

BLAKE PUDDING

CHAPTER 4

HAPPILY, GRIM

That damn gnome, I swear, he went full Houdini on me! Picture this: bumping into another Earthling—whose soul got yanked right outta Earth—a seismic 'holy shit' moment in this magically chaotic mess of a dimension. And then... poof! The dude's a damn ghost. Seriously, WTF?!

The nightlife began to exhale its final breaths as the midnight veil thickened. Staggering figures, too penniless to linger in the warmth of the brothels and inns, spilled out onto the streets. They swayed, their inebriated bodies navigating through the familiar path, perhaps toward waiting wives. I leaned against a nearby wall, its cool, rough surface pricking my back, as I chewed on the options sizzling in my mind.

The gnome was gone—for now. Survival here needed coin—or at least, some semblance of it. It's the drill in every otherworld tale: pop into existence, land a job, and tackle the noble goal—be it epic journey, princess-saving, or demon king-slaying. My noble goal? A ticket back to Aurelia. But first, I needed a roof for the night—even if sleep seemed an elusive friend right now. And to score that, my pockets needed weight.

Robbery! The thought sidled up, whispering dark and enticing possibilities into my mental ear. Handy? Absolutely. Packed with perks? Unquestionably. But it wasn't exactly serenading me tonight. Such scheming necessitated a grim, permanent mute on my victims—and any poor soul who chanced upon us. While these hands had committed dark deeds before, it was always my other half steering the ship through those stormy moral seas.

A languid "Ugh," slipped into the night, reflecting my inner tug-of-war. I needed my other half to rouse herself, and pronto!

Internally, she'd clearly flicked on the 'Do Not Disturb' sign, deep-diving into a dreamy (or should I say, nightmarish) vacation, effortlessly ignoring my mental elbow jabs for her to snap out of it. Another sigh tiptoed through our shared consciousness, marrying the crisp night air, while a faint "ugh" grumbled softly mirroring my own silent frustration. That insufferable bitch of my other me, refused to wake up!

"I really don't wanna dirty these hands," I whined into the night.

My other half was the real wild card, a murderous psychopath who, without a second thought, indulged in deeds either out of necessity or just for the hell of it. Now, that wasn't me—well, not this 'me' anyway. I was the silent watcher, the ethical compass, albeit occasionally a slightly demagnetized one, who kept us on task. Sure, there might've been moments where I didn't exactly

discourage my counterpart's dark escapades, but it wasn't like I was the one getting my hands dirty.

"*We are Blake*," mumbled my sleeping sister.

Okay, fine. Maybe I had a hand, or at least a couple of fingers, in those deeds since I am, after all, part of Blake. I also had this sneaky suspicion Nightmare (a fitting nickname for my other half, don't you think?) was semi-aware in our cozy, shared mind, given her timely sleep mumbles always seemed to slip out at the most opportune—or inopportune—moments.

Peeling myself off the wall, I figured, "*Why not take a stroll through the city at night?*" Heck, with a bit of luck, maybe some poor SOB would try to mug me instead, gifting me a guilt-free pass to Slaughtersville. A low chuckle burbled from me, savoring this deviously neat loophole. It's not technically murder if it's self-defense, right? At least where I come from—or where I used to come from—it doesn't count. Good ol' USA, am I right? We'd fondly dub that 'stand your ground'—or, you know, legalized murder. *Tee-hee!*

"Oh mother, maybe I am as psychotic as my other me," I gasped out to the cool night breeze.

A theatrical slump of my shoulders, and off I went, a nocturnal wanderer through the dim-lit city, serving a convincing portrayal of a damsel not exactly in distress. Honestly, I wasn't. But hey, a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do, right? Strolling with ostentatiously feeble steps, I cast sidelong glances at the sparse passersby, inviting calamity with eyes wide and deliberately vulnerable. And nothing. Not even a half-hearted side-eye in return. Apparently, my "bait" was as tempting as leftover macaroni salad at a barbecue. Sigh. It's tough being ignored when you're practically begging to be a victim.

"Ugh, I ain't ugly, am I? Hell no! Took a good look in the mirror, and damn, I'd totally sit on my own face if I could. Hmm, as a Black Pudding...that might actually be doable," I mused, allowing those slightly raunchy thoughts simmer a moment longer before shooing them away with a smirky grin and a sigh. *Was I sounding a lot like Nightmare?* A little mental poke into our shared consciousness yielded zip, zilch, nada. Still snoozing away in there, apparently.

Must've been close to three in the morning, assuming mornings here even worked the way I remember, as I meandered, slightly aimless, through the shadowy city streets. Honestly, I was pretty clueless about how many hours made up a day in this bizarre place. My steps kept a solitary beat against the cobblestone, each tap a soft, sardonic reminder of a plan going sideways. Not a single thief or even a lecherous gaze had crossed my path. I mean, really, what's a girl got to do to get some unwanted attention in this place?

A distant clamor of laughter and the buzzing of vibrant chatter teased my ears, pulling me from my self-pitying haze. It emanated from an imposing yet peculiarly out-of-place building nestled among its modest neighbors. It loomed, a curious blend of a capitol building and something straight out of mythical Greece.

Curiosity pulled me up the stately steps and through the expectant, yawning doors. Inside, a hive of mirth and sloshed camaraderie greeted me, the air rich with the hearty, familiar scent of ale.

Folks lounged at scattered tables, their laughter and banter stitching a vibrant tapestry of revelry across the space. Meanwhile, others huddled, their eyes dancing excitedly over a large board. Yet, amidst the sea of jubilant chaos, a lone human male leaned nonchalantly against a counter, his eyes narrating a silent, vivid tale of profound and all-encompassing boredom, an isolated island in an ocean of cheerful uproar.

A surprising bustle of people, considering the supposed wee hours, surrounded me, all immersed in their laughter and sips, yet strangely not a single person—dwarves included—appeared overly sloshed. My brows furrowed in mild confusion, and involuntarily, my head pivoted around the room, trying to digest the peculiar atmosphere, until a shock of sunlight from the doorway behind me struck me rigid.

Sunlight? But, wasn't it just the dead of night?

My mind churned, grappling between the logical and the ludicrous. Was I freezing in thought for longer than I realized, or am I suffering from a brain tumor? A gentle shake of my head, I shelved those bizarre thoughts for a later pondering and sidled deeper into the lively building.

My gaze drifted towards the board, a canvas splattered with slips of paper—no, wait, maybe parchment?—each pinned neatly with what looked like an undecipherable, squiggly script. A blink, and fragments of meaning began to click into place. Odd. Another blink, and clarity wove itself into the foreign letters. With my [Veil Polyglot] translation skill supposedly offline, this newfound comprehension confused me. Yet, before my mind could spiral down that rabbit hole, the contents of the board unveiled themselves: bounties – on monsters, individuals, and even for the gathering of various flora and materials.

A lightbulb flickered on in my brain. “Well, I’ll be...an adventuring guild,” I whispered, a mix of revelation and disbelief lingering on my tongue.

Navigating a magical world likely adhered to two main rules: firstly, enroll in a magical academy—yet having already dipped my toes into the non-magical variety and ended up as a college dropout back on Earth, that option was a solid, “hell no!” Secondly, find yourself an adventure guild. This option, at least, whispered promises of replenishing my dwindling coin stash and perhaps even scattering a few breadcrumbs leading out of this desert.

Sure, the thought of commandeering an airship had wafted through my mind, but given that my knowledge of sailing—be it on waves or wind currents—totaled a firm zero, that idea was shelved in the 'perhaps another day' file. Thus, adventuring stood as the chosen path. And if Nightmare opted to emerge and embark on a violent spree? Well, maybe that'd conveniently hasten our investigative endeavors on the express route back to Aurelia.

Pondering over my snoozing alter-ego, I couldn't help but wonder if she was the reason behind my newfound talent of unwittingly fast-forwarding through the day. A chill tingled down my spine at the thought, but I shook it off and strutted over to the front counter, locking onto Mr. Ennui himself.

A shiver scuttled down my spine, but I shrugged it off for the time being, directing my steps towards the counter and the glaringly disinterested human man behind it.

But, as luck—or my recent streak of it—would have it, my arrival at the counter failed to register on his radar. Not even an insincere, half-hearted “How may I help you?” Nothing, nada.

I stood there, wrestling with a ballooning frustration and a pang of something akin to self-doubt. Was I somehow invisible in this weird dimension? A shade not quite worth anyone’s acknowledgment? *Am I a ghost?*

“Hey!” A pointed cough. “Any chance I could get a smidge of attention here?” I waved my hand slightly, my voice laced with a feigned cheerfulness that barely masked a burgeoning irritation.

His eyes blinked open, a faint, distant look clouding them as if he’d momentarily wandered into a far-off thought. “Hmm, oh,” he murmured, a bland neutrality returning to his expression. “How may I help you?”

My words clipped with a mix of annoyance and stark curiosity, I declared, “I’d like to join.”

A response lumbered out of him, slow and dreadfully monotone. “After your mock battle, I have you listed as a copper rank. You may accept bounties of a copper rank from the board. Thank you and…” He stifled a yawn, “have a wonderful adventure.”

His disconnected demeanor wore at my patience. “I didn’t do a mock battle,” I retorted, a sigh skirting my words, wafting my annoyance into the space between us.

His eyes, dull and distant, never quite met mine. “Thank you and have a wonderful adventure,” he repeated, his words seeming not truly meant for me, even though I stood alone at the counter.

My cheeks puffed, as I muffled “What the hell” past my lips. But, you know, whatever. If he didn’t give a shit, why should I stress? Apparently, I had the green light to snatch up any bounty that caught my eye—so long as it was copper-ranked. Fingers crossed they weren’t all “pick flowers” or other yawn-worthy fetch quests.

With a lazy pivot away from the sleepy asshole, I faced…well, nothing. Abandoned, pristinely clean tables stared back at me, the emptiness feeling overly haunting. Peering outside the open doors, the sneaky night had enveloped the world again. My eyebrows knitted together, fingers idly twirling a loose strand of hair as the cogwheels of my brain clunked and clattered, trying to piece the weirdness together.

“Guess the sanity train has officially left the station,” I mumbled to myself, half-amused, half-exasperated. Sanity? Who needs her anyway?

In the half-light of the empty room, an unexpected patch of color blinked from the corner. A girl, no older than six, with jet black hair, a wild poof of playful rebellion, with streaks of pink highlights that seemed to have a whimsy of their own, fading in and out of existence. Her skin, a rich, warm caramel seemed to fade into a cold charcoal that drank in the room’s dim light, while her eyes, oh, those eyes! They were an abyss, deep and fathomless, promising endless darkness. Draped in a dress as pink as the transient streaks in her hair, she sat there, her expression dancing ambiguously between a smirk and a scowl.

"Am I the only one seeing this?" My question, a fragile patchwork of confusion, lingered unanswered. Turning back towards the counter, an abyss greeted me where the man had once been—his absence a silent, suffocating void in the otherwise empty room.

I whirled back toward where the little girl had been, expecting... I don't know, spooky empty air? Instead, I was smacked in the face by a wall of hearty laughter and the rich, golden glow of sunbeams filtering cheerfully through the front door. My eyebrows might've hit my hairline—wasn't it just night a second ago?

Puzzled, I peeked back at the counter. Lo and behold, Mr. Bored-and-Ignoring-Everything was now Mr. Bright-Eyed-and-Bushy-Tailed, face stretched into a grin that screamed, "How may I assist you today?"

I sighed, massaging my temples. "Alright, which cheeky god up there did I piss off?" I grumbled.
...Silence.

"Nightmare, if there was ever a time to stop hitting the snooze button," I muttered, "it's now. Wake the fuck up, will you?"

...Nothing.

I sauntered over to the board, a curse or two slipping out under my breath. A subtle ripple of eyes from the surrounding adventurers tossed my way felt like an award ceremony, handing my 'tiny-terrifying-girl' culprit theory the first-place trophy. Mental note: pencil in a heart-to-heart with the mini-horror at some point—kids, seriously, who needs 'em? But a duel of wits with a possibly divine tween would have to wait in queue; first, I needed to fill my coin pouch.

"Needed" might be overstating it a smidge. "Wanted" was more accurate. Besides, the thrill of embarking on a legitimate, magic-dusted quest was tickling me in all the right places. I mean, an actual adventure in a full-tilt magical world? Dream. Jackpot!

Oh, and I couldn't forget about that steampunk-y gnome. So, priorities: one, steal—uh, earn some money. Two, track down Mr. Goggles. Three, my main goal, find a way back to Aurelia. And let's sprinkle in a number four: a forthcoming chat with creepy little miss.

Ugh, back to task number one: the good ol' quest board. "Alright, what have we got here? Snag some cinnamon dew from a desert beetle's underbelly, ten copper per ounce. Nab a few desert rats, twenty copper per rat. Gather lizard tails at three copper per tail..." My voice, a monotonous drone, trudged through the list. "And ah, of course, pluck a flower that has the decency to bloom only at the crack of dawn—all for a shiny silver," I ended, my words soaked with a hefty dose of sarcasm.

A puzzled frown knitted my brows together. "How many coppers to a silver, again?" I grumbled under my breath.

"Hundrehd," chimed in a female dwarf to my side, her beard gloriously braided in a way that almost made me forget my financial confusion. She leaned back, crossing arms over her sturdy chest, and offered a knowing, somewhat patronizing smirk. "Easy peasy, right? Cozy-like pattern

it is—hundrehd copper to a silver, hundrehd silver to gold, an’ so on, right up to the mithril, all in tidy hundrehds, so it is.”

My eyebrows knitted, skeptically surveying her face. Did she just explain economy with ‘easy peasy’?

She leaned in, her eyes a-twinkle with playful mischief. “Now, when ye get te talkin’ mana crystals, lass—oh, that’s where the plot gets lost, it does. Gets all wibbly-wobbly like a feathered-donkey, dunnit? Ye’ve got potency, charge, and all that mystical ballyhoo, and then—whoosh!” Her hands exploded outward, adding an emphatic exclamation to her words, “Any semblance o’ straightforward’s up the forge chimney!”

I blinked, momentarily confused. Sure, the ‘hundrehd’ bit landed—I got the whole hundred-for-each-coin spiel. But the mana crystals part? Lost. Still, something told me asking for clarification would only spiral into deeper confusion. So, with a polite nod and a mumbled, “thanks,” I chose the path of least resistance.

“Aye, ye’re more than welcome,” she beamed, her eyes a lively dance of steadfast dwarven mischief. “Ain’t ever laid eyes on an albino human b’fore. Usual-like, y’find ‘em ‘mongst them dark elves, nasty pieces o’ work, them. Same can be said ‘bout them snow elves,” her face scrunched into a momentary, harsh scowl. But like spring chasing away winter, her grin sprang back, eyes gleaming with unbridled dwarven spirit as she leaned in once more. “Me mates and I, we’re gearin’ up fer a bit of a monster hunt, y’see. Got wind of a wee acid drake stirrin’ trouble outside the walls. Could always be usin’ an extra mage, if ye’re lookin’ fer work. Ye are a mage, aren’t ye? With them glowin’ eyes an’ all,” she queried, her gaze sharp yet awash with a blend of mischief and earnestness.

“I am,” I replied.

My gaze lingered on the woman, absorbing the details that sketched her presence. First, the beard—an artful cascade of blonde braids, whispering tales of adventures through the sly streaks of gray that wove through its length, stealthily concealed yet proudly displayed. It tumbled down, gracing her form, ending just shy of her waist. Then, those eyes—vivid green, gleaming with a mischievous twinkle, quietly promising stories of battle lust and hearty ale under their playful veneer. Her armor, with a sheen reminiscent of polished silver even amidst the dim, flickering tavern light, bore witness to countless campaigns, seamlessly mending the new with the old. And there, nonchalantly slung over her shoulder, a battleaxe whispered tales of battles bygone and yet to come, its edge gleaming with muted threat and promise.

Every inch of her seemed to echo the quintessential dwarf, as if she’d strolled straight out of Tolkien’s imagination—yet something soft, a secretive mirth lingered in her gaze, whispering of tales yet unsung. Her lips curled into a mischievous grin, her head tilting ever so slightly, voice a playful, lilting murmur, “Takin’ a gander, are we, lass? Won’t lie, I’ve warmed the bedroll with a few elves and human lads, even a gnome or two, but never a human lass, and certainly not an albino at that. What say ye, fancy bein’ me first?”

I blinked, her boldness planting my feet firmly in a moment of stunned silence. “Umm, what?” A fleeting thought of ticking an item off my bucket list fluttered through my mind. However, until I was securely entwined with Aurelia again, I wasn’t venturing into anyone else’s pants.

Her laughter, hearty and unabashed, filled the space between us. “Ah, just yankin’ yer tits, lass. They call me Grimmail,” she declared, her grin wide enough to rival the cheshire cat.

“Blake,” I said, after a moment of inner turmoil, considering the tangle of confusion that would surely unfurl if I kept introducing myself as Dream, especially once Nightmare awoke. I chewed the inside of my cheek thoughtfully, waging a tiny war with myself. “A pleasure, Grimmail. Your offer—I’m in.”

A slow, suggestive purr eased from Grimmail, “Oh, in that case, I wouldn’t mind getting me hands acquainted with ye.”

My eyebrows skyrocketed, feeling a slap on my backside, followed by extensive groping—not just a single ass cheek—she was all up in there, “What? No, no—drake. I meant the drake,” I cried out.

A vibrant chorus of cheers erupted from the adventurers populating the guild hall, swiftly shadowed by a wave of disheartened groans, as I skillfully wriggled free from her lecherous grasp. *Ugh! Nightmare would have flat-out mutilated this dwarf and worn her intestines as a necklace had she been awake.*

“Aw, now ye’ve gone and got me nethers all in a twist,” she pouted, mischief sparkling in her eyes. “But aye, we could really be usin’ an extra mage,” she conceded, a playful grin dancing across her face. Sighing dramatically, she stretched onto her tiptoes, reaching as high as her stout frame would allow, and snatched a bounty from the board.

Safely out of Grimmail's reach—and honestly, given her dwarf size, it wasn't too hard—I watched her take the parchment to the counter guy. They dove into an animated exchange, which I tuned out, letting my eyes and thoughts wander. I mean, today was wild. Respawning in a winter wonderland, somehow ending up in a desert, crossing paths with a creepy child ghost or goddess, questioning my sanity, bumping into another Earthling, and then losing them again. Oh, and being felt up by a dwarf woman, that was an unexpected tick on the bucket list. So, all in all? Not a bad day, weirdly entertaining, even. Next up? Fighting a drake with a merry band of adventurers. Now, if only my woman was here, this would be a dream come true.

My thoughts were yanked back to reality by a firm hand patting the lower curve of my backside. “Aye, ye done daydreamin’, lass? We’ve got a drake that’s waitin’ to be slain,” Grimmail said, her hand lingering with assured familiarity. “The others are meetin’ us outside the gates.”

Slipping free of her unyielding grip, I asked, “How many are in your group?”

“Oh, we’re a snug, naughty bunch of five, ain't we? Though there’s always a nook fer one more. We've got a catcher, a fister, and a healer—always cozy to have 'round after the rough stuff, ye ken? And dinnae ferget our grizzled auld man. He mostly just watches. Me? I’m the pounder,” Grimmail declared, her finger embarking on a bold nasal journey, followed by a flagrantly indulgent sniff of two digits. “We best shuffle along, else the old coot'll blow his top, eh?”

Holy shit, she's in a party full of swingers! I froze, disbelief anchoring me to the spot. Don't get me wrong, I was no innocent flower. I've done stuff, embarked on my fair share of wild escapades—an ex-boyfriend's mom. Oh, two girls, a guy, and me with a harness. That's just naming a few. Yet my loyalty to Aurelia was non-negotiable. Silently, I sent up a prayer of thanks that my other self slumbered through this debacle. She, I was fairly certain, had inherited the brunt of our naughtier tendencies—and, differently, our murderous inclinations. *Ugh, I hope that doesn't make me the boring one!*

"Catcher, fister, and a pounder?" I blurted, my eyebrows shooting upwards. "Look, I don't think I'm into all that. I'm already in a relationship," I continued, inching backwards cautiously.

"*We are Blake,*" a thought unspooled from my dormant sleeping self.

"*Oh, would you shut it?*" I snapped internally.

Grimmail squinted, a brief moment of confusion flickering across her face before she burst into hearty laughter. "For the gods' sake, lass! Wha'r the terms ye humans use, eh? Ah, defender... umm, tha' hand-t'-hand loonie warrior, and healer, then wizard, and me, a pure offense type," she paused, seemingly replaying the words in her head before nodding assuredly.

"...Sure," was my only reply.

"Aye, it be troo," she insisted, wiping away a stray tear. "C'mon, lass, we've others t'meet, but first, I need t'grab a few thin's."

I tipped my head in a nod, shadowing the rowdy dwarf out of the adventurers' guild, my hips swerving just in time to dodge her fast hand aiming for another cheeky grab at my rear. A mental flicker of Nightmare, waking up and systematically murdering Grimmail, danced through my mind, coaxing an involuntary shiver of amusement through my core. But, alas, no dwarven murder was on the agenda—yet. There I was, jaunting off to slay a drake—an honest-to-gods, fire—wait, no, acid-breathing drake! Teenage me inside was executing jubilant somersaults, and adult me? Yeah, I was fully on board for the acrobatic celebration too.

"So, what items are you getting?" My curiosity piqued; I wondered about the common things adventurers might grab before a quest.

"Ye know, th' basics. Food, water, 'specially water out in these parts. Our healer's got some nice water spells, but ye can ne'er be too careful, aye? Somethin' happens t' th' healer, the whole party's done fer if ye rely too much on 'em," Grimmail paused, a shadow crossing her features. "Seen it happen too many times, I have."

"Oh, that does make sense," I said, leaning in with a friendly, curious grin. "Any chance your healer might give me a quick crash course on healing spells? Gotta admit, my knowledge there is embarrassingly non-existent."

Grimmail gave her head a thoughtful scratch, brows furrowing in contemplation. "Mebbe, but don't be expectin' too much, aye? Castin' ain't really in me wheelhouse, if ye get me drift."

I blinked, taken aback a bit. “Really? I kinda thought everyone here was doing... I don’t know, magical things all the time.”

A wry smirk tugged at her lips. “Nah, lass. We’ve all got our own little tricks, but me? I funnel mana right into these here muscles.” She flexed, her biceps bulging even under the sturdy armor. “Makes me axe light and me limbs sturdy as mithril.”

I found myself mentally giving Grimmail the teaching points that Circe had never quite earned.

I blurted out my next question, unable to contain the bubbling curiosity. “But if magic isn’t a one-size-fits-all thing, how does casting with ambient mana work?”

Her eyes twinkled with amused surprise. “Lassie, ye really are green, ain’t ye? No one, not even them high and mighty gods, can wrangle the mana just floatin’ about. Ye gotta absorb it first—through yer skin, food, or naturally while ye kip. Only those fabled beings, the three Primordials and the Titans, ever claimed to work the world’s magic directly, but that’s all bedtime stories an’ legend, innit?” Her chuckle was a warm, friendly rumble, a nonjudgmental tease between newfound comrades.

I kept my poker face firmly in place, opting not to mention my own ambient mana-casting abilities. My thoughts tangled into a perplexing knot. Was my ability related to being a Black Pudding, a shard of some Eldritch Abomination? Who even knew at this point? I was definitely penciling in a thorough Q&A session with Mother next time we met. “Geez, I really gotta start jotting down these questions somewhere...” I mumbled to myself, mentally drafting an ever-growing list.

I trailed Grimmail, weaving through stalls as she picked up goods, nonchalantly stuffing them into a tiny pouch on her hip. Dimensional storage, I wagered. I felt a tug of temptation to access my own spatial skill just for kicks but swiftly nixed the idea. My skill, 'Stellar Void,' involved a ghastly act that looked alarmingly like I was rending open my own chest cavity—because, well, I literally was. Definitely not the kind of casual parlor trick to whip out while masquerading as human.

Besides, all that should be in my creepy void of a storage space is a Dungeon Core, doling out endless respawns like candy. Immortality, you glorious beast! But wait, there was that other dimensional storage item, wasn’t there? The one pilfered from General What’s-His-Face. Ugh, right—that little trick ended with a bang last time. I’m curious about how epic that explosion looked. “Memo to me: Mixing dimensional storages, particularly with a Dungeon Core? Not on the to-do list,” I mumbled into the ether.

Then, a tiny mental itch... was I forgetting something? Something... shiny? A ring, or a rock maybe? My shoulders lifted and fell in a resigned shrug. “Eh, if it’s crucial, it’ll come back to haunt me at the most inopportune moment, as these things do,” I prophesied with mock solemnity.

Our stroll through the city stretched past an hour, and—miracle of miracles—nothing crazy happened. No sudden shifts from day to night, no bizarre events, just a plain ol’ shopping trip. Folks passed by, nodding greetings my way, treating me like I was just another ordinary Jane. The unsettling oddness from before seemed to have vanished, though I kept one eye peeled for the

creepy kid and my fellow earthling trapped in a gnome body. Yet, as we meandered, another oddity nudged my thoughts.

Dodging yet another attempt from Grimmail grope my ass, I quirked a brow and asked, “Hey, where are all the children?”

She barely batted an eye, hand aborting its mission and returning to her side. “Ah, wee ones are a rare sight. We all have a habit of stickin’ ‘round a verra long time, only meetin’ our end by mishap or misadventure, y’know.”

My steps faltered for a heartbeat. “Wait, everyone's immortal? Seriously?”

She nodded, “Aye, an' no one's been able t' suss it out. Some say it's the magic that's saturatin' the air. Others reckon Death herself's turned her back,” she confided, her frown deepening as another sneak attack on my posterior failed. “As fer the wee ones, a lot of the Gods-fearin' folk are of the mind that without the Primordial of Life, the whole cycle of reincarnation's gone askew. But, t' me, that's all just tales an' musings.”

Racking my brain, I could only recall crossing paths with two other children: a wart covered goblin who claimed me as his “Mummy” and a bunny-eared girl whose dad... well, ended up as my dinner. “There must've been others,” I muttered, momentarily dropping my guard, which, of course, Grimmail took as an invitation. “Hey! Quit it,” I snapped.

“Ah, can't help it,” Grimmail chortled, her hand unwilling to abort its mission. “It's all soft an' squishy-like. Why're ye hidin' it under that white robe of yers? Ye oughta be flauntin' it, ye know, the way them barbarian types do,” she suggested, her grin wide and hand unyielding.

And so, with a mixture of lingering annoyance and begrudging amusement, I followed the shameless dwarf beyond the city gates, embarking on a path that would lead us to her party—and, inevitably, the drake. *I'm going to be a real adventurer!*

“We are, Blake,” my other self muttered in her sleep.

“Oh, just shut up and let me savor this, will you? Also, could you at least be original?” I snapped back into our shared mindscape.