

TEN

Dorothe had no choice but to comply with the Council's request to accompany them out of Aften. She wouldn't dare make a scene inside of the city, in so public a forum. Tonlin and Louve didn't let her go alone however, yet that didn't seem to calm the Paladin's nerves no matter their goodwill. The Surclerics allowed them, seeing the Bard and the Druid as Dorothe's accomplices. Although the girl didn't want to attract any attention to herself, it was easy to go unnoticed as the locals rushed to the now glowing lordstone that spilled a bright red light into the sky. The Paladin wanted to find Donovan, Erwan, and Gail, but there was no breaking away from the three Surclerics.

They passed through Aften's gates, and for every step taken, the harder it was to not look behind themselves. None within the group itself said a word, tension between each faction thick in the air. The Council walked around the outside of the trio, the man who spoke leading the way. He didn't look much older than Dorothe or Tonlin, probably in his mid-twenties. At their left was a woman possibly entering her late thirties. Her hair was pulled into a tight bun, but thin strands of dark brown were left untouched at her temples. On their right, an elder male shuffled along quietly, his eyes a fading grey color.

Of these three, Dorothe had no doubt that the man who led them toward the river was the Necromancer. The masculine voice ruled out the woman, and the thought that the old gentlemen could fit the stature was just laughable. The Paladin gripped the hilt of her sword, silently calculating their chances of surviving a scuffle with the Council. Of their escorts, Dorothe predicted the most challenge would come from the man in front of her. She took a deep breath and began to draw the blue-tinted blade.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." The caster didn't turn as he addressed her. *"Look behind you."*

Her eyes followed the trail over her shoulders, and much to her surprise, it seemed her friends had fallen behind, caught up in quiet discussion with the other Clerics. Her attention snapped back to the tall male as he spoke again.

"You can fight, or you can run and hide, but keep in mind your friends cannot. If you value their lives, you will be cooperative."

Dorothe did not enjoy being manipulated, and wished she didn't care so much for her companions as she did. But she didn't speak these thoughts as they were ushered into a rowboat. Waiting for them was a younger woman who looked identical to the male leading them away from the lordstone's light. The twins sat together at the front while the other Surclerics sat at the back, forcing the trio into the seats in the middle. Tonlin expected that they'd have to row all the way down to Voluundrun as some kind of torture, but to the party's surprise, the oars started without them.

"Why do we have to come with you to the capital?" Louve couldn't stand the strained silence. If they were supposed to travel all together for a few hours, she wanted to know why. *"Can't you see Rasmus is dying?!"*

"You don't have to come..." The male at the front of the boat began.

"... But it's strongly suggested." His twin finished.

"What did we do? How do you know us, who are you?" Encouraged by Louve's boldness, Tonlin felt he was entitled to some answers as well.

Without changing their bored expressions, the twins both raised a brow before answering.

"I am Facil." The male twin bowed his head, his silver earrings twinkling in the starlight.

"I am Tarcel." The female twin bowed as well, showing golden triangles glittering from her earlobes.

They were very nearly the same person with subtle differences. Both had long raven hair, but while Facil had icy blue irises, Tarcel's were warm amber, almost orange. Their earrings were different, as was the embroidery on their white robes. Facil had incorporated jagged edges in silver and Tarcel's designs were more rounded. They wore no other jewelry than the earrings, and they mimicked each other's behaviours - or rather, they *shared* them. Their mirroring gave Tonlin the creeps.

"I am Enora", came the woman from the back. She wore a ruby ring on her right forefinger, something that Louve sensed was not of natural origins. Her embroidery included a series of loops and crosses, decorations that hinted her strength was in the restoration school of magic. Most Clerics are initially taught the restoration spells, she read, unless they show potential in any of the four elements.

"And I am Joel." The elder male's voice was hoarse and quiet - It couldn't be any further from the Necromancer's tone, Dorothe thought to herself. Joel's cloak had stitched spirals, resembling smoke plumes. This seemed to indicate his strengths were in the school of illusion. Louve was not surprised that the Council was made of a variety of magics, as they were handpicked for their specific gifts. The Druid had read about the Council in passing, never finding much interest in politics over the years.

"As for yourselves, there isn't much we don't know about our Paladin here." Facil's words made Dorothe's stomach knot. What was there to know about her? She was raised in the Chapel of the Clerics, sure, but she wasn't exactly special... right?

Tarcel pointed at the two others. *"You are Tonlin Godefrey, a Bard, and you are the daughter of the late Surdruid, Louve. Am I wrong?"*

The trio looked at each other quietly. *"... the **late** Surdruid..."*, she said. But how did she know he was dead already? Did Bretta or the Fighters at her house recognize his corpse and tell the Council? Did the Druids figure out he wasn't in the forest? If they knew he was dead, did they know that the party were the killers? Louve swallowed their fear and affirmed the female's statement. It was useless to try to deny his death.

"It's a shame the Druids don't have a leader right now. You'd be in line to become the next Surdruid, right Louve?" Enora's voice had slight traces of intrigue. She wasn't emotionless like the twins were, and that was relieving to Dorothe. Maybe the whole Council wasn't corrupted, she thought. Maybe they were. They seemed to avoid talking about, or even looking back at Aften's current crisis.

"That's right," Louve started. *"As long as the kin is worthy of the title, it passes through the bloodline. We're tested by our connection to the Lord Dyr. If the connection is too weak, or if there is no kin, the*

Surdruid is chosen among the rest of the Druids." Louve stared out into the river as the self-sustained boat crossed into the waters where the two Northern branches merged into one thick course. *"That's how Torrick was made into Surdruid. Since I'm not there, the Druids might just find someone among them to replace me. I won't mind."*

"How long until we reach Voluundrun?" Dorothe spoke finally. She didn't want to add fuel to the fire though, so the girl only wanted to ask technical questions until they got to the Chapel. She didn't think the Surclerics would take them anywhere other than their own building, but there was room to be wrong.

"An hour." Facil answered her, meeting her gaze.

"The river is flowing South, and with the Black Moon, the tides are steady rather than violent tonight. Should be smooth sailing to the capital." Joel added, staring up at the cloudless sky.

"Black Moon...?" The Bard was unfamiliar with the term.

"The moon goddess, Manen, uses one night a month to rest. During this time, the moon is gone from the sky. It's called the Night of the Black Moon." Louve showcased her knowledge, though Dorothe couldn't figure out how she could be so collected in their situation. Maybe she still didn't grasp their peril. The Paladin watched the stars' reflections in the ripples of the water behind their boat, regaining her silence.

"Manen's influence is double on the night when the moon is full, in balance to the Black Moon." Tarcel added. Her amber eyes were turned upward to the dark blanket above as she spoke, enthusiasm in her voice for once.

"Yes, sister..." Facil's eyes followed his twin's. *"On those nights, Manen outshines even Sol."*

The rest of their trip was silent, save for Joel's periodic coughing. Dorothe didn't know how old the man was, or if he'd stay alive long enough to see them to the Chapel. At one point, Tonlin had tried to lighten the mood by playing the pan flute, but almost as soon as a note escaped the pipes Tarcel snatched them from his hand.

"That's two instruments I've lost now. Am I unlucky?" The Bard lamented his loss.

The hour crawled by, 60 minutes of agony for the Paladin, whose thoughts took her further and further into her already building anxiety. What was going to happen to them, she wondered silently. If it came down to it, she would have to go on without the pair. Or possibly have them continue without her. Either way, Sjel had to be completed.

Eventually, the capital came into view. It was the largest city of Voluun, with two thick walls circling towering buildings, one of which was topped with a golden celtic knot. It had barely changed from what Dorothe remembered of her childhood. A wide, red, wooden bridge extended from across the river, letting travelers into Voluundrun. The boat sailed gracefully underneath, somehow undetected by those walking yards above their heads. It slowed as the shadow of the bridge concealed them, this being the point where the river was nearest the city. Joel sat up, as if waking from a nap suddenly, and waved his hand in a wide arch at the rock wall under the wood.

Before them, a passageway was revealed, just large enough for the boat to go through. The hexed oars worked to turn them toward the hole, then slowly guided them into darkness. Dorothe looked back up the river. The last glimpses of daylight shone before her, and the pillar of red light from Aften began to fade. Joel made another motion, concealing the tunnel once more. Tarcel's shadow turned to face their path. She cupped her hands around her mouth and exhaled deeply, a small pile of embers spilling into her palms. The female then threw the embers into the air in front of the boat, each landing into sconces lined on the walls ahead. Torches burst into life, illuminating the steady stream they traveled.

The oars dipped into oil-like water, though their destination wasn't as far this time. It only took a handful of minutes for them to find the other side of the tunnel. The boat docked at a set of stone stairs, silver veins running through the cavern wildly. With Facil in the lead again, they ascended the staircase.

"Where are we?" Tonlin asked, though it appeared obvious.

"Under the Chapel of the Clerics." Enora replied. *"This passage is for the Council's use only. This way was easier and faster than going through the city itself."*

"We will take you to the Council's Chamber...", Facil said.

"... And explain your situation there", Tarcel followed behind.

They climbed up a spiral case, with flat platforms every now and then that Dorothe suspected were hidden access doors to the different floors of the Chapel. She counted in her head with every step she touched. 30... 52... 84... 124... Finally they stopped when she counted 130 steps. Joel wiped his hand across the wall, and sure enough a doorway appeared. They entered a large room from the side, and the Surclerics parted from the group, moving behind a tall white marble counter. Dorothe, Tonlin, and Louve moved into the heart of the room, instinctively gathering into a circle of gold painted on the floor.

The architecture of the Council's Chamber was unlike anything they'd seen in the previous cities. Voluundrun made use of pillars, carvings of the Lords and the Gods embedded in the stone about the room. Glass crystals reflected light from tall torches, the orange glow glittering on the walls. Beneath the three, large tiles of speckled black granite showed their faces back to them. Dorothe had never been allowed within the Council's Chamber as a child, but the rest of the Chapel was significantly less decorated as she recalled. It was clear to her that whatever funds the capital received from clergy work was purely reserved for itself, rather than redistributed to the other cities.

The Council stood silently waiting behind the high counter, Facil, Tarcel, Enora, and Joel, their right hands placed upon the surface of the marble. They looked imposing, judges of a court that the trio were subjected to, though their crimes were not yet made clear. They stared down upon Dorothe and Enora spoke.

"Not many people get to see the inside of this room who aren't Clerics on their way to becoming Surclerics. You three are a rather special group - of course that's easy to see." The older woman seemed to imply something that none of the trio were catching onto.

"You have been collecting the seven shards of Sjel", Joel croaked with a knobbly finger pointed out over the counter. *"You are the only ones who have been able to gather them in over two hundred years. Do you know who was last able to rejoin Sjel?"*

Instinctively, both Tonlin and Dorothe looked toward Louve, but even she had to shake her head. For once, her various books did not cover that subject. Joel muttered under his breath about uneducated youths before continuing on.

“King Reddus II. I believe the Paladins make tribute to Skjold by burning his likeness... or, they did anyway. He made the same trek you are on now, collecting the great magenta crystals from each of the guilds.”

“The Clerics’ shard was easy, because the King resided in Voluundrun”, Enora chirped.

“From there, he went to Morksvik. The Thieves were cautious of the King’s visit, but let him escape with their gem.” Tarcel said plainly.

“The Druids of Traertap Forest relied on the lord of nature too much to see the cunning of man.” Facil said coldly.

“The Fighters were eager to prove their loyalty to the King, so they handed their shard to Reddus II without a thought”, Joel steepled his finger together, looking rather tired of the story already. *“And the Sorcerers were promised power in place of their shard, easily goaded.”*

“Then came the Bards. King Reddus II had five shards then, and slowly the shards began to pull toward each other, though the whole gem couldn’t reform until all seven were together. The Bards had no reason to give up their shard, however. They had music and merriment, and that was all they wanted. There was nothing the King could offer that would make them give in.” Enora looked down to Tonlin, frowning. *“In his greed, he placed a curse on the Divine and his family, promising he would dispel it when the Bards’ shard was his... but he left Cansang without filling his end of the bargain.”*

Tonlin looked to the floor, saying nothing.

“Reddus II came to Regnarsvar, looking to complete the gem...” Dorothe began to recall her studies, the reasons why the Paladins hosted an effigy burning every midyear. *“But the Lords were growing wise to his plans, and the guilds had all received word of his deeds in Cansang. Skjold was not happy and wrought justice upon him. When he dug up the shard in Paladin’s Rest, the shards slammed together and fused into Sjel.”*

The room was silent except her voice, Louve and Tonlin watching the Paladin continue to recite her lessons.

“When the gem was still hot, King Reddus’s greed overcame him and he could not wait - He picked it up. The fool was set on fire, and he fell to his knees. He called for help, and though the citizens heard him and came, they only watched his skin char and his wicked grin continued to curl. Skjold watched and was appeased, justice served for Cansang’s Divine. That’s why the Paladins burn him every year as tribute.”

Dorothe glanced up at Joel, who seemed satisfied by her knowledge. After a moment of silence, he cleared his dry throat and licked his lips, meaning to add more.

“As I’m sure you’ve heard by now, after Dromme’s death, the Sorcerer’s guild attempted to gather the shards once more. They never forgot the promise of power if all seven shards were collected...”

“But didn’t King Reddus II succeed?” Louve wrinkled her brow.

“Ah... yes...” The elder male lost his train of thought, cut off mid-lecture.

Facil picked up where he left off. *“The citizens of Regnarsvar were not happy with the intentions of Reddus II.”*

“They scattered the shards again, sending them back to each guild”, Tarcel aided her twin.

“Right, right. As I was saying...”, Joel had to clear his throat one more time. *“The Sorcerers went to Aften and were subjected to their trial of bravery. It’s written that they passed the trial, but were still not trusted given their history. No shard was collected there. They went to the forest, but the Druids were stubborn, revering their crystal as part of nature. So the Sorcerers left a nasty present as they moved on to Morksvik. The Thieves were less than welcoming. The Lord Osyge stole a bit of the Sorcerers’ magic and they were finally sent home, dissuaded.”*

“We’re not on this path to gain power or wealth.” Dorothe felt the Council meant to compare them to the previous attempts, judging their worth before knowing their cause.

“We know.” The twins whispered, though their voice carried through the large stone room nonetheless.

“We suspect your intentions are of nobler roots.” Enora nodded wisely. *“However...”*

“Dromme is dead”, Facil reminded Tonlin.

“Skjold is dead”, Tarcel stared down at Dorothe.

“And Rasmus is dead”, finished Enora.

The trio knew already. There was nothing they could have done, even if the group was still in Aften. They might have been able to comfort Donovan and the other Fighters, but there was very little that words could repair. Dorothe’s face hardened as she tried to keep her composure. Showing weakness wouldn’t make their situation easier. Enora shifted her weight, glancing down to the countertop before continuing.

“The Council has decided that it would no longer be useful to consider their followers to be organized in guilds. The Fighter’s Barracks will be torn down.”

“The Bard’s College has been disbanded.” Joel knit his fingers together.

“The Paladins are... no more.” The twins spoke in unison, the echo of their harmony ringing in Dorothe’s ears until there was nothing left but those words.

No more...

No more...

No more Paladins!

“As lordless, guildless citizens, you are unfit to carry the shards of Sjel.”

Dorothe couldn't tell who spoke next, or what they attempted to communicate to her. Her mind was swimming, her heart sinking into the abyss of her stomach. She could barely control her breathing. The girl's limbs shook like leaves that threatened to drop in the harvest month. Somehow she stayed upright, and several moments later Dorothe regained her senses. She felt eyes boring into her soul, waiting for some kind of answer from her. A moment of silence fell before Tarcel shook her head.

“Nevermind. We will take them from you later.”

“There is another matter to address.” Her brother looked to Joel, who moistened his lips once more.

“Ah, yes.” The elder gentleman cleared his throat and straightened out. *“The circumstances under which Surdruid Torrick died. Dorothe Addams, Tonlin Godefrey, and the Druid Louve have all been accused of his murder.”*

If it was at all possible for humans hearts to implode, to be grinded into dust and yet still pump blood as necessary, though no longer wanted, that was what Dorothe felt. She would not deny the fact that the three played a part in his death, but it was in defense. As for the second incident, Torrick was not of this world. He was a puppet, dancing on the string between life and death. Perhaps this mark soiled her conscience, but now that she was deemed no longer worthy of the shards, her pride didn't matter.

“You are hereby sentenced to trial in seven days for the murder a guild leader.”

With that last statement, Louve fell into Tonlin's arms with despair. Tonlin could say nothing to comfort his companion, but he embraced her in his arms and stood silently beside her. The girl who was no longer a Paladin finally allowed her emotions to wash over her body, falling to her knees. Pain from the weight of her own body hitting such a hard surface shot through her legs, but she ignored it. She did not cry. She did not yell out. Dorothe could only feel hope escaping from her fingers and the coldness of the granite seeping through her gauntlets. She felt a failure to her guardian, her Lord, and her friends.

Though Joel meant to conclude their business, raising his right hand from the counter to signify their meeting was done, the twins deemed it necessary to extend the trio's agony. Their eyes narrowed and their mouths curled into small snarling smirks.

“Your possessions will be confiscated...”

“... Personal affects kept under lock and key...”

“... For the duration of the seven days...”

“... You will stay in Voluundrun's dungeons.”