

BLACK PUDDING

CHAPTER 5

Had Lady Aurelia been rebirthed as a leveler, Olin would have retained his prestigious status as a distinguished vampire. Yet, fate had other plans, and his life took a wicked turn. Two centuries had passed since Lord Demidicus, enraged by Olin's failure, cursed him to the loathsome existence as a ghoul. To the Grand Elder, Olin's groundbreaking discovery of an entirely new plane beyond the veil, teeming with souls that seemed to greedily consume mana from this realm, held as much importance as a vampire's reflection in the mirror. No matter that these souls outshone summoned demons in their power. In the end, Olin's failure was the only certainty to Lord Demidicus.

Reluctantly, after her ladyship achieved the status of elder, Olin found himself bound in service to his new mistress. Lady Aurelia picked up the research where he had faltered, delving deeper into the realm of the forbidden arcane knowledge. He had marveled at her prowess, achieving feats he had once deemed unattainable. Fueled by a singular fixation, she shattered the very foundations of magical law in her quest to pluck a lone soul from beyond the veil.

Initially, Aurelia's triumphs stung like salt in his wounds, but as the decades wore on, Olin found himself nurturing a paternal affection for her. After all, he had been the one to secure her very soul from beyond the void. Why shouldn't he think of her as his own? With this belief, Olin basked in her accomplishments as if they were his own, his affection for her growing stronger with the passing of time.

As Aurelia basked in her joy of triumph, the war crept up on them, and Olin found himself stranded on a foreign moon, far from the one he perceived as his own. Oh, how he detested his mistress's obsession – this Blake, a Black Pudding masquerading as a woman, birthed from the darkness beyond the veil. She was a ravenous creature whose appetite dwarfed that of even the most inexperienced vampire fledglings. Nonetheless, he observed her tenderness towards young mortals, a curious trait. Could it be a lingering trace of empathy from her former life? Regardless of the cause, she occasionally exhibited restraint that seemed uncharacteristic of the wretched being he perceived her to be.

Olin contemplated abandoning her to the celestial expanse while he returned to his cherished mistress. Regrettably, the monster had achieved something even Lady Aurelia had failed to do. This Black Pudding had transformed him from a ghoul into a lich, a remarkable feat considering the scarcity of phylacteries, particularly since the war had begun. Astonishingly, Blake had obtained not one but two of these rare artifacts.

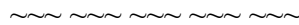
Olin harbored a fervent hope that she wouldn't obliterate the precious gift she had unwittingly granted him, for the destruction of his phylactery would signify the annihilation of his very soul. However, she concealed the precious artifact within her interdimensional vault beyond his grasp. Deprived of his phylactery, he doubted his ability to escape the moon without her by his side.

Another reason for his reluctance to leave her behind lay in his mistress's affection for Blake, or Bowen as she had been known to Aurelia in a previous life – or rather, he.

In the midst of everything, Olin delighted in pondering whether the essence of Bowen's soul, the aspect his mistress treasured, had withstood the test of time and countless reincarnations, ultimately manifesting as this Blake, or become so distorted that Aurelia will eventually cast her aside. He eagerly awaited reuniting with Lady Aurelia, keen to witness if a mere moment in the presence of this monstrosity would alter her perception and end this unhealthy obsession. Of course, his mistress had the misguided notion that Blake was her soulmate, a frivolous fantasy that every sane researcher knew to be an utter myth. Regardless, Olin derived great satisfaction from seeing how his mistress's pursuit of reclaiming her beloved's soul infuriated Lord Demidicus.

Although demoted to the role of a mere research assistant for his esteemed Lady, Olin's thirst for knowledge remained unquenched. In secret, he continued with his own research, though it had veered far from his initial pursuit of the creation of a leveler. Innumerable realities coexisted beyond their own, and beings from these realms had been summoned throughout history, demons being a relatively recent instance. As the veil weakens over time from the countless summonings, magic appears to reach out and abduct entire celestial bodies into their domain, merging distinctive soul pools and giving birth to new species. It's only a matter of time before the sinister realm that spawned demons will be dragged into their own. A prevalent theory suggested that every race dwelling on the Moons of Völuspá originated from beyond this very realm.

Nevertheless, Olin discerned a remarkable characteristic within Aurelia's soul, a trait he also identified in Blake and the other former champion candidates. Their very souls appeared to harmonize with this realm, attracting magic at an extraordinary rate he had never witnessed. He was convinced that even the ascended gods were not as attuned to the magic of this realm as these summoned souls he had found were. However, one thing remained indisputable: while they might have once viewed themselves as humans hailing from another reality, they undoubtedly were not human, at least not akin to those in this realm. Although he dared not voice his suspicions, he resolved to remain near Blake, this monster masquerading as a woman, determined to validate his hypothesis.



Trudging through the sewers behind this rodent, Faelwen was becoming a dreadful bore. It felt like ages since we left her decrepit basement, which doubled as a home slash sewer. However, my size was significantly growing as I feasted on every repulsive creature I found down here – from man-sized centipedes and feral vermin to a stray goblin.

Oddly enough, Faelwen didn't seem too bothered by my actions nor the notion that she had offed her husband Razzle, especially after I shelled out a pretty penny for his corpse... or so she assumed. *Ha-ha!* As for my motives for overpaying her, let's attribute them to a nasty case of indigestion whenever I see her little brats and leave it at that! Faelwen continued to insist, though, that we were nearing the necromancer Razzle mentioned just before I feasted on his intestines while he begged for the sweet release of death. To make matters worse, Olin's creepy glances made me feel like a lab rat, a bizarre sentiment considering he was stuck in a rodent's body.

“Ugh, can you quit staring at me like that?” I grumbled to Olin.

Olin blinked a few times, his large rat eyes widening before scratching his chin and asking, “How do you manipulate mana?”

“What?!”

“While casting magic, I’ve observed that the flow appears to follow two distinct methods, which are significantly different from one another. It seems as though you can either draw mana from within yourself or utilize the mana around you for casting. These two methods shouldn’t coexist within a single entity.”

Oh, I get it now. My furry undead friend must be talking about how I occasionally use my skills with the system and how I can also cast spells without it. Who knew the lich had such keen eyesight? With a mischievous grin, I offered the most eloquent explanation I could muster, “None of your business!”

Abruptly, Faelwen came to a halt, and the aroma of fear emanating from her was tantalizingly tempting. Yet, somehow, I managed to summon a shred of self-restraint and held back from giving in to my urges. Her head and ears darted in opposite directions as if her eyes and those large rat ears were scouting separate paths. The three of us had stumbled upon an intersection in the sewers, which, to my dismay, had grown drier as we ventured deeper. However, the increasing number of skeletal remains evoked memories of those documentaries about the crypts beneath Paris. *Ah, I’ve always wanted to pay a visit to that playground of death...*

“What’s the matter?” Olin asked with a hint of condescension. *Tee-hee!* My snarky response to his earlier question seems to have slightly wrinkled his whiskers.

“You really can’t hear that?” Faelwen stammered, her voice quivering with fear as she nervously shuffled behind Olin and me. “Something or somethings are heading our way.”

I cocked my head toward one of the paths but detected no sounds. Regrettably, my hearing wasn’t as finely tuned as my sense of smell, which seemed particularly drawn to fear and decay. Not that I minded, really – it was quite a delightful aroma. *The simple pleasures of being a Black Pudding.* Despite my confusion, I couldn’t help but notice Olin’s ears twitching and swiveling about. *What are these two so worked up about?*

It took a few moments, but eventually, I picked up on it – a low, rhythmic shuffling that gradually quickened in pace as if a horde of maracas were approaching. Was it one creature or many? I couldn’t quite tell, but the sound alone was enough to set my metaphorical heart racing with excitement. Suddenly, a brilliant idea struck me, and I attempted to activate [**Thermalsense**] with a mental command. Of course, nothing happened. Pathetically, I had completely forgotten that I had lost that skill after my last respawn. *Idiot, Blake... ugh!* My idiocy never ceases to amaze me.

“A wave of mana just expelled from you. What did you just do?” Olin’s voice cut through the tension, his curiosity seeming to outweigh any concern for the approaching danger.

With a wicked grin, I shot back at Olin, “None of your business.” Of course, I wasn’t really hiding anything. Still, the joy of getting under the lich’s undead skin was just too irresistible. However, his mention of my mana release piqued my interest. Why did it happen when I didn’t even have the skill to activate it? Maybe I should enlighten the undead rat on what really happened.

My playful thoughts about messing with Olin came to a screeching halt when the creature I had hoped to face finally emerged from the shadows. My excitement quickly turned to dread as I beheld the monstrosity before me – a gargantuan centipede the length of two articulated buses. And, of course, it was undead. Its skeletal exoskeleton glistened in the dim light, and I could see what appeared to be rows of seats within it, with a young boy in coveralls perched on one. *What kind of twisted reality have I respawned into?*