

BLACK PUDDING

CHAPTER 15

Kaida was meticulously merging a raw mana potion with the toxic petals of a rotblossom when she heard the creaking of the door into her sanctum. To her pleasant surprise, it was none other than her favorite research specimen. “Nikola, how did it go?” she asked the gnome.

“Well, first, Blake lit the entire arena and all of the applicants in scorching purple flames, nearly incinerating everyone. I thought for sure they would have kicked her out or even locked her up. I had no idea the trial competition was going to turn into a massive free-for-all battle. And believe it or not, it didn’t even last three minutes before Blake unleashed that spell.

“And, afterward, I was brought to a Professor Stormrain... or was it Stormruin? Anyways, apparently, Blake can attend the academy, but she needed a sponsor. Can you believe that gnomes are considered on par with nobility here? I sure didn’t. Anyway, the only thing standing in her way was paying the tuition fees. She stepped out to use the restroom, and when she came back, she had the entire tuition for four years of magical training. I have no idea where she was hiding that amount of coin, but Professor Stormrum seemed rather excited. Although...” Nikola’s voice trailed off, a hint of concern in his tone.

“Although what?” Kaida asked.

“I don’t think the headmaster is particularly fond of her,” Nikola replied.

“I wouldn’t be too concerned,” Olin chimed in from the opposite corner of the chamber, where he was engrossed in scribbling notes on summoning rituals.

Olin’s focus remained fixed on finding a connection between the reality from which Blake had been summoned and any potential ancient links to his own reality. However, he encountered a significant hurdle in his research. The other reality, while indeed ancient, was not as ancient as he had initially presumed. It spanned a few eons, perhaps four, but the existence of humanity within that reality appeared to be relatively recent, with their presence dating back only two hundred thousand years. This revelation shattered Olin’s models and hypotheses, leaving him perplexed and in need of a new approach.

“You’re probably right,” Nikola nodded, trying to convince himself of the validity of his own words. “She does seem like someone who can take care of herself.”

“What are you going to do now that Blake is in the academy?” Kaida inquired.

“I’ll be heading back to my little hideout and tinkering around with some final touches to my starship,” Nikola replied with a smile, his eyes lighting up at the thought of his ongoing project.

“Well, if that’s the case, I’ve finished the short-range portal gate you asked for,” Kaida stated, her skeletal finger pointing towards a specific desk in her laboratory. On the desk sat a large green gem radiating with infused mana. “This should enable you to access my sanctum whenever you desire. Just make sure the runes on the door you plug it into match the ones on the portal gate I’ve crafted.”

“Thank you,” the gnome expressed with a breath of awe as he approached the fist-sized gem on the desk.



After spitting out a chunk of my not-so-hard-earned stolen coin to cover the expenses for a whole damn tenure at this academy, I made a smart-ass decision to hand over just enough for a single friggin’ semester. The Headmaster appeared genuinely perplexed by my calculated decision, much to my satisfaction. Or perhaps, it was the sight of an alleged street urchin like me having a significant amount of coin on hand that had thrown him off. *Whatever!*

No way in hell was I gonna overpay for this shit when I had bigger plans, like dropping out and getting the hell outta here. Besides, with the vast amount of hidden wealth within Stellar Void, I had no real concerns about running out of funds. My focus was solely on achieving my goal of returning to Aurelia. Everything else was merely a means to that end. And now, here I was, on a private guided tour of the campus, playing my part in this charade until the opportune moment to make my move presented itself.

“So, do tell me, Miss Pudding, what made you decide to apply to our esteemed academy?” Professor Stormrune inquired, his eyes gleaming with a curiosity that I found rather irksome.

What was my cover story again?

“*He suspects you’re a leveler,*” Circe scuffed. “*I suppose that’s why he’s been so overly enthusiastic about you joining this pathetic excuse for a magical academy.*”

Ah, who cares! “Well, to be honest, I planned on stealing some mana stones from here,” I nonchalantly shrugged, “but then I figured if you’re going to teach me how to make my own, why not stick around for a bit and learn a thing or two?”

“I-I see, umm, well, preferably, I would advise you not to disclose that information to anyone else in the future. Instead, you’re here to learn about mana crystals,” the dark elf professor advised, his tone a mixture of caution as he glanced all about. “I find that the simplest truth is always the best approach.”

I simply shrugged at the professor’s advice, dismissing it with nonchalance. Circe’s irritating snickering didn’t bother me, either. Oh, how I was going to savor her complaints as I sat in class, fully embracing the lectures on magic. However, a nagging feeling inside me reminded me that my lack of survival instinct and caution was far from a healthy or safe mindset. The knowledge that I could respawn if confronted by a powerful opponent was perhaps fueling this reckless attitude. It was a dangerous mindset that needed to be addressed sooner rather than later. *Ah, I prefer later.*

“Well, in any case, you’ve been enrolled in a few classes, nothing too challenging. You’ll start with Mana Stone Theory and Creation, taught by Professor Morbane. After that, you’ll attend Spell Theory and Creation with Professor Gigglesprout. For your Combat Training, you’ll have Major Emberblade. And finally, you’ll have Philosophical History of Magic with yours truly,” Professor Stormrune informed me as we reached a pair of imposing iron doors. “But before all that, you’ll need to attend the orientation. Best of luck,” he added before walking away, leaving me standing outside those imposing iron doors.

He didn’t make it too far before glancing back over his shoulder at me. “If you need anything, ask for my assistants, Dibbles and Nibbles,” he added with a wave before disappearing around a corner.

Every aspect of the academy surpassed my wildest imagination, whisking me away into a realm of enchantment and wonder. The sight before me evoked the vibrant landscapes depicted in the pages of fantasy novels, eclipsing even the most visually stunning movie scenes. The academy stood proudly, a magnificent stone castle that defied the laws of gravity. Its towering spires reached toward the heavens, leaving me in awe of their majestic presence. What made it truly extraordinary was the mesmerizing sight of the floating towers, each one a grand and stately structure gracefully orbiting around the central edifice. It was a spectacle, unlike anything I had ever witnessed.

During my tour, I found myself captivated by every corridor I ventured into; my eyes were greeted with ceilings that seemed to hold captive, entire nebulas, their shimmering lights casting a spellbinding glow throughout. The magical enchantments were so intricately woven it felt as if I had stepped into a realm where imagination and reality intertwined seamlessly. It truly was an experience beyond words.

With an unsettling grin spreading across my face, I confidently pushed open the imposing doors, revealing a cavernous lecture hall teeming with prospective students. My gaze swept across the room, and to my delight, not a single familiar face from the arena was in sight. Well, not that I paid much attention to those I had set on fire. Still, it seemed that none of those hapless candidates had made the cut for admission. *Ah, what a shame.* Instead, what I beheld was an assembly of individuals who appeared to be born into a life of privilege and entitlement. The air reeked of snobbery and self-importance. My smile faltered for a brief moment, but then it hit me; *who cares?* In fact, this was even better. Nothing quite like thrusting a monster into a den of stuck-up snobs, eh? The possibilities were endless, and the thought of a few disappearing here and there filled me with wicked glee.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Miss Pyromancer,” a voice chimed from behind me.

I turned around, coming face to face with the green-haired wood elf from the arena, the one who had effortlessly disintegrated someone with his lightning spell. “Oh, joy,” I groaned, my tone laced with sarcasm. “So, they let you in, too, huh?”

“Let me in? Oh, heavens no, I was already admitted, thanks to my esteemed lineage. I simply couldn’t resist the thrill of the fight and the chance to strike fear into the hearts of the common folk. Though, I must admit, you did a splendid job with that pyromancer spell, demoralizing them far more effectively than I did. I must say, I’ve never seen purple fire before. But I digress, please

pardon my arrogance. I am Prince Rayne, but I have already earned my sorcerer's name, Thunderleaf," he declared, puffing out his chest with an air of superiority.

To my astonishment, Circe couldn't help but roll her eyes in exasperation, but what truly caught me off guard was the burst of whimsical laughter that erupted from a young girl who had risen from her seat and approached Prince Rayne and me. However, it wasn't her laughter that perplexed me, but rather her unusual appearance. She stood before us completely naked, her body fashioned entirely out of wood. If I had to hazard a guess, she was a dryad, but her intricate wooden form and vibrant yellow flowered hair, as well as her eyes that matched the color of her blooms, were truly remarkable.

The wood girl's voice pierced through the air, her laughter resonating with a touch of mockery that brought a hush to the classroom. "Oh, Prince Thunder Cheeks, what a noble act to bless the lowly commoners with your presence in the arena," she taunted, her words laced with sarcasm. "But forgive me, I struggle to comprehend the grand achievements of a prince who holds the humble rank of seven hundredth in line. With so many siblings ahead of you, one might argue that you're practically a commoner yourself," she continued, her laughter echoing through the room once again.

The wood elf gritted his teeth as he retorted, "Damnable nymph, return to the forest where you truly belong."

Suddenly, a thunderous bang reverberated through the class, instantly capturing everyone's attention. Heads turned towards the front, their gazes fixated on the source of the disturbance. The seating arrangement, resembling that of a grand auditorium with its elevated, stadium-style seats, compelled me to lower my gaze to the front, where the commotion originated. And there, standing before us with an aura of authority, was the formidable figure of the Headmaster himself, his long wiry beard bristling with indignation as his piercing gaze bore into me.

"You have only just arrived, street urchin, and already you're causing a commotion," the Headmaster barked. "Be seated and remain silent," he commanded.

I felt a fleeting urge to argue with the Headmaster, to point out that it was the wood elf and nymph causing the commotion, not me. But in all honesty, I couldn't be bothered. So, true to form, I simply shrugged, an action that seemed to deepen the furrows on the bearded elf's forehead if such a thing were even possible. With a resigned sigh, I made my way to the nearest vacant seat. To my surprise, the nymph decided to take a seat beside me.

As for the so-called prince, he made his way to a different row of seats, accompanied by a group of elves who bore a striking resemblance to him. *Siblings?* The entire auditorium was filled with an array of fantasy species, representing a diverse mix of creatures from different realms. However, it was evident that a significant number of students were elves of various kinds, their pointed ears and ethereal beauty defining their presence. Amidst the sea of faces, I noticed an elf who seemed to be giving me lingering glances. It took me a moment to realize they were actually a man, proving once again how tricky it can be to determine genders among elves. Though I had to admit, I had a

soft spot for femboys, but alas, I considered myself already taken, so I needed to put a peg in that thought.

“Ladies and gentlemen, you have all gathered here to attend the esteemed Academy of Arcane Knowledge. I am Headmaster Thalador, and I congratulate you on your acceptance. For those of you who have chosen to pursue Combat Training with Major Emberblade, please note that it will now be conducted at our main campus, which is accessible through the portal gate located on the seventy-fifth floor in the Frostborne Grand Hall,” the Headmaster announced, his authoritative voice echoing through the room.

His gaze then settled on me, a piercing glare that made me feel like I was under a microscope. “Many of you come from preferred legacies, nobility, and esteemed backgrounds. I encourage you to make the most of your time here and strive for excellence. Now with that said, I shall leave you in the capable hands of one of our teaching assistants, who will assist you with your dormitories, uniforms, and any other personal matters. Make us proud,” he concluded before disappearing in a dramatic puff of smoke.

“What a dick,” I muttered to myself.

“I heard he’s always like that,” the nymph whispered to me.

“Ugh, I can’t stand this pathetic place anymore! Here’s a new rule: only call on me if you actually have a question worth asking. Do us both a favor and spare me from your pointless inquiries until you’re no longer trapped in this hellhole,” Circe hissed venomously before disappearing into thin air.

I was taken aback by the fucking goddess throwing a tantrum right there in the classroom. It was quite a sight, I must say, and it brought a twisted grin to my face. But it seemed like the nymph sitting next to me misunderstood my amusement for something else. Little did she know, I wasn’t smiling at her comment but at the sheer audacity of a goddess making such a scene. It was an interesting experience to be the only one who could see and hear the divine chaos unfolding before me. It was like having a front-row seat to my own personal divine circus.