

# 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.

**NOTIFICATION**

**Jörmun the Grand** has proclaimed you as his Champion.

**CONGRATULATIONS**

**[System Unlocked]**

You have earned the title: **[Paladin of Vengeance]**

Embody that which calls for retribution.

*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 worshippers. 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.

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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.

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“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-like 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 chasms! 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!