

# Cresthaven: The Shattered Path:

## Chapter Four – Beneath the Hollow

written by A J | April 15, 2025

Morning came to Cresthaven like the breath of something long dead.

The storm had broken, but it had not passed. Not truly. The air was heavy with moisture and memory, and the sun did not rise—it merely bled through the clouds in pale smears, casting the land in a sickly half-light that revealed without truly illuminating. A low fog clung to the earth like a shroud, drifting between buildings with deliberate malice, crawling along fields and fences as if searching, coiling around gravestones with the slow deliberation of a hunter stalking wounded prey. In the distance, sky and fog met without boundary, as though the heavens themselves had descended to walk among the dead, to whisper secrets to those who no longer had ears to hear.

The graveyard on the hill—Shady Hollows—waited in silence, a patient sentinel of stone and memory.

No birds sang in the twisted branches of the ancient yews that stood like sentinels around the perimeter.

No dogs barked from the village below, as if even they sensed something unwholesome in the air.

Only the soft crunch of boots in wet grass marked the passage of four figures as they crossed from the broken temple yard into the mist-bound land of the dead. Each step seemed to disturb some ancient equilibrium, sending ripples through the fog that swirled about their ankles in unnatural patterns, like water retreating from an approaching predator.

Kaelen led them, his broad shoulders hunched against the damp chill, axe slung across his back like a buried oath waiting to be fulfilled. The storm had dried on his cloak but not in his bones, where cold had settled with a familiarity that spoke of old wounds and older promises. His eyes, sharp as winter ice, scanned the drifting white as if expecting something to reach out from it—something with hands made of shadow and hunger.

“The graves speak to those who listen,” he muttered, words carried away by the mist. “And I don’t care for what they’re saying.”

Aelinthir followed close, her staff glowing faintly with arcane sigils that pulsed in time with her breathing. Her presence disturbed the mist as little as wind through spiderweb, an ethereal quality that marked her as something not quite belonging to the mortal plane. She moved not with caution, but with reverence—like a pilgrim on ancient ground. Magic whispered at the edges of her thoughts, old magic that tasted of iron and earth. Watching. Waiting. She felt it in the marrow of her bones, a resonance that called to her own power with subtle insistence.

"There is power here," she whispered, "but twisted from its purpose. Corrupted." Her fingers traced symbols in the air that glowed briefly before dissolving into the mist.

Durim walked beside her, his sturdy frame a contrast to her willowy presence, muttering to himself in the old tongue—prayers perhaps, or wards against what might await them. His mail clinked softly with each step, a counterpoint to the silence that pressed in from all sides. He paused often, laying a hand on cracked stones, reading names worn down by wind and grief, his expression growing more troubled with each monument.

"Too many graves," he said at one point, his voice gruff with emotion. "Not enough peace. The dead should rest undisturbed, not... this." He gestured to the mist-shrouded landscape, to the wrongness that permeated the very soil beneath their feet.

Thimara ranged ahead, catlike and sharp-eyed, her movements fluid and precise as she slipped between crypts and half-fallen statues with barely a sound. Her tail flicked with nervous energy as she crouched to inspect disturbed earth, nostrils flaring to catch scents that human senses might miss. The fur along her spine stood on end, a warning sign as clear as any shout.

"The soil's been moved," she whispered, her voice barely audible above the hush of fog against stone. "And not just by the storm." Her claws extended unconsciously as she traced the edge of an upturned sod. "Something pushed from below. Something that should have remained buried."

They found the first disturbed grave near the northern wall, where ancient trees cast permanent shadows even on the brightest days. The dirt had ruptured outward in a spray of soil and broken coffin wood. No claw marks marred the edges. No tool scars betrayed a grave robber's work. Just a cavity, gaping and wrong, like a mouth frozen in a silent scream.

Then another, this one fresher, the turned earth still dark with moisture.

Then more. A dozen. A score. Scattered across the graveyard like pockmarks on diseased skin.

Some were recent burials, the headstones still crisp-edged and legible. Others so old the markers bore only symbols, no names—forgotten ancestors from times when Cresthaven was young. All had been opened from below, as if the occupants had decided, as one, that their rest was at an end.

Aelinthir knelt beside one, brushing her fingers across the rim of shattered coffin wood. Splinters of oak and pine radiated outward, embedded in the soil like arrows fired from within. "These weren't raised like pawns," she said, her voice troubled. "Not like the mindless undead we faced in the western plains. Something called to them. Something gave them purpose."

"Or someone," Durim's brow furrowed as he traced a rune of warding in the air. The symbol flared briefly, blue-white against the gray, before fading into nothing. "The magic here is old. Older than the markers. It sleeps in the bones of this place."

A cold gust stirred the fog, sending streamers of white curling around their ankles. Somewhere distant, metal groaned—a gate perhaps, or something less mundane.

They crept deeper into the graveyard, past leaning headstones carved with names no living tongue had spoken in generations, past angel statues with weatherworn faces that seemed to follow their progress with sightless eyes. The mist grew thicker, wrapping around their legs and curling up the crypt walls in defiance of natural airflow. It clung like a memory that refused to be forgotten, like guilt that found no absolution.

Kaelen stopped abruptly, one hand raised in warning.

“There,” he said, voice dropping to a whisper that nonetheless carried command.

A silhouette moved behind a towering obelisk near the center of the cemetery—tall, thin, and still as death itself. It made no sound, gave no acknowledgment of their presence, yet somehow projected an awareness that chilled the blood. The figure stood motionless, shrouded in mist and shadow, facing away from them as if contemplating some distant horizon visible only to its eyes.

For a moment, no one breathed. Even the fog seemed to pause, suspended between heartbeats.

Then the figure turned slowly, revealing nothing but a darker absence within the mist, and ran—vanishing into the fog like smoke drawn backward into flame, leaving only swirling eddies to mark its passage.

“Go!” Kaelen barked, his hand already closing around the haft of his axe.

They gave chase, boots striking soft ground with dull thuds, blades drawn, spells readied in tense fingers. The mist blurred the world around them, turning every shape into a potential ambush, every shadow into an adversary. But the figure was quick, weaving between the stones with unnatural precision, as if it knew the path by heart or could see through the veil that blinded mortal eyes.

It led them deeper into the graveyard, past crypts bearing names they recognized from village records, past monuments to forgotten heroes and unmarked graves of the destitute, until it vanished into the open maw of a freestanding crypt at the far end of the graveyard—a structure older than the rest, half-consumed by creeping ivy and shadow.

Stone doors slammed shut behind it with the finality of judgment rendered. A moment later came the sound of metal slamming into place—bars or bolts securing against pursuit.

The party reached the crypt seconds too late, their momentum carrying them to the sealed entrance like waves against unyielding rock. Thimara’s claws scraped uselessly against stone as Durim muttered curses in the ancient language of mountain halls.

Inside, visible through narrow gaps in the door's construction, a portcullis had dropped—a secondary defense against unwanted visitors. Rusted but thick, the gate sealed the passage beyond with a finality that spoke of careful preparation.

"Hold it," Kaelen growled, holstering his axe.

He stepped forward, hands gripping the cold iron bars, testing their weight. With a growl that started deep in his chest, he lifted—the muscles in his arms bulging, veins rising like carved lines beneath his skin. The portcullis shrieked in protest, metal grating against stone channels unused for decades, but it rose inch by painful inch under his strength.

Sweat beaded on his brow despite the chill. "Quickly," he grunted through clenched teeth.

Durim wedged a stone beneath the rising edge to hold it open, the makeshift brace groaning under the immense weight. Thimara was through first, slipping beneath with feline grace, followed by Aelinthir, whose staff cast dancing shadows on the walls beyond. Then Durim, muttering protection prayers as he ducked through the opening. Kaelen came last, letting the gate crash down behind him with a sound that echoed far too long, reverberating deep into the earth as if announcing their arrival to whatever waited below.

They now stood in a narrow stone antechamber, carved from dark granite veined with quartz that caught the light from Aelinthir's staff and reflected it in a thousand tiny stars. Dust lay thick in the corners, undisturbed for generations, but the center of the floor showed signs of recent passage—smudged footprints leading deeper into the crypt, toward a descending stairway barely visible in the gloom.

The air here was still and cold, but not stale as might be expected in a sealed tomb. It felt preserved, as though sealed by intent rather than time—a deliberate separation between the world of light and what lay beneath.

Along the walls, alcoves held urns and funerary niches, many empty or broken as if ransacked. Some held fragments of bone, others the remnants of grave goods too mundane to tempt robbers. One stood untouched—a sealed tomb, framed in iron banding that showed no rust despite the damp, and set into the wall with meticulous care. Above it, a single name had been carved deep into black stone, the letters filled with what appeared to be silver but gleamed with an unnatural luminescence:

HOLLOWMERE.

Aelinthir stepped forward, brushing fog-mist from the engraved letters with gentle fingers. The silver-like substance clung to her skin momentarily before sinking in, leaving no trace. "This is his family," she said quietly. "This is where he comes from."

Thimara's ears perked forward as her eyes narrowed at the name. She circled the chamber, her movements restless, tail lashing with agitation.

"Hollowmere," she said, her voice carrying the weight of remembered tales. "I

know this name.”

Kaelen glanced at her, eyebrow raised. “You’ve heard of them?”

“In the guild halls,” Thimara replied, running a claw along the engraved letters. “Whispered over ale when masters think apprentices aren’t listening. Years ago, they say the townsfolk burned a man for necromancy—Samuel Hollowmere. Accused him of stealing corpses, of communing with the dead.”

She moved to examine the crest carved beneath the name. “His son, Varnek, vanished the night of the execution. The guild elders used the tale to warn us against meddling with certain… patrons.” Her whiskers twitched as she studied the footprints leading deeper into the crypt. “The Hollowmere name was meant to be buried with the father’s ashes. Yet someone disturbs these graves. Someone who knows these crypts too well.”

“Could it be the son?” Aelinthir asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Thimara’s tail flicked once, sharply. “After so many years? Perhaps. Or perhaps someone else has taken interest in an old family’s secrets.”

“Whoever they are,” Durim said grimly, his hand tightening on his warhammer, “they’ve chosen a poor doorstep to call home.”

Thimara circled the chamber, her movements restless, ears flattened against her skull. “There’s magic woven into these walls,” she murmured. “Old wards. They weren’t meant to keep people out.” She paused, running a claw along an invisible line in the air. “They were meant to keep something in.”

Aelinthir’s staff flickered with pale light that grew stronger as she raised it overhead. Shadows retreated across the floor like tide before moon, revealing more carvings on the walls—a raven perched upon a twisted tree, its roots curling downward into spiral patterns that seemed to move when viewed from the corner of the eye. Beneath the crest, words were carved in an archaic script:

“Death is not the end. It is the door.”

The words seemed to hang in the air, to resonate with the stone itself. For a moment, Aelinthir thought she heard whispering—too faint to discern words, too persistent to dismiss as imagination.

Opposite the sealed tomb, at the far end of the chamber, a spiral staircase descended into darkness—chiseled directly into the rock, its steps worn smooth by time and use. The prints continued downward, disappearing into shadow that even magical light seemed reluctant to penetrate.

No sound rose from below. No footfalls. No breathing. No movement.

But something stirred. Not sound. Not movement.

Presence. Awareness. The sensation of being observed by eyes that required no light to see.

Kaelen stepped forward, hand on his axe, determination hardening his features into a mask of stone. "No more running," he said, voice steady despite the weight pressing against them. "No more hiding in shadows."

Aelinthir nodded, the light from her staff brightening in response to her resolve. "Let's see what waits beneath the Hollowmere name."

Durim muttered a final prayer, touching the holy symbol at his throat. It glowed briefly, warm against his skin. "May the Forge Father guide our path."

Thimara's ears swiveled, catching sounds beyond mortal hearing. "Something waits," she whispered. "Not just the figure we chased. Something... hungry."

They descended, one by one, into the crypt's heart—Kaelen first, followed by Thimara, then Aelinthir with her staff held high, and finally Durim, whose sturdy frame seemed to fill the narrow passage.

And the door above them shut with a sigh of finality, as if the tomb itself were drawing breath before speaking long-held secrets.

The darkness waited.