

BLAKE PUDDING

CHAPTER 13

AWAKEN

My head—scratch that, I’m currently lacking one. Umm... consciousnesses? *Yeah, that works!* My consciousnesses swirled with confusion as I woke to find myself sprawled on a stony surface, oozing out like an impromptu Rorschach test in black tar.

Too silly?

Just a tad, Dream.

Shush, me.

Panic should’ve been the appropriate response, but let’s be honest, this wasn’t exactly new to me. My senses were a tangled web of confusion, vibrating with what felt like panic or pain—I couldn’t quite discern. Amidst the chaos, whispers skittered through the darkness.

“Our prayers have been answered,” came an awed breath.

“Answered? Looks like someone took a dump on the altar,” a less impressed whisper countered.

Igniting my Mana Sight felt like trying to read a spellbook in the dark—underwater, with goth rock blaring in the background. *Ah, reminds me of high school.* A perfect picture of trying and failing. When I tried once more, it was akin to yanking at a stuck zipper on fishnet tights—frustrating and slightly painful. But persistence paid off, and soon enough, my world came into view as a beautiful cascade of dusk, twilight, and a delightful kind of blurriness.

—Wait, this isn’t right.

No, shit!

“Do you see that?” a voice cut through the murkiness with a tremor of excitement.

“There are two glowing orbs within it,” another observed with a note of intrigue.

“Quick, someone fetch Kaida!” demanded another, urgency etching each syllable into the heavy air.

Focusing took effort, but as far as I could tell, I was in some poorly lit chamber swarming with shadowy figures whose outlines bled into each other like spilled ink on parchment. Why my Mana Sight was on the fritz was beyond me.

I bailed on the battle for better vision and turned to Polymorph, targeting a less... blob-like and more socially acceptable shape. *Full disclosure: that’s a bit of a stretch.* Contorting into an airbrushed fantasy from a beauty mag’s centerfold felt akin to wriggling into ‘aspirational’ jeans—

you know, the ones optimistically purchased during a fleeting (and possibly delusional) skinny phase. But hey, the fashion runway isn't known for comfort, right?

My arms reached out from the puddle of my tar-like form into the void above... and grasped at nothingness.

“Look, it's almost as if it's reaching out for someone to hold it,” a voice cooed, a mix of wonder and amusement in their tone.

What the hell?

Maybe we messed up the spell?

I doubt it.

Give it another go, just to be sure.

I'm still on it.

“Don't just walk up to it; we have no clue what it's capable of,” cautioned another voice, edged with a hint of fear.

“It manifested on the altar, for Beastveil's sake. It's obviously been sent by a divine to aid us,” I heard someone else argue, their tone laced with a stubborn certainty.

Whispers fluttered around the altar like moths to a flame, their debate as fervent as the chants in a crypt. I reached for my Mana Sight, craving the control over the chimeric darkness, only to find it as elusive as grasping smoke with clawed fingers. Shadows wrapped around my senses, a shroud of secrecy that defied my command.

With the hunger of the ancient catacombs, I called forth Necrotic Flame, my souls' abyss yearning to see their flesh crumble to ash. Yet, the dark gift betrayed me, and no pyre rose to consume the heretic whispers. Bitter and cold, my essence recoiled. I turned to Blight, to unleash a miasma of pestilence, envisioning a cloud rolling over them, blossoming sores and weeping lesions upon their skin, a dance of decay to ravage flesh and fear alike. But the silence that followed was as profound as the grave's depth—no wail of affliction, no chorus of sores, only the sterile air mocking my futile rage.

My powers, once as omnipresent as the night's embrace, were now as absent as the warmth of the sun from the catacomb's heart, leaving me adrift—a specter bereft of its ancient dread.

Such a drama queen. Hey Nightmare, stop hijacking my narrative!

Oh, shut it, Dream. It's a dual act, remember?

“Did it just... burp?” one voice queried, a note of bewilderment in the air.

“No, that was definitely a fart,” another concluded, snickering.

Ugh, this is so humiliating.

Did we lose our system access again?

No idea. I'll check, but those weren't system skills.

NAME: BLAKE RACE: ELDRITCH PUDDING CLASS: PHANTASM <u>TITLES</u> DESCENDANT OF THE END SCION OF DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES		
<u>RACIAL SKILLS</u> [DEVOURER] [DISINTEGRATION] <u>SPELLS</u> [PHANTASMAL DOMINION] [PHANTASMAL MIST] <u>ABILITIES</u> [PHANTASMAL SURGE] [WEB OF WHISPERS]	<u>VULNERABILITIES</u> [FIRE] [HOLY] <u>IMMUNITIES</u> [ACID] [CHARM] [DARKNESS] [DISEASE] [POISON] [SLEEP]	<u>UNIQUE</u> [BIRTHRIGHT] [SOVEREIGN HEIRESS] <u>SELECTABLE</u> NONE

See! We still have access to the system.

Do you feel that?

I don't feel anything.

Exactly!

Extending my senses into the surrounding murk felt off. No, I don't possess a sixth sense or anything mystical like the 'Force,' but usually, ambient mana flows to me, intertwining with my essence effortlessly. However, now the mana was scarce, leaving the air so thick it was like trying to breathe amidst a forest inferno. Logically, you'd think a mana-saturated air would feel heavier, but I was quickly realizing this was the exact opposite; accustomed as I was to mana's abundant presence, its absence now felt suffocating. The more I grasped the stark lack, the more the feeling of asphyxiation gripped me, heightening my alarm over what was truly wrong.

Lost in thought about my predicament, a tantalizing and delightful scent teased my senses. It was an unexpected scent that drifted by, warm and comforting—like fresh-baked bread and cookies just out of the oven. Yet, I knew the delicious smell was a trick of my odd biology; what I was actually sensing was the stench of decay and death.

The gathered figures before me parted, and the blurred outline of a woman stepped forward from the group. The intoxicating fragrance emanated from her, and despite the oddity of my true form, I experienced something akin to salivation.

“A Black Pudding,” came a raspy feminine voice, rich with astonishment.

“It appears so, Lady Kaida,” another voice confirmed.

“And it manifested here on the altar?” Kaida’s voice probed further.

“Just after the altar blazed with light, and as it dimmed, this... pudding remained,” came the explanation from another bystander.

“Fascinating,” Kaida mused, her curiosity palpable in the air.

“Fetch some meat,” she commanded abruptly.

“But our supplies are already so low,” a concerned voice interjected.

“We need not dip into our provisions. Remove a limb or something from one of the Slaethian prisoners,” Kaida decreed with a dismissive wave, resolving the matter.

“What about the woman who arrived recently? I’ve been itching to sink my claws into her,” a gruff male voice proposed, tinged with a sinister anticipation.

“No, she remains untouchable...for now,” Kaida’s voice cut through the suggestion with authority.

The chamber’s details were a blur, but the sound of footsteps scattering at Kaida’s command was clear as a pack scattering at the alpha’s growl. My attention, however, was riveted to the woman—the aroma wafting off of her hinted at her undead nature. An inexplicable hunger gnawed at me, a ravenous itch deep in the core of my being, whispering that it had been years since my last feast.

Let’s just gobble her up!

Easy there, psycho. We’re in a room full of strangers, and our magic is on the fritz. Again.

System skills are still a go, right?

Should be. But let’s play it cool until we know the score.

Fine, waiting it is. She did mention something about a snack coming our way, right?

Yeah, free lunch sounds good to me.

The undead woman drew nearer, her movement cautious and measured, a faint aura of mana clinging to her like mist to the moonlit gravestones. She was a solitary anomaly in a room suffused with the scent of the living—a beacon of the macabre in an ocean of warmth, which led me to suspect some form of magical masquerade at play. In my brief tenure in this realm, I’d learned that the undead typically didn’t mingle freely outside their ilk, preferring the morbid company of necromancers and sexy vampires.

I tried to query aloud, to unravel the enigma she presented, but found my voice to be just another absent friend, likely another casualty of my tenuous grasp on the lack of ambient mana. Speaking, once a seamless act, was now as fruitless as trying to catch smoke with bare hands. It was a curious predicament, considering that I could still comprehend the murmurs and debates fluttering around me—thanks, no doubt, to whatever vestiges of the Veil Polyglot skill remained woven into my subconsciousness or perhaps even my essence.

In the scant mana permeating this place, my reliance on innate magic seemed to teeter on the brink of oblivion. Yet, here I was, still understanding their words as if carried on the whispers of the wind itself. Magic, it seemed, was as fickle and unpredictable as the Dream Realm’s ever-twisting narrative—a puzzle forever missing pieces, a game played with the rules ever changing. But hey, when life gives you lemons, you make zombie-ade, right?

Zombie-ade, Dream? Really? Could we not?

Ha! It’s catchy, right?

My narrative could do without your... culinary commentary being added into it.

Remember, it’s a team effort here. Teamwork makes the dream work, right? Or should I say... nightmare work?

You must’ve gotten all our sarcastic smart mouth.

...Seems so. But it’s better than all our bitchiness.

...

The sound of my internal bickering was drowned out by the thunderous approach of hurried footsteps—a clear signal someone was on the move.

“Lady Kaida, the meat you requested,” a man’s voice broke through the din.

“Thank you. And the prisoner—did they resist when you took it?” the undead woman’s voice was calm, almost curious.

“No, my lady. It was easier to take from those already fallen,” he replied.

“A prudent choice indeed,” Kaida mused, a hint of approval in her tone.

“There’s talk of feeding it? Is it to become a pet now?” a skeptical voice interjected.

“What’s she going to do with a pet like that?” another added, the snark in their voice failing to veil their underlying unease.

Irritation flared as I overheard the “pet” comment, and instinctively, my form swelled and leaned towards the sound. The room’s occupants were still nothing but a murky sea of silhouettes to me, each one as indistinct as the last—a frustrating smudge on reality’s canvas. Hindered by this hazy sight, I held back the urge to unleash my newly acquired system skills on the fools who had referred to me as an animal. But hey, let’s not get too huffy over some chump’s words, right? Instead, I’m

just here simmering in my own gooey stew of spite, itching to give everyone a taste of real terror—*see how pet-like they find me with a bit more mana in the air.*

“Is that thing eyeing us?” echoed the voice of the “pet” comment, tinged with a mix of curiosity and unease.

As I toyed with the idea of testing my new Phantasmal Surge skill on them, a delightful interruption came in the form of decaying flesh pressed against my form—a gift, perhaps, or a peace offering. I reveled in the flavor, relishing the old, ripened taste of meat left to age like a fine wine, only juicier. What can I say? Aged meat’s got character, like cheese, but better. Judging by the texture and the subtle hints of stringy youth marinated in cinnamon flavored fear upon death, I pegged it as elf—a gourmet’s choice in the realm of carrion connoisseurship. I caught a glimpse of the hand—pun totally intended—being proffered by the undead lady, with a finesse that belied her blurred figure.

“Mmm, so good,” I murmured, the richness of decay filling my gooey body’s taste buds with delight.

The Kaida lady recoiled, letting the limb fall back onto the altar, still within the sprawl of my reach. I paid her retreat no mind, instead savoring my meal through the process of corrosion—or was it Disintegration now? It was hard to keep track with my skills getting a makeover.

“It... it spoke,” came the collective gasp from the surrounding figures.

Did I? I tried again for good measure. Hello! ...Nope, just the silent treatment from me. Great.

Ugh, typical.

Finishing the last morsel of the offered limb with a mental flourish that my form emulated with a shrug, I was barely allowed a moment’s respite before another deliciously decaying hunk of flesh dangled before me. My body’s cravings took over, and I indulged in the tender rot. *The body knows what it craves, right?*

While I was in mid-chew, the undead lady Kaida stepped closer, her curiosity apparently piqued.

“Did you just see it... shrug?” someone in the crowd marveled, their voice tinged with disbelief.

“You’re imagining things,” another dismissed, the skeptic in the bunch.

“Quiet,” the raspy command from Kaida sliced through their murmurs. “Hello there, can you understand what I’m saying?”

I didn’t pause my feast to acknowledge her. Instead, I kept at it, savoring the morbid meal. In my head, I quipped about her futile attempt at communication. “As if we could talk back right now—she’s either playing the fool or just plain stupid. Yeah, the ambient mana here sucks ass! But hey, as long as the buffet keeps coming, who are we to complain? Let’s not chomp on the zombie lady handing out the goodies, at least not yet.”

“It—it does talk,” I heard the shock in their voices, a collective inhale of breaths as they processed my inner monologue made audible.

Kaida staggered back, as another person cut in, “What does it mean by zombie?” The question hung in the air, heavy with implications and a hint of dread.

Wait—did we just say that aloud?

Seems like it.

“Everyone out!” Kaida’s command cut through the air, decisive and cold.

A murmur of dissent rustled through the chamber, followed by the scuffle of feet as the congregation began to disperse. Yet amidst the retreat, one figure remained—a hazy outline lingering in the room, exuding an aroma of rot and decay that was paradoxically intoxicating. To me, it was the scent of a forbidden allure, a perfume that bespoke tales of the night.

Is she...

Staying?

I watched the vague form of Kaida with a predator’s interest. The stale air of the chamber seemed to cling to her, like the final note of a gothic symphony hanging suspended in the atmosphere, both grim and exquisite.

There was something richly ironic about finding the stench of decomposition so... alluring. It was the kind of signature scent that could turn heads in the most shadowed of alleyways—‘Eau de Necrosis,’ a true undead classic. I could almost picture what a bottle would look like: sleek, dark, with an elegant skull label.

Dream!

My bad.

Perhaps she lingered for a reason. Maybe she sensed a kindred spirit in my amorphous form, or perhaps she was just morbidly curious. Either way, her presence was like an unexpected blessing, a macabre patron with a seemingly endless supply of gruesome gifts—provided she kept the limbs coming, of course.

After the last footsteps faded, only Kaida’s intense scrutiny remained, palpable in the stillness.

“How did you know?” she hissed with a touch of awe—or was it fear?

Know what?

That she’s... you know, undead and stuff.

Oh, right!

Trying to answer her felt like pushing against a closed door in my mind—sometimes, my voice was a gushing river, other times, as elusive as a desert mirage. I aimed for a word, any word, but

found silence instead. In a display of what could only be described as blobby frustration, I managed a gesture that resembled a shrug, as much as a pudding could muster, to show my nonchalance—or maybe my helplessness.

Helplessness? Nah, we'll call it annoyance.

Agreed.

The woman's posture hinted at exasperation, perhaps a silent, dramatic palm cradling her forehead. She lingered in a tense pause before she approached, her form casting a larger shadow over my spread-out self on the altar. As she neared, my world brightened with sudden color, turning the previously grayish blur into a splash of hues. It felt like a drab scene from an old film suddenly bursting into technicolor—except, in this version, the ruby slippers were just out of reach.

Finally noticing my new, albeit still fuzzy, chromatic view, I sensed mana flowing from her—subtle, yet undeniable. It mingled with the air, offering me a thread to grasp. Realization dawned, and with it came a spark of boldness.

“Can you hear me now?” I spoke out, half-expecting a chorus of Munchkins—or gnomes—to join in.

She froze, her presence still as death. “I can,” came her response, laced with a mix of surprise and caution.

“What's up with the lack of mana in the air?” I asked.

The question might not have been top-tier in the grand scheme of things, but at that particular moment, it was burning a hole in my patience. Let's face it, stuck in goo form with no shapeshifting jazz hands and a monologue that needed a mana boost from zombie lady here? Yeah, it kind of shot up to question number one on the hit parade.

“We're beneath the Beastveil Kingdom's capital, in the catacombs,” she started explaining, voice echoing slightly off the stone walls. “It used to be the bustling black market, now it's a makeshift sanctuary for the last of the rebels and refugees. The ambient mana's thin because we're siphoning it for a barrier to keep the Slaethian patrols above from finding us.”

“Okay, slow down, backtrack,” I interrupted, still digesting her words.

I caught ‘Slaethian patrols’ and ‘catacombs’ and stuck on those because let's be real—I was to magical knowledge what a fish is to a bicycle: absolutely clueless. Plus, ‘Beastveil’? That sounded like the name of a level in a dark fantasy video game I'd play... not live. The rest flew over my head faster than a bat out of hell.

“I'm just looking to reunite with a certain sexy vampire,” I said. “Just show me where to find the nearest coven, and I'll be on my way.”

“Vampires?” Kaida echoed, confusion lacing her voice. “You weren't sent to aid us?”

“Nope, not in the slightest,” I replied with a shrug that my form couldn't quite emulate.

“But we have been praying for deliverance,” Kaida pressed, her desperation tangible even in the gloom. “For two long years, we’ve sought the goddess’s intervention, and then you emerged upon our altar, a beacon in our darkest hour.”

I paused, considering her words. “Yeah... about that, I’m just going to need that direction.”

Her disappointment was audible. “Why would the Crone deliver you to our doorstep if not to assist us?” she murmured, more to herself than to me.

Crap.

“The Crone?” I repeated, with unintended interest creeping into my tone. Kaida’s sharp gaze snapped to me, a predator sensing vulnerability. Even through the blur, the intensity of her stare was palpable, and I realized I might have just sparked a deal—or a problem.

“You know, there’s been talk of your coming,” Kaida said, a new edge of intrigue in her voice. “Why not meet with our Queen? She’s been eager to see the one spoken of in prophecies.”

“Prophesied?” I couldn’t help the skepticism dripping from the word.

Kaida’s chuckle was a low, knowing sound. “Indeed. An elf turned herself in, claiming she’d been guided by her god to await your arrival. We were all a bit surprised when a Black Pudding showed up, speaking no less.”

I sighed, my mind on other matters. “I’m just trying to find Aurelia.”

“Empress Aurelia?” Her voice hitched with surprise.

“Empress?” The title rolled off my tongue, a mix of confusion and curiosity.

She nodded, her tone a mix of respect and a hint of fear. “She’s rallied what’s left of the fallen kingdoms. To us, she’s nothing short of an empress.”

I frowned, digesting the news. “How long was I out?” A pause followed, then a more pressing question. “And are you... hiding that you’re undead? You seemed tense when I pointed it out.”

After a pause thick enough to slice, she confirmed, “Yes, it’s a closely guarded secret. The Queen alone is privy to the truth of what I am.”

“Understood,” I replied, the words dripping with a solemnity I didn’t quite feel. “Your secret’s... let’s say, as safe as a chocolate bar at a weight loss camp.”

Her confusion was almost palpable. “What?” she echoed, her voice laced with surprise and a hint of alarm.

“What? What?” I parroted back.



Heather awoke in a panic, bolting upright in her bed. The sheets slid from her dusky elven skin, her breath quickening as sweat beaded her body. Long white hair, a cascading shield of silver, clung to the contours of her breast, offering scant protection from the chill of the room. A flurry of whispers invaded her thoughts, each one sending a tremor through her. The abruptness of her awakening nearly sent her tumbling from the bed, but for the arm ensnared around her and the comforting cover of a demonic wing draped over her lower half.

“What’s wrong?” The succubus’s voice, a velvety purr, broke the silence.

“She’s returned,” Heather panted, the words barely escaping as she gasped for air.

“Who has?” The succubus propped herself on an elbow, her eyes narrowing with concern.

“Blake,” replied Heather, the Priestess of Dreams.

A shadow crossed the succubus’s face, her lips twisting. “I’ve never cared for that one,” she muttered with a hint of distaste.

Heather’s touch was tender as she caressed Niamh’s cheek and drew her into a lingering kiss. “This time, things will change,” she whispered, a promise wrapped in the warmth of her breath.

Niamh exhaled, letting the Priestess’s assurance sink in. “Then we must inform...” Her voice faltered, betraying her reluctance. “Aurelia.”

With a lingering kiss that hinted at both urgency and a promise, Heather finally broke away, her movements brisk as she reached for her robes. The process of dressing was interrupted by Niamh’s arresting stare, her eyes alight with a predatory interest that roved over Heather’s exposed skin. The Priestess hesitated, torn between the call to action and the silent call of desire.

But the pull of the succubus’s gaze was a siren’s call she found irresistible. With a playful smirk, Heather let her robes slip from her grasp, the fabric pooling at her feet. She returned to the bed with a deliberate, sensuous grace, surrendering to the warmth and welcome of Niamh’s waiting arms. Thighs entwined with arms, and hands grasping horns, they found solace in their shared passion, letting the day’s quietude delay the pressing news of Blake’s return until evening’s first shadows invited whispers of the night’s stirring.



Yua’s stride was a tempest, each step a crack of thunder across the sunlit courtyard, her heart a battlefield of emotions she dared not name. The betrayal she felt was a living thing, tearing at her with claws of frustration and fangs of pain. She blinked rapidly, trying in vain to dam the flow of tears that betrayed the agony of the moans and screams etched into her memory. Her fury was a blinding blaze, an eclipse of reason, as she raged against the injustice that had set her world alight.

“Can’t sleep during the day either?” The unexpected deep voice startled Yua, sending her into a defensive crouch.

As her eyes adjusted, they focused on Rob, the half-orc standing before her, the tension in her frame eased, but the surprise lingered. “You scared me,” she admitted, straightening up while rubbing the tears from her face with a raw, unsteady hand.

Regaining her composure, Yua drew a deep, shaky breath, the ache in her heart refusing to subside. She gave Rob a fleeting look, one that spoke volumes of her inner turmoil, before she turned to walk away—seeking solitude, seeking respite from the relentless grip of her sorrow.

Rob’s voice, hushed yet insistent, followed her. “If you want to leave this place, I know how and where we could go. I even got someone who’ll help us. You know, if you wanted,” he offered, his words a tentative whisper in the daylight’s clarity.

Had it been night, such a proposition might have reached unwanted ears. But under the sun’s watchful eye, only Yua, with her keen elven senses, caught the gravity of his words. She paused, turning back to regard Rob with a mixture of curiosity and desperation, the silent weight of her decision hanging between them.