

## NINE

*“Dorothe!”*

The Paladin began her descent into the dark abyss, only tethered to the mortal coil by a rope wrapped around a thin guy, held onto by an even smaller girl. Tonlin watched her fall and tried his best to steady himself for the weight he was about to take on. Louve closed her eyes, hoping the stone wrapped around their feet would be enough to hold them. Dorothe’s eyes widened, her arms flailing as her body wanted to topple forward with her momentum. It was the impact that came next that terrified her the most.

Her face smashed against rock, but it wasn’t the side of the cliff, as she expected. Louve had to open her eyes, as the smack was so loud, she couldn’t help but peek. There in front of Tonlin, a defeated girl laid out in the gap between the two cliffs. She didn’t move for a long while, prompting the Bard to drop his hands and let the rope dangle from his hips.

*“... What.”*

No one really knew what to say. The girl peeled her face from an invisible walkway, and picked herself up, dusting off her scraped up breastplate. She stood, albeit warily, and looked down into the darkness she appeared to be hovering over. Dorothe didn’t want to move a muscle, in case this was a one-in-a-billion fluke and any second now gravity would flip back on and send her careening into the canyon. The Fighters who waited by the staircase were certainly entertained by her feat of levitation. They’d been hysterically laughing since Dorothe smashed her face into the nothingness.

*“I-i’m not sure what to do...”* Dorothe frantically began to look around her feet for any sign that she was safe to continue to the other side.

*“Dorothe... your feet!”* Louve moved from behind the Bard, pointing as the cave released her from the spot.

*“What about my feet!?”*

*“You have a shadow!”*

*“What...?”* The older girl didn’t see what shadows had to do with her not falling.

*“There’s a surface under you, you have a shadow! I thought I saw a shadow there when the pitcher was crossing over, but I wasn’t sure.”* Louve nodded, approaching the rope on their side. She grabbed hold of it with both hands and continued to reassure Dorothe. *“Take a step. I’m sure I saw the shadow all the way across. If I’m wrong, we’ll both be pulling you over. Go on!”*

*“Alright...”* The Paladin’s heart was hammering away, but did as she was told. Gingerly, she lifted her left foot and placed it back down inches in front of her right. It was solid, as Louve suspected. Dorothe internally celebrated that she wasn’t falling into the pit below and continued slowly across the invisible bridge. Tonlin and Louve removed the slack on the rope for every step she took, that way at least she wouldn’t trip on the

line on her way over. The girl carefully crossed halfway between her platform and the others', keeping her breathing steady though her heart wanted to beat its way out of her chest.

*"Almost there...!"* Louve encouraged her friend, who wavered when the Druid yelled. *"Eep! Sorry!"*

Finally, Dorothe was able to touch her toes to the rocky plateau. As she did, she collapsed to her knees and felt the stone beneath her hands, struggling to calm her heart. Tonlin and Louve clasped their hands on her shoulders, all three relieved that she survived. The Fighters, Erwan and Gail, clapped their hands, still giggling to themselves.

*"Shoulda' seen your face!"* The man jeered.

*"It gets better and better to watch every time!"* The woman added.

*"So..."* Dorothe looked up from her crouched position. *"Explain it."*

*"It's a trick of sorts. The bridge is real, but not how you expect it to be."* Gail helped the Paladin to her feet. *"It's glass! The rocks that were there are just an illusion spell cast onto the actual bridge, activated when you walk across it once so that it appears the "bridge" is falling."*

Erwan looked smug. *"Every year's end, the recruits get a real surprise outta' it. One year, a group figured it out almost as soon as the rocks fell. Same way Louve did - the shadows. Sometimes we don't get bright enough people and they can't figure out a way to get back. They start cryin' that they wanna go home, and that's how we know they're not Fighter material."*

*"Oh!"* Gail lifted her right pinky finger. *"By the way, we're not to let you complete the tribute until you swear your secrecy to us. No one's allowed to talk about the trial, otherwise there wouldn't be a point to the illusion, right?"*

The trio looked between each other and nodded their heads, each putting their pinky fingers around Gail's in agreement.

*"Now that's out of the way, let's get this pitcher upstairs and to the well. The Surfighter should be waiting there for us already."* Tonlin was eager to get their task over with, but not more so than Dorothe was ready to leave the cave altogether. The Bard gripped one side of the silver container while she heaved the other. With Tonlin facing frontwards, they waddled to the staircase and very cautiously began to ascend. Water sloshed inside the pitcher with each step upwards, while Louve and the two Fighters followed behind. They made it into the Barracks, inching their way out of the door and past the blacksmith, who looked up from his work to watch.

*"It's not Year's End already, is it?"* He wiped the sweat from his brow, eyes hidden by protective goggles..

*"Special occasion. I'll tell ya' about it later, Arthur."* Erwan quipped.

*"I do love your stories..."* The blacksmith Arthur readjusted his eye wear and went back to work.

The group walked along around the side of the building, directed by the two Fighters, who knew where the well was built. As they rounded the corner, the lordstone of Rasmus came into view. It was one of the taller

of the stone pillars, where as it was said Osyge was one of the shorter ones. The Paladin had previously thought the lordstones were identical, but now that she was thinking about it, Dyr's stone had a greener tint to it than Skjold's did - almost as if it was part of nature despite the temple it sat in.

Just beyond the lordstone, a small well was built. It served to bring up the spring of fresh water that flowed just beneath the surface of the ground they walked on. There was no other purpose for the task of carrying the silver pitcher half-full of water to the well, except to pay tribute to Rasmus, who blessed the First Man Arlen with pride and honor. The Surfighters attributed the gift of a natural spring to the Lord as well, and not wanting to waste the gifted water, they collected the slow drip into the silver pitcher and added it into the well at the end of the year. Tonlin and Dorothe stopped beside the brick well, setting the container down. The group collected around the two as they caught their breath.

*"Good to go?"* The Paladin stood up straight, stretching her arms over her head.

Tonlin was stooped over with his hands on his knees, panting. He was not used to physical exercises like Dorothe was. Bards were rather squishy. He took a long moment to recover, then stuck out a thumb to indicate that he was as ready to lift the pitcher into the well as he would ever be. Together they gripped the bottom of the silver pitcher and grunted, rising it inches at a time. Slowly, they tipped the lip of the pitcher over the well and the water poured out into the pool below. The silver became lighter and lighter until it was empty, although the pitcher itself had quite a bit of weight alone. They set it down on the ground and sighed with relief.

Donovan appeared from behind the lordstone, approaching with his hands clasped behind his back.

*"Well done."*

Erwan and Gail joined their Surfighter's side, smiling.

*"It was hilarious, as usual."* Gail commented.

*"But they got through it together. I believe they're the right ones to be on this journey."* Erwan nodded wisely.

Donovan looked over Dorothe and Tonlin and Louve.

*"If my two best Fighters say you're worthy, I have no reason to disagree. You have courage, and have fulfilled your end of the deal, so I will follow on my end."* He held out a hand, gesturing to a rope tied onto a winch on the well. Dorothe approached and raised the line, noticing a small bucket tied at the end. Once the bucket was out of the water, she pulled it onto the lip of the well and saw the magenta shard enveloped in well-water. The girl collected the crystal, holding it up to the light. A glitter of purple-pink mesmerized her again, a whisper of magic that was held back until all seven shards were together taunted the Paladin. She wanted to get lost in its shine, to study it for days on end, but a brief gust of wind threw her mind back to reality and she stuffed the shard of Sjel into the sack tied to her belt.

Donovan bowed his head to the trio and offered some words of advice, *"If you're going to be staying within the city tonight, go to The Last Crossed Swords and tell them I sent you. You'll get discounted beds and free meals for the morning. I don't tend to recommend people to the inn, so they know to expect well*

*behaved, quality patrons.” The Surfighter gave them a pointed look, as if to say “You had better be good people on my behalf, or else.”*

They said their goodbyes to the Fighters and wandered into the residential area with a little less stress than when they had entered Aften. The houses had slanted roofs with clay brick extensions that poured out grey smoke from the boiling pots below. The streets were paved with speckled rock slabs and smooth pebbles that filled in between. There was a quiet percussion of people passing through the residential quarter, to and from the market, a cart or two hauling trade goods. Dorothe saw furs and handmade trinkets, and a stall that peddled fresh fruits and vegetables.

The Paladin knew that Bretta would be in Aften with her children in a few months, trying to sell her wool among the others in the market place. She hoped it panned out for the mother of the city’s Divine, and that Adler would mature into the man that Aften needed him to be. Or at the very least, that he didn’t turn out to be as spoiled as Reginald was - Bretta wouldn’t allow that to happen. Dorothe wasn’t very politically savvy, but it was always easier on the cities when their Divines actually cared about the townsfolk.

The trio entered the marketplace, where the inn was located. The area was a might busier than the residential quarter, but that was to be expected. So many shining objects, a plethora of aromas to entice wagging tongues and jingling coin purses to check out a handful of stalls that were always changing according to the season. Louve began to gravitate toward a cart that was offering herbs and plants for healing purposes, while Tonlin pulled aside a local to ask for directions to The Last Crossed Swords. Dorothe shielded her eyes from the sudden glare of the sun that began to dip low in the sky, though she thought she caught the sight of something else in the midst of the crowd.

*“Hey...”, She started. “Why don’t we all meet back here in an hour? Tonlin can reserve our rooms for us while me and Louve go pick up some more provisions for our trip.”*

They agreed, although Louve was only half listening while she oggled some gemstones being sold on a cart just across from them. Tonlin left with their map to go plot out the road ahead of them after he secured the rooms, leaving Dorothe and Louve to take their remaining 150 silverbits and wander about the market. They saw plants and gems and carved wooden trinkets and shiny baubles with golden chains. Louve hovered admiringly between the shops, picking up basil leaves, chamomile, a new dagger for Tonlin, an amethyst and a rose quartz crystal, and a book about the supposed healing properties of crystals, running them thirteen silverbits in total.

*“Do Druids typically use crystals in their rituals?”* Dorothe was curious, not having heard of this method of spell incantation before.

*“Some do, some don’t. There are three different sects of Druidry: One is attuned to the elements, like when I called down the lightning. One is attuned to beastmastery, which is how Torrick was able to shapeshift into the bear. The third is attuned to the earth itself, utilizing crystals in every aspect, in healing, in scrying, in communication with Dyr herself.”* Louve skimmed across the first pages of her new book, though Dorothe could tell a lot of the knowledge was already contained inside the Druid’s head.

*“They focus on the fact that the lordstone is our link with the Lords, and there are very powerful crystals embedded in the rock of the lordstones. Sjel is like these strong crystals. So in every pure gemstone there must be a link to the lords that aids in our magic, although a much weaker link than those in the lordstones or Sjel.”*

*"Huh..."* Dorothe mused to herself.

*"Sorry. Am I talking too much again? I always feel like I'm saying more than what people actually want to hear."* Louve stuffed her new items away into her shoulder bag, embarrassed.

*"No, no! Not at all! I had no idea that the lordstones had crystals in them. That makes sense, the reason why we're having to collect a crystal, how it's connected to the lordstones..."* Dorothe subconsciously lowered her hand to feel the small pouch on her belt, hearing the four shards tinkling as they rolled against each other.

*"Oh! Well, I'm glad to have taught you something then."* Louve looked bashful and readjusted her bag. *"You know, I sometimes think you don't like me..."*

*"Ahaha..."*, Dorothe looked away, giving a nervous chuckle. *"What's not to like? You're a very smart girl with a colorful background. That is to say, your Druidry is interesting. It's a way of life, whereas being a Paladin is just a discipline. I've been called a militaristic machine on more than one occasion."*

*"You do... appear to be rather stoic a lot of the time."*

The girls began to walk side by side, neither stimulated by the wares around them any longer.

*"It's part of the training, I guess."* Dorothe shrugged. *"I've never really had much cause to care about other people, besides Sigrid. It was only really recently that I felt I had a friend."* She looked to the blonde and smiled slightly. *"Or two."*

Louve grinned widely in response, hooking an arm around the Paladin's.

*"So..."*, the older girl cleared her throat. *"You and Tonlin, huh?"*

The Druid stopped in her tracks, stammering, *"I-is it that obvious?!"*

The pain in Dorothe's chest returned, magnified by Louve's response. It was a fact now, but rather than losing Tonlin as a friend, the Paladin realized that she had instead gained Louve as well. It was funny how quickly the perception of a person can change through a simple conversation. Dorothe figured she could endure the temporary heartbreak, if it meant both of her friends were happy. She pushed past the pain and guided Louve back through the marketplace toward where she saw Tonlin disappear into a building - The Last Crossed Swords.

*"Since the day he saw you for the first time"*, Dorothe assured the Druid.

Louve blushed, leaning onto the Paladin's shoulder with newfound affection for the older girl. They navigated their way back to the area where the residential and market squares met. Tonlin stood there quietly tracing routes along the Western coast of Voluun on the map when the Druid rushed to meet him, ringing her arms about his neck gently and kissing his cheek.

*"Oh!"* He flushed a rosy hue. *"Hello there, Louve. I've got our rooms secured, if you're ready to retire. The sun's already on the horizon, and I'm a bit exhausted from our little ordeal."* The Bard folded up the map and tucked it into his backpack.

*"That sounds great. Let's have supper first though. It's been a few hours since we were back in Bretta's kitchen."* The younger girl pat her stomach, which had begun to gurgle.

*"You two go on ahead. I'll catch up."* Dorothe figured they'd like some time to themselves after her conversation with Louve.

*"You're sure?"* Tonlin raised a brow, eager to turn in to the inn for the night.

*"Yeah, no worries. I just saw something back in the market that I think I want to check out before we leave Aften."*

The two turned to each other with a smidge of concern in their eyes.

*"Alright. If you insist. We'll save you a meal for when you get back, and I'll be waiting in our room for you."* The Druid waved a hand before they turned around to retreat to The Last Crossed Swords.

Dorothe thought she had people figured out already, being 19 and growing up in an environment that shunned her for not being what was expected of her. She was supposed to be sympathetic, she was meant to be a Cleric, but not until she learned the art of spellwork. The girl trained to be a Paladin, but somehow she picked up pyromancy on accident. She was supposed to be the savior of Voluun, but did Dorothe even want to be? The girl sometimes had a hard time remembering why she was traveling across the country, or why it even had to be her. The Paladin felt less and less like a Paladin and more like an errand girl - a lordless girl. Was it right for someone without a lord to be trying to save the remaining ones? Would the Gods just laugh her off, telling her to find someone more suited to communicating with them?

The longer that Dorothe had been away from Regnarsvar, the more it seemed she had to learn - about the other guilds, about the lords, about friendships, and about herself most of all. It was clear that some people gravitated towards others of greater emotional caliber than it appeared she was capable of, but if they knew of the storm that raged inside her mind... well, that probably wouldn't help her either. The Paladin harbored a constant dull pain that began to brew around the identities of her parents and became sharper when she thought about her future. Where would she go after this journey was done? Back to Regnarsvar, where her vocation no longer served a purpose? At least Tonlin had Louve now, and that would of course end in a lifelong relationship for the happy couple.

Dorothe wandered back into the marketplace, however she forgot about having seen something familiar in the crowd. She didn't even make eye contact with the merchants who were starting to pack up their products for the night, and they ignored her in return. The air turned crisp as the sun dipped lower in the sky, but there was no breeze. Stars began to poke through the veil the sunlight created and the moon was nowhere in the dark blue blanket that night. The Paladin was in no hurry to go to the inn just yet, enjoying a bit of time to herself. She ended up following the market district back around to the Fighter's Barracks. As she stopped to watch the blacksmith pack up his tools, she caught sight of a blur of movement in her peripheral vision.

When Dorothe turned to look, she saw a dog. Shaggy brown fur partially covered his eyes, but she could tell he was staring directly at her. The mutt sat at the corner of the Barracks, and the girl had almost mistook

him for a decorative statue, except that he blinked at her a few times. The Paladin had a fondness for dogs, as many large purebreds roamed the halls of the Chapel of the Clerics during her childhood. Although it was forbidden to pet or hug the Clerics' companions, she always snuck in a good pat on the snout when no one was looking. And the dogs seemed to be thankful for any ounce of affection they received from the girl.

Dorothe approached the dog slowly.

*"Hello there."*

She offered her hand to the mutt, knowing dogs preferred to learn the scent of their acquaintances. The shaggy dog nosed her palm, sniffing for a minute or so. He then sat at her feet and looked up at her, his intense dark eyes boring into her soul.

*"Who do you belong to, hm?"* Dorothe glanced around for anyone who looked like they were searching for a dog, finding very few people about now that the sun was going down.

*"The Council."*

A masculine voice whispered in her ear, making her jump and wildly spin around to locate the source. There was no one near enough, no one who was paying her any attention. She looked down to the mutt who had opened his maw to let his tongue wag as he panted. Dorothe shook her head, ignoring any wild thought that began to form as she stared down at the dog. The girl bent slightly to pat the beast's head between his ears.

*"They're looking for you here."*

That time, she couldn't deny that the sound was coming from the dog. His tongue wagged at just the right times, and his jaw moved with the rhythm of statement. Dorothe's eyes grew wide, and she took her hand away.

*"Wh-... what did you say?"*

Before she could get a clear answer, the mutt turned to trot around the Barracks, disappearing behind the building and down an alleyway through the network of houses. The Paladin didn't know whether she wanted to chase him down or just to leave him be. She didn't have to make up her own mind, as behind her Aften's gates were suddenly busy. Dorothe could see white and silver robes sweeping between the large iron doors. Two men and one woman were being escorted into the city by Fighters that she recognized were the ones Bretta hired to fix her barn.

The girl immediately forgot the dog and turned to sprint toward The Last Crossed Swords to find her friends. She was sure that caster from the farm's barn was a member of the Council, but if she recalled correctly, his robe was mostly silver while theirs appeared to be mostly white. It made no difference to her however, silver was silver. Dorothe found her way through the market district again, locating a two story building with a plaque out front - two crossed swords. She fled inside and ran directly up the stairs, where she assumed correctly that the rooms would be situated. Down a short hallway with five doors closed, the Paladin stopped in front of the sixth door that was wide open.

*"Louve!"*

The Druid had been sitting at the window, staring out into the moonless night. Dorothe's approach startled her.

*"Ack! Dorothe!"* Her face changed from frightened to concerned when she noted the haste in which her friend roused her from her thoughts. *"What's wrong?"*

*"The Council is in Aften! They're with the Fighters... they must've told the Council where to find us! We have to go!"*

Louve didn't seem to understand the Paladin's plight. She sat dumbfounded a moment before answering.

*"But... aren't we supposed to give Sjel to the Council anyway?"*

*"I... huh. I'm not sure anymore. But if that caster was a member of the Council, why would he try to kill me? If he was part of the Council, then they're not to be trusted. We can collect Sjel ourselves and ... we'll have to figure out how to use it."*

The Druid was slowly realizing the implications of the Council's presence.

*"How are we supposed to get that sort of information...?"*

*"You're smart - you'll figure it out. Please, Louve. We need to get Tonlin up so we can get out of here",* Dorothe pleaded. *"I don't know how much time we have."*

*"Alright, alright, I understand!"* Louve left her window seat to walk across the hallway and banged on the fifth door. There was a brief clatter and a scrambling before the door opened. Tonlin stood groggily, his feet bare and his tunic laying on the floor, a white under shirt untucked from his breeches. *"Get your things together, we're heading to the next city. You've got the map, right?"* The Druid was to the point, much to Dorothe's approval.

Tonlin didn't hesitate, though he was still in a sleepy stupor. He collected his boots and tunic, his bag, and the map, and stumbled out of the room with all items in his hands. Louve helped him through the hallway and down the stairs with Dorothe leading them toward the doorway. There was a bit of merriment on the ground floor - a small fire pit was lit and drinks were shared between a handful of out-of-towners, possibly merchants who had had a successful day of peddling. The trio ignored the noise as the Paladin pulled open the door, filling the room with a gust of cold night air.

White and silver filled their vision. A tall man with silver hoops dangling from his ears stood in their way, his hair long and black like dreadful thread that spilled over his shoulders. His eyes were ice that froze Dorothe when she tried to step backwards but found her muscles wouldn't move under his gaze. The robes of the Council moved like silk as he slid a hand out into the common room, gesturing to the Paladin. Behind him, one woman and one man stood dressed in similar robes, each with their own personal touches.

*"Dorothe Addams?"* He spoke with a monotonous voice. *"We've been looking for you. Please come with us to Volunndrun."*

Behind him, a red light burst into the sky.