

BLACK PUDDING

CHAPTER 5

My brilliant plan to storm the monster sanctuary of Ockpool for some serious level grinding turned out to be a complete flop. But hey, it wasn't a complete waste of time. Turns out, these so-called monsters were more human than I anticipated. I mean, I swear I even spotted a few humans among them. Sure, they had their souls tied to a Dungeon Core, which automatically branded them as monsters in everyone's eyes – or so they claimed. But seriously, I mean, come on, they're not real monsters. I'm the real deal here, the epitome of monstrosity! It's all starting to sound like political nonsense to me. Anyway, these so-called monsters, or Dungeon Folk, as some prefer to call them, just want their precious stolen Dungeon Core back.

So here I find myself in the dubious company of the ancient chieftain werewolf, or rather warg as he proclaimed himself to be (like it made any difference), and my sneering, I mean loyal escort lizard, Drake Redtail, we scurried towards the hidden entrance on the outskirts of their crumbling city. As I skittered along on my boneless eight legs, a twisted thought crept into my mind. Did slaughtering every living soul in sight really have to be solely for the purpose of gaining levels and skills? Couldn't it also be about savoring the exquisite pleasure of well-prepared flesh? I mean, who says being a monster can't be a gourmet experience?

"I-I'll miss, Muddy," the pipsqueak proclaimed.

Damnit, I completely forgot about the kid. Wartie had also followed our little group to escort Redtail and me out of the city. It was strange, but for some twisted reason, I couldn't muster the will to murder the little brat, let alone contemplate it without getting an unsettling case of indigestion. Was this a disturbing remnant of my former humanity poking through? Or just a twisted case of selective taste? The only logic I could come up with was even as a slime monstrosity, I had culinary preferences. Who would've imagined?

"Wartie, we'll find you another pet. Leave our honored guest, Blake, be," the werewolf spoke with a firm yet soothing tone.

"I'm not a pet," I grumbled to myself, ignoring the quizzical look my bitter reptilian guide, Redtail, shot my way. At least, that's what I thought he was doing, though I was starting to realize lizard facial expressions were rather difficult to read. *I wonder if he tastes like chicken.*

The kid sniffed, seemingly unfazed by my remark, and carried on as if he hadn't even heard me. "Be a good boy, Muddy."

"I'm a girl!" I shouted. The proclamation caught the little goblin off guard, causing him to stumble back in shock, much to the surprise of both the lizard and the wolf.

The chieftain let out a soft cough, “Well, Redtail. I’m not sure how many remain now the core is gone, but ensure our esteemed guest starts with the weakest of the remaining bosses. We want ‘her’ to gather the necessary resources to retrieve the Dungeon Core for our village.”

The drake’s voice hissed with skepticism. “You can’t seriously believe this pudding can accomplish what our forces failed to protect. It’s just one monster against an entire raiding party consisting of paladins and sorcerers.”

“Something brought a leveler to our humble village,” the chieftain began, only to be rudely interrupted by Redtail, who jabbed a claw toward Wartie.

“Yeah, that orphan,” Redtail interjected.

Unfazed by the interruption, the old werewolf pressed on, his voice filled with authority. “I have made my decision. Redtail, you will escort our esteemed guest to any remaining dungeon bosses and then guide her through the treacherous deep roads to retrieve the coveted Dungeon Core from the very raiding party that laid waste to our home. My decree is final. Now, be gone!” With a theatrical flourish, the chieftain spun on his heels and stormed off toward the ruins of his home, dragging the reluctant Wartie in his wake. Though the child couldn’t help but cast a few tear-streaked glances back at me as they departed.

The twisted thought of ending Redtail’s existence crossed my mind once again, tempting me with its dark allure. Ah, the sweet satisfaction it would bring. But just as I contemplated the lizard’s demise, a soft, feminine voice erupted in laughter, filling the air with an eerie delight.

“*Well, well, that was rather entertaining!*” the voice chimed, amusement dripping from every word.

“Fuck, I forgot about you!” I swore.

“Have you not been paying attention this entire time?” Redtail retorted, his words seething with frustration, his teeth clenched tightly together.

“What? No, I was talking to her!” I explained, aghast at Redtail’s apparent ignorance, as I pointed emphatically at the radiant figure before me.

How can he not see her? She stood there, completely nude, her form composed of swirling clouds of ethereal blue and pink light. Admittedly, there were no anatomically correct naughty bits, as if she were a Barbie doll brought to life. Her luminous body predominantly took on shades of blue, with intermittent bursts of pink dancing within. Conversely, her hair was a dazzling display of pink hues intermingled with occasional flashes of blue, like a mesmerizing aurora in motion.

“There’s no one there, you dimwit!” the lizard huffed with exasperation. With an air of annoyance, Redtail stormed forward, leading the way through the concealed path out of the hidden cavern.

“*He can’t see me, child,*” she continued to laugh, her ethereal voice filling the air with an otherworldly melody.

“Great, so now I look like a complete idiot talking to myself,” I moaned in frustration.

“Well, you are an idiot talking to yourself,” Redtail retorted, his sarcasm dripping with disdain.

“*Hahaha! Oh, I don't think he's particularly fond of you,*” the glowing woman snickered with a mischievous delight I rather did not enjoy.

“Who are you?” I asked with a hint of irritation. Deep down, I already had a fairly good inkling of her identity; truth be told, I wasn't exactly thrilled about it.

“Argh! Seriously?” Drake Redtail seethed. “Listen up, you insufferable creature! I am Drake Redtail, and against my better judgment, I have been assigned to be your guide through this forsaken dead dungeon. We will scour this decaying maze, searching for any remaining bosses so that your feeble excuse for a brain can attempt to level up. And do you want to know why? Because my deluded chief actually believes you possess some miraculous ability to succeed where the rest of our kind have failed miserably in retrieving our stolen Dungeon Core. It's ludicrous, but here I am, stuck with you. So, don't get in my way, and let's get this over with.”

Huh, well, he's not going home. I glared up at the annoying reptile, or at least I tried to, but with my mana sight, my vision was a swirling mess of dizzying details. Nonetheless, I could still direct my attention toward him, and that was enough. *Whatever!* It's not like I really cared about their stupid core. Maybe I'll go find it later after I find a use for it, but right now, that's a no-go. Besides, I'm more interested in leveling.

“*Well, that's good to know!*” the woman chimed in. Startled by her sudden response, I lost my footing on my six legs and tumbled headfirst onto the unforgiving rocky ground with a splat.

The drake, unamused by my antics, simply shook his head and forged ahead, leaving me to gather myself and catch up. As I hurried after him, a disconcerting thought wormed its way into my mind.

“*Can you hear my thoughts?*”

“*Yes, I can, so do keep them appropriate. I am aware of your tendencies and am rather uncomfortable with the way you've been eyeing my body,*” she laughed.

“*My tendencies? Cannibalism?*”

“*Hahaha! Aren't you just precious?*”

A sneaking suspicion crept up within me, an inkling that this woman was intentionally mocking me with her laughter. It was time to put my hunch to the test. I mustered up the courage to address her directly. “*You're Circe, aren't you?*” I mentally blurted out, unable to contain my thoughts. The name had flashed across my consciousness during the notification that granted me the dubious title of the Hopeless Crusader. And considering the appearance of this ethereal blue specter, she seemed to be the most fitting candidate.

The woman stuck out her modest chest in pride as she proclaimed, “*As a matter of fact, I am—.*”

“**[Oracle]**,” I shouted my command, interrupting Circe with my skill. I couldn't help but revel in the surge of amazement that washed over me as the woman standing before me vanished into thin air, as if I had pressed a mental button to dismiss her presence. The expression of disbelief etched on her face as she faded away into nothingness was truly a sight to behold.

“Well, you keep your voice down,” Redtail hissed, his reptilian eyes scanning the surroundings. “The dungeon may be a lifeless husk, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t any unknown creatures lurking about. And without zone restrictions enforced by the core, we might encounter some overpowered beast that wandered out of its restricted cavern. I’d rather not end up as its next meal.”

Oh, don’t you worry, my dear lizard. I won’t let anyone snatch my food away from me. I mentally grinned to myself, relishing the mischievous thought. However, I kept my amusement to myself and said nothing to the nervous drake as I obediently followed him. But after a few minutes, I issued a mental command this time, activating **[Oracle]**, and couldn’t help but chuckle inwardly as a disgruntled goddess materialized before me.

“*You dare treat me with such dis—*.”

“**[Oracle]**,” I whispered with a gleeful twinkle in my eyes, enjoying the power of my command. And just for the sheer delight of it, I repeated the word once more, loving the exasperated expression upon the goddess’s face. “**[Oracle]**.”

“*You know, I could smite you if I wanted,*” she nonchalantly stated, effectively snuffing out the flicker of enjoyment that had momentarily sparked within me.

“*Fine,*” I internally grumbled.

“*Now, we simply must address your appearance. It’s absolutely unacceptable,*” she exclaimed with a disapproving tone.

“*What’s wrong with the way I look?*” I huffed.

“*You’re a wiggly-looking spider with tentacles for legs,*” she stated matter-of-factly as if that was the only explanation needed.

“*Fine, it’s polymorphing time. [Polymorph]!*” I exclaimed with my mischievous thoughts, my body writhing and twisting in a grotesque spectacle of transformation. Limbs snapped, flesh contorted, and limbs extended in unnatural ways as I embraced my monstrous form. When the excruciating ordeal came to an end, I stood before her as a sight straight out of a horror flick, a lanky figure with limbs that seemed to stretch into eternity and a face that could send chills down the spines of even the bravest souls. The atmosphere grew thick with an eerie presence, and I couldn’t help but revel in my dark and terrifying makeover.

At least, that’s how I envisioned myself – a terrifying, otherworldly entity with a presence that could freeze blood. But in reality, I looked like a gooey, tar-coated hobbit who had seen better days. *Oh well, can’t win ’em all.*

“*No. No. No. You’ve got it all wrong,*” she chastised me, her voice dripping with condescension. It was as if she was scolding a child who couldn’t grasp a simple concept. “*You can’t just picture the form you want. You have to feel it. Embrace the essence of the form you wish to become. Let it consume you from within.*”

“*Ugh, and how would you know?*” the thought slipped out, bypassing any filters or restraints.

“Child, I am the Primordial Goddess of Magic, and you would do well not to disregard my advice,” she admonished, her voice carrying an air of divine authority. *“There are deities who would obliterate entire constellations for the opportunity to be trained by me.”*

“Fine, I get it. You’re some sort of big deal,” I grumbled, unable to hide my sarcasm. *“But seriously, why bother with me? I’m not your typical goody-two-shoes, you know. I’m an abomination of creation, and honestly, I kind of like it. There’s a certain freedom that comes with being a Black Pudding, and I’m not keen on giving it up.”*

“That doesn’t matter right now,” she dismissed my question with a nonchalant wave of her hand. *“Instead, focus on what I told you and embrace the essence of the form. Let go of your misconceptions and let the magic flow into you.”*

“Into me? I don’t have a mana pool?”

“Yes, you have a mana pool by default, bestowed upon you by the system. However, your unique nature as a Black Pudding grants you even greater potential. Your body, born of magic, possesses a rare gift for manipulating the ambient mana of this realm. And what’s more, your soul holds a rare attunement to the mana, a connection that hungers for its power. It’s a remarkable combination of traits that will eventually lead to extraordinary possibilities. But let’s set aside my musings for now. Focus on following my instructions, and who knows, I may unveil more secrets along the way.”

“Well, that’s certainly a lot to process,” I thought. Still, I was determined to follow her guidance. Instead of picturing the form I desired, I focused on feeling it, letting the essence of my desired shape permeate my being. As I did, I breathed out a single command, “[**Polymorph**]!” I felt my body begin the process of shifting. Yet, to my dismay, the transformation yielded minimal results.

“No. No. No,” she interjected, her tone carrying a sense of exasperation. *“The system draws upon the provided mana pool, but what you’re attempting is to cast with ambient mana. It’s not about thinking or commanding. It’s about instinctively channeling and manipulating the surrounding mana. Don’t think, don’t command, just do.”*

I spent the last few hours trotting behind my reptilian guide, who conveniently chose to pretend I didn’t exist, all while receiving a never-ending stream of criticism from an invisible nagging presence. But eventually, we found ourselves outside the first dungeon boss chamber. The highlight of it all? My attempt to master shapeshifting, transforming from a hobbit-like creature to a goblin. Oh, the wonders of my achievement! A slightly larger head, shorter legs, and voila! A goblin! Truly, my talent knew no bounds. I was mastering the art of contortionism, all without the need for the system’s assistance. And the best part? I didn’t feel like I was using any mana at all. It felt more like performing an intricate dance of wiggling my toes, rubbing my head, and patting my stomach simultaneously.

However, the persistent ethereal presence that haunted me continued to remind me that my ultimate goal was not to transform into a goblin but rather to assume the form of a human or an elf. Naturally, I couldn’t help but retort, accusing her of being a racist for such a suggestion. After all, what’s wrong with being a goblin? They have feelings, too. No need for body shaming!

Despite my ongoing struggles with shapeshifting, I managed to achieve a few notable modifications. My crowning achievement was the successful growth of tentacle hair, making me the envy of Black Puddings everywhere. As for my endeavor to perfect the art of breasts, well, let's just say it was a work in progress, much like a lopsided sculpture created by a blind artist. And oh, my mouth! It bore an uncanny resemblance to my toothless granny's gummy smile, a sight to behold or perhaps to avoid. But the real triumph lay in my mastery of Mana Sight with Circe's guidance. I had honed the spell to focus on specific locations, granting me functional eyes with a significantly reduced risk of seeing everything at once like a deranged cosmic entity. It was a major improvement, sparing me from unnecessary nausea. *Ah, the perks of being a shapeshifting, tentacled, partially toothless wonder.*

Fortunately, luck was on my side as we stumbled upon a few decaying corpses of fallen dungeon monsters on our little journey. While feasting on them didn't bestow any new skills upon me, it did offer a delightful increase in my mass. I now stood at a towering height of four foot nine inches, or an impressive one hundred and forty-four centimeters if my dear old dad from a previous existence had any input. Though, I'm certain he would be bursting with pride at my sudden growth spurt.

That all being said, I couldn't help but relish the disgusted contortion on Redtail's face or whatever expression he attempted to convey when I ate those corpses. Either way, it provided me with a small sense of satisfaction to keep him on his scaly toes.

Redtail let out a low growl, clearly growing impatient. "What are you waiting for?" he snapped. "The boss is inside. Hurry up, you damn slime!"

"What about the other bosses?" I leaned in close to Redtail, my voice dripping with mock curiosity. "How am I supposed to locate them once I'm done here?"

He let out an exasperated sigh. "Even a dimwit like you should be able to figure it out. Just follow the damn path," he retorted.

"Hmm... fascinating," I replied, feigning interest. "And what about this elusive highway and those pesky adventurers who took the core?"

Redtail growled in frustration. "For scale's sake! Head back the way we just came, and you'll stumble upon a cavern with a friggin' waterfall. The highway's entrance is behind that water—hrrrk!"

His sentence was abruptly silenced as my clenched fist collided with the lizard's mouth! The satisfying symphony of muffled screams and gurgled whimpering filled the air as my arm contorted into a writhing tentacle, slithering deep down Redtail's throat. Meanwhile, my other arm reverted to its true form, bursting into a web of inky black goo that ensnared him, trapping him like a helpless fly in my diabolical spiderweb. Oh, the pure ecstasy of watching him squirm and struggle in my grasp! It was a moment of sheer bliss.

"Ah, splendid," I said with exaggerated gratitude. "I guess that means I won't be needing your brilliant guidance anymore." Redtail put up a feeble struggle, but it only fueled my twisted delight.

The more he resisted, the more my deranged pleasure grew. “Oh, fuck yes! Go deeper, Blake, deeper,” I moaned to myself in a perverse display of self-indulgence.

I couldn’t discern whether it was my own tremors of delight or the last remnants of life convulsions that coursed through Redtail’s body. Regardless, the sensation was exhilarating. My tentacle arm continued its invasive journey, plunging deeper and deeper into his throat, piercing his stomach, and snaking through his intestines. The frigid air caressed the tip of my tentacle, a chilling reminder of the finality of his demise. And then, it happened—the unmistakable shudder that signified his ultimate surrender. A maniacal scream of ecstasy erupted from my newly formed mouth, echoing off the stone walls as my prey surrendered entirely to my devouring embrace.

Maybe, just maybe, I absorbed more than I intended from the succubus... *Nah!*

“*Well, that was a sight to see,*” Circe commented, her voice breaking through the haze of my pleasure. I had momentarily forgotten about her presence, lost in my own twisted display of indulgence.

“Turns out lizards taste a lot like lemon zest chicken,” I whispered with joyous satisfaction. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to savor my meal in peace.” With that, I turned my attention back to the lifeless body in my grasp.

You have defeated a [Drake] .
Do you wish to [Absorb] [Drake] ? Yes / No

Wanting to enjoy my meal, I ignored the notification. It took a few minutes to complete the process of dissolving Drake Redtail and a few more to tidy up the delightful mess of juicy remnants and scattered morsels that adorned the ground. Disposing of a body can be such a messy affair, but oh, the taste! It was absolutely delectable. I couldn’t help but revel in the sheer delight of it all. Life was truly a marvel! The numbing sensation that once plagued me had dissipated, leaving me feeling more alive and human in this peculiar form than ever before.

Once I was done with my meal, I returned my attention back at the notification. I already knew what was coming my way, but I mentally clicked the “Yes” option anyway.

[Absorb] Unsuccessful. [Drake] did not have any skills.
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Now that delightful little interlude was over, I turned my attention to the imposing iron doors leading into the boss’s chamber. To my surprise, they were slightly ajar, inviting me to take a peek inside. What did I find? Absolutely nothing! Just an ordinary, unremarkable circular stone chamber. *Well, well, well, talk about anticlimactic.*

But hey, let's not overlook the real stars of the show here—the doors themselves! They reminded me of that time I had a court appearance when I was a rebellious seventeen-year-old. Ah, good times. Apparently, dousing the head cheerleader with a well-deserved pepper spray for calling me a goth cunt wasn't exactly encouraged. Who would've guessed? Anyway, those courthouse doors had a similar air of grandeur, looming over me as if they were larger than life itself.

With a nonchalant shrug, I shoved those magnificent iron doors aside and confidently stepped into the boss's chamber, ready to unleash my own brand of justice. However, to my dismay, the chamber truly was empty. I glanced around, my head swiveling from side to side in search of any hidden nooks or crannies, but to no avail. It was a damn circle, after all—nowhere to hide! Just as I was beginning to think this boss encounter was a big fat joke, that familiar surge of adrenaline coursed through my veins. Time seemed to stretch itself out as if playing a cruel prank on me.

I turned my gaze to Circe, my eyes narrowing suspiciously as I noticed her mischievous grin. Following the direction of her pointed finger, my gaze locked onto something large and red, looming both above and behind me.