

BLAKE PUDDING

CHAPTER 22

PHANTASIA

With a pout as annoyed as it was petulant, I stomped off toward a nearby sewer entrance. This was the less-than-glamorous gateway to the beastkin's hideout—a mix of sewers and catacombs beneath the ruins of what used to be their capital before the Slaethian forces turned it into a pile of rubble. Dropping down into this shithole wasn't straightforward; there was a secret entrance hidden in one of the stone walls. How Vanya, my Champion and personal pain in the ass, had managed to find it and allowed herself to be nabbed by a bunch of malnourished and pitiful-looking refugees was a mystery to me.

Still maintaining my pissed-off pout, I strutted up to where the hidden door was supposed to be in the sewer wall and walked right into it, expecting it to open. Spoiler alert: it didn't. Instead, I was greeted with a smack that sounded suspiciously like a splat.

“Ugh, what the fuck,” I groaned, rubbing my flattened nose.

I pushed against the wall, then tried shoulder-barging it, but it was like trying to move a mountain. Today was not going as I had expected, but then again, when did it ever? My life was basically a series of these ‘what the hell’ moments, the newest series of them was all thanks to my bitch of a Champion. I threw a glare at Vanya, my killer joy-buzzkill, who had to interrupt my fun just because she didn't like my style.

She totally doesn't get it. I'm not one for the whole shiny knight-in-armor gig like Vanya. I'm wired for the scare-the-crap-out-of-'em style. But try explaining that to Ms. Goody-Two-Shoes, who's all about honor and doing the ‘right thing.’ I mean, seriously, since when is fighting about honor? It's about winning, and if I get to freak people out along the way, well, that's just the cherry on top of the terror sundae. Well, maybe the actual cherry is eating their corpses, but that's a minor detail, right?

“The entrance is around the corner,” Miss Holier-Than-Thou pointed out, watching me manhandle a wall that was, embarrassingly, just a regular old wall and not the secret entrance I had assumed.

Ugh, so embarrassing.

Let's just play it cool.

“I knew that,” I lied through my silk teeth, dropping my pointless assault on the wall.

Executing an overly dramatic twirl, I let my hair whip through the air behind me. It ‘accidentally’ struck Vanya, the paragon of virtue, right in the face. Granted, she was a few steps away, and perhaps my hair had elongated just a tad for that extra bit of theatrics and reach, but I acted as if it was all perfectly normal, not acknowledging the incident in the slightest.

“Seriously,” Vanya grumbled, her voice flat with exasperation.

“Whatever do you mean?” I responded, feigning innocence as I sashayed around the corner. My eyes scanned the area, searching for that stupidly elusive secret entrance.

As I sulked around the corner, Vanya’s irritated whisper reached my ears. “What was Jörmun thinking,” she muttered, seemingly to herself but loud enough for me to catch.

I whirled around, my irritation boiling over like a pot left too long on the stove. “I’d really like to know what Jörmun was smoking when he paired us up,” I snarled at Vanya, not holding back my exasperation. With a dramatic flourish of my arms, as if I were conducting an orchestra of complaints, I let loose. “You’re like the worst Champion ever, you know?”

My voice started to escalate, each word laced with increasing volumes of sarcasm and frustration. “Here I am, a literal terror-inducing monster, and there you are, playing at being a saint. What’s your deal, huh? Why are you even training me? Because let’s face it, all you’ve done so far is bitch slap me around and cockblock every good fight I get into!” I was practically yelling by the end, my voice bouncing off the sewer walls, a perfect symphony of annoyance and disbelief.

“Cockblock?” Vanya echoed, sounding utterly bewildered. She scrutinized me, her head tilting from side to side. “I thought you were a female,” she remarked, as if trying to solve a puzzle.

“It’s a figure of speech!” I yelled back, frustration mounting. How could she be so dense?

But is it? I mean, we could morph ourselves one.

Not helping!

Vanya’s demeanor shifted, her voice dropping to a low, intimidating timbre. “Let’s get something straight,” she began, her words heavy with disdain. “I don’t like you. You killed my husband and aided that vampire in slaughtering an entire regiment of knights. And let’s not forget your little stunt that blew up an armada of airships, killing hundreds,” she spat out, her glare intensifying with each accusation.

I shifted feeling a bit proud under her praise, but she continued. “I’ve been promised my husband’s return by that snake of a god if I train you. He didn’t specify how, nor did he say I should help you with your... antics. And how I choose to train you is apparently up to me, since there were no guidelines. So, if I decide to mold you into a decent and noble fighter, that’s exactly what I’ll do.” Her glare never wavered, etching every word with an unspoken threat.

“Pfft, good fucking luck with that,” I chuckled with a dismissive wave of my hand, not taking her threat seriously. Then, I leaned in a bit closer, a wicked grin spreading across my face. “Oh, and by the way, you started all of this when you killed my son.”

The look of shock on Vanya’s face? Absolutely priceless. Okay, so maybe the whole ‘my son’ thing was a bit of a stretch. I mean, it wasn’t like I had any actual attachment to that wart-infested kid. What was his name again? Anyway, I’m pretty sure my mom was just cracking a crude joke when she declared him as such. Definitely not my kid! But, let’s be real, I wasn’t about to pass up the chance to screw with Ms. High-and-Mighty Elf.

Umm... I don't think mother's the type to crack jokes.

Zip it, Dream!

Vanya, on the other hand, can't stop yapping about her dear hubby—you know, the guy whose neck I so kindly snapped before turning him into a puppet for Olin's soul. She seriously needs to get over it. Talk about being overdramatic! Well, if she's all about pointing fingers, I'm more than ready to play that game. I'm going to ride this 'dead son' story for all it's worth, and then some.

Vanya went all silent treatment on me after my Oscar-worthy performance, which suited me just fine. It would have been even better if she had the decency to point out the real entrance before I did my impression of a head-butting goat against yet another wall. But hey, after what I'm calling my fourth noble attempt (it was more heroic than pathetic, okay?), I finally hit the jackpot and found the stupid entrance.

More like the sixth time, actually.

Shush, Mare!

Mare?

Yeah, 'Nightmare' is a mouthful, so I'm cutting it down. Efficiency, you know?

I don't think so. How about I start calling you 'Ream' for short, then?

Nope! Hard pass. Nightmare it is.

Scared of a little reaming, are we?

Let's just say I prefer my routes less... invasive. Unless, of course, that's what our sultry vampire prefers.

Ooh, point taken.

More like a fist.

...

Heaving a heavy sigh, I stepped into what they optimistically labeled a refugee camp. Personally, I was more in favor of 'Chambers of Grief' – had a more honest ring to it, and heck, it might even be worth trademarking. The place was an accurate reflection of its inhabitants: reeking of despair (complete shit) and hopelessness (even more shit). As soon as I crossed the threshold, I felt the ambient mana thinning out to practically nothing, like a luxurious dessert turning into one of those tasteless diet foods. Just my luck.

Glancing over at Vanya, my so-called Champion, I tilted my head and let out a deep breath. "Ah, smells like home," I quipped.

All I got in response was a sharp "Tsk" from her.

Vanya, as annoying as a pebble in a shoe, was a necessary evil at the moment. I mean, how did Pinocchio ever tolerate Jiminy Cricket? She had her strengths, sure, but that holier-than-thou vibe she gave off was a total buzzkill—and I'm talking potentially lethal! Worse yet, sticking close to her was like clinging to a life raft in a sea of slime. It was either bear her disapproving glares or dissolve into a pathetic, gooey mess. So, yeah, I'd take the glares. After all, keeping my solid form was definitely worth a few scowls.

Internally, I set a firm reminder – figure out how to survive in these mana-deserted hellholes. If I didn't crack this puzzle soon, I'd be as vulnerable as a nudist in a cactus patch. Being a pushover in low mana zones? That's definitely not the image I'm going for. Thankfully, the Chambers of Grief had been the only such mana-starved dump I'd encountered so far, and I was keen on keeping it that way. I mean, one wasteland of despair and mana-famine was more than enough for anyone, especially for someone who preferred their environments as lively and mana-rich as a witch's brew party.

Dream, dial down on the analogies, will you?

What? They're fun.

Maybe less is more.

You have all the fun of a funeral director at a fiesta.

Dream... Seriously, I despise you.

Hey, now you're starting to sound just like our ex-stepfather.

Ex?

Yeah, Nightmare, remember? From our past life. Now shush, I'm trying to narrate here.

Your narrating? I'd give it two stars, tops.

Ugh, critics! Always ready with their negative opinions but never willing to step up themselves.

Are you done venting, or can we get back to narrating?

Hmm, I could probably vent a bit more.

...

As I navigated through the sea of starved and broken souls, I noticed a flicker of hope in their eyes whenever they looked at me. Frankly, it irked me. I even found myself enviously eyeing the scowls and glares they reserved for Vanya. Why couldn't I be the target of such delightful loathing? Shaking off the thought, I trailed behind Ms. Sunshine-and-Rainbows, not having a clue where she was leading us.

Meanwhile, my mind wandered to the pressing issue of surviving in low mana environments. That is, when my two souls weren't stuck bickering between themselves. It's like having two squabbling siblings in my head. Seriously, I can be such a bitch to myself sometimes.

What I really needed was my own power source. Currently, Vanya was like a barely adequate walking mana battery, emitting just enough juice for me to maintain this creepy cute form of mine. But what I craved was something more robust, a power source that was both stronger and more reliable... And then it hit me.

Oh, shit—

Oh, shit!

We do!

We really do have something like that!

A dark grin spread across my face, and I could feel the eyes of the hopeless refugees on me as I trailed behind my insufferable Champion. Maybe they thought I was plotting her demise or something, given the perked-up animal ears as their whispers started buzzing around me. There was a hint of anticipation in their hushed tones, a whisper of excitement. I almost felt bad for letting them down. Usually, I'm all for a spectacle of blood and violence, but not this time.

Instead, my focus was on accessing the Dungeon Core I had stashed away in my own dimensional space. It was odd that I couldn't draw energy from it while it was inside me, but then again, my understanding of how dimensional spaces worked was sketchy at best. Maybe it wasn't literally inside me, but somewhere else, and my Stellar Void skill was just a doorway to it. Magic, according to Circe, hinged on desire, imagination, and sensation. So, that's what I leaned on – visualizing an opening within myself, desiring its creation. And, of course, I had to tap into Stellar Void, a spell whose sensation I was already familiar with. That part was a given.

Pfft, how many holes do you think our vampire would want in us?

Dream, you're such a pervert.

Hey, it's only perverted when a guy thinks it. When a woman does it, it's considered sexy.

I'm pretty sure that's not how it works.

And you accuse me of being the delusional half.

...

Taking a deep breath—a little trick enabled by my subconscious during shapeshifting, which conveniently provided me with faux lungs—I attempted to quell the incessant bickering in my mind. My focus then returned to visualizing a tiny pinhole opening. Let's face it, I didn't exactly want to leave a gaping portal for all to peek at my... Dungeon Core. Keeping that hidden was crucial. So, channeling the often-ignored philosophy of 'less is more,' I tapped into Stellar Void, fostering the image and desire for just a tiny aperture to allow a trickle of mana through.

I was banking on the Dungeon Core radiating mana, though I hadn't really paid much attention to it before. The more I thought about it, the more I realized this plan wasn't entirely fleshed out. But, that's never stopped me before. So, onwards with the half-baked ideas and a sprinkle of hope. Oh well, here goes nothing.

Staying close to Vanya was crucial while I worked on my little project. Without her nearby, I couldn't access my non-system skills, as they depended on ambient mana. Fortunately, she was too preoccupied with her own destination to notice what I was up to. The mana she unknowingly radiated provided just enough for me to use the bare minimum of my magic. And so, I put it to use.

As I activated Stellar Void, I concentrated on the mana around the newly formed opening. Now paying closer attention, I was stunned to notice the waves of mana billowing out. I couldn't believe I hadn't realized this before, making me feel like a complete idiot. The amount of mana escaping was astonishing! How I hadn't thought of this solution earlier was baffling, but in my defense, fully grasping the intricacies of utilizing magic was still somewhat beyond me. Perhaps this was an area where my judgmental Champion could actually be of some assistance.

The most amusing and significant realization about myself that I had already grasped but hadn't fully acknowledged was this: the more mana around me, the more powerful I became. For the life of me, I couldn't understand why Death had warned me to discard this Dungeon Core. It was a veritable goldmine of power, and I intended to exploit every last bit of it.

However, as I glanced down, the supposed 'pinhole' in my chest didn't look small at all. It appeared as if I had a gaping hole punched right into my chest cavity. Despite my best efforts to close or at least shrink it, nothing worked. In a moment of inspiration, I tried a different approach, focusing on the sensation where the hole seemed to end within me. To my surprise, I felt it shift.

Looking down again, I noticed the hole now went clean through me, like a grotesque tunnel.

"Great," I groaned.

In a frantic attempt to reverse this, I stopped casting Stellar Void, only to watch the hole close up. As it sealed, my form suddenly lost coherence, and I splattered onto the ground in a liquified mess. Squinting through my now blurry vision, I realized Vanya was gone.

"Damnit, I wasn't paying attention to her," I gurgled out in frustration, my words warping in my liquefied state.

A sense of urgency overtook me as I desperately struggled to recast Stellar Void, longing to harness that alluring mana flow. But then, an icy realization dawned on me. Devoid of ambient mana, I was completely stranded, unable to access my dimensional space or tap into my essential power source. To make matters worse, the mana that had previously leaked out had already dissipated into thin air, most likely absorbed by the crystal array thingy that Kaida had mentioned earlier.

"Shit," I gurgled again, the sound distorted and bubbling from my formless, slime body.

Struggling to see in my current form, I could just discern that I was in a corridor. Mana Sight usually requires minimal mana, but with the scant amount available now, it provided only the faintest visibility. Predictably, the refugees were nowhere to be seen in my limited view. I could barely see a few meters ahead. I've always preferred to shape my Mana Sight into two orbs, mimicking human vision. Experiencing a full three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view might sound intriguing, but trust me, it's more disorienting and nauseating than it's worth.

A new idea sparked in me, and I withdrew my Mana Sight, submerging my surroundings into complete darkness. Filled with a sort of child-like hope, I reached out for the sparse mana, wishing it would be enough to pry open a pinhole into my dimensional space. Unfortunately, nothing happened. I lay there, spread out on the ground like a stain, vainly struggling. I was so focused on my task that I didn't even notice a few people inadvertently stepping over me, as oblivious to my presence as I was to theirs.

In a last-ditch effort, I shifted my approach. Instead of reaching outward, I turned my attention inward, curious if I could somehow internally nudge open Stellar Void. As I focused, I felt an unusual shift within me. I paused, intrigued and bewildered by this novel sensation stirring inside.

Abruptly, as if responding to an unspoken command, the sensation within me stirred again. It was like prodding a slumbering creature beneath a blanket, feeling it move and shift, yet stubbornly refusing to emerge. As I delved deeper into this oddity, it began to rouse. It was akin to turning a faucet and watching something unexpected flow out. An entity separate from me started to seep upward, morphing into various tar-like forms. Then, it hit me: this was the other Black Pudding.

I struggled to recast Mana Sight, but as it came into effect, I noticed the entity before me, like a shadow given form, shifted and flowed in enigmatic patterns. Its presence, at once both foreign and oddly familiar, stirred a cocktail of apprehension and curiosity within me. The unease stemmed more from my vulnerable state on the ground than the entity itself. Sure, I had a few system skills at my disposal, but none were particularly suited for offense, except maybe Disintegration. However, its effectiveness against another pudding was a big question mark.

If push came to shove, I could always gamble on escaping with Phantasmal Surge, but I hadn't had the chance to fully get the hang of my new skills yet. Damn it, if only my oh-so-righteous Champion hadn't cut short my fun with those jerks earlier. Now, here I was, sprawled out and facing an unknown variable, with more questions than answers.

As I gazed at the other pudding, it struck me as something akin to an eager puppy, almost as if it was yearning for my approval or affection. No sooner had this idea crossed my mind than the creature began to transform, morphing into what could only be described as an 'ugliest dog contest' winner. Picture this: a tiny, awkward creature with an oversized tongue lolling out of its disproportionate tiny face and large, mismatched eyes that seemed to look in different directions. Ridiculously adorable!

The more I observed it through my blurry vision, the more I realized that this peculiar pudding seemed to respond to my thoughts, or perhaps my whims? Curious, I thought of a crab, and to my amusement, the pudding reshaped itself into a crab-like form. However, it resembled more of a cartoonish Sebastian rather than anything from a live-action musical—not a fan of those.

Then, on a whim, I envisioned a cat. True to form, the pudding obligingly shifted into a gooey black cat. I couldn't help but feel a sense of shared amusement emanating from it. It was as if the other pudding was enjoying this game of morphing as much as I was, reacting to my every fanciful thought with a new, gooey transformation.

Despite the amusing transformations, something told me that neither a dog, crab, nor cat was quite the right fit for this other pudding. I hate to admit it, but my inner child, filled with girlish delight, had a different form in mind. As I focused on this idea, I sensed a wave of agreement or maybe even enthusiasm from the pudding.

It began to transform again, its body bubbling and shifting as tendrils wove in and out. Gradually, it took the shape of a unicorn. But this was no ordinary, fairytale unicorn. It morphed into a stunningly dark vision of a unicorn, crafted from blackness and goo, with a sleekness that seemed to be woven from shadows. It was a beautiful, nightmarish rendition, and it would have been downright terrifying to behold if it wasn't for its size. There it was, the size of a stuffed unicorn doll, utterly adorable in its fearsome beauty. I could just imagine, if I were in my human form, scooping it up in a heartbeat for the most gothically cute cuddle session ever!

Lying there in my formless state, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of envy as my pet pudding effortlessly shifted shapes. It baffled me—why could it transform at will, while I was stuck as a puddle? As my adorable little gooey unicorn nudged me with its nose, seemingly puzzled by my immobility, I felt a jolt akin to a static shock. To my surprise, the other pudding was emitting a faint trace of mana. This realization struck me with its implications, despite my limited understanding of magic. My pet had its own internal source of mana, whereas I depended entirely on ambient mana around me.

Why was this the case? What differed between our two forms that granted it such autonomy? Even more perplexing was why I hadn't detected its mana when it was within me. Perhaps it hadn't been actively using its mana then, rendering it undetectable? The questions piled up, each one leading to further mystery and fewer answers. It was a riddle wrapped in an enigma, all encapsulated in a tiny, gooey unicorn form.

Feeling another gentle poke from my pet pudding, I received another mana zap, reminiscent of a life-saving shock needed during resuscitation. Seizing this minuscule boost of energy, I concentrated my desire on the sensation of casting Stellar Void. Miraculously, like being jolted back to life, a hole materialized within the gooey mess on the floor as mana flooded out of me. Slowly, I began to rise, the hole moving with me, situated right within my newly formed chest cavity. This time, however, the hole was a clear passage straight through me, leaving an eerie, see-through gap. It seemed as if my experimentation had caused some kind of bizarre, perhaps irreversible change to the spell. Although it didn't hurt or appear to create any immediate problems, the alteration was visibly unsettling.

Honestly, the sight of it didn't freak me out as much as the concern over what the hell I had just done to myself.

Tentatively, I reached into the hole with a nearly solidified hand, aiming to tap into my dimensional storage. But, to my confusion and growing alarm, my hand simply passed through the space. Frantically, I tried again to access the storage and retrieve something, anything, from it. My heart sank as I realized I couldn't physically access the space. It was still there—I could feel the mana leaking from it, sustaining me—but it was as if a barrier had formed, preventing me from reaching inside.

“Crap,” I muttered under my breath. “What the hell did I do now?”

As I grappled with my situation, a plushie-sized unicorn nudged my leg, seeking attention like a cat. Instantly, my concerns faded into the background. Sure, I needed to figure out what I’d just done to myself, but how could I resist this adorable little pudding unicorn? I bent down and scooped it up for a cuddle, struck by the fact that I had no urge to eat it. Was it a he or a she? Somehow, it felt more like a she to me.

“What should I call you?” I cooed, gently scratching behind her ear. She leaned into my touch, clearly enjoying the affection.

How about Nightmare?

Hey, I thought that was supposed to be my name!

Alright, alright. Eclipse then?

Maybe. But what about Twilight?

Hmm... nope, getting too much of a sparkling vampire feel from that.

Yikes, definitely not. Let’s skip that.

What if we go with Phantasia? It links to our Phantasmal class and fits with our whole theme.

We have a theme?

Are you kidding me right now?

Okay, okay. You know, Phantasia does have a nice ring to it.

“What do you think, huh?” I cooed again, tightening my giddy embrace around the tiny, adorable unicorn of death and murder. “You like being called Phantasia, don’t you?”

I felt a ripple of what seemed like approval from her, but she was too busy soaking up all the affection I was dishing out to give a proper response. And I wasn’t about to stop either. As I wandered down the corridor, I couldn’t help but notice the malnourished beastkin eyeing me with their sad, hopeful gazes. With a groan—and noticeably lacking my holier-than-thou Champion’s company—I knew what I had to do next.

“Do you wanna go on a little hunting trip? How about it, Phantasia? Ready to murder a whole lot of people?” I kept up my cooing as I spun around, heading back to the surface with a wide grin upon my face.