

## THIRTEEN

Donovan and Selene led the trio back down the spiral staircase, passing the second floor on their way to the first. Louve kept her shoulderbag clutched tightly to her chest as they descended, five shards of the gem Sjel closely guarded in her grasp. Despite the time spent in the Council's Chamber, no one else appeared on the ground floor as they emerged from the stairway. The Surfighter paused to ensure everyone was together before they exited the Chapel of the Clerics.

*"What's our plan?"* His question was targeted at Dorothe, but was open to suggestions from the others.

*"We need to get to Cansang",* the Paladin glanced toward Tonlin as she spoke.

*"There's only two shards left to gather",* Louve double checked her bag, paranoid that something may have happened to them on their descent. *"We'll have Sjel back together in no time."*

As they left the building, Dorothe noted that there was a distinct change in the atmosphere from before the group had gone into the Chapel. She did not have an opportunity to mention it before a voice called out from their right.

*"There they are, just as I said they'd be, and they have the shards with them as well",* Facil's voice rang clearly over the low hum of a crowd. Voluundrun guards lined the city street, the Council member standing in the middle, all having come from the stadium it seemed. A large grouping of citizens gathered behind the line, most witnesses to the trial that morning. A testament to Tarcel's words, the front of her twin brother's robes were spattered in blood, his face spotted in red in places as well. He had killed Joel.

But the crowd behind him didn't appear to be any amount of frightened by him or his actions. They seemed entranced, romanced by his plot, simply blindly putting their faith into the Councilman though he had slaughtered another member of the Council in front of their eyes. Dorothe was almost certain their awe was the work of some spell placed on the spectators, but the scene was daunting nonetheless.

*"Capture them!"* The male twin commanded of the troops. Plated soldiers advanced on them with glaives pointed at the group. Donovan tugged at Dorothe's arm, signaling a retreat. It was lucky enough that the city guards were lined up on the street toward the center of Voluundrun, and better still that the exit was to their left - only patrolled by two guards rather than a whole platoon. The five fugitives sprinted toward the city gate, narrowly avoiding confrontation with the two soldiers stationed on either side of the opening, and spilled out onto the bridge that led them into Western Voluun.

Twelve guards followed them as ordered while four stayed behind to keep the gate secure. Facil watched as the group ascended the large stone bridge and was quietly joined by his sister. Donovan led the charge out onto the bridge as Selene kept at the rear of the group. The Surthief unclipped a pouch from her belt and emptied its contents behind her. Caltrops dropped onto the worked stone, ensuring some of the guards would slow their pursuit. The woman smirked when she heard yelps of pain, closing the distance between her and the rest of the group.

They descended from the bridge, met by two more familiar faces - Erwan and Gail. Both were crouched on either side of the end of the archway, popping out to run past the group before greetings could be given. The two Fighters stopped short of the peak on the bridge and assumed defensive stances as the wave of guards befell them. Erwan gripped his longsword tightly upright at his right side, his feet set shoulder-width apart and knees slightly bent. Gail craned her neck in wild angles, popping her joints audibly, her long copper hair swaying against her back. She stretched her arms across her chest one at a time before adjusting the fingerless gloves she wore over her hands, the thin steel plating over the knuckles glinting.

Dorothe slowed her escape long enough to see Gail bat away a soldier's glaive with the back of her left hand and smashed his jaw in the same direction with her right. Erwan had slashed across another guard's belly with his blade when Selene pushed the Paladin to continue off the bridge.

*"No time for dawdling! They're buying us time, let us use it wisely!"*

Donovan led them off the established road, into brush that gained height the further from the capital they ran. None of them looked back toward Voluundrun until Louve, Tonlin, and Dorothe spotted an established campsite ahead of them, hours away from the city roads. The guild leaders were certain none of the guards were following them when they settled around the clearing. To the trio's delight, both of their horses were hitched to makeshift posts on the outside of the camp, along with two other horses. The Paladin approached Felipe, slowly calming herself as she ran her fingers through the mount's mane.

*"We'll spend the night here. Erwan and Gail will meet us here before we leave for Cansang in the morning."* Donovan sat down upon a fallen log, staring at the remnants of a campfire. *"Best not to light a fire and draw attention to our position tonight. Bundle up, because it's getting colder these days."*

The Druid and the Bard came together near the small pile of charred firewood, sharing a borrowed blanket. Dorothe spent more time with her thoroughbred horse, once again visiting the thought of continuing alone. Fatigue set in before the idea manifested into the material plane, and the dark haired girl settled down close to the horses, not yet falling into a state of sleep. The guild leaders sat on the other end of the camp and chatted with the other nonchalantly.

*"Are you sure your two fighters will be able to make it out of there? My count was nine - after my intervention."*

Donovan lifted an eyebrow, challenging the Surthief's claim. *"Nine or twelve, those two are the best in the guild. They won't have any trouble getting back here by morning."*

*"The best in the guild?"* Selene cocked her head to one side. *"What does that make you then?"*

The Surfighter scoffed, rolled his eyes and added with confidence, *"You know what I mean. There's a reason I'm the guild leader and one of those two ain't."*

*"What reason is that, exactly?"*

The two bantered back and forth like flirting teenagers. It was amusing for Dorothe to see them act like juveniles given their situation. They were still bickering when her eyes fluttered closed for the last time. Sleep had captured the girl. That night, she dreamed of Sjel again.

The crystal was unbearably large as it was last time, buried partly in the ground. Dorothe felt a sense of restricted time as she gazed upon the glittering magenta gem. Something within it called to her, to try to find the Other Realm connection. *"How...?"*, she asked Sjel. *"How do I reach the Lords' Realm?"* Time was running out, she felt. The girl desired to take the crystal from the dirt, but try as she might, the Paladin just couldn't move it and she began to panic. From behind Sjel, a large white hand came forth to pluck the gem out of the ground. The large statue of Manen appeared, gripping the magenta crystal in her perfectly sculpted fingers.

Dorothe whimpered as she woke, shaking and sweating. She sat up, glancing around to find Donovan and Selene had fallen asleep and her companions still in the throes of their dream worlds. Some stray thought gripped the Paladin's mind and she fetched the obsidian totem from Louve's bag. Dorothe figured it might be best not to disturb her friends and went to wander a few yards away from the campsite, away from the horses, the idol in hand. Once she felt she was far enough away, the raven-haired girl stared down to the goat figure and wondered for the first time how she could go about summoning the Puck Demon from her temporary slumber.

*"... Wake up"*, she whispered into the night air, though her plea went unanswered. She ran a thumb over the engraved symbol in the goat's body, unsure of its meaning yet knowing it played some significant part in Zylla's background. The girl spoke again, this time with some conviction. *"Answer me, Demon."* At her request, the symbol began to flicker a violet hue beneath her touch.

*"I'm here"*, the sultry voice called from behind a tree. In the dark, it was hard for Dorothe to tell whether or not the midnight black robes had separated from the bark itself or if it had been a trick of the shadows. Zylla looked to have healed from their last encounter, her robes no longer torn from the Paladin's blade and presumably the Demon's flesh mended during the last week and a half. Zylla's eyes wandered over her surroundings as she slowly approached Dorothe. *"The Sorcerer's Tower has changed since last I saw it - though I do prefer this remodel over the dead wooden walls of what I remember."*

*"No, it's not time for that yet."* The girl kept a wary eye on the Other Realm creature.

*"Oh? Why do you wake me then? You're going to back out of our deal already, are you?"* Zylla's eyes narrowed.

*"No, no. I want to know something you might be able to tell me : Where do the souls go?"*

The horn-headed demon quirked a brow, taken aback by the question.

*"What's this? Suddenly curious about the consequences to your actions? Wondering if perhaps you should've thought first before shaking my metaphorical hand?"* Zylla laughed, a terrible sound that made the Paladin frightful of waking her compadres.

*"Hush!"*, the girl waved a hand in front of her, glancing back toward the camp. *"I have no intention of going back on our agreement. I just want to know, what happens to the souls you collect. If you don't know, just say so."*

Zylla scowled.

*"Don't be stupid. Of course I know! Souls go to the Other Realm, to wander until they are eventually drained by the Gods and Lords to be used for energy."*

*"All of them?"*, Dorothe wondered.

*"Yes, all of them. Good and Evil makes no difference in the Other Realm, if that's what you're getting at. That's not how we operate. Spiritual beings such as I simply do as we will. How else could Lords like Skjold and Osmus exist together in the same realm without being at each others' throats all the time? It's you lot that wage the wars on each other. Does that satisfy your curiosity?"*

The Paladin nodded, having been given more to think on.

*"Yes, mostly. Souls just float around in the Other Realm then? Doesn't it get crowded? And what do you get out of that, since that's your preferred method of payment?"*

*"Whoa there - you're throwing too much at me", Zylla complained before attempting to address the girl's concerns. "Firstly, the Spirit Realm is infinite. It may appear to be set on a physical plane, but the land goes on forever. It's impossible to travel in one direction and find a repeat in the environment. Secondly, as I said, a soul will be consumed for spiritual energy by the Gods over time, and the more Gaea consumes, the stronger I become."*

*"Gaea...?"*

*"The Earth Goddess. She is my shepherd, so-to-speak."*

Dorothe yawned lightly, her body reminding her that though her mind was awake with questions, she still required rest. *"She doesn't seem to be keeping a very well maintained leash on you."*

Zylla cracked a smirk. *"We do as we will, girl. Shall I assume you'll be releasing me back to my slumber now?"*

*"Yes. The next time I call upon you, I will have need of your abilities. You may sleep now."*

The Paladin saw it plainly this time - the Puck Demon stepped back toward the tree and lifted a hand to touch the trunk, but where there should've been a physical barrier her skin passed right through. The black robe melded into wood and soon Zylla was gone altogether. The purple light that dimly glowed on the totem faded out. Dorothe was left there alone to contemplate how she could follow through on her end of the deal. She had known exactly what the terms of the contract were when she last spoke to the Demon - A soul given in exchange for the Sorcerers' shard.

The girl began to walk back toward her sleeping friends, her mind alight with thoughts. Above, the stars flickered through the treetops, the faint glow of Voluundrun to the Northeast. The conifer trees that surrounded Dorothe made her thankful to not be spending another night confined in marble walls. This would be the first night they'd spent outside since the night that Skjold died, just her and Tonlin sleeping on rocks. The forest floor was much more comfortable, she thought as she stooped back over the bed roll, taking one more glance around the campsite.

Sleep took the girl with more ease this time and the visions her dreams played for her more pleasant. When next she woke, the sun had returned to the sky and her companions were cleaning up their belongings to move on.

*“Good morning, Paladin,”* Donovan addressed her as he helped to roll up and tie the other bed rolls to saddlebags on the horses.

*“Morning, Surfighter,”* she replied, stretching her arms up over her head before standing to dust herself off. It had been ages, she suddenly realized, since she’d had a proper bath. But that was the price to pay for running off to chase myths. *“I hope I didn’t keep everyone waiting while I slept.”*

*“It’s no trouble. We’re still waiting for Erwan and Gail to join us, besides.”* Donovan absently scratched the back of his head, gazing out over the brush toward the capital city. *“They should be with us shortly... or else we’ll have to go on without them.”* He hoped it didn’t come to that, but it was foolish to stay so close to Voluundrun so soon after their escape.

*“I told you they couldn’t handle it.”* Selene quipped with a smug look on her face.

Before the Surfighter could retort, there was a rustling in the bushes nearby, the sound putting the group on edge. They jumped to grab at their weapons - Selene diving her hands to a small blade on her right thigh and the shortsword slung on her back; Donovan plucking up his bow, nocking an arrow on the taut string. Dorothe hadn’t had time to tie her sheath back onto her belt, choosing to toss the leather to her bedroll as she pulled the tinted blade from its housing. Louve and Tonlin stuck close, her quarterstaff in both hands and his new dagger wielded in his right hand. They looked a formidable force, defending their grounds from whatever lurked in the leaves’ cover.

*“Keep yer pants on, it’s jest us.”*

A greying mohawk parted through the brush, Erwan’s face grim and tired. His longsword was put away at his side, the sheath splotted with drying rust-colored fluids that Dorothe knew had come from once-living beings. He brought a hand up to wipe sweat from his brow, using the other to clasp Donovan’s shoulder. Selene handed Erwan a waterskin and a rag to clean himself off as best he could with as little luxury they could afford.

*“And Gail...?”* Louve questioned the appearance of only one out of two of the members they had been waiting for.

***“Ergh!”***

A young man tumbled through the bushes then, coming in from the same area Erwan had. He fell face first into the dirt and grass, shaggy blonde hair caked with mud, green stains, and sweat stuck to his forehead. He was dressed in a loose tan shirt, brown breeches tucked into tall boots that covered his shins. As the boy weakly pulled himself up from the dirt, Gail stepped into the campsite behind him, her left fist curled into her right palm. Her mouth had fallen into a frown, her eyes hard on the blonde boy.

*“Found this rat sniffing around where he ought not to be.”* She craned her neck, joints popping with a sickening sound. *“Thought you’d like to see his face before I pound it into tenderized meat.”*

The boy turned face-up, trying his best to scramble away from the towering strong-woman. He threw an arm up over his face as she leaned down, a plated fist swinging fast and downward.

*"Wait!"* Donovan called, a hand out stretched to halt the Fighter.

She did as commanded, stopping just inches short of the young man's guarding limb. There was a long moment before he realized he'd just been saved and popped up to his feet, distancing himself from the copper-haired woman. Gail shrugged and wandered toward Erwan, wanting to clean herself off as well. Secretly, she had known the Surfighter would stop her, but she wouldn't pass up an opportunity to intimidate the boy. Donovan approached him, his eyes trained on the supposed sneak.

*"Who are you and what were you doing lingering around our camp?"* The Surfighter's voice was bereft of any kindness, reminding Dorothe of their meeting in the Fighters' Barracks.

*"M-Mikael"*, he answered, shivering, both due to the cold mud caked on his skin and the fear of what dangers he seemed to have stumbled upon. *"I know who you are."* The statement seemed to be directed more at Dorothe than Donovan or the others.

Donovan's brow furrowed.

*"I was afraid you'd say that."*

*"O-oh, don't worry. I'm not going to tell anyone."* Mikael's attention returned to the older male, both hands up in a sign of surrender. *"I want to come with you."*

*"What...?"* The echo came from more than one member of the group.

*"How do we know we can trust you?"* Selene questioned the boy.

*"Well, I... I don't know. I can tell you that I've never really been too fond of the Council, and that what they've done... what Facil's done is terrible."* Mikael's eyes unfocused, seeing things that the rest of them couldn't. He was silent for a moment before adding, *"I saw it happen."* He blinked and flickered his gaze to Dorothe. *"I know you're trying to find the shards of Sjel. I've studied the stories too, since I was a kid."*

Louve moved to her bag, bringing it forward with one of the pouches undone. She smiled at the boy, inviting him to look inside.

*"They're not stories anymore."*

Mikael saw them - five magenta crystals, grouped together at the bottom of the pocket. His face relaxed, in awe of what was offered to his sight. He reached a hand slowly toward the glittering jewels.

*"Oy!"* Erwan handed off the wash rag to Gail, quickly stepping toward Mikael with his hand at his blade. Donovan held his arm out in front of the Fighter, shaking his head. Erwan curled his upper lip in a snarl, not yet trusting of the boy or his grip on one of the mythic crystals, thinking perhaps he had foul intentions. But if the guild leaders felt Mikael held no ill will against the group, Erwan had no choice but to allow the blonde to remove the shard for but a moment.

The Spirit Gem had some weight to it, surprisingly. More than Mikael had expected, almost as if it did not wish to be taken from its sibling shards. He marveled at its purplish glow, holding it up to the sunlight that trickled through the trees, just enough for him to get a good look at its shape and the minute cracks that slithered through its body. It was rounded on the outside, the inside with jagged edges that hinted that it belonged with one or more of the other shards. Together, the five shards would make up more than half of a whole jigsaw - the completion of which would result in a spherical shape. Sjel, the spirit gem of Voluun's past.

Dorothe knew what it was the boy was seeing, what kept him staring longingly into the magenta shard. Behind the shell of precious stone, there was a magical property that lingered there. Faint whispers of lives past, souls trapped within, voices that promised secrets abundant and power beyond imagination if one should succeed in restoring Sjel to its full state. Dorothe knew what Mikael saw, and that made her nervous. She cleared her throat, staring pointedly at Louve, hinting that it was past time to return the shard to her bag. The Druid held her pouch out again but it took a bit of the boy's will to let the crystal roll from his fingers, allowing it to sit with the four other pieces once more.

Dorothe was put at ease, as well as Erwan who stepped back toward Gail. The Fighters took inventory of their things, making sure they were well prepared for the journey ahead. Donovan continued to scan over Mikael, measuring his physical prowess.

*"How old are you, boy?"* The Surfighter asked.

*"I'm not a boy - I'm seventeen"*, Mikael grew a shade of pink.

*"Pfft."* Gail rolled her eyes, approaching the discussion now that she was free of the sweat and dirt that had accumulated on her face and neck. Dorothe thought she looked much less like the barbarian she had grown accustomed to seeing now and more like the farm woman, Bretta. The Paladin silently wondered if they were related in some way as Gail crossed her muscled arms over her chest. *"You're real scrawny for a man. You don't even have a weapon on you."*

*"I-I..."*, Mikael stammered, attempting to quickly come up with some reason for his lack of equipment before being cut off by the mohawked male who followed a step behind his friend.

*"What'dya think was gonna happen here? Maybe we'd have ourselves a lil pow wow and elect ya into the group? D'ya think we're gonna go ask the other guilds for their shards **politely**?"* Erwan furrowed his brow, restraining himself from shouting at the pathetic sack of meat that quivered his lip at him. They did not need to be weighed down by someone who could not carry his own at the pace they needed to be at. *"Don't waste our time, boy."*

*"I'm not a **boy**!"*, Mikael yelled. *"I came here because I want to help, I want to save the Lords too! You're not the only people in the country who've noticed them dying, and definitely not the only ones who're looking for something to do about it!"* He turned to Gael with a scowl. *"And I don't have a weapon because I don't need one!"*

Mikael bent his right arm backward, his hand open as if gripping a large ball, and swung it out in front of himself. As he did so, a gust of wind was shot up and out at the group, toppling Tonlin, Louve, and Selene off their feet, knocking them backward. Dorothe had to step back a few feet with the force to avoid being thrown, Gail and Erwan linked arms to help center themselves, and Donovan seemed the least affected by

the sudden burst of air. Mikael did spy an impressed expression on the Surfighter's face, however, and lowered his hand to his side as he waited for the company to regroup.

*"Extraordinary!"* Louve piped up, picking herself up from the dirt and grass and dusted herself off, though if you hadn't been looking hard enough, it was hard to tell that her mint-green jerkin was soiled. She gave Tonlin a hand up, grinning as if she'd just inherited a library to do with what she wished. *"I've never seen a Cleric who could channel air for myself!"*

*"Oh, but I'm not... I dropped out of the Chapel."* Mikael pursed his lips together, suddenly guilty. *"I mean, they kicked me out."*

*"No matter",* Donovan offered a hand to Selene. *"We could use all the help we can get at this point. I can see you have confidence at least, to have approached us here in the first place. I admire that."* The guild leader grabbed one of the tied bed rolls and tossed it to Mikael. *"If you are to travel with us, you will make yourself of use. Go and help ready the horses. Let's not stay here any longer."*

The young man smiled, happy to meet with Louve to finish packing the saddlebags. Tonlin spoke with the guild leaders, the map with their route in his hands, tracing a line through the forest toward Cansang with a forefinger. The rest of the group finished gathering their things and within half an hour they had mounted the horses and began their trek. Donovan took Felipe's reins with Dorothe sitting behind him. She did not so much mind the guild leader handling her horse as she thought she might. Erwan and Gail came behind them on a painted mustang, keeping close should they come across any of the capital's guards or other types of resistance. Tonlin kept his nose to the map in hopes of limiting their chances of becoming lost among the trees, allowing Louve to guide Nicodemus once more. Mikael was allowed to ride with Selene on a black mustang, making up the rear of the party.

The eight of them together gave Dorothe the idea that perhaps her cause wasn't hopeless, that it was somehow more possible to complete with more than just Tonlin, Louve, and herself. Journeying with two of the seven guild leaders did give the girl a leap of self-esteem and some bit of self-importance. Knowing that the two Fighters and the Would-be Cleric came along of their own volition, believing in Sjel... and in Dorothe Addams, the nineteen year old Lordless Paladin girl whose hair swayed as she stepped over branches and the occasional stone. Her bright green eyes sparkled with every beam of sunlight that managed to reach them on the forest floor.

*"Where are we?"* The Paladin asked, not entirely familiar with the Western lands of Voluun past the River Del.

*"We're in Aldri Forest",* answered Tonlin from two horses behind her, taking his attention from the map for but a second. *"It stretches from the Dragmir Mountains down to Cansang. From where we camped, it shouldn't take us more than two days to get to the city. Maybe less than that."*

*"I had an aunt named Aldri who raised me when I was still a pup",* Gail said, closer to the Paladin than Tonlin was. *"She always liked to say 'never say never'."*

Erwan smirked at the copper-haired woman.

*"What'd she say when you wanted to join the Barracks?"*



***“Never!”***

The group broke out into bales of laughter, making Mikael feel more at ease among them and less like he'd just signed his life away.