

BLACK PUDDING

CHAPTER 9

Nikola was having a strange day!

He had been summoned to this reality by Kaida, who had taken on the role of a caring and doting mother. However, beneath her façade, he knew he was nothing more than a research specimen to the skeletal woman. Yet, he couldn't deny the kindness she showed him, going above and beyond to support his engineering projects. In a twisted way, he recognized the passion and insatiable thirst for knowledge that burned within her. They were kindred spirits, in a sense, united by their shared pursuit of understanding. While Kaida delved into the mysteries of magic itself, he focused on the unexplored realm of magical engineering, a field that held untapped potential. As far as he knew, he was laying the groundwork for a future where magic and technology intertwined in a magnificent symphony of innovation.

To Nikola's bewilderment, he discovered that no one else had ventured into the realm of magical engineering. It seemed that the potential of combining magic with technology had remained unexplored or perhaps deliberately ignored. However, as he delved deeper into his experiments, he encountered a perplexing obstacle. Electricity-based technology simply refused to function within this dimension, as if the laws of physics themselves had undergone a bizarre transformation. It was as if magic possessed a distinct personality, asserting its authority and rejecting any other power source. The more he worked with it, the more he became convinced that magic was not merely a force but a living entity with its own whims and idiosyncrasies. A stubborn and unpredictable entity.

Returning to the strange events of his day... Nikola couldn't help but be astounded by the encounter with the girl, or rather, the monstrous creature masquerading as a stunning young woman. It was already bizarre enough to meet someone else summoned from Earth, but what bewildered him even more, was how effortlessly she had persuaded all of them to embark on a daring mission that he himself had been too terrified to entertain... stealing mana stones from the duke! The gnome found himself pondering whether Blake possessed some kind of mind control ability, but he couldn't detect any manipulation of his thoughts. Instead, he wondered if it was simply her unwavering confidence, an air of invincibility that seemed to radiate from her. It was as if she believed nothing could stand in her way, and her conviction had an uncanny power over those around her.

Oh, how Nikola longed to return to his starship, that magnificent creation of his own making. Hidden from prying eyes, it was a marvel that could potentially rival the fastest-sailed airships but without the need for the elusive and heavily regulated ethereal sails. And that wasn't all. In theory, his beautiful vessel boasted superior maneuverability, outclassing even the most coveted airships that were reserved for the privileged few. If his calculations were correct, the creation of airships powered by mana stones would revolutionize society, wresting power from the grasp of aristocrats

who held sway over everything. The common citizens would finally be liberated, free to come and go as they pleased, no longer bound to the lands controlled by those snobbish nobles. Oh, the possibilities were exhilarating! Nikola dreamed of traversing the moons and hopefully being capable of venturing into the vast expanse of the stars themselves.

Indeed, Nikola could only suppose that those were the reasons why he had reluctantly agreed to accompany Blake on this audacious quest to pilfer from the duke. As for Kaida's inexplicable presence, it remained an enigma that eluded his understanding. Perhaps, he pondered, she had joined them for the sake of his safety, although that rationale felt somewhat inadequate. Whatever her true motive, there was one glaring oversight that had slipped his mind entirely—the nauseating stench that pervaded the far depths of the sewers. The noxious odor assailed his senses, a constant reminder of the less-than-pleasant environment in which they now found themselves.



“What is that intoxicating aroma?” I gasped, my body quivering with delight as the scent enveloped me like a seductive lover.

The rhythmic sound of footsteps bouncing off the cold stone walls abruptly ceased, replaced by an eerie silence that echoed in the air. I turned my attention to two of my three companions, Olin with his perpetually furrowed brow and Nikola wearing an expression of skeptical disbelief. Their glares spoke volumes, a mixture of disbelief and utter disgust directed toward me. Ah, the sweet scent of victory! Or rather, the overpowering yet strangely wondrous odor that permeated the air. Kaida, our ever-mysterious companion, stood alongside them, her skull offering no clues to her emotions. That said, the other two struggled, albeit unsuccessfully, to conceal their noses from the assault of the pungent ambiance that surrounded us. Little did they know, they were missing out on the true essence of this magnificent place.

“You can’t be serious?” the little gnome exclaimed.

“No, she’s most certainly serious,” the lich responded.

“We’re at the junction point, right at the heart of the city’s sewer network, where the embedded enchantments initiate the treatment process. It’s a marvel of magical engineering—.” The little nerd continued his explanation, but I zoned out completely. Instead, I immersed myself in the glorious ambiance of the sewer, relishing in the symphony of putrid odors and the soothing sensation of slimy walls against my slimy body. Ah, what a cesspool of joy! Truly! It was so wondrous. I wondered if this wretched paradise was the natural habitat for my reincarnated species.

However, Kaida swiftly snapped me out of my reverie, reminding me of the true purpose of our descent into these magnificent depths. “Keep your wits about you,” she cautioned. “We’re approaching the underbelly of the duke’s keep. Expect enchantments and traps that safeguard his home.”

She had a point. We had set our sights on pilfering the duke’s precious stash of mana stones, all for the gnome’s grand invention – his so-called starship. In hindsight, I probably should have demanded a sneak peek at this supposed vessel before committing to this daring robbery. Oh well,

no use crying over spilled mana. What truly caught me off guard was Kaida's unexpected agreement to join our mischievous escapade. It seemed she had developed a rather protective instinct towards the twirp, not in a swooning romantic manner, but more like a mother hen guarding her clueless chicks. Although, I couldn't help but notice the peculiar googly eyes my pet lich would occasionally cast in her direction.

Ah, undead love – focus, Blake!

In the unfortunate event, the duke disappointingly lacked a coveted stash of mana stones, our eyes would turn toward the esteemed academy. However, I couldn't help but notice Kaida's reluctance towards targeting them. Perhaps their better protective enchantments or her soft spot for academia. Regardless, we found ourselves near the lower section of the duke's ostentatious sewer pipes, ready to plunder him of his treasures. Well, that was my hope, but let's face it, nothing in my life ever went according to plan.

The desire to attend the magic academy burned within me, fueled by my secret obsession with anime and the fantastical notion of studying magic in a formal institution. It was a cliché, I couldn't deny that, considering how many fantasy books I had devoured where protagonists were transported to another world and found themselves enrolled in a magical academy. I scoffed at the idea of following that tired trope, yet deep down, I couldn't shake the yearning. Was I being hypocritical? Perhaps. But damn it, I really wanted to go! Ugh, the internal struggle of a conflicted fantasy nerd.

However, my resolve was strong enough to resist the allure of that overused trope. I refused to be a cliché! So, here I was, begrudgingly agreeing to partake in a daring heist to steal mana stones from the duke, all to help the little gnome power his airship—sorry, starship—and escape this gods' forsaken place. My motivation? The one I held dear, my love Aurelia. I could only hope she had the patience to wait for me. Most people back on Earth struggled to wait a year for their loved ones deployed in war zones, but in Aurelia's case, she had no way of knowing if I was still alive, let alone that I would be resurrected. I could only hope that the Crone's little priestess, Heather, had informed my beautiful vampire of my imminent return.

“Stop!” Olin barked, causing my eyebrow to raise in curiosity. However, it was already too late for me. The trap had been sprung, and everything went black in an instant.

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Kaira noticed Nikola's eyes widen in horror just as an enchantment beneath Blake's feet sprung to life, unleashing a towering pillar of flames that consumed the entire corridor. In that split second, she conjured a protective shield of necrotic magic out of reflex, encompassing Olin and her precious research subject. However, out of desperation to protect Nikola, she had made herself vulnerable to the blast wave of enchanted flames that collided with her. She let out a piercing shriek as magic fire hot enough to melt flesh from bone turned her favorite dress into ash.

Worst of all, the true devastation lay in the fact that the trap had disintegrated her newly acquired research specimen, a soul trapped within the body of a Black Pudding that she had been so eager to study. Overwhelmed by an indescribable sense of disappointment and fury, she continued to

scream amidst the engulfing flames, venting her rage at the merciless enchantments that had torn her aspirations to ashes.

How had it come to this, she wondered. Kaira was, at her core, a devoted researcher, not a seasoned combat mage or a necromancer, despite possessing the skills and knowledge in those fields. No, her purpose in joining this little expedition of grand larceny was solely to protect her valuable research subjects. Perhaps, wreaking havoc on the insufferable duke and giving him a well-deserved black eye as she tore out his soul was not the worst way to spend an evening. Besides, she had a duty to help the young gnome acquire the mana stones for his magnificent work of engineering. It had nothing to do with the laboratory he had specially designed aboard. As if enticing her to join him on his adventures to new and undiscovered moons... and discovering new research specimens... Ha! As if such things would work on her...

“How did he put it?” she pondered, her raspy voice barely a whisper amidst the roaring flames. “Boldly go where no undead has gone before?” Oh, how it warmed her long-lost heart to know how much he cared for her aspirations.

As the flames subsided, the aftermath of destruction came into view. Nikola stood unscathed, untouched by the scorching inferno. However, a pang of grief shot through Kaira’s being as she looked upon the lifeless form of Olin, the lich who had been enveloped within her protective spell. His soul, once bound to the body of Razzle, was now absent, severed from its vessel. She followed the trail of her senses, tracing it back to the spot where Blake had stood before being reduced to ashes. A surge of realization washed over her, mingling with profound remorse.

“Oh, no, you foolish man,” Kaida sighed.

Liches, those seemingly unstoppable beings of immense power, possessed one glaring weakness that undermined their might: their souls were tethered to a phylactery, an exceptionally rare artifact. With possession of a lich’s phylactery, one could bend the once-mighty creature to their will or obliterate its soul, forever banishing it from the cycle of life and death.

The revenant woman’s essence sank as she realized that Olin’s soul had vanished along with the destruction of the Black Pudding. It could only mean that his essence had been obliterated, lost forever. The weight of losing not only a valuable research specimen but also a fellow researcher in a single devastating blow struck Kaida with profound anguish. However, there was still a sliver of solace in the fact that her initial primary subject, whom she had fortuitously encountered during her soul-summoning experiments, remained unscathed. Now, her utmost priority was to safely escort him out of harm’s way before the duke’s guards descended into the sewers to investigate the triggering of their wards.

“Nikola, we must depart,” Kaida declared, her voice filled with urgency as she observed him fixated on the spot where Blake had once stood.

The tiny gnome reluctantly tore his gaze away from the ashes of the Black Pudding and shifted his attention to the lifeless body of Olin sprawled on the ground beside him. Despite being nothing more than a motionless cadaver, the corpse still towered over Nikola’s small frame. “They’re gone,” he mumbled, his tone laced with grief, an emotion Kaida herself had not felt in years.

“We must depart,” she reiterated, her voice carrying a hint of concern despite the difficulty of expressing emotions as a revenant. After all, he was a precious subject, deserving of her protection.

“I heard something coming from this direction!” a stern voice echoed through the corridor, signaling to the revenant that her time was running out.

Glancing down at the lifeless husk that was once Razzle, Kaida effortlessly cast a raised undead spell with a flick of her wrist, almost resenting how effortlessly necrotic magic flowed through her. If there was one thing she didn’t want to be remembered for, it was being a necromancer. No, she yearned for her research contributions to magic to be immortalized, not her skills in necromancing.

The undead rodent stirred, its lifeless body reanimated as a mindless zombie devoid of consciousness or will. It could only obey the simplest of commands, a mere puppet under Kaida’s control. Now, she had to decide whether to send it down the sewer path to confront the approaching guards or to employ it as a means to snatch the gnome and flee from the impending danger. Regardless of the chosen course of action, the initial endeavor to steal mana stones from the duke ended in a catastrophic failure. Their plan unraveled before they had even set foot inside the catacombs beneath the duke’s keep.

With a raspy sigh, Kaida commanded the freshly reanimated zombie rat-man to shuffle down the dark corridor, its purpose of diverting the attention of the approaching guards. Meanwhile, she invoked a levitation spell to lift the gnome off the ground, cradling him in the air protectively. With determined haste, she dashed in the opposite direction, hoping to elude any pursuers that may be trailing behind.



As consciousness reluctantly seeped back into my slimy form, every oozing fiber of my being felt like it had just taken a dip in a boiling cauldron. Only now, I found myself spread across a cold, unyielding surface, once again plunged into the suffocating abyss of darkness. The loss of so many treasured system commands, or rather my skills, like Mana Sight, weighed heavily on me. But hey, who needs them anyway? Activating Mana Sight without the system had become as effortless as blinking for me now.

With no effort whatsoever, my vision returned to me. I cast a cursory glance around the chamber, instantly recognizing the familiar surroundings of the ritual chamber with its stone slab altar that I now laid upon. It seemed that I had met my untimely demise yet again. *How delightful...* But what struck me as truly peculiar was why I hadn’t awoken to the gleeful embrace of the Crone’s meadow.

*Ugh, here we go again.* It was time to work my shape-shifting magic and transform myself into something more impressive. *But wait... What’s this?* As I began to morph, a sudden realization hit me. *I’m freaking tiny!*

*Oh, joy!* Just when I thought life couldn’t get any better, I found myself trapped in my puny, original size from when I had first reincarnated as a Black Pudding. *How delightful!* It was like a cruel joke played by some cosmic sadist. I mean, who needs the ability to transform into a majestic

creature when you can be stuck as a tiny, slimy, black goop? It's a real self-esteem booster, let me tell you. So here I am, contemplating whether to embrace my identity as a pint-sized menace or find myself a quick meal. With what I've got to work with, at best, I could probably resemble a teacup chihuahua, if it was a newborn pup, and a few months premature... *Ugh! Life's a real bitch.*

Rather than opting for the form of a female dog, I contorted my shape into a crude, slime ball, and extended eight sinuous appendages. Given my limited resources, my legs ended up on the skinnier side, granting me the charming resemblance of a daddy long-legs spider. Now, all that's left is to find a delectable snack to satiate my hunger, regain my desired curves, and hopefully soon.

Crawling down from the altar, I began my descent towards the exit, feeling a pang of disappointment at the lack of any sound or sign of life within the desolate temple atop the mountain. It seemed that a decent meal would have to wait until I returned to the bustling city below. However, to my surprise, a peculiar sensation washed over me – loneliness. *How odd!* I had always been a solitary creature, an utter loner, delighting in my own company. But now, an unexplainable desire for companionship gnawed at me, even if it was just for someone to ignore. With a graceful swirl of one of my eight appendages, I mentally called out, “[**Oracle**].”

Magical clouds filled the chamber's ceiling, swirling, and coalescing until Circe emerged, seemingly descending from above with an air of elegance. Her flawless face arched an eyebrow in a rather infuriatingly perfect manner. She was the epitome of beauty and power, a magnification of magic itself. Her skin, an ethereal canvas, shifted and flowed with mesmerizing shades of luminous blues, cyan, and intermittent bursts of pink, akin to wisps of dissipating clouds. Her long hair, resembling glowing flames, radiated a vibrant pink hue with occasional fleeting hints of blue. And then, there were her eyes, a dazzling bright pink that mirrored the gleam of my own orange orbs.

Or my eyes would have mirrored hers if I had enough mass to assume a human form. Alas, I was cursed to exist as a peculiar sight—a floating black eyeball with a solitary glowing orange iris, accompanied by a set of spindly spider legs. Truly, the epitome of elegance and grace.

Of course, Circe had to be naked, not in a scandalous way, but to flaunt her impeccable figure like one of those unrealistic dolls crafted by Earth corporations. Move over, Barbie, there's a new contender in town. Oh, how I loathe her infuriatingly flawless appearance, as if she's the epitome of perfection itself. *Ugh, what a bitch!*

“*Excuse me?*” she interjected with an exasperated tone.

*Damnit, I forgot!* I mentally cursed as the realization hit me. She could hear every twisted thought that crossed my mind. In a desperate attempt to divert the conversation from my blunder, I quickly interjected, “By the way, my Oracle skill got hacked by some dick head with exceptionally creepy ...eyes.” As the words slipped out of the tiny mouth that materialized beneath my glowing iris, I couldn't help but recoil at the ridiculous, high-pitched squeak that accompanied my pint-sized form. *Ick!*

“*Huh, interesting,*” she mused, a finger lightly grazing her chin in contemplation.

I couldn't help but cast a glance downward, my sight fixating on her hovering feet, seemingly defying the laws of gravity as they disdainfully refused to touch the lowly ground beneath her. *Well, isn't someone fancy?* I couldn't resist rolling my solitary eyeball at the pretentious display. But then, a sudden realization struck me—I had made another slip-up. *Ah, well.* Who needs to keep their thoughts under control anyway? I mean, I can barely keep my mouth from blurting out the wrong thing, so why bother? Besides, it was quite amusing to see that insufferable bitch casting me an annoyed glare. It added a touch of delight to my otherwise dreary situation.

Disregarding her presence, I resumed my trek out of the temple, or was it more of a cavern? Well, a temple within a cavern seemed more fitting now that I pondered over it. But who cares about the specifics? I scurried away on my eight spindly legs, with the irritated goddess floating begrudgingly behind me.

Stepping outside, I realized that my diminutive size made it impossible to get a proper view of the city below without getting dangerously close to the edge of the cliffside. As I stood there, peering down with my one glowing eye, a thought crossed my mind. "Hey Circe, what's the deal with all my lost skills? And do you have the power to grant them back to me?" I asked with a mixture of hope and annoyance.

*"That would be your so-called mother's brilliant idea,"* Circe replied, her tone dripping with sarcasm. *"She thinks that by altering your system status, it will make it more difficult for any prying eyes to spy on you and potentially destroy your soul. As you've already experienced with that unwelcome skill hacker, I'd say her plan wasn't exactly foolproof. But to answer your question, yes, I have the power to restore your lost skills. However, I'm afraid I must decline."* she stated with a touch of satisfaction.

"What? Why not!" I exclaimed in disbelief, completely disregarding the part about my mother's intentions to protect me. Typical me.

*"Consider it a lesson in humility and adaptability,"* she explained, her voice tinged with that same annoying touch of satisfaction. *"You'll have to find your own way to navigate this world without relying solely on what others give you."*

"Ugh, you suck!" I blurted out, unable to contain my frustration.

*"Why don't you go attend that pathetic school they call a magic academy down below?"* Circe added, her voice dripping with an unhealthy amount of sarcasm.

I knew she didn't actually mean for me to attend the school, judging by her attitude. However, I had to admit she had a point. Perhaps I could learn some new skills, whether it be within the confines of the system magic or, even better, learn to cast new spells without relying on the system. And if my previous plan of breaking into the duke's fortress from below had failed, why not take a more audacious approach? Walking in through the front door of the academy and seizing what I desired seemed like a brilliant idea. *Fuck it, I've always been a hypocrite. Cliché time it is!* "Circe, you're a genius!" I declared with a mix of my own sarcasm and genuine admiration.

*“What? Oh, no, you can’t be serious!”* Circe exclaimed with exasperation. *“Forget what I just said. Those so-called academies are an insult to my domain. Filled with insufferable mages, each believing they are the pinnacle of magical prowess.”* She let out a groan of frustration, clearly not enthused by the idea.

“Well, this is perfect,” I stated with a wicked grin, my voice dripping with amusement. “You can attend classes with me!” With a mischievous twinkle in my single orange eye, I started my eight-legged march down the mountain, eager to explore the academy with my oh-so-reluctant companion. *Time for my own overused magical academy trope!*



In a disorienting haze, Olin regained consciousness, only to find himself surrounded by a pool of crimson liquid. Everything seemed oddly askew, with the world turned upside down as he glanced unnaturally toward his rear end. A peculiar sense of detachment washed over him as he attempted to push himself up using his arm. However, to his bewilderment, he watched his body rise while his vision remained fixed, locked in place on the ground. A twisted bout of vertigo had seemingly taken hold, leaving Olin in a state of bafflement and unease. Yet, amidst the confusion, it didn’t take long for him to grasp the aggravating truth—he had been decapitated.

The final image etched in his mind was that of his mistress’s imbecilic lover, obliterating herself by carelessly stepping on an unmistakable rune left on the ground, a trap so obvious that even the dimmest of intruders would have spotted it. With a resigned sigh, Olin mustered all his post-decapitation determination to retrieve his detached head. Yet, his attempts proved fruitless as his arms flailed in comical fashion, missing the mark with frustrating precision. Left, right, left again—the struggle continued, transforming annoyance into exasperation, until finally, after several minutes of wayward arm movements, he managed to cradle his severed head in his hands.

Unfortunately, Olin was a fledgling lich, a newborn still in the early stages of his second undead existence. Despite possessing the knowledge and ability to mend his mutilated and decaying body, his youth as a lich hindered his efficiency in doing so. He needed the assistance of someone with more experience, like Kaida, who undoubtedly possessed the necessary skills to aid him in his undead repair. With her help, he hoped to not only mend his ruined form but also restore what that insufferable pudding devoured, reclaiming what was rightfully his... his dignity... his manhood!

Still, considering everything that had transpired and the fact that he had lost consciousness, it could only mean that Blake, the bearer of his precious phylactery, had met her untimely demise. Yet, here he stood, a testament to her ability to be reborn upon an altar once again. The notion of that creature somehow possessing immortality filled him with a mix of resigned dread and scientific curiosity. How had she achieved such a feat? Legends spoke of Levelers being reborn upon altars, but only within the confines of dungeons. There was never any mention of them being able to accomplish this outside those mystic structures. It was a puzzle that intrigued and unnerved Olin in equal measure.

Holding his head in his hands at chest level, Olin surveyed the scene, his gaze shifting from one lifeless guard to another. The corpses bore the marks of a brutal encounter as if they had been



viciously mauled and bitten by a ravenous creature. However, despite his thorough search, there was no sign of any creature that matched that description. Shaking off the puzzling sight, he turned away from the grim aftermath of the bloody battlefield that unfolded in the confines of the sewer. With his beheaded body bearing the evidence of multiple stabs and slash wounds, he mustered what little strength he had left and limped his way back to Kaida's laboratory, seeking solace and, hopefully, some answers.