

FIVE

Dorothe pulled the white leather tunic over her head, fit her arms through the half-sleeves and adjusted the pauldrons. It fit near perfectly - the blacksmith had acquired a good eye for sizings. He also took the liberty of quickly repairing her sword's leather hilt. The Paladin was quite pleased with his handiwork on her plate shoulder coverings and tipped the metalworker 20 bits. That brought them down to 13 silver, but she didn't mind paying for good craftsmanship. With her boots and the gifted gauntlets, Dorothe felt fairly protected again, no longer trodding about in ruined chainmail. The only thing better would be if she could accrue a shield and re-secure her chestplate, but the girl didn't have the time to engage the blacksmith in these tasks. She thanked the man and left to find Louve and Tonlin by the campfire.

Tonlin left to find the young Druid just before Dorothe was to pick up her armor and found him enjoying her company. They seemed to have been talking for a while, about knowledge of the other guilds - particularly the Fighter's Guild. It was assumed this would be the next guild they were to travel to, granted they survived the encounter at the Druid's Temple. Louve spoke of Zylla, the puck demon that needed to be gotten rid of. She called her "The Grotesque", and an Other-Realm creature.

"It's highly debated that Zylla is an organic spirit of the forest, an extension of nature itself. Although, my father believes that she is a conjuration of the Sorcerers gone awry." The young Druid talked as if she was reading from a book laying open inside of her mind. Dorothe could admit to herself that while Louve was descendant from the most arrogant man the Paladin had met thus far, the blonde girl was knowledgeable on many subjects that would prove useful to them in the near future. She wondered silently what her nature-worshipping father thought about Louve pursuing knowledge based in the other guilds, and she approached the two by the fire.

"What were Sorcerers doing in the forest?" She would announce her presence, injecting herself into their conversation. Tonlin stared at Dorothe for a moment, a flash of annoyance mixing through his expression. She had seen it and quickly turned her gaze toward Louve.

"That's a good question. No one can say for sure, but I suspect it was around the time that Dromme died - Sorry, Tonlin." The younger girl apologised for mentioning the Bard's lordlessness, continuing on, *"Father says the Sorcerers are a power hungry guild, selfish and always looking for ways to overpower the other guilds. I wouldn't be surprised if they were trying to obtain the other shards and summoned Zylla when the Druids wouldn't give them the crystal."*

"The Sorcerers are selfish?" Dorothe couldn't help but feel the irony in that statement when she was being sent on an errand by the Surdruid who wouldn't let his shard go. She wasn't sure he was going to give it to her after they'd banish Zylla, either. Oblivious to the banter, Louve spotted food being dished out near by and offered to bring the two their share. Once she was out of earshot, Topher scolded Dorothe for her attitude.

"She's only trying to help."

"She's being forced to help. I doubt she cares very much about us collecting the shards. We're just going to

the Temple so Torrick can fork over the Druid's crystal. Don't forget that." The words came out harsher than the Paladin had intended, but they had already left her mouth.

Tonlin's face grew red. *"Forget?! How could I forget when that's what my life has become? In just a few days I went from being happy and carefree to trekking across Voluun behind you to ensure a future I - we - don't get to enjoy anymore!"* The Bard's arms gestured dramatically as he spoke.

Dorothe was taken aback. *"Tonlin... I didn't mean--"*

"Of course you didn't mean to upset me. You don't think about others before you talk, do you? This might be just a mission to you, but this is the Druid's way of life. They are protective of their shard, sure, but it's also part of their faith. You can't just change a whole guild, Dorothe."

The Paladin didn't know what to say. She didn't realize she was subjecting Tonlin to the subtle torture he seemed to be describing. This was how she operated - like a machine, a cog in the bigger wheel that was meant to be the Paladin vocation. The gears turned so slowly for her as she hoped to reach the top that she had become used to just carrying out the duties given to her without so much as a whimper of a question. Her throat attempted to close, making it hard to swallow or breathe, much less speak.

"You... don't have to keep following me. I can handle Sjel myself." Dorothe left the fire pit just as Louve returned with plates for the group.

"... Where's she going?"

Dorothe retired to her tent, battling the temptation to pursue Zylla solo. Besides the fact that she had no idea where the Temple was, she also highly doubted she could survive an encounter with a demon on her own. The Paladin sat on her cot with her sword in hand, weighing her options : She could venture out into the forest blindly with a low chance of returning for the shards of Sjel, or she could just beat Torrick's face in until he succumbed and she would be on her way to the Fighter's Guild. The girl knew these were not viable choices deep down - they stemmed from her anger with herself.

As she sat reflecting on her predicament, the tent curtain was pulled aside.

"Tonlin, look, I--" Dorothe began.

"Sorry, wrong one." Louve poked her head into the tent. Dorothe frowned and her head drooped. *"Tonlin told me you two had an argument."*

"Yeah? And...?"

The Druid shook her head, placing her hands upon her hips. *"I know my father can be a bit tough to work with, but I'm not him. I'm going with you to the Temple to help you, and if you'll let me, I'd like to travel with you and Tonlin to collect the shards. I've studied the other cities, the Gods, and Voluun's history my whole life! An adventure like this is exactly what I've been waiting for."*

The Paladin pursed her lips, suddenly seeing much of herself in Louve. She daydreamed a good portion of her childhood away, thinking of the world outside of the Chapel of the Clerics. *"You're right. I judged you too quickly and for that, I apologise. However, I'm not sure Tonlin is going to continue with me after we settle*

our business here, so you might want to reconsider your offer.”

“Don’t be silly. Tonlin isn’t going anywhere without you. Hold on right there...”

Louve disappeared outside and reappeared just as suddenly. Tonlin succeeded her, one of his hands combing through his hair as he stared at the ground. Dorothe looked between them in silence before the Druid elbowed the male in the arm, prompting him to speak.

“I’m sorry, Dorothe. When we started this, you told me I didn’t have to follow you to Paladin’s Rest. I answered truthfully then when I said I wanted to bring pride to the Bards, but I didn’t tell you that I ran away from the College. I wasn’t really staying with friends for the Festival, just camping outside of the city. I didn’t tell my parents I was leaving either. They must be worried sick.”

The Paladin stood from the cot, patting Tonlin’s shoulder to hush him.

“I’m sorry too. Don’t worry about it, we’ll get you back home soon enough. We can send your parents a letter by courier when we get back from the Temple. I’m glad you’re with me.” She turned to the Druid. *“And I would be happy to have you along for the ride.”*

“Sterling!” Louve clasped her hands together. *“Now let’s get some food in us so we can get on our way!”*

They returned to the camp fire, finding the whole guild seated around the flames. Torrick beckoned Louve to sit with him while Tonlin and Dorothe ate with the blacksmith who seemed happy to see them again. Their meals consisted of rice and beans, shredded beef and tortillas. The pair were glad to have a cooked meal, thankful they haven’t had to go without since they slept on the road to Victor’s Villa. Strangely enough, the Paladin, the Bard, and the Druid were eager to get to the Temple.

Once supper was over, Louve reunited with the pair, a quarterstaff in her left hand and a backpack slung over her shoulder.

“I told my father I would be coming with you on your quest after I meditated with Dyr. He is unhappy.”

Dorothe couldn’t help but crack a smirk.

“Are you ready to take us to your Temple?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

They left the camp, heading East through Traertap Forest. Night had set in during their meal, requiring the use of the torch Dorothe had asked Louve to bring. The younger blonde girl led them, holding the light while the Paladin brought up the rear with her sword wielded in her left hand. Tonlin stayed sandwiched in the middle, given a simple dagger for defense’s sake. They walked together while the Bard hummed, as he always did, for half an hour before a familiar chittering broke their rhythm.

“There’s a small group of the minor demons up ahead. I can sense them.” Louve held a hand up, slowing the other two down.

“You can sense them?” Tonlin seemed intrigued.

“Well, it’s more that I can’t sense anything from them at all. Other-Realm creatures don’t have souls, they’re not connected to our Gods in any way. Druids feel them in the way that you can see shadows - as an absence of light.” Louve stared out into the dark forest.

“That’s definitely the same smell, in any case.” The Paladin wrinkled her nose, the dung-and-metal scent offending her olfactory organ. *“We’ll take care of it. This time, they won’t get the drop on me.”* Dorothe moved in front of the Druid, more than willing to dispatch the gremlins as revenge for the Froskrumpe Cave.

They quickly moved down the path, the torchlight casting the creatures in light. Five long-eared monsters stared blankly at the approaching party, mouths chewing on the meat of slain animals that lay in the middle of their path. Dorothe spared no words, only raising her blue-tinted blade as she charged at the closest of the five. She cleft it in twain and quickly moved to slash at another as the body of the first was still falling. The Paladin swung her blade horizontally, tearing the second asunder. Tonlin joined his comrade, his dagger plunging into a small green chest, ripping through a reddish-purple heart.

One of the last remaining imps leapt past Dorothe, scraping her face with a jagged claw as it fell at Tonlin’s feet. It opened its mouth to yell, hoping to alert any other nearby groups, but found the point of steel in the Bard’s hand suddenly thrust into its skinny throat. The gremlin gargled its own darkly colored blood and became silent. The Paladin quickly dispatched the final creature, stabbing her sword through the gremlin’s gut with a vehement resentment.

“That’s done.” She jerked her sword out of the tiny corpse and wiped it off.

“Uhh, guys...?” Tonlin stood over the carcasses of what they thought were wild game. Upon further inspection, the bodies turned out to be those of the two hunters who had gone missing days prior. Louve placed a hand over her mouth and turned away, never having seen dead bodies before, much less dead friends. Dorothe had little trouble, the duty-bound will of a Paladin powered her through the gory sight. She bent down to close their eyes and said a quick prayer taught to her by Mother Sigrid, bowing her head.

“May the Lords guide you to peace in the Ever-After.”

A moment of silence passed before she stood and turned her backs to the fallen. *“Let’s keep moving”*, she suggested. It was another thirty minutes through Traertap Forest before they spotted the Druid Temple, with no other resistance encountered on the way. Although several instances of chittering threatened to delay them even more, the Druid reasoned that the scent of their allies’ blood on them kept others at bay.

“There it is”, Louve whispered, stopping behind a covering of bushes along the path, a hundred or so feet from the base of the Temple, prompting the other two to do the same.

The building was ivy-covered, moss attempting to overtake the carved stonework. There were four tall pillars that met with a carved stone ceiling, no walls to enclose the lordstone that sat in the center of the Temple. Dorothe could see a figure pacing between the pillars, whom she suspected was the puck demon Zylla. None of the gremlins appeared to be in the area, much to the relief of the group. As they got closer, the trio crouched behind a small ridge to contemplate their battle plan.

“So... how do we chase her off?” Dorothe stared out at the figure. Zylla was a satyr-like creature, with seaweed tinted skin and moss infected horns that spiraled down out of either side of her skull. Short raven

black hair covered her head and dark green eyes fixated on her surroundings. A long black cloak covered hooven legs that carried the demon back and forth across the stone floor in front of the lordstone.

"I brought something to help us." Louve brought the backpack around to her front and thrust her hand into the pouch. She brought up a silver set of pipes, bound together with metal fittings. *"The books say that Other-Realm creatures can't resist a song played from the pan flute. There's a primordial magic about the instrument that pulls their souls partly back to their own realms. This way they're more susceptible to suggestion and easier to control. That's how the Sorcerers do it."*

The Druid handed the pan flute to Tonlin.

"But didn't the Sorcerers lose control of Zylla? How do we know this is going to work?" He questioned.

"Well... we don't know that it'll work, but it's worth a shot. Besides, I have a few tricks of my own in case she proves difficult. We'll be in and out of here in no time, my friends." Louve was optimistic, more than enough for Dorothe and Tonlin who looked back toward the Temple fatalistically.

"We better get going. Stalling won't make the demon disappear." The Paladin was eager to get the task over with.

Her cohorts nodded - Tonlin held the pan flute in his left hand, still gripping his dagger in his main hand while Louve tossed the backpack onto her shoulder again. Her quarterstaff moved between her hands as they circled the ridge and made themselves visible just a few yards away from the stone pillars. As Zylla turned to continue her pacing, she spotted them and stopped just before Dyr's lordstone. Her head cocked in curious wonder.

"I was not expecting visitors this late." Her voice was silvery, clear, light, and pleasant in contempt of the body it came from. The Paladin did not anticipate that the puck demon would be cognizant, staggered by this fact alone.

"Now, Tonlin!" Louve ushered the Bard forward.

He pressed the pipes to his lips and remembered days in the College when they would teach the guild's newcomers to play the flute before they were allowed to pick their own instruments. Tonlin recognized this must be the reason why and began to play a simple tune, hopefully being enough to subdue the demon. The melody hung in the air and the group waited to see the effect.

Zylla began to writhe, pressing her hands to her ears as the Bard played the tune in a continuing loop.

"It's working! Keep playing!" Louve shouted to Tonlin.

The demon began to groan and the Bard lowered the flute from his mouth before she ceased her wriggling. Dorothe wasn't even sure Zylla was breathing anymore. Louve and Tonlin looked between each other and then confirmed with the Paladin before choosing to move closer to the Temple. Their feet stayed just outside of the stonework, wary of the puck demon still, though her eyes were closed.

"Is that it...?" Tonlin couldn't believe how easy it was to overcome the creature for all the hype there seemed to be about her.

"I... I guess so", Louve wasn't convinced. "I don't know what to do with her now."

"So, Torrick is finally upholding his end." Zylla's voice came, but she hadn't moved from her sleep-like state. "How long has it been? Seventeen years?"

Dorothe and Tonlin took several steps backwards, but Louve remained at the building's side. Her brow knit and she gripped her staff tight.

"What did you say, demon?"

The creature's eyes opened, her head fixed downward. Louve stayed where she was, encouraging the others to retrace their steps at her side.

"He sent you to complete the contract he made. Your life belongs to me now, child."

A chorus of bewildered reactions sounded from the side of the Druid Temple. Louve raised her quarterstaff above her head and descended it, anger in her motion.

"That's not true!" Upon the last word, a bush of thick, thorny vines sprouted up at Zylla's feet, entrapping her to the spot.

Zylla made no movement, no attempt to struggle out of the bindings.

"Oh, but it is."

"What was this bargain?" Dorothe disliked the Surdruid, but didn't think he was capable of tossing his daughter to the wolves - so to speak - even if Sjel was involved.

At this point, the demon lifted her head and gazed apathetically at her audience. Tonlin placed the panflute over his lips, threatening to perform the melody again. Zylla grimaced.

"Oh please, not again! Don't play!" She threw her head back as she cackled, her hands hugging her stomach in dramaticism. *"Can that even be called playing? It was awful! Do you think you are the first to try serenading me to sleep with just a song? You're not Sorcerers; no doubt you have no idea of the proper spell to dominate a demon. I cannot be controlled without my totem otherwise."*

"Where is this item?" Tonlin asked, hoping beyond hope that the puck demon would just tell them.

"Don't you want to hear a story first? Don't you want to know why your father would send you to your death?" Zylla asked of Louve, who appeared to be trying to ignore her. Torrick had advised them the creature would use trickery to stall them. The demon was amused, obviously having a card up her sleeve.

Dorothe didn't know how to react to this creature. They had been sent to banish her, she thought, and it turned out they were only bait. Although, Zylla only seemed to acknowledge the Druid... and Dorothe could use this to her advantage. Louve shook her head, trying to block out the demon's words. Her father had warned her against the monster's cunning.

"Tell us, then." Tonlin figured as long as Zylla was talking, she wasn't eating their insides.

"Very well. Seventeen years ago, a man wandered through Traertap Forest and came across a strange totem left by the Sorcerers who had attempted to claim a powerful item a year earlier. They had attempted to convince the Surdruid of that time to give them the item, to prevent other Lords from dying. But Sjel belongs to nature, as the Druids say. The man plucked my totem from the dirt and felt the magic contained within. He wished to harness this magic, knowing it could overpower the Surdruid and then he would be in possession of the shard of Sjel."

"He summoned me with his desire to gain power. I offered to him a contract, one in which I would give him the necessary skill to fulfill his wishes. In return, I asked but a simple thing: A soul. He could not give me his own, but he promised to bring me what I asked the next day. The man preferred that I wait for him here - the Druid Temple. He tricked the Surdruid into meeting him by Dyr's lordstone to discuss a plan to keep the crystal safe in their possession. They met here at midnight and I imbued in the man a temporary strength with which he brutally murdered the Surdruid. He did not anticipate the Surdruid's wife would follow her husband, concerned for his safety. Rightly so, I might add. But the man was blind with power and her life meant nothing to him. She died magnificently."

"When the price of his power came into play, he realized he could have sent the wife to me instead, but it was too late. Luckily, the man remembered the wife had been pregnant and she was due soon. A little blood and crying later, a girl was born. He tried to sell the infant to me, but her soul was much too weak to beget the end of his deal. I told him so, and he became furious, accusing me of trickery. All he needed to do was let the girl cultivate, and in the mean time, enjoy his new position as Surdruid. It wouldn't be hard to make up some lie about how wolves tore his predecessor apart and convince the guild to elect him in his stead."

"As the days grew into months, the Surdruid became suspicious of me, paranoid that I would tell everyone his secret. So he stole my totem away from me and confined me to this realm. I hid all these long years, waiting until just a few months ago. I took his precious Temple and let my minions run wild through his forest until... Well, it's midnight now. You're eighteen, aren't you? Just ripe enough."

Tears streamed down Louve's face, unable to accept what the puck demon was saying. Her hands covered her eyes, not wanting to be seen. Tonlin cradled his arms around her shoulders, trying his best to comfort her, but all he could be was sympathetic. Her parents were dead and the man she thought was her father was nothing more than a murderer.

"Father always told me... my mother died in labor... but he killed her! He isn't... he isn't... my father!" Louve threw the Bard's arms off her and quickly raised her quarterstaff again. With the staff, so too did the vines at Zylla's feet grow to surround her body. It snaked up her arms and coiled around her neck, the thorns piercing skin and drawing violet, Other-Realm blood. The demon gasped for breath, her eyes wide.

"Louve!" Tonlin ripped the quarterstaff from her hands, feeling pity for the creature.

"But she'll kill me! That's why we're here, so the deal can be finished!" Louve collapsed on the grassy ground, sobbing terribly into her hands. As she did, the entangling roots lessened their hold, allowing Zylla to breathe and giving her room to slip out from their hold. Her hands outstretched toward the Druid and a wicked grin crawled across her face as she spoke in a demonic tongue.

"Llowswa."

A faint light surrounded Louve and gathered until the brightest concentration began to pull from her, like a tendril, back toward the demon. Tonlin tried to swipe at it, to break it from Zylla's grasp, but the light could not be handled by mortal hands. He tried to help Louve to her feet, but she did not respond, cold to the touch.

Before the tendril could extend too far toward Zylla's reach, a blade sliced through her back and protruded through the black curtains she wore. Dorothe had stepped onto the stage from behind the demon and thrust her sword straight through, ensuring Zylla's demise. The creature fell as the Paladin reclaimed her weapon, facing up at the stars above. The tendril separated from Louve and began to fade with nowhere to go.

"You talk too much, demon." Dorothe wiped the monster's blood off onto her cloak, a smug expression on her face.

Zylla gurgled in response, coughing and shivering while holding a hand over the hole in her stomach.
"W-wait, Paladin. There's another way."

Dorothe quirked a brow, not sure she wanted to hear anything from the demon's mouth after her story.

"Get my totem back. Give me my totem and I will consider this bargain resolved. I will leave the Temple and go back to my realm." Zylla shuddered with every word.

"And Louve can live?" Tonlin shuffled onto the stage, sticking fairly close to the lordstone that played witness to all that transgressed that night and the night eighteen years ago.

"Yes, yes! Torrick has the totem. Get it back and she can be free!" Violet pools collected under the demon.

"How do I know you're not lying?" Dorothe pointed her blade back down at Zylla.

"Why would I be? What do I have to gain from telling lies while I'm dying? Urnret!" The hooven creature spoke again in her demon's tongue, releasing the Druid's soul from her spell. The light regained its luminescence and sailed back into Louve's mouth, returning breath to the girl. She choked and cried as her lungs stung with fresh air. Tonlin helped her to her feet and handed her staff back, keeping an arm around her waist.

"Please, Dorothe", the girl pleaded. *"Let me confront Torrick."*

The Paladin thought the demon should be banished from their world, and killing her would do the trick. But if Louve and Tonlin were in agreeance on letting Zylla live, she had no other choice without risking the Druid's life again. She bent down over the creature, her free hand hovering over the wound.

"Fine. Let me close this so you don't bleed out before we can get you back to where you belong."

The girl closed her eyes and though the chance of setting Zylla aflame was present, it was a risk she was willing to gamble on. Dorothe focused her mind on the healing spell, and found that after she had purposefully set several things on fire, it was much easier to determine what elements of the spells were needed for the separate effects. A few seconds passed and she channeled the healing spell through her fingers. The fabric of the cloak was still torn where she had punctured on either side, but the sickly green skin beneath was rendered anew.

"Let's go fetch this totem." Dorothe stood back up and cantered passed the lordstone, Tonlin and Louve following in her wake.

Zylla sat upright, inspecting her body where the entry and exit wounds once were, saying nothing.

Once they were back on the path to the camp, Louve took the lead with Tonlin at her side.

"I'm sorry..." Tonlin attempted to ease the Druid's mental and physical pain.

"Don't be sorry. I always knew, somehow in the back of my mind. Torrnick was not a very caring father. He pushed me in my Druid training, and though I was thankful for his encouragement because it made me a strong caster, he ignored me all other times. So I turned to studying what books were available to me to fill the hole he created in my heart. In a way, I suppose it turned out alright. I just wish he hadn't pretended I was his daughter. If he had told me my parents were dead... Well, that doesn't take away the fact that he is the one who killed them. No matter what he says, I cannot forgive him."

Louve curled an arm around Tonlin's, taking to leaning on him as they traversed Traertap Forest, her lungs still stinging a bit. Dorothe looked on from behind, a sorrow burrowing in her heart. It wasn't sympathy for the blonde girl that made her gaze fall to her feet, but seeing how quickly the two bonded in just a few hours... it made her angry, though she couldn't rationalize why. Tonlin leaped to Louve's defense so quickly, and Dorothe had finally felt as if they had a connection after the incident in Froskrumpe Cave. The Bard held another girl in his arm in front of her, dangling his friendship on a string for the Paladin to chase after.

"I'll be glad when this mess is over." Louve muttered.

"Me too." Both Tonlin and Dorothe responded in synch.