

BLAKE PUDDING

CHAPTER 8

THE GATHERING

AURELIA

Hand in hand with my beloved, we stood before one of the many courtyards, her hand warm against my cool flesh. Despite my usual frigid touch, my heart throbbed intensely. I've waited an eternity to be united with my love. Now, at last, I have her—well, him in a past life, but such details of reincarnation fade into insignificance—she's mine!

As I leaned into Blake, our cheeks softly touching, I was momentarily enveloped by the warmth of her skin—a stark contrast to the perpetual chill of my vampire existence. Her closeness reignited a forgotten sensation, stirring a profound longing within me. For a fleeting second, my composure wavered, nearly lost to the surge of affection and desire I felt for her.

A gentle whisper escaped my lips, flowing into her ear with the tender warmth of a shared desire. “Would you please wait here, my love?” The words, soft and rich as velvet, were laden with a depth of emotion, each syllable a tender caress, promising more than mere words could convey. “I'll be just a second.” The assurance in my voice carried a weight far beyond the immediate moment, pledging a constancy and devotion that transcended the bounds of time, reaffirming my unyielding bond to her, come what may.

I stifled a laugh, instead offering a smile in response to her earnest nodding. How could such a creature, so fearsome and horrifying, simultaneously be such an adorably beautiful monster who has fiercely captured my heart? The yearning in her gaze was profound, mirroring my own deep longing. Summoning all my resolve, I pulled away from her and opened the door to the courtyard, my focus immediately shifting to the source of my concern and ire, Vanya Anlyth. Eager not to distress my beloved, I gently closed the door behind me. Then, I advanced toward the elf woman, who was deeply engrossed in her sword practice, her blade cutting through the air with elegant agility. Our eyes met, and I detected a flicker of something concealed within hers—was it perhaps fear? *Good!*

Anlyth was about to speak, but I had no patience for her words. I silenced her with a single raised finger, cutting off her impending remarks with a sharp glare. “Let's be crystal clear. I may not fully grasp the extent of my beloved's divinity or her connection to the Crone. Truthfully, it doesn't matter. Whether she's been reincarnated as a demigoddess, her soul's been reforged as a deity, or something else entirely, she is my everything, my goddess. You've been sworn—willingly or not—to serve as her champion, to enact her will, but your

responsibility extends further. You are to shield, guard, and protect her with your life, your very being, and your soul. And yet—” my gaze swept over her, evaluating her as dismissively as one would a pile of trash “—I find myself underwhelmed. So, tell me, can you commit to that? Because if you cannot, I am fully prepared to end you right here, right now,” I grinned, baring my fangs as I did.

To my mixed fury and amusement, the elf woman rolled her eyes at my threat, her lips parting to utter what surely would be regrettable words. However, feeling unexpectedly magnanimous—after all, my beloved was back with me, and I hadn’t felt such joy in nearly two centuries—I opted for mercy. I denied her the chance to voice those damning words that would determine her end, thus preserving my love’s champion. Pathetic and inadequate though she may be, she remained, nonetheless, the champion of my beloved—my everything, my goddess!

In the blink of an eye, I closed the distance between us, our noses nearly touching as I loomed before her. Her eyes widened in surprise, her instincts kicking in as she stepped back, swinging her sword at me. With effortless grace, I deflected the sword with my claws, dismissing it as if it were a child’s toy. Yet, I noted the faint warmth from the holy light imbuing the blade with a golden glow. As I casually brushed her weapon aside, she drew her offhand close to her chest, conjuring a circular shield of physical light that materialized as a barrier between us.

This tangible manifestation of holy magic wielded as any mundane shield, shattered under the mere touch of my claw. Overcoming holy magic was no great secret—it didn’t require brute strength or swift agility, just an overwhelming infusion of cruelty, malevolence, and darkness within oneself, rendering any sanctity powerless with merely a touch.

The aura of fear emanating from the paladin, along with the trembling of her sword, was exquisitely delightful, nearly irresistible in its call for me to drain her of her blood. Yet, I restrained the impulse... for the time being. I contemplated striking her with a punch, but she didn’t deserve the honor that comes with a warrior’s battle.

Instead, I chose to deliver a slap, one so forceful that the castle itself vibrated from the impact—a blow delivered instantaneously, with a vampiric speed that eclipsed even the ancients. Her face, briefly registering shock, was swiftly engulfed by a daze of confusion, unable to comprehend the swift reality of her situation. The foundational-shaking open-palmed strike was immediately followed by a backhand of such might that it threatened to bring the entire keep down upon us. Propelled by the immense force, Anylyth was sent flying backward, smashing into the stone wall with such intensity that it burst into rubble around her.

Reluctant to escalate matters further and deprive my beloved of her tool, I cast a disgusted sneer at the dazed and humiliated paladin before turning my back to her. Exiting the courtyard, I was greeted by the radiant orange eyes of my goddess. Preferring not to delve

into the details of my... interaction with her champion, I offered her a sincere smile, planted a tender kiss on her cheek, and whispered, “Have fun, my love.” With that, I sauntered off, adding an extra sway to my hips for her amusement, making sure she had a captivating view as I vanished around the corridor.

I was well aware that my next meeting should already be in progress, but I never minded making others wait for me. The thought brought a smile to my face as I approached the iron door. Swinging it open, I entered a chamber dominated by a large hexagonal table. Uniquely, it featured a long rectangular extension, creating a designated head position, unmistakably reserved for me. While several new faces were seated around the massive table, a few were familiar. Their presence sparked a mix of anticipation and recognition as I prepared to take my seat.

This meeting convened the various leaders of refugees who had sought sanctuary within my lands. The assembly included vampires, albeit none of pure blood, alongside a diverse array of other races: numerous breeds of beastkin, nymphs, and elves of various kinds—the drow’s malice, matching that of the vampires, brought an intriguing twist to the already tense atmosphere as all participants warily eyed each other. In addition, there was a dwarf, an orc, and a lone human, not to mention a few peculiar races to which I hadn’t paid much attention. I acknowledged Chief Hensley with a nod as I took my seat; his adept management had been instrumental in the swift expansion of the city below, a growth crucial for the formidable army I was in the process of assembling.

“How goes the war effort?” I initiated the meeting, cutting directly to the core issue.

“Our food stocks are at an all-time high,” a nymph interjected sheepishly.

“Ah, my lady, the issue lies with the smiths. We’re currently short on the ore needed for the mass production of armor and weapons you’ve requested,” a dwarf interjected gruffly.

“Our enchanters are also facing a shortage, lacking the necessary resources to adequately supply all the warding gems we require,” added an elf, voicing another concern.

“What about my soon-to-be late husband’s ore mines within the mountains,” I asked.

“Soon-to-be?” a foolish fur-faced squirrel-looking woman muttered under her breath. I let it pass.

“Aye, we took a few miners out to survey it... umm, My Lady. But, the mines in this region, it seems, have long gone dry some few centuries ago, I had to guess,” the dwarf scratched his beard deep in thought.

The scarcity of ore required to craft weapons and armor for our physically oriented warriors presents a considerable risk, potentially jeopardizing the entire army before our first major engagement. Mana augmenters, who can infuse their bodies with mana to make their skin as durable as steel—or even mythril for the more potent among them—often choose to

traverse the battlefield in minimal clothing. This approach maximizes their ability to absorb and redistribute the local mana. In contrast, spellcasters require no traditional armor, preferring to wear loosely fitted robes imbued with powerful warding.

However, some combine mana augmentation with spellcasting, resulting in a considerable drain on their internal mana reserves. Hence, many resort to consuming large quantities of food to replenish their mana or rely on drawing ambient mana into their reserves, leading to the preference for minimal clothing to facilitate better mana absorption. Nevertheless, the bulk of our forces require standard armor and proper warding. In the absence of the necessary ore, we—specifically, I—scarcely have an army prepared for combat. Furthermore, there's the issue with the gems. I possess the troops; I merely lack the resources to equip them adequately.

“What about the potions we'll need?” I sighed.

A nymph raised her hand, her presence marked by visible terror. “T-The ingredients for healing and mana potions are plentiful, M-My Lady,” she stammered, her voice trembling. “B-But, we seem to lack sufficient alchemists to brew them,” she finished, shrinking back into her chair.

“If I may,” another voice interjected.

My attention was drawn away from the wilting nymph to an entirely new presence, a catkin with flowing black hair. Looming protectively behind her was a figure with white hair and bunny ears, cloaked in a simple illusion that I instantly saw through—a feat I suspected was beyond most, if any, present in the room. Despite her misleading guise, her true identity was unmistakable to me: she was an undead, specifically a revenant. Yet, I felt no unease about her being there, considering the company of a few undead species were at the table.

“Greetings, My Lady, or perhaps more fittingly, My Empress,” the catkin bowed her head gracefully, seemingly oblivious to or perhaps indifferent to the hushed whispers that followed her acknowledgment of my true title. Indeed, many fallen leaders had pledged their allegiance to me, but none had so openly recognized me as Empress. “I am immensely grateful for the sanctuary you've provided for me and my kin. I am Queen Rhyessa of the Beastveil Kingdom. Although the Kingdom of Slaethia has decimated much of my army, I have managed to bring a substantial number of alchemists and craftsmen with me. Moreover, my realm is richly blessed with both ore and gems, and I am confident that our vaults, brimming with these excess resources, remain undiscovered by the Slaethians.”

“And I can craft you a fleet of airships,” interjected another voice.

My gaze shifted to a half-bred dragonkin. Under normal circumstances, her kind might have been considered adversaries, but her status as both an undead lich and a subordinate of my beloved altered the equation significantly. Moreover, my beloved possessed the dragonkin's phylactery, ensuring her loyalty was beyond question; my love essentially held her soul.

A smile revealing my fangs spread across my face as I surveyed the assembly; the pieces began falling into place. All that remained was to dispatch a substantial force to secure these vital resources from Beastveil. The prospect was thrilling, especially the acquisition of airships—a formidable asset many kingdoms lacked and a key reason the Empire under the Ascended Gods had managed to conquer so many Moons of Völuspá.