

BLACK PUDDING

CHAPTER 29

In the depths of an old, abandoned reservoir, its water long gone, and far below the bustling sewers, Nikola toiled away in his workshop. It might not have been the most conventional place to work on an airship—or rather, what he liked to call a starship—but his mind buzzed with ideas. He was determined to blend the magic of this world with the science fiction tales from his home, Earth. The possibilities of interstellar travel within this reality using magic consumed him. It was, without a doubt, his greatest dream.

As he tinkered with the vessel, Nikola felt a surge of excitement. He was certain he had cracked the code to navigate among the stars using magic. Though the people in this reality had long been traveling through space with their airships, their reach was limited to this single system, specifically the Moons of Völuspá. But could it truly be called space travel? Völuspá's atmosphere stretched far and wide, wrapping itself around most, if not all, of her moons—an enigmatic phenomenon that kindled an intense curiosity in Nikola's mind. And yet, he had grander ambitions. His dreams reached far beyond this single system.

Adding to his fascination, Nikola was also obsessed with the ancient gates that once interconnected kingdoms and moons. Unfortunately, the vast majority of these gates were now defunct, and the few that still operated only connected to a single destination or were severely damaged, making any attempt to traverse them a perilous gamble. Yet, it was precisely this aspect that held the key to his vessel's method of travel and how he planned to extricate his starship from the depths in which it had been created. And, of course, it was thanks to his earlier proof of concepts that he had managed to gather the materials into his workshop, to begin with.

Nikola took a short break, stepping back to admire his creation—the vessel that had become his pride and joy. The main portion of the ship resembled an old-fashioned arrowhead, with notches between the head and base. However, the base extended slightly further to support the nacelles, which had been inspired by his favorite TV show and held great significance for the self-sustained gate travel his starship needed to venture beyond Völuspá.

Yet, reality didn't quite match his initial vision. The starship featured a total of six nacelles—the two primary ones, built from former airship hulls, resembled Earth's sailing ships, but they were uniquely adapted so that the bottom of their hulls faced outward from the side of the main structure, serving as his innovative gate warping drives. As for the other four nacelles, they were scavenged from discarded long boats, or rather, airboats, as the locals called them. Positioned beside the large nacelles along the base of the arrowhead were two of these vessels, their bottoms facing upward, while the remaining two were mounted below, facing downward. These four nacelles functioned as his impulse drives, enabling his starship to maneuver gracefully without relying solely on the ethereal sails typically used by airships.

Within each of the hulls of the nacelles, engraved runes and wiring fashioned from vines sourced from the massive tree at the capital adorned the wood. Nikola had discovered that tree vines were surprisingly excellent conductors of mana currents, making wood the ideal material for his entire starship. What had started as a mere prototype had now evolved into something much grander, driven by Nikola's passion and ambitions. Doubts about building another ship anytime soon lingered; his focus was firmly fixed on this starship and its limitless potential. If all went as intended, he would bid farewell to this moon, setting sail on a voyage like no other.

Nikola sighed with pride at his work, completely engrossed in his tinkering. Oblivious to the world above, he remained unaware of the unfolding events until a sudden intrusion shattered his solitude. A group of unwelcome visitors emerged, and it was evident they were no friends of his.



I groggily regained consciousness, and from touch alone, I knew I was back on that damn altar again, now just a tiny blob of myself, utterly baffled by what the heck just went down. Beardy, in a moment of madness, blew himself to smithereens—like, seriously, was it to spite me or what? This shit made zero sense, but hey, I'm in a realm with all sorts of freaky magical races, customs, and cultures. Maybe they have this twisted belief that it's better to go boom with your enemy than to accept defeat. Whatever, I can't change it now, and let's face it, I'm still alive while Beardy's gone, so that must mean... I won? Yeah, sure, I'll take it as my victory! *Ha! Suck it, Beardy!*

Now, the bigger question is, how much of the city was destroyed by the massive blast? I mean, I'm pretty sure he didn't care about collateral damage, so I'd better hope my favorite spots are still intact. Ah, who am I kidding? I don't honestly care about collateral damage. Sure, I'm against killing children and all that, but that's more of a guideline of mine than an actual rule. Besides, I didn't cause the explosion that would have wiped most, if not all, of the city away! As long as Nikola's airship—starship—or whatnot is intact, and he can get me back to Aurelia, all is good.

"Now, let's have a quick meal to replenish my mass; being this tiny isn't among my favorite things," I groaned, accompanied by a satisfying stretch of my gooey little body.

"Awe, even your voice is tiny and squeaky when you're like that," a voice cooed as if from a little girl.

Mana Sight surged to life, lighting up the damn dark chamber with a wicked orange brilliance as I scanned around, hunting for the source of the voice. Oh, I totally knew who the culprit was—an annoying little pink-wearing pain in the butt! But guess what? The sneaky brat was nowhere to be seen! It was honestly driving me a bit nuts. Though, let's face it, sanity ain't really my thing. Yeah, I know, I don't think that's a Black Pudding treat either, that's just a me thing, but hey, it's all part of my charm.

Muttering under my breath about my pesky little stalker, I gobbled up my meal from my reserves with a speed that would put any other slime monster to shame. In no time, I was back to my ideal mass. Sure, I could have packed on a ton more pounds—or kilograms, whatever—but I wasn't in the mood for squeezing myself into a compact blob. Nah, I had places to go, things to see, people to murder, you know, the usual stuff. So, with my belly full and my size restored, I was ready to

make a grand exit. Plus, let's be real, I've been doing the dying thing quite often lately, so, no need to let a good meal go to waste.

And just like that, my head was back to square one, totally baffled as I stepped outside, taking in the sight of a perfectly intact city. I mean, seriously, what the effing fucking fudge?! Even the damn stadium off in the distance was still standing tall and proud! Did I miss something here? Did I enter an alternate dimension—again? Perhaps, I time-traveled back in time, stuck in some twisted loop, destined to relive this crazy adventure over and over until I got it right? This was some messed-up magic right here, like a freakin' horror movie plot twist. *Ugh, I can't even right now. This whole thing is so bizarre it's starting to creep even me out.*

Taking a deep breath, attempting to salvage the empty patches of where my sanity should have gone, I marched down the cliff top and right through the gate. And you won't believe this shit—there were no guards! Like, seriously, where the hell did everyone go? It was a freakin' ghost town. But my curiosity—or maybe it's just my stubbornness—got the better of me, and I kept going. As I ventured further in, I stumbled upon a few corpses sprawled out in the streets. One of them was some lizardman, and the others... well, let's just say I hadn't bothered to learn my magical species just yet—I mean, I had technically dropped out of my magical university after a single week—though they were a bit hairy—like, Cousin Itt hairy, it that helps.

From the looks of things, the streets bore the marks of a large-scale battle, but surprisingly, there were still no signs of the massive magical detonation from when Beardy went boom. Weird, right? Well, in this freaky realm of magic, anything's possible. So, I shrugged it off and decided to adopt a little mantra, “When in doubt, it's magic. When in doubt, blame magic. When in doubt, it's always fucking magic!” ‘Cause, you know, magic's always the go-to explanation for the inexplicable. That or freakin' UFOs. Yup, never underestimate the UFOs, man. They're out there!

Now where was I? Oh, right, time to descend into the freakin' sewers and pay a visit to Olin and his undead squeeze. Maybe, just maybe, they have some answers that don't involve me pointing fingers at magic all the time. Not that I don't love blaming magic for everything—it's my favorite pastime in this wacky realm—but hey, a girl can hope for some real answers, am I right?



Olin blinked, his vision adjusting to the dim light as the darkness receded. Gradually, the details of the room materialized, and he found himself staring up at the ceiling. Soon enough, the face of the person he considered the bane of his existence loomed over him, glaring down. Normally, he would harbor nothing but disdain for his mistress's love interest, but his perspective had shifted since arriving at this place and meeting Kaida. Despite his initial misgivings about Blake, he found himself grateful for being sent here with her.

“What the fuck happened?” she snapped at him. “And seriously, why the hell is that undead revenant chick, like, dead-dead? Isn't she, you know, supposed to be undead?”

Olin's body jolted upright, and his eyes swiftly surveyed the scene of devastation that had marred Kaida's once serene sanctuary. The memories of the event came rushing back, engulfing him in a wave of dread. A single phrase escaped his lips, filled with an intense hatred, “the duke.”

His heart would have stopped beating if it hadn't ceased long ago, along with several bodies before. There, Kaida lay, a magical bolt having blown straight through her chest, putting an end to her revenant existence. Olin staggered to his feet, only to notice his shadow and the light that shone through his own chest, casting a haunting image on the ground. Blake had seemingly restored his soul to his vessel, an action that shouldn't have been necessary unless the attackers had known they were dealing with a lich beforehand and had prepared a spell to sever the connection between Olin's phylactery and his body. However, revenants did not possess a phylactery for their souls to return to, but that didn't mean there wasn't still hope for Kaida.

"Being a revenant, her soul should persist near her lifeless form for centuries, seeking to gather enough ambient mana to facilitate her return. They are known for their stubborn persistence in such matters. If we can supply her soul with the necessary mana, there's a chance she could be revived," Olin explained. However, he soon realized that Blake hadn't been listening at all; instead, she was busily rummaging through Kaida's belongings.

"Hey, Olin," Blake began, not missing a beat as she continued her rummaging. "So, I was having this epic showdown with that headmaster asshole from the academy, and guess what? He freakin' blew himself up with enough magic to wipe the entire damn city off the map," she blurted out. But before she could continue, Olin spun around to face her, his expression a mix of concern and irritation.

"What!" Olin blurted out.

"Oh, don't worry," she nonchalantly replied, "after I respawned, I found the city perfectly fine—no signs of any widespread destruction like I'd seen before the explosion. Well, unless you count all the random dead corpses littering the streets. But hey, buildings were still standing!" She paused, frowning in confusion. "Still, I can't figure out why nothing was blown away or why that bearded elf killed himself," she finished with a shrug as she held up a gold skull she found amongst Kaida's possessions.

"That... That doesn't make any sense. Are you sure you saw the city being destroyed?" Olin asked, his tone tinged with concern and confusion.

"I witnessed the mushroom cloud firsthand before it killed me," Blake added, her tone casual as she nonchalantly picked up a dead rodent amongst the wreckage and ate it.

"Did Headmaster Thalador say anything before inflicting a fatal blow upon himself?" Olin inquired further.

"Who? Oh, Beardy, yeah... what was it—Oh, 'it's time to wake up,'" Blake retorted, her cruel grin stretching wider, accompanied by that mischievous glint in her eye. Olin couldn't help but notice how disturbingly familiar he was becoming with that cruel smile of hers.

"I'll need some time to process all of this, but for now, can you please help me with Kaida?" Olin's request came out with a mix of uncertainty and a hint of desperation, trying his best to keep his tone neutral despite dealing with his mistress's wicked lover.

"Sure," she replied as she casually tossed the skull over her shoulder.