

(This is a story based on the Live-Action Roleplaying Game known as 'RenQuest' at the Bristol Renaissance Faire, circa 2013. 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.

Several chapters were co-written by other authors, or written by other authors *entirely*. Author credits will be noted at the beginning of each chapter. – Dave)

"Inevitable: Book I"

A RenQuest Fanfiction by David Manley

Prologue: What Happens After The End?

(Written by Rayna Chucka)

A chill wind was blowing in the night air, and the once silent woods gave a muttered groan. Gnarled tree branches clattered up against one another, the brittle twigs conducting a foreboding orchestra.

It made the small clearing unnerving, for it had been that very same morning in which the most unlikely of heroes had stood forth against all odds.

They had been a ragged team of men and women, torn from the very comforts of their lives- and even time periods- to be thrown into chaos most unpleasant. They were Healers, Mages, Warriors, all strangers in a strained truce, trying to find their way home and their purpose for suddenly being thrown together.

But that was hours since passed; Little evidence remained of the ominous "Void Angel", Danny Priest, or the others who had so adamantly attempted to get their revenge or settle some score. and the relative silence that now prevailed was peaceful in comparison.

It was, however, not silent for very long.

At first it was the creak of a branch, or the crunch of stone. Then it was the swish of fabric and the sharp clack of bone against metal.

The lone, hooded figure that caused the disturbance was unperturbed by the sounds. She moved forward deliberately, tip toeing without need, jumping at the rustle of wind in the trees and the scurrying of some unseen animal into the brush.

The ominous sounds- those *not* of her own making- caused her grip to tighten on the short staff she carried- An ornate skull tipped a length of decorative bone and beading, wrapped with a few wilting stems of wolfsbane. It was the only identifiable feature outside the dark cloak that obscured her true attire, and by the tightness of her grip, was the most precious.

The snap of a twig underfoot brought the girl to a standstill, but after a pause, she strode onward once again.

Eventually she made it to her intended destination, the path she traveled ending at last at a patch of grass that- in the light of the moon- was charred and unnatural.

With a heavy sigh, she knelt into the dirt, apprehension written in the slump of her shoulders.

She sat like that for quite some time, staff across her knees as she stared downward, hand upon her chin.

For once, she was glad for the time alone, despite the cold chill and the tremors of fear that raised the hairs on the back of her neck. Yet, she knew her window of time was swiftly closing, and with a sharp exhale, began working.

A dagger, pulled from her hip flashed silver in the light, and she drove it into the dirt. The blade swirled in the dark soil as she worked with precision, circles and spirals overlapping, creating intricate runes. She paused only briefly to raise a hand to her chin again, observing the work done, before rising into a crouch.

Extending her arm, she drew one last large circle slowly around whole image with a soft murmur.

The instant the circle was completed, she jumped back as the sigil hissed, growing darker than the void and burning into the ground.

The girl quickly snatched up the staff she had been carrying and stepped a few feet backwards, knuckles white from her grip as the wind whipped about her cloak. Her arm rose to cover her eyes as a blinding flash exploded from the etched runes.

As the light began to fade... a familiar voice emitted across the once empty clearing.

"S'like I was saying. St. Elmos wasn't even a setback. Still I-..."

The drawl broke off, the lanky figure of Danny Priest turning with only a raised eyebrow as any hint of bewilderment at his sudden relocation. A frown was cast across his face, eyes narrowing at the now crimson sigil underfoot, and the woods that lay all around. Yet as his gaze fell upon the female before him his face slid into its customary smirk. He swept his hat off and bowed ever so slightly to her, an audible exhalation of air a hint of his inward amusement..

"Well well, love... don't you know it's rude to interrupt someone in the middle of a conversation?" He made to step forward, but at the motion the girl thrust the staff she held before her like a shield, taking a step back.

"D... Don't!" Her voice was shaky, unnaturally loud, and- as it happened- entirely unnecessary; The moment Danny reached the threshold of the circle drawn in the dirt, he stopped. It didn't take him long to realize that his form- not quite physical- was confined within the summoning circle. So, he instead proceeded to tap his foot, hands on his hips, that knowing smirk still plastered across his face.

"That's a neat little trick there, take long to figure that one out? And here I was thinkin' you had no talent." The girl merely shook her head, a clatter emitting from the staff she held. It betrayed her and caused Danny to raise his eyebrow in amusement.

"You know love, I do have places to be, so if you could make it quick that would be swell." His tone was light as he continued, as if he had not been seen dying earlier that day, as if everything- Gwen, Aldrazar, even those poor, forsaken Shades- as if it had never even happened.

"You...I have some questions for you Danny Priest!" She squeaked out the words quickly, the attempt to be brave having little conviction. She paused again, and the silence only gave Danny more time to interject.

"By all means, ask away. But, if you would, make it snappy n' all. I have to get back to bein' dead you see."

He said it with mockery, and the girl felt the emotion of the day course through her veins as clearly as if it were happening all over again. Who else suffered from this man? Her friends, her family, would they ever be the same after what they had been forced through?

As the thought crossed her mind she strode forward, tossing her hood back. Anger and confusion etched across her face, tears threatened to spill out of her hazel eyes. She shoved the staff up to the edge of the barrier. In this world or the next, she knew something had to be able to be done.

"Gwen...Aldrazar...What did you do to them? How do I... how can I bring them back?" She nearly begged the words, as if that was enough to undo the horror she had seen, as if it could bring them back.

She was prepared for anything... or so she had thought.

Danny Priest only grinned wider, leaning in ever so slightly to make direct eye contact with the girl. No questions were asked, nor were they needed. Danny had been there, and he knew too much- Too much about the Band, about the world and those beyond.

He merely adjusted his glasses and grinned.

"How'd you like to make a Deal, Miss Wellington?"

Part 1: The Book (Co-Written with Rayna Chucka)

It wasn't as though 'Davem of the Davemport' trusted the man in the strange black attire... but considering his position, there was little else for it: He was a man who- one by one- had seen his aspirations dashed, and as of his exploits in the Underworld, had nothing to look forward to upon crossing the veil of death.

Of course, hopeless as he was, he was nevertheless disconcerted as he watched the mysterious man open a swirling portal of distorted air opened before them with a wave of his hand.

"Oi, in ya go, then." The stranger Davem had only come to know as 'Priest' said in that irritating, cockney drawl. He was about to voice some manner of protest when Priest grabbed him by his collar, and shoved him through the portal.

The 'Lorekeeper' staggered through with a high-pitched shriek... but once he regained his footing, he was immediately was taken aback.

He had written about the passages between worlds while documenting the Tovias Farraday story... but even Lillith and Gertrude's descriptions of it could not have prepared him for the near-maddening garbled dimensions all around him.

The only thing that kept him grounded- allowed him some semblance of stability- was the figure of a familiar looking young woman standing upon the nothingness before them.

"Oi! You make any progress on them coordinates I handed you?" The man in black addressed the woman as he entered behind Davem, sauntering to the girl's side.

Her wardrobe was a bit different, and she lacked the usual bandanna. Even her hair had changed somewhat, but there was no mistaking her.

"... Alice? Is that you?" Davem asked, his eyes widening.

Alicia Wellington narrowed her eyes, brow furrowing with confusion as the befuddled man spoke her nickname. A frown- so atypical of her- crept upon her mouth. She stepped back slightly (not any closer to Danny, who she knew well enough, but away from them both), seemingly to assess the situation. She ignored Danny's words for a moment, instead focusing her attention onto the newcomer.

After a moment, she spoke up.

"I am sorry, but do I know you?" she asked, an apologetic waver playing through her voice as she grasped a piece of paper tightly between her hands. "'Tis not often I forget a face, but it has been a trying past few days." She bobbed her head sheepishly, shrugged and pulled her hands to her chest. "But, 'tis a pleasure to meet you, or meet you again Sir...?!" she gave a small hop to show her excitement at meeting someone new.

Davem cleared his throat, still visibly bewildered- perhaps as much as she was.

"I'm sorry, miss... I just... know someone who looks a lot like you. Her name was Alice, and I... I merely assumed..."

The man hesitated. He had never- aside from this 'Danny Priest' fellow- met anybody from another dimension before... but that seemed very much like what he was presented with now.

Slowly he stepped forward, reaching out a hand for her to take and shake if she so desired.

"Just call me 'Davem'. For whatever reason, everyone does."

With a tilted head, Alicia took Davem's hand and shook it, pleasantly and with a genuine smile.

"Pleasure is all mine! Also never you mind for mistaking me for another, I have had moments like that before myself! I mean just the other day..." She trailed off, realizing her words were going off on a tangent, and so she could listen as Danny spoke up.

"This is definitely *an* 'Alice' alright, but she's got a bit more rattlin' about upstairs than the last one y'dealt with." Danny said, now sidling uncomfortably close to Alicia, actually craning in with a rather lewd expression as he swept a hand before her. "Ain' bad on the eyes, either; y'could sharpen a sword on that stomach."

"Hey..." Davem cleared his throat, his face a deep red with embarrassment for the 'Alice' before him. Even if this weren't the one he knew, he still felt awkward.

For her part, she flushed and furrowed her brow as Danny drew closer, but said nothing, merely resigned to crossing her arms and choosing to ignore him as Davem continued;

"I'm from New Dover Port, in the New World."

"Dover Port...I cannot say I know of it. Although I have never been one for geographical intelligence." She chuckled, but once again her expression turned to a more serious side as Danny spoke once more, his accent sharp and demanding of their attention.

"And now that we've all gotten buddy-buddy, it's back to the matter at hand." He said, weaving away from Alicia, but gesturing to the piece of paper.

She unfurled the page of coordinates she had been studying before the pair arrived, worry causing her brow to furrow, and her shoulders to shrug in defeat.

"These are nothing like I have ever seen before. The symbols, everything about it is different than what I know. And even more so different than the Void... thing... the Core! Ah the Void Core!" She smiled, proud of herself for remembering.

"I did notice something however. This mark here, and here." She traced her fingers in a line across the page, "Have some of the similarities of the Void Core symbol, and..." She rustled into a pouch that hung off her belt, drawing forth a small book, which she quickly opened. "And that picture there!" She rocked back on her heels, beaming slightly.

"That's all I could figure out. Nothing Gaia ever taught me related to this... I mean most of my knowledge just came from a mix of all the mages, strangers, half of it I don't even understand still. You know this." She pouted and crossed her arms. Working with Danny Priest did test some of the limits of her trust and love of all people. Ever since the Gwen and Aldrazar incident... well, she just needed to keep hoping. She turned her back on Priest for a moment, returning her attention to the still rather confused looking man.

"S'no wonder some'a them symbols might seem familiar; The Void is as primal as its opposite number... y'see, them coordinates lead to a place born of Creation... s'why I needed you. I can't open that portal m'self... bein' who / am."

"What's the meaning of all this?" Davem asked, looking back to Alicia. Now that she got a closer look at him, he seemed to be in dismal shape; his clothes were muddy, his eyes red from a mix of alcohol and tears. "I don't... I don't understand why you brought me here."

"One step at a time." Danny replied with a cheshire smirk.

Alicia listened to Danny's explanation on the symbols, but couldn't help noting Davem's confusion at all of this; For certes, he appeared less like a willing participant of this adventure, and more like one who had stumbled across it by chance. As he finally spoke aloud his confusion, Alicia could not help but feel a twinge of frustration.

"Priest!" She exclaimed, crumpling the paper a bit in her exasperation. "Must... must you be so cryptic all the time!?" she stomped a foot on the nonexistent ground, holding back some of her more colorful words. She turned on her heel and took a deep breath, eventually turning back around to look at the two. One bedraggled, one conniving, oh they were a motley crew. She drew a breath, reminded herself of her purpose, and eventually spoke once more;

"Alright Priest. Where are we going next then?" She knew better than to press for information, for it would not always be given.

"This, my dear, is where we tip the scales, as you so wished." Danny explained calmly. His accent dissolved as he spoke, as it always did whenever he was beginning to take things in a more serious light. "You wanted your happy ending... and this is where our new mutual friend Davem will find it."

"What?" Davem asked, perking a bit and watching as Danny stood to his full height- actually hovering an inch over the invisible ground and floating back to Alicia's side.

"Thanks to the way my world was constructed- thanks to the Balance- /never had a chance to be anything other than what you see before you... and this young man's world is only concerned with the war of the Gypsies an' Cultists; never had no regard for him, resulting in this ragged wreck... at least, until now." He cast a smiling glance at Alicia. "You will act as his salvation, where his own world offered him not but despair and tragedy; the same tragedy and despair I've claimed will consume *all* worlds. But now is your opportunity to prove me wrong. All he wants is a second chance... and you can give it to him."

"Wait, wait." Davem shook his head. "Salvation and despair... I don't understand any of this."

"You needn't understand it *now*." Danny replied shortly. "But you will, soon enough." With that, he looked to Alicia. "Well?"

"I...he *will* prove you wrong." Alicia huffed, crumpling the paper in her fist once again. It was clear why the parchment was in such a worn state. Just like the state of their little affair. Yet it was all Alicia had at this point. She could not just go back pretending like the Void Angel, Gwen and Aldazar, and all the rest of it didn't happen.

No, she had to prove Priest wrong. If it meant putting her trust in this rather ramshackle man, she would.

"All I can say is, I hope you know what awaits us at this mysterious destination."

With this, Alicia turned to Davem, and gave him an apologetic smile.

"My apologies you got dragged into this mess! But as it were, there is nothing we can do about it now. Just..." She paused, suddenly earnest. "Whatever you fight for..Davem, just... do not forget it."

Priest gave a pointed cough, and Alicia could practically feel his eyes rolling at her words. Paying him no heed, she instead pranced a few steps away, pulling out a fabric-wrapped piece of charcoal from the pouch at her waist.

"This better work.." She mumbled to herself, unfurling the parchment and laying it flat. The ground in this dimension- the void- was not like anything she had ever experienced, and for a moment she could not be certain if her tools would even work. Yet, there was no room for second-guessing and, with a deep breath, Alicia began to work.

Each motion was fluid as she connected the symbols on the parchment together, each symbol linking to the next without lifting the charcoal, a mix of magic and science, coordinates and connecting lines. To the untrained eye it might as well have been a slew of nonsense. However to Alicia, it was so much clearer. This place, this task, it was not going to be easy.

She lifted the charcoal from the strange ground, and regarded it only for a moment, before unsheathing a small dagger and outlining around the symbols with the tip, marking the containing circle for the portal. She muttered quietly to herself as she worked the final curve, the lines meeting with a hiss as the symbol burned gold, burning into the dimension itself. Alicia scrambled backwards as the symbol sputtered to life, not quite so certain if this was the best idea anymore.

Davem watched with awe, both at Alicia herself and the runes she crafted and connected what looked more like an elaborate dance than anything else.

"Impressive, ain' it?" Danny murmured quietly so as not to interrupt, folding his arms with his usual smirk. "Somethin' about seein' that one work with pointy objects."

"Shh." Davem answered simply, although not paying much attention to begin with as the portal-crafting ritual reached its climax.

The hissing sound grew to a rapid crescendo, coupled with another strange sound- almost like buzzing... and then, all at once the gateway opened before them in a shower of lights from the glowing runes, and what seemed to be scrabbling of glass insects.

When this subsided, all that remained was a strange tunnel leading into a darkened plane.

From the outside, the whole of the tiny world looked to be not but a lightless hallway but for one pinpoint of shimmering white in the distance.

Davem hadn't noticed before, but Danny had swiftly retreated away from the portal entrance, shielding his eyes from the distant speck as though it pained him to look upon it.

"What are you trying to lead us into, Priest?" Davem demanded, looking back at him over his shoulder.

"Your welfare and salvation, Davemport." Danny said with a scowl. "Nothin' less. Now get moving b'fore some other authority gets wind'a this an' spoils our fun."

Davem blinked, looking back to the portal. He couldn't deny feeling a certain unease- a murmur in his chest and a feeling in his stomach that suggested something- everything about this- was wrong... but what he'd said, what Alicia had said... and everything he'd experienced up until this point...

Wrong or not, there were no choices left.

Slowly, he stepped toward the portal, clenching his teeth. He came to stand beside Alicia, and offered her a hand.

"... Come with me?" He asked meekly. "I mean... I don't know... I-"

"Nothin's gonna happen." Danny called with another roll of his eyes. "But y'may as well go, too; see what's behind Door Number One."

Davem glanced at Danny again, but shook his head and offered her his hand one more time.

"Please?"

Alicia looked apprehensively at the portal. Now, having traveled this way before she did not deny the world beyond was 'safe' to at least access. However, the journey itself, and what lay after the travel is what had her nervous. Besides, she was still not a fan of this dimension jumping business. Yet the pathetic, confused look in Davem's eyes resonated within her very core principle of helping those who needed such, and she could not just leave him to wander blind.

She did not take his hand right away, however. Instead, she whipped around to Priest, the fiercest expression she could muster upon her face.

"No funny business Danny." She pointed at him threateningly as she could, stomping a foot. "Understand?"

Without waiting for a reply she turned around and grabbed Davem's hand, striding into the tunnel before either of them had any chance of turning back.

The anarchic brightness and swirling images of the between-world was quickly left behind as Davem and Alicia stepped through the doorway. In that instant, everything was swallowed up by an odd stillness- the only sound an ominous hum emanating from the distant light.

Their surroundings- if they could be thusly named- seemed to be an endless, starless night. However, there was also an unsettling, claustrophobic nature about the place, as though the darkness were not as deep as it seemed.

Taking a deep breath- breathing in what he was not entirely convinced to be genuine air- Davem walked toward the light which seemed strangely warm... almost inviting, as opposed to the effect it had on Danny. He had recoiled from it not unlike a vampire of legend... what *was* he?

"Alice... how do you know that man?" He asked softly, not certain Danny would hear them regardless. "How could he know me? Or the Alice from *my* world? Why would he-... or you- care what becomes of me?" His voice was small, even for trying to keep from being heard. "I don't understand..."

Alicia bit her lip, feeling badly that Davem was so in the dark about the whole situation. But although she only knew the surface of Danny Priest and all this Void nonsense, she figured Davem deserved to know as much, now being a part of things himself.

"I... it's complicated." She continued to move forward, eyes ever so often flickering to Davem as she began or story.

"I will admit I only have known Priest a few days, due to an unfortunate set of circumstances I am afraid. You see, he sort of pulled us, that is, a group of people from all over-" She waved her free hand in a circle about her head, symbolizing the different dimensions, "-all for... well a myriad of reasons.

It is difficult to explain, but Priest is some sort of ambassador, or something that works for this creature, this entity known as the Void Angel." She paused, knowing her words probably made little sense to the already bewildered man.

"Basically, he wanted to summon this thing, and let it consume the world, so to speak." She paused in her walking. "Well, as Priest was the one behind the whole fiasco, we fought him. In the process however... two of our members, they died to help us land the blow that defeated Priest.

The Void Angel though... it had already been summoned. Yet, it did not succeed. For we still had the one thing that kept us strong through the whole affair. We had hope, and love, and all the good that people hold on to."

Alice continued to move, now gazing at the ground. "I will admit, this is a bit of a conflict where you are now the holder of our fate so to speak. You see...I believe there is good in all people, and that hope will prevail through any darkness. Priest, he believes more in grief and despair ruling our human nature."

"You have to be the one to prove one of us wrong."

She was quiet for a moment, and then glanced back to Davem. "I am sorry, I realize how much pressure this must be."

"It's alright." He said with surprisingly little hesitation. Perhaps he'd already known some time ago Danny Priest's true nature, even if the specifics eluded him. Nevertheless, he gently released Alicia's hand. Turning back to her, he continued:

"Alice... I believe the same thing as you do. I want to believe there's good in everyone. It's the reason I left Bristol. There was a girl who-... Alice, I'll tell you now, as God knows I haven't told anybody else, and I'm not sure what's about to happen... I loved her. She was involved with some people almost as bad as you say Priest is, and it has... it has since led to her death... and it was believed that even while she was alive, she never had the slightest shred of anything other than cruelty or apathy in her, but... but I think I was the one person who believed otherwise.

To that end- proving I was correct in my beliefs- I tried to be something I wasn't... tried to be a hero, a Lightbringer. I paid for it with any sort of pride I might have had... it's no wonder Priest would pick someone like me to drag into this."

Looking back toward the light again- much closer to it now- Davem began walking toward it once more, continuing to speak as he did.

"But knowing what I know now- after what you've told me- he will be sorely disappointed. Whatever this is, if it really can give me another chance to redeem myself in everyone's eyes, to fix my mistakes, I will not squander it; there will not be a soul in my world who will not remember 'Davem of the Davemport', what he did, and what the world became as a result."

Alicia listened to Davem talk, her expression softening as he spoke of his troubles. She felt badly for the man, and could understand his desire for vindication of any sort. Yet, it all seemed too easy. She said nothing however, merely consented to listening to his speech, trying to ignore the uneasy feeling she had about the whole affair. She wondered if Danny knew Davem would feel this way, if it were all some sort of trap. Yet the conviction in Davem's voice was certain, that much Alicia could tell. So perhaps, by chance, Danny had put his cards on the wrong man.

At last, the two of them came to stand before the light, Davem's eyes widening as he saw precisely what it was:

There, hovering in the space before him, was an open tome. Its pages were blank, yet shone as though they were crafted from pure light. The cover seemed to be made of silver, but the object as a whole felt of something unlike anything either he or Alicia had ever seen before.

"A book...?" Davem murmured in awe, reaching out and gingerly brushing his hand over one blank page.

Alicia's apprehension turned into awe at the tome before them. It was enchanting to say the least, burning with an energy that unnerved Alicia to the point of her jumping as Davem made contact with the pages, eyes wide.

"Just...be careful! That...book...is not normal." She stated the obvious, biting her lip as she waited for Davem to decide what to do, unable to shake the voice that screamed it was just 'too easy'.

Davem carefully- oh so carefully- took the book into one hand. His eyes remained locked wide open, staring into the light of the pages. He could still feel a tingle in his fingertips where they had made contact.

"This is..." He mouthed, then swallowed a dry-mouthed swallow before speaking in earnest, "This is... *Creation.*" He whispered, turning carefully, looking back to Alicia. "This book... it-... but it makes sense, does it not? That... That existence is just... just stories. Human lives are stories. The entire world... just a series of stories. What else *could* the embodiment of creation be?" He asked, his voice shaking. Closing his eyes, he brought his hand over the first blank page.

Concentrating on one thing and one thing only- just by way of testing his theory- he waved the hand over the radiant parchment.

And then, as though by magic, there appeared before them-

-a pitcher of water, cool to the touch, as well as a pair of empty glasses.

Davem's eyes opened once more, almost startled to see what had happened.

"It *is*..." He tried to speak again, but then reached out and took hold of the floating pitcher. Filling one of the glasses, he drank deeply from it and let out a shaky breath.

"This cannot be real, can it?" He said afterward, turning to Alicia once more. "... Alice... what am I... meant to do with this?"

Alicia just stared at him, wide eyed and confused.

"No one should... have that much power.." She muttered, wanting to take a step back but rooted to the spot by emotion. She shook her head at Davem, not knowing what to tell him. She was admittedly afraid. If that book got into

the wrong hands, everything could be undone, both good and bad. She shook her head again, this time actually taking a few steps back in the confined space.

"Just...put it back..." She whispered, even though she knew that was the least likely option to occur.

Davem slowly turned, reaching out to do precisely that... it was as she'd said; no one should have that much power. Even as insurmountable as the Draco Disciples, as Tiamat, and others could seem, the Gypsies- and, indeed, heroes in general- had ever defeated them with little more than a hope and a prayer.

He looked to the pitcher and the empty glass... to a single errant droplet of water that broke from its rim and simply hung in the air.

"... Alice..." He brought his arm back- still carrying the now-closed tome- and held it to his chest. "Ever since I was born, I've been seen as a failure; I failed my parents as their little heir, I failed my employers as their 'mercenary', I failed the Band as their Lightbringer, and... and I failed Estella. Now Danny expects me to fail *you* as well." Closing his eyes and bowing his head, he took in a breath. Turning, he walked to Alice, and without paying heed to the book, he took her by her shoulders, and pulled her into a firm embrace.

"Perhaps I'll just have to fail *him* this time." He whispered. "Just... please, trust me."

With that, he released her, and began to walk back toward the portal through which they had entered.

As he did so, the darkness seemed to collapse in upon itself without the presence of the book to sustain the space around them... it was likely the book had provided air to breathe and solidity to walk upon as well, but that didn't seem to matter anymore.

The collapse of space snapped Alicia into motion, and she quickly jumped forward, just ahead the edge of darkness. Her mind was a whirl, and every one of her instincts screamed that the book should not leave the world it came from. Yet, the power of creation... The idea of such a thing struck wonder in Alicia. If used properly, all the things that could be fixed, the thought was tantalizing.

There could exist a world without pain or darkness, a place where people could be safe. But despite the fantasy, Alicia knew deep down that a world such as that could never exist. The world existed on balance, and to take away the dark could be as detrimental as taking away the light. No matter how good of intentions one could have, she knew it would never work out as planned. Such was the way of magick. It was to tricky to be tampered with on such immense scale.

To let one man control such power, it could not be allowed no matter how good his motive.

However, she wasn't sure what she could do. No words of persuasion would change Davem's mind, his stance gave away that much. But she knew she had to do something. Her instincts had never failed before, and she figured now was not the time to question them.

Alicia's shoulders tensed as she waited for Davem to be in mid-step, and with a grunt she leapt forward, trying to avoid contact with the book as she made to barrel into Davem with all the force she could muster.

At that moment, as she made her wild lunge for the Lorekeeper, she felt a gloved hand seize her by her shoulder, yanking her sharply back.

"Now now, love..." She heard Danny's voice purring cruelly into her ear as his arms locked around her struggling body, "If I don't get to interfere, then neither do you."

Davem left the pocket dimension, realizing only then that Alicia was no longer behind him. He turned around his eyes growing wide.

"Alice-?!" was all he could say before the doorway between him and the other pair collapsed upon itself... leaving Danny and Alicia alone in utter darkness.

"There he goes... On his way back to the world he crawled out of; a new man ready to lead his world to its destiny." Danny mused quietly, releasing Alicia at least. "For better or for worse."

The darkness that now surrounded them was strange- frightening... it wasn't as though there was something in it ready to pounce- except perhaps Danny himself- but instead there was this unknowable feeling of emptiness... an absence of *anything*.

"...I wouldn't worry about trying to go after him anymore, Alicia." He spoke again, breaking the silence without his usual unbearable false accent; this didn't seem the time for such pretense. "This little oubliette has no footholds to other worlds. Getting in was easy because of the Reality Fragment. Getting out... now, that's only possible for those who routinely tread the Void. Quite literally, this place should not exist; my will is all that's keeping it from collapsing. It will sustain you, yes, but I'm afraid I can't let you out." He paused, looking over her shoulder at where the doorway had once stood, "Not until this little wager is finished."

Alicia shrugged off Danny's grip the moment he relaxed, and narrowed her eyes at the darkness. A feeling of dread washed over her, the darkness and near solitude crushing. She turned to Danny's voice, and listened quietly, realizing this meant he would be able to leave if she was correct, and she would be stuck here for God knew how long. The

realization was daunting, and she took a moment before responding to his words. When she did however, the words were quiet, angry, and trembling with suppressed apprehension.

"So now what, Priest?" She spoke to the darkness, her words seeming too loud in the empty space. "You cannot just leave me here... this was not part of our agreement!"

She spoke the words, but with little conviction. She knew that Priest was fully aware of his power in the void, and she would inevitably be stuck as a spectator to this whole affair, willingly or not.

"Our agreement was that I wouldn't interfere with Davemport or his acquisition of the book... I didn't make any promises regarding you or the rest of his messed-up little world. But look at it this way:"

As she listened to him, Danny's voice began to grow quieter... further away...

"You wanted something good to come out of everything that happened in St. Elmo's Corners... I've tried to tell you time and again that nothing good *can* come from it- or from anything else. In the end, it all falls into darkness, disarray, and finally into silence... but Davem now has the power to ensure that that never happens; It's just a matter of seeing just how he chooses to use it."

She could hear the cynicism in his voice, and even as he spoke again, his frustrating accent had returned;

"Just make yourself comfortable, love... and enjoy the show."

And with that, he was gone... and she was alone.

Part 2: Let Go

Davem trembled lightly as he walked slowly off of the gangplank leading off of... 'his' ship.

It was a strange thing to want to get used to. It was hard not to think of how quickly- how abruptly- things had changed.

... All thanks to that book.

Images still swept through his mind, those of the strange void between worlds, of the kind young woman who had led him through it, and of the sinister man in dark garb who had chuckled at him all the while.

It all felt like a dream... perhaps more like a nightmare, just waiting for its monster to arrive.

However, quite literally with the turn of a page, he had seized the power to alter his destiny, the destiny of anyone he met, even those he had *never* met.

He had no reason to be nervous anymore, and yet...

No one should... have that much power. He could hear the girl's voice echoing in the back of his mind. *Just... put it back...*

Even as he made his way across the city, remembering all too well the festive decorations that hung from every building and tree, he could not help but remember the reason he had left... his mind stumbling over unhappy thoughts like tree roots weaving in and out of a dirt road.

He stopped, casting a sidelong glance at the Buttery... at the table he had waited at for a very long time for one who would never arrive.

His brows furrowed, before he turned and continued on toward the 'Shakespeare Meadow' where the Gypsy Vardo sat.

Even as he did, he felt a rustle in the loose cloth of his shirt. Frowning slightly, he reached down into its collar and procured a long, gray and green object with two dark buttons sewn on one end of its body.

"Toil, would you stop? We've arrived." He said shortly... probably confusing a few whom he passed as he addressed the small wormling- the magically animated toy he had acquired from Gertrude the Witch almost one year ago.

He was actually surprised. The creature had not been quite this active for some time.

Davem was happy that at least one of them was excited to have returned...

-

"Good morrow to you!" Raven Hawkwood addressed Davem brightly as the ex-Lorekeeper walked slowly toward the wagon. Standing beside him- addressing some Pub Crawl patrons on the Vardo's opposite side- was a young blonde girl who Davem did not recognize.

Davem shook his head as Raven opened his mouth to continue his usual pitch.

"It's me, Raven... Davem. I'm not surprised if you don't remember."

"Davem?" Raven asked, raising a brow, but then nodding with a smile. "Oh, right! The Lorekeeper who Talia- ah! My apologies, I did not recognize you. Yes, yes... so, will you be questing with us? As it happens, things have gotten a bit."

"I appreciate the sentiment." Davem replied coldly. "The idea that you think I might be of some use... but I am afraid I must respectfully decline."

"Oh?" The other man asked, his expression one of concern and sympathy... but Davem only shook his head again.

"I am only taking a look around to see how things have changed... if they've changed. I can already see they have a bit." He answered, reaching up and gesturing to Abbey Downton. "I'm actually surprised you can actually convince anybody to join anymore, given the mortality rate."

Once again, Raven was taken a bit by surprise at Davem's words. He was about to reply, when the ex-Lorekeeper turned to depart, giving a half hearted gesture to a few other men and women who were lingering about the Vardo, giving it curious glances.

"Nevermind... I'll have a look around myself."

Raven watched him go, but even as he smilingly addressed the new group before him, he couldn't help the feeling of unpleasantness that resonated in Davem's wake.

"You!"

Davem let out a gasping cry of pain as he felt a familiar hand strike him in the shoulder.

Staggering a little, he turned to see the face and form of Adria Dubh standing behind him.

He had arrived at the Lunar Tribe's camp, the old hut, table and garden none the worse for wear... but now there was a rectangular section cordoned off, and a few training dummies set up not far away from it. They didn't seem like things the Lunar Tribe would customarily keep around... but then trying to envision where such things would fit by the Order of the Sun facade on Shoplatch Lane, he figured this was probably the only place such things *could* go.

He could see the usual suspects milling about- Lillith Sparrow, Vashta Nerada, Willow Spellworthy, he was assured Gaia was still roaming around someplace, but she was currently absent.

At least it wasn't permanent, which was more than he could say for several others...

"Where have you been!? What have you been doing?!" Adria demanded, glaring at him. "You promised you would come back, and instead I get a cryptic letter of resignation! We had believed you *dead!*"

Davem frowned, but unconsciously held Toil a little closer to him.

"Did you find what you wanted to? After abandoning us, I should hope you can give us *that* at the very least."

He let his eyes fall from her, looking to the ground but he could still sense her standing close to him... he expected her next move to be to grab him and jerk him up to face her, but he heard her straighten.

"Oh, shit... We will continue this later!" She said suddenly, rushing off much to Davem's bewilderment.

Slowly turning, he turned to see another man approaching from the direction of the Vardo. He was dressed like most of the other Gypsies, his garb consisting of blue trousers, a maroon shirt and a brown vest, which was matched by the cap upon his head.

"Adria!" The man called out, clearly having heard the Order's Swordmistress bellowing, but not having seen her sudden exit. "Where have ye gone, Adria? I merely wish to... Hello?" He stopped near Davem, looking from side to side with bewilderment. Not seeing Adria, he merely looked to Davem with a cordial grin. "Oh, hello there!" He began anew, although his mixed Scottish and Irish accents muddled the words a bit; more akin to 'heloo dar'.

"I am afraid you just missed her." Davem said shortly, already not having much to say about the swaying, foolish looking man who now stood before him. Of course, he wasn't one to judge considering how he himself had acted year last...

"Which way did she go?"

Davem hesitated. He was tempted to rat Adria out to this man, but at the same time she was mad at him already, and so long as he was around it didn't seem as though she'd be coming near anyway.

"I'm sure she will be back momentarily..." Davem answered quietly.

"I thank ye sir... have we met before?" The man began anew, looking Davem over curiously, but tilting his head a bit when he saw Toil in the ex-Lorekeeper's arms.

"No we have not." Davem shook his head. "I have that kind of face, I suppose... call me 'Davem'." He said, shifting Toil to one hand while extending the other.

"Angus Stormcloud." The other man replied, eagerly taking the hand and giving it a firm shake.

"You are... a Gypsy, I assume."

"Aye, aye." Angus nodded, finally releasing Davem's hand and looking around the camp. "And what of you? Are you here to assist us, good sir?"

"No." Davem's reply was swift, to a point of being outright curt. "I was once, year last... I served as a Lorekeeper for the Band... Now I am just visiting some old ghosts, is all."

Angus watched, a bit confused as Davem looked away, casting his glance southwestward... specifically toward the Bronze Jester, although he wouldn't know it.

"... My memories of this place are not the best."

"Well, I am sorry to hear that! Believe me, I know a bit about ghosts." He said, pointing to his ear.

Davem blinked.

"I hear 'em, you understand. Ghosts and the like. Every now and then I hear them talking, and it makes things terribly confusing when I cannot tell if it's the living or the dead trying to talk..."

The ex-Lorekeeper said nothing. He only stared at Angus for a few moments, looking away from him at last.

"How long have you been with the Band?" Davem asked, quickly changing the subject, distracting himself from the feelings in his stomach by giving Toil a few gentle caresses with his fingers.

"A few months..." Angus answered, looking Davem over again. It wasn't hard to see- even to feel the aura surrounding him... Raven had sensed it, but Angus was right beside him. He could sense it far more distinctly.

"... Who are the new ones?" He asked, pointing around the camp to those whom he had not seen before.

"Well... That one there is Gaia Vedeas's brother Amyrite... That one there is Astrid, and that there is Thomas, and that one is Falco..." He began reciting names, pointing this way and that, with occasional interjections from Davem.

"... And the lasses all dressed alike, those would be the Bawdy Belles, Dorothy, Regan and Mimi. There are two more- Mina and Felicia- but they're not about just now..."

"Nevermind them..." Davem said softly, casting his gaze back to the ground again. "I never counted them anyway..."

"What?"

"Nevermind... what about the Draco Disciples?"

Angus looked rather taken aback, much as Raven had before at the mention of the Pussycats, but shook his head with mention of the Disciples.

"... Their leader is-"

"I *know* who their leader is." Davem cut him off, his eyes narrowing. "... I meant the others."

"W-well..." Angus began again, now not entirely certain he wanted to involve himself with this man given his manner... but then again, he would not be the first member of the Band to be rude or unruly. "Liam Bloodroot remains from year last, but now they have a sorceress- Zula Gozaryean, as well as Kat Mandrake the poisoner, and Castor Sloan... more of a 'face', that one. Sort'a like myself." He said with a broad smile that Davem ignored. "They have tricked the Band into dispelling all magic from the world."

"About as effective as ever." Davem murmured, looking down at Toil. The toy peered back at him, not possessing the cognitive abilities to understand the joke. "So he gave her away for nothing after all."

"Well... none of the Gypsy wizards or witches can use their powers to the fullest... and now the Praetor's used his fortune to steal the Order of the Sun camp and-"

"I will leave those matters with the Gypsies... where they belong." Davem murmured. "I do not doubt they can fix this..." He looked back at Angus. "Thank you for your help."

Angus quirked his brow once again, taking a step back.

"Er... t'was a pleasure to meet ya, Davem... bit of a peculiar name- nevermind. I should get back to findin'... right.."

He stumbled away, leaving Davem alone for the moment.

Davem sighed, slowly making his way back to the table and sitting down, placing Toil down and leaning on its surface.

"... Things change so quickly around here." He said softly, regarding Toil although he knew he might as well have been talking to himself. "I guess... would it really be so bad if I just... left the Gypsies to their own matters? I could easily go home and live a comfortable life with the money from my parents, could I not?" He let out a gentle sigh. "... the comfortable life of a merchant's son who never did anything important, who was never a hero, no one of note when I could have been that and more... could still be, really..."

You have to be the one to prove one of us wrong.

Davem's teeth clenched and he shook his head as Alicia's pleading face once again appeared in his mind.

"Isn't a good life- a comfortable and happy life more important than that? Than heroics and renown? Isn't a good life the kind of thing the Gypsies fight so people can have?"

He let out a soft, defeated sigh as he looked into Toil's eyes.

"You! Stop floating about up there! ... I... stop that, you- Get out of there, Estella!"

Davem immediately sat straight up in his seat.

Turning toward Shakespeare Meadow, his eyes caught sight of Angus again who was stumbling about, shouting at the trees...

At first he had thought he had misheard.

"Estella Foxglove, you have no business here! Get out'a the-"

"Angus!" Davem shouted, stumbling out from the table. Already there were a few other Gypsies and Lightbringers present, but he paid them no heed.

Already, he was beginning to wander back toward the Lunar encampment, seemingly shouting at the air.

Neither of them seemed to notice Gaia Vedeá approaching as well. She recognized Davem straightaway and had been about to greet him when she noticed Angus' rantings.

However, as soon as she came within a foot of the Lunar Tribe's table, Angus let out a gasp of surprise, his gaze-followed by Davem's- darting to one of the bags at Gaia's waist.

"Gaia, watch out!" Angus shouted. "That spirit... it's gotten into that cat'a yours... at least, I hope that's where it went..."

Gaia shook her head, more confused than anything else as she reached into her pack.

Unfortunately, in her haste, she had quite forgotten to don the glove she normally used to handle the skull of Felix- the ill-tempered cat whose skull she carried with her.

The Keeper let out a cry of dismay, the lightbringers and other Gypsies all around her letting out gasps and concerned cries of their own. They moved forward, each trying to figure out what was going on.

However, all of them- except for one- stepped back as Gaia looked up to regard them all with a smirking countenance... one that was most certainly not Gaia Vedeá.

"That... That's not-" Angus began, but Davem spoke over him.

"... Gaia... Felix... what is this?" He asked.

"Aww... Your little Keeper can't come out to play right now... and neither can this precious little pussycat." Gaia replied, although even her speech pattern was unlike what anybody who knew Gaia was used to. "But if you want to talk to me, you do owe me another *date*, old man."

-

"What is happening?" Adria demanded, having hastily returned at the sight of the mass of people gathering around the Lunar Camp, as well as the ruckus that accompanied it. Her eyes narrowed as she pushed through the ring of humanity... seeing Davem glaring at Gaia... who clutched Felix's skull and stood in a languid pose as she wandered toward Thoren's hut.

Before she could speak another word, her eyes widened as Davem turned and thrust Toil sideways into her stomach. She grunted, adjusting her hold, and looking at the ex-Lorekeeper with bewilderment.

"... Leave me be." He said simply. "Just... stay away."

With that, Davem left her and Toil behind.

-

He said nothing as he wandered across the Lunar camp, the muttering voices soon fading to the background as he reached the relative silence of the hut porch.

Truth be told, his mind was clambering over itself with things to say- things he had wanted to say... even as he came to stand before the porch, he wasn't quite sure what was going to come out of his mouth.

"Well?"

He ought to have been more certain about her though.

"After all the talking you did before, I thought you would have something better than just sitting me down and glaring at me." 'Gaia' said, although her behavior was very clearly not that of the Keeper. "So? Out with it. Where's the lecture?"

More than anything, Davem was at a loss at how composed she could be after having *died*..

"... I..." He began, looking up into Gaia's eyes, but looking away.

This was not how he had envisioned this moment... not in the slightest.

"You...?" She asked, clearly beginning to grow bored in waiting. "It was boring enough bein' dead in the ground without waiting for you to start workin' your bloody jaws."

Davem shuddered... and finally spoke.

"When you and I spoke last... you accused me of being no different from your father- that all I wanted when I asked you to join the Band was to change you, make you into something you are not..."

Estella only gave a wary nod of her head, which Davem regarded with one of his own, perhaps trying to be sure she still remembered that conversation.

"... But that couldn't be further from the truth. Estella... The apathy, the cruelty, the *arson*, none of that ever mattered to me. I- ... I wanted you to join the Band just so that-... just so that you wouldn't have to be so very far away from me anymore."

As he spoke, he could feel the heat of tears beginning to rise.

"I loved you, Estella Foxglove... I had from the first. I just-... I just did not realize it until you were further from me than I could ever hope to reach. The day that I found out what had happened to you, I felt as though my heart had been ripped from my chest-"

"I know that feeling well enough." Estella said with a roll of her eyes, dismissing even this sentiment as Davem continued.

"-and every moment from then on has been filled with the thought that if only I'd said something, done something, been somewhere or been someone different, that I could have saved you- that I could tell you these things to your face, when now-... when now all I have are shadows and memories, and no one to confess to but a lonely, unmarked grave."

"So? So what?" 'Gaia' shook her head, looking up at Davem from where she sat with an odd expression; one that reeked of uncertainty, of confusion... of anger, even. However, Davem did not answer her.

"I know my feelings probably do not matter to you, but... you were all that mattered to me." His voice fell to a murmur, leaning forward and taking her into a weak embrace. "That is all I have to say."

"Why are... why are you telling me this?!" She asked, trying to pull away a bit, but her bewilderment kept her for the most part glued to the porch bench.

Davem closed his eyes, slowly reaching down and taking hold of Felix's skull.

"Goodbye." He whispered before wrenching it out of Gaia's hand.

Instantly, the connection was severed.

Gaia awoke to the sight of Davem stumbling back, hurriedly discarding Felix onto the bench behind him. Staring at his hand, eyes wide and streaming with tears, he shook his head.

"I-... I have to go... I have to-..."

The ex-Lorekeeper ran from the Lunar Camp, more than one of the Gypsies watching him as he departed. Most of them having no idea what had just happened... and those that did felt uneasy.

Something was definitely wrong.

Vinz frowned.

Things were going smoothly enough, but this affair would not see its end until Thoren and company were either dead or gone from Bristol for good... and seeing as the latter could never be confirmed, the former was good enough for him.

Tonight would be the Gypsy's big push for Bloodtharken's hoard, he could sense it.

He knew the lot of them would not be content to let things stay as they were. Honestly he could not be sure his own minions- particularly those who were magically inclined- would not aid them in some roundabout way.

Draco Disciples...

The Praetor could not help wondering- thinking about something he had heard only a few short months ago... something that strange man in black had said to him-

"Where is Simeon!?"

Vinz was jarred from his thoughts- from relaxing in the afternoon sun in his extravagant chair- by the growling demand of a familiar voice.

He was used to hearing such sentiments from people, but he could not help raising an eyebrow when he recognized the speaker.

He almost had to do a double-take, but finally recognized the tear-stricken, shaking form of Davem of the Davemport standing before him.

"Is there something I can do for you?" Vinz asked casually, inwardly curious. He had no reason to be overly cautious; Despite his talents, Davem was even less capable than even the worst of the Gypsies. That, plus Liam *and* Castor were close by.

"Where is Simeon?! I want to give him a message... mainly with regard to the fate of his *daughter*."

Vinz stiffened visibly. His eyes only for an instant betrayed the emotions within him... but thankfully, neither of his minions witnessed it.

He... does not know...

"Malificus?" Castor asked with a quirk of his brow.

"Nay, one of the *other* Simeons within this city." Davem shook his head. "Bring him out here *now*; I am in no mood for games."

"He's still in prison, is he not?" Liam chimed in, lumbering up a pace and looking down at Vinz. "*Has* been ever since last year."

"Indeed he *is*, Liam." Vinz agreed, if only to get Davem out of there as quickly as possible.

"Just as well..." Davem nodded. "He deserves to rot there after what he did to Estella."

He turned, taking one step away from the Draco's new headquarters... but then Liam spoke:

"What, was that b'fore or after you killed 'er, Vinz?"

Davem froze.

Slowly, he turned to face Vinz... but eyes that were twitching in a way that made even the Praetor stand from his chair with apprehension. Normally he could handle the worst outrage with impunity, and it felt absolutely absurd to feel any sort of concern around *this* man, particularly... and yet...

"What... what did he say?" Davem asked, in a voice that suggested he needed no repetition. His foot began to creep forward, although his leg was a bit shaky as it did.

"Davem, you clearly do not realize-" Vinz began, about to gesture to Castor and Liam again, but Davem cut him off.

"Is what he said the truth, Clortho? *Speak*, damn you!"

Davem moved with intent to stand face to face with Vinz (figuratively speaking given their height difference), but he hardly made it a foot away from the Praetor before his guards stepped in.

The ex-Lorekeeper looked up at them, hesitating in his forward stride. They grinned back down at him (mostly Liam, as he having remembered a few more amusing encounters with him the previous year). Rather than continue his advance, he merely looked at Vinz with raw, unadulterated hatred.

"You loathsome, lying son of a bitch." Davem replied with a scowl. "You may not have been Estella's father, but at the very *least*, you were her friend, and you... For what? What did you think was so damned worth the cost?"

"Davem, please." Vinz rolled his eyes in a fashion Davem would recognize all too well. "You speak as though this were my idea. T'was Zula's, and we were out of options otherwise." He explained. "I do not suppose you could understand this, but at times, one is forced to-"

"Don't give me that 'victim' act!" The ex-Lorekeeper snarled, outright ignoring a bewildered Liam and an incredulous Castor. "Year last, you could not say enough about how close to you Estella was when we believed her dead... and now you callously throw her life away? Now I suppose we see how much she- how much *Fianna*- really mattered to you. Just another beating heart for another power-hungry monster just like the one sitting in the Bristol dungeon."

Vinz's eyes narrowed behind his spectacles.

Liam and Castor- their expressions still dismissive, yet uncertain in turns- stepped a little bit closer to the exchange, as though ready to draw upon the ranting man before them..

"Liam... you and the others..." Davem said, taking a step back from them as his hateful gaze raked across the three of them, "You can thank your Praetor for what's coming now... for everything he's consumed to get to where he is, because thanks to that?"

He let his eyes fall back on Vinz with a bitter smile,

"I have nothing left to lose."

He turned on his heel and walked at a brisk pace northward down Shoplatch Lane.

In the wake of this, the Disciples were left to give each other an uncertain- but amused- look.

"Perhaps we ought burn the city down." Vinz said to his companions, shouting loud enough that he knew Davem would hear... but there was an unusual feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Davem walked past the Bronze Jester, his body still trembling, perhaps part of which was due to the fact that his encounter with the Disciples should have been deadly for him... but he still felt himself roiling inside with anger, with despair and outrage...

"... If... maybe if I use... if the Book can be used to resurrect Estella, then... then it would be like in the story." He said to himself. "Vinz would lose his precious power, and..."

He hesitated, reaching up and pulling off his cap, raking his other hand through his hair.

"Yes... Yes, it would... I can change things... why not? Certainly, Alicia could not find fault with that... it is all for the greater good."

His feet were already rushing, staggering forth to run through the Bristol streets to its harbor. He ignored- and was ignored by the Fairegoers throughout his trek, running up the gangplank-

But then he stopped at the door to his cabin.

"Davem. Stop."

Before him- big as life, but everything but- stood the transparent face and form of Estella Foxglove.

"Estella..." Davem froze, his eyes widening as he took a half-step back- the hurried pace he'd been running at nearly had him collapsing.

"Davem... what are you doing? Why?" She asked. "I was willing to let you talk yourself blue in the face about love and buy me free meals, but if you think I am about to let you stop Vinz, you're bloody *mad!*"

"Is this what you were planning, Estella?" Davem asked. "Is this what you meant? 'You can finally see what this has all been leading up to'- is this what you planned?! To just... to just *die* for Vinz's sake?! Do you not... do you just not *care!*?"

"Eh." Estella shrugged. "It happens."

"Do you even *hear* yourself?!" Davem asked, not caring that those on land could probably hear him as they milled about on the docks. "You're *dead*, Estella! Don't you understand what that means!?"

"That I can fly about and harass people like you anytime I like? I could get used to it."

Davem trembled, looking her in her smirking eyes... but then reached through her to grab the doorknob and tear open the door.

"Fine. I won't give you a choice, then." He said in a hiss as he walked into the cabin, looking to the bookshelf. "You'll thank me later."

"Like *Hell!* I will!" She countered, floating into the room before coming to a standstill near his desk. "Davem, I wanted to toy with you a little more, but you're not giving me many options here; you need to stop this *now*, do you understand?"

"I'm saving your God-damned *life*, Estella!"

"I'm saved *already!*" She shot back. "Saved from having to deal with people like you! Of you and the Gypsies and the Dracos and everybody pulling me this way and that! Do you want to know when I was happiest, Davem? I was happiest when I was with my mother... and now I can be with her again."

"I could save her, too! I could bring her back! Bring anybody back, and crush the Draco Disciples! We could leave here- leave the Gypsies, and I could make sure none of them- or anybody else- bothers or frightens you ever again! Don't you get it?!"

"I 'get it', Davem, I understand... but what *you* don't 'get' is that you think this was ever about you." She said, moving to sit up on the desk. "I died, but I'm happy enough. My friend is the leader of the Dracos or whatever, and my father got what he deserved. Now we just sit back and see what the Gypsies do about it."

"Why does it have to be about them? The Dracos, the Gypsies, why is it always about *them!*!" Davem demanded. "Doesn't... I *love* you, Estella! Doesn't that mean *anything!*!"

"NO!" Estella shot back. "No, it *doesn't*, Davem! The Gypsies and the Draco Disciples are the only ones who mean anything! You'd think you would have learned that, but I guess you're too thick-headed! You're just an obsessive old man who's delusional and pining for a life he's never going to have! And I'm not going to have any part of it any more! If I were you, I would forget about me, forget about the Gypsies and the Dracos, go back home and die, and when you do, don't come looking for me, because I never, *ever*, *EVER* cared about you!" She snarled.

Davem only stared at her.

... and this young man's world is only concerned with the war of the Gypsies an' Cultists; never had no regard for him...

"... Good." Estella concluded with a smile. "Now if you don't mind, Vinz is probably wondering what your little display was all about, so... what are you...?"

Davem had turned away from her, kneeling and opening a small chest at the back wall of his cabin.

As Estella watched, he procured one strange object after another; a pile of dust, a vial of water, a bit of ribbon, a mortar and pestle, a spoon and a bowl, a flint, parchment and a quill.

With a silent, intense focus, he began to work with the strange array of items, drawing runes on the parchment before burning it and crushing the ashes with the powder in the mortar.

"If this is your little plan to resurrect me or my mother, don't you dare!" She scoffed. "You might as well stop now, before I tell Vinz... he'll be happy to do so himself."

She received no reply as Davem carefully opened the vial... for some reason treating what seemed to be mere water as though it were one of Percy's explosive potions.

Without a word, Davem emptied the water and the mortar into the bowl, stirring its contents.

"... Fine. If that's what you want." Estella said at last... but as she tried to depart the place, she found herself drawn back by some unseen force.

Davem slowly poured the contents of the bowl- the resulting liquid now black as pitch- into another, larger vial, which the ex-Lorekeeper corked and tied off with the ribbon.

The second he did so, Estella let out a cry as she was pulled violently toward the vial.

"Wh- What is-...!?" She gasped, catching herself on the edge of the desk, trying to push away as Davem stood up to watch.

He said nothing.

"Davem-... Davem! What is that thing?! What did you do!?" She asked, shaking her head as her hair and clothing whipped toward the small glass vessel as though carried by a strong wind. "What's happening?!"

"... Goodbye, Estella."

"What?!" She gasped, looking with horror on her features down at the vial. "No! NO! Please... Please don't do this- I-... No!" She cried, struggling but falling to her knees against the desk. "Vinz won't let you get away with this... He can-"

"No. He can't." Davem shook his head. "Nobody can. Not anymore."

Estella let out another cry, another unseen pulse seizing hold of her and pulling her up over the edge of the desk. Scrambling helplessly, she let out a scream as her body was pulled feet-first into the vial.

Her scream was one of agony, as though her spectral form was being pierced by a great many burning knives. They only grew louder, more intense as she disappeared inch by inch into the vial.

"NO!!! Please! Davem-... I thought you-... Please... *HELP ME!!!*" She cried.

Davem looked her squarely in her pleading eyes, his own as cold as his words.

"I tried."

Estella's eyes widened... before a final pulse pried her fingers from the desk's edge, and her ethereal body vanished within the small glass vessel.

Davem slowly took hold of the container of jet-black liquid, looking it over for a moment. Afterward, he placed it back upon the desk, returning the other objects to the box one at a time.

Finally, he closed it with a sigh, and made his way to the bookshelf.

Without hesitation, he plucked one particular volume- one bound in a ebony jacket- and opened it.

Immediately, the cabin was bathed in a bright silver light.

Trembling and closing his eyes, Davem held the book open with one hand, the other raising over its pages.

"... I am sorry, Alicia... but Estella was right. *Danny Priest* was right." He said softly. "This world is nothing if not about the Gypsies and Draco Disciples killing each other..."

Small branches of white lightning began to flare down from his fingers, engraving words into the book's pages as his eyes opened once again.

"This world is broken... and must be repaired."

(Co-Written with Carynne Dati, Julie McMillin and Alexis Cohen-Pena.)

Given all of the commotion that had taken place throughout the day-only *some* of which the Band and their allies knew of- the harbor of Bristol was blessedly silent but for the rush of waves on the shore. The sun had nearly finished its slow, steady descent, and most of the denizens of the town had made their way to a well-earned dinner and rest.

However, not all were allowed their respite just yet.

Talia Tale, Bardmistress of the Band of the Twisted Claw, and her Swordmistress counterpart Adria Dubh, had only just arrived at the docks... when by all rights they should have been bonding with her newfound niece and up to her eyes in drink, respectively.

The men who had summoned them there had been cryptically terse with regard to who had done so and where fore, but nevertheless it probably wasn't in their best interests to refuse, especially given the Band's recent troubles with the law.

Vinz Clortho, despite his defeat, was still the tax-happy Justice of the Peace... but something about this felt unusual-- not like the Praetor somehow.

At the very least, the ship wasn't painted red and black.

Talia sighed and pushed her hands harder against her lower back to relieve the stress and tension she felt growing. Adria continued to pace, keeping her eye on the Bard as the sun finally kissed the horizon. With no sign of the third visitor to be had, and the stoic guards offering nothing other than the view of their firm calf muscles, Talia was finished with the inconvenience.

Spying a crate nearby, she began to waddle towards it.

"Mistress!" called the guard, with the implication that Talia was moving somewhere she was not permitted. Adria prepared to storm the guard, her fingers wrapped around her blacksmith's hammer to draw, but Talia only needed put up a hand to halt her advance.

Talia turned slowly until she was profile with the young man. "I shall sit upon this crate until it is time to sit somewhere else, or I shall find your own mother and tell her that you denied a woman great with child the ability to sit."

The guard's companion failed to contain his snort of laughter. The swordmistress let out a smirk and released her weapon.

Talia sat.

The wait was not an easy one, at least not for Adria. She had tried her best to keep calm for Talia's sake, but the last hours of the day had put her into a mood. Seeing the Dracos humiliated and retrieving the Bloodtharken's hoard should have elevated her spirits. But seeing the Praetor alive, though his command of the dead was severed, could not make her completely happy. Though his death might have brought the law upon the gypsies, she wished Thoren would have followed through, and gutted Vinz on the spot after what he did to the Band... to her friends... to her. Watching Castor's vile smirk even after he and the other Dracos had run off with their tails between their legs left an even more bitter taste in her mouth. Seeing those two still breathing after all that misery... and now this ominous messenger. She did not like what this might portend.

Her fingers drummed against her hips as she bit her lip until a gentle hand wrapped its fingers around her shoulder.

"Relax, love," Talia tried to reassure.

"Relax?" Adria almost snapped. "How can I relax after all that has passed? How can you be so calm? You cannot possibly think that any good can come of this."

Talia squeezed her shoulder and placed a hand on her own belly, which was met by a soft kick. Adria saw the slight wince.

"'Tis bad enough I have one anxious being around me."

A hiss of breath escaped Adria. She knew the child would be coming soon. Even if she were not summoned along with Talia, Adria would have come regardless. She had left Robert, her newly appointed housecarl, in charge of the camp, but she did not trust anyone else with the Bard Mistress' safety; She had to be the one to attend her.

But she also knew that her head had to remain level. She swore that after discovering her father's killer, she would not let her emotions dictate her actions again.

The wolf ring hung heavy around her neck. Talia was part of her pack and Adria had to ensure she would be safe.

"I'm sorry."

"No need," Talia smiled quickly before another kick came. Adria grabbed her hand, receiving only a nod of thanks.

A heavy breeze sprang up, rippling the ships' sails and batting down the long reeds that sprouted by the harbor's edge. A sound not unlike the whirling of a metal spring echoed in its wake, as dark figure flew down the center of the street.

Gertrude Normyl gritted her teeth, and kicked hard at the dirt road with a worn, dusty shoe. The extra leverage served to vault her higher above the road, but the broom only rose another three feet before sinking back down again.

It was a question of atmosphere- once the sun fully set and the clouds grew heavy and cold, the economy-sized broom would have no trouble flying. But while streaks of light still graced the sky and the dry air clung to fading warmth, any sensible witch would forgo the broom, and keep to her own two feet.

Except Gertrude had been doing that all day. Her soles and toes ached fiercely, a testament to many hours of mischief managed. Well worth the effort, but equally deserving of a footstool or a nice salt scrub. And if Gertrude was going to be called away from her hut by a pair of nervous but very determined soldiers, then damned if she wasn't going to come down in relative comfort.

Kicking once more against the hard packed dirt, Gertrude sped into the docks. She jabbed her right heel against the ground, and yanked the handle up. The broom skidded to a stop and turned vertical, depositing the sharp-faced witch neatly on her feet.

Gertrude scowled briefly at the shock plastered across Talia and Adria's faces. They should have expected her to arrive in such a fashion. But the audacity had caught them off-guard- ironically enough, it had caught the *guards* off-guard as well.

"How now, Talia." Gertrude said amiably. The witch gave a respectful nod to Adria, who returned the gesture.

Gertrude squinted at one of the startled guards. "What are you looking at, then?"

The guards felt thoroughly bewildered by this assortment of Gypsies and Witch, communities which most men in lofty positions tended to avoid. Nevertheless, they turned and walked toward- and subsequently, up- the ship's gangplank.

The ship itself was a thing of relative beauty; not a run-down, well-worn veteran of the seas, but far from some tiny dinghy. It was a mercantile vessel, that much was clear, marked as belonging to the 'New Dover Port Trade Commission'. Something about the name felt familiar, but none of the visitors could quite put their finger on it.

"The young master will be expecting you." One of the guards said superfluously with a half-hearted gesture to the ship's cabin. "Go on up."

Neither soldier made eye contact, or even stood remotely near the trio's path, seemingly content to keep their distance- particularly from Gertrude.

"Young master?" Adria asked, trying to suppress her frustration, at least for Talia's sake. Still, some questions required answers. "Will you not tell who sent for us? A name? Anything?"

The guard remained silent, never catching her gaze.

"Don't bother with 'em." the witch chided. "It might be gold that's bought their silence, or it might be fear of me what's stole their tongues. But it hardly makes a difference. They're not going to talk, and I'm not going to apologize."

The guards neither confirmed nor denied the witch's words. Their silence was maddening.

Adria's fist was tightly clenched, but she let out an exasperated breath, forcing herself to momentarily relax. Gertrude was right, as she was wont to be; nothing would come from them. And if the answers lay inside, she may as well hear it from this "young master". Her steps expedited toward Talia, who waited patiently at the cabin door.

"If it makes you feel any better," Gertrude said as they reached the door. "Them bidding me here when my feet are blistered is just as sour for me as it is for thee."

It was strange to hear any attempt at comfort from the witch. "It does not," Adria replied, "though your effort is appreciated."

For several minutes the three women stood outside the door, staring at the ornate woodwork. Fireflies began to dance on the wharf and mossy docks behind them. Windblown branches bobbed on the pine trees that bordered the distant sandy coastline.

"Beatrice caught a toad today." Gertrude remarked offhandedly to Talia. "A wee one, all green and wrinkly and no bigger than your thumbnail."

"Oh, truly?" Talia said, her eyes growing big at the adorable picture the witch painted. "How sweet!"

"Aye, it were." Gertrude nodded. "Until the wee beastie crawled up Beatrice's nose, and got stuck in her nasal cavity. We had to force feed her cheese to increase the mucous membrane, then grind peppercorn on her face until she sneezed him out. It took us ten minutes to find him in the phlegmy mess. Half the bogies looked just like him."

Talia's expression instantly changed from delighted to disturbed. "... I rescind my comment about the toad's sweetness."

"I thought you might." Gertrude said. She thwacked her palms against her doublet and skirts, attempting to shake out the worst of the dust.

Adria shook her head as if waking from a trance. "We waited long enough for Gertrude to show up! Why the hell are we waiting even longer?"

"I've wondered that too," Talia remarked. "You went to the door first, I half expected you to have knocked it down by now."

"I expected the same myself, Mistress Dubh." Gertrude added. "You being ornery and prone to snapping, it seemed logical to wait for your cue."

Adria had wondered why she had paused as well, but all three of them felt it: a sense of looming dread. They knew something was not right with this ship. As much as they wanted to know why they were all summoned, for some reason, they were hesitant to find out.

"I've had enough!" Adria growled. Her furious fist raised to slam down on the door before-

"It's open, Adria."

The gentle voice should not have halted her as it did. But there was something familiar about the voice that the women noted. It was calm and gentle, so... inviting. But who among their champions or Lightbringers had profit enough for their own mercantile vessel?

The three exchanged wary looks before Talia gently pushed the door open.

The inside of the cabin was about as one might have expected: Very clean, very well organized, and filled with various knick knacks including portraits, bookshelves, candles, small boxes and well-appointed furniture. Several mid-sized chairs were set up before a large oaken desk...which itself stood before a comfortable- and frankly, pretentious-looking armchair.

Seated within it was a familiar figure, one with whom the trio had become very well acquainted, indeed...

"I'm glad you were all able to make it. I've heard you- all of you- have been rather busy."

'Davem of the Davemport' addressed the three of them with a casual smile as he watched them enter from the comfort of his unsettlingly throne-like seat. "Please, sit down... we've got about a year's worth of material to catch up on."

He looked well... far better than he ought to have, considering. Having seen him more recently than the other two, Adria would probably have expected a more tired, haggard and morose individual than the cheerful and bright man that now spoke to them. Not to mention unlike the traveler's garment he'd worn then, he was now dressed in a businessman's regalia with more than a few expensive looking buttons and emblems.

Strangest of all was that unsettling feeling that had plagued the women as early as when they'd been eyeing the ship on the docks... it was stronger here than ever.

"I understand there's been all manner of excitement recently; new Band members, new Disciples, new mischief... I suppose some things never change, in spite of our wishes."

"There be plenty of changes." Gertrude remarked, looking around the cabin. "Yourself, for one. You've obviously come up in the world, and quite quickly. I wonder how you came by all these smug domestic accessories. Did you strike gold in the Danish tulip market? Or was that 'our wishes' bit the Royal Our, and you've married into a monarchy?"

Davem gave Gertrude a strange little look- one reflecting a gradient between amusement and distaste, before shaking his head.

"My family was always in the mercantile business. Just as I researched and wrote about other peoples' adventuring successes, they transported and took inventory of other peoples' *financial* successes... at least, they did." He was silent for a moment, before he continued in a slow, bitter tone, "They took ill and died not long ago, and I- as their only heir- took over the company."

"You seemed to have accomplished much in so short a time," Adria commented warily.

Davem simply glanced towards her as she spoke, but that gaze sent shivers through her. Something was odd about this. About Davem. Very odd.

"It all actually started not long after my little journey 'south'..." He let his gaze wander to Talia, knowing that of the three, she was the most likely to have read of his exploits in the Underworld.

Talia met his gaze steadily and smiled. "It has been quite some time since I last saw the blue waters of the Mediterranean. Were you able to enjoy any part of your trip?"

Davem scowled and Talia realized she had miscalculated. She assumed that her previous dealings with the Lorekeeper would lighten the mood, but the levity in the room was far more like the time she was called to speak before the entire collected Draco Disciples.

"I meant no disrespect, gentle master, only curiosity to hear the tale from you directly. For you must understand, in my present condition, if I were to tell your tale as I received it then mine own validity would be called into question."

Adria raised an eyebrow. "How so?"

Placing a hand on her stomach Talia tried not to stammer from the growing fear she felt. "There are many who would... would explain away any of my more...unbelievable tales as a result of the baby."

"I would not doubt you," Adria stated firmly.

"Wouldn't you?" Talia was near tears. "If I were to speak, in truth, of meeting an ancient god and striking a bargain with him in his own domain? Or fighting alongside the souls of the damned in their own hellish conflict?"

"You should have believed my words before anyone." Davem regarded her coldly. "You met your Paragons and battled dragon souls."

"I DO believe you, Lorekeeper!" The tears began running down Talia's face. "You hold to the truth as much as I do. I've wanted nothing more than to trumpet your triumph as soon as I heard your tale. Stealth through purgatory! Defeating devils! Victory over death itself! Your accomplishments place your tale among the founding heroes of our very factions."

"So then why hide all of your accomplishments from us?" Adria interrupted. Davem didn't have to look back at the warrior leader to see that she was trying to not explode in the cabin.

Talia urged forward to try to calm her. "Adria, please..."

"Nay, Talia!" Adria snapped as she swatted her hand away. "If he had this much funding, could he not have help us sooner? Even if Davem remained with us, he would still have inherited his family fortune. He could have helped prevent the Order camp from being taken in the first place!"

"Still sour about my resignation?" he replied nonchalantly, rubbing his shoulder where she had punched him earlier.

"How could he have known he would inherit so much?" Talia tried to cling to reason before her own emotional outburst drove everyone in the room to say something rash.

"Does that matter? He could have stayed! He could have helped us, or at least tried to!" Her face was red with rage. It was a wonder her voice calmed down to a whisper. "How could you just leave and make us believe you would never return?"

"With or without me, The Band of the Twisted Claw won... not that it *ever* needed me. Damn it to hell, in all the time I worked for them, you never even bothered to ask what my real *name* was."

"Your *real name* could have been Eggbert Benedict Cumberbund and it would not have changed a damned thing! You *promised* me that you would come back!"

"And I have, even if it was rather late."

"Have you?"

For the first time since the three women had entered, Davem did not have a vague, bitter response.

Gertrude broke the silence with a rude snort.

"I have less than a ha'penny worth of care to give to this." The witch spat crossly. "So Prince Davem here left the Band, and wasn't here to help in a crisis. Boo-bloody-hoo! He's right, he *wasn't* needed. He could have made the struggle easier for you gypsies, sure enough. But what can you complain? You *won*. All's well that ends well, isn't it? And Davem's back now, simple as string. 'Tis as I always say: If you let go easy, they come back easy. Better for everyone that way. Except..."

Gertrude tapped her chin thoughtfully.

"Except in the long run, I think Adria may be right. Nothing wrong with having your own adventures, of course. But being gone so long seems to have turned our friend here into an enigmatic, melodramatic git. That's hardly palatable, no matter how fancy you garnish the plate. Speaking of which, Davem...what *exactly* was the point of that embellished Underworld tale?"

The witch crossed her arms and glared at Davem.

"If you plan on makin' up tripey adventure stories in the future, you might want to keep a tighter hold of any witnesses." She said. "Toil is incapable of deceit, and he talks up a storm while he's being mended."

Talia stifled a gasp.

Davem hesitated for a moment, his facial features twitching slightly.

"It does not matter to me what you may think of me or my methods." He shook his head. "No matter what differences there might have been between my experiences and what I've chosen to share, more than enough of it is true; You do

not wish to *know* what I have been through. And as I recall, Gertrude, you gave Toil away; he isn't your problem anymore, nor should you try to make him *mine*."

His words- his tone- had grown suddenly more curt... *darker* than they had been before.

"... Which brings me back to Adria, and to you as well, Talia. I come back here not as an errand boy, here to solve your puzzles and answer your riddles... you might not have noticed since you were busy with the Draco Disciples, but have you seen Robert Tyrwhitt recently? Or the Sirens? Or the Danse Macabre or the Dread Crew of Oddwood? Snifflewort?"

As he listed off the members of Bristol's more 'unsavory' caste, he stood up and turned away from the three women, making his way to the cabin window and staring out into the darkening horizon.

"Nay, not recently." Gertrude said. Her voice had gone strangely flat, and her face was difficult to read. "But from your oh-so-idle name dropping, I wager *you* have. In which case, have a care what threats or oaths you put against my kin. Snifflewort is my great-uncle, and for all his troll-baiting and gypsy-taunting he is dear to me and mine."

"I am... sorry to hear that." Davem said, a genuine note of surprise in his voice. "That being the case, I suppose you will wish to visit with him before the morrow."

After a brief moment, he turned to glance at the three.

"... Before the *execution*, I mean."

Collective breaths were stilled.

"E-execution?" Adria stammered. When the only answer was Davem's back, her ire died down, and her anxiety began to grow.

"What have you done?"

Nevermind that Snifflewort had done some odious deeds in the past towards the trolls and the students of Oakmont Academy. Nevermind that Oddwood's misdeeds as pirates had caught up to them (even if they did once bring joy to Her Majesty's court). Nevermind that Tyrwhitt had threatened Sir William Cecil when he tried to steal Walsingham's Book of Secrets. Those matters could be dealt with by the lawmen of Bristol. But how could one presume to execute those of the supernatural sort? Sirena, for one? Why were they condemned? But more importantly, how was he planning on destroying the Danse?

Everything now felt wrong. This was not the same bard who graced their camp year last. This wasn't even the same man that left their camp in a huff not long ago.

Adria advanced towards him, her hand reaching out to make him face her.

"What the hell have you done!?"

"I have not done anything, Adria." Davem replied coldly, grabbing Adria before she could touch him. Quickly, she pulled her wrist away, her hand falling onto her hammer. "Tyrwhitt got himself caught blackmailing the nobility. The Danse was pried away from the new Praetor and sent back where they belong. Snifflewort- for all his familial ties- has crossed the bounds of morality one time too many, as have the Pirates. The Sirens are predators, and deserve no less than to be strung up in the dry sun until only dust remains." The man hesitated, perhaps noticing the rise in his own voice. With a deep breath, he continued:

"I have done nothing, only watched as one by one they have been removed. What happens to the dark things dwelling in this town on the morrow is no more or less than what they have brought upon themselves. I am merely an *enthusiast*."

"Truly?" Talia whispered. "Or have you left out more convenient details? I trusted your story, trusted your word, and if not for my own fears I would have spread your half-truths as the truth. You play with both truth and fate... not your own, but mine. And now how many more?"

"Do you mean to be their executioner?" Adria asked, her fists white-knuckled and clenched. "If so, then you are an even greater fool than I thought anyone could ever be. Who are you to pass judgment on these beings?"

"The Crew of Oddwood and Tyrwhitt are men whom the law of the land must deal with, not any single man." Talia spoke slowly, "The Sirens are a force of nature. Any whirlpool accomplishes the same end to ships, as well you know. Death is something we all must face and the Danse is but a reminder of our mortality. Despite what they have done to us in the past, that does not make them inherently evil."

"Is that the truth? Or is that merely your excuse for lacking the power to *stop* them?"

Adria could restrain herself no longer.

"Yes, the Sirens are predators. Do you wish then that all wolves should be executed? Hmm? All bears? Hell, you could argue that humans are predators too. Shall we execute them solely because they hunt and hurt and condemn others?!" She angrily approached Davem, staring him in the face with fire in her eyes. "Do you even know what you speak of? You dare tamper with a force you've no right to even touch?!"

"Yet you told Alice that casting the Mors Magicae curse was a good plan," Davem pushed back, meeting her hateful glare. "You gave her express permission to tamper with these laws because it would 'weaken the Draco Disciples', am I right? How dare you condemn me for the same crime that you encouraged another to do?"

"Because I was naive enough to believe it only affected dark magic! That damned curse caused us so much misery in the end, despite it crippling our enemies. But something like that never just affects one side. It crippled our mages, too. Had I known the repercussions, I would never have suggested it and I will not allow anyone, not even you, to make that same mistake again!"

"Some 'misery' you suffered," he snorted. "Gertrude said it plainly; in the end you won. You unlocked Bloodtharken's horde and solved all of your financial woes. You restored magic back to the world with the 'power of love'. You even brought father and daughter together. I'd say that disrupting the natural leylines worked out pretty well in your favor, don't you think?"

"Because Alice acknowledged her mistake and made amends by helping to restore magic to the world! What might have happened if she did not try to balance the leylines again? She tried to fix what should not have been altered because she realized it was not hers to change it in the first place! You can curse the gods and men about the Danse and the Sirens and pirates all you want until your face is blue, but it is not, and will *never* be, your duty to decide their fate!"

"Funny how that improbable plan of yours to stop the Dracos actually succeeded. One might think that but for the merciful hand of some greater authority, who knows what might have happened to you?" Davem asked... although he seemed to have a difficult time maintaining his decorum as he spoke.

"What troubles me most is your reasoning for this proposed mass murder." Gertrude remarked. "It fair *reeks* of righteous indignation; and a heavy dash of petulance to boot."

The witch stood between the two gypsies, arms folded across her midsection. She was staring at Davem intently, as if to size him up.

"All in all, it makes your enemies sound more like victims than anything else."

The young man blinked.

"Do not...do not tell me that you feel *sympathy* for these creatures!" Davem's voice reached a level of biting intensity once more as he rounded on the trio.

"For privateers who rape, kill, destroy, and in their very next breath *laugh and sing* about it without fear of repercussion? For a trio of monstrosities who lure men to their deaths by the *boatful*? A man who would hoard dark secrets to keep the entire *country* under his heel? A wizard who has tormented the innocent of this town for *years*? These are not *humans*, they are *monsters*, with no hope of- of-..."

His voice began to cave in beneath the weight of his emotions, and when he could again speak, he did so in a whisper- directly to Talia.

"...You were mistaken. *Both* of us were mistaken... about Estella. There was never any good in her. None. In her, nor *any* of the Draco Disciples. Just as our reality created the gypsies to struggle in a world that will never accept them, and created Lightbringers to be nothing but easily replaceable observers to some greater story they cannot control, powers loftier than ourselves created people like the Disciples, Pirates, Sirens and others to do nothing but consume and destroy. There was never hope for them. They are not. Worth. Saving."

Gertrude sighed, and raised a hand to pinch the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger in a gesture of frustration.

"Stopped your ears up." She muttered. "Well, then."

Without another word, the witch quietly turned on her heel and walked towards the door of the cabin. She opened the door and slipped out onto the deck, the hinges barely creaking as it closed behind her. The gypsies heard her footsteps cross the deck, and descend the gangplank.

Davem said nothing as she left, though the ire on his face remained.

Adria shook her head. This man who stood in front of her was not someone she recognized anymore. A familiar heartache erupted in her chest.

She knew what came next, though disgust filled her to do so. Adria did not even wish to look at his face any longer, but her anger forced her to keep his gaze. Never in her life would she have thought to say words like this to a Lightbringer:

"If they are not worth saving... then neither are you."

Davem nodded soberly before turning away from the gypsies.

"Come, Talia," her low voice growled. "We're leaving." She opened the cabin door and waited in the way for the Bard Mistress.

"Very well." The former Lorekeeper called after them, "I'm sorry that we cannot see eye to eye. It would not be the first time, I suppose, but I would have you know this."

Slowly, he stepped back, over to a bookshelf at the room's far end. Absently, one of his hands feathered over the spines of the gathered tomes.

"Those whom I have mentioned are not 'people' who the military are going to 'kill'. They are, and always have been *problems*, long overdue for *elimination*. If you and your family cannot stay silent while justice is carried out, then I would advise making yourselves scarce..."

At this, he turned to glance back at the remaining pair over his shoulder, as he concluded,

"...lest *you* be seen as 'problematic' as well."

The threat hung heavily in the air between them. Slowly, as if approaching a wounded animal, Talia crossed the room to Davem. She whispered something in his ear.

"Who?" Davem asked.

"My true name." Talia said simply. "If nothing else is said between us...You're the only person in England to know my true name."

"Why-"

"Because I wanted you to know. Because Talia Tale is how I wish Bristol to know and remember me." She backed to the door and whispered. "Because I assumed you wished to be known as Davem."

The door latch fell into place with a click of finality.

As Adria and Talia descended down the gangplank, the clouds overhead had obscured the moon, leaving the docks dark and cold. The Swordmistress stomped onto the hard stone while the Bard followed slowly and solemnly behind her. When they were beyond the ship's guards, Adria stopped. Her hands covered her face and she sighed heavily. Talia approached and tried to comfort the distraught Swordmistress. But Adria's shoulders weren't shaking. Instead she rubbed her face and stared up at the dark clouds.

"Thoren needs to know of this."

"Will that do any good?" Talia asked.

"And then the rest of the Band must prepare themselves," she continued in a hollow voice.

"You're not seriously suggesting waging war on Davem, are you?" Talia asked incredulously.

"You heard him, Talia! He plans to disrupt the very balance of the world! The last time that happened, we had a horde of dragon-folk invading Bristol along with shades of possible future Draco Disciples! Who knows what could happen because of Davem's indignation? Nay, I will not let that come to pass while I live and breathe. We must tell Thoren."

"We?"

"Tell the mages to begin their magical preparations. All the artifacts should be gathered immediately. Lillith and Conal need to keep watch in case something happens before we are ready. Inform the Scribes they must send word out to our other Lightbringers, too. I'll go to Legion Field and gather the Barbarians."

"Adria. Your path takes you elsewhere. You just finished your goodbyes. Are... are you staying with us?"

Adria turned slowly towards Talia. The fire was still present in her eyes despite their redness.

"The factions might be disbanded, Talia, but I still have Order blood in my veins. I swore an oath to protect this world and I will do my damndest to honor it. When Thoren brought me into the Band years ago, you all became a part of it. No matter where I venture, no matter how far I travel away from Bristol, the Twisted Claw will *always* be my family, and by my father's sword, I will not leave you all until I know you are safe..." Adria trailed off for a moment and stared down before resuming. She tried to rub her eyes quick enough to stop a tear from falling. "...even if it's from one of our own. Then again, we're no strangers to that, are we?"

Talia saw the redness in her eyes growing. "Tovias was not your fault. You cannot blame yourself for-"

"If you see Eamon on your way back," Adria interrupted, "Tell him I have one more thing to take care of before I leave with him. If he wishes to stay, that is his prerogative, but I will not ask him to wait for me."

With that, Adria stormed off into Bristol, heading towards the Barbarians, leaving Talia alone on the docks.

The Bardmistress found her mind drifting back- back to the moments following the Band's defeat of the Draco Disciples... it had not been so very long ago, barely *hours*.

She could remember the happy looks and bright cheers, the accolades for the Lightbringers, for Thoren and for the Gypsies...

Funny how that improbable plan of yours actually succeeded. One might think that but for the merciful hand of some greater authority, who knows what might have happened to you?

Ouroboros

Praetor Vinz Clortho, the sorceress Zula Gozeryen, the brute Liam Bloodroot, the seducer-knight Castor Sloan and the assassin Kat Mandrake sat together in the parlor of what was now known as Draco Manor.

It was absolutely silent, but for the tick of a small antique clock sitting atop a sturdy oaken shelf.

The tension in the air was agonizing; One could almost taste it.

At last, one voice broke the thick, daunting quiet.

"Do we get to kill the Gypsies yet?"

"Shut it, Liam. Just shut it." Vinz was the first to respond, but he was near spoken over by the only slightly slower Castor.

"Oh, certainly. *Do* tell me afterward how you fare with a hobbled *leg*, Bloodroot."

"I'm sure *you* will have a fine view of it from the rear lines, Castor." Kat smirked, "I didn't see *you* draw any closer after the Gypsies' errand boy beat you within an inch of consciousness."

"At least I do not have a nice little souvenir to show for it..." Castor muttered back, gesturing to the bruise around Mandrake's neck, in the shape of Thoren Grymm's bulky hand.

The bickering ceased in an instant as the Praetor slammed his hand down on the table's surface with a short, sharp *thwack*.

"Be silent, *all* of you." Vinz bade them all. "Not a one of you was of any particular use... and nor was I." He said, standing up and out of his chair.

Turning, he walked away from the table, coming to stand at a window overlooking the Bristol shore.

"I... miscalculated. The lord of the rats may say as he likes, do as he likes... for now. But as I have learned, things change with time. And as it happens, with the return of my immortality, I have more than enough of *that* to reverse the urchins' newfound fortune."

"Yes, all the time and patience in the world," Castor answered swiftly, regardless of his lord's earlier command, "which is more than one could say for the *rest* of us. Nightshade has reported that some of the others are beginning grow uneasy... there has been talk that if *Simeon* were to return, *he* might be able to-" The smirk on the dark knight's face suggested he meant this not in earnest... merely to get the inevitable reaction (it was what he was best at, after all).

Only Zula caught the reflection of Vinz's darkening expression.

"Malificus was a fool. He squandered Bloodtharken, squandered the heir of Druscilla's bloodline, squandered countless artifacts by *entrusting* them to Nightshade, and squandered-"

"A Foxglove, but then, he was not the only one." Castor concluded, the smirk growing even wider, actually chuckling a bit as he noticed the Praetor's flinch.

It seemed Kat Mandrake noticed it as well.

"Stow it, Castor," The assassin suddenly hissed, "Unless you tire of the breath you waste so freely."

Castor glanced over at the blonde Disciple, eyebrow quirked, before melting back into his seat with a noticeably less satisfied smile.

"I must admit," Zula spoke at last, taking to her feet and moving to stand closer to the Praetor, "when I aided you in taking away Simeon's power, I did not assume you had meant to do the same to *me*- to *all* magic users amongst the Draco Disciples." She said this with her usual elegant tone... but with a noticeably wry air. "Far be it from me to be quite as bold as Master Sloan, but there *are* those who... did not take it quite so well. They would ask if it is truly Tiamat's name and the glory of Dragonkind in which you scheme... and not the name of Vinz Clortho, and the laws and coin of *man*."

"All that I have done, I have done for Her honor, with Her blessing. It is as I said. Mere miscalculations, underestimations of the Gypsies' abilities have led us to this unfortunate moment... but I shall do as I have said; I shall reverse this. Rest assured that circumstances can change without the slightest-"

Suddenly, there was a loud knock at the manor's front door.

The Dracos looked about the table, some startled, others only leery. As though by reflex, Liam reached down for his sword until Vinz walked past him, the Praetor giving Castor a glare on the way.

After taking a moment to regain his composure, Vinz slowly opened the door to the manor.

What greeted him on the other side was the gentle caress of night air, the glow of the moon and stars above... and no less than a dozen militiamen headed by none other than Thomas Kelk: The Lord Mayor of Bristol.

"Lord Mayor!" Vinz said instantly, stumbling to a swift reverence. "This is an unexpected and pleasant surprise-!"

"Master Clortho." The Lord Mayor only gave a nod, his brow furrowed, before stepping slowly to one side to allow the militiamen access to the entryway.

"Wait... what is the meaning of this?" Vinz's eyes widened behind his spectacles, trying to remain in the doorjamb as the soldiers began to push their way past him.

"We have a warrant for your arrest, and the arrest of all in attendance within this household." One of the soldiers stated firmly, reaching out and thrusting a rolled up parchment against the Praetor's chest.

"Under... Wait, I... *what?*" Immediately, Vinz turned and rushed back to the parlor, where the other Draco Disciples were already beginning to rise from their chairs. "Surely, there must be some sort of mistake..."

"I am afraid not." Thomas replied simply as the soldiers began to disperse throughout the house, opening doors and drawers where they were found.

"You have no... You cannot- you have no right-!"

"I have *every* right, in case you have forgotten the hierarchy within this city; It was I who appointed you Justice of the Peace when Simeon Malificus was imprisoned... a decision I now see the folly of in full."

"You did so for a *reason*, 'milord'." Vinz said, his voice suddenly a whisper that the soldiers would not hear in the midst of their search. "And if you want to continue to enjoy the fruits of my labor as your tax collector- aside from my own sizable donations to your campaigns-"

"*That*, Master Clortho, shall no longer be any of my concern, or of yours." The Lord Mayor stated, adjusting his spectacles. "Your assets have been frozen, to be seized within the week by the Secretary of State, Sir Francis Walsingham."

The words hung in the air like the blade of a guillotine... and Vinz's pale expression carried with that theme quite well. His lips moved, but no sound came forth.

"On what grounds do you see fit to do *any* of this?" Zula demanded, stepping forth to speak where the Praetor had lost his strength to do so.

"Upon the confessions of several dozen citizens of this very town, numbering nearly one hundred strong... each and every one admitting to committing crimes upon threat of having their lives destroyed by the one who blackmailed them... and I might easily have been among them someday." Thomas sighed a bit, then turned down to Vinz with a glare. "On top of this, your dealings with the occult have been made known to us."

Another of the soldiers stepped forward, gingerly holding the edges of a large black tome.

"This- the 'Draco Tome'- was taken from the cart of the Gypsies in their final days of the Queen's festival." Thomas explained.

"Talk to the bloody Gypsies, then." Kat spoke up, coming to stand at Vinz's other side. "We've never seen that collection of chicken-scratch before."

At that moment, there was a call from the chamber belonging to Vinz.

"The pages are here." One of the soldiers called.

"Excellent." The Lord Mayor said, taking the book from the soldier, and walking forward. "This god-forsaken collection of rituals and devilry was taken by the Gypsies, but they claimed to have given a few pages to you by way of negotiation. I would say that this is more than enough to settle the matter of 'grounds for your arrest'."

At that moment, the militiamen- now having reconvened in the parlor, stepped forward and began to seize the Disciples as one; most of them struggling and indignant... except for Vinz.

Liam was a hair's breath away from drawing his rapier, and Kat, her dagger. Only when Zula was about to brandish her wand did Vinz raise a hand to stay theirs.

"No." He stated, able to speak once more, and with surprising firmness. "We will accompany them to the prison until this mess is sorted out..." He said quietly. "Surrender your arms, and say nothing."

"A wise choice." Thomas nodded, once again having to step aside to allow the guards room to escort their prisoners from the manor.

"Clortho..." Zula began in a low growl, but Vinz only shook his head- a gesture that she would do best to remain silent for the moment.

"There is something wrong here." He whispered back. "Just... for now. We must allow this charade to play out."

"What do you mean 'wrong'?" Kat asked, pushing up in spite of being cuffed to stand by Vinz as well.

"You said it yourself;" Castor nodded from behind them, "Circumstances can change."

Vinz looked away from them.

"... Call it a hunch."

With that, the Draco Disciples were led away to the dungeon of Bristol.

"I hope the food is better this time..."

"*Shut it*, Liam."

The journey from Draco Manor- or what was formerly Draco Manor, under the circumstances- was uneventful, mostly because the Praetor deemed it so. More than once, even after the Disciples had left the place, they had been tempted to draw their weapons, fight their way out, or at the very least make a run for it.

'No', Vinz had growled to them, 'It will accomplish nothing'.

Zula was certain that a spell or two would have gotten them out of this with considerable ease, and yet her commander was adamant... for whatever reason.

Only minutes after the interruption of their 'round table' meeting, the minions of Tiamat found themselves (once again, in at least two cases) in the cold, dank surroundings of Bristol's dungeon.

"Well?" Castor asked once the last of the guards who had escorted them had left.

"Just a moment." Vinz replied without hesitation.

"I do believe we have waited long enough." Zula snapped. "We are in *prison*, 'Master Clortho', in case you have not noticed!"

"And things will not improve if I cannot focus." The Praetor replied, to which Kat added a hissing 'shush'.

"What is there to know?" Castor continued, resuming his smug countenance even beyond cold iron bars.

The prison had been completely outfitted with magic-dampening spells and magic-resistant walls and bars (compliments of Randalph the Blue before he had departed Bristol for the indefinite future). Even if Vinz or Zula had the proper implements for spell casting or rituals, it would have been in vain... ironic how magical means could nullify magic more effectively than 'removing' it altogether, but that was not where Vinz's focus lay.

After a moment, Vinz reached the conclusion he had been dreading.

"I cannot contact Tiamat... something is blocking the connection between I and She."

"We're in Antimagic Cells." Castor said, unimpressed by this revelation.

"These spells were not designed to block internal magic, such as the Ritual of the Praetor; only the projection of magical energies." Zula interjected, sliding her fingers over the bars as she stood just behind them. "He should still be able to speak to Tiamat through proper meditation..."

Just then, another voice pierced the dank dungeon air, startling the other five Disciples.

"Perhaps she has realized the error of sending a Tax Collector to do a Sorcerer's job."

Vinz cringed somewhat, then turned his gaze down the hall.

"I was wondering if you were still here, Simeon."

A low chuckle answered Vinz, as his predecessor- Simeon Malificus- made himself known.

"It's been a long time, Vinz." Simeon said smoothly, from his position seated at the rear of his cell. "I have not seen you since the final day of the festival year last... before I was inexplicably dragged back into prison. I realized who was to blame for that quickly enough. I just did not think you would be willing to go to the lengths you did to steal my position."

In spite of what was being said, the former Praetor spoke coolly- one could hear the wry smile on his face.

"Was it worth it?"

"To be rid of you?" Vinz growled back, aware that all of the other Dracos' eyes were now on him, "I would do it again in a heartbeat."

"And yet, at the end look at where you are: rotting in prison while the Light Descended continue revel at the Dark Mother's expense."

"Our circumstances are as they are by no Gypsy hand." Vinz said firmly. "...There is something else at play here."

"So you keep saying." Zula nodded with a frown. "Again, I would ask for all our sakes what makes you so certain."

"Zula... do you know why people accept bribes? Why they allow themselves to be put in a position to be blackmailed?" As he spoke, Vinz's face took on a darker demeanor. It was the sort of expression that would have reminded anyone that saw it that- indeed- Vinz Clortho could, in fact, be fearsome.

"Because people like money?" Liam guessed, but was quickly corrected.

"*No*. It is because the world is a scary place, Liam. They do it because there are more things than Draco Disciples that creep outside their doors and scratch at their windows each night: An unseasonable frost that kills their crops, a highwayman that rapes and pillages his way across the countryside, a plague that slaughters all who happen to brush the wrong hand or breathe the wrong air... and people fear not only for their own lives, but for those of their families and friends. It is people like us- people like myself who take advantage of these poor, unfortunate men, women and children. When we give them our money we buy far more than their salvation; we buy their fates."

"Until, of course, they realize they are being used, report us to the authorities, and our coin is taken in one fell swoop." Castor added, only slightly perturbed by Vinz's expression.

"Don't you see, you fool? The Lord Mayor is no better off than the imbeciles he rules over! He has every bit as much to lose by depriving me of my coin as I do, as his people do! Without our 'protection'!"

"Perhaps he and his people no longer *need* your 'protection'." Simeon said. "Perhaps this is what happens when your plotting and scheming rely solely on mankind and its society- the very thing the Dark Mother would see brought to ruin."

"Do you really believe this is natural? That suddenly everybody develops a conscience and are willing to throw themselves and those they love into a crime and disease addled world without assurance? Mankind is benevolent now? Evil is over?" Vinz harrumphed, and looked back to one corner of his cell.

A hush fell over the prison, and hung there for quite some time.

"Do you... have any idea who is behind this?" Kat Mandrake finally spoke up, her voice clearly the result of some resolve-stealing.

"None... even if I had an inkling, I've nothing in the way of evidence..."

He suddenly stopped, his voice dissipating into the clammy air as he heard the sound of footsteps approaching from the darkness.

Two prison guards bearing a set of manacles approached, coming to stand before the Praetor's cage. Throwing the manacles in, they bade him to place them about his wrists.

"What is the meaning of this?" Vinz asked.

"You have a visitor... rather, one who would speak to you in private." One of the guards stated simply.

After a moment, Vinz took up the manacles and secured them about his own wrists... There was a magic-suppressing charm about them as well. Typical.

"Might I ask who this mystery-man is?"

Perhaps we will discover the culprit sooner than I thought.

The other guard opened the cell, stepping aside to let Vinz step outside... the Praetor freezing in place as he heard the reply:

"He calls himself 'Davemport'."

Part 4: Settling Old Accounts

Leaving the remainder of the Draco Disciples in their cells, the city guards led a handcuffed Vinz Clortho from the Bristol Dungeon, and toward the harbor. The night air- once clear and cool- now felt stifling somehow.

The Praetor's thoughts ran in tiresome circles, much like a dog chasing its tail; nothing coherent, just one confusing or indignant (or both) thought after another.

A sudden and complete shift in the balance between the world's forces of Good and Evil... and Davem of the Davemport of all people had something to do with it... it didn't make sense, for certes.

Finally, he was led onto the deck and into the captain's cabin of one of the many ships docked thereabouts. The sound of waves against the shoreline as well as the salty smell of seawater perhaps did not soothe him entirely, but it served to bring him back to the moment.

I will learn all I need to know soon enough. He reassured himself as he stepped through the cabin door.

The inside of the cabin was predictably dark, lit here and there by small oil lanterns. Tall shadows of furniture and other such things loomed about the chamber walls.

The guards sat him down in a sturdy chair, his arms slung around the back of it, before binding his arms and legs more securely. The chair itself stood before a large, equally sturdy oaken desk- its larger chair currently vacant.

With that, the two guards dropped the keys to Vinz's manacles on the desk and took their leave, the Praetor now alone in the room.

Unable to move, his spectacle-laden eyes darted about the cabin, the room probably bearing less of an intimidation factor than his host may have liked to hope. He'd seen creepier places than this- particularly three months ago- but he had to give points for effort. Finally, his eyes found themselves drawn back to the desk.

A few books and sheaves of parchment dotted the wooden surface, as well as a single oil lamp... and an odd-looking vial bearing a ribbon tied around it. He had at first dismissed it as a jar of pen ink or lantern oil. However, the longer he looked at it, the more unsettling it became to him, as though not even ink or oil could be quite that dark.

"It's a Ghost Trap."

Vinz jerked back where he was tied as a voice pierced the silence of the ship's cabin. He had been so engrossed in staring at that jar that he hadn't heard the door open. Turning his head as best he could, he caught a silhouetted figure leaning on the doorjamb.

"Developed by Aggie McGee in The Year of the Quest 2011, but with a few modifications, designed specifically to deal with the Praetor of the Draco Disciples... *whomever* it may be..." As the figure continued to speak, he closed the door behind him and walked around the chair, coming to stand behind the desk. With one hand, he absently took the keys, and placed them in his pocket.

"I never thought you would ever show your face around here again, *Davem*." Vinz muttered with a mocking tone as he glared at the other man. "I was rather surprised at your first visit... although not by its content."

"Mocking me for believing you actually cared. That doesn't surprise me." 'Davem' replied, taking a seat in the desk's chair, and staring back at Vinz. "Even if you wanted to keep up that charade now, your actions have spoken louder than your words ever could."

Now that Vinz had a better look at Davem, he saw that he was no longer wearing ordinary adventuring garments. Rather, he was now dressed in a businessman's regalia, bearing insignias and decorations that seemed far too lofty- or at least expensive- for one of Davem's presumed station.

"Yes, yes, we have moved past that though, have we not?." Vinz nodded, then proceeded with a casual disinterest, "Now, are you going to tell me what it is you want, or are you going to continue to waste my time? As it stands, your little 'Ghost Trap' frightens me not- Even if I were to fall prey to it, the others would release me soon enough."

"That Ghost Trap is no ordinary containment vessel." Davem answered, "It was made using waters from the Lethe- the Underworld's river of Oblivion. The second your soul enters, every last shred of your consciousness will be burned away as a body would be in a vat of alchemist's acid." He looked at the other man as his arms folded on the desk between them.

"Just like what happened to Estella."

"What was that?" Vinz's eyebrows raised, and again- for an instant- one could catch a glimpse through his usual disregard.

"She happened to visit Bristol earlier today... she thought it might be fun to toy with me a little more from beyond the grave." He picked up the vial again, giving it a passing smile. "In the end, she was not a complete waste to me after all: She made an excellent test subject."

Vinz was dumbfounded.

"You are a *liar*." He declared. "The spineless worm I knew would never have the stomach for that sort of treachery."

"Is that so?" Davem replied, leaning forward. "You know better than anybody that every man has a breaking point."

"You are a *hypocrite*, then." He countered. "If what you say is true, then in stealing Estella's eternal reward from her, you have done just as much- *more*, even- than I have in sacrificing her for the greater good."

Davem let out a single loud laugh.

"Comparing yourself to me? You need only open your eyes to see the difference; You *repeated* the crimes you once swore to avenge, and followed the footsteps of the man who committed them all the way into *prison*... all you accomplished in it all was to keep the battle between the Gypsies and Dracos going."

Vinz shifted uncomfortably.

That sentiment sounded disturbingly familiar.

"Clearly you have a point to make, Davem." Vinz growled. "You would not have had your men drag me all the way here- exposed your involvement in all of this to me- unless you had some reason, something you *want*."

"Vinz, there was only ever one thing I wanted in Bristol... only *one*... and that was taken away from me, thanks- in no small part- to *you*." Davem's voice, normally as polite and amiable as he could manage back when Vinz had known him before, was now cracking, its cheerful façade giving way to sheer malice. "And now, I've sacrificed my very *future* for nothing."

"Oh, please, spare me." Vinz's eyes rolled behind his spectacles as Davem rose from his chair once more. "If all of this is about revenge for *Estella*, rest assured she never gave you a second th-!"

Vinz was cut off suddenly as Davem walked around the desk, took hold of his shoulder, and *shoved* him- chair and all- over with a resounding, clattering 'thunk'. The Praetor let out a grunt of pain as the back of his head struck the wooden floor beneath him.

"Nobody understands Estella's worthlessness now better than I do." Davem continued, moving to Vinz's head and kneeling to face him, upside-down from his view. "It's not about her, though. At least, not Estella Foxglove *specifically*."

Slowly, Davem shifted his position to sit cross-legged near the prone Disciple.

"You might as well get comfortable, Vinz. I have a little story to tell you."

"This is absurd." Zula scowled. She was on her feet again, pacing back and forth in her cell. "One moment we are comfortably and peacefully-... *comfortably*, at any rate- seated within our rightfully staked home-in-Bristol... and the next, the world loses its mind, as had our Praetor." She came to a halt, folding her arms and glaring at the floor. "Damn him..."

"T'is your fault, you know." Castor mused, sitting against the far wall of his own cell. "The Praetor who now rules us sprang from your own hand. You know, the business of a Draco Disciple was far simpler before bringing it within the walls of this ridiculous city. I mean, the taverns are pleasant enough, but-"

"Stow it." Kat said softly, but sharply. Castor said with a heavy sigh. "What is it that we're supposed to do? We don't even understand who's doing what. And what is this about the 'Davempot'? I've never heard of such a place."

"That... is another matter entirely." Simeon's face took on an odd expression- something between amusement, and *bemusement*. "Davem of the Davempot was one of the Gypsies' errand boys, one of their precious Lightbringers... rather, he was acting as a Lightbringer on behalf of a *real* one. Davem was really quite inept."

"S'he the one Vinz n' I dragged back from the Duck?" Liam asked, then gave a low laugh as Simeon nodded. "Some 'spy' he was..."

"He left at the end of year last, not long before I was arrested again." Simeon explained, furrowing his brow. "Now he has returned, and has somehow machinated the complete and utter destruction of all things evil in Bristol, if not the world..."

"T'is not simply Bristol, Milord."

There was another collective rustle amongst the Disciples- although they should probably have become accustomed to this sort of thing by that point- as they heard a familiar voice approaching.

"Florence!" Zula said with a gasp. "Have they-"

"I come alone." Florence Aconite proclaimed quietly as she walked down the hallway, coming to stand in the middle of the cages. "The guards did not see me enter- the city, nor the dungeon."

"How?" Simeon asked.

"What of the Disciples in Kent?" Zula asked swiftly, "you said that-"

"My commander was arrested, as were more than half of the others..."

"And the rest?" The sorceress continued, although she hadn't needed to. She could tell by Florence's expression of helpless anger.

At last, the newcomer shook her head and glanced back over her shoulder again.

"I was met by one of our messengers from Kent; out of breath, he told me what had happened. I sought to warn you all, but arrived too late, it seems."

"That you even arrived at *all* is strange." Simeon muttered to himself. After everything that had happened, it surprised him that anyone should have slipped through the cracks.

"Unfortunate news is not the only thing the messenger brought." Florence added as she made her way to Zula's cell. Immediately she procured a set of lockpicks from a satchel at her side.

"I have hidden it just outside the city walls... By the Dark Mother's grace, it may well be our deliverance from this catastrophe."

-

"Once upon a time there was a young man who worked in his family's mercantile firm in the New World- in New Dover Port. Actually, 'worked' is a poor choice of words. He basically spent all of his time fantasizing about magic and adventure. Finally his parents grew weary of this, and shipped him off to England, where most of the stories the young man obsessed over were perfected, if not written. Their goal was to jar the fancy from his mind- to make him useful to them.

When the young man arrived he took up with a mercenaries' guild, but not a proper one. It merely sent volunteers to places where adventurers were needed, without regard for the skills of their employees when compared to what was needed at the destination. For instance, our protagonist found himself in Bristol, trying to perform the work of a Russian bounty hunter- something he was poorly equipped for. He was nearly laughed out of Bristol until being recognized for his true skills by the local gypsy Bardmistress.

While researching a local legend for the Band of the Twisted Claw, the man met with a young girl- a girl he grew fascinated with, and came to care for. As it happened she was the spawn of the worst person in the world-... second

worst, I suppose. Either way, she was surrounded by evil, and she herself was cruel and apathetic to everyone and everything.

The man was still obsessed with his stories, his fantasies, his ideals... and wanted to pull the girl away from her life of darkness so he could be the hero he had always dreamt of becoming... but was mocked by both his friends and his enemies... even the girl herself.

In the end, the girl he wanted so desperately to save was killed. The world he wanted so desperately to live in shunned him. The adventure he so desperately wanted to find was kept from his reach, reserved for a bunch of carefree gypsies and those they favored.

The man came to realize that this was the nature of the world... that the world does not care about one's hopes and dreams and fantasies. The world does not care how hard a man works for his goals.

The world has already chosen its fate- how it will play out, and who will matter as said fate runs its course... who will live forever as a hero- or a villain- and who will die in obscurity, alone and forgotten."

Vinz trembled angrily as he listened to Davem speak, uncertain what to say or do, but in the end he decided to simply lay there and try not to focus on the throbbing pain in the back of his head.

"The Band... and the Draco Disciples... don't you see? You are the ones the world has chosen... everyone who is not one of you- one of either of your stock- does not matter. You people take your lives for granted, when it is the lives of the Band and the Dracos around which the events of this world turn. *They* fight for peace in a world that hinges on an eternal war. *You* fight to rule a people who will not *be* ruled by monsters. The lives you people squander on worthless causes are the crux point of our very existence... but no longer."

With that, Davem stood up and walked to one of the bookshelves. From it, he plucked a single tome...

"In my darkest hour, I was visited by a guardian spirit... and was given the means to change everything."

Slowly, he made his way back to where Vinz lay cuffed to the chair and knelt beside him.

"It's already started. It started the moment the Gypsies came to take Bloodtharken's hoard.

The circumstances under which the Gypsies claimed the hoard are irrelevant; My understanding of which magics ought and ought not have worked is sketchy at best as I was uninvolved in the events leading up to it... but I can sum things up with a single question."

Vinz's eyes narrowed.

"How did you forget that you are richer than the Gypsies?"

"What?" The question was so strange, as though it had been asked in an entirely foreign language. It took him a moment to process it.

"The second the Gypsies claimed the hoard, what stopped you from calling the city guard, and reporting that the gypsies had stolen from you a cache of treasure- a mountain of riches *well above their station*? A single gold piece in their hands would normally be enough to have them arrested, and yet, it eluded you to do so? Instead, you ran off with your tail between your legs rather than using the *ONE THING YOU HAD BEEN HOLDING OVER THEM THE ENTIRE TIME*. It seems like a rather silly oversight on your part, given how meticulous and calculating you can be."

As Vinz trembled in anger, his mind played back Davem's words... words so familiar, it was as though he had thought them before...

... He *had* thought them before.

It had been his plan- his failsafe to keep the hoard from falling into the Gypsy hands... but he had forgotten somehow- forgotten the critical Plan B...

"But it's too late now, isn't it? You've lost the hoard, you've been stripped of your wealth, you're trapped in prison... You cannot possibly *imagine* how good it feels to watch your fall from the top."

Vinz actually spat at Davem, trying to reach his face, but only striking his pant leg.

Davem flinched, then slowly stood back to his feet.

"After kissing noble boots for so long, I would think you would have better *manners*."

After a moment, he reached out and *slammed* his foot down on Vinz's chest.

The Praetor let out a wheezing grunt of pain, trying to double over, but unable to do so with his hands cuffed behind the back of the chair.

"Much better." Davem smiled.

"If... I am understanding correctly..." Vinz began once the pain in his chest diminished and his breath returned.

"Then you have manipulated me into failure... and manipulated the very nature of the Balance to side against us. How? Surely this is no Gypsy trick..."

"Indeed it isn't. Even if it were, they would never have had the nerve to use it." Davem replied simply, looking down at the book once more. "That much is clear. I suppose it's why he chose *me* to carry this. "

"Wait." Vinz said after another trembling breath to try and soothe his lungs. "You said... a guardian spirit... what did this spirit of yours look like?"

Vinz had grown weary of Davem's melodramatic exposition some time ago, but what the man had just said- the 'true nature of the world' and all that... Once again, it rang as being unsettlingly similar to words he'd heard only a short few months ago from a source he had hoped never to hear from again.

"Oh?" Davem glanced at him from the corner of his eye, "He was a curious sort, to be sure... black pants, shoes and a shirt the likes of which I've never seen... glasses, and a most peculiar hat..."

If he were able to do so, Vinz would have stood up straight in his chair.

"Priest... Danny Priest is *alive!*?" The Praetor spat, looking around, then up at Davem. "That is *impossible!*"

"It seems you know him, then." Davem chuckled. "I suppose you have enemies *everywhere!*"

"Davem. *Listen* to me." Vinz said quickly, the daze and the pain in the back of his head fading- replaced by a stomach-turning near-panic. "Whatever that man- that *thing!* is telling you- has *given* you-"

Before he could finish, Davem walked to him, lifting a foot, and slammed it down upon his chest.

Vinz's pained cry was cut off, lacking the proper air. It was reduced to a coughing, breathless gasp.

"Y-you don't *understand*, you fool!" He was barely above mouthing the words at that point, but his eyes were wide, frantic as they tried desperately to touch some emotion in Davem that had not yet been tainted by what was very clearly madness. "I have *seen* this before. If you do not *listen* to-!"

Davem stopped, slowly crouching beside him once again, staring him dead in the face.

"I listened to you once before, Vinz. It was a mistake that I will not make again."

Slowly, Davem opened the black cover of the tome, and instantly, the interior of the cabin was awash with a blinding silver light. Vinz squinted up at Davem, the ex-Lorekeeper's face ominously lit from below by the illumination.

"You asked me before why I brought you here, what it is that I wanted, what point I wished to make. You, the one who *lied* to me, *mocked* me, took *everything* from me, had the *nerve* to ask such a thing... Estella is gone now. My dream of becoming a hero has been shattered. Were it not for this book, my very soul would be forfeit to Hell. But now I have a new cause, greater than I could have imagined when I left my home."

As he spoke, he raised a hand over the silver pages of the book. Suddenly, tiny branches of white lightning flickered to life between his fingertips, burning glowing words onto the shimmering leaves.

"What I want is for you to watch your entire organization drown in the blood it has shed- choke on the lives it has consumed- and be *buried* under the ruins of all it has *destroyed*, and now I have the means to make that happen; Danny Priest gave me the means to *remake* this world in a single night; One by one, the Dracos, the dark wizards, the evil privateers, I will *crush* every last vestige of darkness on this Earth."

With a flick of his fingers, the book- bound in black leather which somehow contained its unearthly nature- snapped closed. As he did, the door to the cabin opened. The two guards who had dragged Vinz here now stood on the other side, stepping in warily.

"Is everything alright?" One of them asked, looking down at where Vinz was laying, chair-bound on the floor.

"I doubt they've ever been better." Davem replied, casually standing to his feet once more, and walking behind his desk.

Vinz opened his mouth to scream at the guards- to stop Davem, to take the book from him, and yet he couldn't seem to force the words from his throat. His eyes darted back to the other man, who now stood at the side of the desk, tapping a finger suggestively on the book that now lay upon its surface.

As the Praetor was dragged to back into an upright position, the binds that tied him to the chair gradually undone, he struggled to speak even though it seemed the ability to do so had been taken from him.

"Take him back to his cell." Davem concluded.

The guards nodded, ignoring Vinz's increasingly panicked struggles.

He couldn't express it aloud, but in his mind, the voice of Danny Priest echoed over and over again:

"I did not create the disasters that claimed their worlds; I expedited them- led poor, desperate people to the tools with which they carved their own Armageddons."

As the cabin door closed, Davem looked at the book with an almost charmed smile.

"Because of you... everything will change."