

(This is a story based on the Live-Action Roleplaying Game known as 'RenQuest' at the Bristol Renaissance Faire, circa 2010-11. 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. – Dave)

"The Story of Tovia Farraday: Book I"

A RenQuest Fanfiction, by David Manley.

Chapter 1 – Calling to the Night

Time can change a man, as a steady flow of water carves vast canyons, or as a gentle breeze wears great mountains to not but dust over the ages.

Up until a short time ago, I would have believed that such changes could only occur over grand spans of time: Months, years, even decades. It was nearly twenty years, after all, that made me what I was; a bitter husk barely resembling anything human.

But now, things have-

"You're still awake? Did ye not hear the church bell? T'is after midnight, sir!"

Tovia Farraday's body flinched sharply in surprise. His mind- only split-seconds before peaceful, focused on what he was doing- was now screeching with panic.

In his lap, a quill and a piece of parchment twisted around, smearing ink on his already dirty gray robe. The garment- held about his waist with a ragged hempen rope- was what his current companions had come to recognize as his main identifying feature. Otherwise, his messy brown hair, tan pants and dark shoes blended easily in with any other local vagrant. His body- pale and rendered painfully thin by years of less-than-filling meals- was mostly hidden by his attire.

The parchment on which he had been writing now crinkled against his thigh, he turned to address the one who had interrupted his thoughts.

"Sorry, Will. I couldn't sleep. The campfire was almost out, so I threw a few more twigs onto it to keep it going for a bit longer... is it keeping you awake?"

Will Spellworthy was just one of the numerous members of the Band of the Twisted Claw- a clan of gypsies who- although well-traveled- tended to make their home in and around the premises of the English port-town of Bristol.

Tovia had once- and on occasion, still- operated as something of an errand boy for them.

Over the past several months though, he had become something more.

"Nay, Tovia." The young- yet remarkably tall- boy replied, his normally bright and spirited voice tinged by exhaustion. "But I'd ask- if'n you don't mind my asking, sir- what might be troublin' you?"

It was true, what Tovia had said about his apparent insomnia; He'd had a great deal on his mind of late. Much of it had to do with why he had aligned himself with the Band in the first place... and that was something he dared not speak a word of, to Will or to anybody else.

When he'd first arrived in Bristol, he had made a certain acquaintanceship, one the Band would never approve of... even now that she had been long since lost.

"It's... something I don't like talking about." Tovia replied at last, the hand holding the parchment clenching a bit. "I thank you for your concern... You're certain nobody's going to be bothered by this? I can probably write just as well by the moonlight."

He was quick to turn the conversation away from what he was doing. Will was one of the Gypsies gifted with literacy, and as such, Tovia knew he'd do well to keep the letter from the younger man's sight.

"Nay, nay." Will smiled. "Just try to use only the twigs and little branches... Wouldn't like ta think what *he* might do if you used any of the *good* firewood, see?" he finished, turning and gesturing to one of the other Gypsy tents... a slightly larger one.

"Yes, I can imagine." Tovia mused... although his voice seemed to darken noticeably.

After an awkward, silent moment, Will forced a weak chuckle.

"Just be certain to put it out when you're through." He concluded, standing to depart for his tent.

"Of course." The robed man's lips twitched in an attempt at a smile as Will turned on his heel. "Good night,

Will."

"Sleep well, Tovias."

Tovias gave a slight sigh of mixed relief and frustration, the latter mostly at himself. He would have to be more careful as he wrote these letters, or he may as well post them on the Vardo for all the Band to see... let alone the infamous 'him'.

Slowly, after making certain he was again alone, Tovias turned the parchment back over in his hand. He was thankful to see he hadn't written enough to smear it too terribly.

Lifting his ink pen, he continued.

-changed somewhat.

In the brief time that I have spent with the Band of the Twisted Claw, the pitiful, scrounging parasite has all but disappeared. In his place, an accomplished magician has risen from the gypsy ranks; one with the power to banish both living and unnatural darkness. Under the right circumstances, even the ambitions of the Gods themselves can be turned aside through his great- and frankly, inexplicable- power.

I have become more than I ever believed possible... even before the tragedy of my youth.

There is a price I have paid in exchange for this newfound strength, this new identity. As with any other poor soul who should happen to be 'saved' by the Band, I find myself caught up in the daily minutiae of it all: The petty rivalry betwixt the proud Order and the mischievous Tribe, the battle against the Disciples Draconian who- in another life and under other circumstances- might have been dear friends and allies... but who, now, are mere shadows of what they once must have been.

Speaking of whom, of late the 'Draco Disciples' have added a new member to their ranks by the name of Scarlett O'Hemlock. She has a strange manner about her I'm not certain I can trust, even by Draco standards. Ruby Nightshade told me that Scarlett has a talent for dumbfounding the minds of men. Through my own experience I must say that this ability is-

Tovias' mind slowed, drifting from its train of thought. His eyes hazily left the parchment on which he was writing, and looked to crackling flames just beyond. He remembered those piercing eyes staring into his... he couldn't look into them for long. If he had to compare her to anyone, perhaps he might liken her to the Italian Gypsy, Cyanne de Wolfe, if she took on a more wicked façade.

With a slight shiver, he continued to write.

-undoubtedly effective.

But I digress.

One by one the gypsies- whom I once thought to be mere puppets, slaves and clowns with no shortage of flaws and foibles- have proven more capable than I could have believed; From Vashta's skills as a healer to Adria's prowess with a blade, from Will's ability to communicate with wild beasts to Yvonna's natural charisma in dealing with the scum that dwells in the local pubs... I misjudged them all.

At the very apex stands Keeper Gaia Vedeia and her new unlikely apprentice.

"Tovias!"

"Ah!" Tovias couldn't restrain a startled little cry; This time, the voice was right beside his ear.

It was a piercing female whisper, one more whimsical than the night's darkness might generally allow.

"Rose Peregrine! Good Gods, don't do that." Tovias gasped, clutching the paper to his chest (this time mussing the words up at least slightly).

"Oh, I'm sorry..." The lovely, golden-haired gypsy looked away, then back into his eyes with the countenance of a wounded fawn.

Tovias hated that expression. It made it impossible for one to stay angry with her, regardless of the chaos she may cause. However, since she had inherited supernatural abilities as a 'Keeper' (much like her mistress, Gaia Vedeia), the gypsies' tolerance of her had paid off in spades..

"Why are you awake? And why are you tending the campfire? It's bedtime. You can just sort of... let it go out. We do not usually keep it going while we are sleeping."

"I'm using it." Tovias replied, fumbling a bit.

Tovias had never known anyone quite like Rose. Despite her penchant for attracting danger, her poverty and her lacking judgment, she was beautiful, thoughtful and sweet; very much the "heart" of the Band.

"What are you using it *for*?" She persisted.

Tovias was more unsettled than ever. If things kept going as they had been, soon he'd have Grease Lugnut and the Barbarians trying to squeeze around the crackling embers with him.

"I'm writing a note." He answered at last. "For myself. It might end up being a spell, I... I'm not sure yet."

The words in his letter hadn't been self-gratifying embellishment. Not entirely. He had, in fact, become a significant force within the Band- one that couldn't be brushed off as another mere traveler or adventurer:

He had become a Champion- a Mage Champion specifically.

"Oh! Let me see! Let me-!"

Tovias' eyes widened as she reached out for the note.

Keepers possessed an uncanny ability to assimilate absolute knowledge from anything or anyone they touched. Rose's gift- though unpolished- was particularly potent. Perhaps she couldn't read, but being who she was, if she so much as brushed a fingertip against it the parchment-

"No!" Tovias let out a hiss of his own, louder and more cross than he'd intended. He'd actually raised his hand to swat at hers, but restrained himself just barely.

Rose merely stared at him with that same doe-eyed expression as before, although there was a slight quiver at her lower lip this time.

"I'm sorry, Rose. I didn't mean to-... to do that." He said. He hadn't yelled, struck at her or really done *anything*. He just knew he needed to apologize. "I just... I'm sorry, I can't focus... I had waited for nightfall so I could have a bit of peace and-"

"Well, I beg your pardon." She interrupted, standing and gathering the skirts of her nightclothes in her delicate fingers. "Fine then, do whatever it is you're doing. I don't mind."

"I didn't mean-!" Tovias began; He could never have allowed her to see or even *touch* the letter, but the last thing he wished to do was alienate himself with any member of the Band, now that he'd garnered such a reputation. Rose was a golden child among them (quite literally, her hair taken into account). Before he could say another word, she had rushed back into her tent.

Tovias' brow creased, before his shoulders slumped in defeat.

"She'll probably forget all about this in the morning." He softly reassured himself before turning back to the campfire.

That was very likely what would probably happen.

At this, he returned to his writing.

There is, however, one man amongst these Gypsies... you knew him all too well, no doubt.

The man who refuses outright to tell others of his past while he himself seems to possess absolute omniscience with regard to the comings and goings of all who cross his path.

The man who commands a veritable army of deceptively powerful misfits.

The man who now possesses Gods-only-know how many dangerous artifacts.

The man who perpetuates the war that has taken so much from everyone involved...

The man who took you away from me...

He is the man who stands at the head of the Band of the Twisted Claw.

Thoren Grymm.

Tovias stared intently at the words for a very, very long time. When his inkpen moved again, it was almost as though he wasn't entirely aware of it until a few words into the next sentence;

With the Keepers' gifts, the Lunar Tribe's knowledge of nature and the occult, the Order of the Sun's alchemical and martial skills, their combined numbers and power and loyalty... With that under my command, I could with the greatest of ease hunt down every last bloodthirsty savage and gold-hungry noble... and I would do to them what was done to me-

This time, he heard it- the rustle of cloth from one of the tents not far from the campfire.

He had plenty of time to put the parchment aside before turning to smile pleasantly at the form behind him.

He'd watched as each member of the Band had entered his or her tent. He knew who it was even before she spoke.

"Tovias."

"I'm sorry, Mistress Sydney." He replied in a soft whisper, "I was working on something... Did I wake you?" His body shuffled a bit where he sat in an effort to discreetly cover the facedown parchment.

"No." The dark-haired, world-weary Lunar Tribe wizardress- Sydney Dove- sighed quietly, taking a seat beside him. Perhaps she'd taken his slight movement as an invitation. "I just have something on my mind."

"Well... would you care to discuss it?" He pursued, but she shook her head.

"You first, Tovias."

Tovias swallowed.

"...I don't-?"

"Tovias. You may be Order of the Sun, but I taught you everything you know about the fundamentals of Magic... and those basics should *never* have been enough to best a bloody God." She stared unyieldingly at him, but he couldn't return her gaze for very long. It put him ill at ease, even from the first time they'd met.

She was a hard woman to know, and even harder to get along with. However, she had seen a certain potential in Tovias where most others had seen not but another pair of hands and a fragile back unsuited for manual labor.

"Is that what troubles you?" He asked. "My abilities? I assure you, Mistress, I'm every bit as in the dark as-"

"No, Tovias." Sydney replied. "I want to know why *you* of all people would have trouble sleeping. After all you've accomplished..."

"Mistress, my troubles are not- I insist-"

"I am certain you do. You do this all the time; when something is truly troubling you, you go out of your way to draw attention everywhere but toward yourself." Sydney replied, turning her eyes to the flames before them. "And for that matter, I am *not* some old woman. My hearing is sharp enough; I heard you speaking with Will and with Rose... What did you *do* to Rose, exactly?"

"I didn't do anything. She just got a bit grabby over this, and I-..." He began to reach for the parchment, but froze, inwardly cursing.

"...And what is that?"

"It's..."

He picked it up slightly, staring at its blank side.

"You haven't scribed a spell since your first assignment in Mage Training. Since then, you've been more inclined toward somatic and implematic spells." Sydney said flatly.

The color drained from his face.

"You're going to show me that note, Tovias, or I'll personally have you made Yvonna's assistant on the Pub Crawl for the next month."

He bit his lip. He wouldn't put it past her to do something of the sort. The last thing he wanted to do was subject himself to the whims of the inebriated madmen and women about Bristol.

"...I'll tell you. But it's between us, do you understand?"

"That depends on what it is."

Tovias winced at her response, but shook his head. It was better than nothing.

"I haven't told anyone else, Sydney... who my family was, and that... that they were murdered."

"So?" Sydney asked to Tovias' chagrin.

"I know it's not an *original* story," Tovias gave her a look which she didn't seem to notice, or perhaps didn't acknowledge seeing. "... I lost a lot in that attack, and every day since then; I lost more than a lot of people could understand."

"Maybe if you explained it, we could." Sydney stated. "Yet, you never talk about yourself; Where did you come from? Who *was* your family? Why is it that even after all you've done, you cannot sleep peacefully, soundly... cannot open up to us?"

"Sydney."

For a moment, the strangest feeling passed through his mind, one he couldn't place... but it was shunted aside by the impulse to keep the note hidden.

"I'll... tell the Band. I'll tell them of my family when-"

"Tomorrow. Tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow night. All right." He agreed with a hint of exasperation in his voice.

With that, Sydney stood smoothly to her feet. With a sweeping turn- her skirts brushing his shoulder a bit- she walked back to her tent, knelt, and crawled back inside.

Tovias was left to stare after her, her words leaving a tense sensation in his chest.

"Not to worry..." He thought aloud, but quietly. "Talia Tale herself considers me a passable Bard... I'll think of something to tell them by tomorrow night. Just have to busy myself with chores and errands until then."

He nodded to himself, turning the parchment once more.

-suffice it to say that they lived as filthy scavengers, and I would see to it the Twisted Claw put them down in a manner befitting such.

*But I am not in command of the Twisted Claw, this potentially lethal force.
Thoren is.
He is a man who the Gypsies follow unfailingly... and yet, a man I don't think I will ever find it in myself to
forgive.
Gods help me if the Band ever discovered... if they knew...*

*But aside from even that, something else troubles me. It is this above all else that keeps me awake nights
and distracted all through the daylight hours.
It is a something I hesitate to contemplate for the sheer scope of it.
Ever since my adventures in Bristol, I have been privy to the strangest phenomenon: I call them Echoes of
the Past - Experiences I have lived already, happening all around me, that no one else seems to witness-*

A sound.

Then nothing.

*-but as I see them, I am not the man living those memories, but others. Perhaps they are other Lightbringers
in other similar realities, exposed by the magical energies at play in this village. I would think that my powers have
begun to take their toll on my mind- that I would do best to abandon them... but for one thing.*

Another sound. Tovias could not ignore it this time. Gripping the piece of parchment, he stumbled to his feet, his gaze scanning over the forest all around the camp.

Footsteps. Swift. Light.

Only two people that he knew of could make footsteps like those, and one of them was fast asleep in her tent, leaving-

"Estella." He called out into the air in a voice barely above a whisper (After Sydney's remark, he wasn't about to speak any louder than that).

The footsteps ceased. A gentle breeze crept over the camp in the resulting silence.

The relationship between Tovias and Estella Foxglove was... strange. Although she was a member of the Draco Disciples- a sect of Tiamat Worshipers currently bent on the destruction of the Band- she was treated as a brat and a nuisance by the gypsies whenever they were graced by her presence. The same was true of Tovias whenever he encountered the Draco Disciples en-masse. Ruby Nightshade, Thomas Wisseu and Scarlett O'Hemlock seemed to look upon him with the appropriate condescending manner the rivalry of their groups dictated (perhaps this had changed a bit after his ascension to Champion, but not in any meaningful way).

Tovias never took issue with Estella, though. She'd been thrust into a life not *altogether* of her choosing, as he had. She had adapted, as he had. She probably didn't completely agree with- or even completely *care* about- her 'family's' actions and aims. Estella was prone to straying from the other Disciples to suit her own devices... again, much like himself.

Whenever they met- which was surprisingly often- he regarded her with courtesy, unless it was some manner of emergency. For her part, she tended to treat him as a child would a neglected pet, simply letting him wander about with passing amusement.

"Don't make me raise the alarm, Estella; Odds are the Band would kill us *both* for spoiling their rest." He said, his voice never leaving that hushed volume as he swayed on his feet (He'd been sitting for too long; His legs felt numb). Slowly, he walked to the edge of the camp clearing, leaning his back against a tree and tilting his head to face toward the forest." What is it you want?"

"You were none too shabby, Tovias..." The girl replied. He could hear the smirk on her face as she (probably) leaned on the opposite side of the tree, "... back at the graveyard."

She- as Sydney had before her- referred to the events of only a week or so ago... when Tovias had singlehandedly succeeded in the seemingly impossible task of banishing Loki Skywalker- Child of Giants and the Nordic God of Chaos.

"Someone had to lead the charge." Tovias replied, pride struggling to tear down his wall of modesty. "It just turned out I was holding the right tool for the job."

"Instead of any of *us*; Your Soothsayer, Vedeia, seemed intent on you being the one to hold the Crosier of Saint Patrick- the Chaos God's bane." Estella continued. "And no wonder. You never flinched. One might say you're either brave, or very stupid."

"I like to believe it's a little of each. Most do." This was true enough, but she only chuckled.

"Nay." She answered. "My Mistress would disagree. She could hear it in your voice then... She *knows* what gives you your strength, even if you don't yet. She has great plans for you."

Tovias bit his lower lip.

"I don't care what Ruby thinks." He answered. "If you came here to congratulate me, then thank you. If you came here to recruit me, the answer is 'no', as it has ever been. I have my own affairs to settle. I don't know why you would risk getting caught by the Band for it either way, but-"

"Who ever said I was speaking of *Ruby Nightshade*?"

His voice died immediately.

"I'm speaking of *my* Mistress... and *yours*."

After that startled moment, the mage champion shook his head and glared back toward where she stood.

"Estella, what do you mean? Who are you talking about? Tiamat?"

At last, Tovias swept his way around the trunk of the tree he was leaning against... and his jaw slackened.

What he had expected to see was the smirking countenance of the girl, perhaps pointing her broken wand or even a dagger in his direction.

Indeed, what he saw was Estella, only... not Estella at all.

She wore similar clothing, possessed a similar posture, but her form was three, perhaps five years the elder of the girl he was familiar with (the swell resulting from a tightly laced bodice made that much clear). For that matter, her body seemed to be nothing more than that of a ghost; Through her figure, he could see the dark tree line which was barely illuminated by the tiny fire at the camp.

"Estella... what...?" Tovias fumbled in a breathless whisper.

"Time, Tovias. In time."

With that, the image faded into the night air, Tovias raising a hand in a vain attempt to catch her before she disappeared into the ether.

He couldn't have known how long he stood there staring into the night, but by the time he had finished, the campfire had nearly died. Silently he turned, resting against the tree once again. This time, however, he allowed his body to slump to the ground.

Looking back at the letter- now smudged almost beyond recognition, he took up his quill one last time. It didn't matter if he couldn't read it.

It would be burned upon completion anyway.

*I hear a voice- **your** voice- reaching through the now thin membrane between this world and the worlds that might have been- or may yet be still.*

*I **cannot** be mad, my visions **must** be real.*

In some world, some time, some way, you must still live.

A single teardrop splashed upon the parchment.

*I **will** find you.*

I swear it.

Chapter 2 – Gypsy Skillet

Tovias did not sleep well for the remainder of the night (which was par for the course, really, but now he had new reasons). Thoughts of both the explanation he would have to give the *coming* night, as well as the ghostly visit of Estella-some-future-hence haunted his waking and dreaming hours until the sun finally rose again. Already, he could hear the rustling and chatter of the gypsies outside of his tent.

For a moment, he had panicked at the notion that he may have forgotten to burn his last letter, but it didn't take long for him to remember the smell of its ashes, and the thought that he would have to wash the smeared ink from his robes as he'd incinerated it.

Part of him didn't really understand why he still wrote the damned things at all. All this nightly ritual of his did was endanger the one true secret he had. He wanted to think they helped him get his thoughts in order, helped grant him some sort of comfort... perhaps that in some metaphysical way *she* could see his writings, his progress... perhaps even bless him from wherever she'd ended up.

"Tovias!" He heard a familiar male voice outside just before the flaps of his tent rustled, and an inquisitive head poked in. "I hope you're decent; It's time to get moving. The Bristol Faire won't be around forever, and there's work to be done."

"Yes, right then, I hear you." Tovias replied in a groan, "Have a bit of mercy, Raven. You're a member of the Lunar Tribe anyway. Why should *you* have to wake me?"

It was Raven Hawkwood; one of Thoren's closer allies among the Band, probably second only to the Gypsy Leader's half-sister, Talia Tale.

"Well, my apologies, Tovias, but it's either I or Adria Dubh; I should think a swordmistress wouldn't be quite as gentle." The other man mused before giving him a nod, confident that Tovias was up and on his way.

The mage sighed, kicking away his shabby blanket and sitting up. He could barely remember what it was like to sleep in a proper bed anymore...

That had been twenty years ago.

Climbing out of his tent, he could already see most of the gypsies out and about. Some were opening the Vardo, others waking up stragglers as Raven had been doing, while the rest spoke among themselves about things he couldn't hear or had no interest in.

He turned back to his tent and began the reluctant task of taking it down and rolling it up... he could have used just one more hour of sleep.

He stood up again with a heavy sigh, but at that moment, he felt a hand on his back. It delivered a sound, playful shove, making him stagger in a comical fashion before he spun on his foot.

It was Sydney who had pushed him, and was now looking away as though nothing had happened. She sauntered past him, arms folding as she walked.

"Remember, Tovias; Tonight." She called over her shoulder before joining Will Spellworthy and his sister Wanda in their efforts at getting breakfast prepared.

"Of course." Tovias mouthed after her, but squeaked as he was pushed over by another pair of hands. This time he fell to the ground amid the remnants of his tent. "Gah!"

Rolling over, he saw the Band's young cutpurse, Lillith Sparrow, standing over him with a feeble attempt at an innocent expression.

"Lillith, Damn it..."

"What? I thought everyone was doing it." She explained with a guiltless shrug, nodding sideways toward Sydney. "Some sort of game, I thought."

"Well, it isn't." Tovias replied curtly, getting back on all fours before staggering to his feet. "I'll explain it tonight at camp... do you not have something better to do?"

"Not really."

"Typical." He sighed, picking up the rolled bundle that was his tent, and dropping it in a pile with the others. He was startled by a piece of parchment reaching into his view. Turning, he could make out what appeared to be an extensive 'To-Do' list which Lillith now held out to him.

"I just thought you might want a leg-up on picking today's chores." The young thief offered. "Get your turn before anyone gets a look at them." She added with a mischievous smile.

"That's uncharacteristically generous of you." Tovias replied, quirking a brow.

"Well, what you did with the Crosier at the graveyard was no small feat." She responded. "I just wish to give credit where it is due."

"I'm getting that a great deal recently, but it wasn't- ... It's fine, Lillith. You don't have to do this. It wouldn't be fair to-"

"Just take it, Tovias." Lillith insisted, "Besides, I may've taken some of the easier chores for myself already." She added with a smile, rolling up the list and jabbing it lightly into his chest until he accepted it.

With a sigh, Tovias unrolled the parchment and looked it over.

His eyes widened a bit as his eyes caught one entry in particular.

"'A Missive from Ruby'? As in 'Ruby Nightshade'? As in 'The Draco Disciple' Ruby Nightshade?"

"Don't ask me." Lillith shrugged before turning on her heel and wandering away.

He watched her leave before yet another hand nudged him in the back. He glanced over to the just-as-tall-but-significantly-better-toned form of Grease the Barbarian.

"You're going to gaol, ya keep lookin' at her like that, Tovias."

"Don't start with me this morning, Grease." The mage rolled his eyes. "I did *not* sleep well last night, and this is the *last* thing I need."

While Tovias was a mage- the Barbarians possessing a dislike for that sort in general- he was also easily teased; a fact they consistently took immense pleasure in.

"You still owe the Band some time in the sword-trainer's pit." Grease returned, folding his arms chidingly. "You've been going out of your way to avoid it long enough."

"Grease, did you *not* see me banish chaos from the world a little while ago? With magic, and *not*- might I add- with a sword?"

"Might be a time when your magic isn't an option, Tovias. I admit you're good at what you do, but we don't need you gettin' yourself killed when some clever bastard takes your magic away."

That hadn't been a notion Tovias had ever considered. From the first time he'd used it, his magic had felt like a part of him- like an extension of his body... even though his power had not even manifested until only a year ago.

"Grease, I swear that soon enough that I'll talk to Lady Adria. She will put me through the gauntlet, I'm *certain*."

"You still call her 'Lady'. That's funny."

"It's an old habit." Tovias retorted. "She said the same thing though... right before belching."

"Sounds about right." Grease chuckled, turning and walking off to meet with the other barbarians.

Tovias shook his head, inspecting the list of duties for the day- both mundane (moving the Order's Mongering Cart) and unique (whatever it was that Ruby wanted... thought it was strange; For being mortal enemies, the Disciples felt entitled to call upon Thoren and his Band to handle their errands when it suited them... they must have been seriously lacking in manpower). After picking a few he was confident he could handle- including Ruby's, whatever it was- he walked to the Vardo where Andra and Deirdre Ibis had just finished their preparations.

It was the two of them- the Ibis Sisters, the Vardo Girls, or whatever you please- that kept track of the Band's inventory, monetary accounts and its full roster for both the Order of the Sun and Lunar Tribe; no surprise either sister was from an opposite faction, just to keep things fair.

"Good morrow, Tovias." Deirdre said with a cordial smile. Andra gave him a simple nod, albeit with a smile as well.

"Good morrow, M'ladies." He replied, offering the parchment.

"How did you get this?" Deirdre asked, genuinely curious.

"A little bird brought it to me." Tovias chuckled. "But I would like to get started presently." As he spoke, he glanced around the camp once more, starting a bit as his eyes met Sydney's which were staring right back at him.

"...I've got a busy evening planned."

Chapter 3 – Happy Anniversary

Tovias' gait was a leisurely one as he made his way from the gypsy Vardo into the Bristol city proper. Already, the shops were open and peddling their wares, street performers hoping to pick up whatever scraps remained from the Fairegoers' money purses.

It would be some time before the Vardo was actually allowed to enter the city gates. The nobles had been informed well in advance of the gypsy presence in Bristol, and despite the efforts of the Band to keep the city safe from everything from Dragons to Gods, their (only partially warranted) reputation as thieves and freeloaders endured. As a result the wagons were forced to wait outside the city wall at night, and were only allowed entry when there were enough guards awake to keep a proper eye on them.

To the gypsies, it was a pointless waste of time to move the Vardo out of the city every night just so they could cart it back to the same place every morning. Unfortunately it wasn't up to them, but to the nobles who would have had them banned from entry entirely. Seeing as their efforts at doing so continually and mysteriously failed, they met the gypsies halfway by ordering them to leave during the nighttime. That way, the Band wouldn't be tempted to heist every last coin from the populace mid-slumber.

It was only through convenient connections that the Band was able to enter Bristol to begin with:

Mistress Thomasina de Paris- a most stately and good-natured dwarf- had been presented by French Royalty as a gift to Queen Elizabeth herself. In her time as a member of the nobility, she had incidentally become familiar with the Band and with gypsykind in general. Perhaps they appealed to her own humble beginnings. She loyally served the queen, yet at the same time she sympathized with the Band's cause. Her unassuming stature made it extremely easy for her to sweep under the rug certain missives that might prove inconvenient to the Band and its endeavors.

Further, one of the aspiring nobles of Bristol- Festivus Merrier- a jolly gentleman with what some might call 'delightfully questionable values', was also a Band sympathizer, and a rather wealthy one at that. It was thanks to his

money and influence that the Vardo had a place within the city in the daylight hours; near the center, some distance beyond the city square¹.

Passing the Town Square Public House, Tovias hesitated.

Just before him, there lay a grassy glade filled with sturdy wooden benches and large bushes which, themselves, obscured tiny pixie domiciles (though in this festive time, the small fay folk had more important things to do than stay indoors). At the center of the pixie gardens, there stood a large, shady tree.

It was all so familiar to him, and yet somehow so very different from that day...
...from that moment when-

"You, there."

For an instant, the mage's heart ceased to beat in his chest. Slowly, he turned westward.

The voice was all too familiar to him.

All at once, there they stood.

There *she* stood.

Dark. Imposing. Oozing with a regal malevolence that Tovias had only seen in his life once before:

It was the Draco Disciples in all their former glory... but foremost of all, their once great and proud commander...

Lady Katherine Tso.

"You there... urchin." He heard her speak again, catching a glimpse of those breathtaking features beyond the fan she carried. Yet, her eyes were not upon his, but cast just beyond him at the level of his thigh. He turned to follow her gaze, already knowing what he would see.

Instantly, his eyes began to mist over with a sadness he could not restrain.

There, cringing, shivering even in the warm sunlight... he saw *himself*; Tovias Farraday, a mere one year younger. His knees were drawn against his chest, a bit of discarded potato which he had been voraciously devouring clutched in his hands. Tovias could remember it having been *days* since his last sad excuse for a meal, and how absolutely sublime the dirty thing had felt in the pit of his empty stomach.

He watched his younger self, watched his tired eyes grow wide with awe, with fear... and with admiration.

Through the days and weeks and months, he could still feel the woman's presence.

"What is it you are *doing* over there?" She asked, her voice somehow synthesizing perfectly tones of indignation and amusement. It made his past self shiver, and even now he couldn't repress a gentle flinch. He would watch himself stumble over words, to try in vain to be something- *anything* other than what he was.

"It is..." He began, "It is... my endeavor at a performance, m'lady. Much like others about this lovely faire..."

"Hm." She mumbled, a look of distaste passing over her refined features. "I've no need for this mockery of extravagance, this gathering of bottom-feeders... but you call this display of yours a *performance*?"

"I- Indeed, m'lady." The younger Tovias replied in a stammer, his eyes quite unable to escape hers. "It is-..."

"He's no different from the rest of the gutter rats." Exclaimed a man seated just to her right. "What say we put him out of his misery? Get some practice before we settle matters with the Claw?"

The elder Tovias balled his right hand into a fist. If this encounter were to occur again this day, he would shuffle the man loose his mortal coil just as easily... but as he watched, just as she had then, Lady Katherine raised a pale-skinned hand.

"True, perhaps, but I do feel that *somewhere* in that ratty robe, dirty skin and louse-ridden hair, there may yet be something worth hearing from this vermin... he makes for a unique change of pace from the usual fools and jesters in this sad little city." All the while, her eyes remained locked upon Tovias'.

"So tell me, 'performer'; what is the *moral* of your little play?"

"I... I don't know that, m'lady." The younger Tovias replied shakily. "What sort of 'lesson' is there in a life like mine? I did only as my family wished, and my family did only as came naturally to them... and our reward? That they should be *slaughtered* like cattle, and their only surviving son lives off of *scraps*, hoping for pity where there is none.

¹ Of course, his motives for this would prove *not* to be in the Band's best interests...

Wishing for a miracle that will never come. My lady, I look to these people, to this *place* and I... I see no moral. No justice. I see only a prison painted with lies."

His eyes- Their eyes- stared into hers. Lost.

"I see only the life I wish I had again."

Lady Tso raised an eyebrow, and then began to laugh loudly. After a second or two, her entourage joined in the merriment at his apparent expense. Although the younger Tovias watched with anger beginning to surge inside him, the elder watched with a growing smile.

The ravishing woman raised a hand once more, her haughty smirk seeming to soften, to the younger Tovias' astonishment. It was an expression the elder had come to believe she showed to very few. Even if it wasn't completely earnest, it was rare.

"What is your name, performer?"

"Tovias Farraday, m'lady." Both responded, the younger in a stammer and the elder in a whisper.

"Know you how to read and write?"

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

One of her entourage shouted at him, cutting him off in the middle of his explanation;

"An educated vagrant. How novel."

Tovias looked away, his face a deep red as the Draco Disciples again shared yet another laugh. Again, though, he heard them go silent at her bidding.

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

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

As he watched, the vision disappeared slowly as would the light from a dying man's eyes, leaving him alone in the shade of the garden.

They would never meet again.

Tovias' hand fell weakly to his side, flicking open his leather satchel. Retrieving from it the missive he'd received from the Vardo, he departed, his head bowed as though in reverence under the weight of a thousand-thousand thoughts.

Chapter 4 – Eye of Newt, Cameo of Witch

- Earlier, at the Vardo -

"It's from Ruby Nightshade." Dierdre explained as she handed Tovias the sealed letter through the Vardo window.

"So I'd assumed." The mage replied as he accepted it. "Am I delivering this to anyone in particular, or...?"

"It's for *us*. The Band." Andra stated, her tone more curt than usual. He wasn't entirely sure if this was because she was 'Lunar' and he, 'Order'. Perhaps it was simply due to the Draco Disciple's involvement in the subject matter.

"So I should just...?" He persisted, beginning to slide his finger between the flaps of parchment held together by an intricate wax seal. "Has Thoren seen this yet?"

Tovias didn't need the sisters' expressions of disapproval to realize it was a stupid thing to ask, considering the aforementioned seal.

"...Okay, *why* has Thoren not seen this? He'd have to have known it was here to put it on the list of chores, and you'd think after the incident with the Banshee Comb, he would want to-

The two girls simply shrugged (simultaneously, to Tovias' mild amusement) before going back to their business. Without another word, Tovias slipped his finger along the flaps, breaking the seal and unfolding the letter.

May the illustrious Band of the Twisted Claw see fit to send one of its esteemed representatives to the Rhetshire Estate at the intersection of High Street, Shoplatch Lane, and St. John's Crossing, at the hour of Ten and Fifteen, that we may remain in one another's good graces.

- Ruby Nightshade

He could sense the sarcasm in her words just by reading them.

- Present -

Tovias stared up at the large, gated estate before him, the place foreboding even when surrounded by houses dressed for the Faire. This mansion showed no regard for the festivities. Gnarled trees decked its expanse of dying grass, and the house itself was a tall gray monolith whose facade was covered in ivy.

"The Rhettsire Estate... recently belonging to the late Butler Rhettsire." He said to himself, wondering how a place like this could have snuck into the middle of the brightly appointed marketplace. However, as he began to reach for the gate latch, a voice interrupted his thoughts.

"I wouldn't recommend it, Tovias."

The mage literally jumped, startled by the sudden presence at his side. Although he was very powerful, there were still things he couldn't quite get used to.

One of these was the sudden, stealthy appearance of witches.

The Normyl sisters- as irony traditionally dictates- were anything but 'normal'. Most often when seen together, they were three² wicked crones, scheming and plotting endless magical mischief. However, more than one Tovias had seen them squabble and shout like any other trio of sisters. They were almost endearing in that way.

Each was not without her own... memorable quality.

The youngest, Abigail, was troublesome, crude and- when she could manage it- outright cruel. One might call her the witches' answer to Lillith Sparrow or Estella Foxglove. She caused her sisters- and indeed, the people of Bristol at large- no end of trouble. She'd even been a thorn in the side of the Band of the Twisted Claw and the Draco Disciples at times in her young, unnatural life.

One of the most frequent targets of Abigail's abuse was her older sister, Merriweather Normyl. She was a good-natured and well-meaning witch- at least, to her sisters- but less than effective when it came to dealing with the general public. She wasn't as deceitful as Abigail or as clever as Gertrude, which made it harder for her to keep it secret that she was, in fact, a witch. Needless to say, she had been burned at the stake and subsequently revived more than once (on occasion no thanks to Abby...)

The duty of keeping Abigail and Merriweather in line fell squarely on the hunched shoulders of the eldest Normyl Sister, Gertrude. As the most competent and even-tempered, she often found herself cleaning up the messes her sisters left in their wake (Thanks to the aforementioned burnings and raisings from the dead, Gertrude had more than once been forced to drug the Bristol Water Supply with Herbs of Forgetfulness.) Unfortunately, as she was responsible for repairing such collateral damage, she was oftentimes the busiest and- as such- the hardest to find.

Tovias' own dealings with the witches was limited, but memorable. Although even the most magically well-versed of the Band looked warily down upon the witches, it was Thoren's opinion that the trio should be kept in close proximity. In this way, the Band could avail themselves of the Witch's herbs and knowledge and- should they start trouble- they could be promptly stopped, if necessary.

As such, in the time before he had taken up the Crosier and earned his title as Protector of the Ancients, Raven, Talia and Sydney had often sent Tovias to do daily chores for the Normyl sisters. These included but were not limited to chopping wood, collecting herbs from the garden and the like.

On occasion, he was given one additional task whenever it was Gertrude in charge of delegating his chores.

- Weeks Ago -

"And so, the young sailor pursued the dark ship he saw in his vision, so desperate was he to warn his poor family and his town of the coming danger- of the horrible pirates that infested it like a plague."

Tovias nodded, listening intently as he tossed a moth-ridden bedsheet over a laundry line just outside the witch's cottage. Were he not so involved in the story, he might have wondered what had become of the *moths*...

"The pirates were the most wicked sort: Murderers, burglars, rapists and the like. The sailor was quite convinced that they were on their way to his home town. He worked as hard as he could to close the distance between himself and them, hoping to overtake them and warn his poor wife and daughter what lived there before the dark ship arrived. He traveled day and night, eating not but the raw fish and gulls he could catch, drinking not but the salty seawater, sleeping not, and thinking only of his home... and the ruin that would become of it should he reach it even a minute too late."

² This was before Mildred, Ursula or Beatrix had been introduced to the public. They are a far more prolific family than one might have assumed. Perhaps they are not a direct 'family', merely a coven that sees itself as such.

"I thought seawater wasn't fit for drinking... and gulls not fit for eating." Tovias said, shuddering slightly. "Particularly raw..."

"I rather enjoy raw animals." Abigail chimed in. "I'm sure you would too, if you tried one."

"Right you are, Tovias." Gertrude nodded to him, though shooting a glare over at her sister. "With every passing day of food that weren't meant for human stomachs, water that were draining him instead of refreshing him and a lack of any sleep 'till, the sailor started to take leave of his senses. All he knew was that he had to get back home.

When at last he did, it were the middle of the night. The sky was black as chimney soot, and all he could see was the silhouettes of each house. He crept into his own home, seeing no sign of ships, nor hearing any screams of pain or panic. But as he ascended the stairs, he saw the door to his daughter's room was wide open. Quiet as you please, he snuck over and peeked inside. He saw his beloved daughter laying asleep, her breast rising and falling with her breath... but at her bedside stood a dark figure reaching down for her."

Tovias had by that point forgotten about the laundry, so engrossed in the story until Gertrude ceased in the telling. At a firm glare, he remembered himself, and resumed his task.

"The sailor didn't hesitate. With a howl of rage he lunged, grabbing the figure by the shoulders. His daughter awakened to the sound of the intruder's head striking the wall over and over and over again. But when he finally regained what of his senses his sickly body could, he heard the sound of his daughter shrieking. 'Mother! Mother, no! Wake up!' he heard her plead... and indeed, as he looked down, he saw not the body of a dread-pirate, but his poor wife- the last lights leaving her tear-stricken eyes."

"Oh, God..." Tovias whispered, a hand slowly coming to clasp over his mouth.

"The sailor didn't know what to do. His daughter didn't recognize the unkempt shell he'd become, and even if she had, what would she think of him now that he'd murdered her mother, his wife? She ran from the house and he could only follow, trying in pitiful wimpers to explain himself. It was too late though, as all the townsfolk had been awakened by the panicked screams in their quiet little hamlet.

Soon the whole of the city and its local law was chasing him. He ran to the docks- back to his ship- intent on escape... but as he pushed away from the dock, what did he see but the dark ship on the horizon."

Tovias' eyes narrowed as he threw another sheet over the line.

"At that moment, the sailor understood: the ship wasn't there for his family or his town. It had never wanted them. There was only one soul it had meant to claim all along: his. He was now as they were- one of the damned."

The mage stared at her for several long, quiet moments in the story's aftermath until Merriweather broke the silence.

"I should like to go on a ship sometime."

"Well?" Gertrude said, looking at Tovias expectantly.

Whenever Gertrude gave Tovias a story of this sort, Gertrude would always ask him for a moral to go with it. However, these morals were rarely ever easy to pin down, given the ambiguous nature of the tales she tended to spin. In this situation, he had to make a good deal of assumptions, such as the sailor's morals prior to his encounter with the ship, whether the ship was real or just a figment of his imagination and whether or not that detail even mattered.

More often than not, it required a good deal of personal introspection.

"Well... I am not sure *what* to say. 'Slow and steady wins the race' isn't it, or else the ship would have gotten there first, were it real after all. 'He who hesitates is lost' isn't it either, since if he'd taken time to care for himself properly he might have recognized his family when he saw them. 'Look before you leap', no. He tried to look, but because of earlier circumstances, his vision and his mind were dulled."

The mage finally shook his head with a light sigh.

"The best I can think of is 'The road to hell is paved with good intentions', but ... perhaps no matter what path one chooses, there is no escaping one's destiny."

"That last one will suffice." Gertrude shrugged, citing the mage's words just beyond the story's spot in her book. "Not all that bad, although I tend to believe that we have a greater hand in our own destinies than we might wish to think."

- Present Day -

"A- And what is it you wouldn't recommend, Mistress Gertrude?" Tovias addressed witch at last, once he'd caught his breath.

"That's a right wicked place... haunted by the dead *and* the living." She explained, genuine concern in her voice.

"I know." Tovias nodded with a sigh. "I don't like it, but I *have* to go in there. Twisted Claw business."

"The Rhettschire estate was owned by Butler Rhettschire until he were killed... now it looks like he left the whole estate to his wife what survived him: Scarlett O'Hemlock."

Tovias twitched at the mention of the name.

"Wonderful." Tovias shook his head, face slightly flushed.

"You know 'O'Hemlock' wasn't her actual name; the Dracos choose these monocrurs as *trophies*. 'Hemlock' is what she killed her husband with."

"What? Lord Rhettschire was *murdered*?" He asked, his eyes widening a bit .

"He were marrying a Draco Disciple, whether he knew it or not; of course he was." Gertrude nodded. "She has done so to *several* rich husbands, as I hear tell. T'is a good way to earn a living if yer willing to shirk a bit of one's humanity in the exchange... which reminds me. Abby still wishes to talk to you about when the two of you will be getting married."

"Alright, first of all, no, and secondly... how did you know she murdered her husband? And how do you know she used hemlock?" Tovias persisted, watching after her as she finally turned to take her leave.

"Who do you think sold it to her?" Gertrude replied simply.

That said, Gertrude departed, a dumbstruck Tovias staring after her until at last turning back toward the gate.

Turning the latch, he made his way inside the grounds of the Rhettschire Estate, intent on meeting with the Draco Disciples... though he knew not wherefore.

Chapter 5 – O'Hemlock & Key

The facade of the Rhettschire Estate was- all things considered- a perfect place for the Draco Disciples to make their lair; It was tall and imposing... but it was full of cracks.

Ever since the loss of their most recent commander- the loss of Lady Tso- they had seemingly fallen into disarray. Elements of their former menace remained, and yet lacked a certain cohesiveness.

It wasn't as though Tovias held any sort of love for them in the least. In fact, of the four remaining publicly known members, he treated one with courteous apathy (Estella), one with drooling apprehension (Scarlett), one with unease (Thomas) and one with barely-restrained hatred (Ruby). It was his inexplicable feelings for their former leader that kept him from dismissing the lot of them outright the way the Band tended to.

Reaching out, he gave a gentle knock on the mansion's front door. The air was thick as he awaited the reply from within.

No matter how he felt, they were still dangerous. He had to remember that.

He must have waited several minutes before finally glancing down at his pocketwatch- on loan from the Order of the Sun's tinkerer, Aggie McGee.

"Well..." He said softly to himself before raising a hand. He turned the latch on the door, pushing it lightly inward. With the customary creak all houses of that sort produced, the door swung aside to allow him entry.

It was dark, considering the bright, early-daytime sun outside. Most of the curtains must have been drawn, which made some amount of sense considering its occupants.

As his eyes adjusted, he could make out well-appointed furnishings in the hall. The antechamber stretched some distance before him, ending in a very large mirror at its opposite end. Doors to other rooms appeared intermittently, and a stairway to the second floor appeared halfway down the right-hand wall.

Finally, he began to see silhouettes among the furniture and other decorations.

Standing against one wall, like a decorative suit of armor was the assassin, Thomas Wisseu. He was staring absently down at a dagger he had drawn, occasionally flicking his gaze to the doorway in which Tovias stood. The mage could see a threatening glow in the other man's eyes as the door closed, leaving them both in minimal light.

His attention was called away by another figure lying- really, more like *sprawled*- on a couch against the opposite hallway wall. Estella had sat up very suddenly, likely in response to the light that had briefly flooded the room. Her groan was a telling one, even without noticing the mostly-empty bottle of mead clutched against her chest. Tovias had heard similar- albeit low and gruff- groans on mornings after particularly intense Pub Crawls.

Upon seeing her, however, Tovias couldn't help remembering the night before when he had seen... whatever it was that he had seen.

"Why're ye lookin' at me like that, gypsy?" Estella broke the silence with a guttural tone. "Varlots at the Hardo not... Harlots at the Hardo... Vardo Harlots... not enough for yeh?"

"Where is Ruby? She's expecting me." Tovias let his eyes linger one more moment before ignoring Estella's words altogether and turning back to Thomas.

"Let *her* come and get you, then." The male Disciple shot back as he lowered his arms, noticeably *not* sheathing his dagger. He wore his contempt for the Band proudly. "Maybe *she* is fool enough to deal with the likes of you, but I am not."

"How's your arm?" Tovias countered before he could stop himself. "Still a bit sore?"

During the battle against Loki, one of the key pieces of the puzzle- a spear known as Draca Slaga- had been taken from the Band by Thomas in the *Disciples'* bid to stop the Chaos-God (Really, it had become a matter of pride, since the Disciples were responsible for bringing Loki to the world in the first place). The assassin had been intercepted by the Band, and was defeated in single combat by Gabe Thalion, Adria's Warrior-Champion.

It was a wound Tovias doubted would heal quickly, neither in body nor mind.

As it was, he had his *own* wounds to worry about.

Thomas lunged with a snarl of rage, and snatched Tovias by the collar of his robes. He slammed the mage against the closed door of the mansion, pressing the tip of his dagger against the blessedly thick robes he wore.

"Low-class *curr*." Thomas growled. "I should just kill you and send your rat-eaten hide back to your precious Band."

"You've forgotten, Thomas." Tovias answered. He was struggling to at least *appear* calm in spite of his pounding heart and pale face. "You've forgotten what a *real* Mage can do, without saying a word, without moving a muscle..."

Without his wand in hand it wasn't quite as easy as that, but after one more moment of pressing his blade to Tovias' robed stomach, Thomas did finally relent and return to his 'brooding spot' against the wall.

Tovias himself was checking to be sure his robes were still intact; With one of the Disciples a proven poisoner, he couldn't take any chances. As it was, he already felt cold nauseous. His lower jaw trembled.

Physical conflict had never suited him.

Then, all at once the tension in the air was swept away by a loud, hearty laugh, punctuated by the sound of slow clapping.

"Magnificent."

Ruby Nightshade's voice echoed through the hall as she stepped in from an adjoining chamber. He wondered how long she had been standing there listening to the exchange. Scarlett O'Hemlock sauntered in just behind her, appearing equally amused.

"I had hoped for a *favor* from the Gypsies, but I had not expected *entertainment* as well! Truly, the Band must be commended for its *generosity*."

In a unique moment of like-mindedness, Tovias and Thomas both looked to Ruby with scowls on their faces.

"And look," Scarlett chimed in in her usual purr, "Is this not the charming gentleman I met in the marketplace? I believe his name was 'Toby'...?"

"*Tovias*." He corrected her through a choking throat. "With a 'V'. Tovias Farraday." Every syllable was forcibly pulled from a mind as thick as quicksand, his face nearly red as the garments in which the Disciples decked themselves.

"Well met, indeed, Tovias Farraday." Ruby responded with a nod. "Perhaps Thoren is taking me seriously after all; I had expected an *errand boy* when he has sent one of his *best*."

Tovias looked away. After the intensity of his encounter with Thomas- who was now pacing in another room like a caged wolf- and the hung-over Estella, confronting *these* two together was disconcerting at best. Their looks alone would take most men off guard. On top of that, both were undoubtedly evil, and while Scarlett was a simple black widow (to Tovias' knowledge), the extent of Ruby's power and treachery, he had yet to see... although he had his suspicions.

"That's enough." Tovias murmured, holding up the missive she had sent. "I didn't come here for accolades, Ruby. Tell me what I *did* come for; I have other tasks to attend to." He might have told her that *anyone* could have seen to her errand, but then the notion that he had gone out of his way to deal with it himself carried with it its own implications.

"Of course, of course." Ruby chuckled softly, obviously taking no offense to the mage's dismissive tone. "Come into my parlor, by all means. My dear Scarlett, if you would be so kind as to treat our guest with what mead Estella has not yet consumed..."

"Nevermind that." Tovias called back lowly. "I'm not so dry as to accept a drink from-..." He began, but stopped in the middle of his thought. He didn't want to get Gertrude on the bad side of the Disciples by letting slip that she had told him of Scarlett's crime. "...That is... I'm not much for alcohol..."

This was true enough.

"Is that so? Are you quite *certain* you are one of the Gypsies?" Ruby exclaimed as she led him into the parlor. Coming to stand at the head of a vast, pristine ebony dining table, she sat gracefully and threaded her fingers beneath her chin. She leaned forward a bit as Tovias took a seat at the opposite side of the table, Scarlett conspicuously remaining behind Tovias' chair.

"That's neither here nor there." Tovias shook his head. It was a little easier to focus now that Scarlett was not in his line of vision. "Let's not waste time."

"Indeed." Ruby said, with a hint of regret in her voice. Tovias could only imagine how much she enjoyed toying with him. "Now, as you have no doubt noticed, the Draco Disciples are in a bit of... a dire strait."

"That is certainly one way to say it." Tovias replied flatly. "The Band of the Twisted Claw has the spear you stole, they sealed the Cauldron you opened, and now they have St. Patrick's Crosier along with not one, but two Keepers. Meanwhile, the Draco Disciples-"

"We are *lacking in resources*, yes. Make no mistake, there are powers we possess with which you have yet to reckon, but within the walls of Bristol-"

"You've hardly a working *tunic*, let alone artifacts or powerful magicians. The only power you had was..."

Tovias hesitated... and yet, somehow, Ruby seemed to know precisely what he meant.

"... Was *Lady Katherine Tso*. Yes." For the first time in the conversation, a frown passed Ruby's face. "Not a day has passed that I've been allowed to *forget* her."

Tovias said nothing. But as Ruby watched, she could see ripples of outrage crossing the mage's features.

"What could *possibly* be going through that head of yours, Tovias?" She asked softly.

"What is it you want from me, Ruby?" Tovias asked firmly, cutting her off and rising to his feet. "I've listened long enough; Tell me now, or-." However, as he began to turn, he felt a pair of smooth hands come to rest on his shoulders. They began to push slowly downward, his body obeying their silent command against his mind's desperate attempts at resistance.

"Please, stay a moment longer." He heard Scarlett's velvet tones in his ear, and though he still pushed against her, his body proved heavy and clumsy thanks to his mind's struggle between logic and instinct. "In sooth Lady Ruby has little to do with your presence here... it is for *my* sake. Will you not sit for but a min?"

Tovias bit his lower lip in some final bid to keep his senses from leaving him in full.

"F- fine." He murmured, but dared not turn to look into her eyes. She left her hands draped over his robed shoulders, much to his dismay.

"Mistress Ruby's point, that the balance seems terribly lopsided in favor of the Band is not without merit... The Draco Disciples have very little to their name. However, as you may have noticed I have recently acquired some holdings of my own..."

"Yes, by murdering your husband, apparently." Tovias muttered back, hoping his spite would overturn her aura. It did in some small way, but she did not acknowledge it in the slightest.

"His estate and his wealth are now mine, provided his will and testament stating such can be found and delivered to Lord Francis Walsingham by tomorrow eve. I have reason to believe someone has stolen it in an effort to take that which is rightfully mine." Scarlett explained.

"Why not simply forge a new one?" Tovias asked. "It seems more your speed anyway."

"Oh my." Ruby said with a broad smile, but shook her head. "Pursue something that is rightfully, legally ours when it is stolen from us, and yet *we* are the ones treated as criminals."

Tovias harrumphed, but again he could not escape the feel of Scarlett's delicate fingers upon his shoulders. He took a deep breath, and let it out as a sigh.

"So... steal back the Will of Butler Rhetshire so I can ensure housing and financial security for the Draco Disciples, who would just as soon kill me and the Band of the Twisted Claw, as well as endanger the people of this town. That's the basic idea?"

"That is the basic idea." Scarlett nodded, though her echo of his words came with that unsettlingly soothing purr.

"...I fail to see why I would ever do that." Tovias replied.

"There are things that Ruby and I might offer you that the Band would *never* consider." Scarlett said, reaching out one of her well-kept hands to gesture to the other side of the table where Ruby had resumed her smirking countenance.

"We shouldn't need to provide you with examples." Ruby stated casually.

The mage faltered.

After letting him fumble a few moments for a response, Scarlett let out a teasing little laugh.

"...It is not what you are very likely *thinking*."

Tovias slowly let his eyes drift back to Ruby... and when she next spoke, she did so without a trace of humor.

What she said made Tovias' blood run cold.

"I remember you. One year ago, in the Pixie Garden. You are the man... the 'educated vagrant' Lady Katherine found so amusing."

Tovias straightened in his chair. His face, already red, became a deep crimson. He hadn't *remembered* seeing her there... but back then his gaze had been captured solely by one person; it was no surprise he had missed anybody else.

"I was the one who took her to safety on the day she was wounded. I know where she can be found... and if you bring Scarlett the will, I would be obliged to tell you everything that I know."

"And what... makes you think I would want to know *anything* about Lady Tso? She's *your* leader, not mine." Tovias countered, though his voice was quivering, body shaking anxiously.

"You *do*." Scarlett whispered in that deep, caressing tone once more. "You *want* to know where she is, what's become of her. It is not hard to see. I can *feel* you, trembling at her very *name*."

"Stop it." Tovias finally cast his gaze over his shoulder, trying in vain to glare at Scarlett. "Don't-..."

"Oh my..." Ruby purred tauntingly. "It *couldn't* be... Thoren's pet magician- their 'Protector of the Ancients'- is *infatuated* with-"

There was a loud crash, and then silence.

Tovias stood before the table, his wand in the hand of his outstretched arm. From it, a lance of magical energy had shot forth, past Ruby's head and reduced a vase against the far wall to powder-fine fragments.

Ruby's face had lost its teasing smirk, but remained remarkably composed in the face of near-death. For her part, Scarlett had stumbled back, eyes wide.

"...Who has it?" Tovias asked softly, a hint of defeat in his panting voice. "Rhetshire's Will?"

But he already had a very good idea.

Chapter 6 – Ashen Puddle

Some time later, the door to the estate opened once more and Tovias emerged, stepping back out into the busy Bristol intersection. His eyes squinted into the bright daylight.

He was only really beginning to understand the bargain he had just made and the potential complications it may entail, when there was a strange sound from behind him... like something being dragged.

"By the way, gypsy." He heard the wry, grumbling voice of Thomas behind him. "This bit of trash belongs to you, I think."

With that, there was a heavy thud as the load- whatever it was- was unceremoniously dropped. Tovias had already begun to turn at the Disciple's first words- paranoid as he was of being stabbed. He sucked in a silent gasp as he beheld a blue-and-sable female figure now laying in the doorway. Even with gradually adjusting eyes he could see blots of crimson staining her attire. Tovias glared after Thomas, who was smirking cruelly as he disappeared back into the mansion.

Puddle the Fool- or Lucy Thatcher, when addressed by her given name- was a relative newcomer to Bristol... and yet, she had left quite an impact upon both the Band and the Disciples; It was she, after all, who had been the human host to Loki during his brief reign of terror.

"Puddle!" Tovias called out, rushing to the fallen jester's side. He gently eased her onto her back, his teeth clenched. She was alive- breathing- but her face was drained of color and her expression one of lingering anguish.

The mage couldn't- and did not wish to- imagine what sort of tortures and experiments she had suffered in the Draco Disciple's 'care'. She was cut and still bleeding in several places, and there were patches of burned skin visible through torn bits of her outfit.

Very likely, they had tried to tap into whatever power had tethered Loki to Puddle, perhaps in efforts to repeat the process in a controlled atmosphere. It was even *more* likely that once they knew she was useless to them in that regard, they had taken out their aggressions in the only way they knew how.

"Oh, Gods..." Tovias bit his lip, pulling Puddle as carefully as he could out of the doorway, and letting it close behind them. Glancing over at the streets already bustling with people, he was about to call out to them, but hesitated. The wounds she had suffered- both physical and psychological- were probably going to be too much for normal clerics to deal with.

This was one for the Band.

With a great effort (due to his own negligible strength- she was actually quite light), Tovias slid his arms beneath Lucy and lifted her up off the ground. Blood smeared bits of his robe, but combined with the ink stains he hadn't had time to wash away, it was unlikely that anybody would notice.

"It's okay, don't worry." Tovias whispered back as he began making his staggering way down Shoplatch Lane. "You're going to be alright. You're going to be alright..."

He hurried as best he could down the lane, trembling with the effort... as well as the combined anxieties of the past hours.

"So Ruby and Scarlett know... that's fine. If they rat me out they don't get their Will... Thrice-damned useless arms- Where's Petris or Gabe when you need them?" He muttered as he hurried along. He found it a sad commentary on the part of the Bristol locals that none of them asked about the wounded Fool he carried. Such was the nature of Fools, he supposed.

- Months Ago -

During the time that Puddle had been possessed by the spirit of Loki (but before anyone was aware of it), Tovias had at one point found himself alone with her near to the gypsy encampment outside of Bristol. Still grappling with exactly what he was feeling toward the Band, the Disciples and other respective peoples, he had looked to Puddle as something of a neutral party.

Lucy had shared with Tovias her unfortunate tale of woe. While she had had two more years with her family than he had his own, he had not been subjected to the dark tendencies of certain hedonistic lords. But both of them had spent enough time on the bottom-rungs of the world to allow Tovias a certain rapport with her.

"You've been very kind, Tovias. Most people wouldn't think twice on the troubles of a simple Fool. Even only a handful of the Band cares quite so much."

"It's my pleasure, really..." The mage began, only to trail off with a thoughtful expression on his face. "... Lucy, can I ask you something?"

He had all but made his decision to ask her already; He was bursting at the seams- had to talk to *someone*.

"Of course you can!" She replied with an excessively wide grin, shifting to sit cross-legged beside him.

"... I was the same as you, in a way... But I never found my niche. I couldn't become a Fool as you did- I don't have your talent. I don't have *any* talent. Just... my body for what use it is, and my mind for what little it seems able to take in among these people."

The bells about Puddle's figure jingled as she nodded, listening intently.

"For so long I wandered Europe... beneath anyone's notice. Sometimes because I was hiding, and other times because no one had any use for me."

"Awww. I'm sure /could find a use for you!" Puddle said teasingly, walking two fingers up the length of one arm. Tovias brushed off the apparently jesting sentiment with a chuckle and a wave of his hand.

Of course, if he had known then what he did now regarding Loki, he probably would have found the sentiment far more unnerving.

"At any rate, when I came to Bristol I found... found a strange sort of salvation. In a place no one else would think to look for it."

"The Band?" Puddle's expression turned smoothly from one of curiosity to one of sheer boredom. "That's no surprise at all."

"No." The mage replied. "It was someone else."

A moment passed.

"That's so sweet of you!" Puddle said with a wicked little giggle as she leaned in and took hold of his arm. "Perhaps you and I ought to get married then! I've often admired the way you fall down and speak so awkwardly... and you claim couldn't make a passable Fool..."

"No, no. That's not what I meant." Tovias answered unsteadily, gently pulling his arm away. "Besides, I think you'd have to fight Abigail Normyl for that... This is an odd city." He added softly before Puddle shoved herself off of him.

"Fine, be that way." She pouted, folding her arms. "Is *that* who it is? Your 'salvation'?" She asked with a clearly mocking tone in her voice.

"Gods no." He shook his head firmly. "I... met her when I first came to Bristol..."

He hesitated.

"I need you to promise... I need you to promise not to speak of this to any of the Band. Not a one of them, do you understand?"

"Oh, my lips are sealed. As a matter of fact, you don't even need to *tell* me."

Tovias gasped, shifting back as Puddle leaned forward. He wasn't certain what to expect, but something felt incredibly odd... almost *unnatural* at that moment. He was too late, however, to avoid her hand as it stretched out and rested its palm on his forehead.

"Oooo, I see. One of Tiamat's, eh?" Puddle murmured, but for a split second, Tovias swore he heard someone else whispering under the Fool's breath. "Interesting..."

"How did you-?!" The mage sputtered, but stopped.

He'd seen stranger abilities come from more unassuming members of the Band, so why not a mind-reading Fool?

"Nevermind. Just..."

"Yes?" For a moment, the Fool turned to regard him with that unsettling grin, one that he should have been far more suspicious of.

"I've heard the stories, heard of the horrors she's committed..." He said slowly, "... and yet, even after all they have done for me, I'd not have had any reason to stay with the Band of the Twisted Claw- would never have met them at *all* if it weren't for her. They would condemn her- condemn *me* for even speaking her name, and yet, I... I just don't know anymore, Lucy. What am I supposed to do?"

"Oh, Tovias, things are never so simple. Everyone has something to hide. Remember; if you don't have a shadow, you're not standing in the light." Puddle said, her smile brightening a bit... but then her voice turned again. More than a whisper. It sounded like a man's voice. Something wicked inside her that only now peeked forth from its hiding place.

"Some shadows are just darker than others."

With that, she skipped off into the night.

- Present Day -

"What on Earth- what in the name of-... what is this!?"

Tovias wasn't surprised to hear Aggie's horrified exclamation when he finally reached the Order of the Sun's 'camp' along the western end of Shoplatch Lane.

"It's me asking to use Jameson's Mongering Cart, is what it is." Tovias replied breathlessly, looking around for the rickety wooden cart as he barely held Puddle aloft.

"Aye, yes, by all means, yes." She said swiftly, rushing forth to aid Tovias in clearing its surface and lifting Lucy up onto it. They took care not to move her around any further than she already had been. "I'm no good with the cuts, but I know a thing or two about burns." After setting the Fool on the cart, Tovias hurried to the front of it, hoisting it up by its handles. At the same time, Aggie leaned in and tucked a small jar of salve in beside Puddle's unconscious form. "If'n yer goin' to Vashta, she'll be needin' this."

"Thanks." Tovias nodded hastily. "Oh!" Quickly he reached into his pocket and handed back her pocketwatch. "Do you need this back?"

"Never mind that for now, Tovias! Hurry off with ye... Stirling!"

Tovias straightened, turning to see the hulking, blue-skinned forest troll wandering toward the camp, presumably in the aftermath of his morning walk.

"Eh?" He tilted his head, scratching his scraggly beard as he looked curiously from Aggie to the Mongering Cart.

"Help Tovias deliver Puddle to Vashta." She ordered, to which Stirling only nodded; the Troll was ever eager to help... whether by nature or training, the Mage had never rightly looked into it.

"Right." Tovias nodded once more, looking ahead and dragging his feet forward, muttering a final thought under his breath.

"What was tha?" Aggie called after him, but Tovias pretended not to hear as he made his loud, rumbling way toward the Lunar Camp.

Chapter 7 – No Good Deed

"T'is fortunate that you got us to her when you did, Tovias." Gaia Vedeia murmured, standing back with the mage as they watched Vashta Nerada- Lunar Tribe leader and the Band's foremost Healer- work. "The local doctors would only have made a mess of things."

The two of them- Gaia and Vashta- had been toiling away in the herb garden that early afternoon, but had ceased at the rumbling arrival of the Mongering Cart. It didn't take long to pull the two of them away at the sight of its

cargo. They, along with Tovias, had moved her to a temporary- and more stable- place atop the table near to the garden.

"By the way, thank you too, Stirling." Tovias called over his shoulder, regaining a touch of the good humor he had lost in his meeting with the Disciples as he watched the troll lumber away.

"It okay." Stirling grunted a reply. "Stirling need to burn off breakfast calories."

Tovias quirked an eyebrow. Eventually he turned back to where Puddle lay, only to jump with surprise as he found Vashta now standing before him.

"If it were the Disciples you got her from, Tovias, we're lucky to have Puddle back alive at all." She said grimly. "You must send our thanks to Aggie for the salve. T'was good judgment... for once."

As she handed over the jar, Tovias had to remind himself of the ongoing bad-blood between the factions (although most of the Band had probably been privy to enough of Aggie's conflagrations to be wary of her regardless).

Tovias had remained largely removed from the schism. As a member of the Order of the Sun, yet trained in the Arcane Arts by the Lunar Tribe, he'd made friends- or at least made few enemies- on either side.

"So, Tovias, I hear that you are going to have a story for us this evening." Gaia's smiling voice once again startled Tovias from his thoughts.

"So Sydney decided to announce it to everyone. Great." He muttered, then shrugged. "I suppose I'll be telling the Band where I come from... how I came to join the Twisted Claw."

"That promises to be quite the story, indeed." She replied, voice full of genuine interest. "You need not be concerned in the telling."

"Do I look concerned?" Sure enough he didn't, but the sheer effort involved in trying not to look concerned all but oozed through his every pore.

"T'is well. After all you have done for us, Tovias, it would be our pleasure to hear your history, no matter what it may entail."

"It's an intricate tapestry, Lady Gaia," Tovias looked away from her, down at the dirt and grass beneath his feet. "woven with many dark threads."

"Tovias, I promise you this:" Gaia reached up and lightly rested a hand on his shoulder. "No matter what you say, we will judge you not, and shall not spurn you. The Band of the Twisted Claw is and always has been family. Perhaps we have our inner squabbles but in the end... we will always be family."

Tovias didn't look up, but nodded. A small smile tugged at the edges of his lips, but his mind refused to let it blossom.

"Off with ye now." Vashta called, standing by Puddle's unconscious form once again. "We need to get her inside and deal with her stab wounds, and she won't be in any position for men-folk to see 'er."

"Of course." Tovias said, face turning a deep red. Somehow in the midst of her rollicking about in tights and bells instead of a bodice and skirts, he'd managed to completely forget she was a girl. Not that he would have stayed for the surgery even if she weren't; he never cared for the sight of blood and bone and that sort of thing.

Pocketing the salve, he turned on his heel and left. Between Gaia and Vashta, he was confident that she couldn't be left in better hands.

The Vardo had arrived within Bristol at last, taking its designated place in the grassy glen near the Pig & Whistle Tavern. It didn't take long for word of Puddle's condition to spread: Jameson asked why Stirling was hauling his Mongering Cart around. Stirling mentioned how 'Funny Scary Blue Lady got to ride in it'. Then Jameson saw the blood stains on its wooden surface. From there, the questions and rumors exploded among the Band.

Quite a few of them had asked Tovias where he had found her. He had answered truthfully; he had acquired a note from the Draco Disciples, and it was the location described within said note at which he had found her. He might have embellished a bit, but the fewer questions asked about the specifics, the better. He took care not to mention the Rhetshire Estate, and he had left the missive with Ruby upon his departure- Her idea, actually, to prevent the Keepers from discovering their little plot. Luckily, all parties seemed to be more focused on Puddle.

After giving Tovias a few compulsory pats on the back, the crowd of gypsies parted, and the mage let out a long, contented sigh. It always felt nice to be appreciated, and he felt happy for having helped Puddle... but now he could go back to his tasks at hand.

Or so he thought.

He felt a firm tap on his right shoulder, and a familiar voice behind him. Female. Strong. *Extremely* insistant.

"So Tovias, I heard you had a bit of exercise with the Mongering Cart this morning. That's good."

The mage winced, slowly turning. Before he could respond, he almost doubled over as a long metal object was thrust sideways into his abdomen. His hands fumbled to take hold of it - A lightweight training blade.

Tovias looked down at it, and gradually brought his gaze upward over the skirts, leather apron, shoulders, and finally the smug smirk of none other than the Band's Swordmistress and the Leader of the Order of the Sun: Adria Dubh.

"You'll need it."

Chapter 8 – First Rule of Bear Pit

Whereas only a short while ago the Gypsy Glen had been filled with the rumbling of the Mongering Cart, it was now filled with the thrashing, whining protests of Tovias Farraday.

"What are you doing, Adria?!" He demanded, now wishing his robe were as flimsy as it was unattractive as Adria dragged him by its collar.

"Did you forget having a little conversation with Grease this morn'?" She asked, utterly ignoring his struggles.

"About sword training! Right! I told him I'd speak with you about it later!"

After forcefully leading him along, Adria suddenly released him, allowing him to fall face-first to the dirt ground.

"It's 'later' now, so it's time we 'spoke', isn't it?" She said very matter-of-factly. Tovias supposed there was no point in arguing with her. Then again, there was rarely *ever* any point in arguing with her. Merit or flaw, her stubbornness could not be overestimated.

He staggered indignantly back to his feet, unsurprised to see where he had been taken to.

The two of them were now surrounded by furs, leathers, a good deal of bare skin and the sound of clashing weapons.

Ever since Tovias had joined the Band, he had never known what to make of the so-called 'Barbarians'. Although they certainly dressed- and fought- the part, their linguistic skills and their entrepreneurial nature (as well as their superior grooming habits) placed them a cut above their more savage brethren. Perhaps Thoren- or even their former employers the Draco Disciples- had managed to domesticate them to a point.

While they served as protectors and mercenaries for the Band, for the most part they kept to themselves, forging and selling weapons and armor to make ends meet. In exchange for the former, the Band was more than happy to protect them from any threats of a magical nature.

"Why can this not wait until tomorrow?" Tovias insisted. "I have a lot on my-"

"A lot on your mind? That is the excuse you gave the time before last." Adria replied with a roll of her eyes. "And last time, you claimed to be too *busy*."

"I was banishing a Norse God from the physical plane, Adria." Tovias pouted back.

"Well, then this oughtn't be any challenge for you at all." Before Tovias could respond, they were interrupted by a loud, booming voice.

"LINE UP, BARBARIANS."

The booth from which the Barbarians sold their wares had now become a sort of podium. Within it stood a tall, hulking, bald-headed barbarian with a large wooden mallet slung over his shoulders: Tribe Chieftain Kai.

Although Grease served as the liaison between the Barbarians and the Band of the Twisted Claw, Kai was the unquestioned commander of the Barbarians. A talented warrior in his own right as well as a capable strategist, Kai was also gifted with an impressive set of lungs.

"TODAY'S TRAINING EXERCISE IS 'FIVE-ON' DUELS. DUBH'S BROUGHT US SOME NEW MEAT TODAY, SO MAKE HIM FEEL WELCOME." Kai raised his hammer, pointing it at each of the female barbarians in turn.

"FURIES* AND DUBH. LINE UP. EVERYONE ELSE, LINE UP. I'LL CALL PAIRS." He pointed over at the 'Bear Pit'- a large ring of hempen rope- first to one side, then the other to indicate sides.

With this, the women in attendance broke away from the men, Adria offering Tovias what seemed like a less-than-earnest 'best of luck'.

Tovias was beginning to believe there was a pot going to see who could push his buttons the most effectively.

As it was, the mage joined the men's huddle on their side of the Pit. However, he noticed a slight discrepancy.

"Wait." He called. "We're ahead by one man."

On the men's side, there was Afro (named for his unique hairstyle), McLovin (a rather large but exuberant man), Horus (a rather unassuming barbarian who was surprisingly lethal), Agnarr (who Tovias hadn't seen much of), and of course, Grease.

For their part, the female barbarians- or the Furies- consisted of Mary (the 'shopkeeper' among them, as well as the eldest, facts many unfortunate victims underestimated her for), Penny (a rather diminutive barbarian with impressive speed), Morgan (a talented fighter as well as the Barbarian's blacksmith), and Malissa (a tall woman who wielded a spear with terrifying effectiveness). Adria, as would be expected, paced among them with anticipation.

"Perhaps I should sit this one out." Tovias suggested. However, as they so often were, his hopes were dashed as a shorter female figure hurried along past the men to join the women.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Vashta needed help with Puddle. Have you started yet?" Tovias blinked, but sighed in defeat as he recognized the bright voice of Wanda Spellworthy.

"No, no!" Adria greeted her with a chuckle. "You are right on time." She shot a wicked grin over her to Tovias, who couldn't have been more pale. Apparently despite their opposing factions, Adria and Wanda had an interest in swordsmanship in common, which transcended the schism. "It's a pleasure to see you."

"I wouldn't have missed it." Wanda returned with the same smile, giving Tovias one as well.

"Yes. It is an absolute pleasure to have you here." Tovias said. Even a deaf man could sense the sarcasm. He then turned to Kai.

"Hey, wait. Kai, what if YOU come and take my place? I could call the pairs-"

"PENNY. TOVIAS."

"What?" This was all Tovias had time to say before the lithe brunette sprang away from her huddle, swinging and striking the mage in the back with her blunt-edged short-sword.

The next thing Tovias remembered, he was again laying face-down in the dirt.

"POINT!"

Rolling onto his stomach, Tovias heard the roaring laughter of the Barbarians around him. Sitting up, he glared. Not in any specific direction; all in attendance had earned his ire.

"Good work." McLovin commented, making no effort to hide the grin on his face.

Tovias was about to give him a particularly angry scowl when a hand reached into his view.

"Nice to finally see you in the Pit, Tovias." Grease said with a wide smile. "Might want to pay a little more attention to what's going on in the ring, though."

"Noted." Tovias muttered as he accepted the assist. "I won't lie to you, Grease; It's hard to want to raise my sword to... eh... this kind of opponent." He said, subtly nodding to the women's side.

"I think I understand." Grease said, reaching out and planting a hand on Tovias' shoulder. He gave the mage a somber nod, then looked to Kai. There was another nod between the two... although had Tovias seen the conspiratorial wink, he wouldn't have been quite as reassured.

"PENNY. TOVIAS."

"Hey, I thought-!" Tovias began, but the air that would have become the remainder of his protest was knocked clear from his lungs by another spring-heeled strike from the Barbarian.

"POINT!"

"I told you, Tovias." Grease chuckled, pulling him out of the pit.

"Hate you... so much..." Tovias gasped.

"I know, but I couldn't resist."

"MALISSA. AFRO."

Tovias struggled for breath as he stood aside and watched the two Barbarians duel.

"All that blood on you... I've gotta say, you're starting to look like one of us." Grease said, giving him a rough nudge about the upper arm. The mage reached up to rub the resulting ache and shook his head.

"It's been a strange morning, Grease."

"Rough?"

"No, just strange."

"POINT! MARY AND DUBH, HORUS."

The two men were silent for another moment.

"So you fancy some of the Furies, huh?" Grease asked teasingly, Tovias suddenly choking and coughing on some of the precious air he'd managed to collect.

"Can we not discuss this, please?" He finally asked, still rubbing his arm.

"POINT! CONTINUE."

"I apparently already have two fiancées outside the Band, and I have a lot of other things to worry about right now."

"Is that so? You really ARE a busy little mage." Grease replied, nudging Tovias again.

"POINT! AGNARR. MORGAN."

"Hey, It's not because I'm trying. It's because everyone around here is insane."

"I'm just telling you, Tovias; marryin'a barbarian woman's the 'slow and painful' route; better to jus' fight 'em so you can die quickly an' painlessly."

"Grease, this is far from amusing. I'd like to just be quiet and watch the-"

"POINT. WANDA AND DUBH. GREASE AND TOVIAS."

"-Damn it." Tovias cursed under his breath, quickly raising his training weapon; a mid-sized 'Avenger-style' blade. It might have felt heavier had he not been lifting and hauling bodies and mongering carts all morning.

"This shouldn't be too bad..." Tovias murmured to Grease. "Wanda's a mage like me, right? You can take Adria..."

"No." Grease shook his head. "She's a mage, but *not* like you. She came to *us* to learn swordsmanship, and she's damned good at it; I've been training her myself."

What little confidence Tovias had managed to scrounge up was immediately replaced by terrified frustration.

"Why didn't you wait until I had some personal training to drag me into this?!" He demanded.

"Well, last time you were busy, the time before that-"

"Nevermind!" Tovias snapped, but gasped as a training sword swung in an arc before him, deflecting another blade that was thrusting directly at his midsection.

"Eyes. On. Ring." Grease stated one last time before shoving Tovias aside. From there he proceeded to parry another attack from Wanda, stepping in to engage her.

Righting himself, Tovias' spirits sank as he found himself blade to blade with Adria.

"I suppose negotiation is out of the ques-" The mage began before letting out a squeak of dismay. Adria had lunged, Tovias stumbling back and swinging his training sword frantically. His style- if one could call it such- was a mess of chaotic and unnecessary parries, leading Adria around the ring, and not looking where he was going.

"Tovias!" Grease shouted, and it was then he realized he was about to walk right between him and Wanda.

The barbarian reached out and grabbed Tovias, yanking him over to stand alongside him. He thrust his sword in Tovias' wake, nearly striking Wanda who hopped back to rejoin Adria. The swordmistress had been keeping her distance from Tovias' wild swings and awaiting her own opportunity to counterattack.

"Start pulling your weight here, Tovias." Grease murmured, his voice taking a serious tone. "I don't wanna be rude, but neither of us are gonna win this one alone. Well, I might, but..."

Tovias sighed, looking across the ring. He was already exhausted. And yet Adria was standing there grinning at him like a cat might at a crippled mouse.

"You can at least *pretend* you're not enjoying this so much." Tovias called to the swordmistress with a frown.

"Nay."

At this, Tovias' face twisted into a quivering, pouting expression, his feet shifting and finally springing into an excessively telegraphed lunge. His arm seemed to forget the weight of the blade as it thrust outward, aimed at the left breast of Adria's leather apron.

Then he felt his foot catch, perhaps on a root or outcropping of rock.

His body twisted into half-turn, his body already awkwardly positioned from the thrust. Soon enough, he was once again lying on the ground.

The three remaining combatants only took a fraction of an instant to stare with amused confusion before snapping back into action.

Grease instantly stepped in, managing to sweep his sword under Adria's guard as she fought to restrain her laughter at Tovias' expense.

"POINT!"

Immediately after, Wanda lunged to swing her twin short-swords across Grease's now vulnerable body. He deflected the first, but the second met its mark.

"POINT!"

However, as she turned downward to 'finish off' her remaining opponent, she noticed too late Tovias' wildly flailing sword hurtling toward her hip.

"POINT!"

With that, a cheer went up from the male barbarian's side of the pit, Grease once again offering a hand to drag Tovias back to his feet.

"You see, Tovias?" He chuckled. "You're better than you think."

"I thought you were bad luck." McLovin added with a loud laugh and a hearty slap to the mage's back. "I guess you just have 'different luck'."

Tovias staggered a bit, a soft 'Hrmh' escaping his lips.

"Can I at least be done now?"

"MALISSA, MORGAN AND MARY... TOVIAS."

The string of expletives that followed was enough to give even the barbarians pause... and make Adria beam with pride.

Chapter 9 – Easy Come, Easy Go

All things considered, Tovias' morning could have been worse.

After all, while he was only barely managing to limp away from the Bear Pit, at least he was still alive. Even after his repeated jaunts to the dirt pit floor and the repeated bludgeoning of his body by training weapons, it seemed as though he would live to see the aches and pains fade.

"Welcome back, Tovias." Deirdre said, trying to hold back a chuckle as the bedraggled mage half-collapsed at the Vardo window. Andra simply shook her head with a smile.

"Deirdre, I'll be completely truthful with you; I haven't exactly gotten around to doing many of my assigned chores today. Except the missive. You might have heard about Puddle." He began softly. "Thanks to that and Adria dragging me to the pit, I'm just a little behind schedule... but the fact is, if I don't get something to eat soon, I might not be alive to DO my chores. Do you think Thoren could forgive giving me a little advance? I promise that as soon as I'm finished..."

Normally, the exchange was a simple one; Those who work eat. Those who don't... well, suffice it to say there wasn't always enough in the Gypsy coffers to afford to feed everyone, especially slackers.

"T'is well." Deirdre said with a smile. "Thoren was told about Puddle, and stopped by to speak on your behalf a few min ago." As she spoke, she reached down beneath the rear of the Vardo window, into a compartment not many of the Gypsies got to see. From it, she plucked a small, jingling handful of coins and laid them on the table.

"It seems you'll not starve this den after all, Tovias." She smiled, sitting back in the Vardo, a note of envy in her voice as she dug around for her pipe.

Tovias stared down at them. Long ago- in another life- it would have looked like a paltry sum. Now, however, he looked upon it with gracious awe. It was a significant amount of money, more than he'd ever been allowed to hold at one time in his tenure with the Twisted Claw, and indeed enough to buy more than his small stomach could hold.

He continued to stare at the coins for quite some time until- with a giddy smile- he swept them off the window ledge into one hand using the other.

Between everything his mind and body had endured thus far, a bit of good-natured self-indulgence was exactly what he needed to take his mind off of it for a little while.

"God save thee, cousin! Tovias Farraday, was it not?"

Speak of the Devil.

His smile never fading, Tovias turned to see the rather rotund and garishly dressed form of Festivus Merrier; the psuedo-noble without whom the Claw's presence in Bristol would be negligible if nonexistent.

"A pleasure as always, M'lord!" the mage answered, curling his fingers around his newfound wealth.

"Not 'Lord' yet, Tovias, but by the grace of God, soon enough!"

"It never hurts to be optimistic." Tovias was one to talk, but Festivus' jolly demeanor was infectious.

"Indeed, it does not. You seem to have had an... eventful morning." Festivus added, quirking a curious brow at Tovias' blood-and-inkstained robes.

"I have, in fact." Tovias nodded with a sigh, the gesture not half as exaggerated as it probably sounded. "I was actually about to treat myself to my first meal of the day." He held up the coins Dierdre had given him.

"You must have rescued all of Bristol to have earned such a bounty." Festivus commented with his usual smile. Tovias chuckled. He knew money like this was paltry compared to the frivolity the man was accustomed to, but he appreciated the compliment.

Of course, Tovias *had* helped saved all of Bristol, but he wasn't about to say so. After all, he had a fast to break, and if he even began regaling Festivus with the story of Chaos Rising, Tovias knew he'd be stuck giving every last detail before even getting a bite of food.

"I'd best hurry and spend this before Jasper relieves me of it."

"By the way, what of Yvonna and Lucien?" Tovias asked, now carrying a large dish, heaped with cheese fritters, mushrooms, bits of chocolate-covered fruit and small chunks of seasoned meat fresh off the skewer. "I don't think I've ever seen you without at least one of them."

The two of whom Tovias spoke were two of Festivus' 'drinking buddies'. The three were more often than not seen together; while Lucien Draven was more of an associate- the Sancho Panza to Festivus' Don Quixote, Yvonna Schottz- an Order of the Sun member- was the one who had won Festivus over and earned his sympathies for the Band with her knowledge of drinking games, mixed spirits and an overall talent for consumption³.

"Oh, they're escorting a few of our good fairegoers about some of our fine drinking establishments, in accordance with my 'letter of encouragement' to the Brewmaster's Guild."

Tovias needn't have been reminded of *that*. The Band had *written* that particular letter as part of Festivus' bid for the position of Lord Mayor (The intricate web of relationships between all of Bristol was terribly complicated, now that Tovias came to think of it).

Thanking the Gods he still had all of his teeth (given his morning with the Barbarians), Tovias happily began to make his way across the well-appointed platter of fingerfood. As they walked, though, the mage was certain to stop by both camps to share his 'good fortune' with Aggie, Vashta, and the others who had helped with Puddle's plight.

As they walked and talked, Tovias finally explained the details of the Chaos Rising to Festivus. Although the aspiring noble likely did not seem to completely understand or believe Tovias' bizarre tale of Gods, Artifacts and Draco Disciples, he listened politely, making a lighthearted remark every now and again⁴.

With the conclusion of his tale, Tovias looked back to the dwindling plate of food, and finally took up a chocolate-covered strawberry, eyeing it with a drooling smile. Opening his mouth, he moved to place the confection inside, when-

You seem to like those... is it their color? Red and Black?

Tovias let out a gasp, the berry slipping out of his hand and back onto the plate as he froze in place. The lot of what was left nearly tipped out of his other hand before Festivus- in a remarkable display of luck and/or reflexes- plucked it from the mage's hands.

"Are you well?" Festivus asked, looking over the tray of food in his hands with some amount of interest. He seemed, however, far too polite to ask a poor gypsy to share such a rare bounty.

"Not... I'm not sure." He answered at last. "I was... just someone I was thinking about someone..."

"I see..." Festivus replied with a Cheshire grin, "Between our sweet Rose, the clever Aggie, your learned tutors Sydney and Mistress Adria, those Barbarians, you certainly seem to deal with a great many young women, Tovias. All without a coin in your pocket. A noble could get jealous of a man such as you." Festivus said mischievously, leaning in a bit.

"Not you, too, Festivus." Tovias groaned, carefully taking back the plate with one hand and burying his face in the other.

"Tovias!" The mage- as seemed to happen to him every half-hour or so that day- was interrupted in his thoughts by the loud, startled shout, thick with an Irish flair. A thud and a clatter followed as Tovas found himself once again moving the Mongering Cart... this time, with extreme prejudice.

Not looking where he was going, he had almost knocked it over by walking into it, but Jameson McGuinness had managed to catch it from the other side. In the end, no piece of the junk on the cart's surface was harmed... at least, not as much as Tovias' ribcage as he staggered back off of it.

"Bloody 'ell, Tovias. Watch where yer goin', would ye?" Jameson said, catching his breath in the wake of his brief panic. "First ye go an' get my cart all covered in Fool blood, an' now-"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry..." Tovias said, although he would have browbeaten Jameson on leaving the mongering cart in the middle of the road. "And if the blood is that big of a problem, I'll help you-"

³ Both Lucien and Yvonna have since proven to be ignorant of 'Festivus'' true nature at the time these events occurred; Lucien was simply content to have a rich man buying his drinks, whereas Yvonna was adamantly convinced she was the one doing the seducing...

⁴ More likely, Simion was taking notes of this new angle on the failure of his minions.

Before he could say another word, let out another breathless grunt as a bucket of paint was shoved into his hands.

Suddenly, Jameson McGuinness was nowhere to be found.

"...Typical." Tovias frowned, glancing down at the paint and at the Mongering Cart.

Then he realized his plate of food was gone.

"Twice-damned typical." He was about to curse rather loudly, when he felt a hand pat him gently on the shoulder.

"No worries, cousin." Festivus said with his usual broad smile. "Continue upon your labors... pray, what plans have you for this eve?"

"I have... well, tonight after the Vardo leaves Bristol, I plan to have a bit of a campfire storytelling session with the Band... I'll be the guest of honor." He said without even a hint of eagerness. Of course, he had another plan in mind besides, but he was damned if he would tell Festivus about the Estate⁵...

"I see! Well, I shant miss it! However, if you would allow me the privelege, I should like to give you a reward of my own." He said. Tovias quirked his head. "For all of your tireless efforts."

"No, that's all right." Tovias shook his head, "I saved some coins, just in case something like this happened. I rather expected it, actually. I won't starve."

"I did not mean *that*, Tovias." Festivus chuckled. As he and Tovias looked at each other, the latter looking down at the paint and to the stained wagon, they both turned to regard a passing Cyanne de Wolfe.

The comely Italian gypsy was holding a few bits of food in one well-kept hand... likely taken off of the stolen tray.

Slowing her stride as she passed Tovias and Festivus, she gave the latter a slight curtsy, then turned to Tovias. As he watched, she popped one of the pieces of steak into her mouth- surprisingly sharp teeth making quick work of the dry but tasty morsel.

"Grammercy." She said simply, smiling at him with those dark eyes of hers before sweeping herself back into her daily business.

Festivus grinned mischievously as he noticed Tovias staring after her.

"I'm sure you shant regret it, Tovias. Go to the Town Square Public House at the hour of Five." He said. "I shall see thee upon the closing of the gates this eve!" He concluded, just as jovially as ever. He then disappeared into the crowd who welcomed him with cheers and smiles.

Tovias only blinked.

"Why not..."

Chapter 10 – Interlude de Paris

Tovias sat with a long, exhausted sigh on the stone wall of the raised garden near the Vardo. It had taken him longer to 'touch up' the Mongering Cart than he'd thought it would. Then again, he'd taken the time to ensure the paint was smooth and even. Given that Jameson would harangue him for anything less, the mage knew it was a job worth doing right.

The paint was of low quality and would probably wash off with the first rainfall anyway, but it was the principle of the thing.

Wiping a paint-flecked hand on his robes, he dug through his satchel to seek out the pocket watch and checked the time. There was still a fair amount of time between that moment and the evening, but then there was whatever surprise Festivus had in store for him. He had a fair idea of what it would be, considering the timing and the place.

Tovias had never been on a pub-crawl, with Festivus or otherwise. Along with the Bear Pit, a pub or any place where the excessive consumption of alcoholic beverages was encouraged was a place the mage refused outright to go to. He had actually said once to Festivus himself that he had no tolerance for alcohol and its advocates (present company excepted). He could never stand their rudeness, their recklessness, their occasionally dangerous activities, any of it.

But now he had to wonder just what that Festivus had up his sleeve. Then again, there were was still the Will to worry about, not to mention the story he would have to tell to the entire Band (plus some). Most of all, he could not help thinking of Lady Tso, how long he could hide his feelings from the Band.

⁵ Odds were, he already knew anyway.

As he had said to Puddle, and in his serruptitious letters: He had come to appreciate the Band as boon companions, friends, even as family... but with all this recent talk of marriage and who fancied whom, it was hard for him not to think of the woman who captivated him so.

Lady Katherine Tso and Tovias Farraday had met only one time. And yet, in that single chance meeting, she had unlocked a bizarre sensation inside him.

He couldn't be sure he had ever felt love before. In what memories he could pull from the time before his family was killed, 'Love' was never present. All marriages were arranged. There was always something for someone to gain, whether it be wealth, status... Even the bedtime stories he was told as a child were devoid of love: No damsels in distress and princes on white horses ending happily together forever after. All of them were very mechanical. Very cold.

Those, along with the darker years he had spent without them had him wondering if he would ever recognize love when he saw it.

And yet, he had.

Seeing Lady Tso, he had felt a sort of warm, soothing familiarity. Like being with among family- true family. Like she had somehow been with him even then.

Like she had *always* been a part of him.

-

Tovias had decided not to use the remainder of his payment yet. Whatever Festivus was plotting, it might require what was left. Instead, he busied himself with actually completing the daily chores he'd selected for himself. He quickly discovered, however, that other Lightbringers had taken the liberty of doing them in his absence. Mostly Petris (Tovias would swear he was a man possessed with the number of daily duties *he* took on his shoulders...), but Druscilla, Lindria, Gabe, and Colin had invested their fair share as well.

In the end, all Tovia did with his afternoon was wash his robes- at last- and hang them to dry. This done, now dressed in a modest tunic, loose breeches and sandals, he made his way down to the Noble's Glade- the beautiful outdoor courtyard where the upper-crust tended to spend their faire days (they couldn't be seen fraternizing with the low-class, as much as some of them enjoyed it). It was a simple delivery job.

-

"And how fares the Band this day, Monsieur Farraday?"

Tovias looked away from where a group of young noble girls were amusing themselves with an oversized tower of blocks, a game the likes of which he'd seen in much smaller scale back at the Lunar Tribe's camp. His eyes cast themselves next to the bench on which he sat to the diminutive noble, Mistress Thomasina. In a rare instance, she was unaccompanied by her attendants, and thusly free to ask such things.

"Fair enough." He replied with a smile, shifting over a little to allow her a place to be seated.

"Grammercy." She said, hopping up onto the wooden bench beside him. "So what business do you have with me?"

"I had intended to meet with Admiral Winters, in sooth," He began, glancing over at the girls once again, the tension in the air rising with every block removed and replaced, "but it appears I've missed him."

"By only a few minutes, Tovia. He may yet return."

"I'm not sure I have enough time." He murmured softly. "You may remember Festivus Merrier... I'm to meet with him... for him... I'm really not certain, but it's to happen shortly."

"Oui, Monsieur." Thomasina let out a small chuckle, almost a giggle. "He visited the Noble's Glade but yesterday. Ambassador de Espes did not care much for him."

"He doesn't seem to care much for *anybody*." He replied, but as they exchanged glances again, they shared a bit of a conspiratorial smile.

The tower fell over with a mighty clatter and a storm of laughter from the noble girls.

"Look at that... Still too young to understand the world is such a complicated place..." Tovia, murmured after a moment. "...Mistress Thomasina, do you... do you think I would have made a good nobleman? Like Admiral Winters or Ambassador de Espes? If I... If I had grown up in that sort of atmosphere?"

Thomasina blinked and stared back at him. After a moment, she made a bit of a face.

"Tovia Farraday, I do not believe you would have made a good nobleman, like Admiral Winters or Ambassador de Espes."

"Oh." Tovia blinked, letting his gaze fall back to his feet.

"However, you make a fine Gypsy and a fine magician, and I am sure you would have made a fine nobleman, not like *anybody* else."

Tovias looked up again, returning the dwarf's bright smile with one of his own.

"If you would like, Monsieur Farraday, I would be glad to deliver your message to Admiral Winters."

"Thank you, Mistress Thomasina." He stood, giving her a deep, respectful bow before offering her the envelope. "I should probably go. It is just about time for... whatever Festivus has in mind."

At her bidding he rose again, turned and hurried away from the Noble's Glade.

Chapter 11 – Arranged Mariage

The day was passing swiftly- more so than Tovias might have liked, considering what awaited him at the end of it. At the very least, a gentle breeze and the mild sunlight made for a calm, comforting atmosphere as he arrived at the Town Square Public House. It was just across the road from the Pixie Garden... but he didn't want to allow himself to get lost in nostalgia again. He had to think.

Now standing at one of the stairways leading down the House proper, he hopped up onto a banister and waited.

"I don't suppose you're in the mood to talk to me *now*..." He mumbled. Although his tone was too soft for anyone else to hear, his intended audience was not one of flesh and bone.

It didn't surprise Tovias that the purpose of the 'Other Estella's' visit seemed to be to harass him. What *did* bother him was twofold: First, that in all the 'Echoes' he had experienced since coming to Bristol, he could never interact with them. He would see them, but they never acknowledged his existence. The second...

"Who ever said I was speaking of Ruby Nightshade? I'm speaking of my Mistress... and yours."

Her words had pierced him to the quick. If this Estella were speaking to Tovias from some point in the future, and the "Mistress" of whom she spoke was...

He shook his head. One step at a time. But then again, what if the reason he could see this alternate Estella were because this point in time was a critical juncture of some sort? That made sense. The way in which he might handle the business of the Rhetshire Will, and how the Band would be affected upon learning about his family, what he might learn about the fate of Lady Tso and how he might react... it felt like he was close to something, but it was hard to know just *what*...

"Tovias!" The mage perked up as he heard the sound of Festivus Merrier approaching, with the addition of a few others. However, it wasn't the usual gaggle of drunken revelers, with Yvonna and Lucien staunch at Festivus' flanks.

It was, instead, a distinguished looking man dressed similarly to Festivus- perhaps almost as fancily as some of the court nobles... but dialed back just enough to keep from being hanged. At his side was a similarly dressed woman, layered thick with powders and paints.

Lastly, barely visible beyond the flamboyant couple (and their equally flamboyant escort), there walked a young lady- presumably the couple's daughter.

"Lord Festivus! Ah... The crowd for your pub crawl seems lacking today, doesn't it?" Tovias asked, attempting a joke, but immediately regretting it. He had no idea what sense of humor these well-dressed individuals might or might not have had.

"The Pub Crawl awaits my guests and I back at the Vardo. I shall be brief; Lord Laurent Mariage and Lady Jeanne Desmares-Mariage, it is my honor to introduce to you Tovias Farraday."

Tovias gave an extremely self-conscious bow. Not enough that they were Lords and Ladies, they were *French* (Granted, he got along with Mistress Thomasina well enough, but he wasn't so certain about the rest of the country).

"It is to he I recommend you entrust your daughter while we attend to our nightly Crawl."

Tovias stood straight up, as though jabbed soundly in the backside with a hatpin.

"I b-beg your pardon, Lord Festivus?" Tovias asked, his voice a weak wimper from the depths of his lungs. His eyes darted to the couple, then between them to the girl who was eyeing the surrounding shops and houses with varying degrees of interest.

"Tovias, Lord Mariage and his wife are my guests in Bristol for the days of Faire⁶. He and I have been friends for years, sharing drinks when together and correspondence when apart. They've only just arrived, just in time for the Pub Crawl. This is their lovely daughter, Suzanne."

With a broad smile, Festivus gestured to Laurent and Jeanne who stepped apart, allowing their daughter to emerge.

Given that Tovias was a fair bit older than he appeared, to say that she was about his age was probably inaccurate. She looked about his age, was more like it. However, considering that he had lived the life of a beggar and a gypsy and an adventurer for the larger share of his life, his appearance was significantly grungier than hers was. He almost hated Festivus for not warning him in advance of what he was in for...

"Bonjour, Monsieur Farraday." Suzanne addressed him quietly, with a curtsy of her more earthen-colored skirts. For whatever reason, she seemed to be dressed down compared to her parents. Even the amount of makeup she wore was wanting, at least when standing next to her mother. Her hair was straight, black, and this part of her at least was well cared for; shimmering in the late-afternoon sun.

All told, she was really quite beautiful.

"Does she... speak English?" Tovias asked meekly.

"A bit." Suzanne replied in a low, smooth tone, startling the mage, who for some reason suddenly felt extremely embarrassed. "Enough, I think."

"Of course." Tovias nodded, giving her as well as her parents another low bow, the best he could manage... mostly to hide the redness all about his face. "So... You wish for me to escort her around Bristol while you attend to the Pub Crawl?"

"Indeed." Festivus nodded. "It simply would not do to have her wandering along behind us while we do as we do best." He added with a mischievous grin.

Tovias would have agreed.

"Fare the well, we shall see thee anon. I trust that your afternoon shall be a pleasant one!"

"Yes..." Tovias nodded, watching with some small amount of regret as Festivus escorted the surprisingly-confident-in-Tovias couple back toward the Gypsy Vardo.

The mage took a silent breath, letting his gaze turn back to Suzanne, who was eyeing him with a mix of curiosity and amusement. He was still blushing terribly. Not enough he felt naked without his thick robes, it was rare he was ever left in the presence of a non-gypsy non-disciple non-performer non-merchant girl for very long... let alone for an entire afternoon. He had trouble even knowing where to begin.

"So... you are a gypsy?" Suzanne finally asked after a moment of uncomfortable silence.

"I am... sort of." He replied, nervous eyes drifting back to glance over at the rows of merchant stalls, then back to her.

"What is it that gypsies do?"

"...We... That is, they... have... they travel... they have been known to save the WORLD on occasion." He fumbled. It was pretty hard to pinpoint exactly what the Band of the Twisted Claw did. They could be as versatile as they could be completely unproductive.

"Is that so?" She certainly wasn't making this easy.

"It is." He nodded, biting his lower lip, straining for any topic that might be interesting without utterly confusing or terrifying her. "Um, we... they've a pet *troll*..."

"I should like to see a Troll." She stated, her expression a thoughtful one, although he swore he caught the briefest instant of a teasing smile on her face.

"WE DEPART!" He abruptly declared, a grand sigh of relief in his voice.

With that, Tovias turned and started off in the direction of the Lunar Camp, the young lady hiding a giggle as she followed along behind.

Chapter 12 – Entertaining Thoughts

Tovias' afternoon tending to the lovely Suzanne was a pleasant one indeed. Although he had expected more teasing and taunting on behalf of the gypsies, most of them seemed surprised if nothing else at his company.

⁶ To this day, I have yet to discover any link to the Mariage family and any worshippers of Tiamat. It is likely that, like Lucien, Lord Mariage and company were unaware of Festivus' true nature.

As promised, Tovias had taken her to the Lunar Camp, where they met Stirling the Troll. It was clear she was doing her best to be polite, but the mage knew few people could remain completely composed when confronted with a troll's pungence.

While Suzanne introduced herself to him, as well as to Vashta and the Spellworthy siblings, Tovias couldn't help glancing at the small hut just before Vashta and Gaia's garden.

The little hovel was there that they had taken the wounded Puddle after he'd brought her here earlier. The mage hoped that Puddle would come out of this none the worse for wear... but he couldn't help but wonder exactly how much she would remember upon awakening; whether or not she would remember whatever Loki had seen in his mind...

At any other time, the hut was where Thoren would take time from his duties to relax, or hold private audiences when on the Bristol grounds.

Of course, when his thoughts turned to Thoren, his features visibly darkened.

The fact that Thoren had had a hand in Lady Tso's disappearance had been a point of silent contention for Tovias... Granted, Edana Dragonborn held the dagger that landed the blow, and the Elemental Paragons acting on behalf of the Lord of Light were at greater fault, but they were conspicuously absent.

Aside from that, Thoren seemed to have supreme authority over a force that could probably overwhelm the Queen's Army with proper preparation. Coupled with the Gypsy leader's secretive origins, anyone could have been suspicious⁷.

He had tried so hard not to think about it, to accept his new life and family... and yet, there was a suspicion and anger in him that could not be quenched, a love- nay, an *obsession* he could not put behind him and... thanks to the appearance of this strange 'Alternate Estella' the previous night, the feeling that he was coming closer to being able to *do* something about it all.

"...Until that moment, as I was standing under the old tree, I never would have believed that a small jar of colored ooze could contain an otherworldly spirit. But there I was- the crone's Cauldron staring me in the face- and I could feel it; I could feel the current of demons and restless dead flowing- no- erupting like a geyser from its mouth. Before the foul things could so much as sully the Bristol air, however, they were pulled upward, sucked into the Ghost Traps the Order had come up with. I felt like I could just as easily ride the wave of invisible essence with but a leap. But I had more important things to worry about than surfing the winds; it was only a matter of time before the ghostly flood overwhelmed the traps, and buried Bristol- buried the WORLD- in ectoplasmic horror."

"Ecto...?" Suzanne asked with a tilt of her head.

"One of Aggie's words." Tovias explained with a shrug. He was just as lost as Suzanne was. "Just put emphasis on 'horror'."

"Oui. Please continue."

Tovias and Suzanne sat together in the Lunar Tribe camp, at the table near the garden. He had begun to tell her the story of the 'Chaos Rising'.... if for no other reason, to remind himself that it had all actually happened.

That, plus it was a very long story, and telling stories- as Talia had once told him- was something he did best.

In his old existence, he had enjoyed the lifestyle of nobility. The years of arranged play-dates and having anything he liked without lifting a finger... it was more than twenty years ago, and yet, he could still vaguely remember the sterile boredom of it all.

But now, working for his meals, scrimping and saving his meager wages for anything remotely frivolous, all of it was strangely satisfying. Even his brief time with Suzanne; while he couldn't be certain if they would ever meet again once Faire was over, it felt good to be in her company.

"I'll tell you the truth, Suzanne; I could not remember the incantation. I mean, I could remember 'Here there is', and that 'Light', 'Love' and 'Life' were involved, but... I could not remember what was where."

⁷ Thoren has entrusted the finer points of his background to Gaia, Talia, Vashta and other veterans of the Band; Anyone who has dealt with the Draco Disciples and seen their ability to capitalize on others' slightest weaknesses could understand Thoren's unwillingness to be forthcoming. Tovaais, here, seems to show more sympathy for the devil he knows than for the 'devil' he does not.

"Monsieur Farraday, it was a mere three LINES. I am certain you exaggerate." She replied. At first, she was incredulous, but as she watched his expression grow increasingly bashful, her features softened to a sympathetic smile.

"No. No I do not, Suzanne. My memory is horrible. Especially under pressure. That alone almost killed me in my first dealings with the Disciples."

Second, technically.

"But from the first moment- from the very first syllable I uttered, I felt the spell taking over. I wasn't speaking the words any longer, the spell spoke through ME. Then I sensed the spiritual geyser weaken and turn. The phantoms and monsters were all at once pulled back from whence they had come. Rose slammed the lid... and just like that, it was over. The danger to Bristol had passed... for the moment."

Once Suzanne was certain his story was complete, she gave a slight nod. That smile had not yet left her face... Perhaps she was simply being polite as the daughter of nobles, but that look was unlike anything he had received from Gypsy or Draco. There was nothing behind it, nothing beneath. Sincerity.

"Monsieur Farraday... It is an incredible story." She said. "I don't know if I can fully *believe* it all, but you certainly tell it well."

"Did I mention I'm a Bard?" Tovias replied awkwardly.

"And a damned fine one!" Tovias jumped once again as he heard a familiar voice approaching from nearby. He'd forgotten somehow that Talia Tale was a member of the Lunar Tribe.

"You ought hear him when he gets going on a tune or one of his... his 'sketches', he calls them." She said with a jovial smile as she came to stand before the two. She offered a reverence to Suzanne who instantly bade her to stand. "Who is this young lady, Tovias? She seems to be new in our circles."

"Talia Tale, Bard Supreme and dabbler in all trades, I introduce to you Young Lady Suzanne Mariage. She's our guest by the bidding of Festivus Merrier." Tovias explained in slow, careful tones.

"A pleasure, sure enough." Talia said with a smile. "So, has our Mage Champion proven suitable company for you, Lady Suzanne?" She continued.

"He has taught me much about your humble culture, and I have enjoyed it very much." She replied, a look of amusement crossing her features briefly. "Although I hate to impose upon your already generous hospitality, but I am terribly hungry..."

"Of course. I would hate to intrude." Talia said, shooting the two of them a mischievous smile.

Tovias, however, cleared his throat and looked somewhat awkwardly back to Talia. Slowly, he reached into his satchel and drew what remained of the money he had been given at the Vardo for his daily labors.

"Talia... would you mind taking Suzanne to the Buttery for me? You can bring her right back. I just... want to check something." He said quietly, handing Talia the coins and glancing back to Thoren's hut.

Talia followed his gaze, her expression briefly turning serious.

Normally, if the hut were being used for anything else, Thoren would not want him- or anybody else- anywhere near there... but under the circumstances, Talia was willing to give Tovias the benefit of the doubt.

"It would be my pleasure, Tovias. We shall expect thee back and ready to entertain upon our return!" She said, soon smiling again and sweeping an arm in an inviting gesture for Suzanne to follow her lead. Soon they were off, leaving Tovias alone.

Once they had gone, he turned and made his way to the hut.

Chapter 13 – A Fine Line...

Tovias silently opened the door to the hut, uncertain whether or not Puddle- no, *Lucy*- was awake or not, but it didn't matter. His curiosity and concern had the better of him.

Once the door had closed behind him, the light within was scarce; Only slivers of day shone in through the curtains that barely covered the hut's windows. Along the abode's north wall stretched a cot of a bed, in which lay a girl he almost didn't recognize at first... he was used to seeing her in her Jester's cap and mask.

Her eyes were closed, her breathing soft, her body covered with several thin blankets. Perhaps the only way he would have known it was in fact 'Puddle' was the familiar sound of her voice, audible even through her slumbering breath.

Tovias approached, sitting quietly on a chair across from the bed.

He hesitated, and then finally...

"I... I know you can't hear me..." He began softly, trying- ironically enough- not to rouse her. "But I guess... I guess some of this is my fault, isn't it? You being in this condition... I don't know how much of your strength Loki being

banished from you took away, and you probably wouldn't blame me for trying to help regardless, but... we weren't paying attention when the Dracos got ahold of you. None of us were. Most of this was because of that. That's cause enough to apologize, and I'm used to apologizing for things, so it might as well be me." He explained, eyes able to see her more clearly as they adjusted to the darkness.

"But the other thing- I don't mean to imply 'the more important thing'- is..." He stopped. He wasn't certain if he ought to say anything at all. Perhaps if she remembered nothing, his words were best left unsaid.

Then again, he had trusted her before knowing Loki was dwelling inside her, so why not now?

"When Loki looked into my mind and saw... whatever it was that he saw, could you see it, too?" He asked, although his body trembled lightly. "...I guess you did, didn't you? I suppose you have had other things on your mind, and in truth you wouldn't even know Lady Tso as the monster the Gypsies make her out to be... she was before your time with the Band. Before mine too, really, but that's not the point." Turning, he glanced out the sliver of window visible beyond the curtain to watch for Talia and Suzanne's return.

"I once told you- told Loki- that she was my salvation, Lucy. Something about seeing her- even for those few moments- was... unique. Special to me. I never would have thought to have joined the Band of the Twisted Claw if it weren't for her. My family hated Gypsies, and lit that fire of hatred within me as well, and when I heard of Lady Tso's demise, I wanted nothing more than revenge against them. I joined them for that very reason; I joined them so that I could train this body of mine to become strong enough to make them pay. The Band accepted me with open arms, not knowing who I was or caring that I had no talent, no strengths. In time, they did exactly what I had hoped, and look at me now. They gave me what I wanted... Gaia, Rose, Sydney, Adria, Aggie and the others... I used them, Lucy. I used them. I took every last ounce of knowledge and power they cared to give me, and I grew more powerful than any of us could have imagined..."

But then something happened. Something... I don't know if it's terrible or wonderous. I... only realized it recently. That my time with the Gypsies had given me something other than magical power; it gave me a sort of understandi- no- an *appreciation* for life I never had before.

If I'd been allowed to live my life up til now with my family, I can't imagine what I would be like; powerful, wealthy, but arrogant and cold..."

Tovias gently shook his head.

"But as cold and arrogant as they were, it does not stop me from missing them, loving them... they were taken from me, just as Lady Tso was... The Gypsies think so much of me. I am their Champion, their Lightbringer... more than anything, I'm their friend. I never thought I would have a real friend, let alone so many." He bowed his head deeply. "And yet... and yet..."

Looking out the window once more, he could see Suzanne and Talia approaching from the Buttery. He didn't have much longer.

"Was I... not meant to be content? To be happy? I don't understand..." At last, as though under the weight of his own words, he slumped. He cupped his head in his hands, teeth clenched.

"What can I do?" He shuddered. "All the power I have at my command, and- and nothing can quell the pain of loss... a whole new life, and yet at the center of it lies a monument to what's been ripped away, and I can't tell the Band. Not a one of them... or risk losing everything."

There was a soft knock at the door to the hut, and Tovias gave a quiet sigh.

Tovias wordlessly stood and made his way to the door. For a brief instant, he was worried that it might be Thoren on the other side.

Then he saw it.

Glancing down at where the afternoon sunlight leaked through the bottom of the door, he noticed something he hadn't seen upon entering the hut. It had been too dark, and his focus hadn't been on the ground beneath him.

It was a crisp, clean, very official looking piece of parchment, folded into thirds and branded with a wax seal. It had likely been slid under the door earlier in the day... with Thoren as its intended recipient.

Curiously, Tovias crouched and took it up off of the floor. As he looked closer at it, the wax seal began to look very, very familiar.

It was the insignia of the Rhetshire House.

"I was the one who took her to safety on the day she was wounded. I know where she might be found... And if you bring Scarlett the will, I would be obliged to tell you everything that I know."

His body shivered as it would from a chill winter breeze.

But in truth, his body felt terribly numb.

Talia walked to the door of the hut, gently knocking on the door... which opened even as her knuckles rapped upon the wooden surface. Tovias soon emerged, fussing a bit with his tunic.

"Young Lady Suzanne is ready for her dinner entertainment... have you said what needs saying?" She asked, then quirked an eyebrow at the mage as he quietly closed the door behind him. "Do I wish to know what you wanted with Puddle?"

"Just to check on her, Talia. I know I'm not exactly qualified, but you can't blame me after I dragged her about all morning. But what song do you think I ought to sing for Suzanne?" He asked.

Sydney was right; he WAS quick to change the subject whenever he was uncomfortable discussing personal matters... but at that point he was so paranoid about other things he had not considered the vaguely suggestive nature of himself and Miss Thatcher alone together.

"T'is well. I understand." She smiled. Whether she believed him completely or not, he would never know. "And as for the song, not to worry, I'm sure you'll think of something."

As they turned and began to make their way back toward the Lunar Tribe table, Tovias gently brushed his hand over his tunic again... hoping from the bottom of his pounding heart that no one would notice the parchment tucked beneath it.

Chapter 14 – The Origin of Tovia Farraday

Before the Fairegoers knew it, the sun had dipped below the horizon, bathing the sky in a red-orange twilight glow. The now-closed Vardo had wheeled its way back out the city gates as- all around them- the revelers sang songs to bid the day farewell.

Tovias had never gotten the chance to drop off the Will at the estate; Between Suzanne and the gypsies, he never got any time alone or an excuse to break away from them since acquiring it. He supposed he could have dashed off long enough to slip it under the front door of the estate, but that would have been foolish. The deed was his ace-in-the-hole, should their little deal begin to go awry. He had no reason to doubt Ruby knew where Tso was. It corroborated what Lady Gaia had told him some months ago.

How willing Ruby would be to *supply* said information? He would cross that bridge when he reached it.

The Draco Disciples had already figured out Tovia's dirty little secret. In the end though, that had very little to do with his drive to fulfill Scarlett's request. Sure, the Disciples could tell the Band of the Twisted Claw outright and Tovia would get anything from a slap on the wrist to a death sentence, depending who heard it first. But on that same token, Tovia being in the Band was exactly what made him useful to the Disciples. They would do no such thing.

Let them believe they were in complete control of his actions. This opinion of him only worked in his favor; Find Lady Tso, or confront Thoren Grymm at last. The matter of the Will would result in one of the two, and that suited him fine.

The Mage Champion shivered, his back leaning against a tree near to the gypsy's campfire. It was a much larger bonfire than usual- or rather, a much larger seating area. By now the tents were usually up and most of the Band had already given in to exhaustion or inebriation and gone to bed. Only a few sat around the campfire, swapping stories in laughing tones of interesting people they had met that day or unique moments they themselves had experienced. The mage rarely indulged. He usually remained in his tent on the pretense that he was researching or reading or some such thing. After everyone went to bed, however, he would leave his tent, and sit next to the fire to write one of his meaningless letters.

Tonight was different. As he glanced around the tree, he could see each member of the Band making space for themselves and for each other, leaving a large open area on the opposite side...

An area meant for *him*.

It wasn't just the Band; He saw Festivus Merrier laughing and talking with the gypsies. He could see Grease sitting near Adria, most likely talking about Tovia's adventures in the Bear Pit earlier that day. He could see- Oh God- he could see the Normyl Sisters sitting on the fringes of the gypsy numbers. He even saw Suzanne and her parents seated close to Festivus, the elder Mariages inebriated enough not to mind the noises and scents the gypsies offered for their refined senses.

He knew even Lucy was here, having been moved inside the Vardo before the Gypsies had left that day.

This wasn't fair. No one else had had to entertain a crowd this large when telling their own tales of woe. Sydney certainly wanted him to suffer, having informed this many people about it. But then, he'd told a few people himself, intentionally or not...

As he attempted to suss out inwardly just how much of this was his own fault, his view of the assembled crowd was blocked by Sydney Dove herself.

"Are you ready, Tovias?" She asked, her voice frustratingly casual. Of course it was. This was a simple task for her, ordering him about. For him, it was torture.

At least he had his robe back, and thanks to it there was very little chance anyone would see the envelope hidden beneath the layers of fabric.

He walked out from behind the tree, making his way to the campfire- as slowly as he could possibly manage- he could hear someone call out his name, followed by a round of what felt like disingenuous applause. He had never felt more self-conscious in his life.

Talia Tale then began to speak, immediately bringing the assembled crowd to a respectful silence.

"Tovias Farraday has been with the Band of the Twisted Claw for only a few months. Yet, in that short time, he has attained the rank of Champion, but I would argue he has become far more to us than simply that; With all that he has done for us and continues to do for us, I would take great pleasure in calling him my colleague and my friend. He may have started out quiet, and perhaps just the slightest bit too serious and proud for his own good, but I think we can all agree that things have certainly changed- both for him and for the Band of the Twisted Claw. I would like to believe that this change is one for the better... of course, if it turns out to be the opposite, I would like to remind everyone that he is a member of the *Order*."

There were a few hisses and boos from the Order of the Sun members, while the Lunar Tribe- and the non-Band members in attendance- laughed long and loudly.

"Nevertheless, this night, I have the pleasure of introducing master Farraday, who has a story to tell the lot of us; the story of his family, and how it is he came to Bristol."

There was another bit of applause, Tovias stepping forth into the cleared patch beyond the fire. His shadow was large against the Vardo behind him... perhaps lending an appropriate atmosphere as the mage looked downward to the flames, then out at the assembly.

He cleared his throat, swallowed, and began his tale.

"My... Uncle's great grandfather... his name was Wolfgang Von Kaiser. He was a mercenary who plied his trade as a hired killer in the Germanies almost one hundred and fifty years ago. Legends claim that he was more monster than man; that he felt no pain, felt no remorse, that he killed for the enjoyment, for the taste of blood. His lust for it could never be sated."

"Who does *that* remind you of?" Vashta muttered under her breath.

"Entire entourages of bodyguards. Beloved heroes. Nobles, women, children, the sick, the homeless... he killed the weak because he could never stand the sight of human weakness. He killed the strong to prove his own strength to himself, and to the Gods themselves. However, there came a day when his sword swing came more slowly, his legs moved less cleverly, his body began to strain under the weight of his armor... age comes to all of us one day or another. So he took the blood money he had earned over his many years as a sellsword, and with it bought a plot of land in the German outskirts, near the ocean. He built what would become the House Von Kaiser, in the midst of many other noble houses. None of them were entirely happy to have this 'man' as part of their territory, but they soon learned to respect him.

You see, that was the one thing that Wolfgang sought more than anything else: Power. Physical power. Political power. Any sort of power. With power comes respect. Or fear. Both achieved the same goal. He built a Noble House entirely upon his dark reputation."

"You're... you mean t'say you're one of these 'Von Kaisers'?" Will asked, having seated himself in the front row, but now a bit leery about this decision.

"...In a sense." Tovias sighed, happy Will had stopped him. He could have gone on about Wolfgang Von Kaiser... Gods knew the rest of his family did. "My family- the Farraday family- married into the Von Kaiser family several years before I was born. My maternal aunt, Elissa Arathos, was chosen by Manfred Von Kaiser as his wife... When Wolfgang married, he selected a wife of 'substance'. A strong woman. None of the noblewomen could stomach his taste for killing and death. He considered them too weak to be able to produce offspring worthy of his name.

However, by the time Manfred became head of House Von Kaiser, the family had lost much of Wolfgang's zeal for killing, his lust for greater power. Their only concern was in asserting the power his reputation bestowed upon them; they still disparaged the weak, taxing surrounding lands into the ground, and using the money to enlist others to wipe out the poor, the sick, even the Band of the Twisted Claw would not have been spared had they crossed within our borders... They relied on their name and money to force others to follow their will.

And follow they did. The Von Kaiser family was for a long time the wealthiest and most feared Noble House in that part of the Germanys. My family married into theirs... Funny. I can remember every last snippet of history regarding the Von Kaiser family, but nothing of the Farraday family... or even the family my mother came from.

I had a sister, about a year younger than I... Genevieve. Growing up, our servant read us little, other than stories of the Von Kaiser house, nothing but books of bloody battles and records of military engagements... things no child should be forced to hear. I wasn't even to be named Heir to the Von Kaiser name as I was not of their bloodline. Nevertheless, I was schooled to be an authority on the family name as though it were the only thing in the world that mattered."

"T'is a fine way to build character," Gertrude nodded, "but I am not too sure about the sort'a character we're *building*."

"Over time, rumors of the Von Kaiser family's wealth and their declining strength began to spread... and then one night, I heard it. I heard the smashing and splintering of wood. There was a breaking of glass, and the screaming of our servants as their quarters were raided. By then my father and mother, my uncle and aunt, all of them had awakened... since it was only the servants' quarters, they weren't about to charge downstairs yet; they were still content to remain in their rooms and ponder what they ought do about these invaders, come up with some strategy... but then we heard my sister's scream. She must have gone down for a night snack...

My mother and my aunt took me and rushed me toward one of the doors as my father and my uncle armed themselves for battle. They knew at eight years old I would only get in the way... but what they didn't know was that this was more than just a handful of burglars and vandals. There was a virtual army of them. They must have been just as afraid of our family as anyone else to have brought so many... and they were waiting for us outside.

Lord Von Kaiser and my father never emerged from the house. They, and our servants, had probably all been killed by that point. But I could still hear the screams of my sister and the handmaidens... my mother and aunt Elissa had daggers, but these men... they were every bit the bloodthirsty monsters Wolfgang was, but what they lacked in strength and skill they made up for in numbers. All I remember were the cries... and then falling. My mother must have pushed me off of the cliff overlooking the ocean in a last gambit to keep me alive. I had better chances with the sea than with those... things. The last thing I heard- the last thing I saw before blacking out was the smoke of the burning House Von Kaiser billowing into the air, my ears still ringing with the screams... and the hellish cheering of the demons responsible."

Those in attendance were silent as the grave. Only the fire saw fit to break the silence with its whispering heat and sudden crackles.

"...When I awoke, I had washed up on shore. I was still in German lands, still dressed in my silk bedclothes." Tovias continued quietly. "I could barely walk. I was bleeding in a few places. I was dizzy. But I was not far from a small port village where I might find aid. I crawled there on all fours, my mind filled with the horrible things I had just experienced... but when I arrived, when I told the guards my name and what had happened..."

He hesitated.

"They laughed. They laughed, and laughed and shouted the news to the whole city as though it were some miracle. 'The House Von Kaiser has fallen' they said. They didn't cease until all men, women and children in all households were awake and celebrating the news... that my family had been slaughtered. As for me... As for me, they took out their long-standing fear of my family on me. They beat me, and- quite literally- threw me out of town.

As it happened this was the general opinion of *all* surrounding lands. The fall of the House of Von Kaiser was seen as a blessing, especially since- somehow- the savage barbarians and pirates responsible had disappeared after destroying my home and taking all of my family's wealth. All I had left of theirs was their name and useless knowledge of how great and fearsome we once were.

I wandered... days- one village to the next only to be mocked and beaten to within an inch of my life. No family. No friends. Weeks- starving and demanding food, then asking for food, then begging for food, then begging for SCRAPS. Months- seeking shelter and finding none no matter how far from my homeland I walked. Years- trying to find some way of making a life for myself, but having no skills beyond knowledge no one needs or wants, forced to live the life of a filthy urchin ...Five years- Wearing nothing but shredded rags, feet blistered and bloody. Ten years- an old gray robe with a torn seam at its underarm became my most cherished possession. Fifteen years- Thrown off of ship after ship until finally one sailed away without noticing the red footprints leading into its cargo hold, with me huddled inside. I should never have survived, and yet, I lived to suffer day after day.

And finally... almost twenty years had passed. One year ago, I set foot in Bristol... it might well have been this very day."

His voice had gone hoarse. His body was trembling with exhaustion... the thought of it all coming back to him...

Then he felt a hand on his shoulder. Turning weakly, he saw Talia giving him a somber smile.

"When I... When I came here, I could just feel something... something that made it special. And though I never found out what it was until a year hence, I... I could not have imagined just how special it truly *was*- could not have imagined the kind of person it would make of me... and... I'm thankful. So thankful... for all of it..."

There was another moment of silence as Tovias' voice finally died.

At this, the end of the mage champion's tale, Talia finally spoke again.

"Thank *you*, Tovias." She began. "Even in spite of all you've been through, after all you've done for us, thank the Gods as well for sending you to us."

Tovias stared back at Talia, lower lip quivering just a bit.

The gentle clap of Suzette's smooth hands came first. Then the slow, approving applause of Gertrude. Her sisters followed suit instantly. Talia nodded and joined, followed by other Lunar Tribe members, the Order- not to be outdone, especially by the Tribe, Festivus, soon all in attendance.

Tovias raised his eyes, looking at them all... tears now streaming freely down his cheeks.

However, as he looked from one smiling face to another, he saw one face that was not smiling.

To his surprise, it was not Thoren's.

It was Rose's.

When the applause faded, a voice piped up from the half of the audience the Lunar Tribe gravitated toward.

"Oi... so I s'pose those letters you been writin'... to the family, then?" Lillith asked. He'd expected Sydney to have been the one to ask this, but perhaps the younger girl had just been a hair quicker.

"Y- Yes." Tovias said automatically... but at this, he noticed a flash of movement from the corner of his eye as Rose stood and bolted from the campfire... rushing off into the darkening woods.

All of the other gypsies looked on after her with confusion... but Tovias' face went pale.

He hadn't forgotten the previous night...

"Why don'cha go after 'er, Tovias?" His thoughts came to an instant halt as Thoren's voice rang out from behind the other attendees.

The way in which he said it, a sort of knowingness, made Tovias wary.

The mage blinked, reaching up and wiping away his tears with his robe. With a final nod to Talia and turning to follow Rose into the woods, hand unconsciously pressed against his chest.

Chapter 15 – Mutiny

As Tovias pursued Rose, running deeper and deeper into the woods surrounding Bristol, he felt his weary body grow lighter. Faster. Spurred on by fear.

There were only three reasons why Rose would have run off as she had; His story could have affected her deeply, and she didn't wish to cry in front of the Band, but that didn't seem likely. Perhaps she needed to priv, but the grim expression on her face didn't bear *that* sort of urgency... plus the exchange between himself and Lillith just before Rose had run off led him to the only possible solution.

She knew. She had to. In his mind he replayed over and over the previous night as he sat near the campfire, when she had surprised him...

"I'm sorry, Rose. I didn't mean to-... to do that. I just... I'm sorry, I can't focus... I had waited for nightfall so I could have a bit of peace and-"

"Well, I beg your pardon. Fine then, do whatever it is you're doing. I don't mind."

"I didn't mean-! ... She'll probably forget all about this in the morning."

Except she hadn't. Somehow she had figured it all out- *Rose Peregrine*, of all people.

Tovias came to a halt in the center of a grassy clearing.

"Rose?" He called out. It was unnervingly quiet. Looking around, he could no longer see the campfire in the distance. "Rose, where are you?"

For a moment, his heart grew still, his mind aching from inward prayers he had been mistaken...

"Tov... Tovas?"

After a moment, her sweet voice called out from the menacing silence. Slowly, she emerged from the woods and stepped before him, hair flickering gold in the pale light

"I haven't seen you all day. I didn't even realize it until this evening. You have not been... avoiding me, have you?" He asked, trying to sound innocent just in case he was wrong- dearly *hoping* he was wrong... but from the way her eyes fell, searching for nothing in the grass beneath them, his hopes didn't last. After all she had been through during the incident with Loki, he knew when she was genuinely troubled. "Rose, please. Talk to me... I-"

"OhToviasIdonotknowwhattosay,

itwasanaccident,Ididnot~~meant~~totouchitbutthenIsawitandIjustdonot*understand*, Tovas!"

He staggered back in surprise from the sudden outburst. She began to pace in circles around the clearing, speaking in panicked tones, her arms flailing dramatically with every unbroken syllable.

"Rose, calm down. *slow* down! I-!" He began, reaching out to touch her shoulder, but all at once she went silent and shied away from him, eyeing him warily.

"Rose, I... I need you to tell me what's wrong." He explained quietly. "I think... I may *know* what it is, but-"

"... I was cleaning the fire pit this morning, and I suppose my hand brushed one of the cinders- a cinder from- from a letter you burned... I did not understand what it was that I saw; I saw Lady Katherine Tso, and I saw Thoren..."

"You-..." Tovas' innards sank, collecting into a nauseous pool.

The cinders... Keepers truly were amazing creatures.

"I know you were not lying at the camp. I believe what you said about your family, and your wanderings... about your feelings for us... I believe you, Tovas, but I do not... I beg of you, please tell me what have you to do with Lady Tso?" She asked, glancing up into his eyes, but both immediately looked away.

"I do not know, Rose." He replied after a few moments of thought. "It is very difficult to explain-"

The end of the sentence was punctuated by a lunge, Rose seizing him by the shoulders. Shaking him frantically, Tovas had to brace himself so as not to have his neck broken.

"Tovas, Lady Tso is a monstrous person! She is not... not *even* a person! She is *half* a person, or something of that sort! She does not have a soul! She does not- How do you even know her? Is she- has she returned? You must-"

"Rose!" Tovas replied sharply, reaching up and taking her by her arms. "Rose... I met Lady Katherine Tso year last. When I first came to Bristol. Even before I met the Band... You may not believe it, but she was the first person in a very long time who did not instantly dismiss me as human trash... For whatever reason, she..." He bowed his head with a heavy sigh. "No matter what the Band thinks of her, she was the first 'friendly' face I had seen in almost twenty years... and that's how I will always think of her... after what happened with Tristan, I know you, at least, could understand me... It is not as though it matters anymore, though. Only the Draco Disciples know where she is now... if she even still lives. Believe me when I say I would never let the Draco Disciples hurt you or the Band, just... just that there is much that I owe to her; in a strange way, she was the one who led me to you."

"And... Thoren?" Rose asked, still visibly distressed at the mere mention of Lady Tso.

Tovas grit his teeth.

This was not at all how he'd envisioned himself explaining this, and most definitely not to whom.

"... Thoren helped facilitate the disappearance of Lady Tso... and to this day he refuses to divulge any information he has about her..." His shoulders slumped slightly. "He has made it perfectly clear what would happen to anybody who goes around looking for her." He explained, turning away from her.

"Tovas, please." Rose took another step toward him, wringing her hands. "All that Lady Tso did was cause pain and suffering any way she could. Most of us have known Thoren for years, and he has done nothing but protect Bristol- protect *us*! I am certain he only wants to protect you as well."

"From what?!" Tovas suddenly snapped, rounding on her. "Rose, look at the Band of the Twisted Claw. Look at what *we* have accomplished. Have you- have *we- ever* needed him?!" His voice had become rather frantic now, eyes glinting with mounting anger. Rose watched him in growing apprehension.

"Tovas, please! You can't-... you musn't-"

"He may well be using *us* as a shield from the Disciples, Loki and the like, even as he uses his mysterious, unknowable reputation as a shield from *us*! Here *we* are, fighting *his* battles, and all the while he has us believing that we need *his* protection!"

The silence was deafening... and Tovas smiled weakly as he spoke again, glancing toward the forest:

"...Don't you, Thoren?"

Rose said nothing, words still lodged in her throat as she turned as well... to watch the familiar hulking silhouette approach from the dark woods.

"A right pretty speech, lad." Thoren Grymm said casually, watching as the mage stepped back- away from both him and Rose. "Though I can't help noticin' ye left out the part about the Rhettschire Estate."

Tovias' eyes narrowed. He ought to have known Thoren had already figured it out. In a way, he had. He'd at least assumed he would, given Thoren's uncanny sixth sense for most things that happened in Bristol.

"So you see fit to speak so ill of me to the Band, and yet, you keep the fact that you were going to sell us out to the Disciples a secret." He asked, finally emerging into the clearing.

"Rose..." Tovias looked to her, watching as she shuffled ever so slightly in Thoren's direction. "I took the Will of Lord Butler Rhettschire from Thoren's hut, and I planned to give it to the Draco Disciples. In exchange, Ruby Nightshade promised to tell me what has happened to Lady Tso and where I might find her... to give me the information the Band has denied me."

"What?!" Rose blinked, seemingly uncertain whether to feel outrage, or confusion as she had no idea who Butler Rhettschire was.

"What would the Band have done with Rhettschire's estate?" Tovias asked. "They have just as little right to it as Scarlett does."

"The Band of the Twisted Claw had no part in Lord Rhettschire's death. Scarlett O'Hemlock could no' say likewise. *That* gives us the right." Thoren replied.

"Nevertheless."

"You know I can't let you do that, lad." The elder man stated plainly.

"Why not?" Tovias scowled, his own hand already caressing its fingers over the wand tucked into his sleeve. "Thoren Grymm and the Band of the Twisted Claw can't handle the Draco Disciples if they have a few extra gold pieces in their coffers? Look at how much more powerful the Band is than they are. Perhaps *you* still fear them, but the *Band* is more than capable of countering any move that they make. We've all but *proven* that much." He turned to Rose, who merely looked away.

"I've seen what the Draco Disciples are capable of. Not one of the Band would dare to give the Disciples even an inch. More likely than not, they'd leave all of Bristol a burning wreck... Is that what you want?"

Thoren and Tovias stared at one another across the clearing, Rose's eyes darting back and forth between the two men.

"What I *want*, Thoren, is information. Information you have the Band too frightened to give me. Information about... about someone important to me. I have no choice but to turn to the Disciples instead."

"It hasn't occurred to you they may just be using you, that they may be intending to kill you? Sacrifice you?"

"It has." Tovias admitted. "And I will cross that bridge when I reach it. They will not be allowed to stand in my way, and nor will you."

"...I suppose I cannae change yer mind, then." Thoren sighed, and slowly made his way toward Tovias. For all of the power the mage possessed, Thoren seemed to bear his usual wordless determination. "Dracos cannae be trusted... particularly the one ye seek."

"What in *hell* would you know about it!?" Tovias demanded, his hand suddenly gripping his wand and thrusting out toward the Gypsy Leader. Thoren did not so much as flinch as the crystal at its tip flared... but let out a gasp of surprise as a ray of light flew past him, a hissing sound of burning hair and skin emanating as it brushed against the back of his palm.

Despite a brief look of shock that passed over his features, Thoren did not hesitate. His other hand siezed and drew his rapier, his good eye glaring at the mage.

"I know that they took my family from me... took the lives of many innocent people. They took my eye... as well as the woman I love." Thoren said, in a low tone that Rose probably did not hear.

"Just as you would take the woman I love from *me*." Tovias snarled, Thoren barely managing to dodge as another ray of light blazed forth from his wand. "Claim the moral high ground if you wish, but you're no different than them! You would just as soon stop anyone else from finding her so you can have her head to add to your 'glorious reputation! Is *that* it!?"

Even as Thoren raised his free hand, the words of magic on his lips, he overadjusted in his efforts to dodge another flurry of bright lances, one of them striking him in the arm and sending him spinning to the ground. Tovias pantingly straightened his posture, standing over the Gypsy Leader.

"Now, Thoren... it looks like you have a choice to make." Tovias murmured. "It ends here either way, but *how* it ends is up to you. The Rhettschire Will is staying with me, unless you can tell me what I want to know."

He was silent for a moment, eyes flinching away before looking back to Thoren's.

"Help me find Lady Tso, or..."

"Tovias, *stop this!*" Rose cried out, looking back and forth between the two. "I don't understand why you're fighting! The Band of the Twisted Claw... we're family! We're all family... isn't that what you wanted, Tovias?"

"She's right, Tovias." Thoren nodded, still tending to the hissing wounds on his arm and hand. "Ye don't want to do this. If ye keep this up-

"Then *what*?! The mighty Thoren Grymm will strike me down with his unparalleled power?!" Tovias swung his wand out at an arc, burning a line in the grass near his feet.

"You think this isn't all I've ever wanted, Rose? A family? People who care about me? You wonder why I'm willing to throw it all away for... for someone like *her*?" He shook his head weakly, though his wand-arm remained firmly trained on Thoren, "...Why should I have to choose? After losing everything, why would you insist I surrender more?"

Tovias' eyes closed, and as they opened again, his arm leveled to aim directly at Thoren's chest.

"It doesn't matter... At this point, I am lost no matter what I do." He briefly glanced at her... then back to Thoren.

"... I-"

Suddenly, there was a flash of light.

Rose Peregrine cried out in surprise as Tovias sailed past her, and landed in a singed heap on the grassy forest floor.

Thoren looked to where the mage had fallen, his lips betraying a silent sigh of relief. He then let his gaze drift to the edge of the clearing where the robed form of Randalph the Blue Wizard had emerged, hand outstretched.

"I do hope my interruption was not unwelcome." He announced grimly, shaking his head as he looked from Rose to Thoren, and back to Tovias' fallen body. "Regrettable as it is."

"Nay." Thoren murmured, leaning against a nearby tree, arms still wracked with pain. "Rose... if you would. Find the will. Tovias should have it somewhere on him."

Rose was frozen, still stunned with terror and confusion... but at last her limbs began to obey his command. Crouching at Tovias' side, she opened the mage's pack. Not finding it within, she bit her lower lip and brushed a hand over his chest. She let out a gasp as Tovias' body twitched... but she felt it. With some hesitation, she reached down into his collar, over bare skin until she got hold of the folded parchment.

Drawing it free, she took it- as well as another item- over to Thoren.

He accepted the parchment, then looked with bewilderment at the other object...

It was the jar of salve Aggie had given Tovias to deal with Puddle's burns. Weakly, Rose opened it, and offered it to him.

Thoren's face darkened from a look of stoic relief to something more suited to his namesake.

"Thoren... What just-...?" Rose asked, voice and body trembling.

"I don't know, Rose." Thoren murmured, taking the salve and beginning to tend to the seared skin left by Tovias' wand. "I... honestly don't know."

Chapter 16 – Echoes No Longer

Tovias didn't need to open his eyes to realize where he was. The bitter kiss of cold stone against his cheek, dankness in the air, the sound of rats and the faint smell of sewage told the tale.

Then again, it was open his eyes, or watch as his mind replayed over and over again the potential consequences of his actions...

The worst part- he had quickly realized- was that he had opened up to the Band, told them of his unfortunate history only moments before attacking Thoren. He had leaned enough about trust and friendship to know what would happen when they were betrayed.

Most of them would probably meet him with a somber shake of the head. Others, repressed rage. Still others- Adria, most likely- would respond with rage that was considerably *less* repressed.

The images of their faces were almost more than he could bear to think about... but what was worse, the idea that soon enough it wouldn't just be images. Thoren and Rose would tell the Band, and then...

Tovias sat up slowly, hugging his knees to his chest and resting his chin upon them. He stared listlessly at the cold floor of the dungeon, immersed in the silence around him.

"What... what in hell have I done?"

"What you thought was right, Tovias." Tovia looked up, beyond the bars of his jail cell.

Estella- the *other* Estella- was leaning in that familiar languid manner of hers against the opposite wall. "Even if the one-eyed oaf could never understand."

"I... He could have helped me, Estella." He murmured, shivering in the cold air of the cell. "If he and the Band are so afraid of Lady Tso, we could have come together, kicked in Ruby's door and *made* her tell us where she is! That way, no matter *what* became of the Will, I... I could have..."

"And what would you have done when Band tried to *kill* her when you discovered her whereabouts? What then, Tovias?"

"I-..." Tovias faltered.

About an hour after their confrontation with Tovias, Thoren stood with Rose at the gypsy Vardo.

Thoren's burns were less noticeable now, as were Rose's tear-stricken eyes. She hadn't quite managed to come to grips with the events that had just transpired. For his part, Randalf seemed more morose than anything else.

After knocking the mage unconscious and relieving him of the Will, the salve and- of course- his wand, Randalf had taken upon himself the unhappy task of transporting Tovias into the gates of Bristol and into its dungeon (Given Randalf's reputation as one of the Great Wizards, he could even enter at night if he wished to... not like the guards could stop him).

He had also taken the liberty of placing what he called 'dampening runes' upon Tovias- a final failsafe measure to ensure that- wand or no- he could no longer manipulate magical energies to their full extent. It was safe to assume Tovias wouldn't be going anywhere anytime soon.

"You cannot keep this from everyone forever, Thoren." Rose said quietly as she followed Thoren through the campsite, approaching the Vardo. "Especially not after tonight... I am not sure /can."

"The fact is, we dunnae know *what* this was." Thoren grumbled back, raising a foot on the ledge outside the Vardo wagon door. "And where the bloody hell is Talia?"

"Thoren... when I was possessed by the Banshee Comb, Tovias held me back to make certain I would not reclaim it when it was stripped from me..." She began with a shudder, not wishing to relive those moments, but with some effort she spoke again, "He... touched me. And I saw much of his childhood, the years he was alone, all of the time he wandered..." She said in a near-whisper, looking every which way to be certain they weren't being overheard. Finally, she brought her bleary eyes back to meet his. "... as a Keeper, I should have seen *this*, should I not? How could he have hidden it?"

A ripple of concern passed over Thoren's features... but he said nothing. He simply turned away.

At that moment, they both noticed the steady approach of footsteps through the grass. Talia had arrived from whatever errand Thoren had sent her on carrying a small stack of books.

"After years of starving, wandering, loneliness, hoping until your hopes burned down to nothing, you finally did it, Tovias. You discovered friendship, happiness, power beyond your wildest imaginings... but only now do you see that this happiness and our Mistress cannot coexist. By now, Thoren Grymm has told the Band of your treachery. He has branded you a liar, a thief and a Draco Disciple sympathizer. Even now they probably wait for the coming of dawn for when they may deal out the punishment they feel you so richly deserve."

"Why?" Tovias asked in a shaky whisper. "Why didn't you- If you have been here all this time... why did you not you tell me this would happen?"

"You had to realize the truth on your own." Estella replied, absently balancing an intricately carved wand on the tip of one finger.

"So you let me suffer for my own good..." Tovias murmured, rolling his eyes. "Why? Why me, Estella? What do you stand to gain from all of this? Look at me; The Band hates me, the city of Bristol will probably execute me as a witch without their protection, I failed at bringing the Draco Disciples the will so I will never see Lady Tso..." Slowly he raised his hands, looking over the backs of his palms. "I can't... I can't even use my magic anymore..."

His face fell, eyes squeezing shut in an effort to hold back the tears... if anyone, he didn't want the smirking, spiteful young woman to see him weep.

"Well, that makes *one* of us, anyway."

Tovias' eyes shot back up to her, wide as he watched her lean up and off the wall. Lowering her wand, there was a flash of light, and the gate swung open- its lock now a lump of useless molten iron.

"Es- Estella!?" Tovias gasped, stumbling to his feet. "Wh- What have you-"

"I was thinking of just leavin you in 'ere to wallow in your sorrow a bit longer. But it is not up to me." She explained in a facetious monotone. "Get out'a there."

"B-But... But what about-!?" He began, but he was unable to gather his thoughts. Up until that moment, this ghostly figure had been little more than a hallucination. Something that may exist nowhere but in his own mind. But as he stared at the melted lock on his cage, he knew... she was real.

"The guards?" Estella asked, shrugging and pointing up and down the dungeon hall... which was now littered with lightly armed and armored bodies.

"Y- You *killed* them!?" Tovias demanded in shock.

"And it shall be one more crime on *your* head if you are caught." She snapped back, reaching back and grabbing his sleeve.

Body numb with terror, Tovias could only allow himself to be led from the dungeon into the Bristol night.

"Wh-... Where are we going!?" He asked in a hiss.

"Where do you think?" Estella replied.

"We're going to see our Mistress."

"Thoren, I have looked into Tovias' story, and he has told not but truths." Talia said firmly as she placed her stack of books on the footstep leading to the Vardo door. The three of them stood together, far from earshot of the other gypsies. "The Von Kaiser family is- or was- exactly how Tovias described them. Straight up to Wolfgang himself. The Farraday Family is from England, but moved to the Germanies en-masse upon marrying into the family."

"What about the Arathos family?" Thoren persisted, his good eye glinting with suspicion.

"Nothing. Other than the family tree, listed as being married to Andrew Farraday- Tovias' father." Talia murmured. "I am assuming it was a psuedonym."

"It probably is." Thoren nodded thoughtfully.

"Why is any of this important?" Rose asked, having composed herself somewhat, but still visibly uncomfortable. "Should we not be... what should we be doing?"

"There is more to that man than any of us thought- more than he is telling. Perhaps more than he *knows*." Thoren grumbled. "One of us should have noticed it before." Again, he glanced down at his singed arm and hand. "He may have learned magic from the Order of the Sun and the Lunar Tribe... but the energy he used was not like either."

"It could not have been..." Talia agreed, looking over the wounds. "...It is not even something the Draco Disciples could have cooked up. Otherwise they would have used it themselves."

"I asked Randalf to do a bit of his own research after dropping Tovias off at the jail." Thoren nodded, beginning to wrap a bandage around his hand and arm. "If anyone can figure it out-"

At that moment, much to all their surprise, the door to the wagon opened. It took a moment for Talia and Rose to recognize the girl inside.

"Puddle." Thoren turned, nodding slightly.

Indeed, the young woman was no longer wearing her jesters' attire. Instead, she wore ill-fitting gypsy attire- a few bits from the Band's contingent of 'spares'. Her hair was in disarray and she still looked rather pale, but she didn't appear patient enough to go back to her bed.

"You should be resting!" Rose said, her voice gentle with concern, but still a bit weak in general.

"We were just discussing the-" Talia began, but Lucy promptly ignored her.

"I know well enough what you were discussing." She said quickly, gasping as she nearly stumbled over the books on the step down from the Vardo. "... I've got some bad news."

Thoren, Talia and Rose glanced at one another.

"Did you say that Tovias was in *prison*?"

"Please, Lucy, lay down. You're-" Rose persisted, reaching out and touching her shoulder, but Lucy weakly batted it away.

"...Tovias attacked Thoren." Rose replied quietly, looking unnervedly back over to the rest of the tents. "We had to be certain he would not lash out again until we could-..."

Lucy sighed, looking from her to Thoren's hand to his arm, and up to his good eye.

"...When Loki was still inside my mind, Tovias spoke to me... He was so troubled about his feelings for this 'Lady Tso'- feelings he couldn't explain. He knew this would be the result, how you would react."

"Could we... could we not have helped him?" Rose asked, looking to Thoren. "Certainly he would have understood the truth before things got too far out of hand."

"We could not risk that." Thoren grunted insistently. "You saw what happened."

"That was not entirely his fault!" Rose said... but suddenly clapped a hand over her lips, the words startling even herself.

Lucy looked to the Keeper, sighing.

"It is not too late to talk to him." The Fool said quietly. "We... I would like to go with you- to the prison- and we can *all* speak to him."

"... Very well." Thoren sighed after a moment's thought. "I will get Randalf back; he can escort us into the city. I just hope that you lot are certain of yourselves." He glanced back through the trees, along the path back toward Bristol, "I'm not quite convinced."

"I will see if I cannot learn more about the Arathos clan." Talia offered, nodding to Rose and Puddle before looking back to the pile of books.

"I just... hope it isn't too late." Rose said quietly, biting her lower lip.

Chapter 17 – Race to the End

The Rhettsire Estate was not the most warm and inviting place to begin with. However, with the coming of the night it looked outright ghastly. It seemed more like a mausoleum than a luxurious manor house. The dim light enhanced its pallor, long gnarled shadows of tree branches raking across its moonlit face.

"I'll not be with you for this bit, Tovias." The alternate Estella whispered into the trembling mage's ear.

"Without spell or sword, you will have only your wits to rely upon."

Tovias nodded, biting his lower lip in hopes that the mild pain would curb his fear.

There really was no going back now.

"Now go on... finish what you started."

And in the blink of an eye, she was gone once more.

Tovias stepped through the gates and up to the front door. He took one final breath, and knocked soundly upon its aged wooden surface.

"Ye shouldn'a come." Thoren mumbled to Lucy as the two- together with Rose and Randalf- materialized just outside the entrance to Bristol's prison. "It may not be safe fer ye, considerin' what we're dealin' with now."

"I don't know *what* we're dealing with now, Thoren." Lucy replied, somewhat unnerved as they descended into dark tunnels, lit only by torches and slivers of moonlight. "Just... Promise you'll let me speak to him just once. There may be a way to-"

Her reply ended with a hushed gasp as the three turned another corner, and beheld the string of bodies that marked the trail from the dungeon entry to Tovias' prison cell. Thoren immediately drew his pistol.

"Oh my..."

Thoren approached the now-empty cell, annoyed that there had been a sort of purging of the lower-crust before the Festival. A prisoner might have been able to tell them what exactly had happened, though he had a good idea.

"Was Tovias granted a second wand by the Band, Master Grymm?" Randalf asked as he followed Thoren, eyeing the melted lock curiously.

"Nay." Thoren replied, eyes vigilant. "Tovias couldn'a afford a second. Unless he were given one without our knowledge."

"The lock upon this cell was melted using highly focused magical energy, unlike that which could be created by any store-bought wand. This leaves one of three possibilities:

First – Tovias overcame the Dampening runes, acquired a wand of expert construction, escaped his cell and killed all the guards before an alarm could be raised.

Second – Tovias did the same, only without employing any means of arcane focus, which would mean the guards allowed him enough time to finish an incantation strong enough to undo iron bars.

Third – An entirely foreign party found, released and absconded with the young mage."

"The Draco Disciples?" Lucy thought aloud, glancing around again.

"I am not well-versed in the Draco Disciples' level of skill in the field." Randalf began, "but if I am not mistaken, their strongest- nay, their *only* wielder of the art is..."

"Estella Foxglove." Thoren nodded. "Not likely. She's not strong, let alone bold enough for this."

"Then who?" Rose asked softly.

The four of them looked at each other... then Thoren swiftly leveled his pistol at the end of the tunnel they'd come from as a figure of black and sickly maroon shuffled noisily in.

"Don' look at us!" The figure spoke as she emerged into the torch lit hall, her voice like the creak of an ancient door. It was the hunched, emaciated form of Abigail Normyl, with a few other shadows visible behind her. "We jus' got 'ere!"

Randalf and the gypsies simply stared for a moment in bewilderment.

"I believe the terms of the deal were laid out plainly enough... even for a gypsy."

Even the most venomous of insults were absolute ear-velvet when delivered by the lips of Scarlett O'Hemlock.

Tovias now stood in the main hallway of Rhettsire Manor. He didn't dare to step in further just yet... he had to know Thomas wasn't about to lunge out and put a dagger in his flank. His eyes were- despite the dressing gown Scarlett now wore- constantly wary; not just of Thomas, but any of the other Disciples.

"We have heard about your little campfire story... as well as your failure to take the Will and your ejection from the Band. You are no longer of any use to us... you may go." She concluded with a dismissive wave. "And be happy you do so with your life."

"... With the Gods' own eyes," Tovias said lowly, "I could not begin to see why I should give a damn about that anymore." His face flickered back and forth between pale and flushed, eyes locked upon hers despite a perpetual downward pull. "You will tell me where Lady Tso is, or I will kill you. And Ruby. And Thomas. All of you, if I have to."

Tovias reached slowly down to the sleeve of his robe where he would ordinarily keep his wand, knowing full well he would not find it there any longer. Before he could reach it though, his bluff bore fruit in the form of Scarlett's widening eyes.

"Now, let us not be hasty, little mage. I shall call for Lady Nightshade, and mayhaps we may come to some sort of-"

"Oh, you needn't bother with that." The two of them turned toward the entryway to the parlor as Ruby herself appeared, similarly wrapped in a silken nightdress. "I am here already."

As she came to the middle of the hallway, she raised a pale, well-kept hand to gesture at Tovias'.

"And he, Lady Hemlock, is bluffing."

"And what... makes you say that?" Tovias asked as though he were not already aware, his complexion deciding at last on a stark white.

"Those lovely little markings on your hands." She explained with an amused chuckle. "Those are-"

"Irrelevant." The mage snapped suddenly, almost choking out the words before his mind could fully catch up.

"Oh?" Ruby asked, now coming to stand beside Scarlett. "And just how could your complete and total lack of power be construed as 'irrelevant', when you are threatening us, sir gypsy?"

Tovias had but a moment to consider this himself... he didn't have long before any bluff would be rendered unbelievable if not laughable.

His hand continued to reach, but drifted away from his sleeve to his leather satchel. Flipping the string that held it closed, he reached within.

It was empty, except for one item.

"You didn't think I would come here completely unprepared, did you?" Legs rooted in place, Tovias slowly withdrew a small, round, copper-plated object which glinted in the soft indoor lighting, and let out a soft ticking amid the uncomfortable silence:

Aggie's watch.

"Aggie McGee gave me this... just in case my magic ever failed me for whatever reason." His thumb began stroking absently over the polished surface of it. "I guess the guards didn't think to take it on the belief that it was some kind of pocket-watch."

"It *is* some kind of pocket-watch. The sort that tells the hour." Ruby said with a weak smirk.

"Perhaps it appears that way." Tovias replied, lifting it up to them. "That's how it was designed. You might know about Aggie's nickname. 'Boom-Boom'? I drop this, and it won't matter who has the bloody Will anymore. Even if anyone survives, the Estate is finished."

This was it. If this ploy failed...

The two women glanced at one another before letting out a long shared laugh.

"You truly believe such a thing could destroy the Estate? It is a watch. And even if it weren't, you expect us to believe you have the stomach to do something like that?" Ruby asked, trying to fight her laughter long enough to complete this pointless repartee.

Tovias bowed his head.

"It's not about what I have." He said, still holding the watch and stepping forward. "It's about what I've lost. Oh, believe me, Ruby. I've become accustomed to what it's like to have nothing. Imagine having access anything money can buy, anything your heart could possibly desire... then imagine watching all of it burn. In a moment, you won't have to imagine it, but I digress."

Another step forward. His words came through clenched teeth, through a salty veil of forming tears.

"Imagine wandering the world for day after day after day, wondering why you were chosen- cursed to survive, only to have everyone around you wish to see you dead. Wondering why you can't simply stop fighting the will to survive and just... lay down and die... You know there's a reason. You become desperate to find it even though the hope of finding it wastes away with every passing year. And then you find it. You find that one thing you know you need to be happy, but it's nothing more than an illusion. Some sick, perverted joke of the Gods, a conspiracy between your own conscience, instinct, faith and feelings and before you realize it, you've lost more than you ever imagined you could... lost your hopes. Dreams. All gone.

I have nothing now. AM nothing. To anyone. Now ask me again. ASK me if I have the stomach for it, Ruby. Lady Katherine Tso is the last thing- the ONLY thing- I have left in this world, and if you keep her from me, my last act upon this earth will be my answer."

"But... it is simply a pocket-watch." Scarlett said, her indifferent chuckle hiding poorly the tremble in her body and voice as Tovias took another step toward them.

"Even if that were true," Tovias said weakly, rasping, "It was a watch crafted by Aggie herself. There's a fair chance of it exploding anyway." This actually elicited a weak chuckle from his quivering lips. "Go ahead and try me... you stand to lose far more than I will."

Scarlett blinked, glancing back up to Ruby. The latter simply stood stone-faced, the expression similar to how it had been earlier, during their first negotiation...

"Ruby?" Scarlett said gently.

"...Damn." Ruby growled, turning and- much to Scarlett's surprise- leading Tovias to the far end of the hall. Taking a hold of the frame of the mirror mounted on the wall, she pressed an unseen switch on its back. With a click, the mirror swung open to reveal a hidden passage beyond. She turned back to give Tovias a wry smile.

"Well?"

Casting one last glance at Scarlett, Tovias walked down the hallway- pocket watch in hand- past Ruby, and into the secret door where a stairway descended into the cold, unnerving embrace of shadow.

"They really ought to tidy up this dungeon. Or at least get some new guards." Merryweather Normyl observed as she and Abigail stepped around the bodies laying about the dungeon's stone floor.

"Waste-not, want-not." Abigail replied, crouching a moment to reach down and yank a tooth straight from one of the dead men's mouths, and dropping it into one of her pouches.

"What're ye doing here?" Thoren demanded, stepping forward to engage the sisters, looking beyond them in the hopes that the most rational of their number was here as well.

"Well, so much for subtlety." Came the croaking chuckle of Gertrude as she wandered into the dungeon hall as well. Glancing at the carnage, she shook her head and sighed. Finally, her eyes came back to the assemblage of the living. "So whose mess is this, then?"

"Who' ave ye done with my fiancée!?" Abigail said suddenly, now hunching next to Randalf and gazing into the empty cell.

Thoren's teeth clenched as he clapped a hand to his forehead in agitation.

"How did the three of you get into Bristol after nightfall?" Lucy asked warily, more than a bit confused by their sudden appearance. "They would not have let you in, would they?"

"We were always in here." Merry said in an overly rehearsed but poorly delivered reply.

"No you weren't! You were at the gypsy bonfire." Lucy countered. "I could hear you three cackling through the Vardo walls!"

"No we weren't!" Abigail snapped back, obviously just to stoke the coals.

"*ENOUGH!*" Thoren roared at last, instantly silencing the 'young ladies', except for Gertrude who stepped through them to join Thoren and Randalf.

"Tovias is no longer here, I take it?" Gertrude asked. "Typical. From what I can tell, he needed a solid kick in the shin, and he disappears before it can be delivered."

"Nay." Thoren frowned. "An' if he escaped..."

"He wouldn't go after the Band of the Twisted Claw, would he? ...No offense, but it seemed to be only you he was intending to hurt..." Lucy said softly.

Even if attacking the Band were Tovias' intent, Thoren had faith they could protect themselves... at least until he himself could eliminate the other possibility of his whereabouts.

"Tovias only wanted one other thing." Thoren said softly. "Information about Lady Tso."

The witches visibly cringed at the mention of her name.

"Why would 'e want ta know anythin' about that devil of a woman?!" Abigail demanded.

"The Rhetshire Estate is at tha corner of St. John's Crossing, Shoplatch Lane n' High Street. Right where they meet. Come on!"

With that, Thoren, Rose, Randalf, Lucy and the Normyl sisters turned and ran back from whence they came. Only Gertrude turned back, giving the lonely chambers of stone and iron a lingering gaze before scurrying away.

"Lady Katherine Tso and I were but children when we met." Ruby explained, keeping a few paces behind Tovias, the torch she now carried illuminating a long, dank subterranean corridor.

"Back then I could not have imagined the sort of person she would become, the sort of power she would possess... I cannot deny harboring the slightest bit of resentment toward her, but we were friends in the end, if you can believe Lady Tso capable of feeling such things as friendship. I did of course grieve when the events of year last unfolded, but knew Katherine would not wish me to waste time and energy on mourning her. She would wish me to continue her work."

A sharp right and some distance after their initial descent, Tovias estimated they were probably close to the Bristol Jousting field... or would have, were his mind on anything of the sort. At present it was on one thing: Moving forward.

"Unfortunately I did not realize just how much of her work depended on her presence... try as I might, I could not command the kind of authority she did at her peak. Then the Cauldron came into our possession, and I thought perhaps that things might change."

"You tried to harness its power ... and we see how well that worked out." Tovias muttered absently, eyes still facing ahead.

"We failed in our attempt. More than failed. Loki was released into the world, that he would usurp the efforts of our own Goddess, and we lost both Draca Slaga and the Crosier of Saint Patrick to the Band of the Twisted Claw in our efforts to fix our mistake." The regret in her voice was not for their sin, for the world's near-destruction at the Disciples' hands, but for the loss of what might have been their advantage over their hated enemies.

"Thomas would defect or rebel were it not for the blood and gold on offer, what little we have left. Estella's already unsteady devotion to the cause dwindles. Scarlett shows promise, but even she is only an initiate... For all our sound and fury the Draco Disciples are all but finished in Bristol... and yet, there is one thing that keeps my own faith alight."

Tovias suddenly stopped.

Then he ran. He ran forward as fast as his weary legs would carry him. The stones of the corridor rushed past him in a blur.

The restless night's sleep, dragging Puddle, his nightmarish time in the Bear Pit, running all over Bristol for any number of reasons, the ache and fatigue in his body and mind... suddenly none of it mattered. Numbness swallowed it all.

The slightest wisp of torchlight had betrayed pale, flawless skin draped in red and black.

Then he fell, his foot tripping over a small outcropping of rock. The knees of his breeches and the skin beneath scraped and tore with the impact. Aggie's pocket-watch fell from his hand, clattering across the ground.

He continued to crawl, legs still attempting to push off and run once more, two small trails of blood left in his wake. Shivering, eyes now brimming with the warmth of tears of pain, sorrow, perhaps joy, arm over arm he advanced.

At last Tovias collapsed, his strength waning. Panting heavily amidst the tears streaking down his cheeks, he slowly brought his eyes upward.

Her form was like unto a doll of porcelain. Her skin perfectly preserved. There was not a single speck of dust nor a wrinkle in the same magnificent gown he saw in his memories. Her eyes were open, staring forward as though in wait for someone, something that would never come. Waited until her breast had risen its last. Her heart had beat its last.

"Lady Katherine... I was with her when she died... I was the healer who attempted to mend her wound, but she had lost so much blood already, there was so much internal damage... there was nothing I could do." As Ruby spoke in a voice that in no way carried her usual confidence, she reached up and placed the torch on a small mound within the small chamber. As she watched Tovias shakily struggle to his scraped knees- casting one brief glimpse at the decidedly unexploded pocket watch- she reached her fingers into her chest. From it, she withdrew a small cylindrical container. Flicking open a tiny clasp, she took from it a long, sturdy needle... a needle smeared with a very potent poison.

"I had intended to have a mausoleum constructed for her, but I soon discovered that her body was showing no signs of decay; Not even so much as a single carrion insect would touch her. She remains, as though in wait, as though some future purpose has yet to make itself evident. I believe she may yet return to us... but I am afraid I cannot allow knowledge of this to spread until that time has come." Slowly, she knelt behind Tovias, raising the needle to the level of his neck.

Tovias could only continue to stare into those sightless eyes... lost to the world.

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The front door of the Rhetshire Estate suddenly found itself tested in its endurance as Thoren Grymm pounded madly at it.

"Open up! Open up ye blasted lizard-loving-!" Rather than finish, Thoren snatched his pistol up, and raised it at the level of the lock. Before he could pull the trigger, the door opened, Scarlett standing at the other side of it.

"I do not know why such ruffians are allowed in Bristol at this time of night," She began, scowling at Thoren, and at the others behind him. "I have a mind to call the Guard."

"Where is Tovias?" Thoren demanded, lowering his weapon... for the time being.

"Oh, he isn't with you?" She asked softly. If she weren't a Draco Disciple, she would come off as completely earnest... even now, it was difficult to discern completely whether she was lying.

"Nay. Ye ought t'know. I'll nae ask again."

"Very well, then. Good night." Scarlett shrugged, moving to close the door, but Thoren swiftly pushed his sheathed rapier to block it from closing.

"I think ye misunderstand." Thoren frowned, shoving the door with his full weight. Scarlett stumbled back with a surprised gasp. She let out a loud scream- or started to anyway before her voice caught and warped, until it sounded more like the croaking of a frog.

"One of my favorites, that one." Abigail chortled as she and her sisters pushed in behind Thoren, Rose, Lucy and Randall.

"He must be in here somewhere. Find him. I'll deal with Thomas." Thoren ordered.

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"Farewell, Tovias Farraday. Loath as I am to admit it... I almost *regret* that I must."

Just as Ruby was about to finish her thought- and subsequently Tovias- she let out a gasp of shock and pain. The needle fell from her hand as she swooned, before collapsing unconscious to the stone and dirt beneath.

Tovias' haze was broken just for a moment by the alternate Estella's voice.

"It has arrived, Tovias... the time is now." She said as she stepped into the room, raising her wand away from the prone form of Ruby Nightshade. "There are none left to stop you."

"The time...?" Tovias echoed. His eyes could not break away from the vacant gaze of the woman before him. He almost wished Estella- spirit of the future or otherwise- would leave him be.

"Our Mistress has waited for this moment... Waited all this time. All these years. For you. Now the moment has come for you to fulfill the destiny you were meant for." As she spoke, she reached up and placed her hands about his shoulders, much as Scarlett had done before.

"What... can I do?" He asked, trying to turn away to speak to Estella, but he could not. "She is dead, is she not?"

"I know your childhood was remiss in teaching you your fairytales..." Estella purred grinningly, "but it should come naturally to you, Tovias."

Tovias' eyes widened. The light of understanding illuminated them for a moment, staring into the beautiful lifeless face before him.

"Now do it... Awaken her."

Trembling, Tovias reached forth and rested his hands upon Lady Tso's shoulders, frightened that she may shatter at even the most gentle touch, but she did not.

Instead he tensed at the chill he felt from the flesh and bone beneath the flowing dress. The chill of shadows. Of the grave. Any warmth of the world seemed to rush from him the closer he drew.

He hesitated.

His lips quivered.

Somewhere he heard a voice, within him or somewhere beyond... begging him to stop. To cease. He heard pounding from somewhere behind, somewhere far away... He couldn't have known Thoren and the others had arrived, had entered the estate, and had surmised that the mirror was some sort of secret passage.

"Tovias! Answer me! Are you in there?!" It was Lucy's voice, crying out to him.

"Get back!" Thoren's reply followed by a resounding crash as something shattered the reflecting pane of glass far behind. Footsteps came through, began to rush down the corridor.

"Tovias! TOVIAS!"

"Rose? ...Lucy?" Tovias murmured aloud, about to look behind him...

"This is your only chance, Tovias!" Estella shouted. "Do it!"

As though by no will of his own- rather, by sheer reflex, his body stiffened and turned. His arms wound around Lady Tso's body, drawing her to him in a longing embrace.

His lips touched hers.

And then he heard it.

The hiss was faint at first. It emanated from a place whose distance from the world could not be physically measured. Slowly it drew closer, closer as Tovias remained there, arms wrapped about her lifeless body, his shivering breath gracing her cold, blood-red lips.

Then they grew louder. Louder. Echoing. One atop another atop another. The hideous sound froze his blood, stole the air from his lungs. He felt a searing pain, smelled burning flesh as the Dampening Runes on his hands suddenly smoldered away.

The hissing was deafening now, a cacophony that scorched his mind, leaving its mark like the blackened mass on the backs of his palms.

The terrible hissing all at once vanished... returning as a single soft, bloodcurling whisper:

"The time has come."

Tovias screamed.