

BLACK PUDDING

CHAPTER 27

Thalador stood proudly at the podium, gazing out at the cheering crowd below. His speech had just concluded, and the elation in the air was palpable. As High Priest Nelzar had foretold, everything was going according to plan, and Thalador couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction. The Church of Light's paladins were diligently purging the academy campus and the city of Thirion from the filth that had infested it. But more importantly, they were diligently gathering souls within Soul Crystals. Of course, the religious fanatics had their goals and ambitions, and he would aid them in their righteous cause. But beyond their holy crusade, Thalador had his own clandestine agenda—he yearned to gather as many Soul Crystals as possible for the creation of raw, untapped Mana Stones. For he harbored a secret desire that he dared not utter aloud, fearing that unseen entities of divinity might take notice.

As Thalador stepped away from the podium, the jubilant cheers of the crowd turned into a rush of terrified screams, instantly seizing his attention. He swiftly spun around, his eyes widening as he leaned over the podium to witness a dark wave sweeping over the audience. Fear and panic replaced the previous elation, and the headmaster's frustration grew. But it wasn't until he noticed a wave of purple flames washing out from the darkness that he had his suspicions as to who it could be. After all, he had just witnessed a similar spell barely a week ago.

Reacting quickly, Thalador raised his hand and activated the protective wards that encircled the stadium. The magical runes embedded within the arena were supposed to dispel any foreign magic in the air at his command, giving the headmaster godlike control within this domain. He smiled to himself as the purple flames dissipated, but to his bewilderment, the darkness remained unaffected. It stubbornly clung to the crowd, defying his attempts to quell it, as if the spell itself was being fueled from some unknown source. It didn't make any sense to him.

“How?” he muttered in disbelief.

Amidst the screams and torment that seemed to grow as the darkness spread, Thalador strained to hear a voice rising above the chaos with his elven ears. Though the shouts and cries were deafening, a single phrase stood out, carrying a note that was both feminine and unmistakably lustful, “[**Nightmare Mist**],” a phrase that contained such potent mana that he knew only a Leveler could have wielded it.

Thalador's curiosity only peaked as he witnessed the horrifying sight unfolding before him. Innocent people emerged from the creeping darkness, their faces contorted in agony. But there were no visible wounds or injuries, yet they acted as though they had been doused in acid. Some even resorted to clawing and gouging their eyes while others tore and ripped at their flesh.

Thalador's long life had brought him into contact with Levelers on rare occasions, but never had he been forced to confront one in battle. As he stood there, the weight of his failed control over the

stadium's wards weighed heavily on him. The protective barriers, meant to dissipate all mana at his command, had proven ineffective against this vile Leveler's magic. An unsettling feeling washed over him as he struggled to comprehend the extent of this threat. The potential consequences loomed like a dark cloud over the church and, more importantly, over himself. If he couldn't find a way to subdue this dangerous adversary, the implications would be dire—for he yearned to claim all those succulent souls within Soul Crystals for himself.

“Such a waste,” he groaned.

Guards, soldiers, even knights, paladins, and spellcasters of all kinds rushed to form a perimeter, attempting to contain the spread of darkness. Those trapped within continued to pour out, their bodies covered in necrotic burn marks and self-inflicted wounds. Amidst the chaos, Thalador remained rooted to the spot, observing the magic with a scholarly curiosity. He sought to unravel the mystery of how this magic resisted the stadium's wards, but its secrets eluded him. Amidst the cacophony of screams, he caught that soft, almost delighted, feminine voice once again, uttering the words, “[**Phantom Surge**].”

His intense focus on the darkness saved him from missing the sudden apparition. Like a vengeful spirit, a spectral figure burst out of the section of the stadium seating that had been overwhelmed by the foul and cruel magic. With remarkable speed, it streaked across the sky, leaving almost and after image of ghostly magic as a student he was all too familiar with hurtled straight at him.



Whoa, things got real weird real quick! My new Phantom Surge skill kicked in, and I felt this strange numbness creeping all over my body. Everything around me went all blurry and stretched out. Before I could even wrap my head around it, whoosh! I was flying in the direction I had been staring at when I activated my newly converted Burst skill (or whatever the hell you call it—formerly converted, maybe? Ah, who gives a damn!).

Still with everything happening, Nightmares' Dominion and Nightmare Mist were a blast! Mist had its differences from the old Acid Breath, though. The mist didn't actually frickin' hurt anyone; it messed with their heads big time, like some kind of crazy waking nightmare. They totally believed they were getting burned alive and ended up hurting themselves thinking they could get it off. It was wild, like watching a crazy horror flick play out. But damn, I so wished I'd learned how to cast that acid version before losing it. Ah well, I'm getting sidetracked again, happens to the best of us! Now, where was I? Oh, right! I'm being flung across the stadium at fucking warp speed! *Whoaaa! Hold onto your tits!*

Moving at such a crazy speed, I had no idea how the hell I was gonna stop. Splatting into the wall seemed inevitable, but surprise, surprise! I came to an immediate halt, like I'd freakin' teleported instead of just accelerating like Captain Kirk. Thank the Crone for not having a spine, 'cause that would've broken it for sure... possibly? But hey, either way, I was completely unharmed, so I couldn't complain about that.

Well, the only problem was my current stance. Here I was, standing in front of that frickin' bearded elf headmaster, looking like I just saved myself from faceplanting while squatting in the woods.

Don't judge me, it was goddessdamn terrifying! Anyway, there I was, squatting—or standing, who the hell knows—facing that bearded elf with the weirdest expression ever. It was like he was trying to solve some epic riddle, or maybe he just needed a good laxative. Hell, I couldn't tell you.

“I must say, Levelers never cease to amaze me. However, I am genuinely curious, before I end your fate, what led you to enroll in this academy, wielding such immense power?” the pointy-eared, Gandalf-looking fucker asked, giving his beard a thoughtful rub.

Oh, crap, maybe I should turn my ears back to human size before I start judging people like that. Yeah, I know, I'm on a roll today, but that's how you know I'm having a good time, so what? Give me a little murder and mayhem, and I'm a happy monster girl.

“Well, you know, I kinda wanted to learn how to cast magic without just relying on my awesome powers. But, to be honest, that's mostly bullshit. The real deal is, I really wanted to snag a few Mana Stones, and maybe see how the hell they're made,” I said with a casual shrug. No point in lying, right? ‘Cause let me tell you, I'm totally gonna kill this guy. Or, you know, get my ass kicked trying, and then try again. I freaking love being able to respawn!

“So, you're after Mana Stones as well, I see,” the headmaster mused to himself, which was pretty damn rude, by the way. How dare he muse to himself when I'm trying to be all intimidating! Talk about ruining the moment! Whatever, I was done talking.

With a wicked smirk on my face, I decided to cast Blight, but to my frustration, nothing happened. *Ugh, that damn headmaster was able to snuff out Necrotic Flame earlier like it was nothing. But hey, at least my system command skills still worked! Bwahahaha!* I couldn't help but gleefully whisper, “[**Plaguebringer**].” Yeah, yeah, I know, announcing my skills while casting them is totally unnecessary and stupid, but for reason that I've already stated (murder and mayhem), I was in an amazing mood and just didn't care.

When I cast Blight, it usually appeared as a cruel and foreboding black cloud of death. And turns out, Plaguebringer was no different, except for one thing—within the heart of that black cloud of despair, there was a vibrant orange glow with little flickers of lightning, like a freakin' static electrical storm going on. Oh, and did I mention the lightning is orange too? It's honestly rather beautiful, at least to me. Well, not to some of the folks who've been watching the elf and me since I streaked across the stadium like a fucking comet. Yeah, Phantom Surge definitely isn't the most discreet skill, that's for sure.

When I used Nightmares' Mist just a few moments ago, it spread like freakin' wildfire, covering a huge area of the stadium. But for some odd reason, Plaguebringer turned out to be rather small. I mean, it was still the size of an SUV, but I had just blanketed almost half the damn stadium with my magic, and now this? *What gives?*

Anyway, my thoughts were cut off when that elf fuck suddenly appeared before me—as if out of magic—well, because it was magic, of course. He reached out and placed his open palm against my lower abdomen. “Umm, ever heard of boundaries? Besides, you're not really my type,” I said, just as I was about to cast one of my other new skills, Abyssal Flame. *What the hell?* There was a sudden flash of light, and everything turned upside down on me. *Dammit! Shit!*

Everything happened so fast, I barely had time to process it. I was flung up into the air and thrown over the balcony where that asshole had been spewing his crap. As I plummeted, I caught a fleeting glimpse of my lower half collapsing on the ground below him. The dumb elf hadn't even realized I wasn't one of them, but once he saw the gooey mess left behind, he'd figure it out.

Okay, let me give you the lowdown on this stadium. Sure, it may look like your average Earth one from the outside, but let me tell you, it's freakin' massive! Those seats shoot up sky-high, like skyscraper level high! Or wait, maybe it's sky-low, 'cause they technically go down? Ugh, who cares! Anyway, guess where I ended up? Not at the tippy-top, but halfway was no joyride either. So, when Mr. Pointy Ears blasted me off that damn balcony, I fell like a meteor right into a panicking crowd of spectators. Yum, right? Nah, not really, 'cause Beardy was on my tail, zapping around with his fancy teleportation spell. And let me tell you, his teleportation was top-notch, while mine felt more like I was using some wonky Enterprise Warp Drive. Long story short, I was screwed. There was no way I was winning this fight. *Ugh!*

Sure, I may have had my respawn powers, and I was ready to embrace death, but that didn't mean I'd go down without giving this pointy-eared asshole a hell of a fight. Nope, no easy wins for him! I was gonna be the biggest pain in his ass before he killed me. And you know what? There's more than one kind of nightmare! I've always thought being stuck around toddlers and infants was the worst living nightmare imaginable. So, if I couldn't scare the living daylights out of this elf bastard, I'd be a whole different kind of nightmare, and I was gonna have a blast doing it! *Tee-hee!*

With a wicked laugh, I bolted through the crowd of fleeing victims—or maybe you call them bystanders, but to me, they're just prey. Anyways, I was in a hurry, and damn, the headmaster was fast! Maybe that's why my legs didn't look quite right, or maybe it was the horrifying memory of toddlers... Ugh, don't ask. So, yeah, I was running like crazy with gooey Black Pudding baby legs. Not exactly my proudest moment, but hey, it helped me stay hidden among the crowd. So, I guess there's that, right? Let's just call it a tactical move!

Oh, and before I forget, let's give [**Web of Whispers**] a whirl! Let's see what this baby can do! *EEW!* That was some seriously cringe-worthy wording right now, even for me. But hey, let's embrace the creepiness!

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Thalador hurriedly chased after the mysterious creator, initially mistaken for a young snow elf woman. The situation was utterly perplexing, leaving him uncertain about what kind of abomination she might be. He could only hazard a guess—perhaps a Black Pudding? But sentient puddings were unheard of, and that added to the puzzle.

What amazed him even more was her resilience. She survived being torn in half by a small arcane blast and then managed to survive a fall from a staggering seventy-five meters. Clearly, she was no ordinary opponent.

Amidst the chaos of fleeing bystanders, the headmaster struggled to keep track of her. She seemed to blend in seamlessly, making it difficult for him to pinpoint her location. As the thought of

igniting everything in flames crossed his mind, he quickly dismissed it. As much as he wanted to unleash his powers, he needed to maintain a good standing with the church.

Thalador's footsteps halted abruptly as an eerie voice pierced the air—a voice he thought he'd never hear again. It was a mere whisper, barely audible, like a chilling breath against his neck. "*Daddy, where were you?*" The words hung in the air like a haunting melody, sending shivers down his back.

His eyes darted around, searching for the source of the ghostly voice, but there was nothing to see—just an empty, desolate space. Yet, the presence of his long-deceased daughter lingered, a specter from the past, refusing to be forgotten.

"*Daddy, it's so cold,*" the voice whispered again, carrying a sorrow that cut deep into his soul. Thalador's heart pounded in his chest, gripped by a mixture of terror and grief. He couldn't comprehend how this could be happening; his daughter had perished centuries ago.

But the whispers persisted, as if from beyond the grave, and the temperature plummeted, leaving an icy chill in the air. "*Where were you?*" The question echoed hauntingly, a reminder of the fatherly duty he had failed to fulfill.

In the midst of the chaos, as the stadium now burned and panic reigned, Thalador found himself confronted by a darkness that transcended time and space. The past and present merged into a nightmarish reality, and the question remained unanswered—where was he when she needed him most?

The horror of his daughter's voice, lost yet still haunting, left him paralyzed with guilt and fear. In this moment, the headmaster faced not only the magical chaos consuming the stadium but the relentless echoes of his past failures. The cold, lifeless specter of his daughter's voice beckoned him, and he could not escape the dreadful truth of his own inadequacy.

In a haunting whisper, his daughter's voice pierced the air once more, "*Come and join mommy and me, we still need you.*" The words hung in the chilling silence.

"Seraphina!" a man's voice bellowed out, jolting Thalador out of his trance.

As Thalador glanced around, he noticed something strange happening to the fleeing bystanders. They had all come to a sudden and eerie halt, their faces contorted with grief, their voices calling out to the wind, as if pleading with some unseen entity.

Thalador's keen eyes caught a glimpse of something peculiar—an ethereal strand of webbing so thin it was almost imperceptible to the naked eye. This was no ordinary magic. In all his long years, he had encountered countless horrors, but this was something else entirely. It stirred a deep sense of unease within him, something he couldn't ignore.

Blake, as she called herself, had crossed a line, and the anger inside him erupted like a blazing inferno. How dare she play with forces beyond her understanding? The implications of her actions gnawed at him, and he felt the weight of his daughter's memory pressing down on him.

This time, it was personal. Thalador's emotions were no longer clouding his judgment—they were fueling his determination to put an end to this madness. Something had to be done about her, and he would unleash his wrath upon that monster.