

*Gather around my children and you shall hear the story of how High Cleric Jahlon attained his position so young.*

"Even the Clerics fear the Siren woods on Haunts" he had heard since he was a boy.

He had travelled to many different schools across Verra to learn how they taught their Clerics, and never had he heard a superstitious lot like the ones in his own Empyrea.

It was Harvest, the end of the months when even the Clerics trained with the Army. Once the revered Harvest festival was over, all those students magical would be shuttered away in the citadel. Tonight, was different though. It was Haunts, the day to celebrate the deeds of the recently departed.

Slipping through the market crowds, Jahlon hoped to go unnoticed. He was the favored son of an elder Cleric and everyone knew his face. The hour grew late and he needed to slip out the Rivergate, before it was garrisoned for nightfall. From there it was just a short run to the Siren woods everyone bade him avoid.

"How goes little brother" he heard a female voice call.

As he turned, he knew it was her even with her hood up, yet it was as if a shadow had climbed into her hood and she was wearing oblivion as a mask. "Eclaire? How does the day find you?"

"Do not pursue your course brother." I have seen your death this night."

Without another word she turned backward and vanished into the crowd.

"Nice try," he whispered to himself. "Just another Haunts prank."

The evening garrison was in formation ahead of him. Quickening his step, he barely managed to get ahead of them. Had he worn the colors of any other caste he might have been stopped, but few impeded a Cleric on their duties, even a Cleric student.

He knew exactly how far the Siren woods were. He and his brothers and his sister had come here often as children. This night however it seemed longer, as if his destination kept getting further and further away. The deeper the sun set into the sky, the higher the white mist seemed to rise. By the time the pitch darkness settled in around him he could barely see three steps in front of him.

Just as he raised his hand to throw a hand flame to illuminate his path, he became keenly aware of the cold. The white mist was thickened by the frozen breath he exhaled. Reaching out with his attuned senses he felt all the life around him, for Clerics are attuned to all things living .

He felt an insect struggling in a spiderweb until the spider found his dinner. He felt the spider expire as a finch nabbed the spider from its web.

Just as he was feeling something snap the lifecord of the finch, he become aware of the growing smell of rot lingering around him. Focusing his eyes into the white mist, he watched as a sinister green hue began

reflecting off the mist and illuminating the clearing he had unknowingly stumbled into. More than a dozen shambling shapes filled the clearing, shuffling towards the hooded shape of a child figure.

"Look out" he cried as the first of the figures reached towards the child.

No sooner had he broken his silence did he realized his mistake. In unison, the horde of undead turned their attention toward him. Reaching under his cloak for his sword, he sniffed the metallic scent of fresh blood as the undead he never saw knocked him to the ground.

As he struggled to push the creature off him, it snarled and snapped dripping blood and pus all over his cloak. Getting loose and rolling to his feet Jahlon knew he was in over his head. Fighting a single undead was a tale worthy of the strongest of Clerics, fighting a dozen as a student was death.

Slipping off the cloak, his white tunic adorned with the black and silver rose of his family crest glowed eerily in the pale light.

Expecting an immediate attack from the next undead, he knew he would not make it out of the clearing, so he silently vowed to take as many of these creatures with him as he could. Instead, they stopped, fixated on the glowing rose. From behind them, he could hear the gnashing of teeth as the little girl scrambled toward him.

"NO! Mah pets," she shrieked as she skittered across the ground.

She lunged at him knocking him over and pinning him down. Her hood came loose, and the evil underneath was revealed. Deep lacerations covered her face, but it was not blood that oozed out, instead it was a black ichor bubbling up from the darkest pits of hell. Her eyes, glowed an eerie green and were without doubt the source of the light in this clearing.

As she gnashed her teeth at him, she began muttering "Mah haus...mah haus" as she tried to bite into his chest.

He searched his mind frantic for anything, a word or phrase that might help. Grabbing her by the sides of the head he whispered "'Bui, I rod plural..."

As he finished the phrase she let loose a death shriek that pierced the night. As her corporeal shell shattered a green light erupted into the sky exploding outwards.

Struggling to his feet he whispered a prayer to the undead now freed from whatever control she had over them. They now wanted only rest.

Reaching to his side he felt the sticky moistness forming. Pulling a metal object from his side, he collapsed just as he saw the black and silver rose crest pin of his family.

*For you see my children, he is why we can now walk safely in the Siren Woods. For Lord Jahlon, still a student of the Cleric Arts had banished his great-great aunt, a child prodigy who had lost her soul in those very woods on Haunts many years before.*