

FIFTEEN

The cabin was of moderate craftsmanship, made with intersecting logs of large size. A stone chimney protruded from its top. White smoke spilled forth, evidence of a fire burning at its base. There was no one outside of the lodge much to Dorothe's relief, though Tonlin noted it looked as if someone had been chopping firewood mere moments before their arrival. An axe had been stuck into the stump of a fallen tree, remnants of its body strewn about in quartered pieces. Footfalls were pressed into the dust at the roots of the stump. They led away to the cabin's twin doors, meeting with several other pairs of prints, some that ended at the threshold and some that led back out into the forest.

Selene was the first to dismount her horse, patting its nose as she approached the house.

"Stay, Shilo."

Dorothe and Tonlin did the same. The Paladin almost immediately took her blade with her left hand, still cautious. They followed behind the Surthief, wary of any ambush.

"Look here." Selene stooped to peer closer at the impressions in the soil leading from the cabin. There among boot marks, overlapping solid trails snaked between what appeared to be a dozen men, give or take a few. They were signs of bodies dragged out from the forest - Erwan and Donovan. This was all the clue Selene needed to see before she stood again and strode up to the twin doors, one hand extended in front of her and one hand at the dagger secured on her thigh. *"If they've hurt him..."*, she growled through a clenched jaw.

"Selene, wait...!" Dorothe had started to say as the heavy wood creaked and moved for the Surthief. But it was too late when she heard the snap from within the cabin. Her heart jumped into her throat, fearing the worst for her companion. The door had been attached to a thin string rigged to a crossbow. It was pointed at chest level, toward the spot one might have stepped if they were not wise to a hunter's tricks. But that spot was empty and the bolt was stuck fast to the wood of the open door. Selene's face held a bored expression as she unsheathed the dagger.

"Oh Sol", Tonlin breathed faintly. *"I thought you had turned into a shishkebab."*

Selene shook her head. *"It'll take more than a party trick to catch me off-guard. Or have you already forgotten the Thieves' Hole trial?"* The older woman took point, entering the building properly this time.

"Who could forget that?", Dorothe muttered to herself, keeping close but trusting the guild leader's expertise here.

The first room was an open area. On their right, the fired crossbow sat on a small table stuck in a corner. Selene yanked it from its makeshift mounting, tossing it to the Bard though it had no more ammunition to make it useful. *"Better with us than with them"*, she quipped after spying the boy's confusion, moving along the wall and further into the common room. The heart of the cabin was an open fireplace where chopped

wood burned brightly. Dorothe was not sure why a fire was lit in the midst of such sweltering weather, except perhaps to serve as a signal to other companies of hunters.

Behind the stonework hearth, a long table waited with high-backed chairs and the heads of the hunters' conquests watched from the parallel wall. Various pairs of black, beady eyes gleamed in the glow of the firelight. Dorothe imagined many a great feast was held here, featured the rest of the animals displayed. Suddenly, a terrible scene played in her mind that made the color drain from her face. Selene found a room on either side of the row of gaping maws, the left one full of bunked cots and the right room held weapon stands. Some of them were barren while others kept longbows and short blades. Dirt dusted the wooden planks under her feet, prints matching those of outside.

"They left not long ago", the woman observed.

"With our men?" Dorothe stood in the room's doorway, watching.

"No." Selene crouched to inspect the dirt. *"They're here."*

"The other room is empty. We're the only one's here." Tonlin doubted the hunters would be so stupid as to leave their captives alone while they went to find their supper.

"Not so." The Surthief gestured to the far corner of the weapons room. It took the others a moment to catch on to her meaning. Where there was dirt spread about on the floor, a solid square of wood panelling appeared barren.

"A hidden doorway?" Dorothe bent to get a better look, a faint line in the floorboards becoming clearer to her.

Selene pried at the wood with her dagger, no indentation or handle to grab hold of to make it easier to lift the trapdoor. It barely budged with her effort. After grunts of frustration, she sat back defeated. As soon as the Surthief was clear, a long dusky-blue blade took her place, stabbed into the thin break in the floorboards. Selene looked up, seeing the Paladin wedge the sword in, using its length to leverage a bigger opening. When a space was apparent, Tonlin and the Surthief helped to lift the trapdoor until the crawlspace was completely uncovered.

There was a faint orange glow coming from down below. A metallic, rotten smell invaded their nostrils and Dorothe hoped this was the hunters' storage room for whatever game they tended to bring back. A small, wooden staircase helped them down into the underground level onto a stone floor. Selene descended first, her heart thumping so hard that she feared it would echo in the cold, stuffy chamber. Before them, four large iron cages lined the walls. Lit torches were stuck in sconces that marked the way toward a long wood workbench. There were steel knives and butchers' tools hanging above the table, stained with multiple uses that matched with the cuts in the wood beneath that bled.

The torches dimly illuminated a figure slumped over in one of the cages. Shuddering breaths could be heard from the shivering mound, prompting the Paladin, the Bard, and the Surthief to rush to the cageside. Erwan's eyes were shut tightly, pools that reflected the torchlight collected under his head. He looked worse for wear, and it was hard for Dorothe to judge just how bad off he was until she could see him properly. Selene crouched, reaching a hand through the iron bars, but was a yard away from touching his cheek.

"Erwan...?", the woman whispered to him, not wanting to startle the man nor alert anyone else to their presence if they were wrong about the house being empty.

The Fighter's mouth twisted into a grimace, his mind not yet registering the voice he heard. He looked as if he struggled to open his eyes, Dorothe noting that his left eye was swollen and dark.

"Erwan...", Selene tried again to get his attention.

This time he picked his head up from the stone floor, if only inches from the diluted mixture of blood and tears. While his right eye was wide with surprise and fear, only a sliver of his left pupil could be seen between the purple and red of his eye socket. He seemed to take a moment to remember where he was, and when it came back to him, he took in a pained breath.

"S-Selene?" He croaked, propping himself upright with an arm.

"Gods, what did they do to you...?"

Erwan scooted closer to the bars, getting a better look at the three. He was relieved to see familiar faces, though he knew he looked less familiar to them in this state.

"We were jest ... tryin' ta find something that would feed all o' us. We had managed to nab a couple o' rabbits. Donovan wanted to get back ta camp but I thought we could find a good sized stag if we stayed out a bit longer." The Fighter coughed a few times, hinting at perhaps another wound hidden beneath his chain shirt. *"I should'a listened."*

Selene shook her head, touching her fingertips to his dirtied hands. *"Don't worry about that now. What happened?"*

"It was jest my luck that we happened to come across a deer not minutes later. Looked a bit sickly, but a meal's a meal. Before we could even get to it, a bunch o' these guys come out from the trees, throwin' nets down on us. Gail... she got away, but not before one of the hunters tried to gut her." Erwan looked up at Dorothe for a moment. *"Did she... make it back?"*

"Yes, of course", the Paladin said. *"Mikael and Louve are with her. She's in good hands."*

"What about Donovan?" Selene asked, as the only cage occupied was Erwan's. There was no sign of the Surfighter.

Erwan paled.

"How do we get him out of here?" Dorothe asked, walking around to the cage door facing toward the table.

"I think I got it covered." Tonlin joined her, a hand at his belt. A slim leather case was pulled from his breeches, the buckle undone and the case unrolled. Several silver utensils sat neatly in the case. They were the lockpicks that the Bard insisted on buying in Morksvik.

"I completely forgot you had those." Dorothe stared at the picks and wrenches, glad for what she had thought was a frivolous purchase. *"You know how to use them?"*

“Sure! I practice every time we stay somewhere with locking doors.” He kneeled down to set the case on the floor and gripped the padlock that kept the cage secure. *“Although houses usually employ locking knobs rather than padlocks. I’m sure it’ll only take a minute or two to get this open.”* Tonlin began pulling tools from the leather case and set to work.

“Where is Donovan...?” Selene pulled her hand back through the bars, standing up from the cold stone floor. Her face was hard, her eyes boring into the top of the Fighter’s skull. *“Where is he, Erwan?”*

Erwan said nothing. He lifted a hand to his face, trying to block his vision from something no one else was seeing.