

BLAKE PUDDING

CHAPTER 6

NIGHT AFTER NIGHT

What could I possibly say at this moment? Flabbergasted—bewildered—befuddled—my mind raced through a maelstrom of mystification and perplexity. Was I teetering on the brink of insanity? Well, considering who I was, that was a definitive yes.

Standing there, the specter of General Ezad Anlyth—whom I'd killed, and then subsequently shoved Olin's soul inside of—loomed before me. *Oh, damn, I'd forgotten all about Olin.* But then again, he was pretty much a grumpy jerk. Oh well, his soul was tucked away within the phylactery I was loaning him. That's right, I had already lost one phylactery to a goblin kid; I certainly wasn't about to let that bastard keep my other one. Both it and he were concealed within me—or rather, within Stellar Void. Wait...what was I rambling about again?

Oh, right!

Ezad and his wife, Vanya Anlyth, were right in front of me. Vanya, who I thought had perished when I exploded inside the dungeon ruins during their siege.

“Am I dead?” The words barely escaped my lips, a whisper so soft it barely disturbed the air.

But that couldn't possibly be it, could it? Mother had respawned me after I'd shown her the Dungeon Core, which still resided within me. So, what in the underworld was happening here?

My eyes flickered to the hooded wizard, recognition slamming into me. Craycroft! That meant the handsy dwarf, Grimmail, was Gimona Grimmail. Last time I saw her, she had more of a five o'clock shadow rather than a full beard, so I hadn't recognized her. The entire gang was assembled here. Apart from the General and the gnome, this was the very party that had ruthlessly murdered the kid, Wartie.

A desperate question kept repeating itself in my puddin' skull: “*What's going on?!*”

My gaze swiftly shifted to the gnome—Nikola. His soul had been summoned here, just like mine. A torrent of questions churned within me for him. But that interrogation would have to wait until after I exacted my revenge on this whole party... Well, maybe I should exercise a smidge of restraint, but one way or another, vengeance would be mine, with or without my other half awake.

"Oi, what's I missed?"

Grimmail—or no, Gimona—strolled into the cave, droplets of water carelessly cascading from her armor and the sopping wet beard that obscured part of her grin. A wide, unchecked smile beamed across her face, each crease and crinkle slicing into my rising fury like a well-aimed dagger. Her merriment, so starkly incongruent in this twisted reunion of specters and past deeds, acted as a corrosive, an acid, slowly eating away at any composure I had barely managed to hold onto.

After my declaration that I had killed Ezad—despite the man standing right there—and Vanya’s little outburst, the only other sound had been the crackling of the fire. Now, that was being drowned out by the footsteps of the dwarf, who was oblivious to the growing tension.

“Explain yourself,” Vanya, the woman in armor, demanded, pointing her sword at me.

Well, it looks like that smidgen of restraint wasn’t going to last.

“Umm, what’s goin’ on, lassie? Also, why is your outfit fallin’ apart?” Gimona asked, her wide dwarven smile fading into a look of confusion.

I glanced down, noticing my dress and robe fraying into silk threads. A twinge of embarrassment might have pricked me—after all, I was on the verge of being stark naked with a sword pointed at me—but I could feel it: darkness welling up within, oozing out like a building nightmare.

Ignoring the sword pointed at me, I glanced at Gimona, “I may have revealed a little secret,” I offered with a coy smile, “and it seems Vanya isn’t a fan of truth-telling.”

Gimona’s eyes flicked between Vanya and me, a frown forming as she attempted to puzzle out the situation. “Yer tellin’ tales, are ye?” She mumbled, scratching at her damp beard, before boldly stepping closer to Vanya. “Now, now, let’s not be hasty with the pointy end, aye?”

Vanya’s grip tightened on the sword, a myriad of emotions wrestling for dominance in her eyes. She was on edge, yes, but something in Gimona’s words or demeanor seemed to penetrate her fury, at least momentarily.

I took a cautious step forward. “I’ll explain. But I suggest you lower your weapon. We wouldn’t want things to get... messy, now would we?”

Secretly, I craved the mess, the chaos, the upheaval. A sensation—a slow, languorous awakening—stretched through my consciousness. No, *our* consciousness. Nightmare simmered beneath the surface, her attributes of malice, hatred, hunger, and cruelty pooling into an engulfing darkness within us, obliterating my naive dreams and hopeful aspirations.

Vanya’s sword dipped, its point redirecting from my chest to my groin—a marginal improvement, at best. Still, a perceptible shift lingered in the air as my words, combined with Gimona’s insistence, seemed to sow seeds of doubt within her.

In that moment, clarity dawned upon me as if out of nowhere. I was more than just a naive dream; she... Nightmare was our true essence. We were not merely entities of dreams and nightmares; we were the embodiment of fading dreams and enduring nightmares. Her gradual awakening brought a stark comprehension of our true nature.

Confusingly, none of them bore any recollection of me or my deeds. While I had begun to harbor suspicions that they had discovered a means to revive everyone—much like my own ability to respawn—their apparent amnesia contradicted that theory.

Was this the test mother intended for us to take?

Without my other soul, I was only half of what we were—a fading dream, clinging futilely to a hope I hadn't realized I didn't even desire. Now, I felt it—I yearned for the dream to dissipate, to gently fade away. We were the dying light, the looming horrors, the withering hope.

"We. Are. Blake," I declared, as Nightmare unfurled her eyes within us.

What followed was a pending silence from my souls, an unspoken understanding hung in the ethereal space between us. Before anyone could comprehend what was unfolding, we struck!

My arm, now a relic of a past self, snapped toward Craycroft with an otherworldly aggression. It disintegrated, silk threads wafting through the nightmarish air, as a grotesque jet of black goop spewed from the void it left, smothering the wizard's face in a suffocating embrace. His muffled struggles were sweet, discordant melodies in our shared consciousness.

Necrotic Flame billowed toward Vanya next, a malevolent purple inferno seeking flesh. But she was quick, too quick, her shield leaping to intercept my malice with a resounding, ethereal clang. It didn't matter; my intentions were broader, more insidious.

The gnome's scream, high and brittle, fractured the cavern space as he collapsed, scrabbling backward on his rear, eyes wide, reflecting the horrors unfolding before him. My questions for him could wait; his despair was another note in our dark symphony.

The dwarf was not so fortunate. She was a mere pawn, caught in the insidious drapery of my attack. Her form twisted on the ground, a pitiful writhing display birthed from the melding of magic and flesh. Her screams, ah, they were a poignant duet with Craycroft's muffled gurgles.

And then there was Ezad. The brute, his muscle-bound form a rampaging silhouette against the fire light, bellowed and charged. My hair, once a gentle white cascade, erupted into a writhing mass of black tendrils. They snaked forward, embracing Ezad in a lover's cruel corrosive caress, his screams harmonizing with the chorus of anguish reverberating through the cavern.

Craycroft, submerged in the abyss of my vengeance, emitted no screams. But I felt them—every silent plea, every unvoiced curse, rippling through the nightmare we had unleashed.

A soft glow began to emanate from behind Vanya's shield, subtly at first, then blooming into an assertive, dulcet luminescence that seeped, unwelcome, into every dark crevice of the cavern. A slow crescendo of light, culminating in her sword's zealous eruption into a divine inferno, tore through the pulsating, purple ambiance, framing her in an awe-inducing, yet ominously dangerous aura.

Ah, the pain was like a sudden, unexpected dance partner, leading my dark, gooey, pudding-esque self in a torturous tango of agony. Picture it: being submersed in a cauldron of the spiciest chili while nursing a grade-A sunburn. That sword—holy heck, it hadn't even given me a proper smooch yet! Just its sanctimonious glow was slathering my dark essence in an existential crisis and barbecuing it slowly over an eternal flame.

The sword was more than a mere weapon; it was a conduit of the holy, a divine semaphore sending Morse code of impending doom directly into every strand of my being. Its holiness wasn't merely

a visual spectacle—it permeated, dissected, and tormented my essence with every glimmering flicker, searing through me with both condemnation and purification. Worse, her shield started to glow along with it.

My formless, shadowy being crumpled inwardly, sending silent, shapeless screams reverberating throughout our interconnected mental abyss. Every scintillating wave of light told tales of obliteration, chronicles of creatures of nightmare such as myself being annihilated, their remnants scattered to the cosmic winds by its sanctifying blaze.

Cocooned within this blinding, celestial doom, an insidious drip of despair and rebellion seeped through my very core, coating every fiber of my being with a resolute truth: *Oh, we were spectacularly and irredeemably screwed.*

Frantically, I grasped at the ambient mana around me, attempting to double—no, quintuple—the unholy wrath of my Necrotic Flame, now gushing toward Vanya’s shield like vomit from a demonic dragon with one too many in it. But as my formless tendrils stretched out, seeking to imbibe the swirling energy, the holy fire's searing intensity spiked.

“What the fucking hell is this?!” wailed my fading dream.

“It’s like sticking your hand in lava for a high-five. Damn, should’ve hit the snooze button on waking up,” groaned my enduring nightmare in pained retort.

The ambient mana felt tainted, soaked through with that accursed holy magic, slipping through my tendrils as if scorning their very existence. The realization seeped into us, cold and foreboding: *we can’t grasp it, can’t control the mana.*

Before either facet of me could puzzle out a solution, Vanya—shield ablaze with that godforsaken light—barreled through the waning tendrils of my purple flames. A metallic crash and my arm was shoved aside by her shield, leaving my form searing and gaping, exposed.

Then, that light, that horrifying, scorching light, came arcing down, directly towards my face.

“Two?”

“Aye, found meself a magus-tier caster who’s offered t’join us,” Gimona boasted, swagger practically dripping from her words. “An’ I’ve already called dibs, so hands off—she be mine.”

A blink, a breath, and suddenly the cavern entrance was before me, Gimona to the side, gabbing away with Craycroft, who lurked just out of view inside the cavern’s maw.

“Now, lassie, off ye go,” she nudged, a sly, conspiratorial grin playing across her features. “I’ll be tailin’ behind ye soon enough. Just need a quick splash in the river—can hardly abide me own stench from these sodden trousers,” she proclaimed, a roaring laugh erupting from her broad chest.

Confusion gnawed at the edges of my understanding, but the nightmare within didn’t care for reason, didn’t pause for rationale. Without thought, without discussion, she lashed out. Our arm burst into a torrent of black goop, smacking into Gimona’s head with a grotesque slap, tendrils

crawling down, igniting Necrotic Flame through them and leaving her head engulfed, body now a thrashing pyre.

“Die monster!” Craycroft’s voice echoed from the cavern, permeated with loathing and terror.

I twisted toward him, catching sight of an impending bright blue brilliance streaking my way. A single thought flashed: *Always strike the mage first*. There was no time to consider the spell, no moment to evade. Pain lanced through, and then...

“Two?” I heard Craycroft say once again.

“Aye, found meself a magus-tier caster who’s offered t’join us,” Gimona’s voice, a ghostly refrain, filled the space again. “An’ I’ve already called dibs, so hands off—she be mine.”

“Wha...What’s happening?” The words tumbled out, bouncing off the cliff walls.

Gimona’s brow furrowed as she cast a glance my way, a simmer of worry in her eyes. “Eh, Lassie? We’re meetin’ the rest of me merry crew, and there’s a wee drake that needs a good slayin’. D’ye not remember agreein’ to this?”

From the cavernous depths of our consciousness, a dark murmur emerged. “*What mess have you roped us into now?*” Nightmare inquired, her voice a venomous hiss slithering through our shared mental space.

My fading dream chimed in, a delicate, translucent whisper in contrast, “*Uh...Nightmare, let’s just...keep the killing impulses on a leash till we’ve puzzled things out a bit, yes?*”

The dark entity’s response was a snarl, “*What did you just call me?*”

“*I gave you a name. Like it?*”

A pause, then a venomous, “*No!*”

“*Tough cookies! Now, play nice or not at all!*”

Nightmare’s acquiescence was a begrudging, guttural grunt, “*Ugh!*”

A smile slinked its way across my face, a mingling of what I intended as sweetness but was unmistakably predatory. “Ah, just lost in thought for a moment, Gim—Grimmail.” I aimed for an air of innocent ignorance, pretending I didn’t know her full name.

Both of me knew, however, that pretending innocence was about as foreign to us as self-restraint.

Gimona offered a slow, hesitant nod, her eyes flickering with a glint of suspicion. “Aye, if ye say so, lass.”

Nightmare chuckled darkly within us, murmuring, “*She doesn’t buy it, not one bit.*”

“*Will you be quiet? Go back to sleep!*” my fading dream huffed in silent retort.

Turning our attention back to the present, we noted Gimona's call toward the cave, "Ye plannin' to invite us in, mage?"

From the dimness within, Craycroft's gruff voice spilled outward, "Yes. Yes. Do come in. I'm keen to meet this magus-tier caster you've brought us."

"*Magus-tier?*" Nightmare whispered, a shadow of intrigue tinting her usually venomous tone.

"*Yeah,*" Dream responded, an airy lightness to our thoughts as if she were attempting to navigate through a puzzle. "*Seems like they've got a tier system in place for magic users. Oh, and keep your eyes peeled for a little girl in a pink dress. Got a hunch some goddess is having a good ol' time messing with our head.*"

Nightmare, a bit too eager for confrontation, sneered, "*A goddess, huh? Think she'll bleed like the rest of them?*"

Then there's Dream—or me, or is it she?—shuffling through a dusty corner of appreciation for Nightmare's typically unabashed, violent curiosity. Oh, for the love of—didn't we iron this sodding identity crisis out already? We're both Blake, which means me is us. Or us is me. Or... oh, for fuck's sake, who even cares anymore?

Wait, wait, back it up, where was I...? Ah, goddess! Right.

Dream, maneuvering gingerly through our mangled mindscape, trying not to trip over Nightmare's crueller urges, sighing, "*Look, as delightfully messy as it might be to kill a goddess, perhaps we don't provoke the celestial bee, eh? Let's tumble a bit further down this bonkers rabbit hole before we go making enemies with the divine, yeah?*"

Following Craycroft into the cavern, I gave a perfunctory nod that barely qualified as a greeting, while Gimona sauntered off toward the river for her so-called washup. Honestly, neither of me thought she smelled all that rank; in fact, considering typical dwarven odor, this was practically an upgrade. I just assumed she'd return with that classic wet-dog essence. Admittedly, I hadn't really given her post-river aroma much thought during the previous run of this batshit Groundhog Day loop.

Navigating a bend in the dimly lit cavern, Vanya, Ezad, and Nikola came into view. Vanya was diligently sharpening her sword with that "*I'm preparing to eviscerate something*" intensity. Ezad, meanwhile, was relegated to some shadowy nook, determinedly punishing himself with push-ups.

Nikola, parked beside the fire, was fiddling with something that closely resembled a flintlock pistol, except for the perplexing, glowing crystal where the flint ought to have been. Another similar item was discarded nonchalantly by his side. Tiny things they were, no bigger than my small hands, but considering the gnome's diminutive, practically infantile hands, brandishing a standard-sized pistol would presumably be out of the question for him.

"Alright," Craycroft heralded our entrance with unearned grandeur, "seems the dwarf's dragged in another caster to lend us a hand." He turned to me, all chivalrous decay. "I'm afraid I didn't catch your name, dear."

“Blake,” I offered, a saccharine smile concealing a symphony of internal screams shouting, eviscerate them all! “Pleasure to see you again, Nikola,” I tacked on, deliberately bland.

Nikola's brows did a confused dance. “Um, do we know each other?”

A genuine lapse in memory, I figured, scanning briefly for a twirl of pink fabric and finding zilch.

Ezad, having abandoned his calisthenics in the dark, slinked over, all testosterone and misguided charm. “Oh! What do we have here, a woman, and a fine-looking one at that.”

Oh, the internal battle was real. Every ounce of me screamed to unleash hell; Nightmare was practically frothing, and Dream... well, she wasn't putting up much of a fight against the notion. But we knew, oh we knew, impulse control was key here.

I tossed a coquettish grin his way, “Flirting, are we? What's your wife over there gonna say?”

“Wife?!” The simultaneous outburst from both Vanya and Ezad was more harmonious than they likely would've preferred.

Vanya snapped back first, “We're just dating. Like I'd ever legally bind myself to him,” she added, catching me a bit by surprise.

“Oh, darling, you slice me deep,” Ezad riposted, a hand dramatically clutching his chest.

“Hold up, you two aren't hitched?” I probed, utterly bewildered—*what were we missing?*

“Nope, they're tragically unwed,” chimed in Gimona, miraculously sneaking up behind me to get a handful of my ass, her clothes and armor dripping but, surprisingly, absent of the anticipated wet dog scent. Probably why I missed it last time. “Right, now that we're all gathered 'round, what say we give that drake a hearty kick in its scaly tail, eh?”

With her hand firm on my ass, Nightmare's abysmal amount of patience evaporated into an insatiable urge for chaos. Ezad, Gimona, and Craycroft were just within arm's reach. A battle raged within me—I knew surrendering to the impulse meant starting this wicked dance anew. Yet, there was an intoxicating allure in the idea of murdering everyone in this little party. Despite a part of me screaming to resist, I struck, a dark satisfaction curling in the pit of my stomach as I doomed myself to revisit this moment once more.

Yet, I found delight in each scream, in every moment of agony. Every clash, loss, and victory was a spectacle to behold. I can't help but wonder—how long can I sustain this? How long before the girl in pink spoils my fun?



The perpetual drip of water echoed through the dimly lit space, harmonizing with distant rattles of chains and faint, despairing screams. Occasionally, roars and cheers from the outer world permeated the dense stone walls, but visitors were a rarity here—only the occasional guard, delivering a day's worth of slop onto the frigid floor, deemed it food. Even the armored boars of the highland goblins feasted better.

In that dark, damp cell, a dwarf woman shuddered, awakening to the cold.

"It happened again?" A raspy voice sought to offer solace from the adjacent cell.

"'Tis always the same," she replied, her voice brittle. "I-I find this enchantin' human woman," she stammered, stifling a snuffle, "ask her to join our party, and then she murders us. Brutally, mercilessly, again and again. Always the day before dat terrible night, it is."

"Ah, the night Slaethia fell?" The old man queried, a knowing timbre in his voice.

"Aye," she whispered in confirmation. "She's hauntin' me dreams, she is."

Nightly rest had turned into a horrifying ordeal—an unyielding nightmare for nearly two years now.

"It's strange, isn't it? I find her in my dreams at night as well, always doing the same thing," he replied with meaning. "It's been so long since I've had a good night's sleep," he sighed.

The dwarf woman let out another subdued snuffle, trying to shield the sound of her tears from any ears. For a dwarf, no shame was greater than showcasing such vulnerability. However, everything had been stripped from her and her comrade. Falsely accused of treason and thrown into prison without a trial, all because the nobles needed a scapegoat. It was an undeserved cruelty. Of course, she wouldn't admit that she might have performed a few unsavory deeds in her time, but she had never experienced anything like this before.

"Gimona," the raspy voice called out softly. "We'll get out of this, I promise you."

"Aye, but don't ye be makin' promises we both know ye cannae keep, Craycroft," she replied, holding back tears. "For now, I'd settle for a bit of shut-eye without losin' me intestines."

"Yes, that'd be a blessing," he contributed with weighty intent. "Last night, I dreamt she fashioned a necklace from my own entrails. Yet, she's never laid a hand on Nelzar in any of my nightmares."

"Nelzar—the High Priest?" Gimona queried, a note of surprise in her voice, a realization flickering after all this time. "He ain't in any of me nightmares. It's some other gnome I don't recognize."

"He wasn't always a priest," Craycroft elucidated. "He served as our healer in the party before Slaethia fell."

"Ye're right. But I'm tellin' ye, it be another gnome," Gimona insisted. "What do ye make of it all? D'ye reckon Vanya's havin' the same nightmares?"

Craycroft exhaled heavily, his voice a mere whisper in the dank dungeon air. "I don't know, Gimona. I just don't know."



Vanya awoke, a rare feeling of refreshment coursing through her. Nightly, she dueled in her dreams with the woman who had stolen her husband from her; some nights saw her triumphant, smiting

the vile creature. The others, utter defeat, and horrendous torment. Nonetheless, last night she'd tasted victory once more, and it was a sweetness she reveled in.

As she meticulously adorned herself in her shining new armor—a generous gift from the church made of pure mithril and graced with golden accents—she couldn't help but linger in the sensation of it. The shoulder guards, crafted to resemble wings encircling her, were a sight to behold. Yet her heart ached slightly for her old, tarnished set, tinged with memories and past battles. The church insisted on her wearing this resplendent armor, especially since she remained barred from battle by her god's decree. High Priest Nelzar, an old friend and former comrade in adventures, desired to keep her safe, even if he couldn't shield their friends from the nobles' ruthless condemnations.

Stepping out of her tent, Vanya prepared to observe two of the other champions, who stood ready to quash any spark of rebellion smoldering in the remnants of the Beastveil Kingdom. The plan had been to push onward, towards the next kingdom, but war rarely adheres to well thought out plans, and the Kingdom of Slaethia seemed hell-bent on conflict.

The third champion, Galen, was otherwise absent, embroiled in tasks dictated by the kingdom. Precisely what those tasks entailed was beyond her, but she harbored no ill-will toward anyone who found themselves entangled with that fairy.

Slaethia had once known a semblance of peace or at least, a milder form of chaos, with only occasional skirmishes over land with neighboring realms and occasional monster raids. That tranquility shattered when Aurelia emerged, casting a dark shadow over the capital with her unexpected siege. The surviving nobles, turning to the gods for salvation, found their borders overwhelmed with refugees descending from other moons, replenishing the lives lost. Taking this as a divine sign, the nobles proclaimed a righteous mission to purge all other life from this moon—a cause Vanya Anlyth herself, and even her late husband, had once supported. He'd eagerly joined the military, swiftly ascending to the rank of General.

Yet, as it seemed, no good thing was meant to endure. All she truly craved was another night bathed in victorious dreams, where she could witness Blake, the murderer of her husband, consumed by divine, searing light.

Nonetheless, that desire was largely fueled by her need to escape the other, more harrowing visions that enveloped her: the wailing, sobbing, and agonizing screams of the captured beastkin. Day after day, they were impaled upon spikes, their limbs kicking and voices pleading through the few drawn-out days it took them to perish. No mercy was granted, not even to the children and infants alike.

“How could it be,” Vanya whispered silently to herself, “that, night after night, repeatedly dying—and occasionally triumphing—against the monster that murdered my dear husband in my dreams was more comforting than the waking nightmare of reality?”