

# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 24

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### TOUCHING BASE

Vanya's thoughts were a tumultuous storm as she trudged through the dark, dank corridors. Hours had passed since she had lost sight of that infuriating creature she had been unceremoniously handed off to, treated like an object to be bartered by that snake of a deity. The realization that she had been traded off as a Champion to the very monster responsible for her husband's demise was a bitter, jagged pill to swallow, shattering her understanding of the divine order. The possibility of a Champion serving anyone, but a god was unthinkable, challenging the very bedrock of her beliefs about the deities. The more frightening notion was, Blake could be... No, she dared not venture down that path of thought.

What gnawed at her even more was the knowledge that it was her actions that had set in motion the events leading to her husband's death. The memory of killing a goblin child, now haunted her. Feral goblins were so common that encountering a goblin with a soul was almost mythical, a justification she had used to assuage her conscience during her raids. The Grotto of the Betrayed had been no different; she had seen the inhabitants within as mere monsters, justifying their slaughter.

But now, with the revelation that the goblin child and all the other races she had vanquished in the dungeon were more than mindless feral beasts, her convictions were shaken. This new perspective cast a shadow over the holy crusade, the mission to purge the realm of the feral, that her former gods had championed. Everything she had believed in, everything she had fought for, was now under a cloud of doubt and guilt.

Vanya's gaze swept over the beastkin, a diverse group bearing various degrees of animalistic traits. Some bore a resemblance to humans or elves, their features subtly accented with animal-like characteristics – from pointed ears to expressive tails. Others, however, were more distinctly beast-like, their wild, animal forms only faintly tinged with human-like qualities.

What struck her most was their collective air of defeat, the evident hunger etched on their malnourished faces. This sight deepened the well of guilt within her. Her unwavering adherence to her former gods' decree—to purge the realm of those deemed feral and inferior—now seemed a flawed pursuit. Witnessing these beastkin, so clearly downtrodden and desperate, challenged the very tenets she had once held sacred.

This realization, coupled with the stark conditions of the beastkin, perhaps explained the stirring of atonement within her. It was this budding sense of responsibility, albeit grudging, that had led her to serve as the Champion of one she considered a monster. In her heart, she knew this was a path she had to tread, however reluctantly, as a step toward redemption for the misjudgments of her past.

As Vanya wandered, lost in her own thoughts, she stumbled upon a space hastily converted into a makeshift smithy. The setup was rudimentary, the equipment of poor quality, and much of it appeared to have been hastily thrown together in this room, perhaps in a desperate attempt to create some semblance of order.

Amid the clutter, one figure was diligently at work, and Vanya recognized her immediately—a half-dragonkin woman, or more accurately, a newborn lich recently reanimated by Blake and tethered to a phylactery. The woman was absorbed in her work, crafting an object of unusual design. Its shape was reminiscent of a distorted sword hilt or perhaps a metallic wand, complex and unfamiliar in its construction. Notably, a mechanical lever was integrated at its base's curve, and Vanya observed that a depleted mana crystal had been affixed to this mechanism.

Vanya's intrigue was piqued by the peculiar object. Unable to quell her curiosity, she inquired, "What is that you're working on?"

The half-dragonkin woman jumped, clearly startled, as she spun around, the odd hilt aimed directly at Vanya. A moment later, she relaxed, recognizing her visitor. "Oh, it's just you," she exhaled with relief. Lowering the hilt, a hint of frustration crept into her voice. "I call it a crystal-lock, but I'm having trouble here. The crystal refuses to retain any mana."

"Crystal-lock? I've never seen anything quite like it before," Vanya said, her interest clearly evident. Realizing her lapse in etiquette, she quickly added, "Oh, where are my manners, I'm Anlyth," introducing herself by her family name.

The woman with dragon horns tried for a gentle smile, but her dragonkin traits lent it a somewhat intimidating aspect. "Nikola," she introduced herself. Her face then shifted, showing a blend of pride for her invention and a hint of frustration. "It's a sort of pistol, or more like a flintlock," she shrugged, "that's why I call it a crystal-lock. I've never had the knack for magic," she said, giving the device a shake, "but this should bridge that gap. It's designed for a single shot, so I doubt the design will catch on. However, I've always been able to instantly recharge these ruby-sized mana crystals." She gestured towards herself. "But now," her voice tapering off into a sigh, "I'm concerned that this new body might be limiting that. I can't get this stupid crystal to absorb any mana."

Anlyth, puzzled, offered a suggestion, "So, it's kind of like a wand? Why not just use a wand instead? You'd get more utility from one with an embedded mana crystal."

Nikola's response carried a tone of mild derision. "You'll get what, ten fireballs from a preset wand with a fully charged mana crystal per week, before needing to let it recharge from ambient mana," she scoffed. Then, holding up the crystal-lock, she continued, "With this, I can unleash the equivalent power of those ten spells as a pure bolt of mana every second. At least, I could if my mana wasn't acting up," she grumbled, frustration evident in her tone.

"That sounds... rather terrifying," Anlyth muttered, absorbing the implications. "Your mana issues might be similar to that slime creature's. From what I understand, all the ambient mana in these chambers is being diverted to power some sort of crystal array they use for concealment."

Nikola's demeanor shifted at the mention of the array, her interest visibly piqued. "Oh, really? I'd love to see that array," she said, her excitement clear. "But first, I should test this theory. Maybe going topside will resolve my mana problems," she mused, scratching her cheek thoughtfully. Glancing back at Anlyth, she asked, "Want to come along?"

Anlyth gave a casual shrug, her gaze lingering on Nikola. It was only then that she noticed the subtle signs of decay on the lich's flesh, the slight cloudiness in her eyes, and a faint odor of rot that had been masked by the more overpowering scents of the refugee camp, mingling with the mustiness of the catacombs and the stench of sewage. "Sure," she stated simply, a reminder flickering in her mind that this woman was, in reality, a lich, not a dragonkin half-breed.

Offering an unintentional predatory toothy grin, Nikola bent down to grab a small leather pouch. "Might as well try recharging these crystals while we're out," she remarked. "It's surprising how many people leave empty mana crystals lying around. But hey, one person's trash is another's treasure," she chuckled, her voice tinged with excitement. Setting a brisk pace, Nikola led the way out of the chamber, with Anlyth closely following, drawn into the lich's infectious enthusiasm.

As they traversed the corridors, a new scent wafted through the air, drawing Anlyth and Nikola's attention. They realized the beastkin were congregating in one of the larger chambers near the exit, the source of the charcoal-like aroma mingled with the smell of cooked meat. Both women exchanged glances, their stomachs grumbling in response to the tantalizing scent.

What they discovered in the chamber was unexpected. Blake had set up a massive, makeshift barbecue using Slaethian armor and shields and was grilling actual meat. The smoke was noticeable but didn't seem to trouble anyone. The chambers were spacious, and Nikola doubted anyone would suffer from smoke inhalation. Yet, the question lingered in the air: Where had Blake acquired such an abundance of food?

Approaching Blake, they noticed the gaping, see-through hole in her chest, which she seemed unfazed by, humming contentedly as she repeatedly grabbed little chunks of meat and bone, crunching on them while continuing to cook. The malnourished beastkin eagerly accepted the food she offered.

"What are you eating?" Anlyth inquired.

"Hmm? Oh, hey Von Von. Just some finger food," Blake replied, revealing a truly predatory smile as she popped another finger-sized chunk into her mouth, crunching down. "I have teeth," she added with a dark chuckle, a remark that left Anlyth and Nikola somewhat bewildered. "Want a rib?" she then cheerfully offered, extending a cooked rib towards them.

Nikola accepted the rib without hesitation, savoring it with a moan of appreciation. "I can't remember the last time I ate real food," she hummed contentedly, taking another bite. "Honestly, I'm not even sure how long I've been dead."

Anlyth eyed the rib in Nikola's hands skeptically, her gaze darting between it and the beastkin who were also enjoying their meal. "What exactly is it?" she asked cautiously.

Blake, unfazed, gestured towards the rib. “Hmm? Oh, that,” she pointed, “that should be Ms. Robes, but most of it is goblin,” she stated matter-of-factly.

The chamber fell silent at Blake’s revelation, even the beastkin pausing mid-bite, their sensitive ears picking up her words. The only sound was Blake’s crunching on her ‘finger food’—which Anlyth now realized were actual goblin fingers.

Nikola, visibly horrified, dropped the rib. “I think I’m going to be sick,” she muttered, looking even paler than usual for an undead.

“Don’t get all squeamish now,” Blake grumbled, continuing to eat. “Eat goblin or starve—that’s the game down here. Choice is a luxury when you’re dancing with death, right?” Her light laughter was unsettling against the grim backdrop.

The beastkin nodded, understanding the harsh reality, and resumed eating, though unease lingered in their eyes.

“Oh, Von Von,” Blake suddenly said, her eyes gleaming manically as she changed the subject. “I cleared out that Slaethian fort or outpost or whatever above ground. Should be free of patrols for now!” This abrupt news made a few beastkin choke. “But we need to leave before they send more... what are they? Knights, soldiers? I never keep track of those silly terms,” she laughed, her mood erratic. “Nikola, darling, you’re a vision, loving the new body! You build airships, right? We need one of those to escape before the military comes snooping,” she continued without pause, her energy erratic and commanding.

Nikola remained silent, her expression frozen in horror as she stared at the remains of Ms. Robes being cooked. The revelation had clearly unsettled her, leaving her momentarily lost for words.

Blake, seemingly oblivious to Nikola’s discomfort, hummed thoughtfully. She tapped her chin, pondering something else entirely. “Hmm,” she mused aloud, “speaking of which, where are Kaida and Olin?”



Kaida lounged in her chair, her mind deep in thought. Ever since the devastating invasion of the Beastveil, she had transformed her underground black market, nestled beneath the capital city, into a sanctuary for refugees. She had even managed to rescue the queen and her royal twins—a feat she considered non-negotiable. The existence of children, particularly twins, was exceedingly rare within the realm. In fact, within the catacombs, two of the refugees were pregnant, a phenomenon that was quite literally, miraculous.

Kaida was puzzled by these occurrences. Initially, she wondered if it was a side effect of the low-mana environment created by her crystal array. However, the two women had already been pregnant before being discovered amidst the ruins. Every so often, search parties venturing out to evade Slaethian patrols would return not just with scraps of food but also with survivors found hiding in the rubble.

Something significant, something beyond her understanding, was happening. It was an unknown shift, a mystery that lingered just beyond Kaida's grasp, leaving her to ponder the strange developments unfolding around her.

"Mind if I intrude?" a male voice called out, breaking Kaida's contemplative silence.

Looking up, Kaida recognized one of the recently raised liches. The presence of another undead being didn't disturb her; beneath her beastkin illusion, she was a revenant, an undead human. Although she lacked the extensive magical abilities of a lich, her soul remained bound to her physical form, granting her the ability to return to her body after defeat, unless it was utterly destroyed. This was a different kind of resilience compared to a lich's reliance on a phylactery.

Her eyes focused on the undead rat lich, Olin. She pondered his presence, musing over the unique vulnerability of liches tied to their phylacteries, which could be exploited for control or destruction by others.

"I do not mind," she responded calmly to Olin, her voice carrying the subtle resonance of her revenant nature.

Olin awkwardly made his way to a nearby seat, but immediately jumped up as he struggled to accommodate his new tail. After a moment of readjustment, he tried sitting again. Kaida couldn't help but snicker at the sight, finding the lich's clumsy attempts to adapt to his new appendage rather endearing.

"What were you, before?" she asked, gesturing towards him, leaving the rest of the question unspoken.

Looking up, Olin exhaled a heavy sigh. "I was a ghoul for nearly two hundred years," he revealed, "and before that, I was a vampire, dating back long before the convergence of Nyxoria with this reality."

Kaida fell silent, processing this new information. She had never met a native of this moon before. Like many others, she had come here in search of riches and new magic, only to meet her untimely end in a monstrous wave centuries ago.

Her expression softened as she shared her own story, connecting with Olin's experience. "I'm sorry to hear that," she said sincerely. "I had to flee my home world not long after it became one of the moons. I wandered around for a while before ending up here. Then, well, things happened, and I found myself staying here, beneath the Beastveil."

Olin nodded, acknowledging the harsh realities of their world. "It's a hard realm," he admitted. His expression then shifted to one of mild surprise. "I must say, though, I'm taken aback by how readily you and your people have accepted us. You know nothing about us, yet I've been allowed to wander around freely."

Kaida let out a knowing smirk. "First off, you're inhabiting the body of a beastkin. That alone deters most from questioning you," she explained. Her expression then turned more serious. "Second, you're associated with her."

“Her?” Olin’s confusion was evident.

“The daughter of our goddess, or rather, my goddess,” Kaida clarified, her voice tinged with reverence. “After her daughter’s recent appearance, I wouldn’t be surprised if more start converting to follow the Crone, or even openly worship her daughter.”

He scoffed at the mention of Blake, earning a sharp glare from Kaida. “Blake?” Olin said dismissively. “She was summoned here by my mistress. She’s not some deity,” he insisted, his tone firm. “I can personally attest to that.”

Kaida’s expression, however, remained unwavering. “The signs of the Crone’s essence are interwoven into her souls. It’s unmistakable to anyone who can peer into a soul. As an undead, you should be able to see this yourself,” she countered with conviction. “I don’t need her confirmation to understand who or what she is.”

The revenant’s gaze drifted as her voice laced with wonder as she spoke of Blake. “There’s so much more than just divinity in her souls. Legends, myths... they’re all there, etched deep within,” she murmured, her eyes reflecting the vast tapestry of stories she imagined within Blake. The reverence in her tone was unmistakable, hinting at her deep belief in the extraordinary nature of Blake’s existence.

Her focus then sharpened, a flicker of curiosity in her eyes. “But she’s not the only enigma,” Kaida noted, her gaze piercing. “There’s a similar depth in that other lich.” The way she leaned in, her voice lowering, suggested a wealth of untold tales linking Blake and the other lich.

Kaida’s expression became inquisitive, yet she maintained a hint of subtlety. “I’m curious about those two... And about what you said – your mistress summoning her. What’s the story there?” Her question, poised casually, belied the keen interest behind it, inviting Olin to unveil a part of the puzzle she was piecing together.

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In awe, Yua stared at the city’s marble walls, extending into the vastness beyond. “It looks like something straight out of Aladin,” she whispered, her gaze tracing every detail of the splendid architecture.

Beside her stood a rich brown-hued man with long, braided black hair and pale green eyes, his elongated ears marking him as a woodland elf. “Far better than the dark, dreary lands those bloodsuckers came from,” he remarked, his voice tinged with disdain.

Turning towards Rob, Yua’s eyes quickly assessed his attire. “The first thing we need to do is get you some better clothes,” she observed, noting the oversized garments draping his form.

Rob’s voice carried a hint of uncertainty as he gazed at the imposing walls. “What do you think we’ll find behind those walls?” he asked, the question revealing a flicker of doubt about his recent choices.

In his mind, he wrestled with the consequences of turning away from the vampires. He reminded himself firmly that he had never pledged allegiance to anyone, not even the Crone. His desire was simple: a safe, normal life, maybe even a chance to return home. The title of Nightmare Paladin weighed heavily on him; he felt too young for such burdens, only about seventeen, though he suspected his body might be way older. His internal conflict was evident in his expression, a mix of resolve and apprehension about the path he had chosen.

Rob felt a surge of reassurance as a soft, comforting feminine voice reached him, audible only to his ears. “*Don’t worry, if anything messes with you, use what I’ve taught you,*” Circe’s gentle tone soothed him.

He glanced over, his smile softening as he caught sight of Circe’s ethereal presence, her ghostly blue and pink form a tangible reminder of his safety. He nodded subtly in acknowledgment, grateful for her guidance. The thought of trying to explain the invisible guidance he received seemed absurd in his mind. “*I’ve got an invisible goddess teaching me magic?*” he mused internally, unsure how such a revelation would be received or even believed. Keeping Circe’s presence, a secret, for now, seemed like the wisest course of action.

Yet, amidst their interactions, Rob couldn’t help but notice moments when Circe appeared preoccupied, her gaze drifting upwards to the sky. She seemed lost in contemplation, perhaps pondering over events far greater and more complex than he could fathom. These instances of her distant musing hinted at the depth and scale of her concerns, stretching beyond the immediate realm to the broader cosmos.

Just as they ventured into Slaethia, the lively hum of the bustling city came to an abrupt halt. It felt as though time itself had paused, with every gaze in the crowded streets turning towards them. The sudden silence was almost deafening, heightening the sense of drama unfolding.

At that precise moment, a remarkable figure made his entrance. A thin, fair man, no taller than a dwarf, descended gracefully from the sky. His dragonfly-like wings buzzed at incredible speeds, reminiscent of a bumblebee’s rapid flutter. As he landed, his intense glare was directed unwaveringly at the two of them, adding an air of imminent confrontation to the already charged atmosphere.

As the figure alighted before them, he introduced himself with a certain formality. “You may call me, Galen,” he stated, his tone carrying an air of authority. His gaze, sharp and assessing, lingered on the pair as he posed a simple question. “Who may you two be the Champions of?” he inquired.

There was a weight to his question, an unspoken implication that hung heavily in the air. It was clear that their response was critical, and the wrong answer could spell their immediate doom. Feeling the pressure, Rob’s eyes darted to where Circe usually appeared, seeking her guidance, but she was conspicuously absent. He then turned to Yua, whose expression mirrored his own apprehension.

Sophia's breaths came in heavy pants, a mix of exhaustion and intense focus evident in her demeanor. She was immersed in her efforts to harness the magic within her, a task that had proven frustratingly elusive. The teachings from the vampires and the dungeon dwellers, emphasizing the use of inner mana, seemed futile; it simply didn't resonate with her.

In stark contrast, the tips Rob had shared with her before his and Yua's abrupt departure—a departure she still bitterly labeled as betrayal—had opened a new pathway. "Traitors," she muttered under her breath, her annoyance still fresh. But despite her feelings towards them, she couldn't deny the effectiveness of Rob's advice on external mana manipulation.

Now, she found herself deviating from the system's prescribed magic, discovering that her own way, free from the system's constraints, allowed her a greater sense of control and power. This newfound approach felt more natural, more in tune with her soul, and she delved deeper into it, leaving everyone else's teachings behind.

The title of Dark Acolyte, bestowed upon Sophia, hadn't brought the dramatic changes she might have expected. There were no extraordinary skills or significant unlocks that came with it, with one notable exception. She had begun to notice an accelerated learning curve unique to her class. The rate at which she was mastering magic was astonishing, surpassing her peers with an almost ludicrous ease.

Her fondness for studying under the necromancers had nothing to do with their control over corpses—an aspect she found distinctly unappealing. Instead, it was their manipulation of souls that captivated her interest. The abundance and potential of souls offered a new realm of power for her to explore.

A dark chuckle escaped her lips as she recalled summoning her first spectral warrior, shimmering in ethereal green hues. The thrill of conjuring such a translucent being filled her with a sense of wicked delight. The idea of commanding a ghost army, a formidable force under her control, was intoxicating. She eagerly anticipated the day when she would be powerful enough to turn this ambitious vision into a reality.

The aspect of her newfound power that Sophia found both horrifying and delightful was the ability of her spectral warriors to remain unseen and undetected, yet ever-present and ready to act on her command. This clandestine nature of her ghostly minions added a thrilling, almost sinister dimension to her abilities.

At that very moment, she was guarded by no fewer than thirteen spectral figures, each one a silent, invisible sentinel watching over her. To the outside observer, she appeared alone, but in reality, she was far from it. This secretive shield of protection filled her with a sense of dark satisfaction.

Sophia couldn't help but wonder how Blake would react to her newfound skills. Would she appreciate what Sophia could offer? Would the dark monster of a woman appreciate her? And then there was Jason, the sadist. A wicked grin spread across her face at the thought of unleashing her ghostly army on him. The idea of her spectral warriors, ethereal and merciless, tearing out his heart was a fantasy that brought her an undeniable sense of wicked pleasure. She chuckled to herself once more, reveling in these dark musings.





“I think we’re lost,” came the remark from behind.

Jason snarled, casting a sharp glance back at Vorigan, the frog-like vampire who had become an irritating shadow. Despite his many efforts to ditch him, Vorigan persisted, reappearing with maddening consistency. “We’re not lost,” Jason hissed through his needle-like teeth, frustration lacing his voice.

“At this rate, it will take us a few more months to arrive at the Beastveil,” Vorigan croaked, an almost gleeful tone in his voice, as if relishing the prolonged journey.

Jason’s look lingered on the vampire, his gaze sharp and wary, suspicion simmering beneath the surface. He noted how Vorigan’s skin blistered and charred under the harsh sunlight, only to heal almost instantly—a grotesque yet fascinating display. The nagging thought that Vorigan was intentionally goading him seemed increasingly likely. Maybe the perverse vampire was looking for another round of violence, something that seemed to bring him a twisted sort of delight.

Finally, Jason’s patience snapped. “Shut the fuck up, or I’ll rip your arms off this time and shove them up your ass!” he threatened, his voice a dangerous growl, hinting at the violent capabilities he was all too willing to unleash.

Vorigan’s reaction was immediate and bizarrely enthusiastic. He hopped in place, his eyes lighting up with a disturbing kind of excitement. “Yes, please!”