

BLACK PUDDING

CHAPTER 26

Vanya Anlyth, Elven Knight, and Paladin of the Kingdom of Slaethia lay alone in her bed. The bitter cold of the bedsheet's emptiness filled her heart with an aching at her husband's absence. The knowledge that he was fulfilling his duties as the General of the army was of little comfort. The hours of his absence seemed to stretch on endlessly. The sounds of this night's celebrations only now fading, leaving behind the drunken laughter of a few soldiers stumbling toward their bedrolls.

The victory was but a distant memory from a few days ago. Yet, the celebrations raged on every night since, a cacophony of revelry and debauchery. But why wouldn't they rejoice? The vampire who had once destroyed their kingdom lay confined within a prison cell, reduced to a mere plaything to their holy whims. The elves, dwarfs, and human races that had resurrected their kingdom were soon to escort the heinous creature back to the kingdom, where her true torment would commence. A display of their righteousness, a warning to all the abominations of the night that they would soon vanquish every monster and deprave race from existence. They were all destined to be annihilated in pursuing Slaethia's holy crusade! Vampires, werewolves, lizardmen, and even beastkin were just a few among the many vile abominations.

Rising from her bed, Vanya donned a cloak that was little more than a wisp of fabric, barely concealing the bare flesh beneath from the watchful gazes of the night. Her armor lay waiting for her, but she had other plans for this evening. She wanted to catch her husband off guard, to surprise him with what lay beneath the cloak, or at least that was her desire.

Stepping out into the night, Vanya felt the chill sweep through her, like icy fingers clutching at her bones. And then, a dark thought crept into her mind, a thought of her husband lost in drunken revelry with his officers. *No, that couldn't be true*, she thought. He wouldn't have left her alone in bed. Not unless it was important...

"If my husband is drowning himself in ale with his fellow officers or another woman... I swear to the gods, I will make him pay," Vanya muttered as she set out into the cold night, determined to find Ezad.

Vanya stepped into the command tent, but to her dismay, her husband was nowhere to be found. The tent was ominously empty, devoid of the usual presence of an on-duty officer. Her annoyance turned to unease, as she noticed several chairs knocked over, evidence of a struggle or a hasty departure. She spun on her heel, her heart heavy with worry, and ventured back into the night, searching for answers.

"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 is empty,” Vanya stated as if nothing else needed to be said.

“**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 spoke with a sense of unease, but the underlying determination in her voice was unmistakable. “Ezad has the dungeon core safely stored within his dimensional ring with the other relics. We must locate him or anyone from the senior staff and determine if we’re under attack.”

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

“Uh, yeah...” Vanya averted her gaze, looking away awkwardly. “It’s not a typical ring.”

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

“Uh, let’s just, uh, check with one of the soldiers on duty first,” Vanya stammered, wishing to get back on topic. “We might be overreacting. Perhaps they saw something that can explain all this.”

Vanya and Gimona made their way through the encampment. Still, oddly enough, most of the on-duty sentries had left their posts. It wasn’t uncommon to find five or six who left their posts in the last few nights to join in on the celebrations, but twenty missing soldiers were too many. This only confirmed her fears. They were under attack!

“We must seek out Craycroft,” Vanya sighed. “This situation may be too much for us to handle alone.”

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 I am left with no alternative. I assume full control of the army until we find my husband or a commanding officer. Gimona, go sound the Wailing Drums, for we are under siege.”

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

“Our enemies are usually a blend of necromancers, vampires, and other dark beings. I must secure the remains of our fallen and prevent them from becoming pawns in the hands of our enemies.”

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

“It would,” Vanya replied with a hint of sadness, “but desecrating a body before a proper funeral is guaranteed to cause unrest for the departing soul. And I’ve witnessed enough poltergeists and tormented spirits for one lifetime.”

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Gimona Grimmail sprinted away, leaving Anlyth to handle her own affairs. Her short, stubby dwarf legs carried her as quickly as they could, pumping with adrenaline. The flickering fires of the camp's numerous fire pits had now died down to smoldering ashes, but she needed to reach the Wailing Drums. She needed to rouse the entire camp, but as Gimona raced towards the drums, she couldn't shake the feeling that she would face her enemies before she reached her goal. A smile tugged at her lips, for tonight was a good night to be a Monster Slayer!

Gimona was slightly annoyed that she had left her axe behind, but her confidence was unwavering. She didn't need a measly weapon to defend herself. And then it happened. She felt the stealth strike before it even occurred, a telltale ripple in the air that signaled the underhanded tactics those vile creatures favored. It was a pitiful attempt at an attack! Gimona's hand shot up and caught the assassin's wrist in a flash, intercepting the dagger aimed at her throat.

With a swift twist and pull, the dark figure was lifted off his feet and crashed to the ground. Gimona didn't waste a second, delivering a crushing blow with the force of a detonated mana crystal to the attacker's face with her boot. The shockwave rippled out from the impact, but the soldiers in the encampment were too deep in their drunken slumber to notice, snoring loudly despite the dwarf's display of force. The Gimona couldn't help but find the situation laughable. It was proof that she's been claiming all along, humans and elves couldn't handle the piss they called ale.

With a sense of urgency, Gimona cast her gaze toward the spot where the vampires were impaled. Gimona's heart sank as she noticed the impaled monsters were now missing. A mere drop of blood was enough to heal their wounds, making them a significant threat to the camp. To make matters even worse, the General was missing, leaving the army without its leader in the face of an ongoing siege. Gimona refused to let the army fall on this night! She set off once again, rushing towards the Wailing Drums. If anything could wake an army up from a drunken night of depravities, it was the soul-shattering wail of that beat. But her progress was abruptly halted as a group of dwarves stumbled out of their tents. They were groggy and irate at being disturbed from their slumber.



Vanya sprinted towards the Repository Tent, her heart pounding with dread, her bare ass revealed beneath her flapping cloak. If the necromancers had infiltrated their lines, she knew that tent would be the first place they would strike. But to the elf woman's immense relief, the guards stationed there were still on duty, standing at their posts like an impenetrable fortress. Ezad had always chosen the most elite soldiers to stand guard over the fallen, and it seemed his wisdom was paying off in this crisis. Despite the guards' stoic demeanor, Vanya couldn't help but feel their eyes linger on her a little longer than was comfortable. She tightened her cloak as she approached, a dark smirk playing at the corner of her lips, promising untold suffering if they commented about her appearance.

"Have you seen the General?" Vanya ordered them in a stern tone.

"Aye, Paladin Knight Anlyth, Ma'am," one of the guards replied. "General Anlyth is currently within the Repository Tent, conferring with a priestess. However, I must mention that his behavior seemed quite odd."

Vanya inhaled deeply, trying to calm herself. "Listen up, you six, you're with me," she commanded the guards. "I have reason to believe we've been infiltrated by the enemy. Be ready for anything!"

The six knights, each a hardened veterans of countless wars, stood at the ready, eager to face the enemy. Their salutes were all the Paladin needed to know that they were prepared. They were already primed and itching for the fight that lay ahead. Vanya unsheathed her sword, took a deep breath, and stepped into the tent. What she saw confirmed her darkest fears. Her husband was standing alongside the vampiric princess who had once razed her kingdom to the ground. If there was any monster that haunted the dreams of Slaethia's children, it was the hushed whispers of a single name, Aurelia. The citizens of the Kingdom of Slaethia tremble at the mere mention of her, and yet, here she was, standing before them.

Vanya's heart was shattered as she gazed upon her husband, now standing beside the monster that had taken him from her. The sight of him, now a shell of his former self, filled her with deep and overwhelming sorrow. Tears flowed down her cheeks, and her sword shook in her hand as she struggled to come to terms with the loss of her love. The monster had claimed him, and she knew there would be more victims before this night's end. Vanya swore that she would not rest until she ended the vampire's evil and freed her husband's soul, sending him to rest in peace within the veil. Though the thought of facing the monster, filled her with fear, she knew it was her duty to avenge her husband and protect others from suffering, for she was a Paladin!

However, it had been a miracle that they had even captured her once. Without Craycroft, Vanya doubted she could do it again. The vampire turned to Vanya with a sinister smile, revealing her gleaming fangs. Vanya's eyes were drawn to the white priestess robes the vampire had been wearing, which suddenly began to unravel, revealing a gown blacker than the depths of the night sky. The dress was more fitting for a grand ball than the battlefield. Still, in it, the vampiric princess was a vision of terror, as if she wore armor made of the most malevolent dark magic.

Then the sound Vanya had been waiting for hit her deep to the core. A repetitive drumbeat echoed through the air, striking a chord of hope in her heart. The beat was relentless, building an aura of darkness and foreboding. With each boom, it carried a banshee's battle cry. The shrilled scream that followed the drum beat pierced the air and sent shivers down Vanya's spine. The wail seemed to go on forever, a haunting and mournful chorus that forewarned of an imminent threat. The combination of the drum beat and the banshee's wailing scream created a soundscape of dread and terror, snapping the entire sleeping army into action! Knights throughout the encampment awoke from their drunken stupor alert, sober, and ready for a fight to be had.

Although the initial siege at the dungeon ruins caught the bloodsuckers off guard, both sides had taken a hefty death toll. Unfortunately for them, Aurelia had the makings of her own army within the tent made of that toll. The tent was littered with the bodies of her fallen soldiers. A mere fraction of the living that lay beyond, but enough to fear. Vanya was well aware of their dangers, knowing that battling necromancers was a losing game, as every fallen comrade could be resurrected as a weapon against them.

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 couldn’t be sure, but it seemed as though the vampire’s dress shifted in response to Gimona’s insult. The black fabric appeared to writhe as if alive, and the sleeves twitched subtly yet sinisterly. There was a cruel aura that pulsed with dark energy, and for a moment, it seemed as though the air in the tent thickened, smothered by the weight of her evil presence. It was unlike anything Vanya had ever experienced and certainly not vampiric or necrotic. The entire atmosphere was heavy with the promise of violence. It was like a storm about to break and unleash its fury upon the land.

“Gimona, I thought you were the one beating that drum?”

“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 gaze was filled with anger as she turned to the dwarf, her eyes flicking back to the vampire, who now wore a sinister smile that spread across her lips like a disease. The stillness of the monster was unsettling, and that smile even more so. Vanya couldn’t help but wonder if Gimona had revealed too much to the vampire. Regardless of what the dwarf may have revealed, Vanya knew she had to act. The stakes were too high!

No longer able to withstand the tense standoff, Paladin Anlyth acted. With a swift movement, she raised her arm and summoned the power of her divine magic. “By the grace of the gods,” she declared, her voice ringing with conviction, “let my holy light guide me!”

With her spell incanted, the beam of holy light shot forward, a brilliant ray of hope in the darkness. But the intended target was not the sadistic vampire, no. It was Vanya’s beloved husband, the very heart and soul of her existence. The spell hit him with the power of a raging inferno, lifting him off the ground and sending him flying backward. It had left a gaping wound in his chest where the light had burned its way through. It was so powerful Vanya was certain she had snapped his neck from the impact. The sight was a horror beyond comprehension, and Vanya felt like her world was collapsing as the tears flowed. Her once-living love was left with a charred and smoking fist size hole in his chest. The thought of what she had done tore at her very soul. But it had to of been done!

Still, there was something off about the vampire’s attire. The dress seemed to shift about as if writhing in pain, trying to avoid the scorching heat and blinding light of Vanya’s spell. Vanya raised her hand again to cast another incantation. Still, she was taken aback by the look of fury on the vampire’s face. It wasn’t directed at Vanya for destroying her husband. The vampire seemed livid about something else. But before she could even utter the incantation, she felt a cold grip around her ankle.

Looking down, Vanya saw that one of the seemingly lifeless bodies on the ground had come to life. It reached out and clutched at her leg. In a moment of horror, she realized the necromancer’s spell had already taken hold. She hadn’t even noticed until it was too late. The entirety of the tent

was filled with fallen soldiers and was now stirring as they reanimated. It was a horde of undead rising from the dead.

Vanya was in the thick of a battle for her life. The once-still bodies of fallen soldiers now thrashed and lunged for her. Their empty, dead eyes blazing with ravenous hunger. The tent was a whirlpool of chaos and destruction, with Vanya at its center, fighting alongside six knights and Gimona as they battled the relentless horde of the undead. The air was heavy with the putrid scent of death and decay, the sounds of tearing flesh and snapping bones ringing out with each swing of her sword. She was surrounded on all sides, with no escape in sight, and the cold, hard truth of her situation set in. She was in the heart of a living nightmare, and her only hope for survival lay in her cunning and mastery of magic.

Paladin Anlyth summoned her greatest weapon with a roar of determination, a powerful spell that needed no incantation. A maelstrom of light and fire erupted from her hand, a whirlwind of destruction that burned everything in its path. The Repository Tent's enchantments began to falter. The fabric of the dimension they were in pulsed in and out like the beat of a heart. The Paladin knew what she was doing was both foolish and dangerous. Still, she couldn't risk the undead horde breaking free into the encampment. Most of all, she couldn't allow the sadistic vampire, Aurelia, to live.

The explosion of the tent's enchantments was like a bomb going off in the encampment, flattening tents and sending soldiers flying through the air like ragdolls. The shockwave slammed into the walls of the village of Elsterwick, reducing them to splinters and causing homes to crumble to dust. Those who were aware of the situation braced themselves for the inevitable implosion that was to follow. When a pocket dimension explodes, it is followed by a catastrophic implosion that restores the natural dimension. The shockwave roared back with the force of a thousand thunderbolts, destroying even more buildings and pulling knights and civilians back toward the center of the disaster. The scene of such destruction and chaos caused a deafening **BOOM** that echoed throughout the lands.

Vanya was stunned to find herself still breathing, dazed, and disorientated as she stumbled to her feet. The dwarf Gimona Grimmail stood over her, her hand gripping tightly onto a barrier medallion. The golden aura of the enchanted relic kept Vanya and Gimona safe from harm, a beacon of hope amidst the destruction. Unfortunately, the six brave soldiers fighting alongside them were not so fortunate. Looking around at the devastation, Vanya couldn't help but hope that the sadistic vampire, Aurelia, had finally met her end.

Sadly, Vanya's worst fears were realized as she gazed at the monster and a red barrier that slowly faded away. The vampire was twirling amidst the rubble of the fallen tents, humming a demonic tune that defied any realm of reason. Her dance was a grotesque spectacle, a twisted mockery of a royal waltz. She hugged herself, running her hands and fingers over her dark dress with sickening affection. The sight was a nightmarish spectacle. Vanya couldn't help but feel a shiver run down her spine as she watched the monster revel in the destruction around her.

The soldiers rose from the ashes of the destroyed camp, the determination etched on their faces. Vanya stood tall and proud, her eyes scanning the scene of horror and devastation with a cold

smile. The sadistic vampire, her adversary, was now surrounded by a sea of soldiers, each thirsting for blood and vengeance. The vampire may have wielded immense power, but she was not unbeatable, and Vanya was eager to prove it. She would be the one to strike the final blow, ending the monster's reign of terror once and for all. After this night, the children of the Kingdom of Slaethia could sleep peacefully, knowing Aurelia was no more!

"This is for you, my love," Vanya whispered mournfully, her eyes igniting with divine light. The vampire may have taken everything from her by killing her husband, but Vanya would have her revenge, and at that moment, she knew that nothing could stand in her way!