

# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 15

### RELUCTANT CHAMPION

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Prior...

Vanya Anlyth, Champion of Jörmun, pushed open the door to a tavern now overrun by Slaethian forces. Inside, a raucous symphony of laughter and drunken debauchery filled the air, a cacophony born from another conquest. The jubilant atmosphere was shared by all except the tavern owner, a stout man with a blend of human and elven features, and a server with unmistakable elven features, her red eyes hinting at blood elf heritage. She deftly maneuvered through the crowd, balancing trays of drinks while adeptly avoiding the unwelcome advances of the barbarian warriors crowding the establishment.

These barbarians were a unique breed of mana users, infusing their bodies and muscles with magic to reach extraordinary levels of strength. The notion of using ambient mana directly was unheard of in these parts, a concept relegated to the realm of titans from ancient lore. Instead, these warriors could allow their internal mana to absorb the surrounding mana, replenishing their inner reserves and using it to bolster their offensive and defensive capabilities. Their technique of absorbing ambient mana necessitated minimal clothing, allowing the energy to permeate their bodies more freely.

This practice wasn't unique to the barbarians alone. Many magic users produced their own mana by metabolizing the energy from either food or environment, while a select few mastered the art of harmonizing their internal mana with that in the air, essentially 'breathing in' the magic around them. However, this didn't equate to manipulating ambient mana directly.

Those capable of generating their own magic and aligning it with the environment typically carried an air of arrogance. Observing the tavern, Vanya couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy for the owner and the woman, likely his wife, as they navigated the rowdy crowd of magic-infused revelers.

Vanya, draped in a pitch-black cowl and cape, moved with a quiet yet palpable intensity. Her attire concealed the glint of her armor and obscured her facial features from curious onlookers. Yet, it was the formidable aura she exuded, the unmistakable presence of a Champion, that instilled a wary respect in the tavern's patrons. Her very essence seemed to resonate with a power that chilled the air, prompting even the hardest souls to give her a wide berth.

She navigated towards a corner table, occupied by a burly human and two stout dwarves. The table, large enough to accommodate twice their number, had become their exclusive domain, a testament to their strength in a room full of warriors. However, as Vanya approached, a ripple of unease spread through them, their bravado momentarily eclipsed by the cold wave of her formidable presence.

The human man at the table looked up cautiously at Vanya. His eyes fleetingly met hers, catching the unusual glow of blue tinged with gold in her gaze—illuminating eyes were a hallmark of extraordinary mana prowess, revered and feared among magic users. His attempt to avoid her intense stare only betrayed his unease. Confusion and apprehension flickered across his face, unsure of her intentions or what he might have inadvertently done to draw the ire of such a formidable presence.

With a deep, exasperated sigh, Vanya made her demand in a single, authoritative word, “Move.”

Her command left no room for debate. The trio at the table exchanged hurried, unsettled glances before complying. Rising swiftly, they vacated their seats, clearly recognizing the futility of contesting her will. They retreated, leaving the coveted corner table to her.

Vanya took her place at the table, positioning herself with the wall to her back. This strategic choice afforded her a clear, uninterrupted view of the entire tavern. She noted the sudden hush that had enveloped the room, a stark contrast to the earlier cacophony of voices and laughter. The patrons consciously avoided directing their gazes toward her corner. Their deliberate aversion spoke volumes of the respect and fear her presence commanded, as eyes darted everywhere but in her direction.

The blood elf woman hesitantly approached Vanya's table, her steps betraying a deep-seated fear. The hushed atmosphere of the tavern had not escaped her notice, and while she might not possess the ability to sense the raw power emanating from Vanya, the unnerving silence was enough to alert her to tread carefully. She carried a large mug of mead, her hands trembling so much that some of the golden liquid sloshed over the rim, spilling with each shaky step she took. By the time she reached the corner table, the mug was noticeably less full.

“I-It’s on the h-house,” she stammered, barely managing to set the mug down before quickly retreating from Vanya's intimidating presence.

Vanya's gaze swept the tavern, taking in the scene with a calculated eye. The atmosphere was thick with the spoils of conquest, each drink served on the house in celebration of another territory succumbing to the Slaethian forces. The half-elf owner and the blood elf server, skittishly navigating through the rowdy crowd, were perhaps the only threads holding the tavern from descending into complete anarchy. It was the unspoken rule of such places: so long as the ale flowed and the establishment stood, chaos was kept at bay.

In the Slaethian ranks, where might often made right, official policies against misconduct were as flimsy as parchment. Vanya was acutely aware of the harsh truth that lurked beneath the surface of such victories. In the tumult of these newly claimed lands, the line between raucous celebration and outright pillage was perilously thin. Despite the veneer of discipline, violations and aggressions were all too common, sometimes even at the hands of the female warriors who could rival their male counterparts in their predatory pursuits. The tavern, for now, stood as a microcosm of this conquered territory, teetering on the edge of chaos.

Within the tavern walls, the screams and cries from the streets outside were a muffled, distant reminder of a harsher reality. Outside, the brutality of the Slaethian conquest was in full, merciless

display. Pillaging, rape, and public executions with ceaseless torture were not just common; they were expected, a dark tradition of the conquering forces. Under the banner of Slaethia, those who resisted faced not just defeat but annihilation, and those deemed unworthy or 'unenlightened' faced fates often worse than death.

Vanya, now a Champion, found herself grappling with these realities in a way she hadn't before. Her battles had been about survival, about proving her strength and worth, but they were always colored by the rush of adrenaline, the heat of conflict. Watching the chaos unfold without participating, however, opened her eyes to the senseless carnage. Standing on the sidelines, she saw the bloodshed not as a warrior in the thick of it but as an observer to an unfolding tragedy. This perspective shift brought with it a torrent of doubts and questions, the sheer scale of destruction and loss weighing heavily on her conscience.

Vanya's finishing of her mead was as deliberate as it was bitter. Setting the mug down with a bit more distance from her, she signaled her desire for another. The blood elf server, slightly steadier this time, returned with a refill, managing to spill much less in her approach.

However, before the server could retreat, Vanya had an inquiry. “Do you have any vacant rooms?” she asked, her tone casual but carrying an undercurrent of authority.

The server visibly tensed, her reply laced with nervousness. “N-No, I’m s-sorry, m-my lady,” she stuttered, fear evident in her eyes.

“That’s unfortunate,” Vanya murmured with a soft sigh, then added another request, “Would you be willing to point out who took your last available room?”

The woman hesitated, clearly torn. She glanced around the silent tavern, where every patron seemed to be consciously avoiding any interaction with the Champion. The fear of displeasing Vanya outweighed her reluctance, and she reluctantly gestured towards the group that Vanya had displaced earlier. The trio, now huddled in the opposite corner, visibly deflated upon realizing they had been singled out. They had taken over the space from others, and now it seemed their actions had come full circle, drawing unwanted attention from the one person in the tavern everyone wished to avoid.

Vanya’s lips curved into a soft, unnoticed smile beneath the shadow of her cowl as she stood up. Her movements were fluid and purposeful, drawing the attention of everyone in the tavern. With a deft flick of her wrist, she tossed a small coin purse onto the table. The purse, heavy with gold coins, clinked softly upon landing, offering a small fortune to the server—a sum that would sustain the tavern for years in better times, but now served as a rare act of generosity in a land ravaged by war and occupation.

Her stride towards the small group—a burly human and two dwarves—was marked by a quiet determination. She halted before them, extending her hand in silent demand. Words were unnecessary; the meaning of her gesture was clear to all. The trio exchanged resigned glances, as their brief respite hidden in the corner abruptly ended once again. With a collective sigh, they held out the key they had claimed for themselves after indulging in the tavern’s fear-induced hospitality. The key passed from their reluctant grasp into the Champion's waiting hand.

The atmosphere in the tavern had become suffocatingly tense, every eye covertly watching the shrouded figure of Vanya ascend the stairs. Her steps creaking across floorboards that filled the hushed tavern, each footfall ratcheting the tension higher. The patrons collectively held their breath as she reached the first door, the sound of a key sliding into the lock breaking the silence. But instead of the click of a door unlocking, there was a jarring scrape of metal against metal—a sound of denial. Muffled curses seeped down the stairs, reaching the ears of the anxious onlookers.

This scene repeated itself as Vanya moved from door to door. Each attempt met with the same result—rejection, frustration, muffled expletives. The tavern's patrons counted silently, their curiosity piqued yet veiled behind feigned disinterest. Finally, after the thirteenth attempt, a squeaky hinge gave way, and the door slammed shut behind the Champion. A collective sigh, a release of pent-up breaths, rippled through the room.

The silence stretched, heavy and pregnant with unspoken questions, until someone's whisper cut through it like a knife, "Isn't there only eight rooms in this place?" The query, soft yet clear, lingered in the air.

As Vanya closed the door, a heavy sigh escaped her. The events of the past two years had unraveled far from her expectations. The loss of her husband, the grotesque transformation of his corpse into a vessel for the undead, had shattered something within her, a fracture that words could hardly encapsulate. But the saga of her despair didn't end there. In death, she had been offered a peculiar boon—a second chance fueled by vengeance. Jörmun, a deity unknown to her, had bestowed upon her the title of his Champion.

However, her role as Champion had not been as straightforward as she had imagined. Instead of engaging in battles to purge the realm of its vile corruption, she was instructed to observe. And with each passing day, as she watched the unfolding chaos, her convictions about good and evil, right and wrong, began to blur. The line between justice and cruelty seemed to dissolve, leaving her in a mire of doubt and questioning.

Now, leaning against the door she had just closed, Vanya felt the weight of uncertainty heavy on her mind. Her thoughts raced, a tumultuous storm of confusion and hesitation. What was her purpose now? How could she navigate this complex web of morals and motives? The answers eluded her, leaving her feeling lost and directionless in the midst of the chaos she had been commanded to witness.

"You're being rather dramatic," a male voice casually remarked from behind her.

Vanya whirled around, her warrior instincts primed for confrontation, only to be met with an unfamiliar yet strangely familiar face. It was youthful, almost elvish with its delicate features, and yet there was something off about it, as if it were fake. Despite the odd appearance, she recognized the essence of the being before her—it was unmistakably Jörmun. He lounged in a rudimentary wooden chair, set awkwardly between two basic bunk beds. The accommodations in the tavern's room were even more dismal than Vanya had initially thought.

"Jörmun, why do you look like that?" she demanded, her tone laced with exasperation. She was quite certain she had never seen his true form, only the varied visages he chose to present.

“Look like what?” he replied with a feigned innocence, a mischievous smile playing on his lips. His nonchalant demeanor starkly contrasted the tense atmosphere of the room, almost as if he was deliberately downplaying the gravity of the situation.

“What do you want?” Vanya asked bluntly, cutting through any potential for his usual antics.

“I think it’s time for a new strategy,” Jörmun replied, his smile carrying an edge of cunning. There was something about his demeanor, a predatory undercurrent, that put her on alert.

“Change my strategy?” Vanya’s response was laced with skepticism. “I refuse to be a pawn for mindless slaughter, neither for you nor the kingdom.”

“That’s not what I’m asking,” he assured her, his grin unwavering. “What I need from you is to return to the Beastveil Kingdom. Surrender yourself to those who are still resisting in hiding.”

“What? Why would I do that?” Vanya’s voice rose in volume, a bit more than she intended. A sudden awareness of the paper-thin walls and the deathly quiet of the tavern below made her lower her tone.

“Rest assured, this conversation is beyond the ears of even the other gods,” Jörmun said, a statement that offered little comfort to Vanya. “My elder sister, in her own complex way, has adopted and somewhat recreated a soul with her own essence, considering it her daughter. I want you to train her,” he explained with an unnerving smile.

“And who might this be? Why should I forsake my duties to my kingdom to train someone on your whim? This would make me a deserter. The other Champions will hunt me down, and you’ll be branded a dark god for having your Champion forsake their post,” Vanya countered, her tone laced with skepticism.

“I’ve always operated outside the realm of the other gods, unbeknownst to them. As for their perception, let’s not concern ourselves with that,” Jörmun replied nonchalantly. “And about the one you’re to train, her name is Blake. She’s the one responsible for your husband’s death.”

“What?” Vanya’s voice was a low growl, tinged with disbelief and rising anger.

“Yes, Blake. She’s also been haunting your dreams, as well as those of your close allies,” he continued, scratching his chin thoughtfully.

“Why would I train her? Why wouldn’t I just kill her outright?” Vanya hissed, her anger barely contained.

“Firstly, because she’ll simply return if you do. She’s not so easily gotten rid of. Secondly, you share a common enemy, whether you realize it or not. And thirdly, and most importantly,” Jörmun’s smile took on a serpentine quality, “I will bring back your husband if you comply.”

Vanya felt a cold shiver run down her spine, trapped in a conundrum wrapped in a riddle. The offer was tantalizing, yet it reeked of deception and manipulation. She was caught in a web woven by a god whose intentions were as murky as the shadows he seemed to thrive in.

Vanya’s voice trembled with a mixture of hope and disbelief. “You can actually bring Ezad back?”

"Yes, it's within my power," Jörmun affirmed, his voice steady and sure.

Her mind raced with questions, each more pressing than the last. "Why her? Why train Blake? And who exactly is this shared enemy we're supposed to be against?"

Jörmun's expression grew more serious. "Our enemy is those who call themselves gods. The ones who use the system to masquerade as deities. Blake is... unpredictable, volatile. She's the kind to set the realm ablaze over the slightest offense. My aunt, the Primordial of Magic, has wronged her, and Blake's vengeance will be fierce and unyielding. With the right guidance, her path of destruction can align with my goals."

"And what exactly are those goals?" Vanya's skepticism remained.

"To dismantle the facade of these false gods. The system they exploit for their power—it's not truly theirs. They've become powerful by siphoning strength from the ancient system. My niece, Blake, possesses a nature that could potentially shatter this system. Doing so would strip these false deities of their borrowed power, leaving only the true, elder gods in control. The natural order would be restored," Jörmun explained, a hint of passion in his voice.

Vanya absorbed Jörmun's words, each laden with daunting implications. "I also get my power as a Champion from the system too," she stated, a hint of conflict in her voice.

"Yes, but think of it—you'll have Ezad back," he paused, letting the gravity of his offer sink in. "Consider the endless violence, the wars waged in the name of these so-called gods. Not to mention my aunt's deeds. As we speak, she's pulling two new worlds into this realm—one, a brutal reality teeming with demons poised to unleash chaos, and another that's mysteriously resisting her. I don't understand her endgame, but this madness needs to end. The system must be dismantled, and we, the remaining elder gods, must restore balance to this reality."

"I have to admit, I'm rather taken aback that you're being so forthcoming," Vanya remarked, her eyes narrowed in skepticism.

Jörmun leaned forward, regarding her with a measured gaze. "You've always been one to act on what you believe to be true, and I've given you nothing but the truth. My penchant for manipulation is well-known, but it's not the sole reason I chose you as my Champion. You possess inherent skills, talent, and a sense of justice. You just needed a cause worthy of your dedication. However, there is one additional task I need from you. It's something you might not appreciate at first, but I think you'll find a certain... irony in it, especially since Blake will be equally displeased."

The corner of Vanya's mouth twitched with a mix of curiosity and apprehension. "And what might this task be?"

"Oh, you'll both know when the time comes. Don't worry about that," Jörmun assured her, his voice laced with certainty. "Just keep in mind, Blake will jump at any chance to defy my aunt, especially if it means protecting someone she holds dear. She may not realize it yet, but her determination will drive her to do whatever it takes, no matter the cost," he said, his smile taking on a sinister edge.

“You know, your intentions are still a bit murky to me, but after witnessing all the ceaseless slaughter in the name of the gods, I wouldn’t mind giving them a taste of their own medicine. I’ll never forgive this Blake for killing my husband, but if you promise to bring him back to me, I’ll train her. How do I find her?” Vanya asked, her resolve firming.

“Just head to the Beastveil Kingdom. Make your way to what remains of the royal palace and wait there. They’ll find you,” Jörmun advised, his voice carrying a finality that brooked no further question. With those words, he vanished into thin air, leaving Vanya alone with her thoughts and a newfound purpose.