

# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 2

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### CHAMPIONS

The capital of Beastveil Kingdom trembled as cries tore through the night, mingling with the flames of magic gone wild. The mayhem was punctuated by the crazed laughter of Orlaith, the Dragon God Zarathos' chosen champion. Adorned in a golden-scaled dress, the hues of her attire danced between reds and greens with every flicker of flame that reflected off it.

A year had spiraled by since the calamity at the Grotto of the Betrayed, a mana cataclysm that left Orlaith crippled. Yet fate twisted anew when Zarathos bestowed upon his human champion a draconic divine blessing. The woman was reborn, now a meld of human and dragon.

The realms of her humanity and newfound lineage blurred; while part of her flesh still bore the soft texture of human skin, sections of her body boasted scales not belonging to her dress but her own being. The dragon-like crown of horns that graced her head and the magnificent golden wings that sprouted from her back were the living testament to her transformation.

Orlaith reveled in her cataclysmic dance of fire and fury; the dread she instilled echoed through the very heart of the Beastveil Kingdom. Soaring through the sky like a blazing comet heralding devastation, she weaved around the newly rebuilt Slaethia air armada that blanketed the sky—all under her command.

The dragoness exuded a regal air, and her divine transformation had been the final enticement that swayed the dragonkin to align with the Gods of Light's cause. Many revered her, and thus, their mighty wings beat alongside the hovering airships, bolstering the intimidating display of aerial might.

Two champions of the other Gods of Light trailed close behind in her wake, each a harbinger of ruin in their own right...well, at least one of them was.

Einarr, the chosen champion of the Abyssal Stone God Khyron, reveled in the annihilation of his foes. The dwarf was a sight to behold, his ample beard a cascading river of red that seemed to have a life of its own. It flowed over his armor, a formidable blend of dark mithril adorned with delicate touches of gold that caught the light with every subtle movement. Atop his head sat a helmet, its golden wings unfurling behind him in a grand display of splendor. The wings seemed poised for flight, imbuing a semblance of the mythical into his stout form. He was the epitome of dwarven aspiration; a living, breathing embodiment of their robust culture. And yet, amid the glory and pride reflected in his bearing, was an unyielding prowess in the art of drinking. His legendary capacity to outdrink even the hardest of his kin was a source of pride that sat as comfortably upon his shoulders as his meticulously crafted armor.

With every swing of his colossal dwarven war hammer, Einarr brought desolation, and the pleas of the beastkin citizens he encountered fell on deaf ears. His grin widened with each strike, the splattering crescendo that followed was a symphony of demise that played to the rhythm of his heart. The dwarf found euphony in the discord of battle, the cries of despair intertwined with the visceral notes of his hammer's wrath. Each shattering impact, a stanza in this morbid melody, drove him further into a dance with oblivion, carving a tale of dread with every step he took through the devastated streets of the Beastveil Kingdom.

Among all the champions of the Gods of Light, only the fairy Galen, the chosen of the Ethereal Goddess Lyzara, was absent in the Kingdom of Slaethia. Yet, their newest champion was there—Paladin Champion Vanya Anlyth. With her sword sheathed and shield on her back, she watched in awe as the two champions single-handedly brought an entire kingdom to its knees.

No one knew anything about Vanya's god—including herself—and even fewer bothered to remember his name—Jörmun. But that wasn't an issue, for the Gods of Light had a myriad of deities within their pantheon. So, the standing of a minor god was of no consequence, only the service of their champion within the Holy Church of Light mattered.

“Oi, lassie, ye goin' t' swing that sword around or just stand there gawkin'?” Einarr bellowed.

“My god told me to watch and learn,” Vanya replied, pausing to exhale a long sigh, “and when I'm ready, he would tell me when I could slay the unjust,” she finished.

“Still a bit odd, havin' 'is champion hold back, even stranger 'e hasn't commanded ye to grow 'is followin',” Einarr paused to crush a reptile-like beastkin's skull with his war hammer before continuing, “the gods need followers t' grow in power, it's why not all the Gods of Light have champions. Still, there are many Moons of Völuspá, so maybe this...” he stopped in thought.

“Jörmun,” Vanya reminded the dwarf.

“Aye, him. Maybe he's a big shot on one of the other moons,” he shrugged, his massive hammer looking comically light in his short arms as he did.

Vanya cast her gaze skyward, captivated by the spectacle of Orlaith gliding through the skies. With each elegant weave around the hovering airships, she'd swoop down in a deathly dance, setting rows of homes ablaze. The ensuing smoke and flames cast a haunting glow upon the night, rendering the dragonkin and airships as menacing silhouettes against the dark skies. Within those vessels, thousands of soldiers lay in wait to descend, yet it was the champions who led the vanguard, bound by divine duty to bring their adversaries of their gods to their knees. The soldiers and knights were destined for the aftermath, to cleanse what remnants of resistance that lingered.

Yet, despite the ordained sequence of warfare, Vanya found herself wincing with every cry of anguish that pierced the night—each scream of a child kissed by Orlaith's merciless flames, every thud of Einarr's hammer sealing a fate most grim. The discord between the surreal beauty of the fiery skies and the grotesque reality on the ground gnawed at her conscience. Each crackling flame and mournful cry served as a stark reminder of the savage call of their divine mission. Yet, she could not avert her eyes. Bound by the will of her god, Jörmun—the one who gifted her a second

chance at life after perishing in the mana cataclysm a year ago—she bit her lip, did as told, and watched and learned. Though, the lesson she was meant to grasp eluded her.

“Oi, we’re breachin’ the castle from here,” Einarr announced with a wicked grin. “Heard there’s a fetchin’ queen within these walls. It’s always a holy delight to humble the high and mighty in front o’ each other,” he chuckled.

In moments like this, Vanya yearned for the camaraderie of her dear friends—Craycroft, the wise old wizard, and Gimona, the boisterous dwarven woman. However, ever since the calamity known as the Mana Cataclysm at the dungeon siege, life had never been the same. With her beloved husband, General Ezad Anlyth, tragically slain, the vengeful eyes of the royalty needed someone to blame. Though the divine declaration of her as a champion shielded her from accusation, it was her cherished friends who bore the brunt of the aristocracy’s disdain. She knew all too well that the nobles’ vendetta against her friends was merely a hollow gesture, for the true object of their blame was her late husband. The bitterness of this reality was a gall pill for Vanya to swallow.

Yet, amidst the ashes of despair, she clutched onto a shard of hope. By emerging as a righteous champion in the kingdom’s eye, she might pave a path for her friends’ release. Or at the very least, negotiate a discreet and dignified excommunication to free them from the shackles of unjust blame.

The aristocrats within the Kingdom of Slaethia had always held themselves in high regard, but their allegiance to the Gods of Light, much like many other kingdoms within the Moons of Völuspá, granted them a sanctified arrogance. Despite her internal disagreements, Vanya bowed to their judgment, recognizing the celestial mandate that overshadowed worldly whims.

However, she knew the swiftest path to vindication lay in the capture or extermination of the nefarious vampire who had once plunged Slaethia into ruins. Vanya speculated that all the devastation, the airships shattered and warriors fallen during the cataclysm might have been forgiven, had they not lost the prized captive they’d ensnared earlier—the very same vampire, Aurelia herself. Yet now, Vanya had her sights set on a different woman, one whose skin seemed so pale it appeared lifeless, who donned a dress darker than the void itself, and whose eyes glowed with a demonic orange light—Aurelia’s dark lover, Blake.

“Oi, lassie, quit yer daydreamin’ and get tha’ fine elven rear up here. We’ve got to set the example for the soldiers, and there’s a beast queen in need of a good dwarven rumpin’,” Einarr bellowed out. Vanya, however, could only hope it had been said in jest.

The paladin champion trailed behind the dwarf into the castle just as the airships above commenced their descent. Knights, barbarians, paladins, and mages alike poured out onto the scorched battlefield, a land that once flourished as a vibrant jungle city. This conquest was but one stop among many, as the kingdom harbored ambitions of expanding into an empire, striving to purge all non-enlightened races from their moon in a quest guided by their unwavering belief in the righteousness of their cause.

Orlaith swooped down, landing beside Vanya, her eyes forward and her expression indomitable, not sparing a glance for her fellow champion. She held her head high, as if everyone and everything were beneath her, and even Vanya, who had faced many horrors, felt a wave of trepidation and

menace emanating from her. Vanya suspected that Orlaith possessed some skill that projected a dragon's aura of intimidation, making her appear more fearsome.

"Halt! You shall not pass," roared a porcupine-like beastkin.

From his attire, Vanya recognized him as one of the royal guards. Orlaith snapped her fingers, and instantly the beastkin ignited into a screaming blaze.

Einarr spun around, a look of frustration upon his face. "Oi, tha' one was mine," he grumbled.

"I shan't lower myself to partake in your dwarven trifles," Orlaith sneered with contempt as she folded her wings neatly behind her. "If you seek amusement in slaying games, perhaps the fledgling," she gestured dismissively toward Vanya, "will oblige. She's scarcely proven herself thus far."

"Aye that," the dwarf said as he scratched at his red beard, "but 'er god told 'er to watch and learn fer now, so nothin' can be done about it," he added.

"Watch and learn?" Vanya struggled to hide a wince as her fellow champion clicked her tongue in disgust. "I didn't realize our religion harbored such weakling gods," Orlaith huffed.

The dwarf nodded in agreement with the dragoness's remark, swinging his hammer with lethal precision and obliterating several royal guards who emerged to bar their way. Finally, they stood before a pair of massive doors leading into the throne room.

With a brawny kick from Einarr's stout leg, the double doors yielded, tumbling from their ornate, leaf-engraved hinges into the throne room. They crashed atop the last remnants of the royal guards, silencing their anxious cries—the king and queen's last line of defense had been effortlessly breached. The king stood there, a formidable figure with the proud bearing of a seasoned warrior. His lion beastkin heritage was unmistakable, his mane a regal cascade of golden locks that seemed to roar of royalty. Beside him, the queen's elven grace blended with the quirks of a catkin, her black cat ears twitching atop her head with a rhythmic uncertainty that belied her serene facade.

"Whence comes this onslaught?" the king thundered. "What purpose bears such heedless ruin? Surely your deities don't harbor such venom, such malice," his voice trembled through the hollow grandeur of the throne room.

The king's words fell on deaf ears; no champion offered a reply.

Vanya caught the soft snicker from Einarr as his eyes roved over the queen; it was then she noticed two frightened catkin children nestled behind their mother, gripping at her dress as tears cascaded down their cheeks in streams of despair. Einarr, hoisting his war hammer onto his shoulder, advanced towards the queen, a wicked grin widening across his gruff face. It was Orlaith's sigh that filled the silence before a snap of her fingers summoned an inferno, wrapping the royal family in a fervent blaze.

Einarr whirled around, fury blazing in his eyes. "Oi, I'd already called dibs on the queen," he bellowed, his voice thundering through the room.

“We don’t have time for your games. High Priest Nelzar awaits us aboard the Swift Sentinel,” Orlaith retorted, her voice as cold and indifferent as ice.

“Pfft, wha’ does tha’ gnome wan’ with us now?” Einarr grumbled, scratching his beard in irritation. “Besides, I’m amazed the Swift Sentinel is even skyworthy after its crash durin’ the cataclysm,” he added with a snort.

“It’s a living vessel, with a seed of the Great Tree of Yaddith housed within,” Orlaith said, waving her hand dismissively at the dwarf’s ignorance while her eyes already scanned the horizon for their next conquest. “But that’s beside the point. We are to meet with the high priest. Our duty here is done; it’s time to set sights on the next kingdom.”

Vanya cast one last glance at the charred remains of the king and queen, and their two children, the ashes swirling in the breeze that swept in through the demolished throne room doors—a harsh reminder of the cruelty she had just witnessed. With a heavy heart, she turned away, her steps weighted as she followed her fellow champions out of the desolate throne room.

“Apparently, there’s been talk of a growing undead army to the north,” Orlaith muttered to Einarr, though Vanya missed the rest.



Jason leapt through the shadows in the vampire’s territory, ever watchful of where and whom to strike. It had been a year since he and his fellow Earthlings were summoned to this reality of magic and monsters, and here he was, a monster himself, or more precisely, a dark fae. His appearance was far from appealing: overly pale, tall, and skinny to the point of lethargy, with crazed black hair upon his head that spiked out in all directions and a mouth full of razor-sharp, needle-like teeth. He certainly embodied the essence of someone’s worst nightmares.

Unlike him, the others who were summoned had been captured—the fools, he thought of them disdainfully. Well, all except one, but he didn’t count her; no, he tried not to think of that monster, that bitch. He wished, with every fiber of his being, that she who shall not be named had died with the destruction of the dungeon a year ago. Despite that, they had all been thrust into a wicked competition to become the Dark Champion, or rather the Nightmare’s Champion, and against all odds, he had won, despite being slain by that wretched bitch inhabiting a Black Pudding’s body. Oh, how Jason loathed her. Thankfully, this reality harbored a magic system, and more significantly—a respawn point.

Yet, as the chosen champion of the Crone, he was now tasked with freeing his worthless compatriots from their cells—a task he would rather avoid. However, the goddess’s insistent whispers inside his mind were enough to drive anyone to the brink of madness. Fortunately, after a few months, he had learned how to tune her out, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t working, albeit reluctantly, to free them.

Well, perhaps more than reluctantly, seeing as he was more engrossed in leveling up. After all, what’s the point in storming a vampire’s coven if one was under-leveled? And that was exactly what he was up to now, tailing a trio of vampires. He often encountered former dungeon denizens

patrolling the lands, but even he couldn't completely ignore a screaming goddess whenever he slayed one of them.

With a wicked grin, showcasing his needle-sharp teeth, he activated his skill—[**Shadow Step**]. Jason's body dissolved into a nearby shadow. Instantly, his surroundings morphed into a whirlwind of shadows. Everything was drenched in a black mist, the world rendered in monochrome hues—this was the Darkened Realm. Jason took off sprinting past dark, shadowy trees and the remnants of spirits from eons past, who seemed to be crafted from nothing more than black smoke. The thick, murky fog enveloping the scene lent the realm a nightmarish quality.

Within the veiled gloom, Jason's vision pierced through like the gleam of a predator's eye, every dark contour appeared as clear as day to him—this was the realm where a dark fae reigned supreme. The trio of vampires wandered amidst the shroud of dusk, a skittish aura about them; their kind had met with shadows and doom far too often over the past year, a sinister whisper of fate they could not shake off.

Yet, the oblivion of shadows was relentless. No prey could elude its cold, merciless grasp.

With a hunter's precision, Jason burst forth from the Darkened Realm amongst the veil of shadows right behind one vampire, his sword descending like the verdict of death itself upon the unsuspecting creature. The blade met flesh and skull bone, slicing through with a crisp, final note of fate fulfilled. Without a pause, Jason's hand shot forth into the chest of another vampire, the fluid motion a grim dance of death—all while his grin seemed to grow beyond what was natural, a twisted revelry dancing in the depth of his needle teeth. Each movement was a choreographed dance with death, his laugh a haunting melody to the eerie rhythm of despair that now enveloped the night.

This was the morbid routine that filled his days now—hunting, killing, and feasting upon the hearts of his vanquished foes. Yet, Jason had observed a peculiar oddity; some vampires would disintegrate into ashes the moment his fingers reached into their hearts, while others bore the violent intrusion with a monstrous resilience. This bizarre inconsistency rendered his favorite grisly delicacy a rare find in this accursed land. But fortune seemed to favor him this night; the heart he now held aloft, dripping with the last vestiges of life it once held, was not of the ashen ilk.

With a savage eagerness, Jason tore into the still-beating heart he held clutched in his bloody hand. Each bite released a burst of life force that surged through him, mingling with the dark essence that veiled his soul. It was an ephemeral moment of wild exhilaration, one that anchored him, however fleetingly, to a semblance of euphoria amidst the endless gloom of his cursed existence.

A few paces away, the third vampire, yet untouched, stumbled backward onto the damp soil, a palpable dread swirling in his eyes as they were transfixed on the monstrous feast before him. His desperate shrieks echoed through the night, piercing the eerie silence that hung between the canopy and the forest floor.

The vampire's terror reverberated through the twisted trees, setting the leaves quivering in the cold night breeze, adding to the grotesque orchestra that played the tune of death and despair under the ghostly moonlight.

To Jason, the cry of horror interlacing with the sickly chewing of the heart between his jaws orchestrated a symphony most exquisite. His dark eyes, now ignited with a malicious gleam, shifted leisurely from the remains of his meal to the pathetic creature before him, trembling under the shadow of inevitable demise.

Oh, what a dark, twisted serenade it was—a melody of fear and dread, blended with the rhythmic cadence of his dark heart, beating to the grotesque dance of death he now reveled in. The sinister landscape seemed to close in, enveloping the impending brutality in a veil of darkness as a sinister grin twisted further on Jason’s gruesome maw.

“Hey, Jaws!” a woman taunted from behind a tree.

The gnawing paused as Jason’s head turned slowly, his eyes cutting through the dense shadows toward the source of the interruption. The mild twitch of amusement on his nightmarish face was a ghastly sight under the pale moonlight. The trees seemed to part as a familiar figure emerged, the darkness clinging to her like a cloak.

“Yo, Sophia, what’s up,” Jason quipped, his words accompanied by the grotesque sight of him waving a half-devoured heart at her before tearing another bite with a crunch that seemed to resonate through the silence around them.

Sophia had been one of the fellow summoned candidates—or victims as she saw it—competing to become the Crone’s champion. However, Jason had slain her right at the starting point where they had all been thrust into the dungeon ruins. He could still recall the euphoria coursing through him at that moment; she had been his first—the first heart he had devoured, that is. But after he was declared victor, they all had been brought back to life, Sophia included.

Before their chatter could continue, the eerie silence was shattered by the grotesque sound of bone snapping back into place. One of the vampire corpses, its skull misshapen from Jason’s brutal assault, jerked upright. In one fluid motion, Jason drove his boot into its face, the sound of bone crunching beneath his heel as his teeth continued their savage dance around the heart.

“Escaped, huh? Well, that saves me some time,” he muttered, his words accompanied by the rhythmic thudding of his foot stomps.

“Just so you know, we’ve worked things out,” Sophia mentioned nonchalantly, her words intermingling with the symphony of crushing bone and squelching flesh.

His foot froze mid-air, hovering over the twitching remains of the vampire, as his head snapped up. “What?”

“We’ve worked things out, Lady Aurelia is now in charge. Everyone’s been freed,” she elaborated, her hands casually resting on her hips as if they were discussing the weather rather than the fate of their group amidst a horrific scene of gore.

The casual discussion continued amid the grisly backdrop, with Jason’s confusion painted across his face. “Wait, so we’re all cool now? What about that creepy vampire, Lord Demi-ass?”

“Demidicus,” Sophia corrected with a trace of humor, “and he’s gone off on a trip or something, trying to build his own little empire of darkness.”

“And Aurelia is in charge now?” Jason sought confirmation, seemingly puzzled by the turn of events, while continuing to chew on the heart. “I thought she was being married off?” he asked, to Sophia’s grimace as both blood and flesh flew from his mouth, dribbling down his chin.

“Oh, she was,” Sophia said with a snicker, “but it turns out the duke wasn’t powerful enough to control her. So, she turned the tables on him—now he’s practically her bitch.” Sophia chuckled again. “She’s taken the reins here. Though, we’d do well to watch out for the duke and his cronies, but for the time being, she’s got our backs.”

“Huh, so we’re cool now?” Jason muttered to himself, more so questioning the bizarre turn of events than seeking Sophia’s affirmation. He delivered a few more vindictive stomps to the twitching vampire beneath his boot before deeming it adequately pummeled. His attention then shifted to the third vampire, who was now cowering against a tree, the stench of piss heavy in the night air.

Sophia shifted her gaze to the third vampire and sighed, “Go ahead,” she said to Jason. “He’s one of the duke’s supporters, just don’t get caught doing it.”

For his part, Jason flashed a chilling grin, rendered all the more nightmarish by the blood smeared across his face and chin. The vampire let out a terrified squeal as Jason lunged forward, mouth gaping wide.

The persistent gnawing sounds lingered in the dark woods, mingling with the distant cries of nocturnal creatures. Sophia’s foot tapped impatiently on the forest floor, her annoyance growing with every bite Jason took. The eerie melody of crunching seemed to dance mockingly around her, testing the limits of her patience. She finally snapped.

“You done yet? Come on, we’ve got to find Hensley and fill him in on the latest news,” she urged, attempting to peel her mind away from the ghastly sight before her.

Jason looked up, pausing his grotesque meal. “The werewolf chief from the dungeon folk?”

“He’s a warg, not a werewolf,” Sophia retorted, rolling her eyes.

“What’s the difference?”

Silence.

“Exactly,” Jason chuckled, sending a few flecks of blood spattering onto the leaf-littered ground.

Sophia hissed, “Whatever. Look, we need to head to New Ockpool and share the good news with him. Apparently, Lord Demidicus had been enslaving them to raid nearby tribes for blood for his vampire lackeys, and when they weren’t raiding, they were being tortured.”

Jason rose to his feet, wiping his blood-coated hands on his trousers. “The goddess never shuts up whenever I kill one of those fuckers.”



Sophia's eyes skimmed over the grotesque tableau of the three lifeless vampires on the ground, the pale moonlight casting eerie shadows over their distorted faces. "Shouldn't they turn to ash or something?"

"Nah, only the lesser ones disintegrate into ash," he replied nonchalantly, picking remnants of heart flesh from between his teeth.

"Will they regenerate?" she questioned, a sliver of hesitation crawling into her voice.

Jason's gaze lingered on the corpses, his mind churning. "These ones might, yeah. But I've found a good decapitation, followed by a game of hide-the-head usually keeps them from coming back before the sun does its job," he mused, a dark glint twinkling in his eyes as a chilly wind swept through the clearing.

"...I see."