

Four

Para waved to the retreating figure of Henry Sidgwick. Her smile served a striking opposite to Mun's frowning countenance. "Can you believe that little shrub had that much coin? I don't feel so bad about not getting a secret."

"Did you leave him any silver?"

"Psh." Para sent Mun an irritated glance. "I didn't fleece him, if that's what you're asking in such a delicate fashion. I made certain I took only enough to keep us in froth and bedding for a week. All right?"

Mun's ears reddened, but his glower remained. "My apologies. I—"

"You told me 'no' and you don't like being ignored. That and you don't trust me—why in Nefa's fire is it so blasted cold all at once?" She rubbed at an ache in her arm as she shifted her dark glare to the clouds looming above. "With the way the air is hitting at my face, I would hazard a wage that snow is coming."

"We should make for an inn."

Para nodded and pulled herself back into the saddle, sending another glance in the direction of Henry Sidgwick. He,

however, had already disappeared into the forest. “Funny little shrub,” she muttered under her breath.

As they made their way forward to the city of Pomeroy, she paid more attention to the foreboding that had migrated from the back of her head to her front right temple. She took a pinch of herbs from the pouch at her belt and tucked it into her cheek, cringing at the initial bitterness before the spicy coolness. It always dimmed her most tenacious aches and pains.

“Head ache?” Mun asked, his stony expression registering concern.

She waved it off, shifting her attention from pain to impressions of the city. Pomeroy was a massive hub of activity built behind a soaring wall. However, the wall didn’t present a sense of unwelcome as the gates stood wide, almost beckoning people inside. They were unguarded as well, and that caused a double-take from Para on her way past.

When did a city the size of Pomeroy leave gates open and unguarded—“Do you smell that?” Para hissed. The aroma of roasting meat set her stomach to growling and her nose to seeking out the nearest inn. She smacked his arm with the back of her hand, gathering his attention. “Come on. Let’s get some directions over a plate of whatever smells so good.”

“Perhaps we should report first to the lord Pomeroy?”

“You think he might offer a plate of meat? My mouth won’t stop watering, and I think my stomach is becoming a dragon.”

Mun smirked. “I’m sure a lord will have a plate of meat for two travelers.”

“All right, let’s...” Para grabbed the arm of a boy doing his best to skirt the pair. “Say, where is Lord Pomeroy’s house?”

To Para's displeasure the boy directed them to a mansion that gave her a case of the shivers. "For the love of... Milord Meek, why are the creepy places those places we seem to wander to the most?"

"A law of nature?"

"I don't doubt it." She shrugged. "Well, I guess we should get to it before I change my mind and venture elsewhere."

"There's treasure to be had here, Par. You wouldn't leave that behind."

"If my skin is in danger I might."

"That isn't what I saw in the cavern."

"I was younger then."

Mun chuckled.

Gesturing toward the mansion, the two made their way through the hustle and bustle with some modicum of difficulty. "What do you suppose has everyone in a lather around this place?"

The warrior indicated a sign in the process of being raised.

"Founder's Day, eh? Haven't been in a place long enough to see about one of those, have we?"

"Not as of yet, no."

"We might need to take a turn around to see what's what before we dive into the wage. That meat dish beckons my name with fervor!"

"I agree."

Mun stepped up the granite steps to the front porch of the mansion. Para hung back a pace, allowing the warrior the duty of knocking the brass ring in the lion's mouth. The massive door opened by a maid dressed in the usual drab gray dress with

white apron and white mob cap.

She gave the pair a curtsy of greeting. "Your names?"

"I am Para, and this is Munwar. We got word from the tavern master—" She looked to Mun. "Where was it again?" He shrugged. "For the love of... Well, we heard that your lord Pomeroy is seeking some help."

"Indeed. Will you come this way please?"

"Lead on."

The maid directed them to a small salon just inside and to the left of the entry. "Wait here, please. I will fetch the master."

Para nodded with an absent motion, her eyes wide as her gaze swept the room of unique artifacts and furnishings.

The maid retreated, closing the door behind her.

"Will you look at this, Mun? Do we even have these trees? They look too red." She gestured to the scallop-back couch of tapestry upholstery and a rich redwood. "I haven't even heard tell of furnishings like this! How in all that's holy did the lord get these pieces here? And from where, is what I would like to know! Can you imagine how much these would fetch—"

"Are you a city ranger, Par?" Mun asked in a low tone.

Para's attention snapped to the warrior. "That's not fair. I have an appreciation for pretty things."

"And the coin that goes with them."

"Hey. Watch that tone, Milord."

Mun crossed his arms over his chest of leather scale armor as a tall man entered the room. He was of a slender build with shoulder-length bluish gray hair and dressed in purple and gold. Though Para knew the Pomeroy house had wealth rather than noble standing, the quality of his apparel and his home declared

the worth of a royal birthright.

“Welcome,” he greeted in a somewhat bass voice, “I am Lazarus Pomeroy. You are here to help me?”

Para stood. “Yes, Milord. All we need know is what the bit of trouble is that you need help with. And what price the helping will fetch.”

Lord Pomeroy regarded them both before motioning for them to sit. Munwar, of course, declined. Para complied, sitting in an overstuffed armchair with a smile as Lord Pomeroy sat opposite.

“My fifteen-year-old daughter, Alicia, was betrothed to Cyruss Kensington almost seven months ago. The Kensington family owns the palace north of here.”

“Noble blood, are they?”

“Indeed, ‘tis true. My daughter left to stay with the Kensington family the month before the wedding. The morning of, the guards assigned to her protection were found outside her room, slain, with her body nowhere to be found. She is dead, I know,” Lord Pomeroy admitted in a gruff tone, “and her spirit now haunts Kensington Palace.”

Para sent Mun’s stoic features a glance. These types of stories always put him on the path of no return. “What can we do for you, Milord Pomeroy?”

“I want my beloved Alicia to be freed from her haunting, but,” he interjected with a single lifted finger, “but without the harm of turning or exorcism. Are either of you clerics? No? Excellent.”

“You don’t know how to free your daughter from the curse of non-life,” Mun observed.

“Just so, and in the process of freeing her, I don’t wish to

sully the Kensington name. We have already been at war for so many generations.... Alicia was to be our peace, in her marriage to their first-born."

"First-born, you say?" Para asked.

"There is a brother: Derek. He is the local priest. He will answer any questions you may have of his brother and my Alicia's betrothal, if you feel you are up to the task."

"We're up to the task, Milord. In fact, we'll leave the talk of reward to after the duty is done." It would be nonsensical for her to decide a price if it didn't do justice to the effort.

Lord Pomeroy inclined his head. "In the meantime, I will give word to the proprietor of *The Journeyman's Palace* that your stay will be at my cost." He stood and accepted her offered hand. "Thank you, and you, sir. Please. Stay this evening for dinner and a bath. Ann will show you to your rooms." The maid appeared as if summoned by the mere thought of her.

Para nodded. "That's right generous, Milord, and I think I will take you up on your offer." In fact she had to keep herself from running up the main stairs ahead of the maid.



The two were served their meal in a private dining room on the second floor in the east wing. If Para hadn't been a ranger, she very well could have become lost in all the twists and turns to their quarters. The fact did nothing less than make Para even more certain that her goal in life was to not only become proficient in wilderness tracking, but in having a mansion the size of the Pomeroy estate to heighten her rural tracking.

In fact, she found it amusing all the way through her bath to

imagine the prospect.

Mun didn't care for the posh surroundings as Para did, and sat ramrod straight in the high-back chair as the maid took his plate to serve him dessert. The warrior didn't quite know what to make of the sweetness of the cream and fruit. It made Para realize that he must have been traveling in less than civilized situations for an even longer time than she had. That or he simply didn't hold enough appreciation for foods of the higher-class.

He retrieved the small silver spoon in his massive hand with some initial difficulty. Then, once he had it adjusted in his hold, he scooped a small bit of the sweet cream and fruit and tasted it as if the spoon would bite him should he take it wrong.

Her lips twitched upward. "So, what do you think, Mun?"

He didn't answer right away, so intent on the taste of the dessert and what he imagined it would do to his insides.

"Munwar."

This time he lifted his gaze to meet hers. "I think it's too sweet."

"I think you don't know when you have a good thing." Para reached out. "Here; let me have it. You can gnaw on the table."

Even as he passed her the bowl of dessert his thoughtful gaze remained. After traveling with him for three years, she knew what weighed on his mind because it weighed on her own as well—thoughts of the young woman and her tragic end.

Para lowered her gaze to the bowl of cream and fruit. She hadn't wanted to ask Lord Pomeroy about his daughter and what kind of person she was. That would have been a torture even after six months of grieving. *Better to ask the priest.* Everyone knew that people had a leaning toward talking about everything

to a priest. Para doubted a fifteen-year-old nearing marriage would have been much different, even if it was the brother of her betrothed.

“You want to start tonight?” she asked without lifting her gaze.

That question drew his attention and a response. “That would not be wise. We need to plan.”

Para nodded. “Talk to the priest. Talk to others that knew her and the families. It’s not so late that we can’t make a trip to the church—at least find out where it is so we can do it in the morning. I might head up to the palace for a look-see. It seems about a half-day’s journey. I could camp out and leave the questioning of the priest to you.”

“No,” Mun said in his usual tone of firm calm, “we will stay together. There is something wrong in this place, and I don’t think it wise to split up.”

“I hear that, and don’t have a thing to say against it. So,” she set down her spoon and pushed the second bowl away, “what is the plan? I opt to speak to the priest this evening. Derek? Last service was just a bit ago, so the church should be empty.”

“I agree. But let’s not visit the palace until the morning.”

Para hemmed and hawed on that request as she tapped the table with a solitary finger. “I would like to take a gander....”

“Evil things are out with the stars, Par, and venturing in without preparation isn’t the way to solve a mystery.”

“Right, right, right,” she admitted, standing. “Well, let’s head on over to Priest Kensington and see what tales are to be told. Shall we, Milord Meek?”

There sounded a tap on the door that caused both Mun and

Para to turn. It opened to reveal Ann, the maid. She stepped forward after a curtsy and offered a letter. "The master asked me to give that to you for Master Derek."

"Ah." Para accepted the letter, noting the wax seal and the crest pressed within. "His eyes only, eh? All right." She tucked the letter into her blouse. Before the girl could make a somewhat hasty retreat, Para reached out a hand.

The girl's attention returned. "Yes?"

"Are you off somewhere in a hurry?"

"I've duties, but nothing pressing."

Para motioned inside. "Do you have a moment or three to spare for us about the Miss?"

The maid's expression shifted to that of discomfiture, yet she nodded and entered. She accepted the offered chair at the table, sitting primly and a bit on the unapproachable side. It gave Para a moment's pause as she shut the door to their room.

"How long have you worked for the Pomeroy's?"

"Almost nine years."

"You like it, do you?"

The maid nodded.

Para expected more information to follow. Servants tended to delight in offering details into the private lives of their masters. "And the Miss? Headstrong, was she?"

"Miss Alicia? Indeed not." The maid's attitude bristled. "The Miss was always a proper lady, especially after the death of her mother, poor dear."

The hair on the back of Para's neck stood at attention. "When was that?"

A return of the reluctance to answer caused the maid's

gaze to shift. "The Miss was eight—just turned." Again, no embellishment followed.

"Was the missus sick a long time?"

The maid pursed her lips, irritation dancing in her hazel eyes. "The missus wasn't sick a day of her life," she responded curtly.

It was that abrupt end to the statement that made Para lean toward the girl swift enough to cause a start. "Look—what's your name?"

"Ann."

"Look, Ann. The more you can tell me without needing a rope and a prod, the better idea I get of how to help your master and the Miss."

Ann sent Mun a quick glance, the fact of which had one of Para's eyebrows twitching. "I don't take to gossip," she stated.

"Bah! Who's asking for gossip? Just tell me what you know and I'll take what I want from the tale. No one's asking for more than that, girl."

While Ann didn't look convinced, she did seem to relax her posture.

"Now about the missus...?"

"The Lady Pomeroy passed from the consumption after a visit to her sister in Carmaline."

"Did a doctor or cleric or such put a question over her death? Rule it foul play?"

Ann shook her head.

Para pursed her lips as she tapped a fingernail on the table. "And you say Miss Alicia did what now?"

"When?"

“After her mum passed. Miss Alicia took it well, did she?”

Ann’s chin tilted in haughty defiance. “She was devastated but carried it with silent bravery. The poor dear. Such a lady she was; genteel and full of an angel’s heart.” The maid’s voice caught and Para noted the tremble of her chin as she looked away. Then the girl cleared her throat and slowly stood. “If you’ll excuse me?”

“Aye. Thank you.”

Ann curtsied and left the room.

Para stared after her a moment before giving a slight shrug and focusing on Mun. “All right, let’s get on over to the church. I’ve no idea where it is in this maze of a city, so we better get on out there and get some directions before everyone’s gone to bed.”

The two didn’t require much in the way of effort to find the church, as the building had been erected only about 100 yards to the left of the Pomeroy mansion. It was a well-kept chapel with a somewhat large main room holding several rows of wooden pews, a stone podium and altar, and a heavy wooden door with iron hinges that led to what was likely the priest’s chambers.

As Para and Mun entered, they noticed the usual tapestries on the walls, the crimson runner to the altar, and the crimson padded pews on each side. There was also wrought iron candelabrum along the walls and on each side of the wide aisle. While they chased away the darkness of the approaching night, they didn’t keep back the chill of the approaching winter, much to Para’s dismay. She absently rubbed at her arm.

Mun shrugged his shoulders and she heard the slight hiss and click of his claymore lifting from its sheath. She sent him a glance, her eyes darting toward the podium and the point of

his intense focus. Munwar Meek didn't unsheathe his sword unless there was a possibility he would need it, and rather quick. Taking her lead from the experienced warrior, Para rested her hand on the pommel of her sword. As a ranger she didn't prefer tight spaces such as this because it rendered her bow useless. But a sword or dagger was a nice bit of fun, unless Mun got under foot.

Or she got under his.

Para frowned as she and Mun continued forward at a deliberate pace. She found her fingers tightening their grip on the pommel of the sword as the back of her head began to throb. *Pomeroy would have given us a shout if the priest weren't to be trusted*, she soothed. But that didn't explain the current situation—

A tall man in the usual raiment of a priest exited through the back door. He halted at the sight of them. Para's frown didn't lessen. The man looked approximately thirty years of age with tousled brown hair and a beard and moustache needing a washing of the food remnants that dangled. Also, his priest robes were too short for his frame.

"What do you want?" he asked brusquely.

She sent a glance toward Mun, who continued to regard the priest. "We're looking for the priest. Drew."

The man looked to each one in turn. "I'm the priest."

"Ah-hah," Para acknowledged slowly, her gaze shifting behind him to the door standing ajar. The back of her head continued to throb. She motioned. "We need to talk with some privacy. You mind?"

The priest's gaze darted to the entry behind them. "I was on my way out to, ah, visit with a sickly girl in need of, ah, a healing.

Come back later.”

“Aye, about that... I don’t think that is an option at the moment. Lord Pom told us to talk to you.”

Again, the priest offered no correction to a misspoken name, which raised Para’s hackles and adjusted her grip on the pommel.

“Fine. Wait here and we can talk when I return—”

The door behind the priest crashed open. “S-Stop him...,” the bloodied man stammered. He leaned heavily against the door, his black hair matted and the blood dripping into his eyes.

Mun and Para moved as one, the warrior blocking the imposter’s dash for the church’s front entry. Para deflected his dagger as Mun grabbed the man’s hand to yank his arm hard behind him. The man slipped free and bolted, Para and Mun on his heels.

The imposter grabbed at the door, crumpling when Para’s dagger caught him on the back of his skull. Mun grabbed a fistful of priestly raiment and dragged him back into the church, slamming closed the doors to impede another attempt at escape.

“Got him?”

Mun nodded, adjusting his hold as he sought a leather thong from his pouch to tie the imposter’s hands. Para took the opportunity to stride to the man still hanging on the door to his quarters. His face was a dangerous shade of white, and he groaned when she draped his hanging arm around her shoulders and helped him to the nearest pew.

He sat heavily as she made certain his head didn’t smack against the stone wall. She dug into her pouch for a small vial, yanking the wax topper free with her teeth. Taking hold of his chin, she hissed, “Drink this, quickly,” and tipped the vial into

his open mouth.

He coughed but swallowed it all, unable to even open his eyes.

Para heard Mun come to stand behind her, his shadow falling over her and the man – whom she assumed to be the true priest. “Will he live?”

“I think so. Can you get some water and a clean rag? I need to clean this to see about stitching it closed.” She pulled a runner from one of the side tables and used it to staunch the flow of blood. The man groaned. She rummaged in her larger belt pouch for her mending kit. “In all of Nefa’s fire... who nearly kills a priest?” she grumbled. “Ah! Here it is.”

Poking the needle into the outside flap of her pouch, she accepted the clean rag from Mun and dipped it into the bowl of water he set on the side-table. The task of cleaning the wound was slow going, punctuated by the pain-filled moans of the delirious priest. Once done, she set to the task of stitching the gash closed while hoping to have enough thread for the task.

After the stitches were tied off, she rinsed the rag and once again pressed it against the oozing wound. The priest’s color seemed better. Para breathed a sigh of relief. Having the death of a priest on her conscience was not something she looked forward to.

“I think he’ll make it,” she assured Mun. When she noticed he didn’t stand behind her, she darted a quick look around to find him kneeling in front of the altar. “I didn’t know you were the praying sort, Mun.”

He remained in that position for a moment more before standing and making his way to her. “Is it safe to move him?”

Para motioned behind her to the priest's quarters. "Aye, see if the bed is to rights."

Mun did as requested, returning a few moments later to help her ease the priest to his feet and guide him into the sparsely furnished quarters. They laid him back onto the bed, Para covering him with his single blanket as Mun took to the task of building a fire.

"I suppose this is a 'no' to getting information from Master Derek," she said, arms crossed.

Mun grunted his agreement.

"For the love of—" Turning, she exited the priest's quarters and strode toward the church's entry. The imposter had slumped to one side as he leaned back against the stone wall, his hands and feet tied behind his back. In all honesty, the man looked as if he were ready for the roasting spit.

She pulled a seat close and straddled it, staring down at the man with a narrowed gaze. He was just coming to. "I've a few words and questions for you, Priest That Isn't."

"Don't waste your breath." He spat.

"Oh, it won't be any waste of mine, that's for certain. You might give a scream and holler, though."

The man glared at her, silent.

"Don't believe me, eh? That's too bad. You see, you've got information in that head of yours that I'm right curious to find out, especially with this attack on a priest. Who does that but someone who doesn't want that same priest to either: one, do something of use to another side or; two, confess some information that would make it right impossible for a bit of a plan to come about. What do you think? Am I right?"

The man spat, this time at her face. To his luck, the spittle flew wide.

“Now that wasn’t a right choice by any stretch. Munwar!” she called, her eyes not leaving their scrutiny of the frowning Priest That Wasn’t. “Milord! I’ve a problem here that I think you can help me with.”

After a few moments of silence, Para could hear Mun’s lumbering step from the direction of the priest’s quarters. If Mun’s initial appearance didn’t impress the imposter, the first smack from the back of his hand would.

The imposter’s gaze darted behind her.

Mun came to stand just behind her and, she was certain, struck his best intimidating posture. Para had seen it more than once in her journeys with him, the first being their run-in with a hill giant after their escape from the cavern. It was quite the sight to behold, as he seemed to grow and expand at least three inches.

She motioned a single finger toward the man. “I’ve asked a question to this Priest That Isn’t and he refused to answer. Not only that bit of irritation, he up and spat in my face.”

The imposter’s frown wavered, his eyes darting yet again to the impressive stance of the warrior. Mun scowled at the man while adjusting the leather gauntlets on his massive hands.

“Now this is how the ball will roll,” Para began, “I ask a question and you offer me the answer without a lot of disgruntlement. Well, maybe there will be disgruntlement, but no refusal. How’s that? Agreed? That way I keep my minion here from beating your face into the back of your head.”

The Priest That Wasn’t pulled at his bonds, the expression

on his face a mixture of fear and anger. Still he offered no vocal response, and that began to pick at the back of Para's brain.

"Munwar, have a grip at the back of this man's neck to see if you can wring his brain loose. Or at least his mouth. It seems to be stuck closed."

In one long stride Mun was at the man, his large hand taking up the back of his neck as requested. The look of terror pushed aside any anger, but the man didn't even yell when Mun gave him a little shake.

Para swore. "Set him down. We won't get anything from him."

"A spell?" the warrior asked as he released the imposter. The man crumpled.

"Yes, a blasted spell. The minute I started questioning him, too. So not only are we dealing with a murderer, but now there's an arcanist thrown into the mix. How perfectly lovely." She pushed back from the chair, frowning, and tossed it aside. It clattered against a pew. "Adventure the hard way it is," she decreed, turning back toward the priest's quarters. "I'll take second watch, Milord Meek, if you don't mind."

Mun never did.