

# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 1

### DEVOTED TO A NIGHTMARE

Aurelia strode forward, every step radiating a fierce determination and seething rage. Before her, Lord Demidicus loomed, an ancient vampire who had once plucked her dying soul from Earth when she was known as Aislinn, during the days the Romans had set foot in her homeland of Britannia.

Whispers spread in hushed tones throughout the vampire coven. Rumors abounded that Lord Demidicus had replaced his own daughter's soul, disappointed by her lack of malice and might. However, his true intent ran much deeper: he had aimed to create a Leveler within his bloodline—fabled warriors of legend with the potential to ascend to godhood. Though that vision may not have materialized as he hoped, Aislinn—now Aurelia—was no mere replacement. Her arcane abilities eclipsed even those of the Gods' Champions, Levelers themselves. Some even mused, with a hint of jest, that she harbored the soul of a Titan.

Despite it all, this day was no festive occasion. As Aurelia moved forward, she passed by rows of seated vampires, each present to bear witness. She was draped in a breathtaking black gown, intricately embroidered with patterns reminiscent of tentacles and tendrils—symbols of death and nightmares that she held close to her heart. A dark veil obscured her face, concealing her disdain. But while her gaze initially fell upon Lord Demidicus, her alleged father, it soon shifted to the other central figure in this bleak ceremony: her intended groom.

For nearly two centuries, Aurelia pursued a singular, unwavering goal: to summon the soul of her true love, her husband, Bowen. After enduring countless trials and tribulations, her dream was at last realized. Yet, the Bowen that returned to her was not as she remembered. As it transpired, time meandered differently across realms. While Aurelia had experienced just shy of two centuries, a staggering two millennia had passed for Bowen on Earth.

After countless reincarnations, perhaps numbering in the hundreds or even more, Bowen's last life—and the only one he remembered—was that of a woman. Further complicating matters, this reincarnated soul, now known as Blake, found herself entwined within the essence of a Black Pudding, a slime monster. This unexpected outcome was contrary to Aurelia's meticulous plans and tireless efforts to find a suitable vessel. It felt as though some divine force had intervened. Yet to Aurelia, these intricacies mattered little. Whether the notion of soulmates was grounded in truth or merely a romantic fantasy, she believed with all her heart that Blake was, and always would be, hers.

For all these reasons, Aurelia's gaze towards her groom, Duke Lysander, was a tempest of contempt and unbridled fury. Lord Demidicus had arranged this union, intending to solidify his influence in the nascent coven. Consequently, Aurelia felt a vehement loathing for both male vampires: Lord

Demidicus for bartering her in a power play, and Duke Lysander for willingly being part of the transaction.

Duke Lysander stood out in any gathering—a mammoth of a man with broad shoulders, built like a barbarian. He loomed over everyone, his stature undeniably commanding. However, what he possessed in physical presence, he lacked in age, a defining metric of power among vampires. He was clad in a tailored black suit, topped off with his signature cape. Yet, Aurelia surmised that the cap on his back was likely a set of wings, a hallmark of pure-blooded vampires. Even Lord Demidicus could manifest a pair, though he was so potent that he could effortlessly conceal them within himself.

Aurelia, a pure-blood vampire by birthright, lacked wings. She theorized that perhaps this was due to a blood trait inherited from her vessel's biological mother, a woman about whom she knew nothing and had no desire to learn. For a moment, her gaze settled on Niamh, seated amongst the guests. The succubus was a favored pet of Lord Demidicus, who reveled in displaying her for all to see. “*Could she...*” Aurelia pondered, but the thought faded almost as quickly as it came, her attention refocusing on Lord Demidicus, the architect of this grim ceremony.

“On this shadowed night, within the embrace of Völuspá’s glow, we come together,” Lord Demidicus proclaimed, his voice resonating throughout the Grand Hall where vampires from every corner had assembled. “Tonight, in the heart of darkness, we bear witness to the union of my cherished daughter, Aurelia, and the esteemed Duke Lysander. This sacred bond not only melds two great covens but also amplifies our dominion over the night,” he continued. As his words filled the air, Aurelia trembled, a storm of unbridled anger surging within her.

The vampire lord droned on, his words a monotonous blur to Aurelia, who felt a tightening grip of impatience and agitation. Her mind wandered back to Blake, to their last encounter within the shadowed confines of the Grotto of the Betrayed. Amidst the chaos of the dungeon’s siege, Blake had made the agonizing decision to remain behind, pushing Aurelia through the escape portal to safety. That memory was a cruel shard in Aurelia’s heart, a constant reminder of the pain of having worked so tirelessly to bring her beloved back, only to be torn apart once more.

The uncertainty of Blake’s fate was torture. The void left in her wake, a constant ache in Aurelia’s chest. She couldn’t even take solace in the hope of another reunion, for locating a specific soul within this realm was akin to finding a single star within the light of the afternoon sun. The cycle of reincarnation here was twisted, an imperfect process seemingly operating without the oversight of the gods. Each beat of Aurelia’s dark heart was a cruel reminder of the uncertainty surrounding Blake. No, that was not right, deep down, a sorrowful truth lurked, one she had been unwilling to face.

“*Blake is truly gone,*” Aurelia finally admitted to herself, a blood-stained tear tracing the path down her pale cheek, only hidden beneath her veil.

“Should any present take issue with this union, voice your dissent now, or forever be... silenced,” Lord Demidicus intoned, the hint of a threatening growl punctuating his final word. This part

always preceded the vows. Yet, Aurelia was certain no vows would be exchanged on this day; she had steadfastly warned that she would offer none.

Unlike the customary formalities observed in most species' weddings, vampires did not shy away from airing their grievances when permitted. Moreover, weddings were the perfect opportunity to make public demands without fear of political recompense—at least... traditionally. Within that tradition the bride and groom will negotiate terms to ensure harmony, averting potential blood feuds. Responding to Lord Demidicus's call, twenty individuals boldly rose, forming a line down the central aisle, each eager to voice their objections and ascertain their potential gains.

At a vampire wedding with hundreds in attendance, having merely twenty oppositionists was unheard of. Typically, at such ceremonies, nearly every attendee would voice some form of grievance. Yet, those who now stood were primarily from outside covens, naive to the depth of Lord Demidicus's pettiness, vindictiveness, and ruthlessness. They dared challenge him, even if indirectly. While this might not have been his own wedding, those seated understood the stakes. The entire event was a manifestation of the ancient lord's hunger for power, even if it necessitated marrying off his daughter. And from the icy glare lurking beneath his cowl, it was clear these brave or foolhardy souls standing were utterly oblivious to the danger they courted.

“How will this union influence our hunting territories?” a pallid, hunched bald vampire with misshapen goblin ears demanded. Aurelia couldn't suppress an eye roll at the sight of his fangs, protruding from the front of his mouth, resembling rat teeth more than anything. “The darklings of the Densen Mountains seek permission to encroach upon these valleys,” he persisted.

The subsequent grievances, demands, and wishes followed a similar vein. Every claimant sought to determine what they could acquire, all their entreaties directed at Duke Lysander. While tradition permitted Aurelia to voice her own terms, her mind was preoccupied. Most of her thoughts lingered on her true love and the potential methods to locate Blake's lost soul. Yet, as she pondered, no solutions surfaced.

“Well, well! We all know Lord Demidicus did the unspeakable to his own darling daughter,” bellowed a vampire so massive that two servants were tasked with carrying him. “Why ever should we entertain the thought of such a soulless creature uniting two covens? Even now, the soulless bitch is too silent to—.”

A sudden burst of carnage erupted, drenching the attendees in a grisly downpour. As the viscera rained from above, many glanced about in shock, while some lasciviously extended their tongues, hoping to catch the falling droplets that bathed over them. As for the portly vampire who had dared insult the bride-to-be, there was no trace of him or the two servants who had been by his side.

Duke Lysander found himself momentarily taken aback, the event unfolding too swiftly even for his vampiric reflexes. Yet, he heard a muted sigh from the ancient vampire behind him. As he spun to face Lord Demidicus, his gaze inadvertently caught Aurelia. Her veil partially lifted, she was delicately licking blood from her fingers. A sinking realization washed over the Duke. It was at that moment... he knew, he fucked up. He'd always known of Aurelia's might, but never had he

imagined her powers dwarfing his own, especially to such an extent. The thought then struck him, “*Does she surpass even Lord Demidicus?*”

After the sheer power Aurelia had displayed, the last three hopefuls still standing swiftly reevaluated their priorities and promptly chose the safer option, retaking their seats. Yet, amidst the tense silence, another figure rose. His trembling legs and the snickers from several corners of the room announced his approach before anyone truly took note of him. This was no awe-inspiring figure from vampiric lore, but a pitiable hybrid creature bearing a set of amphibian features. Devoid of the signature fangs, his froggy countenance instead hid a row of small, fish-like teeth. His lack of any semblance of intimidation or grandeur only further solidified the disdain with which the crowd regarded him.

To the crowd, the frog-like vampire appeared a mere joke, an object of derision. All except Aurelia viewed Vorigan as a pitiable figure. Yet, Aurelia knew the truth of it. And for the first time in what felt like an eternity, a sly grin tugged at the corners of her hauntingly beautiful face. Vorigan was no simpleton, no pushover. The tremors coursing through him were not of fear but of sheer ecstasy. The former beastkin reveled in the disdain and repulsion he garnered from the masses. Every sneer, every mocking whisper fed his masochistic desires. In the midst of all the ridicule, he was in his element, basking in every moment of it.

“*Ah, if only they really did those mean things they say,*” Vorigan mused to himself, a gleeful shiver trembled down his abdomen and to his knees.

Aurelia’s lips twitched with restrained amusement. “Vorigan, to your chambers. I’ll have two torturers from the dungeons attend to your... impertinence shortly.”

Vorigan’s response was an animated croak, easily misinterpreted by the audience as trepidation. Yet beneath that seemingly pathetic exterior was a creature overflowing with elation. Deep down, he had wished to make a request for Lady Aurelia’s benefit. She had been one of the few – if not the only one – to ever show him a semblance of kindness. But in the thick of the moment, with all eyes on him, and the weight of the occasion pressing down, he couldn’t quite muster the perfect demand that would serve her well. So, with a shivering nod, which belied a mix of anticipation and regret, Vorigan made his way to his chambers, each step a mix of apprehension and suppressed glee.

Lord Demidicus gave a disapproving shake of his head, momentarily distracted by Vorigan’s antics. Resolute to move the ceremony forward, he began, “If that is all, then it is my duty to pronounce you vampire lord and—” but his words abruptly halted.

The oppressive atmosphere of anticipation hung thickly as all eyes darted about, seeking the source of the sudden intrusion. Whispers of dread and uncertainty rustled through the gathered crowd like leaves caught in a sudden gust. The shadows, previously inconspicuous and obedient to the glow of the torches, began to behave erratically. They twisted, stretched, and writhed, like living entities, refusing to be confined by the limits of light and structure.

Gradually, the wriggling masses converged, coiling around the grand pillars that supported the chamber’s vaulted ceilings. The sight was eerily reminiscent of a gargantuan basilisk, its long

serpentine form seeking to encircle and constrict its prey. As the darkness continued to weave and intertwine, a collective gasp of horror and awe arose. The gathered vampires, ancient and young alike, recognized the manifestation of the Serpent, this coven's dark god. The very room seemed to pulse with the heartbeat of this shadowy god, challenging those present with its very existence.

The Serpent god dispersed, fleeting like mist before sunlight, leaving a sense of unease in its wake. From behind a pillar, a little girl made entirely of darkness emerged, her presence almost whimsical amidst the otherwise solemn gathering. As she disappeared behind another pillar, a tall, shadowy figure stepped out from its opposite side. The Serpent, now adopting a vampiric silhouette, persisted in this mystifying game. With every pillar it navigated, a new shadowy form materialized, each more enigmatic than the last, yet all undeniably connected to the same dark essence.

The charade continued, building in suspense, until finally, the Serpent stood before the bride and groom. It had transformed into a Naga: the upper half resembling a man and the lower half, that of a serpent, crowned by the majestic hood of a cobra. Yet, the entirety of its form was veiled in an overwhelming aura of darkness.

“Sssso, I have come to bless this wedding,” the Serpent hissed, its tone dripping with venomous intent.

Aurelia's dismay deepened upon hearing the serpent god's proclamation. She had carefully plotted to sever 'both' of Lysander's heads this night. Yet, with divine sanction gracing their union, her desired plans now seemed fraught with peril. Her frown deepened; it appeared she would have to content herself with a slightly less lethal approach, at least for the time being—perhaps limiting herself to the nightly ritual of removing his manhood, for starters.

“You honor us,” Lord Demidicus intoned, bowing deeply.

Aurelia's keen eyes swept the assembly, noting that every attendee was prostrating themselves in reverence. All, that is, except for her. This defiance wasn't lost on either the Serpent or Lord Demidicus. Yet, the elder vampire didn't dare chastise his daughter, particularly when the Serpent let out a chuckle, seemingly amused by Aurelia's audacity.

“Oh, it is an honor, yesss. But not quite as you perceive it,” the Serpent hissed. “This vampire duke? He now belongs to Aurelia's harem.” A wheezing, sibilant laughter followed, echoing eerily in the hall.

“My what?” Aurelia's eyes widened in surprise.

“Wasssn't your sssoul already bound in matrimony?” the Serpent hissed with amusement. “Ssso, I now declare you man and wife. To undo thiss union, or to dissolve your 'harem', your two paramourss must engage in ritual combat.” His sibilant laughter echoed, sending shivers through the attendees.

Lord Demidicus and Duke Lysander straightened up abruptly, faces contorted in fury. “You have no right to...” both began to protest in tandem, but then swiftly checked their words, thinking better of challenging the deity.

“Ssshhe’s bound to the Crone’s scion, a union that echoes through the very fabric of reality. Even I must acknowledge this vampire bride’s ties to another—essentially, the offspring of a goddess,” the Serpent hissed, an eerie smile stretching across his shadowy visage. “Thus, I recognize this union. As the divine patron of this coven, my decrees are absolute. But heed this: should members of Aurelia’s harem duel in ritual combat and only one remains, that victor shall inherit all the other possessed, titles and all,” he warned. His laughter, echoing with a sinister hiss, lingered even as he vanished into the void.

For the first time since Blake’s disappearance, a surge of elation made Aurelia’s heart race. This revelation all but confirmed her beloved was still out there. She cast a gleefully wicked grin at her newly-acquired groom. Until she could reunite with Blake, this man would endure every ounce of her malice until Blake delivered the final blow. And as her gaze slid to her alleged father, it was clear he wasn’t exempt from her sinister intentions either.

“Has anyone thought to inquire about my wedding gift wishes?” Aurelia cooed, reveling in the stunned silence that hung in the air.



The anguish nested in Rob’s heart felt as cold and unyielding as the stone walls enclosing his prison. He often found himself drifting into fantasies where the most taxing challenge was beating a tricky level in a video game or acing an exam, not fighting tooth and nail for survival against vampires, beasts, and beings wielding unfathomable power. Every heartbeat thudded against his ribcage, echoing through the void that had settled within him, mirroring the hollow clang of chains as other prisoners were dragged, screaming, past his cell.

He had been merely a teenager engrossed in video games before being torn from his home and family, and thrust into a realm brimming with magic and monstrosities. Here, he had been forced to compete against six—no, seven others. He often overlooked Blake, but she was among them, and they all vied against one another to become the Dark Champion, or Nightmares’ Champion as the goddess, the Crone dubbed it. And yet, it had been Jason who had won the title. Nevertheless, Rob had been christened the Nightmare Paladin—a title that bore a dark irony, far removed from the virtuous white paladin, or knight he had hoped to embody.

Rob honestly didn’t care about any of that now, no, he yearned for his family. He yearned for the mundane banter at the dinner table, the comforting embrace of his bed, the assurance that with the dawn, a new day of predictable normalcy awaited him. Above all else, he wanted to go home.

His hands sought the cold, unforgiving surface of the stone wall, the rough texture anchoring him to the bitter reality. And as he curled up in the abyss of the unknown, the cries of tortured prisoners brought tears streaming down his cheeks as he wept. He closed his eyes, letting the distant cacophony of screams and clanging metal serve as a twisted lullaby, ushering him into a restless slumber where shadows mercilessly replayed the cruel game of his reality.

As days morphed into weeks, and weeks dragged into months, the cell’s cold stone seemed to leech the hope from Rob’s veins. His prison cell had become a claustrophobic world of torment where Heather’s ceaseless murmurs and prayers to the Crone echoed endlessly off the dank walls. Once,

Rob's eyes would roll at every desperate plea that escaped Heather's lips, now they stared blankly at the ceiling. They were barren of hope, mirroring the void that had grown within him.

His flesh had once quivered in fear at every distant scream that reverberated through the prison's hollow corridors. Now, his skin felt numb, a cold, lifeless barrier encasing the void that had replaced the fervent soul within.

He could no longer feel the gritty cold floor against his skin; it was as though a vast abyss had swallowed the half orc who once dared to dream of rescue, of escape. Even despair, the old companion of the forsaken, had abandoned him in this abyss.

Rob's ears picked up the mocking drip of water from somewhere in the dark, each droplet a cruel reminder of time passing, of life ebbing away in the sinister gloom that now housed his existence. The looming dread that once haunted him had now nestled deep within his bones, a permanent chill that even fear dared not traverse.

In the dead of the night, as Heather's prayers turned into whimpered sobs, the silence in Rob's soul screamed louder than the shackles that clanged against the fate of the damned that shared his plight.

On a fate-drenched night, as Rob idly traced the crudely chiseled marks on the wall—a mocking calendar left by a prisoner whose fate he did not know—he realized the monotonous dripping had ceased. It was a bitter testament to his hardened senses that he noticed the silence of the water droplets before the absence of screams. Nonetheless, this small break from routine nudged Rob from his numbing reverie, and for the first time in weeks, a flicker of curiosity drove him to glance around.

His languid gaze collided with a vision of surreal beauty—a glowing woman standing amidst the clinging shadows. Her skin was a canvas of ethereal blues swirling with tender pinks, shifting and blending like the transient clouds at dusk. The colors seemed alive, breathing a silent dance of ancient rhythms. Her hair, a cascade of reverse hues, flowed with a life of its own, pink dominating the scene with whimsical streaks of blue playing hide and seek amongst the waves.

Her eyes, however, were what held Rob captive—radiant pink orbs that cut through the darkness, filling his prison cell with a ghostly luminescence that painted every dingy corner with hues of forgotten hope. The eerie glow cast an otherworldly gleam on the chains that hung lifelessly against the grimy walls, momentarily pulling Rob from the abyss of despair that had been his reality. And despite all, it seemed only he could see her.

For a heartbeat, fear mingled with awe as he watched the ethereal figure seemingly unperturbed by the claustrophobic darkness that enveloped the dungeons. Was she an angel of death come to deliver him, or a figment of madness born from endless nights of haunting screams? The flicker of fear danced around the edges of his weary heart, yet amidst the deadly ballet of dread and wonder, Rob felt something he hadn't in a long time—a burning spark of curiosity that momentarily thawed the icy void within.

“Who are you?” Rob managed to rasp through his parched throat.

“You may call me, Circe,” she said, her smile illuminating the gloom, a ray of warmth that made Rob’s heart flutter. “I see great promise in you.”

Suddenly, the screech of the prison door jarred the silence, causing Rob to whip his head around. But when he looked back, the angelic woman had vanished. Yet, he felt a breath against his ear, a whisper that sent a chill down his spine, “I’ll be seeing you again, soon.”

Rob spun his head wildly, eyes darting across the murky gloom for a glimpse of Circe, but she was gone. His breaths came out in short, shaky gasps as the reality of his desolate situation bore down upon him once more. Yet before he could sink back into the abyss of despair, the clatter of boots against stone pulled his attention to the entrance of his cell.

Two guards approached, their eyes piercing through the dark. But behind them, a familiar face emerged from the shadows—a short cat girl with gray hair he recognized. Her eyes twinkled with mischief as a broad smile spread across her face, cutting through the eerie stillness that hung in the cold air.

“Princess Aurelia has been gifted the five of you as her personal servants, as part of her wedding gift from Duke Lysander,” Hikari proclaimed with a sly grin.

“Princess?” Sophia’s voice was unmistakable amid the silence.

As for Jeremy, he remained silent, but Rob noticed him standing in his cell, approaching the bars with a furrowed brow. Like himself, Jeremy had taken on a different race after being summoned into this reality; his soul was placed within a wolf beastkin, while Heather became a dark elf. Even Yua, who seemed ever so concerned with Heather’s safety, had received a high elf body. Only Sophia had retained her humanity. As for Jason, the only one among the original six who managed to avoid capture, he found himself in a dark fae form.

“Did you not know?” Hikari inquired, tapping her chin in thought. “Lord Demidicus is a vampire lord, and the oldest known vampire. His title is akin to that of a king, making his daughter our princess. Though many vampires don’t see it that way; nonetheless, it’s her official title, even if most refrain from using it within this coven.”

As the rusty gates of the prison cells screeched open, a palpable sense of dread mingled with the stagnant air. Yua burst forth from her confinement, the sudden motion causing the guards to snatch at the hilts of their blades. They froze for a beat, eyeing her warily, but her attention was riveted to Heather. With a blur of elven grace, she swooped into Heather’s cell, wrapping her in an embrace that seemed to stave off the cold, if only for a fleeting moment. Heather reciprocated the gesture, albeit stiffly, her face an unreadable mask.

Rob ambled out of his cell, the desolate echo of his steps a grim reminder of their reality. As he scanned the faces around him, a gallery of despair, he was met with vacant stares that mirrored the void he felt gnawing at his soul. The guards’ cold, dispassionate eyes watched them, hinting at a darkness far more sinister waiting beyond the cell’s cage if they stepped out of line. Each movement felt like wading through a swamp of despair, the horror of the unknown ahead knotting in his stomach, strangling the last vestiges of hope that threatened to flicker out.



Despite the looming uncertainties even if they had been liberated from the confines of their cells, Rob couldn't shake the feeling that their struggles were just beginning. Still, a genuine smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. His mind was drawn back to the recent memory, or perhaps a fleeting illusion, of the ethereal woman. She was bathed in mesmerizing swirls of blues and pinks, and even amid the hopelessness, her presence felt like that of magic. Her voice, imbued with a gentle confidence, still echoed in his ears, "I'll be seeing you again, soon."