

BLAKE PUDDING

CHAPTER 23

NIGHTMARE DOMINION

My head tilted from side to side, trying to make sense of the scene before me. As I stood here, I found myself bewildered by the sight of a dead body sprawled on the ground. *This is just... weird.*

Exiting the Chambers of Grief had been a breeze compared to finding that stupid secret entrance, and it wasn't long after when I stumbled upon another Slaethian patrol. They appeared to be looking for their missing comrades—the ones my ever-so-righteous Champion had dispatched. Ah, the sweet, sweet taste of irony! She's tiptoeing down the dark path, and I'm loving every minute of it. *Mwahahaha!*

Now, if only we could get her to stop bitching about our methods.

This other patrol had three members as well, a knight, nudist, and caster? Honestly, their roles—or classes—didn't matter much to me; they all fall down the same way. Mr. Armor and Captain Birthday Suit were already taking a dirt nap—courtesy of yours truly. Ms. Robes, though, she was shivering off to the side, probably wondering if she was next.

But the star of the show? The semi-nude corpse. Something about his untimely demise was just... off. Like a puzzle with a missing piece.

That shouldn't have happened.

I know, right?!

I flicked a glance at Ms. Robes, who looked like she'd just had a one-on-one with Death—except, you know, Death being that little girl with pink hair. Not exactly the fearsome specter you'd expect.

Pointing at the semi-clad stiff, I couldn't resist sharing my observation. “He fell funny!”

After what felt like an eternity, Ms. Robes managed to eke out a flabbergasted, “W-What?”

“He fell funny,” I said again, with a tone of disbelief.

Seriously, is she blind or what?

No, it's just plain weird, that's all.

Ms. Robes simply stared at me, her face a mix of bewilderment, shock, and fear. But I pressed on, determined to make her see. “Look, I snuck up on you guys, and gave Captain Birthday Suit here the ol' surprise tentacle-slap to the noggin from his right side. His head did a twist, flew off, and kaboomed against that wall.” I gestured to a pile of debris that was once part of a building on our left. “You get me?” I insisted, unable to shake the feeling that something was amiss.

She rapidly shook her head, her fear seemingly rendering her mute.

Ugh, what is up with her?

I'm as clueless as you are.

Exhaling a deep sigh, I gestured emphatically towards the deceased. “Look closely. I whacked him so hard his head took a one-way trip that way,” I indicated the blood-streaked wall to my left once again, then redirected my finger to the body lying to my right. “See what I mean?”

Yet again, she shook her head, each of my words seeming to make her flinch more.

I glanced down at the corpse, then back at the visibly shaking Ms. Robes, slightly off to the side but still in front of me. Then I looked back at the corpse. “Maybe it’s the angle,” I mused aloud. “Come on, come here. Stand where I’m standing. Look at it from my perspective,” I urged, gesturing frantically with my hands, trying to coax her towards me.

Ms. Robes’ eyes widened in terror as she glanced from me to where Mr. Armor lay lifeless. Following her gaze, I noticed Phantasia contentedly munching on her meal. My plushie-sized unicorn, a Black Pudding, was a sight to behold, savoring her canned delicacy with such patience and joy. It baffled me how long it took her to eat; she didn’t seem to have a knack for dissolving things as fast as I could, but watching her was still an absolute treat.

“Don’t worry about Phantasia; she’s just having her meal. Now, come over here. I really want to figure this out,” I coaxed, eager to share my puzzle with the petrified woman.

Unsurprisingly, she didn’t budge, frozen in place by fear. But that wasn’t going to deter me. With a sigh, I bounded over to her like an overexcited kid wanting to share a secret, which, admittedly, did nothing to ease her state of shock. Nevertheless, I reached down, gently hoisted her to her feet, and began guiding her back to where I had been standing over Captain Birthday Suit’s decapitated remains.

Seriously, what’s with all these practically naked people?

Umm, I’m pretty sure we’ve covered that once or twice before.

Huh, okay.

Back at the scene, I stood behind her, pointing once more at the lifeless body, and then to the wall splattered with what was left of his head. “Do you see it now?” I asked, my voice brimming with anticipation, hoping she’d finally catch on to what I was seeing.

She shook her head in response, her silence unbroken as she stood rigid, seemingly rooted to the spot.

As I pondered the perplexing scene, I stepped back, still trying to make sense of it. “Why can’t you see it? I hit his head from the right, and it flew off to the left. But his body fell to the right. It doesn’t add up. It shouldn’t have fallen that way,” I explained, my frustration growing.

Ms. Robes, trembling, continued to flinch at each of my words, her fear streaming down her cheeks.

To illustrate my point, I drew back my right arm and swung it at Ms. Robes' head. In an instant, my arm transformed into a thick tentacle, striking her with force. Her head snapped off, soaring towards the same blood-streaked wall, while her body did something entirely unexpected—or rather, I should say, expected. Instead of falling like Captain Birthday Suit's, her legs flipped up, and her body somersaulted in the same direction as her head—completely opposite to what I had hoped to repeat.

“SCORE!” I exclaimed in the moment, but my triumph was short-lived. The outcome only deepened my confusion.

Seriously, Dream?!

What?

“Huh,” I mumbled, feeling a mix of bewilderment and curiosity. But then I shrugged it off. There were more important things to focus on, and besides, some mysteries weren't meant to be solved.

I allowed Phantasia to wrap up with her canned food while I swiftly handled the other two corpses using Devourer. However, much to my chagrin, I didn't gain any new skills from the encounter. After Death's thorough nerfing, it was becoming increasingly unclear what it would take to steal fresh skills. *Ugh!*

Despite the tinge of disappointment, the meal was satisfactory, though it lacked the distinct, matured flavor unique to the undead. No time to dwell on culinary critiques, though; there were places to go, and people to eat.

Setting out, my mind was already plotting the next encounter. This time, I intended to focus on sharpening my Phantasmal skills, rather than solely relying on the element of surprise and brute force. A more strategic approach was needed, and I was eager to test my limits and adapt my tactics. The thrill of the hunt and the anticipation of learning through each confrontation kept me moving forward.

As I roamed the remnants of what used to be a bustling city, I encountered no more patrols, but the place was crawling with goblins. These creatures were odd, almost zombie-like in their behavior, incapable of speech, and aggressively gnawing at their own ears as they lunged at me. It was almost pitiful how easily they fell to my powers.

It was surprising, sheer numbers were meaningless; I was quickly learning it was all about the quality of the opponent and the right type of magic. Holy and Fire magic were my kryptonite, but beyond that, I felt near invincible. Physical attacks? Practically ineffective against me, especially with my Disintegration passive at the ready. Sure, a blow powerful enough to obliterate a mountain would certainly do damage—actually, that would definitely be the end of me—but standard sword strikes and punches were mere child's play, often turning against those who dared to attack.

My only conceivable threat would be someone skilled in either Holy or Fire magic, much like my temperamental Champion. Absent such a confrontation, I felt invincible as I traversed the ruins, curious and ready for whatever challenges awaited me in this once grand city's remains.

Hauling yet another goblin towards the increasingly large pile of corpses, I paid no mind to his frantic screams, aggressive snarls, and desperate kicking. Admittedly, his attempts at kicking were rather futile, given that I was dragging him by his ankles. All the while, Phantasia playfully pounced at his face, her antics were undeniably adorable, though I doubted the goblin agreed.

Glancing back, a sudden surge of panic gripped me when I realized Phantasia was nowhere in sight. Just as I was about to set off in a frenzied search, my attention was drawn to the gurgling whimpers of the goblin I had been dragging. To my surprise and amusement, a flurry of tentacles burst forth from the creature's chest in a scene reminiscent of an alien movie. There she was, my adorable little unicorn, Phantasia, causing havoc in the most endearing way. A soft smile crossed my face at her delightful antics.

Deciding against adding this particular corpse to my growing pile, I left it for Phantasia to devour, knowing well she wasn't the fastest eater. While I could have consumed them myself, these goblins didn't offer much in terms of mass or skill acquisition, being too weak. Of course, I could always eat, but these specific ones were off-limits for me.

As I pondered about where I was storing all my extra mass, I found myself reaching into the pile and nonchalantly devouring another goblin. Yes, I was aware of my earlier stance on them being off-limits, but what can I say? Sometimes the urge just wins over.

The goblins, embodying a feral state, roamed the ruins much like scavengers, their presence almost ubiquitous. Despite my earlier resolve, the temptation to snack on a few was too strong to ignore. Their proliferation throughout these ruins provided an almost inexhaustible resource. Moreover, considering the dire situation of the beastkin refugees, I doubted they'd be finicky about their food sources. So, in a way, I was gathering sustenance for them as well.

They better not be choosy about what they get.

No kidding. Some looked like they hadn't had a decent meal in ages.

After hours of wandering through the desolate city, I chanced upon a sight that, in hindsight, seemed obvious but hadn't occurred to me earlier. In the distance, there stood a structure that appeared to be a hybrid of a wooden fort and ancient stone ruins. The sun was on the cusp of setting, casting a golden hue over the scene. Small fire pits within the fort were just beginning to flicker to life, their warm glow starting to punctuate the encroaching dusk.

Absorbing the sight of the fort amidst the ruins, a devious smile slowly crept onto my face. The promise of what awaited inside sent a thrill through me. Looking down, there was Phantasia, brushing against my legs like a cat in search of some love. She seemed to sense my uplifted spirits.

Yet, confronting an entire fort single-handedly required more than just enthusiasm; it demanded a strategy. With a gentle, almost sing-song voice, I announced, “[STATUS].”

NAME: BLAKE

RACE: ELDRITCH PUDDING

CLASS: PHANTASM

<u>TITLES</u> DESCENDANT OF THE END SCION OF DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES		
<u>RACIAL SKILLS</u> [DEVOURER] [DISINTEGRATION]	<u>VULNERABILITIES</u> [FIRE] [HOLY]	<u>UNIQUE</u> [BIRTHRIGHT] [SOVEREIGN HEIRESS]
<u>SPELLS</u> [PHANTASMAL DOMINION] [PHANTASMAL MIST]	<u>IMMUNITIES</u> [ACID] [CHARM] [DARKNESS] [DISEASE] [POISON] [SLEEP]	<u>SELECTABLE</u> NONE
<u>ABILITIES</u> [PHANTASMAL SURGE] [WEB OF WHISPERS]		

Honestly, the sight of my once-lush Selectable skills looking as barren as a ghost town was a real kick in the clit. It used to be like a buffet of diabolical choices, but thanks to Circe, now it's as empty as a blind date's personality. Sure, I could blame Death—if I fancied a bitch-fest with a reaper who looks like she still gets carded—but that's not the hill I want to die on, figuratively or literally.

But hey, enough with the whining. The real deal now is strategy. My current skill set isn't exactly screaming 'overpowered assassin,' but more like 'sneaky strategist.' It's all about control now – pulling the strings of fear, manipulating the battlefield like it's my personal chessboard. I'm not just playing the game; I'm setting the rules, like the sovereign bitch I am.

Am I being a bit delusional about my powers? Hell yeah! I mean, I'm still that gal who loves a good stealth kill with a tentacle up the brown star as I inflict both physical and psychological terror—just your average emotionally unstable femme fatale. But now, I'm also the queen of horror, wielding my enemies' fears like a kid with a new toy. When I think about it, not much of a change, really. Same old me, just slightly more delusional.

Peering at the choices before me, I clicked on Phantasmal Dominion.

<p style="text-align: center;">[PHANTASMAL DOMINION]</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>CLAIM YOUR DOMINION AND YOUR POWER WITHIN IT.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>TYPE</u> SPELL</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>ACTIVATION</u> CAST</p> <p>DESCRIPTION: You have become an entity reborn into that of dreams and nightmares. You wield considerable</p>

influence within the Dream Realm. Wherever you may go, you can call forth this realm's essence to you, amplifying your innate potential. Consequently, the strength of all your skills swells within your dominion.

Honestly, I've grown quite fond of the updated skill descriptions in the system. It's hard to pin down whether Death spiced them up or if Circe had initially nixed them, but frankly, that's splitting hairs. The main thing is, they give me a clearer image of how each skill should pan out, painting a vivid picture in my mind's theater.

Circe, with her whole spiel about magic, would probably argue that these detailed descriptions dampen one's innate potential. She's big on the idea that the less you know, the more creatively you can wield your magic. But, if you ask me, these descriptions are like adding fuel to the fire of my imagination. They don't box me in; they're more like a springboard, launching my thoughts into new realms of magical mischief. So yeah, I'd say they're a win in my book.

It's honestly a bit of a shocker, the level of adaptability I've found in these system skills. Last time I tapped into Dominion, it was within Phantasmal Mist, as in, it was like tapping into a thunderstorm of mana showering down all around me. But now, with the Dungeon Core snugly nestled inside, maybe I don't need to stick to that old mental script for Phantasmal Dominion. Instead of envisioning the skill as a personal power-up, I should really lean into what the description suggests: letting the skill boost my abilities, instead of me.

I know, I know, it might seem like I'm just chasing my own tail with this but hear me out. There's a difference, subtle as it might be. I've always been a bit of a hoarder when it comes to benefits—if it doesn't serve me directly, what's the point, right? But that might just be where I've been tripping up. Maybe it's time to stop being so self-centered with my magic. Think of the skills and magic as their own entities, their own allies. If I focus on beefing them up, rather than just myself, who knows what new heights I could reach? Yeah, I know, still self-centered. Still, it's a shift in perspective, and hey, flexibility is key in this game.

Umm... Nightmare, that whole self-centered diva-bitch routine? I'm pretty sure that's all you.

And what's wrong with that? Divas get shit done, unlike your wishy-washy, indecisive ass.

Wishy-washy? I'm not entirely convinced that's all me... is it?

Oh, it absolutely is!

Okay, maybe there's a bit of truth to that.

Quieting the relentless banter between the two halves of my soul, I shifted my focus to the task at hand—strategizing my attack. I was clear about my objectives; the real challenge was the scale of the magic I needed to employ. I had never cast spells of this magnitude before. The fort ahead, while not exactly imposing—actually, quite underwhelming, and comparable to a fort I once visited in my past life in Texas. You know, the one Ozzy pissed on. What was it again? Alma, or something like that.

The Alamo. Dream, if you're going to pretend to have forgotten shit like that, I might just scrap our little unspoken rule about sharing and take over this whole narrative.

Fine, fine. Chill out, no need to get our tentacles in a twist.

Shaking my head to dismiss the distracting thoughts, I concentrated on executing my magic, starting with [PHANTASMAL DOMINION]. My focus was on the skill doing exactly what it was meant to: claiming an area as my dominion, enhancing the strength and potency of my magic. As I activated the skill, the area in front of me was enveloped in a glowing orange haze, marking the infusion of the system's power with my command. This eerie glow engulfed the fort, and almost immediately, cries and shouts of panic echoed from within, as its inhabitants became acutely aware of the powerful, unseen force now at play.

Next, I followed up with [PHANTASMAL MIST].

[PHANTASMAL MIST]

SUMMON THE ETHEREAL EMBRACE OF THE DREAM REALM.

TYPE
SPELL

ACTIVATION
CAST

DESCRIPTION:

Emanating from the depths of dreams and nightmares, you can summon the very essence of the Dream Realm in the form of an enigmatic mist. This Phantasmal Mist distorts reality and cloaks the surrounding area, confounding and ensnaring the senses of those engulfed within. To those trapped inside, the lines between dreams, illusions, and waking reality blur, leaving them vulnerable and disoriented. Harness this power wisely, for while it can serve as a potent weapon, it also reminds of the fickle nature of dreams.

This skill was truly a fascinating one. As I unleashed it, a shroud of mist began to envelop the area, an ethereal blanket that allowed me to strike from the mist, unseen yet omnipresent. However, I realized I wasn't utilizing it to its full potential. I wasn't just a Black Pudding or should I say, Eldritch Pudding; I was the Scion of Dreams and Nightmares, and more so, I bore the mantle of a Phantasm. My approach needed to be more... haunting.

As the mist grew denser, a spectral legion began to emerge, not just soldiers, but all manners of nightmarish creatures. Grotesque figures, twisted and malformed, lurked within the fog. There were not only soldiers with unnaturally contorted faces but also creatures that defied description—amalgamations of fears and horrors, beasts with too many eyes, or mouths where there should be none, all of them a manifestation of terror.

Approaching one of these phantasms, a soldier whose face was a grotesque canvas of life and decay, I passed my hand through its form. They were untouchable, unable to inflict physical harm, yet perfectly designed to terrorize the waking world.

“Sovereign, we are at your command,” it spoke, its voice a chilling cacophony, like nails scraping against the soul.

This was a turning point. These beings, emerging from the Realm of Dreams, were not mere illusions. They were as real as the fear they inspired. In this moment, I understood my path was not of leveling and conventional growth; it was something more profound, more aligned with the essence of who I was.

Surrounded by this haunting array, I felt a newfound clarity. My previous approach to my powers had been narrow, confined by my limited understanding. But now, standing as the sovereign of this nightmarish host, I felt aligned with the true depth of my souls.

With a deep sense of purpose, I commanded, “Haunt their minds.” At my words, the nightmares surged forward, descending upon the fort like a wave of primal terror, each entity embodying the essence of fear.

As the nightmares advanced, the fort responded with a spectacular display of magical defense. Bolts of magic, shimmering in an array of colors and lights, shot out towards the encroaching wave of horrors. The scene was akin to a futuristic battle, with lasers and plasma rifles illuminating the fog of war, further dramatized by the dazzling arcs of colorful lightning. It struck me how fantasy, in moments like these, often mirrored scenes from science fiction.

Just as I was about to join the fray, I felt a gentle nudge against my leg. Looking down, I saw Phantasia. Silent as always, yet her presence conveyed a desire to be part of the action. Though she didn’t have the ability to speak, there was an unspoken understanding between us, a connection that allowed me to grasp her intentions. It wasn’t crystal clear, but under the current circumstances, her eagerness to join the battle was unmistakable.

“Fine, but you better be careful, little lady,” I cooed affectionately to Phantasia, the tiny black unicorn composed of goo and harbinger of murder.

Her response was almost palpable, a sense of delight at my approval. With an energetic burst, she surged forward. It was a sight to behold: her hooves morphed into a horde of tentacles, giving her lower half the appearance of an octopus, while her upper half retained the charming form of a unicorn. As she charged toward the fort, her eagerness for chaos was almost endearing. *So adorably lethal!*

As I prepared to follow suit, a sudden burst of fire lighting up the mist halted me. It was more than just a visual alarm; it was a stark reminder of my vulnerability. Glancing down at myself, I realized that I hadn’t bothered to form a silk shell since the last time my human form had reconstituted. There was a small comfort in the knowledge that I had had the presence of mind to close my gaping hole after emerging from the Chambers of Grief. Still, my black, gooey essence was fully exposed, not even a mask to cover my face. I pondered whether this exposure even bothered me anymore.

Then an idea hit me—the Web of Whispers wasn’t just an ordinary silk; it was a magical variety, and crucially, it seemed to be resistant to fire, if not completely fireproof. This realization opened up new tactical possibilities and provided a vital edge in the heat of battle, literally and figuratively.

[**WEB OF WHISPERS**]

SILK THREADS SPUN FROM DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES ENTANGLE REALITY.

TYPE
ABILITY

ACTIVATION
CAST

DESCRIPTION:

From the intangible fabric of dreams and nightmares, you summon ethereal threads. These strands, both beautiful and terrifying, manifest as whispers that can ensnare the senses of all who witness them. Their tales, drawn from the deepest recesses of the mind, have the power to captivate, bewilder, and influence.

Taking a deep breath, I softly called forth [**WEB OF WHISPERS**], summoning the ethereal silk from the Realm of Dreams. Shaping it into a protective shell around me was effortless, akin to the familiar manipulation of Silk Webbing. My lips curled into a malicious smile as it finished, all while I cast my next skill, [**PHANTASMAL SURGE**], a spell whose workings seemed clear enough to bypass a second glance at its description; I preferred the version already painted in my mind.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl as I hurtled towards my chosen target – the lookout tower at the fort’s far end, opposite where my spectral army was sowing terror. The soldiers, knights, and casters below were oblivious to the fact that these nightmares couldn’t harm them physically, a detail lost in their panic.

I abruptly stopped, light flashing around me, likely leaving a trail or afterimage, as every eye turned to my sudden appearance. The man in front of me, armed with a bow and glowing arrows, froze for a moment, his surprise evident. Just as he began to raise his weapon, I lunged at him. But in that instant, my body seized up, immobilized as if turned to stone. It dawned on me then – the silk of Web of Whispers was rigid, solidifying into an unyielding form once woven.

“Umm... Hi,” I managed through a locked jaw, moments before an arrow struck my face.

Much to my surprise, and clearly to the bowman’s as well, the arrow simply bounced off. The Web of Whispers proved to be a poor substitute for my usual silk shell, turning out to be excessively solid once woven. To make matters worse, it was immune to my Disintegration skill, likely because it was a product of my own magic—well, my system magic.

But my nature as a Black Pudding offered a way out. I began to ooze through the openings left in the rigid silk form, a reminder of my subconscious tendency to shape my bodies anatomically correct—a habit I’d need to reconsider. This grotesque transformation, however, proved to be an advantage. The onlookers, witnessing a woman with ghostly white skin (the usual silk’s shimmer amplified dramatically by this variety) and black goo emerging from every orifice, were utterly horrified. They had no idea what I was, or what was happening. To them, I was a creature from

their worst nightmares, which fortunately caused them to pause their attacks. *Dumbasses!* Their momentary shock provided me with the perfect opportunity.

Unleashing my tentacles, I didn't bother reverting to human form. Instead, I let my inherent magic run rampant, a torrent of Blight cascading from me. This malignant force bathed those nearby in diseases pulled from the darkest corners of nightmares. Their skin blistered and wept with pus, a black ichor seeping from their eyes, a horror scene come to life.

The afflicted writhed in agony, some doubling over to expel their insides, while others, in desperate defiance, swung their swords, hacking at my tentacles. But such efforts were futile. I effortlessly reattached any severed appendages and extended new ones, latching onto my attackers. My tendrils and tentacles wrapped around them, my flesh corrosively melting theirs, their screams of pain filling the air.

This was no longer a battle; it was a showcase of my dominion, a display of the raw, nightmarish power I wielded. The battlefield had transformed into a tableau of terror, with me as the orchestrator of this macabre dance.

The casters stationed at the fort, potentially the only real threat to me with their arcane prowess, were preoccupied with the phantasmal horrors scaling the walls. Their spells, though powerful, passed through the nightmares as if they were mere extensions of the mist itself, inflicting no damage. It was a mesmerizing sight. The attackers, engulfed in their frantic efforts, seemed unable to grasp the futility of their actions. The nightmares, now manifest in the waking world, were immune to their magic, yet this realization eluded them within the realm of my dominion.

Only those in close proximity to me exhibited any real understanding that I was the primary danger. But even they were barely functional, ensnared as they were in the grips of my Blight. As they succumbed to the horrifying symptoms, their ability to mount any significant defense waned. The fort, once a bastion of magical defense, had become a theater of the absurd, its defenders helplessly entangled in their own incomprehension and fear, while I, the orchestrator of this chaos, continued my relentless assault.

Phantasia, in her own grotesque manner, reveled in the chaos. She moved from one victim to the next, infiltrating their bodies through any opening she could find—and I do mean any. The delightful horrific screams of those she dissolved from the inside were wonderfully chilling, even to me.

Within just fifteen minutes, the fort lay vanquished. Not a single soul stood against us, not even the few wounded stragglers who fell prey to Phantasia's gruesome whims.

Reflecting on the battle, I had anticipated a larger, more formidable force of Slaethians. But there were only about sixty of them, none even remotely matching Vanya's caliber. They were disappointingly weak. It seemed likely that the main army had moved on after decimating Beastveil, leaving behind just this small, inadequate garrison. Regardless, it didn't matter anymore. The fort was cleared, and I had amassed plenty of meat to feed the desperate refugees.

Ugh, none of them better be vegans.

Seriously, if they are, I might just lose it and eat them myself.

As I cast a final look over the spectral legion that had served as my distraction so well, I relinquished my grip on the skill, letting the nightmarish figures dissolve back into the thinning mist. Watching them fade away, a thought lingered in my mind, a contemplation of the boundless possibilities that lay within my grasp. With the right dash of imagination, there seemed to be no limit to what my magic could achieve.