

## SIX

When the group returned to the camp, sleep had claimed the Druids. The camp fire had been put out, and only the moonlight and their torch guided them. Louve led them toward the tent that overlooked the camp, her quarterstaff gripped tightly with the anxiety that came with having to face a man she had grown up believing was her father. As they crossed the settlement and came closer to the Torrick's tent, a light could be seen through the fabric entrance. The younger girl tore open the cover and swiftly moved inside, Dorothe and Tonlin right behind her with their blades ready.

They were met with blood. A large puddle of violet blood covered Torrick's bed, a wool blanket hastily tossed from the mattress that indicated that it was occupied before they arrived. Only now, the tent was empty except for the trio. Nothing else had been disturbed, not the plants, not the rug beneath their feet. The Paladin sheathed her weapon, slightly disappointed their confrontation was delayed. Louve lowered her staff and stepped back toward the cloth flap to scan the camp from their vantage while Tonlin inspected the bedding, leaning over the pool.

*"Isn't this... Other-Realm blood?"* He straightened out, looking back to his companions.

*"You don't think..."* Dorothe raised a brow, glancing toward Louve who adamantly shook her head.

*"No. Torrick might be a monster for what he's done, but he is very much human. This must have something to do with the puck demon's totem."*

A whinny called Louve's attention from the tent, beckoning her back down into the camp. Dorothe and Tonlin noticed her distraction and left the mess to follow the Druid. She walked towards a small path that curled down and around the back of the Surdruid's tent, into a stable that opened up to outside of the log wall that surrounded the camp. The hunters kept their horses here, four black thoroughbreds from Morksvik. The Paladin recognized their horses among the hunters', glad they had been taken care of, as she had completely forgotten about them outside of Froskrumpe Cave.

Toward the opposite end of the stable, Torrick was attempting to fasten a saddle onto one of the black horses, who seemed determined to make it difficult for the Surdruid. He was struggling to secure the leather seating when he caught a glimpse of Louve at the doorway.

*"No..."* Torrick stood, letting the saddle slide to the ground. His face held a look of terror as he froze to the spot. *"How could you be alive!? She wouldn't've let you go, you're the soul she needed!"*

*"She did"*, Dorothe said, matter-of-factly.

*"Lies!"* He hissed.

The younger girl stood silently, clenching her quarterstaff. Her eyes were pinned on the man before her, hatred plastered on her face.

*“How...?”*

*“We know everything, Torrick”,* Tonlin interjected.

*“How did you get past Zylla?! Did... did you banish her?”*

*“We would have, but she was feeling talkative. She told us the truth - about how you became Surdruid”,* Dorothe said. She anticipated he would run, but he surprised her by approaching Louve, a fire in his eyes.

*“You cannot be left alive, with or without the demon at your side”,* he said with desperation in his eyes. The Paladin suspected he spoke of her rather than Zylla. *“I’ve protected my secret for far too long, I put up with you for 18 years, for it to be let out now. I am the Surdruid!”*

Louve was only made more upset by his words.

*“You killed them...”* She had tears in her eyes once again. *“You killed my parents!”*

A flash of manic happiness could be seen in Torrick’s eyes. Memories of the deed he tried to quiet for 18 years played in his mind. The giddiness turned into anger, for all the hard work he had to put in to keep up the lies, to pretend he had discovered the couple mauled by the wolves, to say he had no connection to the Other-Realm beings that began to overtake their forest. But it was no matter. The emotion in his eyes was quieted almost as quickly as it appeared.

*“Yes. I killed your father, Banning, and your mother, Lelani. When I sliced open her belly, there you were - the perfect sacrifice. But I was made to raise you until your soul was ready. It was meant as punishment, though all I saw was the chance to take Banning’s spot as Surdruid.”*

*“But why?!”* Louve asked of him.

*“I had a stronger connection with Dyr! I know the land better than anyone else, but the Druids asked him to lead! He was the stronger caster, so there was nothing I could do but wait until he died of old age, but by then, I would be too weak to become Surdruid - it would’ve passed on to someone else. I found the demon’s totem...”*

Torrick reached into his robe and pulled out a small onyx statuette. Two horns identical to Zylla’s poked out of either side of a small goat skull, mounted on a long bell shaped body. There was a rune carved into the body, and two gashes that glowed the same color as the blood that was on the Surdruid’s bed. The gashes were placed in the same spot as the wounds Dorothe inflicted on the demon. Torrick held the totem in his hand, staring down at it with contempt.

*“... And I summoned Zylla. She promised me the power to take what I wanted. That is, as long as I paid her with a soul. I didn’t know how troublesome she would become.”*

*“I’ll never forgive you...”* Louve closed her eyes, trying to steady her ragged breathing. *“You’re a monster.”*

The Surdruid laughed. He turned around to kick away the saddle, planning to forgo it altogether.

*"You won't have to worry about forgiving me. I'm going to bury this thing in the forest, and no one will ever know what happened here."*

Quickly, Torrick whirled back around to face the group, his hands thrust out and turned back inward toward his body. His arms raised and his fingers turned up at the sky in a sweeping motion. As he did so, the lower half of his robe became thick with brown fur. His feet grew black claws that jutted from fat paws. The fur coated his legs and slowly climbed the rest of his body, and he hunched over onto all fours. A bear's face stared them down and Torrick let out a blood-thirsty roar.

*"Oh gods",* Tonlin's face went pale.

Dorothe pulled her sword from its leather sleeve, looking upon the shapeshifter with dread. A bear was vastly different from a gremlin. Still, she slipped in front of Louve, who seemed frozen to the spot, and held her blade level with the beast. The bear charged, a paw swiped down at the Paladin, barely missing her. Tonlin moved around to the horse stalls, ducking underneath wooden railings to pass between them, grabbing his dagger from his belt. The horses startled at both the bear's roaring and the Bard's sneaking behind their hindquarters, all six taking to kicking and whinnying. That made it a challenge for Tonlin to maneuver without getting hooved to the face.

Dorothe countered the bear's swipe with a slash slanted toward the upper right, tearing at the huge arm that just shred through the air in front of her. It didn't have any effect on the beast, using his off-hand to bat the Paladin into the wall of the stable while her arms were raised. She clattered to the ground, still managing a grip on the hilt of her blade. Torrick moved closer to Louve, who took her quarterstaff in both hands to block the Surdruid's bite. Gnarled teeth scraped against the twisted wood, chipping off some of the branches that grew up and around the thick core. The impact slid the Druid back a few inches, dislodging the staff from the bear's maw as she was sent backwards.

Louve quickly whirled her implement clockwise once around and slammed the end onto one of the closer railings. When she pulled the staff back toward her, the railing came with, reforming and attaching itself to her appendages. One of the black horses was let free with the subtraction of the wood, and it sprinted out into the night, beyond the camp's walls. Tonlin had made his way to the last stable and was now inching behind the bear, hoping the other two could keep it distracted long enough for him to continue to be unnoticed.

The Paladin steadied herself back onto her feet and joined Louve, both attacking the bear head-on with a series of strikes about the head and neck. Torrick snarled, confused by the onslaught, and stepped back, shaking his head to clear his vision. The Bard suddenly appeared on the bear's back, stabbing continuously into the meat of his enemy. The Surdruid panicked, trying to reach behind and grab Tonlin, to no avail. He became frustrated and pained, and ran out of the stable with the male still attached.

Dorothe and Louve chased Torrick outside of the camp, fearful of their friend's fate. The beast stood up on his hindquarters, with more room to move about, and caught Tonlin by the foot as he dangled there. The dagger stayed in the bear's back, but the Bard was effectively removed. He squirmed in the air, trying to slap at Torrick ineffectively before the Surdruid tossed him a yard away.

*"Tonlin!"* Dorothe watched him land in the dirt. He didn't move, and the girl was about to sprint to his side when Louve blocked her path with the quarterstaff.

*"I'll finish this!"*

This time, the Druid stabbed her weapon head-down into the ground. A bolt of lightning arched from the heavens down into the standing monstrosity, sending electricity through Torrick's borrowed form. The sky glowed bright as day for a second and a thunderous crack was heard. When the light dissipated, the bear fell on his side, fur falling off of him in large patches, revealing the Surdruid's robe beneath. He made no attempt to move.

*"You won't be selling any more souls to demons."* Louve removed her weapon from the ground and held it at her side. Dorothe spotted Tonlin struggling to sit up and ran to help. The Druid approached the lifeless body that had taught her everything she knew. Her mind raced, wondering how much of what he said was lies and if anything in him was genuine love for her. The girl looked upon Torrick much like he looked upon others - with apathy.

*"Tonlin! Are you alright?!"* Dorothe pulled him up to his feet, dusted off his torn breeches, and looked him over.

*"I think my arm might be broken."* He winced as she lifted his right arm, rolled up the sleeve and inspected a bruise that quickly appeared on his forearm.

Dorothe frowned. *"We need to get you some armor of your own. A bit of padding will be good for you."*

Tonlin used his left hand to comb through his hair, sheepishly. *"... Heh."*

The Paladin and Bard wandered toward the human corpse, Louve still gazing down at him. Dorothe bent down to pluck Zylla's totem from his robes. The empty black eye sockets stared up at the girl expectantly.

*"I guess we'll have to take this back now."*

*"We can take the horses, it'll make the trip faster."* Louve turned away from the scene, heading back into the stables. The wooden armor fell off her body as she walked.

Dorothe quickly healed Tonlin's arm, though it would take at least a day for the bone to rebuild its strength, and helped him onto the back of his horse. Louve sat with him, taking the reins to save him from having to move his arm too much. The Paladin climbed onto her own equine mount and they trailed around the camp's perimeter. They caught sight of Druids coming out of their tents, woken by the sounds of their battle. The horses did not stop, continuing into the forest, onto the path they came to be familiar with. Hoofbeats came at a gallop, carrying the trio toward the Druid Temple at a satisfying pace.

*"Won't they need a new Surdruid?"* Tonlin asked, too exhausted to hum this time around.

*"..."*

Louve hadn't exactly been concerned with the politics of killing her parents' murderer.

The Temple came into view only twenty minutes through the trip. Zylla had managed to pull herself to the lordstone, now slumped against it to keep herself upright. Even though Dorothe healed the wounds, she had still spilled a lot of blood. Her eyes were closed when the group approached with the totem in hand.

*“You’ve got it? Give it here.”* The demon’s voice was shaky.

*“What happens when I do?”* The Paladin hesitated, watching Zylla carefully.

*“I go back to my realm, back to sleep.”*

*“And the totem...?”*

*“My totem stays in your world, to wait for the next fool. It’s a relic that belongs to the Sorcerers, but I doubt they miss me enough to come looking.”* Zylla reached toward Dorothe, her eyes heavy and tired. *“Give me my totem, Paladin.”*

Dorothe looked between Tonlin and Louve, then back down to the weakened creature before her. Everything within her screamed to finish Zylla off and be rid of the Other-Realm creature once and for all, but... perhaps she could manipulate the being to serve her purposes. She held the onyx goat out, and the puck demon immediately took hold. But the girl did not relinquish the item. Zylla tugged, becoming frustrated.

*“Let... go! Let me sleep!”*

*“I wish to form a contract with you, demon.”*

*“What!?”* A chorus was heard from her friends.

Zylla’s eyes grew bright, like charcoal set aflame.

*“Dorothe, are you mad?!”* Tonlin couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Hadn’t they just killed a man who enacted a deal with the very same creature? The girl ignored him, intently focused on the demon. Zylla was pleased, so very pleased, to hear the hallowed warrior falling down the path that so many chose.

*“Tell me your wish, child.”* A crooked smile played on the demon’s lips.

Dorothe drew in a slow breath.

*“I will give you this totem, and you will get your sleep, as you so crave. In return, when the time comes, you will assist me in acquiring the Sorcerer’s shard of Sjel.”*

Tonlin and Louve appeared relieved, as it was a harmless bargain the Paladin offered. Zylla weighed the options, and though the girl dangled her totem before her, she did not seem satisfied with her benefits. She peered up at Dorothe, her eyes narrowed.

*“You know that’s not how this works.”*

Dorothe did not break eye contact with the Other-Realm creature.

*“I’m aware.”*

*"Then it is done. Now allow me my rest."*

The Paladin released the goat statuette into Zylla's possession. Once fully in her grasp, the demon grinned wickedly. She whispered a word unintelligible to the trio and her body slowly transposed into the night sky, with stars being sucked into the small black totem. As the last star was swept away, the totem dropped to the ground. For a moment, no one moved. Three pairs of eyes looked upon the relic with apprehension. Dorothe bent down to pluck up the goat. In her hand, the violet cuts that had been made on the stone vanished and the rune carved upon the body began to glow instead.

*"Dorothe, what did she mean?"* Louve asked, though she knew exactly how the demon's contracts had turned out before.

*"You're to meditate with the lordstone to awaken your potential, no? I believe we have an opportunity for such a task now."* Dorothe paced to her horse and placed the totem into her saddlebag. She would not have need of the demon until they reached the Sorcerer's Tower, and that wouldn't be until after they visited Fighter's Barracks in Aften.

*"It'll take an hour..."* Louve eyeballed Dyr's lordstone.

*"We have time."* Dorothe didn't want to hasten returning to the camp just yet. Though they still had to locate her missing shards, she didn't want to be around when the other Druids discovered Torrick's body. It wouldn't be too hard for them to blame the outsiders... even if they *did* kill him. Louve did not question the Paladin. She sat facing the stone pillar, crossing her legs and closing her eyes. Tonlin looked after the blonde girl for a time, saying nothing. He stood close by, just watching. How they could be so calm after that night was anybody's guess. Dorothe gazed at them, a familiar pang in her chest, and decided that she would walk her horse about the clearing a few times, brush his hair out, and lead him to a nearby pond.

*"Don't look at me like that, horse."* She scolded him as he stared right through her with judging eyes. The horse snorted and bowed his head to drink. *"I know what I did. A soul will be needed. Maybe I can find a way around it by the time we get to the Sorcerer's Tower... Maybe I can delay payment."* The girl patted between his ears, sighing. *"I'm talking to a horse. One with no name, at that."* Dorothe admired the stars' reflection in the water, noting they had begun to disappear as the sky lightened. Dawn approached. *"What do you think of Felipe?"* The beast exhaled through his nose with some force, which the girl interpreted as approval. *"It was in a book Mother Sigrid read to me once."*

The hour crawled by. Louve stood up, nodded her head toward the lordstone to signal the end of her meditation, and turned to Dorothe and to Tonlin, who hadn't moved an inch during the ordeal.

*"I have an idea of where Torrick kept Sjel."*

They mounted their horses again - Louve and Tonlin together on his and Dorothe alone on Felipe - and loped back down the path to the camp for the fourth and final time. When they approached the camp, they were all confused to see everyone going about their business. A breakfast meal was being served, much to Tonlin's delight, and none of the Druids showed any signs of apprehension at the trio's appearance. In fact, one of them beckoned Louve down from the horse to speak.

*"Louve! You've completed your meditation? That's wonderful!"* An older male clasped the girl on the shoulder with pride.

“Y-yes...” She staggered, glancing back at Tonlin and Dorothe.

*“Could you do me a favor and rouse your father for the morning meal? He’s later than usual...”*

“O-of course!” Louve forced a smile and turned back to the horses, grabbing Tonlin’s by the reins to guide it around the encampment.

*“I don’t understand...”,* Tonlin said after they were out of earshot, scanning the oblivious Druids. *“They can’t have missed his body by the stables. We made an awful amount of noise out there.”*

*“We’d better check there before we get the shards.”* Dorothe found it hard to keep at a walking pace when she wanted to urge Felipe into a run, straight on until Aften.

When they rounded the corner outside of the log enclosure, they could see the stables in plain view. Signs of their battle were still evident - part of the wooden railing was still gone, laying on the ground in front of the doorway, and the ground was scorched where the lightning struck. Tonlin’s dagger lay in the middle of the burned earth, and he moved to reclaim it. But Torrick’s body was missing!

*“Where the--!?”* Dorothe hopped down from the horse, kicking at the dirt in angry bemusement.

*“Huh...?”* One of the guild’s hunters wandered out of the stables, wearing a leather jerkin like Dorothe’s, but in a color darker than her own. He was leading one of the black horses out by the reins, no doubt about to go into the forest. *“Oh! Louve! I thought I heard someone out here. It’s the strangest thing... some of the stalls were torn apart and one of our horses is missing. On top of that, I found bear fur in there. Looks like one of the beasts managed to get in there and attacked. Shame, she was one of our best horses, too.”*

Louve quickly played off the hunter’s suspicions. *“They can’t find my father, either. Do you think... maybe he heard the noise and came down here? Gosh, I hope he’s alright...”*

Tonlin and Dorothe looked to each other, impressed with the Druid’s quick wit.

The hunter frowned, shaking his head. *“I bet he chased it back to the forest. Looks like some fire marks out there by you guys.”* He looked thoughtful for a moment. *“Hey! You know what that means? The wildlife is back! Zylla’s gone.”* With a bit of a smile, the hunter mounted the black horse and cantered off toward the trees.

*“Let’s go, before he figures it out.”* Louve helped Tonlin down from his horse and quickly penned both chestnut thoroughbreds in the stalls. She led them up the small path and into Torrick’s tent. Louve approached the wooden table that sat in the middle of the room, with Dorothe and the Bard on either side.

*“In the ground Sjel is found”,* the Druid stated, grabbing hold of the ivy plant in the middle. She maliciously uprooted the green leaves and dropped them onto the rug beneath their feet. Louve dug her fingers into the dark soil and retracted her hand with one of the magenta crystals held in her digits. Watching her, Tonlin and Dorothe began to do the same to the snake-leaved plant and aloe as well. Two more shards came unburied.

*“How did you know?”* Tonlin asked.

*“Dyr told me.”* Louve cleaned off the shards and deposited them into Dorothe’s small burlap pouch. *“She wants to see us succeed.”*

Dorothe was more than happy to get them back into her possession. She pat the sack hanging from her belt, satisfied with the added weight.

*“Let’s get some food in us before we leave.”* Tonlin turned to exit Torrick’s tent, not wanting to linger in the room any longer.

They made their way down to the fire pit, Louve had gone to get a shoulder bag for a few of her books and some herbs she thought they might need for their journey. She then joined them for supper, sitting with the two this time. Plates of venison and corn meal filled their bellies as the hunters boasted their first deer shot of the season. The atmosphere had changed from when Dorothe and Tonlin had first arrived. Everyone was smiling, laughing, genuinely happy. The Bard lended a tune as they danced without rhythm around the pit. As the trio got up to leave the camp, Dorothe felt a hand on her shoulder. Startled, she turned quickly.

*“I’ve got a bit of a surprise for you.”* The blacksmith found her at the end of breakfast, a twinkle in his eye. He held her old breastplate in his calloused hands, made shorter and straps attached to fit over her leather. *“I know your chainmail had to be scrapped, but I thought you might like a bit more of your old plate back.”* The smith helped her secure it, one section to her front and another onto her back. The sides were left open for the straps to sit, but it was more than the Paladin could have expected.

*“I... I don’t know what to say...”* Dorothe ran a hand over the cool metal. *“Thank you.”*

*“Don’t worry about it. I had a feeling about you when you came into my shop. The Druids are happy, and the hunters are hunting again for the first time in months. That means I’m going to be busy repairing their weapons and armor.”* The blacksmith looked the girl over, admiring his own handiwork. *“I suspect that’s something to do with you. So it’s me that owes you thanks.”*

Once they returned to the stables, Dorothe, Tonlin, and Louve rode out on their horses, headed West for a change. Past the river that split Voluun in two, a part of the land was isolated by the water. Aften was where the lordstone of Rasmus, the lord of pride and honor, sat waiting for the group to collect the fourth shard. The road stretched out ahead of them and the sun beamed at their backs.