

(This is the continuation of 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.

In addition, this is a story within a story- a 'fictional' narrative written by 'Davem of the Davemport', whose story is outlined in [The Davemport Records](#).)

## "The Off-Season"

A RenQuest Fanfiction by David Manley.

### Part 1

All things considered, Davem would have preferred a city-owned, official dungeon; makeshift prisons- i.e. the dank cellar with a set of manacles hanging from the ceiling from which he now hung- lacked a certain professional touch.

Not that he was well versed in prisons; he'd only ever really seen *one* before, but still.

As he wracked his brain in an effort to remember how he'd arrived here- or even where he *was*- he allowed his gaze to scour his dark surroundings.

There was a single crack of dim light leaking in from beneath what seemed to be the chamber's only door. As his eyes adjusted to the dimness, he could make out the outlines of shelves, and all manner of etcetera lining each one.

Eventually his eyes turned back to the door... where he caught a glimpse of his pack laying on the ground beside it. Gradually, the memories came back to him.

"What in God's name is there to be done in *France*?"

The curmudgeonly sentiment came from none other than the merchant Volstav, one of Davem's recent (grudging) traveling companions. The stocky man sat in the driver's seat of a rickety, creaking, donkey-drawn wagon which was at the moment- piled high with riches.

Said riches were the spoils of his latest adventuring endeavors journeying at the side of both Davem 'of the Davemport', and their mutual escort Mercy Mannheim.

Mercy was a paladin, as evidenced by the gleaming armor she wore and the presence of her mighty 'War Mare', Eva. She was really the reason both Davem and Volstav had even lived this long.

"Selling off your ill-gotten treasure, for one." Davem muttered. It didn't matter much to him if Volstav heard him or not; he knew he would be met with a disapproving frown regardless.

"I believe Davem had someone he was going to meet." Mercy answered more audibly from her place astride her mount. As ever, she rode slowly alongside the rear of the wagon, where she could speak with the Lorekeeper more easily.

"Well, I'm not sure of that." Davem replied. "From my research of the Tovas Farraday story, this is about where the Mariage Estate ought to be, and I'm hoping to get a chance to speak with at least *one* of the family. Preferably Suzanne."

"Who?" Volstav demanded, but shook his head. "Nevermind. Go wherever you like, if it means I'll not have to suffer your presence for a while."

"Can you come with me, Mercy?" Davem asked, ignoring Volstav's comment. "I'm not exactly 100% sure about these people."

"Why are they important to you?" Mercy inquired, tilting her head lightly at him. "Are they relatives of yours? Are you *French*? You don't *sound* French."

Davem quickly waved off the notion before she got too far into it.

"The Mariage Family played a minor role in Tovas' story. I never got to speak with any of them directly- only with Talia, Lucien, Yvonna and Gertrude- people who met with them for that one day or so... well, there was *one* other, but..."

"But?"

"He was Simeon Malificus- Praetor of the Draco Disciples." Davem said, his tone growing somewhat dark at the mention of him.

"I've never heard of them." Mercy said curiously.

"I've never *told* you about them." Davem nodded. "I don't know. There's just... there's a lot of reasons I don't want to think about them if I don't have to." He explained, his voice going soft- almost so much so that Mercy needed him to repeat himself.

After a moment, he took a deep breath and began:

"The Draco Disciples are a holdover from the Dragon War; where the soldiers of the Lord of Light took up arms against Tiamat and her hordes. Ultimately Tiamat and her hordes were cast down, her army scattered to the four winds.

Since then, descendants of the Dark Mother's elite have started to resurface all over the world: The Nachritteren in the Germanies, the Shadowed Sun in the Orient, even the Ebon Scale in the New World.

The 'Draco Disciples' are more fanatical than most worshippers of Tiamat; zealots who believe humans were meant to serve and sustain Dragonkind- dragons being the closest mortal beings to Tiamat herself. If you are Tiamat's ally, then you serve the dragons. If you're her enemy... well, you're served *to* them."

Mercy simply nodded.

"It's hard to believe that such heathens exist in this day and age."

"They do." Davem nodded with a sigh, "And I have a feeling they always will... Praetor Simeon Malificus is their current leader, and the most influential advocate of their Goddess. He gained the power of near-immortality through the most gruesome of rituals, able to possess the bodies of others by displacing his soul... aside from that, he's not really any more or less powerful than a standard mage, I guess. He's just... tricky. Underestimating him can be a big liability. He's managed to infiltrate the Band of the Twisted Claw twice over; The first time was four years ago, possessing the body of a Band mage. The second time was last year, when he masqueraded as a nobleman named Festivus Merrier... and that's what brought me here. Laurent and Jeanne Mariage were both friends of 'Festivus Merrier'... I want to see what the extent of that 'friendship' is."

"If these Disciples are as dangerous as you seem to believe they are, then it *would* be in your best interests not to visit the Mariage Estate alone." Mercy said after a few seconds' thought. "I will have to check this place for signs of BlackPence activity, but once that is finished, I will gladly accompany you."

"How can we be certain," Volstav began with a mocking leer, "that *you* are not being possessed by your friend Simeon?"

"I'm pretty sure he wouldn't waste his time on *me*." Davem answered curtly... although in reality it was more a hope than an honest opinion. There were certain thoughts, memories... and even fantasies that he didn't want Simeon to have any knowledge of.

Groaning in discomfort, Davem struggled to stand. He twisted his wrists in the manacles, gritting his teeth as he struggled to free himself. The cuffs and chains, however, were far too sturdy for him.

Suddenly, he perked up and looked over to his pack. He called out in a hushed, hissing voice.

"Toil! *Toil!* Are you in there?"

There was a moment of silence before his leather bag began to rustle and twitch.

At last, a slender figure of green and gray popped out of the pack, looking around until fixing on him with a blank, button-eyed stare.

Toil the Wormling was the final, least-known member of Davem's traveling party... mostly because the magically animated toy snake seemed hardly worth mention.

"Ah, thank God." Davem sighed. Whatever had captured him hadn't taken Toil... and he was about to see how much of a blessing that was. "Toil, can you get-... er... can you reach-... no... can you try to-..."

One by one, ideas ran through Davem's mind. Unfortunately, most of them required a creature with arms, legs, a mouth, the gift of speech... basically everything Toil couldn't offer.

At last, Davem took one more glance around the room.

He hadn't noticed it upon his first cursory glance, but in one corner of the room was a large mound of coal, spilling out from what appeared to be some sort of chute.

"Well... I'm not seeing any better options. Toil! Go see if you can crawl out of here through that chute; try to find Mercy, okay?"

Of course, chances were equally good that Toil would end up trapped in an avalanche of coal, pinned until he was eventually shoveled into a fire, but if it could potentially save his Davem's life, he was fairly sure Gertrude would forgive him.

Either way, it took a little time to make the Wormling understand what Davem was asking for. He kept crawling toward the captive Lorekeeper with expectations of getting scratches on the head- which Davem was currently ill-equipped to deliver.

"No, no! Toil, go over *there!* Go to the *chute!*" Davem insisted, but gasped as he began to hear loud footsteps overhead. "Damn it!"

Looking all over the chamber, his mind frantic, he finally wrapped his fingers tightly around the chains that held him aloft. Reaching down with his feet, he seized Toil between his shoes, and swing his legs wildly about.

In a surprising display of dumb luck, the Wormling sailed through the air until landing with a 'plop' and a clatter of coal lumps on top of the pile.

"Okay, good. Now climb *up!*" Davem called, with rapidly rising panic.

Toil craned around to look at Davem, making a slight motion toward him.

"No, no, no! Not *me!* Climb up the *chute!* Go, Go! Find Mercy! Get out of here!"

The footfalls became louder and heavier, until they stopped just outside the door to the 'cell'. Davem's heart was pounding, praying that- in spite of all odds- Toil had understood and begun to squirm his way up the coal chute.

Davem turned to the door, clenching his teeth.

However, before it opened, he heard a male voice speaking on the other side of it.

"Foster. Light."

Then, there was a brilliant flash from the crack beneath the door that grew into a full-on blinding radiance as it swung open. Davem tried to shield his eyes so he could squint into it, but his hands- again- were unavailable. He turned away, shutting his eyes tightly. He could feel the rush of warm air from the other side of the door, and heard those footsteps approach and finally come to stand before him.

Davem couldn't look upon his visitor, the light both blinding him and silhouetting the man's form.

"Good morrow to you, 'Davem of the Davemport'."

He wanted to say something- anything- but for some reason, his words failed him. He didn't recognize the voice, nor could he even hope to see what the man looked like. Even so, he knew one thing was certain:

He had never before experienced the kind of fear he felt at that moment.

He couldn't explain it; he had stood in the presence of the Praetor himself, had suffered the most horrific nightmares and even had plans for the depths of Hades itself... but somehow this single man did more to chill his heart than the three of them combined.

"We have looked through your possessions, and read through most of your manuscripts. They have garnered our *interest*. You tell a most intriguing tale."

Biting his lower lip, Davem trembled where he hung by his manacles.

"You have much to offer. *Information*, specifically; Information regarding the Light-Descended."

"Who... are you?" Davem finally managed to speak, the words having to be forced like a stubborn mule.

"No one of consequence for the moment." The man replied. "Would you happen to know where the rest of your kind have gotten to? After Helena Bassett's death, I would have thought they would be properly detained. Executed, perhaps."

"Helena... Bassett?" Davem blinked.

"I believe you would know her as 'Helena Handbasket'."

"What?" Davem straightened. "Helena... she's *dead?* How?"

"By all accounts, she yet lives. However, my agents do not make mistakes. I know not by what mysticism she still makes appearances, but I assure you this world no longer stands tortured by her existence."

Davem quivered slightly. It wasn't as though he and Helena Handbasket had been close friends- or even friends. But... something about the way this man simply dismissed her...

"You... you called them 'Light-Descended'..."

"A generous term for those descended from the Lord of Light's army." The man replied simply. "Now that I have seen fit to answer a few of your questions, perhaps you may see fit to answer *mine*."

"I... don't know anything, really." Davem replied. "I'm... not one of them. I'm just-"

"An *intern*." The man completed Davem's words before he himself could speak them. "I am well versed in your tenure with the Gypsies. Humble as they are, they possess a unique eye for talent, *Lorekeeper*."

"What do you want from me?!" Davem finally shouted, immediately regretting another effort at looking at the man before him.

"I am not yet certain of that." The man said quietly, "but I am certain of this; once I have finished reading your works, I shall have a great *many* questions for you."

"M-most of that is just... just fancy and conjecture." Davem said quickly, swallowing.

"Certainly." He answered softly. "Then you would be the first person I have ever known that would go so far out of his way to make himself look so pitiful in his own works of fancy."

Davem flinched.

"I consider myself too much a gentleman to bring up your 'romantic endeavors'. But the fact remains. You needn't pretend your works are anything but truth- or by what you believe to *be* truth, as it corroborates intelligence we already possess. Intern or no, you are a special sort of mercenary- one who wields a pen with every bit as much skill as most *traditional* warriors wield a blade. And that is a skill we should like to have."

"I'm really not in a position to accept any other offers right now... or to give out any information. You would have to take that up with my..." His words trailed off as that strange sense of terror overtook him again.

"A pity." The man replied softly, as though he earnestly meant it. "Then, perhaps, your *superiors* would give up the information I require of their *own* accord, after hearing of your capture."

"Don't hold your breath." Davem retorted, hoping to hide his fear behind sarcasm. "Twenty shillings says they don't even remember who I *am*."

"We shall see." He answered casually. "In the meantime, I shall continue to study your 'works of fancy', and you may continue to enjoy your accommodations."

After another moment, the blinding light disappeared behind the closing door.

Davem heard the sound of the man's footsteps disappearing back from whence they had come, leaving him alone once more.

He straightened again, turning and looking behind him at the pile of coal.

Toil was gone.

Davem took another deep breath, though the sigh that followed quivered in lasting unease.

"Who in the hell...?" He whispered to himself, but it didn't matter. For the time being, his mind was focused on the hope that somehow, the little Wormling would find him a way out of this. While normally his hopes wouldn't be high, at this point they sort of had to be.

At that point, 'Hope' seemed to be all he had left.

## Part 2

"I'll meet you in front of the Mariage Estate in two hours." Davem called to Mercy as the crowded city streets ever threatened to pull them apart in the midst of their discussion. "You have the address, right?"

"Yes, I have written it down." Mercy replied with a stern nod. After all, she still had a syndicate to hunt.

Considering his current situation, it was ironic that Davem was the one who would not arrive.

For the time being though, Davem had a good amount of time to kill before he was to meet her.

His stomach let out a low rumble, and he frowned.

It was the early afternoon, and he hadn't eaten since the prior evening. After living with the Gypsies for a while, he should have been used to not eating for extended periods of time, but he'd been 'spoilt' in a manner of speaking. He'd come from a reasonably successful family (albeit not nobles), and he'd carried some of that wealth with him from the New World to England. He was used to having a decent meal each day.

"Okay, well, a town this big must have plenty of inns." He said, mostly to himself, but he could just have been addressing Toil the Wormling who was now peeking out of his pack.

Wandering down the street (yet keeping a close eye on his possessions, as his dealings with sticky-fingered Gypsies had left him paranoid), his eyes scanned the signs hanging over each building, hoping that French cuisine was every bit as wonderful as he'd heard about.

At last, he arrived at a humble looking building (as humble as 'French' gets, anyway) with pleasant smells wafting out from its entryway.

"Le Bohémian Étrange... why does that seem so fitting?" He muttered, then shook his head. "Feh."

The place's interior matched its exterior perfectly; doing its best to look well-appointed and assimilating its stereotypical surroundings, while at the same time doing so on a budget.

Davem sat down slowly at one of the place's tables, close to the corner. He wouldn't have to worry about watching for Mercy or Volstav, and these days he found himself wanting to remain undisturbed (aside from the serving girl, of course).

He had been in England for a few years now. He'd only spent just shy of *one* of them with any knowledge whatsoever of Bristol and the Descendants of the Dragon Wars.

In reality, he was beginning to wonder if he was better or worse off for it.

It was a complete and awful mess.

On one hand there were fragments of a defeated army, burrowed underneath the everyday world just waiting for an opportunity to rear its ugly head at the expense of every man, woman and child on the planet.

On the other was a disorganized, childish, mismatched horde of madmen and women who were the quintessential example of 'the lesser of two evils'.

Between the two was a veritable museum of ancient magical weapons of war; spells, artifacts, even living entities calling themselves 'Gods'... although Davem was beginning to sincerely question the validity of the term. Beings like Loki, Tiamat and the Lord of Light didn't seem to have much hand in the creation of the world; they were merely wardens of the world who represented certain aspects of it.

Davem was beginning to doubt that- if there *was* a God-god- that he was even paying attention to the world anymore, and- should he start in the near future- he would have a long, angry talk with those he'd left in charge.

"Que voudriez-vous?"

Davem was jolted from his thoughts by the sound of a young woman addressing him in her native tongue... which- when it came to French- would seize *most* men's attention.

"Pardonnez-moi. Je ne parle pas français." He replied, using the only French phrase he'd bothered to learn before coming here. He'd known that the Mariage family obviously spoke English, so in that fact, he had casually ignored the possibility that other Frenchmen did not.

"Parlez-vous anglais?"

"Oui... er... yes." Davem answered bashfully, and shook his head. "If I could have some soup, that would be amazing. I'll work up from there. And some water."

The girl smiled and hurried off, leaving Davem to... whatever he was doing.

The distraction had thankfully disrupted his... well, his *distraction*. He reached into his pack and withdrew his journal which would- by the end, if he survived- contain his thoughts and discoveries regarding The Darkening.

Much like the Draco Disciples, Davem hadn't told Mercy about The Darkening. He hadn't really told *anybody* about it. It was in his small anthology regarding his experiences at Bristol, but he hadn't shared much of that with his friends- Gypsy or otherwise. The Band could draw their conclusions about Estella- he didn't care anymore- but they had their own troubles to deal with now that the Faire had ended. Simeon had been foiled, but he doubted the evil bastard would be gone for long. And even if he was, someone or something would inevitably take his place. They would need their Gypsies, their Questers, their Lightbringers and even their Champions, just in case.

Davem was little more than a glorified librarian- a gatherer of information. For now, however, this was exactly what dealing with the Darkening would require: Until he knew for certain whether it was his mind's overcompensation over Estella's death, or a genuine threat to the world- something that could spread- his journey would continue.

He was fairly certain is intended destination- the pit of Hades- would hold the answer he sought.

The afterlife contained endless numbers of people, one of whom *had* to know *something* about the Darkening. Although it usually required terrible occult rituals and selling one's soul to even *speak* to the dead, the entire Greek Pantheon was available to anybody willing to do the legwork (although people like Orpheus and Icarus learned the hard way to watch what they were *doing* during such visits).

He didn't expect Mercy to accompany him, and frankly wouldn't have wanted her to. Getting from England to Greece and back, sure; he'd need all the help in the world. But that part... that part, he would do alone.

Davem's smile was twofold, if such a thing were possible; first, because the serving girl was headed in his direction, and because she was holding a large bowl full of what smelled like the most delicious soup to come out of France. He sat up straight in his chair, clearing the table off and putting everything back in his pack. He hadn't gotten much done, but really he should have been more focused on what he planned to ask Suzanne when he finally met her.

"Thank you very much." Davem said, reaching into his coinpurse.

He'd taken his own minute share from the coffers of the aforementioned BlackPence pocket Mercy had decimated, much to Volstav's disapproval, but it was doubtful- amidst all the merchant was likely to make selling it- that he'd miss a few coins here or there... even if they *were* of the gold variety.

The girl did a bit of a double-take at the coin as he dropped it into her palm, but smiled.

"Let me know when you are ready for your next course." She said with a wide grin- almost too wide, but Davem was too busy with his soup and bread to notice.

The bowl was soon empty, and he was working on the bit of bread he had left when he suddenly began to feel incredibly dizzy.

"Uhh..." He murmured, blinking and glanced all about the room. Thinking it was just some after-effect of breaking so long a fast, the notion swiftly waned as his vision began to darken.

He felt an odd, queasy sensation in his stomach, and he raised his heavy eyelids with a sudden realization.

"Ohh, that is *ironic*." He managed, before falling face-down on the table.

Davem groaned, shaking his head as he awakened once again in the dark basement of... wherever he'd ended up.

The bowl of soup had been his last meal before ending up in this place, and that hadn't even begun to fill him up. He'd been looking forward to some kind of lamb or beef or *something*, but instead he'd been treated to a pair of cold iron manacles and a hearty helping of suffocating shadows.

He didn't know how long he'd been there but enough for his stomach to start reminding him how little he'd had to eat recently.

"Look, I *tried*, okay?" He murmured weakly down at his abdomen. "From this point until he saves us, blame Toil."

He glanced behind him, back at the pile of coal. He hoped that Toil had found Mercy, or somebody, *anybody* who wasn't one of his captors.

*Could they be Draco Disciples? Did they recognize me somehow?* He thought, glancing down at his apparel. He hadn't been wearing any of his Gypsy souvenirs upon arriving in France (just in case). *But the way that man was talking before didn't seem... didn't make it seem like they were... it seemed more like he was looking at the Praetor and the Bristol Dracos from the outside, as if...*

He nodded to himself.

*These people are not Draco Disciples... but they're definitely 'Dark-Descended'* He concluded, but as he spoke, he heard footsteps approaching from outside the room.

The door opened slowly, and his eyes were forced to adjust even to the dim light that flowed into the small chamber.

"I don't suppose you're here to let me out of these cuffs, are you?" Davem asked, struggling a little. "They're pretty, but they just don't match my outfit."

The figure stepped inside, and after a few seconds Davem could smell something... some sort of cooked meat. Whoever it was placed something down beside him-or-her, and knelt before the captive Lorekeeper. Procuring a set of shackles from a carried pack, he/she went about latching them onto Davem's ankles. Afterward, he/she stood, and with a flick of a key, sent him falling in a heap to the ground.

"Wow, I... I didn't think you were gonna go for it." He said with a murmur, glancing down at the ankle-cuffs. "I assume you're not rescuing me."

The figure only pointed down at the other object that had been brought inside; a tray containing a small amount of vegetables and meat.

"Is this going to knock me out again or something?" He asked, but after not receiving a response, he looked down at the food. "...You're not going to talk to me, are you?" He asked with a sigh. "Why are you guys being so secretive? Back in Bristol, the Draco Disciples couldn't shut up about themselves."

"Are they successful?"

Davem blinked at the whispered response. He hadn't been listening for one, so he only heard it as an utterance-unable to make out any details about the voice, even if it belonged to a man or woman.

Slowly, Davem began to work away at the food, but as he turned to look up at the figure, he/she backed out of the room and closed the door.

He frowned. He wasn't going to get to see any of these people long enough to know what any of them looked like; He *did* know that one of them was named Foster, and heard their leader's voice at some length... plus, there was that terrible, ominous feeling he got from him.

But for all of these failed attempts at hiding their own particulars, the figure had been right. The Draco Disciples virtually announced theirs to the world, inviting it to stop them. And the Gypsies and Lightbringers were all too willing to do so. Repeatedly.

*What in hell could he want?*

After that brief meal, he had been affixed to the manacles from the ceiling once again. This sort of thing repeated at certain intervals whenever biological necessities were an issue. It was a surprisingly accommodating treatment he received, but it only served to unnerve him more and more.

Every minute that passed without a sign of Mercy or Toil was one more inch his stomach seemed to sink. For all he knew they had already left without him, or perhaps Mercy had already come for him and died in the effort.

The frightening man came to visit him a second time after that... possibly a full day, it was difficult to know. Light flooded the place, obscuring the man's presence once again.

"Davem."

"... You." He had no other name to address him by.

"I have finished reading your works... and I have come to a conclusion."

"You are... going to let me go?" Davem managed, but the man only chuckled. Really, the Lorekeeper hadn't expected any other response.

"Yes." He answered simply.

This was a response Davem *hadn't* expected.

"Wait, what?" He asked, leaning forward where he hung in his chains. "Does that mean you're... going to kill me? That's how these things usually go: you get what you want from me, and then you make sure I don't talk about what I've seen...?"

"This is *true*." He said... and it seemed as though another pulse of pure terror saturated the air, Davem's lips going numb and unable to speak further. "However, there is one thing I yet have need of... a service only *you* seem ready to provide."

Davem closed his eyes, but turned his face toward the blinding light- toward the man.

"Do you know the name of Fianna Foxglove?"

He nodded dumbly.

He ought to have. Fianna was Estella's mother; the Praetor's wife who Simeon had killed to gain his power of immortality.

"Of course you do. I had to be certain. For you see, the task which I would have you carry out for me entails both *her*... and your journey to *Hades*. As I understand, you intended to visit the Land of the Dead anyway."

Davem flinched.

"You are going to help me kill the 'immortal' Praetor, once and for all."

### Part 3

"Why!?" Davem managed to overcome the fear the man instilled in him with the power pure incredulity. "I- I mean, I hate Simeon Malificus as much as anybody else, but... but you're both worshippers of Tiamat, aren't you? Why are you people so intent on killing each other?"

There was a moment of chilling silence, Davem's words swallowed by the oppressive atmosphere.

"The Praetor- and, under his leadership, the Draco Disciples- have lost sight of what it truly means to serve the Dark Mother." The man answered in a low tone.

*People are going to interpret that in different ways...* Davem thought, but continued listening intently. He was still trying to gather as many details about the man who spoke to him as he could from sheer voice alone.

"The Praetor believes that Dragons are a superior race to Humanity; that the world is rightfully theirs, and that we exist upon its face by sheer happy chance. And yet, how many dragons remain? How many dragons have been slain at the hands of humans?"

The Dark Mother refuses to acknowledge what the Lord of Light learned long ago. Mankind is the next step in the world's evolution, and the Draco Disciples' devotion to the old ways is leaving them behind. It is why Lady Tso failed, why Ruby Nightshade failed, and why Simeon Malificus has and will fail in the future... and with their every failure, the name of Tiamat suffers. The honor that comes with serving Her is tarnished.

It is an immutable truth whether She is willing to accept it or not; In order for the faithful to properly uphold Her name, the blemish of Simeon Malificus and the Draco Disciples must be cleansed from the Earth. She must learn to place the same faith in Her worshippers that the Lord of Light does in his, rather than treating them as her playthings; Only then can the work of making Her name one to be feared and revered begin again from the ruins She and the Disciples have created."

Davem's eyes would have been wide had he been looking at the man instead of squeezed shut and cast aside. True, he was still clearly quite insane, but he could more readily envision an army of evil men as opposed to an army of dragons.

"What do you want from me, then?" Davem finally asked.

"Only for you to continue whatever business you had in the depths of the Underworld." The man replied. "But on your way out, if you could see fit to... *pick up* something as you return..."

Davem hesitated, his mind stumbling over itself before he realized:

"Fianna... Fianna Foxglove. You want me to bring Fianna Foxglove back from the Underworld...?"

"Precisely. The ritual Simeon Malificus performed in order to achieve his power and status required the death of the one he cared for most. If Fianna Foxglove lives and breathes in the land of the mortal and the living once more, the contract struck with the Dark Mother is broken; Simeon will lose his power. And then, I myself shall put an end to him."

"What makes you so certain that I'll even be able to do that?" Davem asked, "Or that I'd even help you at all? As bad as Simeon is, I know nothing about you. It's not like you've got a pile of *manuscripts* for me to read..."

There was another moment of unnerving quiet. There must have been an unspoken command, because the sound of footsteps followed. Then, Davem twitched as something was placed over his head; a cloth sack.

Opening his eyes, he could see the magical light disappear through the veil of cloth. The man stepped into the room, and the door closed behind him.

They were alone.

Davem waited, uncertain of what was to come... but after a pause, the story began.

"My brother was not a member of our organization. Although he was Dark-Descended, he chose the path of peace. He married a beautiful young girl and moved out to the country with my father's blessing. I, meanwhile, remained in the city to research and to plan, as we are want to do.

The day Simeon Malificus- Festivus Merrier- and I met was during a ball held by none other than the Mariage family. He had come to meet with me specifically. My father had died, leaving me to inherit his position and command over his extant affairs and ongoing endeavors; he had come to me in search of an alliance.

It soon became clear that his beliefs- his goals- would not coincide with those my father had set down for me, and I declined Simeon's proposal as a result.

One week from that night, my sister-in-law came to my doorstep, hideously mangled, covered in blood and gibbering in a fit of madness.

Instantly I led a group of my men to my brother's home, where we found the place picked clean of valuables and burned to the ground. His body lay just outside, his throat hacked to near decapitation and the bloody dagger still clutched in his hands.

From what we were able to pull from the broken mind of my sister-in-law, one night, my brother returned from a nightly walk... but this time, he was accompanied by a number of men dressed in red and black. His eyes were burning with an unnatural gleam.

Without word or hesitation, he proceeded to brutally beat his lovely bride- whom he cherished more than anything in the world- with his bare hands. He stripped her to not but her bare skin, and proceeded to rape her in front of them... then invited them to join him.

On and on it went, until they tired of her at last. Drawing their daggers and swords, they decided to leave their final bloody marks on her soiled skin.

The men left, leaving my brother and his traumatized wife behind, standing outside of their home now set ablaze.

She lay there, quivering and sobbing on the ground before him... and as he raised a dagger in his hands, she prayed he would kill her, that this horror might finally be put to an end.

However, he turned the knife upon himself, and looked to her with that same psychotic grin.

'Tell my brother that Simeon Malificus sends his regards.'

And then, he stabbed himself in the throat. Again and again. His last words, a fit of gurgling laughter."

Even though Davem could not see him, he stared in horror in the speaker's direction.

"Now..." He flinched again, started back to the moment by that single syllable, "as you consider what I have just told you... consider this: what do you know of Estella's disappearance? That you woke up one morning to find nothing but a bloody smear upon the Bristol soil."

Already, the hairs were beginning to rise on the back of his neck, even as his stomach- and his heart- threatened to plummet.

"What do you remember of the night before she vanished? After you departed Bristol's dungeon where she was held? After the peaceful night you shared? Know you any details at all?"

Davem's breathing grew quick, light, trembling within the suffocating confines of the sack over his head. He felt nauseous. His legs were trembling and his lower jaw quivered.

*How can we be certain that **you** are not being possessed by your friend Simeon?  
I'm pretty sure he wouldn't waste his time on **me**.*

"No!" He shouted at last. "N-No! She's not... I didn't...She- She came to me! She told me, she's still alive!"

"What makes you so certain of that?" He persisted.

"Why would he kill his own daughter?!"

"Why would he openly provoke the leader of a faction under the command of his own Goddess? Why would he sacrifice the woman he professes to love in exchange for an eternity of slavery? Why does he sacrifice his men in droves in pursuit of mad schemes when a smarter man would consolidate, strategize and seek out pinpoint weaknesses?" He countered, his voice taking on a soft, menacing growl. Combined with his natural aura, it felt as though he was ready to throttle Davem right there and then.

"Simeon Malificus has as little regard for humanity as Tiamat herself; from his own potential comrades in arms to his wife to his own daughter. While this suits him as the Praetor of their zealous lot, he is an ancient, antiquated *burden* to those of us who would see Tiamat's ambitions succeed. And although you have seemingly lost your stomach to do the deed yourself in spite of what he has taken from you- regardless of the manner in which he has done so- you cannot claim that Simeon is worth anything to you or to innocent and free people so long as he lives."

Davem shook his head... and the man did not need to remove the sack to sense the confused, pensive expression on his face. The idea of a worshipper of Tiamat who even regarded such a thing as 'free and innocent people' seemed counterintuitive to Tiamat's infernal plans.

Then again, the only Tiamat worshippers he'd ever interacted with were the Draco Disciples...

"If you are correct and Estella still lives, the return of her beloved mother would earn you a place in her heart forever. In addition, it would give you an ally in the personage of Vinz Clortho, who lusted after Fianna but saw her taken by the Praetor. It would effectively disband the Bristol Disciples, and the loss of their leader could cause other pockets of their cult to crumble all over the world, leaving only Tiamat's true faithful prepared to take their place."

The Lorekeeper trembled slightly.

"But if you are wrong, if Simeon has slain this 'Lady Tso' to your 'Tovias Farraday'... then it is not merely a matter of morals and politics, and not even a matter of revenge. It becomes a matter of setting things right... and rescuing the girl you love."

A final, intense silence.

"I shall leave you to consider your options, but know that I shall not-"

"Untie me."

The man's voice died at the sound of Davem's whisper.

"I beg your pardon?" He asked, although it was mere jest; he had heard well enough.

"I'm ready to go whenever you're prepared."

"The journey shall not be as long as you think." He answered with a smile in his voice. "However once we arrive at the mouth of Hades, I cannot guarantee your safety."

"I knew that when I decided to go to begin with." Davem replied. "As I said. I'm ready."

"Very well, then. I shall have your travel arrangements prepared, and you shall leave with the coming of dawn tomorrow... we shall keep you here, to keep you from having any second thoughts."

"Of course. But once I return, you tell me *everything*; who you are, and all about your 'organization'... I'm a *Lorekeeper*, after all."

"Indeed."

The door opened, the blinding light returned, and the sack was drawn off of Davem's head.

When he was again left alone, he looked down at the floor beneath him.

"Think, Davem... think... you left the Dungeon that night, and where did you go... what did you do..."

He trembled where he hung from his manacles, taking in a slow, shaky breath as the chill of the room- and of his heart- began to set in.

"Please, God..."

#### Part 4

"Hold still, damn it all. Skinny as you are, it is hard enough finding room to scribe upon."

Davem was still imprisoned within the cold cellar, however at that moment, the ambient chill in the air bit at him worse than ever. He had been stripped of his clothing which now lay in a pile beside a chair in which he now sat. The exception to this was his pants, which had been hastily used to cover certain... *vitals*.

Leaning before him, hunched and crooked, was an aged woman of presumably oriental descent. She was wound in a very plain looking assortment of browns, grays and blacks. Her skin was wrinkled and mottled, her eyes clouded over

with a slight film. Her ratty black hair was done up in a bun, but some scraggly strands escaped it and dangled around her head.

In one shaky, gnarled hand she held a short quill... with which she was inscribing a seemingly endless string of foreign characters onto Davem's skin.

She spoke only on occasion, but when she did it was usually a barking order or words of degradation.

Evidentially 'Mistress Ai'- as she had been called- was some manner of witch. From what Davem knew of witches, however, she seemed more like a mage or a wizard. Gertrude and her family specialized more in potion brewing and hexing rituals. Sydney Dove and even Randalf the Blue were more experienced in scribing runes, and even then, he had only ever heard of Randalf doing so on the skin of a living human being.

It seemed strange that she saw fit to cover every inch of his body with these ancient letters, but there was a damned good reason for it.

"The Heart Sutra was used by the great musician, Hoichi, to hide from the eyes and the senses of the dead." She had explained as she first dipped her quill into what Davem sincerely doubted was ordinary ink. "It will be indispensable for your journey into the Underworld. Without it, the souls of the dead will overwhelm you- drain your life force and leave a dry husk in their wake."

"Wait, 'Hoichi'?" Davem repeated, twitching a little as she drew a few small lines on his pale hide; the tickle of the pen and cold trickle of the ink was damnably uncomfortable. "You don't mean 'Hoichi the Earless'...?"

"I shant forget to paint your ears as well, boy... nor any other part of you you would not have *torn off*." She replied, glaring down at where his folded pants covered him.

Davem winced.

"Can't you just paint the Sutra on my clothes?"

"It must be etched onto the skin of a living being to take effect. But your garments and other belongings will all benefit from the spell."

"What about my eyes?"

"You shall simply have to be wary; to be sure your open eyes do not meet theirs."

"Fantastic."

A short while after this, Davem was brought another meal by that same person who had served him the previous time. After hearing the figure's voice for a while, he was fairly certain it was a female. A young one, at that.

"Hm. Heracles, Orpheus, Odysseus, Theseus... and Davem of the Davemport." The girl mused. "Whether you succeed or fail..."

She didn't need to continue. Davem imagined the word 'legendary' would have popped in there somewhere, but as he finished up the rest of what could very well be his last meal, a grand reputation was the last thing on his mind.

"What's this?" Davem asked, plucking up a small golden ring from one side of his food tray.

"The Ring of Gyges." The girl... young woman... it was still hard to know, replied as she watched him eat. "It will render you invisible to the creatures that dwell within the realm of Hades."

"Raven Hawkwood never had to prepare this much..." The Lorekeeper muttered. "If you had this, why did I have to sit around for hours letting an old woman paint my unmentionable bits?"

"You are invisible to the undead using the Heart Sutra." The girl replied, with a hint of a chuckle. "But more than just spirits of the deceased are wandering around down there. Demons, Titans, Elementals..."

"Right." Davem nodded sheepishly, looking at the ring again. "How did you get this, anyway?"

"Like the Draco Disciples, we have our methods."

Davem was loathe to point out that the Dracos had squandered most of the artifacts they possessed on fool's errands... some of which very much resembled what *this* could easily turn out to be. However, thoughts of the Draco Disciples brought him back to thoughts of the night before.

He'd slept very little, replaying in his mind again and again the hours following that visit to Estella's prison cell, the nightmare he'd suffered when she'd scolded him, and the latest instance of her appearance at his companion's campsite. All the while, he tried to find some unseen, unspoken evidence... anything that might prove false what his unnerving captor had insinuated:

That Davem himself- under Simeon's power of possession- was responsible for Estella's demise.

It wasn't outside the realm of possibility. As the man had told him, Simeon was capable of far more sinister things than he had ever demonstrated at Bristol- or rather, been *allowed* to demonstrate (mostly thanks to the Band).

Even if the trauma of it had pushed the memory into his subconscious, why would visions of Estella still come to him, insisting that she was alive and safe?

It didn't matter. He was going to Hades, and there he would find not only the answer to The Darkening and the key to slaying Simeon for good, but the Draco girl's fate as well.

Blindfolded, Davem was escorted from his 'cell', and into another cellar chamber. He recognized the rush of warm air, happy to feel it after so much time in the colder room (not to mention happy to be fully dressed again). He had been given his pack, all of his books and all of his maps at his own request.

"If I fall into the Lethe River, I'll need something to remind me of why I'm there," he had only half-joked. In truth, there were more things to worry about than just monsters and ghosts in the Underworld; rivers of flame, waters that robbed mortal souls of their memories, and Gods only knew what else.

He was halted in place for a moment, and he could hear someone move to stand about two feet in front of him.

"We have no time to linger. When you step forward, the teleportation circle will send you to the rim of Avernus Crater in Campania, Italy. At the bottom, you will find the entrance to Hades."

"Italy? I thought I was going to Greece."

"There are many ways to enter the Underworld. You shall find this one more easily accessed... and more aesthetically pleasing."

"You aren't coming?" the Lorekeeper asked. "How do you know I won't just take my fancy new invisible ring and run off?"

"Because you won't." answered his captor. "You and I- all those present here- know what is at stake in this endeavor. And you are not the sort of man who would shirk responsibility, are you?"

Davem shook his head.

"Good. Whenever you are ready."

Even as he began to step forward, he was caught by one arm and pulled back. Forced to turn slightly, he was caught by a swift, clumsy kiss that landed somewhere between his cheek and the edge of his lips.

Letting out a slight, squeaking gasp, he opened his mouth to speak... only for a hand to push him forward.

There was a rush of scalding air all around him... and through the blindfold, the atmosphere went from a dark and dank interior to that of a fresh, cool sea breeze and the brilliant light of day.

As quickly as he could, Davem reached up and yanked the blindfold away. Ignoring the pleasant tingle at the edge of his lips, his eyes swiftly adjusted to his new surroundings.

Around him was a magnificent ring of green forestland, descending into a circular lake. There were small bits of ruined building here and there that looked as though they hadn't been tended to in a long while... of course, considering the entrance to the Underworld was around here someplace, Davem could understand the lack of maintenance.

For a moment he just stood there (trying to ignore the pleasant tingle at the edge of his lips). One last time, he allowed himself to think of Toil and Mercy and the Band of the Twisted Claw. Of Gertrude the Witch, Talia Tale, that surly Russian bounty hunter Kyril, and even of his family back in the New World. He breathed in the air, and- if he weren't full from his breakfast- he might have eaten something just to appreciate the experience.

He looked down at himself, at the golden ring on his hands, his hands which- like the rest of him- were covered in Japanese letter...

"Well..." He said to himself, but did not finish. Instead, he turned and disappeared into the trees, descending to the bottom of the crater... where Hades awaited him.

## Part 5

At the base of Avernus Crater, there lay a calm, circular lake which reflected flawlessly the blue sky above. However, Davem's eyes were cast neither up nor down, but all around the crater's bowl in search of a doorway- even just a *hole*- that might have been Hades' entryway. He dearly hoped that it did not lie beneath the water... perhaps he should have considered that possibility before packing all of his beloved writings, but *all* of his best ideas came to him in retrospect.

As he passed by a particularly thick patch of shrubs, he heard a soft 'thud' emanate from its leafy mass.

Quirking an eyebrow, he turned and reached out to part the foliage.

Within it was a tiny twitching figure: A large bird that had fallen down from the sky. As Davem watched, the winged creature twitched and finally grew still where it lay.

Looking up to the sky and seeing nothing, the Lorekeeper turned his gaze back down to look the creature over. He could see no sign of struggle or wounds that might have brought it down. It seemed to be well-fed, as well. There was no reason-

Then he remembered. According to rumors he'd heard, the gateways leading to the Underworld gave off a bitter, stale resonance, fatal to lesser creatures.

After kneeling for a moment, Davem stood once more and advanced through the brush. This was the first lead he'd had since arriving at the crater... and although it wasn't the most encouraging omen, he'd take it.

Climbing with some effort up one of the lake's surrounding hills, he let out a gasp, barely catching himself as he nearly pitched forward.

Before him stretched a long gap in the hill leading straight down; A narrow ditch stretched out from one end of the hill to the other, with a dirt ramp at the bottom. At its deepest end was a small portal of pitch-black, only large enough for a *pony* to comfortably navigate.

"Looks like this is it..." Davem murmured to himself.

As he looked down at the black oval, he was suddenly aware of how still and quiet the surrounding landscape was. It was just one more little detail he hadn't noticed in the midst of his search... one more thing that unnerved him.

He didn't allow himself any more time to take in the silence, already on edge as he was. He let his pack slip from his shoulder, the strap falling into his waiting hand. Moving around to where the ramp met the surface of the hill, he descended into the ditch, having to traverse it with his body tilted to one side to account for the narrowness of it.

He hesitated for only a moment in front of the black portal. Up close, it looked like a solid surface, as though someone had draped a black cloth over the dirt. Reaching out, he watched as the toe of his shoe disappeared into the inky shadow. A chill rippled down his body, but he tensed himself in an effort to force it away. He forced a lunge from his back-leg, stumbling forth into the dark.

The ground beneath him, thankfully, stayed firm (he'd half expected to topple forward into nothingness). The tunnel itself was cold, moist and constricted... and now, even Davem could smell the stale air- the stench of decay all around him.

More unsettling still was the fact that the runes all over his body- the Heart Sutra written on his skin by Mistress Ai- was beginning to tingle, to *push* from the *outside*... as though the blackness itself was trying to permeate his form, and the runes adorning his skin were all that kept it at bay.

A swift and silent thanks to that old witch rushed swiftly through his mind before he focused once more on moving forward.

One benefit to the tight confines was a linear path. There were no outrageous twists or gaps to traverse, and there were no forks- no decisions to be made. The pressure all around him continued, and he began to feel a strange nausea in his stomach after a while, but it eventually passed. He could only ascribe it to moving from one plane of existing to another.

He couldn't see anything throughout the descent. Granted, he had torches, but he doubted- after seeing the sunlight's inability to penetrate the tunnel- that they would do any good.

It began to feel as though *hours* had passed since he first began the journey, his body aching from his prolonged crouching stature.

"I'll probably end up looking like Gertrude when this is over..." Davem said to himself... but then stopped.

At first he thought his mind was playing tricks on his eyes, but after blinking and rubbing his eyes several times, he was certain: There was a faint glow- a pale light- almost *pulsating* in the distance.

He was happy to know that this lurching portion of the journey was nearing its end, but would have been far happier if his destination were *anyplace else*.

The light grew slowly with every step he took, until at last, he saw something in the light;

It was a human form.

Gasping sharply, Davem jabbed a hand into his pocket, realizing only now that he'd forgotten to put on the Ring of Gyges.

Quickly, he shoved it onto his ring finger... and as he felt his body tingle with magical energy, he was puzzled to find that the silhouette in the distance vanished as well.

Swallowing, Davem shook his head.

*Whatever it was*, he thought, *if it could see me before, it can't see me now*.

Not that it mattered; he really had only one way to go from his current position.

Limping and stumbling on through the tight confines of the tunnel, he suddenly emerged into a much larger chamber, lit with that dull, pale aura he'd seen before; light that reflected against chalky white stone from a source directly behind where he'd entered from.

Flustered, he turned in place, and instead of a pitch-black, miles-long corridor, he looked out to see the dirt ramp leading out into the sunlit 'Overworld'... as though his trek through the dark had only been a delusion.

Davem only stared for a moment, until letting his head fall into his hands with exasperation.

After a sigh, he looked up again to observe his new surroundings.

It was a massive cavern, about as large as a cargo vessel from his experiences working at the port back home... and about the same shape, too, if it were flipped upside-down. Its vastness was dotted with stalagmites, and other manner of rocky outcroppings.

Seeing only a curved wall on his right, he turned to the left to look down the vast expanse of the chamber. He couldn't see any other exits, and nothing leading further on into its depths.

As he made his way further in, however, his second glance caught a hint of movement at the far opposite end of the room.

It looked like a massive rock at first... but the more he looked, the more he listened, he realized that the 'rock' seemed to be *breathing*.

Creeping a few steps closer to it- despite his better judgment- he could make out more and more details: Hulking muscles, rippling flesh, ragged fur, paws as large as a troll's torso, a body twice the size of the Gypsy Vardo, and finally, three heads bearing slaving jaws...

... one of which was standing up, and glaring directly at him with burning orange eyes.

Cerberus, the ancient and immortal guard-dog of Hades itself: the first- and potentially the last- true mythological beast Davem had ever seen in the wild.

The sight- or rather, its sight of *him*- triggered a gut-wrenching terror inside the Lorekeeper. He only barely managed to keep himself from screaming.

*It can't see me, it can't see me, it can't see me.* He thought to himself over and over again, *It can't really see me, it only heard me...*

He tried to keep his breath slow and silent, but felt as though his thundering heartbeat would make his breath a moot point. He looked back longingly at the exit to the Overworld... but shook his head firmly.

Reaching into his vest, he- with some effort- pulled out a strange object, and began to creep toward Cerberus. He wouldn't be able to sneak around him- not with its keen senses- and he would *never* be able to overpower it as Heracles had done.

He only had two options, and he had already decided against leaving.

The closer he got, the more heads awakened from their slumber until soon, all three of them were listening for his footsteps with a growling vigilance.

As Davem came within about twenty feet of the thing... he could tell by its constant twitching that it was just waiting for some definitive sign- an excuse to pounce... but that's when Davem caught a glimpse of a small archway in the wall beyond it.

Glancing down at the object in his hands, Davem took a slow, silent breath... and tossed the corpse of the bird from earlier at Cerberus, aiming for its central head.

Before it even hit the ground, the center head lunged at the bird with a snarl, only to have its path barred by the right head's snapping jaws.

Davem didn't wait to see if the distraction would last. He charged around the left side of the monster, as fast as he could given the encumbrance of his pack.

A deafening bark issued forth from the left head as it followed Davem's escape, able to hear his footfalls even with the din of its fellow heads' struggle.

This time, Davem *did* cry out as the beast bit down... an inch behind the frantic Lorekeeper's leg. He could feel heat from its muzzle- so much that it actually *singed* his pant leg. He didn't stop, however, and by the time the two other heads had made short work of the bird carcass, he was already standing a fair distance in the archway. He continued running as fast as he could despite the aching in his body from the long crawl down the dark passageway.

The echoes of Cerberus' furious barks followed his escape, the archway (perhaps deliberately) too small for the monster to give chase.

As he slowed to a halt, falling to his knees and panting to catch his breath, he hoped dearly that there was another exit somewhere down there...

... if he made it back out at *all*...

## Part 6

The queasy feeling in Davem's stomach began to subside as he made his way further down the underground pathways. Although the light from the outside had begun to wane, leaving him in darkness once more, he finally decided to light one of his torches.

After struggling with his flint for a moment, a flash of light and the smell of smoke sputtered from the tip of the sturdy wooden rod. A flickering bright-orange glow lit the dull white stone, only now Davem could see that the raw, non-worked stone was interspersed with actual columns. These carved pillars began to grow more frequent as the Lorekeeper proceeded onward, even as the tunnel itself began to widen and its ceiling rose.

So gradual was the change that Davem didn't really realize it until he was standing in a large, echoing hall. Although it wasn't quite as massive as Cerberus' chamber, it was far more elegant. The pillars remained, standing in two rows on either side of the room. The walls were perfectly cut and angled to form a rectangular shape.

At that moment, he felt terribly conscious of himself- of the light he carried. Although the Heart Sutra and Ring of Gyges would keep him from being seen, he did not doubt that the light of the torch would be easily noticed. At the same time, though, he was loath to put it out. The large room felt like it contained a vast emptiness that would swallow him whole, invisible or not.

The light of his torch only barely reached the opposite wall. There, the stone abruptly returned to the same sort of natural cave wall as the sort he'd just emerged from. Instead of a door, there was a ten-foot-high gap that reached from one end of the chamber to the other. The wall above it leveled off to a stone canopy that reached further on into the dark.

Amid the crackles of his torch and the sound of his own breathing, Davem heard the sound of water from within.

He stepped forward, wary of the shadows stretching out from behind the pillars, worried that something may have been lurking within. Perhaps they even had a life of their own, and watched his every step somehow.

Suddenly, he froze.

Standing at the center of the room, he could finally see within the wide gap toward which he was headed.

At first, a thin fog seemed to dominate the interior, growing thicker as he moved forward... but as his eyes focused upon it, it began to take shape- or rather, *shapes*.

Skeletons. Skeletons of human beings stood before him in rank and file; Thousands and thousands of skeletons of mortal men and women and children, waiting to be ferried to the underworld proper.

The Lorekeeper let out a slight hiccup-sound, uncertain of what to do. He noticed after several tense seconds that none of the skeletons seemed to notice his arrival, not even turning at the aura of his torch.

Biting his lip, Davem began to walk slowly forward. As he did, more figures began to appear around him. More skeletons seemed to materialize from all around him, adding themselves to the queue.

As one such entity passed alongside him, his torchlight flickering off of its bony façade. For an instant, a transparent image of a flesh-and-blood woman- devoid of clothing or possessions- imposed itself over the skeleton.

For that second, the skeleton began to turn to look at Davem. The image disappeared quickly, though, and almost immediately she was just another skeleton in the crowd.

He had seen something in her eyes. He had seen fear. Uncertainty. Apprehension. What else would a person feel in this position; Newly dead, her worldly goods, clothing, and even her flesh ripped away and devoured by Cerberus in preparation for her final journey. Now she was on her way to be judged- to ascend to heaven or condemned to hell.

Davem began to roll over in his mind what he'd done in his own life, which of the two he would be likely to go to. He'd never committed any major sins (thanks to Gertrude and those mushrooms). Then again, if Estella...

He shook his head again. That was Simeon. But it wasn't, was it? She wasn't dead. And even if she was- which she wasn't- it wouldn't have been his fault... but would the 'judges' know to distinguish who was in control of his body when it was tainted with the blood of another?

His thoughts were interrupted by a brief gasp of panic as his foot caught on something. He stumbled forward, barely catching himself on his other leg and his free hand. Looking down, he could see ancient black wood beneath his hand. Hurriedly he sprang to his feet to avoid being trampled by the constant parade of skeletons.

Looking around, he could see the newlydead crowding around him... and somewhere ahead, he could see another pinprick of light; a lamp, or a torch like his, most likely.

The sound of rippling water all around him told him where he was easily enough:

This was the Ferry of the Dead, the Ship of Charon.

Davem didn't have time to ponder the mechanics of Hades, even to stop and take notes. If he did, he would have wondered how one Cerberus- even with three heads- could deal with legions of dead souls on a constant basis, and why he had not passed any of said souls on the way in.

As quickly as he could, he tossed the torch he carried over the side of the ship. It struck the water quickly, revealing that the boat did not rise very far above its surface. His surroundings were instantly cast into darkness, but he was still crowded by meandering skeletons. and he could still see that glow in the distance. Carefully, he began to proceed through the ranks of the dead, trying as best he could not to touch any of them. Mistress Ai had stated the Heart Sutra would hide him from the 'senses' of the dead, entailing not only their sight. Nevertheless, he worried for his own welfare; He'd heard that contact with specters such as these might be detrimental, and he wasn't willing to test the theory.

He crept forward bit by bit, the light becoming clearer as he advanced.

As he'd surmised, the light came from the inside of an ancient lantern, which itself hung from the end of a long wooden pole at the bow of the ship.

He nearly missed the dark silhouette; It seemed to ripple and blend into the shadows that lurked just beyond the lantern's light. Keener eyes would notice that the silhouette was *holding* the wooden pole with gnarled obsidian fingers, and that the pole extended over the edge of the boat, disappearing into the murky water.

This was, no doubt, the Ferryman of Souls.

Again, the back of his mind raced with questions; How did so many souls fit aboard one vessel? How did Charon hope to move the enormous ship with but a single slender oar?

He ignored those questions for the moment, prowling on along the rows and rows of souls... he could hear the sounds of faint crying, of uneasy moans... Cerberus stripped the newlydead of their worldly possessions, but not of their memories, of their emotions.

Of course it didn't. If it did so, punishing the damned would be meaningless. The Lethe's waters were what cleansed the dead of their final ties to the world. Until then, that old biblical passage was mistaken:

"For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any *thing* that is done under the sun." Ecclesiastes, if he wasn't mistaken.

Shaking his head, he moved forward until at last coming to stand before Charon. He stood to his full height... which proved to be noticeably shorter than the Ferryman.

Davem said nothing, and Charon did not move. Nevertheless, Davem *felt* its attention locked upon him.

Already, he was beginning to wonder about the validity of the magical defenses with which he had been gifted... then again, he got the feeling that the looming shade was not a spirit, nor would he be fooled by mere invisibility as Cerberus had been. His thoughts, his bodily warmth amid thousands of corpses, perhaps, had given him away.

Releasing the oar with one bony hand, the Ferryman made a grand display of twisting it into a cupping gesture.

From his palm, a throng of black tendrils spread like smoke through the crowd of the newlydead. The pointed wisps stopped at each soul, claiming *something* from them as they passed.

*The toll...* Davem thought. *Right.*

Reaching into the pocket of his pants- and quite happy that his captors had not robbed him blind during his imprisonment- he plucked out his money pouch and fished through it again.

Seeing as most of these bodies were likely not of Greek descent, he assumed obols were not required.

Instead, he plucked out one ten-piece 'Wyvern'- a gold coin the likes of which he had taken from the BlackPence coffers.

Dropping it into the Ferryman's waiting palm, Charon made no reaction. He only waited for the other souls to pay their tolls as well.

Davem closed his eyes, trying to calm himself as he waited. Every bit of progress into Hades was a longer distance from the Overworld- a deeper immersion into the chill of what, to most, was the grave.

Then, he heard a series of shrieking sounds from within the crowd behind him.

Unable to help himself, the Lorekeeper spun around, seeing that the black tendrils had wrapped around the necks and bodies of many of the ship's occupants. They hung in the air for only a moment, before being carried through the air toward himself and Charon and beyond... over the edge of the ship.

*They can't... they can't pay their toll. They were never buried with-* Davem's eyes widened.

Without thinking, he stuffed his hand into his money pouch once again. He pulled out a large handful of coins, and all but *threw* them into the Ferryman's hand.

"Here! Here!" He hissed, not caring if the ship's other occupants heard him or not.

As the coins disappeared into Charon's hand, the tendrils hesitated, then slowly carried the souls back to place them on the deck.

Davem let out a quiet sigh of relief. Of course, in retrospect, some of the souls he had just paid for might be condemned to Tartarus anyway, but at the time he allowed himself a bit of philanthropic pride.

With that, Charon turned back and took hold of the oar.

He began to row with slow, creaking motions, and to Davem's amazement he felt the musty air begin to rush past him, misted by the waters of the River of Hatred (turning away and holding his shirt over his mouth and nose as he remembered this particular moniker).

Davem saw no need to talk to the Ferryman any further. He had not responded at all in the matter of his paying for the souls' passage. He was uncertain if Charon even *could* speak. What was there to say in his line of work? He only really ever took one route, and dealt with only one sort of people.

Instead, he remained knelt at the bow, feeling the gentle bob of the ship.

At last, he had a chance to collect his thoughts.

*That darkness... if I hadn't been given the Sutra, it would probably would have filled me with some kind of supernatural fear, or even possessed me- forced me to run out. And it probably vanished once I got through to make it more tempting to leave, especially once I saw Cerberus. I bet he's got some kind of Omnipresence; that that chamber is the same for everyone, but a different room... Cerberus just exists in all of them.*

Nobody was listening. Nobody cared. Perhaps working and compiling unimportant details helped to comfort him- to distract him from his fear.

*How will I find Fianna if everybody looks like a skeleton? What if she couldn't pay her toll? What if she was cast into the Styx like those others nearly were? Or into the Lethe?*

*No. One thing at a time. One thing at a time.*

He steadied himself and stood up from where he crouched, bracing himself on the ship's wall.

All at once, the surrounding caves were flooded with a lifeless gray illumination.

His eyes gradually adjusted to it, but even as they did, he could barely comprehend what he was seeing.

The cave had disappeared, replaced with what looked like an *endless* expanse of gray sand and stone. Occasional patches of sparse grass and forest appeared every now and again. The rivers of Hades could be seen- The Styx continued forth a great distance before it branched off in two directions, extending off to horizons Davem could not see. Legend told that the Styx encompassed the whole of the Underworld... but the Underworld seemed to be *without* entirety, stretching into infinity. Above it all, where- in the Overworld- clouds, blue skies or even stars might be seen, there was not but granite, and that light that had no source.

Beside him was- he presumed- the Acheron River, fed from another cave beside the one from which they had entered. Just ahead, there seemed to be some man (or God)-made structure that would allow the boat to alter its path between the intersecting rivers; a 'switching station', as it were.

Soon, Charon was guiding the ferryboat down the Acheron instead, approaching a gigantic marble structure. It appeared to be a temple or some sort of ancient administrative building.

*The Place of Judgment?* He thought.

He could see three more rivers winding about and splitting the landscape... one in particular that led away from the Place of Judgment. It rippled with red and orange, and gouts of flame crashed like waves wherever it met the land.

The Phlegethon; the River of Fire that led directly to Tartarus.

Simply *looking* at it for too long filled his head with screams of agony.

The ferry came to a halt before the colossal building, and already Davem could see rows of souls already present, awaiting their judgment.

As a wooden bridge appeared from Charon's vessel and the passengers began to disembark, Davem briefly forgot that he shouldn't have expected any thanks from the souls he'd 'saved'; they couldn't see him, after all.

He himself turned to leave once the spirits had done so... only to be halted by a hand on his shoulder.

The Lorekeeper let out an embarrassingly feminine shriek before clapping a hand over his mouth and spinning around to acknowledge Charon.

The ferryman withdrew his hand, taking the oar again. However, Davem could still sense his focus upon him. It was not a sensation of encouragement. Even though he did not betray any actual feelings by actually doing so, he got the distinct notion that Charon would have been shaking his head at him.

Davem swallowed.

After a moment, he bowed his head with a rueful sigh. Hefting his pack up over his shoulder once more, he turned to hop up onto the bridge. After passing over it, he watched the wooden plank vanish, and raised a hand to wave at the ferryman... but he was already walking around the rim of the boat to its opposite end for its return journey.

Turning back, he looked up at the marble edifice that towered over him and the other assembled spirits.

Not content to wait his turn behind more than a hundred thousand people, he strode toward the enormous gate leading into the Place of Judgment.

As he stepped past the threshold into the building's antechamber, paying no heed to the souls around him (as they paid none to him), he heard a booming voice from just ahead, down the long hallway leading to (again, by mere assumption) the Chamber of Minos:

"The Judges of the Dead now call forth: Estella Malificus Foxglove."

## Part 7

"*What!?*"

Davem's feet tangled over themselves, sending him pitching forward. He crashed to the marble floor, but immediately pushed himself back up. He sprinted madly, his awareness of the surrounding souls disappearing.

He burst free of the hallway, emerging into an immense courtyard.

A ring of sturdy white pillars bordered the pavilion. To the left and right were doorways smaller than that which he'd entered from. Either of these led to a stairway which disappeared into the waters of the Phlegethon (to Davem's right) and the Lethe (to his left).

Before him, dominating the stadium, was what seemed to be a trio of enormous statues:

Each was an ancient, bearded man in King's regalia, seated upon an ornate throne.

"Aeacus, Judge-King of the Occident, shall now consider his verdict. Proceed."

The voice had come from the 'statue' seated in the center. This was almost definitely King Minos (If the positioning wasn't enough evidence, the brutish bull-headed man skulking about the throne clinched it).

Rather than take in the sight of the three grand entities, his eyes fell to the skeleton who stood languidly at their feet, one hand resting on a cocked-out hip.

"When the charges against your soul have been weighed against the good you have done the world, your fate shall be decided."

Davem's eyes widened and his lower jaw quivered as he crept further into the arena.

"Twenty three counts of murder of man, woman and child.

Two hundred counts of theft.

Five counts of seduction.

Sixteen acts of betrayal.

Long-standing negligence of your responsibilities.

Consumption of mead to excess."

"Right, right. I'm a terrible person." Estella interrupted Aeacus with a tone dripping of boredom. "Just send me to Tartarus and save your breath."

"ESTELLA!!!"

All four of those involved in the judging straightened in their places. Their eyes turned toward the sound of rapid footfalls that now accompanied the echoes of the sharp cry.

"No... No, it *can't* be..."

After a second, Estella shook her head and whirled back to face the Judge-Kings.

"Don't you listen to a *SWIVING* word he says!"

Davem stumbled to a halt in the center of the room just beside Estella- or what bony remnants remained of her, anyway. He reached out and seized her sharply by her shoulders.

"WHAT ARE YOU *DOING!*?"

"Who is this intruder!?" the third Judge-King- King Rhadamanthus- demanded, his voice a fearsome shriek at the interruption.

"HE'S *NOBODY!* NOW DO YOUR BLOODY *JOB!*" Estella shouted back, but Davem yanked her around to look him in the eyes (the only part of him she *could* see).

"*WHY!?* WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS!?! DON'T YOU REALIZE WHAT'S ABOUT TO HAPPEN TO YOU!?"

"FAR BETTER THAN *YOU* DO, YOU STUPID *GIT!* NOW LEAVE ME BE!"

"*NO, I WON'T LET YOU-!*"

"How *dare* you disturb the Judgment of the Dead!" King Minos called from his throne, staring scornfully down at the two. "This is beyond the ken of mortals! To disrupt it means to call down the wrath of Lord Hades Himself!"

"M- My Lords, I am sorry, but-" Davem began, but Estella shouted over him.

"That's *right!* Now do what you were gonna do, and-"

"Estella doesn't belong in Tartarus! None of this was-!"

Estella reached back and struck Davem soundly across the face, wrenching from his grasp and staggering away.

"Go back to your damn Gypsies, Davem! Better yet, go back to your stupid family back in your stupid 'New World'! Go wherever somebody would actually *want* to see you, you stupid, scrawny old man!"

"Shut up, Estella! Shut up, and just *listen* to me for once!" Davem snarled back, cupping his stinging cheek, but lunged as she turned to bolt for the doorway to the Phlegethon.

The Lorekeeper caught her by her skeletal wrist and yanked her back, pulling her against him. Soon, the both of them fell to the ground, with him desperately trying to pin her down.

"When's it gonna sink into that *rock* you call a *head!*?" She hissed at him as she struggled, "I don't want to be *saved!* Especially not by *you!* I don't even *like* you! You're nothing but a *disgusting, drooling-*"

"I didn't *come here* to save you! I didn't even know you were *here!* You *lied* to me!"

"Then what are you bloody *doing here!?*"

"I came here to save your *mother!*"

Instantly, Estella's struggles stopped, her body going limp.

Davem's fingers slipped from her arms, releasing her as he stood up and away from her.

"I was going to... to bring her back."

"... Why?"

He blinked down at her, her eye sockets staring back at him.

His mouth opened to speak... but then all breath was stolen from his lungs.

In the corner of his vision he caught a glimpse of fluttering gray.

All at once, he was reminded where he was, and turned to look up at the three Judge-Kings... but his gaze never made it that far up.

Standing not ten feet away from him was a tall, pale form- taller, even than the Ferryman, Charon.

His slender body bore a gray pallor, and was wrapped in a toga only a few shades darker. The garment was studded with black gemstones, and tied at the shoulder with a brooch in the shape of a coiled serpent. He carried a two-pronged spear, and wore a gray helm- both of which seemed to exude magical energy.

The sheer *presence* of him... his *aura*... Davem was a layman when it came to magic, but words simply could not *describe* what he felt.

"As you would not suffer the restless dead in the Surface World," he began, tilting his head slightly, "I will not suffer the restless *living* within *mine.*"

"Lord Hades!" The three Judge-Kings instantly bowed their heads in reverence. Even the souls waiting to be judged found themselves falling to their knees. Davem swallowed quietly, his body chilling over as he himself knelt on the spot. He shot a glance at Estella, who had crawled up onto all fours... but the quiver of her body suggested that it was not fear or respect that kept her there.

Davem's eyes softened, but he did not let them linger. He turned back to the Lord of the Dead and bowed his head in kind.

"And just who is it I suffer?"

Estella was only barely paying attention as Davem introduced himself- his *given* name, rather than his more popular handle given him by his 'friends' back home.

"Why have you come here?" Hades asked. "I know every thought and emotion that passes through the denizens of my realm, but mortal flesh impairs one's view of the soul. All that I see is a trickster who sees fit to recklessly tread in my domain."

"I..." Davem began, but his thoughts- and his ability to verbally convey them- was lost.

Was this how it had felt to confront Loki? Or Tiamat?

He gazed into the flickering gray irises that stared out from the eyes of the helm.

"He..." Estella spoke suddenly, her voice choking over a strange lump. "That stupid old man... he wants- wanted-... he wanted to bring my mother back from Hades. My mother, Fianna Foxglove." Slowly, her own gaze rose to meet that of the Greek Deity.

"He's a right imbecile... an' he shouldn't have come here." Hints of spite and slivers of what Davem thought were *sorrow* were woven into her words.

"Mortal men have come to my land before, and few have escaped with their souls intact." Hades explained, "However, even 'few' is far too many. Would you see the Underworld- nay, death itself- robbed of its meaning? Mortality robbed of its import?"

"N-No, sir!" Davem finally squeaked.

"Sir?" Estella echoed.

"NO, Lord Hades." The Lorekeeper quickly corrected himself. "But what I *would* do is aid you in ridding the world of a man who has skirted death for more than a *decade*."

Hades' head tilted the opposite direction, considering. He took a single step toward Davem.

"Of whom do you speak?"

Davem looked toward Estella. Although she could not see him, she knew precisely to whom he referred.

"... My father. Simeon Malificus."

Beneath his helm, Hades raised an eyebrow.

"I shall not allow the work of the Judge-Kings to be further hindered." He began softly. Both Davem and Estella watched as he turned grandly, bidding the two to rise with a gesture of his 'bident'. "We shall retire to my palace... where we may discuss this matter in-depth."

They rose slowly, following him as he began to walk toward one of the arena walls.

Keeping close behind him, the Place of Judgment melted into an awkward swirl, as though it were made of wet paint.

When everything regained its solidity, they were walking in a plain of slate-gray dirt.

This disorienting, bizarre manner of travel repeated itself several times more, giving a sample of the land's terrain and a view of its people (lost spirits for the most part, flitting and sweeping all about).

For a moment, he looked to Estella... but cast his eyes away again.

He had to focus.

It would be impossible to negotiate through sobs.

At last, they arrived at another large stone building- this one far grander in scale and far more intricate than the Place of Judgment had been. While that one had been very plain, very official, this one had much in the way of décor; Carpets, large statuettes instead of ordinary columns, and murals- usually portraying the same beautiful woman being swept up by a handsome man in a chariot.

*The Rape of Persephone...* Davem thought. Suddenly, he was even *more* uncomfortable (something he hadn't thought to be possible).

## Part 8

Hades' throne room was surely among the most extravagant any he had ever seen.

True, most of it was the same sort of drab gray motif as- basically- the entire underworld, but the stone here was meticulously carved into magnificent shapes, every angle perfect, every surface smooth (except where it oughtn't have been). The murals that hung from the walls were intricately woven- by Arachne herself no doubt, post-mortem- as was the black carpet that trailed from the palace entrance to the thrones themselves.

All about the chamber, all manner of silver paraphernalia stood, whether in the guise of piles of coins or standing suits of armor. They added an almost celestial glimmer to the place.

At the end of the chamber stood two ornate thrones.

In the center stood that of Hades: A towering thing carved of black volcanic glass and fitted with gray cushions, one could see silver talons built into its arms and feet. At the top of its soaring back were a pair of voluminous wings reaching out to either side.

Beside it was a far smaller throne, this one forged of silver with white cushions mounted upon it. Its 'wings' better resembled a dove, to Hades' fearsome vulture.

Seated within it, silent and still, was the visage of a beautiful woman- lovelier than any Davem had ever seen before. Even the painstakingly crafted sculptures all around the palace couldn't quite do her justice... but much about her looked *wrong*.

Her fitted gray gown- while matching the rest of the décor- in no way suited her rose-tinted skin, and her golden hair shimmered with the darkness of storm clouds. Within her locks, there appeared to be bare twigs where, once, there must have been blooming flowers. Her expression was one of stark, incomparable apathy, although her indifferent stare was cast squarely upon Davem and Estella.

"I have been watching you." The Lord of the Dead proclaimed in that soft yet grumbling tone. While doing so, he swept around elegantly, seating himself in his throne. "I looked on with curiosity as you braved the Dark Tunnel. I felt mild disappointment as you bested my guardian, Cerberus. I even found some amusement in your act of charity, granting reprieve- albeit temporarily- to the souls of the bereft."

Davem bit his lower lip, mostly to keep them from chattering in fear.

"I chose to wait until your actions became a direct impediment to the workings of my domain. Now that they have done so, I will give you one chance to explain yourself- to convince me not to cast you down with the Titans."

Davem nodded, taking a deep breath.

"Lord Hades..." he began, slowly sinking to his knees (thankful to do so, considering the long journey he'd made to get this far), "Lord Hades, I have come here this day for the purpose of... of ending the reign of an earthly scourge so despicable that even the Gods of Olympus cannot afford to ignore him any longer.

He is a servant of the Babylonian monster calling herself Tiamat, the Dark Mother. He is a member of one of her worshipping sects known as the Draco Disciples, and bears their highest rank- that of Praetor."

"After the passing of Marduk- Son of Ashur," Hades said, interrupting Davem as he collected his thoughts to speak further, "The 'Lord of Light' was created in his stead to act as Tiamat's opposite number. So long as he and his followers exist, Tiamat's dealings in the world of mortals is not the concern of Olympus."

"Of course. Under other circumstances I would not waste your time this way." Davem nodded, clearing his throat. He would have to maintain his tact. He was *vastly* out of his league here. "The power granted to Simeon Malificus- the Praetor of the Draco Disciples- is that of Soul Possession. This grants him the power of immortality, as well.

You see, while even Achilles had a physical weakness, Simeon's body can be killed, but he can never die. He will always be able to transfer his spirit to a new host, willing or otherwise. All the while he scoffs at mortality, unafraid of death and free of judgment.

As things stand now, the Lord of Light has no method of counteracting this power he possesses. The best his worshippers can do is clean up the damage he causes, and you cannot believe his antics will cease when he reaches the borders of England; The Draco Disciples are *everywhere*. It's just a matter of time before they knock at the door of Athens or Rhodes. Once Tiamat has assembled enough followers under her immortal emissary, she may try to attack and conquer Olympus itself."

Hades said nothing, but Davem let out a sigh before concluding his 'pitch'.

"There is only one way to defeat him, and the Lord of Light will be completely useless in the effort. That is why I have come to Hades- come to *you*, milord."

The God of the Dead only sat in silence, his fingers thrumming against the haft of his bident.

"What part would the Lord of the Underworld have to play in the affairs of mortals?" He asked, sounding more *amused* than anything else.

"None." Davem replied with a shake of his head. "All I need is information; where I can find Fianna Foxglove."

"So you can take her from the Underworld?" Hades asked. "Why?"

"The ritual involved in giving the Praetor his power involved sacrificing the one thing he held most dear to him. If Fianna is brought back to the mortal world, the foundation of Simeon's power will be shattered."

"No."

A voice interrupted Davem's thoughts once again. This time, it wasn't Hades' low, grumbling tone or Estella's sarcastic, abrasive one, but a soft, empty one.

Instantly, he turned back to face the woman on the silver throne.

"Even if this 'Fianna' is returned from the grave, the love they shared will remain dead, and it is the *love* that the Praetor sacrificed; nothing less than that."

He hesitated for a moment, face grappling between a blush and a pale chill. At last, he bowed his head to her before speaking again.

"With all due respect, Lady Persephone- and may I say that you are wise to match your beauty- that is-

"Well, aren't you a regular *Marlowe*..."

"*Estella!*" Davem hissed before turning back to Persephone. "But as I was saying, milady, *that* is the trick of it; Tiamat doesn't *understand* what True Love is. Not really. She knows of Lust and Obsession, and often mistakes *those* for Love, but she's never experienced and can't truly comprehend it. Nor can any of her higher-level worshippers.

Tristan Holbrook was one of Tiamat's lesser followers. He fell in love with a gypsy named Rose Peregrine, and defected from the Disciples at the risk of his own life.

Simeon Malificus, however, was married to Fianna Foxglove, and for the glory of their Goddess, they decided that Simeon should eat Fianna's heart. After securing the safety of immortality, he proceeded to rape, kill, torture, steal, all- simply- because he could without fear of the repercussions mortals were meant to suffer.

Simeon was- as I hear tell- visited by the spirit of Fianna Foxglove herself. Now, it could well have been a hallucination, some extant echo from having eaten her heart, I don't know, but the point is he was frightened. *Frightened*. Now I ask you, what would an *immortal* Praetor have to fear from seeing his wife back from the dead? If he is, in fact, immortal, a simple thing like a *zombie* shouldn't faze him, should it?"

"Indeed." Hades nodded with an audible smile.

"He was afraid because he knew what would happen if she ever returned from the underworld in earnest.

Whether or not the two of them loved each other *truly*, Simeon sacrificed collateral in the personage of Fianna Foxglove. Her presence in the world of mortals is the price he paid. Love has nothing to do with it; The Ritual of the Praetor's Ascension is nothing more than an exceptionally convoluted human sacrifice that hopes to make mockery of the ideals the Lord of Light stands for. By Tiamat's own twisted laws- laws that have little regard for her own flock- the ritual will become null, and Simeon's power will be stripped the *second* Fianna sets foot in the Overworld."

Out of the corner of his eye, Davem could see Estella staring at him. Her eye sockets seemed wider somehow, and her lower jaw hung slightly. Perhaps she was going to say something, or perhaps she was simply impressed. Without flesh, it was hard to know.

"And what of this girl? This 'Praetor's' daughter?"

Davem's eyes snapped forward again.

"C-Coincidence, Lord Hades." Davem fumbled.

"Why would you be concerned if this girl- well on her way to becoming a Praetor herself- is sent to Tartarus? Her crimes are myriad and varied, particularly for one so young."

Davem tensed. He could only be grateful that she couldn't see the flush in his cheeks... but by this point in their acquaintanceship, she could probably guess it was there already.

"I..."

*I don't know*. It was his usual answer. It was the answer he always gave; to the Band, to his friends among the Lightbringers, to anybody who asked. That, or no answer at all, leaving them to draw whatever conclusions they liked.

This time, however...

"... I care about her, milord. I care about her a great deal, and I wouldn't see her cast down to an eternity of suffering, no matter what she's done. Even if I never see her again... even if... Even if the bad outweighs the good by as great a margin as you and the Judge-Kings seem to believe, I... I still..."

Davem's face fell, his words failing him at last. As such, he missed Persephone's soft hand reaching up to place itself on Hades' sleeve.

A moment passed.

"Interesting." He nodded at last, glancing sidelong at his bride before standing from his throne.

At his whim, a portal of swirling grays, whites and blacks opened up just to Davem's left.

"I bid you, refresh and compose yourself, whilst I consider this matter."

Davem nodded, weakly pushing himself to his feet. His body, his mind, and now even his *spirit* were weary.

As he turned to the portal, he heard Estella's voice behind him, addressing Hades.

"Me, too?"

"Of course."

Slumping noticeably, the skeletal form followed Davem as he disappeared through the portal.

This had not been the definitive answer he'd been hoping for, but he hadn't been executed on the spot.

That was something, anyway.

## Part 9

Davem emerged from the twisting portal almost instantaneously.

The new room in which he found himself looked like some sort of parlor. The décor was an assortment of ebony furniture with silken cushions and monochromatic tapestries. Dotting the walls were a series of small, ornate braziers crafted of silver and black iron.

There was a large fireplace on the opposite end of the room from where he'd entered; its logs carefully stacked so as to look like a miniature funeral pyre... a 'pyreplace', if Davem had been in better spirits.

Suddenly, he heard a high-pitched squeak from behind him. He began to turn to face Estella as she entered.

He caught only a hint of bare skin before-

"DON'T LOOK, YOU!"

Immediately, his head jerked away, his face beet-red. Too late, he remembered how the light of his torch had revealed the flesh of otherwise skeletal spirits upon Charon's ferry... and how they had been completely unclad.

He made a rather comical effort of stumbling about the sitting room, looking for anything she could use to cover herself.

At last, he claimed a tarp from one wall and- without looking- threw it behind him.

He could tell it didn't go anywhere near as far as he'd wished, but closed his eyes and covered his face in his hands.

He heard her grab one of the chairs, likely using it to shield herself as she dragged it toward the fallen tapestry. Awkward silence dominated the room, except for the sound of rustling cloth.

"Where are you?" She asked at last, her voice still a bit wary.

"Over here." Davem answered, the echo of his voice suggesting he'd been facing one of the walls anyway.

"You didn't *see* anything, did you?"

"No."

"Shame for you, then." She said, that mocking smile creeping back into her voice. "That's the only chance *you'll* ever get."

Davem didn't reply, waiting for her to step out from behind the chair before opening his eyes and speaking again. The tapestry was now hastily draped around her, forming an improvised toga.

"It was to see Fianna again, wasn't it?"

"What?"

"All the bad things you did, your insistence upon going to Tartarus, telling me to stop trying to whitewash your reputation; All of it was just to make sure you'd see your mother again."

"That's just how you work, isn't it?" Estella asked, giving him a cynical look, "always jumping to conclusions that are so bloody *'Gypsy'*: Is it really that hard for you to believe that I *like* burning things down? That I get bored easily, and that tormenting people- people like you- is just a way to kill time? Yes, you're right- I stopped you from trying to defend me so you wouldn't ruin my chance to see my mother again. But aside from that, nobody's made me do anything I wouldn't have done anyway; not the Praetor, not the Disciples, and most of all, not *you*."

A moment passed before she continued.

"You made a pretty convincing pitch back there." She said at last. "Seems you really *were* trying to find my mother after all. But I guess your motives weren't what I thought they'd be."

"No, you were half right." Davem nodded slowly. "The plan I was given was to come down here and retrieve her so the Praetor could finally be beaten... getting you to notice me was just a fringe benefit."

"Right..." She nodded, giving a little eye-roll.

"... Why did you say that?" Davem asked after another long pause, "Why did you tell me you were still alive? Why did you trick me into thinking you were-"

"Bear in mind, 'Davemport'," she began, cutting him off mid-sentence, "I don't like you very much. Much less 'care about you a great deal'." She made a pouting face, openly mocking how he'd spoken during his audience with Hades, "but after all of your silly, stupid antics when I was alive... seeing what was happening to you once I died... someone had to do *something*, and nobody else seemed about to step forward." She let out a light sigh, looking up to one of the braziers. "Though I have to say you make a surprisingly good killer-"

"FUCK!" Davem said suddenly, causing Estella to jump a bit.

"What the-!?"

"I forgot to ask Hades about the Darkening! I completely *forgot* about it!"

"The what?" Estella asked, quirking an eyebrow.

Davem explained- in a stumbling fashion, as his expositional mind was very much burnt out- the nightmare as experienced from his perspective. By the end, he was actually shaking a little.

"I'm almost hurt." Estella said after his conclusion. "Here I thought you just snapped because how much you *loved* me."

"That's what *started* it, anyway." Davem nodded weakly. "Then-"

"So you *do* love me, then." She grinned.

"Not the time, Estella. Really, this is *not* the time."

"If you insist." She said, but a cruel little smile never quite left her face as she folded her arms with satisfaction. She sauntered over, sitting down on one of the couches. Davem slumped down in a chair a few feet away.

"Whatever the Darkening is, it latched onto my feelings of loss, making me more sensitive to the grief and anger. I started lashing out at everyone- friends, enemies... I nearly struck an innocent man simply because he *looked* like your father. If it hadn't been for those mushrooms of Gertrude's- and for you, of course- I'd be dead or running from the law as we speak."

Estella tossed her short hair to cast it from her face, still not looking quite convinced.

"At first I would have agreed with you- I thought it was just my brain overreacting to... losing you, I guess. But looking back, there's something far more sinister at play.

"So you plan to casually ask the Lord of the Dead about your little trumped-up magical angst while you're here to pick up my mother from Tartarus?"

"It was actually the other way around, before I was roped into this." Davem frowned, "but now that *you're* here, I'm not sure *what* to do."

"What does that mean?"

"You were about to condemn yourself to Tartarus just to see your mother again. And if all goes as planned, I'm about to go and *take* your mother *out* of Tartarus."

"... Shit, you're right." She murmured. "Every day you find a new way to ruin my life- er, my *existence*."

"I guess there's nothing for it but to wait for Hades to make his decision." Davem sighed, leaning forward and putting his head in his hands.

"Right." She nodded with a sigh. "... How in hell did this happen?"

"I was in France, hoping to visit the Mariage family to corroborate a lot of information I got from researching the Tovia's story... and to settle a few suspicions," He explained, "but I was kidnapped by one of Simeon's rivals. I don't know who they were. They chained me up in a cellar for a while before putting me up to this whole thing. Since I was headed to Hades anyway to research the Darkening, they sent me to get your mother as well. The equipment and spells they gave me probably explains why you can't see me."

"Ah, right..."

"They wanted the Praetor dead, and after what he did, I wasn't about to argue."

"The Praetor is the Gypsies' problem, Davem. Not yours." She said flatly, but cringed a little as she noticed his disembodied stare.

"That's not true."

She sat there in silence, before casting her eyes away from his.

"He used me to kill you," the Lorekeeper asked softly, "didn't he?"

She faltered, looking down at the table at the room's center which was decked with food and water (which Davem had decidedly ignored).

"Estella..."

"I had decided to leave. At least for a bit. After what happened at the Faire, I didn't want to spend another day missing my mother. I told the Praetor I was going to find a way to bring her back, and- as you guessed- he didn't want her popping up again and spoiling his 'lifestyle'... I don't know why he picked you. I think Ruby must have told him about what happened at Tuscany Tavern."

"That gossipy trollop." Davem growled under his breath, but shook his head.

"You- that is, 'you'- met me as I was walking past the Bronze Jester, and..." Her voice trailed off.

"... I'm sorry."

"It's not your responsibility, Davemport." She said, slowly standing. "But I knew if you ever realized what'd happened, especially when you were so bloody hysterical already... I didn't want to tell you. I figured you'd do something *stupid*."

Davem sat in silence for a moment or two before standing as well.

"You mean, like walking alone and unarmed into the depths of Hades?"

"Exactly." She said with a slight chuckle.

"One thing you'll learn about me, Estella," He began, a little smile breaking what would have been a tearful expression, "is that I don't need *anybody's* help to do stupid things."

Just then, another swirling portal appeared before them, in the exact same position they had entered from.

"Already?" Davem blinked with surprise.

"I guess he just realized it was a bad idea leaving me alone with *you*." She teased.

"Let's just go." Davem let out an exasperated sigh, shifting the pack on his shoulders and making for the doorway. Hesitating as he reached it, he craned his neck to look back at the girl.

"... What?"

"I just... I'm sorry. Before you turn into a *skeleton* again..."

He simply looked at her for a lingering moment, and then turned to step into the portal.

"Sorry I slapped you." She called after him.

"No you're not."

"True."

With that, Estella shuffled through after him.

## Part 10

Davem returned to the throne room of Hades, followed shortly thereafter by Estella. She was still draped in the tapestry nicked from the sitting room, only now she had been once again stripped of her flesh to leave a mere skeleton behind.

"I see you have made good use of the amenities provided..." The God said musingly. He had since removed his helmet, revealing a shock of black hair and dull gray eyes amid his other pale, pointed features.

Estella looked down at her makeshift attire and shrugged.

"It was that, or *this* one would never have been able to focus. Poor git's already in *love* with me; I wouldn't."

"Estella!" Davem growled.

"I notice," Hades began, startling Davem back to the moment, "that your courtesy has *waned* a bit."

"M- My apologies, milord!" The Lorekeeper stammered, instantly falling to his knees. "It has- has simply been-"

"I am aware of the circumstances that have brought you here." The Lord of the Dead interrupted him casually, standing from his throne. Stepping down from the altar upon which it stood, he paced before Davem and Estella.

Persephone was still present, stoic as ever.

"And I am aware of your 'Darkening', as you call it."

"What- Wha- How?" Davem spat before he could stop himself. "D- Do you know of it?"

"He knows because you told *me* about it." Estella said bluntly. "Remember what he said?"

Davem paled slightly.

"Indeed." Hades said, glancing to Estella and back to Davem. "But to answer your inevitable inquiry, I have no knowledge of this phenomenon. I have seen murders committed by madmen so often that- were they influenced by magical means- I would have taken no notice of the difference."

Davem slouched a little where he knelt, but straightened again as the God continued.

"You shall be provided means to navigate the Phlegethon. Beyond that, you shall have no aid in the depths of Tartarus. If you are able to find Fianna and best her jailors, you may take her from my realm."

"I'm going with him." Estella interjected matter-of-factly.

"The hell you are!" Davem choked. "Estella, *no*. I'm not gonna let you-"

"It's where they were going to send me *anyway*." She said, punctuating her words with her characteristic eye-roll. "And four eyes are better than two."

"Indeed. Your stake in this matter is great." Hades agreed, as though this were what he had intended from the start. In all reality, it probably *was*.

"B- But she has no way to hide! No defenses, no weapons..."

"And I suppose you're a bloody Sir Lancelot, are you?" Estella muttered back, "What're they gonna do? *Kill* me?"

Davem gave a long, ragged sigh as Hades proceeded with his explanation.

"Young Mistress Foxglove and yourself shall enter Tartarus. When you return with Fianna, you, Davem, will be allowed to bring her back to the mortal world. There she shall remain until the Praetor of the Draco Disciples is destroyed."

"So she'll be... what, *she'll* be immortal until *he* dies, but *he'll* be mortal once *she's* alive again?" Hades ignored Davem's question, looking instead to Estella.

"You shall remain here, in the Fields of Asphodel until Simeon's demise. From there, you will be allowed to choose where your and your mothers' souls shall be sent."

"Can't argue with *that*." Estella smiled broadly. "Maybe I'll go to Elysium... try to burn it down, just to see if I *can*."

"I suppose it would be foolish to ask what happens if we come back from Tartarus *without* Fianna..."

"Then you shan't return at *all*."

"That's what I'd assumed." Davem nodded, bowing his head once again.

"I would offer you one more chance to leave the Underworld, Davem." Hades said, much to Davem's surprise.

"Drink from the waters of the Lethe. Forget about this labor, leave Estella to her fate, return from whence you came and hope the dangers you have brought into your life do not follow. But if you insist upon this journey, I will offer you a night's reprieve in my guest bedchambers before you depart in the morning."

"I'll take the bedchambers, milord." Davem said almost immediately. "But... if it's all the same?"

He cast a glimpse over in Estella's direction, then back to Hades.

"I'd prefer separate rooms."

It was probably very easy to guess what the bedrooms in the palace would look like: black wood, gray and white cloth and silver flourishes wherever they fit.

Davem sighed gratefully as he allowed his pack to fall from his shoulders. Rubbing them for a moment, he sat down on the edge of the large, comfortable four-poster bed provided for him.

This had all gotten so insane at an exponential rate, with new and creative ways to get himself killed rearing their ugly heads with every passing moment.

He fell on his back, staring at the black wood that arched between the bedposts. Small specks of silver were embedded in it, looking very much like stars in a clear night sky.

*Just as well,* He said thoughtfully to himself. *Might be the last time I ever see anything close to it again.*

"My apologies, Master Davemport."

Davem's eyes blinked into focus as he recognized the soft voice of Hades' bride, Persephone.

Instantly, the Lorekeeper sat up.

"Yes?"

"I would seek an audience with you."

"Of course!" He replied hastily. "Of course; It's your home... well, more yours than it is *mine*, anyway."

As he brushed his vest a bit to straighten it, another swirling portal opened to admit the beautiful- if perpetually disconsolate- Lesser-Goddess.

"I shall arrange to have food and drink brought to you presently." She said, walking gracefully to the center of the bedroom's open area.

"That's... not necessary." Davem answered quickly, his face reddening a little. "I have some dried rations and a waterskin of my own..." He had avoided the food and drink in the sitting room before as well... for a very particular reason. Considering who he was talking to, he felt uncomfortable pointing out the obvious.

"I would have those replenished as well." She said, looking down at his pack. "Surely you wouldn't have enough to last you through a journey of this nature."

"With all due respect, milady-"

"The *arrangements* would be to have such things brought back from the Overworld." She said slowly, but firmly.

"Really?" Davem blinked, feeling more than a bit sheepish. "I... I didn't think I would be worth that kind of attention."

"I would not see you imprisoned as I have been, and on that same token I would not see you starve to death." She explained, a hint of bitterness the first emotion he believed he had ever heard from those pale lips. "Lord Hermes has for some time been a pleasant acquaintance of mine in the course of his duties as messenger and guide. I believe he would have no qualms accommodating my guest."

"I see..." Davem nodded slowly. "... If I may be so bold as to ask milady a question..."

"As you like." She answered, moving to take a graceful seat upon a chair in the bedroom corner.

"Have you... spoken to Hades about any of this yet? Like, when I was with Estella in the parlor?"

True, it might have been a risky move to ask her such things, but at least she wasn't *dead*, per se. He wouldn't be able to instantly read her thoughts the way he could his subjects.

"I am in no position to speak of my Lord's opinions." Persephone replied in that bland voice. "... But were I to do so, I would suggest that my husband has no love lost for mankind. In his eyes, they are poor, hopeless sheep to his begrudging shepherd. You have provided him some amusement, yes, but while he will not stand in the way of your mission, nor will he aid you in any fashion."

"Well, I'd assumed that much." Davem nodded pensively.

"Also... he will not stand idly by whilst a mere mortal compromises the laws of his microcosm."

"... What do you mean?"

"He would- upon the success of your mission, should you succeed- make an *example* of you. You are no prodigy, gifted with otherworldly skill like the musician Orpheus, no God-Born like Heracles; you are a mere mortal. No mere mortal was meant to return from the Underworld."

Davem sat still for a moment. He didn't even breathe. All the color had drained from his already-pale face.

"He's... going to kill me once I get Fianna out of Tartarus." He asked with a weak shiver.

"I am in... no position to say one way or the other." Persephone replied gently, but even lacking much in the way of emotion, her stare spoke volumes.

"Oh."

"Are you frightened, Davem?" She asked.

"No... just... just *sad*." The Lorekeeper shook his head. "I'm going to die in Tartarus, or I'm going to die somewhere between here and the Overworld once I get *out* of Tartarus." He said, his voice growing weaker with each word. "No matter which, I won't get the chance to say goodbye to my friends or family... not that it *matters*."

"Why would you believe such a thing to be meaningless?" Persephone asked, standing from the chair and approaching the bed as Davem's head fell into his hands.

"My family shipped me off from home without batting an eye. AdventureTemps sooner fired me than tried to find a place that better fitted me. I'll bet Mercy barely remembers me and the less said of Volstav the better. The people of Bristol consider me a joke, and with good cause. I was wrong about Estella all along and now I'm suffering the consequences. Those men who captured me packed me up and sent me to Hades for a half-cocked plan that might not even *work*, and now Hades is going to watch in amusement while I tread off to certain death- at some monster's hands or at his own."

Shaking his head, Davem took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry, Lady Persephone, I'm... I'm just not..."

He felt her hand place itself gently on his back. His head slipped between his hands, fingers tangling in his hair. Finally, he looked back up to the beautiful deity with bleary eyes.

"... I don't suppose I'll get my own constellation?"

She stroked his upper back for a moment before letting her hand fall away.

"Sleep now." She said, "And do not be so certain that your destiny will end on the morrow. None can be so certain."

She turned, walking toward a portal that once again appeared before her.

However, before she could reach it Davem stood.

"Wait... Lady Persephone."

She turned back to face the Lorekeeper as he wiped his eyes.

"... Do you think... Lord Hermes would be up for doing me a favor?"

## Part 11

Davem awoke the next morning (although time was relative in the Underworld) after a sleep only marginally better than he'd had the night before in that cold, dank cellar. He slid his legs over the side of the bed and sat up with a light groan of discomfort. His body still ached from all of the crouching and running and so forth, but his head ached even more from a night of unpleasant thoughts.

*Perhaps Hades' plans for me would be a blessing after all...* he thought.

He looked down at his body, making certain that the Heart Sutra was still imprinted on his skin. There seemed to be nary a smudge nor a single mark out of place; As he'd surmised, the ritual involved in its scribing used something more than ordinary ink.

He stood up, taking his clothes off of a nearby table. He'd only just finished tying off his drawstring pants when another portal of swirling distortion opened along an open section of stone wall. He was only partially surprised to see Estella Foxglove step inside... now sporting a black and red dress similar to what she wore in life.

"Well, look at *you*." She teased, looking over Davem's (excessively) lean and pale upper body just before he put on his long-sleeved white shirt.

"What's *that*?" Davem shot back, gesturing to her attire. "Even after they betrayed and murdered you, you still wear a Draco Disciple garment?"

"I *like* these colors." She retorted with a pout. "I think it compliments my *natural beauty*, don't you?"

Davem said nothing, slipping his vest over his shirt and buckling his belt around his waist.

"Oh, come on. Nothing?" She quirked her head. "I see a little blush in there, but come on. Where's that goofy smile?"

"That's enough, Estella." He replied firmly- to her mild surprise.

"Grew a pair of bollocks last night, did you?"

There was a long pause.

"Estella, do you remember when we met for the first time?"

"Oh, please." Estella replied after a moment, rolling her eyes. "Do you think I actually pay attention to how I meet every last hopeless case to start drooling at my heels?"

When she brought her eyes back to his, she faltered a bit at a most intense stare. Reluctantly, she began to consider the question in earnest.

"The Dirty Duck, wasn't it?" She asked, "When Vinz and Liam dragged you across Shoplatch Lane, and-"

"No." Davem shook his head. "It was the Town Square Public House, near the Maypole. I had asked you and Ruby to confirm some parts of Tovias's story, back when I was researching it... everything I'd heard about you and- well... the other 'you', although you couldn't have remembered her since you never met."

"Oh, right." She nodded slowly, putting a hand on her hip as the other thrummed its fingers on a nearby ebony table.

"Back then, as I was reading and writing about you, I didn't look at you and see the 'Praetor's Daughter' the way the members of the Band did; I saw a charming- if incredibly cynical- girl with a lot of potential."

"And I saw a lonely old man with his head so full of fairy tales and fantasies that he probably farts rainbows." She replied with a smirk, but Davem ignored it. "Besides, what the hell would *you* know about *potential*?"

"You're going to kill me once we find your mother, aren't you?"

Estella froze, her eyes widening as they stared into his.

"Just so she can't leave you again."

The hand fell off of her hip, and he could see her teeth clench between her lips.

"That's what I figured." Davem nodded slightly. "And here, I really wanted to trust you... You know, that 'potential' I saw? I'd hoped it wouldn't be the potential to become exactly like your father. Now it looks like I owe Percy twenty shillings... I guess it's like what Hades said; you're well on your way to becoming the next Praetor."

As she watched, he turned away from her and walked toward the portal. He hesitated only a moment longer to cast a glance back toward her.

"You know Fianna *hates* him now... I'm sure she'd be so fucking proud of what you've become."

With that he stepped through the portal and vanished.

-

He reappeared not in Hades' throne room, but onto a beach of gray dust overlooking a reservoir just outside of the Place of Judgment. The water within flickered with bright orange, and spat goutts of flame from its churning surface.

Hades was nowhere to be seen, but a small black vessel was docked along the shoreline.

Without hesitation, he swung his pack up into the boat before climbing up and in after it. A long, sturdy oar awaited him within, and he hoped to the Gods the Phlegethon wasn't going to be as tricky to navigate as he'd seen from the Styx. He took up the oar, reaching over the edge of the boat to push off of the gray dirt... but as he did, a black-and-red blur emerged from the portal.

Without so much as a word, Estella took a running start and leapt the few feet of distance, rocking Davem's small boat as she latched onto its hull.

Davem let out a cry of surprise, dropping the oar back into the boat as he fell to the floor. He quickly staggered back up as Estella tried to climb up and over the wall, nearly slipping and falling into the burning water. As she tenaciously gripped the smooth black surface of the ship, she felt a pair of hands seize her arms. She twisted her own, grasping Davem's and climbing up the side of the boat... but not knowing where he was given his invisibility, she tripped over the wall and wound up collapsing on top of the Lorekeeper.

She simply sat there for a moment, panting (which must have been purely for show). It looked incredibly strange, with every flicker of fire from the Phlegethon revealing the girl's face where, otherwise, there was nothing but bleached bone.

"What in hell are you doing?" Davem asked, quirking an unseen eyebrow.

"Not letting you get the last word, Davemport." She replied simply before standing off of him and offering a hand. As she helped him up, she shook her head. "I'm going to say this, and I *hate* saying it... but you're right. I don't care what becomes of my father- especially now- but... yes."

The two of them stood there for a moment, before Davem leaned down to claim the oar again.

"Just make certain you get my mother back quickly."

Davem nodded slowly.

"I'll do the best I can."

Clearly, Hades hadn't told her what Persephone had told Davem.

-

The River of Fire departed from the Place of Judgment, but from where they stood on top of the boat, Davem and Estella could see many souls of the thusly-damned submerging themselves and beginning the long, agonizing trek through the fiery water.

Gradually, the gray surroundings and its occasional patches of dull greenery faded away into a plane of charcoal-black. Before he even realized the horizon of gray and 'more river' was no longer there, it had dropped off into erupting pillars of fire and a dizzying plateau overlooking- bar-none- the most horrifying sight he had ever laid eyes upon.

Tartarus, in all its terrifying glory.

No, not 'Its'... *His*.

"Tartarus was a Titan..." Davem murmured, not intending to speak but compelled by sheer awe.

Before them, laying upright against the far edge of the yawning crater, was a festering cadaver of immeasurable size; its ribcage had been split open like the bloody wings of some hideous bird. Its chest cavity had been used, seemingly, to construct the whole of this Gods-forsaken place of punishment. Cooled and hardened magma formed each layer, every one tailored specifically to one particular sort of sin and sinner.

Quite literally, when the Gods had cast the Titans down in the ancient wars, they had built Tartarus FROM Tartarus.

What was worse, was that- on occasion- the imprisoned Titan would occasionally twitch, sending tremors through the whole of Hell.

He was still *alive*.

"Somehow just dying doesn't seem so bad now." Davem said weakly, feeling a great illness in his stomach.

"Well, Davemport, you're the mastermind here." Estalla murmured, looking down into the pits. "Where do we start?"

"This is Tartarus." Davem replied quietly, "We're not going to get many choices." He pointed ahead to where the Phlegethon split, forming a circle around the pit and leading to the gruesome remains of the Titan in its lounging posture. The River of Fire, embraced on either side by charcoal shores passed directly between two of Tartarus' ribs, and deposited them upon the obsidian shore that was the First Level of 'Hell'.

In spite of the fact that this place was built inside of a living creature that ought to have had established boundaries and measurable distances, upon passing through its ribcage, Davem could no longer see the edges of the ribcage; only darkness, the glow of embers and immense, writhing serpents that danced through the horizon.

"Storms..." He murmured. "This is the Circle of Lust, isn't it? Oddly enough, this might actually be where Fianna ended up. I'd had it down to Lust, Anger, Heresy, Violence or Treachery."

"Only five? Hm. They really don't exclude anybody around here, do they?" She asked as the boat ground to a halt. Immediately Davem hopped out, careful not to lose his footing and fall into the Phlegethon.

After helping Estella off of the boat as well, the two of them pulled the vessel up onto the land, wedging it near a few convenient rocks.

"Hey." Davem exclaimed, looking Estella over a bit.

"What?"

He gestured to her, revealing that- in the ambient flames of Hell, Estella was no longer the skeletal remnant she'd been in Hades.

However, as Estella looked down at herself, Davem heard a gentle rumble beneath him. At first, he thought it was simply one of Tartarus' convulsions... but as he turned, he saw an immense figure crawling down from one of the distant mountains.

As he squinted into the dark, stormy horizon, the creature extended two voluminous wings and lunged off of the mountain. It glided down through the air, headed straight for them.

"C-Crap... Estella, HIDE!" He hissed, shoving the girl aside.

"What about you?" She asked,

"Invisible! Hello?" He shot back.

"He's going to destroy the boat!"

"Better the boat than us! Now HIDE!!!"

Seconds after she took refuge behind another large black outcropping of stone, the thing crashed down in the blackened fields before them.

It was a revolting thing the size of the Bristol Globe Stage; its face looked like a disgusting parody of a man, its head bald, and its eyes vacant. Its body looked like that of a lion, but with feet that bore the talons of a scavenger bird. Last of all, it possessed a long, lashing scorpion's tail.

The thing twisted its head upside-down and grinned a wide, terrible grin.

Suddenly, its mouth opened wide- too wide- its jaws popping sickeningly. Inside its mouth was yet another, smaller face. This one seemed to be weeping hysterically. *Its* mouth opened, revealing a third and final face; its eyes seething with hatred.

"Who... Who intrudes upon... the land of the damned?" The creature demanded, its comically small head speaking in a booming voice. Its other two mouths attempted to speak at the same time, but only produced muffled, choking gasps. "A gifted soul... A soul who needn't swim the river of Fire but shall be punished all the same!" The thing said in a singsong voice, its clawed feet kicking up sooty stone as it clambered this way and that. "Geryon shall break you... Snap you in two and cast you deep, DEEP into the pit... Let your halves search for each other *forever!*"

*I should have saved another bird corpse...* Davem murmured, his feet frozen to the spot.

## Part 12

*Well, this was unexpected...* Davem thought as Geryon skulked around him, looking for whomever it was that had arrived in the tiny black vessel. *I don't remember this guy all that well, but I thought he was a little further down in the circles than this... Didn't Heracles kill him? Or wasn't he friendly? Then again, that might have been in Christian Mythos. Damn it, why didn't I borrow Raven's copy of Divina Commedia while I was at it? Not that I can read Italian...*

"Come out, come out, little soul..." Geryon said, eyes burning as hotly as any of the surrounding volcanoes, "You cannot hide forever, and we have all of eternity to punish you for your mischief. Why not come out now so we can get *started?*"

Davem's teeth clenched as the Hellbeast approached Estella's hiding place, uncertain of what to do. This was *precisely* why he hadn't wanted her along to begin with. He could have snuck away by now.

She'd said it herself; this thing couldn't exactly *kill* her, but the last thing he needed was to have to find (and possibly reassemble) *two* people instead of just one.

Swiftly he took off at a run, back to where he and Estella had stashed the boat. Clambering inside of it, he seized the oar from within. As he did, the laughter of Geryon seemed to suggest that he'd managed to find his companion. He could hear her scurry out from the rock, dashing madly and weaving between several more outcroppings to make way for the boat.

"Little *help*, Davemport!?" She shouted as Geryon pursued her, smashing over several towering stones in the process.

"There are *none* who can help you now, little girl!" The monster bellowed back. As he passed the boat, he didn't notice the hovering oar rising high and swinging down from behind.

The wooden pole thumped down on the back of Geryon's head... with little effect.

"What... and who- or what- is *this?*!" After shaking off the mild ache of the oar's strike, the monster stomped around to face the boat. Lunging forth, the paws of its forelegs seized the boat and pulled it down on its side. Davem was sent tumbling forward, dropping the oar and barely catching himself. As Geryon glared into the sideways vessel, Davem slowly, silently crept as far to one side as he could. Thankfully unseen, he only had to keep his panting breath in check.

"I know you're in there... but what *are* you?"

Suddenly Davem sprang into a run- thankful his pack was unencumbered by books and other supplies. Geryon lashed out with one taloned foot, missing the invisible Lorekeeper by a fair margin.

"Would you believe 'Virgil?'" Davem called back, instantly regretting it as Geryon's scorpion tail lashed out and crashed into the ground just behind him.

*Better not do that again...* He thought, stepping carefully backward as Geryon looked around warily. *At least Estella got out...*

Of course, now he was equally screwed.

"You cannot hide forever..."

*Would it have killed Hades to give her a **wand** or something?*

Suddenly Geryon leapt forward, lashing out with a powerful foreleg as he crashed to the ground. The stroke missed Davem completely, but instantly afterward the creature stomped around and swung its tail in a wide arc. Davem had no time to react before the carapace-covered appendage crashed into him, sending him tumbling head over heels before crashing to the ground.

"Ahh, *there* you are!"

Davem groaned with pain, staggering and clutching his chest. Shuddering, he struggled to his feet and stumbled toward another small cluster of black rocks.

"You're a *mortal*, are you not?"

*What, did the **bones** give it away?* He thought as he ducked near them.

"We have troubles enough in this land without your kind meddling in our work. But simply one more among troublesome *spirits* will be nothing but another *toy* to play with."

"Hey!" Geryon swiftly spun around again, his tail crashing into the rocky pillars around Davem and sending them down around him. However, as he craned his three-faced head around, he saw Estella standing before him with a large handful of embers. They sizzled in her hand, and she had a noticeably pained expression on her face, but it twisted into a sadistic grin as she hurled the fiery coals into the monster's face.

Geryon screeched in pain, stumbling as its forelegs reached back to clutch at its eyes. The second face's mouth closed around the third, spitting and gagging helplessly.

"See? Wasn't so hard!" Estella said, hopping back a pace and clutching her smoking palms together.

Geryon let out a strange sound, a mix of a muffled howl and a choking wail. Before Estella could dodge, one of its claws grabbed her around the midsection and *threw* her against the blackened landscape, where she slumped and lay still.

Wincing, Davem stood straight and let his pack slip off of his shoulders. Charging forward, he grabbed the lashing scorpion tail and held it fast in both arms.

Of course, it probably would have been more effective if he'd *kept* the pack, not to mention kept all of his books; combined, it probably weighed more than Davem himself.

Geryon lifted him up off the ground, snarling and beginning to toss him this way and that.

*This isn't going well.* His mind managed to commend in spite of the fact that his ribcage was in a good deal of pain. Holding on with all of his negligible might, he struggled his way up the tail's length, reaching the pointed tip that dripped with venom.

*And you left your stupid training foils behind, too, didn't you?* He thought, *Why the hell- what, did you think you wouldn't have to fight anything? Ah, right, because nobody was supposed to see you because you were invisible, God damn it, Estella!*

And then, at that moment, there was a strange sound of ripping flesh and splattering fluids. Davem let out a cry of surprise as he fell promptly to the ground... accompanied by a fair half of the creature's tail.

His eyes widened as Geryon screeched out a second time, stomping around to glare down upon his severed tail.

"Er... I know how this looks..." Davem said weakly, looking up into the thing's eyes. Of course it still couldn't see him, but he got the feeling it would seek him out quickly enough with a couple of stomps.

But he himself had not been the one to cut off Geryon's tail.

A large figure- not so large as Geryon himself, but by a behemoth by human standards- lunged out from the corner of Davem's eye. Both Geryon and the Lorekeeper let out choked gasps of surprise as the monster was sent hurtling to the side, rolling until it managed to catch itself and spring back to all fours.

At the same time, Davem and Geryon's eyes rose to meet the newcomer.

As noted, he was *huge*: Seven, perhaps eight feet tall, almost every inch of his body decked with scars and rippling with sculpted muscle. He wore a few random scraps of cloth (likely a luxury in this place), and carried what looked like a crudely fashioned axe sculpted from the black rock all around them. His face matched the rest of his body- riddled with scars and worn with age- but was stately nonetheless. His graying hair must once have been black, messily cut and sticking out every which-way (likely groomed using a blade similar to the one he carried).

Davem didn't spend any time gawking at the large man, rather scurrying across the blackened battlefield to Estella's side.

Geryon, meanwhile, stared stupidly at the warrior before him. Its severed tail began to twitch, before leaping back toward its owner, as if it had a mind of its own. The monster said nothing as the appendage reattached itself, only snarling as it pounced.

The man only shook his head, raising his obsidian axe and standing his ground.

Meanwhile, Davem looked on from the side of the battlefield, standing guard over Estella's fallen form in case some other winged monstrosity decided to invite itself to this growing party.

"Brainless wretch." The man finally spoke, before diving out of the way of the monster's lunge. Swinging around, he managed to slam the butt of his makeshift weapon into Geryon's outermost face. Again, the abomination tumbled side over side to the ground. "You'd best return to your proper circle... if *counting* is not beyond your ability."

The man spoke English, yet it was thickly laced with an accent that placed his origins somewhere in the Germany. Clearly he was a long-time resident of this place, and yet Davem would have expected a bit more helplessness- or at least *reverence*- on the part of anything human for the demons that dwelt here. But here he was, making *sport* of Geryon.

Spitting out the last of the ash Estella had thrown at him, the monster's second mouth opened to reveal the third, as hatefully as ever.

However, as though thinking the better of this situation, his wings extended to their full length, and with a single beat he took to the air. Davem and the large man watched as Geryon disappeared into the dark horizon, his departure punctuated with a quiver of the land beneath them.

Davem sighed with relief, reaching down to gently nudge Estella.

"C'mon, wake up, he's gone."

As he did, the man approached where they lay-slash-crouched, keeping his weapon ready.

Without a word, he knelt down and swept her up under one powerful arm.

"H- Hey! HEY!" Davem protested, standing up and jogging after the newcomer who seemed completely unfazed by the Lorekeeper's disembodied voice. "Hey, put her down! Where are you going?"

"Safety." The man replied, "And should you wish to join us, you would best keep your voice down, and your pace up."

"Who are you?" Davem asked, very much bewildered as he retrieved his pack.

"I am Wolfgang Von Kaiser."

With that, he strode off along the dark plains of Tartarus, leaving a momentarily stunned Davem to in swift pursuit.

### Part 13

"Whoa, whoa, You're not-"

"Stop your incessant *buzzing*, or I will shall feel no guilt in *swatting* you."

Davem hurried along behind Wolfgang, every now and again glancing down at Estella. He knew it was only a matter of time before she recovered, but it was unnerving to see her limp, breathless form dangling from the man's arm.

"M-My apologies, sir-... m-milord." He answered in a pant. He was the only one who could still suffer from physical exhaustion. "It's just that... that your reputation precedes you."

"How is it that you have heard of me?"

"It was... in a roundabout way, I suppose." Davem replied.

As the two of them walked he led Davem toward another of the large volcanoes that dotted the dark landscape of Tartarus' uppermost level. Stabbing his weapon into the ground beside him, Wolfgang grabbed hold of a slab of black rock that blended in quite well with the rest of the mountain face. With little effort, he pulled it aside to reveal a doorway leading to a pitch-dark tunnel.

"Long story short, I know you because your family is connected- contrived as it may be- to one of the most powerful mages in the history of the profession." The Lorekeeper began, trying to keep the story quick; he didn't know just how much patience this man had... Lord knows it didn't seem like *much*. "But believe me, you were not forgotten. In fact, the aristocratic melting pot the Von Kaiser family became never stopped paying homage to you, and you were half the inspiration that made Tovias Farraday what he was."

"Bah." Wolfgang spat, and Davem hesitated, hoping- in the darkness- he didn't slip on it... "I'll not hear what became of my bloodline if 'aristocrat' was the best they could aspire to."

"Fair enough." Davem nodded. "I doubt a one among them could have hoped to become what you have. I wouldn't have believed a mortal soul could attain such a level of strength in Tartarus so as to stand toe to toe with *demons*."

"In this world, demons- and the very environment itself- exist to break spirits." He answered simply, "Some spirits cannot *be* broken."

Bracing himself on the walls of the tunnel, Wolfgang made his way down the rocky corridor with Davem following clumsily behind. His smaller, slender stature left him poorly equipped to navigate the tunnel. He nearly tripped over a divot of rock, stumbling and desperately grasping onto the side.

The tunnel, as it turned out, wasn't quite a safe-haven; at least, not in the traditional sense of a large underground room with impromptu furnishings. It was simply another deep, dark tunnel (the likes of which Davem was starting to get *very* tired of). At random intervals, another slab of rock could be seen obscuring it from- likely- another circle of the Pit.

Those ominous quivers and quakes of the living land endured, and with each one Davem worried that the whole thing would collapse on top of them.

"You have chosen a poor time to visit Tartarus... No, I should say you have chosen a poor place to visit at *all*." Wolfgang said, stopping for a moment and sitting the unconscious Estella up against one wall.

Davem only slumped on the floor with an exhausted sigh.

"So, what? You've spent the last century-and-a-half hiding away from Demons?" Davem asked, silently wondering if the large man had taught himself English in that time as well...

"If you will recall, I was not the one retreating from the battle with Geryon."

"Of course, of course. I simply misspoke." Davem said quickly, a nervous little squeak accompanying his words. "I... meant simply that you have been here fighting demons since you died?"

"Yes." The larger man nodded. "And you, presumably, have come here in search of this girl." He added, gesturing to Estella.

"Er... not exactly." Davem replied, looking down at Estella with mild disdain.

As he explained his situation to Wolfgang, he was able to take time to appreciate just how out-of-hand the matter had become.

"I originally intended to come to Hades to learn about The Darkening, but now I'm in *Tartarus*, trying to rescue Estella's *mother* for a group of Tiamat Cultists, but not the *same* Tiamat Cultists Estella and her mother worked with. *They're* trying to kill *that* cult's *leader*, but can only do it if Fianna- her mother- is *alive*. Also, I have a bargain going with Hades where- if I succeed- Estella gets a Pasadena out of Tartarus (she's an evil little brat, by the way)."

"Pass... Pass-what?"

"It just means she won't end up in Tartarus. I don't know where I learned the term, but anyway, there's a high risk of me getting killed. Then if I come back without Fianna, someone else is going to kill me. And the best part is, even if I come back *with* Fianna, somebody's probably going to try to kill me *anyway*. Don't know why, doesn't matter, I guess destiny just decided the poor stupid bastard from the New World needed to be taken down a peg."

"Hm." Wolfgang chuckled lowly. "You seem resigned to your fate."

"I'm not seeing many options." Davem agreed.

"Mankind was not meant to grow powerful in the realm of the Pit. I refused to accept this. Mankind was not meant to *rule* the Pit, *regardless* of how powerful we become... and until such a time as I can prove fate mistaken once again, I am ever seeking amusement where I can find it." Wolfgang explained. "I shall aid you in seeking out this 'Fianna', once the girl has awakened."

"Really?" Davem asked, his eyes widening a little. "I wouldn't have thought..."

"In exchange, you will tell me what is remembered of me in the world of the living. In addition... tell me what you know of this 'Tovias Farraday' you mentioned in passing before."

"Can do." Davem nodded with a little grin on his face.

By the time Estella finally came around again, Davem and Wolfgang had reached the next circle of Tartarus, which housed the Wood of Suicides. Even the slab hiding the catacomb of tunnels couldn't drown out the screams of suffering issuing from outside.

"What are we stopping here for?" Davem asked, "I thought we were going to try the Circle of Heresy. Seems closest to where we'd find Fianna."

"You say this girl is a mage." Wolfgang answered, "She will need a magic wand."

Pushing open the slab, he directed the girl to dash out and claim whatever bit of wood might be necessary to craft a wand.

"Doesn't it need to be a special kind of wood?" The Lorekeeper persisted, "Like, magical or something?"

"It's wood from the forests of *Hell*. I think that's about as special as it *gets*." Estella said before hastily dashing out to one of the trees (taking care to avoid the eyes of their Harpy tormentors). There were no leaves on any of the trees, so she would have to be particularly stealthy (sure she could have borrowed the Ring of Gyges, but she might disappear completely with Davem's luck).

Davem sighed, content to remain inside the tunnel as Estella sprinted into the thickly wooded landscape.

"You might actually like her." Davem said quietly. "Fianna, I mean."

Wolfgang only let out a low harrumph.

"Judging from what Tovias said in his story, it was understood that you preferred hardy and strong women over the aristocratic set, and from what I've heard of Fianna, she was about as hardy as they come. A fair bit misguided before the end, though..."

"I see." This was all he gave him before Estella returned, carrying a long stick, broken off of one of the trees.

"Look at this!" She proclaimed happily as Wolfgang went about putting the slab back in place. Davem could see as she held the wand up, showing off the broken end, which was dripping with crimson.

"I wish *all* trees bled. It'd make burning things down *twice* as fun!"

Davem only bowed his head, rubbing his eyes with one hand.

"So, you're the ringleader of this, Davemport; How are we supposed to find my mother?" She continued after amusing herself with the bleeding stick a moment longer.

"You went to Oakmont Academy with Will Spellworthy, didn't you?" Davem asked, not yet looking up at her.

"If you call that place a *school*..."

"Did you at least pay enough attention to what was going on to learn the same Finding Spell he knew?"

"Do you really think I'd have made you bloody Questers search the Gypsies for my Evil Potato if I could'a done it myself?"

"YES."

There was a long pause before a dull light flared at the end of Estella's new wand. Immediately after, she cast another spell, and the arcane implement began to tug her down the tunnel.

Wolfgang only chuckled as Davem rolled his eyes and carefully followed after her.

"So... this is the Circle of Heresy?" Davem asked as Wolfgang opened the slab in the tunnel wall leading to the next gallery of horrors... but even he seemed a bit more cautious than usual.

The stone doorway opened up to dark red skies and black horizons on all sides. Hideous white outcroppings could be seen everywhere- the spine and ribs and other bones of the massive titan from which the Pit was built.

"This is where my mother is supposed to be?" Davem asked as Estella poked her head through the doorway, around Wolfgang. "I..."

Her voice suddenly trailed off.

Davem stepped forward, the invisible Lorekeeper gently pushing Estella aside and moving out into the open. After his eyes adjusted from the near-pitch-dark of the tunnel, he understood why Estella had gone silent.

Near the center of the Circle was what seemed to be the framework for a gigantic building, leading straight from floor to ceiling. Upon second glance, however, it was no building at all... rather, only *scaffolding*.

Located in several positions around the cage-like structure were a series of blazing furnaces.

Davem could not see very far, but judging from the screams all around him, he could just tell what... or who... was fueling the hellish infernos within each one.

Even as Davem was trying to figure out exactly what this was, or what purpose it served, there was a sudden throb of movement from within the cage of wood, stone and other materials.

Hanging inside of the frame from various enormous tubes... was a *heart*. A giant, pulsating heart.

"Oh... my..." Davem's words fell away to horrified silence.

"Want to guess where the wand's taking us?" Estella finally spoke again, with a heavy note of sarcasm as she and Wolfgang proceeded down the slope of the mountain from which they had emerged.

As he followed, Davem took a grim sense of solace in the fact that he was going to die no matter what he did; it seemed to take the edge off of his abject terror.

## Part 14

Davem had been so stricken with horrified fascination at the Circle's most prominent feature- the living heart of Tartarus- that he hadn't even bothered to look down at the landscape below.

At first, it didn't seem like much more than the blackened expanse Davem had seen everywhere else. However, the further down the mountain slope he and the others traveled, the more the world transformed before his eyes.

A journey across simple, charred plains would have been simpler- if not easier, for what sense that makes- but with every descending step, the ground began to grow blocky and uneven, until finally becoming a vast skyline of buildings riddled with fiery specks. All of it was encompassed by an enormous wall of burnt black wood and metal.

"... The City of Dis?" Davem asked, unable to think of what else this frightening metropolis *could* be.

"Correct." Wolfgang nodded. "The closest equivalent to civilization in the Underworld."

That wasn't saying much; All of Tartarus was a prison, really, but now the souls were confined to undersized cages (instead of, say, trees). Most of these were subjected to unbearable temperatures or prodding demonic imps.

Davem himself was beginning to feel the intense heat of the Pit bearing down on him from all directions. He reached up to wipe the sweat from his brow, but immediately pulled his hand away in a fit of nauseating horror.

"Estella!" He suddenly hissed, freezing in place. "Estella, can you see my forehead!?"

The girl stopped in place, craning her neck around with a sardonic expression.

"Well?" He persisted, pointing at his forehead. "Can you see me? Er, wait-" He reached down, pulling off the Ring of Gyges, but immediately slipped it back on. "Did you see me just then?"

"No." She muttered. "Just your stupid eyes."

"Oh, thank God..." Davem let out a sigh of relief. The Heart Sutra held up just as well here as anyplace else, and wiping at it didn't so much as smudge it... frankly, he was starting to get a little concerned if it would *ever* come off when this was all over.

Then again, odds were he wasn't going to live through this at *all*, so why would it matter?

Either way, it was fortunate the Heart Sutra still functioned as it ought to; the runes all over his body were throbbing madly, much as they had been in the dark tunnel at the journey's beginning. There was no telling what would have become of him if they hadn't been there...

"Dis Pater is the ruler of this City." Wolfgang continued. "He hears the pleas of the so-called 'Heretics'. If they were among the good in spite of their 'misguided religious beliefs', they are returned to Hades"

"So, he's like the Underworld Court of Appeals or something?" Davem asked curiously, but was ignored outright.

"Seems like he's been *busy*." Estella observed, gesturing to the scaffolding surrounding the heart of Tartarus, still visible from their vantage point.

"Has that always been there?" Davem nodded at Estella's observation, and looked to their savage companion (Now that he thought about it, he was rather thankful for the flames all around them; as hot as they were, they kept his companions' spectral flesh illuminated, or else he'd have been marching around with a couple of skeletons).

"I have been curious- waiting to see what function it will serve." Wolfgang replied, "Hades and his ilk have not seen fit to intervene in its construction yet, or perhaps they do not know of it at all, somehow."

Davem doubted that. If Hades could assimilate the knowledge of any spirit in his realm, *one* of the Olympian Gods must have known about... whatever the thing was.

Davem frowned. If ever he needed proof that the so-called deities were a disorganized mess, he needed only look at the past twenty four hours; reasons to yearn for atheism were swarming him in droves.

But then he'd end up in one of Dis' prisons as a heretic.

*I don't get it...*

"Who stands before the Gates of Dis?"

The enormous walls of the great dark city were guarded by large winged humanoid entities; two standing at the gates, and many more looking on from the parapets of the city. Each of them was twice the height of Wolfgang and far better armored, but they lacked his powerful build.

Fallen Angels: The Gatekeepers of Dis.

"Wolfgang Von Kaiser." He replied without the slightest hint of fear.

"And Estella Foxglove." Estella chimed in from behind him. True to form, she didn't seem terribly impressed or intimidated.

Davem remained silent, hoping these beings were like Cerberus- unable to see the Lorekeeper so he could slip along unnoticed.

"Begone, Wolfgang Von Kaiser. None may enter or depart these lands without the consent of the Master."

"I have done one already." Wolfgang replied with a hint of malicious glee, "and now I intend to do the other."

"W-What?!" Davem hissed as the larger man drew and raised his obsidian axe, the angels quickly unsheathing their own armaments, ranging from spears to swords to bows. "What're you doing!?"

"So much for subtlety." Estella rolled her eyes, brandishing her wand. As she leveled it at the winged creatures, eager to see how this would turn out, Davem looked up to the wall of Dis where the other Fallen Angels were beginning to take flight and gather overhead.

In spite of every bad decision Davem had made in his life up to that point (particularly within the last year), they were starting to feel downright *smart* in comparison to simply walking up to Hell's most infamous fortress, and dropping a gauntlet.

Then again, he had to remember with whom he was traveling.

As had been the case with Geryon, Wolfgang threw himself into the fray without hesitation. It wasn't long before his crude stone weapon shattered, batting aside a strike from one of the angel's longswords.

At that moment, it registered to Davem that this warrior had actually *broken out* of this place.

Of course he would have ended up here upon his death... but it was as Wolfgang had said; his spirit was unbreakable, and he cowed to no one.

He answered to and believed in only one person.

Wolfgang spun around, catching the spear of the other angel. The guardian held fast to the haft of the weapon, only to have Wolfgang break off a sizable length of it- blade included.

There was a low whistle from above, just before an arrow the size of a javelin impaled itself in the ground just beside the warrior's heel.

"W-Watch out! Archers!" Davem let out a gasp of surprise, stumbling back as a flurry of arrows followed the first.

"I am aware." Wolfgang replied without looking back. Leaping out from the arrow's strike-zone and batting a few others aside with his new weapon, he charged his two immediate opponents.

"Estella, can you give him some support?" He asked, calling to the girl.

"What do you expect *me* to do?" She short back. "I only know a few auras and hexes, and they won't be much use *here*."

"What about that thing you used to shield Thomas when he tackled Loki-Puddle-Whatever? Can't you do that one?"

"That was a *Chaos* Shield!" She answered, actually having to dodge away from a few more massive arrows that hurtled down from above. "These things are *Lawful*"

"You mean to tell me you don't have a single offensive spell!?"

"I only learned a few basic spells, and then whatever Ruby made me learn."

"For a girl who loves burning things down, you mean to tell me you never learned a single god-damned fireball spell!?"

"You don't have a *clue* how boring learning high-level spells is, do you?"

"My *God*, you really never really cared about *anything*, did you?!"

"Oh, *now* you figure it out; Least of all do I give a damn what *you* think, you dirty old-"

"STOP CALLING ME THAT!"

"I WILL END *BOTH* OF YOU IF YOU DO NOT SHUT YOUR MOUTHS." Wolfgang bellowed, twisting his body around to hurl the broken spear upward to impale one of the Fallen Angel archers. Afterward, he ripped two of the arrows from the ground, just before ducking under a sweeping longsword strike.

Davem cringed, doing exactly that; Not only because the warrior was so frightening (especially in the heat of battle), but because- for whatever reason- the angels hadn't noticed him and his shouting yet, and he would prefer to keep it that way.

Stepping back, Davem started searching his surroundings for a tunnel or a break in the wall, or... really *anything* he could use to bypass the guardians... but as he looked at the immense wall, it began to rumble and shift.

At first, Davem assumed it was just another of Tartarus' ripples. But as he watched, the wall actually began to *move*, its components twisting and bulging at its center just above the gate.

Within the lump of wood and metal, two blazing fires burst to life, forming a pair of burning eyes. A short, wide nose poked out from just beneath them, and with another low rumble, a wide mouth full of jagged teeth yawned open.

The entity in the wall looked down upon the battle playing out below, which seemed oblivious to its appearance.

Only Davem stared up in apprehension while the thing seemed to test its motor skills, blinking its eyes and opening and closing its mouth. After doing this several times, it addressed those present in a gravelly voice.

"What business has brought you back to my city, Wolfgang Von Kaiser? And why have you seen fit to include, in this business, this fledgling soul?"

"I do not state my business to *walls*, Pater." Wolfgang replied, stepping away from the angels he'd been battling. It was just as well, Davem thought; the warrior had dealt the most damage and showed no fatigue, but the angels did not seem to tire either.

"So that's Dis Pater..." Davem murmured. "Or at least... kind of?"

"Such arrogance." Dis Pater murmured softly, although it still came out as an intense rumble. "You forget that- for all your power- you are not invincible."

"You have given me little reason to think otherwise."

Davem's eyes widened at the large man's words. He wanted to say something that would keep Wolfgang from getting them all killed (such as spirits could be). Even if it was just Wolfgang and Estella that suffered his wrath, it would leave Davem alone to fulfill the mission himself... without Wolfgang's power or Estella's Finding Spell.

He was starting to wonder how he ever thought he could have done this on his own.

"You will discover shortly, little German, that there are beings whose power is far beyond the ken of mortals, on par with the Gods themselves... but for the time being, my guardians shall stand down."

With this, the winged creatures sheathed their weapons, returning to their posts on top of the wall or at the gates. The enormous doors swung open with a low creak and a slight tremor of the earth.

"My castle is currently vacant... come to the site of the grand construction... I suppose I needn't show you the way."

With a deep chuckle, the face disappeared back into the wall.

Without hesitation, Wolfgang proceeded forth into the walls of Dis. Estella jogged alongside him, and Davem hurried on as well, keeping as close as he could to prevent himself from getting separated.

One Davem had noticed in his travels through the Underworld thus far was that- no matter how endless the world seemed and how far away something appeared, the distance always ended up closing itself once one had an intended

destination in mind. The journey from the front gates to the Heart of Tartarus was still a good walk, giving him plenty of time to take in the 'scenery'.

"My life is starting to take on a very predictable pattern." Davem muttered, mostly to himself as they passed tower after tower constructed entirely of cages, each one containing a wailing, tortured soul.

"Well, luckily it's almost over, so you won't have time to get bored with it." Estella replied with a wicked little grin.

"Thanks." Davem sighed.

At last, the horizon seemed to leap forward in the blink of an eye. After passing by another cluster of 'buildings', the emerged into a strange, soft landscape. Kneeling down, Davem touched it experimentally; It felt like... like an old waterskin- or to be more specific, like a dried out inner organ.

It made sense, for in the close distance, the Heart of Tartarus stood like a pillar from the ground, reaching all the way to the circle's ceiling.

The idea that it was still alive, still beating every now and again, made Davem sick to his stomach...

"Welcome."

Startled, Davem looked up from the leathery ground to the scaffolding surrounding the heart.

There stood aged, hunched yet clean-shaven old man in ragged maroon king's regalia, complete with a stone circlet about his head. His gleaming eyes and wide nose looked similar enough to the features which had manifested on the city walls: This was Dis Pater.

With a wave of his arm, the ancient man engulfed in a column of flame. Another such column erupted before Wolfgang and the others, Estella looking on with interest and Davem doing his best to stay away from the blaze.

"Now then, the business that has brought you here, as you see fit to interrupt our work with your uninvited presence..." Dis addressed him, hunching forward on a wooden cane.

"Hm." Wolfgang cast a glance up to the heart, narrowing his eyes before looking back to Dis. "We seek the woman known as Fianna Foxglove." He proceeded. "That is all."

"I see." The old man answered with a soft chuckle. "I shall consider your request, but for now-"

"You will give her to us, or we will take her from you. Either way, we will not tolerate your stalling."

"You forget, little German," Dis grumbled, "just whom is 'tolerating' whom."

"There will be a day when you can no longer hide behind your angels and your demons." Wolfgang shrugged.

"And you will be obliterated far before that day ever comes." Dis replied simply before turning away from him.

"I don't even know what's going on anymore..." Davem murmured, and Estella shuffled closer to him. "Is he *trying* to get us all killed?"

"You may be brainless, but you must have noticed; he's gotten us *this* far."

"I suppose..." Davem sighed, "But what now?"

"Now, I suppose he satisfies his curiosity."

"And just how, exactly, do you plan to do *that*?"

"Do not be so proud as to think my plan is limited to *your* destruction." Dis waved a dismissive hand in his direction.

As the old man hobbled forward, both Davem and Estella started, Davem letting out a sharp gasp.

All throughout the scaffolding, flickering red-orange lights- some sort of pyres or furnaces- began to burst into existence, one after the other, until the heart was completely illuminated by them.

More unsettling was the fact that each furnace- likely quite large up close- had several pipes connecting them to the Heart of Tartarus itself.

Slack jawed, Davem looked back to Dis Pater who only smiled over his shoulder.

"We are going to obliterate *everyone*."

## Part 15

"What the hell are those?" Davem barely managed to keep himself from speaking too loudly. His eyes focused on the strange furnaces dotting the scaffolding all about the Heart of Tartarus. More so, he was confused- but nonetheless menaced- by the large tubes that connected them.

What purpose could it all possibly serve?

"A charming light show." Wolfgang said, less impressed, but nonetheless wary. "So your plan is to..."

"Just a moment." Dis slowly raised his hand, still looking to the towering platforms.

Following his gaze, Davem- and the others- could see a line of tiny figures- no larger than ants from this distance- walking in a slow, dreary procession up the scaffolding.

"More souls?" Wolfgang asked, folding his arms as he moved to stand beside Dis.

"Indeed... only these will have a very special honor of being my test subjects."

"I don't like where this is going. Estella." Davem hissed over to the girl, silently pacing in her direction. "Estella, use your Finding spell again. Is your mother up there?"

"No..." She muttered back, already holding up the wand. "But she's close."

"Just our luck." The Lorekeeper shook his head. "If I knew any magic I'd go and find her myself..."

Estella looked from side to side. Although there *were* a few more fallen angels meandering about (mostly watching the display on the scaffolding), none of them seemed to be paying attention to her.

"Give me your hand." She said, reaching out with her own free one.

"What?"

"I can't see you! Now give me your bloody hand!"

Davem nodded, swiftly navigating his wrist to her fingers. Turning her hand, she clasped it and felt her way up to his fingers. Placing her wand in them, she carefully adjusted each of his digits to hold the wand precisely. It disappeared once he held it, making it that much more difficult, but soon enough she nodded with relative confidence.

For his part, Davem wasn't completely comfortable with holding a piece of broken human soul infused in a stick, particularly since it still felt like it was bleeding. He was a bit distracted from that though as Estella felt her way around him, moving around him to take hold of his arms and guide his movements.

"Ah..."

"Don't get too excited, Davemport. I need you to *focus*." The girl muttered.

"What would you know about 'focus'?"

Quickly, Estella led Davem through the movements of the spell. It took three or four tries- and all her effort for Estella not to call attention to herself by yelling at him, but at last the wand began to tug him along as it had done her.

"Once I find her, I'm not sure I'm going to be able to get her back here. Maybe I could run back and tell you where... she..."

His words fell off to an horrified silence... or rather, there *was* one sound in the distance.

Screams.

Horrible, bloodcurdling death cries. But these were different from the tortured sounds of agony synonymous with Tartarus.

As he looked up to the scaffolding, he once again saw the procession of mortal souls moving up the platforms, driven on by demonic jailors.

They were being marched toward the furnaces and, once standing before them, shoved unceremoniously into the flames. As more and more souls were forced into them, the tubes connecting them to the Heart of Tartarus began to glow...

"What are they-...?" Davem caught himself before his voice grew too loud.

"Just go find my mother, will you?!" Estella hissed back, bringing Davem back to his senses. He nodded and turned, moving as quickly and quietly as he could manage in the direction the wand pulled him.

"And what do you call this?" Wolfgang asked, furrowing his brow.

"Taking advantage of a *resource*, little German." Dis said with a smirk.

There was another shudder of the land as the colossal Heart of Tartarus beat again.

It felt *stronger* this time.

*How the hell do I get myself into these things?* Davem asked himself, ignoring the irony within the question.

He passed several demons who were in the midst of dragging prisoners from their cells, and throwing them into the line of souls destined for the furnaces.

*Whatever this is, they just had to be doing it while we're actually **searching** for one of these people...*

Davem's legs finally grew weary, forcing him to pause and rest for a moment. Normally he would have chosen to slump against the wall of an abandoned alley, but considering all the buildings here were made out of occupied cages, there was no such thing. Instead he chose the most open area of charred ground he could find, and sat down to catch his breath.

*You know, it's not too late for this whole thing to have just been a dream, and for me to wake up warm and safe- er- cold and miserable up against a tree listening to Volstav's snoring... hell, even hanging from the ceiling of that stupid cellar. I'd take that over this any day. Yes, it might mean I'm stuck being blindfolded and interrogated by that scary evil guy, but it'd also mean...* His mind flitted back to the moment just before he'd stepped through the portal to Italy, when someone had kissed him.

*What was **that** about?* He thought, bringing his hand to the edge of his lips. *Could have at least said who it was. Now for all I know it was the **scary guy**. That'd be awkward... it was **nice** though... Like that kiss on the cheek Rose Peregrine gave me that one time for helping her with chores... or that little smile Estella gave me in the dungeon.*

It was a stupid thing to think about. And what was worse, he was starting to feel tears welling up in his eyes the more he did.

*How did it get this far? Who did I think I was, leaving home with some delusion of becoming some great hero in a land of whimsy and fantasy? When now, the best I can hope for is to... to what? This whole thing was born, has lived, and is a hair's breath away from **dying** under the most foolish of pretexts.*

At last, he stood up and wiped his eyes, sniffing as quietly as he could. Repeating the Finding Spell, he hurried off once again toward where he hoped he would find Fianna. Much to his dismay, the path was beginning to drift, suggesting that she was on the move. Considering where many of these souls were headed, that was less than encouraging.

*Well... this is it.* Davem thought as he finally happened upon one of the spirit processions.

They all looked quite bedraggled, which he'd expected, and they were all quite naked. Judging by the demons occasionally interspersed among them though, he would have other things to worry about once he found her.

The wand's pull strengthened, focusing on one segment of the marching spirits. Swallowing hard, he waited for a break in the line before weaving his way inside; His experiences at Faire had made him quite good at navigating crowds. Turning, spinning and strafing through the shuffling bodies, his wand suddenly poked into a soft surface, and ceased its pull.

Davem's eyes jerked up from where he'd been watching his step, his invisible face again flushed with embarrassment as his eyes met with the stern ones of a stately, mature woman. About as tall as he was, he could easily see Estella in her hair color, if in nothing else about her.

She said nothing, giving him only a raised eyebrow and an indignant flare of her nostrils.

Davem was about to speak, but stilled his tongue for the moment. As he watched, she turned forward again to continue the march... but gave a slight nod of acknowledgment.

She knew he was there, and it seemed she knew what his intent was.

After a moment's thought, Davem took the makeshift wand he'd been carrying, reaching down to take hold of Fianna's wrist. Much as Estella had done for him, he offered the wand to her, praying that she had at least some level of magical aptitude (more than her daughter did, anyway).

Closing her fingers around the wand, she twisted it so it lay against her inner arm.

"Your daughter's here in Tartarus." The Lorekeeper said quietly, to which Fianna's eyes widened. "Find her."

She said nothing as he shuffled away from her and ran to the edge of the road. He came to a stop just outside one of the slender paths between two of the cage-towers.

Then he removed the Ring of Gyges.

## Part 16

"So, then," Wolfgang muttered as he watched the goings-on upon the scaffolding from the ground far away and below, "you intend to revive the Titan, Tartarus."

"With the power of human souls- properly refined- the lifeblood of Tartarus can be replenished, and he will burst free of his imprisonment at last." Dis Pater chuckled, looking proudly upon his grand work. "Olympus will come crashing down, the Dead shall swarm the realms of man, and utter chaos shall reign upon the earth."

"Hmm." Estella nodded thoughtfully... perhaps a bit *too* interested by the prospect of complete Armageddon.

"The Gods who cast the Titans down once before yet remain." Wolfgang shrugged. "They will not stand idly by."

"The *Gods*?" Dis snarled, rounding on the warrior, "My entire *existence* revolves around listening to and patching up an endless parade of their failures and mistakes, little German. Proud, self-important hypocrites, all, using mortals for

their own gain, throwing away those who *have* no use, and forcing *me* to sweep up their forsaken refuse. Even now, Hades sits comfortably upon his throne alongside his stolen bride, caring neither for his kingdom nor its people, much less for *mine*."

"And how is that different from pumping their souls into a giant half-dead heart just to teach them all a lesson?" Estella asked with her usual smug grin.

"Instead of hypocrisy, consider *this* poetic justice." Dis replied without missing a beat. "The Gods struck down their Titan creators to break free of their yoke. Now, Mortals shall do the same to the Gods... albeit in a rather *indirect* fashion."

"Maybe I'll stick around here after all." Estella said quietly. "This place has actually gotten a bit interesting."

"Only recently was I able to summon the manpower necessary to build the furnaces, and to collect enough souls to fuel them."

"And suppose your little project were to be *destroyed*... where would it leave you *then*?" Wolfgang asked, a heavy note of suggestion in his voice.

"I assure you, it will take more than your unique brand of mechanical expertise to destroy the furnaces... even so, you of all people should be eager to see Tartarus resurrected." Dis replied, now grinning. "Should your spirit endure the grand upheaval, you could carve out a new kingdom in the midst of the turmoil. T'is been quite a long time since the mortal world has seen a Von Kaiser worth more than a shit and a copper."

"Hm." Wolfgang frowned.

"Make no mistake, if you stand in our way now, I *will* end you for good and all. I recommend you sit back and-... eh?"

At that moment, the sound of screeching demons, shouting spirits and all other manner of commotion rose from some distance away.

"What in blazes-!?" Dis hissed, looking from the uproar to where Wolfgang and Estella stood.

Wolfgang stared over the hunched man, his eyes narrowing while Estella's brow quirked in confusion and mild disbelief.

"... Davemport..."

Davem tore free from yet another alley of cages, panting with mounting exhaustion. The monsters pursuing him by land and air never ceased in their hunt, constantly at his heels.

He turned, kicking up black ash as he weaved through the 'buildings' as best he could; His mind and his eyes were focused upon the giant Heart of Tartarus- on distracting and stalling for as long as he could while Fianna made her way back to Estella and Wolfgang.

If he were allowing himself to think retrospectively, he could just as easily have waited and seen what the German had planned before running off on his own. Near as he could tell, though, he didn't have a lot of time before Fianna would have been marched into one of the furnaces and this whole trip would have been for nothing (which it still could be if he didn't pay attention).

Reaching into his pack, he pulled out his waterskin- almost half-empty from his journey in the Pit- and slung it under one arm. He shrugged off the rest of his pack, letting his remaining rations fall to the ground behind him (facing facts, this was beginning to look like the point where he would no longer be needing them).

Charging down one long stretch of road, a hot, glowing light descended rapidly in his path. Davem skidded to a halt just before running headlong into a fiery winged demon a foot or so taller than him.

The thing leered at Davem and let out a roar of malicious intent... seconds before receiving a pressurized stream of water straight to the face.

Davem threw the now empty waterskin aside as the demon staggered back in a cloud of steam, screeching in harmony with the hissing of the vaporizing water.

Allowing himself a Cheshire grin, Davem ran past the demon only hear several more closing the distance toward him.

He wanted more than anything to put the Ring of Gyges back on, but he couldn't know if Fianna had some similar way of shielding herself from their view, or if she'd even managed to escape from the dark procession yet.

If their attention was on him, it was not on her. That was all that mattered.

The loss of his pack- the shedding of the weight- was offset by the ache and wobbliness beginning to set into his legs. Gritting his teeth, he pushed on... but he couldn't keep this up for much longer.

"If you will excuse me." Dis Pater stated, before disappearing in a column of flame as he had done before, leaving Estella and Wolfgang behind.

"Well, 'little German', what do we do now?" Estella asked, sauntering over next to Wolfgang.

"You sent the boy off to find your mother, did you not?" Wolfgang replied, still staring at the Heart.

"He's not a *boy*, the git's almost *thirty*."

"He will have sent her back toward us. We cannot leave."

Estella frowned, folding her arms.

"And here I was hoping we'd get a chance to look around this place... thing... before it woke up." She glanced down and kicked at the dark ground absently. Then she looked back up at Wolfgang. "Wait... if he sent my mother toward us, why are all the demons going *that way*?"

"Because he is creating a diversion." Wolfgang answered simply. "So he has chosen the path of martyrdom."

"What?" The girl blinked, glancing back at him.

"You may not have been aware of this," He continued, watching as the demon swarm began to thicken, "but he never intended to survive; only to recover your mother and send her back."

"What?" She turned to face him fully, an incredulous expression passing over her features.

"Your friend Davem is not going to live beyond this journey. After recovering Fianna and ensuring your father's mortality, he will be executed by Lord Hades himself. That is, provided he leaves Tartarus."

"How is... but then, how-?"

"I believe he has entrusted you and I with that responsibility."

"Estella! ESTELLA!"

The girl's head instantly perked, her eyes wide as she looked askance.

At first she saw no one... but she knew that voice from years ago, even before the veil of invisibility fell away to reveal the face and form of her mother rushing in from the distance. Her body was now draped in magically fabricated garments, the wand still clasped in her hand.

She came to a halt before Estella and Wolfgang... the two women wasting no time throwing themselves into a tight embrace.

"Mother..." Estella murmured, burying her face in Fianna's shoulder.

"My little girl... you've grown up so beautifully, but... what's become of you?"

"It was father who did it." The girl replied, a sob in her throat, though she could no longer shed tears. "No surprise there, I imagine..."

"Oh, Estella..." Fianna drew her in tighter, shaking her head. "I... have had nothing but time to regret every moment I spent with that monstrous excuse for a man, to regret the decisions I... Estella..." She gently took her by the arms and eased her back, "Who was that boy who you sent to rescue me?"

"He's not a *boy*." Estella repeated, giving a halfhearted eye-roll and pointing in the direction of the demonic cluster nearing the Heart. "He's only Davem, and he's about to be a *corpse*."

"What are you saying, Estella?" Fianna asked, furrowing her brow, "Were it not for what he has done-"

"There's nothing *we* can do for him." Estella shook her head. "He's doing what he's doing to get *you* out of here! So let's go!"

Wolfgang stepped forward, kneeling and- after a moment of confusion- taking Fianna up on his back. She wrapped her arms around his neck while the warrior simply swept Estella up under one arm.

"I don't suppose you people *bathe* in Tartarus." Estella quipped as she tried to squirm away from his underarm a but, but he paid no mind.

As he turned with the two women in tow, he hesitated... as a large figure swooped over them, headed toward the other demons.

True to Underworld form, the distance between Davem and the encased Heart closed swiftly. He dared not look behind him, able to hear the screeches and flaps of demonic wings closing in.

His feet clambered haphazardly up one of the many ramps leading to the scaffolding, trudging souls scrambling aide as the chasing demons followed in his wake.

He ran up and along one ebony platform after another... until at last, his feet gave out from under him.

Tripping over his own feet, he toppled down, rolling to a halt to the splinter-riddled floor. Panting weakly, he could hear them coming up the ramp- approaching from the air- from all around...

But then, he heard much larger, terribly familiar wingbeats.

"Out of the way... OUT OF THE WAY! He's MINE"

Before the horror could really sink in, a huge figure crashed onto the surface of the Heart beyond him, destroying a small amount of the scaffolding in the process.

Davem hardly had time to look before a clawed hand reached down and grabbed him by the throat. His limp body lifted in a squeezing choke-hold, Davem coughed and gagged, now faced with the grotesque façade of the demon, Geryon.

"Well well well... you must be *Virgil*." The thing said mockingly. "Did you really think you could escape me?"

The Lorekeeper would have explained the contrary, but he was too busy trying to stay conscious as both his blood and air were cut off by those gripping claws.

"Fret not, mortal..." He continued, the monster's Matryoshka-style mouths all licking their lips in a disgusting display, "I may leave your soul for my brothers to play with... once I've had my fill."

With a final, hideous guffaw, the creature opened its gaping mouth, prepared to swallow the Lorekeeper whole.

## Part 17

*So this is it...* Davem thought, though even his mind was weak in the midst of his asphyxiation. Through his half-clouded eyes, he could see the black mouth of Geryon as he was guided toward it.

*This is it... this is how I'm going to die... eaten by some hideous monster in the depths of Hell... at least Tovyas knew his death was going to mean something...*

Heat and foulness of the demon's breath made him wince... although he suddenly found himself oddly *happy* he couldn't breathe.

Rows of drool-dripping fangs soon encircled him, the darkness beyond them stealing what little remained of his vision until...

"Release him!"

Davem heard the command only as a muffled garble, but the creature obeyed nonetheless. The Lorekeeper was dropped unceremoniously to the ground, the imposing presence of Geryon retreating a few paces in the presence of the newcomer. Choking for breath, he gradually recovered and regained a twitch of strength in his limbs. He feebly rolled onto all fours, and pushed up to his knees.

"I must say, mortal, I am quite impressed." As the fog in his head began to disperse, Davem recognized the voice of Dis Pater, who now stood over him. "You are foolish, certainly, but you are a rare specimen regardless."

Looking around Davem could see not only Geryon, but countless other demons surrounding the two of them.

"What was your intent with this display?" Pater demanded, leaning over his walking stick to glare at him. "Do not tell me you are the God's answer to my plans. Did they honestly believe a single mortal could undo *this*?"

As he gestured grandly to the scaffolding (aside from what bits of it Geryon had broken), Davem let out a relieved sigh amid his struggled breaths.

Dis hadn't made the connection yet, and judging from the number of demons assembled here, neither had they (and he was certain Wolfgang could handle any that remained).

"Well?"

Dave, raised a hand, begging his pardon and his patience as he fought to regain his strength. At last, he stood unsteadily to his feet.

"You would do well to remain on your knees in reverence, boy." Dis said gently, but with a hint of menace. "Know you whom you address?"

"Dis Pater." Davem replied simply, "Ruler of the City of Dis, and Judge of Appeals of the Damned."

"And yet you would not kneel before me?"

The Lorekeeper wobbled a little on his feet, but shook his head.

"Milord, I don't know *what* I intended to accomplish here. I don't know at all."

"In spite of what you may believe after not having spotted you throughout your sneaking about my city, I am no imbecile."

"I believe no such thing, milord." Davem insisted, "Perhaps... perhaps if you would allow me to explain myself from the beginning, I could."

"My patience wanes. It is out of simple curiosity that I have even allowed you to live *this* long- curiosity to know what sort of man could cause so great a disturbance... especially when the only man I thought capable of such a feat was standing beside me at that exact moment." He muttered, half to himself. "You've not much longer before I lose my interest altogether."

"I've been made aware of my impending demise more times in the past twenty four hours than I care to count, milord." Davem replied curtly, now that his throat had recovered enough. "I know my death awaits me momentarily, but... before then, there is something I must ask you."

He drew in a slow, deep breath.

"Do you know what The Darkening is?"

Dis Pater raised a brow.

Wolfgang and the Foxglove women made their way past the enormous gates of Dis through another of the German's well-hidden tunnels- likely the way he'd first escaped from the city.

They'd met with surprisingly little resistance, thanks to whatever it was Davem had done- or was still doing.

On the way, Wolfgang related to Fianna all of the information Davem had given him (with occasional color commentary by Estella).

"Remarkable." The elder woman concluded as she brought up the rear of the trio's 'crawling order'.

"Not really." Estella shrugged. "He never did anything without being forced, or without having someone else do all the work for him."

"A bit like *you*, Estella." Her mother chided back.

"He was a helpless little puppy, mother. The old man was completely obsessed; couldn't bloody get *rid* of him before he was good enough to throw himself headfirst into Hell. Bloody useless."

"Estella..." Fianna began after another pause, "That may not have been his fault. Not *completely*."

Estella hesitated in her forward crawl, casting a bewildered expression over her shoulder at her mother.

"I fell in love with your father's charisma- his presence- and I knew he was destined for great things... but as I once was, I knew I would never be worth his attention.

I prayed to the Dark Mother night and day until she at last 'blessed' me with an irresistible charm- a charm that worked only upon Simeon Malificus."

"So what's that mean?" Estella asked, looking increasingly agitated that they were devoting any time at all to discussing him, "What's that have to do with Davemport?"

"Perhaps nothing." Fianna replied distantly, "But I was blessed to irresistibly enamor a man destined for greatness, good or ill."

She looked away from Estella with a light sigh.

"Perhaps my daughter carries this charm as well."

The two were still for a moment, until Wolfgang's voice broke the silence between them.

"Do not linger. We know not how much time we have left."

Estella immediately turned to continue her crawl, Fianna following along behind.

"I trust your curiosity is now slaked." Dis concluded, his posture having relaxed a bit throughout his explanation.

Davem continued to stand before him, his entire body aching... but a great weight lifted off his shoulders.

"Yes, milord... yes it is"

Even if there was no longer anything he could do with regard to this problem he had come so far to remedy, he knew- at the very least- that he had not been *imagining* it all this time.

"Excellent." The old man nodded, smiling as he turned his back to leave Davem at the mercy of the demonic host.

"You know..." Davem called after him, "... what the worst part of all this is?" Dis hesitated and turned back to glance at the Lorekeeper, the younger man struggling to keep the whimper from his voice.

"It's having spent so much time believing there was something better out there... something amazing, something *meaningful*, just waiting to be found: Adventure, excitement, magic, true love... and then having all those years of hoping and dreaming thrown back in your face. It's realizing that the real world is nothing but living minute after minute of disappointment and heartbreak, wanting so badly to be something- to be a *hero*- but treated like a waste of space, ignored by some and hated by others until even *you* begin to hate yourself..."

"If you are attempting to curry my *favor*, I-" Dis began with amusement.

"No." Davem replied with a shake of his head, forcing a weak smile through his tears. "My life isn't worth begging for now... but last words are pointless unless somebody's around to hear them, right?"

Dis let out a soft, grinding chuckle as he turned away from him at last.

"Farewell, boy... I have a feeling I shall be seeing you again very, very soon."

Davem of the Davemport slowly settled down to his knees again, closing his eyes and bowing his head.

His arms fell limp at his sides, fingers slackening... allowing the Ring of Gyges to fall between them. It bounced on the ebony platform with a gentle "click" before rolling off the edge of it and plummeting through the air below.

Closing his eyes, he drew in a deep breath as he waited to be torn limb from limb. He struggled think of one peaceful memory to cling to... but was answered only by a hungry growl of his own stomach.

*Damn it... really?*

At that moment, the drooling cackles of the demons were cut off by a thunderous explosion from directly beneath Davem's platform, which itself was followed by a tremendous rush of searing heat...

...as the Ring of Gyges fell into an exhaust pipe from one of the Soul-smelting furnaces, located directly beneath Davem's platform.

Shielding his eyes, Davem leaned over to behold what had just happened, his jaw dropping in disbelief.

An enormous crater had been blasted out of the bottom of Tartarus' heart, a sickly sludge flowing out from the resulting wound.

There was a massive rumble as the world around him jerked and quaked... pained convulsions of the living corpse. The scaffolding- already terribly weakened by the destruction of one of the furnaces- immediately began to splinter and topple, more gouts of flame launching skyward with every additional furnace that crashed to the ground.

The web of wood and stone and metal fell away piece-by-piece, sending demons and souls everywhere as the heart continued to pulse madly.

Davem clutched the black wood platform as his own section of the scaffold began to sway. Trembling, he looked over the edge again... only to see a rush of roaring flames surging up to engulf him.

He let himself fall on his back on the platform, letting out a small, ironic sigh.

### Addendum

(The following letter was delivered to the Band of the Twisted Claw not long after the delivery of 'The Off-Season'.)

*To: Talia Tale - Bardmistress of the Band of the Twisted Claw*

*(Courtesy Copy: Thoren Grymm - Leader of the Band of the Twisted Claw, Adria Dubh - Swordmistress of the Band of the Twisted Claw, Gaia Vedeo - Keeper of the Band of the Twisted Claw, Raven Hawkwood - Logistician of the Band of the Twisted Claw, Percy - the Abjurer of the Twisted Claw, et al.)*

*I hope this letter finds you in good health and in good spirits... also that you can forgive a large stack of books being dropped unannounced on your doorstep. I suppose I could have sent them home to my family, but most of these manuscripts will be of far more use to **you**- and besides, some of these books and maps belong to Raven anyhow. I have included an address above so that a letter may be sent to them if you so choose.*

*Before I begin, I will have to apologize for what will no doubt be some amount of confusion regarding the volume delivered to you entitled 'The Off-Season'.*

*To clarify: I am still alive, having survived my journey South... but not without cost.*

*I am writing this letter to tender my resignation from the position of Lorekeeper that Talia so graciously bestowed upon me, and all that it entails pertaining to duties and responsibilities to the Band of the Twisted Claw.*

*I've seen a lot of the world and what it has to offer in the time since I left Bristol. It is a world that presents equal parts beauty, terror, and most important of all, chance.*

*It's the same sort of chance that brought the Band of the Twisted Claw together; everyone from Thoren to Gaia to Rose. The same sort of chance that gave Simeon the horrible power he wields today. The chance that allowed Bristol to be built, and allows it to stand to this day. Even the chance that allowed Tovias Farraday to experience love, happiness, and the opportunity to know what it's like to be a real hero just before the end of his days.*

*It's what allowed for all of those wonderful adventures I loved reading and writing about so very much.*

*But chance can never favor everyone.*

*As I write these words, I find myself in a position where returning to Bristol will be unlikely, but fortunately I was able to have a messenger deliver back to you the items I will no longer be needing. Do with them as you like; some are a bit personal, but perhaps they will give you some insight on why I left you to begin with. I regret to say that many of them are unfinished.*

*I wish you all the very best of fortune, and I know you will carry on as you ever have.*

*-'Davem'*

*Post-scriptum: The enclosed coins are for Percy the Abjurer; Unless my conversion is off, it should amount to about twenty shillings. You were right, Percy, and I am a man of my word.*

*Post-post-scriptum: I'm sorry.*