

BLAKE PUDDING

CHAPTER 18

STRAY

Once again, I found myself being hauled around in a bowl—well, more of a large bucket now. Sure, I can crawl by myself, but as it turns out, Black Puddings aren't exactly speed demons without the ability to morph legs. Heck, I'd even settle for spider legs at this point, but all I can do is sprout a few tendrils and drag myself along with them. It's utterly humiliating! And to add to the absurdity, I've apparently got my own Champion? Yeah, I'm still trying to wrap my head around that one.

Luckily, it's the undead fake bunny girl who's carrying me around, which is good because I'm still contemplating whether or not to launch a surprise attack on my so-called Champion, Vanya. But let's be real, in my current state, she would absolutely thrash me. On the other hand, the bunny girl is emitting a rotting undead aroma that's surprisingly appetizing. Maybe I should consider pouncing on her instead. *Tee-hee!*

Get your head out of the gutter; we're spoken for!

What? We're poly.

Since when?

Remember when we were dating those two girls and that guy?

We weren't dating them. That was... something else. Also, he was a gold star bottom, so he doesn't count.

Hahaha! Relax, I'm not talking about betraying our sexy vampire. I'm talking about an actual meal, not a 'fun' meal. Though... eating people is kind of fun. Also, he counted.

We just ate! ...And yeah, it is kind of fun, isn't it. Intestines are among the best—and, no he didn't.

Mm-hmm. Yep. Yep. And yep, he did. Remember, we ate his—

Okay, okay—he counted! I'm starting to regret that we share all the same memories. Let's just move on.

We don't even need to strap anything on now. We can just grow our own—

I said, let's move on!

Fine.

Sometimes, I wonder which one of us is the nightmare.

Pfft, your bitchiness should have made that clear.

Hey!

The revelation that Vanya was merely pretending to be a prisoner sent ripples of unrest through the area. With none of the beastkin in a position to offer any real resistance, they watched uneasily as she walked around with an air of confidence, almost as if she were in charge. I found myself keenly awaiting the cat queen's response to this turn of events, but Kaida seemed to be deliberately keeping the golden-haired elf away from her, a decision that seemed quite prudent to me.

Additionally, the imitation bunny girl seemed caught in a whirlwind of indecision, vacillating between the impulse to run and an urge to lash out. Despite her evident internal conflict, she remained steadfast, carefully holding my bucket, while trailing behind the Champion. Although, I did notice a subtle hint of curiosity in her demeanor as she observed the unfolding situation.

Despite the scarcity of mana in my surroundings, I felt an odd tingle as we passed one of the numerous chambers dotting the catacombs. "What's in there?" I inquired, gesturing with a goopy tendril towards the source of the strange sensation. I had been attempting to form a proper tentacle, but all I managed was the goopy approximation.

"We don't have time for this," Vanya groaned.

"What? Why not, Vanya? We're just following you around," I spluttered.

"Do not call me that. Only my friends may call me by name," she hissed back. "The sooner I train you, the sooner that insufferable god will return what you took from me," she spat out, her words laced with bitterness.

"Huh, well, sorry to tell you, but I'm pretty much useless without any ambient mana around here, so training won't do much good. Also, what should I call you, my Champion?" I replied, my light chuckle at the end sounding more like a bubbling cesspool than anything jovial.

Kaida tensed up noticeably at my words, while Vanya let out a deep sigh and facepalmed herself. A prolonged silence ensued, during which I genuinely couldn't fathom what I had said that was so problematic. However, my attention wasn't entirely on their reactions; I was still preoccupied with the peculiar tingling sensation that had captured my interest.

"Call me Paladin Anlyth, or just Paladin," she said after a moment. Her focus seemed to sharpen.

"And what do you mean, you're useless without ambient mana?"

"Just that, Vanya. No ambient mana, no attacky attack magic," I explained. "I mean, there's the whole system thing, but without ambient mana to back it up, it's pretty lackluster. It's like, woosh and then... poop. Not impressive. You get me?"

Dream, why must you always be such a pain?

Shush! I want to see how far we can push her before we're forced to respawn.

I hate you.

What's new? We've always hated ourselves—self?

...

Vanya might have facepalmed again, accompanied by a few muttered curses. I couldn't quite catch what she said; my hearing isn't exactly top-notch in my current, liquid state. Meanwhile, Kaida seemed on edge, as if she was prepared to bolt at the first sign of my so-called Champion lashing out to obliterate either of us. In fairness, I was deliberately trying to provoke her. Admitting my mana weakness like that probably wasn't the smartest move, but then again, I've never been one to think things through when I'm in a sassy mood.

“Come on, bunny! That way. Chop, chop,” I urged, gesturing excitedly toward the tingle.

Kaida froze, her gaze flickering uncertainly between me and the grumpy elf. The fear in her eyes was evident, torn between the authority of the paladin and the whims of me, the creature sent by the Crone. Yet, the peculiar dynamics between me and the elf, coupled with the authority I seemed to wield, nudged her hesitation aside. Reluctantly, she led us toward the chamber—well, Kaida carried me in my bucket, and I'm pretty sure Vanya bitterly followed.

As we approached, a large metallic door loomed before us, sealing off whatever secrets lay behind it. Kaida's hand trembled as she reached for a key, her movements hesitant and fraught with nervous energy. With a click, the door creaked open, revealing a scene that could only be described as something straight out of a mad doctor's laboratory.

The chamber beyond the door presented a macabre sight. Corpses were strewn about haphazardly, some with limbs severed, others in such a state that they appeared to have been put through a blender. It was a scene of sheer gruesomeness, the likes of which I had never encountered. Yet, in a twisted way, it also held a delicious appeal. However, it wasn't the mouthwatering stench of rotting corpses that had drawn me to this place.

“What vile place is this?” the elf exclaimed, her hand swiftly moving to cover her mouth and nose, trying to shield herself from the overwhelming stench.

“We can neither bury nor burn our dead without your people discovering us and slaughtering what few remain,” Kaida retorted, her voice laced with a mix of fury and fear. Her eyes flashed with a raw, unbridled rage that momentarily overpowered her evident nervousness, revealing the depth of her resentment and the grim reality of their situation.

In one corner of the room, something else caught my pudding tingle. My vision, blurred and imperfect by the low mana, failed to offer a clear view across the expansive chamber. I strained to see what it was that had piqued my interest, the mysterious source of the odd sensation that had lured me here.

“That way, bunny!” I grumbled, oblivious to the somber mood enveloping both women.

To my surprise, the undead woman complied without protest, though her anxiety around Vanya was palpable. Her steps were hesitant yet determined, a clear sign of her internal struggle between fear, anger, and the need to follow my direction.

She must really like our mother.

Seriously, I would have murdered you by now if you were that lippy with me.

I am you.

...

As we neared the source of the mysterious tingle, I let a substantial part of my tar-like body droop over the edge of my bucket, my gaze sweeping around with heightened alertness. Kaida navigated her way through the chamber, stepping cautiously over one body after another. The sight almost put me in a mouthwatering trance, yet I restrained myself, still unsure of what was drawing me closer. My curiosity piqued further when, amidst the chaos, I noticed something jiggle.

“*I kill you! Die and fear my fury,*” a tiny voice squeaked out, barely audible. Despite this seemingly feeble battle cry, neither Kaida nor the elf standing at the chamber’s doorway reacted, as if they hadn’t heard it at all.

Realization hit me, and I slumped in my bucket, a wave of disappointment washing over me. It was just a tiny gelatinous cube. For a fleeting moment, which seemed to linger longer than it should have, my mind wandered to a wart-covered goblin I once knew. But I quickly brushed off the thought as irrelevant. With that kid’s luck, he was probably long gone, taken down by someone or something.

Refocusing on the diminutive cube that had sparked my interest, I prepared to slither out of my bucket to devour the pitiful little creature. But just as I readied myself, something else—a shadowy blur—darted forward and consumed the cube before I could even make my move.

As the gelatinous cube met its end, I realized the tingly sensation hadn’t dissipated. Whatever had swiftly captured the cube wasn’t large; its movement resembled a cat pouncing on a mouse, quick and precise. It was small, about the size of a human fist, but its appearance was striking – pitch black and glossy, as if coated in oil.

A moment of recognition washed over me, and in a hushed tone, I whispered, “Black Pudding.”

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Paladin Anlyth, the Champion, watched with a mix of bitterness and disgust as the beastkin bunny carefully navigated through the sea of corpses strewn across the expansive chamber. Her bitterness, however, wasn’t directed primarily at the beastkin or even at the abomination she had been cornered by that snake of a god, Jörmun into training. What truly exacerbated her resentment and bewilderment was the system notifications that had popped up when she had begrudgingly extended the offer to train the vile creature. The realization of what she was being compelled to do, and the implications of those notifications, weighed heavily on her, tainting her every action with a sense of disdain, helplessness, and dread.

NOTICE

REQUIREMENTS HAVE BEEN MET

<p>JÖRMUN HAS TERMINATED THE DEITY CONTRACT</p>
<p><u>NOTICE</u> YOU HAVE OFFERED SERVICE TO A *****</p>
<p>ERROR</p>
<p><u>NOTICE</u> YOU HAVE OFFERED SERVICE TO A *****</p>
<p>ERROR</p>
<p><u>NOTICE</u> YOU HAVE OFFERED SERVICE TO A *****</p>
<p>ERROR</p>
<p>USER: DEATH COMMAND AUTHORIZATION GRANTED CLASSIFICATION ERROR OVERWRITTEN</p>
<p><u>NOTICE</u> YOU HAVE OFFERED SERVICE TO CONFLICTING HIGHER ENTITIES</p>
<p>DO YOU WISH TO ACCEPT [DESCENDANT OF THE END] [SCION OF DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES] AS. YOUR. DEITY? YES / NO</p>

The implications of the notifications she had received sent a chill through Paladin Anlyth's bones, reaching deep into her soul. She had grown up on legends of the three Primordials, but never in her wildest dreams did she imagine Death herself intervening in her system notifications, and in favor of the Black Pudding that had been responsible for her husband's death. The thought alone was enough to instill a deep-seated terror within her.

What perplexed her even more was the notion that this pudding, or Blake, as she had once inadvertently heard it being called, was somehow a deity. The concept was baffling, and the titles it was given only added to her confusion: 'Descendant of the End', 'Scion of Dreams and Nightmares'. She couldn't help but wonder what she had entangled herself in.

When Anlyth first received those system notifications, her initial reaction was to flatly refuse. However, the involvement of Death herself made her reconsider. She accepted the task, clinging to a glimmer of hope that it would somehow lead to the fulfillment of Jörmun’s promise to revive her deceased husband, slain by this vile deity she was now compelled to serve.

At that crucial moment, Anlyth had observed something that the pudding, or Blake, had completely missed – a fleeting reaction from Jörmun, the shadowy figure orchestrating these events. He had flinched, a brief but telling display of surprise, as the notifications cascaded in. Anlyth surmised that Jörmun hadn’t anticipated Death’s intervention in his machinations. This revelation offered her a small measure of comfort.

It hinted at a lack of control on Jörmun’s part, a chink in his otherwise impenetrable façade of certainty and power. Anlyth found solace in the thought that if Jörmun could be caught off guard, then perhaps he, too, might not achieve all his goals in this high-stakes game he was playing. And if she couldn’t have her desired outcome, the thought of Jörmun and the pudding also falling short of their objectives was a satisfying consolation.

Anlyth’s contemplation was interrupted when her keen elven ears picked up the pudding whispering, “Black Pudding.” Her sharp eyes quickly located a second, much smaller Black Pudding, just as the beastkin holding Blake in a wooden chamber pot did. She exhaled deeply, preparing to summon her sword to dispatch the small slime monster, seeing it as her duty as the Champion of the being that had slain her husband.

But as she readied herself, Anlyth hesitated when she saw Blake stretch out and consume the other Black Pudding. A shiver of revulsion ran through her at the sight of the entity she had sworn to serve devouring one of its own kind. This act, witnessed up close, added a new layer of horror to her already complicated feelings about her role as the Champion of this creature.

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Umm... Nightmare, did you just eat it?

Well, yeah.

I guess we are cannibals after all.

Was that ever in doubt—

WHAT WAS THAT?!

I abruptly halted my internal thoughts, sensing a peculiar tingle within me. It felt as if something was softly stirring inside, reminiscent of a gentle kick in the belly. It wasn’t painful, but it was undeniably odd.

It feels more like an enema.

Really, Dream?!

Well, it does.

Umm... We never received a system notification for eating that other pudding.

...

“IT’S INSIDE ME,” I cried out.

The sensation was peculiar, and I scrambled to figure out what to do, drawing a complete blank. In a moment of desperation, I attempted to expel the little parasite. However, given my gooey state and the lack of any claws or nails, my efforts were feeble at best. It was a rather pathetic sight, accompanied by sounds akin to hips slapping together, as I struggled in vain to extract the unwelcome intruder.

Thankfully, the intruder eventually calmed down, ceasing its restless movements. It was as if a cat had found a cozy spot to settle in, now content in its newfound nook. This turn of events was far from what I had anticipated, but at least for the moment, it didn’t seem to pose any immediate danger. I considered this a minor victory in an otherwise perplexing situation. Nevertheless, I knew I had to figure out how to expel this other pudding, particularly before it decided to view me as its next meal.

Does it feel like it’s purring to you?

What? No—well, sort of, I guess.

Fuck, did we just pick up a stray?

Ha! I think we did.

Damnit.

Taking a deep sigh, which was rather impressive considering I hadn’t formed any lungs, I gurgled out to the beastkin carrying my bucket, “What are the plans for all these corpses? I need to find two of them in good condition for my... minions,” I said, unable to hide the amusement in my voice at the term ‘minions’.

“The shielding crystals we’re using to stay hidden also reduce the magic in the air, which also prevents the dead from turning into unwanted undead. But we don’t have a way to give them a proper burial or cremate them. We’re honestly at a loss,” Kaida explained, her voice tinged with helplessness. If I had a face right now, it would be beaming with a wide grin.

“We need to leave,” Vanya interjected, her impatience evident.

“Yeah. Yeah,” I shot back, a bit surprised that I could hear her from across the chamber given my impaired senses, but her radiating mana was significantly stronger than the undead bunny girl holding me in my wooden bucket. “So, would there be any objection if I put them to good use?” I inquired curiously.

“...As long as they’re not used for some zombie army, I don’t think anyone would object. Why?” Kaida asked, her apprehension apparent.

“Just an idea,” I responded cheerfully, deliberately omitting the specifics of my plan.

“It wants to eat them,” the elf commented dryly, cutting straight to the point.

“Oh, yeah, that should be fine,” Kaida replied with unexpected cheerfulness, causing both shock and disgust in Paladin Anlyth.

“You can’t be serious,” Vanya groaned, her hand moving to her forehead in disbelief.

“I’m a she, not an it,” I corrected, managing to convey a sense of pouting, or as close to one as possible in my current pudding form.

It seemed my bitchy Champion hadn’t yet realized that the bunny was an undead, which likely meant Kaida’s sense of morality was as flexible as my own. Regardless of her reaction, my current priority was to find two corpses in decent condition for Olin and Nikola. But given my blurred vision and the temptation of the ‘buffet’ surrounding me, it was a struggle to stay focused on my task without succumbing to my more primal urges.

“Hmmm, what about that one?” I pointed with a tendril at a corpse that seemed to be in decent condition for what I needed.

“It’s missing a head,” Kaida informed me, her tone devoid of any judgment.

“Hmmm, what about that one?” I pointed at another one, confident that it had its head intact.

“It’s missing all its limbs,” she informed me, still in an unjudging manner.

“That one?”

“That’s a pile of severed limbs.”

“Ugh, any of those over there?” I swept a tendril in a general direction.

“Those are where we’ve been storing what we believe to be our own people, but there’s not enough left of them to properly identify,” the fake bunny explained.

“Ugh, can you just pick two random corpses that will work?” I grumbled out of frustration.

“Work for what?” Vanya approached, clearly disgusted as she held a hand over her mouth and nose, trying and failing to block out the pungently delicious scent of decay.

“I have two souls inside of phylacteries that I need to find bodies for,” I explained, my tone bordering on whiny, though I was not about to admit that to myself or anyone else.

Kaida turned and started making her way to the other side of the chamber. She eventually reached a row of bodies neatly laid out side by side. The first one resembled a giant otter or something of the sort, but the rest were indistinct to me, appearing as nothing more than blurry shapes. I let out a sigh, which technically shouldn’t have been possible in my current form – unless it was all just a subconscious effort.

As I attempted to summon my two phylacteries from the Stellar Void, nothing occurred. “Crap, that’s not a system skill anymore,” I grumbled in annoyance. Feeling a wave of frustration wash over me, an idea suddenly sparked in my mind. “Yo, Champ, get your fine ass over here and try radiating some more of that mana of yours,” I called out to Vanya, hoping her mana could somehow facilitate what I needed.

My abrupt and somewhat cheeky request to Vanya caused the bunny holding my bucket to almost drop it in surprise. She quickly steadied herself, but I couldn’t help but notice the slight tremble in her hands as she continued to hold my bucket.

“I should slay you, and be done with this idiotic game you’re playing,” the elf hissed, her irritation wafting off her like a brewing thunderstorm.

Yet, despite her clearly pissed-off mood, she begrudgingly did as I asked. As she edged closer, the mana in the air thickened, almost tangibly. It was a pleasant, almost soothing sensation, akin to the feeling of taking a refreshing cold shower after a long, hot day outside. Her presence, despite the tension, brought a much-needed vibrancy to the mana around us.

It became clear to me that she wasn’t actively manipulating the ambient mana. Instead, she was simply allowing her own internal mana to seep out into the surrounding area. With a contented sigh, I leaned over the edge of my bucket and spilled onto the ground. The amount of mana wasn’t sufficient to accomplish everything I wanted, but for the moment, it was adequate.

The sensation was akin to stretching after a long nap – and this wasn’t just a metaphor. Two glossy, black, tar-like arms extended from the puddle that I had become, reaching out in a grand stretch. The rest of my form slowly rose up from the ground, taking advantage of the mana now available, feeling more potent and capable than moments before.

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Kaida, initially taken aback by the notion that her goddess, the Crone, had sent a Black Pudding in their time of dire need, had even briefly questioned the logic of it all, including her faith. But now, as she observed the entity her goddess had dispatched, her skepticism gave way to wonder. The being, known as Blake, rose from a dark pool on the ground, morphing into a woman’s shape. It was as if darkness itself had materialized, an amalgam of traits – cruel, sadistic, evil, yet simultaneously exuding charm, playfulness, and an odd sense of welcome.

This Blake was far from what Kaida had envisioned. She remained silent, captivated by the transformation unfolding before her. The figure’s form became increasingly distinct, taking on a more elvish shape, though lacking the characteristic pointed ears, suggesting a semblance more akin to humans. Yet, the exact nature of the Black Pudding’s appearance was challenging to define. It was otherworldly, particularly as what seemed like silk stretched taut across its face. The hair was not typical hair but a blend of tendrils, almost tentacle-like, adding to the alien quality of the entity.

Kaida found the sight both strange and entrancing. The being was alien to her, yet there was an undeniable allure in its appearance. This sense of beauty was amplified as Blake opened her eyes, revealing a majestic, glowing orange gaze that seemed to illuminate her otherworldly features with an ethereal glow.

“Ah, much better,” Blake sighed with evident satisfaction. “I know, right? Hey, does that stray feel like it’s purring even more? Yeah, it kind of does,” she continued, apparently responding to herself. This self-conversation left Kaida concerned by the peculiar dialogue unfolding before her.

Blake then glanced around and, with a smile, turned her attention to the paladin. “Hey Champ, can I call you Champ instead of Vanya?”

“No,” Paladin Anlyth responded dryly, her voice laden with unyielding anger, causing Kaida to shudder at the intensity of her emotion.

“Cool. Cool. So, Champ, I’m going to need you to stay close by, radiating mana until we get out of here,” Blake said, her voice unusually cheerful. “Or I’ll get all gooey and stick, and not in the fun kind of way—will you stop that,” she suddenly added, her tone shifting to one of evident frustration.

It seemed clear to Kaida that Blake’s irritation was directed inward, at herself. This self-directed dialogue and the Black Pudding’s peculiar mannerisms were both intriguing and bewildering. Paladin Anlyth chose to withhold any comment, merely raising an eyebrow at the Black Pudding’s antics.

Kaida, meanwhile, opted for silence, deciding that observing quietly was the best course of action in the face of such an unusual scenario. Blake, on her part, began scanning the corpses around her. Suddenly, she stopped and pointed excitedly at a rat beastkin’s body, nearly bouncing on her toes with a peculiar enthusiasm.

“That one, Olin always gave me a rat bastard vibe,” she announced cheerfully, her delight evident in her tone. She then shifted her focus, musing aloud, “Now, what about that gnome?” while theatrically tapping her lip, contemplating her next choice.

Once again, Kaida found herself questioning her faith in her goddess.