

BLACK PUDDING

CHAPTER 12

Nikola’s eyes shifted upward, his brow creasing with a trace of worry, as he asked, “Have you memorized your cover story yet?”

“Huh, ugh, yes!” I replied for the umpteenth time.

Despite the brilliance of my idea, Kaida and Nikola insisted on treating me like a clueless imbecile. They even went so far as to concoct a pointless cover story for me, as if I needed one. Olin, on the other hand, remained indifferent, but I suspected that he knew my secret—I was essentially immortal as long as I kept the Dungeon Core hidden within me, or rather Stellar Void. Yet, despite the brilliance of my plan, a single glaring weakness stared back at me from my status sheet.

Name: Daughter of Nightmares Race: Black Pudding Class: None Level: Restricted <u>Titles</u> [Hopeless Crusader] [Scion of the Crone] [Restricted] [Restricted]		
<u>Racial Skills</u> [Corrosive] [Stellar Void] <u>Spells</u> <u>Abilities</u> [Veil Polyglot] [Venomous]	<u>Vulnerabilities</u> [Fire] [Holy] <u>Immunities</u> [Acid] [Charm] [Darkness] [Disease] [Poison] [Sleep]	<u>Unique</u> [Oracle] [Restricted] [Restricted]

Oh, the irony of it all! I was about to embark on a competition to secure my spot in a second-rate magical academy, only to find myself in a comically tragic situation. My spell list resembled a barren desert devoid of any magic! As if that weren’t enough, my level was locked away or rather restricted. But why stop there? Let’s add a pinch of confusion to the mix. I had lost my class as a

Dungeon Monster, and now I stood as a classless wanderer. I suspected these issues were interconnected, but finding a solution eluded me. What I needed was a new class!

In my twisted quest for answers, the notion of seeking Circe's wisdom danced devilishly through my mind. Oh, what a delightful thought it was! I could almost hear the echoes of her sarcastic laughter reverberating in my skull. The ever-not-so-helpful Circe, the epitome of guidance and wisdom about all things magic, surely held the key to my troubles. Or perhaps she would grace me with a condescending smirk, dismissing my woes with a mere flick of her wrist. Then again, I could summon her just to subject her to the agony of listening to a lecture at the academy. How peculiar it was that the literal Primordial Goddess of Magic herself despised the very concept of magical education.

Despite the challenges I faced, I took solace in the fact that I still possessed a few spells I could cast without relying on the confinements of the system. Necrotic Flame, Blight, Mana Sight, Astral Insight, and Spider Webbing were among my repertoires. Ah, and how could I forget Fear! Although Astral Insight served no purpose in combat, it did come in handy whenever I needed to mess with Olin's phylactery.

As for the competition, Kaida had insisted that it would be a brutal free-for-all battle fueled by a handful of healers who found pleasure in keeping the violence unchecked. *How reassuring!* Rather than instilling fear, her warnings only fueled my anticipation of the impending bloodbath. *Oh, the sheer delight of it all!* I only hoped that amidst the chaos, I could secure acceptance without anyone suspecting my true nature—an inconspicuous bloodthirsty Black Pudding masquerading as a potential student.

Nikola's words jolted me back to reality, again capturing my attention. "You claim to have it all figured out, but every time we rehearsed, your cover story changed," he pointed out.

"Ugh, fine, I'm a refugee from Sedona... Why Sedona?" I grumbled.

Well, with too many cities and moons to remember, Kaida and I thought it would be best to choose a place that would stick in your memory and help maintain consistency in your cover story," the gnome explained, his grin tinged with a hint of sheepishness.

"So, you settled on a place from Earth? Well, I suppose it's as good a place as any," I scoffed, unable to hide my sarcasm. "After escaping the never-ending wars that mercilessly tore through my homeland, I had hoped to find solace here on Yaddith. But alas, it seems fate had other plans, leaving me with nothing but the desperate desire to claw my way into the academy in hopes of a better life," I concluded, a tinge of mock exasperation coloring my tone.

"Perfect!" Nikola nodded in agreement, though my lack of conviction in reciting my fabricated backstory didn't seem to affect his approval.

As we walked through the streets, I couldn't help but notice a few glares and lingering stares from passersby. I suspected my street urchin appearance had something to do with it. It became more apparent as we approached the academy, where the streets took on a more refined ambiance. The attire of the locals transformed into regal garments, elegant dresses, and what seemed to be this

reality's version of a sophisticated suit. It was all tailored for the warmer climate, revealing a good amount of skin. The sight was perplexing, considering the entire city was enveloped by snow-covered cliffs. *Magic is awesome!*

It was probably for the best that Olin and Kaida didn't join us. The sight of a skeletal revenant woman would likely have caused quite the commotion, and I doubted Olin's rodent vessel would have fared much better. As we approached the academy, the diversity I had observed in other parts of the city seemed to fade away. The streets became predominantly populated by gnomes, elves, and a few lizardmen. The lizards appeared to be serving as bodyguards for some of the pompous rich folks in the area. A sudden surge of dark, twisted amusement unfurled within me as my gaze landed on one such 'bodyguard.' I couldn't help but grin, the odd resemblance this being had with dear old Red Tail not lost on me. Ah, the delightful memory of having thrust a slimy tendril down Red Tail's throat as I feasted on him from the inside out. It was quite the mood-lifter. *Mmm, he was tasty!*

Suddenly, it unfurled before me. Or rather, it had been gently creeping into my field of vision for a while now, only I hadn't fully registered the grandeur of the colossal fortress looming ahead. It was the academy. "It's huge," I murmured, craning my neck to absorb the staggering spectacle.

Nikola's eyes flicked around before they caught the focal point of my jaw-dropping admiration. "Nuh-uh, Blake," he snickered, nudging his goggles up his forehead. "That ain't the academy. It's the Queen's cozy lil' summer getaway she stays in when she's visiting. But, if whispers are to be believed, the duke's been giving shelter to those fanatics in there."

"If that's not the academy, then where the hell is it?" I shot back, brushing aside any interest in the religious nut jobs. *Who cares about those loons anyway.*

My pint-sized gnome buddy gestured towards an unassuming park blanketed in verdant grass and marked by a lone stone archway leading to... well, nada. In front of it, though, was the only splash of true diversity this corner of the city offered: an eclectic line-up of all sorts of magical beings. *Well, ain't that a sight?*

The crowd huddled in an orderly line, all eyes fixed on the unassuming archway as if expecting some grand spectacle. My curiosity was piqued, and I stood there, transfixed on the archway. And it didn't disappoint. The archway pulsed to life, a kaleidoscope of dazzling hues surging and then subsiding into a molten wall of silver reminiscent of liquid mercury. It shimmered with iridescent oil-slick colors every so often, like the fleeting beauty of a soap bubble. The odd assortment of magical beings walked forward one by one, melting into the spectral barrier and vanishing from sight.

"Hurry up, Blake, we can't miss the portal closing up," Nikola blurted out.

As the gnome scampered off toward the back of the line in a mad dash, or at least that's what he tried to do. His sprint, if you could call it that, was hilariously endearing, with his pint-sized legs churning beneath him. I couldn't help but let out a chuckle as I sauntered up to him, catching up effortlessly without even needing to jog.

True to form, the line stopped moving once we jumped into it, rendering Nikola's previous dash somewhat unnecessary. And turns out, we weren't the tail-enders of the queue either, as at least fifty more fell in line behind Nikola and me, still pegging us towards the back. *Quite the crowd hoping to score an academy entry*, I mused, surveying the eclectic mix of magical races waiting their turn.

Among the crowd, one peculiar entity stood out. They struck me as some uncanny troll-bird blend, looking like a troll blanketed in a flurry of colorful feathers. The creature towered over the surrounding crowd. Its colossal size made me feel utterly insignificant in comparison, even though I stood at a respectable five feet nine inches.

Should I make myself taller? I pondered fleetingly before dismissing the thought. The last thing I wanted was to surpass Aurelia's height. There was something inexplicably enjoyable about gazing up into her eyes. *Ugh, now I'm missing her*, I grumbled inwardly, shaking off the distraction. I needed to stay focused on my mission—to pilfer their precious mana stones for pipsqueak and his so-called starship. In order to achieve that, I needed to gain entry into this magical academy by any means necessary. *Even if I must murder everyone here to do it*. Honestly, I was sort of leaning toward mass murder, regardless. *Tee-hee!*

The majority of those in line remained relatively subdued, perhaps containing their excitement within. Many appeared to be anxiously fidgeting in place while a handful pumped their arms as if gearing up for an imminent battle. It was as if everyone was mentally preparing themselves for a grand clash. However, amidst the crowd, a select few seemed strangely cheerful, their attire suggesting that they were not here for a fight but rather for the spectacle unfolding before them.

Finally, a flicker of action sparked at the front of the line, capturing everyone's attention. An elderly elf emerged, his visage reminiscent of the stereotypical wizards portrayed in movies—a sight that caught me off, guard. It was the first time I had encountered an elf with a beard. Until then, I had noticed most elves devoid of facial hair, with a few resembling women. In my defense, their unmistakable feminine features threw me off. Little did I know, it wasn't a matter of transitioning but rather a feature of the Prismara Elf race, where both genders possessed breasts. Who would have thought?

It had indeed been a while since I had felt any attraction towards a man, reminiscing on my foolish teenage years. Yet, as I glanced across the line, there was an undeniable allure in the form of one or two potential Prismara Elves. However, it wasn't a matter of sexual attraction that I found in them, but rather a sense of admiration tinged with a hint of envy. It occurred to me that perhaps I should invest some effort into sculpting and remodeling my own form. After all, the last thing I wanted was for Aurelia to perceive those men as prettier than me.

“Attention, as a reminder, all who dare to embark on the treacherous paths of the academy remain in this line. For those who have come to witness the spectacle, form a separate line on the other side of the portal. Now, let the entry into the coliseum commence,” proclaimed the wizard, his announcement snapping me back to reality and refocusing my thoughts on the task at hand.

“Best of luck, Blake,” Nikola said as he bid me farewell and veered off from the line, making his way to the other side of the portal.

I couldn't help but be mildly surprised as I noticed that the number of individuals who followed the gnome was smaller than I had anticipated, amounting to only around thirty or so in total. Meanwhile, my own line seemed to stretch out, containing approximately two or three hundred people. Of course, I wasn't about to meticulously count heads, hence the rough estimation.

After the second line formed, my line began to inch forward, and before I knew it, my turn had arrived. I wasn't about to close my eyes. No, I wanted to take in every moment. I stepped into the portal with wide-open eyes, bracing myself for what lay ahead. And what I witnessed in that instant stole my breath away, leaving me awestruck and captivated.