

BLAKE PUDDING

CHAPTER 26

THE BREACH

Vanya's head thudded against the dark, moisture-laden wood of the drop pod, also known as an Airlight Pod, as her muscles braced for what lay ahead. An earsplitting blast shook her to the core, marking the start of the airships' arcane bombardment. The nauseating smell of vomit filled the air, revealing the nervousness of the novice squires, who were about to engage in both lethal and magical combat for the first time.

Beneath them lay the Grotto of the Betrayed, a legendary dungeon shrouded in mystery and swallowed by the overgrown forest. Its remnants, a once-mighty fortress, now lay in ruin. Vanya had skillfully navigated the treacherous subterranean passages to infiltrate the dungeon and seize its core—an immense treasure for her kingdom. Dungeon cores were a rare commodity. The Kingdom of Slaethia possessed a mere two. Claiming a third would have been a monumental victory.

However, fate had other plans. The vile Aurelia recaptured the pilfered core and claimed the life of Vanya's cherished husband, General Ezad Anlyth. Driven by fury and the desire for retribution, Vanya volunteered to join the vanguard in the first wave of Airlight Pods, despite the disapproval of her comrades Gimona and Craycroft. Choosing to bide their time, they remained aboard the Swift Sentinel, accompanied by High Priest Neizar.

“Ah, sure, I do be lovin' this part!” Einarr, one of the two Champions aboard, declared with a grand smile, twinkling amidst his impressive red beard. His enthusiasm drew a few chuckles from the seasoned knights around him.

Observing Vanya's stern visage, Orlaith tried to offer comfort. “Pay him no heed, Paladin Anlyth. He's always had a penchant for the excitement of battle,” Orlaith said, exhaling. Her presence felt intense, like sitting near a dragon radiating an aura of fire magic.

Glancing at the other Champion, Vanya admitted, “Normally, I'd share Champion Einarr's enthusiasm, but this battle holds a deeply personal significance for me.”

The resounding snap of metallic fasteners filled the pod as they detached from the airship. Vanya's stomach lurched violently, and she felt the gut-wrenching sensation of freefall, plunging her into a maelstrom of adrenaline-fueled chaos. As they hurtled toward the ground and the menacing creatures below, Vanya steeled herself for the grueling task ahead, eliminating the vampire responsible for her lover's demise. The wooden frame around her creaked and groaned under the strain of their descent.

As they approached their target, Vanya sensed a magical barrier enveloping the ruins below. She felt the essence of several Airlight Pods wink out of existence, presumably having collided with

the magical shield. However, numerous other pods managed to breach the defense in time. *“Those below are in for quite the surprise,”* Vanya thought, casting a glance at Einarr and Orraith, the two Champions sharing her pod. Stretching her magical senses further, she detected Galen—the most formidable among them—had already descended and was waiting on the surface, poised for the impending clash.

The moment they touched down, a faint trace of magic activated the enchantments on the front door, blasting it open. Beyond it lay a battlefield in chaos. Undead creatures lunged into the pod, snapping and biting at Vanya. Einarr swung his hammer down, crushing a zombie’s skull, while she thrust her sword through the empty eye socket of a skeleton. All around them, soldiers poured out of the few pods that had successfully breached the barrier, only to be immediately engulfed by the attacking abominations.



The barrier activated the moment I stepped away from the Dungeon Core, my thoughts whirling as though influenced by the very air around me. Aurelia took the reins, skillfully bending the core to her will to initiate the creation of our escape portal. I observed her handiwork with a soft smile, resting my chin on her shoulder. My arms naturally found their way around her waist, my chest pressed against her back, as if drawn by some magnetic force that even I barely understood.

“Umm, you have forgotten to reform your face,” Sophia teased.

“I still can’t tell if I like that one, or want to kill her,” I thought to myself.

“Perhaps a combination of the two?” my mind answered back.

I let go of Aurelia, my lips forming a pout, and allowed my Spider Silk to weave over my viscous form. I focused on covering my entire body except for the section that constituted my dress. The sensation of revealing my darker self was thrilling, and I admired how it looked. To anyone observing, my attire could be mistaken for a sentient being from the darkest corners of the abyss—a tar-like entity hungry to engulf them. Although my preference leaned towards the rich, decayed flavors of rotting meat, I wasn’t averse to feasting on the living, especially their succulent innards. But I digress. I reformed my ivory silk face and skin and, once done, placed my cheek back against the nape of Aurelia’s neck. As she worked, I reveled in the peaceful moment, my darker urges momentarily stilled.

“I’ve just realized, each time you recreate that form of yours, there are always some subtle or significant changes. It could be the length of your hair, the style of your dress, or even the details of your facial features. Watching the transformation is truly fascinating,” Sophia remarked.

Ah, the urge to eliminate them all was strong, but I knew better than to touch these former adversaries, for fear of angering my foster mother. Still, I couldn’t help but ponder: would removing a limb or taking a kidney be considered acceptable? After all, it’s not the same as killing them, is it?

The portal began to form, tiny sparks of light darting through the air. A small opening appeared, no bigger than a pocket mirror, making it clear that expanding it to fit an average-sized person

would take some effort. While I was confident in my own ability to pass through, leaving Aurelia behind was out of the question. The notion of temporarily storing her in my Void flitted across my mind, but I quickly rejected it, unwilling to risk her well-being. I was in dire need of a test subject. To add to the complexity of the situation, the mild discomfort in my stomach had escalated into agonizing cramps. A wave of shouting and frenzied voices filled the room, pulling my attention away from the portal and, more critically, from Aurelia. I shifted my focus toward the unfolding commotion.

Amid the clamor, a chilling phrase surfaced, reverberating through the chamber like a grim harbinger, “Knights have breached the barrier!”

My heart surged with a complex blend of excitement and malevolence, as if a tantalizing opportunity had presented itself, beckoning me to indulge my darkest desires. I knew that I stood no chance against them in an open fight, but who said the rules couldn’t be bent? More importantly, I needed to buy as much time as possible for Aurelia. It was clear that daylight weakened her, and I was resolute in my commitment to protect her at all costs. Strangely, neither of my two souls could identify the root of our unwavering loyalty to her. True, in my previous life, I’d had relationships with numerous women and a few men. Yet aside from a few disastrous exceptions, my aspirations never extended beyond preparing them breakfast and seeing them out the door, and even that was an overgenerous rarity on my part. Emotional attachment was an anathema to me; it felt like an unbearable weight when there were far more diverting matters to attend to. And yet, here I stood, ready to lay down my life for Aurelia.

Feeling a blend of amusement and irritation rise within me, I metaphorically took a deep breath—lungs being irrelevant in my case. Detaching myself from Aurelia, I knew she was too engrossed in crafting the portal to restrain me. The din of frightened voices and shouts abruptly fell silent; every gaze shifted to me as I began to leave the Grand Hall. Yet, someone I deemed inconsequential—an unfamiliar face—had the gall to obstruct my way.

A diminutive boy with green-hued skin and cheeks wet from tears stammered, “Mummy, please don’t go.” My mind churned in confusion, trying to identify who this child was. Had our paths crossed before?

“*Who the hell is this kid?*” I thought, perplexed.

“*I have no idea,*” my other half mentally replied, a hint of amusement coloring our internal tone. “*Don’t recognize him at all.*”

“*Did he just call us ‘mummy’?*”

The goblin kid bore a slight resemblance to Wartie, although he was notably wart-free and a bit taller. Despite that, he didn’t occupy my thoughts for long. I patted his head reassuringly as I walked past him, giving no second thoughts to his maternal plea. The notion of being anyone’s mother was utterly foreign to me. My attention snapped back to the knights I was intent on confronting, a thought that filled my mouth with a corrosive and venomous sense of anticipation.

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“Squire, to me!” a knight called out, decapitating a charging skeleton with a swift swing of his sword.

Lyric, in his fourth year as a squire, had already shown promise—not just of becoming a knight, but potentially a paladin. However, nothing could have prepared him for the scene unfolding before him. A zombie, its face half-rotted away, lunged through the air directly at him. Lyric instinctively raised his mithril shield, and the undead creature slammed against it, clawing and gnawing with frenetic desperation. Feeling his back leg begin to buckle under the weight, Lyric summoned a surge of fierce determination. With a swift, overhead swing of his mace, he shattered the zombie’s skull, sending it tumbling away from him in a broken heap.

“Sir Drin,” Lyric shouted over the cacophony of battle, “We should move toward the champions for support!”

“Nonsense!” Sir Drin bellowed in response, cleaving another undead creature in two. “Glory comes to those who forge their own path forward!”

Around Lyric, several fellow knights and their squires who had descended before the barrier was raised cheered in unison, galvanized by Sir Drin’s rallying cry. However, Lyric himself felt a deep urge to fall back to where the champions had landed, as they were effortlessly cutting through the undead horde like a hot knife through butter. Taking a deep breath and landing another swing of his mace to clear the immediate threats, Lyric glanced toward Sir Drin to nod in agreement. But the knight was already engrossed in hacking down skeletons and zombies as though they were mere logs to be split.

“Up ahead! That’s the entrance,” Sir Drin shouted, pressing forward in that direction with unwavering focus.

Caught in a moment of distraction as he watched the champions forge their own entrance into the ruins, Lyric was suddenly bowled over by a skeleton. The creature, adorned with bits of rotting flesh hanging from its bones like half-eaten ribs, knocked him onto his back. Scrambling to cover himself with his shield, Lyric found it was too late. The skeleton’s bony foot stomped down on the shield, pinning it and his left arm underneath. As he braced himself for what he thought would be the end, a shining sword burst through the skeleton’s skull, scattering bone fragments in all directions. Looking past the collapsing remains, Lyric saw Sir Drin standing there, his expression a mix of concentration and annoyance as he continued to cut down the approaching undead.

“On your feet, lad!” Sir Drin bellowed, executing a sweeping arc with his sword that bisected two approaching undead.

Lyric scrambled to his feet, swiftly smashing an approaching undead centipede-like creature with his shield before finishing it off with a solid strike from his mace. Taking a deep breath, he pressed onward, following his comrades into the ruins as they continued to hack, slash, and bludgeon their way through the relentless undead horde.

“I thought the soldiers from the other camp had already raided this place. Why are there so many undead?” another squire wondered aloud. With youthful, elven features, she caught Lyric’s attention, appearing a few years too young to be embroiled in such a battle.

“You have to take down the necromancer who’s controlling these undead if you want to put an end to them for good. The earlier raid did wipe out a lot, but once the vampire leading this nest fled, most of the undead fell apart, their source of power cut off,” another knight explained to the youthful squire.

“So, who’s commanding these ones?” the squire inquired as she thrust her spear through a zombie’s jaw, the tip emerging from the base of its skull.

“The Destroyer,” Lyric whispered, reluctant to utter her name within these accursed walls. Though he feared her, she had acquired many titles over the years: Slaughterer of Slaethia, Butcher of the Innocent, Horror of the Night. No matter the epithet, she was universally feared, and only she could command such a multitude of undead—perhaps even surpassing the infamous Lord Demidicus, known for his cruelty.

“Aurelia,” the knight replied to his young squire, seemingly unaware of Lyric’s whispered comment. “Be prepared, lass; not many of us may live to see tomorrow’s light,” he cautioned, even as he deftly kicked three undead creatures off his glaive.

The small group of knights and squires, bolstered by a handful of paladins and mages, steadily advanced through the ruins. Though the comforting rays of the sun had long since given way to darkness, they were more than a match for the relentless waves of undead that assailed them. While a few squires and even a mage were occasionally overwhelmed, swift assistance and healing spells from the paladins quickly restored them. Yet, as they delved deeper, an oppressive darkness—darker than any black—seemed to stalk them. Though they couldn’t put it into words, they all felt the unnerving sensation of being watched. This indescribable feeling seemed to make their weapons tremble just a bit more as they thrust their blades into the ceaseless tide of undead.

“What’s this black sludge?” a third squire exclaimed, stomping his foot on the ground for emphasis. Lyric observed how the viscous substance clung to the squire’s boot, stretching like taffy before finally releasing its hold with each step.

Sir Drin quickly surveyed the situation and roared out a warning to the group, “Hold off on any fire-based magic or anything that could ignite this substance! It’s likely flammable, and we can’t afford to spring a fire trap!”

Lyric observed that two of the mages and even the paladins hesitated to use their magic. For the paladins, the caution was particularly notable; their holy magic had the additional effect of setting unholy creations ablaze. It didn’t take long for Lyric to realize that the intensity of the undead attacks increased when deprived of the support from magical spells.

“Is this sludge in every corridor, or is it actually following us?” the youthful squire wondered aloud.

It’s following us,” Sir Drin growled.

Fending off a zombie and a skeleton with his shield, Lyric followed up with a mace strike aimed at the knee of a lizardman zombie whose scaled skin had toughened to the texture of hard leather. Despite his blow, the lizardman lunged with its elongated jaw at Lyric's head. With a swift sidestep, Lyric narrowly avoided the snapping maw. Unfortunately, due to the close proximity, he couldn't muster enough force to swing his mace through the undead creature's leathery hide. The lizardman fixed its lifeless eyes on Lyric, who braced for the impending attack. Just as the undead creature lunged forward to sink its teeth into Lyric's head, a spear pierced its skull, effortlessly penetrating the tough hide.

Lyric turned to thank the young squire who had saved his life, but his words were cut short when a black tentacle shot out from the darkness, seizing the squire by the neck. There wasn't even time for a scream; her neck was snapped and her body yanked back into the shadows before Lyric could react. Fueled by a surge of anger, he charged forward, his footsteps feeling increasingly heavy as they sank into the sticky sludge beneath him. He reached the pillar he believed her body had been pulled behind, but as he peered around it, he found neither body nor tentacle—only the consuming darkness and the persistent layer of sludge at his feet. Worst of all, it seemed he was the only one who had witnessed the event, as the rest of the group continued to battle the relentless waves of undead, oblivious to the young squire's grim fate.

Whirling around, Lyric spotted another tentacle on the opposite side of the corridor, this time targeting a mage at the back of the group. Flanked by two paladins, the gnome caster was oblivious to the impending danger. The tentacle struck swiftly, snapping the gnome's neck in an instant before dragging the lifeless body into the shadows. Shockingly, the elf and human paladins beside him remained unaware, even though the gruesome event had occurred just a meter and a half below them and behind their backs.

“Something's ambushing us from the shadows!” Lyric shouted, his voice tinged with urgency.

“Steady yourself, lad,” Sir Drin commanded, effortlessly fending off a cluster of undead with a series of graceful slashes. “We may be surrounded, but we've got this under control.” He tried to instill some confidence as they steadily advanced deeper into the ruins, the only source of light being a dim blue orb that floated above one of the elven mages.

Fear pervaded Lyric's thoughts as he tried to keep an eye out for the next tentacle attack. But the undead were relentless, giving him no room to focus on anything but the immediate threat in front of him. Forced to continue wielding his mace and shield against the surging wave of skeletons and rotting corpses, Lyric nonetheless remained vigilant, his eyes darting to the ominous shadows whenever he could spare a moment.

“Justicar? Justicar Aelios,” the elven mage with the floating orb called out, spinning in all directions to locate her paladin counterpart. But Lyric already knew what she would find: only darkness and shadows.

“Stay focused, lad,” Sir Drin urged, as he relentlessly drove his sword through the advancing undead.

Suddenly, the corridor plunged into pitch blackness, eliciting a scream from the elven caster. “My mage light! Something’s shattered out my mage light!”

Lyric swung his mace frantically as darkness enveloped them, but to his horror rather than relief, his mace met only air. It was as if the undead had vanished—or worse, pulled back to lie in ambush. Though not a skilled mage by any means, Lyric knew a few spells. They were mostly parlor tricks he used to entertain fellow squires in the barracks, but among them was a minor flame spell. As he continued to swing his weapon ineffectively through the dark, he reached inward to tap into his latent magical abilities. But hesitation seized him. Taking another squelching step on the sticky ground, he reconsidered lighting up the spell; he didn’t want to risk igniting the potentially flammable sludge beneath them. Some fates, he concluded, were worse than others.

“Sir Drin, what do we do now? Can the mage cast another mage light?” Lyric called out into the stifling darkness. Silence was his only answer. “Sir Drin!” he shouted again, his voice tinged with a rising sense of panic. Still, only the oppressive silence met his ears. “Sir Drin? Hello?” he hesitated, gripping his mace tightly. “Anyone?” he finally asked, his voice tinged with desperation. Yet once more, silence reigned, leaving Lyric isolated in the ominous dark.

A soft, whimsical laughter echoed through the darkness, sending a shiver down Lyric’s spine. To his great shame, he lost control of his bowels. “I should let him live,” a voice mused mysteriously in the void. “Why would I want to do that?” the same voice countered, its tone tinged with malevolence. “Because we want my legend to grow,” she answered herself. “Are we concerned about our image?” the voice cooed, laden with a lustful undertone. “No, it’s about reputation,” she clarified. “Ah, yes, I understand now,” she mused. “Dead men tell no tales. I get it. But survivors should also bear a mark,” her voice sang with sadistic delight.

In a state of panic, Lyric frantically swung his mace around, repeatedly shouting, “Sir Drin! Sir Drin!”

Nothing made sense to him; his thoughts kept circling back to The Destroyer. Yet he was too frightened to even utter her name, especially as a woman’s voice continued to cackle ominously from all directions. Startled, he jumped when his back suddenly made contact with a wall. To his horror, even the wall was coated in the mysterious, sticky sludge. Still, Lyric remained pressed against it, quivering behind his shield while holding his mace out before him, prepared to swing at whatever nightmare lurked in the encompassing darkness.

Lyric’s panic surged anew as he felt something constrict around his ankle like a viper. In an instant, he swung his mace down at his own leg. Almost simultaneously, something snaked around him from behind, wrapping around his limbs, waist, and neck, effectively immobilizing him. Despite his terror, he strained to make sense of the situation; he had been so sure that only a stone wall had been behind him. He froze, every ounce of fight draining from him as a chilling realization wormed its way into his mind. “The sludge,” he whispered, just before even his mouth was constricted by what could only be another tentacle.

As he stiffened, his shield and mace clattering to the ground, Lyric dropped to his knees. In his left ear, he heard haunting yet beautiful laughter. In his right ear, soft breathing sounded, as if struggling to hold back some dark, cardinal desire. “We. Are. Blake,” she cooed into his right ear, while that same voice in his left ear snickered. In that disorienting moment, the tentacles that had been constricting him dissolved abruptly, transforming into a fluid that enveloped his entire body like a tidal wave.

Freed from the tentacles yet coated in the sludge, Lyric found himself with slightly more mobility than he had a moment ago. In a state of desperate panic, he clawed at his face, attempting to remove the substance that was slowly seeping into his nose and mouth, cutting off his airflow. His attempts to cry out only accelerated the sludge’s intrusion into his throat. Just when he thought he was going to suffocate, a new sensation emerged: a burning that spread across his skin and seared his mouth and throat. It wasn’t the burning of fire, he realized, but the corrosive burn of acid. His frantic clawing intensified as he desperately tried to remove the sludge, but his efforts were futile.

“Not too much, we only want to leave a mark,” the woman’s voice cautioned. “Burning off his skin will leave one hell of a mark,” she cackled. “Didn’t I want to leave him alive?” she mused, seemingly questioning herself. “Fine, fine. But let’s at least burn off his nose and lips,” she suggested, practically pleading. “Why?” She seemed genuinely puzzled by her own query. “Imagine the screams he’ll hear when people see him coming,” she chuckled darkly. “That’s just cruel. Besides, you’ll want to keep his ears intact if you want him to hear that,” she added, a note of annoyance coloring her voice. “Ah, yes, you’re right. I should leave those,” she concluded, thinking aloud.

Lyric’s confusion gave way to sheer terror as the woman’s unhinged self-dialogue echoed around him. Meanwhile, his muffled screams continued as the burning sensation intensified, eating away at his flesh, lips, nose, eyes, and even sizzling his tongue. The moments stretched into an eternity for the squire until, at last, he collapsed to the ground. A shallow, ragged breath was the only sign that he still clung to life. At that point, the sludge retreated, leaving Lyric horribly disfigured—a living, breathing warning of the nightmares that lurk in the darkness.



Vanya marched forward with her fellow knights of Slaethia, every step on the loathsome stone surface sending a shiver of revulsion up through her boots. Fueled by a seething anger that narrowed her focus to a singular objective—vanquishing Aurelia—she advanced. Over the past century, many had attempted to achieve this aim. They had come agonizingly close, even succeeding in confining her for a brief time. But that proved to be their undoing. Had they executed her when they had the chance, the current chaos could have been averted. No, they should have ended her existence while the opportunity was ripe.

Taking a sweeping glance around, Vanya observed that, remarkably, the fortress ruins had withstood the airship’s bombardments well. While the exterior lay in unrecognizable rubble, the interior remained surprisingly intact, save for some scattered stones and dislodged bricks. Yet,



despite the seemingly untouched facade, an unsettling presence loomed as if they were being scrutinized by an unknown entity.

“Up ahead, there be a zombie still breathin’,” Einarr bellowed, lifting his hammer and preparing to charge at the prone creature.

“Undead don’t breathe, you fool,” Orlaith chided the dwarf champion. “That... That’s one of ours,” the fire mage champion realized, clasping her hand over her mouth in horror.

Vanya eyed the figure sprawled on the ground and took a quick look around the corridor. Oddly enough, there was no sign of any battle having taken place here. In the soft glow of Orlaith’s hovering flame, it was as if something had meticulously cleaned away all traces of corpses and blood from every surface.

“Orlaith, do you think you can heal him?” Gale, the fairy champion, inquired.

“I’m a fire mage; any healing I could attempt would just make things worse,” Orlaith responded, purposefully avoiding looking directly at the maimed figure’s face. “However, I think I have a spare teleportation stone. It’ll send him to the church, where they should be able to help him. Though, healers skilled enough to repair... that level of damage, are rare,” she added.

“Ye sure that’s a lad?” Einarr blurted out. “I don’t see any dingles down there.” His eyes widened in shock as a grim thought occurred to him. “Ye don’t think they got burnt off too, do ye?” The dwarf gasped, horrified.

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I couldn’t help but chuckle softly, savoring the electric tension that had filled the air. They were completely in the dark, ridiculously easy to manipulate. “*Do they actually believe that the dark muck under their feet is just a trivial backdrop?*” I mused to myself. They were woefully blind to the peril lurking just beneath the surface. But me and I were delighted in their unawareness; their attention was so captured by the undead that they had neglected to pay heed to their own footing, granting us the perfect opportunity to strike.

As I stumbled into the hall, a wave of euphoria washed over me, culminating in a burst of uncontrollable laughter that reverberated off the walls. But then, almost as quickly as it had arrived, the elation morphed into something far more menacing. My hand shot to my stomach, clutching it as if trying to hold back some indescribable torment brewing within. Dropping to one knee, the disquieting sensation continued to escalate, becoming increasingly incomprehensible with each passing second. Then, out of nowhere, a muffled sound escaped. I looked around in mortification, praying no one had heard the unfortunate noise. “Oh no, please tell me Aurelia didn’t hear that,” I whispered to myself, aghast at my unintentional emission that resembled a struggling lawnmower.

As the portal widened enough for people to pass through, I felt a wave of dark elation wash over me at the sight of their frenzied attempts to escape. And the best part? No one had noticed my minor faux pas as I regained my posture. Those who were close enough to the portal shoved their way toward the opening, each person jockeying for position to flee from the looming peril.

Despite the urgency, I found myself lingering at the edge of the crowd, my hand clutching my stomach as though harboring a secret delight—or perhaps a hidden nightmare. A tempting notion swirled in my thoughts: the audacious idea of abandoning everyone else and seizing both the core and the portal for my own ends.

The prospect of their anguished screams, the heart-wrenching cries of children, and the collective pleas for mercy only amplified my twisted exhilaration. The portal's opening, barely as wide as a car door, made it glaringly clear that not everyone would escape this nightmarish scenario. However, I was steadfast in ensuring that Aurelia would be among the fortunate few. Yet, a shattered fragment of my soul held me back, particularly when my eyes fell upon a young rabbit-girl crying out for her missing father.

The knights were fast approaching, the air thick with tangible fear. But for me, it was just another intoxicating moment to bask in the glorious chaos.