

BLACK PUDDING

CHAPTER 15

“Alright, Blake, it’s time to get back to training!”

“Oh yes, Ava, because while we’re busy trying to track down the four escaped candidates that nearly took me out with a single spell, let’s make sure to add even more to our already overflowing plate. Priorities, right?”

I stumbled out of the boss chamber where I had just battled the five candidates. I was frustrated. The remains of the one I had decapitated were nowhere to be found, just a bunch of bloody stains smeared on the stone floor. To make matters worse, the remains of the undead goblins I easily tore apart were barely a snack. And to add insult to injury, Ava won’t stop pestering me about training. As much as it irks me to say it, she’s got a point. To guarantee my freedom, I must learn to harness my power without relying on that damn goddess-controlled system.

“Ah, finally! You’re catching on. Plus, you can easily handle this training while we track them down. At the very least, it’ll help you avoid getting taken out by one spell-like some noob.”

“Ugh, fine, Ava, what am I practicing first?”

“Listen up, rookie. You can’t keep relying on those system commands if you want to be a real spell caster. Let’s face it, you haven’t quite mastered the art of spellcasting yet. But hey, no worries, that’s why I’m here to guide you. Who knows, maybe someday you’ll throw out spells like a big girl sorceress... Or, at the very least, like a deranged man-eating sorceress with some major daddy issues.”

“Seriously, Ava, can you stop being such a pain in my ass? You know what, fine, whatever, let’s just get this over and start already. I already know the basics of casting without the system. The tricky part is doing it in the heat of battle, not during training.”

“So, clueless as ever, I see. Care to explain how you’re casting magic without the system?”

I suddenly sensed something was off with Ava but couldn’t quite put my finger on it. “Well, it’s hard to explain, but when it comes to casting spells, I rely on my instincts and gut feeling. It’s like a sixth sense, you know?”

“Pshh, like an aimless child stumbling in the dark, you have no idea what you’re doing, do you? Casting spells by feel?! That’s just ridiculous.”

“Whatever, it’s not like you’re giving me any useful guidance anyways. But yes, Ava, I rely on my instincts and intuition to cast magic without the system. Wasn’t that what you told me to do?”

“Listen up, child. What you’re feeling is not some magical intuition. It’s the ambient mana surrounding you. The system only taps into your internal mana, which is limited and regulated, but

ambient mana has no boundaries, restrictions, or anything. And if you want to be a real spellcaster, unbound by any laws, you need to know that every magical rule has a million exceptions. So, the biggest exception you can use to your advantage is channeling the mana around you to cast your spells and abilities. Got it, or do I have to spell it out for you again?”

“Wow, someone’s in a lovely mood. Ugh, whatever. I think I’m getting it, Ava, but how does that apply to stamina spells and abilities?”

“By the ancient magic, do you not know anything? Stamina-based abilities can be rebalanced with proper mana manipulation. You must substitute stamina with mana with a fine balance of mana manipulation. To master manipulating mana for stamina abilities, you must hone your mana control. Alas, I shouldn’t expect you to grasp the intricacies of magic, should I?”

A sense of unease grew as I listened to Ava’s condescending remark about my lack of magical knowledge. Her last remark didn’t sound like her, and I knew it wasn’t something I would say, even when I was being a total bitch. If it wasn’t something I would say, then why would Ava? It was like someone had taken over her personality and was manipulating her. *OH SHIT!* The realization hit me like a ton of bricks, and I couldn’t help but mentally scream.

“By the ancient magic? You’re not, Ava, you fucking bitch!”

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“Ava, are you still in there?!”

“Yes, what’s up? What were we talking about?”

“...How ambient mana works.”

“Oh, right!”

“You were going to tell me how to cast magic with ambient mana....”

“Oh, that’s easy, by feel!”

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“What?”

“Nothing, Ava...”

“No, seriously, what?”

“Umm... I’m pretty sure you were just swapped out with Ms. Bitch Ass.”

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“Ava?”

“FUCK!”

“So, Ava, if I can completely abandon the system, will she lose the ability to manipulate us?”

“She’s not exactly manipulating us, Blake, more like assisting us, but in the most irritating manner imaginable.”

“Ugh, tell me about it.”

“The worst part, Blake. I don’t think she’s doing it on purpose.”

“Wonderful, so, what is it? Does she think so little of us that she has no understanding of our free will and how morally wrong it is to manipulate us?”

My reality was beginning to infuriate me as it dawned on me that some goddess was messing with my life. Sure, she seemed to be trying to help us condescendingly, but only because we were mere pawns in her stupid proxy war. She didn’t care about me, or Ava for that matter.

“Umm, morally wrong? ...Blake, you enjoy murdering and devouring people.”

“Oh, shut up.”

As I stepped out of the boss chamber, a strange sensation began to crawl up the back of my neck. I paused and looked around, but the vast expanse of the dungeon’s cavern system revealed nothing out of the ordinary. However, I knew better than to assume that there wasn’t something hiding and watching me.

“Ava, did you feel that?” I asked, hoping she might have sensed something I had missed.

Ava responded, her voice teetering between amusement and excitement. “Yep, that was me. I was trying to share your Soulsense spell with you. You should probably start training that one first since it’s pretty handy. Try to focus on it without activating the system command and see if you can find our little spy!”

“Spy?”

“...Yep.”

Ava urged me on, her voice full of excitement as if she was struggling not to laugh. She was clearly amused by the fact that someone was watching us, but I didn’t care. I couldn’t help but feel a sense of thrill for a hunt. Besides, I knew she was right and needed to train the skill, so why not have fun while I do it.

“Alright, I’ll give it a shot,” I replied.

I’ll try focusing on it without activating the system and see if I can find my meal. With a deep breath, I closed my eyes and focused on the sensation of the spell, trying to detect any sign of a presence lurking nearby. After a few moments, I felt a prickling sensation at the back of my neck, indicating that someone or something was watching me. To be honest, I think Ava was aiding me. But there was something odd about the feeling; it was pulling me in a particular direction as if beckoning me to follow. So, I did what any flesh-eating monster would do. I gave in to my primal instincts and followed the feeling, eager to track down my prey.

The sensation led me to a large boulder, and with a simple flex of my arm, it twisted and writhed into a grotesque black tentacle that whipped around the rock, searching for the source of the feeling. Suddenly, a startled yelp pierced the air as the tentacle found its target. I pulled it back towards me, eagerly anticipating the taste of fresh blood and flesh on my tongue. As my prey came into view, I realized the horrifying truth. My tentacle had ensnared a small goblin...child.

My heart raced with excitement, and a sadistic grin spread across my face. I felt a surge of adrenaline and a sense of elation as I pondered the new depths of depravity I could reach. I reveled in the thought of killing, savoring the feeling of power and control as I prepared to commit even more gruesome acts.

However, for a moment, I considered releasing the child. But the thought of letting my prey go was abhorrent. I couldn't let this opportunity slip away, no matter how small and insignificant my meal might be. As I raised my tentacle, grasping the child, he looked at me with wide, gleeful eyes filled with joy and excitement. I couldn't help but feel a twinge of guilt and remorse, but it was quickly replaced with a burning desire to satisfy my hunger. With a cruel smile, I prepared to finish what I had started, determined to sate my bloodlust no matter the cost.

So, you can imagine my disappointment when I released the little shit.

I asked, my voice tinged with frustration, "Wartie, what are you doing here?"

Damn, Blake, I really thought you were going to eat him, came Ava's surprised remark. Glad I turned off your passives.

Same here. I mentally shot back, my tone carrying a hint of regret.

"I-I follow, Muddy. Wanna show you new pet. See. See. Look!"

In his small palm, the goblin held up a square cube, revealing a tiny gelatinous cube monster that jiggled about, and to my surprise, with a soft and squeaky voice, it cried out, "Kill me!"

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"It wasn't your imagination, Blake. That was the Veil Polyglot translating what it said for you," Ava said.

"No, I Wartie, not Beak. What ill polywart?" replied the goblin child to Ava's remark.

Could you fucking stop speaking with my mouth in front of others, Ava? I feel like some kind of deranged psychopath with a split personality when you do it.

"But you are a psychopath with a split personality," Ava quipped.

"Stop that! And we already established you're not a split personality!" I retorted.

"No, you established that. I did not,"

"Ugh!" I groaned in frustration.

“What’s wrong? Who is Muddy talking with?” Wartie asked, his large saucer eyes filled with concern.

“Nothing to see here, just me talking to myself... Anyways! Did you happen to see four shady adventurers leaving this chamber while carrying a savory-looking, uh, I mean, a headless dead body?” I refused to acknowledge that they weren’t adventurers but instead my fellow competitors in a trial to become the Dark Champion.

“Yes.”

“And,” I replied with a forced calm, my patience already thin.

“And?”

The small cube continued to jiggle in the goblin’s hand, letting out squeaking pleas, “Kill me!”

“And...which way did they go?” I asked through gritted teeth as I ignored the cube.

“They go too deep roads. It down below dungeon.”

“Didn’t your Chieftain mention that the entrance to the deep roads was behind the waterfall?”

“Uh-huh,” he said while swaying back and forth on his heels.

“Did you hear them say anything as they went by?”

“Uh-huh.”

For fuck’s sake, I’m gonna rip him apart!

Your moral compass may be a bit off, Blake, but even you draw the line at killing children,” Ava said with a note of amused admonishment.

He’s a goblin, not a child.

Well, now you’re just being racist.

Argh! Fine, I’m not murdering the little bastard!

“Imp, uh, I mean, Wartie, can you tell me what they said?” I asked, my patience about to snap with the goblin child.

“Okay... Umm, but only four, no headless body. They say, trial over, quitting, finding own exit, they say.”

I was left confused and bewildered. Where could his body have gone if they didn’t have the dead candidate? And, to add to the confusion, they were quitting the trial. What did this even mean? Did it mean I had won by default, or did I need to go after them? The more I thought about it, the more questions arose, and with no one to ask for answers, I was left completely lost. *Ava, thoughts?*

Ava shrugged, using my shoulders. “I don’t know either. Until someone tells you you’ve won, my best guess is to go after them.”

“Won?” the child asked.

“I’m going to fight those big evil adventurers who killed your last pet. What was his name?” I asked, still not confessing to having eaten his pet slime.

Wartie’s eyes burned with fiery determination as he proclaimed, “Doodles!”

“Kill me!”

“Umm... Wartie, can you hear your new pet cube speaking?” I asked.

“Muddy silly, Gooley cannot speak,” the kid laughed.

The tiny cube jiggled in the goblin’s palm and emitted a high-pitched squeak, “End my misery!”

I gazed upon the tiny wobbling cube and uttered, “I see... Well, you take good care of Gooley. I’m leaving. Places to go, adventurers to kill.”

“I come!”

FUCK! I mentally shouted, causing Ava to burst out laughing in my head. “Oh, no, no, no! It’s not safe for you where I’m going. You’d better go back to your village.”

The child leaned towards me, a broad grin spreading across his face. “Me know shortcut!”

Ava’s laughter only intensified. The only other noise that could be heard was the cube’s persistent begging for death.

“Fine, lead the way, kid,” I said, my frustration showing in my tone. *I hate my life!*

Wartie’s grin only grew wider as I conceded to the goblin child’s desire for revenge against the ones I had falsely accused of killing his last pet. *Ah, whatever*, I thought to myself. *Doodles had been pretty tasty.*