

BLAKE PUDDING

CHAPTER 10

HORROR OF WONDER

With the city's gates looming behind, I distanced myself from the party. The insidious urge to snuff out their pitiful existences flickered in my mind—tempting but not quite irresistible. I had no wish to be ensnared in another tortuous cycle. My steps, aimless and wandering, took me deeper into the city, my senses sharpened for the telltale essence of the gnome who'd been tossed into this dreamscape like myself. There was a litany of questions I could've posed to him, but my real intention was clear: to ensnare his soul and entomb it within my newest phylactery. Yet, as I moved, a nagging thought persisted. Why did I truly need this gnome's essence?

“Oh, for fuck's sake! You're more melodramatic than a soap opera villain. My turn!”

“Dream, you insufferable...”

“Hush, Nightmare. My narrative now!”

Walking into the city, I left that ragtag band of adventurers behind. You know, there's something satisfying about not having the urge to... well, permanently quiet their chatter. Sure, the temptation was there, like craving a midnight snack when you're on a diet, but I didn't fancy another round on the endless-loop rollercoaster.

That said, while meandering through the maze-like streets, I was on the lookout for a certain gnome who'd also taken an unexpected isekai vacation. Imagine being plucked from your usual surroundings and plopped somewhere foreign. Like going to the fridge for a snack and ending up in Narnia.

“Another food analogy?”

“What? I'm hungry. Also, I'm pretty sure that was a metaphor.”

“Are you sure?”

“Not really, no. We failed English 101, remember?”

“We passed it on our second attempt.”

“...Barely. Anyways.”

While a sensible person might compile a laundry list of questions for such a gnome, my list was, shall we say, a tad concise.

All I knew was, I recently snagged this swanky new phylactery. Think of it like the Gucci bag of the underworld. Ultra-luxe. And I just HAD to pop his soul into it. Why? Heck if I know. It's like when I see those over-the-top goth—sorry, I mean "combat"—boots online. Do I need them? No.

Would they give me blisters? Probably. But darn it, they're wowza fabulous! And let's face it, sometimes, you just gotta do stuff 'cause... reasons. Or in my case, because the lil' Death girl told me so. Go figure!

“Did you seriously drop a ‘wowza’ into the mix?”

“Okay, it just kind of... popped out. Can we proceed?”

“If I hear ‘jinkies’ next, I’m making an exit.”

“Promise!”

Segue back to the main event: The city’s ambiance transitioned from the serenity of a morning coffee to the rush of a triple espresso in mere moments. Seriously, who was the snitch? Did a town crier have a bullhorn? Or did someone spark a viral dance on Tik-Tome (catch the pun? Different dimension, remember?).

“I’m so judging you right now.”

“Life’s fleeting. Why not add a dash of silly?”

“...”

“Oh, come on, Nightmare—if you’re going to be like that, go back to sleep!”

The intoxicating aroma of citywide panic was undeniable, similar to tearing open a fresh pack of chips. It’s hard not to take a deep, satisfying inhale. Yet my aim was unwavering: pinpoint the steampunk-esque gnome.

Amid the pervasive, tantalizing fear, I showed remarkable restraint, avoiding the temptation to ‘sample’ anyone. Kudos to me! But then again, I’m left pondering what the essence of dreams would even taste like in this place. Is it akin to munching on sugar, spice, and everything nice, with an accidental addition of an extra ingredient in the concoction, Chemical X? That would be me, by the way.

“You’re the worst.”

The city streets pulsed with fearful anticipation. Everywhere I looked, guards with sweat-slicked brows hustled by, their armor clinking, as they darted in practiced formation. Knights, their cloaks billowing, shouted commands while mages, their robes awash in a kaleidoscope of colors, chanted incantations that cast shimmering barriers around the perimeter. With the fervent urgency in their movements, one would think that doom was just around the corner. But my hasty calculations, gauging our breakneck speed earlier, suggested the undead horde wouldn’t be knocking at the city gates for at least a few more hours.

Not that their fate weighed heavily on my conscience. In this dream realm, I often felt like a ghost drifting through a lively party – most attendees didn’t even cast a second glance my way. There were the odd few, however, who caught a glint of recognition in their eyes when they looked my way, giving them a momentary jolt of unease.

But as I wandered, lost in thought, fate played its card. There he was, amidst the sea of frantic faces: the one I had been seeking.

“Nightmare, did you seriously just hijack the narration?”

“Merely weaving in some threads of my own. If you’ve shadows to cast, by all means, let them loom. Otherwise, shut the fuck up, and let the story unfurl.”

“Overreaction princess, fusspot fanatic, emotional exhibitionist, diva deluxe!”

“Fusspot?”

“Yes, Nightmare that’s you, you drama queen!”

“Did your hamster fall off the wheel?”

“Considering we both use the same hamster and wheel, you just called yourself stupid.”

“...”

In the din of my split souls’ relentless sibling squabbling, the diminutive gnome held my attention, standing stark against the frenzied flux of panicking citizens. But as I drew near, a barrage of hurrying feet blurred my line of sight. Pushing forward, the place he’d been was now devoid of his presence. A twinge of unease seized me. Yet, at the brink of resignation, a fleeting glimpse of his form caught my eye, darting swiftly into the mouth of a dim alleyway.

Exasperation weighed me down, like wet sand in my slippers. I released a sigh, one drawn from the depths of my darker soul, and trudged toward the shadowy alley. It felt as though the cobblestones had tiny hands, grabbing at my feet, echoing my frustration. A cursory glance revealed an emptiness—a void where the gnome should have been. But then, like a mirage materializing through desert heat, he shimmered into existence, teasingly distant, beckoning me from deeper within the alley’s gloom. My silk capped teeth pressed against each other in taut determination. It felt like an endless dance, him always a few steps ahead, luring me further into the alleys concealed behind walls, each corner, each turn leading me to where he wanted me to go.

“Okay, seriously? Why’s everything gotta be so dramatic?”

So, here I am, tailing this gnome-sized escape artist—like a messed-up version of hide-and-seek. Part of me—okay, definitely the Nightmare half—kinda wants to squish him. But me, the Dream side? All about the gold-hearted curiosity. He’s dropping breadcrumbs, and I’m wondering what’s at the end. Enlightening gnome wisdom? Gnome-y secrets? Heck, maybe even a pot of gold. Who’s to say?

Okay, not gonna lie: as much as my halves were bickering about our gnome friend, there might’ve been a tiny bounce in my step as I chased him. My darker half really did need to loosen up and enjoy the moment. I mean, c’mon! With the city unraveling, and those delightful impending screams of fear and horror echoing even in these alleys—it was like music to our ears. Picture it: Undead theme park, and me, happily in the middle. Now, if only we could throw in a sighting of our drop-dead gorgeous vampire? Heaven. Though a side of rotting delicacies wouldn’t hurt either.

Soon enough, the bleak alleyways started to gussy up a bit. The rough-hewn sandstone gave way to pristine, sleek marble that adorned the walls, and that gritty cobblestone path? Well, it fancied itself up into marble bricks, as if rolling out the red carpet for me into some regal district. And smack dab in front of me was this—wait for it—super swanky looking... warehouse? Fortress? Honestly, who can tell these days? All I knew? This joint screamed “fancy pants”.

“Fancy pants?”

“I was considering throwing in a ‘jinkies’ there.”

“That’s it, you just lost your narrating privileges.”

“WHAT?!”

With a twitch of self-amusement, I turned my gaze toward the grandiose marble structure before me. Its architecture seemed to have been plucked straight from the annals of Grecian lore, with proud pillars standing guard like ancient sentinels. But it was the rooftop that ensnared my intrigue. Oddly out of place among the classical motifs, it hinted at a mechanized design, suggesting the possibility of it peeling back to reveal the heavens. Why? The mystery lingered in the air.

The building’s entrance loomed before me, resembling those grand doorways I’d come to expect all too often in this reality of magic: towering, dual-winged, and fortified as if challenging any who dared to intrude. I couldn’t help the devilish smirk that played on my lips as I pressed my palm against its imposing surface, summoning the ambient mana for a Necrotic Flame. The beauty of igniting such a volatile spell in a confined space—like, say, the palm of your hand—is the unbridled burst that follows. And burst it did.

Even with my known vulnerability to flames, my own arcane creations seemed to exempt me from harm. The ensuing explosion, potent enough to tear the massive doors from their moorings, might have easily left me one-handed. Yet, there I stood, wholly intact. The only sign of fracture? A wicked grin that sliced its way across my visage.

The twisted metal skeletons of the doors had barely clanged to their rest when a mischievous itch tickled my brain. Why not give my latest toy a whirl? Without missing a beat, I conjured [**Phantasmal Mist**]. The haunting fog began its steady advance, claiming the interior as its domain. My feet moved forward, but my expectations remained anchored in uncertainty. The cavernous expanse revealed an imposing airship, tethered and looming, its presence an overwhelming shadow within the vast chamber. Guards swarmed in disarray, their agitation palpable. Yet, amidst this chaos, an unexpected sight chilled me—a gnome, lifeless and dressed in the intricate gear of steampunk craftsmanship, his role as a mechanic hinted by his attire, now eerily silent in death.



Nearly a lifetime ago on Earth, or perhaps around eighteen years or so, Gabriela existed—a dreamer yearning for a depth the world seemed unwilling to give. Her life, however, met a tragic and untimely end, one that mirrored the stories of countless others. Yet, the darkness of death didn’t consume her. Instead, her consciousness expanded, becoming attuned to the vast expanse of

knowledge, memories from myriad past lives rushing in like a torrent. Every secret of humanity, every emotion and experience lay bare before her. From her ethereal vantage point, she observed Earth and was drawn to an unborn child, a beacon of life and potential.

An epiphany washed over Gabriela, but as she gravitated towards this new life, an intangible force from the distant realms ensnared her. This mysterious energy seemed to strip away her newfound omniscience, leaving her disoriented and lost. Amidst the haze, flickering memories of her former life were all that remained.

Suddenly, she found herself thrust towards a blinding tunnel of light. Every fiber of her being felt raw, hypersensitive, as if she was being born anew. The distant cries and labored breaths grew louder, culminating in the gentle yet firm grasp of hands welcoming her back to existence.

Blinking in disarray, the world around her was an overwhelming cascade of brilliance and novelty. Every sensation struck her with such intensity that it pulled a heart-wrenching cry from her, muddled by sobs. The unfamiliar cadence of chatter enveloped her, its foreignness made even more elusive by her own distraught cries.

Squinting against the piercing luminance, Gabriela felt the rhythmic comfort of being cradled. As her eyes adjusted, the overwhelming brightness began to wane, revealing a modestly lit chamber. The soft glow of a single flickering candle stood as the sole source of light, yet its brilliance still stung her newborn eyes.

Gradually lifting her gaze, she met the face hovering above her—a visage that belonged to a little girl or perhaps a toddler. However, there was a depth, an agelessness in the eyes that didn't match the youthful facade. Subtle pointed ears peeked out from her hair, hinting at her otherworldly lineage.

Gabriela's neck felt frail, and her head weighed heavily upon her shoulders. Still, she summoned enough strength to glance around the dimly lit chamber, making out the silhouettes of various figures. But when the girl with the childlike face adjusted Gabriela in her embrace, a startling revelation took hold. She noted an extra appendage below her belly. Her eyes widened in shock, the full gravity of her rebirth dawning on her: she was no longer she, but he—the crying and screaming returned with vengeance!

As turmoil raged within her—now his—consciousness, and amid the unfamiliar tongues filling the air, a soothing voice from the woman above pierced the cacophony, whispering a word that resonated profoundly within him: “Nikolanthos.”

Nikolanthos—often shortened affectionately to Nikola—struggled for nearly four years to master the language of the people around him. Some expressed concerns over the duration it was taking him, whispering worries that perhaps he might never truly grasp it. But perseverance paid off, and through conversations, he amassed knowledge.

He quickly understood that his diminutive companions, with their childlike statures, identified as gnomes, and that he himself was one of them. The peculiarity of his situation became apparent

when he discovered he was the sole child in their settlement, the previous birth being a distant memory from over six decades prior.

His conversations, full of curiosity and relentless questions, uncovered more astonishing truths. Their home was not a planet but a moon, one among countless others orbiting a breathtakingly magnificent gas giant named Völuspá. The origins of the name remained shrouded in mystery, a relic from ancient times, whispered to be the name even gods used for the planet.

And gods? They were as real as the ground he walked upon. Diverse in nature and opinion, many of them bore animosity towards their counterparts, resulting in the tapestry of wars that seemed to constantly envelop this cosmic domain.

Yet, perhaps the most mind-bending revelation was the nature of the moons themselves. They weren't native to this reality. Instead, like Nikola, they had been plucked from other dimensions, from realms beyond the veil of known realities. Many of these moons once existed in universes devoid of magic, while others were planets teeming with technological advancements. The transition, however, rendered much of this technology obsolete. Nikola felt a pang of disappointment upon learning that the laws of physics, so consistent in his original world, varied across dimensions. Technologies, especially those reliant on electricity, became relics of a past life, their principles rendered irrelevant in this new, magical existence.

Mesmerized by his first sight of magic, Nikola was consumed by a desire to learn and cast such magnificent spells. Yet, he found himself at a distinct disadvantage. Though the gnomes possessed a seemingly inexhaustible reservoir of mana, Nikola himself was curiously devoid of it. While he could perceive, and sometimes even visualize, the mana currents flowing vibrantly around him, his own absence of it meant no tutor was willing to instruct him in the arts of magic. Attempts to devise an alternative consistently met with frustrating dead ends, and each failure weighed on him.

One languid afternoon, while sprawled out on a grassy knoll, eyes tracing the clouds, Nikola witnessed a sight that rekindled the flame of passion within him. Soaring gracefully through the sky was an airship, its silhouette framed against the backdrop of Völuspá. The ship, suspended and propelled by means he couldn't yet understand, was a marvel of magic.

The sight was transformative. In the grandeur of that floating vessel, Nikola saw potential—a bridge between the technological wonders of his past and the magical reality of his present. It was a beacon calling out to him, offering a path, a purpose. Determined, Nikola resolved to unravel the secrets of these airships, dreaming of a day when he would not just understand, but also command such marvels.

Nikola threw himself into his studies, devouring knowledge at a rate that left the gnomes of the village in awe. By the age of nine, he had constructed his first airship. Though, in truth, it was more of a floating raft. Still, its significance was not lost on the Kingdom of Slaethia. His achievement drew their attention, and soon an invitation to their capital city, also named Slaethia, was extended.

Upon his arrival, Nikola learned that airship construction was a delicate and often hazardous undertaking. Properly calibrating mana crystals for these vessels was a challenging feat, with many

attempts culminating in catastrophic failures or explosions. However, Nikola possessed a unique edge: not only could he feel the mana within the vessels, but he could also visualize its flow. This utterly unheard-of innate talent gave him a significant advantage over craftsmen who had been perfecting the art of airship building for centuries.

Nikola's fingers danced with precision over the blueprints, his passion evident in every crafted detail. Soon, the skies over Slaethia brimmed with the magnificent silhouettes of his airships. Among them, the "Skyborne Sovereign" stood out, its majestic form promising an endless journey through the skies, an ambassador to other moons.

On a brisk morning, whispers filled the city about a merchant possessing a seed, believed to be from a colossal tree on a distant moon. As Nikola cradled it, his heart pounded, sensing its formidable power—far surpassing any mana crystal he'd known. A hint of recognition teased the edge of his consciousness, though he couldn't place its origin. Compelled by its allure, he persuaded the city's treasury to part with their coin, securing the coveted artifact for himself.

Inspired by memories of science fiction from another life, Nikola envisioned an airship unlike any other. Eschewing the traditional maritime design, he imagined an arrowhead-shaped vessel, sleek and commanding. Powered by the enchanting seed, the vessel forwent sails, instead boasting four massive magical thrusters reminiscent of nestles. The ship was designed to soar, cutting through the skies effortlessly, he christened it "Swift Sentinel". Its true marvel lay not just in its unparalleled speed, but in its ability to create portals, offering passage to any of Völuspá's countless moons.

The panicked chimes of the city bells reverberated through the thick walls of Nikola's workshop. Whispered rumors had transformed into a palpable dread: an overwhelming undead horde was on the horizon, bearing down on Slaethia. In the dim glow of his workshop, sparks flew as Nikola worked feverishly on the Swift Sentinel, hoping to make it airborne for a desperate escape.

The clang of metal against the workshop's doors sent a jolt through him. In seconds, shadows spilled into the room—bandits and rioters alike, their eyes alight with greed and desperation. A sharp, searing pain erupted in Nikola's side as one of them, a fellow gnome thrust a blade into him, their intentions clear: to hijack the airship. Gasping, Nikola crumpled to the ground, blood pooling around him. The bandits' frenzied attempts to activate the Swift Sentinel echoed in his fading consciousness. But as realization dawned that the ship was futile without its creator, their frustrated curses filled the air. Their footfalls grew distant, leaving Nikola alone in the dark.

By the time the city guards arrived, Nikola's world had already dimmed, drawing him once more into the embrace of death.

In the aftermath of his untimely demise, Nikola's existence felt starkly different. Unlike the vast omniscience that had once enveloped him upon his death as Gabriela, where every past life was an open tome, this time there was only a haunting emptiness. He felt hollow, a mere wisp of his former self, adrift in the realm of the living yet unseen. Every corner of Slaethia he wandered bore the scars of the undeads' rampage, a chilling reminder of the life he had left behind.

His yearning for reincarnation, for that comforting embrace of rebirth, was met with a deafening silence. The magical realm, it seemed, did not frequently grant the gift of life.

Lost and forlorn, he wandered aimlessly, his spirit treading the boundaries of existence. But destiny, it seemed, had another path for him. Nikola stumbled upon the Realm of Dreams, an enigmatic expanse both tangible and ethereal. Within its shifting boundaries, the living tread lightly, their subconscious selves lost in the throes of dreams. Yet, there were others, spirits like Nikola, ensnared by the memories of their past, replaying moments of joy and despair, seeking solace in this sanctuary where time melded with memory.

Caught in the perpetual whirl of ship-building memories, Nikola found solace in the intricate designs and the hum of infused mana stones. But even within the comforting embrace of these memories, there remained an undercurrent of alertness to the Realm's ever-changing nature. So, when an anomaly rippled across the dreamscape, he felt it instantly.

Compelled, he withdrew from his repetitive tableau and ventured out, following the magnetic pull of the new presence. It led him to her.

She was a stark contrast against the dreamscape—a vision in white. Every inch of her, from the flowing dress and robe to her porcelain skin and silken hair, was a pristine white. All except the striking orange glow of her eyes that seemed to smolder with a fire all their own. Her appearance was ethereal, reminiscent of the most enchanting dream one could have, yet the stark black of her gums and tongue—evident when she spoke or smiled—contrasted sharply, pulling her image into the realm of haunting nightmares. She was a paradox, a blend of the beautiful and the eerie, simultaneously pulling him closer while sending a chill down his non-corporeal form.

Drawn to her mysterious aura, Nikola approached the radiant figure, even engaged her in brief conversation and gradually shadowing her steps. Subsuming himself into a backdrop memory, he observed as the dreamscape led her to a recurring sequence featuring an adventuring party that had been the ones to stumble upon the undead horde in a canyon and given Slaethia its warning.

However, as the scene progressed, an unforeseen transformation consumed the girl. The purity of her white visage dissolved, replaced by the malevolent darkness of a gown that twisted and writhed with tendrils and tentacles. From an ethereal dream, she metamorphosed into a monstrous nightmare, a force of malevolence. Her intent became clear as she mercilessly pursued the adventurers, condemning them to repeated deaths. The cyclical nature of the dream meant that Nikola bore witness to countless instances of this gruesome spectacle, each replay causing him to lose track of their myriad endings. The chilling juxtaposition of the girl's prior serenity with her now relentless brutality became a haunting testament to the unpredictable nature of the dreamscape.

A force, gargantuan and immeasurable, began to pervade the dreamscape. It was a power so vast and consuming that Nikola could scarcely comprehend it. Instinctively, he retreated, trying to find solace in the familiarity of his cherished memories. But instead of being greeted by the comforting recollections of his airship designs, he was plunged into the darkest moment of his life: his own death.

The cold metallic taste of blood, the sharp pain of the blade, the echoing laughter of the bandits, and the tardy arrival of the guards—every detail replayed with excruciating clarity. The cycle was relentless, each repetition drawing him further into despair.

Amidst this torturous reenactment, he sensed that overpowering presence guiding the transformed girl towards him. A cold dread settled over Nikola as the sounds of his own dying breaths intermingled with her nearing footsteps. The weight of the presence and the approach of the monstrous girl combined, rendering Nikola paralyzed with fear, trapped in the agonizing loop of his own demise.

A cacophonous blast shattered the monotony of Nikola's unending nightmare. The heavy metal doors, once stalwart guardians of the entrance, were now bent, warped, and hurtling inward. As they struck the ground with a thunderous crash, a thick, eerie mist began to seep in, enveloping everything in its path.

The mist was no ordinary fog. It pulsated with an uncanny energy, shifting and changing, casting eerie shadows that danced on the edges of Nikola's vision. Within its depths lurked phantasmal shapes, each one suggesting a tale of horror or wonder. The air grew cold, and a hush settled over the dreamscape, as if even the very fabric of the dream itself awaited what would emerge next.

Nikola, momentarily freed from the repetitive grip of his nightmare, stood still, his heart racing. Each ghostly beat echoed the silent question: what had just been unleashed?