

SEVEN

It would take the trio a day and a half to reach Aften, and the road between the city and Traertap Forest was rarely traveled. Dorothe, Tonlin, and Louve were the only ones around for miles, but the Bard made sure his practicing on the pan flute would keep them entertained. The day had started off rather interestingly with Torrick's death - or, at least, they had thought him dead. Now they didn't know what to think after they discovered his body disappeared from the field outside of the stables. The Druid camp was hours behind them, the Paladin speculated, and it didn't matter where the Surdruid was now.

The road was unkempt, though the scenery was nice. Small bushes lined the dirt path and skinny trees dotted the horizon that paled in comparison to the forest's thick wood. The grass carpeted their surroundings, but it was somehow more yellow than it was green. A strong wind chilled the air, carrying the scent of the forest behind them with it. The breeze pushed against the horses, slowing them to a trot. At this pace, they wouldn't reach Aften until the next night.

"Tonlin...?"

The melody had stopped, causing Louve to worry for the male at her back.

"He's asleep..." Dorothe peered over at her companion, seeing his head slowly fall to his chest.

"We're all a bit tired, I think. We've been awake for nearly 18 hours. Does your map say if there's a place closer than Aften?" Louve was thankful she had been the one at the reins, though it was hard to see the Bard behind her to ensure he wasn't slipping off the saddle.

Dorothe dug around in the saddlebag a bit, taking out the thick folded parchment. She traced their path with a forefinger and stopped near the river that split Voluun in two - the River Del. A penned blot appeared to be directly ahead of them a dozen miles, give or take a few. They could stop there until nightfall and cross to the island that the river isolated, where Aften was built. The Paladin was sure the water barrier was kept in mind when the territory was being considered.

"Looks like there's a milling town half an hour away, if we can get the horses into a run." Dorothe folded the map back up and slid it into the bag.

"Sounds good to me. Tonlin, you'll have to be awake to hold on." Louve gently elbowed the boy in the arm. Unfortunately, it was the healing arm, and the sudden discomfort shook him conscious.

"Ack! Wh-what's goin' on? We're going somewhere?" He wiped the saliva from his chin and sat up straight, nearly dropping the pan flute.

"Just hold on." Louve snapped the reins, sending the thoroughbred into a canter. Dorothe followed suit, Felipe keeping up a few paces behind. The horses kicked up dirt and rocks, carrying their passengers safely along the road. Wind rendered the girls' hair into flowing manes, streaks of obsidian and gold that danced in

the midday sun. Tonlin might've complained that Louve's hair was trying to stuff itself down his throat, but he didn't seem to mind being cocooned in her scent.

As the sun started to fall from its peak in the sky, a long drove of clouds began to roll in from the Southwest. Buildings came into sight soon enough - houses among a barn with a watermill sitting partly in the river. Fields stretched along the road with farmhands working the soil a few feet apart from each other. Most of them ignored them passing through the town, but some would lift their straw hats to wipe the sweat from their brow, unsure of their own eyes. A few would look upon the decorative chest plate Dorothe wore and mutter through clenched jaws as others spat on the road as the horses trotted past.

"Friendly bunch", Tonlin said with a sarcastic note.

"Is this how people treat Paladins now...?" Louve asked, hoping it wouldn't sway their chances of finding a place to rest for the afternoon.

The trio pulled their horses up to a two story house built next to the big red barn and tied their mounts to a conveniently planted tree near the residence. Louve helped Tonlin down off his horse while Dorothe knocked on the door. There was a bit of chatter within the building before the door opened to reveal a work-worn woman of copper hair, wiping her hands with the bottom of her apron.

"How can I help you folks?" She seemed surprised to see armed individuals at her door, but something told Dorothe she had seen stranger things in her days.

"We'd like to ask to stay here until night, if you have the room for three extra bodies." The Paladin studied the woman's face for any sign of abhorrence for her vocation, but she didn't seem phased by the silvery engravings on her armor.

"I would be happy to lend you a room upstairs. Unfortunately, we've only got two spare rooms, but you girls can bunk together. I have a few old stalls in the barn for your horses, but...", she paused, cleaning her hands off onto the white cloth, *"By the looks of those clouds, there's a storm that'll be here by sundown. I think you should stay 'till tomorrow afternoon at least. It should pass us by then."*

Dorothe glanced back at Louve and Tonlin, neither disagreeing to the extension. Tonlin had to keep blinking his eyes to stay conscious as it was. The Paladin turned back and nodded, digging at her coinpurse to seal the arrangement.

"Oh. No, no. We don't deal in coins here. At Orethod Mill, you pay us in labor."

"I'm afraid we can't linger more than a day here."

"A morning's worth of help around the land would be just fine. I'm a reasonable woman." The woman winked at Dorothe. *"My name's Bretta. Go stable your horses and I'll show you to your rooms."*

As they led their companions into the barn, Tonlin seemed more awake than he had been seconds prior. Louve glanced back at the house, then to Dorothe.

"That was easier than I thought it would be. Did you see the looks you were getting back there? Some of them looked like they wanted to hunt us just for passing through."

"Yeah", Dorothe said. *"I saw."*

"Is that... normal?"

"I suspect it will be", The Paladin muttered as she led Felipe into the stable and unlatched his saddle, setting it over a wooden beam with his reins. The horse sighed contentedly as she ran a hand over his fine chestnut coat. *"It's happening again, the same way it happened to the Bards. We're lordless, seen as inferior guilds now. People are turning their backs on us because we're not connected to a divine source anymore."*

"But Skjold died merely days ago!" Louve protested. *"How can they treat you like this so soon?"*

"That's how people are, Louve", Dorothe kept her gaze focused on Felipe as she talked. *"They love to hate others. Change can be frightening, so they band together in this at least, to feel safe again."*

Tonlin cleared his throat loudly. *"Hey! We have a place for the night. We should get inside before the wind sweeps us back to the forest."*

Dorothe felt ashamed of her choice to leave the Chapel of the Clerics for the first time in her life, but she said nothing of it as Bretta toured them through her house. The trio introduced themselves, and marveled at the simple, yet bountiful life the farm woman had. Bretta had three children - a son of 15, a daughter of 13, and a young girl of 6. The woman was a widow - Her husband had died just after the youngest was born. He'd been a member of the Fighter's Barracks and died an honorable death on the field of battle. Bretta's kitchen was enormous, but the sitting area was very quaint. The woman said it was because there was hardly any time during the day to sit. She and her children spent most of the day doing chores, and the rest was either cooking, eating, or resting for the next day.

"Here we are. Tonlin, you're in this room, and the girls are right across the hall. I gave them the larger room - girls need all the space we can get."

The Bard wandered into the room, beelining for the bed. He didn't take the time to appreciate the space he was renting. The girls, however, marveled at the decor in their room. Pressed wildflowers hung in frames on the walls, books about herbal remedies stacked on a single shelf. There was a faint scent of laundry soap hanging in the linens that tied the room together. There was only one bed, but it was wide enough for both females to rest upon, and the sheets were a sky blue that made them long for better weather to reach them faster. Louve laid out on the mattress, a low moan escaping her throat as she settled with her nose to the pillows.

"My room is at the end of the hall if you need anything." Bretta flashed a smile before she disappeared back down the stairs to her children.

The wind only gained strength the lower the sun dipped. Tonlin had fallen asleep almost as soon as he lay down, but Louve stayed awake with Dorothe. The Druid stared out of the bedroom window facing East, back toward Traertap Forest. Dorothe sat in the wooden chair in the corner, unbuckling her chest plate to make herself comfortable. She pulled her plate boots off one by one and stacked them beside the door, then tossed her gauntlets atop. Her sword came undone from her belt and was placed leaning against the chair, yet her coin purse and the sack that held the shards stayed exactly where they were.

Louve sighed and turned to the Paladin.

"When we're done collecting Sjel, I'll have to go back to the camp. I don't have any other home. I'll have to tell everyone what's happened."

Dorothe didn't respond. She didn't know how. The Paladin still had a home, she still had Mother Sigrid, and although her Lord was dead, she still had company at the Rest. She averted her gaze, allowing the Druid to continue to voice her thoughts.

"I lost everything I thought I knew in a day..." Louve glanced back out the window, watching the sun touch the line where land and sky met. *"I would've lost myself, if it weren't for Dyr."* The Druid seemed to recoil from her own statement, realizing her audience almost as soon as the last word left her lips. She hung her head.

"What's it like to meditate?" Dorothe attempted to distract the Druid's mind away from her predicament. She was honestly curious about the subject, being that it wasn't practiced in her vocation.

"Meditation is about clearing your mind, or focusing on one thought. For the Druids, that one thought is Dyr. When we wipe away all else in our minds, there is space enough for our Lord to occupy, and in that space she fills us with hope and knowledge, creating a thread between our souls and the nature that surrounds us."

Louve's face had completely changed when she talked about Dyr. She practically glowed, suddenly confident. Dorothe didn't realize the other guilds were as fanatic about their Lords as the Regnans had been about Skjold. It was heartwarming to see.

"When Dyr establishes this connection with us, it's said a Druid is lent the Lord's power when casting nature-centric spells. It's true that we become stronger casters after the meditation ritual, but I don't really feel any differently. Perhaps over time... right now I think I might be too tired to think straight."

Dorothe nodded. *"Me too."*

Louve climbed into the bed, taking the side closest to the door, while the Paladin carried her boots, gauntlets, and sword to the seat under the window for safe keeping while they slept. As she straightened out, she caught a glint of silver through the window, somewhere near the barn. She gasped audibly and turned to look properly, but it was already gone. The barn door was wide open, though they had shut it after penning the horses.

"What is it?" Louve eyeballed Dorothe, already half-asleep.

"The barn's open..." The dark-haired girl watched, something nagging at her at the back of her mind. She was sure that the flash of silver was the same person she had chased down the alley in Regnarsvar.

"Must've blown open. The wind is getting violent."

"Must've." Dorothe looked to the girl whose eyes were closed, knowing it would be cruel to rouse her and Tonlin just for a hunch. *"I'm going to go close the barn up"*, she said to no one in particular. She quickly

pulled back on her boots, slid her gauntlets over her forearms, and reattached the plate to her chest. The Paladin took up her sword and quickly skipped out of the room and down the hall. As she passed Bretta's room, she noticed the door was open. It would be arduous to explain to the woman why she needed her help, but one extra person was better than no extra persons. Dorothe knocked on the open door, not wanting to be intrusive.

"Is that you, Dorothe?" Bretta appeared to be reading a book in bed, the day's fading light requiring a dim candle that was lit on a dresser nearby. *"I didn't expect you to be in your armor so late in the day. I nearly thought one of the city guards had come to my door."* The woman closed her book and let it rest in her lap, a curious look on her face. When she noticed the concern on Dorothe's face, Bretta placed her book onto the bedside table and changed her tone. *"What's the matter, hun?"*

The Paladin cleared her throat, choosing to go with the simplest explanation she could give to bring Bretta with her outside.

"I saw... someone going into the barn. I need you to come with me, to make sure the horses are safe."

Bretta's face became hardened. *"Horse thieves? In the middle of a storm? They get bolder and bolder every year."* She shook her head and tossed off her blankets, revealing a long gown. *"Let me grab my boots and Alaric's old broadsword."* She shuffled to the other side of the room, fetching worn leather boots and a thick coat. They slipped easily over her frame, making her look mismatched with the combination of her nightgown and the mud-caked outerwear. Stepping back toward Dorothe, she opened up a wardrobe that looked to be severely neglected. The wood panels creaked with age, and swung aside to allow Dorothe a good look at the large steel blade.

The metal glittered in the candlelight when Bretta took it from the dusty cupboard. The hilt was shorter than Dorothe had expected for a blade so wide, and the crossguard came down at an angle away from Bretta's hand. Somehow, she looked right with the broadsword in her possession.

"Stay behind me, Paladin."

Dorothe wanted to protest, but Bretta was already halfway down the stairs when she came to the realization that she was essentially sending the farm woman into possible danger. They raced down into the kitchen to the door leading outside. The older female stepped out into the dusk, raising the broadsword at her side when she spotted the barn door had swung wide open. There was a locking mechanism - a bar of wood that slides into a handle on the adjacent wall, and a padlock that secures the bar in place - but the padlock lay on the ground with half of the wooden bar destroyed.

"Dammit! I've had to replace that thing twice already this month. I'll have to ask the Fighter's Barracks to loan me their blacksmith and create a proper lock." Bretta kicked aside the broken beam and stared into the dark corners of the open barn. *"Whoever's in there, you're not very bright stealing horses from a Divine's house!"*

"Wait, what?" Dorothe had to double take, not sure she had heard Bretta correctly. *"You're Aften's Divine?"*

Bretta laughed, *"Not me, hun, my husband. Alaric's from the line of Arlen, Rasmus's First Man. But because he's dead, the Divinity's passed on to my son, Adler. He's a bit too young to be leader of a city, but the Fighters from the Barracks fought side-by-side with Alaric, so they treat my son like royalty anyway."*

A glitter of silver pulled the women back to the situation. The Paladin drew her sword and craned her neck to try to see better in the shadow as the farm woman continued into the building ahead of her. A hooded figure stood in the middle of the building, waiting. Familiar robes cloaked its body, silver fabric that dusted the ground beneath plated feet. As the two females passed the threshold into the barn, the shadow lifted a hand and swiped it right to left, followed by the door's closing behind them.

"Hand over the shards." A modulated male voice came from the figure, rather controlled, slow, yet clear. *"You don't know the power you mess with."*

"Shards...?" Bretta glanced back at the Paladin, confused by the intruder's request.

"Is there another way out?" Dorothe moved in front of the woman, ushering her back toward the entryway. *"Destroy the door if you have to. I need you to go wake the others."*

"There's a way through the roof..." Bretta wasn't sure what was going on, or what kind of trouble these adventurers brought to her house, but she wasn't going to be brought down by a damned horse thief. *"... But the ladder's behind this brigand. If you keep him busy, I can go around the pens."*

"Not a problem." The younger girl advanced on the stranger, unsheathing her dark, burnt blade with her left hand. *"I saw you in Regnarsvar, leaving the square. You were in Paladin's Rest too, weren't you?"*

"Give me the shards!" The male darted to the Paladin, narrowly avoiding being slashed upon approach, and placed a hand on her cheek. His palm began to glow an icy blue, and through his skin an unnatural chill emitted. Dorothe did not feel that her skin was being frozen, but her soul was instead. She felt weakened almost immediately, dropping to a knee. Dorothe exhaled, and condensed air escaped her lips.

Dorothe shivered. She was being frozen from the inside out. The girl snaked her hand up and clenched the caster's right hand, her fingertips already glowing a contrasting orange-red. The stranger hissed, yanking his flesh away from Dorothe's burning touch. As he recoiled she looked up, trying to see the face of her attacker, but only darkness filled the hood. The back of his hand was reddened and he jerked away the other hand, pushing it back out with his palm raised toward Dorothe. Passing from the hooded man's left hand was the conjuration of a spirit-like banshee, who shrieked with a powerful wind that bowled Dorothe backwards towards the barn door.

When it reached the large sliding door, the wood was blown apart by the force of the shriek, creating an exit for the Paladin to retreat through if need be. Bretta had made it up the ladder by this time, already out of the barn and hopefully on her way to Tonlin and Louve. Dorothe stood up, still inside, and wiped the dirt from her brow. She rotated her sword in her left hand once and glared at the caster.

"You're not going to get in my way. I will restore Sjel and bring it to the Council."

The robed figure chuckled. *"I may not slow you down, but HE will!"* A pale finger pointed beyond Dorothe, sending her gaze over her shoulder. There stood Torrick, ragged ivy-covered robes barely hanging onto his frame. His eyes were glazed over, much in the way that Mother Sigrid's had been when using her foresight, but the Paladin doubted this was the case with the Surdruid. He had been *dead*.

The girl looked back to the caster, but found no one else in the barn. He fled the scene and Dorothe has more pressing matters than to go chasing after him this time around. She stepped over the wooden debris, exiting the barn. Torrick did not wait for the Paladin to be ready, throwing a bright blue ball of spiritual energy directly at her before she was even fully outside of the wreckage. The fiery orb exploded next to her, a burning light spreading through the air around her, effectively blinding her for a long moment - long enough for Torrick to move about and begin to cast another spell without her knowledge. Dorothe rubbed at her eyes fruitlessly.

When her sight came back to her, the Surdruid was on her left, his hands were pulled back at his sides, ready to conjure fire in his glowing palms. The girl started in a run, spheres of flames bouncing past her heels as she arched in a wide circle around the undeceased. As she got closer to Torrick, she took her longsword in both hands and lept. He punched another fireball at her, hoping to scorch the girl's upper body. Dorothe sliced the sphere in halves, coming down upon its source. His hand caught the brunt of the attack and the blade cut through the appendage, between his first and second fingers and across the palm.

Torrick did not so much as flinch when his hand was torn asunder. His blood did not appear and Dorothe noticed his skin was pale, almost translucent. She wondered if he had blood left at all if an injury that severe could not summon it up from his heart. She stood stunned for a second. The Surdruid started to counter with an entangling thorn bush rising up at her feet, grounding her to the spot while he stepped back to regain his distance from her. Torrick didn't even notice his left hand was only half there.

"Dorothe!"

Louve and Tonlin rushed out of the house. Louve quickly dispelled the roots that curled around the Paladin's ankles and joined her side, looking at their opponent in horror.

"B-but... we killed you!"

"There was someone else here, someone who used death magic, but..." Dorothe stared out at Torrick.

"Mother Sigrid had told me once that it was outlawed."

Tonlin gripped his dagger. *"I guess we'll just have to kill him again, then!"*

The Bard circled around Torrick, who didn't seem to register that anyone else had come out of the house. He was focused purely on Dorothe. He lifted both arms, brought them out at his sides and clapped what was left of his hands together. The effects of this motion was not immediately recognizable, but his wide stance gave Tonlin a chance to get in at his right side, slicing away at his arm. Overhead, a cloud of bats swarmed from behind the barn and flocked to Torrick, whose gesture sent them flying at Dorothe and Louve. The Paladin tried her best to cut the flying rats down, but was outnumbered by tens and tens.

Louve swirled her quarterstaff in the air above her, creating a gust of wind that knocked most of them away from the pair and to the ground. As the Druid cleared the bats, Dorothe charged Torrick, her blade wielded from her waist. The undead man attempted to sear her in her armor, but some quick footwork proved him useless. She stabbed her blade through his middle and tore it sideways to rip his skin irreparably before pulling the sword back to her side.

Tonlin finished the deed, plunging his knife into the back of Torrick's neck. He had managed to stick it between two vertebrae, more intent on jamming his blade further into the spinal column than he was on

reclaiming it. It was effective, as the Surdruid clattered to the ground with finality, his innards spilling over the patches of grass. Louve approached the body, uncertain his death was for good this time.

"I don't think I'm taking my dagger back this time." Tonlin quipped. "Better to keep it in there in case he decides he's not done living. At least next time around, he'll already be wounded."

"We can buy you a better weapon in Aften." Dorothe looked back to the barn, hoping to find some sign of where the silver caster fled. "I've seen that man before, in Regnarsvar... I was chasing him down when I bumped into you, Tonlin. I have no idea who he is or how he found me here. I put a family in danger..."

"Nonsense." Bretta stood in the doorway of her house, her arms crossed. "I've seen worse. My children grew up with their father constantly in harm's way. That's how the Fighters are. They take care of us though, so don't even worry about the barn. Your horses are fine, my cows are still alive, and the chickens are still laying eggs. That's all that matters." The older woman crossed toward the group. "But the horse thief wasn't just a horse thief. And you're not just a Paladin, are you? He said something about shards... the shards of Sjel, right?"

Dorothe nodded. *"I'm trying to repiece Sjel, to communicate with the gods. There has to be some way to help the Lords, so none of them have to die. We've already lost Skjold and Dromme. Two is too many."* The girl looked to Tonlin, who smiled approvingly. It was the first time since she first woke up in the Druid's camp that he seemed to pay her attention. Her stomach flipped, taking her out of the situation for a minute.

Bretta pulled her back to the earth, adding, *"So it's not just a myth then. Good to know. Listen, I'll send a letter to the Fighter's Barracks, telling them to expect you. The word of a Divine's mother has to have some weight, right? They shouldn't give you much trouble concerning their shard, although they might have you work for it."* She glanced over at the broken barn door and chuckled. *"I don't know how I'll explain this away to the others on the Mill, but so long as we get you three out of here by the afternoon, there shouldn't be much trouble. We'll get the regular chores done in the morning and I'll send you on your way. Now get back up to bed and get some sleep. Tomorrow's going to be an interesting day."*

They all shuffled into the house, none more exhausted than Dorothe, who did not get the chance to sleep before this misadventure. She hoped sincerely that that was the last they'd ever see of Torrick. The group trudged up the stairs and into their separate rooms, Bretta closing her door behind her. Tonlin went straight back to sleep as Louve and Dorothe retreated to their room.

"Do you know anything about death magic, Louve?" The Paladin hoped it had been mentioned somewhere in the girl's numerous books, but wasn't holding her breath. *"I wasn't told very much about it as a child. My guardian is a Cleric, and they tend to shy away from the topic."*

Louve sat up in the bed, finding it harder this time to sleep, watching Dorothe peel her armor off herself for the second time. *"Well, I know that it's called necromancy. It draws upon the power of the moon, to restore life taken away or to take away life from the still living."*

"That sounds like what he tried to do to me. He touched me and I became really cold and weak..."

"Mmh. Yeah. Sounds about right. It's said that one of the most famous Council members experimented with death spells in his youth. When the Council found out about his research, they excommunicated him, sent him to live in some plagued town on the Southwestern coast as punishment. In his time there, he found

a dead dog and brought it back to life, sustaining it until his own death about a decade ago." Louve laid down, tucking herself under the blankets.

"A council member did that...?" Dorothe repeated aloud. In her head, cogs began to turn and thoughts congregated into a petrifying thought. She had seen those silver robes before... in her youth living in the Chapel of the Clerics. *"What was his name?"*

"Darrius."