

# BLACK PUDDING

## CHAPTER 7

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My mind was blown – the little gnome I stumbled upon was from Earth! What were the chances of such a random encounter? Unless, of course, dear mother had a hand in it. And yet, why would she want me to cross paths with Lenny – no, sorry, Nikola. As I gazed at his innocent, childlike face, I couldn't help but feel both repulsed and intrigued. He didn't seem special in any way – I mean, I'm no magic guru. Still, I like to think I've figured out enough to know a thing or two about power, and this little guy was not giving off any of those vibes. If anything, he looked like a harmless toddler playing dress-up in steampunk gear. Though, to be fair, he was the first person I've seen in this world wearing such an outfit.

Then there was Kaida, the skeleton who answered the door. She was draped in a shredded purple dress that looked like it was about to fall off her bony frame any second. As her gaze locked onto Nikola, there was a strange flicker of excitement in her hollow eye sockets, but as soon as she spotted Olin, her skull seemed to twist with rage before settling into a look of utter confusion. It was like she couldn't decide whether to invite us in for tea or to gnaw on Olin's bones. *Ha! I like her.*

The skeleton's bony finger pointed at Olin. "Who the hell are you, and what have you done with Razzle?" she rasped.

As Olin opened his mouth to speak, I cut him off with a grin, "Oh, don't mind him. I killed Razzle and replaced his soul with my... friend, erm... servant."

Olin quickly chimed in, "I serve Lady Aurelia, not you."

"Keep telling yourself that," I winked.

Kaida rested a bony hand against her skull and let out a tired sigh. "Let me get this straight, you killed Razzle?"

I nodded with a smirk. "Yep, I killed him. Don't worry. It was nothing personal. I just felt like doing it."

The gnome, Nikola, looked like he was about to squirm out of his skin as if he sensed the chaos that was about to unfold.

Meanwhile, Kaida's bony hands dropped to her hips, her posture relaxing slightly at my words. "Well, that's perhaps for the best. Razzle did betray us for those zealots that have taken over the city," she finally said, eliciting a nod of agreement from Nikola. "Well, best come on in," she added with a creaky laugh as she disappeared through the room's dark interior beyond the doorway.

As I stepped into the room, the grandeur of it all smacked me in the face like a heavy slap. The space was breathtaking like an extravagant ballroom plucked from a nightmare and plopped into a sewer. I was oddly thrilled. And wouldn't you know it, this massive, gloomy space was being used for a mad scientist's lab. Olin's face lit up with glee as he waddled over to the skeleton like a bow-legged penguin. *Tee-hee! Classic dickless Olin.* But I couldn't care less about his excitement. My attention was drawn to the little gnome who was busy excavating through a small crate of rocks and crystals, throwing one after another over his shoulder while muttering curses under his breath.

"Whatcha looking for there?" I asked.

"Huh? Oh, I need a strong enough mana stone to power my creation. I was hoping Kaida might have had a soul crystal to my specifications, but none of these will work," he muttered, tossing another crystal aside.

I nodded along as if I gave a damn about his magical rock collection. What I really wanted to know was the juicy part. "So, you're from Earth, right?" I asked, a sly smile creeping onto my face.

The gnome paused, his face contorting into an expression of discomfort. He looked like he'd rather be anywhere else than having this conversation. Leaning in closer, he responded with a hushed tone, "No!"

I blinked a few times in disbelief. "What? But you called me Shera!"

The little liar's eyes shifted back and forth for a few moments as he considered his next words before his shoulders slumped. "Yeah... I mean, yes, I was originally from Earth. Austin, Texas, to be exact. When it happened, I was an engineering student, shot to death for cutting some asshat off on the freeway. Next thing I knew, I woke up here, with Kaida standing over me."

"That lich summoned you?"

"Don't let her hear you calling her a lich. She's a revenant. It's a rather tender subject for her."

"Huh, good to know... what's the difference – you know what, it doesn't matter to me. So, how long have you been in this reality?"

"Three years... I think?" Nikola answered, sounding unsure of himself. "Time doesn't seem to flow the same over here, and sometimes it varies depending on which moon you're on. But hey, that's just my theory based on some research documents Kaida swiped from the academy before she got kicked out by her former colleagues," he added, shrugging nonchalantly.

I couldn't help but feel amused as I saw the skeletal woman trapped in a conversation with Olin. She looked annoyed, and he seemed clueless about it. My attention turned back to the little pipsqueak. "So, time flows differently here? What year was it when you kicked the bucket?" I asked.

"Hmm... Oh, eighty-nine," he replied as he went back to digging through the crystals.

"Huh, twenty-five for me."

“Lucky you, missing out on the Great Depression. Things got really depressing back then,” he said while examining a diamond before carelessly tossing it over his shoulder.

“What? No, it’s two thousand and twenty-five,” I corrected.

His eyes widened in shock. “And they’re still showing Shera on Saturday morning cartoons?”

“What? No, I streamed them. That’s not the point. How come you’ve only been here for three years while I’ve been trapped in this reality for over a decade, according to Olin?”

“Steaming? Huh... oh, like I said before, time flows differently here.”

*This conversation was going nowhere fast.* Instead of asking about Earth, I just watched him. He acted like a mad scientist on the verge of a psychotic episode. Speaking of which, his flustered state as he dug through the crate of crystals made me wonder if he would snap at any moment. I knew deep down that I didn’t give a flying fairy’s ass about this dude’s project, but my morbid curiosity got the best of me. “So, you need a power source for your creation?” I asked.

“Yes! She won’t make it off this moon with the mana stones I’ve found so far. No, I need one of the crystals they horde at the academy or in the duke’s mansion. But that fat bastard would sooner sell his soul to those religious fanatics before aiding me.”

“She?”

“My awe-inspiring masterpiece, an airship of unparalleled design, an extraordinary marvel that defies convention! Instead of utilizing sails, I’ve built nacelles!” the gnome cackled with the glee of a toddler who had just set the Christmas tree on fire. Maybe I was projecting that pyromaniac toddler vibe, seeing as he had the stature of one. But it was hard not to find amusement in his twisted excitement as he spoke of his... *holy shit, an airship!*

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Olin stared, entranced, into those captivating hollow eye sockets, elated to have discovered a kindred spirit in research. Moreover, he instantly discerned the gnome’s soul, a testament to the staggering prowess of this enigmatic woman’s summoning abilities. For it was a similar soul from beyond the veil to Lady Aurelia and the belligerent pudding, only adding further credence to his growing hypothesis.

As his eyes swept the laboratory, he spied soul crystals housing an astonishing array of entities. His jaw nearly hit the floor when he spotted a magnificent dragon soul, nonchalantly tossed around by the gnome as if it were a mere pebble. The wonders within the skeletal sorceress’s sanctum surpassed anything Olin had ever experienced, not because he could not acquire such marvels but because the oppressive Lord Demidicus had stifled his aspirations.

“That young lady accompanying you possesses a soul strikingly akin to my cherished Nikola,” Kaida eventually remarked.

“Your keen observation only serves to amplify my admiration for your craft,” Olin responded.

“Pray tell, is she the sole soul you’ve summoned from their plane of existence?” Kaida inquired.

“No, I summoned another, and she conjured up that peculiar pudding,” Olin explained.

“A Black Pudding, you say? Intriguing, yet it bears such an elven semblance,” Kaida observed.

“Ah, indeed, it’s an extraordinary shapeshifter—highly lethal and mentally unhinged,” Olin elaborated.

“How utterly fascinating,” Kaida mused. “Regarding yourself, I cannot sense a soul within Razzle’s former body. Sir...?”

“Olin, and no, my soul is securely beyond reach, even my own. I am a lich, and what about you?”

“A revenant. Most intriguing, I can’t detect an anchor; your soul must be concealed on another plane. And yet, there is but one plane where such an event could transpire. It would have to be nestled within the divine plane.”

“Not to my knowledge, but that warrants further investigation,” Olin declared, stroking his chin thoughtfully.

Kaida sauntered to an ancient, leathery grimoire and began scribbling down notes, piquing Olin’s curiosity even more. To his perceptive gaze, the tome appeared bound with a stitched blend of elven and human skin. The emanating aura of magic was dark and malevolent and, to Olin, just as awe-inspiring as its enigmatic possessor.

“Olin, have you observed anything unusual about these summoned souls? It appears to me that they excel in both mana integration and manipulation, surpassing even demons—”

“As though this were their rightful plane of existence,” Olin interjected, completing Kaida’s thought.

“Yes,” she concurred, her voice barely a whisper.

“HEY, OLIN!” the boisterous pudding bellowed, rudely intruding on Olin’s strictly professional conversation. “I’ve stumbled upon our ticket off this blasted moon, but we’ll need to ransack either an academy or the duke’s mansion first... Possibly both!”

Olin clamped his eyes shut and grimaced internally. Of all the moons and wretched places to be stranded, why, he mused, did he have to be stuck with this insufferable aberration? And to compound his misery, why was his precious mistress so infatuated with that grotesque creature?