

BLAKE PUDDING

CHAPTER 21

Jason grunted, a deep sound born from the very core of his pain. Every nerve in his body screamed in agony, each pulse threatening to send him crashing to the ground. The searing pain radiating through his veins seemed to drain his vitality, rendering him feeble and weak. With each passing second, his limbs quaked and spasms of torment wracked his body, making it feel as if his very essence was being shredded from within. Just as the weight of his suffering was about to pull him under, an explosive force shattered the encroaching darkness, reigniting the will to fight within him!

A cataclysmic explosion erupted from the direction of the knight's camp, tearing the silent shroud of night asunder. The sheer force of the detonation carved a path through the dense woods, effortlessly breaking ancient trees and scattering debris like mere toys. Jason was caught off-guard, the violent gust threatening to knock him off his feet. But before he could succumb, a powerful pull dragged him backward, away from the devastation. As pandemonium ensued, with cries of terror echoing through the trees, a handful of silhouetted figures emerged. They stood unwavering amidst the chaos, arms raised defiantly, as if challenging the very cosmos, shielding all behind them from the brunt of the explosion's wrath.

Weakened and drained, Jason found himself sprawled on the ground. Suddenly, a hand reached out towards him, its fingers tipped with razor-sharp talons. Gentle but menacing, the hand proffered a vial filled with a luminescent blue potion. Lifting his eyes, Jason was met with the hauntingly beautiful gaze of Hikari, the silver-haired feline enchantress.

"Your courage in volunteering to rescue the prisoners has not gone unnoticed, Champion," Hikari purred, presenting the blue vial with a teasing smirk.

"Volunteering?" Jason retorted with disbelief, grabbing the vial from Hikari's grasp. "Piss off!"

A sinister silhouette abruptly took its place next to the feline woman, dipping into a deep bow of respect. Jason gave the man a cursory glance, dismissing him as just another minion in their little horde of escapees.

"Lady Hikari," the figure intoned urgently, "we have unidentified entities approaching from the west."



Aurelia spun, swayed, and danced with wild glee. Her fingers roamed over my form with reckless abandon, as if the soldiers rising from the wreckage of the encampment were not even there. It may have appeared that she was fondling herself over her dress to them. But in truth, she was fondling herself and me! Aurelia was lost in her own world of pleasure. In return, my tendrils caressed her every curve, heedless of the onlookers. We continued our waltz, in full view of the

audience, despite my growing unease as more and more knights emerged from the wreckage. I had already learned that I was no match for Anlyth's holy magic, and even a glancing blow was enough to send me reeling in agony. But I was grateful for Aurelia's protection as she shielded me from the elf's last devastating spell, which reduced the tent to ashes with the force of a miniature Little Boy detonating.

I couldn't help but feel a twinge of admiration as I glanced at the elf who had caused such destruction. However, as I stared at the paladin, I couldn't help but smile. Seeing her tears, as she watched in agony as Olin pushed aside some rubble and rose to his feet with a gaping wound in his chest, was priceless! It was a fitting punishment for someone who had taken my kid—I mean my potential prey's life!

“No, we didn't.”

“Shut up. Yes, we did!”

The two halves of my soul stopped bickering as Aurelia approached Olin and slid her hands down his pants. To say I was a bit horrorstruck was an understatement when she grasped his manhood, although so was Anlyth.

“Umm...”

“What's she doing?”

At the sight, Anlyth suddenly screamed out, **“I'LL KILL YOU!”**

Aurelia, for her part, only smiled with that dark and tantalizing grin that sent a quiver of delight coursing through me. She pulled out – a golden circular ring. Initially, it appeared too small for her wrist, but as she began to slide it on, it miraculously expanded to fit her perfectly.

“Dang, Olin's packing!”

“No kidding!”

With a fierce battle cry, Anlyth let out a deafening scream, her voice resonating like a thunderclap, **“BY THE GRACE OF THE GODS, LET MY HOLY LIGHT BE MY GUIDE!”**

As Anlyth let out a heart-wrenching scream, she unleashed a relentless torrent of holy light, a turbulent river of divine might poised to turn all in its wake to mere cinders. But Aurelia, with a grace that belied the situation, brushed the divine onslaught aside, treating it as nothing more than a bothersome gnat. I, however, was not so fortunate. The sacred onslaught scorched me, sending tendrils of agonizing pain throughout my being. The anguish I felt was intense, yet it was overshadowed by the ferocity evident on Aurelia's face. Every inch of her demeanor screamed of impending vengeance, all directed at Anlyth for the audacity to harm me. But before Aurelia could unleash her pent-up wrath, she found herself encircled by a squadron of knights, their weapons drawn, their intent clear and deadly.

As Aurelia faced her opponents, the initial assault came from a figure clad in the gleaming armor of a knight. With determination in his eyes, he aimed a ferocious overhead blow at her. Almost

simultaneously, another warrior lunged at her, his blade seeking her heart with deadly intent. Yet, Aurelia's reflexes defied belief. She sidestepped the overhead swing and gracefully pivoted away from the thrust, avoiding both strikes with ease. With the elegance and danger of a wildcat, she retaliated, her razor-sharp claws slicing through the first knight's armor as if it were parchment, inflicting a deep wound. For the second, she executed a powerful kick that struck his kneecap, producing a horrific crunch, causing him to crumple in pain. While they were distracted by Aurelia's prowess, I seized the moment. My tentacles burst forth from her shadow, coiling and striking, showing no mercy to the audacious foes before us.

"I'll stick to physical attacks, while you stick to magic," I asserted to myself.

"But Circe kicked us out of the system, we can't use any of our skills!"

"We've still got a couple spells we can use without the system."

"Oh yeah!"

The knights swarmed us with unyielding fury. Arrows were let loose, yet Aurelia deftly dodged or brushed them aside effortlessly. Mystical assaults followed, with streaks of lightning and fiery orbs launched our way. However, the pulsating red barrier surrounding Aurelia absorbed every magical blow, forcing the knights to resort to traditional combat techniques. While some were easily felled by a singular, devastating hit, a few showed commendable resilience, getting back on their feet and charging again and again. On another front, Olin unleashed his wrath, a storm of punches and kicks tearing through the ranks, but he was soon overwhelmed by sheer numbers.

Despite unleashing the full might of my arsenal, the knights resiliently got back to their feet, suggesting the presence of healers among them, which made my onslaught feel like an exercise in futility. My tentacles lashed out in desperate abandon, constricting knights by the throat and hoisting them into the air, only to have my grip broken with every blade's strike. Some were momentarily incapacitated as I thrust tentacles down their throats, but even these were rapidly severed. While my Corrosive and Venomous touch incapacitated a few, and my Paralysis rendered others immobile, the momentum of the battle still shifted against us. From beneath Aurelia, a deathly miasma seeped out. A black cloud imbued with Blight, interspersed with deadly purple Necrotic Flames. Even the acidic yellow haze of her Breath and random spurts of Acid Spit couldn't deter the knights' relentless advance.

Aurelia serenaded the battleground with a haunting tune, effortlessly dispatching soldiers one after another. Yet, beneath the façade, her eyes betrayed a hint of exhaustion. The most formidable adversaries were the scarcely clad warriors—quite an unanticipated sight. Their defenses varied; some boasted ethereal barriers that flickered upon impact, while others were endowed with skin rivaling the durability of metal. It was notable that attire—or the lack thereof—was not limited by gender, as both male and female warriors donned such minimalistic garments. Their tenacity was admirable, but my intention was clear: their survival stood in opposition to our objectives.

Aurelia, ever graceful in her combat, now portrayed signs of exhaustion, her movements weighed down by the incessant barrage from the knights. Though her expertise was evident, the relentless onslaught seemed to push her to her limits. As imminent danger approached in the form of a

knight's blade aiming for her, I reflexively contracted around her midsection, forcing her into a stooped position and narrowly evading the lethal cut. Capitalizing on this evasion, I retaliated with a surge of Necrotic Flame, reducing the knight's visage to ashes. Observing her, even in her fatigue, her eyes radiated an unwavering determination, suggesting a deeper intent within her actions.

The onslaught momentarily ceased as the soldiers strategically shifted to encircle us, cunningly staying just out of my tentacle's reach. Their positioning was a taunt, a challenge that I couldn't answer. Recognizing the dwarf woman from our previous encounter in the deep roads and Anlyth beside her, my hopes dwindled. Memories of the tragic loss of Wartie due to the elf paladin's actions flooded my thoughts. My anticipation of imminent doom grew, and the prospect of Aurelia's recapture or worse, her demise, became increasingly tangible. Yet, curiously, in the depths of Aurelia's eyes, there remained an inexplicable spark of anticipation.

"Would ye look at what we have here? It's the little lady herself, back in our clutches once more," the dwarf sneered.

"It's apparent to me we don't have the means to restrain her," Anlyth declared.

Anlyth moved forward, her sword at the ready, with her light cloak billowing, revealing its underside. A sudden commotion disrupted the knights' ranks as two amongst them unexpectedly collapsed, victims of an invisible adversary. Their collective attention diverged from Aurelia, as they endeavored to pinpoint the origin of this unforeseen assault. Anlyth, with unwavering intent, continued her advance, her sword poised to strike. Yet, she found herself compelled to divert her planned blow, parrying an ethereal blade that emerged from the void, targeting her throat.

"Oh shit," Jason uttered, disappearing into the void just as the dwarf woman launched her attack in his direction.

The abrupt emergence and vanishing of Jason sent shockwaves of astonishment and bewilderment through the surviving knights. Although the devastation wrought by the explosion and Aurelia's assault was palpable, a formidable number of knights remained on their feet. The battlefield was strewn with their deceased brethren. Amidst this chaos, Aurelia's harmonious laughter resonated, serving as a haunting prelude to the reanimation of the fallen as undead beings. The subsequent events can only be described as sheer pandemonium.

Despite the knights being distracted by the reanimated corpses of their comrades, both the dwarf and the elf remained fixated on Aurelia, and by association, on me—regardless of their awareness of my true nature. I couldn't shake the feeling of being in over my head with the imminent confrontation. As formidable as Aurelia had proven herself to be, it was clear, both alarmingly and intriguingly, that she was nearing her limits.

"*Any ideas?*" I asked myself.

"*Nope,*" was my only reply.

"..."

“I apologize, my beloved, but you must flee without me,” Aurelia whispered, before hurling herself back into the fray.

“The hell with that!”

“Damn straight!”

Anlyth charged, her sword targeting Aurelia. However, Aurelia deftly dodged the attempt. The dwarf took a different approach, unleashing a formidable punch to Aurelia’s side. Reacting swiftly, I adjusted my form to cushion the impact. The force was like a lightning bolt, catapulting Aurelia backward. Even with the shock rattling my senses, she persisted, battling against the odds. The dwarf didn’t let up, barraging us with punches that each reverberated with pain.

The dwarf’s punishing blow was immediately followed by the elf’s magic. Instead of charging forth, she maintained her distance, hand aloft as if orchestrating some impending doom. A radiant surge of energy burst forth, finding its mark on Aurelia before she could mount a defense or parry. The sheer force of the arcane onslaught sent us skidding across the warzone, amidst soldiers and risen dead alike. Through the barrage, Aurelia’s resilience shone, but even she had limits. My essence felt as if it was being scorched from existence. I couldn’t discern if the pain was from losing a part of myself, but the aftermath was clear: a trail of charred, black gelatinous residue marked our path, remnants of me.

Desperation clawed at me, prompting me to draw on every scrap of ambient mana around, trying to maintain my form through sheer will and magic. However, my talent with magic without the system’s aid was still too limited, and the onslaughts had been too much, too furious, and soon enough, I felt the dread of my eminent death. Though, it was not my death that I feared, but it rather, I was terrified of losing Aurelia. I couldn’t pinpoint the exact reason for my deep attachment to her or why she felt indispensable to me. Call it fate, destiny, love, lust, or perhaps even naivety, all I knew was that a reality without her was unimaginable.



Gimona reveled in the midst of the most exhilarating battle she’d ever experienced. True, using an army to wear down a vampire before confronting her directly might not scream “honor.” But right now, with the legendary Aurelia in front of her, winning was the name of the game. Every time Aurelia tried to dodge, her ever-adaptive dress took the hits, shifting and changing to protect its wearer. Gimona had never witnessed such a piece of enchanted attire in her life. But with Anlyth’s continuous magical barrage, what was once a grand, flowing dress now resembled a thin nightgown. Gimona smirked, thinking it wouldn’t be much longer until Aurelia would be left in nothing but the kind of lingerie one might find in the city’s seedier establishments.

The battlefield was a frenzy of motion and magic, with Aurelia masterfully controlling the undead and casting spell after spell. However, what caught Gimona’s attention was the strange magic emanating from the dress: a cocktail of poisons, corrosive acids, and enigmatic purple flames. But to Gimona, a hardened dwarf warrior, such low-tier magical antics were hardly a concern. Most knights would’ve been severely challenged, but not her. Yet, the real nuisance was that teleporting, sharp-toothed menace who darted in and out of the knightly ranks, reducing their numbers with

each appearance. Gimona could almost taste the creature's dwindling energy reserves, which fueled her anticipation. The endgame was in sight. Soon, the undead would be no more, and Aurelia would meet her fate.

Gimona took every ounce of her battle-hardened might and focused it upon the deteriorating form of Aurelia. Each blow, infused with her dwarven magic, brought with it the satisfying sound of snapping bones. Her spirit soared as she prepared her ultimate strike, summoning her deepest reserves of magical energy into her fist. As it slammed into the vampire's midsection, Aurelia was sent careening, the ground beneath her breaking apart in her wake. She was bleeding profusely, not healing. The telltale sign of a vampire in dire need of sustenance.

With victory seemingly within grasp, Gimona vaulted into the air, her entire body intent on delivering a death blow akin to the explosion of a mana crystal. But victory was snatched away in the blink of an eye. An overwhelming force, like the rupture of reality itself, swept across the battlefield, disrupting her descent. Both knights and undead were cast aside in chaotic fashion.

Gimona regained her footing, her triumphant mood now replaced with dread. Her gaze was drawn to the treeline, where an imposing new threat had emerged. An army unlike any other, led by an age-worn Warg, holding a staff that seemed to throb with immense magical power.



Death hovered like a vulture, waiting for me to give in. But then, from the treeline, a sliver of hope appeared. There stood an army, with a warg at the forefront who looked like he'd jumped straight out of some old monster flick. This geezer of a warg, with deep wrinkles, a thick beard, and eyes that seemed to see right through you, was an intimidating sight. The staff he held seemed more alive than the knights around me, its energy fizzling with a light show that'd put a disco ball to shame. As powerful as he seemed, I felt a smidgen of fear creeping in.

However, seeing the very soldiers that nearly slain me now distracted and shaken by this new threat, I felt a resurgence of hope. Now, the trick was to hustle and get Aurelia, with all her allure, over to the side of these unexpected saviors.

As the soldiers were entranced by the approaching dungeon forces, Aurelia seized her moment. In a swift and lethal gesture, she sank her fangs deep into the exposed neck of a distracted barbarian, drawing out the very essence of life. Within moments, her once wounded physique rejuvenated, appearing as though she had just stepped out of a luxurious spa. The only imperfection in her radiant form was me – a ragged and almost formless black goo, desperately clinging to her.

I was a hot mess, both literally and figuratively. Beaten, battered, torn, and burned, I was left reeling as I clung to Aurelia's flesh. The battle had taken a toll on me, reducing me to a mere shadow of my former self. My survival depended on feeding to regain my mass, but I was surrounded by enemies eager to take down the stunning vampire I was attached to. Fighting was not an option without replenishing my strength. Still, unlike the beautiful bloodsucker, I doubted I could consume enough bodies in time to survive the army of soldiers that surrounded us. And with the feast Aurelia had just indulged in, the enemy was no longer in a state of stunned disbelief.

The elf dude—or no, wait, elf woman, Anlyth—(seriously, those biceps and jawline are more misleading than a map drawn by a drunk goblin. I mean, not *that* bad, but distinguishing elf genders, especially when they're decked out in armor? That's a challenge.) was on top of her game, barking orders with an urgency. Her rebellious cloak was having its own little sideshow, offering glimpses of her well-toned backside and that... shall we say, “overgrown” lawn she proudly flaunted. Meanwhile, she was marshaling her troops, prepping them to fend off Chieftain Hensley and his assembly of dungeon oddballs.

The warg, looking like it took styling cues from the darkest of horror films, was keeping a hawk-eye on the unfolding drama. And Anlyth? She was orchestrating a shield wall around Aurelia—sort of like penning in a pet that's been too curious with the house plants.

Just then, Jason shimmered into existence right next to us, sending my already frayed nerves into a new spiral of alarm. I felt a sudden urge to lash out, even though I was in no condition to fight. But Aurelia, ever the composed one, clearly recognized him. Sporting a mischievous grin that showcased those menacing, razor-sharp teeth, Jason reached out his hand towards Aurelia.

“Umm, that's our woman!”

“Hands off, we had dibs first,” we attempted to blurt out, but in truth, I didn't have the energy to muster the words.

Jason's arrival sent shockwaves through the soldiers surrounding us, and they surged forward with renewed determination. I was pretty sure Aurelia could handle another round, but me? Eh, not so much. Jason announced with a grin that was way too pleased with himself (seriously, could he be any cheesier?), “Come with me if you want to live!”

“Do you think our new mom will let us kill him...again?”

“We can only hope.”

Aurelia seized Jason's hand, just as the knights, weapons at the ready, lunged for us. Instantly, our surroundings morphed into a whirlwind of shadow. Though we hadn't moved, everything was drenched in a black mist, the world rendered in monochrome hues. Through this darkened realm, Jason gripped Aurelia's hand, guiding us forward.

“Hold on tight, babe,” Jason said with a wink, his arrogance evident. “We need to make it to the tree line before my spell fades. Time's not on our side, so hustle or get left in the dust.”

“Oh, he did not just call her babe!”

“I don't care what mom says. He's so dead!”

As I clung to Aurelia, I watched in awe as she and Jason sprinted past the ghostly figures of soldiers and knights, who seemed to be made of nothing more than black smoke. The thick, murky fog surrounding us lent the scene a dreamlike quality, as if we were running through a surreal, alternate world. The strange stillness of the shadow realm only added to its eerie atmosphere, making our escape feel like a treacherous journey, despite everything being nothing more than mist. The

crowning jewel of this strange land was the massive black hole that loomed above us, casting its event horizon as the only light source in this bizarre world.

“The next time we kill him, absorb better steal this ability, or I’ll be pissed.”

“No kidding!”

In mere moments we found ourselves standing beside a grizzled silhouette of an old werewolf made of smoke. Just like that, light and color flooded back into the world. I was surprised to see that the Chieftain seemed unfazed by our sudden appearance beside him. He stood there, staring at the enemy forces with a steely gaze, not batting an eye.

One of my halves conjured up Aurelia’s black and red-trimmed robe to drape over her. The robe manifested perfectly around our vampire. Though I’d like to boast about my skills, this was more due to luck than expertise. But hey, no one had to know that. While I gave back her robe, I was holding onto a particular lacy article of clothing as my little trophy. I reluctantly began to slither down Aurelia’s leg, attempting to reshape myself into my human form, but my mass was just too scant.

“Ha! You look like a fucking toddler!” Jason laughed.

I looked down and let out a groan of frustration. Jason was wrong. I was no toddler. I was more like an infant, not even reaching Aurelia’s knees. *“This is humiliating,”* I muttered aloud by mistake, which didn’t help stop Jason’s fit of laughter.

“We still have those corpses stashed away inside the void.”

“Only that succubus’s body is left. We devoured the other bodies during the fight to replenish our mass,” I reminded myself.

“No, we already used Absorb on her,” I corrected myself, much to my frustration.

Before I could even kick off a tantrum worthy of a toddler (and really, who wants to see that from a Black Pudding?), the bewitching vampire lifted me up and cradled me. I was engulfed in a swirl of emotions—partly humiliated, yet also strangely comforted as I nestled closer to her cold embrace. Even amidst the battlefield’s pandemonium, she looked done with all the action, her gaze more fixated on the ancient warg and his mismatched band of ex-beasties. In an almost playful gesture, she handed me the golden ring she wore as a bracelet. Not exactly a pacifier, but I gladly tucked it into my void, earning a raised eyebrow from her and a chuckle from me. (Apparently, she doesn’t know that I have my own dimensional storage; probably thinks I stuck it within my goo). But even as I basked in the coolness, there was this irksome nudge in the recesses of my mind, like I’d overlooked something pivotal...