

BLACK PUDDING

CHAPTER 15

“Arise, my dearest Blake, the hour is nigh to leave thy dreams behind! The other young ones do prance and play in fields so wonderous and kind. So come, child, and join the fun in the meadow bright and rare, where frolics and games and joys untold do await thee, fair and rare.”

I awoke to the sound of childish laughter, a symphony of joy and delight. My eyes beheld a verdant meadow where six young children frolicked without care. They cavorted and gamboled, their giggles ringing through the air as they chased each other in wild abandon. The sight was both haunting and beautiful, a nostalgic reminder of the carefree days of innocence.

“Oh, little ones, do come and share in play with dear Blake, who hath just arisen from slumber’s sway. But heed my words, I implore thee, the woods, a place to stay away. Stay here, where games and laughter doth await, and hours of merriment thou shalt create, in this wondrous land, with joy so bright, a melody of glee, shining in the light.”

The first to come near was a youthful child with golden tresses and a beaming face. Her laughter rang out like chimes in glass, her happiness, a contagious grace. She hopped and twirled, with hand outstretched, eager for a new friendship to be fetched. “Greetings, Blake, I am Sophia, do come and join us. Let us play, a game of tag, with you as it!”

With disbelief swirling in my heart, I beheld a wondrous sight, for I had shrunk to a child’s size, a diminutive figure, a mere shadow of my former self. But amidst the fluttering laughter that danced in the air, a smile adorned my face, a radiant expression I couldn’t contain. In that moment, doubts were cast aside, and with reckless glee, I clasped her tiny hand, becoming one with their mirthful brigade. We raced through the meadow, their infectious energy infusing my every step, a wild abandon set free. The echoes of youthful giggles cascaded like a majestic symphony, and within this realm of unadulterated bliss, nothing else held significance, for I had discovered my true sanctuary. My spirit awakened, resonating with the resounding laughter, and basking in the boundless realm of joyous existence.

With nimble steps, I wove and bobbed, my heart alight, as I bounced and leaped, embracing the all-pervading happiness that enveloped the air. Playfully, I nudged the shoulder of a lad, his laughter rippling through the meadow as he twirled in mirthful delight. In this realm of enchantment, the gaiety knew no bounds, a tapestry of joy woven with each breath. Laughter and delight intertwined, painting a perpetual smile upon my face, as the magic of this place unfolded before my eyes.

“Rob, you are it,” Sophia proclaimed.

As the hours waned and the sunbathed the meadow in its warm embrace, we laughed and played, our spirits dancing in the radiant light. Yet, a weight settled upon my heart when I beheld another

girl, her dark freckled face and piercing eyes fixated upon the foreboding woods. Her once vibrant smile had vanished, replaced by an air of trepidation. The shadows seemed to stretch, casting an ominous veil over the wooded expanse, stripping away its enchantment and revealing only darkness and fear. A shiver coursed down my spine, for I sensed the proximity of imminent danger lurking within the depths of those forbidding woods.

As the day turned to dusk, the freckled child's joy was but a distant memory. She stood still, her gaze fixed upon the silent woods, her face now pale. My heart raced with alarm, and terror ensnared me as the shadows grew ever near. The woods held no magic, no wondrous glee, no enchantment or delight, for all to see.

The first voice I heard upon awakening in this wondrous realm sounded aloud to the freckled girl, filling the world with kindness and grace, *"Fear not, dear Heather, 'tis just shadows that dwell, there is naught to see, only tales to tell. Do come and play with the children once more, dinner draws near."*

As I sought the woman behind the voice so sweet, her presence I could not meet. I rubbed my eyes and searched around, but her form could not be found. Yet, a mischievous giggle filled the air, and I was whisked away to a realm beyond compare. With boundless glee, I chased after children in a carefree race, leaving behind the shadows of doubt and embracing pure delight's embrace. Their laughter and play, a symphony profound, enchanted my mind with joy unbound. In this magical place, I had discovered my true home, where laughter echoed and joy freely roamed. The sense of belonging warmed my soul, as I reveled in the wonders that this realm did unfold. Surrounded by youthful laughter's tune, I embraced the beauty of each passing hour. But alas, the time had come, dinner beckons.

The children gathered, Sophia, Heather, Rob, Jeremy, Yua, and Jason too. We all gathered around the table, which appeared to expand, our feet swinging in the air as we leaned in, eagerly awaiting the feast at hand. Laughter intertwined with the air, our smiles reflecting the joy we shared. And there I sat, immersed in my chair, a radiant grin adorning my face, captivated by the sight of their laughter and harmonious embrace.

As if conjured by enchantment, the table stood adorned, with a feast fit for kings, a culinary delight adorned. The children's eyes widened with delight, their hunger unmasked, as they indulged in the flavors, their enthusiasm unabashed. Laughter and voices intertwined, an orchestra of mirth, filling the air with melodies, as they savored the earth. I leaned back, a smile upon my face, content in my quiet observation, cherishing their joyous embrace, a memory to treasure, an everlasting sensation to preserve.

Basking in the tantalizing allure of the feast, I refrained from partaking, my senses alert and watchful, my gaze fixed upon the others, as a malevolent notion insinuated itself into the recesses of my mind. A palpable air of unease cloaked the surroundings, a nebulous void that resisted comprehension. I scanned the expanse of the table, yet the enigmatic woman remained elusive, her presence a puzzle yet unsolved, leaving me with an unsettling disquietude and a riddle yet to be gleaned.

As the feast carried on, an ominous shadow cast its pall over the table, its presence unnoticed by the other children. The wooden floorboards creaked beneath our feet, and the house swayed with an unsettling rhythm, yet they continued to indulge in their meal with unabated glee, blissfully ignorant of the gathering darkness. The shadows deepened, their sinister tendrils creeping, but as I scanned the room, my heart pounding in fearful anticipation, I found naught but fleeting specters, dissipating like a nightmare's hold released by the dawn's gentle touch.

Still, my unease lingered, a gnawing in the depths of my mind, a resolute feeling that all was not as it seemed, and the darkness held a purpose, not blind. The children's laughter, once so joyous and free, now rang hollow and forced, their faces contorted, a grotesque masquerade. The darkness ebbed and flowed, reemerging with renewed vigor, its tendrils extending and entwining my thoughts, pulling me deeper into a realm of obscurity where the brilliance of light faltered, and the shadows reigned supreme.

Amidst the ongoing feast, a boy's head tumbled across the table, a sight that left me shaken, if true. It was Rob's severed head that had passed through, yet the other children feasted on, oblivious to the horrors I had borne witness. I sat there frozen with fear, as another head fell into the cheer, this time belonging to Heather, or so it seemed, but the feast pressed on, like a nightmare turned real. In a sudden flash of lightning, the truth was unveiled, revealing the skeletal forms of the children, a haunting sight that could not be curtailed. But still, the feast went on, as the children chewed, the headless too. A nightmarish sight, one that I could not unsee.

A withered old hag, face hidden within a veil, gaunt and sickly thin, shuffled into the room with a slouch and a hobble. She was garbed in dark robes, so familiar, yet untrue. She approached with more food as the children cheered. They eagerly fed, yet only in the briefest of flickers did the lightning reveal what to be true.

I peered through the window and beheld the sinister woods that surrounded us. The trees were twisted and twirled, like tentacles of darkness, beckoning me with their dance. The forest held within it, dark delights, forbidden pain, and horrors of the night. I caught the eye of the hag reflected off the windowpane, her eyes fixed upon me, with a look of hunger so vile and untrue. I turned and she withdrew, and I shuddered, for I knew that within her, there lay a hunger so cruel.

The sound of footsteps echoed through the house, creaking upon the floorboards above. Down the stairs they approached, slow and steady, like the march of death. A fearsome creature descended, its arrival marking the end of the children's cheer, their laughter and merriment now silenced and ceased. And then, she appeared, shrouded in darkness and mystery, leaving me trembling with fear, until it withdrew, revealing a little girl shrouded in light.

The child's complexion was pure, her dress and hair a shining white, with a celestial appearance, she was a sight of delight. But, as I gazed into her glowing eyes, I saw only myself reflected in their eerie orange light. The hag approached, guiding the child toward the table, and with each skeletal figure they passed, a shudder rippled through their bony frames. Seated across from me, the child eagerly partook in the feast, her youthful cheer unbounded. The hag, too, took her place, her gaze fixed upon the lavish spread with a wondrous delight, her dark eyes shifting toward me.

Yet, as I gazed upon her, her face remained veiled within a void so dark and cruel, yet somehow it felt akin to a dream so pure.

“Come, my dear, cast away thy fears,” crooned the hag, her voice a cackle on the wind. “Behold, even thy sister revels in this delight. No need for trepidation, my sweet. Now, tell me, how dost thou find this feast?”

“Sister?” I repeated to myself that went all but unheard.

“Verily, ‘tis a delight beyond compare, I offer thee my sincerest thanks,” replied the girl who bore my resemblance, her countenance adorned with a joyous smile. “Blake, thou must partake as well, I assure thee, ‘tis a feast so scrumptiously good!”

Another gleam of lightning illuminated the feast, and at last, the true nature of the repast was fully revealed. A table bedecked with decay and putridity, spoiled meats crawling with maggots and flies. The girl, unfazed, dined on a severed human limb, its flesh grotesque as it clung to the bone. And I, transfixed by the wonderous display, licked my lips in hunger and awe. The children, seated around the table, remained but skeletons, while two skulls rested upon plates of twisted entrails and innards. The sight was ghastly, yet I could not avert my gaze, ensnared by the delectable spectacle that unfolded before me. The hag cackled, her laughter resounding through the chamber, as the feast pressed on, the children now wary of both this peculiar girl and me.

An odd sight it was, for though I knew not this girl’s identity, a sense of familiarity pervaded the air, as if we were bound by an unseen thread, connected through the tapestry of our lives. The hag herself exuded a similar aura, as if she were more than a mere stranger, but perhaps a long-lost mother or kin. Yet, despite these musings, my gaze was undeniably drawn back to the grotesque and strangely mouthwatering feast, where my own doppelgänger reveled in unhindered delight.

Another flicker of light, and I beheld the hag, cloaked not in her robe, but in the likeness of a grand ball gown, seated regally in her chair. A hood still enshrouded her head, veiled her countenance in a mysterious darkness, revealing only skeletal hands and thin figure to my discerning gaze. Strangely, I sensed no malevolence emanating from her as I daringly indulged in a bite of a putrid heart, savoring its flavor as if it were a delectable fruit freshly plucked from a verdant branch.

And with each bite I took, the taste of decay greeted my palate, a perverse pleasure that should have turned my stomach. Yet, I reveled in the sensation of each crunch and chew, savoring the morbid symphony upon my tongue. The hag, now draped in the elegance of a refined lady, carried herself with a grace befitting royalty, her laughter tender and whimsical as she observed my indulgence in the feast of the dead. Though her shrouded gaze exuded warmth and affection, my eyes were inexorably drawn back to the girl seated opposite me, her face adorned with a gleeful grin, as she continued to relish the grotesque banquet with unabated delight.

“Who are you?” I eventually inquired of the girl seated opposite me, my words mingling with the taste of the morbid feast upon my lips. Yet, my question extended beyond the reflection of myself, veiled in ethereal white, but also encompassed the once hag, now an enigmatic woman shrouded in profound darkness, exuding an aura reminiscent of a fleeting dream.

And yet, it was not the girl who uttered the next words. “My dearest young ones,” spoke the woman of gentle and motherly nature, clad in garments of deepest black, “the hour hath come, and my decision is final, for the rules decree that only one champion shall be crowned.”

I ceased my feast as my gaze shifted around the table. The six skeletons seem to awaken from their haze to our reality, with a few of them trembling in sorrow and grief. One of them even directed a hostile glare in my direction, while another tried to remove the delightful meal from their jaw and ribs. Meanwhile, my mirrored reflection remained unperturbed, continuing to savor the meal with a broad grin on her face.

“My dear Sophia, thou hast scarce had a chance to sparkle and yet, thy time with us is done too soon. But I can spy the longing in thy heart to show thy mettle, and for that, I dub thee a Dark Acolyte, may the shadows lead thee on.”

With the woman’s ominous declaration, Sophia’s bony remains disappeared from the table, leaving the other skeletons and myself in a state of shock and confusion. I watched on as their empty eye sockets glanced around frantically, searching for any sign of the vanished child, but she was nowhere to be found, vanished into the ether as if she had never existed. My reflection, however, continued to hum a cheerful tune as she feasted on what was clearly not a sausage, seemingly unfazed by the strange events unfolding around her.

“Oh, Rob, my dearest child,” spoke the woman with a tender affection, her words imbued with a gentle cadence, “I have pondered deeply of late if thy loyalty to our cause is unwavering. But after much contemplation, I have reached a verdict and declare thee my Nightmare Paladin, and guardian of dreams. Remember, my boy, that fighting for the nightmares that creep does not make thee a monster or fiend, not in the least. For many things that others deem evil and base are but dreams that belong to one’s own pace. So, if ever thou art plagued by doubt, simply remember that thou art fighting for the right to dream freely.

Rob’s skeleton voiced its fear, “What does that mean?” Yet, ere the words could fully escape its bony jaw, its remains crumbled into dust and vanished, much like the fate of Sophia before him. This spectacle left the remaining skeletons in a state of unease, uncertain of the fate that awaited them all.

In the depths of my being, I clung to the conviction that triumph was within my grasp, and yet, my gaze was repeatedly drawn to the girl seated across from me, a reflection of myself adorned in garments and locks as pure as the driven snow. With unabated delight, she continued to savor the feast, oblivious to the doubts that plagued my mind. Did she come to usurp my place, emerging as the triumphant one while I suffered a defeat? Uncertainties swirled within the recesses of my thoughts, but alas, before I could articulate my fears and seek solace in comprehension, the motherly woman proceeded with her next utterances.

“Fear not, my dear Yua,” spoke the shrouded woman of bones, her voice a spectral whisper carried on the breeze, “but let thy heart overflow with joy. For I do name thee Nightmares’ Assassin, the one who shall deftly strike down the adversaries of dreams with agile skill. And thou, sweet

Heather, with thy heart so pure and kind, I name thee my Priestess of Dreams, venture forth and unleash my nightmares and dreams upon the realm, let them entwine and ensnare.”

As Heather and Yua both disintegrated into dust, a profound sense of awe washed over me, mingled with a tinge of trepidation. Only Jeremy, Jason, and I remained seated at the table, accompanied by my doppelgänger who continued to feast with evident satisfaction upon her countenance. The shrouded woman, her visage veiled beneath the depths of her hooded robe, maintained a momentary silence. The scene unfolded like a vivid dream, blurring the boundaries of reality and fantasy, casting a spell of wonder and enchantment upon my senses. Amidst this mystical tableau, I succumbed to the allure, reaching out to partake in yet another serving of putrid flesh, delighting in its morbid flavor with an unsettling glee.

“And now, my dears, to the rest of thee,” she said in a soothing tone, “each of thee hast shown great promise, and it doth pain me to make this decree, that only one shall bear the title of Dark Champion, a name not befitting of thy purpose. Thus, I shall rename it to Nightmares’ Champion, a title that aligns more closely with the essence of thy calling. And with that, Jeremy, thou art a noble leader in the making, thy cunning and bravery shining bright. I name thee Sentinel of Dreams, a guardian entrusted with the sacred duty to serve me faithfully. Go forth, Jeremy, and mayest thou fulfill thy role with unwavering devotion, tending to the dreams and nightmares that dwell within.”

I released a sigh, my heart heavy with the weight of uncertainty, for I had come perilously close to losing the title I coveted so fiercely to Jeremy. The true reason behind my intense longing eluded me, hidden deep within the recesses of my soul. Perchance it was what Aurelia wished of me, an unspoken yearning that resonated within my depths. Above all else, my fervent desire was to find my way back to her, to bridge the vast expanse that separated us, even if the enigmatic pull that drew me toward her remained shrouded in mystery. If being hailed this Nightmares’ Champion, held the promise of bringing me closer to Aurelia’s embrace, then my longing for that title blazed with an even more fervent flame. Yet, as my gaze locked with the girl seated across from me, her joyous smile concealed a cryptic secret, a hidden desire that mirrored my own yearning for the presence of Aurelia.

The elegantly dark woman’s words carried through the air, a melodic decree filled with a touch of solemnity, “And thou, cruel Jason, with thy heart full of anger and rage, naught can quell the fire that doth blaze within thy cage. It is for that reason, I do name thee, my Dark Champion, go forth and be the harbinger of my will, so mote it be.”

I was horrified, utterly taken aback by the fact that I had lost to that razor-toothed skeleton. Jason, with his dental peculiarity, displayed his defiance by taunting me, flipping me the bird with his bony finger before crumbling into mere dust, while Jeremy, wearing an expression of disappointment, shook his head and faded into oblivion. Confusion and shock overwhelmed me as I grappled to comprehend the woman’s unexpected declaration. How had I faltered in the trial? The skeletal remnants of those six had now become nothing more than fleeting memories, leaving only the girl and me at the table with the enigmatic figure shrouded in a hooded cloak. The room

sank into an unsettling silence, punctuated only by the rhythmic sound of the girl's chewing, and a chilling sense of unease settled within me, akin to an icy finger tracing its way up my spine.

The woman chuckled with sinister glee, her demeanor changing as she spoke. "At long last, they have departed," she exclaimed, her eyes almost twinkling beneath the depths of her hood. "Oh, Blake, my dearest, thou hast truly ensnared my malevolence, despite the interferences of Circe. I beseech thee to grant me thy forgiveness for the deeds I have enacted," she declared, extending a hand of grace toward both me and the girl who seemed to be both my reflection and my polar opposite. The girl had ceased her feast, her gaze brimming with curiosity.

"Fear not, my precious lil' ones," she continued, her voice flowing with a melodic cadence that resonated with ancient wisdom. "I doth comprehend that the tapestry of this tale may bewilder thy innocent hearts. Circe's deed was a cruel twist, for she ensnared thy soul within a Black Pudding, a treacherous trap. Upon thy demise, it shattered thy soul into thousands of shards, and would have casted ripples of devastation throughout the realm and beyond. Alas, her motives remain as elusive as a fleeting dream, though I do have my suspicions as to why. Perchance she sought to rekindle a fragment of the Eldritch Abomination that once claimed the heavens or simply to destroy all of reality. The truth eludes my grasp.

"Nonetheless, I have exerted my powers to mend the damage and salvage thy soul, or rather souls now, averting the imminent calamity she nearly unleashed upon the realm. Although thou may not bear the title of mine champion, I bestow upon thee a different mantle – my Scion. I have embraced thee as mine own, weaving threads of my divine essence to restore thy fractured soul. However, thy souls now reside in a harmonious duality, akin to the tender bond shared by twins. Such a phenomenon rarely occurs, except in the creation of newborn souls, something that hasn't happened within this realm since its inception. By merging thy essence with mine, I have ushered forth your wondrous rebirth, transforming thy soul into interconnected halves. Thou art now mine cherished daughters, and my love for thee knows no bounds, for the divine of this realm have never created something new since the fall of my own mother, until now.

"Now, my delightful daughters, venture forth into the realm and unfurl the tapestry of thy marvelous dreams and haunting nightmares. But do exercise caution in the presence of Circe, for even my powers of the divine have their limitations when confronted by a Primordial."

"My soul shattered?" the girl and I echoed in unison, our voices filled with disbelief. We longed for an explanation, a deeper understanding of our fractured existence. However, our inquiries were swallowed by the tumultuous currents of uncertainty. Reality twisted and warped, leaving me disoriented and lost within the labyrinth of confusion. Countless questions clamored for attention, yearning to be answered. Yet, before anything else could escape my lips, everything dissolved into oblivion, fading like ethereal remnants, as I succumbed to the embrace of the enigmatic void.

To the heavens, the Crone proclaimed, declaring you as her daughter, now and for all eternity.
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You have earned the title: [Scion of the Crone]
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May the heavens one day fear you!

Best of Luck!

“Ow, my head hurts! Wait, what the fuck, daughter of the Crone? SHHHIT!”

“Wait, that wasn’t my thoughts?”

“Oh, no!”