

# BLACK PUDDING

## CHAPTER 19

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As I emerged from my slumber in the all too familiar viscosity of my tar-like form. I was once again filled with a sense of frustration at the repetitiveness of the experience. *One of these days, I'll wake up without being a puddle of goo!*

I shifted into my human form, allowing my spider silk to wrap me up, fashioning my gorgeous phony casing together. Well, maybe phony to others, but it was my luxurious skin to me. Once that was done, I gazed into the darkness surrounding me with my orange, glowing eyes, influenced by Mana Sight. I found myself lying upon a stone altar, its hard surface a sharp contrast to my smooth silk skin. My mind was clouded, unable to recall how I had come to this place or where I was. The only recollection I had was of that damn idiot who had fucking brought the deep roads crashing down upon us – and the Crone! As I gazed down upon myself, I was faced with the chilling realization that I was completely naked?!

“What the hell, Ava?” I spat out in frustration.

“What... Oh! **Ha!** That was all you, Blake. You did that all by yourself! Hahaha!” Ava laughed in response, but there was a hint of something else in her tone. “Blake...I feel like something is wrong,” Ava murmured, a note of fear creeping into her voice.

“What’s wrong, Ava?” I asked, my own unease growing.

“I’m not sure,” she replied, her voice shaky. “Let’s check the status sheet.”

<b>Name@:</b> B&ake / Ava <b>Race:</b> B&ack P%dding@* <b>C&amp;a@@:</b> D%nge\$ n M\$ n@ter@ <b>Tit&amp;e@:</b> [H\$pe&e@@ Cr%@ader@] [@ci\$ n@ \$f the Cr\$ne] [Re@tricted] [Re@tricted]*		
<b>Racia&amp; @ki&amp;&amp;@:</b> [Ab@\$rb] [C\$rr\$@ive] [P\$&ym\$rp h] [@te&&ar V\$id] [Therma&@en@e]	<b>@pe&amp;&amp;@:</b> [B&ight] [Charm] [Fear] [&ife Drain] [Mana @ight] [Necr\$tic F&ame] [@\$%& C\$ntainer]	<b>V%&amp;nerabi&amp;itie@:</b> [Fire] [H\$&y] <b>Imm%nitie@:</b> [Acid] [Charm] [Darkne@@] [Di@ea@e]

	<p>[Acid Breath] [P\$#@n @pit]</p> <p><u>Abi&amp;itie@:</u> [B%r@t] [Defen@e B\$\$@t] [&amp;eap]</p> <p>[Para&amp;y@i@] [@i&amp;k Webbing] [@\$%&amp; @%cker] [@\$%&amp;@en@e] [@pider Wa&amp;k] [Vei&amp; P\$&amp;yg&amp;\$t] [Ven\$m\$%@]</p>	<p>[P\$#@n] [@&amp;eep]</p> <p><u>%niq%e:</u> [Di@@\$ciative] [Paradigm Inver@i\$ [@\$%&amp; B\$nded]</p> <p><u>@electable:</u> [Weap\$n Pr\$iciency] [%narmed Pr\$iciency] [@hie&amp;d Pr\$iciency]</p>
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“What the shit, Ava!”

“I... I don’t understand,” Ava’s voice trembling with confusion. “She-who-must-not-be-named, never paid much heed to the system, but now... This should not be happening!”

“Are you saying this is Asswipe’s doing?”

“I am at a loss, Blake,” Ava replied, her voice filled with worry. “I can’t even access the spell and ability descriptions. It’s like the system is completely malfunctioning!”

“Ugh! What about those extra, Selectable skills? Can we use them?” I asked.

“No,” Ava replied, shaking our head. “You can only have ten active Spells and ten Abilities at a time. You’re at ten abilities now. We’ll have to switch something out if you want to use a new Selectable. But I wouldn’t recommend it, especially now. We may need to rush your training so you can ditch the system.”

“There also seem to be a lot of changes that don’t make any—.”

“**Holy shit, do you ever stop talking to yourself, you psycho bitch?!**” A male voice rumbled from the depths of the shadows ahead.

I froze, cautiously scanning my surroundings as I prepared for any potential danger. The darkness was all-consuming, with a soft hint of orange light reflecting off a few shapes until I remembered one of my first Racial Skills at my disposal. I focused my thoughts and, with a pulse of determination, commanded [**Therma&@en@e**] to awaken. The world around me exploded into a frenzied barrage of colors before finally settling into a haunting purple hue. Six glowing figures, each pulsing with a menacing red, orange, and yellow stirred to life on altars like mine.

*Blake, for crying out loud, seriously, **stop using commands!** You’ve just demonstrated that you can shift into human form and weave skin without my aid, so knock it off! We don’t know the extent of the system’s damage! For all we know, a spell could backfire!*

Ava’s voice reverberates in my mind, frustration and irritation evident in her annoyance.

“Argh! Alright!” I growled. And yet, I couldn’t help but pause in amazement at what else she had said... I had finally weaved the spider silk for my skin entirely on my own. “Sweet,” I whispered in awe.

“Thank the god...or goddess? Thank the Crone!” The fucker who called me a psycho bitch proclaimed.

With Thermalsense, I couldn’t identify his facial features since everything and everyone was nothing more than glowing colors to me, but I recognized the voice.

**“I wasn’t talking to you,”** I yelled back at him!

“Psycho,” he muttered under his breath, but the sound still reached my ears.

“Where are we?” another female on an altar asked with a note of worry in her tone. She had interrupted the eerie stillness of the darkness and my growing irritation with the individual who persisted in calling me a psycho bitch!

**“Heather!”** a woman cried out in alarm. “Where are you?”

“Over here,” came the reply, filled with fear and anxiety.

“I’m coming to you!” the woman reassured, her voice filled with determination.

I descended from the altar, and as I did, my fluid, inky form flowed out from beneath my ethereal, white silk skin. The black tar-like substance that made up my true form continued to seep out as it shifted in shape. The result was a breathtaking display of gothic beauty and nightly horrors as my dress reformed around me like tendrils of cruel darkness. The dress was adorned with intricate black embroidery that seemed to writhe and dance with a life of its own. I was a sight to behold, a mesmerizing combination of grace and horror, like a figure straight out of a funeral for the undead or an elegant dark ball of untold frights.

I pivoted, my hand resting on the altar I had just departed from, and heeded Ava’s guidance, especially now the system was fucked. I reached out with my senses and searched for the pulsing energy of mana that surrounded me. It didn’t take long to find it. With fierce determination, I cast forth the flickering fire of Necrotic Flames, illuminating the room in its eerie purple glow. It was effortless to call forth the magic when not in the heat of battle. The same was true when releasing my Thermalscene spell. As I turned to face the six familiar nude figures, I couldn’t help but feel a twinge of recognition. Half of them, I had personally ended their lives.

“Now, now. What should I do?” I purred, a sinister smile spreading across my face as Ava pulled my lips into an unnatural demonic grin. It was clear that Ava and I shared a delight in tormenting and intimidating others.

“I-I won! I’m the champion! You can’t touch me now!” Jason, the foolish man who had insulted me in the dark, declared triumphantly, like a pathetic child playing tag on a playground.

“Oh, how delightful it will be to shatter your delusions,” I replied with a sly smirk. My elongated tongue slithered out between my lips and whipped about before retracting back into my mouth in a taunting manner.

“P-Please, Jason, don’t p-provoke her!” the girl I had beheaded implored, Heather’s voice quivering with fear. She and another familiar figure, Yua, if I recall her name, cowered behind an altar, attempting to shield their nudity from view.

“Go ahead, Jason, taunt her,” a third female goaded, her voice ringing with confidence and defiance. She stood tall before her altar, her hands on her hips, her face a mask of determination as she challenged Jason with her gaze. She instantly became my favorite amongst this group of shitheads! *I remember her! She was the dead body I had found and consumed.*

I heard Heather mumbling under her breath, but it was the wolf-eared fuck that caused the tunnel’s collapse that made my blood boil. He was ignoring us, fueling my growing irritation. The temptation to violently rip those stupid ears from his head was overwhelming. Meanwhile, another figure lurked in the shadows, a hulking brute with a slightly greenish tint to his skin. He cowered behind his altar, desperately trying to conceal his manhood with his hands.

“I honestly don’t know whether to feast on you all or pity you,” I said, shaking my head in disbelief at the sorry state before me.

I heard a gasp, most likely from Heather. Her eyes were fixed on me, filled with shock and disbelief. “H-Has anyone taken a look at their status yet?” she stammered.

“I’m guessing everyone else’s status sheet is busted?” I said aloud.

“Broken?! Mine is working perfectly!” Jason’s boisterous laughter echoed throughout the chamber, “I’m the champion, bitches!” he declared proudly.

“A-And she’s the S-Scion of the Crone!” Heather stammered out. Her voice was still tinged with shock.

*Huh, I’m thinking just ours is broken, Blake.*

*Fucking wonderful... Why could Heather see our sheet if it’s screwed?*

*I don’t know – Probably because she can’t see our full status sheet? I’m not sure, Blake.*

*You’re telling me that Asswipe didn’t give you any info on how to fix it?*

*Blake, everything is screwed up, and the fragment of knowledge I got from she-who-must-not-be-named doesn’t cover any of this shit!*

*Ugh! Fine, Ava. And her name’s Asswipe.*

“What in the hell does that mean?” Jason asked Heather, his voice tinged with boredom as he absentmindedly ran his tongue over one of his grotesque, needle-like teeth.

“Well, well, well. You may be skilled in using that Appraisal spell. Still, when it comes to checking for kill notifications, you all are a bunch of useless idiots,” I sneered. “And let me make one thing clear, Champion, the Crone has claimed me as her own, you dipshit! From this moment forward, you serve at the whim of my new foster mother,” I proclaimed with a sinister smirk as a comforting chill ran down my spine. It was strange how that declaration so naturally spilled out of my lips. The declaration even seemed to fill me with a strange sense of pride. My smile twisted into a grotesque grin, reflecting the darkness within.

Jason let out a bloodcurdling scream, his voice echoing throughout the chamber in a frenzied outburst of terror and disbelief. **“WHAT THE FUCK!”**

I ignored the pathetic champion and marched towards the wolf-eared annoyance, determined to rid him of those vexing ears, once and for all.

“Whoa! Hey there now! The trial’s done! We’re on the same side now,” the irritating Jeremy spoke up. I paused, considering his words. On the one hand, he was correct. On the other hand, I still had an intense desire to rid him of those ears.

“Don’t do it, Blake!” Ava insisted.

“Oh, but I so desperately want to tear those ears from his head,” I complained, my frustration growing with each passing moment.

“She’s babbling to herself like a fucking lunatic again,” Jason bellowed, his voice bouncing off the stone walls of the chamber.

With a curl of my lip and a flick of my dress, I abandoned the hapless dipshits to their fates as I stormed out of the chamber. The very sight of them made me want to reach out with a tentacle and unleash my wrath. I fumed as I walked, my way lit by the flickering purple flame I now held aloft in my hand. It took everything I had, but I restrained myself, remembering they belonged to my new foster mother, the Crone. I was to avoid violence at all costs. *Well, a little violence, I’m sure, would be fine.*

A voice cried out, “Please, wait for us!” only added to my mounting frustration. The words echoed in my ears, taunting me with their very existence.

I spun around to see them hurrying after me, their precious bits jiggling and flopping with each stride. Their nudity was on full display, and I couldn’t help but laugh at the sight of them. The three women and the hulking green brute whose head I had lopped off had decided to follow me... *Oh, joy.* The spectacle of the women struggling to keep their breasts from bouncing as they ran. And Rob, I think was his name, with his muscles bulging and hands clutched tightly over his private bit, was fucking hilarious!

“I ate your lifeless body and severed your two heads with ease,” I hissed, my frustration bubbling just below the surface. “Why in the name of all that’s unholy would you follow me?” my arms were folded firmly across my chest as my light source gently floated near. I glared at the group with a mixture of disbelief and annoyance. Well, mostly in disbelief at how comical the entire

situation was, but my thoughts were focused on someone else, and these idiots were holding me up.

“No way am I staying back there with that creep, Jason,” Sophia declared, her hands firmly planted on her hips. She wasn’t shy or bashful in the slightest. Out of the group of hapless idiots, she seemed to be the least annoying.

My gaze shifted to the hulking figure of Rob, who was desperately trying to avoid staring at the three women. Despite his appearance as a middle-aged muscle-bound orc, he seemed overcome with embarrassment and shyness. It was a strange and almost absurd sight, this massive, brutish man reduced to skittish awkwardness in the presence of naked women. But such was the strange world I found myself in. *Ugh, whatever!*

“Ava, would you mind?” I groaned, knowing I didn’t have to spell it out for her. I was confident that my split personality, fragment, a wad of memories, or whatever, already understood my request.

“Ava? Wasn’t that the evil girl in white who was sitting with the Crone and us at the table?” Yua queried with a hint of fear in her voice.

“D-Didn’t she re-refer to A-Ava as your s-sister?” Heather stammered out, her voice trembling with confusion.

“Hi! I am Ava!” Ava’s words spilled from my lips as she took control and plunged my hands deep into my abdomen, delving past the writhing mass of black tendrils that formed my dress. Our four eyewitnesses gasped in shock as they watched my arms disappear into my body, where my guts should have been. I paid no mind to their dry heaving and horrified reactions, focusing instead on the task. With ease, Ava wove four pairs of pristine spider silk bath robes and threw them haphazardly at the feet of our onlookers.

“How? Where?! **What the hell!**” Sophia cried out in both disbelief and awe. Out of all the idiots in their group, she was the only one still a human.

I shrugged nonchalantly. “I can steal powers, by the way. Thanks for the Purple Necrotic Flames,” I stated before pivoting and resuming my search. The heavy darkness and silence throughout the corridors started getting to me, causing a gnawing sense of worry to settle in my gut. “Where the hell is everyone?”

“You didn’t steal it,” Sophia retorted, her voice tinged with a hint of fascination. “I still have my spell.”

“Interesting,” I murmured, barely paying attention to their presence as they continued to trail me, now fully dressed in the robes I had provided. The thoughts weighing on me were more pressing and demanded my full focus. *Where is she?*

“What is this thing made of?” Yua inquired, her voice grating on my nerves. “It feels like fine silk,” she added, running her fingers over the smooth fabric.

“Spider silk,” I growled, my concern growing with each passing moment. I peered into one of the chambers we were passing by, searching for any sign of something out of the ordinary, but nothing caught my eye.

“Why are you so grumpy,” Yua asked with a cheeky tone.

“Allow me to make a few things clear,” I hissed, casting a dark gaze over the four following me. “It’s taking every ounce of my self-control not to turn on you and feast upon your flesh. And secondly, where the hell is everyone? It’s unnerving that no one is here to greet our dipshit champion! But I shouldn’t expect much from a group that doesn’t even bother to check their system notifications when fighting!”

“Oh, don’t act like you’re any better,” Ava taunted, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “You never bother checking your notifications. You have me do it for you.”

I gritted my teeth. “You evil bitch! Don’t call me out in front of them... I’ve got a reputation as a bloodthirsty psychopath I’m trying to maintain.”

“Who are you talking to?” Sophia questioned, her brow furrowed in confusion.

“Ava,” I replied tersely.

“I thought you were Ava,” she asked, her face a mask of confusion?

“No, I’m Blake!” *I don’t have time for this back and forth.* I resumed my march down the hallway, my footsteps echoing in the silence.

“Oh, wow! You have a split personality skill or another soul trapped in your head! Don’t you?!” Rob exclaimed, his words reverberating down the empty hall and up my nerves.

I was briefly tempted to unleash my wrath upon them, but I pressed on, my weary feet trudging deeper into the darkness. The shadows seemed to be alive, suffocating me with their oppressive presence. Yet, something was soothing about it, like a comforting embrace. And then, as I turned the corner, I was faced with a horrifying display of death and destruction. The aftermath of a brutal battle was scattered before me. And it was clear that the necromancers had suffered a catastrophic defeat, their bodies twisted and contorted into grotesque and unnatural positions. Despite the hunger that threatened to consume me at the sight of the feast before me, I had only one thought. *Aurelia!* With a snarl of annoyance, I tossed aside bodies as I combed through the carnage, pausing only to dissolve a bit here and there. *What? A girl has to eat!*

“W-What happened here?” Heather’s voice reached my ears, but I paid her no mind as I continued my relentless search.

The obsession that had taken hold of me and drove me to find Aurelia was a mysterious longing that I could not explain. Still, the fear that came with it was all-consuming. As my search continued down this corridor, I was relieved that her body was not among the fallen I had found. However, the destruction that surrounded me was staggering. The walls were marked with telltale signs of blood, flames, and explosions, and the dead lay scattered about like forgotten toys. With a sense of foreboding, I continued my search, my four irritations trailing behind me like ducklings.

A sense of unease gnawed at the back of my mind. The feeling was persistent and maddening, like a fly buzzing just out of reach. I couldn't shake it, no matter how hard I tried. It was as if I had forgotten something important.

I took another turn down a murky and foreboding hallway, and there, sprawled out on the ground, I found the little twerp ghoul, Olin. This time, he lay lifeless with an axe buried deep into his skull. A dark urge coursed through me, tempting me to grind his face into the ground and feast upon his eyes. But it was Ava who disrupted my thoughts, her voice ringing out like a clang of a church bell.

"I have an idea," Ava said. "Heather, could your mending spell work upon the undead?" she shouted back to the four individuals who followed me like lost souls searching for guidance.

"I-I don't know," Heather stammered, fear creeping into her voice as she anticipated my reaction to her answer.

My relationship with Ava had been tumultuous at the best of times, marked by conflict and strife. But now, we were united in purpose, our minds and body focused on a single, all-consuming task: finding Aurelia! None of Ava's training, ditching the broken system, nothing else mattered anymore! I vowed not to let my stubbornness interfere with this purpose... *I hope not!*

"Well, you are our priestess," Ava said with a hint of expectation. "So, let's give it a try." With that, Ava reached out to pull the axe from Olin's head.

"Ugh, if this doesn't work, I'm devouring him," I said, my black tongue darting out to wet my lips in anticipation.

"Were you always like this, or is that twisted personality from the screwed-up body they gave you?" Yua queried, her voice tinged with both worry and revulsion.

"I was always like this," I teased with a sinister grin. The others stepped back, fear evident in their eyes as I stood over Olin's body, holding a massive axe. I was ready to feast on his remains if Heather's spell failed.

Heather approached with hesitation, her hands trembling as she reached out. "I c-call upon the darkness, m-mend," she stammered, her voice barely above a whisper.

*Blake, did you see what she just did?*

*No.*

*She cast the spell without using the command! I don't think she even realized what she did!*

*Interesting... How does that help us?*

...

I watched in fascination as the injuries on the undead ghoul started to heal, a revolting show of blood and brain matter flowing back into its body as if being pulled by a vacuum. Despite the



gruesome and deliciously tempting sight, I was determined to get some answers and eat after! Unfortunately, the ghoul's hazy gaze remained devoid of life.

"What's next, Ava?" I asked, trying to conceal my annoyance...and saliva.

"There's a yellow liquid seeping from the corner of your mouth," Sophia said, her face contorted in disgust.

"Oops!" I replied as I wiped away the acid with my thumb.

"Shall I proceed, or would you like to give it a go?" Ava inquired, her voice low and haunting.

"I'm in the dark as to what you're doing," I replied indifferently, "so by all means, do your thing."

Ava extracted my second phylactery from Stellar Void. As she did, a burst of realization hit me like a lightning strike as I comprehended what she was doing. Despite this newfound insight into her plan, the gnawing sense of something forgotten still lingered at the back of my mind, haunting me with its elusive presence. *I'll worry about it later*, I thought with a shrug, dismissing it altogether.