

INTERLUDE

“Hey, did you hear?”

A small group of people were gathered outside of Padrig’s general supply store, gossiping between each other. The day had been rather long for poor Padrig, having suffered the loss of one of his jeweled chalices that he was scheduled to send to a buyer that afternoon. He wasn’t particularly absent-minded and highly doubted he misplaced it. As the man tore through his store looking for the invaluable item, he seemed to recall serving a shady-looking character the evening previous to its disappearance. Padrig muttered curses under his breath, suspecting vagrants from Morksvik had paid him a visit.

The shopkeeper exited his quaint building, turning to lock the doors with a key passed down from his father to him. The night air was chilled, refreshing after spending the last few hours rushing about his store, his blood boiling in his veins with anger and disappointment in himself. At this hour, the moon would usually be high in the dark veil above, but tonight was the Black Moon. The absence of natural light put Padrig on edge as he spotted those who conversed a few feet away. He lingered a moment, casually eavesdropping on their gossip for any hints of the identity of the chalice’s thief.

“... locked up in the dungeon.”

Bingo! Padrig finished locking his shop and inched closer toward the group, attempting to mesh in and look natural in the crowd of five, adding one more to their numbers. It appeared to work, as no one noticed the extra body with his neck craned to hear better.

“I heard they’re trying to...”

“...”

Much to the man’s dismay, they had started to whisper, making it difficult for him to make out the details. Risking revealing that he was out of place, Padrig spoke up.

“What was that?”

Several pairs of eyes looked him over, silence falling over the scene. The shop owner gave a sheepish grin and his answer came.

“Someone has been trying to chase that old myth - y’know, the shards of Sjel!”

“Oh...” It wasn’t exactly what he had wanted to hear, but Padrig couldn’t help but be interested by the notion that someone was attempting to save the dying Lords.

“Don’t be stupid, Mikael. No one actually believes that stuff.” A woman in a dirty leather apron protested the thought. Padrig recognized her as their blacksmith’s apprentice. Her face and blouse were still smeared with soot from that day’s work. *“Those stories are for children.”*

"I'm telling the truth!" Mikael insisted. *"I saw the guards taking her to the stockades!"*

"I saw them taking three people!" Another male from the circle nodded his head, moving to stand next to Mikael. *"One of them was a Stringer."*

"And a Druid." Mikael was a young man who had been rejected from the Chapel for being "too rowdy", as they put it. He was well known for telling tall tales and his affinity for the air element. That is, the boy enjoyed pulling pranks on others, blowing out the candlelight one woman was using to read by, forcing gusts of air under several of the older Clerics to blow up their robes for laughs, and other such things that were typically frowned upon. It was no wonder the group he stood before now did not exactly believe his word.

"A Druid... didn't their Surdruid just die? What's a Druid doing in Voluundrun right now?" The apprentice crossed her soiled hands over her chest, her mouth stuck in a frown.

"That's what I'm trying to get at - the three were the one who killed him. S'why they're locked up in the cells."

There was a few gasps among the crowd, Padrig shaking his head.

"Wasn't that dark-haired girl wearing plate?" A younger girl asked.

"Oh, yeah!" Mikael glanced around the corner, stealing a look at the dungeons. *"A Paladin, I think."*

"That doesn't sound right..." Padrig speculated. *"Why would a Paladin kill a Surdruid and then travel with one of them?"*

"That's a good question", the apprentice agreed, still skeptical.

"Well, no one really knows. But I guess we'll find out - they're holding a public trial in a few days." The ex-student stretched his hands over his head. He didn't really have much to do during the days anymore, taking on a lethargic and sloth-like nature. *"If she really is reforming Sjel, though..."*

"If", the woman emphasised.

*"Yeah, **if** she is, I hope she succeeds."*

Mikael didn't have to explain why. It wasn't hard to imagine that no one in the country of Voluun wanted to lose their Lord. If the old stories of a great crystal that would allow direct communication to the three Gods were true... not that they were, but **if**, then the mortals could figure out why the Lords were dying, and how to save those that remained. This girl, a mystery to all who had already heard about her, had a noble cause. She was a Paladin, a Chapel drop-out - which was why Mikael was fascinated with her - and if anyone could pursue a legend, he was convinced it would be this girl.

"But she killed a guild leader, Mikael." The blacksmith apprentice seemed determined to devalue Mikael's supposed champion. *"I doubt the Council is going to let them continue their journey."*

"..." The boy frowned. *"I guess so."*

Padrig sympathised with Mikael. Everyone roots for the underdog, of course, but a murder could not be excused to chase after rumors. The Paladins stood for justice, after all. It was only fair that a Paladin be made to face her own actions. Though their Lord had only died a week ago, their guild was still going strong. He wondered how they would react to the knowledge that one of their own was shaming them.

“Look, I know Rasmus just died a few hours ago... and we could all use a little hope, but it’s nonsense to think there’s anything we can do about it. The Lords are of the Other-Realm, Mikael. We’re mortals.” The woman tried to comfort her young friend, but it didn’t seem to be effective. *“The only thing we can do now is go on with our lives.”*

“You can go on with your life, Yigrid, but three Lords have died already. I don’t see any reason it would stop at three. You go home and sleep like a child, carefree and unmindful of the crisis we’re ignoring while the rest of us pray each night that Ejel won’t be the next one. So what if someone out there believes in the shards of Sjel? At least they’re doing something about it!”

The young man stormed off, leaving the group to quietly disperse into the night. Padrig sighed, neither having any information on his burglar nor gained any ease of mind from wandering into the conversation. Yigrid shook her head, mumbling as she lingered by the general supply store. The older male spoke up.

“You tried, but kids will be kids. They can’t let go of the stories their mothers sing them to sleep with.”

Yigrid gave the shop keeper a frown.

“I used to believe in those books too. But as I grew older, I had to stop waiting for miracles to happen because life was continuing whether they came or not. I was the same as Mikael is now - He took Ejel for granted, and his education in the Chapel wasn’t important to him because he thought Ejel would be around forever anyway.”

The blacksmith’s apprentice stared up at the moonless sky. The stars weren’t enough to make up for the absence of Manen’s warm luminescence.

“Now he’s realizing he was wrong, that the Lords aren’t going to be there to guide him. He’ll have to become an adult and be responsible for all of his actions. That’s why he’s clinging on to the hopes that maybe someone can restore his faith - his safety net.”

Padrig didn’t know what to say. This woman was saying that there was no hope left, but he could tell by the look in her eyes that somewhere within her lied the same sense of desperation, some small amount of desire to be proven wrong by the three who waited inside of the cells just around the corner. Yigrid lowered her head, defeated and tired. She flashed the man a smile and began to walk down the street toward the rows of houses that filled up part of Voluundrun, exhausted from a day full of hard work and a night full of debate.

“Who knows”, she laughed. “Maybe we all need an enigmatic hero to come save the day.”

Padrig smiled, no longer irate at what he had deemed a waste of an hour, and began to follow the apprentice toward the city’s residential quarter. The shopkeeper must’ve been deep in thought, as he accidentally knocked into a woman who was walking in the opposite direction.

“Oof!”

She wore thick layered leathers, a hood of the same material shrouding her face in shadows.

“Oh! Pardon me!” Padrig apologized quickly and helped her regain her balance, though it seemed he was the only one knocked off-foot.

“Ah...”, her voice was soft, like airwaves made of silk in his ear.

“Karma.”