



# GRIMDARK FUTURE

## A CURE TO HATE



SHORT STORY



# A CURE TO HATE BY BROOKE STEMME

A dense humidity weighed down the leaves of the trees, a thick heat pressing in despite their shade. The stagnant swamp water added a pungent smell to the place. Still, life thrived, even if most of it consisted of fungi, small creatures in the ground, and plants that braved the harsh conditions.

Hollowpox had seen it all before. She saw ancient trees fall, their logs crumbling to dirt as the mushrooms and other small animals ate away to make way for new life. Time accumulated on the surface of the water pools. Plants floated along its surface; bones and other lost things sank to its bottom. Spores, mushrooms, parasites, and disease were all part of this great whole as well, breaking down individual life forms to nourish the land itself. Nothing could exist alone; it was all part of something larger.

Mosswilt landed gently beside her, the Fury's wings creating ripples in the water. He gently cut a shoot off a thick plant, tucking it into a pouch at his waist.

He looked sideways at Hollowpox.

"Do you plan on foraging anything during this mission, or are you simply enjoying the sights?"

Hollowpox bared her teeth in the rough approximation of a smile. "I am looking for something, despite the way it might appear. What exactly it is, I will know when I see it."

Mosswilt reached for a branch to gently free a piece of peeling bark. "Is there something I can help you look for? I know our swamp inside out."

The trees in the swamp had sparse leaves this time of year, though the clouds were always thick in the sky above. Hollowpox craned her neck, trying in vain to see anything beyond them.

"See, I'm looking for something, anything that might have come from outside of it."

Mosswilt nodded slowly, though his expression was sombre. "There's a reason that Rotgrowth sealed off the Wormholes. Here, we can thrive and grow, safe from the dangers beyond. You would do better to keep your eyes open to the things right in front of you."

It was another wise statement. Still, Hollowpox couldn't help but envy that her companion had seen worlds beyond their own, even if he preferred not to talk of them. She had heard tales from others, though, of a universe that held far more secrets and beauty than her home.

A short time later, as Mosswilt was finishing her foraging, a glint of something caught Hollowpox's eye. She knew better than to get her hopes up, but a small twinkle of excitement took hold inside her. It turned out to be right.

Buried beneath the embrace of viny plants and partly submerged in water was something strange: a smooth and tough stone, polished in parts to a sheen. Other parts looked orange-brown, worn through, and nibbled on like a rotting log by worms. She had seen glimpses of the object brought back by others: metal.

Hollowpox carefully investigated the pile. It had been shaped by intelligent beings and melted into the most fantastical designs. Avoiding sharp edges and keeping the items from toppling fully into the water, she grabbed all of the pieces that she could carry.

The debris would mean little to the other Daemons; it could serve little useful purpose to them, and even the creators of the device seem to have abandoned it. Still, it meant something to her to hold a piece of a world beyond her own.

"Is that all you plan to bring back with you?" Mosswilt said as she watched her work.

Hollowpox ignored the scepticism in his tone. "Maybe it is. All this stuff belonged to someone. Maybe they'll even come back for it some day."

"I hope not." Mosswilt replied, looking down, "Even the small trace they left behind has already done its damage."

Dark oil stains created patches with no growth. Not even the plague could prevail where there was only death.

Before Hollowpox could reply, a deep shudder shook the ground. Thousands of little waves disrupted the surface of the nearby water, with small animals taking to the air or diving for shelter. The Plague Furies braced against a nearby tree, their eyes meeting. The sound didn't last for long, but it was not soon forgotten.

"I do not think that was a natural tremor." Mosswilt looked towards the ground. "Perhaps it would be wise to return."

Hollowpox hesitated for a moment, wondering whether her new treasure represented a threat of some kind, but she looked back with determination.

"Whatever caused the tremor may be gone by then. It's best we go now and return with word of what we find... if we find anything to begin with."

As they took to the sky, they encountered another Plague Fury, Itchgristle. He dove down as he saw them, moving close to Hollowpox as he around excitedly.

"You think it's an asteroid?"

The excitement in his voice only served to increase her own.

"It was big. Anything more than that is just speculation."

Itchgristle smiled widely. "You are the very best at speculation. What do you think it is?"

Hollowpox only hesitated for a moment.

"An asteroid. That's all it ever is."

Asteroids, though, had a way of making a spectacular landing. Rocks may not be alive, but they did carry with them elements from beyond Hollowpox's world. Elements meant resources. Recovering those might make up for the lack of useful materials she'd collected so far.

Itchgristle rolled his eyes. "Just one new thing: that's all it takes for it to be new and exciting when the rest of the world moves so slowly. If we're really lucky, maybe a little lifeform has survived the journey."

It was a nice change of pace from Mosswilt's disinterest in places beyond their swamp.

Still, the impact didn't feel like an asteroid. The vibrations in the ground were too rapid and even. The final impact felt softer, somehow. But if it wasn't an asteroid, what could it be? She hardly dared to let herself imagine anything else.

Whispers of conversation continued as the Plague Daemons approached the impact site. Still, the sound of voices grew louder. Mosswilt signalled the group to silence. The sound of voices continued up ahead. They were not alone.

Itchgristle's eyes widened, as he glanced between Mosswilt and Hollowpox.

"What do we do now?"



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Hollowpox spoke up, her curiosity becoming boldness.

"Follow my lead."

She approached the voices, taking to the air to settle in against the branches of a tree. From her vantage point, the swamp and its secrets were visible.

Across a large pool was a ship. Its angles were nothing like she'd ever seen before. The metal of its panels was also free of rust, sparkling, and new. It stood out against the murky backdrop of the swamp. It hadn't crashed. It landed.

Not only that, but it had carried visitors.

Hollowpox restrained her wonder with effort, resigning herself to listen first. A makeshift camp resided on the closer side of the pool. Walking among the shelters and outside the boundary were Dwarves. She only recognised them from stories ancient Plague Daemons told, but they were true to their word.

They had thick beards, metal armour, and axes. Hollowpox shuddered at the sight. No tree had been cut down for many ages. The first trickle of doubt took root in her mind. Maybe Mosswilt was right. Not everything from beyond was worth bringing back.

A pair of Dwarves wandered near the place Hollowpox was hiding, her shadow flowing with the organic shape of the tree below and disguising her presence. They covered themselves with fabrics and metals from their toes to their shoulders. For a moment, she wasn't sure if there was anything beneath until one removed the metal cover from his head.

His skin was a pale, weak colour, like a newborn creature not yet used to the spores and parasites of the swamp. But instead of embracing their surroundings, which would strengthen them, they seemed to fear the world that had nurtured her and her people. It was tragic.

"Sure, there's always some danger if you're careless, but do you have any idea what this is worth? The chemicals this plant is synthesising could burn a hole through a diamond! Gotta take some risks if you want the reward."

"Look, we're not in the gardening business; we're here for the ore. I'm starting to wonder if the weird wildlife here messed with our scanners, and now we're just stuck here watching each other get sick with strange new kinds of diseases."

"Right, but so long as you're careful, you won't want to end up in quarantine. Even if you do, that's all the more reason for us to collect plant samples. It's a matter of time until we find a cure for the blasted disease, and then we can get to mining."

Hollowpox tilted her head at the curious word. A cure was something needed when life was threatened by injury or unnatural means. Yet, on her world, life thrived in every corner and only awaited for the Dwarves to embrace it.

In the neighbouring tree, Mosswilt and Itchgristle glanced between her and the Dwarves. Their lack of warning, or signal to return, gave her assurance to take the next step.

Hollowpox took to the air, dropping down to land in front of the Dwarves whose conversation she was just listening to. Their eyes widened visibly, even beneath their armour. They recoiled from her before she could speak.

"Daemons!" one shouted, pointing her axe at Hollowpox. "They must be the root of this!"

The other raised his rifle. "You'll not infect me, swamp scum!"

The other Plague Furies landed beside Hollowpox the same moment his gun fired.

The sound surprised Hollowpox almost as much as their words. She had never felt such hatred, the kind that gives creation to bitter loneliness. They had not come to share in the world she loved, to join them as part of the greater whole that her people had created; they sought to destroy her and perhaps even the swamp itself.

They sought a cure for life itself.

The Plague Furies dived for cover, though this portion of the swamp offered them little. The trees were sparse, the pools of water doing little to slow down the advance of the Dwarves.

Hollowpox dashed forward, driving forward with her arm blade to strike the Dwarf shooting at them. Her blow landed in a weak point in the armour of her foe, and she heard him scream with pain and horror as he collapsed.

His companion turned to her with his axe, charging, and soon, the sound of gunfire echoed as other Dwarves rushed to join the fray.

Hollowpox leapt in the air, getting out of the way as the other Dwarf moved closer. Then she saw it; other Daemons who had been foraging had been drawn by the commotion, unaware of the Dwarves. If she fled, the new arrivals would be caught completely unaware, and many would die.

Hollowpox swooped in a large arc over the Dwarves, drawing their fire to keep their eyes off any of her fellow Daemons. As she circled, there was a decrease of shots aimed at her location for a brief moment.

Curious, she circled again. A wide smile broke out on her face as she realised the pattern.

Hollowpox dove in close to the nearest Dwarf rifleman, their screams growing as her claws sank into them. But wounds weren't her intent. It was their focus she needed.

She looked at her companions; both of them had come out to aid her but moved to hide as the gunfire got heavier. She could see they were as afraid, but in Mosswilt's eyes, she could see something else: hatred. It reminded her of the Dwarves.

"Mosswilt, Itchgristle! Follow me!"

Mosswilt and Itchgristle flew in formation nearby, only going to ground once the density of the swamp's trees no longer allowed them to fly as directly as needed.

Mosswilt drew close to Hollowpox as they darted through the forest. Stray gunfire shattered the bark on the surrounding trees, causing her to grimace. Still, she carried on.

"I presume you have a plan?"

For once, Mosswilt's tone wasn't one of doubt.

"It's the sun. They can't fire straight when they're staring into it. They think they have the upper hand now, but they won't for long. We know this place better than they ever could."

Hollowpox approached the mire at speed. She took to the air but kept as low to the ground as possible. Assuming Mosswilt passed on the details of her plan to the others, she waited for the others to get into formation.



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The squishing sound of boots in thick mud grew as the Dwarves moved to try to get a better vantage point. Then Hollowpox struck; she flew full speed into an enemy Warrior, knocking him onto his back in the swamp before she landed gracefully on a log.

Mosswilt and Itchgristle followed, swooping down behind her to strike down two more Dwarves. Itchgristle merely tackled his foe, while Mosswilt seemed to take glee in tearing the flesh from his target. Other Furies took their moment to reveal themselves, sweeping down from the surrounding thickets to bear down on the unwary Dwarves.

With their range advantage gone, the Dwarves began to break rank. Even as the gunshots fell silent, Hollowpox's ears still rang faintly with the remembrance of the sound. She picked up a strap of leather lying in the mud, securing it to herself.

Mosswilt and some of the others pursued them, but Hollowpox remained where she was; the battle had been won. She still needed to come to terms with what had happened.

It was not long, however, before Mosswilt returned.

"There are more of them. An invasive species," her companion said dryly. "It is too many for us to deal with now. Let us go and report our findings so that they can be dealt with."

"I'll stay behind." Hollowpox replied, "If you want to wipe them away, then I want to see them before they're gone. There is beauty in all life, even theirs; it is a shame not to see that."

Mosswilt nodded slowly, then turned to go. "Try not to die."

Hollowpox slowly approached the dwarven camp with greater caution. It seemed that they were still reeling from the first encounter; their sentries were scrambling around nervously, with their eyes fixed above them.

Yet, her body knew the swamp, and approaching carefully, it was difficult to discern where her shape began and that of the swamp ended. The confusion had left them with gaps in their line, and the largest one was blindingly obvious. At the edge of their camp, isolated from the rest, was a large tent.

Hollowpox moved towards it, entering quietly. The air was damp, heavy with familiar smells of rot and decay. She paused, seeing beds laid out throughout the space. Only a quarter of the beds were occupied, but the stark white fabric was eerie against the dirty ground. It unsettled her.

A groan caught Hollowpox's attention. A lone Dwarf lay near the edge of the tent she entered by. She didn't dare touch him, but something stirred him to consciousness.

His eyes were hazy, but his hand reached out faster than she could avoid. It gripped the strap of leather she'd taken from a fallen Dwarven warrior. His voice cracked as he spoke, his words slow and measured.

"Help me, please. I... need food."

She could see the fear in his eyes. Yet, something more grew inside of him; he bore a touch of the world with him. Would he embrace it, or would it take him by force?

She only hesitated for a moment before reaching into that pouch and drawing out a medley of mushrooms, roots, mosses, worms, and barks. She had no way of knowing whether it would be any good for the Dwarf. Either way, it was better than nothing. She dropped it into his hand. He snatched it back quickly.

He discerned things a little, his hand recoiling as it felt a wriggling worm. Yet moments later, he found a mushroom and swallowed it, followed by others.

The Dwarf coughed hard, taking a few moments before recovering his ability to speak.

"Odd stuff, but I suppose it's medicinal or something... I shouldn't complain though; it's been a long time since anyone brought us much of anything at all... the rest of 'em are afraid to catch it."

Soon, he was gnawing on the roots and mosses. By the time he handed it back to Hollowpox, all that remained were barks, which were too thick to eat, and even they had some bite marks.

"You have my thanks, but you should go before you're seen... or they might stick you in the tent with the rest of us. Is there any word on a cure?"

Low voices on the other side of the tent began to grow closer. Hollowpox studied the Dwarf for a moment longer, then quietly slipped away. If he had anything more to say, she was too far to hear.

As Hollowpox emerged from the tent, she could see the silhouette of her companions in the distance. They were returning already; she looked up at the setting sun above and realised how long it had taken her to sneak into the camp.

Yet, if they were visible to her, she knew it was only a matter of time before...

An uneven beat of gunfire echoed above her like a downpour of rain against a heavy log. The fight had already begun. Dwarves rushed to the perimeters, keeping close together and relying on artificial light. They were determined to use range to their advantage, dividing into groups to cover each other.

But Hollowpox and the Plague Daemons weren't the only dangers, living or otherwise, the Dwarves faced. As the Daemons approached and the Dwarves moved back, they soon found themselves caught in the roots and morasses beneath them. Before the force had even crashed against them, some Dwarves began to panic as swamp creatures began to venture into their camp, drawn by the sound of gunfire.

From above, Plague Slingers pelted the camp, and panic spread. Hollowpox stood watching in idle awe; she had long since gained resistance to the swamp's life, but the Dwarves were not so lucky. What little skin was not covered by their armour turned red, distracting them from their external enemies to the anger of their own flesh. The few that still held their ground grew smaller in number.

The cry for retreat came as the door to the ship opened.

"Retreat to the ship! Don't let yourselves get infected."

The Dwarves ran back toward their ship, wading panickedly through water as many were picked off by the creatures that dwell within or even just by mud and trees.

As the Dwarves reached their ship, Rotgrowth, the Plague Champion, gave the order to cease.

"They shall bear the touch of our world, no matter how far they travel. Let them return or go whither and die without us." Rotgrowth spoke with stern authority, "Our concern must be for what they have left behind."



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Hollowpox followed the Champion's gaze; some Dwarves, too injured to flee, lay scattered over the field. Yet, her eyes turned to the tent where she knew many more lay.

Before she could say a word, Moss wilt stepped forward.

"They came to destroy our swamp and have already done much to taint it. We should dispose of them, along with their rusted metals and chemicals before they do more harm."

Rotgrowth nodded slowly. "We thrive here, but it is a delicate balance, which I have sought to preserve. There is certainly a danger in allowing them to remain."

Hollowpox fidgeted with her leather. She could sense some hesitation in the Champion's voice, but she feared that if no one spoke against her friend, then he might just accept Moss wilt's suggestion.

"They came here to destroy what they did not understand, but should we do the same?" Hollowpox asked, "I believe their hearts can be cured of this hatred; these Dwarves have been abandoned, some before this fight even began. I think our world has already touched many of them and accepted them into our fold; should we not try to do the same?"

There was a long silence among the Daemons. The sounds of the swamp and the pained groans of the Dwarven survivors punctuated the silence, playing over each other.

Finally, Rotgrowth spoke, meeting her gaze. "You said there are others, ones abandoned before this fight began? I would have you show them to me."

Hollowpox held her breath, but it seemed that the decision was still unmade.

Hollowpox led the Plague Champion and her fellow Furies toward the Dwarven camp. Hollowpox pulled back the tent flap, entering first. The room was dark, and many seemed weak, though there were faint mutterings as the light broke into the tent.

Sickly Dwarves lined the beds, tended to by those who had been more recently quarantined. Though all of them seemed groggy, as the realisation came that these were not Dwarves come to rescue them but Daemons, none attempted to fight.

Some backed away slightly, but one of the Dwarves simply acknowledged them with a wary nod. His gaze was still hazy; his hand reached out to Hollowpox, trying to recognise her, and grabbed the same leather he had touched before.

"Did they leave us?" The Dwarf's tone was resigned.

There was a pause.

In the end, it was Rotgrowth who broke it, "Yes."

"What will become of us?" The Dwarf looked to the ceiling of the tent. "I know I'm doomed; if not by your hands, then by disease, but I will want to live with every fibre of my being."

Hollowpox placed her own hand over it. The Dwarf recoiled, but she did not let go.

Rotgrowth stepped forward. "You shall never step foot again beyond this swamp."

His words were cold and final. The Dwarf simply looked down, but his free hand reached out for Hollowpox.

"You are a part of it now." The Champion said, "And it is a part of you. If you would live such a life, we shall care for you as we do for every creature found in our home. If you would prefer death... there are those among us who would give it to you, but the choice is yours to make."

Moss wilt's face held an expression of shock as the Champion turned away, allowing the tent flap to fall and the Dwarves and Hollowpox in darkness. Moss wilt, too, lingered by the door.

Hollowpox laid a hand on Moss wilt's shoulder. A swell of warmth radiated through her as more and more Dwarves seemed to murmur among themselves. The mood was resigned acceptance, though some were not yet ready to accept their fate.

"Do you remember when you first took me foraging? I was too afraid to harvest even a small piece from a flourishing plant, despite the good it would do for us and its growth."

"This is different. They came here to destroy..."

Hollowpox shook her head. "You taught me that life is far from fragile; that we are all a part of something greater. But life changes, and we cannot hate these changes; stillness isn't life, growth is. Life always finds a way to survive and flourish and becomes a part of something greater."

Even in the faint light, Hollowpox could see Moss wilt's expression soften and the hatred in his eyes when he saw the Dwarves fade.

"Perhaps." He said reluctantly. "If these Dwarves can be cured of their hatred of us, then I can learn to accept them as well."