

## EIGHT

In the morning, the trio woke slightly sore and still exhausted. But they had a debt to pay to Bretta, so they all trudged down the stairs with their possessions all packed up in the saddlebags and went to work in the barn. Dorothe was eager to move on to Aften, but the farm woman wouldn't allow them to go half-a-day's travel without an escort. She had sent a pigeon to the Fighter's Guild that morning - the fastest way of communication in this age so far - and estimated they would get it within the hour. Bretta informed the guild that she was in need of assistance, both for a new lock for her barn, not to mention a new door, and for a pair of escorts for the Paladin, the Bard, and the Druid.

Louve was happy enough to lend a hand tending to the animals, as Druids were wont to love. She milked the cows and amassed the chicken eggs while Tonlin was stuck cleaning out the pens. Dorothe cleared the wood debris from the night's events, chopping them down into stove burning fodder with Bretta's axe. The older woman looked on as her children refilled the feed trough, brushed out the sheep and narrowly avoided being bitten by one of the female geese. With all seven of them doing the regular daily chores, they got done by the midday and had an early lunch in the large kitchen.

*"I don't know what to do with the rest of my day, thanks to you three."* Bretta slid small slabs of beef around on a frying pan, poking at them with a long pronged fork to check their doneness. String beans and corn boiled in a pot, both staples from others that lived at Orethod Mill, all of whom came together every quarter of the year in Aften's market to trade their goods with others from the other cities. Bretta usually sold her meats and cheeses, but this year she hoped to introduce her sheeps' wool into the mix.

*"We could sleep more."* Adler didn't seem to be a fan of getting up at the dawn to tend to the animals any more than Tonlin or Dorothe were. Bretta shot her son a chastising glance before shoveling the steaks onto three individual plates to serve to the adventurers, and sat at the table to join her family who already began to dig into their meals. They each ate in silence, the gravity of last night's scuffle setting into their minds. The children, of course, were none-the-wiser, having slept right through the night obliviously. Their mother had to explain the barnyard door away as a crazy random happenstance. Perhaps the wood was rotten? Bretta had managed to drag away Torrick's corpse into a thicket before the children woke up that morning.

Louve and Tonlin sat close together, nearly in each other's laps. Dorothe suspected something was different between them, being that she woke up alone that morning with the pair already downstairs chatting away. She couldn't bare looking at either of them, at how happy they were sharing the seat together. The burning pain in her chest returned and she couldn't finish her lunch. The Paladin tried to reopen her throat with a sip of water, but ended up failing miserably. She choked on her drink, causing the couple to stare at her.

*"I-i'm alright"*, the girl lied.

As lunch ended, a knock at the door startled everyone at the table. Bretta was the first to jump up, opening the door to let in a band of five men and women, all in various types of armor, with several different weapons at their waists.

*"We've got a wagon loaded down with wood and that lock you asked for!"* A woman about the same age as Bretta clasped the farmer's forearm and brought her in for a hug. Tonlin thought she looked intimidating in a scale-like jerkin and thick leather fingerless gloves, a thin metal plate across her knuckles. Her hair matched Bretta's copper color, worn long in a single tail that was bound in segments. His fear was almost immediately washed away as she turned to wiggle her fingers at the youngest daughter, who giggled like they were close friends.

*"Fantastic. We can start work right away."* Bretta greeted an older man, her age as well, who wore a chain shirt complete with a thin plate chest guard with the rune of the Fighter's Guild painted in red upon it. He had leather breeches and plate-covered boots. His grey-white hair was shaven into a mohawk that he ran his fingers through with one hand, the other gripping the pommel of a longsword at his side. Three much younger apprentices followed, a young man in studded leather with a mace, a girl in layered cloth that included a tattered hooded robe and a belt of daggers, and a last male who dressed in a suit of plate armor, wielding a shortsword and shield. Dorothe thought he looked rather like a Paladin and took a fancy to him right away.

*"Are these the adventurers...?"* The older female looked over the trio still sitting at the table.

*"Oh! Yes, this is Dorothe, Tonlin, and Louve."* Bretta motioned to each one as she introduced them. *"And this is Gail and Erwan, and a few of the Fighter's Guild recruits."*

The older two saluted their respects toward the group. Dorothe nodded while Louve and Tonlin beamed at them stupidly from their corner of the table.

*"Y'all are lookin' to come up to Aften on business, I hear?"* Erwan spoke with a heavy drawl. He seemed to focus on Dorothe, instinctively pinning her as the leader of the three of them.

*"Yes."* The Paladin excused herself from the table. Not only because she could no longer stand sitting next to the couple, but to better introduce herself to the Fighters. *"I am Dorothe Addams. I am collecting the shards of Sjel to bring to the Council. If you could escort us to the Fighter's Guild in Aften, we would be appreciative."*

*"Y'know..."*, Erwan combed a hand through his goatee, trading looks with Gail. *"The only other people to have pursued Sjel were the Sorcerers, right after Dromme died."* The elder male stared at Dorothe, almost a full head's height above her. *"They came to Aften first, to plead with the Surfighter for our shard. When he rejected them, they moved on to Traertap Forest, to the Druids. That didn't end very well, from what Ah know."*

*"That was almost twenty years ago. Skjold has died, times have changed. Do you think your Surfighter would reject me too?"* The Paladin was willing to work to gain their leader's favor. They had amassed almost half of the crystals already. Too much had been seen, too much done to be stopped now.

*"We'll take ya' to the Guild and see fer ourselves."* Erwan leaned down a bit, adding, *"Personally, Ah'd like to see ya' succeed. Two Lords are gone. If Rasmus had died, there'd be no question in givin' ya' our shard. For all we know, he could be next."*

*"We'll take off as soon as you three are ready."* Gail turned to Adler. *"It was good to see you again, Divine."*

The teenaged boy rolled his eyes. He didn't seem to enjoy inheriting his father's title. Bretta was right - he was much too young to oversee the duties of a whole city. Dorothe suspected that deep down he was grateful for their tribute to Alaric by taking care of his family. The older woman then switched her attention to the three understudies, her tone becoming stern.

*"You three will stay here and help Bretta with her barn. She is your supervisor until you are done. She decides when you are done, if you get water, or piss breaks. You will respect her and her children or you will be ejected from the Guild."*

They stood in silence, dreading the next hours to come.

*"Now, I'm not that mean! You guys'll be done in no time. Come around to the barn and we'll begin."* Bretta chauffeured the Fighters outside, where they began to unload the wood from the carriage. The two older Fighters, along with the Paladin, the Bard, and the Druid, followed them out of the house. The trio mounted the two thoroughbreds and Gail hopped into the carriage with Erwan leading the horse. The working Fighters were expected to walk back to Aften when their job was completed.

Dorothe pulled Felipe over to the left side of the carriage while Tonlin took his horse's reins - his arm was feeling much better - and took the right side, all of them effectively taking up the entire road. There was a well-traveled path from the Divine's house to the Eastern river that joined with the Western river to form the long line, splitting Voluun in two.

*"How are we to cross the Del, Erwan?"* The Paladin couldn't help but wonder how they would get not only the horses, but the wagon across the wide stretch of water.

*"Well, we have a barge tied up on the shore, won't take us but a few minutes' ride to get there. It's big enough to carry our wagon full of wood on it, so I'm sure yer horses will be a fine substitute for the weight. It's not got a sail, so we have to push it off the sand with poles. Since we're going across the river and not down, we kind of have to fight with the current. We'll come onto the island at an angle because of it."*

Erwan and Gail acted like a married couple, though they denied any accusations of a relationship. Gail had leaned up to the male's seat at the front of the carriage and they chatted away while Dorothe pretended not to listen. They gossiped about the understudies of the Fighter's Guild and how long it would be until they received a pigeon, complaining that they want to go home. The elder Fighters reminisced about older days when they had been understudies, how much harder their trials were when they had entered the guild.

Dorothe looked over to Tonin and Louve who seemed to enjoy each other's company just as much as the Fighters. She couldn't ignore the growing feeling that she was the only one on this journey for the shards, that Tonlin had gotten so distracted when Louve joined them, that the Paladin was essentially... alone. The more she thought about it, the angrier she became. It was irrational, she knew deep down, but Dorothe couldn't help feeling like somehow she was missing something.

They reached the Del before long, and just as Erwan promised, a barge was waiting for them on the water. A long wooden platform was tied to a stake hammered down into the sand, three tall poles lain on its face. Erwan pulled the wagon onto the dock without hesitation, Tonlin led his horse to the barge afterwards, with Dorothe showing Felipe across the gently rocking platform last. They all fit snugly and the horses didn't seem to mind the swaying, although Dorothe looked as if she'd be sick before they even set off.

Louve noticed and delved into her shoulder bag for the first time since she left the Druid camp. In her hand was a thick plant root, a dirty brown skin with white meat. She borrowed the Paladin's sword and cut off a sliver of the root, giving it to Dorothe to chew.

*"Ginger root. It'll help with your nausea."*

The Paladin wanted to decline, her pride making her stubborn, but as the waves sloshed so too did her stomach.

*"Thanks..."*

Gail took up the three poles, tossing one to Erwan and one to Tonlin.

*"We had the recruits pushing us upstream, and since they're not here, we'll be doing the pushing. Won't be as much of a test of strength going down current."*

The older woman stabbed her pole into the rocky bed of the river, the two males mimicking her action. With all three poles in the water, they pushed the barge off into the flowing current. Erwan and Gail stood at either side of platform while Tonlin was stationed at the end. Once the barge was off the shore, they all pulled their poles from the rocks and brought them back down in front of themselves and pushed again, ensuring they would not be following the Del down into the heart of Voluun. The barge rocked harder against the water's flow, the liquid threatening to pull them, splashing upon the deck. Dorothe paled, having to sit as she chewed the ginger.

Louve stood near the Paladin, comforting both her and the horses while the barge slowly crept over to the other side of the river. The river was only 300 feet across here - it was double that nearer to the country's capital - and they didn't have to wait long before the barge slid onto new sand. Tonlin dug his pole into the rocks and pushed one last time to ensure the platform was properly grounded. Erwan hopped off the barge and hammered down a stake to tie off at.

*"We never really know how fast the river will flow on the days we need the barge, so we end up littering the shoreline with these things", Gail explained. "Every now and then, we send the recruits down here to collect the stakes and bring them back. The one on the other side will be brought back when they're done. In a few hours we'll send someone with the barge back over to collect them."*

Dorothe was more than happy to put her feet back down onto dry land. Louve helped the horses off the platform as Tonlin gathered the tall poles and laid them onto the wooden barge. Erwan and Gail climbed back into the wagon, with Gail at the reins this time. Tonlin helped Louve onto his horse before turning to the Paladin.

*"Are you okay to ride? I can have you on Nicodemus with Louve."*

*"No..."* She was still slightly nauseous. *"I'm fine."*

Dorothe was trusting Felipe to compensate for her state. She climbed into the saddle and queasily handled the reins. The girl hung back until both the wagon and Tonlin's horse Nicodemus went past her, giving her free reign to look as ill as her stomach wished on her. Usually, the jostling that came with traveling by horse

did not bother her, but now Felipe's movement was magnified. Closing her eyes didn't seem to help. All the Paladin could do was endure it until the ginger root was gone.

By that time, they could see Aften's iron gates. Erwan turned as he sat in the back of the wagon, directing Tonlin and Dorothe to the stables ahead of them. Gail led the wagon in after them, having to pull it in awkwardly because of the size. Erwan unhitched the horse and stabled it next to the two thoroughbreds. It was then that Louve got a good look at the Fighter's horse. It was a very large breed, with thick muscles and a short tail. A clydesdale, the Druid surmised. She patted the equine's nose before joining the others retrieving their backpacks, slinging her shoulder bag over an arm.

*"The color has returned to your face, Dorothe. I'm glad to see the ginger root helped."* She smiled at the Paladin who was internally celebrating being able to stand on her feet again.

*"Ah, yes. Thank you, Louve."* The dark-haired girl smiled back for once, though the sentiment didn't last very long. *"I'm ready to meet your Surfighter now"*, she turned her attention to Gail and Erwan who were talking to the Bard about sights to see in Aften. *"I don't want to waste very much time in the city until after we've got the shard. I don't see the harm in spending the night here."*

The group didn't seem to be having too much trouble finding beds to sleep in so far. That was the only amount of luck they were having, it felt like.

*"O'course, o'course"*, Erwan nodded. *"The Barracks is just before the residential quarter. Right this way."*

Gail and Erwan showed the trio through the iron gates of Aften, a testament to the guild's blacksmith - rumored to be the best blacksmith in all of Voluun. The wall was at least 50 feet high, made of boulders worked down to giant smooth bricks. Aften was the second city they'd been to that dealt in stone walls, the first being Regnarsvar. The buildings within the city were similar to the Paladin's home - tiling on slanted roofs, carpet squares in front of houses, and runes that heated baths in thanks for trading with the Sorcerers.

Louve seemed slightly uncomfortable in Aften, given that she was attuned to nature, and nature was not exactly prevalent in this city. But the Druid did not complain. She read about places like Aften and Regnarsvar in her books, poured over the pages, and daydreamed about life in the larger cities. Now that she had the chance to experience it for herself, she was a little overwhelmed with how crowded and cold it could be. The residential district was not as busy as the marketplace was however, and the younger girl didn't dare venture that way just yet.

Dorothe reacted just the opposite to the city - it invoked feelings of homesickness within her. She thought of Mother Sigrid, how the elder Cleric was getting on without her, and if her premonitions were still haunting her dreams. She sorely wished Sigrid was with her now, if only for the company. The sooner Dorothe could reconnect Sjel, the better.

Behind all the homes sat a wide two-story building with a furnace being tended to just outside. A blacksmith waved to Erwan and Gail, a hammer in his hand. The Fighters led the group through thick iron doors and instantly the noise from outside was reduced when the doorway was closed behind them. The Fighter's Barracks was empty except for one man who stood a yard away, his arms crossed over his chest expectantly. The man before them was not much older than Gail or Erwan, but his hair was whiter than Erwan's. He wore a leather cuirass and chainmail pants, a quiver strapped to his back, yet no bow to be found.

*“You must be Dorothe, Tonlin, and Louve.”*

They bowed respectively. His eyes were a steely grey, and perhaps his age and the disciplined air he carried about him marked him as the guild’s leader. Dorothe noted he faintly smelled of vanilla.

*“My name is Donovan. Bretta sent word of your arrival, told me you’re trying to restore Sjel.”*

*“Yes, that’s correct.”* The Paladin stepped forward.

*“I am willing to help you, however you must prove your courage. I’m sure you’ve heard by now, you’re not the first to pursue this task. The Sorcerers Tower sent some of their members to try to collect all the shards, but their intentions were not as noble as I suspect yours are. You have cause, you have lost your lord. You have selflessness, trying to save the other guilds from losing their own. But do you have the courage to see your journey to the end?”*

*“I do.”* Dorothe’s pride spoke for her.

*“You can say you do, but until it is proven, I will not give you our crystal. In the year’s end, when the trees are dead and the grass is brown, the newest of our recruits will go down into the cavern beneath the Fighter’s Barracks to retrieve a silver pitcher. This pitcher collects water that runs through a natural spring that gives Aften fresh water. There is a stalactite that drips slowly into the pitcher, and at the end of the year the pitcher is full. Our tribute to Rasmus is the transfer of this water to a well built behind our lordstone.*

*“It would be simple enough to collect water from our faucets but the errand is to collect from the pitcher. Given that it is only a week after Midyear, the pitcher will be half full. The weight will be no problem for you, but getting it to the well is the trial.”* With that, the Surfighter smiled slyly and added, *“Erwan and Gail will oversee you, but will not aid you in any way. I will meet you at the well when you’re finished.”*

Donovan walked away, toward the back of the guild hall, turning off to the left at a door. Gail took the lead, Tonlin and Louve following close behind. Dorothe and Erwan walked together, and the group filed down a flight of stone stairs that slowly became natural worn indentations inside of a cave. The air grew colder, damper as they descended.

*“When we had to do it in our first year, we were not allowed assistance either.”* Erwan tried to assure the Paladin. *“It was only me an’ Gail at the time. Just us two. Ya’ have three, so maybe ya’ll will get through this a bit faster.”*

There were one hundred steps, give or take ten, until they stood on flat ground. Both Fighters stopped at the bottom of the staircase while the trio continued on.

*“Good luck”,* the two said in unison.

Tonlin and Louve hung back, allowing Dorothe to take initiative for a moment. She quickly found the cavern opened up to a large canyon as they walked along a platform that reached through the middle of a great open room. On either end of the bridging, a standing torch was placed to illuminate their path. At the

end of the walkway, an altar of sorts jutted up out of the rock and upon it sat a silver pitcher. As Donovan stated, a stalactite dripped down above the ceremonial cup, ever so slowly leaking water.

*"All we have to do is bring this back? Doesn't seem like a big deal..."* Tonlin proclaimed, moving forward to help Dorothe lift the pitcher.

*"I don't know..."* Louve looked back toward the Fighters who both seemed to know something they didn't.

*"No problem."* Dorothe and Tonlin both reached the far end of the cave together, with Louve hanging back around the Fighters. Side by side, they hefted the silver pitcher together, more of a challenge for the Bard than it was for the Paladin, and began to inch their way back across the rock bridging. Just as they reached the middle, the rock began to crack audibly.

*"Oh...! Better speed it up!"* Louve shouted.

Tonlin shifted so he was in front and Dorothe was in back, hoping to minimize their impact on the bridge. It didn't seem to garner any advantage, however, and the rock began to collapse! Dorothe quickly pulled the pitcher back toward the altar while Tonlin leapt to the other side with Louve, with chunks of the bridging falling into darkness below.

*"Dammit!"* Dorothe yelled as a 15 foot gap presented itself before her. *"Now what do we do?!"*

*"Good question."* Tonlin scrambled to his feet and proceeded to inspect the gap, his mind quickly trying to find a solution. *"Did you happen to grab the rope when we got our things from the horses?"*

*"Yes, actually!"* Dorothe dove her hand into her backpack, pulling out 20 feet of coiled rope. *"We should make sure the pitcher is over with you guys first before worrying about me. Here, grab onto this end!"* The Paladin took one end of the rope in her hand and tied it around a rock. She then chucked it across the gap, easily caught by the male, with one end still in her hands.

*"Nice! Got it!"* The Bard clasped his hands around the rock and released it from the binding, keeping hold of the rope.

*"Great. Now let me just..."*, Dorothe threaded her end of the rope through the pitcher's handle and lifted the rope above her head, effectively sliding the silver cup down the line to Tonlin. *"It's a good thing it's only half full. I'm not sure the handle could carry the weight of a full pitcher."*

Louve squinted. *"Wait a second..."* She approached the ledge with Tonlin as the pitcher crossed the gap. *"Is that... No, no... nevermind."* She waved her thoughts away as the Bard took the pitcher from the makeshift zipline and set it on the ground beside him. Louve dragged it away to the staircase while they figured a way to safely get Dorothe across.

*"Tie the rope around your waist and I'll tie my end around me. That way in case you fall, we can get you back up. Your armor can't weigh too much, can it?"*

Dorothe shot him a look that said otherwise.

*"... Right. Louve, hang on to me. Since the Fighters can't help us, this will have to be enough..."*

The girls did as they were told. Louve swirled her quarter staff clockwise once and tapped the cavern floor, commanding some of the cliff they stood on to lift and fall onto their feet, acting as an anchor. The Paladin quickly knotted her end of the rope around her waist.

*"Alright, what now?"* Dorothe asked.

*"Jump."*

She shook her head. *"I'm sorry, I thought you just told me to jump 15 feet."*

*"I did."* Tonlin held onto his end, though it was already tied around himself, as if his grip would help anymore.

*"Tonlin, the most I could jump is maybe five or six feet. That's not even halfway."*

*"It's better than nothing. I can't think of anything else to do, can you?"* He lowered himself in a squat to ready himself for the impending weight of his companion on the rope.

*"... No."* Dorothe swayed her arms at her side, trying to psych herself up for the feat of jumping *maybe* five or six feet, steeling her stomach for the fall. After a full 30 seconds of stalling, she could wait no more. The Paladin was able to pick up a little speed with three or four steps before leaping off the ledge, the rope flailing about between the two bodies. Air rushed past her and through her long black-brown hair, creating an effect much like the tail of a comet tumbling through the sky.

But just as the girl predicted, she arced through the cave, only clearing a third of the gap before starting back down into the abyss below.