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Para waved to the retreating figure of Henry Sidgwick, a smile on her face that 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 coin?"

"Psh." Para sent Mun an irritated glance. "I didn't fleece him, if that's what you're asking so delicately. He has plenty silver left in his pocket. I made certain I only took enough to keep us in froth and bedding for a week. All right?"

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

"But 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?" Para shifted her dark glare to the skies above and the clouds that loomed. They threatened snow or her name wasn't Para Sedi. It was clear enough in the bite of winter in the air. "With the way the air is hitting at my face, I would hazard a wage that snow is coming." She absently rubbed at an ache in her arm.

"We should make for Pomeroy and 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 Pomeroy, Para began to pay more attention to the rising foreboding that had traveled from the back of her head to the 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 that was always followed rather quickly with a 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, and all of that mass had been built behind a tall wall. To Para’s surprise, the wall didn’t give Pomeroy an impression of unwelcome; mostly because the gates stood wide open, almost beckoning people inside. In fact, the fact they were unguarded made Para perform a double-take on their way through the gates.

When did a city the size of Pomeroy leave gates open and unguarded?

When the two entered the city they were accosted with the aura of excitement. Women and children scurried through the streets laden with groceries. The aroma of roasting meat set Para’s stomach to growling and her nose to seeking out the nearest inn.

“Do you smell that?” she hissed to Mun.

He nodded and pointed ahead of them to a mansion. It stood tall but desolate and gave Para a case of the shivers clear to her bones. In the distance, just behind the mansion, stood a palace and neither Para nor Mun could determine if it was vacant or inhabited.

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 to the lord, Pomeroy, first?”

“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 the mansion that had given her the shivers just a little while before. "Nefa's ass.... Mi'lord 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 heaved a sigh. "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. At the door, Mun knocked and the door was opened by a maid dressed in the usual drab gray dress with the white apron and white mob cap.

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

"Para. And this is Munwar. We got word from the tavern master in Vielle that your lord Pomeroy is seeking some help."

The maid smiled and curtsied again. "Will you come this way please? Then I will get the master."

"Lead on."

The maid led them to a small salon just inside and to the left of the entry. It was furnished with some of the most unique and expensive artifacts that Para had ever seen, and most of that she had never heard of. The family was wealthy beyond her imagination and had plenty more to bequeath to adventurers such as herself and Mun. If they played their cards right, the two could retire for a long time after this job.

“Will you look at this, Mun? Do we even have these trees? They look too red. How in all that’s holy did mi’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 frowned. “That’s not fair. I have an appreciation for pretty things.”

“And the coin that goes with them.”

“Hey. Watch that tone, mi’lord.”

Mun, still standing by the chair the maid had led him to, crossed his arms over his chest of leather scale armor and looked away. As he did so, a tall and slender man entered the room dressed in a purple robe worthy of a royal birthright. His hair was a bluish gray and fell to just above his shoulders.

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

Para stood. “Yes, mi’lord. All we need to know is what the bit of trouble is that you need help with.”

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

“Royal blood, are they?” Para inquired.

“Just so. Six months ago, my daughter left to stay with the Kensington Family the day before the wedding. The next morning, those guards assigned to her for protection were found outside her room, slain, and her body was nowhere to be found. She is dead, I know,” Lord Pomeroy admitted in a gruff tone, “and her spirit now haunts the 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, mi'lord?"

"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? There is a brother?" Para asked.

"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, mi'lord. In fact we'll leave the talk of reward to after the duty is done. This one has me piqued and I'll do it even if you were to offer a rusted copper."

Lord Pomeroy smiled, albeit reluctantly, as 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 from before appeared as if by magic.

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

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The two were served their meal in a private dining room on the second floor of the three story mansion, 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 to imagine the prospect all the way through her bath.

Mun didn't care for the posh surroundings as Para did, and sat ramrod straight in the high-back chair as he waited to be served, as he ate, and then as the maids took his plate to serve him dessert. The warrior didn't quite know what to make of the sweetness of the cream and fruit, which made Para realize that he must have been traveling in less than civilized situations for an even longer time than she had.

Either 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 with the fruit and tasted it as if the spoon would bite him should he take it wrong. Para nearly laughed aloud.

"So, what do you think, mi'lord Meek?"

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 girl 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, what kind of person she was, because she had known 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 but 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’s 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 her 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 going in blindly 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, mi’lord Meek?”

There was a tap on the door causing both Mun and Para to turn as it opened to reveal Ann, the maid. She stepped forward after a curtsy and offered forward 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 as the maid curtsied and left the room. “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 right 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 of the wide aisle. There was also wrought iron candelabrum along the walls and on each side of the 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 Para 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 that he would need it, and quickly. Taking her lead from the experienced warrior, Para rested her cross hand on the pommel of her long sword. As a ranger she didn't prefer tight spaces such as this because it rendered her bow useless, for the most part. 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 very slowly. She found her fingers tightening their grip on the pommel of the sword, and the back of her head began to pulse with a premonition of something that wasn't to her liking. *Pomeroy would have given us a shout if the priest weren't to be trust*, 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, halting at the sight of them. Para's frown didn't lessen. The man looked approximately thirty years of age and had tousled

brown hair and a beard and moustache that needed to be washed of the food remnants that dangled there. 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 slightly open door. The back of her head continued to throb. She motioned to the door. “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.”

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

Again, the priest 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 to reveal a man leaning on it heavily, his black hair matted with blood that dripped down his forehead and into his eyes. “S-Stop him,” he stammered.

Mun and Para moved as one, the warrior stepping into the imposter’s path as he made a mad dash for the church’s front entry. Para drew her long sword in time to deflect a thrown dagger as Mun grabbed at the imposter’s other hand to yank it hard behind him. To Para’s irritation, the man extricated himself from Mun’s hold with little difficulty. She swore under her breath and took off after the imposter, Mun on her heels.

Palming a dagger, she chucked it at the imposter, catching him in the back of the head with the pommel and sending him sprawling to the ground. 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 to help him to the nearest pew, that being the one against the far wall nearest the priest’s quarters.

He sat heavily, and she made certain his head didn’t smack back against the stone wall. She dug into her pouch for a small vial and tugged at the wax topper, spitting it away. 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 – who she assumed to be Derek the 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 pressed it against the still oozing wound. 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 wound cleaned, Para set to the task of stitching the gash closed, and grimaced when she nearly ran out of thread before the task was done. The bleeding still hadn’t stopped, so after she tied off the stitches she rinsed the rag as best she could and

pressed it against the wound again. The priest's color seemed better, which made Para release a breath 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 the church and found 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. "Yeah, see if the bed is to rights."

Mun did as requested, returning a few moments later to help Para ease the priest to his feet and guide him into the sparsely furnished quarters. They laid him gently back onto the bed, Para covering him with his single blanket as Mun went to build 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— Oh well." Turning, she exited the priest's quarters and strode toward the church's entry, her focus finding and holding on the imposter slumped to one side as he leaned back against the stone wall. His hands had been tied behind his back, his feet tied to them as well. In all honesty, the man looked as if he was 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. She tipped her head to one side, allowing the spittle to shoot past.

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

After a few moments of silence, Para could hear the lumbering steps of Mun coming from the direction of the priest’s quarters. With his 6’ 3” frame that neared 300 pounds, she was fairly certain that if his initial impression didn’t affect the imposter, the first smack from the back of his hand most certainly would.

The imposter’s gaze darted behind her and the man’s jaw clenched, but the scowl didn’t recede. Mun came to stand just behind her, not saying a word and, she was certain, offering the imposter 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. That intimidation factor of his was quite the sight to behold, as he seemed to grow and expand at least three inches and 50 pounds.

Para 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, and Para was certain that Mun now scowled at the man. He very possibly even adjusted 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 reaching out to take up the back of the man’s neck as requested. The look of terror pushed aside any anger, and the man didn’t even yell when Mun gave him a little shake.

Para swore. “Set him down, Mun. We won’t get anything from him.”

“A spell?” Mun asked as he released the imposter. He crumpled.

“Yes, a blasted spell. The minute I started questioning him, too. So not only are we dealing with a murderer of little girls, but now there’s a magic user 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, mi’lord Meek, if you don’t mind.”

Mun never did.