

## TWO

The second day of the Midyear Festival was much like the first. Drinks and food and games and fist-fights were aplenty, many of which were started by the Bard's persistent presence. Although Dorothe encouraged him to lay low, Tonlin insisted on playing his music during the celebrations. On the second night, the Paladin again returned to the Rest battered and bruised, but working the Festival was a welcome change from the usual workday chores.

The Surpaladin would have the trainees clean whatever needed cleaning every other day, and on the days between, they would study the lessons of Skjold and Ejel, the Healing Lord. On the off days, the Paladins were made to spar, which Dorothe hated. She was not a fan of hurting others, and unfortunately she seemed to be a natural at doing it accidentally. On the first day the girl was allowed into the courtyard to spar with her peers, she went to disarm one of the males and had elbowed him in the face instead.

Every few matches following, Miss Addams somehow added a new injury to her partner's list - including but not limited to: a broken arm, a chipped tooth, a bruised rib cage, and while practicing her healing spells on him, Dorothe had managed to burn his eyebrows off. How she conjured a fire while trying to heal, no one ever found out. As much as the Paladin tried to stave it off, she couldn't escape injuring others and secretly hated herself for it. Mother Sigrid would often mention how silly it was for the girl to want to carry a sword if she never planned on using it, but Dorothe didn't care. She chose her own path.

She woke up on the third day of the festival exhausted. Miss Addams was more than ready for the celebrations to be over with. She climbed out of bed and pulled her chainmail hauberk over her head and donned the chest plate. Her long black hair was twisted into a bun and a steel sword sheathed and tied to a belt that hung from her waist on the right side. The mess hall was located in the corridor opposite of the dormitories, where the girl strode through to enjoy a quick breakfast of eggs and an assortment of fruits. Once she was sufficiently recharged, the Paladin made her way out to the city square where she returned to her posting beside the stage.

Dorothe was pleased to see Tonlin was present once again, yet without any instrument in hand. Perhaps he had learned his lesson from the days prior. The Bard meshed in with the crowd and was quite adept at the carnival games, she saw. The Paladin wasn't really good at making friends. Her childhood at the Chapel of Clerics went as smoothly as riding a carriage over a dirt road - the other children hated her because she didn't show much interest in healing or magic spells until her moon day, the day she menstruated.

The moon day was usually when children were accepted into the Chapel, not in infancy like Dorothe was. For the boys who were interested in the Clerichood, their acceptance depended on their proficiency in magic. There was nothing particularly special about the Paladin, except that somehow her parents had managed to set it so if anything happened to her mother she would go straight to the Chapel to be raised. That made her a target to the other children, easy to pick on, easy to hate. Dorothe grew up not caring very much about making friends, but the Bard Tonlin was making it hard to ignore him. As the morning shifted into afternoon, there was only one fight that broke out in the square and had nothing to do with Tonlin. Part of the girl was proud, while the rest of her worked to separate the battlers. As the other Paladins towed them away, the sun began to set, throwing into motion the main event of the Midyear Festival.

Upon the stage, a giant man stood made of sticks stood wearing a blackened wood crown. His eyes were coals and sharpened stones made up a wicked grin. The effigy of King Reddus II was posed menacingly, standing 20 feet tall and held stable on a wooden pole that was affixed just in front of the lordstone. For the first time in three days, the Paladin's spirits were high. The Burning King was always her favorite part of the celebrations. As the sky turned a peachy hue, a man in elaborately decorated clothing with a fur and jewelry hanging from his neck strutted across the stage to the wooden man.

This man was Regnarsvar's Divine, Reginald Auber. Each city had a Divine - one who was descended from the First Men. Reginald had come from the line of Regnar, whom Skjold taught right from wrong and instilled in a sense of justice. Thus the vocation of Paladin was born. Reginald was far from the man that Regnar was however. He concerned himself very little with Paladin's Rest, or the other citizens of Regnarsvar, and depended on the plated knights to take care of his messes. As far as Dorothe knew, Reginald only appeared during the Festival's main event to be able to take credit for Skjold's tribute, and therefore seem worthy of being Divine.

Reginald held an unlit torch in his hands, looking forcibly enthused, as he did every year for the past ten years. Dorothe missed his father Roggerik, Divine before him, who would be present during the entirety of the Midyear celebrations right beside his guests. Reginald cleared his throat and began to speak to the masses who started to gather at the foot of the stage.

*"We come now to the end of our festival, but as you know, we saved the best for last."*

There was a bit of whooping, and some applause.

*"Join me now in sending our dear King Reddus II to the fiery pits with a song."*

Dorothe knew that somewhere in the compacted crowd, Tonlin would be singing the traditional rhymes the loudest.

*"Old King Reddus, how did he treat us?  
With contempt in his heart and fire in his eyes.  
He taxed the food and dared to cheat us,  
But the just Lord Skjold began to grow wise.*

*Old King Reddus, his heart was icy cold,  
But Justice soon caught up with the liar.  
So every year we honor Lord Skjold  
By committing King Reddus to the fire.*

*Good Lord Skjold, we thank you this day,  
For freeing us from tyranny and greed.  
Keep your watchful eye on us as we pay  
you tribute with this burning deed."*

Reginald's face turned a bright pink as the words rang through the air. It was a well known fact that the infamous King Reddus II came from the line of Regnar, making him an ancestor of the Divine's. He held the torch outwards, impatiently waiting for Surpaladin Lorik to come light the oiled rags so Reginald could set

the effigy ablaze and be done with the whole event. When no one came to his rescue, the guests began to murmur amongst themselves.

*"...Well?! Where in the Gods is he?"* The Divine began to fuss onstage.

Dorothe scanned the crowd, spying only her fellow Paladins, each glancing between each other in confusion. Concern bubbled in her chest, as Lorik was not known to be tardy for anything, especially a duty as important to Regnarsvar as this. Reginald spotted the girl standing beside the stage, saw her plate armor that identified her as a member of the Rest and turned his embarrassment and anger toward her.

*"You there! Get up here and light this damned thing, will you?"* He hissed at the Paladin.

Before she could argue that perhaps they should be looking for the Surpaladin who was meant to do the job, the girl was getting shoved toward the stairs. She climbed the small stone steps to the platform and was given a lit torch. Reluctantly, Dorothe approached the Divine. She tipped the fire toward him and the flames jumped to his torch. Reginald eagerly turned to light the effigy of his great, great, great, great, great grandfather, watching the fire spread slowly.

Despite her company, the Paladin was privileged to be on stage during the Burning King. She wished Mother Sigrid would come out of her library to see the child she had raised as one of her own, up on the stage as a grown woman now. She turned to look for Tonlin in the group of oohing and ahing faces, hoping to gloat later on. Before her eyes, the awe in their expressions had turned to horror. Dorothe stood dumbfounded, wondering why, until she twisted back toward the effigy.

The old King Reddus II was a massive figure of orange flames, his coal eyes burning a piercing white. His blackened crown had grown into a wild helm of fiery thorns. But it wasn't the Burning King that terrified the Regnans. Behind the effigy, a pillar of blue light protruded from the lordstone of Skjold. The older members of the crowd stood petrified, remembering the death of Dromme in Cansang. Their children pawed at their sleeves, asking, fearful of what the beam of light meant for their generation.

Reginald did not wait around for an answer, a man of 40 years knowing exactly what happened in Cansang. He dropped to his knees and showed the first signs of humility anyone alive had ever witnessed of him - the Divine began to pray. Dorothe watched as others mimicked him, both the elders and the youngers, Paladins and merchants alike. They bade Skjold forgive them for past transgressions, and thanked the Lord for the knowledge bestowed upon Reginald's ancestors. The girl did not join them, however, attempting to wade through the kneeling throng to find Tonlin.

The Bard stood speechless in the midst of turmoil, unsure of how to react. He was thankful when the Paladin pulled him away into the alleys between the square and the residential quarter. They paused there in silence, both seemingly out of breath though they hadn't moved very far from the scene. It was possible that both he and Dorothe were having panic attacks, neither sure of what to do next or how to go about their lives from this point. They didn't know how much time they had to decide before the lordstone would dim.

*"I... I need to get to the library, to find my mother."* Dorothe broke away from Tonlin and the awkward silence. She didn't wait for an answer, and he didn't wait for an invitation to go with her. Together they strode into the housing area, brushing past onlookers who were headed toward the city square, and through the marketplace where stores were being left unattended in haste. The library doors were closed, just as the

Paladin had left them days before. She burst through them, the Bard in tow, panting heavily. Mother Sigrid sat behind the marble counter, reading from one of the large tomes that were usually lined up on the shelves. Instead, a mess presented itself on the counter, several of her favorites lay open on top of each other.

Dorothe slowly approached the Cleric, her brow furrowed.

*"... Mother?"*

There was no answer as Sigrid muttered passages to herself.

*"Mother, the lordstone..."*

The girl circled the counter, stopping in front of her elder who seemed in another world. Dorothe stooped down to peer into the eyes of Mother Sigrid. But the Cleric didn't seem to notice the Paladin or the Bard's presence. Dark brown irises that over time grew foggier, focused intently on the pages in her lap. The woman opened her mouth to speak, though Dorothe didn't know whether it was to her or to herself.

*"One by one the stones are done, unless in the ground Sjel is found."*

Dorothe exchanged looks with Tonlin, who looked just as perplexed as she did. She placed a hand over the open book in Sigrid's lap, trying to gain her attention.

*"Mother, the lordstone is shining just as you said Dromme's did. Skjold will die soon!"*

*"I was a girl when Dromme died."* The Cleric's eyes closed, tears forming on her lashes. *"No one knew what to do. They said the Council was present, that they would help us. But not even they could've seen the death of a Lord. We turned away from the Bardic College. What will happen to the Paladin's Rest now? What will happen to you, my child?"* Sigrid lifted her head as Dorothe straightened back up. The elder couldn't look Tonlin in the face, though she knew he was there near the door, his brow knit while he considered her words.

*"You said something a moment ago, something about the lordstones..."* The Paladin didn't want to think about a life without Skjold, not just yet. Dorothe didn't want to go back to the Chapel of the Clerics. She couldn't. Once you leave the church, there is no going back.

*"I never mentioned it to you, because I didn't want you to think less of me. I'm losing my eyesight."*

*"Why would that matter?"* Tonlin inched closer to the counter with his question.

When Dorothe saw Sigrid genuinely surprised to hear the Bard's voice, the girl knew she was being sincere. *"He's a friend"*, she assured the Cleric, taking her pale, thin hands into her own. *"I understand why you secluded yourself inside of the library now, why you rarely read to the children anymore. I'm sorry that you felt you had to hide it from me, but... I don't respect you any less. Please, explain what you meant about the stones."*

*"The stories, they may be myth to you, but all legend come from truth."* Sigrid appeared serious as she spoke now, less distraught. *"If the death of anymore Lords can be prevented, we have to believe that Sjel*

*exists. The crystal was split up into seven parts, one shard for each guild. The books say if all seven pieces come together, a band of the wisest men can use it to reach the Gods - Sol, Manen, and Gaea. I believe it refers to the Council."*

*"One for each guild?" Tonlin frowned. "Does that include the Bardic College, or do your books not account for Dromme's death?"*

Sigrid nodded, unable to look him in the face. Her vision was limited to an arm's length these days.

*"Seven guilds. That means the Bard's... and it means Paladin's Rest. If Sjel is real, a shard will be there."*

Dorothe realized Mother Sigrid meant for her to find Sjel, to send her into the Rest and collect the mythic crystal from the other guilds. That morning, she was just another Paladin trying to climb the ranks. Now it seemed as if her guild would no longer exist if she didn't do as was asked of her. This was a chance for her to prove her worth to not only Surpaladin Lorik but all of Voluun. It was a chance to bring honor to Sigrid, who raised the orphan girl with no prospects of becoming the Cleric she had wanted her to be. But it would also mean leaving Regnarsvar and Mother Sigrid behind.

*"Come with me."*

*"Dorothe..."* The elder's eyes dropped to the volume in her lap.

*"Please!"*

Mother Sigrid shook her head lightly.

*"Dorothe, I am an old woman. I would only slow you down. My days of adventure are over. The both of you are young and can survive this journey. You will save Voluun, not I."*

*"But you have the wisdom, the knowledge given to you from the books! How will I know what to do when I get to the Rest? Or the other guilds?"* The Paladin pleaded, to no avail.

*"You will know. I've read the very same books to you since you were a child. You have so much determination and courage. There is magic inside you waiting to be released. Now go. When you find the Paladins' shard, come back to me and I will give you a map to help you find the other guilds. Go."*

Mother Sigrid pressed a kiss to Dorothe's hand and gave her a gentle push. The girl of 19 couldn't imagine her life would change so drastically in the blink of an eye. She and Tonlin exited the library together, headed back toward the city square. A tiny wave of relief washed over them as the great pillar of blue light greeted them outside. Skjold was still present for the moment. Knowing time was not on their side, they ran through the market and residential quarters, and burst through the alleyway to find the prayers had stopped.

Dorothe was certain that all of Regnarsvar and even more denizens from other cities were now gathered around the stage, centered on the glowing lordstone. Everyone had stayed in their kneeling positions, but no words came from their lips. They only waited as families held each other close. Reginald joined the crowd on the ground rather than on the platform. In their minds, there was nothing they could do but be present when Skjold died. But Tonlin and Dorothe had better ideas. They moved behind the stage so as not

to attract too much attention, and not to disturb the devoted denizens.

When they reached Paladin's Rest, the girl pushed the door open and let her companion in ahead of her.

*"You didn't have to come with me, you know."* Dorothe said suddenly, though she was unsure of why.

Tonlin gave a reassuring smile.

*"And miss the chance of bringing glory back to the Bards? I think not."*

The two stared down either corridor and looked to each other.

*"Where do you think it could be?"*

*"One by one the stones are done, unless in the ground Sjel is found"*, the Bard recited with a bit of added rhythm. *"In the ground, I surmise."*

Dorothe's brain sparked, and she began to pull at Tonlin's sleeve.

*"The only bit of dirt in this place is the courtyard. Trust me, I have to clean everything you see."*

They broke into the courtyard where the trainees would usually have sparring matches during the day, but Dorothe figured it was too late in the day... and the other Paladins were probably in the square by now anyway. All of them except for Lorik, that is. As the pair wandered further into yard, Dorothe was able to work out why he wasn't present on the stage. He was too busy digging!

The Surpaladin stood in front of them, in the center of the courtyard. Wielding a shovel in his hands, he scooped up inches of soil at his feet. He didn't seem to notice Dorothe or Tonlin until he struck something solid in the dirt. Lorik straightened up to wipe away the sweat from his brow, although it didn't appear he had to dig for very long. His eyes widened when he caught sight of his audience.

*"Oh! Dorothe! I'm glad it's you."*

*"Were you expecting someone else?"*

*"N-no. Well, yes."* The Surpaladin's eyes shifted to the side of the yard. *"There was someone here. I had to make sure the shard was safe."*

Tonlin took a step closer, craning his neck to see whatever was in the hole.

*"It's real?"*

*"Who was here?"* Dorothe interrupted before the elder male could answer.

*"I don't know... the doors were open to the courtyard as I was about to leave for the Burning King. When the lordstone lit up, I knew it had something to do with Sjel."*

The pair came closer to the digsite, the Paladin peering into the hole. Before her sat a sliver of a crystal,

about the size of her palm. It glittered with a magenta sheen, inviting Dorothe to pluck it from the dirt. As she held it in her hand, it did a terrific job of masquerading as an ordinary stone. The girl would not have known the object in her grasp was important if Sigrid hadn't said so. Dorothe stared at it in wonder, forgetting her surroundings for a moment. She flinched when Tonlin disrupted her thoughts.

*"We need to take the shard to the Council. They'll know how to use it."*

*"Yes. That would be best for Skjold. For Voluun. I can't go, not now. Not while Skjold is..."* Lorik's voice trailed off, a frown gracing his lips. *"Please, Dorothe. I trust you. When you first came to the Rest, when you asked for me to take you in and train you, you were a child. I underestimated you, and I didn't give you much opportunity to rise higher. You have to go in my place."*

Dorothe felt years of being underappreciated wash away. She hadn't expected to be able to walk into the Rest and be handed the crystal piece. The girl also hadn't expected it to be real either. The Surpaladin said nothing else, leaving Dorothe and Tonlin to exit the courtyard in silence. The Paladin slipped into her dorm room to find a plain burlap sack to carry Sjel in, so as not to lose nor garner any attention towards it. She fastened it to her belt and led the way back to Mother Sigrid. As they exited Paladin's Rest, the Bard called for Dorothe to hang back. She knew why almost immediately.

The brilliant blue beam began to thin and fade away from the sky. It was slow at first, then disappeared all at once. No one in the city square wanted to be the first to abandon the lordstone, however, so there they remained. They held onto the lingering hope that perhaps it was just a nightmare. Perhaps Skjold was not gone after all. Tonlin and Dorothe stood staring at the sky for a long moment, clinging onto their own dwindling dreams. When the lordstone's carved rune dimmed before their eyes, they had no choice but to continue to the library with the shard pouch dangling from the Paladin's belt.

Mother Sigrid was much more coherent this time around, albeit notably saddened when told the lordstone had dimmed. It was not unexpected, but all three thought they would've had a bit more time. Dorothe untied the sack from her belt and lay it onto the counter for the Cleric to inspect. Long spindly fingers pulled the pouch open and probed it until they found the pinkish-red shard.

*"Incredible."*

Sigrid looked upon it with wisened eyes within her narrowed field of vision, neither surprised at its existence nor the magic it was said to contain within. After laying it atop of the sack, she bent down to retrieve a folded piece of parchment from under the counter.

*"The journey to come will be a long one. It will take at least a day to reach Morksvik, to find the Thieves' Hole and locate the next shard. It won't be necessary to return to me when you have it. As I've said, you will be the ones to bring Sjel to the Council, not I. This is probably the last you will see me for a very long time."*

Dorothe wished she could change the Cleric's mind. Even if Sigrid only slowed them down, the girl didn't care. She felt she owed something to her guardian, to make up for the guilt she felt over not having chosen to follow in her footsteps and for thinking less of Sigrid over the past few months. But within her mind, she knew her elder was right - this wasn't any light task they were undertaking.

*"I promise this isn't the last time I'll see you, Mother."* Dorothe felt excitement well up in her heart. *"We'll*

*reclaim Sjel, for you, for Dromme, and for Skjold."*

Tonlin clasped the Paladin on the back.

*"We'll be back before you know it."* His optimism was not only directed at Mother Sigrid, but to Dorothe... and himself as well.

*"It will be difficult to travel by yourselves",* The Cleric lifted a coinpurse onto the counter, a light smile gracing her lips. *"Please take this to make your course easier."*

They said their goodbyes, and the Bard and the Paladin left the library. On their way out of Regnarsvar, Tonlin noticed the public solemnly returning to their homes. There was a steady stream of travelers out of the city, those who came for the festival and stayed until the end, visitors from all over Voluun. The two merged into the progression, planning amongst themselves the best way to proceed toward the Lord Osyge's guild. They would travel by foot for the day, collect the shard and buy horses for the remainder of their quest.

Once they were outside of the city limits, Dorothe pulled Tonlin aside of the chain of migrants.

*"What is it?"*

Dorothe swiveled to back toward Regnarsvar, with the moon peeking up over the apex of the library. The sun had finished its decent and made way for a bright and starry night. The city was cast in the moon's shadow, a symbol of the loss of its sanctity. There was no wind. The atmosphere was heavy and grim. This was not the way that Dorothe wanted to remember her home, but she knew this would be the last she would be able to see its silhouette. She hoped it would not be the very last, however.

*"I just want to look. Just for a moment."*

Tonlin allowed her this courtesy. Once she was satisfied, they began Northwest facing Morksvik. On the horizon ahead of them, a small town blossomed from the economy that overflowed from Morksvik and Regnarsvar. Viktorsvar, though halfway between the two cities, was usually caught between the criminals that cycled out of Morksvik and the men and women who didn't make it to Paladinhood. Many who lived in the small town resented those who lived in Regnarsvar, but it seemed the Paladin would have to pass through the shady pit on their way to the Thieves' Hole. The Bard was not too familiar with the Southeastern area of Voluun, where Regnarsvar and Morksvik were located, so he followed Dorothe's direction.

Tonlin addressed his companion, a crooked smile on his face.

*"Are you ready to save the Lords?"*

A gentle breeze picked up as Dorothe replied with confidence, *"Yes, I am. Are you?"*

*"Not at all. Let's go."*