

BLAKE PUDDING

CHAPTER 26

RHYESSA

What can I say? Nikola was overly passionate about her cruddy looking airship, and I had no idea why. Seriously, a preschooler armed with crayons could whip up a more appealing design. But, biting my tongue, I refrained from sharing these thoughts with the dragonkin lich.

Half-dragonkin!

Does it really matter? Also, she's missing that quintessential lich scent.

It totally does! And you're right, it's kind of a letdown.

I rolled my eyes at Nikola's back as she fiddled with her precious seed, a supposed gift from the beastkin queen. Truth be told, there was nothing I could contribute to her project, and frankly, I wasn't itching to either. So, leaving her to her devices, I meandered off to explore the ruins of the city, my mind wandering, trying to reconstruct its former splendor before its downfall.

The setting around me was distinctly tropical, although my explorations hadn't extended beyond the city limits, so I couldn't say for sure if this was just an oasis or something more. The shattered remnants of palm-like trees caught my attention. They were unmistakably palm trees, yet there was something peculiar about them that I couldn't quite pin down. Maybe it was their size? The trunks were like giant redwoods on super steroids. Weird, right? But hey, whatever.

As I wandered through the ruins, I absentmindedly toyed with a flickering orange flame dancing in my palm. The Necrotic Flame, which used to have a purple hue, had shifted to orange after I acquired the Phantasmal class. The reason for the color change was a mystery, but this particular flame didn't harm me, and it turned out to be perfect for cooking goblin meat. Lately, I've been trying to limit its use during hunts, focusing instead on mastering my system skills, especially those I struggled to cast without the system's assistance.

Take Disintegration, for instance. It's hard to tell if I'm actually managing it without the system. It behaves similarly to Corrosive, leaving its effectiveness up in the air. Then there's Devourer. Sure, it speeds up eating, but its main feature of adding skills to my Selectable list hasn't kicked in yet. Honestly, I miss the Absorb variant – it was superior in every way.

Phantasmal Dominion and Phantasmal Mist are incredible for controlling the battlefield, but they're elusive, escaping my grasp when I try to cast them system-free. Their magic feels too alien, too complex. But not everything is a struggle. I think I'm getting the hang of Phantasmal Surge, which would be a real game-changer if I could use it at will, system be damned. There's no visible cooldown or mana cost without the system, but I know there are limits; I can feel them.

Web of Whispers is slightly easier to manage without the system's assistance, at least for the smaller stuff. Right now, as I'm sharing this, I'm running my black tentacle tongue over my now solid teeth, savoring the feel – there's a certain satisfaction in the crunch of bones. But for tasks requiring greater finesse, I still struggle with control, even with the system's help. Armor casting is a prime example. My efforts there have been rather underwhelming; the joints are just too complicated to get right, and the end result looks more like a fabric than the formidable armor I had in mind. It's quite vexing.

On a positive note, the silk variant I've been working with has an interesting quality – it's fire-resistant, possibly even fireproof. That's something worth noting. And now, I'm intrigued to find out if it offers any defense against Holy magic as well. It would be a real kicker to finally get a one-up on Vanya in the waking world for once, and not just in my dreams—hang on, that came out wrong!

Then there's Stellar Void... what can I say about it? It's still a hot mess – broken, altered, or somewhere in that frustrating gray area. Accessing the dimensional space it's supposed to open up? Yeah, that's a no-go. Instead, it's left this gaping void inside me whenever I cast it, that sort of acts like a leaky faucet for mana from the Dungeon Core. The upside? It gives a serious turbo-boost to my non-system skills and lets me be more than a glob of black goo in those annoying mana dead zones.

Last but not least, there's the enigma of my two Unique skills, Birthright and Sovereign Heiress. Their descriptions are frustratingly locked, leaving me clueless about their functions. All I know is that they're passive and, as of now, quietly active in the background, doing... well, something. I'm holding out hope that they're incredible, something truly awe-inspiring and badass. But given how my luck usually pans out, they might just be duds, and I'll probably lose them before I even crack their mystery. Seriously, the cosmic jester juggling my fate, or story, or whatever you want to call this mess, must be having the time of their life. What a royal dick!

Oh! And for the final-final roll call, let's not forget Blight, Spirit Vessel, and Polymorph. And of course, there's the good old normal Silk Webbing. But here's the kicker – thanks to sensations from Phantasmal Mist and Web of Whispers, I'm getting this vibe that I might be able to rekindle my old Fear skill. There's just this faint echo in them that harks back to that old trick. If I can latch onto that feeling, maybe, just maybe, I can whip it back into shape. It's like I can wield any type of magic I want, as long as I get the hang of how it feels, and those two system skills are giving me a nudge in the right direction. Now, if only I could unravel the mysteries of Paralysis and Venomous, I'd be absolutely ecstatic—as ecstatic as a split-soul, dramatically insane happy-go-lucky girl-monster-thing can be, anyway.

Damn, we really do sound like a hot mess, don't we?

We? Please, I'm practically the epitome of normal. You're the walking, talking disaster here.

Nightmare, need I remind you of your fondness for draping intestines like they're candy necklaces?

Well... at least I don't use them as a jump rope.

...

Ah, damn, I almost overlooked Veil Polyglot. That's my translation skill, and while it's not currently in my skill list, I have this sneaking suspicion that I'm still subconsciously using it, system assistance or not. It's one of those skills that tends to slip my mind.

We still need to get our hands on a lightning spell. I really, really want lightning.

Yeah, but to snag that skill, we'd need to devour someone way stronger than us who has it, while crossing our tentacles that it even becomes an option.

Ugh, screw that. I want the spell, sure, but I'm not about to get zapped trying to swipe it.

What, scared of a little shock?

N-No...

Thinking about it, that probably covers all my magic, though I've got to admit, my memory isn't what it used to be. Hey, have your soul shattered and pieced back together, then let's talk about how sharp your memory stays, not to mention your grip on sanity. Seriously, some people are so judgmental. Now, where was I going with this? Oh, right... Wait, actually, I'm lost. What was my point again?

Lost in my own maze of thoughts, I absentmindedly continued to manipulate the Necrotic Flame. I was captivated by the way its orange glow danced around my hand, vanishing and reappearing at the mere snap of my fingers. It was an odd fascination, really. This flame, potentially lethal and certainly something I should fear given my vulnerability to fire, instead brought a peculiar sense of delight as it harmlessly caressed my dark, sinister pudding flesh. Surprisingly, it didn't even affect my silk webbing—the original variety, not the fire-resistant, hardening, mind-altering type. Sure, the other variant, Web of Whispers is a bit overpowered, but under my clumsy control, it's as useful as using silk for teeth. Well, perhaps that analogy doesn't quite work, since that's quite literally what I'm doing. *Tee-hee!* Though, it does make me wonder—could I fashion a sword out of it? Not that I'd be swinging any blades around with my nonexistent sword skills, but maybe I could weave some into a sharp point for a tentacle. Ah, the endless possibilities.

The day had settled into a sort of mellow rhythm. The beastkin were up and about, out of their catacombs, conducting patrols, and, notably, there was no sign of the Slaethians. It was, in a word, boring. Ever since I found myself in this bizarre reality of magic and monsters, my life had been one long string of battles. Even lost in the Realm of Dreams, I was constantly fighting, though I've got to admit, I'm a meaner fighter there than in the waking world. Von Von better not catch me saying that.

Oh, how I wish I could best her just once in our spars, or rather, in the beatdowns she dishes out. I bet she relishes every single one of those sessions. She's still topping my list as the worst Champion ever, but mark my words, I'll bring her over to the dark side. She will succumb to my malevolent ways—it's only a matter of time.

"BLAKE! BLAKE!" a woman's voice rang out, urgent and unmistakable. I turned to see the source, immediately recognizing the illusionary long bunny ears that bobbed energetically.

"Kaida," I greeted as the undead woman skidded to a halt in front of me, her expression one of utter disarray.

"An airship has been spotted heading this way," she blurted out, her words tumbling over each other in her haste. "It's an advanced scout ship the Slaethians usually send out before the main wave of their armada."

A smile tugged at my lips. "Huh, well, this should end my boredom," I mused.

"W-What? You don't understand," Kaida continued, her eyes wide with a mix of fear and urgency. "They always attach at least one Champion to a scout ship."

A Champion, huh?

Nightmare, we can't even handle Von Von. What makes you think we can take on a different Champion?

Simple, we're not alone. We'll have holy bitchiness with us.

You're going to get us killed—again!

Do you want a new jump rope or not?

An edible intestine jump rope? Hell yeah, I'm in!



Einarr, perched aboard the airship, couldn't help but grumble under his breath. He was irked, having been recalled from the front lines to address what was being termed a minor insurgence by remnants of the beastkin. To him, the situation seemed like something an outpost could easily handle without his intervention. The Kingdom of Slaethia's forces were already stretched thin across various fronts, and pulling back a Champion for such a trivial matter was not just inconvenient, but it felt like a misuse of his skills and prowess. The dwarf's annoyance was palpable as he brooded over the situation, his dissatisfaction evident in his every muttered word and disgruntled expression.

Additionally, Einarr found himself missing the... distractions he had back on the front lines, particularly Orlaith's arse. Her fine figure had always been a pleasing sight to him, though he had become considerably more cautious in expressing any admiration. Ever since Orlaith had been imbued with dragon essence from her deity—a reward for her valor during the chaotic battle at the Grotto of the Betrayed—she had become less tolerant of unsolicited attention. Einarr recalled the last time a brash elven soldier had made an unwelcome advance towards her; she had promptly set the poor fool's crotch on fire with a burst of dragon flame. The memory alone made Einarr wince, walking bow-legged for a few days in empathetic pain for the elf's misfortune.

Despite the current irritations, a piece of intriguing news had reached Einarr from the capital. It was rumored that one of the minor deities had resurrected a dead general, a feat Einarr had never thought possible. While the gods were known to revive Champions under certain conditions, the revival of a general who had been dead for nearly two years was unprecedented. This piqued Einarr's curiosity about this lesser-known deity, Jörmun. Unfortunately, information on the gods was scarce, given the vast number of Ascended Gods. Last he heard, there were over a hundred Champions, but only a handful, four to be exact, were stationed on this moon, Nyxoria. The rest were scattered across the various Moons of Völuspá, carrying out the divine mandates of the gods and striving to purge the realm of what were deemed vile races. This, after all, was the grand purpose of the holy crusade.

Adding to this, Einarr had caught wind that another armada from the Empire had recently arrived, bolstering Slaethia's efforts in this sacred endeavor. The news stirred a mix of anticipation and resolve within him, rekindling his sense of purpose in this sprawling celestial conflict.

Reflecting on the four Champions present on Nyxoria, Einarr found himself unsurprised by the recent news concerning Paladin Champion Vanya Anlyth's betrayal. In his eyes, she had never truly been an active participant in their holy crusade. Rather than raising her sword in battle, she had seemed more content to quietly observe, learn, and study her fellow Champions. To Einarr, this behavior had always appeared somewhat suspicious.

Initially, Einarr had speculated that Vanya was simply following the will of her god, Jörmun, and that perhaps Jörmun harbored some dark, clandestine agenda. However, the recent event of Jörmun resurrecting a dead general, apparently to aid in the downfall of Paladin Anlyth, shed new light on the situation. It now seemed evident to Einarr that Vanya's betrayal extended not only to the Kingdom of Slaethia but to her deity as well.

Einarr made his way to the bow of the vessel, his eyes fixed on the distant, broken remnants of the Beastveil Kingdom. His sturdy dwarven hands gripped the wooden railing of the Skyborne Sovereign. The wood creaked under the strength of his grasp, a testament to the tension he felt.

Clad in armor that masterfully blended mithril and gold, Einarr cut an imposing figure. The intricate wing designs etched into the metal gave him the air of a dwarven Valkyrie rather than the hammer-wielding warrior he was at heart. And yet, there was no hiding the sheer delight he took in wielding his massive war hammer. The hammer, comically oversized for his short and stout frame, and seemingly too heavy for practical use, was a spectacle in itself.

However, thanks to his unique skill in gravity manipulation, Einarr can handle the hammer with the ease of a child playing with a feather, only to exponentially increase its weight upon impact. It's like being struck by the full force of a mountain—or, as Einarr mused with a sly grin, like a scornful wife catching him in bed with her sister. That memory brought a fond, if somewhat mischievous, smile to his face as he reminisced about his second... and later, third wife.

Glancing over his shoulder, Einarr caught sight of the imperial armada in the distance, joining forces with Slaethia's own fleet of airships. It was evident they would need a few hours to catch up with the Skyborne Sovereign. If he was indeed tasked with quelling the minor insurgency,

Einarr was determined to wrap it up before the rest of the fleet arrived. And he was not just resolved to get it done; he anticipated deriving a certain twisted pleasure from the task.

The notion of discovering a beastkin lass to amuse himself with lingered in Einarr's mind, painting a rugged, mischievous picture. This idea sparked a wicked gleam in his eye. His last visit to these parts had been a letdown, having harbored unfulfilled expectations of a brief dalliance with the kitty queen. Those hopes were dashed when Orlaith, in a fiery rage, obliterated the beastkin woman, leaving not even a trace of ash behind.

The memory caused Einarr's crotch to twinge in empathetic discomfort, recalling the fate of the foolhardy elf who dared to make an advance on Orlaith after she had been infused with dragon essence.



Rhyessa paced relentlessly, her usually calm demeanor frayed by anxiety. The gravity of their situation weighed heavily on her, not so much for her own safety, but for what she cherished above all else.

“What’s wrong, mom?” Kael’s voice cut through Rhyessa's troubled thoughts.

She paused, turning to her son with a smile that masked her inner turmoil. Rhyessa crouched down, gently cupping his cheek, careful to steady her trembling hand. Then she extended her other hand to Kira, her daughter, who watched with wide, expectant eyes. “We’re going to be leaving soon, but before we do that, I need the two of you to be strong for me,” Rhyessa said, her voice soft yet firm. “Can you be fierce lions for your mother? Will you do that?” Her eyes conveyed a depth of love, while hiding the terror she felt.

For Rhyessa, her twins were her world, surpassing even the significance of her kingdom. Her late husband had been the one with aspirations of rule, but with his passing, the weight of leadership had fallen squarely upon Rhyessa's shoulders. In her own eyes, she had failed miserably, her heart aching at the sight of her husband's legacy crumbling into ruins. Yet, amidst the despair, Rhyessa found solace and hope in her children, a miraculous gift in these dark times.

Their very existence was now under threat, along with the lives of all the beastkin, as the relentless Slaethian army sought their utter eradication. The recent decade had brought a small glimmer of hope to Rhyessa—a few new births among the beastkin, a phenomenon nearly unheard of. Five births, out of the quarter million that once thrived in Beastveil, marked a significant change, a sign perhaps of something momentous on the horizon. But this hope was tainted by tragedy, as the Slaethian forces captured and brutally displayed three of these newborns upon spikes, alongside so many other beastkin, in their ruthless campaign.

Rhyessa was determined not to let her twins suffer the same horrific fate. Her resolve to protect them was unwavering, a fierce maternal instinct that overshadowed her despair over her kingdom's downfall. In her heart, Rhyessa knew the hour of leaving was near—a desperate bid to preserve the last flickers of hope represented by her children and the future of all beastkin upon Nyxoria.

Despite her royal status and responsibility, Rhyessa found herself at a loss for solutions in these dire times. Her reliance had shifted to Kaida, a revenant woman who cleverly disguised herself with magical illusions to appear as a beastkin. Surprisingly, it was Kaida who had become the linchpin of their survival, effectively steering the ship in Rhyessa's place. Skepticism would have been a natural response to placing such trust in an undead being, but Rhyessa found herself unable to doubt Kaida. The revenant had become a beacon of hope, providing not just protection for Rhyessa and her twins but also for the remaining beastkin struggling under the shadow of extinction.

Furthermore, Kaida had taken an unexpected step – she turned her supplications to a dark, almost forgotten deity, the Crone. Rhyessa had harbored doubts about seeking aid from such a source, but to her astonishment, the Crone responded. She sent her own daughter to their aid in what seemed like their darkest hour. This intervention was nothing short of a miracle, a sliver of hope in their seemingly hopeless situation. Rhyessa couldn't help but feel a mixture of gratitude and awe for the unexpected support that had come their way, rekindling a faint hope in her heart.

Despite the assistance they had received, Rhyessa harbored a lingering unease towards the Crone's daughter, a Black Pudding monster. Her wariness wasn't rooted in what the creature was, but rather in its actions. This Black Pudding had claimed a Champion, one of those involved in her husband's death. Paladin Anlyth might not have personally struck the fatal blow, but she was there in the throne room, a silent witness to the tragedy. Rhyessa knew that if not for Kaida's timely illusions, she and her twins would have shared her husband's fiery fate.

In response to these tumultuous events, Rhyessa retreated into the shadows of her once-great kingdom, taking refuge in the deep catacombs. There, she remained vigilant, ever cautious, constantly safeguarding her children, Kael and Kirak. The weight of her responsibility as a protector overshadowed her former role as a queen.

But now, the time for departure was drawing near. It was time to flee the Beastveil, to abandon the remnants of her kingdom. In the ruins of what once was, Rhyessa realized that she was no longer the Queen of the Beastveil; that title had lost its meaning as her kingdom crumbled. What remained was a desperate, scared catkin mother, devoted to the safety of her two precious twin kittens. This harsh reality filled her with a sense of urgency and a poignant understanding of the sacrifices she must make for the sake of her children's future.

“Umm, Hi’ya,” a woman’s voice suddenly called out, startling Rhyessa so much she almost jumped.

Whirling around, Rhyessa found herself facing a dragonkin woman – an enemy, one they had killed, standing right there before her. Her heart raced in her chest, pounding against her ribcage. It took a moment for her to gather her composure and remember that this woman was actually the lich to whom she had given one of the great tree seeds from her treasure vault. The seeds, while impressive in their potential, had mainly served as ornamental plants, never quite reaching their full, majestic growth into great trees.

“Nikola, was it?” Rhyessa asked, mustering all the regal courage she didn't feel. “How can I help you this time?”

“I need that,” the lich pointed, her tone carrying a sense of urgency that drew Rhyessa’s attention.

Her eyes followed Nikola's pointed finger, landing on the object of her request. A flicker of concern crossed her face as she realized what the lich was asking for. “You want the array crystal?” she asked, her voice tinged with apprehension.

Rhyessa's eyes fixed on the large crystal, its lion's head size radiating an ethereal mix of pink and blue hues—a signature of mana-rich objects. It was more than a mere piece of the array; it was the heart, channeling and concentrating the mana around it. This process effectively created a magical dead zone, a cloak of invisibility that kept their presence hidden from external threats. The thought of this sanctuary without its core—the crystal—was unsettling. It meant exposing themselves, losing their shield against magical detection.

"Why?" she asked, her voice tinged with a mixture of curiosity and concern. "What are you planning to do with it?"

The dilemma was clear: if leaving Beastveil was inevitable, the crystal could not remain. Yet its removal was not merely a logistical challenge; it symbolized the dismantling of their last bastion of safety. This crystal had been more than a tool; it was a part of their collective identity, a silent guardian in these catacombs. As Rhyessa waited for Nikola’s explanation, her mind grappled with the ramifications of this decision, each possibility leading to a future fraught with uncertainty and vulnerability.

Nikola's response was delivered with an almost eerie excitement, catching Rhyessa off guard. “I need to link the crystal to the seed to jump-start it, and then begin growing the airship around the skeletal framework I’ve already prepared.”

“You’re going to grow the airship?” Rhyessa echoed, her tone laced with disbelief, unsure if she had heard the lich correctly.

“Absolutely! It baffles me that no one has figured out my ship-building technique since I've been dead, but trust me, growing airships is far superior to building them. Just lay out the basic skeleton, inscribe some instructional runes on the seed, and with a good mana source, you'll have an airship in no time!” Nikola leaned in, almost conspiratorially. “Without that mana crystal, I guess it would take about a year to fully grow it. But with that crystal, I bet we can have it grown by the end of the day.”

Rhyessa blinked, absorbing this astonishing plan. She glanced from the mana crystal array to her children, Kael and Kira, and then back to Nikola. There was a moment of silent contemplation before she finally spoke. “I’ll put my trust in you,” she declared with a firm nod. It was more than just a leap of faith in Nikola; it was a trust placed in Kaida, in the goddess who had sent her own daughter to aid them, and in all those who followed the Black Pudding, this Blake. It was a decision born out of desperation, but it was one she was willing to make for the sake of a potential escape, a chance at safety for her children and her people.