

# BLAKE PUDDING

## PROLOGUE

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Beyond life and death, in a realm where wonder abounds and lost souls often wander, exists an ephemeral yet eternal sanctuary. This realm, accessible to all yet rarely held in memory, resides not beyond the veil but intricately within its fabric. Here, one can retrace long-forgotten memories or weave new tales as fanciful and whimsical as the mind can envision.

Yet, this realm was never meant to contain the essence of its wanderers indefinitely. Once a fleeting refuge, where the living came to dream and departing souls paused to whisper their last farewells before rebirth, its harmony has been long since disrupted. The delicate balance and cycles that once governed it were shattered long ago, tragically leaving the lost souls to flood the Realm of Dreams, now a place stripped of the hope and promise of rebirth, now haunted by unknown nightmares abound.

At the heart of this veiled realm, a seemingly unremarkable cottage stood, its humble exterior belying the castle-like significance it held for those who understood its true essence. Within dwelled a figure, perceived differently by each beholder. To some, she appeared as a lonely old woman, devoid of love or family, her life seemingly bereft of warmth. To others, she was a skeletal figure, cloaked in dark, mysterious robes, her face hidden beneath a veil that seemed to embody the very essence of darkness. Yet, at times, she revealed her true self as she saw it: a youthful spirit brimming with love and affection, her true nature concealed behind the interplay of her dreams and nightmares.

As countless eons have unfolded, most of the siblings she once knew have fallen in a war shrouded in the mists of myths and legends, with only a few now remaining. In their stead, new entities have ascended, empowered by the magical construct left behind by the mother she had long lost. Through these vast and relentless changes, she remained steadfast and unyielding, continuing her vigil from the solitude of her cottage. Her unwavering commitment anchors the perpetuity of the Realm of Dreams.

Yet, the gods who have ascended to replace her fallen siblings see her only as a Crone, blind to the vastness of her true identity and the pivotal role she plays in the cosmic tapestry. To these self-proclaimed deities, she is an entity to be shunned and cursed, not revered. This ignorance has permeated the realm of the living, where her true name, Duskara, Goddess of Dreams and Nightmares, has faded almost into oblivion, overshadowed by the simplistic and dismissive label of the Crone. This diminished moniker has taken root even among those who devoutly worship and revere her, but they too are slowly fading away with the new wars that have followed.

Duskara's solitude seemed destined to extend into eternity as she toiled tirelessly to uphold a realm on the verge of collapse, its crucial cycle of reincarnation forever lost. With her mother, the Primordial of Life, lost in the cataclysmic aftermath of a war against the eldritch that annihilated

so many of her siblings, the possibility of restoring the cycle was all but a dream. Compounding this was the self-imposed exile of her other mother, the Primordial of Death, who roams the Realm of Dreams, unseen by all except Duskara. Even in her presence, Death remains aloof, never revealing herself, since without Life, Death has no purpose. Though rebirth occasionally transpires, it is but an accident, a miraculous miracle as fleeting and elusive as capturing lightning in a bottle.

However, one fateful day, Duskara was startled to sense the annihilation of a soul unlike any in her realm, yet oddly familiar. She reached out and discovered the soul had been obliterated into dust by a soul burst, a trail leading unmistakably to her aunt, the Primordial of Magic. This egregious act incensed Duskara, compelling her to act. The Goddess of Dreams and Nightmares painstakingly gathered the soul's fragments, endeavoring to reassemble them. Yet, she soon realized the damage was more extensive than she anticipated. In a desperate bid to mend what was broken, she infused part of her own essence into the soul's reconstruction, creating a bond reminiscent of the one she shared with her mothers.

The magnitude of her actions dawned upon her unexpectedly, yet it did not deter her. Tears of joy and happiness flowed from Duskara as she realized she was not merely fixing a soul but rebirthing one right before her eyes. Panic soon gripped her, however, as she discovered a flaw in her endeavor: she could not fully restore the soul to its original state. Instead, she was compelled to reforge it into two halves, distinct yet inseparable, each requiring the other for survival. These were not mere twins, for their existence was interdependent, two parts of a singular whole. From that moment, they would be her daughter, unique and perhaps a touch insane, but cherished all the same.

Duskara observed an extraordinary phenomenon in her daughter and the dual souls within, a bond not created in their recent rebirth but tracing back to a saga spanning countless past lives, an eon-spanning link to another soul—a soul mate. Such connections, incredibly rare and typically formed when true souls are cleaved at their inception, stood in stark contrast to her daughter's reforged existence. Duskara realized the uniqueness: a genuine twin soul, perfectly complementing her daughter's bifurcated one. This unbreakable soul-bound bond, transcending life and distance irresistibly drew them together.

To Duskara's astonishment, five additional souls found their way into her domain, each exuding an aura eerily akin to her reborn daughter's. She welcomed them into her cottage, providing nourishment, solace, and eventually sending them back to the living realm alongside her cherished daughter. Duskara bestowed upon each of them titles and powers, not for her own benefit, as they might have presumed, but in service to her new progeny.

This was only possible because of the remnants of her mother's ancient system, crafted to provide all of life with the tools to triumph over the eldritch in the wars of myth and legend. Each of the five souls in her cottage, like her newborn daughter, was on a distinct path of ascension through this system and had perished near a fading respawn point within a dungeon, giving Duskara the ability to send them back.

Not long after her daughter's return to the realm of the living, she found her way back to Duskara in the Realm of Dreams. Duskara, both elated and saddened by her daughter's return so soon through death, recognized that her daughter was not yet strong enough to protect herself nor her soulmate.

Determined to assist her daughter, she presented what was described as a 'test'. In truth, this was an introduction to an entity far surpassing her own power, and the potential for making a new ally as well. This maneuver was a key part of her elaborate scheme to intertwine her daughter's destiny with forces beyond their wildest imaginings, setting the stage for an epic journey beyond the Realms of Dreams and Nightmares. Yet, a complication arose with the disappearance of the respawn point. Fortunately, her newborn carried the dungeon core within, granting her the ability to respawn freely, without the usual limitations.

And so, with an aching heart, Duskara sent her newborn away once again.