

BLAKE PUDDING

PROLOGUE II

LOST SOULMATES

Aurelia stood on the balcony, her hair caught in a wild dance as the wind whipped around her, swirling snowflakes into a frenzied ballet. Yet, she remained motionless, her gaze fixed on the distant horizon toward the Beastveil Kingdom. Her vampiric heart throbbed with anticipation, aching for her beloved. For nearly two centuries, she had labored to bring her beloved's soul into this reality, to reunite once again. And she had succeeded, only for them to be wrenched apart after mere moments of blissful reunion.

The Priestess of Dreams had declared that her love was drawing near, and Aurelia was brimming with anticipation. Closing her eyes, which gleamed a deep, lustrous red, Aurelia let the memories of her past life envelop her. She could almost hear the whisper of those names she had never forgotten, as if they were gently caressing her ear.

“Ayslinn,” Bowen breathed, his voice a soft murmur, just moments before their lips met.

In that instant, a wave of passion, longing, and desire enveloped them. Their bodies entwined in a dance as old as time. With a playful and mischievous spark in her eyes, Ayslinn rolled them off their straw bedding, allowing her to take the dominant position atop him. Bowen, a man of strength and potential, a leader in the making with a warrior's heart, always seemed to melt under her touch. It was this vulnerability, this willingness to surrender to their love, that made her cherish him even more. Gently, she took his hand and guided it to her breast, leaning in for another kiss, deepening their connection.

Aurelia opened her eyes, the memory of the touch and the kiss as vivid as if it had happened just yesterday. Instinctively, she reached up, her fingers delicately tracing her lips, caressing them as if to capture the lingering sensation of that long-lost moment.

Peering down from the balcony, over the castle walls perched atop the snow-covered mountaintop, Aurelia observed the city sprawling below in the valley. It had blossomed under her reign, becoming a haven for refugees from across the moon of Nyxoria. Many were former victims of her own kind—vampires who once hunted them for sport and sustenance. Yet, in times of greater peril, even former foes can unite. This was the essence of the Kingdom of Slaethia.

Unlike the vampires, the Slaethians did not hunt for sport or necessity. They were consumed by a fanatical holy crusade, relentlessly committed to genocide. Their objective was to exterminate entire races, not solely on this moon, but all moons in collaboration with the Empire of Luminance, often simply referred to as the Empire, which was under the governance of a council of Ascended

Gods. The Slaethians' primary targets were species capable of producing soulless offspring, known as the feral, as well as any beings who resisted the worship of these deities within the Church of Light.

Under Aurelia's rule, she revitalized many of the crops and foods that had been lost when Nyxoria was drawn into the orbit of Völuspá. Historically, vampires were not always blood-feeders. Originally, they thrived on natural vegetation that contained a vital liquid found in other living forms. However, when outsiders began to ravage their moon following a convergence, the vampires were forced to adapt for survival. It was then they discovered that the blood of various races was not only a suitable substitute but also quite palatable.

For the first time since their arrival in this realm, the vampire race found themselves in a position of burgeoning strength. They had amassed a growing army, garnered significant influence, and acquired subjects who, while not entirely devoid of fear, certainly viewed them with less dread than they did their enemies. This newfound status, a stark contrast to their past, was a testament to Aurelia's leadership and strategic acumen. Under her guidance, the vampire race was not merely surviving; it was flourishing, carving out a place of power and respect in a world that had once been hostile and unforgiving.

Thanks to the assistance of forest nymphs, Aurelia's reign saw the restoration of these 'blood fruits' and plants, providing a sustainable source of nourishment for her kind. Despite this, not all vampires were content with what they considered bland fare. Some still prowled the streets of the burgeoning city below for a more visceral dining experience. Aurelia tolerated this practice as long as it did not result in fatalities. After all, she herself relished the taste of warm blood from others, indulging in this primal pleasure that harkened back to their predatory nature.

The transformation of other races through a vampire's bite added another layer to the complex dynamics of Aurelia's reign. Those bitten by vampires didn't become pureblooded, but they did undergo a significant transformation, acquiring many vampiric traits and experiencing alterations in their magic. This process led some races to equate vampirism with a disease, advocating for the eradication of those who carried such traits.

However, the reality of vampiric transformation was more intricate than simply being a disease. It required not only a bite but also the draining of the victim's blood, followed by the transfusion of the vampire's own blood. This complex process often resulted in the failed creation of a feral vampire. Given its elaborate nature, vampirism was far more than a mere disease; it was a profound and deliberate alteration, requiring specific conditions and actions, and not something that could occur spontaneously or spread uncontrollably like typical diseases.

Additionally, the magical binding between a vampire sire and their newly arisen fledgling vampire's soul was a crucial aspect of the transformation process. This bond granted the sire a marginal degree of control over their progeny, including power over those who failed to arise properly and became feral. This unique ability to exert influence and command over others was, perhaps, the primary reason the Ascended Gods of the Empire sought to eradicate vampires above all other races.

Yet, as Aurelia gazed upward at the twin orbs swirling with hues of pink and blue that dominated the night sky, she understood that the Empire would now be preoccupied with larger concerns. The celestial spectacle, a constant reminder of the cosmic changes and challenges, reassured her that her moon, Nyxoria, might escape the immediate attention of the Ascended Gods. This respite allowed her thoughts to wander, contemplating the future and the survival of her kind.

A smile, revealing her glistening fangs, spread across Aurelia's face. She was acutely aware of the urgency and magnitude of the tasks ahead, all designed to ensure that nothing and no one could ever separate her from her beloved again. With a renewed sense of determination, she turned away from the balcony and strode back into her chambers.

Inside, her sniveling husband lay curled up on the floor, his form coated in blood. Aurelia regarded him with a mix of disdain and indifference, the sight of him in such a pathetic state barely registering any reaction. She simply scoffed as she walked past him, her mind already occupied with the grander designs and challenges that awaited her.



Duke Lysander kept his gaze fixed on the ground as Aurelia, the woman he was bound to in marriage, entered the room. He remained motionless, not daring to sneer or make any move that might provoke her wrath and subject him to another bout of her torturous mutilation. His mind wandered back to the beginnings of their union, pondering the grave missteps he had taken. His decision to assert himself forcefully on their wedding night, coupled with his declaration of her as mere property post-marriage, now seemed not only misguided but perilously foolish.

He should have realized the gravity of his situation when, during their wedding ceremony, the Serpent, his once-revered god who had now abandoned him, intervened to declare that his bride was already wed, making him merely a secondary husband in her harem. This revelation should have been a clear indication that he lacked any real authority over her.

Additionally, Lysander's union with Aurelia, arguably the most formidable vampire in existence, further complicated matters. While debates might rage about whether her father, Lord Demidicus, held more power, there was no denying Aurelia's own formidable strength. In retrospect, Lysander recognized the folly in agreeing to marry her. He lamented how under her leadership, the once-fearsome vampire kind had been reduced to mere shadows of their former selves, hiding away in their castles and strongholds. In his eyes, they had become pitiful, cowering from the moon they used to prowl and hunt.

However, the dynamics shifted a few nights ago when Lady Hikari introduced Lysander to an enigmatic and mysterious power. Through a portal, he witnessed two figures: one was a girl who, despite her human scent, seemed to be surrounded by a magical aura similar to his wife's and those summoned beings that the Crone had elevated to positions of power. This puzzled Lysander, defying his understanding of his magical reality.

The other figure, shrouded in mystery, made a compelling promise to Lysander: the restoration of his coven to its former glory. The motivations behind this promise were unclear to Lysander. He

couldn't fathom why this figure would offer such assistance. It was evident, though, that the two figures were operating discreetly, possibly to evade the watchful eyes of gods or some other powerful entities. Their actions were calculated, suggesting a need to remain unnoticed.

Duke Lysander sensed that help was indeed on its way, yet the true price of this assistance remained unknown. The uncertainty of what would be demanded in return for this promised aid hung heavily on his mind. What would be the cost of regaining his power and status once everything was set in motion? This question lingered, unanswered, as he contemplated his next moves in this complex and ever-evolving game of power.