

BLAKE PUDDING

CHAPTER 19

HALF-BREED

In the somber chamber, surrounded by the lifeless remains of those who had fought valiantly for their right to live, a beastkin slowly blinked back into consciousness. He found himself amidst the still and silent forms, a stark contrast to the chaos of battle. Lifting a hand to his face, he was met with rodent-like fingers and fur-covered skin, a sight that filled him with confusion and unease. His mind, still clouded and disoriented, struggled to make sense of this unfamiliar reality.

His gaze wandered to the three women nearby. One was an elven woman with golden locks that caught the dim light, giving off a soft glow. Another was a beastkin, her form almost human but for the bunny ears on her head, which appeared almost illusory upon closer inspection. The third woman was somewhat familiar, yet her appearance had changed significantly. No longer quite human, her form now carried an otherworldly, dark, and sinister air.

As he turned his gaze back to his rodent-like hands, the full reality of his situation began to dawn on him. The shock of realizing he was now inhabiting the body of a rat beastkin hit him like a tidal wave. Overwhelmed by horror, he let out a piercing, high-pitched shriek, akin to a blood-curdling scream, shattering the silence of the chamber.

The sinister-looking woman, who he thought he recognized from somewhere deep within his forgotten memories, looked on as he finally ceased his screaming. In a panic, he tried to scoot away from the three women, only to bump into something behind him. Twisting his head around, his eyes met the lifeless gaze of a corpse, reigniting his terror. He let out another scream, scrambling away in a frantic effort to escape, only to collide with yet another corpse.

He attempted to crawl away, his movements were blind and erratic, driven by a visceral fear of the sinister-looking woman in black. With each desperate shuffle, he felt the cold, unyielding touch of death beneath his hands and knees. The dim light of the chamber cast long, haunting shadows across a ghastly scene, transforming the space into a nightmarish tableau.

Around him, the chamber was a grotesque landscape, littered with the remains of the fallen. The dead lay in twisted poses, their final moments etched in the contorted positions of their bodies. Limbs and severed body parts were strewn haphazardly, creating a morbid mosaic on the cold stone floor.

Every inadvertent contact with the lifeless bodies intensified his horror. The chilling sensation of brushing against cold, unresponsive flesh sent waves of revulsion through him. The grim reality of his surroundings was overwhelming, a stark contrast to the life he once knew.

His new form, unfamiliar and disconcerting, added to his disorientation and panic. As he continued his blind retreat, the oppressive atmosphere of the chamber weighed heavily upon him. Each

encounter with the remnants of the dead was a jarring reminder of the horror that enveloped him, a horror compounded by his own unsettling and unfamiliar existence in this morbid place.

"Huh, I don't think this one is Olin," the woman clad in black casually remarked, her tone indifferent to the dramatic scene unfolding.

The eerie woman brandished a dark orb in her hand, but it was what happened next that truly shocked Nikola. She reached into her chest as if plunging her hand into an invisible cavity. As Nikola watched, teetering on the edge of mental collapse, she extracted a second orb. It would have been almost perfect, were it not for the small chip marring its surface.

"I'm guessing you're the gnome," she said, directing her words at him. For a brief moment, her statement jolted Nikola out of his terrified daze, and he looked up into her malevolently glowing orange eyes. "Alright, I was hoping to stick this asshole," she said, lifting the chipped orb, "inside that rat body. I mean, it sort of fits him more if you ask me," she added with a dark grin.

Her next words sent a fresh wave of dread through Nikola. "So, before I yank your soul out of that body, I'll be nice and let you pick which body you want out of these," she said, gesturing towards the gruesome piles of corpses around them. The offer, coming from her in such a chilling, nonchalant manner, made the horrific scene even more surreal and terrifying. Nikola's mind reeled as he realized the gravity of the choice being forced upon him in this dreadful and unsettling situation.

Nikola, still reeling from the shock of his surreal predicament, finally managed to remember his own name amidst the chaos. But the realization brought little comfort. He remained frozen in place, overwhelmed by the rapid succession of terrifying events that had unfolded around him. The ability to move or respond had deserted him, his body rendered immobile by fear and the morbid surroundings.

Surrounded by the dead, with no path to escape or even crawl away, Nikola could do nothing but stare up, almost lifelessly, at the woman looming above him. Her glowing orange eyes seemed to pierce through the darkness of the chamber, casting an eerie light that only heightened the sense of dread. They were like beacons in the gloom, holding him captive in their malevolent gaze. In that moment, he was acutely aware of his vulnerability and the grim reality of his situation, paralyzed by fear and uncertainty.

Nikola's state of overwhelming dread was briefly interrupted by the intervention of the golden-haired woman. She let out a deep sigh, her voice tinged with exasperation and a hint of empathy. "Can't you see he's confused and terrified?" she implored, her words cutting through the tense air.

The woman with the glowing orange eyes retorted sharply to the golden elf, her tone laced with annoyance. "Confused and terrified about what? I haven't done anything to him, and I'm even giving him the choice to pick a body. There's nothing to be confused about. In fact, I think I'm being rather generous," she declared.

The shift in Nikola's expression from sheer horror to a mix of confusion and skepticism was marked by a raised eyebrow. It was a subtle, yet significant change, as he tried to make sense of

the bizarre conversation unfolding before him. His attention moved from the intimidating woman with the orange eyes to the golden-haired elf, who seemed to offer a semblance of safety.

As the elf approached him, her presence seemed to exude a calming aura, contrasting sharply with the sinister vibes of the other woman. Just as Nikola began to feel a hint of relief, it was abruptly shattered. The orange-eyed woman let out a sharp yelp as she suddenly transformed, her form collapsing into a puddle of viscous goo that splattered with a chilling sound. The sight was horrifying, sending Nikola's fear skyrocketing once again.

Panicked and desperate for escape, he frantically scanned his surroundings, but the chamber offered no clear path to safety. The floor was littered with corpses, leaving him trapped in a grotesque maze with no way out. The only thing that stopped him from attempting a futile scramble over the bodies was the comforting presence of the approaching elf. Her approach, gentle and reassuring, was the only anchor he had in a sea of terror and confusion. Nikola found himself torn between the instinct to flee and the inexplicable sense of safety that the elf's presence brought in this nightmarish scenario.

The golden-haired elf's voice carried a soothing, gentle tone, filled with empathy for Nikola's ordeal. "I know you've gone through a lot, all of which I don't even understand. I, myself, am questioning what I'm doing here, but take a moment and breathe," she urged him calmly.

Her gaze momentarily shifted with a hint of revulsion towards the gooey puddle that was once the woman with orange eyes. "Apparently, Blake," she continued, her voice laced with a touch of disdain as she gestured towards the remains on the ground, "can give you a new body. I do not condone the undead, and am quite capable of destroying them, but I'm doing my best to keep an open mind."

The elf's expression then turned serious, almost grave. "That said, do take the time to find a body you want amongst these. I don't think you'll get another choice like this," she cautioned him. Her words carried a weight of warning, her face clouding over with a darker intent. "But if you turn out to be some life-devouring undead abomination, I will smite you, regardless of the agreements I've made with," she paused, pointing back to the viscous remains, "that!"

Nikola, still grappling with the surreal turn of events, managed to nod his head shakily at elf's words.

"I'm Vanya," she introduced herself with a hint of warmth in her tone. "What's your name?"

"N-Nikola," he replied, his voice trembling slightly.

"Best get to it, Nikola," Vanya encouraged him with a gentle smile, trying to ease some of his apprehension.

Meanwhile, the ominous puddle on the ground started inching closer to Vanya. From its depths, a female figure began to eerily rise, forming out of the viscous goo. The figure remained still as it emerged, only becoming animated when its glowing orange eyes opened and fixed a glaring look at Vanya.

"Will you give a girl a warning next time you take off like that?" the figure complained, her voice tinged with irritation. "I can't keep this form without the mana you're radiating. Seriously, Champ, there's hardly any ambient mana in this stupid place for me to properly function," she continued, her whine a mix of annoyance and frustration.

Vanya, however, seemed to pay little heed to the other woman.

Finally mustering enough courage to steady his trembling legs, Nikola stood up. He was faced with the daunting and dreadful task of selecting a new body from the chamber filled to the brim with corpses and severed limbs. The sight before him was nothing short of a horror show. He noticed the bodies near his location were less mangled than the gruesome piles of body parts at the other end of the chamber, a small relief amidst the overwhelming nightmarish scene.

As Nikola surveyed the area, he couldn't help but notice the majority of the dead were beastkin. They weren't just soldiers; many seemed like innocent victims caught in the crossfire. The charred remains of those who appeared to have burned to death were particularly haunting, their faces frozen in expressions of agonizing pain. The reality of being undead, as the elf had mentioned, and having the choice to claim any new body weighed heavily on him. He knew he didn't want to be reborn as a beastkin or gnome again, having disliked his previous life as a gnome.

Despite the wide array of choices, no particular body appealed to him, nor was he comfortable with the idea of inhabiting the body of the deceased. It felt like an invasion, a form of desecration he wasn't sure he could reconcile with. But just as he was grappling with these thoughts, something caught his eye. In the corner of the chamber lay another row of bodies, all positioned face down. Something about this group stood out to him, piquing his interest amid the sea of death. He approached cautiously, curiosity mixed with a sense of dread as he pondered what he might discover in this particular pile.

Nikola's approach towards the pile of bodies was cautious and measured, his attention so deeply focused that he was unaware of the watchful eyes of the three women. His gaze fell upon a body adorned with horns, strikingly similar to those of an argali, a type of large mountain sheep he vaguely remembered from his previous life, or rather, from his past past life as he now considered it.

Battling his internal conflict regarding the disturbing reality of choosing a body among the dead, he summoned the courage not only to touch the body with a trembling hand but also to turn it over. To his surprise, the rest of the body appeared human, with skin of a deep shade of red.

"What race is this?" he inquired, addressing the three women without diverting his gaze from the corpse.

"That's a half-breed between human and dragonkin," the bunny-eared woman replied informatively. "Most dragonkin half-breeds retain their scales, but as with many human half-breeds, they often resemble their human parent more, especially when the mother is human. It's different with a human father. They're quite rare. It looks like this one lost its wings in battle. I know some magic that can heal the back where the wings were, smoothing out any scarring, but I can't do anything about restoring the wings."

"There are dragonkin amongst the beastkin?" Nikola asked in curiosity, he had always heard of the dragonkin, but never laid eyes upon them before.

"No, the bodies you're looking at are enemies we've killed," the bunny-eared woman clarified. "Ideally, we should have left them where they fell. But leaving the Slaethians to find their dead isn't an option with our failing hidden rebellion, and we're short on space to store them separately. So, we've had to mix them with our own dead. Whoever placed them here face down did so as a final act of disrespect for our enemies who have slaughtered so many of ours."

Nikola caught a fleeting, peculiar glance exchanged between the orange-eyed woman and the bunny-eared one, but he didn't dwell on it. Instead, his attention returned to the half-breed dragonkin body. It was distinctly different from his previous incarnations; after being reborn as a gnome and now a giant rodent man, he was contemplating this one, especially since it was of his original gender back on Earth.

He had always been a woman in his life on Earth, a fact that became painfully apparent to him after his death and subsequent rebirth as a gnome male. This whole ordeal felt like a nightmarish loop, but being offered another chance, another choice, was an opportunity he couldn't ignore. The body of the half-breed dragonkin woman before him represented not just a new life, but a chance to reclaim a part of his identity that he had lost. With this newfound resolve, he made his choice. He wanted this body; it felt right, aligning with his deep-seated sense of self in a way his other forms hadn't. Besides, the body appeared powerful, dangerous, and gorgeous, like a demonic goddess.

"I want this one," Nikola declared, his voice imbued with newfound determination. A bright grin spread across his rat-like face, whiskers twitching with the intensity of his emotion.

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I followed Kaida, our path weaving beneath an elaborate crystal array they had set up to lower the ambient mana. Kaida claimed it was crucial for keeping them hidden, but for me, it was more of a hindrance. Staying close to my golden-haired champion, who seemed to have a strong aversion towards me, added an extra layer of challenge—though I couldn't fathom why she disliked me. I mean, I'm pretty awesome, right?

As we moved, I was trailed by my two newly reanimated liches. One was the half-breed dragonkin who, honestly, was absolutely slaying it with her curves and baby doll face, crowned by those massive horns. The lack of a tail was a bit of a letdown, but those horns more than made up for it. I couldn't help but marvel at the former gnome's unexpected taste.

The other, our rat bastard, stumbled along, clutching his head, and groaning about the worst headache ever. I had tucked away his chipped phylactery, not entirely sure why Olin's head—or soul—was aching, but I figured he'd get over it eventually. For now, I just enjoyed the strange dynamic of our little group as we navigated through the dimly lit corridors.

It was a peculiar situation, being within arm's reach—or rather, two arm lengths—of Vanya. I still couldn't wrap my head around how everything had led to this moment. One day, I was snapping her husband's neck, and the next, she's my champion. It's a strange twist of fate, to say the least.

The whole concept of having a champion seemed like something out of a god's playbook, and if there's one thing I was certain of, it wasn't that I was a deity of any sort. Just your average goth girl who got a second shot at life in a world where magic is the norm, but with a twist—my personality isn't just mine anymore; it's split into two. But it's not as if it has changed; it's more like it's divided. Even so, these two halves often function as one, leaving me sometimes oblivious to who's really in control at any given moment. After all, both halves were me.

With a mischievous smirk on my face—because let's face it, being a nuisance is half the fun—I casually hooked my arm around my champion's and leaned my head against her shoulder in a mock display of innocence. "So, Champ, what's on the agenda for training first?" I asked, fully aware of the irritation this might cause.

The reaction was swift and intense. A surge of magical force erupted from Vanya, propelling me across the corridor. I splattered against the stone wall, my form flattening and stretching across it as I transformed into a goopy mess. From my new, rather undignified position, I heard Vanya hiss out a single word, "Boundaries," which I took to be my first lesson.

It was a hard lesson, no doubt about that. And if I were to be completely honest with myself, it was a lesson I doubted I'd actually learn. But hey, the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single splat, right?

The corridor was thick with horrified expressions, stretching from the fake bunny girl to the grumbling rat beastkin, still nursing his head—soul—ache. I figured we'd have a proper chat once he stopped whining about it. Then there was the former gnome, now a half-breed dragonkin. Figuring out how to address them was a bit of a puzzle—transgender, transspecies, trans-interdimensional, trans... something. It's not like I have an issue with it; I've had my fair share of diverse relationships, including dating a transgender girl once—thrice.

Huh, we've slept with a lot of people.

Yep! We're what you call a whore.

Eh, no more than any dude out there. Why is it when a woman enjoys her freedom, she's labeled, but guys get high-fives all around?

What's our body count again?

Ten, twenty... eighty-ish? Thereabouts?

We're a whore. If not for being short and curvy in our past life, we would have had our own Onlyfans account.

...Yeah, fine.

As I trickled down the wall, Kaida approached with the bucket she had used earlier. It struck me as odd how I managed to fit into the wooden bucket, especially after my feeding frenzy. Post giving Nikola his new dragonkin body and Olin his rodent form, I had indulged in devouring the corpses in the chamber. Kaida seemed indifferent to my feast, while Vanya oscillated between fury, as if I was desecrating the dead, and revulsion at the sounds of my enjoyment—a combination of wet smacking sounds and delightful moaning.

Yet, despite consuming a chamber full of bodies, my size hadn't increased significantly. Logically, I should have ballooned to elephantine proportions, but here I was, retaining the size of a typical human woman—albeit on the slightly taller side. I pondered if the extra mass was being diverted to Stellar Void, my internal dimensional storage. A quick check inside revealed only the two phylacteries, a dungeon core, and the remnants of Vanya's husband's shattered cock ring—the dimensional storage ring that made me go kaboom like a nuke. There was also another ring that seemed vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place where I had seen it before.

The aftermath of my little stunt with Vanya had left her wanting nothing to do with me, pushing her patience a bit too far. Without her nearby to radiate mana, transforming back into my human form was off the table. The issue of relying on ambient mana was becoming more of a glaring weakness than I had initially thought, almost rivaling my vulnerabilities to Fire or Holy elements.

Thankfully, Kaida seemed to be the only one still willing to tolerate me, albeit with some difficulty. She hauled the bucket around, her struggle more apparent than before. I couldn't help but wonder what was making it harder for her now.

But then, something unexpected occurred. The Black Pudding that had taken residence inside me started acting out. Every time someone came close after my splat incident, it lashed out, almost like a guard dog. Its purring transformed into what felt like hostile growling. The little protector inside me nearly attacked the fake bunny girl. Thankfully, I managed to keep it in check. The last thing I needed was for it to harm the few allies I had in my most vulnerable state. It was becoming clear that this newfound pet of mine would need some serious obedience training.

As we trudged along, I couldn't help but cast curious glances at the two new additions to my odd little group—the dragonkin, and the rat beastkin, whom I'd nicknamed 'Rat Bastard'. It made me wonder about the Crone's intentions. Did she really think I needed them, or was this some intricate game orchestrated by Death?

Why did Mother send us to them? Especially Nikola. Was it her plan all along, or just a stroke of fate intertwined by Granny Death?

It's hard to say. But why do we even need him?

Wasn't Nikola a tinkerer? He or she built that airship, right?

Yeah, she did. Maybe we can get her to work on something for us.

Exactly my thoughts. We do have a knack for thinking alike.

Well, obviously. We are one and the same, after all.

Emerging into a larger, vacant chamber within the catacombs, the contrast was stark compared to the previous rooms. This space, devoid of the huddled, starving refugees that had become a common sight, felt eerily empty.

"This part of the catacombs lies just outside the array's influence," Kaida explained, a hint of caution in her voice. "The ambient mana is more palpable here. But I must implore you, keep your use of magic to a minimum. Slaethian patrols are frequent above us, and any discovery of this place could spell disaster for the remaining citizens of Beastveil."

Truth be told, I had begun to feel the gradual increase in ambient mana for some time during our trek. The opportunity to revert to my human form had presented itself earlier, yet I had chosen not to. Partly, I found a strange comfort in being carried around in the bucket. More so, it allowed my mind—or rather, my minds—to wander, indulging in the luxury of introspective thought.

But the time for my ride was over. It was time to take shape once again. Rising effortlessly from the bucket, I transformed back into my human form, albeit retaining the otherworldly, strangely captivating appearance I had come to embrace. Creepy, yet undeniably cute—an aesthetic that was, admittedly, growing on me.

As I turned my attention to Kaida, I suggested, "Hey, bunny, could you take Nikola to a workshop or something? I'm not sure what use she could be, but I doubt she'll be entirely useless," I said, giving the nervous half-breed a darkly amused smile.

"I actually have a place in mind for that," Kaida responded, her tone carrying a hint of thoughtful consideration.

"Cool." My gaze then shifted to Olin, and I nonchalantly said, "As for you, Olin... um, I honestly don't know." I shrugged, dismissing him as if he were an afterthought.

"Ughhh," he grumbled, still massaging his throbbing head, a clear sign of his discomfort.

Turning back to Vanya, I suddenly stopped, my eyes locking onto the flaming sword in her hand. The cruel smile stretching across her face sent a shiver down my gooey spine. It dawned on me that this encounter would be nothing like our previous battles in her dreams. This was real, and it promised to be a challenging ordeal—one that was going to suck immensely.