

BLAKE PUDDING

CHAPTER 22

Earlier

There was Darkness!

Heather descended into the bowels of the dungeon, stumbling behind a young undead goblin. The oppressive darkness enveloped her like a suffocating shroud. The memories of her past in this hellish dark pit were not fond, and she cursed herself for venturing back into this abysmal abyss once more. Her trembling hand instinctively reached for the back of her neck to verify that her head was still securely attached to her body. And, to her relief, it was still there...for now.

The glittering particles that coated every surface of the dungeon were the only source of light, a cruel mockery of the starry sky above. To Heather, they were a tease, a mirage of beauty that belied the terror that lurked in the shadows. It was as if they were tempting her with a glimpse of a wondrous dream, only to plunge her into a waking nightmare. The sight was breathtaking and heart-stopping, a reminder of the horrors that awaited her in the dungeon's depths. Tragically, these wondrous flickering stars began to fade, one by one, like candles snuffed out in the wind.

Heather's gaze was drawn to the goblin child and the void where his heart should have been. The child was skittish and aggressive, growling and ranting about some muddy avenger seeking retribution for his lost pets. Yet, all the while, Heather's gaze was fixed on that empty hole, a gaping wound in the child's chest. The child cradled an orb the size of a softball, clutching it like the key to the universe itself. Heather sighed, her heart heavy with pity, and muttered the incantation of her healing spell, hoping to soothe the troubled soul of the young goblin.

Wartie froze, rooted to the spot, causing his followers to abruptly halt. He watched in disbelief as the wound in his chest mended itself, and his precious phylactery ripped from his hand and sucked up inside. Wartie was no expert on liches, but he knew enough to know he should hide his soul-containing artifact. The idea of a lich hiding their phylactery within their own body was an incredibly stupid and unsettling thing to do.

Sophia and the others gazed upon the goblin in wonder. Their eyes widened as they beheld the miraculous transformation brought on by Heather's healing magic. The goblin's once hazy and clouded eyes cleared, his posture straightened, adding an extra head's worth of height, and warts that marred him vanished. This was all on top of the hole in his chest closing, leaving him looking like an entirely new creature. It was a breathtaking sight that left them marveling at the power of Heather's magic.

He spun around to glare at the healer who had caused this, a tempest of emotions raging within him. Appreciation for the healing, annoyance at the theft of his phylactery, all on top of the anger he already held for them. He hated them for killing his pet slimes, and now this... Wartie was not

fond of them, to say the least! Wartie growled, the sound rumbling deep in his chest like an approaching thunderstorm. He spun back around and strode off with the five following closely behind.

Upon awakening within Muddy's void, Wartie felt reborn. His transition into a lich had cleared his thoughts, leaving him sharper and more focused. He was bewildered by the changes within him, but he couldn't deny the thrill of the newfound clarity. Regrettably, Muddy had left him in the company of five vile slime slayers. No, Muddy wasn't the right name he wanted to use. For some reason, Mummy felt more natural. Mummy was on a quest to rescue someone she cared about, and if they were important to her, they were also important to Wartie. So, despite his misgivings, Wartie obeyed Mummy's bidding, guiding the evil slime slayers to the secret haven of the dungeon folk within the dungeon, the sanctuary of Ockpool.

The journey to Ockpool was a bleak and desolate one. The first time the former candidates had embarked on their trial, the halls had been quiet, with only a few monsters growling out from the shadows. Still, now, the passages were dead silent and abandoned. It was as if the last vestiges of magic that had flowed through the dungeon were slowly draining away, like a river running dry. The sparkling lights that danced like stars on every surface flickered and dimmed one by one. It wouldn't be much longer until the last remnants of the dungeon flickered into nothingness.

"Intruders! Intruders! **RUN!** To arms! Get Chieftain!" A goblin bellowed out before he and two others turned tail and ran.

Wartie shook his head in disgust as he continued down the secret passage that led to the sprawling cavern system of Ockpool. The once thriving underground metropolis was now nothing more than a ghost town, its grand buildings reduced to rubble and ruins in the aftermath of the raiding party's theft of the dungeon core. A few remaining structures still stood, but they were a haunting reminder of the city's former glory, a sad testament to what once was.

The panicked cries of the goblins, who had fled at the sight of the intruders, echoed through the cavern. It wasn't long before a small group of dungeon folk emerged from the ruins, ready to defend themselves against another raid. However, the sight of them was pitiful, a sorry excuse for defenders. Half looked like they were already teetering on the brink of death. Their sickly, malnourished forms were a testament to their suffering. Even Heather was not intimidated by their presence, not the least. She pitied them.

"Umm... So there, Priestess, are you sure these are the ones the Crone wanted us to recruit?" Sophia asked.

"I-I believe so...."

"If they're the makings of our army, we're screwed," Rob sighed.

As the defenders parted, an old wizardly-looking werewolf with a walking stick stepped forward, his eyes fixed upon the intruders. But his gaze was drawn to Wartie, his scrutiny intense as he stared at the child. Wartie, unphased by the weapons pointed in his direction, walked toward the group of dungeon folk, seemingly unfazed by their lack of recognition. The old Chieftain continued

to watch him closely as if he knew who Wartie was but couldn't quite believe it. The five others who followed the young goblin hung back, uncertain how the situation would play out.

"Wartie, is that you?" Chieftain Hensley asked, both sure and uncertain.

"Of course. Who else would I be?"

The Chieftain was taken aback as whispers of surprise and disbelief rippled through the survivors. The child before him was taller, his warty face clear and smooth, and he no longer sounded like a typical goblin. And yet, the old warg knew in his bones that this was indeed Wartie. As he glanced back at the group of six individuals who had followed the child, the Chieftain couldn't shake the feeling that this was some kind of trap.

"Who are your friends?" the warg asked, his tone cautious and guarded.

"Mummy had me bring them to you," Wartie answered with a sly smile. "They come with an offer to restore magic to Ockpool."

"Mummy?" the Chieftain repeated in confusion.

Heather stepped forward, causing the defenders to raise their weapons in fear. But the usually timid girl seemed unafraid and unfazed. Instead, she offered a warm smile and a gentle wave, leaving the dungeon folk bewildered and unsure how to react. The once-timid girl now exuded puzzling and alluring confidence as she approached the Chieftain with a purpose.

"Hi, I am the Crone's Priestess of Dreams. It's really nice to meet you." Heather declared without a single stutter.

"Excuse me?" the old warg started to ask but was silenced as Heather lifted a finger, signaling him to stop.

"One second, please. The Crone wishes to make the offer herself," Heather added before going silent.

The old warg was left speechless as he watched Heather stand there, swinging her arms back and forth with a disturbing sense of expectation. Time seemed to drag on as they gazed at her, the Chieftain's impatience growing with each passing moment. Just as he was about to speak, he was caught off guard by what happened next. Heather's eyes snapped open, turning pitch black. She began to levitate off the ground, her body suspended in mid-air. The sight shocked everyone except her companions and Wartie, who seemed to know what was coming.

"Greetings, ye denizens of the dungeon depths. Thy bond with the dungeon core hath been shattered, leaving thee lost in a sea of despair and destruction. Fear not, for I shall grant thee a new bond with thy souls and magic. With it, thou shalt be restored to thy former glory. For I am a fair and loving deity. I ask only for thy loyalty. Protect my twofold daughter as they claim their rightful inheritance, and tend to my darling grandchild, whom I have taken as mine own.

"Fulfill these requests, and thou shalt be rewarded with power and retribution beyond thy wildest dreams. Swear thy devotion to me, for I am the Crone, I am Death, I am Acceptance, I am the Bliss

of the Beyond. Utter it, and it shall be fulfilled, and thou shalt revel in thy former grandeur and beyond.”

The Crone’s spell was broken, and Heather plummeted to the ground, only to be caught by Yua’s quick reflexes. The dungeon folk, however, remained stunned in silence. A deity had offered them the return of their magic and power. All they had to do was pledge their faith to her. They were already devotees of the so-called dark gods since they were the only ones who answered their prayers. It seemed too good to be true, but the only question that lingered in their minds was the identity of this mysterious twofold daughter and grandchild.

As Jeremy and his companions waited for the dungeon denizens’ response, the air was thick with a deafening silence that was only punctuated by the occasional sidelong glance. But soon, the stillness was shattered by a growing crescendo of murmurs and hushed whispers that swelled into a cacophony of voices. It was impossible to tell if the dungeon folk were elated, mournful, or incensed by the Crone’s proposal. Their reactions were a jumbled mess of emotions.

The Chieftain of the dungeon folk tugged at his lengthy beard in contemplation as more and more survivors emerged to investigate the disturbance. Initially, they had feared that the marauding party of raiders had returned to claim more victims and finish what they had started. But as news of the Crone’s offer spread, the ruckus of voices grew into a frenzied chorus of excitement. The warg, who had been observing the proceedings, finally met the gaze of the Priestess of Dreams and offered her a subtle nod. No words were needed, for the agreement was implicit in the gesture. The crowd erupted in cheers, their voices a deafening roar of hope and anticipation. They eagerly proclaimed the Crone, their new goddess.



“She killed Redtail,” the Chieftain said with a sigh, but his tone had no real animosity. In truth, Blake had done him a favor. Redtail had plotted against him, and his removal was a welcome resolution.

“I can see her doing,” Yua acknowledged with a nod.

“She’s not a vicious monster that attacks those she considers her allies,” Jeremy argued.

“Are you sure?” Yua threw out there with a hint of skepticism.

Jeremy shot Yua a scathing glare. Her added remarks weren’t helping the situation. Of course, the dungeon folk had accepted the Crone’s offer. It was evident by all the magic and power swirling around them, but once they learned that Blake was the twofold daughter, many of them began to have second thoughts. However, the fact that Wartie was Blake’s adopted child caused some of them to reconsider their initial impression of her. Nonetheless, the prospect of venturing to the surface to attack the raiders that had crippled them was still daunting.

Rob, meanwhile, remained silent. The thought of attacking any army, much less doing so to aid the monster that had beheaded him, was unfathomable to him. Despite his misgivings, he kept his opinions to himself, simply leaning against a ruined building with his arms crossed, silently watching and listening to the conversations.

Sophia rose to the occasion, exuding utter confidence as she addressed the gathered crowd, “In the depths of the dungeon, I was just like many of you, lost and uncertain. I even died down here. But, like all of you, the Crone showed me a new path and gifted me with wondrous magic. She only requests our loyalty and support for her daughters, and so what if Blake and Ava are unique psychopaths? Aren’t we all?! The Crone has placed her trust in that Black Pudding, and after experiencing the Crone’s grace, I, too, place my trust in her. I am willing to do all that I can to support them. What do you say? Will you stand with her?”

Heather was taken aback by Sophia’s impassioned speech. The Priestess title had been bestowed upon her, yet Sophia radiated devotion like a beacon in the darkness. She cast a wary gaze over the gathered dwellers, each nodding in agreement and brandishing their weapons with fervor. The once pitiful group was now a unified horde, ready to march to battle in support of the very monster that had claimed one of their own as a victim. The deafening roar of their voices echoed through the dungeon, a haunting chorus of loyalty to the twisted and bloodthirsty Black Pudding.

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Chief Hensley’s finger pointed ominously at a spot on the map, marking the location of the enemy’s stronghold. “We won’t be able to keep them at bay for long,” he warned, his voice echoing through the war room...well, the ruins of one. “Elsternwick is where they’ve gathered the bulk of their forces, but the real danger lies here,” he continued, tapping the farmlands on the map. “This is where they’re most likely hiding their more seasoned soldiers, their deadliest weapons, and their mightiest knights. We can strike Elsternwick, but we must be prepared to fall back. As bleak as they may be, the dungeon ruins offer our strongest defense. But without the core, I fear any barrier we erect won’t be sufficient to repel their forces for very long.”

“Well...shit,” Jeremy sighed.

Wartie suggested, “We could always retreat to the tunnels of the deep roads and make our stand there.” The Chief’s eyebrows shot up at the proposal. Still, Wartie continued, “Although, I’d wager that Mummy has already reclaimed the dungeon’s core, so hopefully, it won’t come to that.”

The Chief was taken aback by the goblin child’s words, confidence, and demeanor. Still, instead of commenting, he looked sidelong at Wartie and pondered the suggestion of fighting in the deep roads. It was a dangerous gambit, but the deep roads would offer a strategic advantage for their final stand if the worst came to pass. The Chief knew this was a complicated and messy situation. Still, he also knew they were now obligated to help the goddess’s daughters, and reclaiming the core would be an added benefit. With a heavy sigh, he returned his gaze to the map, considering all the options before finally looking up at Jeremy and then to the Priestess before nodding.

“It’s time to put our plan into action,” Chief Hensley declared with a firm tone. “We’ll strike Elsternwick, leaving a lasting impact, and then retreat back to the dungeon, where we’ll use the core to fortify this position. If worst comes to worst and we can’t retrieve the core, we’ll make our final stand in the tunnels of the deep roads.”

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A horde of former dungeon dwellers marched forward, numbering around four to five hundred. They had always been called monsters, but now, they were free of the dungeon core and bound to the Crone. The title monster was forever lost to them. They were no longer linked to the core as their source of magic and, for that, no longer considered monsters but a relentless, wrathful horde of the Crone's faithful, tied and bound to her magic. Much more respectable!

The ragtag army was more of an angry mob, but they were still a force to be reckoned with, and with their Chieftain leading the charge, they were a sight to behold. Many of them had once been oppressed and enslaved escapees. They fled and hid away in the dungeon, and now was their chance to strike back and make their presence known. The once-monstrous horde was fueled by the fire of their newfound faith and their unwavering determination to a Black Pudding.

They were a group comprising all manner of creatures, from goblins to lizardfolk, from hobgoblins to minotaurs, and even humans, orcs, and some of the elven races united under the banner of the Crone. And to make their presence even more intimidating...the group was joined by three former dungeon bosses. The three of them were now reformed followers of the Crone, their stone bodies lending a massive presence to the horde. They were a fearsome sight as they marched toward Elsternwick.

The people of Elsternwick were in for a rude awakening as the former monsters descended upon them like a dark cloud. The horde was now a unified force, bound by the goddess and driven by their faith. Their leader, Hensley, was a seasoned old warg who had been reinvigorated after pledging his faith to the Crone. His staff crackled with magic as he barked orders, marching at the front with determination. The horde marched towards the city, pounding boots, feet, and hooves like a hundred drums, an ominous rhythm that signaled their arrival as they emerged from the tree line and descended upon...Elsternwick in ruins?

Wartie stood with the Chieftain and the slime slayers, scanning the destruction for any glimpse of Mummy. But all he saw was chaos, and at the heart of it, a battered vampire dressed in a tiny, torn black dress. That dark creature of the night gazed up at their horde and beamed a grin, revealing her elongated fangs that glinted in the night.