

(This is a story based on the Live-Action Roleplaying Game known as 'RenQuest' at the Bristol Renaissance Faire, circa 2012. 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.

What follows are the records of a Quester known to most by his pseudonym, 'Davem (of the Davemport)', who vanished during the off-season of the Year of the Quest, 2012. - Dave M)

"The Davemport Records"

A RenQuest Fanfiction by David Manley

Entry #1 – Bright New Beginning

It all started back when I was a child, I suppose.

Born and raised back in what's called 'The New World', my mother and father are the founders of the New Dover Port Trade Commission. I suppose it wasn't too different from living back in England now that I've seen both, but there are certain key distinctions that I'm not certain many could recognize... I guess it's mostly a matter of mindset.

Growing up, I spent much of my time with my nose in books... not accounting books and ledgers as my family would have liked; They were of the opinion that I should quickly and completely immerse myself in the business of the Trade Commission, and once I was old enough to be trusted with any level of responsibility, this is exactly what they attempted to do. To their credit, they had every reason to believe I would be successful in such things (if I'm not boasting too much in saying so).

As much as it should probably shame me, the books I read as a child and even into my early adulthood were all stories of fantasy; Myths, folklore and fairy tales, most of which stem back from the 'Old World'. My head was full of dragons, knights, magic, monsters, trolls, wizards, fairies... and the ease with which I could remember and categorize even the smallest details of these stories were what made my parents believe I could make good in the business world.

Unfortunately, what they did not account for is the sad fact that records of transactions, logs of inventory regarding textiles, rare metals, food and other supplies is not half as interesting as ancient legends of heroes and epic journeys (at least, not to me. With all due respect to those who make the former their passion).

I didn't do well in the years upon years in which my mother and father attempted to hammer in the principles and work ethic that they desired for me. It isn't as though I was ignoring them, that I didn't want to be helpful. That's really *all* I wanted, but for whatever reason- perhaps my mind has just been contaminated all this time- I couldn't find it within myself to just *do* it.

After more than a decade of this, my father finally grew weary of waiting for me to get my mind in order. He used one of our own commission vessels- albeit a small one- to transport me to the 'Old World'; Specifically, he sent me to England. You see, it is in England where many of the tales I immersed myself in were written, rewritten, translated or at the very least printed.

In their mind, once I saw that the world I had invested myself so deeply in did not exist, or at least, was not as exciting and wonderful as I had led myself to believe over the years, then I would finally come back ready to work. Of course, I fail to see what use I would be to them as a jaded, disillusioned shell, but who was I to object to a pass to fair England, where I might finally see the amazing things I had read about (or at least what inspired them).

When I first stepped off of the boat into the English port town of Bristol, there was not much to see. It was a fairly sized town full of little people doing little things- nothing out of the ordinary. I couldn't help a strange feeling that there was more to it than met the eye, but after about a week of staying there and finding nothing, I decided to move inland.

I learned quickly enough that if I were ever going to get anywhere, I would have to remove or otherwise hide any sign that I was part of a successful mercantile firm (such as I am).

That may seem counterintuitive, but the fact of the matter is that I was asking to be pointed in the direction of where I could find adventure, mysticism... in short, things I oughtn't have been looking for at my age. I would have ended up in an asylum if some dignified businessman were walking around asking for the whereabouts of a fairy commune or witch's cauldron. That sort of thing was better suited to the lower-class, troubadours or gypsies.

I purchased some commoner garments, left the rest up on the boat to be shipped to who-knew where, and set off on my path. I was not worried about a ride back. Not only was the Trade Commission a frequent visitor to the Bristol Port,

but I had no plans on going back anytime soon. Plus, I was given enough money to last until I managed to find a job (or until I was robbed, whichever came first).

I found little more than guards, merchants and ordinary citizens in Bristol, so I made my way northward to Manchester.

Along the way, we happened upon a small group of mercenaries camped out by the roadside one night. It was fairly clear they weren't *bandits*, or else I have the feeling neither I nor the other occupants of the wagon I was riding with would have walked away from that place.

Having already paid the driver for a full transport to Manchester, I hopped off of the wagon with my meager effects, leaving them to proceed as I approached the small mercenary band.

They numbered at four, and to be honest they were better kempt than others of their stock. They were in the middle of eating some game they'd hunted, and although I wasn't keen on eating a thing whose face I could still see, I sat down and started pecking away at my rations.

"So..." I began after some time watching them eat and listening to them mutter amongst themselves about where they were intending to go next. "I had meant to ask you..."

"We're in the middle of a job right now, boyo." One of the men answered before I could actually ask the question.

"No, no. I wasn't going to ask to hire you." I said with a nervous chuckle. "I wished to know..."

"A shame." Another mercenary, this one a woman clad in thick leathers with metal plates here and there, smirked. "A man like you wouldn't last a day out there alone."

"... I want to know where one begins the life of an adventurer." I said, once they had all stuffed their faces with a hunk of meat from their spitted prey. Although I had pegged them for the types to speak with their mouths full, I knew I was capable of speaking over the resulting garble.

However, another of the men laughed once he'd swallowed his mouthful of food, not at all subtle as he directed said laughter straight at me.

"An 'adventurer'?" He asked. "You mean like one of those mumbo-jumbo 'Quester' types?" He asked. "Look, boy..."

"I am twenty nine years old."

"All the more reason to go back to wherever you came from. If you're not a journeyman of any kind at your age- with your build- then it's best to save yourself the anguish and find a less strenuous job."

"And say for instance I wished for something *more* strenuous." I replied coldly. "Where would I go about finding such a job?"

The men and woman continued to chuckle at my expense, before the remaining man cleared his throat.

"You're no mercenary, that much is clear. I doubt you'll ever be a Lightbringer like those gypsy types; though they strike me as the type to take in *anybody*, I think they take themselves pretty seriously. Think they're saving the world or something... but for you, I'd suggest AdventureTemps."

"What?" I asked, quirking a brow as I looked at him over the fire they had crackling away.

"AdventureTemps is an adventuring firm. I believe they have an office in Birmingham, due East."

"What, them?" The first man, the largest one chuckled, folding his arms. "They're nothing but pretenders. Nothing but a bunch of peasants looking to make a few extra coins and schoolboys hoping to live out fantasies they've seen in fairy-tale books."

I cleared my throat uncomfortably, hastily getting out my bedroll and setting in for the night.

It wasn't ideal, but at least now I had a direction to take myself in upon the morrow.

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I never spent much time off of the beaten paths; To be honest, if I was on my way to becoming an adventurer, I was off to a bad start. I hadn't procured any weapons, nor had I many maps of the areas to work with. I did have enough money to pay for a few rides along the way whenever they happened to pass by. Hence, a journey on foot that should probably have taken a week, a month or more only took a few days.

When I arrived in Birmingham, it was more or less what I'd expected. It was a crowded, bustling city full of people going about their daily business... it was starting to appear as though my parents were correct, and there really was nothing to England and the Old World after all.

Of course, there were those mercenaries to think about; I hadn't spoken with them much, and had been given only curious, amused- or bemused- glances in return for any questions I asked.

There was still something to discover, and I meant to seek it out.

Simply because it was how these things are supposed to go from everything I had read, I inquired about 'AdventureTemps' with one of the taverns.

I likely didn't turn any heads as I entered, and much as had happened with the mercenaries, when I asked about the adventuring company I was met with a chuckling roll of the eyes by the barkeep.

"Please tell me you are one of their know-nothing quill-pushers." He said through poorly maintained teeth. "God help us all if you intend be one of those 'save the world from evil' types."

"As a matter of fact..." I began, an angry twitch moving across my features which I couldn't catch in time, "... I *am* one of their administrative workers. But I am new to this city, and I don't know where their office is located."

"North of the town square; big sign with a shield and two swords. Can't miss it." He said, plopping a tankard down on the tavern counter as though to punctuate the sentence- apparently he had no more attention to spare for a man who wasn't drinking.

I left the tavern, following his directions until I found the sign he had described. It didn't look dissimilar from any of the other buildings in the city, but as the man had mentioned, there was a very large sign hanging over the door. It portrayed a shield with swords running across the top and bottom of it. The word (words?) 'AdventureTemps' was emblazoned across the center.

A bell jingled over my head as I walked through the door, into a well-lit parlor full of benches with several desks and shelves stocked with papers opposite the front door. Along the wall, signs were posted that said things like "Enriching the Lives of Adventurers", "Live Your Own Legend", and "Who Wants to Be a Hero?".

Seated on the benches was a strange array of men and women, most of whom seemed less than well-to-do. Many were overweight, dirty and more than a few were past their prime.

I could only assume they were adventurers or mercenaries in search of one last hurrah, beggars desperate for a quick gold piece or perhaps there were a few like me out there who were just in search of something more than the world were given.

Walking up to one of the desks, I was addressed by a large, dark-skinned man who had just sort of been sitting there, taking in the view of the assembled aspiring 'Adventurers'.

"Excuse me..." I said, raising a hand and placing it on the chair in front of his desk, meaning to pull it out, expecting an actual conversation. However, I was cut short as he peeled a single sheet of parchment from a stack where he sat. Without really looking at me, he raised the paper in my direction.

"Fill out the form." He said in a very thick accent.

"Um... Alright." I nodded, hesitantly accepting the form. I was a bit surprised he didn't ask me any questions, but then judging by his terse manner, he likely was not used to any sort of repartee.

Sighing, I sought out a place at one of the benches, wedging myself as best I could between a very heavy-set, stocky, one-eyed man, and a slender but foul-smelling man thick with layers of cloth. Using a book I'd brought to brace the form, I procured a quill and a small bottle of ink from my pack and began.

"Name... Gender... Age... Height and weight... Prior occupations and years held..." I murmured aloud as I scrawled my responses to each entry. "Place an X in this spot to acknowledge that 60% of every financial reward provided by clients will be given to the AdventureTemps Adventuring Firm... Huh?" I blinked, looking at the other side of the page. Nowhere did they ask for prior adventuring experience, nor did they ask for areas of specific expertise.

Standing up, I returned to the desk I had started at, offering the page back to the man.

"I believe I didn't get the entire form. I only-" I began, but once again, my words were cut off by a curt 'snap' when he took the paper from my hand.

"Have a seat. We will call on you when you are needed."

I blinked, simply standing there dumbfounded. It was certainly not what I had expected, or was hoping for... it seemed more like a joke than anything else.

If this was all the organization asked of their volunteers, it was no wonder nobody took them seriously...

As I waited for my first assignment, I- as well as my 'adventuring colleagues' sat in the AdventureTemps office, watching the time tick by on a large grandfather clock they had set up in one corner.

On occasion- I want to say twice per day- a letter would come in requesting the services of an AdventureTemps contract adventurer. One of the desk workers would take the letter, take the top sheet off their stack of completed forms, bunch them together and call off the name on the form. The 'adventurer' would be given an address and sent on his or her way.

These 'adventures' were deliveries or escorts... but most of the time they were chores that nobody wanted to do; cleaning streets after one too many chamber pots were emptied on it, walking halfway across the country for a delivery, farm work... on occasion, they were guard missions, escorts for finicky and thrifty nobles.

Most adventurers would return shortly after, giving the company its cut before sitting back down in the office again to wait for the next opportunity to do something life-affirming.

During the days, we often found ourselves talking about what we hoped to accomplish in our 'adventuring careers'... truth be told, I really hadn't thought about exactly what I wanted. Just to see, to feel and experience that world of fantasy, to know it was real and waiting to be recognized? At first I thought that that was what I was hoping to get out of this... but I guess coming home with a trove of treasure and a beautiful princess on my arm wouldn't be so bad either.

For the most part I stayed outdoors during the night. It was still rather cold, but I knew it would not be in my budget to stay at a proper inn for all that time. Even if and when I did receive a mission of my own, I would likely not make enough to cover such expenses.

I may not have been in it for the money, but I was rapidly beginning to find such practical things necessary. It would not be long before I required another job to make ends meet.

I almost felt pity every time another aspiring adventurer came through the door of that place. The longer I waited, I knew they would be waiting just as long if not longer.

However, all of that changed the day *my* name was called.

It was the middle of summer by then, and my finances were wearing thin. It wouldn't be long before I would have to go back to Bristol and wait for a ship back home.

If my parents' goal was to disillusion me, then England and AdventureTemps had done a fine job of that... however, I held out to the very last copper piece I could spare.

My head perked up and I rushed to the desk. The dark-skinned man handed me the paper and the letter... rather surprised when I noticed the destination was none other than Bristol itself.

The letter was from a bounty hunter who was tracking a mark in the port city. The details were a bit sketchy, but apparently he had heard of AdventureTemps' reputation. Judging by whatever was happening in Bristol, he had no doubt that any agent they could send would be more than enough to handle the situation.

I didn't really care, in the end. It got me out of the office, and no matter what was to happen, I was heading back to Bristol.

Whether it will be the first step on my way back home or my first step on a grand adventure, I guess that remains to be seen.

Entry #2 - The Intern

My journey back from Birmingham was a bit shorter than the journey *to*, no thanks to AdventureTemps. All travel and expenses was paid for with our own money. Between that and the meager 40% cut of all payment- if the job paid at all- it was clear that AdventureTemps was not in the business of producing millionaires.

Nevertheless, it wasn't as though I would have to pay for transport home, if that's the way things turned out- only for lodging in the meantime. Therefore, I afforded myself the fastest- yet safest- possible means of travel, and managed to get myself to the port town in but a few days.

When I arrived, however, I barely recognized the place. It was in no way the same ordinary town that I had seen before.

The ordinary city gates and walls were decorated with festive ribbons and garlands. The sound of happy revelers and the most wonderful smells emanated from within. People were pouring in, and among the carriages and other means of conveyance that were parked outside the city walls, I could see a number of overly fancy ones all situated near one another... with what I sincerely believed to be a royal coat of arms gracing its doors.

Suddenly the reason for the change was abundantly clear.

I had stumbled directly into a visit from the Queen of England herself.

I made my way through the front gates of Bristol, the experience infinitely different than it was upon my first visit. I was welcomed by the townsfolk, offered samples of seasonal delicacies, and found myself surrounded by performers of all kinds: actors, puppeteers, costumed cavorters, and there was even a maypole being attended to by festively attired frolickers.

I was so wrapped up in the sights, sounds, smells, the whole *experience*, that I very nearly forgot what I'd gone there for to begin with.

Now carrying a plate of 'cheese fritters', a glass of 'sassafras' and wearing a few random crafts and trinkets on my person, I made my way north. I passed a wide array of shops, including a book store that caught my eye... but looking west I could see the harbor, even the dock where I had first set foot on these lands. It didn't feel like so very long ago, but that was probably due to the lack of variation in my whereabouts of late- sitting in an office *waiting* for days on end.

I knew that this faire would likely be gone not long after the Queen left, but seeing at *all* it made me loath to want to leave like I had been considering before. it wasn't exactly wizards and dragons and fair maidens, but.. it was nice.

At last, I found myself standing before a small wagon, well-worn with age yet adorned as festively as could be managed by a clearly lacking budget of any kind.

"Well met, good sir!" I heard a bright voice call out from inside the wagon, and I turned up to see a young man smiling out at me from beneath the wagon's awning. He wore a cap and tunic of earthy colors, and his cheerful face was graced with well-trimmed facial hair.

"Well met, indeed!" I answered, his smile infectious. "Is this-... Is this the Band of the Twisted Claw's wagon?"

"Oh, you've heard of us, then?" His expression shifted from a jovial demeanour to one of curiosity.

"You might say that." I replied, reaching down into my pack. From it, I pulled out the letter I'd received as well as my AdventureTemps identification form. Handing them up to him, he accepted them with the same puzzled look.

"I am not certain I understand." He said after reading the form over a few times. "One of our Questers has... placed *you* in charge of his questing affairs?"

"Yes." I replied. "I believe his name was Kyril Aleksandrov, if I'm not mistaken." I said, beginning to reach up and point at the letter, but at that point I heard a groan of distaste from the other end of the wagon.

I hadn't noticed her before, but standing in the wagon with the man was a young woman in a blue bodice with a red chemise underneath. She had been preoccupied to her pipe, but at the mention of this 'Kyril', she was suddenly interested in the conversation.

"That horrible Russian man... the one who does not take any of what we are doing with... with *any* seriousness at all!" She grumbled.

She wasn't entirely off. From what I'd read of that letter, Mr. Aleksandrov seemed to believe that whatever it was the people here were up to was not worthy of any sort of genuine attention.

"I suppose this man- I am sorry, what is your name?" The man in the wagon asked, turning to look at me.

"It says it on the form..." I said, a bit put-off by this increasingly uncomfortable situation, but shook my head. "Just... call me 'Davem'. Most people do."

"As you wish." The man nodded, giving the papers another bewildered glance before shrugging.

"Regardless of Kyril, I believe we can use all the help we can get. If you're ready to work and ready to help, we would be happy to have you!" He reached out a hand. "Raven Hawkwood."

"Good to meet you, Raven." I answered, accepting his hand and shaking it. "So, what do I do now?"

"Seeing as you are here to fill in for Kyril, and Kyril was assigned to the Order of the Sun faction, I will assign you there as well, and you can pick up where he left off."

"Factions? Pick up? What do you mean?" I asked. Aside from brushing off the entire ordeal here as a children's endeavor unworthy of attention, Kyril had been less than forthcoming about the details.

"Normally you can choose to join the Order of the Sun, which stresses justice and technology, or you can join the Lunar Tribe which favors mysticism and tradition. I hope you do not mind my making the decision for you, but circumstances being what they are..."

"No worries!" I nodded, although given my purpose for coming here in the first place would have had me gravitating toward the Lunar Tribe. "I'll do my best, whatever you need from me."

"Well, good." The woman with the pipe nodded. "A vast improvement over your predecessor, anyway. Speak to Adria Dubh over at the Order of the Sun camp; the facade over that way." She said, pointing out the opposite side of the wagon. "Through the Dirty Duck. You cannot miss it."

"Very well!" I nodded, eager to be on my way.

Perhaps it's the faire environment around me elevating my mood, but I do not care. This seemed like the first bit of real progress I've made since I left home.

It was a long drop off of Liam.

Coughing and favoring the arm on which I'd landed, I slowly struggled up and off the dusty ground.

"Next time, you would do well to keep your dogs on a shorter leash, Dubh." A snide voice chuckled, punctuating the injury with a bit of insult as Vinz Clortho and Liam Bloodroot- henchmen of the Draco Disciples- turned to depart from the Order of the Sun camp at which we now stood.

It had now been several hours after I had first checked in with the Order of the Sun. I had met with Adria Dubh- a rather rough-around-the-edges woman with a quick temper and who took herself far more seriously than I would have expected given Kyril's attitude toward the Band and its conflict with the Draco Disciples.

Certainly, under the circumstances, I had not given proper consideration to the fact that I would be engaging cultist minions of the Dragon Goddess Tiamat, but in my defense, I was not given adequate instruction. Besides, cultists or not, what were they going to do to me in broad daylight in a crowded street in the middle of a faire when the *Queen* was in town?

I suppose I had not thought of being dragged across said street in a most humiliating fashion, and dropped unceremoniously to the ground.

"What is the *meaning* of this?!" Dubh asked, her skirts and apron brushing heavily against me as she came to stand over me with an absolutely vicious expression.

"I do not think there's any subtle *meaning* to what you're seeing here." I answered with a groan, standing as best I could. "The Draco Disciples did not take kindly to my presence."

"They spotted you?" She asked, shaking her head at the obvious question.

"Was I supposed to be hiding?" I asked.

"Of *course* you were 'supposed to be hiding!'" She shot back frantically. "What, did you believe they would sit there allow you to spy on them?!"

"I did not think I would *have* to!" I sputtered back. "I was told to 'observe', not to 'spy'!"

"Are you really that much of a fool!? Have you no common sense at all!?"

"You are one to talk!" I said before I could stop myself. "Trusting random people with your spying duties? *Anybody* could just... just *join* the Band and be a Draco Disciple sleeper agent! Did you ever think of that? Surely you can't think such a thing has not happened before!"

At the beginning of my (brief) Questing career, I was told about the recent goings-on; about how a local nobleman, disguised as a friend of the Band's leader, Thoren Grymm, had proven himself to be member of the Draco Disciples. He had been calling himself 'Festivus Merrier', but his true self- Simeon Malificus- had been a long-standing, unseen enemy of the Band for decades.

Adria was silent for a moment... I don't know what I said, but I had obviously struck a nerve. The outrage she had been showing me all at once transformed into that weird silence; the kind where you know you've said something, could see the incoming backlash, but there was nothing to be done about it.

"We do not need your help." She said at last.

"What?" I asked, going a bit pale at this and forgetting all about my aching arm.

"You heard me well enough. Get out." She said coldly, no longer even looking at me.

"Wait... Can I just ask-"

"GO." She snapped, with such emotion that I actually staggered back a pace. Following my reflexes, I turned and hurried off in the direction of the Band's Vardo.

Once I returned, I explained what had happened to Raven and the woman who was working with him (whose name was Dierdre Ibis).

"We know." Raven sighed heavily. "Word travels around here quite quickly... especially when words like 'kicking and screaming' and screaming are involved..."

"I was not 'kicking and screaming!'" I protested. "I was dragged! Dragged, then lifted up on Liam's shoulder and dropped on the-"

"Just... stop." Deirdre said with a pained groan, her face falling into one hand.

"Well... what do I do now, then?" I asked, very much at a loss as I looked back and forth between a bewildered Raven and a clearly embarrassed-on-my-behalf Deirdre.

"I am not certain." Raven answered honestly, looking quite uncomfortable, glancing about as though Adria were going to pop out of the woodwork and unleash her rage at all in attendance. "I would recommend just... remaining scarce for a little while."

"But what about 'questing'?" I persisted. "What about filling in for Kyril?"

"I do not know." Raven shook his head, and I heard Deirdre mutter something under her breath. From the expression on her face and the tone of her voice, I could tell it was something that did not paint me- or Kyril- in a favorable light.

With a long, slow sigh, I turned away from the Vardo and shuffled off toward what the people of Bristol referred to as the 'Buttery'- a line of food shops on the east side of the city.

Not long after I had drifted away from the Vardo, I sat at an old wooden table amidst a large crowd who was staring up at a juggler on a nearby stage, tending to a small portion of shepherd's pie.

I was not sure what to do with myself. I could always go back to Birmingham and sit in the office waiting for another assignment... but then again, I couldn't. This was to be my last-ditch attempt at doing or experiencing something incredible before my funds ran low and I would have to go home, head hung in shame as I explained to my parents that my search for wonder in the world was a waste of time.

I let out another heavy sigh, my head falling into my hands, fingers raking through my hair.

"You look awfully depressed for a man seated in the middle of, perhaps, the most festive place in England."

My attention was called away from my own thoughts as I raised my head to see a cheerfully-faced woman looking down at me, a plate of food in one hand and a goblet in the other. From her attire, I could identify her clearly as one of the Gypsies I had seen meandering about (although my experience questing had been minimal, I had seen and been introduced to a number of them)

"... Does the term 'kicking and screaming' hold any meaning for you?" I asked, my tone dry shook off the momentary surprise at my sudden company.

"Oh." Her eyes widened as she realized what I was referring to; Raven was quite correct.

The woman blinked, then slowly sat down, quickly regaining her good humor.

"No worries, love. Everybody makes mistakes in their first missions... may I ask your name?"

"Davem." I said, my mind unwilling to invest itself completely in this conversation yet; for all I knew, this was just another bid to embarrass me somehow.

"Is... is that your-"

"Everyone calls me 'Davem'. I'm used to it."

"Very well." She nodded, the smile returning to her face. "Talia Tale; Bardmistress of the Band of the Twisted Claw... Might I ask what brought you here?"

It wasn't anywhere near as long as story as it felt like, but every bit as dour. Surprisingly though, she sat there and nodded between bites of her food, her expression one that suggested she was genuinely engrossed in the tale.

Of course, she may have been acting. She was a bard, after all.

"... And so, after coming all the way here, my first mission was a dismal failure." I concluded. "I do not know what sort of consequences have resulted from my actions- probably compromised the Band's efforts at espionage as a whole, but really... I suppose I can't count on finding what I was looking for here after all."

Talia nodded slowly, looking away from me at the stage which was now clearing off in preparation for the following act. At last, she looked back to me with a thoughtful expression.

"Davem... You said Adria lost her patience with you after you mentioned enemy traitors infiltrating the Band, correct?"

"I have a feeling she lost her patience some time ago, before /arrived..." I murmured, but nodded. "Yes. Was it that which had her so upset?"

"... You also said that you were likely to go back to the New World once your ship arrives. When will that be?"

This was one question I hadn't expected. Of course, at that point, chances were she was asking because the Band at large was eager to have me out of their hair. However, the manner in which she spoke made me wonder.

"... Judging by the usual schedules I saw back at home? I would say... probably a month, at the maximum?"

"There is something I would like you to do." She said, taking a bite of her meal and washing it down with a quaff from her goblet. "You are, as you have led me to understand, proficient with the gathering and organizing of information?"

"Yes..." I nodded, now wondering if she was going to ask me to stay on as the Band's treasurer or something- something I doubt Deirdre would have been happy about. However, this was far from the case.

"Do you wish to know why your mention of Band members turning traitor affected Adria so?" Talia proceeded, now nudging her food and drink aside to focus on what she was saying. "And, incidentally... if you want to hear a *real* tale of heroism that will shed some light of wonder on you as *well* as your predecessor Master Aleksandrov... there is a story I have been meaning to research and write, but I believe that, perhaps, someone of your talents and desires would be better suited to the task."

I blinked, tilting my head a little. I was certain she must have been mistaken- that she must realize I had no business at all being in Bristol- or even in England- any more... but that jovial, confident smile never left her face. I couldn't help asking.

"What story is this?"

"The story of a man named Tovias Farraday."

Entry #3 - Illumination

Somewhere in the course of the week following Talia Tale's proposition, I received a letter from AdventureTemps, effectively terminating me from their company. I was cited for 'poor performance'. I suppose one of the members of the Band- be it Adria or some other member who had heard of my 'exploits' had sent them a letter of recommendation for my removal... but honestly, I was well beyond caring by that point.

Roughly one year ago, an incident had taken place in the city of Bristol, unbeknownst to the rest of the world- half because the Gypsies had prevented it from spilling out, and half because all traces of it had been erased from the minds of the locals by herbal witchery.

The incident surrounded a single day- the last day, actually- of Tovias Farraday, Mage Champion of the Band of the Twisted Claw, circa Year of the Quest 2011 (terminology which I will explore further in other writings... if I have the time). I will not relate the entire story here, as even the fragmented bits and pieces Talia supplied me with would be enough to fill a great many pages.

Talia wished for me to seek out every last little fact regarding that day from every last person involved (short of Tovias himself for obvious reasons), and to compile it in a manuscript which she could then bind and give to Kyril Aleksandrov and to other interested parties should they wish to read it. I cannot tell why Kyril- if rumors about him were to be believed- would have any interest in such a thing, but Talia was most insistent.

The story was intriguing from the beginning; Talia told me of a man who joined the Band with the explicit goal of turning on them, only to realize at the moment of his death that he had grown to love them, and be loved by them in return... and as she told me this, it became so very clear why Adria had reacted the way she had.

I did not need to look up to see the expression of outrage on Adria's face as I walked toward the Order of the Sun facade. At least I could take solace in the fact that it probably was not half as vicious as it might have been a short while ago.

"How dare you show your face here again after such a display of *incompetence*?" She asked straightaway.

"I have no place else to go." I replied honestly, shrugging and raising the bundle of parchment I was carrying. Most of it was blank except for the notes I had taken from Talia. "But I am actually here on Band business."

"What?" She asked, quirked a brow. She had been speaking to a pair of Questers, and although I was hesitant to want to interrupt, she was more than willing to attend to getting rid of me as quickly as could be managed.

"I suppose I am no longer a Quester, but... Talia Tale has asked me to collect information for a project of hers."

Adria raised a hand to the questing pair, stating that she would only be a moment longer. Narrowing her eyes, she glanced down at the bundle of papers I carried, and back to me.

"... What do you know about a man named 'Tovias Farraday'?" I asked.

The second the words left my lips, I noticed an instant softening of her features, a hand raising to her lips as she drifted back a pace. Her gaze fell to the ground for a moment, then she turned back to the pair at her side.

"As I said, simply meditate; if you have a vision, you may relate it to me." She said swiftly before nodding them off toward a nearby tree. Afterward, she looked back to me with the same serious- yet oddly somber- look. "As for you... please, sit." She stepped back, offering me space on the Order's modest bench.

Taking a careful seat and retrieving my quill and ink, I watched as Adria took a deep breath and sat down beside me.

"... This may take some time." She warned, but I only smiled- mostly at seeing this side of her.

"I have all the time you can spare." I replied. "Talia would not settle for anything less than the whole truth."

"Then that is what I shall give you." She replied, folding her arms as and beginning her tale.

It is really rather amazing, the kind of effect a simple *name* can have.

It's no doubt that my reputation as a fool had been spread around the Band, as was evidenced by many of the looks I got approaching members of both the Order and the Lunar Tribe, but the moment I mentioned Tovias, I was immediately treated differently- not because I was any more important than I was before, but because his memory clearly evoked some intense emotions among them.

This was not true for *every* member of the Band; the newer members were not familiar with Tovias, but his reputation was apparently one to be respected.

Vashta Nerada- also once known as Magdelene Bloom- was the leader of the Lunar Tribe, and yet she spoke of Tovias affectionately, as though even as a member of the Order, he was one of their own. I suppose that made sense; he was the Mage Champion, so at least part of him would transcend that particular rivalry. She spoke of how he helped save the life of Puddle the Fool, another major player in the tale, carrying her all the way from the other side of the city.

The normally ever-cheerful and rather flighty Rose Peregrine grew serious, almost stoic at the mere mention of Tovias, her tale everything from tense to heartwrenching.

A barbarian who was closely aligned with the Band by the name of Grease Lugnut confirmed the embarrassing chapter of Tovias' experiences in the Barbarian's training arena known as the Bear Pit- a story other Barbarians were willing to chime in and laugh right along with.

Derian Solarii- a Knight of the Order of the Sun- related the details of the chaotic battle that took place that night, wherein the forces of Light were thrown into an impromptu battle for their lives against an otherworldly- yet unsettlingly familiar- foe, which had emerged through a rift in reality itself.

Randalf the Blue, a wizard who had made Bristol his temporary abode, spoke of how it had taken all of his magical power to contain the epic battle, and keep the enemy from bleeding out into an unsuspecting world.

Even Mistress Thomasina de Paris, the Queen's loyal companion, had a story to tell; that fateful day, he had stopped by the Noble's Glade on an errand, and the two had had a peaceful conversation on precisely what he was meant to achieve in the world... I suppose in that way, he and I would have had a rapport. Although I don't suppose there's any way in hell I could ever achieve his level of adoration.

By the end, I was starting to feel as though I had spoken to everybody but the Queen Herself... but there was one group to whom I had avoided speaking with for as long as I could manage.

The sounds of battle on Legion Field were still audible in the close distance as I came to stand near the front gates of Bristol... a slight knot forming in my stomach as I saw the mass of black, red and gold before me... but that quickly subsided, changing into an overall feeling of disconcertion.

Simeon Malificus, Praetor of the Draco Disciples, was crouched near some of the village youths, a broad smile on his face as he regaled them with some story or other, while the other Disciples lay on one of the sturdy benches surrounding the well in the square; Liam and Vinz I saw right off, and nestled in the middle someplace was a figure with fiery red curly locks that I couldn't see all that well.

Casting them aside- as neither Vinz nor Liam had been around one year prior, I approached Simeon carefully as he stood up and away from the children.

"Whomever said there was 'no rest for the wicked' was poorly informed." I called out as I came to stand a few feet away from him.

Simeon drew himself to his full height as he turned to face me, a curious look changing into a broad smirk as he quickly recognized me. Casting a glance at his napping minions, he looked back to me with a shrug.

"Indeed... you must be lost; if you wish, I can have Liam and Vinz escort you back to your Mistress again." He chuckled, but I quickly shook my head.

"I actually have business with you." I replied. "Or rather... I have business with the man known as 'Festivus Merrier', as you were known during Tovias' time."

Simeon hesitated, his inquisitive expression returning.

"Tovias... Farraday? The Band's Mage Champion year last?" He asked, his interest instantly piqued. "And just what would you know about him?"

"More, if you would be so kind as to humor me for a while." I said, reaching out to present the writings I had already amassed.

In what could be considered a remarkable display of good faith, I gave him the bundle of papers for him to look over, which he did with a surprising level of interest.

"It appears you have been busy in your time not bumbling around at the Gypsies' behest." He commented, flipping back and forth. "Although your handwriting is-"

"I know, I know, I am well aware." I interrupted him, reaching out to take the papers back from him. "I would be obliged to ask you your take on what happened that day... as well as Ruby Nightshade's if she is available. As I understand it, Thomas Wisseu and Scarlett O'Hemlock are no longer around..."

"You would likely want to speak with my daughter Estella as well." He said, absently gesturing back to the pile of sleeping Disciples, at the redheaded girl in the middle. "She was there, although I believe she was drinking rather heavily that day..."

"Later, I suppose." I nodded, ready and eager to speak with the Draco Disciple commander... a rather invigorating thought, all told.

It was fascinating, getting to hear Simeon's side of the story back when he was infiltrating the Band as an ally of theirs. Of course, there were bits of the story he decided to keep to himself, but what I was given was really quite interesting... particularly regarding the part where the story's mysterious antagonist made itself known. Rarely do forces of evil ever get along, but this took such rivalries to a new level altogether.

All the while, I couldn't help occasionally glancing back to the sleeping Disciples, particularly Estella, but it didn't look like I would be able to get to her anytime soon.

Even once Simeon finished his story, I was swept up almost immediately by Ruby Nightshade who- after having a short laugh at my expense- spirited me away to give her part of the tale- a significant one, as she was the commander of the Bristol Disciples at the time, and responsible for much of Tovias' inner turmoil.

Once I had completed my interviews with the Disciples, I departed as swiftly as I could, resigning myself to putting off my meeting with Estella to another time. My guess was, judging by what I'd heard of her behavior, she would have little to contribute anyway (although her alternate self was very much the opposite).

The day ended for me with a partial interview with Gertrude Normyl, a witch whom I had some difficulty finding, but who was more than willing to speak her piece about Tovias- about how he would do chores for her and her sisters, and about her own adventures *within* the rift Master Solarii had mentioned... chilling, to be sure, and leaving me all the more anxious to finish my interviews in the morning.

This was... a strange morning.

Emerging from one of Bristol's many inns (each one filled to capacity thanks to the Faire), I saw the usual gaggle of busy, festive people wandering the streets and merchants selling their wares... it was beginning to feel more and more like home.

It took a conscious effort to remind myself that I would be heading home within a few weeks' time, and that even the Faire would not be here forever; This was only happening because the Queen was visiting, and when was that likely to happen again?

Walking up toward Farnham Way, I was surprised to stumble upon Gertrude the Witch, whose darker countenance was a jarring incongruity to the rest of the brightly lit Faire, much like the Danse Macabre whose presence here was *entirely* inexplicable to me.

"How now, Davem?" She addressed me cordially, looking down at the papers I still carried. "I cry thy pardon, we will have to hold off on our discussions for a moment; I must seek out my sisters, but I would gladly see the anon at the Nipperkin's Kingdom." She said, referring to playground along High Street.

I blinked, but nodded.

"Very well. I will wait for you there, I suppose."

"Have you seen Estella yet?" She asked, taking step, beginning to pass me. "She is at Tuscany Tavern with her draconic ilk should you wish to."

I nodded once again, waving her a thanks before turning west to wander up Guild Hall Row.

Tuscany Tavern was one of the busiest among Bristol's drinking establishments, but also one of the most comfortable. Thanks to its being situated beneath a thick canopy of trees, one could drink comfortably without having the sun beating down on one's back.

The day was young though, and far more temperate than fairegoers were accustomed to, so the crowd around Tuscany Tavern was sparse... it was easy to pick Estella out, especially when she was not sandwiched between two other Disciples.

I came to a halt at the intersection between Guild Hall Row, High Street and King's Landing, looking up the hill upon which the tavern was situated.

Sitting there on one of the stone walls surrounding the tavern, one leg draped over the other beneath her skirt and pants, was the redheaded girl from the day before. I could not be sure what she was doing on her own, but the way she looked this way and that, I assumed she was waiting for the other Disciples...

I suppose... I suppose I had not really paid all that much attention to her before now, before that point... I remembered her cap, her hair, that impish countenance she had, but... well... there was something different about her. She *looked* different. I couldn't explain it, really. Not at first.

Time seemed to be acting outside of its normal course, the girl standing before me, speaking before I realized she had even noticed me.

I heard her giggling maliciously at my expense (by now I could recognize such things), and my eyes blinked away the momentary haze. They looked to the ground, then gradually made their way back up her form- catching for a moment on her now-bodice-clad body.

The bodice, that must have been it... and yet, regardless of this change in fashion, I could not help thinking that this was not what I had expected of the Praetor's daughter...

"Oh *God*..." I heard her say, and immediately my gaze jerked up to her bright green eyes, glittering with mischief. Currently she was in the process of rolling them in a gesture of sarcastic, second-hand embarrassment. "Pick up your jaw, would you?"

"Ah- I-..." I gasped, trying again to shake off the fog in my mind. "I was- I wanted to ask-"

"Oh, right, you were asking people about that Gypsy mage from year last..." She said, giving her eyes another mocking toss. "Tovias or whatever it was..."

"Y- yes..." I managed... for some reason unable to collect my thoughts, or put them into proper words... and frustratingly unable to keep my gaze from drifting down from her eyes to her garb-sculpted frame.

"Oh, God's *death*."

I was startled- quite sharply- from my lack-of-thoughts by a black mass that suddenly impeded my vision.

Blinking hurriedly, I turned to see that Gertrude Normyl had caught up with me, and had removed her hat... and was now using it to block the view of Estella's body (in all honesty, I'm not certain whether that, or the sight of her tightly wound bun of scraggly hair was more startling).

"G- Gertrude! I-... I was just... I was on my way to-" I began, but my voice faltered at her chiding glare. I didn't have to look to see that Estella could barely contain her snide grin- if she was trying at all.

"Come on." She grumbled, giving Estella a huff as she finally took her hat away and put it back in its place atop her head. Turning, she began at a slow pace up High Street.

For my part, my feet stumbled to follow along, but my head kept wanting to turn back to look at Estella, my mouth moving in some poorly conceived effort at speech.

"I- I was... I just... I wanted to ask Estella- a- ask her about a few small things-"

"Hey. These are at *least* 'medium' things." She said, folding her arms, and giving me a pouting expression before letting it dissolve into that toothy little smirk of hers.

I swallowed before forcing myself to turn, running along after Gertrude, my face flushed.

When I looked back again, she had resumed her perch on the stone wall, once again searching for her companions.

Just then, I yelped at a sharp pain in my ear as Gertrude's fingers pinched my earlobe, dragging me along behind her.

It was back to work for me, but since then, I've been unable to fully will away that infuriating blush, or the thoughts of that wicked grin...

My senses will return with a good night's sleep, I'm certain.

I think.

Hopefully.

Entry #4 - Dinner Date

One by one, the Band of the Twisted Claw not only got used to seeing me around, but actually began to *enjoy* my presence- a far cry from being stared at, wondering what mistake I would make next. Maybe it was the fact that they saw I was taking the task seriously. Even others, such as the Witches, the Barbarians and some of the Nobles actually became accustomed to my presence (although with regard to the lattermost, I did have to pull my rarely pulled rank as a merchant's son so as not to be mistaken for a 'dirty gypsy criminal' [spoken ironically, of course]).

Between the sheer number of stories that needed to be told, the length of each one and the amount of people I had to hunt down (even excluding people like Sydney Dove, Aggie McGee and others who were not readily available), it took over a week to compile the information I would need to write Tovias' story. However, what probably took even longer was the process of transcribing the stories and factoids into chronological notes, each with their own myriad footnotes.

Honestly, though? I would not have traded the experience for anything. It's true that the whole thing could have been some elaborate ploy to keep me out of the band's business, but I could not remember the last time any task I had ever undertaken had been so fulfilling. Why, by the end, I could almost feel Tovias' spirit- wherever it was now- looking over my shoulder with a smile of approval as I worked.

There has been only one little hitch in the process...

For whatever reason- and thankfully so- Gertrude Normyl never saw fit to tell anybody about the little 'incident' near Tuscany Tavern... although to be perfectly frank, I would not be surprised if some members of the Band had not figured me out anyway.

Estella Foxglove...

So often, I would see her wandering around Bristol; laying about with her comrades, or in a street by herself, running afoul of questers, getting into a wrestling match with Will Spellworthy or some sort of *potato* if I had heard correctly, chatting heartily with one of the boys of the Buskin Frolic... I was beginning to see her- or at least *notice* her far more often than I used to. This would have been worrisome enough, but... there is more to it than that.

My mind has taken to thinking of her often... not *fondly*, mind you, just... it's strange.

In my youth, I would read so many stories about bold knights rescuing damsels in distress, children escaping from dark witches, adventurers traveling to distant lands to slay terrible dragons... but I had never come across someone quite like Estella in all my obsessive readings.

As the daughter of Simeon Malificus- who had murdered her beloved mother in pursuit of power and subsequently brushed her aside as an afterthought, she was hard to place..

She was no cultist, no great force of darkness. Hell, even as a purported mage, she was likely no better with magic than I am.

She was a member of the Draco Disciples by blood if nothing else, but... I simply could not reconcile her presence among them. Even the Gypsies could offer no solid response to that question when it was put to them (in a surreptitious manner; I was not going to tip my hand so quickly if I did not have to). Most of them believed she cared nothing for the plots and machinations of her father or her compatriots; some of them even believed she could be convinced to join the Band with proper goading...

... and it was *that* thought which truly had me wondering amid my own fluttering insides...

Doubtless, her father would not suffer her flippant impudence for him or for their work forever. What if he tried to kill her? Perhaps sacrificing her for power as he had his wife? Would the Band be tasked with her rescue? I dared not wonder if I had proven myself to the Band enough that I might be included in such a thing... what would she say if she knew I had done such a thing? Risked my life to save hers?

There was always the possibility that she could mature into a villainous role, finally taking her place beside her father or- more likely- usurping her position... We would certainly have to thwart her... but even then, I couldn't... I could not forget that oddly charming little smirk of hers. She would escape, certainly. Perhaps she and I might meet later by chance, sitting at the shore of Lake Elizabeth, talking about our futures... I would watch her laugh and roll her eyes at the notion of giving up her life of evil, and yet...

Or through some miracle, maybe she *would* join the Band, bringing her snarky, facetious attitude to the Gypsy Camp, keeping them on their toes every day... as well as that mischievous little grin... perhaps ultimately abandoning

them as well and running off with Will Spellworthy with whom she had gone to school, or that Frolicker boy I often saw her speaking to... or...

Ideas like those above have begun to pester me so often; every night, and every time I close my eyes in the day... just a desire to see how her story would end... a desire to see *her*.

Suffice it to say that I recognized the portent of such thoughts; At first I had hoped it was just Toviass' story rubbing off on me a little too much, but such thoughts have become progressively more insistent, more vivid...

Something must be done about this.

"Oh God's death, you again." Ruby Nightshade rolled her eyes as I made myself evident, approaching where she stood on the Bristol road near Tuscany Tavern.

"I'm afraid so." I agreed with a gentle shrug. "I... wanted to ask you something."

"Oh?" She gave me that expression- the one that was both humoring, and gearing up for a long, haughty laugh.

It would have only made slightly more sense, but I wasn't terribly interested in Ruby. I mean, maybe on some subconscious level I was. Most men probably are.

But no; Ruby had decided very early on that I wasn't worth seducing, and I had decided she wasn't worth being seduced *by*. The man who ends up with Ruby will have to possess certain nuances and possess a strong fortitude against poisons.

Moving on:

Frankly, I don't know why I felt I had to ask Ruby to begin with. Technically she *was* the second-in-command, and damned if I would ask Simeon-bloody-Malificus... though- again- it would have made more sense.

"I wanted to ask-"

At that moment, a voice piped up from behind me- one that made me cringe.

"Liam and Vinz are back at the Duck, so we ought to- ...What does *he* want?"

Immediately, my face fell into a waiting palm.

"We are just about to find out." Ruby replied, delighting in my reaction to the arrival of Estella Foxglove, who now crouched on the stone wall behind me. "And I get the distinct notion that it is going to be most entertaining."

"Turn him around." The younger Draco Disciple crooned. "I want to see if he can *look* at me yet."

I stood my ground, although my face remained buried in the palm of my hand.

"Well?" Ruby persisted. "What was it you were going to ask?"

I won't repeat here the curses that went through my mind at that moment, but nevertheless I managed to keep my composure... sort of. That annoyingly noticeable blush never left my cheeks.

"It is... a matter of a personal nature." I said gingerly.

"Ooo! Now I *really* want to hear it!" Estella grinned, swinging her feet out from where she perched, sitting on the wall and crossing one leg over the other. I fumbled over my words, biting my lip.

"I do not have the patience to wait for you to rally your nerve." The elder Disciple said, feigning disinterested impatience. "Stop wasting my time and ask what it is you wish to ask before I take my leave of you."

I sighed to myself. There was nothing else for it; Ruby would be with Liam for the rest of the day, or worse, with Simeon. It was just how they seemed to want to split themselves up. I had to speak up now.

But Estella was *right there*...

"He's hardly even *looked* at me and he's speechless. Maybe I could give you a few lessons, Ruby." Estella chuckled from where she sat.

"Hey!" Ruby pouted back, looking down at her chest, actually adjusting herself a bit.

"Oh God's teeth..." I buried my face in my hands at last, trying to stop blushing like a schoolboy... "I wish to-..." I began, my self-awareness kicking in and causing me to trail off.

"You wish to what?" Ruby said with a curious quirk of her head.

Shuddering, I finally thrust a rigid arm backward, pointing in Estella's direction.

"What? What about Estella?"

"You want me to leave?" Estella asked, switching up the positioning of her legs.

"DINNER." I said sharply, trying to remain stone-faced, but probably looking comical with the effort.

"You want to *eat* Estella?!" Ruby asked, deliberately slow on the uptake from what I could figure.

"You couldn't afford me." Estella said with a lascivious smirk... or rather the one she already wore growing a hair wider as Ruby opted for the tamer of two misinterpretations.

"Where would you even put it all? There is no 'There' there!" She exclaimed, gesturing to my negligible stomach.

"NO!" I finally said, arms waving in front of me. "I. Want to take. Estella. To dinner. A dinner that I am going to pay for. And that we are going to eat!"

This was not how I had envisioned the scene playing out, but either way it was out there now... for contemplation or straight-up ridicule.

There was a long, uncomfortable silence.

"*Why?*" Ruby asked, looking at me as though I'd grown a second head.

"*Why not?*" Estella countered, sounding every bit as insulted as you might expect she would. She hopped down from her seat and moved to stand between Ruby and I... turning to look me over. "But yes... *Why?*" She asked. I rolled my eyes and looked away as she made an active effort of pushing out her chest.

"Cut it out." I managed. "Do not get me wrong, I haven't forgotten; You're still evil, you're young, and I'm-"

"*You're a dirty old man.*" She commented, and I blushed again. Nearing thirty years of age as I was it was fair enough a cop, of course, but she didn't have to point it out.

"I just need to get her- agh." I started, having been speaking to Ruby, but I managed to force myself to look down at Estella instead. "I need to get *you* out of my head!"

"Aww, but there is so much *room* in here!" she teased, but Ruby only smiled.

It was true enough, though; After straining my mind for some solution as to how to cure myself of my inexplicable fascination, I had concluded that the easiest way to prove she was a bratty little psychopath unworthy of further fixation was to meet with her in a one-on-one atmosphere. That way, any delusions would be shattered forthwith.

"I see... Well, Estella, you *are* a woman now- as our friend here has no doubt noticed. You are old enough to make decisions for yourself. I must say, however, that I *do* appreciate his... 'traditional' approach." She mused. "What say you?"

Estella glanced back at her, then turned to me again, hiding that cruel grin behind a thoughtful façade.

"Well... you *are* an old man, and a gypsy-"

"In point of fact, not a Gypsy; Technically an intern-Lightbringer." I corrected her, but she continued as though I'd not spoken.

"...spineless, a bit of a nitwit, and you could stand to visit a barber..."

"Are you going anywhere with this?" I muttered, self-consciously rubbing my upper lip.

"On the other hand? Take me for example; when I want to build a fire, I don't simply throw a blanket over it and say 'there, I warmed it up, that's good enough for me'. A little meet-an'-greet over cheese fritters is hardly going to fix whatever might be wrong in your mucked-up little brain. Which- apparently- is a lot. So, short answer: Not on your bloody life."

"You could have just said that." I answered, shoulders slumping slightly.

Really, I suppose that was exactly what I had been expecting.

"... Then again, it's a free meal, *and* I can use this as blackmail some time later, so... sure. Why not?"

I stared blankly at her as she turned to join Ruby, the two of them walking off together toward the Dirty Duck. She turned and called back over her shoulder.

"Five and Thirty at the Buttery. Don't be late... *old man.*"

I sighed and cupped my face one last time.

I got to the Buttery fairly early. Not too early. Like, Five... Four... Okay, I got there way earlier than I had to. But I was getting to the point where I couldn't focus on anything else.

So there I sat, constantly checking my timepiece only to see that not even a full minute had passed since the *last* time I'd checked it.

By and by, that parade of less-than-a-minute increments led to the Five and Thirty mark... without the slightest trace of Estella Foxglove.

I gave her the benefit of the doubt, figuring she probably wasn't going to treat this with the utmost seriousness. Perhaps she would show up five or ten minutes late... fifteen if she really wanted to put me through the wringer.

But then, by the time I finally stopped checking my watch, it was nearly Seven of the clock.

Clearly, she'd forgotten. Or had just been messing with me the whole time. Either way, I was alone in the steadily emptying row of food merchants.

I stood up, shuffling slowly away from the mass of tables thereabout. The slight relief at not having to worry about the whole thing after all was almost completely smothered by pangs of disappointment... pangs which really shouldn't have been there. I didn't know what I'd been expecting, to be honest.

I saw the Gypsy Vardo already in the midst of closing its doors... all of their number who remained seeming in quite a jolly mood. *More* jolly at this time of day than they usually were.

"You all seem awful perky." I said halfheartedly as I sat on the rock-ring surrounding the Fountain thing by the vardo, not really caring who heard me, or bothered to reply.

"You missed it?" The voice belonged to Effie Cue, one of the band's Scribes. I did not notice straightaway, but whatever I had missed seemed to genuinely surprise her.

"Apparently." I shrugged, sighing and looking down at my feet.

"What happened?" She persisted, shuffling a bit closer.

"I feel pretty lousy right now. I'm not sure I want to talk about it." I explained quietly, even as Effie hesitated in her closing duties to hear me out in whatever I chose to say. At last, I sighed. "I was supposed to meet someone at the Buttery for dinner... but she never came."

"I am sorry." The redheaded gypsy said sympathetically, but shrugged. "Well, if it makes you feel any better, the Draco Disciples were apprehended today!"

"The whos were what?" I said, only realizing what she'd said after a rather long and awkward silence.. "The Disciples were captured?"

"...Yes?" Effie nodded slowly, raising an eyebrow with uncertainty... maybe I'd shown a little *too* much interest in the fate of the Gypsies' red-and-black nemeses. "They tried to use dark magicks to control Thoren, but some of the other Lightbringers managed to-"

"I- I have to-... they are in the prison, right?" I asked, words and feet stumbling over themselves.

"... Yes?" Effie blinked, but by the time she had managed a response, I was already running back toward the buttery. I heard her call out after me, bidding me that she hoped I would feel better soon, but I was already feeling... okay, not 'better', but *hopeful* at the very least... an odd feeling to *have* where Draco Disciples are concerned.

Nevertheless...

-

I had only been inside of the Bristol Dungeon once before, in the interest of researching 'The Story of Tovias Farraday'. I knew how dank and cold it was, but that particular night had been warmer than usual thanks to the day's warm weather.

Estella had been placed in her own cell, as had each of the other Draco Disciples; for obvious reasons, the authorities didn't want them bunking anywhere near each other (although when it came to rooms with not but stone floors and wood boards, 'bunking' was an incredibly generous choice of words).

"This is how you treat a lady?" She said, but was answered only by her echoes... and the sound of approaching footsteps.

"Oh, what now? I'm not talking, and if you think I'm going to let you get all 'handsy' with me again-..."

"Um..."

At that point, I thought it was probably best to announce my presence. Frankly, I didn't *want* to hear the rest.

I stepped forward, into view of where she peered out from the iron bars.

"S'you." She said simply, a wry smile appearing on her features. I imagined prison did not have much of an effect on her, considering- as a Disciple- she had probably spent plenty of time there. If anything, she was probably happy I was there- she could kill some time making comments at my expense.

"Indeed." I answered, thankful for the dim light of the Dungeon hall; it finally succeeded at hiding my blush.

"Oh, right." She said with a weak chuckle. "I missed your little 'date', didn't I?"

I bowed my head slightly.

I hadn't asked the Gypsies the particulars of what had happened. I only knew that Malificus had failed. It didn't matter... to me, anyway.

"I hardly had a choice. Praetor takes priority."

"Praetority." I murmured, and caught her wince at the pun.

"So what? You came here to make fun of me? To lecture me?"

"...No." I answered at last. "Just a moment, please."

"It's not like I've anyplace else to be." She muttered as I turned on my heel and left the hallway, hurrying back to the guard station. Soon enough though, I returned, carrying a tray with me.

"I had to let the guards look through it... make sure there weren't any lockpicks or anything..."

I would later come to find that the Prison feeds its occupants with scraps from the Dirty Duck- some of which were half-eaten and all of which were cold and stale. It was probably because of that that she couldn't completely mask the brightening in her face when she beheld what lay upon the tray.

It wasn't much; a few skewered chunks of meat, a fresh cob of corn I'd broken in half, some fried potatoes and two large tankards of cool water... and a pair of chocolate-covered strawberries for good measure.

"The merchants were starting to close. I got what I could." I explained as I slowly took to my knees, laying the tray on the floor outside the cell. "Hate to say, no cheese fritters."

I watched her hesitate, probably trying to think of some clever quip... but ultimately, she knelt down across from me, looking back and forth from me to the food.

"It's not like I've got anything else to do." She said at last, grabbing for one of the slim tankards, which barely fit through the bars. "You didn't *poison* it, did you?"

"Of course not." I said, a smile forcing its way onto my face even as I fought to keep composed, raising and clanking my tankard against hers. "Cheers."

"You know..." She said, plucking a cube of ice from her own, "Since I started wearing the bodice, Ruby taught me a trick I can do with these... want to see it?"

I sighed raggedly, face-palming once more.

"Maybe later, Estella... just hurry up and eat before they throw me in there with you."

"And you'd *complain*?" She countered with a grin.

"Just eat."

Over the course of the meal, I finally had the chance to ask her about her experiences one year ago, regarding Tovias' story. It was as Simeon had said; she could not remember most of it, thanks to an excess of mead throughout the day back when she still took to drinking.

Thankfully she did remember snippets of the night the mysterious enemy force came to Bristol, although she had done little else besides observe... although she did still demand my chocolate strawberry in exchange for telling me that much.

Once she had finished, I looked down at the dwindling tray of food, then back up at her.

"Hm. Looking at my *face* this time, are you?" She asked with that little sneer of hers.

"... Estella..." I began, ignoring the blush and the fact that we were in a prison, focused only on her eyes. "... I have a serious question for you."

"You aren't going to ask me to join the bloody *Gypsies*, are you?" She asked dryly... and I suppose my hesitation was good enough of an answer for her. She gave a heavy sigh, shaking her head.

"You people are bloody hopeless." She said with a predictable roll of the eyes, but at last she looked back at me with an amused smile. "At least you tried to bribe me with food this time... more'n the others've ever done."

"Estella, I-"

"Visiting hours are over."

My words were cut short by the firm tone of one of the prison guards... much to my irritation. But still, I was not about to ignore him. According to Tovias' story, they had every right to be as strict as they pleased.

With a sigh of my own, I reached down to take the tray from the ground.

As I began to lift it, Estella's hand reached through the bars, and placed her empty tankard down upon its surface.

"I'll *consider* it."

I barely had time to register her words, my eyes widening as I was led out by the guards.

I made a brief stop outside of the Bristol Gates for the purpose of giving Talia my now-completed notes of Tovias' story, and on some level, I was curious to see what she would come up with. It was a riveting tale, to be sure.

More importantly- to me, anyway- I had achieved my goal; I had gotten my audience, as I wished to have... but contrary to my desires, instead of dispelling the illusion, those moments on opposite sides of a row of cold iron bars confirmed a most unsettling truth:

I am in love with Estella Foxglove.

Entry #5 - [Untitled]

Going home is no longer an option for me.

I realized it shortly after I returned to my inn room for the night... after my visit with Estella and the subsequent realization.

I could not be certain exactly what the future held for her, but whatever it was, I would be there to see it... for better or for worse.

I was not about to tell any members of the Band about it- not yet, anyway. I wish I could say that- like Toviás- I simply did not want them to think I was compromising them by fraternizing with the enemy (but then again, I had compromised them once already- why would they be surprised at it happening again?).

The real reason for my reluctance to share the news of my infatuation... it had more to do with their opinion of *her* than of *me*.

By and large, they *hated* Estella.

I could understand, I guess. On top of being a Draco Disciple, she could be rude, snarky, crass and lazy. Even though she had helped the Band and the Dracos in their defeat of Loki one year ago, it was only at Ruby's direct order; otherwise, she probably would not have been pried away from her leisure in whatever form it took.

So often, I realized, I'd heard words like 'whore', 'trollop', 'wench', 'brat' and other unkind sentiments pass the lips of the Gypsies with regard to her... she had not garnered a positive reputation among them, and they were doing very little to encourage her to do so. More than once, I had been tempted to mention that those same Gypsy women had suffered similar insults from the people whose city- whose *lives*- they routinely saved. That they would not give her the benefit of the doubt was against everything they had expressed to me about their morals.

Really, there was a lot of groundwork to be done before any of my deepest desires could begin to come to fruition.

If Estella was to be taken seriously, she would need to be vouched for by someone the *Gypsies* could take seriously. Even after gathering the information necessary for the Toviás story to be written- and the friends I had made as a result- I was still far from being the kind of man who could convince the band to rally for Estella's sake (either as a potential ally, or as an enemy).

The following morning, I was unsurprised to hear that the Draco Disciples had already managed to escape from the Dungeon... well, escape or bribe their way out, it was the same result either way. But I could not be bothered with that; I had training to do.

I revisited the Vardo firstly, registering with Raven Hawkwood- no longer as a representative of another Quester, but there of my own accord. Much as Toviás Farraday had done before me, it was my intent to hone whatever skills I had until I was something worthy of the Band's attention (True, Talia Tale had already commended me on my skills as a Bard, having completed her request with flying colors, but I knew in my heart it would take more than information brokering to achieve what I hope to achieve).

I spent most of the morning doing gofer missions, solving riddles to the best of my ability and even spending a little bit of time upon Legion Field under the watchful eye of the Bristol Barbarians (I may not have been too terribly handy with a blade, but I had to learn the fine art sometime).

One item of particular note- both figuratively and quite *literally*- one of the incidental stops in the course of my morning rounds was at the Order of the Sun facade; Adria and her fellow Order member Robert O'Coppe had gone off to see to representing the faction in the festival parade, leaving only Percy the Abjurer behind. He and I had not really spoken much, but it was not *him* I found so intriguing.

Percy had been left with a small box, as well as a note from Gertrude Normyl:

The note contained a set of riddles concocted by Gertrude herself to test the wits of the average passers-by... which I considered to be a perfect test of my newfound Quester's mettle.

While the first two riddles were rather simple ones, it was the third one that gave me trouble, but in the end I triumphed and was granted the contents of the small box which Percy was watching over... and I was rather surprised at what it contained.

Within was a small, slender green-and-white object which I at first mistook for an old stocking... and in another life, it might have been. However, as the thing wriggled into an upright posture and stared up at me with two dull, maroon-colored buttons sewn upon its face, I realized that it was far more than a repurposed sock.

"What... is this?" I asked, looking to Percy with a look of confusion, and- as I rather expected- he had no response. As a matter of fact, he looked every bit as confused as I was.

Gingerly reaching out, I took the 'creature' from the box, looking its hand-stitched body over. Thankfully it did not still *smell* of sweaty feet, but I was still leery of it.

"Can you... can you talk?" I asked it, but it only continued to stare at me. It slowly leaned out toward my face as I moved in closer, very nearly toppling off of my cradling arm. Adjusting my hands, I reached out to pet the thing with my free hand.

"I guess that is a 'no'..." I murmured to myself, but smiled a bit nevertheless. "I'll call you... 'Toil'." I decided quickly, my thoughts still on the hectic training I had put myself through all morning- the riddles included. "Toil the Wormling."

I did not know where I got off deciding the thing's genus as well as its name- I probably could have asked Gertrude, but honestly if she was giving him away without a name of its own, I did not presume to think she cared one way or another.

"Hey."

I blinked, glancing back from where I'd been hacking away at one of the Barbarians' training dummies, a bit perplexed to see the Lunar Triber, Helena Handbasket, standing there. She was glancing around with disinterest, as though even she didn't understand- or even care why she was there (Personally I found it hard to understand how the Gypsies could condemn Estella and yet keep *her* around).

"What is it?" I asked warily, bracing myself for some inexplicable, oddly macabre comment.

Sighing impatiently, Helena walked toward me and plucked something from her namesake; It was a small envelope, which had some nearly illegible letters scrawled on its surface in red ink.

"Raven said you were doing a bunch of questing... this was at the Vardo in the morning. Nobody else wants it, so he sent me to give it to you."

"Who is it from?" I asked, out to accept it.

She said nothing, already turning and walking away. I wasn't sure if I saw her shrug or not, but it was just as well. I quickly opened the envelope, pulling out and unfolding the letter inside.

Come find me.

~ E.

Estella is dead.

It began the afternoon of my last entry, after I was given that damned note.

As it turned out, it was the beginning of some bizarre scavenger hunt, directing me to search the other various camps about Bristol; The Order of the Sun, Lunar Tribe, the Vardo, the Draco's usual haunts (I should have thought of another term to use just now...), and speaking to many of those whom I had spoken to before about the whole Tovias affair... only time time, as I spoke to Puddle the Fool, Ruby Nightshade, Will Spellworthy and others, the best they were able to provide in terms of explanation for what I was doing- what I was even *looking* for- were trinkets or bits of red and black clothing, each one scribed with a letter written in the same red ink as the note which had started this.

Every piece of the puzzle I found, I wondered why I had seen every Draco Disciple *but* Estella. Every face I saw was another face I wished was hers. I wanted to see her, to talk to her about the evening at the prison... even if she was not going to join the Gypsies, I could at least ask her if she... would ever *consider*...

As I searched, I began to hear odd rumors about her... the Draco Disciples telling me she was due to be shipped off to visit her family in the countryside, the Band suggesting that she might have ended up with child as a result of some tryst with a city guard... that one came from Helena, so I knew better than to accept that as truth.

I could not help wondering if Estella had told any of her compatriots of my visit... or if she had dropped a subtle hint to the Gypsies about it.

At last, my search brought me to the south end of High Street.

The dusk was just beginning to darken the sky, the jovial figure of the Bronze Jester nearby doing nothing to improve my mood.

I was in another place at the time, that is, my mind was... awash with thoughts of what I would say to her when she inevitably popped out of some corner or alley or even out of a tree...

I had not even noticed that I had company; Vashta Nerada- the Lunar Tribe's leader and foremost healer- had been standing near me... even asking if I was alright. I suppose I had been more 'intense' with regard to this mission than even I realized- I was told that I had snapped at more than one member of the Band in the midst of my focus, but I do not remember doing so... I would not be surprised if I had.

Lady Druscilla- one of the veterans from the Tovias Farraday incident was there as well, but I believe she was only there to protect Vashta... She had no interest in Estella's whereabouts. Neither did Vashta, I wager...

The three of us stood together, waiting for whatever was to come... I couldn't have known, did not suspect although I should have...but at the very least, I was unsurprised to see Simeon Malificus lumbering toward us from the distance, his lackey Vinz Clortho not too far behind.

I was not rightly in the mood for their usual games, and frankly if *Estella* had brought us all here, I presumed it was nothing anybody was going to die over.

I stood at my full height- not enough to stand up to *Simeon* by any means, but it was the best I could offer.

"Well. Isn't this a surprise." Simeon said, looking at me, but mostly over at Vashta and Druscilla... although I was standing in front, I suppose he had his priorities...

"Begging a thousand pardons... we were just-" Vashta began, nodding to Simeon and reaching up to take my shoulder and pull me away, but I stepped away from her the moment I felt her fingers brush against me.

"Where is Estella?" I asked flatly, ignoring my companions. "She has had me running around all day, and... and I want to talk to her. Tell me where she is."

"Even if she were present, it occurs to me you have had enough time with her *already*." He said musingly.

"Tell me where she is." I repeated, a bit more insistently. I felt Vashta's hand on my shoulder again, but this time my other shoulder was taken by Druscilla. Perhaps their presence had them more on guard than he otherwise might have been, but he only shook his head.

"She is, as you may have heard, visiting family in the country."

"When will she return?" I persisted. "Better yet, *where* in the country? I will find her and speak to her myself."

"Davem..." Vashta whispered. She was saying something, but I could barely hear her. I was too focused on the man before me.

"It is not your business to know the affairs of my family." Simeon replied simply, but oddly, Vinz spoke up at that moment.

"Whatever game she is playing, I do not see why we ought to keep her whereabouts a secret. Why not tell him? What harm could he possibly do?"

"Because it is none of his business, just as it is none of *yours*. Do not think I have not noticed *you* poking around where you do not belong, Vinz."

"Simeon, I will *not* be ignored!" I growled, taking another step toward and glaring at him. However, as Vashta and Druscilla's hands squeezed on my shoulders in an effort to pull me away from him, I rounded on them. "And you two! Enough of that! I know the two of you- I know the whole God-forsaken *Band* could care less about Estella. So go cease caring about her someplace else and *leave me be!*"

The two of them stared wide-eyed and wide-mouthed at my outburst, even as Vinz and Simeon continued.

"Why are you hiding her all of a sudden?" Vinz persisted, although I could barely hear him over my own voice, my own maelstrom of thoughts. "Did she ask you to do this? ...Have you done something to-?"

"You are out of *line*, Clortho!" Simeon snarled back at the smaller man. "I need not answer your-!"

"Tell me where she *is!*" I whirled back and shouted at him. Distracted, he turned to shout back at me over his shoulder:

"She has gone to see her mother!"

Everything stopped.

I did not see Vinz's reaction, nor Vashta or Druscilla's.

I just stood there, staring agape at him.

"... But... but her mother is... Fianna Foxglove... I thought you *killed*-?"

Simeon said nothing, turning and beginning to walk away from us, his face red with the slowly subsiding fury he had been all but reeking of moments before.

"Simeon, wait! I... does that mean... are you saying Fianna is still *alive*?" I murmured dumbly.

There was a terrible silence from behind me as Vashta's hand placed itself back on my shoulder.

"There are... *two* ways in which his statement can be interpreted, lad." She said softly, the hand squeezing once before sliding off of me as she spoke again.

"I'm sorry."

My eyes were on Simeon's back as he slowly disappeared into the crowded Bristol streets... only barely hearing Vashta and Druscilla behind me. They were saying something- speaking to me, perhaps- but I didn't hear them... did not *want* to hear them... did not want to hear what I had just heard.

"... Why..." was all I could manage. It was the only word I could find in a mind otherwise numb. My eyes finally fell away from Simeon, having lost him entirely by then... and my legs gave out. Falling to my knees, I barely caught myself before collapsing completely.

Again, I felt Druscilla and Vashta's hands on me.

"Lad... come back to the camp. You need water. Somethin' to eat, perhaps."

"Yes. Just sit down for a moment. You-" Druscilla started, before I jerked away from their hands, my head shaking.

"No... just leave."

"Lad, we cannot let ye-" Vashta began, but I shouted back at her.

"NO. GO AWAY."

I didn't need to look to see her flinch, or to hear as Druscilla murmured something to her. The two of them finally turned and left me alone with the Bronze Jester...

... as well as with Vinz Clortho.

"... Davem..." His low, but naturally abrasive and smug voice pierced my paralyzed thoughts.

"I sent my friends away just now." I whispered. "Why would I want to talk to *you*?"

"... I want to thank you... For what you've done."

It was probably the last thing I had expected him to say, but I heard- and caught from the corner of my eye- Vinz slowly getting to his knees near me.

"Do not mock me." I said weakly. "I did not save her. I did not avenge her. She's dead, and I couldn't do a damned thing about it. Just go away."

"I know how you feel, believe it or not." He answered.

"How? How in hell could you ever know how I feel, Clortho? You haven't even the slightest idea." I shivered... and that was when I realized I was actually *crying*.

"Davem..." Vinz began after taking a slow breath, "Estella and I were good friends. She was very nearly a daughter to me... Fianna and I were... t'was ancient history, before Simeon was ever the Praetor. Estella was the only piece of Fianna I had left. I swore long ago that I would not allow her to suffer the same fate as Fianna did. But like you, here I am, having missed my chance... for the second time."

I remained silent as Vinz spoke... not really having the strength to say anything more right then anyway.

"For what it it worth..." He began again, looking up at me from behind his spectacles although I did not have the strength even to lift my head and return his gaze. "... I do not plan to leave this unpunished."

I said nothing for a while.

There were a great many faire-goers and townfolk wandering along beside us, probably paying us a mere passing glance if that.

"Well..." Vinz sighed softly, slowly standing and offering me a hand. After looking up toward it, I raised a shaky hand and took it, regardless of the fact that it was in fact Vinz's. With some effort, he managed to get me back up on my unsteady legs. "You had best get back to your Gypsy friends... They will start believing... Believing that Simeon killed you as well."

"He may as well have." I answered quietly, slowly turning and beginning to stagger east down Guild Hall Row, back toward my room at the Inn.

I do not know if Vinz watched after me or left immediately after to seek out some way of getting revenge as he had suggested...

I have not eaten much since that day, or even left my room. I have not even been able to write about the experience until now... only able to write a word or two at most before losing myself to grief and anger; Anger at Simeon for what

he did, anger at the other Disciples for not stopping it, anger at the Gypsies for their apathy- just more Draco in-fighting, as far as they were concerned- and anger at myself most of all...knowing that it was all very likely my own fault.

Night after sleepless night, day after day without so much as setting foot outside of the inn into the happy, festive streets.

And here I shall remain until my family's ship arrives.

Entry #6 - Drachen Nachtmahr

Liam Bloodroot grumbled incoherently under his breath as he emerged from Bristol's front gates. The noon-day sun had long since begun to dip, the hour standing late in the after.

It wasn't as though he needed proper diction; there was no one around to hear him except a sparse, lethargic city guard posted here and there... it was a lethargic sort of day. Even Liam felt more exhausted than usual that particular afternoon, standing in the hot sun. Perhaps it was because he had just eaten, but it didn't matter.

As he wandered along into the thick trees some distance from the city limits, even the city guards, camping visitors to the Faire and even the Gypsies were nowhere to be found.

Just as well, Liam thought to himself. *If this is what I think it is, I will not want witnesses.*

In either hand, he held his trusty rapier and a note... a note that had been given to him in front of La Paloma as he awaited the arrival of the rest of his Draco Disciple cohorts.

Meet me in the clearing in the woods just outside Bristol; we have something to discuss.

This was all the note said. There was no signature, and the handwriting was unfamiliar to Liam; it certainly wasn't the chicken-scratch Robert O'Coppe claimed to be legible prose.

It was probably one of the Gypsies nevertheless. He couldn't guess who, but it hardly mattered.

Beyond the question of who could have sent the note and why, there was the distinct possibility that this was all some kind of trap. Even if it was, though, the extent of the Gypsies' righteous fury usually amounted to nothing more than a wallop with training foils or a thorough clothes-pinning... they would never openly provoke any member of the Draco Disciples with genuine violence, lest they incur the Praetor's wrath.

However, as he reached the clearing, he was disconcerted to find nobody at all... at least, not at first.

"Well?" He called out to the trees. "Here I am." He absently dropped the note to the ground, raising his sword to rest on his shoulder, the proclamation dissolving into a yawn.

"Good." An answer came with startling quickness, considering he'd thought himself alone. He almost didn't recognize the voice, however. It seemed familiar, but it was low, smooth... carried an air of sinister, grinning satisfaction.

As Liam watched, a slender figure stepped out from behind one of the many trees. He recognized him on sight, but again... there was a certain smirking confidence about this individual that the Disciple didn't like.

"You..." Liam murmured, eyes narrowing, although the edge of his lip began to twitch into a smile. "You ought'a be back with the Gypsies... S'like you've got a death wish calling me out here like this."

"I know you are a dumb ox, Liam, but I never figured you a mind-reader." The figure murmured back, taking a single step toward him. "The fact of the matter is, I *do* have a 'death wish'... but it's not mine I'm wishing for."

At this, Liam slowly let his sword slide from his shoulder, holding it out at his side.

"I see..." The Disciple chuckled, licking his lips. "So you're finally tired of chasin' us for the Band, aye? But I feel it's only right I ought to remind you how far from your depth you are..." He reached up, waving his sword at the slim build of the other man. "I'll give ye a head start if you want to run crying back to Thoren."

"Thoren doesn't know about this. None of the Gypsies do." The figure replied simply. "And I take it neither do the Dracos."

"No... so you came here of your own will to challenge me? Alone and unarmed?" Liam said, his smile fading into a look of confusion, before he grinned once more and raised his sword before him. "To the *death*?"

"Anything else would ruin the whole point." The other man said... the coolness in his tone causing Liam to twitch somewhat. "Whenever you're ready."

"...Right!" Liam growled, rushing forward... but to his bewilderment, his lunging legs stumbled, feeling weak under the weight of the rest of his body. Even the thrust of his sword felt cumbersome, as though the sword weighed far more than it did, and was easily dodged by his opponent.

"Somehow I think you will have to do a lot better than that." The other man said, stepping around, actually weaving his body as Liam cast another slow swing at him.

The hulking disciple growled, shaking his head in an effort to clear it... he couldn't explain it; he felt completely exhausted, as though he'd been fighting for hours. He fought to restrain another yawn, and his eyes were heavy... it was far from noon, but it was also far from night.

"W- What... I don't... Somethin's wrong..." He staggered back as the slender man stood before him, not even winded from the effort of dodging his attacks.

"You can carry a man over your shoulder all the way across Bristol, and yet you can barely lift your sword. How sad."

"W-What... have you done?" Liam demanded breathlessly, eyes drifting strangely as his sword trembled in his grip.

"What have /done?" The man asked. "The more important question is what did you and your *friends* do to the workers at the Dirty Duck. I was surprised at how willing they were to slip the Sleeping Herbs I gave them into your stew at lunch time."

"W-What...!?" Liam demanded, swaggering forward and raising his sword, but his feet stumbled, and- in his flailing efforts to stay upright- sending his rapier flying from his hand. It spun in mid-air, until impaling itself in the ground next to the other man.

"You heard me well enough, Bloodroot." His opponent said with a smile as he drew the sword from the soil beneath. "And I suggest you relish it while you can still hear anything at all. Frankly, I guess I could have poisoned you to death, but I honestly wanted to watch that look of dawning realization."

"W-What are you... what...?" Liam said, his face more dazed than before, his legs trembling before giving out and crumbling into a kneeling position. "Y-you won't kill me... You're not... you're a Gypsy... you're a Lightbringer, aren't you? You can't... Thoren wouldn't..."

"Thoren doesn't know I'm here, remember?" The smaller man answered. "And if you'll *also* remember, I was never a 'gypsy'. I was an intern- an *independent agent*- and as of late, I have been very *angry*."

"What're you... plannin' to do?" Liam asked, stumbling back out of the kneel, retreating in a trembling crab-walk to the edge of the clearing. His head was swimming, his body too weak to stand.

"I thought I told you already. Once the Sleeping Herbs take full effect and those eyes close... they're not opening ever again. But don't worry, you won't be alone for long; The others will be right behind you."

"You... you're gonna..." The large Disciple murmured, now incoherent because his mouth ceased to fully cooperate with his mind. "You... think you can kill... all of us?"

"*All* of you?" The man chuckled softly, and shook his head. "No... *each* of you? That's another matter entirely. Now close your eyes... I'm working on a bit of a schedule, here."

"You... You'll never... You don't have the guts... and even if you do, you'll never... beat the Praetor with a trick like this..."

"Don't you worry about that. I have others. By tonight, the Draco Disciples will be nothing but a bad memory."

"...Please..." The last word quivered on numbing lips... before Liam's eyes eyelids sank at last.

"You're begging *me* for *your* life?" The other man said with a chuckle. "What a novel idea..."

Then, with a heavy grunt, the figure gripped the sword in both hands and swung the it in an arc before him.

Liam's final word was a choked, incoherent gasp that was abruptly cut off... as well as his head.

The other man let out a quiet sigh, dropping Liam's bloodstained sword into the grass beside his motionless carcass. The smile on his lips widened as he made his way back toward Bristol, searching his pockets for his next weapon.

"One down..." He mused, "...three to go."

"Where is that lout?" Ruby Nightshade exclaimed as she sat poutingly on one of the benches outside of La Paloma. "He ought to have been here before the rest of us."

"And the Praetor is off 'praying for guidance' or whatever it is he's doing..." Vinz muttered as well, leaning on a banister across from her. "It is not like Liam to be late, though... The lumbering git is little better than a lost puppy without someone to point him in the right direction..."

Ruby let out a wicked little giggle at Liam's expense... but stopped as she heard steadily approaching footsteps; footsteps headed decidedly in her and Vinz's direction.

Turning, both of them beheld a startling sight; that of the awkward, bumbling Lightbringer known as 'Davem' walking toward them, seemingly with a great deal of purpose.

In his right hand, he held a fresh red rose, likely purchased from one of the vendors milling about the Bristol grounds.

"And speaking of people who are useless on their own..." Vinz muttered, rolling his eyes... although after recent events and even more recent conversations, he had come to feel the slightest sense of unease around him.

At last, Davem came to stop before them. He did not stop for very long, pausing only long enough to hold out the flower to Ruby.

"What... is this for?" She asked, hesitating a moment before- at Davem's frowning, jabbing insistence, taking it from him.

The Lightbringer turned on his heel to continue down Farnham Way, while a most puzzled Ruby looked at the flower.

There was a small note attached to it.

"... 'A new fragrance for an old friend'." The Disciple woman murmured off of the piece of parchment.

"New fragrance?" Vinz asked, glancing after the trail Davem was making in the dirt road. "And what is he doing, giving *you* flowers?"

"'Tis likely not his idea. I would suggest that it is one of the Gypsies' little errands. Perhaps one among them, one of their allies or some other party asked him to deliver it." She mused, taking a deep breath to draw in the scent of the flower.

"There is always the possibility that it is trapped somehow; The thorns, or perhaps the blossom could be-" Vinz began, but Ruby waved him off with a chuckle.

"There is not a poison in this world that I need be concerned with." She replied. "I am a professional poisoner. There is no toxin that exists that I am not immune to. Besides, I would-..."

Her eyes suddenly quirked.

"... would never poison exists Vinz strange..."

"Pardon?" Vinz suddenly turned back to Ruby, and straightened instantly as he saw the vacant look in the woman's eyes... and the trails of blood trickling down from her nostrils. "Ruby!"

"Praetor's a Liam git have another peacock beaver I don't." Ruby answered, her words slurring together slowly, a bit of saliva blurring her lipstick.

"Ruby! RUBY!" The shorter Disciple rushed in front of her, reaching out and taking her by her upper arms and shaking her. "Ruby, have you lost your-..."

Ruby suddenly went stock-stiff, her eyes snapping wide. The flower fell from weak fingers and rolled down the La Paloma entrance ramp, coming to rest in the dirt.

"L-Lady...K... Katherine..."

With that, she collapsed out of Vinz' grasp, laying in a heap at his feet.

"Ruby...?!" Vinz collapsed to his knees, rolling her onto her back.

She wasn't breathing... and within seconds, her heart had stopped.

"...dead...!? You're *dead!*?"

Ignoring the shopkeepers and concerned passers-by, Vinz immediately turned toward where Davem had disappeared and sprang into a swift run.

Instantly, one possible reason for Liam's absence came to him with stomach-turning clarity.

He dismissed the other townfolk and visitors, ducking and weaving through them; his short stature had rendered navigating the city an easy task. He darted to one side, catching a glimpse of his quarry through them.

Davem was standing there, actually *waiting* for him, before turning and running as well.

"You vile, scheming piece of-"

Despite Davem's longer stride, Vinz had little trouble pursuing him past the Pig & Whistle, thinking perhaps he was heading to the Gypsy Vardo.

Is Thoren responsible for this? Vinz wondered, or has that little bastard finally lost it?

However, instead of turning toward the wagons- the Gypsies' attention turned away from Vinz' mad dash and toward some other distraction- Davem turned left, and rushed into the garden just across from them.

"The bloody hell...?" He blinked, immediately drawing his stiletto and pursuing him past the garden façade and into the back area.

The place was empty. Vinz kept his back to the wall as he moved further on. There weren't many places to hide here... except two large privies.

"Come on out, 'Lightbringer'." Vinz grumbled, hefting the blade in his hand. "You can't hide in there forever. And when others come in looking to use the privy, you can explain to them you can't come out because you are a bloody murderer."

"... Said the Pot to the Kettle," came the response from inside one of the booths. "The Praetor murders Estella right under your nose, and you do nothing about it but continue to snivel and grovel and kiss his damned feet. Ruby dies,

and you cannot avenge her fast enough like a good little minion of Tiamat; I suppose that now we see the full scope of your character... *small* as it is"

"You are not one to speak of *character, Davem.*" He spat. "You miserable, sulking, maladroit coward. Count yourself lucky I found you first; Liam would-!"

"If you are waiting for Liam," came Davem's reply, "you will be waiting for some time. As it is, he may require a bit of *reassembly* beforehand."

"So I was right..." Vinz hesitated, before raising his stiletto again. "You-"

"Drugged him and cut his head off. He was a brainless glutton. He wasn't about to check his food. Then I handed Ruby a flower laced with carnivorous spores. Her immunity to poisons would blind her to a threat she had *not* build up an immunity to... anybody can kill *anybody* provided they are willing to do enough research- something I suppose you never understood."

"You smug little bastard." Vinz answered flatly, "You have damned your friends with your actions... but for now, I am going to cut you a new smile about your neck to match that smirk in your voice. You can come out now and die like a dog, or jump in the bowl and die like a *gypsy*; it matters not to me."

"Tell me, Vinz... Serving the Praetor all this time even after what he did to Fianna... it wasn't about revenge for her, and it sure as shite wasn't about watching out for Estella." The muffled voice behind the door asked. "I certainly believe that you wanted to kill Simeon, but it was hardly to avenge your dead lover. This was about his *power*, Power you were cheated out of. You wanted to usurp his position because like every Draco Disciple ever, it's what you believe you are entitled to."

"How dare you!" Vinz snarled, growing steadily closer to prying the privy door from its hinges and murdering him all the sooner. "You know nothing of me, of my past, of my goals, or what I have suffered! Who are you to judge?"

"*Someone* has to." Davem replied. "Face it; you and Simeon are both bloodthirsty animals who are willing to sacrifice anyone in the pursuit of *more*. It was never about anybody else's well-being. From the lowest Draco lackey to Tiamat herself, it's all about yourselves."

"This coming from the man who feels so bloody entitled to a beautiful, happy ending with a girl he clearly knows nothing about." Vinz grumbled back, but shook his head. "Suppose you were right; that she was just an damsel in distress, looking to be saved- which I assure you she was *not*: *This* is what her knight in shining armor would do to avenge her? Rampant murder, and making some bollocks speech with nothing but a privy door between him and a knife to his stinking heart?"

"This door isn't protecting me from *you*, Vinz." Davem replied... and Vinz heard that smirk in his voice. "I do not need protection from a dead man... or at least, as I said, not from *you*."

"What do you mean by that?" Vinz asked warily, taking a step back from the door and glancing around.

"Have you not realized where you are? That that everybody else has cleared out of this place? Tell me, what time is it?" Davem almost purred from within the stall.

"Not that it will matter to you in a moment, but it is Six of the clock."

"*Perfect.*"

At that instant, from the wall of the alley near the privies, a black cloud burst to life (so to speak)... and a swarm of humanoid figures robed in darkness sprang forth next to where Vinz stood.

The Draco Disciple could only let out a surprised squeak before he was seized and overwhelmed, the dagger falling from horrified fingers as he was buried beneath the Danse Macabre.

Clawed hands tore at his soul. Mouthless faces gorged themselves upon his life force. Ethereal weapons pierced and choked and slashed at his mind.

At last, the terrible rattling and rustling ended... and as Davem emerged from the privy, he saw Vinz on his knees several feet from the door; His clothing was torn in places, but his flesh- even his eyes- were completely gray, as though he were only a granite statue in a man's clothing.

After a moment, Davem reached out a foot, kicking the unmoving form. Vinz's body collapsed instantly into powdered ash, leaving only empty clothing where Vinz had once been. Reaching down, he plucked Vinz's spectacles out of the resulting pile, and stared into the lenses.

"It didn't have to be this way... ah... who am I fooling; of *course* it did."

With a slight chuckle, Davem tossed the glasses behind him and walked away, brushing the Disciple's remains off of his shirt and pants.

"One to go."

-

"Miserable imbeciles... how can this have happened?!"

The entire incident- the slaying of all three of Simeon's minions- had taken place in the span of only about fifteen minutes. As such, the Praetor's warning from Tiamat and the subsequent severing of the guidance ritual he had cast that day came with nowhere near enough time to prevent any of it.

Nevertheless, as he looked upon the bodies of Liam and Ruby (and the ash-strewn garments of Vinz), he could feel the infernal rage of the Dark Mother within him, and could think of only one thing:

Who could be responsible for this?

None of this added up. Nothing had changed between himself and the Gypsies. Even when he had revealed himself as a traitor- revealed his true persona of Simeon Malificus- he had noticed no real difference in the Gypsies' methods. They were still the same childish gaggle of fools, spouting off nonsense about Light and Love...

What had changed?

But then, it struck him.

"That man from the... Davem... at the Bronze Jester... he cannot have-!?"

Instantly, he stalked away from the corpses of his men- or what was left of them, anyway- and emerged back into the Bristol streets. He could have hunted Davem down then and there... but he knew better;

He would not have to go out looking for him- Davem would seek him out soon enough. Better to prepare for whatever trick he had in store.

"That presumptuous little flea... Simeon Malificus will *not* be cowed by a whelp such *him!*" He hissed. "I shall not be swept aside by a non-entity harboring a schoolboy infatuation with my petulant brat of a *daughter!*"

He could have simply possessed him as he had done to Thom the Enchanter years ago, but this did not call for such surreptitious methods:

An example had to be made.

Night fell at last on the city of Bristol... as Simeon Malificus walked slowly into the Noble's Glade.

Apparently Davem had gone through some impressive lengths to ensure this encounter would not be disturbed; not a guard was to be seen, even in this place of extravagance.

There was a small raised area of brick upon which a table was set. It was decorated with food, a pitcher and two tankards... as well as a fully set game of Pope Joan.

Davem sat at it, staring through dim moon and torchlight at the approaching Praetor.

"You killed my Disciples." Simeon addressed him, his face- for once- not wearing that haughty smile... but a stern look of barely-restrained fury.

"You killed *Estella*." Davem replied. "I imagine you're not accustomed to things like *consequences*."

"This is true..." The massive Disciple replied in a growl that caused the ground to rumble slightly. "I suppose it never crossed my mind that anyone would dare to stand against me so blatantly... especially not an inept clown such as yourself."

"Inept clown? Those days have passed." Davem murmured. "Most Lightbringers probably started exactly the same way."

"You are no Lightbringer." Simeon snarled back. "Lightbringers play by rules. Morals. None of which coincide with your decision to murder my men."

"And I would murder a thousand more of them if it meant a shot at you for what you've done."

"So what now?" Simeon asked, finally allowing himself a smile. "You throw whatever intricate trap you have at me, I crush you with Tiamat's power, and we call it a night?"

"More or less." Davem replied with a shrug. "I figured from the beginning that getting this far was completely unlikely... but you'd have loved to watch it play out, even if they were your men."

"And all of this?" Simeon asked, gesturing to the table. "I would have thought after I had Estella executed, this would be the last thing on your mind."

"It's kind of my own personal reward." Davem replied, a slight tremble rippling through him. "For killing your Disciples, and for finding a way out of having to go back home to my family after failing at what I originally came here to do."

"Kudos where they are due, you have certainly grown in the short time I have known you." Simeon admitted. "Killing three of my men, right under my nose, in less time than a bloody Mud Show. Even Thomas Wisseu could not make a claim such as that."

"Aw." Davem gave a faux bashful wave.

"You would not consider joining my service?" Simeon asked.

"...Really?" Davem quirked an eyebrow. "You know I want to kill you, but you'd take me in anyway?"

"I took Vinz in." Simeon replied with a wide grin.

"You knew about Vinz?" Davem asked, then plopped a fist into his other hand. "I *knew* you knew!"

"I did not need Tiamat's guidance to understand human nature- nonetheless, I will make the offer one last time; join me, and make reparations for those of mine you have slain, or... we proceed with whatever *this* is." He said, gesturing to the table.

"... One last game of Pope Joan." Davem said, sitting back down at his chair. "A shared dinner, maybe talk about Estella some... From what I've researched, you were a decent guy as Festivus Merrier; I'd like to see some of that before you murder me. Plus, there is much that I want to know about Estella; What was she like?" He held out his arms. "I'm not armed, I can't use magic, no one will interrupt us, and I used up all my toys killing everyone else. You've basically won already. This is just a last request."

Simeon stared down at the setup, frowning, but shrugging.

"So long as you have resigned yourself... but I shall have no need of the food you've prepared, nor of whatever you've put in that little pitcher of yours." He proclaimed, taking a seat opposite Davem.

Davem, for his part, looked hesitant, glancing anxiously at the food and water... before gingerly taking up his cards and shuffling them while Simeon took a seat across from him.

The game went on for hours and hours, the moon seeming quite stationary in the sky. The beads exchanged hands many, many times and more than once Davem offered Simeon the food provided, assuring him there was nothing wrong with it (though not touching it himself). Simeon always refused, instead feeding himself with the dark cocoa dusted almonds and barbecue beef jerky he kept for himself in his leather pouch.

The game went on until eventually...

"I tire of this." Simeon murmured, finally pushing away from the table. "Your little plot has made itself evident and it has *failed*; I tire of pandering to this joke of an attempt on my life. Even had your food successfully poisoned me, I am afraid it would all have been in vain."

"Um..." Davem blinked, glancing down at the beads, then at Simeon.

"Have you something to *add*?" the Praetor asked, raising his hand. "I'll allow you last words, but nothing more. I have been generous en-...!"

At that moment, his words ceased. His hands reached up, clutching at his throat.

"...That would be your throat closing up." Davem said, standing from his chair as well.

Simeon's eyes bulged in their sockets, his face going red with hell-born wrath.

"And soon there'll be slight headaches, severe stomach pains, loss of vision..."

He hopped back a step as Simeon opened his mouth in a silent roar, grabbing the game table and throwing it aside in a mighty crash.

"Right now you're probably asking 'what have you done'. 'How did you poison me'. 'I never touched your rancid little meal'... But you didn't have to." He grinned. "You touched your own food... after touching the Pope Joan beads."

Even in the throes of mounting suffering, Simeon froze.

"I smeared them all with locane Extract before setting up the game."

Simeon lurched forward, but doubled over in pain as the aforementioned stomach-pains began.

"I didn't eat anything just to make you think you had the trick figured out, to let you think you had me beaten... the real problem for me was not biting my nails. Otherwise I'd be right there with you."

Simeon crawled forward, weakly grabbing at Davem's leg, the other clutching at his neck and stomach each in turn.

"Forget your fancy spells; Your throat's closed, your body's convulsing... I'd be surprised if you could even *focus* through the pain." He shook his head. "I actually *diluted* the poison a little just so it wouldn't kill you *instantly*. I wanted to *watch* this" At this, he actually began to smile in spite of himself, a giddy laughter making itself evident. "And under any other circumstances you'd be right; Poisoning you would be pointless since your soul can just go and possess somebody else if your body is destroyed. But don't think I haven't planned for that as well. I'm not stupid."

All the while, Simeon choked and writhed on the ground, a truly horrid sight in the dim illumination around them.

At last, his wild flailing weakened to slight twitches, the light leaving his eyes.

"This was for Estella, you callous son of a bitch."

With that, Davem turned and left the Noble's Glade, leaving the poisoned corpse of Simeon Malificus behind him... the sinister presence of the Praetor's soul inexplicably vanishing.

Davem worked diligently to wash the poison from his hands, never fully satisfied that he'd gotten it off. Frankly, *he* hadn't worked up an immunity, and wasn't about to take chances.

At last, he crawled back from Lake Elizabeth, sitting at its shoreline with his knees drawn up to his chest.

Amid all the plotting that had gone into this particularly gruesome day, he had not fully considered the ramifications of this endeavor. As the cloud of anger faded from his mind, his thoughts began to emerge like the murmurings of a concerned crowd.

He had really, truly done it.

True, in many of the old legends and fables he'd read, the hero was not above slaying a few dragons, demons and dark knights. But at the same time, those very same heroes were usually given something for their trouble; wealth for the rest of their lives, or the hand of a fair young maiden... Davem was not likely to receive *either* of those things, and what he had himself destroyed were not dragons, not demons, not even dark knights. They had been human beings (such as they were).

The Draco Disciples- evil as they were- were members of the Nobility... most of them anyway... and now their murder would most likely bring the Law down upon the Band- as well as the Witches if the specifics of just how they died ever came to light.

Davem swallowed, his face growing pale, his entire body quivering as he realized the sickening truth; the full extent of what he'd done.

"I killed them..." He murmured. "But... but they were evil... is that really such a bad thing? Why should the Band- why should anybody be punished for it? It isn't fair... why should he have been allowed to kill Estella? Why should they be allowed to kill as much as they want and... and even just to protect ourselves, avenge those we care about, we can't... Perhaps I could escape, or just... if I just explained..."

He knew better though.

There was always a strange sort of balance to this sort of thing.

But just then, another sound pierced the stillness.

The sound of soft applause.

"Not bad... not bad at all. You got a little whimpery at the end, but otherwise it was damned fun to watch."

Davem immediately staggered to his feet. His eyes, now brimming with tears went wide as he turned in the direction of the voice.

Standing on the wooden bridge that crossed the middle of Lake Elizabeth... was Estella Foxglove.

Instantly, Davem's heart began grappling with itself, whether to leap or sink into a pool with the rest of his innards at that moment.

"I-... I don't... you're *alive*? How?!"

"Of *course* I'm alive, you git." The young Disciple muttered, cocking out a hip and glaring at him as though insulted. "Staying alive is one of the things I do *best*. I would have thought that being so bloody confident with all your research, you would understand *that*. I'm *insulted*."

Davem stood there, stunned.

"But... but I just... I don't...?"

Davem's legs gave out beneath him, causing him to collapse back on the lakeshore.

As he did, his eyes falling back to the water's rippling surface, Estella sauntered across the bridge and into the grass surrounding the lake, coming to sit beside him.

"But... but Simeon *killed*?"

"Father did as I asked him to do; to let everybody believe he had killed me." She replied absently, flopping down on her back as she explained, "I thought things were starting to get a little boring around Bristol, thought I might see what's happening in the rest of England. But as long as I was leaving, I figured I would leave people like you a little farewell gift."

"Letting us believe you'd been *killed*?" He asked, turning to glare down at her. "Estella, why would you ever do something so horrible?! We-"

"And just who is 'we', Davem?" She countered, rolling her eyes before looking back at him, then up to the darkening skies above. "I would be willing to bet you could count every person in the world who would have cared about it on one finger."

As she spoke, Davem could hear a distant roll of thunder, and feel slight drops of rain against his skin.

"Believe it or not, I have my own plans for Bristol, for my father, the other Dracos and even the Gypsies. So long as I have people like you sniffing around though, I will never get anywhere."

"But why? Estella, if you believed that nobody cared anyway, then... then why would you go through all this trouble?"

"The off-chance that at least one person did. And lo and behold, here you are." She replied triumphantly, shooting him a mischievous grin.

"But... But I just... I just KILLED-"

"Tsk." The girl shook her head. "If only. You'll never be any more of a killer than I am a corpse, Davem."

"But then... but then what did-..." Davem's voice faltered, devolving into a series of incoherent syllables.

"Do you really think you have the spine to kill *anybody*?" She mused. "... This is just a foolish dream rolling around in that mucked-up mind of yours. Like one of the Bard's boring plays... but I have to admit, this one was a bit more exciting, what with the murder and all."

"B-but... if this is a..." Davem struggled to form his words into something intelligible. "If... this is a dream, then... then you are not alive after all? You are still..."

"I already told you once. Are you deaf?" She replied. He could hear the offended glare in her voice even if he weren't looking at her. "I am not *dead*."

"Then where are you now? Why are you *here*? I still do not understand!"

"Davem. Look," She began, apparently frustrated to a point where she was no longer willing to let him bury himself in awkward prose, "Like what Dead-Vinz said; I am *not* some kind of damsel in need of saving. I do *not* need your help. I do not *want* your help. And like what *I* said, I am busy with my own workings, and your interference does me no good."

He couldn't find an answer for her words, which was just as well. She didn't seem about to let him plead any sort of case.

"I don't know why you are so bloody obsessed with me, Mister 'of the Davemport', but from what I can tell, 'tis because you want me to be a 'good girl'; To 'see the error of my ways' and 'live happily ever after' with you and your friends... well, that is not how things work. It is never as simple as that. You're a grown man; you ought to know that by now."

"Estella, you do not understand. This isn't about-"

"I do not *care* what you think this is about."

Davem winced, then sighed.

"... Well... what now?"

"Now I leave you to these dreams of yours for a while... wander around for a year or so if you like. Learn what you need to, and I'll expect to see your drooling face around this time next year; then you can finally see what this has all been leading up to."

The man blinked, finally letting out a weak nod of surrender.

"Is it a 'date' then, Old Man?" She persisted, and he couldn't hold back a helpless chuckle at her less-than-complimentary nickname for him.

"Only if you promise to *show up* this time, you brat." He finally answered, his mind still muddled from everything he had just heard.

Slowly, I stood up from the shore of Lake Elizabeth, and reached down to take her hand to help her to her feet.

At that moment, a flash of lightning illuminated the city surroundings... and when it dimmed, Estella was gone once more.

I suddenly sat upright on the cold dirt floor of a ramshackle cottage. My breathing was short, and I was in the midst of a cold sweat.

Sitting in my lap and blinking up at me was the green-and-white-striped wormlike creature, Toil the Wormling.

Looking around, my eyes gradually adjusting, I recognized the hunched form of Gertrude herself, working at her spindle beside where I lay.

"Wha... what happened?" I asked groggily, looking down at Toil.

"It figures..." She muttered, seemingly to herself, "So caught up in the lives of others that you can barely remember the details of your own; You came to me asking for my help. You said you were experiencing some sort of 'Darkness' or some such thing; You said if you didn't clear it up, you might do something you'd regret, so you asked to use my mushrooms to jar it out of you like what they had done for Jasper Trustworthy once. I told you I didn't want any part in your nonsense, but there were that Poppet you gave unto me in your fit of mad Questing not long ago, so... We'll call ourselves square from here."

I looked down at myself, and then glanced about the cabin.

It had all felt so real... I mean, *surreal*; Watching myself from a third-person perspective as I did those horrible things, regardless of who the victims were, had made me so ill, and yet I couldn't look away. I couldn't force myself to wake up from the nightmare.

And then there was Estella... had what I had seen been... 'real', so to speak? Was she actually still alive?

"Well?" Gertrude asked. "Are you over whatever it were you wanted getting over?"

"Yeah..." I nodded after a moment. "... I think I've decided against killing anyone, at least."

"Good for you. Now get out and go frolic in the bloody sunshine." Gertrude said, gracing me with a cynical roll of her tired eyes.

Still rather groggy, I stumbled out of the witches' home, ignoring the apprehensive stares of those around me- those who likely wondered what I was doing there to begin with.

I could not know what had just happened, why, nor do I know what is to come... but after that dream, one thing stuck with me; call it an experiment.

Whether Estella is alive or dead, I may have found the key to dealing with her father.

The time has come for me to leave Bristol... but not for home.

Not quite yet.

Entry #7 - Day Last

When I finally emerged from my inn room and made my way into the city streets once more, I was not exactly welcomed happily.

I suppose this was to be expected; The last time I was seen by the Gypsies, I had verbally lashed out at Vashta and Druscilla, and was left in the company of Vinz Clortho, and that was before disappearing for a solid week.

This was not to say they were repulsed by me. Indeed, those who were not wary of me showed legitimate concern, asking if I was alright, if I had been eating, etcetera.

Nobody brought it up at first, but it was unrealistic to think that nobody had heard the circumstances of my disappearance... that others had not heard about Estella. But as I said, nobody had spoken of it, to mock, mourn or otherwise.

This was just as well. I am not sure how I would have reacted to any mention of her anyway.

Not seeing her prowling or laying about like a stray cat was probably a relief to most, but to me the crowded, festive streets felt empty now that she was gone... dead or otherwise.

I could not be certain exactly whether what I had seen in that dream- that nightmare- was true to life or not. It was equally believable that Simeon had killed her for no discernable reason, or that she had just left of her own accord and had her father claim that he had murdered her, just to rile people up.

One thing that could be said for that terrible vision, however, is that it has given me a rather intriguing idea regarding Simeon... although one could argue one way or the other the moral aspects of engaging the Draco Disciples in lethal combat, I doubt anybody would complain at the prospect of dealing with the *Praetor* for good and all; Besides, it seemed everybody else was champing at the bit for a way to get rid of him, so I might as well throw my hat into the ring.

By way of keeping this little plan of mine a secret- just in case- I will refrain from going into further detail until such time as I have put some distance between myself and Bristol; I do not need anybody potentially getting ahold of these journals and discovering my plans beforehand.

On another note, a merchant's vessel from the New Dover Port Trade Commission finally arrived at port. Although several members of its crew were men and women I had never seen before, they recognized easily enough my identification papers and coat of arms insignia (hidden for the most part until now).

Being the son of the owners of the company, I was able to convince them to take home a letter on my behalf, as well as to refresh my supply of coin- most of my own having dwindled by this point (I was surprised they gave it to me, to be perfectly honest; Perhaps my parents had believed I had gotten myself killed, otherwise they might have warned them not to give a thin pence to their miserable, talentless, no-account son). I would need every advantage I could muster, as I had a great deal of travel and untold trials ahead of me.

"Are you certain you want to do this?" Robert O'Coppe asked... as though I hadn't heard the question enough between the Order of the Sun collective. If nothing else, his concern for me was deeper than that of Percy the Abjurer, who... well, I will get to him.

I was just finishing the process of bundling up my personal effects and newly purchased supplies; rations, a waterskin, several stacks of bound parchment, swords I only barely knew how to use (my training was limited, and they were mere short swords, but they were better than nothing) and other things that I figured might come in useful for my journey. Heavy as my pack was by the end, I would probably thank myself later on for being prepared.

"When is anyone ever completely sure of anything?" I replied, shrugging- my wormling companion Toil shifting in order to remain in place along my shoulders. "As enlightening as it has been in the Band's company, but this something I must do."

Just then, there was a loud 'thud' from the door leading behind the Order of the Sun's camp facade as it was thrown open and a figure stomped forth from it.

"You!" came the voice of Adria Dubh as she emerged from the back of the Order facade in her typical stalking fashion (typical, anyway, when something has rubbed her the wrong way). "Every time I wish to give you the slightest hint of faith or confidence, you do something even *more* foolish!"

"Guilty as charged, I suppose.." I sighed. Granted yes, she still terrified me to some level, but by that point I had grown used to outbursts such as these- at myself, or at her subordinates... but perhaps it was less that I had 'gotten used' to them, so much as I had begun to understand why they happened in the first place.

Adria was a caring person. She had to have been to have raised Edana Dragon-born, and to take in people like Robert, Percy and others. She just had a strange way of showing it at times.

"Please do not tell me this has... please do not tell me that this is for Estella's sake." She said, her voice growing quiet, softer- although she was still clearly agitated to a point where 'softer' was a poor word to use. "I... do not claim to know everything about what happened-"

"*Nothing* happened, to be perfectly honest." I answered quickly, although I was somewhat relieved that someone actually *did* mention her after all. "Estella is gone, and there is nothing I can do about that. I... I simply wish to do some additional research on the Tovias Farraday story; see if I cannot hunt down a few of the players who I could not interview here."

Adria frowned at me, not entirely believing what I was saying... which I suppose was fair- I *was* lying. But even if my plan for eliminating Simeon were something she or the rest of the Band would have gotten behind, I wanted to keep it on a need-to-know basis, again lest the wrong ears hear of it.

"Can you look me in the eye and *swear* that this has nothing to do with her?" She asked, actually giving me little *choice* as she reached out and took me by the shoulders, turning me to face her.

"I... cannot say it has *nothing* to do with her." I replied. "Traveling in hopes of forgetting follows that theme, does it not? After all... even if she were still alive, I doubt that anybody here would believe she could change her ways; not you, not Thoren, nobody."

"And yet, you still hope." She said firmly, but still with that soft edge.

"I thought she deserved a *chance*." I replied plainly. "But it is too late for that now. Now I just... leave and try to pick up the pieces in the year to come."

Adria gave a noticeable flinch.

"Where do you plan to go?" She asked quietly.

"Europe. France, I know. Perhaps I will see if I cannot find Saint Xavier's and see if Cyanne's arm is healed yet. There were a few other stops, but nothing that bears mentioning and nothing altogether dangerous. There is no need to worry."

Again, I was lying. There was plenty to worry about, and I believe she knew that. But in the end, suspicions were all she had to go on. She didn't have much choice but to allow my departure.

"If you truly believe this is for the best... just promise you will return."

My eyes widened a little. I could not be certain why she had said *this* of all things; indeed, she had been one of the first- and most vocal- in losing her patience with me when I had arrived.

I slowly raised a hand, warily placing it on her shoulder.

"I will. I promise, and when I *do* return, I will be a different man; one you would have been *proud* to welcome into the Order."

Adria flinched, opening her mouth to speak, but I shook my head.

"I am not blind, deaf or otherwise. Even after compiling Tovias' story, I know that I am far from being anything close to a true Lightbringer, or even an ordinary Quester... but I will be."

The swordmistress sighed and nodded.

"Best of luck to you, Davem."

With that, she actually reached up and around me, pulling me into a firm embrace which I smilingly returned... but as she released me, I let out a gasp as I was half-tackled at the level of my hip by a yellow blur.

"HUGS!" Bucket the Troll squealed gleefully as I collapsed beneath her exuberant 'glomping' (Toil barely managing to stay in place).

"Easy, easy!" I managed after suppressing my laughter. "I'll miss you too." Gingerly, I reached up and gave her scraggly hair a few gentle scratches before finally looking up to a smirking Adria.

"Well... I suppose it's time I left. I have a few more visits to make and a long road ahead."

She nodded, reaching down to bid Bucket to come away from me and waving me off.

"Go on. But be back all the sooner next year."

I gave her my best salute before hurrying back toward the Lunar Tribe's camp.

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"I very much appreciate this, Mistress Gaia." I said with a deep bow, addressing the Band's elder Keeper. "I know it might not be pleasant for you, but it's very important to me."

"I should hope so." Gaia replied, frowning as she picked through the Lunar Tribe's collection of snacks, looking for something that interested her. "One tires quickly of sifting through the memories of gory murder-sites, much less scrying through the Land of the Dead"

"Why don't you wait until she's done her rituals before running off?" Lillith asked the obvious question, quirking a brow at me as she gently scritch Toil just above the tip of his nose. "If Estella is still alive after all, what point is there in disappearing for an entire year?"

"There are other things that need to be settled; other projects that I have that will require me to do a bit of travel. Just... keep an eye out for any developments on that front in the meantime."

Really, I would have preferred that Lillith not have known about my desire to have Gaia look into Estella's supposed demise, but I had to be certain one way or the other if the dream I'd had was my own mind torturing me... or if it were Estella torturing me the way she always had. As it was, the sneaky little minx had overheard me as I'd made my request.

"T'is well." Gaia nodded with a smile.

"You plan to find us, then? When your journey is complete?" Vashta asked (Yes, she had been there as well, but I was less concerned about her presence- having been there at my initial breakdown, I imagined she was probably just happy to see me up, around and overall functional again)..

"That will be the easy part." I replied. "I will simply meet you back here in Bristol next year."

"We might not *be* in Bristol!" Alice said, her eyes wide with concern between being wide with eagerness and curiosity. "We might be somewhere else, unless the Queen decides to visit again, and what are the chances that she'll come back here another year in a row?"

"I'll take my chances." I said; If, in fact, the dream was in any way accurate, the Dracos would be back here next year and up to their usual tricks with the Gypsies not far behind.

With that, I took up my possessions (as well as Toil), gave a final wave to the Lunar Tribe members gathered about their camp, and made my way toward the Main Vardo.

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Amusingly, when I arrived, I found Willow Spellworthy and Dierdre Ibis playing with the Protection Poppets I'd given them before (as part of a 'quest' Gertrude mentioned in an earlier entry). Raven Hawkwood was in the Vardo itself, practicing his sleight-of-hand on a small coin, with Effie Cue and Piper Starling meandering nearby.

"Well, I'm off." I announced, kneeling briefly and putting a hand to the ground so Toil could flop down and hurry (as best he could being a wormling) toward Dierdre and Willow.

As he went to collect his attentive scritchings, I stood and looked to Raven.

"Do you have the maps I asked you for?" I asked, stepping closer to the Vardo counter.

A grim expression passed the normally good-natured Lunar Triber, before he reached behind the Vardo and procured several rolled-up parchments, handing them to me.

"I've no idea why you'd want these... or what earthly business you could have in a place like that. I hardly wanted to go the *first* time; barely got out with my life and soul intact."

"Don't worry." I replied, accepting the parchments and putting them in my pack with everything else. "I won't take on anything I can't handle."

"Jus' be sure ye know what'che *can* handle." Piper interjected. Apparently she'd seen the maps of Greece Raven had been poring over per my request. "I only jus' *met*che. Can't go losin' new friends so quickly."

"I'll be fine. I promise." I sighed, glancing around. "Thoren's on his final Pub Crawl of the season, then?"

"Aye." Raven nodded. "Probably at the Public House by now."

"No worries." I shrugged. "I'll give him a wave on my way out and see if he even remembers who I am." I reached over and gave Raven's hand a shake, making my rounds and hugging all who required hugging.

Only then, as my list of good-byes to Gypsies and Lightbringers began to dwindle did I realize exactly how much I would miss this strange group of people... but there was nothing else for it.

If I wished to make something- *anything*- of myself, then I had no other option than to depart. The Gypsies would do as they had always done, and I would do something I had never done.

I had been unprepared before, but by the end of the so-called 'off-season', I would return a better man... better than Simeon or even Thoren. Better than any Lightbringer who had ever walked through the Gates of Bristol, and woe to those who would question me.

I would be prepared for them.

After the briefest and most wary of passing nods to Gertrude, Beatrix and Ursula Normyl where they crowded near the Fountainside Music Stage, I jogged past the Public House en route to the front gates. My pack was already feeling heavy, but I had not planned to travel with it weighing on my shoulders for very long; I would have a carriage soon enough.

At the other side of the Public House, The sound of someone very loudly clearing his throat startled me, breaking me out of my forward stride.

Slowly turning, I was not terribly surprised to see Thoren Grymm and his Pub Crawl crew- Jameson, the Pussycats, and a large number of locals and visitors (who were several sheets to the wind already). Rose Peregrine was there as well, but from her cordial-yet-unnerved manner I could tell she was not there to revel- she was probably there delivering some sort of message.

Thoren, however, had stopped her in the middle of whatever she had been saying, apparently having noticed me passing by. Reaching up, he waved me over toward the crowd- but specifically to him.

Thoren Grymm and I had never really talked much. He had been quiet and reserved when not at Pub Crawl, and even then he focused more on the patrons than on anything else (which made sense considering the Crawl's intent).

I suppose I was fortunate that my futile attempts at being a Quester had either gone unnoticed or unaddressed by him for the most part. Perhaps it was he who had written that letter to AdventureTemps or at least given his blessing to do so, but he had not given me his personal attention. From what I had heard, personal attention from Thoren when it came to matters of discipline was something folk were better off never experiencing.

The only time I had actually spoken to him for longer than a few moments was when I had interviewed him for the purpose of researching Tovias' story... and even then, he remained cryptic and aloof (It was true, he had his own tragic and sordid past to deal with, as well as who-knew how many pieces of knowledge he did not want shared, but the weight of what happened that evening was perhaps beyond even his grade of pay).

Either way, I was on my guard as I came to stand before him as Jameson kept the participants of the Crawl occupied

"Yes, sir?"

"I heard ye were leavin' us." Thoren stated. Although he was wearing his usual confident and jovial smile- the one he always wore on Crawl- I could tell there was some other emotion behind his words just by the glint in his good eye... not concern or anger or even well-wishes.

"Yes..." I replied with a nod. "I believe for the time being I have done as much damage as I care to do."

Thoren glanced back at the Pub Crawlers, assuring himself that their attention was solely on Jameson and the Pussycats... which was not a difficult feat to achieve given Jameson's charisma and the Pussycats'... let's just say 'charisma' again.

"Whatever your name is," he began, which actually made me flinch a bit. It had been so long since anybody had actually addressed me by anything other than my pseudonym, "an' whatever it is ye plan to do, I've one request."

"What is it?" I asked, taking a slight step in closer to him to hear him more clearly amid the nearby festivities.

"Leave it alone." He said simply. "I've heard'a what you've been doing around the city, mostly concernin' the Draco Disciples." His look was beginning to dissolve from its festive expression to one of stony disapproval. "I would advise

ye to forget about it... there have been too many unfortunate events- too many unfortunate people who have suffered dire fates at the hands of the Disciples to be throwin' yer potential away for one. Especially *that* one."

His words conjured thoughts of Tovias... certainly there were more examples than him, but Thoren probably just knew that I would understand that particular instance better than any other.

It was that last bit which made me flinch, though I knew better than to try and debate him.

"But that said... here."

I was ready to stalk away from him then and there... but as I watched, he reached into his vest and procured a small envelope which he offered to me.

"My sister asked me to give ye this," He said plainly, "b'fore she wandered off."

Taking the paper, I watched as Thoren gave me a last nod, and turned away to lead his Crawl toward their next destination.

Davem of the Davemport:

Again, I must thank you for your assistance in gathering the information surrounding Tovias' stay with the Band of the Twisted Claw; both for the sake of not one, but two Lightbringers, but as well as for my own. You have helped more than you realize.

In addition, I have been made aware of your efforts to seek knowledge in, shall we say, other matters.

Goodness is not precluded by Darkness. Clearly you have realized this. I wish you good health and the best of fortunes in your endeavor.

Regardless of what you encounter, let not a word of it go undocumented. In the short time we have been acquainted, we have found much to admire in your written insight.

The Band of the Twisted Claw shall be eagerly awaiting your return, for a new year, and a new beginning for he who has become one of our most invaluable scribes.

Fates be with you, Lorekeeper Davem.

-Talia Tale.

"... Lorekeeper, huh?" I smiled, reaching up with my free hand and giving Toil an absent stroke as he squirmed upon my shoulders..

With a final glance back at the early-eve-lit city, I turned and headed for the gates.

"Well, Bristol... 'Til next year.

And with that, another Faire year ends... and a new adventure begins.

Entry #8 - To Hell and Back

It is highly recommended that anyone reading these records first read the piece entitled [The Off-Season](#).

The following piece is a companion piece to the story 'The Off-Season'... or one could say that 'The Off-Season' is, in fact, a companion piece to these journals.

I understand that anybody who is reading this- which I do not imagine happening for some time- will wonder why the aforementioned story will require any sort of companion piece... but the fact that I am alive, well and able to write this should make the answer obvious to anybody who has, in fact, read the original work.

The story of 'The Off-Season' was written in a single night (at least, that is how long I believe it took- perception of time in the underworld is altered to the extent that we mere mortals are unable to truly comprehend its passage), and it was written in the midst of sheer despair and panic... but I am getting ahead of myself.

The reason that 'The Off-Season' was written was twofold: Firstly, it was done to give my acquaintances back in the city of Bristol (although I imagine they have moved on in their travels by this point) the news that I was very likely going to die and would not be returning to their service. Secondly, in the event that I miraculously survived- which I have- I would not allow my motives and methods to come to any unwelcome ears.

My ultimate plan for dealing with the scourge of the world's good and decent folk continues undeterred, and I would just as soon keep it that way.

There is, of course, the question as to why I would bother writing this companion piece to begin with... why I would bother telling the truth of what would otherwise be a rather intriguing fantasy (if I do say so myself)... and the simplest answer I can come up with is that back when I wrote it, I was certain the reality of things would not matter for much longer; now writing it is almost necessary...

It helps me remember what parts of it were *real*.

- Regarding Parts 1 and 2 -

My journeys after departing from Bristol were nothing of particular note; I met nobody worth mentioning, and encountered no men or monsters worthy of remembrance. Although in the story I met two traveling companions- Mercy Mannheim the knight and Volstav the merchant, neither of these two actually existed. They were merely based on a few companions I had with me briefly at various points throughout my travels.

In reality I spent most of my trip alone, except for the presence of Toil the Wormling. In spite of what the story said, at no point did I ever leave him behind. I suppose I wrote that part so as not to alert Gertrude to just how careless I had been, dragging him with me into possibly the worst place in existence.

Most times, traveling by day, I could largely be found in the company of traveling Gypsy bands. Now that I had had some experience with one such troupe, I was more easily able to track down more; An entire society living under the nose of that with which the usual commonfolk were familiar.

In the interest of keeping my money purse, I would spend my nights sleeping at local inns here and there, but in the meantime I would avail myself of the knowledge and stories the Gypsies could offer me (usually paying a few coins in the exchange).

It was in the course of traveling- making my way through France in hopes of hunting down the Mariage family- that I happened upon the Third Company- a group of Tiamat Worshipers whose ancestors date back to the wars between the forces of Light and Darkness- back when the Band of the Twisted Claw's 'factions' were founded. Literally, the 'Third Company' were the descendants of Tiamat's Third Company. Although they were not local to France, they happened to have agents in the area that the Gypsies were on the lookout for.

What intrigued me most about them was that- as I was told- they were in no way in league with the Draco Disciples. While the Disciples were the wild, chaotic minions of the 'Dark Mother', the Third Company were equally cruel, yet well-ordered. They had fallen out of favor with Tiamat for being less proactive, but possessed immeasurable potential for destruction. For this- and for other reasons- the Third Company despised they who could have easily been allies.

One major difference between the written version of the story and reality was that I was not drugged and kidnapped by the Third Company; It was I who sought out their insight.

It was not terribly hard to hunt the Third Company down; It was simply a matter of following the shadows through dark city alleys until I caught a glimpse of a strange insignia, not entirely dissimilar from the Draco Symbol. I had to grow accustomed to not seeing red-and-black, given that these were colors stolen by the Disciples specifically and they were not about to share in this dubious honor.

Nevertheless, when I came knocking on their door, I did not do so completely blind; I knew enough about them- and about the local Gypsies- to convince them that I was not a spy, and that my interests lay solely in the downfall of the Draco Disciples' leader.

Of course, they still did not trust me completely, but the more I told them about my plan- what it would require and that I was willing to go through with gathering the ingredients to craft my 'masterpiece'- they grew increasingly willing to cooperate with me (plus I believe their leader could read minds... I will not delve too much into him though).

- Regarding Parts 3 and 4 -

The idea that Simeon had possessed me in order to carry out the murder of Estella did not escape my mind as a possibility, but after the dream I had, it occurred to me that Simeon himself- or possibly Estella's ghost- would not have kept it a secret from me. My torment at knowing would have been irresistible to them.

Either way, that was about the only part of the story that I fabricated... although it is a fairly large part of the story to come.

Everything else; my being told the story of the Third Company's leader- why he loathed Simeon so much- was fact (or, at least, accurately retold). Having to strip naked and have sutras painted on my bare skin, this was true (although I left out a few bits which others would be best off not hearing about). I was, in fact, given the legendary Ring of Gyges, although it has since been taken from me- it would probably have come in handy some future day.

Lastly, the process of being teleported to Hades' alternate entrance in Campania is true (complete with the kiss I received from whomever it was).

It is a shame I do not bear that sort of attraction to certain *other* women...

-Regarding Part 5 and 6 -

My retelling of the events in Avernus Crater were accurate enough, down to my frightening trek through the tunnel leading to the outer caverns of the Kingdom of the Dead; The breathing rocks, the sickening sensations, the strange humanoid silhouettes- which turned out to be my own- and the horrifying visage of Hades' watchdog were all nightmares that will continue to haunt me.

The method by which I managed to pass by Cerberus is true, although I would not recommend it without the aid of a legendary artifact, a spiritual sutra or both. I believe if the monstrous dog could have seen me fully, the ploy involving the dead bird would never have distracted him long enough to keep him from tearing me soul from body.

After my encounter with Cerberus, my heart was pounding, and I felt as though I could easily die right then and there (and have to do it all over again). However, what followed made the whole thing seem less *real*. As I walked further down the tunnel, images of skeletal figures started to materialize around me, all walking in the same direction. It was eerie to say the least, but none of them seemed to notice me, so I tried to focus myself on moving forward.

As stated in the story, this little parade of the dead led to the boat of Charon, the ferryman of Hades. The events that took place upon the ship- paying the ferryman far more than I probably ought to have considering I would need money for the journey home when/if I emerged from Hades- were accurately retold although I could imagine one would think I embellished that part to make me seem more noble than I actually am.

Admittedly, it might not have been a conscious decision I was making at the time, but in retrospect, I could probably use the good karma.

- Regarding Much of the Remainder of the Story -

I never found Estella Foxglove in Hades. Nor did I find Fianna Foxglove, as they were not the reason I had gone down there to begin with. I highly suspected that I would not find Estella there, and as for Fianna, even if I did attempt to go through with the plan outlined in the story, there was no way that the Lord of the Dead was about to allow me to go any further than I had gotten already.

As it is, I am surprised even now that I have managed to acquire that which I already have.

When I disembarked from Charon's ship, the little warning the ferryman gave me was actually something that happened... although I could not be certain exactly what he was warning me against. There was a great deal going on at the time- a mortal treading in the realm of Hades- but somehow I feel as though he meant something greater than that... but so far I have managed to live and my plans going forward have not hit any significant barriers. Therefore, I suppose I shall simply have to continue moving forward... although looking over my shoulder much of the way.

I immediately left the grounds of the Judge Kings' palace, using the maps of Hades Raven Hawkwood had loaned me to make my way toward the Lethe- the River of Oblivion.

This river is the one in which souls immerse themselves to forget their lives as humans, and it was this river that I had come to Hades in order to find. Granted, it was a great deal easier than seeking out a single soul in an infinite prison of the damned, but what I sought out of it was just as important.

Using a few tools borrowed from the Third Company- including tongs, vials and a great many towels to keep from touching even a drop of the Lethe's waters- I managed to procure a vial of its dark, yet crystal clear contents.

Swiftly corking it and placing it in my pack (with a great deal of padding to ensure it would not be shattered or otherwise compromised), I turned to begin to long search for an exit... only to be confronted with Hades' guards- a pair of armored skeletons who- in spite of my magical defenses- were quite aware of my presence, and quite insistent that I accompany them...

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Every detail of Hades and Persephone's throne room was as accurate as I could manage to make it. It was every bit as terrifying as one might imagine, although I would imagine the Lunar Tribe would have appreciated the amount of black and silver involved in the decor.

Being in the presence of a God is like nothing one could ever imagine. I suppose it happened a great deal more often in the ancient past, but these days, it only seems to happen by proxy; Loki in the body of a humble fool, for instance, or the Lord of Light sending his emissaries- the Paragons- to do his great works in his absence. However, this was meeting a deity in his own plane.

I tend to believe humanity has- for all its ingenuity and ability to adapt to earthly forces- has rendered itself more vulnerable to supernatural and primeval forces whenever they see fit to rear their heads.

In short, I should probably have died or gone mad in the presence of Hades, but perhaps it was my experiences in England- specifically with the Band- that are to credit for my survival and my sanity when confronted with Lord of the Dead himself.

This alone, however, was not about to save my life.

Hades knew full well what I was in his realm to do, and no amount of explanation was going to lead him away from the fact that yet another mortal had intruded upon his domain. I had been lucky enough to get this far, but he told me on no uncertain terms that this intrusion was not going to come without cost.

The fact that Simeon was an immortal being flying in the face of Hades' very purpose was seemingly of no consequence to him. At least, it was not as important as his pride.

Very much as it had happened in the written work, I was told to wait for his decision in his guest chambers (I did see one of the parlors while being escorted to the bedroom, but otherwise did not spend any time in one).

I should probably mention at this point the concept of 'The Darkening'.

It is a notion that I was not certain existed before I came to Hades; it first entered my mind when I awakened from my Draco-killing nightmare which was detailed in Entry #6.

After discovering that Estella had been murdered by Simeon- or, at least, believing she had been- I was distraught and angry. I suppose most people would be able to understand that.

However, over the days that passed in the aftermath of my gruesome discovery, I found myself growing more and more so; to a point where I felt as though I could just as easily have committed the acts in Drachen Nachtmahr in reality.

I have never been a violent person by nature, but the impulses were growing stronger with every passing day. Each moment I spent when my hands were not bathed in the blood of Estella's killer was another moment of agony for me, and that- I can tell you simply- is not the thought process of a sane man with aspirations toward heroism. I mean, I do plan to deal with Simeon in the very near future, but the primal hatred I was feeling was not conducive to measured, righteous vengeance so much as it was to ruthless, bloody slaughter.

I was not certain if the whole thing was my own overly emotional state, or if there was some legitimate dark magic at play; given the Disciples' involvement, it could have gone either way (perhaps they wanted to have me attack Simeon seemingly without cause and have me arrested as a result, but I would think there were more important matters in their busy schedules than simply harassing *me*... but then, Estella has proven me wrong before.

Either way, I did ask Hades if he was aware of such a spell that could inflict a state of exponentially increasing hatred, and he did, in fact, have an answer for me;

He told me the story of the great Heracles, who was afflicted with a magical plague by his 'mother' Hera; a plague that caused him to lose himself in a blind rage during which he murdered his innocent family.

Although I could not be certain that it was this horrific, legendary 'hate virus' that I had contracted, it was certainly a step in the right direction.

Any further discoveries regarding this 'Darkening' will be addressed in a further companion piece.

One item in the story that I am very pleased *not* to have fabricated was the event that took place over the course of the night I spent waiting for my fate to be decided- the night during which I wrote The Off-Season.

It might be difficult to believe that I could have penned the entire story in a single night, but again, the concept of time is very difficult to convey where the Land of the Dead is concerned; That, and although my mind was weary from so many harrowing experiences consecutively, I was not *tired*. When I first arrived, I merely looked at the bed in the chamber with disdain; As though I could get a wink of sleep in that place.

With an undefined amount of time between myself and my almost certain demise at Hades' hands, I decided to spend it doing the one thing I had hoped to do from as early as my childhood: seeing myself in a great legend- albeit one written by my own hand.

I supposed it was cheating, but at the time I could not be sure I would ever live to see it happen any other way.

As I wrote the story of my fictional self and his journey through Hades- for a vastly different objective- I was surprised as I was suddenly graced with the presence of Persephone, Hades' bride.

I felt as though I would have heard the door to the chamber open, so my only guess was that she had used a portal- or simply manifested herself in the room with me.

I was elated at her presence; as intimidating as she, a Goddess, was, she was vastly preferable to her husband (and part of me felt as though she would have agreed... or at least understood).

She, like her husband, knew precisely what I was there for- water from the Lethe River. I had told Hades what I wanted it for, but Persephone wanted further information; why I felt it so important to have done this errand myself. Undoubtedly others were champing at the bit to be rid of Simeon. However it was I, a merchant's son and fairy tale enthusiast, who had seen fit to come down and retrieve the water personally.

For the first time in a long time, no longer surrounded by anybody who would judge me for my emotions and my instincts as a mortal man, I told her precisely why: my love for Estella Foxglove, and my desire to be recognized for what I truly am by her, by my friends and even by my enemies.

She listened with a gently curious expression, reminding me somewhat of Talia Tale's expression whenever I regaled her with a story.

I did not harbor any grand delusions that pandering to Persephone's sympathies would improve my situation, but whether or not it had done so, at the very least it allowed me to spend a few minutes longer in her presence. It goes without saying, but she really was quite beautiful.

In turn, she warned me that although her husband was no one to be trifled with (again, a fact that went without saying), there were many dangers awaiting me back in the world of the Living; even if I was somehow able to walk out of this place with all of myself intact.

To that end, she walked to the collection of maps I had brought with me, taking that which Raven had drawn of the realm of Hades.

Looking it over for a few moments, she took my inkpen and circled a small area in the rocky wall that surrounded the gray lands.

Immediately afterward, she turned and went to take her leave through a portal that appeared before her mid-step.

It was then that I asked her if she might contact Hermes- messenger of the Gods- to collect 'The Off-Season' when it was completed, and deliver it to the Band of the Twisted Claw.

At this point, any readers of these journals would know just how much of it was embellished, but they would also know that I had my reasons for doing so.

When Hades finally called me back into his presence, he gave me his final verdict.

Although I had not committed any major sin in coming to his realm- and since Persephone had, in fact, vouched for me for whatever reason (pity, perhaps)- Hades had elected not to have me executed there and then.

No. He would not kill me... but he promised me that upon my death- the circumstances of it and whatever feats I managed to achieve- my soul would not be judged, but thrown to Tartarus to be tortured by demons for the rest of eternity so that I might prove as an example to those who might tread in his lands in the arrogant belief that they would not pay penance for doing so.

I was too horrified to say or do anything, even to react at all. If I had been anyplace else- that is to say, anywhere on the material plane- I probably would have blacked out... but instead I simply stood there, trying desperately to process what I had just been told.

With that, however, he had me removed from his presence by his guards. I probably would have been afraid of them, but after that cheerful bit of news regarding my future in the great beyond, everything else paled in comparison.

My memories of my departure from the Land of the Dead almost completely lost; I remember my feet shuffling forward, my eyes only vaguely aware of the bodies of water and the pale marble structures of my surroundings. I remember avoiding basically everyone and everything to ensure that no part of my body or spirit was harmed- or even destroyed- on my way to the location Persephone had pointed me toward.

At last, I reached the immense wall of stone that encapsulated the Land of the Dead; It was not smooth, but jagged and frightening to behold, like an endless plane of hideous teeth that stretched vertically to unknowable heights. I supposed that someone with the will to do so could scale the wall, but would have suffered a great many cuts to his hands in the process.

But judging by the comparatively tiny hole in the cliffs- still about large enough for me to crawl through- I realized that scaling the wall was not what Persephone had had in mind.

Removing my pack and making certain Toil was still with me- I was not about to go back to Gertrude having lost her gift to me somewhere in the netherworld, lest my damnation begin prematurely- I pushed it into the cave ahead of me before getting to all fours and beginning the long trek back up to the surface.

Of all the stories I had heard of getting into Hades, I knew precious little about getting out again. I knew that Orpheus had foiled his own effort at saving his love in the process of doing so, but that was about all I knew.

The ground within the tunnel was rough and uneven, and more than once I had to be wary of cutting my hands or legs on a random outcropping of rock here or there.

Not far into my ascent, the strange ambient gray light that existed in the lands of Hades seemed to snuff out all at once. Once again, I felt that terrible pressure all over my body, held at bay by the magic of the Heart Sutra that had protected me all this time... although I could feel it beginning to weaken.

Perhaps the ritual itself was only effective for a limited period of time... but more likely, its very name told the tale; the Heart Sutra drew its strength from my own heart- my will and determination, which after being told I was damned no matter what I might achieve in my life was in a shambles.

The only thing I could think of- the only thing that kept me going- were thoughts of returning to Bristol with my secret weapon in hand. The thoughts of the looks on the Gypsies' faces when their greatest enemy was felled by a simple merchant's son from the New World. The notion that even Hades could not deny my unexpected grand performance. The look on Estella's face when I singlehandedly brought the Draco Disciples down... and the look on her face when I, the most accomplished Lightbringer in the history of the wars between Light and Darkness looked her in the eye, brushed a gentle hand through her hair, drew her close, and...

And then, at last, I drew my first breath of sweet, earthly air in what seemed like ages.

Standing to my feet, I looked back only to see the tunnel had disappeared, leaving only a sheer cliff face. Beneath me was a lush field of green grass, leading off into a sparsely wooded area.

Immediately I opened my pack and retrieve a scroll onto which was scribed a teleportation circle that would take me back to the lair of the Third Company. Granted I could have avoided meeting them again altogether, but at that point I had no food, no provisions and no idea where I was; best to deal with the devils I knew, rather than the devils I did not.

I have since returned the Ring of Gyges and scrubbed away the Heart Sutra- not that it had not come in useful, but it would not look terribly normal, walking around in public in broad daylight covered in painted runes.

I swore on pain of death I would not divulge the whereabouts of the Third Company's hideout, and they finally released me to begin the long trek back to Bristol after allowing me to use their Mystic to send a message to the Band with the news of my continued existence.

Now only one thing remains:

To prove myself to my friends, my enemies, and to the woman I love.

-

Today I received a return Sending spell from Gaia Vedeia, Keeper of the Band of the Twisted Claw.

This is what it said.

"On this, the darkest night, Felix tells me that he has seen Estella in the spirit realm.

I am sorry to be the bearer of ill tidings."

I suppose I will not have to wait to die for my torment to begin.