

BLAKE PUDDING

CHAPTER 5

GHOSTS OF THE PAST

So, here I am, tailing an eccentric dwarf lady—complete with a Viking beard and a persistent groping issue—heading who-knows-where beyond the city gates. I mean, what could possibly go wrong? I do have to say, there is something oddly familiar about her... eh, it's probably nothing. We're just off to have a not-so-friendly battle with a drake, alongside some of her buddies I've yet to meet. You know, I'm pretty sure this is the starting plot of some horror movie. But hey, I've never seen one that takes place within a fantasy world with magic, so... odds are in my favor, right? Plus, there's a certain slumbering nightmare coiled up inside me—or us, technically. *Wakey-wakey, anytime you're ready...*

Ugh, Nightmare—aka, the other me, trademark pending—just won't wake the hell up. It's skirting the edge of maddening, yet, there's this sliver of me starting to relish having full control. It's like dabbling with new meds: you're thrown off, loathing every second of it, but, given time, it insidiously grows on you. Then, when you finally kick them, the vivid spectrum of their suckiness fully dawns on you. Or for a better comparison, it's like... nah, scratch that, rekindling things with an ex is a glaringly bad analogy. BUT, POINT BEING! Once my other, darker half—my co-soul, alternate consciousness, evil twin, or just... the other me—finally decides to stumble back to the waking world, I'll question how I ever functioned without her.

“How far until we meet up with your merry band of drake slayers?” I finally blurted out after what felt like an eternity slogging through the endless desert sands.

Seriously, has this woman never heard of horses? Camels? Heck, I'd settle for a stubborn jackass at this point—anything but this endless, relentless walking.

The dwarven woman shot me a backward glance. “Oh, we're but a third o' the way, lassie. But don't ye fret,” she somehow managed to say with an impeccably straight face, a mischievous twinkle betraying her, “if ye're needin' a wee breather, I've no qualms settin' up a tent for a cozy bit o' rest fer the two of us.”

“No! No—Nope. I'm good, no need for any of that! Onward, shall we?”

“Aye, ye don't need to be woundin' me heart like that,” Grimmail pouted. “I'm not seekin' a relationship or anythin' with a human. Just a bit o' fun in the desert,” she grinned. “Ye know what they say: what happens in the desert, stays in the desert. Well, unless it's between a man and a woman; in that case, sometimes ye be bringin' home a wee one. Done that a few too many times,” she chuckled before attempting—and failing—to swat at my backside.

“I thought you said children are rare?”

“Aye, that they be. In o’er eight hundred years, I’ve only managed t’have three,” the dwarf said as she scratched at her beard. “That puts me in a tie for the most births any dwarf, human, or elf has had on written record since any of our homes were brought here.”

“Your homes were brought here?”

Grimmail glanced over, eyebrows hitched high on her forehead. “Where’ve ye been dwellin’, lass? Every soul’s home world was yanked right outta their reality, to become one o’ the countless moons o’ Völuspá. Some moons be draped in elves, others in various kin o’ dwarfs, gnomes, or humans, an’ others yet with creatures from the darker nightmares o’ realms: orcs, goblins... even one with those bloody vampires. An’ then there’re those with monsters that’d freeze yer blood to stone just gazin’ upon them.

“Theories an’ religions, they’re aplenty regardin’ the ‘why’ of it all, but none can lay claim to true knowin’. The gods, they haven’t spared us a word. All I ken for sure is that more souls, they’re passin’ on than are bein’ birthed into this realm. Were it not fer new worlds joinin’ our moons, all life, it’d just wither away in time.”

She paused; her eyes distant yet seemingly burdened as she bit her lower lip.

“Take Slaethia, for instance. We lost more than a thousand good souls in the first half o’ this year alone, we did, with less than fifty new births, an’ that’s what we call a good reproductive year, it is. Were it not for all the travellers comin’ from the more hostile moons, our little kingdom, it’d vanish into the sands. That’s why adventurers are so crucial, lass. We need to fend off the monsters, slay our enemies, an’ ensure the darker races don’t lay claim to our kinds. Or else, we end up like the fae folk – not many of them left now, is there? An’ it don’t help none that we’ve been at war for so long with the vampires and beastkin. A three-way war, it is, with no signs of peace.”

Grimmail took a deep sigh, pausing to gather her thoughts before adding. “Worse still, all the signs are pointin’ that the world from where the demons hail, it’s to be the next new moon, it is. Might be in a year, or mayhaps in the next two hundred, but all indications, they’re showin’ they’re slated for the next convergence.”

I trudged behind the woman, scaling an endless sea of sand dunes, directionless and devoid of any indication toward our destination. Her words, though—they resonated, burrowing deep within me as I sought to weave together a tapestry from my fragmented understanding. From the tales she spun and the echoes of past conversations, a pattern emerged: every race, along with their homeworlds, had been abruptly yanked—isekai’d—into this realm overflowing with magic.

Interestingly, there were repetitions: worlds hosting varied strains of similar races, like several iterations of humans, elves, and so on. Hence, dark elves, high elves, frost elves... the list was seemingly endless for every race.

However, a shadow loomed over this reality; birthrates had plummeted dramatically. Whispers and rumors alluded to the shattering of the reincarnation cycle and the creation of new souls ever since the Primordial Goddess of Life fell victim to the Eldritch, tilting the scale heavily toward death—especially from wars and monstrous onslaughts—over new life. In order to preserve this realm,

immortality—or perhaps just remarkably prolonged lives—had been bestowed, though one’s journey was often cut short by unforeseen calamities. To offset the decline from dwindling birth rates, worlds from various realities were constantly being stolen every few centuries, replenishing the number of living souls.

However, one particular detail she shared left me a bit confused.

“How do you know the demon world is the next one?” I eventually asked after my thoughts came full circle.

She didn’t miss a beat. “It’s quite simple, lass,” she responded, a disconcerting calmness in her voice. “Every time a convergence is nigh, the veil thins, and souls from the reality next in line, they begin to be summoned into ours before their entire world follows, they do. We’ve been witnessin’ demon summonin’s for a good spell now, though they’re an odd bunch, those demons. Never have I seen a soul reshape their host body into their own true form before. Watched a male gnome once—turned he did into a human-sized female succubus, after her soul was set into the host body. Sent a chill straight down me spine, it did.”

Well, shit. Could that mean Earth is also up for being stolen?

“What do you mean by ‘the veil is thin’?”

“Aren’t ye full of questions,” Grimmail chuckled. “Well, lass, we can’t rightly say whether the veil is bein’ thinned by summoners before a world is pulled through to this one, or if it’s the gods themselves who are thinning the veil before they go about stealin’ an entire world,” she explained.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I grumbled.

Grimmail let out a hearty chuckle. “Aye, it’s a bit of a puzzle, isn’t it? Like ponderin’, what came first, the egg or the winged toad?” she mused, her boots shuffling through the sandy expanse.

Winged toad? Do they farm those like chickens here?

“I mean, how does summoning work?”

She shrugged, her armor creaking slightly with the motion. “Ah, I’m nae the one t’be askin’, lass, not bein’ a summoner nor a mage, ye ken? But, from the wee bits I’ve heard, summoners, they reach through the veil, searchin’ for souls, they are. If the stars align, or some other mystical mumbo jumbo, they link up with one an’ give it a good yank right into our reality. But here’s the ticklish bit, it’s only the soul that gets through, unlike a convergence, nae body t’be seen. So a lifeless host is needed on this side, ready an’ waitin’.”

“So, it’s necromancy?” I thought out loud.

Her expression darkened, resonating with a deep-rooted disdain as she spoke. “Nah, it’s nae necromancy, lass. I’ll have none of that vile talk,” Grimmail’s voice, previously amicable, now bore a stern edge. “When I say ‘lifeless,’ I’m nae talkin’ of the dead. ‘Tis a vessel without a soul I speak of, like a ship with nae captain, sailin’ the ethereal seas above, waitin’ for a soul to take the helm. ‘Dead’ suggests somethin’ that once lived and breathed, whereas these hosts, they’re still

alive, just empty, with their own souls forcibly evicted. They'd all be guilty of some manner of crime or another. But aye, darker practices exist, but, by the gods, that's a path none should tread."

"...Huh."

A mental eyebrow quirked at Grimmail's anti-necromancy rant. So, Aurelia, the stunning necromancer vampire who unapologetically swiped my heart and soul—well, souls, being plural now—was a conversational landmine here. Note to self: love life discussions were firmly in the 'do not enter' zone.

"*Dibs*," a mumbled claim echoed, sleepy yet oddly assertive, through our mind.

I rolled my eyes, silently contesting the stake my sleep-talking half laid on Aurelia. *Pretty sure I'd shouted 'dibs' first*. But, honestly, whatever. We were two halves of the same person.

Circe's celestial thievery, though... that was a puzzle. My thoughts wrestled with the intel, trying to knot it into something coherent. Was she casually thinning the cosmic veil between realities to steal entire worlds? Or were unwitting summoners laying them out like welcome mats for her? Whichever way, Circe was tucking worlds into Völuspá's sky like glittering trophies. The whole thing was a bit baffling to say the least.

But, amidst the cosmic chaos of magic, a tiny seed of "maybe" took root. Perhaps—just maybe—I might find a way to thumb a ride back home... after Earth took its place among the stolen celestial jewels. A bizarre comfort, but hey, I'd take it—yay?

However, the most pressing unanswered questions lingered: What had Circe been trying to use me for, and why had she tried to destroy my soul?

The dwarf paused, planting her boots firmly atop the sand dune, the grains cascading down from her sturdy stance. She turned, a wide, triumphant smile breaking across her face, eyes alight with a hearty blend of adventure and welcome. "We're here," she declared, her voice dancing on the winds that swept across the vast, open desert.

I clambered up the dune, sand slipping beneath my boots—fine, shoes—OKAY, ballerina slippers—until I stood beside the stout woman. A canyon, eerily reminiscent of the Grand Canyon back home, yawned open before us. A slender river snaked through its center, looking almost pathetic from our lofty vantage point. But if I knew anything, it was that once we descended, that itsy-bitsy river was bound to reveal its true, mighty self.

"So, the drake and your part are down there?" I asked.

"Aye, that they be. We've a small cave we often use as a campsite when we're huntin' in The Crack of the Desert's Heart," the dwarf grinned, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "If ye've any last questions, now'd be the time, for once we make our way down, I'm suspectin' we'll be tanglin' with a few small critters. Mostly feral goblins, rabid and the like."

"Only that if you wish to keep your hand, I'd recommend removing it," I retorted.

The dwarf lifted her hands defensively, though a roguish grin still danced on her face. “Ah, but it’s a fine arse, it be,” she sighed, sounding a tad mournful. “Like it’s made of putty, just perfectly moldin’ to me hands, it is.”

I rolled my eyes at the woman. “Well, sorry for you, but my ass already belongs to someone else.”

“W-What? Who’s gone and laid claim to such a wonderful bounty, then?” Grimmail stuttered out.

I cracked a smile at her, “Oh, just a vampire.”

Her expression shifted quick-like to a glare. “Oi, that shite ain’t funny,” she huffed. “Let’s get a move on, we’ve still a couple o’ hours to make our way down there, we do.”

“A couple hours?” I groaned. “I thought you said we were here.”

“Aye, we’re here, right at The Crack of the Desert’s Heart,” she chuckled, before adding, “if ye don’t take kindly to unwelcome hands on your fine arse or perfec’ titties, keep a sharp eye out for them goblins. The feral ones, they’ve no care for kindness nor decency. If they get ye, they’ll just hammer away on dat arse, not carin’ if ye’re a man or woman, all whilst bitin’ and tearin’ at yer flesh. It’s a horror, watchin’ them rabid beashts comin’ at ye, all while they be bitin’ at their own ears. Worse, if ye survive, ye’ll be infected with their rabies. Thankfully, they be easy to deal with, but it’s the numbers ye’ve got to watch out for.”

Honestly, I wasn’t the least bit worried. In fact, the idea of someone biting into my false silk flesh to find a mouthful of corrosive Black Pudding beneath? Priceless. The same went for any unwanted poking with curious appendages. So even if I was overwhelmed, fear was off the table.

Oh, and let’s not overlook magic. While my full array of spells was out of reach—courtesy of Circe’s unwelcome intervention—I’d managed to pick up a few useful ones without leaning on the system. The learning curve was unexpectedly smooth, revolving majorly around feel, imagery, and desire. Casting evolved into something akin to vivid daydreaming about the intended result, subsequently propelling it into reality by tapping into that familiar sensation of casting.

“*Necrotic Flame*,” I mused, considering it as my likely go-to spell.

Intriguingly odd, that spell. Despite my somewhat dire vulnerability to fire, this particular spell didn’t wreak the slightest havoc on me. The effects on its victims, however, were another story. At first glance, aside from its vibrant purple hue, it might pass for any ordinary flame. But, contrary to traditional fire, it didn’t merely burn; it voraciously corroded any flesh it caressed. And the aroma? Exquisite! A heady perfume of decaying flesh.

“*I suppose Nightmare and I share the same dark tastes for rotting flesh, even though I regard myself as the kinder half*,” I mused silently, hesitant to voice our concealed, darker desires to the dwarf woman. Though, I thought I sensed my slumbering half begin to stir.

“Oi mean it, lass, keep an eye out on the cliff side as we go down. Some o’ them little buggers like to leap down on top o’ ye once ye get under them,” Grimmail warned as she pulled her battleaxe from her back.

I nodded in confirmation, and we began our descent into the massive canyon along a narrow, precarious trail. A single misstep, and I could tumble right over the edge. Grimmail, for her part, seemed unperturbed by the sheer drop, strolling along with apparent ease—though her eyes constantly scanned for threats. I supposed her low center of gravity offered some advantage in this terrain. If I were to fall and go splat, I considered, how long would it take for my slime body to pull itself back together?

“Why didn’t you come out here with your party from the start?”

“Focus, lassie, ye need t’ pay attention to them critters before they get the jump on ye,” Grimmail hissed.

After a few minutes, though, her tone lightened, and she began speaking again.

“We haven’t been a party for all that long, y’ know. We’re still learnin’ the ropes of one another. Heck, two of ‘em still haven’t bothered givin’ me their names yet. The third’s a grouchy old wizard. Tho’, the healer, a gnome, he’s decent enough. Formin’ bonds in freshly-minted parties is a tough bit, especially since new groups usually form after members of their old ones meet their doom. That’s what happened to all of us. Well, all except the gnome. Not quite sure what his tale is, but he’s utterly obsessed with his trinkets, claims he joined us to fuel that very obsession.”

She took a deep breath, peeked over the edge to ensure all was clear, and we pressed on.

“I didn’t go back fer supplies alone; the gnome had joined me. But I was takin’ too long, so he grabbed a sand sail and went back here by himself,” she chuckled softly, a hint of melancholy tinting her voice. “He’s good folk. ‘Tis a shame what befell him this night.”

My mind snagged on the mention of the sand sail. What in the world was that, and why hadn’t we ridden one? But then, another part of her statement snagged in my thoughts. “What do you mean, what’s going to happen to him?” My voice was tinged with suspicion, and I couldn’t help but wonder if I was being led into some sort of trap.

Grimmail’s head swiveled toward me, her eyes glossing over in a distant, unfocused gaze. It lingered for a mere moment before she blinked, clearing the fog from her eyes. “What was that, lass?” The dwarf’s voice held genuine confusion. “Hurry up, we’ve got to reach the others ‘fore the sun sets.”

“Well, that was odd,” I muttered, trailing behind the dwarf. A prickling suspicion crawled up my spine: we were being watched. But no matter how intensely I scanned our surroundings, the watcher remained unseen.

Out of nowhere, it happened. This goblin, right, screaming like it had just seen a ghost, dived from above, aiming for Grimmail with everything it had. Its head cocked weirdly to the side, its mouth in overdrive, snapping wildly, trying to take a chunk out of its own ear.

Grimmail wasn’t having any of it, let out a roar, and swung her axe with enough force to chop a tree down. But close quarters and a pesky cliff wall messed with her swing, her weapon clanging against rock before it connected with our unwelcome visitor. It wasn’t a clean hit, but hey, it

worked. The rabid little nightmare, still hollering and trying to snack on thin air, tumbled down into the void, shrieks fading away.

“Behind you, lass!” Grimmail’s warning rang out as she took a swing at another plummeting goblin.

Whipping around, my gaze met a sight to behold: a whole gaggle of goblins, frothing, snapping, and oddly... trying to bite nothingness, clogging up the path we’d just tiptoed down. Everything about this chaotic, drooling mass screamed (quite literally) rabies – just like Grimmail had said.

I couldn’t help but be reminded of my own little goblin.

A grin tugged at my lips as I lifted my hand, the ambient mana around me thick, almost tangible, so much more than the measly wisps in the dungeon ruins. I let it wind its way through me, merging with the image in my mind, felt it condense, and then, with a mental shove driven by sheer want, I pushed.

Whoosh! A wave of purple flame engulfed the horde like they were dry leaves, and honestly, I was kinda taken aback by the sheer oomph of the spell. The goblins’ initial cacophony morphed into something more akin to wails and sobs. A couple even seemed to snap out of their rabid frenzy, eyes clearing as if sanity flickered back in, if only for a moment. Others, in blind desperation, flung themselves off the edge, into the abyss below.

One after another, the goblins crumbled, my Necrotic Flame turning them into little more than husks, their flesh rotting away in a horrific yet oddly satisfying display. Oh, and the smell was delicious! My eyes blinked in genuine surprise at the fiery spectacle before me. I mean, where did that come from, right? My magic had never packed quite THAT much punch before. Was the mana in the air supercharged here or something? Who knows? But hey, I definitely wasn’t about to start complaining about a bit of extra magical oomph!

“Lassie, ye never did mention ye were a magus-tier caster!” Grimmail gawked, her eyes flickering between me and the smoky remnants of the goblin horde. “After obliteratin’ them so, ye’ve surely earned yourself a snug spot in m’bed—you’ve left me positively... wet,” she cooed.

My eyebrows raised, both surprise and a modicum of exasperation. “You really don’t know when to quit, do—” My retort caught in my throat, eyes dropping to the dark stain spreading across her trousers.

Her wink was as cheeky as her chuckle, “Ah, not quite in the manner ye’re assumin’, lass,” she admitted, unbothered and unabashed. And despite myself, a snort of laughter escaped me.

The dwarf had pissed herself.

“Now, off we go, lass. Camp’s callin’ and a river rinse is in dire need,” Grimmail declared, unabashedly turning on her heel and resuming her trek down the path.

I sauntered behind, my brows knitting above a smirk at Grimmail’s unassailable spirit. There she was, shrugging off what others might find mortifying with a whimsical ease. It was almost a pity, really. Once my other half awoke, she’d likely extinguish the dwarf’s spirited life, along with those

of her entire party. And me? I wouldn't lift a finger to prevent our darker descent. My counterpart just had a way more compelling argument for our cruelty than my daydreaming hopefulness.

I mean, as tempting as it was to just wrap this whole thing up... it must've been the hunger tickling my conscience, especially after getting a whiff of that goblin meat, seared to perfection by Necrotic Flame. Nah, that wasn't it, was it? Bingo. My other self was starting to stir from her slumber. Soon, I'd be whole, but how soon was Nightmare going to fully wake up? Two minutes? Two hours? I've never been one to bounce out of bed, even as a teen. I could snooze past noon and still feel like a zombie. I can visualize it now: she's going to wake up, and I'll be left manning the fort, driving this body around until she deigns to lend a hand. *Goddess, I am such a pain in the ass.*

After some time, we were finally approaching the bottom. Grimmail, her voice a hushed whisper, subtly pointed at something across the canyon, "O'er there, lass. The drakes' den. We need t' tread light and easy now." Her eyes, steady and considered, met mine briefly. "After unleashin' that spell, yer mana must be near spent, aye? Dunna fret. We'll round up the others soon enough, and ye can rest up, recharge yer mystical might."

I simply nodded in response to Grimmail, choosing not to confess that I hadn't dipped into any of my own mana – if I even had any to begin with. My mind began to meander down a familiar path of pondering. Did I possess my own reservoir of magical energy? And if so, how on earth did I tap into it? But then, a mental shrug. Why get bogged down with such thoughts when I could harness the abundant ambient mana around me, presenting a seemingly infinite wellspring of magic? Worrying about personal mana felt akin to lamenting the lack of a truck when a cargo plane was at my disposal.

Pulling up to a petite cave entrance, Grimmail announced, "Oi, we're here," her voice ringing with a certain finality. My enthusiasm didn't exactly skyrocket, considering the journey we'd undertaken to get here. Honestly, had I known adventuring involved this much...well, trekking, I might've rethought my decision to tag along on a monster-and-drake-slaying escapade. But hey, I was here now, biting back the cynical anticipation that she'd next tell me the real party was another three-day walk deeper into the cave.

"Dwarf, is that you?" A voice, seasoned with age and wear, floated toward us from the dim entrance.

"Who the feck else would it be, the drake?" Grimmail snorted.

"Just checking," came back his voice with a slight grumble.

"Ye're the one on watch, yeah? How 'bout the healer, did the lil' fella make it back?" she asked, her voice dipping into a blend of curiosity and impatience.

"Yes. Yes. He has some feather-fall-like gadget, and gracefully descended into the canyon just to where you stand now. Perfectly unharmed. Though, we were all a bit miffed you hadn't accompanied him yourself," the man said from within the cave, still out of sight.

Grimmail scoffed, “I ain’t his ma, he wanted t’come back and I wasn’t ready, so he came back on his own. I hadn’t a say in it, nor is it m’responsibility to do so. Now, y’old wizard, ye gonna let the two of us in or not?”

“Two?”

“Aye, found meself a magus-tier caster who’s offered t’join us,” Grimmail announced, a swell of pride lilting through her words. “An’ I’ve already called dibs, so hands off—she be mine.”

I rolled my eyes but let the comment slide, not even bothering to argue with the woman.

“Now, lassie, off ye go,” Grimmail nudged me forward, a sly grin sneaking across her features. “I’ll be trailin’ behind ye in a jiff. Need to give meself a quick rinse in the river—this stench from me own soaked trousers is truly startin’ to assail me nostrils,” she boomed out with a hearty chuckle.

I dipped my head, ducking into the cavern, half-expecting Grimmail’s hand to make a familiar journey toward my backside. But, surprisingly, it didn’t. Perhaps the display of my magic had granted me a respite from her groping advances.

Inside, I was greeted by the silhouette of a man, enshrouded in shadow, his form veiled by cascading gray robes. The hood pulled low over his forehead obscured most of his features, though tendrils of a wispy gray beard peeked out from beneath it. It struck me as odd, considering the apparent prevalence of immortality in this world, to see such distinct signs of aging.

He lifted his head slightly, just enough for his eyes to meet mine, and spoke, his voice carrying a gravelly weariness. “Greetings. Ye can call me wizard or mage; it’s what everyone around here seems to favor,” he remarked, a hint of bitterness lacing his words.

I nodded, respecting his somber introduction with silence before responding, “Pleasure to meet you, wizard.” But as the seconds ticked by, I found myself squinting slightly, studying the scant features visible beneath his hood. A strange familiarity echoed in my mind, though from where, I couldn’t quite grasp.

I brushed off the nagging thought, turning my attention back to the immediate conversation. “I’m Dream,” I introduced myself succinctly. The thought of sharing my other name, Blake, passed through my mind, but if he wasn’t offering a proper name, I didn’t see the need to offer mine.

He nodded, the gesture barely visible in the dim light of the cave. “Well met, Dream. We’ll be glad of your help, especially given what Grimmail has surely shared about your tier.”

“I’ll be honest, what do you mean by tier?” I asked my question seemingly catching the wizard off guard.

“I would expect someone of your caliber to know such things,” he replied, his voice laced with a note of surprise. “Why don’t we go further back into the cavern by the fire? I can introduce you to the others and we can talk about magic, if you’d like.”

After that, I trailed the old wizard deeper into the cavern for what felt like an eternity—just kidding! The cozy enclave was merely around a bend, not far from the entrance at all. Surprisingly, a robust bonfire roared in the middle of the space, strangely not suffusing the area with smoke.

An elven woman, her hair sleekly pulled back into a ponytail, sat nearby, her helmet resting on the ground beside her while she attentively sharpened her sword. Her armor, marred with dents and scratches, whispered of countless battles endured. At first, my inner critic wanted to suggest the use of a shield, but a swift perusal of her vicinity revealed one already present, resting nearby. Even though I couldn't fully discern her face, the playful dance of the firelight upon her skin suggested a certain captivating elegance.

My attention then veered toward the healer, or rather, the gnome—Nikola, another Earth-soul like me, except his spirit had been deposited into a gnome, while mine inhabited a Black Pudding.

“Nice seeing you again, Nikola,” I muttered dryly.

He looked up, blinking in apparent confusion. “I’m sorry, but do I know you?”

Internally, I raised an eyebrow. So, we’re playing the ‘I don’t know you’ game, huh? Noted. That also likely answered whether the rest of this crew knew about his out-realm origins.

From the corner of my eye, I thought I saw a flash of pink, but a quick glance revealed nothing.

Suddenly, a deep male voice resonated from the other side of the cavern. “Oh! What do we have here, a woman, and a fine-looking one at that.”

I turned toward the voice, my eyes meeting a human man who emerged from the darkness. His dark skin, shaved head, goatee, and muscular physique presented an imposing stature, with attire that blended barbarian and monk aesthetics. Recognition jolted through me, my mind whirling in shock and disbelief.

“I—I killed you,” I stammered, the words barely squeezing past the lump in my throat.

The woman’s head whipped up, a piercing glare illuminating her features, and I recognized her too.

“Ezard, what’s she talking about?” she snarled with a venomous edge to her voice.

“Honey, I swear, I’ve never seen her before,” Ezard responded, an audible swallow punctuating his plea. His eyes flitted nervously back to the elf, now on her feet, armor-clad and formidable.

“Please, Vanya, you’ve got to believe me.”