

FOURTEEN

Aldri Forest kept the same temperate and balmy weather for most of the year. Not even a month had passed since the Midyear Festival in Regnarsvar and the same was true as the Paladin, the Bard, the Druid, the Would-be Cleric, two Fighters, and the Surthief and Surfighter tromped through flora and fauna on their way to Cansang. As Tonlin had stated, it would be two days at the most before they reached their destination. Louve had no qualms about the length of their journey, considering that it led through familiar territory for the Druid. She felt at home in the shaded woodland, enjoying the nostalgic scent of pine and soil, the occasional sound of some small critter scurrying along bark and leaf. Often she heard the cry of a hawk overhead.

If Louve had her way, she would spend the time they had asking Mikael questions of his upbringing, his skills, and other such queries her mind wished answered. As luck had it, the guild leaders wanted him to stay seated with Selene on her horse and Tonlin had need of the Druid on Nicodemus as he studied the map. And while Louve sought the time to talk with the Cleric, Mikael longed for the same with Dorothe. She had been the reason he tracked the group to their campsite after all. That day he caught a glimpse of her silver chest plate, he had made up his mind about the Council. The boy had never put too much faith into the system that trusted a whole four people to the fate of the country, but to jail a Paladin who was simply trying to save the Lords was near blasphemy.

Witnessing the murder of a Council member by the hands of another broke the veil of whatever was left of his trust in the Chapel of the Clerics. Mikael knew he must seek out the Paladin girl and offer his services to aid her cause. He didn't know exactly what that would entail yet, but the Cleric boy reasoned that it would be better than whatever would have come to him if he had stayed in the capital. He sat now on the back of the Surthief's slender black horse, partly admiring being submerged in nature and partly busy with anxiety over the things to come in his future. Mikael hoped for a chance to speak to his plated idol.

Three hours passed and the midday sun was high overhead the travellers. With the sun rose the humidity in Aldri Forest, waking insects both flying and otherwise.

"Pbth!" Gail wiped her mouth on the sleeve of her scale mail. *"Bug in my mouth! Third time in an hour!"*

"Ah swear these things have a taste for us." Erwan grimaced behind his partner, silently counting himself lucky that he wasn't the one at the reins and he'd had Gail to block most of the oncoming swarms.

"Don't worry", Selene said. *"We'll sweat to death before they can kill us."* She tugged at the leather that seemed to hug her neck with a ferocity that only added to her discomfort.

Louve donned a bewildered look. *"Sweat..? I feel just fine."*

Erwan turned to shoot a look at the girl just behind him. *"Shut up, **Druid**. The rest of us haven't lived our lives in forests."*

She stuck her tongue out at him, only to catch one of the winged pests. The noise she made gave both Fighters a small bit of satisfaction.

“Alright now. Let’s not lose our heads over the heat.” Donovan appeared the most composed given the circumstances. *“We’ll be here overnight, so find a way to cope and entertain yourselves.”*

Dorothe felt the same as the rest of the group - her white leather jerkin was beginning to make her sweat around the neck and down her back, and the metal of her chest plate, pauldrons, and gauntlets were not only attracting heat, but slowly cooking her too. She had a hard time believing that Louve’s jerkin wasn’t at least warm in this biome. If there was anyone who was still completely comfortable in the wood, it was Tonlin and Mikael. Both of them were wearing cloth, not leather, scale, nor plate. She envied them and would have gladly discarded of her armor if she wasn’t sure that Facil had some search party out for their heads.

In fact, the Paladin was surprised they hadn’t run into any of the city’s guards yet. The path they took wasn’t well travelled, but it wasn’t a secret either. Most preferred to forgo Aldri Forest, as an established road would take merchants around the trees toward Cansang instead of through them. But if one felt time was of the essence, or if they felt lucky enough to take the forest path, they would on occasion trek along the same way the group chose to go. Luck was largely a factor being that Aldri Forest was known to harbor hunters and bandits alike.

“What’s there to hunt here?” Gail’s enthusiasm had returned to her when Tonlin mentioned there would be a hunter’s cabin nestled somewhere along the way.

“Elk, deer, rabbits. I suppose the usual thing you’d find in the woods.” Louve thought about the question for a moment before quickly adding, *“You’re not going to go... kill something, are you?”*

Gail twisted her mouth up. *“No, I’m going to make conversation with the rabbits. Do you think they like tea? Maybe I should bring a cake?”* She put a finger to her chin. *“Oh wait - We don’t have cake. In fact, we should look for food soon. I wonder if the deer know where we could get some meat for a meal.”*

Erwan snickered, but Louve wasn’t particularly amused by the jest.

“That’s not funny. I don’t like the idea of you killing anything in a place we’re just passing through. It could upset Dyr.”

“Upset deer?” Gail echoed. *“That’s what I intend to do.”*

The Druid huffed and wrinkled her brow.

Selene scratched at her neckline and called from behind, *“We’re going to have to break soon anyway. It’ll be a good idea to let the horses rest as much as we can allow them - mainly because of the heat. We don’t want them passing out.”*

They continued for an hour more, and though the sun had begun its descent, it did nothing for the temperature. The group pulled off the path a few yards to rest, all four horses tied to the trunk of a tree. Selene and Louve tended to the mounts, giving them water and brushing out their coats. Dorothe sat against another pine, thankful for some rest. While the horses had to carry the party, it was still a workout on her thighs and back. The Paladin watched as Tonlin wandered the area, taking notes on how far they’d traveled

and the amount of time that had passed in order to calculate how much longer they'd be entwined in the forest.

Gail took a second to grab one of the waterskins and a length of rope, Erwan joining her with naught but his blade at his side. They made to leave the group, heading off into the forest before the Surfighter called to them.

"Where do you two think you're going?"

Gail looked to her companion before answering, *"I wasn't kidding, sur. We'll need something besides water and bread to eat tonight."*

Donovan shook his head.

"What are you going to do? Hunt with your fists and a sword? You'll not be going without me. I have the bow."

Selene took her attention from her horse for a moment, turning toward the three.

"Please be safe. We don't know who else is out here."

It was then that Dorothe saw the usually stoic Donovan give Selene a look that spoke of feelings that had to be tucked away on all other occasions. And as quickly as the expression came, it was hidden again just as fast.

"If we see anything, we'll come back in haste."

Gail, Erwan, and Donovan disappeared behind tens of trees in search of game, leaving Selene to move on to care for the painted mustang. Mikael saw this as an opportunity to approach the Paladin, strategically seating himself near her with the excuse to rest, though internally he was quite excited to get this chance.

"D-Dorothe?" He spoke, his voice quieter than he remembered it being, and worried that he hadn't been heard.

"She looks miserable."

"... Who does?"

The Paladin had been lost in thought, the Cleric's voice throwing her out of her mind. She didn't notice he sat down next to her, the revelation of such startling her.

"Ah! Sorry, I didn't see you there."

Mikael gave a sheepish smile.

"I just wanted to thank you...for making me question the church. For doing something about the Lords, and giving us a cause to work toward."

Dorothe glanced over toward Louve and Selene before replying.

"To be honest, Mikael, it wasn't exactly my idea."

"No?"

"No. I'm only out here because of someone back home. Another Cleric, actually. She took me in when I was brought to the Chapel at a year old. She's the one who told me the stories of Sjel."

"I see", the boy muttered, thinking back to years ago when he had first heard of the gemstone. "Where is your Cleric now?"

"Regnarsvar. I left the day Skjold died, and though I wished she would come with me, I can understand why she didn't. Age will slow us all down in time."

"My folks are in their Winter years as well. I don't think they have much longer. Maybe another good year or two left. I feel bad leaving Adelaide to care for them, but I know she'll be proud of me when I return..."

The Paladin shot him a curious look.

"Adelaide...?"

"My sister. Younger than me, but somehow wiser. She's not the kind of person who runs off to join a party of Lordless--- er..."

Dorothe sighed and shrugged her shoulders.

*"It's what we are. The sooner we finish this, the better it'll be. At least **some** guilds will still be there in the end."*

"See, that's what I admire." Mikael beamed at the girl. "The selflessness and the courage. Even though your Lord is dead, you still choose to be out here chasing Sjel's shards to the benefit of other guilds. Even the Surfighter is out here with you, despite his Lord being the most recent death."

The Paladin frowned, unsure of how to respond to his favor.

"What do you make of the Druid and the Surthief then? They've still got their Lords, don't they?"

Mikael turned to look toward the horses, considering the question.

"I would guess that has more to do with your charisma."

"I doubt that. Louve is with us because of Torrick, and Selene... well, I suspect she's not really sticking around because of me."

"Did you...", Mikael had begun to say something, then hesitated to finish his question.

Dorothe waited a moment before peering at the boy.

"Did I what?"

"Did you really see a necromancer?"

"Yeah", the girl nodded, reflecting on that night.

"..." Mikael shifted his weight, chewing on the inside of his bottom lip.

Dorothe noticed his sudden silence.

"What?"

"It's terrifying. The thought that someone could bring me back into the world for whatever purpose they wished. Do you think Torrick could still feel? That he was still conscious inside of that body?"

It was the Paladin's turn to be silent now. The boy continued nonetheless.

"Do you think he felt you kill him again? Maybe he was in pain. Maybe he was screaming inside of his own mind, helpless and confused."

"I-I don't really...", Dorothe started to say.

Mikael's eyes were wide, his brow wrinkled and his mouth stuck in a grimace, and yet he still spoke.

"The last thing he would've remembered was you murdering him the first time, and suddenly he's awake again and there you are--"

"That's enough!" She shouted.

"Gail!"

The Fighter had just reemerged through the trees, staggering and alone. Selene and Louve rushed to her side as Dorothe stood to make sure some room was cleared to lay the barbarian woman down. The Druid and Surthief put their arms under Gail's and helped her sit in the small clearing. Her scale jerkin was broken at the side, blood seeping through the bronze slowly. Her face had small abrasions here and there, wet dirt caked over the cuts, strands of hair loose from the bound tail it had been in. The Fighter's complexion had gone pale from the blood loss, the woman disheveled.

Dorothe joined the three, kneeling at Gail's side. Mikael lingered near the trees with Tonlin, watching over the scene.

"What in the realm happened, Gail?" Selene asked.

Gail shook her head, her eyes staring up at the treetop. It was not the leaves above that the Fighter was seeing, Dorothe could tell by the way her mouth quivered before she spoke.

"Ambushed. They took... Donovan and ... they took Erwan." The woman gave a sob and clutched her wounded side.

Selene began to curse under her breathe.

"I told him to be careful out there, that idiot."

Louve breathed a shallow sigh, looking down at the Fighter's wound. She grasped the scale jerkin and began to pull it off Gail.

"We'll need to get a better look at this wound. I'm sure Mikael won't mind healing it." The Druid curled her forefinger at the boy who stood by the trees gawking, beckoning him forward. *"This might hurt... a lot, but we have to get this armor off."*

As Mikael stepped forward, he could see the Fighter wince and whimper as the women slipped the scales over her head, showing a cotton undershirt beneath that was torn and soaked with blood at the wound. He kneeled beside her, peeling the shirt away just enough to see the cut properly.

"Hunters, it looked like", Gail said. *"Got me with a hewing spear before we could even turn around to see 'em. ERGH! I swear on Rasmus, boy, if you're just going to keep sitting there not healing me, I will spend my last drops of blood making sure you go with me."*

Mikael startled. *"R-right! Sorry."* He placed his hands over the wound, hovering mere centimeters away from the torn flesh. Tonlin was reminded of the night Dorothe had set their camp fire with a very similar method and he flinched, unsure if the outcome here would be the same.

"Why would hunters attack you?" Dorothe glanced out into the trees, suddenly paranoid that Gail might've been followed back to their small camp.

"Maybe they thought Gail was a bandit", Louve suggested, half in jest.

*"Maybe **they** were bandits",* Tonlin thought.

"Nnn... No", Gail slurred in some confused euphoria from the healing. Mikael's hands had begun to glow and Tonlin noted that it was a pure white light rather than the orangish one that Dorothe had produced that night. *"They were hunters. They were accusing us of being competition..."*

"Competition...?" Selene furrowed her brow. *"For what?"*

"The White Doe", Gail sighed.

As the Cleric lifted his hands away, the skin beneath had been renewed. It was a better patch job, Dorothe thought, than the one she had done on Zylla. Whether or not it was because the demon was of the Other Realm or perhaps because Mikael was simply more of a natural healer than she was, the Paladin did not at all mind having a stronger Cleric with them in the group. Gail's eyes fluttered closed and her breathing soothed. She looked surreal covered in blood and yet so peaceful as she rested.

"She'll need to rest a while", Mikael said peering down at the barbarian woman.

"What's the White Doe?" Dorothe asked, sure that Louve would know something.

"It's a rare beast that lives in Aldri Forest", Tonlin surprised the Paladin with an answer instead. "They would sing of it in Cansang when I was a child."

"Would you...?" Louve begged of the Bard, eager to hear his sing-song voice again.

*"I hear you in the Forest,
I see you betwixt the trees,
I've known you when I was little,
I've known you in my dreams.*

*The White Doe waits for me,
Her dark eyes know all,
Long antlers reach for sky,
Can you hear her call?*

*One question may I ask her,
One answer shall I receive,
A soul as old as death,
And death shall she achieve.*

*Slay the White Doe once a year,
The Doe shall whisper in my ear,
One question may I ask her,
One answer shall I hear."*

Silence fell among the group after the Bard was done. Sometimes Dorothe forgot that her friend had come from Cansang, that he still took pride in a vocation that had been without the grace of a Lord since he was an infant. She felt respect for him in that aspect, the Bard who carried the hope of his whole guild with him, who had family and friends back home riding on the success of this journey. Tonlin Godefrey would bring glory to the Bardic College with her help.

"Slay the White Doe once a year?" Louve found her words faster than the others had. "How can you keep killing the same animal?"

"I'm not sure. That's just what the song says." Tonlin shrugged.

"We have to find Donny and Erwan." The Surthief looked about to tear the forest up from the roots to find the men.

"How do we go about that, Selene?" Dorothe asked.

"Follow the trail back, perhaps." Mikael gestured his hand down at the soil, pointing out the dark red blotch by their feet. "I should stay with Gail and make sure she's not alone when she comes to."

"I'll stay too", Louve offered, plopping down beside the Cleric. "I don't think I'll be much help with the hunters and I have some healing experience in case it's needed. When Gail's awake again, we'll come find you if you haven't come back by then."

"I'll go with you two", Tonlin piped up, wanting to be useful instead of having to wait at their camp.

Selene was already getting the horses ready to set out, moving their bedrolls and the heavier equipment out of two of the horses' saddlebags and loaded them onto the two others' bags. It would be important if they needed speed on their side. She unhitched their reins from the tree and swiftly seated herself onto the mustang's dark leather saddle. Not wanting to delay the Surthief, Tonlin and Dorothe quickly mounted Felipe, giving a last look back toward Gail. The Fighter woman had beads of sweat on her forehead, and though the Paladin would've liked to keep at her side, she knew it was imperative to find the missing men.

They started off at a moderate pace, their eyes to the forest floor to follow the trail that Gail had made on her way back to their resting area. Rather than a straight line, it appeared the Fighter had zigzagged through the trees, perhaps to lose the trail of those who had injured her. As they picked up the general direction that she had come from, Selene urged her horse into a canter, forcing Dorothe to keep up against the inkling feeling that they were hastily throwing themselves into a trap.

Before she could voice this concern, the trees parted to reveal a clearing wherein a log cabin sat. Smoke billowed from a steel pipe on its roof, indicating inhabitants.