

Chapter One

The woods surrounding the enclave were lovely and peaceful, and the hallways in which she was permitted to stroll were equally so, but Chris-Tien found herself restless. While she accepted the need to recover from the days and nights spent in the maze, the paladin was keenly aware of the need to aid the faculty of Strixhaven against the bugbear wizard Murgaxor, who even now could be gathering his strength and materials and assistants for a deathly ritual deep in the woods of Witherbloom.

Waiting and recovering were near the bottom of the list of things she wanted to do. But she had little idea of where she actually was located ... and the monks of the Cobalt Soul had taken her gear. To repair it, was the excuse they gave and Chris had to admit that it had suffered during her latest encounters. Fighting defensively, to wear out but not maim her ensorcelled friends, the paladin's armor had been dented and scorched to the point of potential failure. Her current benefactors were currently mending it ... as well as her body promising that one of their bards would be able to teleport her to Phandalin far faster than she could travel

by ship and horse. Considering the heat that came off the nearby fields, Chris was sure that the journey by normal means would take weeks, if not months. The climate here, so warm and dry, suggested that she was far south of Neverwinter. She just hoped that the bard would be as good as he thought he was.

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"I wish," Chris mused to herself as she crested a small hill, "that my intuition was not so often right". She stood on an unfamiliar dirt road, looking at the unfamiliar stone wall that surrounded the unfamiliar town. She had no idea where she was, but it was certainly NOT Phandalin.

Whether by accident or by design, the cleric's spell had sent her to the wrong town. She should probably be happy that she had not ended up somewhere worse.

Well, there was nothing to do about it right now other than enter and find out the name of the place. Night was falling and a wolf's howl in the distance made the prospect of a warm meal and a comfortable bed even more appealing. Besides, given the obvious prosperity of the place, with its neatly white-washed buildings, she could probably find transportation in addition to information.

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Chris' musings were interrupted by a rustling in the woods off to one side. She had suspected that she was being followed for part of the day, but now, at nightfall, the shadow revealed itself as a shaggy, dark wolf with yellow eyes.

Loosening the sword in her scabbard, Chris realized that the beast was not alone. Several more golden eyes appeared under the trees. The paladin didn't like the odds of facing an entire wolf pack. Backing slowly toward the town gates, she considered her options and decided to chance the sprint toward the safety of the sturdy stone walls.

No sooner than she had rounded a slight bend in the road, Chris nearly tripped over a red-bearded dwarf, kneeling at the side of the road, looking intently at some flowers.

"Hey, there, traveller. Watch yourself!" he exclaimed in surprise.

"Head for the gates," Chris panted, drawing her sword. "Wolves " she pointed back down the road just as several of the pack scrambled into view.

The dwarf tsked, wagging a finger at the pair, acting for all the world like a stern tutor with two naughty pupils. And much to Chris' surprise, the wolves whined and backed out of sight.

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The market square was strangely deserted when Chris arrived, having followed the directions the dwarf provided. The streetlights illuminated shop signs all around her, but none spelled out the name of the inn she was seeking: The Pickled Chicken. Langston, for that was the name of the

town, according to the strange dwarf, seemed oddly subdued.

As she considered her options, a side street disgorged a figure in white robes. The young woman didn't seem to notice Chris, as she juggled a sheaf of papers. Sunbursts decorated her robes, marking her as a sun cleric someone hopefully educated and helpful.

"Hello?" Chris called out.

The startled cleric, reflexively grabbed the golden sun pendant around her neck, her eyes wide for a moment. "Oh. Hello." She quickly scanned the paladin's armor and gear, relaxing into a smile. "Welcome, traveller. What can I do for you?"

Chris-Tien explained that the dwarf had directed her to the inn, but that she was having trouble locating it.

"A, yes, Roi is rather fond of that inn. I'm on my way there myself if you want to follow me. I really must hurry. The funeral will be starting soon." she gestured vaguely with her sheaf of papers. "Did you know the deceased?" she queried as she started quickly down a street.

Chris has to admit that she did not know the person in question.

"So sad ... so young" the cleric sighed as she returned to consulting her pages and walking down the otherwise deserted street. In short order, the pair stopped in front of a

building sporting the sign "The Pickled Hen", and the nameless young woman quickly opened the door, stepped inside, and let the door close immediately behind her.

With a frown, the paladin stepped back to examine the building more closely. She didn't want to intrude on the grief of those apparently gathering for what? A funeral? It seemed an odd location for such a solemn event. The wake perhaps? In either case, it did not seem an appropriate place for a stranger. But, looking down the street in either direction, there did not seem to be an alternative.

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For the second time that day, Chris found herself wishing that she listened better to her intuition. Shortly after she entered the tavern, a man overcome with both grief and drink began asking veiled questions of the stranger among them namely Chris-Tien herself. Actually, the questions were no better veiled than a dancer performing at a very seedy establishment. Chris had to de-escalate the situation and quickly.

Taking a deep breath, she raised her open hands and spoke gently. "Yes, I am a stranger here, but I am no threat. I am sorry for your loss," she looked around the room, "but I was not the cause of it, I assure you. I just arrived not an hour ago."

"Don't take that tone with me, vagabond," the man snarled as he took a swing at the paladin.

The blow did not connect. Partly because Chris had moved --- the man was no fighter and had telegraphed his intent --- but also because it was interrupted by a half-orc woman dressed in a somber business suit. The hand that stopped the punch was criss-crossed with scars, and despite her clothing, Chris-Tien was certain this person knew the business end of a sword or axe.

"That's enough," the green-skinned woman told the trouble-maker. "I think it is time to leave"

"Yes, Your Honor," the drunken man mumbled as he staggered toward the door, the crowd parting to let him through.

Chris was about to thank her benefactor and explain that she had the situation under control but the suited woman's glare suggested that she should listen to her intuition **this time** and keep silent. Third time is a charm, right?

#

The half-orc looked Chris up and down carefully, noting the arms and armor before coming to a decision. "I am Mayor Tanya Anthram." Her Common was lightly accented with the characteristic Orcish twang that reminded Chris-Tien of Khrum. "I might have use of you. Come find me after the funeral."

Chris' questions died on her lips as the Mayor abruptly turned and walked away as the

funeral began.

The funeral was an odd affair. Sad, certainly. The victim's parents spoke of their young daughter, hinting at the brutal way in which she was murdered and mangled. To Chris, it sounded more like an animal attack than an actual murder until a couple of boorish locals seated in the back, near the paladin, started sniggering about a Wolf and the need to lock up the woman folk of the town.

The men's wives hushed them before Chris could be tempted to do so more forcefully, but the rude comments had started making her wonder if there was more to the situation than was first apparent. As the woman's fiance finished his remarks, the feeling that there was something off ... became even stronger. Chris started looking more closely around the room, paying particular attention to the erstwhile finance, Tomlin, and the rapt attention the younger women of the crowd were paying him.

"You are all, always, welcome in my home" he finished with a winning smile, just slightly tinged with sadness and regret.

Before Chris could begin speculating about the newly re-eligible bachelor, the red-bearded dwarf took his turn at the front of the room.

The red-bearded dwarf was the same kind soul who had directed Chris to this very tavern. A druid, he spoke of his role as the spiritual advisor of the community and how the

young woman was now returning to the circle of life. With a simple magic spell, he made flowers appear around her casket as the climax to his remarks, only marring the effect by sneezing partway through the spell. That would have only been a brief distraction, but the dwarf's hair and beard and hair also seemed to thicken for a moment and stand on end, as if he was near a lightning strike.

This struck Chris as a further oddity in an evening that seemed constantly not quite right, particularly since he had sneezed during their brief encounter outside of Langston. At the time, Chris-Tien had dismissed the hair and beard bristling as her imagination. Now, she was intrigued and focused closely on the druid and her recollection of these two incidents ... wondering what else about him seemed wrong?? Although she had discounted her impressions earlier in the day, she knew that it had been more than the hair and beard. His eyes and nose were red, as if he had been crying possibly the death of one of his community had affected him more than he was letting on during the funeral. But the paladin was sure that she had seen other changes ears and nose had seemed to lengthen, and his build had shifted slightly. Overall, he had impressed her as rather canine in appearance, as if he had been shifting into a Wild Shape but had stopped. Very odd.

But Chris' speculation would have to wait because the young Sun Cleric who had helped her find the inn was now taking her place, leading them in the next stage of the funeral. Her demeanor had changed remarkably, and she seems confident and capable rather than sweet and scattered. After some remarks, the cleric tried to lead the crowd in a funeral hymn that no one else seemed to know. The people gathered did not seem to be devotees of the Radiant Order,

although they politely tried to follow her lead.

Finally, the mayor stepped up to take over the proceedings, startling the cleric for a moment, before she seemed to come to herself, ceding the front of the room to the half-orc.

In a town comprised mostly of humans, the mayor made an unusual and commanding figure at the front of the room. Tall and muscular, she filled the well-tailored suit perfectly, its fine cloth contrasting with the many battle scars visible on hand and face. For a moment, she stood still, hands clasped behind her back as she seemed to gather her thoughts. Beside her, a huge mastiff mirrored its master's stance. Imposing without being intimidating.

"Before I became your mayor, I fought in the Battle of Three Rivers, defending the people from the barbarian horde. When I came here to heal, you took me in and made me welcome." She looked over the crowd picking out individuals with her eyes. "Now, there is a killer out in the darkness" her eyes locked on Chris' for a moment. "And it took one of the people under my protection. We will find out who or what it is, and we will end the threat. That is my promise to you."

The assembled people murmured and applauded softly. Fear lessened a little at the mayor's assurances as she turned to address the dead woman's parents. "I am so sorry for your loss," she ended as she stepped away from the casket and began to walk toward the back of the room, the dog padding beside her.

"The Battle of Three Rivers" the paladin murmured to herself as she searched her memory ... and found the Mayor's story wanting. That battle had not been against a barbarian force rather a coup attempt from the neighboring kingdom. And the local peasants had been not victims, but had joined the aggressors in the coup. Why did she lie to her town?

Chapter Two

"Paladin, I have need of you," the mayor called out to Chris before she had a chance to start looking for the owner of the Pickled Hen.

Chris-Tien sighed before nodding her head in acknowledgement. She knew what was coming and didn't have time to waste on a local problem, but she also knew that she would be honor-bound to accept a direct request for aid. "Your Honor, how can I help you?"

The half-orc was not one for pleasantries. "You know our situation here. The people are scared and need assurance and to have the culprit brought to justice."

"Surely, this is something you can handle " Chris looked significantly at the mayor's battle-scarred hands.

"There is more here than I can tell you right now." The mayor spoke quietly and

glanced sideways at the assembled mourners before continuing in a more normal voice. "We will pay your room and board while you are investigating. Meet me in the town hall tomorrow morning. You can get the key to your room from the innkeeper," she finished, pointing at a balding man in an apron before nodding to herself. Abruptly, she turned back to mingling with the funeral-goers.

The mayor's manner added to Chris' confusion about her unusual position in this human settlement, but before she had time to speculate further, Tomlin approached her.

"Hello. I haven't met you yet. I'm Tomlin, the village herbalist. How did you know Maybelline?"

After an exchange of pleasantries, Chris extricated herself to find the innkeeper and her bed.

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The next morning found Chris-Tien Jinn in the mayor's office, where the half-orc was no more congenial and not much more informative than at the Pickled Hen. The victim's body had been found in the city limits, torn apart as if by a bear or a wolf. When Chris pointed out that the most obvious answer was often the correct one, Mayor Anathram curtly dismissed the idea.

"Roi keeps the woods around the town free of dangerous beasts ... or supernatural threats. No, this is something different, and our town militia is only really able to handle

straightforward incidents, such as bandits or rustlers. We need someone from outside the town ... someone objective to ask questions and get to the bottom of this."

Reluctantly, Chris agreed to take on the task. The mayor's offer of 320 gold didn't hurt, and the paladin had to assume that Jorge and Khrum had already left for Strixhaven without her. If she could find the culprit quickly, the gold might be enough to hire a competent cleric or wizard to get her to her destination without too much more loss of time.

The mayor had recommended that she start her investigation with Tomlin. The local herbalist and fiance of the victim, Maybelline, was as good a place to start as any.

By the light of day, Chris' first impression of Langston was reinforced by the quiet bustle of the locals, grieving but getting back to the routines of working life. As she passed by the inn, with a wagon filled with limp flowers left over from the funeral, the drunk from last night called out to her. "Hey, adventurer!! We're still watching you, don't ya know." As he turned away into his shop, several people on the street shook their heads in embarrassment before they turned back to their tasks. Something still seemed off about the whole town, and murmuring a short prayer, the paladin reached out to detect good and evil influences Suddenly a strobe of light and a rising hum filled Chris' head with piercing agony. There was good and evil here, warring with each other necromancy fighting against abjuration. Clearly there was much to learn about the goings on in Langston.

The moment passed quickly, and with a final shake of her head to clear away the

lingering pain, Chris headed toward the edge of town where the mayor said the herbalist's cottage would be.

Chapter Three

Chris looked over Tomlin's house in frank envy. As a fellow herbalist, the neat cottage's filled window boxes, trellises, and flowerbeds coaxed her to explore and identify the various plants that she could see in front and that peeked at her from the sides. She had the impression that the back of the cottage would include a substantial garden, where even more useful species would thrive.

With a sigh, the paladin decided that good manners required that she try the front door before exploring the grounds. But she could hope that no one answered so that she would be required to walk around to the back, looking for the herbalist. At her brisk knock, muffled voices and the sound of heavy furniture being moved emerged from the house but then a brief silence settled. Chris was almost ready to knock again when the door flew open , revealing Tomlin and a young woman. Both were red-faced and had tousled hair. "I saw you at the funeral last night, didn't I?" Tomlin spoke first. "What can I do for you?"

Jinn quickly explained her mission from the mayor, at which point the young woman quickly excused herself and started off.

"Don't forget your medicine" Tomlin called out, grabbing a bundle of dried herbs from the nearby table. " for your aunt."

The young woman blushed and hurried off before Chris schooled her face to neutrality and asked who the woman was. She was investigating a murder, after all

"Oh, just routine, really " the herbalist started. "Just a young woman getting medicine for her poor, ill brother "

"Aunt," Chris corrected him, eyebrow raised.

"Ah, yes. Aunt ... won't you come in?"

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The herbalist's cottage was a riot of colors and scents, some familiar and some new to Chris-Tien. The hearth held a fire, banked low with a gently simmering cauldron over it. On a workbench sat a small filtering system, dripping an orange concoction into a vial. It looked neat and well-organized, with attractive touches that might have been the influence of Maybelline.

A pot of water boiling over a burner began to whistle, and Tomlin grabbed a packet of

herbs to toss into a teapot, followed by a pour of the hot water. He barely let it have a moment to steep before pouring the yellowish, bitter-smelling brew into two cups, handing one to Chris. He watched his guest with a bit too much interest, and so the paladin took her time sniffing the tea and sorting through her knowledge of herbs before deciding that the tincture was not only safe but probably very good for her. She took a careful sip of the still-hot liquid and nodded her appreciation.

Tomlin smiled broadly. "Thanks. It's an old family recipe to increase stamina" he began and suddenly stopped, looking embarrassed.

Chris raised an eyebrow and set her teacup aside. She could have used something for the headache that still ghosted around from her examination in the town, but it seemed impolite and an unnecessary distraction to ask for something more useful.

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"So, what can you tell me about Maybelline? Did she have any one who would want to harm her??"

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Tomlin scoffed at Chris' question. "No one would want to harm her. Everyone loved her, and she loved everyone. Simple as that."

"No one avoids rubbing someone the wrong way at some point," Chris-Tien began, trying to coax a more reasoned response out of the herbalist.

He resisted at first, but fairly quickly sighed. Looking at Chris, he started, "You have to understand that these were not serious. Just, as you say, rubbing someone the wrong way"

At the paladin's nod, he continued. "Maybelline and the mayor argued a little while back. I didn't hear what it was about. And "

"Go on"

"Solaine and I were lovers before she went on pilgrimage. When she got back and realized that I hadn't waited for her " he gave a shrug. "It was obviously a blow to her. She shut herself in the tower and barely comes out except for her priestly duties."

Chris wanted to wipe the self-serving smile off the man's face, but she decided to redirect questioning. "Have you noticed anything strange around the town lately?"

"No only that the wolves have been howling more lately. And seem closer to town."

"Are they a threat?" the paladin asked, remembering her encounter with the pack just the day before.

"Only to livestock ... although someone mentioned some strangers camping out by Emmet and Tilly's farm. Unless you're a druid like Roi, I'm not sure that would be a good idea." Tomlin's eyes flashed in anger. "Farmers have been complaining about thefts you don't think these strangers could have done this?"

Chris raised a calming hand and assured the herbalist that she would check it out in due course.

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After Tomlin had settled down and was sipping the last of his tea, Chris asked as gently as she could, "I have to ask where were you the night Maybelline died?"

Anger flashed in his eyes only to be replaced by shame. "I was with friends not what you think!" added defensively. "Our courtship went so quickly that I didn't really have a stag party. So, we kinda had a last night guys-only night at the tavern." He looked morosely into his tea. "It got out of hand and lasted a long time."

Chris nodded her understanding and asked who he was with that night. Tomlin rattled off a list of names who were with him until dawn, and while they would certainly confirm his story, the paladin intended to ask a few of them what they knew about the events of that night.

As Chris-Tien thanked Tomlin for his time and stood up, he cleared his throat and began quietly, "Before you go something has been tearing up my garden at night, leaving large, clawed prints in the soil ..."

When Chris asked what he thought she could do about what was probably a badger, Tomlin continued, "Well, obviously, I'm a lover and not a fighter. Please? Can you just go look?"

With a sigh, Chris agreed and headed for the back door of the cottage, her hand on her sword hilt.

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Tomlin's garden was surprisingly large, with flower beds and green herbs dominating the central space. Around the edge, a trellis filled with vines served as the fence. Bees filled the air with their lazy buzz. It was lush and tidy, and Chris could tell that the herbalist was a master of his craft.

In the far corner of the garden, one of the beams supporting the trellis had fallen over, and Chris decided to start with that anomaly. As she walked back to the disturbed corner, Tomlin mentioned that he had tried to move the beam but was not able to get it up at the time.

Upon closer examination, it seemed to have been partially dug up, and it was lying on top of something. Together, Chris and Tomlin shifted the beam to reveal a human figure made of gnarled wood with long, sharp claws. It is broken in several places, which suggested that the beam fell upon and killed it.

"Scraplings!" Tomlin spat. At Chris' look of confusion, he explained, "Animated plants that thirst for human blood. They've never come into my garden before, but people further out have seen them." His face was full of anger and fear as he continued. "They are very dangerous

and almost never alone"

Chris-Tien drew her sword as the two of them began to explore the garden, walking past flourishing beds of flowers and vines. One section is strangely out of place, with two parched and dead shrubs hugging the wall. Before Chris realized what they were, the two humanoid figures attacked.

Each of the scraplings clawed at Chris-Tien before she shook off the surprise to raise her sword. She cursed the decision to leave behind her armor this morning as the second monster's claws raked a shallow gash along her left arm.

"Kill them," yelled Tomlin as he grabbed a nearby pitchfork. "Use fire if you can!" he added as he stabbed wildly at one of the two shrub-like beings and missed.

Chris incinerated the scrapling nearest her and tried to do the same with the beast nearer to Tomlin, but her spell rolled off it harmlessly. It rounded on the paladin immediately, ignoring Tomlin's attempts to stab it. A second, deeper gash joined the first. The creature's small size seemed to be giving Tomlin a hard time, and he missed again with his pitchfork. But Chris had no trouble hitting this one with her sacred flame, ending the battle. With a scream of wild fury, Tomlin stabbed the burning scraplings, having no trouble hitting them this time, until the burning wood scraps were scattered around and the pitchfork's rusty tines began to bend. He obviously had been holding grief and anger inside and had finally found a suitable way to vent it.

Stepping back, he brushed his hair out of his eyes. With his easy smile back in place he said with forced brightness, "Glad that's over. Want a souvenir?"

Chris accepted a clawed hand as a specimen to examine later possibly checking with the local druid, Roi, for information. Unfortunately, the day was drawing to a close, and -- given the day's happenings -- it might not be a good idea to wander around in the dark. Besides, those gashes hurt, and the blood was sticking to the torn shirt.

With the intention of heading back to the inn to recover, Chris began to bid the herbalist goodbye, but he shushed her and asked, "Before you go, and you join me for a moment?"

With a barely audible sigh, Chris did as he asked. Once inside, he gave her a small box filled with vials. "This is a philter of remembrance. It will inspire extremely vivid memories for about 10 minutes ... or until the perfume is washed off." He hesitated for a moment with a far-away look in his eyes before continuing, somewhat vaguely. "I was going to give it Maybelline for our wedding, but I can't stand to have it in the cottage anymore."

Gravely, Chris-Tien accepted the gift and slipped it into her pouch before finally making her way back to the inn for a hot meal, some rest, and her armor.

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Chapter Four

It was the middle of the night with moonlight streaming in through the window when Chris woke with the hairs prickling on the back of her neck. She had not set an alarm spell, assuming that the peaceful town and beautifully clear night did not warrant such precautions. Yet, when she walked to the window, she spied a figure on the roof of the neighboring building. Its silhouette was hunched and hairy, and although Chris could not see its face, the eyes glowed yellow. As she watched, it extended an powerful arm and pointed at her.

Chris opened the window and called out softly, "What do you want?"

The figure lowered its arm and studied Chris-Tien as she regarded it carefully in turn. All she could determine was that it seemed to be covered in fur or wore a furry cloak, with eyes that caught the moonlight in shades of golden yellow.

"He's mine," the creature snarled, and with a low growl, it disappeared over the edge of

the rooftop.

With a shaken breath, the paladin closed the window and took stock of the situation. She was bone tired after the first day, and still healing from the encounter with the scraplings. As tempting as it would be to rush out after the creature, she needed to get some proper sleep. Setting an alarm spell, she tucked back into bed and calmed herself fading off to a restful sleep.

Chapter Five

A cold breakfast waited outside of Chris' door the next morning after she dressed and donned her armor. Her arm was a little stiff, but otherwise, she felt healthy, whole, and well-rested as she walked through the quiet, empty streets of Langston.

The wagon filled with the limp flowers from the funeral still remained outside the inn, but she set aside that oddity as she turned her footsteps out of town, toward the druid's grove.

A short walk along a dirt road to the south-east of town led across a river to old-growth forest with a path leading to Roi's place. Dappled golden shafts of sunlight pierced the canopy to illuminate the brown earth and green moss of the woodland path. Beautiful and peaceful, it almost made Chris relax, but something was definitely wrong. The forest was utterly silent. No birds sang, and no insects buzzed or scuttled in the leaves.

With a shrug, Chris turned to follow the path south, walking unbothered until she reached

a clearing. For a moment, she hoped it was the druid's grove, but it was apparently just a natural opening in the trees. It seemed a good place to rest a moment and have a drink of water, but as she was reaching for her canteen, a stirge dropped out of the trees. With leathery wings and six clawed legs it tried unsuccessfully to get a hold of her and find an opening in her armor with its long proboscis.

The paladin threw a hand of chill touch at it and missed, but swatting it with her canteen was more effective. Examining its corpse, Chris noted that it looked even before she had squashed it ragged and pale. Since these are usually found in annoyingly large clusters, Chris took a quick drink while she listened for more. The woods remained unnaturally still as she continued on down the path.

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The path wandered through the woods for a while longer, until it opened into a meadow dotted with wildflowers. In the middle of the clearing stood a massive stone outcropping with a kitchen and table set out underneath an overhang. A hammock and chest completed the cozy camp.

The druid himself was nowhere to be seen, but near the outcropping, a wolf was scenting the air. Medium sized, it was unusually stocky and had reddish fur. So far, it had not noticed Chris-Tien.

Wearing mail, Chris knew that she would not be able to sneak up on the wolf. Besides,

she had a hunch so she walked into the grove without any attempt to hide her presence. The wolf circled around the druid's home, head down and hackles bristling. It was not baring its teeth, but the paladin couldn't help noticing that there was blood on its muzzle. Taking a deep, steadying breath, she walked a few steps, hands open and away from her weapons. She really hoped that her guess was correct.

The wolf looked at her quizzically, ears flicking as if it was listening to sounds of the eerily still forest.

"Roi, is that you? We met a couple of days ago" Chris began.

The wolf nodded and trotted off to the outcropping where it nosed around a pile of tattered clothing. Returning to Chris, it dropped the druid's holy symbol at her feet.

The paladin looked at the wooden artifact and the wolf quizzically. "Ok. So, this will be a long conversation if we have to do 'Yes and No'. Can you change back?"

The wolf looked at her woefully and shook his head.

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Chris followed Roi back to his dwelling, where he nosed around in a box of scrolls for a few moments. Finally, he pulled out the one he wanted, gently unrolled it and put his paws down to keep it flat. Chris read read over his furry shoulder:

Polypox, aka the Doppelganger Curse, is a blood-borne disease that affects those who can innately transform their shape, such as doppelgangers, dragons, and Druids who have mastered Wild Shape. It causes sporadic, uncontrollable s shifts as long as the disease lasts, which can be several weeks. In extreme cases, delirium and memory loss can occur.

Following the description of the disease, there was a recipe for a decoction, which presumably could treat the disease. She would need wolfbane, sage, and hornwort

"Roi, do these herbs grow nearby?"

The wolf nodded and trotted off into the woods. It took a short while to collect the various herbs required, and Chris was soon brewing up Roi's cure, which he lapped up as soon as it was cool enough to tolerate.

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It took about an hour for Roi to recover his ability to shift back to human, although with watering eyes and a red nose.

Not fully recovered from polypox, the druid was still able to thank Chris-Tien profusely. "I don't know what I would have done if it wasn't you who came to the grove. Polypox is a hard disease to catch it must have been from that old stirge. It bit an infected shifter somewhere in these woods before it bit me."

Chris nodded, "Yes, I encountered one on the way here. Squashed it with my canteen, I'm afraid."

Roi sighed. "Probably just as well, old and separated from its swarm like that" the druid considered for a moment. "I want to give you something as my my thanks." Before Chris could protest that she needed nothing in return for a good deed, Roi handed her the silver brooch from his cloak. "It is the Silverstar and can remove one curse. It was a gift from Solaine's predecessor at the Temple, but I've never needed to use it. "

Tucking the brooch in her pouch, Chris took a deep breath before continuing. "Roi, I have to ask you. Were you infected with polypox before Maybelline's death?"

"Can't rightly say for sure. I wasn't sniffing at first, and it took a few weeks for the sneezing and changing started around the full moon"

"Any gaps in your memory since you got bit?" Chris continued.

"Oh, am I a suspect now?" Roi roared in laughter. "Far as I can tell, I don't have any amnesia. Today with the first time I had a completely uncontrolled change in form, actually."

"Can werewolves be infected with polypox?"

"Well, yes. Anything that shifts can get it why?"

Chris-Tien considered for a minute. "Was it a full moon when Maybelline died?"

The druid thought back a bit. "Yes now that you mention it. She died about that time. Maybe even on the night of the full moon." Roi looked at Chris, "You might be onto something there."

"One last thing" Chris pulled out the scrapling's claw. "Could this have been the killer?"

Roi took the claw and shook his head. "No, this wee thing was not the killer. Whatever mauled the victims was much larger. You should look at what's left of the girl. You'll see."

With that, Chris took her leave to let Roi rest and finish recovering.

Chapter Six

Chris' sleep was troubled by odd dreams. After a good, quiet meal and relaxing evening, she had thought the night would be restful, but her nightmares echoed the day's adventures: being attacked by a rose bush, running through the town on four legs, and being hunted by the same furry, hulking beast as had visited her the night before. The latter was the most vivid and anxiety-producing of the three. The figure had reached for her from the shadows, but as its forearm stretched into the light surrounding her dream self, it had cracked and crumbled to nothing, startling her awake finally.

As she lay in her bed, she looked out the window, but the roof of the building beside the inn was empty this night. Gradually, taking deep breaths, she finally managed to fall back into -- this time -- a dreamless sleep.

The next morning, as she was getting ready for the day, there was a knock on the door. Opening it, Chris found the innkeeper with a hot breakfast and the news that not only did the sun

cleric, Solaine, drop by to request a visit, but the mayor also wanted to speak with Chris-Tien, claiming that there was a new lead in the case.

#

The mayor was the first stop of the day, and Chris-Tien was shown to her office as soon as she arrived at the town hall. The huge mastiff was still accompanying its master, standing impassively besides the desk.

Her honor got to the point quickly. "There are two strangers hanging around the edge of town, making our folk nervous. Plus livestock and other valuable items have gone missing. I want you to check on the reports these bandits may be related to Maybelline's death."

While Chris was not so sure that the two strangers were connected to the murder, she kept her opinion to herself. Something nagged at her, as if the mayor was not sharing all of the what she knew about the incidents.

"Give me your map of Langston," the mayor ordered. When Chris complied, the half-orc circled an area to the north of the town. "Search this area and remove the bandit camp. With force, if necessary. And stick to the forest paths. People are already anxious enough without seeing another armed stranger on the roads."

The paladin accepted the map with a bemused expression and took her leave, heading

north after she exited the town hall. Although the mayor's mind was made up, Chris resolved to keep an open mind herself.

Chapter Seven

The road north skirted between farmlands to the west and a deep wood to the east. Keeping the mayor's request in mind, Chris picked her way through the forest, following game trails heading in the general direction of north. She had spent most of her career with the rangers, as was often the case with paladins who took the Oath of Ancients, and she was confident in her sense of direction. The woods were quiet, although not as still as those to the south, where Roi had been taken ill. No, these were simply peaceful, full of the natural hum of insects with a gentle trill of a brook somewhere further east. As Chris-Tien relished her walk, she came to a clearing, ringed with gnarled, thick trunks. The birdsong was particularly complex, and the smell of wildflowers was sweet. In the middle of the grove sat a woman with bright green skin and hair that was a tangle of moss and leaves. She regarded a robin so closely that she had not noticed the paladin approach.

Carefully, Chris stepped into the clearing, making sure not to alarm the dryad. The moss and leaves that comprised her hair and clothing rustled in a breeze that was not there, but she

did not seem afraid and regarded her visitor evenly.

Chris-Tien greeted the dryad in rusty Sylvan, eliciting a polite smile.

"I am glad you speak Sylvan since my Common is limited. What brings you to our woods?"

Chris explained about her search for the bandit camp, and the woman responded eagerly, "Yes, there are several men scaring the residents and making a mess. They have placed many snares and traps far more than they should need for food."

When informed that her mission was to remove the men from the forest, the fae woman was delighted. "You are much nicer than that young man from town who comes gathering herbs but also keeps trying to bed a dryad."

"Really? When has he been in these woods?" Chris asked, surprised.

The dryad thought a moment before responding. "Must be 10 days ago? I had to escape into that tree," she pointed to a tree at the edge of the clearing. "He kept saying that non-humans don't count. I think. My Common is not good."

Chris sighed, thinking of someone she had met in town recently before asking if anything else strange had been happening in the woods.

The fae nodded. "The trees have been reporting a strange creature that seems associated with the camp. But they describe it as both a 'beast' and a 'person'. Something odd that they do not know the name for."

The paladin thanked the dryad and assured her that she'd rid the woods of the ruffians. In gratitude, the fae offered Chris-Tien a vial of barkskin before leading her to the camp.

#

The clearing to which the dryad led Chris stood in stark contrast to both the dryad's glade and Roi's home to the south. A hastily-dug firepit occupied the center of an area strewn with scorched bones and various bits of recent meals and other detritus. A pot of grey porridge sat beside the remnants of a cooking fire, but no kindling or fresh wood was to be seen.

As the paladin eased closer, she could see that the camp was currently unoccupied. Two lean-tos were set over bedrolls, but there was very little else visible, other than an oil cloth bundle suspended in the trees presumably to keep food out of reach of bears.

Chris decided to investigate further, taking down the suspended bundle first. To her surprise, it did not contain food, but rather an leather scroll case containing a roll of vellum. It was a warrant granting Horace and Titch (presumably the bandits' names) for the capture - dead or alive - of someone known as the Wolf of the Road, whose proper name was written in Orcish. Chris didn't speak Orcish ... so she couldn't make out the name, but she read further that there

was a reward of several hundred gold and that the Wolf of the Road was wanted for killing a constable in Three Rivers. Slipping the document back into its case, Chris decided to take that with her.

Searching through the rest of the camp, Chris-Tien found mostly tattered and poorly repaired gear. But a second oilcloth bag, hidden in a tree knoll, contained an agate brooch and jeweled dagger.

Tucking the scroll and the jewelry into her pouch, Chris glanced at the sky. She should be able to make it back to Langston before nightfall, hopefully finding the Mayor still in her office.

#

Chris arrived at the town hall just in time to find the Mayor's aide locking up for the night. "She left a little early," he informed the paladin, "just after receiving a sealed message. I don't know what it was about."

Explaining that she had new information about the murder, Chris got directions to the Mayor's house and hurried along the mostly deserted roads. As she turned the final corner, she noticed two shabbily dressed men lounging around the entrance to the Mayor's neglected garden. One was quite tall and lean and the other short and stout. Both men wore armor and

clothing that was mismatched, patched, and dirty.

As Chris watched, the Mayor approached from a different direction. Upon spotting the two men, she scowled, hand drifting toward her belt as if for a weapon that was not there. After a moment's hesitation, she stalked forward. The shorter ruffian wiggled his eyebrows, and the three people exchanged unfriendly greetings before entering the house. After a moment, lamplight appeared in the front window. and the curtains were pulled closed.

Approaching the single-storied house, Chris could hear angry, raised voices through the thick door, but she couldn't make out what was being said. Considering her options, the paladin decided to be direct and pounded on the door.

Silence answered her knock for a few moments before the Mayor called from the other side of the door, "Who's there?"

"It's me. Are you alright?"

After a few more moments, the Mayor opened the door and politely greeted Chris, ushering her into the house.

Confused, Chris entered the house cautiously and realized that the taller bandit was behind the Mayor with a dagger at her back. "Welcome to the party," he sneered. "Come in and relax and no one gets hurt."

At the Mayor's nod, Chris entered the parlor and the two bandits shifted places to stand between her and the half-orc who took her place in a wing-back chair beside her mastiff, one hand resting on the dog's head. The room was comfortably appointed with heavy furnishings suited to the muscular frame of the half orc, but it seemed impersonal. Other than a well-used great axe hanging over the fireplace, there were no mementos or paintings of family members on display.

When the mayor did not offer her a chair or introduce her to the visitors, Chris decided to dive into the reason she was here. "I'm here investigating the murder of a young woman and came to report to Her Honor" Chris explained.

The shorter bandit made a show of listening and nodding along with the explanation. "Did you have something to do with that," he asked his companion sweetly.

The taller one lounged against a wall, hand on his knife and chuckled, "Maybe a pretty young lady found your secret while out gathering berries. Or heard something in the marketplace, hey?"

Chris looked at the Mayor to see how she wanted to handle the situation.

Chapter Eight

The mayor sat impassively, staring into the middle distance with her hand resting on her mastiff, as the bandits, Horace and Titch, laid out their blackmail scheme. They showed Chris a wanted poster, similar to the warrant in her pouch, but this one included a detailed sketch of the Wolf of the Road who was plainly Mayor Anathram.

".... so, if you don't open up the town coffers and we don't make it back by morning, our friends from the camp are going to spread your little secret to everyone in town. And don't think this is all the proof we got," Horace brandished the wanted poster in front of the mayor.

Chris cleared her throat, "Actually, I've been to your camp. You two are alone, and your additional proof has been moved somewhere safe."

Blood drained from the faces of the two men as the mayor smiled, showing her tusks.

"Gentlemen, I hate to state the obvious, but you two have brought knives to a sword fight, and you are woefully underdressed for the occasion." Chris rested her mailed hand on the sword sheathed at her hip.

Horace gulped audibly, and Titch's eyes flew about the space, looking for an escape route.

The mayor stood slowly, easily taller than anyone else in the room. "If you hand over that poster and leave now, you may leave safely."

Mutely, Horace held out the parchment. Mayor Anathram gave a command in Orcish, and the dog padded over to take the illustrated sheet from the bandit.

"Well, it's been nice catching up, hasn't it, Horace?" Titch made an attempt to save face.

"Right you are, Titch." Horace replied, "But it's been a miserable waste of time, ain't it, Wolf or should I say, 'Mayor'?"

"Just get out," growled the half-orc, "before I change my mind.

The two men sidled around the mastiff and Chris-Tien as they half-jogged toward the exit, glancing over their shoulders nervously before the heavy door finally closed behind them.

"Is it wise to let them go?" the paladin asked.

The mayor sighed. "They are cowards. Desperate enough to try that once, but I doubt they will have the nerve to try again."

#

I did not kill him," the mayor gently took the wanted poster from her dog's jaws, "And I am not certain who did." She looked significantly at the door through which Horace and Titch had just left. "I was a warrior once and then I was merely a thief for a long time"

Slowly, Mayor Anathram told her tale of falling between human and Orcish societies. Finding a place in neither, she had eventually led a band of bandits, becoming known as the 'Wolf of the Road'. At Three Rivers, the death of the constable was seen as an assassination, local tensions erupted into pitched battles. During the fighting, she and her dog had simply left. The people of Langston had assumed she was a veteran of the conflict, and she had not corrected them.

"You will have to ask, I know, but I did not kill Maybelline either. Yes, she found out my secret I don't know how and we argued. She did not think that I should retain my position as Mayor, but I tried to convince her that I was honestly trying to make amends, protecting the town from threats I understand only too well. She was alive when we parted. Only to be killed the next day." The mayor looked at Chris with tears in her eyes. "And now, my town is ready to lose itself to fear. We need to find the killer quickly."

Chris-Tien regarded the half-Orc carefully. Her story seemed sincere, and the paladin nodded, "Agreed. So far, we actually have no solid clues, however."

"No," Anathram sighed. "You will need to keep investigating, and I want you to have some additional protection." She lifted an amulet off her neck and handed it to Chris. "This will protect you from all manner of beasts. It was helpful when I was training Buttercup."

With a glance at the huge mastiff 'Buttercup'??? Chris-Tien slipped the amulet over her own head.

"Now, if you don't mind it's been an exhausting day" the mayor balled up the poster, throwing it into the hearth fire, and started toward the back of the house. "You can find your own way out, I trust?" At Chris' nod, she continued through the doorway.

The fire settled, and the balled up parchment rolled out of the fire. With a sigh, Chris tossed it back and added the warrant from her pouch. The mayor seemed earnest in her commitment to making the best of her second chance watching the fire consume the past, she was surprised by something wet and warm on her palm. Buttercup had padded over to nuzzle the paladin before settling down on her bed.

With a sigh, Chris decided it was time to seek out her own accommodations at the inn.

Chapter Nine

A peaceful night's sleep and a good breakfast behind her, Chris-Tien finally made her way to the Radiant Temple to meet the cleric, Solaine. A note from the mayor informed the paladin that she would be expected and urged her to examine Maybelline's body, due to be buried the next day.

Unlike the rest of the town's construction, the Temple tower was made of light limestone that seemed to glow in the sun. Clearly, it predated the rest of Langston and would probably stand long after other buildings had crumbled. Chris pushed open the tower's single door and entered a round room with benches tucked against the walls. Passages lead off in the cardinal directions, but the room was otherwise empty.

"Hello? Solaine?" Chris-Tien's voice echoed down corridors but was not answered. The Temple almost seemed to be empty.

Chris settled down on one of the benches for a bit but was too restless to sit for long. Soon, she was up and wandering around the entry, examining the fine tapestries and mosaics. The tapestries depicted the Sun Clerics in a battle against the undead and other dark forces. They seemed to be organized as a history, and the last one clearly showed the current Temple amidst the town of Langston. Most of the scene was bright, woven in a variety of colors, but a dark band of earth off to one side was inhabited by red, menacing eyes. It vaguely reminded Chris-Tien of something, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

She turned to the mosaics on the floor of the receiving room, which she quickly realized were so well constructed by craft or magic that there were no visible divisions between tiles. However, as she walked over the pattern, her foot snagged on something on the floor. The holy symbol - a small sunburst - was not quite level with the rest of the floor. Bending down, the paladin took a closer look. Hairline cracks radiated from the sun in an even pattern. Possibly the floor would open with the right key, such as the amulet that Solaine was wearing at the funeral. Curious, Chris pushed against the piece of stone, feeling magic building up around her until, with a click, the loose section shifted so that the floor was flat again. No cracks or seams were visible anymore.

With a sigh, Chris stood up and looked around to find Solaine striding through the front doors. Her face was ashen, and the hem of her white robe was stained black with what looked like soil. Spying Chris, the cleric's expression morphed from an initial surprise to fear and anger before she was able to compose herself. "Who are you? And what can I do for you?"

The paladin produced the note from the Mayor and held it out. "We met at the funeral, if you'll remember. And the Mayor asked me to meet with you about Maybelline's death."

"Oh, of course. What do you need to know?"

#

"What do you know of Maybelline's fiancé?" Chris began. She didn't want to bring up sad memories for the cleric, but she had to see if Tomlin's story about their previous relationship held up. Right now, either the herbalist or his scorned lover seemed to be the best suspects. Unless, of course, the druid or the mayor were lying.

#

"Ah, yes, Tomlin" Solaine's polite smile turned sad. "We were lovers at one point, although that's hardly a unique honor, I'm afraid." The young woman's laugh was bright but brittle as she glanced at the paladin to gauge her reaction. If she had expected Chris to be surprised, she recovered quickly. "He said he would wait for me while I was on pilgrimage. He said I was his only love." She shook her head at her own naivety. "Well, while I was gone, he found his second 'only love', I guess. I came back after a hard journey to find him betrothed to another, but I put that aside. My duty is to all of Langston, and I will do it," she finished with a despairing survey of the empty Temple.

#

"You realize that this could make you a suspect? So why are you telling me this?" Chris asked gently.

#

“Because you will hear of it from anyone in Langston,” Solaine replied bitterly. “Everyone knows the gossip. So, what else can I help you with?”

#

Chris had many questions that she wanted to ask, but viewing the victim seemed to be the most pressing business at hand. Strangely, the cleric adamantly refused. “Definitely not. It is an affront to the family And it is not necessary.”

#

Confused, the paladin studied Solaine, picking up an undercurrent of fear to her refusal. “There’s nothing to be afraid of ...,” she began gently. “... the mayor herself tasked me with this investigation, and Roi suggested that I should see the body for myself”

#

“Afraid? Goodness, no. I was just thinking of the poor family ... and Maybelline was so badly hurt But I suppose I cannot stop you. She’s in the mausoleum of the cemetery. The altar is enchanted to prevent decay before the burial.”

#

Chris managed to get directions to the cemetery out of Solaine with a little more coaxing. After thanking the cleric, the paladin headed for the door, leaving the young woman gazing at the tapestries, shuffling around the foyer and muttering to herself.

#

Chapter Ten

The path to the cemetery was a tapestry of various shades of red, gold, orange, and brown, and a mix of leaves continued to rain down in the gentle breeze. The crunching of the nuts beneath boots added to the symphony of bird song and the chitter of small creatures in the woods on either side of the trail. If not for the unpleasant duty lying at the end of the journey, this would have been a lovely day to explore the Temple grounds.

#

The trees opened up as the path ended in the northern quadrant of the cemetery. The gentle light of the morning sun softened the hard edges of the headstones as Chris-Tien walked the flagstone path that wound between sections of graves and still-green grass. Flowers dotted the grounds in various stages of freshness. Townsfolk apparently came periodically to remember their friends and relatives.

#

Near the center of the graveyard, the mausoleum stood vigil over the grounds. Cut of the same light-colored stone as the Temple itself, it almost seemed to glow in the golden light, although,

Chris mused, that could also be an effect of the stasis spell on the altar. Relatively fresh flowers graced the steps of the central building in profusion. Maybelline had obviously been popular.

#

Off to the left, a plot of disturbed earth caught Chris-Tien's attention. It did not quite look like a burial site awaiting its newest resident. On closer inspection, the paladin confirmed that the black earth had been thrown about rather haphazardly as the grave was dug up. From underneath.

#

Poking through the earth and the remains of the rotting casket, a skeleton appeared to be frozen in the act of climbing out of its grave. Chris approached carefully and knelt near the disturbed ground, but the bones remained immobile, the skull newly cracked and sitting lopsided on a mound of the dark soil. A broken flagstone was buried partway beside it, resting next to skeletal fingers to which bits of dirt and wood clung. Based on the decomposition, this poor soul had been dead for decades, with a brief respite from that usually terminal condition.

#

Murmuring a brief prayer, Chris-Then determined that the magic that had animated these bones had faded, but an undead was lurking nearby In the mausoleum itself. She stood slowly, loosening her sword in its scabbard, a sinking feeling settling in her stomach.

#

#

Returning to the flagstone path, Chris could see into the mausoleum. The large stone structure's central room was open on one side, displaying a white limestone altar. No windows opened into

this room, but it was well illuminated by round orbs set into the ceiling. This was a peaceful place, where those awaiting internment could lie in state, preserved temporarily by a spell , so that grieving friends and relatives could privately pay their last respects, before the deceased finally nestled into their eternal rest.

#

Currently, a young woman's body lay on the white stone. Even from the path, Chris-Then could see deep gouges in the woman's face, neck, and forearms As if she had fought off someone or something. Her blonde hair rippled over her shoulders, and she held a bouquet of pink flowers, preserved by the same stasis spell, in her slender hands. Oddly, a white sheet, which was presumably used to cover the body, was lying on the ground, at the base of the altar.

#

As Chris cautiously approached, the body slowly turned its mangled face toward her. Although she'd been expecting something of the sort, chills ran up the paladin's spine, and she recalled her first morning in Langston. She had sensed good and evil in the town ... and she now faced the fruits of that conflict.

#

With a snarl, Maybelline's corpse sat up and descended from the altar, staggering toward Chris-Tien. Her movements were slow and awkward as she dropped the flowers and began working her way down the path.

#

"Mielikki, grant this poor victim quick release," the paladin prayed as she drew her sword. Divine power answered her prayer, adding power to her arms as she fought. Her sword struck true, and the corpse collapsed as if a puppet's strings had been cut. Kneeling beside the remains

of the once-beautiful young woman, Chris prayed for her soul's peaceful repose and took a few moments to examine the original wounds.

#

It was obvious why everyone had described Maybelline's death as being caused by a wild animal. The cuts were deep and broad and confined only to her upper body, as if fending off a beast standing on two legs. There seemed to be no pattern to the attack, with gashes crisscrossing each other in some sort of frenzy. If this had been done by an intelligent being, Chris would have said that it was acting in a rage. But why would something like a bear have attacked this young woman and left the body in the town?

#

Looking around for inspiration, Chris noticed the bouquet of flowers that the zombie had dropped on its way down the path. On closer inspection, the flowers were a mix of white daisies and some sort of pink flower, the only ones of that type that Chris could see amongst all of the flowers left near the mausoleum itself. The note tied to them read simply, "Rest well, Maybelline", and it was signed by Tomlin.

#

With a sigh, Chris stood. No doubt the cleric, Solaine, would have something to say about disturbing the poor girl's body, but the undead was certainly a matter for the Sun Cleric to help decipher.

Chapter Eleven

The sunlight, leaf-strewn path back to the Temple was muted as Chris-Tien made her way back to the Radiant Temple to report on the events at the mausoleum and seek the counsel of the Sun Cleric. Surprisingly, Solaine was where the paladin had left her, in the Temple foyer, looking at the tapestries as if she hadn't seen them every day for years.

#

As Chris approached, Solaine jumped and stifled a shriek. "You're back? I mean, 'you're back so soon'?" the young woman stuttered. "What did you learn?"

#

The paladin filled her in on the events at the cemetery, describing both the perplexing state of the skeleton climbing out of its grave and the unfortunate need to put down the zombie who had late been a member of the cleric's congregation.

#

"That shouldn't be possible," Solaine murmured repeatedly, staring vacantly and clutching the sunburst amulet. She turned back to the tapestries and started up at one depicting holy warriors

destroying an army of skeletons with some sort of holy light.

#

Chris was perplexed by her reaction. She'd expected anger and recriminations for having ignored Solaine's attempt to prevent the visit to the mausoleum Or a desire to see the scene for herself. Instead, the cleric was strangely, silently disengaged.

#

The quiet stretched awkwardly until the paladin strode over to stand in front of the young cleric. "Solaine, I need you to focus on helping solve this murder. Snap out of it!"

#

The cleric looked Chris in the eyes with horror plain on her face, "The dead shouldn't be rising. They can't ... not while there is a member of the Radiant Order occupying the temple."

#

Shaking her head, and tempted to shake Solaine by the shoulders, Chris replied in exasperation. "Well, they are. We need to tell the Mayor so that she can decide how to protect Langston."

#

"Of course Yes, she must be told," Solaine had resumed staring off into the middle distance, hopefully in thought rather than in shock. "If you would please, let the Mayor know. That would be very helpful."

#

Chris stepped back in surprise, opening her mouth to ask if the cleric was entirely well. From the moment they had met, she seemed a bit drifty. But this behavior was worrisome.

#

Solaine ignored the reaction and continued, "Now, if you don't mind, I need to return to the

library while you speak to the Mayor. Thank you so very much.” She turned sharply and hurried down one of the empty hallways.

#

Blinking in bemusement, Chris-Tien watched for a moment before hurrying off to inform the Mayor of the disturbance in the cemetery.

#

As she walked back to the town hall, Chris-Tien reviewed what she had learned in recent days. She was beginning to put pieces together, but she had little evidence and certainly no proof against her leading suspect. She needed the Mayor’s help and support to dig deeper And they needed to figure out why the dead were suddenly rising. Solaine had said something about it being impossible And Chris remembered something from religious history lessons in her long-ago youth. She just couldn’t put her finger on what those tapestries reminded her of.

#

At the town hall, the Mayor’s aid ushered her into Tanya Anathram’s office. The Mayor was writing a document with a wooden pen clutched in her massive hand and didn’t even look up as she asked, in lieu of a greeting, “Did you learn anything new?”

#

Chris nodded and summarized as succinctly as she could, “I met Solaine at the Temple, and she directed me to the cemetery with some reluctance. There, I found two undead corpses.” The

paladin noted that the Mayor and her aid were both now listening with full attention. “One from long ago, and one very recent Maybelline’s in fact. The magic that raised the skeleton had dissipated, but the new zombie attacked me, and I had to take action to stop it.”

#

“That’s not possible!!” blurted the aid. “The temple and its cleric are meant to protect us. Is the magic fading? What of Solaine? What is she doing to stop it?”

#

“It is possible because it happened,” Chris glowered at the man, “but I take your meaning. Solaine is acting Strangely. She was late to our meeting at the temple and seemed to have forgotten that you, Mayor, had arranged for me to meet her there. In fact, when I first arrived, she had sent me a request to come visiting, but she has been very forgetful since the night I arrived and first met her.” Chris paused, realizing the potential significance of the cleric’s forgetfulness. “When she did arrive, she had dirt on the bottom of her robe and on her boots Black soil like that in the cemetery, around the disturbed grave. And what’s more, the skeleton had a second, recent crack in its head, apparently from one of the flagstones. I think Solaine knew full well what I would find in the graveyard because she had just come from there.”

#

The mayor regarded Chris for a moment, coming to a decision. “Clearly, we have another potential problem, and we need to finish the investigation quickly, before people begin to panic.” She looked at the aid, “Call up the militia and have them patrol the cemetery, especially at night. And ... draw up a proclamation announcing the accusation of Maybelline’s murder tomorrow.”

#

“I only have suspicions and little real evidence ...” Chris began.

#

“Either the proclamation will flush out the murderer or cause them to run. If neither happens, you can tell me the rest of what you know and suspect, and we’ll decide where to go from there.”

Anathema looked at the paladin closely. “In the meantime, I could use your help patrolling the streets and the graveyard tonight, if you are not too fatigued.”

#

Chris nodded her acceptance of the directive, and with a slight bow of her head, she turned to find the head of the militia.

#

Chapter Twelve

As Chris-Tien descended the stairs from the town hall, she could hear shouted orders coming from the General Store. Men and women in homespun clothes, bearing improvised weapons and farm implements, were gathering around a stout man who stood on a platform of empty crates.

#

“Alfie, Jessica, and Oliver, you take the northwest from High Street and Water to the wall,” he gestured at a trio standing near him who nodded in response and started walking together in the indicated direction. “Jack, Ruby, and Jimmy, take the southwest.” Another group moved off. “Now, I’ll need a patrol to start at the temple and cover to the cemetery” The gathered crowd seemed to edge away from the makeshift podium, as the man organizing the militia sought out members for the next group. His eyes landed on Chris as she walked up to introduce herself. Jumping down, he quickly shook the paladin’s hand in obvious gratitude. “I’m Alard Dunn. I run the general store and the local militia, whenever we need it Not too often, I’m glad to say.”

#

“Chris-Tien Jinn. I just briefed the mayor Could you use a hand?”

#

“Aye,” Alard replied with a wry grin. “And a sword if you’ve a mind to bring it with you. It would do everyone some good to have a paladin patrolling with us ... particularly the cemetery.”

#

“I can do that. I need a couple of strong hands and stout hearts to help me and Solaine restore order to the place before anyone else goes as far as the graveyard.”

#

The head of the militia nodded and briskly picked out a few people who had not drifted too far away yet. “Charlie! Harry!! This here is Paladin Jinn. Get your gear and go with her to the graveyard. You’ll patrol with her tonight until the moon sets. If you need anything, see Grace in the store before you head off.”

#

“Gentlemen, you can just call me Chris. Let’s get some shovels, and we can make short work of this”

#

After reburying the skeleton and restoring Maybelline’s corpse to peaceful repose on the white altar, Chris’ patrol returned to the Radiant Temple, hoping to find Solaine and ask her to bless the reburied skeleton. Maybelline’s twice-attacked body would be prayed over and blessed tomorrow at the internment, but all three of the cleanup party wanted to ensure that the skeleton would not rise again.

#

Chris was equal parts relieved and annoyed to find Solaine had left the front hallway and its

tapestries. “Let’s see if we can find her. I’ll take the library.” As she headed north, Charlie and Harry each picked a hallway and headed off in search for the cleric.

The library was unexpectedly large, containing several reading tables in the middle of a room packed on three sides with shelves of books and scrolls. Only one table seemed to be in use at the moment. There was a small stack of books and scrolls relating to religious texts and rituals, which Chris assumed had been Solaine’s research in preparation for Maybelline’s funeral, but there were some texts on history as well and a text on the treatment of common curses.

#

Only one thing seemed to be out of place ... a single book, bound in some sort of black-dyed skin sat off to one side. The book’s cover had an odd feel to it, similar to most leather, but rougher and slightly oily to the touch, but ones hand came away dry after touching it, although the smell of sulphur lingered. The book was normally clasped with a tarnished metal lock but it had been left unsecured. The book made Chris’ skin crawl, but it was unfortunately written in a language she didn’t know. Out of context, the images of a black sun, corpses, and ghouls feasting on the dead were ominous. Even more worrisome was a note that Chris found tucked in a section that read “this one” marking an entry that seemed to be about animated corpses. Was Solaine looking for explanations for the failing magic?

#

“Paladin,” Harry’s call interrupted Chris’ puzzlement, “We’ve looked through the rooms No one is here.”

#

Reluctantly, Chris took another quick look around the library with its secrets before turning to the two men. “Ok. Maybe we’ll find her in town. Let’s return these shovels and see what we can find for proper weapons for you two.”

#

The evening and night spent patrolling the graveyard passed without incident until near midnight when the alarm sounded in the town square. Patrols had come across two new victims with wounds similar to Maybelline’s. Deep gashes raked their upper bodies in seemingly random, chaotic strokes. Just as before, the cuts were jagged and criss-crossed, but this time, Chris was able to pick off bits of rough hair or fur. Grey-tipped brown, they reminded her of wolf fur, but no pack of wolves would have attacked these people in such a pattern. It was perplexing, and the lack of sleep was not helping solve the puzzle.

#

#

After reporting to Alard, Chris took herself off to her room at the inn, falling into her bed as soon as she had removed her armor.

Chapter Thirteen

It seemed that, as soon as Chris' head hit the pillow, the sun rose in annoyingly brilliant splendor on a day that did not promise breakfast. Nothing was left outside her door this time, which probably meant that the innkeeper had also been out on patrol last night. Alard had seemed to be organizing every land and business owner into patrols to rotate through the town and neighboring farms throughout the day and night. With the two new corpses, everyone was becoming increasingly worried. For their own sake, Titch and Horace had better be far away from Langston by now.

#

Chris descended into the common room to find the Mayor sitting beside a clean bowl and a pot of tea under a tea cozy. She nodded to the pot of oatmeal beside the banked fire. "You'd better get a good breakfast before we get started."

#

"You heard the news, I assume?" Chris-Tien poured tea and added a big spoonful of honey before tucking into the porridge. It was likely to be a long day, especially if she could convince

the woman in front of her to go along with a revised plan of action.

#

“I did.” Mayor Anathram’s frown accentuated her lower tusks. “I admit that I had not anticipated this outcome, however. A sensible person would have run Or possibly hidden. These murders make no sense ... at least, none that I can see.”

#

“You assume that we are dealing with a sensible person.” Chris pointed with her spoon. “Those gashes were made by someone in a rage. With Maybelline’s death, I thought I had a reason for the rage. These last two” Chris shook her head ruefully. “... Maybe she is simply losing control”

#

“If you know who did this, we need to complete the proclamation and make the arrest.”

#

“We need to arrest the correct person. If I am mistaken, we could end up with more bodies tonight.”

#

Anatham considered for a moment, frown deepening. “What do you need?”

#

“I need a guard and a few people whose word you ... and more importantly, the town folk ... trust. I need to search the Radiant Temple.”

#

“You can’t possibly suspect Solaine?!?”

#

Chris sighed. This is why she needed evidence. “There are a few things I haven’t told you, or anyone, yet. The night after I questioned Tomlin, I had a visitor sitting on the roof across the alley from the Pickled Hen. I couldn’t see clearly, it it looked like a cross between a person and a wolf.”

#

“A werewolf?”

#

“Yes. And it told me quite plainly ‘He is mine’ before taking off across the roof tops.”

#

“Could be Roi.” Mayor Anathema was playing the perfect devil’s advocate, for which Chris was grateful.

#

“No. A Druid in Wild Shape cannot talk. And why would he be possessive of someone? I’m assuming that my visitor was referring to Tomlin, of course, but he’s the only one I had visited at that point.” Chris sipped some more tea, gathering her thoughts. “Roi gave me another clue, inadvertently. When I visited him, he was suffering from an illness called Polypox. Only shapeshifters can get it, and it is rare because it is transmitted by blood. We deduced that he got it from a stirge that had previously bitten an infected shifter ... possibly a werewolf.”

#

“What does this have to do with Solaine?”

#

“Symptoms of polypox include forgetfulness, as well as the loss of control over shifting from

one form to another. Have you noticed how scattered and forgetful Solaine has become?”

#

The Mayor considered for a moment before nodding reluctantly. “I even had to send for her when she almost missed Maybelline’s funeral. But, this is all a set of weak links to Solaine.”

#

“I know, but think about it as the only way that the pieces fit together. We probably have a werewolf in the vicinity. Something fitting that description showed up to warn me that Tomlin belonged to it. Solaine is one of the few people who had a reason to kill Maybelline.” Chris sat back and fitted one last piece into her argument. “And the dead of Langston are rising, despite the presence of Solaine in the Radiant Temple. Which suggests that she has set aside or broken her vows ... or maybe the curse is weakening the protective magic.”

#

“You said ‘one of the few’. Who else could have committed the murder?”

#

Chris-Tien smiled and nodded at Anathem. “Well, you have motive, but the manner of the attack does not fit.” The mayor looked quizzically at the paladin; so she elaborated. “You are a warrior and veteran of battles. And I have seen the war axe over your fireplace. A single blow from a half-orc would have been fatal.”

#

The mayor nodded in agreement, “But what about Tomlin?”

#

“Oh, you noticed how quickly he moved on to a new girlfriend, did you? I suspect that he felt rushed into the marriage for some reason, but I’ve seen the man fight. He’d be more likely to

poison her than attack directly, I think.” Chris shrugged. “If we find no hard evidence against Solaine, we could consider him a suspect..”

#

#

The Mayor stood, smiling now that there was a course of action. At least, Chris assumed the grimace was a smile. “Ok, you’ve convinced me that you have good reason to suspect Solaine, and I agree that you need stronger evidence if we are going to arrest her. Alard will meet you at the temple with a patrol, and my aide will help you search. I’ll summon her to my office to discuss the problem with the undead ... but it won’t give you much time.”

Chapter Fourteen

Chris-Tien approached the Radiant Temple warily and was relieved to see the Mayor's aide, Cameron, waiting in front of the entrance with Alard Dunn and a few other members of the militia. At some point, they had found mismatched pieces of leather armor that looked suspiciously like repurposed, protective coverings of a blacksmith. They had a couple of swords among them as well, in addition to clubs and a pitchfork or two. It was enough to go up against a human opponent, and Chris sincerely hoped that is all they would have to face if the search was interrupted by an angry cleric.

#

"Cameron? You are with me. We'll start in the library. The rest of you, give warning if we are going to be disturbed, but if there is a werewolf ... get out of here immediately. Understood?"

#

General murmurs of begrudged assent followed these instructions, which was good enough to send Chris and the Mayor's aide into the Temple with Chris leading their turn northward into the Library.

#

The first thing Chris wanted to examine was the strange book in black leather bindings. “Can you read this?” she asked Cameron, hoping that his training had included whatever language was written in these harsh, jagged symbols.

#

Ruefully, he shook his head. “I’ve never seen anything like this.” He turned a few pages, blood draining from his face as he examined some of the sketches. “It’s disturbing, but maybe she was trying to find a solution to the rising corpses?” He glanced at Chris-Tien uncertainly.

#

“Possibly. I certainly hope so. This is the other book she seemed to have been reading ...”

Chris-Tien turned to the *Compendium of Curses: 17th Edition*. It seemed to be an extraordinarily complete overview of every curse known to every people of Faerun. Carefully, making sure that Cameron was observing, she looked for a book mark or other notation that would give them an idea of what curses Solaine had been researching. Sticking out, slightly larger than the pages of the book was a note written in elegant, looping script. It was clearly a draft, with several words scratched out or smeared and sections rewritten. It appeared that the letter-writer was crying while composing this missive.

#

Chris and Cameron stood shoulder to shoulder, reading

Dearest Tomlin,

I write to you as a truly changed woman. I returned from my pilgrimage needing you more now than ever. I need your strength and your love and your faith in me. The journey to my Order's Mother House was harrowing, to say the least. And unexpected events have increased my need

for all of the goodness in you.

#

Yes, I returned home to find not a lover but someone whose wedding I must officiate. While I can find it in my heart to forgive you, I fear that the darkness spreading in me will not allow me to forgive her.

#

For I must tell you

#

And that is where the letter ended. Carefully, Chris examined the pages of the book where the note was placed. It in was the section on lycanthropy.

#

Cameron met Chris' eyes and nodded, carefully taking the book with the note stuck between the pages as evidence. "She had motive, but this isn't proof that she killed Maybelline."

#

"No, I agree. Let's check the refectory."

#

The dining hall made Chris' heart ache after reading Solaine's letter to Tomlin. The large room held five large wooden tables, their surfaces worn smooth by many years' of use. Approximately 40 people could easily fit in this room for communal dinners. Now, it served as the home of only one, lonely cleric.

#

Chris and Cameron made their way through the hall and passed through the open door into the building's windowless kitchen. Glowing orbs set into the ceiling here too gave the space a

warm, yellow light ... enough to work in without being dazzled. It was spare and functional with a water pump, basin for dishes, and a single set of dishes and cutlery stacked in the wash basin. On the outer wall, a dark iron stove and an unlit hearth held pots, a kettle, and a cauldron. The stove did not seem to be used much, based on the rusted patches covering its surface, but there is ash and soot around the door, suggesting that someone had lit it fairly recently.

#

Chris looked at Cameron significantly, and he gave a shrug before he opened the stove, giving a subdued cry of surprise. Carefully, he pulled out a few pieces of charred clothing. The weave was fine and had probably been white before having been fed to the fire. Clearly, the garments had been old and worn, and they seemed to have some spots of blood along the edges of what possibly had been a sleeve. Mutely, the aide tucked the crumbling pieces of cloth into a bag. “There could be a good reason to dispose of old clothing” he began, half-heartedly.

#

“True,” the paladin replied. “But I think the Town Council is going to have to consider that question.” She turned to the cold room out of curiosity, finding limp and pathetic vegetables, molding bread and cheese, and several fresh cuts of meat carefully wrapped in loose cloth. It was a lot of fresh meat for one person. There were several dressed chickens, a leg of lamb, and quite a few cuts of beef. Nothing was obviously related to the murder, however.

#

“Although I hate to disturb her privacy further, I think we need to check her living quarters. Agreed?”

#

The hallway of the Order’s living quarters was as empty as the rest of the building. Monastic

cells, doors standing empty, lined both sides of the passage. A skylight in the ceiling allowed the morning sun to illuminate walls and flooring of the same light-colored stone the comprised the temple's exterior. It was smoother than the outside of the building but not polished, and dust and cobwebs clung to every small rough spot and filled every corner. The floor itself was grimy, and Cameron and Chris-Tien stirred up small dust devils with each footstep.

#

Some of the rooms contained aging furniture and furnishings slowly crumbling into more dust. Other cells were completely bare, dust motes sparkling in the sunlight as their only ornament. The stillness and loneliness were oppressive, causing the two investigators to hurry toward the only closed door at the end of the hallway.

#

Chris stopped and stood quietly in front of the closed wooden door, examining the stone and bronze hinges quietly. Cameron cleared his throat, "What are you waiting for? No one is here."

#

"I know, but I don't want to overlook anything this time." Finally, she pushed on the door and entered a sparsely furnished room. As fitting a cleric, the room held a single bed, a chair, a pale wardrobe, and a small table containing an envelope. Chris nodded at the envelope, which looked like it had been handled and opened many times.

#

Taking the hint, Cameron picked it up gingerly and unfolded the piece of paper inside. He read a few lines before grimacing and handing it to Chris to read. It was a love letter to Solaine from Tomlin. Written in limerick, it was dreadful, but it was, no doubt, of great importance to the young, lonely cleric who had been ... and possibly still was ... in love with him.

#

The last thing to examine was the wardrobe, which held the expected clerical vestments. One had been extensively repaired recently, and it reminded Chris of the partially burned garment they had pulled from the stove, but it was clean for all of the recent wear it must have seen.

#

As Chris closed the closet door, she noticed that the cabinet was not standing flush against the wall, and something seemed to have fallen or been shoved behind it. With Cameron's help, she moved the heavy wardrobe far enough to retrieve a single ribbon.

#

Together, the two searchers looked at the ribbon carefully. It was a lovely lavender strip of silk with some sort of stitching or embroidery decorating it. The sort of ribbon that a young woman would wear in her hair for a special occasion. It was also visibly blood-stained and tied into a tangle of knots with strands of golden blonde hair intertwined.

#

Cameron carefully tucked the latest find into a bag with visible frown. "I think we have found all that we can, don't you?" Nodding, Chris lead the way out and down the passage. It was time to report to the mayor, finish the proclamation, and make an arrest.

Chapter Fifteen

The Mayor, her aide, and Chris slowly descended the stairs from the town hall to greet a substantial crowd. With the two recent deaths, grief for Maybelline's loss was beginning to degenerate into panic, and the murmuring from the assembled townsfolk had a decidedly worried edge to it. As the three moved to the platform set up beside the notices board, Chris nodded to a few people with whom she had spoken during the week and tried not to show any particular interest in any of them.

#

She recognized the heckler from the funeral, quietly standing with friends with subdued interest. Nearby, Tomlin stood close to a young woman who Chris had not seen before, and the paladin had to suppress an eye-roll. On the other side of the crowd, Roi's nose and cheeks were ruddy with his recent illness. Standing off by herself Solaine, in her fine white robes, seemed to be holding herself apart from the crowd. She looked exhausted as well as lonely. Scattered throughout the crowd, trying to look inconspicuous, members of the militia stood ready with long clubs, short swords, and improvised armor.

#

Clearing his throat, Cameron took the proclamation from the Mayor, unrolled it, and began to read

#

Citizens of Langston,

#

We have lost valued members of our community. Friends and family mourn Maybelline, Jack, and Olivia, all taken before their time. While we cannot bring them back, we can lay them to rest knowing that justice will be served.

#

As the Mayor's appointed investigator, Chris-Tien Jinn, Paladin of the Oath of the Ancients, has gathered and examined evidence, duly brought it before the Mayor, and we now accuse Solaine, cleric of the Radiant Order of these murders. She will be taken into custody to stand trial before the Town Council to be convened tomorrow morning.

#

A shocked murmur ran through the crowd, and a few people cried out in disbelief. One man, near the front of the gathering shouted, "A cleric a murderer?!? I don't believe it. What evidence can you have?"

#

The Mayor looked at her aide and nodded. Carefully, Cameron brought out the hair ribbon that they had discovered in the search of the temple and held it so the crowd could see the beauty of its purple silk and embroidery. Alard Dunn and his patrol edged closer to Solaine as inconspicuously as they could in the commotion.

#

“Maybelline’s ribbon,” Tomlin shouted as he started toward the platform. “Where did you find it?”

#

“This was found in the accused’s room at the temple.”

#

“I gave that to her for her birthday,” Tomlin explained as he looked around at the crowd. “She was wearing it the night The night ... “ his eyes finally found Solaine. “On the night you killed her!” In fury, with fists raised, he started to wade through the crowd toward the accused cleric, finally being held back by a pair of strong men. Chest heaving in anger, he shook off the two to stand glaring at his former lover.

#

In the mean time, the crowd had backed further away from Solaine, leaving her isolated and glaring at Tomlin. Her mouth was set in a thin line, and her face was pale. She seemed to be shaking in fear, fury, or exhaustion.

#

Mayor Anathram waved to the militia and spoke over the renewed buzz of the crowd. “Take her into custody.”

Chapter Sixteen

Solaine looked at the militia members approaching her, then back to Tomlin, and finally at the Mayor and Chris-Tien. “So, that’s it, is it?” The smile that spread across her face held nothing of the quiet and meek healer that everyone knew and counted upon. In fact, there was more than a hint of madness as the smile turned into a wolfish grin. “Don’t you all want to know how I did it?”

#

Wisely, Alard and his men backed out of arm’s reach, glancing up at the Mayor in uncertainty just as Solaine bent over and cried out in excruciating pain. Impossibly, the slight cleric’s body began to crack, pop, and rearrange itself. Muscles bulged and bones elongated, splitting the cleric’s white robes at the seams to reveal brownish fur covering her body. When she finally stood, her face had contorted into a bestial muzzle leaving nothing of the kind young woman who had occupied the space moments before.

#

The crowd stood, rapt in horror until Solaine’s pained laughter shifted into a bestial growl.

“Werewolf!” Roi gasped.

#

Members of the crowd started shrieking, rousing several members of the militia into action. As they rushed toward the werewolf to restrain her, Solaine raked them with her now powerful arms and long claws. Their improvised leather armor proved little protection, and they fell to the ground bleeding heavily, weapons clattering on the cobbles,

#

“You!” Solaine pointed to Tomlin. “You promised that I was your one true love. You will always be mine!” She ran toward her former lover, teeth bared and saliva dripping.

#

#

Horror’s grip on the crowd suddenly broke, and people began shouting and scrambling to get away from the beast and the blood. They buffeted Chris and impeded her progress in their panic. The militia were doing little better in their attempt to gather around Alard and form a plan to restrain the werewolf.

#

“Oh, gods, no!” Tomlin screamed as Solaine reached him. In her bestial form, his weight was no more than a child’s toy to her, and she snatched him up easily. With the herbalist tossed over one shoulder, she barreled through the crowd, knocking people over in her haste to escape.

#

She reached the walls of one of the taller buildings and climbed, one-handed, up to the roof, leaving gashes in the white-washed walls and exposed timbers. When she reached the building’s

apex, she let out a long, keening howl before she started sprinting across the town, from roof top to roof top. She was clearly heading eastward, toward the Radiant Temple.

#

Chris and Mayor Anathram exchanged glances. This had been a possible outcome, although they had hoped that Solaine would not be able to change form at will. They knew little for certain about lycanthropy, but they used what they knew to sketch out a plan. Chris took a moment to reassure herself that she had what she needed in her pouch, hoped their theory was correct, and started toward the east.

#

“Careful, lass,” Roi called out as Chris-Tien passed him. “Break the curse if you can. We’ll tend the wounded.” Then, dropping to his knees beside one of the militia members, he started chanting, his hands glowing green as he began to work.

Chapter Seventeen

Chris-Tien jogged through the town in the general direction of the Temple, although the twisting and unfamiliar streets made progress frustratingly slow. She was taking turns by feel and a sense of direction that was better suited to woods and wilderness than this muddle of timbers, white-washed walls, and cobblestone. In preparation for the arrest, she had not considered the map of the town to be important, an error of judgement that was costing valuable time now.

#

Just as she happened upon a familiar intersection in front of the Mayor's house, a man's scream split the silence. High and despairing, it terminated suddenly, but it gave Chris-Tien a renewed sense of the direction of the Radiant Temple and a renewed urgency. Hurrying to the south east, she quickly spotted the tower and in a few moments entered the courtyard.

#

If there had been any doubt as to Tomlin's fate, it evaporated as the paladin rounded the public altar. The herbalist was lying in a pool of blood, slowly spreading along the seams of the fitted limestone. Carefully, Chris-Tien approached the body, keeping a wary eye out for Solaine, who,

based on the bloody paw prints had fled toward the Temple proper.

#

It seemed appropriate to offer a quick prayer for the repose of Tomlin's soul. He had broken at least one woman's heart, but this was not a fate that he had deserved. Dismissing the thought as wildly inappropriate, Chris wondered what would happen to his garden now and turned to examine the area. She knew too little about werewolves and had been surprised that Solaine could change at will during the day, and not at a full moon.

#

While the wounds were deep gashes, similar to previous victims, these were more purposeful, meant to kill, rather than the wild, erratic blows found on Maybelline's body. Solaine was learning, possibly from the animals whose carcasses Chris and Cameron had found in the kitchen larder. Chills ran up Chris' spine beneath her armor.

#

The front door of the temple had been smashed open, claw marks visible on the old wood that hung from the battered hinges. The front hall's welcoming, golden glow had faded into a sullen, menacing red-tinged gloom. Even the tapestries seemed to take on a different meaning in the aftereffect of today's events. The dead seemed to be feeding off the sickly light, taking strength from the red light rather than being defeated by it.

#

The floor itself had also changed. The sunburst mosaic had morphed to a spiral staircase that descended into darkness occasionally lit by the same golden orbs placed throughout the temple. While it was possible that this was a distraction set to mislead pursuers, Chris-Tien was betting that Solaine had not run into the oppressively empty corridors where she had lived before the

pilgrimage. The bed that had not been slept in suddenly seemed to make sense, and Chris was betting that Solaine had lived below when she returned to Langston But why did these tunnels even exist for an order devoted to the sun?

#

Cautiously, Chris descended the rough-hewn steps to a set of passageways illuminated with the golden glow of the magical orbs. Eventually, they ended in an intersection of rough-cut corridors. With no indication of which way Solaine had gone, Chris took a passageway at random, trusting in her hunches to help her find her quarry. They had served her well when studying with the rangers and were rarely misleading.

#

The damp walls were decorated with motifs similar to those found above. Sunbursts and rays of light made a sharp contrast to the animal bones in various stages of decomposition underfoot. That these tunnels existed at all was a mystery that would need to be solved on another day. Between the indifferent light, the poor footing, and an enemy who probably could see in darkness, the paladin's progress was achingly slow. If there was a second exit out of these tunnels, Chris-Tien could easily lose her quarry, but it was better than losing her life.

#

Gradually, Chris realized that the tunnels all lead to the same place: a large, central room where Solaine had made her lair. She was sitting in the middle of the room, still in werewolf form. Neither human nor wolf, her fingers ended in long claws, dripping blood. She whined slightly as

she breathed, a canine sound that suggested pain Or possibly remorse.

#

Since there was no where to hide, Chris did not try for stealth, walking toward Solaine with her hands open at her sides, she still hoped to reach the cleric within the monster.

#

“You shouldn’t be here,” Solaine growled. “Go away.”

#

Chapter Eighteen

“I just want to understand what’s happened.” Chris-Tien advanced slowly and calmly, hands empty, until she stood a few feet away from the cursed cleric.

#

Solaine’s ears were pinned back, and her lips curled up from impressive fangs while she considered the paladin for a moment before relaxing a little. She settled back on her haunches before licking her lips. “What do you want to know?”

#

“For a start, how did you become cursed?”

#

“I was on my way to the main temple of the Radiant Order to see my mentor. It was to be a sort of pilgrimage, traveling alone on foot ... in humble contemplation But, one night, I was attacked by a lone wolf. I drove it away with holy magic and healed my wounds. I didn’t think much more about it, and I reached the monastery the next day.” She paused for a moment, lost in memory before rousing and continuing. “I fell ill almost immediately with a fever and was

delirious. There were various illnesses being treated in nearby towns, and no one thought to check for a curse ... they all just assumed I was ill.” Bitterness crossed her face as Solaine continued. “The next full moon, I was outside, gathering herbs when I blacked out. I came to in a farmer’s field, naked except for being covered in blood ... surrounded by mutilated sheep.” “Why didn’t you ask for help?” Chris asked softly. “Someone must have known the spell to remove a curse...”

Solaine was holding up her claws, still wet with Tomlin’s blood. “At first, I was afraid. And then, I thought that I could find the cure when I got home to the library here.” Golden eyes gleamed green in the soft light from the orbs. “But then, I realized that this is not a curse.” She stood now, holding her claws high. “It’s power! Power such as I never had as a cleric.”

“You had great power, Solaine. The ability to heal, to turn back the undead, even to bring someone back from the brink of death ...”

“To fix broken wrists and stop coughs” the werewolf sneered. “I was a servant!! Powerless and unregarded. Left to rot alone in this temple, unable to leave so that Langston would be protected by the power of the Radiant Order.” She began to giggle, an odd whining sound to come from a wolf’s muzzle, and Chris-Tien could see that the lonely years and the prospect of more to come had broken something in the young cleric. “Of course, **that** power is gone now. The last Sun Cleric has left, taking the protection against the undead from these lands. But maybe that is what Langston deserves?”

#

Chris made sympathetic noises, and Solaine calmed down a little, sitting back down on the rough stone floor. As she had in the town square, the cleric seemed totally exhausted. Clawed hands rested on the ground as she slumped forward, shoulders rounded. It was a risk, but the paladin needed to ask more questions about the murders.

“But it sounds like you were trying to find a way to break the curse. I saw the books in the library ...”

“Yes ... I found the treatise on lycanthropy ...” Solaine’s voice drifted as she remembered her research. “But it did not have the spell to remove curses ...”

“You were trying to find a way back to normal. You were trying to do the right thing but didn’t know how. That’s understandable. Why did you kill Maybelline?”

Solaine’s back straightened and she replied with a snarl, teeth bared again. “Because she was a lying little vixen,,” she snapped. “Everyone thought she was an innocent little maiden who sold vegetables in the market place, but I knew what she really was.”

“And what was she?”

“A scheming wench. She took Tomlin from me, but that was just the beginning. She pretended to be a kind, sweet soul but she was manipulative and cruel.” Madness seemed to be taking further control of Solaine as she remembered the past few weeks. “She mocked me for my faith and for being a servant of Langston instead of making use of my position. She told me that she had discovered a secret that would give her even more influence, and that she would make use of Tomlin as long as it suited her and then And then she was dead.”

#

Solaine remained quiet for a while, contemplating her bloodied, clawed hands. And then

Chris-Tien realized that she was actually smiling as she continued in a matter of fact tone, “and that felt good. Better than good.”

Slowly, the werewolf stood and turned to face the paladin. Her eyes were no longer those of a devoted spiritual leader and healer. They were the eyes of a monster who had killed four people and was eying its fifth victim.

#

Chris came alert and shook out her shoulders and arms. She hoped to resolve this with no more deaths, particularly not her own, but there were still unanswered questions. “I understand killing Maybelline. But, if you loved Tomlin, why did you kill him?”

“Tomlin betrayed me,” Solaine snarled, ears pinned back again. “He lied to me and used me before he dropped me for that market wench.”

“I gather that he flirted with and lied to a number of women ...” Chris tried for a soothing, understanding voice, but it was to no avail.

#

Solaine had started to pace, violent anger driving her furred hind legs across the width of the chamber. She was shaking her head as if trying to fling out invasive thoughts. “If only he hadn’t lied. If he had chosen me, this would have been all ok ... all ok ...”

Chris considered asking about the two victims found last night, but the way that the werewolf was pacing, hands clenching and unclenching, the question seemed moot. Humanity seemed to be dripping away from Solaine as she paced. If there was any hope of getting her to come peacefully, it had to be done now. The rest of the investigation could wait.

#

“Solaine,” Chris began, stepping forward slowly. “It can still be ok. Just come with me peacefully, and I won’t harm you.”

The werewolf threw back her head and emitted a rumbling laugh. “You saw those people in the square. Do you really think they will not hang me after what I’ve done? You’re just like I was. A fool!!” She flexed her muscled arms and began advancing toward the paladin. “A fool who is in my way. Solaine of the Radiant Order is dead ... and you are about to join her.”

#

Chapter Nineteen

Chris was watching for the attack, she was quickly placed on the defensive by Solaine's supernatural strength and speed. The monster's claws scrambled ineffectively over the scale mail on her chest, but the strong jaws found the gap in her armor, just above the paladin's right elbow.

#

Surprise and pain added force to Chris-Tien's shouted spell, pushing Solaine back, as blood welled up from slashes in the werewolf's upper arm and chest. She pulled back, eyeing her opponent warily. This was the first time someone had fought back effectively. Apparently, killing the investigator was going to be harder than dealing with livestock and villagers.

#

Shifting her body, as if trying to protect her injured arm, Chris turned to hide what she drew from her pouch. Days ago, Roi had given her a talisman in return for helping him brew medicine. Neither had known just how valuable Silverstar would be. Chris just hoped that she would be able to use it in time. Her sword would be useless, and she had only so many offensive spells

that she could cast ... unless.

#

“You know Roi and the Mayor will be on their way by now. You can still surrender,” Chris suggested.

#

Solaine’s only response was a low growl before she moved in quickly, knocking the paladin back a few steps with the ferocity of her attack. Wincing in pain, Chris-Tien turned into the attack and got her forearm up in time. The werewolf’s teeth harmlessly dented her vambrace, but her claws raked the unprotected hip, and blood seeped from gashes that left the paladin limping.

#

But the gambit had worked.

#

Pushing through the pain, Chris pushed Silverstar against the Solaine’s furred chest, right at the place where the cleric’s Sunburst amulet used to rest. Power surged from the metal into the cursed woman’s chest, locking both opponents, motionless, in place.

#

Chris-Tien could feel the werewolf’s pained breath and rumbled snarl through the connection Silverstar made between her and Solaine. Power continued to pulse in waves as the paladin ignored the clatter of feet on the stairs and stones behind her, pushing the talisman harder against the furred chest.

#

Suddenly, a loud crack echoed around the chamber, and a shower of bright sparkling lights flared

forth from Silverstar. Solaine jerked erect, arms flung out wide as she emitted a heart-rending howl of pain and anguish.

#

Motes of silver light danced around the chamber as the werewolf's transformation reversed itself. Solaine shrunk into her normal form, bones and sinew retracting as the fur melted into her skin and muscles lost their strength and form. The howl turned into a young woman's scream of pain as she fell to her knees, tatters of cloth settling around her pale body.

#

"No," she yelled. "Dear gods, no!" She began sobbing as she looked at her small, thin hands, still stained with Tomlin's blood. And then she looked up at Chris-Tien. Her tear-stained face did not hold relief or gratitude as she spat, "How dare you take that from me?" Looking back down, in a low, quiet, despairing voice, she finished, "Now, I'm just me again." Collapsing to the dirty, bone-strewn floor, she sobbed bitterly into her red-stained hands.

#

Roi and the mayor stood back and watched as the militia members gently coaxed Solaine to her feet and guided her to the stairs. Dark rings under her eyes and a clumsy, staggering step betrayed how exhausted the cleric had become. Pulling the shreds of her vestments around her, she looked like a woman beaten and broken.

#

For a moment, Chris-Tien felt a wave of compassion for her. Then, the cleric looked over her shoulder at the paladin, and an odd smile crossed her face before she was escorted out of view. It was hard to know when the disgraced cleric had given in to the beast and shed her humanity ... or if she could ever recover it.

#

The moment passed along with the adrenalin boost from the prospect of becoming the werewolf's latest victim. Chris sagged against a wall as a wave of dizziness hit her, and Roi was quickly at her side, helping her slide down to a seated position.

#

"Oy, I thought I told you to be careful, lass," the druid chided. He pulled ruined cloth away from Chris' arm wound and blanched. "This is a bite wound ..."

#

Chris nodded, suddenly terribly weary. "She got my hip with her claws too ...". But it was not the wounds themselves that worried them. Understanding locked their eyes together for a moment as both of them shared a single thought. *Lycanthropy*.

#

"Where's Silverstar?" Roi whispered.

#

"Here," Anathram pushed bones and other refuse around with her booted foot before bending over to retrieve the amulet. "Will it work again?" She sounded worried as she realized that they might have traded one beast for another.

#

“Aye,” Roi reached for the silver talisman. “As far as I know,” he shrugged. “Don’t have much need to remove curses, I’m afraid ...” He began removing Chris’s armor and loosening her shirt, “but it can’t hurt to try ...” He looked at the paladin for confirmation.

#

Nodding, Chris pulled aside the Mayor’s amulet and exposed her chest over her heart. “If this doesn’t work ... promise you will end the curse ... whatever it takes.”

#

“Aye,” Roi whispered solemnly as he pressed Silverstar against Chris’ skin.

#

The results were less spectacular, for which Chris was immensely glad. But power surged through the metal, and motes of silver light danced around the paladin for a moment, lifting the creeping fatigue pressing down on her since Solaine had managed to sink her teeth into the arm.

#

Gratefully, Chris looked up at Roi and then at the Mayor. “I won’t really relax until after the full moon, but I think it worked. Now,” she sighed. “If you don’t mind, I think I need to rest.”

#

Roi helped the half-orc carefully pull Chris to her feet. “You need more than a bit of rest. We’ll get you to the inn and bandage those wee scrapes.” He chuckled at Chris’ look of indignation before looking at the Mayor significantly. “And then we can meet at the town hall **tomorrow** morning.”

#

Chapter Twenty

The next morning found Chris-Tien rested and healthy. Her wounds were mostly healed, thanks to Roi's ministrations, a good dinner, and a night's uninterrupted, peaceful sleep. When she opened her door, porridge with honey was waiting on a tray, along with her shirt and trousers, freshly laundered and repaired. The routine of the Pickled Chicken seemed to be returning to normal.

#

The brightened mood continued as the paladin made her way to the town hall. People were out, walking the streets, tending to business, and chatting with their neighbors. The tension of the past few days was fading away, replaced by relaxed industry. The news of Solaine's capture had spread quickly ... whether by rumor or a town crier, Chris did not know. But she was glad to see fear replaced by smiles as she greeted people on the streets.

#

At the town hall, a group of locals were busily employing water and scrub brushes to remove the blood from the cobblestones, and Chris assumed that a similar group was working in the temple

courtyard. So many bodies and so much blood spilled. She patted the pouch on her right hip and considered the tragedy of hubris.

#

“Good morning, lass,” Roi’s exuberant greeting broke her pensive mood. “Good to see you up and about!” He too was heading to see the mayor. After comparing notes while he’d bandaged her wounds yesterday, they had come to the conclusion that there were still questions to be asked and answered.

#

The mayor’s aide bowed them in as soon as they ascended the stairs. “The Mayor is expecting you,” he gestured toward the office door as Buttercup came bounding out to lick Roi’s face and dance around the dwarf in excitement.

#

“Aye, lad, all is well,” he wiped his face and shooed the dog back toward the office, grinning broadly. At Chris’ raised eyebrow, he explained, “I have a way with dogs ... and true wolves, as you’ve seen.” He sobered for a moment. “But not with the shapeshifters ... sadly.”

#

As the two entered Mayor Anathram's office, she gestured to two armchairs and then sat back, steepling her fingers. “I am glad to see you looking well,” she began. “I trust there are no lingering effects from your fight with the werewolf?” She looked between Roi and Chris-Tien

for confirmation.

#

Chris flexed her upper arm and winced slightly. The bite had been deep. While the arm was mostly healed, it would be stiff for a while. “No lasting effects, thankfully.” She looked at Roi, who nodded back, “I think we can be assured that Silverstar removed the curse from me as well as Solaine.”

#

The mayor nodded, “Good. And good work. Solaine had confessed to the murder of both Maybelline and Tomlin, and we saw her attack the two militia members as a werewolf.” She stopped, frowning.

#

“Solaine had us all fooled,” Roi continued sadly. “She was well-liked. Loved even. It was a tragedy that she could not see that herself.”

#

“And now, the people of Langston can rest easy. You have our gratitude, paladin.” Anathram opened her desk drawer and brought out a large coin pouch and, standing, handed it to Chris-Tien. “We owe you this and more.”

#

Chris wanted to demure and return the coins, but travel to the Sword Coast would be expensive and take every penny she could muster. She tucked the money in her pouch and drew out Silverstar, which she held aloft for a moment.

#

“Thank you, Your Honor.” Chris smiled at the half-orc and then caught Roi’s eye. “I am

grateful to have been of service. But there are a few things that concern me, and I may not be leaving just yet ...”

#

The mayor nodded, picking up the chain of issues. “While Solaine is in custody, we are not sure if she is still a threat or not ...”

#

Roi continued the thought “ ... she is oddly calm. Sitting in that cell, awaiting trial for capital offenses, she seems to be waiting for something ... or someone.”

#

“Plus,” Chris began to bring up points that she and Roi had discussed the previous night. “She never has admitted to killing the two people the night before her capture ... and she doesn’t seem to have polypox. So, she isn’t the only shapeshifter in the area. Someone else must have spread it to Roi, which means we could have another werewolf around Langston.”

#

“And don’t forget that, now that there is no cleric of the Radiant Order in the temple, the dead are not remaining so.” Having listed the challenges facing them, Mayor Anathram sounded suddenly tired. “We will be sending for someone from the main monastery, but that may take some time.”

#

“So,” Chris-Tien quipped. “You won’t mind me staying around for a while longer?”

Chapter Twenty-One

The path from the cemetery back to town was a carpet comprised of shades of brown. The crunching of nut shells underfoot sounded shockingly loud in the quiet of early morning, disturbed only by feet rustling through the dead leaves at the end of a quiet night's patrol. There were not many of them these days.

#

Langston had done its best to quarantine the graveyard. Townsfolk walked up and down the rows of headstones, armed with clubs to dispatch any dead who tried to crawl out of their not-so-final resting places. This strategy was effective in the main cemetery. The problem was that Langston had been in this location for centuries, and not all the rising corpses had been buried in the current location. And not all corpses had been human. Chris-Tien herself had encountered several house pets in addition to two human skeletons that had been interred well outside of the official cemetery. It was tiring and depressing work.

#

And for the day, it was over.

#

Chris waved her patrol ahead of her when they arrived at the Pickled Hen, “Get something to eat and then rest. Meet back here at dusk ...”

#

The innkeeper greeted them with a hot breakfast as they settled onto benches in the main, common room. It was filled with militia members and additional volunteers with more drifting in. As the unofficial headquarters of the undead hunters, the inn was a bustling place. After taking a few bites, Chris noticed the Mayor stride in with her patrol, the great axe strapped to her back. The half-orc’s face and bearing hardly betrayed any hint of tiredness brought on by late nights and the continued, normal business of the town. After seeing to her patrol’s breakfast, Anathram joined Chris-Tien’s table and waved to the innkeeper.

#

“Any word from the messenger?” Chris asked after blowing on her porridge.

#

“None.” The mayor accepted a bowl of her own and gave it a moment to cool. “The Radiant Order’s main monastery is several day’s hard ride away. But we should expect a cleric to arrive fairly soon.” She added a big spoonful of honey and started eating, letting a companionable silence settle over the table.

#

Unfortunately, the morning’s calm was disturbed by the slamming of the tavern door. Roi rushed in, splashes of blood visible on hands and arm, ahead of two men carrying a wounded woman between them. “Put her here,” he swept the table nearest the door free of the leavings of breakfast and directed the placement of the limp form where bowls and mugs had rested. “Now,

give us some space,” he commanded as he rested his hands on her abdomen and began chanting.

#

Chris hurried over to join him just as the green glow of the healing chat sputtered and died. He cursed in several languages. “We were caught on the main street by three skeletons!” He shook his head in disbelief and turned to the paladin. “I’m out of healing power. Go to Tomlin’s house ... you know the way, right? ... And see if he had any healing potions made before he died.”

#

Shaking her head, Chris-Tien offered to step in. “The blessings of Mielikki allow me some small grace in this area.”

“We’ll do that if no potions are available. Save your spells for now. I’ve got her stable enough.”

Looking at the Mayor for confirmation, Chris nodded and hurried out the door.

#

Chris was gasping for breath as she reached Tomlin’s cottage. It seemed like so very long ago that she was here, hiding snickers - and too be honest, an unkind opinion of his close relationship with “clients” - and ridding his garden of scraplings.

#

In fact, it had hardly been more than a week, but in the early grey light of dawn, the cottage itself looked like a corpse. The windows were dark, and the flowers and plants in the front gardens and window boxes were limp and dying for lack of care. Tomlin’s bright energy and obvious love of his herbs and teas had given the place life. Now, it seemed as dead as its owner.

#

Chris shivered slightly in chill and set aside her discomfort of the prospect of breaking into the

cottage. Vainly, she tried the front door before eyeing the trellises against the garden walls. The garden gate looked stout, and the vines, while thick enough to support her weight, looked to be armed with thorns. The back door was not going to be an option.

#

No doubt, there was a key hidden ... or someone had a spare ... but the wounded woman needed the last of his craft. And quickly. Since the door looked as stout as the garden gate, Chris elected to break a window. She was sure the Mayor would allow it to be replaced out of city funds.

#

Using the hilt of her sword and shielding her eyes, Chris smashed the glass inward and carefully knocked away the shards that clung in the window frame. It was a bit of an awkward climb in, but soon, she dropped into Tomlin's tidy cottage, glass crunching under her hard soles.

#

In the dim light of the cottage illuminated only with the weak light coming through the windows, it look like little had changed since the last time she was here. The bright herbs and flowers hung drying in the rafters, and their smells mingled with an undercurrent of mustiness beginning to take hold in Tomlin's absence. The fire had gone out as had any braziers under bubbling concoctions. For a moment, Chris felt the poignant double loss of both the cleric and the apothecary, but then she shook herself free of the melancholy and began to search for any unsold healing potions.

#

Tomlin had been good at his job and meticulous in his organization of ingredients and potions. After a quick study of his system, Chris-Tien was able to locate three healing potions as well as a

vial of antitoxin. Carefully tucking them into her pouch with some padding, she took another look around the room, eyes lighting on a garland of woven wildflowers.

#

Presumably, it was intended for the wedding, but its flowers were all fresh as if picked only moments ago. Curious, Chris turned the wreath around in her hands, noticing a slight shimmer in the pale light. It might have some sort of use, although she had no knowledge of such magic. Maybe Roi could make something out of it. Later. After the current crisis.

#

With one last look, Chris opened the door and, leaving it unlocked, ran for the Pickled Hen, hoping to be in time.

#

#

Chris rushed into the main room of the inn to find the scene much calmer although no less tense. The young woman's wounded had been bandaged, but they were already beginning to show the seepage of blood.

#

Off to one side, Roi was quietly talking to Anathram, "There were **three** of them this time. Only skeletons, but one got past my defenses, and the girl got hurt bad. Still no word on when the new cleric will arrive?"

#

"No," the Mayor sighed. "Have you learned anything from Solaine?"

#

“Unfortunately, nothing that we did not already know.” Roi frowned in frustration. “Just that the land around here is cursed and the Temple puts the dead to rest so long as a member of the Radiant Order is tending it.” He shrugged.

#

The mayor turned to Chris, “Did you find anything of use?”

#

“Not much, but we have some more supplies for emergencies.” Chris handed Roi one of the healing potions, feeling the scarcity of their backup resources as an addition to the pit in her stomach.

#

Roi administered the potion to the mostly-unconscious woman, and the three of them sighed with relief as she visibly relaxed with the lessening of pain. “That should do her, at least until I can recover my healing spells. How was **your** patrol?”

#

“A lost less interesting than yours,” Chris quipped. “But I found this at Tomlin’s house.” She handed Roi the garland and watched as he turned it over, examining it.

#

“A wedding garland, I guess. Mostly, these flower symbolize love, but this is odd.” He pointed to a flower. “This is poisonous. And this red one,” he pointed again, “only blooms in the spring. They should have faded long ago.” He turned the wreath over again, noting the shimmer. “I don’t see any harm in it. Let’s bring it back to Maybelline’s folks as a remembrance. And it will do us good to get out of town and stretch our legs.”

#

No sooner than he had hit on the idea, the energetic dwarf was heading toward the door. Chris supposed her only option was to follow him, although she did spare a longing thought for her bed upstairs before jogging to catch up with Roi on his way out of town.

#

Chapter Twenty-Two

The trek out to Maybelline's home was a gentle walk, during which Roi gave Chris-Tien more information about Solaine and her history with Langston. "She was such a sweet lass and seemed devoted to her order and the town. Some people took advantage of that, I guess. But she was an important member of the community." He shook his head, remembering the recent changes to the cleric. "I thought she knew what she meant to the community ... and to Tomlin."

#

"But Tomlin moved on ..."

#

"Aye, but it was a shock to everyone when Tomlin left Solaine for Maybelline. He seemed right devoted to her, even when she was on pilgrimage. Such a whirlwind courtship ... and sudden engagement. Odd. Right odd ... Changed Solaine when she arrived home, I'm afraid."

#

Further conversation died the country road narrowed to a path. Clouds rolled in, starting a steady drizzle that soon left the two travelers wet and cold. Chris had begun to wonder how far away

the farm was from the town when the house finally came into view. Roi walked up to the front door and knocked gently.

#

Maybelline's mother opened the door a crack that widened as she recognized the druid. She gave both Roi and Chris-Tien an open smile that didn't quite reach her tired eyes before inviting them in. "Roi ... and Christine?" she fumbled for the paladin's name.

#

"Chris-Tien," she corrected gently, noticing that the woman seemed to have lost weight since they met at the funeral. "We are sorry to disturb you."

#

"Not at all. You must be freezing with this rain. Come in by the fire. I have a kettle on for tea already."

#

Gratefully, they followed her into the communal area in the center of the house and stood near the crackling fire. Maybelline's father sat nearby, mending a harness. At their approach, he looked up and gave a nod of recognition. His eyes were red-rimmed, and dark circles accentuated his eyes. He too seemed to have lost weight, clothes loose around the frame of a man who worked hard every day.

#

As Maybelline's mother wandered into the kitchen, Roi leaned close to Chris' ear to whisper. "I know they are grieving, but there's something off here. Keep your eyes open."

#

The paladin nodded as Maybelline's mother came in with the tea and four cups. While she

busied herself with the tea, Roi brought out the garland they had found at Tomlin's cottage and showed it to Maybelline's parents. As soon as they saw it, their faces frowned.

#

"Chris-Tien found this at your future son-in-law's house. We thought you might want to keep it, in remembrance."

#

"I remember something like that," Maybelline's mother began, "but weren't there two of them?"

#

Maybelline's father nodded, "Definitely two. I remember her making them. She was humming and singing some funny-sounding songs while she worked. Didn't you find the other one too?"

#

Roi looked significantly over at Chris who shook her head. "No." He replied. This garland is unusual. Would you know where the other one is?"

#

"No," Maybelline's father was ineffectively picking at the harness in his lap. "But you are welcome to look around for it, if you think it would help."

#

Maybelline's mother looked up vacantly. She still had not poured the tea and seemed surprised to see them there. "Yes, please look around. Anything that might help"

#

#

Chris and Roi exchanged concerned looks as they asked directions to Maybelline's room. Her

father simply pointed down a hallway and returned to fiddling with the leather straps again.

#

Trying to disturb the room as little as possible, the pair found the twin garland tucked under Maybelline's pillow. Like the one found in Tomlin's cottage, it had a distinctive shimmer. As Chris-Tien turned it over in her hands, she felt it distinctly pull toward the one that Roi was holding up for comparison. A sense of longing also seemed to be emanating from the braided wildflowers and vines. She looked at Roi, who was glancing between his garland and the one Chris held.

#

"You feel it too?" he asked. "This looks like some sort of enchantment, but nothing I've ever encountered before."

#

The tugging between the two garlands was gentle but insistent.

#

"Come here," Roi instructed. "I want to try something. Just don't fall in love with me."

#

Cautiously, they allowed the two wedding garlands to touch each other. The tugging ceased abruptly, and the shimmer erupted in a flash. When their vision finally cleared, Chris and Roi looked down at two chains of blackened, rotting flowers.

#

"Ugh!" Roi exclaimed. "Not a proper love spell, that's for sure. Why would she weave such a spell into this thing? It smacks of dark magic, but nothing I have heard of." He shuddered and rubbed his fingers as if they were coated with something greasy and vile.

#

“Who might know more about this kind of magic?”

#

“Solaine. She has studied dark forces for years. She always said that it helped to understand the light better in the face of darkness.” Roi sighed, remembering the bright young woman he had known. “There’s something more like this ... somewhere not far. We’d better take a look around.”

#

Maybelline’s parents barely seemed to notice them as Chris and Roi moved from Maybelline’s room to the farm house kitchen. They continued to sit by the fire vacantly, picking at daily tasks with little progress.

#

The kitchen, at first glance, was not unusual. Dried herbs hung from the rafters. Pots sat atop an old, well-used stove. The miscellany of a small farming family spoke of ordinary lives. But the two investigators carefully dug deeper, concerned that Maybelline’s parents seemed affected by something stronger than grief.

#

Eventually, they found an oilcloth pouch tucked into the back of the pantry, containing a collection of herbs and flowers. But the plants seemed strangely distorted. Flowers and leaves were rimmed with unnaturally bright borders of purple and bright green. A couple of flowers were almost black in hue, and one had a bright red stain reminiscent of fresh blood.

#

Chris sucked in a breath. “I know of these, but I’ve never seen them. These only grow on

unhallowed ground. They are used in rituals to communicate with the lower planes. And they are very toxic ... They should **not** be in a kitchen no matter how well wrapped.”

#

“Aye, I recognize them too, but only by reputation.” Roi looked worried. “Demons and devils are outside my area of expertise. I deal with the woods and its natural creatures. This ...” he shook his head. “Solaine is the expert on the lower planes, if she is willing to give us more insight ...”

#

Chris shrugged. It would be worth asking the cleric.

#

Roi very carefully tucked the herbs into his bag. “But this isn’t enough to cause the disturbance I’m feeling. There must be something outside.”

#

Maybelline’s parents took no notice of them as they made their way outside to the kitchen garden behind the farm house. It was filled with vegetables planted in neat rows, but it was also filled with a riot of weeds. Late tomatoes were rotting on the plants, and the squash, and pumpkins sitting on the ground, beginning to go soft. Judging from the straggly plants, the garden had not seen much care in nearly a month.

#

There were a few flowers in bloom, although there were not many, given the lateness of the

season. Still, Chris and Roi looked for flowers similar to those in the garlands. They were wildflowers and sturdy vines that would be unbothered by neglect. But the searchers came up empty handed Except for noting an odd patch of ground located under Maybelline's bedroom window.

#

This patch of soil looked different from the rest of the garden. It was was richly black as the soil in the cemetery. But this patch was too small to be a grave, unless it had been a family pet.

#

Steeling herself, Chris knelt down and started digging carefully, removing one layer of soil at a time. Breaking off his search, Roi joined her, watching in silence as she pulled away the eerily dark soil to reveal a piece of darkly stained parchment.

#

The page was covered with symbols in a jagged, otherworldly script, which reminded Chris of the black-bound book in the temple library. There was a braided lock of hair attached to the paper.

#

"Looks like Abyssal to me," Roi breathed. "I can't read it, can you?"

#

Regretfully, Chris shook her head. She'd never had cause to study with powerful spell casters or speak with infernal beings. She'd learned Orcish, which generally stood her in good stead on the few occasions she'd needed to speak with humanoid monsters.

#

"Then, we will need to see Solaine. She speaks Abyssal and may be able to tell us what this

does.”

#

“If she doesn’t know already,” Chris muttered to herself.

Chapter Twenty-Three

It seemed only polite to bid Maybelline's parents goodbye, but Chris and Roi decided to avoid mentioning what they had found in Maybelline's room and in the garden. At any rate, both of her parents were still barely responsive as the investigators bid them good bye. If they could locate and neutralize the source of the magic that Roi felt, it would hopefully release these two from their fugue.

#

As Chris turned toward to the path to town, Roi called out. "There's no time to lose. Get on."

#

Chris turned toward him in confusion only to observe him shifting into a powerful sorrel pony. He pranced toward her and tossed his chestnut mane, clearly inviting her to ride him. Without tack and saddle, it would be a rough ride, but she had to admit that it would probably faster this way. Jumping on, she took a double handful of mane and held tightly as Roi took off at a gallop.

#

As soon as they reached town and the jail, Roi shifted back, and the pair of them mounted the

stairs to the jail. Inside, it was dark and gloomy, lit only by a few oil lamps and the light streaming in from the open door. With only a single cell, it was obviously used primarily for people who needed a place to sleep off a boisterous night. Currently, its one resident was Solaine.

#

The cleric looked strange without her vestments. She was wearing a plain, grey dress, donated by some kind woman in the village. Even now, Chris assumed that people remembered her kindness and healing and sought to repay her somehow.

#

There was, however, no sign of kindness or healing in her now. She sat, oddly calm, on the edge of her cot. Her hands rested on her knees as she stared at the wall opposite until Roi walked in view. “Roi, thank you for visiting me again,” she spoke with an eerie, chilling calm. “To what do I owe the pleasure?” She seemed like a regal lady, accepting visitors to court.

#

Her manner made Roi nervous, and he wrung his hands as he began his request. “Solaine, darling. I am loathe to ask, but I need your expertise and possibly advice.”

#

The cleric looked between her friend and Chris-Tien as if considering refusal. Finally, she addressed the paladin directly, “You may have beaten me, but I am not broken.” Shifting her gaze to Rot, she added, “I will help. But only because you are asking Roi. What do you need to know?”

#

#

Roi nodded to Chris, who took out the lock of hair and paper that they had found in Maybelline's garden plot. She held it out to Solaine who immediately recoiled,, grasping for the holy symbol that used to hang from her neck. "That's Tomlin's hair! Where did you find it?"

#

"It was buried with the parchment in Maybelline's kitchen garden."

#

"Show me the writing." Solaine commanded.

#

Chris obliged, holding up the parchment so that the cleric could read it.

#

"Pact magic," Solaine hissed. "It is an enchantment written in the language of demons. A price must be paid, and I assume that Maybelline didn't offer up herself. Are her parents alright?" She sounded, for the moment, to be a spiritual leader, concerned for members of her flock.

#

"They were acting oddly, and there was something ... wrong ... with the place." Roi shivered in memory of the inky evil he felt at the farm. "It was as if the land was crying out in pain."

#

"Now that that is removed," Solaine looked at the spell as if it were a poisonous serpent.

"Everything should return to normal, and her parents should recover in a couple of days." She turned away, muttering to herself, "So that's what she meant by 'powerful friends'. I thought she was just talking about some self-important yokels."

#

“What do you mean?” Chris asked.

#

Solaine looked at the parchment and then locked eyes with the paladin. “It means that I killed the man who loved me,” she replied bitterly. “But it means that I got my revenge on the woman who made me do it.”

#

Chris-Tien put away the spell and began reaching for the other items they had brought from the farm, but Roi cut her off quickly. “Thank you, Solaine.”

#

The cleric looked at them with a haughty air and addressed Chris with a sneer. “I can’t tell if you are truly noble or if you are doing this for your own personal gain. But you are doing nothing I would not have done in your place.”

#

Chris began to thank her, but she suddenly smiled with a wolfish edge. “I will get my revenge one day.”

#

“Come on.” Roi took Chris’ arm. “It’s time for us to go.”

#

Outside of the jail, the pair took a moment to collect themselves. Tears rolled down Roi’s cheeks and into his beard as he looked up to the clear blue sky. “She was the best of us once.” He sniffed and wiped his nose on his sleeve. “She was a good person who did what was right. She served this community and took care of its people and never complained” He closed his eyes for a moment. “And now, my friend is gone because a silly girl couldn’t accept someone else’s

happiness.”

#

Chris did not know how to reply to that and so stayed quiet, hoping that her presence was support enough from a stranger.

#

The moment passed, and Roi clapped Chris on the back. “But enough of that for now. We need to rest before tonight’s patrols.”

#

Companionably, the dwarf and human walked back to the Pickled Hen, although Chris wondered why Roi was coming this way rather than heading off to his grove. As soon as they arrived at the tavern, the mystery was solved. Roi shifted into his wolf form, tucking his red tail over his nose as he settled before the fire in the common room. He was snoring before Chris had made it halfway up the stairs.

#

Chapter Twenty-Four

For the second night in a row, the evening patrol was uneventful. Circling back to the tavern after the first watch, Chris relaxed for a moment. Streaming from the open door came good natured bantering and the sound of militia members playing games of chance. Tonight, it sounded like they might be playing Dragon's Hoard. Dice were being rolled while players were shouting out combinations that they recognized. With a watch like this, people needed to blow off some of the stress of waiting for the next horrible wave of walking corpses.

#

It was a clear night, and Chris took a moment to stretch her back and look over the sleeping town and up at the bright full moon. With a prayer of thanks to all the gods, Chris reveled in the fact that she could look up at the peaceful, star-filled sky and not fear that she would be changing into a ravening beast. She was so enjoying the evening that she almost missed, in the dappled shadows cast by un-shuttered windows, a small hint of movement on the other side of the street.

#

For a moment, Chris was going to dismiss the flicker as fatigue or her eyes playing tricks on her.

No one went outside unarmed at night now, but the paladin was sure that she saw a female figure in the shadows. She could not see many details as the light and shadows danced with each other, but she had the impression of a woman clad in a simple dress with light-colored hair tied back in a bun. When Chris blinked, the image was gone except for a lingering impression of a wry smile.

#

If someone was outside alone and unarmed, they would need an escort, and so Chris quickly hurried across the street. But the spot where she'd seen the figure was empty ... and oddly chilly,

#

"Hello. Is anyone there?" Chris called out. But only silence and a gentle breeze answered her. With a grimace, Chris sighed and crossed back to the inn. Even armed, no one should be wandering in the shadows alone. It was time for her to join her patrol for a hot meal and possibly turn in the night.

#

Chris woke to the sound of a commotion on the main floor of the tavern. It didn't sound like another injured patrol, but voices were raised, and she thought she could detect the sound of the mayor's Orcish accent as well as Roi's good natured brogue. Throwing on some clothes, she left her armor and weapons to hurry down the stairs.

#

Standing in the common room, a tired-looking militia member was trying unsuccessfully to explain something that had happened this morning. The half-Orc looked like a thundercloud ready to burst. "There is a problem," the mayor summarized as Chris-Tien arrived. Succinct,

but given the past few weeks, Anathram would have to elaborate.

“Well,” interjected Roi, “the problem is gone, actually. And that’s the real problem.”

At Chris’ confused look, Roi gestured over to the panting militia member who shook his head.

“Please, don’t make me try to describe it. Just come with me.”

The four of them hurried over to the jail with the mayor in the lead. Her long legs forced everyone else to walk briskly ... and the dwarf had to jog just to keep up. Upon arrival, everyone stood for a moment, trying to make sense of what they saw.

#

The cell’s door was hanging open, the shattered lock was covered in what looked like frost. The surrounding air was chilly enough that everyone’s breath hung in the air as they looked dumbfounded at the empty cell. A missing problem, indeed.

#

The walls and floors of the jail’s interior were also frosted, but Mayor Anathram pointed to a pattern on the floor of the prison cell itself: a large crescent moon. “What does that mean?” she asked Chris who shook her head in ignorance.

#

“Hello?” called a voice from outside the jail. “I was told I could find the mayor here ...” A young man followed his voice into the corridor. He was dressed in dusty, white clerical robes.

#

“Ah, lad,” Roi answered him and clapped him on the back, staggering the stooped-shouldered holy man. “Well met!! My name’s Roi ... let me get you settled up at the Temple.” He guided the new cleric out the door, giving Chris and the mayor a moment to talk.

#

“I don’t know what it is or means, Your Honor.” Chris bent down to look more closely at the frosted symbol on the flagstones. “Last night, I thought I saw a woman outside in the village, near the inn. She looked ...” Chris stopped a moment before looking Anathram in the eye and continuing “... like Maybelline’s twin. And when I hurried after her, I was met with this sort of unnatural chill. There are still strange things going on in Langston, and I don’t understand them. But I know where we have an extensive library for research. And our new cleric looks like a studious young man.”

#

“You know, I cannot keep paying your room and board at the Pickled Hen ...” Mayor Anathram’s voice was filled with regret.

#

“No need,” Chris stood up and dusted her palms. “Let me take over Tomlin’s cottage and garden. I have some skill with herbs and potions. Although I don’t think I will be as popular with his ... femaleclients, I can mix up remedies for the sorts of injuries and illnesses that farmers and merchants are likely to need.”

#

The mayor thought a moment, “And Roi and our new cleric can handle more difficult situations.” After a moment, she nodded her agreement. “And you will keep looking into this?” she asked tentatively.

#

“I will. Unnatural and dark things are happening, and it is my oath to combat them.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

The bell over the door tinkled as a young woman pushed open the door to the herbalist's cottage. "Hello? Is ... is anyone here?" she asked anxiously, looking around the neatly organized workroom and dispensary. Herbs and flowers hung in loose bundles from the rafters, drying in preparation for potions and tinctures. On the work benches, a couple of small pots were simmering gently, emitting pleasant wafts of herbal remedies, and one retort was slowly dripping a bright green solution into a glass beaker.

#

Most of the space was occupied by freshly cleaned equipment sitting atop polished tables. Various pages sat out, weighed down with mortars or beakers ... recipes waiting their turn under the attention of the new herbalist. The table between the door and the workroom held various bundles of herbal mixtures, neatly labeled with the name of the recipient, sitting next to a ledger. It all looked as if Tomlin would come 'round the corner from the back washroom any minute. Shelley knew that could no longer happen, and she sniffed back a tear just before a middle-aged woman appeared from the back room.

#

For a moment, Shelley couldn't place the herbalist, although she looked vaguely familiar. Light auburn hair, if one was being generous, was liberally mixed with silver strands, and the thin oval face had an unfortunate tendency to freckle as much as tan. And, from the woman's face and arms, she spent a great deal of time outside. Then, the knowing smile, which reached to the woman's blue-green eyes, placed her in the younger woman's memory. She flushed, recalling the day when the investigator entered the cottage to find her and Tomlin.

"You?" Shelley asked in confusion. "I thought you were ... some sort of warrior. Why are **you** here?"

Chris-Tien chuckled warmly. "Well, who else would need healing potions more?" She wiped her hands on her apron. Out of armor, she looked a good deal smaller as she moved gracefully to the counter where she opened the ledger. "Are you here to pick something up?"

Awkwardly remembering the last encounter, Shelley nodded, "I really do have a sick aunt. Henley Thorntone ... she needs her medicine and we couldn't get it last week ..." She placed several gold pieces on the table between them. "Please don't think badly of Tomlin. He ... all of us girls chased him. He was kind and funny and good looking ... and," she shrugged.

"Eligible," Chris finished for her. Looking around the cottage, she imagined that Tomlin had been one of the few young men in town who owned their own business. He certainly had been the most charming of the bachelors she'd met so far in Langston. She almost grimaced, thinking of the loud-mouthed drunks she had met at the funeral. "Let's forget how we met last time,"

Chris winked before turning to the waiting packages. She flicked through a couple before she found the one she wanted and pulled it out. “Here’s your aunt’s. Make sure she takes no more than the prescribed dose and sees the new cleric, yes?”

At Shelley’s nod, Chris found the entry she wanted in the ledger and made a check mark with a quill dipped in ink. “Ok, I will probably still be here next week when she runs out again. See you then?”

The young woman smiled in gratitude as she turned and exited the cottage, setting the little bell to tinkling again. Chris had added that when she had repaired the window, not sure how Tomlin managed without it to let him know to leave the garden or still room to tend to a customer.

#

With a sigh, the paladin returned to the back workbench to add to her list of questions. She took a sip of her tea before pulling out the rough paper and charcoal with which she was making notes about the investigation. They knew that Solaine, as a werewolf, had killed her rival, Maybelline, as well as Tomlin, her former lover. She had attacked the militia members at the proclamation, in her werewolf form, but she had never confessed to killing the two people the night after the Mayor had announced that they were close to making an arrest. Guiltily, Chris realized that she didn’t even know the names of those victims let alone what their connection to Solaine might be. Maybe they had simply been in the wrong place when her anger got the better of her. Now that the cleric had escaped, they might never know the reason, but Chris wrote it at the top of her list: *Why the additional victims?* Everyone seemed to assume that there had been one monster

responsible for all four deaths, but if they were wrong ... then they may not be safe.

#

Which begged a related question. Was Solaine still around and dangerous? She had promised that she would get her revenge “one day”, but hadn’t she already destroyed her rival? Who else was there to punish in this apparent love triangle? She sipped some more tea, savoring the peppery sweetness of cinnamon. It reminded her of the love knots her mother used to make this time of year. Something warming and fragrant as the winter weather approached. Chris added *Further revenge on whom?* to the list. And then quickly added a particularly vexing question: *Who taught Maybelline Abyssal?*

#

She sat back in her chair and pondered. Solaine had been genuinely surprised at the spell they had found with the lock of Tomlin’s hair. Not only were they supposing that Maybelline knew Abyssal but also that she knew spell casting ... and pretty high level magic at that. Most commoners did not know how to read and write Common well. Who could have taught the young woman? The obvious teacher in Langston was Solaine, and Chris could imagine that she might have taught Maybelline the improper spell that was on the wedding garlands as a form of revenge. But the pact magic was a whole different level.

#

Who wrote the spell? went on the list next. Maybelline might be selfish, but Chris-Tien had a hard time imagining that she would sacrifice her parents in order to marry Tomlin. Also, this spell seemed too high powered, given what they knew about Tomlin’s fiancé, but then, they’d almost overlooked Solaine too. Still, she had to learn both the language and the spells from someone. They had not found a spell book in Maybelline’s room when they had searched it.

#

Chris sat there, tapping the blackened stick she was using to write with as she considered the question of Maybelline. Her body had gone missing the same night that Solaine had escaped ... and Chris had seen someone who looked an awful lot like the young woman. That book in the Temple library had a passage that seemed to be instructions for raising the dead. Chris-Tine needed to go see the new cleric and ask him if he could shed light on the text. *Zombie?* was added next in the list. It would be a sort of poetic revenge if Solaine had raised her rival to help her escape prison for the crime of killing her in the first place.

#

What was Solaine now? Was she a necromancer? Or some sort of evil cleric who worshiped a different god? Since the dead had been escaping their graves, it would seem that Solaine was no longer a cleric of the Radiant Order, but the hidden tunnels under the temple were also a mystery.

#

Finally, Chris added *Langston -> Strixhaven?* at the bottom of the page. She didn't even know where she was in relationship to the Sword Coast. Locals had heard of it, but no one knew where it was other than somewhere to the northwest. She needed a map. Not just of the region but of the whole continent.

#

Looking over the list, she pursed her lips considering the next move. Several of these questions could be answered by talking to the new cleric. She looked at the parcels remaining near the front of the cottage and made a decision. As soon as the regular orders had been completed, she could get a start on the list. She pulled a sheet of fresh paper from the stack in front of her and pulled out a bottle of ink. "Closed", she penned in large, bold letters.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The shadows were long by the time Chris-Tien was able to leave the herbalist's cottage and make her way through the darkening woods. She shivered a bit, rubbing her arms as she hurried toward the Temple. In the rosy light of sunset, it glowed orange, a beacon of light against the approaching darkness.

#

She was relieved to see that someone had, indeed, scrubbed the flagstones of the courtyard. Although, as Chris looked closely, the edges of the stones still seemed lined with rust. Tomlin's death would not be easily erased from memory or pavement. Standing in the cold, Chris' breath hung in the air. She needed a cloak against the cold of the approaching winter. As much as she had resisted going through Tomlin's things, whatever he had put away in his attic would have to do. Idly, Chris wondered if he had a family who would eventually come to claim the material remnants of the young man's life and dreams. A different fate would have given him a family ...

#

With a sigh, Chris took a moment to stand at the Temple's public altar and sent up a prayer for

the herbalist's soul. For good measure, although she hoped to find nothing, she added the prayer for locating the undead. After seeing someone, or something, that had looked like Maybelline the night Solaine had escaped, she had been checking the area periodically. She still kicked herself for missing the opportunity that night to check if the apparition had been a zombie. Obviously, she had been too tired to think at that point; Alros' arrival had been a welcome and necessary reprieve from the near-constant struggle against the rising corpses.

#

#

The altar in front of her glowed in other-worldly light, and Chris sighed in relief. Either Tomlin's murder at its feet had not desecrated it, or the new cleric had already reconsecrated it. Over the small sounds of the birds in the autumn-crisp gardens, a gentle and melodious chime reverberated, like the last hint of sound from a struck bell. The peace of the place relaxed a tension in her chest that had been bothering the paladin for days, and she took a deep breath, only to stop short.

#

Turning around on her heel, Chris completed a circle, sniffing the air. It was not strong enough to get a fix on, but there was a definite smell of evil on the air. There were no undead nearby, but something lingered. Experimentally, she walked slowly around the courtyard, sniffing. She couldn't be sure, but the scent she detected seemed to be coming from the cemetery ... or possibly beyond.

#

"Are you going to walk around our courtyard all night, or do you want to come in?" Alros stood,

framed by the arch to the Temple's foyer, an amused look on his elegant face. Like most half-elves, his features were refined and slightly exotic to her human eyes. Brown hair and eyes, with light chestnut skin, suggested that his elf parentage was wood elf. That he had set aside the forests and wilderness for cloisters and temples of stone was intriguing, and Chris looked forward to getting to know him. The smirk might grate on her, however, although it probably stemmed from being much older than his appearance would suggest.

#

"Just taking in the fresh air," Chris replied solemnly, approaching the Temple's entrance. "We have not met yet. I am Chris-Tien Jinn, paladin of the Oath of Ancients." She held out her hand for him to shake. She debated about telling him what she had sensed and decided to wait until she had a better sense of where the evil might be lurking.

#

"Alros, cleric of the Radiant Order," Alros replied seriously. "How may I help you, paladin?" The amusement had fled his face but continued to dance in his eyes.

#

Chris looked at the deepening sunset and considered. "I, unfortunately, have more questions than daylight. I would like to spend time in your library if I may, once I have caught up on the herbalist's work."

#

"Of course! We always welcome fellow scholars in the Library. Whenever the doors are open," he gestured to the patched wood and iron, "you are invited to make use of our collection. Come in, and I can give you an orientation to what we have, to make your search more efficient." With a sweep of his arm, he indicated that Chris should proceed him through the foyer and down the

corridor. The mosaics of the front entry way were once again in place, hiding the stairway to the tunnels below. Hidden away again, they were not forgotten, and Chris-Tien resolved to ask about them when she knew the new cleric better.

#

Quickly, they reached the library, which remained as Solaine had left it. Several books remained on the library table, although the black-bound volume had been closed. Alros quickly directed their attention to how the volumes were categorized and arranged in the space. They had substantial sections on religion and history as well as most of a wall devoted to the healing arts.

#

“Do you have any maps of the area?” Chris asked. “Or maybe even larger? I need to find my way back to the Sword Coast.”

#

Alros nodded. “Yes, of course.” He pointed to a large, cabinet with wide, thin drawers. “We keep them all here, but I’m afraid that the Sword Coast is nearly month’s journey away.”

#

Chris sighed. The news was not unexpected, and it could have been worse, but it was a blow. “Well, I’ll take a look at those later. I was really hoping I could ask you some questions ... about Solaine.”

#

#

For a moment, Alros stood still, as if weighing two options and not liking either. “I should have expected that you would want to know more about her, given recent events.” He pursed his lips

before continuing, “What do you need to know?”

#

Now that she was here, Chris was not sure where to begin. She had so many loose ends tied up in a vexing knot that she wasn’t sure which thread to pull on first. The woman who was out and about on the night Solaine escaped was weighing on her mind most; so she started there. “Can clerics raise the dead?”

#

“Well, all clerics **can** learn to bring back the dead,” Alros began. “If I may be frank, that is a task you adventurers need us to perform with some frequency. If it were not for the material requirements of the spell, I fear we would do little else with our time. And,” he continued, warming to the opportunity to share his expertise, “I might point out, you paladins can learn the spell just as well can. So can bards. But the person’s soul must be willing to return and able to do so.”

#

“What would prevent a soul from being able to return?”

#

The cleric shrugged. “If it has been bound to an object or location by dark magic. Several items are capable of trapping a soul. And a soul might be destroyed.”

#

“A soul can be destroyed?” Chris gasped.

#

“Possibly. Old tomes speak of monsters capable of eating souls, such as the barghest, but I hope that those scholars were mistaken or mistranslated older scrolls.” He gave the paladin a quelling

look before continuing as if he had not been interrupted. “Alternatively, if the body has been turned into a vampire or zombie, the soul cannot return to it.”

#

Chris-Tien nodded, encouraging the young half-elf to continue.

#

“Of course, bringing back the dead begs the question of what that means. ...” Alros looked thoughtful for a moment.

#

“How so?”

#

“What does it mean to be alive?” The cleric stopped and waited, looking at Chris, plainly expecting an answer.

#

“Um ... Able to move and breathe. Have a heart-beat ...?” Chris began, somewhat at a loss.

#

“Think ... feel ... choose one’s actions?” Alros added helpfully.

#

“Yes ...” responded uncertainly.

#

“And that’s the heart of the question! You see, any cleric would willingly bring someone back to that, if the soul was willing.”

#

“But ... what else is there?” Chris sounded confused.

#

“You see, there are two spells ... one to truly raise the dead and restore them to their life. It is an ordeal for the one raised, and they are very weak at first, but they return as independent beings. The other is ... “ he stopped and swallowed, looking as if he might be sick. “... to animate a corpse or skeleton to create an undead servant.”

#

“Could a cleric do something so ... evil?”

#

“It is not necessarily evil, if the need is great and the cause just. But, yes, it is something few clerics would contemplate.”

#

“So, Solaine could have animated Maybelline as part of her revenge, right?”

#

“It’s possible.” Alros moved over to the library table and pulled over the black-leather-bound volume that Solaine had left. He let it fall open to the section that the young woman had marked weeks ago. “She certainly had the skill, and the components of the spell are easy to find. But,” he read the section, finger almost touching the page as he skimmed, “it must be renewed every day for the caster to keep control over the ... zombie ... and you need to be close to give it commands. Solaine would have been too far away to call it to her from her cell.”

#

Chris sighed. If she had seen Maybelline’s zombie that night, it wasn’t under Solaine’s control. Unless ... and she knew she was grasping at straws here ... “What if it had been commanded to come to her every night? What would the caster need to redo the spell?”

#

Consulting the tome again, Alros' lips compressed into a hard line. "Not much. A drop of blood, a bit of flesh, or bone dust."

#

"Blood she would have, if she could use her own, right?"

#

"Yes ... but consider ... what shape was the body in when you saw it that night? You said that it ran off quickly. Does that sound like a zombie?"

#

Deflated, Chris shook her head. She had seen a blond woman, dressed in a plain grey homespun, but without apparent injuries. "No," she mused. "It was mostly an impression anyway ... but what happened to the body, then?"

#

Alros looked vaguely ill. "It depends upon who we are dealing with." At Chris' raised eyebrows he continued. "I hardly think Solaine broke herself out of jail, do you?"

#

"No," Chris remembered the frozen lock and the pattern left for them in frost. That looked like the work of a wizard or sorcerer, and either would have been able to disguise themselves as the poor Maybelline.

#

"So, we are dealing with at least one other person, who helped Solaine escape, took Maybelline's body, and left behind the symbol of a crescent moon. Does the moon mean anything to you?"

#

Alros started walking toward the main entrance, inviting Chris to follow with a wave of his arm. Robes swishing behind him as he hurried on sandaled feet, he stopped when he reached the Temple's foyer. Standing in the middle of the room, which once again concealed the tunnels below, he turned in a circle until he found a particular tapestry.

#

"There," he pointed up at a scene where a man in grey robes strode ahead of an army of undead. The figure carried a banner on which a silver crescent gleamed against a background of midnight blue. "The Order of the Dying Moon. Necromancers. And our old adversaries. They used to rule this area and cursed the city so that its dead would not rest after burial."

#

Chris looked through the tapestries that showed a series of battles and eventual victory over the necromancers. The sunburst amulet glowed golden on many chests or in the hands of the eventual victors. "Your order defeated them?"

#

Alros shrugged, "To some extent, although it was almost a draw. We contained the curse, but could not remove it. One of our order must live here and reinforce the containment spell each morning."

#

"And if they don't?"

#

"The spell will gradually weaken and crack. Not immediately, but within a few days, the dead will start to free themselves from their graves."

#

“But the dead started to rise even while Solaine was here, in the temple.” Chris stopped and walked over to the central mosaic. “Why?”

#

“I do not know for certain,” the cleric began, “but it is not enough just to say the words of the spell. It’s as much a prayer ... and if she had stopped believing in her mission ...” He shrugged.

#

Chris tapped her toe where the floor of the foyer had turned into a staircase below. “She was living in the tunnels below. Would that make a difference?”

#

“I regret to say that I do not know for certain,” Alros walked over to stand beside the paladin and looked wistfully at the sunburst symbol below his soft boots.

#

“Why does that chamber below this even exist?”

#

Alros jumped slightly before he collected himself, remembering that the woman beside him had fought the werewolf in that formerly secret chamber. “You would have to ask those who built it,” he replied lightly ... and then frowned, considering that the builders of the original temple may well be buried in the nearby cemetery. It might be possible to do just that, although most people would not be able to find the spell nor have the ability to cast it.

#

Chris caught the frown before the cleric schooled his face to neutral interest. She was sure that

he was hiding something. Having been sent here to clean up after the recent fiasco, he would have been briefed on all pertinent spells, prayers, and history. The Radiant Order knew about the chamber system. Their symbol appeared in in the underground rooms. Chris-Tien would have to try a different approach to getting the information out of Alros ... she felt certain that it was important.

#

With a sigh, she noticed that dusk had nearly faded completely to night. “Well, I best be getting back. I hope to see you again tomorrow.” Chris smiled at Alros’ answering nod and raised a small lantern. With a few murmured words, the lantern glowed, casting enough light for her to use on her way back to the cottage.

#

She had to admit that she was both relieved and annoyed to hear the Temple doors close behind her and the bar drop into place. It would have been nice to have some company back down the carpeted path.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Over the next several days, life in Langston seemed to settle down to a new routine. Farmers completed the harvest and gathered their flocks into barns and pastures closer to town. Food was salted and dried against the looming cold of winter. The last traders passed through to resupply the general store, unfortunately heading south instead of north toward Neverwinter and the Sword Coast.

#

The new cleric settled into his new duties. He offered prayers morning and night and conducted the weekly rituals. As he mended injuries and cured the ill, sometimes with help from the new herbalist and the druid, people only occasionally compared him unfavorably to “that sweet girl”. His exotic half-elven looks and kind manner also made Tomlin’s memory begin to fade like the flowers laid on the graves of those they had lost that fall.

#

Parents still reminded children to stay nearby, but foraging and fishing pulled the oldest of them beyond the wall ... more wary to be sure. The werewolf was gone, and no undead roamed.

What had become of Solaine was a mystery that most people did not really want to solve. The contradiction between the healer they had known and the monster that had briefly terrorized them was too great a chasm to span. She was simply gone again as if on pilgrimage.

#

#

If the occasional chicken went missing, or a sheep wandered off, townsfolk blamed it on “those bandits” or wolves coming too close to town with the winter closing in. Chris-Tien kept her eyes open for such mundane threats as she wandered the woods near the Temple and the cemetery. She found evidence of neither, but she occasionally detected the presence of several undead, usually somewhere beneath her and moving around. It was a vexing situation, but since they were not, apparently, coming to the surface, she did not want to alarm the townsfolk. She shared her findings with only a select few people: the Mayor, Roi, and the new cleric.

#

Both the Mayor and Roi were concerned enough to mount extra patrols, discretely. The militia’s numbers remained slightly higher than usual, and they patrolled the town’s entrance near the Temple more often. Roi enlisted the local pack of wolves to search the area each night. So far, their efforts had yielded nothing significant.

#

Chris-Tien had tried talking to Alros again about the tunnels below the Temple. She was certain that they were more extensive than the single room and dead ends that Solaine had occupied, but the new cleric continued to deny knowledge of a larger system.

#

Sitting in a quiet corner of the Pickled Hen with the Mayor and Roi, Chris confessed her failure as she stabbed a piece of stew with more vigor than needed. “He left the library in a bit of a huff after I pointed out that the tunnels made no sense if they didn’t connect with other rooms or something. And now, I think he’s avoiding me.”

#

“Aye, me too,” Roi volunteered before taking a long pull from his mug. “I showed up this afternoon, regular time for healing folks who need it, and he wasn’t there. Thankfully, the winter fevers haven’t set in yet”

#

“You think there are more tunnels ... and that the undead are wandering around in them?” the Mayor asked quietly, making sure that the sounds of the common room and the bard playing near the fire would mask her question.

#

“That would make the most sense.” Chris hazarded. “The sense of evil is strongest in one second of woods, near the Temple, but I can’t find anything above ground that could be emanating such a spiritual stench.”

#

“I could ask,” the Mayor suggested casually, “but it would have to be strictly unofficial.” She sipped her ale thoughtfully. “Religious orders are autonomous.”

#

“If we’re right, the town is in grave danger. Surely, Alros can see that?” Roi huffed.

#

Anathram nodded, “But we still need to tread softly. He is not **required** to share their secrets.”

She sighed, “I’ll pay him a visit tomorrow. I haven’t really welcomed him to Langston yet”

#

After that, the trio settled into their dinner and talk of less consequential matters, turning over the question of how Chris-Tien would manage to travel north after they had laid this current issue to rest. The possibility of a late trade caravan heading toward Neverwinter was a matter of speculation for the remainder of the night, when they were not listening to the tales spun by the bard.

#

#

“I tell you, there are bandits in those woods. My Hirnark found a cave with tracks in the snow ... leading in and out. Someone is living rough out there again.” The matronly woman made her point, tapping a work-roughened finger in the worn counter.

#

“Na. That stranger got rid o’ them bandits, I heard.” Her companion put a hand on her hip and stood a bit straighter as if height would improve her argument.

#

“That was on the other side of town. And those were here to rob the Mayor herself!” The first woman shared a bit of rumor in apparent triumph.

#

Alard, behind the counter, was doing his best to maintain a straight face as he turned to Chris-Tien and asked if there was anything he could help her with. Smiling, she passed him a list of supplies she needed before addressing the two women. “Excuse me, but I wonder if I

could talk to Hirnark.”

#

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Hirnark was of that indeterminate age between boyhood and man that made his age hard to place. He had enough responsibilities around his parents' farm to form calluses that Chris could feel when she solemnly shook his hand in greeting. But the roguish smile he gave her suggested a quick wit and an inclination to mischief. There was not much of use in this woods near town, and Chris-Tien wondered what the young man had been doing when he found the "cave" in the side of the hill. He had been vague when asked how he had found the entrance to the what seemed to be a constructed tunnel, and the assembled searchers had decided to leave the question un-explored.

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"Hirnark, this is the Mayor, as you know." Chris pointed to the half-orc, her normally elegant suit traded in for mail. "And you have probably seen Roi before," the druid returned the boy's nod of recognition and adjusted the strap on this leather vambrace. "We're going to take a look at what you found and then decide where to go from there. Right?"

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“That’s a lot of weapons for just taking a look,” Hirnark observed dryly. Chris had to agree.

They certainly were not trying to be discrete. If townsfolk saw them, she hoped that they would be relieved that the Mayor was taking the “bandit problem” seriously.

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“Always good to be prepared,” the paladin responded evenly. “**If**, there is trouble, I want you to get back here as fast as possible and find Alard Dunn. Tell him where we went and to bring in the militia. Got that?”

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“Yea,” Hirnark responded with the long-suffering patience of youth humoring authority figures. “I got it.”

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Buttercup, lying at the Mayor’s feet, sighed as if commenting on the boy’s reliability. Chris had to agree with the mastiff. Odds were against any hope of him doing what she’d asked. Which is why she had packed the vial of barkskin in her pouch and hoped that he the sense to run if things got bad enough to need it. She patted her weapons and mentally ran through the spells she’d added from her research in the library. At the least, they could lay a few souls to rest today. At worst ... the Radiant Order might have to return here in force.

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The fall storms had restructured a bluff near the river, felling a couple of trees and washing away a boulder that had obscured an opening in the sandstone. Originally, the opening had probably been a carved archway with doors of stone or wood. Now, it had a vaguely oval shape with hints

of circles and crescents on the outer edge. Bare hinges hung, rusted, from the inner edge of the opening.

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From their vantage point in the woods, the scouting party could see tracks in the snow, traveling along the river, away from the town. From this distance, they could not be sure whose tracks they were ... only that they seemed humanoid. “Are any of those yours?” Chris asked the boy beside her.

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“No, ma’am. I ain’t been here since the snow yesterday.”

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“Ok then. It’s occupied by someone How far did you go in before?”

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“Just to the first set of doors. I figured out how to get them open, but I didn’t have a lantern” Hirnark grumbled.

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“Didn’t spring any traps, but that doesn’t mean that are none.” Anathram murmured.

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Chris nodded. “Ok, we probably won’t be able to avoid detection forever, but just in case we can get in and out without a fight, let’s do our best to stay hidden. Something evil is in there, and I’d like to find out what it is without it finding us first.”

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“I can help with that.” The mayor murmured a spell. “This will get us in without a trace. Stick close.”

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As soon as Hiram cleared the threshold, the doors to the chamber slammed shut behind him. The party whirled around at the thud and started looking for the sunburst and crescent symbol pairing that would allow the to open it. None were visible. With a sinking feeling, Chris-Tien realized that the room was brightening, and she could see a variety of mosaics on the wall.

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Behind them, someone began to clap slowly. Returning to face the chamber once more, the eyes of the adventurers lighted on a pale figure in heavy black robes, getting up from a throne-like chair. On one side of him stood a skeleton, bones aged to a yellowish cream. On the other side stood Maybelline's zombie, gashes from the werewolf's attack still plainly visible where they were not covered up by the dirty purple gown she still wore.

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"Welcome, welcome. I was almost beginning to think I would need to issue an invitation to get the mayor ... and this pesky investigator ... to come for a visit." The figure's thin, bluish lips smiled broadly. If he was worried about facing three armed opponents, he was covering it well.

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"You know who we are?" Mayor Anathram asked as she stepped forward cautiously.

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"Of course I know who you are. Solaine has been so helpful in explaining who is currently occupying my town." Solaine was standing in the diminishing shadows. Her white vestments had been replaced by grey robes, and a crescent moon amulet rested on her chest. She stepped forward quietly. In the shadows, her pale skin and sunken eyes made her look almost like a ghost, eliciting a sad groan from Roi.

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“Your town?” Tanya Anathram growled.

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“Yes, mine ... or at least ... my Order’s. We built this Temple and the city around it. It was our seat of power until the Radiant Order came and disposed us. And I have come to take it back.”

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“An’ who exactly are you to be taking it back?” Roi moved up to stand beside the mayor.

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“Ah, yes. Pardon my manners. One forgets the niceties when stuck in a hole in the ground. I am Visés. Head Wizard of the Order of the Dying Moon. And you will surrender to me.”

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Mayor Anathram’s back straightened in defiance. “How do you plan to force us to surrender? You hardly have an army with you.” She looked between the two undead flanking the wizard and then at Solaine.

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“Not yet. I will as soon as I manage to break through the new cleric’s defenses. It is only a matter of time before I wear him down as I did his predecessor. I just have to find his weakness.”

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Chris-Tien wasn’t sure, but she thought she saw a flicker of something in Solaine’s eyes ... anger? Defiance? Comprehension? Roi edged slightly toward his old friend and unlatched his belt pouch. With the exit closed behind them, they would almost certainly have to fight their way out. While the Mayor was keeping the necromancer talking, Chris-Tien scanned for an alternative way out of the chamber, edging closer to the blonde zombie.

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“Weakness? Solaine was - **is** - anything but weak.” Anathram looked past Vises and tried to catch Solaine’s eyes.

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“All I had to do was turn that young man’s affections to another,” Vises glided over to the zombie and ran a finger over her gouged face.

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The Mayor shook her head. “Maybelline did that. We found her garlands and the spell in the garden.”

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The wizard’s laughter rang through the stone chamber. “You thought that **girl** could write a spell?” Vises snickered. “She could barely manage to keep the family accounts. Not that she was unintelligent. She memorized the songs to create those wedding garlands” He mused. “After I provided her with the materials, of course.”

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Chris-Tien shook her head. “But she made a mistake in crafting the wreaths. When they touched, they ... melted.”

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Vises’ smile turned appreciative. “Well, I couldn’t let her live after I had corrupted Solaine, now could I? She might have realized the price she was paying through that spell I gave her to bury, or even realized that once she got what she asked for, it wasn’t really what she wanted. No, that fickle creature had to be removed before she could let anyone know about me. Thankfully,

Solaine managed that on her own. Werewolves are so temperamental. ”

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“I’ll not believe it,” Roi sputtered, stepping forward in his anger. “Solaine was ... **is** ... a kind woman who never hurt another soul. She forgave Tomlin ... and even Maybelline. I know it. She would never have killed anyone, even a rival.”

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“Well,” Vises preened a bit, “I **may** have had something to do with that. A bit of a shove off her pedestal, as it were.”

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Understanding flowered in Chris’ mind. “You charmed her,” she whispered. “**That’s** why she seemed so scatter-brained! You were taking over her mind and acting through her.”

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“Think of it as giving a part of her the little nudge she needed to stop being such a milk sop. Oh, she **wanted** to kill Maybelline and reclaim Tomlin. She just wouldn’t give herself permission to do so. I opened up her world. One day, she will thank me, once she realizes what I have done to help her embrace her power.”

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“Was killing two more members of my township part of that ‘embracing her power’ lesson?” growled Anathram. The axe handle groaned under the pressure of her white-knuckled grip.

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Vises regarded the half-orc with his ink-black eyes. “She was beginning to think of coming forth and confessing her crime. In fact, she was most of the way to your house that night. I could hear her, trying to convince herself that she should do the right thing ... that her friends would find a

way to forgive her and help her. Bah! I had to step in and make sure she understood that there was no going back to her old life.”

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Suddenly, the necromancer turned toward Chris-Tien, “And **you!**” he spat at her. “You had to rob her of her usefulness with that talisman.”

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At the edge of the shadows, Solaine looked like she had been slapped. Emotions roiled over her face in succession until they settled on despair. But Chris couldn’t spare more than a moment’s glance at the cleric because Visas was now saying something in a language that she did not understand. “Now!” she shouted, hoping that Hirnark had found cover and would stay there.

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Hirnark had certainly found cover, but he had no intention of cowering there. He could not follow the paladin’s orders to run for help. The doors behind them had no handles and no

obvious way of opening them, and he couldn't see another way out of the chamber, although he assumed that the shadows on the edges of the room hid another tunnel. He had heard the adults talking about tunnels they suspected ran from the Temple out under the cemetery, and he hoped that they were right.

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The paladin had told him to find some place safe, and he figured that the casks he was behind were good enough, but he smiled to himself as he brought out his sling and the pouch of stones that the druid had given him. Roi had said that these would pack a punch ... so be sure of what he hit. And since he was pretty good at taking down birds and squirrels, he figured that hitting the tall guy in dark robes shouldn't be too hard. Tucking one of the stones in the sling, he wound up and let loose. The stone flicked the man's robe, putting a hole in it, before chipping a gouge in the far wall. Hirnark swore to himself. That wasn't the heroic first blow that he had hoped to strike.

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With a furious roar, Anathram swung her great axe around, grazing Visen's left arm, which was not enough to stop a wave of sickly green mist from washing over Chris-Tien. The paladin staggered as her skin visibly dried. Pale, she straightened and raised the symbol of Meliki high, sending the skeleton and zombie in opposite directions as they attempted to escape. With her other hand, she drew her sword.

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Meanwhile, Roi approached the cleric. She was raising her hands as if to cast a spell, but then she stopped and looked at her friend, indecisive. "Roi, don't make me Please, don't make me"

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“Lass, ya don’t have to do this. Remember ... remember who you really are,” he murmured as if approaching a spooked deer. He was fumbling around in his pouch, looking for something as he crept closer.

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The boy’s next attempt with his slingshot found its mark, and he whooped as the enchanted stone exploded against the wizard’s chest, pushing him back with a grunt of pain. Holding his hand to his chest, he searched in Hirmark’s direction for his attacker only to be brought up short as Tanya’s axe sliced another line in his robes and skin. Hissing, Vises spoke again in a language they didn’t understand, and his skin darkened and visibly roughened.

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Anathram swore, “Stoneskin!”

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“No matter,” Chris grimly replied and waved her hands in a pattern she had learned at Strixhaven. Vises began bleeding from several new gashes, a stunned expression on his face. He looked to Solaine for help.

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“Kill her!” he ordered, pointing at the paladin.

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“No, lass, please ...” Roi had reached Solaine and was waving an open vial underneath her nose. “Remember. Remember who you are. Remember who really stole Tomlin from you.”

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In surprise, the cleric took a breath. And in breathing, inhaled the smell of sweet grass, warm

sunshine, and a warm tenor voice reading really terrible poetry. “Tomlin” She gasped as tears began to roll down her face. She turned toward the necromancer and her expression hardened. “It was you ... you!”

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Another stone struck Vises, harmlessly this time, but it gave the wizard a glimpse of the young boy and he began to utter another spell.

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“Oh no, you don’t!” Yelled the Mayor as she rushed the black robed figure and knocked him off his feet. For a moment, they grappled on the floor of the chamber and Vises unsuccessfully tried to use the contact to siphon energy from the half-orc.

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“Get away from him!” Solaine’s tear-stained face contorted in rage as a spectral sword appeared above Vises’ prone form. Anathram quickly rolled to the side and scrambled away as the sword stabbed wildly at Vises, missing as he backed away. “Weak am I?” Solaine’s voice trembled with renewed vibrancy. The sword rose again and wavered in the air, drawing the necromancer’s attention as Chris-Tien resumed chanting. More streaks of blood appeared on Vises’ chest. Eyes wide, he gasped for breath.

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Beside Solaine, Roi moved his glowing hands in the pattern of a snowflake. Frost covered Vises as he stiffened and breathed his last.

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Orange flames licked the deepening blue sky, as smoke joined wispy clouds in the crisp wintery air. Four figures stood before the raging fire, silent, watching as sparks flew up from the pyre consuming the remains of Vises, Head Wizard of the Order of the Dying Moon. Prayers and blessings had been said by cleric, druid, and paladin, hoping that the necromancer's soul would find rest and respite ... or at least would not be returning to this plane of existence any time soon. The half-orc ranger had sprinkled the corpse heavily with salt, for her part, and now stood at ease, once again in her tailored and elegant suit. As Mayor, she had represented the town, witnessing the end of a man who had been ultimately responsible for the loss of four of her people, and the injury of many more.

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The burning logs sighed and sagged, sending up more sparks and illuminating the watching faces. Alros was in his most ornate vestments, bright sunburst gleaming on his chest. His narrow hands held closed the book of rituals from which he had read the funeral rites of the Radiant Order. Confronted with the evidence, he had admitted to the network of chambers and tunnels beneath the Temple. He would say little about their origin other than to admit that, once upon a time, members of the Order had, like Solaine, studied the dark as well as the light in order to better understand both.

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Hirnark had deciphered how the moon and sun worked together to open some of the passages, and they had used this to trap the two undead in a corridor after the battle. Alros had used a spell to destroy both of them utterly. Only hints of dust had remained afterward, but the Mayor had carefully swept that up into an urn, adding salt, and burying it in the cemetery for good measure.

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Solaine remained a problem that the Mayor had decided should become someone else's problem. They had all heard Visen's claims that he had dominated her mind and pushed her into killing rages, but it was also clear that she had cooperated with the necromancer to some degree. How much guilt she bore was beyond the consideration of a town's council. Currently, she waited in a cell beneath the Temple that Alros **said** was enchanted against her magics. Members of the Radiant Order would come to take her off Anathram's hands, and Alros' opinion was that she would be confined to seclusion in a hermitage somewhere remote.

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The pyre gave another sigh and collapsed further to the ground. “Well, that should be it.” Chris broke the silence and turned to Roi and Anathram, clasping arms with each in turn. She gave a curt nod to the cleric before turning toward the town. They had already said their good byes and well-wishes. It was time for her to go.

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From the edge of the clearing a stately woman clad in Harper blue strode toward the small assemblage. The paladin had resisted asking why a bard of her skill was visiting a small, back-water town such as Langston. But she had lost no time in asking if her abilities extended beyond a warm alto and a sure hand at the lute. The teleportation spell left her purse substantially lighter, but it was better than a slog north through the winter.

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“I assure you, you will arrive safely in Strixhaven.” Hedley smiled reassuringly as she stopped before Chris. Her blue robe fell away from freckled arms as she began to cast. “There is a permanent circle in Lorehold College, as you well know. This spell cannot fail.”

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“Famous last words,” grumbled Chris-Tien as the world shimmered around her and disappeared.

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