

FOUR

Trees began to dot the landscape when Dorothe spotted the cave a mile into Traertap Forest. She double checked the map to be sure it was the correct location and, after folding the parchment back up, led the way down into the thick of the woods. The Paladin wasn't sure how the horses would handle the rough terrain, seeing that there wasn't a distinctive path on the leaf-covered ground, but they rode through the flora and fauna with grace. The sun was high overhead, yet barely reaching them through the canopy. The air became humid in the midst of the forest with the wind unable to breach the trees.

Dorothe peaked into the darkness of the cave. It appeared uninhabited as far as she could see inside, which wasn't very far at all. Glancing around, she dismounted and guided her horse toward a nearby tree.

"We shouldn't be long. Let's hitch them here until we get back - grab your canteen in case we find water inside."

They tied their reins around the trunk and Tonlin did as he was told, taking with him his backpack. As usual, Dorothe took the lead into the cave, disappearing into the shadows with the Bard in tow. The cavern carried a stale scent, like long-dried droppings mixed with something metallic. When the light pouring in from the entrance was no longer enough to sustain their eyesight, she snagged a torch from Tonlin's bag. After a moment's concentration, the Paladin lit it aflame and slowly waved the torch about the cavern, looking for some sort of clue to where the Druids were located.

The floor was littered in puddles and stalagmites that shot up taller the deeper the pair wandered. Dorothe could see no signs of human life ahead. The stalagmites began to climb to the roof of the cavern, closing off the chamber little by little. Their walking room narrowed into a passageway that connected to another room. As they continued through the passage, Tonlin gripped the girl's arm.

"Do you hear that?"

Beyond the narrow walkway, the torch barely illuminated the next chamber. Dorothe couldn't hear very much at first, except the dripping of water that pooled in various places. After a moment she was able to discern a quiet chittering just below the noise of the water. It wasn't like birdsong, much higher pitched than squirrels. It was akin to discordant cackling and muttering all at the same time. The Paladin looked to Tonlin who shook his head, not able to place the sound either. He pointed to her belt, and the sword that hung sheathed in leather was then drawn in Dorothe's left hand. It was the first time she drew it since they left Regnarsvar, and the girl was not entirely confident she could defend them from whatever dwelled within the cave. She passed the torch to Tonlin and took a deep breath.

The Paladin held the blade parallel to the ground, the fire light giving it an orange-red shine as they slowly entered the room. With every step, Dorothe knew the light got closer and closer to revealing the source of the chatter. With every step, her grip on the hilt of her sword made her knuckles go whiter. The rotting, metallic scent grew stronger. Sooner than she would have liked, the torch began to illuminate a handful of creatures, no taller than mid-thigh, some of greenish and some of brownish complexion. Long ears poked out of tiny heads that bobbed back and forth as the creatures danced with excitement. Large golden eyes stared out at

the Paladin and the Bard's flaming stick. The gremlins jabbered at each other and began to yell at the intruders with words neither could understand.

"Manhus! Dofu! Ew tae!" One shouted.

"Tbu thlig eyth ngbri! Thlig atth rnsbu!" A brownish critter cried.

"Llki emth!" They started to advance on the pair.

Tonlin began to wave the torch around, attempting to scare off the little gremlins and make himself seem larger in the process. They hopped about manically, still shouting between themselves. One by one they came close, nipping at Dorothe and scratching at the air. The Paladin took a step backwards and swung her blade diagonally downward, trying to drive them back. When her arm was pointed toward the ground, the closest of the terrifying greenish monsters took the chance to leap, a sharp-toothed grin plastered on its face. The girl brought the sword back up and slashed again, diagonally in the opposite direction this time. She caught the gremlin by the shoulder and knocked it to the floor. It crumpled on its side, letting out a small whimper.

Neither Tonlin nor Dorothe expected her swipe to be very effective against the unknown fiends. They didn't seem to take kindly to their friend being rendered unconscious and began to attach themselves to the Paladin's boots.

"Agh!" The girl kicked her feet, trying to dislodge the little demons. One on her right foot got flung away, but was quickly replaced. Soon they were piling onto her legs and though she desperately punched at them, they were able to topple the Paladin. As she impacted the cave floor, her sword clattered to the ground and the gremlins were prying the plate armor off her in sections. *"Get off you little--!"*

Tonlin brandished the torch, managing to set fire to an elongated ear or two, sending them out of the cavern howling in pain. Dorothe clawed at the dirt and rocks, trying to reach her sword. There were four or five of the vicious creatures still holding her down and more flitting about her feet. The Bard punted away another of them and circled around to shoo away the small group.

"Go away! What are you things?!" He waved the torch about, but the grinning green and brown faces didn't seem to fear the flames anymore. They took turns lobbing stones at Tonlin, and after a rock landed on his face, he dropped the stick directly into a small puddle of water. The light went out, casting everything in darkness. *"Crap!"*

"Tonlin...!?" Dorothe yelled out, panicked and violently kicking at the blackness where her attackers were.

"Here! I'm here. They got me in the eye, dammit. I dropped the torch."

"I can't see!"

She could feel more of the gremlins climbing her limbs, slowly taking over her torso. One yanked at her hair, pulling at her face and ears. One of her pauldrons came off with a snap, and Dorothe felt nails scratching just under her chest plate. They meant to deshell her like a lobster. Their combined weight on the Paladin kept her stationary, with no defense. She couldn't see, but the girl knew her sword was mere inches from her fingertips.

“Ew tae! Ew tae!” They yelled. *“Tebi dan awcl! Ashgn dan nchmu!”*

Dorothe closed her eyes, though it didn't matter. They managed to dismantle her chest plate and several endeavored to bite at her through the chainmail beneath but it only served to slow them. Thoughts of failure floated through the girl's mind, shutting out the sound of Tonlin falling to his knees after a particularly nasty blow to the head. They hadn't come very far, she thought. No one would notice if they died now. No one would care if they ever came across the corpses of two lordless people... except perhaps Mother Sigrid.

There was a tug at her belt. Mother Sigrid had seen the death of two Lords now. She shouldn't have to live through a third. Dorothe promised to return to Regnarsang, but to do it, she had to survive. Another tug at her belt returned her to her senses, recognizing the pressure was coming from the sack that contained the two shards of Sjel; one of the creatures was trying to take it! The Paladin shot her left hand out, toppling the gremlin who sat on it.

“NO!” She shouted, and a bright flame caught the creature trying to steal away the shards. She charred it, causing the demon to curl and blacken, leaving the pouch alone. Tonlin yelped and scrambled behind her, out of the line of sight. The flame continued, uncontrollably projecting from her palm. Dorothe felt anger well up inside of her, for her failures, for her fate, and for her Lord's death. Fervently, she let the flames swallow her enemies in red-orange light. It was thrilling, the feeling of abolishing the tiny green gremlins.

As the creatures scrambled about in panic and pain, the Paladin's sword was kicked further away from her hand. She didn't need it. For a moment, she felt powerful. The fire was unbiased, however, and embers fell onto her body. The girl felt warmth envelope her and her limbs felt heavy. The flames ceased and in the afterglow of the fire she saw several tall shadows cast on the wall of the cave. A faint hissing could be heard somewhere within the cave, but the girl could not be bothered to lift her head to see what new threat created the sound.

“Dorothe, that was amazing!” Tonlin's voice sounded far away. *“Dorothe...?”*

Without the strength to answer back, The Paladin slipped away into her dreams. Osyge's eye watched her, judged her for her actions. The orange painted eye burst into flames and whisperings of the balance of karma and fate jolted her awake.

Dorothe stared up at a beige canvas for a long time, drifting in and out of consciousness involuntarily until eventually she was able to lift her head and silently question her whereabouts. Suddenly remembering the chaos in the cave, she pat down her upper body to discover her armor was gone, and parts of her chainmail had missing links and the cotton shirt beneath had holes and tears. Essentially, her protective shell was rendered useless, but there were no burns to be found. Her belt was still about her waist... but the shard pouch wasn't there anymore! Dorothe's mind was still in a fog and she could not remember what happened after she became a human volcano.

The Paladin scrambled to her feet and finally realized her surroundings. She had been taken to a tent to rest, but now the girl had no intention of staying still. Dorothe left quickly, only to be met with the sun shining directly in her eyes and the smell of burning sage. Dusk was setting in, or was it dawn? She couldn't tell if she had been dead to the world for mere hours or a few days. Dorothe stood agape with her hand over her brow for quite some time before she noticed she was in the middle of a camp. Several people were staring at her, a girl who was plainly out of place. Men and women in various stages of life lumbered about, dressed

in long robes, elaborately decorated with colorful gemstones and plant-like headdresses. Dorothe noticed they walked barefoot, and that her boots must've seemed strange to these naturalists.

"You're awake!" Tonlin's voice brought relief to the Paladin. He threw his arms about her shoulders and hugged her close. *"When I saw you were knocked out, I feared one of the little beasts got through your chain shirt - though it looks like they did here and there. It's lucky the Druids saw our horses tied up outside the cave. They brought us back to their camp and healed you. What happened?"*

For once, Dorothe thought of Tonlin as a friend rather than just a fellow misfit. True, they were both lordless, but it seemed the Bard had followed her from Regnarsvar for more than to restore glory to his guild. As he held her to his chest, she could hear the beating of his heart, fast paced with genuine concern for her well-being. The girl was grateful to have him along for this arduous task. Returning the affection, she wrapped her arms around him and gave a light squeeze before releasing and taking a step back to recompose herself.

"I'm not sure what happened, really. I got upset and lost control for a while. I guess it must've exhausted me. Next thing I know, I woke up here."

"Well, I'm glad you're alright. That was an insane amount of fire you conjured. How did you do that?"

Dorothe shook her head. *"As I said, I was mad. The things were trying to take the sh-- The shards!"* Remembering, she shot a hand to her belt, finding the sack missing still. *"They're gone!"*

Before Tonlin had time to react to such news, they were interrupted.

"Curious that a Cleric would wear chainmail."

The voice stemmed from a man in his middle ages with long, blonde hair. A golden headdress rested on his head and small braids fell over his shoulders. His face was taut and his eyes dark, in contrast to the peridot colored robes he wore. Ivy leaves snaked up the fabric in brown embroidered thread and Dorothe was left with a sneaking suspicion they were actually real. As he approached, the other Druids stopped staring and went on with their day.

"I'm a Paladin", Dorothe replied with pride.

"Paladins don't channel fire, as far as I'm aware." He seemed to want to argue an obvious fact, and already the girl felt as if Selene was right about this guild.

"You saw that?"

"Oh yes. We arrived just in time to save you. What, may I ask, were you doing in Froskrumpe Cave?" The man had the expression of someone who seemed perpetually unimpressed with everyone around him.

"Looking for the Druids."

"Us? Why would Druids be in a cave, Cleric?"

"It was a bad idea, I'll admit, but it seemed to work." The Paladin clenched, sure he was calling her a Cleric

just to be irritating.

“Why were you looking for us? You don’t seem the type to wander into forests on a regular basis.”

“I am on a mission to recover the shards of Sjel, to restore communication with Sol, Manen, and Gaea.”

“Ah. So those crystals were yours.”

Dorothe’s heart leapt. *“You have them?! Thank the gods, I was afraid those creatures got ahold of them.”*

The elder male’s face did not change. He seemed annoyed to be speaking with another person at all. The girl would have thought he might be interested to hear about the myth of Sjel, about the prospect of speaking with Gods - the most natural of forces. It was the Gods that created the Lords, after all. It was the Gods who gave them the First Men, who passed down knowledge of nature to the Druidic Lord Dyr. But this leaf-clad mannequin of a person did not budge or blink an eye when Sjel was mentioned.

“Could I... have them back?” The Paladin wasn’t sure how to react to his non-reaction.

“I’m afraid not.”

Tonlin and Dorothe were both startled, not expecting that answer. The Surthief Selene had warned them that they would be stubborn in giving up their shard, but failed to mention they’d take any they could get their hands on. It was unheard of for a guild to have more than one shard, but then again, the girl supposed there had never been an opportunity before now to own more than one.

“What do you mean no? Those shards don’t belong to you!” Tonlin contended, his arms crossed over his chest.

“Oh? They belong to you, then?”

“Well, no, but--”

“The gems belong to no one. They are nature’s gifts, and here they will stay nature’s gifts.” The man knotted his hands together in front of him, looking rather pleased with his cunning.

Dorothe felt embarrassed to have let herself be walked on by such an arrogant person. She took a breath, calming her nerves before speaking again.

“I want to see your Surdruid.”

Finally the middle aged man smiled and turned away from the pair.

“I am Torrick; I am the Surdruid.”

The Paladin thought her heart had sunk to the pits of her stomach. She had survived the pint-sized beasts only to have to face off with the leader of a guild. He instilled in her a sense of hopelessness, but the girl could not give up so easily. Before they had left the Thieves’ Hole, Selene had told her that every man had a price - That was how she climbed the ranks to Surthief, and perhaps it would help Dorothe here.

“There must be something you need!” Dorothe shouted after the elder Druid. “Something you would trade for the shards?”

He paused in his steps and the Paladin’s heart regained an ounce of life.

“... Come with me, both of you.”

They followed closely behind the Surdruid. The camp was large, about the size of a town, but seemed temporary. It consisted primarily of tents and areas sectioned off by walls made of logs. A large firepit sat in the middle of the enclosure, many of the Druids sitting in a large circle around the warmth. The Druid leader showed them to one of the larger tents that overlooked the entire camp and some of the forest that kept it hidden from the rest of Voluun. The tent’s curtains already drawn back as if he had been expecting guests. Within the canvas, a wooden table sat with three potted plants perched upon the surface. One was an aloe, one was a plant whose leaves snaked upright rather than fall, and the third was an ivy with leaves identical to the ones on the Surdruid’s robes.

“There is an infestation of Outer-Realm creatures in the forest, ones like those you encountered in the cavern.” He wasted no time in getting acquainted. The man stopped in front of the table, lacing his fingers together again. *“You may or may not have noticed, but our temple is not here in our camp. The little monsters have taken over the Druid Temple, forcing us to send out hunters with those who wish to visit Dyr’s lordstone. The gremlins are led by a puck demon named Zylla. I believe she is a rogue conjuration of the Sorcerers who came to visit us just after Dromme was declared deceased. Rid the temple of Zylla and I will consider returning your shards.”*

Dorothe noted that he said to return *her* shards. That meant he was still clinging onto the Druid’s crystal.

“What exactly is a puck demon?” Tonlin spoke up.

“A puck demon is a mischievous nature spirit. They like to make bargains that they primarily benefit from. Zylla is quite the trickster. Do not trust her word.”

Neither of them felt the Surdruid was any less conniving.

“I’ll need new armor. My plate is gone, and my chain shirt is ruined. My sword is missing too.”

“I have your blade.” He pointed off to her right, where the scabbard lay on top of a pile of plate sections that had come off her armor during the scuffle. *“You will be given a new cuirass, seeing as your previous armor wasn’t up to the task. I will also be sending a Druid with you to see that the deed is done. In our guild, it is customary to journey to the temple once a Druid has come of age. As I stated before, I have had to send our hunters with the Druids when they wish to commune with the lordstone. We’ve only been able to drive the demon away for a few hours at a time. Unfortunately, our two strongest hunters met their peril a few days ago, but seeing as you are so eager to please me, you will accompany her. She will be waiting at your tent when you’re ready.”*

Dorothe grabbed her sword and gathered as much of the plate she could before leaving the Surdruid’s tent. She didn’t look forward to meeting one of his followers. Tonlin suggested they see the blacksmith to ensure they got the right measurements for the cuirass, trying to delay going out into the forest until they

were sufficiently armed. It took some time locating their armorer, as everyone they asked only pointed in a general direction. It wasn't until they started hearing the grinding of a pedal stone that they thought to look inside one of the tents.

"You must be the Cleric."

"Paladin." She quipped.

The blacksmith seemed to be in on the joke, for he smirked and beckoned her closer.

"Torrick was here already, said you needed some protection to go clean out the Temple. Took you a while to find me." He shook his head and held up a white leather tunic that looked long enough to go to her knees. It was short sleeved and made up of several long strips of hide, sewn together to form a thick dress. *"We usually give these to our hunters, but this one looks like it'll fit you."*

"Druids that hunt animals? Doesn't that go against your guild guidelines or something?" Tonlin frowned, unsure if these were actually Druids or if he and Dorothe were kidnapped by a group of bandits.

"Whether it does or not, it doesn't matter anymore. The Druids don't have much to hunt, what with those creatures running all the wildlife out of the forest. If this keeps up, there won't be much food left to sustain us here." The blacksmith scratched his chin. *"So, don't get cocky. Do you want this or not, girl?"*

Dorothe stared at the jerkin. The white leather seemed appropriate for a Paladin, but something was missing.

"Would it be possible to fit my pauldrons onto the shoulders? My plate armor was taken apart, not destroyed. I have them here, it shouldn't be too hard for a smith of your calibre." She poured on the honeyed words as best she could.

He considered it for a moment, and decided her compliment was just enough motivation to take on her suggestion.

"Yeah, sure. Tell you what, I'll even throw in some gauntlets that came to me from the Fighter's Barracks a week ago. They're a bit snug for most of the hunters, but you could probably use them. Come back in an hour and I'll have your plate on there for you."

Dorothe left the blacksmith's tent feeling confident. Although the tunic wouldn't be the same as the armor given to her at Paladin's Rest, it would have to do. They headed back to her tent with the intent to rest, forgetting all too soon that the young lady standing outside was waiting to depart with the duo. With blonde hair and a mint green jerkin that covered her torso, the girl was very identical to the Surdruid Torrick. This only made them more apprehensive about taking her along.

"Greetings, Cleric." Not the best first impression.

"I'm a Paladin. The next person to call me a Cleric gets punched in the throat." Dorothe walked right passed the Druid into her tent, followed by Tonlin and the girl. She didn't seem to have any qualms about violence anymore, not after the brush with demons.

“O-oh! My apologies. I was told you casted Cleric spells.”

“I set a couple of gremlins on fire. Not exactly what I would call clerical.” The Paladin sat on her cot, setting her scabbard across her lap. The young blonde stood in front of her, a finger pointed in the air.

“On the contrary, it has been known that some Clerics study the elements, usually choosing from air, water, earth, and fire. Many of the great members of the Council channeled the elements - for instance, Randoul of King Reddus II’s Council could channel water.”

Dorothe and Tonlin exchanged looks.

“You’re fun”, the older girl lied.

The Druid smiled sheepishly.

“I almost forgot to introduce myself. I am Louve, daughter of Torrick. I will be traveling with you to the Druid Temple.” The girl was slightly shorter than Dorothe, her eyes were a bright blue in contrast to her father’s dark ones. The leather she wore had ivy leaves that met at her stomach, connected by a vine that circled around her back. Small emerald studs decorated her earlobes, but no further jewelry did she wear. Darkly tanned breeches covered her legs, and like the other Druids, she walked barefoot.

“Tonlin Godefrey.” The Bard flicked a wave.

“Dorothe Addams. So why is it your father is sending you into what he perceives is danger?”

“Tomorrow marks my eighteenth year. Every Druid must meditate at Dyr’s lordstone in their eighteenth year in order to become kin with the forest and the animals. But with the Other-Realm creatures inhabiting the Temple, some of us who are of age cannot complete this quest. Our connection to Dyr will be severed if the Druids can’t make tribute this year.”

“When is the Druid tribute to take place?” Dorothe shifted her weight on the bed.

“In two months, to usher in the harvests.” sword

“I see.” The Paladin thought for a moment, figuring Zylla would have to wait until her armor was finished.

“We’re going to need some things before we go. Another torch, for one. I’m not a fan of fighting in the dark, but I’d rather get this over with sooner instead of later.”

“And food, secondly”, piped in Tonlin, grabbing at his stomach.

Dorothe didn’t realize they hadn’t eaten since that morning in Morksvik. She nodded in agreeance.

“Not a problem. We should be serving supper very soon. I will go grab some things for our excursion, join us at the firepit after you fetch your armor.”

Louve bowed her head at the pair before leaving the tent. Tonlin watched her go, then turned to Dorothe who seemed focused on her sword.

“She seems nice”, he sounded hopeful.

The Paladin unsheathed her sword, finding the hilt and the blade changed. The protective leather that was wrapped around the metal core of the hilt had been melted off in places, requiring replacement. The blade itself was now blue-tinted, much to her surprise. The steel had been heated when Dorothe set the gremlins aflame in Froskrumpe Cave and rapidly cooled when it landed in the water... the hissing! The girl looked upon her mutated sword, at her reflection in the dusky blue.

“I don’t trust her.”