

I 'm training to be a Paladin, he says." Para scoffed, fists on hips as she glared up at the tavern sign, *Heckel's Hideaway*. "Thank you very much, Mun, leaving me on my own in a heaven-forsaken place like this. Don't even know where I've got myself, and there's not a doubt in my mind my few silvers won't get me to the next bit of dinner."

She scrubbed a hand through her pixie-cut red hair before squashing the felt cap onto her head and stepping up and into the over-flowing establishment. From the level of discussion that left a ringing in her ears she already knew there wouldn't be a spare bit of space even for her cap. To say nothing about a cot for a weary traveler. She should have taken the fighter up on his offer of that star sapphire in his pouch.

"Excuse me. Paladin-in-training." Para grumbled under her breath and shoved her way through the compressed bodies to the far hallway and a bit of her own space. It was hardly large enough for a mouse, but she made due. She plopped onto the floor tailor style, making certain she didn't set her bum into a wet or sticky spot. Then she slipped a silver coin from the pouch at her belt and flicked it high. Heads she slept in the stables. Tails she tried a hand of cards to get coin enough for a room and a cup.

Heads. Para grimaced and then shrugged. She would give herself a few minutes in the crowded warmth of the tavern before seeking the stables out back. One never knew what could be heard from drunken yammering, and sometimes a little bit of patience was rewarded by the slip of a nice wage-hire. Of course, the last wage-hire she stumbled upon in a tavern had resulted— Don't think of that. She frowned and tucked the coin back into her pouch.

After shouting at almost half a dozen jobs who couldn't see her for all the ale in their gullet, Para decided to call it a night. She would inquire after the missing arcanist in the morning. The answer would more than likely be the same as it had in the three towns before this one. For two weeks she had traveled from hamlet to village to burg with nothing to show for it, not one tidbit of information. The sniveling arcanist looked to have vanished.

"Bah. Not on my watch."

Para stormed from the tavern, found her horse's stall, and piled the hay in the farthest corner from the stable door. She hunkered down and snuggled into her cloak. Maybe tonight she wouldn't have dreams of werewolves and lycanthropes bursting from that sword. She shuddered and pulled her cap

over her eyes. The bay of a wolf did nothing to settle her mind as she drifted into a fitful slumber.

A velvet softness against her head jolted her awake. "Leave off, you good-for-nothing—" She snatched her cap back from her horse's grip and straightened the wrinkles and marks. "It's too early for mischief. At least let me have a mug of coffee first."

After dusting hay and the like from her britches and shirt, Para gathered up her things and ambled into the tavern. A few were up and about, but most of the crowd from the previous evening were asleep at their tables or in the hall. Whether they hadn't made it to their rooms or just hadn't bothered to acquire a room Para didn't know. She grumbled while she did her best not to step upon fingers, heads and toes on her trek from the back door to the nearest table. After pushing one man's snoring form further down the bench, Para motioned to the tavern master and dug into her pouch for one of her few coins. She hated to part with it, but a body had to eat if she was expected to continue her investigation.

"What can I be doing for you, kind traveler?"

"I will be if I can get a mug of coffee and a plate of whatever you're offering for breakfast. Is this enough? Good." The tavern master hurried off – Para felt certain that hurrying was the only speed a tavern master or barkeep knew. She yawned and scratched while promising herself a long, luxurious bath in the near future. For right now she would need to make do with the occasional splash in a river or water trough.

The tavern master returned with a steaming bowl of porridge, a mug, and a large pot of coffee. Para grinned at the man. "Such a sight for this cold soul."

"Sugar? Cream?"

"Gods no. Give it to me black." Para held her mug out with eager anticipation. The tavern master filled it to the brim and then set the pot in front of her and turned to move away. "You got a moment?"

"Of course. What can I get for you?"

"You know of Lord Pomeroy?"

"To the south? Yes, I've heard of Pomeroy."

Close enough. "You hear what happened a few weeks past?" She took a long draught of the steaming brew and closed her eyes to revel in the feeling of the warmth cascading and then overflowing into her core.

"No, I'm afraid not. We haven't had many visitors from the south. Most of my guests have ventured here from the north, the Delmar border."

Para's scrutiny zeroed in on the tavern master's smiling face, a twitch of interest tickled the back of

her brain. "A bit far south for them to hike it all the way here, aren't we?"

The tavern master shrugged. "Will there be anything else?"

"Seen or hear anything about some bit of strangeness here or there?"

"Strangeness?" The tavern master considered the question for a few moments before giving a shake of his head. "Nothing more than the usual."

"And what would 'the usual' be around here?"

"Haunting in the wood to the west, wolves attacking a sheep-farmer's flock, an owl the size of a house stealing away a chicken coop...." He shrugged again.

"Bah. I don't need to know the ranting of people who can't handle a bit of a brush waving in the wind." She motioned to the steaming mug and bowl. "Thanks for this."

He nodded, bowed, and moved away. Para frowned at her coffee and decided to ride north toward the Rommel and Delmar border. It would mean another week of traveling without means for taking a bath. At the thought of seven days of sponge bathing Para shuddered and cursed Mun for abandoning her in her hour of need. Of course she blamed Derek, too. She should have known the priest couldn't be trusted to play fair.

Para finished her porridge, wrangled a second bowl, and then polished off the entire pot of coffee before setting off. When she gauged the dangerous light weight to her coin-purse, she decided to forgo her sudden spend-thrift nature and spring for a banquet, a warm bed, and a bath that would make the gods jealous. Then she would see about hiring herself out in order to finance the rest of her trip. At this point in the investigation she would even be willing to join a circus troupe for a couple coins to jingle in her pocket. If she had long hair, she would have sold it at the drop of a hat. "I might even sell you." Her horse cast a withering glance over its shoulder and snorted.

"What I wouldn't give for a game of dice with the little shrub." She had never heard of coins meaning much to a sylvan, but Henry Sidgwick always seemed to have more than his share of coin. One of many reasons she didn't feel much in the way of guilt when she relieved him of a handful or three.

A shiver scurried up and down her spine. Para cast a glance behind her, but the road from the town of that morning was empty. Was she so bored that she needed to imagine a bit of trouble? Para snorted and adjusted her seat. The next town couldn't come soon enough. She jingled her purse and grimaced while hoping she had enough for at least a room and a bath. Maybe she could wash dishes in exchange for a meal? She had done it before and she wouldn't shirk the possibility of needing to do it again. She would even wait tables to have another hot meal in her stomach.

Why she refused Mun's offer of the star sapphire she still didn't know. "Nefa's bones...." She

would have had enough money to forgo the investigation and retire. Maybe even buy a ship and have an adventure on the high seas. She would make a grand pirate, except for the whole curse of being a woman. She scoffed.

The closer the time approached mid-day the faster Para urged her mount. She couldn't squelch her eagerness to come upon a town of some kind, and her patience wasn't doing well in holding up against that anticipation. When she trotted into a modest sized city, she wore a grin the size of a Kensington mansion gargoyle and didn't care that she looked a fool. In the span of two minutes she completed a plot of the fastest route from a reputable looking inn to the public bath-house. The mouth-watering aroma of roasted pork wafted from the inn and drew her there first, even though her shell of grime was beginning to chafe.

"Milord tavern master." She emptied the contents of her pouch onto the long bar and pushed it toward the balding innkeeper. "What are your rates for a room, a bath, and a meal?"

The innkeeper shifted his scrutiny from her to the paltry amount of coins on the counter.

"If it isn't enough, I'll wait tables."

His consideration was obvious as he cast her another glance from head to toe. Then he shrugged, swiped up the coins, and motioned for her to follow him upstairs. Para only just restrained an enthusiastic exultation before she scurried after him.

"Do you want to dine first?"

"No, I'll take the bath!"

He ushered her into the last room on the left. "The bath is in the corner. Fetch the water from the kitchens."

Then he was gone and Para couldn't get back down the stairs to the kitchen fast enough. More than ten trips later the water level was to her liking and she stripped down to her nothings with fingers that trembled with anticipation. When she caught a whiff of her own aroma, she was hard-pressed to not dive in head first. Instead, she chucked her boots, shirt, quiver, belt, socks, cloak and britches in the corner—a blue stone glittered in the light from the second story window as it clattered and then rolled across the flooring. Para gawked at it a long moment before crouching and swiping it up.

"Well I'll be Nefa's Nanny. That—" She smirked and shoved the star sapphire into her empty pouch. The next time she saw her friend she would plant a big kiss right in the middle of his face. The more witnesses the better.