

BLACK PUDDING

CHAPTER 4

I found myself in a delightfully bizarre situation. It hadn't even been an hour since my rebirth, and I was already deep in some freaky dungeon, following a goblin child with more warts than a toad's backside to a monster sanctuary. And to top it off, I've already offed a ghoul, a succubus, and a handful of spiders. Their flesh was delectable, but nothing compared to the random girl's corpse I stumbled upon. *Mmm, tasty! Hey, I was hungry, okay?* And it's not like she was using it anymore. But the real kicker? I was now a contender for the title of dark champion, locked in a sick competition with five others. If they didn't go off each other first, I was more than happy to lend a hand, or rather, a tentacle. It was a game of dungeons and murder, and I was reveling in it like a kid in a candy store.

I couldn't believe it. Me, a former rebellious goth girl, was now cool with murder and cannibalism. How did that happen? I guess being reincarnated as a Black Pudding really screws with your mind. Aurelia did mention something about fate being mischievous. I wonder if fate is laughing at me right now as I decide whether to shed tears or grin ear to ear – not that I have much of a face anymore. But hey, I'm having a blast, right? It's not every day I get to indulge in the darker side of life without any consequences.

As soon as I followed the goblin child, I followed his example and remained silent. After all, what was there to say? Besides, it wasn't like I could speak. Instead, I stared at the goblin child, wondering what he would taste like. *Maybe like candy? Yum! Wait a minute, he's just a kid... Ugh, children are off-limits, aren't they?* But the thought of devouring him was so tempting, and yet, I felt like I was being plagued with a serious case of indigestion the more I thought about it.

Pulling my focus away from the little morsel, I took in the sights around me. The cavern was enormous! It truly was a sight to behold. I peeked around at everything like a tourist with my headless body. As we trudged deeper into the tunnels and pathways that crisscrossed over one another, I couldn't help but get lost in thought. *Am I on another planet, universe, or in a different reality altogether?* The idea of being reborn on Earth in a future where magic existed seemed far-fetched but not impossible. *Oh, the possibilities!* As for my current state of mind, had I become a psychopath? Do I want to be a dark champion, or should I find a way to escape this dungeon? *Decisions, decisions. Screw it, I'll stay!* Who needs a way out when you're having this much fun? *Feh, what's wrong with me? Maybe I shouldn't ask that question.*

The goblin child abruptly came to a halt, and I nearly stumbled over him. I made a mental note to be more careful around the little green runt – one touch from me, and I could snuff out his life like a candle. Suddenly, his grubby little hand shot up, attempting to grab mine. I recoiled in horror, narrowly avoiding contact. *What was he thinking? Does he want to die? Well, I suppose he would make for a tasty snack... Ahem. No, no, bad thoughts! Must keep it together.*

“It is good. Acid not hurt. Got from last pet slime, Doodles.”

Oh, kid, I'm also poisonous, and what do you mean by last pet slime?

Deactivate [Corrosive]? Yes / No
Deactivate [Venomous]? Yes / No

Hmm, looks like I can deactivate my passives. That's great news! I was worried that my skills would interfere with some more cardinal desires. You know, like accidentally killing someone during tentacle play... I wonder how Aurelia is doing right now? Anyways! No need to worry about that now, right? The important thing was that I now had control over my skills. I could switch them on and off like a light switch, which was a real lifesaver. Or should I say, a real live killer? Of course, I mentally clicked "yes" on both.

My pleasant musings were interrupted by the kid. "Hmm, I give you name, you Muddy! Yes, good name," he exclaimed.

I couldn't help but roll my metaphorical eyes. *Muddy? Really?! How original. Oh well, at least it's better than being called "Blobby" or "Gooley" or something equally ridiculous.*

"Come, Muddy, entrance over here!" he continued, pointing to a dark and ominous tunnel.

Well, this should be interesting.

Pet Tamer has unknowingly cast [Submission] on you. Accept [Submission]? Yes / No
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The notification sent shivers down my spine with disgust. *Submit to him? As if!* The very idea made me want to gag. I mentally slammed the "no" button so hard it might as well have triggered a small mental earthquake. He may have "unknowingly" thought he had power over me, but little did he know, he was dealing with a rebellious psychopath with a taste for flesh... albeit, I seemed to prefer the ones already dead and decaying if that ghoul was any indication. *Mmm... perhaps I should taste a few more living ones to confirm that. After all, variety is the spice of life, or in their case, death.*

Still, I couldn't shake off the feeling of annoyance and disgust after the submission notification. I swore to any deity or demon responsible for this twisted system that thought a submission skill was a good idea: *I will find you, and I will kill you! You messed with the wrong monster! Whether you're a bitch or a bastard, it doesn't matter to me.*

You have vowed to slay the Primordial Goddess of Magic.
You have earned the title:

Hopeless Crusader

Best of Luck!

Bitch, it is! EEK – no, I mean, a-apologies... shit!

“Good boy! Muddy, follow. Come, boy, go inside now.”

Ugh, boy?! Why you! I’m a girl, damnit! That’s it, I’m going to kill him! Oh wait, that’s not good. Deep breaths, Muddy – Blake! Ugh! He’s just a kid. A soon-to-be-dead kid! Oh, come on, that’s not helping. I had just pissed off a goddess, but at least I made someone’s day. I should take a minute and collect myself, maybe grab a snack. Can’t ruin my farming location before I’ve even stepped foot in it, right? Fine, if this kid wants a pet, I’ll play the part. Who knows, maybe I can train him to fetch some rotting meat for me. With a sinister thought of my next victim, I mentally called forth [Polymorph].

Oh, the sheer ecstasy as my decapitated form writhed and contorted, limbs shredding and melding, contracting, and elongating. I stood on eight sinewy appendages in mere moments, an abhorrent blend of cephalopod and arachnid. Certainly, my inky, viscous form and the absence of an exoskeleton lent me a more octopus-like appearance, but the terror I induced was undeniable. The way the kid stumbled backward, eyes wide with dread, confirmed it. How amusing, a headless figure couldn’t unnerve the boy, yet the mere sight of a spider could. *Seems the fear of spiders transcends all realities.*

“Muddy?” Wartie uttered in a hushed tone.

Rooted in place, my sinister glare skewered the pint-sized goblin whelp... or it would have, had I managed to craft actual eyes for myself instead of depending on some odd skill to perceive my surroundings. *Regardless, Muddy? Preposterous!* I scoffed silently; *He couldn’t possibly be serious.*

“Umm, g-good boy, follow now,” he stuttered, patting his leg as though addressing a fucking dog!

Easy there, Blake. Let’s not jump the gun... just yet. No, no, snuffing out tykes is downright distasteful. If there’s one rule to stand by, it’s that one... though, on second thought, he doesn’t genuinely need both kidneys, does he? A little souvenir wouldn’t hurt, right? Chuckling darkly, I wrenched my attention away from my wicked thoughts and opened my [Status] sheet.

Name: Blake

Race: Black Pudding

Class: Dungeon Monster

Level: 13

Titles

Hopeless Crusader

<u>Racial Skills</u>	<u>Vulnerabilities</u>	<u>Unique</u>
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<p>[Absorb] [Corrosive] [Polymorph] [Thermalsense]</p> <p><u>Spells</u> [Blight] [Mana Sight]</p> <p><u>Abilities</u> [Silk Webbing] [Veil Polyglot] [Venomous]</p>	<p>[Fire] [Holy]</p> <p><u>Immunities</u> [Acid] [Darkness] [Disease] [Poison]</p>	<p>[Restricted] [Restricted] [Restricted]</p> <p><u>Selectable</u> [Astral Insight] [Fear] [Life Drain] [Silk Webbing] [Stellar Void] [Paralysis]</p>
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Seriously, what was up with that absurd title? Kudos, oh heavenly mischief-maker, I mused, a blend of relief and irritation washing over me. You got me good this time. Whew! I narrowly avoided the calamity of being rechristened as "Muddy." The moniker of Hopeless Crusader wasn't half bad. However, the horror of bearing the name "Muddy" would have been too much to endure. Then again, it's still a step up from Wartie! His parents must have harbored some serious resentment toward him.

Casting my gaze upon the goblin, I observed the little pest as he pivoted, puffed out his chest, and sauntered through a crevice in the wall. Had I not just witnessed his passage, the opening would have easily eluded my notice. With a sigh, I reassessed my predicament, seeking a more palatable perspective. The most satisfying interpretation I could muster: I was merely toying with my prey. Certainly not some goblin whelp's plaything! That settled, I trailed the youngster. *Ugh, I refuse to be anyone's pet... Well, perhaps Aurelia's. Oh, for shits' sake, Blake, get your head out of the gutter!*

With my eight legs in tow, I skittered after the young goblin. Coordinating so many appendages was an odd sensation, yet my body seemed to instinctively know what to do. Unexpectedly, the opening through which I trailed Wartie didn't reveal a mere tunnel or passageway but rather an impressive archway leading to another cavern. Lurking within were four goblins garbed in haphazard leather and iron armor – if one could even call it armor. It resembled nothing more than pitiful scraps of metal bound together with frayed leather straps. To add insult to injury, their loincloths left little to the imagination, particularly from my regrettably low vantage point. *Talk about getting an eyeful.* Despite their shoddy attire, these goblins loomed over the child and me, their expressions seething with fury. *Well, isn't this just delightful?*

“**WHERE GO,**” one of them bellowed out?

“Doodles ran again. I chased,” the kid replied, wiggling his toes into the dirt.

"What's that?!" One of the other goblins roared, brandishing a wooden club in my direction.

“Found Muddy, I did. Muddy saved me. New pet! Adventures killed Doodles. I and Muddy want revenge!”

Not quite how I remember it, but whatever.

"Adventurers?!" The goblin exclaimed, a note of panic lacing his tone. "How many? Saggy, fetch Chieftain!" Surprisingly, the goblins' appeared genuinely terrified.

Little do they know, I'll tear this whole village asunder before allowing them to harm one hair on my future meals. Yet, why did these goblins have to bear such wretched monikers? Wartie, now Saggy? One of the green creatures nodded, then promptly bolted. Observing his hasty departure, I couldn't help but note the goblin's bow-legged gait. As he scurried off, I caught a horrifying glimpse of something sagged beneath his loincloth, an unsavory pair to behold. *Ugh, why did I have to see that?*

The child appeared hesitant as he squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. "T-there were ten of them. Yeah, ten adventurers! Muddy battled all ten. Muddy unbeatable! Adventurers ran in fear!"

Ha! You little fibber!

"That fought ten adventurers?" Another goblin surged forward like he dared the child to a brawl. "Spider scary, sure, but you lie!"

"You challenge?" Wartie replied with a low growl.

"I do!"

"Me accept – Muddy, attack!"

What?! Is this kid for real? Well, I mean, I wouldn't necessarily be opposed to the idea. Before I could weigh the pros and cons of slaughtering a goblin amidst a village of monsters, a wooden club smashed into my arachnid face.

"Muddy, I say attack!"

The goblin hoisted his club aloft for another swing. Yet, I detected a scowl etched across his hideous face as he took stock of how little his impact had done to my gooey form. Nevertheless, I harbored no desire to endure a pummeling to my soft cranium. After all, I had a magic attack I wanted to use again. A sly grin spread across my thoughts as I focused on my spell, [**Blight**]. A murky, black haze enshrouded the goblin as he uttered a piercing scream, followed by a resounding thud as his club clattered. As I readied my next move – activating my passives and springing forth – I realized it was too late. My opponent crumpled into a revolting mixture of blisters, pus, and blood. *Well, that was anticlimactic...*

You have defeated a [Goblin].
Do you wish to [Absorb] [Goblin]? Yes / No

As I braced myself for the inevitable level-up notification, nothing happened. *Well, isn't that just peachy...* I couldn't help but wonder if there were other ways to level up besides bloodshed or if the whole system was just a twisted joke designed to screw with me.

As I gazed at the repulsive heap that was once a goblin, I couldn't help but shudder with disgust. I mean, I'm no stranger to getting my hands dirty, but this was a whole new level of grossness. Yet, the temptation to acquire new spells and abilities was too strong to resist. So, with a mentally heavy sigh, I clicked the "yes" button on absorb. My body stretched out over the goblin's corpse, and his remains slowly vanished within me as I reformed into a spider. *Well, at least it's good for my figure.*

[Absorb] Unsuccessful.

[Goblin] did not have any skills.

Ah, yes. The sweet, sweet notification of crushing disappointment. I had taken out the goblin and Doodles, yet I had nothing to show for it. How many more of these critters did I need to off to level up or gain a new skill? And what the hell was the requirements for leveling up anyway? I swear to god, if that "goddess" doesn't fix her janky system, I might just have to pay her a little visit...

The anger bubbled within me like a simmering cauldron. I couldn't believe it. Spiders had skills, but goblins didn't? What kind of twisted reality was this? And to make matters worse, the taste of salt and vinegar lingered in my mouth, reminding me of the horrid creature I had just absorbed. *Well, I guess the flavor isn't that bad.* Nevertheless, I hated this farming location already.

The other goblin's eyes widened in terror as he pointed a shaky finger at me. "T-THAT NOT SPIDER!" he shrieked, his voice cracking with fear.

Oh yeah, I forgot, I had an audience. Wartie tried to put on a brave face, but his eyes were darting everywhere except me. The other two goblins were backing away slowly, ready to bolt at any moment. And to top things off, a dozen other creatures were slowly approaching us. Great, just what I needed, more spectators. *Maybe one of them has a skill or two?*

"Chief! Monster!"

I couldn't help but chuckle at the irony of the situation. I, a spider, am being called a monster by these ugly green goblins. Oh, the hypocrisy! But I knew better than to underestimate the approaching mob. I needed to think fast and devise a plan, or else I'd end up just like the pile of goblin slop I had just absorbed.

A frizzled-looking werewolf creature stepped forward from the group. The creature was a sight to behold. He looked like he hadn't had a decent meal in weeks, and his scraggly gray beard could have doubled as a mop. His outfit, on the other hand, was a fashion disaster. The old beast wore a pink and black robe that was so worn out that it looked like it had been through a war. And let's not forget the long skirt that came with it. I mean, seriously? Did he steal that from a dead sorceress or something? To top it all off, his walking cane was impressive, but it gave off an unsettling vibe. It was like it was displacing something, maybe even the air itself.

The frizzled werewolf looked at me and spoke with a surprisingly high-pitched voice. I couldn't help but feel a sense of unease as I looked into those beady little eyes. "It seems you've found

yourselves a leveler, boy. And it hasn't murdered all of us. Fascinating and peculiar. How very peculiar indeed." He then turned to Wartie and asked, "Boy, this pudding, you tame it?"

Tamed me? Hell no!

"Yes, Chieftain."

"Good. Good. Well, let's not dawdle about out here like idiots. Let's head back inside."

One of the goblins cried out in terror, "But Chieftain! That thing ate Gaping!"

Oh god, why was that goblin's name Gaping? You know what, I don't want to know.

"Ah, I see. Boy, did you start the challenge, or did Gaping?"

"Gaping, Chieftain."

The werewolf creature chuckled, "Ah, Gaping. Always did take on more than he could handle. He was eventually going to encounter something too big, even for him. But it was a challenge, so no rules were broken, even if the boy's pet ate the corpse."

Ah... what? I-I... ugh, never mind.

"But Chieftain?!"

"Rules are rules, and if they haven't been broken, there's no need to dwell on the matter. Now, Wartie, come with me. We have some pressing questions about these so-called adventurers."

The werewolf-like creature turned and started hobbling away, and I couldn't help but feel a twinge of excitement. Maybe this level farm wouldn't be so boring after all. As I followed him, I had a mental debate about waiting for the kid to catch up. *Nah, he's a big boy. He can handle himself.* I couldn't help but wonder how far I could push these supposed rules before it became a problem. *Would killing one of these monsters be crossing the line? Or would I have to slaughter them all to finally get some levels?* The possibilities were endless, and I couldn't wait to see what kind of trouble I could stir up.

"Welcome to Ockpool," the old werewolf finally said, his gaze fixed on me as he hobbled through the broken gate into the village.

The ruins of Ockpool were a pitiful sight. The once glorious city was now a desolate wasteland of despair. As I strolled through the streets cluttered with rubble and debris, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of disappointment. The buildings still standing looked like they would collapse at any moment, and the few monsters who roamed around were weak and feeble. It almost made me pity them, but that thought quickly dissipated. These losers weren't even worth killing. I doubted they had any levels or skills to offer me, and it was a waste of my time to even consider it. It was like being stuck in limbo, surrounded by weaklings who couldn't even put up a decent fight.

And to make matters worse, my latest notification had left a bad taste in my mouth. Gaping had been a disappointment, and the thought that I had wasted my time on him was almost as sickening

as his taste in my mouth. If this place was nothing more than a graveyard of weak monsters, any hope of leveling up here was as hopeless as the village.

Blake, are you really upset that you lost your reason for committing a massacre?! No, I'm upset that there's no point, I grumbled in response to myself. Maybe I should find a therapist, I mused, or maybe Aurelia will let me crawl into her lap and vent once I've taken care of the other candidates.

Despite my now sorrow at losing what I had hoped to be a plentiful leveling source, I scurried behind the Chieftain, my eight squid-like spider legs skittering along the cobblestone. With every step, his walking cane clinked against the ground, emitting an aura of power that made me both intrigued and uneasy. I couldn't quite see the power, but I could feel it. It was like watching heat waves distort the air around hot asphalt in the summer.

"My apologies for our current state. We've had a few unfortunate encounters with adventurers as of late. After our Dungeon Core was stolen, we've been unable to rebuild."

Dungeon core?! If I destroy it, will I get a huge experience boost? Better yet, can I use it to build my own dungeon for farming if I steal it for myself?

"The idea of stealing a dungeon core is a revolting blasphemous deed, and I pray the gods will smite those responsibly. Still, I can't imagine what a vile creature would do such a thing. Adventurers have no respect for the balance and order of this moon. They just take and murder as they please. Oh, I did not mean to vent there. Please forgive this old warg. It only pains me to see what our enemies have done to my fellow Dungeon Folk."

Okay, that's a lot to unpack. Was he reading my mind? Warg? And did he say moon? That's so cool! I really need to get to the surface and see this for myself.

The central plaza was a makeshift gathering pit, a chaotic mess of bricks, stones, and rubble piled up to form a seating area. The old werewolf settled into a particularly cozy-looking stone, his cane clinking as he shifted his weight. The other monsters took their seats, eyeing me warily, but I didn't care. Let them try something. I was more than ready. The Chieftain's gaze bore into me, analyzing my every move, and I could feel his thoughts forming some kind of twisted conclusion. But I remained stoic, my spider legs twitching with anticipation.

As soon as the last monster took its seat, the Chieftain's attention turned to Wartie. "Boy, are you sure you've bonded with this pudding?" he asked, his tone questioning and suspicious.

"Yes! Muddy, my pet. He protected me," Wartie blurted out defensively.

"Let it be known that no one in Ockpool shall lay a hand on the leveler," the Chieftain declared, his gaze shifting to the boy. "I assume your pudding friend here resisted your spell over lesser creatures. It is not bonded to you, as you may think." He then turned his attention to me. "And as for you, Muddy...did you really name a Black Pudding, Muddy?" he asked with a hint of amusement.

The kid nodded as he gasped, trying to hide a sob, "Y-yes, C-Chief. But, what a leveler?"

"Leveling is an ancient and mostly forgotten form of attaining power, much like how we attuned ourselves to the Dungeon Core," he explained. "Now, Muddy, if you can understand me, scratch one line in the ground for yes, and two for no."

"Chieftain, you can't be serious! That slimy thing can't comprehend you. We should just put it out of its misery. Black Pudding's are among the most unintelligent monsters. Their only usefulness is as waste and filth disposals," a lizard blurted out, his scaly skin rippling as he spoke.

I could feel my pudding body starting to boil with anger. Who did this scaly lizard think he was, calling me unintelligent? I mean, I may not be a scholar slime, but I'm not as dense as a goblin. I wonder if lizard meat really does taste like chicken. Blake, stop it. Why should I care what these fools think anyway? They're probably just jealous of my unique, shape-shifting abilities. But enough of that, time to show them who's boss. I lifted two front pseudopods and etched two deep gashes into the ground, a clear sign of my understanding. Let them underestimate me. I'll prove them wrong with my deadly prowess. Who needs brains when you have fear on your side?

"See, I told you! It's not capable of understanding us," the lizard shouted!

What? Oh, shit! I scratched two lines for no.

The old warg let out a low growl and pinched the bridge of his muzzle as he spoke, silencing Redtail's tirade. "Enough, Redtail! Well, Muddy, clearly, you've got a sense of humor. My apologies if Drake Redtail offended you. We don't often get reasonable levelers down here, much less a Black Pudding."

Oh... Ha-ha. Yeah, I totally meant to make two marks.

"Ah, where are my manners? I am Chieftain Hensley of Ockpool, and all those within this village are under my protection, as you may have already guessed. Now, to the matter at hand, leveler. Our question is simple: will you retrieve the dungeon core and return it to us?"

I responded with a clear message, scratching two additional lines into the ground. *Absolutely not!*

"If I told you that the group of adventurers who stole the core were incredibly powerful individuals, would that pique your interest? As a leveler, I imagine the challenge would be enough to drive you to attain several levels."

Oh, come on, that's not fair! So the only way to level up is by facing a challenge? How does this old mutt know exactly what motivates me? And how powerful are these adventurers? Outclassing me is not even a challenge. It's a death sentence. But hey, I'm not short on targets. In fact, I'm already plotting the demise of five others. Maybe I'll just settle for killing a few of these pitiful villagers. They may not be powerful, but they're deliciously squishy. Who needs tough adventurers when you have an endless supply of snacks? *Ugh, I'm getting hungry just thinking about it.*

As I hesitated, the Chieftain seemed to sense my uncertainty and decided to sweeten the deal, "While we do want the core back as soon as possible, we also know that the adventurers are holed up in the old highway, which isn't too far of a trip from here. Plus, there are still a few pesky floor

bosses you could level from in your way. And don't worry, I'll even give you an escort. So, what do you say? Are you in?"

Yep, that incentive sealed the deal. Who wouldn't want a free escort to floor bosses for leveling up? Although, I don't trust their motives. How long do I have to track down those adventurers before they escape? And what about the other candidates? Should I kill them while I'm taking down the floor bosses? *Decisions, decisions... But who cares?* I can always change my mind and kill them all later. With my plans set, I etched a single line into the dirt. Time to get to work.

[Restricted] Unlocked.

My heart began to race as I realized what was happening. Could this be the result of that goddess's meddling? The mere thought of her unlocking a restricted skill for me made my slime body tense in fear. I prepared myself for the worst, ready to face whatever fate had in store for me. *Blake, this is going to suck!*

[Oracle] is now available.

[Oracle]

Gain the capability to call forth divine wisdom through inherent sorcery.

Type

Unique

Activation

Cast

"Wait, what? Divine wisdom? What the hell does that even mean?"

I heard a few gasps as everyone leaped to their feet and started backing away from me. It's always fun to see the fear in their eyes. The Chieftain seemed to be grinning, or as much as someone with a muzzle could grin... or was that a snarl? Even Wartie, who had bravely first approached me while I was headless, now looked like he'd seen a banshee riding a dragon.

"We apologize, but we are unfamiliar with the concept of divine wisdom you mentioned," the Chieftain said with a hint of curiosity.

"Wait, you can hear me?!"

"M-Muddy can speak," Wartie stated with as much wonder as I felt.

I nearly exploded with glee, my pudding spider form wriggling my round butt with excitement. Who knew all it took to be considered intelligent was a little bit of Oracle? *Finally, they will know my true greatness!* I could verbally give them a reason to express their fears and horror. With this new power, I could manipulate them all to my will. Maybe I'll even convince them to call me by something more fitting, like The Mighty Slime Princess or The Devourer of Worlds. *As for those*

pesky candidates? I can't wait to see them try and run from my grasp. I'll make sure to savor their screams before they become nothing but a memory. *Oh, the possibilities!* Suddenly, my butt wiggle came to an end as I realized an obvious fact, I hadn't cast Oracle yet. *So, how am I speaking now?*

"Redtail, why don't you be the one to escort our friend." It was hard to tell with his muzzle, but I could've sworn the old wolf's expression briefly darkened when he spoke to Redtail.

"You can't be serious?! A talking slime? It has to be a demonic trick!"

The chief addressed Redtail, stating, "Our friend here is a leveler. There's no trickery involved." He then clarified that his decision was final and that anyone who opposed it could take it up with someone else. He paused momentarily before addressing me, "I'm sorry, but I'm going to assume that Muddy isn't your name. What should we call you?"

"Nope! It's Blake," I exclaimed before continuing with another question. "By the way, do you have any more information about levelers?"

The old warg began stroking his beard as he thought about his response. "Ah, Blake, you must still be a young leveler. Let's see how best to explain it. The goddess that oversees magic provides countless ways for us mortals to interact with and use magic. For those of us called Dungeon Folk, we bind ourselves to a dungeon core for our magic and are called monsters for it. Although, without our core here binding us, we are quite helpless and powerless. Our binding is similar to what warlocks and witches do with their contracts with powerful entities. It's a means to gain magic, power, and longevity. But be warned, Blake, with great power comes great insanity.

"Leveling is just another means to gain that magic and power. Levelers are the rarest type and grow in might not through bindings, contracts, knowledge, training, or cultivation like the others but rather through overcoming difficult tasks and the slaying of powerful foes. And a leveler who loves the thrill of battle is indeed an unstoppable force. I hope that helps. I'm afraid if you want to know more, you've best find yourself a church or academy on the surface. However, they may mistake you for a common monster and attempt to kill you on the spot, especially the Church of the Light."

"What about Wartie? Is he a leveler?"

The kid's name seemed to trigger a reaction from him, and he straightened up. The Chieftain didn't seem fazed, though. "Ah, no. Our young ones form their knowledge on their own naturally and don't bind to a core until they come of age. It's always their choice. Some even leave us to explore the outside worlds, probably to find themselves or something equally ridiculous."

Well, well, it turns out Wartie was just some unassuming kid bound to creatures without even realizing it. But that's not important. What's important is that I retrieve their Dungeon Core and restore these helpless villagers to their full power – all the better for me to absorb their skills. It's a win-win situation, really. And did I hear that correctly? *Worlds?!*

So much had happened so quickly that my brain wriggled with excitement and confusion. *How the hell was I talking?* Was it the skill's power or something more sinister at play? *And seriously, what the eff was this [Oracle] thing anyway?* As my new skill activated, I felt a sudden surge of energy

course through me, like I'd been hit by a bolt of lightning. But no otherworldly visions, no angelic chorus, just me and these villagers, gaping at me like a fish out of water. And in the background, a glowing lady made of light, looking like she was ready to judge and smite us all. *Lovely. Another day in the life of a Black Pudding, am I right?*