

# ONE

It was a rather sunny day. The wind was calm and the clouds had moved on, showing no signs that there had been a storm the night before. The marketplace was bustling, merchants stood behind their stalls and proclaimed their wares were the best in Voluun to the copious amounts of out-of-town visitors. There was a light scent of lavender that bloomed in the middle of the city hanging in the air, as was usual for the midyear. Some came to Regnarsvar for the trade goods, some came for the atmosphere, and some came to train to become Paladins. However, the Midyear Festival was what drew in most travelers.

The Midyear Festival took place over a period of three days, serving as a break from the year-long studies for the children and a change of pace from the busy lifestyles of the adults of Voluun. From tending the crops and minding the stores, there wasn't one Regnan who didn't look forward to letting off some steam during the festival. Rich foods and strong drinks were abundant, as were games played to win mediocre prizes. At the end of the three days, an effigy of the old King Reddus II was burned to lift the spirits of all who witnessed. Although his rule ended more than two centuries prior, his likeness was used almost immediately to celebrate the end of the era.

Regnarsvar was usually a quiet, ordinary city, which made the festival all that more interesting. It was one of the few cities that was built with mortar and stone, whereas many of the other cities of Voluun preferred to go with more natural resources. The tallest building in Regnarsvar was the library - the only building with more than two floors in the city, and easily the most recognizable from afar. It was not the biggest collection of books in Voluun, but the Regnans were proud regardless.

Outside of the library on a small field, a group of children sat in rows listening to a woman in beige robes read from a large tome.

*"... A crystal clear and free of corruption, Sjel was a gem used to communicate with the Sun, the Moon, and the Earth gods when all else failed. The gem was split into seven pieces, one for each of the First Men, meant to unify the temples of the Lords in times of turmoil."*

*"But isn't Sjel just a myth, Mother Sigrid?"*

Amber eyes drew themselves up from the pages onto the face of one of the older boys.

*"... Is it, Tomas?"*

*"My da says it is. He says the gods can't be bothered with us anymore."*

The Cleric Sigrid closed the tome on her lap and folded her hands over the dusty leather binding. Her hair was a greying brown soup that spilled over her shoulders, partly down her back and partly over her chest. She was displeased, although faith in the church and in the gods had been dwindling since she was a young woman. There was very little she could do by herself, except to keep reading from the old texts in hopes they wouldn't fall on deaf ears. Tomas was a prime example of how insignificant the church had become in just under twenty years. Clerichood meant nothing if you weren't in the Council.

*“Reading to the children again, Mother?”*

To the Cleric’s relief, she spotted one of the Paladins approaching the library. The armored knights were still connected to the church in their own way, albeit choosing to wield blades rather than spellbooks. This particular plated person was one familiar to Sigrid - Jet black hair stuck up into a bun and green eyes that smiled as the girl jested with the Cleric. Feelings of both pride and disappointment frothed in her mind as the Paladin stopped on the path just short of the library.

*“They don’t want to be learning when the Midyear Festival is being held in an hour, Mother Sigrid.”*

The older woman peered over the little heads that bobbed up and down in agreeance with the Paladin. *“Is that so?”* They nodded more vigorously now. *“Ahh, well... I suppose you should be off then. Go on, behave yourselves today, and don’t forget to thank Miss Dorothe.”* They jumped to their feet and sped off in various directions, each child yelling their appreciation for their savior as they left to enjoy their childhood. The Paladin beamed, waiting for Sigrid to join her on the walkway.

*“You enjoyed the stories when you were their age, you know.”* The Cleric dusted her robes off as she stood, carrying the book under one arm. Together they pushed open the double doors to the library, stepping onto a cobblestone floor. The building was four stories tall, each wall lined with ancient history, local knowledge, and the legends of Voluun, and each floor left open in the center for a massive banner of a royal blue hue to hang down from the ceiling. It was embroidered with a black sword and shield - the emblem of the Paladin guild hall, aptly named Paladin’s Rest, later adapted to become Regnarsvar’s icon.

Immediately Sigrid strode behind a long marble counter, placing the tome on a shelf that was no doubt filled with other such journals about the lords and the gods. She then sat in a cushioned chair, beckoning the Paladin toward the counter. *“You only visit when you have need of me. So tell me what’s on your mind, child.”*

Dorothe wanted to argue, thinking she must’ve stopped by more often than she was accused, but it was true she sought the advice of the elder. *“I’ve just been worried about you, that’s all. You’ve been so busy with your books lately, it seems to be all you think about these days.”*

*“The stories are important.”*

*“I didn’t say they weren’t”,* the girl started, *“they are, I’m sure - but you used to be...”*

*“Young?”*

*“Active. You used to be more involved in the community, all over the city. Even when I was a child, you were the one wearing me out at the Chapel, volunteering every chance you got. Now you’ve secluded yourself in the library. I think this was the first time in months I’ve seen you reading to the children. What’s changed?”* Dorothe looked at the woman who had raised her, once a vibrant influence in her life, and now she felt as if the roles were switched. Now it was the girl’s turn to take care of her guardian. The woman she looked upon now was disheveled and obsessive.

*“I’m fine. I’ve read to the children plenty of times... they don’t listen anyway. Children never do.”*

*"I did!" Dorothe folded her arms across her chest, a frown wrinkling her expression. "That's not the point, Mother. There's something different about you and you know it."*

Sigrid shifted anxiously in her chair, glancing behind and up at the shelves of books. The young woman who stood in front of her had spent her younger years listening to the Cleric read from the very same books. Sigrid had watched her grow, had taken her in under her wing. Deep down she knew Dorothe meant well.

*"I'm just preparing..."*

Dorothe wrinkled her brow.

*"You've said that before, but you never tell me what you mean. You think I won't understand, that I'm too young to know it, but... but if you just tried..."*

But before the Cleric could answer, excited yells and cheers began to echo from the other side of the library doors. She shook her head defeatedly. *"I have to go; they want the Paladins to act as security for the festival. I guess they've decided to start earlier this year."* Dorothe stepped around the counter to embrace the Cleric in both arms, giving a light squeeze. *"Please know I love you, and my concern is for your health."*

*"I know, dove."*

The girl pecked Sigrid's cheek before releasing her and leaving the library in silence. Dorothe realized their relationship had become strenuous over the years, and it pained her to have such conversations with her elder. In the back of her mind, she knew it was because of the choice she made years ago to follow the Paladin's path rather than stick with Sigrid and the Clerichood. But Dorothe was happier for it, and Sigrid had made the choice to move with the girl to Regnarsvar to train with others at the Paladin's Rest. If the Cleric really was that upset, why had she accompanied her?

Dorothe didn't have the time to spend fretting personal issues. Her instructions were clear: she needed to get down to the city square where the festival stalls had been set up that morning. There were glittering streamers in red and purple strung about from the buildings surrounding the area, and banners with bright designs to capture the attention of passersby. It was not hard to figure out where to go without the assistance of either of these decorations. The girl simply followed the growing sounds of a crowd's cacophony coming from around the corner.

When she reached the perimeter of the celebrations, she could hear a booming voice announcing the beginning of the Midyear Festival. Dorothe scanned the party for the other Paladins. Catching sight of three others in decorated plate, one she recognized as Surpaladin Lorik, she briskly walked over and saluted.

*"Sur."*

*"Paladin"*, Lorik returned the gesture.

Dorothe had wanted to wear the platemail since she was 14, seeing one of the holy knights visit the Chapel of the Clerics in Voluundrun on political business with the Council. Of course, she'd only gotten a glimpse while she was supposed to be doing her chores, but it was enough to pique her interest. At 16, she left the church to pursue the vocation, and had been training at Paladin's Rest for three years since. At the time, there were only two candidates along with herself, and of them only one other was promoted to Paladin. She

felt blessed to be so lucky. Perhaps Lord Skjold had been watching over her that day.

*"We need a set of eyes by the stage. It won't be used until the king's burning, but better to be safe."*

Dorothe saluted again, signifying she understood the directive given, and parted from the group. Merging into the crowd, the girl headed toward the large, square, stone platform that was aptly dubbed a stage when such events called for it. It stood in the direct center of Regnarsvar and held the most important artifact in the city - a lordstone. For the Paladins, the smooth rune stone served as a line of communication with the Lord Skjold, herald of all things judicial and fair in the world. In some ways, the Midyear Festival was also a way to thank Skjold for showing the First of Men the line between right and wrong, imbuing in him a conscience. The Festival was their way of tribute, as all guilds must give back to their Lords once a year.

All guilds except...

*"Get off the stage, ya' filthy Stringer!"*

The Paladin hadn't even gotten to the platform yet and sure enough there was trouble already. As she cut through the throng of people, she took note of a young man about her age standing on the stage, wielding a long-necked musical instrument in two hands like a weapon. He appeared to be fending off a handful of intoxicated party-goers who were attempting to wrestle the item out of his grip. A small gathering of onlookers cheered on the conflict, tossing garbage at the poor musician.

*"Gerroffame!"* He sputtered, trying his damnest to swing at their heads, if it weren't for their grabby hands all over the teal-stained wooden body of the instrument. Dorothe wasn't sure if all involved were drunk or not, but it was taking place in her jurisdiction and she did not tolerate violence on her watch. The Paladin hefted her heavy armor through the jeerers to disperse them, stepping onto the stage with a grunt. She quietly wedged herself between the unruly bunch and the music player to catch the brunt of a stray punch across her chestplate, causing her to stumble backward a few steps.

The loud clank effectively disrupted their fisticuffs as the attacker yowled and clutched his hand. After a second of exchanged *"huh"*s and *"whosat"*s, her station was quickly recognized, and each participant began to try explaining themselves. All at the same time.

*"We was just..."*

*"... Stage is meant for the..."*

*"Ya' see miss, what had happened was..."*

*"OH, my neck...!"* Which came from none of the three assailants. Dorothe swiveled around, expecting to see the musician grasping his broken body. His pain, however, seemed to stem from the instrument. He cradled the stringed object that lay in two pieces in his arms, completely oblivious to his surroundings.

*"He's a stinkin' Bard!"* One of the men called, leaning against the other two for support in his unsobber state.

*"Yeah!"* They resonated.

Dorothe shook her head.

*“I don’t care what he is, what purpose does fighting serve? You’re all three a disappointment to Skjold.”*

Her statement shocked and shamed the drunken juveniles. Most, if not all citizens of Regnarsvar took their faith in the lords very seriously. To be called a disappointment to “The Judge”, as Skold was affectionately called, was the worst of things to be said about a Regnan. As they began to sob among themselves, the other Paladins found their way toward the commotion.

*“Again, Petri? What have I said about drinking so much during the workdays?”* One of the female Paladins clasped the leaner about the arm, helping him off the stage and toward what Dorothe knew was the Rest, where the oaf would stay for the duration of the festival. The other two vagrants followed as they were told by a second Paladin, while the third stayed a moment to thank Dorothe for her assistance.

*Assistance.*

It was not as if the girl didn’t appreciate her time training under Surpaladin Lorik. Quite the opposite! She was lucky to have been given the chance to operate with him, but sometimes... *sometimes* Dorothe felt underappreciated. With three years under her belt, the 19 year old had the tingling feeling that perhaps she might’ve been given more privileges by now, given better jobs than guarding a stage or cleaning the baths, if only she had stayed in Voluundrun with the church. All the same, she had to push these ideas far off, her job was not done yet. Her plated boots echoed across the stage as the Paladin turned back to face the Bard, who still kneeled over the broken teal wood of his instrument.

*“Sir, I need you off the st--”*

*“Where am I supposed to get this repaired?! It’s not as if you savages know what music is!”*

*“E-excuse--”*

*“No! Excuse **me!**”*

Dorothe was not used to being cut off. She stood agape as the stranger stormed off the stone platform, which was ultimately what she was trying to accomplish. If only it hadn’t happened so incredulously. It was obvious the young man was from out of town, and wasn’t exactly concerned with Skjold’s watchful eyes. The girl watched him disappear into the festival with his instrument and his pride in tow. The Paladin climbed back down to the ground level and stared blankly at the crowd. She had a vague understanding of the conflict that rose and collapsed before her eyes.

As a child, Mother Sigrid taught Dorothe about the Lords. Seven Lords - Osyge, Rasmus, Skjold, Dromme, Dyr, Ejel, and Mager - who were given seven of the First Men to fulfill their wishes. Each Lord was tied to the earth through small runic stones, called the lordstones, which were used to communicate with the First Men. Each Man built a temple to serve their Lord, later becoming the guilds of Voluun. For Osyge had the Thieves’ Hole, and Rasmus had the Fighters’ Barracks, Skjold watched Paladin’s Rest, and Dromme orchestrated the Bardic College. Dyr guided the Druid Temple, Ejel taught the Chapel of the Clerics, and Mager imbued magic into the Sorcerer’s Tower.

Sigrid also spoke of Dromme’s passing, and with the death of a Lord goes the death of his guild. At first, the other guilds were sympathetic to the Bards, wishing them well, that nothing had changed. Then, over the

span of almost two decades, they began to turn on the College one by one, because a guild without a Lord was no guild at all. The name "Stringer" came about as a derogatory term. Dorothe was barely a year when the lordstone in Cansang projected a beacon to the sky, and thus had no memory of the calamity. She was only sympathetic to the Bards that rarely passed through Regnarsvar, while others seemed apathetic, and at times... aggressive.

In her reflecting upon her regret that the fray was not handled more delicately, the Paladin caught a glimpse of a peculiar sight - while it was not uncommon for participants to dress in costume during the Midyear Festival, they were usually done in purple and red fabrics, smeared in golden glitter. Dorothe could've sworn she'd just seen a flash of silver pass between the buildings, headed further into the city. She surveyed the unknowing mass to see the other Paladins had not returned from the Rest yet, and decided they could not have seen what she had.

The girl knew she was told to stay by the stage, but there was something sinister about the silver light that nagged at the back of her mind. Perhaps it was the flash of a weapon, something that could threaten the security she promised to uphold. Dorothe would quickly find out what it was she saw sneak by, and if she was back before the other Paladins were, they wouldn't even know. If somehow she managed to thwart some brand of suspicious activity, they might begin to see her as useful. At least, that's what she told herself as she stalked away from the city square and slipped into the residential area she saw the figure by.

There would be little chance to run into any citizens in the housing quarter while the Festival was going on, but just in case, Dorothe wanted to appear as casual as possible until she was out of sight of the city square. As she rounded the corner, Dorothe saw it again! She was sure it a person dressed in hooded robes, hastily moving down an alleyway that lead into the market district. Whether they'd realized the plated girl was on their tail already didn't seem to bother them, as they made no movements to make their course too complex to follow - just a beeline to the mess of stalls and shops.

She sped up her pace a bit, not wanting to lose the trail. The girl hadn't realized how late in the day it was until the setting sun was blinding her, sitting tauntingly on the horizon in the direction her quarry fled. Part of her thought it was a purposeful tactic. Dorothe burst into the marketplace, a hand shielding her squinted eyes from the brilliant rays, determined to keep her gaze on the shimmering silver shadow. In her half-vision, she bowled over a pedestrian, landing both her and the victim onto the ground.

*"Oh gods, I'm s-so sorry!"* The Paladin stuttered, scrambling to her feet to try to spot the silver robes again. Much to her dismay, it seemed they'd escaped. The girl offered a hand to help the poor soul up, and was shocked to find the bewildered face of the Bard. She thought he would've been out of the city by now from the way he was treated by the drunkards.

*"That's alright. I deserved that for the way I snapped at you earlier."* The young man clasped her hand in his, pulling himself from the dusty ground. *"I should've thanked you for helping me. I am Tonlin Godefrey, at your service."* He brushed away the dirt on his grey breeches and straightened out the dark green tunic he wore, cinched at the waist with a thin leather belt - none of which had any silver - then stuck his hand out for hers in return. His black hair was cropped short and his brown eyes smiled with optimism.

The Paladin shook his hand.

*"They called you a Bard - is that true?"*

Tonlin nodded, gesturing to a cloth sack that had gotten knocked to the ground in their tumble. *"My mandolin is broken, but the music is still alive."* He scooped the bag up in his arms and swung it over his shoulder by the drawstring.

Dorothe felt personally responsible for the damaged instrument.

*"Can I help you pay for repairs?"*

Laughter erupted from the Bard's throat and he shook his head, the expression resembling the many times Sigrid answered questions from the Regnan children. Tonlin had thick, wavy auburn hair that was swept back from his face but still danced around as he mocked her. *"Are you kidding me? I don't know if you were watching back there, but Regnarsvar isn't exactly hospitable to people from the Bardic College. If I gave Mandi to a blacksmith here, I'd be lucky if I got back the ashes."*

*"Mandi...?"*

He pat the sack with a crooked smile.

*"Ah."* He named his instrument. *"So what brings you to the city then?"*

*"The Festival, of course. See, the other guilds might ignore us Bards, but we still go where the music is needed. They don't know it yet, but the world would be boring without a little melody here and there."* Tonlin was certainly an optimistic fellow, but the girl couldn't help but wonder how often he got himself into trouble with that point of view. She figured the scuffle in the square wasn't his first bout, and it wouldn't be his last. *"Besides, what's a Midyear Festival without some excitement?"* He flashed a grin at Dorothe.

*"I take it you're not allowed to stay at any of the inns, given your vocation?"*

The Bard's smile faded a bit.

*"Oh... no. It's alright though, I'm staying just outside the city with a few friends who came along with me."*

Dorothe could tell he was lying, but didn't want to press the matter. She already felt like pondscum for allowing his mandolin to get destroyed and further still knocking him over. She bid the Bard a good night and hastily returned to the city square. She managed to get back to the Festival just before the other Paladins resurfaced. The hours bore bruises telling of her escapades, but was able to explain it away as belonging to the stage's unofficial event. The girl didn't see that flash of silver again before retiring to the Paladin's Rest for the night.

Paladin's Rest was located relatively close to the city square, opposite of the residential and market quarters. Where the library was the tallest building in Regnarsvar, the Rest was the largest. Though it was only two stories tall, it included a courtyard for sparring and a small forge where the city's blacksmith often made and repaired the Paladin's weaponry and armor for free. He was happy just knowing he could help the guild in any way.

Dorothe slogged through the entryway, beaten and fatigued from a day she was not prepared for. Turning down the left corridor, she couldn't help but think about the shadow in silver. There was some part of her that was tempted to go back out into the night to search for the figure, to find out who they were and what

they were sneaking about for. But a much larger portion of her body cried for rest. After passing a number of doors in the hallway, she stopped in front of one on her right and twisted the bronze knob.

Closing the door after her, the Paladin began to slough off her platemail boots and chest piece. Beneath the armor, she was made to wear a chain shirt for added protection, which ended up on the floor within minutes. Her cotton underclothing was sweaty and fell on top of the pile of laundry she had meant to send for cleaning the day prior. Dorothe reveled in the fresh air that tickled her bare skin, deciding she had worked hard enough to merit bathing before turning in to her bed for the night.

The Paladins' bathroom was at the end of the dormitory corridor, one for each gender on either side of the hall. Dorothe was lucky to have to share the women's baths with only one other female Paladin, as the other three were male and Surpaladin Lorik had his own. They were all still out patrolling the festival, so the bathroom was essentially her own for now. She wrapped a towel around her middle, grabbed a bar of soap, and quickly padded down the rest of the hall to the women's baths.

The floor tiles were made of marble, cold but refreshing under her feet. In the room stood three tubs of brass, each requiring meticulous cleaning on the workdays. Dorothe stepped towards the middle of the three, as she usually liked to take advantage of the room that being alone granted her when washing up. She tapped one of the fire runes that lay in front of the tub, setting fire to a layer of coals beneath a grate in the floor, and waited for the water to warm. Runes were a luxury provided by the Sorcerer's guild, a privilege granted for opening trade between their city, Regnarsvar, and the capital Voluundrun. Dorothe dropped her towel and climbed into the tub. As the water filled up, the girl sank down until it leveled at her shoulders.

Becoming relaxed, Dorothe allowed her eyes to close, just for a moment. In her mind she raced through the town after the silver blur. They twisted and turned corners that they hadn't before, climbing the buildings and sliding across the patches of grass. Inevitably, the Paladin crashed once again into Tonlin, causing her to physically flinch and rise slightly out of the brass tub. Dorothe took a slow breath, reminding herself she was in the bathroom. Reluctantly, she forced herself to reach an arm out of the warm water to fetch her soap bar, silently replaying the end of hers and the Bard's conversation.

*"I should be getting back to the stage before anyone notices me gone."*

He seemed sad to see her go. Tonlin began to lift a hand to wave in parting, but quickly changed his mind.

*"Oh, wait! I didn't catch your name."*

*"I'm Dorothe",* the Paladin answered,

*"Dorothe Addams."*