

# BLACK PUDDING

## CHAPTER 16

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Darkness enveloped me, and I found myself in that strange state between death and life—a place that felt more like being reborn—or respawning, if you will. It was like wandering through a dream, and I felt an unusual sense of peace washing over me, unlike anything I had ever experienced before. Amidst this serenity, I sensed a spark of life within me, like a tiny ray of sunshine, quietly dreaming away while I roamed through darker nightmares with glee.

As I drifted in the void, I couldn't resist delving deep into the connection to my messed-up soul. I was faced with a real mind-bender. Was I Blake now, or was this broken piece of my soul somehow her, or maybe neither of us? The questions swirled around my mind, and to be honest, I had always found philosophy to be rather lame. To be, or not to be—what the fuck is the question! My head was spinning with all this existential shit.

Ugh, to make things even worse, it turned out that Circe was the one who did this to me! And just when I was kinda starting to like her—okay, not really. I hardly like anyone, and that's not some new Black Pudding trait I picked up. In my past life, I was always pretty antisocial. But back to the point, my damn soul had shattered, and now this Crone goddess was acting like my freakin' mother, trying to piece me back together. Oh, and I'm her scion? Well, she did succeed, kinda. I mean, she put me back together... into two pieces, but they sure as hell don't feel identical. *Ugh, this whole situation is so damn confusing!*

Man, the big question haunting my mind was how and why the hell did Circe shatter my soul? Seriously, what the actual f... The Crone had her guesses, but they're just freakin' guesses! Well, thank goodness I didn't even notice it happening. I can't even imagine how much that would've hurt. Just thinking about it makes me shiver. But seriously, what the fuck? Circe was supposed to be teaching me magic, sorta like a reluctant sensei or something. She even gave me that Oracle skill to talk with her. *None of this adds up, like, at all!*

*"We always overthink things, just relax. We'll figure it out,"* that little spark within me said.

*"We?"* I echoed, the word feeling like ash on my tongue—or, well, mind, since I'm not really speaking while floating here in the void.

*"Yes, we! I mean, you are me, after all,"* she replied back, a little too chipper about this whole arrangement if you ask me... I mean, us.

Ugh, this was going to get confusing if I—we don't nip it in the bud. *"Okay, let's drop this we bullshit, it's already hurting my head."*

*"Sure thing,"* she quipped back, as if trying not to laugh. *"Seems like you've inherited a whole lot of Blake's irritability,"* she added, not bothering to hide her laughter now.

“No way, I didn’t inherit shit! I’m Blake, and you’re like a little piece of me,” I groaned, feeling like I was losing grip on what the hell was going on. “You know what? I should give you a name. It’ll make it easier to deal with all this madness if I treat you like a whole new person instead of the other half of my broken soul,” I mused, trying to regain some control over the situation.

“If that makes you less moody, I’m fine with that,” she chuckled, much to my irritation. “Now, what should I call myself? Oh, I’ve always loved the name, Ava!”

“What? No way, I’ve always loved that name—hold up,” I blurted out, then quickly reined myself in, trying to suppress a groan. Of course, she always loved that name, she was technically me.

“Okay, Ava, I guess it’s nice to meet you,” I managed to say, though my teeth were probably clenched so tight it’s a wonder they didn’t crack. Or were they? Wait, no, my teeth were fake, a creation I made out of silk, they weren’t capable of cracking. To be honest, the more I thought about it, I wasn’t even sure if I was even corporeal in this freaky place! Did I even have teeth to clench, or a freakin’ body? This whole situation was just, fucking weird!

“Flee, Aislinn, my love,” a man’s voice called out, halting my internal dilemma in its tracks.

The darkness of the void started to fade, and my heart raced as I saw the outlines of a forest ablaze, with two figures running desperately through the chaos. I tried to reach out, to see more, but before I could make sense of it all, a small, ominous figure emerged—a little girl shrouded in an eerie mix of pink and pure darkness. She waved her hand, and my vision was abruptly cut off. *What the hell’s going on?* I had felt a sense of urgency surging through me, but she took it all away, plunging me back into blackness as I drifted to sleep.

As I stirred from my slumber, I found myself enveloped in the all-too-familiar gooeyness of my tar-like form. *Ugh, here we go again.* “Will there ever be a day when I wake up and not be a puddle of goo?” I groaned to myself. “I can only hope.” But wait, there was something else... an odd dream, slipping away from my memory like water through my fingers. *Oh well, dreams are weird anyway. No use dwelling on it.*

I shifted into my human form, gracefully wrapping myself up in my spider silk to create my gorgeous phony human casing. Well, maybe others see it as phony, but to me, it’s my luxurious skin. After the silk settled, I scanned the dark surroundings with a faint orange glow emanating from my eyes, thanks to my Mana Sight.

I found myself lying on a stone altar, the hard surface a sharp contrast to my smooth skin. My mind was hazy, unable to recall how I ended up in this place or where I was. The only vivid memory was of that idiot who caused the deep roads to collapse – and the Crone! But what was more shocking was looking down and realizing that I was completely, freaking naked?! *Seriously, how the hell did I end up in this mess?* And, oh great, I was anatomically correct too! *How lovely!*

“What the hell?” I spat out in frustration, feeling the need to vent my anger. Without thinking, I cast [**Oracle**], hoping to find someone to bitch out. However, as soon as I cast it, I cursed myself;

Circe was the last person I should call out to. After all, if what the Crone said was true, Circe had tried to destroy my soul.

But to my surprise, it wasn't Circe who responded. "What? Oh! Ha-ha!" a sudden fit of laughter resonated within my head, and the memory of Ava came flooding back into my mind. Yet, there was still something else missing, like the fading fragments of a fleeting dream.

"Ava?" I groaned, it was pretty clear now that Oracle must be hardwired to the other fragment of my soul instead of Circe. Seems like the Crone made sure Circe no longer had any access to me, which is a relief!

"Hey, what's up?" Ava shot back, her voice filled with a little too much perkiness, which was going to quickly get on my nerves. Seriously, did she get all the parts of my personality I've been suppressing or what?

"Oh, look who's here," a familiar male voice rumbled from the depths of the shadows ahead. "Do you ever stop talking to yourself, you psycho bitch?!"

I froze, my senses on high alert as I cautiously scanned my surroundings, preparing for any potential danger. The darkness seemed all-consuming, but a faint hint of orange light reflected off a few shapes, reminding me of one of my first Racial Skills. With a pulse of determination, I focused my thoughts and commanded [**Thermalsense**] to awaken. The world around me exploded into a frenzied barrage of colors before finally settling into a haunting purple hue. That's when I saw them—six glowing figures, each pulsing with a menacing red, orange, and yellow—stirring to life on altars like mine.

"Umm, Blake, we're not alone," Ava's voice rang in my head, or at least I assumed it had.

"No, shit, psycho!" the fucker yelled back at me.

"Argh! Alright!" I growled, it was clear Ava could speak using my mouth. Damn! And yet, I couldn't help but pause... technically, it was our mouth? "*Ava, can you hear my thoughts?*"

"Yep," she shot back... through our lips! Seriously, this whole sharing-a-body thing was going to get old, real quick.

With Thermalsense active, I couldn't make out his facial features since everyone appeared as glowing colors, but there was no mistaking that voice. I knew exactly who it was.

"I wasn't talking to you, shark face!" I yelled back at him.

"Psycho," he muttered under his breath, but the sound still reached my ears.

"Where are we?" a girl on one of the altars asked, her tone carrying a note of worry. She had interrupted the eerie stillness of the darkness (well, technically I had) and my growing irritation with the individual who persisted in calling me a psycho bitch!

"Heather!" another female voice cried back in alarm. "Where are you?"

"Over here," came the reply from the first girl, her tone filled with fear and anxiety.

“I’m coming to you!” the other reassured, her voice filled with determination.

I descended from the altar, and as I did, my fluid, inky form flowed out from beneath my ethereal, white skin. The black tar-like substance that made up my true form continued to seep out as it shifted in shape. The result was a breathtaking display of gothic beauty and nightly horrors as my dress reformed around me like tendrils of cruel darkness. The dress was adorned with intricate black embroidery that seemed to writhe and dance with a life of its own. I was a sight to behold, a mesmerizing combination of grace and horror, like a figure straight out of a funeral for the undead or an elegant dark ball of untold frights.

I pivoted, my hand still resting on the altar I had just departed from, and reached out with my senses, searching for the pulsing energy of mana that surrounded me. It didn’t take long to find it. With fierce determination, I cast forth the flickering fire of Necrotic Flames, illuminating the room in its eerie purple glow. My control with ambient mana, and more importantly, casting without the aid of the system, seemed to have greatly improved. Though, it was a lot simpler to call forth the magic when not in the heat of battle. I canceled my [**Thermalsense**] skill as I turned to face the six familiar nude figures. I couldn’t help but feel a twinge of recognition. Half of them, I had personally ended their lives.

“Now, now. What should I do?” I purred, a sinister smile spreading across my face, my lips contorting into an unnatural, demonic grin. I could feel Ava stirring within me, as if a bit uncomfortable with what I so badly wanted to do. Though, I sensed it was more of guilt that she delighted in tormenting and intimidating others just as much as I did. Huh, seemed like both halves of my soul were screwed up.

“I-I won! I’m the champion! You can’t touch me now!” Jason, the foolish man who had insulted me in the dark, declared triumphantly, like a pathetic child playing tag on a playground.

“Oh, how delightful it will be to shatter your delusions,” I replied with a sly smirk. My elongated tongue slithered out between my lips and whipped about before retracting back into my mouth in a taunting manner. I could practically taste the fear in the air, and it was intoxicating.

“P-Please, Jason, don’t p-provoke her!” the girl I had beheaded, Heather, implored. Her voice quivered with fear as she and another familiar figure, Yua (if I recalled her name correctly), cowered behind an altar, trying to shield their nudity from view. The sight was almost pathetic, and I couldn’t help but find it amusing.

“Go ahead, Jason, taunt her,” a third female goaded, her voice ringing with confidence and defiance. She stood tall before her altar, hands on hips, her face a mask of determination as she challenged Jason with her gaze. Instantly, she became my favorite among this group of shitheads! *Oh yes, I remembered her.* She was the first dead body I had found and consumed. The taste of her lingering on my tongue for quite some time, and was rather satisfying.

I heard Heather mumbling under her breath, but that wolf-eared fuck who caused the tunnel’s collapse was really getting on my nerves. He was just ignoring us, fueling my growing irritation. The temptation to violently rip those stupid ears from his head was overwhelming. And then, there was another figure lurking in the shadows—a hulking brute with a slightly greenish tint to his skin.

He cowered behind his altar, desperately trying to conceal his manhood with his hands. *What a bunch of sorry-ass characters!*

“I honestly don’t know whether to feast on you,” I started to say.

“Or pity you,” Ava finished, completing my thought as if we had been in sync our entire lives. It was surprising how effortlessly we were already coordinating with each other.

I heard a gasp, most likely from Heather. Her eyes were fixed on me, filled with shock and disbelief. “H-Has anyone taken a look at their status yet?” she stammered.

Shrugging to myself, I decided to pull up my own status sheet.

<b>Name:</b> Blake <b>Race:</b> Black Pudding  <b>Class:</b> Dungeon Monster <b>Level:</b> 45  <u>Titles</u> <b>Hopeless Crusader</b> <b>Scion of the Crone</b> <b>Unholy Mother</b>		
<u>Racial Skills</u> [Absorb] [Corrosive] [Necrotic Flame] [Polymorph] [Stellar Void] [Thermalsense]  <u>Spells</u> [Acid Breath] [Blight] [Fear] [Mana Sight] [Paralysis] [Spirit Vessel]  <u>Abilities</u> [Burst] [Poison Spit] [Silk Webbing] [Spider Walk] [Veil Polyglot] [Venomous]	<u>Vulnerabilities</u> [Fire] [Holy]  <u>Immunities</u> [Acid] [Darkness] [Disease] [Poison] [Sleep]  <u>Unique</u> [Oracle] [Restricted] [Restricted]	<u>Selectable</u> [Astral Insight] [Brittle Bones] [Combat Proficiency] [Decay Touch] [Fortress] [Leap] [Life Drain] [Mindless Regeneration] [Rotten Aura] [Shamble] [Shield Proficiency]

“I think mine’s broke,” I huffed, feeling a bit annoyed by what I saw.

“Broken?! Mine is working perfectly!” Jason’s boisterous laughter echoed throughout the chamber, “I’m the champion, bitches!” he declared proudly.

“A-And she’s the S-Scion of the Crone!” Heather stammered out. Her voice was still tinged with shock.

“Oh, yeah, there’s that. No, I meant I didn’t level up for killing all of you. Seriously, how weak are all of you?” I grumbled, feeling a mix of frustration and disappointment.

“What in the hell does that mean?” Jason asked, his voice tinged with boredom as he absentmindedly ran his tongue over one of his grotesque, needle-like teeth.

“I mean you all were too weak for me to earn any levels from beating your asses,” I replied, a touch annoyed I had to even spell it out for him.

The idiot rolled his eyes at me. “No, not that, I wasn’t talking to you,” Jason huffed. “Besides, winning with a sucker punch doesn’t count.” He grumbled on, but honestly, I couldn’t give a damn as I returned to tuning him out. Who had time for his whining anyway?

“Whatever, you bunch of useless idiots,” I sneered, rolling my eyes back at them. “And let me make one thing crystal clear, Champion. The Crone has claimed me as her own, so from this moment forward, you serve at the whim of my... new foster mother? Or something like that!” I declared with a sinister smirk, feeling a chilling satisfaction creeping down my spine. It was strange how easily those words came out, and even stranger how proud they made me feel. My smile twisted into a grotesque grin, reflecting the darkness within.

“Oh, come on, spare me the whining,” Jason grumbled, but I brushed off his complaints and continued to ignore him. However, his bravado quickly crumbled when he let out a bloodcurdling scream, his voice echoing through the chamber with terror and disbelief. “WHAT THE FUCK!” It was as if he had just woken up and finally realized what I had said earlier. Talk about a delayed reaction!

I paid no attention to the pathetic champion and marched towards the wolf-eared annoyance, my mind set on ridding him of those vexing ears once and for all.

“Whoa! Hey there now! The trial’s done! We’re on the same side now,” the irritating Jeremy spoke up. I paused, considering his words. On the one hand, he was correct. On the other hand, I still had an intense desire to rid him of those ears.

“Don’t do it, Blake!” Ava insisted.

“Oh, but I so desperately want to tear those ears from his head,” I complained, my frustration growing with each passing moment. Ugh, resisting the temptation was going to be a real pain.

“She’s babbling to herself like a fucking lunatic again,” Jason bellowed, his voice bouncing off the stone walls of the chamber.

With a snarl on my lips and a swish of my dress that could've caused a tornado, I left those sorry sacks of stupidity to their miserable destinies and sashayed out of the chamber. Just laying my eyes on them had me wanting to whip out a tentacle and gift them a dose of hellfire – or would that be Necrotic Flame? My black gooey blood boiled as I trudged along, the only source of light coming from the eerie, flickering, purple flame dancing in my hand. It took all the self-control I had—and trust me, it's not much—but I kept myself in check, remembering that these dimwits belonged to my new surrogate mama, the Crone. *Well, a little violence, I'm sure, would be fine.*

A voice piped up, “Please, wait for us!” That did nothing but stoke the fire of my growing annoyance. Those pleas echoed in my ears, teasing me with their relentless persistence.

I whirled around to see the sorry lot scurrying after me, their private goodies jiggling and swinging like they were auditioning for a pancake-flipping marathon. Oh, right, almost slipped my mind. There they were, prancing in their birthday suits, and honestly, I could barely hold back a snort of laughter. The three ladies and the beefy green behemoth—who by the way, had lost his head, quite literally, to me—had made the executive decision to tail me... *Fantastic.* The sight of the girls wrestling to keep their jiggy bits from performing a full-on samba was downright comical, and rather alluring if I do say so myself. And Rob—yeah, that was his name, right?—with his muscles popping like overfilled water balloons and hands clamped over his family jewels, was a freakin' riot!

As they edged closer, I jabbed a finger at each of them, spitting out a venomous rebuke. “I feasted on your lifeless husk and cleaved your two heads clean off,” I snarled, my fury teetering on the edge of eruption. “So why, in the realm of all things batshit crazy, would you follow me like lost puppies?” I crossed my arms across my chest, a fortress wall against the crying to come. Meanwhile, my personal eerie purple nightlight bobbed along dutifully. I shot the group a glare filled with a good measure of aggravation. Mostly, I was in disbelief at the laughable display, but my mind was firmly stuck on another pressing matter. And these idiots were holding me up.

“Absolutely not! I'm not staying with that creep, Jason,” Sophia proclaimed, hands firmly set on her hips. She wasn't shy or bashful in the slightest. Out of the group of hapless idiots, she seemed to be the least annoying.

I then slung my eyes to the mountainous outline of Rob, who was trying his level best to not get caught eyeballing the trio of naked ladies. Despite his looks screaming middle-aged, muscle-encased orc, he was knee-deep in the murky waters of bashfulness and embarrassment. Talk about a sight that was as odd as it was hilarious, this man-mountain morphing into a jittery mess in the company of clothes-deprived women. But hey, that's the bizarro world I had been thrown into. *Pfft, whatever!*

“Ava, can you handle this?” I grumbled, knowing full well my own compassion reservoir was running on fumes, and frankly, I was curious about Ava's solo abilities, considering we were flatmates in this body. I was pretty damn sure my alter ego, soul scrap, memory hodgepodge, or whatever she was, already caught the drift of my request.

“Bitchy,” she shot back, but it wasn’t a stung retort, more like an eyeroll you’d get from a sibling who’s heard all your crap before.

“Ava? Was that the evil girl in white who was sitting with the Crone and us at the table?” Yua piped up, a dash of trepidation lacing her voice.

“D-Didn’t she re-refer to A-Ava as your s-sister?” Heather stammered out, her voice trembling with confusion.

“Hi there, I’m Ava!” The words burst from my lips, just as my hands plunged into the gooey abyss that was my belly, burying deep beneath the squirming mass of black tendrils that formed my oh-so-trendy dress. Our four stunned spectators gasped in shock as they watched my arms vanish where my innards should’ve been. I disregarded their dry heaving and faces that could easily win a horror-show contest, focusing instead on the task at hand. Effortlessly, I spun four pairs of top-notch spider silk bathrobes and tossed them without care at the feet of our stunned spectators... Hold on, didn’t I ask Ava to take care of this? Damn, I can’t tell when she’s puppeteering my body!

*“Chill, girl, I’m not pulling our strings. It’s the same for me. I can’t tell where you stop and I start,”* Ava chimed in my head—or was it our collective headspace? *“Besides, we’re two halves of the same crazy coin, whatever you’re doing, it’s like I’m doing it, and the same goes the other way around. I’m just as much a part of Blake as you are. I only changed my name because you hogged all the bitchy stubbornness.”*

It wasn’t until her words percolated through my—no, our—mind that the reality dawned—I’m not just Blake... We. Are. BLAKE! Well, damn. My—no, better yet—our stepdad always had us pegged as crazy. And who would’ve guessed? The old prick actually hit the bullseye. Does this mean that my supposed internal monologue has been a duet all this while? Well, that’s a heap of craziness to unpack.

“How? Where?! What the hell!” Sophia’s voice rang out, teetering on the edge of disbelief and awe as she stared at the silk bathrobes. Among the merry band of misfits, she was the lone holdout who still retained a human.

I shrugged nonchalantly. “I can steal powers, by the way. Thanks for the Purple Necrotic Flames,” I stated before pivoting and resuming my search. The smothering darkness and hush of the corridors began to gnaw at my consciousness—no, our consciousness—a nagging sense of worry burrowing deep within. “Seriously, where the hell is everyone?” I mused aloud, to myself, or should I say, to ourselves? Nah, screw it. We’re both Blake, no need to split hairs.

“You didn’t steal it,” Sophia retorted, her voice tinged with a hint of fascination. “I still have my spell skill.”

“Curious,” I muttered, only vaguely aware of their lingering presence as they followed in my wake, now fully swaddled in the robes I’d conjured. I seemed to have processed rather swiftly that Ava and I were fundamentally the same person, but a more pressing worry soon monopolized my attention. “Where the hell is she?” I found myself muttering under my breath.



“What is this stuff?” Yua’s voice intruded, her tone grating like a cheese shredder against my nerves. “Feels like premium silk,” she continued, tracing her fingers over the sleek texture of the robe.

“Spider silk,” I grumbled, the edges of worry sharpening with each passing moment. I peered into one of the chambers we were passing by, searching for any sign of something out of the ordinary, but nothing caught my eye.

“Why are you so grumpy,” Yua asked with a cheeky tone.

“Allow me to make a few things clear,” I hissed, casting a dark gaze over the four following me. “It’s taking every ounce of my self-control not to turn on you and feast upon your flesh. And secondly, where in the unholy abyss is everyone? It’s downright unnerving that no one is here to welcome our dear dipshit champion! But then again, I shouldn’t expect much from a group that can’t even be bothered to check their system notifications during a fight!”

“Umm, you mean when we ditched you in the dungeon boss’s chamber? Yeah, we checked the system notifications and thought it was smarter to leave you there instead of trying to dig you out to finish you,” Yua blurted out.

“Oh, don’t act like we’re any better,” Ava teased. “We never bother checking our notifications either.”

I gritted my teeth. “You evil bitch! Don’t call me out in front of them... I’ve got a reputation as a bloodthirsty psychopath to uphold here,” I hissed, trying to preserve whatever semblance of fear-inducing image I had left. Of course, I was bickering with myself, but whatever!

“Who are you talking to?” Sophia questioned, her brow furrowed in confusion.

“Ava,” I replied tersely.

“I thought you were Ava,” she asked, her face a mask of confusion?

“No, we’re Blake! I don’t have time for this back and forth.” I resumed my march down the hallway, my footsteps echoing in the silence.

“Oh, wow! You have a split personality skill or another soul trapped in your head! Don’t you?!” Rob exclaimed, his words reverberating down the empty hall and up my nerves.

I was briefly tempted to unleash my wrath upon them, but I forced myself to resist the urge, my weary feet trudging deeper into the consuming darkness. The shadows seemed to pulsate with life, enveloping me in their suffocating embrace. Oddly enough, it felt somewhat comforting, like a warm and familiar presence.

As I turned the corner, my heart sank at the ghastly sight before me—a horrific tableau of death and destruction. The aftermath of a brutal battle was strewn across the landscape, a macabre tapestry of twisted bodies and unnatural poses. The necromancers had suffered a catastrophic defeat, and their corpses bore the marks of a merciless slaughter.

Despite the hunger that threatened to consume me at the sight of this gruesome feast, I managed to maintain my focus. My mind was fixated on one thing only—Aurelia! With a snarl of annoyance, I pushed aside bodies as I combed through the carnage, sparing a few for a quick bite here and there. Hey, a girl's gotta eat!

“W-What happened here?” Heather's voice reached my ears, but I paid her no mind as I continued my relentless search.

The relentless obsession that had gripped me and compelled me to find Aurelia was a baffling yearning I couldn't quite fathom. Yet, the fear that accompanied it was all-encompassing. As I pressed on, scouring the corridor, a glimmer of relief washed over me—Aurelia's lifeless form wasn't among the fallen I had come across. Nevertheless, the destruction that lay in its wake was nothing short of staggering.

The walls bore the unmistakable marks of blood, fire, and violent eruptions, while the lifeless bodies of the defeated were scattered haphazardly like abandoned toys. With a heavy sense of trepidation, I soldiered on, my four bothersome companions trailing behind me like pesky ducklings.

A sense of unease gnawed at the edges of my mind, persistent and maddening, like a pesky fly buzzing just beyond my grasp. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't shake it off; it felt like I had forgotten something crucial. As I took another turn down a murky and ominous hallway, there, sprawled out on the ground, was the little twerp ghoul, Olin. This time, life had abandoned him, an axe now wedged deep into his skull.

A dark temptation coursed through me, urging me to grind his face into the floor and feast upon his eyes. But before I could succumb to those sinister impulses, Ava's voice rang out like the clash of a church bell, snapping me back to reality.

“I've got a thought,” Ava chimed in. “Heather, reckon your mending spell could work on the undead?” she hollered back at the four souls who followed me like a pack of lost puppies in need of direction.

“I-I don't know,” Heather stammered, fear creeping into her voice as she anticipated my reaction to her answer.

Accepting that Ava and I were two fragments of the same soul was a lot to wrap my head around, but I did it, and adjusting to this newfound unity would take time. But despite the complexity of our situation, our souls, mind, and body were now aligned, fixated on one singular and all-consuming mission: finding Aurelia! All the training, ditching the broken system, and even Circe's attempt to obliterate my soul, all of it paled in comparison to this paramount quest. I vowed not to let my stubbornness get in the way of achieving this purpose... well, at least we hoped I wouldn't!

“Well, you are our priestess,” we said with a hint of expectation. “So, let's give it a try.” With that, we—I reached out to pull the axe from Olin's head. “Ugh, if this doesn't work, I'm devouring him,” I said, my black tongue darting out to wet my lips in anticipation.

“Were you always like this, or is that twisted personality from the screwed-up body they gave you?” Yua queried, her voice tinged with both worry and revulsion.

“I was always like this,” I teased with a sinister grin. The others stepped back, fear evident in their eyes as I stood over Olin’s body, holding a massive axe. I was ready to feast on his remains if Heather’s spell failed.

Heather approached with hesitation, her hands trembling as she reached out. “I c-call upon my dreams, m-mend,” she stammered, her voice barely above a whisper.

“*Blake, did you see what she just did?*” Ava voiced in our head.

“*No,*” I replied, but I couldn’t help but glean some insight from what Ava had observed from her side of our shared consciousness.

“*She cast the spell without using the command! I don’t think she even realized what she did!*”

“*Interesting... How does that help us?*”

“...”

I observed in both fascination and hunger as the injuries on the undead ghoul began to knit themselves back together—a grotesque display of blood and brain matter flowing back into its body, as if some unseen force was wielding a twisted vacuum. Despite the gruesome and strangely enticing sight, my priorities were clear—I needed answers first, and feasting could come later. Alas, the ghoul’s hazy gaze remained lifeless, and my quest for answers was far from over.

“There’s a yellow liquid seeping from the corner of your mouth,” Sophia said, her face contorted in disgust.

I wiped at the corner of my mouth, feeling a slight tinge of embarrassment. “Oops!”

I yanked my second phylactery from Stellar Void, and bam! It hit me like a frickin’ bolt of lightning, finally getting what we were up to. I mean, I kept saying it, and will probably keep saying it, but Ava and I were two shards of the same twisted soul. I—we—I, whatever, really aren’t separate people; she’s just me, doing her thing in our crazy shared brain space. *Got it, me!*

But even with this newfound clarity on our plans, that damn feeling of something forgotten kept gnawing at the back of my mind. It was like an annoying itch that I couldn’t scratch. “*Meh, whatever! I’ll deal with it later;*” I thought, giving it a dismissive shrug. There were more important things to worry about.