

BLAKE PUDDING

CHAPTER 2

FEEBLE

I was plummeting toward the ground—not as a clichéd meteor, though. That simile's been done to death. A comet? Still not quite right. Then, it hit me! I was on a pinpoint descent to the ground below, akin to an American cruise missile zeroing in on what's purported to be a harmless Middle Eastern village. Imagine, the villagers, blissfully unaware, perhaps engaged in the daily dance of their lives or, more poignantly, gathered in celebration at a wedding!

Dream!

What?!

That's fucked up!

Don't judge me, Nightmare, you're the half that likes to wear our victims' intestines like jewelry!

Edible jewelry.

My point exactly!

Y-Yeah, well... you're the half that likes to play with our food.

So?

...

Okay, Nightmare, Let's consider this: What's truly worse? Subjecting our prey to torment and torture, then adorning ourselves with their remains as if they were mere trinkets in a twisted candy necklace display of psychopathy? Or merely toying with them as part of the game?

Playing with them!

Is not!

Dream, you were supposed to be the sweet kind half—you're not. You have our flirtatious, seductive qualities mixed with the desire to be the center of attention, despite we were always the antisocial goth. You're beyond shallow while being overdramatic, a bit gullible—well, maybe more than a bit—and have an overly needy desire for intimacy. Oh, and you're an airhead!

You forgot my dommie anal fetish... Listen here, Norman Bates, I don't need you judging me! It's like being looked down on by Hannibal Lecter, that shit just ain't right. And you—if I were to pin you down, it would be a blend of Sadness and Disgust.

Did you just Inside Out my personality?

...Maybe. I should have thrown in Psycho and Schizo, but I'm not certain if they were characters in the film. We never actually watched it, remember?

Amid the relentless bickering of the two warring halves of my fragmented soul(s), I remained caught in a relentless freefall, having leaped from the airship devoid of any means to glide or decelerate. There I was, in pursuit of my quarry—a dragon.

This creature, in a fervent bid to regain control over its plummeting body, beat its sole operational wing with frantic urgency. Its other wing, incapacitated and twitching hideously, was a testament to the magical onslaught it had suffered at the hands of Mrs. Grumpy Holy Panties—or has she now reverted to Ms.?—my Champion, whimsically known as Von Von. For those with a penchant for formality and a deficiency in humor, she is Vanya Anlyth. Her affinity for holy and fire magics, a concoction particularly lethal to my existence, was a source of genuine concern. Not that I harbor any aversion to confrontation or violence. Rather, my reluctance is borne from the knowledge that such magics are famously effective against me. Consequently, an irate Vanya ranks high on my list of undesirable encounters.

Opting to evade rather than engage in whatever discussion she intended, I chose the decidedly irrational route of hurling myself overboard. This decision, irrational as it might seem, also masked a deeper fear. My journey neared its conclusion, the realization of what I yearned for most became painfully clear. Aurelia, the living incarnation of all my deepest affections and desires, had been tantalizingly within grasp. Yet, in a twist of fate, I found myself in pursuit of a falling dragon, having taken the dramatic leap from a soaring airship. What does that say about me?

The haunting fear of unreturned love weighed heavily on me—does Aurelia perceive the true depth of our bond, or am I nothing more than a piece in her elaborate plot? The possibility that she might not reciprocate my intense emotions is a terrifying prospect I'm loath to face. While I recognize that voicing such insecurities might seem trivial, during this fall, I desperately needed a momentary reprieve—a chance to gather my thoughts and prepare for whatever lies ahead. Above all, I felt an overwhelming urge to destroy something!

See, Nightmare, isn't the narrative better when we share? Your penchant for drama combined with my flair for storytelling—it's the perfect blend!

Ugh... you make us sound like an airhead.

The wind roared past me during my descent, with the dragon's flames encircling it in a spectacular spiral as it exhaled, twisting and turning as it fell. In hindsight, pursuing a fire-breathing beast might not have been my brightest idea, yet I was gambling on the creature not surviving the fall. As for myself, I wasn't concerned about the impact—I was certain to make a splat, but that was a trivial matter. My mind was preoccupied elsewhere. Deep down, I knew my worries were overblown, that everything would turn out perfectly, and that Aurelia would welcome me with open legs.

Dream!

What?!

You're such a pervert!

Yeaaaaah, but don't act like you don't crave the same thing.

...

Flapping my arms as though it would somehow alter my fate, I continued my free fall, pondering just how high the airship had been sailing—though, can it truly be called sailing if there are no sails? Glancing downward, the details of the rapidly approaching landscape began to crystallize.

Ah—there's the ground.

Wow, and there goes the landscape.

The dragon collided with said ground with such immense force that it sent shockwaves rippling through the terrain, uprooting trees and hurling dust into the air from the epicenter of the impact. A fleeting sense of relief washed over me at the sight of the motionless dragon, but this feeling was swiftly supplanted by dread. A thunderous boom ensued, its sound and force reaching me long before I neared the ground, exacerbating my tumble and causing me to flail even more hopelessly.

Facing an imminent and potentially painful landing, I realized my only option was a new skill I hadn't even practiced. The uncertainty of its outcome made this choice a gamble, effectively a toss-up between salvation and further peril. With resolve, I cast my newest spell, [ASTRAL GRAVITON].

Fortune was on my side—wait! No, it's not—as the skill activated successfully, albeit with an unexpected result: my descent's velocity cranked up to levels I hadn't imagined. If I thought I was falling fast before, the activation of Astral Graviton made my previous speed seem leisurely. My descent accelerated exponentially, akin to a fighter jet engaging its afterburners to break the sound barrier, propelling me towards the ground at a terrifying rate.

In those final moments, as the ground rushed up to meet me, a grimly humorous thought crossed my mind: the last thing to go through my head, quite literally, was my ass—like a fly's abrupt collision with a windshield.

My vision blacked out as I felt my body getting smeared and splattered across several meters. Honestly, it wasn't the worst thing I've experienced. In fact, Einarr, that gravity-manipulating dickhead of a dwarf—and let's not forget, a now very dead Champion—had hit me harder than my SpaceX-style landing ever could. His intestines, by the way, made a surprisingly tasty and resilient jump rope. But, that's neither here nor there. The real task at hand was pulling my scattered bits back together, which was proving to be a royal pain in the ass.

It's a wonder I didn't knock myself out cold—given everything is pitch black, perhaps I actually did? Regardless, it's quite remarkable that I haven't managed to off myself. Turns out, aside from fiery or holy smiting, I'm pretty damn hard to kill. However, this detail is somewhat moot, given my ability to respawn indefinitely, courtesy of the formidable dungeon core trapped within me. I should really make an effort to liberate it and resolve my dimensional storage issues. Yet, amidst the chaos of my life and my inherent laziness, I never seem to find the time to address such problems. I'll just fix it when it becomes an issue... although, I must admit, I really would like to

get a hold of Aurelia's panties I've got stashed in there. Oh, and let's not forget the random ring and the broken cock ring—that last one really tore me a new one. Um... that came out wrong.

As my vision gradually cleared, I activated Mana Sight once more, bringing back into focus the spell that graced me with two glowing orange orbs in place of my natural eyes. This unique vision, a side effect of channeling my gaze into distinct parts of my body, mirrors the conventional sight I once had. Without centering the spell into a singular perspective, it would unleash an overwhelming, all-encompassing view that, despite my growing tolerance, I still found unsettling. This version of my sight, reminiscent of a previous existence, was far more to my preference. It certainly beat the thermal and eerily spectral vision akin to that of a Black Puddings normal sight—utterly distasteful!

Amidst the process of reassembling myself, a mixture of snaps and cracks filled the air, sounds distinctly separate from the viscous squelching noises of my own regeneration. Narrowing my now luminous eyes, I scanned the vicinity until my gaze settled on the site of the dragon's crash. There, I observed the supposed remains of the dragon unsettlingly stir. It dawned on me then, perhaps the creature wasn't as deceased as I had initially concluded.

"How the fuck did you survive?" I groaned, injecting as much whine into my voice as humanly possible. "This was supposed to be a quick bite," I grumbled, stomping my freshly reconstituted foot and dramatically throwing my still-forming arms up in frustration—let's just ignore the wicked smirk on my face. No, I wasn't secretly delighted that the dragon had pulled through. Not at all. I definitely wasn't internally cackling, psyched for a brawl. Not me. Okay, fine, I was downright ecstatic at the prospect of unleashing some pent-up aggression. So what?

The dragon was a mess, its scales either fractured or missing entirely, with blood oozing from practically every crevice. The poor thing looked like it had been through a blender, which, in my mind, spelled an easy win. But then it lifted its head, glaring at me with a level of hate and venom that would put a pissed-off cobra to shame. Opening its gargantuan mouth, I caught sight of the ominous sparks flickering in its throat, and suddenly, I was the world's clumsiest sprinter, bolting away while unleashing a string of curses and creatively vile insults about Jason's mother that would make a sailor blush.

"Screw you, my mother didn't sleep with the clown from It," I heard that cursed voice retort.

"Oh, hey, how did you show up so quickly?" I halted my frantic retreat, pausing to offer a nonchalant wave. In a fluid motion, I sidestepped as a spiked tail came crashing down, missing me by less than a meter. Casually folding my arms behind my back, I leaned forward in anticipation, awaiting an explanation from the spiked-toothed creep.

"Shadow Step," he responded with a lack of enthusiasm, just before his expression turned to one of sheer terror, prompting us both to dive out of the way of an incoming inferno.

The dragon's fiery assault was mercifully short-lived, ending abruptly as the creature succumbed to a violent coughing fit. I seized the moment to shout back at the dark fae, "I call dibs! It's mine, you kill stealer!"

Jason crossed his arms and shot me a look of pure annoyance. “Fine, see if I ever help you again.”

“That’s exactly what I’m hoping for,” I declared, raising my hands in a mock gesture of gratitude. My lingering resentment towards him, especially after he claimed the final blow on Einarr when I had done most of the legwork, was still a sore point.

The familiar sound of sparking hinted at another imminent blast from the dragon, but I was prepared this time, intent on drenching the beast in Necrotic Flames. At least, that was the plan until a brilliant beam of light descended from the heavens, spearing the dragon directly through its skull and ending its misery instantaneously.

With a scream that could curdle blood, I exclaimed, “Damn it, Von Von!”

Looking up, I caught sight of the cursed airship circling the crash site, with my so-called Champion basking in a divine glow at the prow of the ship, looking every bit the avenging deity. At that moment, I harbored an intense desire to punch her right in the cooch. Dejected, I trudged over to the now lifeless dragon. If I wasn’t going to be the one to end its life, I’d at least salvage the situation by consuming it in hopes of acquiring a new skill.

Embracing the dragon’s snout with the enthusiasm of a child clinging to a Great Dane, or perhaps more aptly, a T-Rex, I sprawled across it, arms wide open in a peculiar form of affection. As I nestled in, I began to meld into its form, my body dissolving into it bit by bit, relishing the taste as I gradually consumed it. I could hasten the process, devouring what remained of the dragon with more urgency, but certain meals deserve to be savored, especially in the company of kill-stealers, those despicable scoundrels.

Ah, the dragon’s flavor brought to mind a spicy beef thingy-delicacy from an all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet. Yeah, I said ‘thingy’ because, honestly, what’s it called again? Szechuan beef, maybe? I don’t know, all I can say is it’s damn good!

I lost track of time as I devoured the dragon, tuning out the surrounding grumbles and complaints with deliberate indifference. I took this moment not just to sate my hunger but to soothe my turbulent thoughts—or more accurately, the tumult of my fractured souls. Internally, I was a mess, a contradiction of emotions. By all accounts, I should be elated, ready to drop everything and rush to Aurelia’s side, yet here I was, consumed by fear. Me! It’s laughable, really. I, who could stare into Death’s void-like eyes and jestingly call her grandma, find myself undone by the mere thought of a single vampire. The very idea tied my insides into anxious knots.

[DEVOURER] [DUNGEON BOSS, THE FLAME DRAGON] SUCCESSFUL
<u>SELECTABLE</u> [WEAK FIRE WARD]

I paused my gnawing on the remnants of the dragon’s scales, having just finished the tail and cleverly stashed a few spareribs to the side for a snack. Honestly, looking at those ribs, you’d think I’d yanked them straight from a Flintstones episode. But then, just as I was about to dive back into

my prehistoric feast, something unexpected happened—my Devourer skill finally decided to make an appearance at the party. I was on a roll, acquiring two new skills in quick succession; it seemed my dry spell of gaining new skills had come to an end. But what was my reward for all this trouble? Weak Fire Ward. Seriously? That's the kind of crap gift you'd expect from a dodgy Secret Santa. After chomping down an entire dragon, that's what I get? It's like winning the lottery, only to find out you've been paid in Monopoly money.

[WEAK FIRE WARD]

Craft a feeble barrier designed to deflect incoming fire magic.

Type

Spell

Activation

Cast

"Feeble?" I complained through a mouthful. Yeah, I don't technically need my mouth to eat, but I still enjoy the process of eating like a regular human when the portions are a bit more reasonable.

I stopped mid-chew on a scale, eyebrow arching as I reconsidered the earlier notification: [DUNGEON BOSS, THE FLAME DRAGON]. My head tilted from side to side, pondering the existence of a nearby dungeon. But, frankly, my interest waned quickly. Nope, not with the sight of an irate blonde elf making a beeline towards me, her impatience as clear as day on her face.

Crap!

Double crap!

Can we just kill her?

Do you think we could?

...No.

The elf halted her approach, standing tall above me as I lounged on the ground, legs crossed, industriously gnawing on a dragon scale the size of a dinner plate. That's right, I'm actually chewing. Thanks to my Web of Whispers thread, I can create hardened silk, which I've fashioned into makeshift teeth. Sure, I could potentially craft swords and other sharp implements, but the truth is, my physical combat skills are practically nonexistent. My approach to battle leans heavily on sowing chaos, using an unconventional fighting style to bewilder my opponents. Then there's my magical prowess—let's not forget that. I'm like a skunk, spraying enemies with plagues from Blight and undead fire—unholy fire—or whatever you want to call the source of my Necrotic Flame. Essentially, I embody chaos, a trait that has propelled me to my current standing.

Embody chaos? Dream, we don't actually have any real talent, not even for chaos; we're merely lucky.

Luck might as well be considered a feature of the chaos skill tree.

But the magic system here is fundamentally flawed—there's no such thing as a skill tree.

I'm convinced there is one; it's just that we haven't managed to gain access to it yet.

"Are you going to continue to ignore me?" Ms. Pissy Holiness hissed, her foot tapping with impatience.

"Maybe," I shot back, my chewing uninterrupted. "Look, Vanya, it seems you're in the mood for a serious chat, and frankly, I'm not the go-to for that. Honestly, I might just be the worst person to discuss... well, whatever it is you're aiming to bring up," I sighed, reluctantly removing the dragon scale from my mouth.

"Things are about to get difficult for me," she stated, evidently disregarding my earlier hint about not being in the mood for a heart-to-heart. Honestly, I couldn't care less. "We're entering the dark lands, aligning with those who have been my adversaries for longer than I can recall," she continued. "I'm uncertain of what lies ahead."

"Oh, don't sweat it," I assured her with a dismissive wave of my hand, as if to brush away her concerns. "You're with me now, so you're in safe hands. Consider yourself on the VIP list," I declared with a grin, turning my attention back to the dragon scale, quite pleased with my so-called solution.

"Then there's my husband," she added, causing me to pause mid-bite, my expression souring. "He appears to be at the helm of the Slaethian army. I'm not sure what to make of it. Do you think it's possible to convince him of the Kingdom of Slaethia's malevolence and corruption?"

"Look, we're all a bit evil, malevolent, and corrupted," I began. "The problem is, those jerks you used to work for brainwashed everyone into thinking they're on the side of righteousness and all that nonsense. From what I've seen, convincing someone they're in the wrong is a lost cause. You've got to show them instead," I explained, my patience already wearing thin from this line of discussion. Just as I was about to sink my teeth back into my scale, a tentacle sprang forth from the center of my chest, snatching the scale right out of my grasp. "Ugh, Phantasia," I groaned in annoyance—though, that was only half-hearted; she was rather adorable, after all.

After our little heart-to-heart talk, Von Von seemed to be in better spirits, albeit her resting bitch face still firmly in place. But, I suppose that's just part of her unique, if not exactly endearing, charm. Once we boarded the airship, the crew's looks in my direction changed. The reverence they once held was now mingled with something else—awe or irritation, I couldn't quite discern. I mean, I had jumped out of the sky to chase after a dragon without a parachute, all in hopes of snagging an easy meal, so let's lean towards awe. Yep, definitely awe. That definitely wasn't an eye roll some llama-looking jerk just threw my way. *Freaking beastkins.*

And just like that, we were ascending back into the air, my nervousness about seeing the woman of my dreams still lingering.



Champion Orlaith, fury incarnate, thundered through the claustrophobic corridors, dragon wings folded into a rigid embrace against her back. Her dress, a cascade of red and gold scales, danced with light, each step igniting sparks as if she tread on embers. The crystals studding the ancient walls bathed her path in an ethereal blue, yet her eyes, ablaze with a vengeful inferno, outshone them all. Rage simmered within, each breath she released was a harbinger of storm clouds, puffing out tendrils of black smoke.

Deep beneath the capital of the Slaethian Kingdom, Orlaith moved in a silence that screamed of suppressed fury, a tempest contained. Above, the heavens themselves had been redrawn in strokes of surreal pinks and blues, a canvas of cosmic disorder marking a convergence of not one, but two worlds. This spectacle in the skies was no mere beauty to behold—it was the precursor to chaos.

The gods, those enigmatic beings of power, had thrown their verdicts like dice upon the cosmic board, issuing a retreat of the imperial legions from Nyxoria. Their gaze turned from conquests of old to the forging of new alliances, to the plundering of new moons caught in the gravitational pull of Völuspá's orbit. This divine decree was not just a call to explore but to exploit, to seize the treasures born from the confluence of worlds: mythical creatures emerging from the void, mana crystals brimming with raw, untamed energy, and the birth of dungeon cores, pulsing with potential.

These marvels, spawned from the chaos of convergence, were treasures beyond measure to the Ascended Gods, coveted for their power and promise. Yet, against this backdrop of cosmic upheaval and divine desire, this distant, shadowed moon on the fringe of reality faded into obscurity. In the grand tapestry of the universe's unfolding drama, it was rendered a mere footnote, a dream lost to the light of dawn, its significance evaporated like mist in the rising sun.

Orlaith's fury knew no bounds. Betrayed by one of their own, the loss of Champion Einarr was a blow that could not, would not stand unavenged. While Champion Galen had swiftly heeded the celestial summons, vanishing with the dawn of the convergence on wings of fairy speed, Orlaith's resolve only hardened. Abandoning this moon, her quest for revenge, was unthinkable. A smile, cold and resolute, graced her lips as she felt the unmistakable warmth of Zarathos's approval wash over her. Her dragon god stood with her, apart from the other deities, sharing her sense of betrayal and her thirst for justice.

Orlaith's entrance into the dungeons was marked by a sharp tsk, her disdain palpable at the sight that greeted her. There, chained within their cells and enveloped in their own squalor, were a wizard and a dwarf woman. These two, once friends and comrades of the very one who had betrayed them, now languished in the deepest despair. A flicker of desire to engulf them in flames danced across Orlaith's thoughts, a brief imagining of retribution through fire. Yet, she restrained this impulse, concluding that an eternity imprisoned in their current state was a punishment far more fitting and cruel.

Navigating past the prisoners with a dismissive sneer, Orlaith delved further into the dungeon's gloom. Her hand, unfazed, turned the knob of a metal door, releasing a flood of torturous screams into the silent corridor. The door's creak was a mere whisper compared to the chaos within.

Inside, a beastkin with an unusual blend of frog-like features and fish-like teeth presented an odd spectacle as he arched his head back in a scream. On either side, soldiers were engrossed in their grim work—one methodically breaking his kneecaps with a hammer, the other carefully slicing the flesh from his abdomen. Orlaith observed the scene with cold detachment, her gaze sweeping over the torment without a hint of pity or horror. The calculated cruelty unfolding before her was nothing more than a fact of life in the depths of the dungeon, a necessary measure in her quest for justice and retribution.

Orlaith's gaze shifted, landing on a large, bald man stationed in the corner of the room. His arms were crossed, his stance imposing, eyes alight with a fierce anger as he watched the interrogation unfold. Yet, as Orlaith approached him, her movements deliberate and alluring, his expression shifted to one of undeniable desire. Leaning into him, she sealed their connection with a deep, passionate kiss, the prisoner's screams fading into the background of their moment.

"General," she whispered, breaking the intensity of their embrace with a smile that spoke volumes.

"My flame," he responded, the affection in his voice wrapping around her like a warm embrace. The nickname he had bestowed upon her sparked a flicker of joy in her heart.

Their moment of closeness shattered, pierced by the prisoner's bizarre cries. What started as pleas for mutilation spiraled into moans laced with disturbing delight. "Lower! Lower!" he howled, his voice a twisted mix of agony and ecstasy. "Do it! Do it! Cut off my cock!" His shouts morphed into groans, blurring the line between torment and twisted pleasure.

Confusion rippled through the room, the soldiers halting their actions, their gazes turning towards General Anlyth for guidance amidst the bizarre turn of events.

Orlaith, cloaked in a veil of exasperation, commanded the space with authority, "Step aside." The soldiers, knowing better than to disobey a Champion, hurriedly leapt back.

With a mere gesture, Orlaith unleashed her fury, and flames roared to life, engulfing the prisoner in a wrathful inferno. The frog-beastkin was consumed by fire, his flesh peeling away from bone, some turning to dust in the fierce heat. Amidst this spectacle of destruction, his screams twisted into moans of perverse ecstasy. "More! More! Just like that, baby! Yes! Oh, gods, yes!" he rasped, his voice hoarse with twisted delight.