

BLACK PUDDING

CHAPTER 38

“Arise, my dearest daughters, for time quickens its pace, and thy slumbers now belong to bygone days.”

Again, I found myself awakened in a world of enchanting wonder, nestled upon a verdant bed within a wondrous dell. Above, the celestial clouds frolicked and danced with joy, free of all darkness and malice. Time itself seemed to dance and skip past me as I lay there, enraptured by the heavenly display above. In this realm, my soul felt as pure and unburdened as that of a child at play, with all harsh and shadowy desires driven far from me. And yet, a peculiar sense of emptiness persisted, as if two pieces of my very being had taken flight and vanished into the ether.

“Blake,” another voice didst call, and as my head pivoted upon that soft, verdant pillow of green, I espied a countenance resembling mine own. My skin, a subtle shade of flawless ivory; mine eyes, set aflame with the warm, molten radiance of an orange blaze; and my tresses, as white and fragile as the choicest spider’s silk. Truly, this was not my visage, for my locks were of the darkest ebony. This otherworldly presence was but a shard of my very soul that had taken wing; this was Ava, my dearest counterpart in this land of whimsy and wonder.

“Ava,” I whispered, fixing my gaze upon my other self. Once, I had loathed her, for she was nothing more than a figment of my own imagination, born of a curse wrought by a wrathful deity whom I had dared to defy. But upon meeting with our mother, Ava had become an integral part of my being, a cherished sibling beyond measure. Oh, how fickle and unpredictable the hand of fate can be.

“Mother awaits within her dwelling atop the knoll; we must not dally, for twilight draws nigh, and with it, the encroaching woods shall advance.”

With boundless mirth, I sprang up from the verdant meadow and grasped my sister’s hand, twirling and skipping with sheer delight towards our mother’s refuge atop the hillock. The approaching twilight cast its somber cloak over the land, summoning forth the creeping shadows of the wooded realm, where the anguished cries of the tormented echoed in the deep. Yet, terror held no sway over us, for within this realm of wonder and magic, we were the very monsters to be feared.

Though we did appear as youthful sprites, our nature was one of unfettered ferocity and strength, unrivaled and untamed. Our hearts harbored a wickedness, yet we frolicked and danced with an unspoiled joy, surrendering ourselves to the enchanting embrace of this limitless realm as the forest’s shadows stretched and deepened. In a world where the innocent were oft the initial to succumb, we confronted the shadows with a daring and relentless spirit, heeding not the cautionary tales whispered within the glades.

The merry dance ceased as we arrived at our mother's haven atop the knoll, yearning to bask in her warm embrace and share our thrilling tales of adventure and love found within the other realm. But as we neared her door, a peculiar feeling arose within me, a questioning of whether she truly was our mother. For despite her claims of taking us in as her own, could we truly be her daughters now? The doubt gnawed at my heart, filling me with a sense of unease as we stood upon her threshold.

The creaking wooden door swung open, and a shiver ran through my soul as I stepped into the dimly lit room. Shadows danced across the walls, playing upon the face of the one we called the Crone, whose features were shrouded in a black cowl, hidden within a dark abyss. Only the skeletal bones of her fingers were visible within the folds of her dark gown. Yet, despite her ominous appearance, I felt a warm and kind smile emanating from the void where her face lay concealed. I could not say whether the Crone was death herself or a goddess fulfilling the role, but all doubts about her love vanished within her gaze.

"Pray, take thy rest, my cherished daughters, for we hath much to discuss in this time we share," spoke the Crone, her voice a delicate, rasping whisper, akin to the rustling of crisp leaves within a tender breeze.

As we drew near the table where we once feasted upon a meal for the damned, time stretched infinitely though only a day had fled. The table was empty, no food was in sight, but the room emanated a warmth and love that filled us with delight. A strange feeling stirred in our hearts, a dream-like essence we couldn't quite define, but it wrapped us in comfort, like a cloak divine.

Seated side by side, Ava and I listened intently, giving our dear mother our utmost attention. Despite the lack of any hurry in her manner, she waited patiently. Suddenly, a tapping sound echoed through the room, a tap, tap, tap. But as we gazed toward the window, it became apparent that the woods had drawn near. The branches outside swayed and writhed like tendrils of gloom, but we were not filled with fear or doom. For the darkness beyond beckoned us with a warmth that could send others fleeing, but not Ava and me. We were not like others, we were creatures of this realm, and here we belonged.

"Pray, speak, my cherished daughters, why hast thou come to me so soon?" asked our dear mother, her voice a symphony of refined elegance and wisdom. Though her tone bore the weight of concern, she already knew the purpose of our arrival.

"We perished while safeguarding one whom we cherish, though I cannot say with certainty, Blake and I have both fallen for Aurelia," spoke Ava, her voice gentle and meek, yet resolute in our confession.

"Mother dear, wilt thou send us back to see our beloved Aurelia?" I beseeched, my eyes glowing with a fiery hope that burned like molten gold.

Amidst my ardent plea, the Crone remained still, her skeletal fingers fidgeting with an air of uncertainty. She clasped them tight to conceal her hesitation, as the shadows of the trees beyond the window drooped in a shroud of gloom. It was as though a dark secret had been shared among all, but Ava and I remained unaware.

“My dearests, I rejoice to see you have found another piece of your soul. Alas, I cannot send you back, for rules were broken and the dungeon you perished in has vanished. Without the respawn point, there is nowhere for you to return to. It grieves me to say, but you are now free from those distant moons beyond our veil,” spoke our beloved mother with a voice that carried both regret and compassion.

“Dead, dead, with no chance to respawn?” Ava whispered, anguish seeping through her voice.

Amidst the Crone’s speech, a certain phrase did seize my ear, not of the dungeon’s doom or the fate of our demise. “Mother, pray tell, what doth thou mean by another piece of our soul?”

I beheld her shoulders stiffen, and her once noble form faltered, as if I had stumbled upon a secret she wished not to utter.

“Prithee forgive me for the grave tidings I must impart, my dear daughters, but truth thou art entitled to from the very start,” spoke the Crone, her bosom rising and falling as she drew a breath, revealing the contours of her skeleton beneath her dress. “Let us commence at the beginning. Twin souls were once formed in this realm, though it has not occurred in many an eon’s helm. When a newly manifested soul departs the ether, an exceedingly rare miracle can transpire, causing that soul to split naturally in half, creating what is commonly known as identical twins. They live together as inseparable siblings, but when their mortal bodies die, their identical souls separate upon arrival within the veil.

“In the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, a soul may be reborn and live a wondrous life on its own, for the identical twin souls have long been split and flown. However, in rare instances, two once identical souls may cross paths in another life, centuries or more later, and find that their bond is so strong, even the gods would fear to keep them apart. We call them soulmates,” continued the Crone, her voice tinged with a note of sadness and woe.

“For those fortunate enough to find their soulmate, it is a blessing beyond compare. But for those like thee, my dearest daughters, who have only just found them to lose their missing piece, it is a tragedy of the highest order. I cannot send thee back to thy loved one, to Aurelia, but take solace in knowing that the bond thou shared with thy beloved is eternal, and that someday, in another life, thou may be reunited once more.”

My thoughts did race and spin, and upon a glance at Ava, her expression told me no less, for she too was thrown into confusion’s mess. I had believed Ava to be a piece of my soul, not Aurelia, and this truth left me without a goal. Nothing made any sense, how or why, and now that beautiful vampire, from my grasp does fly. The veil’s realm lost its allure, and the darkness that once comforted, felt like a taunting nightmare, nothing to cure. My heart cried out to get back to her, for in her arms, my soul felt a whisper.

“I thought Blake and I were two halves of the same soul. How can Aurelia be our missing piece?” Ava inquired of the Crone.

“Ye twain were but a mishap brought forth by me, to rectify a mistake upon the first soul, from which thou twain were created,” spoke the Crone, her voice tinged with a hint of sorrow.

Her words struck me like a bolt of thunder, jolting me from this dream turned nightmare's slumber. My words stumbled out, as if I had forgotten how to speak. "So, you mean to say that neither Ava nor I am the true Blake?"

At my outburst, the whimsical allure of the realm we found ourselves in seemed to shatter. The Crone's worried demeanor dissipated as a sense of nurturing care emanated from her. It was as if she longed to wrap us in a comforting embrace, treating us like innocent children in need of her protection.

"Dear daughters," spoke the Crone, her voice now devoid of the realm's enchantment, "you are both the true Blake. When I removed the magic skill that held you captive, your soul fractured into two pieces, an uncommon occurrence that only ever happened to newly manifested souls. However, your soul was matured with many past lives, and I, as the one who split your soul, have accomplished something that no other deity has done since the great cataclysm. I created two new souls. You may have wondered if I am just a foster mother to you, but I assure you, I am the one who gave birth to your current existence. Therefore, you are both my daughters, and no one can dispute that fact."

My mind spun once again, I truly wasn't the complete Blake, no, that wasn't right, I was just a broken half of the original Blake's soul. Wait, no, I was only a small piece, and Aurelia was the other half, while Ava and I made up a quarter of the original soul. No, that didn't seem right either... Ugh, my head was hurting as I tried to make sense of this revelation.

Ava spoke up amidst my turmoil, her voice cutting through the chaos, "Mother, can we find a way to return? Any way at all?"

"Regrettably, my beloved children, I have no means to send you back as the dungeon has been destroyed," said our mother with sorrow in her voice.

A wondrous realization dawned on me, and with it, the spellbinding allure of the veil was once again restored, causing my eyes to widen with awe. The wonders of the veil seemed to react to Ava and me, but that was another thought for another time. My mind was upon a memory of before. It was but a mere chance that I could not say would work, but I knew it had once before. On my last visit to see our mother... No, that was not right, upon Ava and my birth, Wartie had accompanied Ava and me to this realm of wonder within the veil. Yet, while he may never have stepped a foot within it, he had been here all along.

My trembling hands I brought them to my chest as I took a deep breath. Though I appeared as a child in the realm of dreams and nightmares deep within the veil. Yet, fear was not something that I held, for I was a force to be reckoned with here, I was the nightmare within the veil, for I was my mother's daughter. I plunged my hands inside, burrowing deep into my chest cavity. My hands had vanished into the liquid of my body, but my true intentions lay hidden within. I sought something, and in the darkness inside me, I found it – Stellar Void still had sway within the veil. A smile of malevolent glee spread across my face as I withdrew my hands grasping an awakened Dungeon Core.

A gasp escaped from Mother's lips, a rare sight that brought a sly grin to my lips and Ava's as well. We had managed to surprise her after all. "My dears," she said, her voice ringing with a mixture of pride and relief. "With this and access to the system, you need not fear being trapped within the veil ever again. Freedom will be yours to come and go as you please."

"In that case, may we return to Aurelia?" I asked with eagerness, hoping to depart at once.

"The system has been malfunctioning ever since our respawn," Ava lamented, shattering my fleeting joy.

Upon a tilt of her head away from us, Mother uttered, "Hmm, let me see what I can do." Though her hood concealed her face from sight, it appeared as if she was peering into the inner workings of the system. After moments of deep contemplation, she suddenly exclaimed, "Ah, there's the problem!"

"What was wrong," Ava asked.

"Tis a curious thing," said Mother, "the system struggles with two souls sharing one interface. Circe's system is old, forgotten by the primordial herself, but its power remains for deities to exploit. Alas, many errors and glitches are known only to Circe, and she cares not to fix them. Even I cannot remedy all its problems. However, I shall endeavor to find a few workarounds. Take heed, though, for unforeseen issues may arise. Nevertheless, the system should work for you two once again."

"Why doesn't she care to fix them?" asked Ava.

"The system predates the cataclysm that killed her sister. It is the reason why no new souls have been created since then. Circe is one of the three pillars of existence, for she is Magic itself. But once her sister, Life was slain by Circe's own foul attempts at meddling with creation, no new souls have since been created. Well, that is until I inadvertently created the two of you from a single soul." Mother's tone was pained, as if she was keeping something from us.

"Wait, does that mean everyone is soulless?" I interjected.

"No, my sweet child. The portion of the system Circe's sister created is still functioning, providing a never-ending cycle of reincarnation from the veil to the realm. However, without new souls, and with nearly every soul destroyed during the cataclysm, Circe resorted to stealing souls from beyond our veil to inhabit our realm."

"I have so many questions," Ava exclaimed.

"All in time, my daughter. For now, grasp that core with your sister."

As Ava joined me in grasping the Dungeon Core, I couldn't help but inquire, "And what of the war between the gods?"

"My dear children, let my words be etched upon your souls. A matter of great weight shall be discussed at our next meeting, but for now, strive to gain power at any cost. Your Dungeon Core is a treasure beyond compare, and even the gods will send those to claim it if they find out." Mother

paused, her bony hands stretching out to rest upon our cheeks. “And I must ask for your forgiveness, for I shall take measures to keep you both safe. Know that I love you both dearly, and above all else, I am sorry for what must come next.”

In a flash of brilliance, the Dungeon Core blazed with a fierce light, pulsing through the room and beyond with all its might. But as swiftly as it came, darkness enveloped me, and I crumbled to dust, as the two of us were thrust through the veil’s starkness. My reality faded into nothingness, but one thing remained, our love for Aurelia, our beloved soulmate, an unyielding flame.

SYSTEM REBOOT INITIATED
Recalibrating...
Recalibrating...
ERROR DETECTED!
R e c a l i b r a t i n g ...
V I R U S D E T E C T E D !