

BLACK PUDDING

CHAPTER 34

Rob surveyed the chaos unfolding before him, the cacophony of screams and shouts blending into a disorienting symphony of fear. People shoved and jostled desperately to squeeze through the narrow portal, hoping to escape the encroaching knights that slipped through the barrier. Rob's motivation differed from Blake and Jason, who reveled in bloodshed. He yearned to be a hero, to save the day and emerge victorious in the face of insurmountable odds. The individuals before him, the wounded, the destitute, and the escapees, stirred something within him that had been dormant since he arrived in this reality. Perhaps it was a desire to feel powerful or to make up for his perceived shortcomings, but whatever it was, he felt like he had a purpose now. Though he may not be their Champion, he would be their protector. Standing tall and unyielding as a Dark Paladin, Rob was ready to face whatever horrors awaited them on the other side.

Thanks to Blake's timely intervention, they'd bought themselves precious moments. Rob couldn't comprehend her methods, but the lingering pain in his neck served as a chilling reminder of her capabilities. As he approached the large doors of the Grand Hall, the weight of his massive round shield in his hand reminded him of the Dungeon Folk's gift. They discovered it lying around in a dungeon's boss chambers. But now, there was no time to dwell on its origins as he prepared to secure the two bulking doors. Just then, three towering stone figures emerged, their presence striking terror into his heart. With the dungeon's fall, the bosses were no longer bound to it, but these three had taken the Crone's offer. Whether they could withstand the upcoming onslaught was uncertain, but Rob was glad they were on his side. The fate of everyone in the chamber was at stake, and he couldn't afford to falter now.

Rob examined his dark-green-tinted fist, still coming to grips with his half-orc body. His status sheet didn't reveal the other half of his heritage, but based on his pointed ears, he suspected it was an elf, perhaps a drow. As he pondered his lineage, a flicker of light caught his attention down the dark corridor. In this oppressive darkness, even the slightest glimmer was a beacon. Then, without warning, a roaring inferno engulfed him. Rob bellowed as he braced himself and his allies behind his massive spartan-like shield. Despite his efforts, the blast pushed him back, causing him to slide with every agonizing moment of the torrent of flame.

“**[IMPREGNABLE]**,” Rob bellowed!

Calling upon his newly acquired skill after the class changed from his respawn, several octagon-shaped barriers shimmered into existence. A bubble of pure mana enveloped him, preventing him from being pushed back any further. Regarding gamer logic, Rob knew what he was in this new reality...he had become a tank! And he refused to falter in his duty to protect those behind him.

The screams of fear behind him intensified as the desperate ones fought to make it through the portal's narrow opening. Despite the growing chaos, Rob held his ground, unyielding to the

raging inferno. Yet, the onslaught persisted, but Rob refused to budge. He was the last line of defense, the tank that would never falter...that said, despite his determination, Rob felt himself faltering under the unrelenting blast of fire.

With gritted teeth, he muttered, “Status,” calling upon his interface, fearing his mana was running low.

<p>Name: Arno Robert Chidozie Race: Half-Orc Class: Dark Paladin Title: Defender of the Forgotten Level: 57 Health: 837 / 940 Mana: -133 / 430 Stamina: 19 / 750</p>		
<p><u>Racial Skills:</u> [Bulking Might]</p> <p><u>Spells:</u> [Raise Undead] [Necrotic Flame] [Impregnable]</p>	<p><u>Abilities:</u> [Polyglot] [Defender]</p>	<p><u>Vulnerabilities:</u> [Holy]</p> <p><u>Immunities:</u> [Darkness] [Mild Poison Resistance] [Low Cold Resistance] [High Fire Resistance] [Mild Fear Resistance]</p>

As he checked his status, he noticed a new title that hadn’t been there before. The words “Defender of the Forgotten” blazed across his interface, a title that intrigued him. But what caught his attention was the negative mana displayed below it. It made no sense. The very laws that governed magic seemed to be broken. He had noticed the inconsistencies since the beginning, but they had become more pronounced after his respawn. Despite the confusion, Rob was grateful that he could still maintain his barrier, even if his magic was in the negative. He was determined to protect those around him, no matter what. The fate of the innocent hung in the balance, and he refused to let them down.

A calm voice echoed in the chaos. “[Death Bolt],” it was announced as if it were an everyday occurrence.

Rob’s jaw tightened, and his eyes flicked to the side just in time to see Jeremy’s hand sparking to life with an ominous surge of darkness. A demonic force that swallowed all light in its path burst forth, slicing through the air with a ravenous appetite as it sped down the corridor.

As the dark energy blast receded, the fire’s once-oppressive heat dissipated, granting the Dark Paladin a fleeting respite amidst the chaos. Once stifling and thick, the air settled into a deceptive calm that belied the intensity of the conflict that had just transpired. A soothing sense of relief

cascaded over Rob, calming his taut nerves. Yet, at that moment, the last vestiges of strength deserted him, and his battered form crumpled to the cold, unforgiving ground. The void of unconsciousness engulfed him, leaving him at the mercy of the harsh, brutal reality they had been summoned into.

With a surge of adrenaline, Jeremy rapidly gripped the unconscious orc by the back of his armor, hauling him toward the portal. Rob had achieved his objective, safeguarding the chamber's inhabitants during their frantic exodus, leaving only a handful of stragglers scrambling to escape. However, they knew they couldn't withstand another barrage of magical force like the previous one.

Without any cue, the trio of erstwhile stone floor bosses barreled down the hallway, steeling themselves for a brutal face-to-face confrontation with their enemies. The atmosphere buzzed with suspense, the sheer gravity of the situation inescapable. Their valiant actions aimed to secure precious moments for the remaining individuals to traverse the portal, eluding the lethal clutches of their unyielding opponents.



Vanya watched with a sardonic smile as Orlaith unleashed a relentless ten-minute torrent of flames, powerful enough to rival a dragon's breath, down the corridor. Once Orlaith depletes her mana, they'll nonchalantly saunter through the scorched remains of any survivors, decapitate Aurelia if she managed to cling to life, seize the Dungeon Core, and merrily depart, sporting a new necklace crafted from Aurelia's fangs. The loss of a few squires was an unfortunate but acceptable price to pay. Vanya had expected an epic confrontation; however, they were met with a laughably feeble resistance.

In a shocking twist, wicked and malevolent magic raced down the corridor, aimed directly at them. The dark force slammed into Orlaith, propelling her violently backward through the air. Before anyone could assess her condition, the thundering approach of a few somethings echoed through the hallway. Illuminated only by the faint red glow of the molten stone lining the corridor, the unfolding sight seemed inconceivable. Three colossal stone figures charged toward them, bearing down with incredible speed.

As the colossal stone figures rapidly closed the distance, Vanya instinctively raised her sword and channeled holy magic, creating a barrier to protect her companions. Orlaith, still reeling from the initial impact of the dark magic, struggled to her feet, gritting her teeth in determination. She focused her remaining mana into her hands, igniting fierce flames that danced and crackled around her fingers.

Einarr, clad in his myrtil armor, charged forward with his massive war hammer, smashing into the first stone statue with all his might. The impact sent a web of cracks across its surface, but the relentless monstrosity continued its advance. Galen, the dwarf-sized fairy Champion, wove a gale of wind around the second statue, attempting to slow its progress. He also sent healing magic toward Orlaith, easing her pain and replenishing her energy.

Orlaith, now rejuvenated, launched a flaming assault on the third stone statue. Hotter than a volcano, the fire seared the stone's surface, gradually weakening its structure. Vanya, meanwhile, slashed at the first statue with her sword, imbued with holy energy, cleaving off chunks of stone with each blow. Despite their efforts, the statues continued their relentless advance, forcing the party to fight on the defensive.

With a gleeful madness dancing in his eyes, Einarr hoisted his colossal war hammer and slammed it into the first statue. The force of the blow shattered the stone guardian into a thousand jagged shards, each piece reflecting the dim glow of molten stone. Orlaith, her lips twisted into a mocking grin, unleashed a torrent of unrelenting fire upon the third statue, reducing it to a seething puddle of magma.

Galen, his demeanor calm and collected amidst the chaos, summoned the full force of his wind magic upon the second and final remaining statue. The whirlwind enveloped the stone behemoth, growing more violent and chaotic with each passing moment. The air shrieked and wailed, an orchestration of annihilation, as the maelstrom tore the monstrosity to pieces.

As the last remnants of the stone guardian crumbled to the ground, the cavernous chamber resonated with the sinister echoes of maniacal laughter and scornful scoffs from Orlaith and Einarr. Ever the stoic hero, Galen surveyed the scene with quiet satisfaction, his sense of duty unwavering in the face of the darkness surrounding them. The sight of their vanquished foes only heightened the twisted elation of the others. Einarr and Orlaith's faces contorted in a perverse blend of delight and madness. Together, the group reveled in the palpable atmosphere of dread that now permeated the depths of the dungeon, fueling their dark, manipulative sense of superiority.



I couldn't help but feel a twinge of admiration for Rob's display of resilience. Who would've thought that the hulking green brute could endure such potent sorcery – even I couldn't have withstood that. Nevertheless, we needed to skedaddle before the fire-loving fanatic decided to unleash another magical onslaught. Casting a sidelong glance at Aurelia, it was apparent that her focus remained on the Dungeon Core and sustaining the portal. Fortunately, she had managed to widen the opening just enough to let a few more of my precious morsels escape simultaneously. Even that delusional kid that called me Mommy...or was it Mummy? Still, I needed to ensure Aurelia's safe passage, as well.

"Aurelia, we need to leave," I urged her.

Regrettably, she shook her head. "I'm sorry, my beloveds, but you'll have to go on without me."

"Not a chance!" I retorted, scanning the chamber. Just a handful of stragglers remained. Jeremy was hauling the unconscious Rob through the portal, and even Heather, Yua, and Jason had managed to escape.

A crimson streak marred Aurelia's cheek as she gazed into my eyes. "I can't transport the Dungeon Core through a portal it's sustaining, and I won't allow them to take it back. Possessing

it would enable them to reopen the portal to the exact location I selected, and I can't bear the thought of them killing you. No, my dear, I've gambled too much to bring you back, but your well-being means more to me than my own. Please, go!"

"No. No. **NO!**" My mind reeled, a whirlwind of bewilderment and fury. What did she mean by gambling too much to bring me back? It didn't matter; we adored her, even if Ava and I couldn't quite grasp why.

We can't let her die!

No shit! We won't allow that to happen!

The cacophony of metal clashing with stone echoed from the corridor leading into the chamber. Still, my thoughts raced in circles, unable to decide. I couldn't bring myself to abandon Aurelia. It baffled me – I wasn't one to be concerned about others. Yet here I stood, consumed by a storm of anger, dread, and disarray as I gazed into her entrancing crimson eyes.

In this unfamiliar realm, I had transformed into a monster, reveling in every exhilarating moment of the freedom it granted me. Why, then, did this one woman wreak such havoc within me? I had no prior connection to her before she summoned me into this existence. Yet, from the moment I laid eyes on her, I was captivated, as if she had captured my heart. Even as my mind and soul splintered into fragments and I grappled with my own sense of self, my devotion to her remained steadfast. No, I would not let her perish here!

"Please, my beloveds, please enter the portal now! Before you're ensnared here alongside me."

"Aye, would ya look at that, a vamp with a tender heart," scoffed a dwarf clad in shimmering silver armor. He sported a helmet resembling a stereotypical Valkyrie. He also had a magnificent red beard that I begrudgingly admired – I instantly hated him.

A small band of soldiers filed into the chamber behind the dwarf, and I knew I couldn't let them lay a finger on Aurelia. The portal remained open, and her pleading gaze urged me to flee through it. I wanted to yell at her, to defy her wishes! To make matters worse, my stomach churned with agony, tempting me to curl up and sob until I passed out. What a terrible day it had been!

I locked eyes with my lovely Aurelia and mouthed, "I'm sorry."

Swift as lightning, my arms morphed into squirming tentacles before anyone could react. One encircled Aurelia's elegant waist, while the other clutched the Dungeon Core. With a resolute twist of my body, I lifted her from the ground, our gazes locked.

"Don't do this," she cried out.

Ignoring her plea, I propelled her through the portal. As she disappeared into the opening, I stashed the core in the Stellar Void – safe and well beyond the reach of our foes. But as the core vanished, the portal followed suit, stranding me with the knights.

A blood-curdling scream came out from that Paladin that had killed Wartie. “You bitch! She killed my husband, and now you stole from me my revenge!”

I couldn’t resist delivering a final jab before meeting my doom, “Ha, it wasn’t Aurelia who offed your dear hubby. It was me,” I confessed, displaying a grotesque grin that only my shape-shifting form could muster.

The Paladin screamed once more as she lifted her sword. The waves of divine magic emanating from it made my skin coil in agony. I wasn’t one for self-sacrifice or heroism; no, I relished in the sadistic pleasure of tormenting others. The reasons behind my actions now eluded me, yet it felt so fitting to both Ava and me. Bracing for the end, I was about to squeeze my eyes shut, but the red-bearded dwarf raised his hand to halt her. Oh, the torment in my gut was unbearable.

I stared Vanya down, her eyes blazing with a mix of malice and determination. The tension between us was palpable, a crackling energy that begged to be unleashed. My black, gothic dress shifted restlessly, ready to lash out in the form of tentacles at the slightest provocation. Though I could still use magic, accessing it through the system was out of the question.

Defying the dwarf, the Paladin charged, and a battle erupted in a blur of motion. Vanya lunged towards me, her sword slashing through the air with lethal precision, imbued with holy magic that could sear my very being. Reacting instinctively, my dress transformed into writhing tendrils, striking back with a force that would leave lesser opponents trembling. Ava’s voice in my mind urged me on with a twisted glee. I couldn’t help but revel in the chaos, the darkness inside me bubbling with delight as we danced a wicked waltz of violence, all the while knowing this was the end.

In the heat of the battle, my mind splintered in panic as I could not keep up with the woman. Ava warned against using the system to cast magic, fearing the consequences. Yet, in my panic, I ignored her caution, acting recklessly as anger consumed me. Channeling my Necrotic Flame spell through the system, I felt the surge of dark energy coursing through me. However, as I released the spell, it backfired horribly. An explosion of Necrotic Fire engulfed my arm, severing it from my body in a shower of black goo.

Gritting my teeth through the pain, the dwarf intervened, stepping between Vanya and me. His imposing presence brought our twisted dance of my death to a halt. His eyes, filled with anger and authority, demanded that we stand down, putting an end to the battle. Ava’s voice fell silent, and I couldn’t help but feel a sense of impending doom.

A new figure entered the chamber, a woman adorned in a splendid dress crafted from mesmerizing reflective red scales. In my former life, dresses never held much appeal. Still, they’d become a newfound fascination in this bizarre existence, and I adored hers. Yet, the woman appeared to be clutching her shoulder, nursing what seemed like a minor injury. Given the absence of any blood scent, I could only assume it to be minor.

We need to get out of here.

How?

“Wha’ sort of creature might ye be?” The dwarf inquired.

“I be the stuff of your darkest nightmares,” I grinned at him, a twisted glimmer in my eyes.

“Ha! I’ve taken a likin’ to this creature,” the dwarf chuckled heartily.

“Enough of this nonsense. We should eliminate the creature and retrieve the core from its lifeless corpse,” a man no taller than the dwarf asserted. His stature was no hindrance to his superiority, as the dragonfly-like wings extending from his back set him apart from the others.

Yet, before they could carry out their menacing intentions, I crumpled to my knees, clutching my abdomen. The inexplicable affliction that gripped me intensified. Its ferocity surpassed anything I had ever experienced. My body seemed to bubble and churn as if I were being boiled from within. A searing agony extended throughout my entire form. It felt as though I was being consumed by a ravenous inferno!

“What’s happening to that thing?” asked some random knight I couldn’t be bothered to care about.

I could sense the holy magic from Paladin Anlyth coalescing into a lethal strike that would end my suffering. Whether motivated by mercy or vengeance, I couldn’t tell. Yet, her assault never materialized as my chest burst open, unveiling a glowing golden circle no larger than a small bracelet. Ah, it was the ring of holding the Paladin’s husband had been wearing around his impressively large junk. She also seemed to recognize it, her eyes widening in what could only be terror.

“The imbecile held a pocket dimension within another pocket dimension,” screeched the woman in the red dress. “FLEE!”

The ring dangled within my torn-open chest, its glow escalating with every second as it began to whirl with a sinister aura. Simultaneously, a thunderous hum amplified, reaching a deafening roar as the knights stumbled over one another in a frantic effort to flee. As for me, the pain ceased once the ring was extracted from Stellar Void. I remained motionless, smiling throughout, knowing Aurelia was out of harm’s way.

I think this must be love,

Without a doubt.



Olin observed from afar as countless airships encircled the ruins where his mistress took refuge. The barrier had vanished, and he couldn’t be sure she had evaded the inescapable. Worse still, if the monster bearing his phylactery perished, his time in this realm would be limited. Inhaling deeply, the newborn lich steeled himself. What he had been dreading at last transpired – the ruins erupted in a mana detonation, making the Way Stone explosion seem trivial. The shockwave collided with the airships, hurling over half of the fleet to the ground below. A mushroom cloud towered into the heavens. However, Olin failed to witness any of it, as his soul was abruptly severed from General Ezad Anlyth’s body.