

PROLOGUE

Father Darrius sat at his small wooden desk, looming over a thin scroll of parchment. A raven's feather scratched across the surface, penning out the name of the eighth death that month. There had been ten the month previous and six the month before that. A plague had hit Long Fjord hard; it wouldn't be long before the small town would be barren if the pattern continued. As it was, the Cleric expected at least six more gravestones to line the coast of the lake by the end of the month.

Plagues weren't typical for the era. Perhaps back when King Reddus II reigned and the Clerics were reserved for members of the court, but in 200 years the church spread to all corners of the country of Voluun. There aren't many ailments the Surclerics cannot cure, but when the first of many sufferers of the plague came forth to ask for blessings, Father Darrius could only make the man more comfortable over a short few days of pain. As far as he was concerned, the Cleric's presence in Long Fjord had been the most trying in all his time under the church.

Darrius was a man of just under 60 years, his hair noticeably thinning and grey on his head, yet a full, wiry mess beneath his chin. Long cream colored robes clung to his frame and stopped just before touching old leather slippers. The Cleric looked frail and tired, the stress of his station and the situation taking its toll on him over the years, but beyond the shadows were glints of the wisdom, knowledge, and undoubtedly powerful magic in his steely blue eyes. They poured over the details of the parchment laying on his desk.

A death certificate explained away the fate of Camilla Addams as one succumbed to disease. The woman was well-known in the community, as was inevitable living in a small town. She was said to have been a widow - An unknown husband who had fought and died in battle, but not before sowing his seed. Ms. Addams left behind an infant girl who would be arranged to be sent to the church where the Lord Ejel could watch over her. Father Darrius figured Camilla's husband must've been of some rapport to be able to arrange that - the church only accepted children who had already showed potential in both healing and magical abilities.

The Cleric signed the certificate, let the ink dry, and rolled it up to be sealed. In the morning he would send it by courier to the capital, Voluundrun, where life and death records were preserved. Father Darrius lifted his body from the stiff wooden chair with a groan that professed the effort required. The noise awoke a sleeping mass in the corner of the Cleric's small cabin. It lifted a furry head and gave a stifled bark before setting back down to slumber again. The elder kicked off his leather shoes in front of a nightstand and decided sleeping would be delightful after such a long day. He turned to the bed that sat merely feet away from his desk, due to the limited space presented in living in a quaint cabin. Darrius pulled a shabby blanket up to his neck and tossed left and right before finding a way to quiet his aging bones. Dreams took the Cleric without much fight.

He saw younger days when he was on the Council in the capital, at least 20 years before the events at Long Fjord. Joined by three other Surclerics, they oversaw the church's activities in Voluun, usually being the ones called on in cases of medical and magical severity. Along with Darrius, a younger set of twins, one male and one female, and a woman of Darrius's age made up the Council. The twins, Facil and Tarcel, were always in sync and were several times more powerful healers than Darrius had been when he entered the Council.

However, they were only effective when performing their spells together. The older woman was Marrana, and she was an empath, which is why she was chosen for the Council.

Marrana had sensed the exact point when Darrius had fallen for her. The thing about empaths is they're so tied up in feeling others' emotions that there isn't much room for encompassing their own. Or more precisely, they doubt what they're feeling is genuinely theirs to feel. But the two were members of the Council before all else, and duty came in between what never flourished. There was still room in his softly beating heart for the woman who felt pain when others wept. Warm thoughts of the past were interrupted by rude knocking on a door outside of his dreams.

It would take Father Darrius a long moment before he realized the sound was real. He sat up quickly when there came a second rapping at the door, sliding on the leather slippers before shuffling towards the query.

"What is it? Who would wake an old man at this hour?", he asked of the door and whomsoever waited behind it.

"Father Darrius? Your presence is requested in Cansang", a muffled voice called from beyond the wooden slab.

The elder pulled open the door, an annoyed expression on his face. *"I am no longer on the Council - Go rouse them from their sleep!"* A slim young man stood on the cabin's porch, a letter gripped in his hand. Silver wax sealed the envelope, catching the Cleric's eye. *"Hand me the letter then"*, he groaned, snatching it from the boy's outstretched digits.

"You don't understand, Father. It's the Council that summoned you."

The note contained within the envelope was written on lightweight bleached parchment, yet the ink was commonplace and scrawled with a hurried hand. It gave a very vague sense of urgency, spoke of a growing concern with the lordstone that sat in the middle of the city of Cansang. In Cansang, the Bardic College paid tribute to Dromme, the lord of feasts, merriment, and music. If there was a problem with the lordstone, it would mean a disconnection between the Bard's guild and Dromme himself. If the Council thought Father Darrius could help, he would have to go.

The courier stood dumbly while the Cleric finished reading his summons. *"Fetch a horse then, boy"*, Darrius bemoaned, startling the young man out of his trance-like state. The elder turned back toward his cabin, shutting the door after him. He would have preferred to slump back onto his bed and fall back into sleep, forgetting the courier, the letter, and all of it. But duty dictated he had to travel through the early morning hours to a city that was conveniently one of the closest to Long Fjord. Father Darrius began to gather his essentials.

The hairy mass in the corner of the room became curious as to why the old man was hurrying about in the wee hours of the morning. It groaned as it moved from its warm spot, much in the way Darrius had when standing from his chair. Padding over to its master, the dog sat to inspect a burlap rucksack that was being stuffed with extra sets of undergarments and socks, food items, and a few tomes in case there was something that needed studying. Droopy ears and soft old brown eyes could recognise when there was trouble ahead.

"Oh, Marco", Darrius placed a worn hand between the dog's ears, rubbing spots he had come to know well over the past 20 years. *"I'm sure it's nothing"*, he lied to his companion. It was a lot more than nothing if the

Council couldn't deal with whatever this issue was themselves. There came another set of knocks at the door. *"That'd be the horse. Come, Marco."*

The young man stood with reins in hand, waiting to help the Cleric atop the hired mount. When Darrius was situated and his sack secured behind the saddle, he looked down his long nose at the courier and tipped him. Cansang lay Eastward, only a few hours travel on a lightly trodden path from Long Fjord. Certain he had all he needed, Father Darrius urged the horse into a canter, Marco weaving through the bushes behind them.

The sky was lightening ahead of them, turning clouds pinkish hues by the time they were at the top of the hill that separated Long Fjord from the rest of Voluun. The Cleric paused the horse at the crest while Marco slowly peaked his head from the path. Ahead of them, an established road out of Cansang was covered in traffic that flowed into the city, pedestrians and caravans alike were jammed around the gate. Darrius could see it clearly now - from the middle of the stone-worked buildings that made up the city, a great yellow beam of light shot into the clouds above. There was not a doubt in the Cleric's mind that the source was the lordstone of Dromme.

He kicked the horse into a gallop toward Cansang's gates with the dog in tow. The trio pulled into the discord of citizens from the other six cities who wished to know what the bright yellow tower of light meant for the Lord Dromme. Was it a sign? A plea for help? The murmuring and speculation only grew louder the closer to the gate Father Darrius was able to move. It seemed a year before the horse shuffled past the large stone archway, but the crowd spread as soon as they were far enough into the city, each group making its own way to the plaza where the light originated.

"Darrius!"

A familiar voice called to the old man, causing him to turn about in the saddle to find the body it belonged to. He caught sight of white robes that glinted with silver embroidery, robes of one of the Council. Darrius was both relieved and made anxious to see it was Marrana who waved him toward the stables. Better her than the man who was elected to replace him when he was transferred to the plagued little town on the coast, but seeing her stirred old feelings.

Marrana's hair had been long, wavy, and chestnut in color when they first met. As he peered over her now, it reached only her shoulders in white locks that curled around her face delicately. Just as Darrius had thinned over the years, so did Marrana appear just as fragile in her bright robes. But the decades did not take away the sparkle in her emerald eyes, redolent of a time long past.

"Marrana, dear girl, what in the gods is happening to Dromme?" He asked, dismounting the mare and untying his bag from the saddle, shoving aside old memories. Marco followed faithfully behind the two Clerics as Marrana bid them down the road into the plaza.

"We don't know", she started with, which was not very reassuring to the male. *"But Facil and Tarcel say that Dromme is under distress. Why is the question. The Bards have never forgotten a tribute since the guild was established."*

"Have there been any attempts at communication?" Darrius scrubbed at the foliage beneath his chin, a sign he was deep in thought.

"The twins are at the stone now, trying to listen. It's hard when half the population of Voluun is gathered around whispering in their ears that the lords have turned their backs."

"I can imagine."

The trio pushed their way into the plaza. The lordstone stood solely in the middle of a concrete set of stairs that cascaded downward into a shallow pit. On either side of the stone stood two tall statuesque figures, one Facil and the other Tarcel. Facil wore earrings that dangled just above his shoulders, silver hoops shining in the light of the lordstone, while Tarcel's earrings showed golden triangles. Both kept their hair cropped short, still a raven black color. Their silvery robes had always seemed too long on them, yet the twins looked like proper Clerics standing in the light of Dromme now, arms stretched toward the stone.

"Where's your fourth?" Darrius couldn't deny the presence of the whole Council might be needed.

"Abjorn is in the college now, talking to the Surbard. He shouldn't be too long."

Abjorn was chosen to take Darrius's place once he was sent away, and therefore thought of as a rival. The protege was less than half his age now and was already said to have peaked in his mastery of spellwork at 22. It was nothing if not frustrating, leaving Darrius to feel outdated and upstaged. He didn't exactly mind his absence at the moment.

Their thoughts were cut short as the twins dropped their hands to their sides. They stared at each other for a long moment, saying nothing. Some of the crowd were dissatisfied with their quiet, however, and began to yell down to the pair. *"What does Dromme say?" "What can be done?" "What use is the Council?" "Why do you do nothing now?!"*

Marrana pushed through the crowd to make her way to the twins. Darrius followed in her wake, and Marco after him. The woman turned toward the crowd with her hands up.

"Please!" She pleaded, *"The Council is doing the best we can, but there is only so much we can affect when it comes to the lords and the gods. We are only mortal ourselves, after all."*

But it was not satisfactory. *"We trusted you!" "You're supposed to have answers!"*

Before the crowd could turn their anger onto Marrana and Darrius, who tried their best to calm the fussing, there was a sudden hush. The bright yellow light that poured from Dromme began to dim. Hundreds of pairs of eyes widened with fear, with anxiety and confusion as they watched the light slowly disappear from the sky. Before they could ask themselves why, the lordstone was darkened, much as it had been before that morning. It was different, however. There was an unexplainable void behind the small stone pillar.

"Dromme does not answer", Tarcel spoke clearly.

"Dromme is dead", Facil told the waiting faces of Cansang.