

ELEVEN

A week crawled slowly and painfully by, like a caterpillar that metamorphosised into an even uglier creature. Dorothe, Louve, and Tonlin were escorted out of the Chapel of the Clerics through the hidden stairwell and out into the city. They trudged to a white building nearby, out in public long enough to be seen by any who happened to be loitering about. They each had their possessions taken away and locked up in a room adjacent to where they would be spending seven days. Louve's quarterstaff was hung up on the wall, Tonlin's pan flute was locked away in a glass container, and Dorothe's plate armor was draped over a mannequin. Their map had been taken as "evidence" and the rest of their items dumped over a table for inspection. The shards of Sjel were confiscated by the Council.

They all three were able to stay in the same dungeon cell, possibly because the Council didn't want to waste any more space on them than they already had. The building was made in marble - not with bricks, or slates, but appeared to be a solid marble, as if the insides were carved out of a great deposit - and smelled of stale air. Within the marble walls, the rooms were divided by long iron bars and each cell had a small window cut out near the top of the wall, barred with more iron. There were cots chained to the bars on either side of the cell, but only two were present. That was no problem for the Bard and the Druid as they automatically gravitated toward one of the beds together, leaving Dorothe the remainder.

They were fed fairly well, a pair of the capital's guards bringing them leftover meals from the Chapel of the Clerics. Considering the students at the Chapel were still-growing children, the food was well-rounded. Fruits and vegetables, rice and beans, warm breads baked every morning and cold juices freshly squeezed. It was almost a luxury, if they hadn't been held captive. In fact, on the first day they were informed that they were being served by a pair of guards because the trio was considered dangerous - even without their weapons. By the fourth day, the two guards seemed convinced that if the trio so much as flinched in their presence, they would spontaneously combust before they got back out of the dungeons. Dorothe wondered what lies the Council was spreading as their days led up to the trial.

On the seventh day, they woke up with aching backs and no breakfast. Some of their bags' contents were gone from the table in the other room, Louve noticed. When the afternoon meal came around, again no guards showed their faces. Tonlin suggested they had been forgotten, while Louve thought perhaps something happened to the guards instead and tried her best to stand on the cot to look out of the tiny window to the outside world. From as little as the Druid could see, it appeared that there were very few people on the streets today. Hours rolled by and finally the dungeon door swung open.

"Alright, you three. Time to go to the square." One of the guards stood in the doorway, a baton firmly gripped in his hand, ready for whatever trouble the trio would cause. The second guard approached the cell with a keyring dangling in his hand. The trinkets jingled as he inserted the key into the iron mechanism, turning it slowly until a click could be heard. The door swung open and they shuffled past, happy to be given time outside. Even if it was just to attend a trial of which they were already found guilty. The guard at the door led them out of the building while the second kept an eye on them from behind. They walked single file through rows of chiseled marble pillars, a straight line from the Chapel and the dungeons to the center of the capital of Voluun.

Up ahead they spotted where the usual foot traffic had gone. A theater-like arena sat in front of them, stadium seating set up in stone slabs. At least one hundred locals were waiting in the rows, watching them being escorted toward the clearing in the middle. They would not be alone, however, as this was where Voluundrun's lordstone protruded from the ground. Lord Ejel would be present during their trial, which almost came as a relief to Dorothe. She had grown up in the capital city and become accustomed to considering Ejel her Lord before moving to Regnarsvar.

The Council had set up another tall counter to preside over the trio, all four members sitting behind it now. A third guard lingered near the counter.

"Are you sure it's safe for them to be so close to the lordstone?" He stared at Dorothe, leering.

"What...?" The older girl raised a brow, unsure if she had heard him correctly. *"What does he mean 'safe'?"*

Louve and Tonlin looked about at the faces of the crowd that had begun to jeer at them. They were angry, some frightened and some furious. The Druid couldn't believe that Torrick had made such an impact on the other cities that would bring about this kind of turnout. It wasn't believable at all, in truth. There had to be something else upsetting the people of Voluundrun.

Joel shooed away the guard and cleared his throat noisily.

"Let us begin the trial."

The crowd hushed and sat, behaving so that they could hear the Council. Dorothe took a deep breath, her anxiety skyrocketing after she realized that the many faces in the stands would be focused on her. Enora stood from her seat, glancing over their audience for a moment before speaking in a clear tone. Her eyes cast downward toward the three young adults who stood awaiting their fate.

"The Council recognizes the Druid Louve, Tonlin Godefrey, and Dorothe Addams."

Their names elicited shouts of disfavor from the crowd that had to be quieted by the guards before Enora could continue.

"They stand before us today, having collected four shards of the gem Sjel... but at what cost? The Druids have a particular way of life, as Louve should know." A moment's pause for dramaticism. *"The Surdruid Torrick, her father, refused to give this girl their shard - As is ordinary for the nature-loving guild to hold onto a piece of the land. Dorothe couldn't take no for an answer however, much like King Reddus II. Is there anything you want to say, young lady?"*

As expected, there was hissing and booing from the stands. Dorothe didn't want to say anything, she wanted to curl up into a ball and disappear from the world until the trials were over. The girl knew that saying nothing was as good as confessing yours sins, though. She swallowed her heart and stepped forward.

"I may not be a Paladin anymore, but I still believe in righteousness. The day that Torrick died, we found out he had made a deal with a demon in order to gain power. With that power, he had slaughtered innocents - the previous Surdruid's family. Those people were Louve's birth parents."

A small amount of chattering began in the crowd. Enora looked to the Druid to confirm what Dorothe said, and to her relief Louve did nod. She resumed her defense.

“The taking of a life does not constitute the taking of another, but in this case, Torrick attacked us first. We did not charge in with blade swinging, contrary to what you might think...”

“He turned into a bear, for gods’ sake!” Tonlin injected, wanting the crowd to know their fear, to which one or two gasps could be heard.

“And, he attacked first.” Dorothe repeated with a forefinger stuck in the air to punctuate her point.

“Is that all?” Enora didn’t seem phased by her story. The cheerful, sympathetic demeanor she had when the Council had brought the group to Voluundrun that first day was all but gone. The girl didn’t expect any member of the Council to be helpful toward them, but even Enora’s apathy now was distressing.

“... Yes.”

The older woman sat back down, Joel standing this time.

“You mentioned a demon...”, he began.

“A Puck Demon named Zylla.” Louve thought it best to include as many details as they needed.

“M’hm. You say that Surdruid Torrick made a deal with this... Zylla. Remind me what the deal was, please.”

Louve looked to Dorothe, who encouraged her to speak to the Council herself. The girls rotated so that the Druid would be in front rather than the older girl. She took a deep breath.

“The man you call my father was actually a fraud. He struck a deal with Zylla at the Druid’s Temple to obtain more power in his spells and used it to kill the then-Surdruid Banning in order to take his place. Banning was my father. In order to complete the transaction made with the Puck Demon, he needed to sacrifice a soul to her. He raised me for the sole purpose of feeding me to that creature when I came of age.”

The audience was rather silent this time. Joel looked down toward the other three Council members, exchanging glances before continuing his questioning.

“If Torrick was the one who enacted a contract with the demon, why was a demon’s totem found among your belongings?”

Dorothe had forgotten about the totem. She dragged her fingers down the side of her face as Enora produced the ebony goat idol for all to see. It was damning evidence against them and there wasn’t very much she could say to regain their ground. The crowd would believe the Council over some Lordless, guildless girl.

“I am taking the demon’s totem back to the Sorcerer’s Tower, where it belongs.” It wasn’t a lie. It wasn’t the entire truth either. She would have to try to expand on the statement a little to cover for it, to try to win

the crowd back - most of whom were lost to the Council now. *"We were told several times along our journey that the Sorcerers had been to Traertap Forest before us. What you're holding there was their parting gift to the Druids."*

"... I see", the elder man shuffled in his place, glancing down to the totem for a moment. "Out of curiosity, are you aware of the means in which the demon Zylla granted Torrick's wish? That is to say, how this power was granted to him?"

The trio looked between each other before shaking their heads, although Louve had an idea she recanted to the Council member.

"The demons are Other-Realm creatures like our Lords, if I remember correctly. Our connection to the Lords is what gives our spellwork strength. So I'm guessing that it's really our connection to the Spirit Realm that powers us. In that sense, a demon can grant us power as well. Is that right?"

"That is correct", Enora relieved Joel from standing, spotting that he had began trembling with exhaustion already. "Some of your Druid companions have led research on the crystals contained within the lordstones. I am surprised that you don't know more. But nonetheless, the fact that you've had the totem in your possession leads one to believe any one of you could've made the deal with the demon for the power to destroy the Surdruid."

"That's absurd!" Tonlin shouted, causing Enora to leer at him for speaking out of turn.

"Care to enlighten us, then? How did you manage to kill a guild leader? We are not exactly novices in our crafts."

The young man stepped forward, taking Louve's place.

"I've written a song about it, actually..." He gave a great smile and cleared his throat.

*"Torrick turned into a bear with thick brown hair,
He tossed the Paladin aside without care.
His fatherhood was a ploy,
He chewed on Louve like a toy.
All the while the Bard snuck around,
And he plunged his dagger into fur of brown.
The bear was frightened, he ran outside
Where Louve called down the lightning
to strike at Torrick's brown hide."*

Though no one clapped for his performance, Tonlin bowed and waited for Enora's rebuttal. The Councilwoman clicked her tongue against her teeth, not quite sure how to respond to the boy's song. She looked to Joel and then to the twins. Tarcel nodded her head, excusing her to sit in order to speak to the group herself. The older woman pulled her white robes to her legs before taking her seat. The female twin's golden earrings swayed as she stood, her gaze focused down at Dorothe for a moment before she spoke.

"You put a Divine in danger for your greed. Do you remember a young boy by the name of Adler and his mother, Bretta?"

Dorothe pinched the bridge of her nose. She had a feeling they would be dragged into this trial sooner or later. Tonlin nodded his head.

"We remember."

Tarcel continued.

"When we arrived in Aften, we had caught up with a group of Fighters who had just completed their day's task of helping their family restore a barnhouse. They said it looked like a monster had torn it up the night before. Would you happen to know anything about that?"

The female twin cocked her head, a brow raised as if challenging the trio to lie to her.

"We fought Torrick there--...", Tonlin began but was almost immediately cut off.

"I thought you had killed him at the Druid camp. Which is it?"

"Oh. Well, we fought him at the camp first, and then while we were staying at Bretta's farm."

"So you didn't kill him at the camp?"

"Yes, we... er, no."

"Yes or no, Mr. Godefrey?"

Tonlin tripped over his own words, looking toward the other two for help. Dorothe spoke up and took over for him.

*"Allow me to clarify - We were under the impression that we had killed him at the Druid camp, and by all medical standards, we had. He **was** dead. When we were getting ready to move on to Aften, we discovered his body was missing."*

Tarcel's eyes flickered down to her brother just for a second, but Dorothe caught the glance.

"Please inform me how a dead man was able to walk away", the female twin pursued, but the Lordless girl suspected she knew exactly how.

"The process is a mystery to me", she quipped. *"However, we met him again on Bretta's farm. There was another person there..."*

Dorothe waited a moment, staring around at the crowd.

*"... a **Necromancer**."*

Several members of the theater seating gasped and began talking among themselves, some even taking to shouting down to the Council. *"I thought Necromancy was outlawed!"* *"Who was it?"* *"Will you find them?"*

and et cetera. The guards scattered around the stadium had to quiet down the audience once again, though it took full minutes this time around. Tarcel shook her head slowly, her arms crossed over her chest.

"You mean to tell me you battled a death caster who brought the Surdruid back to life just to fight you again?"

The Lordless girl thought a moment.

"Yes. I noticed Torrick's eyes were white when he appeared at Bretta's farm. I thought that might be evidence of ... um... Necromancy. Well, that and the fact that we killed Torrick once already."

Tarcel crossed in front of the counter, pacing casually.

"I see... and can you tell me what happened to the Necromancer? Where is he now?"

Dorothe noticed right away that the female twin used a male pronoun, though the girl made no mention of the gender of the caster.

"He...?" She attempted to catch the twins in their own facade.

"Or she", Tarcel quickly rectified her mistake.

"It was a male, as a matter of fact. He was right around your brother's height, and had the same apathetic tone in his voice. I remember he ran to me and the slightest touch to my cheek sent chills through my very core. I was dying. I only escaped because I grasped his right hand and burned him." Dorothe raised a brow, staring pointedly at Facil. *"He would have scarring on the back of his hand, I believe."*

Enora caught on to the girl's not-so-subtle suggestion and turned her head ever so slightly to peer at the male twin's hands. He noticed her glances and scoffed, raising his hands where all could see. White silk gloves covered his digits, not exactly disparaging growing suspicions. As whispers among the crowd only grew, Facil began to pull away the fabric from his left hand, showing no burns.

"And the right...?" Louve called from the center of the stadium.

He shook his head and did as he was told. The silk slid off his right hand, but only undamaged tissue was revealed. Tacil smirked and Facil laughed to see the disappointment on the trio's faces.

"As it happens, I did need healing on my right hand recently. However, it was the result of experimental spellwork - not the flames from a Pala-- That is, Lordless girl. That is why I was wearing these gloves, to keep contamination on healing skin to a minimum. I suppose wearing gloves automatically makes one suspect."

Dorothe was not convinced that his hand needed healing because of a backfired spell, and neither was Enora. The rest of the crowd seemed split on this excuse as well. Some nodded, accepting his word as fact, having no reason to doubt a member of the Council. Some began to shake their heads, losing faith in their leaders. If anything, the Lordless girl was happy to see some people questioning authority.

“Moving on”, Tarcel insisted, wrangling the crowd’s attention again. “What happened after the supposed Necromancer disappeared?”

“Well, Louve and Tonlin came out of the house to assist. We managed to kill him again.”

“And his body?”

Dorothe was stumped on that one. She didn’t actually know what Bretta had done with the body, or if the Fighters were told to do away with it. In that case, it made sense the Council knew, as they were escorted into Aften by the Fighters.

“I’m... not sure what happened to Torrick’s corpse after that. We were told to go back inside and sleep so we could make the journey to Aften.”

Tarcel didn’t seem happy with her answer. She continued to pace a bit.

“I see. Let’s forget Torrick for now.”

The trio were under the impression the trial was solely for the death of Torrick, so this notion caught them by surprise.

“In one of your bags we found a map.” Tarcel held up the folded parchment, expanding it to show the map that Tonlin had been looking over the night in Aften that was cut off by the Council’s arrival. *“Can the three of you agree this belongs to you?”*

They each nodded.

“It may be hard to see in the stands, but there is a route traced in the map that starts at Regnarsvar and ended here...”, The female sibling pointed toward the top of the map. *“... At Aften.”*

“Yes, that’s where you intercepted us in our path.”

Tarcel glanced back at the stone counter, silently communicating with her brother that she wished to switch out with him. Facil stood from his seat and graciously allowed his sister to rest, taking the map from her to continue her train of questioning. He seemed eager to begin.

“Do you each recall the death of the Lord Skjold?”

Dorothe frowned.

“Of course. What of it?”

“You were present, Dorothe Addams, is that correct?”

“... Yes.”

Facil poked a long finger at Aften on the parchment.

“And here, you were present, correct?”

Dorothe pursed her lips, wanting to say that she wasn't as “present” as she had wished - that she wanted to have been able to go to Surfighter Donovan's side, to console Erwan and Gail as their Lord's light died. She would have rather spend the night at the Last Crossed Swords Inn instead of a cold marble cage. But the girl didn't say this, not wanting to anger the Council anymore than she seemingly had.

“... Yes, I was there. We all were.”

“As I suspected...”, the male took up pacing as his sister had been. He folded the map and placed it on the counter behind him, no longer in need of a visual aid. *“You were present when all three Lords had died.”*

“No, actually. I had been sent to the Chapel of the Clerics the day of Dromme's death. I was barely a year old then.” Dorothe shook her head, not wanting to think of her deceased mother during the trial. It was bad enough she was being put on the spot by the Council member she suspected was the Necromancer. The girl didn't want to let him see her cry as well, adding insult to injury.

“I was addressing your companion, the male.”

These words came as a surprise to her, and Louve. Dorothe forgot Tonlin was her age, that his background would place him in Cansang at the time the first Lord died. Tonlin nodded quietly.

“But he was barely a year then as well”, the girl added. *“We had no idea what was going on at the time. Our parents had to explain it to us.”*

Facil crossed his arms, taking a moment to glance around the crowd, all who wanted to know where the Council member was going with his line of questioning.

“I have a hard time believing Tonlin had no idea what happened to the Lord Dromme.”

None of them replied, unsure of how to respond. Facil went on in their silence.

“I have good reason to believe Tonlin killed the Surdruid Torrick in cold blood.” The male twin turned back to the counter to retrieve another item to aid in his explanation. He held out a small blade, covered in crimson ichor. The Bard's dagger, left in Torrick's back, had been reclaimed by the Council. It seemed the Surdruid's body was discovered after all. The girls looked to Tonlin with concern, whose face had lost most of its color. *“He also has the most motive to collect the shards of Sjel.”*

“You're pulling at straws, Facil.” Dorothe protested, not wanting her friend to be any more humiliated than she was.

“Am I?” The male held the blade up. *“Torrick didn't want to give you the Druid's shard, is that correct? So Tonlin dealt the finishing blow, securing the crystal would stay among you.”*

Louve furrowed her brow.

“Why would Tonlin want the shards that bad?”

She couldn't see the Bard as having violent tendencies.

"Why indeed." Facil looked toward the musician, prompting others to follow his cue. "Would you like to tell them, or shall I?"

Tonlin said nothing. He stared down at his feet, avoiding the waiting expressions of his two friends.

"No? Surely you're aware that Tonlin is a Bard, right Dorothe?"

"Yes, of course. What does that matter?"

"Do you remember the part of King Reddus II's story, when he was turned away from Cansang, leaving the Divine's lineage a curse?"

"Yes, I remember..."

Facil approached the trio, centering his attention on the young man.

"You're not just trying to save the Lords, are you, Tonlin Godefrey? You're trying to save your family as well, at the cost of another Divine's lineage, isn't that right?"

Tonlin paled, shaking his head.

"Isn't that right?", Facil demanded.

The young man looked up to meet the Council member's gaze. His eyes were full of sorrow and guilt.

"I never meant for anyone to get hurt."