

BLACK PUDDING

CHAPTER 6

“Dreams are like the stars, infinite and ever so beautiful as they sparkle in the dark of night, forever out of our reach. So, it is incumbent upon us to forge our own stars.” ~ Me

A whisper of my thoughts, *time to wake up, it's playtime* stirred as my vision, tweaked to precision by Mana Sight, zeroed in on the chamber's gateway. Sure, it wasn't exactly eagle-eyed precision. Still, it has improved greatly in the short time since I started using it.

Perched in a small alcove above, a monstrous crimson toad prepared to spring. His battle gear was a peculiar combination of a grotesque cleaver nearly five feet long and a heavy-duty shield reminiscent of Spartan tales. His outfit was rounded off by a gladiator's helm and an embarrassingly minimal loincloth. The enormity of his stomach was a sight to behold, making even a sumo wrestler appear svelte. A desire for a skill in dual-wielding playfully scratched at my mind, yet I had no desire for any sword arts.

At the moment, my only goal was to survive. Then, with a mental eyebrow raised, I realized that was just the sentimental nostalgia of my past human life, acting as the proverbial ball and chain in my survivalist sprint.

“*Oh no, child, don't just survive. Learn. Grow.*” Circe's voice was in my ear as I threw her a side glance. She seemed to be basking in the delight of the upcoming pandemonium.

A sigh danced on the tip of my thoughts, yet I knew she had hit the bullseye. This wasn't just about survival. This was about leveling up, sprouting into a formidable force. *Screw survival! I need to flourish!* It was time to unfurl, to bloom into a waking nightmare in this fantastical world of sorcery and monsters!

Then, the oversized toad lunged with a mighty croak. A surge of adrenaline, both alien and potent, stormed through my senses. The behemoth descended with a lethal arc of its weapon, threatening to slice through everything in its path. Yet, my instincts, completely and utterly unhoneed, took an unexpected sharpness, and I managed to outmaneuver the imminent carnage.

Or so I thought. The chamber shuddered as the massive cleaver bit into solid stone, shearing off the triplet tentacles sprouting from my grotesque mockery of a skull. The toad and I stood entranced in a fleeting heartbeat that stretched out like eternity under the adrenaline's wicked spell; our gazes froze on that gruesome sight of my tendrils.

Well, he might've been laughing, but it sounded more like a disgruntled gardener wrestling with an obstinate lawnmower, the repetitive croaking grating on the nerves.

A dark pool of viscous fluid spread on the ground where my hair had splattered beneath the blow... though the pool was significantly larger than I had expected. That's when it hit me! That overgrown wart had taken more than just my hair. He had also relieved me of an arm, lopped off cleanly at the shoulder!

This is it! Showtime! A mental command rang out, “[**Blight**].”

A terrifying black miasma exploded out of my form, wrapping itself around the cleaver and the toad's arm. The virulent magic of my Blight spell took hold, birthing pus-ridden blisters upon the amphibian's limb. His triumphant croaking turned into agonized screams as his arm succumbed to the infection, his grip on the cleaver faltering and ultimately failing as he hopped clumsily away from me.

The infected appendage now hung lifeless and defeated by his side, leaving the toad effectively disarmed, sans the colossal shield he continued to clutch in his other hand.

The toad let loose a noise somewhere between a primal roar and a comical ribbit before charging headlong, shield held high. Struck with the force of a speeding freight train, my form liquefied under the impact, sending me hurtling across the cavern. There was a disgusting, wet smack as I splattered against the wall, my remains spread across it like a horrific inkblot test.

Within moments of the messy collision, my form began to peel off the wall, pooling on the ground like a grotesque pile of slop, only to begin reforming. This time, however, my 'human-ish' shape was augmented by the addition of eight spidery, squid-like limbs jutting from my back, their grotesque form resembling a pair of wings crafted from despair and death itself.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of Circe, nonchalantly observing the chaos as if it were a mundane spectacle. That did it. I was thoroughly infuriated now.

In a startling twist, the new appendages on my back responded almost instinctively to my commands as if they were a part of me since, forever. Yet, even as I discovered this new-found control, the toad was in the midst of his next assault. He dashed and leaped ferociously, landing on me with a gut-churning squelch. The entire chamber reverberated with a thunderous crash. This was certainly not how I had envisioned this battle to unfold.

The toad's collision with me seemed to have left him in a daze, albeit temporary. But while he shook off the stupor, I was trapped, reduced to a sticky mess beneath his colossal shield and the stone-cold floor. To add to my woes, the reformation process was also off to a shaky start, with only a handful of tendrils managing to extrude from the edges of the shield.

In the face of my grim predicament, I had to admit, I was devoid of any coherent strategy or hardened battle instincts. In a twist of irony, my fight had evolved (or devolved, rather) from a lofty quest for growth and power to a desperate struggle for survival. It appeared that my plans for leveling would have to wait until I gained a better grasp of my abilities.

Regardless, I wasn't out for the count just yet. A few of my liberated limbs lashed out, one ensnaring the arm wielding the shield, another coiling around the nearest leg, and a third securing a firm grip around his thick neck. However, my hopes were dashed as my bold move amounted

to... nothing. I groaned in frustration, “Great!” *I must have switched off my passive skills after consuming Red Tail. Convenient timing, self.*

Activate [Corrosive]? Yes / No
Activate [Venomous]? Yes / No

“Yes,” I gurgled out in response to the mental prompts. As my passives activated, the subsequent turn of events turned out to be less favorable than I had anticipated. The toad let out a blood-curdling cry before hurling the shield straight up at the stone above with all his might. Each of my limbs that had clung onto the boss monster was severed brutally, pieces of me still clinging to the toad. At the same time, the remainder of my form was sent sailing through the air with the shield before making a catastrophic impact on the chamber’s ceiling.

In the throes of excruciating pain, the toad’s mouth gaped open, releasing a bellowing roar that echoed off the chamber walls. My fragmented remnants were ruthlessly burrowing into his hide, fueled by a Corrosive hatred and Venomous fury. Amidst his tormented cries, I noted the absence of teeth within the cavernous maw.

In a display that might have seemed almost pitiful in a different circumstance, the toad raised its arms skywards, a futile plea for divine intervention. Yet, the only entity above him was not a merciful deity but me. At this moment, an idea, deliciously wicked and deviously brilliant, sprouted in my mind. I could almost hear myself cackling aloud. *Oh, Blake, that’s evil!*

With a devious sense of timing, I released my hold on the ceiling-bound shield and plunged straight into the toad’s gaping maw, filling its screaming abyss with my own Corrosive and Venomous presence. I slithered down his gullet, my form seeping into every nook and cranny, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. The toad’s cries of pain were abruptly cut off, as his vocal cords were among the first things my form had devoured.

Suddenly, I was enveloped by a crushing pain. The toad had managed to reach into his mouth and grab hold of my remaining form that hadn’t yet found its way into his lungs and stomach. Desperate, I decided to cast what I had initially dismissed as a useless spell - [Spider Webbing]. To my dismay, the spell didn’t project out in long strands or at great distances but instead seemed to multiply in copious amounts within the confines of the toad’s mouth. Frantically, I kept casting, coating every inch of the creature’s maw, stalling for precious time as my Corrosive and Venomous passives did their work. I wasn’t going down without claiming at least one lung for my troubles.

Regrettably, I had underestimated the toad’s resolve. Turns out, it’s easier to tear a slime monster in half than to dislodge a lung. The next scream that echoed through the chamber was my own. With a cruel jerk, the toad had succeeded in bisecting me. My consciousness echoed my scream of agony, but soon that too began to fade, along with everything else, as my world spiraled into darkness.

You have defeated a [Toad Barbarian].
<u>LEVEL UP!</u> <u>LEVEL UP!</u> <u>LEVEL UP!</u> <u>LEVEL UP!</u> <u>LEVEL UP!</u> <u>LEVEL UP!</u> <u>LEVEL UP!</u>
You are now level 20. Immunity Unlocked [Sleep]
You have unlocked 2 Selectable skill slots.
Do you wish to [Absorb] [Toad Barbarian]? Yes / No

Returning to consciousness felt like shaking off a particularly stubborn dream, but the ever-present system notifications were like a cold splash of water. Honestly, without those pestering prompts, I might be lost. My sight, blurred at first, cleared up to reveal a scene straight out of a low-budget horror film. There I was, casually oozing through the remains of our dear, departed ‘Toadinator.’ The fight had cost me an arm and... well, a lot more. I really should find my missing pieces to reabsorb.

My rather unsightly meal was rather delightful, a necessary component of my wonderful existence. The brawl had been a stark reminder that this world was less ‘survival of the fittest’, and more ‘growth through gratuitous violence’. Here, the toll was steep, paid in blood, entrails, and the occasional misplaced appendage. Just another day at the office, I suppose.

“*Quite the spectacle,*” Circe chimed in at last, her voice dancing with amusement. But I paid her no mind. After all that excitement, I was due for a good snooze.



Circe had watched the entire chaotic dance with an air of detached amusement, as though she were observing a toddler’s feeble attempts at fisticuffs that ended in a lucky, swift jab to the nether regions. For all her vast, spanning eons, she had not beheld a battle so pitiful and yet so oddly entertaining. Yet, her interest didn’t lie in the creature’s combat abilities or even its connection to the system she had graciously permitted. Rather, her fascination was piqued by the creature’s origins.

Without a doubt, she had the liberty to select any of the myriads of aimless souls those dimwitted necromancers had dredged up from some far-off dimension for her eccentric amusement. However, this one, this soul, when stripped of its corporeal tether, had intrigued her. This Blake was no more unique than any of the other souls from her realm, save for that peculiar vampire with an odd

fixation. But in this realm, the vibrancy of her soul stood out to Circe, a captivating pulse amid the monotony.

It seemed rather apt to bestow it upon one of her unique creations—an uncanny monstrosity birthed from her whimsical inspiration and jealousy, for Black Puddings were remnants of the abomination. A misstep at playing with life’s domain, one that she still grimaces at when she thinks back, yet it might just be a mistake ripe for redemption. Circe so desperately hoped that, through this strange soul, she could glean insights into the mysteries of that distinct reality and what secret she so desperately hoped it held. And naturally, once she’d gleaned all the essential knowledge she sought from this oddity, she could effortlessly discard it, just like the countless others before it.



Waking up from a dream of grandeur, I languidly stretched out, savoring the remnants of the dream. I was a monster, brimming with power and ruthlessness, devoid of mercy... My eyes snapped open in surprise, taking in the unfamiliar surroundings. Instinctively, my [Mana Sight] latched onto a pair of eyes that spontaneously formed in the palm of my hands. This peculiar occurrence was due to the fact that the rest of me was a sticky black puddle of goo on the floor, with my extended arms reaching out. I looked like a snail popping out of a tar pit, my eyes darting around independently in their sockets.

Holy shit! I was startled as my snail-like eyes briefly crossed paths, revealing a glowing orange orb. Curiosity piqued, I withdrew [Mana Sight] from one of them for a closer inspection. As I did, the eyeball dimmed, going pitch black as if someone had snuffed out a light. Recast [Mana Sight], the eyeball glowed a fierce orange once more. The entire ordeal was quite surreal yet strangely engrossing.

As I stopped playing with myself—I mean, glowing eyeball examination—I turned my attention back to my surroundings. I found myself inside a large, circular stone chamber with not one but two exits. Wasn’t there just one before? Right! I had dozed off mid-feast on the dungeon boss. But now, the problem was the toad’s corpse had vanished, and in my oversight, I had neglected to use Absorb on him. *SHIT!*

“Calm yourself. No need to fret. You’ve got a cozy cushion to play with before you can no longer utilize that skill of yours,” the goddess finished with a soft chuckle.

I let out a sigh of relief, or at least my disembodied arms appeared to do so, while the rest of me remained a squishy mess on the floor. With a simple mental command, I clicked the metaphorical “Yes” button, activating the Absorb skill.

[Absorb] [Toad Barbarian] Successful.
<u>Selectable</u> [Burst] [Fortress] [Leap]

[Shield Proficiency]

Ugh... Those new skills seem to lean towards physical combat, but what I crave is pure magical might, overwhelming firepower that leaves nothing but ashes in its wake. Scanning through my other notifications, a glimmer of hope emerged as I noticed that I unlocked two additional skill slots. *Sweet!*

“Hey, magic lady,” I casually addressed Circe, though the perplexed expression on her face suggested she was taken aback by my audacity to refer to her with anything less than complete reverence. Well, that wasn’t going to fly with me. “How do I unlock more skill slots?”

“You begin with two skill slots, and every five levels, you unlock an additional one,” she stated matter-of-factly as if the answer was as clear as day.

“Hmm, and how does one go about unlocking skills, like those awesome Racial Skills?” I inquired with a tinge of curiosity.

“Usually, skills are unlocked every five levels, but the process can vary significantly depending on one’s class and race,” she replied with a hint of exasperation in her voice.

“Well, isn’t that just a splendid turn of events?” I retorted sarcastically. “Here I am, going from level thirteen to level twenty, expecting to unlock two glorious new skills, only to be rewarded with the oh-so-thrilling immunity to Sleep. What utter bullshit!” The words dripped with annoyance as I couldn’t help but express my dissatisfaction.

Despite my outburst, the oh-so-perfect goddess seemed rather unfazed and remained silent. Letting out an exasperated groan, I summoned my status page with a simple mental command. It was time to assess my current predicament and see what new spells I could unlock.

<p>Name: Blake Race: Black Pudding Class: Dungeon Monster Level: 20</p> <p><u>Titles</u> Hopeless Crusader</p>		
<p><u>Racial Skills</u> [Absorb] [Corrosive] [Polymorph] [Thermalsense]</p> <p><u>Spells</u> [Blight] [Mana Sight]</p>	<p><u>Vulnerabilities</u> [Fire] [Holy]</p> <p><u>Immunities</u> [Acid] [Darkness] [Disease] [Poison] [Sleep]</p>	<p><u>Selectable</u> [Astral Insight] [Burst] [Fear] [Fortress] [Leap] [Life Drain] [Necrotic Flame] [Paralysis]</p>

<u>Abilities</u> [Silk Webbing] [Veil Polyglot] [Venomous]	<u>Unique</u> [Oracle] [Restricted] [Restricted]	[Shield Proficiency] [Spider Walk] [Spirit Vessel] [Stellar Void]
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“Well, I suppose there’s a silver lining in all of this,” I grumbled with a tinge of resignation. “At least I don’t have to waste any points on acquiring sleep immunity. Small victories, I suppose.”

Casting a swift glance over the list of selectable options, I immediately recognized the first without needing a second read of its description. It was a skill I had eagerly anticipated, and now the time had come to claim it as my own.

Would you like to select **[Necrotic Flame]** as an active Spell?
 Yes / No

With a decisive mental click on the “Yes” option, I claimed Necrotic Flame as my own. The anticipation had built up, and now I finally possessed what I hoped would be a truly badass attack spell. The thought of unleashing its destructive power filled me with sinister delight.

5 out of 6 Selectable skills have now been activated.

“Now, let’s see what is next,” I mused.

[Burst]
 Obtain the power to propel oneself at tremendous speed in a specified direction.
Type
Ability
Activation
Cast

[Fortress]
 Obtain the power to fortify your defenses.
Type
Ability
Activation
Cast

[Leap]
 Obtain the power to propel oneself in a specified direction.
Type
Ability

Activation
Cast

[**Shield Proficiency**]

Obtain the knowledge to proficiently guard against incoming attacks.

Type
Ability

Activation
Passive

“Well, Leap does seem rather lackluster compared to Burst unless Burst doesn’t involve any airborne acrobatics. It’s incredibly frustrating that these skills lack detailed descriptions,” I grumbled to myself in frustration. Turning to the one individual who should have all the answers, I directed my question to her. “Why aren’t these skills more descriptive?”

With a nonchalant shrug, she replied, “That’s for you to discover.”

Narrowing my eyes at the goddess, I retorted, “So, in other words, you don’t know either.”

The glare she shot me could have burned a hole through solid stone. “Magic is not something to be confined by definitions; it is to be experienced. Why would I ever impose limitations on something that should never be restricted?” Circe responded with an air of haughtiness.

In a peculiar way, her words held a glimmer of logic, suggesting that perhaps I had the potential to surpass the limitations set by the system’s basic definitions. It made me wonder if I had already been doing so with my Mana Sight. As I shifted my gaze back to the list of available skills, the desire to acquire Paralysis tugged at me strongly. However, considering that many of my attacks were already reliant on physical contact, I reluctantly clicked on Burst, resigning myself to physical attacks. *Ugh, I so badly want to be a sorceress!*

Would you like to select [**Burst**] as an active Spell?
Yes / No

“Yes,” I muttered with a tinge of both acceptance and self-assurance.

6 out of 6 Selectable skills have now been activated.

As I reflected on the bizarre sequence of events, I couldn’t help but be utterly dumbfounded. Yesterday was an absolute thrill ride. I died, only to be reborn inside the body of a Black Pudding. *Classic*. Then I embarked on a glorious battle, dementing my first dungeon boss, and emerged triumphant. And, if my scant knowledge of these skills was worth a damn, I was a bona fide menace now. *Those poor little candidates won’t know what hit ‘em.*