

Chapter One: Middle Management

Serpent, Tommy, Sindawe, Ox, and Wogan have just returned from Rat Street and their murder of moneylender Lymas Smeed and his disagreeable pet baboon. Hans and Beyar are working the door, and greet them as they enter the Gold Goblin. Serpent pauses to ask the two how long they've worked for Saul. "Oh, about a year. Why?"

"Well, what's the story with his ex-wife?" The group had only a vague understanding of Saul's history, including vague details about an allegedly dead previous wife. But when they interrogated an assassin who had made an attempt on Saul's life yesterday, she had admitted under torture that Saul's ex-wife had hired her for the job.

"Uhhhh..." Both guards look uncomfortable. "Ask me sometime when we're somewhere more private," Hans says, nervously looking around at the casino patrons.

"Fair enough, maybe we can get a drink after work one evening." Serpent and the rest of the crew head in and up to Saul's office to debrief him.

Sindawe ribs his comrade; "You made his day, now he's all excited that he's going to get to drink with Serpent!" The others chortle.

"Boys! What's the good word?" Saul is sitting in his chair, short legs propped up on his desk. They show him Larur Feldin's bloody cloak, found in the dumpster behind Smeed's flat. "Yeah, that's Mr. Feldin's all right," Saul states heavily, stroking his sparse beard.

"We interrogated Smeed a long time, but he didn't tell us anything about the dwarf," says Sindawe.

Serpent adds, "We think you're debt free now, though it seems that he was secretly in the employ of Boss Croat. I don't know if that means someone else will show up wanting payment or not."

"He ended up kissing the snickersnak. There was some heat, but nothing we couldn't handle," explains Tommy.

"Well, sometimes bad things happen to bad people. Nothing to worry about. It's a shame about Feldin, he was a good floor manager. You boys, though..." Saul smiles and slaps Sindawe lightly on the cheek a couple times. "You're always on top of things."

They fret about the situation with the other crime lords in Riddleport for a while. Tommy is very concerned that they've overstayed their welcome in town with their recent shenanigans. Saul notes that sure, the other major players are sure to be testing their limits, but since no one's killed any of their capps (and he praises them for their restraint with Braddikar Faje, whom they just stripped of his signature armor and left alive after fighting him) their admittedly somewhat dangerous game of brinkmanship is still in play. "We should definitely be looking for friends too," he tells them.

After a thoughtful pause, Saul says, "What do you guys think about Marzielle for Feldin's job?" Marzielle Ajuela is the current head bartender of the Gold Goblin.

"Do you trust her?" Serpent asks Saul.

"Well, she seems reliable. I'll need to stay hands on, especially on the games for a while. And unless one of you is looking to switch over to church work, I need *someone* to manage the floor."

All Saul's capps consider for a moment, then nod.

The five filter downstairs and go about their business in the Goblin. Ox disappears with his needy girlfriend Iesha. Sindawe heads over to Marzielle and asks her if she's seen Lixy Parmenter lately. Saul had mentioned that he had heard Lixy might be looking to defect to one of Overlord Gaston Croamarcky's gambling halls with her custom game of ghoullette. Ghoullette is a game based around a unique ghoulish head that insults gamblers in a random but semi-predictable manner. "She was running her game a while ago, but I think she's on break now."

Sindawe turns to go look for her, but Marzielle stops him. "Hey, something else you might want to know – your friend Sam hasn't been back to the Goblin since yesterday."

"That's not good. I'll look into it." He walks through the employee lounge and back rooms looking for Lixy. She's nowhere to be found, but he does see that the box that holds the ghoulish head is put up in its normal place with the rest of the gaming materials. On a hunch, he checks the box, but the head is missing.

As Sindawe is walking back out to the main room, something catches his eye about a scullery maid taking a bag of laundry out the back door. He strides over through the kitchen, tapping the greasy cook, Wendt, on the shoulder to get his attention, and grabs the maid by the scruff of the neck. "Hello, Lixy!"

Lixy stammers out excuses in her thick Riddleport accent. "I was just doing Iesha a favor... She was putting together some kind of surprise for Ox and asked me to do the laundry for her!"

"Well, let's just check that story out..." Sindawe opens up the bag of laundry and looks inside.

A ghoulish head stares glassily back at him. "Nice shirt, jerky!" it proclaims.

Wendt exclaims, "Hey, that means you win twenty-five gold!"

Sindawe sighs and closes his eyes until the bloody, bloody drums stop their incessant pounding. "Wendt, go get the other guys."

Wendt merrily walks over to the kitchen door and yells out into the front of the house, "Hey! Pig fuckers!" A dozen casino patrons look in shock at the cook. Wogan, Serpent, and Tommy glare at him as they push into the back room to join Sindawe.

The crew works their way through several layers of excuses from the anxious Lixy. "Did they threaten you?" urges Wogan.

"Yeah... They said I'd never work in this town again if I didn't come to work for them!"

"We can protect you!"

Lixy looks extremely dubious at this claim, given the death of her boss earlier that same day. Sindawe loses patience with the situation. "Where do you live? We're all going there." He ensures that Dungo, the ghoulish head, is put back in the gaming cage and then hustles her out of the bar.

On the way, Sindawe employs one of the ubiquitous urchins living on the streets of Riddleport to be a messenger. Lixy chatters away nervously about the origins of ghoullette. "There was this priest of Calistria, see, named Dungo, and he was known for his sharp tongue and vitriolic insults. But one day he got in over his head and some guys, they were pissed that he was telling them off, they were gonna kill him, and he prayed to Calistria for deliverance, but they killed him anyway, but I guess Calistria thought it was

funny, 'cause his head kept living and still insulted the guys even after he was dead! I got the head at a card game and I got to thinking... Oh look here's my place! Can I use the bathroom?"

Sindawe checks out the small place. There's a bed, sparse furnishings, and a separate privy with a high, potentially Lixy-sized window. "No. Sit down." They sit her on the bed and put a leash on her and hand it to Wogan. She clearly wants to ask why they are carrying a leash around with them, but wisely refrains.

They dictate a letter for Lixy to write to her new employers, along the lines of "Some of Saul's guys are on to me and are keeping me in my apartment! There's only two of them and they're really out of shape!"

Sindawe dispatches the lad to one of Overlord Croamarcky's casinos and they settle in to wait. Serpent lurks in an alley nearby, Tommy clammers up on a roof to the east of the flat, and Sindawe takes a similar position to the west. Wogan stays in the room with a firm grip on Lixy's leash.

Time passes. Lixy unsuccessfully tries to convince Wogan to let her hide in the privy or under the bed so she's not in the line of fire when fighting breaks out. Then she decides to take another tack. "So, Wogan... The other guys have girlfriends, but you don't seem to have one yet."

"No, my religion forbids it."

"It forbids... What, *exactly*?" Lixy bats her eyes and puts her hand on Wogan's knee.

"Uhh..." Wogan starts considering the question carefully.

Meanwhile, five armed men stroll down the nearby avenue and turn beneath Sindawe's perch. He carefully signals to his confederates with a bird call. "Lookuphere! Lookuphere! Hey, you guys!" The men walk by the alleyway when Serpent emerges. The tall Ulfen, leaning on his heavy quarterstaff, stands staring at them creepily with his snake draped over his shoulders.

"Oh, shit, check that guy out! Hey, he's one of Saul's crew. Get him!" The thugs whip out shortswords and mob Serpent. One cuts him, and then he and his snake get to work; he batters them back with a rain of blows from his staff. Sindawe leaps to the ground and charges to help him; he runs up and throws a javelin full force from a bare couple feet away into an opponent's back, transfixing him. Tommy launches a sling stone from atop the roof into the melee. Blades flash in the street as the men fight back.

Back in the room, Wogan leaps up at the commotion outside. He runs over to the window and aims and fires his blunderbuss into the press, badly wounding a man. Still peering out the window, he goes to draw his pistol to take another shot but his hand meets the empty leather of its holster instead. A brief moment of confusion leads to a dreadful realization. He turns slowly to see Lixy already has moved across the room to the door, pistol pointed directly at him.

"Come on... You don't want to do that..." Wogan calculates his chances and starts moving toward Lixy. He knows that using a wheellock accurately takes some training. She does a quick calculation of her own. Wogan sees the devious spark in her eye as she tosses the pistol in a high arc into the privy and towards its dark hole in the

floor. Fear of losing his precious pistol seizes Wogan's heart; he spins and dives into the privy and snatches the gun from the air right before it is lost into the sewers. He gasps in relief at the narrow save and then whirls, pointing the weapon at the front door, which is now open and swinging in the breeze. There's no sign of Lixy. "Son of a BITCH!!!" he cries.

Out in the street, Serpent and his snake kill two of the thugs in short order. One breaks and runs but the big constrictor slithers after him and brings him down; Sindawe snaps the neck of the other. Then Wogan comes running out the door of the flat. "Lixy's gone!"

Sindawe quickly takes in the area and guesses at her escape route. He flies through an alley and catches sight of her fleeing southward. She tries to run but his strong native muscles enable him to close the gap on her quickly. He grabs the leash that's still trailing behind her and yanks, bringing her to a painful stop. He has her hog-tied by the time the rest of the crew catches up.

Satisfied with the carnage, they tell Lixy she's coming back to the Gold Goblin with them. She panics. "You're not going to put me in the animal cage are you?!? I won't go in the cage!!!"

Wogan is taken aback at this. "No, no, you're just going to stay there for your safety. We're not going to hurt you. We're not monsters!"

"Speak for yourself," says Serpent.

Chapter Two: Unexpected Assistance

After they get Iesha to make up a guest room for Lixy, the four comrades turn to their next problem – finding Samaritha. She had told Serpent the other day that she was going to go to the Cypher Lodge and research the snake cult they'd uncovered. They check her room for notes or other clues but it's neat as usual. Inquiries with the staff prove useless; they try to not take too much interest in 'fancyboy business,' as the common man's parlance describes Cyphermage activities.

They travel across the river to the Cypher Lodge and find a young apprentice working the door. He hasn't seen Samaritha, but says the normal doorman, Milos, may have. He left suddenly yesterday, however, leaving a note about sudden illness, and hasn't been back in today, which is a little odd because he quarters in the Lodge. Serpent's look of alarm is ignored by the Cyphermage initiate, who goes on to complain about being put on something as demeaning as door duty. "I'm not even supposed to BE here today!"

Serpent leads the way back towards the ferry, cursing under his breath. Tommy narrates the likely sequence of events. "She showed up, said 'I want to research some serpent cults,' he said 'Oh step right in here,' and poof the bag went over her head." Sindawe and Wogan speculate as to where he could have taken her; either he got her back across the river or he brought her somewhere on the west bank. But the affluent Windward district is an unlikely place for a captive to be hauled - unless the captor is rich, that is, in which case it's fair game. They previously had trailed another cultist, Enzo, who hung around the Mystery of the Gate, an inn catering to Cyphermages, so they decide to ask around there.

When they board the ferry across the Velashtu River, they quiz the ferryman, Grimas Oltedler, about whether he's seen anyone answering the descriptions of Milos or Samaritha lately. He remembers Samaritha going across yesterday, but not coming back. He tells them that "There are a lot of ways across the river, though – people that don't want to be seen use a boat of their own, or pay a fisherman. Here we are; this is your stop." The ferry pulls into a boathouse on the eastern bank of the river. The men have been so busy debating their approach to the problem at hand that they don't notice until now that this isn't a usual ferry stop. A deep voice greets them from the gloomy interior.

"Hello, boys. I hear you're looking for someone."

The four unconsciously move into line and confront the figure addressing them. He's a large figure in cloak-covered chainmail and wide-brimmed hat, with a bow and sword crossed across his back. *Her* back, actually, they realize with surprise as they scan her – a large, stout, tusked half-orc woman. She's carrying a lot of weapons and they're all kitted for ready use.

"Hey," says Sindawe noncommittally. He can tell she's not an average Riddleport goon just by looking at her – Boss Croat has a lot of half-orc enforcers in his employ but there's something different about this one.

"And I hear you've been having snake troubles."

"Uhhh, where'd you hear that?"

"Well, I couldn't help but notice your friend there," she indicates Serpent, "was selling a bunch of unusual items in the marketplace lately."

"Hey... Are you with the God Squad?" ventures Wogan. He had heard rumors about some kind of secret group within the gendarmerie that specialized in demons and evil cults and other such threats.

"Everyone knows they don't exist," she replies flatly. "But I *am* here to help you. My name is Salvadora Beckett."

The men relax a little and introduce themselves. "There's a lot of people trying to kill us, but usually they just fling themselves upon us like lemmings, so I guess you're okay," notes Sindawe. "Would you care to accompany us? We're going to the Mystery of the Gate."

"Sure." She walks along with the group. "But they're not there."

"How do you know all this?"

"I also couldn't help but notice someone buying up all the unusual items lately put out on the market."

"Milos?"

"Yes."

The four comrades frown at each other. The items they had "liberated" from the serpent temple were for some dark religious purpose they hadn't been able to identify so they had just hocked them. Now, it seems, the cult has them back in hand.

"So where do you think they are?"

"He's disappeared from all the places I know to look. I'm guessing they're at this snake temple you've been to. What I need to know is where it is."

"We're all going," says Sindawe grimly. "But first, we need a couple things."

Night is already falling as Sindawe looks for an open all-night apothecary. Luckily, as this is Riddleport, there are several. It takes a little while to convince the

woman running the shop that he is really looking for an antidote to actual snake-type poison, and not a contraceptive or cure for a venereal disease, but once they're on the same page, a purse full of coins is exchanged for a vial of antitoxin for each person.

"And now, to church!" declares Serpent. The five go to the high-class brothel that also serves as the temple to Calistria, one of the most popular faiths in Riddleport. The octagonal pyramid is just beginning to get into the full swing of the evening. He asks to see the head priestess. As the men have quite a reputation around the brothel, they are shown in to see her in short order.

Shorafa Pamodae is a striking woman, not the least because her purple-hued skin, large horns, and small fangs allude to the demonic part of her heritage. She walks gracefully over and offers her hand to Serpent. "What can I do for you gentlemen this evening?" she purrs.

"I'd like scrolls, or potions if that's all you have. Healing mainly, but whatever you've got."

She pulls out a small coffer and opens it. "Is this what you're looking for?" she says, leaning over to display its contents and revealing her ample cleavage at the same time. She smiles, exposing one sharp little fang. The four men shift around uncomfortably. They know the tiefling woman is not only the high priestess of Calistria, who is the goddess of revenge as much as she is of lust, but she's also one of the major crime lords that run Riddleport. They can't help, despite all that, reacting to the intense sensuality that surrounds her like a mist. Sindawe begins to sweat, and thinks to himself over and over, "She must have back problems..."

Serpent and Wogan pick out some healing scrolls and pay the madam. She smiles and says, "We look forward to your next visit." Tommy, Ox, and Sindawe frequent the brothel; in fact Tommy has a soft spot for another tiefling tenant of the Silken Veil, Lavender Lil. Ox sometimes visits the woman, Selene, who gave him his freedom after his last voyage as a slave. In fact, it is she who told Ox about the shipment of slaves that Boss Croat's men were preparing to hand over to the orcish pirate Captain Scarbelly. Ox is off staking the warehouse in question out; it's up to Tommy, Sindawe, Serpent, and Wogan (and, apparently, Salvadora) to go rescue Samaritha from the serpent temple.

Chapter Three: Third Time's The Charm

They show Salvadora to the small hovel in the Leeward District that is the entrance to the temple of the serpent men. It's an unassuming derelict house with bricked up windows. The comrades smile grimly as they remember Ox's consternation at the bricked up windows in a wooden house; it offended his Garundi sensibilities in some strange way.

Tommy and Serpent circle the place carefully and look for sentries. It looks clear, so they enter the small house through the front door. The inside is complete ruins. They head to the trap door in the back, but Serpent and Salvadora pause and crouch to scan the floor. "Someone dragged something big through here," observes Serpent. Everyone unlimbers their weapons.

Sindawe whispers, "I'll go first." Serpent hefts up the trap door and Sindawe peers in. It's dark in the wine cellar, and the reek of vinegared wine rises strongly from

the depths. They all turn and look at Wogan. “I just tapped the one! And I left it closed!” he protests.

Sindawe carefully walks down the wooden steps, Serpent following closely. Several of the huge wine casks have been hacked open and spoiled wine covers the floor of the cellar. There is a sudden splash, and a huge six-foot eel creature with a gaping maw full of fangs explodes from the muck! Its hundred-plus pound bulk thrashes up the stairs, drunk and enraged. The men are ready, though – Serpent fends it off with his staff and Sindawe leaps up and brings his full weight down on one foot, snapping the creature’s neck instantly. “Swamp barracuda,” says Serpent. He looks around the space. “It didn’t get in here by itself.” The others come down the stairs too. Tommy looks nervously at the creature’s carcass; as a halfling he’d only make a decent mouthful for it.

Tommy checks the wine cask that conceals the secret door to the underground passage to the temple. The hidden catch doesn’t open it this time. He checks around but however it’s locked, it’s not accessible from this side. He shrugs at the others. Sindawe begins to gesture to the others to batter it in, but Salvadora holds up a hand to stop them. “Allow me,” she says, and holds a hand to the front of the cask and concentrates. From inside, there’s a clink and the rattle of chains collapsing to the floor.

“Nice trick,” Sindawe grunts as he pulls the front of the cask open. The Mwangi pulls out a sunrod and strikes it; light fills the dark tunnel that has been revealed. He clambers in, the others following.

The five quietly move down the rough-hewn stairs into the temple area proper. They step carefully around the hidden pit trap which has been reset in their absence. Serpent says, “Last time, those serpent men got in front of us somehow. I think there’s a hidden door here.”

Sindawe considers and says, “We’re in no rush. Let’s check. Take your time.” Tommy runs practices hands over the wall and sure enough, shortly he uncovers a concealed doorway. He opens it to reveal a damp cave leading off into the darkness. He moves ahead to scout as silently as he can. He peers into the darkness and turns to wave the others forward, but then starts as he hears a strange slithering sound moving his way; he whirls to see two serpent men charging him with spears. Their sinuous bodies writhe angrily as they show their four-inch fangs.

Sindawe leaps forward and pulls Tommy behind him; he and Serpent form a quick skirmish line that the snake-people crash into a second later. One stabs his spear deep into Serpent’s thigh and blood pours out. They fend off the serpent men’s attacks and try to hold them back.

Salvadora fires arrows past the front line at their assailants, but they fail to penetrate their thick scales and sheath of muscle. Wogan invokes the healing power of Gozreh to close the wound in Serpent’s leg and the Ulfen warrior presses his attack. Serpent and Sindawe abruptly realize that they haven’t taken their preventative antitoxins yet as fangs snap an inch from Sindawe’s collarbone. Serpent’s python wraps around one of the serpent men but gets a poison-filled bite for its trouble.

Serpent goes nuts and rains a flurry of blows on the creature with his quarterstaff. His giant constrictor snake lashes out at the other as it leans down to bite again and fastens its jaws on its eye! It hisses in rage and staggers backwards. That’s all the break they need; Serpent finishes the first off with a crushing blow to its triangular skull and the

other descend on the other as it wrestles with the python and hack it to bits. Serpent feeds his antitoxin to his badly wounded snake and everyone else takes the opportunity to down theirs.

Breathing heavily, they push forward into the Stygian dark. The cave widens into a large natural cavern, a pool of black water at its end. Serpent and Salvadora pause as they see ripples in the water, water which should be perfectly still in the subterranean stillness. As one, they gesture silently in the direction of the pool; Salvadora casts a spell of protection on Sindawe and then swings out to the side to get a clear shot. Serpent and Sindawe stand shoulder to shoulder, the nearly albino barbarian from the North next to the dark-skinned savage from the jungles in the South. They nod their readiness. Wogan tosses a stone across the room into the water and two serpentine forms explode from the water and half-run, half-writhe towards them. He fires his blunderbuss at the oncoming monsters with a thunderous report.

The battle is joined, and despite Wogan and Salvadora's continuous fire, the serpent men begin to push back Serpent and Sindawe. Tommy decides he can't stay out of the fracas any longer and runs around to stab one of them from behind. It hisses in anger and whirls but that gives the other two warriors an opening to take it down quickly. The other rakes Sindawe with its spear but Salvadora puts an arrow into its long neck.

They spread out to check the room. The dark water is still. There's a side passage that Sindawe looks down; it ends after about ten feet. He sees two eyeholes in a hidden door at its end abruptly close. "Oh come *on*," he says exasperatedly, and immediately rams the door, smashing it open. The rest of the group runs over to assist him and they discover that they've found the main temple.

The temple is a long hall, flanked by six pillars carved to have a giant snake coiled around it, stretching up to the ceiling thirty feet above, and the walls are covered with frescoes of snakes. An altar of black basalt stands at the end of the temple, fairly near the hidden door, with a sizable mound of corpses stacked in front of it. Five skeletons ring the door and a serpent man lurks nearby behind a pillar. A small black-robed figure stands behind the altar – Milos, the doorman from the Cypher Lodge – and Samaritha sits alongside it, with a collar and chain connecting her to the slab. She looks up as the five rush in and lets out a hopeful cry.

Milos smiles at the interlopers and pushes his glasses back up his nose. "Congratulations on reaching the hidden temple of Ydersius. Sadly you will not be living to tell the tale!" The skeletons clatter towards the secret entrance and start slashing at Sindawe and Serpent as Milos begins to intone an evil-sounding chant.

Tommy, in the back ranks, drinks down a potion and scrambles up the wall like a spider. He clammers up the wall and onto the roof of the temple, well out of range of the undead's attacks. The serpent man attacks; he is so eager to get at the party that in his rage he tosses skeletons aside to make room.

Sindawe smashes one skeleton to bits with a chest-punch and takes advantage of the gap to rush out of the press straight towards the cultist behind the altar. Bony claws rake at him as he passes but he breaks out from their lines and charges Milos. Milos raises his voice triumphantly as he completes the chant and the mass of corpses shifts; all the bodies clamber rapidly to their feet and leap at Sindawe. No slow, shuffling zombies

are these; they are frighteningly fast and agile. He is quickly surrounded by hostile corpses. The Mwangi will not be denied, however – despite the horde of dead besetting him he pushes through and delivers two vicious blows to the surprised Milos. The first shatters his kneecap and the other sends him spinning around and staggering away from the angry warrior.

Up on the roof, standing upside down, Tommy sees his chance. The evil priest is distracted and is leaving himself open. With a mighty whirl of his sling staff, he sends a smooth stone arcing through the unholy air of the temple to embed itself in back of Milos' skull. He falls to his knees with an expression of shocked disbelief on his face and then collapses.

Unfortunately, this does nothing to check the crowd of undead. Serpent and Wogan are left back at the secret door, trying to fend off skeletons and an angry serpent man. Wogan's efforts to keep Serpent healed are having trouble keeping pace. Some of the zombies sprint at Salvadora, who has been plying her bow upon the enemy.

Sindawe is completely surrounded by grasping zombies. He braces himself, crouches, and explodes like a coiled spring with his arms wide; he checks four of the undead off their feet towards Wogan and Serpent. Wogan raises his holy symbol high and calls upon the power of Gozreh. A holy wind blows through the dark temple; the skeletons crumble to bone fragments and the zombies writhe in spiritual agony. But then Sindawe is overcome; the zombies drag him to the ground and prepare to feast on him.

Samaritha is struggling with her chain and collar, trying to get free, as a shape shuffles towards her. It is the corpse of the group's missing friend Vincenz, his long beard hanging below empty eyes. She screams as his animated body reaches out towards her to tear and rip her flesh.

The serpent man slams his spear into Serpent's abdomen. Black blood runs out over it as he staggers. Salvadora turns from her own assailants to leap over and heal him as Tommy scurries down a pillar to harass the snake-man from the rear. The zombies not clustered around Sindawe rush the others.

Wogan raises his holy symbol again and cries out. Gozreh moves powerfully to aid him; the flesh and muscle on all the undead melts into salt water and they collapse. His comrades all cheer in relief. Serpent takes advantage of the sudden increase in elbow room to swing his staff around in a broad arc and crush the ribs of the serpent man; Tommy cuts its throat as it writhes on the flagstones.

The zombie Vincenz alone was not smitten by the power of wind and wave; he looms over Samaritha, going for her tasty brains. Salvadora takes aim and drops him with an arrow right through the eye into the skull. Everyone fans out to make sure there's no danger left as Wogan rushes to Sindawe's aid. His magical healing closes his wounds and brings him back from the brink.

"Well, that was something," says Salvadora.

Samaritha pipes up, "I don't mean to sound ungrateful but would someone like to get this collar off me?"

They quickly loot Milos' body, stripping it of its armor, poisoned daggers, keys, and magical ring. A large coiled snake tattoo winds around one of his arms, looking much like one of the carved serpent-wrapped columns holding up the temple roof in miniature. They use one of the keys on his key-ring to let Samaritha free from her chains

and Serpent helps her up and dresses her wound. Salvadora concentrates and whispers for a moment. “Hey, guys, don’t panic when a bunch of gendarmes come running in here in a minute.”

Tommy and Sindawe look nervous, given their recent murder of a moneylender and subsequent flight from the authorities. Salvadora sees their discomfort and adds, “Don’t worry, they’re not here for you. Take what you want, but please leave this stuff” – she indicates the familiar serpent-decorated gong, candlesticks, and incense burners on the altar – “and anything else that’s, you know, evil cult related.”

The four men spread out and sweep the area for other valuables. Finding none, they head down the hall towards the study that they saw but didn’t have time to search during their last visit. In the distance they can hear booted feet and men’s voices. In the study, there is a beautiful teakwood desk with a black leather-bound tome sitting on top of it. It bears the title, “The Coils of Ydersius.” Serpent goes to pick it up, but Salvadora frowns and shakes her head. “Check the drawers,” says Sindawe. Tommy carefully checks the desk drawers, wary for traps, and finds a variety of papers but no loot. Salvadora confiscates the papers but not before Tommy can read the top one; it’s a contract with the Yellow Shield Mercenary Company for an ambush on “five degenerate associates of Saul Vancaskerkin.” “I prefer to think of *him* as *my* associate,” Tommy thinks to himself.

“Can we take the desk?” asks Sindawe. Salvadora looks amused, and allows it. A squad of gendarmes reaches the study. Salvadora tells them to go secure the temple area. The four men tote the large desk down the passageway and up the stairs, a bemused Samaritha following after. When they emerge into the street there’s a truly heroic number of gendarmes surrounding the building. Salvadora gives them instructions to retrieve all the bodies, close the place up, and post guards until a proper “cleaning crew” can arrive. Meanwhile, Sindawe arranges for a rented wagon to transport their trophy back to the Gold Goblin.

Once the details are attended to, Salvadora turns back to the group and announces, “You did good.” Sindawe steps forward and embraces her in a big hug. Her eyes widen in surprise and she stiffens involuntarily for a moment, but then she awkwardly pats him on the back till he withdraws.

“Thanks for the help,” he says.

“If we need to get a hold of you, how can we do that?” asks Wogan. She provides them with a code phrase to use on a flyer on a public notice board that’ll cause her to get in touch with them. They feed her other bits of information they’ve come across in case it will help her in her work. Then they take their leave.

Walking down the street, the other men keep eyeballing Sindawe. “What?” he demands. “She saved my life like twice! And yours, too!” He directs this at Serpent.

“I didn’t say anything.” He checks to make sure Samaritha’s dressing is still in place. “So are we going to go help Ox with those slavers?”

“I don’t know, we’re pretty beat up...” Wogan looks worn out as he absentmindedly reloads his wheellock pistol. “And I’m totally out of healing.”

“It’s getting late, and the handoff will be soon. He may attack even if we’re not there to back him up,” says Tommy. “We should at least go try to pull him off, but if we show up, a fight might be unavoidable.”

“Well, let’s get Samaritha back to the Gold Goblin first, and then see.” She draws up close to Serpent in response.

“And the desk!” adds Sindawe.

“Yes. And the desk.”

The cold fog closes around the group as they walk through the streets of Riddleport at midnight, following the lonely gaslights back to the Gold Goblin.