

BLAKE PUDDING

CHAPTER 25

CALM BEFORE THE STORM

Crunching on sizzled goblin fingers, I reveled in the sensation of the bones breaking apart in my mouth before the flesh melted away. This delightful new sensation, enhanced by my latest skill, Web of Whispers, was unexpectedly satisfying. While the skill itself came with some nifty mind manipulation magic, it had also given me something resembling real teeth—hard and practical after it's been woven into shape, making the experience of chomping down even more gratifying.

Ah, so wonderful!

Mhmm.

If I'm being totally honest, intestines are more my style—there's something irresistibly tasty about bitterly pungent meat—but I'm not exactly fussy. Cooked meat, especially fingers, well, they've got a special charm of their own, kind of like nibbling on roasted pecans.

For the past month, I had been playing chef to the beastkin, using my various kills as the main ingredient. The fact that they didn't bat an eye at my eclectic menu choices brought a twisted smile to my face. They scarfed down everything I served – goblin, human, elf, and even dwarf. Of course, the non-goblin options dried up pretty quickly after that first raid on the outpost. Goblin became the staple, but hey, I'm not complaining. There's something oddly gratifying about feeding the masses.

Turns out, I'm not the sole fan of unconventional diets around here. The beastkin might not have known exactly what they were eating, but ignorance is bliss, right? I wasn't about to give them a breakdown of their meals. Sure, I mentioned the goblin part, but the rest? Well, that was left to their imagination. If they guessed the true variety of their diet, more power to them. But what they don't know won't hurt them, and in this case, it was definitely better left unsaid.

I suppose you could call me the benevolent type, a philanthropist. See, I'm not some raving, bloodthirsty maniac. Feeding the needy and downtrodden is like charity work, which pretty much scores me good person points, right? But hey, if anyone begs to differ, I'd be more than happy to yank out their guts and let them have a front-row seat to their innards dissolving between my fingers. And then? I'd serve them up as the next day's special.

Speaking of which, oh, how I relish the taste of pain and suffering between my fingers. I don't even need to physically stuff things into my mouth, considering it's essentially just a construct—a reminder of the humanity I left behind. It's more of a subconscious creation, like a lot of my body stuff: lungs, tongue, boobs... well, maybe not the boobs. If I left it all to my subconscious, I'd be back to the pancake chest of my past life. No, thank you! I've gotta draw the line somewhere with my subconscious, right? Standards, darling, standards. And let's be honest, these babies are nothing

short of impressive, just like my perfect backside and this killer hourglass figure. I mean, if you're going to rework your body, why not go all out, right? Aim high or don't aim at all, I always say.

We've never said that.

Well, we do now.

Do we have a point with this line of thought, or are you just rambling about our shallowness?

...Rambling, I guess. Why?

No reason, just curious.

Anyway, ever since I wiped out the outpost, the beastkin started venturing above ground more frequently. And wouldn't you know it, Ms. Holy Bitch hasn't stopped nagging me about it, harping on it to this very day.

“What would have happened if they had a Magus Tier caster or physical enhancer in that fort?” she keeps pestering me.

I once asked, “What's a Magus Tier?” But did she listen? Nope, she just kept on griping.

“If you die, my deal with that snake of a god dies with you,” she loves to remind me every single time I sneak out without her on a goblin hunt, almost like she believes what happened to her husband was my fault or something. Ridiculous, he totally had it coming when he went after my sexy vamp.

However, I was pleasantly surprised by Nikola's little bit of genius. The dude—well, now a dudette—used to be a gnome and now sports this wingless dragonkin look. She's got this elvish-dragon hybrid thing going on, complete with horns and some seriously badass claws, all decked out in steampunk glory. Her invention, those crystal-locks, they're like a throwback to those old-timey flintlock pistols. Once we surfaced, Nikola was powering up those mana crystals faster than you can say "boom," and man, the punch those things pack! They could put a fist-sized hole in a stone wall. Granted, it was a pretty shabby wall, but still, color me impressed. How they'll fare against those Magus Tier bigwigs Ms. Holy Bitch keeps moaning about is anyone's guess, but hey, it's a start.

And the cherry on top? Turns out, I can recharge and fire those crystal-locks too, which was absolutely hilarious, especially watching Von Von's jaw drop when she couldn't. Looks like I've got some sort of special touch, since no one else besides Nikola and myself could get those pistols juiced up again. They could fire off a shot with a pre-loaded crystal, sure, but after that? Those babies were about as useful as a battery-less vibrator.

A battery-less vibrator? Dream, I'm not sure that analogy hits the spot.

Why not?

Well, technically, you can still make do without batteries.

That's the point, isn't it? You end up doing the heavy lifting yourself.

That... huh, I guess when you put it that way, it kind of works, in your quirky, roundabout way.

Hey! Who are you calling quirky?

Come on, have you listened to your contribution to the narrative lately? You're making us sound like a couple of airheads.

That's not fair! I'm just trying to keep things light.

Using 'dudette'? Seriously? We might as well hang a 'quirky' sign around our neck.

...

Oh, and last but certainly not least, Nikola kicked off the airship construction, roping in some beastkin to help. With proper grub in their bellies and no Slaethian soldiers to dodge, they were actually getting stuff done. We all knew it was just a ticking clock until those Slaethian forces decided to snoop around their trashed little fort and bring the fight to our doorstep again. The airship itself? Not exactly a masterpiece of engineering, more like a hulking ark designed for lugging bodies rather than zipping through the skies or duking it out. But hey, it's all about getting these beastkin to safety, to my Aurelia's lands. Speaking of her, I miss that vampire something fierce. Weird, considering we barely hung out. But she's there, in my thoughts, elbowing her way in amongst all the internal bickering.

So, that's the rundown of the past month. Yeah, it's packed with Von Von's endless nagging and her idea of 'training,' which is basically just her pounding me into the ground. Regular fighters and casters? Piece of cake for me. But a Champion, even a baby one like Vanya? No luck. I'm outclassed, and it's complete and utter bullshit. I mean, seriously? How is it even fair that I can wipe the floor with a small army of regulars but get my ass handed to me by a single Champion? It's like playing a game where the rules keep changing whenever it feels like it. Totally infuriating.

That all said, I will, oh yes, I will, one day be able to wipe the floor with them. Just you wait and see.

No, we won't.

Yes, we absolutely will. Now be quiet.

And how, exactly, do you plan to stand toe-to-toe with a Champion?

Simple. We cheat!

...Huh.

Refocusing my attention to the present, I found myself in the midst of training with my irritable Champion, deftly dodging another one of her relentless strikes. Since I knew I could reconstitute my form from any physical harm—as long as she refrained from using her magic—she didn't pull any punches. I've lost count of how many times I've had to literally peel my face off a wall.

In response, I've increasingly relied on using tentacles, particularly from my head, however any attempt to use my hair as such results in it being chopped off by her sword. There have been

sessions where I end up looking like a freshly shaved barbie doll – utterly ridiculous. And let's not even get started on her teaching skills. "Horrible" doesn't even begin to cover it!

Caught up in my daydream of raiding another outpost teeming with moderate soldiers—now those are opponents I can handle—I suddenly snapped back to reality. Everything seemed peculiarly askew. Then it hit me: the world wasn't upside down; I was. My head was, anyway. Detached and dangling, I could see my body a few feet away. Oh, right. Vanya had decapitated me. Again. Classic Vanya.

"We should stop here; you're clearly not focused on our spar," Vanya scoffed, eyeing my detached head with a mix of annoyance and exasperation.

After Von Von's huff, she strutted away, clearly fed up with me for the day. This was her usual drill: whupping my ass for hours, getting pissed off, lecturing me about my scatterbrain tendencies, and then storming off. She thinks I can't focus? Ha! I wonder how that airship is coming along?

Pulling myself together, I skipped the usual step of casting my silk shell. Lately, I've been growing more comfortable with my natural, unmasked appearance. But the teeth? Those are a must-have. As I meandered past, some of the beastkin waved, looking healthier by the day, the pallor of malnourishment slowly fading from their faces. The queen too had begun to emerge more frequently from her seclusion, often with the twins in tow, but always making sure to avoid any encounter with Vanya. There's an unspoken tension between them, thick and palpable, yet neither of them breathes a word about it.

As I strolled towards the remnants of the old airship yard, a casualty of the Kingdom of Slaethia's destruction, I couldn't shake the feeling of an impending storm. Around me, the birds chirped, flowers bloomed, and the sun(s?) shone down – it was hard to tell with Völuspá's colossal presence often obscuring the sky. At night, the landscape transformed into something reminiscent of Pandora from those blue alien movies, with bioluminescent plants casting an eerie glow. Völuspá's reflected sunlight added to the confusion, blurring the lines between day and night. It seemed the locals either didn't mind or had grown accustomed to these odd cycles. But this got me thinking – what about winter? What happens when Nyxoria's orbit takes us behind Völuspá, away from the sun's warmth? Would we face an endless winter until we reemerged on the other side?

Our thoughts are wandering again.

What? It's a valid question.

Anyways! The airship construction site was a jumbled mess of rubble and ruins. Amidst the debris, an imposing structure loomed – a large, wooden vessel, awkwardly pieced together from scavenged scraps. Its haphazard construction gave it the appearance of a ghost ship, more a relic of desperation than a feat of engineering. The sight was somewhat pathetic; the ship looked as though it might fall apart before even attempting flight.

As I stepped aboard the makeshift vessel, I promptly snagged my foot on a rusty nail. Annoyed, I allowed the nail to dissolve beneath my foot, a small comfort. The ship itself was an odd mix, spanning three or four decks, resembling a fusion of an old pirate ship and a steampunk fantasy,

as if commandeered by Captain Kirk himself. The strange protrusions at the back, which I assumed were engines, resembled elongated boats more than anything technical.

I think they're called nacelles.

I navigated through each deck, noting with concern the generous gaps in the hull. Sunlight streamed in from all directions, including from above, despite the presence of two decks overhead. The more I saw, the more I doubted the ship's integrity. It seemed so fragile, so precariously pieced together, that I half-expected a light breeze to reduce it to nothing more than a pile of toothpicks.

Finding Nikola at the stern of the vessel, I was immediately drawn to an unusual object she was working with—a massive rock or shell, almost as large as my torso.

"What is that?" I couldn't help but ask.

She looked up, a hint of excitement in her eyes. "Oh, hey Blake. It's a seed from a great tree. The queen had it hidden away in the vault. Turns out the Slaethians never found it; it was buried even deeper than the catacombs, beneath the castle. It's not from Yaddith, though—those seeds are really something else—but this one should work. I might need to borrow that crystal the beastkin are using for their array," she explained, her hands busy tinkering with the seed.

"Yaddith?" I echoed, my brow furrowing in confusion.

Nikola nodded, her hands still working. "Yaddith is a moon, home to the largest of the great trees. These trees are rare, but the one on Yaddith is exceptional. Its upper branches reach beyond the moon's atmosphere. Legend says its roots sprawl across the entire moon. Fascinating, isn't it?" Her voice was filled with awe, not pausing in her task.

"Okay... so, what's this seed's deal with the airship?" I inquired, tilting my head curiously.

Nikola looked up, a mix of exasperation and excitement in her voice. "What does it do? It's the core of my design! My type of airships are dead in the air without it. Honestly, I doubt anyone's even come close to replicating my designs since I, well, kicked the bucket," she rambled on.

Then, something clicked. "Weren't you a Slaethian before you died?" I suddenly remembered.

She snorted, "Yeah, before they turned into... let's say, the overly zealous border patrol of the fantasy realm," she scoffed.

I couldn't help but smirk. "Careful, you'll get canceled with that kind of talk."

"Fine, let's just say they aren't the most welcoming bunch," she corrected without missing a beat in her work.

"That's right, your soul was summoned from earth as well," I mused, scratching my cheek thoughtfully.

"I wasn't summoned, I died and was reincarnated here," Nikola explained as she fiddled with her seed. "Being reborn as a guy, though? That was a bit of a shocker. Let's just say I'm more than

happy to be a woman once again," she muttered, the last part almost lost under her breath as she continued her work.

"I can only imagine how thrilled you must be, no longer being ankle-height," I quipped with a sardonic grin.

"That's an understatement," she agreed, nodding earnestly.

Shifting my weight back and forth on my heels, I couldn't help but ask the glaring question. "So, what are the odds this behemoth actually takes flight?"

"Oh, it'll fly, no doubt about that. The framework's solid, and with this seed—plus the overcharged crystal I plan to 'borrow'—we'll have this beauty airborne in no time. Less than an hour, tops. That's if the crystal's as juiced up as I expect. If it's not, well, I'll have to power it up myself," she elaborated, her enthusiasm evident.

As I scanned the so-called solid framework, my eyes snagged on the half-hammered nails and the uneven wooden planks, their gaps resembling missing teeth in a drug addict's grin. My gaze then drifted to the dragonkin lich woman. Observing her, I noted the glaring absence of her usual lich traits. The familiar, strangely appetizing scent of decaying flesh was conspicuously missing.

"Did you do something to halt your undead body's decay?" I inquired, my voice a blend of curiosity and mock concern.

"No, why?" She paused her work to look up at me.

"Just curious," I replied with a shrug. She mirrored my gesture, brushing off the question as easily as swatting a fly, before returning to her task. I couldn't help but notice the way her fingers delicately traced over the seed, etching runes or some mystical patterns onto the shell.

I let out a deep sigh and decided to leave Nikola engrossed in her work. A fleeting thought crossed my mind about whether she intended to stick with that name, but I shrugged it off, deciding to stick to 'Nikola' unless she suggested otherwise. As I climbed one of the staircases leading to the top deck, a plank snapped under my foot. I immediately blamed the subpar craftsmanship, stubbornly ignoring the fact that it might have something to do with the substantial mass cleverly disguised by my delicate, hourglass figure.

Wondering where we're hiding all this extra mass... We should be the size of three elephants by now.

No idea, but thankfully it's not piling up on our hips.

Hmm, I'm not too sure about that.

Hey!

Changing the subject, I thought about Phantasia, the little black unicorn of goo and murder, still no bigger than a plushie despite her hearty appetite over the past month. She'd been an active participant in many hunts, though a bit selfish when it came to sharing her spoils with the beastkin hunters who occasionally tagged along. Truth be told, the beastkin weren't much help in goblin

hunts, sticking to their own territory in the ruined city. They preferred hunting those three-headed lizard creatures – hideous things that tasted nowhere near as good as a goblin. But Phantasia? She turned out to be even less finicky than me, and I'd eat just about anything, including Stiffler's mom.

For the first time in ages, there was a strange sense of calm, and I found myself at a loss. What does one do when everything suddenly goes... mellow?



High Priest Nelzar, ensconced in his office in the capital, was deeply engrossed in reviewing reports related to the ongoing war effort. The past few days had been a whirlwind of activity and contention, particularly following the unexpected arrival of two Champions at the city gates, seeking asylum. These weren't ordinary Champions; they were Levelers unaffiliated with any deity, sparking heated debates among the echelons of power. Despite the controversy, the two had been taken in and were currently undergoing interrogation, willingly divulging all they knew about the adversaries of the Gods of Light.

The gnome's meticulous examination ground to a halt as he discovered the absence of a key military report. The more he searched, the more he realized that this wasn't the only missing document. Deep lines of concern etched his brow as he noted a significant lapse in reports from the outpost in the Beastveil – no word had come in the past month, an anomaly that couldn't be overlooked.

To Nelzar's relief, additional forces were currently en route from the Empire, located beyond Nyxoria. This regiment was destined to bolster the Kingdom of Slaethia's troops in their sacred crusade to eradicate the malevolent races from the realm. However, given the unsettling silence from the Beastveil, Nelzar considered redirecting them first to investigate and secure the outpost. Only then would they join the main forces, gearing up for the impending and decisive assault into the dark lands.

The stakes were enormous. Once the dark lands were purged, Nyxoria would be entirely under the control of the Kingdom of Slaethia. This pivotal victory would then pave the way for even grander ambitions, allowing them to join forces with the Empire in a righteous crusade spreading across all the Moons of Völuspá. The potential for such widespread dominion fueled Nelzar's strategic planning as he navigated through these turbulent times.

Nelzar's grin stretched wider as he hopped down from his chair. Being a gnome, he humorously sat himself upon an elven-sized desk, cluttered with a ceaseless tide of documents and scrolls. Despite the tumultuous events rippling across the moon, the past week had sparkled with celebration, a rare respite in these trying times.

As he meandered through the castle's corridors, deep in contemplation, Nelzar reflected on his substantial influence. He wasn't the king, but as High Priest, his power eclipsed that of any ceremonial sovereign. The church wielded the real authority; after all, the gods they worshipped were not mere myths but entities who walked among them. The Empire itself was governed by the

counsel of these gods, relegating the administration of the kingdoms to the capable hands of priests and nobility. Yet, even among these esteemed ranks, a High Priest like Nelzar stood tall, his authority in wartime rivaling any mere king.

But his current mirth stemmed from a different source. The gods had granted them an extraordinary boon. The former Champion, Vanya, an elf, had committed the unthinkable act of betraying her god Jörmun. Although Jörmun was relatively obscure among the council's myriad minor deities, his reaction to the betrayal was unprecedented. In a move fueled by spite and a desire for retribution, Jörmun had resurrected their army's general. This act, deemed impossible by many, was a divine intervention meant to steer the tide of war towards a resounding triumph for righteousness. This development filled Nelzar with a sense of invincibility, seeing it as a clear sign of the gods' favor in their righteous crusade.

Adding a layer of sinister intrigue to Jörmun's revenge was the identity of the resurrected general – none other than Vanya's own husband, Ezad Anlyth. Nelzar found a wicked pleasure in envisioning the moment Vanya would confront her ex-husband on the battlefield. The drama was further heightened by General Anlyth's reaction to the revelation of her betrayal. In a public declaration, he had not only renounced their marriage but also made a solemn vow to end her life, framing it as a divine mission to punish her treachery. This personal vendetta intertwined with divine retribution brought a darkly satisfied grin to Nelzar's face, as it symbolized not just a victory in war but also in moral righteousness.