

BLAKE PUDDING

CHAPTER 20

LOST IN THOUGHT

Death had long been a familiar presence to Olin, even before he became undead. Born a vampire, he existed before the convergence of Nyxoria into the reality of Völuspá, where it found itself orbiting as one of the more distant moons. With the convergence came colonizers from other moons, drawn to Nyxoria in their relentless pursuit of untapped riches and arcane knowledge. They arrived in relentless waves, settling in with no intention of leaving.

However, Nyxoria was not a defenseless moon—it was a realm dominated by vampires!

What ensued was a relentless sequence of wars that spanned three millennia. These battles were fierce and unyielding, showcasing the vampires' extraordinary strength and resilience. However, it was fundamentally a war of attrition, exacerbated by a critical issue: the vampires' birthrates had ceased entirely following the convergence, further tipping the scales in this war of attrition. Despite their remarkable powers, the vampires found themselves vastly outnumbered.

The situation reached a pivotal juncture with the arrival of the enemy's Champions. These entities possessed the ability to harness a type of magic that was entirely different from that known to the vampires.

As defeat followed defeat, the vampires' retreat became a grim necessity, surrendering swathes of their homeland to the unyielding invaders. These foes, relentless in their conquest, not only seized territories but also established their own realms, imprinting the moon's landscape with burgeoning kingdoms. This encroachment brought an unforeseen crisis for the vampires: the gradual failure of their crops, the very sustenance that sustained their unique kind.

Evolved to thrive on Nyxoria, the vampires had long nourished themselves on the native vegetation, a symbiosis between predator and plant life. However, as their agricultural heartlands dwindled, so too did their traditional source of nourishment. Facing starvation, the vampires made a desperate yet pivotal discovery. The blood of their enemies, the very invaders encroaching upon their lands, offered an alternative sustenance that wasn't all too dissimilar from their previous food sources—blood! This revelation, while providing a solution, was not without its limitations. To eat—to survive, they must hunt the very forces that hunted them.

Yet, within this grim reality, a sliver of opportunity emerged. The vampires discovered they could transform members of other races with their own blood, creating beings akin to themselves. These new entities, while not pure blood vampires, shared enough of their essence to be considered part of their kindred.

...And yet, it was not enough.

Nearing extinction, the vampires sought refuge in the shadows of crumbled ruins, hidden valleys, and dark corners of Nyxoria, forming covens to survive, their once proud bastions now mere echoes of a lost grandeur. Amidst this desolation, they chanced upon mysterious ruins that had emerged post-convergence, structures alien to their ancient memories. These enigmatic edifices, known simply as "Dungeons," hinted at hidden purposes, their secrets veiled in obscurity somehow linked to a strange system of magic.

It was within such a Dungeon that they uncovered the secrets of the magical system pervading their environment, a complex and newfound aspect of their altered reality. This system, they realized, was what empowered the Champions. Among the vampires, Lord Demidicus, both venerable and ruthless, recognized the immense potential of this arcane power. He yearned to master it, to use it as a weapon for their resurgence. However, this profound knowledge remained as elusive as a shadow at twilight, always just beyond his reach. It promised immense power yet remained tantalizingly unattainable.

In his relentless search for a solution, Lord Demidicus turned his gaze towards the pantheon of this reality, seeking divine intervention. It was then that he stumbled upon a forgotten deity, a goddess whose power seemingly eclipsed that of her divine peers. This deity, known as the Crone, became a beacon of hope for the vampires, leading them to embrace a newfound religious fervor. While many devoted themselves to the worship of the Crone, a faction within their ranks found solace in another deity, the Serpent, creating a dichotomy in their spiritual pursuits.

Olin, whose fascination with the unknown knew no bounds, could not pinpoint which god had bestowed upon them the ability to summon entities from beyond their reality. Yet, this arcane knowledge ignited a passion within him, a fervent study he pursued with unbridled enthusiasm. His endeavors did not go unnoticed; Lord Demidicus himself took a keen interest in Olin's research.

Since mastering the magical system of their reality eluded him, Lord Demidicus turned his attention to Olin's groundbreaking research. Olin had been delving into the art of summoning a soul from beyond the veil, a practice that might offer access to the elusive system. This prospect shimmered like a faint light amidst their darkened plight, offering a chance to regain a measure of control in a reality that had become increasingly foreign and hostile. This was especially crucial as the invaders from beyond Nyxoria, with their Champions capable of harnessing the system's power, continued to grow in strength.

Olin's initial forays into summoning were marred by repeated failures, until he came to a crucial realization: he was not pulling a physical body through the veil, but rather a soul. Armed with this insight, he provided a physical vessel for the soul, leading to his first successful summoning. Through continuous experimentation, he observed that a living vessel already containing a soul underwent significant transformations when a summoned soul was introduced. The body would alter to mirror the original form of the new soul. In contrast, a lifeless vessel already devoid of a soul remained unchanged during the process.

Furthermore, Olin discovered that extracting the original soul from a living vessel, while keeping the body alive, prevented these dramatic transformations. He hypothesized that the process

involved using the original soul as a sort of power source, enabling the summoned soul to induce the changes. This theory added a new dimension to his understanding of the interplay between souls and bodies.

Lord Demidicus's appreciation for Olin's work grew as the initial summonings yielded an array of diverse and unusual beings. These entities, self-identified as demons, exhibited a wide range of characteristics and dispositions. Some were immediately hostile and violent, necessitating quick neutralization. Others, cunning and manipulative, assimilated into vampire society with unsettling ease. Lord Demidicus, intrigued by this adaptability, even attempted to replace several of his rival vampires with these demons, only to face their eventual betrayal, driven as they were by personal power quests.

Interestingly, these demons possessed a unique ability: their souls could return to their original bodies beyond the veil after death in this realm, allowing for their subsequent resummoning. In all his research, Olin had not encountered any other species with this capability in this reality.

The dynamics of their summoning endeavors took a significant turn with the arrival of the first succubus. This event marked a new chapter in their experiments, introducing unexpected elements into the already complex interplay of power and allegiance within the vampire realm.

The succubi, unlike the other less overtly hostile demons, displayed a peculiar form of loyalty. Yet, they shared the common trait of manipulation. Rather than seeking power for themselves, they seemed to revel in subtly controlling those in power, skillfully weaving their influence. Lord Demidicus was particularly amused by the succubus summoned by Olin, allowing her to exercise her manipulative tendencies. All her efforts, however, appeared to be in vain—at least, that was the prevailing belief. In reality, the succubus had risen in stature alongside the vampire lord, occupying a position more akin to a favored pet than a reigning queen.

Then, over two hundred years ago, an extraordinary event unfolded—a rarity akin to capturing lightning in a bottle. The succubus became pregnant, harboring within her a child of vampiric lineage. This unprecedented event had been poised to mark a turning point—

Suddenly, Olin's contemplation of these distant memories was shattered by a swift gust of wind and a resounding splat. Jerked back to reality, he found himself in the expansive chamber where his mistress's oddly favored pudding was in training. To his astonishment, it was locked in a sparring match with an enemy, a Champion no less. A deep throbbing pain engulfed his head, seeming to echo through his very soul. Dazed, he struggled to regain focus. Seeking clarity, he questioned what had happened, only to be met with a baffling response from the pudding about 'Humpty Dumpty' or something of the sort, leaving him utterly perplexed.

The half-breed dragonkin had already left in the company of the undead woman, whose poor attempt at an illusionary disguise elicited nothing but a scoff from Olin. The dragonkin had been rambling about needing a workshop or something of the sort, but Olin hadn't really been listening. His head was still throbbing with pain, and his thoughts were meandering through memories of the past. Now, he found himself lingering near the entrance of the chamber, watching the distasteful

scene unfold. The so-called sparring session between the pudding and the enemy was hardly a match—it was more of a one-sided thrashing.

Olin watched the peculiar training session with a detached sense of discomfort. The favored creature of his mistress was repeatedly subjected to brutal attacks – sliced, decapitated, limbs severed, only to be sent splattering against the walls, ceiling, and floor in a grotesque display. Each time, it reformed back into an elvish semblance, only for the cycle to repeat. Magic seemed forsaken in this hidden place, a curious deviation from the norm. Olin regretted not paying closer attention to earlier conversations, but the throbbing pain in his head and the disorientation from being in an unfamiliar body clouded his usual sharpness.

This feeling of detachment was not unfamiliar to Olin. It echoed back to the days following his transformation by Lord Demidicus, who, in his quest to create a Leveler capable of harnessing the system's unique powers, had turned him into a ghoul. This transformation was Olin's grim punishment for failing with Lord Demidicus's daughter, a possibility he had forewarned might happen.

As a ghoul, Olin's body frequently deteriorated, necessitating the transfer of his soul into new corpses every few years. It was a harrowing experience, a constant reminder of his failure in what he had advised Lord Demidicus was a highly risky endeavor. Yet, from Olin's perspective, the outcome wasn't a complete failure. While Aurelia did not become a traditional Leveler, her new soul exhibited immense power, surpassing many others in different ways.

Aurelia's triumphs marked a stark contrast to Olin's earlier failures. She excelled in an area where he had not, masterfully summoning new souls as Levelers, beings who could access the system's powers. This feat alone was remarkable, but it was further complemented by her inherent abilities. Aurelia possessed a distinct mastery over mana, manipulating it around her in a manner that appeared almost otherworldly. Her adeptness in both summoning and magic manipulation showcased a rare blend of skills, setting her apart in their complex realm of power and intrigue.

Olin often found himself musing about Aurelia's true nature, one that he doubted her father understood or could even fathom. What kind of reality had she come from that granted her such effortless mastery over magic, enabling her to bend mana to her will in ways that seemed beyond even the gods? Her extraordinary abilities raised profound questions about the nature of magical realms and realities. Furthermore, the souls she had summoned also possessed the same influence over the mana around them.

Another whoosh of wind followed by a resounding splat abruptly pulled Olin's attention back to the present, his eyes focusing on his rodent-like hands. Becoming a beastkin was an entirely new experience in his long existence. His transformation into a lich, facilitated by a phylactery, had eliminated the need for further body transfers. Yet, his current circumstance was far from reassuring. His soul, safely ensconced within the phylactery, was now in the possession of the pudding—a supposed place of safety.

However, Olin harbored deep reservations about this arrangement. He watched the pudding being soundly humiliated in a sparring match with an enemy, all the while considering the creature's

unstable nature. The pudding's erratic behavior and apparent insanity raised serious doubts in Olin's mind about its reliability as a guardian of his phylactery. He couldn't shake the feeling that the pudding might whimsically transfer his soul from one random corpse to another, with his current rat beastkin form being a perfect testament to its capricious decisions.



I gathered myself off the floor, my form oozing back together after yet another unceremonious drip from the ceiling.

Thinking back on those bouts with Vanya in the Dream Realm, I was definitely there in full physical—or maybe ethereal?—form, while she was probably just dreaming. Looking back, I can't help but wonder if it was really her I was squaring off against, or just some kind of shadowy echo, like a recording or something. Honestly, the Dream Realm is one big question mark to me.

But, getting back on track, our fights there were pretty evenly matched. Sometimes she won, other times I came out on top. Eventually, I started winning more often than not. But here? In the real world? It's like night and day. Vanya's completely owning the match, making me look like a total noob, utterly at her mercy. It's a whole different ball game compared to those recurring dream—or nightmare—clashes.

Go for the groin hit!

She's lacking the equipment.

Judging by how she's been dominating our ass, I'd say she's hiding a pair somewhere.

The training, if that's what you could even call it, was ridiculously one-sided. We hadn't been using any of our magic, all because of the Slaethian patrols floating around up there—couldn't risk them detecting us, which was complete and utter bullshit. I couldn't help but wonder how this so-called spar, or rather this humiliating beatdown, would've played out if I were fighting with all my tricks. But no, here I was, getting mercilessly pummeled and bitch-slapped around by her.

“Ugh, that's it, the big girl panties are coming off,” I hissed.

Wait, don't we mean we're pulling them up?

Nope!

Vanya cracked a grin, the first expression other than contempt or revulsion she had shown me. It was a rather sinister grin, I had to admit. She lunged at me with her sword, which was definitely going to suck. Thankfully, she hadn't been using any of her magic like when she first revealed that flaming sword and all. She was holding back, limiting herself to just slicing me to ribbons... with a regular sword.

But as she lunged this time, I decided I was done trying to fight like a human. Kaida had been kind enough to provide me with a dull sword to fight back, but let's be real, I was no swordswoman—I was a monster!

The moment turned chaotic as I burst into a wild mass of tentacles, wildly thrashing at Vanya. She was caught off guard – probably wondering where in the hell all that mass came from. There she was, darting and dodging, pulling off all sorts of acrobatics to avoid my tentacles, which were as thick as electric poles and all hell-bent on smacking her head. I know, I know, this was meant to be some sort of light sparring or whatever, but come on, I was desperate for a win here. Vanya, tough as nails, was up for the challenge, gracefully sidestepping my attempts to squash her like a bug. Every time I tried to snag her, she'd just slice through my limbs with that sword of hers. It was irritatingly impressive – I'd reconnect them, sure, but she was just too damn slick.

One thing Vanya didn't seem to consider was that each severed tentacle, as they hit the ground, formed an expanding pool of blackness beneath her, all connected to me. As she sliced through another of my tentacles, she suddenly felt something coil around her ankle. A brief glance down was all it took for both of us to realize I had her.

The black pool beneath her feet erupted into a frenzy of tentacles, engulfing her in a chaotic embrace. She struggled fiercely, making it a bit more challenging than I'd anticipated to pin down her sword arm.

But eventually, I had her completely bound, like something straight out of a kinky hentai scene, with black tentacles wrapped all around her body. The look of sheer panic on her face was absolutely priceless. For a moment, I wondered if she thought I was going to kill her. Frankly, even I was starting to wonder.

“Say, uncle,” I cooed teasingly.

“What?” came her bewildered response.

“Uncle! You know, like giving up,” I urged.

“W-Why should I?” she retorted, puzzled.

I let out a sigh as I transformed back into my human shape, though I kept the tentacles wrapped around her. They stretched across the ground, merging seamlessly into the lower part of my dress. I couldn't help but think I resembled a sexy Ursula. Both halves of my soul briefly toyed with the idea of showing this form to Aurelia once we got back to her.

“Just admit I won,” I finally huffed, slightly exasperated.

“You do realize I could just engulf my body in holy flames and walk right through you?” she shot back with a glare.

“Umm... Uncle,” I quickly conceded and hastily released her.

As I crossed my arms, radiating all the disdain I felt for the golden-haired elf, my gaze drifted over to Olin. He was still standing by the entrance of the chamber, looking somewhat dazed. It was hard to be certain, though reading a rat's facial expressions isn't exactly easy. But with his whiskers drooping and his ears hanging low, not to mention the way his brows were furrowed, I figured something was definitely bothering him.

Maybe we should check on him, considering everything he's been through.

... Yeah, you've got a point.

“Hey, rat bastard, who pissed in your Cheerios?” I shouted at him.

Olin glanced up at me with what I guessed was annoyance—still, interpreting nonhuman facial expressions isn't exactly my forte. Then, with a flick of his rat tail, he turned and sauntered back down the corridor, away from the chamber where Vanya and I were.

I'm pretty sure we're the ones who pissed in his Cheerios.

Who would've guessed a guy with a face like that wouldn't have a pee fetish?

T-That's... no, just no! Ugh, I'm so gross.

I shrugged at myself while watching Vanya sheathe her sword, or more accurately, make it vanish into thin air. Magic really is something else! Meanwhile, I was just finishing up putting my face back together. It's not that I had any issues with my stark pitch-black appearance, but having a silk coating on at least my face lent me a semblance of my old self. Sure, with my tendril hair and tight face, coupled with glowing orange eyes, I looked a bit alien-like. But as I've said time and again, I'm more creepy cute than anything else, and I've grown quite fond of this look. Plus, I was pretty sure it gave my bitter Champion the creeps, which was definitely a nice little bonus.

Humming the Freddy song under my breath, I sauntered over to the elf, who was still shooting me a stink eye. “So, how did I do?” I asked, feeling pretty proud of myself for entrapping her in the end.

“You have no battle awareness, your reaction time is abysmal, and your arrogance is off the charts,” she shot back. “Any squire worth their salt could have taken you down a hundred times over,” Vanya added with a scoff.

“Ouch, that's harsh. But hey, I wasn't using any magic,” I defended myself.

“And neither was I,” she retorted sharply.

To be honest, I thought she was being overly critical. In my own mind, I was nothing short of a badass. Sure, most of my victories involved ambushing people and sucker-punching them with magic, but those still counted as wins, right? “Hey, I once took on a whole squad of knights and their squires, so I can't be that bad,” I blurted out defensively.

“Were you lurking in the shadows when you did that?” the elf asked with a mocking tone.

“N-No,” I mumbled, quickly averting my eyes.

“Sure, you'd make a decent assassin, but as a fighter? Not so much,” she finally conceded, giving me a backhanded compliment that felt more like a slap in the face.

Fine, being a barbarian brute mindlessly swinging a sword wasn't exactly my style anyway. I had always envisioned myself more as a sorceress. What I really needed was to get out of this

godforsaken place, head topside, and fine-tune my magic. And, of course, try out my system skills on some unsuspecting victims above. With a smile creeping up, I stepped closer to my Champion, closing the distance until I was just an arm's reach away, locking eyes with her.

“W-What are you doing?” she stammered, leaning back slightly.

“We need to head topside, fight with magic against those jerks up there,” I explained, gesturing towards the exit. “The ambient mana down here is awful, and I seriously don't want to have to slither around as a slime trying to find my way to the surface.”

“I'm not here to help you wage war against my own people,” Vanya replied, her voice tinged with uncertainty. “My agreement was only to train you. That's it.”

“Come on, aren't you supposed to be some noble warrior of light, or whatever?” I countered, rolling my eyes. “Open your eyes and look around. The real victims are down here, and those so-called people of yours up there? They're the real villains.” I conveniently left out the part where I was far from being a saint myself. To be honest, if I didn't need the remaining beastkin down here, I might have already gone on a rampage in these catacombs. Allies are important, or so they say – or some stupid shit like that.

“No!” she rebuffed me firmly, leaving no room for argument.

“Ugh, fine. You're the worst Champion ever,” I groaned, rolling my eyes. “But at least walk with me to the surface. You can chalk it up to training or something,” I suggested, trying a different angle.

Vanya chewed on her lower lip, deep in thought, before finally sighing in resignation. “Alright, I'll accompany you to the surface and observe, but I won't help you attack my people,” she stated sternly, pointing a finger at me for emphasis. “Seeing how you actually fight with magic will be... useful for training purposes,” she conceded.

“Yay!” I cheered, unable to mask my enthusiasm.

In my head, though, I was already scheming. What I really wanted was to see if I could 'accidentally' send an enemy Vanya's way and watch her take down one of her own. There's something wickedly satisfying about corrupting others into doing the dirty work. Plus, after being repeatedly sliced and diced by the elf-she-bitch, I was starting to feel a bit peckish.

Oh, she's going to cross over to the dark side, isn't she?

Absolutely. We'll have her embracing our kind of chaos before long. Muahahaha!