

# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 20

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Vanya Anlyth, an Elven Knight and Paladin of the Kingdom of Slaethia, lay solitary in her bed. The chilling void of the empty sheets pierced her heart, intensifying the ache from her husband's absence. Though she understood he was fulfilling his obligations as the General of the army, it brought her scant solace. The hours without him felt interminable. The echoes of the evening's festivities had begun to wane, leaving only the muffled chuckles of inebriated soldiers making their way to their resting places.

The triumph from mere days ago felt distant as the festivities continued unabated each night, an orchestra of wild merrymaking and indulgence. And who could blame them? The vampire, once the terror of their kingdom, was now a captive, subject to their sacred desires. Elves, dwarves, and humans, the trinity that rebuilt the kingdom, were preparing to parade this malevolent being back to their homeland, where her true ordeal would begin. It was a testament to their virtue, a stark message to all nocturnal horrors: every fiend and forbidden race would be eradicated in the name of Slaethia's divine mission. From vampires to werewolves, from lizardmen to beastkin, none of the darkened creatures were spared from this decree.

Rising gracefully from her bed, Vanya draped herself in a cloak, a mere whisper of fabric that scarcely shielded her form from the secrets of the night. While her armor stood prepared for her, she had a different agenda for tonight. Her intention had been to take her husband by surprise, to unveil the mystery hidden beneath the cloak. But that initial desire had shifted.

Emerging into the embrace of the night, Vanya was met with a biting cold that seemed to grip her very marrow. Amidst the chill, a shadowy suspicion wormed its way into her thoughts: her husband, ensnared in the depths of inebriated merriment with his officers. "Surely not," she silently argued. He wouldn't have abandoned their shared warmth without significant reason...

"Should my husband be lost in the company of ale, officers, or – gods forbid – another's embrace, he will rue the day," Vanya whispered fiercely, stepping forward into the crisp night, resolved to seek out Ezad.

Upon entering the command tent, Vanya was met with an unsettling sight: her husband was conspicuously absent. The tent, usually bustling with the presence of at least one on-duty officer, now stood eerily vacant. Her irritation morphed into anxiety as she spotted chairs overturned, hinting at either a skirmish or a swift exit. With a heavy heart and rising apprehension, she swiftly turned and delved back into the night's embrace, seeking clarity.

"Well now, Anlyth, aren't you a sight to behold! I can hardly believe me own eyes, seein' that lovely behind of yours runnin' around without a lick of armor on, love. Ain't ye a bit of a tease, ye are?" Gimona, the cheeky dwarf woman, chided with a smirk.

"Not now, Gimona. Have you seen my husband?"

“Och, so that’s the game ye’re playin’, dressin’ up like that, are ye?” Gimona chuckled, a teasing glint in her eye.

"The command tent stands vacant," Vanya declared, her tone suggesting the gravity of the situation without further elaboration.

“**WHAT IN THE NAME O’ THE GODS?!**” Gimona roared. “Do ye think we’ve been breached? Do ye think the dungeon core’s been taken? Sweet mother of mercy, I hope not.”

Vanya's voice carried a hint of anxiety, yet the resolute determination echoing through her words was undeniable. "Ezad secured the dungeon core in his dimensional ring alongside other relics. We need to find him or any of the senior members to discern if we face an imminent threat."

“I’ve ne’er laid eyes on that man wearin’ a ring,” the dwarf woman retorted with a hint of skepticism.

"Uh, yes..." Vanya shifted her eyes, evading direct contact in a moment of discomfort. "The ring isn't exactly... conventional."

“What in the name o’ the gods does that mean?”

"Um, perhaps we should, uh, consult a soldier currently on duty," Vanya faltered, eager to refocus. "It's possible we're jumping to conclusions. They might have witnessed something that sheds light on the situation."

Vanya and Gimona navigated the encampment, but it quickly became evident that an unusual number of sentries had abandoned their posts. While a handful might stray during festivities, the absence of twenty guards was alarming. This stark realization cemented her suspicions: they were indeed under siege!

"We need to find Craycroft," Vanya uttered with a heavy sigh. "This predicament might be beyond what we can manage by ourselves."

Gimona shook her head, “That old codger brought a Way Stone with him. He uses it to scuttle back to his tower at night, preferrin’ the comfort of his own bed over a tent and bedroll.”

"Then my path is clear. I shall assume command of the army until either my husband or a senior officer is located. Gimona, strike the Wailing Drums. We stand under threat."

“Aye, Anlyth. I’ll get right to it. And what will ye be doin’?”

"Our foes often comprise necromancers, vampires, and other shadowy entities. It's imperative that I safeguard the remains of our departed to ensure they aren't manipulated as tools by these adversaries."

“It’d be better to burn the bodies, it would.”

“It would,” Vanya replied, her voice tinged with a hint of sadness, "but violating a body before its rightful rites unsettles the departing spirit. I've seen my share of restless phantoms and tortured souls; I wish to see no more."



Gimona Grimmail took off with urgency, allowing Anlyth to manage her matters. Despite her compact, sturdy dwarf legs, she moved at a remarkable pace, driven by surging adrenaline. The once vibrant fires of the camp had dimmed to mere embers, but her objective remained clear: the Wailing Drums. The need to awaken the entire camp was paramount. Yet, as Gimona dashed towards the drums, an unshakable sensation hinted she might confront adversaries before reaching her destination. A smile crept onto her face, embracing the thrill of the moment. After all, tonight was an opportune time to be a Monster Slayer!

While Gimona regretted leaving her axe behind, her confidence remained steadfast. She was no mere dwarf that needed a blade for protection. And she proved it when she sensed an impending attack. The almost imperceptible disturbance in the air hinted at the deceptive approach these detestable beings preferred. Their assault was laughably amateurish! With reflexes honed by experience, Gimona's hand shot out, seizing the assassin's wrist and stopping the dagger mere inches from her throat.

With a nimble twist and yank, the shadowy assailant was airborne for a moment before crashing heavily onto the ground. Without hesitation, Gimona's boot came down on the attacker's face with the might akin to a mana crystal's explosion. A concussive wave emanated from the strike, yet the camp's inebriated soldiers, lost in their alcoholic haze, remained oblivious, their snores uninterrupted. Gimona couldn't suppress a chuckle. The scene reaffirmed a belief she had long held: humans and elves simply couldn't handle their pitiful excuse for ale.

In her urgency, Gimona's eyes darted to where the vampires had previously been staked. Her heart plummeted when she found the spots empty. Just a minuscule amount of blood could mend their grievous injuries, making them formidable adversaries for the encampment. To exacerbate the situation, the General's absence meant the army was without its commander amidst an apparent siege. But Gimona was resolute in her determination to prevent a disaster this night. She surged forward once more, aiming for the Wailing Drums. The only sound capable of rousing an army from its alcohol-fueled escapades was the haunting resonance of that drum. Yet, her momentum was suddenly thwarted when a cluster of dwarves, groggy and irked, emerged from their tents, disgruntled by the disruption to their rest.



Vanya dashed towards the Repository Tent, every heartbeat echoing her growing apprehension. The trailing end of her cloak occasionally gave way, cheekily revealing her exposed rear. If necromancers had indeed breached their defenses, that tent would be their prime target. To her immense relief, the guards outside remained steadfast, an embodiment of resilience. Ezad's foresight in choosing only the elite to guard the fallen shone through in this crisis. While their commitment was unyielding, Vanya caught their lingering glances. As she neared, she drew her cloak closer, a shadow of a smirk forming, silently warning them against any mention of her current state.

"Has anyone seen the General?" Vanya demanded, her voice stern and authoritative.

"Aye, Paladin Knight Anlyth, Ma'am," responded one of the guards. "General Anlyth is presently inside the Repository Tent, in consultation with a priestess. But I must note, his demeanor struck me as peculiar."

Taking a deep breath to steady herself, Vanya instructed, "You six, fall in with me," addressing the guards. "I suspect the enemy has breached our lines. Stay alert and expect the unexpected!"

The sextet of knights, battle-scarred and seasoned from myriad wars, assumed a stance of readiness, their zeal palpable. Their salutes signified their unwavering allegiance, leaving no doubt in the Paladin's mind about their preparedness for the looming conflict. Drawing her blade, Vanya braced herself and ventured into the tent. The scene within was the manifestation of her gravest apprehensions. Her beloved stood beside the vampiric nemesis, the very scourge who had once laid waste to her realm. A name, whispered in fearful tones, haunted the nightmares of Slaethian children: Aurelia. For the populace of the Kingdom of Slaethia, her name invoked a paralyzing dread, and yet, there she stood, challenging all present with her mere presence.

Vanya's heart splintered, witnessing her once valiant husband, now ensnared by the very creature they had sworn to vanquish. The man she loved, a mere shadow of the leader and partner she once knew, stirred a torrent of anguish within her. Tears blurred her vision, and her sword wavered in her grip, the weight of her grief threatening to pull her under. The monstrous seductress had ensnared him, and Vanya realized the scale of the calamity that awaited them this night. She made a solemn vow: she would ceaselessly battle the vampiric fiend until her husband's soul was liberated and he could find eternal repose in the afterlife. Facing the fiend, though fraught with peril, was her unyielding obligation; for her love, her kingdom, and her sacred oath as a Paladin.

Yet, the act of her initial capture was nothing short of a marvel. Without Craycroft's guidance and might, Vanya questioned whether a second victory was attainable. Aurelia, the vampire, met Vanya's gaze with a malicious grin, her ivory fangs glistening menacingly. Vanya's attention was momentarily captivated by the pristine priestess robes Aurelia donned. However, in an unnerving display, the robes seemed to disintegrate, giving way to a gown as dark as a moonless night. It was a garb more befitting of a lavish soirée than the blood-soaked terrain of a battlefield. Yet, as Aurelia stood there, she resembled the embodiment of a nightmare — as if her very attire was forged from the purest, darkest sorcery.

The rhythm that Vanya had been yearning for finally resounded, reverberating deeply within her soul. The unyielding cadence pulsed through the night, conjuring an ambiance thick with anticipation and unease. The drum's resonating sound was soon accompanied by a haunting scream — a banshee's war lament. This ethereal shriek cut through the night, chilling Vanya to the bone. The cry seemed endless, a melancholic anthem signifying impending doom. The symphony of the drum's rhythmic pounding, combined with the banshee's spine-tingling wail, crafted an aura of imminent peril, jolting the entire encampment to readiness. Warriors all around were roused from their inebriated haze, suddenly lucid, primed, and poised for the confrontation that awaited.

While the initial onslaught at the dungeon's remnants had taken the vampires by surprise, neither faction emerged unscathed. Both experienced grievous losses. Regrettably for Vanya's side, Aurelia had all the ingredients to forge her new legion right within that tent. The canvas shelter

was strewn with the lifeless forms of those who had once fought alongside Vanya. Although they were only a small representation of the living forces outside, they posed a threat not to be underestimated. Vanya recognized the peril all too well. Engaging with necromancers was a precarious endeavor; every ally lost on the battlefield could be reborn to turn against them, weaponized in death.

Gimona burst into the tent, her face twisted in fury as she stared at the General and the vampiric princess. “Hey now, what in the blazin’ hells is goin’ on here? General, what the devils are ye doin’ with that blood-suckin’ wench?”

Vanya's eyes darted to the vampire's gown, sensing a distinct change. The inky fabric seemed to come alive, reacting defensively to Gimona's words. It shifted and undulated, and the dress's sleeves twitched in a manner that suggested latent animosity. The sheer malice emanating from the dress was palpable, filling the tent with an oppressive and chilling energy that was neither vampiric nor necrotic. It was as if the very air had turned to lead, pregnant with imminent violence. The tension was so tangible; it felt like the charged moment right before a tempest unleashed its rage.

"Gimona, weren't you the one sounding the Wailing Drums?"

“Well now, lassie, I had a few of me lads sort it out.” But she couldn’t keep her thoughts to herself, as she muttered, “Still don’t see where that dimension ring could be on that man!”

Vanya's eyes blazed with fury as she glanced from the smiling vampire to Gimona. The unsettling stillness of the monster, coupled with her malevolent grin, was chilling to the bone. Vanya feared Gimona might have inadvertently given something away. Regardless of any potential slip, Vanya was resolute in her decision; the situation was too dire to second-guess. They had to act swiftly and decisively.

With fervent determination, Paladin Anlyth called upon her divine powers. As she uttered the words, her arm was bathed in radiant light, emanating purity and strength. "In the name of the heavens," she proclaimed, her voice echoing with resolute authority, "may sacred luminescence be my beacon!"

Having unleashed her spell, a radiant beam of divine light surged forth. Yet, it did not strike the malevolent vampire as one might expect. Instead, its target was the person Vanya held dearest: her beloved husband. The brilliant luminescence collided with him, its intensity akin to a roaring blaze, propelling him off his feet and hurtling him backward. The aftermath revealed a ghastly sight – a searing hole in his chest, the surrounding skin charred and smoking. The sheer force seemed like it could have broken his neck. Vanya was left reeling, her heart wrenching as tears streamed down her face. The man she had cherished now bore a mark of her divine wrath. The weight of her decision bore heavily upon her, but deep down, she believed it had been necessary.

Despite everything, Vanya's attention was caught by the peculiar behavior of the vampire's dress. It moved as if it had a life of its own, seemingly recoiling from the divine radiance of Vanya's magic. Preparing to unleash another spell, Vanya halted, unnerved by the intense rage evident in the vampire's eyes. Oddly, it wasn't Ezad's fate that infuriated the vampire but something else

entirely. Lost in her observations, Vanya was jolted back to the grim reality by an icy grasp on her ankle.

Glancing downward, Vanya's eyes widened in horror as what she'd assumed to be a corpse latched onto her ankle. The chilling realization hit her: the necromancer's dark magic was at work. She had been blind to the looming threat until this very moment. All around her, the tent came alive with movement, as fallen warriors began to rise, their souls enslaved to undeath, creating a nightmarish army from those who once fought valiantly.

Engulfed in a maelstrom of combat, Vanya fought back-to-back with her six knights and Gimona. The previously inert forms of the fallen were now animated in deathly rage, their vacant eyes filled with an insatiable hunger. The tent had become an arena of chaos, echoing with the cacophony of clashing blades and haunting moans. Every thrust of her sword met decaying flesh, every parry countered a deadly grasp. Encircled by this relentless undead force, Vanya's chances seemed bleak. The fetid odor of rot and the grim cacophony around her intensified the nightmarish reality she was facing. But her resolve was unwavering, her only path to salvation being her wits and her profound command over the arcane.

With a fierce resolve, Paladin Anlyth unleashed her most potent weapon. Without uttering a word, an inferno of radiant fire and blinding light spiraled from her very being, incinerating all in its wake. The protective magics of the Repository Tent groaned and wavered. The very fabric of the realm they occupied throbbed erratically, akin to a distressed heartbeat. Despite being aware of the dire ramifications, Anlyth's primary concern was containing the undead threat and ensuring that the malevolent vampire, Aurelia, met her end. The stakes were too high, and the Paladin was willing to risk it all for the greater good.

The eruption of the tent's enchantments resembled a cataclysmic detonation amidst the camp, toppling tents and hurling soldiers into the air like leaves caught in a tempest. This seismic shockwave violently collided with the fortifications of Elsternwick village, shattering them into fragments and reducing homes to mere rubble. Those cognizant of the unfolding calamity braced for the subsequent implosion, a dire consequence when a pocket dimension destabilizes. True to their worst fears, the shockwave surged back with the vehemence of a relentless storm, obliterating more structures and dragging both knights and villagers toward the epicenter of the catastrophe. The ensuing explosive cacophony reverberated across the realm, marking a moment of unparalleled destruction.

Reeling from the shock, Vanya struggled to regain her bearings, amazed that she was still among the living. Over her, the steadfast dwarf Gimona Grimmail stood vigilant, her fingers clutching a barrier medallion. The lustrous glow of the magical talisman shielded both Gimona and Vanya from the cataclysm's wrath, a solitary beacon in the midst of utter chaos. Regrettably, the gallant six knights who had fought valiantly by their side were not as fortunate. As Vanya surveyed the ravaged landscape, she clung to the hope that the malevolent vampire, Aurelia, had at last been vanquished.

To Vanya's horror, her deepest dread materialized before her eyes. Shielded by a dissipating crimson barrier, the vampire Aurelia danced amidst the debris of shattered tents, her voice lilting

to a malevolent melody that seemed otherworldly. Her movements were a grotesque parody of an elegant waltz, contorted and chilling. She caressed her shadowy gown with unnerving tenderness, seemingly celebrating the devastation that surrounded her. Witnessing this macabre display, a cold chill raced down Vanya's spine, as she watched the fiend take delight in the havoc she had wreaked.

Emerging from the ruins of the razed camp, the soldiers stood resolute, determination clear on every face. Vanya, a pillar of strength amidst the chaos, surveyed the devastation with an icy, unyielding smile. Now, her nemesis, the monstrous vampire, found herself encircled by an army united in their thirst for retribution. While the vampire's might was formidable, she wasn't invincible. Vanya was more than ready to demonstrate this fact. By the time dawn broke, she vowed to extinguish the malevolent force that was Aurelia. And from then on, the young souls of the Kingdom of Slaethia could find solace in the night, free from the specter of Aurelia's terror.

With a sorrow-laden whisper, Vanya murmured, "For you, my love," her eyes blazing with divine fervor. The vampire had robbed her of her heart's joy by slaying her husband, but vengeance would be Vanya's. And in that pivotal moment, she felt an indomitable force rising within, ensuring that no obstacle could deter her!