

BLAKE PUDDING

CHAPTER 27

CLASH OF CHAMPIONS

Chaos reigned all around, with beastkin darting about in frenzied panic. The approaching airship, a looming speck in the distance, was steadily drawing nearer. It sparked a heated debate among the beastkin: to retreat underground, back to the relative safety of the catacombs, which would likely spell doom for the half-built airship and risk their discovery, or to stand their ground and confront the impending threat. Amidst this turmoil, I had found myself a spot on what appeared to be a stone bench. Its battered state suggested a history, perhaps involving an unfortunate encounter with someone's face—at least, that was the amusing backstory I envisioned in my mind.

There I sat, in a bubble of calm, with Phantasia contentedly curled up in my lap. It struck me as amusing that, despite my general inclination towards devouring anything and everything, I had never felt the urge to consume my pet pudding. Instead, I found her endearing, particularly her growing fondness for feasting on goblins and such. I mused that she'd probably gobble up every beastkin around if I let her loose, and frankly, I'd be tempted to join in. But, with a sigh of reluctant acknowledgment, I recognized the importance of having allies—or whatever other nonsensical reasoning dictated. I mean, it certainly wasn't for some goody-two-shoes moral reason like 'thou shalt not kill'—please, that would be utterly ridiculous.

Sitting there, I was perfectly content, my mind wandering through a maze of self-reflection about my multiple selves. It's hard to pinpoint exactly when I reached a sort of equilibrium with my two inner souls. They significantly influence my personality and often clash with each other, but in the end, they are both integral facets of me. One is reminiscent of Hannibal Lecter—a touch over the top, reveling in terrorizing everything and everyone before devouring them. The other is more whimsical, insanely so—though, in truth, both are. But this one finds joy in the chaos, kind of like a Harlequin or Harley, something along those lines. They represent my enduring nightmare and my once-fading, now elusive dream. I don't know; it's sort of hard to label that portion of me.

Sure, the dreamier side of me might seem kinder, but that's only when it's the sole half that's awake. The darker side—my nightmarish soul—when dormant, leaves this more cheerful part adrift in confusion, uncertain of its true desires. Both halves are essential; they complete each other and, in turn, complete me. Without both aspects awake, I'm merely a shell harboring only half a soul, unsure about what or whom I truly desire. And what do I crave? With both halves awake, the answer is now straightforward! I yearn to bathe in the blood of all who oppose me, while entwined in passion with my seductive vampire atop a mountain of corpses. And afterward, I'd casually craft a sandwich from the entrails of my mountainous conquest. *Mhmmm!*

It's strangely comforting, this duality. Even if I had the chance to be 'fixed' and made whole again, I'm not sure I'd take it. Life is too exhilarating with these contrasting yet intertwined aspects. It's

like loving all the insanity and violence, but the manner in which I embrace and crave it differs. It's akin to enjoying ice cream for its coldness but simultaneously despising the chill, loving its flavor yet detesting it, adoring the texture while finding it off-putting, and in the end, just loving it for being ice cream. Confusing, right? Probably. But that's exactly why I adore it—or them... my selves? It's the complexity and contradiction that make it—make me—so delightful.

Mmmm... Now I'm craving some ice cream straight from the carton.

What if we puree a brain and serve it ice-cold, straight from the cranium?

Oh! I love that idea!

I must admit, fully embracing who I am is still a work in progress, a familiar struggle that echoes from my past life. Back then, I was Blake Lyanna Jefferson, a short, curvy goth girl, often too harsh on myself, especially about my less-than-voluptuous chest. I'll be real, I wasn't as hopeless as I make myself out to be. Self-deprecation was just my shield back then—a hard habit to ditch—yet I had no trouble finding me some tits, dick, and ass when the mood struck me—and it often did—well, not so much the dick. I eventually came fully out, but I had my identity crisis phase before then.

However, I never truly saw myself as anything remarkable. Perhaps it was the constant barrage of sly insults and demeaning remarks from my stepfather that eventually wore me down. I could never fathom what my Karen of a mother saw in him. When he wasn't putting everyone down, he was holed up in the garage, obsessing over that old Daytona he inherited from his grandfather. Good riddance to that life—I hope someone steals that damn car and drives it off a cliff.

Now, here I am in a new world—moon—a realm of magic, and I've become something entirely different—a psychopath, you might say. I often wonder if this newfound existence has simply uncovered what was always lurking beneath the surface, or if it's this new monster body that's awakened these darker impulses to hunt, kill, and revel in the mayhem, while dining on the rotting corpses of my foes—not that it really matters. I'm finding joy in every moment of it either way, and that's what counts!

Though life now is far from perfect, the persistent issue I've faced has always been a profound sense of searching—for something, for someone—yet never finding it. It felt as if a piece of my soul was missing, plunging me into an unending depression, hence my goth phase. I could have brushed off my stepfather's demeaning remarks and his unsettling leers, but there was this void within me, an emptiness.

In an attempt to fill this void, I turned to whoever or whatever I could find, pun fully intended. But no matter who or what I encountered, nothing seemed to fill that gaping hole. That is, until I was reincarnated into this reality. Something inside me shifted; it was as if I finally discovered what I had been missing all my life. And there it was, right before me, and it—she—had a name: Aurelia.

Now, propelled by this newfound purpose, I am prepared to go to any lengths to return to her. I would willingly bathe in the blood of my enemies, my allies, and even the innocent if it means reuniting with Aurelia—though, to be honest, I might do that anyway, you never know. And now,

I am tantalizingly close, with only one obstacle left—a tiny speck in the sky, gradually growing larger as it draws nearer.

Continuing to sit there, I remained unsure of the beastkin's plan, absently petting Phantasia as the airship closed in. As it descended, I observed a stout dwarf standing at its front, or bow—or whatever you call the front end of a boat. He was clad in armor that sparkled with silver and gold, not unlike Von Von's, though this red-bearded fellow sported significantly more silver. Draped over his shoulder was a massive hammer, seemingly twice my size, which was saying something given that I towered over the average dwarf. I smirked, wondering if maybe he was compensating for something.

Nightmare, does he look familiar to you?

Can't say, all dwarves look alike to me.

Isn't that a bit racist?

Nah, I don't think it applies to fantasy races.

Actually, it does.

Really?

Yep.

Huh... But they're all short, armored, and bearded. That includes the females!

It still counts.

Well, that's just ridiculous... Hey, Dream? How do you tell them apart?

Oh, I can't. That's why I was asking you.

...I hate you.

The dwarf at the tip of the airship locked eyes with me, and I caught a glimpse of a dark gleam in his eyes. His lips seemed to curl into a predatory smile, although it was hard to tell for sure with that thick red beard obscuring most of his face. Not to mention, his helmet adorned with wing designs kept drawing my attention away from his expression. Whatever it was, I wasn't fond of the way he gazed down at me. I resolved to kill him either way.

That was my plan, at least, until the stout fellow did the unexpected. He leapt off the airship, plummeting downwards, and landed not far from me with an unnerving ease. He didn't even bother with a flashy superhero landing; instead, he landed upright on straight legs, as casually as if he were stepping off a curb—like it was nothing! *What the fuck?*

“Howdy,” I cheekily greeted the dwarf. “Have we met before? Honestly, it's so hard to tell, you all look alike.”

Nightmare!

That wasn't me, and you know it. When would I ever use a word as corny as 'howdy'? Seriously!

I might have kicked things off with 'howdy' and the 'have we met,' but you definitely threw in the 'look alike' bit.

Are you sure?

Yeah, pretty sure!

Like how sure?

About thirty percent sure.

Seriously? That's hardly sure at all.

Fine! It was me.

Realization seemed to light up the dwarf's face, his leering gaze turning into a more scrutinizing look. "Aye, I remember ye now. Ye be the one that exploded in the dungeon ruins? Singed the hair off me nuts, that did," he said, his thick accent adding a melodic quality to his words.

Honestly, I was growing tired of that accent. Why do only dwarves have accents, while none of the other races seem to? It made me wonder if the remnants of my Polyglot skill were just fucking with me now.

"Yeah, that wasn't one of my finer moments," I admitted. "Though, I'm surprised you survived," I added nonchalantly, still seated and stroking Phantasia on my lap.

I thought you said you didn't recognize him, and that they all look alike?

I don't, but he just mentioned he was in the dungeon when we exploded. Now shush, Dream. The grownups are talking.

"Surprised I survived? Ye be the one that bloody blew up! How in the hells did ye manage to survive that?" the dwarf blurted out, his left arm waving animatedly as he spoke, while his right arm balanced the massive hammer on his shoulder.

"Tsk, Mr. Dwarf, a lady's gotta have her secrets," I drawled, putting on my best Southern accent for added flair.

Pfft, we're no lady. More like a whore, bitch, cunt—

ZIP IT!

"The name's Einarr, Champion Einarr," he announced with a grin, the dark gleam returning to his eyes.

"Champion?" I gasped, dramatically pulling my hand from Phantasia to my chest, all while maintaining my faux Southern drawl. "Well, I declare," I said with feigned surprise. "Turns out, I have a champion of my own." A smile played on my lips. "Von Von, I know you're watching from somewhere," I called out over my shoulder, my voice laced with mischief.

“Ugh,” I heard Vanya groan from behind me.

“What?” Einarr paused, his expression shifting to one of stunned surprise.

I didn’t bother turning around; my attention remained fixed on the dwarf in front of me. All the while, I kept stroking Phantasia’s black, gooey unicorn—well, pudding—flesh, maintaining what could only be described as regal Southern hospitality. You know the kind, that polite yet unmistakably clear 'screw the fuck off' smile.

"Paladin Champion Vanya Anlyth," the dwarf hissed, his tone laced with contempt. "I thought ye had just abandoned us, left yer oath to the kingdom and to righteousness. But ne'er did I think ye'd join these... these lesser, vile species, the very ones we've sworn to eradicate," he spat out, each word heavy with scorn.

"Hey! I might be vile, but who are you calling lesser?" I retorted with feigned indignation.

Behind me, I heard Von Von let out a weary sigh. "Einarr, can't you see what we've been doing? Look around you," she urged. Although I kept my eyes fixed on the dwarf, I could sense she was gesturing to the ruined city that surrounded us. "The beastkin aren't lesser or vile. They didn't attack our kingdom or bring ruin upon us. We are the ones who brought violence and death to them. How can that be righteous? And the young ones, the very few they've been blessed with, displayed on spikes... How can we call that just? Such a precious gift, a dream for many, and yet we snatch it away from them," she continued, her voice tinged with a mixture of sadness and conviction.

"Is that it? Ye betray us for a handful of wee ones, not even enough to count on the hand I use for jerkin'?" he scoffed dismissively.

"The gods' demands are cruel and evil," Vanya countered sharply.

"Aye, every crusade has its dark side, but to bring forth the light, ye've got to wet yer whistle or something," Einarr quipped, his tone nonchalant.

Puzzled by his bizarre expression, I tilted my head. "Shouldn't it be more like, 'it's always darkest before the dawn' or something along those lines?" I chimed in.

"Oh! Aye, that's a good one," the dwarf exclaimed, pointing at me enthusiastically. He then turned to Vanya, nodding with approval. "What she said."

Another sigh escaped Von Von, a sound that was becoming all too familiar around here. Sighing had become one of my favorite ways to express frustration, and it seemed I wasn't alone in that. Risking a glance around, I noted the eerie quietness and the absence of any beastkin. Typical, they always seemed to vanish when the going got tough. *Cowards!*

“If ye've betrayed us and your god Jörmun, that means you're no longer a Champion, now are ye? Kicked right out of the system's divine grace,” Einarr stated, his voice laden with a dark undertone.

“Oh, I didn’t betray Jörmun. He traded me off,” Vanya replied with an eerie sweetness.

“W-What?” Einarr stammered, clearly taken aback. “And which god do you serve now?”

“Umm, hello! I did mention I have my own champion,” I interjected with a scoff, feeling a bit indignant.

“Ye can’t be serious? An ascended goddess, are ye?” he sneered, skepticism dripping from his words. “Are ye even in the system? What level are ye?”

I couldn’t help but respond with a touch of haughtiness, “Well, I wouldn’t exactly call myself a goddess, though I’m not opposed to the title.” I maintained my composure, still seated on the dilapidated bench, stroking the purring, plushie-sized Blake Pudding unicorn in my lap. “And yes, for your information, I am indeed a Leveler,” I announced, relishing the absurdity of it all.

“And yer level?” Einarr pressed, his hand gesturing impatiently, urging me to spill the beans.

“Don’t answer that,” Vanya chided sharply from behind me.

I shrugged, a hint of mischief in my voice, “Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t. My status sheet’s not showing any level.”

Dream! Are you actually serious?

What?

Einarr’s face twisted with disbelief. “Y-Ye’ve ascended? That’s got to be a lie,” he stammered, clearly shaken.

“I’m inclined to believe him,” Vanya added, her voice tinged with skepticism.

“Honestly, not lying here. My status sheet is genuinely blank on the level part,” I reiterated, throwing a glance back at Vanya. “I don’t even know if that makes me ascended or something else,” I mused aloud. A thought struck me—maybe this anomaly was the reason I have my own champion. Was the system recognizing me as a goddess, or maybe a demi-goddess of sorts? The thought process was becoming more intricate than I’d initially thought.

Damn it, Dream, why do you always lead us into the dumbest of shit?!

What did I do this time?

You took our eyes off him!

Oh, shit!

In the midst of scolding myself internally, I suddenly noticed Von Von's expression of shock. Reacting instantly, she sprang into action, her sword and shield appearing in a brilliant burst of yellow light. Yet, something was eerily off. Her movements seemed to unfold in slow motion, as if time itself had slowed to a crawl, creating a surreal, bullet-time effect reminiscent of an action movie.

Simultaneously, I felt a startling jolt, my head snapping forward in a jerky, disjointed manner. It was as if invisible strings were puppeteering my movements. Alongside this, Phantasia, my gooey unicorn companion, began to merge with me. This fusion, familiar yet unsettling, felt more forceful

than our previous meldings, almost as though some unseen force was pushing us together. Around me, the world seemed to twist and warp in a bizarre, dreamlike fashion. Just as my head finally aligned forward, I caught a glimpse of the cause behind this sudden shift in reality.

I faced Einarr, the dwarf. His massive hammer, already in motion, was a mere blur as it barreled into my stomach. The moment stretched, my body lifted off the bench, caught in the surge of his strike. My limbs flailed helplessly, a frantic dance against an unstoppable force.

Time, which had trickled to a crawl, suddenly snapped back into its merciless flow. The hammer's swing, a formidable crescent of raw power, reached its apex. With the impact resounding like a thunderclap, I was flung through the air. My body, unmoored and tumbling, became a ragdoll in the wake of his ferocious blow, spiraling uncontrollably into the ensuing chaos.



Vanya steadied herself, shield at the ready, as Einarr nonchalantly sent Blake soaring with a single, mighty blow from his hammer. Panic surged within her—not for the wellbeing of Blake herself, but for the dire consequences that could ensue. If the entity she was bound to meet her end, what would become of Vanya's Champion status? Would she lose her connection to the system? So much hinged on the survival of the malevolent pudding creature.

Despite her internal turmoil, Vanya's focus remained sharply on Einarr, the imminent threat before her. Her elven ears twitched as they picked up the sounds of Blake's destructive path. She could hear the echoes of Blake crashing through building after building, each collision sending reverberations through the ruins. Even at a distance of seven kilometers, the trail of destruction was relentless, causing Vanya to shudder internally at the sheer scale of the chaos.

The confrontation before Vanya marked a departure from the usual encounters she had faced since her resurrection and her subsequent servitude under Blake. This was a genuine clash of Champions, a tier of combat she hadn't experienced in her new existence. Vanya frequently contemplated Blake's comparative weakness despite her access to the system. Blake's prowess, though formidable against average soldiers or even a small battalion, paled in comparison to a true Champion like Vanya. However, the recent insinuation of Blake being a goddess, albeit an underwhelming one, shed new light on this power dynamic.

Taking a quick glance at the airship, Vanya was relieved to see it begin pulling up and back into the sky, far away from the combat. Not that she wouldn't mind knocking it out of the sky, but she didn't want the soldiers aboard getting any ideas of joining—not like they could do much to aid the dwarf. That said, Einarr has been a Champion far far longer than she has, and she highly suspected, she was out matched in every way. Still, she had no other options but to fight.

"Aye, be ready to meet yer end, lassie," the dwarf, Einarr, chuckled with a menacing gleam in his eye. He lunged forward, his massive hammer hoisted high, ready to unleash its fury.

The hammer struck with a force that resonated through the fallen city of Beastveil, causing more ruins to crumble. Vanya's shield absorbed the blow, a testament to her strength as her legs withstood

the shockwave. Her grin was met with a flash of surprise on Einarr's face. Seizing the moment, she lunged forward, her sword aimed directly at his neck.

Einarr's reflexes kicked in, and he leaped back just in time, narrowly escaping the blade's deadly path. "Ye lucky wench," he growled, his eyes narrowing with resolve. He charged again, this time with unrestrained ferocity.

The hammer's impact was a brutal side blow this time. Vanya braced herself, her shield taking the full brunt once more. But the power behind the strike was overwhelming. She was hurled sideways, crashing through three dilapidated buildings. Tumbling to the ground, she rolled into another structure, then swiftly twisted upright, sliding through the debris. Just as she regained her footing, Einarr's hammer descended in a crushing blow towards her once more. She raised her shield in a desperate defense, bracing for the impact.

The city trembled under the might of their clash, debris scattering like leaves in a storm from the epicenter of their battle. Einarr, a blur of relentless aggression, swung his hammer with devastating speed and power. Vanya, with equal ferocity, met each strike with her shield, an impenetrable wall of defense. Their exchange was a whirlwind of motion, too rapid for the normal eye to track.

In a split second, Einarr's hammer clashed against Vanya's sword, the force of the blow sending the blade flying from her grasp. But she was unyielding. With the resilience of a seasoned warrior, she immediately summoned another sword, materializing it into her hand with her magic. The two Champions stood their ground, each blow exchanged with the intensity of a hurricane unleashed upon Völuspá. Their combat was more than a mere fight; it was an elemental force, a dance of destruction echoing through the ruins of the Beastveil.

Despite the ferocity of their clash, Vanya was acutely aware that Einarr was merely toying with her. She knew the battle would conclude only when he willed it. This realization was underscored by the sound that punctuated their combat: amidst the thunderous booms of hammer colliding with shield, the air was filled with the raucous, almost maniacal laughter of the dwarf. His amusement, clear in every echoing chuckle, revealed his sadistic enjoyment of the duel, transforming what could have been a deadly serious fight into a twisted game for him.