

# The Temple of the Dead Mall

One of the diaries of Leilani Hawkins, by We're All Mad Here

*In shadows, they gathered.*

*“The signs are clear,” the High One spoke. “The stars align. Soon.”*

*“Soon!” the others echoed.*

*A dagger flashed in the shadows. Ruby-liquid flowed into a chalice. The liquid was poured into a cauldron. Steam erupted from within. An image formed in the shadows.*

*“All hail!”*

*“ALL HAIL!”*

*“The Ancients show us! Seek out this, our next sacrifice! In the meantime, Jasper, get a mop and clean up this mess.”*

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It was one of those perfect Summer days. The skies were clear and blue. It was toasty hot with a hint of a breeze to keep it from getting too overbearing.

And, best of all, it was Saturday.

My name is Lelani Hawkins. On this Saturday, I was chilling out with some of the other faculty from Arcanum University at our annual barbeque. Even though I'm "just" a librarian, I rated an invite. I expect part of that was due to the special Hawkins family "punch" that I brought in a large cooler. Dad, if you only knew how much mileage I get out of that recipe.

"I swear, this is the *best* stuff!" Andy Boyers, a professor of English at the university, gushed as he eyed me with that familiar look of poorly-disguised lust.

“Just remember to drink water with it!” Constance Atchison scolded.

The counsellor was an older woman with a no-nonsense attitude combined with a true gift for giving helpful, if brutally-direct, advice. She also had little patience of the juvenile antics of some of her colleagues.

“Always a good idea to stay hydrated,” Thorne agreed, helping himself to a third cup of the punch.

Jonas Thorne was one of the younger faculty. He held a position as a professor in the Archaeology department, studying ancient civilizations. No one exactly knew what Thorne had managed to do to get tenure at the university at his age. It earned him a lot of ill-will that was barely offset by his agreeable and easy-going manner. He never seemed inclined to get involved in any of the interdepartmental politics of the university.

I had to say, Thorne was one of my favorites among the faculty. He was funny and could hold his liquor. Cute butt, too.

Oh, I know. It's inappropriate to say stuff like that about a coworker. Whatever. He's checked out my ass multiple times. At least he's not as sleazy about it as Boyers and some of the others.

“Yes, one would need to wash away the taste, I expect,” Erma Gainsworth sniffed.

Erma was thin to the point of looking gaunt. The woman could stand to eat a sandwich or two, but I could see why she didn't. Her ass was so tightly-clenched, she probably couldn't shit her food later. She was *not* one of my favorites, in case that wasn't clear.

“Go ahead and tell me more about flavor, Emma dear,” I said. “How *is* your wine-from-a-box, by the way?”

She just glared at me and turned to Thorne.

“So, Professor Thorne, tell me about this new dig,” she purred.

And by “purred”, I mean made a sound like a Klingon gargling broken glass.

Yeah, I *really* don't like her.

"Not much to tell, really," Thorne shrugged, seemingly oblivious to the glares Emma and I exchanged. "When developers started to do some initial work at Blackcrest Mall, they found what seemed to be human bones. After the police were done, they found that they were very *old* human bones. Then they found signs of what appears to be an ancient civilization and called the University."

"Native American?" I asked, suddenly intrigued.

Thorne took a swig of his punch and shook his head looking slightly puzzled.

"No," he said slowly. "That's the funny thing. Having a bugger of a time figuring out who they were. Might all just be a prank, but at the moment it's a bit of a mystery."

"Well, mystery is the spice of life!"

We all turned to see Isobel Hawks saunter up. Isobel was another of the faculty in the Archaeology school. She was one of the younger professors, though not tenured. She was, I had to admit, damn sexy. Busty and fit with her light brown hair done back in one of those Lara Croft braids.

I had to admit I always liked Isobel. She played up the whole "action heroine" look deliberately, but was otherwise pretty down-to-earth and not pretentious. She was also hell to try to match at shots.

"Hey Leilani," Isobel gave me a nod and made a face at Emma as Emma's expression of distaste. "How's things, Anorexia?"

"Hmph!" Emma tossed her head and stalked away, leaving the three of us to chat.

I filled Isobel's cup with punch as Isobel got Thorne's eye.

"I got a call from the workers," she said. "They had some kind of breakthrough. They found - get this - a secret chamber under the mall!"

Thorne's eyebrows shot up. "You're kidding!"

"I'm not!" Isobel all but squealed. She gets adorably teenager-ish when she gets excited.

She pulled out her phone and started showing some pictures to him. Thorne looked at the photos and frowned.

"I can't tell... huh. Lelani, can you take a look at these?"

I dutifully took a look. There were poorly-lit pictures of odd symbols on walls. They looked vaguely familiar.

"What do you think?" he asked me.

I shrugged. "Looks familiar, but the lighting is pretty bad."

"Well," Isobel elbowed me. "Guess you'll have to come take a look at the secret chamber. It'll be good for you to get out of that dusty library."

I made a face at her, then grinned. "Sure, why not?"

Sigh. When am I going to learn?

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Blackcrest Mall was one of those places that are all too commonplace these days. It was probably a hopping and happening social center in the Eighties or even the Nineties. Back in the days of video stores, before the Internet devastated brick-and-mortar shops, it was probably where all the kids went to hang out, flirt, and sneak booze and smokes while dodging adult supervision.

Now, Blackcrest was just a graveyard dotted with the shells of closed stores and abandoned shops. Graphitti and petty vandalism were the only signs that human beings had entered this property in the last decade. I'd read somewhere that developers were finally going to do something with the land. I wondered absently why it had taken so long.

I parked my motorcycle near Thorne's Jeep and eyed the expensive sports car that was parked in the faded remains of what used to be a handicapped parking spot. Figured. This car was the sort driven by douchebags who instinctively did that sort of shitty thing.

I followed the markers to the building where the excavation was going on. It was a former video store, which probably rated its own place in an archaeologist's digging. Inside was Thorne, Isobel, Bob (one of the grad students in the Archaeology department), and a smarmy-looking weasel in an overpriced shirt and slacks.

The weasel had that sort of sprayed and styled hair that only a truly vain shit ever aspires to. He looked like someone who used a tanning booth. He glanced in my direction and, unsurprisingly, started to undress me with his eyes.

Probably didn't help that I was in daisy-duke shorts and wearing a bikini top with my biker boots. Hmph. If I'd known I was going to have that kind of audience, I would have at least worn an offensive t-shirt.

"Hi!" I said brightly, shifting the satchel that rode across my shoulder. "What's going on?"

"Hey Lelani," Thorne said, frowning a little at the well-dressed weasel. "We were just waiting for you. We were about to go down when Edgar arrived."

"Edgar Fleetwood," the weasel said, stepping forward to offer his hand. "Of Goodhart Properties."

I shook it briefly. His skin was clammy. Ick. I didn't want to know what this creep did to have clammy skin on a hot Summer day.

"Edgar represents the developers who have purchased this property," Isobel added, looking at Edgar like he was something unpleasant found at the bottom of a shoe.

"How... nice?" I wasn't entirely sure what was going on here.

"I fear I have bad news for the University," Edgar said, his mournful expression never quite being convincing. "We have decided to close down this dig site."

“And I’m telling you that’s not your decision to make,” Thorne said, shaking his head. “Once we were brought in, the State put a moratorium on development...”

“No longer,” Edgar replied, producing a sheet of paper.

Bored, strolled from the argument to the edge of the dig site. The floor of the video store had been torn up, exposing stairs of worn stone that descended into darkness. Stepping over the string marking the site, I squatted and examined the steps. There were sigils marked into them. They were the same sigils I’d seen in Isobel’s camera earlier.

“Step away from there!” Edgar’s voice went shrill.

He really was turning out to be a proper shit. I stood and looked back at Thorne and Isobel. Neither looked happy.

“The paperwork is in order,” Thorne said, looking dubious. “This isn’t over, though.”

“Oh, it is,” Edgar sneered. “Now, you are trespassing.”

I helped them gather up their equipment and carry it back to Thorne’s Jeep.

“I’ve got a friend I think can help with this,” Thorne said. “I’m going to head out to see if we can stop these assholes from damaging the find.”

Isobel looked at me funny.

“Go head,” she said. “I’ll bum a ride with Lelani.”

“Can’t blame you,” Thorne winked at me. “Certainly a prettier ride... uh... back.”

The double entendre seemed to dawn on him. He flushed a bit then made an excuse and hastened to the Jeep. Bob grinned and sauntered after him. I let out a - God help me - giggle after he was out of earshot.

“Prettier ride...I’m never going to let him live that down.”

“I bet he’ll enjoy that,” Isobel said. “There’s a good brewery a few blocks from here. I’ll buy lunch and you can tell me what you saw that made your eyes go all wide.”

My poker face sucks.

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We finished off a couple of burgers and a pint each of a good IPA when Isobel finally looked serious.

“So, what did you see?”

I sighed.

“Those sigils in the pics on your phone. They’re on the steps going down into your secret chamber.”

“Yes, I saw them.”

“They’re referenced in the *Journals of Abraham Black*,” I explained. “We have a copy in the Closed Stacks. Abraham Black was a sailor in the Nineteenth century. Spent a lot of time on ships going around the Pacific. He kept journals of his voyages. He shared copies of his journals with a couple of scholars he used to correspond with for questions he had about... odd... things he found during his travels.”

“Lovely,” Isobel said, a trifle impatiently. “What did he say about the markings?”

I frowned in memory. “His ship went off-course in a storm. They weighed anchor on a deserted island, noted for large statues upon it.”

“Easter Island?”

I shook my head.

“The statues he described are much more disturbing. He said each statue was different and cast of some dark, oily stone. They depicted some kind of monsters. At the base of each was writing. He copied what he could and some of the markings were the same.”

Isobel's frown matched mine.

“What do they mean?”

I shrugged. “Black's later writings indicated that the markings haunted him in some way. He had nightmares of the sigils and monsters. He claimed to hear voices and wake to find the walls covered in the writing.”

“Sounds like a nutcase.”

“Maybe,” I shrugged. “He saw a lot of odd things and kept very detailed notes for a sailor. He disappeared around the turn of the century.”

“Hmph,” Isobel sipped from her second IPA.

“You're thinking of sneaking on to the site,” I accused.

She had the good grace to look sheepish.

“I have faith in Jonas's connections,” she said. “But that might take time. I want to record as much of the site as possible before Fleetwood and his thugs ruin it.”

I smiled, unable to resist the bait.

“So... we go tonight?”

Isobel grinned in response.

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After nightfall, the mall lost its despondent and sad appearance, taking on instead a vaguely sinister and creepy air to it.

Isobel and I crept on to the property under the cover of darkness. It was a warm night, so we both opted for comfort. She wore tight black shorts and a black tank top along with boots that were laced up to the knee. I opted for some comfortable cut-off jean shorts and a bikini top. I had trainers on and a canvas satchel (I call it my “adventure purse”) with a few essentials.

It didn’t look like Edgar Clammyhands had bothered to pay for any kind of security guard, so it was childishly-easy to get into the building.

After the big deal old Edgar made earlier, you’d think that would have tipped me off.

Once inside, we chanced flashlights. I paused to examine the steps down in more detail. I couldn’t read the strange, squiggly script and was a bit grateful for that. The sigils had a way of kind of creeping into the brain. After a few moments of study, I took pictures and looked away, feeling a bit sick.

I followed Isobel down the steps into the chamber. The steps went down a surprising distance. The chamber under the video store had a good twelve feet between the floor and ceiling. The walls were covered with more of that strange sigil-script. At each corner of the room was a squat pillar, about three feet high, and made out of a strange black stone that looked as though they were coated in oil. The stone seemed to suck the light in, making the shadows deeper and more ominous. At the base of each post was more of that weird sigil-script.

“Hey, come and look at this!”

I went over to where Isobel crouched on the floor by one of the walls. There were stones in the floor that looked loose.

“Some kind of trigger,” Isobel mused.

I frowned. “Wonder what it...”

Then Isobel pressed the stone. I stared at her in shock over her impulsive move then at the wall in surprise as it started to split into sections and open into a passage. I glared at her.

“Do *not* press strange buttons in creepy chambers! Good lord, how do you not know this?”

Isobel rolled her eyes. “Yes Mom. Jeez, you sound like Jonas.”

I compressed my lips in irritation. I frankly wished he was here. Our gaze went toward the passage. Our flashlight beams struggled against the darkness. We exchanged glances.

“We really ought to at least check it out,” Isobel said, her expression clearly torn between curiosity and wariness.

I bit my lip. I felt the same conflict. This was a really *bad* idea.

“Yeah,” I found myself saying. “We’re here, after all.”

And so the two of us, like perfect idiots, followed the hidden passage into the mysterious, creepy temple underneath a dead mall. I pondered the irony of doing *exactly* what someone in a horror movie *shouldn’t* do as we were beneath an old video store.

Didn’t stop me, though.

The passage opened into another room with more of the creepy sigils on walls of oily black stone. This room went a bit further with a large, nine-foot-tall statue of something my eyes couldn’t properly focus on, made out of that same stone. The shape of it was indistinct, with flowing shapes from it that looked way too much like tentacles for my comfort. Eyes dotted it in various wrong places.

And, of course, right in front of it was something that looked just like an altar.

“Is this what I think it is?” Isobel asked, her eyes wide.

I could only gulp and nod. This looked like one of the statues Abraham Black described in his journals.

“I think we should go,” I said faintly.

“So soon?”

We spun to see Edgar Fleetwood standing behind us. He was flanked by a pair of very large, burly fellows wearing hoodies that concealed their faces.

I moved without thinking, kicking Edgar in his smug face.

I am very good at kicking. I've been taking various martial arts since I was a child. I can kick hard enough to break boards without trouble. When I kick people, they know it. So when I kicked Edgar in his face, I was expecting him to fly back, maybe lose a few teeth, and enjoy a delightfully-broken nose.

I was *not* expecting his head to snap back then suddenly back in-place like some child's toy!

Isobel, in the meantime, rushed forward, snapping a kick for the knee of one of the hulking bruisers. I moved for the other bruiser, then realized Edgar was studying me, his head tilted like a bird's.

“That one is strong. Take both of them.”

The rest of the fight went pretty much as expected.

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I wonder if getting tied up on altars is just going to be a thing now? If I get out of this, am I going to wind up naked and tied to an altar tomorrow after work? Next week after yoga?

I'm all for a bit of a kinky tie-up game, but there's a time and a place for it. Also this *particular* altar feels... icky.

So, yeah. I've been stripped and chained to the altar in front of the creepy statue. Edgar-who-probably-isn't-entirely-human and his very strong thugs subdued Isobel and I with almost ridiculous ease.

Then the rest of their robe-and-cowl-wearing freak convention came streaming in to form a semi-circle.

“I will admit to some surprise,” Creepy Edgar said.

As I paid more attention to him, I realized he didn’t blink very often. When he did, it was as though he realized he needed to do so in order to keep up appearances. His skin seemed to have something *writhing* beneath it in random places.

Remember when I said there’s a time and a place for tie-up games? So, when a gal is tied up and the guy has weird things under his skin rippling around is *not* one of those times and places.

“Surprise about what, asshole?” I asked, very proud that I was keeping my voice steady.

I craned my neck around. Isobel was struggling in the grip of one of the bruisers who subdued us. She was stripped and bound. A knotted cloth filled her mouth as a gag.

“You surprised me,” he said, his fingers touching my cheek, then tracing down my body.

I couldn’t help but shudder. His touch felt like someone painting sewage on my body.

“Not used to hot Hawai’ian girls in Creepyland, or where-ever you’re from?” I retorted.

“No,” he straightened. “We performed a divination for our sacrifice and knew *she* would come.”

He gestured at Isobel, who continued to make ‘mmp’ noises and struggle ineffectually.

“We didn’t anticipate there would be *two* of you,” Edgar looked me over with approval. “Or that *you* would be so strong. Yes, you will be a very suitable sacrifice.”

“Wow, you’re really into the cliches, aren’t you?” I strained against the chains, but they weren’t going to give anytime soon. “You were just waiting for hot girls to come into your secret sanctum? That seems kind of... I dunno... inefficient.”

He chuckled.

“No, my dear. The stars are aligned this night. We allowed word of the site to leak to your university. We allowed your scholars to dig just enough. We were shown the way by the Old Ones, the first of whom will now be summoned forth to bring an end to this world.”

My eyebrow raised. Seriously. He sounded like a bad movie villain. I wondered if this cult had spent a little too much time in the back room of the video store.

“Uh... yeah, right,” I said. “So how does this go, then? You’re not the sort to get the sharp objects for virgins or anything, are you? Heck, if you’re looking for a virgin, I probably ought to set a few things straight.”

“You needn’t worry,” Edgar sneered, pulling out a wicked looking dagger that actually *did* make me worry quite a bit.

He picked up some kind of plastic bag with his free hand and smiled at me, showing far too many teeth.

“I would not damage your lovely skin for the Old One,” he said.

He slashed the bag and some kind of red goo flowed out. He squirted the red goo all over my body, then started to rub it all over my skin.

“Hey!” I growled. “What the hell?”

It was a sticky goo and smelled of cherry concentrate. To say I was finding this weird is a bit of an understatement. It got weirder when he pulled out the candies. He sprinkled a variety of candies - the sort sold as snacks in theaters or gas stations - all over the sticky goo.

And so there I was, chained down to an altar and coated in some kind of icky soda concentrate and random bits of cheap candy. I can honestly say that was a first for me.

“I *do* apologize,” Edgar said, actually sounding contrite. “I am a traditionalist as these things go, but I don’t make the rules. Mortal energies have had an effect, it seems, on the Old Ones.”

“An effect?” The smell of the sticky concentrate was making me feel a little ill.

“Yes,” Edgar shrugged. “It was the videos, you see. The captured stories in this shop. They bled through the *aether* and the Old Ones took notice.”

He grimaced. “Especially the ‘adult section’. They picked up odd... well... kinks, for lack of a better word.”

I blinked. First of all, I didn’t know there *were* videos with kinks involving sticky soda concentrate and candy. Then, the thought that extra-dimensional beings from beyond were somehow tuning into old videos was just a bit much for me to wrap my head around.

“Anyway,” Edgar said. “We work with what we have.”

He turned to the statue and started to gesture with the knife. “*Aug shib-ghog m’pagn olg bah nib-nib!*”

The eyes on the statue started to move.

“Yeah, okay, that’s enough!”

There was the clicking sound of cocking guns. I craned my head. Jonas Thorne tossed aside cultist robes while brandishing a shotgun

Edgar turned, his eyes wide. “Stop him! We cannot allow the ceremony to be interrupted!”

“Yeah, which is why I’m doing it,” Jonas said and fired the shotgun, covering the statue in bits of Edgar.

Turns out Edgar didn’t really have a lot of blood in him. Lots of creepy worm things, though. That got a nice scream of terror and disgust out of me.

The rest of it was a lot of gunplay, manly fist-fighting, and a well-placed head-butt from Isobel from what I gather. I didn't really pay a lot of attention to all that. I was a lot more focused on the eyes of the creepy statue that were paying me *far* too much attention. Oh, and the statue starting to move.

The shotgun sounded off four more times and I was suddenly able to move free of the altar. I hopped off, snapping a roundhouse kick that would have made Chuck Norris proud at the nearest creepy cultist. The moment I was off the altar, the statue stopped moving. The eyes kept following me for another few moments, then grew still and the statue went inert.

Jonas cut Isobel free then turned to me.

"Are you okay?" Jonas handed me the robe he'd used as his disguise.

"Am I okay?" I looked incredulously at him. "I'm coated in sticky sweetener and candies. How do I look?"

"Good enough to eat," he said.

And so I had to punch him.

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It turned out that Jonas Thorne was better at esoteric knowledge than either Isobel or I had expected. Upon leaving the site, Jonas checked some of his sources on a hunch and found the 'stars were right', whatever that means. He collected some guns and returned just as the cultists were streaming in after Isobel and I got grabbed.

I was sitting in a nice restaurant, having washed the gunk off of me and taken a good hour to get it out of my hair. Lck! Across from me, Jonas Thorne smiled, wincing slightly at the bruise forming on his cheek, as he raised a glass. Isobel sat to one side, wincing slightly and delicately touching the bruise forming on her head from her head butt.

"Looks like this will still be an impressive find," Isobel said. "We've taken out a doomsday cult and have some things remaining to study."

“Not much, though,” I muttered.

Shortly after we took down the cultists, the statue started to *melt*. After that, it was your obligatory “lair collapsing” montage. We got out just in time. Jonas took Isobel and I home then reached out for dinner, first taking me back to collect my motorcycle. And so I was enjoying a very expensive steak and a nice bottle of wine.

“I guess you’re right,” I said after a moment. “We saved the world from weird monsters with unspeakably-strange kinks.”

“True enough,” Jonas said. “It’s certainly not how *I* would have done it, in their place.”

I raised an eyebrow. “And how would *you* have done things, Professor Thorne?”

“I would have gone with whipped cream,” he said after a moment’s consideration, an impish grin forming on his face. “And probably tied the two of you together.”

Isobel and I exchanged glances. I leaned forward, suddenly thinking this evening was not a total loss. “Tell us more...”

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Leilani Hawkins will return in **A Concert in Amber**