

BLAKE PUDDING

CHAPTER 13

THE CORE

My night took a nosedive pretty fast. I kicked things off trying to master flying, but instead, I ended up splattered all over the ground—too much gravity, not enough airtime. After scraping myself together from that debacle, I figured maybe flying's not my thing right now. Next brainwave? Weaving myself a skeleton. Sounds bizarre, I know. It's like, I'm trying to give my life—well, my form—some actual structure, and if there's one thing I hate, it's structure. *Blah!*

But honestly, if I've got bones, I'm thinking I might not end up as a puddle every time I take a hit. Sure, I can morph back into shape easily enough, but having a sturdy frame to keep me together? It sounds like a T-800 endoskeleton vibe, or maybe more Rev-9... Nah, let's be real. That series ended after the second movie; we acknowledge nothing beyond that. Anyway! It seems like a solid upgrade to me.

Yeah, I know, you all know this stuff already. So, what's next? Well, I'm itching to dive back into my '80s training montage. I still have that Weak Fire Ward to learn, not to mention mastering Phantasmal Mist. My silk skills are on point, but Phantasmal Surge needs some serious work. I can blast off at high speed in a straight line for short bursts, but I'm still leaning on the system to cast it—that's gotta change.

However, despite my struggles with flying, squishing myself into paste, and getting murdered by... well, whatever it is I'm munching on right now, my biggest gripe is that Phantasia is being such a hog!

Seriously, girl, scoot over and learn to share!

We're willing to give you twenty percent.

I don't think she can hear our thoughts.

Ugh, she's after the whole thing!

Eat faster!

I begrudgingly settled for just fifteen percent of the corpse, the saltiness over Phantasia's gluttony still lingering—mainly because she managed to out-eat me, though I'd never openly admit that. Unfortunately, there wasn't enough left to trigger my Devourer's passive—perhaps because I hadn't landed the killing blow, or maybe because the corpse had been dead too long? I don't know; it feels like a bit of hit and miss, and then miss, and miss again with Devourer's skill stealing.

After that, I reshaped my body to the desired full figure, albeit without the DDs, ending up with a less-than-voluptuous A cup. I contemplated reallocating some padding from the back end to address that, but let's be real—if it's a choice between crafting the perfect ass or the ideal bust, I'm

all about that bass. Besides, adjustments to my tits can wait until after dessert. Speaking of which, I wonder what's on the menu for dessert?

“What are you doing?” Von Von's voice startled me. I spun around, instinctively striking my best *hiya chop* pose, only to find her standing behind me. Her arms were crossed, and she had an eyebrow raised in a way that screamed, *Are you serious?*

My head swiveled back and forth faster than a bobblehead on the dashboard of a car going off-road as I scanned the courtyard. Despite my best efforts and no help from my pouty lip, Aurelia was nowhere to be seen. Just as I was about to voice my concern to my champion, she preempted me with an answer.

“Your significant other went off to get your dessert,” Vanya huffed. “She told me to keep an eye on you. And if you somehow manage to get yourself killed again, she'll—, and I quote—‘rip my heart straight out of my ass before shoving it down my throat.’ End quote.”

“Aww, isn't she just the best?” I smiled, truly meaning every word.

“...”

“So, you've just been standing around watching me eat? A bit creepy, wouldn't you say?” I added, a sly grin playing on my lips.

I brushed off the long sigh from the elf woman as I walked over to the corner of the courtyard. Sitting down with my legs crossed and my back firmly against the wall, I settled in as I closed my eyes. I was itching to get back to training. Having Von Von around would make it the perfect time to test my little fire shield. However, one nagging thought kept playing at the back of my mind. Where had that toad come from, and why did it look like the dungeon boss I had fought so long ago?

“Whatcha doing?” a voice squeaked out.

Without opening my eyes as I tried to refocus, I replied, “I'm about to select a skill.”

“What skill?” came another squeak.

“Weak Fire Ward,” I exhaled.

“Why?”

“So I can learn to use it,” I responded, irritation creeping into my tone.

“Why?”

“To use it,” I repeated, annoyance now evident.

“Why?”

“Look, do you want me to kill you?” I grumbled, exasperated.

“Yes! Yes!”

“Wait, what?” Surprised, I opened my eyes to see a little gelatinous cube bouncing joyfully in front of me.

“Kill me! Kill me!” it sang out gleefully.

“Don’t mind Gooley; he’s just like that,” another tiny voice jiggled toward me.

“Gooley? Don’t I know that name from somewhere?” I muttered to myself, trying to place the familiarity. Turning my attention to the second slime cube, I asked, “And who might you be?”

“I’m Doodles,” it replied, its tiny voice suddenly taking on a much deeper tone with its next few words, “and I remember you.”

“Hmm... Yeah, no, it’s not ringing any bells,” I shrugged, dismissing the attempt to jog my memory. Then, closing my eyes, I settled back into trying to find my meditative zone.

“What? Y-You killed me, and you don’t even remember me?” Doodles cried out, a mix of shock and indignation in its voice.

Meanwhile, the other slime continued its odd chant, bouncing with each “Kill me! Kill me!”

“Nope,” I uttered bluntly. “But if I killed you, how are you here?”

Of course, I remembered both of them. How could I forget? But I wasn’t about to let on—I mean, messing with people’s minds is just too much fun. Doodles met his end at the hands of my acidic finger, a time when I hadn’t yet mastered controlling my corrosive touch. And Gooley... okay, I’ll admit, I had forgotten about him until Doodles jogged my memory. It seems I had stepped on him, or them (do slimes even have genders? Do I? Wait, yes, it’s what I identify as, and that’s as a female meat popsicle—ten points if you get the reference) in the chaos following the liberation from Wartie, after the goblin kid’s demise. Silently, the memory of the kid’s death stirred a surge of anger within me. Casting a quick glare at Vanya, I let out a sigh.

“I’ve died many times, but as long as I’m attached to the Dungeon Core, I can always respawn,” Doodles explained.

Realization dawned on me, and my eyes snapped wide open. The dragon I had battled, the toad that had defeated me, and even the two slimes, they were all connected to the Dungeon Core within me. “Oh, shit,” I whispered, the weight of the revelation settling in. I was a walking, talking dungeon. “Death was right,” I breathed out, absorbing the magnitude of this truth.

“What’s wrong?” Von Von approached, having apparently been eavesdropping on my conversation with the slimes—

Well, one of the slimes, since the other was still bouncing around, continuing its chant of “Kill me! Kill me!”

“Hmm? What’s what?” I blinked at her, my eyes wide and unblinking—literally, big owl eyes, not just a figure of speech. I had morphed my eyes to mimic those of an owl as I gazed up at her. It seemed to unnerve her, judging by the step back she took.

“What’s wrong?” she reiterated.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” I waved a hand dismissively. “Just casually stuck a Dungeon Core inside me for, you know, shits and giggles. Not literally *shits*, of course—it wasn’t that kind of hole,” I added with a nervous chuckle, though the elf didn’t share my amusement. “And next thing I know, I’m basically a dungeon, I guess?” I shrugged, my gaze shifting away from hers.

“What do you mean, you’re basically a dungeon?” my champion asked, her gaze piercing through me.

“Well, I—”

My words were cut short as the castle trembled, an ear-shattering roar interrupting the moment. Vonya and I locked eyes, and I offered another nervous chuckle before leaping to my feet. Opting for action over explanation, I took off running, not keen on answering any more questions. Nope! Nope! It’s always better to have an excuse to run away than to stick around for an interrogation, I always say.

Running as fast as I could, without using Phantasmal Surge, of course—didn’t want to accidentally kill any more vampires. As for running into them, well, that was happening quite a bit at the moment. Plenty of shoulder checks were happening. I even managed to topple a few, one of whom looked like a butler holding a tray filled with wine glasses with what could either be blood or grape juice—I’m opting to think of it as grape juice. To my dismay, Von Von caught up to me, her glare making me gulp nervously. A wave of relief washed over me, thankful that Aurelia would likely forgive me for any inadvertent mayhem, because let’s face it, that kind of look Vonya was giving me coming from Aurelia would be far worse.

And I say, *inadvertent mayhem* because, let’s be real, I had a pretty good idea what made that roar after talking with Doodles. If you didn’t already know as well, well, you just haven’t been paying attention. Speaking of the roar, another one was let loose, shaking the castle once more.

I came around a corner leading to the front gates with a screeching halt, my champion at my side. The gate and portcullis were wide open, and several vampires were battling—or rather, getting their asses kicked—by one big kitty with a snake tail.

“Ah, fuck me,” I grumbled, before looking over at Von Von with a big old smile. “Do you want to play with its nuts with me?”

“What?!”