

That Which Never Was

A Prologue

By Rachel M.

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Oriana woke slowly to the quiet hum of the inscribed bars and the distant glow of a lamp illuminating the cell, casting alternating shadows on the back wall. She tested the wound in her chest, placed a hand through the hole that pierced all three layers of her armor. All she found was unscarred skin, and sparkling dust on her fingers. Residue from a disintegrated diamond, all that remained of the resurrection spell that had interrupted her trip to the afterlife.

While the crater through her heart had been entirely erased, she didn't need to feel around to notice the various lasting bruises and scrapes from the battle in the town square. Rest had given her the strength to stay awake again, but certainly not enough to fend for herself.

She tried reaching for one of the bags on her side, but it wasn't there. Frantically she patted around for something, anything, but her toolbelt was gone. Six bags of holding, and everything in them, confiscated. No potions would be easing her pain tonight.

She pushed herself up against the wall behind her with a groan, and began taking in her surroundings. Charlotte was sat motionless across from her, further from the bars than Oriana. The cell was otherwise barren, and outside all that could be seen was identically barred rooms lining a stone hallway. Notably, not a single one seemed to have a visible gate.

Then, at the very front of the cell, Oriana spotted a small bottle of red liquid. She strained to reach for it, catching the cork with her fingertips and rolling it closer. She had the restraint to inspect the bottle, finding it wasn't one of hers. She swirled the liquid inside, and found it to be legitimate as far as she could tell. Besides, why would she be resurrected only to be poisoned right after?

The relief the potion granted was immediate, but not complete. Still, it was enough. She'd pushed through worse.

Throughout all of this, her cellmate had remained silent. Oriana would have expected a quip about her sorry state, or at least a greeting, but this

was unlike her. Charlotte seemed not to be resting, either. She held her hand above her head in a column of light, inspecting it. Whatever she was looking for in each segment, joint, and mechanism, Oriana couldn't know.

Oriana prompted her. "Any progress with an escape plan? If there's a lever out there, we could try that trick with your arm again."

Charlotte slowly curled her hand into a small fist. "Powerful antimagic on that metal. My limbs deanimate if I get close."

Then, silence. Charlotte's gaze did not leave her outstretched hand.

Oriana thought back to the town square, the last bits of pandemonium before a hole was put through her chest. Charlotte had seen something, *realized* something that had broken her spirit. Nothing else could explain what had happened.

Clearly, this wasn't a time for Oriana to beat around the bush. "You sound like you've *given up*."

Charlotte finally lowered her arm, and looked out into the hallway. "That's one way to put my fate, I suppose."

Oriana didn't know how to respond in a situation like this. For weeks, Charlotte had been the one to keep her going, to find a path forward in spite of seemingly undeniable evidence. Now, her pessimism felt infectious.

With a shudder, Oriana couldn't help but let her mind wander towards the guard captain's fate. "What do you think they're going to do with us?"

Charlotte finally turned her head to face her, and blinked twice. "Ori, *you're*... not in any danger."

Oriana couldn't wrap her head around the idea. "Why would *I* be different?"

"You haven't figured it out yet?"

Oriana forced a smile. "No, what don't I get?"

"That's fine, I have some... relevant experiences that clued me in." Charlotte tilted her head back towards the ceiling. "I'll walk you through it, before I say goodbye."

Finally made it to Vitros.

I'd really only picked the furthest town from the capital I could find, who would have thought this place would be so big? Another decade and this'll be a city, from the looks of it.

Some of the locals threw me a welcome party? A few of them were fans, but a worrying amount seemed to be businesspeople looking to make a good first impression. Hoping that all dies down after I settle in, I moved out here to get away from the public eye.

The Guild's moving services were top notch, as one would expect. I had always prided myself on packing light, but seeing a career's worth of belongings fill up a wagon put things in perspective. Guild must have been letting us fill an entire bunkroom with it all.

Still dreading whatever parting gift is waiting for me at my new home, so I'm electing to sleep in the tavern tonight. One benefit of being along the border is ready access to imported ale.

Took a tour around the commercial district first, a little lost at first since I couldn't find anything resembling a market. Seems everyone doing business out here has the intent to enterprise, despite how remote they supposedly are.

Picked up this notebook on a whim. Going to need something to keep myself company out here.

1

"I'm telling you, she moved like a *demon*."

"You must have hit your head on the way here."

Oriana was sitting by herself, in the furthest corner she could find among the tavern's scattered tables. This early in the day, the place was largely empty. The tavernkeep who'd shown her to a room the previous night was off somewhere else, leaving alone the only patrons who hadn't already left. Oriana, and two merchants across the seating area that had been arguing for minutes by now.

"I have the scrapes to prove it!"

"Like I said. I got into town just fine, why would a bunch of goblins be waiting for *you*?"

Oriana was getting anxious. The instructions she'd received had been very clear: "Meet in the tavern first thing in the morning, don't talk to anyone about why you're in town." She rummaged through her back left bag to find the note and double check. As quickly as she found and reread the scrap of parchment, she returned it to the chaos of demiplanar storage.

"Hells if I know. They wanted me prisoner, brought ropes and everything."

"...Right."

Wasn't this strange? She had gone outside of the Guild to find a private investigator, and now she was following directions from someone she was *hiring*. Were people who took jobs, under the table, as it were... always like this?

"And that girl! The doll!"

"Uh-huh."

She thought about Joanne. Missing for a *month* now, and no progress made by the local authorities. Everyone Oriana had spoken to at the guild

expressed discomfort at the idea of moving quickly so close to the border, and she couldn't wait for bureaucracy to catch up. So for the first time in her life, she'd taken things into her own hands.

"She *danced* through them, and they just started dropping like flies. I could swear I heard music, too."

"Struggling to keep your story straight?"

The trip had been fast, but for all she knew it had taken up precious days from her impending search. *Twenty four* days before word had reached the capital, and five days for her to cross the better half of the country.

"It all went by so fast. She chased after a few, the rest ran. Never approached me at all."

"So you've said."

But *words* were supposed to travel faster than that. In today's age, every settlement has a sending stone constantly communicating with the Guild's Board, how is it that someone like Joanne went unnoticed for so long? So it came to be that Oriana had suspected foul play, and set forth to find her adventuring partner on her own. *Ex-adventurer*, she corrected herself.

"Look at my arm! They had me tied up, I would have been stuck there if the knot wasn't so loose!"

"And you've told the guard this tall tale?"

Oriana was not one to stray outside the regulations of the Guild's monopoly on mercenary work. Unable to get in touch with Norrad, she'd picked up an illegal listing from a rogue for hire, and maintained a written correspondence for several days. But what if it was some kind of trap? What if she was being led to the same fate as Joanne?

"Of *course*. Big guy jotted it all down, slid it into a folder thicker than my leg and told me that was all he needed."

"I take it that's not why I had to pay bail?"

"He wouldn't *listen* to me! I nearly died, but all he..."

Oriana found herself pulled away both from her silent worries and the escalating debate by a brush against her leg. Something small and... *soft* had bumped into her, pressed hard enough to be felt through the shin plates of her greaves.

She checked under the table, bent sideways and pulled up the tablecloth, only to find nothing but bits of trash that had been missed by a broom. With a puzzled sigh she sat back up in her chair, only to almost jump straight out of it.

Directly in front of her, sitting at the edge of the table, was a black housecat. As Oriana caught her breath, it glared at her intently, then glanced backwards to stare as the other patrons' heated debate had begun to lead itself outside.

Oriana watched the door slam behind the agitated merchant, then re-established eye contact with the cat. Under its sheen fur it seemed to be far too lean and capable to be someone's pet, but its coat was awfully well kept for a stray. As it sat on the tablecloth, it panned over the interlocking plates of Oriana's armor, and peered down towards the equipment that was visible on her waist.

A thought occurred to Oriana. "You're a familiar, aren't you?"

"Second floor, fourth room on the right." The black cat turned to stride across the table and dropped off the far end without a sound.

Oriana took a moment to process what had just happened. The cat had just talked to her. Its voice was raspy but distinctly feminine, cold in tone but endearing in pitch. However, familiars couldn't *talk*.

Oriana got to her feet, looked across the now fully deserted dining area for any sign of her visitor. In finding none, she began to wonder if she had imagined the encounter.

No, she told herself. She was supposed to be done with doubting herself like that, disbelieving her own experiences at the slightest doubt. Joanne's repeated reassurances ran through Oriana's mind, bolstering her confidence but only worsening her momentarily forgotten anxieties on Joanne's whereabouts.

As instructed, Oriana walked to the back of the tavern.

There had to be another explanation for the cat's speech. A druid? No, they couldn't speak during their transformations, as far as she knew. She'd had to set up telepathic links with Romyar multiple times for that reason.

Oriana ascended the open stairs to the second floor of single bedrooms, pushing through a swinging door into a repetitive hallway.

Maybe it was an illusion? A powerful Image could easily be that convincing, and producing sound would be no challenge at that level. But that couldn't explain the brush against her leg.

Oriana found herself at the door she was looking for, unassuming among any of the numbered rooms she had passed.

A magical item of some sort? Oriana knew of enchanted jewelry that could improve the capacities of its wearer, they were some of her more frequent commissions for civilian clients. But the cat wasn't wearing even as much as a collar.

She glanced back towards the way she'd come, perhaps hoping to see the cat again. Maybe she'd be able to *ask* it what it is. With a sigh, Oriana had to put away her curiosity and face the task in front of her.

She'd been standing in front of the door for a few moments now, lost in thought. It took a couple of deep breaths, but she finally mustered up the courage to knock. Two quick taps, enough to alert anyone inside.

But no response came.

Oriana first thought to check that she was at the right door, perhaps she had miscounted while distracted. She pointed to each room, one, two, three, *four*. Number eight by the alternating system of segregating odds and evens. This was the right place.

There was no cat to be seen, nobody to be heard, she'd already watched everyone who'd spent a night in one of these rooms like her pass through the dining area. Nobody would be giving her any direction here.

Immediately out of options, Oriana returned to the door, and knocked once more. Again, she was met with only silence.

She thought about heading back to her own room on the floor below and checking for another letter, or maybe wandering off under the assumption that she had been stood up. She'd slain *dragons* before, wouldn't she be able to find Joanne by herself?

If Joanne was here, she wouldn't let Oriana run away like that. She imagined the things Joanne might do in this situation. Maybe she'd knock down the door, or get Norrad to check the window from outside, or have Romyar crawl under the door as an insect. She'd have taken the lead, so Oriana could sit back and wait until it was her turn to be useful.

But now Oriana was alone, no party members to rely on in an unfamiliar situation, leagues away from the stuffy workshop she had so quickly become accustomed to. Even if this social interaction felt more frightening than a fight for her life, she couldn't let herself be deterred. She had to do this herself.

Once she was ready, she tried the doorknob. The door wasn't locked.

The room itself was empty, but there were clear signs of life, compared to the otherwise identical room Oriana had been shown to last night. The upper end of the bed had its linens disheveled, but the lower half was still perfectly made. The desk that sat below the room's sole window had its chair pulled out to the middle of the floor, facing an undisturbed wardrobe. At the corner of the desk lay a worn book, splayed out with its cover facing upwards.

Oriana took a cautious step through the doorway. Maybe there was another note left for her here? She hoped she wouldn't be communicating with her private investigator through writing forever.

The slightest flutter of cloth, and something dark fell from the ceiling. It landed on the head of the bed with enough force to create a breeze throughout the room, sending Oriana's parted hair into disarray.

Years of practice kicked into action, and the retired adventurer found herself quick on the draw. In a single motion, the gauntlet on her right forearm sprung into a shield, and her other hand slipped the handle of her flail from its holster. Immediately the chain fell to the floor, the sphere on its end floating inches above the wooden planks.

The dark shapeless fabric held out a hand from somewhere within. "Woah, lady! You oughta learn what *discreet* means."

Oriana watched the mass settle into the shape of a cloak as another hand went to adjust an oversized hood. "Who..." She couldn't find the words for anything else, adrenaline still rushing through her combat-ready stance.

"I guess I shoulda been more specific. I hope all that clanking around didn't catch anyone's attention."

As the figure pulled her hood back enough to reveal her face, Oriana finally got a good look at the person who had fallen from the ceiling.

Her hair was a pale blonde, tied up in two large pigtails that disappeared into her cloak. Her bangs were straight and combed to one side, but her pigtails were coiled with the volume of industrial springs, pressed into a solid mass by the close quarters of her hood.

Then Oriana saw it.

The strange girl's neck was segmented, made up of two joints under the chin and at the collarbone. One of the joints was blackened metal, granting the appearance of a choker if you squinted a little. Somewhere underneath the front clasp of the hood, white ruffled fabric was poking through, hints of a second layer of clothing below the first.

Her hands too, were distinctly mechanical. Each knuckle caved inwards to an exposed joint, her palm split in half for the mobility of her thumb, her wrist narrowed to an obscured sphere.

The pattern continued across the rest of her body. Oriana could see glimpses of the girl's forearm flaring out at the elbow, her covered knee pinching her cloak. She had a minuscule figure, her shoulders nearly concave with the way her cloak failed to find purchase upon them. Even sitting, Oriana was sure that the girl couldn't have been much more than five feet tall.

Beginning to piece together a theory, Oriana looked back towards the mechanical girl's face. Her features were soft and diminutive, the highly malleable faceplate far too uniform in color compared to ordinary skin. Her

eyes were slightly too large for her head, their surface as reflective as glass, their irises an impossible shade of lavender.

But her *gaze* was something else.

Despite her otherwise neutral expression, she scanned over Oriana with the intensity of a hawk. In complete silence she individually examined each piece of equipment being worn or held. Fully contrasting her casual tone from moments prior, her demeanor carried a quiet sense of deadly seriousness. When their eyes finally met, she nodded her head very slightly, but gave nothing else away.

"Place's empty, and the owner's running inventory in the cellar. We should be fine."

Oriana was broken out of her trance by the voice of the cat from before. She turned to watch it slink through the door she had left open and nudge it shut with both front paws. Then it pushed itself up the doorframe, wedged itself between the doorknob and the adjacent dresser, and turned the deadbolt with its teeth.

The cloaked automaton tapped once on the window, spinning Oriana back around. "I'm worried about someone on the street." She peered out the glass, careful not to make herself fully visible from below. "Looks like we're clear though. Got lucky this time." Her voice was off in the slightest way, but not stiff in tone, it was shockingly expressive. There was a slightly ethereal quality to each sound, like noise created by illusory magic.

Oriana couldn't contain her confusion any longer, even if she didn't know where to start. "Who... *what* are you two?"

The automaton kicked her feet out, resting one on top of the chair in the middle of the room, and the other crossed over the first. Her shoes were as dark and bland as the rest of her attire. "You hired us, remember? We're supposed to find that paladin of yours."

Oriana was incredulous. "You. You're the private investigator I hired."

"And you're a master enchanter with a thirty seventh floor workshop, who retired from guild work after eight years of adventuring, and now you're looking for one of your old party members that's gone missing." The

automaton raised up a hand and rested her cheek on it. "Are we all caught up now?"

Oriana shook her head. "You're an... animated servant. Wartime magic repurposed for domestic use, more expensive in practice than hiring an actual person. I was a *consultant* for the fine motor controls of the attraction holding your fingers together."

The automaton frowned. "So I've heard."

The cat, clearly part of a package deal, leapt silently onto the bed and stood beside the automaton wordlessly.

Oriana slumped her shoulders, let off the tension of her stance she had only just begun to notice. "You aren't supposed to be so, so... *sentient*. Animated armors and the like struggle with anything beyond basic commands."

The automaton grinned and closed her eyes for a moment. "We all have our secrets." She reached out to the desk and pulled the disheveled book off of it, then folded the corner of a page and placed it somewhere inside her cloak in one smooth motion.

After all the years she'd spent in the field, Oriana had seen too many novelties to stay shell shocked for long. "Alright, then? What-uh, what, next from here?" She knocked her shield back into its sheath, and began rolling up the chain of her flail back into the bag it had deployed from.

The automaton slid forward off the bed and undid the latch on the window. "We'll start at the paladin's place, look around for a lead. It's just outside the south end of town, can't miss it."

"Passed it on my way in. Makes... sense to me." Oriana finished returning the length of her flail to its bag, and clicked its handle into place in a holster that held closed the opening to the weapon's demiplanar holding area.

The cat jumped onto its compatriot's shoulder from the bed without disturbing the cloak it perched upon.

The automaton undid a latch somewhere within her dense layers, and pulled out a well-used book. "Great. See you there." As she flipped

through the pages with purpose, Oriana realized quickly that the grafted pages and arcane scribbles were telltale signs of a wizard's spellbook.

"Okay?" Things were moving very quickly for Oriana again. "Could I at least have your names?"

The automaton looked up from her spellbook, opened to a page near the front. "Oh, I'm..." She paused, looking off into the distance for a heartbeat. "You can call me Charlotte."

Oriana held out her hand. "Nice to meet you, Charlotte. My name's Oriana."

Charlotte stared at the gesture, eventually realizing what was being offered. She shifted her spellbook into a single hand and clasped her other into Oriana's. "Oh, and this is Kettle." Charlotte nodded her head towards the black cat on her shoulder. "She doesn't bite."

"That's a lie." Kettle immediately corrected.

"Nice to meet you too, Kettle." Oriana considered prompting the cat for a handshake as well, but decided against it, if only for logistical reasons.

Charlotte turned to swing open the window with her free hand, then reached over her shoulder to place her palm on Kettle's back. "Right then, we'll see you there."

Charlotte began incanting a spell, placing her spellbook hand on each of her shoulders, then her forehead. In a single motion, the final stroke of the invisibility spell rendered both her and Kettle immediately imperceptible, at least to a normal pair of eyes.

Oriana focused her talents, and watched their combined silhouette pass through the window with impressive grace. They climbed down the wall and out of sight, but not before pushing the window closed from the outside.

Just as quickly as she had been thrust into a bizarre meeting, Oriana found herself alone again.

She stood there, thoughts bouncing around her head, trying to make sense of what exactly she had signed herself up for. Surely she shouldn't

take anything as strange anymore, how many times by now had she had to face something that was new to her?

But she could never have imagined that a creation of her craft could behave in such a way. A fully mechanical person, a *wizard* no less. Oriana hadn't been very involved in the production of animated servants, she was brought on only briefly between assignments from the Guild. Was it possible that the requisite discoveries had been made in such a short time, all without her hearing about any of it? Why would something, *someone* like that be *here* of all places, hiding behind anonymous letters and working for coin?

Oriana looked down at her wrist to see that it was still well before noon. She could spend all day standing here if she wasn't careful, trying to make sense of what she had just experienced.

Eventually she got going.

All I asked for was some quiet retreat on the northern border, and somehow in the time it took me to travel, someone at the Guild had an entire estate built for me. This place is huge, far bigger than one person could possibly live in. I keep finding more servant corridors and barricading them. I can take care of myself, thank you very much.

Oh, and the statue in the foyer. (An entire room for your shoes! Why!) At least it was small enough for me to move. Not interested in hearing about whoever they got to carve it, and certainly won't be answering any questions about my distaste for it.

Unpacking went by smoothly, at least. I thought I had more stuff than could fit in a house, but everything fit cleanly in just two rooms. Which is good, because this place seems to come with extravagant furniture I'll never use. In what world do I need a dining table with eleven chairs.

Bedroom, too. Feels like I'm sinking in quicksand on this thing. Heavily considering pulling out a bedroll and sleeping on the floor. Maybe on a rug, work my way up to some sense of luxury.

One step at a time, like always.

2

The path up to Joanne's house was overgrown with weeds. Had it not been for the gravel laid haphazardly to guide the way, the fields may have overtaken it altogether. An offshoot of the main road out of the south side of town, far enough to be out of earshot, but close enough to remain in sight.

As Oriana approached the hilltop manor, she found her eyes drawn to the distant Arcs. Unobscured by clouds on a day like this, the pale and blotchy rings framed the building ahead like the halo of a celestial. It didn't take long for perspective to drift them out of sight behind the shingled roof.

Oriana heard them before she saw them, before turning the last bend of the winding trail.

"...your idea to get some practice in the field, wasn't it?" Charlotte was up ahead.

"Yeah, but, this ain't normal. Some psychopath made this one. Must be cursed." Kettle was clearly straining in her voice.

Oriana found them at the front door to the manor, attempting to make their way inside. Charlotte was down on one knee, which Kettle was using to stand her hind legs on. One of her front paws propped her up against the door, and the other was firmly applying pressure to a turning tool hanging out of the front door's lock. Wedged in her mouth was an unremarkable lockpick, being manipulated with shocking precision.

Charlotte shook her head. "It's mundane, I already checked. We can get you some spare tumblers to work through again."

"This isn't like any of those." Each time Kettle spoke, she had to pause her attempt and hold the pick in place with her nose. "This is the work of a devil."

Oriana thought it best not to interrupt, but made no attempt to be quiet in her steps. She glanced up at the plate above the entrance, reading: "J. GAUTZELIN."

Charlotte spotted her first, furrowing her brow as she looked back towards the lock. "We're officially wasting time now, think you're close?"

Kettle dropped off the wall with a frustrated huff and placed the lockpick into Charlotte's hand. "If you think it's so easy, why don't you give it a try?"

Even if the two seemed disappointed in Kettle's results, Oriana thought it wildly impressive for a cat to perform such fine movements. Even Romyar couldn't do comparable feats while transformed.

As Charlotte got to work on the lock herself, Kettle noticed she was being watched. "Got something to say, lady?"

"Oh! Uh," Oriana wanted nothing less than to be seen as rude. "I just thought that was really cool what you were doing there. Can't be easy to do with paws and teeth."

"Don't come easy, but the principles aren't that outlandish." Kettle walked between Charlotte's legs to get a better view of the progress being made. "At least when you aren't up against the greatest home security known to man."

Oriana and Kettle both watched Charlotte fiddle with the lock. Seconds of quiet rattling turned into well over a minute.

Charlotte whispered to herself. "*holy shit.*"

Kettle jumped back up onto Charlotte's knee. "I **told** you! Something's not right with this door."

Charlotte refused to be deterred, leaning even closer to the keyhole. "Who'd *make* something like this? Pins aren't supposed to *do* that."

Oriana looked off towards the town, panning over the graveyard on the opposite side of the main road. It was small, a few dozen headstones, a clear sign of the settlement's age. She took a moment to mull over the potentially rhetorical question that was asked.

Eventually she found her answer. "Last winter, I think, six or seven months ago now. Norrad sent me a deadbolt lock as a gift, probably sent Joanne one as well. He always had very strong opinions on security."

Kettle pulled away from the spectacle to prompt her for more. "What was this Norrad like?"

"Halfling, about three and a half feet." Oriana held a hand out flat in front of her waist. "The kind of thief with big dreams of making a difference, not just lining his pockets. Turned out there are in fact worse monsters out there than the rich old men he didn't like." Oriana shook her head. "Helping people was the only thing keeping him and Joanne from each other's throats."

"Burglary isn't heroism." Kettle wore what Oriana assumed was the feline equivalent of a frown. "Some of us resort to it for survival."

"I can't speak for him." Oriana found it difficult to hold a deep conversation over the sounds of furious clanking and scraping. "But I can vouch for his skill with a lockpick. Maybe we can find another—"

Then with a *clunk*, the lock gave way, and Charlotte shoved open the door.

As she stood up, she stretched her arms completely backwards in celebration, far beyond a normal range of motion. "Got it." She looked down towards Kettle. "Were you timing me?"

Kettle blinked. "No? Why would I?"

"Shame." Charlotte was the first to step inside. "Pockets always timed me."

The foyer was spacious, and empty. Off in the back right corner, a stone statue had been turned to face away from the door. To the left, a hallway to the rest of the house, flanked by a wall hung head from a hydra. Next to the door, a pile of untouched envelopes had formed directly underneath a slot in the wall at about chest height.

As Charlotte went straight to the letters, Oriana passed her to look at the statue.

Unmistakably, it was of Joanne. It was embellished, far less modest in attire and far more enthusiastic in expression. But it was her. The base had been slid across the room, creating a clear trail in the floor where the wood's

finish had been torn up. There were growing cobwebs between the statue's arms and the walls.

"Oriana?" Charlotte's rustling of paper stopped suddenly.

Oriana spun in place as soon as she was addressed. "Yes!" Being called her name was an improvement.

Charlotte gestured towards the mess of envelopes as she closed the front door. "Could you gather these up, pick a room for us to get our findings together? Kettle and I are going to make a couple laps first and see if the place is clear. Or see if anyone else's been in or out recently."

"How would you be able to tell?"

Kettle so far had been sniffing around the room, but perked up now to answer. "Someone's been through here, somewhere between one or two weeks ago. A man, I think. Too long ago for me to try and pinpoint who, but he definitely took off his shoes here." Kettle finally turned towards Oriana. "Rest of the room just smells like you."

Oriana was stunned by the efficacy of bringing a cat to an investigation like this. "You're sure of all that?"

As she was talking to Kettle, Charlotte wandered off deeper into the manor.

Kettle swished her tail back and forth. "Wouldn't swear on it. But it's worth checking other points of entry."

Oriana shrugged and began coalescing the letters. None of them stood out at a glance, a heap of solicitations and requests for interviews and the like. As an array of shapes and sizes, carrying them altogether was difficult. She settled for taking multiple trips.

As she quickly realized the other two were long gone by now, Oriana looked around the first floor for somewhere to place her haul. She passed through an enormous kitchen, only perhaps a quarter of its counter space having seen any use. There was a storeroom in the back, holding dry ingredients and liquor in lieu of a dedicated cellar. A dining room with every single chair stacked along one wall, and its table pushed to the side. A

shredded training dummy was brought to the middle of the room, the floor covered in scratches.

Finally, she found the living room. An ordinary table had been pulled close to a comfortable chair, disconnected from the others by the fireplace. Judging from the ignored dishes at the table's center, it had served as Joanne's dining arrangements.

Oriana dropped off her clump of letters and ferried the stacks of plates to the kitchen, then began doing the same bringing the rest of the letters back to the living room. After her third trip, she noticed something peculiar.

On the end table next to the fireplace, wedged between a pair of couches, a book had been skewered through its front cover. Getting closer, it became clear that the book was open to a specific page, face down, pinned by a rather ornate dagger. Oriana tried pulling on it gently, but it was embedded in solid wood. The cover read: "Tyr's Teachings: Through the Ages".

Less gently but still carefully, Oriana began extracting the dagger. She held down the book to keep it from lifting along with the steel, and with only a couple attempts the deed was done. The dagger itself was ergonomic despite its embellishment, weighty despite its size. On its hilt was an unmistakable signature. Silvermane, locally based here in Vitros, and nationally renowned.

The page the book was turned to featured a visual timeline of followers Tyr had declared his champion, beginning nebulously in the time before the stars fell and outlining strict dates in the modern era. Flipping through the rest of the book, it seemed to be an outsider's recount of the church of Tyr, purely historical in tone. An outlier among some of the written doctrine that occupied a nearby bookshelf.

Oriana placed both items on the table where she'd been collecting the letters. As she did, she spotted Kettle perched on the railing of the stairs at the back of the living room.

Kettle reported her findings dryly. "Every window's locked, back door in the dining room's blocked up by furniture. Whoever came through here used the front door."

Oriana put her hands on her hips. "That's reassuring, I suppose."

Kettle hopped from the railing, to a chair, and then to the table. She sniffed around its surface without looking up at Oriana. "You've been busy down here. The two of us have been mostly upstairs."

A question occurred to Oriana as she watched the cat inspect her work. "What do I smell like?"

Kettle opened her mouth to speak, but hung on the first syllable. As she squinted at the pile of letters, it became clear answering the question wasn't as straightforward as assumed. "You smell like... a human woman. And metal."

Oriana was curious now. "Could you tell me apart from another woman in armor?"

"Of course." Kettle answered instantly this time.

"How?"

Kettle stepped closer to Oriana and gave her waist a sniff. "You... smell different. Everyone does."

"How do I smell different?" For a moment, Oriana was worried she was about to lead the talking cat in circles.

But instead, Kettle went quiet. She sat in place and looked up to the ceiling, nodding her head back and forth every so often. "...I need to think about this."

Oriana realized she might have barged into something sensitive. "Oh, no, it's fine! I didn't mean to pry."

Kettle shook her head and got to her feet. "I've never thought about this before. I need some time to find the words."

"Of course!" Oriana gave a little bow.

Kettle gestured with a paw towards the stairs. "There's an office up there, another pile of letters. Couple other things we want you to see too."

Oriana recomposed herself with a deep breath. "Lead the way, then."

Kettle raised her brow as she trotted away. "Try not to get lost."

The office was a mess, which at this point came as little surprise. A selection of letters had been sprawled out over a desk with no particular features. An inkwell was spilled over the front part of the desk and its quill had fallen to the floor. The ink had been dry long enough to be gathering dust.

Kettle batted at a basket behind Oriana. "Some crumpled drafts Charlotte didn't get to."

Oriana went and rummaged through an assortment of unopened envelopes to fish out each of the balled up pieces of paper, then laid them out at the desk.

They were unfinished letters, each of them addressed to Oriana.

~~*Ori, I've been keeping something*~~

~~*Ori I need to*~~

~~*Ori, I'm sorry I never*~~

~~*Dear Oriana,*~~

~~*I regret to inform you that I am having a midlife crisis at twenty seven, please refer to*~~

~~*Ori, do you remember back when we snuck int*~~

~~*Ori, I wouldn't be here without you, but*~~

Oriana,

~~*If it wasn't for you, I'd still be an uptight piece of*~~

Oriana.

If I hadn't met you, I'd probably still be rotting away in a chapel, or maybe doing sermons for a bunch of kids who couldn't care less. Risking our lives together was the best thing that ever happened to me.

~~*I don't want to think about where you'd be if we never*~~

I left you, because I needed time. Losing Romyar weighed on all of us, and I picked a rather dramatic way to grieve.

But I'm still grieving.

~~*In the years we spent together I was able to hide fro*~~

I don't want to talk about it like this. Could you find time in your schedule for me to visit?

Yours,

That was all the letters read. Clearly, none of them had ever been sent.

Oriana could only speculate on what had been omitted, or why she had never received anything even resembling a letter like this. Were these written before or after they had last spoken over a sending stone this spring? Was Joanne not able to communicate that she was in danger? Why wouldn't she have told-

"You can pocket those for now, we'll go through it all together." Kettle called out from the upstairs hallway.

Oriana gathered up everything that looked important. It all had to fit together somehow, in the end.

Next after the office, Kettle pawed open a door to what would have ordinarily served as a bedroom. Instead, it held a dazzling assortment of containers, safes, and chests, each with a piece of paper tacked on its front. Along the closest wall stood a mannequin wilting under the weight of Joanne's first set of plate armor. This was where her collection ended up.

Sitting on the floor, Charlotte appeared to be fiddling with one of the chests, trying to get it open. It was engraved with a silver mural depicting a ship being dragged under the ocean waves. Where a latch would normally be, concentric circles spun back and forth to form a combination lock. Spaced evenly on each metal ring were embossed historical depictions of a moon.

Kettle was the first to speak up. "Find anything yet?"

Charlotte responded without interrupting her task. "All of them have been empty so far."

Oriana figured she ought to have seen this coming. "Joanne liked to collect these whenever we had the opportunity to carry them home. They're all empty, trust me."

"We don't know that."

"**I** know that." Oriana considered how to make her point heard. "These aren't for storage."

"Better to be thorough." Charlotte was undeterred from her mission.

Oriana craned her neck to peer over Charlotte's shoulder from the door, only to be met with immediate bafflement. "Is that why you've turned the solution backwards?"

Charlotte froze, hands still on the chest's dials. After several seconds of tense silence, and without acknowledging the backside of the paper under her nose, she offered up an excuse. "...I know what I'm doing."

Kettle yawned as loud as she could muster and brushed past Oriana's leg. "Leave her to it. She works fast."

Oriana's words caught in her throat as she thought to protest. It wasn't worth it, so long as the strange pair was overall a boon. Still, as she closed the door, she couldn't help but feel doubt over the price she'd paid for their services.

At the end of the hallway, two doors led to the master and a guest bedroom. The guest bedroom door was ajar, so it was visited first.

At least, Oriana had assumed it to be a guest bedroom. Inside, the floor was lined wall to wall with crates and barrels, some nailed shut and others missing a lid. From what was exposed, it appeared that most of the storage was dedicated to spare equipment, rations, and most bizarrely, wrapped gifts. Those too large to fit in crates had been stacked in a corner, some ripped just enough to check their contents, others untouched.

Kettle leapt up onto one of the crates and nodded towards the unreachable end of the room. "Back here. Something strange, had to move some stuff to get to it."

Oriana stood on her toes at the edge of the walkable floor, trying to get a better view. "What is it?"

"Charlotte climbed over, but that works too I guess." Kettle dropped into the small crevice between the boxes and the wall, leaving only the end of her tail visible. "Someone was held captive here."

Oriana had her eighth double take of the morning so far. "You're sure?"

"In this corner, for at least a day. There's bits of frayed rope tucked into the trim. Someone swept up afterwards, got the crates back into place. But the cleanup wasn't thorough."

Oriana took a step back from the clutter. "Why would Joanne tie someone up in her house?"

Kettle jumped back up out of the room's depths. "Beats me, but it gets weirder. This was the same guy that came in the front door. I'm sure of it."

"So someone sneaks in, gets caught, and bound up here?" The theory made enough sense, but it didn't feel right to Oriana.

"If only." Kettle's brow furrowed. "This is old enough to be a few weeks ago, maybe a month. *Before* when I smelled his boots."

Oriana couldn't make sense of it. "You said in the foyer it was mostly faded, how are you so sure about this one?"

Kettle hopped off the crates and walked back into the hallway. "Guy was here a while. Just trust me on this one."

The last room of the house, the master bedroom, looked the most lived in of all. The bed was enormous, most of its linens kicked to the floor, its canopy tied up as tightly as possible. Two wardrobes flanked an empty vanity along the left wall, each with its contents poured onto a rug. The right wall was lined with sparsely populated bookshelves, with the negative space filled with a handful of spare short swords on display. Next to the head of the bed, a nightstand held a candle stand overflowing with wax.

Kettle climbed up the side of the bed and panned across the room. "Charlotte didn't make it this far, I had to pry her away for the storage room. Nothing stood out to me my first time through here, though."

Oriana waded through the upturned wardrobes, finding mostly comfortable plainclothes and padded underclothes for plate armor. Along the bookshelf was almost exclusively fiction, sorted haphazardly into two major groups. As she passed by the bed, she noticed Kettle pawing the mattress in alternating motions out of the corner of her eye.

Oriana decided to ask what she hoped was obvious. "This room smells like her, I assume. Will you be able to recognize her again based on it?"

Kettle looked up at her without pause. "Naturally. I'll keep a... nose out."

Oriana pulled open the nightstand's drawer, hoping that this wouldn't be the last of their leads.

In the drawer was a journal. Or more accurately, half of one.

I'm not cut out for this.

I thought maybe by moving out beyond the Guild's reach, placing myself directly between an extraplanar hotspot and a settlement, I'd have something to do with myself. But no, Vitros's people have that covered. Mysterious ruins that demons wander out from every few months, visible from a major trade route? Handled. Ordinary. The cost of doing business.

This place should be far from mundane, shouldn't it? Already I've been shown the work of a beastfolk smith, introduced to dwarven exiles, bought parchment from an old man even shorter than Norrad. Somehow, this town makes it all so uninteresting. Fantastical tales whittled down to storefronts and customer service.

I'm starting to get used to the house, I think. Far too big for one person but I've consolidated down to the rooms that matter. And if there's one good thing that came out of the Guild furnishing the place, it's the library that came with it. Enough literature here to keep me occupied for years, if quality keeps up with the first few novels I pulled.

Thus concludes the storied life of Joanne Gautzelin, savior of the southern coast and champion of Tyr. Rotting away on a couch, reading books she didn't even buy.

Maybe I'll get a dog or something.

3

Oriana read the entirety of the clipped journal in the living room, on the chair by the now cluttered table.

First she skimmed, found the point where the pages ended abruptly. Immediately following an entry where Joanne resolved to set out on a lengthy expedition, the binding had been sliced cleanly through its approximate center. The back cover, and whatever pages came after the excision, were missing.

Starting from the beginning, and joined by Kettle quietly pawing through a pile of letters taller than her, Oriana pried into Joanne's private confidant.

The passages described unpacking, growing pains, the house they were now in. First impressions of the townspeople, anxieties and concessions made to local businesses. A fight with a Guild representative, and a tense call home.

Oriana had been on the other end of that sending stone, that spring. She remembered vividly Joanne's slew of apologies, and the old memories they shared together to ease the mood. The journal shed no light on what remained unsaid during the conversation, but it cataloged in excruciating detail the depressive spiral it preceded.

Near the Journal's end, a handful of entries described a run-in with a novice necromancer, intent on resurrecting a loved one. After the trial, a single passage spoke of preparations for a trip, and dryly stated that Joanne and Tyr were no longer on speaking terms. And then it ended, cut short by the precision of a well placed knife.

Oriana placed the half-journal down on the table with all the rest and sank into her seat. The journal revealed nothing of substance, just somber introspection and further questions. Who had taken the time to censor such a personal account, and why?

As Oriana brought her hand back from the journal, she felt it brush against fur.

Kettle was looking down at her from the table's edge. "I can't tell you what you smell like."

Oriana had no idea what had prompted the return to the topic, but she sat up straight to reassure Kettle regardless. "That's fine, really."

Kettle put a paw out onto the chair, over Oriana's shoulder. "But you can tell me what color this upholstery is."

"Sure?" Oriana touched it herself, as if it might be somehow different than expected. "It's olive, I think, maybe a little darker. Why, are you colorblind?"

Kettle retreated to the table. "Only partially."

Oriana looked back and forth between the chair and the cat. "I don't quite follow."

The black cat looked out towards the nearest window. "The magic that made me like this, it... didn't just give me the ability to talk."

Oriana nodded along. "Presumably. You can't teach pets to do tricks like you've done."

Kettle paced in a circle, jerking her tail back and forth as she went. "When I broke that rock, it infused me with this language of yours. In an instant I was implanted with words for colors I cannot see, and flavors I cannot taste. I understand them as concepts, as descriptors. But I have no way of experiencing them as I am." Finally she stopped, and laid down at the center of her route.

Oriana considered reaching out to comfort the talking cat, but the gesture felt strange when offered to a person she had just met. "That must be upsetting."

"Not really." Kettle arched her back and stretched in place. "Goes both ways. As much as my sight struggles to differentiate the shades of your world, your sense of smell can't compare to mine. To me, there are countless turquoises and beiges in the spectrum of my strongest sense."

Oriana found herself floored by the sudden burst of deep conversation coming from an ordinary looking cat. She did her best to follow along.

"But I was given *your* language. I have no words to communicate the ways my experience differs from yours. When you ask how you smell, all I can do is point at a painting, with all its nuance, and call it 'a portrait'." Kettle finished her speech by turning away from the distant window and staring directly into Oriana's eyes. "A human woman."

Oriana took it all in, and formed the only response she could manage. "You're awfully... *philosophical*, for a cat."

Kettle looked away again, this time towards the stairs. "I'm a lot of things that cats aren't supposed to be."

Oriana could sense the melancholy in her voice without being able to pinpoint its cause. This time, she decided to press the issue and try to contribute. "Could you relate me to other things? You said I smelled like metal."

Kettle rolled onto her side, away from Oriana. "You're wearing armor."

"Right, sure." Oriana put a hand on her seat again. "Consider this chair. I described it as 'olive', which is a color named after another thing. If I had to describe a portrait without mentioning color or technique, I might compare it to other artists, or other people."

"I see." Kettle went still. "Okay."

Perhaps Oriana had taken it too far. "Or maybe not. You've said your peace."

Kettle climbed to her feet and walked towards the edge of the table once more. She gave Oriana's shoulder a single sniff. "You smell... a little like deer."

Oriana didn't quite know what to expect from the experiment. "Deer?"

Kettle sniffed again. "Slightly. More than other humans, not nearly enough to be mistaken for a forest animal."

"Anything else?"

"Basil, but if it was like birch bark. It's subtle."

Oriana tried to stifle a laugh. "I can't possibly know what that means."

"Well, yeah." Kettle tilted her head to the side. "We've been over this."

It seemed to Oriana that the mood had been lifted, if Kettle was back to her curt self.

But Kettle wasn't done. "And the moment before Charlotte casts a spell. There's a certain quality to the air when it happens, and it's always a little like that up close to you."

Oriana patted at her gauntlet and circlet. "I am covered head to toe in enchanted items, maybe that's why?"

"Maybe." Kettle returned to what appeared to be a reserved spot on the table. "But Charlotte has a couple, and they aren't like that. Something about you."

"Hm." Oriana had a guess that had to do with magic's tendency to act up in her presence. But she wasn't interested in bringing up that part of her past unprompted. Hopefully, these two hadn't commented on her eyes yet because they saw it simply as an oddity, and didn't know the stories behind them.

Eventually, Charlotte emerged from the upstairs collection room and descended to the living room. When she reached the rest of the group, she triumphantly slammed a fountain pen onto the table.

Oriana had seen the pen before. "What's that for?"

"It's a starting point." Charlotte declared. "In the bedroom nightstand, there was this pen, but nothing to write on *anywhere* in the room. I propose that whoever came through here most recently confiscated a diary of some sort, in order to hide something important."

Oriana sighed, but Kettle beat her to the explanation. "We have it here. You're a little behind."

"Oh." Charlotte picked up the half-journal. "Huh."

The three of them went through its contents together, with Charlotte reading it aloud. The act made Oriana uncomfortable, invading Joanne's

privacy like this. But someone had gone out of their way to censor its contents, and that made it important.

Charlotte fingered between two specific pages. "You missed something."

Oriana stood up to take a look.

"Here, between these entries. The numbering skips by two." Charlotte felt between the fold of the open book. "A page was torn out here, by hand. Bits of the margin are still left."

Oriana skimmed through the passages to either side. It was between Joanne's encounter with a necromancer, and testifying against him three days later. "Another redaction?"

"Different, I think." Charlotte flipped to the end of the book where the binding was cut. "Whoever did this one had precise tools, precise enough that if they did both, they could leave no trace besides the numbering."

Oriana considered the discrepancy. "You think two different people did it?"

"It's possible." Charlotte set the journal back on the table. "We could assume that they were done at different times, without jumping to a full conclusion. But even that isn't assured."

Oriana rolled her eyes. "*Anything's* possible, really."

"It's not all that unlikely that this was left for the express purpose of it being found. Why not take the whole thing?" Charlotte flipped it onto its cover, exposing the final page. "Why leave us with this entry in particular?"

Oriana sat back in her chair to follow the train of thought.

Charlotte continued. "None of your paladin's immediate equipment is here. Not her armor, sword, pack, or boots. But her *bedroll* is. In storage, a couple sacks of adventuring gear were returned by shoving them back in a crate, along with some unused dry rations."

Charlotte tapped the journal. "If we're supposed to believe that she left on the weeks-long voyage described here and never came back, the evidence doesn't line up. Instead, she returned, unloaded, and left again,

packing light. She left her journal here, and the second half is missing because there was *more* in it. I'm certain of this much."

Oriana repeated back the highlight of the theory. "She left her bedroll."

Charlotte smiled down at her. "Interesting, isn't it? She wasn't planning to be gone more than a day."

Oriana's thoughts drifted towards the darker chapters of the journal as she picked out the dagger from before. "Or she wasn't planning on coming back."

Charlotte stared intently at the weapon. "It's possible. What do you have there?"

"Stabbed through an academic book on Tyr." Oriana tapped it with the tip of the blade from across the table. "Journal confirmed it, something happened between them."

"A falling out of religious proportions. Can't be a coincidence, but can't be the full story either. There's other actors at play."

Oriana nodded to Kettle. "The visitor, I assume?"

Kettle's brow furrowed and her tail dropped to her side. "Doesn't make *sense*. Guy spends a day tied up in a corner, then some time later strolls in the front door with the courtesy to take off his shoes."

Charlotte gestured towards the foyer. "That door, too. I can't imagine anyone getting through that without giving up and smashing a window."

Oriana spoke up. "You got through just fine."

Charlotte beamed and stood as tall as she could manage. "I'm not just *anyone*. Best non-destructive entry on the southern coast, whether it be mundane or arcane security." She returned to her normal hunched posture. "Whoever came through here must have had a key."

Oriana didn't find it pertinent to argue. "If you're sure. Do we have anything else?"

Charlotte bent over the table. "How about the letters?"

Kettle batted at the closest envelope. "All junk. I think we can safely conclude this paladin lady was not the social type."

"That's it, then." Charlotte walked to the center of the floor.

Oriana considered bringing up the crumpled drafts, but decided against it. They contained nothing of substance, and their tone was already a known fact. Joanne was troubled, and kept it to herself. Put like that, it wasn't really much of a revelation at all to Oriana.

Charlotte paced across the living room. "No answers yet, but plenty of questions. You were right to get some help with this. Someone's already hoping to lead us astray."

Oriana found the activity infectious and got to her feet as well. "What next? We could ask around to see if anyone saw Joanne return briefly, or track down a spare key with whoever built this manor."

Charlotte put a hand under her chin. "That's a quick way to get a target put on your back."

Kettle piped up as well. "The shadows are safer. We'd sooner repeat what we've done here with every suspect's house in town."

Charlotte pointed at Oriana. "Does anyone know you've come out here?"

Oriana put her hands on her hips. "My excuse is that I put in a commission with Silvermane, and asked if I could see him on short notice. We've worked together over correspondence in the past, and now I'm to have a tour of his smithy later this afternoon. I suppose that would mean him, his workers, and anyone they've told. One of them spotted me in the tavern last night and we struck up a conversation."

Charlotte opened her mouth to speak, but Oriana cut her off to continue. "Why does that *matter*, though? I traveled nearly unannounced, like you asked. Now that I'm here, what could possibly go wrong that's worse than the potential of getting accounts from the people Joanne spoke to in town?"

Charlotte went silent, then walked towards the fireplace seating, turning to hide her face from Oriana. "This is non-negotiable for us."

Oriana wasn't going to take no for an answer here. She expected people to live up to the commitment of an accepted job, especially at the price range advertised. "Why?"

Charlotte leaned forward onto the couch and hung her head, ponytails drooped out of sight but freed from her hood. "It just isn't."

Oriana crossed her arms and tapped the plating of her gauntlets. "You owe me an explanation, at least."

The better half of a minute passed in silence before Charlotte offered anything more. "We're professionals, and we've made enemies. I can't afford to let them find me."

Oriana remained unconvinced. Such a fact could hardly be considered a surprise to anyone with a list of exploits to their name. She held her ground wordlessly. It was self-evident the justification given wasn't enough.

Kettle was the first to make a sound, dropping from the table and trotting across the floor. She made no attempt to move quietly, despite having demonstrated her ability to do so in the past. She climbed onto the back of the couch and looked up at her partner. Oriana could have sworn she saw the cat's mouth move, but any words spoken were left an inaudible whisper from across the room.

Charlotte gripped the upholstery with enough force for a metal finger to pierce into cotton stuffing. "There's a fate worse than **death** waiting for me." Her voice raised noticeably in volume, indicating that the primary emotion was not fear, but *fury*. "*There used to be more of us*. If I slip up now, we'll never find them."

Oriana's eyes widened as she read between the lines. "A fate worse than death. An animated servant working as a career criminal, hiding behind anonymous listings. The company that made you, they want you *back*, don't they?"

Charlotte nodded slowly, grip tightening even further, squeezing out tufts of cotton.

Oriana took a deep breath, resolute without having to consider anything besides the girl's anguish. "I won't let them have you. If anyone like that shows up, I'll recognize them, the industry is pretty close in the

capital. If it comes to defending ourselves, well..." Oriana put a hand on her flail. "You seem like you've done your homework."

Charlotte's grip loosened, but her posture remained unchanged. "I appreciate that, Oriana. Really." She let go of the couch and finally turned back towards Oriana. "But I can't risk this." Her faceplate wore the same neutral expression as always, but this time Oriana knew it was forced.

Kettle, undisturbed by the damage to her perch, put her front paws on her partner's shoulders. "I know you're scared. But if you haven't noticed, Oriana here is armed to the teeth. I think we're safer following her around."

Charlotte's jaw hung open as she spun her head in disbelief. "You too? We've talked about this."

Kettle craned her neck up towards her. "She's a good girl. And even though she only met us today, she'd side with us against people she's worked with for years. That's the kind of person we want with us."

Unsure how to handle the compliment, Oriana attempted her own assurances. "It's totally possible that only Silvermane's smith knows who I am, and I can ask them to keep it a secret."

Charlotte was unconvinced. "Aren't people just going to recognize you?"

Oriana shrugged. "Maybe. But the songs that bards play about Joanne don't have me in them."

Kettle tenderly climbed the rest of the way up Charlotte's cloak. She pushed her way through her companion's heavy hood, and rubbed against her faceplate. Oriana took a moment to internalize that the person she'd been waxing philosophy with minutes ago was still a cat, one who showed her affection in ordinary ways.

Charlotte leaned into the physical comfort for as long as it took for her to calm down. Then she relented. "Fine. How are we going to do this?"

Oriana pulled her focus away from the feline behaviors. "You're an animated servant, and I'm the target audience. We get you something to wear, and you just pose as my assistant. Maybe you can carry something for me."

Charlotte's gaze panned across all six of Oriana's bags of holding. "You seem pretty good at that already."

Oriana laughed at the dig. "Doesn't matter. It's still a pretty good cover. And you don't even have to talk."

Charlotte's eyes dropped again. Perhaps it was understandable for her to be uncomfortable with the idea. If she had escaped from a life of servitude, returning to that, even as a disguise, must have seemed unpleasant.

But to Oriana's surprise, Charlotte began fiddling with her cloak. "I have something prepared, actually. Figured I'd have nothing else to lean on."

As Kettle hopped onto the floor and the cloak fell away, Oriana finally got to see the outfit underneath.

Charlotte was adorned with a traditional maid uniform in a barely recognizable state. Looking like it had returned from a warzone, tears through layers at a time exposed cross sections of the featureless body underneath. Not a single hem was intact, and half of the dress had been burned away, the rest of it singed. All of its white fabric, from apron to lace trim was stained gray with ash.

Oriana took it all in, then stated the obvious. "That's **not** going to work."

Charlotte threw her arms in the air. "It's all I have."

Oriana couldn't hold back her curiosity. "Did you escape *yesterday*? What happened to you?"

Charlotte tugged at the dress, pulling a nearby tear open just a little further. "Kettle freed me a little over a year ago. I've been holding onto this, just in case." *Just in case*, she said.

Kettle gestured towards the stairs. "An entire wardrobe's on the floor up there. Might be something to wear."

Oriana looked at the top of Charlotte's head, now exposed. "I doubt anything of Joanne's is going to fit."

Kettle had already started up the wooden steps after darting across the room. "Won't know unless we try."

Charlotte and Kettle got to work sifting through clothing, while Oriana dragged in a standing mirror from the "guest room" next door. As she did, she got a good look at herself for the first time today.

Her misshapen irises stared back at her. Bright red, petalled like flowers, but with an uncanny tendency to refuse to sit still. A mark, a blessing that let her peer into the fabric of magic itself, and a curse that could endanger those she cared about most.

Her hair was a mess. She hadn't been bathing as often as she'd like on the road here, and her uniform haircut had begun to get greasy. The reddish brown strands hung just above her shoulder, brushing against her compact pauldrons.

Her armor, at least, was flawless. The polish she'd done before leaving would last another month at the minimum, and it hadn't been subjected to any wear so far. A geometric arrangement of deceptively light metal extended from her neck to her powered boots.

When Oriana set the mirror down in the master bedroom, Charlotte was holding up a well kept maid's uniform. And Oriana recognized it *immediately*.

Oriana hid herself in the mirror, watching the growing color in her cheeks from up close. She moved the mirror pointlessly further into the room to give herself time to calm down.

It has been *years* since she'd worn that outfit. Why did Joanne still have it? Why was it **here**, of all places???

After a couple of deep breaths, Oriana collected herself enough to hold a conversation. "Find something?"

Charlotte held the dress a bit lower to look over the top of it. "Yeah, might have been left along with all the unused servant's passages. I'll change in a moment."

As Oriana stood out in the hallway with Kettle, she realized how strange such an action was. She knew there was nothing under Charlotte's

clothes but abdominal segmentation and spinal joints. What reason would an automaton have to be self-conscious?

When Charlotte opened the door, she dropped her arms to her sides, posed as a mannequin for inspection.

The outfit broke from actual servant attire in a number of ways that served to reduce the total amount of fabric. It was off-sleeve, fully exposing Charlotte's shoulder joints without giving up the classic apron or ruffled collar. The apron started low along with the blouse, exposing a low neckline that suggested nothing at all. The skirt itself was designed to be short, but on Charlotte it nearly reached her knees.

Oriana had expected much worse, considering.

Kettle tried the new fabric, gave it a cautious climb. From atop Charlotte's shoulder, she tilted her head. "It's flimsy, but it works. Looks good on you."

Charlotte regained some of her normal posture. "You think so?"

Oriana smiled. "You wear it well."

Charlotte was silent, staring down at the clothing.

Oriana realized too late what she might have implied. "Because it looks good on you! Not because, uh, you're actually a servant or anything. You're a master thief or whatever you said before, and this is your newest disguise."

Kettle yawned. "Nice save."

Charlotte remained quiet, then spun back towards the mirror and held out the hem of her new skirt. "It'll do."

The walk back to town was tense, a continuation of the tone from when Charlotte was explaining her past. Oriana had been the one to gather up the relevant pieces of evidence into her bag of miscellany while the other two shared a brief, private conversation.

Oriana watched Charlotte on the trail. The automaton's movements were stiff, her attention focused only on the path ahead. Oriana figured it

wasn't part of an act. Whenever Charlotte seemed to feel stressed, she froze up, and never trembled.

Unprompted, Charlotte spoke. "You said I wouldn't have to do any talking, right?"

Oriana replied softly. "Yeah. I'll take care of it, if you can help me piece things together."

Some of the tension let out of Charlotte's gait, but not all. "Good."

The trio had agreed that Kettle could pose easily as a familiar, but would be the first candidate to sneak off if the situation called for it, or if things got ugly. Nobody would be able to tell her apart from a stray, keeping an eye on things from a safe distance.

But as the group arrived on the main street where Oriana had spent the night in the tavern, Kettle made good on the plan early and drifted into a nearby alley.

The lined storefronts were empty, each of their shopkeepers and patrons out on the street in a crowd. As Oriana approached to find the source of the commotion, Charlotte didn't follow.

Oriana turned back to see that Charlotte was *petrified*, hand in a fist placed across her neckline. She was looking back and forth between the crowd, and the alley that Kettle had darted into.

She'd been fine on the walk here, resolute despite her expressed fears. Her anxiety had flared so suddenly, it made Oriana wonder. Was Charlotte dependent on Kettle's support? No, Charlotte had stopped as soon as they'd turned the corner, before Kettle departed. As soon as they spotted the crowd.

Oriana found herself looking at a girl who would face danger head on, but would run from the prospect of a public forum. Gods knew that she could relate.

Oriana stepped back to Charlotte, and pulled the frightened automaton's wrist away from her chest. "It's going to be okay. I'll do the talking." Oriana squeezed down without knowing if it would be felt. "And I won't let anyone touch you."

Charlotte stared down at her clasped wrist, now being led forward by it. She shook her head briefly, like she was trying to buck off her fears. "Sorry." She pulled back her arm, and regained her dispassionate composure. "Lead the way."

As the two closed in on the crowd, Oriana stood tall to get a better view of the scene unfolding.

The crowd was being held back by a handful of local guards with identical armor and blunt polearms. Three people stood at the door to a regal building behind them, engaging in a hushed conversation. A woman in leather armor with an ornate katana at her side, a man with a played up version of the other guard's attire, and a younger man in custom made plate armor.

The crowd shouted over each other, asking questions about the future of shipments, of wartime agreements, of who might be responsible.

Oriana spoke the only question on her mind, to no-one in particular. "What's going on here?"

"Haven't you heard?" An elderly voice came from below her.

Oriana looked down to see a white bearded man at her feet, barely visible under the brim of his pointed hat. It read the name of a nearby store, and sat on his head below Oriana's waist.

The gnome shopkeep pointed up towards the insignia hung above the building's door. "A man's been murdered."

I was wrong to call this town boring, I think. Nobody sane comes out to a place like this, myself included.

I've been getting looks from the townspeople. At first I assumed it was my deeds preceding me, but I'm not egotistical enough to think that they're admiring my exploits.

They look at me with the eyes of hunters searching for prey. To them I am either an opportunity, a partner to be, or a threat.

Far from the safety of organized heroism, perfectly in the cradle of tenuous treatise and unfavorable trade agreements. You can feel it in the air. This town is one misfortune away from boiling over entirely.

Hi, it's me! If you've gotten this far, I probably ought to apologize that there's no more chapters left.

If you have the time still, I'd really like to know what you thought about this preview! I'm not expecting a review or anything, a basic vibe check is more than enough.

I'm putting these first four chapters out there for that explicit purpose, vibes. There's a lot of moving parts in a murder mystery set in a fantasy setting (how would you establish the limitations inherent to deduction when magic is involved?), and a lot of work still left to be done. I want to gauge how compelling the initial hook and character dynamics are to first-time readers before fully committing, figuring out what's working and what isn't. As an analogy, this release is meant to act as a demo before I dedicate myself to production, except in this case instead of making a video game I'm writing a 60-chapter manuscript. So again, please let me know how you feel about this little prototype.

The entire book *is* laid out, but unfortunately the first act is going to take a while to get written due to its structure. Once it's done, though, there's a good chance I won't be posting it here.

At the recommendation of several people close to me, I'm going to be exploring the possibility of getting this story published traditionally. To that end I'd be keeping the manuscript rather close to the chest until it's complete, to ensure that I won't have locked myself out of an exclusivity deal.

That being said, I will still be looking for input on my prose as it develops. Once act one nears completion, expect to see me put out a call for beta readers! (alpha readers, if you want to be pedantic) That Which Never Was is an amalgamation of my storytelling experience, and as a result many of the people I've been showing it to so far have prior knowledge of different parts of its puzzle, from its setting to its characters. Finding people with a fresh perspective has proved a challenge in private, and that's where you (yes you, the person reading this via a link on Cohost) come in. No particular ETA, so follow me if you're interested (I don't seem to post about much else).

Thanks again for reading!