

("This is a story based on the Live-Action Roleplaying Game known as 'RenQuest' at the Bristol Renaissance Faire. As fanfiction, this story is non-canonical. The events and dialogue are intended as good-natured parody, and are not endorsed by Bristol Cast, Writing Staff or Administration.")

This story takes place in an alternate universe timeline, parallel to the one in which 'The Story of Tovias Farraday' occurs. – Dave)

"Another World"

A Renquest Fanfiction by David Manley

Questing Year 2010

"You there... urchin. What is it you are *doing* over there?"

"It is... It is... my endeavor at a performance, m'lady. Like the others about this lovely faire..."

"Hm. I've no need for this mockery of extravagance, this gathering of bottom-feeders... but you call this display of yours a *performance*?"

"I- Indeed, m'lady. It is..."

"He's no different from the rest of them. What say we put him out of his misery? Get some practice before we settle matters with the Claw?"

"True, perhaps, but I do feel that *somewhere* in that ratty robe, dirty skin and louse-ridden hair, there may yet be something worth hearing from this little gutter rat... he makes for a unique change of pace from the usual fools and jesters in this sad little city... So tell me, 'performer'; what is the *moral* of your little play?"

"I... I don't know that, m'lady. What sort of moral is there in a life like mine? I did only as my family wished, and my family did only as came naturally to them... and our reward? That they should be *slaughtered* like cattle, and their only surviving son lives off of *scraps*, hoping for pity where there is none. Wishing for a miracle that will never come. My lady, I look to these people, to this *place* and I... I see no moral. No justice. I see only a prison painted with lies... I see only the life I wish I had again."

"What is your name, performer?"

"T- Tovias Farraday, m'lady."

"Know you how to read and write?"

"The Queen's English, yes, M'lady. As well as some history and mathematics... I was to be trained in linguistics as well."

"An educated vagrant. How novel."

"My... mother and father insisted upon it."

"You intrigue me... I would be interested in hearing of this upbringing of yours, and how it may relate to your- shall we say- current dramatic endeavor. Seek me anon, Tovias Farraday- Lady Katherine Tso... for I believe we have much to discuss, you and I."

"Get out of my way! GET OUT OF MY WAY! I must see her!"

"Be off, urchin! She is not for your eyes- not for the eyes of trash such as you!"

Dusk had fallen over the small, isolated cabin some miles away from the port town of Bristol... and yet, it did not carry with it the peace and tranquility one might have expected.

The young man in the ratty gray robe had followed the crowd of strange men and women- the small trail of blood they had left as they departed the town- and was now struggling with reckless abandon to pass by the two red-and-black guardsmen who kept him from entering.

"Enough of this. Kill the wretch." One of the men growled, lashing out and grabbing the slender, robed urchin by his wiry arms. The other guard reached to his waist and drew a dagger from his belt... but the very instant it left its sheath, the struggling man lashed out with both legs to knock it away. Writhing in the guard's grip, he bit down ravenously on his hand, and pried himself away as the larger man recoiled in pain.

The robed man fell to the ground, grabbing the dagger and plunging it into the gut of the man who had drawn it. Over and over again, he pulled the blade free only to drive it back into the guard's bowels.

"You rat!" The other guard reached down and grabbed the hilt of his short sword, only to go perfectly still as the door to the cabin opened.

"Mistress Lin..." The guard gasped, as the robed man turned toward the cabin door. "This little bastard is-!"

"Be silent." The woman who now stood in the doorway- a handsome woman of the Eastern Lands- spoke curtly, paying surprisingly little heed to the corpse at her feet. She looked to the trembling man in the now bloody mess of a robe.

"You are... what has happened?" Tovias Farraday asked, his lower jaw quivering as much as his bloodsoaked hands. "What has happened to Lady Katherine?"

"Hrmh." MinMei gave Tovias a dark, appraising glance, one that acknowledged his unkempt visage and his unpleasant odor, but spoke nevertheless. "She is... not long for this world. Our healer has done everything that she can, but-"

"No! No, I must-!" Tovias' face drained of color, chalk-white as he staggered toward the door. MinMei, however, swiftly drew her sword and brought it to the level of Tovias' neck.

"There is nothing you can do." MinMei growled. "You would do best to turn and leave this place; leave the dying in peace, that she might not suffer the presence of scum like yourself in her final moments."

There was a long moment of quiet... but then;

"Let him pass, MinMei."

The voice had come- albeit weakly- from just beyond the dark doorway, almost inaudible, but the silence had allowed her voice to flow from the depths easily enough.

"Lady Tso..." MinMei called back over her shoulder, but Tovias did not pay her heed any longer. Quite literally, he pushed past her and rushed into the cabin.

There were several other figures who he couldn't see gathered densely around one of the small domicile's bedchambers. Most of them gave noises of confusion and distaste as the distraught man shoved his way past them until finally staggering into the room.

The interior was less than suitable for any kind of nobility, built of rugged wood and musty furniture. Some of this was offset by the smell of incense burning, and the light of several candles casting an eerie glow all around.

However, what drew Tovias' eye- as it had from the very first- was the visage of Lady Katherine Tso... who now lay on her back on the chamber bed.

"Lady Katherine!" Tovias cried raggedly, falling to his knees at her side. The dagger fell to the ground, his hands fumbling before him. At last, they clutched one another over his mouth in horror.

She had been stripped of her magnificent gown, covered only by off-white sheets, some of which were stained a dark crimson at the level of her abdomen. Her face was ashen white, her scarlet lips and raven hair seemingly more so by comparison. Already, her beautiful, piercing eyes were misting over, her pain giving way to oblivion by inches.

"Tovias Farraday..." The woman said softly, her eyes showing nothing as her head tilted to face him in the obsidian pool of her hair. Her voice showed not the slightest hint of emotion. "The educated vagrant... you have come, as I asked..."

"Her injuries are severe." Tovias had not noticed the other woman upon entering- the tall, voluptuous, deceptively sweet-faced woman, whose broken voice called out softly from behind Tovias' shoulder. "There is naught that can be done for her."

"My Lady..." Tovias' voice collapsed under the weight of grief, his head falling forward to bury itself in the mattress upon which she lay.

"Are you crying?" Tso asked quietly... but again, her voice was cold, unfeeling... *calculating*.

"I... I am..." Tovias answered, bringing his head up from the mattress again, willingly revealing his tears to her. "Who has done this... why-?"

"Know you not who I am? What I am? I am Lady Katherine Tso, of the Draco Disciples... I have killed many, stolen the honor of the Paragon of Fire, I am descended of the Soulless One... and possess naught but a crippled half-soul myself... and yet, you would cry for me?"

"I would... my lady." Tovias replied simply, his hands reaching down and take hold of her chill, white one, his thumb caressing the back of her palm as though praying his touch may give her what relief her healer could not.

She said nothing, merely staring expectantly at him.

With a shiver, Tovias began again amid his tears.

"I... you were... My family was killed when I was but eight years old... and from that day on, for twenty years, I have not seen a face- seen eyes- the likes of yours... eyes that remind me so much of them." He whispered. His hands

squeezed hers gently. Bowing his head to try to collect his thoughts, he continued, "When I found you- or perhaps, when you found *me*... I thought that my days of wandering alone in this world were over... for the first time in two decades, I had found one who smiled upon me as they once did... it was a smile no less radiant than that of a Goddess... Lady Katherine, I fell in love with you that very moment."

There were sounds of some distress coming from the crowd behind him, but something silenced it quickly enough.

Immediately- the second the word 'love' left Tovias' lips- Tso looked back to her impromptu healer- to Ruby Nightshade- and gave her the slightest of nods.

"Are you *certain*, Katherine?" The poisoner asked, her eyes widening, although Tovias could only continue to stare with a puzzled expression behind his tears.

"Master Farraday... Tovias." Tso addressed him, the very act of it causing his tears to run anew. "Do you know why I wished to speak with you?"

"No..." The robed man replied, weakly shaking his head.

"Your family... was bound by marriage to the Arathos Family."

"Yes..." Tovias nodded, biting his lower lip. "Know you of my-?"

"The Arathos Family were worshippers of my Goddess... of the Dark Mother... of Tiamat." She whispered softly, reaching up with her free hand and caressing his cheek with the delicate skin of her fingertips. "As one who shares their blood, you carry the blessing of that family... *Her* blessing. Your potential is greater than you could ever have imagined in your pitiful life."

Tovias reached up to wipe his own tears away, that he might more clearly see her face as she spoke to him. In spite of the things she said, every last word was so terribly precious to him.

"Tovias... your power can be awakened... and be made greater still... greater than any other in the world."

"I care not." Tovias said suddenly. "If I cannot save you, then what is power worth?!"

"Nothing can prevent my death now." Tso replied coldly. "My soul will find no refuge in heaven nor hell... It is- and has ever been- broken, incomplete, and will do naught but decay until nothingness remains. However, if you do as I ask, then I shall live on... within you. Where I cannot be saved, I may yet be avenged."

"... What is it you would ask of me, my lady?" Tovias asked, trying to brace himself in spite of his grieving weakness.

"Before I die, you must consume my heart as it still beats."

Tovias' eyes were aghast.

"Never! I would *never*... not... you cannot ask this of me!"

"My body is no longer of use, Tovias... it is merely a shell which houses a soul that will only fall to dust in time... my only salvation lies with you... the vagrant who survived the world's tortures for two decades, just so he might aid Lady Katherine Tso in this, her hour of greatest need."

"But my lady-..." Tovias cried out... but was silenced by her hand upon his lips.

"You *must* do this... this is the final request of the woman you love."

"No!" Came a shout from outside the bedchamber once again. "You treasonous witch; you would usurp the power of Simeon Maleficus through this... through this gypsy scum!?"

"And who are we to care for that overstuffed windbag if *this* Praetor becomes greater than he?" another voice countered, "Goddess knows Lady Tso achieved greater things in her time as a mere *soldier* than he ever did sitting on his miserable laurels!"

"Then you and yours are traitors at well!? So be it!"

There was a great uproar from the crowd as a battle began- those loyal to the Praetor taking up arms against the few who were loyal to Lady Tso... but as one of them began to shove his way into the bedchamber, he was dragged back and impaled upon MinMei's rapier.

"Do as you must," the warrior-woman shouted from the melee, "but do it swiftly!"

Tovias looked back to Lady Tso, tears and horror still stark upon his face... but the fear gave way to sorrow... to more tears as Ruby crouched to retrieve the dagger Tovias had dropped.

Coming to stand behind him, the poisoner placed the dagger in Tovias' hands, and guided his arms to level the tip of the blade over the beautiful woman's breast.

"May we be together always..." Katherine said, her unfeeling voice producing a striking imitation of sentiment... yet not a tear was shed.

"I love you..." Tovias breathed, his eyes locked with hers...

...then squeezing shut as the knife pierced her ivory skin.

Rise...

Rise, Tyrannus Feldrake...

Rise, and seek our vengeance...

Rise, and kill...

"That's the last of them... now to finish off the poisoner and that miserable urchi -... what...!?"

"What is it? What's-... Oh Goddess, it can't be-!"

"... stop... *breathing*."

"DARK MOTHER, HE-"

"Finish him! Kill him now! Befo-"

"He just- Oh GODDESS, NO!"

"RUN!"

"GET OUT OF-"

"No, NO, GET AWAY FROM-!!!"

"NO!!!"

In the aftermath of the unmitigated death that played out before her, Ruby stared at the resulting carnage... and at the robed man who stood in the center of it all.

What was once Tovia Farraday said nothing, only staring forward as he stood and walked toward the cabin door... crimson droplets falling from his fingertips.

"We would... we would do well to retrieve Thomas... he was loyal to Katherine as well, and awaits us in the Bristol Dungeon."

But he was well beyond hearing her.

All he could hear was the voice of his beloved echoing in his mind:

The Band...

The Gypsies...

Edana...

Thoren...

Kill them all...

Kill them...

Kill them...

Kill...

Kill...

One Year Later (Questing Year 2011)...

Ruby Nightshade walked briskly down the upstairs hallway of the grand estate in which they- Tyrannus Feldrake and his followers- now resided. Her footfalls were echoed closely by another set, these bearing the sharp clacking that accompanied stiletto heels.

Her companion- a rather unsettled but nonetheless beautiful young woman- looked around with wide, nervous eyes as she followed Ruby, taking in the vast, elegant surroundings. She bore long, raven curls, impromptu Disciple regalia and a deep voice breathed through voluminous crimson lips.

The manor house had been part of the English land holdings belonging to Lady Katherine Tso... and as such, they now belonged to Praetor Tyrannus. Several of her old servants and many signs of her former wealth could still be seen hovering about the place, but it was for the most part dark and silent, even in the light of day.

"Mistress Nightshade..." The other woman began as Ruby came to stand before a large door at the end of the hallway... one which, Ruby knew, led to the mansion's study. "... I do not know if."

"He will accept you." Ruby said reassuringly. "He needs only my word of recommendation. I have earned his trust, and so shall those to whom I have extended personal invitation."

"But..." The newcomer trembled slightly, looking to the door once again.

Scarlett Olivia Harrison had not been a Draco Disciple from birth, as most other Disciples were... although she certainly acted the part.

More than once, Scarlett had been party to the death of her husband, and the sole beneficiary of his estate. She had gone through no less than four (brief) marriages in this fashion, each time selling off the lands and making off with the resulting fortune within a day or two of the death.

Her well-practiced crocodile tears, her immense wealth and... other assets... had done well in keeping her from suffering any legal repercussions resulting from this practice.

In all likelihood, this would have continued into Bristol had she not chanced to meet Ruby in a Kingswood tavern.

Ruby happened to be there on Draco business, spreading the word of and recruiting for the new Praetor...

After the wholesale slaughter of Simeon's Bristol followers- those whom the former Praetor had sent with Katherine to ensure she was successful (or perhaps not)- Ruby (with a less-than-balanced Tyrannus in tow) had spent the year tying up a few loose ends: recovering a few followers and belongings of Lady Tso, for starters. They had attempted to acquire the Gem of Souls at first to curry favor with the Dark Mother before she had become... estranged.

Ultimately, they had given up on the endeavor at Tyrannus' insistence.

There was one item of business which he had avoided altogether for the time being... that of dealing with the Band of the Twisted Claw.

In truth, Tyrannus knew very little about them; all he *did* know was that Edana Dragonborn and Thoren Grymm were at the forefront of those already dead in his mind.

They were to blame for Lady Katherine's demise, and they would suffer dearly for it.

But not yet.

"I am aware of his reputation... and it is well deserved." Ruby said quietly, casting her glance down and away from Scarlett. "Nevertheless, there is still some semblance of a dear friend within him... one that trusts me, and to whom I would trust my life."

Reaching out, Ruby placed a hand on Scarlett's shoulder to give it a reassuring squeeze.

"Go in."

Scarlett gave Ruby one last apprehensive look, before the latter pushed open the study door.

After a moment of hesitation, Scarlett took a deep breath and walked inside, Ruby sweeping in behind her.

The study was a stately and elegant place, befitting its former owner. Large ebony bookshelves with matching chairs and a large desk filled the room, all of which was overseen by a window on the room's opposite end. Only the sheer curtains were drawn, allowing the afternoon sun to illuminate the room with a dulled glow.

Standing at one of the bookshelves, flipping through what looked to be some sort of journal was a young man in a fresh, fitted robe with short-cut hair.

"Lord Feldrake..." Scarlett called out softly, her practiced, sultry voice choking a bit at the abject terror that came with the notion that she may do something wrong, and pay dearly for it.

However, the young man only returned the book to its place on the shelf amid the others, before turning his gaze to the newcomer.

"Lady Harrison." He replied. Scarlett was not used to being addressed by a male who was not immediately and completely dominated by her wiles... but then, this was probably what she should have expected. Besides, from what Ruby had told her, some part of the individual before her was not 'male' at all...

"Mistress Nightshade has told me a great deal about you."

"I believe she would be a valuable asset to us, Lord Feldrake." Ruby chimed in immediately, in a cheerful-but-not-overly-so tone.

"How so?" The man answered coolly, the response causing a bit more color to drain from Scarlett's face.

Ruby, however, did not seem quite as concerned.

"She would serve us well as a negotiator, I believe." She continued, moving to stand between Tyrannus and Scarlett. "A negotiator, and a seducer, besides; There are few men who could resist even her slightest request."

"Hrm." Tyrannus only shrugged, walking away from his second and toward his desk. His robes rustled in a way that seemed unnatural- disturbed by a wind that was not readily apparent. "... Can she be taught the ways of combat? Martial or magical?"

"I have-!" Scarlett began, her tone already pleading, as though anything Ruby said would be less than satisfactory for the man before them. She went immediately silent, however. Slowly she reached up with one hand nervously favoring her throat until she realized both Ruby and Tyrannus were now staring at her, waiting for her to finish.

"I... I have trained with a blade... One of my former husbands began to teach me before he passed. I believe I may build upon the foundation he has provided."

"Good." Tyrannus nodded, before looking back to his bookshelf. "Ruby, take her to Thomas. Have him report to me once she is of some use."

"With all due respect, my Lord..." Ruby began, "I believe she would serve us far better as a mediator- as a-

"There is no one with whom we need to 'barter' or 'negotiate', Mistress Nightshade." Tyrannus retaliated coldly.

"Negotiations are for those we see as equals or superiors... what we must do is demonstrate who is superior *now*."

Scarlett was shaking ever so slightly... this was not particularly what she was expecting from this meeting, and even Ruby was rather taken aback. However, the latter bowed and reached out, taking Scarlett by the arm and guiding her out the door.

After a few moments- as Ruby informed Scarlett where she was to go- Ruby reentered the study with a slow sigh.

"I have done as you asked; her training will begin presently."

"Excellent."

There was a moment of unsettling quiet, before Ruby spoke again.

"May I ask what it is you seek in Katherine's old journals?"

"These do not all belong to Lady Katherine." Tyrannus murmured, his voice quiet as he spoke her name. He reached up, gesturing to one row of books in particular: "Many of these are old journals belonging to Praetors of the past... Lady Vermillion... Mistress Ai... Lord Strothberg... Baron Equinoss..."

"What sort of enlightenment is it you are trying to find?" She asked, the edge of her lip quirked oddly, as though trying to hide a mote of sarcasm.

"You needn't concern yourself with that... not yet." He replied, his own voice suddenly cold as he turned on her.

"More importantly... were you able to find him?"

Ruby's breath caught for a moment, but at last, she bowed her head.

"The Dark Mother mocks us." Tyrannus hissed. "She has told me that Simeon attempts to take back the power I 'stole' from him..." His pale, slender features contorted into a snarl. "I assumed he would do so, but now Tiamat seems to take active *pleasure* in it..."

"I... presume there is no love lost for Lady Katherine where Tiamat is concerned..." Ruby said, the hint of cynicism dissolving as the revelation struck her:

She had sided with what remained of her best friend over her Goddess.

"Lady Tso 'failed her' as a servant, and a soulless death was to be her punishment... but now she lives, and Tiamat's position of greatest power- her most critical anchor and foothold in the world- is held by me... a street urchin." His eyes closed, turning to lean back against the desk. "I could murder a million of her enemies, and still her pride would never tolerate that single disgrace. Simeon may have achieved no more than Lady Katherine ever did, but she would rather see him return to power than allow me to hold it any longer."

"We are still her worshippers... perhaps-"

"Perhaps *what*, Ruby? Perhaps we should *allow* it? You know damned well what that would mean."

As he spoke, Ruby found herself unconsciously stepping back... she could feel his anger beginning to mount- his power to spike.

Ruby had witnessed Tyrannus' power firsthand... understood its nature better than anybody else.

Tovias Farraday's power- the power unlocked within the Arathos family by dark and terrible magics- was the ability to convert hatred into raw energy; such energy was wild, difficult to control, and yet far more potent than other 'aligned' magics.

Lady Katherine Tso was well versed in many forms of eldritch knowledge, having done years of research... however, most of those spells- lethal as they were- were impractical, requiring many rare components or more power than she was able to project on her own...

But now, her knowledge was the core of a limitless arcane battery.

Together, they were the ultimate magical weapon.

"Power of the Praetor be damned... If Simeon were to succeed, Lady Katherine would disappear. Forever." He reached up slowly, placing a hand over his beating heart.

Ruby said nothing, but her eyes softened as she looked to him.

"I cannot allow that, Ruby."

"But what can we do?" Ruby asked, walking to the shelf of books. "We would be able to find him easily, but now Tiamat herself masks his location. The only thing we can do is hope to seek him out by word of mouth... but there are not many who would give up his location; to do so would be to stand in open defiance of both him and of Tiamat herself."

"Simeon has made many enemies..." Tyrannus spoke... and there was an ominous presence in his voice; and words that may not have been his own. "And in his and Tiamat's desperation to be rid of me, he may have made even more."

At that moment, Ruby suddenly stiffened, her eyes widening.

"Speak of the Devil and he appears..." A smile- subtle at first, but widening into a full grin- spread across Tyrannus' face as he recognized the symptoms of a Sending spell being received. From the way Ruby was twitching, it was a rudimentary one as well; cast by someone who was not experienced in magic.

"Lord Feldrake... Simeon Malificus means to take refuge in Chester... He will sacrifice his daughter in order to fulfill the requirements of the Praetor Ritual."

"... And to whom do I owe thanks for this information?" Tyrannus asked simply, already beginning to focus himself for a teleportation spell; perhaps Tovia had never been to Chester, but Lady Katherine certainly had been in her time... but there was one more stop that needed to be made. "And where might I find you?"

"A manor... what's left of it... several miles south of the city..." Ruby continued, letting out a cough on behalf of the sender:

"... My name is Vinz Clortho."

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The interior of Simeon's estate in Chester was precisely what one might have expected of the Disciples' former Praetor; well appointed in terms of furnishings, and bearing a decor that bordered between elegant and frightening. Stylized statuettes of dragons were hung and mounted all about the main hall, and within every nook and cranny... a passing observer would have merely thought the place's occupant simply had an infatuation with old fairy tales and legends.

This would not have been far off.

There was a loud, choking scream which was all at once silenced, and a human body- decked with blades and black and red clothing- fell to the ground, very much dead.

A black-booted foot stomped over the fallen form- a boot belonging to the cold, fearsome visage of Tyrannus Feldrake.

Just behind him stood a worried-looking Ruby Nightshade, and Thomas Wisseu who- for his part- looked right at home walking in the blood-trail left by his new master. Behind the two of them staggered Vinz Clortho, still wounded from his earlier encounter with the Praetor.

"We should have brought Scarlett along." The assassin remarked, "She could have used the field experience."

Tyrannus did not bother to reply. Instead he only walked forward, heading for a bookcase along one wall of the chamber. Arcs of searing light clove through the wood and paper, sending it collapsing to the ground and revealing an empty wall.

Scarlett would have been a mere hindrance, and this was a key moment. As it was, bringing Vinz along was a liability.

Seeing the empty wall, Tyrannus unleashed several more blasts of magical energy that decimated the bookshelves and other decorations. More and more of the wall was revealed... until a dark hallway was revealed amid a mass of mechanical devices attached to the bookshelf that hid it.

"I suppose that's one way to do it..." Vinz muttered, inwardly wincing at the number of books that had been destroyed in the process.

He would not have voiced his objections though, and even if he would have he missed his opportunity by leagues as Tyrannus stalked toward the tunnel.

Already, he could hear muffled cries within its depths.

Hurry... hurry, you fool! The pretender approaches!

Simeon frantically ran this way and that about the mansion's hidden cellar, throwing over vials and grasping for various ritualistic devices. He seized a curved dagger off of one shelf, throwing it onto what looked like an altar in the middle of the room.

"Keep that blasted door secure!" He snarled to a small group of armed men, draped in red and black, all of whom were clustered around a stairway leading upstairs.

The men said nothing, raising their pistols and swords- but gasping in apprehension as the bookshelf concealing the door was blasted to wood and paper shrapnel.

The former Praetor ran back to the altar, on which squirmed and struggled the form of a young girl bearing fiery red hair and freckles unbefitting the daughter of a sinister cult-leader. She wore the same sort of black and red as the other men and women who served Simeon- served *Tiamat*- but in addition she sported an unsightly cloth gag that muffled her grunting, screaming words.

"Don't worry, Estella." Simeon said, his eyes flashing wildly as he turned his attention back to her, approaching her and taking up the dagger he'd tossed onto the altar, "At the very least, you will be able to see your beloved mother again."

Quickly he stood at the center of the altar, raising the blade in both hands in that practiced way as he had done once before... But at that moment, there was a blast that rocked the foundations of the manor house, and the room's occupants with it.

Stumbling to regain his footing, he looked across the room, hearing the crack of gunshots and cries of pain as his men fought in vain against the coming horror.

"Damn!" Simeon hissed, looking down at the form of his daughter.

He said nothing, swiftly raising and bringing down the dagger, and Estella let out another muffled scream as blood streamed from where the blade bit into her torso.

Simeon began to lurch forward, intending to pry her ribcage apart, but a blinding ray of searing white light arched over her, sending him hurtling back into the chamber's stone wall.

The mage grunted and fell to the ground, frantically trying to stand once more- though now tending to a grievous burn wound in his chest. Estella lay still on the altar, the knife still standing out from her body. She was still alive, but she had passed out from the sheer agony of the attempted ritual.

"You might as well stay down." Simeon clenched his teeth as he heard a voice address him from the stairway- where his men now lay as a pile of bloodied corpses (and pieces of such).

"A rat would not dare to order a king." Simeon snarled back, standing again swiftly. "As a peasant and a private would do well not to reckon with Simeon Malificus."

Tyrannus Feldrake stepped down the stairs, though now followed only by Vinz Clortho (at whom Simeon growled lethally).

"A long time has passed since Lady Katherine was a mere private of the Disciples..." Tyrannus replied, "and just as long a time has passed since you possessed the power to ever compare yourself to a king."

"The Dark Mother will never accept you, or her fallen daughter." Simeon retorted, "Tso's age has come and gone, and it is high time you- and she- understood that."

"An unfortunate choice of words, Malificus." Tyrannus replied, and for a moment his voice seemed to split- the sound of Tso's piercing, commanding tone rising to be heard over Tyrannus' hissing, hate-filled one. "If *you* are the one in whom the Dark Mother has placed her faith- you who have failed so very many times- then I would suggest my time has 'gone' prematurely."

Simeon looked from the body of his daughter back to Tyrannus, to Vinz and back to Estella.

"Choose wisely." Tyrannus said, raising a hand which glowed with an ivory light.

Simeon said nothing... but snarled, and suddenly vanished from the room, leaving only Tyrannus, Vinz and a bleeding Estella behind.

"... Very well."

"Estella!" Vinz called out, rushing down the stairs- though keeping as wide a distance from Tyrannus as he could manage. He ran to the girl's side, carefully reaching up to take hold of the ritual knife. He turned his head to call over his shoulder for Ruby to come down... but his voice was cut off before he could properly do so.

Tyrannus was still standing there, magical energy coalescing around his arm, eyes fixed on Estella.

"W- What are-!?"

"Stand aside." Tyrannus stated plainly. "As long as the girl lives, Simeon may use her to re-attain his position, and as I once said to Nightshade... I cannot allow that."

"Please!" Vinz shouted, turning to stare the Praetor in the face, remaining between him and the girl. "Don't do this... she never wanted a part in his plan. She hated him for Fianna's sake- for her mother- for what he did to her!"

"If you plead for lives, you would best begin with your own." Tyrannus scowled at him.

"W- what?!" Vinz asked, his face going instantly pale as his expression grew to one of disbelief. "Why? I gave you what you want, Master Feldrake. You have no reason to do this! Estella perhaps, but I can assure you she would never-!"

"Silence." Tyrannus commanded sharply. "I smell *treachery* on you; Just as you betrayed Simeon, you would betray *me*... and pressed hard enough, you would sacrifice even this girl to do so; if not to save your miserable life, then for the sake of what you believe to be power."

"I... I-" Vinz stammered, looking back at Estella.

After so long obsessing over vengeance upon Simeon for taking Fianna from him, after so long seeing Estella as a friend and companion... he could not imagine what could ever possess him to throw her life away as easily as Simeon had Fianna's.

"Die now, and beg in vain." Tyrannus said... but as he raised his arms, Vinz's voice pierced the silence of the room once again- this time as the shorter man fell to his knees.

"Please... Please, there must be something- *anything* in this world that you desire. Even a man so powerful... I beg of you. Let Estella live, at the very least, but if you allow me to live as well, I will give you anything you want. Name your price and I will gladly pay it; I will help you find Simeon. I will help you kill him, even. I will help you find more followers, I will... I..."

"A worthless snake, crawling on your miserable belly..." He said... but suddenly he stopped.

Thomas and Ruby had begun to make their way down the stairs- although not too far in case Tyrannus decided he had no need for *them* as well. They both looked on in mild confusion as- like before- a voice began to take precedence over Tyrannus' fury-laden tone.

This one did not belong to Lady Tso.

If any of them knew it, Ruby Nightshade knew it well.

"... There is... one thing I want."

Vinz did not dare rise to his feet, but he turned up toward the Praetor who now looked down on him with eyes that were softer... almost *sad*.

"... I want you to find a way... to bring Lady Katherine Tso back to this world."

Vinz's eyes widened behind his glasses.

"You may see Estella, but you may not leave my library until you have done so... is that understood?"

No... what are you doing? Lady Katherine Tso asked, her voice resonating in Tyrannus' mind. *Even if such a thing were possible, do you not understand what such a thing would mean?*

I do... and I do not care.

No strength can match ours, and yet you would-

I would, my lady... I would.

... Why...?

...

You little fool

"W... Why?" Vinz asked, his eye quirked. "Lady Katherine Tso is dead... her body and soul lost thanks to the Praetor Ritual. She has no spirit to resurrect, and even if she were to return, where would it go?"

"Those are my terms." Tyrannus- or Tovias- replied. "Find a way to bring her back... and I do not care what happens to me, to the Praetor's power... you can have it, if you want; Just... let me look into her eyes one more time."

Vinz was dumbstruck. He looked upon the man who had just butchered more than a dozen men before his eyes- had just threatened to annihilate both himself and Estella- and yet who had become a rather pitiable, helpless pup right in front of him.

He had never seen that devastated grief on Simeon's face, nor could he remember it in the annals of Draco Disciple history.

Everything before this was simple mocking imitation;

Tovias had made a true 'sacrifice'.

"I... accept." Vinz bowed, rising to his feet. "I will research every book you possess- every tome in this world until I have found a way to return your love to you. I swear it."

"Very well..." Tyrannus nodded, ignoring the tear that rolled down his cheek as he gestured to Estella. "Thomas,

assist Vinz with her. Ruby can tend to her upon our return."

"What about Simeon?" Ruby asked, descending the stairs as well.

"The time will come when he and I will meet again." Tyrannus stated, bowing his head.

"In the meantime... we had best make ready."

With that, Tyrannus, Ruby, Thomas, Vinz and Estella disappeared, leaving only the empty laboratory in their wake.

Two Years Later (Questing Year 2012)...

It was uncertain what Simeon was planning in the year during which he was absent from Tyrannus' and even the Gypsies' radar. Most likely he was gathering what pieces of Tiamat's power he could scrounge together, whatever ancient artifacts he could find, as well as mustering the armies still loyal to the both of them.

Tyrannus was growing stronger. It should not have been possible; the very idea of being Praetor- Tiamat's favored- was that such favor could be taken away at any time... and yet, Tyrannus' power remained.

The peace and silence of St. Xavier's library was cut short by a short, sharp cry of dismay.

Instantly, the dozens of the mages and supernatural outcasts young and old looked up from their many and myriad books, their gazes converging upon a single table, on a single person...

To the untrained eye- to those who did not know better- it would have appeared to be nothing more than an ordinary young woman in her late-teens, dark of skin and of hair. She was dressed in very plain, earthy colored skirts with a white blouse and well-worn boots.

"Is something the matter, Miss Edana?"

The girl suddenly straightened, having realized what had just happened. Looking around, Edana Dragonborn shrunk a little where she sat amid a cluster of open history books.

"Or have you simply had enough of bettering yourself through higher learning?"

"No! No. Not at all." Edana replied with a tone that was both bashful, and betraying a quiver of extant terror. "I just... I just dozed off... had a nightmare... My apologies, Father Charles."

"None needed..." The elder chuckled, giving her a kind little smile as he crouched beside her at the table. "...what is it that troubles you? No ordinary nightmare could ever instill so great a fear as that which I sense in you."

Indeed, Father Charles had always had a sixth sense for that sort of thing.

"It is nothing, truly." Edana answered again, shaking her head and finally getting a hold of herself. "I promise this will not happen again."

Of course, it wasn't 'nothing'; Not at all.

Two years had passed ever since Edana had turned on the woman who- in many respects- was her own flesh and blood... Katherine Tso.

Long ago, the Lord of Light had placed his Elemental Paragons- his avatars and emissaries- on earth to watch and to guide humanity, especially since Tiamat had taken it upon herself to begin meddling in their affairs.

In the course of these events, a human woman Druscilla had become something of a golden child whom the Paragons had chosen to learn their powers and their secrets... but it didn't last.

Druscilla was seduced to the dark side of magic by Tiamat.

In an effort, perhaps, to remove her as a threat, the Paragons used their powers to split Druscilla into two entities; the empty husk of Druscilla whose mortal form was already corrupted by darkness, and her spirit which housed all of her magical energy- honed by the Paragons, yet tainted by Tiamat. This spirit took the form of the great dragon Bloodtharken.

In spite of the great and terrible visage of this new entity, the Paragons knew that somewhere within Bloodtharken, there was potential for good- potential for the Druscilla they had entrusted with their secrets and powers to return in some way.

Unfortunately, through deceit and through force, Tiamat managed to gain control of both Bloodtharken and Druscilla, giving her two powerful soldiers instead of one (albeit weaker than Druscilla might have been before the split).

Time passed; while Druscilla died, her children's children lived on, and so forth until Lady Katherine Tso was born of her line, no less dark and tainted than was her ancestor (though having to rely on implematic and ritual spells, having no inherent magic of her own anymore). Bloodtharken, for her part, retreated when Tiamat's corporeal form was banished to the Abyss in ancient times, living on the outskirts of civilization. She even found a mate, and might have been content to live in relative peace, until said mate was slain.

With renewed vigor and a hatred of mankind, Bloodtharken rejoined the fanatical, proactive followers of Tiamat known as the Draco Disciples an an effort to return their Goddess to the mortal plane.

Bloodtharken was subsequently slain by the descendants of the Soldiers of Light- a band of Gypsies known as the Band of the Twisted Claw.

However, Bloodtharken left behind the hope the Paragons had seen when they created Bloodtharken so many years ago; the egg that would contain she who would come to be known as Edana Dragonborn.

The egg was taken by the Band of the Twisted claw, and Edana later raised and nurtured by the Gypsies, that she might come to understand the notions of love and caring; the ideals of humanity, rather than the darkness of which Tiamat preached.

The ultimate clash between Lady Tso and Edana- with the Paragons, the Gypsies and the Disciples as their proxies- ended with a single blow from Thoren Grymm's blade, wielded by Edana herself.

Since that day, Edana had had nightmares- visions that plagued her both day and night.

The snow was falling rather heavily that evening, and Edana found herself unable to find rest. The nightmare today had been especially vivid.

With it, there was a strange feeling- like something terrible was about to strike.

The last correspondence with her adoptive mother had gleaned very little regarding Bristol, or anything happening there.

Perhaps if it had still only been a year or so since Tso's defeat, she would not have been as troubled... but waiting so long without so much as a sign of Tiamat's forces? They were tenacious- not likely to give up. They still had their Praetor, did they not?

Slowly, Edana sat up and stood from her bed, taking another glimpse out of the dormitory window, biting her lower lip with apprehension.

She was a dragon. In spite of her inexperience- particularly in her natural form- she knew that she was strong enough to deal with almost any threat that came her way.

He was concerned for her family.

She opened the door to her chamber and began to walk its lonely, dimly-lit halls.

She could transform, *fly* to Bristol and check on them herself... she was always discouraged from doing such things, potentially revealing herself- the continued existence of dragons- to the world, but it was certainly an option.

There was also Father Charles. He was usually more than amiable and happy to lend assistance. More than that, he was one of the foremost scryers in the wizarding community. If there were any danger back in Bristol, certainly he would know about it.

But no... it was still the dead of the night. She wasn't about to awaken him over a few bad feelings. She ought to have told him earlier that day at the library. That, or he should already have known, given his natural/supernatural talents.

Suddenly, a deafening 'Boom' rocked the stone walls of St. Xavier's.

For a moment, she had no idea where to go; whether to go back and warn- or even help- as many of the other students as she could manage, or to run to Charles' own chambers as fast as she could manage.

Judging by the sound of the blast, it had actually *come* from Charles' room.

While she- and others- might have considered the old man to be more than capable of fending for himself, her curiosity- and her concern for her new adoptive guardian won out.

She rushed down the many stairs and halls, her body filled with the stamina of a dragon. She was hardly winded by the time she arrived in the hallway containing the door to the old man's quarters. By then she had already seen others awake and running about, trying to sort out what had happened.

Perhaps she was the only one with senses keen enough to have pinpointed the source of the blast.

She took a step toward the door, when suddenly there was another deafening explosion- this one directly in front of her.

Large chunks of stone, bits of shrapnel, mortar and other manner of debris filled the hall, and by the time she could see clearly again, Edana's jaw dropped.

The wall surrounding Charles' door had been obliterated... as well as the opposite wall leading to the courtyard several stories below.

As she recovered from the shock of it, she could hear the wheezing cough from within the settling dust.

"F-Father Charles!" She called out, her body shifting to a wary, defensive posture.

Carefully stepping over the stones and making her way to the new opening in the wall, she was again started by the 'woosh' of a large form rushing past her. It hurtled out the opposite wall, and tumbled into the snow of the courtyard with a muffled 'thud'.

It took her a moment to recognize the blackened body.

"F... Father Charles...?"

Quickly, Edana looked back into the old man's chambers, which had been almost completely destroyed by now; The wall on the room's other side overlooking the countryside had been destroyed, admitting whatever intruder had been responsible for the desolation.

The wind from outside kicked up the dust anew, bringing in a chill that was not merely thanks to the cascading snow.

She could see the silhouette of a cloaked figure standing in the room's remnants.

"Who are you!?" Edana demanded, the righteous hatred in her voice quivering with cold and despair.

The figure turned to face her, slowly raising a hand.

"Let me show you."

For a moment, Edana's world erupted in searing white light.

The entire building was up in arms, preparing themselves while others were running for the courtyard.

Some had already emerged, and stumbled across Father Charles' body which was half-buried in the snow.

Looking up, they saw the gaping hole in the upper floor wall from which he had fallen... only to see another burst of blinding light thunder outward from it.

A small human figure flew into the air of the courtyard, unrecognizable from the ground below... but as they watched, the assembled mages and demihumans gasped.

Edana Dragonborn's human form suddenly shifted, her night-dress splitting to tattered, scorched shreds as her body warped and transformed. Her falling body suddenly caught itself on the wind with leathery wings that split from her back. Her slowed descent landed heavily in the snow on clawed hands and feet, but soon her form launched back into the air with a single slam of a long, scaly tail.

Not a one of those gathered had ever seen Edana's dragon form... few of them had ever seen a dragon, *period*. But now, as they watched her rise in the air, they all felt a twinge of terror as she looked with hateful eyes into the hole she had fallen from.

Standing within it was another human figure, draped in a heavy cloak, unaffected by the winter's bite.

"You... You killed him... you *killed* him!" Edana roared, the beat of her wings and the heat of her breath rustling the figure's cloak even more so than the intense storm.

"Then avenge him, Edana." The figure called back. He was clearly a male, but... not *human*. There was no way he could have been. "I'm waiting for you."

With another roar, Edana beat her wings one time, sending her hurtling forward, into- and through- the hole the figure had made with his blasts.

When she emerged on the opposite side, the figure went with her, knocked from his footing and falling toward the ground.

Edana- as stated before- did not have much experience with her natural form. However, instinct seemed to take over, fueled by overwhelming anger. Her body angled downward, and with another beat of her wings, she sped down toward him.

After what he had done, simply falling to his death was too good for him.

Opening her mouth of swordlike fangs, she felt her anger boiling within, manifesting in a crackling spark at the back of her throat.

With another roar, she unleashed a gout of flames at the figure.

Although he seemed to evaporate instantaneously, Edana twisted her body in mid-air, seeing the man re-materialize some distance behind her. He was not moving, as though gravity had no effect on him.

Another beat of her wings carried her back upward, her fury no less diminished... but now, she could see that the man's winter cloak had disappeared, perhaps incinerated by her breath.

It seemed to be a man in his late twenties, perhaps thirty... his skin was pale, his hair brown and rather unkempt- although that might have been due to his cloak, or the wild winds. His garments were red and black- Tiamat's Colors- but the more she looked, the more familiar his clothes began to look...

And then he saw his eyes...

All our work... all our planning, all for naught... all for naught...

Take heart- perhaps without the Gem of Souls, you can finally learn my grandmother's greatest desire... to once again be human, and to love. Soon you will finish your time here and move on... my mother eagerly awaits you beyond the Lethe river.

Edana stopped in mid-flight, nearly falling back to the ground in her horror.

"That's... that is not...! You are... But you are *dead*... that is not *possible*!"

"Ah... you see it now." The man said softly. "I had expected a warmer welcome for your spiritual sister... the woman you killed."

Edana was no longer listening. She was flying higher, adjusting her body into an aggressive posture.

This was no longer about destroying an assassin.

With an earsplitting screech, the dragon dove down upon her opponent, claws forward, teeth bared, flames roiling up from her gullet.

"If I must kill you again... then so be it!"

At that moment, she felt something wrap around the base of her right wing, like a lashing whip.

She turned just in time to feel the burning pain as the appendage was sheared off by the same white energy, the wing carried on the snowy winds as it hurtled to the ground.

The pain and shock blinded her completely to the notion that- without both wings- she was no longer in control of her trajectory. Her dive veered off to one side, missing the man by only a few feet.

Edana tried to pull away from the face of St. Xavier's, but it was too late; she crashed heavily into the stone wall, before tumbling to the ground in a far less controlled landing than earlier.

A heavy barrage of snow collapsed on top of Edana's body from the roof of the building, half-burying her in white even as blood from her wound stained it red.

She desperately struggled back to her feet, although her body ached, and the loss of her wing left her significantly weak.

"K- Katherine... Katherine Tso..." Edana shuddered as the man reappeared, walking toward her.

"Tyrannus Feldrake." He corrected her. "The name Lady Katherine gave me... on the day she died."

Edana's large body shifted back a pace, before she opened her jaws to release another gout of flame.

The pillar of fire engulfed the approaching figure of Tyrannus... but with a brilliant flash of white, Edana saw the fire extinguished, leaving only a few licks of it to be doused by the melting snow.

"... on the day you killed her."

"She was a monster... she had no heart, no soul... knew nothing of love nor family!" She said, welling up another breath of fire, when suddenly she felt that same sensation of tightness as she had felt around her now-severed wing.

Tyrannus' hands were glowing with energy, and with a sweeping gesture, a sickening 'crack' emanated from her right foreleg.

With a spray of crimson, the limb collapsed beneath her, causing her to collapse to the ground. The dragon screamed with agony as Tyrannus came to stand before her, crackling with torrid white light.

"Lady Katherine is only what your Paragons made of her... Although Druscilla and Bloodtharken may have found salvation, Lady Tso found no such salvation. Born a slave to Tiamat's whims, serving as the Draco Disciples' weapon... and dying simply because you judged her a *thing* incapable of love. Is that what your beloved family taught you? To kill those who believe differently from you? I dare say they would have made fine Draco Disciples themselves."

Edana was about to force herself back up, to unleash fire and fury upon Tyrannus... but another 'snap' echoed in the air as her left hind leg was broken much as the other had been.

"Th- then why... why do *you*... serve them?" Edana whimpered through clenched fangs.

"I serve no one." Tyrannus replied. "My love... Katherine Tso... someone must pay for her death. The Draco Disciples who failed her in her hour of need were the first. Now it is your turn."

"If you... think this will solve anything, then... then kill me." Edana gasped, trying to keep her thoughts coherent despite the horrific damage to her body. "Go on killing... but one day my mother... my family will find you... and you will be stopped."

"Kill you?" Tyrannus murmured, looking up at the parapets of St. Xavier's. "No... I am not here to kill you, Edana."

As he spoke, he slowly knelt in the snow, one hand reaching out and touching her shuddering, smooth-scaled body. She flinched, her shuddering and broken body refusing her commands to lash out at him.

"Then... why...?"

"As you have stated, your family- and even the Disciples will soon be coming for me." He explained, closing his eyes. "I will need to raise an army."

"Never..." She hissed spitefully, a bit of fire flickering from between her jaws. "I will never aid you... no matter what you do to me, I will never-!"

"I do not need you... but to build the army I require..." Tyrannus replied as their bodies began to pulse with energy, snow melting as it came in contact with the aura.

"... I need at least one female dragon."

Edana's eyes were wide with agony and terror as they disappeared from the outer wall, leaving only bloodstains and the shouts of approaching mages.

Three Years Later (Questing Year 2013), somewhere in the cliffs of northern Europe...

The Nordic winds howled mercilessly about the small camp along the snowy mountain path, far from welcoming any visitors to explore its majesty and its hidden secrets. The icy chill whipped through the tent tarps that fought to remain nailed into the frozen ground, threatening to tear them away and send them flying into the distance... as well as its sole occupant.

He did not intend to stay there long.

Tyrannus Fel Drake sat by himself, legs crossed, unhindered by the inclement weather outside. His eyes were closed, deep in focus, while his hands were rested gently upon his knees.

Continue forward... through the darkness. Toward that which is blacker than night, darker than the deepest oceans... where there is no sun, where there is no warmth, this is where you will find the Abyss... where you will find her...

In spite of the man's absolute stillness- not even shivering to regard the cold- his heart was pounding. Sweat beaded and began to trickle from his brow.

All of the terrors he had seen- and even committed- had in no way prepared him for this... for this moment... and yet, with the sound of Lady Tso's voice guiding him, he dared not turn back or even hesitate in his forward progress.

Tyrannus was making a spiritual jaunt into the Abyss... to confront Tiamat directly.

-

Meanwhile, outside, three figures proceeded up the mountain, bundled up as best they could manage from the cold... while remaining ready for anything. Each was girded with steel, each keeping his or her eye just as sharp as their blades.

"I understand Lord Tyrannus' purpose, that he delves into dangerous territory..." The muffled voice of Thomas Wisseu hissed from behind a dark scarf, "but I would very nearly walk through the abyss *myself* if I did not have to endure another minute of this."

"I second that emotion." Scarlett growled as well, reaching up to pull her thick cloak tighter around herself. "If we had traveled all the way here by foot and by ship, I would have left you some time ago."

"Be silent." Ruby called back to the two of them. "I am enjoying this no more than you are, but according to Vinz's research, Vermillion's Clutch ought to be nearby. The sooner we have them, the sooner we can teleport back where we came from."

"How can we trust Clortho?" Scarlett asked, her eyes narrowing behind her own scarf, in part to mask against the oncoming snow. "He may have us chasing shadows, freezing to death for his enjoyment; I cannot say I would do any differently if I were locked in a library for a year."

"And what if Tyrannus fails?" Thomas added. "Then we will have no way back."

"I have faith." Ruby replied simply, staggering a bit as they turned another corner on the mountain path. "I believe in Katherine."

Scarlett and Thomas looked at one another with uncertainty; placing their faith in one who had already died once did not seem like the best idea.

Nevertheless, they pressed on.

Tyrannus continued to sit, completely oblivious to the world outside... even as the sound of heavy footfalls and crunching snow approached from the close distance.

A rustle of cloth heralded a rush of chill air from outside... and the daunting figure of a man whose ample frame barely cleared the door of the tent.

"Well, well... look who we have here." Reaching up, the figure pulled off the hood of an ornate cloak to reveal the bearded, grinning countenance of Simeon Malificus. "Fancy meeting you in a place such as this..."

Slowly, Simeon pulled a longsword out of the sheath at his side, fumbling with it a bit as the cold caused the blade to stick. This done, he pointed it up slowly at Tyrannus' unmoving form.

"I do not know what it is you intended to do, intruding upon my Goddess' domain, but I am even more bewildered that you did not think I would be made aware of it." He chuckled softly, letting the tip of the blade wave before the other man's face. "And from what I gather, it seems you have sent your only defense out to acquire the clutch of eggs acquired by Former Praetor, Mistress Vermillion."

Whether or not Tyrannus could hear him, Simeon seemed to take immense pleasure out of the fact that he had the man precisely where he wanted him. He almost wished he would wake up... although it would mean great danger if he did so. He was counting on Tiamat to warn him well in advance, and at this point no one would know the whereabouts of his spirit better than she.

"Did you truly think that the Dark Mother would allow you to come quite this far? We have allowed you your revenge against Edana, but your continued crimes against our Goddess cannot be ignored- neither yours nor those of your minions... even that scoundrel Vinz." He said, his voice absent as he mentioned the latter.

The library was every bit as silent and lonely as it has been when Vinz had first set foot inside of it one year ago. Since that day, he had taken his meals there, slept there, even bathed there by virtue of a basin and towels brought there at Tyrannus' behest.

For hours at a time, Vinz had stared at page after page of tome after tome, Tyrannus constantly finding new ones for him to sift through:

Books on every Praetor who had ever held the position (in which he had learned about Vermillion's Clutch), books on souls of the dead and soul energy, books on soul removal, transference and anchoring...

Katherine Tso's consciousness- an unearthly abomination crafted of a mix of magical energy and raw anger was an anomaly; whereas souls could be displaced and moved with ease, whatever Tso was made of was not so easily dislodged, nor moved to a new host. It was almost as though she were loath to want to leave, even in spite of Tovias' plea...

The Ritual of the Praetor was laced with ambiguity. Ideally- to use a relative term- it was the act of both parties sacrificing a happy mortal life in the service of the Dark Mother; one partner sacrifices his or herself to the other, who consumes the heart of the former in a grotesque display. The idea that the survivor has eaten the heart of his or her "true love" seemed to be mere hyperbole given the rank's history:

Simeon Malificus had eaten the heart of a woman who afflicted him with a Love Spell; hardly 'True Love' at all, merely an obsession culminating in tragedy.

Vinz had read of another ritual that required the blood of an ancient dragon and a willing sacrifice which achieved more or less the same effect as the Praetor's ritual.

He was beginning to doubt the act of achieving the rank of Praetor at the cost of one's 'True Love' had ever occurred.

This, of course, brought him to the curious case of Tyrannus/Tovias and Lady Tso.

Tovias loved Lady Tso, a fact Tso was more than willing to take advantage of on her deathbed. While this was unrequited, the fact that Tovias did in fact love her gave ritual far more potency than Simeon's; Indeed, more than *most* Praetors of the past. This, combined with Tso and Tovias' individual strength, placed Tyrannus among if not *the* most powerful that had ever been.

And here, he was a traitor, Tiamat's true faithful making every effort to dethrone him... never knowing that 'Tovias' had made that very thing Vinz's sole purpose.

Vinz's reddened eyes twitched behind his spectacles as he heard a clamber of activity in the halls of Lady Tso's manor. Normally he would have shrugged this off as one of their prisoners' tantrums, but for the fact that Tyrannus and company were up north in search of Vermillion's Clutch... nobody but servants ought to have been here.

He sighed and went back to his books; although he might have been interested in investigating such a thing, he saw little reason to make the attempt; Even if the library were not securely locked, discovering the secret of ending Praetor Tyrannus took precedence. He could divulge that secret to the Dark Goddess, or take Tyrannus' power for himself if he chose. In truth, he had not decided *what* he wanted to do, even if he *did* discover the secret.

The look in Tovias' eyes...

There was another uproar of activity from outside, to which Vinz was tempted to call out a snarky remark, something about keeping it down out there while he was trying to read, but any such thoughts left him immediately as the door to the library was blown in by a loud explosion. Taking cover, Vinz watched as a thick cloud of ash and dust settled to reveal a woman decked in the Sorceress' regalia of a Draco Disciple. More than once he had seen this particular woman at Simeon's meetings, sitting around with a look of distaste on her features...

"Zula Gozaryean." Vinz called out after a moment, standing up to confront her... Zula regarding him with a wicked smirk.

"What was that?" Ruby called out, hesitating in her step as they neared the summit of the cliff she and her companions walked.

"What was what?" Scarlett called out against the wind, but even as she did, Thomas was already raising his blades and stepping forward.

"I saw it, too." He began, getting up between Scarlett and Ruby, only to be tackled from out of nowhere by a dark, hulking figure that stood more than a head taller than the assassin.

Scarlett staggered back, crying out in surprise as Thomas struggled with the massive figure. Stumbling in the snow, she nearly found herself pitching over the side of the cliff, only to be pulled back by her shoulder. The wave of relief she felt was replaced by a chill greater than that of the winter winds as a blade of glinting steel blade leveled at her neck.

"Mmm... you'd make too beautiful a corpse to have you splattered at the bottom of a cliff." A male voice purred into her ear.

Meanwhile, Ruby turned to squint back down the pass she and her companions had been walking through, only to hear a voice from behind her.

"God save thee, cousin."

Spinning around, Ruby gasped as she saw another woman- this one svelte and bearing long, straight blonde locks, which blew in the winter breeze beneath a hat not dissimilar from Ruby's.

"Kat... Kat Mandrake?!" Ruby shouted, rounding on her in full. "What are you doing here?!"

Kat Mandrake- unbeknownst to most- was Ruby Nightshade's cousin, and a fellow poisoner... but this one a legitimate assassin where Ruby seemed to be more of an aristocrat.

"I am doing what needs to be *done*, cousin!" Kat shouted back, reaching to her side and drawing a long dagger, near unto a short sword. "You have been condemned for siding with the fallen one... and as you well know, loyalty is thicker than blood."

"Hrm. Whatever that means." Ruby rolled her eyes. "Once Tyrannus finishes his business-"

"Tyrannus *is* finished." Kat smirked, raising her blade and lunging.

Slowly, Tyrannus crept forward in the astral plane, until finally coming to a halt in the pitch-black weightlessness.

"Dark Mother... Tiamat. Come forth." Tyrannus commanded, white energy crackling at his hands.

As he spoke, his body began to grow hazy. His features lost definition for a moment, before the spectral image of Lady Tso appeared behind him. Her arms held him from behind in a perpetual embrace, Toviias' countenance transforming instantly from cold malice to reveal the uncertainty and fear Toviias himself felt.

"I am impressed..." a voice echoed from the blackness. "That you would of your own volition come here to your demise."

"I have come to do no such thing." It was Tso who spoke, tightening her grip around Toviias. "I have come here to offer you one last chance, 'Mother'. It is not too late for you to seek forgiveness for shunning me, for leaving me to die... We share a common enemy in the forces of Light, and if you but offer your services to me, we may see fit to allow your minions into our service."

There was a silence before a low, almost sultry laughter.

"Hmmm... You intrude upon the home of Goddess. You suggest that she ought *apologize* for casting aside those who have *failed* her. You *demand* that she offer up her worshipers to further the ends of a foolish pretender... if nothing else, I admire your nerve."

"This is the only chance I will offer you." Tso spoke again, unmoved by Tiamat's dismissive tone, "One 'failure' pales next to the millennia of failures of you and your worshipers. For all of your sound and fury, for all of the rituals and occult magic... there are whispers. There are those who believe that you are no longer the powerful entity you once were. Whereas Marduk stepped aside and was replaced, you cling to your own delusions. You remain an aging, purposeless relic of another time, a time of ignorance and fear."

Toviias could feel the air trembling around them as Katherine spoke, his own body trembling until stilled by a firm squeeze from Tso's arms.

"Join me, and we will ensure your name is not swept aside by the winds of time, immortalized and not forgotten... but if you continue to fight us..."

"The 'fight' as you put it ended the moment you came here." Tiamat scoffed. As the two watched, the darkness began to collapse inward, coalescing before them into the form of a many-headed serpentine beast. "Simeon Malificus and his followers have been dispatched to the Nordic Lands... to the very cliffs upon which you and your men now stand... Simeon stands before your body, ready to slash your miserable throat."

"The Praetor Ritual renders us immortal." Tso countered. "Kill Toviias' body if you like; we will merely take Simeon's in turn."

"But only if little Toviias' soul is strong enough to defeat Simeon's in Astral combat." Tiamat chuckled. "I assure you, he cannot. And once he dies, your energy- and the Praetor's power- will return to my service where it belongs."

Tso's eyes narrowed, feeling Toviias shiver in her embrace as Tiamat's hissing laughter echoed throughout the abyss.

"And now, the game *ends*." Simeon chuckled, raising his blade once more... but then, his eyes widened before he dove back out of the tent.

The cloth shelter disintegrated into ash and searing flames, leaving the meditating Tyrannus untouched, and a shocked Simeon gasping for breath as he fell back in the snow.

Looking up, his eyes widened, then glared hatefully at a figure perched, catlike, on a small outcropping of cliff rock, her fiery red locks framing her grinning face.

"Hi, daddy."

"It's been too long, father." Estella called over the Nordic winds. "Bit longer than a year."

Simeon frowned as he discarded his rapier, instead reaching up to take hold of his holy symbol.

"I think the last time we parted, there was a rather nasty *knife* sticking out of my chest."

"And what do you mean by this?" The former Praetor shot back. "If Tyrannus believes you can hold your own against me, he is a greater fool than I could ever have believed. If anything, I suppose I ought to thank him."

As he spoke, Estella prowled off of her rocky perch, a wand that seemed wrought of black iron gripped tightly in her gloved hand.

"... Once I have dealt with you, I can complete the Praetor Ritual, and end this messy business once and for all."

"That is assuming you have what it takes to finish the job, *old man*." With that, Estella raised her wand. A lance of electricity crackled forth from its tip, hurtling directly toward Simeon. The man growled, squeezing the holy symbol and raising his hand. The smell of singed hair could be caught on the icy breeze for a moment as the lightning impacted with his hand, deflecting off and sailing off into the distance. Growling with discomfort, Simeon curled the fingers of his hand into a fist to be certain his hand had not been crippled in the effort.

"Even if you would not side with me, what makes you think Tyrannus will ever succeed?" He demanded, reaching back and thrusting his arm forward. A shower of sparks flew from his palm, whizzing through the showering flakes of snow toward Estella. "What makes you believe he stands a chance against the Gypsies and their allies? Against Tiamat?"

With a gasp, she darted to one side just as the first of the sparks reached where she had been standing. A thunderous roar erupted as the spark detonated, making a sizable crater in the rock and snow.

The sparks trailed along after her, each one exploding one after another as they came close. Each time she barely managed to dive out of the way, and each time another one of the glittering fragments of death waited to try and cut her off.

She scurried back, coming to a halt and glaring at Simeon through the snow. She could see there were still several 'delayed blast' fireballs hanging in the air... but did a double-take as she noticed one of them was beginning to drift toward the meditating Tyrannus.

Instantly, Estella pointed at the fragment with her wand, and with a grunting effort, dragged it back like a fishing rod. The spark headed in Tyrannus' direction trembled in place, then began flying back toward Estella at an exponential rate of speed. With a snarl and a yell, Estella swung the wand downward, the hurtling spark following its lead. It exploded on impact with the snowy floor of the cliff, the other sparks nearby exploding as well.

When the chain of roaring 'booms' finally faded, Estella remained panting, her legs trembling although it couldn't be certain whether from exhaustion or adrenaline.

Either way, Simeon grinned at her from his side of the frozen battlefield.

"Well?" He chuckled, squeezing his holy symbol again to conjure more of the deadly sparks, "Beginning to regret your decision to stay with that fool yet?"

"The only thing I regret," she responded, getting back to a ready posture in the snow, "is not bringing a thicker coat."

"It will get a good deal warmer all too soon, I promise." Simeon grinned wickedly, his hand throbbing with fiery energy.

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It was difficult to tell just how much of the snowstorm raging across the rest of the cliffs was due to the weather, and how much was simply snow being kicked up by the battle taking place between the Draco Disciples (although under the circumstances, considering Tyrannus and his allies to be *among* the Disciples would probably be inaccurate).

Ruby's attire- while equipped for the cold weather, was not conducive to battle. She had actually brought this up to Tyrannus before their departure, but their leader had insisted that he would be the only one endangered in any meaningful way... a sentiment that seemed ignorant as she frantically dodged the slashing blade of Kat Mandrake (her own blade had been knocked from her hand, and was now sitting in the cascading snow some distance away).

Kat's strikes seemed wide and slow, giving Ruby time enough to get out of the way, but leaving nothing in the way of an opening. Of course the poison coating the edge of her weapon would be meaningless to either of them, given their mutual knowledge of such things.

"What are you doing here?" Ruby demanded. "Here on Simeon's behalf, no doubt?"

"I suppose." Kat shrugged. "Simeon does not have much in the way of authority these days, but we are where Tiamat guides us, and as of now, she has guided us to deal with the traitors to her cause."

As she spoke, they could hear Liam Bloodroot- Simeon's lackey and bodyguard- snarling as he grappled with Thomas. The larger man grabbed Thomas by the wrists, lifting him up in an effort to hurl him over the side of the cliffs. However, the assassin twisted his body, arching his back and whipping his head forward. His forehead crashed into Liam's face in a brutal headbutt, sending the latter staggering back and clutching at his face. Both men righted themselves, grasping their swords and leaping once more into the fray.

"It seems a terrible shame to kill you..." Castor Sloan murmured, gripping Scarlett tightly as she struggled- though torn between the fall before her and the embrace of the Disciple behind her. "I could see you performing great services to the Dark Mother's men in the future... for a very long time."

Suddenly, Scarlett wrenched to one side, allowing Castor's sword to nick the side of her neck before delivering a solid elbow to Castor's throat. He stumbled away, choking for breath as Scarlett stood straight, righting her winter gear which Castor had disturbed somewhat.

She actually looked a bit surprised at her own actions, her widened eyes quickly snapping back to the moment as Castor readied his blade again.

"You know," He began again, his voice laboring a bit in the aftermath of the throat-shot, "I was warned not to underestimate you people..."

"It is not too late for you to join us." Scarlett offered, her demeanor changing now that she'd gotten ahold of herself again. "I had not thought anybody worth looking at was still among the Draco Disciple ranks."

Castor blinked, then smirked, standing to his full height.

"Turning against my Goddess- no matter for whom- would probably not be in my best interests, but the offer is extremely tempting... perhaps you might consider leaving your harebrained master and coming to work for us in earnest. Regardless of what I said a moment ago, you would be most welcome."

"Hm..." Scarlett sighed, looking away for a moment. "A shame we could not have met earlier. Whatever side ends up the victor, we may have lived or died in a far more interesting situation."

"A shame, indeed." Castor nodded ruefully before raising his sword. Scarlett raised her arms in a fighting stance, and it was then Castor realized the error he had made in attempting a grapple to begin with- she was an unarmed fighter.

"Huh. Tiamat was not mistaken after all..."

"Vinz Clortho." Zula Gozaryean announced as she sauntered into the library through what remained of the door.

"Zula." Vinz repeated... but said nothing more before sitting back at his desk, brushing a bit of dust off of the tomes collected there.

"Those servants you had meandering about left something to be desired." She said, casually eying her wand, "They are not terribly skilled in the art of guarding the house in their master's absence."

"Are you here to liberate me, then?" Vinz asked, slowly sitting down, treating her presence with an equally casual disinterest. "Or are you here to do what Simeon likely desperately wishes he could do himself? For my coin, he is likely where Lord Tyrannus is."

"For what the information is worth to you, yes." Zula replied, coming to stand in front of the desk, facing Vinz, though he refused to return the favor. "It will not be long before Tyrannus and his minions have been dealt with, and the hierarchy of the Draco Disciples is as it should be once more."

"The 'hierarchy'..." Vinz scoffed. "You mean putting Simeon back in charge? We see how successful he has been thus far. He fails to see the truth even as it stares him in the face."

"The truth?" Zula asked, quirked her brow, her wand never ceasing to keep its tip trained on him. "What sort of truth do you speak of?"

"Why do you believe I have been locked in this library for the past year and a half or so?" Vinz asked, glancing up at her behind his spectacles.

"Because you are an untrustworthy little worm." She replied with a chuckle.

"Say what you like, but there is a reason beyond Disciple gossip." He replied, letting out an offhanded growl as he closed the book and pushed it aside, replacing it with another. "What would you say if I told you that Tyrannus had no interest in being Praetor? Never did from the beginning?"

Zula blinked.

"What nonsense is this?" She demanded. "And stop reading; look me in the eye. Have some bloody *manners*."

"I have looked into the eyes of the man behind Tyrannus... and he is no leader, no 'Praetor'. He is nothing but a *prisoner*."

Zula's eyebrow raised once again, higher this time.

"Are you implying that Lady Tso has dominated the poor fool who entered into the pact with her? Whomever it is that body of Tyrannus' belongs to?"

"Only in part." Vinz replied, reaching up to adjust his glasses. "He wishes for Lady Tso to be free of his body- wants her to be alive again regardless of the power he would lose. Do you understand that? He does not want the power that comes with the position of Praetor, because he truly loves Katherine Tso. He would rather have her than all the power in the world."

"Foolish." Zula shook her head. "That is what the position of Praetor *is*; sacrificing worldly things in service to Tiamat."

"The practice of sacrificing worldly things for power is part of the Praetor Ritual... but Tiamat has little to do with it." He replied. "The ritual dates back to a time before Tiamat ever used it; much how Christianity borrows from pagan rituals, Tiamat's Praetor Ritual is simply a watered-down version of something more potent, something more powerful and ancient than even she remembers... Tyrannus- no, *Tovias*- his love for Tso resulted in something stronger than Simeon or most Praetors before him. And *Tovias*' Arathos bloodline renders him even stronger. His magic is more potent than anything we have seen, and that is why Simeon is the true fool in all of this. He cannot stop Tyrannus through force. No one can."

"Then what would you suggest? That his love for Katherine can be taken advantage of?" The sorceress asked. Now she had become genuinely curious.

"I have been locked in this library for the explicit purpose of finding a way to reverse the Praetor Ritual- to revive Katherine Tso, and to sever the bond of power between them. Simeon attempts to take his position back, which would- if successful- shunt Tso's soul from *Tovias*' body, destroying her for good and all. So long as he- or anybody else- continues to attempt this, Tyrannus will ever appear to confront and destroy them. However, if I am successful, I will be able to 'defeat' Tyrannus, splitting him into *Tovias* and Katherine once more, his power free to be claimed by another worthy party."

"... I see."

Zula stood there, pondering this development.

"The best way to fight Tyrannus is not to fight him at all..."

"Now you see." Vinz nodded. "I do not enjoy toiling away in this tome-filled dungeon, but it is a necessary evil, so to speak."

"Hm..." She nodded in return. "I was going to burn this miserable place to the ground, but given what you have told me, perhaps it would be best to spare you... but I will look on with great interest, waiting for my own opportunity to avail myself of this unexpected turn of events."

Slowly, she turned away from him and made her way back to the door.

"We shall just have to wait and see how Tyrannus reacts to the dead servants and the ruined door; if you survive, I wish you good fortune in unlocking the secret of the 'Praetor's' bond. One way or the other, it can only benefit Tiamat's true chosen."

"Perhaps..."

As Zula passed through the ruined doorway, she froze as she heard Vinz's voice, accompanied by a soft 'click'.

"... except for you."

The silence in the aftermath of the gunshot that followed continued as Vinz sat back at his desk, cracking open the next of his tomes.

Let them destroy one another... when the dust settles, someone must remain to rebuild the world.

"Your minions cannot hold out forever against my Disciples." Tiamat said, her writhing heads seemingly ever poised to lunge at *Tovias* and Katherine. "This game served to amuse me once I realized the joke, but no matter what contingencies you may have put in place, we are prepared to annihilate you all... and oh, once the descendant of Druscilla is no longer protecting you, words cannot *describe* the horrors you will suffer."

"You know nothing of 'horror'." *Tovias* said softly, independent of Katherine who merely hovered silently behind him. "For all your years, for all your *centuries* of life, tormenting mortals and fighting your wars, you are blind. You are nothing but a petulant brat, believing existence owes her because she was scorned by one man. Even given so much time, you could never let it go when mortals with a fraction of the life you possess would have moved on after mere months, years at the most."

"How *dare* you!" Tiamat shrieked, her voice causing even the immaterial astral plane to shake. "How dare you even utter those words..."

"I 'dare' because you sicken me... you think you know what horror is? What grief is? You watch from your pedestal as humans suffer, directing others to inflict it, but having no idea what it is *to* suffer. I wandered for more than *twenty years* alone. Looked down upon, spat on, and worse. You do not know what suffering is until you have experienced it at the hands of men. Never known grief until the one person in your life who you loved is cut down, watching her bleed to death, having to *eat her goddess-forsaken heart* to give her some twisted mockery of life... Tiamat, you are no 'Mother'. Not even a Dark one... you are just a child, full of self pity and a need to torture others that I doubt I will ever understand."

"... Die."

With that, Tiamat lunged at Tovas and Katherine, all ten of her eyes burning with hatred.

"I'll not wait for Simeon to take back the power of the Praetor; I will rip you both apart, and scatter your essence to the four winds!"

However, as she came within mere inches of his face, his eyes- his entire body flared to life with a blinding white energy. Even Katherine had to shield her eyes, though never letting her hand leave his shoulder.

"No." Tovas growled, his eyes narrowing as he stared at the Dark Mother who now scrambled back on clawed feet. "NO, Tiamat... I offered you the chance to join me, but now you will watch as a new generation takes your place... a generation that needs no Dark Goddess to understand what suffering *is!*!"

Simeon's eyes suddenly widened. He clenched his teeth as he looked back at Tyrannus' still body.

Kill him! Kill him now, Simeon! You cannot delay any longer; forget the wench and kill him!!!

The former Praetor looked beyond Estella, raising his holy symbol once more, and calling upon every ounce of magical energy he could muster, and thrusting out his other hand.

From it, a howling image constructed of bright blue flames lunged, rapidly surging through the air toward Tyrannus. The howling winds and falling snow were banished in its wake as it hurtled up, then down upon its target.

Estella who now stood between them widened her eyes and threw up her hands, letting out a whimpering cry of dismay.

A cloud of steam and shattered rock erupted from where the draconic blast crashed into the ground, a deafening 'BOOM' echoing all around the cliffs. Snow cascaded over the hillside exposing jagged dark grey stone, and when the thundering cacophony ceased at last, the only sound that remained was Simeon's exhausted panting.

"Now..." He murmured, closing his eyes. "Now to deal with that poor nitwit's soul, and to retake my well-deserved..." He murmured... but ceased in the midst of his retreat into meditation.

Whereas he had expected Tyrannus' soul to engage him in astral combat for control of his body- the parasitic nature of the Praetor's lesser-understood powers- he felt nothing... there was no spirit probing at his mind.

"... No..." He breathed, his eyes opening just as the snow began to fall once again.

Across the field of battle, Simeon could see a faint glow... it was not the brilliant white that represented Tyrannus' energy, but a strange, glittering silver that he did not recognize at first.

"What... what is this?" He asked, weakly standing to his feet. The blast had taken nearly all of his magical power, his dragon-magic almost completely drained for the purpose of annihilating the pair.

However, Estella and Tyrannus remained there, the girl's arms thrown up to shield her face... both she and the 'Praetor' surrounded by a flickering barrier of silver that was crumbling out of existence even as he watched. "How... how could you- *How?!!*" The holy symbol fell from Simeon's hand to dangle from its chain against his chest as his eyes focused on the dissipating barrier. "*Fairy magic!?*"

"Fairy what?" Estella replied, her arms falling back to her sides. She caught a brief glimpse of the shield before it vanished, and only then did she feel it- a tingle in her cheeks she could not attribute to the cold. "A fairy's blessing... a *fairy's blessing!?*" Simeon snarled, stomping across the snow toward her.

Estella fumbled for an explanation of what had happened, bringing her wand back up to hurl several blasts of magical energy at Simeon. This time, Simeon lacked the power to deflect her bolts, each one striking him in his broad torso. Nevertheless he continued his advance, intent on throttling the girl with his bare hands.

"Damn you... *Damn you to hell!*"

He did not know what was happening on the Astral Plane, but one thing he was plainly aware of:

He had to end this *now*.

Thomas let out another grunt as he was hurled back down to the ground, Liam standing over him with a smirk.

"S'pose an assassin is not much face to face, eh?" The larger man chortled. "Putting you and your friends out of your misery is going to be easier than Simeon said it would be." He gave a feint lunge, laughing again as Thomas skittered back and struggled to his feet.

Thomas shook his head, bracing himself on the snowy ground and glaring up at Liam. He appeared to be trying to speak, but something stopped him- as though something were caught in his throat.

"No witty retort? What's the matter? Cat got your-"

Thomas' mouth opened, but no words came forth:
Instead, a gout of flames spewed out, much to Liam's horrified disbelief.
He had no time to throw up his hands to guard his face, the fiery blast scorching the whole of his head.
The bodyguard let out a scream of pain, dropping his sword as he reached up to try to bat out the flames that burned away his skin and hair.
Thomas let out a strange-sounding groan, although from the look of him it seemed a miracle he could talk or even stand.
His cheeks and lower jaw had been almost completely burned away, even his upper lip was largely gone to expose his teeth and the lower half of his skull. With a drooling roar, Thomas rushed toward Liam as he staggered and stumbled, shoulder-tackling him in the midsection.
With a wail of dismay, Liam's feet scrambled in the snow before he pitched back off of the edge of the cliff, his screams of pain disappearing as he plunged into the darkness far below.
Thomas stumbled back, falling to one knee, the shock and pain of it all finally sinking into his mind. He let out a terrible scream before pitching forward into the snow, unconscious.

The deafening explosion that came with Simeon's attack had not gone completely unnoticed; Scarlett and Castor stopped in the middle of their exchange; their heads turning in the direction of the blast.
"Was that...?" Scarlett murmured, eyes growing wider in the brief moment the torrent of snow ceased its assault.
"That was one of Simeon's..." Castor nodded. "A big one, too."
"Is Tyrannus...?"
"Dead, if I had to guess. But if what I've heard of the 'Praetor' is true, that is merely half the battle."
"Hm..." Scarlett frowned, glancing away.
"Something the matter, love?" Castor pursued, turning back to her and raising his sword partway. "Having second thoughts about this, are we?"
"In the beginning, I knew nothing of Simeon." Scarlett replied, shrugging as she took a step closer to Castor. "I was brought into this by Ruby, and since then I have been forced to live a life of looking over my shoulder, lest I speak or move out of turn... if I did not devote myself entirely to Tyrannus and remain 'useful', there was no telling what he might have done to me- to any of us if we failed him."
"He certainly has no room to talk about 'failure' now, does he?" He replied, looking her over as she got closer. Far be it from him- or any Draco Disciple- to trust another of his kind, but with the apparent defeat of their enemy, the tension seemed oddly lessened.
"Well... I suppose now would be a good time to consider-" Scarlett began once again, but at that moment, she heard Simeon's exclamation of disbelief.
"*Damn you to hell!*"
"... Oh. Never mind, then." Scarlett said flatly.
Before Castor could react, Scarlett reached down to grasp the hand wrapped around the handle of his sword. With a twist of her body, she forced the blade upward, the tip of it piercing through the bottom of Castor's jaw, and up through his brain.
The motion took all of a second... the Disciple very much dead before he knew what had happened. He slumped down into the snow, his body still twitching a bit.
"... Hm..." Scarlett sighed, looking down at Castor's body with some amount of regret, before hearing the blast from Thomas.
"Damn..." She cursed, rushing off in his direction; if he had to use the little experimental 'contingency plan' he had been gifted with shortly after 'acquiring' Edana, he would not survive for long.

Ruby seemed to be in no better shape than her companions had been at first; without any real combat experience or training, pitting her against her far more adroit cousin, was a grim prospect at best.
"If you had not sided with that *corpse*, Tso, this might not have been necessary, cousin." Kat said with a smirk, sauntering up to where Ruby had fallen back in the snow. "Such is life, I suppose, but you will not have to suffer it much longer."
As she spoke, Ruby frantically reached up and through her winter garments, to drag out the small cylindrical case she kept packed in the tight valley of her chest. Quickly, she opened it and drew out the long needle she kept inside, gripping it tightly as she turned up to Kat.
"... You really are getting desperate." Kat mused. "If you believe you can best me with that little *pin* of yours..."
Kat slowly raised her sword, wary if Ruby were to make any movement at all. She was hardly perturbed by the slight waving and wagging of that small needle... but raised an eyebrow as its tip suddenly began to glow.

"What the-!?" She gasped as the needle's tip flared, a ray of magical energy lanced through the air, piercing through her left breast and burning cleanly through the other side.

Kat's eyes shot wide open, staring down at the wound in her chest, then at the needle in Ruby's hand.

"I don't..." She managed, blood trickling down the edge of her lip before she slumped to her knees, her sword falling from her hand.

Ruby slowly stood and turned, taking a single deep breath.

"For what it is worth... that hurt me just as deeply." She concluded, looking further down the row of cliffs where Scarlett ran to check up on Thomas. It had seemed the three of them were victorious... but there was still an objective to claim.

Quickly she turned back, running through the snow along the rocks and snow to seek out Vermillion's clutch at last.

-

Tiamat let out a screech of outrage as she tried time and again to lunge at Tovas, only to be turned back by his aura of white energy.

"How... How are you doing this?!" She demanded. "Your power... your power was born of my rituals, my *children*... You are not stronger than I!"

"Perhaps not... but if I am, you have only yourself to thank." He replied, his energy spiking as Lady Tso looked on in awe behind him. "That, and the hatred you kindled within me for turning upon Lady Katherine."

In truth she had been more than a bit uncertain how this would play out... but Tiamat was old. Weak from her defeat and from her inactivity. Even a Goddess could be defeated in an arena such as this if circumstances were right.

"Consider your achievement in *oblivion*, Malevthix."

However, as he raised his hand to release a life-ending blast, Tiamat's eyes flashed... and then, all at once, the shadow of her form disappeared, leaving Tovas and Katherine alone in the vastness of the Astral Plane.

"She is gone." Katherine murmured, moving forward to once again wrap her arms around him. "She has escaped."

"She teleported Simeon away as well, no doubt." Tovas murmured, turning to look back in the direction from whence they had come. Of course, now travel back through the immaterial plane was as simple as a thought, but he remained still for a moment.

Slowly, he turned back to face Katherine, her hands shifting to maintain contact with him as he did so.

"Tovas, what is the matter?" She asked coolly. "We have a mission to complete, in spite of this setback."

He said nothing, simply looking into her spectral eyes.

"Tovas, we must leave this place. We have more pressing matters to attend to than your lingering stares."

"Katherine... Katherine, is this truly what you want?"

"Is it not what *you* want? After years of wandering, of scrounging and scraping like a dog, you do not wish revenge? You do not wish to be something, someone greater than what you were?"

"The only thing I have ever wanted in my life is... is what I still want, Katherine..." He trembled. "I want *you*. I want to look upon you once more..."

"And is this not enough?" She asked, looking down upon him with an expression of disapproval. "In the Astral Plane you may look upon me as much as you wish."

"I do not wish to look upon a *ghost*, Lady Katherine! Not anymore! I cannot endure it..."

"But endure it you shall, This is your life now... *our* life. And I refuse to allow our power to be compromised due to your *weakness*."

"... Very well." He murmured, bowing his head and turning away from her... but his tone of voice seemed... insincere somehow.

As he departed the Astral Plane to rejoin his comrades, he cast one more look over his shoulder at Katherine's image.

He could only hope Vinz's research would not be in vain.

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Simeon let out a bellow as he lunged forward... but found himself no longer standing on the dark cliffs of the north. Instead, he stood inside of a dark, dank shack somewhere in the English woodland.

"What... where is...?!" He stammered, looking around in bewilderment.

The others have failed.

He straightened as he heard Tiamat's voice in the back of his mind.

A retreat was required for the moment... it seemed as though your daughter was an unexpected obstacle... it is a mistake you must not make again.

"What do you mean?" Simeon demanded. "For all of your divine insight, you ceased to notice my treacherous daughter meandering about the cliffs... nor- I notice- were you able to keep Tyrannus trapped in the Astral Plane... If you had waited, then perhaps-"

Do not forget to whom you speak, Malificus. It was I who gave you your power, I who gave you your very name!

"A great deal of good any of that does us now." He scowled. "... No... It seems this matter has grown beyond our control. There is only one man who can even hope to undo this chaos."

As he went about the business of packing for the long journey to Bristol, he heard Tiamat's voice once more:

... So be it.

Four Years Later (Questing Year 2014)...

The Band of the Twisted Claw- although they were localized largely in Bristol for reasons even *they* couldn't rightly explain (perhaps to keep tabs on the Draco Disciples who targeted the place almost exclusively- equally inexplicable) - had a tendency to roam. Of course they did. They were gypsies through and through.

Even as some of them retired, married, settled down in whatever manner befitted them, the Band at large never stayed in one place too long.

That fact made it all the more shocking when Simeon Malificus and his followers- what few remained- arrived at their doorstep.

"Ye have some nerve coming here."

Thoren had to restrain himself with every last fiber of his being to keep himself from killing the Draco commander on the spot. Perhaps the only reason that he did *not* was the manner in which these unusual guests had graced their presence, which was to say, they had walked in quietly and peacefully from the woods, instead of cutting the gypsies' throats as they slept.

It was nighttime, the bonfire still burning bright as though to add that much more intensity to the summit playing out in the large forest clearing.

The silhouette of Thoren Grymm lent him an almost unnatural level of authority over the proceedings, flanked by every last member of the Gypsy Ranks; At one hand stood Adria Dubh- Swordmistress and leader of the Order of the Sun. At the other was Gaia Vedeia, the Soothsayer and recently discovered 'Keeper of Knowledge'.

There were also several of their independent agents- referred to as Lightbringers- standing close by. Each had their weapon of choice, wand or blade, at the ready and keeping their eyes fixed squarely on the Disciples.

"Believe me, Grymm," Simeon responded, "If I had another option, I would have turned to them long before you. Unfortunately, as it happens, my other options have been systematically *butchered*."

"T'is no more or less than you *deserve*." Robert O'Coppe, one of Adria's lieutenants, spoke up bitterly, glowering at Simeon with unbridled spite. Indeed, many of the Gypsies nodded in agreement.

Under normal circumstances, Simeon may have smirked with satisfaction, having cultivated such a reputation among his hated enemies... but unfortunately this vitriol did not help him in the situation at hand.

"I find it hard to sympathize with ye on any level," Thoren began again, the mutterings amongst the other Gypsies going immediately silent, "after getting word of your ruthless attack on St. Xavier's."

"You miserable snake!" Adria finally spat. All this time she had been sitting still, deceptively peaceful-looking until those words left Thoren's bearded mouth. "Tell us what you have done with Edana, or Praetor or no, I will slash your lowly head from-!"

"Adria!" Gaia called out, stepping forward and shooting the Swordmistress a sidelong glance, not a curt one, so much as pleading that she keep her head.

At last, Adria took a deep breath and stepped back to Thoren's side.

"As it *happens*," Simeon began after a brief pause- to be sure Adria had spoken her piece. "I was not aware of the attack upon St. Xavier's- or Father Charles' death- until just recently. I do not know what has become of Edana... but what I do know for certain is that your attacker is none other than Lady Katherine Tso."

"What?!" Talia Tale gasped, having kept behind Thoren at his behest.

"Lady Tso was killed! Was she not?" Rose Peregrine asked, her eyes going wide as she backed into the embrace of Tristan, her beloved. "I- I thought she had been."

"Our view of events on the day she was defeated is vastly different." Simeon shook his head. "She completed the Ritual of the Praetor moments before she was supposed to have died... On that day, Tiamat's power- *my* power- was stolen by a miserable little street urchin. Since then, the Dark Mother and I have attempted countless times to take back what is rightfully ours, and every time, we have lost more. The more we have lost, the more *he* has gained."

Thoren nodded slowly. He could not deny the fact that the Draco Disciples had been oddly inactive over the past few years- some pockets of their cult disappearing altogether.

"Who is he?" Talia asked, finally pushing her way between Thoren and Gaia. "Who is the man with whom Tso performed the ritual?"

"That's... actually a very good question." Raven Hawkwood observed. "The Praetor ritual... requires *love*, does it not? How did Tso ever manage that?"

"I haven't the slightest idea *who* he is." Simeon replied coldly. "A misguided fool, to be sure. The Dark Mother had no intention of allowing Tso's life to continue, nor did she intend on allowing some impertinent *boy* to hold her highest station. But he has grown beyond our ability to stop. My men are dead. Many of those who remain have defected to his side... turned their backs upon the glory of Tiamat's power, and sided with Tyrannus Feldrake."

"Why would we ever help you?" Adria demanded. "After all that you have done, after all that you have done to *us*, why should we lift a *finger* to aid you and yours?"

"... On his own, he decimated all of my agents in Bristol soon after his birth. He did the same one year hence at one of my bases, from which I was barely able to escape. The next year, I presume, was when Lady Tso took her revenge on Edana Dragonborn." With this, he added a bitter glare in Adria's direction before continuing, "Year last, he and his minions destroyed my Honor Guard and absconded with the clutch of hatchlings hidden by Lady Vermillion."

Talia was grim-faced as she listened to Simeon, relating the dark sequence of events like a laundry list of misfortune.

"How?" Gaia asked. "How was he able to achieve all of this? How was he able to grow so powerful?"

After years upon years of struggling against the Draco Disciples, barely able to hold their own against Simeon and his underlings... Katherine Tso had come back from the dead, and nearly obliterated the lot of them in one fell swoop.

"The better question is," The former Praetor murmured, "what we are going to do to *stop* him."

"This is *your* mess." Robert spoke again, "I don't see why we ought to help at *all*."

"Fool." Simeon scowled directly at him, the Gypsies and Lightbringers raising their weapons as he drew himself to his full height, "First I and my men, who abandoned Lady Tso, and then Edana who struck the killing blow upon her... where do you think he is likely to strike *next*?!"

A sudden hush fell over the entire camp.

Thoren gave a long, slow sigh.

"He's right." He said at last. "If this Tyrannus Feldrake is strong enough to defeat a squad of Draco Disciples, defeat an adolescent dragon, and even defeat Father Charles singlehandedly... then we must do what it takes to stop him."

The Gypsies- and even the remnants of the Draco Disciples- gave a collective nod. None of them particularly enjoyed this prospect, but it was as Simeon had said:

They were out of options.

The time has come at last, my dear Tovias...

Tyrannus said nothing in reply, did nothing to acknowledge the voice of Lady Katherine in the back of his mind.

Are you not pleased? She persisted, *what began with Simeon's lackeys, began with that traitor, Edana, ends soon.*

Still, Tyrannus was silent. Tovias' voice did not answer her.

Please understand, so long as Thoren Grymm and his ilk- Edana's adoptive family- live, there will always be a threat to us.

"There is *always* a threat to us!" He shouted at last. "Simeon, Tiamat and the Disciples, Edana, now these Gypsies... I am... I am *tired*, Lady Katherine..."

Do you tire of me? She asked, her cold, spiteful voice giving its best imitation of a soft and gentle tone.

"Never." He shook his head. "Never, my Lady... I just..."

His voice fell silent, and remained so until he heard a soft knock at the door to his study.

"Lord Tyrannus..." Ruby called as she opened the door.

He looked up to meet her gaze as she peeked inside. She stepped in, Tyrannus standing to walk around his desk.

"Is it time?"

Ruby's answer came in the form of a deep bow, moving aside and pushing the door open for him.

"Thomas, Scarlett and Estella are prepared, and the troops are... actually rather excited. Some of them have been looking *forward* to this."

"I have no doubt." Tyrannus replied, speaking more to himself than to her, "And what of the Clutch? And Edana? Has any progress been made?"

"Yes. Some will be ready as early as the attack." She nodded. "Since Thomas' recovery, he has been outfitted with several new alterations as well."

The two of them departed the study, making their way through the manor's upstairs hallway and down the staircase leading to the main hall. Already, he could hear the rumbling and murmurings of the crowd outside.

"Lord Tyrannus."

The voices of Thomas, Scarlett and Estella called out in salute as he and Ruby arrived, although Estella's was predictably less emphatic.

What Simeon had said was not untrue; even before meeting with him at the cliffs, word of Tyrannus' power had spread quickly, and particularly once the battle had ended and the new Praetor stood victorious, they were seeking him out in droves.

It wasn't enough that Tyrannus possessed power, but he seemed more than willing to share that power to give where others lacked, rather than letting spite and aspiration guide their growth, leading to inevitable betrayal time and again.

Ruby and the others were the prime example of this new policy.

Ruby, already a master of poisons and socially skilled, had been 'encouraged' to seek training in the arcane arts. Imbuing her needle with magic was only the first step. Over the year since the battle for the Clutch, she had learned more about mixing and manipulating elemental energies. It was not altogether different from herbs and chemicals. Aside from that, having secured her place as his second-in-command from the beginning, she was often the one to speak for Tyrannus whenever it was necessary to address the new troops. There were those who assumed Ruby and Tyrannus were lovers, but those who suggested thus had no knowledge of Tyrannus' attachment to Tso.

Over time, Scarlett- who at first had been little more than another forgettable aristocrat and a reasonably skilled seducer- had trained endlessly to become something more worthy to Tyrannus. At first this was for fear of her continued existence, but over time, it became exciting- liberating, even- to develop skills with which she could decide her own destiny (instead of relying on the kindness and libido of rich strangers).

Estella had been gifted with great potential at birth, and raised by a powerful mage and a powerful alchemical (her father and mother, respectively). Unfortunately this potential was left largely untapped thanks to a combination of Simeon's skewed priorities and Estella's own bratty tendencies. However, thanks to Vinz's pleading on her behalf and her willingness to 'play along', she had survived and thrived, becoming more than a match for most other mages in single combat... although some of her more frustrating habits remained (As for the Fairy Blessing... it was a story she preferred to avoid telling).

Arguably, Thomas had changed the most... whether this change was for the better or the worse was also arguable. As was evidenced by his battle against Liam Bloodroot, certain parts of him had been... *altered*. His mouth and throat had been previously outfitted with a gas bladder and a 'Thor's Thimble', allowing him to exhale bursts of flame not unlike a dragon... of course, this ability was not meant for human use. More adjustments had to be made before he could do so again. And these were merely the first in a series.

Vinz Clortho- not one of Tyrannus' 'Field Agents' was not granted any special training or gifts; only audiences with Estella for about an hour per evening, as well as any other creature comforts he might require within reason. Oddly enough, he did not seem to require- or even ask for- these things. His requests were surprisingly conservative... and perhaps only Vinz and Tyrannus himself knew why.

He was running out of time. Vinz was swiftly running out of time, as well as tomes to sift through. This would have been vastly easier if Lady Tso were anyone- or more accurately, 'anything'- other than what she was. As some bastardized, diluted 'half-soul', he had come to realize her life-essence was very particular about where it could or could not be placed.

Specifically, it could not be placed anywhere but inside her own body... and yet, her physical remains were decayed and butchered beyond recognition; it could not have survived before the Praetor Ritual, and could not be mended properly in death. He had even gone so far as to research building a new body for her, but all in vain. All such efforts required a complete 'soul'.

There had to be something he could do, or else his life- and Estella's, most likely- were forfeit.

He had to hope the Gypsies, with all their rudimentary, childish and idealistic 'magic' had a solution.

Tyrannus opened the door to the manor, greeted with the sound of cheers from the assembled troops outside.

Almost all of them were men and women who had defected from the ranks of the Draco Disciples. In spite of the fact that they still wore red and black, Tyrannus took no offense or even notice. After all, looking back, it was Lady Tso herself who had taken the colors for the Disciples to begin with. It was just as well they join her.

Even the basic infantry and mages had been granted certain boons, whether it be advanced equipment from raided or surrendered Draco caches. All told, even the least of them was now in a different league altogether from any average city guard.

"My friends..." Ruby declared, walking out behind Tyrannus and coming to stand beside him, "Our glorious commander... Lord Tyrannus Feldrake."

There was another cheer from the assemblage, which Tyrannus acknowledged with a slight nod. Looking aside to Ruby, he nodded to her as well, and she stepped back to join the line formed by Thomas, Scarlett and Estella as they emerged as well.

They grew quiet at last, waiting for him to speak... something most of them had never seen since joining this new organization, and which many of them were curious about. All they knew of him was what they had heard in whispered rumors.

"My forsaken brothers and sisters... forgotten and shunned creatures, slaves to the Dark Mother, slaves to the very world in which you live... I have felt your pain. I have experienced your grief. I know your torment. For I, you see, was once like you. Less than you. Less than anybody in the world." He began, speaking slowly. Although his words were meek, he projected in such a manner only Lady Tso ever could.

"My family was destroyed by a roving band of marauders- my family, supposedly guarded by the blessings of Tiamat herself... and yet, she was content to allow us to suffer. She was content to allow us to be lost in pursuit of some greater prize. The Draco Disciples have followed her whims in the hopes of attaining infamy, wealth and power, never knowing that Tiamat herself would never allow another to surpass her. And to that end, she time and again allows even her most loyal, her strongest followers to fail, to die."

The troops were deathly silent... though a collective gasp rose from them as his brilliant aura began to materialize around his body. Slowly he raised a clenched fist, starting at the trembling hand.

"Twenty years I wandered alone. And for just as many years, Katherine Tso devoted her life to the Dark Mother's cause... and neither of us found salvation. She turned her back on us both. But now a new power rises- one that she can overlook no longer."

A sound like a crash of thunder echoed through the sky as Tyrannus' form was lifted into the air, his aura spiking, perfectly in tune with the fury within.

"Tiamat, the Lord of Light, the Draco Disciples and the Soldiers of the Light in whatever form they take... All will crumble before the shadows they have ignored- the powers they have neglected- the infinite strength of we, the Dragon Army!"

The earth trembled with this final declaration, Tyrannus' aura disappearing in a blinding flash before he hovered down to rejoin his comrades.

"The 'Dragon Army'?" Estella mused teasingly, folding her arms. "Really?"

"Tiamat does not own dragonkind." Ruby shushed her as Tyrannus turned to disappear back into the mansion to make his final preparations before their departure.

"Not anymore, anyway." Thomas chimed in before the rest followed suit.

"... No... no... Here!" Raven called out as he dug through the various books and artifacts belonging to the Band of the Twisted Claw.

At present, he held up a small box, secured with a heavy padlock. Its surface was engraved with the symbols of the four Elemental Paragons.

"I think this is what Thoren was talking about."

"I pray he knows what he is doing..." Talia- who had been assisting in the search- nodded as she held the Spear of Ascalon- another of the Gypsies' trophies. "Dealing with the agents of the Lord of Light so directly is not something to be taken lightly. As it is, they have already given everything for us once. I am not certain how keen they will be to do so again."

With a grim nod, Raven turned and led Talia out of the Gypsies' impromptu vault.

Once the door was closed, however, a strange figure appeared from the shadows... leaning against the wall as though he had always been there, only now revealed by the darkness.

His garb was strange; a black shirt with buttons down the front, black pants, black shoes polished to a mirror shine, black gloves, and an odd black trilby hat. Even his glasses seemed too modern for the Renaissance age...

With a grin, the figure twirled a hand, producing a book bound in gray.

Its cover was embossed with strange golden runes, illegible to all but the most discerning of eyes.

With a flick of his wrist, he tossed the book into the piles of others, his grin glinting in the dark.

"There it is... come an' get it." He said, his voice bearing a smirking, cockney drawl as he disappeared into the nothingness from whence he had come...

The night sky crackled with a brilliant white energy, which descended from the heavens like lightning... yet not a single cloud marred its starry nexus.

The pillar of white remained, splitting up from the base and spreading along the ground, leaving melted snow, charred grass and blackened remains of trees in its wake.

The column contorted and twisted until forming an archway... the other side of which revealed the form of Tyrannus Feldrake, his Honor Guard, and his followers- now known as The Dragon Army.

Without hesitation, the ranks of warriors and mages began to march through the gateway, into a heavily forested land lightly dusted with white.

"I never dreamed this day would come." Ruby murmured as she watched them advance. "Not when I was among the Draco Disciples, anyway."

"I had often wondered why Simeon did not simply march into the Gypsy camp and burn it to the ground." Thomas agreed. "It seems far more efficient." As he spoke, the assassin raised his hands to admire them... now covered with scales and tipped with lethal claws; even the jaws through which he spoke were now accented with vicious fangs.

"My guess is any nearby locals would not take kindly to the noise." Scarlett said, placing a hand on her hip as she looked to Ruby and Thomas in turn. "From what I have come to understand, such an attack would not be as concise and direct if Simeon were in charge. Collateral damage and so forth..."

"I wonder if he'll ever turn up again." Estella sighed, sauntering up behind the others, absently twirling her wand in one hand. "If he does, you remember, he's mine."

"We know." Ruby muttered, in a tone that suggested this was not the first time she had assured her such.

After a few moments, the last of the soldiers had walked through and Tyrannus released his hold on the gate. It began to close itself, allowing the five of them time enough to step through before the archway vanished.

"I hope you know where you're going." The young sorceress added, glancing around the forest and folding her arms in an effort to gird herself against the cold.

"I know that you are not on familiar terms with such things as 'planning' and 'contingency'," Tyrannus explained, "But please, do not share in your father's ignorance by underestimating me. The inconvenience I would suffer would be unbearable, having to find a replacement for Vinz."

"Hm." She chuckled. She was about to make some snide quip regarding his 'dirty little secret'. It was foolish to assume she and Vinz didn't *talk* in the time they spent together... but as she opened her mouth, a lash of white energy suddenly wrapped around her neck, yanking her body into the air. Her eyes widened, hands reaching up to try and pry it away.

The light constricted... before disappearing and allowing her to fall back to the ground. She choked and coughed, trying to catch her breath as she rubbed her neck.

As far as Tyrannus was concerned, 'correcting' her was an ongoing process.

"This is *not* a good idea." Raven said with a firm nod of his head, reading over the shoulder of Thoren Grymm as the Gypsy leader stared at the strange letters of the scroll contained within that ancient box.

It was impossible to navigate without Talia's translation; the contents were a mishmash of Auran, Aquan, Terran and Ignan, the letters altering so much that even if one could read the letters, it required a healthy amount of decoding.

As it was, though, the combined efforts of the Gypsies had succeeded in working out the spell's finer points...

"If this Tyrannus is as powerful as Simeon claims, we haven't a choice." Thoren replied, although the words came so automatically, it was clear he had spoken them more than once. That, and he was not keen on second-guessing at this point.

"How do we know we can even *trust* him?" Raven persisted, glancing over his shoulder as the combined forces of the Dracos and Gypsies scurried about, equipping and preparing themselves for the impending battle. "When this 'Tyrannus' arrives, he and the Dracos may turn on us!"

"All the more reason to do this." Talia answered for Thoren, giving him her full attention as Thoren kept reading. "Once it is done, no matter who our enemy is, this should give us the edge we need to banish the darkness for good and all."

Raven nodded uncertainly, before turning and rushing off to aid whoever it was that needed it.

"The Ritual of the Elemental Host." Thoren murmured quietly, although clearly speaking to Talia. "Pullin' the essence of the Paragons from the aether, an' imbuin' em into the bodies o' willin' humans."

"Will they be the same Paragons we knew before?" Talia asked, her heart pounding.

"No way'a knowin'." He replied. "Whether or not they're the same as b'fore, they should recognize a genuine threat when they see it."

"How long does it last?" She persisted, slowly clasping her hands together against her chest.

This time, Talia received no reply.

"... How long does it *last*, Thoren? Is it... it cannot be *permanent*-!?"

She stopped as Thoren simply looked up at her with a strange, stoic expression.

Talia's body trembled, gently biting her lower lip.

"Then... I suppose the only matter left is finding-"

"Bring Adria, Rose and Gaia to me." Thoren said firmly, answering her question even before she had finished it.

"Rose?" Talia asked, her eyes widening for a moment before she turned and hurried off to do as her half-brother commanded; after all, there was little time for debate.

At Tyrannus' bidding, the marching squadron came to a stop at a seemingly random point in the forest.

"What is the matter?" Ruby immediately asked, fingering her weapon- an iron scepter- anxiously. "Are they close?"

"More likely we're *lost*." Estella chuckled.

Instead of answering either of them, Tyrannus stepped forward past his guard and through his army to stand in front of them.

Through the trees, he could see a larger clearing, but not a single sign of the Gypsies... but that was fine.

Simeon and Tiamat are nearby...

"Band of the Twisted Claw." He declared sharply, a rush of cold air rustling his robes. "Soldiers of Light, and all devotees of the teachings of the Lord of Light and his Paragons..." He hesitated, peering off into the distance, "For years, for decades, for *centuries* you have toiled, willfully living in the dirt, underneath humanity's heel for the sole purpose of elevating Gods who have long ceased to care for you... the time for such loyalty to this archaic worship is ended.

I have come here for one purpose; the destruction of Thoren Grymm, of Simeon Malificus and all who stand with them, but that need not be the fate of all. If you are worthy, you may stand with *me*; cast aside the ages of useless squabbling and lead this world into a new dawn... the new dawn *you* have striven for for so long, the new dawn you would never see in the midst the Lord and Tiamat's endless battle.

Turn Thoren Grymm, Simeon Malificus and their faithful over to us, and I guarantee you the safety of all who remain."

The moment he completed his ultimatum, there was another crackle in the sky... but unlike the column of white lightning that had brought Tyrannus and his Dragon Army, this one was joined by a strange, swirling maelstrom that manifested quickly in the canopy of night above, the clouds remaining and spreading until many of the stars and the moon were overtaken.

Strangely though, the moonlight almost immediately penetrated the veil of clouds, and even the clouds themselves emanated a curious warmth. The snow around them immediately began to melt, green grass and (albeit still bare) trees left behind.

The streaks of moonlight reaching out from the twisting clouds above grew brighter until a single, brilliant ray of light shot from its center. It landed in the distant woods, in the place where Tyrannus had been speaking toward moments before.

"... Why do you not stop this?" Scarlett asked, a bit unnerved by all of these strange magical happenings.

Tyrannus shook his head.

"This is better." He answered. "Allow them every opportunity, set up every defense, prepare every offensive they wish... sometimes that is what it takes." Casting his eyes to the heavens, specifically to that descending ray of light. "... Only when the light of hope has been extinguished can a new flame be ignited."

"Why do we not simply kill them?" Thomas asked, stepping forward a pace. "I believed that was what we were doing."

His voice choked and fell to nothing as Tyrannus gave him a single glare over his shoulder.

With that, the 'Praetor' looked toward the forest ahead once more.

"What has happened?" A deep, thickly accented voice rumbled lowly from Thoren Grymm's lips. Yet, the words were not his own.

Standing at the center of where the ray of moonlight touched the earth were Thoren himself, as well as Gaia Veeda, Adria Dubh and Rose Peregrine.

Just outside the circle stood numerous human figures, all of whom looked in with intrigue.

After a brief moment, one such figure broke free to address the assembled four.

"Master Terranus. Paragon of the Earth." Talia Tale gasped, immediately dropping to one knee, as did the Gypsies behind her.

The Draco Disciples showed no such reverence, but watched with curiosity as the body of the Gypsy Leader looked around, the spirit now dwelling within taking in its surroundings.

Talia's eyes were wide, quivering with the conflicting sensations of being in the Paragon's presence once again... but also where his spirit had taken residence.

Thoren Grymm's body was now host to Terranus, the Earth Paragon... and he was not alone.

Turning rather grandly to look behind him, Terranus saw the others standing there. Each one was looking down at her hands, her body, and at her surroundings as though unfamiliar with it all...

"... Talia." Gaia- or at least, she who *had* been Gaia until moments ago- stepped forward, addressing the Bardmistress with a puzzled look in her eye. "What is... how? Why have you summoned us again?"

"Oh, Adria..." 'Adria' murmured in a low, thick accent as she stared down at herself, shaking her head somberly. "Why have you done this...?"

"Masters and mistresses." Talia said quickly, "I wish there were time to explain... there is no time to do so any longer. Lady Katherine Tso has returned in a new guise with power greater than-!"

Her words were cut off by a roar as Adria drew her claymore, a wreath of flames bursting to life around it as she caught sight of the Draco Disciples within the Gypsy camp.

"Nay, nay!" Raven shouted, rushing to move in front of the Dracos who were now more than a little unnerved, and even beginning to regret the decision of joining them.

"What are the minions of Tiamat doing here?!" Rose asked... her voice- and even her mannerisms- oddly not that different from before.

"Let us dispense with the confusion and squabbling."

All other voices were silent, the Paragons' gaze immediately rising to recognize the proud figure of Simeon Malificus, walking toward them with a look of stark determination.

"The sons and daughters of the Dark Mother are here for the same reason you have been summoned, why those whose bodies you inhabit have offered themselves: For the sole chance at beating back the monster that now stands at our very doorstep."

The Paragons- Rose channeling Aria, Gaia channeling Nais, Adria hosting Ignis and Thoren doing so for Terranus- gazed at Simeon with apprehension, but judging by the expressions on the Gypsies' faces, there was little reason to disbelieve... as *un*believable as this situation was...

"The Bard is not mistaken." Simeon began again, casting an offhanded gesture to Talia, "We have no time with which to spend on banter. Tso has used the Praetor's Ritual to ascend to a new level of power- one which I lack the ability to stop on my own. To that end, I have enlisted the Gypsies- and by proxy, yourselves- to assist me."

"The Dark Mother finally confesses what she is, then." Adria/Ignis said with a smirk even as hatred flashed in her eyes. "Nothing but a weak, cowardly serpent."

"As amusing as it would be to wax theology and *hypocrisy*," Simeon shot back at Ignis, "Tyrannus Feldrake- Tso's new puppet- is far greater a concern to the both of us. To *all* of us."

"What?" Thoren- or rather, Terranus- blinked, narrowing his eyes at Simeon.

"He said 'Tyrannus', I believe." Nais explained, moving forward and placing a hand on Terranus' shoulder. "And you feel the presence of Darkness as much as I... It sets a precedent, but Simeon is not lying to us."

"Indeed." Talia finally found her voice at last in the midst of her uncertainty. "My brother Thoren... he... he has had the Ritual of the Elemental Host in his possession for years, having inherited it from his village long ago. It was never assumed we would ever need it... our situation is dire, indeed."

"Say no more." Terranus said, reaching up a hand to silence her. He did not do so sharply, but rather, adopting the most gentle tone his commanding voice could muster.

Slowly, Robert approached the Paragons where they stood in the now-dwindling ray of light from the clouds. In his hands, he held the Spear of Ascalon- the weapon that had slain the dragon Bloodtharken's mate.

"Are you... goin' to want this?" He asked but straightened as he noticed Simeon approaching.

"Give it to me." He said simply. "With it as a focus, I should be strong enough to compete on equal footing with the Paragons, and indeed, with Tyrannus."

"Never." Robert said quickly, but softened as he felt the hand of Adria- or rather, Ignis- on his shoulder.

"We will take it back from him if necessary." Ignis explained, giving Robert a nod.

Robert stared into Adria's eyes, trembling as part of him was once again forced to confront the gravity of the situation.

At last, he sighed and reached out, offering the spear to Simeon, who took it up handily.

"The rest of you." Terranus called out to the Gypsies and Disciples, "Do not involve yourselves in our battle... concern yourselves only with Tyrannus Feldrake's minions."

"Aye." Talia nodded, looking to Raven, who in turn looked to the Gypsies.

"Can I entrust you with the command of the Disciples whilst I am occupied?" Simeon spoke, addressing a young woman dressed Disciple garb. "Remember, Mistress Aconite; Business before pleasure. The Gypsies, for now, are our allies until the pretender has been cast down."

"Certainly, milord." The woman nodded firmly, watching as Simeon joined the Paragons.

With that, the five of them strode forth together, delving into the trees to confront Tyrannus at last.

"Rose..." Tristan called out weakly, all this time having been held back by another man, Conall Beithir.

"We can only pray her sacrifice will not be in vain... steel yourself." Conall murmured, drawing his own sword to join the Gypsies and Disciples as they made their way to the large clearing.

One way or the other, this would truly be the decisive battle.

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The night was silent, except for the tromping of boots in the grass; not a bird or beast dared to make a sound in the face of what was about to take place.

The Paragons of the Elements, each one inhabiting the body of one of the Band of the Twisted Claw's primary members and joined by Simeon Malificus- Chosen of Tiamat, emerged from the forest and into the presence of Tyrannus Feldrake- Praetor of the Dragon Army.

"Well, now. I never would have thought this would be possible." Tyrannus chuckled, his tone surely closer to Lady Tso's than Tovias'. "The Paragons and the Praetor... fighting side by side for a cause they must realize is hopeless."

"So you are 'Tyrannus Feldrake'." Ignis- speaking through Adria's lips- addressed him, effortlessly hefting the swordmistress' ancestral claymore, Grlanhoir. "My student and disciple, Adria Dubh, sacrificed her young life that we might stop you after everything you have done."

"A sad waste, to be sure." Tyrannus answered, much to Ignis' growling indignation. "And if you are referring to my killing of the Disciples and of that Dragon, I find that rather strange; you would not have had any complaints four years ago."

"Enough of this." Terranus commanded with a voice that nearly shook the ground, the imposing figure of Thoren Grymm suiting the Earth Paragon all too well as he stepped forward. "We do not intend to waste words with you; not any longer."

"And what of your followers?" Tyrannus asked, folding his arms as his Honor Guard and his small army of minions looked on, "How many of them will you condemn to death with you? I know one order of execution is already signed." He concluded, gesturing at Simeon, who now hefted the Spear of Ascalon.

"Bold words, in the face of what now stands against you." The former Praetor declared, but Tyrannus merely scoffed.

"Pardon me if I am underwhelmed." Tyrannus replied, shooting a glare at the Paragons. "The Dark Mother turns to her hated enemies to ensure her own continued pitiful existence."

Behind him, the Dragon Army members- specifically his Honor Guard- watched Simeon. Estella more than once attempted to raise her wand and unleash a magical blast, but each time Ruby reached up to push her arm down- each time, she whispered something nobody else heard... words to the effect of 'not yet'.

"Your grievances with Simeon and the Draco Disciples matter not... and neither do ours. Not this night" Nais declared, stepping out beside her comrades. "Tonight we stand together against *you*."

"So be it." Tyrannus nodded. "Although given Simeon's record- as well as the fate of Gabriel Newberry, I would be wary of standing with *any* of you."

When he spoke again, he spoke louder, to his comrades.

"When this is finished... reward the others for their devotion with a swift death."

Without a battle cry- without so much as a word- the Dragon Army and the assembled Gypsies and Disciples watched as Tyrannus walked forward to meet Simeon and the Paragons on the field.

"After so very many years," Tyrannus began as he came to stand directly before his opponents, "the sins of the past have finally returned to visit you. What began when the Lord of Light shattered Druscilla's boundless potential- and when the Dark Mother turned upon her most gifted disciple- ends tonight."

"Use caution." Simeon stated lowly, ignoring Tyrannus' musings, "He is a Spite-Shaper; you will be unable to halt or manipulate his attacks."

"He manifests hatred, then... no elemental energy." Terranus murmured. "This should prove a challenge."

"Let us settle it quickly." Aria said uneasily.

"We must." Nais nodded, warily appraising Tyrannus.

"Very well."

With these words, Ignis raised Adria's Claymore and lunged into the air, flames once again swirling around the blade.

Tyrannus' white-hot aura flared to life, his body shifting hastily to dodge Ignis' initial strike.

The following sequence played out so quickly, few were able to follow the movements;

Tyrannus' knees bent slightly before he leapt high into the air, just in time to dodge as Simeon lunged, the blade of the Spear of Ascalon piercing the air he had occupied a fraction of a second ago.

With a loud cry, Aria raised her arms and raked them downward, catching Tyrannus where he hung in the air and sending him to the ground with a loud 'thud'. Instantly, Terranus' hands followed suit, summoning the powers of earth; Like a tide of soil and grass, the ground below them awakened and washed over the fallen Tyrannus, burying him swiftly even as he struggled to his knees.

"There!" Ignis shouted, turning and leaping into the air once more. Flipping the blade in 'her' hands, he dove unerringly toward the mound of earth in which Tyrannus was caught.

However, an eruption of white energy disintegrated the impromptu hill, Tyrannus now standing there with a ferocious glare in his eyes. Reaching out, he clapped his hands together around the flat of the descending blade- flames nevertheless burning at his palms before he turned it aside, sending Ignis flipping through the air before 'she' landed in a crouch beside the other Paragons.

"Damn..." Ignis cursed, standing again and readying the claymore once again.

Meanwhile, Tyrannus tensed as he sidestepped another strike of Simeon's spear, followed by another, and still a third.

It was actually rather surprising how well synchronized Simeon was with the Paragons; perhaps his previous defeats had lent to some humility on his part, but past experience would have suggested he would have been more aggressive, or even tried to take a commanding lead over his comrades...

Simeon took a half-step back, grinning as the blade of the Spear of Ascalon suddenly flashed with energy, the burst taking Tyrannus by surprise and knocking him back.

At almost the same time, a whistling sound heralded the arrival of Adria's claymore as it hurtled toward him in a

rapid spin.

Twisting his body around, a white barrier appeared an instant before the weapon could strike him, the burning blade crashing into its surface. The blade managed to rip through the reflexive magical shield, but the impact was lessened as a result. Tyrannus staggered back, favoring his left arm which now bore an instantly cauterized gash.

"After all of that talk, have you lost your nerve?" Simeon asked with a little grin. "I had warned Thoren and his men to expect more than *this*."

Meanwhile, the Dragon Army seemed to be growing restless, watching their commander battle seemingly in vain.

"Let me! I told you before, the old bastard is *mine!*" Estella growled, trying to step away from her allies to join the fray, but Ruby reached out to pull her back.

"No. Not yet." The poisoner growled, although in truth she was growing as restless as the girl was.

What is he waiting for?

Slowly, Tyrannus shifted back to his full height, looking from Simeon to the Paragons.

Then, he vanished.

The five combatants' eyes widened, only Aria managing to follow Tyrannus' movements.

He reappeared near Simeon, seizing the haft of the Spear of Ascalon and pushing it aside, his other hand rose and unleashed a powerful blast of energy, which sent Simeon hurtling back. Crying out in pain, the former Praetor grasped the spear for dear life, even as his body rolled along the ground.

"Simeon!" Nais shouted, but, but quickly returned her attention to Tyrannus.

The commander of the Dragon Army was again wreathed with a white aura, but now it was crackling with the heat of mounting fury.

In the blink of an eye, he stood over Simeon, one hand raised to summon a magical blast that would obliterate the former Praetor where he lay, but suddenly, he let out a choking grunt, clutching his chest.

Aria was staring right at him with a look of extreme focus... as she drew the air from Tyrannus' lungs.

With another useless gasp, Tyrannus managed to weave out of the way of Simeon as he rolled, thrusting the Spear of Ascalon up at him. It nicked his side, but out of sheer luck the 'Praetor' managed to avoid an otherwise lethal blow.

"That does it." Estella growled again, but Ruby roughly squeezed the younger girl's shoulders.

"We are not to interfere." Ruby insisted, but Estella scowled back at her.

"He will get himself killed while we wait for him to get his bloody head together!"

"Believe in him." Ruby murmured back, although even she was beginning to wonder... she had not anticipated this level of resistance- had not anticipated that the Gypsies would be so desperate as to resort to this.

Battling the Paragons alongside Simeon who, himself, still maintained his tether to Tiamat.

This was more than most of Tyrannus' followers had bargained for.

Tyrannus leapt another pace back from Simeon, and barely kept his footing as Terranus conjured several sinkholes in the earth. At last, with a tremble and a wretch, he swept his arm upward. With it, a wave of white blades thrust up from the ground, and hurtled toward Aria.

The Air Paragon let out a high-pitched squeak of dismay as she hurled herself to one side, the white blades missing as they traveled along their path, but turned to home in upon their intended target.

As Aria struggled to escape the attack, Tyrannus finally managed to take in a breath. Letting it out as a roar of rage, he pointed directly toward Terranus, unleashing a ray of brilliant white.

It blazed through the air toward Thoren's body, but in a flash of red, Ignis stood between the ray and the Earth Paragon. Grlanthoir was held high, the ray impacting with the flat of the blade.

The smell of melting metal and scorched atmosphere emanated from where beam met sword, and for a moment Ignis' heart sank- worried the attack might pierce through the blade or even snap it in two altogether... but his faith in Adria and her blood was not unfounded.

The blast receded, leaving a large dent in the folded steel... and yet, the sword remained intact, as did Ignis and Terranus.

At that moment, Nais called out to her companions.

"Get back!"

Given Tyrannus' power, none of them were going to question her... but instead of the attack they had expected from *him*, they instead saw a thick mist beginning to manifest in the air around him.

"What is this?" Ignis asked, not moving from 'her' spot in case another ray was to come.

Nais did not reply, only following Aria's example and keeping her eyes focused on Tyrannus.

The mist... This mist- Tovas, get out of there! Now!

Tyrannus heard the voice of Lady Tso in his mind, but it was too late to react.

The fog appearing in the air grew more and more dense, rapidly obscuring the world around him until all he could see was a strange nexus of gray in all directions.

"What is... what is this?"

With clenched teeth, his body disappeared... but reappeared in what seemed to be the same place as before.

"What is this!?"

On the outside of the fog, the Paragons regrouped on their side of the battlefield, Simeon limping his way to them as well.

"What did you do?" He asked, looking at the man-sized sphere of mist that had coalesced where Tyrannus had stood.

"Meandering Mist." Terranus nodded knowingly. "In some lands there are grounds contaminated with dark magic of the Earth, known as 'Stray Soil'. No matter what direction you travel in, or for how long, the soil will never allow you to leave."

"So this 'Meandering Mist' acts upon the same principle." Simeon nodded. "So do you believe he will be content to remain trapped there forever?"

"It need not be forever." Nais replied, her eyes and hands still focused on keeping the orb of Meandering Mist alive.

"A Spite-Shaper who grows too infuriated but lacks an outlet will burn him or herself out." Terranus explained.

"Given the level of anger between Tso and her host combined... it should not be long."

Simeon sighed heavily... wondering how he had not thought to do such a thing himself...

Meanwhile, Tyrannus' forces- most specifically his Honor Guard- were looking on with dismay. Of course, those who had been former members of the Draco Disciples were no strangers to failure, but something about seeing his felt... wrong. Like things ought to have been different under Tyrannus than they had been before... and yet, this was the result as it had ever been.

"What now?" Thomas asked, although his tone carried not despair, but frustration. "May we interfere yet?"

"Simeon's mine." Estella declared once again as she stepped forward, but let out a cry of outrage as Ruby once again pulled her back.

"The Severing Charm." Ruby hissed at Estella. "Use it now. On her." She ordered, pointing at Gaia/Nais.

"What?" Estella blinked, turning back to glare at her. "What good will that do?!"

"Severing Charm?" Scarlett asked.

"Guard Estella." Ruby commanded to her, looking to Thomas. "And you... deal with her." She concluded with a glare at Aria.

"Hrm. I'd be happy to."

Tyrannus let out a bellow of rage, his energy spiking time and again, and yet even the most intense of his blasts refused to pierce the mist around him.

Calm yourself, you fool! Do you not understand what is happening!?

Tyrannus' eyes flashed once more, his body trembling as he heard Tso's voice almost shrieking in his mind.

"I cannot... this is... what am I to do, Katherine?" He demanded, his heart pounding, his breathing short. The mist was confining, constricting... it felt as though it were closing in with every passing moment.

Perhaps Tso knew straightaway what the Paragons were planning, but all she could do is hope Tovas could control himself.

"Just... remain ready."

"He has relaxed..." Nais murmured, murmured.

"Aria, remove the air from the orb." Terranus commanded, but the Air Paragon rounded on him with a gasp.

"But... but that will-!"

"It will make him frantic. Desperate. He will panic and attempt to use his full power; it will put an end to this."

Aria looked back at Terranus, her expression one of uncertainty... but even in this sort of time, she had seen what Tyrannus was capable of. Even as dishonorable a tactic as this was, perhaps she could merely render him unconscious.

Quickly, she brought her hands up and leveled them at the orb of mist.

"Wait!" Simeon's voice shouted from beside them, the former Praetor lifting his spear and aiming it beyond the sphere at where Tyrannus' honor guard stood.

There, Scarlett had taken a defensive position in front of Estella, the youngest of them already chanting something in a rapid tongue.

"Damn it!" Ignis shook her head. They had been so caught up with Tyrannus, they had not considered anybody else would involve themselves... but as he stepped forward to make his move against them, he realized it:

He counted only three.

"Ignis, what-!?" Aria began, but her words were cut off in a gasp as a blur of red and black careened out of the corner of her vision. Thomas Wisseu- now bearing two sleek, leathery wings- tackled her aside, disappearing with her into the trees.

By this point, the Gypsies and Dracos began to realize what was happening.

"Attack! ATTACK!" Robert shouted, raising his sword.

"No, stay back! Do not get in the way!" Terranus called back, but several of the Draco Disciples had already opened fire, training upon the Honor Guard and the Dragon Army beyond them with a volley of arrows and crossbow bolts.

With a snarl, Scarlett stood her ground, twin short-swords cleaving through the air and leaving bisected arrows in their wake. Not a one of them penetrated the area, leaving Estella and Ruby completely unharmed.

"Blasted Aria!" Ignis snarled, looking over to the spot where the two of them had disappeared to.

"She can take care of herself!" Terranus growled lowly.

"No, go help her." Simeon growled, "The traitors are *mine!*" With that, he charged forward, his eyes locked on the threesome.

Regardless of this battle's outcome, he thought, I will have my power returned to me!

He would relish the taste of Estella's heart now. Power of the Praetor be damned, the brat would receive her well-earned comeuppance at last.

As he charged the three of them, however, Estella stood up from behind Scarlett, her eyes locking on his for a single, oddly rueful moment before looking past him, past the orb and past Ignis... raising her hands straight at Nais.

Suddenly, Gaia Vedeia stood among them once again.

The next horrifying moments seemed to occur in slow motion... not a one in attendance able to stop them.

Gaia- recognizing herself and knowing this to be wrong- to be *impossible*- turned in one direction, then the other, the expressions of 'Ignis' and 'Terranus' ones of disbelief and outright panic.

The Keeper turned one more time to look directly in front of her... but saw only the palm of Tyrannus Feldrake's hand.

The Praetor had broken free of the mist in the moment Nais' consciousness had been repressed... but even as it clawed back into Gaia's body, a violent blast, a furious eruption of blinding-white wrath engulfed both body and spirit... neither having the time even to breathe before being silenced.

Nothing was left.

Neither Gaia, nor Nais.

The Gypsies, the Disciples, even the Dragon Army and Tyrannus' Honor Guard stared in utter grim astonishment at the bare crater left in the wake of the Praetor's attack.

"No... NO... WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!?" Ignis' low voice became a shriek of despair and fury, a fresh billow of flames bursting to life around Adria's sword. Immediately, she turned upon Tyrannus who still hovered in the air in front of where Nais had stood. "You *MONSTER!*"

Tyrannus turned, his aura jutting out in bladelike ripples.

"Blame yourself or your God."

He lunged forward in mid-air to meet her, missing being impaled by a jutting stalagmite (courtesy of Terranus) by mere inches.

Meeting Ignis in the center of the battlefield, a sword of white light manifested around Tyrannus' right hand, a massive 'clang' ringing out across the battlefield as he deflected Grlanthoir.

Ignis let out a bellowing roar, a wave of flames shooting out in pulses of intense heat.

Another barrier of white flared out from Tyrannus' body, blocking the first few waves before it finally shattered into pieces.

However, as Ignis lunged to cleave Tyrannus in two in the aftermath... the blade of Tyrannus' energy-sword plunged into the center of her chest.

Ignis' eyes widened... but with a wince and a glare 'he' continued forward, raising the claymore high into the air.

Tyrannus stepped back, raising his hand, and clenching it into a tight fist.

The energy blade still impaled in Ignis' chest suddenly burst into light, the Fire Paragon disappearing in a column of alabaster light.

Slowly, Tyrannus turned back to face Terranus.

"Your ritual... it binds the Paragons' awesome power to fragile human bodies for the span of their natural lives after which they are released back to the Celestial Realm... but it leaves them vulnerable."

"You..." Terranus spoke, his voice trembling in anger, in shock and in fear.

"Terranus." Tyrannus murmured, unperturbed by the Gypsies and Disciples who watched in stomach-turning horror, their will to raise their weapons fading by the moment.

The Earth Paragon's eyes widened, before going to furious slits as he raised his arms.

However, this time, it was Terranus who let out a cry of pain as his arms, flaring with white light, let out audible 'cracks' as Tyrannus' energy manifested, and twisted them until snapping them at the elbows.

"I realize Thoren is no longer in there... but I will save you for last... allow you to witness the full gravity of your greatest mistake."

Terranus' eyes widened again, letting out an agonized shout.

"Enough!"

From the sidelines, Robert finally shouted, calling the Gypsies and Disciples to arms... and they responded as one.

In spite of the monstrosity that had played out before them... they refused to surrender.

Simeon had fallen back a bit at Nais' destruction, but now that two of the Paragons had been slain, he was utterly at a loss of what to do. Quivering, he tightened his grip around the spear, and raised it in Tyrannus' direction.

Well? he thought, *What now?*

There was no reply.

The former Praetor turned, looking to his minions... rather shocked to see that they had raised their weapons as well... and showed no sign of turning on him *or* the Gypsies.

The edge of his lips cracked an earnest smile before, hefting the Spear of Ascalon once more, he turned back to face Tyrannus' Honor Guard.

Arrows, bolts and magical blasts disintegrated against Tyrannus' magical aura as he rose into the air, looking down upon Terranus, Simeon, the Soldiers of Light and the Draco Disciples.

Suddenly, another echoing crackle thundered in the sky, another column of energy- much like the one Tyrannus and his forces had entered through- appeared.

As it opened, the forces of Balance could hear the slaving, jabbering howls of something... some unearthly abominations the likes of which had not been seen in generations; not since the Dragon Wars of old.

Terranus stumbled to his feet, his useless arms dangling at his sides as he watched the Dragon Army approach... and watched this new contingent of hideous things approach from the magical gateway.

However, as he braced himself for the onslaught, he caught sight of Talia Tale at his side.

"... This is not the end." Talia said simply, nodding to the body of her brother, and to the spirit within it before raising her sword.

With that, the portal burst with endless ranks of darkness, the battlefield swallowed in claw, fang and scale.

Silence reigned.

Silence, except for the muffled sound of footsteps in the snow.

The moonlight had been extinguished, the starlit night air chilling to the very marrow of one's bones.

Tyrannus Feldrake walked through the forest, flanked by ruined trees, and followed by the haggard figures of his

soldiers; A wounded but smirking Thomas, a pout-faced Estella, an exhausted Scarlett and Ruby, who now leaned upon the Spear of Ascalon like a walking stick.

Tyrannus came to a halt in front of the now-abandoned wagon, once belonging to the Gypsies.

With a slow nod to Ruby, Tyrannus stepped aside to allow his second-in-command to use the Spear to shear the door from the Vardo.

He stepped inside, looking over the books piled within, several of the mages in the Dragon Army ranks quickly swarmed inside, snatching up every tome they could carry.

Tyrannus himself found his attention captured by a single book, this one bound in gray leather, and embossed with golden lettering.

Kneeling, he slowly retrieved it from the wagon floor.

With a deep sigh, he turned and left the Vardo- yet another abandoned carcass among countless others that lay upon the cold ground.

Whether or not the answers he sought lay in the book- or anywhere else- there was one thing he knew for certain:

None remained in this world who could stop him.

Five Years Later (Questing Year 2015)...

In the aftermath of the destruction of the Paragons, the Draco Disciples and their allies, more than one attempt was made to turn back the tide of darkness that was Tyrannus Feldrake and the Dragon Army:

The Fairies, headed by Shadow King Oberon and Queen Titania, had collected a host of other supernatural creatures to form one such offensive... but without the power of the Lord of Light and the Elemental Paragons, their own strength was vastly diminished. Their attack was in vain.

Several of the Lightbringers who remained attempted another attack, which was also turned aside; much of their magical power depended on the very same elemental power that had failed the supernatural folk, and even those more geared toward melee combat were no match for Tyrannus and his minions- specifically the monstrosities he had force-bred using Edana's body and whatever beasts he could find.

Tiamat- being condemned to the abyss long ago, was now without a tether to the mortal world. Without Simeon and having been shunned by Tyrannus, she was trapped and alone- her name now forbidden among his followers.

Lady Katherine Tso, the fallen progenitor of Tyrannus himself- would be the new Dark Mother... or so went the declaration.

The treasures the Dragon Army had claimed from their fallen foes were limited; Few were left alive, and those who were would soon regret this.

The traitor, Tristan Holbrook, was one such case... although Ruby's previous affection for him had little to do with it. An example had to be made.

But more than that, aside from any prisoners, the trove of magical knowledge at the command of the Band and their allies was what intrigued the Dragon Army the most. Although much of it was worthless given the Paragons' passing, bits and pieces of it could be applied using other power sources such as the essence of slain Fay.

Using these new powers, the Dragon Army- after dealing the fatal blow to their hated enemies- had quickly crushed the world's remaining armies, and became the greatest and only ruling power.

But in truth, very little of that mattered anymore.

The deaths of the Paragons very much equated to the death of the Lord of Light; the sun no longer offered any sort of warmth to the world, its light gray and empty. The world had grown cold, and unable to support its children; animals and plants died in droves, leaving only the hardiest to be consumed by the fittest.

Needless to say, the novelty of it got tiresome very quickly, having little to eat other than cannibalized dragon-flesh and not much to drink besides stagnant water.

Of course, this did not stop Tyrannus from punishing those who questioned this new way of life, regardless of how dystopian it was.

Estella- draped in a thick robe over her usual attire- breathed into her hands in the hopes of achieving some level of warmth as she knocked on the door to the library.

"Come in, Estella." Vinz's voice called out from the other side of the door.

The young woman hurried into the library, looking to the stacks of books that now stood all about the room. Of course, all of them had been read and reread countless times- now only there for decoration.

As she approached, Estella noticed something that she was certainly not accustomed to seeing whenever she made these nightly, hour-long jaunts to this otherwise unfamiliar place of learning.

Vinz was smiling.

He was currently peering down at a single tome- the strange book Tyrannus himself had taken from the floor of the Gypsy Vardo one year prior.

He had not wasted much time with most of the Gypsies' other volumes, as most of them had more to do with magical fundamentals and history of the Paragons...

But this strange book, oddly out of place with its gray cover and golden lettering, was different somehow... it was as though it did not in any way belong with the rest. It must have been a trophy, or something the Band had dismissed as being too complicated- or too dangerous- to muck about with.

When he had first looked upon the runes and pictures within its pages, Vinz had been able to make no more sense of it than Thoren had when uncovering the Ritual of the Elemental Host.

However, with a year of study... and no small amount of desperation to spur him on...

"Where is Lord Tyrannus?" Vinz asked, not looking up from the book.

"In his chambers, most like." Estella replied. "Why? Afraid he's finally lost his patience?" As she spoke, she hopped up onto a slender stack of books, crossing one leg over the other.

"Nay." Vinz shook his head. "I will need you to fetch him."

Estella blinked, quirked her head slightly.

"Tell him I have found it."

"The book is... is a *lexicon* of sorts." Vinz explained as Tyrannus stood on the other side of the library desk.

Nearby, Ruby, a significantly more draconic Thomas, Scarlett, and Estella stood in attendance, all of them listening with great interest.

"But it does not catalog people, places and events in the world we know. Rather, it documents *alternative* events, alternative *versions* of people and places we know. For instance, what if I were to tell you that- in a world not too dissimilar from ours- Lady Katherine Tso was-?"

Vinz froze, clearing his throat as he caught a strange look from Tyrannus.

"That is... a world in which the Paragons and Gypsies still exist; one which might be conquered in a *different* fashion. One that would not result in *this*." He concluded, looking around the room. Of course there were no windows, but Tyrannus and the others wearing their coats indoors was enough to make his point.

"Why would stories of another world interest me?" Tyrannus asked, his eyes narrowing.

"They are not merely *stories*, milord. Look at this." He said, pushing away from the table slightly so Tyrannus could get a better look at the tome.

Beneath the first paragraph of runes Vinz had been gesturing to before was another collection of runes, these letters printed in gold not unlike those upon the book's cover.

"These are different. I have managed to decode the letters above, but these... these are symbols, which I believe translate into numbers... into *coordinates*."

"You are... you cannot be serious." Ruby murmured in disbelief. More than anything, she did not want to invest her hopes in something so unimaginable as a brand new world.

"I am. Very much so." Vinz replied, standing up. "Using Tyrannus' power, I have no doubt that- given enough of it- we can open a gateway to this world. We possess the strength to do what needs to be done... it is simply a matter of doing it."

There was an awed hush in the room, only Vinz and Tyrannus themselves wearing any different an expression; the former a look of absolute conviction, and the latter... a strange, conflicted sort of countenance.

"Very well." Tyrannus said at last. Looking to Ruby, he nodded. "Assemble the third company and have them prepared to depart the moment the gate is open."

"Let us go as well!" Thomas said with a fanged smirk. "It has been too long since I tasted the blood of the Light-Descended."

"One step at a time, Thomas." Ruby chided him as she escorted her companions out... she could only imagine how the other members of the Dragon Army would react to the prospect of an entirely new universe to conquer; one with a warm sun, with animals to hunt and feed from, water, plants...

Tyrannus and Estella lingered, however, the Praetor walking to the door, but closing it for a moment. He turned to give Vinz an odd backward glance.

"You know what needs to be done." Tyrannus said simply... although once again, the voice did not carry Tso's authoritative tone.

As he departed, Vinz let out a soft sigh. Estella- who had taken back her position seated on top of the stack of books- leaned forward.

"Alright Vinz; you and I both know you've not been spending almost five years locked in this place just to find another universe to conquer." Estella said with a frown.

"The world of which I speak," Vinz began, double-checking out of the corner of his eye to be sure the door was locked, and making certain to speak low, "is similar to ours but for two key differences."

Estella hopped off of the stack of books, walking and coming to stand just behind him, looking over his shoulder.

"Do not strain yourself attempting to read this." Vinz said simply, brushing a hand over the runes on the gray book's pages. "The first difference... is that Tovias Farraday never reached Katherine Tso."

"What?" Estella blinked. The names were familiar to her, as Vinz had mentioned them more than once. "Reached... you mean he never did that ritual? Tovias never became Tyrannus, then?"

"Precisely. No Tyrannus. No Dragon Army. Simeon remained Praetor and the Band of the Twisted Claw remained alive and well, as did all of their allies."

"What *did* become of Tovias and Lady Tso?" Estella persisted, albeit with a casual disinterest. The idea of alternate worlds was not particularly fascinating to her, but she could sense it was something he wanted to go on about.

"That is the strange part." He murmured, looking back to the page of incoherent runes, "Katherine Tso sustained a similar wound to the one that would have killed the Tso of *our* world, had she not died offering herself in the Praetor Ritual first. But the odd thing is... she did not *die*, per se, even without Tovias' intervention."

"She survived?"

"Nay. She did not *survive*, either. According to what I have read here, she... neither lived, nor died. She was left in a comatose state, her personality gone, the power she possessed gone, everything. She did not possess a soul before, but after her defeat she was literally nothing but an empty shell."

"But... still alive?" Estella quirked her eyebrow.

"The wound she was dealt should have killed her, but this world deals with death in an odd way." Vinz answered, his voice carrying a note of confusion. "It was as though the powers that be were keeping her alive- in a sense- just in case she were needed. It is difficult to guess at why this phenomenon took place. But I can tell you this;" He turned to look directly into Estella's eyes, "I surmise that the world itself- something bigger than even Tiamat or the Lord of Light- believed Katherine Tso may be of some use again in the future, and did not allow the passage of time to spoil her in case that purpose arose."

Slowly, Vinz placed a bookmark inside the tome and closed it, taking it up under his arm.

"If we find the body of that world's Katherine Tso and somehow bring it here, Tyrannus can use it as *this* world's Tso's new host body."

"Then... Tyrannus will no longer exist. Tso will lose the power she and Tovias possess together."

"Yes." Vinz nodded. "I am not certain... but I do not think Tso expects Tovias to go so far to bring her back as to willingly throw away the power that has brought them this far. I truly believe Tso merely considers this another conquest of a world more *temperate* than our own has become."

"What happens when she realizes the truth?" Estella asked, her own words suddenly giving her an unpleasant, queasy sensation in her stomach.

"... With any luck, we will not be here when that happens." Vinz replied. "Nor will we join the rest of the Dragon Army in whatever crusade Tyrannus has otherwise planned."

"What do you mean?"

"We, my dear Estella," Vinz began, taking a deep breath, "I think the time has come for us to take our leave."

"What?"

"Estella... when I first joined Tyrannus, it was to one day inherit his power... but I have seen what comes with total victory. I have seen the tragedy and loss that comes with absolute dominion... and I will tell you with certainty that it no longer interests me; has not interested me for years. The only thing that I want anymore is to leave this world and the Dragon Army, the Light and Dark Descended, to leave the conflict behind, and live happily elsewhere."

"Vinz, I believe that you've been stuck in this place too damned long."

"I am in earnest." Vinz said, reaching out and placing a hand on the girl's shoulder. "You and I will wait for Tyrannus to succeed in his plan, to separate into Tovas and Tso to whatever end, and we will leave through the gate between this world and the other. Through it, I hope to find another world- one that will free us from all of this."

The two of them stared at one another for a moment, before Vinz nodded, and made his way to the library door.

Hesitating, he turned the handle and- for the first time in years- walked out into the mansion hallway.

"Very soon... this will all be at an end."

The time had come at last.

The Dragon Army's Third Company- usually used as front-line troops or as an exploratory squadron back when the Army still had enemies to *fight*- stood rank and file in the bitter cold of the ruined overworld; Kobolds, lizardmen, draconian humanoids, wyverns and wyrmlings, drakes and human worshipers of the new 'Dark Mother' waited eagerly for this opportunity... an opportunity they never would have anticipated ever having...

The chance to leave this hideous place, and to stake a claim in an entirely new universe.

At the forefront, staring into the distance from atop a barren hill, stood Tyrannus Felrake. His bold speech had already been delivered, not that it was necessary; The troops were every bit as anxious without any sort of preamble.

Standing just behind Tyrannus himself were his Honor Guard... and the seated, still form of Estella Foxglove.

It was she upon whom the Army waited.

"Even with Tyrannus, we lack the ability to punch through the fabric of reality with enough... with enough *give* to allow for moving an entire *army* through it. At best, we could manage to move *one* person through." Vinz had explained as the Third Company was being assembled.

"Let me go first!" Thomas said, but was once again hurriedly shushed.

"What are you proposing we do?" Tyrannus asked.

"... I am proposing that we use the one person in that world with an adequate level of power to provide a sort of... energy tether for you to 'grab onto', in essence."

"Well, don't keep us in suspense." Estella said, mostly because she did not wish to stand in the cold any longer than necessary.

"We will manipulate the Tovas Farraday of that world into awakening his power, which would otherwise remain dormant..."

"And how would *that* be managed?" Tyrannus asked, the tone in his voice colder than the unlivable conditions outside.

"... Tovas Farraday's power only manifested upon meeting Lady Katherine Tso. Although- by my research- he would be unable to awaken the Tso of his world in any meaningful way, some significant means of contact would provide the 'spike' we require."

"I see." Vinz was apprehensive as he heard the familiar notes of suspicion in Tyrannus' voice, to a point where his heart began to pound as the man's eyes locked on him. "How is it you propose to *arrange* this contact? I believe you stated that the entire reason for this difference between our worlds is that our otherworldly counterparts never met one another."

"Estella provides the magical skill required to remain unnoticed, even by their most powerful scryers." Vinz stated, turning to look at the girl.

Although Estella looked quite uncomfortable at the notion of being chosen for any sort of special mission, her silence- to anybody who knew- made it clear that Vinz had already spoken with her about this... that this was important enough for her to 'play along', as it were.

"Estella can hunt down that world's Lady Tso, and arrange a meeting between her and Tovias. With proper guidance, she should be able to give us the opportunity we need."

"... Provide the energy tether so that the army may be moved through." Tyrannus agreed, looking to Estella. "But once this is done, kill that world's Tovias and Katherine. "We will have no use for them."

"Certainly." Estella agreed, looking to Vinz who gave her a knowing look.

Slowly, Tyrannus walked behind her as she sat down on the cold ground, crossing her legs. He reached down and placed a hand on her shoulder, closing his eyes to focus his energy into her body. Vinz moved in front of her, taking a knee and opening the gray tome to the page portraying the universe in question.

With that, the astral projection had begun.

As the Army stood in wait, Tyrannus glanced down as Estella's body gave a slight twitch.

"What is it?" Vinz asked immediately, leaning forward a bit.

Estella's lips parted and moved, but only breaths- no true voice- escaped them, making it difficult to hear her speak when it was little more than a whisper.

"Vinz." Tyrannus murmured after a moment.

"He has found her... It is only a matter of seconds, milord."

"Very well." Tyrannus nodded, closing his eyes; When the signal came, he would have to summon every ounce of his power. Part of him was more than confident that this would work... but the other half of him prayed only that the former would never know what was coming.

"This brings up an interesting question." Ruby said offhandedly from behind. "What are we to do when we meet our other selves?"

"That should be obvious." Tyrannus answered, unmoving. "They will no longer be needed."

"Including that fool Simeon." Thomas said with a leer. That should make the brat happy." He looked to Estella.

"Hm..." Scarlett nodded, the notion a strange one to her... but this whole affair was strange.

Just then, Tyrannus felt another twitch under his hand. Looking to Vinz who only nodded confirmation, Tyrannus let out a low growl, that grew in an unsteady crescendo along with a crackling white aura around his body.

The energy arched downward, pulled into Estella's body like a vortex.

Vinz's eyes widened as he watched, dearly hoping that this would not destroy Estella- in body or spirit... but at that moment, a strange crackle emerged from several feet behind Vinz.

At the peak of the hill upon which they stood, small branches of energy began to manifest themselves in mid-air.

With each passing second, the energy bolts grew larger and more frequent. At last, they twisted and warped themselves into the shape of a circle, and began to expand. Within the circle, the air was distorted, as though swarming with hundreds of thousands of glass insects.

The Army and Tyrannus' Honor Guard watched in amazement as the gateway opened wider and wider, until the bottom of the circle touched and disappeared into the ground.

When the portal finally finished its expansion, it stood as tall as and as wide as Katherine Tso's manor house.

Tyrannus lifted his hand away from Estella's body; her soul would no longer need his power to link her to this world with the gateway fully opened.

Instead, he merely turned to Ruby and gave a slight nod.

Ruby, in turn, looked back to the Third Company, whose awe was giving way to excitement.

"Go."

Time went on after the Dragon Army marched through the gateway, leaving Tyrannus and his Honor Guard to wait. More than once, Thomas asked why they were not allowed to simply march in along with the army, and obliterate

anybody in their way.

In spite of their training, Tyrannus had replied, there were still a great deal of unknowns on the other side of the gate; Estella still had yet to return and give her report on how things were progressing.

However, after nearly an hour after the Third Company had departed, Estella suddenly jerked to life, pitching forward and catching herself on her hands.

"Estella!" Vinz gasped, reaching out and taking her by her shoulder, gently easing her back, brushing some hair from her face.

"Still alive." She answered breathlessly. "Still kicking..."

"What happened? What is happening in there?" He persisted, soon joined by Ruby who crouched beside him.

"Vinz..." Estella began, shaking her head, "Vinz, I don't think... I don't think they'll make it to the portal. The Gypsies or the Army will catch them."

"What?" Tyrannus blinked, looking down at the two. "What do you mean?"

"Tyrannus." Vinz looked up at him, his eyes growing rather desperate. "The Honor Guard needs to go in, and assist against the Gypsies. Without them, the Army may slaughter them blindly and we will be right back where we started!"

"I would think the Army would know better." Tyrannus folded his arms. "Better than some of us, anyway." He added, glancing back to Thomas. "But I suppose you are correct. Nothing can be left to chance at this stage."

At this, he turned and looked to the three remaining members of the Honor Guard.

"Go in. Assist the Third Company in crushing any resistance they may find. Once this is complete, I will join you."

"Why do you not come with us?" Scarlett asked, stepping around them toward the portal. "With your power, you should be able to break them easily."

"Because if anything is amiss," He answered, "I must remain on this side to keep the portal open."

"Yes, because *ever* coming back here is *ever* so enticing." Estella muttered, staggering to her feet.

The three strode forward, disappearing into the hole in reality. However, as Estella stepped toward the portal to join them, Tyrannus spoke again.

"Estella, you will stay behind... I believe you have done more than enough for us already."

Vinz bit his lip nervously, looking back and forth between he and Estella as he stood.

"With all due respect, milord," Vinz began, "I believe the Third Company will require all of the assistance they can get. There is no time for debate; this is a very delicate-!"

He stopped... as a brilliant collar of energy flared around his neck.

"I have no time for *debate*, this much is true." Tyrannus nodded. "Did you believe I would not see that the two of you were planning something?"

As he spoke, he brought one hand upward, clenching it slowly into a fist- every millimeter tightening the collar around Vinz's throat.

"Although I know not what it is, I will not-!"

At that moment, Tyrannus' voice halted. The expression in his eyes wavered from a cold, dark look to that of frantic desperation. It was those eyes that turned to Vinz, the energy collar dissipating almost instantly.

Vinz coughed, but looked up to Estella, waving at her.

Estella stepped forward, one hand moving toward her wand... but at Vinz's bidding, she spun around and leapt spryly into the portal.

What are you doing? Tso's voice echoed in Tovias' mind. *What is that treacherous fool and the brat planning?!*

Tyrannus finally staggered back to life, his countenance darkening once more as he looked to Vinz.

"The price of whatever treason you attempt will be steep... I will take from you far more than your lives... you and Estella both."

Vinz trembled, not daring to move.

At that moment, all he could do was hope.

The first to return from the portal- much to the surprise of both Vinz and Tyrannus- was Thomas Wisseu; a bleeding stab-wound in his abdomen, and the articulated hands on the tips of his wings hacked off. Immediately, one of the Dragon Army healers rushed to his side, attempting to patch up the damage done to him in spite of his blood-fury.

The next was Scarlett, battered and unconscious. Her swords were missing, and her entire body was soaked with sea water.

"... Enough of this." Tyrannus glared down at the two, then looked to two more Draconian soldiers. "Send Tristan

through the portal... whatever game they are playing, it ends now."

"Milord!" Vinz called, but froze as Tyrannus turned his glare upon *him* instead.

"... Right, then." Tyrannus growled, turning to watch as a massive form was drawn forth by several chains... accompanied by a deafening, groundshaking roar.

With dismay, Vinz watched as the figure was released from the chains, and disappeared into the gateway.

Just then, there was a flash as Estella appeared, staggering up from the ground. She let out a growl of anger and dismay, but was caught by Vinz.

"What happened?" Vinz asked, rather regretting that he, himself had no combat ability; he would have liked to see this all for himself.

"Ruby used the Meandering Mist spell to separate the defenses of the city... but they're still giving us a bit of trouble." She blinked, her words evidenced by Thomas and Scarlett's state. "But there's good news... we bought enough time. They were on their way to the portal."

"Who is 'they'?" Tyrannus snarled... but hesitated.

I want to look upon you once more...

And is this not enough?

*I do not wish to look upon a **ghost**, Lady Katherine! Not anymore!*

"No... No, you would not..." He murmured aloud... but it was not to Vinz she spoke.

*Tovias... Tovias, I will not allow this. I will not **allow** you to-
Katherine... in the years we have been together, I think... I think that, perhaps, you have begun to mistake my silence for weakness.*

Tovias' voice murmured quietly in Tyrannus' head, while Tso's- while previously outraged- began to grow apprehensive.

Tovias, think about what you are-

*I **have**... and for those years, this is the moment I have been thinking **about**... All of the men and women we have killed together, the army we have amassed and the power we've gained... none of it has compared with even a **shred** of the happiness I experienced that day... the day your eyes met mine, that day that... that I finally believed I that I had a purpose in this world.*

And you would throw that purpose away for your own selfish delusions.

*Love is not a **delusion**, Katherine... it is the only thing that has kept me going all this time... the horrible things that we have done... that we have created... just... knowing that one day I would see you again and that we would be together, and that the world would be a place I could-*

***Stop.** Tovias, you **sicken** me. I know not where you got these notions or how long you have been entertaining them. If it is eternity you seek, I will give you that; an eternity of unquestioned rule. Our power is unmatched, will forever be unsurpassed... but if it is 'love' you desire- for even an instant, much less **eternity**... then you are a greater fool than I ever could have imagined.*

Tyrannus' hands squeezed tighter and tighter, clenching until crimson droplets flowed from between his fingers.

I do not believe that, Katherine... I never have. Perhaps you consider yourself incapable of love, but I do not. Just, look! Look at the Dragon Army, at the Honor Guard! None of it would have been possible without nurturing their gifts, without granting them power instead of... instead of focusing so intently upon asserting dominance as the Draco Disciples did! Look at what we have achieved because we allowed Vinz Clortho to live! We have another chance... a world that might remain warm and might flourish!

*Tovias... You do not understand. Even from the first, I doubt you ever have. I was descended from Druscilla, whose soul was ripped away. She could not love. She could only aspire to greater power when she could never attain it. Her magic largely accompanied her soul in its departure. Since then, the emptiness- even diluted over time- has been replaced by hatred for the Paragons, and a need for the power that was taken away. **That** is all I want... revenge. Power. That is all that I have **ever** wanted, and all that I ever **can** want.*

It is not too late to change that.

Suddenly, there was a strange ripple along the surface of the portal, much like the one that had occurred when the members of the Honor Guard had been sent back through... but instead of another staggering or slumping member of Tyrannus' elite...

It was the pale figure of Katherine Tso.

Her eyes were empty... just as they had been before, albeit wreathed with crackling white energy- as was the rest of her body. She moved smoothly, fluidly beneath voluminous skirts and sashes, as though hovering over the ground rather than simply walking. Her dress was stained with blood, the rapier wound in that same, familiar place.

"What...?" Thomas blinked, tilting his head at this even as the healer tried to mend the wound in his stomach.

Even Vinz was more than a little taken aback, but Estella spoke.

"There's nothing in there." She said breathlessly. "She's just a puppet animated by Tovas' power when they made contact. Probably drawn here by the magical link Tyrannus made, most likely."

"Tyrannus!" Vinz called out, turning to cast a look at the Praetor who was trembling, his arms shaking as his bloodstained fists finally opened. "Tyrannus, Now! You must do it now!"

Tyrannus' body turned, although his movements were jagged and slow... quite literally two minds struggling for control.

There was a strange, inhuman growl from Tyrannus' body before he leapt forward, kicking up snow from the frozen ground.

As Thomas, Estella, Vinz and a now-awake-and-groggy Scarlett- along with the rest of the Dragon Army- watched in confusion, Tyrannus took the figure of Lady Tso into his arms, pulled her close, and pressed his lips to hers.

There was a shrieking sound, like that of splitting metal as the white aura around the both of them flashed, growing to a blinding fever pitch.

"What is this?" Scarlett asked, still recovering from whatever had become of her in the other world.

Thomas did not reply, other than with a little grunt.

Vinz and Estella looked on, the former sincerely weighing the idea of running through the portal as this was happening... but just as abruptly as it had begun, the light was snuffed out.

In the silent aftermath, all stared back and forth between the two... the white energy having vanished from Tso, although it remained in weak crackles around 'Tyrannus'- and the Portal had remained.

Tso's body- no, Lady Tso- was looking down at her trembling hands in utter disbelief.

For his part, Tovas stared wide-eyed at the now sentient woman before him.

"... Katherine..."

Suddenly, Lady Tso let out a shrill roar, almost echoing the sound of the splitting souls that had pierced the air earlier.

Tovas' body crackled with energy, and yet no attack came forth as Katherine threw herself upon him. Relentlessly, her long nails raked across his skin, leaving bleeding scratches. They jabbed into his eyes, and stabbed mercilessly into the flesh of his throat.

"What...!?" Scarlett was the first to gasp, her legs trembling and giving out beneath her as she watched. Thomas only watched curiously.

Vinz grew pale, standing up and taking Estella's arm over his own. However, even as he started to make his way for the gate, the enormous figure of a dragon- Ruby Nightshade perched on top of it- came swooping back through it.

Along with her, the Third Company- almost half of its number dead or wounded- materialized along the expanse of snow-covered grass.

"What is going on!?" Ruby shouted as the dragon came to land near the gate. "What... What is- Katherine!?"

Tso was unaffected by the arrival of Ruby and the Third Company, never ceasing in her wild, furious attack.

When Tso at last stood, the bloody form of Tovas Farraday lay still... tears unnoticed amidst the flood of crimson all about his body.

All of the Dragon Army stood unmoving... many of whom slack-jawed as they stared at the body of what was once Tyrannus Feldrake... and at this strange woman who now stood before them.

"Katherine..." Ruby finally broke the silence, magic carrying her from the dragon's back down to the ground to face her long-time friend... in the flesh at last.

"Ruby," Tso murmured, although she grimaced as she looked down at her wound. "Heal me... that I might lead us to finish what we started." With that, she looked back to the portal, speaking through clenched teeth, "We have a world to conquer. And Thomas?"

The draconic Honor Guard blinked, his own wounds mostly healed as he looked in relative awe at this ghost of the

past... but followed her gaze as she looked back to Vinz and Estella.

"Kill them."

Vinz and Estella choked, staggering in their slow stride toward the portal as Thomas- his old loyalty to Lady Tso and his blood lust constant- hurled himself toward them.

Estella cried out, reaching down for her wand, but it was far too late as Thomas' clawed hand slashed straight across her throat... nearly decapitating her.

Vinz barely had time to react, staring in shock as the girl's body started to fall to the ground. However, his hesitation cost him as Thomas continued in his forward momentum, seizing him by the neck and twisting sharply.

With a muffled crack, Vinz's body went still before he fell to the ground as well.

As Thomas turned to listen for further orders, he was barely allowed his own screech of surprise and pain as a blast of energy engulfed him, his body disintegrating before the eyes of both Tso and the army... all of whom looked back to Ruby.

"Katherine!" Ruby declared in a scowl, teleporting from the dragon's back to the ground. "Katherine, stop this!"

"What is the meaning of this!?" Tso countered, rounding on her former friend. "What have you done!?"

"What have *you* done, Katherine?" Ruby countered, the figure of the dragon rearing back with uncertainty- much as Scarlett was. "I know that you... I know of your soul, your feelings, but... but *why*?! Why have you done this?!" She asked, pointing at Tovias' body. "That man... his power was great enough on his own! He could have continued to lead us! And those two... they have done nothing but aid in our cause! And they even went so far as to return you from *death*, and... and this...?!"

"Tovias was a worthless, spineless little wretch, spouting drivel about 'love' and 'happiness, no different from the Band of the Twisted Claw. His power was great, but his spirit was utterly useless!"

"Katherine..." Ruby murmured, squeezing the scepter she now carried as her magical focus, "It was thanks to his spirit that we ever got this far... and thanks to the ones Thomas just killed that we ever had this opportunity to pick up the pieces after... after all of this." She said, reaching around and gesturing to the frozen lands around them.

"Regardless, you will follow me, as you have done in the past. You never saw fit to question me before, and doing so now... I was every bit as much Tyrannus as that fool was." Tso hissed, gesturing to Tovias' body. "I am rightful commander of this army. You will do as I order, or-!"

At that moment, a low, dull rumble echoed forth from the gateway, the sound enough to draw the attention of the entire Dragon Army.

"No..." Katherine whispered as she stared up at the portal. The semicircle of energy was beginning to shrink, the distorted air flowing inward as though something were sucking it away. At that moment, the entire army began to charge toward the portal, Tso only reaching out for it in horrified realization. "No, no, No, NO, NO-!"

Then, in an instant, the circle diminished to but a single point of white light... then exploded in a roaring blast of energy that engulfed the legions of draconic monsters.

For a moment, everything was white.

The bleached bones of humans and monsters lay scattered, some of them already partially buried beneath the drifting snow. Bits of burnt scale and fluttering, tattered fabric were the only decorations amidst the grisly necropolis.

Only one figure stood among the legion of corpses:

The strange man in black who had placed the gray tome on the floor of the Gypsy Vardo.

He stood silent, unmoving, not even shivering amidst the cold until he closed his eyes and slowly raised his arm.

Overhead, the sky began to distort with gentle ripples... until five strange crescent-shaped objects appeared, as

though piercing through from some other world entirely.

Then five more appeared nearby... and as both sets grew, one could see that they were in the distinct shape of *hands*...

The fingers- clawlike and black with decay- were swarming with those glass insects like those within the portal... but they were spreading with every moment of the hands' presence.

As this happened, the man in black looked to where the hill had once stood. It was now nothing but a snow-filled crater, but it was not at it, nor at the now-nonexistent bodies of Tso and Tovas at which he was looking.

He was looking *beyond* them... at another world.

"One down... one to go."

The hands in the sky suddenly wrenched apart, the sky splitting to reveal for the most brief of instants a skull-like face wreathed by the blackened feathers of rotting wings.

And then there was nothing.