

THREE

Tonlin and Dorothe walked along the route of the other travelers straight through the night. Out of pure anxious energy, or for Dorothe the sense of duty, they did not stop until they were a mile and a half away from Viktorsvar. The Paladin suggested they should camp outside of its borders rather than within, as she didn't trust their belongings not to go missing if they turned in at the town's quaint inn. Tonlin was happy to rest anywhere, but he agreed a small sense of security might be best for their trip. They walked a moderate distance away from the dispersing crowd of the Midyear Festival's guests and plopped down between two jutting boulders.

The pair hardly had the time to gather supplies before they departed Regnarsvar, but the Paladin believed they would be able to find the necessary provisions in Morksvik. They would just need to make it through the next day by themselves, and both were confident they could do that easily. Dorothe collected some tinder from around their campsite while Tonlin fumbled with some sticks he found, trying to create a fire. The girl watched him curse under his breath for a few minutes before interjecting.

"Do you... do you know how to make a fire?"

"..."

"You don't."

Tonlin hung his head and shook it with shame. *"I've seen it done, but I've never actually made a fire myself."*

Dorothe couldn't help but shake her head. She grabbed the sticks from his hand and laid all but one of them onto the pile of tinder, retrieving a thicker branch to place directly in front of her. After examining the remaining stick in her hand, she handed it back to Tonlin with a smirk. *"Typically, you're supposed to sharpen one end of it."*

"... Oh." The Bard pat down his pockets, finding no knife. Dorothe had her sword with her, but she raised a hand when Tonlin suggested they use that.

"Let me try something first."

The Paladin placed her hands onto the branch that lay in front of her and closed her eyes.

"Is it cold...?" Tonlin scratched at his scalp, unsure of why the girl needed to feel the dead tree limb. *"What, uh.... what're you doing?"*

"I'm healing it", the girl stated simply.

"What...!?"

Dorothe's face scrunched up as she concentrated on the healing spell. The bark beneath her fingers glowed a faint yellow light, and the male's eyes widened as he watched. Suddenly, her hands shot back from the log and sparks emitted where they once lay. Oddly, the Paladin noted a burst of the smell of soap that diminished almost as quickly as it came. She opened her eyes to see a small flame growing slowly and eventually spreading to the tinder and sticks. Tonlin and Dorothe matched expressions, both pleasantly surprised at her magic.

"But I thought you said you were healing it." Tonlin carefully tossed the last stick into the fire.

"I did. Er, I was. It's a funny story." Dorothe explained to the Bard about the time she tried to undo the accidental damage she had done to her sparring partner, only to end up setting him aflame. He got away with second degree burns, and she was lucky it wasn't any worse. The Surpaladins were curious about how she managed to conjure fire by accident, but all she could say was that she *really* meant to help. It had never happened again after that and they never asked her about it a second time. *"I wanted to see if I could do it again. Strange that it happens when I mean to heal."*

"Maybe it's not a healing spell." Tonlin considered the facts for a moment, poking the building flames with a twig.

Dorothe scoffed. *"I'm a Paladin. What do you mean 'not a healing spell'?"*

Tonlin smiled, holding a finger up. *"Bare with me here, but it created fire, correct? Well, maybe it's a fire spell."*

Dorothe furrowed her brow and shook her head. *"I'm a Paladin, Tonlin. They only teach us healing spells, and sword and shield mastery. The only other influence I have is Sigrid, who is a Cleric. Not a Sorceress. Not a Druid."*

Tonlin's smile faded quickly, realizing for the first time, an important detail about the girl who was supposed to save Voluun. *"Sigrid is not your mother, is she?"*

"No. She raised me as if I were her daughter, though."

"What happened to your parents, if you don't mind me asking?"

The Paladin's face softened. She didn't get many chances to talk about her parents. The Lorik hadn't asked, and Dorothe didn't really have many friends outside of the Rest. Sigrid avoided the topic for fear of upsetting the girl. In fact, this was the first time since she lived with Mother Sigrid in the Chapel of the Clerics that anyone had asked her about her history. Being that she hadn't been raised by the couple in question, it didn't cause her much pain to talk about them. It was still a confusing subject for her nonetheless.

"I... I was told my mother had died of sickness nearly a year after I was born. As for my father, I have no idea. Sigrid didn't know who he was, thus I was never told. I just assume he's dead as well." Dorothe gazed toward the fire rather than at the Bard's face, imagining that if her father wasn't dead, he certainly didn't make much effort to find her. *"What about you?"*

"My parents are Bards, as their parents and their parents before them were. It's a tradition-- Or, it was a

tradition.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be”, Tonlin shrugged. He was a Bard in his heart, whether or not his Lord was dead. “Tell me about your mother.”

Dorothe didn’t know very much about her, but there was some information given to the girl by the Chapel’s records of life and death.

“She was a farmhand in a small town called Long Fjord; inherited the land from her father and lived there all her days. She was kind and dependable, or at least that’s what I read about her. Luckily for me, my mother sent me away to the church as soon as she found out she was sick, so I lived. That’s all I know. I don’t remember her at all.”

The Bard and the Paladin laid out beneath a partially cloudy sky, with rocks for pillows and the night for a blanket. There were only snakes and voles for company, and neither person was desperate enough for food to venture into that type of cuisine. They agreed they would have to dine in Viktorsvar the next day, but try their best not to get too caught up in the town. Tonlin fell asleep almost right away, but Dorothe couldn’t get comfortable no matter how many times she tossed and turned. She let her hair down from the bun she usually kept it in as was regulation for the Paladin. There was some small relief in this trivial freedom she gained, but her mind was focused elsewhere. Thoughts of her parents kept the girl up for hours longer than she had intended.

The sun had no problems rising on time the next morning. The same could not be said for the Paladin. She awoke with a sore neck and an achy back when the sun was already halfway to its peak. Tonlin had put out the fire long beforehand when she discovered him whistling with blades of grass between his fingers.

“Oh! You’re awake!”

“Yeah...” Dorothe rolled her neck, attempting to ease some of the pain as she stretched.

“Rough night?”

She shrugged, not wanting to admit to him that his questions made resting all the more troubling. *“It was alright. Tonight we’re sleeping on pillows. Let’s get going.”*

Tonlin hopped up from the ground, eager to move on. There was nothing to collect from the campsite, which made continuing on their path rather straightforward. Nearly half an hour passed when they crossed into Viktorsvar and they both immediately sensed a change in the environment. The air was stale and the grass died off half a mile outside of the perimeter of the town, replaced by dirt and rock and weed. The pair shared a look of concern for the other’s health as they attempted to look casual locating a tavern. Dorothe pointed out a building that seemed to have a treasure-hunter’s theme.

The atmosphere inside was gloomy, the rotting wooden floorboards smelled of dust and creaked as they crossed to the bar to pay for their breakfast. Tonlin thought some of the patrons might’ve already heard about Skjold’s death and were in mourning, being that conversation was sparse. The two ordered eggs and ham, and asked for milk rather than take a chance on the local water system. It was a simple meal, but

enough to keep them going until they could reach Morksvik. Rather than break the silence they observed, they ate quietly, both reflecting on the journey ahead. As Tonlin and Dorothe got up to leave the establishment, a yell could be heard from across the room.

“Oh, lookee! A Paladin! Or what is it we should be callin’ ya’ folks now that ya’ ain’t got a Lord?”

It was quite clear that this patron was inebriated, as it seemed most were who begged for trouble from Dorothe. She scanned the tavern to find a scruffy face thrown back in laughter at his own supposed joke. He was a large beast who might have been a soldier at some point in his life, but in the present day his belly was round and his muscles had gone soft. Other faces that were scattered across the room turned to see the shining platemail armor that had almost made it out of the door. Dorothe contemplated responding to the heckler, but Tonlin placed a hand on her shoulder that reminded her of their promise to get out of the village as soon as possible.

“Wotsa matter? Not enough faith in the guild to stand up for it no more? Tch.”

The Paladin clenched her jaw, restraining herself from reacting. It wasn’t the fact that he was picking apart her guild so soon after Skjold’s death, but as he questioned her faith, the girl felt anger boiling her insides. Her cohort picked up on her tense expression and began to tug her away.

“Thanks.” Dorothe took a deep breath as soon as the not-so-fresh air met them outside of the tavern. *“I don’t know how long I could’ve kept my mouth shut like that before my teeth would begin to shatter.”*

Tonlin chuckled, *“Welcome to my world. I didn’t think people turn on your guild so quickly after... you know. I guess I’m just used to how they treat Bards, but it’s surprising to experience as a third party. Sorry.”*

“Don’t be.”

The pair kept to their word and left the dusty town of Viktorsvar, heading further Northwest with a much larger shadow on the horizon this time. The noon came and went quietly; Dorothe noticed there were less travelers rivaling them on the route to Morksvik. The Bard hummed a jaunty tune that defined the excitement shared between the two, still missing his mandolin. As the afternoon rolled on, they talked back and forth, creating a list of things they would need for the duration of their adventure : Two simple bedrolls for the nights they were stuck beneath the stars; one waterskin to share between each other; two backpacks to divide the weight of their supplies; one 50ft rope; bread and meat for meals that would last a few days, just long enough to be able to reach the Druid Camp after Morksvik; and various smaller trinkets that the Bard insisted include a set of lockpicks.

“Why lockpicks?” Dorothe quirked a brow.

“Oh, just in case.” The Bard’s eyes twinkled with mischief, and she could’ve sworn he was from the Thieves’ Hole for that second.

It was already nightfall when the duo approached Morksvik. The city was the complete opposite of Regnarsvar, both in terms of law and architecture. The wall that enclosed Morksvik was made of logs stacked one upon another with torches lit on either side of the entranceway. The buildings were of dark wood planks with tatchrooves. The air was cleaner here than Viktorsvar and carried a hint of a sweet white flower growing

in large pots scattered about Morksvik. Both tourists stared around in awe of the differences, how simplistic yet pleasant the city already appeared to them.

Guardsmen waited on the inside of the log wall, and more patrolled liberally between the houses. Dorothe did not forget this was the home of the Thieves' Hole, and as impressed as she was with the atmosphere of the city, she suspected the guards were bribed by the guild if they weren't already members.

"So how do we find the guild?" Tonlin couldn't find any sort of welcome banner laying out for them, nor brightly painted signs to point them toward the Hole.

A few breaths after he had asked, a strange hissing sound could be heard from behind them. He and Dorothe whirled around to face toward the wall again, both curious as to its origin. *"Psst!"* It came again. One of the guards seemed to be subtly nodding his head to their right. Together they carefully traversed around the inside of the wall, about the backside of a nondescript cabin. There stood a small shed, and as soon as Dorothe saw it she glanced back at the guard who ignored their presence altogether now.

"Should we?"

"That doesn't look large enough to hold a whole guild", Tonlin observed.

"Maybe it's bigger on the inside."

The Paladin pulled open the door, and though she was joking, Dorothe almost got her wish. The shed hid a stairway that delved into the earth, giving way to a cavern.

"Ladies first."

Tonlin closed the shed door behind them, allowing the girl downstairs ahead of him. The chamber was barren, but directly ahead of them sat a door with a barred window in the wood. On its face, several shades of crimson red and dirty brown splotches were splattered around the bottom of the doorway, sometimes in the shape of hands that clung at the frame.

"This must be the place", his voice rebounded off the cavern walls.

"What business do you have in the Hole?"

The Bard was visibly startled as he heard the question come from the staircase behind them. Dorothe would've laughed, but she too did not expect their greeter to catch them at the entrance. She hesitated, not having exactly practiced what she would say to the guild leaders when they reached Morksvik. What does one say when one needs a guild's most protected possession?

"We're here for the Thieves' shard of the gem Sjel."

"Oh? And why do you think the Hole delves in myths, girl?" The speaker was invisible in the dark of the stairway, but his voice carried authority. Dorothe's hand went to the small pouch tied to her belt, and as she dug her fingers inside, the figure drew closer. When a beam of dim light hit the magenta crystal, so too did the light illuminate the face of the guardsman, no longer arrested in shadows. *"Is that...?"*

His hand lifted, silently requesting permission to feel the mythic shard in his own grasp. The Paladin allowed the guard this courtesy, though both Tonlin and Dorothe watched him anxiously. As they feared, he palmed it, allowing it to disappear into a discreet pocket sewn inside of his sleeve. The guard grinned wickedly and sprinted toward the bloodied door, slipping behind it.

“Wha--! Get back here! Gods dammit, what should I have expected from the Thieves?” Tonlin punched at the air, with Dorothe too stunned to be outraged. The Bard pulled at her hand, dragging her and shocking her back to reality with his touch. She was glad the chamber was barely lit, as her face flushed with a reddish tint. *“Come on! We have to get it back!”*

The pair followed the thieving guard, the red door still opened a crack, allowing Dorothe to jam her hand inside and pull it open further. The light was almost blinding, sconces lined the walls of a long corridor, wide enough for the both of them to stand shoulder to shoulder just beyond the door. As they crossed the threshold, the door behind them closed, although they were oblivious to it. Tonlin proceeded ahead, determined to reclaim what was theirs.

“Tonlin! Wait!” Dorothe warned, knowing the Thieve’s Hole was not going to be an easy trip down a long tunnel - they were *Thieves* after all. But it was too late. The Bard hadn’t seen the tripwire at his feet, and trip he did. Just inches from his face, a stream of arrows shot up at the ceiling from several holes in the floor. He fell forward, shutting his eyes tightly, expecting to be skewered at any second. He wasn’t, however. The back of Tonlin’s green tunic was caught by Dorothe’s fist, holding him dangerously close to death. The arrows hit the cave ceiling and harmlessly ricocheted back down around their feet. After half a minute or so, the arrows stopped firing and the male regained his balance.

“... Thank you, Dorothe”, was all he could manage to say.

“Watch your step. We don’t know what’s in here. This is probably what keeps out the other folk of Morksvik, how the Thieves’ Hole has been kept secret while still being incredibly close to the city gate.” The Paladin shook her head. *“Let me take lead this time. You’re a bit squishier than I am.”*

Tonlin didn’t disagree. He had almost gotten his face taken off and was more than happy to allow Dorothe to find the next trap. They gingerly stepped over the holes and kept their eyes glued to the floor. After a few feet of inactivity, an odd scurrying noise could be heard *inside* the wall. Before either party could question it, a large axe blade swung from a slot in the cavern wall like a pendulum. The Paladin had barely enough time to back off from it, her pauldron getting grazed as she turned away.

“Holy Lord!” Tonlin yelped, freezing in place with his hands up, protecting his soft Bardic hide. *“For all that’s good and musical, what kind of guild is this?! We’re just trying to save Voluum, that’s all!”*

The dreadful pendulum continued to fall back and forth, disappearing into the slots on either side of the hallway. It didn’t seem that it was going to stop any time soon. *“We’ll have to time this...”* Dorothe didn’t wait for a response from the Bard before scooting behind him and shoving just as the blade cleared its exit from the wall. *“... Just...”* He had plenty of room, but still landed on his knees on the other side, quickly rolling aside to make room for the girl to cross. She waited for the axe to come back into the nearby slot and out again before dashing to Tonlin. *“... Right!”*

The two caught their breath, staring ahead at a door very similar to the one they had come through - a wooden surface with a window, yet instead of blood there was an orange eye painted in the middle. The eye

was incomplete, but still silently judging them. The skittering and scratching came back, directing their attention to the walls. Several large cracks had been running through the stone, and in them, faces were plastered, eyes watching the pair in their trials.

"H-hey! Give us back the shard!" Tonlin yelled, but with no answer from the onlookers.

"Let us speak with your Surthief!" Dorothe tried, a similar response given, although more scuffling could be heard beyond the cracks.

"It's no use. Let's just keep going." The male looked down the corridor, spotting long, jagged spikes affixed to the roof of the cave. *"I wonder what that'll do"*, he groaned sarcastically.

They stopped just short of where the spikes started on the ceiling. *"Let's try throwing something over there"*, Dorothe suggested. She figured they could get a good gauge of what to expect this way. The Bard scanned the floor for a rock, finding a small pile of rubble against the right wall. Dorothe plucked one of the bigger rocks up and cautiously tossed it into the line of fire. As they assumed would happen, the spikes came crashing down onto the rock, attached to a large wooden platform that was governed by a chain. Just as soon as it dropped, it was hoisted back up into the ceiling to wait for the next victim. *"Well, that's no good."*

"There's a lever on the other side, which probably turns this thing off. I'm guessing it's activated by a pressure plate in the floor." Dorothe looked back to the pile of rocks. *"How good is your aim, Bard?"*

Tonlin caught on right away, smirking. *"I guess we'll find out."*

They both began to pelt the lever with rocks, each one budging it just a little bit until it was able to slide down into position. To test that their plan worked, Dorothe lightly tossed one last rock out onto the floor, waiting to see if the spikes activated. When a few seconds passed without failure, they quickly rushed to the other side, nearly to the door. In front of the painted eye stood a woman who wasn't there seconds before, with dark brown hair laying over her shoulders, wearing a leather cuirass and black breeches lined with pouches of various sizes. Her arms were crossed over her chest as she looked upon the pair. In one hand, she held their shard of Sjel, no doubt passed onto her by the guard.

"I've never even seen another shard; I was beginning to doubt ours was real. You're from Regnarsvar. If you have this, Lorik must trust you. My underlings told me that Skjold's lordstone had dimmed yesterday, but I didn't want to believe it." The older woman handed the crystal back. *"I am so sorry, Paladin."*

Dorothe could say nothing and the Surthief expected nothing of her.

"Come", the woman curled a finger, waiting to show them to the cavern on the other side of the copper eye. As she stood at the door, the Surthief waved her hand, exposing a similar design on her palm. The paint on the wood glowed for a moment before the door swung open and allowed the two to pass.

"I didn't know Thieves casted spells." Tonlin oogled the copper eye with interest.

"We're not thugs and cutpurses. Osyge is the Lord of the shadows. She employs us to keep karma in check. In her name and with her magic, we take from those who don't deserve what they have. Sometimes that includes life."

Dorothe and the Bard exchanged a glance. Beyond the door, a proper guild sat within a cave system that the Paladin surmised ran under the entire city of Morksvik, granting the Thieves access to whatever or wherever their Lord asked of them. The guild was moderately decorated, though Dorothe assumed most of the furniture was smuggled into the caves. While the Surthief took the pair through the guild, half a dozen sets of eyes followed the plate armor. Some of the underlings stopped slashing at mannequins to bow their heads, and some paused in their lockpick training to catch a glimpse of the lordless girl. Tonlin couldn't tell if their faces held sympathy or pity.

In the middle of this large system of tunnels, Dorothe caught a glimpse of Osyge's lordstone. It stood lonesome on a small, raised platform encompassed by lit torches that bathed the stone in a red-orange glow. Its face had the unfinished eye carved into it, a symbol of the shadow Lord's connection with the men and women who had their own eyes on the Paladin and the Bard. A shiver shot down Dorothe's back that forced her to return to attention to the task at hand.

The Surthief opened another door with her palm, leading into a small chamber. A large bed took up most of the room, but a bookshelf, a nightstand, a long chest, and a banner managed to make the chamber appear livable. The cavern room smelled like vanilla and had a calming effect on the Paladin. The shelving was filled with books about Osyge and the other Lords and Voluun and spell tomes. Tonlin would admit later that his preconceived ideas of the Thieves' Hole and its members were nearly completely washed away when they proved to be more than lawless marauders.

"I'm Selene, by the way." The Surthief stepped inside of her room, stopping in front of the bed.

"Dorothe Addams, and the Bard Tonlin."

"A Bard? So you're both misfits, then. Dorothe, if you're planning to restore Sjel, I offer you a piece of advice: Never let them out of your grasp. You are a very trusting person to have let the guard hold it without asking proof of his vocation first. You're lucky I have my faith in Osyge to keep me on a straighter path than those who would've kept the shard. Others won't be so forgiving. Now, lift the banner. Go ahead."

Dorothe appreciated the words of wisdom. She stepped forward toward the short cloth banner, black with a copper eye sewn into the surface. It reminded her of the one that hung in Regnarsvar's library. Carefully lifting the fabric, the Paladin saw a shelf cut into the wall of the Surthief's domain, and within sat a jar. The girl could not see a shard inside, but rather sand filled to the brim.

"Bring it to me, please." Selene sat on the foot of her bed, a hand stretched toward the jar.

Dorothe obliged and the woman uncorked the jar and began to tip it over the floor, until the first grains of sand threatened to fall.

"Osyge teaches us patience as well as balance to maintain karma. If I were to upend the jar, all of the sand would land in one place, creating a mound for you to sift through for Sjel's shard. But if I carefully spread the sand in a larger circle, like this..." Selene slowly let the sand slip from the glass lip, spiraling outward in a tight circle. *"... Then there is no need to exhaust energy to find the shard. It will come to you in the end."* Just as she said, the sand emptied from the jar, leaving the shard to catch on the lip of the bottle and was the only remaining substance within. *"You must remember patience above all things when you carry Sjel."*

Dorothe plucked the shard from the bottle and marveled at it before placing it in the pouch on her belt with the first. *"Thank you, Selene, for your kindness and your wisdom. I will remember them. Somehow, I feel as if the Hole will have been one of the more cooperative guilds we encounter on our path."*

The Surthief chuckled. *"The Druids will be one of the most stubborn of the guilds. They protect and revere their shard, thinking that it came from nature and must be regarded as they regard the wild beasts of their forest - like a child."* Selene escorted Tonlin and Dorothe to a pair of beds that were unused, allowing them shelter for the night. In the morning, they would be permitted to take what supplies they needed before they departed for the next city.

"Tonlin...", Dorothe sat up in the borrowed bed. *"Do you think they'll resurrect Dromme and Skjold once we have all the shards?"*

Tonlin yanked his boots off and turned to look at the Paladin.

"I... I don't know, Dorothe. I hope so, but the Lords are not exactly human. I don't think it's that simple. Sorry." He noticed the look of discouragement on the girl's face as she slumped down under the blankets and turned away from him.

"I was just thinking aloud. It's alright."

The Thieves seemed to adjust to their presence, leaving the two alone for the night. Once again, Tonlin fell asleep almost right away. Dorothe stayed awake, staring up at the ceiling of the cave for what felt like a few hours but was only a few tens of minutes. Her dreams were a mishmash of her fears of failing Mother Sigrid, Skjold, and all of Voluun. The seven magenta shards came together to form one gem before her, collectively creating an item much larger than herself - something she could not carry to the Council. The gem came crashing down onto Dorothe, and at the moment of impact, she violently jolted awake.

Thankfully, it was sunrise when the night terrors ended. The Paladin found Tonlin still asleep when she shuffled out of bed. The Thieves were spread about the cavern in their own cots. It appeared that Dorothe was the only one awake at the moment, reassuring the girl that at least no one saw her frightened to wakefulness. Although she would've liked to have an hour or two to herself to recollect her thoughts, she pushed on the Bard's arm until he rose.

"We need to get going."

"Good morning to you too", Tonlin groaned, rolling off the cot with no amount of grace.

Together they scrounged up the supplies on their list and the Bard's desired set of lockpicks. He was ecstatic to hold the slim leather roll, constantly running his fingers over the iron tools enveloped within. They exited the shed and headed toward Morksvik's stables to purchase horses. The mounts were fully grown, chestnut colored thoroughbreds. The stablemaster asked 50 copper bits for each and offered to throw in saddles and saddlebags for an extra 25 copper. Sigrid had given the Paladin only silver bits, but one silver counted for 10 copper. Once the transaction was completed and their possessions loaded into the bags, Dorothe emptied the remains of her coinpurse into her palm.

"20, 50, 100... 150."

“Is that all we have left?” Tonlin looked at the fifteen silverbits in her hand.

“... Yeah. We’re going to have to make these supplies last as long as possible.”

They mounted the horses and bid Morksvik good tidings, headed Northeast this time, in the direction of Traertap, a forest that covered the upper East region of Voluun. It would be another day before they reached the trees, but Dorothe’s map didn’t illustrate where they could find the Druid’s Temple. There was a cave marked on the outskirts of the woodland, which they both agreed would be their best bet until otherwise told. The sun beamed down on them in the late morning sky, with a gentle breeze chasing away the heat.

“I could try singing songs of our adventure thus far for tips in the next town”, Tonlin suggested.

“I don’t think Selene would appreciate us telling everyone her guild lives in a toolshed.”