

“Thomas... Wisseau?” Skylana struggled, staring at the Draco assassin.

“You know this man?” Shade almost choked out.

“He was in Bristol this past summer with Lady Tso. We were able to stop him along with the rest of her cadre.”

“Good to see you too, knife-ears,” Thomas sneered from under his flat cap. “I will make you and your lover boy pay for what you did to our Lady.”

The woman at his side squeezed his shoulder; her crimson nails nearly pierced his clothes. “Come, come now, Thomas,” she crooned. “This should call for celebration, not angst. If anything, you should be thanking them.”

Thomas let out a wicked smile. No doubt he had been waiting anxiously to come across any of the other Paragon Defenders to exact his revenge upon. Ryder and Skylana were present on the day that they confronted the Draco Disciples of Bristol and the Gem of Souls was sealed away. They had watched as Thomas helped the others take Lady Tso away to try to mend her wounds, but no one knew whether or not she still lived. When Edana had stabbed her, it seemed like a mortal wound. Then again, Lady Tso was no mere mortal.

“I really should, Alice,” the assassin hissed, “but I don’t think they deserve that courtesy from us.”

“Alice...” Talis breathed as he scrambled in his knapsack to find a healing potion for Ryder. “Where have I heard that name before?”

“Alice... Bartlebee,” Ryder winced. “I know who she is... Thoren said she tried to frame the Twisted Claw before the summer... She stole from the Earl of Sussex and was going to make it seem as if the Band was responsible... Fortunately, she was caught before anything happened to them.”

“I underestimated the tenacity and intelligence of the gypsies and their... pets,” the woman hissed.

Talis got a closer look at the men that now filled the cavern, wondering why they looked so familiar. But then he saw him, the man with the scarred face and neck. He struggled to remember his name, but there was no mistaking the scarred face of the quarterman.

“Ryder,” he whispered, “these men were on the *Deimos*.”

Thomas let out a chuckle before aiming his pistol towards him. “I was wondering how long it would take you to fit the pieces together.”

“I did warn you, Thomas,” Alice purred in his ear, “they are not wholly stupid, but that does not mean they are immune to manipulation.”

Talis blinked and shook his head. “What are you talking about?!”

“Isn’t it obvious, little man?,” the witch asked, her voice full of amusement. “This was all a machination of the Draco Disciples to lay claim to the Font Garoux. Is that simple enough for you to understand? Ever since you met on the docks of London, your movements have been manipulated.”

The alchemical’s gaze fell hard towards Gwen, still on her knees in shock. His face darkened into anger. “You... you betrayed us!”

“No...” She shook her head, barely aware of what was happening around her. “No, this... this was not supposed to happen.”

Alice’s voice snapped him back to her. “She speaks truly, though it does not seem as if

she means your accusation. But regardless, she knew nothing of this. She was just a mere pawn, more so than you were, in fact.”

Thomas drew close enough to stick the gun to Gwen’s neck. The silver barrel burned into her skin, awakening her from whatever daze she was in.

“I am no one’s pawn,” she growled, swatting the barrel away from her. But he quickly drew a second pistol... and fired.

The whole crew went ballistic as they watched Gwen tumble back into the pool. The waters ran red from her collarbone and she cried out in agony, the silver slug burning inside of her.

“Damn,” he cursed. “You went down easier than I thought.”

Nemo ran towards the dark flame hoping to leap through them. Talis shouted a warning, but was subsequently ignored. Upon touching the fire, Nemo suddenly felt his body grow weaker. Whatever energy he had to run through those flames was quickly extinguished. His body swirled in fatigue as it washed over him and he fell to his knees.

“Blackfire!” Talis gasped. Only the darkest of magics were able to conjure up such powerful entropic flames from the deepest parts of the Abyss. From this alone, he knew that this witch was not one to be trifled with. “Get him away from there!” Ecks and Zachary rushed towards him, almost dragging his body away from the flames, careful not to get caught in it themselves. Alice let a sadistic smile crack her lips as she turned to those on the wall.

Those upon the wall struggled harder, trying to free themselves, but Alice only clutched tighter. Everyone felt their breath escape their lungs as they were constricted by the telekinetic force. Skylana tried to see if she could summon her staff, but she was securely pinned to the cavern wall. Hands began breathing hard through his teeth next to her, and that was when she noticed the bulge in his shoulder sticking out under his chemise. Everyone else didn’t seem to be injured too badly, though a small trail of blood began to run down Crow’s right leg.

“Like moths to a flame,” Thomas chuckled, glaring at the group.

“Did you never wonder what transpired after Tso’s defeat?” Alice asked as she stepped towards the blackfire. “She knew that with the power of the Gem of Souls sealed away, so, too, was the power of the Paragons. They would not be long for this world after that, but they still had some unfinished business to take care of. So she bade Thomas to follow them, hoping that he might be able to kill them before their time had gone, trapping their power in this world before it was released back into the universe. But one day, the Water Paragon brought him to this woman here, and told a pretty little story about the Font Garoux, making certain that only you were the one to open it again.”

“When I told Lady Tso about this,” Thomas continued, “she knew exactly what it was. Knowing that this was a more valuable venture, she told me to forget the Paragons and find Malocchio. He had done some business with her father and I had heard of his... methods. Had I not already been employed under Lady Tso, I would gladly become a member of his crew. Working with him has been such a pleasure. She also brought Alice to our attention to help hide ourselves from you and your senses.”

Alice swayed behind him as he continued. Her fingers encouraged the blackfire to grow. The crew huddled together, now noticing that instead of the flames burning, they were unnaturally cold. Ryder swiftly drank the potion Talis had given him, allowing the slug to pop out

as his wound healed. While she spoke, he crouched down low, feigning agony, and hoped the flames would be obscuring enough that they would not see him rummaging through his pack.

“She was so kind to release me from prison as she did for Thomas. She contacted me and we devised a plan to follow you. We’ve been pursuing you ever since you came across the *Deimos* that night.”

“I must admit, you impressed us,” Thomas almost whispered, leaning down to Gwen’s level. “We were worried that the sirens would do you in, but you managed to take care of them by yourselves. Fortunately for us, even if they had found our ship following you, they were already swimming with their tailfins between their legs. I don’t know what you did, but you frightened them a great deal. I’m slightly envious.” Gwen glared up at the assassin with spite as he slammed his hand on her injured shoulder blade. She let out a grunt of pain through tight lips.

“And you opened the gate to the Font Garoux,” Alice continued. “Grammercy for your contribution; you’ve just handed us the trump card in the war against the Light.”

“What the hell is he talking about?” Talis demanded, staring at Gwen, while Ryder took out a dark green bottle.

“I... don’t...” she tried to answer, her fingers digging into her shoulder to try to find the bullet.

“Do you really think you can take this Font?” Skylana declared proudly from the side (though still struggling to breathe). “This was a creation of the Lord of Light, Himself. Even now, He is with us. There is no way you or your Dark Goddess could possibly take that power away.”

At this, Alice let out a haunting laugh that echoed throughout the chamber. The fire grew colder and those on the wall began gasping for breath. “Oh my dear girl,” she chuckled as strands of dark hair covered half of her face, “it is you who are the fool.” Skylana’s fervor faded away and she sank back into the wall. The witch’s laugh sent chills down her spine. “Think for but a moment: This whole journey lasted approximately one week. During that time, did you honestly never question why a creation of the Lord of Light was sealed in the first place?”

Talis’ heart sank. *He* had questioned before, but after everything that happened, he had to trust that Gwen knew what she was doing. Why did he stop questioning?

“Tis true that the Lord of Light created this place to heal the very soul of a being,” she continued. “In fact, it was originally called “l’Étang des Âmes”, the Pool of Souls. Many would make a pilgrimage to this place hoping that their souls would be healed and they could return to the grace of the Lord of Light. T’was akin to a baptism, where all their corruption and all of their sin would be washed away within those waters and the person would be made pure and whole again. It would occur at one of four times: at dawn, where the sun was lifted in the air, high noon, where the sun’s power was at its peak, at dusk, when the sun kissed the earth again, or at midnight, where the moon could lend her power, a time where each of the Paragons would lend their power to purge the wicked and heal the weary.

“Until one day, a man afflicted with lycanthropy came to use the Font. He used it under a full moon, where Nais’ power ruled, but instead of being healed upon bathing in the waters, two souls sprung forth: one human, and one wolf. Without provocation from anyone, the two souls fought one another, and the human soul emerged victorious. After that night, the man discovered that upon the rise of the next full moon, he did not change. He remained human every month and never took the form of the wolf again. He had discovered the cure to an ancient curse.

“From then on, those cursed under the full moon would be the ones who would visit the pool the most frequently. Eventually, it’s old name died and it became known as the Font Garoux. Many were able to fell the wolf that tormented them, but it did not always work. Those who let the curse dictate their lives would strengthen the soul of the wolf, making it the dominant one. When they fought, the wolf would defeat the human soul, and they became ravenous beasts, doomed to their inhumanity for the rest of their days.

“Until one day. A man journeyed to the Font, hoping to end the suffering he had caused, not unlike you did. But something happened, something that no one had anticipated: Upon seeing his wolf’s spirit, he chose not to fight against it. Instead, somehow, he managed to tame his wolf. He made peace with the creature and both souls chose to share the body. From that day forward, he was able to control his curse. He could change when we wished. He could be stronger than an ox and quicker than a falcon in his human form, and he could make logical, calculating decisions, even as a wolf.

“The discovery was revolutionary; it changed the entire outlook on becoming afflicted with the curse of lycanthropy. It turned a terrible curse into a godly blessing. Imagine leading an entire army of intelligent werewolves. Powerful. Agile... Obedient. Naturally, once Tiamat learned of this, she ordered her followers to claim it for her own. It started a mighty battle, but in the end, the Lord of Light chose to seal it away with his power, so that no one who marched under the Dark Goddess’ banner would be able to open it and use it for evil intent.”

All while Alice was talking, Thomas prepared his pistol for another shot. Gwen stared at the witch in utter disbelief, wondering if Nais knew about this “third option” for the Font. If she did, then why wasn’t she told about it? Furthermore, what was her own future to become? She had one chance to be rid of the curse forever, and now she was sentenced to live with it forever.

“Congratulations, Gwendolyn Gwilt,” Thomas sneered. “You are now living proof that the curse can be controlled.”

The silver barrel went to her forehead and it hissed upon contact. Gwen tried not to show any more pain through gritted teeth.

“So you wish to make a lycanthrope army,” Nemo wheezed. The other Disciples turned to him as he struggled to stand. “And how do you expect to gather your army? Are you going to make her turn you all? You’re all idiots if you think you can force her to do anything that you command!”

“True, t’will take much time,” Alice purred, “but she is not the only werewolf that exists in the world. Even you know that. In the end, all it takes is one.”

Immediately after she finished speaking, they heard loud roaring and growling coming from the tunnel.

“You should be careful who you leave alive to tell the tale, Gwilt,” she continued. “Your tactics can be easily learned. When you met us on the sea, you thought you could turn our little trap against us. But the truth of the matter is that you did everything that we needed. Regardless of how your little tussle with this crew may have ended back then, everything went according to *our* plan.”

Finally, a group of four men emerged from the tunnel, pulling what seemed like a giant cage that was built on wheels. It must have been a feat to get it through the caverns with all the rough terrain, but they tirelessly pulled nevertheless.

But inside the cage, thrashing angrily, was a large beast that almost dwarfed what Gwen was when she turned. It barely fit within its confines, reaching out to try to grab a stray crewman every now and then, but the Draco crew was wise to keep their distance. Even when it did, they could hear the distinct hissing and the smell of burnt hair came through. Its howls filled the cave with its ferocity and animalistic rage.

But the one thing that made everyone's blood run cold was the creature's left eye, pale and milky, but marred by a single scarlet mote.

"My God," Crow whispered upon the wall.

"It can't be..." Talis gawked.

"M-Malocchio..." Gwen breathed.

"Descendants of Druscilla are quite resilient, aren't they." The witch strutted over towards the cave where a monstrous Malocchio followed her movements. "I will admit, we did underestimate your viciousness. We almost didn't revive him in time. But the venom from your bite was already coursing through his veins. All we needed to do was wait for you to do the rest while he recovered."

Suddenly, a wide grin spread across Talis' face as Ryder tore off a piece of his cloak. "But unfortunately, you miscalculated."

The witch raised an eyebrow towards him. "Oh? And how did we do that?"

"You speak so smugly as if your plan is foolproof. However, in your arrogance, you've forgotten the most important element in this ritual: it is their *souls* that do battle amongst each other. Descendants of Druscilla have no soul, so therefore Malocchio cannot use the Font. Only the wolf's soul would emerge and since it has nothing to fight, you only have a ravenous monster as your leader!"

Talis grin was wide with accomplishment, but Alice's smile never faded from her cheeks. "Oh dear, Thomas. I do believe he's right." The assassin's smile grew frighteningly wide, and whatever bravery Talis had slowly began to recede. "Yes, Malocchio has no soul with which to fight. But it seems that you have forgotten: all of the Dark Descended are blessed with the power of Tiamat, Herself. Using that power, one can manifest a spirit to fight the wolf. And Malocchio might not use it much, but he has such potential. Almost as much as Lady Tso. When the moonlight hits him, Tiamat will grant him the power to create a spiritual effigy of himself and force the wolf to submit to him."

With that, Talis' eyes widened. He had heard of this spell once before when he fought against Souldrinker, but he did not think that the Disciples were actually capable of such power. He turned to Ryder, who was tying cloth discreetly.

Gwen felt sick to her stomach. What was supposed to be a cure to her affliction had turned into something unspeakable. She had prided herself on her planning, her foresight, but in all this time, she had not caught a single scent of the Disciples. How could she have missed them? How could she not have noticed that there was something following them? Even if something was invisible, she could use her eyes to see the distortion in the waters or hear the creaking of another ship.

But she had not. This disaster- the great horror that was to come- rode unchecked into an unsuspecting world upon the wind of her failures; She had led Malocchio back to her cabin. She had spurred her crew on towards the Font Garoux without so much as a backward glance.

She was willing to do anything to ensure that she was rid of her curse.

But now, her curse was neverending. The wolf would be with her until the end of her days and the Draco Disciples would defile a sacred place for their vile purposes, all because of her.

This wasn't what she meant to have happen, and now, everyone would suffer for it.

Staggering, she stood up from the waters. Her fingers finally found the bullet and ripped it from her wound. She bit her lip to muffle her scream as the slug was extracted. It sizzled in her fingers briefly before she dropped it into the water. Her corset turned from a brilliant gold-green to a deep crimson on her right side.

The wolf, Malocchio, struggled in his cage; he banged against the bars hoping they would snap and he would be free to rampage. She looked at the beast, wondering if that was how terrible she looked under the moonlight. She wondered if others saw her in the same light when she was human, if they thought that she was just as much of a monster as she was whenever she had turned. But now, she no longer knew which was the monster anymore, her or the wolf.

However, man or beast, Malocchio was a monster.

Defiantly, she stood between the Draco Disciples and the Font Garoux. As the others helplessly watched from the side, Thomas let out a small chuckle. "Oh good. I was hoping you'd get up again." Casually, he finished putting the bullet in its place before cocking the gun and aiming it towards her. "How about you make it more of a challenge then."

But Thomas had failed to see the silent commands she was giving to her crew as she brought herself up from the pool. To her left, she saw Nemo had recovered from the blackfire, but he still looked considerably more vulnerable than before. Talis and Ryder were exchanging whispers, staring back at her with steeled eyes. Knowing their intent, she glanced at the rest of her men that lay encircled within. To her right, the ones on the wall caught her glare, one that they were very familiar with. All of their expressions darkened and they ceased their struggle to free themselves from their invisible grasp. When Skylana caught her eye, she lowered it down to where her staff lay, but never returned her gaze. Instead, it slowly wandered over to Thomas and the Draco Disciples as the barrel of the gun pointed between her amber eyes.

For the first time in ages, she smiled.

"As you wish."

Everything happened almost too quickly for mortal eyes to follow.

The other Draco Disciples expected him to shoot her and be done with it, but Alice had fanned the flames too high. In her pride, she hadn't noticed Ryder had crouched down, hidden from her sight and could not see him taking the ice wine from his pack to soak it in torn cloth. She couldn't have seen him wrapping it around his arrow tip and peeking through the top of the flames. By the time he was prepared to loose an arrow, her attention remained focused on Gwen. Healed from the potion that Talis had slipped him, he was able to take aim and shoot through the flames the very instant Gwen finished speaking.

The arrow blazed in dark flame as it sped towards Alice, hitting her square in the side. She hadn't thought to protect herself from its effects, knowing that neither Talis nor the elves used entropic magic. It broke her concentration long enough to dispel the force that held Skylana and the others against the wall. Thinking quickly, she bolted to her staff, aimed towards the water and commanded it to douse the blackfire. Once the men were freed from their confines, entropic or telekinetic, they open fire upon the Draco Disciples.

At the same time, Alice's initial scream had distracted Thomas long enough for Gwen to wrench the pistol out of his hand with such force that a loud snap came from his wrist. He screamed and clutched his limp hand before being met with a swift knee to the stomach. It knocked the wind out of him, but only briefly. He avoided the second kick, rolling quickly to the left and drawing his blade when he rose. Gwen responded in kind with the ring of her cutlass leaving its sheath. Neither of them wasted any time before their blades crossed.

Chaos had erupted within that chamber. The crew of the *Fenris* had caught some of the Disciples off guard, wounding most, but killing at least two men. Talis' staff blazed with holy flame, blasting fireballs off to every man that allied himself with Tiamat. Some of the men were skilled enough to avoid his attacks, but even they suffered a bit of charring here and there. Before he could take out another, a stream of Blackfire rushed towards him again. This time, Talis was ready.

"Reddere Stregallum!" The invisible barrier formed around him just in time to reflect the Blackfire back to its caster. However, Alice was not one to be fooled by the same trick twice. As it returned to her, she caught it in her hands, dancing as the momentum of its energy spun her around so she could gather it and face Talis once again. The two magic users stared daggers at each other before attacking once again.

Almost instantly, Alice felt a presence behind her. Swiftly, she sent out a bolt of red lightning at the ground where Shade used to be. The young girl rolled to the side after each bolt sent after her, unable to go forward due to the rocky terrain around her. Talis took her distraction as an opportunity to cast a flame strike upon her, but the witch caught the spell out of the corner of her eye. Using a quickened casting, she was absorbed into the shadows.

Frantically, Talis looked around, trying to keep an eye on where the shadow went, but the cavern was darker now that he had no fire to cast. The light from the opening barely helped him. Shade ran up towards him to aid his search, but it was just as fruitless, until she saw the distortion in shadow and the feline eyes.

"Look out!" she screamed. Talis instantly turned with a fireball ready in hand. Alice barely blocked it in time, but she still was able to hold her own against Talis' magic. Shade scowled, realizing that the light would hinder her ability to sneak in this cavern. She turned to Talis before darting back into the fight. "Find me a way in," she uttered. "I'll take care of her." Talis looked around to try to speak, but she was already gone, perhaps using the chaos of the fight to act as her cover. He had no time to find her as another shot of Blackfire rushed towards him.

Ryder had dropped his bow and pulled out his twin blades. In the calamity that was occurring, there were too many variables for him to shoot into combat. Using the magic of the forests of Atlea, he imbued his blades with an acidic touch, giving him a slight edge against the Disciples. The first one that approached him charged screaming at him. Using the rocky terrain, Ryder side-stepped the charge and sliced at the man's side, causing him to drop his blade to futilely try to keep his organs inside of him.

To his immediate right, he barely managed to scissor his weapons upward, catching the blade of a cutlass that was hurtling down at his head. Ryder attempted to disarm his attacker, but the Disciple flowed with his movements. He weaved his cutlass out of Ryder's grasp and attempted another slash at his belly. Ryder backed away before it made contact, but he never took his eyes off his foe. He saw him draw a pistol, but Ryder was quicker. Using one blade to

block the cutlass again, he used his off-hand blade to slice the pistol hand clean off the wrist. The Disciple screamed in agony as the acid dissolved the wound even more, eating away at the flesh.

Ryder's foot quickly met the Disciple's face, but it was the loud "CLANG!" behind him that drew his attention. He turned to see Crow engaging another disciple, his vile blade aiming for his back. Crow pushed back against the attacker, but kept near the ranger. The Disciple tumbled backwards down a small rocky slope, but swiftly recovered. With a sideways glance, he caught Ryder's eye and the knowing smile that followed. He wasted no time and soon stood back-to-back with Crow as he took on another enemy.

The two fought remarkably well together. Crow was just as fast with his attacks as Ryder was, but he aimed to cripple his foes first. Then he would turn and Ryder would face the same enemy, hoping to land a fatal strike with acidic bites from his blade. It worked very well, but some of the Draco Disciples proved more adept the longer they fought against them. One crewman got a lucky shot at Crow's leg. The blade embedded itself deep into his shin. Ryder felt him buckling down behind him. Without hesitation, his blades swung around, meeting the man's shoulder. The power of both his blades made a deep cut, almost cleaving him in two. The Disciple crumbled before him and Ryder took Crow's arm over his shoulder, hoping to get him somewhere where he could quickly be healed.

Skylana tried to rush over to Hands as soon as everyone had been freed. For someone so big and burly, he moved awfully fast and was into the fray and near the entrance to the cave before she could think to heal him. He fought with his left hand and it was obvious that he struggled. His right arm lay limp at his side. She aimed her staff at the opening of the cavern ceiling, calling the wind to help her walk over the battle to reach him.

For a brief instant, she thought that the opening looked a little smaller than she remembered, but the thought quickly left her mind. She ran on the air above Talis and Alice's mage fight, narrowly missing a stream of Blackfire as Alice caught her trying to pass, but a bright lightning bolt drew the witch's attention back to Talis.

The elven mage glided over to Hands, who was swinging at smaller Disciples, hoping to land a hit. His bare fist caught one of them in the mouth. A loud cracking sound preceded his fall. From behind, another enemy had slammed into his injured shoulder. Hands let out an agonized scream as he was knocked onto his side. Before his assailant could attack again, the very rock underneath his feet split open. The Disciple fell into the small crevasse. It was not too deep as to have him fall forever, but it was just enough to completely swallow him in the earth.

When the earth had sealed itself again, Skylana landed next to Hands, who was clutching his shoulder in anguish. Bringing some of the water from the pool, she created a makeshift ice shield for the two of them. She did not need to hold it for long like she did with the sirens. Just long enough to heal Hand's dislocated shoulder and get him back into the fight.

The ice barrier only took a few hits from another Draco Disciple to shatter, but by the time it did, Hands was already bursting free, engaging in a fistfight with a newly healed arm. Skylana followed behind him, granting him a boost of strength (it wasn't as if he *needed* it, but she knew these Disciples had to be taken out as swiftly as possible). The sheer brutality of Hands' newfound power allowed him to beat the disciples to an almost literal pulp. Knowing that he would be able to hold his own with a renewed arm, Skylana weaved in and out of the fight to lend

aid to the others.

Nemo fought as hard as he could, but he knew that it was nowhere near his actual ability. The effects of the Blackfire had made him more tired. His precise stabs were sloppy and did not always hit their mark. He concentrated hard, hoping that if he could focus, he could gain his ability back. But even he noticed that he was slightly sluggish as he moved.

He wanted to help Gwen; he was worried that although she battled even now, after everything that had happened, she might not be fighting at her prime. He noticed that her style was much different. Though she didn't seem to acknowledge the shift, Nemo could see that her attacks were less calculated than how she usually fought. Gwen was fighting with a more primal urge than what she had used before. Instead of smooth, flowing attacks, every strike was felt by everyone around. There was passion in her attack, as if she channeled all of her emotion into her fighting.

It wasn't entirely clear as of yet whether this new style was a good or bad thing, but before Nemo could move in to assist, the quartermaster of the *Deimos* approached him. Bastian, he thought his name was, not that it was important to him. With an insidious smile, he stood between Nemo and the pool.

"I've been waiting for this for some time," he spat.

"I hope I do not disappoint you then," Nemo panted, trying not to show his weariness. He thought he caught the slightest hint of a smirk at the edge Bastian's lips before he charged in for the attack.

He had forgotten how powerful Bastian's strikes were when he first fought him on the *Deimos*. Each attack was a strain to keep him from penetrating his defenses. Nemo was normally very proficient in reading others' moves, but every so often, his opponent would go out of focus. The cave would illuminate and deluminate with the fire of the caster fight, but the lingering entropic effects were taking their toll.

Bastian raised his blade to come down on Nemo. He brought up his own sword to guard, but missed the feint and Bastian aimed his blade straight for him. Nemo barely dodged it in time, but his sword sliced into his side. Instinctively, he brought his cutlass from its guarding position, slashing downwards. He felt the resistance of iron upon skin as Bastian obtained a new scar across the unblemished side of his face. The shot was lucky and deep enough to catch his eye. Bastian cried out in agony, clutching his face. Nemo took this opportunity to charge him, but Bastian swung back at him, narrowly missing his chest. Now they both had their own disability to deal with as they fought. The fight was far from over, but at least Nemo had evened the odds a little bit.

The crews of the *Fenris* and of the *Deimos* fought hard against each other, neither side letting up. The sound of metal clashing filled the whole cavern. However, the crew of the *Deimos* was much more difficult to overcome than last time. This time, their agenda called for the deaths of Gwen and her crew, instead of letting them live to lead them here. They fought just as competently as the *Fenris* crew did, but their attacks were much more brutal. On top of that, Alice's surprise attack had caught some of the crew off guard. Crow hobbled next to Ryder, his leg almost useless from the damage it had taken. Skylana had incredible difficulty getting to those who required healing, forcing her to spend much of her magical energy to protect herself or others. She was starting to run low on her mana, and she knew that Talis probably wasn't too

far behind.

But despite their disadvantage, the *Fenris* crew still held their own. Though their enemies were now more difficult, Skylana's healing became an invaluable asset, as Alice was the only spellcaster the *Deimos* had, and Talis had her sufficiently preoccupied. Ryder's imbued blades had given them a chance, crippling enemies that he had successfully struck. They were just strong and quick enough to at least keep up with the fight. Even Gwen was matching Thomas blow for blow, each pouring their all into the fight.

Alice knew that with three mages against one, they were slowly starting slip into a disadvantage. As she cast her spells and avoided Talis', she knew that she had to turn the battle back to their side. With quick glances to the battlefield, she saw that the crewman that kept the keys to the cage was clutching his severed hand, trying to prevent the acid damage from eroding the rest of his arm.

This was taking too long. She needed to act now.

After Talis sent another fireball towards her, she raised her hands and clapped them together. The thunderous echo from her hands rushed towards Talis, throwing him back against the cavern wall. The mage saw stars for several moments.

Alice turned towards the feral Malocchio, who was thrashing against the gate, smelling spilled blood and almost dying to taste it. Raising her hand high, she clenched it into a tight fist and made a knocking motion once... then twice...

Before she could knock a third time, something had latched onto Alice's arm, forcing it behind her back. She let out a small cry as her forearm was raised upwards.

"You're done with tha' now," a low, gravelly whisper spoke. Scarbeth's grip tightened upon her wrist, but Alice's eyes narrowed. A gout of black flame began to envelop Scarbeth. He could hear his breath laboring as he forced himself to hold onto Alice. His form shrunk against her, but Alice had protected herself this time.

"Hurry up!" he called into the fray. The Blackfire was taking its toll on Scarbeth; it felt like she would burst out of his grip at any moment. But he finally saw a figure dart from the fray and charge towards Alice.

Shade's middle and forefinger poised for striking, but Scarbeth's strength had faded much faster than he had hoped. Before she could get to her sacral chakra, Alice wrenched her arm out of his grasp. Her fist clenched, raised, and bent slightly towards the cage. When Shade disabled her sacral chakra, her most basic of magic had been cut off, but by then, it was too late.

Even if they did not hear the sound of the lock clicking, everyone in the cavern heard the iron gate crashing open as the monstrous wolf burst out of its confines. For a second, the fight came to a screeching halt to observe exactly what had been done. Shade did not get a chance to finish disabling the rest of Alice's chakras before she was interrupted. Talis' vision finally cleared to see the horror that had emerged. Even Gwen stopped to witness the terrible, awe-inspiring figure of the creature. She had not seen one in the flesh in such a long time and seeing it unbound made her realize the fear that everyone had when they first saw her.

The monstrous Malocchio charged into the battle towards the closest targets, where Shade was trying to support a weakened Scarbeth.