

# BLACK PUDDING

## CHAPTER 11

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Once again, I found myself waking up in my liquid form on the floor of the former Red Toad's boss chamber. This time, every nerve in my Black Pudding body was ignited with jolts of pain as the aftereffects of that attack spell that hit me slowly faded. To make matters worse, I was buried in a pile of rubble. *Just fucking great.* I was so damn confident that I had the upper hand in that fight, considering the massive level gap. Who wouldn't feel invincible with over twenty levels of advantage? But no, I had to delude myself into thinking I was unstoppable, only to get my ass handed to me with a single goddamn attack spell. *I'm such a fucking idiot!*

After oozing out from under the debris that had come crashing down on me, I swiftly went to work reconstructing my form. It was remarkable how much easier and more fluid the process of shapeshifting had become with each iteration. Gone were the days of my creepy-cute alien appearance; now, I took on the form of an alluring human woman. Weaving my silk-like flesh back together had also become a seamless task. As I reformed, I made subtle adjustments to my dress, although it seemed to take on a slightly different look with each reshaping. The intricate details, like fashioning my silk face or adorning my attire with sinuous, writhing tendrils, seemed to flow effortlessly. It was as if my dark, gooey flesh possessed a will of its own, guiding my artistic choices with a twisted elegance.

That battle had been an absolute disaster, and to make matters worse, I hadn't followed Circe's advice to tap into ambient mana for my casting. Well, I can't deny that I made an effort, but let's face it, a life-or-death struggle isn't exactly the best time to experiment. Although, I must admit that my shapeshifting abilities have been working quite well without relying on the system. However, my primary goal remained unchanged: mastering spellcasting and refining my abilities without being dependent on the system. It seemed like a straightforward task, but executing it in the heat of combat proved to be a pain in the ass.

Truth be told, I still hadn't fully grasped Circe's reasoning behind ditching the system. I mean, it was her system, wasn't it? She would simply stress the importance of not relying on the system, hinting at some sort of advantageous exploit. However, reflecting on the chaotic encounter with the horde of undead, I couldn't ignore the fact that my reliance on the system had left me drained of mana, unable to sustain a constant barrage of Necrotic Flames.

With a luxurious stretch and a delightful sigh, I managed to shake off the last pesky remnants of that spell's jitters that lingered in my body. Glancing around, I didn't notice Circe's blue phantom ass anywhere. Most likely, getting knocked out had deactivated my Oracle skill. As much as I enjoyed annoying her, I didn't feel like resummoning that goddess just to endure another lecture about everything I had done wrong. I needed some time to process and figure things out on my own. But let's face it, I've always been a bit of a hypocrite, so I decided to cast [**Oracle**] anyways, just to see if there was anything useful she had to say.

As Circe's translucent blue and pink form rematerialized, I went to claim my prize... *What the hell?! My meal, the one I took all the effort to behead, had vanished into thin air! I could see the evidence of my work on the ground, the blood stains from where I had removed his head, but the candidate's remains were nowhere to be seen. And to add insult to injury, the two undead goblins I took down were barely even left as scraps. Argh, this is just fucking fantastic!*

"Hey Circe, how long was I out from that damn lightning bolt?"

"Now, how would I know? I wasn't here for it," Circe replied, her tone utterly disinterested.

"Wonderful..."

"Alright, so what's your brilliant plan, Blake? Are we going to chase after them like a desperate fool, or are we going to gracefully pursue some other equally idiotic endeavor? I mean, it's not like you ever listen to my divine advice anyway."

"Are you upset because I didn't completely rely on ambient mana?" I retorted, my frustration seeping into my words. "Well, you know what? Whatever! I honestly have no clue what I'm doing anymore. I thought having a higher level would make that fight a walk in the park. But clearly, there's something more to it. So, enlighten me, Circe. What's the deal with that? Why does level advantage sometimes feel like a complete joke?"

"Don't let levels deceive you, Blake," Circe replied, her voice laced with a mix of wisdom and frustration. "Sure, having higher levels and boosted Attributes can give you an edge, but success in battle goes beyond that. It's about strategy, luck, and skill. Did I mention luck? Even a lower-level fighter can surprise you with a lucky hit and take you down. Yes, high-level mages may have more resources at their disposal, but they are far from unbeatable. The true advantage of levelers lies in their ability to learn new spells and abilities more easily, but you need to take them and go beyond the system's constraints. That's what I'm trying to teach you, to fight as a sorceress unbound by the system. Once you can do that, cooldowns, stats, and all the rules that govern them will no longer apply to you. You'll be free to unleash your true potential."

"The ancients understood this well, which is why leveling has become a rarity, a thing of myths. But people still hold levelers in high regard, seeing them as heroic figures of legend, an unstoppable force, because of their accelerated learning of magic. It's true that your Absorb spell takes that concept to a whole new extreme, but don't be fooled by appearances. Use the system as it was intended for acquiring new skills and knowledge, but don't rely on it as your sole means of combat."

"So, if levelers are so rare, how did Aurelia use Appraisal? I feel like everyone I come across is a leveler."

"Don't be fooled by appearances. Aurelia's not a leveler. Did you not bother to notice the ring she was wearing? It was enchanted with the Appraisal spell, most likely created by an ancient leveler."

"Huh, I don't recall seeing Aurelia wear a ring... Oh, wait a minute! I do remember a spark emanating from a ring right before she analyzed me. So, if you don't mind me asking, could you refresh my memory on which finger she was wearing it?" I asked the dreaded question, but the

insufferable woman seemed to ignore it, clearly done with the topic. It was a frustrating response, to say the least.

“I’m still uncertain about my next move,” I groaned. “Usually, I’m all for an unfair fight in my favor, but one of the other candidates has an attack spell that could level the playing field. It’s making me slightly hesitant to launch a full-on attack. Maybe I should consider hit-and-run tactics? Perhaps ambushing one of them while they’re taking a pee? Sneak attacks have their own charm, after all,” I considered aloud. Unfortunately, the useless goddess remained disinterested, leaving me to devise my plan in solitude. “Fantastic, good talk,” I muttered sarcastically to myself. “Well, I suppose I’ll just have to take matters into my own hands and show these four remaining candidates who’s truly in charge,” I remarked with a twisted sense of glee and determination.

The candidate I had dispatched may be absent, but to my delight, the remnants of the two undead goblins were still scattered about—a grisly spectacle that would make any connoisseur of the grotesque shudder with twisted pleasure. Though it consisted of a mere few fragments of flesh, some entrails, a pair of forlorn left legs (with the whereabouts of their counterparts unknown), and a solitary hand, it was a sight that stirred the dark recesses of my appetite.

With an elegant motion, I gracefully lowered myself, delicately picked up a tantalizing morsel of guts, and brought it to my lips, relishing it as if it were a succulent sausage. Of course, if I actually had functional teeth, it would be a bite to remember. Alas, my teeth were merely for show, and the experience was more akin to allowing a delectable morsel to dissolve upon my acidic tongue. I briefly contemplated the option of simply stepping on the remnants or employing a tentacle to dissolve them, but let’s face it—I’m not a monster. I’m a lady.

*“A lady? Hahaha! Child, you’re a delusional monster.”*

“Oh, shut up,” I hissed between mouthfuls.

I wasn’t delusional. I knew this goddess had ulterior motives, though I couldn’t quite pinpoint what they were. One thing was certain, I didn’t trust her. Don’t get me wrong, she had her perks. She possessed a wealth of useful information, but extracting it from her was like pulling teeth. Still, I couldn’t deny that under her guidance, I was rapidly expanding my knowledge of magic. So, I suppose you could say things were looking up in that regard. Plus, having someone to bicker with did add an element of entertainment to an otherwise lonely existence. After all, there was no one else around, and if there were, well, let’s just say I had a tendency to eliminate and consume potential companions. So, for now, I was stuck with this Circe chick. Lucky me, right?

*“Did you just deep-throat that goblin leg?”* Circe asked, her expression a mix of astonishment and disgust as she watched me devour my meal.

“...No—stop talking to me while I’m enjoying my meal,” I mumbled with a toe hanging out of the corner of my mouth.

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

“Ugh, will you please stop calling me a child? I’m in my late twenties or maybe early thirties... Well, to be honest, I can’t quite remember my exact age now that I think about it,” I said, scratching my head in confusion.

*“Turn at least a millennium old, and maybe I’ll stop referring to you as a child,”* Circe stated with a hint of amusement.

Frustrated and seething with annoyance, I stormed out of the boss chamber, where I had engaged in a brutal battle with the five other candidates. The remnants of the one I had decapitated were nowhere to be found, leaving only lingering traces of bloodstains on the cold stone floor. To add insult to injury, the dismembered remains of the undead goblins I effortlessly dispatched were nothing more than a pitiful appetizer, failing to satiate my hunger. And as if my mounting frustration wasn’t enough, Circe persisted in her relentless pursuit of training. Reluctantly, I acknowledged that she had a valid point. If I truly desired to carve out a life in this reality, I had to break free from the shackles of reliance on the system. It was time to view the system as mere training wheels, a means to acquire new spells and abilities while ultimately mastering them through my own sheer will and determination.

*“Ah, finally! You’re starting to catch on,”* Circe exclaimed with a hint of satisfaction. *“And the best part is, you can continue your training while we track down the others. It’ll give you an edge and prevent you from being taken out by a single spell, like some inexperienced newbie.”*

“Will you stop invading my thoughts!” I retorted. “But fine, what should I focus on in my training? What should I practice first?” I asked, eager to get started.

*“Listen up, rookie. You can’t keep relying on those system commands if you want to be a true spellcaster. 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 be casting spells like a seasoned sorceress... Or, at the very least, like a deranged man-eating sorceress with some serious daddy issues,”* Circe teased.

I was taken aback by Circe’s unexpected change in demeanor. It was usually my pleasure to torment her, not the other way around. “Seriously, Circe, can you stop being such a pain in my ass? Fine, whatever, let’s just get this over with and start already. I already know the basics of casting without the system. The real challenge is executing it in the midst of battle, not during some training session,” I retorted, expressing my frustration while begrudgingly acknowledging the importance of her guidance. It was strange to see her willingly being helpful for once.

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

“Well, it’s hard to explain, but when it comes to casting spells, I rely on my instincts and gut feeling. It’s like tapping into a sixth sense,” I explained, trying to find the right words to describe the intangible connection I felt with magic, and failing.

*“Pshh, like an aimless child stumbling in the dark, you have no idea what you’re doing, do you?”* Circe sighed with a hint of condescension. *“Well, at the very least, you’re not entirely wrong. I’ve already explained before that, it’s about will and imagination. And you’re right, going off feeling*

*does play a big part in spell casting, but there's more to it. You need to visualize the spell you're casting," she clarified, emphasizing the importance of mental imagery in the process. "Listen up, child. What you're feeling is not some magical intuition," Circe scoffed, dismissing my notion. "It's the ambient mana surrounding you. The system only taps into your internal mana and provides you with a finite resource, which is limited and regulated. But ambient mana? It has no boundaries, no restrictions, nothing to hold it back. The key to unlocking your potential lies in channeling the mana around you, using it to cast your spells and abilities."*

"I believe I'm starting to grasp the concept, but could you clarify how this applies specifically to spells and abilities that rely on stamina?"

*"By the ancient magic, are you truly ignorant? Stamina-based abilities can be recalibrated through adept mana manipulation. You must substitute stamina with mana, achieving a delicate equilibrium through refined control over mana. Mastery of mana manipulation for stamina abilities necessitates honing your skill in mana control. Unfortunately, expecting you to comprehend the intricacies of magic may be too optimistic, isn't it?"*

"Yeah, that makes absolutely no sense," I stated.

As I advanced through the dungeon, mulling over the illogical advice of the goddess, an unsettling sensation started to crawl up the nape of my neck. I halted abruptly, scanning the vast expanse of the cavernous system, yet finding no discernible signs of anything amiss. Nevertheless, I had learned not to dismiss the possibility of concealed threats lurking in the shadows, observing my every move with sinister intent.

"What is it now?" Circe groaned as her floating form came to a stop.

I glanced at her, wishing she would return to her normal, quiet self. Deciding to silence her myself, I deactivated [**Oracle**], causing her ghostly form to vanish. A look of exasperation adorned her face as she dissipated, and I couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction at having the upper hand, even if only momentarily.

"Now, let's find out who's been spying on me," I grinned, a mischievous glint in my eyes.

I may have just dismissed a literal goddess, but I couldn't ignore the weight of Circe's words about magic. Determined to put her teachings into practice, I decided to activate a skill without relying on the system, specifically to locate my next meal. With a deep breath, I closed my eyes and focused on the sensation of the spell, attempting to activate **Thermalsense** without relying on a command. However, I encountered an unexpected discrepancy in the flow of mana, as if it wasn't gathering in the anticipated area. Frustrated, I unintentionally activated [**Thermalsense**] using the system. It was a reminder that, despite my efforts to learn magic without the system, it was undeniably useful and intuitive.

My world transformed into a surreal palette of blacks, purples, and blues, with splashes of reds and yellows leading me to a large boulder. With a simple flex of my arm, it contorted and morphed into a grotesque black tentacle that slithered and writhed, eagerly searching for the source of heat. At least I could polymorph without the need for system commands, a small victory in my quest

for might. Suddenly, a startled yelp shattered the air as the tentacle found its target. Pulling it back towards me, a rush of anticipation coursed through me, the primal desire for fresh blood and flesh stirring within me. I will admit I preferred rotten meat, but fresh blood had its place too. My figurative 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. But as my prey came into view, the horrifying truth revealed itself. The tentacle had ensnared a small goblin... a mere child.

However, for a moment, a conflicted feeling washed over me. I briefly considered releasing the child, as the thought of preying on such innocence was disturbing. But the insatiable hunger within me, the thirst for power and dominance, overpowered any hint of compassion or remorse. I couldn't let this opportunity slip away, no matter how small and insignificant my meal might be. As I raised my tentacle, firmly grasping the child, their wide, innocent eyes met mine, filled with a gleeful and trusting gaze. It was at that moment that a pang of guilt pierced through the darkness, a flicker of my lost humanity reminding me of the atrocities I was about to commit. However, the hunger and bloodlust prevailed, extinguishing any remnants of empathy. With a cruel smile forming on my lips, I steeled myself to finish what I had started, determined to satisfy my insatiable appetite, regardless of the consequences. *Ugh, but it's just a kid... damnit!*

So, you can imagine my disappointment when I released the little shit. I couldn't help but express my frustration, my voice tinged with annoyance, as I asked, "Wartie, what in hell are you doing here?"

"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!"

It wasn't a figment of my imagination; I could actually understand other slimes. A mix of surprise and annoyance washed over me, followed by a sudden realization. I had a skill I hadn't bothered to check on: Veil Polyglot.

**[Veil Polyglot]**

The ability to converse fluently in any language encompassed by the realm of Völuspá.

Type  
**Ability**

Activation  
**Passive**

"So, Blake, that's what Veil Polyglot does," I mused to myself. "It seems my ability to understand other slimes wasn't just my imagination after all."

"No, I Wartie, not Bleak. What ill polywater?" replied the goblin child.

“Oops!” I sighed, realizing that I had let my thoughts slip out without intending to.

“What wrong?” Wartie asked, his large saucer eyes filled with concern.

“Nothing to see here, just thinking aloud... 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 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 tear him apart!* I paused to take a deep breath, my moral compass may be a bit skewed, but even I have my limits when it comes to killing children. *But wait, he’s a goblin, not a child. Ugh, now I’m just being racist. Argh! Fine, I won’t murder the little bastard!* “Imp, uh, I mean, Wartie, can you tell me what they said?” I asked, my patience hanging by a thread 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 in a state of utter confusion and bewilderment. If those adventurers didn’t have the body of the deceased candidate, then where could it have gone? And to make matters even more perplexing, they were quitting the trial altogether. What did this sudden turn of events signify? Did it mean that I had won by default, or was there still something more I needed to pursue? The more I pondered, the more questions flooded my mind, and with no one around to provide answers, I felt completely adrift and lost. The thought of resummoning Circe with Oracle crossed my mind, but honestly, I had my fill of her for the day.

Shrugging my shoulders, I muttered to myself. “I’m not sure. Until someone explicitly tells me that I’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!” the tiny gelatinous cube cried out.

“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. Circe may not have been here, but I could have sworn I heard her bursting out in laughter, or was that my schizophrenia again? “Oh, no, no, no! It’s not safe for you where I’m going,” I urged the young goblin, my tone laced with genuine concern. “You’d be better off returning to your village. Trust me, it’s for your own good.”

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

I hesitated, a faint flicker of my humanity still lingering when it came to children. In one part of my mind, I didn’t want to put the kid in danger, but in another part, I found him utterly irritating. Despite my reservations, the allure of a shortcut proved too tempting to resist. “Fine, lead the way, kid,” I grumbled. *I despise my life!*

Wartie’s grin widened further as I acquiesced to the goblin child’s desire for revenge against the individuals I had wrongly implicated in the death of his previous pet. *Ah, whatever,* I thought to myself, a hint of amusement coloring my inner voice. *Doodles did make for a rather delectable meal, after all.*