

(This is the continuation of 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 II"

A RenQuest Fanfiction by David Manley

Part 5: Exodus

"What... the hell!?"

"What the hell happened?!"

"Where are the other guards!?"

"Go and find the others!"

Vinz couldn't help a small smile as he watched the guards who had brought him here break out into a full-on panic at the discovery that the other cells were empty. Even as he was hurled into his old cell and the bars were closed, he let out a small chuckle and stood up again. The guards hadn't unshackled him from his magic-sealing cuffs, but it wasn't as though it made a difference thanks to the cage.

Once they were gone- relatively speaking, one of them still stood at the entrance to the prison some distance away- Vinz slumped to a sitting position on the cell floor.

"Well...-!?" He sighed to himself, only to find that his voice had returned. Immediately, he stood up and rushed to the cell bars. "Guard! *Guard!* Get back here, you worthless git! We are all in danger!"

"He is not listening." Vinz was startled to hear the voice of Simeon Malificus from the far end of the hallway. "And I envy him; I would kill for the ability to tune out your squawking."

"Simeon?!" Vinz asked, turning his head in his direction. "You are still here?"

"Indeed." The former Praetor replied. It was hard to see him in the darkness and from Vinz's angle down the hall, but Vinz could just sense that mischievous little grin he always had on his face. "I am surprised to see your return; knowing that Davem of the Davemport was the mastermind of this whole affair, and after what you and the sorceress did with regard to Estella, I should think your body would be in pieces, decorating his parlor."

"Davem is not the mastermind of this affair." Vinz shook his head. "For whatever he was capable of before, he would never be capable of this. Not by himself... where did the others go?"

"They were released by Florence Aconite. She arrived not long ago, and aided in their escape- babbling something about some manner of overturning this situation to Tiamat's favor."

"And what of you? Why did you not join them? Or did they leave you behind?"

"Call it 'Praetor's Intuition'." Simeon replied. "Something is clearly wrong. I have no intention of participating in it all. I shall remain here until it sorts itself out."

"Hrm..." Vinz frowned, brow creased in deep thought.

"It would appear that *you* are the one who was left behind."

"It is no mere chance that Florence Aconite arrived here." Vinz replied, stroking his chin. "Davem of the Davemport was set firmly upon imprisoning and destroying the forces of darkness and chaos and clearly has the ability to make good on that desire, so why is it that Mistress Aconite was able to slip through his trap? How was she able to machinate this little jailbreak, and how did she acquire some ace card of which he does not know?"

"I know not." Simeon shrugged. "Perhaps he could not account for everything."

"Nay." Vinz frowned. "Again, it comes back to the fact that this was not all Davem's plan... although he believes completely that it is."

"You know who this puppeteer beyond the shadows is, then?" Simeon asked casually.

"Yes. I believe that I do."

Quickly, but in as great of detail as he could manage despite his effort to keep it short, Vinz explained the details of the night several months past... of that night in the unsettling if not outright frightening world of St. Elmo's Corners.

He spoke of the nauseating sensation of being dragged through dimensions and arriving beside the Gypsies- even some whom he did not recognize. He relayed his account of the battles against the inhuman Shades that inhabited the world, the vengeful persons who dwelt there, and last but not least, its curator Danny Priest.

"... Danny Priest is... is more a some *thing* than a some *one*, and serves a creature I wager is more terrifying than the nightmares of Tiamat Herself... the Void Angel... It is an entity whose very presence is enough to erase reality itself. Danny Priest roams from place to place, destroying Balance, crushing sentient wills until they beg for Nothingness... and the Angel brings it to them."

"Preposterous." Simeon muttered, although his tone betrayed a quiver that suggested he did not entirely disbelieve. "You say you defeated him- Defeated him as well as his master... Why not simply repeat what you did before?"

"I am starting to believe that we never *did* defeat him." Vinz frowned. "He referred to his efforts in St. Elmo's as a 'shortcut'... as though it were not his intended plan, but an alternate, expedited route toward his goal... this new attempt is what he has been plotting from the start; He plans to disrupt the Great Balance using Davem as his proxy. Chaos will ensue, death and destruction will run rampant, and at the end of it all, the Void Angel will wipe this world away as though it had never been."

Silence reigned throughout the prison for a moment... until a low, cruel laughter began from Simeon's cell.

"What is so amusing, Simeon?!" Vinz demanded.

"Do forgive my impertinence..." Simeon began in the midst of his laughter. "I simply tickles me... say what you will of my failures as Praetor, but at the very least I left existence intact."

"'Tis not *un*-tacted yet, Malificus." A flat, nasally voice rang out from down the hall.

Vinz blinked, his gaze jerking back in the direction of the dungeon entrance. A familiar, hunched figure hobbled towards the cells, her pointed leather hat and ragged black clothes wrapped around her like a mouldy shroud.

"That'll be quite enough of that."

Hobbling down the hall was a familiar figure bearing a pointed hat, decked in black with a green chemise and patches to match all about her form... although it could be argued that the latter were the doing of no tailor, but by incidental bits of mold.

"Gertrude Normyl." Vinz exclaimed. "How long have you been-?"

"Long enough to know that this is no time for idle chatter." She replied, coming to stand in front of Vinz's cell. Quickly, she flipped open and began to dig through a satchel at her side.

"... You would try to release me?" Vinz asked, eyes widening a bit. "I should think that there is no love lost between us after having blackmailed you."

"True." Gertrude nodded, looking over the wand for a moment, then at the lock of the cell. "But you weren't there for my meetin' with 'Master Davemport'." She said with no small amount of sarcasm. "Circumstances effectively make you the 'enemy of the enemy', for the time bein', and I'll not have an enemy of Davem's locked up like he wants."

"If you mean to use a wand or some other witchery, it will be of no use." Vinz stated, watching as she searched her bag. "These are magically resistant cells and shackles."

"Some of the best I've seen, too." Gertrude muttered. "Likely Davem's doing as well. But thankfully I've planned a more direct course of action."

At this, she pulled a jingling ring of large keys from her pack, flicking through them one by one.

"Compliments of Jasper Trustworthy before he left. Not going to do him any good wherever he ended up, and he owed me a favor."

"What about the guard?" Vinz asked, shaking off his instinct to demand how long she'd been hiding those keys.

"He wasn't about to cooperate." Gertrude replied shortly, holding up her broom to present its gnarled handle. "Once again, I was forced to take a more practical approach." With a quick gesture, she pointed the Praetor in the direction of a prone, unconscious form near the dungeon entrance.

"I see." Vinz blinked, but the witch was already looking past him, deeper into the dungeon to Simeon's cell.

"What about you, then?" She called. "I would imagine Davem would be just as displeased to see you out of your cage as any other enemy he's made."

"'Tis as I told our good *Praetor*." Simeon replied, his voice still carrying an air of morbid enjoyment at the situation. "This is his own Hell; let him and his minions sort it out. For my part I am content to remain where it is safe, and I am supplied my meals at a reliable interval."

"Provided the remainin' guards aren't murdered in the resultin' chaos..." Gertrude muttered loudly enough for him to hear her.

After a moment, she shrugged and began making her way out of the dungeon.

"What do you plan to do now?" Vinz asked, glaring down at the shackles on his wrists. "I don't suppose you have the key to *these* on that ring of yours... or some lockpick or other such thing."

"Mm." She shook her head. "I've no manner of gettin' em off of you. You'll have to sort that out yourself. As for me, I'd hoped to get the remainder of those Davemport's locked away out of their cells, but it looks as though they've been locked somewhere different." She cast a glare back at the empty cells. "I'll be lookin' for them, if you care to join me."

"Hm." Vinz frowned. "If it is all the same, I believe my skills- such as they are with these miserable shackles- would be better directed elsewhere. Although I thank you for your assistance."

"S'more than you deserve." Gertrude replied. "You never showed I nor my sisters this sort of courtesy, but as I said before... this ain' about me."

With that, she took her leave of him, walking back up to the empty Bristol streets.

After her experience with Tovas Farraday, she knew well enough that there was more than one place to hide a body in this city, dead or alive.

As for Vinz, he emerged from the dungeon, looking about the sleeping city.

Now that he was aware of what was happening- having a fair grasp if not a complete understanding- he knew what had to be done:

Get the book away from Davem, and get things back to normal... if not a little better than that.

With a determined little smirk, Vinz began to make his way through the streets and alleys of Bristol, the faint sound of the city guard calling out in the distance.

"Damn it." Adria cursed, staring around her at the Band's encampment located not far outside the city.

A cursory look at her surroundings was enough to explain her ill humor.

The lion's share of the Band of the Twisted Claw was passed out- having done a bit too much reveling in the aftermath of their victory over the Draco Disciples only hours ago. Even the younger set had been allowed a sip or two- it *was* a festive occasion, after all.

Unfortunately this did not leave them in a very good position to deal with Davem with any sort of united front.

"What about Thoren?" Adria asked as Talia emerged from Thoren's tent.

"'Tis a fool's errand, trying to get my brother out of his bed after a celebratory binge." She shook her head.

"Of course. Of course it had to be tonight that Davem would choose to take leave of his senses."

"This is no coincidence." Talia shook her head. "Davem of the Davemport... I know not how he is doing it, but this is just as unnatural as the defeat and apprehension of the forces of Evil the world over. He ensured the Draco Disciples' fall, and ensured as well that we would be in no position to stop whatever his plan is."

"I could not reach Eamon, nor any of the other Lightbringers..." Adria sighed heavily. "Nor the Barbarians... I believe we are on our own in this."

"Unfortunately." Talia nodded. "I feel as though I have said all that I can say... It is as Gertrude said; he refuses to listen."

"I know." Adria breathed through clenched teeth. "I know... and I had prepared myself for what may be necessary from the moment he gave us his ultimatum."

"Adria?" Talia slowly walked toward her, gently reaching a hand out to touch her shoulder.

There had been a strange tone in her voice... one Talia recognized easily as sadness struggling to remain hidden.

"Why?" Adria asked softly. "Tovas and now Davem... I don't understand... why does this continue to happen?"

"You cannot blame yourself." Talia shook her head. "... Tovas proved himself to us in the end, and it is not too late for Davem to do the same..."

She let the thought end there, but Adria knew what she would have said.

It was unlikely at best.

"Talia..." Adria began again.

"We know what must be done, you and I..." The Bardmistress replied. "But it cannot go unsaid; 'Would it truly be so bad if all darkness were removed from the world'... if Davem truly possessed the ability to do so... what would the world be like if never again did I have to worry for the sake of my children, for my family, my friends..." She shook her head. "But those dangers are a part of life- of being *human*... to shut that out is to take away Light's meaning."

"I know this." Adria almost snapped back. "Who would not wonder for a world of everlasting peace? Where I would not live every day as if I were to fight a battle. Where no one in the whole world would ever know suffering again... what are we fighting for if not for this everlasting peace?"

But I learned long ago that there is no such thing as everlasting peace. We're not put here to achieve that goal. The only reason we stand here is to prevent the total descent into chaos."

"Well spake." Talia nodded, giving Adria's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Come, now. We must try to put an end to this... whatever that entails."

Adria nodded ruefully... Talia dearly hoping her Swordmistress companion would not need the dagger which she slid into a hilt at her side.

The Bristol harbor was filled with the usual sounds: gentle waves, distant gull calls... and one sound that was unique to this particular evening: that of a muffled thumping and clattering.

"Of course... even *he* would not be that stupid."

Vinz Clortho growled to himself, panting as he looked about his surroundings.

He stood inside Davem of the Davemport's cabin within the New Dover Port Trade Commission vessel amid a mass of books, papers and other objects now scattered all about the floor.

Other than the Praetor himself, the place was empty; had been empty since Vinz was escorted from the place. By his estimate, Davem had departed for a room at one of the inns.

Frustratingly, it seemed he had taken that book and that 'Ghost Trap' of his with him.

He had not yet been able to escape his cuffs, but at the very least he had managed to slip them out from behind him. It made it easier to tear apart Davem's cabin in his search, but ultimately it turned up nothing.

As he began to search through the clutter for something that might give him some insight as to where Davem had gone to, suddenly heard a soft thump and a creak from outside the cabin door.

His eyes widened behind his glasses. Looking one way then the other, he ultimately made his way behind the closed door- hiding anywhere else would have been too obvious, or put him too far from the exit in case a hasty retreat was called for.

A moment of intense silence passed.

Letting out a silent breath, Vinz- beginning to think that perhaps the sounds had been a mere figment of his anxious imagination- leaned his head over to listen at the door.

Then, a resounding 'Boom' rang out, and the door suddenly swung inward, striking him in the head and knocking him to the ground. He let out a loud string of expletives, but they died as he turned upward to face the newcomer(s).

The daunting silhouette of Adria Dubh- combined with his handcuffed state- momentarily robbed Vinz of the cognizance that he was an immortal Praetor. He trembled for a moment before recognizing her and shaking his head.

"Clortho!" Adria hissed, fully advancing into the cabin- Talia Tale right behind her. The Swordmistress reached out a skirted leg and kicked the cabin door shut. "What are you doing here?!"

"I should ask the same." Vinz replied, having regained his composure. However, as he began to stand, she leveled the dagger she'd drawn at his neck.

"*Please.*" He grumbled, rolling his eyes as he reached up to push the dagger away. "You would be doing me a favor; I can do very little in this body while trapped in these cuffs."

"Where is Davem?" Talia asked, eyeing Vinz warily as he staggered back to his feet.

"If I knew, I would have done my best to slash his throat and take the keys to these bloody things from his corpse." He answered. "What brings you here? Here to congratulate him on his ill-conceived victory?"

"Hardly." Adria frowned, sheathing the dagger. "What happened? To you and to the other Disciples?"

"I cannot say what became of the others," Vinz began, not about to rat out his cohorts if, indeed, they had some manner of turning this affair against both Davem *and* the Gypsies, "but we were taken to Prison not long after Grymm dismissed us. The people of Bristol had a crisis of conscience, it seems. After that- and a personal audience with Davem- I was freed by Gertrude Normyl."

"Where is she, then?" Adria persisted. "Has she any further insight into this mess?"

"She went off to try and meddle in Davem's plan, and I wish her good fortune in her effort. As to her insight, however, I should think she knows only what I have told her. Know you of Danny Priest?"

"What?" Talia's eyes widened immediately.

"Him!?" Adria snapped, her expression immediately one of seething outrage.

Indeed, the very night after the events in St. Elmo's Corners took place, Robert O'Coppe and those local to this Bristol were quick to relate all of the particulars... of course, it was not as though Adria and Talia had not crossed paths with the mysterious man before that. However, stories of his true aims and his nihilistic deity spurred Adria's indignation and Talia's awed fascination to a maelstrom of rage and terror.

"I should have known." Adria growled. "I should have known that miserable *thing* was behind this."

"Danny Priest has given Davem the power to alter the course of the reality we know, as you are no doubt aware." Vinz turned back toward the empty bookshelf. "I attempted to warn him of Danny Priest's nature once I knew him to be involved, but..."

"But he would not listen." Adria nodded. "We had gathered that much; he refused us a similar courtesy."

"Damn." Vinz cursed. "I had hoped this would be a simple talking-down for you."

"But why him?" Talia murmured, more to herself. "Why involve Davem?"

"Davem told me that much himself; He had nothing left. He is *exactly* the sort of man who Danny would seek out." The Praetor replied. "He wished to be a renowned hero, but left Bristol a dismal failure year last..."

"And of course you murdered Estella." Adria commented. "For good or ill, he was infatuated with her. Perhaps he would have gotten himself killed in his efforts at wooing her, but it *certainly* would have been preferable to *this!*"

"I do not need to take this from you, Dubh." Vinz growled angrily. "I am not sorry for what I did to be rid of Simeon. nor would she be, were she alive to say one way or the other. He would still be here tormenting *all* of us were it not for my efforts."

"I thought Zula was responsible. You merely stood to benefit." Adria snarked back, but Talia stepped forward.

"As of this early evening, we are on the same side. Or at least, close enough to it."

"She is right." Vinz admitted with a rather odd-sounding sigh- it bore the slightest of quivers to it.

"Fine. Then what do we do?" Adria asked, turning back to Talia.

"We need to... if we had a better idea of the nature of Davem's power, then we might be able to get it from him- to put things to rights."

"Who is to say what is 'right'?" Vinz asked. "Suppose you knew what it was, and took it from him. Who is to say you would not use it toward the same end?"

"The very reason we are here is that we want to *prevent* what Davem is doing." Adria snorted. "We would want nothing more than to... to destroy it or to seal it away."

"Of course. Of course you would." He shook his head. "You would no doubt at least try to tilt the odds *slightly* in your favor."

"We would not need it to defeat the likes of you. We have done perfectly well without in the past." Adria countered haughtily, to which Vinz rolled his eyes.

"Have you?" Vinz retorted. "Davem told me himself; he influenced your victory. Were it not for that book-!" He immediately cut himself off, looking away from the two women.

"What 'book'?" Talia asked, eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"The... the spellbook. The tome belonging to Una. It... because of the-"

"It did not give us our victory." Talia persisted. "No... Davem himself let the truth slip. 'The merciful hand of some greater authority', he called it... but it was him. Him and this 'book' of which you speak, that turned the tide against you."

Vinz cursed himself inwardly.

"You vile hypocrite!" Adria hissed, and very likely would have plunged her dagger into Vinz's shoulder if Talia had not stayed her hand. "Trying to accuse *us* of using the book to *our* own ends?"

"... You cannot blame me for a modicum of self-preservation under the circumstances." Vinz finally grumbled.

"Be that as it may." Adria reached down and grabbed Vinz by the scruff of his neck. "You are staying with us. We will find Davem together. You will not be going back to your fellow Disciples."

Wherever they are... Vinz thought, grunting as he was pulled along with the Swordmistress.

Gertrude Normyl knew better than most the inner workings of Bristol, and thus, was able to whittle down the number of possibilities where the captured villains might be hidden.

She had quickly deduced that they must still be in or around Bristol, as Davem needed them to be close so he could drag them out when the time for the execution came. He had not likely banished them to some other dimension or shrank them to keep them in bird cages or little jars, or else he likely would have done the same to Vinz instead of trapping him in cuffs and bars.

After weighing the possibilities, she finally decided on one truth:

Davem could not have the Gypsies, the Witches, *anybody* interfering with the imprisonment of these individuals. Now, where- even if the Gypsies, Witches or anybody else could get into Bristol, where was the one place where they were under no circumstances welcome?

The witch stepped over the unconscious forms of two city guards into the doors leading behind the Nobles' Glade Facade. She hadn't had to clock them over the head with her broomstick, merely mix together a few herbs and potions to create a potent 'sleeping-smoke'. By this point she doubted anybody would notice a few more dead guards, but she also didn't want to pile any more bodies on Davem's account. For all she knew, it's what he would want- an excuse to throw her to the wolves just like Snifflewort.

"Thinks he's got it all figured out," the witch muttered as she made her way down a dark corridor, not unlike the one beneath the Rhetshire Estate, or the Bristol Dungeon. "Thinks he can save all the good folk by killing all the bad ones with a snap of his fingers. But what if the good folk don't want him doing that? What if we want to do it our way, and not his? It was our problem first, and if he wants it to be his problem he's got to play by our rules, not his! Who's HE to say what's best? He's a little boy! A sniveling little boy who's been dragged across the roughshod. And did he take the best from it and grow as a person? No! Instead he throws a hissy fit, and whines 'If I can't have it my way, then it's not going to happen at all'. What a bloody useless attitude. And now that useless meck thinks he's got the power of a god?" At this, she stopped mid stride with a furrowed brow. "Over my dead body he does! I know gods well, and people better, and I can tell you that NOBODY wants a god who's made of nothing but pity bruises and self-righteousness. What a pointless mess. If it came down to being stabbed by Vinz's sorry little stooges, or saying "Grammercy, thanks for defeating evil." to Davem of the bloody Davemport, I'd shout "Have at, Liam!" and call it a day."

As her rant came to an end, she could hear a strange sound in the close distance; it was muffled, but she could piece the syllables together, coupled as they were with a familiar melody... though this rendition was particularly slow and carried an air of melancholy:

"The skeletons of our enemies
will one day meet the skeletons of our friends,
and they'll all sing together in great rhapsody:
'We'll meet each other again'..."

At last she emerged in another tunnel, her keen eyes narrowed in the darkness. She didn't have much trouble seeing in these conditions, but two things were unsettling to her:

First was the sheer lack of guards here. Once those stationed at the actual dungeon realized the Dracos had escaped, one would think more of them would reinforce the guards already stationed here (this was, of course, provided she was right about the other 'villains' whereabouts... and she was very rarely wrong).

Second, was the lack of presence on Davem's behalf. If she *was* correct, then after that display on the ship, she would have imagined he would be here dancing on the graves of the condemned. He had dragged Vinz to one of his little lectures, so why not come down here to rub it in a little more.

Nevertheless, she stepped warily out into a hallway about ten feet in width and about one hundred feet in depth. Lining the walls on either side were heavy wooden doors, each one sealed with a heavy padlock.

"This'll be it, then." She murmured aloud, to which a loud rustling and the sound of shuffling feet answered her.

The occupants of the rooms slumped up against the doors, voices shouting out from within.

"Who's there?!" One gruff male voice called out.

"Let me out of here! Whoever that is, I *demand* you release me at once!" Another more refined voice added.

"We didn't do anything! ... Not *lately* anyway! C'mon!" Another gruff voice.

There were pounding sounds coming from every one of the portals, but Gertrude shook her head.

She had no intention of leaving a single one of them behind.

Immediately, she dug her spindle and her knitting needles from her bag and knelt at the first cell. With a series of chaotic jabs and twists, she set about trying to pick the heavy, clunky lock with the only tools at her disposal.

Nevertheless, regardless of how bizarre and improbable it was, the lock gave a heavy 'click' and the door was hurriedly pulled open.

On the other side stood a bedraggled- and rather hung-over- accordion specialist of the Dread Crew of Oddwood, Wolfbeard O'Brady.

"Get outta here." Gertrude said without any hint of emotion as she moved on to the next door. "You won't want to stand round here for long, lest you end up back where I just sprung you from."

"Hrm." Wolfbeard shook his head adamantly, staggering to one of the other doors and began trying to lift his foot to stamp down at the padlock.

As this had predictably little effect, Gertrude merely rolled her eyes with a 'Suit yourself', and set about opening the other cells.

One by one, she managed to get the cells open... all the while reminding herself that this was entirely too easy; sloppy work for even a petulant brat of a man-who-would-be-god.

One by one, each of them were released: the Dread Crew, Tyrwhitt, the Sirens- each of whom now bore cold wrought-iron collars which somehow kept their songs in check- and finally Snifflewort. Quickly, they congregated into their respective groups- aside from Tyrwhitt who stood away from the others (he had no use for sirens, witches or pirates).

"What happened?" One of the Dread Crew asked, "We were at Tuscany Tavern... n' I remember... um..."

"Don't rattle your brains too hard over it." Gertrude stated. "I would imagine they are sore enough from your indulging. The fact of the matter is this will take some explaining, and there's far better places to do so than here where we're no better than cornered rats. As is, we're still too close to these cells for my liking."

Many of those now with her nodded in agreement.

Gertrude nodded, turning and stepping toward the corridor leading back out of the dungeon.

"Then let's be off to someplace more-"

She stopped.

In the shadows of the catacombs, she caught a hint of motion- of a shadow blacker than the darkness of the tunnels before her.

All she could see of it at first were tiny flickers of light reflecting off the glasses that covered his eyes.

It was not Vinz Clortho, she knew that right off; the level of the figure's eyes were too far up to suggest one of the Praetor's height... but more than that was the *feeling* she got from the newcomer.

"Danny." She hissed warily, reaching out a hand to one side to stop those with her from advancing any further.

"By now I'm sure you're wonderin'..." came the damnable drawl of the mysterious man who emerged from the corridor at last, "... why it is that there ain' more guards here."

As he came to stand before them, he raised his gloved hands, folding his arms over his chest.

"Truth is, he only ever needed *one*."

"Get out of the way, Priest." Gertrude spat immediately. "This lot and I have more important things to deal with than you."

"Get out of your way?" Danny smirked. "I've always liked you, blackbird, but not that much."

"Who is this guy?" Another of the Dread Crew demanded, the entire group of them by now cracking their knuckles, ready to pummel this man senseless if he intended to impede their escape.

"No one you'll want to have heard of." Gertrude answered before turning her attention back to Danny. "Couldn't leave well enough alone, could you? You failed to erase the world or whatever you aimed to do back on your own pitch. Following the Gypsies back to their home was probably the worst mistake you could make."

"How so, blackbird?" His repeated use of the nickname made the witch grimace with distaste.

"A tiny little pendant full of existence was enough to weaken your magic, and look; now you're *surrounded* by things. Not just things, but things that won't be quick to buy into what you're selling- this nihilistic nonsense of yours."

"What is this? What is this all about?" Tyrwhitt demanded, stepping forward. "So is this the man responsible for this insanity?"

"Aye." Gertrude nodded. "In part, anyway. He provided the tools while another man provided the childish ignorance; you'll be meeting him momentarily."

"Afraid not, love." Danny said, taking another step out from the corridor. "I'm *afraid* that you lot'll be steppin' back in those cells'a yours now. You've a long- er- *short* day ahead 'a you come the dawn..."

"Nobody's held the Dread Crew of Oddwood in a prison for long." Riven Rahl, First Mate of the Crew declared, cracking his knuckles and flashing what he knew was commonly an intimidating, toothy grin. "Maybe you'll see why when your head's danglin' from the mast of our ship."

Already, the prison's other occupants were starting to slowly advance, some more warily than others especially when seeing Gertrude's behavior toward this man; Fear was not an appropriate word for it, but wary anger was closer to the mark. For her part, she kept one hand up to keep Snifflewort out of the conflict. Even the Sirens, though, looked upon Danny Priest with revulsion and hate; they consumed souls, but as they looked into *his*, they saw... something else.

"... Thirteen against one?" Danny asked, tilting his head. "Seems a bit *unfair* if you ask me. 'Specially if in this place I don't have the full extent of my powers... unless I've forgotten something."

"STOP HIM!" Gertrude suddenly shouted in spite of herself, but as the others heard and began to charge, Danny Priest had already raised one hand and snapped his fingers.

The shadows of the tunnel- those stretching upon the floor of the dungeon suddenly grew darker, and from them ashen hands in tattered clothes reached out. One caught the ankle of Smithy Crow, navigator of the Crew, sending him to the dirt floor of the tunnel. Instantly, he was lost beneath an exploding flood of the pale figures steaming out from the darkness.

Some of them looked like they might once have been ordinary citizens of some unfortunate town or other. Others- a large number of them, actually- appeared to be the ethereal remnants of some large cabal of bandits.

Now they looked to be something else... not undead, not zombies certainly, as they showed no signs of decay. They simply looked like human beings whose color- in clothing, in skin and even in *soul*/had been bled away.

As more of them appeared, they proved to be not just men; there were women, children, even animals here and there.

"CHARGE!" Captain O'Brady ordered the remaining crew, intending to rip the things off of Smithy, in hopes that he was still alive. They had no weapons, but had gotten by with merely their fists in more than one encounter.

The three sirens beheld these newly arrived monsters in very much the same way they did Danny... these were not humans. They were, in a way, even less than Danny Priest. While Danny's soul was twisted and tainted with emptiness, these things had no souls whatsoever... they were simply automatons of flesh and blood.

"Agh!" It was hard to tell which of the Dread Crew let out the wavering shout of dismay; it had been the first to physically strike- or be stricken by- one of the monsters.

"What is it?!"

"These things... Touchin' em... it- my legs aren't workin' right! Barely stand..."

"No nappin' on duty, you lily-livered-!" O'Brady shouted back, although even his arms were trembling as he struck the monsters as well- and particularly as the dog-creature leapt out and sank its fangs into his arm, spreading complete stinging numbness through him.

"Shades..." Gertrude murmured, wide-eyed as the Dread Crew fought- if this could even be called a fight as the Shades' enervating touch began to take hold of the escapees.

The Sirens, seeing their allies beginning to waver, rushed up to assist; In spite of their slender frames and penchant for luring and consuming rather than direct combat, they were running low on options; kill or be killed.

Even without their voices- for what good it would have done them against these foes anyway- their supernatural nature allowed them an edge men like the Dread Crew did not; their superior strength and damaged souls offered them some measure of protection against the Shades.

As the battle raged in the small tunnel, Danny smirked unflinchingly at Gertrude, who had done her best to keep her eye on him as well.

"Gertrude..." Snifflewort began, but Gertrude held up a hand again.

"I'd have words with this one... and they've been a long time in coming."

"By all means." Danny nodded, reaching up to adjust his glasses. Strangely, as Gertrude watched, the battle began to part before her, leaving her a clear path to where Priest stood. He slowly reached out to beckon to her.

"I must say," Gertrude began, "that you've managed to do something most impressive; In all the years I have known the Gypsies and Draco Disciples and citizens of Bristol- Hell, in the world over, there has not been a single soul who has managed to confuse and *irritate* me quite as much as you have in a single year."

"Proud as that might make me, blackbird," Danny chuckled, stepping forward to meet her, "I ain' doin' it for *you*. I know a non-audience when I see it."

"Hm." Gertrude snorted. "Your big bad scary angel made a poor choice in working his way to this place." She commented.

"Whether they bought into it or not never rightly made a difference to me." Danny replied. "Accepting it merely makes the process a bit smoother. But time and again, whether it be the first group'a children back in my hometown or the patchwork gits who foiled my more recent effort, this world's proven it's desperate to maintain its death-grip on its own damage."

"What's this 'damage' you're goin' on about?" Gertrude muttered. "If it's the plagues and the wars and the social inequity you're talkin' about, you're preaching to the wrong choir... the irony of which is astounding, considering. We know full well we're not long for this world. It's what the Danse Macabre is for- what the *Faire* is for! To celebrate fleeting events while we still have the opportunity!"

"I know better than to wax morality with you, blackbird." Danny shrugged. "People on the other side of the world could be dyin' in droves, but so long as it doesn't bother your 'celebration of life' here, then it's just fine."

"People die. That's what they do."

"People die, and they're forgotten. That's true. It starts in happy little places like this; A child who gets on the wrong side of some pirates. A gypsy who was on the wrong side of a cultist. A witch who was on the wrong side of an angry mob... Abigail and Merryweather; both of 'em died on your watch, didn't they?"

Gertrude quirked a brow at him.

"What, don't you remember them? Or is it more convenient to *dis*remember them?"

The battle between the Shades and the 'villains' of Bristol continued, but Gertrude had all but forgotten about them. She stepped forward, knuckles growing white around the handle of her broom.

"I remember them on my own time, in my own way."

"And what of others? Nobody remembers Vashta Nerada's husband anymore."

"She's had her closure. Gave Thomas Wisseau a much-needed kick in the privilege- something I think *you* could benefit from."

"How about Will Spellworthy? That little bedtime story about a Frenchman was a fine cover-up for what really happened. What will poor little Willow Spellworthy say when she finds out what the Gypsies did?"

"That is no business of mine, what they choose to remember and choose to forget."

Danny chuckled a bit, looking down at his gloved hand, as though examining the fingernails he couldn't see.

"So many people disappearing and dying, and no one mourns their passing. Perhaps a question or two from a random mouth, but otherwise silence and emptiness remains their epitaph. You say that my master made a poor choice in aiming to wipe this Bristol from the face of existence, but in truth there is no world more deserving. At least in other worlds, such turnover of life is worth contemplation, is worth more than a slipshod explanation, is worth more than a mighty shrug and an 'oh well, we all go sometime'. The curious customs of death, the mourning, the burials, the sadness, it's what makes these worlds human, just as does the hedonistic happiness you claim this place represents."

"We mourn in our own way." Gertrude snapped. "Open your bloody ears, I have said so already."

"You do nothing of the kind." Danny shook his head. "You forget. You move on. You bury your loved ones without so much as a *thought*, without so much as a single lingerin' memory." His eyes flashed behind his glasses in the first expression of legitimate fury. "I have watched *millions* of worlds die, Normyl... and I remember every one. The last expression on the last living soul of every last universe that my master has touched. And the idea that you cannot be bothered to dredge up a single tear for one who was so recently your blessed and beloved kin? You dance and drink and eat and laugh upon their graves just because you knew it was coming."

As he spoke, his cockney accent seemed to fade away into another accent Gertrude could not place.

"Your answer is to just curl up in a helpless little ball and die right along with them? Or to burn the world down the way you and Davempot are trying to do?"

"To accept that the world is no ally to you, nor to anybody else. When you die- and you will- your presence will not have had the least bit of significance. You will be forgotten just like the others; why, in the distant future, the lessons you have tried to teach those around you of personal responsibility and common sense will be left in the dust, ignored in favor of the pursuit of this hedonism you fight to preserve even now."

"Then that is the future's problem." Gertrude concluded, now face to face with him. "Take it up with them. But in the meantime, KINDLY. BUGGER. OFF."

The sounds of battle began to fade, and Gertrude did not bother to turn to see how it was progressing. Her gaze was fixed on Danny Priest, who only continued to fume behind his glasses.

But then, Danny began to laugh. Long and loud as his arms folded once again.

As he spoke again, his accent had returned.

"Why, blackbird, if I weren't me, you would almost have me convinced of my wrongdoings. As it happens though, / am not the one who needs to be convinced to save your messed up little world... and between the two of us..."

Gertrude raised the handle of her broom to silence Danny in short order with a rap about the head... but as she did- for only a second- the world around her went gray... gray and black, in a scrabbling mess. She could hear a shrill sound, like nails on slate, but only for that instant.

The witch staggered back, one hand still gripping the broom handle tightly, although the bristles crumpled against the ground as she staggered and leaned on it like a walking stick.

She shook her head, trying to stop whatever it was as it continued in erratic increments, but it only grew in frequency until it was almost all she could see except for a smirking Danny who drew ever closer.

At last, he had come to stand directly in front of her, even as she struggled to *remain* standing. He reached out, and tilted her head up to face him.

For a moment, the 'static' disappeared, leaving Gertrude to hear Danny's final words:

"... neither is *Davem*."

Gertrude's eyes widened, but before she could speak, her world was engulfed in emptiness as Danny's Void Aura peeled away at her mind.

At last, she fell to her knees and pitched forward, motionless, to the ground.

Dusting his hands, Danny looked up to his Shades, who now held the inert forms of the would-be escapees, already dragging them back to their respective cells.

Once the doors were closed and the padlocks back in place, Danny slowly walked back out of the prison, the sound of his whistled rendition of 'Skeletons' echoing in his wake.

Part 6: No Return

"The Ritual of the Elemental Host?" Zula Gozaryean asked quietly as she beheld the ancient scroll that Florence Aconite had drawn from an old box dug up from a dirt patch some distance outside of Bristol.

"T'was taken from Thoren Grymm's own storage by Simeon Malificus whilst he was infiltrating the Band." Florence replied.

"What *is* it?" Kat Mandrake inquired, trying to peer over Zula's shoulder to get a better look.

"More importantly, how is it supposed to help us?" Castor asked, sitting languidly against a nearby tree. "The world seems dead-set on every one of us ending up in prison... or worse."

"Its original intent was to summon the Elemental Paragons directly to a mortal host, the host body sacrificing him or herself permanently in the process." Florence explained. "I hope you do not mind, took a little peek when I first acquired it..."

"Tis well." Zula said, although her words to Florence were more an afterthought than anything else. Finally, she took her eyes from the scroll. "What is it that we are meant to do with this? If we bind the Elemental Paragons to our men, we will be bound to their souls as well as their power... It will merely heighten the power Good holds thanks to this unfortunate turn of events."

"It is not the Elemental Paragons whom I would suggest we bind to one of us." Florence answered, reaching into the box once more. "Along with that scroll, the messenger from Kent gave me one other item..."

With an air of reverence, she withdrew a tiny vial... with what looked like a single tiny crimson gem inside of it. However, a closer look revealed it to be a miniscule droplet of glimmering red liquid, which reflected swirls of darkness when the light shone upon it.

"Many, many years ago, the Dark Mother once walked the earth in her earthly guise of a many-headed dragon... her corporeal form was slain by the armies of light, but a single drop of blood was taken from the scene of the battle. This last relic of the Dark Mother's essence made its way through antiquity, from one age to the next until at last finding its way into the hands of our kinsmen... the messenger gave me these two items, in the hopes that they may be precisely what we require."

"Wait." Kat said, straightening. "Wait... you are saying that... that by use of this ritual and a drop of what is presumably the blood of *Tiamat herself*..."

"... That the Dark Mother will at last walk this earth once again." Zula nodded. "If the world wishes its darkness to be snuffed out, they will do so over Her corpse."

"Well... not *hers*." Castor said, his voice carrying its usual snark, although even now he was standing and eyeing the others. "Well, if it's down to a decision of what poor corpse we sacrifice for Tiamat to make her triumphant return, I nominate Liam." He jerked a thumb at the Disciple Enforcer.

"Why me!?" Liam demanded. "Wha'd'I do?"

"You're the biggest, and I do not consider your mind to be any great loss.. Besides, it would be an honor to sacrifice yourself for the good of Her cause."

"No." Zula shook her head. "Whomever is the one to take up her power and her consciousness- at the cost of their own- must bear a certain affinity for the deity he or she wishes to host..."

"The Praetor?" Florence asked... but her eyes widened as Zula reached out for the vial.

"Were Simeon the Praetor, I may have agreed..." Zula frowned, "Malificus was a bungler, not to be trusted with anything but the duties of a mouthpiece. But that imbecile Clortho has no right to be *Simeon's* bootlick, let alone the Dark Mother's host body. His affinity for the mystic arts is almost nonexistent; 'tis clear why he chose to eliminate all magic. So long as magic does not exist, his 'coin' is the greatest power in the world. He spits upon Tiamat's glory with his heresy."

"His plan nearly *worked*, though!" Kat interjected, but was immediately stared down by Zula, Florence and Castor. Liam still looked a bit lost.

"'Almost' is not a success. We have had dreadfully *few* successes under our previous leaders... and if there were ever a time to reach out to our Dark Mother, this dreadful time is it... and there is only one among us with the magical prowess, strength of will and *loyalty* to our Goddess that will allow for a seamless bond..."

"Better you than I." Castor shrugged. "As it is, if there is even the slightest chance of this going south, I shall do as I ought to have done a long time ago... I hear Spain is pleasant this time of year."

"For your sake, I hope you know how to stay those flapping lips of yours. I would imagine these days Her sense of humor has worn thin." Zula replied, turning to look back at the vial with a shiver- as though realizing what she was about to do.

Finally, she took a single deep breath.

"Let us begin."

Davem sat quietly in the parlor of the large house which had once been the Rhettsshire Estate, pouring over the blank yet brilliant pages of the Book of Creation- the drawn curtains doing little to hide the flickering light within. Beside the open tome lay other books, filled with his own handwriting; The story of Tovias Farraday, the journals of his exploits as a 'Lightbringer' (a notion that now evoked a derisive scoff whenever he thought of it), his descent into the Afterlife and several other journals written incidentally throughout his travels.

The estate had been seized by Lord Walsingham shortly after 'The Farraday Incident', although he had remained largely unaware of that side of things. He had merely put it on auction to the highest bidder, but up until that night there had not been a single bidder *on* it; it was considered haunted, bewitched or some state in-between.

However, with a wave of his hand, Davem had retroactively sealed his ownership of the Estate with the Lord Mayor of Bristol.

He had been unable to sleep, far too excited about the morning to come... not to mention the ruckus coming from outside; The city guards were in an uproar about something; likely something having to do with one of the many doomed to imprisonment and death...

...who ought to have been safely imprisoned by now.

Slowly, Davem stood up from behind his desk, closing the glowing book and leaving it behind as he made his way into the estate's main hallway from the parlor. Walking down the hall, he came to stand before one of the windows looking out onto the intersection of streets in front of the manor.

He watched the silhouetted figures running this way and that, his brow narrowing.

There is nothing they can do... no way they could have escaped... Davem thought, *It is literally impossible, isn't it?*

Taking a deep breath, the voice in his mind silenced itself just long enough for him to hear the echoes of another voice, this one from a very recent memory:

"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."

"No..." He murmured. "You were both wrong... Some people were created without any Good inside them, but that does not mean that we must live in sadness and fear... we can do better."

At that moment, his eyes widened as a hand reached out from behind him and clamped roughly over his mouth.

Davem let out a muffled cry as he was dragged roughly backward, and he felt another arm reach around his other side- this one holding a small dagger at the level of his stomach.

"Where is the book?" The voice of Adria Dubh hissed violently into his ear.

Davem twitched and struggled, even as the edge of the dagger's blade pushed harder against his abdomen.

"I will not repeat myself."

"Just forget it; kill him now while you have the chance." Vinz Clortho growled quickly. from somewhere behind them. Immediately upon hearing his voice, Davem's struggles intensified.

As the former Lorekeeper kicked and squirmed, Adria forced him to turn in the opposite direction.

Vinz stood behind them, giving Davem his customary smirk, while Talia stood behind her- likely to be certain he wouldn't bolt away from them in search of the book.

"Mmmph!" Davem grunted, trying to bite Adria's hand to no avail.

"Davem." Talia spoke from behind Vinz. "Davem, you must listen to me; I cannot know what you have been told with regard to the situation you are in now, but you must know what you are doing- what you have done *already* is... is beyond you, me, or anybody else. Not even the Gods intended for mortals to possess the sort of power you wield."

Adria finally let his mouth go, but kept her hand over his throat to throttle him if he so much as attempted to shout for help.

"We would still seek to help you, however that might be done. However, before that, we must see to it that that terrible book is banished somehow, or locked away... I beg of you, do not let this go on any longer than it has."

"You must know how futile it is for you to be here..." Davem answered, then looked to Vinz, "and how *dangerous* it is for you to be here with *him*."

"Why are you doing this?!" Adria demanded. "You *know* this is wrong- that Danny Priest is simply *using* you! If you have an *ounce* of sanity left, I should think you could piece *that* together!"

"I am certain that he is *attempting* to do so." Davem replied with a roll of his eyes. "I have been warned of his treachery by sources far more reliable than yourselves; Pardon me if, given your present company and tactics, your credibility is less than impeccable to me." He reached out to acknowledge Vinz's presence. "But the fact of the matter is, regardless of whatever plan he has, he has made a poor choice in selecting me to wield the book. Whatever 'Void Angel' he hopes to bring to a sad and desperate world will be disappointed in what he will find."

"Davem, *please*." Talia said, her voice soft as it had been when they had last parted company, "I beg of you to simply trust us. I... understand that you feel cheated, unhappy, that the world has wronged you. Perhaps that is true. But if you but give us another chance-"

"I *gave* you another chance." Davem replied coldly. "Really, I truly don't understand any of you. I am doing the world a service by annihilating its tormentors for good and all- a task which for more than two thousand years you and yours have failed to accomplish- either by weakness or by choice."

"And we would gladly continue to fail if success means tearing apart the balance of existence!" Adria stated passionately, to which Talia nodded.

"Good and Evil are conflicting ideas, perhaps, but each is as important as the other- they *define* each other! The only way for Good to recognize itself is the presence of its opposite. As we learned so recently, there can never be a lack of one, lest there be nothing at all."

"There is one critical difference between your silly Mors Magicae dilemma and what I intend to do..." Davem answered, leaning back in his chair. "Yours was just another chapter in a battle that would go on forever if allowed to... and this?" He gave a shrug, gesturing at nothing in particular, "This is me ending it."

"You stupid fool." Vinz hissed, trying to pull out of Adria's grasp. "I have faced what Priest hoped to bring upon this world, and it is not-"

"It is not of any *consequence* if you have endured it once already." The former Lorekeeper chuckled. "If you have met with it and survived, surely you must admit that *I* am overqualified. Once you and your kind are out of the way, I will banish or destroy this Danny Priest and his God just as easily. You people *still* fail to comprehend what it is I can be with that book."

"What you have become is precisely what we *feared*!" Talia finally cried out. "Davem... If ever anything I have taught you, anything you have learned from us, and anything you yourself have done for us meant anything to you... you cannot let this continue. I understand the sorrow, the anger, the disgrace you must have suffered at the hands of the Draco Disciples, and I cannot claim to know the whole truth of what happened during your journey into the Underworld... I will give you all that I have- my ear, my forgiveness for whatever has happened, my blessings what blessings I have to give... if you would but relinquish the book."

The Bardmistress looked to Adria and Vinz, who fought to restrain their own looks of indignation.

"... None of mine have died yet, that I know of." Vinz said softly, "I am willing to forget this- to give you immunity to an extent- in exchange for your end to this... unpleasantness." The Praetor offered, mostly through clenched teeth as he looked to a nodding Talia.

"I offer you nothing." Adria added. "... this is the most I *can* offer. The idea that I will not strangle you the moment you surrender that book is the only thing of any value I can give; I have no more room in my heart to accept you any longer... so the best that I can put forth is my willingness to exist in the same world as you."

Davem watched as each of the three spoke, his eyes narrowing, then finally softening in the silence following Adria's words.

"... You know... I never wanted to be 'tolerated', to be 'spared'... more than anything, I never wanted to be a villain, someone you would ever need to *beg*." He murmured at last. "You must believe that all I have ever wanted- from the very beginning- was to be a hero... I have admired true heroes since I was a child, and I believed the book to be my one chance at achieving my dream of becoming one myself."

As Davem spoke, he looked over the shoulders of Talia and Vinz, back to the parlor doorway.

"As Vinz knows... as you *all* know... it was not to be. AdventureTemps was a waste of effort. My attempt at serving the Gypsies as a Lightbringer was a joke. My love for Estella was mocked, and... and even the effort of going through Hell to save her- and to destroy Simeon- was rewarded by my soul being damned. There is not a thing I have done which I have not paid for, with nothing to show for it. Meanwhile, the Draco Disciples murder indiscriminately and grow stronger as a result. You Gypsies simply do what you feel is right, and look at the family you have acquired. Even Gertrude is a miserable, jaded old crone, and yet she has no hatred for the world... you cannot possibly understand what these past few years have been like."

As he spoke, Davem's eyes fell away from the parlor, away from Vinz and Talia and at last came to rest on the wood floor of the manor.

"... But I suppose none of that matters now, does it? Regardless of my feelings, my actions, you are not about to release me to get the book myself."

He nodded weakly upward, again in the direction of the parlor.

"Well?"

Glancing over their shoulders, Talia and Vinz looked back to the parlor. Turning, their feet followed Davem's gaze- Talia taking point to once again ensure that the still-cuffed Vinz did not attempt to break away.

As they entered, Davem let out a light sigh- Adria squeezing him by reflex.

"... It is there, on the center of the desk."

Talia looked back to him, Adria keeping a firm hold but watching Vinz warily. She was beginning to consider stabbing the former Lorekeeper in the leg to keep him from going anywhere so she could focus on the Praetor... but instead, she only continued her grip on him.

"You had best not be trying to trick us..." The Swordmistress grumbled, the pressure of the knife-blade lessening against his stomach. Davem could feel the hand trembling- not that it was a cue for him to make for an escape.

"I am not. The book is right there, for all the good it will do you now." Davem spoke again... but Adria failed to catch the little smile on his face, "After all..."

"... I've already written this part."

"Talia, WAIT-!!!" Adria's eyes widened as she looked up to the Bardmistress, who had just reached out to take hold of the black-bound tome.

There was a sudden flash of brilliant light, followed by a moment of silence and two heavy 'thuds'.

As the light receded, Adria covering her eyes with one hand and wildly swinging the dagger with the other, she let the former fall away to find Davem standing beside the desk, one hand on the book. Frantically she looked to either side to see both Talia and Vinz groggily struggling to recover from the contained explosion.

"You treacherous little-" Adria hissed, springing forward on one foot to lunge at the grinning man before her... but before the dagger could even begin to swing, her arm was caught and dragged back by a large hand, her back striking a broad, leather-clad torso.

"Not so fast, Adria."

"W-what... McLovin?!" Adria gasped, looking behind her to see the large barbarian man standing behind her, now holding her in a fierce grip.

Behind McLovin, Mary and Morgan- the other two Barbarians still local to Bristol- stepped inside, either one seizing Talia and Vinz and dragging them up from the ground.

"What are you doing?!"

"Sorry, Adria." Morgan gave her a rueful little look. "We are under a new contract as of earlier this evening."

"The Barbarians of Bristol *are* merchants at the end of the day." Davem shrugged. "Perhaps back in the old times, Grease valued loyalty over finances- even his own life and that of his tribe... but as our friend Vinz so eloquently expressed, not everybody feels that way."

"You bastard..." Adria spat, but Davem only chuckled.

"I warned you, Adria, Talia... I warned the both of you, and Gertrude. I warned you to stay out of my way... but only now do I see what is truly happening here, and what must be done." He said, shooting Vinz a glare as the Praetor recovered enough to glare back.

"It is all so clear to me now. Since I picked up the book, I looked at you all like... like *insects*, I suppose; skittering around, so concerned with their own comings and goings that they had no comprehension of the greater danger hanging over them like the blade of a guillotine. I knew that with a single wave of my hand I could banish the blade, the guillotine, and even... the spiders and scorpions that would kill and devour you piecemeal." He glared at Vinz once again before turning to scowl at Adria and Talia.

"But no. You are no mindless insects... you are more like *actors*, performing on the grand stage that is Bristol. And on that stage, you are the heroes and villains of the greater story, while people like myself are mere observers. That is why I have never been anything but what you allow me to be... what you manipulate me into through fear," he looked to Adria, "through guilt," to Talia, "and through lies." He concluded, walking to Vinz and coming to stand before him. "None of you are any better than the other. The Draco Disciples kill and torture and destroy, but they can only do so because those who should be protecting humanity refuse to do what must be done." He turned upon Adria. "If, ages ago, some man- or woman- had done what I intend to do, people- good men and women, like your *father*- might still be alive. But no. Every evil life you spare is another *thousand* good lives lost, and you claim to be acting in their best interests!?"

"How *dare* you!" Adria shrieked, struggling against McLovin, but to no avail.

"You purposely spare the monsters of this world so you have something to save people from; so you can arrogantly ride in on your bloody wagon and save the day again and again and again... but it ends with the coming of the sun. You will watch as your golden geese are burned, hanged, whatever must be done to scour every last one of them from the face of this world. Then I suppose you will have nothing to do but to mourn in the midst of a world of everlasting peace."

With that, Davem stepped back and made a wide, sweeping gesture with one hand.

"Take them away... and aid the city guards in ensuring there will be no more bloody *escapes*."

"You bastard... cowardly, treacherous son of a *bitch!*" Adria howled as she was literally dragged by McLovin out of the parlor, and further, out of the manor house.

Now alone, Davem turned back to the desk and brushed his fingers over the dark cover of the Book.

"The longer this night drags on, the more 'excitement' there is likely to be..." He murmured, slowly opening the cover to reveal its blinding pages.

"... Perhaps the dawn comes *early* this day."

Part 7: Daybreak

"*Why?*" Vinz Clortho demanded as he was dragged down the dark Bristol streets, en route back to the prison he had only recently been liberated from. "Why did you not kill him as I told you?! We were so bloody *close!*"

"Because that is not our way." Talia sighed. "Although we were prepared to, should the situation have called for it."

"Besides, judging by what happened, it seems as though it would not have made a difference. Damn that book..." Adria grunted, never quite ceasing her struggles, but held firmly in place by the barbarian. "I *would* have run him through, given the chance... Talia?" In the midst of her outrage, she noticed the Bardmistress bearing a pensive expression.

"How long has he been planning this?" Talia asked, perhaps to herself. "How long in advance could Danny possibly have known about this? It does not seem plausible that he would know that Davem would reach this level of madness, that his fate should become so entwined with our own... could he have had knowledge from as far back as the Von Kaiser family the events that would play out?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" Vinz asked. "What matters is the here and now. Davem is going to destroy the Balance, and all of us will pay the price. What does it matter where its genesis lay?"

"How far in advance he has planned may give us a window into what he is planning next... I believe there is some other, darker plot at play here..."

"Darker than *this?*" Adria asked incredulously as the three of them were led back into the dungeon.

"Even at its most grim and bizarre, nothing that Danny Priest has ever done could ever be taken at face value. The story Robert told at the fire? The new members' expedition into Danny's home world? It was all simply a facade for an attempted recruitment. The battle against Danny, the mish-mash of alternate universes, it was just a demonstration- a bluff. We know too much about this already for it to truly be what Danny has in mind."

"Hm." Adria grumbled, nodding.

"But if this is true, if what we are seeing- the destruction of Evil to shatter the Balance- is not Danny's intent, then what, pray tell, could it be?" Vinz asked, still wincing a bit from internal bruising as a result of the earlier explosion.

"I suppose we shall find out for ourselves when the morning... comes?" Talia began... but as she spoke, she caught a faint hint of light on the floor of the dungeon, its source somewhere behind her.

Turning, her eyes widened as she caught a sliver of light from the door leading out of the prison...

... a glint of *sunlight*.

"Whatever you are doing," Castor Sloan remarked as he looked out onto the Eastern horizon, "I suggest you make haste. We are running short of time."

"But... how?" Kat asked, in awe, bringing a hand to her lips. "This is... the sun has not been down for... for even two hours yet!"

"Be silent!" Florence hissed, looking to the scroll she now held, standing behind Zula who was on her knees in the grass. The sorceress faced away from her, head bowed, lips moving in a slow, steady chant... which was interrupted only for a second by a wince of pain as Florence slashed the blade of a ceremonial dagger across the nape of her neck.

The chanting continued as Florence looked to the scroll, answering Zula's chant with another of her own, acting in harmony to her melody. As they did, she nodded, and a nearby Liam Bloodroot uncorked the vial containing Tiamat's blood-drop. Quickly handing it to Florence, the Disciple woman accepted it, overturning its contents to roll and land on Zula's skin, just above where the incision had been placed.

Zula's body tensed at the tickle of the droplet landing and sliding down her body... but the mere tremble became a fit of convulsions as the blood seeped into the broken skin, crawling inside her as though it were *alive*...

Florence continued the chant, and as it grew in volume it could be recognized as ancient Draconic, a language not many Dracos could speak themselves in spite of their lauded affinity for the beasts.

Her voice, however, was suddenly drowned out by Zula's. The sorceress' chanting grew to a shrill shriek, her seizing body jerking this way and that, all Disciples except for Florence putting as much distance as they could between themselves and her.

At last, Florence's chanting reached a ferocious climax, shouting to be heard over Zula's screams...

... and then it ended, Zula falling heavily to the ground.

"... Zula?" Florence called out softly, the scroll falling from her hand.

"Is she still alive?" Castor asked, not precisely keen on going near them after what he had just witnessed.

"What now?" Liam nodded, equally curious, but equally deferring to self-preservation by keeping his distance.

"Wait..." Kat breathed, having caught the slightest twitch from the Sorceress' body in the silent aftermath.

Gradually, all of the Disciples slowly made their way toward Florence and Zula, although they more or less forced Liam to take point (and even he was quick to push back against them despite his forward momentum).

As they finally came to stand before her, there was a sudden jerk of her body, and Florence suddenly cried out. Looking to her, the Disciples quickly discovered the reason for her dismay:

Florence had been standing in the shadow of Zula Gozaryean... which was now moving of its own accord.

Transfixed, Liam, Castor, Kat and Florence watched as the dark mass began to stretch and grow outward before tearing free into a throng of writhing black figures, each tipped with a horned head.

Their collective breath stolen, only Kat Mandrake managed to look away from the horrific visage before them... but came face-to-face with Zula... or at least, what was once Zula.

Her eyes were washed over with crimson- the same color as the droplet of blood her body had been tainted by.

Blinking once and tilting her head at an unsettling angle, 'Zula's' lips parted, and she spoke:

"Take me to him. Immediately."

The front gates of Bristol were beginning to grow loud with activity and the voices of anxious citizens now roused from their beds by the sun... which seemed to be up entirely too soon.

The city guards (amazing how many of them there always seemed to be in spite of repeated unfortunate incidents) coupled with a Bristol Barbarian here and there, funneled and guided the people of the town, leading them to the place that was normally the site of many merry greetings and merry partings; However, now, it seemed to be the site of something far more grim.

Stretching out along the front of the 'Renaissance Collection' shoppe was a long wooden platform- the presence of which took the locals by surprise every bit as much as the sudden dawn. Its swift and silent construction over the (oddly brief) night was unsettling to say the least. However, seeing its occupants immediately deferred their inquisitive minds to other matters.

The Sirens were chained to the platform separately, each one still bearing the collars they had worn in prison. The Dread Crew and Tyrwhitt were both simply chained with no additional measures taken... but perhaps the most striking was the sight of Gertrude Normyl and her uncle Snifflewort chained at the far end.

The witch was completely inert, eyes wide open with some expression of horror and disgust so intense that none of those assembled could even begin to imagine feeling in their lives. Perhaps more than anything else, the fact that Snifflewort actually seemed to be *sobbing* over her body sobering to say the absolute least.

"Gertrude!" Talia gasped as she recognized the crumpled form of the witch.

"What happened to her?" Adria asked, looking to Vinz- he having been the last to see her up and around.

"Damn it..." Vinz hissed, looking up to her as well. "Danny Priest... He must have intercepted her in her attempted rescue."

The Bardmistress merely shook her head, closing her eyes.

As the people gathered near the city gates, the doors opened to reveal the Band of the Twisted Claw, each and every one of them as groggy as one might expect of those who had received little sleep and suffered from a terrible hangover. Beside them were several city guards who were ferrying them very much like the townsfolk. The Band quickly noticed the captive Talia, Adria and Vinz, but not a one of them seemed capable of anything more than weak, rudimentary attempts to push past the authorities.

On the northwest side of the square opposite the long platform, Talia, Adria and Vinz Clortho watched the proceedings, by now having fully recovered.

"This is idiotic..." Vinz grumbled. "Even I never indulged in this sort of public display; that was always Simeon's style."

"Where is Davem?" Adria asked, glaring around them. "I should think that he would relish being on center stage for this, the conniving bastard."

"This must be what it is like to be present for one of your diatribes against *me*." The Praetor sighed... but his ears perked at a strange sound somewhere in the distance.

Perhaps nobody else would have noticed it over the muttering din of the people, but for some reason this particular sound reached him easily, as though for it alone his senses were heightened to a superhuman level.

It was the sound of a scream- no- a scream mixed with a bizarre screeching noise which seemed so very familiar...

"Vinz. Vinz!"

He was thrown from his fascination with the strange sound by Talia, who was trying to nudge him back to reality. She nodded her head toward the platform, leading Vinz's gaze to face it.

The Lord Mayor- looking oddly well groomed for this time in the morning and speaking with a clearer and more 'awake' tone than anybody might have expected- now stood on the raised wooden scaffolding.

"Good men and women of our fair city of Bristol..." He began, hesitating for a moment, before looking back to a large unfurled scroll he carried. "Good people of Bristol... It is my distinct pleasure to welcome you to this... this landmark occasion. This day, this time, and this place... will all be immortalized as the instant when the world changed- not for the better- but for the best. This is the day when the world declared in a united voice that darkness, murder, greed and fear will no longer rule our nature... and those who stand before you shall act as examples of... of the glorious revolution to come."

"Davem must have written this." Adria scoffed.

"His style is easy to pick out..." Talia nodded unhappily.

Vinz only listened... but bowed his head away from the stage to face the ground.

That book... that miserable book... he trapped it somehow. How can we hope to get it away from that...

The Lord Mayor proceeded to list of the various crimes committed by each of those chained to the platform, and going into great detail regarding how each one would meet his or her end; Death by hanging for the Dread Crew,

decapitation for Tyrwhitt, 'death by sun' for the Sirens, and burning for Snifflewort (as well as Gertrude though she seemed beyond needing to be burned to put an end to her mischief).

The other Gypsies who had by now gathered inside the gates watched with dismay as the Lord Mayor bowed to the people, moving to step his way off of the platform so the series of executions could begin...

... but at that moment...

"Stop!"

The voice that cut through the low mumbles of the townspeople was familiar to some as belonging to Zula Gozaryean.

Yet, as the mob of townsfolk- as well as the crowd of Gypsies- turned to the front gates to address her bold voice... they could not have been prepared for what they witnessed.

Zula stood there, indeed, but although she was flanked by her underlings as would be expected... it was what stood at her back which was the foremost concern to those in attendance: The writhing mass of living shadow, taking the guise of many dragonlike heads. In spite of the daylight, every last detail of each shadow could be seen clearly: every horn, every fang, even the unearthly glow of each ferocious eye. Careful observers could even see what looked like saliva or venom falling from each vicious mouth and leaving dead grass and bleached soil wherever they struck the ground.

The guards, Gypsies, Barbarians and townsfolk scurried back, away from the entourage... the Gypsies very quickly coming to understand what was happening.

"Vinz... Vinz, what is this!?" Adria demanded, her eyes widening.

"Hm..." The Praetor's eyes narrowed at Zula's arrival, staring into those crimson eyes of hers... although she seemed to pay him- supposedly her greatest servant- no heed.

"Well now..." Zula spoke again, looking from one side of the square to the other, smiling as its occupants already began to scatter. "I am not surprised at your reaction to the return of your rightful Goddess... of course, not that it will make any difference whether you run or stay; all of you will pay the price for your indiscretions in due course." With this, she shot a hateful glare at the Band of the Twisted Claw.

"... Oh... oh..." Talia's eyes widened, looking at the figure before them. "... This... cannot be..."

"It is." Vinz replied, although his voice was still unsteady, uncertain. "It is the Dark Goddess Tiamat."

"My quarrel, however, is not with you... not yet, at any rate." 'Zula' continued, striding her way up the scaffolding, smirking at the 'lesser villains' in the midst of their plight. "'Tis not with you, the Gypsies, not with the city of Bristol which has so often defied my will whether it knows such or not. 'Tis not even with the Lord of Light Himself." She said, looking to the offensive sun, but at last brought her gaze down upon the horrified onlookers.

"My quarrel, at present, lies with no great warrior or mischievous little interloper... but with one man; One single man who has taken it upon himself to assert himself in the affairs of the Gods."

Her crimson eyes raked over the crowd, with an intensity that not only raised hairs... it actually drove several of those present to faint dead away.

"I am looking for the one called... *Davemport*." She stated. "If he is not brought to me by-"

"Not to worry; I'm right here."

Only a handful of people in the crowd turned as a new figure called out from the gatehouse above the Bristol doors.

There stood Davem, in all of his debatable 'glory'... still holding the book close to his breast.

"Davem!" Adria shrieked from her place, no longer held back by the terrified McLovin. "You fool... do you *see*? Do you see what you and that... that *thing* have wrought?!"

"Indeed." the Dark Mother nodded, each of her shadow's heads jerking around to face the Twisted Claw's former Lorekeeper. "How interesting."

"Ladies and Gentlemen of Bristol!" Davem called out, ignoring the mortal-anchored goddess entirely. "As our esteemed Lord Mayor has stated, this will be a day remembered forever... and now, the guest of honor has arrived."

With a grand gesture at Zula, he let out a soft chuckle.

"I haven't the slightest idea how the lot of you managed to escape from prison, or how you managed this," he nodded to each of the Disciples in turn- particularly Florence- "I had not planned for this, but in the grand scheme of things, I could think of no better way to end this era of conflict and uncertainty."

As he proceeded, he looked to the ordinary folk of Bristol- those neither of Gypsy or Draco affiliation:

"... and indeed, such a world is what these two peoples have inflicted upon you. Beneath your very noses, the forces of the Light and Dark-Descended have callously manipulated the destinies of the world's innocent for hundreds- nay, *thousands* of years."

"You unbelievable hypocrite." Tiamat purred. "You are one to speak of manipulating destiny- of 'darkness, murder, greed and fear'... Betrayal. Kinslayer. You are in no way different from myself or my Disciples."

"I *had* been expecting *that*." Davem smiled, and for perhaps the first time, the Gypsies- *and* the Dracos- could see the wild expression in his eyes. "Trying to convince me- and these good people- that *I* am the monster here... perhaps not from you, but certainly from *someone* trying to paint this situation with deceit and ambiguity... and that is why I have taken the liberty of preparing, shall we say, a... base for comparison."

As Tiamat and the mortals present watched, Davem reached out with a flourish, sweeping the book open with his opposite hand. The sunlight was suddenly obscured by the blinding light of the book's pages, coupled with the crackling of silver lightning from Davem's fingers as he held them over the shining leaves.

"What is he doing?!" Morgan called out as her grip on Vinz squeezed tighter with apprehension.

Soon, all was lost in the light of Creation...

When the brilliance faded into the soft glow of dawn's light... no... not 'faded'; It never truly faded, for there remained a shimmering light far above which shone down throughout the gate square.

Tiamat herself had raised a hand to guard her human eyes from the flash, but as she recovered and looked up to the source of the light, her jaw dropped, the draconic heads cringing away from its source.

One by one, the Gypsies, the Draco Disciples, the criminals, villains and townsfolk turned upward to the sky directly overhead.

What now descended from the sky was a large, pale-skinned figure draped in white- yet the whole of its form shimmered with prismatic light. Its face was flawless, resonating with an aura mixed of unparalleled peace and righteous strength.

Hovering downward from the dawn's golden-blue sky, it came to stand on air just before the still-cringing Tiamat, its shining eyes fixed directly upon her.

Davem of the Davemport beheld the awed crowd before him with a wide smile before concluding his words:

"It gives me great pleasure to introduce... the Lord of Light."

Part 8: Inevitable

The silence in the wake of Davem's unbelievable declaration was so thick, so impregnable that a full-blown joust to the death might have been happening nearby and it would never have reached the ears of those who stood at the gate square.

The collective breath of the people- those who remained after the panicked retreat during Tiamat's arrival- simply stared in a mix of awe and terror at the confrontation before them:

The Lord of Light- big as life and twice as brilliant- had at last descended down from the air and touched down on the ground. Wherever his bare skin touched the ground, the dirt road began to flourish; grass and flowers began to sprout from what had once been a barren, well-trod path.

From the moment he had arrived, not a soul had seen him turn his attention away from the Dark Mother, his eyes fixed upon his enemy with an expression not of hatred, but of an almost unnerving serenity.

For her part, Zula Gozaryean- or rather, her many-headed silhouette- stared back with a snarling countenance.

"I must admit, this was not what I had expected when I was ripped from my prison and placed into this weak mortal body." Tiamat spoke from with Zula's husk. "You have been dreadfully out of touch ever since your pawns cast me into the abyss; No speaking, not so much as a glimpse of you for over two thousand years... All this time, we have allowed our proxies to battle in our stead, and even *then* you never saw fit to intervene yourself; sending your aspects the Paragons to commit your crimes while keeping your miserable hands clean." As she spoke, she glanced behind her at the condemned prisoners. "But now we see the full extent, the true nature of your 'goodness' and 'benevolence'... we see how willing you are to allow your 'children' to slaughter those who are different, those who would dare to believe and act in a way that does not fit into your perfect world- a world your predecessor Marduk and I made what it is *together*. You would turn this world against its rightful mother, then allow my legacy to be destroyed?"

There was no reaction from the Lord of Light; his peaceful expression never changed, nor did he open his mouth to speak a single word.

"Nothing to say?" Tiamat asked, a slight twitch of Zula's left brow betraying the slightest hint of aggravation. "Will you say nothing in all of your self-righteous posturing to accuse me of lies? Of misguiding your precious flock?"

Still, no words came from the Lord; Nothing but that passive, resting gaze.

"*SAY SOMETHING!!!*" Tiamat roared, her voice booming and causing the entire city to shake... and yet, there was still no reaction.

Tiamat growled, the silhouetted beast behind Zula brandishing its claws and opening its slavering jaws wide. However, as she seemed about to lunge at the heavenly figure before her, her gaze flicked across to where Davem stood.

The man stood there, an ear-to-ear grin painted across his face as he watched this...

He was *mocking* her- mocking the *both* of them.

"I see..." She hissed. "Very well, then. Whether you are yourself, or the puppet of this arrogant *mortal*, I will cut you down- let him watch as his hope is destroyed. I will smother his pitiful dream of a world without my kind, and in its place shall be a world of nightmares beyond your imagining!"

With that, Zula's form leapt- although it looked more as though it were lifted upon invisible strings. Thrusting out a crimson-nailed hand, the mass of heads swarmed toward the Lord of Light, who simply watched with what that unchanging expression.

By now, all but the imprisoned villains, the Draco Disciples and the Band of the Twisted Claw had almost completely cleared out of the gate square. The only ones left were the guards and the barbarians, and even they didn't seem like they wanted much to be there.

"We have to stop this..." Talia whispered, although the lion's share of her was paralyzed, her mind rendering the rest of her immobile. Perhaps it was her Bard's mentality, but the sheer scope of what was playing out before them bore an unimaginable weight.

"What do you intend to do? Ask them politely?" Vinz scoffed, although he, too, was transfixed by the sight. "You have my blessings."

"I do not know how we are going to stop him... but perhaps he is not the one we need to stop." Adria turned to Talia and Vinz. "Do what you can... anything. I need to get back to the Vardo. *Now.*"

With that, she charged away from the other two- McLovin having released her earlier and made a break for the front gate. She didn't bother to try to rile the other Gypsies out of their entranced state, nor the city guards and Barbarians. She imagined Davem's control was still focused enough that they would be of no use no matter her efforts at breaking the Book's control. She soon disappeared out the gates.

"What is she planning?" Vinz asked, looking to Talia.

"I think I have some idea. In the meantime, it seems all we can do is wait."

The entire city rumbled with a furious crash as Tiamat's attack slammed into the ground, gnashing fangs and flailing claws obliterating the expanse of dirt, all the way across the street. The furious rampage had her tearing through the gazebo close to the stall where Vinz and Talia stood.

Only when the dust cleared did Tiamat realize that her prey was no longer there; She had had to close her eyes as she came within striking distance, and so frenzied was her attack that she couldn't even have known if she'd hit anything.

As she recovered, snarling and looking all about for any sign of the Lord of Light, she caught a glimpse of light overhead. She started to jerk her head upward before a pillar of white-blue light cascaded down around her, catching one of the screeching dragon head shadows. The whole of Tiamat's form staggered away from the shower of lights, revealing that the stricken head was now half-dissolved. Bits of shimmering onyx bone were visible within the shadow, and the saliva that hissed on the ground was coupled with crimson blood droplets.

"You... You!?" Tiamat snarled, turning up to face the angelic creature above her with a look of shock and- for only a second- *fear*. Perhaps this was intended to be a duel to the death between them, but she had not expected him to actually lash out with a lethal attack... but that was only half of it.

How is he so strong? Florence thought. *How is it possible? It is not possible... Good could not have permeated this world so completely, so quickly, that-*

Her thoughts were cut off as Tiamat let out a shriek, unleashing a barrage of dark flame gouts from her many heads. Florence could see the wounded head was regenerating back into its shadowy wholeness, but not as quickly as it occurred to her it ought to be.

"Liam! Castor! Kat!" She craned her head back to look to the other Disciples. "Go! Deal with *him!*" She shouted, pointing up to where Davem stood in the gatehouse balcony.

"Finally, something I know something about." Castor rolled his eyes and beckoned to the others. Truth be told he'd been ready to abscond far earlier than this, but the one thing keeping him around was horrified fascination.

It wasn't a far distance between where they'd been standing and the door to the gatehouse. After the short sprint, they grasped the handle only to find it locked... and yet, there was no keyhole. Reaching out, Liam gave it a vicious kick, but he may as well have been kicking a solid brick wall.

"It's a wooden door!" Castor hissed. "I've *seen* you kick *those* down before!"

"It's not working." Liam replied simply, tending to his now aching ankle.

"Can it be picked?" Kat asked, glancing over her shoulder at where Vinz was watching the fight.

"There's no *lock!*" Castor answered frantically. "Pistol. Get a pistol! We'll just *shoot* the bloody bastard!"

The Disciples fanned out, much like Adria free from harassment by the guards and barbarians; more than one of them had been considering escape, but with Tiamat in a corporeal form, they couldn't take the chance... even if she didn't seem to be doing so well.

As they struggled, as Florence and Talia watched and as Vinz's mind raced, Davem's voice emerged from the chaos...

"Ladies and Gentlemen, good people not only of Bristol but of the entire world: From the beginning of time you have been wandering, lost in the darkness and confusion of this vast and uncaring existence, misguided and deceived, manipulated into a life of unwitting slavery by holdovers from an ancient war... but pay attention."

Talia's eyes widened. The sounds of the deities' battle was deafening, and yet the sound of Davem's words were as loud and clear as if he were speaking to her in an empty house.

"This day... the world you know shall end."

Telepathy... she thought, looking to Vinz, who only nodded as if to confirm what she'd suspected; that everyone had heard Davem's voice speaking into their minds. Everyone. Everywhere, the world over, was now patched through to his edicts, and to the terrifying battle playing out before him.

"As you can no doubt see," Davem continued, "The Dark Goddess Tiamat and the Lord of Light are sharing a bit of a dance just now; a climactic final battle thousands of years overdue. These two powerful entities have had a bitter rivalry dating back to a war only a handful of you would ever have even *heard* of as it was swept beneath the rug of human history.

Tiamat and Marduk were two of the great entities who helped construct this world. However, Marduk retired, surrendering his neverending life to the aether and leaving a new and powerful young deity to act as curator to his sphere; the nameless one referred to by his worshippers as the Lord of Light.

The Lord of Light cared for all things equally, and yet Tiamat developed a strange fascination for him. This fascination grew to fondness.

It became clear that the Lord was never meant to belong to one person, no matter how powerful she was. He cared for all equally, and therefore could never show biases the way we humans can. The Dark Mother considered herself scorned, and as a result, became the scourge of all things the Lord of Light was meant to protect.

The culmination of this was the great Dragon War, in which the dark and ancient beasts and monsters of the world took up arms against humans, fay and their allies, advised by the Lord's aspects, the Elemental Paragons.

Many died in that great conflict, and in the end Tiamat was struck down. Her earthly avatar was destroyed, and her spirit was imprisoned in the dark Abyss... one would think that ought to have been enough."

The Lord of Light kept his distance from Tiamat, even as the shrieking Dragon Goddess bore down on him. Her many heads lashed out at him, mouths erupting with dark flame, fangs snapping at the air in hopes that some part of him should happen to *fill* that air.

The battle had torn its way north, an explosion of wood debris signaling the end of the Town Square Public House as Tiamat's rampaging form smashed through it... but as she emerged on the other side, the Lord was there to greet her. A shimmering staff of light had manifested in his hands, which collided with one of the many diving heads with the sound of cracking bone.

The heads reeled back, Zula's eyes widening at the force and viciousness of the strike- a viciousness uncharacteristic of the man she had once admired. She knew he was not himself, and yet... this was wrong.

This was not the Lord of Light she was fighting.

"... but no. Long after that, the petty squabbles of the Elemental Paragons, and the worshippers of Tiamat- now fallen and screaming for revenge- lingered. The conflict continued, stretching on over two thousand years. It never again reached the point of war, but a conflict more... suited to the civilized world; a conflict based around subterfuge, greed, occult magic and manipulating the unwitting innocent into joining their mad race to the grave.

These efforts were painted over with promises of glory, promises of wealth, promises of power, and having your name immortalized in legend... fairy tales, stories of heroes and villains, of valorous knights and princesses in distress,

of striking down evil and carving a legacy out of an uncertain world... these things are nothing but lies, lies used by the Light-Descended as a way of ensuring their life struggling for a worthless, antiquated cause was not wasted. They were and are no better than the Dark-Descended, seducing the wealthy and well-meaning with their heart's darkest desires. It all comes to the same result: Men, women, children, all being recruited into the continued conflict which they had nothing to do with, and which- time and again- would result in pain, misery and death.

Good people of the world... this is where it ends. This is where the conflict is definitively put to rest.

The Dark Goddess, Tiamat, will be slain here and now. In the wake of it, every one of her followers will be executed, along with any other representative of darkness the world over. The world will be cleansed, and thus shall begin a new age of true peace."

Tiamat let out a scream as she swatted outward, actually managing to bat the Lord of Light off of her body as the latter had come to stand over her, brutally striking her over and over again with the radiant quarterstaff. The angelic form skidded back along Farnham way before lunging forward and catching Zula in the abdomen with his weapon. The Dark Goddess was sent hurtling away from him once again, landing back in the remains of the sun garden.

As she staggered up, one could see scarlet trails from her eyes, rolling down her cheeks as she unleashed another blast of dark flame, which the Lord of Light turned aside with a twirl of his staff.

"Tiamat shall be the first- both Tiamat and her minions. But if any other pretenders should stand to replace her- Ares, Loki, Nyarlathotep, Set, Moloch, Satan, you shall receive *far worse*... and if you wish to challenge me, I beg you to remember this day: The day a Deity was crushed.

And as for you heroes... knights, wizards, vagabonds, gypsies... you are obsolete. Fade into the everyday world, back to the life of goodness and innocence. The days of questing and glory are over.

Seek mischief, seek to create 'balance' for what happens here today if you so choose... but do not hold me responsible for what you will find; Know only that you were warned."

"She cannot win." Vinz murmured. "That book will not allow Tiamat to succeed. This is going to be a slaughter."

"Where is Adria?" Talia asked, more to herself. "We are running out of time!"

"That book has limited if not eliminated all of our options." He replied, looking over to where Liam was still trying to break open the door while Kat and Castor tried to procure some manner of weapon.

For a half a second, his heart leapt as Castor managed to overpower one of the town guards, whose eyes were entirely focused upon the battle of the Gods playing out throughout the city.

From the man, Castor managed to steal a loaded pistol, with which he ran back toward the gate house.

The ground beneath them rumbled from the impacts of the fight, Castor barely managing to maintain his footing before skidding to a halt below the balcony.

He leveled the firearm upward. It seemed a miracle that he'd gone this far unimpeded by the guards, barbarians or even the Gypsies, but by that point they had more pressing things to focus upon.

Vinz saw Castor's lips move in some final curse before pulling the trigger of the flintlock.

Nothing.

Vinz's teeth clenched as Castor looked at the gun, examining its every detail. He was no gunsmith to be certain, but he could at least tell the thing was loaded properly.

"He has thought this through... Davem has tilted fate to his favor; No matter what we do, we will not be able to stop him." Vinz said... but then stopped.

"We..."

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.

"We... We cannot stop him." Vinz exclaimed. "Davem has used the book to effectively lock out the Descended. We cannot stop him because he has blamed us for his misfortunes. He has ensured that neither you nor I will be able to interfere with our usual tactics..." He turned to Talia, eyes wide behind his glasses.

"What can we do, then?" Talia asked. "He has prevented us from intervening, and thanks to the book and to this havoc it has created, none of the Bristol folk will be able to aid us!"

Vinz was already past listening to her.

His clever mind had already been hard at work; With this theory forming a chink in the insurmountable wall that was Davem, Danny and the book, he began to feel that familiar twinge of self-satisfaction that came with an impending victory.

Suddenly he broke away Morgan- the barbarian as transfixed as anybody else- and ran for Castor.

"What in the hell is the...!?" Castor muttered as he looked over the gun, but was jolted from his thoughts as the gun was snatched away by Vinz who suddenly appeared at his side.

"What are you doing, Vinz!?" Castor asked as Vinz turned the gun to point it at Davem. "I tried that already!"

Vinz ignored him, his eyes- and his aim- locked onto where the other man stood on the balcony.

The sound of Danny Priest's voice began to echo in his mind- the night he and the Gypsies had confronted Danny in St. Elmo's Corners coming back to him:

You Draco Disciples, you have no right to chortle at the Gypsies' expense. How many sacrifices is your Dark Mother willing to make before she's got nothing left? I guarantee you that one day in the very near future you yourself will be screaming in hell for the aid of your Goddess, while she has long since turned a blind eye and a deaf ear and moved on to her next set of puppets.

Being forced to watch as Fianna fell in love and ultimately sacrificed herself for Simeon Malificus, having no choice but to sacrifice his best friend, murdering his own brother... all for the sake of and in the service of Tiamat.

He had never allowed these things to get to him; not really. It was all for the greater good (figuratively speaking), to hell with his cohorts or with his enemies. He always knew what had to be done in order to tilt the scales further toward his own ends.

However, looking at Davem of the Davemport, at his struggles and trials- real or imagined- had been like looking into a twisted mirror; Both of them had spent time groveling and scraping. Both of them had experienced unrequited love, and lost someone dear to them. However, while Vinz had simply carried on, evolving and adjusting with the times, Davem had a strange and uncanny habit of curling into a helpless little ball of 'sturm und drang'. He was unwilling to accept his own failures and losses, unwilling to learn from them... and with the power he possessed, his stubborn behavior and imbalanced mentality were a threat to everything that did or would ever exist...

Vinz took a deep breath, inaudible beneath the sounds of battle in the close distance as the Lord of Light cast Tiamat to the ground and raised a hand to unleash the celestial blast that would obliterate her, body and spirit.

He could be forgiven for this.

"Malevthix... I *renounce* thee."

And with that, he squeezed the trigger.

The whole of Bristol had fallen back to a dead silence in the wake of the gunshot.

It really had nothing to do with the gunshot itself, of course; they had been staring in horrified reverent awe at the bloody battle taking place between the Lord of Light and the Dark Mother. It had left much of southwest Bristol in a wreck- although the residential areas were miraculously untouched.

As the echoes of the gunshot faded, slowly, the bystanders to the fight- Gypsies, Disciples and all manner of guards looked from the close distance where the Lord of Light stood over his opponent... and back to Vinz Clortho.

Vinz's hand was shaking, still holding the discharged pistol in one outstretched hand. However, his fingers seemed to grow weak, the gun finally falling from his grasp as his arms went slack before him.

Slowly, the eyes that had been turned to Vinz followed the path of his previously outstretched arms.

Up on the gatehouse balcony above the open doors to Bristol, Davem of the Davemport stood tall, still holding the brilliantly shining book...

... but the look on his face did not match the satisfied grin it had been wearing a moment ago.

Slowly, the book began to descend out of view as his arms lowered, the color draining from his skin.

Through the lenses of his glasses, Vinz could see strange colors soaking across Davem's pure white shirt. In places, it was a dark violet, almost black, while in others it was a deep crimson.

After a moment, Davem coughed, a light thud issuing forth as the Book of Creation fell to the ground.

The former Lorekeeper staggered back and forth again, a strange haze beginning to drift over his eyes.

At last, he slumped forward on the short wall of the balcony, nearly tumbling off.

"You... you *did* it..." Castor breathed, looking up at the balcony as a mix of Davem's blood and the other dark substance- the substance within the Ghost Trap- trickled down the side of the wall to drip down the gate's archway.

"Well done!" Kat asked, pushing past Castor and moving close to Vinz (to the former's chagrin). "It would seem Castor could use some practice in pulling a trigger." She added teasingly. Castor was about to protest when Vinz shook his head.

"It had nothing to do with that." Vinz replied softly, hardly bothering to look her in the face. "Davem... had used the book to prevent Gypsies and Draco Disciples from harming him; anybody else could be relied upon to follow his 'story' like a flock of sheep; Castor, as a Draco Disciple, could not harm him no matter what tactics were used..."

"But... but you are the *Praetor*. How were you able to overcome it when even the Gods were not exempt?"

Vinz slowly shook his head.

"It is over. Let us simply leave it at that."

However, as Vinz stepped toward the gatehouse door to begin trying to discern how to get inside- Davem having sealed it before being mortally wounded- he suddenly felt a strange twinge... a familiar, trembling feeling; it was the feeling he had only had twice before...

Turning, Vinz raised his head to see none other than Danny Priest on top of the Renaissance Collections shoppe.

The strange man was staring back down at him with a smile that could only be called *maniacal*. His entire body was strangely out of focus, a strange black smoke seeming to rise from his body- particularly where his body was closest to the Book.

Before Vinz- or anybody else who had now noticed him- could demand what he was doing there, he reached out and pointed casually at the site of the battle between the two Gods.

Quickly, all eyes were once again on the Lord of Light and Tiamat.

The Lord had apparently dismissed the staff he was wielding... staring at himself in a mixture of confusion and horror. Slowly he stumbled away from Zula/Tiamat who now lay broken and beaten in the dirt beneath him. With an expression of infinite sorrow, he turned away from her, beginning his ascent back into the heavens from whence he had come...

No... Vinz's eyes jaw went slack as he realized what was happening...

As the Lord of Light took to the skies... Tiamat's crimson-teared eyes flashed. With a horrible, wrathful screech, she lunged up from the ground. The heads that remained- had not been beaten to a shadowy pulp- lunged forward like a throng of grasping hands.

The first set of champing jaws latched closed around the Lord's ankle, stopping him in mid-air. A strange sound like the shriek of an out-of-tune violin echoed through the city as he was dragged from the air, a second fanged mouth biting viciously into his arm.

He struggled and continued to shriek, his eyes growing brighter with a light that anyone, even ordinary mortals could read as sheer panic before he was slammed to the ground.

A bright flash flared in the midst of the diving dragon-heads as they began to bite, tear and exhale their lethal black flame on the trapped God of Light, but it was soon smothered under the ravenous shadows.

Several screams came from the Gypsies' camp, but by that point, nobody could tell who they came from. All of them were too busy screaming themselves, vomiting, or simply staring in horror.

Even the Draco Disciples were taken aback as they watched the Goddess tear apart and consume her radiant nemesis.

Overhead, the once bright and warm light of the dawn sun began to grow cold, pale, like the empty, cold sun in the dead of winter. From just beyond the wreckage of the Town Square Public House, the grass, trees and flowers that had graced the town began to wilt and darken, death overtaking every last one.

All around them and far above, the clouds began to fade, and yet the blue sky began to turn a sickly gray.

At last, Tiamat rose from the nothing that now lay before her... not a single scrap remained of the celestial being that had been present only seconds ago...

The Gypsies continued to stare ashen-faced, the other folk of Bristol including the guards and barbarians looking on in grim fascination.

"... No..." Vinz finally whispered.

"What?" Liam asked. "Isn't this what we were fighting for all this time?"

"H- He is right!" Castor nodded. "This is a time for *celebration*, is it not? The Light-Descended have lost!"

"Damn it!" Vinz hissed, turning away from the Draco Disciples and wrestling madly at the door to the gatehouse.

"What is the matter?" Florence asked, both confused and frustrated. "As Praetor, you ought to know when to give proper respect to your-"

"I am *not* the Praetor any longer!" Vinz snapped back before freezing, nearly clapping a hand over his mouth. However, his efforts to break the door off in no way lessened.

"What?" Kat asked with a gasp. "What do you mean?"

"Nevermind! Just... just help me open this bloody door! I need to get up inside the gatehouse!"

"Why should we do that?" Castor demanded, moving up beside the shorter man and glaring down at him. "We have already won, and it seems you are no longer one of us if what you say is true; We no longer take orders from you, particularly when our great Dark Mother is-"

As Castor turned to gesture grandly in Tiamat's direction, there was a deafening screech- a cacophony of howls that echoed across the city... across the country of England- perhaps the entire *world*...

Every last man and woman able to do so clapped their hands over their ears in some effort to drown out the hideous noise.

As the screaming continued, the sound of rapid footsteps approached from a great distance outside the city gates as Adria Dubh returned... carrying the ancient spear, Draca Slaga.

The swordswoman's heart was already heavy, her body trembling with an awful sensation of emptiness. She had felt what all of the Gypsies had felt... but only now did she see for herself the truth for herself.

Tiamat stood over the city, 'Zula' clutching her head and thrashing this way and that. Her wild flailing tore up large sections of the dirt roads, massive dragon heads tearing through and collapsing buildings as easily as a child's castle of blocks.

"What is happening?!" Florence shouted, having to do so as loudly as she could to be heard over the din of destruction.

"You do not understand... none of you understand what has happened!" Vinz hissed, looking to Tiamat as her rampage only continued, only grew more heated. Again, he turned around and looked up to the roof of the shoppe where Danny stood.

"The Balance was desperately trying to shift itself back to the alignment of Darkness to stabilize itself in the wake of what Davem was doing, but he was holding it back with the book!! The moment Davem was killed, the dam burst... With the sheer backup of Dark Energy, the Lord of Light was no match for Tiamat, but now... now the Great Scale is broken..."

"But... but that simply means we've won!" Liam insisted, trying desperately to keep up with everything that was being said, but as Vinz turned upon him with a snarl to snap back at him, there was a scream from the Gypsies as Tiamat turned her attention to the mortals before her.

The shadowy heads- now completely shedding their shadowy skin to reveal true dragon-heads, far larger than the shades that had been.

Zula's body began to twitch and contort... until skin and clothing split, a geyser of blood and entrails fountaining and staining the ground as an *enormous* creature with grand, leathery wings, massive taloned hands, and bearing those many horned, fanged heads stepped out of the sorceress' husk.

The gigantic beast- its full height bringing it far above the city walls, paid no heed to anything beneath or around her; only to the compulsion to spread chaos and destruction... completely, and *immediately*.

One grand sweep of its tail obliterated not only the Lord Mayor's forum, but also most of South Farnham Way. The sound of screams were coupled with the sound of crumbling buildings as they were reduced to splinters... and their occupants reduced to less than even that.

"W-What do we do?" Lillith murmured weakly, looking to the others even as her feet unconsciously backed toward the front gates.

"Only one thing *to* do." Robert replied. "We fight."

"With what?" Conal spat. "Our weapons are gone, our mages have no power without the Lord of Light... We have nothing to fight *with!*"

"I do not believe that matters..." Gaia concluded, pointing back at Tiamat as the Dark Mother turned to face the lot of those gathered at the main gate.

With an agonized roar, Tiamat lunged on four enormous legs, crashing to the ground near the middle of Legion Field, her wings spread to their full, voluminous size.

Vinz Clortho had stopped fiddling with the door long enough to glance over his shoulder- a decision he soon regretted as he beheld the berserk Goddess rearing up behind them.

"Shit." He cursed, turning back to the door and slamming against it.

"H- He- The defector is all yours!" Castor shouted over him, rushing to one side to leave Vinz exposed... although it didn't seem as though Tiamat was the least bit interested in any one person. She simply looked down on the scrambling mortals before her.

The Gypsies were too sickened and terrified to move, as were the Barbarians. The city guards and any locals unfortunate enough to be there were running for the gates as fast as their feet could carry them... although anybody could have told them such retreat would ultimately do them no good.

Meanwhile, up on the stage where the execution had been about to take place, Florence Aconite and Liam Bloodroot had been seeing to releasing their prospective comrades in arms... although leaving the impertinent Dread Crew as a sacrifice for their Goddess.

"Up ya go." Liam declared, reaching down and dragging Captain Tyrwhitt to his feet.

"What is... what is happening?" The nobleman asked weakly, but Florence only shook her head.

"You will want to get used to not asking questions... as well as to *obedience*." She said.

At that moment, with another bone-chilling screech, Tiamat's jaws opened and unleashed a flood of black fire down upon the ground, incinerating the ground beneath her... as well as the fear-stunned Gypsies.

"That's the way to do it!" Castor shouted loudly, listening as the voices of their enemies raised in a collective scream... and yet, his leaping heart sank as another head raised to unleash another gout of fiery breath... directly upon *them*.

"What is she-!?" Florence began, but her jaw dropped as Tiamat unleashed her wrath upon them. Soon, the stage, those upon it, and even the Collections Shoppe were reduced to a hellstorm of burning black.

"WHAT!?" Castor gasped, barely managing to stagger away from the inferno before looking to Vinz and Kat. "What was... We are on the same side! Why did she-"

"Did you not *hear me!*?" Vinz demanded. "The Lord of Light is gone... and now so too are the Band of the Twisted Claw! There *ARE* no 'sides' anymore!"

"B-but..." Kat trembled, looking all around at the dark fire.

"I need to get in here!" Vinz shouted, still pounding away at the door. "It is the only way to fix this!"

Kat rushed up beside him, trying to help him smash in the door with shoulder and foot, and soon after, Castor joined them.

"Damn it damn it damn it DAMN IT!!!" Vinz shouted, unable to even budge the door... but as he looked back upon the Goddess behind them, they saw her raising another vicious head to let out the breath that would end their lives.

"No!" Kat Mandrake suddenly cried, pulling away from the door and throwing herself- arms outstretched- between Vinz and Tiamat.

"Kat, you *foo!*" Castor shouted before Vinz could, rushing in front of *her*... and then, all of them were swallowed by the shadowy blaze as Tiamat unleashed her breath weapon, consuming them all in the lethal darkness and blasting the Gatehouse to cinders, bricks and logs. Much of the fire erupted through the front gates, engulfing many retreating innocents and the trees just outside the city wall.

As the roaring blast began to die down, Tiamat- seeing no other targets before her to crush or to burn- turned away to see to annihilating the rest of the city... when a voice shrieked out from the ocean of fire.

"YOU BITCH!!!"

Tiamat turned, her jaws slavering with anticipation for another kill- although two of her heads began the job of filling the city with infernal flame.

Before her, staggering over and through what remained of the gatehouse, stood Adria Dubh... her body burning in the wake of the geyser of Tiamat's breath weapon that had crashed into her even as she reached the city wall.

Her skin and flesh were scorched, her clothing mostly burned away... except for a pair of sturdy leather gloves, as well as an equally hardy apron.

She leaned upon Draca Slaga like a walking stick, her body weak, her breathing troubled.

Tiamat leered at the Swordmistress, stamping toward her, unimpeded by the scorched landscape that still burned even now.

Rearing up, Tiamat let out a mighty screech, ready to slam one of her clawed feet down and end Adria's life as though she were crushing an insect.

However, as she did so, Adria let out another scream of fury, hurling the ancient spear up at Tiamat.

Perhaps in the midst of the charring flames, the Dark Goddess did not recognize the weapon as it hurtled toward her... or perhaps she did not care.

The spear Draca Slaga- the spear handcrafted by the God Loki for the explicit purpose of killing a God pierced the air like the beak of a speeding hawk... before plunging into Tiamat's left breast.

The Dragon Goddess screeched in pain and staggered back, crashing onto the ground below and thrashing wildly. Its heads spat onyx flames every which-way, scouring the city of Bristol with their murderous power. Her thrashing crushed building after building, her scrambling raking up great lumps of earth and sending them crashing into other stalls and houses.

At last, the Goddess Tiamat twitched and collapsed, laying still on the ground as her body began to disintegrate, evaporating to nothingness bit by bit as her essence faded into the aether.

Adria Dubh watched the Dark Mother fall, trembled at the sight of her death throes... the tears she might have shed for the grief she could sense, and for her own grief would not come, as her body had suffered far too many injuries to still be capable of producing tears.

It did not matter now.

"Perhaps I will meet you... in Heaven..." She whispered, before collapsing to the ground as the dark fire consumed her.

Bristol was gone.

Its buildings were destroyed. Not a sound broke the silence- even the ocean at the docks had grown still. This place- once a home for all things wonderful and happy- had become lifeless and gray. Even the licks of dark flame had finally suffocated and gone out.

But within the wreckage, a single figure emerged from the stale air; A figure wearing strange black garments, glasses and a trilby hat.

At last, he came to stand in the center of the Gate Square.

To his left, he could see the massive scorch mark that had been the Band of the Twisted Claw... and to his right were all that remained of the Draco Disciples; another blackened stain in the dirt.

He took a single soft breath, as though indulging in the dry air.

As he let it out, he closed his eyes and raised one hand to the sky.

"Master... at long last, it is done."

"Not... not quite yet, Priest."

Danny blinked, his eyes turning toward the scorched wreckage of the Gatehouse.

As he watched, a large plank of wood overturned itself, revealing Vinz Clortho... clutching in his hands a black-bound book, the pages of which shimmered with white light.

Danny's head tilted, watching as a bleeding and burned Vinz staggered toward him, an ear-to-ear smile on the former Praetor's face.

However, after a moment, Priest shrugged and raised his hand to the sky once more.

"Startled me for a bit there." Danny said, raising a hand disingenuously to his chest. "I was starting to worry you had actually died."

"It ends here, you miserable abomination." Vinz chuckled. "/have the book now."

"So you do."

"Now /have the power... the power to change the world!"

"Yup."

"... Stop being so bloody arrogant, you obstinate fool! Can you not see that you and your bloody winged corpse are *beaten!*?" Vinz shouted, coming to stand before Danny, the book seeming to tremble as it came closer to Danny.

For his part, once again, Danny Priest's body began to ripple in a strange fashion the closer the book became, but Priest seemed to ignore it.

"Beaten?" Danny sighed. "Oh, poor stupid Vinz Clortho... look around you. Look at what has happened. I think we can tell who the true victor is, can't we?"

"You smarmy git." Vinz shook his head. Slowly he sank to his knees, his shackled hands opening the book. Closing his eyes, he focused, branches of silver lightning burning gleaming text into the book.

The accursed cuffs finally unlatched of their own accord, falling uselessly to the ground...

Vinz let out a sigh of relief, rubbing his sore, bruised wrists.

"And now to deal with *you*."

"Please." Danny rolled his eyes. "If that book could really be used to hurt me, do you not think someone else would have done it by now? Davemport had no greater love for me than you lot."

Vinz hesitated, looking down at the book, then scowled at Danny.

"Be that as it may, your plot has failed. Davem may have caused the destruction of one city, but now he- and your ambitions- are slain."

"Davem?" Danny chuckled softly, casually sitting on the dirt road before him. "Davem was never my target... not really. He is not what this whole matter is about."

"... What?" Vinz blinked, raising his hands away from the book.

"No, no, no. Davem was of no use to me; merely means to an end. Without his zealotry, I could not have machinated all this!" He said, raising his arms to gesture to the desolated ruin Bristol had become. "Without him, I could not have shown you the way."

"Enough of this." Vinz sighed. "I grew tired of listening to your sermons some time around St. Elmos' Corners. Say what you mean and then kindly leave me; I have a world in my image to build."

"Hm. Typical Draco Disciple. Even after another in a long line of pointless sacrifices, you refuse to understand." Danny slowly stood back up, looking down upon Vinz.

"Look around you, Clortho... this is your world. This is what your world is destined to become, no matter what you do. No matter who does it. No matter how smart or how skilled or how important you believe yourself to be; it is as I said. This is the culmination of events that have been brewing since this world was born.

You clever Draco Disciples, and the scrappy little Gypsies, whittling away at each other in the midst of a worthless cause.

Over days, months, years, decades... just over a century unless I'm mistaken, the Disciples and Gypsies plot and scheme and thwart and kill each other until at last, the Disciples get hold of that Blood Drop they used to resurrect Tiamat just now. Doing so, they obliterate the final vestiges of Goodness in the world.

However, the nature of the Balance is for Fabrication, Life and Harmony to create and maintain, while it is Destruction, Death and Conflict's duty to destroy... The latter three cannot sustain themselves. They never could.

Tiamat and her worshippers slaughter one another, consuming itself like a great serpent. This entire world dies. The Void Angel appears and sends this forsaken place to its restful oblivion."

"Bollocks." Vinz scowled. "Now that I have the book, do you truly think I could ever allow that to happen?"

"Oh, yes, by all means; follow in Davem's footsteps and make the world better for you and yours. What could possibly go wrong?"

"Do not compare me to that sniveling fool!" Vinz spat. "I am-"

"Oh, certainly, certainly. I have no doubt you believe yourself cleverer than Davem... just as Simeon, Lady Katherine Tso, Loki, Druscilla, even the Dark Goddess Herself were cleverer than their adversaries. In my travels I have seen a great many 'clever' people, all of whom knew they could use their immense power in a manner far superior to their predecessors.

I'll not bother asking you where they are *now*.

But what I will ask you is: Have you not noticed a pattern?

You lost the woman you loved. You sacrificed your best friend. You murdered your brother, and that's just the tip of the iceberg where your bloody family is concerned. You have sacrificed everything that makes you human, and for what?"

"If you believe that sort of thing can even begin to affect me anymore-" Vinz began, but at that, Danny Priest spoke again in a tone that lacked his usual drawl- a tone far darker, empty, as though echoing out from within a great pit.

"Wake up, Clortho. The desolation around you? The silence? The horror? Where is the glory? Where is the eternal reward you were promised in exchange for everything you have given up? THIS IS IT. THIS IS YOUR REWARD. THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU *W/M*!"

Vinz stared up at him, his hands slackening at his sides.

"When one side wins, the story ends. The great Vinz Clortho who gave up everything for unrivaled power rots along with all the other relics in a scorched and blistered world. Use that book to become whatever you want. In the end it will not make a difference: Struggle until you die and are replaced, or succeed and watch the world crumble around you."

"... Then I shall use the book to create another destiny entirely." Vinz answered. "Perhaps... perhaps one in which that drop of Tiamat's blood was never saved, but lost. Then... then this disaster will never occur, and this world can continue on. Perhaps indefinitely..."

"By all means." Danny shook his head. "Go back to the old routine of winning and losing over and over again... knowing that you will never succeed- knowing that if you ever *do* succeed, *this* is the renown that awaits you in the end... and knowing in your heart of hearts that everything you have ever and will ever sacrifice to achieve your goals is meaningless; lives of family, friends and even the ones you may come to love or who may come to love you cast aside for absolutely nothing."

Vinz's head slowly sank, looking down at the book's brilliant pages.

"All the power in the world... and you will never have what you want."

The former Praetor reached up, weakly removing his cap as the other raked through his hair. His teeth were clenched, head gently shaking from side to side.

"There is only one path you can take which will have any true meaning... my path. The Angel's path." Danny said, raising his hand slowly back to the sky. "Let it end now... and your reward shall be a long, well-earned rest from this. From all of this."

As he spoke, Danny looked up to the sky... where eight dark crescents began to pierce the sky.

Fingers. Enormous, dessicated fingers draped in gray, and bearing an aura of what appeared to be invisible insects, blurring and distorting the air.

Vinz's eyes turned skyward as well, widening as they beheld the hideous sight they had seen once before.

It was a sight that haunted him in his nightmares- one that he would have been pleased never to see again.

And yet, here it was once again, to finish what it had started.

"... Why do you not simply kill us?" He found himself asking.

"It is against my Master's will." Danny replied softly. "We do not kill the denizens of a living world; we simply show them the futility of life- usually this involves leading them to kill each other, but never do we disrupt the Balance. Of course, I had to dispose of Gertrude, but she was delightfully *neutral*. The Balance never missed her."

The sky tore open; the darkness beyond the world's veil home to the rotting visage of the Void Angel; its decaying gray wings endlessly dropping its enormous bone-colored plumes through the rift.

Its eyeless face stared down toward Vinz.

A horrible, echoing, rasping, incoherent whisper was deafening in his mind, all efforts at drowning it out proving useless. Even as the Angel opened the rift further, Vinz pulled his eyes away from it, and back down to the book.

"What will you do, Clortho?" Danny asked, his shout a piercing harmony to the Angel's endless whisper. "You can struggle to resist your destiny, but it can't last forever. Your nature is to kill. Your fate is to die."

Vinz trembled, his hands trembling over the pages of the book.

"It is *INEVITABLE*."

"Perhaps." Vinz nodded slowly.

Silver lightning began to branch out from his fingers as he looked up, past Danny Priest, and into the eyes of the God-Lich:

"... but we shall not die this day."

To Begin Again... From The Beginning

Epilogue: Forevermore
(Co-written with Rayna Chucka.)

The moment Vinz Clortho spoke his final words to the Void Angel, there was a bright flash of light- the light of Creation- and Alicia Wellington's view through the magical window between dimensions was lost. The suffocating darkness around her was suddenly dispelled, her entire body surrounded with the brilliant illumination.

Then, suddenly, the ground on which she stood- or rather, the *nothing* on which she *somehow* stood- was swept out from beneath her feet.

Instantly, she was falling- tumbling through the blindingly lit nothingness, completely unable to tell precisely where she was falling *to*...

... until a rustling **thump** rang out as she landed upon a leafy cushion of bushes and grass.

For a moment, she moved not, but the cold of the grass and the softness of the wind were an explosion on her senses, causing the first stirrings of consciousness. She let out a groan, and shoved herself sitting, tired gaze landing upon the charred circle before her, bathed in moonlight.

Back at the beginning...

A laugh erupted from her chest, a rough, disbelieving sound as her hands dug into the grass. What she had just seen, it was still too raw to even- She shook her head slowly.

"Don't be getting all cocky now, love."

The girl's thoughts were suddenly interrupted by that familiar, piercing drawl. With a swift turn of her groggy head, she recognized the figure in black, sitting on a tree branch above where she sat.

"...nobody likes a sore winner."

That drawl. It caused Alicia to turn sharply, a million thoughts rushing to her mind yet none able to be spoken. Instead, she rose slowly, and regarded the ever passive Priest with an air of contained calm, steady breathing holding back the quivers that threatened to break loose.

"Tch, next time, you should lock yourself in an isolated dimension."

She took a few steps back to better regard Priest, and after a pause, she finally spoke again.

"So what happens now?"

"Can't say." Danny replied softly. "Back when I first came to the Bristol Multiverse, I did a great deal of research- dating all the way back to its creation. Calculated the infinite paths the way I do every world and discovered the method in which it would inevitably (I use the term *loosely* now, you understand) destroy itself... but that bloody bastard Clortho had to go and ruin it." He took a deep breath, letting it out as a sigh. Leaning back, Danny looked up to the sky- still as dark and starry as it had been when Alicia had left it seemingly ages ago. "He had to go and reset the game- reshuffle the cards, even removing a few, so now it's far more difficult to know how the Balance will consolidate."

That said, Danny slowly leaned forward, letting himself drop from the tree branch to land on the ground.

"There is nothing more to do here... time for us to move on."

Alicia couldn't help but smile at Priest's words, and as he landed onto the ground, she stepped forward, and put a hand on his shoulder. Despite all the bad dealt at his hand, and the darkness that seemed to define his whole world, she couldn't help but feel like something had changed this time around.

"You... are an interesting fellow, Danny Priest." She stated after a moment of consideration. It was the only thing she could say at the moment. It was not a time for celebration, for nothing had been won, not really. The world merely moved on as ever. Alicia couldn't help but chuckle lightly at the idea and turned to look at the sky like Priest had done earlier, arm dropping lightly at her side.

"Going to find a new world then? New people?"

"S'the nature of the beast, love." Danny nodded, although there was a bit of a strange air to his voice. She- and others- had heard the faux regret of Danny Priest in the past, but this was different. "I am immortal, as is the Angel. We shall *be* immortal, until the day when the last world takes its last breath. It is his 'sympathy' for this and all other worlds that drives us. We must carry on without turning back... without sorrow."

He glanced away for a moment, as though in deep consideration before raising his eyes to hers once again. Slowly, he reached up and removed his glasses, absently cleaning them with one sleeve of his shirt.

She got the distinct notion that- had he the capacity- he would have been flushed about the cheeks.

"I've not said what I am about to say to many, Alicia, and those who have heard it never lived long enough to make anything of it..."

Alicia looked back down from the sky, regarding Danny. She said nothing, but merely watched and waited. She had the distinct feeling he was holding something back, and she knew better than to try and push information out of such a person. Yet she couldn't help the small smile that crept over her face. Yes, something had indeed changed. She turned her gaze away again, content to wait in the silence until he continued.

"... I rather *loathe* what I do. Every world the Angel visits was once filled with hopeful, passionate folk who exist solely to defy His will, and it is my duty to crush that hope, to extinguish that passion, because I *know* that in spite of all your dreams and feelings and faith that He is the one who is right..."

He hesitated again, looking down and away from her once again.

"... but at the same time, with every world we kill, there is one chance fewer that we'll *ever* be proven wrong."

When his eyes met hers again, he reached up to gently place one gloved hand on her cheek.

"You may not believe it, but I am... glad of this. Thankful, even. Because with the rare world that *endures* us, from generation to generation, age to age, you people will grow and evolve bit by bit, until one day you may just discover the truth that has eluded both He and I... the *Real/Truth*."

With that, Danny's hand slipped from her face, and he turned from her, a small smile breaking as he slipped his glasses back in their proper place.

Alicia frowned, and crossed her arms.

"The Real Truth..." She mumbled the phrase, then chuckled. "Cryptic as ever Priest." She rolled her eyes at the back of his head, but her gaze was kind, and almost sympathetic.

"Live well, Alicia." Danny replied quickly, "You've earned it."

With a final grinning glance backward, he was gone, leaving her alone in the starlit forest.

Alicia shook her head, and with a heavy sigh began to head back to the path she walked seemingly ages ago. Yet, she had not made more than a step before a glint of metal attracted her gaze.

"Aldrazar... Gwen..." Her brow furrowed as she picked up the staff and wolfsbane she had first brought with her. Should she keep them? Discard them? Every option wasn't quite good enough.

Eventually, she felt her gaze pull to the charred portal marks. It felt right.

She worked with purpose, a few stones, some flowers, and a bit of arm strength as she stabbed the staff into the soft earth. The sun had just begun to rise as she stepped back, observing the small memorial for the pair, and she nodded to herself.

"...And life goes on."

She felt herself smile before turning, a renewed spring in her step as she turned to finally return from where she came. It was a new dawn and a new day.

~Thank you for reading~