

BLACK PUDDING

INTERLUDE – Nightmares & Tentacles

There were five...

Heather walked silently in front of the other five champion candidates, afraid to make eye contact with them. They journeyed through the dungeon, each waiting eagerly to see who would be next to betray the others. The first to fall was Sophia, at the hands of Jason, he even ate her heart, but since then, the five of them had an uneasy truce. Heather fought against the few creatures that lurked in the darkness, all while keeping a close eye on her fellow candidates. They needed to level—No, she needed to level, but there weren't enough monsters. Her mind ran rampant with paranoia. Who would break the truce first? *Which one will try to kill me first?*

As they continued their journey through the dungeon, Heather couldn't shake off the dread lingering in the air. She felt like the walls were closing in on her, suffocating her with fear. The silence was only interrupted by the sound of their footsteps and the occasional growl of a dungeon monster. But even that was a rare sighting. Heather tried to focus on leveling up and the power that came with it, but she couldn't help but wonder which one would try to kill her first. Who could she trust, Yua? Even if Yua seemed protective of her, Heather knew there could only be one survivor at the end.

Heather was constantly on edge, always looking over her shoulder and checking her back. She was afraid that one of the others would turn on her at any moment. She had no allies in the group, and she was isolated. Heather had been summoned into the body of a small, slender dark elf woman with flowing white hair. She was living her fantasy of being a mage in another world. Well, perhaps not the dark mage part. She knew that to survive, she would have to take a stand and fight for her life. Heather was determined to do whatever it took to emerge as the winner and leave the dungeon alive.

However, telling herself she would survive and win were lies she repeatedly told herself. She knew her days were numbered. She was weaker than the others and was aware that they would eventually figure out the truth. She had lied about her level, hoping that the others would falsely believe it to be suicide to attack her. It had worked so far, and she had managed to keep the others from turning on her. But she knew that it was only a matter of time before the truth was revealed, and she would be at the mercy of the others when the shaky alliance ended. Despite those fears, something felt different.

Heather was the first to reach the boss's chamber, and as she approached the massive doors, she took a deep breath and tried to calm her nerves. The darkness seemed to be closing in on her, suffocating her with fear upon fear. Heather could feel something sinister lurking in the shadows, waiting to strike. Heather couldn't shake off the dread lingering in the air. She felt like they were

being watched, like something was there with them. She couldn't help but wonder what lay within the shadows.



Yua's arrival was marked by her visible trembling, which was at odds with her mysterious and reserved demeanor. Despite her calm exterior, she was filled with doubt and fear as she stood outside the boss's chamber. Her tall stature gave her confidence, and as being summoned into a high elf body, her intelligence and Wisdom were natural traits. Yua quickly became known among the other candidates for her ability to think quickly in high-stress situations.

The air around them was thick with tension, and the darkness seemed to be closing in, making the atmosphere suffocating. As Yua approached the doors, the darkness grew even more oppressive, casting a shadow over her mind and spirit. A sinister presence lurked beyond the doors, ready to strike at any moment. The feeling of being watched was overwhelming, and Yua couldn't shake off the dread.

The dread surrounding Yua was almost palpable as she stood before the doors to the boss's chamber. The responsibility for the battle's outcome rested heavily on her shoulders and those of her fellow candidates, those who she knew would soon be her enemies. She was aware that their collective actions would determine the success or failure of the conflict.

As she took a deep breath and stepped into the unknown, Yua couldn't help but worry about the boys. She hoped that her determination and bravery would inspire Heather and that they would make it out of this situation together. Yua was ready to face her fears head-on and emerge victorious.



Jason was third, and he was surprisingly calm. He quietly observed the others, trying to determine their strengths and weaknesses. Jason considered himself the smartest in the group and was confident he would find a way to outsmart the others. Without any doubt, he had every intention of betraying the group.

Jason was a tall, lanky man with a mischievous grin that was as quick with his wit as it was frightening. His needle-like teeth added to his already fearsome reputation as a cruel and evil assassin amongst the other four. If you asked, he would say he looked like a video game character from Mortal Kombat. In his mind, he saw himself as the ultimate dark champion, reveling in the tension and uncertainty between his party members. Jason eagerly anticipated the next one he would eliminate.

Jason was starting to feel uneasy despite his usual confidence and willingness to cause chaos. The massive doors seemed to emit an unknown danger, and he couldn't shake the feeling that something was different this time. Heather and he had already scouted out the toad. And yet something was gnawing at him in the back of his head. He shrugged it off. He was too excited, waiting in anticipation of murdering the others and eating their hearts after the boss.

Jason was a ruthless competitor and determined to come out on top. He was aware that the other candidates were plotting against each other. Still, Jason was confident in his ability to outwit them. He walked ahead of the group, his mind racing as he planned his next move. The upcoming boss battle was crucial, and Jason was determined to use it to his advantage. He watched as the other candidates were mentally preparing for the fight, but he held back, waiting for the right moment to strike. *Just wait!*

In the end, the choice was simple. Either they fight the boss together, or he could start murdering the others now, face the boss alone afterward, and surely lose. So here he was, waiting for the others to psych themselves up before they face the next boss together, and he'll murder each one after. Jason couldn't wait! He was determined to prove to the necromancers that summoned him that he was the ultimate dark champion. His heart raced with excitement. He knew after this battle would be his chance to eliminate his competitors and secure victory!



Rob arrived next, feeling overwhelmed and scared. He was the youngest of the group at fifteen and wasn't ready for this new world. He didn't want to betray anyone, but he was uncertain if he could kill them in cold blood. Rob silently prayed for a miracle, hoping to leave the dungeon unscathed without blood coating his hands. Despite his fear, Rob had a formidable appearance, with a half-orc body, bulging muscles, and a scowl that commanded respect. Before being summoned, he was an avid gamer with aspirations of becoming a paladin, known for his unwavering devotion to justice and holy powers. However, he was trapped as a necromancer apprentice, much to his frustration.

Rob was plagued by dark thoughts as he stood outside the boss's chamber, with the massive doors to the boss's chamber reminding him of the high stakes, as the truce would end if they failed to defeat the next boss. Jason's aspirations of killing everyone and becoming the dark champion filled Rob with disgust, but even more unsettling was that Jason was uncharacteristically quiet. Something felt off, and Rob couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. Despite his fear, Rob held onto his sense of justice and morality, hoping it would guide him through the darkness.

As a backup plan, if his morality failed him, he had two undead goblins following him, ready to distract Jason and the boss while he made his escape. His primary goal was to leave this nightmare situation alive, and he was determined to see it through no matter the difficulty. The urge to run was strong, but Rob knew that Jason would not hesitate to eliminate him if he fled. So he braced himself, relying on his wits to guide him through the upcoming battle. Although he was not the paladin he once dreamed of becoming, he held onto that dream and remained steadfast in his resolve...lacking it may be.



Jeremy had his soul placed inside a broad-shouldered beastkin with canine traits and a booming voice. He showed the potential to become a fearsome warrior among the five. He also had a protective nature, always striving to maintain peace among the group. Heather and Jason's reconnaissance indicated that the boss was a massive red toad, and the battle would require all of

them to work together as a team. However, Jeremy felt anxious as he stood outside the boss's chamber despite his bravery in battle.

Jeremy was steadfast in his resolve to finish what they had started despite his reservations. He understood the gravity of the situation and realized that they had to fight the boss or risk the end of their agreement and the eventuality of them killing each other. He took a deep breath and prepared himself for the battle, ready to tackle any obstacle. The boss's chamber doors were massive and imposing, reminding Jeremy of the daunting task ahead. Nevertheless, he stood firm and resolute, committed to seeing it through. Though he had concerns, he was ready to fight the boss, no matter the cost!



Finally, Heather and the other candidates marched through the larger-than-life doors to the boss chamber, eager for the battle. But what they encountered was not what they expected. Instead of the toad, they found a beautiful woman with silky white skin and long, flowing white hair in a matching silk dress that a few of them almost mistook for her skin. The woman was seated upon a colossal throne of slithering and writhing black tentacles. The woman gazed at them with hypnotic, glowing orange eyes as if made from molten iron. She looked like an angel with the gaze of a hungry demon wrapped up in the form of a gorgeous lifesize porcelain doll. They couldn't help but notice the black gums beside porcelain white teeth as she smiled, only adding to the demonic aura she gave off as if unimaginable horrors were radiating from her.

The dim lighting of the room was only accentuated by the eerily glowing orange eyes of the woman on the throne. An overwhelming feeling of discomfort permeated the air, making it feel like they were inhaling a dense fog. Four of the five candidates cast uneasy glances at one another, their expressions reflecting the fear and uncertainty they all felt as they stood on shaky legs before the strange woman, bearing the full force of an ominous aura surrounding her.

She started whispering to herself, her words too soft to hear but still causing four of them to question her sanity. Suddenly, she pulled her demonic orange eyes away from them as she scrutinized her black nail polish, almost as if they were beneath her. They all confirmed that the unease and dread they had felt before entering had been coming from her and only grew as she continued murmuring to herself as if they weren't there.

"Ugh, I HATE not being in control. I know, I know, but this is the best way to train to ditch system dependency. But, still, are you POSITIVE this way is better? Yes, everything outside this noob dungeon will OWN us if we don't get you some serious training! Just focus and pay attention to the sensations of what I'm doing."

"Suffer the eye of the seer, for none shall hide, [**Appraisal**]." Heather used that moment to breathe out quietly her spell chant and was horrified by what she saw. At tier one, it wasn't powerful, but it at least showed her a monster's race, class, and level.

<p>Name: Blake Race: Black Pudding</p>
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Class: Dungeon Monster

Level: 20

Titles:

[Hopeless Crusader]

“S-she’s a black pudding,” Heather uttered under her breath. Unfortunately for them, the others weren’t paying attention to her.

Heather was unfamiliar with black puddings, yet that didn’t faze her since she wasn’t familiar with too many of the other monsters and creatures this reality had to offer. However, the level of the black pudding seemed illogical to her. However, she had never encountered anyone or anything with a title, and that name caught her off guard. She wondered, *Could it really be the same monster? How did it reach such a high level so fast?*

Despite the fear and uncertainty that permeated the room, Jason was undaunted. He was ready to take on the battle and was determined to come out victorious while relishing the experience. With a determined gaze, he looked upon the strange woman’s body with hungry eyes, eager to take on the challenge and enjoy himself as he did it.

"Are you sure they’re seeing twenty? Yeah, I got this! Suppressing is a simple trick that even they could do if shown how. We don't want to scare 'em off before the fight even begins! Yeah, yeah, I guess you're right, but I feel like I’m cheating. That’s because you are!”

Yua’s ears were sharper than the others as she overheard pieces of the mad woman's whispers, but not enough to fully grasp the conversation she was having with herself. Her only conclusion, the woman was nuts!

The four candidates, minus Jason, were plagued by uncertainty, their faith in their pursuit wavering. They knew that faltering would lead to their demise. Despite the tremors in their resolve, they could not bring themselves to give up, having come too far to surrender. Their only options were a brutal defeat at the hand of a fellow candidate or united in a violent confrontation with the strange woman. Standing on unsteady legs, they braced themselves for the impending terror as they listened to the woman's manic whispers increase in volume to where they all could hear it, coming to understand the true horror of their situation.

“Fine, but at least let me enjoy eating them after. Well, yeah. Just make sure you concentrate on the sensation of how I’m doing things.”

Jason’s razorblade-filled smirk only grew, “this bitch is crazy!”

Jeremy asked with urgency, "I want to know what happened to the toad. Heather, what's her level?"

"She’s a level t-twenty dungeon monster," Heather replied.

Yua asked curiously, "What about that creepy chair?"

"Appraisal only d-detects her. However, she has a name! It’s B-Blake," Heather answered.

“Blake,” Yua repeated.

Jason laughed, "Ha! So she's all by themselves!"

Rob proposed, "The chair could be an object. Maybe we should try to get her away from it."

Jason dismissed their concerns, "Why are you all so nervous? It's obviously just a decorative throne. We can handle someone at level twenty if we work together."

Jason's laughter echoed through the chamber, sending chills down the necks of the other four. He rushed towards the woman with determined steps, leaving them stunned and off guard as they watched on. The strange woman, however, remained seated atop her throne of writhing tentacles, an epitome of terror in the eyes of the others. As Jason approached, she lifted her hand, and a tentacle from her throne transformed into a sleek and slender staff with a cobra-shaped head.

The woman didn't move from her throne. Instead, she simply pointed the staff toward Jason, who was now within a sword's reach. The cobra head on the staff's tip suddenly sprang to life, expelling a cloud of yellow mist that enveloped him. Jason felt his body weaken as the mist entered his lungs, his body aching, seizing, and burning as if coated in acid. A scream of pain escaped his lips before he disappeared from sight. A few seconds later, he reappeared beside Jeremy, clutching his face and groaning in agony.

“That fucking bitch spit acid at me,” he cried out!

Then the woman rose from her throne, her orange eyes glowing with an inner fire as she watched Jason crumple to the ground. She twirled the black staff in her hand, the cobra head hissing almost mockingly before she went back to murmuring to herself once again. Leaving the other four stunned and silent.

“A bit much, don't you think? Well, yeah, but I haven't killed him yet. I'm talking about the staff! Oh, well, after emptying the two phylacteries, I had to use the spells we got. I thought you were supposed to teach me how not to rely on the system? I didn't use the system to cast; didn't you feel how I drew in ambient mana to cast instead of calling upon the system? ...No! Well, pay closer attention!”

Shocked by what the woman had done to Jason, Heather approached him cautiously. She placed a hand on his shoulder and called forth the power within her. "I c-call upon the darkness, m-mend!" A warm and comforting aura of healing magic surrounded Jason, slowly repairing the damage caused by the cloud of acid.

Despite her efforts to heal him, Heather's feelings towards Jason were far from warm. She despised him; deep down, she wanted nothing more than to watch him suffer and die. She knew well that he wouldn't hesitate to do the same to her if the roles were reversed. But for now, she had to focus on her own survival, and keeping Jason alive was a necessary evil.

Yua shook her head, “we've got to work together, you dumbass!”

“Yeah, I think I figured that out,” Jason muttered as he stood back up, fully healed.

Despite their initial fear and personal reservations, the group quickly realized they had to unite to defeat the common enemy before them. With a shared threat posed by the mysterious woman, even the reluctant Jason acknowledged the need for a united front. The group took a collective moment to gather their courage as they prepared for the battle ahead.

Though they were uncertain of what lay ahead, they knew that working together was their only chance of defeating the woman. They were aware of the possibility that the woman may be their final boss, but their shared goal to overcome the enemy brought them together in a tenuous alliance. The fragility of their temporary alliance was palpable. Still, their determination to come out victorious was stronger than any internal conflict.

The group knew their success was not guaranteed, and the outcome was uncertain. The future was shrouded in darkness, but they were determined to do whatever it took to come out victorious. They understood that the only way to beat the woman was by working together despite existing tensions or conflicts. With a shared purpose and mutual goal, the group readied themselves for the fight, ready to face whatever lay ahead. Despite their fears and uncertainties, they were determined to do whatever it took to come out victorious and defeat the mysterious woman before them.

Yua was the first to shout, **“I call upon you, oh dark goddess, heed my plea, [Darkness Arrow]!”**

Jeremy followed, **“From the gastral depths of my soul, I call forth, [Acid Ball].”**

The dual attacks of [Acid Ball] and [Darkness Arrow] hit the dungeon monster disguised as a stunning woman in white with full force. She let out a scream of agony and stumbled, falling to her hands and knees. Jason burst into triumphant laughter, but Heather noticed the smile on the woman’s face and felt herself shiver.

“A bit dramatic, don’t you think? Oh, shut up and let me have my fun,” the woman muttered beneath her breath to herself.

“Fear the phantoms, for they shall consume you, [Phantom Slash],” Jason chanted before vanishing.

Jason materialized above the woman, still writhing and trembling in apparent pain. With a gleeful grin, he raised the sword he had taken from one of Rob's undead goblins and swung it down upon her. But as the blade approached its target, Jason suddenly realized that the woman was not in pain. Instead, she was laughing! Regardless, Jason followed through with his strike and brought his sword down upon her neck. But suddenly, she and the throne both vanished into thin air.

They all began searching for the woman, turning their heads rapidly. Rob was the first to spot her, but she was now wearing a dress. The black gothic-style dress clung to her curves, accentuating her form, and the jaw-length oily black hair gave her a sinister look. Despite the change in appearance, her glowing orange eyes were still the same, unmistakably belonging to her. One of her arms had transformed into a tentacle, holding onto one of Rob's undead goblins, which was thrashing about as it slowly dissolved in her grasp.

"Okay, now it's your turn. Try to sense the surrounding mana and do what I just did," the woman instructed, confusing the five onlookers.

Jason started yelling in frustration, "WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT!"

"What is she talking about," Yua asked?

"Yua, how long until you can cast [**Darkness Arrow**]," Jeremy probed while considering their options.

"I have a three-minute cooldown! What about your [**Acid Ball**]?"

"Same," he groaned.

The woman glanced away from the sight of seeping goblin guts toward the group. "It's not wise to state your cooldown timer like that in front of an opponent. Geesh, isn't that like basic gamer common sense?"

"FUCK YOU," Jason screamed!

Heather, however, realized something was immediately off about the woman's comment. "How do you know about gamers," she asked?

"Hmm...? Oh, that—. I don't think you should say. Why not? It won't hurt anything. Ugh, fine!" The woman seemed to converse with herself like some kind of lunatic before finishing and glancing back at Heather. "That's because I'm a summon candidate. Just. Like. You! And not only will I win, but I'm also going to enjoy eating all of you!"

"She's a psychopath," Jason stated.

"Well, isn't that rich, the devil accusing a demon of being sadistic! At least I finish my meals, unlike you, leaving a delicious corpse lying around after murdering them. What a waste of a meal. What was her name again? Sophia?"

Heather felt like something else wasn't right about this whole situation. "Suffer the eye of the seer, for none shall hide, [**Appraisal**]."

<p>Name: Blake Race: Black Pudding Class: Dungeon Monster Level: 38 Titles: [Hopeless Crusader]</p>

"S-she's level th-thirty-eight!"

"What! I thought you said she was twenty!" Jason's face went from simply irritated to terror-stricken.

"S-she w-was t-the l-last t-time I c-checked!"

"Blake, listen to me," the woman scolded herself. "I told you you must concentrate on suppressing your internal mana. Did you not see how I was doing it? Ugh, it's impossible to suppress and use mana simultaneously. I can't divide my attention between two tasks!"

Rob stepped back, his undead goblin guardian in tow. "Who are you speaking to?" he asked.

"Hmm... Oh... Uh, myself," the woman asked more than she stated.

Jeremy advanced confidently, trying to mask his fear. "We don't need to resort to violence," he said. "Perhaps we could collaborate and find a way to escape the dungeon without having to murder each other."

"That's a fair point," she mused while smiling. "But, alas, it will not come to pass. For I am hungry, and you are here."

Rob was consumed by fear. The thought of dying in this cursed place was too much for him to bear. Despite seeing himself as a noble and heroic paladin, the reality of being summoned as an evil half-orc necromancer went against everything he believed. He struggled to come to terms with his new reality and couldn't shake the dread that hung over him.

Despite this, Rob was determined not to let fear control him. He was filled with dread and terror, a scared little boy trapped in a man's body, and he didn't want to die in this place. Rob took a deep breath and pushed away the negative thoughts, trying to focus on the task at hand. He tried to convince himself that he was a brave and heroic hero, but deep down, Rob knew he was simply lying to himself.

With a silent whimper, Rob pointed his hand toward the woman and started his chant for his most powerful attack spell. "**The death of the undyings' pain knows no end, [Necrotic Flame].**"

The words flowed from his lips as the spell started to build. A massive wave of dark purple flames shot out at her, but as he unleashed its full power, the woman was already in the air, dodging his attack with ease. Her black dress billowed behind her like a cape as she effortlessly evaded the necrotic flame. Rob was stunned by her sudden movement, struggling to redirect the spell. The woman let out a wicked laugh, relishing in the scene as she landed gracefully behind him.

Her landing was met with a startled yelp from Yua, who stumbled back, losing her balance as she did and tripping to the ground. The woman, however, was unfazed by Yua's reaction and merely chuckled, an evil grin spreading across her face. With a flick of her wrist, she transformed both arms into tentacle-like appendages that swiftly grabbed hold of Rob and his undead goblin protector by their necks, all while muttering to herself.

"Damnit, Blake! You used the Leap command! What was I supposed to do, get hit by those fucking flames?! If it teaches you how to cast without the system, then yes! Ugh, you're such a bitch!"

Heather let out a bloodcurdling scream as she watched in horror as the woman snapped Rob's neck while dissolving it away, resulting in his body and head separating and falling to the ground. The head rolled a couple meters up to Heather's feet. At the same time, the woman's tentacle clung to

the goblin, wrapping and engulfing the undead as it thrashed about in her grasp. The woman seemed to be in the height of pleasure, moaning loudly with delight as if savoring the moment.

The sudden loss of Rob was a devastating blow to Heather and the other candidates. The reality of the danger they were in hit them hard as they witnessed the brutal death of one of their own. Heather's screams echoed through the room as she stared at Rob's lifeless eyes lying at her feet. The fear was palpable, but the candidates understood they had no choice but to move forward. And yet, they just stood there in fear, paralyzed by the gruesome sight before them... Well, at least for four of them.

"Dammit, I wanted to kill him," Jason expressed with disappointment tinting his voice.

Jeremy was overwhelmed with conflicting emotions of hurt, pain, anger, and unbearable rage! He uttered a piercing scream, "Murderer!" and summoned the most powerful spell he had been concealing from the others, "**I call forth the rage of the gods, [Death Bolt]!"** A brilliant, purple bolt of arcing lightning hit the woman, sending her flying across the room in a trail of smoke and electricity. She impacted the wall with a loud thud, her body turning into a puddle of black ooze.

The group stood in disbelief, each trying to process what had just happened. Heather released a snuffle, trying to hold back more tears, while Jason sighed in disappointment. On the other hand, Jeremy was filled with a sense of victory, feeling that the justice he sought had finally been served. Yua was frozen in place, her mind racing as she tried to make sense of what she had just witnessed.

The aftermath of the battle was a chaotic mess. The boss's chamber was filled with smoke and the stench of death, making it difficult for them to breathe. Slowly, they started to relax, each basking in their hard-won triumph. Despite their victory, the four were still on high alert, each waiting to see what the other would do.

After a short pause, the group began to compose themselves, rummaging through the remains of Rob and attempting to comprehend the existence of a mysterious seventh candidate. The chamber walls were left blackened and charred from Jeremy's spell, which proved more powerful than any of them had anticipated. Clearly, he had kept the spell concealed, most likely meant to be used against one of them. Despite the turmoil, destruction, and suspicion that surrounded them, the group felt a sense of accomplishment for what they had achieved. The surviving candidates took a moment to savor their victory, basking in their triumph.

It was over, and now, only four remained...