

Note: I'm unsure if anyone has noticed, but I've been experimenting with Word's new default font, Aptos, in the last few releases. I liked it, but I've decided to switch back to Times New Roman, as the *italics* don't stand out as well with that font format.

BLAKE PUDDING

[BEWARE OF WRITER] – 1ST DRAFT

CHAPTER 9

BONES

After my umpteenth attempt at gravity manipulation, I again found myself splattered into goo across the courtyard. The overwhelming urge to scream in frustration was almost unbearable, along with a deep-seated desire to commit an atrocity against someone or anyone—preferably something endearingly cute, but not Phantasia. She's adorably dangerous in a way that makes her utterly non-murderable.

Yeah, murdering someone would be really nice right about now.

Nightmare, do you always have to be thinking of murdering someone? I wouldn't mind a return to our sexy vampire for a bit of fun instead.

Dream, seriously?

Okay, Nightmare, let me ask you this, what sounds better? Fucking someone up, or fucking?

Can't we have both?

...Huh, that's not a bad idea.

My efforts to master Astral Graviton were going as disastrously as you'd expect for someone constantly turned into a puddle of goop—absolute, utter fucking bullshit! Even Sophia had grown bored with the spectacle, having long since departed. The sole remaining observer was she-who-should-probably-remain-nameless—well, she does have a name, Von Von, or as I prefer, Mrs. Holier-Than-Thou Bitchiness, or is it Miss? Considering her likely defunct marital status, I'll settle on Miss! And, wasn't this something I'd figured out not so long ago? Oh well, I've always been a tad forgetful with such details. I swear, I must have been blonde in a past life—not that I was, but damn, my memory is atrocious.

What was I rambling about again? Oh, right! My magic skills suck, which really... well, sucks! I fantasize about being a badass sorceress, yet here I am, more of a sticky, tentacle-wielding melee fighter mixed with some mind-vooodoo fuckery. Talk about dream-crushing! And let's not even start on the fact that I'm using the system's aid—to boot—I mean, how spectacularly can one person suck? At least I can cast Necrotic Flame and Blight; otherwise, my only offensive spells would be my Corrosive tentacles—though, I guess they're technically Disintegration tentacles. Honestly, I haven't noticed a single difference in their effects. All I can say is... this really sucks!

I heard footsteps approaching while I was deep in my meditative stance—lying flat on my back, arms and legs sprawled out in utter defeat. Turning my head, with the enthusiasm of someone who's surrendered to fate, I watched Von Von lean down to pick up the skeletal hand I had formed on a whim. It lay there, a remnant of my first explosive failure that had splattered me like Silly Putty beneath a hydraulic press—I used to adore watching those videos online. However, my own eruption was significantly messier. Seriously, gathering a massive amount of gravity above your head is no joke! Especially when your aim is the polar opposite. You get it? Polaaar opposite... gravity? No? Fine, it was a stupid joke anyway.

“Did you know you have a tic that shows up when you're frustrated or happy?” Vanya finally muttered, her focus still on my skeletal hand.

“What? No, I don't,” I retorted defensively.

“Your head twitches ever so often. In fact, you just did it,” she observed while manipulating the bony fingers.

Isn't that a sign of Tourettes?

No! Fuck her! Just no!

Why the defensiveness, Dream?

I don't like the implication that we have an STI.

W-What?! That's not... You know what, never mind Dream. Nevermind.

Vanya continued, oblivious to the internal banter rattling around in my head. “You should take a break from your current... endeavor, whatever that self-explosive thing you're doing, and finish crafting a full skeleton.” She toyed with the bony hand, her fingers emitting this obnoxious holy light—seriously, ouch! Even from here, it felt like getting a sunburn in places where the sun shouldn't shine... not that I've experimented with butthole tanning or anything—anyway! The bones, yes, the bones remained utterly unfazed, not even a hint of a sizzle. “The material of these bones is remarkable. You might want to consider fashioning a suit of armor out of this material,” she suggested, examining the unaffected skeletal hand with a blend of curiosity and... was that admiration?

“What's with the sudden change of attitude? Why so helpful?” I gave her a long side-eye, unsure what to make of her... well, helpfulness.

Vanya exhaled, “It's just a suggestion; do with it what you will,” she tossed the bony hand to the ground, landing beside me before she turned and left me alone in the courtyard.

Usually, she seemed indifferent to whether I lived or died. I shrugged it off, attributing it to her getting her ass handed to her by my irresistibly sexy vampiress. Though, I must admit, she had a point. Maybe I should step back and focus on the fundamentals of what I excel at, like knitting with silk, akin to some old seamstress—wait, no, that's not quite right. Anyway, my mythrill-like silk bones from Web of Whispers possess various advantages I can think of off the top of my head—the most notable being their apparent immunity to *holy-shit* attacks.

Heaving myself up, I resettled into my cross-legged position, shut my eyes, and commenced knitting. I decided to start with a ribcage, figuring it was straightforward enough. After an hour or so, I peeked down, brimming with self-pride, only to realize I'd botched it completely. Transforming my body into any desired shape was instinctive, almost too easy. However, meticulously crafting silk into bone structures with only a vague idea in mind? Not exactly a walk in the park. Ever heard people claim they're not overweight, just big-boned? Yeah, I unintentionally took that to heart; the ribcage I crafted was more suited for a rhino than a human.

Ejecting the oversized bones from my chest, I braced myself for a second attempt. The outcome was disappointingly similar. Clearly, I needed to invest more than just a mild effort, requiring actual guidance rather than my usual half-assed attempts. Excelling at half-assery was my forte; deliberate, focused craftsmanship? Not so much. Keep in mind, I was doing all of this without the system's aid, so that's worthy of some kudos, right?

After a bit of grumbling and adjusting myself with a butt wiggle, I gave it another go. By the thirteenth attempt, I couldn't hide my pride. I had crafted a smaller ribcage, although it seemed more suited for a hobbit than a human, hilariously out of proportion with the rest of my body. But by the thirty-third try, I had absolutely nailed it. The ribcage was so flawlessly integrated into my pudding body that it was virtually indistinguishable, exactly the effect I was aiming for. Once I had the size and shape just right, replicating it was as simple as baking a box cake—though, considering I've botched a few of those in my time, maybe that's not the best analogy. You get the gist!

After the ribcage success, I tackled the arm bones, finding them surprisingly simpler post-rib fiasco. There are, what, three bones in each arm? Well, the arms I crafted ended up with three each—I should have taken an anatomy class in college. My right arm somehow turned out longer than my left, debunking my earlier boast about replicating sizes and shapes accurately. A few tries later, I finally got the arms right and ambitiously moved on to my legs, bypassing the hips, which was a big mistake. Realizing the oversight, I figured out the necessity of a spine to connect my ribs to my hips, prompting a backtrack. Then it dawned on me: arms need shoulders! So there I was, redoing my arms entirely from scratch, questioning my life choices, and wishing for an anatomy class.

With all that nonsense in place, I faced the eternal artist's bane: crafting hands and feet. Miraculously, I managed to assemble a hand earlier. However, it probably didn't have the correct bone count. Still, it functioned, and that was enough—mirroring the makeshift success of my entire skeletal crafting thus far. After some dedicated effort, I completed my hands and feet, leaving the skull for last. But just as I was about to pat myself on the back, literally might I add, I realized a crucial oversight... joints. How could I forget about joints? It was back to the drawing board again.

At this point, the courtyard was strewn with bones crafted from my silk, fitting perfectly with the dark, spooky ambiance, tinged with a sense of hopelessness—I actually quite liked it. With that, I began anew, this time making sure to include joints. I was pretty certain they weren't anatomically correct, but hey, practice makes perfect, and I had no qualms about endlessly crafting silk threads into hardened bones.

Immersed in my task, I wove with my eyes shut, deeply focused, which was a Herculean effort for someone like me. Suddenly, a searing pain engulfed my entire body, every nerve felt like it was on fire. I was about to let out a scream when I opened my eyes, and just like that, the pain vanished. A sense of bliss washed over me, and I found peace as I gazed upon a quaint cabin perched atop a hill, nestled in a meadow surrounded by an expansive forest.

A single thought crystallized in my mind about what had just transpired. “Fuck, I’m dead,” I uttered, my words coming out in two separate distinct voices.