

(This is the continuation of 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 Tovas Farraday: Book II”

A RenQuest Fanfiction by David Manley.

Chapter 18 – “Among Horrors Must I Dwell”

- *Twenty Years Ago...* -

The low rumble of thunder in the distance was nothing more than a whisper amid the mutters and mumbblings of the elegant manor house.

It was a glorious estate, near the size of a castle, which stood alone at the top of a wooded cliff. Its view of the ocean was staggering even under the steadily darkening skies. The architecture was a bit mismatched as parts of it were built and rebuilt even as other parts fell into decay, but it remained nevertheless a breathtaking structure.

The interior was, in a word, decadent; accents of gold and crystal were omnipresent, and the occupants of the place cavorted about in velvets and silks. They took only the most ostentatious of food and drink.

In the great hall, the presence of self-important humanity- as well as that of scrounging servants- was thick, so much so that there was want for room to stand with all the running about (which did not bother the former much, lounging as they did in their expensive armchairs).

Every evening of every day was much like this in the Von Kaiser household, and had been such for several decades.

Yet, it was not amongst the revelers which the boy- the young man of a mere eight years of age- took pleasure this night.

Tovas begun his life here, but had by far grown more accustomed to the droning lessons of his family history than he ever had the golden, glittering haze. Perhaps he was too young to truly appreciate the finery and feasts and servants.

He was still dressed in his own family-appointed attire as his father had ordered him to be, as he always did to appease his uncle... to appease the descendant of the mighty Wolfgang von Kaiser whose reputation even now keeps the land fruitful.

But he did not dine amongst the older, haughtier members of his family. Instead, he prowled about mansion's upper-floors like an impeccably dressed thief in the well-lit night. He crept from one door to the next to the next, listening at each one for the familiar voices of two others who did not see fit to dine this evening: his mother and sister.

As he turned down another corridor, he caught the faintest hint of a whisper from some doors down, as well as a soft wisp of burning incense on the air.

Moving as silently as he could, bracing himself against the wall, he proceeded down the hall- casting a glance behind him to ensure no servants had spotted him- until coming to stand just before one of the elegantly crafted white doors.

Crouching down just outside, he brought his ear close to the door crack as close as he could get.

“... will give you more power than ten thousand Wolfgang von Kaisers. This gift is nothing short of the ultimate power- something even the Praetor of the Draco Disciples could never hope to attain at the peak of his strength.”

It was the voice of his mother that spoke first. It was hushed, but clearly elevated by excitement.

“One of the greatest illusions in the world is the bond between power and emotion: There are many among the Dark Lady Tiamat's enemies who believe that ‘Love’ is a binding and unifying force whose power remains unmatched... but this is a naive dream. Certainly, their love for one another can drive them to achieve surprising things, but ‘Love’ itself is no threat. Even hatred does not necessarily increase a Mage or Warrior's power. It merely unlocks the restraints upon a being's potential might. There are still limits.”

He heard his younger sister give her usual response of ‘Yes, Mother’, although he doubted she was paying much attention. She rarely was when she gave that reply.

He, however, was intrigued. He had never heard much about these people who tap into reserves of love and righteous anger to overcome overwhelming odds... much less about any Dark Lady Tiamat.

In truth, he was tempted to knock at the door, but he knew his mother would only send him away to a (much more watchful) father and continue this curious lecture without him.

"But there does, believe it or not, exist a dark power which has been gifted only to our bloodline- to the Arathos bloodline, although it was long ago sealed away... Long have I and my mothers before me attempted to unearth the forbidden magic of Spiteshaping... of converting raw hatred into magical power. At last, I believe I have arrived, have discovered the key... and you, my precious Genevieve will be the conduit through which our power- that of the Dark Lady- is delivered unto our enemies."

Tovias had by this point grown absolutely fascinated by what he heard his mother saying, inching himself up toward the door's keyhole that he might hear more clearly.

"My dear Genevieve... you must swear never to-"

Suddenly, she stopped.

Immediately, Tovias rose to his feet and began to hurry back in the direction he had come from as silently as he could... but the door opened behind him before he had even managed to make it back to the corner he'd earlier turned.

"You little brat." Her snarling voice echoed through the halls, although soft enough that it would no doubt be missed by the rest of the family back in the great hall.

Tovias froze in place, tremblingly turning to see his mother- a tall, rather gaunt and pale woman with fading almond-colored hair- glaring at him with piercing hazel irises.

"M- Mother..." He fumbled for words. "I could not find... Genevieve or-"

"Your sister is with me." She shot back coldly. "Tonight was selected for one of her private lessons. Return to the great hall. Forget what you have heard, if anything in all your sneaking about. If you breathe a word of it to your father- to *anyone* within this manor... I will hang you by your ankles and bleed you dry; Do you understand?"

The boy's face was marble white by then. His mother had always had a certain coldness about her, but never before had she ever been quite so... *unpleasant*, was the only word he could think of.

He could only nod.

By the time the crash of the brigands smashing the front door of the manor filled the house late that night, it was far too late.

Tovias, wrapped in silk bedclothes, could only vaguely process what was happening around him. He heard his parents, his uncle and aunt and other assorted relatives speaking in hushed but swift tones: 'Who could these interlopers be', 'Do you have any weapons', 'Is everybody here' and other such questions swirled around him...

... but those questions died with the sound of Genevieve's scream.

Immediately, his father- but more so his *mother*- was searching the upper floors of the manor for any weapons they could find. However, Manfred Von Kaiser and Tovias' father told her and Elissa to stand aside- that they and the other men would handle these scoundrels... but even as Tovias was ushered through the halls and out a side door of the manor house, he could hear their bellowing screams of agony and outrage.

Even when Tovias, his mother and his aunt emerged from the manor house, the nightmare had not ended. The army of dark figures was still swarming like a committee of vultures.

The fight was short-lived, and soon Elissa had been captured, leaving only Tovias' mother standing defiantly at the edge of the cliff the house overlooked... a trembling Tovias clinging to her leg.

Tovias didn't hear the cruel, smirking sentiments coming from the monsters even now surrounding them, listening only to the increasingly labored breathing of his mother as she grew more frantic, more wild-eyed... her irises flashing in the stormy, firelit night.

"Mother..." He finally whimpered, but gasped as she placed one hand firmly against his forehead.

"Dark Lady, he is not but an insect and a fool ignorant of your ways, but I find myself in my most desperate hour... That your gift would not be squandered, lost to this world forever, I would bestow it upon this, my only living child; I beg of you, let him remain hidden. Let the world turn unto him a blind eye that his gift may remain alive and unspoiled... until he finds his place among your children where he belongs... until a day that he might take revenge upon this corrupt world for this atrocity."

Even as she spoke, the brigands and thieves crept closer, albeit a hair more slowly.

She turned back to Tovias, a look of trembling scorn transforming to a strange sort of smile fixed directly upon the boy.

"Farewell, Tovias."

With that, she raised her hand away from Tovias' head. The boy stood there wide-eyed, his body trembling in the sudden silence... as she brought the knife to her own throat.

With a grin born of madness, she slashed the blade across her throat, flecks of crimson spraying everywhere- including on Tovyias' horrified face. The boy opened his mouth to scream, but that scream tripped over another as he was suddenly shoved back in his mother's final ounce of strength.

The next thing he knew, he was falling...

- Present Day -

Thoren, Lucy, Rose, Randalf and the Normyl Sisters gazed in horrified awe at that which now stood before them.

The body- now upright and devoid of a single wound or blemish- was most certainly Lady Katherine Tso's, but what dwelt inside of it was nothing that could even be mistaken for human. Even without a proper soul as she had once been, there seemed to be even less behind those cruel, smirking lips and the piercing stare of her empty eyes.

"What's the matter? ... Is this not what you were expecting?" The words oozed- not from her lips, but from those of the bedraggled mage who knelt at her feet. It trickled down spines and darkened the sputtering torchlight at the very sound. Inwardly, Thoren and the others bade the small torch to- by all that was good and holy- stay alight, lest they be left in the darkness.

The Gypsy leader paid little heed to Tovyias. In truth, he had no idea what had just happened; all he knew was that Lady Tso was standing again, amid a dark energy more potent than anything he had ever come across in his life.

This had to end now.

With nary a word, Thoren reached down and hurriedly pulled back the bandages on his burned hand. Raking his fingernails over the charred wound, a few small trickles of blood began to run down his skin. Smearing his palm against the red droplets, he raised his hand to Lady Tso, focusing on whatever dwelt within.

"Virlymin Molik!" He shouted, invoking the spell that- in days long since passed- Sir Henry Carrington had used to paralyze Tiamat. It was a far longer and more involved spell than most realized, but just in case- a contingency Thoren always practiced yet prayed he would never need fall back on- he prepared the spell each and every morning like a sort of routine ritual. All that was ever needed was to call out the trigger word in the ancient Draconic tongue.

However, as he cast the spell, he felt strange; the magical energy summoned forth by the spell unobtrusively wound around the figure before him to pin Tso in place... but much like a swinging sword that has missed its mark, he felt no resistance. It was as though he had cast at thin air.

Thoren did not wait to see if the spell had worked; Tso's body had not moved from its standing posture since the group had arrived, so it was hard to tell. He drew his rapier with a single fierce motion.

"I dunnae' know how you managed any of this," Thoren growled, aiming his blade in Tso's direction. "...But I'm finishin' it now!"

With this he lunged, preparing the strike that should end her for good and all.

"No."

A bright white arc of energy erupted from somewhere below the two of them, shearing the blade off of Thoren's sword down to the haft. Thoren staggered back, dropping the hilt to the ground with a grunt of surprise and anger.

"Tovyias!" Lucy shouted from behind him. Instantly both Thoren and Randalf looked down from Lady Tso to see that Tovyias had raised a hand at his side. The arc had come from his outstretched fingers without a word, without so much as a whisper.

From nothing, his entire body was now wreathed with a terrible searing-white energy.

Thoren moved to draw his pistol, but looked back to Randalf.

"Hurry, Wizard. Tell the Band. Take Rose and Lucy with ye."

Randalf did not seem about to argue.

The wizard could not be certain, but he had the most terrible feeling that the extent of what was occurring was not confined to this small underground tunnel.

Thankfully it seemed the Normyl Sisters had had the good sense to retreat some time back.

Nevertheless, Randalf took Rose and Lucy by the shoulder, the three of them dematerializing before any objections could be voiced.

Thoren, now alone, looked from Tso to Tovyias as the woman's terrifying façade reached down and stroked Tovyias' hair as one might do to a beloved pet.

Thoren watched them for a moment, dropping what remained of his rapier and slowly drawing his pistol instead.

Something about it all- even considering what was happening- wasn't right.

"Tovias..." He began, keeping a tight grip on his weapon. "What have you done?"

It was the only thing he could think of to ask... mostly because even he was not entirely sure what was going on.

"That is a foolish question, is it not?" Tovias answered, the quiver in his voice never quite disappearing. "It is as I told you in the clearing: You have made your choice. This is the result."

Slowly, Tovias stood up to stand in front of Lady Tso- or whatever it was that had come to abide within her unliving body. He turned to Thoren, a flash of unsettling light lingering in the mage's eyes.

"*You* could have prevented this- you could have *helped* me!" He spat, the aura of magical power around him and Tso spiking, flaring to a blinding level.

Thoren staggered back, raising his pistol and pulling the trigger. Even now, his aim was trained not on Tovias, but on the wicked countenance of Lady Tso not far behind him.

The gunshot was deafening in the small chamber... but as the echoes faded, Thoren was left to stare in bewilderment and outrage as the bullet hung immobile between them, before falling harmlessly to the ground, a wisp of Tovias' magical power dissipating near it as it landed.

Before Thoren could react, another bright white light appeared, this one in the shape of a dragon's claw. The larger man stumbled back, attempting to dodge as it lunged, but the disembodied thing was quicker. The claw snatched and yanked Thoren's arm slamming it into the wall behind him, burying its talons within the solid stone. Thoren grunted, reaching up with his other arm to wrest himself away, but a second magical claw appeared, seizing it and pinned it as well.

"All I wanted was to know what had become of Katherine... But no. You were too busy with your war... with your battle against the Disciples."

"Yes..." Thoren nodded, clenching his teeth as he struggled in the grip of the magical claws. "I did it t' protect the Band... t' protect *ye*. Believe what *ye* like, Tovias, I hold your achievements in no less regard than they do. An' I wouldn't have *ye* throw it all away." He trailed off, scowling at Lady Tso even as Tovias scowled at him.

"You gave me no options." Tovias shook his head. "Thanks to you, to what you said to the Band, they hate me- they consider me a traitor when all I did was follow my heart..."

"What?" Thoren quirked his brow with apprehension. "Tovias, I have said nothing. I have done nothing to condemn *ye*. You damn *yerself* with your actions. Even now, if *ye* would just-!"

"Look at me!" Tovias shouted, rounding on him with another wild spike of his energy, even as Lady Tso swept gracefully behind him, gently winding her arms around him. His fury-filled eyes- Thoren could now see clearly- were stained with cascading tears. "Look at me, Thoren... I was never a gypsy. I was never a hero. I was never... I was never anybody's friend... This power of mine was never meant to help anybody... I know that now. This is what I am. What I have always been... even if I had come to hope otherwise."

Thoren was silent for a moment, then shook his head.

"Tovias, *listen!*"

"I am *through* listening. I am through being threatened. I am through living like a weak and terrified insect... and I am through with you and yours..."

With this, Tovias began to walk past Thoren, 'Lady Tso' maintaining only a pace's distance behind him. As they departed together, Thoren barely heard the sound of Tovias' voice echoing off the cavern walls;

"Farewell, Thoren... and farewell to the happy world you know."

The Band of the Twisted Claw awoke to a bone-chilling scream.

Staggering out of her tent, the elder Keeper Gaia Vedeo groaned in dismay, clutching her head. She would have collapsed, had it not been for Talia, who rushed to her side and steadied her.

"By the Gods, what's happened?!" The Bardmistress asked. Knowing full well where and for what purpose Thoren and company had gone, this sort of omen was by no means encouraging.

As her mind began to delve into the horrifying implications, the other gypsy tents were already rustling with frantic activity.

"I felt..." Gaia began, letting her eyes drift to Talia's with a grave expression. "What has happened?"

Talia related the story as she had heard and understood it from Thoren. As she explained it, she couldn't help the sickly feeling in her stomach.

"Tovias was tricked into aiding the Draco Disciples... no... he *allowed* himself to be used. He attacked Thoren when he was discovered and taken to the Bristol Dungeon."

As each member of the Band emerged, their eyes were wide with shock, disbelief, and some narrowed with shivering outrage.

"Year last, Tovias became infatuated with Lady Tso and the Draco Disciples sought to use that to their advantage by ransoming her location to him... but now, this..."

"We-... We are talking about the same Tovias, right?" Will asked uneasily.

"Tovias Farraday..." Wanda nodded, although she seemed equally dubious. "He did not rightly have the manner of a traitor..."

"Aye." Aggie shook her head, looking frowningly over to Adria Dubh. "Although I suppose good sense never played into matters such as infatuation."

For her part, the leader of the Order stood silent, though the Band's more observant members could see her hands clenched into tight fists.

"I am not certain what is happening... but his good deeds got us to trust him long enough for him to do whatever he is doing now." Talia concluded. "Thoren, Randalf the Blue, Rose and Lucy have already gone to find him, to talk with him... that was before this." She gestured to Gaia.

"What? Did something happen to them?" Raven demanded. "What should we do? Are they in the city?"

"It is more dire than you realize." Gaia stepped forward. "Thoren and the others are in danger. *Everyone* is in danger... *something* is fast approaching."

"Then... Lady Tso has returned?" Cianne asked, though clearly neither she nor anyone else wished to acknowledge that possibility. However, she shook her head in bewilderment.

"I... I know not... but I feel it is far worse than that."

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The Bristol night had been a quiet one in the aftermath of the day's celebratory din.

And yet, Suzanne Mariage sat up straight in her bed with a gasp.

She and her parents had taken lodging in the home of Festivus Merrier, whose abode lay within a convenient distance of the Bristol Buttery. Her parents and Festivus, as well as his friends Lucien and Yvonna had passed out in various parts of the house (usually upon furniture, sometimes not). Having had only a few sips of mead, Suzanne was none the worse for wear.

She didn't know what had awakened her. Slowly sliding out of bed, a modest silk gown flowing and fluttering about her legs, she stood and made her way to the glass door leading to the small balcony outside her room. Casting aside the curtains in front of the door, she moved to step out onto the balcony... and suddenly all warmth and color drained from her body.

Staring out across the city streets to the Jousting Field, she saw something... something she was certain must have been a nightmare. And yet she could not will herself to awaken and cast it from her apparently haunted mind.

The sky- clear as pure glass when she had gone to sleep not long after the Gypsy bonfire- was now swirling with clouds, but only above the arena. Below the localized maelstrom, she could see something strange... almost akin to the way extreme heat might cause ripples in the air.

But within this strange mirage, she saw something else... something passing through the unobtrusive gateway:

Dark figures, slender, elegant, many of them bearing leathery wings. They marched- and flew- in rank and file, their screeching, bloodthirsty cries rending asunder the former quiet and echoing throughout Bristol.

An army of Dragons.

Chapter 19 – "Open Wide the Gates"

The stringent rules regarding Gypsies in Bristol after nightfall outlived their relevance at the sound of the first bestial screech. Soon the entire city was awake and doing one of two things: cowering in their homes as the dark army spread throughout the streets- choking them with their mere presence... or doing as the Band was:

Preparing.

The Ibis sisters had already taken positions in the Bristol Gate guard towers, looking down upon the red and black flood as it oozed from Bristol's western end. The portal itself- a rip within the boundaries of time and space, was haunting to behold. From its beginnings as a gentle ripple, it now resembled a swarm of glass insects, distorting the air with their frenzy and yet, it exuded the ominous silence of the nothingness between worlds.

More immediate was the danger of the Dragon Army. Their numbers were daunting enough, as was the fact that they spawned within the city itself. It was no longer a siege upon the town- or rather it WAS, but defender and invader were reversed.

Draconic dwarfs- Kobolds- scurried in, mounted atop jibbering, drooling Riding Welpes.

Humans bearing standards, robes and armor of red and black marched through, filling the air with ominous chants.

Draconian Soldiers- former humans blessed with draconic aspects for their loyal service- led squads of lizardmen, their menacing hiss piercing the air around them.

Serpentine wyverns slithered through the air, the beat of their leathery wings kicking up dirt and carrying the stench of doom throughout the city.

Dark scaled Drakes soared amid the swirling clouds over the Field, each one carrying a heavily armored rider. It was their roars, their screeches that were heard most clearly- the Death Knell of the city- nay, of the entire world.

"Why have they not attacked?" Dierdre asked softly, her hands shakily attempting to light her pipe. If ever she needed to calm her nerves... "They've not even kicked in a single door, attacked one single person."

"They're organizing... no." Andra murmured back, as though amid all the draconic noise and panicked cries even her whispers would be heard and sought out by the dark ones. "They look like they're waiting. But what could they be waiting for?"

"Could they be... waiting for *us*?" Dierdre concluded with a chill, looking back down to the Gypsy vardo below.

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"This is like... like some sort of *nightmare*!" Raven murmured as he and Talia made their way about the camp. "Tovias a traitor, I would have believed. But *this*?! An invasion of Dragon-Kin?! Overnight?! And Thoren is missing on top of that..."

"It was my fault..." Talia answered, the tone in her voice only a fraction as grim as the expression on her face. "I should have known better than to let them go into the dungeon alone."

"Randalf was with them, as was Rose. Thoren is capable of defending himself even without their aid. How were we to know this would happen?" Raven offered, trying to shake off his disbelief. "We cannot assume the worst yet."

"Indeed." The two of them froze, turning to see Randalf the Blue, flanked by a most dismayed Rose Peregrine and a still-wounded Lucy.

"What happened?" Talia asked immediately, rushing toward the trio. "Where is Thoren? Why is he not with you? Do not tell me he was-?!"

"Tovias was never at the prison." Lucy began, wincing a little and resting a hand over one of her bandaged wounds.

"Th- the Rhetshire Estate, and the Dracos, and the mirror- b-behind the *mirror*! And when we got there, Lady Tso..." Rose said frantically, flailing her arms wildly as she always did when trying to explain a potential apocalypse.

"Lady Tso is alive?" Raven asked, looking to Randalf in the hopes of something a bit more coherent.

"No... I do not think so." Randalf shook his head. "Knowing what I do of the worshippers of Tiamat, the woman we beheld within the tunnel was not a human being, soulless or otherwise. The body was animated, but without consciousness."

Talia, Raven, Rose and Lucy stared at Randalf, trying to process this.

"Do you mean... What *does* that mean?" Raven asked, glancing over to the Bardmistress who only gave a weak shrug.

Nevertheless, Randalf spoke again, swiftly breaking the relative silence.

"I know not... but unfortunately I cannot stay with you; I must ensure that this disaster does not spread beyond the walls of the city." With that, the wizard raised his staff. With a sigh, followed by a flash of light, he left the Gypsies alone.

After a moment, Raven resumed his barely-restrained panic.

"What will we do? Of course I agree, Tovias or Lady Tso or whomever is responsible for his must be stopped but... but *look!*" He gestured to the growing swirl of clouds. "This is an *army* we are facing, and Thoren is... well, he is still missing, at any rate."

"We *find* him then, and together we send these slithering bastards back to the hell they crawled out of." Talia responded plainly, making certain as much of the band could hear her as could be managed.

"I had hoped you had something of a *plan*." Raven said after a slight, worried pause. "We're outnumbered, we're outgunned-"

"We do the best we can with what we have until the Barbarians arrive, and until we can fight our way to the Blacksmith's shop. In the meantime..."

As they spoke, they approached a pair of figures who- among all the others- were hastily preparing for battle.

"Hurry up, Gabe. We haven't much time." Druscilla- Order of the Sun champion (not to be confused with the ancient 'Druscilla' who had betrayed the Paragons long ago) called over to her companion, who was busy donning his boots. Finally, with a soft sigh, she flicked her fingers in his direction. The laces suddenly writhed and tightened into place.

The Warrior Champion bashfully scratched the back of his head, before reaching over to take up his satchel of swords. Unlike the weapons the Band tended to borrow from the Barbarians, these were his own, and he refused to be parted with them... at least, until he heard the approach of the de-facto Thorens.

"Oy." The two of them looked up to see Talia and Raven, and although both Gabe and Druscilla were both Order members, they were willing to offer respectful nods of greeting where they were due.

"We're goin' to need your swords. Three of them, anyway." Talia announced, looking down at the small collection of weapons. Two of them had been awarded to him by the Band for his skilled service to the band as a swordsman, and the other two were his own; well used and many times reforged.

"I suppose I could settle for breaking ONE in." Gabe said after a moment's thought, plucking one of his newly won blades from the satchel and tossing the rest to Raven. Although he would have been more comfortable with two, the Band had to allocate its resources wisely. The more armed members they had, the better.

With this, Talia and Raven nodded to the pair, before moving on as Gabe hurried to Druscilla's side.

"So this is it, hm?" Petris asked, reaching out and taking a sword from Raven. The Grand Champion chuckled quietly. Perhaps his cool demeanor was born of complete underestimation... but a face not filled with worry was a refreshing sight to anyone who saw him. "This is 'the end'?"

"It seems so." Raven nodded. "But not if we've anything to say about it."

"I do, actually." Petris gave a wry chuckle. "After working this hard to protect Bristol, I'll be damned if we let this Lizard Farm burn it down."

"Well said."

Adria paced anxiously back and forth, holding her father's claymore sword, Grlanthoir, over her shoulders. For whatever reason, she couldn't seem to find that focus within, that resonance that she tapped into to ready herself for the coming battle...

"Oy." The swordmistress looked up, frowning a bit as she recognized the form of Lillith Sparrow among the eerie lights that stained the nights' usual illumination.

"Lillith, what are you doing here?!" Adria demanded, her steps stumbling ever so slightly before coming to a halt. "You ought be off finding the Barbarian Camp! Can't you see this isn't time for-"

"Adria." Lillith said firmly, with a modicum of conviction Adria rarely saw from her, even during the whole bodice debate.

"Make it quick." Adria said, nodding.

"...I would... never say this if things were any different, but..." The thief began, glancing up at the menacing skies with a nibble of her lower lip. She then looked back to Adria. "I know I've caused a lot of trouble for you and the Band... I just-"

As Lillith spoke, she heard Adria give a sigh of exasperation.

"Lillith Sparrow." Adria began, "Nothing you have done- no petty sin you could commit- would make us love you any less. We have had our differences, but in the end..." She gave the young cutpurse a smile, before her features hardened. "Now hurry, find Grease and the others. We need to get in there and deal with Tovas."

Lillith faltered slightly. Glancing away, she took a few shuffling steps out toward the forest to do as Adria had ordered.

"...You do not hate him, do you?"

The swordmistress said nothing, though her hand's grip on the hilt of her claymore grew tighter, white-knuckled.

"Adria-"

"Lillith! Barbarians! Now!" She snapped. And with that, Lillith nodded, turning and disappearing into the night.

Teeth clenched, Adria looked up to the sky over Bristol.

"Are you sure you can stand to part with all of this?" Colin Tist- one of the most talented Alchemical mages the Band had to offer- asked hastily pouring several mixtures of all manner of chemicals into a series of vials set out before him.

"May no' ever get much chance ta use it if not now..." Aggie replied, firmly focused on her own task.

Aggie was simply glad she had chosen to take her workshop with her this night instead of leaving it in the Order Camp as she usually did. At that point she and her apprentice were hard at work, using all they had to make what they could in the time given them. However, while Colin worked tirelessly at concocting one mixture after another, she simply seemed to be dropping strange objects from her trunk into a sturdy leather backpack.

"B'sides, least this way I know it's in good hands." As she said this, she hefted up a larger bundle containing something very large but indistinguishable at that moment.

Colin gave her a smiling nod, before turning back to resume his careful mixing.

"S-Sister... I don't think I understand this." Will Spellworthy said lightly as he finished his task appointed to him by Talia; tying a small note around the ankle of a small bird he'd convinced to act as a messenger. Watching as it flew off, he let out a quiet sigh. "Why would he... What happened?"

"I don't know, Will." Wanda replied quietly. Although she was in the midst of preparation, ready to fight as needed, her thoughts were clearly along the same lines as those of her little brother. She knew she had to keep a calm demeanor even in the face of this rising nightmare, even if only for his sake. "Perhaps... Tovias just was not the man we thought he was."

"The tears he shed were real enough." Will persisted. "At the bonfire, when he told us of them Von Heimers or whate'er they was... It must be... must be some manner'a spell he's under, right?"

"Tovias was a Champion. /s a Champion... Perhaps there is just more we have yet to understand about him." Lindria Cailean- the Lunar Tribe Champion chimed in. "It's not too late. As long as he yet lives, there may be a way to reach him. A way that this may still be reversed."

"I wish I could believe that." A low, sighing voice interjected, and the other Lunar Tribe members turned to see Sydney working on scrawling a few slipshod defensive magical talismans... her body was trembling for lack of being able to pace, though whether out of anger or sorrow, it was hard to tell. "He... Tovias betrayed us. Has brought this upon the world. Whatever his reasons, whatever his intentions, I think the time for talk may have passed."

Sydney's eyes fell to the mounting pile of small scrolls, eyes tired and weak, but then she felt a hand upon her shoulder.

"You musn't ever lose hope." Wanda stated softly. "I believe all shall be revealed by night's end."

"But can we... can we truly succeed against...?" Will asked, standing awkwardly to his feet and pointing up at the churning sky.

"We must." His sister replied.

Slowly, reverently, Gaia Vedeia knelt near the spot where the bonfire had been held only a few hours ago. Her arms placed a long sheet-wrapped bundle on the ground, and carefully unwound it.

Contained within its folds was a trip of objects: Two spears and an elaborate wooden stave.

"The Spear of Ascalon; the weapon that destroyed the dragon Bloodtharcken." Gaia began, lifting the legendary spear and placing it in the tender hands of Rose Peregrine who only stared numbly down at it.

"Draca Slaga; the spear forged by the Gods themselves to be their very undoing." Gaia continued, placing the infernal armament down at her side. Finally, she looked to Vashta Nerada, raising the final object.

"The Crosier of Saint Patrick; a relic that embodies, empowers the Light. Banishing darkness and healing the afflicted, this would serve best in your hands..." She said, somewhat ruefully. None of them needed to be reminded who had last wielded the Crosier and called upon its power during Loki's banishment.

"These artifacts are our most powerful weapons against the Dark Goddess. Wield them boldly, and you shall prevail."

"B-But I do not *want* to 'prevail!'" Rose protested.

At the subsequent looks she received from Gaia and Vashta, she looked away, red-faced. In truth, she had had her reservations about this entire affair, even back when she had first touched the cold cinder of Tovias' letter.

"I... I did not mean... I wish to prevail, of course, but..." She took a shaky breath, finding her voice at last amid all that had happened. "I wish to *understand*. I do not know if Tovias has always hated us, has always been a servant of Tiamat, but... Mistress Gaia, what has the Band been told of Love?"

"Love is a great and powerful force, capable of defeating even the darkest of foes." Gaia nodded, taking up Draca Slaga as she stood.

"... Mistress Gaia, Vashta, I have felt the emotions within Tovias. He cared for me, and for most members of the Band. He did not wish to see me or anyone else hurt. I did sense apprehension, but... but I do not see how he could be merely a puppet or a slave or a heartless villain, how all of those emotions I felt in him could suddenly just... disappear."

Vashta and Gaia stared at her, their faces thoughtful.

"I do not wish to fight Tovias!" She finally concluded with a slight tremble.

After a moment, Gaia stepped forward, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"Fight Tiamat, then. Fight whomever *is* behind this." She said simply. "Fight for his sake."

"And if Tovias *is* the mastermind of all this?" Vashta chimed in, raising the Crosier slightly, "...We shall cross that bridge when we reach it."

Rose nodded to her and to Gaia, reaching up and wiping tears from her eyes that she hadn't even noticed until that moment. She looked down at the Spear of Ascalon, her brow furrowing as she gave a final nod.

"Is everyone here?" Talia asked firmly as the Band gathered outside the gates.

"Lillith has not yet returned, and Cyanne has simply... disappeared." Raven replied uncertainly.

"Last I saw 'er was at the bonfire." Jameson piped up from the crowd. "Checked 'er tent a moment ago an' she's nowhere t'be found."

"We do not have time to wait for them." Talia frowned. "For Thoren, we have lost time enough already."

"So few of us are armed, and so few of us seasoned fighters... We are thirty at best, against almost one thousand strong, and the Gateway at the Jousting Field remains open... more may yet arrive." Raven said quietly, the facade of a leader masking well the churning anger and mounting despair.

"Will and Lillith will give us what reinforcement is available to us... we have done all we can, used all resources at our disposal. We can only hope we can make our way to the merchants' stalls and get what armaments we will need to defend ourselves from there. Besides, it is not the Dragon Army we need deal with, not in full... we need only reach the gate- to close it somehow- but to make sure no one dies in the meantime."

"So then; we split up. Some of us make our way to the Field to engage the source of this mess while the others remain in Bristol, assisting the citizens in escaping and destroying what soldiers of the Dragon Army they can, or must."

"Aye." Talia nodded... but Raven noticed that her head remained bowed. Reaching out, he gave her shoulder a light, reassuring squeeze.

"Talia." But he said nothing more.

Instead, he gestured outward. Following his hand, Talia's cast themselves over the members of the Band, now assembled and standing at attention. Some were armed, most were not. Those with weapons held them ready. Those without only nodded. Each one knew what awaited them. Perhaps not the specific form it might take, but all were prepared nevertheless.

In their eyes, in their conviction, their bravery, Talia found her Bard's voice one more time.

"Band of the Twisted Claw. Protectors of the Ancients. Champions. Lightbringers. Dearest friends and companions... this night we take up arms, not as unseen benefactors of the City of Bristol, but as defenders of our very world, against one of the most grievous challenges we have ever faced.

The task before us is great and dark; some... many may not return. Indeed, this may be the final stand for some of us, if not for us all.

However, if that be the Gods' will for us, let us go forth, our path made bright by the glint of our steel, by the power of our magic, and by the hope that burns within us... the hope for a world of peace."

With this, she turned to the city gates, what cheers and shouts erupted from the band not registering in her ears.

The Bristol gate's heavy wooden doors swung aside with a low groan, and Gaia, Vashta and Rose stepped forth to lead the Band into the streets beyond with the three legendary artifacts held high.

The first foot to tread on the city road was met with a deafening, united roar, and a low, terrible rumble.

From within the Band, Gabe whispered:

"...And so it begins."

Chapter 20 – Roll for Initiative

"Incompetent imbeciles..."

Festivus Merrier muttered as he stalked across the way from his Bristol home, passing the area where the gypsy Vardo was usually stationed during the day.

His face was tinged with a distaste- a near fury that was most unlike him... because it was not 'Festivus Merrier' at all (and never truly was in the first place).

Simeon Malificus- the Praetor (a fancy word for 'leader') of the Draco Disciples had been following the actions of his minions for years now.

He had watched from afar in his Festivus disguise as Ruby's attempt at summoning an ancient dragon from the Cauldron of Cerridwen failed. He had watched as the Gypsies robbed them of one valuable artifact after the next, and as the Draco Disciples had been reduced to relying on their aid to deal with the scourge of Loki.

"... and then she tries to steal the Rhetshire Estate from under my nose... now *this*." He snarled, glancing at the jousting arena in the close distance- by that point teeming with dark figures. "It appears I have no choice but to put her back into her place."

As he reached Shoplatch Lane and turned southward, he heard a strange sound from behind him- a sort of hissing in the rapid staccato signifying a giggle.

Turning, Simeon's eyes widened as he beheld a pair of lithe figures, their forms adorned only sparsely with red and black cloth. The remainder of their bodies was covered leathery hide.

"Oh, my goodness." Simeon said, legitimately surprised- perhaps even a little in awe. It had been some time since he had laid eyes upon actual dragonkin. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this little visit? I sensed a spike of magical energy, but I had no idea we were to expect the children of Tiamat this den... perhaps I misjudged Ruby after all..."

As Simeon pondered this new revelation, he failed to notice the glint in the monsters' eyes... before they lunged at him with the speed of mercury.

The Praetor's eyes opened wide, before he let out a gasp and a grunt of pain as the creatures hacked into his body with their taloned hands.

Simeon staggered back as the two lizardmen leapt back again, their mouths twisted into fanged grins.

"What is the meaning of this!?" Simeon gasped, one hand reaching down to cast a swift healing spell on at least one of the wounds- the other a mere scratch. "Do you know who I am!?"

"Simeon Malificus..." One of them said, to which the other let out a hissing laugh.

"I am certain the Praetor will reward us for his capture..." The second nodded. "He will take great pleasure in ripping him apart once again."

"What?!" Simeon growled, taking a half-step back. "Of what nonsense do you speak?! I am the Praetor! I am Tiamat's most loyal servant, far more valuable than a couple of empty-headed newts such as you!"

"He talks just as much as the last one did." The first lizardman commented, his smirk fading into a deadpan expression. The other nodded, raising its now bloodstained claws. "And they still worship Tiamat."

"Shall we simply kill him, then? Let the Praetor deal with his spirit?"

"Now, see here-" Simeon snarled, his other hand beginning to raise as the lizardmen continued to speak.

"Hrm." The first lizardman licked his lips with a long, discolored tongue. "I am certain he'll not be missed."

"We bury him, then," The second nodded, a murderous glint in his eye as, together, they rounded upon Simeon, "with his Goddess, and the rest of the *relics*!"

"Enough of this!" The Praetor bellowed, raising his hands in a grand, ferocious gesture. "If you do not serve Tiamat, then..."

The two lizardmen were suddenly caught in mid-air by a crackling web of electricity, holding them aloft in an agonizing field of burning light.

"I know not from where you hail, whom you serve, or just who is to blame for your presence," He began, shooting a glare in the direction of the Rhetshire Estate, "but regardless of those questions, you are not *welcome* here!"

The lizardmen screeched before falling into a smoking pile to the ground. Simeon took a deep breath and let it out as a satisfied 'harrumph'. As he turned toward the Rhetshire Estate, he heard the rumblings of the emerging Dragon Army back at the Jousting Arena.

"Damn..." He hissed. He would never make it to the Rhetshire Estate, especially with the speed at which these creatures seemed to move.

Quickly he turned, making his way back to his own home, tending to the lesser wound in his side.

Suzanne Mariage watched in horror from the ground floor window of the Merrier House, witnessing the growing mass of crimson and ebony. What few guards had been making their nightly patrols before had been swiftly overwhelmed, leaving the townsfolk to fend for themselves... and most used that time to cower in the most secluded corners they could find. Those who tried to make a break for the gates or for the city port were handily snatched up by the airborne wyverns and swift-riding kobolds.

"This is... these are not the usual nightly festivities in Bristol, are they?" She asked, somehow able to keep some amount of good humor in the face of the draconic forces.

Turning away from the window, she saw her parents trying- in vain- to rouse Lucien and Yvonna from their earlier revelry.

"Where is Festivus?"

"He said that he was going to investigate this madness!" Her father replied with loud notes of panic in his voice. "He has not yet returned... I can only hope he has not gotten his fool self killed!"

However, at that moment the front door to the house burst open, 'Festivus' staggering inside and slamming the door behind him.

"Milord Merrier!" Jeanne Mariage exclaimed, rushing to his side and hastily looking for some cloth to press to his mild injury.

"I decided to investigate the strange goings-on outside..." Festivus muttered, trying to keep that balance of acting injured, but also acting as though he were bravely suffering in silence. "I am quickly learning that such antics are best left to the professionals... Are you all well?"

"Better than yourself, I imagine." Laurent said quickly. "What are we to do? This is certainly not what I was bargaining for when I came to your humble little town."

"I do not know..." Festivus replied honestly. "I suppose we simply wait for aid."

"Do you mean Tovias and the Band of the Twisted Claw?" Suzanne piped up, unable to keep herself from constantly peeking out the window in terrified fascination.

Where in God's teeth is the Band? Simeon thought, Were I behind this, they would have at least made an appearance.

True, he was powerful enough to fend for himself, but not in public, and not against an unknown- and seemingly plentiful- foe.

"What if they have been slain already?" Laurent Mariage demanded. "Are we to simply remain here and await our sacrifice to these disgusting lizards?"

"Nay, good cousin." Festivus shook his head.

At that moment, Suzanne spoke once again in her smooth, sweet native French, addressing her parents as she approached them. Likely, she meant them to be words of encouragement. Unfortunately, unless Festivus missed his guess, Laurent responded with what could only be called 'incredulous panic'.

Laurent was in the middle of a particularly animated and frantic passage when- all at once- the spacious sitting room was filled with no less than six additional occupants; Colin Tist, Gabe Thalion, Druscilla Snowfire, Lindria Cailean and Petris Vuvuzela.

"Is everybody here?" Lindria asked, glancing from side to side at the others, ignoring for the moment the startled Festivus and company.

"Seems that way." Petris nodded, lowering the sword he had had at the ready. "I guess we had nothing to worry about after all."

"It isn't enough he can shell the entire city off to keep the dragon monsters from getting out, but to be able to teleport us in while he is doing it? Gods."

"'Tis why he is one of the Great Wizards." Druscilla said admonishingly, before approaching Festivus. "Are you all well?"

"None the worse for wear." Festivus replied... inwardly feeling a bit relieved. If they could have simply appeared like that, he was glad they chose now to do so instead of a point when he was betraying his disguise. As he watched, Lindria hurried to him to finish the job Jeanne had begun, using Tovias' wand to focus her healing magic into the wound.

"Hm... it should not be this hard to mend..." Lindria murmured as she finally closed the light gash. "Something is not right..."

"I sense it as well." Druscilla murmured. "The Elemental Balance has been disrupted on top of... or perhaps *because of* this invasion."

"Thank the Gods you've come." Festivus said with his usual cheer... albeit with a sliver of concern. "We were just trying to weigh our options... or see which options were even available to us."

"Can you tell us what is going on? Where are Tovias and the other Gypsies?" Suzanne asked, adopting Festivus' demeanor to an extent. Nothing was going to get accomplished by panicking as her parents were doing. Besides, Tovias' escort through the Twisted Claw might have softened her to this sort of thing.

The Champions (with Colin filling in for the fifth) looked at one another uncomfortably at the mention of Tovias... but then Gabe finally spoke up.

"Thoren Grymm, our leader, is somewhere in the city. Talia and the other members of the Band are looking for him. *We* are trying to get as many people out of here as we can, and I guess we are starting with the six of you."

"Nonsense!" Festivus snorted with well-rehearsed bravado. "Of course, we shall be accompanying you in your endeavor."

It they had not before- which was a distinct possibility- Yvonna and Lucien both snapped wide awake at the sound of Festivus' proclamation. For a moment they began to suspect he was beginning to believe his own Lord Mayor campaign rumors and promises.

"No sense in being the Lord Mayor of a ruined city, and when the time comes to select the best man for the position let it not be said of Festivus Merrier that he cowered in fear like the rest, and that it was he who- shall we say- led the 'Crawl to Safety'."

Not all of the Band (much less the Mariages) shared Festivus' enthusiasm, but each one had to admit he was correct in his own wonderfully absurd way. And they *would* need all the help they could find...

"With all due respect..." Gabe began, thinking that Festivus' boisterous, rotund presence- and that of his hung-over cohorts- might not be advantageous against the monsters they faced.

"You need not worry." Festivus grinned with that mischievous, conspiratorial grin he sometimes wore when courting visiting noblewomen or even at a round of Pope Joan. "I am quite prepared for such an eventuality as this."

With this, he beckoned to all in attendance, departing from the sitting room.

"I do believe you in the Band have yet to see some of the martial trophies in my Display Room."

Grunts, snarls and challenging roars rang out on both sides of the impromptu battlefield. The band's initial charge had been met at the south end of Farnham Way, from where they had begun their northbound ascent.

For their part, the battalion of monsters didn't bother with rank-and-file in their assault. It was first-come-first-served slaughter, and there was not exactly plenty to go around. Fourteen against an estimated one-thousand or more.

Gaia and Rose had taken the front. Even as they thrust and swung the spears to the best of their mutual combat ability (ranging between modest and negligible), the chants of the Keepers raised an aura of power from them that seemed to fuel the fervor of the Gypsies to superhuman levels.

At the rear of the battling circle, the light of the Crosier in Vashta's hands staved off- no pun intended- the scaly monsters that might have swarmed them from behind and from above. Flittering Dragon-imps and the Kobold Whelp-Riders could not bear to look into its light, and even as they drew close to slay its bearer its brilliance seared their scaly forms. Even as this occurred, the light seemed to instantly heal any small wounds the Band incurred at the hands of the wild Dragonkin.

Besides Vashta and the Keepers, the want for weapons was such that much of the Band was forced to fight either with daggers or even barehanded where they could. There were notable exceptions; Adria had her father's Claymore, a weapon suitable for clearing the path for the Keepers. Every swing cut down at least one of the monsters, but thanks to their close quarters, every corpse tripped up at least two more. Talia- with Gabe's sword- was only slightly less effective. Although she couldn't make such wide and powerful sweeps, her magical knowledge allowed her to add protection and offensive cantrips that Adria did not possess. Lastly there was Stirling the Troll, who wouldn't have been caught without his massive club. Each swing- down or across- sent Kobolds and Dragon-imps flying or directly into the ground.

"What in the hell *are* these things?!" Adria demanded as her Claymore fell like a guillotine blade, neatly bisecting both Kobold and Whelp simultaneously. Another took its place so swiftly that she almost didn't have enough time to recover, but from within the circle, a skirted foot thrust out, kicking the drooling Whelp in the face. The thing staggered, its rider unable to right it, until Adria managed to free her blade and send it plunging into the Kobold's neck.

"The results of magical forced-breeding to increase Dragonkin numbers." Talia replied in a mix of desperation and disgust. With a swift weaving of arcane words, the Kobolds near her slowed ever so slightly, allowing her time enough to hack through one. Her blade passed through its body in a spray of black blood, and cleaved into a second before she turned it back to block a third. "But where did the bloody things *come* from!?"

"Smashy-smashy." Stirling chimed in as he swung his club mightily outward, the Band certain to give him as much room as they could. Vashta stood closest to him, but even if the light of the Crosier were not by his side, the Troll stench would have been enough to give the creatures pause.

Even with the collective auras of the artifacts and skilled fighters among the Gypsy ranks, the fact that they had already come so far- nay, the fact that they had not been instantly and completely obliterated- was testament to their strength and tenacity.

"Why did we not have Randalf simply teleport us all to the Jousting field?" Andra asked, she and Dierdre stationed at the center of the circle along with those in the Band not actively fighting yet. Currently, the two of them were holding Aggie's leather bag, while Aggie herself held the large burlap-wrapped object she had brought in with her.

"Jumping right into the middle of this without a plan before we even know what we are dealing with would not have been wise. Thoren probably has a much better idea of what is happening. We need to retrieve him first." Raven explained, anxious to get ahold of a weapon of *some* kind. "I just pray he still lives."

"He lives. I'd have felt it, I think, if he did not." Talia muttered. "Besides, he would not go out easy. I guarantee you this."

"Why did we send the Champions off? We could have used them." Sydney asked, eyes ever-vigilant for any fanged monstrosity that might have gotten through the circle of fighters around them. "Besides, if this battle ends poorly, whether we get the people out of here or not..."

"We cannot afford these creatures any hostages. They already have advantage enough."

"Hostages." Adria scoffed at Raven's words. "You think these monsters would take hostages? It is a wonder they have not burned the town to the ground already." With a growl, another Kobold head was sent flying into swarm.

"Rather no' say what *I'm* thinkin'..." Aggie began, frowning, but Talia shook her head.

"Then say nothing... I think we are all thinking the same thing." The Bard muttered, as the embattled Gypsies turned westward along Guild Hall Road.

"They are probably planning something worse."

The Gypsy Vardo sat inert and- for the most part- unattended near the Bristol front gates. Only Lucy sat in morose silence on the steps leading within the wagon.

Perhaps the band was genuinely concerned for her welfare. After all, her wounds and weakness had not completely healed. On top of that, she was never much of a fighter to begin with.

Then again, the idea that they would have so quickly left her was strange at best... foolhardy at worst. Even if Loki had been involved at the time, Tovias had opened up to her- trusted her. If there were any hope of bringing the mage out of this...

Thankfully, her list of acquaintances was not limited only to the gypsies.

She nearly panicked at the sound of approaching, uneven footsteps... and her relief was minimal when she recognized the hunched forms of the Normyl sisters.

"You an' the wizard had the good sense to stay out of there too, I see." Gertrude said with a stony expression. "As I hear it, the Gypsy Lord weren't so lucky."

Lucy didn't answer.

"Looks like rain." Merriweather said absently, looking up at the swirling clouds that were now beginning to spread. "I should hate to melt again."

"Maybe it'll start rainin' men." Abigail said with a mischievous grin. "S'already raining *dragons*, an' I'm still short some teeth and eyeballs... oh, and by the way." She added, turning her own eyes to Lucy. "Y'kin 'elp yerself to Tovias. I have decided 'e's a bit *strange* for my tastes."

Gertrude and Lucy only stared at her for a moment.

"Left you out to dry here, did they?" Gertrude continued, looking to Lucy once more. The fool frowned at the three of them, but gave a light nod.

"Do you really think you could have talked Tovias out of doing what he did?" The green-attired witch continued, tilting her head a bit. The question came, oddly enough, without the sardonic tone one might have expected.

"I... I do not know what I would have said." Lucy replied eventually. "Tovias saved me... and in doing so saved the world from Loki. No matter what has happened, he is not truly an evil man... but there was a power within him- something dark, tempered with years of being frightened and alone... and now everything has gone wrong somehow."

"Mayhap this is true." Gertrude said thoughtfully, "Tovias' upbringing- stunted an' hellish as it was- probably gave 'em a longing for the company 'a nobles over that of pirates and bandits... An' Thoren- good as he may try to be- he cannot possibly account for everything. There is bound to be trouble where forbidden fruit is involved."

"It is too late for him, isn't it?" Lucy asked weakly. "For Tovias. I did not want to believe it, but..."

"The world is about to be destroyed. I have the distinct feeling that if we are all going to last the night, we need to get Tovias to come around. The Band is trying it their way- their fancy spells and pointy sticks. We'll try it our way, if you are willing." Gertrude concluded, beckoning to Lucy who only blinked.

"I... thought the same thing... Why *did* you go to the Dungeon looking for Tovias?"

Gertrude shrugged.

"Do you think you are the only one who thinks that poor, misguided mage might be worth saving?" She gave Lucy a crooked little smile, beckoning again before she rushed back into the treeline around the city wall, followed by her sisters. Lucy looked after them a moment, but shook her head and chased after them.

As she departed, however, she could swear she heard the sound of approaching footsteps from elsewhere in the woods...

By then, the rest of the army (these being the Draconians and Lizardmen) had caught up with the Kobold frontliners; literally shoving their drooling brethren aside. Even the protective and empowering auras of the legendary artifacts were not enough to push back these greater draconic entities en-masse. There were Disciple Wizards as well, but thanks to the nature of the battle these foul magi could not throw spells to their fullest effect.

"Damn!" Raven snarled, catching the wrists of a clawing, hissing lizardman who had spryly leapt over Talia's slashing blade. Jameson rushed to his side, slamming a fist into the monster's fanged jaw. Together they lifted the thing and hurled it back into the frenzy. This, unfortunately, was not the end of it. The situation was the same all around the Gypsy circle, those inside resorting to fisticuffs (an arena in which the clawed, fanged and muscled soldiers of Tiamat were superior).

It was a wonder that they had ever gotten this far- perhaps thirty meters from the armory and the weapons that would have given them a fighting chance...

"MOVE!" Came the sudden shout from inside the circle.

As they watched the space open in the circle like a slice from a pastry, the Dragonkin would have charged in... but what they saw caused them to hesitate for that one critical second.

At the center was Aggie McGee, the bundled item now free from its burlap confines. It looked like some sort of huge shoulder-mounted ballista; the groove in the center too thick for any arrow or harpoon to properly fit... however, what was loaded inside was no arrow or harpoon; but a mix of strange items, loaded haphazardly inside by Andra and Dierdre from the leather bag Aggie had packed before the siege began.

"PULL!" She shouted again.

The seconds after the trigger was pulled were pandemonium on top of chaos. With a loud scraping sound, the collection of strange objects was hurled forth in a clumsy uneven arc. One large clump of metal hit one of the nearby Dragonkin straightaway, crushing its skull and piercing its throat with jagged bits of metal. However, even as it fell to the ground, the damage had only begun as the remainder of the makeshift artillery arched over its body.

What few members of the band didn't need to be immediately concerned for their lives looked on, dumbstruck as the rest of the projectiles- every one of them one of Aggie's old experiments- hit the ground... or more likely, any number of Draconic troops.

Each impact subsequent from the first was coupled with shattering glass or clanking metal, and in either case, a roaring explosion.

Scaly bodies sailed every which way; crashing into nearby buildings, into trees, into each other... in some cases they were vaporized on the spot.

"LOAD!" Aggie shouted again, not even allowing herself a moment to smirk with satisfaction. Within an instant, the Vardo sisters had the gun heaping with more slipshod contraptions, which became lethally volatile missiles with the pull of a trigger.

"PUSH FORWARD!" Talia shouted over the din, eyes wide at this turn of events. The blasts had left a messy path; which was already beginning to fill in with fresh Draconic abominations.

"We should'a been throwing these the whole time!" Jameson remarked, looking to the leather bag.

"Din' wanna use em unless we dinnae have a choice." Aggie explained, staggering a bit to keep up while carrying the unwieldy weapon. "I worked *hours* on most'a those things I jus' threw out there."

There was a brief silence among the Gypsies.

"They weren'a meant ta be ammunition!" She finally snapped, Dierdre giving her a consoling pat on the back.

Chapter 21 – LFM 50-man Bristol Full Raid

The relief among the gypsies was palpable as the uneven dirt road beneath their feet changed sharply to smooth wooden flooring.

Perhaps the dragonkin army had not surmised where the Gypsies were headed, or perhaps they did not believe it would make any difference. The overwhelming number of them was certainly enough to merit a modicum of confidence on their part.

As for the Band, emotions were mixed. They had arrived at SRG Armory at last. They had taken no casualties, the best result they could possibly have hoped for. Everything was going exactly as planned.

Something was clearly wrong.

"Take what you can." Talia ordered, forming a defensive line along the shopfront with the Keepers and the Band's other currently armed members. The Band proceeded to avail themselves to every piece of equipment that they could wield and was not nailed down.

"Are ye sure we'll not get in trouble fer stealin'?" Will asked, biting his lower lip as he realized the armory was fresh out of long, distance-friendly spears.

"We will see if there is a city guard left by night's end. *Then* we can worry about theft charges." Sydney shot back wryly. She was by all accounts a mage, but her spells were runic in nature, based around chants and symbols. They required time- time they were not allowed in the heat of melee.

The actual battle against the Dragon Army was incidental, as most of the Band was aware. Finding Thoren and- with his help- finding a way to reverse what Tovas had apparently done took precedence.

In the midst of the Band's scavenging for weapons, as Wanda took a sword from off the wall and tested its weight, she noticed something in the corner of her eye... something that- perhaps- should not have been out of the ordinary. Nevertheless, she looked back to her companions.

"Are any if ye wounded?" She asked.

The response was a collective, panting 'Nay' as the Band reformed, giving those who had been fighting a moment's respite.

With a curious quirk of her brow, she turned back to examine what she'd seen; a small, dark splotch of what seemed to be human blood on the stall floor. Stepping over it, she followed what she now found was a trail of it leading to SRG's back room.

Seconds later, the Band- already at their last nerve- jumped as they heard Wanda cry out from behind them:

"Thoren!"

The front gates were relatively quiet in comparison to the goings-on further within Bristol. A fresh contingent of Dragonkin had broken off from the mass fighting in the north, since the tightly packed quarters allowed only so many to get involved. At this point the best they could do was await orders, or failing that, pick off would-be escapees.

However, just as the boredom and the envy of their kinsmen was just beginning to set in, one of the scaly creatures caught a glimpse of a small figure in gypsy rags meandering outside the gates.

Lillith watched as the monsters turned upon her as one, their wicked intent worn proudly from their glowing slitted eyes to their drooling fanged jaws. Her own eyes widened, and she immediately turned to retreat back into the grass and dirt outside.

The draconian soldiers and their lizardman subordinates charged after her, bursting headlong from the tall wooden doors in hot pursuit.

Emerging into the grassy expanse just beyond the city walls, they suddenly heard a mighty bellow from their left flank.

Lillith had turned on her heel to face her would-be assailants, a little smirk on her face... as a fur-and-leather-clad mass of roaring humanity fell upon them.

The Bristol Barbarians had arrived.

For what civilized behavior they managed to display within Bristol's city limits, the extent of the Barbarian's ferocity was truly a sight to behold. Particularly now; Armageddon seemed to have struck with Bristol as ground zero, and there was little reason to hold back.

The small contingent of Dragonkin, eager for the piecemeal butchering of a single gypsy girl, was in no way prepared.

One of the lizardmen threw back its head to let out a loud screech- likely meant as an alarm- but all at once it disappeared under the bludgeoning end of a massive oaken hammer.

Kai raised the weapon with a chuckle to observe his handiwork; a sickly smear in the grass and soil beneath.

The rest of the creatures could barely register what had just happened before the other barbarians swarmed in. Penny dexterously skipped up on top of the clean end of Kai's mallet, springing off of it and careening sword-first upon another shocked lizardman.

"Damn showoff." McLovin growled after her, parrying the claw of his panicked opponent before sinking his other blade dead-center into its chest.

"So, you mind filling us in on what's going on?" Mary asked, calling to Lillith almost casually as she engaged one of the Draconians. "Not that I *mind* a little overtime."

"Don' really know m'self." Lillith replied, feeling the slightest bit awkward at the conversation playing out mid-melee. "It has something to do with Tovias. I guess... from what others were saying, he somehow summoned these things to Bristol..."

"What!?" The incredulous snort heralded a sudden and swift split in the Barbarian ranks as Grease finally emerged... carrying an absolutely massive polearm; a glaive easily taller than himself, or even Kai- a weapon he affectionately referred to as the 'Doorknocker'. "*Tovias?* You're joking."

The Dragonkin had only started to shake off the surprise of the barbarians' sudden assault- enough so to charge the newcomer. Grease's eyes narrowed beneath his helm before his body suddenly twisted, bringing the weapon's massive blade down; hacking two of the monsters in twain in a diagonal sweep.

"I... wish I were." Lillith said. Frankly she wished for the ability to do something like that *herself*, but for the time being...

"He's not still pouting about the Bear Pit, is he?" Malissa asked, her expression bland as her spear plunged through the neck of another lizardman. "Seems like he might be overreacting a bit."

"I don't know, but Talia mentioned something about Lady Tso..."

Grease immediately froze at the mention of the name. The hesitation gave the lizardmen and Draconians enough time to close the distance granted by his weapon... but they were intercepted by Afro and Horus.

"Friend of yours, Grease?" Morgan called, noticing the hesitation in what should have been Grease's eager plunge into battle.

"The freak-bitch who would have had us fighting the Band years back." Grease answered, his glaive suddenly springing to life. It now swung with brutal strength and speed in all directions, leaving death in its wake. "If *she's* here, she and I've gotta have some words... but Tovias? Honestly, never thought he had the stomach for this kinda thing... Y'think we pushed him too hard, Kai?"

"If we did, we've just gotta push him *back*." Agnarr frowned, kicking one of the Draconians back, before bringing his sword down to split its skull down the middle.

By the time they had finished off the smaller guard contingent, other members of the Dragon Army were beginning to notice the new arrivals as they charged through the gates.

"Where do you figure the Band is?" Grease called.

Before she could answer, there was a loud, rumbling crash from the west... near the Bristol Port.

"Captain Wunderhund... is here!"

The declaration came from the helm of a freshly crashed sailing ship, now half on and half off the shore.

Blinking, Wunderhund slowly turned to acknowledge the disapproving glares of his fellow passengers.

"Just because I'm a Captain," he began with an exaggerated pout, "doesn't mean I know a thing about sailing ships. Besides, we made a half day's journey in less than an hour's time."

This particular group of lightbringers had been en route back home, away from Bristol en route to other parts of England, or other lands entirely, when they had received a message carried by one of Will Spellworthy's feathered friends.

"We may still be too late..." Skylana murmured, the elven mage shuddering as the wind she'd summoned to expedite their ship instantly died. On her shoulder sat Will Spellworthy's bird... and even IT gave a wary cringe. Perhaps Skylana would have done so as well, were it not for her companion Ryder who placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

This particular pair had been through many adventures together, and regardless of what was happening now, they would face this one with no less ardor.

"The city still stands." Derian Solarii- a paladin of the Order of the Sun- said insistently. "The Band must still be fighting in there somewhere."

"As *we* must be..." Tsumibito- another Order member who bore a striking resemblance to the Christian Messiah (to 'Tsumi's' chagrin) nodded in turn. As much as he abhorred violence, it didn't seem as though there was much choice. As it was, his words were nearly overtaken by the shout of still another.

"Well then, what are we still doing HERE?! Let us slaughter them!"

"Master, I do not think this to be wise..." came a voice from Nanus Firebain's wrist, one that was below a whisper to anyone but himself. "Whomever this Dragon Army serves, they are... not aligned with the Dark Mother."

"I do not wish to alarm anyone..." Virum called, having just emerged from the ship's cabin, but now pointing northward.

Their rather dramatic entry had not gone unnoticed.

A pair of drake-mounted knights had turned their mounts from their lazy circular flight, and were now hurtling down toward the gathered heroes. By then, the rest of them- warriors Eli and Natalia of the Order, as well as Gwen Walker- a Lunar Tribe rogue- had emerged just behind Virum Multis Nominibus, another- rather verbose- warrior of the Order.

In an instant, swords, shields, bows and spells were readied... but even the swiftness of the experienced adventurers was not quick enough. Spherical flashes of white light flew from the drakes' roaring jaws, crashing into the side of the ship before exploding with deafening booms.

Large chunks of the ship were utterly obliterated, the heroes leaping over the side of the vessel- or thrown overboard. Either way, they all managed to right themselves and regroup as the drakes swooped over them. Spinning around, what mages and archers there were amongst their number let fly a practiced volley of arrows and spells.

However, the drakes' thick hide and surprising agility turned aside all but a few of the relentless missiles, and even then, those that struck inflicted only superficial damage.

From on high, the knights shouted to their mounts in hissing draconic, the beasts turning in mid-air for another deadly pass.

"I don't suppose you have anything better than a few measly arrows?" Nanus demanded of Gwen and Ryder.

"Because your MAGIC has been of any more assistance." Ryder snorted back at him, but then turned once more to Skylana. "Wait. The wind! Can you still control the winds?"

"Something is wrong..." Sky returned, raising a hand to her forehead. "It's disrupting the Elemental energies in the air..."

"One stiff breeze is all that is needed. Can you do it?" Ryder hissed.

Closing her eyes, the elf raised her arms, trying once more to call upon the element of Air... but as she did, she heard chanting from beside her as Nanus lent his power to the spell.

Bringing her hands back down toward the ground, the wind suddenly howled as it followed the motions of her opened hands.

One of the drakes let out a screech of surprise as its wings were twisted by a sudden wind-shear, causing it to change its course directly into the path of the other. The two collided, their bodies and limbs messily entwined as they hurtled toward the ground- the knights screaming and struggling. One of the drakes opened its mouth, letting fly another orb of energy which the adventurers only barely managed to dodge again- this one managing to inflict a few slight burns.

Finally, the drakes fell to the ground. One managed to break away and land on its feet, the other crashing heavily upon its back, severely wounding if not killing its rider. The remaining Knight turned his attention to the heroes as his mount began to regain its balance.

"Now!" Eli shouted to the others. "Do not let it recover!"

The other warriors followed suit, charging the upright beast before it could unleash its breath weapon again while the knight swiftly dismounted.

"Well, the ship is gone." Wunderhund muttered, glancing around. "I don't suppose anyone has any ideas for how to get *out* of here."

"Once again finding myself the bearer of bad news," Virum began, his eyes cast toward the city, "I do not believe escape is a viable option."

Looking around, the Captain finally began to notice the clogged streets and the sound of full-out war.

Immediately, he began to back toward the nearest unoccupied alley.

"Hm... a great many internal *and* external wounds." Vashta explained, trying her best to focus amid the noise of battle. Gradually, the energy of the Crosier sought out and healed Thoren's grievous injuries. "What'd ye do, fight their entire army bare-handed?"

"Hm." Thoren grunted, allowing Vashta to tend to his wounds, "After Tovas was finished with my weapons, I dinnae have much choice."

"Tovas." Adria cursed under her breath, ready to charge anew into the fray at the thought of him.

After Tovas and- apparently- the living corpse of Lady Tso had left Thoren, the Gypsy leader had dragged himself up off the floor of the Rhetshire Estate's hidden basement. After stealing a decorative sword from the Disciples' mantle, he hacked his way through the streets until the blade broke, and his wounds forced him to retreat into the back of the armory where Wanda had found him.

He hadn't expected the Band to find him in time. Perhaps he didn't believe they would have the nerve or the strength to seek him out... but as his eyes fluttered open to find the Band of the Twisted Claw huddled around him- or in the midst of battle- they widened in genuine amazement.

"What happened to you, Thoren?" Talia asked, shoving to the front of the huddle.

After a moment- coughing up one last gout of residual blood and wiping it away with a snarl, he tried to stand despite his unsteady legs.

"Easy." Vashta bade him. "You've lost a lot of blood."

Thoren managed to speak despite his wheezing breath. He was recovering, but nowhere near quickly enough for his tastes. The battle was far from over.

"We lost Tovas..." He said at last. "He and that... that walking corpse Tso left me in the tunnel beneath the Rhetshire Estate."

"W-what about these creatures?" Will asked hesitantly, too terrified to think that perhaps he should have brought his sketchbook along to document the appearance of these things. "Where did they come from?"

"Whate'er ritual Tovas used to awaken Tso's body also resulted in this invasion." Thoren replied. "I dunnae what his plans are, but he has done is threatening ta destroy the entire town... the entire *world* if'n Randall's barrier cannae keep it in."

"We need to find the source of this- the rift that has opened to allow this Dragon Army access to our world- and to close it." Gaia said in a firm tone. "I can sense a disruption- a tear in the fabric of our world... and it emanates from the Jousting Field."

"B-but..." Rose piped up, "... this is not like the Cauldron. If this 'rift' is a hole in thin air, how... how do we close it? Unless there is a chant we can use... is there a chant we might use, Talia? Sydney?"

The two looked to each other, then bowed their heads. Neither one had any experience with this sort of thing...

"Divide by zero?" Stirling muttered quietly. Those members of the Band within the huddle blinked, looking from him to each other and back.

"Wait." Gaia held up a hand. "If... if we do not know how to close this *new* rift... there may be a way to use the gate we *do* know how to close."

"The Cauldron." Thoren nodded. "We may be able to use the energy flow that comes with sealing the Cauldron in order to seal the new rift as well."

"...What?" Adria blinked, but Talia gently patted her on the shoulder.

"We need to get the Cauldron from here to the Jousting field."

"Oh. Good. I was afraid it would be something difficult." The swordmistress rolled her eyes. However, as she turned back to look at how the battle was going, she noticed something had changed.

The Dragon Army was hesitating. Violent activity could be seen to the west and to the south. Adria was willing to hope that the team of Champions was doing their part as well to evacuate others.

"I believe the Lightbringers and the Barbarians have arrived... thank Goodness." Talia murmured, a bright, brief smile passing over her features. With this, she turned to the Band at large.

"Twisted Claw! We're headed for the Tree. Stirling, help Thoren."

"Nay. I can walk." Thoren growled, waving Stirling away and plucking an unclaimed rapier from the wall.

"Dun' strain yourself." Vashta called, readying the Crosier for a fresh assault. "This is no hangover."

"I've had worse." He spat... though he was noticeably paler in complexion, a slight quiver in his stride.

The center of the scaly mass at the jousting arena was filled with an eerie sort of calm. It seemed as though the unnatural rift swallowed any sounds near its unsettling visage.

Nevertheless, one did not need to hear to sense what was occurring throughout the city... and yet, for all the havoc, the vicious army of dragonkin seemed to take no notice of Tovias Farraday, nor his 'companion'.

They are here. Tovias thought. All of them. They are all here... to protect their precious village.

Slowly he turned, casting a glance over his shoulder.

But where were they back then?

His gaze was... empty. Lacking sorrow. Lacking vibrance. All that was present was a cold, undiluted hatred.

Where were their open arms? Their saccharine platitudes? Their litany of pretty lies? Back then, none of them were there to protect me, to save me... and instead, I was allowed to see my life destroyed... oh, yes, they found me in the end, just in time to destroy it all over again.

Very much in kind, the unliving, soulless creature he had wrought stood behind him, unconcerned with the battle, with the armies around her. Her sole concern was, it seemed, smiling that frightening, empty smile and embracing Tovias affectionately.

Why not go to them? A voice in his mind said. At a subconscious whim, the animated corpse tightened its embrace around Tovias' slim frame. After all, you said it yourself; this is the role you were destined for- to be their enemy.

"No." the mage said without hesitation. "... Even as their enemy, I will not face them again." Tilting his head again slightly, he looked directly into Katherine's eyes, his heart chilling over as he witnessed those empty irises staring into his own.

"Thoren and his Gypsies believe they know what is best in all things... from my fate to that of the entire world. Perhaps it is time to see if they can even look out for *themselves*."

"Ah, yes... about that."

Tovias' eyes widened as he turned toward the rift... at which stood a familiar figure.

The elder version of Estella Foxglove smirked at him from where she posed languidly beside the ripple in timespace... but she perked up in alert as Tovias' aura spiked again.

"You!" He snarled, the white light flaring from his body beginning to twist into raking claws which converged on the young woman. "You treacherous little brat. None of this would have happened if it weren't for your meddling!"

"Wait, wait, wait!" The elder Estella called out, stepping back a pace and raising her arms. "I wasn't the one who stole the Will if you want to be- b- but that's not the-!" Before she could continue, one of the claws seized her tightly by the throat.

"I should kill you now... you and this entire army you've brought." He hissed, his magical grip tightening. "This is what you'd intended from the beginning

"N- now now, Tovias... didn't I promise you that I would bring you to your Mistress again?" She choked, squirming fruitlessly.

"You did." Tovias growled back, cutting off her air entirely as his eyes flicked back to the Tso-thing ever-present at his side. "Is *this* what you intended to deliver? This empty *shell*?"

Estella's face was blue, her struggles growing weak. Her head shook as much as it could in his grip until Tovias finally released her. She fell to the ground with a sharp gasp of air.

After remaining there on her hands and knees for a moment, laboring madly to replenish her lungs, her eyes focused and her skin gradually regained its proper color.

"Reminds me of home..." She muttered once she had enough air to speak, but then raised her voice to a proper volume as to be heard. "But as to your problem... as for Lady Tso, the job is only halfway done."

With a subtle gesture, she directed his gaze toward the portal.

"The answer you seek, the key to restoring her to her former glory... it's in there. Back where I came from."

Tovias looked to the warped mass of space, then back to Estella.

"Are you lying to me?"

"Do you have anything left to lose if I am?" She countered, still rubbing her neck.

Tovias said nothing, only continued to glare at Estella... but perhaps his mind spoke for him as Tso's body moved to embrace him once again. With a soft growl- punctuated by another ripple of his energy- he stood up and began walking toward the rift.

Reaching out, he watched with awe as his hand seemed to vanish into nothing, the distorted reality swarming over his hand and swallowing it in their mass.

Withdrawing his hand from it to make certain it was still intact, he cast one final glance back at Estella.

It was as she had said; there was nothing stopping him at this point. He had no friends, and certainly no investment to whatever this Dragon Army was. Lady Tso was what had started all of this. She was where it would have to end.

With a final nod, he reached back to take Tso's cold, almost mechanical hand, and stepped into the gateway.

The elder Estella watched him go... and at the exact same time, watched as something *emerged* from the very same rift...

Three somethings. A trio of dark figures emerging from the rift.

The sorceress recognized them all at a glance, hand on hip as she stepped aside to welcome the newcomers to the world.

"You had us worried for a moment." The 'leader' of the three said, addressing the young woman with a familiar, commanding voice tinged with mischief. "It seems our unwitting ally did not take kindly to being made a pawn in all of this."

"I hope the Company left us something to kill." The second said with a low, hissing chuckle... a voice suited to his feral, pointed countenance.

"Just remember, my dear..." The third chided him in a sultry tone, waving a well-manicured finger. "We must leave *some* of them alive, so *do* try to control yourself."

"Hm. The Gypsies are weak now. *Not* killing them will pose a far greater challenge." The second answered with a fanged leer.

"We will accomplish nothing standing around." The first declared, raising a jeweled scepter which pulsed with magical power. "Let us begin."

With that, the clouds that swirled in the sky above the portal began to descend... forming into a thick mist.

Chapter 22 – The Elite

Incredulous expressions were liberally cast around as Colin, Petris, Lindria, Gabe and Druscilla all emerged from the Merrier house.

"This is not a good idea." Druscilla murmured under her breath, over to Gabe, subtly gesturing back to the new additions.

"I know. But he's not really giving us a choice here. He'd stick around with us no matter what we do."

"Either way, it's damned hilarious." Petris said, grinning and twirling one of Gabe's spare swords in his hand.

Behind them, there was the sound of clanking metal... before Festivus Merrier himself emerged, dressed from head to toe in what looked like armor far too intricate and extravagant to be of any practical use. In his gauntleted hands, he carried a festively painted lance which seemed entirely beyond his capacity to wield effectively. Lucien was armed with a decorative longsword, while Yvonna... well, she kept to her strengths, armed with a large metal tankard in either hand.

Interspersed around and between the Band and their new companions were the Mariage family; mostly unarmed despite the Band's repeated warnings. In truth, Suzanne had taken a fire poker from the house, but Laurent had snatched it away from her upon seeing it, now uneasily wielding it himself.

The Dragon Army charged them almost immediately as they entered the street... and unfortunately, the fact that this had become an Escort Mission was not the only problem for the Champions.

The strange fluctuations in the Elemental Leylines affected the Champions no less than it had the other mages among the Gypsy ranks. The same could not be said for the Dragon Army spellcasters. Their arcane assaults continued unabated.

Lindria and Druscilla did what they could to maintain a magical barrier around the group. Gabe and Petris kept watch upon them, hacking down any scaly creature that attempted to get close. Colin drew one vial of discolored liquid from his pack after another, hurling them into the oncoming hordes. Some creatures exploded when struck by the vials, others burst into flame; one Wyvern actually froze in midair- icicles and all- before shattering on the ground. All others- Festivus, Yvonna, Lucien and (to a lesser extent) Laurent did what they could to keep the group- and themselves- protected...

However, despite their efforts, they could barely progress, having to battle tooth and nail to gain even a foot's worth of distance.

"It's no use." Lindria frowned. "We can barely defend *ourselves*, let alone bring any more hostages out to safety."

At that moment, there was a sudden and complete hush amongst the Dragon Army, both soldiers and spellcasters breaking away from the melee.

"...What is this new devilry?" Gabe asked, his sword still at the ready... until he noticed a wisp of cold white air nearby. Gradually, each of them noticed more and more of it- slivers of mist dancing in the air, coalescing into one large cloud of fog that swiftly enveloped them.

Despite their efforts, neither Lindria nor Druscilla could dispel the cloud, and attempting to outrun it would have them running blindly into a wall of Dragonkin.

Worse, still, as their vision was obscured, each of them could hear it:

At first, it was a whisper from all around them. It grew steadily in volume and intensity as more and more of the creatures joined in...

"Malevthix! Malevthix! Malevthix! Malevthix! MALEVTHIX! MALEVTHIX! MALEVTHIX! MALEVTHIX!"

-

"What the hell is going on now!?" Morgan spat as the fog swirled around the Barbarians as well. They had fought their way along the city streets, almost having reached the Port before they were engulfed.

"Not a clue. Lillith!" Grease shouted, his limited visibility forcing him to cease his glaive attacks, lest he strike down one of his own. "Lillith! Where are you!?"

-

"Stop chanting!" Ryder snarled as he raised his bow, ready to fire into the mist, but somehow it seemed to garble the sounds of the chanting enough that he couldn't even tell where to aim by listening for a target.

"What are they saying?" Derian asked, having engaged a Drake Knight moments before the Dragon Army had withdrawn to begin their chants.

"My Draconic is a bit rusty," Virum began in the midst of trying to remember any healing sigils he knew, "but I believe 'Malevthix' translates to-

"'Mother'." Nanus called. "The Dark Mother."

"Tiamat?!" Wunderhund winced. "You mean *the* Tiamat? 'Dark Goddess' Tiamat? Isn't that just a bit above our pay grade?"

"I don't know... I would have felt her presence." Nanus shook his head.

"We *all* would." Tsumi frowned, never lowering his guard.

At that moment, the strange fog began to slither and writhe into view among them, even surprising Skylana's keen elven senses by its stealth.

It was too late to escape it; their sight obscured, the sound of the horrible hissing mantra filling the air.

"I wasn't even supposed to *be* here today..." Wunderhund groaned.

-

"Meandering Mist." Gaia cursed under her breath as she reached out, taking hold of Talia and Sydney, closest to her at the time.

"She's trying to separate us!" Thoren growled. "Take hold of someone, quickly!"

The fog thickened in an instant, the Band seeking each other out in the dense mist... most succeeding, others disappearing in the unnerving white void.

All the while, the chanting continued...

-

"Lillith? Lillith!" Grease shouted once more, looking back to ensure he hadn't lost his own companions. However, the voice that returned his shout was not the one he had expected.

"Grease? Is that you?"

"Adria!" Grease called back. "Adria, yeah! We're right here! Where's Lillith?"

"I thought she was with you." The Swordmistress stated, finally stepping into view. She was joined by Rose, Aggie, Andra and Dierdre. "Was she not?"

"She was. but then this damned fog popped up." Grease scowled, glancing around. "Any idea what the hell it is?"

"No... and now it looks like we've lost Thoren and the others." Aggie said warily.

"Is everyone else still back there?" Grease shouted over his shoulder, eliciting a satisfactory collective bellow from the other Barbarians.

"We must hurry." Rose murmured uneasily, her grip on the Spear of Ascalon tightening. "We must find-"

Just then, the Barbarians and the Gypsies realized something... the chanting had ceased.

Silence... and then;

"Worry not about your friends, my sweet little Keeper."

The Barbarians raised their weapons as they heard Rose shriek as though she were looking into the heart of Hell itself.

Adria and the other gypsies turned as well- their breath catching in their throats.

Rose stood stock-still, eyes wide in terror, lower jaw quivering, continuing to scream in silence... as a creature now stood behind her, its clawed hands gripping her slender shoulders, talons biting into her skin. Although perhaps he seemed no different from any other Draconian they had yet seen... Most of them- particularly Adria- recognized the face all too well. The very fact of who he was set him apart from any other ordinary soldier or monster...

"What... y-you're...?!" The Swordsman stammered in shock.

He flashed a grin- mouth now filled with rows of razor-sharp fangs.

"You'll all be together very, very soon..."

"That was Rose!" Talia gasped, sword drawn as she spun around, but Thoren squeezed her by the shoulder to keep her still.

"Don't be runnin' off." He said plainly. "Won' do us any good. Who's here?"

After a moment of silent head-counting, another voice popped in- a voice loud enough to both startle and annoy.

"Captain *Wunderhund* is here!"

"What- How did you get here!?" Raven demanded, frowning despite his relief that it was the Captain and Lightbringers, here to assist rather than something far less pleasant.

"I blame my parents." Wunderhund replied plainly.

"We just got into port. It's good to see you all in one piece." Tsumi offered with a weak smile.

"Are you all that remains? What of the others?" Derian inquired, still warily looking out of the fog.

"We were separated by the Meandering Mist." Gaia explained. "Myself, Thoren, Talia, Raven and Sydney are still with us."

"We need to get back to the Tree. To get the Cauldron." Talia reminded them.

"Cauldron?" Nanus spat. "What would we want with that old relic?"

"We'll explain on the-" Talia began again, but was cut off by a shout.

"Look out!" Tsumi suddenly sprang forth, shoving the Bard Mistress aside as a pair of glistening blades thrust out from the mist. The blades- from what Talia saw- were long and curved, clearly of Eastern make. They pierced the fog, bit through the air and into Tsumi's upper-arms like the fangs of a viper. Clearly the strike had been meant to be twin kill-shots through the heart, but Tsumi's lunge had saved both himself and Talia.

"Damn!" Talia shouted, catching Tsumi as he staggered. "What in hell was-!?"

The fighters turned swiftly, pushing Tsumi into the center of their circle with Thoren.

"What was it?" Raven asked quickly.

"I've no idea! It was too fast. I couldn't-"

This time, though, Talia's eyes caught that flash of steel; one of those curved blades swung down like that of a guillotine, this one aiming down the center of Raven's skull. The Bardmistress weaved in, raising her weapon to block the strike with a sharp 'clang'. However, as before, a second blade thrust outward from the mist a split-second before Raven could parry.

He let out a cry of pain and surprise, stumbling back from the sword that had pierced his abdomen even as it attempted to wrench in deeper.

"Get back, Raven!" Virum shouted. "You are wounded!"

"Yes, I noticed!" Raven winced, but did as Virum suggested. He moved to stand near Thoren and Tsumi- the latter trying to focus on healing his wounds (though a warrior, he did have some rudimentary magical healing abilities).

"Everyone, shut up!" Nanus growled. "The blood on its blades... I can sense it. I know where it is."

Immediately, the Band fell silent, each one listening as best they could.

A moment passed.

"There!" Nanus shouted, turning and pointing.

All eyes followed his gesture... looking to Captain Wunderhund.

"What? ...What did I do?" He asked, before turning in the same direction Nanus was pointing... his jaw suddenly going slack.

Before him stood a voluptuous female figure, dressed in striking reds, golds and blacks. A wide-brimmed hat concealed all but a crimson-lipped smirk, as well as waves of ebony hair that spilled down her back and over her generously displayed bosom. Even the skirts about her lower body bore a long slash that readily exposed the skin of her leg when extended, said legs ending in shoes whose heels should have rendered her immobile, much less able to move at the speeds she seemed able to. In either hand, she held a curved blade, both of them dripping with blood. Perhaps only Tsumibito would recognize them as wakizashis, but at that point it didn't matter.

Wunderhund stared dumbfounded at the woman before him, even as she leveled her blades at his throat like a set of shears.

"Captain Wunderhund... is away." She purred.

"Well... I suppose this is a good thing, in part." Vashta frowned slightly, the fog around them granting just enough visibility to reveal their immediate surroundings; she could make out the familiar, imposing silhouette of the gnarled tree against the night fog... and the Cauldron of Cerridwen laying unassumingly beneath its gnarled branches.

Looking around, she saw Stirling, Jameson, Will and Wanda nearby... and held the Crosier a bit more tightly.

This was not a team that would lend itself terribly well to another attack from the Dragon Army.

"What do we do now?" Will asked softly. "D- Do we wait for the others?"

Just then, they heard Rose's scream, its source impossible to pinpoint in the mist around them.

"What was that?!" Jameson gasped, spinning around. "Rose?"

"Jameson!" came another shout, this one sounding out from behind the group of gypsies- a voice they recognized with a wave of relief.

"Yvonna!" Jameson sighed with relief.

"Who else be with ye?" Vashta asked, more than a bit relieved herself that there were more to assist.

Yvonna and Lucien stepped forward, gesturing to the rest of the group that had escorted them... but at that moment, they realized:

"Wait... where are Lord and Lady Mariage? And their daughter? And *Festivus*?!" Lucien asked, turning this way and that.

"They were just here! Don't tell me they just ran off..." Gabe grunted, eyes darting around, though there really wasn't much to see.

"That would be Mistress Nightshade's doing." Another voice from out of the dense mist caused all in attendance to freeze in place. "She sends her deepest apologies and warmest regards..."

"Estella... Estella Foxglove?" Will called out softly, instantly recognizing the voice... although something about it was off.

"...But for the time being, you are all *mine*."

"MOVE!" Petris suddenly shouted.

The assembled fighters (and "fighters") threw themselves in all directions as an orb of swirling red and black hurtled from the fog, exploding on the ground in a burst of tainted flame.

Some dazed, some unconscious (though for a sickening instant Vashta feared the worst), the men and women that could manage it staggered to their feet. As they turned toward their attacker, they watched as a familiar figure strutted into the center of their circle.

It was indeed Estella, and yet...

With a laugh, the young woman raised her wand.

"Time to die."

Meanwhile, outside the city wall amongst the grass and trees, the Mariage family suddenly found themselves walking alone and completely unescorted... yet thankfully, unaccosted by Dragonkin.

"Suzanne?! Jeanne!" Laurent called out, his heart missing a beat before spinning around to find his wife and daughter safe and sound behind him.

Even if one were unfamiliar with the language, the subsequent exchange- held in very low, very fast French- likely took a very predictable path:

-What happened?

-Where are we?

-Where is the Band?

-Where are the lizards?

-Let us depart and leave this to the Band.

-We cannot simply leave!

-What else can we do?

-If the Band cannot stop them, what chance have we?

-Festivus is your friend!
-And Toviás is mine! We cannot leave them!
-Even if we DID, those monsters would surely catch up to us!

"...Oy."

The debate died instantly. Turning, the Mariages recognized a young gypsy girl who they had met at the bonfire not long ago. Faces flushed, they did whatever they could to regain their respective decorum.

"Mademoiselle Sparrow, was it not?" Jeanne asked with a slight nod.

"I dunno 'bout any 'Mademoiselle', but I *am* Lillith Sparrow, sure enough..." the cutpurse responded. "An' yer those 'Mariages'? The ones we saw at the Bonfire?"

"Mariage." Suzanne replied gently. "Why is it you are out here, instead of in there with the others?"

"Dunno m'self." Lillith shrugged, glancing back at the city wall. "I was with Grease and the Barbarians not long ago, but that fog came in... an' then I was here."

"This is... This is a magical sort of fog, is it not?" Laurent murmured, looking up above the wall as well. "These lizard creatures, this 'Tiamat'... did they create it?"

"Most like."

"I... am curious to know why it was we were removed from Bristol, rather than being trapped inside at the mercy of those creatures."

"I'd like t'know that as well. Not like I were begging to stay in close quarters with them, but..."

"How, now!"

This time, all four of them turned.

These four individuals held no meaning for the Mariage family... but Lillith- after squinting a bit into the dark forest, called out curiously;

"Puddle? And the Normyl sisters?"

"The same." Gertrude replied, jerking a thumb at 'Puddle'. "Though you might call that one 'Lucy'."

"What's happening?" Lillith asked immediately, doing away with any further pleasantries.

"We're in a right dire *mess*, is what." The eldest Normyl frowned. "Toviás's lost his senses, an' the Band is fixing to make all of it worse."

"What? What about Toviás?" Suzanne asked, eyes widening at the mention of his name. "What does he have to do with this? Someone owes us *some* sort of explanation for all of this!"

"Eh, bugga off. Yer still barely above a nipperkin." Gertrude gave her a dismissive wave. "But then again... maybe we could use you if..."

"What did you say 'bout the Band?" Lillith persisted, biting her lower lip.

"*You* start." Gertrude said, turning to Lucy.

After a moment's hesitation, Lucy glanced up to Lillith, then- uneasily- over to Suzanne.

"Year last, before Toviás joined the Band of the Twisted Claw, he met Lady Tso and the Draco Disciples... It was only for an instant, but something about her... I suppose it captivated him."

"One cannot do much worse than to be captivated by *her* sort." Gertrude scowled... though she did visibly flinch at the woman's name. "Seems he's had her- and resentment toward the Band for hidin' her fate and whereabouts- on his mind for a good year... and that were after *twenty* years of wandering. You were at the campfire. You know what happened before he came here."

"I do." Suzanne nodded, her mother nodding as well, although her father's mood was a rising mixture of confusion and outrage.

"Seems to me from day one, Toviás has been struggling with what he wants out of life; Back when he were a lad he was spoonfed a legacy to uphold from a self-important family. Now he's clingin' to a few seconds worth of infatuation, blind to what's right in front of 'em."

"But... what are we supposed to do about that?" Lillith asked, her features as soft as they had been when she'd spoken to Adria before the battle began. "If what I heard is true, Toviás... Toviás wouldn't trust *anybody* now, would he?"

"'Til now, everybody's been caught up with what that poor, deluded mage wants: His old riches, revenge on the people what wronged him for all his wanderin' years, that soulless waste of existence Tso... It's high time he be given a lesson in what he *needs*." Folding her arms, she looked back from Lillith to Puddle, and finally to Suzanne. "Are you willing to help? I don't mind telling you now, your choices are limited between 'yes' and 'suicide'."

With that, Gertrude turned her back to the others present, beckoning her sisters to join her- Puddle already giving chase.

Lillith and the Mariages watched after them as they were swallowed by the forest shadows.

After a moment's thought, Lillith straightened, and charged along after them as well.

"You comin', princess?" she shot back teasingly to Suzanne.

With an indignant 'harrumph', before her parents could stop her, the young Frenchwoman was darting along behind Lillith.

Casting a panicked glance at one another, Laurent and Jeanne gave chase as well, leaving only an empty glen beneath the dark, churning night sky...

Chapter 23.1 – Killer Queen

"Urk!" Captain Wunderhund let out a choking gasp as he was snatched back by his collar. The blades at his throat let out an earsplitting shriek as they drew against one another in opposite arcs, barely missing their mark as Thoren pulled him away.

"You'd have just stood there and let her slice off your head like a bleedin' dandelion, huh?" Sydney growled at the Captain as he steadied himself at the center of the circle. "You *men*..."

"Maybe..." Wunderhund replied dazedly.

"Who was that, anyway?" Ryder demanded. "One of the Draco Disciples? I didn't recognize her."

"Was that supposed to be *Scarlett*?" Talia echoed, baffled.

"It *couldn't* be." Raven shot back, still tending to the wound in his abdomen... even as blood was desperately trying to rush to his face. "She was- I mean she *looked* like... *Very much* like Scarlett, but Scarlett can't *fight*, can she!?"

"She may disagree with that assessment." Virum muttered, barely able to follow the glints of steel as they thrust out from the fog.

"The blades don't seem poisoned." Sydney added, trying to tend to both Tsumi and Raven. She wasn't much of a healer, but she was even less of a fighter. "So that's something. Thank the Gods for small favors."

"Watch it!" Ryder shouted, bracing himself as the blades thrust out again, this time aimed at himself and Skylana beside him. However, at her other side, Nanus let out a loud growl. The deceptively ancient fighter lunged, deflecting one of the blades with his shield and catching the other overhead with his own sword. Twisting his arm, he rushed forward to pursue the even-now withdrawing wakizashis.

"Not so fast!" He shouted, his mind filled with the battle-fury of the Blood God.

"Nanus, wait, damn it!" Ryder shouted, but Nanus had already disappeared into the fog after the figure of Scarlett... and after a moment of menacing quiet- punctuated by the sounds of battle far away- they heard a loud splash nearby; the sound of a body hitting the water.

"So that's where we are." Thoren muttered. "Near the Port."

A moment after Nanus had pitched over the edge of the wharf and into the water, he clawed his way back out, climbing up the sheer face until reaching the raised stone and gravel. However, the moment his arms were slung over it- shield visibly absent- he too late caught the sight of the descending curved blades before they plunged into and through his arms, pinning him to the spot. He let out an irritated grunt, his feet slipping and leaving his body dangling over the edge.

Strangely, he felt absolutely no pain from the blades driving through his arms, and the metal seemed to pulse with a strange aura, not altogether dissimilar from the ripples visible from the rift in the Jousting Arena.

"Would you be so kind as to wait right here?" Scarlett purred, leaning forward until her face leveled just above his own, her lower body still immersed in the fog.

"The Blood God will feast upon your wretched corpse!" Nanus spat. "What is-!?"

"The blades? Just a little something cooked up to deal with particularly troublesome threats... they'll keep you out of the way while I deal with your friends; rest assured, I shall be back to deal with you in but a min."

Nanus began to snarl a reply, but she had already disappeared. He was now alone, left to struggle against the impaling blades which seemed to be fastened in space...

"Nanus!" Talia called out, raising her sword warily. She moved to guide the circle toward the direction he'd run off in, but halted when she spotted the now-unarmed Disciple, approaching them in a sultry strut.

"I've not seen your 'Nanus'," She began, her full lips twisted up in a smirk, "but if you should see him, *do* tell me... I left my swords with him."

"Lizard-loving trollop!" Eli snapped, raising his blades and lunging at Scarlett with Natalia a half-step behind.

The fog had ebbed enough so that the fighters could see Scarlett clearly enough... but none of them could have recanted exactly what happened next; it was faster than any of them could register.

As though anticipating his attack, Scarlett ducked beneath his thrusting swords, lashing out with a straight-punch. Her fist slammed into the warrior's stomach with an entirely unanticipated amount of force.

Still in the midst of charging- her mind a fraction of a second from realizing Scarlett had dodged- let alone countered- the first attack, Natalia was already extending her arm to strike as well... only to have the Disciple parry the flat of her blade with the back of her hand, directing it into Eli's side.

With a startled shout, Natalia moved to pull her sword free from her grimacing companion, but Scarlett was upon her first. She planted her knee into Natalia's stomach, grabbing her shoulders and shoving the two aside. Righting herself, Scarlett glanced casually down at her well-kept fingernails.

"Still all in good order? ...Ah, yes... shall we continue, then?" She asked, grinning wickedly from under the brim of her hat.

"We have to slow her down somehow. We'll get taken apart at this rate." Ryder hissed.

"Stay close to Gaia." Talia called. "The aura of Draca Slaga ought to weaken her if she comes near it."

"That might be true of our lesser comrades..." Scarlett began, but stopped, glancing aside. "Oh, speaking of..."

At that moment, a small, frenzied mob of lizardmen and kobolds emerged from the fog, falling upon the heroes in a storm of claws and fangs.

"Ah, right. Almost forgot about them." Wunderhund said with a quirked eyebrow, voice noticeably shaky at the dwindling number of 'meat shields' around them... or perhaps just because of Scarlett's presence, it was difficult to know for certain.

Moving to defend their wounded, the heroes hacked and slashed away at the dragonkin. Even as they did, however, Gwen dodged backward, drawing her bow and letting fly an arrow at the composed Scarlett.

In an inhumanly swift motion, one of the Disciple's hands reached up, catching the hurtling missile by the shaft. In that split second, Gwen had already drawn and loosed a second arrow. In the midst of what might have been a mocking smirk, Scarlett was almost too preoccupied to see the attack coming. With a slight flicker of surprise, she weaved to one side- the arrow grazing her upper arm- and responded by hurling the arrow she had snatched from the air.

Gwen barely had time to gasp before the arrow plunged into her shoulder. The bow fell from her hand as she collapsed to her knees out of surprise, gasping for breath from the impact of it.

"Hey!" Wunderhund finally shouted, running over to help drag Gwen back as Derian stepped forth to engage a second lizardman on top of the one he was fighting already... "Thoren! No offense intended, but if you've got any ideas, I am open to them!"

"Still weak, still pitiful." Scarlett cooed in her usual lascivious tone. "I suppose this is what we should have expected, but still... this is a *dreadful* disappointment."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Ryder shot back.

At that moment she darted forth, weaving through the dragonkin and ducking between him and Skylana before they could react. Both of them turned to face her, but before either could attack, Scarlett's soft hands wrapped their fingers around Ryder's upper-arm. In a shocking application of leverage, the Disciple sent the ranger over her shoulder, crashing headlong into Skylana and sending both to the ground.

Ryder shook his head, trying to recover his senses, having hit his head in the fall. Reaching out, he tried to grab for one of his swords, but shouted in pain as one of Scarlett's stiletto heels stomped down on the back of his palm.

"Such heroic nonsense." Scarlett mused, raising her booted foot away from Ryder's now wounded hand, before turning toward the center of the breached circle.

"Thoren!" Talia shouted, unable to break away from combat with the dragonkin assaulting them, as were Virum, Derian, and to a lesser extent Sydney and the wounded Tsumi who had been trying to tend to Raven's stab wound. This left the weakened Thoren and the chanting Gaia essentially defenseless.

Thoren growled, turning to Scarlett, lifting the rapier he had taken toward her.

"If yer lookin' to take my life, then come take it, wench." The Gypsy Leader muttered. "If that is what this is all about..."

"Troublesome as you've been," Scarlett began, bringing the fingers of either hand together so either hand ended in a row of razor-sharp nails, "it is not my decision to make tonight. I have been given other orders."

Springing forward off of one high-heeled foot, she thrust her hand nails-first at *Gaia*- her strike in no way impeded by the aura that had kept the lesser dragonkin at bay.

Cries of dismay filled the visible pocket within the mist, Thoren lunging forward in an effort to intercept the rapidly moving Disciple from delivering the Keeper a grievous- if not killing- blow.

Then all were suddenly silenced in a collective gasp- even on Scarlett's part- as a hand reached out from nowhere and caught her wrist in an iron grip.

Now it was Scarlett's turn at stark astonishment as her eyes made out the blur that had interceded on the Band's behalf.

What stood before her was a slender form of toned, powerful muscle, sculpted into feminine curves, all wrapped within a bristling hide. In essence, it appeared to be a bipedal she-wolf, inexplicably dressed in the garb of a gypsy...

"What in Hell-!?" Scarlett began, before the creature lifted her arm and swatted at her with its other clawed hand, sending her sailing back.

Instead of crashing to the ground, Scarlett twisted her body in mid-air, landing in a crouch and springing to her feet. Scowling across the small battlefield, her fingers clutched in stark outrage.

"You... You flea-bitten-!" She didn't bother to finish, lunging with the speed none of the other heroes could follow, slamming her elbow into the wolf-creature's chest, spinning around to follow up with a backhand to its jaw, only to have it block, lashing out and barely missing with its claws.

From the moment the she-wolf had entered the fray, the other heroes- and indeed, the dragonkin participants- had stopped their own heated battle to simply stare at what was happening.

For a while, the creature matched Scarlett blow for blow, grapple for grapple, exposed leg landing a fierce kick, lightly furred claw delivering a violent rake, an uppercut, a bite...

"...This is bizarre." Captain Wunderhund stated, eyeing both of the combatants with almost excessive interest. "I *like* it, but it is *bizarre*."

At last, the she-wolf stabbed outward with her claws once more, leveled at a visibly winded Scarlett... but with a victorious grin, the latter slammed her fists together, an audible crack issuing forth from the creature's wrist as it was caught between them.

"Time to send you back to whatever gutter you-" Scarlett began, shoving the arm away and raising her own sharp-nailed fingers to the wolf who was whimpering in pain. However, as she moved to spring forward, it seemed as though her legs refused her mental command.

Looking down, she saw that her feet were stuck to the ground, bound by several small grassy tendrils. Following a trail of twinkling magical essence, she saw the slender arm of Skylana beneath Ryder.

Perhaps Nature magic wasn't Sky's prowess, but under the circumstances, just a little was just enough.

As the panic began to sink in, Scarlett's eyes looked back to the wolf. Her arms raised to a defensive stance, but it was too late; the wolf's arms swung sidelong, catching her in the head and shoulder with inhuman force. Tearing up the rooting vines, Scarlett was sent spinning- unconscious- into the mist, a loud splash heralding her arrival into the Bristol port waters.

After a moment of silent awe, the fighters-turned-spectators turned their gaze to the she-wolf... who had already sprung back into the mists.

They then looked to the dragonkin, who- seeing their commander defeated- had also retreated, leaving no trace. They finally looked to each other.

"Well, I- for one- would just like to say I was happy to be a witness to whatever the hell just happened." Captain Wunderhund nodded firmly. "Am I right?"

He turned to Virum, then to Derian, both of whom simply shook their heads in disapproval. Thoren simply frowned at him, and Gaia sighed.

"Help gather the wounded, Captain." Sydney called out, unamused.

"Captain Wunderhund is away!"

Chapter 23.2 – Monster

"Thomas... Thomas Wisseu?" Adria breathed, her tone a churning mix of shock, horror and disgust. Both Gypsies and Barbarians kept their weapons drawn, all gazes locked on the Draco Disciple and the shivering Rose trapped in the grip of his mutated hands.

"Claws off!" Aggie ordered, leveling the ballista at him (of course, she couldn't actually *fire* it, but one had to admit it was intimidating...).

"*That's* Thomas Wisseu?" Grease blinked, his fellow barbarians moving out to surround the Disciple in spite of the hampering fog. "I feel like he didn't used to have fangs."

"Let 'er go, whatever the hell you are." Kai ordered firmly. "I'm pretty sure between all of us, there wouldn't be enough of you left to sent to the Bristol clinic."

The transformed Wisseu responded with a wicked sneer that put his cruel fangs on full display. His grip on Rose tightened, drawing slight trickles of crimson from her shoulders. For her part, she seemed entirely unable to move, unable to blink... lost in some terrible nightmare.

"I don't know what's happened to you," Adria snarled, "but it's obviously affected your memory. You were no match for us in the past, and now you flagrantly tempt fate."

"Those are *my* words." Thomas answered in a growling purr, into Rose's ear. "... I've already killed you people once."

At that moment, Rose- still as a statue before that moment, let out a piercing shriek- somewhere between horror and agony.

"GET OFF OF ME!"

The Spear of Ascalon released a brilliant flash of light, blinding all in attendance without distinction. However, as the fighters squinted to reclaim their impaired sight, some could hear the sound of a body wrapped in skirts collapsing to the ground.

Instantly, Afro rushed forward, stabbing his katana at the precise spot Rose and Thomas had been standing in.

The Barbarian felt a slight resistance against his blade, but cursed as he heard the tearing of fabric instead of flesh.

"Close..." They heard Thomas hiss with irritation.

Afro's eyes gradually adjusted in the aftermath of the flash, but there was little to see other than fog... before a heavy blow struck him on the back of the head, knocking him to the ground.

"Stay down, Afro!" McLovin shouted, charging out of the mist as he saw the dark figure of Thomas striking his companion- not that the now unconscious warrior would be getting up again soon anyway. Leaping over Afro's unconscious form, the barbarian's swords swung with reckless abandon, the Disciple dodging away just in time to avoid losing at least one limb.

Thomas' eyes widened, keen ears catching the sound of movement behind him. His head jerked to one side just before it could be impaled on the tip of Malissa's spear. The blade of it grazed his cheek, drawing blood. With a snarl, he reached up and seized the haft of the weapon, ripping it from Malissa's grasp.

McLovin let out a grunt of surprise as the spear's tip plunged into his shoulder. Instantly after, the Disciple twisted back to wrench the weapon free once more, planting the butt of it into the still-shocked she-barbarian's throat. In the same motion, his other hand balled into a fist to do the very same to McLovin.

Both barbarians collapsed, clutching their necks in their struggles for breath.

Meanwhile, Andra and Dierdre had rushed forward, able to snatch Rose and the Spear of Ascalon in the midst of the melee before them.

"Are you okay, Rose?" Andra whispered down to the now terribly pale Keeper.

Rose did not respond, only shivering, twitching, and holding herself tightly

"What happened?" Aggie asked swiftly as the Ibis sisters returned. "Did his claws poison her? She's bleeding!"

"I don't know!" Dierdre shook her head, biting her lip... when at that moment, Rose suddenly reached up and grabbed her by the wrist.

"D-Don't let him touch me... not again... I- I saw- he was-... G-Get him off of m- GET HIM AWAY!" Rose cried, releasing Dierdre's arm to clutch at her own eyes.

"Lord of Light save us..." Aggie breathed, but then she heard the low, hissing laughter of Thomas from somewhere in the fog.

"Mmmm... The sweet sound of suffering. You know, it strikes me that my days as an assassin were a waste; killing ends the misery too quickly, you see."

"What have you done to Rose?!" Adria demanded, trying to follow his voice, her claymore raised.

"T'was no fault of mine, Swordmistress." Thomas responded, her title spoken ironically. "She *is* a Keeper; I guess she got a look at my memories and didn't like what she saw." He added with a slavering glance to where Rose had disappeared, "Her screams were just as glorious *then*."

"You BASTARD!" Adria shouted, hacking mightily as she exploded from the mist. However, to her rapidly increasing displeasure, Thomas only continued to dodge and weave until- with a flick of his arm- a long, slender sword appeared in his hand.

Adria struck once more with an overhead blow that kicked up grass, dirt, and swirled the air around them... but even as it all settled, Thomas stood, smiling wickedly at her.

"Perhaps I'll start with *you*."

Thomas lunged with far more speed than Adria could ever remember him possessing, the tip of the blade ready to spear through the center of her chest... but then, a mighty clang rang out as Morgan and Agnarr emerged. Thomas' blade was now caught between theirs.

"Take him out!" Agnarr shot to Morgan, twisting his own weapon and shoving Thomas' upward as Morgan drew hers back, preparing to hack at Thomas' exposed body... neither one noticing the Disciple's cheeks puffing out like those of a bullfrog.

"...LOOK OUT!" Adria shouted, throwing her gloved hands up. Before the barbarians could react, Thomas' fanged mouth released a burst of scorching, concussive flame.

Without so much as a gasp, Angarr and Morgan were sent sprawling to the ground, lying unconscious and burned before Adria.

Thomas chuckled, turning to spit a mouthful of sizzling drool upon the ground beneath them.

"That always leaves the worst taste in my mouth..." He mused.

"You smug piece of lizard shite..." Adria snorted, raising her claymore once more.

Even as Thomas watched with amusement, preparing to dodge her furious swings, a figure lunged out from his side. Catching him in the midst of his hubris, Horus' sword scored a glancing blow at Thomas' sword arm.

"Damn you!" Thomas snarled, drawing in another breath to emit another blast of flame. Horus, however, raised his shield to block the miniature inferno... letting out barely a wince as the metal barrier was near melted through. With a grunt, he let it fall from his grasp, hurling it as best he could at the Disciple.

Dodging back, Thomas readied his blade, not seeing the hulking shadow of Kai until the bludgeoning end of the Barbarian King's maul had already landed a crushing blow into his side.

The bursts of flame had served well enough as a beacon for the Barbarians. As Thomas struggled to his knees, he found himself surrounded once again by those that remained.

"You done?" Grease asked, tapping the butt of his Doorknocker on the dirt ground before him. "Ooh, wait. Lemme rephrase that: 'You're done'."

Clutching at his side with his free hand, Thomas coughed and snarled, wisps of smoke slithering out from between his fangs.

"Not quite yet."

With that, he let out a loud, ragged bellow as his tunic suddenly splitting apart with an ear-piercing screech... releasing a pair of leathery wings. The claws of each gripped a glinting short sword.

The Barbarians had been about to strike- to keep whatever Thomas was about to do from happening- but even as Grease brought his weapon down, Thomas was already gone. The mutated disciple lunged foot-first into Horus' midsection, tackling him to the ground. Horus only barely managed to turn aside Thomas' blade, although his wing-carried blades each landed a blow; one slashing a deep wound into Kai's upper arm, the other knocking Mary in the back of the head with the flat.

Springing off of Horus, Thomas leapt back into the fog.

"Damn coward monster..." Kai grunted, ignoring the cut on his arm as he hefted his mallet.

"If you're going to fight us, then get out here and fight! Or are you just as piss-poor a warrior as you were an assassin?" Adria called out, shifting closer to the Barbarians again.

"You're not listening." Thomas purred back from the mist. "There are far worse things I can do than kill you... ask your precious little Rose."

"Rose... Aggie!" Adria shouted out, realizing just then that they'd completely lost track of where Aggie, Andra, Dierdre, and the incapacitated Rose were...

Aggie looked up from where she'd been tending to Rose's wounds, Andra and Dierdre keeping watch with swords at the ready. The sounds coming from within the mist were not exactly encouraging... particularly when Adria called out to Aggie.

Dropping her sparse medical implements, Aggie took up her ballista... but as she hefted it up to her shoulder, the speeding form of the winged Thomas hurtled out, colliding into both her and the Ibis sisters and sending them in all directions. The contents of the ballista were knocked into the dirt as well, though miraculously none of them detonated...

Chuckling softly, Thomas walked through the three young women, reaching down and seizing Rose by the neck.

"It ended too quickly the first time... but I learned my lesson." Thomas began, lifting her before him and dragging her to a nearby tree. She let out a choking gasp of pain as he slammed her back against its rough surface. "After all, a pretty slave is more fun than a pretty corpse."

Thomas swiftly sheathed the sword in his hand and seized her wrists, pinning them over her head, he heard a strange sound below them; the sound of something clinking against the sturdy tree roots.

Glancing down, Thomas saw what looked like a sealed glass vial- something that had fallen from the Ballista and rolled here. It looked completely empty, but...

"What is-" He began, but at that moment Rose's foot stomped down, shattering the crystal bottle.

Instantly, rush of warm air surged from the broken glass container beneath Rose's slipper. The eye-watering stench of it struck Thomas all at once. Though Rose was engulfed in it as well, she had the foresight to hold her breath.

Thomas stumbled back, his grip on Rose failing as he coughed, gagged and finally crumpled to his knees in a fit of vomiting.

Rose fell to the ground on all fours, crawling as fast as she could, able to feel the power of the Spear of Ascalon even through the Meandering Mists.

"You... Ugh... You BITCH!" Thomas roared, feet stumbling over themselves to pursue the Keeper out of the fetid cloud of the Troll Bomb. "You cannot imagine the ways I will defile you... *all* of you!"

In the midst of his rant, a lick of flame slithered forth from his maw...

Rose had just managed to curl her fingers around the handle of the Spear of Ascalon when there was a mighty billowing of abhorrent-smelling flame behind her... then a series of small explosions around Thomas as the other experiments from Aggie's ballista exploded as well. Silence followed, and finally the whole mad array was punctuated by a heavy thud as Thomas fell to the ground from where he'd been flung into the air by the blasts.

"NGhhh... ughh... You..." Slowly- amazingly- Thomas swaggered to his feet, his garments and scale-ridden skin burned quite badly. The swords kept in his wings' claws had been blown away, leaving him to draw his own. Clutching it in both hands, rage burning in his eyes, he turned upon Rose with a terrible growl.

Lunging into the air, he fell upon her, the wing-claws lashing down at her.

There was a flash of heavy steel and a screech as Adria suddenly emerged out of the fog, her Claymore sweeping powerfully outward and cleaving off both clawed hands from the tips of his wings. Stumbling back, Thomas was stunned just long enough for Rose to whirl around.

Letting out a scream, Rose stabbed forward with the Spear of Ascalon, plunging it into the Disciple's abdomen.

Wincing, Thomas staggered back and fell to the ground, bleeding profusely.

"Im... possible..." He hissed, looking down at the wound even as Rose struggled to her feet. Swaying dizzily, the Keeper advanced upon him, the spear leveled at his face.

Even as he crawled back in retreat, Thomas' fanged mouth twisted into a wry smirk.

"No matter..." He began with a lascivious, fork-tongued lick of his lips. "I'll be back for you, little princess..."

"NO!" Rose shrieked. She leapt at him, thrusting the spear down upon him... but striking only dirt. The mists around them had spilled out, sweeping Thomas' form away like sea foam.

As Adria watched in sickened horror, Rose continued to scream, stabbing over and over again into the bloody ground where the Thomas-thing had lay a second ago.

The Swordmistress shuddered, lowering her weapon. Carefully, she approached Rose, waiting until her stabs slowed and weakened. Only then did she reach out and take her gently by the shoulder.

At this, Rose slowly turned, allowing the Spear of Ascalon to fall from her grip. Adria could see tears streaming from her eyes. Her entire body was trembling. Without a word the Keeper fell forward, throwing her arms around Adria and burying her face into the Swordmistress' shoulder, sobbing hoarsely.

Adria returned the embrace, comfortingly stroking her disheveled blonde hair.

"T-t'is Well, Rose..." She whispered gently as the recovering Barbarians and Gypsies emerged from the mist.

"T'is well..."

Chapter 23.3 – The Youngest

"It... it can't be." Wanda shook her head in disbelief, staggering up and readying both sword and mystically gesturing hand. Her eyes focused upon the red-and-black-garbed young woman standing in the middle of the group of Gypsies and Champions.

Even now, the small group was struggling to recover from her initial attack.

"Estella Foxglove? Is that you?"

"I can't imagine who you might have been expecting." The Disciple shrugged, placing a hand on one cocked-out hip, her wand held languidly at her opposite side.

"None other, perhaps, but ye look like ye've had a wee bit of a 'growth spurt'." Jameson observed, scratching his head as he looked her over. "...In the last *day*."

"Nay." Estella shook her head. "I'm older than I once was, yes, but I'm not *your* Estella... for my coin she's curled up drunk in an alley someplace."

"Then what does that make *you*?" Gabe asked, shaking off the impact of her spell.

"I'm another Estella." She chuckled, stepping back and lifting her wand. "The one what's about to reduce the lot of you 'Champions' to a pile of sizzling *ash*."

"Where did ye come from? What do ye mean by draggin' an army'a lizards in here?" Vashta demanded, Lindria nodding as she looked between the wounded. Estella only laughed.

"Wasn't exactly my idea. T'was a team effort, but none of it would'a been possible without our mutual mage friend."

"Tovias." Lindria's look of fascination at the situation turned into a scowl.

"What've you done with 'em?" Vashta asked, brandishing the Crosier of Saint Patrick.

"What'd I do with him?" She asked, with an expression of mock indignation. "I've no use for him... but those I serve have plans for 'em."

"What do these plans entail?" Druscilla scoffed, trying to draw upon her elemental energies despite their inexplicably lacking presence.

"An' why would I go an' spoil the surprise?" She laughed. "Nay... as it is, I'm only here to remove a few obstacles."

"Remove THIS!" Colin suddenly shouted, hurling a palmed vial in Estella's direction.

The glass bottle of azure liquid soared at her face, but stopped in mid-air as Estella held up a chiding finger. Wagging it from side to side- the bottle mimicking its movements- the Disciple finally pointed her finger in the shape of a pistol and 'fired'.

Instantly the bottle flew once again... this time at Yvonna, who was trying desperately to revive Lucien's unconscious form.

"Look out!" Petris shouted, charging forth and sweeping down with his borrowed sword to block the incoming projectile.

The vial shattered against the blade with a shrill crash, the contents of it exploding outward in his direction. Even as the Champion threw up a hand to shield himself... his body was instantaneously covered in a sheet of solid ice.

"Petris!" Druscilla gasped, running to his side and invoking whatever fire spirits could still hear her through the warped elemental energy field around them.

"Uh... let's try that again." Colin frowned, reaching for his satchel again. As he did, a bright ray of yellow-orange light surged out from Estella's direction. The alchemer drew his hand back just in time to prevent all but a bit of minor singeing.

However, the same could not be said for his bag.

"...Damn." He murmured in gradual realization, a fraction of a second before the ignited and shattered vials exploded.

Colin hurtled out from the blast, crashing to the ground with a dazed grunt and falling limp.

"Lindria! Tend to Colin!" Vashta shouted, the Lunar Tribe Champion nodding and running as fast as she could.

"We can't have *that*." Estella said with a wicked leer, leveling her wand at the sprinting Champion. However, before the lethal bolt that issued forth could strike her, a brilliant barrier instantly appeared- projected from the Crosier of Saint Patrick.

"Spoil my fun, will you, you shriveled old bat!?" The young sorceress hissed, rounding upon the Healer.

"Didn' Nightshade teach ye nothin' about respect fer yer elders?" Vashta shot back, the Crosier's glow piercing the mist.

Just then, Gabe lunged out from behind Estella, grabbing her by her wand-arm and pressing the blade of his sword against her neck.

"Didn' that useless gorilla Thoren teach you anything about *manners*?" Estella asked, her voice every bit as sardonic and venomous.

"Drop the wand, Foxglove." Gabe ordered. "No idea how you've grown from 'brat' to 'bitch', I have no problem cutting you down regardless."

"*No* problem?" Estella purred, her eyes flashing with wicked mischief.

Vashta blinked. For an instant she believed her eyes were deceiving her as a ghostly image of Estella swept free of Gabe's arms.

... But then, a half-second later, the 'solid' Estella which Gabe still held quite literally *exploded*. The Warrior Champion was flung back as Colin had been, laying on the ground, smoke rising from his body.

"Damn it!" Druscilla shouted, both in rage and horror. "Lindria!"

"I'm TRYING!" Lindria called back, trying to mend the burned and bloodied Colin.

"You're making this too easy." Estella said, her smirk audible despite having vanished completely into the mist. "The rest of you, at least *try* provide a challenge."

"I wish Randalf were here..." Will whimpered, finally standing and brushing himself down, looking back to Wanda. "S-Sister, what do we do? We cannot hope to defeat this Estella- if that's who she is- an' this army of dragons without some great and mighty wizard... can we?"

"I don't know, Will," Wanda shook her head, "But we can't give up. We have to- Ah!" She gasped in surprise as a Draconian soldier lunged out, thrusting its claws at her. Barely dodging, she maneuvered herself between it and Will, her parries, sidesteps and thrusts born of many hours of training. "You have to think of *something!*"

Nearby, Stirling was swinging wildly away with his club, grumbling under his breath.

"No like fighting redshirts... Stirling demand more satisfying thing to smash!"

At that moment, Will heard a familiar fluttering sound. Turning, he watched as the bird he had sent out as a messenger to Captain Wunderhund and the other heroes landed gently on his shoulder.

Staring at the bird for a moment, one could almost hear the gears in his head turning over the sounds of battle. Finally, he cleared his throat, and spoke in a magical language heard only by avian types:

- Um... I hope it's not too much trouble, given all what ye already done for me- f-fer us, but... perhaps if ye could deliver one more message fer me...

Moments later, the bird fluttered off, Will praying it could make its way in the fog and drake-filled skies...

"What's the matter? I should think the mighty Band of the Twisted Claw would have no trouble dealing with a lone Draco Disciple!" Estella cackled, darting and weaving through the fog as the assembled fighters attempted to strike her with something- anything. Every attack that they made simply struck another of her illusory duplicates.

"Is Tovia's to blame fer yer sudden bou'a competence?" Vashta called back, eyes shifting from side to side in efforts to single out the Disciple's lithe form amid the illusions.

"Yes n' no." Estella replied lazily. "I don't doubt you'll understand the truth before tonight's end... if you're not dead."

"For my money, you don't know either." Druscilla smirked, finally focusing and releasing a wave of energy from her body. Although it wasn't as powerful as it might have been under usual circumstances, it did manage to burn away the illusory duplicates. The true Estella, however, remained out of sight.

"And who in the hell is this 'Tovia's' everyone keeps talkin' about?" Jameson asked abruptly.

"Tovia is- Oh, now *really*, Jameson!" Lindria rolled her eyes. "The one who told the story about the Von Kaiser family at the bonfire a few hours ago! You made him paint the mongering cart after he helped Puddle!"

"I must not'a been paying attention..."

"You stole his food tray?"

"Ah, right! I-"

"ENOUGH!" Estella shouted. "I've spent too long listenin to you bleedin' gypsies, and that was *before* the last time we killed you! Ruby won't miss a few urchins here or there; I'm snuffin' you right *now!*"

With that, her shaded figure lunged from the mist, a short, glinting blade visible in one of her hands.

Jameson's thoughtful expression suddenly twisted into one of shock and pain... as the tip of the blade and a mist of blood erupted from his chest.

"Jameson!!!" Yvonna cried out, stumbling out from the fog just in time to witness the fatal stroke.

As Estella smirkingly withdrew the blade, Vashta let out a furious cry. From the tip of St. Patrick's crosier, a beam of light shot forth. Unlike those emitted from Estella's wand, this one was pulsing with divine purity. It struck Jameson in the chest- directly in his wound- *through* the wound- and caught Estella before she could react. The Disciple let out a cry of dismay before being thrown back and crashing against the trunk of the gnarled tree overlooking the battlefield.

Gasping for breath, Estella stumbled back to her feet. She glanced down at where Jameson had fallen to the ground... the stab wound she'd inflicted healed completely by the light of the Crosier.

Finally her gaze turned back to Vashta, glaring daggers at the Healer. Slowly she raised her wand... when a metal object came flying from close by, an empty 'klong' sound ringing out as the empty tankard struck her in the side of the head.

Estella- as well as others in attendance who remained conscious- slowly turned to see Yvonna, who had thrown one of her makeshift weapons at the Disciple.

"Um..." she stammered awkwardly, "A nice shot, you have to admit..."

"...Fine, then." Estella growled, sheathing her dagger and cupping her bruised head. She leveled her wand at Yvonna. "You first."

"What in blazes is happening here?!"

The voice, as well as a clanking wobble from the corner of her Estella's as well as a low, caught- nay- *demand*ed the Disciple's attention as Festivus Merrier emerged from the mist.

There had already been an awkward pause in the battle thanks to Yvonna's intervention, but *nobody* among the Gypsies was the slightest bit prepared for what followed.

"*YOU!!!*" Estella's body *literally* rose from the ground, her hands immediately burning with magical energy of the most abrasive hues. "Oh, how I have waited for this."

The expression on her face seemed to warp into a clashing mix of rage and ecstasy, eyes burning with equal parts hatred and anticipation.

"Festivus, get down!" Druscilla called out, hurling a magical bolt at Estella- which the girl didn't even have to deflect. The sheer spike in her power was enough to turn aside the attack.

"You heard the bitch!" Estella cackled. Thrusting out one hand, she unleashed a white-hot blast of energy which caught Festivus full in the chest.

The horrified Gypsies were so shocked by the fleeting events playing out that they didn't notice Simeon's last-second panicked attempt at a magical shield. He was hurled back landing on the ground with a grunt... the attack that should have burned straight through his chest having only burned through the breastplate of his decorative armor.

"Festivus! Are you all right?!" Yvonna gasped, running to his side.

"I am... beginning to believe that this sort of work is best left to the professionals." He stated with a groan, but his eyes snapped wide as he saw Estella bearing down on him again..

"...Why can't you just bloody *DIE?!!*" Estella shouted, raising her wand. As the Gypsies watched, a bright white orb tinged with ribbons of darkness began to coalesce at the tip of it, the heat of it burning away the fog around them to reveal Will, Wanda and Stirling.

Suddenly, there was an odd rumbling in the ground... a rumbling momentarily thought by the Gypsies to be Estella's doing as well, but the Disciple simply cast a quizzical look around the battlefield.

"What in the...?" Druscilla muttered, trying to discern precisely what the sound could be.

"Wasn't me!" Stirling chimed in, swinging his club in defense of both a wounded Wanda and cringing Wil.

Estella only growled, twirling her wand in an extravagant fashion... when suddenly, a whizzing form buzzed passed her, knocking the wand from her light grasp.

"Wha- Damn!" She cursed, looking below her frantically even as that rumbling began to grow louder.

Glancing behind her at the source of the rumbles, her jaw slackened.

Bursting from the fog came not one, but two fully grown elephants... as well as a host of other creatures; dogs, birds, sheep, goats, even at least one llama in the mix.

The hunt for her wand hastened exponentially, falling to her knees and all but tearing through the grass below. Just as her hand reached out for the metal spike, she felt a tug at her leg. She let out a sharp cry of surprise as one of the pachyderm newcomers plucked her up by the ankle, dangling her in the air.

"...What in Hell just happened?" Druscilla muttered incredulously, having just finished melting Petris out of the icy coating.

"Will." Vashta grinned. Glancing around, she watched as Will and Stirling- the latter carrying Wanda over his shoulder- emerged behind the cluster of animals.

"Guilty as charged, Mistress Vashta." Will said grinningly.

"It seems as though these creatures don't have any problem getting through this mist." Lindria chuckled, reaching down and scratching one of the dogs about the head. "But we've more pressing matters."

"Indeed." Vashta nodded, turning to the dangling Estella.

However, before another word could be spoken, the wand on the ground flew up into the air, landing cleanly in Estella's hand.

With a wink and a swift sweep of her arm, her body vanished like smoke in a stiff breeze. Her chuckling voice, however, could still be heard on the wind...

Chapter 24 – Precipice

"So what do we do now?" Will asked, scratching his head as he watched Stirling, Wanda and a few others hitch the Cauldron up to the elephants. Dragging it wasn't the prettiest notion in the world, but it was- as some would say- a damn sight better than carrying it.

"We cannot move until everyone's recovered." Vashta replied grimly as she and Lindria took on the task of healing the wounded. "Most are still unconscious, an' Colin ain' in a position to fight. Petris' barely on his feet, an' Druscilla's magic is only at half strength. All we can do is hope that the others fared better, an' that they find us b'fore the lizards do."

"It's hard to believe that that was really Estella." Druscilla said quietly, sitting beside Gabe.

"Oh, of c-course." Petrus rolled his eyes, speaking through chattering teeth. "An army of Dragonkin, you believe, but the idea that Estella Foxglove could grow into a powerful, capable- all right, that is truth; it's very hard to believe."

"I just keep wanting to wake up... to find that this was just some terrible nightmare." Lindria murmured, shaking her head. "It's all just so surreal."

At that moment, they heard a shout from within the fog.

"What werewolf!?"

Staring into the mist, most in attendance were elated to see the forms of Thoren Grymm and Mistress Gaia emerging, followed by their own ragtag assortment of fighters.

"I didn't see any werewolf. Mostly because you fools left me at the port, dangling like a fish from a hook! How do you expect to stay alive when-"

"Come off it. You shouldn't have run off." Ryder frowned, rubbing his bandaged hand. "And I'm pretty sure none of us could call that battle our finest moment. But we survived, didn't we?"

"It looks like we're not the only ones who can say that much." Natalia sighed, helping a blood-loss-dazed Eli limp along as she gestured to Vashta's group.

Tsumi had- once finished with himself- already begun the arduous task of healing the wounded in his own group with his limited abilities. It was a hurried task at best. As it was they were more than happy to add Vashta and Lindria to the mix.

"Is anyone...?" Talia asked gravely, addressing Vashta... but raising an eyebrow as he noticed the armored Festivus and the large number of animals wandering nearby.

"By the Gods' mercy, no." Lindria replied. "More exhausted than anything else."

"We have to find the others." Raven winced, but let out a sigh of relief as Vashta applied the Crosier's light to his stab wound. "I heard Rose scream; it came from further north. Probably about from where the Vardo usually sits, unless the mist is playing with us again."

"Whether it is or not, the animals can apparently navigate the mist unhindered." Wanda explained. "We can follow them."

"I just hope we aren't too late..." Talia sighed. "I am beginning to think all of this may simply be a stalling tactic, the possibility of killing some of us being a mere fringe benefit."

"T'would certainly fit with why Estella simply vanished." Vashta nodded.

"Let's get moving." Thoren frowned. "With any luck we'll seal the rift and won't have to find out."

With that, after taking one more moment to clean their wounds, Thoren and Vashta's collective groups- including the champions and newly arrived heroes- wandered north along the road. They walked along the dirt paths, staying close to the elephants whose animal senses somehow rendered them immune to the witchery of the Meandering Mists.

It wasn't long before they saw patches of grass beneath their feet, and the buildings surrounding them became a landscape of sparse trees. They could hear the sound of low, gruff tones exchanging banter... and at least one resolute female voice in the mix.

"Adria!" Eli called out, almost tempted to hurry out with Natalia to meet her, but remembering at the last moment the infernal fog around them. Gradually, they came to stand in another patch of thinner mist, able to see Adria, her fellow Gypsies and the Barbarians sitting in the glade between the Vardo's usual spot and the Barbarians' booth.

"What happened to you?" Lindria called out, rushing over to them with Vashta a half-step behind.

"Thomas Wisseu." Aggie grumbled. "Least... we *think* it was."

"Did he appear older? Or changed in some way?" Druscilla asked warily.

"To say the absolute least. He was a bloody *monster*." Adria muttered back. "A dragon-man."

"Estella Foxglove attacked us." Vashta explained softly. "She was older, and had a few new tricks up her sleeve. Actually made me *miss* the one we know."

"Kinda interestin', I thought." Will chimed in thoughtfully. "Made me wonder that *///*look like in a few years."

"Certainly couldn't get any *taller*..." Aggie mused.

"We had the pleasure of dealin' with Scarlett O'Hemlock... she's picked up a few moves herself." Sydney frowned. "Worst of all was she didn't lose the one she had already." With this, she glared over at Captain Wunderhund.

"What?" Wunderhund pouted. "It's fine, that werewolf saved us, didn't she? And in *style*, too."

"Were...wolf?" Adria blinked.

"Nevermind!" Talia shook her head, stepping forward to take a full stock of their fighting condition.

Of Adria's group, most of the injuries were nonfatal stabs or mild concussions. Given the Barbarian's daily regiment, their wounds were nothing they couldn't shake off given a moment to catch their collective breath. Of course Agnarr and Morgan were in slightly worse shape from Thomas' explosive breath weapon, but it was nothing Lindria couldn't patch up.

Unfortunately, that couldn't be said for other maladies...

"By the Gods, what's happened to Rose?!" Gaia suddenly exclaimed as the younger Keeper emerged from the middle of the Barbarian ranks, using the Spear of Ascalon as a walking stick. She still looked pale as a banshee. For the most part, she had remained unresponsive after her breakdown, walking along with the group without a word. As she reached the assembly, she slumped weakly to her knees, still clutching her weapon. Gaia ran to kneel beside her.

"Thomas... the *other* Thomas... touching him must have triggered Rose's 'Keeper Sigh'... forced her to see something truly horrible..." Adria explained quietly. "I believed that perhaps it might have given us insight into what the Dragon Army is doing here, but... I did not want to press it..."

"I wish I'd been with ye." Vashta grumbled. "I'd'a tore Wisseu limb from bloody limb, the way I ought to have years ago."

"Wasn't for lack of *trying*." Grease called with a slight pout. "We almost had 'em."

At that moment, all of them flinched at the sound of a high-pitched hiccup.

"Rose!" Adria crouched quickly at Rose's other side, taking her shoulder.

"I- ...Mistress Gaia, I..." she began, choking on another whimpering sob. After a moment, she continued. "I... see now what Master Thunderbottom meant by 'really disturbing produce'..."

Adria and Gaia merely stared at her for a moment, gentle smiles creeping onto their faces before Adria stood, and Gaia collected Rose into a hug.

"You did well, Rose... you did very well. You were very brave."

"Th-... Thank you, Mistress Gaia." Rose nodded, leaning into the hug.

"Heal the wounded as quickly and as completely as you can." Thoren commanded. "We cannot linger here. We must move on before we're forced to fight more of the Dark Goddess' hell-spawn. We can't hope to stand on equal footing with Tiamat, being whittled away like this."

"Hey, we're good for some time, yet." Kai interjected. "But I've gotta say; with all this backward-ass fog crap and dragon freaks running around, I'm startin' to think this ain't our kind of fight."

"Never known you to run away from a battle, Kai." Grease replied, stepping forward, a hint of concern in his voice at the words of the Barbarian King.

"I never said we were quittin', Grease... didn't you say we used to *work* for these Dragon people?"

"Really?" McLovin blinked, still rubbing his throat. "What were they paying us?"

"They were usin' magic to *control* me, McLovin." Grease muttered, the extant spite apparent in his voice- if not in the white knuckles around his glaive. "Forcin' me to fight the Band. S'why we're workin' *with* the Gypsies now, to keep that from happenin' to any of us ever again."

"Ah, so they probably didn't pay all that well." McLovin nodded. "Good thing we left, then."

"Of course, now we're *still* workin' for free," Mary rolled her eyes, "riskin' our lives fighting a bunch'a mutant lizards."

"If we're going to start talking mutiny, can't it wait until *after* we've saved the city?" Afro asked, standing and shaking off the throb at the back of his head.

"I'm actually kinda surprised we haven't talked about this whole arrangement sooner." Horus said, scratching his head. "Did we *ever* talk about it?"

"No, Kai just gave the nod... under Grease's recommendation." Morgan stated plainly, freshly recovered from her concussion. "I think it was because he was involved with what's-her-name, that Gypsy Warrior."

"Speaking of mutiny." Kai said, his loud voice reclaiming control over the discussion as he turned to Thoren. "What the hell did you and your little club do to Tovias has him throwing Dragons at us?"

"Club did nothing!" Stirling protested, defensively hugging his bludgeoning weapon of choice.

"Tovias? What... the Mage Champion?" Gwen asked, her chest still rather sore from having an arrow shoved through it. "What does this have to do with him?"

"Tovias was manipulated into unleashing this hell upon the city." Thoren said firmly. "We confronted him in the catacombs beneath the Rhetshire Estate where all was revealed. He may not be a Draco Disciple, but it's become

clear he no longer cares what happens to us... he is too far gone now. We have no choice but to consider him an enemy."

"No!"

The shout startled all in attendance, especially considering its source.

Rose Peregrine slowly stood, still clutching the Spear of Ascalon for balance, looking around her with weary eyes.

"When did 'Goldilocks' grow a pair?" Kai blinked, watching her with a modicum of approval as she hobbled toward Thoren.

"No. This- *everything* - ALL of this... 'tis all wrong!" Rose said, tears still squeezing from her eyes although the anger upon her features was plain to see. "This... whatever has happened, this is *not Tovia*s! We cannot simply... simply cast him aside!"

"Be silent, girl." Thoren said lowly. "I understand how ye must feel, but-"

"You do not wish to IMAGINE how I 'feel!'" Rose screamed.

"This is not the time for bickering!" Derian suddenly interjected, stepping out between Thoren and Rose. "We're close to the Jousting Arena, to the rift- close to finishing this before it begins! Can we not do that, before this whole city- the *world* is destroyed?"

"Yes!" Skylana nodded, stepping forward as well, with Ryder at her side as always. "Whatever the matter is with this 'Tovias' and the Band, might we settle it when we meet him face to face?"

For a long, intense moment, Thoren and Rose stared one another down... a sight most in the Band and among their allies never believed they would ever witness.

At that moment, the collective gypsies, barbarians, lightbringers and champions heard a soft, slow, rhythmic sound from some distance off.

The clapping of a lone pair of hands.

Perhaps the sound of it- clear as a bell in the thick mist- was what made it so unsettling... or perhaps the thought of who those hands might belong to.

"...Hold the line here." Thoren called quietly to Kai. "Keep the lizards off our backs, and guard those that were wounded. The Band and I will deal with this ourselves."

"I'm not staying behind." Grease muttered. "Lady Tso or Tovia, I've got words with them."

"As do I." Adria nodded.

"We cannot confront whatever awaits us without Vashta and the Keepers." Talia stated. "And I would face it as well. Will, can we depend on you to direct the beasts when the time is right?" She looked to the Spellworthy boy, who looked to the two elephants.

"I... I s'pose..."

"Stirling. We'll need your help with the Cauldron." Adria stated, beckoning him over.

"Ye'll need me." Aggie said, stepping forward, holding her ballista. "But I'll not ask the girls to join us." She added, glancing behind her at the Ibis sisters... but Sydney stepped forward.

"Then I will. I'm inclined to want to fix my mistake." She said grimly, taking Aggie's satchel of combustibles. "Tovia is my responsibility in part."

"Fine. Then let this be the end of it." Turning, Thoren raised his voice, soon joined by all who knew the ancient Chant of the Light:

"Pay heed, all those of Evil's might;
T'is we who choose the path of right,
and will not flee in this, our fight!
Forever true, the force of-"

At that moment, there was a resounding crack as- all at once- the fog was sucked away, a mighty gust of wind howling and kicking up dirt around the assemblage of fighters.

Staggering slightly, looking frantically about, they found themselves far closer to their destination than they thought; the fencing around the arena nearly within arm's reach. Beyond it was the soft dirt of the jousting field, heavily trodden with horse tracks, and now a multitude of lizard footprints.

The sky above them swirled with clouds darker than the night, and within the center of the arena lay the rift.

Just before it, there stood a solitary figure; Full-figured, dressed in elegant crimson and ebony, all manner of matching jewelry adorning her arms, neck and head. In one hand, she held a dragon-shaped scepter tipped with a crystal sphere.

Ruby Nightshade- but again, not the Ruby Nightshade the Gypsies knew- raised her empty hand at the full congregation.

A single word was punctuated with a calm, casual beckoning gesture.

"Welcome."

Chapter 25 – Past Mistakes

"I'm glad you've made it this far."

Thoren Grymm stared coldly across the Jousting Field at the extravagantly appointed Ruby Nightshade, and at the sundered fabric of timespace behind her.

"I have been waiting a very long time for this."

"Stand aside, Poisoner." Thoren called, the Band behind him warily readying their weapons. "Go back to whatever hole ye slithered from willingly... ye dennae want us to force you."

"Silly little man." Ruby let out a soft, patronizing chuckle. "You've not the capacity to understand what is even *happening*. T'would be to your benefit to abandon whatever delusions of 'heroism' you may have planned." As she spoke, she cast her stare over the hand-picked fighters, finally letting her eyes rest upon the Cauldron.

"For all your talk," Talia began, stepping forward beside Thoren, "we've defeated you before and will do so again. And again, as many times as it may take."

"Will you, now?" Ruby quirked an amused eyebrow. "*Do* forgive my skepticism."

"I'll not warn ye again; we will slay you if you do not move aside." Thoren said, stone-faced.

Ruby's eyes narrowed.

"After all of this- after all of the machinations that allowed us to penetrate your world, you truly believe I would bow to your whim, gypsy?" The end of her words came with a long, loud, haughty laughter that filled the jousting arena.

Slowly, she raised the scepter she held.

"I think not."

At that moment, back at the collected mass of backup-fighters, Druscilla suddenly straightened like an animal alerted by some vicious predator.

"What's wrong?" a freshly awakened Gabe asked, before noticing she wasn't alone. Virum, Skylana, Nanus, Colin- every mage among them- felt the very same sensation inside: a tremble of the hands, a nauseous turn in their stomachs...

"Oh God..." Adria murmured, looking down at her gloved hands, and the apron that adorned her body- the gifts given her by Ignis, the Paragon of Fire... "What... what is-"

"What is this?" Sydney called out from the back ranks of Thoren's chosen team, just as sensitive to the turn in the Elemental leyline's energy.

"You see, much like my fellows in arms, I, too, have expanded my repertoire of abilities. My interest in poisons- in mixing and measuring- and my desire to learn more about the mystic arts in Lady Tso's absence led me to my own path- that of the Alchemical."

Looking over the scepter once more, she smiled admiringly upon it.

"A physical alteration here, a chemical infusion there... you would be amazed at what a truly accomplished Alchemist can achieve. After enough study, one transcends manipulation of the earthly forces granted us by the Paragons," She paused, licking her lips subtly, "and learns to refine and apply the essence of the Paragons *themselves*."

"What?!" Adria shouted, barely restraining herself as Thoren held up a hand.

The crystal at the tip of her wand flared with light- a light that almost sickened Adria and Skylana (attuned with the elements of Fire and Wind respectively)- before a mighty crash erupted overhead. From the swirling clouds, a massive, forking column of lightning fell to the earth and exploded against the dirt just before the Band.

Had it struck directly, at least one of the gypsies would have been completely obliterated... as it was, Thoren and the Elephants were the only ones still standing afterward. All others had been thrown to the ground- and several feet back besides.

The elephants' trumpeting echoed the deafening thunderclap as Will tried to calm them... but Thoren merely glared unflinchingly at Ruby.

"I see you still maintain some immunity to the magics of the Paragons- the magics passed down to Carrington and Newberry." Ruby said with mild disdain. "T'is well. Your mixed bloodlines give you means to live long enough to watch your 'family' die."

"Spread out!" Talia shouted with a sweeping gesture. Instantly, the smaller squad dispersed, Adria grabbing Rose and rushing one way, Gaia another, Vashla remaining in the center near Thoren- and conveniently between other groups, whosoever might need healing... a very likely possibility by the look of things.

"Starting to look like a bad idea, cutting it to just the eleven of us." Grease grumbled to Thoren.

"I want to see as little blood on our end as possible." Thoren replied simply.

"You think we can handle her?"

"She's just a distraction." Thoren shook his head. "Jus' stay alive an' watch for an opening. We need t'get that Cauldron in the Rift."

"Great. So... no plan." Grease frowned. "I love it."

"Gertrude!"

The call of her name startled the eldest Normyl sister out of her dumbfounded paralysis.

They had managed to sneak their way through a hidden passage beneath the Bristol city wall, close to the Jousing Arena. In doing so, they circumvented the Meandering Mist completely... Lillith making sure to remember this little trick for later (if there would *be* a 'later'). The lot of them now crouched within a patch of brush and trees, looking down upon the battlefield.

Gertrude's eyes had been locked onto the rift between realities. She found it impossible to quell completely that sense of terror within her. Staring into the swarm of distorted air felt no different than looking upon the soulless countenance of Lady Tso in her prime; it was a sense of emptiness that teemed with a terrible sort of life, unbeing given form, a force older than the Gods:

The Void.

"I'm here, I'm here." Gertrude finally spoke in reply to Lillith's call. "Keep yer bloody bodice on, I'm thinkin'."

"I thought you knew what ye were doing." Lillith hissed back. "I should be down there with the others..."

"If you want to get yourself burned to a crisp by a fake Draco Disciple, you go ahead and do so." The eldest witch replied. "But you'd serve them far better here. They're plannin' on sealin' the Rift with the Cauldron, an' that needs doing, no doubt. But even if they should defeat this Ruby Nightshade an' enter the rift... there's no way they'll stop Tovias should they run into him." She cast a glance back at Lillith, as well as Lucy and Suzanne. "That's what we're for."

"What... what in the name of God *is* that?" Laurent Mariage asked, looking over his daughter down at the Arena, at the very same gate that had Gertrude transfixed for that moment in time. "The gate to Hell?"

"We should be so lucky. I could use a bit of sightseeing." Abigail muttered, even her blackest of hearts and most disturbing moral compass reduced to the trembling countenance of a child at the sight of the Rift.

"That's just reality unraveling." Merryweather stated plainly, to which the elder Mariages jerked around to stare at her.

"So what are we to do?" Lucy asked, starting to crawl up closer to Gertrude.

"We must find Tovias, and set the daft young man straight."

"You mean... in there?" Lillith murmured, biting her lower lip as she stared at the gateway.

"Aye..." Gertrude nodded, her answer in the form of a soft, uneasy sigh.

"We... we will not have to stay in there for very long, will we?" Merry asked, to which Gertrude hesitated.

"*You* won't be needed at all." Gertrude finally answered, turning around to face Merryweather and Abigail.

"Eh?" Abigail cocked her head, confused, but quite relieved.

"You're staying here." The eldest witch stated softly. "If the rift closes and... I do not return, you needn't wait for me. And if the rift shouldn't close at all and more dragons appear, then run as fast as your feet can carry you, as far as they will allow."

"Wait." Lillith said softly. "Wait... you're... you're thinking that you might not- that *we* might not-"

"I am." Gertrude nodded. "Although- and it's a rare and strange feeling- I *hope* that it does not come to that."

"NO." Laurent hissed. "Gypsy nonsense and armies of dragons be damned, I will not have my little girl lost in some... some other world!"

"Like it or not, your daughter has the dubious fortune of having made friends with Tovias this den." Gertrude explained, turning to glare at Laurent. "And those happen to be what Tovias needs if we will even have a *chance* to live through this."

"I am *not* allowing you to do this, Suzanne, and that is *final*." Laurent growled. "You cannot throw your life away like this. Even this witch acknowledges that you may never return! Besides, she is a *witch*! And those are *gypsies*! Are they really worth throwing your life away for?!"

"If we do *not* go in there, we will all *certainly* die, as opposed to a mere percent chance." Gertrude shot back. "It will not matter who is where, in or out of the rift, this army of dragons will no doubt raze this world to the last living soul they have not enslaved."

Laurent was about to answer, but was silenced suddenly as his wife gently rested a hand on his shoulder.

"My love, look around you." Jeanne whispered, pointing out at the battle taking place before them. "Look at the nightmare that awaits the rest of the world if this 'Band of the Twisted Claw' should fail to stop it. If miss Gertrude truly believes our Suzanne can help, and if she is truly willing- brave enough- to do so... we must let her try."

Laurent stared back and forth at his wife and daughter for a moment... then bowed his head.

"...Then we go, as well."

"Bleedin'..." Gertrude hissed, hands balled into fists, but finally shook her head. "Fine. Just keep your mouths shut when the time comes."

"What is it that we plan to do?"

"Simply to talk. That is all he will need."

Looking back to the arena, her brow creased.

"But it seems that- at this point- what *we* need is a distraction."

"I would hazard a guess as to say," Ruby began, chuckling as a more blasts of lightning and a storm of fist-sized hail fell in a torrent from the swirling clouds, "that most of you Gypsies haven't the slightest idea as to what is going on."

"We know enough, Disciple." Talia shot back. "And we have a fairly good idea about the rest."

"Oh ho..." The Disciple smirked. "...and what of where we came from? What of your erstwhile Mage Champion?"

"Neither one matters right now." Thoren growled, beginning to make his way toward Ruby. Judging by the look on his face, the other Gypsies knew well enough to stay out of his way.

"I beg to differ." Ruby chuckled. "There is so much about this you have yet to understand. For instance, what if I were to tell you that this world is worth more to us with you alive than dead? Have you not wondered who we take our orders from? I assure you, 'tis not who you believe."

"You've ripped a hole in reality, an' terrorized this city." Thoren replied. "I care not what your intents are. I care not who you serve. I only care about ye gettin' yer arses out, an' ye closin' the damned gate behind ye when ye do."

"Oh, Thoren, how I've missed this lovely repartee... but I am afraid I must drop my decorum for a moment as there is really only one suitable response to this ultimatum of yours..."

Her blood red lips twisted into a smirk.

"Come and *make* me."

At that moment, Thoren lunged- running through the soft dirt, aiming his rapier.

There was very little Ruby could do to stop the charge. After all, although Thoren would suffer mild injuries from any collateral damage her magic inflicted, his mixed bloodlines lent him immunity from her spells directly.

However, as he leapt forward and thrust with his weapon, a massive figure emerged from the rift behind Ruby with startling speed.

What lashed outward was an immense, twisted, taloned hand, decked in scales that flickered with inexplicable iridescent rose and orchid hues.

Thoren had only a shocked instant before he was batted away like a fly, sent tumbling away from Ruby, landing in the blessedly soft sand of the arena.

Vashta ran to his side, but soon she- as well as the other Gypsies and observing heroes- found their gaze pulled to the rift as the massive disembodied appendage crashed to the ground beside Ruby.

Another foot emerged, stomping with force enough to shake the earth. Each was easily the size of the Barbarian Booth, if not larger than that.

"Mmm... Better late than never, I suppose." Ruby said casually, reaching down and stroking the talon of one mighty foot.

"Are you ready, Tristan?"

With that an enormous dragon head slithered forth from the portal, staring down upon the stunned members of the Band with strikingly familiar eyes. The flames of hell itself flickered between enormous fangs as its gaze finally rested upon the collected heroes, letting out a deafening roar.

Chapter 26 – TPK

"I see our mutual acquaintance needs no introduction." Ruby said with a smile, the dragon's heavy breathing drowning her out.

"Merciful Gods." Aggie whispered, shooting a sidelong glance to an ashen-faced Rose.

"What say you?" Ruby continued, speaking as cheerfully as though discussing the weather on a fair summer's day. "A significant improvement, don't you agree? Of course, perhaps his human form was more fetching, but ultimately useless."

"You unbelievable bitch." Adria snarled.

"T-Tristan...?" Rose managed, but Adria shouted back to her.

The mix of collective hate and shock could be felt all throughout the Band's battle line.

"Well?" Grease called out to Thoren. "She's got a dragon."

"Aye." Thoren nodded slowly, one hand holding his chest. Already aching from the freshly healed wounds Tovia and the Dragon Army had dealt him, getting bludgeoned by a colossal lizard did nothing to speed his recovery.

"You honestly think we can still handle this?" The Barbarian persisted, tightly gripping the Doorknocker. "I mean, the thing can kill us by breathing on us."

Thoren didn't answer. His mind was racing. Ruby Nightshade- no matter how powerful- was one thing. This, however...

"Starting to see things with some clarity, are we?" Ruby asked, stepping forward. "I suppose now it's simply a matter of which of you wishes to surrender, and who wishes to-"

Her words were cut off by a radiant ray of light, its wake carving a trench in the arena dirt below before crashing full-force into Ruby. Eyes that had been watching her squinted, and the Dragon overlooking them flinched at the explosion of energy.

However, another glimmer of light pierced the resulting cloud of dust, revealing a hemispherical barrier encompassing Ruby. The scowling Disciple turned in the direction from which the attack had come, her eyes fixed upon Rose Peregrine.

"No. More." Rose panted softly, the exhaustion in her voice a swirling mix of physical and emotional. Before Adria could stop her, she lunged spear-first at Ruby with a wrathful expression that took even the haughty disciple off guard. "NO MORE!"

"Very well, then." Ruby nodded, bringing her scepter up in a guarded stance. "Let us settle our old grudge once and for all. Tristan!" She called back to the dragon, "Take care of the others."

With an obedient nod Tristan turned, opened his fanged maw and released a pillar of cerulean flames down upon Thoren, Talia, Grease and Vashta.

As it had before, the Crosier of Saint Patrick flared into life, a pure white barrier appearing over and around its wielder and her companions. The impact of the blast was great- far greater than even Estella's deadly magical rays. As the flames dissipated, the Healer fell to her knees, weakened from the sheer effort of it.

"That's not good." Grease observed, then looked up at the Dragon who was already drawing in another breath.

Before it could unleash another blast of fiery death upon them, Gaia's voice rang out across the battlefield, authoritatively weaving together a string of ancient incantations that- to the dragon- were as nails upon slate.

Letting out a deafening roar, the Dragon drew its entire body from the portal, its eyes burning with rage as they fixed upon the elder Keeper.

Meanwhile, Ruby seemed to be channeling the upper crust of Dracos passed, her feet leaving not a single print in the dirt as she gracefully evaded the attacks of both Rose and Adria.

"This is so surreal to me- more so than you can imagine." She said, her magical barrier parrying another blow from Rose's weapon.

"The pleasure is all ours, you hag." Adria shot back, stepping forth and swinging her claymore again. "The pleasure of wiping that proud little smirk off your face, the way we did your 'Thomas'."

"Interesting." Ruby thrust out a hand- palm outward- toward them. "And why don't we ask Rose how she feels about your 'victory'?" A mighty gust of wind pushed the two gypsy women back a pace, before an arc of lightning flew from her fingertips.

The arc glanced harmlessly off of Rose, the Spear of Ascalon reflexively glowing with a protective aura. Adria, however, was hit full-on. Although she was staggered by it, the apron and gloves she wore- infused with the power of Ignis the Fire Paragon- were able to absorb some of the damage.

Seeing an opening after the magical assault, Adria charged Ruby with a howling battlecry.

Then all at once, the swordmistress froze in place, her blade but inches from a grievous blow.

"I... what..." Adria gasped, wide-eyed, her body quivering. "I can't... can't move!"

Rose shook her head and charged in Adria's stead, the Spear of Ascalon certain to protect her from whatever witchery had befallen the other... only to have Adria's blade lash out, and bat the weapon aside. The Keeper let out a

gasp, staggering back. The swordmistress' body had regained motion, only now she was weaving drunkenly this way and that, her claymore striking out at Rose instead of Ruby.

"I possess mastery over the Elementals." Ruby reminded the pair, casually staring into the crystal at the end of her scepter. "The human body contains a fair bit of *water*... even *you* ought to be able to piece it together from there."

Adria reared back, raising her weapon and bringing it down upon Rose. Although the girl was able to raise the Spear to block it, Adria's strength was far superior, the force of the strike knocking her to the ground.

"R-Rose, I can't stop myself! You have to run!"

Rose, however, did not run. Tightening her grip on the spear she forced herself back to her feet, and looked to Ruby with stark hatred in her eyes.

Ruby only smiled.

The moment Tristan emerged from the portal, his wings snapped outward with a sound like distant thunder. He turned upon the elder Keeper, his vicious jaws yawning apart as blue flame flickered beyond his fangs.

However, before the lethal blast could come, a series of small explosions peppered the dragon's flank- a volley from Aggie's ballista courtesy of her and Sydney.

Startled, Tristan's head swung around, spewing a clumsily, more easily avoided blanket of flame upon the gypsies.

"Not so sure that had much impact, Aggie..." Sydney murmured warily, "other than making him thoroughly angry."

"Perhaps not..." Aggie replied unsteadily, the both of them utterly paralyzed by the horror of the beast looming over them, "But it were a fair enough distraction."

Tristan blinked, suddenly noticing a slight rumble in the ground. Turning, he saw Will Spellworthy mounted upon one of the elephants, the two large creatures charging for the Rift with the Cauldron in tow.

The dragon shook his head, as though grinning at the futility of their efforts. With a mighty 'woosh' of air, Tristan's powerful tail rose up, and lashed out to the side to crash into the incoming pachyderms.

Feeling his tail crash against something, the grin was suddenly replaced with a puzzled expression.

Whatever he'd struck hadn't moved- hadn't *been* moving, but instead stood unmoving like a tree.

Looking over his shoulder, Tristan snarled at the sight of a blue-skinned, slightly charred humanoid figure.

"Stirling LIKE elephants! You not hurt them, lizard-thingy!" The troll bellowed. His body strained, feet dragging slightly where they were braced in the dirt as he held the dragon's tail. "STIRLING IS STRONGEST THERE IS!"

Tristan growled, his rage heightening every passing second- and finding little reprieve as a steel blade carved a mighty gash in his foreleg, compliments of a charging Grease.

Will shouted frantically at the elephants beneath him, urging them as a rider would a racehorse. The animals, for their part, wanted nothing to do with the Dragon, or that unnatural portal. Nevertheless, neither of the creatures could deny the bravery of the assembled humans, and were willing- within reason- to do what they could.

"M- Miss Talia!" Will shouted, sensing the elephants beginning to reach their limits and turn away from the Rift.

Nodding, Talia raised a hand, focusing as best she could under the circumstances. Muttering a swift magical phrase, the ropes with which the elephants had been dragging the Cauldron loosened their knots.

At the last possible moment, the elephants turned sharply, nearly throwing Will clean off. The Gypsy lad held on for dear life- as the two grey beasts ran away from the rift and from the battle... leaving the Cauldron to continue rolling on. Seeing this, Tristan struggled to move his tail to block the Cauldron, but it was held soundly by Stirling. With a roar, the dragon attempted to turn his massive body, only to be struck by another volley from Aggie and another blow from Grease's glaive. Before he could stop it, the Cauldron disappeared into the veil of scrambled air.

Before the elephants charged through the wooden fence and stampeded away, Will threw himself off of his mount, landing in a heap in the sand.

"Will!" Gaia called, "Are you well?"

"A- Aye..." Will nodded dazedly, "I... may'a ripped my trousers, though..."

"You FOOL!" Ruby called, having turned at the sound of the racket. Seeing the Cauldron enter the rift, she screamed back at the dragon. "You musn't allow them to-!"

At that moment, something happened that none of them expected.

A slight rustle was all Ruby, Adria and Rose heard before a living blur rushed past them, heading straight for the Rift... a squirming burlap sack slung over its shoulder.

"What...!?" Ruby blinked, but instinctively raised her scepter up to stop her in the most brutal manner possible.

"Lillith!" Adria called out in shock. Without thinking- without even realizing Ruby's focus had been disrupted and she could again move- the swordmistress dropped her sword and seized the Disciple in a full-nelson hold from behind.

"Agh! Get off of me, you wretch!" Ruby snarled, the scepter flickering as he struggled.

There were numerous cries among the Band as well as the enemy as young Lillith disappeared into the Rift as well... a sickening feeling brewing in the stomachs of the former as they gradually realized what had just transpired.

"It can't be..." Gaia breathed.

"Lillith..." Talia stood, dumbstruck, looking up to Thoren after a moment.

Ruby Nightshade stared at the void through which the Gypsy girl had thrown herself. Her eyes narrowed.
"...Crush them."

Tristan suddenly let out another bellowing roar, raising a clawed foot and slamming it down upon Grease with the quickness of a cat. The Barbarian choked out a cry as he was pinned to the ground.

Stirling's eyes widened as he was lifted from the sand, and with a mighty toss was thrown away. Tumbling end over end, he crashed into Gaia who hadn't the time to construct a defense, or even dodge, both crashing to the ground.

At almost the exact same time, Tristan turned to Aggie, Sydney and Vashta, releasing a cone of blue fire from his gullet. Vashta swiftly called up another barrier, but she was already exhausted from her earlier efforts and could not long withstand the blast.

The barrier shattered in a bright flash, sending the three behind it falling to the ground. Even as Sydney and Aggie scrambled to retrieve the satchel full of ballista 'ammunition', it was consumed by another smaller gout of flame which, itself, went up in an eruption of multicolored explosions.

Even as Adria held Ruby tightly around the arms, she suddenly let out a strange sound, like a gagging wheeze. Struggling to keep her hold on the Disciple, she quivered, staggered, and finally fell to the ground. Her eyes rolled back before falling to the ground.

"W- What...!?" Rose murmured in horror, leveling the Spear at Ruby.

"I removed the air from her lungs." Ruby answered with a shrug. "Don't worry, she isn't dead yet, but I assure you it will not be long."

Rose scowled... looking back to the others, she saw that the lot of them- all but Thoren and Talia who now stared down the nose of a dragon- were unconscious or unable to defend themselves. In the back, she could see the Dragon Army had resumed their assault on the collection of other Gypsies, Barbarians and Lightbringers, trying desperately to crack the shell of their defense and slaughter the lot.

"It is over." Ruby purred wickedly. "The Band has failed. Your Lightbringers, Champions and allies have failed. Even your Lillith seems to have resigned herself to death. It takes the power on par with those of a Keeper to open and re-seal the Cauldron, so whatever she has planned will not have the least bit of significance."

Rose looked stone-faced between them; the battle behind her, the dragon looming over her helpless friends, Ruby cackling gleefully... and finally, to the terrifying rift.

"Well? Should you not be sobbing like a child about now-?."

Suddenly, a gust of air passed by Ruby's cheek... a trickle of blood betraying a small cut from the blade of the ancient spear.

Her wicked smirk was gone in an instant.

"...So be it... Gypsy."

Chapter 27 – Empty Exposition

To anyone without an affinity for the mystic arts, the Rift might have resembled little more than a desert mirage, the distorted space a mere trick of the light; nothing out of the ordinary until one stepped through it.

Any magic user, however- from Randalf the Blue down to the most humble Lightbringer dabbler- could feel the utterly aberrant nature of it. The Normyl sisters, for example, had always harbored a fear and distaste of Lady Tso (a woman who lacked a soul). They would have little use for a soulless *world*, which was what the Rift essentially was.

In short, those who saw little and expected nothing stood to suffer the most when the brunt of it came upon them.

Nevertheless, Lillith Sparrow ran, undaunted, through the gateway. Her mind was focused only on one thing: the hope that whatever plan Gertrude had cooked up could save her friends from almost certain demise.

There were no words, no thoughts to aid young Lillith in comprehending the awe and terror-inspiring sight before her: The alternate Draco Disciples, the dragon Tristan, these were tangible, lethal threats, they could at least be understood, their motivations- whatever they were- logical in their own way.

This was entirely different.

This was a scrambled mess of realities, skittering and swarming over one another. Much like the 'glass insects' one saw in the Rift from the outside, each one now seemed to be a window to another entirely new world. Constantly moving. Constantly changing. Constantly evolving. Being born and dying before her eyes. Happiness, despair, fear, hope, love, light and darkness... and yet, she stood in a place outside of them all, a place full of silence; ignored and insignificant.

Alone.

Swiftly, the cutpurse fell to her knees, opening the burlap sack she had carried in with her. Carefully tipping it over, she released its contents: Five very small croaking creatures- frogs- flopped onto the invisible expanse beneath her.

The sturdy surface beneath her was both encouraging and unnerving. Though it was preferable to falling into the infinite chaos of a world between worlds, it felt as though whatever suspended her from such a fate could collapse at any moment.

Reaching into one of her sashes, she plucked out an item Gertrude had given her a moment ago; a pure red rose with a piece of parchment wrapped around its stem. Unwrapping it, she looked it over, and spoke aloud the words inscribed upon it.

"Er... By maiden's kiss 'pon blood-red rose, thy proper forms be now exposed?" She said awkwardly, then placed a kiss on the petals of the flower... which she then ripped off, and dropped upon the frogs.

A sound like that of windchimes swept through the air around her, before being swallowed by that menacing silence. In an instant, what stood before her was not a sackful of amphibious flycatchers, but the Mariage family, Lucy, and Gertrude Normyl.

"I am never doing that again." Gertrude spat, shaking her head. "Bloody *undignified*, that was."

"What..." Suzanne whispered, looking around her. Her mother and father were of a similar opinion, transfixed by the unnatural surroundings. Gertrude and Lucy were able to keep some manner of composure as they stood.

"On yer feet." Gertrude commanded. "I didn't make Lillith drag you along so you could curl up like bleedin' hedgehogs."

Lillith and Lucy helped the Mariages up, Gertrude now the one gazing around the new and disturbing frontier. However, the witch did so with purpose.

"Tovias?" She called out warily. There came no answer, not even an echo of her own voice.

"Well?" Lillith quirked an eyebrow. "We're here. Now what?"

"In a min." She murmured. "Would have been nice if this place were a bit more linear."

"Are you saying we're lost?" Lucy asked, the mere utterance enough to make those in attendance shudder. After another moment, Gertrude suddenly pointed, beckoning over her shoulder with her other hand.

"This way." She said, striding forward, drawing her broom and tapping the area in front of her to ensure there was still 'ground' ahead. The others blinked, and Laurent Mariage spoke.

"Are you certain, Miss Gertrude? With all due respect, there is no 'there' there. Where is it you plan on taking us?"

"Look." Gertrude grunted, pointing with her other hand.

"I see it... there." Lucy chimed in, her voice a swift whisper. She raised a finger to point as well.

There, among the hundreds of thousands of writhing dimensions, was a single speck of darkness dead-ahead. It seemed to be anchored to the spot, like the invisible plane they stood upon as well as the portal back to their own world.

"There. That portal should lead to wherever the Dragon army came from."

"And we're going *toward* it?" Lillith asked incredulously. "How can you be sure Tovias is even there?"

"He is." Lucy replied immediately. "He's here, there... somewhere between. I've been leashed to a God before, I still have a sense for this sort of thing."

"Exactly." Gertrude nodded. "S'why I brought you along. Doesn't hurt that yer one'a the few people Tovias might give a damn about. S'why the rest of you are here."

"Ah..." Lillith blinked, adjusting her hat to mask a nervous frown. "I did sort of shove him over this mornin'... and I *did* give him the list of chores, the thing what landed him in this mess to start with..."

"He'll not kill the messenger. Especially if the messenger is fourteen bloody years old." Gertrude rolled her eyes. "As for the shovin', I'm sure he's used to that sort'a thing by now."

"Will he listen to us?" Suzanne asked, her voice shaky, still trying to shake off the terror of being exposed to this non-world.

"It's the only plan we've got that doesn't have us throwing ourselves into a suicidal battle against Disciples and Dragons." Gertrude replied.

"Are you suggesting that this is in any way LESS suicidal?" Laurent frowned, but Gertrude ignored him outright.

"How... how did this all happen?" Suzanne asked. "Tovias is... is truly responsible for this?"

"Oi..." Gertrude scowled, rubbing her eyes. "We're about to walk into the pivotal encounter, and ye still don't... ah..." Shaking her head, she looked over her shoulder. "As much as I tend to enjoy telling stories, this is the LAST time I will explain it."

"You remember Tovias' little story around the bonfire this eve. About the Von Kaiser family's demise and his twenty years of wandering. Well, at the end of it all, he wound up here at Bristol one year ago, starving an' hopeless, ready to keel over.

For the last few years, Bristol has found itself unwitting host to a battle between two secret organizations- if ye could call 'em that:

First, there's the Band of the Twisted Claw; a fragmented, mismatched troupe of gypsies, tramps and thieves-"

"Oi!" Lillith shouted, "Who're you calling 'tramp', witch?"

"I did say 'thieves' as well. Now shut it before I lose my patience." Gertrude frowned, then continued:

"The Band dates back to... oh, the 'Great Big War against the Darkness of Doom', or whate'er they call it. Back when Tiamat were cast out of the Mortal Plane by Carrington and Newberry- Don't trouble yerselves, they are not relevant at this point. Know fer now that they are a group'a squabbling gypsies who can't seem to get their act together until their evil, Tiamat-worshipping enemies show up in Bristol. Those be the Draco Disciples. You've been introduced."

"Indeed." Laurent muttered, quirking a brow, trying to wrap his head around all of this so-called 'history'.

"The Band is led by a man named Thoren Grymm. Y'probably haven't see him outside'a Pub Crawls. Only when the Band is in some trouble and he needs to make an appearance to rally 'em, or when one of the Band- or anyone, really- does somethin' he doesn't like."

"Like getting drunk and makes Will Spellworthy sob his eyes out..." Lillith muttered under her breath, but went silent as Gertrude gave her a vicious glare.

"The leader of the Draco Disciples... rather, the former leader, was a woman by the name of Lady Katherine Tso... The descendant of a little alchemical experiment by the Elemental Paragons. See, they thought the answer to dealing with a potentially evil being was to rip its soul out, creating two bein's; one evil, an' one soulless. Tso's ancestor were the soulless one."

"That's not-" Lillith began, but silenced herself in a huff.

"So of these two shining examples of humanity cross paths by sheer chance, and Tovias gets his fool self obsessed with Lady Tso. It were both a curse and a blessing that he lost track of her that year. A blessing in that I wouldn't want to think what would have become of him had he found himself in her service, and a curse... well, you can see what's happening now.

For my coin, when Tovias returned a year hence, he probably went around askin' anyone who'd answer about that 'woman he saw year last in the red and black'. Most probably kept their distance, but I'd say at least one of them reported Tovias' 'curiosity' back to Thoren Grymm. And as for Tovias, once he found out about Lady Tso's disappearance, he was so stricken by it, he went about seeking a means to punish those responsible. Of course back then he didn't have the power to punish anyone."

"That's... when he joined the Band of the Twisted Claw? It was to get stronger... to get revenge?" Lillith blinked, half in awe, half in uncertainty.

"What she says is correct..." Lucy nodded. "Tovias confessed as much to me."

"Thoren probably watched him close the whole time as he went from beggar to gypsy to Lightbringer to Protector and finally to Champion, growin' more powerful than most beginner mages. But even if he were a Draco Disciple sympathizer or the like, with Loki about, both the Band and the Dracos had bigger things to deal with.."

"How did Mistress Gaia not know about any of this?" Lillith asked insistently. "Or Rose, even."

"Powerful magic, is how." Gertrude shook her head. "Only a deity or a mother's dying breath could create a scrying barrier that strong.."

"I see..." Suzanne nodded, her head bowing solemnly.

After a moment, Gertrude proceeded.

"Apparently once Loki was dealt with, Thoren came up with his clever scheme to smoke Tovias out as a Disciple or whatever he thought he was: The Rhetshire Estate Will. He takes the Gypsy's side, he's safe. He takes their side, he's a traitor. His life experiences've left little room for shades of gray."

"But how did Tovias escape from the dungeon?" Lillith asked.

"Those alternate Draco Disciples, like that strange Ruby we saw back there." Gertrude replied. "I'm sure they had something to do with it- with *all* of this."

"How do we stop it?" Jeanne asked, all the while clutching her husband's hand. "Do you truly believe simply talking to him will... after all that has happened to him?"

"It's a start." Gertrude frowned. "Before anythin' else, we need to-"
Her voice died in her throat.

Seemingly out of nowhere, there now stood a bedraggled looking young man dressed in worn grey robes, now crackling from head to toe with silver-white light. At his side, upright and unharmed, stood the Cauldron of Cerridwen the Crone.

After a moment of intense silence, Tovias blinked, looking over the new arrivals.
"...Wow. *Really?*"

Chapter 28 – Tovie's Choice

"Make no mistake," Tovias began, "I'm glad you're all alive, I was just expecting-... Oh God, Gertrude, what happened to Abby and Merry? Are they-?" His voice was filled with more concern than any of those present might have expected.

"Not dead. Contrary to my *occasional* wishes." the witch said, eyeing him warily. Neither she nor her companions were willing to entirely trust the mage. He *had* been crackling with hate-magic only a short time ago. "I left them outside the Rift. This weren't no place for them... or anybody else, really."

"It's actually not so bad," The mage replied with only a hint of bitterness, "if you're used to being alone."

"Well, judging from what's become of Bristol, it seems you've got friends to spare now. Most of em with scales." Lillith frowned. "I know you an' Thoren've had your differences, but ain' this a bit much?"

"It is not within my power to control anymore, Lillith." Tovias' head bowed.

"Nonsense, Tovias! Of *course* it is! Look at you." Lucy shouted back, her voice weary. "Why are you letting this happen?!"

Tovias faltered, looking down at the Cauldron beside him. He let out a silent breath.

"...Gertrude." the Mage said, turning to address the witch.

"What?"

"Do you remember the story you told me not long ago?" He said. "The one about the Dark Ship."

Gertrude blinked, then perked up. Swiftly, she reached into her bag, and withdrew her book of morals. Flipping through it, she thrust her forefinger into its pages.

"'The road to Hell is paved with good intentions'. That was my answer, was it not?" The mage asked softly.

"Indeed." Gertrude nodded. "What is your point?"

"... There was no way for that man to have succeeded. No matter what path he chose, his destiny was written long before he first encountered the ship."

Casting a glance at the Cauldron, he turned to look at the dark speck in the distance.

"I never asked to be born my mother's child. I never asked to be married into a family doomed for destruction. I never asked to survive those wandering years, never asked to meet Lady Katherine. I never asked to feel such grief, such obsession at her loss, nor did I ask to come to feel so close a bond to the Band and their friends. The few choices I *have* been allowed- nay, *forced* to make- have torn me apart inside... and only now do I see that no matter what decisions I made, the result would have been the same."

"Tovias..." Puddle began, but Tovias shook his head.

"I was a fool to hope for peace and reconciliation. I know that now." The mage murmured, his quiet tone still audible thanks to a sheer lack of sound otherwise. "Even if the Band could forgive me- trust me again- I have learned full well the nature of that world; My family, my friends, the woman I loved, there is nothing I can hold so dear that the world would not see fit to take it from me, simply because of a destiny I never wanted. If I ever wanted peace or happiness, I will not find it there."

"So, you consider your life a pitiful failure, so you take it out upon your beloved new family by allowing their world's destruction." Gertrude said flatly. "If you 'were' a fool, little seems to have changed."

"Say what you will, Gertrude." Tovias shot back, his aura crackling unnervingly. "A world that would crush hopes, ruin lives... this is the fate it has earned. If I was intended from the beginning to be its executioner, then so be it."

"Have some sense, man." Gertrude threw up a hand with exasperation. "It is not too late to come back and repair the damage you've done. With all this fancy power you've got, I've no doubt you could send the entire Dragon Army through the rift with its collective tail between their legs. Instead, you choose to stand in this fake world alone, feeling sorry for yourself?"

"No." The mage shook his head. "The moment I stepped into the Rift, and saw all of this, things... things changed."

"What in hell are you planning to do!?" Laurent Mariage shouted, certain to step between the mage and his wife and daughter. "And what does it have to do with terrifying my family, and threatening an entire city?!"

"Lord Mariage, perhaps you and your family would have a more difficult time understanding as Nobles, but the rest of us..." Tovias answered, looking the small group over one by one, "Gertrude; Merryweather is an innocent girl- more innocent than Abigail, anyway- and yet how many times has she been put to the stake? How many times have you had to resurrect her? And then there is you, yourself. All you've tried to do is the right thing; keep to yourself and leave others to their own, right? Hell, on occasion you've gone out of your way to help people. You didn't have to warn me back then that Scarlett was a black widow, or that the Rhetshire Estate was a bad place to be. But you were looking out for me. And others have benefited from your particular brand of 'tough love', loathe as they might be to admit it... and yet, how many times have you been forced to run away from angry mobs or struggle for your very survival just because mankind is nothing but a cesspit of hatred and lies?"

The witch listened, her eyes growing more narrow. However, Tovias quickly turned his attention elsewhere.

"Lillith!" Tovias continued. "Your parents abandoned you to fend for yourself at a mere five years old! Of course Thoren took you in, but for what? So one day you could find yourself on the end of a Draco Disciple's blade, at the end of a hangman's noose or married off so the Band can make a few coppers in the exchange?"

"They would never let that happen!" Lillith shot back, face reddening slightly. "We are a family! We look out for each other... just because-... Wait, *COPPERS?!!*"

"And Lucy... Lucy, you know me better than anyone else, Band or otherwise."

"I thought I did..." The Fool sighed, looking away from him.

"You've been through more than any other misfit out of the Band of the Twisted Claw... Suffered a life full of darkness and pain, made the toy of peasants, nobles and even Gods... and it makes me sick. I hate that such a good person with a kind heart has been... been stomped into the ground by a world you never deserved to be born into."

"Tovias." Gertrude said firmly, gripping her broom in one fist and raising the other to point at him. "I really believed you were one of the smart ones. Yet, here you are trying to throw my teachings back in my face. You know well enough that no world can exist without a proper balance of good and evil. I tell you these stories to make you realize there *is* no one answer. There is perfectly happy ending."

"That's not necessarily true." He answered, raising his arm to gesture at the swirling, scrambled realities around them. "Look. I know it's hard to want to, but look where you are, at what surrounds you. Countless worlds. Infinite dimensions." He pointed back at the dark portal behind him. "A world that hasn't known Goodness or Light in a long, long time, a land of nothing but darkness... the world intended for me... But somewhere in this 'between-realm' there must be its exact opposite: A world of happiness and peace."

Drawing in a weak, ragged breath, he turned to look to the group of six before him.

"I intend to leave this world to the fate it's fashioned for itself- to reap what it has sown over ages of torturing so very many innocent people... Meanwhile, I would offer you all new lives in a world where you would never again have to carry the burden of others, or struggle forever for the bare necessities of life. In a place with no hate, no killing, no Darkness... Paradise."

"Darkness will always exist! Just as Light, and everything inbetween." Gertrude scoffed. "If you're wanting to abandon your world because you can't accept that, then by all means go. Go live happily ever after with your corpse bride. But at least have the decency to clean up your mess, or you'll be making countless lives as miserable as yours."

"You aren't *listening!*" Tovias growled. "Not a one of the Band has anything close to a happy history, and what have they to look forward in this world to besides servitude and war? This world's horrors existed before me, and will exist after I've gone. My actions hold no value, and neither do yours! What would you have me do?!"

"You could start by growing up! Only a child could believe in something as ridiculous as a 'perfect world' and a child is precisely what you are acting like." The witch took a step toward him, but hesitated as Tovia's energy began to crackle again. "You stopped growing up from the moment your family was killed. Never became anything more than the entitled brat raised by entitled brat nobles, suckling at the teat of the only man among you, what died over a hundred years back."

"You shut your mouth, Gertrude." Tovia growled, raising an arm in her direction. "I was willing to let you go, to find whatever Eden existed in these infinite worlds. You would not have to fight or suffer any longer."

"Mistress Normyl is correct." Suzanne suddenly called out, stepping forward in spite of her father's hissed objections. "A painful, difficult life is the only one you have known, and you have my deepest sympathies... and those all of your friends, I am certain." She paused, looking to Lillith who- in spite of her ill temper at the 'coppers' remark, nodded. "But this is the only world *we* have ever known... and now it is being threatened."

"It will *always* be threatened!"

"That may be true." Lucy called, moving to stand beside Suzanne and Gertrude. "But... even if it is meaningless, it is our decision- how we meet those threats."

Tovias clenched his teeth, about to raise his brilliantly glowing arm, but let it fall back to his side. Slowly, he looked Lillith.

The young rogue bowed her head, before taking a single step forward to join the others.

"Tovias." Gertrude spoke once again, "You came to Bristol believin' that no one could ever really care about you. And look at what you found. Now think of how many more friends are waiting in the world you're plannin' on destroyin'- through inaction or otherwise. You're not just turnin' your back on us, but on them as well."

Tovias stared at them, his expression difficult to read... as though to match, his aura grew brighter and fainter in turns with every passing moment.

At last, he spoke.

"Forgive me."

With that, Tovias raised his hand, unleashing a wave of white energy upon the horrified group before him.

Chapter 29 – Closing Statements

Every last creature in the Dragon Army battalion jerked its head in the direction of the Rift.

Tristan let out a low, rumbling growl that shook the ground beneath him. It almost sounded like concern.

"What...?" Ruby breathed, stepping back from her battle against Rose. "Something has happened."

The poisoner's eyes darted all over the battlefield, anxiousness in her countenance. Finally, she let out a vicious growl.

"Damn... We cannot risk it."

With that, she raised the scepter and- before the eyes of the defenders of Bristol the whole of the monstrous army melted away as the Meandering Mist had done before.

A few cheers went up from those behind the Jousting Arena... but fell silent as they saw the collective look of horror on the faces of the mages among them.

All of them were staring at the Rift as well, skin various shades of ashen.

"Do... Do you feel that?" Gaia called over to Vashta, both aged members of the Band staggering to stand.

The Healer didn't reply, though the shudder in her body answered for her.

Alone before the Rift, Rose stared into its terrible gateway, battleworn eyes wide.

However, to their surprise, a bright light flared from within. For a single terrifying moment, the Gypsies expected another horrid monstrosity, or even a fresh company of dragon-monsters to stream from the portal... but what they saw instead was Lillith Sparow, Gertrude Normyl, Lucy Thatcher and the Mariage Family, all sprawled unceremoniously before the Rift.

"Lillith!" Gaia called out, getting to her feet and hoisting Draca Slaga as the other Gypsies shook off their battle fatigue for the moment.

"What has happened?" Rose called out, followed swiftly by Thoren and Talia.

Far behind them, on the outside of the Jousting arena, the other fighters looked on as well in confusion. They were now joined by a sizable number of fairies and other creatures- a contingent under the command of Shadow King Oberon who had at last seen fit to get involved.

"Well, we found Tovias." Gertrude muttered.

"You did?" Rose asked, crouching beside Gertrude even as the witch sat up and retrieved her hat from where it had fallen. "What happened?"

"We may have lost him... it's a bit unclear." The witch muttered, getting to her feet. She squinted at the Rift, then turned back to the others. "I see fewer Dragonkin than before... Did you win, then?"

"I dunnae think so." Thoren shook his head.

"It seems they retreated for some reason..." Talia nodded, helping Lucy up from the ground, "some matter on their home front. It's awarded us a brief respite."

"Then we must act now." Gaia stated firmly. "Was the Cauldron intact when you entered the Rift?"

"It was... but Tovias is still inside." Lucy replied, watching as Suzanne and the Mariage parents- still bewildered by everything that was happening- stood as well. "I doubt he would have let us get near it."

"Thoren..." Rose said quietly as the Gypsy leader stepped forward, raising a hand to touch the surface of the portal.

"No matter what happens, stay out here..." Thoren stated firmly, his gaze straight ahead. "The people of the city need to be protected."

"I am not letting you go in alone!" Talia said sharply, but fell silent as Thoren held up a hand.

"Stay outside." He repeated, taking a deep breath.

"You'll not get anywhere with anger or violence, Grymm." Gertrude warned him. "We left 'em on unsteady footing, so he could fall one way or the other. S'up to you to make the final nudge."

"Aye."

With that, Thoren walked slowly into the portal, vanishing instantly.

"Please..." Rose begged, her eyes never leaving Gertrude, even as the witch glanced about the outskirts of the jousting field in search of her sisters- if they had not yet retreated. "Gertrude, is it true what Thoren said? Is Tovias..."

"We're about to find out." Gertrude answered. "Sorry you weren't able to join us, but we laid the groundwork in your absence. The rest lies with master Grymm."

"But... but after everything that has happened, Tovias may simply kill him..." Talia murmured.

"I do not believe that will be the case, Miss Tale." Suzanne replied, also looking to Gertrude.

However, the witch did not want to say what she was thinking... something perhaps the other Gypsies had managed to overlook in the midst of fighting for their lives.

Whether Tovias killed him or not... Thoren was doomed either way.

"Tovias!" Thoren called out, trying to block the overwhelming stimulus of the Void from his mind. "Tovias, where are ye?"

He was rather unsettled by the lack of an echo, but it made it all the easier to catch the sound of the mage's reply from the depths of the pocket dimension.

"You shouldn't have come, Thoren."

"I had no choice." Thoren replied, walking steadily forward on the invisible walkway between his own world, and the dark world beyond. "There're too many people back home who are waitin' for ye to return."

"I see."

As he approached, he could see Tovias sitting, slumped on top of the closed Cauldron.

"The Dragon Army's withdrawn, but it's only a matter of time before they return." Thoren explained in as quiet, but as stern a voice as he could manage. "This is our only chance to stop this madness... before they lay waste to Bristol and the rest of the world."

"I know." Tovias replied, his eyes cast beyond the invisible ground at the swirling worlds below. "I've been waiting for you to arrive, and to be honest, I've been at a loss at exactly what to say, what to do..." He turned to look at him. "Now more than ever."

"We'd ne'er leave one of our own behind, Tovias... no matter what." He came to stand before Tovias, and slowly reached out a hand. "All's forgiven... and we've got a job to do."

"Yes, Thoren... there is something that must be done." Tovias looked over at Thoren's outstretched hand, but didn't take it.

Standing, he turned to glance at the dark portal again.

"... and I think you know the truth."

Thoren's hand slowly fell, the Gypsy leader's good eye casting away from Tovias and the Cauldron.

"I figured out your plan the moment the Cauldron rolled in here... when it's sealed, there's a powerful force that disrupts and draws in magical energy... it would draw in the energy keeping this dimension standing, sealing off the passageway between worlds..."

Thoren said nothing as he listened to Tovias, hearing the mage's tone grow dark as he spoke the words he himself had been grimly repeating in his mind from the beginning of the mission:

"... and forever trapping whoever seals it."

Thoren said nothing for a long moment.

"Thoren." Tovias spoke again, still staring at the black speck in the distance. "Whatever dark world that Dragon Army came from... That world was no different from ours, I imagine. Just... a neverending cycle of death and despair, until the light finally just... went out."

Thoren stared at the mage, his eyebrow raising as he listened to Tovias.

"But it could have gone the other way, right? There is always hope... Isn't there?"

"Tovias..." Thoren began, his gaze softening a bit more as he recognized the intent in Tovias' voice.

"It can't have been for nothing... everything I've lost." The mage murmured before turning back. His eyes were not upon Thoren, but upon the bright portal behind him.

Thoren, however, reached out once more, and placed a hand gently on Tovias' shoulder.

"You've nothin' to worry about, Tovias... an' we'll be waiting for ye when ye return."

As Tovias turned to take hold of the Cauldron lid, Thoren caught the slightest hint of a weak smile on the edge of the mage's lips... as well as the glimmer of a tear.

"Go."

Thoren turned, hurrying toward the portal. He turned back to face Tovias as he finally reached the gateway, raising a hand in salute.

Tovias only nodded back before turning to face the Cauldron.

And that was the last Thoren saw of Tovias Farraday.

Chapter 31 – "More Than I Can Be"

Tovias took a deep breath, staring down at the Cauldron. With a grunt and a flash of magical energy, he wrenched off the lid from its resting place.

He stumbled back, quickly able to regain his footing, but it was strange. He had expected there to be a burst of ectoplasmic energy as a legion of ghosts exploded free of the Cauldron... and yet, there was nothing.

The mage drew in a long, shivering breath, and began the invocation:

"Here... there is-!?"

Suddenly, Tovias was thrown from his feet, his body tumbling end over end before landing heavily on the invisible ground. The Cauldron lid clattered at his side, which Tovias instinctively fumbled for.

Gasping for breath, he grasped the handle of the lid, his eyes turning toward the Cauldron.

It stood there motionless, without so much as a rumble... but something was different- very, *very* wrong.

The mage could remember the sensation of standing next to the open Cauldron before... and it hadn't been anything like this.

Clenching his teeth, he staggered to his feet and once again made his way toward the Cauldron. Growling, he lifted the lid over his head and threw himself down at the dark iron vessel.

"Here there is life-!"

Once again, that invisible force lashed out, knocking Tovias onto his back.

The mage trembled, sitting up once again and staring in pale, wide-eyed horror.

The first time he had set foot in this place, he had felt that overwhelming dread of setting foot in the Void... and yet, that feeling seemed to intensify the more he stared at the Cauldron.

In here- in this place- something about it had changed... as had what dwelled within it.

The anger within him- at Draco Disciples, the Dragon Army, at the Band... and the anger at himself for everything that had happened... was rapidly replaced by a sheer, unbridled terror.

"Here there is love!" He cried out, and yet another attempt at planting the lid onto the cauldron was rendered in vain by whatever it was that drew near from within its depths.

He raised the lid over his head with every ounce of his waning physical strength, which felt as though it were being sucked away.

"Here there is light!" He hissed, slamming down with his entire body, but the outward current of deathly chill forced him away yet again.

Tovias stared at the open cauldron, panting heavily. His body ached, and his body grew weaker by the moment... the frustration at these repeated failures somehow unable to summon even a spark of his former power...

His eyes squeezed tightly shut, fresh tears streaming down his cheek.

But then... he felt it.

Amid the terrible nothingness within the Void, and the horrifying presence that roiled up from within the cauldron, he felt something else; a strange sort of *warmth*.

Opening his eyes, he looked toward the gateway... back to the world he had left behind.

Perhaps it was just in his panicking, desperate mind, but he could see... sunlight. Sunlight masked by the shadows of leaves and tarps. Two charming young women standing in a large old wagon.

"I believe that's the last of the paperwork; Welcome to the Band of the Twisted Claw, Tovias! Simply go west; you'll find the Order of the Sun camp there. Mistress Adria Dubh will be there to give you your first assignment."

Tovias' eyes opened wider... his mouth speaking in spite of himself:

"Here there is life."

"Ye have no idea who I am, do ye, lad?"

"...N-none whatsoever, sir."

"..."

"...Y-You're Thoren Grymm?"

"Aye."

"... I'm in trouble now, aren't I?"

"All we need you to do is to find would what was stolen from the Guild of St. Michael."

"What if they find out I'm a gypsy?"

"How fast can you run?"

"...Fairly fast."

"Then no worries! Just... don't run back here."

"Here there is love..."

"Lord Merrier, I would LOVE to help you cheer Rose up, but... um... I don't know that song."

"Tis well! Then you will dance, and provide percussion!"

"...Fantastic."

"Let's see... Nine candles... Divided by... Mistress Gaia, you are not seeing me at my peak puzzle-solving skills. Just give me a- Hm... Damn it..."

"Tis well, Tovias. If you perhaps walk away from this problem and come back to it at a later-"

"FOUR! Four! The answer is four, because he... then the other three- FOUR!"

"W-Well SPAKE, Turnip...!"

*"...Are you **certain** I spoke the chant properly?"*

"Here there is Light..."

"Behold, Festivus Merrier! In English, Magnificent! In Spanish, Spectacularrrrr! In French, Magnifique!"

"Excellent, excellent! Louder! Work the crowd, man!"

"Is this okay? Right here?"

"Little bit to the left."

"This cart is incredibly heavy, Jameson. PLEASE, with all due respect, make up your mind!"

"Quit'cher whinin'!"

"ROSE! Oh God, Rose! No, get away from the Comb... Someone! Someone fetch the healer! Now!"

"Here there is life..."

"Aggie, I present to you: One sandwich."

"If I cannot learn all about the Queen in time for my audience with Lord Walsingham, I will most certainly be deported..."

*"Cyanne, there's an avenue here I don't believe we've fully explored; now hear me out; first, we **kill** Lord Walsingham-"*

"I am no longer comfortable exploring this avenue, Tovias."

"How the hell was I supposed to know what color a mockingbird is?! I've never SEEN a mockingbird!!!"

"H- here there is love..."

"THERE, I SOLVED your stupid 'dot puzzle', Ruby! Now tell me the stupid secret!"

"What is it you want, young ones?"

"We're here to plant evil potatoes in your garden, Vashta."

"They're joking, Vashta...(You people are really, really bad at this)."

"So if 'Pen' beats 'Sword', you buy me a drink."

"I am afraid I am lacking for even a pence at the moment..."

"Well, it's a gentleman's agreement. I'd be obliged to pay for it."

"Oh! Well, in that event, yes, of course."

"Here there is... Here there is light!"

*"Please, Lillith, just try **on** the bodice. It's not THAT bad, is it?"*

"YES."

"...Adria, can't you spare Lillith this ONE thing? I'm sure she'll apologize for the Family Crest if you cut her some-"

"NO."

"... This is not going well."

"So, Tovias, what is the moral?"

"HELL IS OTHER PEOPLE."

"...HA!"

"So, ye took Stirling for his walk, did ye?"

"Yes, of course! Can't you tell from the welts?"

"Aye... Did ye curb him?"

"Uh... Of course."

"HERE THERE IS LIFE!"

"Do ya wanna touch my beaver?"

"Mistress Ruby has gone mad!"

"Well, CLEARLY!"

"You must do something!"

"Um... A- Ansuz Dagaz Eihwaz?"

"...W-where am I? What... What's happened?"

"Wait, that actually WORKED?!"

"AND THUS DO WE, OF THE BAND OF THE TWISTED CLAW ABJURE, CHAOTIC FIEND: SO SAY WE ALL!"

"Noooo, Naaaay, Neveerrrr.... No, nay, never, no moooooore!"

"HERE THERE IS LOVE!"

"Oh, Tovias, I don't believe you've met our new friend... This is Scarlett."

"Ah..."

"... .. Oh, for Goddess' sake, have some dignity. Pick up your bloody jaw."

"Well done, Tovias... Well done, indeed."

"Ah... what are you..."

*"S'called a **hug**, Tovias."*

"...R-right. I know that..."

Tovias lay against the lid, screaming the words at the top of his lungs. Opening his tearstained eyes, he saw it... Any intelligible shape in the writhing realities was lost. Now it was a swirling maelstrom with no discernable structure. The portals to Tiamat's world and to that of the Band were swallowed in the storm. He could feel it closing in, even as the rush of air from the Cauldron reversed in its flow, drawn back from whence it came.

Closing his eyes, he smiled. Warm tears splashed onto the lid of the Cauldron.

"Thank you... all of you."

He took a final, shuddering breath, and bellowed for the void, for the worlds all around him, and for all worlds beyond to hear:

"HERE, THERE IS LIGHT!"