

The Flavor of Suffering

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“Summon to me, Nuckalavee!” MacClane’s voice, raspy from a life’s worth of shouting and smoking, echoed off the courtyard pillars of the family castle. Dressed proudly in the family tartan, he waved his smoking flintlock pistol about. Before him lay a circle of powdered bone, ground from the past generations of the MacClane clan, and at its center lay his eldest son.

The night was silent and the torches casually flickered.

Choking back tears, MacClane called out to the demon again. “Nuckalavee, hear me! I offer my best seed, my bravest-” his voice cracked, but he pushed on. “My son! I offer you my *son*, damned beast. Come forth!”

He could see within the bone-powder circle that his son still breathed, but barely. MacClane silently pleaded for whatever God’s attention his son might be worthy of. He wanted his boy to simply die and for this all to be complete.

Convulsing, his son’s ribs crackled and legs flailed. The torches snuffed themselves as if to flee. A groan, low and moaning, rose from the dying young man. MacClane dropped the pistol and fell to his knees, too weak to stand the sight.

The groan grew louder, then a wet puff of hot air snorted out of the dying son’s face. Something clawed from within his body, burning and bright, pushing up through the quivering muscle and sinew until a bloody hoof broke free. Then another. Then all of a skeletal horse, dripping in his son’s gore, tore upward from below and into the crisp night air, steaming and snorting. It groaned with his dead son’s lamenting voice, shook itself steady, and trotted in a circle. A steady pour of blood rolled down its ribs and onto the cobblestone. Sniffing, the demon horse lowered its skeletal head to examine the bone-powder barrier that contained it.

Stammering for words, MacClane eventually regained hold of his gruff voice. “Nuckalavee...” He straightened his shoulders and stood, resolute now that his son’s suffering was over. “The circle contains you. The circle of my ancestors.”

The horse shot its attention to MacClane, noticing him for the first time. Sizzling smoke drifted from the sockets in its skull as errant chunks of his son’s flesh dripped down.

MacClane, having found his courage, continued. “Nuckalavee, I have summoned you through the proper, ancient ways. I now demand a boon in return.”

From the horse came his son's voice, distorted and overlapping, from every stage of his life. MacClane heard the toddler he bounced on his knee, the boy he chastised, and the young man he mentored all at once.

The Scotsman quaked.

"Where did you learn this knowledge of my summoning and containment?" the beast asked.

"Ancient... scripture. Both Norse and Druidic. Found in the archipelago to the North... where your hooves withered the peat long ago." MacClane answered. "I have spent much and lost more to provoke this encounter, Nuckavalee. Grant my boon!"

A laughing hiss spurted from within the demon horse. Searing intestines, still warm from the body in the circle's center, slid free of its foreleg. It approached MacClane slowly, warming him with its unworldly heat. "Your pursuit of this encounter, and certainly the death of your child, have barred you from the gates of paradise forever."

MacClane nodded, anger in his eye. "I barred myself from those gates long before this night. I accept that. But my clan is suffering a slow and embarrassing diminishment. I demand you grant a boon that spans the life and breadth of my remaining kin. Provide prosperity for the MacClanes!"

The beast raised its head, examining the stars for a brief moment. "I am Nuckalavee, that dines on suffering. What do you have to sate me?"

"Is my son not enough? Is my boy's suffering, and my own in offering him, not enough? Is it also not enough of a mockery toward Abraham? Does God not agonize at the sight of this exchange, since He sees all things?"

The horse shook its head. "I will provide prosperity for a single generation, and then I will take it all back unless a fresh sacrifice is provided to me. Here. At this same location. Upon such a time, I will provide another generation of prosperity. Once every forty years."

MacClane nodded stoically. This was easier than he expected, now that the demon had arrived. There had been no haggling or minutia.

"Then is the deal struck?" MacClane asked cautiously, ignoring the cooking reek of his son's flesh on the monstrosity before him.

"It is. Prepare your lineage to summon me in a similar fashion."

And with that, the heat of the demon increased, light wavered around its growing scorch, as it sizzled out of existence. Only baked viscera and four black hoofprints remained.

MacClane exhaled, caught between relief and regret. Placing his face in his hands, he wept for the scattered remains of his son spread about the inside of the bonedust circle.

The MacClane castle courtyard was visibly improved when Nuckalavee ripped upward into the salty, breezy air. Once more, it trotted in a circle around the periphery of the bonedust circle. Shaking off the quivering skin and bloody dress of the recently sacrificed young woman, the demon took in the improved ironwork and manicured trees.

“I w-wish...” a woman holding a bloody dagger stuttered at the fiery sight of Nuckalavee. “W-wish that you c-continue our boon. I, Margot MacClane, h-have offered-”

“Your daughter?” Nuckalavee’s skull bent toward the shattered body at its hooves. It spoke with her voice from all of the stages of her life, much like the young man before. “Your prettiest daughter? In love with a Montgomery?”

The woman dropped the dagger with a gasp. “You know?”

Nuckalavee continued with its macabrely harmonious voice. “You picked her because the affair was an embarrassment. Am I to receive your unwanted leavings? Am I to clean up your complications?”

“I loved her!” the woman roared, stutter gone. “How dare you, demon! I do this for the family!”

Nuckalavee dipped its head in acknowledgement. “For the family? Yes. Like the unborn child in her? Your forming granddaughter that I struggled through to reach the living world?”

What little color was in the woman’s face drained away entirely. Her lips formed the question ‘what’ but no sound carried it.

“You didn’t know? An interesting flavor. I am pleased. Another generation of prosperity for the MacClanes. But in forty years, to the day, I will expect my meal. Or I take it all back.”

She heard her dead daughter’s voice command her. The youngest voice reminded her of the fearful child that jumped into her lap whenever it stormed. That the child’s voice came from the demon drove home the weight of the crime she committed tonight.

The heat from the undead horse glowed a brighter red, sizzling the guts and fabric clinging to its bones. Soon it burned itself up, vanishing into ash to be carried away in the night’s breeze.

Electrical lights flickered when Nuckalavee tore open the quivering torso of a naked man staked in the middle of the bonedust circle. The courtyard had electrical wiring fixed to the stonework, comfort heaters installed, and a new fountain.

The demon did its trot, observing the surroundings while bathing itself in the crisp night air rolling in from the loch beyond the stone walls. At the edge of the circle on all sides stood eight people in wooden masks, clad proudly in MacClane tartans; three men and five women.

Calmly and clearly, one of the masked women spoke. “Nuckalavee!” She addressed the summoned creature. “We MacClanes continue the bargain struck by our great grandfather. We provide you now with familial flesh and blood, which you have-”

“Stop aggrandizing,” Nuckalavee snorted, its voice a cold, monotone blend. “This man you offered has no name. He was sired and raised, imprisoned in this castle, solely for this night. You suffer naught.”

The masked faces glanced at each other. One of the men spoke up. “Demon, we birthed him and raised him. We tormented him, each of us in turn, to spread the misery of his existence and fate between each of us. It is not a lesser suffering we provide, but merely a different manner of it.”

Standing still, Nuckalavee's hooves burned marks into the cobblestone to accompany the ones from before. "Only one MacClane, a MacClane in blood only, truly suffered as you eight calculated your end of the bargain. I find this meal... unfulfilling. This man was unloved."

The masked man nervously cleared his throat. "Will you fulfill your end of the bargain?" he asked.

Before the demon could answer, one of the figures reached into their tartan robes and drew a revolver. Stepping into the circle, she placed the weapon under her chin and pulled the trigger. Gunsmoke wafted from the mask's carved eyes and mouth as she crumbled at the demon's smoldering hooves.

The rest of the MacClanes staggered back, shocked at how swiftly their sister had sacrificed herself.

But Nuckalavee hadn't twitched. "...yes. Of course I will honor my end of the bargain. Another forty years of prosperity. But I will be summoned again and be offered a *proper* meal. If not, I will take it all back."

As the horse immolated itself out of the living world, the masked figures descended upon their fallen member with shaking hands and lamenting wails.

It was pouring rain when Nuckalavee tore into the world once more. The child had his throat slit, ear to ear. Outside the circle stood thirty masked MacClanes, each clad in ceremonious tartan robes. In unison, they raised their hands toward the falling rain.

"We greet you, Nuckalavee; patron of clan MacClane," they chanted in unison. "We offer a loved child of the family. Killed by his own father."

Little remained of the boy Nuckalavee had struggled through, but his head had rolled off to the side, one eye casually open, to reveal a lovely blue. Scanning the crowd, Nuckalavee swiftly found matching blue eyes, swollen with grief and tears, behind one of the wooden masks.

"Your child did not know. Neither did you. You had three children, and drew a lottery an hour ago for which you were to kill." Nuckalavee observed in the child's singular voice, rain evaporating as it struck its searing spine. "This is an

interesting flavor of suffering you provide me. Filled with uncertainty, doubt, and resentment. The mother, upon learning and accepting the reality of the scheme, committed suicide months ago.”

The masked father’s hands, still high into the rain, quivered.

“A delicious meal, to be sure. A mighty suffering, worthy of another forty years of prosperity. Once again, I will expect a sufficient meal or I will take it all back.”

With a ferocious hiss of heat, Nuckalavee burned itself away once more.

This time, the body was massive. Messy. Odd. Arranged wrong.

Nuckalavee was tangled in endless intestines and rubbery muscle. Clawing with its hooves, it finally crackled through a massive jail cell of ribs and into the arid night air.

The courtyard was dead, the windows above cracked or shattered, and the columns barren of moss and vines. The bonedust circle was there, but at the center wasn’t a MacClane but instead a bound longhaired cow.

Nuckalavee stormed in a circle, the binding intestines tripping up its hooves. It burned brighter, burning itself free from its putrid garment.

It went to speak, but only bellowed a demonic ‘moo.’

A scoff came from a weathered woman in a folding chair next to a battered tartan banner. Standing slowly, she took one last drag of her cigarette before flicking it over her shoulder.

Nuckalavee moo’d once more and stamped its flaming hooves.

“Yeah, I get it. Not the dinner bell you were hoping for, but I loved that cow, yeah?” The woman strode slowly toward the beast. She was drunk with several teeth missing from malnutrition. “Got no kids. And most MacClanes scattered to the wind once they started killing each other, yeah?” she shrugged. “So we all eating scarce these days. You included.”

With her toes touching the powder circle, she focused her attention on where the skeletal horse’s eyes would be. “Seems prosperity can be squandered. Botched.”

Nuckalavee's breathing was heavy with apparent rage.

"MacClanes are out. We're done. This sour cow is your last meal, yeah? Take back whatever you gave us."

Nuckalavee shook its head violently, then spoke with all the voices of before. The little boy, the tortured man, the loving daughter, and the brave son.

"I have never given you anything."

She stared, agape. "But, the bargain, we prospered..."

"Did you?" Nuckalavee snorted, casually trotting outside the bonedust circle. The woman leapt back, terrified, but didn't dare run. "MacClane fortunes changed, swung like a pendulum as fortunes often do, but did the clan prosper?" Clomping to the dry fountain, the demon examined the years of dried leaves and twigs filling it. "So convinced at your blessing, that you credited me. So convinced at the hearsay you unburied, you thought something as ridiculous as a bonedust circle could hold me."

"You mean... we did it all for no reason?"

"You did it for yourselves. I merely pretended to give you what you wanted. After all, what better suffering could a crop like the MacClane's yield? Such spectacular, self-inflicted, arrogant suffering."

Crunching in the gravel, the woman sat in defeat. "I..."

"And your realization of this, long after it is too late to save your clan, is my delectable dessert." Nuckalavee's amusement was carried by its choir of voices. With a gallop and a graceful jump, the beast entered the fountain. The dried kindling within burst into blue flame under its hooves as it trotted gaily in a circle. The fire grew into a pyre, flames leaping to the battered tartan banners nearby. Soon the entire courtyard was ablaze as the fire spread into the castle itself.

As the flame flickered in her eyes, the woman saw herself encircled. Head hanging low, she miserably nodded.