

Author's Note: *I've made some adjustments to Blake's skill sheet and removed a few skills. Please refer to the revised chapter 8 for these changes.*

BLAKE PUDDING

CHAPTER 9

PHANTASMAL

My mind was a whirlwind, with two souls caught in the eye of the storm, both equally shell-shocked by recent revelations. Our persistent, unshakable stalker hadn't just been some random nuisance—she was Death. And forget the grim, scythe-wielding specter you'd imagine; she had been a dark-skinned Barbie-doll in a pink ball gown, her appearance unsettlingly childlike. The dissonance was jarring, like expecting a gore-fest of horrors untold, only to be handed puppies to cuddle instead.

The Crone, or Mother, though, she fit the 'Death' look a lot better. The skeletal hands extending from her dark gown, her face hidden behind a hood of darkness and secrets—she embodied the grim aura you'd associate with the end of life's journey.

Underneath my whirlwind of confusion, a sliver of triumph ignited within me. Our petite little harbinger of death, adorned in jarring frills and exuding an eerie cheer, had managed to resurrect something irreplaceable. Something that Circe—or, no, Magic, or, to put it bluntly, that absolute bitch—had taken away: my access to the system. It wasn't a flawless victory; I recovered none of my previous skills, only gaining a handful of new, unfamiliar ones. But therein lay a silver lining – the thrill of uncharted territory, the allure of new skills just waiting to be mastered!

Adding clarity to the haze of my perplexity was the revelation that the acid tripping reality I'd been traversing was, in essence, a dreamscape. No wonder the world around me teetered on the insane; I was ensnared within the very fabric of a collective dreaming. If I pieced together Death's cryptic mumbling correctly, this realm wasn't just a playground for the subconscious minds of slumbering beings but also a haven for lost spirits. These entities, it seemed, revel in the company of ephemeral dreamers, their essences intertwining in this bizarre tapestry of imagined realities.

Once Death concluded our perplexing conversation, she dissolved into the ether, leaving me marooned in the adventurers' guild, my mind teeming with unasked questions and nebulous answers. To add to the surreal quality of the moment, Gimona Grimmail, the dwarf woman with her vociferous demeanor, wild smile, and constant groping, materialized in the milieu, gesturing for me to tag along.

In an odd twist of reality, or perhaps unreality, given the dreamscape's mutable nature, I found myself rewound to a prior sequence of this dream. I trailed behind the bearded lady, an observer

to her meticulous preparations as she gathered supplies for what promised to be a perilous drake hunt.

All the while, my fingers idly swiped through the virtual pages of my status screen, the digital pane floating before my eyes. Sure, I could mentally go through the display, but physically clicking on each skill helped me—or us—make it feel more real. Still, the familiar interface was now a foreign landscape, altered and unfamiliar. My eyes darted from one change to the next, trying to assimilate the new reality of my altered abilities and spells, a silent witness to the profound shifts that had occurred beneath the surface.

With no real order in mind, I started clicking on skills, starting with ‘Devourer’.

[Devourer]

Allows for the potential absorption of a random skill from a formidable foe.

Type
Racial Skill

Activation
Passive

Description:

Embedded within your Eldritch Pudding body is an innate ability to capture and integrate the essence of a powerful adversary. This Racial Skill operates in the shadows, working behind the scenes each time you consume a foe of significant strength. On the off chance it activates, you may find yourself with a new skill previously wielded by your opponent. However, your benefactor has her own sense of fairness—the stronger the opponent, the greater the chance, but there’s never a guarantee. Harness it well, for like all Eldritch skills, it’s both a blessing and a curse.

“Huh, that’s new,” I muttered.

Skill descriptions had always been plain, without any flair or detail. Had Death enhanced it, or had Magic been holding back on the full rundown? The mention of a ‘benefactor’ seemed to hint at Death, which, if true, wasn’t a bad ally to have. Yet being caught in the crosshairs of two Primordials? Not exactly my idea of a good time. But what really gave me pause was that ‘blessing and curse’ bit. Why did it have to be so cryptic? It was clear Devourer had evolved from Absorb, but it didn’t seem like an outright upgrade. And with its unpredictable nature? Not thrilled.

As I continued to randomly sift through my skills, I found myself clicking on ‘Disintegration’ next.

[Disintegration]

The potent destruction through contact.

Type
Racial Skill

Activation
Passive

Description:

Deep within your Eldritch Pudding essence lies the power of Disintegration, a formidable force that exists to unmake and undo. With every touch, you initiate a process where matter breaks down, essence by essence, mana by mana. The aftermath is not a slow erosion but an accelerated destruction. This Racial Skill does not discriminate, whatever or whoever not of your essence touches your flesh, is susceptible.

“Shit!”

The skill oozed power and was an obvious upgrade to a black pudding’s natural Corrosive skill, but that ‘does not discriminate’ part sent a chill down my gooey spine. And not the exciting kind. My biggest concern was how my new skill would impact my tentacle hentai fetish I had been planning for Aurelia once I got back to her. The earlier caution about Eldritch skills being both a blessing and a curse was now ringing painfully true in my ears. This was just... so inconvenient!

With a resigned sigh, I turned my attention to the next item on my list: a spell called Phantasmal Dominion.

[Phantasmal Dominion]

Claim your dominion and your power within it.

Type
Spell

Activation
Cast

Description:

You have become an entity reborn into that of dreams and nightmares. You wield considerable 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.

“So, it’s like a buff skill or something?” I pondered aloud, but no one answered me, not even my two me’s had anything to add. With a shrug, I moved on to the next skill description.

[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.

“Yeah, that’s a debuff if I’ve ever seen one,” I murmured as I scratched my cheek. “Next!”

[Phantasmal Surge]

Transcend the bounds of reality with the velocity of dreams.

Type

Ability

Activation

Cast

Description:

Reborn of the ethereal Dream Realm, you possess the unique ability to tap into its nebulous fabric. With a mere thought, you can surge forward, blurring the lines between reality and dreamscape. To onlookers, you don’t just move; you burst into a haze for a short distance, your form shimmering with dreamlike mystique as you traverse realities in a straight-line. Though, do be careful not to get trapped in-between reality and the dreamscape.

“Did I seriously just get a flash step?” A giggle of pure delight escaped me. Feeling a newfound enthusiasm, I eagerly clicked on the next skill.

[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.

I blinked several times, processing the skill description. Its implications were both profound and confusing as shit. Simultaneously, both my souls raised an identical question, “*How will this affect the silk shell we wear?*”

I quickly glanced over my Vulnerabilities and Immunities section. No surprises there: still the annoying weaknesses to Fire and Holy. Utterly frustrating. On the bright side, my list of Immunities was quite impressive: Acid, Charm, Darkness, Disease, Poison, and Sleep. As long as I don’t end up facing off against a flaming holy bitch—like Vanya—I’m fairly confident in holding my ground without issue. Now, with that settled, my attention shifted to the remaining sections: Unique, Selectable, and Titles. I decided to delve into ‘Birthright’ my first new unique.

[Birthright]

Grasp your legacy.

Type

Unique

Activation

Passive

Description:

Locked. Conditions for unveiling remain undisclosed.

“What the hell,” I muttered, frustrated by the vague description. Not knowing what else to do, I moved on to the next unique skill.

[Sovereign Heiress]

Your reign shall know no limits.

Type

Unique

Activation

Passive

Description:

Locked. Conditions for unveiling remain undisclosed.

“Ugh!”

I was tempted to direct a few choice words at Death for the vagueness surrounding my two Unique skills. Sure, it was an improvement over the previous “Restricted” label, but it remained deeply irksome. After unleashing a few choice expletives, I shifted my focus to my sole Selectable skill: Phantasmal.

[Phantasmal]

Embrace the ethereal essence of the dream realm.

Type
Racial Skill

Activation
Cast

Description:

Ascend beyond mere physical existence, embodying the spectral nuances of the Dream Realm. Whether as a serene waking dream or a harrowing nightmare, the choice is yours to manifest.

“That sounds a bit like my old Polymorph skill, but with a more otherworldly twist,” I mused.

A glance showed two titles: Descendant of the End and Scion of Dreams and Nightmares. I shrugged. Sure, they sounded fancy, but in my experience? Titles were like the flashy stickers you put on a laptop – all show, no added function. Just like in those video games I played in high school where they had zero impact.

I was ready to dismiss my status screen, but then a thought struck, making me pause. “Hold on... if I’m not leveling up, where do I snag points for those Selectables?” A frustrated sigh slipped out.

The status screen seemed to tune into my frustration—maybe it was my little reaper benefactor’s doing—and out of nowhere, a second popup materialized before me.

NOTICE

Only two skills within each classification can be equipped at any one time. They can be swapped in and out with a Selectable skill, but only when not engaged in combat.

“Seriously? Even Circe wasn’t this stingy with my skills,” I grumbled.

My bitching must’ve resonated somewhere because another popup promptly appeared.

NOTICE

To grow stronger, balance is essential.

Due to your feedback, [**Phantasmal**] has been removed from your Selectable skill options.

Care to provide more input?

“Nice job running your mouth,” Dream remarked dryly.

“It was probably that Circe jab you threw in,” Nightmare said with a smirk. “You did catch Death’s none-too-subtle animosity towards her, right? I’d wager she despises that bitch even more than we do.”

Dream sighed, “Yeah... you’re probably right. Might be wise to avoid mentioning ‘she-who-should-not-be-named’ in the future.”

“Agreed,” Nightmare replied with a nod of our head.

My metaphorical heart nearly leapt out of my chest when a face abruptly emerged through my status screen, much like a specter poking its head through a wall. “Oi, it’s a wee bit odd watchin’ ye have a chat with yerself, isn’t it?” Gimona remarked.

“Ha! You totally screamed!”

“That was all you!”

I shot the dwarven woman a flat look, internally reminding myself not to murder her. The last thing I needed was to be trapped in another recurring nightmare. But for now, I forced a smile towards the bearded lady. “Lead the way,” I said, reining in my more sinister impulses.

Gimona’s eyes narrowed slightly, an unreadable expression fleeting across her face before she led the way to the city gates and into the expansive desert. Sand crunched underfoot, and the monotony of the journey dragged on endlessly. A vague memory of Gimona mentioning a sand sail tugged at me.

“Why hadn’t we remembered that earlier?”

“...”

Reaching the canyon, the familiar menace of the rabies-stricken goblins met us. In the heat of the moment, my reflexes bypassed my newfound skills, instinctively channeling the ambient mana into my go-to spell, Necrotic Flame. But when I released it, the expected purple surge was replaced by a radiant orange blaze. It wasn’t your everyday fire’s hue; it bore an uncanny resemblance to the shade of my eyes.

The dwarf launched into her usual tirade about my magical prowess, throwing around terms like ‘magus’ or ‘grand magus’. Frankly, her words became a distant hum as my mind wandered. It wasn’t until we entered the cave and met Vanya, Craycroft, and Ezad that I snapped back. And then...

My gaze zeroed in on an unfamiliar gnome. “Who the hell are you?” I blurted out.

The gnome straightened up, a mix of amusement and pride in his eyes. “Nelzar, at your service. I’m here as the party’s healer.”

I frowned, trying to place the previous gnome’s name. “Where’s... Tesla? Or was it Nikola? Where’s the steampunk-wannabe gnome I met before?” My tone clearly hinted at my annoyance.

“Steam what?” Nelzar echoed, his brows knitting in genuine puzzlement.

“Forget it!” I exclaimed, exasperated. “Let’s just go slay that drake and get on with this dream.” Without waiting for a response, I marched out of the cavern, making a beeline for the spot the dwarf had initially shown me where the drake was lurking.

A chorus of “Wait!”s rang out behind me. *Pfft, dramatic much?*

I was THIS close to turning this whole scenario into a murderous musical, my frustration reaching peak levels. But then, I halted, the sound of echoing footsteps growing louder. My gaze followed a ghastly figure as it sprinted past, its hollow eyes fixed on some unseen target. Before I could fully process the sight, another followed, and then another. The canyon became a morbid parade of decaying figures, each more grotesque than the last.

“By the gods...” Gimona murmured, her voice choked with dread. “It’s a bleedin’ undead horde.” The color drained from her face as she stared at the unstoppable wave of the dead sweeping through the canyon.

The parade of undead before me? Normally, that’s drool-worthy stuff, right? But man, this dream world novelty was wearing thin. I mean, come on! All I was after was one tiny steampunk ghost—was that too much to ask? Just wanted to pop his soul into this fancy new stone thingy Death handed over and zap back to my gorgeous vampire. But nope, here I am, basically waiting in line behind Zombie-Con. *Really, universe? Really?*

“Would you look at that?” the holier-than-thou chick muttered, sidling up next to me. Her eyes widened as she took in the literal ‘dead’ parade down below.

From our vantage point, a quasi-balcony situation overlooking the canyon, the view was prime for dramatic undead sightings. Don’t get me wrong; it’s Insta-worthy, but also a front-row seat to Zombiepaloosa. Given the increasing number of decaying runway models below, our ‘hidden’ status was on borrowed time.

My priority? Operation Find-The-Gnome. But lowkey, props to whoever orchestrated this monumental Day of the Dead parade. *Respect.*

Alright, so just as I’m mentally sending props to whoever’s goth level reached ‘massive undead parade organizer’, I’m suddenly getting a bird’s eye view. Floating. Kinda like that time you accidentally inhaled helium - only way less hilarious. And there’s Craycroft, waving his hands like he’s conducting an orchestra. Glow-in-the-dark style. Super subtle, buddy. The crew seemed to be going for a magic-assisted evac, which, good on them. But yours truly? I’m on a gnome treasure hunt. So, nice scenic detour, I guess. But eyes on the prize, right?

“Uh, Dream? Maybe let me handle the narration for now. You’re sounding a bit... caffeinated?”

“What? I thought I was nailing the whole geek vibe.”

“Just... recharge your batteries, okay?”

“Oh, come on, Nightmare. You always go full soap opera when you narrate.”

“That’s because I have a flair for the dramatic!”

“More like an addiction—.”

“Hey!”

“*Nightmare... it’s true.*”

“*You know what! Whatever, where were we...?*”

In the muted light of the canyon, the procession of the undead was almost poetic — a grotesque dance of decay that wound its serpentine path below. The soft, rhythmic shuffle of rotting feet on the dusty earth was almost hypnotic, lulling me into a grim reverie. That is, until an invisible hand of magic yanked me from my musings, dragging me skyward.

I could feel the chill of altitude and the strange buoyancy of magic as it enveloped me. Risking a glance back, I saw Craycroft, his fingers alive with a dance of their own, weaving threads of sorcery that pulled us up the cliff face in a desperate bid for escape.

Daring another look below, the view was even more haunting from this vantage point. A ceaseless tide of the damned, marching, marching, their numbers seemingly infinite, flowing through the canyon like some grim river of death. The scope of it was chilling, this eerie parade stretching out, lost in the distant shadows of the canyon’s embrace.

“*Too dramatic!*”

“*Shut up, Dream! Just let me narrate for a bit.*”

“*Ugh... fine.*”

Upon reaching the canyon’s zenith, I tore my gaze away from the grisly tableau below, finding myself face to face with... a desert yacht? It bore a vague resemblance to a Catamaran, those dual-hulled ships I’d seen in magazines, though this one appeared rather diminished in size. For a fleeting moment, I thoughts of murdering the entire group and commandeering this curious vessel all for myself danced wickedly through my mind. But the haunting shadow of a never-ending nightmare loomed over that thought, reminding me of the perpetual loop I desperately yearned to escape.

Suppressing the sinister urges bubbling within, I clambered onto the compact vessel. My horror peaked when Ezad, with a smirk perhaps, decided to plop that gnome—the not-the-one-I-was-after gnome—square onto my lap. The little guy was hardly bigger than a toddler. The mantra began internally first: *Don’t kill him. Don’t kill him.* But as the words slipped out in a whispered chant, I realized they had breached the walls of my mind.

The gnome, a hint of terror flashing in his eyes, looked up. “Did you say something?”

“Just talking to the wind,” I said, attempting to sound casual, but the unease hung thick between us.

Beside me, the dwarf thudded down, her weight sinking our tiny desert boat deeper into the sand below. She flashed me a wide grin. “I’d wager they’re on their way to Slaethia,” she rumbled in that heavy accent of hers. But the playful tone couldn’t mask the genuine fear lurking in the depths of her eyes. “We won’t be gettin’ a wink of sleep with that siege on the horizon. We ought to be quick with our warnin’.” The gravity in her voice belied the joviality of her grin.

The smirk I gave her held a real glint of mischief, my eyes gleaming with a dark promise. If this was a dream of the past, I knew exactly what dreamscape I was in, the first fall of Slaethia. The oncoming nightmare of Slaethia's doom whispered a seductive lullaby in my ears. Because in the shadows of that relentless horde, I felt a presence. A magnetic pull only one being ever held over me. I yearned to see my vampire, even if this was all just an ephemeral dance of a dream.

A pang of sorrow tugged at my twin souls, a stark reminder that the scene before me was merely an illusion of the Dream Realm. The world may shimmer with life, dreamers, and spirits, but the very air smelled of un-reality now that I knew what to look for.

With the wrong gnome perched on my lap, the sand sail began its journey, pulling us away from the canyon choked with the undead, and steering us towards the ill-fated Slaethia. My gaze lingered on the horizon we were leaving behind, a horizon that might have hidden her silhouette. The weight of yearning made my eyes moist, each blink trying to capture the image of the enchantress who had ensnared my very souls. But the whisper of the wind reminded me: to truly be with her, I must first conquer the trials laid out by Mother and capture—or convince—that phantom gnome to come back with me.

The somber atmosphere was punctured by Ezad's deep rumble, "Never seen the undead in such numbers."

A brow arched reflexively in his direction, a flash of memory slicing through—my tentacles and his neck snapping. Was this really Ezad, or just a shade, a memory plucked from the dreamscape of another? Regardless, the journey unfurled. Dunes rose and fell beneath us, each one propelling our vessel with a velocity that mocked the pace of mere mortals. Every now and then, the sail would catch an ambitious gust, lifting us into a fleeting flight before we'd plunge back into the shifting sands, speeding ever onward.

The murmur of worried voices reached my ears. "We must get the word out," Vanya's voice trembled as she whispered urgently to Ezad.

Craycroft, sounding every bit like a realist, retorted, "Even if we do, the walls of the city are hardly a match for that... tide." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "The undead won't falter for hunger, fatigue, or the elements. They'll surge forward, undeterred, until we've dealt with the last of them."

From my vantage, the sheen of their fear was palpable, and I couldn't help the wisp of a smile that played at the corners of my mouth. My silence, however, remained unbroken. My encounter with Death had left its mark; it had taught me the virtue of patience, of observing. I leaned back, every fiber of my being attuned to the world around, waiting for the distinct clink and whir of the steampunk gnome to resonate once more.

Vanya's voice, quivering with a frail optimism, broke through. "Could we, perhaps, evacuate the survivors before it's too late?"

Craycroft's reply came with the weight of realism, the voice of one who had seen much. "Unlikely," he said, exhaling heavily. "If we could get one of the ancient portals up and running,

maybe. But that,” he paused, letting the gravity sink in, “will take days we might not have.” The chilling prospect hung between them, the shadow of the coming storm ever looming.

Ezad, taking an impromptu mantle of leadership that made me mentally snort, asserted, “That’s the most solid plan we’ve got.” He sounded every bit the armchair general. “Nelzar,” he pointedly addressed, “the moment our feet touch Slaethia’s grounds, relay everything to your High Priest. And you, Mage,” he gestured towards Craycroft without a hint of personal recognition, “get cracking on that portal. Vanya, ensure our mage is protected. Same goes for you warrior.”

I blinked, letting the conversations swirl around me. An offhand remark from Gimona filtered back—about this motley crew’s recent formation. Made sense now. Most of them seemed more familiar with their weapons than each other’s names. How comical it seemed: Craycroft and Gimona, seasoned warriors, ensnared in this net of familiar unfamiliarity with the likes of Ezad, Vanya, and... Nelzar? A face and name unfamiliar in my memories.

Each of them shot Ezad a decisive nod, so engrossed in their strategizing that I might as well have been a figment of their imagination. Perhaps, in a way, I was, given this spectral walk through yesteryears. Still, a sting of exclusion gnawed at me.

As the vessel slowed, halting before the imposing city gates, a devilish impulse took over. Without a second thought, I nudged the pesky gnome from my lap, watching with a satisfaction I didn’t care to hide as he met the sand with his face. Dream or not, the muffled sounds of Nelzar spitting and sputtering sand brought a genuine smirk to my face.

Drawing a breath, my voice laced with determination, I murmured, “Now, where’s my gnome?”

“Drama queen.”

“I hate you.”