

# BLAKE PUDDING

## CHAPTER 3

### DREAM OF THE BLAKE

The cool embrace of darkness folded around me, yet it elicited no fear—it was an extension of my being, soothing like a lullaby to a fretful child. I existed within this veil of darkness, a creature woven from the fabric of nightmares.

As I blinked the veil away, a celestial view unfolded above. Lying on my back, I looked up into a night sky swirling with clouds and gently cascading snowflakes. Through fleeting gaps in the cloud cover, a colossal planet revealed itself, bathed in undulating shades of pink and blue. Its ever-moving storms upon its surface reminded me of images I'd seen of Jupiter, yet the scale was grander, more enthralling. I recognized the celestial body immediately, yet never had it loomed so large, so breath-taking.

Ever so quietly, I whispered the name of what I saw, “Völuspá.”

My surroundings gradually seeped into my awareness. The stony embrace I found myself in belonged to a crude altar, positioned at the heart of a stone chamber, which I surmised was a respawn point. The room was crowned by an open ceiling, framing the celestial dance above. Despite the cold stone beneath and the snow's tender descent, a soft warmth brushed against my skin, a courtesy of the planet's light painting the snow in shades of pink and blue.

A fleeting image caught the fringe of my vision—a figure draped in pink, scythe aloft, ready to swoop down in a cold arc of fury. A little girl's face, twisted with rage, her eyes pools of an abyss even my own darkness seemed to shy away from. Yet, as I jerked my head towards this harbinger of death, the space she had occupied blinked into emptiness.

“My imagination?” The words slipped out in a shaky whisper. My hand, trembling, lifted before my face as if seeking to catch the fading remnants of that spectral vision.

Then realization dawned upon me—a revelation so stark, yet elusive until now. My wandering imagination had gotten away from me, but now, I was enthralled by my own hand. I was enshrined in my human form, no shapeshifting required. My skin, now as white as spun spider silk, concealed the eerie darkness that simmered beneath. This guise was a result of my victory over a spider, an early conquest in this reality that bequeathed me with the Silk Webbing skill. It was a veil for my true form, the Black Pudding that I had become upon being reincarnated or summoned into this realm—the specifics of which remained blurred.

My sight remained on my bare form, a tender glow of orange enshrouded my gaze, a reflection from the haunting orange luminescence of my eyes. This glow was born from channeling my Mana Sight into the shifted formed orbs that enabled me to perceive the world with a semblance of humanity that I had lost. The skill was utterly intuitive, igniting the magic within to light my vision,

a longing embedded deep within to view the world through a human lens now manifested without so much as a thought required.

Easing my body to the side, I swung my legs over the edge of the altar. The gentle descent of my bare toes came to rest upon the cold stone floor below, where they sunk slightly into the sparkling crunch of snow—a field of white kissed by the sparkling colorful hues of Völuspá as it peered through the plump clouds above.

With a mere thought, I beckoned forth my true form, anticipating the enveloping cloak of darkness that ought to have shrouded me in a gown of writhing blackness, caressed by tendrils of cruelty and nightmares. Yet, the expectation shattered as nothing emerged. Confusion furrowed my brow, my eyes drifting downward to the untouched nude silk flesh that covered my Black Pudding form beneath, questioning the absence of my dark veil. As I contemplated the anomaly, a lock of white hair tumbled forward, cutting through my vision and freezing me in a moment of stark realization.

My gaze upon that lock of hair was shattered by a mirror of memories. I had seen this spectacle before, in the haunting visions within the Crone’s dreamy realm. There stood my twin selves: one, adorned in my typical visage, skin as white as spider silk, her form and flowing locks veiled in inky tendrils of blackness. The other, a mirror reflection, yet her hair and attire shimmered in that same white silk as our shell of false flesh.

The faint memories continued to tumble forward, awakening images of when my once-intact soul had been fractured into a million shards. Circe, the Primordial Goddess of Magic, had been a wave of influence—my annoyance, guide, reluctant teacher, and eventual destroyer. A living paradox—her assistance came at a devastating cost, thrusting my spirit and sanity into ruin. The worst part was, I never saw it coming—didn’t realize it had happened until after the fact, nor could I grasp the rationale behind her betrayal.

Yet, it was the Crone, the Goddess of Dreams and Nightmares—this realm’s ethereal Sandman—who intervened, meticulously gathering the scattered fragments of my soul, weaving them back together with threads of her own divine essence. I could almost hear her whispering loving incantations, claiming me as her own—her “scion,” her daughter.

The tapestry of my being now bore certain frays, embodying a duality—a singular entity harboring twin souls, each resounding a distinct tune. The Crone, despite her divine intervention, couldn’t meld me back into my old singular self, thus leaving me as a duality. To an outsider, it might’ve resonated as the discord of split personalities, but to me? It was harmony. A strange dance where sometimes both of me moved in step, and at others, one led. This inner conversation, the ceaseless chatter between my two souls, felt eerily comforting. I was, in every essence, an entity of two halves forming a cohesive whole, yet neither could exist in isolation. My entire consciousness was a duet, each soul lending its voice to the symphony of my existence. My thoughts, a collaborative ballet, flowed as one yet distinct in rhythm. “*We’re legion, sisters, I am Blake.*”

That being said, something felt amiss, like part of me was slumbering while the other seized the reins. I loathed it, though I didn’t understand why. It faintly reminded me of the endless antidepressants I had gulped down before my reincarnation as a Black Pudding. My life back on

Earth was nothing to gloat about. I was a short, curvy goth girl with dyed green hair—no one’s idea of extraordinary. My moods swung wild, bitterness was my close companion, and my attitude was as spiky as the studs on my boots. Oh, and let’s not forget a vindictive streak that could chill your bones. In short, I was a wildfire—a bit unhinged, unpredictable, and ferociously independent. I believe my therapist’s official diagnosis was “a tumultuous tempest,” or in layman’s terms—a crazy bitch.

The soft glow of this newfound life contrasted starkly against the bleakness of my past. Or should I say, our past. For in this realm, the dual nature of me—or rather, us—found a reason to cherish existence. That reason was embodied in a name: Aurelia. Soulmates, it seems, weren’t just the stuff of romantic tales. The Crone spoke of souls splitting at their inception, akin to the birth of twins. Bound by an ethereal thread, these souls would eternally seek each other out, transcending death, reincarnation, and the confines of flesh. Aurelia was the puzzle piece we’d been missing, the other half of our fractured soul. This revelation explained so much, yet there was a nagging feeling that Aurelia held answers we still sought.

“I need to get back to her,” my voice emerged as barely a whisper.

The ensuing silence was eerie. “*Hello?*” I reached out mentally, yearning for a response from my other soul. But the echoing emptiness only heightened my anxiety. I delved deeper within, sensing the dormant presence of my twin soul. She was there, yet seemed tucked away in a deep, unexplainable slumber.

From the white locks that cascaded down, I deduced which half of the soul I embodied. If my other half represented our darkness and cruelty, then I was the softer, lighter side—if such a distinction existed between us. The essence of the Goddess of Dreams and Nightmares flowed through our twin souls; hence, if my other half is the Nightmare, then the awakened half, me, must be the Dream.

I chuckled, “We’ve been grappling with what to call ourselves,” I mused. “Well, it’s settled,” I said. “I’m Dream, and you, Nightmare,” I proclaimed to my slumbering half.

“*We are Blake,*” I heard my other half grumble in her sleep within the deep recesses of our mind, but nothing else followed.

With a shrug, I cast a glance down at my bare form, pondering my next move. It appeared that this half of myself lacked control over the darkness within me. However, that didn’t seem to be a hindrance. After all, I appeared to have mastery over my silken essence. A grin unfurled across my face as called out, “[**Silk Webbing**]!”

“...Nothing happened?” I sighed with creased brows. “Oh, that’s right, Circe kicked us out of the system,” I groaned.

Thankfully, I had learned how to use quite a few of our skills without the aid of the system, Silk Webbing being one of them. I do remember something about Mother saying she would try to restore our access.

Without relying on the system command, I reached out with my senses to the ambient mana around and was surprised by the vast quantity that surrounded me.

With little effort, I instinctively drew the ambient mana into me, and found that my will easily shaped it as I desired. Silk spiraled out from my pores—or at least, that's what it might look like to an outsider. But in truth, my skin was finely woven silk, so I supposed my pores were the minute gaps amid the silk threads... *whatever! Focus!*

The silk spun and wove itself into a modest short dress, and I fashioned myself slippers—constructing sturdy soled shoes proved a bit challenging with silk, so ballet slippers would have to do. I probably should have conjured something warmer, I reasoned, as I was aware of the cold around me, although I didn't feel chilled in the slightest. With that thought, I decided on a white robe. It loosely resembled a wizard's robe akin to those worn at Hogwarts, only in pristine silky white.

Now that was settled, it was time to step out of this strange circular structure. A cheerful smile found a home on my lips as I made my way toward an arched doorway expecting to find some large underground cavern system—dungeon flashbacks. Yet, to my soft sigh of relief, my steps led me into the embrace of a forest instead.

The trees danced a slow, silent dance, their dark, barren branches swaying gracefully to a rhythm only they could hear. Not a leaf to be seen, yet the snowflakes drifting down from the heavens found solace on their twisted limbs, adding a touch of purity to the gloom. It wasn't bustling with life, yet every breeze that rustled through felt like a soft whisper of the forest's soul, an eerie resemblance of the woods outside Mother's cottage.

Each step I took on the snow-carpeted ground seemed to deepen the silence, yet the forest's breath—a chilly but gentle whisper—kept a tender conversation with the tendrils of white silk that played around my robe. I was alone, yet in the quaint companionship of the snow-kissed wilderness, I found a comforting solitude, much like a peaceful dream.

I found myself surprisingly chipper given the circumstances. Here I was, adrift in an unknown land, no map leading back to my soulmate, and unseen perils potentially lurking around every tree. Yet, an unshakeable lightness bubbled within me. I won't say I was frolicking through the foliage, but... alright, I was unabashedly skipping through this dark, eerie forest, arms swinging, head bobbing, the whole shebang. *I'm so glad Nightmare is asleep; she would never let me hear the end of it.*

A few times, I thought I glimpsed something lurking among the trees, but nothing approached—seeming to give me a wide berth. I brushed it off and continued my merry frolic. That is, until I spied a glow in the distance. As I neared, the forest came to an abrupt halt. On one side, sunlight bathed the sand dunes, while on the other, the night sky reigned, accompanying a gentle descent of snow. The sight perplexed me, yet with a shrug, I chalked it up to the whims of a magical realm—perhaps I was on a tidally locked moon? Without further ado, I stepped into the sunlight, making my way to the summit of a nearby sand dune.

As I crested the dune, vast marble walls unfolded in every direction. However, I managed to catch a glimpse of a castle turret peeking over the walls, though the rest of it remained obscured. Thankfully, a large gate with a queue of people seeking entry came into view. Before heading toward the line, I cast a quick glance back at the forest, only to freeze in confusion... it had vanished? I kid you not, the forest was utterly gone, replaced by an endless stretch of sand as far as the eye could see.

A string of obscenities might have escaped my lips—purely accidental, I assure you—as I navigated my way to the tail end of the line. Remarkably, none of those who seek entry before me spared a second glance my way. The murmurs of their toils through the sands tickled my ears—a chorus of whines and groans that under any other circumstance might have been a melody to my darker half. But, alas, that part of us was asleep.

The real jaw-dropper was the unexpected desires—or rather, the absence of them: that familiar, insatiable urge to paint the sands red with the essence of the prey before me. Not a whisper of it fluttered in the recesses of our mind. A peculiar emptiness where once lurked a monster craving the choreography of slaughter, relishing the thought of a macabre feast. A newfound void, one might say, which, against all odds, bore a tinge of...is that tranquility? Or maybe indifference?

That sinister urge, the thoughts of malevolence that danced to the tune of nightmares—courtesy of...well, Nightmare—was conspicuously absent. And, truth be told, as I stood there amidst the crowd of unsuspecting morsels—ah, I mean, people—I found it oddly, unsettlingly refreshing, and rather lonely.

The guard at the gate exhaled a monotonous, “Next,” his voice a stale breath amidst the desert winds. “Welcome to Slaethia, that’ll be six copper for entry,” he droned, each syllable oozing the weariness of a thousand repetitions, his enthusiasm for his job seemingly buried deep beneath the dunes long ago.

“I haven’t a coin to my name,” I announced, my smile undiminished. A silent thank-you whispered to the slumbering half of me; awake, she might have opted for a far bloodier entrance.

“Name?” His query came parched of interest.

“*We are Blake*,” a sleepy murmur echoed from the recesses of our shared consciousness.

A pause tethered me momentarily as I hovered on the brink of responding. A notion fluttered within: if she slumbered, then perhaps I was not entirely her. My expression faltered, nestling into a brief frown before resolution settled within. “I’m Dream,” was my chosen reply.

“Origin?” he inquired, an audible exhale in his voice.

“Umm... From Blake,” I responded, an innocent charm coating my words.

“Six copper, Dream of the Blake,” he intoned, the words flattening into a monotone landscape.

“Huh, that has a certain ring to it, doesn’t it?” I mumbled under my breath, a faint smirk playing at the edges of my lips.

My pockets were decidedly unburdened by coin, yet as my gaze landed on the guard, his attention seemed tethered elsewhere. A quick pivot revealed an empty expanse behind me—I was the line’s finale. I swiveled back, only to find him ambling away, seeking solace against the weary marble wall. Bafflement stitched my brows together but didn’t sew shut my path forward. With a subtle shrug, I treaded into the unknown beyond the gate.

The moment my foot kissed the cobblestone beyond, a vibrant, bustling market warmly enveloped me. Activities and lively exchanges spilled generously along the thoroughfare, carving a lively path straight toward a distant, mighty castle. This was no Arabian Nights-esque palace; rather, it was a Sleeping Beauty-type super castle, its spires audaciously piercing the heavens. Wagons and citizens navigated the road with practiced ease, while laughter and the staggered steps of inebriated patrons spilled from an array of inns. These establishments, huddling near the entrance, boasted upper levels that leaned genially over the streets below, forming a makeshift canopy for the vendors nestled beneath.

In stark contrast to the formidable walls and the castle in the distance, the buildings throughout the city showcased a humble reliance on sandstone, their facades candidly betraying the inhabitants’ endeavors to mimic affluence. Slices of marble were strategically adorned at the forefronts of the structures, presenting an illusion, albeit thinly-veiled, of complete marble construction. A select few, undoubtedly the dwellings of the more prosperous, boasted genuine marble from base to pinnacle. Despite the meld of sandstone and marble, there lingered a distinct German medieval aesthetic to the architectural designs, intertwining rugged functionality with quaint charm.

Vendors, unfettered by permanent stalls, hawked their wares straight from worn wagons and well-used wheelbarrows, their goods displayed with a casual, easy accessibility.

“Out of the way!” A voice bellowed from behind, accompanied by the rhythmic clatter of wood against cobblestone.

Pivoting, my eyes swept over a vibrant, chaotic swirl of wagons, each one an incongruent bubble of untold tales, rattling assertively through the gate. Every vehicle, a disjointed isle of narratives, held its own against the impatient cobblestones. A serpentine line of fatigued, hopeful faces waited, extending their copper tokens to the steadfast, unimpressed gaze of the gate guard.

Instinctively, I sidestepped their trajectory, yet a tether of perplexing curiosity bound my mind, pausing to ponder the origin of these fresh arrivals, conjuring questions about their sudden emergence from the ostensibly vacant sands behind me. A mirage, perhaps? After all, I had been the last in line, hadn’t I? Their stories, ephemeral and tantalizing, danced at the fringes of my understanding, teasingly just out of cognitive reach.

The discordant symphony of bartering voices and the rhythmic pulsations of spilled ale and uneven footfalls of those stumbling out of inns and—oh my, brothels—whimsically pulled my reflections back into the immediate, tangible chaos around me.

Perplexed, I meandered down the road, my gaze sifting through the vibrant array of vendor goods while considering my scant options. Firstly, I was devoid of money; yes, I could likely locate someone in a dimly lit back alley, bring about their premature demise, eat them, and snatch their

coin, but with my other self nestled in slumber, this half of my soul just wasn't fervently into it. Moreover, I needed to find my way back to Aurelia. However, with a crowd speckled with dwarfs, humans, elves, and gnomes, I doubted that inquiring about the realm's most notorious vampire would yield the desired answers. Perhaps seeking information about a familiar locale might prove beneficial...

"What was the name of that village I blew up?" I whispered to the wind, lost in a cascade of thoughts. "Yeastmond, Eastmond, mond—Something mond... no, it was a berge. Wait, witch, stern, molester, easter—Elsternwick! Ha, that's it!" My arms shot triumphantly into the air, my exclamation slicing through the market's steady hum around me.

A ripple of self-consciousness fluttered through me, prompting my arms to descend, albeit a touch reluctantly. Yet, surprisingly, no eyes darted my way. Vendors perpetuated their animated sales pitches, pedestrians persisted in their up-and-down pilgrimage along the thoroughfare, and wagons rumbled by—all blissfully ignorant of my existence.

With a nonchalant shrug, I sidled up to a random vendor. The elf was a portrait of indulgence, his belly a prominent dome beneath his stained tunic. His hairline had evidently surrendered to time, retreating from a forehead dotted generously with moles. His teeth, a colorful mosaic of yellows, oranges, and browns, seemed to harbor memories of countless meals past.

The sleaziness of his appearance was something my other me would have surely found splendid—this me...not so much.

Amidst his wares—a melancholy collection of aged hand mirrors, each visibly bearing the unkindness of time on their tarnished reflective surfaces—I half-expected to find bloodstains. Sure enough, upon closer scrutiny, speckles of blood adorned a few. Ah, it seemed I'd stumbled upon this reality's version of a pawn shop, seemingly teeming with stolen goods.

Trying to feign interest in his wares, I sparked a conversation with the elf. "I heard the mirrors from Elsternwick are quite desirable. Wouldn't happen to have any, would you?" I cautiously inquired, steering clear of mentioning its destruction.

The slimy vendor blinked a few times, seeming to only just register my presence. "Ah, I've got the finest goods this side of the desert," he responded, his tone carrying the wear of countless repetitions.

My eyebrows knit together. Was he sidestepping the topic of Elsternwick? Pressing, I repeated, "These are... fine wares, but what about goods from Elsternwick? Do you have any?"

"Ah, I've got the finest goods this side of the desert," he parroted, unflinching.

A frown carved its way across my face as I lifted one of the hand mirrors, my reflection staring back at me. My eyes, almond-shaped, emanated a brilliant orange glow as though they were forged of molten iron. Strangely, my appearance bore no semblance to my past life. Even as a shape-shifting monster, I found it amusing—or perhaps subconscious—that I had adopted features from my favorite crushes, an eclectic blend of beloved K-pop singers and Jolie's lips. Though the result seemed more Latina than I had intended, I was undeniably striking. My complexion was not merely

pale but starkly, unnaturally white—akin to fresh snow, or more accurately...delicate spider silk. *I'm pretty sure I already noticed that aspect of myself.* My hair, equally spectral, cascaded in a pallid waterfall to the nape of my lower back. Despite embodying the appearance of an ethereal spirit of a goddess's daughter, a scan of my surroundings confirmed that no one spared me a second glance, even with my conspicuously glowing eyes. Maybe in a reality interwoven with magic, my spectral appearance was less bizarre than it felt internally.

With a reluctant tear of my gaze from the mirror, I realized the cart was now abandoned, the sleazy vendor nowhere in sight along with his wares. Stranger still, the sun dipped toward the horizon, casting long shadows across the now desolate market street. Remaining vendors, with practiced haste, stowed away their goods and guided their wagons homeward. And there I stood, ensnared in confusion, clutching a silver mirror. Its surface, though tarnished around the edges, was enveloped by meticulously hand-carved grooves.

“How long had I been staring at myself?” The question escaped my lips, a whispered breath dissolving into the burgeoning twilight.

I sauntered toward a handful of vendors, those who languidly stowed their goods with no particular hurry, yet my attempts to engage were met with nothing but disregarding silence. Not a single gaze met mine, as if I, with my ghostly white visage, was invisible or perhaps intentionally ignored. My feelings teetered between perplexity and a budding irritation.

As twilight stretched its dimming fingers across the town, a new, lively cascade of individuals swirled into the streets, replacing the daytime bustle with a different, more lascivious energy. Stalls flaunting an array of nocturnal delicacies popped up, catering to the emerging nightlife while I, amidst the growing crowd, remained unseen, unacknowledged.

I wandered, observing scantily clad women, their garments more absent than present, stationed seductively outside brothels, their eyes hungrily scanning the passersby for potential clientele. My presence, however, slipped through their scrutiny like water through fingers, not warranting even a fleeting glance. Strangely, it was their disregard that stung the sharpest, a sobering affirmation of my apparent invisibility in this new, enigmatic reality.

Just before my thoughts could spiral into pondering the myriad possibilities of the situation, a male voice beside me punctured the silence. “Hey, I’ve never seen you here before.”

Turning my gaze toward the voice, I found nothing but empty space beside me.

“Down here,” he prompted.

Casting my eyes downward, a gnome came into view. Goggles were perched atop his head, while a pair of large, framed glasses sat upon his nose. He wore a harness that sported an array of trinkets hanging off a belt, including what appeared to be a wrench and a hammer. His entire aesthetic screamed steampunk to me.

“Hello?” I asked more than greeted.

“I haven’t seen you here before,” he repeated.



“Just got into town,” I replied. “I’m... Dream, Dream of the Blake,” I hesitantly stated, torn between simplicity and potential confusion once Nightmare awakened. Before politeness could dictate, I ask for his name or inquire about Elsternwick, a more pressing curiosity bubbled forth. “Umm...why’s everyone ignoring me?”

“Oh, they get that way around here with new people,” he waved his hand dismissively, “it’s nothing to worry about. They do the same thing to me most of the time. Oh, I’m Nikola by the way,” he smiled, a genuine warmth lighting his eyes. “It’s so nice to meet someone who’ll talk to me,” he beamed, his small stature seeming to inflate slightly with the joy of interaction.

“Yeah... okay,” I replied, a frown still tugging at the corners of my mouth amidst my confusion. “Anyways, do you know how to get to Elsternwick from here?”

Nikola’s smile flickered, replaced by a cautious apprehension. “Elsternwick? Never heard of it. But there’s no leaving,” he paused, an eerie seriousness filtering through his voice. “What I mean is, it’s dangerous to cross the desert. A lot of caravans leave, only to never come back,” he offered, carefully avoiding eye contact, his fingers nervously toying with a trinket on his belt.

However, my attention shifted as my gaze flit upwards, eyes locking onto the surreal sight of a wooden hull that unmistakably belonged to what seemed like an old pirate ship. It sailed with a steady, unhurried pace just above the street, its shadow skimming past us and narrowly evading some peculiarly shaped chimneys—a structural feature that felt a tad out of place in a desert city.

Curiosity got the better of me, and my words tumbled out, “How do the airships not crash into the chimneys sailing that low?”

Nikola’s eyes followed my gaze upwards, and then, nonchalantly, he replied, “Hmm—oh, those aren’t chimneys, they’re called badgirs. They use them for air circulation to keep the buildings cool. They did the same thing in ancient Persia—” His words cut off as he registered the sharp, focused intensity of my stare.

The air between us grew taut, charged with a tangible realization. His awkward chuckle, a feeble attempt to gloss over the seemingly innocent slip, hovered uneasily in the atmosphere.

“Persia?” My voice held an edge, part accusation and part inquiry.

Nikola fumbled for words, his eyes darting momentarily before settling back on mine. “Oh, umm... It’s just some place I heard of once,” his voice quivered slightly with a forced chuckle, the joy from before, now noticeably strained. “Not sure it even exists, you know?” His laughter, awkward and timorous, spoke volumes of his unspoken thoughts.

“I see... So, certainly not a real place on Earth,” I measured each word, casting them into the space between us like bait, watching closely for the subtle flickers in his expression.

The gnome’s eyes widened, bulging behind the large spectacles as his mouth gaped, forming a silent ‘o’. His tools, momentarily forgotten, clinked together as his body stiffened. A shiver of something—recognition, perhaps, or fear—danced across his features. “Y-You, were Isekai’d too?” His voice was barely a whisper, a hushed, wind-blown secret carried into the ether.

As we stood there, the bustling night-life of the bizarre, magical city unfolding around us, a silent understanding knit together the threads of our suddenly intertwined stories.

In that bustling tableau of merriment and inebriated revelry, something fragile and spectral flickered at the periphery of my consciousness. Amidst the clamor of laughter and the scattered staccatos of footsteps from the drinkers navigating the cobblestone street, a fleeting image, an apparition bathed in pink, pierced through the jovial chaos.

Though my focus was on Nikola, my peripheral vision caught a silhouette—delicate and seemingly out of place amidst the boisterous nightlife. A little girl, or perhaps merely the idea of one, shrouded in a soft, vibrant pink, her gaze fastened onto me with an intensity of pure darkness that brushed against the edges of my sanity.

My eyes withdrew from the gnome, shifting from a source pulsing with unanswered questions to another enigma—the little girl in pink. But she had spirited away before my eyes could truly land upon her, leaving behind only the sway of drunks and the bustling food carts attended by nocturnal revelers.

“Did you see a little girl in pink?” I asked.

Silence.

My eyes flickered back to where Nikola had been, finding only vacant space. In a frenzied pivot, I scanned the lively streets, desperately seeking the gnome—someone who, like me, had been thrust into this crazy reality of magic, gods, and monsters. Yet he had evaporated into the throngs of the city, now enshrouded in the full, velvety blanket of night, leaving no trace behind.

“Well... SHIT!”

A sleep-talking murmur of agreement shivered through the recesses of our shared consciousness. “*Ugh, shit.*”

I let out a sigh at that. My mind snagged on a slippery thought, dragging it to the forefront of my consciousness: Could this be the "test" Mother had hinted at before whisking me away for another respawn?