

BLAKE PUDDING

CHAPTER 27

SACRIFICE

Rob surveyed the chaos around him, with screams and shouts merging into a cacophonous symphony of terror. As people scrambled and pushed to get through the portal, aiming to evade the advancing knights, Rob felt an urge contrasting Blake and Jason's thirst for violence. He desired heroism, to triumph against the seemingly unbeatable odds.

In the throngs before him—the injured, the poor, and those desperate to escape—he recognized a dormant part of himself that had been silent since arriving in this reality. It could be a longing for power or an attempt to compensate for what he viewed as his inadequacies. But whatever spurred this feeling, he now had a renewed sense of purpose. He might not be their designated Champion, but he would defend them. Taking on the stance of a steadfast Paladin, Rob was geared up for whatever terrors the other side had in store.

With unwavering resolve, Rob moved to secure the immense doors. However, before he could act, three colossal stone figures emerged, sending shivers down his spine. With the dungeon's collapse, the dungeon bosses had been unshackled, yet these three had chosen to align with the Crone's cause. It was uncertain if they could withstand the impending assault, but Rob was grateful for their alliance.

Taking a brief respite, Rob studied his dark-green-tinted fist, momentarily contemplating his half-orc heritage. While his status remained silent on the specifics on the other half of his ancestry, the pointed nature of his ears suggested elven lineage, perhaps even drow. As he delved into his own musings, a fleeting gleam from the shadowy corridor jolted him back to the present. In this oppressive gloom, even the dimmest sparkle served as a beacon.

Suddenly, a ferocious blaze roared around him. Rob let out a defiant cry, hoisting his immense, spartan-esque shield to protect the innocent behind him. The sheer force of the flames drove him backward, and he struggled to keep his footing as the blistering inferno assailed him.

“[IMPREGNABLE],” Rob bellowed!

Summoning a skill he'd gained after the class change from his respawn, several octagon-shaped barriers flickered into existence around him. A protective sphere of pure mana encased him, stabilizing his stance against the push of the flames. In gaming terms, Rob understood his new role in this alternate reality – he was the tank! He was resolved not to waver in shielding those relying on him.

Behind him, the frantic cries intensified as the panicked tried to squeeze through the narrow portal. Amidst the mounting turmoil, Rob remained steadfast, standing firm against the scorching

onslaught. The assault was relentless, but Rob's determination was unwavering. As the bastion of hope, he wouldn't be moved. Yet, as the fiery tempest continued, he felt the weight of its might.

You have earned the Title:
Defender of the Forgotten

“Dreams Arise onto Nightmares and Nightmares Fade onto Dreams.”

Rob's eyes widened in shock from the unexpected notification. Clenching his teeth, he hissed, "Status," calling forth his interface. It might not have been the ideal time, but his gamer instincts urgently compelled him to check.

Name: Arno Race: Half-Orc Class: Nightmare Paladin Level: 57 <u>Titles</u> Defender of the Forgotten		
<u>Racial Skills</u> [Bulking Might] <u>Spells</u> [Raise Undead] [Necrotic Flame] [Impregnable]	<u>Abilities</u> [Polyglot] [Defender]	<u>Vulnerabilities</u> [Holy] <u>Immunities</u> [Darkness] [Mild Poison Resistance] [Low Cold Resistance] [High Fire Resistance] [Mild Fear Resistance]

Glancing over his status, the first thing he saw was his name. While he was born 'Arno', everyone just called him 'Rob'. Pushing past that, his eyes landed on a new Title that wasn't there before: "**Defender of the Forgotten.**" Curious, he gave it a mental click to select it.

[Defender of the Forgotten]

All defensive magics swell in strength when guarding the defenseless.

Type
Title

Activation
Passive

Rob nearly let his barrier falter in sheer astonishment. He hadn't anticipated that Titles would function akin to skills. Once this battle concluded, he would have to confer with his friends to

determine if they too had made such a discovery or possessed such abilities. But such musings would have to wait. At this moment, Rob's unwavering resolve was to shield those nearby. The safety of the innocent teetered precariously, and he was resolute in his commitment not to fail them.

Amidst the turmoil, a serene voice resonated. "[**Death Bolt**]," it declared, as though it were a mere triviality.

Rob's eyes narrowed, and he caught a glimpse of Jeremy's hand, now crackling with a malevolent surge of darkness. An eldritch energy, consuming every speck of light it touched, erupted and surged down the corridor with a hunger all its own.

As the surge of dark energy waned, the fire's overwhelming heat ebbed away, offering the Nightmare Paladin, a momentary reprieve in the midst of turmoil. Once stifling and thick, the air settled into a deceptive calm that belied the intensity of the conflict that had just transpired. A soothing sense of relief cascaded over Rob, calming his taut nerves. Yet, at that moment, the last vestiges of strength deserted him, and his battered form crumpled to the cold, unforgiving ground. The void of unconsciousness engulfed him, leaving him at the mercy of the harsh, brutal reality they had been summoned into.

With a surge of adrenaline, Jeremy rapidly gripped the unconscious orc by the back of his armor, hauling him toward the portal. Rob had achieved his objective, safeguarding the chamber's inhabitants during their frantic exodus, leaving only a handful of stragglers scrambling to escape. However, they knew they couldn't withstand another barrage of magical force like the previous one.

Without any cue, the trio of erstwhile stone floor bosses barreled down the hallway, steeling themselves for a brutal face-to-face confrontation with their enemies. The atmosphere buzzed with suspense, the sheer gravity of the situation inescapable. Their valiant actions aimed to secure precious moments for the remaining individuals to traverse the portal, eluding the lethal clutches of their unyielding opponents.



Vanya watched with a sardonic smile as Orlaith unleashed a relentless ten-minute torrent of flames, powerful enough to rival a dragon's breath, down the corridor. Once Orlaith depletes her mana, they'll nonchalantly saunter through the scorched remains of any survivors, decapitate Aurelia if she managed to cling to life, seize the Dungeon Core, and merrily depart, sporting a new necklace crafted from Aurelia's fangs. The sacrifice of the other regimen of knights, paladins, mages, and squires was a regrettable, yet tolerable cost for their victory. Vanya had expected an epic confrontation; however, they were met with a laughably feeble resistance.

In a shocking twist, wicked and malevolent magic raced down the corridor, aimed directly at them. The dark force slammed into Orlaith, propelling her violently backward through the air. Before anyone could assess her condition, the thundering approach of a few somethings echoed through the hallway. Illuminated only by the faint red glow of the molten stone lining the corridor, the

unfolding sight seemed inconceivable. Three colossal stone figures charged toward them, bearing down with incredible speed.

As the colossal stone figures rapidly closed the distance, Vanya instinctively raised her sword and channeled holy magic, creating a barrier to protect her companions. Orlaith, still reeling from the initial impact of the dark magic, struggled to her feet, gritting her teeth in determination. She focused her remaining mana into her hands, igniting fierce flames that danced and crackled around her fingers.

Einarr, clad in his myrthril armor, charged forward with his massive war hammer, smashing into the first stone statue with all his might. The impact sent a web of cracks across its surface, but the relentless monstrosity continued its advance. Galen, the dwarf-sized fairy Champion, wove a gale of wind around the second statue, attempting to slow its progress. He also sent healing magic toward Orlaith, easing her pain and replenishing her energy.

Orlaith, now rejuvenated, launched a flaming assault on the third stone statue. Hotter than a volcano, the fire seared the stone's surface, gradually weakening its structure. Vanya, meanwhile, slashed at the first statue with her sword, imbued with holy energy, cleaving off chunks of stone with each blow. Despite their efforts, the statues continued their relentless advance, forcing the party to fight on the defensive.

With a gleeful madness dancing in his eyes, Einarr hoisted his colossal war hammer and slammed it into the first statue. The force of the blow shattered the stone guardian into a thousand jagged shards, each piece reflecting the dim glow of molten stone. Orlaith, her lips twisted into a mocking grin, unleashed a torrent of unrelenting fire upon the third statue, reducing it to a seething puddle of magma.

Galen, his demeanor calm and collected amidst the chaos, summoned the full force of his wind magic upon the second and final remaining statue. The whirlwind enveloped the stone behemoth, growing more violent and chaotic with each passing moment. The air shrieked and wailed, an orchestration of annihilation, as the maelstrom tore the monstrosity to pieces.

As the last remnants of the stone guardian crumbled to the ground, the cavernous chamber resonated with the sinister echoes of maniacal laughter and scornful scoffs from Orlaith and Einarr. Ever the stoic hero, Galen surveyed the scene with quiet satisfaction, his sense of duty unwavering in the face of the darkness surrounding them. The sight of their vanquished foes only heightened the twisted elation of the others. Einarr and Orlaith's faces contorted in a perverse blend of delight and madness. Together, the group reveled in the palpable atmosphere of dread that now permeated the depths of the dungeon, fueling their dark, manipulative sense of superiority.

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Well, color me impressed! Big ol' Rob pulled a superhero act out there! I mean, who knew the big green lug had it in him to eat that much magic and still stand? Even yours truly might've been toasted. But hey, now's not the time for applause. We need to hightail it outta here before flame-crazy down there decides it's time for round two. I threw a quick side-eye at my sexy vampire lady noticing she's still all zoned in—Dungeon Core, portal business, the whole shebang. I then noticed

that oddball kid who called me 'Mommy' (or 'Mummy'...who knows with kids?) managed to scoot through. Despite everything, ensuring Aurelia's safety was, of course, of my utmost importance.

"Aurelia, we need to leave," I urged her.

Regrettably, she shook her head. "I'm sorry, my beloved, but you'll have to go on without me."

"Dream on!" I shot back, quickly surveying the room. Only a few folks were left hanging around. Jeremy was lugging the out-cold Rob towards the portal, and I spotted Heather, Yua, and Jason already making their getaway.

A crimson streak marred Aurelia's cheek as she gazed into my eyes. "I can't transport the Dungeon Core through a portal it's sustaining, and I won't allow them to take it back. Possessing it would enable them to reopen the portal to the exact location I selected, and I can't bear the thought of them killing you. No, my love, I've gambled too much to bring you back, but your well-being means more to me than my own. Please, go!"

"Are you kidding me?!" My brain went into overdrive, a messy cocktail of confusion and rage. What's she on about with this "*gambling too much to bring me back*" business? Regardless, both fragments of my splintered soul adored her, even if understanding the exact reason seemed elusive.

"*We can't just stand by and watch her fall,*" my thoughts churned.

"*Duh!*" I retorted internally. "*Over our dead body!*"

The ruckus of steel meeting stone reverberated from the hallway, but my brain was doing somersaults. Ditching Aurelia wasn't in the cards for me. Odd, given I'm usually not the caring type. But there I was, a hot mess of fury, panic, and confusion, all thanks to those hypnotic blood-red peepers of hers.

In this strange new world, I'd turned into a creature of chaos, loving every wild second. So, why'd this one gorgeous vampire get me all twisted up inside? Before she yanked me into this reality, we were strangers. But man, the moment I got a look at her? Wham! It's like she put a spell on my heart. Even with my noggin and soul all shattered and jumbled, I was still head over heels for her. No way was I letting anything happen to her on my watch!

"Please, my beloved," Aurelia implored. "Enter the portal at once, lest you become trapped here with me."

"Aye, would ya look at that, a vamp with a tender heart," scoffed a dwarf clad in shimmering silver armor. He sported a helmet resembling a stereotypical Valkyrie. He also had a magnificent red beard that I begrudgingly admired—I instantly hated him.

A squadron of troops trailed the dwarf into the room, and it became crystal clear that they mustn't touch Aurelia. The portal beckoned, with her desperate eyes silently imploring me to seek refuge through its shimmering gateway. I ached to shout at her, to rebuff her silent plea! To add to the turmoil, a gut-wrenching pain threatened to bring me to my knees, urging tears to flow until oblivion took over. What a wretched day this had turned out to be!

I locked eyes with my lovely Aurelia and mouthed, “I’m sorry.”

In a blur, my arms transformed into writhing tentacles faster than any could register. One coiled protectively around Aurelia's slender midsection, while its twin secured the Dungeon Core. Pivoting with determination, I hoisted her into the air, our eyes ensnared in a mutual gaze.

“Don’t do this,” she cried out.

Ignoring her plea, I propelled her through the portal. As she disappeared into the opening, I stashed the core into Stellar Void—safe and well beyond the reach of our foes. But as the core vanished, the portal followed suit, stranding me with the knights.

A blood-curdling scream came out from that Paladin that had killed Wartie. “You bitch! She killed my husband, and now you stole from me my revenge!”

With the shadow of impending doom looming, I couldn't help but get in one last zinger, "Oh, by the way, it wasn't Aurelia who snuffed out your precious hubby. That was all me," I boasted, flashing a monstrous smirk that only my morphed form could truly pull off.

The Paladin's scream pierced the air again as she raised her sword high. Every wave of holy magic emanating from it made my skin coil in agony. I wasn't one for self-sacrifice or heroism; no, I relished in the sadistic pleasure of tormenting others. Why I was acting this way was beyond me, but it felt just about right in my twisted noggin. Ready to embrace my death, I was about to clench my eyes shut when ginger-beard over there shot up his hand to stop her.

"*Ugh, my guts,*" I thought with a wince. They were having a proper fit in there. Seriously, I had a sneaky suspicion something was off for a hot minute, but snatching that Dungeon Core? It was like pouring gasoline on a dumpster fire of indignation. “*What's a girl gotta do to catch a break?*”

I stared Vanya down, her eyes blazing with a mix of malice and determination. The tension between us was palpable, a crackling energy that begged to be unleashed. My black, gothic dress shifted restlessly, ready to lash out in the form of tentacles at the slightest provocation. Though I could still use magic, accessing it through the system was out of the question. "Damn it, Circe," I muttered, rolling my eyes.

Defying the dwarf's command, the Paladin sprang into action, her motions a blur of precision and power. Vanya, bee-lined right at me, sword slicing the air like it's some high-stakes cooking show—with me on the chopping block. And that holy magic? Feels like the worst possible combo of a sunburn and an existential crisis. But I wasn't about to be outdone. My dress morphed—superhero-style—into these aggressive tendrils, responding with a might that would have lesser foes scurrying. And amidst the chaos, there's me—I mean, me. You know, two souls thingy—cheering in my head with that twisted glee of ours. Part of me reveled in the madness; the drama, the adrenaline, the sheer thrill of it. But deep down, a somber realization lingered: this could very well be our curtain call.

In the thick of it all, my brain went haywire trying to keep pace with that Paladin. And guess what? In my "*Oh snap!*" moment, I whipped out my Necrotic Flame spell—both ambient casting style and system-assisted. I mean, I felt all legit sorceress-y and stuff. Though, to be real, the system

probably just threw me off my game since it wasn't quite working for me. And, just my luck, when I let the spell fly? Epic fail. A firework display of Necrotic Fire decided my arm was the main event, blasting it off into splatters of black gloop.

Gritting my teeth through the pain, the dwarf intervened, stepping between Vanya and me. His imposing presence brought our twisted dance of my death to a halt. His eyes, filled with anger and authority, demanded that we stand down, putting an end to the battle. Both of my souls fell silent, and I couldn't help but feel a sense of impending doom.

A new figure entered the chamber, a woman adorned in a splendid dress crafted from mesmerizing reflective red scales. In my former life, dresses never held much appeal. Still, they'd become a newfound fascination in this bizarre existence, and I adored hers. Yet, the woman appeared to be clutching her shoulder, nursing what seemed like a minor injury. Given the absence of any blood scent, I could only assume it to be minor.

"We need to get out of here," I told myself.

"Uh, genius idea, but how?" I shot back.

"Wha' sort of creature might ye be?" The dwarf inquired.

"Ever have that nightmare you can't shake off? That's me," I smirked at him, mischief dancing in my eyes.

"Ha! I've taken a likin' to this creature," the dwarf chuckled heartily.

"Enough of this nonsense. We should eliminate the creature and retrieve the core from its lifeless corpse," a man no taller than the dwarf asserted. His stature was no hindrance to his superiority, as the dragonfly-like wings extending from his back set him apart from the others.

Yet, before anyone could carry out any murderous intentions, I crumpled to my knees, clutching my abdomen. The inexplicable affliction that gripped me intensified. Its ferocity surpassed anything I had ever experienced. My body seemed to bubble and churn as if I were being boiled from within. A searing agony extended throughout my entire form. It felt as though I was being consumed by a ravenous inferno!

"What's happening to that thing?" asked some random knight I couldn't be bothered to care about.

I could sense the holy magic from Paladin Anlyth coalescing into a lethal strike that would end my suffering. Whether motivated by mercy or vengeance, I couldn't tell. Yet, her assault never materialized as my chest burst open, unveiling a glowing golden circle no larger than a small bracelet. Ah, it was the ring of holding the Paladin's husband had been wearing around his impressively large junk. She also seemed to recognize it, her eyes widening in what could only be terror.

"The imbecile held a pocket dimension within another pocket dimension," screeched the woman in the red dress. "FLEE!"

The ring dangled within my torn-open chest, its glow escalating with every second as it began to whirl with a sinister aura. Simultaneously, a thunderous hum amplified, reaching a deafening roar as the knights stumbled over one another in a frantic effort to flee. As for me, the pain ceased once the ring was extracted from Stellar Void. I remained motionless, smiling throughout, knowing Aurelia was out of harm's way.

“I think this must be love,” I whispered.

“Without a doubt,” I nodded.



From a distance, Olin's eyes fixed upon the swarming armada of airships that had hemmed in the ruins, the last sanctuary of his mistress. The once impenetrable protective barrier was now nowhere in sight. Doubts clouded his mind; had she truly escaped the inevitable? The thought that the creature which held his phylactery might fall filled him with a creeping dread: his tether to this realm could snap.

Drawing a sharp breath, Olin braced himself against the creeping anxiety. Then, it came—a surge of mana so intense that it dwarfed the Way Stone's explosion. Airships were swept away by the ensuing shockwave like toys, with many plunging towards the ground below. Above, a titanic mushroom cloud dominated the sky. Yet, just as the cataclysm unfolded, darkness claimed Olin. He felt a sudden wrenching sensation as his very soul was torn from General Ezad Anlyth's form.