]</b></p>
DO YOU WISH TO [ABSORB] [UNDEAD MINION]? YES / NO

The overwhelming pain that came crashing into me felt like a violent tornado, but just as quickly as it came, it was replaced by a tidal wave of pure ecstasy. It didn't take long to realize what was causing these blissful moments—devouring the ghoul's decomposing flesh. As revolting as it was, I couldn't deny the pleasure of consuming him, especially when crawling into his empty eye socket had provided such a euphoric sensation. The thought alone made me recoil in disgust, wondering what had happened to me to make me crave such grotesque things.

Aurelia’s lips curled into a wide grin as she spoke, “This is the third time I’ve lost him this year.”

*Oops!*

As I continued dissolving the undead ghoul’s remains, I couldn’t help but feel alarmed by how effortless it was. Aurelia approached me with a stool, her grin making me uneasy. Despite feeling disgusted with myself, I couldn’t bring myself to stop. The taste of cinnamon and apples filled my senses, and I felt myself slipping deeper into a state of bliss. My body seemed to move independently as I slid into the ghoul’s chest cavity, savoring every moment of my meal.

Before completely surrendering to this delightful banquet, I mentally clicked “Yes” on Absorb. Instantly, I was torn away from my blissful consumption, spreading out over what little remained of Olin’s corpse like a cozy blanket. And just as suddenly, his remains vanished, leaving me to shrink back to my previous form. However, I was no longer the small tarantula-sized monster I once was. I had grown significantly in size, now closer to that of a Yorkie.

[ABSORB] [UNDEAD MINION] SUCCESSFUL
<u>SELECTABLE</u> [BLIGHT] [FEAR] [LIFE DRAIN]

The universe must either be punishing or mocking me! I mentally groaned, [STATUS].

NAME: BLAKE RACE: BLACK PUDDING CLASS: DUNGEON MONSTER LEVEL: 9 <u>TITLES</u> NONE		
<u>RACIAL SKILLS</u> [ABSORB] [CORROSIVE] [THERMALSENSE]  <u>SPELLS</u> [MANA SIGHT]  <u>ABILITIES</u> [VEIL POLYGLOT]	<u>VULNERABILITIES</u> [FIRE] [HOLY]  <u>IMMUNITIES</u> [ACID] [DARKNESS] [DISEASE] [POISON]	<u>UNIQUE</u> [RESTRICTED] [RESTRICTED] [RESTRICTED]  <u>SELECTABLE</u> [BLIGHT] [FEAR] [LIFE DRAIN] [SILK WEBBING] [SPIDER WALK] [STELLAR VOID] [VENOMOUS]

Aurelia's grin was so ferocious that it made even the most notorious sociopaths and psychopaths from horror movies look pathetic in comparison. She waved her hand while leaning over me while sitting on her stool, and a tiny orb of light floated out from within me. As the orb drifted away, a shiver ran through my body, leaving me wondering what had just happened.

"Don't worry, my be—little pool of death. It's only Olin's soul."

As Aurelia leaned closer, her breath caressed my gooey skin like a cool breeze. Surprisingly, I felt no urge to devour her. At least, not one that was homicidal. I was honestly starting to question my own sanity—well, I probably lost that in my past life, but that's beside the point.

"Hmm, it appears I'll be replacing his body after all. But do be careful the next time you decide to eat Olin. It's quite difficult to find durable bodies for his soul."

Aurelia made a sharp movement with her wrist, sending the small glowing orb flying over her shoulder toward a nearby table. Despite my small size, I strained to see what was up there. However, my curiosity was quickly satisfied by a sickening sound that followed; a sound that seemed like a devilish gasp yet was somehow unmistakably human.

"Olin, be a dear and clean up this mess. I'll be leaving with our dear Blake to meet the others."

*Wow, how does she know my name?! Ugh, what I would give to be able to speak. I have so many questions to ask her.*

"Yes, mistress," a young boy replied.

As I strained to get a better look at the one who spoke with the child-like voice on the table, Aurelia's gorgeous form blocked my view. Still, my own form seemed to stretch and elongate like a malleable substance drawn by an unseen force. The child appeared to be around ten years old. Although I couldn't discern his nationality. And yet, he looked like any other average kid his age. But as his gaze met mine, I could sense an intense hatred emanating from his hazy green eyes, and I knew I had found my first nemesis in this strange new world.

Bracing myself for round two against the child ghoul, Aurelia suddenly lifted me into the air like a small doll. As she carried me away from the undead child, I couldn't help but wonder what she had planned for me next. Instead of feeling threatened, I felt a strange sense of security being held against her chest like a teddy bear. It was a stark contrast to the terror I had felt moments before.

*I can't say I don't mind being held, but how am I not melting her away?*

"We've got a lot of work, the two of us, but first, you should meet the others. They'll just love you! And if they don't, you can eat their remains once I'm done," Aurelia finished that last sentence with a soft chuckle.

The stone walls of the narrow hallway seemed to close in on me as Aurelia carried me through it. Although my improved ability to see my surroundings with Mana Sight, the constant swaying and bouncing of her movements made me feel queasy. The world around me became a blurred and distorted mess of colors and shapes, leaving me disoriented and dizzy. Aurelia's strength was surprising as she effortlessly held me close like a precious object. I couldn't help but wonder what else she could do and how she had acquired such strength. Despite my discomfort and growing sense of unease, I fought back the urge to vomit—not sure if that's physically possible with this body—and remained still in her arms.

## [SICKNESS] DEBUFF AFFLICTED

Every step Aurelia took echoed through the dark and winding corridor, bouncing off the damp stone walls like a ghostly symphony. The flickering torchlights illuminated each room we passed, revealing a macabre display of alchemy bottles and bubbling potions that seemed to glow with an eerie aura. Skeletal remains littered the floor of some rooms, while others contained mysterious objects that I couldn't identify.

Despite the unsettling surroundings and persistent nausea brought on by the sickness affliction, Aurelia began humming that resonated off her chest like a gentle lullaby. Her beautiful sound calmed my frayed nerves and offered a rare moment of serenity in this new and terrifying existence. Nonetheless, the bitter realization that this was my new reality continued to gnaw at me.

## [SICKNESS] REMOVED

“All better?”

*Wait, she knew I had that debuff?*

As we stepped into the enormous chamber, I was awed by its vastness, with dozens of green flamed firepits lining the walls and pillars stretching several stories high. But what really gave me the chills were the skeletons adorned in ancient-looking armor, standing motionless with spears and shields at the ready. As I tried to absorb the scene, my vision went cross-eyed, unable to take in the eerie sight before me.

But as we ascended a series of steps leading to a large, elevated platform, I saw several individuals lounging on shabby couches, locked in heated arguments with Niamh. Some were even getting physical. Behind them, I noticed a floor section had collapsed into a sinkhole. It was a real shithole, to say the least.

Aurelia cleared her throat before speaking over the ruckus, “Everyone, I present to you our Dark Champion!”

*Dark Champion, how exciting—wait what?!*

Suddenly, everyone stopped their activities, even Niamh, who had a small woman with gray cat ears in a chokehold. I couldn't help but think that hiding under the shelf was a far better option. It dawned on me that Aurelia had referred to me as their “Dark Champion,” which probably meant that I was supposed to embrace my inner darkness and start performing evil acts?

“Is that a slime,” a frog-faced man in a hooded black robe asked?

“No, Vorigan, it's a Black Pudding! Hahaha! She's outdone herself this time! Aurelia, why didn't you tell me that pet was your candidate? Oh, by the Crone, this is too funny!”

“Shut it, Niamh,” Aurelia hissed as her fingernails dug into me.

As I writhed in discomfort, Aurelia withdrew her talons from my skin. I focused on the figure in black, slowly drifting towards us. He moved with eerie grace, like a reaper of death silently stalking its prey. His face was shrouded in darkness by the depths of his hood. But the parts that peeked out

appeared sickly and pallid, as if his skin was decaying. The real showstopper were his eyes, which burned with an intense, fiery red light, almost like they were possessed by a demonic force.

“Lady Aurelia, we already have six candidates undergoing the trial. You’re too late to submit your... creature. Besides, what makes your abomination any different?”

“Lord Demidicus,” Aurelia replied. “He’s special.”

*He?!*

“Hahahaha! Special? Hahaha! It’s a slime, you dimwit vamp,” Niamh gasped out between fits of laughter.

“Silence, demon! Daughter, special or not, your candidate is too late to undergo the trial. Besides, we had an agreement.”

*Daughter?*

Aurelia’s voice was calm and collected as she addressed the ancient-looking vampire, her eyes staring down at him confidently. “He only just awoke, Lord Demidicus,” she said, her voice dripping with subtle hatred that only I seemed to notice. “Per our agreement before the Crone, he can compete. I only ask, can I have some time to work with him before throwing him to the pit for the trial?”

*I’m not a man! I am not—no! Just...no!*

“Fine! Perhaps this is for the best. Daughter, your creature can compete, but it may not receive additional time. Toss it into the depths,” Lord Demidicus said with a dismissive wave.

*Toss me into the depths?*

My attention was drawn to the demoness, who sauntered over to the gaping sinkhole in the floor. Niamh appeared to barely contain another round of laughter as she peered over the edge, her body shaking with amusement.

*Wait, can we talk about this first?*

“Aww, don’t worry, that pretty little head, Aurie,” the demoness snickered. “I’ll do it for you. Pfft!”

Aurelia drew me closer to her face and whispered, “Make it out, my champion, and back to me.” Her eyes gleamed with a sinister grin as she turned her attention to the demon.

*I don’t like where this is going!*

“Alright, Niamh, fine,” Aurelia agreed, and then she launched me directly toward the demonic woman!

A revolting splat resonated as my viscous form collided with the demon’s unsuspecting face. An abhorrent sensation smothered us both. Time seemed to dissipate, and I discovered myself grasping her head with tendrils of ebony ooze propelled by my pure ecstasy. United, we both spiraled into the voracious chasm of the sinkhole. As we plunged deeper, Niamh’s distressing shrieks and Aurelia’s mocking laughter, interwoven with someone saying something about resummoning and demons, diminished into tiny whispers as the two of us fell.

*I really do hate my new life!*

# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 2

### IT'S POLYMORPHING TIME!

Ah, the sweet satisfaction! I was not daunted by what was happening around me as we plummeted down the hole into the infinite darkness that swallowed us whole. Nope, instead, I clung tightly to my quarry. My corrosive form enveloped Niamh's head, and her frantic clawing for release proved fruitless. Her dissolving fingers had become bony stumps, and a wicked delight twisted within me. It wouldn't be long until the rest of her hands succumbed to my touch, a thought I savored with perverse glee. Though I knew a hint of remorse should stir within, but the alluring taste of cherries and sex of her melting flesh overwhelmed any traces of my past morals.

Niamh's hands, barely existent now, still she struggled against me with tenacious resistance. She forged what remained of her digits into a fist, landing a solid punch to her face—effectively, to me as well. Waves of pain washed over me, yet her desperate tenacity commanded my admiration. *Isn't she quite the stubborn one?* Unwavering, she battered me with a barrage of blows, akin to a boxer striking a speed bag.

*Ugh, isn't this just fucking delightful.* And then, in the blink of an eye, the assault...ceased.

YOU HAVE DEFEATED A [SUCCUBUS]
<b>LEVEL UP!</b> <b>LEVEL UP!</b> <b>LEVEL UP!</b> <b>LEVEL UP!</b>  LEVEL 13  <u>UNLOCKED</u> [POLYMORPH]
DO YOU WISH TO [ABSORB] [SUCCUBUS]? YES / NO

What came next was pure ecstasy! An orgasmic wave consumed me as I received the level up notification, prompting my body to constrict Niamh's face even tighter. Just like a watermelon succumbing to an over excess of rubber bands, her head erupted. How I longed to shriek in my euphoria.

Unfortunately, all good things must end. Numbness and gluttony had been my most loyal sensations since awakening as a Black Pudding. Yet now they were usurped by unadulterated agony! The abyss's floor suddenly emerged, and I smashed into it with the ferocity of an



apocalyptic explosion! A sickening splash resonated as Niamh's remnants burst open upon the stone as my viscous form followed in pursuit, splattering behind her wake.

*Ugh, they call this a trial.*

Every part of me throbbed with pain, despite my form being reduced to a quivering goo. Lacking limbs, bones, organs, or a... brain, I found myself a mere pudding, smeared across the stone floor with traces of succubus intermingled. However, my gaze fell upon the notification that still floated before me upon killing the succubus, which seemed to hold some promise. After all, my options were limited while my form sluggishly pulled itself back together. In the faintest of mental whispers, I conceded, "Yes," on [ABSORB].

[ABSORB] [SUCCUBUS] SUCCESSFUL
<u>SELECTABLE</u> [ASTRAL INSIGHT]

Irritation surged within me as I glimpsed the single selectable within the notification. *Why only one this time?* However, there was little I could do. Every advantage was crucial since I had no idea what awaited me in these depths.

*Maybe it's time to explore my selectable options.*

Painstakingly reassembling myself, it was disheartening to find no remaining succubus pieces of flesh. It appeared that my splattered form had no trouble devouring the remnants after she burst like a pulverized pumpkin.

*Ugh, what's happening to me?*

With a mental shake of my non-existent head, I proceeded to scrutinize the selectable section of my status sheet. And in no order, I began reading the skills descriptions.

<u>SELECTABLE</u> [ASTRAL INSIGHT] [BLIGHT] [FEAR] [LIFE DRAIN] [SILK WEBBING] [SPIDER WALK] [STELLAR VOID] [VENOMOUS]
[STELLAR VOID]  GAIN THE CAPABILITY TO CALL FORTH A POCKET DIMENSION THROUGH INHERENT SORCERY.  <u>TYPE</u> RACIAL SKILL

<p style="text-align: center;"><u>ACTIVATION</u> <b>CAST</b></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>[VENOMOUS]</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">ACQUIRE THE POWER TO INFLICT [<b>POISON</b>] UPON ANYONE WHO ENCOUNTERS YOUR TOUCH.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>TYPE</u> <b>ABILITY</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>ACTIVATION</u> <b>PASSIVE</b></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>[SPIDER WALK]</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">OBTAIN THE SKILL TO EFFORTLESSLY TRAVERSE ANY SURFACE, DEFYING GRAVITY ITSELF.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>TYPE</u> <b>ABILITY</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>ACTIVATION</u> <b>PASSIVE</b></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>[SILK WEBBING]</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">ACQUIRE THE CAPABILITY TO GENERATE SPIDER SILK THREADS AT WILL.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>TYPE</u> <b>ABILITY</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>ACTIVATION</u> <b>CAST</b></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>[LIFE DRAIN]</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">OBTAIN THE MEANS TO SIPHON A PORTION OF YOUR FOES' LIFE FORCE TO HEAL YOUR INJURIES.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>TYPE</u> <b>SPELL</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>ACTIVATION</u> <b>CAST</b></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>[BLIGHT]</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">ACQUIRE THE SPELL TO UNLEASH A CLOUD OF [<b>DISEASE</b>] UPON YOUR ADVERSARIES.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>TYPE</u> <b>SPELL</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>ACTIVATION</u></p>

<b>CAST</b>
<p><b>[FEAR]</b></p> <p>GAIN THE SPELL TO SPREAD AN AURA OF <b>[FEAR]</b> AMONGST YOUR FOES.</p> <p><u>TYPE</u> <b>SPELL</b></p> <p><u>ACTIVATION</u> <b>CAST</b></p>
<p><b>[ASTRAL INSIGHT]</b></p> <p>OBTAIN THE POWER TO DISCERN THE SOULS OF THOSE IN YOUR VICINITY.</p> <p><u>TYPE</u> <b>ABILITY</b></p> <p><u>ACTIVATION</u> <b>PASSIVE</b></p>

In a bizarre mix of fascination and revulsion, I found myself faced with the reality of magic alongside vampires, necromancers, and demons. To top it off, I had become some kind of monster! It had been less than an hour since I woke up from death, and here I was, plunged into the depths of an abyss. The uncertainty of what awaited me down here only added to my frustration.

I have always been an antigun advocate. Well, maybe not an advocate, more of a silent complainer. Whatever! Right at this moment, what I would have given for a pistol or assault rifle. It's hilarious how danger can realign your values. My moral compass? Completely scrambled! The next best thing, or perhaps even better, would be range magic!

I scanned my list, slightly irked by the vagueness of the descriptions. Blight, Life Drain, and Fear were the only spells that seemed like long-range attacks magic. Well, rather, they appeared to be more like area attacks. From my gaming experience, two of them were probably debuffs, leaving Life Drain as a healing spell that siphoned life from others to restore my own. Yet, I lacked any strong offensive spells, and that's precisely what I needed. If only I had a fireball or lightning spell or any spell with some serious kick!

Glancing at the list of selectable skills, I felt a strong desire to activate them all. Without giving it much thought, I impulsively clicked on Silk Webbing.

<p>WOULD YOU LIKE TO SELECT <b>[SILK WEBBING]</b> AS AN ACTIVE ABILITY? YES / NO</p>
--

A smirk flickered through my mind as I opted for "Yes," but when nothing seemed to change, I felt a touch let down. It was then that the next prompt materialized, fueling my mounting frustration.

2 OUT OF 4 SELECTABLE SKILLS ACTIVATED
--

*Fuck! What was the first one I selected? Oh, right, Mana Sight. Had I ignored a notification telling the same warning when I activated Mana Sight? Now how the hell do I deselect Silk Webbing?*

In a fit of cursing, I sifted through the status interface, unable to unearth the elusive option to deactivate it. The nagging sensation persisted that it was there, hidden in plain sight, probably smirking at my futile attempts. The problem was the status screen's simplicity; it revealed information only when I mentally tapped a choice, leaving scant space for concealed elements. However, I couldn't shake the suspicion that my incompetence was why I couldn't reclaim that precious skill slot.

*Shit, now I need to be careful about what I pick.*

Casting my gaze back at the list, Stellar Void caught my attention. The prospect of having dimensional storage was alluring, but offense was my priority. I needed an attack spell. My best long-range options seemed to be Life Drain and Blight. However, Life Drain functioned as both an attack and healing, and, judging by my current state, I'd hardly need healing if I could find some flesh to consume. After all, I'd just survived a tremendous fall. It seemed that as long as some part of me endured, not much could bring me down.

*That's probably why Fire is one of my weaknesses.*

Then there's Blight, which appeared to be a combination of an attack and a Disease debuff, but the information provided was rather scant. However, Blight might be superior to Life Drain, considering it could potentially serve as both an offensive and debuff spell. *Damnit!* I just wasn't sure if Blight was an attack spell or not.

*Damnit. Damnit. Damnit. I'm making far too many assumptions! What really is a cloud of Disease—damage over time, maybe?*

The allure of Venomous was undeniable, its description hinting at a touch ability akin to Corrosive. The tantalizing prospect of inflicting a twin payload of suffering on those foolish enough to make contact with me was too irresistible to ignore. So, I made a mental note to circle back to it. In any case, pairing up passive attacks seemed like an obvious choice, even if both abilities required close quarters combat.

Honestly, I won't lie. I really wanted Spider Walk. I mean, it seemed like an excellent choice, especially given my current predicament. I might even be able to scale up the hole I was thrown into with that ability. But knowing the bunch of cult-like lunatics up there, they probably wouldn't consider that "completing the trial." So, I had to stay focused on offensive skills.

Now, Astral Insight has its merits, but who am I kidding? Seeing someone's soul would be absolutely badass, especially since I've seen enough anime to know how cool that would be. However, Astral Insight seemed somewhat like Thermalsense. Still, I hadn't bothered checking out Thermalsense description yet. Nevertheless, it didn't seem necessary to acquire Astral Insight just yet. With that thought in mind, I clicked on Thermalsense to peek at its description.

[THERMALENSE]
---------------

OBTAIN THE POWER TO VISUALLY DETECT THERMAL DIFFERENCES AND UNCOVER THE UNSEEN.

TYPE  
**RACIAL SKILL**

ACTIVATION  
**CAST**

I returned to my selectable list, selecting “Venomous” as my evident choice for my third skill. While it might have been prudent to wait for a superior option, survival was paramount. Right now, this was all I had to work with.

3 OUT OF 4 SELECTABLE SKILLS ACTIVATED

I was torn between Life Drain and Blight for that final slot. I contemplated the best decision and considered the possibility of saving that slot for a better option in the future. But as I had already considered, I needed to maximize my chances of survival with my current abilities. I had to make the most of the options I had right now. And whatever happens, I mustn’t regret it later.

4 OUT OF 4 SELECTABLE SKILLS ACTIVATED

With a bit of hesitation, I had selected Blight for my last option before peeking at my status sheet.

**NAME:** BLAKE

**RACE:** BLACK PUDDING

**CLASS:** DUNGEON MONSTER

**LEVEL:** 13

TITLES

NONE

<p><u>RACIAL SKILLS</u>                      [ABSORB]                      [CORROSIVE]                      [POLYMORPH]                      [THERMAISENSE]</p> <p><u>SPELLS</u>                      [Blight]                      [Mana Sight]</p> <p><u>ABILITIES</u>                      [SILK WEBBING]                      [VEIL POLYGLOT]                      [VENOMOUS]</p>	<p><u>VULNERABILITIES</u>                      [FIRE]                      [HOLY]</p> <p><u>IMMUNITIES</u>                      [ACID]                      [DARKNESS]                      [DISEASE]                      [POISON]</p>	<p><u>UNIQUE</u>                      [RESTRICTED]                      [RESTRICTED]                      [RESTRICTED]</p> <p><u>SELECTABLE</u>                      [ASTRAL INSIGHT]                      [FEAR]                      [LIFE DRAIN]                      [SPIDER WALK]                      [STELLAR VOID]</p>
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As I perused through my updated status sheet, my attention was drawn to a new racial skill that wasn't there before my fall. Polymorph. I couldn't believe I had forgotten about it until now. But then again, I had a lot on my plate, like pulling myself back together after going splat.

While scanning my list, I realized I hadn't checked what Absorb did. Though I didn't care much for examining Corrosive, it was already self-evident after encountering the spiders. Also, I couldn't figure out why Corrosive, Thermalsense, Polymorph, and Absorb were already active. I figured it was because they were racial skills I received from leveling, but I didn't understand why Stellar Void wasn't amongst them.

*Whatever! Best not to complain when broken shit works out in my favor.*

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>[POLYMORPH]</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">THE CAPABILITY TO TRANSFORM INTO ANY SHAPE OR FORM.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>TYPE</u> <b>RACIAL SKILL</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>ACTIVATION</u> <b>PASSIVE</b></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>[ABSORB]</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">THE ABILITY TO ABSORB THE SKILLS OF YOUR PREY AND MAKE THEM YOUR OWN.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>TYPE</u> <b>RACIAL SKILL</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>ACTIVATION</u> <b>CAST</b></p>

I found myself disheartened by the sparse details regarding my skills, especially Absorb, the erratic nature of my thieving prowess, and why the succubus gave me only one new skill. Yet, I lucked out with my initial brush with the arachnid menace. However, I was left with only one mystery remaining.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>[RESTRICTED]</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">THE CONDITIONS FOR UNLOCKING THIS SKILL HAVE NOT BEEN MET.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>TYPE</u> <b>UNIQUE</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>ACTIVATION</u> <b>LOCKED</b></p>
--

*Well, shit!*

My frustration with the restricted dissipated as quickly as it had arrived. I surveyed my surroundings, or at least what I could make out in the pitch-black chamber. It dawned on me that

I had been so engrossed in my status sheet that I hadn't even realized the absence of light. But now, I had the perfect opportunity to try out [THERMALSENSE].

The world erupted in a psychedelic display before settling into purple, orange, and black shades. It took me a moment to get my bearings, but then I realized I had Predator vision—or maybe snake vision? *Who cares about labels!* I couldn't help but wonder if this is how all Black Puddings observed the world around them. It was a racial skill, after all. Either way, I was relieved to find that it was much easier to use than with Mana Sight. *No nausea, sweet!*

I found myself in a chamber chiseled out of solid stone. The walls were adorned with mysterious engravings, possibly hieroglyphs, though the details were difficult to make out. The only discernible feature was the slight variation in temperature between the etched surface and the rest of the walls. Most of the walls were a deep shade of purple, with random black splotches interspersed with the carvings. Orange speckles and smears littered the floor, probably remnants of Niamh's explosive demise. The wonderful taste of her blood and flesh still lingered in me, and the image of her obliteration refused to fade. *Therapy might be in order.*

As I scanned the chamber with my thermal vision, a black figure caught my attention in one corner, at least twenty meters away. Either my ability was failing me, or there was a person in the room with me.

*Yay... I'm not alone.*

My world still appeared in a kaleidoscope of thermal colors as my Thermalsense remained active as I stared at the person in the corner. I couldn't tell if it was human or not, but I doubted they had noticed me yet. I mean, I was pretty tiny...wait, scratch that. I had tripled in size since consuming the succubus.

*Just how much fat was that demoness storing in those tits? Wait, that doesn't matter—focus, Blake!*

I flattened myself to the ground, which turned out to be rather low, and crept toward the hopefully unsuspecting individual. The silhouette in the distance remained motionless, likely relying on their lack of visibility to evade detection. *Foolish.* I could see them clearly thanks to my Thermalsense. *This will be an easy kill.*

*Wait, am I really going to kill some random stranger? Blake, what's wrong with you? Self-defense is one thing, but am I capable of attacking and murdering the first person I encounter at the bottom of a hole, completely unprovoked? YES!*

*Uh, I mean if I don't, they surely will attack me...am I right? So, yeah, that's a legit reason to strike first. Besides, I've seen enough movies to know a good defense is always to attack first! Am I right—right?*

I was beginning to accept I'd lost any resemblance to my past morals and sanity, let's just hope it doesn't get worse.

My pudding-low-crawl came to a halt at the figure's boots. To my disbelief, they remained oblivious to my presence, even though I was directly in front of them. It appeared that they were completely incapable of seeing in the dark. Nevertheless, I couldn't help but admire their steadfastness in remaining silent and still. There was no indication of movement from them, not even the rise and fall...of their chest.

*Well, crapola, they are already dead. Damn it, Blake, stop feeling disappointed you weren't the one to kill them!*

With my thermal vision, I should have realized that a body appearing black meant they were literally dead cold—wouldn't that also apply to vampires? As I slithered myself to their side, I noticed some curvature in the chest. *It's a woman!* It was difficult to discern her age, but I could tell she hadn't been dead for more than a few days. A slight scent of decay was in the air, and despite my best efforts, I couldn't help but feel a twisted sense of hunger.

*No. No. No! Stop thinking like that, Blake!* The body hadn't decomposed enough to make me salivate. *Blake—what did I just tell myself?!*

I couldn't resist the temptation of not letting her belongings go to waste, so I attempted to pull off a boot, but my current slimy state caused me to stick to it like a gooey mess, slowly corroding it away. *Damn it!* I let go of the boot before causing any further damage, but a hole had formed by the big toe.

*I'm thinking like a human as if I needed boots or gear. I can't use them, even if I wanted to. Shit, I guess I have no other choice. Sorry—not sorry!*

I wasn't even sure if Absorb worked on a corpse. Well, notwithstanding a ghoul. Still, there's no time like the present to find out. Without further hesitation, I threw myself over the woman's body like a sticky tar blanket, completely engulfing her beneath me. As she was already dead, her body seemed to dissolve much faster than the succubus had during our fall.

*Huh, she tasted like hot cocoa and mint. Delicious!*

DO YOU WISH TO [ABSORB] [NECROMANCER APPRENTICE]? YES / NO
---

I couldn't help but do a little squiggly pudding dance of joy upon realizing that I didn't have to be the one to make the kill to use Absorb on a corpse. My elation was through the roof, and I mentally cheered, "Yes!"

[ABSORB] [NECROMANCER APPRENTICE] SUCCESSFUL
--

<u>SELECTABLE</u> [SPIRIT VESSEL] [NECROTIC FLAME]
--

*Huh, sweet, two new skills!*

I was pleasantly surprised I had gained two new skills this time, but I wasn't sure how Absorbed worked and why it was so inconsistent.

*Wait a minute—Necrotic Flame?!*

[NECROTIC FLAME]
------------------



ACQUIRE THE ARCANE MAGIC TO UNLEASH A DEADLY INFERNO OF NECROTIC FLAMES.

TYPE  
SPELL

ACTIVATION  
CAST

*Perfect—just fucking perfect!*

I filled up all my skill slots, and then what do I find? An insanely powerful ranged spell. I swore I wouldn't have any regrets, but damn, I was kicking myself now! Especially knowing that this powerhouse of a skill had been sitting here, overlooked in the corner on some stupid dead girl. *Seriously?!*

Without warning, everything went black, as if someone had turned off the lights. I about had a heart attack, but I don't have a heart anymore, both literally and figuratively. *Oh yeah!* With a thought, a Racial Skill snapped to mind [**THERMALSENSE**], and just like that, my world came back into full view in an array of oranges, purples, and blacks.

After consuming the corpse in the room, I grew weary of crawling around the dark, dank chamber. I decided it was time to try out my latest experiment, Polymorph. I closed my eyes and imagined the woman I had just devoured but with a few modifications of my own. Taller, curvier, and alluring—a perfect body that I never had in my past life!

I hoped to see my new, sexy form as I opened my eyes. But, to my dismay, I was still the same slimy, grotesque creature. I tried to remember if there were any instructions or a manual, but I was left to my own devices. *It's Polymorphing time!* My mind raced with the possibilities. But still, nothing happened. There was no transformation or escape from this goo form. It was almost laughable, in a sick and twisted sort of way.

Instead of mentally shouting it out, I mentally clicked [**POLYMORPH**]. Suddenly, I began to stretch out, ripping, mending, and shifting like putty as I did. Tar-like strands, tendrils, and tentacles of all shapes of abomination to sanity twisted into threads of interwoven muscle fibers as I started to take form. I rejoiced! For the first time since awakening, I reached out of the black muck that had been me and toward the heavens with my newly formed hands open wide.

A twisted smile tugged at the corners of my new face as I ascended, my laughter echoing in the darkness of my mind. It was a joyous madness, an intoxicating rush of self-gratification. Here I was, reborn in another world, transformed into a creature of pure darkness and instinct. I've done unspeakable things that would make my former self shudder in horror. I've battled spiders, ghouls, and even a seductive succubus, all of whom I devoured with delight. But it wasn't just them—I couldn't resist sinking my corrosive flesh into a random corpse as well. And the taste...oh, the taste! It was like nothing I'd ever experienced before.

I should feel disgusted, guilty, and perhaps even traumatized by my actions. But I don't. Instead, I stand tall on my own two legs, feeling an unprecedented sense of pride and satisfaction. It's as if my new life as a monster has unlocked a hidden part of me, a part that revels in chaos and destruction.

As I bask in my newfound freedom, a flicker of doubt crosses my mind. *Is this who I really am now? Am I truly a monster?* But the thought quickly dissipates, replaced by a surge of adrenaline at the prospect of new prey to hunt and consume. Yes, I am a Black Pudding, a creature of chaos, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

A chuckle echoed in my mind as I held out my hand like a vapid Instagram model, eager to admire my new form. I had the perfect idea of focusing [MANA SIGHT] through my hand to get a good look at myself. Unfortunately, my excitement blinded me to the fact that the chamber was still shrouded in darkness, and Thermalsense wasn't enough to show me the goods. All I saw was a glowing orange figure against a purple background, and it wasn't quite what I was hoping for. Sure, I looked vaguely human, but more like a bald, short version of Slenderman combined with a gooey skeleton than anything else. Talk about disappointment.

*Where the hell are the curves and alluring features, I had envisioned for myself?*

As I took my first wobbly steps with my new legs, I couldn't help but feel the joy return at my newborn freedom of movement. Walking was easy, like riding a bike, and I felt a sense of power surging through me with my first step. That was before I fell flat on my face, which splattered everywhere, but I got back up and tried again. And again. And again! Along with a few more times after for good measure. But eventually, I got it somewhat down.

The long narrow corridor before me seemed to stretch on forever, but I strode forward confidently, my head held high. Well, that may be an exaggeration. I honestly looked like a wobbling toddler waddling down a dark hallway. *Whatever!*

Thermalsense was a relief compared to Mana Sight, but its orange glow was still far from perfect. And, I had to admit, I still preferred Mana Sight over this snake-like perception, but sadly everything was still too dark to even see with the skill. After my fifth cast of Thermalsense dissipated, I noticed a ghostly luminescence with Mana Sight taunting me from afar. With half an hour's pursuit, I finally reached the elusive glow, and oh, what an exhilarating reward awaited me.

As I emerged from the confining passage, an expansive cavern unveiled itself, a precipice gazing down at a sprawling abyss. I could now see the entire cavern system. A colossal lake held court in the chamber, accompanied by a cascading waterfall, yet I marveled at my newfound tolerance.

*Hallelujah!* No more nausea...well, no more major nausea. *It's about time my body embraced Mana Sight.*

I might not have perfect clarity, but the eerie splendor of the landscape lay exposed before me. Alas, no path announced itself as an obvious choice forward. But lo and behold, a good two football fields beneath me, a squabbling quintet disrupted the silence. Listen to that delightful racket! I strained to discern the identities of those bellowing beings, but their true nature remained cloaked in mystery. Yet, their raucous clamor was music to my ears.

“Rob, I'm fucking tell you, we're not ready for the next boss!”

“Well, Jason. Maybe if you hadn't killed Sophia and eaten her heart, we might've stood a chance against that big fucker.”

“Hey! Hey! We did not have a ceasefire at the time. Besides, it's not my fault that frog-faced freak stuck my soul inside this dark fae body. It's fucking hard to control these impulses.”

*Can't argue with that. I'm still learning about my own dark impulses.*

“Jason, Rob, you're both right. Rob, this isn't a video game. There's no do-over! We need to grind some levels if we hope to beat that boss. Jason, we're in a life and death struggle, and if those freaks who threw us down here were telling the truth, only one of us will be allowed to leave alive. And the door out can only be found at the end of this shit-hole dungeon! So, no, I don't blame you for Sophia. We had not yet made any agreements at the time. However, as soon as we've cleared this shithole, all bets are off.”

*Only one of us can leave alive? Well, let the Hunger Games begin!*

“Jeremy, w-what if we level up to the point the n-necromancers have no choice but to let each of us live?”

“You said it yourself, Heather. Your Appraisal showed their leader with three question marks. I don't see any of us getting a high enough level to make a difference to those fanged fucks, but if everyone here wants to try, I'll play along. I'm all for grinding levels. What do you say, Yuri?”

“It's Yua, and as long as you boys can prove you won't betray us, I'm willing to consider it, but I don't trust the three of you.”

*Hmm, seems obvious those are five of the six champion candidates. I also suppose that makes the dead body I ate, Sophia. Sorry—not sorry still!*

I had no idea how long they'd been down here or what level they were, and I was pretty sure they would kill me on the spot, even if I found a way to tell them I was a fellow candidate. Besides, I don't think I could stop myself from attempting to murder and eating them first. *Ugh, I've become worse than Jeffery Dahmer!*

“Heather, what was the boss's level?”

“It w-was three l-levels above me, at level fifteen.”

“Three days of grinding, and I can't believe you're level thirteen already. That drow experience boost is so unfair! I wish that sick fuck who summoned me had put me into one. Instead, I got some screwed-up fae.”

“S-sorry, Jason.”

*Level thirteen in three days? What. The. Fuck?! I already match their prowess after a paltry two hours in this realm. Maybe Aurelia's faith in me wasn't entirely unfounded. Ugh, who wants to be some evil champion, though? On second thought...it might not be the worst fate.*

*Suppose the other candidates are also at or near my level. In that case, I'll need to do some serious leveling before facing them. I'm outnumbered five to one, and there are two things I hate: one, being on the receiving end of a disadvantage. And the other is a fair fight! Eh, am I really plotting their murder? Yep! Holy crap, I think I am a schizo—Fuck, my stepdad turned out to be right!*

Suddenly, an unexpected, hushed voice emanated from my rear, “Pssst!”

*Who the fuck just did that?!*

# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 3

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### MY RIVALS

“Pssst!”

I spun around, trying to locate the source of the voice. It sounded like it was coming from inside my head, which wasn't exactly a new experience for me. But this was different. This voice had a sense of urgency to it.

*Who the hell just pssst me?*

And then I remembered. [THERMALSENSE]. As the skill activated, I glanced around, searching for any heat signatures. That's when I saw it – a small, glowing square hiding amongst some rocks.

*What the—?*

“Hide! They're going to see you!” The voice spoke again, urgently and panicked.

As I looked down at the group of five people below, I wondered why I was being told to hide. They couldn't even see over the cliff edge. But as a gooey, shapeshifting monster, I still hadn't quite figured out how to speak in my new form. So instead, I lifted one of the oily appendages that I guess was supposed to be my hand and pointed a tentacle-finger at myself. My current human form resembled a tar-covered skeleton, only I was small enough to pass for a child. And to top it off, I was completely bald. It was safe to say I was disappointed with my shapeshifting abilities. But hey, at least I had some knowledge from playing video games—life should improve as I level up, right? So, no full-blown freakouts...yet.

“What?! Yes, you! Hurry! Hide brother!”

*Brother? Oh, hell no! Why does everyone think I'm a man!*

I gave the tiny cube a nonchalant shrug, strolled toward it, and was relieved to discover that I didn't feel a sudden urge to devour it. *Ha, maybe I'm not a complete psycho after all!*

“No, not next to me. Hide somewhere else!”

I nonchalantly gave the cube another shrug and plopped down beside it, crossing my slimy legs as I did.

“What are you doing?”

I lifted my oily tentacle-finger once again, gesturing towards where my mouth should have been, then I pointed at the little hole in the cube's face. The five other candidates were still bickering in the distance, but who cared? This little guy was another slime, and he knew how to talk! If he didn't teach me how to speak, I could always eat him and see what my Absorb skill could teach me.

*Would eating a slime count as cannibalism? Wait, hadn't I already resorted to cannibalism? Technically...well, technically eating Olin and Sophia doesn't count since I'm now a Black Pudding. And Niamh was a succubus, and everyone's probably had a taste of that... Ugh, Blake, you're sick in the head!*

“Stupid puddin’ slime! What are you doing? Get away from me!”

Pointing was not cutting it, and I wasn't about to take “no” for an answer. So, I took matters into my own...tentacle. This should get my point across. Without hesitation, I shoved my finger straight into what I hoped was the cube's speaking orifice.

*Please let this be the right hole!*

[ACID] RESISTED
YOU HAVE DEFEATED A [GELATINOUS CUBE]
DO YOU WISH TO [ABSORB] [GELATINOUS CUBE]? YES / NO

As I slurped on the remains of the poor little cube, I couldn't help but chuckle. *Oops, I guess that answers my earlier question. I am a cannibal! Oh well, no big deal.* After all, it's not like I could help being what I am. And hey, the little guy tasted like peanut butter, so it wasn't all bad. Plus, who needs to speak when you have tentacle-fingers, right? *I guess I'll just have to find another way to learn how to talk.*

I glanced at the notification, and with a mental confirmation, I clicked, “Yes.”

[ABSORB] [GELATINOUS CUBE] SUCCESSFUL
<u>SELECTABLE</u> [PARALYSIS]

*Alright, another skill I can't use...oh, joy.*

“Er, y-you seen Doodles?” a voice asked, much to my surprise.

Glancing up, I spotted a figure of a child approaching me, most likely searching for the cube. Little did he know... Doodles had been quite a scrumptious treat. I attempted to shush him but remembered I lacked a functioning mouth. Instead, I gestured with a tentacle-finger, mimicking the shushing motion where my lips should have been, hoping he'd catch on. Predictably, he didn't.

*Good grief, kids can be so infuriating.*

“YOU LISTEN? ME TALKIN!”

*Oh, I'm so tempted to kill him as well! No, Blake, hold back; he's just a child. Ugh! Is it possible I still have a moral compass? Though, who cares if I ate his friend—pet?*

In a panic, I hastily pointed toward the cliff edge where the other candidates were. Oddly, they had fallen silent... I deactivated Thermalsense and switched to the stomach-churning [MANA SIGHT]. I could see everything around me, enjoying a complete three-hundred-sixty-degree view—and I absolutely hated it! I mean, it had gotten better, but it wasn't perfect by any means. While most of my surroundings were blurry, my focal point was at least clear. I spotted the child with his wart covered green skin and large ears. But I couldn't focus on that for too long as a hazy purple fog started to appear behind me and watched in wonder as a blade formed out of it. And then it swung outward—at my NECK!

My body was tingling with adrenaline, but it was no use. I was still sitting on the ground with my legs crossed, trying to avoid the sword that was aimed below my head. But who was I kidding? The blade found its mark in a split second, and I felt my tar-like neck give way with each fiber slicing apart. I was helpless as the sword moved through me like a hot knife through butter. The sensation was unpleasant, to say the least. And before I knew it, I was decapitated, with my head falling into my lap.

*Well, that's just fucking fantastic!*

As the purple fog dissipated, a dentist's worst nightmare materialized before me, looking almost giddy. He appeared mostly human-ish, except for the serious underbite problem that revealed thousands of razor-sharp, needle-like teeth. But my attention was divided into three tasks. First, I couldn't help but marvel at the grotesque sight of my head melting into my thighs and crotch. Not my proudest moment, but it's far from the worst thing I've seen or done since becoming an acidic flesh-eating monster. Second, I saw the other four candidates approaching from a hundred yards away and closing in fast. And finally, the most important task at hand—planning my counterattack!

“Oh man, I am freaking love Phantom Slash. Hell yeah! I fucking can't wait until my next milestone at level ten—these racial skills are wickedly strong! I can't wait to eat those four fuckers' hearts once we kill that fat-ass boss. Pfft!” My assailant muttered to himself before shouting at the others, “Hey guys, this stupid thing didn't even know what hit it!”

*He seriously believes he'd killed me?*

In his arrogance, he was openly reveling in his plans to turn on his allies. *The nerve of this guy!* If he hasn't yet reached level ten, a mere brush with my Corrosive and Venomous touch could end him. Sadly, his companions were closing in. There was no way I could absorb him and face my fellow candidates in my current state.

*Goodness, have I truly morphed into such a cold-hearted monster? Well, I guess it doesn't matter. I mean, they are trying to do the same to me, after all.*

“Jason, what was it?” Another person sprinted our way as he called out.

“What on earth is Jeremy talking about? What was it?” Jason muttered to himself before shouting in response, “How am I supposed to know? I haven't received the notification yet!”

*Oh, this is going to be delightful!*

“IDIOT, it's not—,” Jeremy started to shout back.

My thoughts focused on a single command, [BLIGHT]. I secretly hoped he'd survive this ordeal; after all, I wouldn't want to lose my future Phantom Slash. A foul black mist emanated from me,

reminiscent of a deadly plague. The stench of sickness and decay engulfed him, and soon, visible sores, blisters, boils, and lesions erupted across his skin in a grotesque symphony of bursting pustules. He emitted a pitiful, childlike shriek as he crumpled into a fetal position.

*Yikes, that's...horrificing. So glad I'm not in his shoes.*

Despite being headless, I sprang to my feet and dashed in the direction the green child had appeared from. I wasn't sure if the noisy brat was still around or if they had managed to slip away, but it made no difference. There was no point in searching for him. After all, I couldn't linger here. I wasn't prepared to face the other candidates just yet.

"I call upon you, oh dark goddess, heed my plea, Darkness Arrow!"

There was a hard impact against my back, and I nearly lost my footing as I continued running away on my wobbly legs.

*Ouch! What the hell was that?!*

[DARKNESS] RESISTED

*Eek, go way, notification, you're blocking my view! Oh no, they're catching up!*

"From the gastral depths of my soul, I call forth, Acid Ball!"

[ACID] RESISTED

*What the hell are they doing? Are they reciting prayers and incantations or something equally stupid? Honestly, what's wrong with these five? They should know that verbalizing isn't necessary for casting spells! Perhaps I should just end this charade and take them out right now. Hold on, Blake. I need to escape this place, grow stronger, then kill them! Crap, I really have lost my mind.*

"Heather, hurry up and use your appraisal already!"

"S-sorry, Rob. S-suffer the eye of the seer, for none s-shall hide, Appraisal!"

A chilling, tingling sensation traveled along my viscous spine and up to my severed neck as one of the girls unleashed their magic on me.

"It's a level t-thirteen dungeon monster. It's weak to Fire and Holy! It's immune to a lot, guys, Acid, Darkness, Disease, and Poison. We should pull back, r-right n-now!"

*How rude! I wish that girl would quit broadcasting my personal details to everyone like that! Ugh, stop pursuing me and tend to your wailing, whimpering, ridiculous friend instead!*

"Shoot, Heather's correct. Let's go help Jason."

*Phew!*

"We'll be prepared to face that monster next time!"

*Oh, no, you won't.*

They had closed the distance to within ten meters but seeing them retreat brought me a sense of relief. They appeared to possess dark magic-like abilities and spells similar to mine yet lacked my immunity. Despite everything, my confidence soared! Could it be that the old man knew this challenge would be a breeze for me before instructing Aurelia to throw me down here? *Nah!*

*Though, I am missing her—hold on! What am I thinking? Blake, she's obviously evil! But, oh, so incredibly enticing.*

“Over here!”

*Ugh, it's that stupid goblin kid!*

“Hurry! We go to Ockpool! Hurry! Hidden city! Deep below, safe! Quickly! Monster sanctuary! Quickly! Plot revenge! They kill Doodles!”

*They killed Doodles? Oh, he means the cube—sure—I can work with that. Wait...monster sanctuary? Woo-hoo, it's level-grinding time!*



# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 4

### MONSTER SANCTUARY

I found myself in a delightfully bizarre situation. It hadn't even been an hour since my rebirth, and I was already deep in some freaky dungeon, following a goblin child with more warts than a toad's backside to a monster sanctuary. And to top it off, I've already offed a ghoul, a succubus, and a handful of spiders. Their flesh was delectable, but nothing compared to the random girl's corpse I stumbled upon. *Mmm, tasty!* Hey, I was hungry, okay? And it's not like she was using her body anymore.

But the real kicker?

I was now a contender for the title of dark champion, locked in a sick competition with five others. If they didn't kill one another first, I would be more than happy to lend a hand, or rather, a tentacle. It was a game of Dungeons and Murder, and I was reveling in it like a kid in a candy store.

I couldn't believe it. Me, a former rebellious goth girl, was now cool with murder and cannibalism—yeah...that seems legit. Still, how did this happen? I guess being reincarnated as a Black Pudding really screws with your mind. Aurelia did mention something about fate being mischievous. I wonder if fate is laughing at me right now as I decide whether to shed tears or grin ear to ear—not that I have much of a face anymore. But hey, I am having a blast, right? It's not every day I get to indulge in the darker side of life without any consequences.

As soon as I trailed behind the goblin child, I followed his example and remained silent—after all, what was there to say—besides, it wasn't like I could speak. Instead, I stared at the goblin child, wondering what he would taste like. *Maybe like candy? Yum! Wait a minute, he's just a kid... Ugh, children are off-limits, aren't they?* But the thought of devouring him was so tempting, and yet, I felt like I was being plagued with a serious case of indigestion the more I thought about it.

Pulling my focus away from the little morsel, I took in the sights around me. The cavern was enormous! It truly was a sight to behold. I peeked around at everything like a tourist with my headless body. As we trudged deeper into the tunnels and pathways that crisscrossed over one another, I couldn't help but get lost in thought. *Am I on another planet, universe, or in a different reality altogether?* The idea of being reborn on Earth in a future where magic existed seemed farfetched but not impossible. *Oh, the possibilities!* As for my current state of mind, had I become a psychopath? Do I want to be a dark champion, or should I find a way to escape this dungeon?

*Decisions, decisions. Screw it, I'll stay! Who needs a way out when you're having this much fun? Feh, what's wrong with me? Maybe I shouldn't ask that question.*

The goblin child abruptly came to a halt, and I nearly stumbled over him. I made a mental note to be more careful around the little green runt – one touch from me, and I could snuff out his life like a candle. Suddenly, his grubby little hand shot up, attempting to grab mine. I recoiled in horror, narrowly avoiding contact.

*What was he thinking? Does he want to die? Well, I suppose he would make for a tasty snack... Ahem. No, no, bad thoughts! Must keep it together.*

“It is good. Acid not hurt. Got from last pet slime, Doodles.”

*Oh, kid, I'm also poisonous, and what do you mean by last pet slime?*

DEACTIVATE [CORROSIVE]? YES / NO
DEACTIVATE [VENOMOUS]? YES / NO

Those two popups had surprised me as they appeared out of nowhere without any prompting.

*Hmm, looks like I can deactivate my passives. That's great news!*

I had been worried that my skills would have interfere with some more cardinal desires with a lovely someone. You know, like accidentally killing a vampire during tentacle play. *I wonder how Aurelia is doing right now?* Anyways! No need to worry about that now, right? The important thing was that I now had control over my skills. I could switch them on and off like a light switch, which was a real lifesaver. Or should I say, a real live killer? Of course, I mentally clicked “Yes” on both.

My pleasant musings were interrupted by the kid. “Hmm, I give you name, you Muddy! Yes, good name,” he exclaimed.

I couldn't help but roll my metaphorical eyes. *Muddy? Really?! How original. Oh well, at least it's better than being called “Blobby” or “Gooley” or something equally ridiculous.*

“Come, Muddy, entrance over here!” he continued, pointing to a dark and ominous tunnel.

*Well, this should be interesting.*

<b><u>SYSTEM NOTIFICATION</u></b>
PET TAMER HAS CAST [SUBMISSION] ON YOU
ACCEPT [SUBMISSION]? YES / NO

The notification sent shivers down my spine with disgust. *Submit to him? As if!* The very idea made me want to gag. I mentally slammed the “no” button so hard it might as well have triggered a small mental earthquake. Little did he know, he was dealing with a rebellious psychopath with a taste for flesh... albeit, I seemed to prefer the ones already dead and decaying if that ghoul and corpse was any indication.

*Mmm—perhaps I should taste a few more living ones to confirm that. After all, variety is the spice of life, or in their case, death.*

Still, I couldn't shake off the feeling of annoyance and disgust after the submission notification. I swore to any deity or demon responsible for this twisted system that thought a submission skill was a good idea: *I will find you, and I will kill you! You messed with the wrong monster! Whether you're a bitch or a bastard, it doesn't matter to me.*

<p><b><u>SYSTEM NOTIFICATION</u></b></p> <p>YOU HAVE VOWED TO SLAY THE PRIMORDIAL GODDESS OF MAGIC</p>
<p><b><u>TITLE AWARDED</u></b></p> <p><b>HOPELESS CRUSADER</b></p> <p><i>BEST OF LUCK!</i></p>

*Bitch, it is! EEK—no, I meant, a-apologies...and shit.*

“Good boy! Muddy, follow. Come, boy, go inside now,” the wart covered bastard exclaimed, seeming oblivious to the fact I had denied his pet tamer attempt.

*Ugh, boy?! Why you! I'm a girl, damnit! That's it, I'm going to kill him! Oh wait, that's not good. Deep breaths, Muddy—Blake! Ugh! He's just a kid. A soon-to-be-dead kid! Oh, come on, that's not helping.*

I had just pissed off a goddess, but at least I made someone's day. I should take a minute and collect myself, maybe grab a snack. Can't ruin my farming location before I've even stepped foot in it, right? *Fine, if this kid wants a pet, I'll play the part—for now. Who knows, maybe I can train him to fetch me some rotting meat.* With a sinister thought, I mentally called forth [POLYMORPH].

Oh, the sheer ecstasy as my decapitated form writhed and contorted, limbs shredding and melding, contracting, and elongating. I stood on eight sinewy appendages in mere moments, an abhorrent blend of cephalopod and arachnid. Certainly, my inky, viscous form and the absence of an exoskeleton lent me a more octopus-like appearance, but the terror I induced was undeniable. The way the kid stumbled backward, eyes wide with dread, confirmed it. How amusing, a headless figure couldn't unnerve the boy, yet the mere sight of a spider could.

*Seems the fear of spiders transcends all realities.*

“Muddy?” Wartie uttered in a hushed tone.

*Regardless, Muddy? Preposterous!* I scoffed silently at him, I felt I should at least be given a better name. *Damn it, Blake, I've already got a name. Just ignore the kid and play along.*

Rooted in place, my sinister glare skewered the pint-sized goblin whelp...or it would have, had I managed to craft actual eyes for myself instead of depending on some odd skill to perceive my surroundings.

“Umm, g-good boy, follow now,” he stuttered, patting his leg as though addressing a fucking dog!

*Easy there, Blake. Let's not jump the gun...just yet. No, no, snuffing out tykes is downright distasteful. If there's one rule to stand by, it's that one...though, on second thought, he doesn't genuinely need both kidneys, does he? A little souvenir wouldn't hurt, right?*

Chuckling darkly to myself, I wrenched my attention away from my wicked thoughts and opened my status sheet.

<b>NAME: BLAKE</b> <b>RACE: BLACK PUDDING</b> <b>CLASS: DUNGEON MONSTER</b> <b>LEVEL: 13</b> <u>TITLES</u> <b>HOPELESS CRUSADER</b>		
<u>RACIAL SKILLS</u> <b>[ABSORB]</b> <b>[CORROSIVE]</b> <b>[POLYMORPH]</b> <b>[THERMALSENSE]</b>  <u>SPELLS</u> <b>[Blight]</b> <b>[Mana Sight]</b>  <u>ABILITIES</u> <b>[SILK WEBBING]</b> <b>[VEIL POLYGLOT]</b> <b>[VENOMOUS]</b>	<u>VULNERABILITIES</u> <b>[FIRE]</b> <b>[HOLY]</b>  <u>IMMUNITIES</u> <b>[ACID]</b> <b>[DARKNESS]</b> <b>[DISEASE]</b> <b>[POISON]</b>	<u>UNIQUE</u> <b>[RESTRICTED]</b> <b>[RESTRICTED]</b> <b>[RESTRICTED]</b>  <u>SELECTABLE</u> <b>[ASTRAL INSIGHT]</b> <b>[FEAR]</b> <b>[LIFE DRAIN]</b> <b>[SPIDER WALK]</b> <b>[STELLAR VOID]</b> <b>[PARALYSIS]</b>

*Seriously, what was up with that absurd title?*

I admit, I was a bit worried this Goddess of Magic might have also seen fit to rechristened as “Muddy.” Still, the title of Hopeless Crusader didn’t sound half bad. However, the horror of bearing the name “Muddy” would have been too much to endure. Then again, it’s still a step up from “Wartie!” *His parents must have harbored some serious resentment toward him.*

Casting my gaze upon the goblin, I observed the little pest as he puffed out his chest, pivoted, and sauntered through a crevice in the wall. Had I not just witnessed his passage, the opening would have easily eluded my notice.

With a sigh, I reassessed my predicament, seeking a more palatable perspective. The most satisfying interpretation I could muster: I was merely toying with my prey. Certainly not some goblin whelp’s plaything or pet! That settled, I trailed the youngster. Afterall, I refuse to be anyone’s pet...well, perhaps Aurelia’s. *Oh, for shits’ sake, Blake, get your head out of the gutter!*

With my eight legs in tow, I skittered after the young goblin. Coordinating so many appendages was an odd sensation, yet my body seemed to instinctively know what to do. Unexpectedly, the opening through which I trailed Wartie didn’t reveal a mere tunnel or passageway but rather an impressive archway leading to another cavern. Lurking within were four goblins garbed in haphazard leather and iron armor—if one could even call what they wore armor. It resembled nothing more than pitiful scraps of metal bound together with frayed leather straps.

To add insult to injury, their loincloths left little to the imagination, particularly from my regrettably low vantage point. *Talk about getting an eyeful.* Despite their shoddy attire, these goblins loomed over the child and me, their expressions seething with fury.

*Well, isn't this just delightful?*

“WHERE GO,” one of them bellowed out?

“Doodles ran again. I chased,” the kid replied, wiggling his toes into the dirt.

“What’s that?!” One of the other goblins roared, brandishing a wooden club in my direction.

“Found Muddy, I did. Muddy saved me. New pet! Adventures killed Doodles. I and Muddy want revenge!”

*Not quite how I remember it, but whatever.*

“Adventurers?!” The goblin exclaimed, a note of panic lacing his tone. “How many? Saggy, fetch Chieftain!”

Surprisingly, the goblins appeared genuinely terrified.

Little do they know; I’ll tear this whole village asunder before allowing them to harm one hair on my future meals. Yet, why did these goblins have to bear such wretched monikers? Wartie, now Saggy? One of the green creatures nodded, then promptly bolted. Observing his hasty departure, I couldn’t help but note the goblin’s bow-legged gait. As he scurried off, I caught a horrifying glimpse of something sagging beneath his loincloth, an unsavory pair to behold.

*Ugh, why did I have to see that?*

The child appeared hesitant as he squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. “T-there were ten of them. Yeah, ten adventurers! Muddy battled all ten. Muddy unbeatable! Adventurers ran in fear!”

*Ha! You little fibber.*

“That fought ten adventurers?” Another goblin surged forward like he dared the child to a fight. “Spider scary, sure, but you lie!”

“You challenge?” Wartie replied with a low growl.

“I do!”

“Me accept—Muddy, attack!”

*What?! Is this kid for real? Well, I mean, I wouldn't necessarily be opposed to the idea.* Before I could weigh the pros and cons of slaughtering a goblin amidst a village of monsters, a wooden club smashed into my arachnid face.

“Muddy, I say attack!”

The goblin hoisted his club aloft for another swing. Yet, I detected a scowl etched across his hideous face as he took stock of how little his impact had done to my gooey form. Nevertheless, I harbored no desire to endure a pummeling to my soft cranium. After all, I had a magic attack I wanted to use again. A sly grin spread across my thoughts as I focused on my spell, [BLIGHT].

A murky, black haze enshrouded the goblin as he uttered a piercing scream, followed by a resounding thud as his club clattered. As I readied my next move—activating my passives and springing forth—I realized it was too late. My opponent crumpled into a revolting mixture of blisters, pus, and blood.

*Well, that was anticlimactic.*

YOU HAVE DEFEATED A [GOBLIN]
DO YOU WISH TO [ABSORB] [GOBLIN]? YES / NO

As I braced myself for the inevitable level-up notification, nothing happened. *Well, isn't that just peachy.* I couldn't help but wonder if there were other ways to level up besides bloodshed or if the whole system was just a twisted joke designed to screw with me.

As I gazed at the repulsive heap that was once a goblin, I couldn't help but shudder with disgust. I mean, I'm no stranger to getting my hands dirty, but this was a whole new level of grossness. Yet, the temptation to acquire new spells and abilities was too strong to resist. So, with a mentally heavy sigh, I clicked the "Yes" button on absorb. My body stretched out over the goblin's corpse, and his remains slowly vanished within me as I reformed into a spider.

*Well, at least it's good for my figure.*

[ABSORB] UNSUCCESSFUL [GOBLIN] DID NOT POSSESS ANY SKILLS
--

Ah, yes. The sweet, sweet notification of crushing disappointment. I had taken out the goblin, yet I had nothing to show for it.

*How many more of these disgusting critters did I need to kill to level up or gain a new skill? And what the hell were the requirements for leveling up anyway? I swear to god, if that "goddess" doesn't fix her janky system, I might just have to pay her a little visit...*

I paused my internal bitching in horrified anticipation for a system notification, but thankfully, nothing appeared.

The anger bubbled within me like a simmering cauldron. I couldn't believe it. Spiders had skills, but goblins didn't? What kind of twisted reality was this? And to make matters worse, the taste of salt and vinegar lingered in my mouth, reminding me of the horrid creature I had just absorbed. Well, I guess the flavor wasn't bad—I mean...he was rather yummy. Nevertheless, I hated this farming location already.

The other goblins' eyes widened in terror as one of them pointed a shaky finger at me. "T-THAT NOT SPIDER!" he shrieked, his voice cracking with fear.

*Oh yeah, I forgot, I had an audience.*

Wartie tried to put on a brave face, but his eyes were darting everywhere except me. The other two goblins were backing away slowly, ready to bolt at any moment. And to top things off, a dozen other creatures were slowly approaching us.

*Great, just what I needed, more spectators. Maybe one of them has a skill or two?*

“Chief! Monster!”

I couldn't help but chuckle at the irony of the situation. I, a spider, am being called a monster by these ugly green goblins. *Oh, the hypocrisy!* But I knew better than to underestimate the approaching mob. I needed to think fast and devise a plan, or else I'd end up just like the pile of goblin slop I had just absorbed.

A frizzled-looking werewolf creature stepped forward from the group. The creature was a sight to behold. He looked like he hadn't had a decent meal in weeks, and his scraggly gray beard could have doubled as a mop. His outfit, on the other hand, was a fashion disaster. The old beast wore a pink and black robe that was so worn out that it looked like it had been through a war. And let's not forget the long skirt that came with it. I mean, seriously? *Did he steal that from a dead sorceress or something?* To top it all off, his walking cane was impressive, but it gave off an unsettling vibe. It was like it was displacing something, maybe even the air itself.

The frizzled werewolf looked at me and spoke with a surprisingly high-pitched voice. I couldn't help but feel a sense of unease as I looked into those beady little eyes.

“It seems you've found yourselves a leveler, boy. And it hasn't murdered all of us. Fascinating and peculiar. How very peculiar indeed.” He then turned to Wartie and asked, “Boy, this pudding, you tame it?”

*Tamed me? Hell no!*

“Yes, Chieftain.”

“Good. Good. Well, let's not dawdle about out here like uncivilized monsters. Let's head back inside.”

One of the goblins cried out in terror, “But Chieftain! That thing ate Gaping!”

*Oh god, why was that goblin's name Gaping? You know what...I don't want to know.*

“Ah, I see. Boy, did you start the challenge, or did Gaping?”

“Gaping, Chieftain.”

The werewolf creature chuckled, “Ah, Gaping. Always did take on more than he could handle. He was eventually going to encounter something too big, even for him. But it was a challenge, so no rules were broken, even if the boy's pet ate the corpse.”

*Ah...what? I-I...ugh, never mind.*

“But Chieftain?!”

“Rules are rules, and if they haven't been broken, there's no need to dwell on the matter. Now, Wartie, come with me. We have some pressing questions about these so-called adventurers.”

The werewolf-like creature turned and started hobbling away, and I couldn't help but feel a twinge of excitement. Maybe this level farm wouldn't be so boring after all. As I followed him, I had a mental debate about waiting for the kid to catch up. *Nah, he's a big boy. He can handle himself.* I couldn't help but wonder how far I could push these supposed rules before it became a problem. Would killing one of these monsters be crossing the line? Or would I have to slaughter them all to finally get some levels? The possibilities were endless, and I couldn't wait to see what kind of trouble I could stir up.

"Welcome to Ockpool," the old werewolf finally said, his gaze fixed on me as he hobbled through a broken gate leading into a disaster zone of a village.

The ruins of Ockpool were a pitiful sight. Though it was evident that it once was a glorious place, now reduced to a desolate wasteland of despair.

As I strolled through the streets cluttered with rubble and debris, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of disappointment. The buildings still standing looked like they would collapse at any moment, and the few monsters who roamed around were weak and feeble. It almost made me pity them, but that thought quickly dissipated. These losers weren't even worth killing. I doubted they had any levels or skills to offer me, and it was a waste of my time to even consider it. It was like being stuck in limbo, surrounded by weaklings who couldn't even put up a decent fight.

And to make matters worse, my latest notification had left a bad taste in my mouth. Gaping had been a loose disappointment, and the thought that I had wasted my time on him was almost as sickening as the shitty taste in my mouth—not that I would admit to enjoying eating a—where was I? If this place was nothing more than a graveyard of weak monsters, any hope of leveling up here was as hopeless as the village.

As we continued walking, I could feel my internal bitchiness stirring.

*Blake, are you really upset that you lost your reason for committing a massacre? No! I'm upset that there's no point.*

*Ugh! I really should find a therapist. Maybe Aurelia will let me crawl into her lap and vent once I've taken care of the other candidates?*

Despite my now sorrow at losing what I had hoped to be a plentiful leveling source, I scurried behind the Chieftain, my eight squid-like spider legs skittering along the rubble and cobblestone. With every step, his walking cane clinked against the ground, emitting an aura of power that made me both intrigued and uneasy. I couldn't quite see the power clearly, but I could feel it. It was like watching heat waves distort the air around hot asphalt in the summer.

"My apologies for our current state. We've had a few unfortunate encounters with adventurers as of late. After our dungeon core was stolen, we've been unable to rebuild."

*Dungeon core?! If I destroy it, will I get a huge experience boost? Better yet, can I use it to build my own dungeon for farming if I steal it for myself?*

"The idea of stealing a dungeon core is a revolting blasphemous deed, and I pray the gods will smite those responsibly. Still, I can't imagine what a vile creature would do such a thing. Adventurers have no respect for the balance and order of this moon. They just take and murder as



they please. Oh, I did not mean to vent. Please forgive this old warg. It only pains me to see what our enemies have done to my fellow dungeon folk.”

*Okay, that's a lot to unpack. Was he reading my mind? Warg? And did he say moon? That's so cool! I really need to get to the surface and see this for myself.*

The central plaza was a makeshift gathering pit, a chaotic mess of bricks, stones, and rubble piled up to form a seating area. The old werewolf settled into a particularly cozy-looking stone, his cane clinking as he shifted his weight. The other monsters took their seats, eyeing me warily, but I didn't care. *Let them try something.* I was more than ready. The Chieftain's gaze bore into me, analyzing my every move, and I could feel his thoughts forming some kind of twisted conclusion. But I remained stoic, my spider legs twitching with anticipation.

As soon as the last monster took its seat, the Chieftain's attention turned to Wartie. “Boy, are you sure you've bonded with this pudding?” he asked, his tone questioning and suspicious.

“Yes! Muddy, my pet. He protected me,” Wartie blurted out defensively.

“Let it be known that no one in Ockpool shall lay a hand on the leveler,” the Chieftain declared, his gaze shifting to the boy. “Despite your claim, your pudding friend here, resisted your submission. It is not bonded to you, as you may think.” He then turned his attention to me. “And as for you, Muddy...did you really name a Black Pudding, Muddy?” he asked the kid with a hint of amusement.

Wartie nodded as he gasped, trying to hide a sob, “Y-yes, C-Chief. But, what a leveler?”

“Leveling is an ancient and mostly forgotten form of attaining power, much like how we attuned ourselves to the dungeon core,” he explained. “Now, Muddy, if you can understand me, scratch one line in the ground for yes, and two for no.”

“Chieftain, you can't be serious! That slimy thing can't comprehend you. We should just put it out of its misery. Black Pudding's are among the most unintelligent monsters. Their only usefulness is as waste and filth disposals,” a lizard blurted out, his scaly skin rippling as he spoke.

I could feel my pudding body starting to boil with anger. Who did this scaly lizard think he was, calling me unintelligent? I mean, I may not be a scholar slime, but I'm not as dense as a goblin. I wonder if lizard meat really does taste like chicken. *Blake, stop it. Why should I care what these fools think anyway? They're probably just jealous of my unique, shape-shifting abilities. But enough of that, time to show them who's boss.* I lifted two front pseudopods and etched two deep gashes into the ground, a clear sign of my understanding. *Let them underestimate me. I'll prove them wrong with my deadly prowess. Who needs brains when you have fear on your side?*

“See, I told you! It's not capable of understanding us,” the lizard shouted!

*What? Oh, shit—I scratched two lines for no.*

The old warg let out a low growl and pinched the bridge of his muzzle as he spoke, silencing the lizard's tirade. “Enough, Redtail! Well, Muddy, clearly, you've got a sense of humor. My apologies if Drake Redtail offended you. We don't often get reasonable levelers down here, much less a Black Pudding.”

*Oh... Ha-ha. Yeah, I totally meant to make two marks.*

“Ah, where are my manners? I am Chieftain Hensley of Ockpool, and all those within this village are under my protection, as you may have already guessed. Now, to the matter at hand, leveler. Our question is simple: will you retrieve the dungeon core and return it to us?”

I responded with a clear message, scratching two additional lines into the ground. *Absolutely not!*

“If I told you that the group of adventurers who stole the core were incredibly powerful individuals, would that pique your interest? As a leveler, I imagine the challenge would be enough to drive you to attain several levels.”

*Oh, come on, that's not fair!*

So, the only way to level up is by facing a challenge? *How does this old mutt know exactly what motivates me? And how powerful are these adventurers?* Outclassing me is not even a challenge. It's a death sentence. But hey, I'm not short on targets. In fact, I'm already plotting the demise of five others. Maybe I'll just settle for killing a few of these pitiful villagers. They may not be powerful, but they're deliciously squishy. Who needs tough adventurers when you have an endless supply of snacks? *Ugh, I'm getting hungry just thinking about it.*

As I hesitated, the Chieftain seemed to sense my uncertainty and decided to sweeten the deal, “While we do want the core back as soon as possible, we also know that the adventurers are holed up in the old highway, which isn't too far of a trip from here. Plus, there are still a few pesky floor bosses remaining you could level from in your way. And don't worry, I'll even give you an escort. So, what do you say? Are you in?”

Yep, that incentive sealed the deal. Who wouldn't want a free escort to floor bosses for leveling up? Although, I don't trust their motives. How long do I have to track down those adventurers before they escape? And what about the other candidates? Should I kill them while I'm taking down the floor bosses? Decisions, decisions... But who cares? I can always change my mind and kill them all later. With my plans set, I etched a single line into the dirt. *Time to get to work.*

UNLOCKED  
[ORACLE]

My heart began to race as I realized what was happening. Could this be the result of that goddess's meddling? The mere thought of her unlocking a skill for me made my slime body tense in fear. I prepared myself for the worst, ready to face whatever fate had in store for me.

*Blake, this is going to suck!*

[ORACLE]

GAIN THE CAPABILITY TO CALL FORTH DIVINE WISDOM THROUGH INHERENT SORCERY.

TYPE  
UNIQUE

ACTIVATION  
CAST

“Wait, what? A unique? Divine wisdom? What the hell does that even mean?”

I heard a few gasps as everyone leaped to their feet and started backing away from me. It’s always fun to see the fear in their eyes, but I wasn’t sure what had caused it. The Chieftain seemed to be grinning, or as much as someone with a muzzle could grin...or was that a snarl? Even Wartie, who had bravely first approached me while I was headless, now looked like he’d seen a banshee riding a dragon.

“We apologize, but we are unfamiliar with the concept of unique divine wisdom you mentioned,” the Chieftain said with a hint of curiosity.

“Wait, you can hear me?!”

“M-Muddy can speak,” Wartie stated with as much wonder as I felt.

I nearly exploded with glee, my pudding spider form wriggling my round butt with excitement. Who knew all it took to be considered intelligent was a little bit of...Oracle? *Finally, they will know my true greatness!* I could verbally give them a reason to express their fears and horror. With this new power, I could manipulate them all to my will.

*Maybe I’ll even convince them to call me something more fitting, like The Mighty Slime Princess or The Devourer of Worlds. As for those pesky candidates? I can’t wait to see them try and run from my grasp. I’ll make sure to savor their screams before they become nothing but a memory. Oh, the possibilities!*

Suddenly, my butt wiggle came to an end as I realized an obvious fact, I hadn’t cast Oracle yet. So, how am I speaking now?

“Redtail, why don’t you be the one to escort our friend.” It was hard to tell with his muzzle, but I could’ve sworn the old wolf’s expression briefly darkened when he spoke to the lizard.

“You can’t be serious?! A talking slime? It must be a demonic trick!”

The chief addressed Redtail, stating, “Our friend here is a leveler. There’s no trickery involved.” He then clarified that his decision was final and that anyone who opposed it could take it up with someone else. He paused momentarily before addressing me, “I’m sorry, but I’m going to assume that Muddy isn’t your name. What should we call you?”

“Nope! It’s Blake,” I exclaimed before continuing with another question. “By the way, do you have any more information about levelers?”

The old warg began stroking his beard as he thought about his response. “Ah, Blake, you must still be a young leveler. Let’s see how best to explain it. The goddess that oversees magic provides countless ways for us mortals to interact with and use magic. For those of us called dungeon folk, we bind ourselves to a dungeon core for our magic and are called monsters for it. Although, without our core here binding us, we are quite helpless and powerless. Our binding is like what warlocks and witches do with their contracts with powerful entities. It’s a means to gain magic and power. But be warned, Blake, with great power comes great challenges.”

“Was that a spider-man quote?”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“So, leveling is just another means to gain that magic and power. Levelers are the rarest type and grow in might not through bindings, contracts, knowledge, training, or cultivation like the others but rather through overcoming difficult tasks and the slaying of powerful foes. And a leveler who loves the thrill of battle is indeed an unstoppable force. I hope that helps. I’m afraid if you want to know more, you’re better off finding a church or academy on the surface. However, they may mistake you for an uncivilized monster and attempt to kill you on the spot, especially the Church of the Light.”

“What about Wartie? Is he a leveler?”

The kid’s name seemed to trigger a reaction from him, and he straightened up. The Chieftain didn’t seem fazed, though. “Ah, no. Our young ones form their knowledge on their own naturally and don’t bind to a core until they come of age. Though, children are a very rare thing here. Still, it’s always their choice. Some even leave us to explore the outside worlds, probably to find themselves or something equally ridiculous. Though, Wartie is our first child here in nearly three decades.”

Well, well, it turns out Wartie was just some unassuming kid who could form a bond with creatures without even realizing it. However, what’s up with the low birthrates? Must be poor infant mortality rates without proper medical services. But that’s not important. What’s important is that if I retrieve their dungeon core and restore these helpless villagers to their full power—all the better for me to absorb their skills. It’s a win-win situation, really.

*Did I hear that correctly? Worlds?!*

So much had happened so quickly that my spider butt wriggled with excitement and confusion.

*How the hell was I talking? Was it the skill’s power or something more sinister at play? And seriously, what the eff was this [ORACLE] thing anyway?*

As my new skill activated, I felt a sudden surge of energy course through me, like I’d been hit by a bolt of lightning. But no otherworldly visions, no angelic chorus, just me and these villagers, gaping at me like a fish out of water. And in the background, a glowing lady made of blue and swirling pink hues, looked as though she was ready to smite us all.

*Lovely. Another day in the life of Blake Pudding, am I right?*

# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 5

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### SATISFYING SYMPHONY

My brilliant plan to storm the monster sanctuary of Ockpool for some serious level grinding turned out to be a complete flop. But hey, it wasn't a complete waste of time. Turns out, these so-called monsters were more human than I anticipated. I mean, I swear I even spotted a few humans among them. Sure, they had their souls tied to a dungeon core, which automatically branded them as monsters in everyone's eyes—or so they claimed. But seriously, I mean, come on, they're not real monsters. I'm the real deal here, the epitome of monstrosity! It's all starting to sound like political nonsense to me.

Anyway, these so-called monsters, or dungeon folk, as they seem to prefer to be called, just wanted their precious stolen dungeon core back.

So, here I find myself in the dubious company of the ancient chieftain werewolf, or rather warg as he proclaimed himself to be (like it made any difference to me), and my sneering, I mean loyal escort lizard, Drake Redtail, we scurried towards the hidden entrance on the outskirts of their crumbling city. As I skittered along on my boneless eight legs, a twisted thought crept into my mind. Did slaughtering every living soul in sight really have to be solely for the purpose of gaining levels and skills? Couldn't it also be about savoring the exquisite pleasure of well-prepared flesh? I mean, who says being a monster can't be a gourmet experience?

"I-I'll miss, Muddy," the pipsqueak proclaimed.

Damnit, I completely forgot about the kid. Wartie had also followed our little group to escort Redtail and me out of the city. It was strange, but for some twisted reason, I couldn't muster the will to murder the little brat, let alone contemplate it without getting an unsettling case of indigestion. Was this a disturbing remnant of my former humanity poking through? Or just a twisted case of selective eating? The only logic I could come up with was even as a slime monstrosity, I had culinary preferences. Who would've imagined?

"Wartie, we'll find you another pet. Leave our honored guest, Blake, be," the werewolf spoke with a firm yet soothing tone, though it sounded a bit odd with his squeaky voice.

"I'm not a pet," I grumbled, ignoring the quizzical look my bitter reptilian guide, Redtail, shot my way. At least, that's what I thought he was doing, though I was starting to realize lizard facial expressions were rather difficult to read.

*I wonder if he tastes like chicken.*

The kid sniffed, seemingly unfazed by my remark, and carried on as if he hadn't even heard me. "Be a good boy, Muddy."

"I'm a girl!" I shouted. The proclamation caught the little goblin off guard, causing him to stumble back in shock, much to the surprise of both the lizard and the wolf.

The chieftain let out a soft cough, “Well, Redtail. I’m not sure how many remain now the core is gone, but ensure our esteemed guest starts with the weakest of the remaining bosses. We want ‘her’ to gather the necessary resources to retrieve the dungeon core for our village.”

The drake’s voice hissed with skepticism. “You can’t seriously believe this pudding can accomplish what our forces failed to protect. It’s just one monster against an entire raiding party consisting of warriors and casters.”

“Something brought a leveler to our humble village,” the chieftain began, only to be rudely interrupted by Redtail, who jabbed a claw toward Wartie.

“Yeah, that orphan,” the lizard interjected.

Unfazed by the interruption, the old werewolf pressed on, his voice filled with authority. “I have made my decision. Redtail, you will escort our esteemed guest to any remaining dungeon bosses and then guide her through the treacherous deep roads to retrieve the coveted dungeon core from the very raiding party that laid waste to our home. My decree is final. Now, be gone!”

With a theatrical flourish, the chieftain spun on his heels and stormed off toward the ruins of his home, dragging the reluctant Wartie in his wake. Though the child couldn’t help but cast a few tear-streaked glances back at me as they departed.

The twisted thought of ending Redtail’s existence crossed my mind once again, tempting me with its dark allure. Ah, the sweet satisfaction it would bring. But just as I contemplated the lizard’s demise, a soft, feminine voice erupted in laughter, filling the air with an eerie delight.

“*Well, well, that was rather entertaining!*” the voice chimed, amusement dripping from every word.

“Fuck, I forgot about you!” I swore.

“*Have you not been paying attention this entire time?*” Redtail retorted, his words seething with frustration, his teeth clenched tightly together.

“*What? No, I was talking to her!*” I explained, aghast at Redtail’s apparent ignorance, as I pointed emphatically at the radiant figure before me.

*How can he not see her?*

She stood there, completely nude, her form composed of swirling clouds of ethereal blue and pink light. Admittedly, there were no anatomically correct naughty bits, as if she were a Barbie doll brought to life. Her luminous body predominantly took on shades of blue, with intermittent bursts of pink dancing within. Conversely, her hair was a dazzling display of pink hues intermingled with occasional flashes of blue, like a mesmerizing aurora in motion. Though her eyes glowed constantly in all pink, as if it were a light in the dark.

“There’s no one there, you dimwit!” the lizard huffed with exasperation. With an air of annoyance, Redtail stormed forward, leading the way through the concealed path out of the hidden cavern.

“*He can’t see me, child,*” she continued to laugh, her ethereal voice filling the air with an otherworldly melody.

“Great, so now I look like a complete idiot talking to myself,” I moaned in frustration.

“Well, you are an idiot talking to yourself,” Redtail retorted, his sarcasm dripping with disdain.

“Hahaha! Oh, I don’t think he’s particularly fond of you,” the glowing woman snickered with a mischievous delight I rather did not enjoy.

“Who are you?” I asked with a hint of irritation. Deep down, I already had a fairly good inkling of her identity; truth be told, though I wasn’t exactly thrilled about it.

“Argh! Seriously?” the lizard seethed. “Listen up, you insufferable creature! I am Drake Redtail, and against my better judgment, I have been assigned to be your guide through this forsaken dead dungeon. We will scour this decaying maze, searching for any remaining bosses so that your feeble excuse for a brain can attempt to level up. And do you want to know why? Because my deluded chief believes you possess some miraculous ability to succeed where the rest of our kind have failed miserably in retrieving our stolen dungeon core. It’s ludicrous, but here I am, stuck with you. So, don’t get in my way, and let’s get this over with.”

*Huh, well, he’s not going home.*

I glared up at the annoying reptile, or at least I tried to, but with my mana sight, my vision was a swirling mess of dizzying details. Nonetheless, I could still direct my attention toward him, and that was enough.

*Whatever! It’s not like I really cared about their stupid core. Maybe I’ll go find it later after I find a use for it, but right now, that’s a no-go. Besides, I’m more interested in leveling.*

“Well, that’s good to know!” the woman chimed in. Startled by her sudden response, I lost my footing on my six legs and tumbled headfirst onto the unforgiving rocky ground with a splat.

The drake, unamused by my antics, simply shook his head and forged ahead, leaving me to gather myself and catch up. As I hurried after him, a disconcerting thought wormed its way into my mind.

*Can you hear my thoughts?*

“Yes, I can, so do keep them appropriate. I am aware of your tendencies and am rather uncomfortable with the way you’ve been eyeing my body,” she laughed.

*My tendencies? Cannibalism?*

“Ha-ha! Aren’t you just precious?”

A sneaking suspicion crept up within me, an inkling that this woman was intentionally mocking me with her laughter. It was time to put my hunch to the test. I mustered up the courage to address her directly.

*You’re that goddess, aren’t you?*

I mentally blurted out my thoughts at her, unable to contain them. The notification from earlier had flashed across my consciousness, the one that had granted me that dubious title of the Hopeless Crusader. And considering the appearance of this ethereal blue specter, she seemed to be the most fitting candidate.

The woman stuck out her modest chest in pride as she proclaimed, “You may call me Circe, and as a matter of fact, I am—.”

“[ORACLE],” I shouted my command, interrupting this Circe bitch with my skill.

I couldn’t help but revel in the surge of amusement that washed over me as the woman standing before me vanished into thin air, as if I had pressed an “off button” dismissing her presence. The expression of disbelief etched on her face as she faded away into nothingness was truly a sight to behold.

“Well, you keep your voice down,” Redtail hissed, his reptilian eyes scanning the surroundings. “The dungeon may be a lifeless husk, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t unknown creatures still lurking about. And without zone restrictions enforced by the core, we might encounter some overpowered beast that wandered out of its restricted cavern. I’d rather not end up as a meal.”

*Oh, don’t you worry, my dear lizard. I won’t let anyone snatch my food away from me.*

I grinned to myself, relishing the mischievous thought. However, I kept my amusement to myself and said nothing to the nervous drake as I obediently followed him. But after a few minutes, I issued a mental command this time, activating [ORACLE], and couldn’t help but chuckle inwardly as a disgruntled goddess materialized before me.

“*You dare treat me with such dis—*.”

“[ORACLE],” I whispered with a gleeful twinkle in my eyes, enjoying the power of my command. And just for the sheer delight of it, I repeated, “[ORACLE],” once more, loving the exasperated expression upon the goddess’s face as she reappeared.

“*You know, I could smite you if I wanted,*” she nonchalantly stated, effectively snuffing out the flicker of enjoyment that had momentarily sparked within me.

“Fine,” I grumbled.

“*Now, we simply must address your appearance. It’s absolutely unacceptable in my presence,*” she exclaimed with a disapproving tone.

“What’s wrong with the way I look?” I huffed.

“*You’re a wiggly-looking spider with tentacles for legs,*” she stated matter-of-factly as if that was the only explanation needed.

“Fine, it’s [POLYMORPH] time!” I exclaimed with my mischievous whisper, my body writhing and twisting in a grotesque spectacle of transformation. Limbs snapped, flesh contorted, and limbs extended in unnatural ways as I embraced my monstrous form. When the excruciating ordeal came to an end, I stood before her as a sight straight out of a horror flick, a lanky figure with limbs that seemed to stretch into eternity and a face that could send chills down the spines of even the bravest souls. The atmosphere grew thick with an eerie presence, and I couldn’t help but revel in my dark and terrifying makeover.

At least, that’s how I envisioned myself – a terrifying, otherworldly entity with a presence that could freeze blood. But in reality, I looked like a goopy, tar-coated hobbit who had seen better days. *Oh well, can’t win ‘em all.*

“*No. No. No. You’ve done it all wrong,*” she chastised me, her voice dripping with condescension. It was as if she was scolding a child who couldn’t grasp a simple concept. “*You can’t just picture*



*the form you want. You have to feel it. Embrace the essence of the form you wish to become. Let it consume you from within.*

“Ugh, and how the fuck would you know?” my voice slipped out, bypassing any filters or restraints. It was a bad habit of mine.

“*Child, I am the Primordial Goddess of Magic, and you would do well not to disregard my advice,*” she admonished, her voice carrying an air of divine authority. “*There are deities who would obliterate entire constellations for the opportunity to be trained by me.*”

“Fine, I get it. You’re some sort of big deal,” I grumbled, unable to hide my annoyance. “But seriously, why bother with me? I’m not your typical goody-two-shoes, you know. I’m an abomination of creation, and honestly, I kind of like it. There’s a certain freedom that comes with being a monster, and I’m not keen on giving it up.”

“*That doesn’t matter right now,*” she dismissed my question with a nonchalant wave of her hand. “*Instead, focus on what I told you and embrace the essence of the form. Let go of your misconceptions, you may not have a natural mana pool, so instead let the magic flow around you.*”

“I don’t have a mana pool?”

“*Yes, you have a mana pool by default, bestowed upon you by the system. However, your unique nature doesn’t naturally grant you one, and yet, you have wondrous potential. Your body, born of magic, hungers for mana. And what’s more fascinating, your soul holds a rare attunement to mana, a connection that allows you to manipulate the mana around you. It’s a remarkable combination of traits that will eventually lead to extraordinary possibilities. But let’s set aside my musings for now. Focus on following my instructions, and who knows, I may unveil more secrets along the way.*”

*Well, that’s certainly a lot to process.*

Still, I was determined to follow her guidance. Instead of picturing the form I desired, I focused on feeling it, letting the essence of my desired shape permeate my being. As I did, I breathed out a single command, “[POLYMORPH]!” I felt my body begin the process of shifting. Yet, to my dismay, the transformation yielded minimal results.

“*No. No. No,*” she interjected, her tone carrying a sense of exasperation. “*The system draws upon the provided mana pool, but what you’re attempting is to cast with ambient mana. It’s not about thinking or commanding. It’s about instinctively channeling and manipulating the surrounding mana. Don’t think, don’t command, just do.*”

*Yes, Yoda.*

I spent the next few hours trotting behind my reptilian guide, who conveniently chose to pretend I didn’t exist while ignoring my one-sided conversation. Not to mention constantly receiving a never-ending stream of criticism from a nagging goddess. But eventually, we found ourselves outside the first dungeon boss chamber. The highlight of it all? My attempt to master shapeshifting, transforming from a hobbit-like creature to a goblinish one. Oh, the wonders of my achievement! A slightly larger head, shorter legs, longer arms, and voila! A goblin. Truly, my talent knew no bounds. I was mastering the art of contortionism, all without the need for the system’s assistance.

And the best part? I didn't feel like I was using any mana at all. It felt more like performing an intricate dance of wiggling my toes, rubbing my head, and patting my stomach simultaneously.

Still, I couldn't figure out why this goddess gave me access to a magical system but had issues with me using it. *Whatever!* The persistent ethereal presence that haunted me continued to remind me that my goal was not to transform into a goblin but rather to assume the form of a human or an elf. *No need for body shaming! And a bit racist if you asked me.* And naturally, I couldn't help but accuse her of such. After all, what's wrong with being a goblin? They have feelings, too.

Despite my ongoing struggles with shapeshifting, I managed to achieve a few notable modifications. My crowning achievement was the successful growth of three tentacles for hair, making me the envy of Black Puddings everywhere. As for my endeavor to perfect the art of breasts, well, let's just say it was a work in progress, much like a lopsided sculpture created by a blind artist—with no arms. And oh, my mouth! It bore an uncanny resemblance to my toothless granny's gummy smile, a sight to behold or perhaps to avoid. But the real triumph lay in my mastery of Mana Sight with Circe's guidance. I had honed the spell to focus on specific locations, granting me functional eyes with a significantly reduced risk of seeing everything at once like a deranged drunken entity. It was a major improvement, sparing me from unnecessary nausea. Ah, the perks of being a shapeshifting, tentacled, toothless wonder.

Fortunately, luck was on my side as we stumbled upon a few decaying corpses of fallen dungeon monsters on our little journey. While feasting on them didn't bestow any new skills upon me, it did offer a delightful increase in my mass. After a few meals I finally stood at a towering height of four foot nine inches, or an impressive one hundred and forty-four centimeters if my dear old dad from a previous existence had any input. I'm certain he would be bursting with pride at my sudden growth spurt. What? I was a shorty in my past life.

That all being said, I couldn't help but relish the disgusted contortion on Redtail's face or whatever expression he attempted to convey when I ate those corpses. Either way, it provided me with a small sense of satisfaction to keep him on his scaly toes.

Redtail let out a low growl, clearly growing impatient. "What are you waiting for?" he snapped. "The boss is inside. Hurry up, you damn slime!"

"What about the other bosses?" I leaned in close to Redtail, my voice dripping with mock curiosity. "How am I supposed to locate them once I'm done here?"

He let out an exasperated sigh. "Even a dimwit like you should be able to figure it out. Just follow the damn path," he retorted.

"Hmm...fascinating," I replied, feigning interest. "And what about this elusive highway and those pesky adventurers who took the core?"

Redtail growled in frustration. "For scale's sake! Head back the way we just came, and you'll stumble upon a cavern with a friggin' waterfall. The highway's entrance is behind that water—hrrrk!"

His sentence was abruptly silenced as my clenched fist collided with the lizard's mouth! The satisfying symphony of muffled screams and gurgled whimpering filled the air as my arm contorted into a writhing tentacle, slithering deep down Redtail's throat. Meanwhile, my other arm reverted to its true form, bursting into a web of inky black goo that ensnared him, trapping him

like a helpless fly in my diabolical spiderweb. Oh, the pure ecstasy of watching him squirm and struggle in my grasp! It was a moment of sheer bliss.

“Ah, splendid,” I said with exaggerated gratitude. “I guess that means I won’t be needing your brilliant guidance anymore.” Redtail put up a feeble struggle, but it only fueled my twisted delight. The more he resisted, the more my deranged pleasure grew. “Oh, fuck yes! Go deeper, Blake, deeper,” I moaned to myself in a perverse display of self-indulgence.

I couldn’t discern whether it was my own tremors of delight or the last remnants of life convulsions that coursed through Redtail’s body. Regardless, the sensation was exhilarating. My tentacle arm continued its invasive journey, plunging deeper and deeper into his throat, piercing his stomach, and snaking through his intestines. The frigid air caressed the tip of my tentacle, a chilling reminder of the approaching finality of his demise, it was then and only then that I reactivate my acidic skill. And with that, it happened—the unmistakable shudder that signified his ultimate surrender. A maniacal scream of ecstasy erupted from my toothless mouth, echoing off the stone walls as my prey surrendered entirely to my devouring embrace.

Maybe, just maybe, I absorbed more than I intended from the succubus... *Nah!*

“Well, that was a sight to see,” Circe commented, her voice breaking through the haze of my pleasure.

I had momentarily forgotten about her presence, lost in my own twisted display of indulgence.

“Turns out lizards taste a lot like lemon zest chicken,” I whispered with joyous satisfaction. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to savor my meal in peace.” With that, I turned my attention back to the lifeless body in my grasp.

YOU HAVE DEFEATED A [DRAKE]
DO YOU WISH TO [ABSORB] [DRAKE]? YES / NO

Wanting to enjoy my meal, I ignored the notification. It took a few minutes to complete the process of dissolving Drake Redtail and a few more to tidy up the delightful mess of juicy remnants and scattered morsels that adorned the ground. Disposing of a body can be such a messy affair, but oh, so tasty. It was absolutely delectable. I couldn’t help but revel in the sheer delight of it all. Life was truly a marvel! The numbing sensation that once plagued me had dissipated, leaving me feeling more alive and human in this peculiar form than ever before.

Once I was done with my meal, I deactivated my acid and turned my attention to the notification. I already knew what was coming my way, but I mentally clicked the “Yes” option anyway.

[ABSORB] UNSUCCESSFUL. [DRAKE] DID NOT HAVE ANY SKILLS
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Now that delightful little interlude was over, I turned my attention to the imposing iron doors leading into the boss’s chamber. To my surprise, they were slightly ajar, inviting me to take a peek

inside. What did I find? Absolutely nothing! Just an ordinary, unremarkable circular stone chamber. *Well, well, well, talk about anticlimactic.*

But hey, let's not overlook the real stars of the show here—the doors themselves! They reminded me of that time I had a courthouse appearance when I was a rebellious seventeen-year-old. *Ah, good times.* Apparently, dousing the head cheerleader with a well-deserved pepper spray for calling me a goth cunt wasn't exactly encouraged. Who would've guessed? Anyway, those courthouse doors had a similar air of grandeur, looming over me as if they were larger than life itself.

With a nonchalant shrug, I shoved those magnificent iron doors aside and confidently stepped into the boss's chamber, ready to unleash my own brand of justice. However, to my dismay, the chamber truly was empty. I glanced around, my head swiveling from side to side in search of any hidden nooks or crannies, but to no avail. It was a damn circle, after all—nowhere to hide! Just as I was beginning to think this boss encounter was a big fat joke, that familiar surge of adrenaline coursed through my veins. Time seemed to stretch itself out as if playing a cruel prank on me.

I turned around spotting Circe, my eyes narrowing suspiciously as I noticed her mischievously grinning at me as she pointed up. Following the direction of her finger, my gaze locked onto something large and red, looming above the doorway.

# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 6

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### SHOWTIME!

“Playtime,” I gleefully stated from my toothless face.

Perched in a small alcove above, a monstrous crimson toad prepared to leap at me. His battle gear was a peculiar combination of a grotesque cleaver slightly longer than me, along with a heavy duty shield reminiscent of Spartan tales. His outfit was rounded off by an embarrassingly minimal loincloth and a few leather straps that crisscrossed over his fat belly and chest. The enormity of his stomach was a sight to behold, making even a sumo wrestler appear svelte. A desire for a skill in dual wielding playfully scratched at my mind, yet I had no desire for any sword arts.

At the moment, my only goal was to survive.

“*Oh no, child, don’t just survive. Learn. Grow.*” Circe’s voice was in my ear as I threw her a side glance. She seemed to be basking in the delight of the upcoming pandemonium.

Upon hearing Circe’s words, I attempted to raise an eyebrow at her. Perfecting facial expressions was still a work in progress for me. However, she had a point. That primitive drive for mere survival, reminiscent of my past human life, would only act as a shackle, holding me back in my pursuit of power. A sigh brushed against the fringes of my consciousness. She had pinpointed the truth. This was not just about staying alive. This was about ascension, metamorphosing into a force to be reckoned with. *Forget mere survival—I need to thrive!* It was my moment to emerge, to blossom into a formidable nightmare in this realm of magic and monsters!

Then, the oversized toad lunged with a mighty croak. A surge of adrenaline, both alien and potent, stormed through my senses. The behemoth descended with a lethal arc of its weapon, threatening to slice through everything in its path. Yet, my instincts, completely and utterly unhoneed, took an unexpected sharpness, and I managed to outmaneuver the imminent carnage.

To my shock, the chamber vibrated as the massive cleaver sank into solid stone, severing the trio of tentacles that grotesquely sprouted from what I’d mockingly called a skull. For a suspended moment, both the toad and I were ensnared in a spell of adrenaline, making that instant feel like an eternity. We watched, petrified, as my tentacled “hair” writhed on the ground, bathing in a dark ooze. The toad might have found amusement in it, but his laughter resembled a frustrated gardener grappling with a rebellious lawnmower; the incessant croaking was nothing short of maddening.

Beneath me, the pool of thick, black fluid—once my animated hair—expanded, its volume surprisingly larger than I anticipated. That’s when realization dawned. That monstrous toad hadn’t merely taken my hair. My arm, cleanly sheared at the shoulder, had been another of his prizes, dissolving instantly upon its forceful removal.

“This is it—showtime!” I growled, followed by a seething command, “[BLIGHT].”

A terrifying black miasma exploded out of my form, wrapping itself around the cleaver and the toad's arm. The virulent magic of my Blight spell took hold, birthing pus-ridden blisters upon the amphibian's limb. His triumphant croaking turned into agonized screams as his arm succumbed to the infection, his grip on the cleaver faltering and ultimately failing as he hopped clumsily away from me.

The infected appendage now hung lifeless and defeated by his side, leaving the toad effectively disarmed—minus the colossal shield he continued to clutch in his other hand.

The toad let loose a noise somewhere between a primal roar and a comical ribbit before charging headlong, shield held high. I of course was too slow to dodge it. He struck me with the force of a speeding freight train, my form liquefied under the impact, sending me hurtling across the cavern. There was a disgusting, wet smack as I splattered against the wall, my remains spread across it like a horrific inkblot.

Within moments of the messy collision, my form began to seep off the wall, pooling on the ground like a grotesque pile of slop, though in a rush I quickly begin reforming. This time, however, my “humanish” shape was augmented by the addition of eight spidery, squid-like limbs jutting from my back, their grotesque form resembling a pair of wings crafted as though from despair and nightmares.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of Circe, nonchalantly observing the chaos as if it were a mundane spectacle.

*That does it—I'm pissed!*

In a startling twist, the new appendages on my back responded almost instinctively to my commands as if they were a part of me since—forever. Yet, even as I discovered this new-found control, the toad was in the midst of his next assault. He dashed and leaped ferociously, landing on me with a gut-churning squelch. The entire chamber reverberated with a thunderous crash. This was certainly not how I had envisioned this battle unfolding.

The toad's collision with me seemed to have put him in a daze, albeit temporarily. But while he shook off the stupor, I was trapped, reduced to a sticky mess beneath his colossal shield and the stone-cold floor. To add to my woes, the reformation process was also off to a shaky start, with only a handful of tendrils managing to extrude from the edges of the shield.

In the face of my grim predicament, I had to admit, I was devoid of any coherent strategy or hardened battle instincts. In a twist of irony, my fight had evolved (or devolved, rather) from a lofty quest for growth and power to a desperate struggle for survival—not what I wanted. It appeared that my plans for leveling would have to wait until I gained a better grasp of my abilities.

Regardless, I wasn't out for the count just yet. A few of my liberated limbs lashed out, one ensnaring the arm wielding the shield, another coiling around the nearest leg, and a third securing a firm grip around his thick neck. However, my hopes were dashed as my bold move amounted to...nothing.

I groaned in frustration, “Great!”

I must have switched off my passive skills after consuming Red Tail. *Convenient timing, self.*

ACTIVATE [ <b>CORROSIVE</b> ]? YES / NO
ACTIVATE [ <b>VENOMOUS</b> ]? YES / NO

“Yes,” I gurgled out in response to the prompts. As my passives activated, the subsequent turn of events turned out to be less favorable than I had anticipated. The toad let out a blood-curdling cry before hurling the shield straight up with all his might. Each of my limbs that had clung onto the boss monster was severed brutally, pieces of me still clinging to the toad. At the same time, the remainder of my form was sent sailing through the air with the shield before making a catastrophic impact on the chamber’s ceiling.

In the throes of excruciating pain, the toad’s mouth gaped open, releasing a bellowing roar that echoed off the chamber walls. My fragmented remnants were ruthlessly burrowing into his hide, fueled by a Corrosive hatred and Venomous fury. Amidst his tormented cries, I stared down at him noting the absence of teeth within the cavernous maw.

In a display that might have seemed almost pitiful in a different circumstance, the toad raised its arms skywards, a futile plea for divine intervention. Yet, the only entity above him was not a merciful deity, but me. At this moment, an idea, deliciously wicked and deviously brilliant idea, sprouted in my mind. I could almost hear myself cackling aloud. *Oh, Blake, that’s evil!*

With a devious sense of timing, I released my hold on the shield imbedded in the ceiling and plunged straight down into the toad’s gaping maw, filling its screaming abyss with my own Corrosive and Venomous presence. There wasn’t a loud boom, bang, or even a splash as I landed, in all honesty—I looked like falling bird shit splattering in his open mouth. Still, I seized the moment and slithered down his gullet, my form seeping into every nook and cranny, leaving a trail of destruction in my wake. The toad’s cries of pain were abruptly cut off, as his vocal cords were among the first things my form dissolved as I poisoned him.

Suddenly, I was enveloped by a crushing pain. The toad had managed to reach into his mouth and grab hold of my remaining form that hadn’t yet found its way into his lungs and stomach. Out of desperation, I decided to cast what I had initially dismissed as a useless spell – [**SILK WEBBING**]. To my dismay, the spell hadn’t projected out in long strand or at a great distance, but instead seemed to multiply in copious amounts within the confines of the toad’s mouth. Frantically, I kept casting, coating every inch of the creature’s maw, stalling for precious time as my Corrosive and Venomous passives did their work. I wasn’t going down without claiming at least one lung for my troubles. I just prayed that this toad couldn’t turn his stomach inside out like I knew so many frogs could, or I was screwed.

Regrettably, I had underestimated the toad’s resolve. Turns out, it’s easier to tear a slime monster in half than to dislodge a lung. The next scream that echoed through the chamber was my own. With a cruel jerk, the toad had succeeded in bisecting me. My consciousness echoed my scream of agony, but soon that too began to fade, along with everything else, as my world spiraled into darkness.

YOU HAVE DEFEATED A [TOAD BARBARIAN]
<p><b>LEVEL UP!</b>  <b>LEVEL UP!</b>  <b>LEVEL UP!</b>  <b>LEVEL UP!</b>  <b>LEVEL UP!</b>  <b>LEVEL UP!</b>  <b>LEVEL UP!</b></p> <p>LEVEL 20</p> <p><u>UNLOCKED</u>  [SLEEP]</p>
2 SKILL SLOTS UNLOCKED
DO YOU WISH TO [ABSORB] [TOAD BARBARIAN]? YES / NO

Returning to consciousness felt like shaking off a particularly stubborn dream, but the ever-present system notifications were like a cold splash of water. Honestly, without those pestering prompts, I might be lost. My sight, blurred at first, cleared up to reveal a scene straight out of a low-budget horror film. There I was, casually oozing through the remains of our dear, departed “Toadinator.” The fight had cost me an arm and... well, a lot more. *I really should find my missing pieces to reabsorb.*

My rather unsightly meal was rather delightful, a necessary component of my wonderful existence. The brawl had been a stark reminder that this world was less ‘survival of the fittest’, and more ‘growth through gratuitous violence.’ Here, the toll was steep, paid in blood, entrails, and the occasional misplaced appendage. *Just another day at the office, I suppose.*

“*Quite the spectacle,*” Circe chimed in at last, her voice dancing with amusement.

I paid her no mind. After all that excitement, I was due for a good snooze.



Circe—or rather, Magic—observed the frenzied conflict unfolding before her with a certain dispassionate delight, akin to watching a child’s clumsy brawl that serendipitously lands a potent hit. In her existence that spanned countless eons, seldom had she witnessed a skirmish so laughably inept yet oddly riveting. But the true lure wasn’t the creature’s battle prowess or its linkage to the system she had so generously granted. No, it was the creature’s origins that ensnared her curiosity.

Magic, in her grandeur, had the luxury to choose from a plethora of lost souls, haplessly summoned by those who blundered with conjurations. But this particular soul, held a unique allure for her that



was almost familiar. This entity, known as Blake, along with the others from her peculiar, magic devoid realm, exuded a vibrancy that was impossible for the goddess to overlook, an intoxicating luminescence in an otherwise mundane tapestry.

The primordial found it intriguing, perhaps even ironic, to gift such a soul a vessel borne of her own whimsical genius, especially one as grotesquely captivating as the Black Pudding. These were remnants, reflections of a time when she had overstepped into the realm of Life—a decision that even now evoked a pang of regret. But perhaps, in this flawed creation, lay a chance for atonement. Through these intriguing souls, Magic yearned to uncover the enigma of their unique world, eager to uncover its deeply buried secret. And once she extracted all she desired from these souls, casting them into oblivion would be trivial, much like the innumerable souls before them.

Her endgame was clear. To achieve it, she'd have to calibrate Life's bygone system to one of these entities' mana. A formidable task, given their inherent inability to produce mana, relying instead on manipulating the ambient mana around them. For now, she would encourage this being to oscillate between its innate abilities and the system, hoping it would illuminate the path to what had been lost to Magic.



Waking up from a dream of grandeur, I languidly stretched out, savoring the remnants of my fading dream. I was a monster, brimming with power and ruthlessness, devoid of mercy... My eyes snapped open in surprise, taking in the unfamiliar surroundings. Instinctively, my [MANA SIGHT] latched onto a pair of eyes that spontaneously formed in the palm of my hands. This peculiar occurrence was due to the fact that the rest of me was a sticky black puddle of goo on the floor, with my extended arms reaching out. I looked like a snail popping out of a tar pit, my eyes darting around independently in their sockets.

*Holy shit!* I was startled as my snail-like eyes briefly crossed paths, revealing a glowing orange orb. Curiosity piqued; I withdrew [MANA SIGHT] from one of my palms for a closer inspection. As I did, the eyeball dimmed, going pitch black as if someone had snuffed out a light. Recast [MANA SIGHT], the eyeball glowed a fierce orange once more. The entire ordeal was quite surreal yet strangely engrossing.

As I stopped playing with myself—I mean, glowing eyeball examination—I turned my attention back to my surroundings. I found myself inside a large, circular stone chamber with not one but two exits. *Wasn't there just one before? Right!* I had dozed off mid-feast on the dungeon boss. But now, the problem was the toad's corpse had vanished, and in my oversight, I had neglected to use Absorb on him. *SHIT!*

*"Calm yourself. No need to fret. You've got a cozy cushion to play with before you can no longer utilize that skill of yours,"* the goddess finished with a soft chuckle.

I let out a sigh of relief, or at least my two arms appeared to do so, while the rest of me remained a squishy mess on the floor. With a simple mental command, I clicked the "Yes" button, activating the Absorb skill.

[ <b>ABSORB</b> ] [ <b>TOAD BARBARIAN</b> ] SUCCESSFUL
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>SELECTABLE</u>  <b>[BURST]</b>  <b>[FORTRESS]</b>  <b>[LEAP]</b>  <b>[SHIELD PROFICIENCY]</b></p>

“Shit yeah, four new skills,” I gurgled out from my puddle.

*Ugh...* Those new skills seem to lean towards physical combat, but what I crave is pure magical might, overwhelming firepower that leaves nothing but ashes in its wake. Scanning through my other notifications, a glimmer of hope emerged as I noticed that I unlocked two additional skill slots. *Sweet!*

“Hey, magic lady,” I casually addressed Circe, though the perplexed expression on her face suggested she was taken aback by my audacity to refer to her with anything less than complete reverence. Well, that wasn’t going to fly with me. “How do I unlock more skill slots?”

“*You begin with two skill slots, and every five levels, you unlock an additional one,*” she stated matter-of-factly as if the answer was as clear as day.

“Hmm, and how does one go about unlocking skills, like those awesome Racial Skills?” I inquired with a tinge of curiosity.

“*Usually, skills are unlocked every five levels, but the process can vary significantly depending on one’s class and race,*” she replied with a hint of exasperation in her voice.

“Well, isn’t that just a splendid turn of events?” I retorted sarcastically. “Here I am, going from level thirteen to level twenty, expecting to unlock two glorious new skills, only to be rewarded with the oh-so-thrilling immunity to Sleep. What utter bullshit!” The words dripped with annoyance as I couldn’t help but express my dissatisfaction.

Despite my outburst, the oh-so-perfect goddess seemed rather unfazed and remained silent. Letting out an exasperated groan, I summoned my status page with a simple mental command. It was time to assess my current predicament and see what new spells I could unlock.

<b>NAME: BLAKE</b> <b>RACE: BLACK PUDDING</b> <b>CLASS: DUNGEON MONSTER</b> <b>LEVEL: 20</b> <u>TITLES</u> <b>HOPELESS CRUSADER</b>		
<u>RACIAL SKILLS</u> <b>[ABSORB]</b>	<u>VULNERABILITIES</u> <b>[FIRE]</b>	<u>SELECTABLE</u> <b>[ASTRAL INSIGHT]</b>

<p>[CORROSIVE] [POLYMORPH] [THERMALSENSE]</p> <p><u>SPELLS</u> [Blight] [Mana Sight]</p> <p><u>ABILITIES</u> [SILK WEBBING] [VEIL POLYGLOT] [VENOMOUS]</p>	<p>[HOLY]</p> <p><u>IMMUNITIES</u> [ACID] [DARKNESS] [DISEASE] [POISON] [SLEEP]</p> <p><u>UNIQUE</u> [ORACLE] [RESTRICTED] [RESTRICTED]</p>	<p>[BURST] [FEAR] [FORTRESS] [LEAP] [LIFE DRAIN] [NECROTIC FLAME] [PARALYSIS] [SHIELD PROFICIENCY] [SPIDER WALK] [SPIRIT VESSEL] [STELLAR VOID]</p>
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“Well, I suppose there’s a silver lining in all of this,” I grumbled with a tinge of resignation. “At least I don’t have to waste any points on acquiring sleep immunity. Small victory, I suppose.”

Casting a swift glance over the list of selectable options, I immediately recognized the first without needing a second read of its description. It was a skill I had eagerly anticipated, and now the time had come to claim it as my own.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO SELECT [NECROTIC FLAME] AS AN ACTIVE SPELL?  
YES / NO

With a decisive mental click on the “Yes” option, I claimed Necrotic Flame as my own. The anticipation had built up, and now I finally possessed what I hoped would be a truly badass attack spell. The thought of unleashing its destructive power filled me with sinister delight.

5 OUT OF 6 SELECTABLE SKILLS ACTIVATED

“Now, let’s see what is next,” I mused.

<p>[BURST]</p> <p>OBTAIN THE POWER TO PROPEL ONESELF AT TREMENDOUS SPEED IN A SPECIFIED DIRECTION.</p> <p><u>TYPE</u> ABILITY</p> <p><u>ACTIVATION</u> CAST</p>
<p>[FORTRESS]</p> <p>OBTAIN THE POWER TO FORTIFY YOUR DEFENSES.</p> <p><u>TYPE</u></p>

<b>ABILITY</b> <u>ACTIVATION</u> <b>CAST</b>
<b>[LEAP]</b>  OBTAIN THE POWER TO PROPEL ONESELF IN A SPECIFIED DIRECTION.  <u>TYPE</u> <b>ABILITY</b>  <u>ACTIVATION</u> <b>CAST</b>
<b>[SHIELD PROFICIENCY]</b>  OBTAIN THE KNOWLEDGE TO PROFICIENTLY GUARD AGAINST INCOMING ATTACKS.  <u>TYPE</u> <b>ABILITY</b>  <u>ACTIVATION</u> <b>PASSIVE</b>

“Well, Leap does seem rather lackluster compared to Burst, unless Burst doesn’t involve any airborne acrobatics. It’s incredibly frustrating that these skills lack detailed descriptions,” I grumbled to myself in frustration. Turning to the one individual who should have all the answers, I directed my question to her. “Why aren’t these skills more descriptive?”

With a nonchalant shrug, she replied, “*That’s for you to discover.*”

Narrowing my eyes at the goddess, I retorted, “So, in other words, you don’t know either.”

The glare she shot me could have burned a hole through solid stone. “*Magic is not something to be confined by definitions; it is to be experienced. Why would I ever impose limitations on something that should never be restricted?*” Circe responded with an air of haughtiness.

In a peculiar way, her words held a glimmer of logic, suggesting that perhaps I had the potential to surpass the limitations set by the system’s basic definitions. It made me wonder if I had already been doing so with my Mana Sight. As I shifted my gaze back to the list of available skills, the desire to acquire Paralysis tugged at me strongly. However, considering that many of my attacks were already reliant on physical contact, I reluctantly clicked on Burst, resigning myself to physical attacks.

*Ugh, I so badly want to be a sorceress!*

WOULD YOU LIKE TO SELECT [ <b>BURST</b> ] AS AN ACTIVE SPELL? YES / NO
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“Yes,” I muttered with a tinge of both acceptance and self-loathing.

6 OUT OF 6 SELECTABLE SKILLS ACTIVATED

As I reflected on the bizarre sequence of events, I couldn't help but be utterly dumbfounded. Yesterday was an absolute thrill ride. I died, only to be reborn inside the body of a Black Pudding. *Classic*. Then I embarked on a glorious battle, decimating my first dungeon boss, and emerging triumphant. And, if my scant knowledge of these skills was worth a damn, I was a bona fide menace now.

*Those poor little candidates won't know what hit 'em.*

# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 7

### CREEPY CUTE

<b>NAME:</b> BLAKE <b>RACE:</b> BLACK PUDDING <b>CLASS:</b> DUNGEON MONSTER <b>LEVEL:</b> 20 <u>TITLES</u> <b>HOPELESS CRUSADER</b>		
<u>RACIAL SKILLS</u> [ABSORB] [CORROSIVE] [POLYMORPH] [THERMALSENSE]  <u>SPELLS</u> [Blight] [Mana Sight] [NECROTIC FLAME]  <u>ABILITIES</u> [BURST] [SILK WEBBING] [VEIL POLYGLOT] [VENOMOUS]	<u>VULNERABILITIES</u> [FIRE] [HOLY]  <u>IMMUNITIES</u> [ACID] [DARKNESS] [DISEASE] [POISON] [SLEEP]  <u>UNIQUE</u> [ORACLE] [RESTRICTED] [RESTRICTED]	<u>SELECTABLE</u> [ASTRAL INSIGHT] [FEAR] [FORTRESS] [LEAP] [LIFE DRAIN] [PARALYSIS] [SHIELD PROFICIENCY] [SPIDER WALK] [SPIRIT VESSEL] [STELLAR VOID]

I thoroughly examined my status sheet, scrutinizing every detail. It seemed that I had uncovered most of its secrets, yet it became increasingly clear that I had merely scratched the surface. Unfortunately, Circe, the stuck-up deity that she was, was not particularly forthcoming with information. She seemed determined to guard her secrets closely, but I must admit, I found it rather amusing how effortlessly I could goad her into revealing a tidbit or two.

“I can’t seem to get Polymorph looking quite right,” I garbled, my voice emerging from what could only be described as a tarpit of a body. I was an unsettling sight, to say the least. “Hey, Circe, any tips on how to make myself look more human?”

“*You are rather informal in your address towards me,*” Circe responded, her tone laced with a touch of superiority as she folded her arms to glare at me. “*I am one of the three Primordials, the*

*ancient entities predating creation itself, and it would be appropriate for you to address me accordingly.”*

“So, in other words, you’re admitting that you don’t know how to do it,” I added with a mental smirk, intentionally averting my snail-like gaze from the annoyed goddess.

That’s right, I found myself still sprawled on the floor, a pile of goo with two arms sticking out, each hand clutching an orange glowing eyeball. I couldn’t help but chuckle at the absurdity of it all. However, as amusing as it was, I knew it was time to gather myself and Polymorph back into a more recognizable form. Frankly, I was growing tired of resembling a horror monster.

*“How dare you!”* Circe exclaimed in exasperation. *“It’s actually quite simple, even for someone with a feeble mind like yours. Magic is all about imagination and desire. Visualize the desired outcome of the spell, channel all your desire into the casting, and voila, you’ve unlocked the secret to magic.”*

“Wait, are you saying I could bypass skills’ descriptions with a strong enough imagination and desire?” I inquired; my curiosity piqued.

*“Let’s just say that the descriptions of your skills are intentionally vague because the way they manifest depends on the imagination of each individual caster. I suppose that’s why I have such disdain for those absurd magical academies. They seek to standardize everyone’s imagination, thereby standardizing magic itself. Magic should never be uniform or predictable across all casters. Such a notion is a direct insult to, well, me,”* Circe explained without hiding a hint of her frustration.

“Hmm, so it’s not solely reliant on imagination but also requires a strong desire to bring forth the manifestation of the spell as I envision it,” I murmured, reflecting on the revelation. “And the descriptions are more like guidelines that can be manipulated to cast the skill in my own unique way.”

Retracting my outstretched arms into the liquid pool that was me, I deactivated Mana Sight. I took a moment to visualize my desired appearance down to the finest details. With the image firmly in my mind, I channeled my magic into the [POLYMORPH] spell, feeling a surge of power as I rose out of my goop. Every fiber of my being stretched and reshaped, transforming my tar-like skeletal frame into solid muscle fibers. Though it lasted only a few seconds, the process felt much longer, as if time had slowed down. When the transformation was complete, I opened my eyes to see the world anew, with Mana Sight spontaneously igniting within my newly formed sockets. It was a seamless and intuitive process; harnessing the power of Mana Sight had become second nature to me.

Glancing down at my newly transformed self, I was taken aback by the grotesque sight that met my eyes. The image reflected at me was that of a tar-coated zombie, my dripping flesh barely clinging to the skeletal frame beneath. It was a far cry from the magnificent vision I had intended. Frustration welled within me, exacerbated by Circe’s infuriating fit of laughter. I lifted a hand to examine it, only to be confronted by the skeletal appearance and the gaps in the fiber tissue that failed to manifest properly. With a heavy sigh, I couldn’t help but wonder where I had gone wrong in my visualization.

As I continued to ponder my failed transformation, my attention was unexpectedly drawn to a particular skill: Mana Sight. I realized that I had been instinctively utilizing it without the need for a system command, and it had worked perfectly. In fact, I had been employing a similar approach with Polymorph, albeit in a different manner, whenever I shaped my tentacles.

A realization struck me like a bolt of lightning, and I couldn't help but exclaim, "Holy shit! I think I've figured it out!"

Taking a deep breath, an action that surprised me, considering I hadn't consciously created lungs, I had an epiphany. *Wait, I gave myself lungs?* This revelation only strengthened my hypothesis. If Circe truly despised the standardization of magic, then it stood to reason that the system itself was not intended for practical applications. Instead, it likely served as a training aid for new magicians. The fact that I had formed tentacles and cast Mana Sight without explicitly commanding it supported this notion, and it was only reinforced by my lungs. If my theory was correct, then relying solely on the system for combat would be a mistake. Instead, I should view it as a tool for learning new spells and honing my skills, ultimately aiming to transcend the metaphorical training wheels that the system provided.

Still fixated by my hand, I focused my imagination and desire, pouring them into the transformation. To my delight, I witnessed my hand shifting into a more familiar form, though it remained jet black, reminiscent of my Black Pudding nature. However, I desired a more recognizable appearance, one that resonated with my past life as a bit of a goth. In that life, I had a pale white complexion, as if allergic to the sun. I couldn't help but feel a twinge of envy toward those who had a legitimate reason to avoid the outdoors, unlike myself, who simply despised the scorching Arizona heat. I had always dreamt of living in a colder climate surrounded by snow. But for now, I refocused my thoughts on my hand, sensing that something was missing.

As I revisited my list of skills, my attention was captivated by Silk Webbing. When I employed the skill within the toad's mouth, it didn't resemble the heroic scenes depicted in comic books. Instead, it had exploded in a chaotic eruption of cobwebs, filling the toad's gaping maw. Regrettably, it had failed to prevent the boss monster from tearing me apart. Nevertheless, I sensed its potential usefulness. This time, I visualized the webbing not as a sticky substance but as delicate silk threads. I imagined the threads tightly weaving themselves together, forming sheets that would serve as a protective shell for my pudding skin, coating it entirely.

Having only used Silk Webbing once before, I struggled to manifest my imagination and desire into the skill. I resorted to using the system command, [**SILK WEBBING**]. Unfortunately, my initial attempt ended in failure, resulting in an explosive burst of cobwebs emanating from my hand. For the next three hours or so, frustration ensued as sporadic blasts of webbing erupted in all directions. The chamber transformed into a chaotic tangle of silk, resembling the dwelling of a colossal spider that had been weaving webs for years. Although the sight was somewhat intriguing, the webbing had no discernible pattern or artistry—it was a haphazard mess clinging to the walls, ceiling, and even me.

Through repeated practice, I was gradually developing a sense of the skill. It was becoming apparent that it went beyond mere imagination and desire—it required a deep understanding of how it felt to cast the skill in order to manifest my desires into reality. Much like the subconscious activation of Mana Sight or the unintentional creation of lungs, it was a matter of intuition and



instinct. With the knowledge of how both Polymorph and Silk Webbing felt, I closed my eyes once more and focused on the sensation. Instead of picturing the skills activating, I immersed myself in the feeling, allowing it to guide my transformation.

As I delved deeper into the transformation, I felt my body elongate slightly, my curves accentuated to my desired proportions, and my hair cascading gracefully down my back. But I didn't stop there—I craved more. With a clear image of my desired face in mind, I channeled my desire into the manifestation of silky skin. I could sense the silk coating my features, creating a protective shell that concealed my true nature. It wasn't perfect, and I knew I still had much to practice if I wanted to pass as a convincing human, but there was a sense of accomplishment as Circe began clapping, even if it seemed tinged with a hint of mockery.

With Mana Sight activated in my hand like some ridiculous selfie stick, I took a closer look at myself. I couldn't deny that my appearance was far from human, more akin to a female alien. Yet, there was a strange charm to it, a creepy cuteness that I found intriguing. I donned a black dress, its shifting, and moving form gave me a demonic vibe. But I hadn't merely worn the dress—I had shaped my body into it. Every inch of me exuded a deep abyssal black, except for my white silk face, which had a sleekness that hinted at an otherworldly allure as if I had undergone one too many Botox procedures. I knew that the vibrant orange glow would further enhance my uniquely creepy beauty once I withdrew Mana Sight back into my newly created eye sockets.

To my pleasant surprise, the facial features moved naturally, as if they were my own flesh. I could smile, frown, and even wink, experiencing the full range of expressions despite the tautness of the silk that formed my skin. It dawned on me that considering the silk as a mere shell coating would be a disservice. If magic operated based on my imagination and desire that is cast based on feel, then I needed to truly believe the silk was my actual flesh. Perhaps, molding it into any desired appearance would become even easier once I fully believed in its authenticity.

Now, don't misunderstand me. I still had a long way to go and much more practice to master my newfound understanding of magic's uniqueness for each caster. However, I was starting to grasp the essence of what Circe meant. As for learning magic without relying on the system, I had yet to figure that out. I secretly longed to cast a lightning bolt, but no matter how vividly I imagined and desired it, there was no accompanying sensation to rely on for its manifestation. It seemed that I needed to experience casting spells with the system before I could even attempt to cast them without it. Moreover, I noticed a distinct difference in the sensations when using system commands compared to casting without them. One method seemed to tap into the ambient mana present in the surroundings, while the other relied on the internal mana provided by the system itself.

All this newfound knowledge buzzed in my mind, waiting for the right moment to be explored further. But for now, my twisted psyche yearned for a more immediate thrill—the next floor boss, beckoning to me with twisted fingers like a demented lover craving my demise. With each step through the newly formed chamber exit, I could almost feel the dark laughter of the ghost of this dungeon echoing in the twisted corridors, enjoying my descent into blissful madness.

Following Redtail's directions was child's play, or rather, playtime in a deranged nursery. The dungeon husk seemed to play tricks on my senses as if the darkness was whispering distorted lullabies that made my skin crawl with a perverse excitement.

“One, two, I am coming for you. Three, four, better lock your doors. Five, six, grab your wands. Seven, eight, you better stay up late. Nine, ten, you’ll never sleep again.” I hummed to myself in utter glee.

But alas, the journey to the next boss proved disappointingly uneventful, as if the dungeon had forgotten its true purpose—to torment and devour. Instead, I found myself meandering through corridors that reeked of stale air and decaying hopes. As I continued to traipse through the lifeless dungeon, my gleeful joy turned to boredom.

A swarm of questions gnawed at the recesses of my twisted mind, their razor-sharp teeth sinking into the fragile fabric of my sanity. What kind of sadistic game were those necromancers and vampires playing? How did the other feeble candidates expect to level up in this empty pit? Were they as famished with excitement as I, longing for the taste of blood-soaked battles?

*Perhaps I should venture out and steal back that dungeon core?*

The one silver lining of aimlessly wandering through the desolate husk of a dungeon was that I reached the next boss chamber with surprising speed. The steel doors leading into the chamber creaked open as if something had neglected to close them properly behind itself. Peering inside, I found a scene all too familiar—a chamber akin to the previous one. But to my surprise, there was no hidden ledge above the door in this room. I shrugged off the anomaly, my anticipation growing as I entered the chamber, fully prepared to unleash my newest offensive spell, Necrotic Flame. Yet, to my bewilderment, the chamber was empty, devoid of any boss or formidable adversary. It was a disappointing anticlimax that left me utterly disappointed.

As I ventured further along the path to the next boss chamber, I couldn’t help but notice the recurring anomaly. The chambers I encountered were all strangely vacant, devoid of any boss or challenge. It was as if the bosses had either been slain and couldn’t respawn without the dungeon core, or they had simply decided to pack up their shit and abandon this place. Whatever the reason, it presented a rather disheartening predicament—I couldn’t level up if there was no one to fight. Frustrated, I turned to Circe for answers, but all I received in response was a nonchalant shrug. I couldn’t discern whether she genuinely had no clue about the situation or if she was simply toying with me, withholding the truth like a sadistic bitch.

After enduring the desolate corridors, I finally arrived at the entrance of what seemed to be a grand boss chamber—a pair of rusted gates guarding the entrance to an ancient coliseum, now reduced to a crumbling ruin. As I cautiously peered through the iron bars, at the heart of the arena stood three towering statues, their Herculean forms frozen in battle-ready stances. Whether chiseled from granite or sculpted from marble, their imposing presence was undeniable. A tingling thrill of excitement coursed through me. These statues, without a doubt, were the dungeon’s final bosses.

With an unnecessary breath, I pushed open the creaking rusted gate, revealing the entrance to the desolate coliseum. It was peculiar, for in my previous life, this moment would have invoked sheer terror. But now, in this twisted existence, I found myself inexplicably drawn to these moments of violence. There was an unsettling aura that permeated the air, sending shivers down my gooey spine. It wasn’t fear that gripped me, but rather, eager anticipation, as if I were on the verge of springing a devious trap. As I cautiously trod across the sand-coated floor, my gaze was drawn to the heaps of collapsed pillars scattered throughout the arena, as if the very foundations of this place had crumbled under the weight of time. Sections of stadium seats were no better, with one segment

entirely collapsed into a chaotic mess. The dome-shaped ceiling, however, remained intact, its surface intricately carved into the very fabric of the dungeon's cavern system. Yet, the sense of unease continued to intensify. And to my bewilderment, I couldn't help but notice a strange sensation—I was salivating.

My attention was fixated on the colossal statues that loomed in the heart of the arena. Perhaps “Herculean” didn't quite capture their true enormity. They were nothing short of gargantuan! In comparison, I stood merely at the height of their upper thighs. As I drew closer, I couldn't help but notice the detail on these three sculptures, crafted from pristine what could only be marble, which stood as testaments to exquisite craftsmanship.

One statue depicted a woman, her form both fierce and graceful. She brandished a massive golden circular shield, bedazzled with shimmering rubies. In her other hand, she grasped a splendid golden spear, akin to those wielded by archangels. Flanking her, the two male statues radiated a sense of raw power. One gripped a golden claymore, its blade adorned with intricate engravings and ornate details. The other statue held a menacing double-ended battleaxe, its presence magnified by mesmerizing carvings. Each weapon seemed to tell its own intricate tale, a testament to the sculptor's artistry.

But despite their formidable appearances, there was a humorous contrast in their depiction. All three were nude, the cold seemingly unkind to the two male figures in a particularly delicate aspect, leaving little to the imagination and much to my amusement.

I had become so engrossed in the visual spectacle before me that I had momentarily forgotten to rely on my other senses. And it was in that moment of neglect that I was assaulted by a delicious stench that permeated the air. Before I could fully comprehend the situation, the sandy floor beneath me erupted, unleashing a horde of rotting undead fighters. They emerged from the sand, their decayed bodies armed with rusted weapons, their hollow eyes filled with a hunger for battle.

A sinister thought crossed my mind as they charged toward me with relentless fervor. Their decaying flesh emitted an odious aroma that was strangely alluring. My senses were momentarily overwhelmed by a twisted desire, a dark craving. But I quickly snapped back to reality, reminding myself of the task at hand. I had to fight first, satiate my hunger later. *Fight now, eat later!*

A horde of several dozen undead warriors descended upon me with savage intent, their tattered forms moving with an unnatural hunger. It seemed as if they were determined to overwhelm me with sheer numbers, as if wrestling me into a grotesque dogpile was their ultimate goal.

I refused to become their prey!

Swiftly, I dodged the swing of a massive mallet aimed at my head, spinning out of harm's way with a grace that belied my appearance of an alien-looking woman in a dress. Tentacles sprouted from my back in an instant, thrashing outwards with deadly force. With a sickening thud, one undead creature was flattened into the sandy ground, while another met a similar fate at the hands of another tentacle.

Yet, the battlefield still teemed with enemies.

Unleashing a primal scream, the world around me was enveloped in a ghastly shade of purple. Flames of necrotic energy erupted from my being, consuming everything within a few-meter radius. The searing power of my command, “[**NECROTIC FLAME**],” swept around me, reducing

the undead foes' flesh to smoldering ashes. Their twisted forms collapsed before my eyes, consumed by the relentless fire of my dark magic.

For a few meters in every direction was engulfed by a swirling vortex of Necrotic Flame, a maelstrom of dark power that devoured everything in its path. Thankfully, that had only been the first wave, and this battle was far from over. Undead creatures emerged from the sand with relentless determination, their rusted weapons lashing out and their decaying bodies clawing and biting. It was a ceaseless onslaught, an unending cycle of decayed aggression.

Amidst the tumult, I glided with a surreal grace, a benefit of not possessing real bones. My movements mirrored a ballet dancer's elegance combined with a contortionist's flexibility, allowing me to effortlessly dodge the clumsy strikes from my undead foes. However, my grace might not have been as refined as I imagined. My approach was like a beacon of Necrotic Flames, engulfing anything that came near.

With every fluid motion, tentacles erupted from my body, striking with Corrosive and Venomous fury. Ideally, these tendrils were meant to extend from my back, with some even resembling hair strands, but occasionally, one or two would awkwardly emerge from my chest, much to my chagrin. Doubts lingered about the effectiveness of my Venomous touch against the undead, but in the heat of battle, I had little time to ponder these subtleties.

Amidst the battle, an unexpected sound reached my ears. It took me a moment to realize it was my voice, softly humming a familiar tune. *Is that... The Safety Dance?* A twisted sense of amusement welled up within me as I continued to dance through the decomposing ranks of the undead, my dark magic and haunting melody blending into a dark symphony of destruction.

But, as the saying goes, all good things must come to an end. The Necrotic Flames that had been my devastating companions began to flicker and fade. The remnants of the undead creatures, once enveloped in my fiery embrace, now crumbled into char, setting the stage for a new horror. From the ashes and burnt remains strewn across the arena, a legion of skeletal warriors emerged. Their bony frames clacked and rattled with an unholy fervor, while their empty eye sockets glowed with a sinister green luminescence.

...*Shit.*

With a surge of determination, I attempted to recast Necrotic Flame, channeling my desire into my imagination. But to my dismay—nothing happened! It seemed that my system pool of mana had run dry, leaving me defenseless against the wrath of the skeletal horde. Panic surged through me as I realized the dire predicament, I was in. I frantically searched my mind for an alternative, a way to turn the tide of battle in my favor. But at that moment, I was left with nothing but a sense of vulnerability as I watched the skeleton horde regroup for another wave.

“*Silly child,*” Circe’s voice echoed out through the chaos. “*You have limits within the system’s constraints. Your mana reserves can only stretch so far. That’s why I advised you to learn to tap into the ambient mana around you.*”

With a quick glance at Circe, I acknowledged her words, the mischievous smile on my silk-covered face growing wider. Indeed, I may not have yet mastered the art of casting Necrotic Flame without the system’s assistance, but that didn’t mean I was left defenseless. Oh, no. I had a repertoire of

tricks waiting to be unleashed. As I prepared myself for the impending second wave, a question gnawed at the back of my mind—when would the final dungeon bosses join the fray?

# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 8

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### UNDEAD CHIMERA

Magic watched in silent amusement as the hapless pudding, Blake, frivolously wasted the internal mana bestowed by the system, attempting in vain to scorch the undead flesh. The goddess couldn't suppress a smirk at the sight of this novice, now floundering against a relatively feeble skeletal horde. This dungeon—or more accurately, its absent core, a relic of her sister's creation—was designed as a training ground for levelers during the Eldritch Wars. For someone with Blake's latent potential, it should have been a simple battle.

Yet there was Blake, blissfully unaware of her shortcomings, under the impression she was excelling. Magic had tried to mentor this misguided soul in the art of manipulating ambient mana, a skill that should have complemented her natural affinity. Despite this, the girl continued to falter. It baffled Magic to see someone so inherently gifted struggle with the simplest of offensive magic that should have been second nature to her.



I couldn't help but revel in the exhilarating chaos that surrounded me, my senses tingling with the thrill of combat. As a skeleton lunged at me, I twisted my curvy hips with a mischievous smirk and swung my arm, transforming it into a tentacle as I did. The impact was glorious, shattering its bony face and sending a rain of teeth cascading through the air. The defeated skeleton crumbled into a heap of bones, scattered like discarded playthings. Oh, the joy of such a satisfying strike!

My moment of triumph was fleeting, as three more skeletal warriors emerged, each eager to join the fray. Unfazed, I harnessed the energy from my previous assault. Continuing my spin, I unleashed a tentacle in a swift arc, striking down two of the advancing adversaries. But before I could completely dodge, a third skeleton managed to latch onto my back, its bony fingers aiming for my jugular. It was unaware that beneath my seemingly human exterior, I was nothing but a fluidic goo.

As the skeleton latched its claws and teeth into me, it quickly began to dissolve, succumbing to the acidic burn of my Corrosive passive. A hint of concern washed over me as I contemplated the state of my pH levels, reminding myself to exercise caution around Aurelia. *That is, of course, if she's interested.*

"I do hope she's interested," I quietly sighed, my thoughts momentarily drifting to the enigmatic enchantress amidst the horde of skeletons.

But there was no time to dwell on matters of the heart, for a few more skeletons were charging at me, their bony frames determined and relentless. Maintaining my wicked grin, I readied myself for the next round, eager to continue this dance of destruction. As I deftly ducked under a swinging

sword, my eyes briefly flickered toward Circe, who was casually fiddling with her nails, displaying a complete lack of interest in my fight.

*How rude!*

My momentary distraction had proven costly, as I found myself impaled by a spear, the blade tip piercing through my chest with a sickening smoothness, like stabbing into a bowl of gelatin—only I was the gelatin! Caught off guard, I had no opportunity to evade the attack before a shield crashed into my side, forcefully dislodging me from the spear’s deadly point and sending me sprawling across the arena’s sandy surface. Wincing, I glanced down at the wound, only to be reminded of my unique nature as a Black Pudding—no internal organs to be damaged. The perks of being a pudding, I supposed. It dawned on me that I was surprisingly resilient to physical blows. Unfortunately, my brief lapse in attention had allowed the encroaching horde of skeletons to converge upon me, their clattering bones a symphony of merciless intent.

Their bones rattling in a macabre symphony, while the sand beneath me continued to churn as more zombies clawed their way to the surface. The grotesque figures hungered for a taste of my flesh, their ravenous desires evident in their bared teeth and outstretched arms. Instinctively, I tried to unleash my powerful spells, calling upon the destructive forces of [NECROTIC FLAME]. Yet, to my dismay, nothing happened. Frustration welled up within me as I desperately roared, invoking the name of [BLIGHT], but once again, my attack failed to materialize.

“Shit,” I muttered under my breath as the horde of undead closed in on me.

One by one, the undead hurled themselves onto me, creating a suffocating, morbid mound. Their skeletal hands clawed relentlessly at my form, teeth gnashing in a macabre symphony as they tore pieces of me away. It was an onslaught that would have crushed any normal being. But I was far from normal. Thankfully, my Corrosive passive was still active – a saving grace that didn’t rely on the system’s mana allocation. Although it didn’t dissolve them as rapidly as I would have liked, its effect was unmistakable. As the weight of the undead bore down on me, their mass slowly succumbed to my acidic essence. There was a perverse delight in feeling their bones and flesh disintegrating into me, a sensation oddly akin to absorbing strawberry-flavored Jell-O.

In this battle of consumption, my victory was assured as the horde of mindless undead gradually dissolved into me. But the thrill of such an easy triumph left me wanting more. I craved excitement and challenge, something beyond the mundane act of letting my foes slowly dissolve into me. It was time to shed my human form and embrace my true nature. With a touch of ambient mana, I ignored the system commands and unleashed Polymorph out of instinct, allowing my imagination to run wild.

Tentacles erupted from my body, sprouting in every direction, a mesmerizing and chaotic spectacle. My back became a writhing mass of appendages while my legs transformed, and my arms split into multiple tentacles. There was no pattern to their arrangement; my focus was solely on lashing out. With my acidic limbs, I unleashed a frenzy of attacks, striking out in all directions upon the horde that piled upon me.

With my writhing tentacles, I seized skeletons and zombies by their necks, their spleens, anywhere I could get a grip. I relished the sensation of my acidic corrosion as I let the potent substance do its work, dissolving their bones and flesh as I repeatedly pummeled them into the ground. Their forms crumbled and dissolved in my grip, their remains scattered and discarded like morbid

confetti. A skull here, a limb there, all sent flying in different directions as I effortlessly tossed them aside before swiftly moving on to the next undead.

YOU HAVE DEFEATED [UNDEAD WARRIOR]
YOU HAVE DEFEATED [UNDEAD BARBARIAN]
YOU HAVE DEFEATED [UNDEAD SWORDSMEN]

The barrage of system notifications flooded my vision like incessant, nagging cries for attention. Yet, I brushed them aside with malicious delight. In the heart of my battle-fueled euphoria, those pop-up alerts were nothing but trivial nuisances. I drowned them out in the symphony of chaos surrounding me, punctuated by the sporadic echoes of my own unhinged laughter.

Time warped around me as I tore through the undead with a frenzy of snatching, smashing, and corroding. What felt like an eternity in the heat of battle was—in reality—mere minutes. As the dust settled, I stood amidst the carnage, surveying the skeletal remains that littered the ground. The air was thick with the sickly-sweet scent of decomposing flesh, a bizarre contrast that oddly conjured up memories of freshly baked bread.

Taking a moment to assess my surroundings, my eyes landed on the three statues standing at the center of the arena. They stood tall and rigid; their unyielding gazes fixated on me with an eerie intensity. It was as if they were waiting for something. With no other immediate threats in sight and a lingering hunger gnawing on my insides, I couldn't resist the temptation to satiate my appetite with a quick snack. The scent of rotting flesh permeated the air, drawing me closer to the piles of undead remains.

But just as I was about to sink my metaphorical teeth into my well-deserved meal, I was abruptly interrupted by the slow and mocking applause from Circe. Her deliberate and exaggerated clapping caught me off guard, momentarily freezing me in place.

*“That was utterly shameful,”* Circe mocked, her tone dripping with disdain. *“I’ve seen toddlers display more finesse and skill than what you just showed. Instead of harnessing the full power of your magic, you resort to brute force like a mindless savage. If this dungeon wasn’t designed for training beginners, you would have been obliterated by the first undead creature you came across. Consider yourself fortunate that there are no enchanted weapons in this dungeon to expose your pathetic weaknesses. A single swing of a holy blade or a strike from a flaming sword, and you’d be nothing more than a pile of ash.”*

Folding my still formed tentacles arms across my chest, I narrowed my eyes and directed a defiant glare up at the floating banshee—I meant goddess.

“I didn’t think I was that bad,” I muttered under my breath.

Basking in my undeniable badassery, I remained utterly unfazed by the deluded ramblings of that hallucinatory bitch. In my mind, I was an unstoppable juggernaut, and her assessments were inconsequential. With the finesse and speed reminiscent of a seasoned Kungfu master, I had obliterated the undead horde, reducing them to a sea of scattered bone fragments. There I stood, a symbol of unbridled power and skill, untouched and victorious. Yet, a peculiar sight caught my



eye. Amidst the debris, several skeletal remains were engaged in a fruitless assault on some of my severed tentacles. Disembodied hands clawed, and lone skulls gnashed at not just one, but multiple detached limbs of mine.

I couldn't help but utter, "when did I lose those?"

In a sudden explosion of sand, the arena was engulfed in chaos. A cloud of dust obscured my vision, leaving me in suspense as to what had transpired. Within moments, the haze began to clear, revealing a monstrous entity that defied description. It was an abomination, an undead chimera of immense size and grotesque appearance. The creature possessed the decayed body of a lion, its majestic mane untouched by the ravages of time. However, it lacked the expected goat head upon its back, yet it did possess a cobra-like snake for a tail. The lion's maw dripped with putrid yellow drool while the snake's mouth oozed a sickly green substance. And let's not forget to mention its colossal size. The undead chimera towered over me! Its monstrous form reminded me more of a monster truck. Surprisingly, the sight filled me with exhilaration rather than fear—most likely a side effect of my new body.

"Oh, this is going to be fun," I growled with utter glee.

The lion's head emitted a thunderous roar, shaking the very foundation of the arena. Simultaneously, its tail coiled around a hefty chunk of a broken pillar, preparing to launch it in my direction. Time seemed to slow down as I assessed the impending danger. Instinctively, I prepared to leap out of harm's way with a graceful somersault. However, it was at that moment I realized I hadn't transformed my tentacle-like limbs back into their human form. My attempts to evade the hurtling stone pillar only resulted in a chaotic entanglement of my unruly appendages, hindering my movement, and leaving me vulnerable to the imminent impact.

With a sickening splat, a colossal chunk of rock slammed into my chest, obliterating everything above my waist in an instant. I was left in a chaotic, bisected state. Yet, as a Black Pudding, I possessed the remarkable ability to regenerate. Already, I could sense my body's reconstitution, as my gelatinous form began to flow and reshape.

As I scrambled to collect my scattered remains, the floating goddess observed with apparent amusement, her laughter echoing through the air. I must admit, the sight of my lower half scurrying about in a desperate attempt to gather its upper fragments was undeniably comical. Even I couldn't help but imagine how hilarious it would have been, witnessing a pair of disembodied legs comically darting around, frantically trying to piece themselves back together—that said...I wasn't laughing.

Merging back with my torn-off pieces, I swiftly evaded two incoming slabs, their colossal weight shaking the ground upon impact. With unexpected agility, I attempted a cartwheel over a pile of bones, twisting and ducking to avoid another slab hurtling toward me. However, my acrobatic display faltered as I clumsily executed a backflip, resulting in a belly flop onto the ground. To my surprise, the awkward maneuver proved fortuitous as the undead chimera launched another stone slab that narrowly missed me, crashing into the stadium with a resounding boom.

I glanced up and locked eyes with the undead chimera, its massive form looming forty meters away. Without a moment's hesitation, the monstrous creature charged toward me, its thunderous footfalls shaking the ground beneath me. As the creature approached, I couldn't help but notice the sickening sizzling sound that accompanied each drop of its yellow drool as it hit the sand-covered

arena floor. Yet, the most unsettling sight of all was the three marble statues, their once motionless figures now shifting about to get a better view, their stone eyes watching my every move.

“Shit!” I swore under my breath.

My hands trembled, a mixture of fear and something else—let’s call it excitement—bubbling within me. I wasn’t afraid, I reassured myself. It was pure, unadulterated excitement. As I slowly lifted my gaze, my heart plummeted. There, charging towards me, was the undead chimera, its monstrous form barreling down with lethal intent.

In that instant, a fierce hatred for my current predicament blazed within me, a fiery intensity unlike anything I had ever felt. The thrilling adventure I had reveled in moments ago now seemed a distant memory, overshadowed by the imminent danger. A wave of sorrow washed over me, mourning the swift departure of the carefree exhilaration that had been so abruptly replaced by this terrifying confrontation.

I’ve always been a bit of a twisted bitch, taking things to the extreme just for the sake of making a stupid point. It’s just how I roll, you know? Like that time when my ex-boyfriend Ethan cheated on me with my supposed best friend, Mia. Keep in mind, this was right around the time I was coming out of the closet. Still, boy, was I pissed!

So, to get back at him, I did something equally messed up—I slept with his mom! Yeah, I know, it’s not my proudest moment, but damn, it did hit him hard. I mean, who would’ve thought he’d be more ashamed of his mom banging me than I was? But hey, she was a total MILF. Maybe not the best mother figure, though. I heard she had quite a reputation among the local bars. And let me tell you, the antibiotics I had to take afterward confirmed those rumors. But hey, at least I picked up a few tricks from her if you know what I mean.

Now here’s the funny part—Ethan’s last name was Stifler. Yeah, you heard that right—I was the chick who banged Stifler’s mom! The jokes and teasing he endured during his college years were endless, while I had to deal with two weeks of burning every time I went to the bathroom. Totally worth it! As for Mia, well, let’s just say Ethan gave her a special little present called his mother’s chlamydia. Ah, revenge is a sweet, twisted pleasure.

So yeah, I may be a vindictive bitch, but damn, did I relish in my victory, and yes, I enjoyed my triumph with a warm slice of apple pie and maybe a few additional visits with Stifler’s mom. Anyways, there’s a point I’m trying to make... Umm, what was that point again? Shit, I completely forgot. Ah, who the fuck cares!

Raising my hand in a desperate attempt to defend myself, I called forth the power of [BLIGHT]—but to my horror, nothing happened. Panic surged through me as the chimera’s shadow engulfed me, its massive jaws descending upon me with a thunderous roar. In a frantic maneuver, I leaped to the right, narrowly escaping being devoured, but I couldn’t evade the crushing impact of the creature’s oversized paws. Like a crushed car at a monster truck rally, I was trampled over, my body tumbling and rolling across the sandy arena. The pain wasn’t as excruciating as I had expected. However, each blow did remind me of my mortality. Miraculously, the chimera’s momentum carried it past me for several meters, its struggle to stop in the sandy terrain, which worked in my favor.

I quickly regained my footing as the chimera slid to a stop, its lion head tilting back to fix its gaze upon me, a predator eyeing its prey. Determined to fight back, I lifted my arm once more, calling upon the power of various spells—[BLIGHT], [NECROTIC FLAME]—but to my dismay, nothing happened. Panic surged within me, clouding my thoughts, and leaving me in a state of confusion and frustration. At that moment, I couldn't think clearly, my mind consumed by the overwhelming sense of helplessness—and had nothing to do with my caved in skull.

The chimera's change in tactics sent a shiver down my sloppy spine as it circled me, its predatory movements mirroring that of a cat cornering its prey. The hissing of its snake tail only added to the sense of impending doom. It was toying with me, relishing my helplessness. At that moment, all hopes of returning to Aurelia were dashed, and a wave of desolation washed over me.

“Perhaps this was for the best,” I breathed out bitterly. I was no champion but a twisted monster with a taste for murder and an insatiable appetite for rotting flesh. Maybe this new world, with all its magic and delectable corpses, was better off without the likes of me.

I let out a resigned sigh as the chimera abruptly stopped its circling and crouched low, raising its snake tail high in the air, and wiggled its butt with an uncanny resemblance to a playful feline. The absurdity of the situation struck me, considering I had never owned a cat. I was always more of a dog person, particularly fond of Great Danes. Those big, lazy, and snuggly giants had been a constant presence in my life since I was a little girl. And yet, as I watched the chimera shake its booty in a bizarre display, a sinking feeling settled in the pit of my stomach. I knew exactly what was about to happen.

There was no escape, no place to hide from the impending doom that awaited me. No matter how fast I ran, I couldn't outrun the inevitable. I was completely and utterly screwed, on the verge of being turned into nothing more than black gooey cat shit. My only glimmer of hope resided in my Corrosive and Venomous passives. When the chimera devoured me, I planned to give it a taste of its own medicine. However, as I watched the yellow drool dripping from the lion's head and the green drool from the snake, a sinking feeling washed over me. It seemed likely that the undead beast possessed some form of immunity to acid and poison. It was a losing battle, and I was resigned to my fate.

In the blink of an eye, the dreaded moment I had feared unleashed itself. The chimera, an overgrown mutant lion, launched into the air, its powerful leap creating a burst of sand that obscured my vision. As it soared above, only to hurtle back down with terrifying force, my survival instincts kicked into overdrive. In a blind frenzy, I screamed spell commands, a wild mix of known and unknown incantations, in a refusal to succumb to what seemed like my inevitable end.

Desperation fueled me, and I found myself shouting out spells beyond my grasp from my selectable list, clinging to a sliver of hope that they might miraculously manifest. Panic gripped me, knowing the system's mana was exhausted, and this frenzy impaired my ability to connect with the ambient mana around me. It was a battle waged more with raw emotion than magical prowess, a torrent of curses spilled out of my lips in my defiant frustration.

“Shield Proficiency! BLIGHT! Necrotic Flame, damn you to hell! YOU FUCKING BITCH! Life Drain, damn it! Fear! Venomous! Astral Insight, you asshole! Corrosive! You piece of shit! Poison! Motherfucking Astral Insight! Leap! Paralysis! Disease! Fortress! FUCKING LEAP! [BURST]!”

My world came to a sudden halt as time seemed to freeze. The undead lion's face loomed dangerously close to mine; its jaws wide open, ready to clamp down on me as it descended. But before its decaying teeth could sink into my flesh, something inexplicable occurred. Against my will, I was propelled forward at an unimaginable speed. I darted beneath the creature's outstretched paws, slipped beneath its rotting belly, and then, with a jarring impact, I was struck by two massive orbs, feeling as if I had been smacked across the face with solid steel. The force of the blow sent me spiraling into a daze, my footing lost as I tumbled and rolled across the entire expanse of the coliseum.

"Ouchie," I groaned, the pain coursing through my body as I came to a stop, having skipped across the arena like a pebble on water.

Struggling to regain my composure, I glanced around frantically, but the thick haze of sand that my tumble had caused obstructed my vision, limiting my sight to a mere ten meters. However, amidst the chaos, a piercing, high-pitched screeching noise pierced the air, sending shivers down my neck. It was a sound that could only be described as a cat suffering a truly agonizing demise. For the first time, I truly understood the meaning of the expression, "It sounded like a dying cat."

"Holy shit," I gasped, a mix of shock and disbelief coursing through me. "I just used Burst! But how? I thought I was completely drained of mana."

Circe's laughter flowed through the air as she explained, "*Abilities don't rely on mana. You can use them as long as your physical strength allows.*"

"What does that mean?" I muttered, still grappling with the concept. However, my attention was quickly diverted as I noticed movement in the haze of dust.

A feeling of unease mixed with annoyance washed over me. I turned my gaze back to the center of the stadium, where the sand in the air was gradually settling. As the dust cleared, my attention was immediately drawn to the three marble statues. They remained motionless, with their cold stone eyes fixed upon me.

*Fucking creepy!*

As I turned my gaze toward the colossal decaying cat with its snakehead tail curled underneath, I couldn't help but notice its pathetic state. It staggered around, its hind legs seemingly paralyzed. The undead beast was also emitting a dreadful screeching noise that pierced through the air like a high-pitched tornado siren. A sickening realization washed over me, and my hand instinctively moved to touch the side of my face, where I found a portion of my Silk Webbing had been torn off.

*H-He tea-bagged me!*

Circe's laughter grated on my nerves, but I couldn't let it distract me. The undead beast, despite its wound, wouldn't remain incapacitated for long. It was just a matter of time before it regained its strength and resumed its attack. I needed a plan, and I needed it fast.

With a plan forming in my mind, I spotted a few corpses strewn along the outer edges of the arena, remnants of the earlier battle. One of them happened to be within reach. Seizing the opportunity, I sprinted towards it, my focus fixed on the motionless figure. I wished I possessed some impressive acrobatic skills to navigate the arena with grace and finesse, but alas, I lacked such abilities.

Instead, my attempt to come to a smooth halt by the corpse ended in a comical disaster. I tripped, faceplanting directly into the groin of a headless zombie.

*Worst. Day. Ever!*

As I lay there with my face buried in the foul stench of a putrid decaying corpse's crotch, a disturbing thought crossed my mind—I was salivating. I couldn't deny the strange allure of the taste of dead things. It was a guilty pleasure that I couldn't fully explain. Why did I find them delicious? Was it simply a matter of evolving taste buds? After all, many people appreciated the unique flavor of aged meat... right?

With a muffled voice, I managed to utter the command “[ABSORB]” as I continued to indulge in my rather grotesque meal. The corrosive power of my acidic touch had already eaten away at the dead zombie's pelvis bone, revealing the grisly scene. *Oh shit!* What does my face look like right now? I seriously doubted my silk face was still intact after all that had happened.

DO YOU WISH TO [ABSORB] [UNDEAD HORDE]? YES / NO
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“Yes!” I muffled out, before pausing, “wait.... does that say undead horde?” I mumbled into the dead man's crotch.

[ABSORB] [UNDEAD HORDE] SUCCESSFUL
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<u>SELECTABLE</u> [BRITTLE BONES] [COMBAT PROFICIENCY] [DECAY TOUCH] [MINDLESS REGENERATION] [ROTTEN AURA] [SHAMBLE]
--

“Fuck, talk about a jackpot! Six kickass skills up for grabs!” I exclaimed with twisted glee, stealing a quick glance at the chimera.

The ugly bastard had ceased its stumbling routine and was now engaged in a delightful session of ball-licking. Well, at least I knew where to aim my next attack. My fleeting moment of hesitation and fear was now long gone, replaced by my usual snarky and cynical self. Time to check my goddamn status, I commanded in my mind, eager to see what goodies I had acquired.

NAME: BLAKE
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RACE: BLACK PUDDING
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CLASS: DUNGEON MONSTER
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LEVEL: 33
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<u>TITLES</u>
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<b>HOPELESS CRUSADER</b>		
<u>RACIAL SKILLS</u> [ABSORB] [CORROSIVE] [POLYMORPH] [THERMALSENSE]	<u>VULNERABILITIES</u> [FIRE] [HOLY]	<u>SELECTABLE</u> [ASTRAL INSIGHT] [BRITTLE BONES] [COMBAT PROFICIENCY] [DECAY TOUCH] [FEAR] [FORTRESS] [MINDLESS REGENERATION] [LEAP] [LIFE DRAIN] [PARALYSIS] [ROTTEN AURA] [SHAMBLE] [SHIELD PROFICIENCY] [SPIDER WALK] [SPIRIT VESSEL] [STELLAR VOID]
<u>SPELLS</u> [Blight] [Mana Sight] [NECROTIC FLAME]	<u>IMMUNITIES</u> [ACID] [DARKNESS] [DISEASE] [POISON] [SLEEP]	
<u>ABILITIES</u> [BURST] [SILK WEBBING] [VEIL POLYGLOT] [VENOMOUS]	<u>UNIQUE</u> [ORACLE] [RESTRICTED] [RESTRICTED]	

Realizing the intensity of the conflict I had just endured, curiosity piqued about the flurry of system notifications I had blatantly ignored during the battle. The difficulty level of this cursed place also gnawed at my mind. I silently offered gratitude to the perverse deities for bestowing me with the Absorb racial skill—a crucial lifeline in the heat of battle, though I wasn't about to give Circe any recognition for it.

The skill had been a godsend, yet a cloud of uncertainty lingered over the status of my system mana pool. I longed for some tangible indicators, some digits to quantify my magical reserves. The strategy to devour those undead nuisances was driven by a glimmer of hope that it might replenish my system mana, about which I had no clue regarding its natural regeneration rate.

Furthermore, my proficiency in tapping into ambient mana for spellcasting was still a work in progress. This inability added another layer of complexity to my situation, making me all the more reliant on a better understanding of my system's mechanics and limitations. This unknown territory was both exhilarating and daunting, a puzzle I was determined to unravel.

However, the fact that I gained six new skills was a welcome bonus. But the biggest shock of all? I was now sitting at level thirty-three, which meant I should have two precious skill points to unlock two of those sweet selectable skills. *Heck yeah!*

Casting a fleeting glance at the chimera, I let out a breath of relief as I witnessed the foul creature engrossed in its delicate self-grooming ritual. Now might not have been the most opportune moment to explore my newly acquired skills or delve into the intricacies of those six enticing abilities, but I needed a game-changer, a lifeline to shift the odds in my favor. Face-diving into its testicles wasn't exactly a sustainable combat strategy for me, after all.

[BRITTLE BONES]

YOUR BONES BECOME FRAGILE AND PRONE TO BREAKING UPON IMPACT.  
MAKES IT HARDER FOR ENEMIES TO LAND EFFECTIVE BLOWS WITHOUT CAUSING SELF-INJURY.

TYPE  
**ABILITY**

ACTIVATION  
**PASSIVE**

**[COMBAT PROFICIENCY]**

ACQUIRE THE EXPERTISE TO EFFECTIVELY ENGAGE AND OVERCOME ADVERSARIES IN BATTLE.

TYPE  
**ABILITY**

ACTIVATION  
**PASSIVE**

**[DECAY TOUCH]**

GAIN TOUCH OF DECAYING HANDS AND ACCELERATE THE DECOMPOSITION OF ORGANIC MATTER.  
THIS CAUSES OBJECTS OR STRUCTURES TO WEAKEN AND CRUMBLE.

TYPE  
**SPELL**

ACTIVATION  
**CAST**

**[MINDLESS REGENERATION]**

GAIN A SLOW AND LIMITED REGENERATIVE ABILITY.  
THIS ALLOWS YOU TO GRADUALLY HEAL MINOR WOUNDS OVER TIME.

TYPE  
**ABILITY**

ACTIVATION  
**PASSIVE**

**[ROTTEN AURA]**

EMIT A FOUL ODOR AND AURA OF DECAY.  
THIS CAUSES NEARBY ENEMIES TO EXPERIENCE TEMPORARY NAUSEA AND REDUCED STAMINA.

TYPE  
**ABILITY**

ACTIVATION  
**PASSIVE**

**[SHAMBLE]**

GAIN A SLIGHT BOOST IN MOVEMENT SPEED.  
THIS ALLOWS YOU TO SHUFFLE ALONG SLIGHTLY FASTER.

TYPE**ABILITY**ACTIVATION**CAST**

Well, none of those seemed particularly awe-inspiring. In fact, a couple of them sounded downright ridiculous. I mean, “Brittle Bones,” seriously? How would that even work for someone like me, who doesn’t have any bones, to begin with?

I heard a low, guttural growl, and I quickly turned my attention to the chimera, which had recovered from my little nutty headbutt. And wouldn’t you know it, the bastard was charging straight at me like a bull on steroids, hell-bent on turning me into its next chew toy. That lion head of his was spewing out a thick, putrid yellow cloud, while that snake tail of his decided to join in on the fun by spitting green globs of phlegm my way. *Talk about a tag team from hell.*

But let me tell you, I wasn’t about to piss my gooey dress in fear. Nope! I squared my slimy shoulders, raised my gloop-covered arms, and gave that undead monstrosity a defiant look that said, “Bring it on, you undead fucker!”

I had a plan, and it didn’t involve running away like a scared little chicken. Nah, I was ready to give this rotten chimera a taste of my own special brand of ass-kicking. I couldn’t help but hope that my little feast on the undead horde had replenished my system mana to the brim. After all, I needed all the magical juice I could get to take down this monstrosity.

As it came charging at me, I mustered all the strength I had and let out a war cry that would make a banshee proud, “[BURST]!”



# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 9

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### MY PRECIOUSSES

With a wicked grin plastered across my face, I made a deliberate choice not to turn my encounter with the chimera into an epic battle of valor and heroism. Nah, that shit was way too predictable for my liking. Instead, I reveled in the twisted joy of my brilliant plan. Empowering my inner banshee, I let out a war cry that probably sounded more like a back-alley crackhead as I activated [BURST] with a system command.

The skill propelled me forward with the speed of a damn rocket. Going nearly supersonic, I zoomed toward the chimera like a bat out of hell, missing its ugly mug as I slipped right under it—just as planned.

In a fit of sadistic glee, I mustered all the strength I could and unleashed a sucker punch from the depths of my twisted soul. With the force of a bullet train fueled by pure adrenaline, my fist found its mark in the chimera's tender lower region. It was like an explosion of pain and humiliation, a one-two punch that left the creature reeling and questioning its undead life choices. I felt something give way, though I couldn't quite tell if it was my arm or its precious family jewels. Not that it mattered much to me at that moment.

A mixture of a shriek and a roar erupted from the chimera's throat, a symphony of suffering that sent a surge of wicked delight through me. Its mighty hind legs buckled under the sheer agony, collapsing like a deck of flimsy cards. As I reveled in my triumph, my momentum came to an abrupt halt, leaving me vulnerable and exposed beneath the writhing creature.

Suddenly, the chimera's cobra-like tail coiled underneath itself, swiftly lashing out in a vicious act of retaliation. Despite my depleted momentum, I managed to narrowly evade its initial strike with a combination of instinct and luck. Ah, who am I kidding? It was all luck. However, my relief was short-lived as I realized Burst wasn't reactivating. It seemed that skill was on cooldown, and I immediately hated my skill descriptions for not having those kinds of important details. Without Burst, I was trapped beneath the chimera's menacing presence, unable to run away fast enough, completely vulnerable against the impending wrath of its venomous tail. I was utterly screwed.

The snake-like tail coiled back, preparing for another strike, while the chimera's lion head emitted a pitiful screech akin to a wounded feline. The pain from my well-placed punch to its most sensitive region was clearly taking its toll. As if to add insult to injury, a yellow cloud of acidic fumes wheezed out from its maw. But none of that deterred me. With Burst failing to respond, I quickly unleashed a different system command, invoking the power of [NECROTIC FLAME].

A rush of purple flames erupted in all directions, the fire's eerie glow casting an otherworldly light. Yet, the cobra's head, tail, tail-head? *Whatever!* It remained undeterred as it collided with me, its fangs sinking deep into my side. Surprisingly, I felt more surprised than pain as the chimera's

venomous bite pumped its toxic venom into my dark and cruel body during those fleeting seconds it had latched on.

[ <b>POISON</b> ] RESISTED
[ <b>ACID</b> ] RESISTED

*I need to get out of here. Burst! Burst?! Fuck!*

Above me loomed the chimera, its lion's head snarling and snapping, its pained roars reverberating in the air. Without hesitation, I prepared to deliver another strike, aiming at those two vulnerable orbs nestled between its crumpled and trembling hind legs. However, as my fist swung forward, I came face to face with the gruesome reality of my last punch. It wasn't the chimera's testicles that had liquified. *My right arm's gone!* To add insult to injury, the cobra head was poised to strike once more, its venomous fangs ready to sink into my gooey form, and that didn't include the yellow acidotic cloud that was coating the two—well, three of us. I confirmed what I already knew. I was screwed.

In a desperate moment, panic took hold of me, and I mentally screamed the command for [**BURST**]. To my astonishment, it responded this time, only it propelled me upwards with incredible force until I collided with the inside of the undead chimera's open ribcage. I was a bit dumbfounded to find myself within the monstrous creature, my mind reeling from the unexpected turn of events.

Despite my unconventional predicament within the chimera's body, the relentless strikes of the cobra's head continued its attempts to reach me inside its own writhing form, narrowly missing its mark. Amidst the chaos, I took a moment to steady myself and assess the situation. With a swift survey of my surroundings, a plan began to form in my mind. It was time to use my two new skill points from my vast repertoire of skills, and as my eyes locked onto the menacing gaze of the cobra's head, I knew precisely which one I wanted.

[ <b>PARALYSIS</b> ]
GRANTS YOU THE SPELL TO INFLICT TEMPORARY PARALYSIS. UPON CONTACT, THE TARGET'S MUSCLES SEIZE UP, RENDERING THEM IMMOBILIZED.
<u>TYPE</u> <b>SPELL</b>
<u>ACTIVATION</u> <b>PASSIVE</b>
WOULD YOU LIKE TO SELECT [ <b>PARALYSIS</b> ] AS AN ACTIVE SPELL? YES / NO

With an evil grin spreading across my face, I eagerly clicked, “Yes” and initiated my assault from within the chimera's body.

7 OUT OF 8 SELECTABLE SKILLS ACTIVATED
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As a Black Pudding, I was a shapeless monstrosity that only resembled a woman if I chose. Well, at least I tried to resemble a woman, though it wasn't quite human looking yet. Regardless! My position inside the creature granted me a unique advantage, which I exploited with swift efficiency.

Raising my arms, or rather, one arm and a stump, I unleashed thick, inky tendrils that shot forth with malevolent intent. They slithered and intertwined, entangling themselves within the chimera's guts and intestines, twisting, pulling, and tearing without any calculated precision. I was lashing out at whatever I could grab.

To my delight, the monstrous chimera froze in place, its mighty muscles seizing up under the effect of my Paralysis. With my sadistic grin, I continued tearing at its organs until I noticed its heart. Lunging forward, I plunged my tentacles deep into its heart.

My strategy was straightforward yet daring: to exhaust the chimera's endurance and probe its susceptibilities to my corrosive acid and venomous toxins. The allure of challenging the creature's limits and uncovering its frailties was too tantalizing to resist. However, my plan hit a snag as the Paralysis skill I had activated began to dissipate prematurely, allowing the chimera to slowly regain mobility. It roared in anger and defiance, the sound reverberating menacingly through the stadium.

Adding to my frustration, the undead monstrosity stubbornly refused to succumb, even after I had savagely removed its heart and organs. Amidst the chaos, a subtle sizzling sound reached my ears – a small victory, indicating that my dark pudding skin was indeed corroding the beast's flesh from within. However, it soon dawned on me that while the chimera wasn't entirely impervious to my acid and venom, it exhibited a significant resistance to them, possibly due to its innate endurance or its own toxic nature.

This realization forced me to confront a daunting truth: my primary passive skills, coupled with Paralysis, were insufficient to vanquish this formidable adversary. The chimera's stubborn resistance necessitated a new approach, a deeper understanding of its vulnerabilities, and perhaps a more creative use of my abilities. This challenge was shaping up to be more complex than I had anticipated, requiring ingenuity and adaptability to overcome.

As the last remnants of my Paralysis passive dissipated, I couldn't help but feel a tinge of regret for wasting a skill slot on something that didn't quite deliver the desired results. Nevertheless, there was no time for dwelling on that now. The cobra's tail, like a relentless whip, resumed its vicious assault, striking into its own chest cavity in a futile attempt to reach me. It narrowly missed its mark as I continued my relentless onslaught, tearing out anything and everything that looked remotely important.

I was in a precarious position, trapped inside the monster's body with no means of escape, but I refused to back down. The chimera's magical attacks had proven ineffective against me, but I couldn't be too sure about its physical blows. While I believed I was immune to them, I didn't particularly feel like testing that theory, considering I still experienced pain. My sole focus was on bringing this undead abomination to its final demise.

Having literally ripped out its heart and organs, one would think the damn thing would keel over and call it a day. But no, it stubbornly clung to life, or would it be unlife? *Whatever!* It defied my

efforts regardless. Frustrated and running out of options, I decided to call forth [BLIGHT]. As I unleashed this dark and cruel power, a remarkable change occurred within the chimera's insides. Pus-filled sores and lesions erupted throughout its twisted form, all while a sinister mist oozed out of me, enveloping the creature in a haze of diseases.

Alas, even that wasn't enough. It seemed like I was less hurting the chimera and more annoying it as it continued its relentless attacks with the snake tail and its lion head shamelessly licking the wound I had inflicted with my powerful Burst-infused punch.

*"Child, it's not just any undead. It's a lich!"* Circe's exasperated voice called out to me, a hint of boredom evident in her tone. *"This monstrosity possesses not one, but two phylacteries. One for the cobra and the other for the lion head."*

As I continued my battle within the chimera's chest cavity, I couldn't physically see Circe's ethereal form outside. However, her voice resonated in my mind as if she were right beside me. It was a strange sensation, her communicating directly into my thoughts. Despite my better judgment, I hadn't unsummoned her, deciding to keep her around. While she could be a nuisance, there were times when she provided useful tidbits of information.

"Oh, look who decided to grace me with their assistance!" I retorted.

*"Say what you will, but you won't learn without first doing,"* she replied.

With an exasperated sigh, I responded to Circe's revelation. "Well, thanks for the heads up. Now, do you have any idea what these phylacteries look like? I've pretty much torn out everything that's inside it."

With what could have only been a sarcastic chuckle, Circe seemed rather amused. *"Oh, come on now. I can't do all the work for you. Where's the fun in that? Best of luck figuring it out yourself!"*

"I hate you," I groaned. "Where could this thing even hide two phylacteries? There's not much left inside here—wait a minute... No. No. No! Ugh, yuck!" I cursed, as realized I knew exactly where they were.

With a determined resolve, I turned around and crawled back through the chimera's ribcage, making my way down its spine. A goddess's laughter echoed outside of the beast, a mocking soundtrack to my endeavor. I pressed on, navigating past the rotting remnants of its stomach and intestines, narrowly evading strikes from its thrashing cobra tail. The interior of the monster was a gruesome sight, a grotesque display of decaying blood and torn guts. I couldn't help but feel a pang of frustration and hunger. All I wanted was a moment to savor a meal, but there was no time for that now. To make matters worse, my Corrosive and Venomous touch proved rather ineffective, and the monster remained resistant to my Paralysis. My trademark weapons were rendered useless in this battle.

As I drew closer to the suspected location of the phylacteries, the chimera suddenly went into a frenzied fit, thrashing about like a deranged bull in an attempt to dislodge me. It jumped, jerked, and shook its body violently, desperate to rid itself of my presence. But I clung to its flesh and bones, resolved in my determination to remain inside the beast. I refused to be shaken loose. With every ounce of my strength and tenacity, I crawled deeper into its insides, navigating through the tumultuous chaos. My tentacle-like arms propelled me forward, pushing through the grotesque

maze of flesh and bone, inching closer to my objective. My will to survive burned fiercely within me, driving me onward into its pelvis.

I had done it! I was right above the bastard’s scrotum, dangling there like a gooey, slimy spider. Now, I just needed to figure out how the hell to get inside that sack. But then, it hit me like a ton of bricks. I released Polymorph and transformed back into my true form, a sticky, tar-like liquid. Nothing could stop me now as I leaked and oozed my way deep into the asshole’s nut sack. And there they were, shining like pale green emeralds the size of basketballs. *No wonder my puny fists couldn’t even make a dent.* Whatever the hell those balls were made of, they were mine for the breaking. It was time to give his family jewels a good old-fashioned pounding.

“Umm... Circe, it just hit me that I don’t have anything suitable to crack open these nuts,” I confessed with a hint of gurgled frustration.

Her voice resonated within my mind, clear as day, despite the chaotic backdrop and my current, somewhat muffled state. “*They’re phylacteries, not nuts. Did you collect the sword and shield?*” she inquired, her tone carrying an uncharacteristic hint of helpfulness.

*Umm... What sword and shield?*

“*From your last boss fight, the sword and shield the toad dropped upon dying,*” Circe reiterated.

*It dropped those?*

“*...Child, this is an ancient beginner’s dungeon specifically designed to help low-level levelers reach level one hundred and choose their first class,*” Circe explained with a hint of exasperation. She paused briefly before continuing, “*This place is usually filled with helpful items for that purpose. It’s your responsibility to seize those opportunities and make use of them, like grabbing a sword that could be used to sever this boss monster from its phylacteries.*”

I didn’t care much for her lectures. Nope, my mind was on that little tidbit of information that she let slip. I couldn’t help myself as I began cackling like a mad woman! I didn’t care if this was some noob dungeon, or that I was a weakling. I had just won; only the goddess and this fucker hadn’t realized it yet! My body was now coating the chimera’s nuts—phylacteries! I didn’t have anything to cut them out, but I had something that could remove them waiting for me to select with my last skill point.

[STELLAR VOID]

GAIN THE CAPABILITY TO CALL FORTH A POCKET DIMENSION THROUGH INHERENT SORCERY.

TYPE

RACIAL SKILL

ACTIVATION

CAST

WOULD YOU LIKE TO SELECT [STELLAR VOID] AS AN ACTIVE RACIAL SKILL?

YES / NO



now able to melt through the undead creature. Instead of freely exploring its innermost depths, I took my time savoring my meal.

With a British-style breakfast of sausage and beans, I oozed my way back into the chimera's torn intestines and out of the hole in its abdomen. I was still in my true form as a Black Pudding and could have easily made a quick exit dissolving my way out from where I had just been. That said, the idea of leaking out of his nut sack, like the day I was first conceived, was a no-go. I was a girl with standards, after all.

In my tar-like form, I typically opted not to form physical eyes, preferring to rely on the full power of Mana Sight for perception. The disorienting panoramic view provided by Mana Sight is both fascinating and overwhelming. However, as I seeped out of the chimera's carcass, a desire to have a more focused perspective led me to reform my eyes. With a surge of mana, a pair of vibrant orange orbs emerged on my gooey form, providing me with a familiar sense of sight. My gaze immediately gravitated towards the spot where the three statues had once stood, now void of their presence.

"Umm, Circe, where did they go?" I asked the goddess as I surveyed the arena for the three missing statues.

"Hmm... *Oh, don't worry about them. They decided to leave,*" Circe replied nonchalantly.

"Decided to leave? Bosses inside a dungeon can do that?"

"*With the Dungeon Core gone, technically, this isn't a dungeon anymore. To be honest, I'm more surprised the Toad Barbarian decided to fight you at all. The chimera, sure, it was a mindless undead lich. But the barbarian? Without the core, there's no contract binding it here, let alone any chance of respawning after defeat.*"

I couldn't help but feel like someone just kicked me in the ovaries. Seriously, I went through all that trouble, crawling into a chimera's nut sack, and now I'm being told that the other bosses just decided to take a fucking hike! *Are you kidding me?* That's a potential thirty levels right there, just walking away like it's no big deal. It's enough to make a badass woman like me want to scream. Now I'm stuck here, contemplating whether I should kick some candidates' asses or go on a mission to steal back the dungeon core. *Decisions, decisions.* Time to weigh the options and see which one will bring me the most carnage and delight.

Before delving into the decision-making process, I decided to shift my form back to its humanlike shape. As I reformed my body, I drew back the two orbs of Mana Sight, unleashing its full force. With an overwhelming awareness, I observed in awe as millions of delicate silk threads shot out from my body, branching out in all directions like a spider's web. They danced through the air, interweaving and entwining with each other until they formed a beautiful, white silk-like skin that encased my newly reformed body. It was a mesmerizing sight. However, as I took a moment to appreciate my transformation, I realized with mild embarrassment that I now appeared completely nude—albeit a Barbie nippleless type of nude. In a quick and somewhat messy fashion, my black gooey form oozed out from beneath my newly formed silk skin, rapidly solidifying into a dress that covered the majority of my silk shell.

Up until this moment, my shapeshifting abilities had always felt somewhat instinctual, as if I lacked precise control. However, something had changed. Now, it felt like second nature, as if my

body knew exactly how to mold itself to my desires. And I must admit, I was quite fond of the result. My face still had that otherworldly, alien-like appearance, but there was a slight increase to my cuteness, at least in my opinion. Now, my skin covered my entire body, even underneath the dress made from, well...me. Speaking of the dress, it had taken on a gothic ballgown style, which was a stark contrast to my past life preferences—I had always hated wearing dresses. Yet, I found myself oddly drawn to them now. At first glance, the embroidery appeared intricate and detailed, but upon closer inspection, one could see that the threads were withering and squiggling tendrils. It was a fascinating blend of elegance and malevolent darkness, and I couldn't help but love it.

I glanced at the remains of the delicious rotting meal I had just vanquished, a thought suddenly dawning on me. It would have been far more convenient if I had consumed and absorbed the chimera's corpse before undergoing my shapeshifting. Now, I was faced with the messy prospect of reforming my body after the fact.

"Damn it," I sighed before mentally activating [ABSORB].

As I triggered the skill, my body underwent a violent transformation. It tore apart, returning to its original gooey state that spread out and enveloped the entire carcass of the chimera. The acidic properties of my form went to work, rapidly dissolving the once formidable creature. Within moments, there was nothing left but a pool of liquefied remains, consumed by my insatiable hunger.

"So much for savoring my meal," I muttered as a few tentacles reached out to swab up the remaining juices. "Where do I store all this food?" I pondered, but Circe didn't bother answering my question, it didn't matter, she would probably say something stupid—like, "it's magic."

[ABSORB] [LICH KING CHIMERA] SUCCESSFUL.
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>SELECTABLE</u> [ACID BREATH] [POISON SPIT]</p>

I couldn't help but feel a tinge of disappointment at the limited options presented to me, especially upon receiving nothing after getting a major level up. Perhaps I had been spoiled by the vast array of skills I gained from absorbing a horde of undead creatures. Plus, the absence of my dream spell—lightning magic—was particularly disheartening, but it wasn't like the undead beast had that spell to begin with. Nonetheless, Acid Breath and Poison Spit sounded like they would offer some versatility to my repertoire at first glance by adding much needed ranged capabilities, complementing my already formidable close-range attacks. I knew I needed to diversify my skillset to handle opponents who might possess resistance to acid and poison, but nothing else seemed to present itself.

With my body reformed, skin and dress intact, I wandered through the coliseum's arena, scanning for any overlooked corpses of the fallen undead. It's amusing how I, as a former human, didn't find the act of consuming corpses to be gross or repulsive. In fact, it's a strangely satisfying sensation that I simply delighted in doing. The temptation to feast on the remains is too great to ignore. However, to my disappointment, I found no stragglers lying about, depriving me of the opportunity for another delectable meal.



Sometime after my meal, Circe had chosen to vanish, a decision that took me by surprise. I hadn't anticipated her being able to disappear on her own, considering I had to use Oracle to summon her in the first place. Still, the notion of a literal goddess being bound to my will seemed even more ludicrous. While I contemplated resummoning her, I ultimately decided to give my plaything a break. I would have plenty of opportunities to annoy her later.

With a quick glance at my skill list, I decided it was high time to allocate my four precious skill points to new magical abilities. After all, I had gained twenty levels off that fight. It was a strategic move to do it now rather than fumbling around in the heat of battle. I mean, come on, only a complete lunatic would attempt...such a thing.

[ACID BREATH]

ACQUIRE THE SPELL TO UNLEASH A CLOUD OF [ACID] UPON YOUR ADVERSARIES.

TYPE  
SPELL

ACTIVATION  
CAST

[POISON SPIT]

ACQUIRE THE ABILITY TO SEND A PROJECTILE OF [POISON] AT A TARGET.

TYPE  
ABILITY

ACTIVATION  
CAST

I pondered my options, considering the best ways to enhance my abilities and expand my arsenal. There were several skills that caught my attention, each offering unique advantages in combat. It was time to make some strategic choices and increase my powers.

10 OUT OF 12 SELECTABLE SKILLS ACTIVATED

With my first two skill points, I wasted no time investing them into Acid Breath and Poison Spit. These ranged attacks would provide a valuable addition to my repertoire, granting me the ability to strike from a distance, an area where I had been lacking in. The thought of spewing acid and venomous poison on my enemies filled me with a sense of satisfaction and eager anticipation.

As for my next two skill points, I found myself faced with a more challenging decision. There were so many enticing options to choose from, each offering unique advantages and possibilities.

SELECTABLE  
[ASTRAL INSIGHT]  
[BRITTLE BONES]  
[COMBAT PROFICIENCY]

[DECAY TOUCH]  
 [FEAR]  
 [FORTRESS]  
 [LEAP]  
 [LIFE DRAIN]  
 [MINDLESS REGENERATION]  
 [ROTTEN AURA]  
 [SHAMBLE]  
 [SHIELD PROFICIENCY]  
 [SPIDER WALK]  
 [SPIRIT VESSEL]

I found myself repeatedly considering Life Drain and Mindless Regeneration, genuinely intrigued by the prospect of acquiring a healing skill. However, upon careful reflection, I realized that my natural resilience was already quite remarkable. While I didn't believe I was impervious to all harm, it seemed that I possessed a remarkable ability to recover swiftly from most injuries. As a result, I ultimately decided to forgo the healing options for the time being.

Opting for a different strategy, I began eliminating the obvious choices that didn't align with my current needs. I crossed out options like Shamble, Brittle Bones, and Leap, as they didn't offer much value to me. While Leap sounded tempting, I felt that it wasn't necessary, considering that I already had Burst.

Furthermore, I chose to postpone selecting Combat Proficiency and Shield Proficiency for the time being. Although I found Combat Proficiency tempting, it wasn't a priority of mine—I mean, I probably should get it, but I really-really wanted to be a sorceress, so I stubbornly refused to consider it. As for Shield Proficiency, it simply didn't align with my needs in the same manner as healing.

Similarly, I discarded the option of Fortress, though a part of me wondered if I could use the skill to create actual bones and teeth instead of the silk caps that I found myself involuntarily touching with my tentacle tongue—yep, I had already gotten good enough with Silk Webbing to form teeth.

Spider Walk also caught my attention, but I decided to save it for a later round of skill selections, knowing it would likely be a valuable addition to my repertoire. And let's be honest, the idea of walking on walls was just too damn cool.

Decay Touch seemed like a viable option, but I couldn't ignore the fact that my touch skills with Paralysis, Venomous, and Corrosive was already a nasty combo. I wanted to branch out and try something new. Rotten Aura intrigued me for a while, with its ability to emit a foul odor and aura of decay. It sounded oddly delightful in a twisted way. However, the thought of repulsing Aurelia with my stench made me reconsider. So, I turned my attention to Fear, contemplating the psychological impact it could have on my opponents. Moreover, Fear had the advantage of being an aura skill, which happened to be an area I was currently lacking.

[FEAR]

GAIN THE SPELL TO SPREAD AN AURA OF [FEAR] AMONGST YOUR FOES.

<u>TYPE</u> <b>SPELL</b>  <u>ACTIVATION</u> <b>CAST</b>
WOULD YOU LIKE TO SELECT [ <b>FEAR</b> ] AS AN ACTIVE SPELL? YES / NO

With a resolute decision, I mentally gave a firm, “Yes” and moved on to my last option.

11 out of 12 Selectable Skills Activated
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Although I contemplated saving it for future absorptions, particularly in the hope of acquiring a lightning spell, I ultimately decided to make the investment. After all, with two phylacteries securely stored within Stellar Void and two souls at my disposal to either utilize or discard for new ones, it seemed only fitting to delve into the realms of necromancy with Astral Insight or Spirit Vessel. Both skills held immense potential for my necromantic future, and the more I pondered, the more enticing they became. Additionally, the prospect of testing these abilities on two intriguing female champion candidates added another layer of intrigue to my decision-making process.

Unable to resist the allure of the phylacteries, I succumbed to the impulse and began toying with my own hands, an action resembling that of a deranged lunatic. “My preciouses,” I muttered in my best Smeagol impression.

However, upon closer examination, I realized that Astral Insight would only grant me the ability to sense and discern the presence of souls in my vicinity. While it was certainly interesting, it didn’t provide the level of control and manipulation over souls that I desired. That realization led me to the conclusion that Spirit Vessel was the skill I truly wanted.

<b>[SPIRIT VESSEL]</b>  TAP INTO THE ENERGY OF CAPTURED SOULS FOR VARIOUS PURPOSES.  <u>TYPE</u> <b>SPELL</b>  <u>ACTIVATION</u> <b>CAST</b>
WOULD YOU LIKE TO SELECT [ <b>SPIRIT VESSEL</b> ] AS AN ACTIVE SPELL? YES / NO

The skill description wasn’t exactly what I would call detailed, but according to Circe, the intentionally vague nature of skill descriptions provided the flexibility for the wielder to shape the spell’s outcome within the confines of the skill’s parameters. It gave me the freedom to determine

the specific effects and applications of the spell based on my own interpretation. And as far as I understood it, this was going to be my first necromancer spell. I gave it a hard, “Yes!”

12 OUT OF 12 SELECTABLE SKILLS ACTIVATED

I mused aloud, weighing my options. “Now, should I go after the dungeon core or chase down the other candidates?” A thought struck me. “Maybe I should ask Circe. Despite her attitude, she occasionally mutters something useful.”

# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 10

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### NIGHTMARES & TENTACLES

There were five...

Heather glided through the dungeon's labyrinthine corridors with a stealth borne of nervous energy. Her eyes, sharp and wary, avoided the stares of the four champion candidates trailing in her wake. Their collective breaths were soft whispers in the oppressive silence, a silence heavy with unspoken conspiracies. Each step they took was a delicate dance on the knife-edge of treachery, their alliance as fragile as a spider's web.

The dungeon's shadows seemed to cling to Heather, its darkness echoing the tumultuous storm within her. Too rarely for her comfort, she fought skirmishes with nightmarish creatures, their forms barely visible in the gloom. Each spell she conjured was not just a weapon against these monsters—each victory was a potential level—a shield against the latent threat at her back. Her companions, potential foes in waiting, stirred a relentless paranoia within her. The question wasn't if the truce would break, but when, and who would be the first to turn their blade upon her.

The path they traversed was one of haunting desolation, the silence punctuated only by the eerie echo of their footsteps. Now and then, a guttural snarl would ripple through the darkness, a fleeting promise of conflict. Heather's mind was a whirling tempest of suspicion and strategy, constantly revisiting one gnawing thought: Who among her group would betray them first?

Isolated within the group, Heather felt the acute loneliness of her plight. Her physical form, that of a lithe dark elf with a cascade of white hair, belied the inner turmoil of her reality. This fantastical existence as a mage in another world, once a dream, was now a stark, unyielding reality where only the strongest survived.

As they approached the boss chamber, the daunting doors loomed like silent judges, their towering presence a stark reminder of the impending battle. Heather's heart raced, a frantic drumbeat against the solemn stillness. She inhaled deeply, in a failed attempt to calm her racing pulse and steady her trembling hands. The weight of what lay beyond those doors bore down upon her, a tangible dread that seemed to drink in the light around them. The sensation of being watched, of being judged, clawed at her resolve, intensifying her fear to a near unbearable pitch.



Yua's arrival was accompanied by a visible trembling of her hands, a telltale sign of the inner turmoil beneath her enigmatic and composed demeanor. Behind the mask of calmness, doubt and fear clawed at her, threatening to consume her resolve as she stood on the precipice of the boss's chamber. Standing tall and commanding, her towering figure radiated confidence, further bolstered by her transformation into a high elf. Gifted with inherent intelligence and wisdom, Yua

effortlessly distinguished herself among her peers, renowned by them for her exceptional ability to think swiftly and make sound decisions amidst the most intense and challenging situations. However, at this moment, she found herself grappling with her own internal fears, as if some external force was stoking the flames of her apprehension.

As Yua made her way toward the imposing doors, the darkness seemed to seep into her very being, suffusing her mind and spirit with a heavy sense of oppression. A malevolent presence lurked on the other side, poised to strike at a moment's notice. The sensation of being watched intensified, engulfing Yua in an overwhelming wave of dread. It clung to her like a shroud, refusing to be shaken off. The weight of responsibility bore down upon her as she stood before the entrance to the boss's chamber. She knew that the outcome of the impending battle rested not only on her shoulders but also on the collective actions of her fellow candidates, individuals who would soon become her adversaries. The gravity of the situation was not lost on her, as the fate of their shared conflict hung in the balance.

With a deep breath, Yua held onto the hope that her own resolve and fearlessness would ignite a spark within Heather, propelling them forward as a unified force. Together, they would navigate the treacherous path ahead and emerge triumphant from this harrowing ordeal. Yua steeled herself, prepared to confront her own fears head-on and, if necessary, to eliminate the other candidates at the first hint of betrayal. Together, she and Heather would seize their chance to escape, leaving behind the trial altogether. That was the dream, at least, the outcome she desperately craved.



Jason approached the door next, a serene composure masking his true intentions. He cast a watchful gaze upon the others, silently assessing their strengths and vulnerabilities. In his mind, he deemed himself the most cunning, confident that his superior intellect would pave the way for his triumph over the rest. Unwavering in his resolve, Jason harbored no illusions—he had every intention of betraying the group.

With his lean frame, Jason sported an unsettling grin that mirrored his quick wit, evoking a sense of unease in those who crossed his path. His sharp, needle-like teeth further enhanced his fearsome demeanor. With a touch of vanity, he boasted of his resemblance to a character from a Mortal Kombat video game, though his hair was more reminiscent of Edward Scissorhands. Embracing the darkness that enveloped him, Jason reveled in his twisted perception as the ultimate champion of the darkness. After all, being thrust into the body of a dark fae had only heightened Jason's affinity for the cruel and sinister.

The palpable tension and uncertainty among his unsuspecting party members only fueled Jason's sadistic pleasure. Each passing moment heightened his anticipation as he eagerly awaited the chance to extinguish yet another unsuspecting soul. However, a flicker of unease began to infiltrate his usually confident demeanor. The massive doors exuded an unknown danger, and an unsettling feeling gnawed at him from the depths of his mind. Heather and he had already scouted out the toad a couple of days ago, but something felt different this time. Jason dismissed the nagging sensation, attributing it to his excitement and anticipation of mercilessly dispatching his companions and indulging in their hearts after confronting the boss.

Jason was a ruthless competitor and determined to come out on top. He was aware that the other candidates were plotting against each other. Still, Jason was confident in his ability to outwit them. The upcoming boss battle was crucial, and Jason was determined to use it to his advantage. He watched as the other candidates were mentally preparing for the fight, but he held back, waiting for the right moment to strike.

In the end, the choice was stark and clear. Either they faced the boss as a united front, or Jason could take matters into his own hands, disposing of his companions one by one before confronting the boss alone and inevitably meeting his own demise. As he stood there, feigning camaraderie while waiting for the others to gather their resolve,

Jason's mind was consumed by sinister anticipation. The thought of executing his carefully crafted plan to murder each of his fellow candidates filled him with a perverse thrill. He was determined to prove himself as the ultimate dark champion, a testament to the power and dominance he wielded. With each passing moment, his heart raced with a mix of excitement and sadistic satisfaction. For Jason, the forthcoming battle held the promise of eliminating his competitors and securing his path to victory.



Besides the others, Rob arrived with a mixture of overwhelming fear and uncertainty coursing through his being. At the tender age of fifteen, he was the youngest among them and felt ill prepared for the perils of this new world. The prospect of betraying his companions weighed heavily on his conscience, and the thought of shedding their blood in cold indifference left him paralyzed with doubt. In the depths of his soul, Rob silently pleaded for miraculous intervention, desperately hoping to navigate the treacherous dungeon unscathed, with no stains of blood on his hands.

Rob's imposing presence was undeniable, his half-orc physique adorned with a musculature that demanded attention and respect. His brow remained perpetually furrowed, a testament to the seriousness and intensity that radiated from within him, despite his young age. In his previous life as an avid gamer, Rob had reveled in visions of becoming a paladin, a paragon of unwavering dedication to justice and a master of divine powers. Yet, the cruel twist of fate had destined him to be a necromancer apprentice, a role that clashed with his aspirations and left him grappling with his true purpose in this new reality.

Rob's mind churned with a storm of unsettling thoughts as he lingered outside the foreboding entrance to the boss's chamber. The sheer magnitude of the massive doors served as a grim reminder of the weighty consequences they faced. Failure to overcome the imminent challenge would not only unravel the tenuous truce that held them together but also unleash a chaotic spiral of betrayal and violence. The very notion of Jason's sinister ambitions, fueled by a desire to eliminate his comrades and establish himself as the embodiment of darkness, stirred a profound sense of revulsion within Rob. The internal conflict waged fiercely as he grappled with his own convictions and sought a path that aligned with his moral compass.

Yet, what disturbed him, even more, was the uncharacteristic silence that cloaked Jason. It was as if a cloud of unease had settled upon the group, and Rob couldn't shake the unsettling feeling that

something was amiss. Despite the fear that gripped his heart, Rob clung steadfastly to his unwavering sense of justice and morality, hoping that it would serve as a guiding light through the encroaching darkness.

As a contingency plan, Rob relied on the two undead goblins that trailed behind him, ready to act as a diversion against Jason and the boss while he sought his escape. While his primary objective was to survive this nightmarish ordeal, he knew that achieving it would require unwavering determination and resourcefulness. The instinct to flee surged within him, tempting him with the promise of safety, but Rob understood that yielding to such impulses would only invite Jason's swift and ruthless pursuit. Steeling himself, he prepared to confront the impending battle, drawing upon his wits as his most potent weapon. Though he had deviated from the path of the paladin he had once aspired to be, he clung fiercely to that distant dream, determined to find solace in the strength of his resolve, however tenuous it may be.



Jeremy found himself in the body of a formidable beastkin, characterized by broad shoulders, canine traits, and a resonant, booming voice. His innate potential as a fearsome warrior shone through, positioning him as a formidable presence among the group of five. Jeremy possessed a protective nature, constantly striving to maintain harmony and peace among his companions. Through Heather and Jason's scouting, they had determined that the looming boss was a colossal red toad, a formidable adversary that would require their collective teamwork to overcome.

Despite his reservations, Jeremy remained resolute in his determination to see their mission through to the end. He fully grasped the weight of their situation, recognizing that their only chance for survival lay in facing the boss together, lest their fragile truce crumble and devolved into a bloodbath. Taking a deep breath, he steeled himself for the impending battle, mentally preparing to confront any obstacle that stood in their way.

The massive doors of the boss's chamber loomed before him, their imposing presence a stark reminder of the daunting task that awaited them. Yet, Jeremy stood firm, unwavering in his commitment to the cause. Despite his concerns, he braced himself for the forthcoming clash with the boss, resolved to persevere at any cost.



As Heather and the other candidates ventured further into the boss's chamber, anticipation burned within them, fueling their eagerness for the impending battle. However, their expectations were shattered upon witnessing an unexpected sight. Instead of the anticipated toad, they beheld the presence of a stunning woman, her flawless white skin and cascading raven hair. Her elegant attire akin to a gothic gown. Seated upon an imposing throne adorned with writhing black tentacles, she exuded an aura of otherworldly beauty and power.

Yet, her mesmerizing gaze, bathed in a molten iron hue, held an unsettling quality. It was as if the radiance of an angelic being was juxtaposed with the hunger of a ravenous demon, her porcelain doll-like appearance belying the presence of unimaginable horrors lurking within her. As her lips



curved into a smile, revealing porcelain white teeth contrasted against black gums, the air thickened with an unmistakably terrifying aura, sending shivers down the spines of all who stood before her.

The dim lighting of the room was only accentuated by the eerily glowing orange eyes of the woman on the throne. An overwhelming feeling of discomfort permeated the air, making it feel like they were inhaling a dense fog. Four of the five candidates cast uneasy glances at one another, their expressions reflecting the fear and uncertainty they all felt as they stood on shaky legs before the strange woman, bearing the full force of an ominous aura surrounding her.

She began muttering to herself, her words so hushed that they were barely audible, yet they stirred a sense of unease and madness within the four of them. Abruptly, her attention shifted from them, her demonic orange eyes disinterestedly fixating on her own black nail polish. It was as though she deemed their presence beneath her, fueling their growing discomfort and trepidation. Her murmurs persisted as if completely oblivious to their existence, intensifying their sense of dread and confirming that the unsettling aura they had felt upon entering emanated solely from her.

“Ugh, are you sure about this? I mean, seriously? But still, I can’t help but question it. Yeah, yeah, I know I need to toughen up for what’s out there, but is this really the way? It’s just... I never expected you to be the one pushing me to ditch the system. Didn’t you create it? I guess there’s that reason. Oh well, I hope so, but everything outside of this noob dungeon can’t really be as bad as you insist. Alright, fine, no casting with the system.”

“Suffer the eye of the seer, for none shall hide, [APPRAISAL],” Heather whispered the incantation.

The air grew heavy with anticipation, and she braced herself for the revelation that awaited her. But when the screen materialized in her vision, horror washed over her, freezing her in place.

**Name:** Blake

**Race:** Black Pudding

**Class:** Dungeon Monster

**Level:** ??

Titles

**Hopeless Crusader**

Heather’s voice was barely a whisper, a tentative murmur lost amidst the heightened tension of the moment. “S-she’s a dungeon monster,” she breathed out, her words a fragile thread in the thick air of anticipation.

Around her, the others seemed oblivious to her revelation, their gazes firmly riveted on the enigmatic woman before them. They were absorbed in their own calculations and strategies, oblivious to the critical insight Heather had just muttered.

Heather herself stood somewhat aghast, her mind racing. It baffled her that no details of the monster’s abilities—its weaknesses and resistances—were visible to her. Normally, such information would be clear, outlined by the system, but now there was nothing, just a daunting

blankness. Her suspicion quickly focused on the most unusual aspect of the creature before her: its level marked by a series of enigmatic question marks.

Heather was unfamiliar with Black Puddings, but that didn't faze her much. After all, there were many other monsters and creatures in this reality that she had yet to encounter. However, the question-marked level of the Black Pudding puzzled her. She had never come across anyone or anything with a title, and the name gave her pause. *Could it really be the same monster?*

Despite the fear and uncertainty that permeated the room, Jason remained undaunted. The prospect of the battle ahead only fueled his determination to emerge victorious, and he couldn't help but relish the experience. With a steely gaze, he surveyed the strange woman's body, his eyes hungry and eager for the challenge that lay before him. He was ready to confront it head-on and savor every moment of the encounter.

Yua finally found her voice and asked the question that had been lingering in her mind, "What level is she?"

However, no response came as the strange woman resumed her murmurs, seemingly lost in her own world. "Yeah, I got this! I don't want to scare 'em off before the fight even begins. Yeah, yeah, I guess you're right, but I feel like I'm cheating. No. No, I like cheating!"

Yua's ears perked up, catching fragments of the mad woman's whispers, but they were disjointed and elusive, preventing her from fully comprehending the conversation. Nevertheless, the erratic nature of the woman's murmurs was enough to solidify Yua's conclusion—the woman was nuts!

The four candidates, minus Jason, were plagued by uncertainty, their faith in their pursuit wavering. They knew that faltering would lead to their demise. Despite the tremors in their resolve, they could not bring themselves to give up, having come too far to surrender. Their only options were a brutal defeat at the hand of a fellow candidate or united in a violent confrontation with the strange woman. Standing on unsteady legs, they braced themselves for the impending terror as they listened to the woman's manic whispers.

"Fine, but at least let me savor the taste of their flesh in silence afterward. Well, gee thanks...though I must admit, I'm rather surprised by your sudden helpfulness."

Jason's razorblade-filled smirk only grew, "this bitch is crazy!"

Jeremy asked with urgency, "I want to know what happened to the toad. Heather, what's her level?"

"I-I don't know! Her level is hidden behind question marks. But it does indicate that she's a dungeon monster," Heather replied.

Yua asked curiously, "What about that creepy chair?"

"Appraisal only d-detects her. However, she has a name. It's B-Blake," Heather answered.

"Blake," Yua repeated.

Jason laughed, "Ha! So, she's all by herself."

Rob proposed, "The chair could be an object. Maybe we should try to get her away from it."

Jason waved off their concerns, his voice laced with confidence. “Why are you all so nervous? It’s obviously just a decorative throne. If we work together, we can take her down without a problem.”

Heather’s voice trembled with urgency as she emphasized their lack of knowledge about the woman’s level. Unfortunately, her timid tone failed to catch the attention of the others, who remained oblivious to her warning.

Jason’s laughter reverberated through the chamber, eliciting a sense of unease among the remaining four. Without hesitation, he charged towards the woman, his steps resolute and determined. The others stood frozen, their surprise leaving them momentarily defenseless. Meanwhile, the enigmatic woman remained seated upon her throne of writhing tentacles, an embodiment of fear and dread in their eyes. As Jason neared his target, the woman raised her hand, and a single tentacle recoiled, poised to strike with lethal intent.

Remaining seated upon her throne, the woman directed a single finger towards Jason, who had closed in on her. In an instant, a tentacle sprang to life, lashing out and releasing a cloud of yellow mist that engulfed him. The noxious fumes swiftly engulfed Jason’s body immediately succumbed to the noxious fumes, his strength waning as the mist infiltrated his lungs. Agonizing sensations wracked his form as if his flesh were being consumed by acid. A piercing scream tore through the air, only to be abruptly silenced as Jason vanished from sight. Moments later, he reappeared by Jeremy’s side, his face contorted in pain as he clutched it, groaning in torment.

“That fucking bitch threw acid at me,” Jason cried out!

As the mist dissipated, the woman slowly rose from her throne, her presence commanding and eerie. Her eyes, aglow with an intense orange hue, held a flickering inner fire that seemed to consume her very being. With a detached gaze, she observed Jason’s collapse to the ground, leaving the remaining four candidates stunned and rendered speechless.

The porcelain doll woman snickered to herself, seemingly entertained by the chaos she had caused. “That wasn’t a bit much,” she murmured, a mischievous glint in her orange eyes. “I haven’t killed him... yet.” She paused as if listening to an internal conversation. “Oh, that? Well, I couldn’t resist trying out one of my new skills. I know, I know, system commands and all that. Geesh! Alright, alright, I’ll feel the so-called ambient mana... No! Ugh, you sound like a hippie. Yes, I’m paying attention!”

Heather’s eyes widened in shock at the sight of Jason’s agony. With cautious steps, she approached him, her hand trembling as she reached out to touch his shoulder. Drawing upon the power within her, she channeled her magic and stammered through the incantation, her voice quivering, “I c-call upon the darkness, m-mend!” A gentle warmth enveloped Jason, emanating from Heather’s touch, as a soothing aura of healing magic embraced his wounded form. Gradually, the damage inflicted by the acidic mist began to fade, replaced by a sense of relief and comfort.

Despite her efforts to heal him, Heather’s true feelings toward Jason simmered beneath the surface, far from warm and compassionate. In truth, she despised him with every fiber of her being, harboring a deep-seated desire to witness his suffering and demise. She understood all too well that he wouldn’t hesitate to inflict pain upon her if their positions were reversed. However, in this moment, self-preservation took precedence over personal vendettas. Keeping Jason alive, albeit begrudgingly, became a necessary evil in their harrowing struggle for survival.

Yua shook her head, “We’ve got to work together, you dumbass!”

“Yeah, I think I figured that out,” Jason muttered as he stood back up, fully healed.

In the face of their initial fear and personal reservations, the group quickly recognized the urgency of banding together to confront the common enemy before them. The mysterious woman posed a shared threat that required their collective strength and cooperation. Reluctantly setting aside their differences, even Jason understood the need for a united front. Taking a moment to gather their courage, the group prepared themselves for the impending battle, fully aware that only through unity could they hope to overcome the formidable challenges that lay ahead.

Yua was the first to shout, “I call upon you, oh dark goddess, heed my plea, [**DARKNESS ARROW**]!”

Jeremy followed, “From the gastral depths of my soul, I call forth, [**ACID BALL**].”

The dual attacks of Acid Ball and Darkness Arrow hit the dungeon monster disguised as a stunning woman with full force. She let out a scream of agony and stumbled, falling to her hands and knees. Jason burst into triumphant laughter, but Heather noticed the smile on the woman’s face and felt herself shiver.

“Dramatic? Oh, shut up and let me have my fun,” the woman muttered beneath her breath to herself.

“Fear the phantoms, for they shall consume you, [**PHANTOM SLASH**],” Jason chanted before vanishing.

Jason materialized above the woman, a wicked smile etched on his face as she writhed and trembled beneath him. With sadistic delight, he raised his sword, relishing the anticipation of the final blow. But as he swung the blade towards her neck, a chilling realization struck him. The woman’s cries were not of pain but of perverse pleasure. Her laughter filled the chamber, stirring a twisted mixture of confusion and trepidation within Jason.

Undeterred, he executed his strike, severing her head from her body in a single swift motion. Yet, as her lifeless form collapsed, a strange transformation occurred. The woman melted away, merging with her grotesque throne, leaving Jason standing beside it, a perplexed expression plastered across his face.

“What just happened?” Jeremy asked.

They all stood in stunned silence as the squirming tentacles of the throne abruptly vanished before their eyes. It wasn’t a simple disappearance; it was a rapid burst of acceleration that only one of them managed to perceive. Rob, with his heightened battle senses, was the first to catch sight of her. The woman’s dress underwent a startling transformation, her face seeming almost alien, while her dress hugged her curves with a newfound allure, while her oily black hair cascaded down to the curve of her lower back, writhing with sinister delight. Despite the change, her glowing orange eyes remained unmistakable, cutting through the darkness with an intense gaze. One of her arms had twisted into a tentacle, ensnaring one of Rob’s undead goblins, which fought desperately but futilely as it dissolved within her grasp.

“Okay, now it’s my turn—what? Ugh, yes, ambient mana, gotcha. Well, I needed to use the system for burst. I get it,” the woman muttered, her tone bordering on argumentative, leaving the five onlookers thoroughly confused.

Jason started yelling in frustration, “WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT!”

“What is she talking about,” Yua asked?

“Yua, how long until you can recast Darkness Arrow,” Jeremy probed while considering their options.

“It normally takes around three minutes. What about your Acid Ball?”

“Same,” he groaned.

The woman’s gaze shifted away from the sight of the oozing goblin guts and landed on the group. “It’s not wise to talk about your cooldowns like that in front of an opponent. Geesh, isn’t that basic gamer common sense?”

“FUCK YOU,” Jason screamed!

Heather, however, realized something was immediately off about the woman’s comment. “How do you know about gamers,” she asked?

“Hmm...? Oh, well, that’s an interesting tidbit,” the woman mused, seemingly lost in her own thoughts. “What? Why not? It won’t hurt anything,” she continued, engaging in her peculiar self-dialogue. She then turned her attention back to Heather, her eyes gleaming with a mix of madness and excitement. “That’s because I’m a summon candidate too. Just. Like. You!” she declared with a twisted grin. “And not only am I going to win, but I’m also going to savor my meal when I devour each one of you!”

“She’s a sadistic psychopath,” Jason stated.

“Well, isn’t that rich,” the woman retorted, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “A demon accusing the devil of being sadistic! At least I have the decency to finish my meals, unlike you, leaving behind a delicious corpse after your murderous rampage. What a waste of a perfectly good meal. Oh, what was her name again? Sophia?” Her mocking tone carried a hint of dark amusement.

Rob stepped back, his last remaining undead goblin in tow. “Who are you?” he asked.

“Hmm... Oh... Uh, what? Didn’t I just say who I was,” the woman responded, her voice laced with a touch of confusion.

Jeremy advanced confidently, trying to mask his fear. “We don’t need to resort to violence,” he said. “Perhaps we could collaborate and find a way to escape the dungeon without having to murder each other.”

“That’s a fair point,” she mused while smiling. “But, alas, it will not come to pass. For I am hungry, and you are here. Also, team evil has a gorgeous vampire I would really like to hook up with.”

Jason, nodded his head in understanding.

Rob was consumed by fear. The thought of dying in this cursed place was too much for him to bear. Despite seeing himself as a noble and heroic paladin, the reality of being summoned as an evil half-orc necromancer went against everything he believed. Despite this, Rob was determined not to let fear control him. He was filled with dread and terror, a scared little boy trapped in a man’s body, and he didn’t want to die in this place. Rob took a deep breath and pushed away the negative

thoughts, trying to focus on the task at hand. He tried to convince himself that he was a brave and heroic hero, but deep down, Rob knew he was simply lying to himself.

With a silent whimper, Rob pointed his hand toward the woman and started his chant for his most powerful attack spell. “The death of the undying pain knows no end, [NECROTIC FLAME].”

As the incantation slipped from Rob’s lips, a surge of dark purple flames erupted, converging into a colossal wave aimed straight at the woman. Yet, with a disconcerting burst of speed, she effortlessly sidestepped the attack, leaving Rob’s spell to crash against empty space. Her black dress billowed behind her like a sinister cape, defying the laws of physics even as she stood motionless.

Rob turned, his eyes widening in shock at her sudden agility, realizing his attempts to redirect the spell were futile. The woman’s wicked laughter reverberated through the air, delighting in the spectacle as she disappeared in a blur once again, only to reappear just behind him with eerie grace.

Yua let out a startled yelp and stumbled backward, losing her balance, and collapsing onto the ground. The sight did nothing to deter the woman, who simply chuckled in amusement, a wicked grin stretching across her face.

With a swift flick of her wrist, her arms transformed into sinister tentacle-like appendages that snaked out, wrapping tightly around Rob and his undead goblin companion’s necks. All the while, she muttered to herself.

“Ugh, seriously? It was just the Burst command. Should I have stood there and let those damn flames hit me? Give me a break! Using ambient mana isn’t as simple as you make it out to be. Urgh, you’re such a bitch!” the woman mumbled in frustration as she seemed to be arguing with herself.

The group looked on in confusion and disbelief as Rob, instead of fighting or lashing out, remained suspended in the woman’s grasp, seemingly paralyzed with fear. Yet, his eyes darted around frantically, searching for any sign of help or escape. A sickening grin spread across the woman’s face as she reveled in her dominance over him.

Suddenly, Rob’s body collapsed, his head separated from his dissolving neck. The severed head rolled across the floor, coming to a stop just a few meters away from Heather, a ghastly reminder of the gruesome fate that had befallen him. Heather’s scream of sheer terror echoed through the chamber, her eyes widening in horror at the sight before her.

Meanwhile, the woman’s tentacle maintained its tight grip around the struggling goblin, tightening with sadistic pleasure as it thrashed futilely. Her moans of twisted delight filled the air, creating a chilling soundtrack to her malevolent enjoyment of the horrifying scene.

The abrupt loss of Rob struck Heather and the remaining candidates with a heavy blow. The harsh reality of the peril they faced washed over them, intensifying their fear and trepidation. Heather’s screams echoed through the chamber, mingling with the heavy silence that followed Rob’s brutal demise. As she stared into his lifeless eyes lying before her, a chilling reminder of the danger they all faced, a wave of fear enveloped the group, leaving them frozen in place, unable to move.

However, among the four, one candidate stood apart, his resolve unyielding in the face of adversity. Jason, with a mix of disappointment and a twisted sense of desire, voiced his thoughts. “Dammit,

I wanted the pleasure of ending him myself,” he muttered, his words laced with a disturbing undertone.

Jeremy’s emotions swirled within him, a turbulent mix of hurt, pain, anger, and an overwhelming rage that consumed his being. His voice erupted in a piercing scream, the word “murderer” escaping his lips like a vengeful cry. In a display of unleashed fury, he summoned forth the most potent spell he had concealed from the others, his words resonating with raw power. “I call forth the rage of the gods, [**DEATH BOLT**]!”

A blinding brilliance engulfed the chamber as a vibrant, purple bolt of arcing lightning erupted from Jeremy’s outstretched hand. The spell surged forward with unyielding force, striking the woman with a cataclysmic impact. She was sent hurtling through the air, trailing smoke, and crackling electricity in her wake.

The resounding crash echoed through the room as she collided with the wall, her body merging with it in a sickening splat. In an instant, she transformed into a viscous puddle of black ooze, dissolving into the chaos of the collapsed chamber, covering her liquefied remains.

The group stood in disbelief, each trying to process what had just happened. Heather released a snuffle, trying to hold back more tears, while Jason sighed in disappointment. On the other hand, Jeremy was filled with a sense of victory, feeling that the justice he sought had finally been served.

Yua was frozen in place, her mind racing as she tried to make sense of what she had just witnessed.

The aftermath of the brutal battle left the once grand chamber in disarray. Thick smoke hung in the air, intermingling with the pungent stench of death, engulfing the space in an eerie haze. The destruction was evident, with half of the chamber collapsed and debris was strewn about, hindering their visibility, and making each breathe a struggle.

“I didn’t get a kill notification,” Jeremy muttered.

“I say we get out of here while we can,” Yua replied.

“I’m not digging through that rubble,” Jason retorted. “Let’s just go.”

“...” Heather silently added.

After a moment of silence, the group collected themselves, gingerly sifting through the remnants of Rob’s body, grappling with the shock of his sudden demise. Amidst their search, they couldn’t help but ponder the existence of a hidden seventh candidate, a mystery that lingered in the air like an unanswered question.

The walls of the chamber bore the scars of Jeremy’s unleashed power, charred and blackened, a stark reminder of the unforeseen might he possessed. It was evident that he had kept this formidable spell concealed, perhaps as a means to wield it against one of them. Despite the turmoil, destruction, and seeds of suspicion that sprouted among them, a flicker of pride ignited within their hearts. They had achieved something remarkable, a victory against overwhelming odds. Taking a moment to revel in their triumph, the surviving candidates basked in the glow of their hard-won accomplishment.

Then there were four...

# BLAKE PUDDING

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## CHAPTER 11

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### ARROGANCE AWAKENS

Once again, I found myself waking up in my liquid form on the floor of the former Red Toad's boss chamber. This time, every nerve in my pudding body was ignited with jolts of pain as the aftereffects of that attack spell that hit me slowly faded. To make matters worse, I was buried in a pile of rubble. *Just fucking great.*

I was so damn confident that I had the upper hand in that fight, considering the massive level gap. I mean, who wouldn't feel invincible with the level gap advantage I had over them? But no, I had to delude myself into thinking I was unstoppable, only to get my ass handed to me with a single goddess damned attack spell.

*I'm such a fucking idiot!*

After oozing out from under the debris that had come crashing down on me, I swiftly went to work reconstructing my form. It was remarkable how much easier and more fluid the process of shapeshifting had become with each iteration. Gone were the days of my creepy-cute alien appearance; now, I took on the form of an alluring human woman. Weaving my silk-like flesh back together had also become a seamless task. As I reformed, I made subtle adjustments to my dress, although it seemed to take on a slightly different look with each reshaping. The intricate details, like fashioning my silk face or adorning my attire with sinuous, writhing tendrils, seemed to flow effortlessly. It was as if my dark, goey flesh possessed a will of its own, guiding my artistic choices with a twisted elegance.

That battle had been an absolute disaster, and to make matters worse, I hadn't followed Circe's advice to tap into ambient mana for my casting. Well, I can't deny that I made an effort, but let's face it, a life-or-death struggle isn't exactly the best time to experiment. Although, I must admit that my shapeshifting abilities have been working quite well without relying on the system. However, my primary goal remained unchanged: mastering spellcasting and refining my abilities without being dependent on the system. It seemed like a straightforward task but executing it in the heat of combat proved to be a pain in the ass.

Truth be told, I still hadn't fully grasped Circe's reasoning behind ditching the system. I mean, it was her system, wasn't it? She would simply stress the importance of not relying on the system, hinting at some sort of advantageous exploit. However, reflecting on the chaotic encounter with the horde of undead, I couldn't ignore the fact that my reliance on the system had left me drained of mana, unable to sustain a constant barrage of Necrotic Flames.

With a luxurious stretch and a delightful sigh, I managed to shake off the last pesky remnants of that spell's jitters that lingered in my body. Glancing around, I didn't notice Circe's blue phantom ass anywhere. Most likely, getting knocked out had deactivated my Oracle skill. As much as I enjoyed annoying her, I didn't feel like resummoning that goddess just to endure another lecture



about everything I had done wrong. I needed some time to process and figure things out on my own. But let's face it, I've always been a bit of a hypocrite, so I decided to cast [ORACLE] anyways, just to see if there was anything useful, she had to say.

As Circe's translucent blue and pink form rematerialized, I went to claim my prize... *What the hell?! My meal, the one I took all the effort to behead, had vanished into thin air! I could see the evidence of my work on the ground, the blood stains from where I had removed his head, but the candidate's remains were nowhere to be seen. And to add insult to injury, the two undead goblins I took down were barely even left as scraps. Argh, this is just fucking fantastic!*

"Hey Circe, how long was I out from that damn lightning bolt?"

"Now, how would I know? I wasn't here for it," Circe replied, her tone utterly disinterested.

*Wonderful...*

*"Alright, so what's your brilliant plan, child? Are we going to chase after them like a desperate fool, or are we going to gracefully pursue some other equally idiotic endeavor? I mean, it's not like you ever listen to my divine advice anyway."*

"Are you upset because I didn't completely rely on ambient mana?" I retorted, my frustration seeping into my words. "Well, you know what? Whatever! I honestly have no clue what I'm doing anymore. I thought having a higher level would make that fight a walk in the park. But clearly, there's something more to it. So, enlighten me, Circe. What's the deal with that? Why does level advantage sometimes feel like a complete joke?"

*"Don't let levels deceive you, Blake,"* Circe replied, her voice laced with a mix of wisdom and frustration. *"Sure, having higher levels and boosted Attributes can give you an edge, but success in battle goes beyond that. It's about strategy, luck, and skill. Did I mention luck? Even a lower-level fighter can surprise you with a lucky hit and take you down. Yes, high-level mages may have more resources at their disposal, but they are far from unbeatable. The true advantage of levelers lies in their ability to learn new spells and abilities more easily, but you need to take them and go beyond the system's constraints. That's what I'm trying to teach you, to fight as a sorceress unbound by the system. Once you can do that, cooldowns, stats, and all the rules that govern them will no longer apply to you. You'll be free to unleash your true potential."*

*"The ancients understood this well, which is why leveling has become a rarity, a thing of myths. But people still hold levelers in high regard, seeing them as heroic figures of legend, an unstoppable force, because of their accelerated learning of magic. It's true that your Absorb spell takes that concept to a whole new extreme, but don't be fooled by appearances. Use the system as it was intended for acquiring new skills and knowledge, but don't rely on it as your sole means of combat."*

"So, if levelers are so rare, how did Aurelia use Appraisal? I feel like everyone I come across is a leveler."

*"Don't be fooled by appearances. Aurelia's not a leveler. Did you not bother to notice the ring she was wearing? It was enchanted with the Appraisal spell, most likely created by an ancient leveler."*

"Huh, I don't recall seeing Aurelia wear a ring... Oh, wait a minute! I do remember a spark emanating from a ring right before she analyzed me. So, if you don't mind me asking, could you

refresh my memory on which finger she was wearing it?” I asked the dreaded question, but the insufferable woman seemed to ignore it, clearly done with the topic.

I was a bit frustrated with her, to say the least.

“I’m still uncertain about my next move,” I groaned. “Usually, I’m all for an unfair fight in my favor, but one of the other candidates has an attack spell that could level the playing field. It’s making me slightly hesitant to launch a full-on attack. Maybe I should consider hit-and-run tactics? Perhaps ambushing one of them while they’re taking a pee? Sneak attacks have their own charm, after all,” I considered aloud. Unfortunately, the useless goddess remained disinterested, leaving me to devise my plan in solitude. “Fantastic, good talk,” I muttered sarcastically to myself. “Well, I suppose I’ll just have to take matters into my own hands and show these four remaining candidates who’s truly in charge,” I remarked with a twisted sense of glee and determination.

The candidate I had dispatched may be absent, but to my delight, the remnants of the two undead goblins were still scattered about—a grisly spectacle that would make any connoisseur of the grotesque shudder with twisted pleasure. Though it consisted of a mere few fragments of flesh, some entrails, a pair of forlorn left legs (with the whereabouts of their counterparts unknown), and a solitary hand, it was a sight that stirred the dark recesses of my appetite.

With an elegant motion, I gracefully lowered myself, delicately picked up a tantalizing morsel of guts, and brought it to my lips, relishing it as if it were a succulent sausage. Of course, if I actually had functional teeth, it would be a bite to remember. Alas, my teeth were merely for show, and the experience was more akin to allowing a delectable morsel to dissolve upon my acidic tongue. I briefly contemplated the option of simply stepping on the remnants or employing a tentacle to dissolve them, but let’s face it—I’m not a monster. *I’m a lady.*

“*A lady? Hahaha! Child, you’re a delusional monster.*”

“Oh, shut up,” I hissed between mouthfuls.

*I’m not delusional.*

I knew this goddess had ulterior motives, though I couldn’t quite pinpoint what they were. One thing was certain, I didn’t trust her. Don’t get me wrong, she had her perks. She possessed a wealth of useful information but extracting it from her was like pulling teeth. Still, I couldn’t deny that under her guidance, I was rapidly expanding my knowledge of magic. So, I suppose you could say things were looking up in that regard. Plus, having someone to bicker with did add an element of entertainment to an otherwise lonely existence. After all, there was no one else around, and if there were, well, let’s just say I had a tendency to eliminate and consume potential companions. So, for now, I was stuck with this Circe chick. Lucky me, right?

“*Did you just deep-throat that goblin leg?*” Circe asked, her expression a mix of astonishment and disgust as she watched me devour my meal.

“...No—stop talking to me while I’m enjoying my meal,” I mumbled with a toe hanging out of the corner of my mouth.

“*Alright, child, it’s time to get back to training!*”

“Ugh, will you please stop calling me a child? I’m in my late twenties or maybe early thirties... Well, to be honest, I can’t quite remember my exact age now that I think about it,” I said, scratching my head in confusion.

*“Turn at least a millennium old, and maybe I’ll stop referring to you as a child,”* Circe stated with a hint of amusement.

Frustrated and seething with annoyance, I stormed out of the boss chamber, where I had engaged in a brutal battle with the five other candidates. The remnants of the one I had decapitated were nowhere to be found, leaving only lingering traces of bloodstains on the cold stone floor. To add insult to injury, the dismembered remains of the undead goblins I effortlessly dispatched were nothing more than a pitiful appetizer, failing to satiate my hunger. And as if my mounting frustration wasn’t enough, Circe persisted in her relentless pursuit of training. Reluctantly, I acknowledged that she had a valid point. If I truly desired to carve out a life in this reality, I had to break free from the shackles of reliance on the system. It was time to view the system as mere training wheels, a means to acquire new spells and abilities while ultimately mastering them through my own sheer will and determination.

*“Ah, finally! You’re starting to catch on,”* Circe exclaimed with a hint of satisfaction. *“And the best part is, you can continue your training while we track down the others. It’ll give you an edge and prevent you from being taken out by a single spell, like some inexperienced newbie.”*

“Will you stop invading my thoughts!” I retorted. “But fine, what should I focus on in my training? What should I practice first?” I asked, eager to get started.

*“Listen up, child. You can’t keep relying on those system commands if you want to be a true spellcaster. Let’s face it, you haven’t quite mastered the art of spellcasting yet. But hey, no worries, that’s why I’m here to guide you. Who knows, maybe someday you’ll be casting spells like a seasoned sorceress... Or, at the very least, like a deranged man-eating sorceress with some serious daddy issues,”* Circe teased.

I was taken aback by Circe’s unexpected change in demeanor. It was usually my pleasure to torment her, not the other way around.

“Seriously, Circe, can you stop being such a pain in my ass? Fine, whatever, let’s just get this over with and start already. I already know the basics of casting without the system. The real challenge is executing it during a fight, not during some training session,” I retorted, expressing my frustration while begrudgingly acknowledging the importance of her guidance. It was strange to see her willingly being helpful for once.

*“So, clueless as ever, I see. Care to explain how you’re casting magic without the system?”*

“Well, it’s hard to explain, but when it comes to casting spells, I rely on my instincts and gut feeling. It’s like tapping into a sixth sense,” I explained, trying to find the right words to describe the intangible connection I felt with magic, and failing.

*“Pshh, like an aimless child stumbling in the dark, you have no idea what you’re doing, do you?”* Circe sighed with a hint of condescension. *“Well, at the very least, you’re not entirely wrong. I’ve already explained before that, it’s about will and imagination. And you’re right, going off feeling does play a big part in spell casting, but there’s more to it. You need to visualize the spell you’re casting,”* she clarified, emphasizing the importance of mental imagery in the process. *“Listen up,*

*child. What you're feeling is not some magical intuition,"* Circe scoffed, dismissing my notion. *"It's the ambient mana surrounding you. The system only taps into your internal mana and provides you with a finite resource, which is limited and regulated. But ambient mana? It has no boundaries, no restrictions, nothing to hold it back. The key to unlocking your potential lies in channeling the mana around you, using it to cast your spells and abilities."*

"I believe I'm starting to grasp the concept, but could you clarify how this applies specifically to spells and abilities that rely on stamina?"

*"By the ancient magic, are you truly ignorant? Stamina-based abilities can be recalibrated through adept mana manipulation. You must substitute stamina with mana, achieving a delicate equilibrium through refined control over mana. Mastery of mana manipulation for stamina abilities necessitates honing your skill in mana control. Unfortunately, expecting you to comprehend the intricacies of magic may be too optimistic, isn't it?"*

"Yeah, that makes absolutely no sense," I stated.

As I advanced through the dungeon, mulling over the illogical advice of the goddess, an unsettling sensation started to crawl up the nape of my neck. I halted abruptly, scanning the vast expanse of the cavernous system, yet finding no discernible signs of anything amiss. Nevertheless, I had learned not to dismiss the possibility of concealed threats lurking in the shadows, observing my every move with sinister intent.

"*What is it now?*" Circe groaned as her floating form came to a stop.

I glanced at her, wishing she would return to her normal, quiet self. Deciding to silence her myself, I deactivated [ORACLE], causing her ghostly form to vanish. A look of exasperation adorned her face as she dissipated, and I couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction at having the upper hand, even if only momentarily.

"Now, let's find out who's been spying on me," I grinned, a mischievous glint in my eyes.

I may have just dismissed a literal goddess, but I couldn't ignore the weight of Circe's words about magic. Determined to put her teachings into practice, I decided to activate a skill without relying on the system, specifically to locate my next meal. With a deep breath, I closed my eyes and focused on the sensation of the spell, attempting to activate Thermalsense without relying on a command. However, I encountered an unexpected discrepancy in the flow of mana, as if it wasn't gathering in the anticipated area.

Frustrated, I unintentionally activated [THERMALENSE] using the system. My world transformed into a surreal palette of blacks, purples, and blues, with splashes of reds and yellows leading me to a large boulder. It was a reminder that, despite my efforts to learn magic without the system, it was undeniably useful and intuitive.

With a simple flex of my arm, it contorted and morphed into a grotesque black tentacle that slithered and writhed, eagerly searching for the source of heat. At least I could polymorph without the need for system commands, a small victory in my quest for might.

Suddenly, a startled yelp shattered the air as the tentacle found its target. Pulling it back towards me, a rush of anticipation coursed through me, the primal desire for fresh blood and flesh stirring within me. I will admit I preferred rotten meat, but fresh blood had its place too. My figurative

heart raced with excitement, and a sadistic grin spread across my face. I felt a surge of adrenaline and a sense of elation as I pondered the new depths of depravity I could reach. I reveled in the thought of killing, savoring the feeling of power and control as I prepared to commit even more gruesome acts. But as my prey came into view, the horrifying truth revealed itself. The tentacle had ensnared a small goblin...a mere child.

However, for a moment, a conflicted feeling washed over me. I briefly considered releasing the child, as the thought of preying on such innocence was disturbing. But the insatiable hunger within me, the thirst for power and dominance, overpowered any hint of compassion or remorse. I couldn't let this opportunity slip away, no matter how small and insignificant my meal might be. As I raised my tentacle, firmly grasping the child, their wide, innocent eyes met mine, filled with a gleeful and trusting gaze. It was at that moment that a pang of guilt pierced through the darkness, a flicker of my lost humanity reminding me of the atrocities I was about to commit. However, the hunger and bloodlust prevailed, extinguishing any remnants of empathy. With a cruel smile forming on my lips, I steeled myself to finish what I had started, determined to satisfy my insatiable appetite, regardless of the consequences. Ugh, but it's just a kid... damnit!

So, you can imagine my disappointment when I released the little shit. I couldn't help but express my frustration, my voice tinged with annoyance, as I asked, "Wartie, what in hell are you doing here?"

"I-I follow, Muddy. Wanna show you new pet. See. See. Look!"

In his small palm, the goblin held up a square cube, revealing a tiny gelatinous cube monster that jiggled about, and to my surprise, with a soft and squeaky voice, it cried out, "Kill me!"

It wasn't a figment of my imagination; I could actually understand other slimes. A mix of surprise and annoyance washed over me, followed by a sudden realization. I had a skill I hadn't bothered to check on: Veil Polyglot.

[VEIL POLYGLOT]

The ability to converse fluently in any language encompassed by the realm of Völuspá.

Type  
**Ability**

Activation  
**Passive**

"So, Blake, that's what Veil Polyglot does," I mused to myself. "It seems my ability to understand other slimes wasn't just my imagination after all."

"No, I Wartie, not Bleak. What ill polywater?" replied the goblin child.

"Oops!" I sighed, realizing that I had let my thoughts slip out without intending to.

"What wrong?" Wartie asked, his large saucer eyes filled with concern.

"Nothing to see here, just thinking aloud... Anyways! Did you happen to see four shady adventurers leaving this chamber while carrying a savory-looking, uh, I mean, a headless dead body?" I refused

to acknowledge that they weren't adventurers but instead my fellow competitors in a trial to become the Dark Champion.

"Yes."

"And," I replied with forced calm, my patience already thin.

"And?"

The small cube continued to jiggle in the goblin's hand, letting out squeaking pleas, "Kill me!"

"And...which way did they go?" I asked through gritted teeth as I ignored the cube.

"They go too deep roads. It down below dungeon."

"Didn't your Chieftain mention that the entrance to the deep roads was behind the waterfall?"

"Uh-huh," he said while swaying back and forth on his heels.

"Did you hear them say anything as they went by?"

"Uh-huh."

For fuck's sake, I'm gonna tear him apart! I paused to take a deep breath, my moral compass may be a bit skewed, but even I have my limits when it comes to killing children. But wait, he's a goblin, not a child. Ugh, now I'm just being racist. Argh! Fine, I won't murder the little bastard! "Imp, uh, I mean, Wartie, can you tell me what they said?" I asked, my patience hanging by a thread with the goblin child.

"Okay... Umm, but only four, no headless body. They say, trial over, quitting, finding own exit, they say."

I was left in a state of utter confusion and bewilderment. If those adventurers didn't have the body of the deceased candidate, then where could it have gone? And to make matters even more perplexing, they were quitting the trial altogether. What did this sudden turn of events signify? Did it mean that I had won by default, or was there still something more I needed to pursue? The more I pondered, the more questions flooded my mind, and with no one around to provide answers, I felt completely adrift and lost. The thought of resummoning Circe with Oracle crossed my mind, but honestly, I had my fill of her for the day.

Shrugging my shoulders, I muttered to myself. "I'm not sure. Until someone explicitly tells me that I've won, my best guess is to go after them."

"Won?" the child asked.

"I'm going to fight those big evil adventurers who killed your last pet. What was his name?" I asked, still not confessing to having eaten his pet slime.

Wartie's eyes burned with fiery determination as he proclaimed, "Doodles!"

"Kill me!" the tiny gelatinous cube cried out.

"Umm... Wartie, can you hear your new pet cube speaking?" I asked.

"Muddy silly, Gooley cannot speak," the kid laughed.

The tiny cube jiggled in the goblin's palm and emitted a high-pitched squeak, "End my misery!" I gazed upon the tiny wobbling cube and uttered, "I see... Well, you take good care of Gooley. I'm leaving. Places to go, adventurers to kill."

"I come!"

*FUCK!*

Circe may not have been here, but I could have sworn I heard her bursting out in laughter, or was that my schizophrenia again? "Oh, no, no, no! It's not safe for you where I'm going," I urged the young goblin, my tone laced with genuine concern. "You'd be better off returning to your village. Trust me, it's for your own good."

The child leaned towards me, a broad grin spreading across his face. "Me know shortcut!"

I hesitated, a faint flicker of my humanity still lingering when it came to children. In one part of my mind, I didn't want to put the kid in danger, but in another part, I found him utterly irritating. Despite my reservations, the allure of a shortcut proved too tempting to resist. "Fine, lead the way, kid," I grumbled. I despise my life!

Wartie's grin widened further as I acquiesced to the goblin child's desire for revenge against the individuals I had wrongly implicated in the death of his previous pet. Ah, whatever, I thought to myself. Doodles did make for a rather delectable meal, after all.

# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 12

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### MONSTER PRINCESS?

As I trailed behind the goblin child through the winding tunnels of the dungeon, a surge of excitement coursed through me. The prospect of hunting down the other candidates, emerging as the Dark Champion, and ultimately reuniting with Aurelia was an exhilarating thought. But for the time being, I had to tolerate Wartie's insufferable presence, though I found some amusement in the pitiful pleas of his newly acquired pet slime. "Kill me!"

As we made our way down a particularly cramped passage, Wartie's eyes lit up with excitement. He eagerly pointed to a small opening in the wall. "Muddy, shortcut!" he exclaimed, a wide grin spreading across his face.

I shot a suspicious glare at the tunnel entrance, half-expecting the goblin child to spring a trap on me. But deep down, I knew Wartie wasn't exactly a mastermind criminal. He excelled at eating and whining about his deceased pet, but that was about it. So, with a shrug, I decided to take a chance. "Fine, Wartie. Let's go with your shortcut. But if you end up getting lost or becoming a monster's snack, I'm not responsible," I grumbled, giving the goblin a stern look.

He flashed a toothy grin at me, his pointy teeth on full display, and eagerly took the lead, bouncing along the uneven floor of the tunnel. I couldn't help but let out a chuckle at the sheer absurdity of the situation. Here I was, a monstrous abomination capable of sprouting spider-like legs and tentacles from my body, following a dim-witted goblin child through the treacherous darkness of a deceased dungeon. It felt like a twisted fairy tale, where the princess was the monster, and the sidekick was a dimwitted goblin.

"Aha! Look at you," Circe chortled. "*You might be a twisted monster, but you're no princess!*"

And then there's Circe. I didn't particularly want to resummon her again, but after spending a couple of hours with an idiotic goblin, I was desperate for someone, anyone else to talk to. Honestly, I had no clue why the goddess granted me the ability to summon and dismiss her like a light switch, but I had a feeling it wasn't something I would appreciate. But damn, it was taking every ounce of self-control not to murder this child. So, having Circe around was a welcome distraction for my warped and cruel mind.

"Why don't you go ahead and crown me the title Monster Princess?" I shot back at her. "And while you're at it, stay the hell out of my mind! I can't stand it when you start poking around in there."

"What 'a printless?" Wartie turned around to ask, his face contorted in confusion as he gazed at me.



*Damnit, Circe!* “It’s a spoiled brat who gets to snatch up everyone’s pet slimes, only to gobble them up,” I quipped, the words slipping out before I realized the impact it might have on the goblin child.

“Kill me!” the tiny gelatinous cube squeaked out, his voice only I could hear echoing off the tunnel walls.

Wartie’s small goblin brain took a moment to process my words before his face twisted with horror and disgust. “I hate printlesses!” he declared!

I struggled to compose myself, but the mental image of me, the privileged brat devouring helpless slimes, was too absurd. I couldn’t contain my laughter, my shoulders shaking as I gasped for breath. “I can’t say I disagree,” I managed to say, fighting to maintain a straight face.

As we continued through the cramped passage, my thoughts turned to Wartie himself. The young goblin, with his plump little body and juicy flesh, would make a tempting snack. However, I resisted the urge, bitterly aware that I needed his help to locate the other candidates. Strangely enough, the idea of killing a child unsettled me, adding an unexpected layer of discomfort to my monstrous desires. Yeah, believe it or not, there’s still a tiny sliver of a moral compass within me—somehow. Still, I couldn’t deny the persistent thoughts of devouring him that plagued my mind. It was an internal struggle, an ironic twist that I couldn’t help but find darkly amusing. But even as I chuckled at the absurdity of my situation, the hunger within me remained unquenched, and the thirst for destruction lingered. *Ugh, what is this I’m feeling?*

“*Ever heard of a conscience?*” Circe teased, a smug grin appearing on her lips.

“Oh, shut up, Jiminy,” I snapped back, but by Circe’s pause, it was clear she didn’t get the reference.

Wartie led me deeper into the twisted tunnels, and my excitement surged with each step. The anticipation of the hunt pulsed through my veins as we continued along the goblin’s shortcut. I could hardly wait to confront my rivals and emerge triumphant, but I knew I had to exercise patience for now.

As we ventured further within the darkness, the temperature dropped, and my glowing orange eyes cast eerie reflections on the tunnel walls. The pale orange light reflecting from crystal shards that lined the walls along with their scattered fragments on the floor grew fainter while the air turned colder and more damp.

Our path was narrow and cramped, forcing us to crawl and contort our bodies to make progress in certain parts. I wriggled and squeezed through the tight openings of collapsed sections, determined to forge ahead. My Black Pudding form proved to be highly adaptable, reshaping itself to fit through each obstacle with ease. As I navigated through the dim path, I brushed against a jagged outcropping of rock, causing a tear in my dress. However, my resilient pudding body quickly repaired the damage, seamlessly mending the fabric. It was a peculiar sensation, with my body acting as its own clothing, but it bestowed upon me a sense of invincibility that was difficult to describe.

As we continued on, my mind wandered with daydreams, consumed by thoughts of unleashing my monstrous form upon unsuspecting victims. The anticipation built up inside me, threatening to burst forth at any moment. My dress seemed to ripple with excitement, mirroring the turbulent emotions coursing through my gooey body.

“Muddy, exit to shortcut here. We ahead of Doodle’s murderers now. They be coming to us! We wait.” Wartie proclaimed with a mischievous grin, showcasing his crooked and jagged goblin teeth.

“Are you absolutely certain?” I double-checked, wanting to confirm Wartie’s statement.

“What ‘a abso-smurfly?”

“Are you positive?” I reiterated.

“Posi-giggity?”

I could feel my frustration mounting as I took a deep breath and tried once more. “Are. You. Sure?” I asked, each word dripping with impatience. And, okay, I won’t deny it. There might have been some handclapping as I spat out each word.

“Uh-huh.”

That conversation had driven me freaking nuts. Here I was, stuck watching Wartie as he rocked back and forth, humming some off-key tune and playing with his slimy blob of a pet, Gooley. Time was dragging on like a snail on a sugar rush, and I was getting more annoyed by the second. Seriously, how much longer could I handle this before I went all “hangry” and chomped down on him, knowing I’d regret it later? *Ugh, the struggle is real.*

At least there was Gooley. That slimy blob, aka the gelatinous cube, would whine and beg for its miserable existence to end. The funny thing was, only Circe and I could hear its pathetic pleas. The little block of sorrow’s cries echoed through the twisted tunnels, and I gotta admit, it gave me a sick kind of joy to revel in its misery.

Exiting the narrow passage, the corridor unfurled like an expansive underground highway, with colossal pillars stretching out into the abyss, disappearing into the darkness beyond the reach of my luminescent gaze. The sight beckoned us, luring us deeper into the enigmatic depths, as if daring us to uncover the secrets hidden within. A chill ran down my back, a foreboding sense of something different about this section of the dungeon. The air grew heavy with an unsettling dread, heightening my senses as I followed the goblin. My core pulsed with eager anticipation, fueled by the darkness that enveloped us. Fear mingled with excitement, creating a strange and intoxicating mixture within me. With each step, the thrill of the hunt intensified, propelling me forward deeper into the depths of the unknown.

The exhilarating desire to rip my rivals apart with my cruel tentacles flooded me with euphoria. I savored the vivid imagery of their piercing screams reverberating through the cracked stone walls of the winding tunnels. However, with each passing moment, an unsettling restlessness crept over me, a yearning for a true challenge, a formidable opponent to satisfy my insatiable hunger. The mere thought of waiting made my skin crawl. After all, I was a monster in human guise, and my

dark cravings needed to be appeased. I would even settle for a chance encounter with a wandering dungeon creature to quench my thirst. Alas, thus far, the only monster I had encountered down here was none other than myself.

*“Fascinating! It seems that your instability is escalating with each passing day. Now, I wonder if it will correct or at least stabilize?”* I overheard Circe murmuring to herself, her tone devoid of any subtlety.

“Hey, don’t judge me, bitch. It’s not like you’re a shining beacon of stability yourself,” I retorted.

Much to my irritation, Circe ignored my remark with an eye roll. Yeah, I couldn’t care less about what she thought either. So, what if I’m a little unstable? I prefer to see myself as a dark and twisted badass with a touch of craziness for good measure. It’s all part of the package in this messed-up world of magic I’ve been thrown into. I’m not about to let anyone else’s messed-up ideas drag me down and turn me into a victim. Nope, I’ll embrace my insanity with open arms. My twisted mind is my shield, my sword against the creepy things that lurk around every corner. I’m here to survive, and I’ll become the very embodiment of a nightmare to do it. This reality will never forget me, for I’ll be their worst nightmare!

As the hours crawled by in the vast corridor, my patience sank to new depths of despair. My insatiable hunger for bloodshed grew stronger by the minute. The endless wait was pushing me to the edge of sanity, and I craved any form of murderous excitement to satisfy my twisted desires. The boredom was slowly driving me mad, and the constant, irritating hum of Wartie’s tuneless melody was like nails on a chalkboard. I was a monster, and this agonizing wait was pushing me closer and closer to the brink of madness.

And once again, my mind drifted back into that delightful daydream. But let’s be honest, Wartie really was a plump little succulent snack. The mere thought of sinking my tentacles into his tender body, feeling his life force slowly fade away, was almost too tempting to resist. It was a desire that tugged at me relentlessly, whispering its seductive promises. However, despite the irresistible pull, I couldn’t bring myself to act upon it. Perhaps it was the innocence shining in the goblin child’s eyes, or maybe that flicker of lingering morality within me. Regardless, the thought continued to linger in the depths of my mind, teasing me with its delicious allure.

“Argh, Wartie, how much longer do you think it’ll take to find them?” I groaned.

“Shortcut good! We two day ahead,” Wartie chirped.

“Two days?! I swear, I’m going to kill him! I just know it. I’m going to end him!” My mind was already spinning with dark and twisted delights, concocting various ways to bring about his demise.

*“Hahaha! We both know you won’t, but I must admit, it’s quite intriguing to watch,”* Circe chuckled.

“Ugh!” I seethed.

A scratchy, masculine voice yelled out. “Ah, for the love of the gods, I heard somethin’ back here.”

My heart raced as I heard the unfamiliar voice calling out, well, my figurative heart since I don't have one, literally and figuratively. I looked at Wartie, and I could see that he was scared, his small frame trembling as he clutched his gelatinous cube tightly, all while the little thing in his palm cheered for its death.

I had no idea what awaited us around the corner, but I was filled with thrilling anticipation to find out. My mind buzzed with endless possibilities, and a mixture of excitement and fear coursed through my core as I took a step forward. I was prepared for whatever challenges or surprises lay ahead, ready to face them head-on.

My senses went into overdrive as I melted my body into a gooey mess. It was a wild experience, shedding my elegant human form and transforming into the badass Black Pudding monster that I truly was. Goodbye, delicate spider silk skin, helloooo tar-like skin that could devour anything in its path. I was a force to be reckoned with, and my hunger knew no bounds. My true form oozed with darkness, a reflection of the twisted monster I had become. And now, it was time to unleash my inner beast upon these clueless fools. They had no idea what was about to hit them. *Game on!*

The hours of restraining myself from feasting on that little brat had pushed me to the edge. My hunger gnawed at my insides, demanding satisfaction. I couldn't bear it any longer. With determination, I advanced, oozing forward in my true Black Pudding form. The surge of adrenaline pumped through my core, electrifying me as I readied myself to pounce and sate my voracious appetite.

*"Please, do compose yourself, child. You are entirely ignorant of the identity of the oncoming individuals,"* Circe condescended with an air of snobbish superiority, much to my fucking annoyance. Surprisingly, though, my murderous thoughts started to slow down. Not that I'll give her credit for it, nope! Well, maybe... just a tiny bit.

I took a deep breath, or at least I tried to. Do I even need to breathe? Who knows? Anyway, Circe's words repeated in my head, reminding me that I had no freaking clue who was coming our way. So, I decided to ditch the Mana Sight in my eyes and spread it throughout my whole body instead. No more glowing eyes, thank goodness. Now I had a 360-degree view. However, everything went pitch black. I contemplated activating Thermalsense, but I held off.

I half expected my entire body to start glowing, but surprisingly it didn't. Guess concentrating the spell in a small spot does that trick. Sure, I already wanted to go back to using those two small spots for eyes but hunting in a dark corridor with glowing eyes wouldn't be the brightest idea. So, I sucked it up and dealt with the annoyance of running Mana Sight through my entire freaking body. It worked, though, so I can't complain too much.

Out of the darkest depths, three figures emerged. One of them held a feeble lantern, its weak light struggling to cut through the gloom and reveal the true nature of the corridor. The one with the lantern was... well, let's just say it was a bit perplexing. They had these massive breasts but also a five o'clock shadow. I couldn't help but think of a dwarf attempting a failed drag act. *Ah, memories of those wild shows... Good times!*

The second figure was your classic elf, complete with long flowing blonde hair and piercing green eyes. They were dressed in fancy white-plated armor with gold accents, looking more like a pretty boy than a battle-hardened warrior. Although I wasn't entirely sure if they were male or female, so I'll go with the former for now. And then there was the third person, the typical human wizard with a pointy hat, a long white beard, and those oh-so-stereotypical gray robes. Of course, they had to top it off with a wooden staff because what's a wizard without their trusty stick?

Honestly, I couldn't help but feel a bit let down by the sight of them. I was hoping for some real excitement, but hey, when it comes to satisfying my appetite, beggars can't be choosers. Food is food, right?

*"Child, I strongly advise against engaging in any form of combat or interaction with those three,"* Circe warned, her voice filled with an unusual touch of concern.

The dim light from their lantern seemed to intensify the surrounding shadows, enveloping me further in darkness and making it even more difficult for me to be noticed. Circe's warning caught me off guard though, her sudden display of concern irritating me to no end. But what really got under my skin was the fact that I was actually contemplating heeding her advice. *Damn it.*

*What?! Ugh, why the hell not?* I mentally shouted in frustration, unable to contain my exasperation from bleeding into my thoughts.

*"You may not have Appraisal, but you've got Astral Insight! ...And let me tell you, child, it's screaming like a banshee right now. Fighting them will be your undoing,"* Circe stated, her voice filled with connotation as if scolding a child.

"But I haven't invested in unlocking Astral Insight yet," I hissed to myself.

"Tsk tsk," the wizard clucked his tongue in disapproval. "You young folks and your paranoia, always jumping at shadows. It's just a harmless feral goblin, I assure you."

*Hold on, what?*

"Ah, c'mon now, Craycroft," the dwarf grumbled with annoyance in her voice. "We've been stuck here for far too long, clearin' the path for this bloody expedition. It seems like everyone's gone soft and lazy on us. A bit of paranoia wouldn't hurt, would it?"

Wartie looked around frantically, trying to spot me, but I stayed put. Nope, not gonna budge!

"M-Muddy?" Wartie sniffled.

The elf boldly stepped forward, his voice brimming with conviction. "May the gods bless me with their divine light," he declared.

With a quick flick of his hand, a scorching white beam shot out, colliding with Wartie's chest with a thunderous crack. The goblin child crumpled to the ground, lifeless, while the beam continued to emit a radiant glow, casting an otherworldly light on the path behind us. The searing brilliance seeped into my skin, making me feel as if I were being slowly roasted alive. The pain was unbearable, but I held myself tightly, resolved not to reveal my presence to those three fools.

<b>SYSTEM OVERRIDE DETECTED</b>
<b>BUFF ACTIVATED</b>
<b>[HOLY] RESISTED</b>

Circe floated above me like a ghost, her ethereal form only visible to my sight. Her arms were crossed, and a stern expression adorned her face as she glared at me with eyes that could shoot daggers. *“Child, don’t count on me to intervene like that again. Next time, I might just let them finish you off,”* she warned. I was left speechless, unable to come up with a response. For once, I found myself at a loss for words, not even bothering to argue with her about being called a child.

The worst part of it all was realizing that I actually felt something, a pain that I thought was long gone since waking up in this messed-up world. It hit me like a punch to the gut, a sickening sensation that spread through my very being. I couldn’t believe it, but I was mourning the damn goblin. I mean, seriously? Grieving over a pathetic creature like that was beyond messed up, and it made me feel all sorts of twisted and unsettled.

“Ah, a bit much, Anlyth?” The dwarf chuckled, amusement clear in her deep scratchy voice.

“Truly, Gimona Grimmail?” the elf retorted with a haughty tone. “It was an unholy creature. I did it a kindness by granting it a swift death.”

“Ah, c’mon now, Anlyth,” the dwarf teased. “Don’t ye know that goblin hearts are a delicacy among us dwarves? Ye went and blew its little heart away!”

“Such strange tastes you dwarves have,” the wizard sighed, shaking his head. “I will never comprehend your dietary choices.”

“Ah, that’s a feckin’ good one, Craycroft!” the dwarf boomed with laughter. “Ye, who’s never savored the delight of dwarven meat and the nectar of our finest mead! Now, that’s a bleedin’ joke! And as for yer tower, I’ve heard whispers about the perverse things ye be doin’ in there.”

Their laughter gradually faded away, swallowed by the depths of the tunnel, until all that remained was the faint afterglow from the broken crystals. The dim light sparkled like distant stars, its brilliance gradually diminishing. As the glow faded, I took my time reforming my body, feeling a growing sense of dread as I approached the crumpled form of the kid. Rage seethed within me, and I couldn’t shake the feeling of unseen eyes watching my every move. The silence was fucking deafening, and a shiver of rage ran through me as I stood there gazing at the lifeless body. The only damn noise that echoed through the tunnel was the jubilant cries of triumph from a small quivering gelatinous cube.

“I’m free! I’m free!” it cried in ecstatic celebration, but I quickly ended its joyful outburst with a swift stomp, fulfilling its earlier wish for freedom with a swift death.

My mind was consumed by twisted thoughts as I neared the lifeless form of the goblin child. I struggled to make sense of the strange mix of emotions bubbling within me. How could I, a

monstrous being, feel sadness for the loss of this insignificant creature that had only served as an irritant? It was absurd, beneath me. I was a killer, a cannibal devoid of such sentimentalities. And yet, the lingering feeling of loss gnawed at me, refusing to be ignored.

*“Fate can be a mischievous entity,”* Circe gently whispered.

“You believe in fate?” I asked, my tone devoid of emotion or interest. I didn’t even bother to glance in her direction.

*“Why not?”* Circe’s response carried a hint of contemplation. *“Even gods often find themselves questioning if there is something beyond their current state of existence.”*

I nodded irritably, letting out a deep sigh as I reached into Stellar Void and retrieved one of my two phylacteries.

*“Looks like you’re getting a new pet,”* Circe teased.

I stared at the kid’s lifeless body, feeling a chaotic mix of emotions—pain, guilt, sorrow, and pure freaking rage. The anger inside me was boiling, and I wanted revenge so damn bad! Thankfully, I had two phylacteries, but wasting one on that annoying brat I barely resisted eating myself felt like a total waste. But for someone else to come along and snuff out the kid’s life? That’s some major bullshit. Death alone wouldn’t be enough to satisfy my thirst for payback. Oh no, I was gonna make those three responsible, pay, and I mean really pay, with a lifetime of misery. But there was one big-ass obstacle in my way...

“Circe, I’m freaking lost on how to use this damn thing,” I grumbled, my frustration evident in my voice.

*“Oh, for the love of me, just rely on the system commands,”* Circe huffed.

“I thought you told me not to rely on the system commands,” I shot back. However, Circe refused to give me any more information, which was super annoying. So, not knowing what else to do, I just lifted up the phylactery and mentally clicked, [SPIRIT VESSEL]. And bam! My arms started flailing around on their own like I was some water bender from that awesome cartoon I used to watch as a kid. Gotta admit it looked pretty cool with the orb floating there. And way cooler than having to chant some spell like an idiot.

“...Do I seriously have to wave my arms around like some kind of total idiot to cast this spell?” I grumbled, my self-consciousness growing as I caught Circe watching me. Yeah, it might have looked cool at first, but now I couldn’t help but feel a bit ridiculous. But hey, who cares if I’m immediately contradicting myself? I’m certifiably crazy, so it’s all part of the package. Besides, I’m entitled to like something while not liking it.

*“Maybe if you actually learn to cast the spell without relying on a system command,”* Circe explained.

“Well, that’s good to know,” I sighed in relief. “Wait, hold on a second. You’re the one who told me to cast it with the system command,” I blurted out. But, as expected, Circe went right back to ignoring my existence, pretending as if I hadn’t said anything at all.

As my skill did its thing, I tapped into the sensation, feeling the mana flowing around me. There was something lurking beneath me like a tiny spark just waiting to be snuffed out. It was a weird feeling, and I could tell my mana had the power to mess with that spark if I wanted to. It had this warm and comforting vibe, but also kind of annoying to be around. So, with a gentle tug, Spirit Vessel grabbed hold of it and holy crap, Wartie's tiny soul was a thing of beauty. It flickered dangerously as if on the verge of fading away completely.

I watched in awe as Spirit Vessel carefully placed the kid's soul into the phylactery. It was like watching a badass seamstress flawlessly thread a needle on the first try. I mean, I can barely sew a button back on without messing it up. It made me wonder if I'd ever be able to do something so delicate and precise without relying on the system's aid.

As Spirit Vessel's work neared completion, a soft glow emanated from the phylactery, signifying the end of the process. Kneeling beside the child, the skill delicately wove a strand of mana from the orb to his body, establishing a connection between the two. Within moments, the phylactery took over, seamlessly carrying on the task that my skill had initiated. It flawlessly integrated the soul within the phylactery and his body. And just like that, Wartie drew in a gasp of air. He was now a goblin lich.

"I feel something... off," I muttered to myself. "There's a strange sensation running through me, but I can't quite pinpoint what it is."

"That's called pride, child. Congratulations, you're now a proud mother," Circe stated with a dry tone.

THE PRIMORDIAL GODDESS OF MAGIC HAS GIFTED YOU WITH A TITLE.
YOU HAVE EARNED THE TITLE: <b>UNHOLY MOTHER</b> <i>BEST OF LUCK!</i>

"Oh, hell no, and fuck you! TAKE THAT BACK!" I screamed.



# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 13

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### [FEAR]

I couldn't even begin to guess how long I'd been walking away from those pathetic idiots who dared to cross my path. The sheer power radiating from the spell that ended Wartie's sorry existence was a brutal reminder of my own current weaknesses. Hell, if it wasn't for Circe's protection, I'd have been fried just being in the damn vicinity of that holy magic. But you know what? That ain't gonna stop me from seeking sweet revenge. No way! I've got a burning desire to make those bastards pay for what they did. And let me tell you, I really hope those pricks have families or people they care about. 'Cause when I tear them down, it's gonna be all the more satisfying knowing I've shattered their lives along with their sorry asses.

"Gimona Grimmail, Craycroft, and that fucking elf, Anlyth," I repeated their names like a twisted mantra, spewing curses with every breath.

Wartie remained unconscious as I carried him on my shoulder, his phylactery safely tucked away in my Stellar Void. Following Circe's advice, I made some tweaks to my mental image of the spell's casting, allowing a trickle of mana to flow from the void and maintain a connection between the phylactery and his body. It wasn't a perfect solution, though. I had no clue how far Wartie could wander from me without breaking that connection. It could be a few measly meters or some cosmic distance, for all I knew. Circe, that annoying bitch, conveniently left out those details, as per usual.

But hey, I was doing my best in this messed-up situation. It took a shit-ton of self-control, you know? Carrying around the lifeless body of an undead goblin and resisting the urge to chow down on it was a real challenge, I gotta admit. But guess what? There was a tiny ray of sunshine in all the chaos. I ran into a bunch of dungeon monsters along the way. They weren't the toughest bastards out there, which probably explains why they didn't bother attacking that expedition group. I can't be certain, but I've got this sneaky feeling they were trailing after the Dungeon Core. These encounters turned out to be pretty damn useful, leveling me up twice and boosting me to a badass level, forty-five. And as if that wasn't fuckin' sweet enough, I even scored an extra skill point to play around with. But goddessedamn, I can't ignore the fact that Wartie's undead body was starting to emit one hell of an enticing aroma.

"Ugh! Seriously, Circe? Can't I just feast on him and worry about finding him a new vessel later?" I grumbled in frustration, my patience already wearing thin.

*"If that's really what you want. However, I should mention that he's a newborn lich. He requires a suitable host body to possess until his soul fully merges with the phylactery. So, chowing down on your little bundle of undead joy might not be the best idea for his development,"* Circe replied, barely able to contain a mischievous smirk.

“Ugh! For fuck’s sake,” I groaned in frustration.

She burst into laughter, unable to contain herself. “*You know, you really are a terrible mother!*” she exclaimed between fits of laughter.

To be honest, I think I preferred it when this damn goddess just ignored me. “Will you stop calling me that!” I snapped. I was just about to cancel Oracle and be done with her when I heard something up ahead. A familiar voice of a girl echoed down the pathway, sending a thrill of excitement through me. I couldn’t help but smile, eagerly anticipating what was to come. I glanced around, searching for a suitable place to dispose of the kid’s lifeless body. But if I were being honest with myself, I didn’t feel comfortable just leaving it anywhere. I leaned in closer to Circe’s floating form and whispered, “What the hell should I do with this kid’s body?”

*I thought that would be obvious, toss him into your dimensional holding, of course.*

“Wait, what the fuck? You mean I can actually stick a living person in there?” I nearly blurted out. I had to bite my tongue to prevent myself from revealing myself to the approaching group.

“*He’s not exactly living,*” Circe replied with a dry tone.

“Ugh, you bitch! You could have fucking told me that earlier! I’ve been hauling this sorry excuse for a body around for over a day, dammit! Why the hell didn’t you say anything?” I complained, my frustration seeping into my words. Her only response was a slight smirk as if relishing in my annoyance before she returned to ignoring me. “Fine,” I sighed in resignation before adding, “[ORACLE],” with a hint of satisfaction as Circe vanished from my sight.

With a wicked grin spreading across my face, I finally took Circe’s belated advice and flung the unconscious lich kid into my trusty Stellar Void. A plan started forming in my twisted mind, and anticipation coursed through me. As a result of my recent level-ups, I earned a free point to invest in a new skill, and I knew exactly which one to choose. In a swift and sinister transformation, six spider-like limbs erupted from my back, spreading out like the wings of a demonic angel, ready to carry me toward my unsuspecting victims. The deep roads stretched out before me, their vaulted ceilings soaring high above like the grand halls of a sinister cathedral, adorned with massive pillars that would serve as perfect hiding spots for my vengeful strikes. The thought of revenge-fueled my every step, and I relished in the delicious anticipation of the terror I would soon unleash upon those foolish enough to cross my path.

Using my newly acquired [SPIDER WALK], I effortlessly scaled up the wall with my spider-like legs, scurrying to find the perfect hiding spot, nestled in a dark nook, completely concealed from sight. From this vantage point, I eagerly awaited the approach of my unsuspecting prey. Malice gleamed in my eyes as I watched their every move, my spider legs twitching with anticipation, poised to strike at a moment’s notice. Their footsteps reverberated through the deep roads, their obliviousness to the lurking monster within these shadows almost comical. While my anger at being unable to attack the elf, wizard, and dwarf earlier still simmered within me, I pushed it aside for now. Those fools would face my wrath another time. At this moment, my focus was fixed on my original targets, and nothing would hinder my pursuit of vengeance. With a wicked grin, a spell crept to mind, and I whispered, “[FEAR].”



“I swear, I heard something,” Yua whispered, her voice barely audible as she struggled to mask the fear that was squeezing her heart. Ever since that crazy showdown with Blake, who claimed to be a fellow candidate, Yua’s nerves were shot. The idea of facing another battle made her skin crawl, and she knew she wasn’t the only one feeling it. Yeah, they had encountered their fair share of dungeon creatures on this underground path, but none came close to the pure terror that went by the name of Blake.

The four of them had reluctantly agreed to put aside their differences and make a pact to escape the wretched dungeon together, no matter what. Even Jason, stubborn as a mule, had finally caved in, probably more out of fear of Jeremy’s secret spell than genuine cooperation. So, there they were, bound by a shaky alliance fueled by desperation and the burning desire to leave the horrors of the dungeon behind. They foolishly thought their trials were over, but little did they know that the real nightmare was just getting started, lurking in the shadows, ready to pounce.

“Be ready for anything,” Jeremy warned, his voice low and filled with an underlying sense of dread. He fought hard to conceal the fear in his eyes, not wanting to show any weakness to the group. But truth be told, his nerves were shot, just like the rest of them, after that last brutal battle. He clenched his fists tightly, his grip ready to unleash Death Bolt with lightning speed if needed. It was one of the three skills he had unlocked so far, and he hoped it would be enough to keep them alive until they could finally make it out from this godforsaken hellhole.

“G-Guys, I.. I can s-sense something. D-Do you f-feel it too?” Heather stammered, her voice trembling with a mix of fear and urgency. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end, a clear sign that something sinister was lurking in the shadows. An overwhelming s-sense of unease washed over her, causing her stomach to churn with anxiety. It was as if a malevolent presence hung in the air, r-ready to strike at any moment. The t-terror was so thick she could almost taste it, and it made her feel sick to her c-core.

“I’m surrounded by a bunch of pussies!” Jason spat, his contempt for his fellow companions clear in his voice. “As long as it’s not a boss or another of those shapeshifting freaks, we can handle anything that comes our way in this shithole——hrrrk!”

Heather’s scream tore through the air, its shrillness reverberating down the dark hallway. From the shadowed recesses above, a serpentine tentacle descended with alarming speed. In a horrifying display, it impaled Jason through his open mouth, piercing him from one end to the other. The tentacle then coiled around his trembling thighs, lifting him off the ground before violently hurling him across the chamber. The sickening sound of impact filled the air as his body collided with the unforgiving wall, leaving him whimpering in excruciating pain. Though he still clung to life, the internal damage inflicted upon him was undoubtedly severe. Time raced against them, with mere moments remaining until he would succumb to his grisly wounds.

“P-p-please, let me l-l-leave this place! I w-want to go home. I want to go home! I W-WANT TO GO HOME!” Heather’s words came out in a frantic, stuttering plea, her voice trembling with fear as she desperately begged for release from the overwhelming terror that surrounded them.

A wicked, demonic cackle echoed through the cold stone walls, permeating the air. It was a taunting sound, a challenge to their courage, tempting them to flee in terror. But Jeremy, though his heart pounded with fear, steeled himself against the looming horror. He refused to be overwhelmed by it. His determination burned fiercely within him, propelling him forward. He was no stranger to adversity, and he would not be defeated by an unseen enemy. With unwavering resolve, Jeremy prepared to face whatever lurked in the shadows, ready to confront it head-on and emerge victorious.

“Reveal yourself, you vile creature!” Jeremy’s voice thundered through the darkness, a volatile mix of anxiety, dread, and fury.

Heather’s muffled scream tore through the air behind them, jerking Jeremy and Yua around in stark alarm. Their hearts raced as they witnessed Heather’s kicking feet disappearing into the devouring darkness above. The inky blackness crept closer, its suffocating grip tightening around them, foretelling their impending doom. Yua’s desperate scream reverberated through the halls, filled with fear and anguish, as she frantically searched the void for any trace of her friend. But the darkness offered nothing but emptiness, punctuated only by the haunting echo of Heather’s fading cries. Seconds later, Heather’s lifeless body plummeted to the ground, crushing Yua beneath its weight. Jeremy stood frozen in abject terror, his gaze fixated on the ghastly sight of Heather’s headless corpse. The silence shattered, replaced by Yua’s inconsolable sobs as she clung to her friend’s lifeless form.

“I call forth the rage of the gods, [DEATH BOLT]!” Jeremy’s voice quivered with a potent blend of desperation, hope, and frustration as he unleashed his spell into the void above. The searing energy crackled through the air, tearing a path with an explosive force that pulverized a nearby pillar, reducing it to a heap of crumbling debris. But the derisive laughter of the darkness only grew louder, its taunts amplifying Jeremy’s sense of futility and feeding his mounting despair. “Reveal yourself!” he bellowed, mustering every ounce of power he could summon. The cooldown on his spell was not too long, but he needed a few precious seconds to regain his composure and prepare for what awaited him.

“Now, why would I spoil the delightful suspense? The allure of the unknown is far too tantalizing to resist, wouldn’t you agree?” A seductive, hypnotic voice playfully teased from the depths of the enveloping darkness.

However, a wave of horror washed over Jeremy as he recognized the source of the voice. “You! How is this possible? You should have perished beneath that rubble! Even if you somehow survived, you shouldn’t have been able to catch up to us,” Jeremy growled.

“Hahaha!” The voice reverberated through the darkness, taunting Jeremy, but no answer was given to his question.

A surge of frustration washed over Jeremy as the realization struck him. They should have dug through all that rubble in the boss's chamber and finished her off. But grief had gripped them, clouding his mind and throwing him into disarray after Rob's tragic loss. And now, here he was, facing his imminent demise in the eerie depths beneath the dungeon. The haunting sound of Yua's heart-wrenching sobs mingled with the taunting cackles of the deranged woman about to snuff out his life.

However, a glimmer of hope flickered in Jeremy's mind, a reminder of his previous reincarnation into this twisted world. Who's to say it wouldn't happen again? A twisted smile tugged at the corners of his lips as he reluctantly accepted his impending death. His time was up, but perhaps this was just the beginning of a new cycle.

Raising his hand, he aimed his finger out and cast his spell. "I call forth the rage of the gods, [DEATH BOLT]!" Jeremy unleashed his spell at a pillar with a flick of his wrist. And yet, before the energy dissipated, he deftly redirected it towards as many pillars as possible, reducing them all to rubble in an instant.

"Jeremy, what the hell are you thinking?!" Yua cried out in a voice laced with panic.

"Taking that damn monster down with us!" Jeremy declared. He glanced at Yua, a bittersweet smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

The ceiling trembled above them, the walls groaning as if an earthquake had erupted overhead. A deluge of colossal stone blocks plummeted from the heavens, crashing down with bone-rattling force. Jeremy stood amidst the chaos, bracing himself as he awaited the moment when the monstrous entity would reveal herself. The sickening crunch of a stone fragment resonated through the air, extinguishing any glimmer of hope for Jason's survival. Dust billowed, obscuring the twinkling crystals that adorned the walls and floor, creating an ethereal, otherworldly ambiance. And then, she emerged from the shadows, her face contorted in a snarl of unbridled fury. Jeremy couldn't help but be simultaneously terrified and captivated by the sheer beauty of her rage.

"You dumbass!" she screeched with venomous rage. With a swift motion, she flung Heather's severed head towards Jeremy, the gruesome projectile finding its mark as it struck him in the abdomen, causing him to collapse to his knees in pain and horror.

"You crazy bitch!" he coughed out.

Then darkness enveloped Jeremy, swallowing him whole. The cacophony of chaos was abruptly silenced, replaced only by the lingering echo of the monster's final expletive-filled scream, "SHHHIT!"

# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 14

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### 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."



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.



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?”



#### 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!”

# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 15

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### A DELIGHTFUL NIGHTMARE

*“Arise, my dearest Blake, the hour is nigh to leave thy dreams behind! The other young ones do prance and play in fields so wonderous and kind. So come, child, and join the fun in the meadow bright and rare, where frolics and games and joys untold do await thee, fair and rare.”*

I awoke to the sound of childish laughter, a symphony of joy and delight. My eyes beheld a verdant meadow where six young children frolicked without care. They cavorted and gamboled, their giggles ringing through the air as they chased each other in wild abandon. The sight was both haunting and beautiful, a nostalgic reminder of the carefree days of innocence.

*“Oh, little ones, do come and share in play with dear Blake, who hath just arisen from slumber’s sway. But heed my words, I implore thee, the woods, a place to stay away. Stay here, where games and laughter doth await, and hours of merriment thou shalt create, in this wondrous land, with joy so bright, a melody of glee, shining in the light.”*

The first to come near was a youthful child with golden tresses and a beaming face. Her laughter rang out like chimes in glass, her happiness, a contagious grace. She hopped and twirled, with hand outstretched, eager for a new friendship to be fetched. “Greetings, Blake, I am Sophia, do come and join us. Let us play, a game of tag, with you as it!”

With disbelief swirling in my heart, I beheld a wondrous sight, for I had shrunk to a child’s size, a diminutive figure, a mere shadow of my former self. But amidst the fluttering laughter that danced in the air, a smile adorned my face, a radiant expression I couldn’t contain. In that moment, doubts were cast aside, and with reckless glee, I clasped her tiny hand, becoming one with their mirthful brigade. We raced through the meadow, their infectious energy infusing my every step, a wild abandon set free. The echoes of youthful giggles cascaded like a majestic symphony, and within this realm of unadulterated bliss, nothing else held significance, for I had discovered my true sanctuary. My spirit awakened, resonating with the resounding laughter, and basking in the boundless realm of joyous existence.

With nimble steps, I wove and bobbed, my heart alight, as I bounced and leaped, embracing the all-pervading happiness that enveloped the air. Playfully, I nudged the shoulder of a lad, his laughter rippling through the meadow as he twirled in mirthful delight. In this realm of enchantment, the gaiety knew no bounds, a tapestry of joy woven with each breath. Laughter and delight intertwined, painting a perpetual smile upon my face, as the magic of this place unfolded before my eyes.

“Rob, you are it,” Sophia proclaimed.

As the hours waned and the sunbathed the meadow in its warm embrace, we laughed and played, our spirits dancing in the radiant light. Yet, a weight settled upon my heart when I beheld another girl, her dark freckled face and piercing eyes fixated upon the foreboding woods. Her once vibrant smile had vanished, replaced by an air of trepidation. The shadows seemed to stretch, casting an ominous veil over the wooded expanse, stripping away its enchantment and revealing only darkness and fear. A shiver coursed down my spine, for I sensed the proximity of imminent danger lurking within the depths of those forbidding woods.

As the day turned to dusk, the freckled child's joy was but a distant memory. She stood still, her gaze fixed upon the silent woods, her face now pale. My heart raced with alarm, and terror ensnared me as the shadows grew ever near. The woods held no magic, no wondrous glee, no enchantment, or delight, for all to see.

The first voice I heard upon awakening in this wondrous realm sounded aloud to the freckled girl, filling the world with kindness and grace.

*"Fear not, dear Heather, 'tis just shadows that dwell, there is naught to see, only tales to tell. Do come and play with the children once more, dinner draws near."*

As I sought the woman behind the voice so sweet, her presence I could not meet. I rubbed my eyes and searched around, but her form could not be found. Yet, a mischievous giggle filled the air, and I was whisked away to a realm beyond compare. With boundless glee, I chased after children in a carefree race, leaving behind the shadows of doubt and embracing pure delight's embrace. Their laughter and play, a symphony profound, enchanted my mind with joy unbound. In this magical place, I had discovered my true home, where laughter echoed and joy freely roamed. The sense of belonging warmed my soul, as I reveled in the wonders that this realm did unfold. Surrounded by youthful laughter's tune, I embraced the beauty of each passing hour. But alas, the time had come, dinner beckons.

The children gathered, Sophia, Heather, Rob, Jeremy, Yua, and Jason too. We all gathered around the table, which appeared to expand, our feet swinging in the air as we leaned in, eagerly awaiting the feast at hand. Laughter intertwined with the air, our smiles reflecting the joy we shared. And there I sat, immersed in my chair, a radiant grin adorning my face, captivated by the sight of their laughter and harmonious embrace.

As if conjured by enchantment, the table stood adorned, with a feast fit for kings, a culinary delight adorned. The children's eyes widened with delight, their hunger unmasked, as they indulged in the flavors, their enthusiasm unabashed. Laughter and voices intertwined, an orchestra of mirth, filling the air with melodies, as they savored the earth. I leaned back, a smile upon my face, content in my quiet observation, cherishing their joyous embrace, a memory to treasure, an everlasting sensation to preserve.

Basking in the tantalizing allure of the feast, I refrained from partaking, my senses alert and watchful, my gaze fixed upon the others, as a malevolent notion insinuated itself into the recesses of my mind. A palpable air of unease cloaked the surroundings, a nebulous void that resisted comprehension. I scanned the expanse of the table, yet the enigmatic woman remained elusive, her

presence a puzzle yet unsolved, leaving me with an unsettling disquietude and a riddle yet to be gleaned.

As the feast carried on, an ominous shadow cast its pall over the table, its presence unnoticed by the other children. The wooden floorboards creaked beneath our feet, and the house swayed with an unsettling rhythm, yet they continued to indulge in their meal with unabated glee, blissfully ignorant of the gathering darkness. The shadows deepened, their sinister tendrils creeping, but as I scanned the room, my heart pounding in fearful anticipation, I found naught but fleeting specters, dissipating like a nightmare's hold released by the dawn's gentle touch.

Still, my unease lingered, a gnawing in the depths of my mind, a resolute feeling that all was not as it seemed, and the darkness held a purpose, not blind. The children's laughter, once so joyous and free, now rang hollow and forced, their faces contorted, a grotesque masquerade. The darkness ebbed and flowed, reemerging with renewed vigor, its tendrils extending and entwining my thoughts, pulling me deeper into a realm of obscurity where the brilliance of light faltered, and the shadows reigned supreme.

Amidst the ongoing feast, a boy's head tumbled across the table, a sight that left me shaken, if true. It was Rob's severed head that had passed through, yet the other children feasted on, oblivious to the horrors I had borne witness. I sat there frozen with fear, as another head fell into the cheer, this time belonging to Heather, or so it seemed, but the feast pressed on, like a nightmare turned real. In a sudden flash of lightning, the truth was unveiled, revealing the skeletal forms of the children, a haunting sight that could not be curtailed. But still, the feast went on, as the children chewed, the headless too. A nightmarish sight, one that I could not unsee.

A withered old hag, face hidden within a veil, gaunt and sickly thin, shuffled into the room with a slouch and a hobble. She was garbed in dark robes, so familiar, yet untrue. She approached with more food as the children cheered. They eagerly fed, yet only in the briefest of flickers did the lightning reveal what to be true.

I peered through the window and beheld the sinister woods that surrounded us. The trees were twisted and twirled, like tentacles of darkness, beckoning me with their dance. The forest held within it, dark delights, forbidden pain, and horrors of the night. I caught the eye of the hag reflected off the windowpane, her eyes fixed upon me, with a look of hunger so vile and untrue. I turned and she withdrew, and I shuddered, for I knew that within her, there lay a hunger so cruel.

The sound of footsteps echoed through the house, creaking upon the floorboards above. Down the stairs they approached, slow and steady, like the march of death. A fearsome creature descended, its arrival marking the end of the children's cheer, their laughter and merriment now silenced and ceased. And then, she appeared, shrouded in darkness and mystery, leaving me trembling with fear, until it withdrew, revealing a little girl shrouded in light.

The child's complexion was pure, her dress and hair a shining white, with a celestial appearance, she was a sight of delight. But, as I gazed into her glowing eyes, I saw only myself reflected in their eerie orange light. The hag approached, guiding the child toward the table, and with each skeletal figure they passed, a shudder rippled through their bony frames. Seated across from me,



the child eagerly partook in the feast, her youthful cheer unbounded. The hag, too, took her place, her gaze fixed upon the lavish spread with a wondrous delight, her dark eyes shifting toward me. Yet, as I gazed upon her, her face remained veiled within a void so dark and cruel, yet somehow it felt akin to a dream so pure.

“Come, my dear, cast away thy fears,” crooned the hag, her voice a cackle on the wind. “Behold, even thy sister revels in this delight. No need for trepidation, my sweet. Now, tell me, how dost thou find this feast?”

“Sister?” I repeated to myself that went all but unheard.

“Verily, ‘tis a delight beyond compare, I offer thee my sincerest thanks,” replied the girl who bore my resemblance, her countenance adorned with a joyous smile. “Blake, thou must partake as well, I assure thee, ‘tis a feast so scrumptiously good!”

Another gleam of lightning illuminated the feast, and at last, the true nature of the repast was fully revealed. A table bedecked with decay and putridity, spoiled meats crawling with maggots and flies. The girl, unfazed, dined on a severed human limb, its flesh grotesque as it clung to the bone. And I, transfixed by the wonderous display, licked my lips in hunger and awe. The children, seated around the table, remained but skeletons, while two skulls rested upon plates of twisted entrails and innards. The sight was ghastly, yet I could not avert my gaze, ensnared by the delectable spectacle that unfolded before me. The hag cackled, her laughter resounding through the chamber, as the feast pressed on, the children now wary of both this peculiar girl and me.

An odd sight it was, for though I knew not this girl’s identity, a sense of familiarity pervaded the air, as if we were bound by an unseen thread, connected through the tapestry of our lives. The hag herself exuded a similar aura, as if she were more than a mere stranger, but perhaps a long-lost mother or kin. Yet, despite these musings, my gaze was undeniably drawn back to the grotesque and strangely mouthwatering feast, where my own doppelgänger reveled in unhindered delight.

Another flicker of light, and I beheld the hag, cloaked not in her robe, but in the likeness of a grand ball gown, seated regally in her chair. A hood still enshrouded her head, veiled her countenance in a mysterious darkness, revealing only skeletal hands and thin figure to my discerning gaze. Strangely, I sensed no malevolence emanating from her as I daringly indulged in a bite of a putrid heart, savoring its flavor as if it were a delectable fruit freshly plucked from a verdant branch.

And with each bite I took, the taste of decay greeted my palate, a perverse pleasure that should have turned my stomach. Yet, I reveled in the sensation of each crunch and chew, savoring the morbid symphony upon my tongue. The hag, now draped in the elegance of a refined lady, carried herself with a grace befitting royalty, her laughter tender and whimsical as she observed my indulgence in the feast of the dead. Though her shrouded gaze exuded warmth and affection, my eyes were inexorably drawn back to the girl seated opposite me, her face adorned with a gleeful grin, as she continued to relish the grotesque banquet with unabated delight.

“Who are you?” I eventually inquired of the girl seated opposite me, my words mingling with the taste of the morbid feast upon my lips. Yet, my question extended beyond the reflection of myself,

veiled in ethereal white, but also encompassed the once hag, now an enigmatic woman shrouded in profound darkness, exuding an aura reminiscent of a fleeting dream.

And yet, it was not the girl who uttered the next words. “My dearest young ones,” spoke the woman of gentle and motherly nature, clad in garments of deepest black, “the hour hath come, and my decision is final, for the rules decree that only one champion shall be crowned.”

I ceased my feast as my gaze shifted around the table. The six skeletons seem to awaken from their haze to our reality, with a few of them trembling in sorrow and grief. One of them even directed a hostile glare in my direction, while another tried to remove the delightful meal from their jaw and ribs. Meanwhile, my mirrored reflection remained unperturbed, continuing to savor the meal with a broad grin on her face.

“My dear Sophia, thou hast scarce had a chance to sparkle and yet, thy time with us is done too soon. But I can spy the longing in thy heart to show thy mettle, and for that, I dub thee a Dark Acolyte, may the shadows lead thee on.”

With the woman’s ominous declaration, Sophia’s bony remains disappeared from the table, leaving the other skeletons and myself in a state of shock and confusion. I watched on as their empty eye sockets glanced around frantically, searching for any sign of the vanished child, but she was nowhere to be found, vanished into the ether as if she had never existed. My reflection, however, continued to hum a cheerful tune as she feasted on what was clearly not a sausage, seemingly unfazed by the strange events unfolding around her.

“Oh, Rob, my dearest child,” spoke the woman with a tender affection, her words imbued with a gentle cadence, “I have pondered deeply of late if thy loyalty to our cause is unwavering. But after much contemplation, I have reached a verdict and declare thee my Nightmare Paladin, and guardian of dreams. Remember, my boy, that fighting for the nightmares that creep does not make thee a monster or fiend, not in the least. For many things that others deem evil and base are but dreams that belong to one’s own pace. So, if ever thou art plagued by doubt, simply remember that thou art fighting for the right to dream freely.

Rob’s skeleton voiced its fear, “What does that mean?” Yet, ere the words could fully escape its bony jaw, its remains crumbled into dust and vanished, much like the fate of Sophia before him. This spectacle left the remaining skeletons in a state of unease, uncertain of the fate that awaited them all.

In the depths of my being, I clung to the conviction that triumph was within my grasp, and yet, my gaze was repeatedly drawn to the girl seated across from me, a reflection of myself adorned in garments and locks as pure as the driven snow. With unabated delight, she continued to savor the feast, oblivious to the doubts that plagued my mind. Did she come to usurp my place, emerging as the triumphant one while I suffered a defeat? Uncertainties swirled within the recesses of my thoughts, but alas, before I could articulate my fears and seek solace in comprehension, the motherly woman proceeded with her next utterances.

“Fear not, my dear Yua,” spoke the shrouded woman of bones, her voice a spectral whisper carried on the breeze, “but let thy heart overflow with joy. For I do name thee Nightmares’ Assassin, the

one who shall deftly strike down the adversaries of dreams with agile skill. And thou, sweet Heather, with thy heart so pure and kind, I name thee my Priestess of Dreams, venture forth and unleash my nightmares and dreams upon the realm, let them entwine and ensnare.”

As Heather and Yua both disintegrated into dust, a profound sense of awe washed over me, mingled with a tinge of trepidation. Only Jeremy, Jason, and I remained seated at the table, accompanied by my doppelgänger who continued to feast with evident satisfaction upon her countenance. The shrouded woman, her visage veiled beneath the depths of her hooded robe, maintained a momentary silence. The scene unfolded like a vivid dream, blurring the boundaries of reality and fantasy, casting a spell of wonder and enchantment upon my senses. Amidst this mystical tableau, I succumbed to the allure, reaching out to partake in yet another serving of putrid flesh, delighting in its morbid flavor with an unsettling glee.

“And now, my dears, to the rest of thee,” she said in a soothing tone, “each of thee hast shown great promise, and it doth pain me to make this decree, that only one shall bear the title of Dark Champion, a name not befitting of thy purpose. Thus, I shall rename it to Nightmares’ Champion, a title that aligns more closely with the essence of thy calling. And with that, Jeremy, thou art a noble leader in the making, thy cunning and bravery shining bright. I name thee Sentinel of Dreams, a guardian entrusted with the sacred duty to serve me faithfully. Go forth, Jeremy, and mayest thou fulfill thy role with unwavering devotion, tending to the dreams and nightmares that dwell within.”

I released a sigh, my heart heavy with the weight of uncertainty, for I had come perilously close to losing the title I coveted so fiercely to Jeremy. The true reason behind my intense longing eluded me, hidden deep within the recesses of my soul. Perchance it was what Aurelia wished of me, an unspoken yearning that resonated within my depths. Above all else, my fervent desire was to find my way back to her, to bridge the vast expanse that separated us, even if the enigmatic pull that drew me toward her remained shrouded in mystery. If being hailed this Nightmares’ Champion, held the promise of bringing me closer to Aurelia’s embrace, then my longing for that title blazed with an even more fervent flame. Yet, as my gaze locked with the girl seated across from me, her joyous smile concealed a cryptic secret, a hidden desire that mirrored my own yearning for the presence of Aurelia.

The elegantly dark woman’s words carried through the air, a melodic decree filled with a touch of solemnity, “And thou, cruel Jason, with thy heart full of anger and rage, naught can quell the fire that doth blaze within thy cage. It is for that reason, I do name thee, my Dark Champion, go forth and be the harbinger of my will, so mote it be.”

I was horrified, utterly taken aback by the fact that I had lost to that razor-toothed skeleton. Jason, with his dental peculiarity, displayed his defiance by taunting me, flipping me the bird with his bony finger before crumbling into mere dust, while Jeremy, wearing an expression of disappointment, shook his head and faded into oblivion. Confusion and shock overwhelmed me as I grappled to comprehend the woman’s unexpected declaration. How had I faltered in the trial? The skeletal remnants of those six had now become nothing more than fleeting memories, leaving only the girl and me at the table with the enigmatic figure shrouded in a hooded cloak. The room

sank into an unsettling silence, punctuated only by the rhythmic sound of the girl's chewing, and a chilling sense of unease settled within me, akin to an icy finger tracing its way up my spine.

The woman chuckled with sinister glee, her demeanor changing as she spoke. "At long last, they have departed," she exclaimed, her eyes almost twinkling beneath the depths of her hood. "Oh, Blake, my dearest, thou hast truly ensnared my malevolence, despite the interferences of Circe. I beseech thee to grant me thy forgiveness for the deeds I have enacted," she declared, extending a hand of grace toward both me and the girl who seemed to be both my reflection and my polar opposite. The girl had ceased her feast, her gaze brimming with curiosity.

"Fear not, my precious lil' ones," she continued, her voice flowing with a melodic cadence that resonated with ancient wisdom. "I doth comprehend that the tapestry of this tale may bewilder thy innocent hearts. Circe's deed was a cruel twist, for she ensnared thy soul within a Black Pudding, a treacherous trap. Upon thy demise, it shattered thy soul into thousands of shards, and would have casted ripples of devastation throughout the realm and beyond. Alas, her motives remain as elusive as a fleeting dream, though I do have my suspicions as to why. Perchance she sought to rekindle a fragment of the Eldritch Abomination that once claimed the heavens or simply to destroy all of reality. The truth eludes my grasp.

"Nonetheless, I have exerted my powers to mend the damage and salvage thy soul, or rather souls now, averting the imminent calamity she nearly unleashed upon the realm. Although thou may not bear the title of mine champion, I bestow upon thee a different mantle – my Scion. I have embraced thee as mine own, weaving threads of my divine essence to restore thy fractured soul. However, thy souls now reside in a harmonious duality, akin to the tender bond shared by twins. Such a phenomenon rarely occurs, except in the creation of newborn souls, something that hasn't happened within this realm since its inception. By merging thy essence with mine, I have ushered forth your wondrous rebirth, transforming thy soul into interconnected halves. Thou art now mine cherished daughter, and my love for thee knows no bounds, for the divine of this realm have never created something new since the fall of my own mother, until now.

"Now, my delightful daughter, venture forth into the realm and unfurl the tapestry of thy marvelous dreams and haunting nightmares. But do exercise caution in the presence of Circe, for even my powers of the divine have their limitations when confronted by a Primordial."

"My soul shattered?" the girl and I echoed in unison, our voices filled with disbelief. We longed for an explanation, a deeper understanding of our fractured existence. However, our inquiries were swallowed by the tumultuous currents of uncertainty. Reality twisted and warped, leaving me disoriented and lost within the labyrinth of confusion. Countless questions clamored for attention, yearning to be answered. Yet, before anything else could escape my lips, everything dissolved into oblivion, fading like ethereal remnants, as I succumbed to the embrace of the enigmatic void.

TITLE AWARDED  
[SCION OF THE CRONE]

NOW AND FOR ALL ETERNITY, THE CRONE HAS CLAIMED YOU AS, DAUGHTER.  
MAY THE HEAVENS ONE DAY FEAR YOU!

*BEST OF LUCK!*

*Ow, my head hurts! Wait, what the fuck, daughter of the Crone? SHHHIT!*

*Wait, that wasn't my thoughts?*

*Oh, no!*

# BLAKE PUDDING

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## CHAPTER 16

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### WE. ARE. BLAKE!

Darkness enveloped me, and I found myself in that strange state between death and life—a place that felt more like being reborn—or respawning, if you will. It was like wandering through a dream, and I felt an unusual sense of peace washing over me, unlike anything I had ever experienced before. Amidst this serenity, I sensed a spark of life within me, like a tiny ray of sunshine, quietly dreaming away while I roamed through darker nightmares with glee.

As I drifted in the void, I couldn't resist delving deep into the connection to my messed-up soul. I was faced with a real mind-bender. Was I Blake now, or was this broken piece of my soul somehow her, or maybe neither of us? The questions swirled around my mind, and to be honest, I had always found philosophy to be rather lame. To be, or not to be—what the fuck is the question! My head was spinning with all this existential shit.

Ugh, to make things even worse, it turned out that Circe was the one who did this to me! And just when I was kinda starting to like her—okay, not really. I hardly like anyone, and that's not some new Black Pudding trait I picked up. In my past life, I was always pretty antisocial. But back to the point, my damn soul had shattered, and now this Crone goddess was acting like my freakin' mother, trying to piece me back together. Oh, and I'm her scion? Well, she did succeed, kinda. I mean, she put me back together... into two pieces, but they sure as hell don't feel identical.

*Ugh, this whole situation is so damn confusing!*

Man, the big question haunting my mind was how and why the hell did Circe shatter my soul? Seriously, what the actual f... The Crone had her guesses, but they're just freakin' guesses! Well, thank goodness I didn't even notice it happening. I can't even imagine how much that would've hurt. Just thinking about it makes me shiver. But seriously, what the fuck? Circe was supposed to be teaching me magic, sorta like a reluctant sensei or something. She even gave me that Oracle skill to talk with her.

*None of this adds up, like, at all!*

*We always overthink things, just relax. We'll figure it out.*

“We?” I echoed, the word feeling like ash on my tongue—or, well, mind, since I'm not really speaking while floating here in the void.

*Yes, we! I mean, you are me, after all.*

My other thoughts replied, a little too chipper about this whole arrangement if you ask me—I mean, us.

Ugh, this was going to get confusing if I—we don't nip it in the bud.

*Okay, let's drop this we bullshit, it's already hurting my head.*

“Sure thing. Seems like you've inherited a whole lot of Blake's irritability,” My other me didn't bother to hide our laughter.

“No way, I didn't inherit shit! I'm Blake, and you're like a little piece of me,” I groaned, feeling like I was losing grip on what the hell was going on. “You know what? I should give you a name. It'll make it easier to deal with all this madness if I treat you like a whole new person instead of the other half of my broken soul,” I mused, trying to regain some control over the situation.

“Umm... No! I'm Blake, you're the other piece. But, if it makes you less moody, I'm fine with that,” she chuckled, much to my irritation. “Now, what should I call myself? Oh, I've always loved the name, Big Sis!”

“What? No. Screw that! I'm not calling you, Big Sis,” I blurted out, then quickly reined myself in, trying to suppress my tantrum.

*Of course, she wanted to be called that. After all, I sort of like the sound of it as well.*

*You know...we share the same mind space.*

*Ugh!*

“Okay, let's just figure this out later,” I managed to say, though my teeth were probably clenched so tight it's a wonder they didn't crack. Or were they? Wait, no, my teeth were fake, a creation I made from silk, they weren't capable of cracking. To be honest, the more I thought about it, I wasn't even sure if I was even corporeal in this freaky place! Did I even have teeth to clench, or a freakin' body? This whole situation was just, fucking weird!

“Flee, Aislinn, my love,” a man's voice called out, halting my internal dilemma in its tracks.

The darkness of the void started to fade, and my heart raced as I saw the outlines of a forest ablaze, with two figures running desperately through the chaos. I tried to reach out, to see more, but before I could make sense of it all, a small, ominous figure emerged—a little girl shrouded in an eerie mix of pink and pure darkness. She waved her hand, and my vision was abruptly cut off.

*What the hell's going on?*

I had felt a sense of urgency surging through me, but she took it all away, plunging me back into blackness as I drifted to sleep. As I stirred from my slumber, I found myself enveloped in the all-too-familiar gooeyness of my tar-like form. *Ugh, here we go again.*

“Will there ever be a day when I wake up and not be a puddle of goo?” I groaned to myself. “I can only hope.” But wait, there was something else... an odd dream, slipping away from my memory like water through my fingers. *Oh well, dreams are weird anyway. No use dwelling on it.*

I shifted into my human form, gracefully wrapping myself up in my spider silk to create my gorgeous phony human casing. Well, maybe others see it as phony, but to me, it's my luxurious

skin. After the silk settled, I scanned the dark surroundings with a faint orange glow emanating from my eyes thanks to my Mana Sight.

I found myself lying on a stone altar, the hard surface a sharp contrast to my smooth skin. My mind was hazy, unable to recall how I ended up in this place or where I was. The only vivid memory was of that idiot who caused the deep roads to collapse—and the Crone! But what was more shocking was looking down and realizing that I was completely, freaking naked?!

*Seriously, how the hell did I end up in this mess? And, oh great, I'm anatomically correct. How lovely!*

“What the hell?” I spat out in frustration, feeling the need to vent my anger. Without thinking, I cast [ORACLE], hoping to find someone to bitch out. However, as soon as I cast it, I cursed myself; Circe was the last person I should call out to. After all, if what the Crone said was true, Circe had tried to destroy my soul.

But to my surprise, nothing happened. “What? Oh! Ha-ha!” a sudden fit of laughter resonated within my head, and the memory of the girl in white came flooding back into my mind. Yet, there was still something else missing, like the fading fragments of a fleeting dream. Though, it also felt as if my consciousness was splitting in half as if I were of two minds.

It felt just like the dream I was having, you know, the one I can hardly remember. *Sigh.*

“What’s going on?” I groaned, it was pretty clear now that Oracle must be hardwired to the other fragments of my soul instead of Circe. Seems like the Crone made sure Circe no longer had any access to me, which is a relief!

“Hey, what’s up?” a voice filled with a little too much perkiness slipped from my mouth.

I froze!

The sensation was odd, another person had spoken within me. And yet, I knew that wasn’t the cause. I didn’t feel as though I was possessed or anything, but rather, my mind was split—or rather, my mind was sharing two consciousness of myself. I couldn’t quite articulate what was happening to me. Though I had a funny feeling the connection between my two souls and our shared mind would have been there even if I hadn’t activated Oracle. It was more like the skill pointed out what was already happening to me. Honestly, the whole situation was confusing even me—us—we?

“Oh, look who’s here,” a familiar male voice rumbled from the depths of the shadows ahead. “Do you ever stop talking to yourself, you psycho bitch?!”

I held my breath, my senses in high alert as I cautiously scanned my surroundings, preparing for any potential danger. The darkness seemed all-consuming, but a faint hint of orange light reflected off a few shapes, reminding me of one of my first Racial Skills. With a pulse of determination, I focused my thoughts and commanded [THERMALSENSE] to awaken. The world around me exploded into a frenzied barrage of colors before finally settling into a haunting purple hue. That’s when I saw them—six glowing figures, each pulsing with a menacing red, orange, and yellow—stirring to life on altars like mine.



“Umm, we’re not alone,” the other voice rang in my mind, or at least I assumed it had been in my head.

“No, shit, psycho!” the fucker yelled back at me.

“Argh! Alright!” I growled. It was becoming clear my twisted internal thoughts could speak using my mouth. *Damnit!* No—that had always been the case. It was as though another set of thoughts separate from my own, and yet—not? I couldn’t help but pause... Technically, it was my—our—mouth and thoughts?

*Can we hear my thoughts?*

“Yep,” she—me—shot back...through our lips? Seriously, this whole sharing-a-mind thing was strange—and...going to get old, quick.

With Thermalsense active, I couldn’t make out his facial features since everyone appeared as glowing colors, but there was no mistaking that voice. I knew exactly who it was.

“I wasn’t talking to you, shark face!” I yelled back at him.

“Psycho,” he muttered under his breath, but the sound still reached my ears.

“Where are we?” a girl on one of the altars asked, her tone carrying a note of worry. She had interrupted the eerie stillness of the darkness (well, technically I had) and my growing irritation with the individual who persisted in calling me a psycho bitch!

“Heather!” another female voice cried back in alarm. “Where are you?”

“Over here,” came the reply from the first girl, her tone filled with fear and anxiety.

“I’m coming to you!” the other reassured, her voice filled with determination.

I descended from the altar, and as I did, my fluid, inky form flowed out from beneath my ethereal, white skin. The black tar-like substance that made up my true form continued to seep out as it shifted in shape. The result was a breathtaking display of gothic beauty and nightly horrors as my dress reformed around me like tendrils of cruel darkness. The dress was adorned with intricate black embroidery that seemed to writhe and dance with a life of its own. I was a sight to behold, a mesmerizing combination of grace and horror, like a figure straight out of a funeral for the undead or an elegant dark ball of untold frights.

I pivoted, my hand still resting on the altar I had just departed from, and reached out with my senses, searching for the pulsing energy of mana that surrounded me. It didn’t take long to find it. With fierce determination, I cast forth the flickering fire of Necrotic Flames, illuminating the room in its eerie purple glow. My control with ambient mana, and more importantly, casting without the aid of the system, seemed to have greatly improved. Though, it was a lot simpler to call forth the magic when not in the heat of battle. I canceled my [THERMALSENSE] skill as I turned to face the six familiar nude figures. I couldn’t help but feel a twinge of recognition. Half of them, I had personally ended their lives.

“Now, now. What should I do?” I purred, a sinister smile spreading across my face, my lips contorting into an unnatural, demonic grin. I could feel my other me stirring within...me, as if a bit uncomfortable with what I so badly wanted to do. Though, I sensed it was more of guilt that she delighted in tormenting and intimidating others just as much as I did. Huh, seemed like both halves of my soul were screwed up.

“I-I won! I’m the champion! You can’t touch me now!” Jason, the foolish man who had insulted me in the dark, declared triumphantly, like a pathetic child playing tag on a playground.

“Oh, how delightful it will be to shatter your delusions,” I replied with a sly smirk. My elongated tongue slithered out between my lips and whipped about before retracting back into my mouth in a taunting manner. I could practically taste the fear in the air, and it was intoxicating.

“P-Please, Jason, don’t p-provoke her!” the girl I had beheaded, Heather, implored. Her voice quivered with fear as she and another familiar figure, Yua (if I recalled her name correctly), cowered behind an altar, trying to shield their nudity from view. The sight was almost pathetic, and I couldn’t help but find it amusing.

“Go ahead, Jason, taunt her,” a third female goaded, her voice ringing with confidence and defiance. She stood tall before her altar, hands on hips, her face a mask of determination as she challenged Jason with her gaze. Instantly, she became my favorite among this group of shitheads! *Oh yes, I remembered her.* She was the first dead body I had found and consumed. The taste of her lingering on my tongue for quite some time, and was rather satisfying.

I heard Heather mumbling under her breath, but that wolf-eared fuck who caused the tunnel’s collapse was really getting on my nerves. He was just ignoring us, fueling my growing irritation. The temptation to violently rip those stupid ears from his head was overwhelming. And then, there was another figure lurking in the shadows—a hulking brute with a slightly greenish tint to his skin. He cowered behind his altar, desperately trying to conceal his manhood with his hands. *What a bunch of sorry-ass characters!*

“I honestly don’t know whether to feast on you,” I started to say.

“Or pity you,” my other me finished, completing my thought as if we had been in sync our entire lives. It was surprising how effortlessly we were already coordinating with each other.

I heard a gasp, most likely from Heather. Her eyes were fixed on me, filled with shock and disbelief. “H-Has anyone taken a look at their status yet?” she stammered.

Shrugging to myself, I decided to pull up my own status sheet.

<b>NAME:</b> BLAKE
<b>RACE:</b> BLACK PUDDING
<b>CLASS:</b> DUNGEON MONSTER
<b>LEVEL:</b> 55
<b>TITLES</b>

<b>HOPELESS CRUSADER</b> <b>SCION OF THE CRONE</b> <b>UNHOLY MOTHER</b>		
<u>RACIAL SKILLS</u> [ABSORB] [CORROSIVE] [NECROTIC FLAME] [POLYMORPH] [STELLAR VOID] [THERMALSENSE]	<u>ABILITIES</u> [BURST] [POISON SPIT] [SILK WEBBING] [SPIDER WALK] [VEIL POLYGLOT] [VENOMOUS]	<u>UNIQUE</u> [ORACLE] [RESTRICTED] [RESTRICTED]
<u>SPELLS</u> [ACID BREATH] [BLIGHT] [FEAR] [MANA SIGHT] [PARALYSIS] [SPIRIT VESSEL]	<u>VULNERABILITIES</u> [FIRE] [HOLY]	<u>SELECTABLE</u> [ASTRAL INSIGHT] [BRITTLE BONES] [COMBAT PROFICIENCY] [DECAY TOUCH] [FORTRESS] [LEAP] [LIFE DRAIN] [MINDLESS REGENERATION] [ROTTEN AURA] [SHAMBLE] [SHIELD PROFICIENCY]

“I think mine’s broke,” I huffed, feeling a bit annoyed by what I saw.

“Broken?! Mine is working perfectly!” Jason’s boisterous laughter echoed throughout the chamber, “I’m the Champion, bitches!” he declared proudly.

“A-And she’s the S-Scion of the Crone!” Heather stammered out. Her voice was still tinged with shock.

“Oh, yeah, there’s that. No, I meant I didn’t level up for killing all of you. Seriously, how weak are all of you?” I grumbled, feeling a mix of frustration and disappointment.

“What in the hell does that mean?” Jason asked, his voice tinged with boredom as he absentmindedly ran his tongue over one of his grotesque, needle-like teeth.

“I mean you all were too weak for me to earn any levels from beating your asses,” I replied, a touch annoyed I had to even spell it out for him.

The idiot rolled his eyes at me. “No, not that, I wasn’t talking to you,” Jason huffed. “Besides, winning with a sucker punch doesn’t count.” He grumbled on, but honestly, I couldn’t give a damn as I returned to tuning him out. Who had time for his whining anyway?

“Whatever, you bunch of useless idiots,” I sneered, rolling my eyes back at them. “And let me make one thing crystal clear, Champion. The Crone has claimed me as her own, so from this moment forward, you serve at the whim of my... new foster mother? Or something like that!” I declared with a sinister smirk, feeling a chilling satisfaction creeping down my spine. It was

strange how easily those words came out, and even stranger how proud they made me feel. My smile twisted into a grotesque grin, reflecting the darkness within.

“Oh, come on, spare me the whining,” Jason grumbled, but I brushed off his complaints and continued to ignore him. However, his bravado quickly crumbled when he let out a bloodcurdling scream, his voice echoing through the chamber with terror and disbelief. “WHAT THE FUCK!” It was as if he had just woken up and finally realized what I had said earlier. Talk about a delayed reaction!

I paid no attention to the pathetic champion and marched towards the wolf-eared annoyance, my mind set on ridding him of those vexing ears once and for all.

“Whoa! Hey there now! The trial’s done! We’re on the same side now,” the irritating Jeremy spoke up. I paused, considering his words. On the one hand, he was correct. On the other hand, I still had an intense desire to rid him of those ears.

“Don’t do it, Blake!” I—her, insisted.

“Oh, but I so desperately want to tear those ears from his head,” I complained, my frustration growing with each passing moment. Ugh, resisting the temptation was going to be a real pain.

“She’s babbling to herself like a fucking lunatic again,” Jason bellowed, his voice bouncing off the stone walls of the chamber.

With a snarl on my lips and a swish of my dress that could’ve caused a tornado, I left those sorry sacks of stupidity to their miserable destinies and sashayed out of the chamber. Just laying my eyes on them had me wanting to whip out a tentacle and gift them a dose of hellfire – or would that be Necrotic Flame? My black gooey blood boiled as I trudged along, the only source of light coming from the eerie, flickering, purple flame dancing in my hand. It took all the self-control I had—and trust me, it’s not much—but I kept myself in check, remembering that these dimwits belonged to my new surrogate mama, the Crone. *Well, a little violence, I’m sure, would be fine.*

A voice piped up, “Please, wait for us!” That did nothing but stoke the fire of my growing annoyance. Those pleas echoed in my ears, teasing me with their relentless persistence.

I whirled around to see the sorry lot scurrying after me, their private goodies jiggling and swinging like they were auditioning for a pancake-flipping marathon. Oh, right, almost slipped my mind. There they were, prancing in their birthday suits, and honestly, I could barely hold back a snort of laughter. The three ladies and the beefy green behemoth—who by the way, had lost his head, quite literally, to me—had made the executive decision to tail me... *Fantastic.* The sight of the girls wrestling to keep their jiggy bits from performing a full-on samba was downright comical, and rather alluring if I do say so myself. And Rob—yeah, that was his name, right?—with his muscles popping like overfilled water balloons and hands clamped over his family jewels, was a freakin’ riot!

As they edged closer, I jabbed a finger at each of them, spitting out a venomous rebuke. “I feasted on your lifeless husk and cleaved your two heads clean off,” I snarled, my fury teetering on the edge of eruption. “So why, in the realm of all things batshit crazy, would you follow me like lost

puppies?” I crossed my arms across my chest, a fortress wall against the crying to come. Meanwhile, my personal eerie purple nightlight bobbed along dutifully. I shot the group a glare filled with a good measure of aggravation. Mostly, I was in disbelief at the laughable display, but my mind was firmly stuck on another pressing matter. And these idiots were holding me up.

“Absolutely not! I’m not staying with that creep, Jason,” Sophia proclaimed, hands firmly set on her hips. She wasn’t shy or bashful in the slightest. Out of the group of hapless idiots, she seemed to be the least annoying.

I then slung my eyes to the mountainous outline of Rob, who was trying his level best to not get caught eyeballing the trio of naked ladies. Despite his looks screaming middle-aged, muscle-encased orc, he was knee-deep in the murky waters of bashfulness and embarrassment. Talk about a sight that was as odd as it was hilarious, this man-mountain morphing into a jittery mess in the company of clothes-deprived women. But hey, that’s the bizarro world I had been thrown into. *Pfft, whatever!*

“Can you handle this?” I grumbled, knowing full well my own compassion reservoir was running on fumes, and frankly, I was curious about my other mind’s solo abilities, considering we were flatmates in this body. I was pretty damn sure my alter ego, soul scrap, memory hodgepodge, or whatever she was, already caught the drift of my request.

“Bitchy,” she shot back, but it wasn’t a stung retort, more like an eyeroll you’d get from a sibling who’s heard all your crap before.

“Handle what?” That Yua girl, if I’m not mistaken, asked.

“Not talking to you!” I replied.

“Whatever happened to that little evil girl in white, who was sitting with the Crone and us at the table?” Yua added, with a dash of trepidation lacing her voice.

“D-Didn’t the g-goddess re-refer to her as your s-sister?” Heather stammered out, her voice trembling with confusion.

“Hi there!” The words burst from my lips, just as my hands plunged into the gooey abyss that was my belly, burying deep beneath the squirming mass of black tendrils that formed my oh-so-trendy dress.

Our four stunned spectators gasped in shock as they watched my arms vanish where my innards should’ve been. I disregarded their dry heaving and faces that could easily win a horror-show contest, focusing instead on the task at hand. Effortlessly, I spun four pairs of top-notch spider silk bathrobes and tossed them without care at the feet of our stunned spectators.

*Hold on, didn’t I ask myself to take care of this? Damn, I can’t tell when she’s puppeteering my body!*

*Chill, girl, I’m not pulling our strings. It’s the same for me. I can’t tell where you stop, and I start.*

I heard myself replying to...well, myself, unsure which one was me. It was as though both were me, and I was only aware of the differences when one or the other 'me' was in mental conflict with the other. *I'm so confused.*

*We're two halves of the same crazy coin, whatever you're doing, it's like I'm doing it, and the same goes the other way around. I'm just as much a part of Blake as you are. You're only thinking you're the whole Blake because you hogged all the bitchy stubbornness.*

It wasn't until her words percolated through my—no, our—mind that the reality dawned—I'm not, Blake... *We. Are. BLAKE! Well, damn.*

My—no, better yet—our stepdad always had us pegged as crazy. And who would've guessed? The old prick actually hit the bullseye. Does this mean that my supposed internal monologue has been a duet all this while? Well, that's a heap of craziness to unpack.

“How? Where?! What the hell!” Sophia's voice rang out, teetering on the edge of disbelief and awe as she stared at the silk bathrobes. Among the merry band of misfits, she was the lone holdout who still retained a human.

I shrugged nonchalantly. “I can steal powers, by the way. Thanks for the Purple Necrotic Flames,” I stated before pivoting and resuming my search. The smothering darkness and hush of the corridors began to gnaw at my consciousness—no, our consciousness—a nagging sense of worry burrowing deep within. “Seriously, where the hell is everyone?” I mused aloud, to myself, or should I say, to ourselves? Nah, screw it. We're both Blake, no need to split hairs.

“You didn't steal it,” Sophia retorted, her voice tinged with a hint of fascination. “I still have my spell skill.”

“Curious,” I muttered, only vaguely aware of their lingering presence as they followed in my wake, now fully swaddled in the robes I'd conjured. I seemed to have processed rather swiftly that me and I were fundamentally the same person, but a more pressing worry soon monopolized my attention. “Where the hell is she?” I found myself muttering under my breath.

“What is this stuff?” Yua's voice intruded, her tone grating like a cheese shredder against my nerves. “Feels like premium silk,” she continued, tracing her fingers over the sleek texture of the robe.

“Spider silk,” I grumbled, the edges of worry sharpening with each passing moment. I peered into one of the chambers we were passing by, searching for any sign of something out of the ordinary, but nothing caught my eye.

“Why are you so grumpy,” Yua asked with a cheeky tone.

“Allow me to make a few things clear,” I hissed, casting a dark gaze over the four following me. “It's taking every ounce of my self-control not to turn on you and feast upon your flesh. And secondly, where in the unholy abyss is everyone? It's downright unnerving that no one is here to welcome our dear dipshit champion! But then again, I shouldn't expect much from a group that can't even be bothered to check their system notifications during a fight!”

“Umm, you mean when we ditched you in the dungeon boss’s chamber? Yeah, we checked the system notifications and thought it was smarter to leave you there instead of trying to dig you out to finish you,” Yua blurted out.

“Oh, don’t act like we’re any better,” I teased myself. “We never bother checking our notifications either.”

I gritted my teeth. “You evil bitch! Don’t call me out in front of them... I’ve got a reputation as a bloodthirsty psychopath to uphold here,” I hissed, trying to preserve whatever semblance of fear-inducing image I had left. Of course, I was bickering with myself, but whatever!

“Who are you talking to?” Sophia questioned, her brow furrowed in confusion.

“Me,” I replied tersely.

“Are you insane?” she asked, her face a mask of confusion?

“No, we’re Blake! I don’t have time for this back and forth.” I resumed my march down the hallway, my footsteps echoing in the silence.

“Oh, wow! You have a split personality skill, or another soul trapped in your head! Don’t you?!” Rob exclaimed, his words reverberating down the empty hall and up my nerves.

I was briefly tempted to unleash my wrath upon them, but I forced myself to resist the urge, my weary feet trudging deeper into the consuming darkness. The shadows seemed to pulsate with life, enveloping me in their suffocating embrace. Oddly enough, it felt somewhat comforting, like a warm and familiar presence.

As I turned the corner, my heart sank at the ghastly sight before me—a horrific tableau of death and destruction. The aftermath of a brutal battle was strewn across the landscape, a macabre tapestry of twisted bodies and unnatural poses. The necromancers had suffered a catastrophic defeat, and their corpses bore the marks of a merciless slaughter.

Despite the hunger that threatened to consume me at the sight of this gruesome feast, I managed to maintain my focus. My mind was fixated on one thing only—Aurelia! With a snarl of annoyance, I pushed aside bodies as I combed through the carnage, sparing a few for a quick bite here and there. Hey, a girl’s gotta eat!

“W-What happened here?” Heather’s voice reached my ears, but I paid her no mind as I continued my relentless search.

The relentless obsession that had gripped me and compelled me to find Aurelia was a baffling yearning I couldn’t quite fathom. Yet, the fear that accompanied it was all-encompassing. As I pressed on, scouring the corridor, a glimmer of relief washed over me—Aurelia’s lifeless form wasn’t among the fallen I had come across. Nevertheless, the destruction that lay in its wake was nothing short of staggering.

The walls bore the unmistakable marks of blood, fire, and violent eruptions, while the lifeless bodies of the defeated were scattered haphazardly like abandoned toys. With a heavy sense of

trepidation, I soldiered on, my four bothersome companions trailing behind me like pesky ducklings.

A sense of unease gnawed at the edges of my mind, persistent and maddening, like a pesky fly buzzing just beyond my grasp. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't shake it off; it felt like I had forgotten something crucial. As I took another turn down a murky and ominous hallway, there, sprawled out on the ground, was the little twerp ghou, Olin. This time, life had abandoned him, an axe now wedged deep into his skull.

A dark temptation coursed through me, urging me to grind his face into the floor and feast upon his eyes. But before I could succumb to those sinister impulses, my other voice rang out like the clash of a church bell, snapping me back to reality. *I've got a thought.*

"Heather, reckon your mending spell could work on the undead?" she—I hollered back at the four souls who followed me like a pack of lost puppies in need of direction.

"I-I don't know," Heather stammered, fear creeping into her voice as she anticipated my reaction to her answer.

Accepting that me and I were two fragments of the same soul was a lot to wrap my head around, but I did it, and adjusting to this newfound unity would take time. But despite the complexity of our situation, our souls, mind, and body were now aligned, fixated on one singular and all-consuming mission: finding Aurelia! All the training, ditching the broken system, and even Circe's attempt to obliterate my soul, all of it paled in comparison to this paramount quest. I vowed not to let my stubbornness get in the way of achieving this purpose... well, at least we hoped I wouldn't!

"Well, you are our priestess," we said with a hint of expectation. "So, let's give it a try." With that, we—I reached out to pull the axe from Olin's head. "Ugh, if this doesn't work, I'm devouring him," I said, my black tongue darting out to wet my lips in anticipation.

"Were you always like this, or is that twisted personality from the screwed-up body they gave you?" Yua queried, her voice tinged with both worry and revulsion.

"I was always like this," I teased with a sinister grin. The others stepped back, fear evident in their eyes as I stood over Olin's body, holding a massive axe. I was ready to feast on his remains if Heather's spell failed.

Heather approached with hesitation, her hands trembling as she reached out. "I c-call upon my dreams, m-mend," she stammered, her voice barely above a whisper.

*Blake, did you see what she just did?*

*No.*

*She cast the spell without using the command! I don't think she even realized what she did!*

*Interesting... How does that help us?*

...



I observed in both fascination and hunger as the injuries on the undead ghoul began to knit themselves back together—a grotesque display of blood and brain matter flowing back into its body, as if some unseen force was wielding a twisted vacuum. Despite the gruesome and strangely enticing sight, my priorities were clear—I needed answers first, and feasting could come later. Alas, the ghoul’s hazy gaze remained lifeless, and my quest for answers was far from over.

“There’s a yellow liquid seeping from the corner of your mouth,” Sophia said, her face contorted in disgust.

I wiped at the corner of my mouth, feeling a slight tinge of embarrassment. “Oops!”

I yanked my second phylactery from Stellar Void, and bam! It hit me like a frickin’ bolt of lightning, finally getting what we were up to. I mean, I kept saying it, and will probably keep saying it, but me and I were two shards of the same twisted soul. I—we—I, whatever, really aren’t separate people; she’s just me, doing her thing in our crazy shared brain space. *Got it, me!*

But even with this newfound clarity on our plans, that damn feeling of something forgotten kept gnawing at the back of my mind. It was like an annoying itch that I couldn’t scratch.

*Meh, whatever! I’ll deal with it later.* There were more important things to worry about.

# BLAKE PUDDING

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## CHAPTER 17

### GLIMMER OF HOPE

Olin's soul still clung around his body, even after his skull had been shattered beyond repair by a massive battle axe—or so Heather claimed. *Man, I really wish Mana Sight would let me see souls. That would be so cool!* And yet, thankfully, Heather, our new Dark Priestess—sorry, Priestess of Dreams, or whatever—had the power to mend the ghoul's head with relative ease, even though he still looked like shit. Now healing magic shouldn't have worked on the undead but being on the dark side seemed to have its benefits. But it was clear that just fixing the skull wouldn't be enough to bring him back to life, or un-life, which was where the phylactery came into play.

So, there I was, standing over the little ghoul bastard's body, holding one of my two phylactery nuts like a boss. With a cocky smirk, I went ahead and activated the system command. [SPIRIT VESSEL] flared to life, and let me tell you, it was a trip! The flow of mana all around me had me feeling like Evil-Lyn. Now, I couldn't see the magic at work, but I could feel it licking my skin. Surprisingly, the skill seemed rather simple, like I could repeat it without the system's aid, though I wasn't entirely confident in my ability to pull it off just yet. But hey, practice makes perfect, right? And how hard could it be to shove a soul back into a body? I mean, what's the worst that could happen if I screwed up Olin's soul? Not like he's gonna die... again... right?

As much as I wanted answers from Olin, a part of me couldn't help but feel like I was wasting his soul on my last empty phylactery—*what a freaking waste*—but hey, desperate times call for desperate measures, right? I needed to find Aurelia, and if this was the way to do it, then so be it. Still, amidst the skill's spellcasting, a nagging feeling gnawed at the back of my mind, like I'd forgotten something important. *Meh, whatever!* I brushed it off with a mental shrug. No time for second-guessing now.

Before I knew it, the skill deactivated, and the phylactery took over, weaving Olin's soul back into his body. The whole process felt strangely familiar, like déjà vu or something. Like, hey, has something similar happened to my own soul before? It was freaky, but I pushed the thought away. Right now, all I cared about was getting answers out of the little rat bastard.

“He's a lich now,” me and I declared.

Hoisting the ghoul over my shoulder, I pressed on with my search through the ruins, heedless of the gnawing feeling in the back of my mind. There was no time for distractions or second-guessing. Aurelia was out there somewhere, and I was determined to find her, no matter what it took.

“Oh, and that nagging in our head, it's Wartie,” my other me chuckled as soon as the realization hit us. “He's still trapped inside the Stellar Void.”

“What? I can’t hear you,” I replied, pretending to be clueless, even though she knew everything since she was me—or wait, was it the other way around? Ugh, this is so confusing. Maybe I should give the other half of my soul a name or something? I mean, we’re both Blake, but it’s getting hard to keep track of who’s who in this freaky soul-split thing. Maybe I should just deactivate Oracle. That way, I’m not aware of it. But then again, it’s kinda handy having someone to talk with that I don’t want to eat. Oh well, I’ll figure it out later.

“You... You seriously didn’t forget, did you?” I playfully accused myself. “Come on, you’re just trying to dodge dealing with him!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I protested, my tone oozing with sarcasm. With a wry twist of my lips, I sought to deflect the accusations I was having with myself—I mean with...me.

“Let the poor kid out!”

“Ugh! Do I have to?” I whined.

Sophia leaned over my shoulder, a look of bemusement on her face. “You know, it’s sort of creepy listening to you argue with yourself like that,” she said with a smirk.

“Umm, Sophia, please don’t tease the man-eating monster that’s already killed three of us,” Yua interjected, her tone wary.

“Five,” I replied, a glint of amusement in my eyes. “I’m counting the cave-in as my victory.” I grinned, reveling in the memory of beheading Rob and Heather and ramming my tentacle down Jason’s throat.

“I’m pretty sure the cave-in counts as Jeremy’s win,” Rob added. His words struck me with bitter annoyance. The grin faded from my face, replaced by a scowl as I glared at him.

“Do you want me to remove your head again?”

“No, ma’am!” Rob blurted out.

As I navigated the twisting labyrinth of corridors, a sense of unease grew within me. Olin’s lifeless body in my arms, I was followed by a group of simple-minded followers. Soon enough, I came across a familiar path that led to the massive chamber where Aurelia had tossed me at that delicious succubus. The memory of Aurelia shoving me into Niamh and devouring her sent delightful shivers through me. The desire to murder and consume that succubus while Aurelia watched consumed my thoughts.

*Pervert!*

*Oh, shut up, like you’re any better.*

...

Despite my attempts at teasing myself, my heart was heavy with dread at the thought of discovering Aurelia’s lifeless body within the labyrinthine corridors. Cautiously, I stepped into the chamber. The delicious stench of death and decay bathed my senses. The space stretched out like a massive

cathedral, with towering vaulted ceilings and endless pillars vanishing into the shadows. The faint green light from a few remaining cauldrons cast an eerie glow, revealing the crushed remains of countless skeletons scattered across the floor.

Amidst this haunting scene of death, I spotted the bodies of necromancers and other dark creatures, all fallen in their final last stand. The mere thought of Aurelia being among them sent shivers of sorrow through my body, and I couldn't help but feel utterly lost in this realm of despair. I wandered aimlessly, hoping against hope that I wouldn't find Aurelia's lifeless form among the fallen.

"Hey, me?" I whispered, "if she's here, do you think we can turn her into a lich?"

I shook my head, her voice equally hushed. My other half's words struck me like a knife to the heart, leaving me feeling hollow. "I don't know. If her soul still remains near her body, it's possible."

"What happened here?" Rob's voice boomed out through the solemn cathedral of death.

My flock of lost sheep began murmuring amongst themselves as I searched through the grisly aftermath of the battle. To my immense relief, I could not find any trace of Aurelia's body amongst the pile of crushed skeletons and fallen dark creatures. But then, I felt Olin shifting about on my shoulder, and my heart raced. Olin was stirring, awakening much faster than Wartie had. I speculated that it was due to his previous existence as an undead. The time had come to extract some answers, and with a cold and callous heart, I tossed the little shit to the ground and loomed over him.

Olin's eyes opened wide in shock and confusion as they met mine. Before he could speak, I transformed an arm into a massive tentacle and slammed it beside his head, causing the former ghoul to tremble. Olin attempted to speak, his lips forming a word. "Bow—," but my voice blasted through the chamber like a clap of thunder, silencing him.

"WHERE IS AURELIA?!" I screamed, my eyes blazing with a harsh, orange light that cast a sinister glow upon the quivering figure before me. However, whether the voice had been mine or mine was unclear—well, technically, it was both. Man, we really need to figure this shit out—as the air around me seemed to thrum with dark and ominous energy. I could have been mistaken, but I thought I had seen a few orange sparks.

"The last time I beheld my lady," Olin spoke, barely above a whisper, "that bastard, Demidicus, was dragging her towards the portal chamber, with the surviving elders in tow, in a bid to escape." The fear and trembling in his voice faded, replaced by a look of determination in his eyes as he stared up at me.

"Where would they have gone?"

"There is another coven located far to the west of these lands, along the coast," Olin replied. "If they went anywhere, it would likely be there. However, I highly doubt they would stay for long. The Grand Elder is not known for sharing power and holds little sway on that side of the continent."

“And after that?” I growled.

“I cannot say for sure,” Olin admitted. “This place was our final resort in Demidicus’s eyes.”

“Ugh! How do I find Aurelia?!” I demanded.

“My guess is she will find you,” Olin answered.

“That’s not much help,” I snarled. “If you’re not going to be useful to me, I might as well eat you.”

Olin’s gaze darted towards the others, a look of surprise crossing his face before returning his attention to me. “I thought the other candidates had perished during the trial?”

“We all did,” I answered. “But the Crone chose to keep us.”

“Did she choose anyone to be her priestess?” Olin asked, a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

“Heather, get your ass over here!”

“C-Coming!” Heather shrieked back as she stumbled over, with Yua protectively by her side and the other two following closely behind.

“Meet Heather, our Priestess of Dreams or some shit,” I announced with a hint of sarcasm, gesturing toward her.

Heather stood stiffly, fear evident on her face, as she nervously waved in Olin’s direction. “H-Hi,” she stammered.

“Excellent! No, remarkable! You are her voice in this world,” Olin said to Heather, his eyes alight with excitement. “If you seek answers, you must pray to our goddess.”

Heather looked around, bewildered, until Yua offered her a gentle nudge of encouragement. My interest, however, was piqued by the other roles in this twisted little group of ours. Something to worry about later!

“W-What exactly should I p-pray for?” Heather stammered.

“Pray for where we may find Lady Aurelia,” Olin instructed, his eyes shining in eagerness. “It may take several hours to respond, but do not stop praying until she answers.”

“Remember that sexy vampire woman we caught a glimpse of before the trial began,” Yua whispered into Heather’s ear, her voice carrying clearly through the silent, cavernous chamber. I felt a longing desire that I couldn’t explain as my other consciousness nodded in agreement.

*Do you think Aurelia has a thing for twins?*

*Shut up, me! ...Maybe?*

“Which one of you is the champion?” Olin asked, his gaze fixed on me as if waiting for me to claim the title for myself.

I gave a nonchalant shrug, “We left the fool in that room filled with altars.”

“You’re not the champion?” Olin muttered to himself.

“Nope.”

“Interesting,” Olin said, his brow furrowed in thought. “My mistress was so sure you would come out on top.”

“Well, these things happen,” I said, a smirk playing on my lips.

“Wait... You said the room with the altars?” Olin’s expression darkened.

“That’s right,” Sophia confirmed.

“So, all of you really did meet your end down there?”

“I’m not entirely sure I did,” I chimed in, my arms folded behind my back as I swayed innocently, “but I can vouch for the death of the others.”

“Some of the old scriptures I’ve found stated that if a leveler fell in a dungeon. Their spirit would be returned to the fold, to a place known as a Respawn Point. So, they may fight again,” Olin mused, his eyes distant and his demeanor contemplative.

“But wouldn’t the dungeon’s core be necessary for that to work?” I asked with a hint of skepticism.

“Indeed,” Olin replied, nodding his head in agreement.

“Funny thing,” I added with a wry smirk, “the core was taken a month or two ago.”

“What? That’s not possible! ...Unless the Crone intervened on your behalf,” Olin gasped.

“Well, that might explain why Rob’s body vanished,” I interjected. “But it doesn’t explain why Sophia’s body was left lying there when Blake started the trial.”

“...When Blake started it?” Olin repeated in confusion at my odd phrasing.

“Don’t worry about it,” I replied with a dismissive wave of my hand. *Yeah, I’m a bit confused by it myself.*

“Perhaps the goddess wasn’t involved at first and left Sophia’s body there until we, or rather, until Blake started impressing her,” I theorized, my mind racing with possibilities.

“Are you talking about yourself in the third person?” Olin asked, sounding a bit puzzled.

“She does that,” Sophia teased. “You’ll get used to it.”

I turned my gaze to Olin, a curious expression on my face. “So, these respawn points only work for Levelers, and are they limited to dungeons?” I asked.

“As far as legends go, they only talk about them working inside of dungeons for Levelers,” Olin replied, a contemplative expression on his face. “There’s no written evidence of them working outside of dungeons.”

Not surprising,” I grumbled, my brow furrowed in thought. “Our knowledge is limited to isekai anime, of course, but it makes sense, nonetheless,” I mumbled to myself.

“I’m concerned,” Olin muttered, his features etched with worry as he fixed his gaze upon me. Probably referring to the way I was speaking to myself, or rather, of myself. *Whatever!*

“And you should be,” I said with a nod. “But for now, shush!”

Heather let out a startled breath as she eyed me with fear, “S-She... Umm, the Crone, the goddess? Your mother, as she put it... S-She says the King-Kingdom of S-Slaethia cap-captured her.”

“Oh, no!” Olin uttered.

I fixed Olin with a steely, intense gaze, my voice tinged with the fury that boiled within me. “Which way is the Kingdom of Slaethia?”

“To the southeast,” Olin answered, his expression a tempest of conflicting emotions. “D-Did the priestess refer to the Crone as your mother?”

“Scion of the Crone,” I replied, but there was no humor or taunting behind my words. My thoughts were solely focused on retrieving Aurelia, and the burning fury within me was overwhelming. I did not heed the others as they proudly announced their titles to Olin.

“S-Scion?!” Olin stammered out, his disbelief and shock oozing from that single word.

I felt a strong urge to plunge a tentacle into Olin’s eye socket, but despite my rage, the sight of his small, childlike form held me back. *Stupid kid face!* However, a wicked idea struck me as I glanced around the room at all the dead bodies.

“Hmm,” I breathed out in a menacing tone, “is it too late to transplant his soul into another host, or is he stuck in that body until his soul adapts?”

In a low, sinister coo, I replied to myself, “Since he was already undead, the answer should be... no? Let’s try it and find out.”

My four idiots went silent as Olin’s eyes bulged in terror, realizing his fate. But before he could utter a single plea or protest, I ruthlessly severed his phylactery from his current vessel, leaving him silenced. I needed warriors, not children. And tormenting him without feeling that dreadful sensation called guilt—*blah*—is just a bonus!

“Did you just kill a child?” Rob asked, his face filled with concern.

“He was already dead,” I replied, my tone flat and unemotional. Ignoring the look of disbelief on their faces, I reached into the Stellar Void and retrieved a tiny, irksome goblin clutching an orb no larger than a softball as if it were the most special thing in all of existence.

“Where? What? Who?” Wartie stammered, his eyes darting around in disbelief as he came face to face with four of his sworn enemies. I gently patted the goblin’s head, calming him down before he could act recklessly. He gazed up at me, his mouth opening and closing as he tried to speak, but no words came out. Then the little pest attached himself to my leg like a frightened child... *Ugh!*

“Heather,” I stated with determination, “ask our mother if she will restore the powers of the dungeon dwellers in exchange for their undying devotion to her.”

Heather muttered, “Our?” before falling silent and resuming her prayers, inclining her head in reverence.

I furrowed my brow in confusion and whispered to myself, “Mother?” It was strange how quickly I had accepted that the Crone was indeed my mother, but it felt surprisingly natural for both halves of my soul to come around to this realization. Still, it was odd how I was referring to myself as

“This is where the fuck you guys went!” Jason yelled, swaggering into the room like he owned the place. He had thrown on some scavenged armor he’d looted off a random corpse, blood stains still evident. With each step, his armor clanked loudly, making his entrance even more obnoxious.

Wartie let out a low growl, but a gentle hand on his head calmed the irksome goblin. Surprisingly, I noticed Jeremy trailing behind Jason, also donning pilfered armor. I had half-expected that jagged-toothed fucker to have killed him. Guess that devastating lightning spell of Jeremy’s had kept Jason in line. *Meh, whatever!*

Heather let out a sharp gasp as she suddenly started levitating off the ground. I turned toward her, noticing her eyes had become as dark as a moonless night.

“Listen well, my dears,” the Crone’s ethereal voice echoed, “for I doth proclaim, that I shall take the dungeon dwellers into my fold, if they swear their undying devotion to me and mine, unyielding and bold. And with thy faithful followers, my dear daughters,” she continued, a sly grin spreading across Heather’s face, “ye shall have the makings of an army, a force to be reckoned with, so begin. But beware, my dears, for if they should stray, they shall feel the wrath of my daughters, nightmares and dreams rolled into one.

“And now, my dears,” declared the Crone with a nod, “my priestess hath received my command, with my beloved grandchild in tow, he and ye three, my paladin, sentinel, and assassin, shall go with my priestess to the dungeon folk, to offer my kindness. With my offer, they shall join our cause, and my daughters’ army shall grow, for ye must be ready, for what is yet to come, so go and make ready, my dears, I bid thee go.

“Now for ye, my daughter, I know what it is ye seek, and know this well, if ye act with haste, ye shall rescue that which ye desire, within Elsternwick to the east, before night doth waste. Take my champion with thee, and when ye return with your love, lead my flock to the covens of the west, for the holy knights shall chase close at thy crest.”

Heather’s dark elf irises returned to their normal purple and pink hue before she collapsed into Yua’s embrace. I turned my gaze to Jason and saw a look of anger and disdain on his face.

*Oh, joy—wait, did she say grandchild?*

We all sprang into action when the Crone finished her decree, splitting into two groups. Wartie—My. My... The Crone’s new grandbaby—Seriously! *What the fuck?! You know what, I don’t fucking care! Anyhow.* The kid led the five dipshits back into the dungeon to present the Crone’s



offer to restore the dungeon folk's lost magic and powers. They just had to swear their devotion to the dark goddess. After the dungeon core was stolen, the dwellers lost everything. It was apparent that they were desperate for a way to regain their magic.

The second group consisted of me, myself, and I. *Oh!* And Jason, the new sucker—champion! He wouldn't have come on his own accord without my new foster mama commanding it.

*I love being the Scion of the Crone!*

It didn't take long before I was nestled deep in the heart of a forest far from the dungeon ruins, keeping a wary watch on the holy knights' encampment just outside the charming town of Elsternwick. That's if a few crumbling houses huddled behind a dilapidated wall was considered charming. Then yeah, it's charming! The Crone's proclamation still resounded in the back of my mind as I scouted the knights' movements. Oh, and I was alongside my mother's worthless champion. Mother? Ha! It's strange how fast I've accepted I'm her so-called Scion or daughter! The cold shoulder Jason gave me was almost amusing. Too bad that occasional glare he threw at me was a bit aggravating. If he continued doing it, my new foster mother might have to search for a new sucker—I mean, champion. *Not it!*

Locating, Elsternwick was a cinch, with the army's trail laid out clear as day, leading right through the forest. Jason and I arrived outside the encampment in no time. My heart dropped at seeing vampires bared naked and impaled upon wooden spikes, Vlad the Impaler-like, still living as they slowly roasted beneath the blazing sun. The once-fearsome creatures of the night were reduced to squirming in agonizing pain! Their skin bubbled, blackened, and blistered, their piercing screams of torture echoing through the air, met with jeers and laughter from the holy knights. If the roasting vampires weren't supposed to be my allies, I would probably take a bite or two. I was grateful that Aurelia wasn't among them. Still, the thought of Aurelia suffering set my tar-black blood blazing with rage as I gazed into the camp, desperate to find her.

“What's the fucking plan?” Jason growled out. “Because I'm not risking my ass against those fuckers!”

I smirked at Jason's arrogant face and replied, “Remain here until I need you. Then let loose and create mayhem at my signal, or you hear a commotion from within the camp – either or! You've got that shadow walker thingy. Oh, and just so you know. I'm still pissed about not stealing that spell from you!”

Jason's face was a mask of frustration and anger as he crossed his arms to glare at me. “I'm not your fucking pawn. I need a real, solid plan, not a suicidal one, you crazy bitch!”

I shrugged at Jason before giving him a twisted dark smile as my body liquefied, shifted, and deformed like a Wicked Witch hit with water. I assumed all my extra mass had disappeared into Stellar Void, but I wasn't quite sure if that was the case; it had gone somewhere, regardless. Following that bitch, Circe's poor teaching, I found that magic was all about feeling and sensation as much as imagination and desire, much like a waltz or salsa. I had to let go of my inhibitions and let my body flow to the beat. *Don't think about the steps. Just move!* I could only pray that I wouldn't stumble at a crucial moment of the beat—like during a fight! Once, my body had shrunk

to the size of a Trounce Spider, my first nemesis. I took off scurrying in a mad dash toward the military encampment, leaving a pissed-off sucker—champion behind!

“What the fuck!” I heard him hiss.

As dusk descended, the sky was awash with orange and pink hues, casting the knight’s encampment into a maze of haunting shadows. The camp was much larger, nearly four times the size of Elsternwick, and being near so many knights gathered in one spot was a bit nerve-wracking.

*How the fuck am I going to pull this off?*

As a mere tarantula in girth, I continued on in my demonic scurrying amidst the encampment, taking full advantage of the darkness as if it were a shield—because it was!

I was overcome by shock as I observed the eclectic mix of knights in the encampment. Half of them seemed to be adorned in elegant white and gold plate mail, befitting stereotypical holy knights. But the other half... Oh boy! They appeared more like barbarians or soldiers, wearing outfits that made He-Man, Conan, and lingerie models seem conservative, leaving very little to the imagination. What was even more surprising was that these revealing uniforms were equally spread among the genders. It was a sight that left me both amused and bewildered.

*Seriously, what the hell?! What is this, some sort of raunchy cosplay convention or an S&M hookup? Unbelievable! What’s going on?*

I couldn’t help but mentally catcall back to myself. *Honestly, I’m not sure... but damn, look at her ass!*

The approaching night was overcome with boisterous laughter of knights bellowing, “Hey there, Gimona! Glad to see you lot made it out in one piece!”

I froze, my tiny legs halting as that name repeated like a cruel mantra in my ears, like a funeral hymn. Wartie’s horrified face flashed in my thoughts, digging that name deeper into my already enraged psyche!

“Ah, ye know it to be true! And I hear tell that yer fight against them blood-suckin’ vamps and necros went as smoothly as a lady’s bosom. Did they suspect that the core was gone missin’?”

“HA! Those vile fuckers never saw it coming! Their magical barrier collapsed like a wizard’s tower made of sand without their siphon into the dungeon core. It only took but a gentle push!” The knight let out a hearty laugh.

“Mercy of Gods! Tis about time! And what of those black-hearted elders? Death too good for ‘em, I say!”

“Their leader or grand shit stain slipped away with a few of his followers, but we got that vile fuck’s daughter. Many of us, I included, offered to spike the bitch, but the General refused. The General is treating her like some fucking VIP, last I heard, intent on handing her over to Slaethia for interrogating. A bunch of bullshit if you ask me! We should strap the bitch down and let the boys spike her! And just be done with it!”

Gimona let out a wholehearted laugh filling the camp. “Ha! If that little vamp is goin’ to Slaethia, she’ll be wishin’ the General ye lads be done with it! Did they drain the lass, at least? Vamps can be a real beast if they’re not. Ye know!”

“Ha! Last I heard, she’s bone dry!”

*How many of them do you think we can kill before anyone notices?*

*Aurelia first, murdering after!*

I peered around the corner of a tent. Easily spotting the dwarf as she lost herself in laughter and ale amongst a gaggle of knights, her five o’clock shadowed jawline on full display. My eyes continued to roam the crowd, searching for the rest of the dwarf’s companions. No sight of the wizard... Still, my true prize was the one approaching a tent. Anlyth, the elf fuck that killed Wartie, arm in arm with a burly, bald behemoth of a caramel-skinned man, built like a seasoned blacksmith or a rampaging linebacker.

*There’s Anlyth, but who’s the man he’s clinging to?*

*Aurelia first, murdering after! She might be held in a tent at the center of the encampment. There’s also a chance she’s in a secure location inside Elsternwick. But I doubt that shithole has a secure enough location to hold her.*

Ugh, I was right, and I knew it. *Then to the center, we shall go!*

I went unseen as I crept through the camp, using the ever-growing shadows of the descending sun beneath the horizon. The last rays of light barely illuminated the tops of the trees, casting the rest of the camp in black and gray shades of darkness. Meanwhile, the knights reveled in their victory, drowning themselves in drink and jubilation. Some even pranced about in the flickering light of their campfires. Laughter rang out like a chorus as the haunting cries of impaled vampires withered with the dying of the light. The scene was both eerie and surreal, a twisted dance of celebration amidst the suffering.

As I slipped my way into the central portion of the encampment, I found rows of steel cages strung about, like those of a dog kennel. And yet, they were all crammed with crying and sobbing people of various races I could not identify. Worse, not a single person within those cages appeared to be from the necromancers’ fortress—base—ruins...lair? Something or other! I didn’t see anyone who would have dwelled among the vampires and necromancers. These prisoners had a different demeanor than my creepy kind of folks. These were families! It wasn’t that heartbreaking to witness their suffering, hopes, and lives shattered by the cruel fate that had befallen them. Though I did feel a tiny bit of pity for the children among them—I blamed the broken half of my soul.

*Hey, do you think these are random families the knights rounded up along their way here?*

*...I think so.*

Since reincarnating into this twisted reality, I now call home, I’ve never cared much for others. In my eyes, everyone was food to me. By preference being that of decomposing flesh, but people were still food. Well, besides a particular vampire who’s somehow caught my deep fascination and

longing, it was almost like love at first sight, if such a thing were real. No, I knew what it was. I was in lust, like some naïve lovestruck girl. But all that aside, what I bore witness to now was wrong – children caged like fucking animals! I mean... I may occasionally want to devour a certain goblin child now and then, but I never did it.

*Do you see that tent over there?*

Amidst the pitiful wails and cries of those caged, a massive tent reminiscent of a Renaissance Fair dominated the scene, guarded by six knights and six savages—nudists, well, barbarians, to be exact. *Honestly, why are they dressed like that?* I desperately needed an opening, a way past them, to reach Aurelia. But to my dismay, there was none. These individuals were devoted and unwavering in their duty, unlike their fellow soldiers, who drowned themselves in booze while reveling in their conquest.

Sweeping my sights over the cages, I spotted a young child who couldn't have been older than six. She had fluffy white bunny ears, and her precious pink eyes were wide and watery, peering at me with a quivering lip. To her, I must have looked like some dangerous spider that had wandered into the encampment. She wasn't entirely wrong; I was dangerous! If I had a heart, it would have shattered into a million pieces at the sight of her. But a funny thing about me in this twisted reality—I had become a heartless bitch. And yet, I couldn't bring myself to abandon the poor thing. It wasn't due to any self-righteous reasons or anything like that. No, I just wanted to inflict as much pain upon those who had taken my Aurelia as I could. One of those ways was by robbing the holy bastards of their captives.

*Hey, got any bright ideas?*

*Not any good ones. We could try corroding the locks on the cages, but I'm sure we'll get caught. Or we could pull the cages into Stellar Void, but we would have to do it one at a time, and besides getting caught, I don't think we can pull living people into it.*

“Well – Shit!” I quite literally muttered to myself, feeling a wave of frustration wash over me. If I couldn't find a solution, I was about to have a mid-mind crisis.

*Ugh! We need a distraction that won't alert the entire drunken camp.*

*Do you think they have a munition or weapon tent like earth militaries? Oh, can you imagine what a magic depot explosion would look like?*

*Didn't I just say we don't want to alert the entire camp?!*

*Yeah, but hear yourself out. They're all beyond shitfaced right now. It just might work! We'll make it look like an accident!*

My dueling thoughts were running wild with the potential plan.

*...Okay, but when has anything I planned ever gone according to plan?*

...

# BLAKE PUDDING

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## CHAPTER 18

### THE MASOCHIST

Alrighty, here I am, squished down to tarantula size like some arcane joke, with my gooey, tar-like body stashed away in Stellar Void—sounds fancy, but who the heck knows how it really works? Not me, that’s for sure. It’s like reliving my awkward twelve-year-old phase all over again. Ugh, the horror!

As the final glimmers of sunlight vanished beyond the horizon, the camp plunged into an eerie darkness, save for the flickering lights of the fire pits. In that dim glow, the shadows seemed to dance like mischievous performers, concealing my movements as I slipped through the camp like a stealthy spider on a mission. My goal was crystal clear—to unearth something, anything, that would sow chaos, confusion, and anarchy like wildfire.

Ah, wouldn’t you know it? It didn’t take long before I stumbled upon the tent, probably where they’re holding poor Aurelia hostage. Of course, nothing is ever straightforward, and that’s exactly why I was certain this was the right spot. Twelve armored bastards were standing guard—six strutting around in their fancy-ass plate armor, and the other six playing dress-up as Conan and Red Sonja wannabes straight outta Comicon. *I swear, you can’t make this shit up! Let’s see what fun we can stir up with these fucks, shall we?*

*“Seriously, why are half of these soldiers prancing around half-ass naked?”*

*“My brilliant hypothesis is that the more skin someone bares, the better they can toy with ambient mana for spellcasting,”* I proudly declared to my astounded self, drawing on the limited knowledge at my disposal.

*“Guess?”*

*“Yes, I guess!”* I retorted to myself, a hint of annoyance in my tone at my own lack of appreciation. *“And you know what? It might also clarify why I’m so damn skilled at it—after all, I’m practically naked all the time!”*

*“What? I am not naked—wait! I suppose I am. Hmph, but no. I’ve got my silk face and shoulders. That should count as clothing!”*

*“Your face? First off, it doesn’t count. Spider silk is a creation of our body, so it still counts as part of me. Because of that, it shouldn’t interfere with ambient mana manipulation. If anything, it might help.”*

I mentally groaned, *“Ugh, whatever!”* Arguing with myself was utterly draining, like a never-ending loop with no clear winner or loser. Well, I guess, in my case, that wasn’t entirely true.

Getting back on topic! The mixture of nudists and knights was spread out like butter on toast, guarding every inch of that tent like their lives depended on it. I'd love to play whack-a-knight and take 'em all out, but then the whole camp would be on high alert. Not exactly ideal for a rescue mission. And don't get me started on the overkill. If Aurelia's in there, I can't risk putting her in more danger.

*"What we need is to locate where these assholes stash their stockpile of boom-boom shit!"*

*"No! That's a stupid idea. No, scratch that—it's a really stupid idea!"*

*"Sometimes the worst ideas are the best 'cause nobody ever sees them coming!"*

*"That's the dumbest reasoning I've ever heard!"*

*"Yeah, but do you have a better idea?"*

*"..."*

*"Thought so!"*

Two hours into my epic search, I felt as useful as a stripper at a funeral. Ha! Ah, memories of my ex-girlfriend at my grandfather's funeral... Anyways! My brilliant plan was turning into a never-ending egg hunt instead of a genius strategy. Despite my lack of success in unearthing their magical weapon stash or the artillery for those damn catapult thingies, I did manage to map out the entire camp. Yeah, that's progress, I guess. I even pinpointed Gimona and Anlyth's tents like a boss. But no luck in finding that Dumbledore-looking piece of shit, Craycroft. He was playing hide-and-seek like a pro, and it was pissing me off.

However, I did notice knights stumbling in and out of that shabby village. So, only one place left to explore before putting my Plan MM for Mass Murder, all ninja-like, into action! Other me was against it, of course, saying we'd get caught. *Blah!*

As I scaled the rickety wooden walls of Elsternwick, my keen eyes caught sight of a familiar figure. It was that hulking brute I'd spotted earlier, the one clinging onto Anlyth as they made their way toward the town.

*"Well, well, well, look who we see,"* I cooed in sinister delight.

*"Aurelia first! We can deal with him later,"* my more cautious side advised.

*"But come on, he's all alone and important to the bastard who killed Wartie. I want him dead! And don't forget, Olin needs a new body. One I can thoroughly enjoy torturing!"* I retorted, eager for some payback.

*"Can't we just leave him and focus on the elf after we've blown this place to bits?"* the more reasonable part of me suggested.

*"Yeah, yeah, we could, but that's not enough for me. I want to strip that bastard and his pals of everything before finishing them off. And you know what would be epic? Shoving a lich's soul*

*inside that hulking brute! Can you imagine Olin landing the final blow on the elf? Anlyth's face right before his doom would be priceless! Ha-Ha! Nope, we're taking him out. Now!"*

Stalking through the crumbling and decaying wooden ramparts of Elsternwick's outer walls, I kept my eye on the big guy below, like a cat eyeing a juicy mouse. And let me tell you, this village was way bigger than I thought—buildings hiding like secrets within a bowl.

From up on my perch, I couldn't help but chuckle at the sight below—more soldiers and knights than you'd find at a, umm, freakin' knight convention – festival? You know what I mean! Anyways! They were stumbling around like drunken fools while the villagers treated them like conquering heroes. *Ah, the joy of impending horrors I'm about to unleash upon these clueless numbskulls.*

I fixed my gaze back on my target—the big brute himself, strutting into a dark alley like he owned the joint. *Time to pounce! Wait, what's this?* Two soldiers guarding a door like it's Fort Knox or something. “General, it is good to see you!” they stated, offering some strange chest-slapping salute to the big guy as he strolled past them and through the door they guarded.

With a smirk that would make the devil jealous, I slinked across the ramparts and clung to the building like some creepy crawlies do. Turns out, Anlyth's little love interest is a real VIP in this hellhole. My form shifted and twisted, my spider legs morphing into sinuous tentacles, ready for some deadly dance. I left a trail of corroded stone in my wake as I crawled because why not add a touch of style to the whole monster gig?

After a night of debauchery, the air reeked of piss and puke, a sweet perfume that got my murderous mojo going. The unspeakable horrors I was about to unleash had my goo pumping with excitement. General Conan-wannabe disappeared behind that creaky door, and I slithered down like a pro hitman, all tentacly and badass. The two guards? Pfft, they were like toys to me. Surprise, motherfuckers! My tar-like embrace smothered their faces, silencing their muffled screams before they even began. Oh, the thrill of the kill, the exquisite taste of terror! Their desperate kicks and thrashes were like a symphony to my ears. But I had a few more items on tonight's menu, so I stored their headless bodies in my void for a later feast.

YOU HAVE DEFEATED 2 [SOLDIERS]
<b><u>LEVEL UP!</u></b> LEVEL 46
DO YOU WISH TO [ABSORB] [SOLDIERS]? YES / NO

*“Well, shit! It's about damn time we leveled!”*

*“Let's rock and roll, baby!”* I shifted back into my human form, sly grin in place, and reached for the doorknob like a master thief. With a rusty screech, the old door swung open, and yeah, I may

have flinched inwardly from the unintentional noise, but who cares? I was still ready to party! Oh, and as I did, I mentally clicked, “*Hell, yes!*”

[ABSORB] UNSUCCESSFUL

“So much for them being skilled soldiers,” I groaned, rolling my eyes. *Pathetic.*

“Seriously!” I answered back with a hushed whisper.

With bated breath, I peered around the door and found a spiraling staircase leading into the unknown depths of a seemingly bottomless black abyss. Tiptoeing past the door, I crept down the stone steps. The voices of a heated conversation reached my ears, growing louder with each step. My curiosity was piqued, and I couldn’t help but wonder what secrets I would uncover. But, damn it, my frown deepened as I realized that what I had mistaken for a friendly chit-chat was, in fact, an interrogation—a brutal one at that.

“Where has your lord sought asylum?!” A harsh slap echoed up the stairwell, “OUT WITH IT!” Another slap sound rang out. “NOW!”

The thought of them torturing Aurelia stirred up a tempest of boiling rage within me. Peeping ‘round the edge of some hefty pillar, I got an eyeful of the General and a couple of muscle-bound bruisers doing a real number on a guy with a face that looked like a toad. Somewhere in the recesses of my mind, a dim bell of recognition rang for the poor bastard, but hey, I wasn’t about to lose any sleep over him.

His frantic squawks were drowned out by the steady thump of fists and the snarled demands of his tormentors – not that he had a snowball’s chance in hell of answering ‘em. The boys seemed more invested in their savage dance than milking any useful info from Toadface. And you know what? There’s a twisted sort of honor in that. *I can respect that!*

One of the interrogators turned to my prey, his eyes sparkling with sadistic glee. “General Ezad,” he growled, “permission to start severing limbs? Let’s see if that’ll loosen the wretched freak’s tongue.”

Ezad, the so-called General, grunted out a pleased sound as one of his interrogators spun on his heel and made tracks for the stairs, sauntering past me with a greedy look smeared across his mug. If only he knew, I was far more ravenous than him. With a casual shoulder roll, bam! Eight thrashing tentacles sprang from my back.

Next thing I knew, I was hoisting my butt up the wall and lurking above the staircase, invisible to the untrained eye. No time at all passed before my soon-to-be snack strolled underneath me, and before Ezad and his remaining bruiser could react, I’d given the poor sap’s neck a savage twist and sucked his lifeless body into me... right into my cosmic hole – Stellar Void! *Ah, damnit!*

“*Ha-ha!*”

“*Oh, shut up!*”



*“What? That wasn’t me. That was you laughing at yourself!”*

*“...”*

Casting a sneaky look back to where toad-man was getting worked over, his pitiful whines hitting my ears like a sweet lullaby. A handful of jail cells caught my eye, snuggling up against the walls. A quick sweep with my [THERMALSENSE] turned up nothing but chilly emptiness in ‘em, like all warmth had been gutted out.

The General appeared to be getting annoyed as he cast his gaze back toward where the other interrogator had vanished, but thankfully, he remained unaware of my presence. I had carefully spread my Mana Sight evenly across my entire body. Which helped avoid the telltale orange glow that would give away my position. This made it easier to remain unnoticed, using only a sly tendril from my body to peek around the corner, keeping a watchful eye on them.

“Soldier! What’s keeping you?” The General bellowed, his frown deepening as no response was offered.

“It’s no use, human. You’ll be dead before you make it back to your pitiful Slaethia,” purred a seductive voice as sweet as honey from a cell that, just a moment before, I was certain had been empty. “My beloved will make sure of it.”

Hearing that voice, my heart missed a beat, and yes, I meant that metaphorically – again! Of course, I don’t have an actual heart, nor blood – unless you consider my corrosive and poisonous secretions to be my blood...or saliva? *Meh*. The point is, I was riding cloud nine, knowing that I’d finally tracked down Aurelia!

*“Uh... if Aurelia’s here, what was in that tent at the camp?”*

*“No clue, but I don’t think it’s a big deal anymore!”*

*“...I suppose.”*

The General’s laugh was low and mean as he sidled up to the cell. “Brave words for one who’s been captured. We stole the dungeon core from beneath your ruins without one of you monsters noticing. Most of your coven has been either slayed or scattered in the wind. So, tell me, dark princess, who’s left to save you now? You’ll be in Slaethia by the month’s end, where King Thunderleaf’s finest will see to your proper integration. Until then, sit back and savor the sounds of your fellow captives’ screams.”

*“Like, I would allow that to happen.”*

*“Nope, not when we have far grander plans in store for Aurelia!”*

*“Tentacle Hentai?”*

*“...”*



Vorigan, a vampiric monstrosity with amphibian-like features, was not blessed with the fangs of his kin. Instead, his frog-like face housed a maw lined with miniature, fish-like teeth. He lacked an intimidating presence of any kind. The cruel joke was not lost on him, as even his tormentors now saw him as nothing more than a mere plaything, fit only to be toyed with and abused. Vorigan felt like a lamb led to the slaughter, dreading the impending impalement that was closing in once the two elves were done. And he really didn't want a wooden pike shoved up his ass, or did he? No, he most certainly did—not...

The two sadistic elf interrogators, despite their relentless efforts to beat out the information from him, had come up empty. Neither his loyalty nor lack thereof kept him from answering their questions. Nor was it a lack of determination on their part. Vorigan simply was as ignorant as they came. Yes, Vorigan was truly a fountain of nothingness, but that was proving to be a blessing in disguise.

The sound of heavy footsteps echoed through the chamber, causing the interrogators to pull their ruthless leers away from Vorigan in surprise. Descending the stairs was a towering figure, a behemoth of a man who Vorigan recognized as the General who had decimated his kin. Vorigan's heart raced as he gazed upon the leviathan-like figure, his skin as dark as sin and his muscles rippling like stormy seas. The amphibian could only pray that the man was about to join in the sickening depravities. The two elves gave respectful nods to the General before returning their full attention to Vorigan, ready to pick up where they had left off.

“Where has your lord sought asylum?!” A harsh slap across the face dazed the amphibian, “OUT WITH IT!” Another slap sound rang out. “NOW!”

Vorigan had already pointed them in the direction of the west. Still, the whereabouts of the coven Lord Demidicus had vanished to remain unknown to him. If he had known, the amphibian would've offered the information four sunsets prior, especially after witnessing the gory spectacle of the first vampire ruthlessly impaled. The image of his fellow creatures of the night being brutally held down and stripped nude before being skewered with a wooden stake still haunted Vorigan's mind with recurring lust – dread! They didn't even have the courtesy to spit on the tip. The thought of experiencing that same cruel fate filled him with such...elation!

The relentless barrage of violence carried on, each blow landing with the force of a blacksmith's hammer. Vorigan was battered, bruised, and bleeding but took it all in stride. If only his tormentors had known about his amphibian physiology. In that case, they might have been taken aback by how their blows only stoked his stiffening perverse desires. No, this was not torture, this was a pleasure, and Vorigan would have told these two hunky elves anything they wanted to hear, just to keep the beatings coming. To Vorigan, life was one long, sickening masquerade of pain and pleasure. And this, this was his idea of a royal ball! He only hoped they could keep the dance going.

One of the interrogators stopped his wonderous beating to face the big brute. “General Ezad,” he growled, sounding more like a purr to Vorigan, “permission to start severing limbs? Let’s see if that’ll loosen the wretched freak’s tongue.”

*“Oh, so sorry, but my tongue is a little too stiff right now,”* Vorigan thought with such glee.

Vorigan appeared to be a spineless wimp, always avoiding confrontation. It was all just a rouse, a cunning act of playing hard to get. He basked in the moment’s thrill as he sat bound to this chair, vulnerable to the whims of his three hulking tormentors. The mere thought of losing a limb sent shivers of euphoria to his groin, a reaction his interrogators misinterpreted as trembling fear. But what did he care if they hacked away at him! After all, he was not only a vampire but also of amphibian lineage. He could regrow any amputated limb in mere moments. Vorigan could only hope that they’d started with his manhood.

Sadly, it was not meant to be. Vorigan felt a retching mix of relief and annoyance as he stared on as one of his tormentors sauntered past the stairwell to retrieve a gleaming butcher knife. But before the elf could lay his hands on it, a tendril of darkness shot out like a striking viper, snapping the elf’s neck with a stealthy crunch. And before the lifeless body could even hit the ground, it was snatched up into the stairwell, out of sight. The General and the remaining elf interrogator remained blissfully ignorant of the gruesome act that had just robbed Vorigan of one of his toys.



Aurelia lay within the confines of her prison cell. Her enemies were wise enough to know to drain her of her blood, or she would have slaughtered all of them. The thirst was almost maddening! And how she longed for Bowen or his new incarnation as Blake. But how she dreaded him seeing her like this, drained of blood, and appearing no better than a mummified corpse, such a horrid sight. Vorigan had avoided the same treatment, most likely since so few considered him a vampire. Oh, how appearances can be misleading.

Her time in captivity was nothing short of tedious, filled with utter boredom. The only downside was the blood they siphoned from her. Despite it all, she was a captive audience to the never-ending beatings Vorigan endured. Little did anyone know, except for Aurelia, that the frog-faced fiend was in a state of ecstasy. He had successfully concealed his depraved desires. But if there was one thing Aurelia was known for, it was her perceptive nature. That’s why she was shocked that she hadn’t noticed the disappearance of one of the interrogators. This thirst was seriously dulling her senses!

“Soldier! What’s keeping you?” The General bellowed, only further souring Aurelia’s mood. But to everyone’s surprise, there was no response from the missing man.

A sinister smile spread across her worn face, exposing a glimpse of the monster slumbering within and the unabated thirst. But relief was near, for she had spotted a tiny tendril of darkness slithered out from the top of the stairwell, a sneaky little spy that only vampiric eyes could easily detect.

Sadly, she had missed the murder of the elf, lost in her daydreams about her beloved, but she was wide awake now.

Aurelia had made attempts to conceal her emotions for Blake from the coven, a futile effort. But now that the coven was no more, along with The Dark Order, a sad collection of refugees seeking asylum in the shadows, there was no longer a need for her to maintain the pathetic rouse.

“It’s no use, human,” she teased. “You’ll be dead before you make it back to your pitiful Slaethia. My beloved will make sure of it.”

General Ezad Anlyth and his wife, Vanya Anlyth, were renowned as an unstoppable pair. Vanya, in particular, was a fierce paladin for the Kingdom of Slaethia, and Aurelia longed to take her down in front of Ezad. The mere thought of their suffering brought her a dark satisfaction, soothing her mind from the constant pain of her insatiable thirst. But nothing could compare to the eager excitement she felt at this moment, not only to be reunited with her beloved but to see what he would do next.

Ezad pivoted towards Aurelia’s cell with a smirk, but little did he know, her smile was far more sinister than his own. The other interrogator ceased his relentless assault on Vorigan and cautiously approached the stairwell. Despite their ignorance of Blake’s presence, the sudden silence aroused suspicions.

The true terror began as the second interrogator approached the table that held the knives and other torture instruments. A writhing mass of inky tendrils and tentacles descended upon the elf, who let out a scream of terror and pain that chilled the very air. General Ezad spun around, his face contorted in horror and fury as he charged forward, his massive fists raised to deliver punishing blows. But before he could intervene, a goopy tendril of tar-like substance snaked around the elf’s lower jaw, wrapping it in a web of sticky tentacles, and yanked.

With a ghastly tug, the jaw was ripped free and hurled toward the oncoming behemoth. With a flick of Ezad’s hand, he swatted the detached jaw out of his way, only to be pummeled over as the still-screaming elf was thrown right at him. The two tumbled in a tangled heap, with the elf’s howls of pain bellowing out from the depths of his throat and throughout the room. The General shoved the wailing elf off him and surged to his feet, but it was too late. A tentacle had already wrapped around his neck and pulled him close.

The only sound heard over the elf’s horrid howling was Aurelia’s laughter!



There I was, giving Anlyth’s sweetie the ol’ squeeze play, my arm coiled ‘round his neck, not quite offing him, but enough to make him about as useful as a screaming toddler. The guy was throwing punches and clawing at me, but every time he scrapped off a bit of my gooey black sludge, it just filled back in. I started morphing back into my drop-dead, chiseled self – me and I had been all for

us giving them the surprise of their lives with my natural look, all sinuous, squiggly appendages waving around like a mad octopus. *Good call, me!*

Bam! Before you could blink, I was back in my sultry human form, rocking the hell out of my dark and deadly goth outfit and skin as smooth as satin. My eyes flickered on again, shooting an eerie orange light that splashed all over the General's face. The second he caught sight of the lady behind the monster, his wrestling act took a nosedive. He just fixed me with a stare that could freeze lava. I was totally eating it up. The only downer was the blubbering elf, who seemed to have misplaced his jaw. Scratch that – I was totally getting my kicks from that too!

“What manner of abomination are you?” Ezad snarled.

Aurelia cooed out from the depths of a dark prison cell, her voice as alluring as I remembered it. “Well, well, you're a woman and a gorgeous one at that! General Ezad, allow me to introduce you to our Dark Champion.”

“Hi'ya,” I stammered, my mouth unusually dry for being a Black Pudding.

“Hi'ya?! Are you kidding us? This is it? Our moment to shine, and you come up with that?”

“Cut us some slack. I'm nervous, okay!”

“Ugh!?”

“Uh... I may not have exactly emerged victorious from the trial,” I added.

“Fuck, me! You're messing this up big time!”

“No matter,” Aurelia chimed in, almost soothingly, her tone hinting at a touch of relief. “You're still alive, so the Crone must have taken you in as one of her faithful.”

“Not exactly,” I corrected. “The Crone more or less adopted us as her daughters.”

“Us?” Aurelia repeated, her voice a mere whisper.

“WHAT?!” The frog man, bound to a chair, roared out.

The General's eyes blazed with fury as he spat out, “I don't give a fuck who or what you are. My wife will avenge me! And I'll see you within the veil, you monster!”

“Wife? I thought you were with Anlyth, that paladin-looking guy. I saw him clinging to your arm earlier.”

“What? Vanya is a woman,” Ezad shouted at me.

“Huh, I did not see that coming,” I replied before snapping Ezad's neck.

“*We should haul that screeching elf to Aurelia's cell and chuck him in there with her,*” I mentally suggested to myself.

“*One step ahead of you,*” I thought back.

Getting a good grip on the inquisitor's leg, I started dragging him over to where Aurelia was caged up. The guy was a hot mess, howling his head off – well, what was left of it after his jaw had taken a hike. I was tempted to just scarf him down right then and there. But I knew Aurelia needed his blood way more than I needed a snack.

The cell looked like something ripped right out of a history book like it belonged in the 1600s or something. I slapped my hand on the rusty old bars, letting my acid flesh do its magic and melt down that hunk of iron. A piece of cake, really – the door crumbled in a few seconds flat. Then, with a cheeky twist of my hips, I chucked the elf into the cell. Waiting for him? One seriously ravenous vampire.

Once that elf skidded to a stop in the cell, my dear, starved vampire pounced. Oh, what a sight! At first, in the inky black, I couldn't make out Aurelia. But the moment she got hold of the elf, all hell broke loose. He was all over the place, kicking and flailing as she dug in for her meal. She was practically a mummy when she started, but as she fed, she filled out. Those curves that drove me wild slowly came back. It was like watching a great white during chow time, but a thousand times better. And me? I was so wrapped up in her, so caught up, I couldn't tell if I was in love or just lusting after her like crazy. Yeah, it's messed me up before, but right now? I was just captivated by her raw, wild beauty. *She's amazing!*

“Dibs!”

“Screw you!”

“That's the goal, isn't it?”

“...I hate you.”

As I was totally vibing on this moment, frog-face had to go and break my trance. “Um, can you unstrap me from this chair?” he croaked.

I took a peek at Toadface, not exactly thrilled. “Yeah, just hang on a sec. Got a little something to take care of.” With that, I fished out the phylactery from my void, the one that was holding Olin's annoying soul.

Aurelia started to step out from the shadows of the cell, her sharp red eyes honed in on the object in my grip. As she moved, I couldn't help but get caught up in the sway of her hips, her queen-like stature, and those killer good looks. Oh, and let's not forget the sexy-as-hell blood still running down her beautiful face.

“And what do you have there?” Aurelia hummed.

“Dibs!”

# BLAKE PUDDING

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## CHAPTER 19

### BELLOVED MONSTER

Hovering over Olin's brand new and still-warm corpse, I was totally channeling some grim reaper vibes. I deftly latched the phylactery onto him, funneling his soul into its new digs. Okay, I admit, that's my [SPIRIT VESSEL] skill showing off, but, hey, I'm more than happy to soak up any praise. With both fragments of my oh-so-broken soul understanding the ins and outs of this skill, I'm thinking... maybe I could do it without the fancy skill? Out of all the wild tricks up my sleeve, messing with mana and souls? *Pssh, easy-peasy!*

While my skill conjures its sorcery, my dual personalities of my souls—me and I—plunged into a whirlpool of self-reflection. Who's calling the shots here? Blake, me, or I? And, for real, we need to consider some individual names for my split souls. When we're working in unison, we're Blake, but we often seem to be at odds like bickering sisters. It's dizzying enough juggling two souls in one body, compounded when one's downright adamant about naming rights. But, whatever, for now, we've settled on the notion that we are, weirdly, Blake. By not pegging myself solely as me or I, things feel a touch less muddled for us—or so we'd like to think.

Hold up, backpedaling a bit, that's a total brain-twister. Could I be grappling with some eccentric mix of dissociative identity disorder with a side order of schizophrenia? *Nah!* But still, my emotions are like a pendulum, swaying based on which 'me' is feeling feisty. Soul fragment 'I' radiates a dark, sinister vibe, while 'me' leans more towards the affable end—albeit by a hair. But hey, at least there's a bright side! We're playing nice right now, so no sassy sister feuds...at the moment. *Tee-hee!*

Oh, and let's not forget, ever since that wild run-in with the Crone, everything seems off-kilter, like a crazy dream where everything's both familiar and freakishly strange. It felt like I'd been chucked into some parallel universe (yep, again), where stuff kinda clicks, but also... nope? And the weirdest part? Amidst all this chaos and looming nightmares, I'd never felt so dang zen. Go figure!

Pulling my attention from Olin's soon to be new corpse body, I was captured by a sight of sheer elegance. *Geez, how did the dueling bitches in my head make us so spacey to lose track of the here and now?* My focus locked onto Aurelia as she sashayed over to the amphibious dude, her every step echoing the fluidity of a feline. A swift movement of her delicate finger, and the leather binds holding him snapped. Oddly, he appeared more disgruntled than relieved by his release. But who cares about him? All of my — or should I say 'our' — attention was riveted on her!

"Vorigan," she commanded, her voice like music to my ears, "release the others from their cells."

"Others?" I asked.

Had I still had a beating heart in my chest, it would've definitely hiccupped in that moment. She swiveled towards me, blood red eyes sparkling with a cheeky glint and her lips curved in a teasing smirk. It was the kind of smile that whispered tales of both thrill and threat. And man, both of me were utterly ensnared by her magnetism, as if caught in her enchantment.

**“BLOODY BITCH!”** Olin bellowed as his soul reanimated the General's corpse.

Aurelia paused in her elegant gait, her gaze piercing the undead lich. A hint of recognition flashed in her eyes, and that previously playful smirk transformed, becoming more ominous, as if she was in on a secret joke. She held her silence, lifting just one finger, that same malevolent twinkle evident. Olin, sensing the underlying threat, swallowed his impending tirade of curses.

“My apologies, my mistress,” Olin stammered, his voice quivering with fear. “I was momentarily disoriented. It won't happen again. It's a relief to see you again, my lady.”

Instead of responding, Aurelia elegantly strolled past him. Her eyes turned back to me, containing a mesmerizing gleam like a blood moon, a wicked invitation to hidden dangers. She had bewitched and captivated my very being. I reveled in her darkness, like a delicate rose flourishing amidst a garden of thorns, ready for her to pluck. It funny how it seemed to me I had once considered myself to be the monster to be feared. Oh, how wrong I was!

Aurelia continued her approach, still moving with that uncanny feline elegance. Every step she took was a breathtaking fusion of beauty and allure. The sway of her black robe, trimmed with dark red, hinted at the mysteries hidden beneath. She was like some ethereal runway model, each stride commanding attention and admiration. And, oh boy, the remnants of her crimson feast smeared across her face only added to her lethal allure. *So damn hot!* Though my true form was that of a slippery, sticky, gooey tar monster, a Black Pudding, I found my mouth going dry with a mixture of nervousness and yearning.

She moved towards me, every movement dripping with seductive grace. Her hand reached out, curling towards me as if it were an enchanting dark tendril. As she drew near, our eyes meshed in a magnetic pull, hers holding a depth that threatened to swallow me whole. Before I realized it, she had eased me back, cornering me against the wall, her hand poised delicately yet assertively between my breasts. I felt like a lovestruck girl, ensnared by a captivating and perilous lover, utterly captive by her beauty.

*Oh, fuck, I want her to take me right here!*

*Us!*

*Hush now, me! We've already settled that we are us.*

“Oh, my beloved,” Aurelia purred, her voice both ethereal and angelic. “What have they put you through?” The cold draft of her breath graced my lips, sending shivers down my core — a feeling so peculiar, yet so thrilling. Her eyes, deep blood red pools of intrigue, delved into mine, searching for answers amidst the shadows. “Your very soul, it's been torn asunder. The divine be damned for such cruelty!” There was a venom in her tone, but her affectionate gaze towards me remained unaltered, ensuring I understood none of that anger was for me.



“We’ve, erm, come to grips with it rather quickly,” me or I, admitted, our voice tinged with hesitant longing. It was peculiar, for I’d always pegged myself as more of the assertive type. Yet, at this moment, I felt as wobbly as a gelatinous cube. Maybe it’s just the sheer intensity of the situation? It’s a fleeting sensation, surely. It’ll pass, and I’ll be back to being the pegger—I mean, confident!

“We?” Aurelia cooed, her voice dripping with intrigue. “So, my quest to find you, darling, has resulted in not one, but two treasures?” She bridged the slight distance between us, her form melding against mine, her hand resting at the small of my back, drawing me nearer and ensuring our pelvises met in a dance of tension. “Such an intriguing turn of events. Tell me, with your unique form, might you have the capability to split, even briefly?”

Her other hand swept across my breast, trailing across the writhing tendrils of my dress, until it came to rest under my chin, tilting my head up. To my surprise, she was slightly taller than me. Her touch was electric, her thumb tracing the curves of my lips with a seductive hunger that seemed to ignite a fire within me. Her intense and passionate gaze held me captive as she continued to peer into my eyes with a ferocity, which I had never experienced in either of my lives.

*Is this love?*

*It must be!*

The magical moment was shattered by the frog fucking nuisance. “Lady Aurelia,” he croaked. “I have released all of the captives down here. What is our next move?”

“Please let me kill him,” I moaned with a sigh of desperation.

Her laughter, melodious and tantalizing, sounded like whispers of temptation, an otherworldly song that hinted at unparalleled pleasures. Her gaze, unwavering and captivating, was infused with a seductive danger that left me both breathless and aching for more. Perhaps I truly am a switch, or could it be my more yielding nature swaying our shared emotions?

Aurelia’s entrancing red eyes remained locked onto mine, their depth pulling me in even as she relayed commands. “Vorigan, assemble those less skilled in stealth and proceed to the ruins. Scour the area for remnants and bodies we can reanimate. The rest of you, focus on undermining the army’s leadership where possible. We’ll regroup at the ruins before the first light of dawn. Given the absence of the Dungeon Core within the dungeon and our drained magical resources, we don’t have the means to open a portal. Thus, we must navigate the deep roads as we make our way to the western covens.”

“As you command, my lady,” the frog said, bowing respectfully.

I hesitated, not wanting to add to her worries, especially with that frog debacle and the added stress of the others around. “Why not just yonk the core back?” I whispered, careful not to break the spell while Aurelia’s thumb lightly danced on my lips.

*Shit, when did we become so timid?*

*I think she’s charmed us!*

*You're probably right, but right now, I don't care!*

“Would you happen to know where they're keeping it, my beloved,” Aurelia asked with a deep purr that sent another thrill through my core.

“Within the center of encampment just outside the village is a large tent under heavy guard. If I had to guess, I would say within there.” I replied, my eyes darting back and forth between her lips and her eyes, silently pleading for her to close the gap and make my wish a reality.

“Olin, how's that new suit?” Aurelia asked.

“Mistress,” Olin reported, “it appears to be a physical augments type. I highly doubt I'll be able to wield magic through it. Still, it'll be useful in close combat against elemental benders.” Olin struggled to stand, both hands clutching his head to prevent it from hanging from his shoulders. “Ah, my lady, it seems my neck is broken.”

“They had more prisoners locked in cages around that t-tent.” I panted out as Aurelia's thigh slid between my legs, sending me to my toes. “I-I wasn't certain if they were from your group or this village.” Yeah, that confirmed it, I'm a switch!

*Oh, gods, which one of me reshaped our body to be anatomically correct beneath this dress?!*

*That wasn't you? Oh, whatever, shut up and grind that thigh!*

“Lady Aurelia,” a small woman with gray cat ears stepped forward, ending my inner discussion I was having with myself. “Those must be refugees from The Order. If we have the chance, we should take them with us.”

“Ha! Who cares about those good-for-nothing refugees? And who the hell appointed Aurelia as the leader?” The grating voice of a familiar figure echoed through the room, striking a nerve with every word. “And, who is that woman you're eye fucking, Aurelia?”

*Did she just talk shit to my woman?!*

*Oh, she's dead.*

My longing gaze was torn from my Aurelia as I set my eyes upon an all too familiar face. One that filled me with a sense of eager delight. At the thought of murdering her, once again! The succubus approached with an overaerated sway of her hips that did the demon no favors.

“Niamh,” Aurelia said with a hint of disappointment and annoyance as she pulled away from me to face the succubus. “I'm surprised our captors didn't return you to the nether.”

“Well, it may have been better if they had sent me back,” Niamh sneered. “I can already sense your father's beckoning summon ritual. But alas, I cannot go to his side while I am stuck here with his pathetic daughter—Gaaak!”

With a flick of my shoulder, my arm transformed into a writhing monstrosity of black tendrils of terror. They shot forth like a bullet from a gun. Before anyone knew what happened, Niamh

included. My tentacles had smothered her head, forcing their way down her throat, ears, and nostrils.

I was just beginning to realize this world was filled with powerful beings, most I knew I couldn't fight, but I was quickly finding out they were nothing when caught off guard. And what better way to catch someone off guard than with a slithering, tar-like appendage being rammed down their fucking throats and forced out their asses! It was a staple of my arsenal, a tool of destruction that left my enemies writhing in agony as I devoured them from the inside out. Sure, I could scorch them with Necrotic Flames, cover them in Blight, or spit Poison, amongst other things. Still, there was something truly satisfying about this method. The taste of their terror as they struggled to escape my grasp, as I feasted upon their entrails from within, was a delicacy I could not give up. If only I could find a means to decompose their flesh as I devoured them.

I cast a glance around, observing a group of onlookers who gaped at me with dread-filled eyes. I couldn't be sure, but I doubted that all of them were of the undead persuasion, namely vampires. Though their numbers were few, I roughly counted fifteen pairs of eyes fixed upon me. Niamh flailed and thrashed in my grasp, a pitiful sight of fear and delight. Suddenly, Aurelia glided up behind me, her arms encircling me just below my chest, her breath cool against my cheek. Her piercing gaze swept over the room, daring anyone to say or do something. I couldn't say whether it was to protect me from harm or assert her claim over me. But one thing was clear, nobody said a word as Niamh stopped her useless flailing.

YOU HAVE DEFEATED A [SUCCUBUS]
DO YOU WISH TO [ABSORB] [SUCCUBUS]? YES / NO

*Well, that's a heck yeah!*

[ABSORB] [SUCCUBUS] SUCCESSFUL
<u>IMMUNITIES</u> [CHARM]

*Score! An immunity without burning a skill point.*

I was on the verge of breaking into my gleeful pudding jig. But given the audience—particularly with Aurelia's watchful eyes—I thought better of it.

Aurelia breathed a hushed whisper into my ear, dripping with lust. "Oh, you truly are a sight to behold, my love. And to think, you managed to withstand her Charm's temptations, it only fuels my desire for you. If she had succeeded in ensnaring you, it would have been a cruel blow to my heart, and I would have taken great pleasure in ending her life myself. Though, I have no doubt that she'll be resummoned before Lord Demidicus within the hour. Heavens forbid he go without his pet."

*She used Charm on us?*

*Probably? I'm guessing we're so lost with Aurelia's presence that it didn't take effect?*

*Huh...*

All eyes lingered on Niamh's corpse as I dragged her body toward me. I didn't want to give the impression of devouring another woman in front of Aurelia, who held me close. Her breasts were pushed snugly against my back, so I had several tendrils pull the succubus beneath my dress, where she vanished from sight. Much more dignified and presentable, I thought to myself.

"Vorigan, take the defenseless to the ruins," Aurelia ordered again. "Hikari, pick out the necessary individuals and take out the army's commanders." The small cat-eared woman gave a nod of acknowledgment. "And you, Olin, shall join me and my beloved as we deal with a tent and some cages."

NOTIFICATION  
**SYSTEM ACCESS SUSPENDED**

I froze with sudden horror dawning on me as I read the notification. "Fucking Circe," I spat, much to everyone's surprise.



The proclaimed Dark Champion, a title that was nothing but a cruel insult. Jason remained haunted by the nightmare of that psycho sludge girl's tentacle ramming its way down his throat and throughout his body. The memory caused him to clench his ass cheeks. It had violated him in the most grotesque manners before tossing him like damaged goods to suffer a slow and painful death. He shuddered thinking about it, but still, he stealthily followed her, remaining unseen to all. Life was a sick joke, and Jason was the punchline! Trapped in a never-ending dance with death in the form of a Black Pudding. It was already dawning on him that he was merely an errand boy, a lackey for a goddess who favored the very monster who had taken his life.

The monster's arrogance was almost as lethal as her abilities. She had carelessly blown her cover, drawing the attention of no less than nine soldiers. Nine! Worst of all, she was completely oblivious to all of it! Thankfully Jason had trailed after her. Only through his quick and deadly precision did she avoid alerting the entire encampment.

Despite Jason's success in eliminating the soldiers who had spotted her, he couldn't help but curse himself for not allowing them to deal with her. The haunting whispers of the Crone crypt in his mind were a constant reminder of his twisted fate. Those dark voices had forced him to follow the very monster who once had taken his life. He wasn't a champion. No, he was a damn bodyguard! He was a guardian sent to protect the homicidal psycho that had killed him. It was a cruel irony!

Amidst his covert assassinations, like a deadly ninja or a rockstar, as Jason saw himself, he had collected a few delicious hearts. He took great pleasure in savoring them as he sat in the shadow of a chimney stack overlooking the building that housed the sludge bitch. When it came to hiding the bodies, he stored them away within his new storage spell. But his brief respite was cut short as the monster that Jason loathed so much emerged, accompanied by some new savory friends. Jason longed to rip their hearts out, but the cruel dark whispers of what would come if he acted upon his impulses prevented him from doing so.

With a twisted twist of mother fucking fate, Jason's title as the Crone's little bitch brought some hidden blessings in disguise, including new skills and a complete overhaul of his Abilities and Spells. The cherry on top was a sudden surge in his level, now proudly reaching level sixty-nine! However, the inner workings of the leveling system left him with more questions than answers. He couldn't see any real gains apart from the new racial skills and immunities.

He started to speculate that levels simply measured his overall lethality and capabilities, with each level unlocking more potential for destruction. It might explain the lack of experience points. His health, magic, and stamina bars seemed more of an estimate than a tangible stat. He even noticed the numbers were often off. Jason's best guess, besides more capabilities and magic, there wasn't much of a big difference between a level one and a level one hundred if caught off guard. Still, a higher level was something to fear if allowed to use their full capabilities.

However, the system didn't concern Jason in the slightest, nor did all its flaws. Jason only cared about the Spells and Abilities he had earned. With them, he had become a terror to be feared, a shadow of death more deadly than even Yua, the so-called assassin. At least, that's what Jason hoped was the case.

With his stealthy grace and the power to slip into the shadows, Jason was a force that couldn't be contained. And with his spells, allowing him to teleport behind his foes and strike with deadly precision, he was a harbinger of death, a true Grim Reaper. It was almost comical how the system had accurately labeled his race as such after respawning. Jason couldn't help but wonder if his gaunt appearance resulted from those changes. He seriously hoped he wasn't being turned into a skeleton! Thankfully, none of the others had noticed it, or they would have surely said something, even mockingly.

Jason glared at the sludge girl he was stuck watching after. He found himself feeling jealous as the girl interlaced her fingers with a seductively gorgeous woman. "Why does she always get the good stuff?" he muttered in frustration.

A portion of the ragtag group split, with eleven led by Vorigan, the frog-faced freak who had summoned him, slinking off to the west, apparently back to the dungeon. Jason couldn't decide whether to call the sniveling coward his summoner or the ritualist who gave him his body, but one thing was for sure, he couldn't stand the sight of him. Something about Vorigan's very existence made Jason's blood boil. The frog's presence incited a desire within Jason to peel back the bastard's flesh and extract every last drop of blood as he dined on Vorigan's still-beating heart.

Jason cast a sideways glance back at the group that remained behind but only saw three of them. The other four had vanished into thin air, like phantoms in the night. Then he felt them, the razor-sharp claws that had encircled his throat, pressing snugly against his flesh, a silent promise of death if he so much as twitched.

“Well, well, well,” a cold breath whispered in his ear, “What do we have here?”



Due to his broken neck, Olin was forced to hold his head upright, but he managed to make it appear as if he were deep in contemplation as he gripped his chin. However, his ruse would easily be exposed to anyone who got too close. Nevertheless, he was with his mistress. With enough death and destruction, she was sure to conquer the entire army, her power growing stronger with each corpse she claimed. The night was their ally, but it was also their enemy, as they only had this night to accomplish their task. Their tasks were straightforward. Retrieving the Dungeon Core. Liberating as many refugees as possible to increase his mistress’s political power. That part wasn’t said aloud, but the reasoning seemed obvious enough. And lastly, opening a portal to the western covens. Simple, right?

With a twisted sense of fate, Olin found himself in the body of the army’s leader, General Ezad, towering over his mistress and her reclaimed lover. The Black Pudding, with her sadistic smile and thirst for torment, was a truly frightening sight to behold. One glance from her piercing orange gaze and Olin knew their cover would be blown. Though his mistress was a powerful force to be reckoned with under cover of night, she was not fit for the art of subtlety. Aurelia was too beautiful of a sight to go unnoticed. No, navigating them through the heart of the enemy camp fell solely upon Olin’s shoulders.

“My mistress,” Olin spoke with a touch of trepidation. “We must find a way to keep the two of you concealed. Our task will be cut short if you’re seen with me, especially with your companion’s unique eyes.” He silently prayed to the Crone that Lady Aurelia had a firm grip on her heart’s obsession, this Blake.

The sinister monster in human form leaned in close to his mistress, resting her head on her shoulder as she gazed up, giving off a pathetic innocent look. Olin found the display revolting. However, Lady Aurelia seemed to be smiling as her eyes traced the woman’s lips.

“If I’m too revealing,” the monster cooed, “you could always wear me.”

Olin thought he was going to be sick. He couldn’t help but roll his eyes as he watched Lady Aurelia’s eyes light up excitedly. Her red irises shined with a sinister gleam. He couldn’t help but wish for these two to find a secluded corner to get it over with so they could focus on the task at hand.

“Well, my beloved,” Aurelia purred, “what will happen to the clothes I’m already wearing?”

The black pudding creature replied with a sly grin, “Don’t worry, I’ll store them safely within us. Nothing will get in the way – I mean, ruined.” Then, she removed her head from Aurelia’s shoulder to gaze into her eyes, “May we ask why you keep calling me beloved?”

With a sense of resignation, Olin watched as his mistress, Lady Aurelia, caressed the cheek of the monster in the human form beside her. Her eyes lit up with a fiery passion, and her voice dripped with desire as she spoke. “That’s a conversation for another time, my beloved. For now, do what you must to hide. If you can disguise yourself as my clothing, even better.”

Olin gave up, dropping his hand holding his chin and letting his head fall back into the most unnatural of positions. He stood there, his head facing upwards towards the darkness of the night filled with the stars and countless other moons shining above.



Aurelia was filled with such elation as her beloved wrapped her arms around her. She basked in the blissful embrace of her beloved. Aurelia finally gave in to her desires and pressed her lips against Blake’s. Her dark heart fluttered with delight as Blake’s tongue slithered into her mouth like a tentacle monster, eliciting shudders of pleasure. A hunger that had been buried deep within her for nearly two centuries. Sure, she had a few unsatisfying conquests in that time, but they were all meaningless. This was the moment she had yearned for what felt like an eternity. And as Blake’s hand possessed her flesh, gripping her ass with a force that threatened to tear her asunder, she was lost to the world, consumed by the fiery passion that burned within her. She reached up, grasping Blake’s breast. Her other hand slid down into Blake’s dress, finding her thighs with a voracious hunger. Aurelia’s finger slid into a putty-like substance that leaked between her fingers.

Blake’s body began to liquefy at that moment and spread out over Aurelia’s body. At first, it was like watching a tsunami coming crashing down, but there was no malice or anger within that dark wave, only love, and tenderness. The tar-like form ran over Aurelia’s body, coating her skin and clothes. Aurelia felt a spell activated from her beloved and noticed that her robe and undergarments had vanished. Everything had been replaced with the Black Pudding that seemed to find its way into every nook and cavity.

Aurelia was swathed in darkness as her beloved reformed around her, unable to contain the malevolent lust-filled desires seething within. Before an outfit could fully be formed, Blake erupted into a tangled, writhing mass of silk threads. A sensual and sinister silk dance embraced Aurelia, obscuring all but the gleam of her gorgeous face as they wove together. The pure white headdress and outfit that settled upon her was a cruel parody of the priestess garments that my other me had spotted within the encampment, a mocking whisper of their supposed purity. But the true horrors of Aurelia’s new attire lay hidden beneath the shimmering cloth, a forbidden secret of squirming tendrils and pulsating tentacles.

“Oh... Oh! Mmmm,” Aurelia struggled to contain her passion and keep her ecstatic screams from reverberating across the land. She was a vampire elder, a regal princess of a once powerful coven, and she would not let such a trivial thing as pleasure break her focus. Aurelia would submit to her

lover's carnal desires, for this was what she had wanted for so very, very long. She surrendered her body over to her dark lover's embrace, for Aurelia knew she could still decimate her enemies with her orifices filled. She was a vampiric necromancer with so few equals, an unstoppable force of the night, and nothing would stand in her way. It didn't matter that her beloved had just found the spot that sent shudders through her stomach. No one could stop her and her beloved now!



Riding the high of the moment, Circe's shenanigans slipped to the back of my mind. Instead, I was all-in, letting myself merge and flow over Aurelia, taking the shape of a sleek black dress. Gotta love the perks of polymorphing!

*Oh, gods, her body is so tight and amazing!*

*Holy shit, she's got fucking abs!*

*And not the overly masculine kind either, the cute sexy ones!*

*She's built like an Olympic pole vaulter!*

*Oh, my gods, her skin tastes so good!*

*Just like blood and death!*

*She's delicious!*

My two halves engaged in a mental back-and-forth, much to our mutual amusement. I admit, I'm known to let my thoughts wander when I'm feeling, well, a bit frisky. And damn, was I revved up now. Who could blame me? Pressed against Aurelia's tempting curves, my inner deviant wanted nothing more than to see just how far I could push our boundaries. Each moment pushed me closer to crossing a line, and with every sultry look she shot my way.

*Screw it, why not dive right in?*

*I mean, who wouldn't want a taste of the forbidden, especially when it's served on such a delectable platter?*

*You go high, I'll go low!*

*No way, you get the front, I'll get the back!*

*Deal!*

I've always had a knack for multitasking, but after my soul split, it became even more pronounced. Still, amidst my oh so titillating meal, I was only vaguely conscious of us transitioning from the village outskirts to the heart of the enemy camp. Any brave souls who risked approaching Olin were swiftly discouraged by a mere gesture from him—the advantages of having his soul occupy a General's body. And even if the sneaky bastard ever thought of escaping, well, I had his phylactery as an insurance policy.



Speaking about putting things in someone's body, I return to our depraved delights. As I basked in the blissful sensations of Aurelia's tight body and firm ass, the outside world was a distant, meaningless place. The tremors in Aurelia's thighs were a symphony of pleasure. I was awed by her mastery of self-control, hiding our sexual acts from prying eyes. Her delicate fingers occasionally wandered down, offering a tantalizing touch. I was impressed that her expression remained serene, a mask hiding the storm of pleasure within, but her gorgeous eyes could not lie. I was lost in the twisted, erotic world of her ecstasy, and nothing else mattered.

Sadly, all good things must come to an end. I withdrew from Aurelia's innermost places as we approached the carnival size tent. I spotted all the cages along the outside of the tent, and that little bunny kid. I couldn't help but feel a sense of dread settle into me.

*It would be so much easier if we could ditch them. Or even better yet, we were allowed to eat them!*

*ME?!*

*What? When did we get a conscience?*

*Ugh, I'm our conscience.*

*You really are a subpar conscience.*

*Oh, crap!*

The light bulb just went off in our head. With Circe kicking me out of the system, does this mean Oracle's stuck in the always-on mode? I mean, I knew I could've silenced this mental twin banter any time I fancied, but it was kind of entertaining when I thought there was an off switch. *Oh, Fuck!* both halves of me chimed in as one. Note to self: cursing the day our new "mom" tweaked Oracle to give voices to my split psyche. But as ticked off as I was, it wasn't the Crone who I was truly pissed at.

I shoved my irritation with that godly bitch Circe to the side and focused on the towering tent before us. It stood guarded by an assortment of stone-faced soldiers, some kitted out in shiny metal while the others were... well, let's just say they were letting it all hang out. Seriously, I realized bare skin aids with ambient mana manipulation or some mystical crap, but fighting with your junk almost exposed? Seems like a one-way ticket to a world of pain. But hey, different strokes.

When they caught sight of Olin, their so-called 'General', they instantly banged their chests in some sort of unified salute. But Olin? Dude just breezed right by them, making a beeline for the tent's interior. I wonder if any of the guards raised an eyebrow at the snub. Though, in Olin's defense, giving a salute would be a tad tricky when you're using one hand to stop your head from toppling off to the side. Just a tad.

*Perhaps it wasn't the best idea to snap his neck.*

*Yeah...*

From the outside, the tent seemed massive. But stepping through its entrance was like diving into a rabbit hole, only to be met by a scene straight out of Alice's trippiest mushroom high. The inside

sprawled out way larger than what the exterior hinted at, like some wacko architect decided to build a stadium inside a tent. No weapons, no magical doodads, no damn Dungeon Core—just an endless stretch of... well, death. If someone had told me they were hiding their fallen comrades in there, I would've laughed. But seeing was believing, and what I saw was a freakin' morbid treasure trove, and I was clutching the perfect ass of not only a vampire, but a necromancer!

# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 20

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### WAILING DRUMS

Vanya Anlyth, an Elven Knight and Paladin of the Kingdom of Slaethia, lay solitary in her bed. The chilling void of the empty sheets pierced her heart, intensifying the ache from her husband's absence. Though she understood he was fulfilling his obligations as the General of the army, it brought her scant solace. The hours without him felt interminable. The echoes of the evening's festivities had begun to wane, leaving only the muffled chuckles of inebriated soldiers making their way to their resting places.

The triumph from mere days ago felt distant as the festivities continued unabated each night, an orchestra of wild merrymaking and indulgence. And who could blame them? The vampire, once the terror of their kingdom, was now a captive, subject to their sacred desires. Elves, dwarves, and humans, the trinity that rebuilt the kingdom, were preparing to parade this malevolent being back to their homeland, where her true ordeal would begin. It was a testament to their virtue, a stark message to all nocturnal horrors: every fiend and forbidden race would be eradicated in the name of Slaethia's divine mission. From vampires to werewolves, from lizardmen to beastkin, none of the darkened creatures were spared from this decree.

Rising gracefully from her bed, Vanya draped herself in a cloak, a mere whisper of fabric that scarcely shielded her form from the secrets of the night. While her armor stood prepared for her, she had a different agenda for tonight. Her intention had been to take her husband by surprise, to unveil the mystery hidden beneath the cloak. But that initial desire had shifted.

Emerging into the embrace of the night, Vanya was met with a biting cold that seemed to grip her very marrow. Amidst the chill, a shadowy suspicion wormed its way into her thoughts: her husband, ensnared in the depths of inebriated merriment with his officers. "Surely not," she silently argued. He wouldn't have abandoned their shared warmth without significant reason...

"Should my husband be lost in the company of ale, officers, or – gods forbid – another's embrace, he will rue the day," Vanya whispered fiercely, stepping forward into the crisp night, resolved to seek out Ezad.

Upon entering the command tent, Vanya was met with an unsettling sight: her husband was conspicuously absent. The tent, usually bustling with the presence of at least one on-duty officer, now stood eerily vacant. Her irritation morphed into anxiety as she spotted chairs overturned, hinting at either a skirmish or a swift exit. With a heavy heart and rising apprehension, she swiftly turned and delved back into the night's embrace, seeking clarity.

“Well now, Anlyth, aren’t you a sight to behold! I can hardly believe me own eyes, seein’ that lovely behind of yours runnin’ around without a lick of armor on, love. Ain’t ye a bit of a tease, ye are?” Gimona, the cheeky dwarf woman, chided with a smirk.

“Not now, Gimona. Have you seen my husband?”

“Och, so that’s the game ye’re playin’, dressin’ up like that, are ye?” Gimona chuckled, a teasing glint in her eye.

“The command tent stands vacant,” Vanya declared, her tone suggesting the gravity of the situation without further elaboration.

“**WHAT IN THE NAME O’ THE GODS?!**” Gimona roared. “Do ye think we’ve been breached? Do ye think the dungeon core’s been taken? Sweet mother of mercy, I hope not.”

Vanya’s voice carried a hint of anxiety, yet the resolute determination echoing through her words was undeniable. “Ezad secured the dungeon core in his dimensional ring alongside other relics. We need to find him or any of the senior members to discern if we face an imminent threat.”

“I’ve ne’er laid eyes on that man wearin’ a ring,” the dwarf woman retorted with a hint of skepticism.

“Uh, yes...” Vanya shifted her eyes, evading direct contact in a moment of discomfort. “The ring isn’t exactly... conventional.”

“What in the name o’ the gods does that mean?”

“Um, perhaps we should, uh, consult a soldier currently on duty,” Vanya faltered, eager to refocus. “It’s possible we’re jumping to conclusions. They might have witnessed something that sheds light on the situation.”

Vanya and Gimona navigated the encampment, but it quickly became evident that an unusual number of sentries had abandoned their posts. While a handful might stray during festivities, the absence of twenty guards was alarming. This stark realization cemented her suspicions: they were indeed under siege!

“We need to find Craycroft,” Vanya uttered with a heavy sigh. “This predicament might be beyond what we can manage by ourselves.”

Gimona shook her head, “That old codger brought a Way Stone with him. He uses it to scuttle back to his tower at night, preferrin’ the comfort of his own bed over a tent and bedroll.”

“Then my path is clear. I shall assume command of the army until either my husband or a senior officer is located. Gimona, strike the Wailing Drums. We stand under threat.”

“Aye, Anlyth. I’ll get right to it. And what will ye be doin’?”

“Our foes often comprise necromancers, vampires, and other shadowy entities. It’s imperative that I safeguard the remains of our departed to ensure they aren’t manipulated as tools by these adversaries.”

“It’d be better to burn the bodies, it would.”

“It would,” Vanya replied, her voice tinged with a hint of sadness, “but violating a body before its rightful rites unsettles the departing spirit. I’ve seen my share of restless phantoms and tortured souls; I wish to see no more.”



Gimona Grimmail took off with urgency, allowing Anlyth to manage her matters. Despite her compact, sturdy dwarf legs, she moved at a remarkable pace, driven by surging adrenaline. The once vibrant fires of the camp had dimmed to mere embers, but her objective remained clear: the Wailing Drums. The need to awaken the entire camp was paramount. Yet, as Gimona dashed towards the drums, an unshakable sensation hinted she might confront adversaries before reaching her destination. A smile crept onto her face, embracing the thrill of the moment. After all, tonight was an opportune time to be a Monster Slayer!

While Gimona regretted leaving her axe behind, her confidence remained steadfast. She was no mere dwarf that needed a blade for protection. And she proved it when she sensed an impending attack. The almost imperceptible disturbance in the air hinted at the deceptive approach these detestable beings preferred. Their assault was laughably amateurish! With reflexes honed by experience, Gimona’s hand shot out, seizing the assassin’s wrist and stopping the dagger mere inches from her throat.

With a nimble twist and yank, the shadowy assailant was airborne for a moment before crashing heavily onto the ground. Without hesitation, Gimona’s boot came down on the attacker’s face with the might akin to a mana crystal’s explosion. A concussive wave emanated from the strike, yet the camp’s inebriated soldiers, lost in their alcoholic haze, remained oblivious, their snores uninterrupted. Gimona couldn’t suppress a chuckle. The scene reaffirmed a belief she had long held: humans and elves simply couldn’t handle their pitiful excuse for ale.

In her urgency, Gimona’s eyes darted to where the vampires had previously been staked. Her heart plummeted when she found the spots empty. Just a minuscule amount of blood could mend their grievous injuries, making them formidable adversaries for the encampment. To exacerbate the situation, the General’s absence meant the army was without its commander amidst an apparent siege. But Gimona was resolute in her determination to prevent a disaster this night. She surged forward once more, aiming for the Wailing Drums. The only sound capable of rousing an army from its alcohol-fueled escapades was the haunting resonance of that drum. Yet, her momentum was suddenly thwarted when a cluster of dwarves, groggy and irked, emerged from their tents, disgruntled by the disruption to their rest.



Vanya dashed towards the Repository Tent, every heartbeat echoing her growing apprehension. The trailing end of her cloak occasionally gave way, cheekily revealing her exposed rear. If necromancers had indeed breached their defenses, that tent would be their prime target. To her immense relief, the guards outside remained steadfast, an embodiment of resilience. Ezad's foresight in choosing only the elite to guard the fallen shone through in this crisis. While their commitment was unyielding, Vanya caught their lingering glances. As she neared, she drew her cloak closer, a shadow of a smirk forming, silently warning them against any mention of her current state.

"Has anyone seen the General?" Vanya demanded, her voice stern and authoritative.

"Aye, Paladin Knight Anlyth, Ma'am," responded one of the guards. "General Anlyth is presently inside the Repository Tent, in consultation with a priestess. But I must note, his demeanor struck me as peculiar."

Taking a deep breath to steady herself, Vanya instructed, "You six, fall in with me," addressing the guards. "I suspect the enemy has breached our lines. Stay alert and expect the unexpected!"

The sextet of knights, battle-scarred and seasoned from myriad wars, assumed a stance of readiness, their zeal palpable. Their salutes signified their unwavering allegiance, leaving no doubt in the Paladin's mind about their preparedness for the looming conflict. Drawing her blade, Vanya braced herself and ventured into the tent. The scene within was the manifestation of her gravest apprehensions. Her beloved stood beside the vampiric nemesis, the very scourge who had once laid waste to her realm. A name, whispered in fearful tones, haunted the nightmares of Slaethian children: Aurelia. For the populace of the Kingdom of Slaethia, her name invoked a paralyzing dread, and yet, there she stood, challenging all present with her mere presence.

Vanya's heart splintered, witnessing her once valiant husband, now ensnared by the very creature they had sworn to vanquish. The man she loved, a mere shadow of the leader and partner she once knew, stirred a torrent of anguish within her. Tears blurred her vision, and her sword wavered in her grip, the weight of her grief threatening to pull her under. The monstrous seductress had ensnared him, and Vanya realized the scale of the calamity that awaited them this night. She made a solemn vow: she would ceaselessly battle the vampiric fiend until her husband's soul was liberated and he could find eternal repose in the afterlife. Facing the fiend, though fraught with peril, was her unyielding obligation; for her love, her kingdom, and her sacred oath as a Paladin.

Yet, the act of her initial capture was nothing short of a marvel. Without Craycroft's guidance and might, Vanya questioned whether a second victory was attainable. Aurelia, the vampire, met Vanya's gaze with a malicious grin, her ivory fangs glistening menacingly. Vanya's attention was momentarily captivated by the pristine priestess robes Aurelia donned. However, in an unnerving display, the robes seemed to disintegrate, giving way to a gown as dark as a moonless night. It was a garb more befitting of a lavish soirée than the blood-soaked terrain of a battlefield. Yet, as Aurelia stood there, she resembled the embodiment of a nightmare—as if her very attire was forged from the purest, darkest sorcery.

The rhythm that Vanya had been yearning for finally resounded, reverberating deeply within her soul. The unyielding cadence pulsed through the night, conjuring an ambiance thick with anticipation and unease. The drum's resonating sound was soon accompanied by a haunting scream – a banshee's war lament. This ethereal shriek cut through the night, chilling Vanya to the bone. The cry seemed endless, a melancholic anthem signifying impending doom. The symphony of the drum's rhythmic pounding, combined with the banshee's spine-tingling wail, crafted an aura of imminent peril, jolting the entire encampment to readiness. Warriors all around were roused from their inebriated haze, suddenly lucid, primed, and poised for the confrontation that awaited.

While the initial onslaught at the dungeon's remnants had taken the vampires by surprise, neither faction emerged unscathed. Both experienced grievous losses. Regrettably for Vanya's side, Aurelia had all the ingredients to forge her new legion right within that tent. The canvas shelter was strewn with the lifeless forms of those who had once fought alongside Vanya. Although they were only a small representation of the living forces outside, they posed a threat not to be underestimated. Vanya recognized the peril all too well. Engaging with necromancers was a precarious endeavor; every ally lost on the battlefield could be reborn to turn against them, weaponized in death.

Gimona burst into the tent, her face twisted in fury as she stared at the General and the vampiric princess. "Hey now, what in the blazin' hells is goin' on here? General, what the devils are ye doin' with that blood-suckin' wench?"

Vanya's eyes darted to the vampire's gown, sensing a distinct change. The inky fabric seemed to come alive, reacting defensively to Gimona's words. It shifted and undulated, and the dress's sleeves twitched in a manner that suggested latent animosity. The sheer malice emanating from the dress was palpable, filling the tent with an oppressive and chilling energy that was neither vampiric nor necrotic. It was as if the very air had turned to lead, pregnant with imminent violence. The tension was so tangible; it felt like the charged moment right before a tempest unleashed its rage.

"Gimona, weren't you the one sounding the Wailing Drums?"

"Well now, lassie, I had a few of me lads sort it out." But she couldn't keep her thoughts to herself, as she muttered, "Still don't see where that dimension ring could be on that man!"

Vanya's eyes blazed with fury as she glanced from the smiling vampire to Gimona. The unsettling stillness of the monster, coupled with her malevolent grin, was chilling to the bone. Vanya feared Gimona might have inadvertently given something away. Regardless of any potential slip, Vanya was resolute in her decision; the situation was too dire to second-guess. They had to act swiftly and decisively.

With fervent determination, Paladin Anlyth called upon her divine powers. As she uttered the words, her arm was bathed in radiant light, emanating purity and strength. "In the name of the heavens," she proclaimed, her voice echoing with resolute authority, "may sacred luminescence be my beacon!"

Having unleashed her spell, a radiant beam of divine light surged forth. Yet, it did not strike the malevolent vampire as one might expect. Instead, its target was the person Vanya held dearest: her

beloved husband. The brilliant luminescence collided with him, its intensity akin to a roaring blaze, propelling him off his feet and hurtling him backward. The aftermath revealed a ghastly sight – a searing hole in his chest, the surrounding skin charred and smoking. The sheer force seemed like it could have broken his neck. Vanya was left reeling, her heart wrenching as tears streamed down her face. The man she had cherished now bore a mark of her divine wrath. The weight of her decision bore heavily upon her, but deep down, she believed it had been necessary.

Despite everything, Vanya's attention was caught by the peculiar behavior of the vampire's dress. It moved as if it had a life of its own, seemingly recoiling from the divine radiance of Vanya's magic. Preparing to unleash another spell, Vanya halted, unnerved by the intense rage evident in the vampire's eyes. Oddly, it wasn't Ezad's fate that infuriated the vampire but something else entirely. Lost in her observations, Vanya was jolted back to the grim reality by an icy grasp on her ankle.

Glancing downward, Vanya's eyes widened in horror as what she'd assumed to be a corpse latched onto her ankle. The chilling realization hit her: the necromancer's dark magic was at work. She had been blind to the looming threat until this very moment. All around her, the tent came alive with movement, as fallen warriors began to rise, their souls enslaved to undeath, creating a nightmarish army from those who once fought valiantly.

Engulfed in a maelstrom of combat, Vanya fought back-to-back with her six knights and Gimona. The previously inert forms of the fallen were now animated in deathly rage, their vacant eyes filled with an insatiable hunger. The tent had become an arena of chaos, echoing with the cacophony of clashing blades and haunting moans. Every thrust of her sword met decaying flesh, every parry countered a deadly grasp. Encircled by this relentless undead force, Vanya's chances seemed bleak. The fetid odor of rot and the grim cacophony around her intensified the nightmarish reality she was facing. But her resolve was unwavering, her only path to salvation being her wits and her profound command over the arcane.

With a fierce resolve, Paladin Anlyth unleashed her most potent weapon. Without uttering a word, an inferno of radiant fire and blinding light spiraled from her very being, incinerating all in its wake. The protective magics of the Repository Tent groaned and wavered. The very fabric of the realm they occupied throbbed erratically, akin to a distressed heartbeat. Despite being aware of the dire ramifications, Anlyth's primary concern was containing the undead threat and ensuring that the malevolent vampire, Aurelia, met her end. The stakes were too high, and the Paladin was willing to risk it all for the greater good.

The eruption of the tent's enchantments resembled a cataclysmic detonation amidst the camp, toppling tents and hurling soldiers into the air like leaves caught in a tempest. This seismic shockwave violently collided with the fortifications of Elsternwick village, shattering them into fragments and reducing homes to mere rubble. Those cognizant of the unfolding calamity braced for the subsequent implosion, a dire consequence when a pocket dimension destabilizes. True to their worst fears, the shockwave surged back with the vehemence of a relentless storm, obliterating more structures and dragging both knights and villagers toward the epicenter of the catastrophe.



The ensuing explosive cacophony reverberated across the realm, marking a moment of unparalleled destruction.

Reeling from the shock, Vanya struggled to regain her bearings, amazed that she was still among the living. Over her, the steadfast dwarf Gimona Grimmail stood vigilant, her fingers clutching a barrier medallion. The lustrous glow of the magical talisman shielded both Gimona and Vanya from the cataclysm's wrath, a solitary beacon in the midst of utter chaos. Regrettably, the gallant six knights who had fought valiantly by their side were not as fortunate. As Vanya surveyed the ravaged landscape, she clung to the hope that the malevolent vampire, Aurelia, had at last been vanquished.

To Vanya's horror, her deepest dread materialized before her eyes. Shielded by a dissipating crimson barrier, the vampire Aurelia danced amidst the debris of shattered tents, her voice lilting to a malevolent melody that seemed otherworldly. Her movements were a grotesque parody of an elegant waltz, contorted and chilling. She caressed her shadowy gown with unnerving tenderness, seemingly celebrating the devastation that surrounded her. Witnessing this macabre display, a cold chill raced down Vanya's spine, as she watched the fiend take delight in the havoc she had wreaked.

Emerging from the ruins of the razed camp, the soldiers stood resolute, determination clear on every face. Vanya, a pillar of strength amidst the chaos, surveyed the devastation with an icy, unyielding smile. Now, her nemesis, the monstrous vampire, found herself encircled by an army united in their thirst for retribution. While the vampire's might was formidable, she wasn't invincible. Vanya was more than ready to demonstrate this fact. By the time dawn broke, she vowed to extinguish the malevolent force that was Aurelia. And from then on, the young souls of the Kingdom of Slaethia could find solace in the night, free from the specter of Aurelia's terror.

With a sorrow-laden whisper, Vanya murmured, "For you, my love," her eyes blazing with divine fervor. The vampire had robbed her of her heart's joy by slaying her husband, but vengeance would be Vanya's. And in that pivotal moment, she felt an indomitable force rising within, ensuring that no obstacle could deter her!

# BLAKE PUDDING

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## CHAPTER 21

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### CATAclysmic

Jason grunted, a deep sound born from the very core of his pain. Every nerve in his body screamed in agony, each pulse threatening to send him crashing to the ground. The searing pain radiating through his veins seemed to drain his vitality, rendering him feeble and weak. With each passing second, his limbs quaked and spasms of torment wracked his body, making it feel as if his very essence was being shredded from within. Just as the weight of his suffering was about to pull him under, an explosive force shattered the encroaching darkness, reigniting the will to fight within him!

A cataclysmic explosion erupted from the direction of the knight's camp, tearing the silent shroud of night asunder. The sheer force of the detonation carved a path through the dense woods, effortlessly breaking ancient trees and scattering debris like mere toys. Jason was caught off-guard, the violent gust threatening to knock him off his feet. But before he could succumb, a powerful pull dragged him backward, away from the devastation. As pandemonium ensued, with cries of terror echoing through the trees, a handful of silhouetted figures emerged. They stood unwavering amidst the chaos, arms raised defiantly, as if challenging the very cosmos, shielding all behind them from the brunt of the explosion's wrath.

Weakened and drained, Jason found himself sprawled on the ground. Suddenly, a hand reached out towards him, its fingers tipped with razor-sharp talons. Gentle but menacing, the hand proffered a vial filled with a luminescent blue potion. Lifting his eyes, Jason was met with the hauntingly beautiful gaze of Hikari, the silver-haired feline enchantress.

"Your courage in volunteering to rescue the prisoners has not gone unnoticed, Champion," Hikari purred, presenting the blue vial with a teasing smirk.

"Volunteering?" Jason retorted with disbelief, grabbing the vial from Hikari's grasp. "Piss off!"

A sinister silhouette abruptly took its place next to the feline woman, dipping into a deep bow of respect. Jason gave the man a cursory glance, dismissing him as just another minion in their little horde of escapees.

"Lady Hikari," the figure intoned urgently, "we have unidentified entities approaching from the west."



Aurelia spun, swayed, and danced with wild glee. Her fingers roamed over my form with reckless abandon, as if the soldiers rising from the wreckage of the encampment were not even there. It may have appeared that she was fondling herself over her dress to them. But in truth, she was fondling herself and me! Aurelia was lost in her own world of pleasure. In return, my tendrils caressed her every curve, heedless of the onlookers. We continued our waltz, in full view of the audience, despite my growing unease as more and more knights emerged from the wreckage. I had already learned that I was no match for Anlyth's holy magic, and even a glancing blow was enough to send me reeling in agony. But I was grateful for Aurelia's protection as she shielded me from the elf's last devastating spell, which reduced the tent to ashes with the force of a miniature Little Boy detonating.

I couldn't help but feel a twinge of admiration as I glanced at the elf who had caused such destruction. However, as I stared at the paladin, I couldn't help but smile. Seeing her tears, as she watched in agony as Olin pushed aside some rubble and rose to his feet with a gaping wound in his chest, was priceless! It was a fitting punishment for someone who had taken my kid—I mean my potential prey's life!

*"No, we didn't."*

*"Shut up. Yes, we did!"*

The two halves of my soul stopped bickering as Aurelia approached Olin and slid her hands down his pants. To say I was a bit horrorstruck was an understatement when she grasped his manhood, although so was Anlyth.

*"Umm..."*

*"What's she doing?"*

At the sight, Anlyth suddenly screamed out, **"I'LL KILL YOU!"**

Aurelia, for her part, only smiled with that dark and tantalizing grin that sent a quiver of delight coursing through me. She pulled out – a golden circular ring. Initially, it appeared too small for her wrist, but as she began to slide it on, it miraculously expanded to fit her perfectly.

*"Dang, Olin's packing!"*

*"No kidding!"*

With a fierce battle cry, Anlyth let out a deafening scream, her voice resonating like a thunderclap, **"BY THE GRACE OF THE GODS, LET MY HOLY LIGHT BE MY GUIDE!"**

As Anlyth let out a heart-wrenching scream, she unleashed a relentless torrent of holy light, a turbulent river of divine might poised to turn all in its wake to mere cinders. But Aurelia, with a grace that belied the situation, brushed the divine onslaught aside, treating it as nothing more than a bothersome gnat. I, however, was not so fortunate. The sacred onslaught scorched me, sending tendrils of agonizing pain throughout my being. The anguish I felt was intense, yet it was overshadowed by the ferocity evident on Aurelia's face. Every inch of her demeanor screamed of impending vengeance, all directed at Anlyth for the audacity to harm me. But before Aurelia could

unleash her pent-up wrath, she found herself encircled by a squadron of knights, their weapons drawn, their intent clear and deadly.

As Aurelia faced her opponents, the initial assault came from a figure clad in the gleaming armor of a knight. With determination in his eyes, he aimed a ferocious overhead blow at her. Almost simultaneously, another warrior lunged at her, his blade seeking her heart with deadly intent. Yet, Aurelia's reflexes defied belief. She sidestepped the overhead swing and gracefully pivoted away from the thrust, avoiding both strikes with ease. With the elegance and danger of a wildcat, she retaliated, her razor-sharp claws slicing through the first knight's armor as if it were parchment, inflicting a deep wound. For the second, she executed a powerful kick that struck his kneecap, producing a horrific crunch, causing him to crumple in pain. While they were distracted by Aurelia's prowess, I seized the moment. My tentacles burst forth from her shadow, coiling and striking, showing no mercy to the audacious foes before us.

*"I'll stick to physical attacks, while you stick to magic,"* I asserted to myself.

*"But Circe kicked us out of the system, we can't use any of our skills!"*

*"We've still got a couple spells we can use without the system."*

*"Oh yeah!"*

The knights swarmed us with unyielding fury. Arrows were let loose, yet Aurelia deftly dodged or brushed them aside effortlessly. Mystical assaults followed, with streaks of lightning and fiery orbs launched our way. However, the pulsating red barrier surrounding Aurelia absorbed every magical blow, forcing the knights to resort to traditional combat techniques. While some were easily felled by a singular, devastating hit, a few showed commendable resilience, getting back on their feet and charging again and again. On another front, Olin unleashed his wrath, a storm of punches and kicks tearing through the ranks, but he was soon overwhelmed by sheer numbers.

Despite unleashing the full might of my arsenal, the knights resiliently got back to their feet, suggesting the presence of healers among them, which made my onslaught feel like an exercise in futility. My tentacles lashed out in desperate abandon, constricting knights by the throat and hoisting them into the air, only to have my grip broken with every blade's strike. Some were momentarily incapacitated as I thrust tentacles down their throats, but even these were rapidly severed. While my Corrosive and Venomous touch incapacitated a few, and my Paralysis rendered others immobile, the momentum of the battle still shifted against us. From beneath Aurelia, a deathly miasma seeped out. A black cloud imbued with Blight, interspersed with deadly purple Necrotic Flames. Even the acidic yellow haze of her Breath and random spurts of Acid Spit couldn't deter the knights' relentless advance.

Aurelia serenaded the battleground with a haunting tune, effortlessly dispatching soldiers one after another. Yet, beneath the façade, her eyes betrayed a hint of exhaustion. The most formidable adversaries were the scarcely clad warriors—quite an unanticipated sight. Their defenses varied; some boasted ethereal barriers that flickered upon impact, while others were endowed with skin rivaling the durability of metal. It was notable that attire—or the lack thereof—was not limited by

gender, as both male and female warriors donned such minimalistic garments. Their tenacity was admirable, but my intention was clear: their survival stood in opposition to our objectives.

Aurelia, ever graceful in her combat, now portrayed signs of exhaustion, her movements weighed down by the incessant barrage from the knights. Though her expertise was evident, the relentless onslaught seemed to push her to her limits. As imminent danger approached in the form of a knight's blade aiming for her, I reflexively contracted around her midsection, forcing her into a stooped position and narrowly evading the lethal cut. Capitalizing on this evasion, I retaliated with a surge of Necrotic Flame, reducing the knight's visage to ashes. Observing her, even in her fatigue, her eyes radiated an unwavering determination, suggesting a deeper intent within her actions.

The onslaught momentarily ceased as the soldiers strategically shifted to encircle us, cunningly staying just out of my tentacle's reach. Their positioning was a taunt, a challenge that I couldn't answer. Recognizing the dwarf woman from our previous encounter in the deep roads and Anlyth beside her, my hopes dwindled. Memories of the tragic loss of Wartie due to the elf paladin's actions flooded my thoughts. My anticipation of imminent doom grew, and the prospect of Aurelia's recapture or worse, her demise, became increasingly tangible. Yet, curiously, in the depths of Aurelia's eyes, there remained an inexplicable spark of anticipation.

"Would ye look at what we have here? It's the little lady herself, back in our clutches once more," the dwarf sneered.

"It's apparent to me we don't have the means to restrain her," Anlyth declared.

Anlyth moved forward, her sword at the ready, with her light cloak billowing, revealing its underside. A sudden commotion disrupted the knights' ranks as two amongst them unexpectedly collapsed, victims of an invisible adversary. Their collective attention diverged from Aurelia, as they endeavored to pinpoint the origin of this unforeseen assault. Anlyth, with unwavering intent, continued her advance, her sword poised to strike. Yet, she found herself compelled to divert her planned blow, parrying an ethereal blade that emerged from the void, targeting her throat.

"Oh shit," Jason uttered, disappearing into the void just as the dwarf woman launched her attack in his direction.

The abrupt emergence and vanishing of Jason sent shockwaves of astonishment and bewilderment through the surviving knights. Although the devastation wrought by the explosion and Aurelia's assault was palpable, a formidable number of knights remained on their feet. The battlefield was strewn with their deceased brethren. Amidst this chaos, Aurelia's harmonious laughter resonated, serving as a haunting prelude to the reanimation of the fallen as undead beings. The subsequent events can only be described as sheer pandemonium.

Despite the knights being distracted by the reanimated corpses of their comrades, both the dwarf and the elf remained fixated on Aurelia, and by association, on me—regardless of their awareness of my true nature. I couldn't shake the feeling of being in over my head with the imminent confrontation. As formidable as Aurelia had proven herself to be, it was clear, both alarmingly and intriguingly, that she was nearing her limits.

“*Any ideas?*” I asked myself.

“*Nope,*” was my only reply.

“...”

“I apologize, my beloved, but you must flee without me,” Aurelia whispered, before hurling herself back into the fray.

“*The hell with that!*”

“*Damn straight!*”

Anlyth charged, her sword targeting Aurelia. However, Aurelia deftly dodged the attempt. The dwarf took a different approach, unleashing a formidable punch to Aurelia’s side. Reacting swiftly, I adjusted my form to cushion the impact. The force was like a lightning bolt, catapulting Aurelia backward. Even with the shock rattling my senses, she persisted, battling against the odds. The dwarf didn’t let up, barraging us with punches that each reverberated with pain.

The dwarf’s punishing blow was immediately followed by the elf’s magic. Instead of charging forth, she maintained her distance, hand aloft as if orchestrating some impending doom. A radiant surge of energy burst forth, finding its mark on Aurelia before she could mount a defense or parry. The sheer force of the arcane onslaught sent us skidding across the warzone, amidst soldiers and risen dead alike. Through the barrage, Aurelia’s resilience shone, but even she had limits. My essence felt as if it was being scorched from existence. I couldn’t discern if the pain was from losing a part of myself, but the aftermath was clear: a trail of charred, black gelatinous residue marked our path, remnants of me.

Desperation clawed at me, prompting me to draw on every scrap of ambient mana around, trying to maintain my form through sheer will and magic. However, my talent with magic without the system’s aid was still too limited, and the onslaughts had been too much, too furious, and soon enough, I felt the dread of my eminent death. Though, it was not my death that I feared, but it rather, I was terrified of losing Aurelia. I couldn’t pinpoint the exact reason for my deep attachment to her or why she felt indispensable to me. Call it fate, destiny, love, lust, or perhaps even naivety, all I knew was that a reality without her was unimaginable.



Gimona reveled in the midst of the most exhilarating battle she’d ever experienced. True, using an army to wear down a vampire before confronting her directly might not scream “honor.” But right now, with the legendary Aurelia in front of her, winning was the name of the game. Every time Aurelia tried to dodge, her ever-adaptive dress took the hits, shifting and changing to protect its wearer. Gimona had never witnessed such a piece of enchanted attire in her life. But with Anlyth’s continuous magical barrage, what was once a grand, flowing dress now resembled a thin nightgown. Gimona smirked, thinking it wouldn’t be much longer until Aurelia would be left in nothing but the kind of lingerie one might find in the city’s seedier establishments.

The battlefield was a frenzy of motion and magic, with Aurelia masterfully controlling the undead and casting spell after spell. However, what caught Gimona's attention was the strange magic emanating from the dress: a cocktail of poisons, corrosive acids, and enigmatic purple flames. But to Gimona, a hardened dwarf warrior, such low-tier magical antics were hardly a concern. Most knights would've been severely challenged, but not her. Yet, the real nuisance was that teleporting, sharp-toothed menace who darted in and out of the knightly ranks, reducing their numbers with each appearance. Gimona could almost taste the creature's dwindling energy reserves, which fueled her anticipation. The endgame was in sight. Soon, the undead would be no more, and Aurelia would meet her fate.

Gimona took every ounce of her battle-hardened might and focused it upon the deteriorating form of Aurelia. Each blow, infused with her dwarven magic, brought with it the satisfying sound of snapping bones. Her spirit soared as she prepared her ultimate strike, summoning her deepest reserves of magical energy into her fist. As it slammed into the vampire's midsection, Aurelia was sent careening, the ground beneath her breaking apart in her wake. She was bleeding profusely, not healing. The telltale sign of a vampire in dire need of sustenance.

With victory seemingly within grasp, Gimona vaulted into the air, her entire body intent on delivering a death blow akin to the explosion of a mana crystal. But victory was snatched away in the blink of an eye. An overwhelming force, like the rupture of reality itself, swept across the battlefield, disrupting her descent. Both knights and undead were cast aside in chaotic fashion.

Gimona regained her footing, her triumphant mood now replaced with dread. Her gaze was drawn to the treeline, where an imposing new threat had emerged. An army unlike any other, led by an age-worn Warg, holding a staff that seemed to throb with immense magical power.



Death hovered like a vulture, waiting for me to give in. But then, from the treeline, a sliver of hope appeared. There stood an army, with a warg at the forefront who looked like he'd jumped straight out of some old monster flick. This geezer of a warg, with deep wrinkles, a thick beard, and eyes that seemed to see right through you, was an intimidating sight. The staff he held seemed more alive than the knights around me, its energy fizzling with a light show that'd put a disco ball to shame. As powerful as he seemed, I felt a smidgen of fear creeping in.

However, seeing the very soldiers that nearly slain me now distracted and shaken by this new threat, I felt a resurgence of hope. Now, the trick was to hustle and get Aurelia, with all her allure, over to the side of these unexpected saviors.

As the soldiers were entranced by the approaching dungeon forces, Aurelia seized her moment. In a swift and lethal gesture, she sank her fangs deep into the exposed neck of a distracted barbarian, drawing out the very essence of life. Within moments, her once wounded physique rejuvenated, appearing as though she had just stepped out of a luxurious spa. The only imperfection in her radiant form was me – a ragged and almost formless black goo, desperately clinging to her.

I was a hot mess, both literally and figuratively. Beaten, battered, torn, and burned, I was left reeling as I clung to Aurelia's flesh. The battle had taken a toll on me, reducing me to a mere shadow of my former self. My survival depended on feeding to regain my mass, but I was surrounded by enemies eager to take down the stunning vampire I was attached to. Fighting was not an option without replenishing my strength. Still, unlike the beautiful bloodsucker, I doubted I could consume enough bodies in time to survive the army of soldiers that surrounded us. And with the feast Aurelia had just indulged in, the enemy was no longer in a state of stunned disbelief.

The elf dude—or no, wait, elf woman, Anlyth—(seriously, those biceps and jawline are more misleading than a map drawn by a drunk goblin. I mean, not *that* bad, but distinguishing elf genders, especially when they're decked out in armor? That's a challenge.) was on top of her game, barking orders with an urgency. Her rebellious cloak was having its own little sideshow, offering glimpses of her well-toned backside and that... shall we say, "overgrown" lawn she proudly flaunted. Meanwhile, she was marshaling her troops, prepping them to fend off Chieftain Hensley and his assembly of dungeon oddballs.

The warg, looking like it took styling cues from the darkest of horror films, was keeping a hawk-eye on the unfolding drama. And Anlyth? She was orchestrating a shield wall around Aurelia—sort of like penning in a pet that's been too curious with the house plants.

Just then, Jason shimmered into existence right next to us, sending my already frayed nerves into a new spiral of alarm. I felt a sudden urge to lash out, even though I was in no condition to fight. But Aurelia, ever the composed one, clearly recognized him. Sporting a mischievous grin that showcased those menacing, razor-sharp teeth, Jason reached out his hand towards Aurelia.

*"Umm, that's our woman!"*

*"Hands off, we had dibs first,"* we attempted to blurt out, but in truth, I didn't have the energy to muster the words.

Jason's arrival sent shockwaves through the soldiers surrounding us, and they surged forward with renewed determination. I was pretty sure Aurelia could handle another round, but me? Eh, not so much. Jason announced with a grin that was way too pleased with himself (seriously, could he be any cheesier?), "Come with me if you want to live!"

*"Do you think our new mom will let us kill him...again?"*

*"We can only hope."*

Aurelia seized Jason's hand, just as the knights, weapons at the ready, lunged for us. Instantly, our surroundings morphed into a whirlwind of shadow. Though we hadn't moved, everything was drenched in a black mist, the world rendered in monochrome hues. Through this darkened realm, Jason gripped Aurelia's hand, guiding us forward.

"Hold on tight, babe," Jason said with a wink, his arrogance evident. "We need to make it to the tree line before my spell fades. Time's not on our side, so hustle or get left in the dust."

*"Oh, he did not just call her babe!"*



*“I don’t care what mom says. He’s so dead!”*

As I clung to Aurelia, I watched in awe as she and Jason sprinted past the ghostly figures of soldiers and knights, who seemed to be made of nothing more than black smoke. The thick, murky fog surrounding us lent the scene a dreamlike quality, as if we were running through a surreal, alternate world. The strange stillness of the shadow realm only added to its eerie atmosphere, making our escape feel like a treacherous journey, despite everything being nothing more than mist. The crowning jewel of this strange land was the massive black hole that loomed above us, casting its event horizon as the only light source in this bizarre world.

*“The next time we kill him, absorb better steal this ability, or I’ll be pissed.”*

*“No kidding!”*

In mere moments we found ourselves standing beside a grizzled silhouette of an old werewolf made of smoke. Just like that, light and color flooded back into the world. I was surprised to see that the Chieftain seemed unfazed by our sudden appearance beside him. He stood there, staring at the enemy forces with a steely gaze, not batting an eye.

One of my halves conjured up Aurelia’s black and red-trimmed robe to drape over her. The robe manifested perfectly around our vampire. Though I’d like to boast about my skills, this was more due to luck than expertise. But hey, no one had to know that. While I gave back her robe, I was holding onto a particular lacy article of clothing as my little trophy. I reluctantly began to slither down Aurelia’s leg, attempting to reshape myself into my human form, but my mass was just too scant.

*“Ha! You look like a fucking toddler!”* Jason laughed.

I looked down and let out a groan of frustration. Jason was wrong. I was no toddler. I was more like an infant, not even reaching Aurelia’s knees. *“This is humiliating,”* I muttered aloud by mistake, which didn’t help stop Jason’s fit of laughter.

*“We still have those corpses stashed away inside the void.”*

*“Only that succubus’s body is left. We devoured the other bodies during the fight to replenish our mass,”* I reminded myself.

*“No, we already used Absorb on her,”* I corrected myself, much to my frustration.

Before I could even kick off a tantrum worthy of a toddler (and really, who wants to see that from a Black Pudding?), the bewitching vampire lifted me up and cradled me. I was engulfed in a swirl of emotions—partly humiliated, yet also strangely comforted as I nestled closer to her cold embrace. Even amidst the battlefield’s pandemonium, she looked done with all the action, her gaze more fixated on the ancient warg and his mismatched band of ex-beasties. In an almost playful gesture, she handed me the golden ring she wore as a bracelet. Not exactly a pacifier, but I gladly tucked it into my void, earning a raised eyebrow from her and a chuckle from me. (Apparently, she doesn’t know that I have my own dimensional storage; probably thinks I stuck it within my

goo). But even as I basked in the coolness, there was this irksome nudge in the recesses of my mind, like I'd overlooked something pivotal...

# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 22

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### THE CRONE'S OFFER

#### EARLIER

There was Darkness!

Heather descended into the bowels of the dungeon, stumbling behind a young undead goblin. The oppressive darkness enveloped her like a suffocating shroud. The memories of her past in this hellish dark pit were not fond, and she cursed herself for venturing back into this abysmal abyss once more. Her trembling hand instinctively reached for the back of her neck to verify that her head was still securely attached to her body. And, to her relief, it was still there...for now.

The glittering particles that coated every surface of the dungeon were the only source of light, a cruel mockery of the starry sky above. To Heather, they were a tease, a mirage of beauty that belied the terror that lurked in the shadows. It was as if they were tempting her with a glimpse of a wondrous dream, only to plunge her into a waking nightmare. The sight was breathtaking and heart-stopping, a reminder of the horrors that awaited her in the dungeon's depths. Tragically, these wondrous flickering stars began to fade, one by one, like candles snuffed out in the wind.

Heather's gaze was drawn to the goblin child and the void where his heart should have been. The child was skittish and aggressive, growling and ranting about some muddy avenger seeking retribution for his lost pets. Yet, all the while, Heather's gaze was fixed on that empty hole, a gaping wound in the child's chest. The child cradled an orb the size of a softball, clutching it like the key to the universe itself. Heather sighed, her heart heavy with pity, and muttered the incantation of her healing spell, hoping to soothe the troubled soul of the young goblin.

Wartie froze, rooted to the spot, causing his followers to abruptly halt. He watched in disbelief as the wound in his chest mended itself, and his precious phylactery ripped from his hand and sucked up inside. Wartie was no expert on liches, but he knew enough to know he should hide his soul-containing artifact. The idea of a lich hiding their phylactery within their own body was an incredibly stupid and unsettling thing to do.

Sophia and the others gazed upon the goblin in wonder. Their eyes widened as they beheld the miraculous transformation brought on by Heather's healing magic. The goblin's once hazy and clouded eyes cleared, his posture straightened, adding an extra head's worth of height, and warts that marred him vanished. This was all on top of the hole in his chest closing, leaving him looking like an entirely new creature. It was a breathtaking sight that left them marveling at the power of Heather's magic.

He spun around to glare at the healer who had caused this, a tempest of emotions raging within him. Appreciation for the healing, annoyance at the theft of his phylactery, all on top of the anger he already held for them. He hated them for killing his pet slimes, and now this... Wartie was not fond of them, to say the least! Wartie growled, the sound rumbling deep in his chest like an approaching thunderstorm. He spun back around and strode off with the five following closely behind.

Upon awakening within Muddy's void, Wartie felt reborn. His transition into a lich had cleared his thoughts, leaving him sharper and more focused. He was bewildered by the changes within him, but he couldn't deny the thrill of the newfound clarity. Regrettably, Muddy had left him in the company of five vile slime slayers. No, Muddy wasn't the right name he wanted to use. For some reason, Mummy felt more natural. Mummy was on a quest to rescue someone she cared about, and if they were important to her, they were also important to Wartie. So, despite his misgivings, Wartie obeyed Mummy's bidding, guiding the evil slime slayers to the secret haven of the dungeon folk within the dungeon, the sanctuary of Ockpool.

The journey to Ockpool was a bleak and desolate one. The first time the former candidates had embarked on their trial, the halls had been quiet, with only a few monsters growling out from the shadows. Still, now, the passages were dead silent and abandoned. It was as if the last vestiges of magic that had flowed through the dungeon were slowly draining away, like a river running dry. The sparkling lights that danced like stars on every surface flickered and dimmed one by one. It wouldn't be much longer until the last remnants of the dungeon flickered into nothingness.

"Intruders! Intruders! **RUN!** To arms! Get Chieftain!" A goblin bellowed out before he and two others turned tail and ran.

Wartie shook his head in disgust as he continued down the secret passage that led to the sprawling cavern system of Ockpool. The once thriving underground metropolis was now nothing more than a ghost town, its grand buildings reduced to rubble and ruins in the aftermath of the raiding party's theft of the dungeon core. A few remaining structures still stood, but they were a haunting reminder of the city's former glory, a sad testament to what once was.

The panicked cries of the goblins, who had fled at the sight of the intruders, echoed through the cavern. It wasn't long before a small group of dungeon folk emerged from the ruins, ready to defend themselves against another raid. However, the sight of them was pitiful, a sorry excuse for defenders. Half looked like they were already teetering on the brink of death. Their sickly, malnourished forms were a testament to their suffering. Even Heather was not intimidated by their presence, not the least. She pitied them.

"Umm... So there, Priestess, are you sure these are the ones the Crone wanted us to recruit?" Sophia asked.

"I-I believe so...."

"If they're the makings of our army, we're screwed," Rob sighed.

As the defenders parted, an old wizardly-looking werewolf with a walking stick stepped forward, his eyes fixed upon the intruders. But his gaze was drawn to Wartie, his scrutiny intense as he stared at the child. Wartie, unphased by the weapons pointed in his direction, walked toward the group of dungeon folk, seemingly unfazed by their lack of recognition. The old Chieftain continued to watch him closely as if he knew who Wartie was but couldn't quite believe it. The five others who followed the young goblin hung back, uncertain how the situation would play out.

“Wartie, is that you?” Chieftain Hensley asked, both sure and uncertain.

“Of course. Who else would I be?”

The Chieftain was taken aback as whispers of surprise and disbelief rippled through the survivors. The child before him was taller, his warty face clear and smooth, and he no longer sounded like a typical goblin. And yet, the old warg knew in his bones that this was indeed Wartie. As he glanced back at the group of six individuals who had followed the child, the Chieftain couldn't shake the feeling that this was some kind of trap.

“Who are your friends?” the warg asked, his tone cautious and guarded.

“Mummy had me bring them to you,” Wartie answered with a sly smile. “They come with an offer to restore magic to Ockpool.”

“Mummy?” the Chieftain repeated in confusion.

Heather stepped forward, causing the defenders to raise their weapons in fear. But the usually timid girl seemed unafraid and unfazed. Instead, she offered a warm smile and a gentle wave, leaving the dungeon folk bewildered and unsure how to react. The once-timid girl now exuded puzzling and alluring confidence as she approached the Chieftain with a purpose.

“Hi, I am the Crone's Priestess of Dreams. It's really nice to meet you.” Heather declared without a single stutter.

“Excuse me?” the old warg started to ask but was silenced as Heather lifted a finger, signaling him to stop.

“One second, please. The Crone wishes to make the offer herself,” Heather added before going silent.

The old warg was left speechless as he watched Heather stand there, swinging her arms back and forth with a disturbing sense of expectation. Time seemed to drag on as they gazed at her, the Chieftain's impatience growing with each passing moment. Just as he was about to speak, he was caught off guard by what happened next. Heather's eyes snapped open, turning pitch black. She began to levitate off the ground, her body suspended in mid-air. The sight shocked everyone except her companions and Wartie, who seemed to know what was coming.

“Greetings, ye denizens of the dungeon depths. Thy bond with the dungeon core hath been shattered, leaving thee lost in a sea of despair and destruction. Fear not, for I shall grant thee a new bond with thy souls and magic. With it, thou shalt be restored to thy former glory. For I am a fair

and loving deity. I ask only for thy loyalty. Protect my twofold daughter as they claim their rightful inheritance, and tend to my darling grandchild, whom I have taken as mine own.

“Fulfill these requests, and thou shalt be rewarded with power and retribution beyond thy wildest dreams. Swear thy devotion to me, for I am the Crone, I am Death, I am Acceptance, I am the Bliss of the Beyond. Utter it, and it shall be fulfilled, and thou shalt revel in thy former grandeur and beyond.”

The Crone’s spell was broken, and Heather plummeted to the ground, only to be caught by Yua’s quick reflexes. The dungeon folk, however, remained stunned in silence. A deity had offered them the return of their magic and power. All they had to do was pledge their faith to her. They were already devotees of the so-called dark gods since they were the only ones who answered their prayers. It seemed too good to be true, but the only question that lingered in their minds was the identity of this mysterious twofold daughter and grandchild.

As Jeremy and his companions waited for the dungeon denizens’ response, the air was thick with a deafening silence that was only punctuated by the occasional sidelong glance. But soon, the stillness was shattered by a growing crescendo of murmurs and hushed whispers that swelled into a cacophony of voices. It was impossible to tell if the dungeon folk were elated, mournful, or incensed by the Crone’s proposal. Their reactions were a jumbled mess of emotions.

The Chieftain of the dungeon folk tugged at his lengthy beard in contemplation as more and more survivors emerged to investigate the disturbance. Initially, they had feared that the marauding party of raiders had returned to claim more victims and finish what they had started. But as news of the Crone’s offer spread, the ruckus of voices grew into a frenzied chorus of excitement. The warg, who had been observing the proceedings, finally met the gaze of the Priestess of Dreams and offered her a subtle nod. No words were needed, for the agreement was implicit in the gesture. The crowd erupted in cheers, their voices a deafening roar of hope and anticipation. They eagerly proclaimed the Crone, their new goddess.



“She killed Redtail,” the Chieftain said with a sigh, but his tone had no real animosity. In truth, Blake had done him a favor. Redtail had plotted against him, and his removal was a welcome resolution.

“I can see her doing,” Yua acknowledged with a nod.

“She’s not a vicious monster that attacks those she considers her allies,” Jeremy argued.

“Are you sure?” Yua threw out there with a hint of skepticism.

Jeremy shot Yua a scathing glare. Her added remarks weren’t helping the situation. Of course, the dungeon folk had accepted the Crone’s offer. It was evident by all the magic and power swirling around them, but once they learned that Blake was the twofold daughter, many of them began to have second thoughts. However, the fact that Wartie was Blake’s adopted child caused some of

them to reconsider their initial impression of her. Nonetheless, the prospect of venturing to the surface to attack the raiders that had crippled them was still daunting.

Rob, meanwhile, remained silent. The thought of attacking any army, much less doing so to aid the monster that had beheaded him, was unfathomable to him. Despite his misgivings, he kept his opinions to himself, simply leaning against a ruined building with his arms crossed, silently watching and listening to the conversations.

Sophia rose to the occasion, exuding utter confidence as she addressed the gathered crowd, “In the depths of the dungeon, I was just like many of you, lost and uncertain. I even died down here. But, like all of you, the Crone showed me a new path and gifted me with wondrous magic. She only requests our loyalty and support for her daughter, and so what if me and I are psychopaths? *Aren't we all?!*”

The Crone has placed her trust in that Black Pudding, and after experiencing the Crone's grace, I, too, place my trust in her. I am willing to do all that I can to support them. What do you say? Will you stand with her?”

Heather was taken aback by Sophia's impassioned speech. The Priestess title had been bestowed upon her, yet Sophia radiated devotion like a beacon in the darkness. She cast a wary gaze over the gathered dwellers, each nodding in agreement and brandishing their weapons with fervor. The once pitiful group was now a unified horde, ready to march to battle in support of the very monster that had claimed one of their own as a victim. The deafening roar of their voices echoed through the dungeon, a haunting chorus of loyalty to the twisted and bloodthirsty Black Pudding.



Chief Hensley's finger pointed ominously at a spot on the map, marking the location of the enemy's stronghold. “We won't be able to keep them at bay for long,” he warned, his voice echoing through the war room...well, the ruins of one. “Elsternwick is where they've gathered the bulk of their forces, but the real danger lies here,” he continued, tapping the farmlands on the map. “This is where they're most likely hiding their more seasoned soldiers, their deadliest weapons, and their mightiest knights. We can strike Elsternwick, but we must be prepared to fall back. As bleak as they may be, the dungeon ruins offer our strongest defense. But without the core, I fear any barrier we erect won't be sufficient to repel their forces for very long.”

“Well...shit,” Jeremy sighed.

Wartie suggested, “We could always retreat to the tunnels of the deep roads and make our stand there.” The Chief's eyebrows shot up at the proposal. Still, Wartie continued, “Although, I'd wager that Mummy has already reclaimed the dungeon's core, so hopefully, it won't come to that.”

The Chief was taken aback by the goblin child's words, confidence, and demeanor. Still, instead of commenting, he looked sidelong at Wartie and pondered the suggestion of fighting in the deep roads. It was a dangerous gambit, but the deep roads would offer a strategic advantage for their

final stand if the worst came to pass. The Chief knew this was a complicated and messy situation. Still, he also knew they were now obligated to help the goddess's daughters, and reclaiming the core would be an added benefit. With a heavy sigh, he returned his gaze to the map, considering all the options before finally looking up at Jeremy and then to the Priestess before nodding.

"It's time to put our plan into action," Chief Hensley declared with a firm tone. "We'll strike Elsternwick, leaving a lasting impact, and then retreat back to the dungeon, where we'll use the core to fortify this position. If worst comes to worst and we can't retrieve the core, we'll make our final stand in the tunnels of the deep roads."



A horde of former dungeon dwellers marched forward, numbering around four to five hundred. They had always been called monsters, but now, they were free of the dungeon core and bound to the Crone. The title monster was forever lost to them. They were no longer linked to the core as their source of magic and, for that, no longer considered monsters but a relentless, wrathful horde of the Crone's faithful, tied and bound to her magic. Much more respectable!

The ragtag army was more of an angry mob, but they were still a force to be reckoned with, and with their Chieftain leading the charge, they were a sight to behold. Many of them had once been oppressed and enslaved escapees. They fled and hid away in the dungeon, and now was their chance to strike back and make their presence known. The once-monstrous horde was fueled by the fire of their newfound faith and their unwavering determination to a Black Pudding.

They were a group comprising all manner of creatures, from goblins to lizardfolk, from hobgoblins to minotaurs, and even humans, orcs, and some of the elven races united under the banner of the Crone. And to make their presence even more intimidating...the group was joined by three former dungeon bosses. The three of them were now reformed followers of the Crone, their stone bodies lending a massive presence to the horde. They were a fearsome sight as they marched toward Elsternwick.

The people of Elsternwick were in for a rude awakening as the former monsters descended upon them like a dark cloud. The horde was now a unified force, bound by the goddess and driven by their faith. Their leader, Hensley, was a seasoned old warg who had been reinvigorated after pledging his faith to the Crone. His staff crackled with magic as he barked orders, marching at the front with determination. The horde marched towards the city, pounding boots, feet, and hooves like a hundred drums, an ominous rhythm that signaled their arrival as they emerged from the tree line and descended upon...Elsternwick in ruins?

Wartie stood with the Chieftain and the slime slayers, scanning the destruction for any glimpse of Mummy. But all he saw was chaos, and at the heart of it, a battered vampire dressed in a tiny, torn black dress. That dark creature of the night gazed up at their horde and beamed a grin, revealing her elongated fangs that glinted in the night.



# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 23

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### THE WAY STONE

As for Sophia and the others, they were now donned in fresh attire and armor courtesy of the dungeon dwellers, stood shoulder to shoulder, exuding the air of fierce warriors and mages—except for Jason, who seemed like he had just raided a crypt. Sophia sported sleek black robes paired with a silver chest plate, feeling a sense of pride in her new ensemble. And let's not overlook Blake, who was being cradled by the vampire like a precious possession.

As they surveyed the enemy army regrouping for another round of combat, Sophia, Rob, Heather, and Yua shared expressions tinged with uncertainty. In stark contrast, Jason reveled in the swirling turmoil. As for Jeremy, his thoughts remained enigmatic. The opposing force comprised battle-seasoned knights, leaving the group second-guessing their decision to enlist the aid of the dungeon inhabitants. In hindsight, fleeing seemed like a far more appealing choice.

The Chief raised his hand, a gesture that commanded a momentary hush across the battlefield, spanning both opposing sides, before unleashing a deafening roar. With unmistakable authority, he bellowed a solitary order, “RELEASE!”

The night sky ignited with a spectacular display of colors, reminiscent of a vibrant fireworks show, as the dungeon dwellers harnessed their magic collectively for the first time since reclaiming it. Heather and her comrades stood in awe of the multitude of spells being cast in perfect harmony. The opposing forces and the few remaining citizens of Elsternwick hastily shielded themselves and invoked protective incantations. Simultaneously, others struggled to flee the impending magical onslaught, as the conjured energies soared skyward, ultimately descending like an unrelenting torrent of missiles.

Explosions reverberated through the enemy encampment, hurling unprotected soldiers through the air by the sheer force of the unleashed magic. The breathtaking spectacle of vibrant colors persisted, punctuating the sky with each detonation as spell after spell descended upon the opposing forces. The billowing dust and an array of colorful smoke veiled the complete scope of the devastation, yet it remained evident that the dungeon dwellers had sown chaos and havoc with their onslaught.

However, donning his imposing wizardly visage, the warg seemed to be in over his head and wasn't about to leave anything to chance. With another deafening roar, he bellowed, “KEEP FIRING!”



Vanya couldn't come to terms with the unfolding nightmare. Her husband had been brutally slain, his soul ensnared within a reanimated corpse—assuming it was even his soul in there. To compound her agony, the very fiend who had orchestrated his death and triggered the kingdom's ruin a century ago was none other than the necromantic vampire, Aurelia. Driven by a desperate urge to thwart Aurelia's malevolent designs of amassing an army of the deceased, Vanya had resorted to obliterating the tent that sheltered the fallen bodies. But let's be clear—it wasn't just any tent. It concealed a spatial pocket, and its destruction triggered a cataclysmic explosion, rending the encampment and Elsternwick itself asunder. Yet, despite the devastation, Vanya couldn't risk allowing Aurelia to commandeer their departed brethren. A cruel necessity, perhaps. And now, the enigmatic dungeon creatures, whose power she had brazenly confiscated, were assaulting them with incomprehensible magic—confounding her understanding of the situation entirely.

“What the hell?! They should be magicless without the core!” Vanya snarled as she hid beneath a magical barrier as a barrage of spells rained down like an unrelenting hailstorm.

“Oi, I'm wonderin' how long these feckers can keep up this little magic show,” Gimona bellowed.

“No idea. They shouldn't even have the capacity to cast spells, but look at them go, showering magic like it's a trend. The worst part is they might have some ambient mana users among them. That means they could keep up this onslaught for hours if the mana saturation in this area persists. We're trapped in a defensive stance, evading spells until either reinforcements arrive or the vampire contingent in their ranks has to retreat at dawn,” Vanya's voice wavered between exasperation and disbelief.

“Well, I'll be fucked! We're going to be arse pounded into oblivion at this rate. We need to do somethin', anythin' but standin' here and takin' a magical beatin' from those vicious monsters!”

“I'm open to any ideas.”

“Ah, sure 'n' why not use that auld coot's Way Stone?” Gimona cackled, her eyes alight with mischievous glee.

“Craycroft's Way Stone?”

“Aye! Sure it's got to be hidin' around here somewhere! Ah, ye think that tent exploding was a wild ride, just ye hold that cooch tight, love, there's more madness to come!”



I stared, wide-eyed and jaw dropped, at the epic fireworks display of magical mayhem the dungeon folk had unleashed on the invading knights. These so-called monsters were putting on an absolute pyrotechnics show of rage aimed at the knights who dared swipe their precious Dungeon Core. I mean, let's face it, the lunacy of it all wasn't lost on me. I'd have swiped that core quicker than a pickpocket in a crowded market, not giving a rat's ass about the fallout. But now, where the hell had that blasted thing vanished off to? Sure, I considered that it might be chilling in the cozy

confines of the spatial ring Aurelia had given me, which I promptly pitched into my own private dimension storage, no big deal. But honestly, with the dungeon gang nearby, there was no way I was gonna whip it out to check. At least not if I intended to keep it all for myself—unless, you know, Lady Sexy Vampire decided otherwise, which of course I would begrudgingly give it back. A swirling mix of excitement, dread, and that unmistakable battlefield unease twisted in my gut, and I had no clue what the hell was causing it.

“Ah, Lady Aurelia,” purred a feline figure as she materialized out of thin air. “It’s so delightful to see you’ve made it through the chaos unscathed.”

Back when I was busy springing the prisoners from their constraints, my focus had been solely locked onto Aurelia. But now, as I gave the petite figure before me a closer once-over, an odd duality in her appearance hit me like a brick. She had this aura, you know? Kinda like she’d seen it all, lived through more than her fair share – mature like a seasoned librarian, a naughty one at that. Yet, right alongside that, there was this innocent vibe, almost like a teenager just starting out, still finding her way. Figuring out her age was like trying to solve a riddle with a missing piece.

*Hmm, she’s a hard one to read.*

*Seriously?*

“Thank you, Lady Hikari,” replied Aurelia. “May I inquire as to the origin of this mob?”

“It seems our new priestess has rallied a small army in the name of the birth of our deity’s daughter,” revealed the cat girl.

“Daughters, plural,” I interjected, my tiny voice trembling as I found that my voice now matched my pitiful stature.

“My sincerest apologies,” corrected the catkin, “daughters.” Hikari glanced back to Aurelia, “Did you manage to secure the core?”

*Yeah, but is it plural?*

*We’ll figure it out later.*

“I have. My darling Blake is keeping it safe and sound within her adorable little belly,” Aurelia replied with a smirk.

*Well, if she considers Stellar Void my belly—.*

*Then she’s spot on!*

Hikari nodded eagerly, “Fantastic news! I’ll inform their Chief. It seems he brought some spell crystals to use as a decoy. This will be the ideal moment to retreat to the dungeon and set up a teleportation gate with the core.”

Drowning out the cat girl’s chatter, my eyes locked onto the explosive symphony unfolding before me. Each blast outdid the last in pure chaos. The night sky turned into a canvas of magic, fiery and alive, as if the dark clouds were part of some twisted masterpiece. You’d think it was a mix between

awe and terror, but honestly, it was more like awe and oh-my-god-I'm-gonna-puke. That level of raw power was like reality on steroids, giving a big middle finger to the laws of physics. I couldn't even spot who was caught up in that maelstrom anymore.

My attention shifted to the spectacle of orcs, goblins, and even a few dungeon-dwelling humans. They were hustling around like mad, setting up a row of crystals perched on tripods. It was like something out of a war movie, but with a fantasy twist and a sprinkle of bling as those crystals caught the flickering light of the ongoing magical chaos.

The sight was a curious one—humans mingling among creatures that the rest of the world deemed as monsters. Or were we on some distant moon? Regardless, it seemed that humans were a race that could be found anywhere there was conflict and strife, without any sense of loyalty or allegiance to anyone but themselves. At least, that was the impression I've always had of them. But then again, I had never held a high opinion of humanity before being reincarnated as a Black Pudding.

My disappointment surged as Aurelia chose to divert her attention from the chaotic carnage. Oh, how satisfying it had been to witness those knights being utterly obliterated. But alas, I remained rather minuscule after shedding a substantial chunk of my mass, snugly ensconced in Aurelia's arms like a newborn. Not that I could complain. Truth be told, I found solace in her embrace, enjoying the warmth and security it offered. Though, the idea of feasting on the soldiers pummeled by the relentless magic was certainly alluring.

Peering from behind Aurelia's arm, my gaze fell upon the activated crystals erected by the dungeon denizens. With a surge of energy, each crystal unleashed a ceaseless onslaught of magic, enveloping the enemy forces in a tempest of detonating spells. The attackers, their energy seemingly drained, halted their casting, visibly gasping for air. A few hurried to aid their fallen comrades. It hit me like a bolt of lightning—this impressive barrage was but a fleeting illusion, a grand show of power intended to deceive, for they had stretched their capabilities to their limits. It was nothing short of a clever ruse!

*Oh shit, we need to get the hell out of here!*

We dashed back toward the desolate ruins of the dungeon, a destination I had little fondness for. In the distance, the barrage of spells continued unabated, its duration uncertain. Abruptly, a colossal explosion erupted, unleashing a shockwave that nearly toppled Aurelia. Yet, she stood firm, a paragon of resilience. Sadly, the same couldn't be said for all members of our motley crew; some were flung through the air like ragdolls by the impact. Scanning the scene, I witnessed a neon rainbow pillar shoot skyward—a vibrant beacon of chaos resembling a volcanic eruption. Strangely, it wasn't alone; in the distance, another towering column of light pierced the heavens.

“Wow, those crystals are amazing!” I exclaimed, in awe of their destructive power.

“That wasn't from the mana crystals,” Aurelia replied.

“Do you think they're all dead?” I asked, my morbid curiosity and hunger getting the better of me.

“I highly doubt it, my love.”

“Seriously?” I exclaimed, struggling to believe that anyone could have survived such an explosion. “You mean they’re not all turned into crispy critters?”

“No, my beloved,” Aurelia replied with a hint of a smirk. “Magical barriers are highly effective when combined together with a spell linkage. It most likely kept their casualties to a minimum. I would estimate no more than a hundred fell from that little display.”

*...Daaamn!*

After a painfully slow and grueling journey, we finally managed to stumble our way back into the dungeon. Apart from Aurelia and a handful of vampires, every single one of the dungeon dwellers looked like they’d been through a meat grinder. My companions from the trials—the six pesky bastards—fared no better. As the gnawing ache in my gut intensified to the point of near agony, I found myself utterly famished. Even worse, I couldn’t retrieve any corpses I’d stashed within Stellar Void, since I had devoured them all during that chaotic battle. But that wouldn’t pose a problem now, not when there were mouth-watering, putrid bodies scattered around the ruins. The time for a feast had come!

I must have looked like a ravenous infant, my hands reaching out desperately toward a nearby corpse, grunting incoherently as my hunger overpowered my ability to form words. My legs kicked and flailed, a futile attempt to propel myself toward a pile of bodies scattered across the corridor. Amidst the darkness, Aurelia’s soft, melodic laugh broke through like a ray of light, a fleeting innocence in the midst of the chaos. She gently lowered me to the ground, and driven by a hunger that felt as ancient as time itself, I lunged towards the mound of flesh, my desire to feast overpowering any other thought.

My small size was oddly disproportionate, with my head slightly too big for my body. I swayed and wobbled as I toddled forward, looking like a newborn taking its first shaky steps. It was humiliating! “Darted” might have been a bit of an exaggeration.

“Aww, check out the little tyke!” The voice might have been Sophia’s, though I couldn’t be sure. My focus was solely on not toppling over as I headed for my feast. But my attempts were futile, and I ended up face-planting onto the unyielding stone floor, half of my head splattering into a gooey mess. Yet, nothing could deter me. I reshaped my face and crawled the last few steps on my hands and knees. The teasing ‘oohs’ and ‘awws’ that surrounded me only intensified my insatiable hunger.

*We’re going to kill them!*

*Yes, we are!*

My stomachache roared like a beast from the depths, but my unrelenting hunger wouldn’t be silenced. At last, I reached my coveted feast, a decapitated head that stared blankly back at me. Unfortunately, my size prevented me from sprawling across the pile, so I resorted to a more devious approach. Transforming into my true form—a liquid-like tar—I slithered into the inviting eye socket, eager to feast on the tantalizing morsels within.

The jeers that initially greeted me as I stumbled my way to the feast swiftly turned to dry retches as most of my onlookers, save for one, abandoned the grisly scene. While I couldn't see Aurelia as I voraciously consumed my meal from within, an inexplicable sensation told me she remained, delighting in the twisted spectacle of my gruesome dining experience as I dined on a man in a way that defied all norms.

In a twisted culinary adventure, I unearthed that decaying brains bore a suspiciously delightful similarity to mashed potatoes drowned in gravy. Unable to resist the siren call of these flavors, I plunged deeper, journeying along the spinal cord, gobbling up everything in my path. Bones crumbled under my corrosive touch, a peculiar concoction of jam and raspberry gelatin swirling on my metaphorical taste buds. But the real *pièce de résistance* awaited in the stomach – bile! Its tangy punch was akin to the wicked satisfaction of the sourest candies. Ah, a wickedly divine treat that left me craving for more!

Just to be crystal clear, let's not beat around the bush here: if the opportunity presented itself, I wouldn't exactly shy away from indulging in a living person's misery as they let out heart-wrenching screams. But you know, I'm a bit of a gourmet in my own right – think of me as the connoisseur of the wicked. Much like those folks who go nuts over dry-aged meat, I've got this refined palate that hankers for a more elevated flavor profile. Believe it or not, there were cultures in my previous life that genuinely savored the distinct tang of rotting bile in their various dishes. So don't go thinking it's some monstrous eccentricity – it's just my way of showing off my sophisticated taste buds. Call it a testament to my impeccable taste! And let's be honest, the allure of decomposing flesh is a class apart from the pedestrian flavor of the fresh stuff, don't you think?

With a twinge of disappointment gnawing at me, I begrudgingly registered the absence of my humble feast. Simultaneously, that unsettling feeling in my gut persisted, taunting me with its mysterious source. I glanced around, and there stood Aurelia, the last one standing by my side, reducing our gathering to a mere duo – or trio, if you're counting me and me. The clock was ticking; those knights were closing in fast, leaving us precious little time to explore our more wicked inclinations.

Unfazed, I initiated the process of reforming, emerging from the obsidian ooze that composed my being. The tacky tar gradually molded into muscles and ligaments, followed by delicate, silken threads draping over my dark, gooey form, forming a soft, natural casing that was my flesh. There I stood, utterly bare and open before her. Alas, time—the ultimate buzzkill—interrupted our shared desire. With a resigned exhale, the tar beneath my fresh layer of skin erupted, morphing into an intricate gothic gown. Sinuous tendrils wove themselves into an exquisite tapestry of the damned.

My vibrant orange eyes locked onto Aurelia's, mirroring a kindred hunger simmering within her deep crimson gaze. But, as fate would have it, time was not our ally in this moment. On the brighter side, I had managed to regain some of my lost stature – not quite the towering figure I used to be, but a reasonable hundred and sixty centimeters, or a humble five-foot-three. Who was I trying to fool? I was still vertically challenged!

Vorigan, the toad-faced freak, entered the chamber and respectfully bowed to my gorgeous vampire. “Lady Aurelia, preparations for the core are finished.”

“Ah, yes. My love may I have that bracelet I gave you.”

*We both know that was no bracelet.*

“Of course!” I smiled.

I decided against tearing my new flesh to access the gold ring in my Stellar Void. Instead, I opted for a more unconventional method. I plunged my arm in my mouth, up to the elbow, delving into the dark recesses where the Void dwelled. I felt around, my fingers brushing against a round orb – not my target. Persisting, I probed deeper into my abyss until I finally found the elusive gold ring. With a swift motion, I yanked my arm out, dragging along Aurelia’s so-called bracelet. In haste, I couldn’t avoid tearing my silken skin, my cheeks splitting into a demonic grin. Though I’d have preferred to leave the grisly smile intact, I couldn’t leave it there with Aurelia watching. Reluctantly, I mended the damage, mourning the brief existence of my wicked jester smile.

Surprisingly, my stomach felt better! I handed over the gold trinket to my sexy vampire. Watching Aurelia glide her finger along the ring’s rim, I felt a pang of envy, wishing that was my...anyways! Suddenly, a glowing orb the size of a volleyball appeared out of thin air, just hovering there. My understanding of magic was still severely lacking. Yet, the aura of energy pulsating from it felt like I was standing before a miniature sun. I wanted to eat it!

“Vorigan, I entrust this to you. I shall check on the reformed monsters managing the defense preparations.” Aurelia gestured nonchalantly, and the Dungeon Core drifted toward the amphibian.

“Understood,” Vorigan croaked. “However, I doubt they can establish a robust enough barrier with the core before the Slaethian knights regroup and lay siege to our position.”

“Indeed,” Aurelia conceded, nodding at Vorigan, “but it ought to endure long enough for the portal to be opened.” Aurelia glanced at me with a beaming smile, making my nonexistent heart flutter. “My love, please hold on to this for me.”

I smirked as I gratefully reclaimed the cock ring – I mean, the bracelet back from Aurelia. My mouth gaped open, revealing a writhing, tentacle-like tongue that ensnared the ring and dragged it into the abyss of my maw, where it was swallowed by the Stellar Void. I could’ve sworn I detected a flicker of eager excitement in those mesmerizing vampiric eyes.

“Let’s go inspect the preparations, my love,” Aurelia purred, her voice laced with dark delight. She sauntered out of the chamber, her hips swaying hypnotically, bathed in an eerie orange glow.

Unfortunately, the gnawing stomachache returned as I followed Aurelia through the ruins.



Craycroft, a wizard of notorious power, lounged in his grand tower, entwined in experimentation upon his lesser servants – a brother and sister, if memory served him right. He reveled in the memories of past conquests, a sinister pleasure derived from capturing and then reshaping the so-called “inferior” races. To him, it was an act of mercy, a way to elevate them, a means to be of use.

While many of his kind advocated for the eradication of non-enlightened races, Craycroft considered himself beyond such base desires. No, he was far too cunning to resort to mere destruction. Why squander potential slaves when you could twist them to your will, manipulate their minds, learn from experimentation, and shape them into tools of use? The thought painted a sly smile on his lips as he injected the two gremlins with viper's bane, an experiment to test the creatures' supposed immunity to poison. The waves of hatred emanating from the two gremlins formed a noxious cloud, a testament to the twisted delight Craycroft derived from their resistance. These siblings had a long journey ahead of them before his reshaping efforts took full effect.

Nonetheless, the current phase centered on experimentation. Every endeavor began with resistance, and the process of dismantling that resistance exhilarated him. Shaping their wills, leading them to acknowledge the perceived imperfections within their own race—this was his motivation. The ability to manipulate and sculpt their minds according to his desires set him apart from his peers. As the two siblings writhed in their hatred and the poison took its hold, he couldn't help but bask in his sense of superiority, a sensation that surged with every new poison he introduced into their veins.

The night wore on as he immersed himself in his twisted experiments, driven by his perverse desires as he delighted in their cries. Eventually, he found satiation in the cacophony of their screams, and sleep gradually overcame him. The two broken servants he'd subjected to his torments slinked back into the shadows of the tower, left to their own pain and misery.

In his slumber, Craycroft experienced no guilt or remorse, his mind free of such emotions. To him, his actions were a form of mercy bestowed upon the unenlightened. In his view, these pitiful creatures would have met a swift and violent end under someone else's hand. Yet, his approach involved reshaping their minds, molding them into something he considered superior—an act of kindness in his twisted perspective. Moreover, the knowledge he gleaned from their natural resistance to poison proved valuable, even more useful was that it did very little to alleviate their suffering.

The room burst into brilliance as Craycroft jolted upright in his bed, his eyes scanning for the source of the disturbance. What he beheld defied logic and reason. The air was charged with magic, a swirling, crackling maelstrom of mana that engulfed not just his chamber but the entire tower. This unprecedented concentration of magic in a singular spot conveyed a clear message—one he understood all too well.

"Mana detonation!" he exclaimed, his horror mounting as he realized there was nothing he could do to avert the inevitable.

The pinnacle of the wizard tower, housing Craycroft's bedchamber, was convulsed by a cataclysmic eruption of untamed magic. The skies themselves ignited with a resplendent spectacle, visible to kingdoms situated as far as three horizons away. A radiant column of energy surged skyward, akin to a geyser of unadulterated magic, showering stone and mana in a mesmerizing cascade. Fleeting, it appeared as if the very heavens were set ablaze. Miraculously, the scores of servants whom Craycroft harbored within the tower emerged unharmed from the chaos, seizing the chance to flee into the obscurity of the night, never to return.



As for Craycroft, he found himself still within the confines of his bed, encircled by the fragmented remnants of the army he had departed from earlier that day. The only conceivable explanation was that the Way Stone had detonated, flinging him back to the encampment of the army. However, what greeted him was an eerie scene devoid of the camp's presence, with naught but traces of a recent skirmish and the soldiers and knights that now lay strewn about him. His grip on the thin sheet tightened as he surveyed the landscape. Crystal fragments were scattered along the tree line, a silent testament to mortar fire. Yet, there was an unsettling absence of the army or any vestiges of military might. It seemed as though a meticulously crafted distraction had been executed, allowing the perpetrators to vanish into the shroud of night. Craycroft seethed with indignant anger, knowing that whoever orchestrated this perfidious scheme would pay a grievous price.



Despite no longer being a mere ghoul, Olin lay sprawled on the battlefield, his neck snapped and chest ripped open. In the rush to scavenge arms and armor from the blood-soaked chaos, the knights had scarcely spared a thought for the fallen. Olin gazed up at the sky, motionless, unperturbed by his injuries. After all, as a lich, his injuries were nothing to worry about as long as his phylactery remained safe and sound. Even with time, Olin knew he would grow in power and eventually be able to heal such wounds. Though, he did worry about how far he could be from his phylactery, which was still in the clutches of that vile Black Pudding.

As Olin rose from his prone position, he cast a discerning eye across the surroundings, unraveling a bitter truth. Utter solitude enveloped him. The creeping weight of realization sank in, a gradual and excruciating comprehension that his mistress had, indeed, abandoned him to this desolate fate.

# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 24

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### CHAMPIONS

Galen was seething with frustration as he was surrounded by the royal court's chosen few, tasked with serving as his personal guards in this desolate outpost in the remote countryside. And while he acknowledged their efforts, he was also irked by his kingdom's constant vigilance over his safety. He was no fragile blossom to be coddled and kept under lock and key like some delicate artifact. Of course, the Kingdom of Slaethia had stationed their prized air fleet here, guarded by their best mages. The fleet was touted as one of the kingdom's greatest accomplishments, second only to Galen, the Champion of Solum. He was a champion, a symbol of power and might, and a shining light to all who beheld him. He was meant to soar like a mythical beast, to vanquish evil and bring justice and peace to the realm.

He paced the deck of the Skyborne Sovereign, frustration mounting as his phantasmic dragonfly-like wings fluttered in frustration. Galen was among the few fairies that inhabited the Kingdom of Slaethia. Still, they were revered, and him being a champion only added to their prestige. Fairies came in all shapes and sizes, from tiny as a thimble to as large as a gnome. Galen was unusually large for his kind. He stood tall like a dwarf, with a lean, toned physique and a captivating elegance that left even the elves envious. The dwarves and quite a few humans found his delicate features too ethereal. But, as a champion, even the dwarves overlooked his lack of a beard.

A tempest of wind and restorative magic swirled around Galen as it coursed through his veins, an ordinary occurrence for his kind. To encounter a fairy without the gifts of wind and healing magic was as unlikely as finding a dryad without a tree. Or a gnome without magic! In fact, the outpost was largely populated by gnomes, who comprised the bulk of the kingdom's most powerful spellcasters. The idea of a gnome being deemed unworthy of the elite ranks and forced to serve among the common soldiers was nearly unheard of, much like the notion of a dwarf spellcaster serving as an elite mage. Such a thing was simply unprecedented and defied all norms and expectations.

Galen was a fairy, but beyond that, he was the Champion of Solum, one of the few Gods of Light, and held an advantage as an Ascendant, or Leveler, as the gods of light referred to it. The gods had altered the ancient system to empower their champions, granting them the strength to overpower the forces of darkness and triumph over evil. This alteration resulted in a virtually endless supply of mana, a boon that Solum referred to as an exploit. This gave Galen the ability to unleash devastating magic with ease, without tiring, though with the limitation of a time limit that prevented him from spamming his most potent spells.

Galen approached the taffrail, gripping the handrail as he surveyed the fleet. Three hundred airships were moored here, filled with ten thousand soldiers, knights, mages, and the kingdom's

most elite forces. A smaller detachment had taken control of the village of Elsternwick, capturing the notorious vampire, Aurelia. Galen had been disappointed to learn that a mere few thousand soldiers had laid siege to the vampires and evil creatures that lurked within the Grotto of the Betrayed Dungeon's ruins. It was not their victory that disappointed him but that they did it without the fleet's presence and, most of all, without him.

Nevertheless, the fleet was here now. Galen was eager to launch a military campaign to the west, eradicating the final remnants of evil in this realm. The prospect of fulfilling the next decree from his god and moving on to conquer the other realms in the sky filled him with fierce excitement. For he had done so little exploring of the other moons of Völuspá.

"Champion Gale," the elven captain of the Skyborne Sovereign called out to him.

"Proceed, Captain," Galen responded.

"Champion, the Swift Sentinel is approaching, seeking permission to land. Champions Einarr, Orraith, and High Priest Nelzar are aboard."

The Swift Sentinel stood apart from all other airships, its reputation firmly established due to the kingdom's repeated failures in attempting to replicate its peculiar designs and functions. The vessel's appearance was far from conventional; its hull bore a resemblance to an arrowhead, while two traditional ship sections were attached at its rear. Additionally, four smaller, elongated boat-like structures adorned the rear as well. Unfortunately, despite numerous attempts, the ship's inner workings remained an enigma to the kingdom's artificers.

In a remarkable departure from the norm, the Swift Sentinel possessed the unique capability of generating portal gates, affording it the ability to traverse the moon of Völuspá in the blink of an eye. Tragically, with the resurgence of the Kingdom of Slaethia, the very gnome artificers who had played a role in its creation met their demise when the High Priest lay claim to it.

"Grant—." Galen's voice cut off as a brilliant shaft of light erupted into the sky, as if a cathedral-sized mana crystal had detonated in the direction of Elsternwick. In the distant east, towards Slaethia, the champion spotted another identical pillar of light.



Craycroft was livid! The crystal that enabled his nightly teleportation to his tower had been shattered, causing a mana explosion. A detonation of a Way Stone was no minor blast. Mercifully, Craycroft had been whisked through the ethereal during the cataclysm, appearing on the other side only after the explosion had reached its peak. He had been dragged along with his bed, clad only in a flimsy bed sheet, appearing in the midst of the army. The embarrassment was unbearable, and the seasoned wizard was determined to ensure that the vile creature Aurelia would face the consequences of her actions. He would take great joy in seeing to those consequences himself.

Reluctantly, Craycroft donned a robe over his nightly attire, not one of his own choosing but one taken from a fallen soldier amidst the ruin of the encampment. The destruction was staggering,

and yet, the survival of so many knights was a testament to their mastery of barrier magic – the very same skill that had brought prosperity to the Kingdom of Slaethia in the wake of its resurrection. A harsh lesson taught to them by the very monsters that had wreaked so much havoc upon them this night.

With a heavy sigh, Craycroft approached Paladin Vanya Anlyth, whose husband, General Ezad Anlyth. Ezad had not only fallen to Aurelia but had been turned into an undead. Craycroft cast his gaze upon the lifeless form of the General, now motionless, a clear sign he had been freed from the spell that bound him to a state of undeath. Regrettably, they could not afford to gather the dead, they needed to regroup and rejoin the main forces in the southern countryside, and the airships moored there. A small detachment would stay behind to watch over their fallen, for they couldn't afford to add their bodies to the ranks of the necromancers' horde. The Paladin had taken command, a decision that was fine by Craycroft, who, although he could easily seize control, preferred to avoid the headache of doing so.

Their enemies had slunk away into the shadows, but Craycroft and the knights around him made no move to give chase. The destination of these fiends was all too clear. And the knowledge that they possessed the dungeon core made it imperative to muster their full military might before they constructed a barrier. But if they failed, the old wizard only hoped they could dismantle their barrier before their foes could open a portal. The consequences of such an event could be disastrous. Portals could lead to any realm, even those beyond their own sky above, and the mere thought of their enemies gaining a foothold in one of those places sent shivers down Craycroft's croaked spine.

And so, they embarked on their arduous march, well aware that the journey ahead would span several grueling days. Yet, the knights clung to a flicker of optimism, praying that their distress signals, in the form of the vivid pillars of light from the magical explosions, would catch the attention of the fleet. The stark brilliance of these beacons was a clear plea for assistance, a desperate cry in the darkness of their dire situation.

However, the destructive power of the explosions that had razed both Elsternwick and the encampment had left more than physical scars. The communication crystals that once facilitated their connection with the main army had been shattered, leaving them isolated and cut off from vital support.

As dawn cast its first rays from the west, a glimmer of hope emerged to the southeast. The silhouette of the Swift Sentinel, the first of the airships, etched itself against the horizon, capturing Craycroft's attention with its distinctive and unmistakable form, standing out like a beacon of salvation amid the chaos.



An elite knight strode purposefully towards a gnome of esteemed reputation, draped in a resplendent robe of white and gold. The gnome's attire gleamed with the opulence of enchanted gemstones that adorned his lavish jewelry. A majestic headdress crowned his head, a symbol of his

exalted position within their ranks. “High Priest Nelzar,” the elite knight addressed him, his voice resonating with authority, “our scouts have spotted the forces from Elsternwick. They appear to be marching towards the outpost.”

The High Priest acknowledged the knight’s report with a solemn nod, even as the captain of the airship issued swift commands to the crew, directing them to prepare for a swift descent.

True to the standard Slaethia airship design—except for the Swift Sentinel—these vessels were engineered for seamless navigation through both skies and seas. A distinct feature was their spiky fish fin-shaped keel, ensuring stability in both realms. However, this configuration made them unsuitable for landing on solid ground. To overcome this limitation, the ships employed ingenious air-whaleboats for embarkation and disembarkation. What set Slaethia’s airships apart were the twin rows of Airlight Pods, enabling rapid troop deployment for swift and decisive attacks against adversaries below.

To amplify their speed, these airships featured a combination of ethereal sails and conventional leviathan leather sails. The ethereal sails were reserved for high-velocity travel beyond the sky, though deploying them within the atmospheric constraints of any moon spelled certain doom—a fiery explosion triggered by the extreme friction at such breakneck speeds. Fortuitously, Völuspá’s magical atmosphere extended beyond the boundaries of known moons, facilitating safe and efficient airship travel across its mystical realms.

The Swift Sentinel gracefully descended toward the surviving remnants of the forces below. The extent of their losses from the initial siege and the earlier cataclysm was unknown to High Priest Nelzar. Still, it was clear that events had not transpired as planned. According to what his deities had revealed, the dark gods now had a new champion. And possibly two demi-goddesses on their side. This promised to be a far cry from the straightforward battle Nelzar had prepared for. However, there was a glimmer of hope for the forces of light. They had three champions and elite knights empowered by their gods, and a single regiment could defeat any seasoned champion. Nelzar had brought along over a dozen regiments of their caliber, providing a formidable force to be reckoned with. That was on top of the over ten thousand standard knights, barbarians, berserkers, elemental benders, and mages of all breeds.

Although High Priest Nelzar had only recently arrived on the scene, he held complete command over the army. The royalty of Slaethia did not dare to question the commands given to him by the gods. Nelzar was the High Priest, the sole voice through which the gods spoke to their followers. He represented all the deities of light across every realm. No other kingdom or realm could claim to have such a powerful voice.

“Bless me shit, I’ve ne’er seen a sorrier bunch in all me days, I tell ya. Them dirty scoundrels really did a number on ‘em... I can hardly contain me excitement for a crack at the action!” A dwarf stepped up beside High Priest Nelzar, grumbling about the sorry state of the forces below while grinning.

The gnome gazed upon a dwarf clad in gleaming mithril armor, with intricate engravings adorning every aspect of his plate mail. He wore a helmet showcasing his full, fiery red beard, with a set of

grand wings jutting from the crown. The dwarf's weapon of choice was a formidable war hammer, towering at least five times the height of the High Priest, which rested on the dwarf's shoulder as if it weighed nothing.

“Champion Einarr, would you kindly send a few of the elites down to retrieve General Anlyth? I find myself in dire need of information.” The High Priest spoke.

“Aye, sure thing!” Einarr spun on his heel before bellowing out. “I need a few of ye fucks to retrieve the General and bring his arse up here!”

Nelzar let out a sigh but refrained from commenting. There was little one could do when dealing with dwarves, after all.

It was then that a human woman stepped onto the airship deck. She approached Nelzar and Einarr. Her figure was draped in a magnificent dress made of adolescent dragon scales, shimmering with an otherworldly glow from the powerful magic imbued within. Though neither Nelzar nor Einarr was particularly drawn to human women, they were both captivated by her beauty. She possessed dark, flawless skin and eyes that pulsed with the essence of her fierce fire magic.

As she neared, the aura of power radiating from her was almost palpable, like the searing heat of a forge, warning all who dared to cross her path. Her eyes blazed with the ferocity of her fire magic, like windows to an inferno. The dragon scale dress clung to her curves like a second skin, highlighting every contour of her form. The residual heat of the dress was a testament to her strength and mastery over her powers. The two onlookers were spellbound, caught in the hypnotic grip of her raw, elemental fire magic.

“C-Champion Orlaith, I entrust you rested well,” the High Priest asked.

“Yes, I did, thank you, High Priest,” Orlaith replied, her voice as sweet as honey but with an underlying hint of the fire within her. Her breath carried the heat of a dragon, a reminder of the raw power she wielded.

The rest of the fleet hovered above as they waited, keeping watch per their standard procedure. The Skyborne Sovereign began its descent, positioning itself alongside the Swift Sentinel.

“Permission to come aboard,” Champion Galen called to the captain of the Swift Sentinel.

The captain responded with a hearty “Aye!” and extended the ramp for the new arrival. But Champion Galen didn't need it. With a flutter of his shimmering wings, he flew across the gap between the two vessels, his wings glinting in the morning sunlight. His entourage of guards swiftly crossed the ramp to accompany him. The crew of the Swift Sentinel stood at attention as he boarded, and High Priest Nelzar stepped forward to greet him.

“Champion Galen, it's an honor to have you on board,” High Priest Nelzar said, his voice filled with reverence. “I trust your journey was uneventful?”

“Indeed, it was, High Priest,” Galen replied. His voice had the typical fairy-like whimsical tone, but it carried the weight of power behind it. “I'm eager to join the battle and do my part in eradicating evil from the realms.”

The High Priest nodded with satisfaction. With the formidable combination of the three champions, elites, and a massive army, he was confident that they could overcome any obstacle that may stand in their way. But as the air-whaleboat returned to the Swift Sentinel, it was not the expected General Anlyth who emerged. Rather his wife, the powerful Paladin Anlyth, accompanied by two others that the High Priest knew all too well, Duchess Gimona Grimmail and Magus Craycroft.

“Explain yourself,” the High Priest demanded.

# BLAKE PUDDING

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## CHAPTER 25

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### PRIMAL INSTINCTS

Yua leaned against the portcullis of the ruins, her body taut with tension. The impending doom seemed to press down upon her shoulders, a weighty burden that threatened to smother her spirit. Her instincts screamed for them to continue running, to escape from this place of death and despair. Yet, they had sought shelter within a fortress that had already endured a siege. She couldn't shake the thought that they might have unknowingly walked into a trap, a place where their journey could culminate in nothing but death.

The ascending sun seemed to mock them, casting a haunting light upon the contorted architecture and the tormented spirits that lurked within the shadows. The scene before them resembled the gates of hell thrown wide open, as if they were gazing directly into an abyss of despair. Yua half-expected a sinister clown to materialize from behind the rubble, but instead, they were met with the presence of Jason and, even more unsettling, Blake.

Reflecting on the final stages of the battle, Yua couldn't escape the sense of awe and terror that Aurelia's power had evoked. It was nearly incomprehensible to Yua that the necromancers had once been vanquished, especially after witnessing a lone vampire like Aurelia decimate an entire army. However, as the remnants of the enemy forces retreated into the obscurity of the night, a revelation dawned upon Yua: many of these creatures bore a significant weakness, the unrelenting power of the sun.

Yua was acutely aware of the dire situation they were in. The morning light was tightening its grip, and the encroaching day spelled trouble. She harbored doubts about their ability to hold out once the pursuing army caught up to them. In her heart, she longed to seize Heather's hand and make a desperate escape. But the newfound Crone's Priestess, now adorned with an aura of both confidence and beauty, had stepped into her role. Yua's thoughts teetered between the grim possibility of their demise and the comfort of having Heather by her side. The uncertainty gnawed at her: *did Heather share the same feelings?*

Dread gripped Yua's heart as she cast her gaze on a distant speck emerging from the southeast horizon. At first, it was a mere smudge against the sky, easily dismissible. But as she strained her eyes, the smudge morphed into a disturbing truth: a growing number of shapes, unmistakably airships, were converging towards them. A wave of fear, cold and stomach-churning, washed over Yua as her gaze darted around. The frog-faced man had been laboring on a magical barrier, yet to her dismay, there was no protective shield encircling the ruins. Vulnerability hung heavy in the air, leaving them utterly exposed. Desperation clawed at her as she searched for a place to hide, and the depths of the dungeon seemed the only option. *How wonderfully grim.*





A little girl's voice quivered with fear as she tentatively approached the Priestess, her bunny ears twitching with anxiety. "Have you seen my papa?" she asked, her eyes brimming with worry.

Heather's response was a soothing melody, her gentle smile a beacon of hope in the girl's troubled world. "I'm afraid not," she said in a soft voice, "but we can certainly look for him."

She took the child's hand, guiding her deeper into the ruins. The corridors were congested with clusters of refugees huddled together, mingling with dungeon dwellers and even a sprinkling of necromancers and vampires, a motley assembly brought together by circumstance. Haunted eyes and hollow cheeks bore witness to unspeakable horrors, a collective trauma etched into their expressions. Torn clothing draped over their frail frames, evidence of better days long gone. Amidst this scene of desolation, Heather couldn't shake the thought that perhaps they were all simply awaiting the embrace of death.

Heather was overcome with a sense of duty to these impoverished people. She didn't know why, but she felt it was her duty to bring them hope, to carry them to a brighter future. And for that, her nervousness had disappeared. Glancing down at the little girl's hand clutching her own, pale skin standing out in contrast against her grayish purple. The thought of them suffering any more than they had was almost unbearable to the dark elf from another world.

Heather had once lived a quiet, unassuming life, resigned to the prospect of solitude and a home filled with feline companions. But destiny had other designs, thrusting her into a new realm and embroiling her in a brutal competition for the title of Nightmares' Champion. Beneath her gentle exterior, Heather held a quiet yearning for retribution against the detestable Jason. Though inherently kind-hearted, even she couldn't help but savor the prospect of his downfall. It was, however, Blake who ultimately sealed the fate of both Jason and Heather, ending their lives in a single, fateful blow. Amid the grimness of that moment, Heather found herself harboring an odd admiration for the woman who had taken her life. And now, reborn as a Priestess of Dreams to the Crone, she bore a mantle she could never have fathomed, even in her darkest imaginings. The strangest part? Heather had come to feel an unexpected gratitude for this twisted turn of events.

The little bunny girl's voice quivered with fear and uncertainty as she spoke to Heather, her eyes brimming with tears. "Do you think my papa is okay?"

Heather felt a pang of sympathy as she caught her own reflection in the girl's glistening gaze. "Don't worry," Heather reassured her, "we'll go find out. What's your name?"

The little girl sniffed softly before introducing herself as "Lulu Willowy."

"Well, Lulu, it's nice to meet you. I'm—"

But Lulu interrupted with an exclamation of awe, "The Priestess!"

A gentle smile graced Heather's face as she observed the change in Lulu's expression, relief washing over her as she saw the pain dissipate from the bunny girl's eyes. "I am the Priestess," she confirmed, her voice warm and comforting.

Suddenly a piercing scream added to the symphony of spent tears and shattered spirits. It was as if a woman was violently torn apart, limb by limb. The mere sound of it was enough to fill the chambers of refugees and dungeon folk with the smell of urine and excrement.



With a twisted grin, Jason watched his prey from the shadows, relishing the moment he had been waiting for. The unsuspecting fool was wandering the halls alone, begging to be caught. But Jason didn't mind – he would savor every moment of skinning the frog who had summoned him into this twisted reality and feast on his heart.

As he moved through the darkness, Vorigan seemed almost still. Jason waited for the perfect moment to strike. Suddenly, he emerged from the shadows behind his prey, his sword poised to strike. But the frog moved quickly, evading the deadly blade by a hair's breadth. The thrill of the hunt only fueled Jason's desire for blood. He eagerly pursued his quarry, determined not to let him slip away again.

Vorigan bolted through the ruins, his pulse racing with twisted glee. He didn't flee for safety or help. No, he fled from anyone who might dare to offer him aid, his heart singing with the thrill of being hunted by a bloodthirsty, homicidal sadist. As he ran, he gradually slowed down, unable to resist the irresistible lure of being caught by his pursuer's serrated teeth. He could already taste the sweet nectar of pain and pleasure that awaited him.

Finally, Jason was catching up to the freak, surprised the stupid frog could run as fast as he did, but it looked like he had finally cornered him. Before the frog could get away, Jason lunged and took a swing with his sword, the sound of crunching bone echoed through the corridors, shattering the silence. Vorigan's bloodcurdling scream filled the air as Jason severed his right leg below the knee. The amphibian crashed to the ground, a pool of blood quickly forming around him as he wailed.

So much pleasure coursed through Vorigan as Jason manhandled him, tossing him onto his stomach with such untamed fury. Vorigan lay there, moaning in ecstasy as Jason mercilessly continued his rampage. The frog-like man couldn't believe his luck in being caught by his sadistic champion. Despite the violating pleasures being brought upon him, Vorigan couldn't help but feel blessed that he had chosen such a worthy man. After all, he had gone to great lengths to secure a Dark Fae body to suit Jason's cruel and sadistic nature.

Oh, how Vorigan loved the feeling of those razor-sharp teeth piercing him so deeply. Jason tore chunks of flesh free from Vorigan's back with each bite, exposing his ribcage from behind. Vorigan screamed in delight as the champion, which he had picked out for his cruel and sadistic soul, repeatedly bashed at his spine. The sound of bones cracking filled the hall as Jason yanked several

ribs out and dug his fist deep in search of Vorigan's heart. Jason was quite literally and metaphorically stealing his heart.

With another tough jerk, Vorigan was flipped over. Like something out of a dark and twisted scene, Vorigan lay on his back, utterly entranced by the figure looming above him. It was as if Jason was a god of lust and pain, bringing pleasure and suffering to his helpless victim. He held Vorigan's still-beating heart in one hand, a sight that would have spelled instant death for any ordinary vampire. But Vorigan's amphibian lineage meant he could survive for months without a heartbeat, a trait often used for hibernation. However, seeing Jason hold his heart only added to his twisted pleasure. Vorigan watched as Jason sank his teeth into his heart with reckless abandon. The quivering in his groin only added to the moment's ecstasy, a twisted dance of pain and pleasure that Vorigan knew he would never forget.

Jason's ascension to becoming the Nightmares' Champion had also altered him, for he was no longer a mere Dark Fae. He was given the subrace of Grimm Reaper, an agent of the Crone, her errand boy – *whatever* – he was a harbinger of death. Below him was the vile frog who had made it all possible, his heart tasting like a perfect mango fruit, its juices dripping from his chin. Jason's only sorrow was that the freak's suffering was over... Jason glanced down, noticing the mutilated frog was reaching into his robes and was—.”

“**WHAT THE FUCK?!** Are you jerking yourself off?!” Jason yelled.

“Oh gods, don't stop! Keep going, my champion.” Vorigan moaned as he continued to enjoy himself.

“You sick fuck!”

Jason kicked the frog's hand aside, revealing more of the amphibian's anatomy than he cared to see. He reached down and grasped the frog by his sensitive area, giving a sharp tug that separated the creature from what would have been any man's prized procreation. To Jason's surprise, the frog's screams hadn't been of agony but rather pleasure. It was then that Jason was hit in the face with a thick fluid, getting the worst of it in his eyes. The burning sensation in his eyes was unbearable. The salty taste that leaked into his mouth made him gag as he stumbled backward, blinded and disorientated.

“Oh, gods. **OH, GODS!**” Vorigan screamed. “That was amazing!”

As several footsteps echoed down the corridor, Vorigan couldn't help but sigh in disappointment. Apparently, his screams of delight had not gone unheard. With a deep sigh, Vorigan's leg, heart, flesh, ribs, and cock began to regenerate, leaving no trace of the damage inflicted by Jason's sadistic pleasures. As the crowd drew near, Vorigan got up, already feeling the sensation of euphoria fading. Glancing at his champion, he was disappointed to see his poor Jason stumbling about, trying to wipe the frog's fluids from his eyes.

“Let me help you with that,” Vorigan said with a blissful chuckle, leaning in to lick the viscous substance from Jason's face and eyes with his still-stiff frog tongue.



Amid the urgency of erecting the barrier, Aurelia hastened to join forces with the dungeon folk's chieftain and Hikari. Regrettably, her current predicament had separated her from her beloved, Blake, amidst the labyrinthine corridors of the ruins. As she wrestled with thoughts of their potential activities, the looming threat of the approaching army should have been her primary concern. With daylight now casting its unwelcome rays, Aurelia found herself ensconced within the dim heart of the ruin's central hall, a place that made her feel exposed and frail. Under different circumstances, she wouldn't have dared reveal herself to outsiders during the day. However, the situation demanded otherwise. Despite her vulnerabilities, her thoughts continued to wander to Blake, yearning for their reunion and hoping that their shared pleasures would soon conclude.

A chilling scream echoed throughout the ruins. Aurelia immediately recognized it as Vorigan's, even though it came from the opposite end of the structure.

A panicked fear spread throughout the hall, and someone exclaimed, "We're under attack!"

"Impossible," another voice responded, "None of our lookouts have reported anything."

A third voice chimed in, "They must have sent elite units ahead of their main force."

Aurelia's patience waned as the room buzzed with hysteria, prompting her to interject calmly, "There's no need to fret. I know that scream. It's not a cause for alarm." Confusion rippled through the gathered group, and a voice called for an explanation. With a weary sigh, Aurelia responded, "We can't afford to be sidetracked by it now. If it bothers you, gather a few others and investigate. Right now, our priority is setting up the barrier before addressing the portal."

Chief Hensley's voice cut through the chaos, "She's right. Let's get to work on the barrier."

The entrance of the new Priestess, accompanied by a young girl with bunny ears, barely registered with Aurelia. The child's tearful visage might have stirred empathy in others, but such sentiments held little sway over Aurelia. She refocused on her task of activating the barrier, relegating her attention to the critical matter at hand. Regrettably, Aurelia had to step in for Vorigan in this role, his magic falling short for the upcoming task. Doubts nagged at her regarding whether her magical reserves were sufficient to reignite the dungeon core in daylight – a task that was pivotal for their survival.

Heather's voice cut through the tense silence, her question hanging in the air like a heavyweight. "Has anyone seen this young girl's father?" she asked her gentle voice a stark contrast to the urgency of the situation.

At that moment, Blake entered the room, causing Aurelia's eyes to light up with a mix of joy and longing as her gaze fixed upon her beloved.



“Ugh, the hunger still lingers,” I groaned. I couldn’t help but exhale in exasperation. The relentless gnawing of hunger persisted within me.

“Hey, at least that rabbit guy tasted pretty good,” I replied to myself.

“No kidding,” I sighed, feeling one of my souls twist in both horror and satisfaction by our actions. “We need to find another one of those.”

I noticed Heather holding the hand of a young beastkin child who looked similar to the rabbit guy we had consumed. “Hey, look at that. Heather has one that looks just like him.”

“Do you think she’ll let us babysit?” I grinned their way.

“What happened to ‘no kids’?”

“Ugh, fine,” I pouted to myself.

The grand doors of the great hall swung open with force, almost ripped from their hinges, as Yua burst into the room with wild and frenzied eyes. Her gaze seemed to reflect a glimpse of a demon from the depths of hell itself. Ragged gasps accompanied her heavy breath as she frantically scanned the room, her eyes darting back and forth in a crazed search for something or someone. They finally settled upon Heather.

“Hundreds of airships are heading this way!” Yua announced, her words igniting a frenzy of fear and chaos within the chamber.



#### MOMENTS EARLIER!

I shadowed Aurelia’s every movement with a hunger that matched a shooting star racing toward the horizon. My gaze remained ensnared by the entrancing sway of her hips, a rhythm that cast a spell upon me, holding me captive. The urge to feel the silkiness of her flawless skin once more consumed me, the desire for those passionate sensations consuming my thoughts entirely.

This sensation, this all-consuming emotion, was foreign to me. I’d never been one to fret over others’ opinions or concerns, always doing as I pleased regardless of consequences. Yet now, I found myself perpetually lost in contemplation, entangled in an unending longing for both Aurelia’s presence and her thoughts of me.

But the greatest enigma was why she referred to me as her beloved. I had no recollection of encountering her prior to my soul’s summoning into this realm. Despite this, an invisible tether bound me to her, thoughts of her a constant presence in my mind. The way she moved, her voice’s melody, the very essence of her scent—all these elements called out to me, igniting a fire of desire within that defied any rational explanation.

I ached to unravel her thoughts, to decipher the reasons behind her choice of me and her intentions for me. Yet, the more I delved into these mysteries, the deeper I sank into the abyss of my own

yearning, ensnared by a desire that threatened to consume me whole. I walked a treacherous path, one that held both allure and danger, but my will was powerless against it. The yearning that coursed through my veins was an inferno I couldn't extinguish, a fire that only the touch of Aurelia could quell.

"Milady Aurelia," the frog's croak intruded, yanking me from my reverie, "they seek your aid in reactivating the dungeon core. I attempted it myself, yet my mana proved insufficient." The frog's interruption jolted me back to reality, shattering the dreamy cocoon that had enveloped me.

Aurelia let out a weary sigh, her graceful form tempting me to draw nearer. "Daybreak approaches, Vorigan. My mana is strained, but I'll give what I can. Is the dungeon denizens' Chieftain here? He possesses the power to reactivate the core."

"He is present, but he hesitates due to his pact with the Crone. He dreads being bound to the core once more."

Aurelia's frustration became evident through her dismissive gesture. "Very well then. Gather any stragglers lurking in the ruins and usher them to the Grand Hall. Also, station scouts and guards at the portcullis."

The frog obeyed without hesitation, but my gaze remained captivated by the one I yearned for. Aurelia was a compelling presence, a force that held sway over me without effort. I yearned to surrender to her every desire, to be engulfed by the intensity of her emotions.

I trailed behind Aurelia once again, my heart pounding with a mix of lust and anticipation as my gaze roamed the dimly lit corridors. The persistent stomach cramps were still present, but I pushed them aside, driven by a different kind of primal urge. In the distance, a figure caught my attention, igniting a completely different kind of desire within me. Without a second thought, I let Aurelia continue on her path, confident that she wouldn't notice my absence and that I could easily catch up later. For now, my focus shifted entirely to the exhilarating pursuit that lay ahead.

At first glance, he appeared like an ordinary man, but as my orange eyes settled on him, I couldn't miss the rabbit-like features that set him apart. Soft fur covered his body, and his farmer bibs added an endearing touch. The sight of him evoked a soft laugh from me, but as he approached with a smile, a different kind of hunger surged within me, one that I couldn't ignore. The notion of sinking into his flesh, tasting his blood, and experiencing his body dissolve around me consumed my thoughts. It was almost overwhelming. My acidic saliva pooled in my mouth as he drew closer, his rabbit-like attributes intensifying my desire. I yearned to feel his form entwined with mine, to devour him whole and relish the sensations that enveloped me. As he stood before me, the primal urges raged within, threatening to consume me entirely. The rabbit-man's smile only fueled my intrigue, and I couldn't help but wonder if he had any inkling of the deep desires that stirred within my very soul.

"I beg your pardon," he said with a concerned expression, his friendly smile never faltering. "I'm searching for my little Lulu."

I wrestled with the insatiable hunger that surged within me, threatening to overwhelm my self-control, the temptation to consume him whole almost too much to bear. “I’m afraid I haven’t encountered anyone by that name,” I managed to respond, my voice quivering as I struggled to rein in my monstrous instincts. “But I’d be more than willing to assist you in your search,” I added, forcing a feeble smile, all the while devising a plan to entice him away from curious eyes and ears.

“Oh, how kind of you,” he replied with a beaming smile, oblivious to the cruel lustful hunger that smoldered in my gaze. “I would forever be in your debt. I’m Elijah Willowy, and it’s an honor to meet you.”

“Blake,” I replied, my eyes raking over his body with a perverse hunger. His scent filled my being, and my primal instincts urged me to feast upon his flesh, to taste the sweet nectar of his blood as I played in his innards.

Aurelia had asked against me devouring the dead bodies that littered the ruins, for the necromancers would need them to bolster their numbers. However, she had said nothing about the refugees, an oversight on her part. So, with my incisional hunger growing stronger by the moment, I was left with no choice but to seek out my own meals. And it appeared that rabbit was on the menu.

At this moment, nothing else mattered except my hunger. The desire to consume and devour until my belly was full, a feat that could never be fully attained, for the hunger always lingered. Still, Elijah was merely a means to a short respite, a fleeting moment of satisfaction in an endless cycle of craving and desire. And so, I continued to allow myself to imagine the taste of his flesh, the feel of his bones dissolving against my skin, all the while knowing that he would soon become just another victim of my insatiable hunger.

“Are you a fighter or mage of any kind?” I asked, my voice cold and calculating.

“Oh, gods no,” he replied, his voice tinged with sadness. “I’m just a simple farmer trying to make my way in this cruel realm.”

When he spoke of the Kingdom of Slaethia taking his lands and killing his wife, I felt a surge of pleasure mixed with contempt. My heart stirred with a perverse delight, knowing he was a perfect victim of my desires. His loss only served to make him more vulnerable, and I longed to take advantage of his weakness.

“I see,” I replied with a false note of sympathy. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

But in reality, I felt no remorse for his suffering. Instead, my mind was consumed by dark, twisted thoughts of taking him as my own, savoring him as I ate him slowly. The thought of his pain and terror only served to heighten my desire, and I longed to claim him for myself with every fiber of my being.

As we strolled down the corridor, Elijah prattled on about his Lulu. He was oblivious to the dark and twisted hunger that churned within me like a hurricane in a teacup. My eyes darted around, searching for the perfect alcove to indulge my darkest desires. And then, a piercing scream shattered the silence like a thousand fingernails on a chalkboard. It was like a woman was being

ripped apart, her flesh torn to shreds and devoured by some unseen force. I could almost taste the metallic tang of blood in the air, like the scent of a rare delicacy.

Elijah quivered in fear, his scent wafting toward me like an irresistible fragrance that only stoked my appetite. It was akin to the aroma of freshly baked bread or a delectable roast, impossible to resist. My hunger surged with every passing moment, a blazing fire threatening to engulf me entirely. Primitive instincts urged me to delve my corrosive form into him, to taste his entrails as I slithered within his body until my cravings were sated. The darkness within me intensified, growing like an invasive weed that strangled all other emotions. In that instant, I was wholly consumed by my lustful yearning. Giving in to a potent impulse, I forcefully propelled the rabbit into one of the chambers we traversed and slammed the door shut behind us, ensnaring the two of us in seclusion.

His fear was palpable, thick in the air like baked cookies in the breeze, as he stammered out the question that hung on his lips. “W-What are you doing?”

I could feel a grin spreading across my lips, relishing in the terror that radiated off him like heat from a flame. “What do you think I am, rabbit?” I taunted, knowing fully that my true nature was far more monstrous than he could ever imagine.

“R-Rabbit?!” he exclaimed, his voice trembling with fear and indignation. “Now you insult me. I don’t know what you are, but you appear human or even elf-like to me.”

I laughed cruelly at his ignorance, my amusement growing as I revealed a glimpse of my true form. “No, no, you poor rabbit,” I sneered. “I’m a Black Pudding.”

Before he could finish his sentence, the embroidery on my dress sprang to life with sudden animation, its tendrils wriggling in eagerness. Poor Elijah’s voice was swallowed by a frightened yelp as both my legs and the lower hem of my dress transformed into a myriad of tentacles. In a desperate bid to put distance between us, he scrambled backward, but his efforts were in vain. Swiftly, I closed in on him, propelled by a twisted hunger that left me no choice, and he was trapped, ensnared in my grasp with no escape. The fragrance of his fear hung in the air, a seductive perfume that beckoned me closer. I inhaled it hungrily, relishing the anticipation of his impending demise.

My tentacles coiled around his limbs as he struggled fiercely against their grip. Yet, much to my satisfaction, he proved to be far weaker than I had expected. Drawing nearer to his face, I traced a finger down his forehead, a caress that left behind an acidic burn mark etched into his skin. The sound of his cries echoed within the chamber, but the door to the stone enclosure was thick, muffling the sound, and I doubted anyone beyond could hear him. This was a feast I intended to savor, a meal that I would take my time with.

I toyed with his lips, savoring the sensation of their flesh dissolving beneath my corrosive fingertip. His agonized screams only intensified my insatiable hunger, pushing me closer to the edge of devouring him entirely. However, I resisted the urge, choosing instead to prolong his suffering, toying with my prey like a predator playing with its catch. His futile struggles and desperate resistance were no match for the strength of my tentacles, rendering him utterly helpless and at the



mercy of my dark desires. I drank in his pain and terror, relishing every moment of his torment as I indulged in the consumption of his flesh. Yet, amid the twisted pleasure, a sinister sadness flickered within me, an unsettling awareness of the cruelty of my actions, as his eyes clenched shut in terror.

*Why would he avert his gaze from something so exquisite?*

It appeared that one of my souls was reveling in absolute delight, while the other fragment was attempting to avert her gaze—though still peeking with morbid curiosity.

I was determined not to let him avert his gaze. I was not someone to be denied pleasure, so I dissolved his eyelids with a sickening sizzle, ensuring he could witness every horrific, yet oddly captivating, detail of my consumption. With every passing moment, my hunger intensified, pushing me to revel in my darkest and most sadistic desires. As I consumed him piece by piece, I recognized there was no retreat from the twisted path I had embraced, a realization that strangely suited both of us.

Regrettably, the rabbit man perished while I was in the process of consuming him. It happened just as I had finished devouring his genitals—my appetite had taken me from his four limbs to that particular region. And even after this grisly consumption, my hunger remained unsated.

After our delectable repast, we made my way back toward the Great Hall, a heavy sigh escaping us. As I walked, our attention was drawn to the sight of Vorigan leading Jason by the hand, both of them moving in the same direction. The self-proclaimed champion seemed to be rubbing his reddened eyes as if he had been struck by some sort of blinding revelation – or perhaps a warning? Our heightened senses detected a distinctive scent in the air, one that was unmistakable.

“Oh, my gods!” I gasped.

“Do we think they’re a couple?” I pondered aloud.

“I don’t know,” I tried to whisper. “Jason didn’t come off as the type to me.”

“I can’t wait to tell the others.” I waved my hands around excitedly, almost shouting.

“Since when was I the gossip type?” I tried to hush myself.

“Since always,” I blurted out!

“No, I’m not,” I replied in horror. “We’re the antisocial type!”



BACK TO NOW!

As Yua burst into the Grand Hall, a wave of unease washed over everyone present, tingling along my senses like a delectable aroma. Her labored breaths and wild gaze ignited a thrilling excitement

within me, a foretaste of the fear that had gripped her. The sudden cry that followed shattered the chamber's silence, a symphony of terror that resonated with my insatiable craving.

"Hundreds of airships are heading this way!" Yua blurted out.

Ah, the chaos, the destruction, the sheer ecstasy of it all! It was as if the world itself had orchestrated a grand celebration in my honor, and I stood there as the guest of honor. The thrill of anticipation coursed through my veins, a delicious shiver that seemed to resonate with the very core of my being. My metaphorical heart danced with exhilaration as the ground quivered beneath us, echoing the impending tumult. Debris cascaded around us like a symphony of devastation, and a wicked grin stretched across my face. Observing those nearby, their eyes wide with fear and despair, I couldn't help but pity their simplicity. They were oblivious to the true beauty of the chaos and destruction unfolding before us. But I was different – I reveled in it, finding delight in the disorder that surrounded us.

Another desperate soul, one that struck a chord of familiarity within me, rushed into the chamber, his face contorted with panic. His presence ignited a flicker of recognition deep within me. "Rob, calm down!" Heather's voice rang out, her words a clear attempt to rein in the escalating hysteria.

It was amusing. Heather had initially come across as the quiet, stuttering type, but now, as she held the hand of a bunny-eared child, an air of confidence surrounded her. The others in the chamber looked up at her as if she held the key to their salvation. The scene bordered on the comical. As for me, fractured between minds and souls, a peculiar sense of elation settled over me.

Oh, how I relished the chaos and madness that enveloped my two fractured souls. Destruction had become our playground, a canvas upon which to splatter the hues of blood and insanity. Yet, amidst the tumult, our thoughts remained tethered to Aurelia, our fierce, sweet, and captivating Aurelia. She wrestled with the Dungeon Core, her struggle drawing our attention. How we yearned to feel her bare skin once again, to possess every part of her, even if it entailed tearing down all that stood in our path.

Aurelia's countenance glistened with sweat as she channeled her mana into the core. My mind was a maelstrom of turmoil, a chaotic tangle of conflicting impulses. One moment, an overwhelming urge to shield her, to become her unwavering defense, surged through me. The next, an insatiable hunger clawed at my senses, driving me to feast upon the very entrails of those in proximity, their fear and panic acting as gusts of wind fueling the blaze of my voracious desire. The bedlam and chaos beyond were but feeble distractions, pale in comparison to the tempest brewing within me.

Yet, their focus remained fixed on Aurelia's exertions, blissfully ignorant of the true monster lurking amidst them. Did they not realize they were but tantalizing morsels for my insatiable cravings? So long as Aurelia's forgetfulness persisted, they were pawns for my amusement and agony. The adversaries would find their conquest futile if I seized their quarry first. Though my hunger gnawed fiercely, they were mine to devour, manipulate, torment... TO SAVOR!

As I was lost in the thought of my next meal, Aurelia's voice jolted me back to reality. "Beloved, I need your help," she said, her beauty captivating me once again.

I approached Aurelia, my own core throbbing with anticipation. She stood as a vision of both beauty and power, and an unapologetic exhilaration surged through me. It was akin to a potent drug, an addiction I couldn't escape. With each passing moment, I found myself more entranced by her, yearning to fulfill her every wish. In this intricate reality, my mind twisted further into tumultuous disorder. Aurelia held a unique influence, coaxing forth an unexpected urge to care about others within me. Though, when I say others, I really mean just her.

Having a vampire, of all creatures, bring out the light within me was a peculiar sensation. It was almost as if she held the unique ability to perceive the hidden beauty within the depths of my fragmented souls. Without her, I sensed an incompleteness, a gnawing emptiness that was unsettling. Depending so heavily on her was both thrilling and frightening, as she became the beacon of guidance in a world that I had always preferred to be shrouded in darkness. Above all, her absence left my shattered souls yearning for their missing piece. Yet, I struggled to articulate the profound strength of my emotions toward her. True, her allure was undeniable, but there was an enigmatic essence about her that defied explanation.

“My beloved, my mana is significantly depleted during the daylight hours. I lament not having enough reserves to activate the Dungeon Core myself. I implore you to establish a connection with it and infuse your mana into its core. As you do so, I will channel the magic into a protective barrier and initiate the portal,” Aurelia explained with a mixture of yearning and a trace of concealed apprehension. It stirred an unsettling emotion within me, a blend of frustration and exasperation at her vulnerability.

The mere notion of Aurelia experiencing fear kindled an intense blaze of anger within me, fueling a desire to rend apart those accountable for tormenting her. Simultaneously, the torment of others was a source of dark delight, their pleas and supplications for mercy akin to a symphony of agony. Still, I couldn't afford to be overly consumed by my sadistic musings. The fear that gripped Aurelia was distinct. It was an unwelcome sensation, one that ignited a seething fury deep within me. I found myself yielding to the compulsion to venture outdoors and immerse in the feast of terror that awaited my indulgence.

Nonetheless, I possessed enough cunning to avoid a direct confrontation with the enemy. I had no desire to be entombed beneath these crumbling ruins. The tremors persisted around us. With a deep exhale, I locked my gaze onto Aurelia's captivating red irises. Despite the simmering rage within me, I painted a soft smile across my lips. A slight nod conveyed my understanding, a silent acknowledgment that her well-being took precedence for both of my souls.

As my fingers closed around the core, a whirlwind of emotions engulfed me—joy, fear, and an unsettling unease. The core's energy began to siphon my mana, yet I persisted, my grip unwavering. My resolve held steady even as my spider silk exterior unraveled, exposing the truth of my nature as a Black Pudding slime monster to everyone present.

The pleasant gasps from onlookers were drowned out by the sounds of explosions echoing through the ruins. Amidst the crumbling and burning world around us, I reveled in the illusion of power that the core brought me. Clutching the core felt like holding the universe itself, and despite my magic being drained, I felt invincible, as if nothing could obstruct my path.

The drain of mana began to blur my vision, flickering it in and out, but I clenched my eyes shut and persisted. I wouldn't release my grip! For Aurelia, I was ready to endure anything, even if it meant sacrificing everything. Yet, the core's power drain was too overwhelming to withstand, but I was determined to shield her at all costs, even if it meant embracing my own demise. The intensity of my emotions for her was baffling, a mystery I couldn't unravel.



Jeremy stationed himself at the portcullis, his fingers tightly gripping the corroded iron bars, his gaze fixed on the ominous airships hanging in the sky. Several vessels cast a disconcerting darkness over the land below, their looming shadows enveloping everything beneath. The remaining ships circled like vultures in the sky, poised to descend and seize their impending prey. An inescapable sense of foreboding crawled up Jeremy's spine, threatening to swallow him whole.

Abruptly, a vivid burst of color erupted from one of the airships, accompanied by an ear-splitting explosion that rattled the ruins to their foundation. The ground quivered beneath Jeremy's feet, as if on the verge of collapsing. In that moment, he realized that their situation had taken a dire turn for the worse.

Jeremy had clung to the hope that the protective barrier enveloping their refuge would serve as their salvation, shielding them from the unrelenting assault of their adversaries. However, as the airships persisted in their barrage, unleashing torrents of magical artillery, it became all too clear that their hope had been misplaced. The coveted magical barrier had yet to manifest.

In the midst of the tumult and devastation brought on by the airships, a sense of panic took hold of those who cast their eyes upward. Desperation clouded the minds of everyone present, causing them to abandon hope and retreat into the depths of the ruins. Unfortunately, the long-anticipated barrier and portal, the supposed saviors, had yet to be conjured. With their fate hanging in the balance, they found themselves entirely vulnerable to the invaders hovering above, and the chances of survival were growing slimmer by the second. In their current predicament, the only alternative escape lay in traversing the eerie recesses of the derelict dungeon—a prospect that instilled a collective sense of dread and hesitance within them all.

Jeremy's gaze remained locked on the heavens, his heart sinking like a stone in a vast ocean of despair. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the horrifying spectacle of numerous colossal sections breaking away from several airships, hurtling down to the ground like ominous drop pods descending from the celestial heights. Amidst this onslaught, a handful of ships persisted in their relentless bombardment, unleashing havoc upon the ruins below. A quick survey of his surroundings revealed his solitary foolishness—everyone else had sought refuge within the crumbling edifice as soon as the vessels appeared on the horizon, even Yua had vanished into the depths of the structure.

Summoning a deep breath, Jeremy pivoted on his heel and dashed toward the relative safety that the structure promised. His heart pounded with a mixture of fear and determination, each footfall echoing the urgency of his escape as he sought refuge within the dilapidated ruins. He prayed that

the shattered remnants of the building would provide at least a modicum of shelter from the relentless onslaught above.



Observing his incredible Mummy clutching the Dungeon Core, Wartie couldn't help but detect an absence of concern in the vampire's gaze. Rather, a broad grin adorned her face, suggesting the existence of some shared secret between her and Mummy. Wartie found Mummy's fondness for the vampire peculiar, knowing full well that she generally held little regard for people. Nonetheless, he cherished Mummy's tenderness and consideration, as it far surpassed any kindness he had ever experienced from others.

As a feral goblin, he had been left to fend for himself, scavenging for scraps wherever he could find them. Later, he found shelter among the dungeon folk, though life didn't improve significantly even with them. His only companions were the pet slimes he managed to tame. Sadly, those wretched companions of Mummy's had slain not one, but two of his cherished pets. However, Mummy changed everything. She granted him a sense of family he had never experienced before. She became a mother who even resurrected him after falling to a Paladin's blade, ushering him into a new life as a lich. The goddess, speaking through her High Priestess, even referred to Wartie as her grandchild, a notion that overwhelmed him. Discovering that Mummy was the offspring of a goddess, the Crone herself, added another layer of complexity. Though he still puzzled over the goddess calling Mummy her daughters when there was just one Mummy, he found solace in the newfound sense of belonging and love he had never known.

Fortunately, Wartie's ears were proportionately larger than his head, enabling him to catch every word whispered by the vampire into his precious Mummy's ear. "My beloved," she said, her voice carrying weight, "you possess a vast reservoir of mana, but you must cease letting the core siphon it from you. Unlike me, you are ambient mana wielder, and I'm certain of it—I have felt it, seen it. Rather than attempting to relinquish your mana to the core, let the magic around us flow through you and into the core."

The young goblin lich couldn't quite discern if his mother had acknowledged the vampire's words, yet he felt an unusual shift in the atmosphere. It was as if the warmth was gradually being drawn away, replaced by a bitter chill that settled in the air.



Aurelia's breath brushed against my neck, an icy dance that ignited an ecstatic chaos in the darkest corners of my mind. Oh, the irresistible desire to cast the cursed Dungeon Core into the gloomy chamber, to claim Aurelia as my own, heedless of any consequences! The once-alluring artifact had transformed into a despicable parasite, greedily draining my magical vitality with each monstrous pulse. The mana I sacrificed to the abhorrent sphere surpassed even my own capabilities.

Aurelia's soothing murmurs echoed within the labyrinthine corridors of my thoughts. Her honeyed words intertwined with the unsteady rhythm of my unbalanced mind. I was entranced, a hapless moth spiraling uncontrollably toward the voracious flame that beckoned me with its seductive heat. This enchantress, a fusion of magnetism and malevolence, wove a cloak of darkness tailored to ensnare my willing heart. And all of it she accomplished with naught but a whisper.

My thoughts ran rampant with desire. *She's right!*

*About utilizing ambient mana?*

*Yes, let's give it a try.*

My eyelids remained firmly shut as I clutched the Dungeon Core, the symphony of explosive tremors assaulting the ancient stone chamber. The screams that accompanied each violent impact were a twisted masterpiece to my senses, mingling with the acrid scent of fear and urine that hung in the air. A perverse delight blossomed within me at the very aroma.

Ignoring the growing ache in my stomach, which seemed to intensify with each passing moment, I extended my senses. I followed the faint trail of knowledge that Circe had begrudgingly imparted upon me. The goddess's boundless wisdom she half-heartedly trained into me, leaving me ill-equipped for the challenges that lay ahead. Nevertheless, both halves of my soul were united, and we had swiftly adapted to harnessing the ambient magic surrounding us to cast spells—an essential skill, given the ongoing malfunctioning of the system. Though, with Circe being the one who had locked me out of the system, I suspected she meant for me to fail.

Following Aurelia's guidance, I seized onto the ethereal strand of magic swirling around me. It was as if an invisible floodgate had been opened, releasing a torrent of mana that surged into me, coursing through my very being before flooding into the Dungeon Core. In the midst of this mystical tempest, I found myself intoxicated by the heady sensation of the energy flowing through my veins. I transformed into a mere conduit, a vessel through which the core could satisfy its insatiable hunger for mana.

In that fleeting moment, I recognized that the explosions had assumed a muffled quality, as if submerged beneath murky depths. Against all odds, I had succeeded—the Dungeon Core was awakened. Within the swirling tempest of magic, I felt the tender embrace of Aurelia's guidance. With her expertise, the core wove a shield around our sanctuary, and my heart... continued to swell with adoration for her. Amid the chaos of this reality, Aurelia had transformed into everything I had, needed, and wanted. Yet, the mystery persisted, leaving me to wonder why she held such a mesmerizing sway over my very souls.

# BLAKE PUDDING

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## CHAPTER 26

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### THE BREACH

Vanya's head thudded against the dark, moisture-laden wood of the drop pod, also known as an Airlight Pod, as her muscles braced for what lay ahead. An earsplitting blast shook her to the core, marking the start of the airships' arcane bombardment. The nauseating smell of vomit filled the air, revealing the nervousness of the novice squires, who were about to engage in both lethal and magical combat 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 approached their target, Vanya sensed a magical barrier enveloping the ruins below. She felt the essence of several Airlight Pods wink out of existence, presumably having collided with the magical shield. However, numerous other pods managed to breach the defense in time. *“Those below are in for quite the surprise,”* Vanya thought, casting a glance at Einarr and Orlaith, the two Champions sharing her pod. Stretching her magical senses further, she detected Galen—the most formidable among them—had already descended and was waiting on the surface, poised for the impending clash.

The moment they touched down, a faint trace of magic activated the enchantments on the front door, blasting it open. Beyond it lay a battlefield in chaos. Undead creatures lunged into the pod, snapping and biting at Vanya. Einarr swung his hammer down, crushing a zombie’s skull, while she thrust her sword through the empty eye socket of a skeleton. All around them, soldiers poured out of the few pods that had successfully breached the barrier, only to be immediately engulfed by the attacking abominations.



The barrier activated the moment I stepped away from the Dungeon Core, my thoughts whirling as though influenced by the very air around me. Aurelia took the reins, skillfully bending the core to her will to initiate the creation of our escape portal. I observed her handiwork with a soft smile, resting my chin on her shoulder. My arms naturally found their way around her waist, my chest pressed against her back, as if drawn by some magnetic force that even I barely understood.

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

*I still can't tell if I like that one, or want to kill her.*

*Perhaps a combination of the two?*

I let go of Aurelia, my lips forming a pout, and allowed my Spider Silk to weave over my viscous form. I focused on covering my entire body except for the section that constituted my dress. The sensation of revealing my darker self was thrilling, and I admired how it looked. To anyone observing, my attire could be mistaken for a sentient being from the darkest corners of the abyss—a tar-like entity hungry to engulf them. Although my preference leaned towards the rich, decayed flavors of rotting meat, I wasn’t averse to feasting on the living, especially their succulent innards. But I digress. I reformed my ivory silk face and skin and, once done, placed my cheek back against the nape of Aurelia’s neck. As she worked, I reveled in the peaceful moment, my darker urges momentarily stilled.

“I’ve just realized, each time you recreate that form of yours, there are always some subtle or significant changes. It could be the length of your hair, the style of your dress, or even the details of your facial features. Watching the transformation is truly fascinating,” Sophia remarked.

Ah, the urge to eliminate them all was strong, but I knew better than to touch these former adversaries, for fear of angering my foster mother. Still, I couldn’t help but ponder: would



removing a limb or taking a kidney be considered acceptable? After all, it's not the same as killing them, is it?

The portal began to form, tiny sparks of light darting through the air. A small opening appeared, no bigger than a pocket mirror, making it clear that expanding it to fit an average-sized person would take some effort. While I was confident in my own ability to pass through, leaving Aurelia behind was out of the question. The notion of temporarily storing her in my Void flitted across my mind, but I quickly rejected it, unwilling to risk her well-being. I was in dire need of a test subject. To add to the complexity of the situation, the mild discomfort in my stomach had escalated into agonizing cramps. A wave of shouting and frenzied voices filled the room, pulling my attention away from the portal and, more critically, from Aurelia. I shifted my focus toward the unfolding commotion.

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

My heart surged with a complex blend of excitement and malevolence, as if a tantalizing opportunity had presented itself, beckoning me to indulge my darkest desires. I knew that I stood no chance against them in an open fight, but who said the rules couldn't be bent? More importantly, I needed to buy as much time as possible for Aurelia. It was clear that daylight weakened her, and I was resolute in my commitment to protect her at all costs. Strangely, neither of my two souls could identify the root of our unwavering loyalty to her. True, in my previous life, I'd had relationships with numerous women and a few men. Yet aside from a few disastrous exceptions, my aspirations never extended beyond preparing them breakfast and seeing them out the door, and even that was an overgenerous rarity on my part. Emotional attachment was an anathema to me; it felt like an unbearable weight when there were far more diverting matters to attend to. And yet, here I stood, ready to lay down my life for Aurelia.

Feeling a blend of amusement and irritation rise within me, I metaphorically took a deep breath—lungs being irrelevant in my case. Detaching myself from Aurelia, I knew she was too engrossed in crafting the portal to restrain me. The din of frightened voices and shouts abruptly fell silent; every gaze shifted to me as I began to leave the Grand Hall. Yet, someone I deemed inconsequential—an unfamiliar face—had the gall to obstruct my way.

A diminutive boy with green-hued skin and cheeks wet from tears stammered, "Mummy, please don't go." My mind churned in confusion, trying to identify who this child was. Had our paths crossed before?

*Who the hell is this kid?*

*I have no idea. Don't recognize him at all.*

*Did he just call us 'mummy'?*

The goblin kid bore a slight resemblance to Wartie, although he was notably wart-free and a bit taller. Despite that, he didn't occupy my thoughts for long. I patted his head reassuringly as I walked past him, giving no second thoughts to his maternal plea. The notion of being anyone's

mother was utterly foreign to me. My attention snapped back to the knights I was intent on confronting, a thought that filled my mouth with a corrosive and venomous sense of anticipation.



“Squire, to me!” a knight called out, decapitating a charging skeleton with a swift swing of his sword.

Lyric, in his fourth year as a squire, had already shown promise—not just of becoming a knight, but potentially a paladin. However, nothing could have prepared him for the scene unfolding before him. A zombie, its face half-rotted away, lunged through the air directly at him. Lyric instinctively raised his mithril shield, and the undead creature slammed against it, clawing and gnawing with frenetic desperation. Feeling his back leg begin to buckle under the weight, Lyric summoned a surge of fierce determination. With a swift, overhead swing of his mace, he shattered the zombie’s skull, sending it tumbling away from him in a broken heap.

“Sir Drin,” Lyric shouted over the cacophony of battle, “We should move toward the champions for support!”

“Nonsense!” Sir Drin bellowed in response, cleaving another undead creature in two. “Glory comes to those who forge their own path forward!”

Around Lyric, several fellow knights and their squires who had descended before the barrier was raised cheered in unison, galvanized by Sir Drin’s rallying cry. However, Lyric himself felt a deep urge to fall back to where the champions had landed, as they were effortlessly cutting through the undead horde like a hot knife through butter. Taking a deep breath and landing another swing of his mace to clear the immediate threats, Lyric glanced toward Sir Drin to nod in agreement. But the knight was already engrossed in hacking down skeletons and zombies as though they were mere logs to be split.

“Up ahead! That’s the entrance,” Sir Drin shouted, pressing forward in that direction with unwavering focus.

Caught in a moment of distraction as he watched the champions forge their own entrance into the ruins, Lyric was suddenly bowled over by a skeleton. The creature, adorned with bits of rotting flesh hanging from its bones like half-eaten ribs, knocked him onto his back. Scrambling to cover himself with his shield, Lyric found it was too late. The skeleton’s bony foot stomped down on the shield, pinning it and his left arm underneath. As he braced himself for what he thought would be the end, a shining sword burst through the skeleton’s skull, scattering bone fragments in all directions. Looking past the collapsing remains, Lyric saw Sir Drin standing there, his expression a mix of concentration and annoyance as he continued to cut down the approaching undead.

“On your feet, lad!” Sir Drin bellowed, executing a sweeping arc with his sword that bisected two approaching undead.

Lyric scrambled to his feet, swiftly smashing an approaching undead centipede-like creature with his shield before finishing it off with a solid strike from his mace. Taking a deep breath, he pressed onward, following his comrades into the ruins as they continued to hack, slash, and bludgeon their way through the relentless undead horde.

“I thought the soldiers from the other camp had already raided this place. Why are there so many undead?” another squire wondered aloud. With youthful, elven features, she caught Lyric’s attention, appearing a few years too young to be embroiled in such a battle.

“You have to take down the necromancer who’s controlling these undead if you want to put an end to them for good. The earlier raid did wipe out a lot, but once the vampire leading this nest fled, most of the undead fell apart, their source of power cut off,” another knight explained to the youthful squire.

“So, who’s commanding these ones?” the squire inquired as she thrust her spear through a zombie’s jaw, the tip emerging from the base of its skull.

“The Destroyer,” Lyric whispered, reluctant to utter her name within these accursed walls. Though he feared her, she had acquired many titles over the years: Slaughterer of Slaethia, Butcher of the Innocent, Horror of the Night. No matter the epithet, she was universally feared, and only she could command such a multitude of undead—perhaps even surpassing the infamous Lord Demidicus, known for his cruelty.

“Aurelia,” the knight replied to his young squire, seemingly unaware of Lyric’s whispered comment. “Be prepared, lass; not many of us may live to see tomorrow’s light,” he cautioned, even as he deftly kicked three undead creatures off his glaive.

The small group of knights and squires, bolstered by a handful of paladins and mages, steadily advanced through the ruins. Though the comforting rays of the sun had long since given way to darkness, they were more than a match for the relentless waves of undead that assailed them. While a few squires and even a mage were occasionally overwhelmed, swift assistance and healing spells from the paladins quickly restored them. Yet, as they delved deeper, an oppressive darkness—darker than any black—seemed to stalk them. Though they couldn’t put it into words, they all felt the unnerving sensation of being watched. This indescribable feeling seemed to make their weapons tremble just a bit more as they thrust their blades into the ceaseless tide of undead.

“What’s this black sludge?” a third squire exclaimed, stomping his foot on the ground for emphasis. Lyric observed how the viscous substance clung to the squire’s boot, stretching like taffy before finally releasing its hold with each step.

Sir Drin quickly surveyed the situation and roared out a warning to the group, “Hold off on any fire-based magic or anything that could ignite this substance! It’s likely flammable, and we can’t afford to spring a fire trap!”

Lyric observed that two of the mages and even the paladins hesitated to use their magic. For the paladins, the caution was particularly notable; their holy magic had the additional effect of setting

unholy creations ablaze. It didn't take long for Lyric to realize that the intensity of the undead attacks increased when deprived of the support from magical spells.

"Is this sludge in every corridor, or is it actually following us?" the youthful squire wondered aloud.

"It's following us," Sir Drin growled.

Fending off a zombie and a skeleton with his shield, Lyric followed up with a mace strike aimed at the knee of a lizardman zombie whose scaled skin had toughened to the texture of hard leather. Despite his blow, the lizardman lunged with its elongated jaw at Lyric's head. With a swift sidestep, Lyric narrowly avoided the snapping maw. Unfortunately, due to the close proximity, he couldn't muster enough force to swing his mace through the undead creature's leathery hide. The lizardman fixed its lifeless eyes on Lyric, who braced for the impending attack. Just as the undead creature lunged forward to sink its teeth into Lyric's head, a spear pierced its skull, effortlessly penetrating the tough hide.

Lyric turned to thank the young squire who had saved his life, but his words were cut short when a black tentacle shot out from the darkness, seizing the squire by the neck. There wasn't even time for a scream; her neck was snapped and her body yanked back into the shadows before Lyric could react. Fueled by a surge of anger, he charged forward, his footsteps feeling increasingly heavy as they sank into the sticky sludge beneath him. He reached the pillar he believed her body had been pulled behind, but as he peered around it, he found neither body nor tentacle—only the consuming darkness and the persistent layer of sludge at his feet. Worst of all, it seemed he was the only one who had witnessed the event, as the rest of the group continued to battle the relentless waves of undead, oblivious to the young squire's grim fate.

Whirling around, Lyric spotted another tentacle on the opposite side of the corridor, this time targeting a mage at the back of the group. Flanked by two paladins, the gnome caster was oblivious to the impending danger. The tentacle struck swiftly, snapping the gnome's neck in an instant before dragging the lifeless body into the shadows. Shockingly, the elf and human paladins beside him remained unaware, even though the gruesome event had occurred just a meter and a half below them and behind their backs.

"Something's ambushing us from the shadows!" Lyric shouted, his voice tinged with urgency.

"Steady yourself, lad," Sir Drin commanded, effortlessly fending off a cluster of undead with a series of graceful slashes. "We may be surrounded, but we've got this under control." He tried to instill some confidence as they steadily advanced deeper into the ruins, the only source of light being a dim blue orb that floated above one of the elven mages.

Fear pervaded Lyric's thoughts as he tried to keep an eye out for the next tentacle attack. But the undead were relentless, giving him no room to focus on anything but the immediate threat in front of him. Forced to continue wielding his mace and shield against the surging wave of skeletons and rotting corpses, Lyric nonetheless remained vigilant, his eyes darting to the ominous shadows whenever he could spare a moment.

“Justicar? Justicar Aelios,” the elven mage with the floating orb called out, spinning in all directions to locate her paladin counterpart. But Lyric already knew what she would find: only darkness and shadows.

“Stay focused, lad,” Sir Drin urged, as he relentlessly drove his sword through the advancing undead.

Suddenly, the corridor plunged into pitch blackness, eliciting a scream from the elven caster. “My mage light! Something’s shattered out my mage light!”

Lyric swung his mace frantically as darkness enveloped them, but to his horror rather than relief, his mace met only air. It was as if the undead had vanished—or worse, pulled back to lie in ambush. Though not a skilled mage by any means, Lyric knew a few spells. They were mostly parlor tricks he used to entertain fellow squires in the barracks, but among them was a minor flame spell. As he continued to swing his weapon ineffectively through the dark, he reached inward to tap into his latent magical abilities. But hesitation seized him. Taking another squelching step on the sticky ground, he reconsidered lighting up the spell; he didn’t want to risk igniting the potentially flammable sludge beneath them. Some fates, he concluded, were worse than others.

“Sir Drin, what do we do now? Can the mage cast another mage light?” Lyric called out into the stifling darkness. Silence was his only answer. “Sir Drin!” he shouted again, his voice tinged with a rising sense of panic. Still, only the oppressive silence met his ears. “Sir Drin? Hello?” he hesitated, gripping his mace tightly. “Anyone?” he finally asked, his voice tinged with desperation. Yet once more, silence reigned, leaving Lyric isolated in the ominous dark.

A soft, whimsical laughter echoed through the darkness, sending a shiver down Lyric’s spine. To his great shame, he lost control of his bowels. “I should let him live,” a voice mused mysteriously in the void. “Why would I want to do that?” the same voice countered, its tone tinged with malevolence. “Because we want my legend to grow,” she answered herself. “Are we concerned about our image?” the voice cooed, laden with a lustful undertone. “No, it’s about reputation,” she clarified. “Ah, yes, I understand now,” she mused. “Dead men tell no tales. I get it. But survivors should also bear a mark,” her voice sang with sadistic delight.

In a state of panic, Lyric frantically swung his mace around, repeatedly shouting, “Sir Drin! Sir Drin!”

Nothing made sense to him; his thoughts kept circling back to The Destroyer. Yet he was too frightened to even utter her name, especially as a woman’s voice continued to cackle ominously from all directions. Startled, he jumped when his back suddenly made contact with a wall. To his horror, even the wall was coated in the mysterious, sticky sludge. Still, Lyric remained pressed against it, quivering behind his shield while holding his mace out before him, prepared to swing at whatever nightmare lurked in the encompassing darkness.

Lyric’s panic surged anew as he felt something constrict around his ankle like a viper. In an instant, he swung his mace down at his own leg. Almost simultaneously, something snaked around him from behind, wrapping around his limbs, waist, and neck, effectively immobilizing him. Despite his terror, he strained to make sense of the situation; he had been so sure that only a stone wall had

been behind him. He froze, every ounce of fight draining from him as a chilling realization wormed its way into his mind. “The sludge,” he whispered, just before even his mouth was constricted by what could only be another tentacle.

As he stiffened, his shield and mace clattering to the ground, Lyric dropped to his knees. In his left ear, he heard haunting yet beautiful laughter. In his right ear, soft breathing sounded, as if struggling to hold back some dark, cardinal desire. “We. Are. Blake,” she cooed into his right ear, while that same voice in his left ear snickered. In that disorienting moment, the tentacles that had been constricting him dissolved abruptly, transforming into a fluid that enveloped his entire body like a tidal wave.

Freed from the tentacles yet coated in the sludge, Lyric found himself with slightly more mobility than he had a moment ago. In a state of desperate panic, he clawed at his face, attempting to remove the substance that was slowly seeping into his nose and mouth, cutting off his airflow. His attempts to cry out only accelerated the sludge’s intrusion into his throat. Just when he thought he was going to suffocate, a new sensation emerged: a burning that spread across his skin and seared his mouth and throat. It wasn’t the burning of fire, he realized, but the corrosive burn of acid. His frantic clawing intensified as he desperately tried to remove the sludge, but his efforts were futile.

“Not too much, we only want to leave a mark,” the woman’s voice cautioned. “Burning off his skin will leave one hell of a mark,” she cackled. “Didn’t I want to leave him alive?” she mused, seemingly questioning herself. “Fine, fine. But let’s at least burn off his nose and lips,” she suggested, practically pleading. “Why?” She seemed genuinely puzzled by her own query. “Imagine the screams he’ll hear when people see him coming,” she chuckled darkly. “That’s just cruel. Besides, you’ll want to keep his ears intact if you want him to hear that,” she added, a note of annoyance coloring her voice. “Ah, yes, you’re right. I should leave those,” she concluded, thinking aloud.

Lyric’s confusion gave way to sheer terror as the woman’s unhinged self-dialogue echoed around him. Meanwhile, his muffled screams continued as the burning sensation intensified, eating away at his flesh, lips, nose, eyes, and even sizzling his tongue. The moments stretched into an eternity for the squire until, at last, he collapsed to the ground. A shallow, ragged breath was the only sign that he still clung to life. At that point, the sludge retreated, leaving Lyric horribly disfigured—a living, breathing warning of the nightmares that lurk in the darkness.



Vanya marched forward with her fellow knights of Slaethia, every step on the loathsome stone surface sending a shiver of revulsion up through her boots. Fueled by a seething anger that narrowed her focus to a singular objective—vanquishing Aurelia—she advanced. Over the past century, many had attempted to achieve this aim. They had come agonizingly close, even succeeding in confining her for a brief time. But that proved to be their undoing. Had they executed her when they had the chance, the current chaos could have been averted. No, they should have ended her existence while the opportunity was ripe.

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.

"Up ahead, there be a zombie still breathin'," Einarr bellowed, lifting his hammer and preparing to charge at the prone creature.

"Undead don't breathe, you fool," Orlaith chided the dwarf champion. "That... That's one of ours," the fire mage champion realized, clasping her hand over her mouth in horror.

Vanya eyed the figure sprawled on the ground and took a quick look around the corridor. Oddly enough, there was no sign of any battle having taken place here. In the soft glow of Orlaith's hovering flame, it was as if something had meticulously cleaned away all traces of corpses and blood from every surface.

"Orlaith, do you think you can heal him?" Gale, the fairy champion, inquired.

"I'm a fire mage; any healing I could attempt would just make things worse," Orlaith responded, purposefully avoiding looking directly at the maimed figure's face. "However, I think I have a spare teleportation stone. It'll send him to the church, where they should be able to help him. Though, healers skilled enough to repair... that level of damage, are rare," she added.

"Ye sure that's a lad?" Einarr blurted out. "I don't see any dingles down there." His eyes widened in shock as a grim thought occurred to him. "Ye don't think they got burnt off too, do ye?" The dwarf gasped, horrified.



I couldn't help but chuckle softly, savoring the electric tension that had filled the air. They were completely in the dark, ridiculously easy to manipulate.

*Do they believe that the dark muck under their feet is just a trivial backdrop?*

They were woefully blind to the peril lurking just beneath the surface. But me and I were delighted in their unawareness; their attention was so captured by the undead that they had neglected to pay heed to their own footing, granting us the perfect opportunity to strike.

As I stumbled into the hall, a wave of euphoria washed over me, culminating in a burst of uncontrollable laughter that reverberated off the walls. But then, almost as quickly as it had arrived, the elation morphed into something far more menacing. My hand shot to my stomach, clutching it as if trying to hold back some indescribable torment brewing within. Dropping to one knee, the disquieting sensation continued to escalate, becoming increasingly incomprehensible with each passing second. Then, out of nowhere, a muffled sound escaped. I looked around in mortification,

praying no one had heard the unfortunate noise. “Oh no, please tell me Aurelia didn’t hear that,” I whispered to myself, aghast at my unintentional emission that resembled a struggling lawnmower.

As the portal widened enough for people to pass through, I felt a wave of dark elation wash over me at the sight of their frenzied attempts to escape. And the best part? No one had noticed my minor faux pas as I regained my posture. Those who were close enough to the portal shoved their way toward the opening, each person jockeying for position to flee from the looming peril.

Despite the urgency, I found myself lingering at the edge of the crowd, my hand clutching my stomach as though harboring a secret delight—or perhaps a hidden nightmare. A tempting notion swirled in my thoughts: the audacious idea of abandoning everyone else and seizing both the core and the portal for my own ends.

The prospect of their anguished screams, the heart-wrenching cries of children, and the collective pleas for mercy only amplified my twisted exhilaration. The portal’s opening, barely as wide as a car door, made it glaringly clear that not everyone would escape this nightmarish scenario. However, I was steadfast in ensuring that Aurelia would be among the fortunate few. Yet, a shattered fragment of my soul held me back, particularly when my eyes fell upon a young rabbit-girl crying out for her missing father.

The knights were fast approaching, the air thick with tangible fear. But for me, it was just another intoxicating moment to bask in the glorious chaos.



# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 27

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### SACRIFICE

Rob surveyed the chaos around him, with screams and shouts merging into a cacophonous symphony of terror. As people scrambled and pushed to get through the portal, aiming to evade the advancing knights, Rob felt an urge contrasting Blake and Jason's thirst for violence. He desired heroism, to triumph against the seemingly unbeatable odds.

In the throngs before him—the injured, the poor, and those desperate to escape—he recognized a dormant part of himself that had been silent since arriving in this reality. It could be a longing for power or an attempt to compensate for what he viewed as his inadequacies. But whatever spurred this feeling, he now had a renewed sense of purpose. He might not be their designated Champion, but he would defend them. Taking on the stance of a steadfast Paladin, Rob was geared up for whatever terrors the other side had in store.

With unwavering resolve, Rob moved to secure the immense doors. However, before he could act, three colossal stone figures emerged, sending shivers down his spine. With the dungeon's collapse, the dungeon bosses had been unshackled, yet these three had chosen to align with the Crone's cause. It was uncertain if they could withstand the impending assault, but Rob was grateful for their alliance.

Taking a brief respite, Rob studied his dark-green-tinted fist, momentarily contemplating his half-orc heritage. While his status remained silent on the specifics on the other half of his ancestry, the pointed nature of his ears suggested elven lineage, perhaps even drow. As he delved into his own musings, a fleeting gleam from the shadowy corridor jolted him back to the present. In this oppressive gloom, even the dimmest sparkle served as a beacon.

Suddenly, a ferocious blaze roared around him. Rob let out a defiant cry, hoisting his immense, spartan-esque shield to protect the innocent behind him. The sheer force of the flames drove him backward, and he struggled to keep his footing as the blistering inferno assailed him.

“[IMPREGNABLE],” Rob bellowed!

Summoning a skill he'd gained after the class change from his respawn, several octagon-shaped barriers flickered into existence around him. A protective sphere of pure mana encased him, stabilizing his stance against the push of the flames. In gaming terms, Rob understood his new role in this alternate reality – he was the tank! He was resolved not to waver in shielding those relying on him.

Behind him, the frantic cries intensified as the panicked tried to squeeze through the narrow portal. Amidst the mounting turmoil, Rob remained steadfast, standing firm against the scorching

onslaught. The assault was relentless, but Rob’s determination was unwavering. As the bastion of hope, he wouldn’t be moved. Yet, as the fiery tempest continued, he felt the weight of its might.

TITLE AWARDED  
**DEFENDER OF THE FORGOTTEN**  
*DREAMS ARISE ONTO NIGHTMARES AND NIGHTMARES FADE ONTO DREAMS.*

Rob’s eyes widened in shock from the unexpected notification. Clenching his teeth, he hissed, “Status,” calling forth his interface. It might not have been the ideal time, but his gamer instincts urgently compelled him to check.

<b>NAME:</b> ARNO <b>RACE:</b> HALF-ORC  <b>CLASS:</b> NIGHTMARE PALADIN <b>LEVEL:</b> 57 <u>TITLES</u> <b>DEFENDER OF THE FORGOTTEN</b>		
<u>RACIAL SKILLS</u> <b>[BULKING MIGHT]</b>  <u>SPELLS</u> <b>[RAISE UNDEAD]</b> <b>[NECROTIC FLAME]</b> <b>[IMPREGNABLE]</b>	<u>ABILITIES</u> <b>[POLYGLOT]</b> <b>[DEFENDER]</b>  <u>VULNERABILITIES</u> <b>[HOLY]</b>	<u>RESISTANCES</u> <b>[DARKNESS]</b> <b>[MILD POISON]</b> <b>[LOW COLD]</b> <b>[HIGH FIRE]</b> <b>[MILD FEAR]</b>

Glancing over his status, the first thing he saw was his name. While he was born ‘Arno’, everyone just called him ‘Rob’. Pushing past that, his eyes landed on a new Title that wasn’t there before: “**Defender of the Forgotten.**” Curious, he gave it a mental click to select it.

**[DEFENDER OF THE FORGOTTEN]**  
  
 ALL DEFENSIVE MAGICS SWELL IN STRENGTH WHEN GUARDING THE DEFENSELESS.  
  
TYPE  
**TITLE**  
  
ACTIVATION  
**PASSIVE**

Rob nearly let his barrier falter in sheer astonishment. He hadn’t anticipated that Titles would function akin to skills. Once this battle concluded, he would have to confer with his friends to determine if they too had made such a discovery or possessed such abilities. But such musings would have to wait. At this moment, Rob’s unwavering resolve was to shield those nearby. The safety of the innocent teetered precariously, and he was resolute in his commitment not to fail them.

Amidst the turmoil, a serene voice resonated. “[DEATH BOLT],” it declared, as though it were a mere triviality.

Rob’s eyes narrowed, and he caught a glimpse of Jeremy’s hand, now crackling with a malevolent surge of darkness. An eldritch energy, consuming every speck of light it touched, erupted and surged down the corridor with a hunger all its own.

As the surge of dark energy waned, the fire’s overwhelming heat ebbed away, offering the Nightmare Paladin, a momentary reprieve in the midst of turmoil. Once stifling and thick, the air settled into a deceptive calm that belied the intensity of the conflict that had just transpired. A soothing sense of relief cascaded over Rob, calming his taut nerves. Yet, at that moment, the last vestiges of strength deserted him, and his battered form crumpled to the cold, unforgiving ground. The void of unconsciousness engulfed him, leaving him at the mercy of the harsh, brutal reality they had been summoned into.

With a surge of adrenaline, Jeremy rapidly gripped the unconscious orc by the back of his armor, hauling him toward the portal. Rob had achieved his objective, safeguarding the chamber’s inhabitants during their frantic exodus, leaving only a handful of stragglers scrambling to escape. However, they knew they couldn’t withstand another barrage of magical force like the previous one.

Without any cue, the trio of erstwhile stone floor bosses barreled down the hallway, steeling themselves for a brutal face-to-face confrontation with their enemies. The atmosphere buzzed with suspense, the sheer gravity of the situation inescapable. Their valiant actions aimed to secure precious moments for the remaining individuals to traverse the portal, eluding the lethal clutches of their unyielding opponents.



Vanya watched with a sardonic smile as Orlaith unleashed a relentless ten-minute torrent of flames, powerful enough to rival a dragon’s breath, down the corridor. Once Orlaith depletes her mana, they’ll nonchalantly saunter through the scorched remains of any survivors, decapitate Aurelia if she managed to cling to life, seize the Dungeon Core, and merrily depart, sporting a new necklace crafted from Aurelia’s fangs. The sacrifice of the other regimen of knights, paladins, mages, and squires was a regrettable, yet tolerable cost for their victory. Vanya had expected an epic confrontation; however, they were met with a laughably feeble resistance.

In a shocking twist, wicked and malevolent magic raced down the corridor, aimed directly at them. The dark force slammed into Orlaith, propelling her violently backward through the air. Before anyone could assess her condition, the thundering approach of a few somethings echoed through the hallway. Illuminated only by the faint red glow of the molten stone lining the corridor, the unfolding sight seemed inconceivable. Three colossal stone figures charged toward them, bearing down with incredible speed.

As the colossal stone figures rapidly closed the distance, Vanya instinctively raised her sword and channeled holy magic, creating a barrier to protect her companions. Orlaith, still reeling from the initial impact of the dark magic, struggled to her feet, gritting her teeth in determination. She focused her remaining mana into her hands, igniting fierce flames that danced and crackled around her fingers.

Einarr, clad in his myrthril armor, charged forward with his massive war hammer, smashing into the first stone statue with all his might. The impact sent a web of cracks across its surface, but the relentless monstrosity continued its advance. Galen, the dwarf-sized fairy Champion, wove a gale of wind around the second statue, attempting to slow its progress. He also sent healing magic toward Orlaith, easing her pain and replenishing her energy.

Orlaith, now rejuvenated, launched a flaming assault on the third stone statue. Hotter than a volcano, the fire seared the stone's surface, gradually weakening its structure. Vanya, meanwhile, slashed at the first statue with her sword, imbued with holy energy, cleaving off chunks of stone with each blow. Despite their efforts, the statues continued their relentless advance, forcing the party to fight on the defensive.

With a gleeful madness dancing in his eyes, Einarr hoisted his colossal war hammer and slammed it into the first statue. The force of the blow shattered the stone guardian into a thousand jagged shards, each piece reflecting the dim glow of molten stone. Orlaith, her lips twisted into a mocking grin, unleashed a torrent of unrelenting fire upon the third statue, reducing it to a seething puddle of magma.

Galen, his demeanor calm and collected amidst the chaos, summoned the full force of his wind magic upon the second and final remaining statue. The whirlwind enveloped the stone behemoth, growing more violent and chaotic with each passing moment. The air shrieked and wailed, an orchestration of annihilation, as the maelstrom tore the monstrosity to pieces.

As the last remnants of the stone guardian crumbled to the ground, the cavernous chamber resonated with the sinister echoes of maniacal laughter and scornful scoffs from Orlaith and Einarr. Ever the stoic hero, Galen surveyed the scene with quiet satisfaction, his sense of duty unwavering in the face of the darkness surrounding them. The sight of their vanquished foes only heightened the twisted elation of the others. Einarr and Orlaith's faces contorted in a perverse blend of delight and madness. Together, the group reveled in the palpable atmosphere of dread that now permeated the depths of the dungeon, fueling their dark, manipulative sense of superiority.



Well, color me impressed! Big ol' Rob pulled a superhero act out there! I mean, who knew the big green lug had it in him to eat that much magic and still stand? Even yours truly might've been toasted. But hey, now's not the time for applause. We need to hightail it outta here before flame-crazy down there decides it's time for round two. I threw a quick side-eye at my sexy vampire lady noticing she's still all zoned in—Dungeon Core, portal business, the whole shebang. I then noticed

that oddball kid who called me ‘Mommy’ (or ‘Mummy’...who knows with kids?) managed to scoot through. Despite everything, ensuring Aurelia’s safety was, of course, of my utmost importance.

“Aurelia, we need to leave,” I urged her.

Regrettably, she shook her head. “I’m sorry, my beloved, but you’ll have to go on without me.”

“Dream on!” I shot back, quickly surveying the room. Only a few folks were left hanging around. Jeremy was lugging the out-cold Rob towards the portal, and I spotted Heather, Yua, and Jason already making their getaway.

A crimson streak marred Aurelia’s cheek as she gazed into my eyes. “I can’t transport the Dungeon Core through a portal it’s sustaining, and I won’t allow them to take it back. Possessing it would enable them to reopen the portal to the exact location I selected, and I can’t bear the thought of them killing you. No, my love, I’ve gambled too much to bring you back, but your well-being means more to me than my own. Please, go!”

“Are you kidding me?!” My brain went into overdrive, a messy cocktail of confusion and rage. *What’s she on about with this ‘gambling too much to bring me back’ business?* Regardless, both fragments of my splintered soul adored her, even if understanding the exact reason seemed elusive.

*We can’t just stand by and watch her fall.*

*Duh! Over our dead body!*

The ruckus of steel meeting stone reverberated from the hallway, but my brain was doing somersaults. Ditching Aurelia wasn’t in the cards for me. Odd, given I’m usually not the caring type. But there I was, a hot mess of fury, panic, and confusion, all thanks to those hypnotic blood-red peepers of hers.

In this strange new world, I’d turned into a creature of chaos, loving every wild second. So, why’d this one gorgeous vampire get me all twisted up inside? Before she yanked me into this reality, we were strangers. But man, the moment I got a look at her? Wham! It’s like she put a spell on my heart. Even with my noggin and soul all shattered and jumbled, I was still head over heels for her. No way was I letting anything happen to her on my watch!

“Please, my beloved,” Aurelia implored. “Enter the portal at once, lest you become trapped here with me.”

“Aye, would ya look at that, a vamp with a tender heart,” scoffed a dwarf clad in shimmering silver armor. He sported a helmet resembling a stereotypical Valkyrie. He also had a magnificent red beard that I begrudgingly admired—I instantly hated him.

A squadron of troops trailed the dwarf into the room, and it became crystal clear that they mustn’t touch Aurelia. The portal beckoned, with her desperate eyes silently imploring me to seek refuge through its shimmering gateway. I ached to shout at her, to rebuff her silent plea! To add to the turmoil, a gut-wrenching pain threatened to bring me to my knees, urging tears to flow until oblivion took over. What a wretched day this had turned out to be!

I locked eyes with my lovely Aurelia and mouthed, “I’m sorry.”

In a blur, my arms transformed into writhing tentacles faster than any could register. One coiled protectively around Aurelia’s slender midsection, while its twin secured the Dungeon Core. Pivoting with determination, I hoisted her into the air, our eyes ensnared in a mutual gaze.

“Don’t do this,” she cried out.

Ignoring her plea, I propelled her through the portal. As she disappeared into the opening, I stashed the core into Stellar Void—safe and well beyond the reach of our foes. But as the core vanished, the portal followed suit, stranding me with the knights.

A blood-curdling scream came out from that Paladin that had killed Wartie. “You bitch! She killed my husband, and now you stole from me my revenge!”

With the shadow of impending doom looming, I couldn’t help but get in one last zinger, “Oh, by the way, it wasn’t Aurelia who snuffed out your precious hubby. That was all me,” I boasted, flashing a monstrous smirk that only my morphed form could truly pull off.

The Paladin’s scream pierced the air again as she raised her sword high. Every wave of holy magic emanating from it made my skin coil in agony. I wasn’t one for self-sacrifice or heroism; no, I relished in the sadistic pleasure of tormenting others. Why I was acting this way was beyond me, but it felt just about right in my twisted noggin. Ready to embrace my death, I was about to clinch my eyes shut when ginger-beard over there shot up his hand to stop her.

*Ugh, my guts.*

I couldn’t help but wince.

They were having a proper fit in there. Seriously, I had a sneaky suspicion something was off for a hot minute, but snatching that Dungeon Core? It was like pouring gasoline on a dumpster fire of indigestion. *What’s a girl gotta do to catch a break?*

I stared Vanya down, her eyes blazing with a mix of malice and determination. The tension between us was palpable, a crackling energy that begged to be unleashed. My black, gothic dress shifted restlessly, ready to lash out in the form of tentacles at the slightest provocation. Though I could still use magic, accessing it through the system was out of the question. “Damn it, Circe,” I muttered, rolling my eyes.

Defying the dwarf’s command, the Paladin sprang into action, her motions a blur of precision and power. Vanya, bee-lined right at me, sword slicing the air like it’s some high-stakes cooking show—with me on the chopping block. And that holy magic? Feels like the worst possible combo of a sunburn and an existential crisis. But I wasn’t about to be outdone. My dress morphed—superhero-style—into these aggressive tendrils, responding with a might that would have lesser foes scurrying. And amidst the chaos, there’s me—I mean, me. You know, two souls thingy—cheering in my head with that twisted glee of ours. Part of me reveled in the madness; the drama, the adrenaline, the sheer thrill of it. But deep down, a somber realization lingered: this could very well be our curtain call.

In the thick of it all, my brain went haywire trying to keep pace with that Paladin. And guess what? In my *'Oh snap!'* moment, I whipped out my Necrotic Flame spell—both ambient casting style and system-assisted. I mean, I felt all legit sorceress-y and stuff. Though, to be real, the system probably just threw me off my game since it wasn't quite working for me. And, just my luck, when I let the spell fly? Epic fail. A firework displays of Necrotic Fire decided my arm was the main event, blasting it off into splatters of black gloop.

Gritting my teeth through the pain, the dwarf intervened, stepping between Vanya and me. His imposing presence brought our twisted dance of my death to a halt. His eyes, filled with anger and authority, demanded that we stand down, putting an end to the battle. Both of my souls fell silent, and I couldn't help but feel a sense of impending doom.

A new figure entered the chamber, a woman adorned in a splendid dress crafted from mesmerizing reflective red scales. In my former life, dresses never held much appeal. Still, they'd become a newfound fascination in this bizarre existence, and I adored hers. Yet, the woman appeared to be clutching her shoulder, nursing what seemed like a minor injury. Given the absence of any blood scent, I could only assume it to be minor.

"We need to get out of here," I told myself.

"Uh, genius idea, but how?" I shot back.

"Wha' sort of creature might ye be?" The dwarf inquired.

"Ever have that nightmare you can't shake off? That's me," I smirked at him, mischief dancing in my eyes.

"Ha! I've taken a likin' to this creature," the dwarf chuckled heartily.

"Enough of this nonsense. We should eliminate the creature and retrieve the core from its lifeless corpse," a man no taller than the dwarf asserted. His stature was no hindrance to his superiority, as the dragonfly-like wings extending from his back set him apart from the others.

Yet, before anyone could carry out any murderous intentions, I crumpled to my knees, clutching my abdomen. The inexplicable affliction that gripped me intensified. Its ferocity surpassed anything I had ever experienced. My body seemed to bubble and churn as if I were being boiled from within. A searing agony extended throughout my entire form. It felt as though I was being consumed by a ravenous inferno!

"What's happening to that thing?" asked some random knight I couldn't be bothered to care about.

I could sense the holy magic from Paladin Anlyth coalescing into a lethal strike that would end my suffering. Whether motivated by mercy or vengeance, I couldn't tell. Yet, her assault never materialized as my chest burst open, unveiling a glowing golden circle no larger than a small bracelet. Ah, it was the ring of holding the Paladin's husband had been wearing around his impressively large junk. She also seemed to recognize it, her eyes widening in what could only be terror.

“The imbecile held a pocket dimension within another pocket dimension,” screeched the woman in the red dress. “FLEE!”

The ring dangled within my torn-open chest, its glow escalating with every second as it began to whirl with a sinister aura. Simultaneously, a thunderous hum amplified, reaching a deafening roar as the knights stumbled over one another in a frantic effort to flee. As for me, the pain ceased once the ring was extracted from Stellar Void. I remained motionless, smiling throughout, knowing Aurelia was out of harm’s way.

“I think this must be love,” I whispered.

“Without a doubt,” I nodded.



From a distance, Olin’s eyes fixed upon the swarming armada of airships that had hemmed in the ruins, the last sanctuary of his mistress. The once impenetrable protective barrier was now nowhere in sight. Doubts clouded his mind; had she truly escaped the inevitable? The thought that the creature which held his phylactery might fall filled him with a creeping dread: his tether to this realm could snap.

Drawing a sharp breath, Olin braced himself against the creeping anxiety. Then, it came—a surge of mana so intense that it dwarfed the Way Stone’s explosion. Airships were swept away by the ensuing shockwave like toys, with many plunging towards the ground below. Above, a titanic mushroom cloud dominated the sky. Yet, just as the cataclysm unfolded, darkness claimed Olin. He felt a sudden wrenching sensation as his very soul was torn from General Ezad Anlyth’s form.



# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 28

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### THE EPILOGUES

“Please, don’t do this! I’m begging you, please, let me go,” cried a simple peasant girl, her wrists bound tightly by chains.

Lord Demidicus, the ancient vampire, regarded the pitiable human at the ritual’s heart with growing impatience. While she was a lamentable sight, dressed in tattered rags with wild hair and an unmistakable stink, his concerns lay elsewhere. He had initiated the summoning ritual multiple times, and that wretched demoness should’ve already vacated the previous girl’s body, allowing him to resummon her.

“Why the delay?” he seethed.

As his frustration peaked, his gaze still lingered on the girl, wondering if she was in her twenties or even forties. Estimating the age of these short-lived races was always challenging, unlike the elves, whose true age was visible within the mana of their eyes.

The room’s atmosphere grew thick with a palpable surge of mana, causing candles to flicker and die in rapid succession. As the candlelight dimmed, a creeping frost began to outline the summoning circle, drawing nearer to the girl within its confines. Her desperate cries echoed louder, her voice trembling with terror and hopelessness. From the room’s darkest corner, Lord Demidicus’s eyes gleamed, a wicked smile barely visible beneath his hood.

His lips curled into a knowing smirk. “At last,” he murmured, sensing the imminent grand entrance of his prized servant.

Cold pulses radiated through the room, each driving the encroaching frost closer to the captive. As it neared, her voice faltered, the weight of despair finally silencing her pleas. She crumpled inward, wrapping herself protectively against the inevitable, a stark contrast to the towering statues of bravery found in tales of old. Lord Demidicus sneered at the sight; such feebleness was all too familiar and ever nauseating. Contrary to what one might assume, the room’s icy embrace wasn’t a product of any summoning magic. Instead, it was the clear sign of the entity drawing every shred of warmth and mana, leaving only cold desolation in its wake.

The snuffed-out candles flared suddenly, their flames defiantly reaching for the crypt’s oppressive ceiling. The girl, momentarily muted by the cold’s retreat, gasped audibly. Driven by an unseen force, she stood, eyes drilling into the ancient vampire, her smile dripping malevolence. From pale flesh to an ethereal shade of gray, her transformation began. Her hair, now a vivid pink cascade, trailed down her back. From her spine, wings unfurled, and a sinuous tail trailed behind her, moving with a mind of its own. As horns crowned her head, her form shifted, contours becoming

more pronounced, an exaggerated silhouette that drew a gleam of approval from Lord Demidicus. Though she remained draped in the remnants of the girl's attire, he could almost visualize her in the leather ensemble he had meticulously chosen.

"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.

Niamh let out a languid sigh, raising her hand and angling it to catch the dim light on her talon-like nails. She took a moment, clearly savoring the sight, before allowing her gaze to slide over to Lord Demidicus. "Your daughter?" She mused, the corner of her lips curling wickedly. "She seemed rather... busy escaping the last time I laid eyes on her."

Lord Demidicus' eyes sharpened, his voice dropping low, his impatience palpable. "The girl is of no consequence right now. Tell me of the abomination she called forth."

Niamh's lips curled into a sly smirk as she recalled the creature. "Ah, the Black Pudding? It didn't just survive the trials, My Lord. It thrived." She paused, a hint of rage flicked in her eyes for a brief second. "And the most intriguing part? It's learned to don a guise quite... human."

His voice dripped with venom as he spat out the words, "That accursed goddess! Has she chosen that abomination as her Champion?"

The corners of Niamh's lips stretched further, her grin darkening. "It seems the creature failed the trial," she mused with malevolent delight.

"What?! How does it still live?"

The succubus leaned forward, her voice dripping with amusement. "Seems the Crone chose to adopt the beast as her very own offspring."

The vampire lord roared, his voice echoing through the chamber. "Blasted deity! Curse the Crone!"

As the echoes of his rage faded, the chamber stood still for a moment.

Hours later, the atmosphere had shifted considerably...

In the shadowed sanctuary, veiled by the third-afternoon sun, the muted whisper of silks and the occasional hiss of discontent rippled through the western coven. Vampires draped themselves across luxurious furnishings, some deeply ensconced in sleep, while others exchanged knowing glances and secretive smiles. The presence of a new Grand Elder had certainly stirred the pot.

Across the dimly lit room, two elders, their eyes aglow with anticipation, exchanged clandestine notes, while a younger member, not yet seasoned in the art of subterfuge, watched keenly, hungry to join the game. Vampires lived for this – the silent orchestra of deceit, the high of a successful coup, and the thrill of trading favors in the shadows.

Contrastingly, tales from the eastern covens spoke of them mingling with other creatures – a practice looked down upon in this part of the realm. Here, cunning and raw ambition were the coin

of the realm, and many, especially the younger members, were eager to spend it. Today, as with most days, dreams of power played out behind closed eyes, as ambitions bubbled just below the surface.

In the dim corridors of the coven, the name “Lord Demidicus” was spoken in hushed tones, almost reverently. But, it was the mention of “Aurelia” that would cause heads to turn and eyes to narrow. An elder, recounting tales to the younger ones, would speak of the unnaturally cold gaze of the ancient vampire and how it was rumored he’d traded his daughter’s very soul for something darker, something more unforgiving.

As two members met under an archway, their conversation would momentarily lower, their expressions wary. “He’d fit right in here, wouldn’t he?” one would muse, their voice dripping with both admiration and apprehension.

“Have you heard about Aurelia’s original soul?” another might whisper, eyes darting around to ensure no prying ears were nearby.

“I’ve heard things,” a third would interject, glancing nervously over their shoulder, “but we must be careful. Walls here have ears... and memories.”

Everyone knew to tread lightly on such topics, for while gossip was a coveted currency, it could also be a deadly weapon in the wrong hands. And within the coven’s crypts, shadows didn’t just darken the room; they listened.

The crypt’s silence shattered by a blinding flash, its glow illuminating even the deepest recesses. The previously still air buzzed with the energy of the awakened enchantments, a stark contrast to the comfortable lethargy moments ago.

Vampires, abruptly torn from their dreams, flung open the doors of their chambers, cloaks billowing behind them. Their eyes, usually calm, now burned with alarm and curiosity. The rhythmic thumping of their boots echoed as they rushed, drawn like moths to the allure of the Grand Hall.

As they entered the cavernous chamber, an unusual spectacle met their gaze. A small breach in the wall, illuminated by an eerie glow, served as a portal for a myriad of creatures. Wide-eyed orcs, anxious goblins, bewildered humans, and restless wargs flowed through, each as disoriented as the next.

One of the older vampires, his robe draped elegantly around him, whispered to his companion with a hint of mischief, “Like a feast presenting itself on our doorstep.”

His friend, a more youthful-looking vampire with sharp features, smirked in agreement, “Let’s not be rude. We should welcome our guests.”

Neither made a move, merely watching with gleaming eyes as the unwitting banquet continued to pour in.

As Lord Demidicus, accompanied by his pet demon, strolled into the chamber, a small cadre of vampires and three Elders followed closely behind. The gleaming red eyes beneath his cowl hinted

at recognition, and to those who observed, it suggested the Grand Elder was familiar with the unexpected guests. While many vampires concealed their irritation, wary of showing their hand too soon, the succubus's self-satisfied smirk did not go unnoticed, drawing more than a few curious glances.

The chamber swelled with newcomers pouring in from the portal, a mix of relief and terror echoed in their cries. Many looked around, only to meet the hungry gaze of vampires, their fangs glistening in anticipation. Yet amidst the clamor, a dark elf of notable stature advanced, tightly holding a young beastkin—a hare descendant—by her side.

Stepping confidently forward, the dark elf proclaimed, "I am the voice of the Crone, her Priestess of Dreams. We seek sanctuary from the Kingdom of Slaethia. Under the alliance of the dark gods, you are bound to accept us." Yet, for all her bravado, it was evident that she was merely a conduit, voicing the insistent whispers of the goddess in her mind.

The esteemed Grand Elder stepped forward, his every move watched intently by the room's vampires, all hungry for any hint of a misstep. For them, any sign of frailty in Lord Demidicus would be a golden opportunity to be seized, another card to play in their endless games of political intrigue. Though age afforded him the right to lead by the law of their kind, he was still an outsider here. The vampires knew that all they needed was time, patience, and covert alliances with like-minded conspirators. Yet, in this shadowy dance, trust was the rarest currency; no vampire would ever risk revealing their true ambitions.

"By the edicts of our dark gods, we grant you sanctuary upon these lands, but not within this sanctum. Remember, the western covens bow to the Serpent, not the Crone." With those words, Lord Demidicus turned away from the Priestess, casting a clandestine nod to his demonic pet.

Niamh's grin widened, pointing her long, clawed finger at the Priestess. "Take her and her five trial candidates to the dungeon. And if the Black Pudding dares to step through that portal, destroy it on sight."

Outraged shouts erupted in the Grand Hall as vampires darted from the shadows, seizing Heather, Yua, Sophia, Jeremy, and Rob. The commotion was quickly muted. Jason, however, deftly vanished into the shadows, evading capture. In spite of their trials, even those bound for the dungeon refrained from protesting. The cavernous room was now filled with muffled cries from those who took solace in their unexpected sanctuary, punctuated only by the soft tread of the last few arrivals through the portal.

The final stragglers stepped through, but an electric tension held the chamber, as if everyone anticipated a predator on the heels of the prey. Without warning, Aurelia shot from the portal, as if thrust by unseen hands. She landed in a crouch and, with a battle cry echoing her fury, made a desperate dash back to the portal. But as her fingers were mere inches from its shimmering surface, it blinked out of existence. Trapping her.

Before anyone could blink, Lord Demidicus was at her side, his movements eerily swift. And while his presence was commanding, all eyes were irresistibly drawn to the ruby trails marking her face, each drop a testament to her vulnerability—and a promise of future power plays.

With a slow, deliberate movement, the Grand Elder drew back his dark cowl just enough for his gleaming fangs to catch the light. “Ah, daughter,” his words oozed with satisfaction, “it is good to see you still alive.”

“Father,” Aurelia’s voice held determination even as she struggled to push past the revulsion the title evoked, “we must reopen the portal and counterattack our enemies.” Her eyes, however, held a softness - a testament to the love she harbored for her beloved.

“Ridiculous,” he snapped, voice cold as the chambers around them. “I raised you better than that. Slaethia lies on the continent’s other side. They would first have to wage wars on neighboring kingdoms before even thinking of us. And risking their air fleet? It would expose this moon to external threats. We won’t engage them further,” he concluded, the authority in his voice brooking no argument.

“The Crone’s daughter is trapped on the other side,” Aurelia raged.

Lord Demidicus’s voice rang out with such ferocity that the very air in the room seemed to quiver, “ENOUGH!” He took a moment to let his words sink in, his eyes flashing dangerously. “She is not the Crone’s ‘daughter.’ She’s nothing more than a lost soul that witch of a goddess has whimsically favored. Our allegiance now lies with the western covens and their chosen deity, the Serpent. All worship, all reverence for the Crone, is henceforth forbidden within these walls! Have I made myself perfectly clear?”

The weight of Aurelia’s disbelief hung in the air, every syllable dripping with disdain. “You cannot be serious.”

“Child,” Lord Demidicus’s voice was a razor-edged whisper, “do not tempt my forbearance.” His piercing gaze locked onto hers, chilling the room. “Remember, replacing your soul once proved effortless; I can just as easily find a more obedient successor.”

Her gaze, fierce and unwavering, clashed with his. Even though her frame was smaller, her defiant posture emanated a powerful resilience that made her presence equally intimidating. Yet, amidst this standoff, Lord Demidicus’s sharp eyes detected the absence of the ring he’d once bestowed upon her. His expression contorted, and the barely perceptible tightening of his fingers betrayed his mounting fury.

“Where is the ring?” His words dripping with venomous malice, his eyes ignited with a rage that seemed to set the very air around him aflame.

The room’s vampires held their breath, eyes darting between the two figures, awaiting the next explosive move.

Aurelia didn’t flinch, meeting his intensity head-on. “I lost it,” she declared, her tone steady as steel. Holding steadfast resolve, she was well aware that any further display of vulnerability would be her downfall. She wouldn’t let herself be diminished in her elder’s shadow. As Lord Demidicus’s features twisted with wrath, he moved to strike her. Yet, in a blur of movement, she intercepted his wrist, halting his assault. “Don’t you ever lay a hand on me,” she hissed, her eyes flashing angrily.

The opportunistic vampires in the room shifted uneasily, reminiscent of wild dogs scenting fresh prey. Others watched in stunned silence, their eyes wide with surprise; never before had they witnessed someone defy an ancient so brazenly.

Lord Demidicus, however, revealed an approving grin. He turned from his dauntless daughter to address a figure standing behind the gathering crowd, one who dwarfed the surrounding vampires. His grin was one of malevolent promise. “As you can see, Duke Lysander, I have kept my word.”

Duke Lysander stepped forward, and as he did, the few hundred refugees who were gathered behind Aurelia trembled with fear for his eyes shimmered with sadistic delight. “It’s an honor to finally meet my future bride.”



Einarr heaved, pushing away debris as he staggered upright, pain lancing through his frame. The sky above mocked him with its serenity—a bright blue that stood in cruel contrast to the chaos below. His armor, combined with his skills, had saved him from the worst, but he wasn’t without injury. His gaze fell to his grotesquely mangled arm, where molten mithril had seared into his very flesh and bone. Doubt plagued him. Could any healer salvage it, or would amputation be the only way?

His only solace lay in the skills of High Priest Neizar, a rare figure among healers who could regrow lost limbs—a skill typically beyond the reach of common healers, but seemingly routine for the twisted beings of the dark races. Anger bubbled up within Einarr at the sheer injustice he faced.

As Einarr surveyed the wreckage, he noticed the scarcity of airships overhead. A terrible omen. His eyes then caught sight of Champion Galen, hovering in the air with ease, unscathed. “Lucky fairy bastard,” Einarr grumbled as he searched for his war hammer, ready for whatever else this cursed place had in store for him.

A small cough drew Einarr’s attention to a pile of rubble, and with a mighty effort, he pushed aside the debris to reveal Orlaith. She was in terrible shape, with half her face seemingly melting off and her left arm missing. It was clear to Einarr that Orlaith would have perished if not for the corpse lying atop her, evidence that Paladin Anlyth had sacrificed her life to save a Champion.

“Oi, I need ya ta get yer pretty lil’ arse down ‘ere an’ take Orlaith ta th’ ‘igh Priest,” bellowed the dwarf.

Galen, his wings fluttering, gazed down at the injured Orlaith. “I can’t spot the Swift Sentinel among the surviving vessels overhead,” he said with a heavy heart. “Though that ship has the unique ability to self-repair, thanks to the living tree at its core. For now, our best bet is to give her a potion and hope one of the few vessels still aloft comes down to our aid.”

“Wid a potion?! Ye can’t be serious! She’s missin’ a blood arm, and one of her legs ain’t much better. If I give her a potion, the High Priest will have a damn of a toime repairin’ the damage done,” Einarr yelled back.

Galen’s heart sank as he made his descent, alighting beside his stricken allies. “This was more than a mere mana explosion,” he began, his voice steeped in sorrow. “We’re facing an event of unmatched magnitude. The thick mana permeating the air, coupled with the state of Orlaith’s injuries, will obstruct even High Priest Neizar’s formidable magic. Even my own healing spells won’t pierce through this dense miasma of mana. I fear for the survivors.”

His fairy eyes blazed with fury as he recounted the origin of the devastation. “That creature planned this meticulously,” he spat, his voice dripping with loathing. “She patiently amassed power, creating a pocket dimension within another, biding her moment. By harnessing the Dungeon Core’s power, she executed her sinister plan, leading to a blast unparalleled in this realm.” The ambient air vibrated with lingering mana, echoing the enormity of the cataclysm. Amidst this nightmare, Galen recognized that the journey forward would be riddled with peril and heartache.

Einarr’s face twisted with anguish as he pulled a healing potion from his bag of holding. Heavy-hearted, he administered the elixir to Orlaith. The potion would spare her life, but it would also seal her fate, leaving her scarred and deformed.

With a resigned exhale, he consumed one himself, the very idea of bearing irreversible scars gnawing at his pride. While waiting for the High Priest might have been a potential choice, Galen’s words echoed in his mind. If their current reality was as bleak as the fairy had suggested, delaying was pointless. He could only hope they’d find a path to restoration in the days to come.

From over a hundred kilometers away, Craycroft staggered to his feet, pain sharp as a splinter pierced his skin. Around him, the Swift Sentinel was nothing but a twisted, gnarled wreck, lost amidst the charred vestiges of a once-verdant forest. Trees lay uprooted and broken, their limbs contorted in grotesque angles. The scene made the wizard’s flesh prickle with unease.

“Wot in the name o’ all tha’s holy happened?” Gimona spat, pushing herself up from the wreckage.

“Mana detonation,” Craycroft replied grimly.

Gimona shook her head in disbelief. “I’ve nivr seen a mana detonation do sumthin’ loik this.”

Craycroft remained silent for a moment, his eyes scanning the wreckage for any sign of life. And then, with a cold, calculating edge to his voice, he asked, “Where’s the High Priest?” The question hung in the air like a sickening, foul stench, a harbinger of something terrible to come.

Navigating cautiously through the wreckage, Craycroft and Gimona soon stumbled upon a crumpled figure amid the devastation. It was the High Priest, battered and bleeding, sprawled like a forgotten ragdoll amid the contorted metal and splintered wood. His once resplendent white and gold robes were torn to shreds, unveiling gashes that leaked crimson onto the scorched soil. Kneeling beside him, Craycroft discerned a faint pulse, a delicate whisper of life amidst the groans and creaks echoing from the fractured landscape.

“He’s alive,” he muttered, his tone grim. “But we need to find a healer before he joins the legions of the dead.”

With a sense of foreboding, they hoisted the High Priest onto a flat surface. Alone in the aftermath, they could only pray to the Gods of Light. Their last hope rested on the Swift Sentinel’s core and its fabled ability to regrow and repair itself.



“Awaken, my precious child; the moment is upon us,” a voice murmured, soft and soothing as a distant song. As her eyes fluttered open, she was embraced by a realm of awe and mystique. The heavens above dazzled with countless hues, each cloud seeming to pulse with life and exuberance. Absent were sorrow or dread, hurt or anguish – in their stead, elation and anticipation swelled within her. Here, fantasies took breath, and all boundaries dissolved.

However, amidst the awe, a curious unease nestled in her heart. It was as if a fragment of her essence had drifted off course. Enthralled by the magic surrounding her, she was simultaneously gripped by an underlying confusion. Who was she in this mesmerizing reverie? From whence did she hail? While the realm bewitched her senses, a thirst for clarity echoed in the recesses of her spirit.

“Do not be troubled, cherished soul, for your anguish has dissolved into this realm of bliss and serenity,” the voice resonated again, laden with solace. Still, the words behind the presence eluded her sight.

As she gazed about, the landscape morphed before her, akin to a magical kaleidoscope. The clouds swirled overhead, their colors brilliant and entrancing. From the mesmerizing dance, a figure emerged. Was it a mirage? Before her stood a tall man, his dark skin contrasting with the brilliance around him, muscles defined and a smile that seemed to promise a world of secrets. He beckoned, a playful glint in his eyes. With caution, she stepped closer. This wasn’t the voice from before, but a face from some long-forgotten memory. Drawn by a deep, inexplicable connection, she couldn’t resist the pull of this enigmatic stranger.

“Vanya, my love, it’s okay,” he whispered, and she felt his arms around her, drawing her close.

“Ezad,” she murmured, feeling a surge of happiness and belonging.

“Yes, my love,” he replied, his smile radiating warmth and comfort.

With a lightness in her step and a song in her heart, Vanya flung her arms around him, twirling in a delightful embrace as the world around them spun and danced. It was a world of magic and whimsy where dreams and fantasies were made real. And oh, how happy she was to be lost in this wondrous realm with her beloved husband by her side.

As Ezad’s embrace enveloped her, Vanya wished time could freeze, preserving this tender moment for eternity. Yet, a harrowing memory pierced through her reverie — the image of her husband’s



lifeless body and the malevolent gaze of Aurelia who had orchestrated his demise. No, that wasn't entirely right. The true monster had gloated, taking perverse pride in ending her husband's life. The weight of the realization bore down on her: being in this realm, this veil, signified her own death. A mirthless chuckle escaped her lips at the cruel irony. Her thirst for revenge had been snatched away just as she'd been given the bittersweet reunion with her love. The wrenching duality of her desires left her heart in turmoil; wanting to cherish the moments with her returned husband yet yearning to exact vengeance for his untimely end.

Suddenly, as if swallowed by the clouds themselves, Vanya's husband and the wondrous world around her vanished into thin air. She felt a searing pain in her chest as he was taken from her once again. "Bring him back!" she screamed, tears streaming down her face.

The disembodied voice responded, its tone as calm and unyielding as before, "Your heart clings to dualities – love and hatred, peace and war. Even in this realm, where serenity should reign supreme, your spirit seeks conflict. This makes you unique, Vanya, but it also binds you in chains of your own making."

Vanya's eyes widened in confusion and anger. "What do you mean?" she screamed out into the void.

The voice replied, its depth resonating in the very air, "The moons of Völuspá have been tainted, and their guardians require one with a fire like yours. It is not just about vengeance, Vanya, but balance. While this realm is of peace, every soul has its purpose, and perhaps yours was never meant to find rest so soon."

"What of my husband, Ezad?"

"He'll be waiting for you here," came the voice's reply, ever calm, ever soothing. "Ever watchful of you." Vanya's eyes darted around the ethereal landscape, the colors and beauty of the place momentarily distracting her from her anger and longing. The embrace of her beloved husband was a comforting thought. However, the faces of Aurelia and the monster who took Ezad away burned in her mind. The prospect of vengeance was tantalizing. But was it worth relinquishing the tranquility she had discovered here?

With a determined glint in her eye, Vanya turned to the mysterious voice and nodded resolutely. "Yes, I accept your offer," she declared.

Suddenly the realm around her disappeared into the swirling mist, as everything went black.

<b><u>NOTIFICATION</u></b>
<b>JÖRMUN THE GRAND HAS PROCLAIMED YOU AS HIS CHAMPION.</b>
<b>CONGRATULATIONS</b>
<b>[SYSTEM UNLOCKED]</b>
<b><u>TITLE AWARDED</u></b>
<b>[PALADIN OF VENGEANCE]</b>

*ENJOY!*

Vanya Anlyth blinked as her surroundings came into focus. She was atop a stone pillar in the Grand Cathedral of Slaethia, right at the core of the teeming capital. Incense perfumed the air, its sweetness almost cloying, and harmonious chants filled her ears, resonating with the devout fervor of the worshipers. Priests and priestesses from various orders swirled in ecstatic dance around her. The entire kingdom was in jubilation that day, welcoming a new champion. Festivities echoed both inside the cathedral and throughout the city streets.

Despite the palpable enthusiasm, not a single soul had the presence of mind to inquire: to which deity had she been declared a champion?



In the suffocating gloom of their common dungeon, Jeremy, Heather, Yua, Rob, and Sophia contended with their fraying minds and fading hopes. Days merged into nights as they were ensnared in their bleak, damp confines, tormented by unsettling murmurs and the haunting specters of their own thoughts in the obsidian shadows.

Jeremy treaded restlessly within the narrow boundaries of his cell, oppressed by a mounting anxiety. In the dim, suffocating ambience, days melded indistinguishably, while the foul odor of rotting matter overwhelmed him. Disturbing murmurs and menacing thoughts twisted his mind. From the onset, that repugnant stench eroded his mental fortitude, ceaselessly plaguing him in his desolate confinement. The reason behind their captivity eluded them, a mocking enigma devoid of answers. Any lingering hopes of salvation decayed, casting them deeper into the abyss of hopelessness.

Previously demure and reserved, Heather had transformed into a pillar of resilience since their rebirth in the arcane land. She persistently murmured prayers, speaking of miraculous potentials and crafting a delicate fabric of optimism. But for Jeremy, with his spirit fragmented and belief forsaken, he couldn't dismiss the persistent skepticism that Heather's steadfast faith might just be an intricate delusion. Deep down, he acknowledged the harsh reality: hope was but a transient mirage meant to evaporate into nothingness.

Jeremy's lone beacon of optimism was an improbable one: Jason. Yet, he was certain that the rogue wouldn't play the hero. Weeks drifted by without a trace of the alleged Champion. The grim truth was that salvation seemed increasingly unlikely. Dejected, Jeremy withdrew to the most shadowed recess of his cell, succumbing to the overwhelming certainty of their bleak destiny.

Yua, isolated from the others due to the prison's sinister design, hadn't seen Heather for what felt like an eternity, perhaps even months. Trapped within her confines, she ached for the sweet release of freedom. However, the prison bars were imbued with strange magic, rendering her powers as Death's Assassin utterly impotent. She was even denied a glimpse of her cherished allies from her obscure vantage point. Each of them had been summoned from Earth, thrust into alien bodies, and

forced into a deadly struggle against one another. Yet, Yua found comfort in her former enemies, as they had become her most treasured friends.

As Yua brooded in her cell, she couldn't help but wonder if the elusive Aurelia might come to their rescue. But the mysterious vampire had vanished, leaving no trace since their narrow escape from the knights. Amidst the darkness and despair, Yua's thirst for vengeance against their captors smoldered within her, threatening to ignite at any moment.

Sighing heavily, she remained vigilant, wary of the guards who sporadically appeared to taunt and ridicule them. At least their torment was limited to verbal barbs, unlike the harrowing screams of the Dungeon Folk that reverberated through the air.

From her cell, Yua would sometimes catch the faint, pained cries of familiar voices, or the frantic shuffle of feet she had grown to recognize. These sounds told her a grim story: the Dungeon Folk and escapees might have found "shelter" among the vampires, but they were no more than trapped birds in a gilded cage. Every so often, the echoes of desperate pleas followed by a haunting silence made her realize that some of them were recycled – released only to be caught again in a macabre cycle. Each time, the weight of the injustice pressed heavier on her chest, fanning the flames of her growing desire to make the oppressors pay for their cruelty.

As for Rob, he lay listlessly on the frigid floor of his cell, eyes glued to the unyielding stone ceiling above. Once vibrant and lively, his thoughts now resembled a barren wasteland, and his sanity had splintered like fragile glass. The soft whispers of Heather's promises of liberation and a brighter future drifted to his ears occasionally. Still, they failed to rekindle the dying embers of hope within him. Despite the imposing visage of an orc, Rob's heart ached like that of a homesick teenager, longing for the warmth and comfort he once knew.

Hidden from prying eyes, Sophia clutched a jagged bone fragment she had gleaned from the pitiable scraps of her meals. Night after night, in the dim light seeping into her cell, she dragged the bone against the rough stone corner, each scrape echoing both her determination and her rising desperation. Every mark she made on the bone was a mark against the cage of her own spiraling emotions, a fragile barrier against the tempest of despair threatening to drown her. Occasionally, the stillness was broken by a quiet sob, quickly stifled, but testifying to the storm raging inside her.

In the oppressive air of their prison, Heather moved with a grim determination. Every step was a defiance against the guards who sneered and jeered, their laughter echoing the despairing wails of the Dungeon Folk. When she looked into the eyes of her fellow prisoners, she didn't see the monsters their captors described. Instead, she saw reflections of herself—beings caught in a perverse game. Every whispered comfort, every hushed reassurance she offered to her friends, stemmed not from certainty but from desperate hope. And as nights turned into days and back again, her prayers to her goddess went unanswered, each silence chipping away at her once unyielding faith. Though Heather sensed her goddess reaching out, a mysterious power seemed to stifle the divine call.

In the dark alleyways of the vampire realm, Jason moved with stealth, every step filled with a restless urge to flee. But there was that ever-present voice, the Crone's insistent whisper, chaining him to her will. It wasn't just about wielding power or the relentless task she'd bestowed upon him to free those five bumbling prisoners. She also desired him to rescue a dangerously alluring vampire with an unsettling connection to that damnable pudding girl.

Every time he ventured near the vampires' den, the system would fail, disrupting his abilities and muting the Crone's voice. He found the brief silence from the goddess's incessant whispers to be a rare relief from her constant nagging. Sometimes he'd slip near their crypt just to bask in the welcomed silence.

Jason knew he wasn't strong enough to take on the vampire coven alone. Lord Demidicus, the ancient vampire draped in a black cowl, radiated such overwhelming power that even his presence sent shivers down Jason's spine. So, he journeyed to the southern border of the vampires' domain to hone his magic under the Crone's ever-present whispers. Although he couldn't save the others yet, he remained steadfast in his belief that he would someday have the strength to do so, and perhaps end the Crone's constant demands of him.



With each heavy step, Chief Hensley led his raiding squad eastward to the enchanted domain of the nymphs and pixies. The vampires' insatiable thirst had left the surrounding lands barren of life, and Hensley's choices were limited. Fulfilling Lord Demidicus's dark demands by targeting innocents was a harrowing task. Yet, the chilling memory of the young and old that the vampires had snatched as reprisal for his past defiance was a stark reminder of the stakes.

The forest, sensing the impending doom, resonated with tension. Its denizens, the delicate nymphs and pixies, retreated into their hidden sanctuaries. Soon, the woods teemed with the Dungeon Folk – a formidable legion of goblins, orcs, trolls, humans, and other creatures, their weapons gleaming ominously. Despite their valiant efforts, the gentle forest inhabitants couldn't withstand the onslaught. The nymphs' nature magic, though powerful, was no match for their adversaries' sheer might, and the pint-sized pixies, with only their needles, faced insurmountable odds.

The sounds of battle soon gave way to heartbreaking pleas and cries of despair. The verdant lifeblood of the nymphs painted the woodland floor, marking the Dungeon Folk's somber victory. In the aftermath, amidst the smoldering ruins and memories of lost kin, the few survivors grieved, their anguish palpable. The Dungeon Folk, too, felt the burden, as remorseful tears betrayed their guilt.

In the midst of the forest's lament, Hensley grappled with his own guilt. While the nymphs were insignificant to the vampires, the pixies were a prize. Their veins coursed with mana-rich blood, a treat the vampires craved. Overwhelmed by the ramifications of his actions and the anguished cries of the captured pixies, Hensley's heart weighed heavy with sorrow.

During the grim journey back, only the poignant wails of the caged pixies marked their passage. Each echo deepened Hensley's regret, making him question the day he had bent the knee in worship to the Crone.



The memory of his Mummy's selfless act, an offering to shield them all from the encroaching darkness of the Kingdom of Slaethia, often lingered in Wartie's thoughts. Nightmares of her cherished ones becoming mere toys for those dark predators plagued him. Yet, amidst this sorrow, a peculiar realization dawned on him: the silent cavity within his chest where a heartbeat once resided. This eerie silence seemed to confound the vampires, their senses muddled, allowing him a momentary edge to vanish into the chilly embrace of the northern peaks.

Amongst the frozen monoliths, Wartie's fingers danced and wove spells, drawing forth ancient energies. As a lich, he commanded certain powers, but it was his blood, tainted with the Crone's legacy, that truly set him apart.

Taking a symbolic breath, though no longer needed, he gazed upon the array of reanimated figures he'd summoned from death's grasp. While they might not yet inspire dread, Wartie could sense the potential – an impending tidal wave of the undead. With determination burning in his undead eyes, he made a silent promise: to rally against the vampires and retrieve the Dungeon Folk, and to exact revenge on the Kingdom of Slaethia for the heart-wrenching loss of his Mummy.



As he slinked through the coven's chambers, Vorigan's gaze flickered with a twisted anticipation as he thought of Duke Lysander's impending nuptial evening. The very idea of enduring the Duke's imminent torment filled him with a dark... longing. Not for Aurelia's hand in marriage, but for the wicked rite that lay ahead. The sensation of such profound humiliation and pain was something he yearned to experience firsthand.

While many in the vampire realm considered him inconsequential, Vorigan was acutely aware of his own twisted desires, savoring them like a rare vintage. However, few ever cared to understand or cater to his deviant inclinations—perhaps save for Hikari, whose attention was born more of repulsion.

His thoughts inevitably strayed to Lady Aurelia. Despite his twisted adoration for her, he recognized the resistance in her eyes, the unwillingness toward the marriage. A pang of complexity surged within him; he owed her, and that made everything so much more convoluted.



“Arise, my dearest daughter, for time flits and twirls, and thy dreams are now but stories of yester morns.”

Once again, I was roused in a world of beguiling enchantment, lying amidst a green embrace in a fairy-like nook. Above, the celestial clouds frolicked and danced with joy, free of all darkness and malice. Time itself seemed to dance and skip past me as I lay there, enraptured by the heavenly display above. In this realm, my soul felt as pure and unburdened as that of a child at play, with all harsh and shadowy desires driven far from me. And yet, a peculiar sense of emptiness persisted, as if two pieces of my very being had taken flight and vanished into the ether.

“Blake,” another voice didst call, and as my head pivoted upon that soft, verdant pillow of greenery, I espied a countenance resembling mine own. My skin, a subtle shade of flawless ivory; mine eyes, set aflame with the warm, molten radiance of an orange blaze; and my tresses, as white and fragile as the choicest spider’s silk. Truly, this was not my visage, for my locks were of the darkest ebony.

This spectral reflection stood as evidence of my fractured state; a testament to a soul torn and shattered asunder yet reborn in twain. It was me—my counterpart in this realm of caprice and dreams. Staring into her eyes was like peering into my very own, a mirror of introspection that clouded the distinction between us. A haunting realization dawned: amidst the remnants of my shattered soul, it was impossible to discern which half was truly me. The bewildering truth was that, in this dichotomous existence, I was unequivocally both halves.

“Blake,” I whispered from the lips of the one before me, our eyes meeting in fluent unity. A part of me loathed her for I had always loathed myself, for she was me, or rather, we are me, born of the shattering my soul. But upon meeting with mother, both of me had become an integral part of our being, like cherished siblings beyond measure, sharing in a singular mind, while having slightly separate wants, further proof that we weren’t put back together in equal parts. Oh, how fickle and unpredictable sanity can be.

“Mother awaits in her dwelling atop the knoll,” I voiced in eerie unison. “We mustn’t dally. Twilight is nearing, and with it, the encroaching woods will advance.”

With boundless mirth, I sprang up from the verdant meadow, our hands joining as though we were sisters. We twirled and skipped with sheer delight towards our mother’s refuge atop the hillock. The approaching twilight cast its somber cloak over the land, summoning forth the creeping shadows of the wooded realm, where the anguished cries of the tormented echoed in the deep. Yet, terror held no sway over us, for within this realm of wonder and magic, we were the very monsters to be feared.

Though we did appear as youthful sprites, our nature was one of unfettered ferocity and strength, unrivaled and untamed. Our hearts harbored a wickedness, yet we frolicked and danced with an unspoiled joy, surrendering ourselves to the enchanting embrace of this limitless realm as the forest’s shadows stretched and deepened. In a world where the innocent were oft the initial to succumb, we confronted the shadows with a daring and relentless spirit, heeding not the cautionary tales whispered within the glades.

The merry dance ceased as we arrived at our mother's haven atop the knoll, yearning to bask in her warm embrace and share our thrilling tales of adventure and love found within the other realm. But as we neared her door, a peculiar feeling arose within me, a questioning of whether she truly was our mother. For despite her claims of taking us in as her own, could we truly be her daughter now? The doubt gnawed at my heart, filling me with a sense of unease as we stood upon her threshold.

The creaking wooden door swung open, and a shiver ran through my soul as I stepped into the dimly lit room. Shadows danced across the walls, playing upon the face of the one we called the Crone, whose features were shrouded in a black cowl, hidden within a dark abyss. Only the skeletal bones of her fingers were visible within the folds of her dark gown. Yet, despite her ominous appearance, I felt a warm and kind smile emanating from the void where her face lay concealed. I could not say whether the Crone was death herself or a goddess fulfilling the role, but all doubts about her love vanished within her gaze.

“Pray, take thy rest, my cherished daughter, for we hath much to discuss in this time we share,” spoke the Crone, her voice a delicate, rasping whisper, akin to the rustling of crisp leaves within a tender breeze.

As we drew near as one, the table where we once feasted upon a meal for the damned, time stretched infinitely though only a day had fled. The table was empty, no food was in sight, but the room emanated a warmth and love that filled us with delight. A strange feeling stirred in our hearts, a dream-like essence we couldn't quite define, but it wrapped us in comfort, like a cloak divine.

Seated side by side, me and I listened intently, giving our dear mother our utmost attention. Despite the lack of any hurry in her manner, she waited patiently. Suddenly, a tapping sound echoed through the room, a tap, tap, tap. But as we gazed toward the window, it became apparent that the woods had drawn near. The branches outside swayed and writhed like tendrils of gloom, but we were not filled with fear or doom. For the darkness beyond beckoned us with a warmth that could send others fleeing, but not for me nor I. We were not like others, we were creatures of this realm, and here I belonged.

“Pray, speak, my cherished daughter, why hast thou come to me so soon?” asked our dear mother, her voice a symphony of refined elegance and wisdom. Though her tone bore the weight of concern, she already knew the purpose of our arrival.

“I perished while safeguarding one whom we cherish, though I cannot say with certainty, Blake and I have both fallen for Aurelia,” spoke me, my voice gentle and meek, yet resolute in our confession.

“Mother dear, wilt thou send us back to see our beloved Aurelia?” I beseeched, my eyes glowing with a fiery hope that burned like molten gold.

Amidst my ardent plea, the Crone remained still, her skeletal fingers fidgeting with an air of uncertainty. She clasped them tight to conceal her hesitation, as the shadows of the trees beyond the window drooped in a shroud of gloom. It was as though a dark secret had been shared among all, but me and I remained unaware.

“My dearests, I rejoice to see you have found another piece of your soul. Alas, I cannot send you back, for rules were broken and the dungeon you perished in has vanished. Without the Respawn Point, there is nowhere for you to return to. It grieves me to say, but you are now free from those distant moons beyond our veil,” spoke our loving mother with a voice that carried both regret and compassion.

“Dead, dead, with no chance to respawn?” I whispered, anguish seeping through our voice.

Amidst the Crone’s speech, a certain phrase did seize my ear, not of the dungeon’s doom or the fate of our demise. “Mother, pray tell, what doth thou mean by another piece of our soul?”

I beheld her shoulders stiffen, and her once noble form faltered, as if I had stumbled upon a secret she wished not to utter.

“Prithee forgive me for the grave tidings I must impart, my dear daughter, but truth thou art entitled to from the very start,” spoke the Crone, her bosom rising and falling as she drew a breath, revealing the contours of her skeleton beneath her dress. “Let us commence at the beginning. Twin souls were once formed in this realm, though it has not occurred in many an eon’s helm. When a newly manifested soul departs the ether, an exceedingly rare miracle can transpire, causing that soul to split naturally in half, creating what is commonly known as identical twins. They live together as inseparable siblings, but when their mortal bodies die, their identical souls separate upon arrival within the veil.

“In the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, a soul may be reborn and live a wondrous life on its own, for the identical twin souls have long been split and flown. However, in rare instances, two once identical souls may cross paths in another life, centuries or more later, and find that their bond is so strong, even the gods would fear to keep them apart. We call them soulmates,” continued the Crone, her voice tinged with a note of sadness and woe.

“For those fortunate enough to find their soulmate, it is a blessing beyond compare. But for those like thee, my dearest daughter, who have only just found them to lose their missing piece, it is a tragedy of the highest order. I cannot send thee back to thy loved one, to Aurelia, but take solace in knowing that the bond thou shared with thy beloved is eternal, and that someday, in another life, thou may be reunited once more.”

My thoughts did race and spin, and upon a glance at myself, our expression told me no less, for we both were thrown into confusion’s mess. I had believed my other me to be a piece of my soul, not Aurelia, and this truth left me without a goal. Nothing made any sense, how or why, and now that beautiful vampire, from my grasp does fly. The veil’s realm lost its allure, and the darkness that once comforted, felt like a taunting nightmare, nothing to cure. My heart cried out to get back to her, for in her arms, my soul felt a whisper.

“I spoke up amidst my turmoil, our voice cutting through the confusion, “Mother, can we find a way to return? Any way at all?”

“Regrettably, my beloved children, I have no means to send you back as the dungeon has been destroyed,” said our mother with sorrow in her voice.



My mind was upon a memory of before. It was but a mere chance that I could not say would work, but I knew it had once before. On my last visit to see our mother... No, that was not right, upon my rebirth, Wartie had accompanied both of me into this realm of wonder within the veil. Yet, while he may never have stepped a foot within it, he had been here all along.

My trembling hands I brought them to my chest as I took a deep breath. Though I appeared as a child in the realm of dreams and nightmares deep within the veil. Yet, fear was not something that I held, for I was a force to be reckoned with here, I was the nightmare within the veil, for I was my mother's daughter. I plunged my hands inside, burrowing deep into my chest cavity. My hands had vanished into the liquid of my body, but my true intentions lay hidden within.

I sought something, and in the darkness inside me, I found it – Stellar Void still had sway within the veil. A smile of malevolent glee spread across my face as I withdrew my hands grasping an awakened Dungeon Core. A gasp escaped from Mother, a rare sight that brought a sly grin to both of me. We had managed to surprise her after all.

“My dear,” she said, her voice ringing with a mixture of pride and relief. “With this and access to the system, you need not fear being trapped within the veil ever again. Freedom will be yours to come and go as you please.”

“In that case, may we return to Aurelia?” I asked with eagerness, hoping to depart at once.

“What about Circe?” I said from my other soul, shattering our fleeting joy. “She's removed my access from the system.”

Upon a tilt of her head away from us, Mother uttered, “Hmm, let me see what I can do.” Though her hood concealed her face from sight, it appeared as if she was peering into the inner workings of the system. After moments of deep contemplation, she suddenly exclaimed, “Ah, there's the problem!”

“What was wrong,” I asked.

“Tis a curious thing,” Mother opined, her voice lilting with gentle assurance. “Yet, worry not, for though it may require but a brief time, I shall set all to rights.”

“Thank you,” I declared, turning my gaze from my other self to Mother. “I have so many more questions,” I meekly stated with wide-eyed wonder.

“All shall be unveiled in due time, mine dearest. For the present, entwine thine hands with thyself.”

Mother paused, her bony hands stretching out to rest upon our cheeks. “And I must ask for your forgiveness, for I shall take measures to keep you both safe. Know that I love you both dearly, and above all else, I am sorry for what must come next.”

Mother hesitated, her skeletal fingers extending to caress our countenances tenderly. “I beg thine indulgence and seek thy forgiveness, for the steps I must take hence are for thine safeguarding. Understand, my cherished ones, that my affection for thee runs deep, and above all else, my heart aches for what lies ahead. But ere you journey back, thou must face thine test.”

“Test?” Our words emerged, harmonizing from two distinct forms. Even as the sensation of unity enveloped me, a profound realization lingered: two souls, distinct and resonant, still thrummed within as my forms intertwined once more.

My senses reeled, vision eclipsed by a sudden void, but soon stars twinkled back into view. Jupiteresque painting loomed impossibly large, its majesty rendered uncanny by hues of pink and blue that danced upon its surface, an ethereal tapestry far removed from its familiar countenance.

A pull, almost magnetic, drew my hand skyward, the touch of my own skin surprising me. It already bore the slippery texture of Spider Silk. Delight played upon my lips, an awakening not as a gooey blob. Yet, beneath this euphoria, there shimmered an undertow of ambivalence, a sensation of straddling the line between dreamscape and waking world.

Blinking, my surroundings swam into sharper focus. I was cradled atop a rocky outcrop, reminiscent less of an altar and more of a naturally formed platform, teetering upon stacked boulders. The walls around me seemed etched rather than crafted, culminating in an expansive aperture above, allowing the snowy descent to drape my confines in a glittering shroud.

A pang, cold and sharp, settled in my heart. The celestial backdrop was alien, far from where Aurelia and I had stood. Had Mother swept me away to another moon, far from my love? This desolation, however, was distinct from the earlier void that had gnawed at me upon my awakening. Mother’s whispered promise of a “test” cast a pall, eliciting a shiver more chilling than the encroaching frost.



“Rejoice!” boomed a god, an awe-inspiring presence swathed in otherworldly robes. His gold crown shimmered with a disquieting luster. “The Crone’s chosen abomination, that very visage of horror, has met her fate in chambers predating even us divine beings!”

Zarathos, a dragon god, resplendent in scales that flickered like emerald fire, seethed with rage. “That monstrosity, dared deface my chosen one, Orlaith, scarring her radiant form with the cruel kiss of a mana detonation. Not only did she desecrate sacred ground, but she also obliterated the pride of Slaethia’s skies.”

Lyzara, an ethereal vision with hair like cascading liquid silver and skin kissed by the luminescence of the moon, intervened with a voice dripping with feigned ignorance. “Yet, how, pray tell, did the Dungeon Core, under our ever-watchful gazes, simply vanish into the abyss of the forgotten?”

Zarathos’s reply, a thunderous crescendo, echoed in the vast expanse of the Citadel, his silhouette casting an oppressive gloom. His wings, dark tapestries of celestial despair, seemed to drain the surrounding luminance. “Demoros, the Core is but a faded echo, lost to the cataclysmic flare. We deemed it a victim of that apocalyptic rupture.”

Khyron, an imposing figure resembling a statue carved from the very shadows of the void, retorted with venomous contempt. “Damnation to the chasmal pits! The Crone’s perverse machinations

and her deranged minion have unleashed this unspeakable horror upon us!” His eyes, incandescent with fury, seemed to burn with the very fires of perdition.

Lyzara’s ethereal gaze settled thoughtfully on the assembly. “What of the Primordial of Magic?” she probed, her voice weaving a tapestry of genuine curiosity. “Would she not intervene in this dire predicament?”

The dragon god let out a disdainful snort, his emerald scales shimmering with a mix of amusement and exasperation. “She vanished into the annals of the past eon. As the last Primordial, she does not care about our wars. Her obsessions are... unconventional,” he huffed, steam escaping his nostrils. “She plucks entire realms from the vast unknown, only to nestle them as moons in our very sky. An enigmatic hobby, if you ask me.”

Khyron, with a quizzical frown, interjected, “Last Primordial? What became of Life and Death?”

A voice, belonging to a nondescript deity among the crowd, piped up, “Life fell to the eldritch horrors, while Death chose exile soon after.”

Zarathos, casting a glance towards the outspoken deity, added gravely, “Those events predate our era as Ascended Gods, even before Magic’s peculiar penchant for abducting realms. To us, their tales are barely more than whispers of old myths and legends.”

Lyzara’s luminous eyes clouded over, her voice carrying a hint of resignation. “Regardless of all that and the Crone’s role in this, I sense Magic’s restless stirrings. We must tread cautiously,” she paused, casting a wary gaze around the assembly, “for from that bygone era, Old Gods still linger. Should they ally with the Gods of Darkness, we would surely be destroyed.”

Hidden from their divine gazes of the Gods of Light, a sly serpent slithered among them, waiting for the opportune moment to unleash his venomous wrath.

Jörmun’s grin grew dark and foreboding, taking pleasure in the ensuing pandemonium among the gods. He moved stealthily through the holy corridors of the Citadel, shrouded by an ominous mist, he reveled in the cacophonous overture of the gods’ frantic lamentations.

Lost in his malevolent musings, Jörmun whispered to himself, paying no heed to the bedlam around him. “Dearest sister of Dreams and Nightmares,” his voice dripping with wicked mirth, “how intricate the snares you lay.” His words, imbued with dark enchantment, seemed to float, a haunting serenade amidst the surrounding turmoil.

Unbeknownst to all, in a place removed from all life hidden within a dream, a petite girl with locks of radiant pink and eyes as deep as the void itself began to awaken from her ageless sleep.

TO BE CONTINUED!