

(This is a story based on the Live-Action Roleplaying Game known as 'RenQuest' at the Bristol Renaissance Faire, circa 2012. As fanfiction, this story is non-canonical. The events and dialogue are intended as good-natured parody, and are not endorsed by Bristol Cast, Writing Staff or Administration.

Several chapters were co-written by other authors, or written by other authors *entirely*. Author credits will be noted at the beginning of each chapter.

At the Bristol Renaissance Faire, there is an event- mostly recognized only by patrons- as The Day of Wrong; It is a day during which all manner of garb is worn and anachronisms are thrown around casually. On this day, I chose to wear a bizarre costume consisting of a striped black formal shirt, black dress slacks, black dress shoes, a twilby hat and glasses. This new character adopted an obnoxious cockney accent, and for some reason took pleasure in making silly and at times very cryptic remarks to the RenQuest cast. He introduced himself as 'Danny Priest', but no one could truly venture a guess at who- or what- he truly was... - Dave)

"The New Kids"

A RenQuest Fanfiction by Dave Manley

Chapter One

"Kind of lonely, around here, isn't it?"

Alice Well sighed gently, absently toying with her Quester-crafted 'Protection Poppet'¹.

She, along with several other members of the Band of the Twisted Claw sat around a mildly sized campfire near the Vardo.

"It can't be helped." Percy the Abjurer replied, not completely interested in what the Lunar Triber was saying (this one in particular- to him- seeming about as fanciful and airheaded as the Order's own Rose Peregrine). "The Faire is over, an' they- like ourselves, eventually- must be movin' on."

"There are adventures and danger in more places than Bristol." Effie Cue chimed in, a fair bit more amiable than Percy had been. "It's why the Band appoints Lightbringers in the first place, isn't it?"

"Why *they* appoint Lightbringers, you mean." Helena Handbasket murmured halfheartedly, sifting through her namesake, as though trying to use its endless contents to avoid devoting herself to the conversation. She nodded her head to the side as she spoke, gesturing to the treeline surrounding the clearing in which they now rested.

The direction she indicated was where- not long ago- Thoren and most of the 'old guard' of the Gypsies had run off to; some big important meeting, or so they'd told the remainder.

The aforementioned 'remainder' consisted of Percy, Effie, Alice, Helena, as well as Robert O'Coppe, Willow Spellworthy and Piper, one of Thoren's newer associates... the lattermost apparently in charge of making sure the factionized sextet didn't end up killing each other.

"What're they even doin' there, do you suppose?" Robert wondered aloud, poking at the campfire with a convenient stick.

"Why did *Will* get to go?" Willow pouted a bit, inspired by Alice to retrieve her own Poppet from her things.

"Maybe it is just a matter only those who have been here before us would concern themselves with. We wouldn't care about it anyway." Piper offered, looking slightly uneasy in the firelight. "S'best not to worry about it. I'm sure if it *were* important, they would tell us."

"Even the *Pussycats* got to go." Helena said... but her continued disinterest suggested she was just trying to keep the debate going, riling up the others.

"The Pussycats don't count!" Percy half-snapped. "If it were no' for Thoren and Jameson's Pub Crawl, they might as well no' even be here."

"But *they're* at the meeting, and *we're* not." Helena concluded.

"Maybe they're planning a surprise party for us!" Alice said at last, looking very excited, as though she had already decided that this was the case.

There was a long moment of uncomfortable silence.

¹ Protection Poppets are small cloth-and-cotton humanoid figurines. These were decorated to resemble members of RenQuest/Bristol as part of an Achievement Quest.

"One thing y'go'a admire about 'at one: her unyeildin' optimism in'a face of a good snubbin'. S'pose it's what comes from fakin' Soothsayer too long."

A piercing, almost painfully cockney tone stabbed through the awkward pause in conversation. With a collective jerk, the Gypsies turned toward the voice's source.

"Seems the lot'a you could use a good dose'a *reality*."

At the edge of the campsite, leaning languidly up against a tree, was a vaguely familiar slender male figure. He wore shoes, pants and a shirt that buttoned down the front- all of unusual make, and black as the night sky.

"Who're you?" Willow asked, instinctively reaching for her wand as she and the others took to their feet.

"You're the one that was pestering Adria." Robert declared, stumbling back a few paces and drawing out his sword.

"An' *you're* the one whose bollocks Adria keeps in a box under 'er mantle." The man replied, shooting him the briefest of smirks. "I got a *name*, if you please."

The Gypsies glanced back at one another curiously- aside from Robert's irked bristling. They had indeed seen this man before, but they couldn't bring his name to mind.

"... Fanny Priest!" Alice piped up at last.

"*DANNY!* Wif a 'D'! It's 'Danny-bloody-Priest! Wha' is your bloody collective *defect!*?" He shouted, but added with a cursory glance at Helena, "'cept yours, I think we'd all just as soon you keep *yours* to yourself."

As the Lunar Tribesman blinked, as though trying to decide whether or not to take offense, Piper stalked forward.

"What is it ye want, 'Mister Priest?'"

"Oh, please, call me 'Danny'." He replied, sweeping forward and bowing deeply to her, before looking up with a salacious grin, "No need for *formalities*, love."

Piper drew back, a feeling of unwholesomeness trickling down her spine.

"I'd hoped to pay a li'ol visit to the Gypsy Proper... imagine my disappointment when I stumble upon their bloody 'Youth Brigade'."

"I appreciate the compliment, *Danny*," Piper spat back at last, having composed herself, "But we're every bit as capable as-

However, as she spoke, Danny broke out into a fit of harsh laughter.

"Sorry, Sorry... I'd be obliged to let you finish, love, but I could sense that li'l wince in yer voice- the one that tells me you're out'a your depth, an're stallin' til someone of *importance* comes along to bail you out."

Piper's face grew red in a mix of outrage, and the slightest hint of embarrassment.

"We're done listenin' to you, Priest." Percy stated firmly. "Now be off, before we-"

"B'fore you *what?*" Danny turned on him with a spin of his lithe frame. "You couldn't 'Abjure' mud from water n' earth- you who couldn't even best *Will Spellworthy* without help. It's a bloody marvel the Gypsies ain' *abandoned* you by now... like *everyone else*."

Even as Percy froze- eyes widening before rage began to make itself evident- Willow stepped forward, already hefting her wand at Danny.

"Speakin' *of*." The dark-dressed man continued looking to the young Spellworthy, "How's it feel to play second-fiddle to your brainless, goofy git of a brother, my little lovely? A damn shame... but I'd be *happy* to give you a proper helping of the appreciation you deserve..."

"Is this all you planned?" Effie growled from her spot near the center of the Gypsies, whose anger was rising, and whose patience was swiftly waning. "Throw insults and lewd remarks? Even the *Dracos*' schemes were more menacing than that."

"And Effie, poor little Effie..." Danny countered with a pouting expression. "How's tha' 'Adventure' you were seekin'? Have you found it where the Band dropped you? Discover all the thrill you wanted, sittin' about a fountain day after day?"

"Why are you being so mean!?" Alice suddenly shouted. She had been silent up to now, hoping to avoid that vulgar, grinning stare of his, but from the moment he'd opened his mouth to speak ill of the first of her friends, she was trembling with barely-restrained indignation. "You were just... *creepy* before, but *now*."

"It were *Faire* season before, love. I were *vacatin'*." Danny replied, stepping back a pace toward the tree he'd been leaning against before. "S'what you *do*. But my master's humbly asked I get back to *work*."

"Who do you work for?" Helena inquired, quirked a brow. "A job where you walk around insulting people? What does it pay?"

"Sorry love, but we ain' lookin' for new members; we ain' exactly a 'growth industry'." Danny answered shortly. "But if you like, I've be more'n' happy to keep you around for *recreation*."

Suddenly, Danny's body hovered an inch or so into the air, and- as though struck by an unseen hand- sent hurtling back into the tree where he landed with a heavy grunt. He fell forward, crumpling to one knee in the grass.

Willow had finally grown weary of Danny's repartee, rewarding him with one of the stronger spells at her disposal. "Not bad." The darkly dressed man said with a light pant, his tongue slithering out and brushing at the edge of his lips.

"More inclined to shut that mouth'a yours, then?" Robert asked, stepping forward and leveling his weapon at Danny's head.

"Course I could..." He began, looking up the blade of Robert's sword until meeting his eyes with a mischievous grin, "...but you li'l nippers ain' learned your *lesson*."

With that, Danny reached up and gently tapped the tip of the blade pointed at him with his index finger.

From where he touched, a surge of rippling air traveled up the steel length, striking the warrior with stunning impact. Before any of them could react, the pulse echoed outward, washing over all seven of the Gypsies... and each one who found him or herself touched by the distorted air fell instantly to the ground, laying perfectly still.

The only one who remained standing and breathing was Piper... who recovered from the spell after a moment, looking down in horror at what had transpired.

"Wh-... What have ya done!?" She asked, her body beginning to shake from a mix of horror and mounting fury.

"Oh?" Danny cocked his head, having stood up and nearly turned to leave.

"What did ya do to them!?" Piper repeated, stepping forward between Percy and Willow in her growling advance.

"So you never *got* one..." Danny replied thoughtfully, as though his own thoughts were far more important than the lives of a half-dozen Gypsies. "I guess you were even more worthless than I thought!"

With a lunge, Piper threw herself at the now cackling Danny... but in the blink of an eye, the man had disappeared completely.

"Come back, ya coward!" She shrieked, looking in all directions but finding no trace of him but the echoes of his cruel laughter.

As it faded, Piper fell to her knees, her shoulders slumping in defeat. Her teeth were clenched, eyes beginning to mist over with tears.

How could this have happened? So quickly that none of them could even react?

What would Thoren say? Or Adria? Or Will when he saw his poor sister laying lifeless in the grass?

Her face fell... but at that moment:

"Piper! Piper, is that you? Where are we? I can't see!"

"I can't move my arms... What...!?"

Piper straightened, looking back over her shoulder toward the place where her friends lay. She had heard their voices- clear yet quiet somehow- but as she looked to their fallen forms she realized with bewildered shock that the sound came not from their lips...

...but from six tiny cloth Poppets bearing their visages.

Chapter Two

For a moment, it might have occurred to some that the sheer absurdity of what had happened had rendered Piper completely catatonic.

Indeed, seeing the souls of one's friends transferred into herb-filled sacks of cloth was enough to give anybody pause. In truth, it was testament to Piper's inner fortitude that she didn't faint dead away in the face of it- that she was only momentarily stunned.

"What... what's going on?" Effie asked shakily through lips of thread, finally struggling free of her human body's sashes.

She did this with some difficulty, as each of the Poppets was bound by the hands with twine as part of their construction

"What'd that rat do to us?!" Percy demanded as he staggered... his own Poppet's facial features sewn on the wrong side from where the rest of his forward-facing body was oriented. His cotton-filled feet staggered, trying to get used to this new arrangement.

"I'm so *cute!*" Alive squeaked, looking over her patchwork garments and giving herself a hug.

"This must be wo' Vinz feels like..." Robert commented, glancing down at his rather dilapidated 'shirt'.

"What happened? I... I still can't..." Willow called out, stumbling a little. Aside from having her hands bound, her Poppet had not been sewn with proper eyes; rather, a small facsimile of her hat had been sewn over the area. She'd thought it cute at the time, but once the nature of their plight sank in, she began to wish Davem had added at least *one*. "Ngh... I wouldn't mind giving that Priest another taste'a my wand..."

"Lot'a good the first did us!" Percy mumbled audibly. "Why din'cha cast somethin' that might'a actually *stopped* him!?"

"At least she was casting *something*, mister 'Royally Appointed Court Magician!" Helena grumbled right back at him. "And you, Robert! You *had* him! Why did you not simply stab him in the face!?"

"I was supposed to *know* he was going to put us in a bunch o' Poppets!?" The warrior called back indignantly, struggling out of his hand-bindings and rounding on Helena... who was already climbing up the wicker 'bowl' of her basket. "I dinnae' see *you* doin' *anythin*!"

Effie nodded, stepping up to stand beside Robert- although she didn't entirely agree with Percy, she disagreed with Helena just as much.

For her part, Alice simply continued to hold herself, but her 'eyes' stared with concern at the mounting debate between her friends.

"Stop it!" Piper erupted at last, roused from her stupefied state by the tiny dolls' shouting voices.

Whether they were genuinely cowed by her authority, or if it was just that she was now far larger than they were, the Poppets immediately went silent. Although the silence truly allowed the nonsensical nature of it all to sink in, Piper shook it off and forced herself to continue.

"We have to keep our heads together."

"Easy for you to say. Least you still have all of your head to keep..." Willow pouted softly as Effie and Alice assisted her in removing her twine binding. It was a difficult task, as none of the Poppets had any fingers to speak of. Moreover, a little toy wand had been sewn into Willow's right hand- another interesting but at-present inconvenient feature of her tiny cloth self.

"We hafta get Thoren. Maybe he and the others'll know what to..."

Her words halted abruptly as a voice grated into her thoughts.

... *You're out'a your depth, an're stallin' til someone of importance comes along to bail you out... I guess you were even more worthless than I thought!*

Piper clenched her teeth, shaking her head firmly. Her pride was not so great as to allow such an obvious goad to reduce her to helpless tears... but...

"I don't know." Willow spoke again, this time more thoughtfully, "I'm not even sure if what Danny used on us was proper *magic*. There were no words or symbols or wands or artifacts... just *this*." She held out one of her cloth arms ruefully.

By that point, all of them- except for Helena who sat perched in her basket- were pacing around in an effort to get a feel for their new, hopefully temporary bodies. Some- like Percy and Willow- had more difficulty than others, but ultimately they were all stable and standing, free to ponder their situation.

"Well, no matter what it is, Thoren should be able to at *least* give us some insight. Gaia as well, and..."

"And Rose would be too busy hugging us to do any helping." Effie finished with a weak smile.

"Thoren and the others should'a *been* here by now, wha' with all the shoutin'." Percy stated, frowning.

"...Maybe they *did* abandon us." Helena muttered, slumping over the lip of her current 'nest'. "Maybe Danny was right after all."

"Nobody abandoned anybody!" Alice scowled at her.

"You don' suppose Danny got to 'em...?" Robert suggested, cringing a bit at the thought.

Piper was already up and moving by that point; One by one, she took up Robert's sword, Willow's magic wand, and came to hesitate over Percy's prone form.

"What are you doing?" Effie inquired, tilting her yarn-covered head.

"Percy might be right... they should'a been back by now; somethin' could be wrong." Piper replied. "Jus' keepin' prepared, is all."

"If yer takin' things," the alchemist began, "take some'a my potions as well."

"I don't know what any of 'em do." Piper replied, squinting at the collected vials about his person.

"I've *forgotten* who' most of 'em do." Percy answered honestly. "They'll do ye just as much good as they would me."

After a moment, Piper shrugged and took the vials, placing them in her satchel. She tucked the sword and wand into her sashes as best she could.

Afterward, she took up Helena's Handbasket- much to the displeasure of its current occupant. She then went about plucking up each of the Poppets, and placing them inside with her; A few of them had reservations about being placed within the vessel- having no idea what was inside- but Piper wasn't in the mood to argue or even to listen.

"This is fun!" Alice giggled, looking down from where the basket hung suspended over the ground in Piper's fingers. Crawling to the 'front' of it, she held out her arms as though she were a bird in flight whenever Piper walked.

As Piper did so, she thought about what Willow had said... if this weren't 'magic' in the way the Band understood it, then what else could it be? Could whatever it was be reversed? What if it couldn't?

But at the same time...

You li'l nippers ain' learned your lesson.

Danny was trying to make some kind of point with this stunt... but what could that be?

Who was he, for that matter? Where did he come from? Was he even any sort of human to speak of? His dialect was off, sure enough. It was lower than even the lowest class of the Queen's English... almost a mocking parody of it amid strange contractions and missing consonants.

As Willow had demonstrated, he seemed to be as vulnerable to magic as any other villain they had yet faced, but she doubted they had seen the full extent of his abilities yet (and in earnest, she was content to have things stay that way).

Eventually she stopped in her forward stride... she had been walking for a long time now, listening offhandedly to the banter amongst the Poppets in the basket.

She couldn't rightly blame them for being unhappy with their situation; she would have been just as much so in their position. Although...

Again, she found herself forcing away another troubling thought, only to have it replaced by another.

She should have found Thoren by now. Or *somebody*.

"Why did ye stop?" Robert asked, clambering for a foothold in the basket.

"Willow." Piper said quietly. "Did Will happen ta share that 'findin' spell' with ye?"

"Aye." Willow nodded, sitting in the middle of the basket; there was no point in sitting near the rim for a better view... not for *her*, at least.

"Kin ye use it to find Thoren?"

"Nay, not Thoren, but I use it to find Will all the time whene'er he gets himself lost. Goin' out in the woods to sketch birds and the like."

"How're you going to use yer wand, though?" Percy asked incredulously.

Willow stopped mid-crawl... none of them had thought about that until that moment, but her face- what bits of it could be seen- brightened as she held up the tiny toy wand in her hand.

"Unless that twig is magical, I don't think it will help." Helena commented, but Willow only continued to smile.

"Nay, The twig is not magical." Willow admitted, "but the pearl that was affixed to it b'fore fell off, an' I had to replace it... this bead *is* magical. At least, a little bit. Enough, if we're lucky."

"How lucky would ye say we are?" Robert asked with a subtle roll of his eyes, but Willow didn't pay any attention.

Raising her right hand, she twirled the toy implement as best she could and waited a moment.

After a hair-raising moment of tension among the Gypsies, her small cloth arm was suddenly tugged forward by the slightest twitching of the bead at the wand's tip.

"There!" Willow said triumphantly, looking up to where she'd heard Piper's voice from with a smile.

"Good work." Piper returned the smile, though she knew she couldn't see it.

The conversation amongst Piper and the Poppets continued on, mostly to keep them all in good spirits... although over time it petered out into uncomfortable silence. Every minute that passed- every minute not being the one in which they found the rest of the Band- stole their enthusiasm a little bit more.

At last, Helena broke the quiet night air.

"Are you sure your wand is working properly?"

"I *think* it is..." Willow said uncertainly. The fact that she could even cast through the toy wand seemed like a miraculous stroke of luck... perhaps too good to be true.

"There's somethin' up ahead!" Robert called out from his spot, now situated next to Alice at the bow of the basket. "It's a light!"

"And a road!" Alice chimed in helpfully. "Or a river... something, I think..."

Unsheathing Rober's sword with uncertainty, Piper approached the light, and the other thing near to it that she was only beginning to see...

As she reached it, however, neither she nor the other members of the Gypsies were entirely prepared for it.

The source of the light stood high in the air, at the tip of a metal pole more than thrice Piper's height. It shone from within a container of glass... but the light itself was different; it wasn't from a fire, simply a bright white illumination that could be seen- and revealed the territory for a good distance around them.

The 'river' that Alice had seen was an expanse of black about twenty-five feet across, a white line painted along its center, stretching in either direction as far as the eye could see.

Carefully, Piper reached down and tapped at its black surface with the tip of Robert's sword. Finding it solid, she warily reached out and placed a foot on its relatively smooth surface.

"What *is* this?" Effie asked softly, looking over the basket's lip and down at the black stretch, then up to the light. "And where are we? I do not remember anything like this when we traveled in the daytime."

"Where do we go?" Piper asked, looking back to Willow, who was growing more and more anxious about not being able to see any of this.

"That way." The mage answered, nodding down one direction of the black path.

"Maybe... we could just sit here and wait for Thoren to find *us*?" Alice offered weakly, but Piper was already walking again.

Although the light of the first strange pole was lost, another glinted in the distance, just enough to show the way. All else seemed to have been lost in the darkness around them. Even the stars could barely be seen.

"Look there!" Percy called from his side of the basket, pointing awkwardly out at where a large sign stood just off the edge of the road.

- Welcome To St. Elmo's Corners-

"I have never heard of this place." Alice observed, noting that the rest of the sign had been worn to tatters.

After looking down to Willow to confirm that this was the right way, Piper sighed softly and proceeded... already able to see the silhouettes of small buildings on the close horizon.

Chapter Three

The strange black path finally fell away, back into a wide dirt road. Perhaps this would have felt more normal, except for the continued presence of the lamp posts dotting the trail.

None of the Gypsies had any idea where they had ended up; They had heard tales of a place with similar features from some of the Lightbringers- most notably from 'The Doctor' and 'Red'... However, this place wasn't as bright and lively as they might have expected it to be. They doubted it was the same one at all.

As Piper entered the town- basket of wary Poppets in tow- they were suddenly aware of the piercing light of the full moon overhead.

Each of them was quite certain that it hadn't been there before, or at least not quite so pronounced. It was almost as though the night itself had suddenly grown desperate for illumination, lest that which crept within its own ebony folds take hold and drag it away into nothingness...

It was only then that they realized that the moon was the only source of light in the town... it seemed the lamp posts here had all burned out.

The blanket of pale light stole all of the color from that which it revealed; patches of grass turned gray as it stood utterly still, without even a gentle breeze to disturb it. The dirt path looked absolutely ancient somehow. Barely discernable footsteps had that feeling of agedness about them... they may well have been made decades, even centuries ago.

The architecture was like nothing any of them had seen before; made of unique arrays of brick and mortar and wood and other materials they could not recognize without looking more closely. All of the windows were shut, the interiors dark... and although it was perfectly reasonable for the Gypsies to believe all of the locals were asleep- being that it was nighttime and all- the utter, imposing silence was enough to suggest something more sinister was at play here.

Piper kept Robert's sword raised, uncertain whether to stay in the light where she could see (and be seen), or creep into the darkness where just about anything could be prowling, waiting...

The Poppets had been restless in Helena's hand basket before, but considering their now unnerving surroundings, most of them were content to remain inside and act as Piper's eyes and ears in the back of her head.

Willow stayed in the middle of the basket and followed the twitches of her wand. With any luck, it would guide them out of this strange place.

Perhaps they couldn't feel it, but the Poppets could see the mist wafting from Piper's lips, indicating a rising chill in the air.

"...What is that?" Alice asked from her position, now cringing at the front of the basket as Piper turned a corner.

The light of the moon glinted off of a strange object, covered in a metal carapace. It lay unmoving, staring at them with large glass eyes, and grinning with a mouth of molded metal. It stood perfectly still, standing on feet made of black wheels.

"Oi." Percy began, clearing his throat to mask the fact that he'd jumped a little at the sight of it. "Tha's an 'automobile'. It's a machine tha' uses alchemical principles ta move ye about. Ye put a mixture'a chemicals in it, an' ignite it, an' away ya go." He explained, waving one cloth arm in a grand gesture. "Tha Doctor tol' me about 'um."

"We're probably best off on foot." Robert said quickly, wary of this whole thing once 'igniting chemicals' entered the discussion.

"We're probably *best off*," Piper interjected, "touchin' as little as we can. Wherever this is, we're here b'cause o' Danny; Safer no' ta trust *anythin*."

"Why did he do this? *Any* of this?" Effie asked absently, uneasily looking up at one of the supposedly abandoned building's dark windows... having sworn she'd seen *something*...

"Probably jus' ta get us away from Thoren an' the others. Leave 'em vulnerable." Piper answered, but was interrupted by a scoff from near the back of the basket.

"That's daft." Helena said simply, rolling her eyes. "If you think we're really important enough to be worth all this trouble, that we *had* to be removed before going after Thoren, you're-

"Shush!" Willow said harshly, about to raise her wand, but remembering she had to let it focus on its 'finding spell'. "Ya haven't had a kind or helpful word to say since-... since..." She quickly found herself at a loss.

"Do you think this is where he *lives*?"

All conversation stopped immediately, and all eyes- even a quick glance on Piper's part- turned toward Alice.

The junior-apprentice soothsayer only continued to stare out at the dark buildings, perhaps oblivious that she had even spoken.

"Danny Priest?" Piper asked, nodding faintly. "Tha' would make some sense..."

"It'd be tha first thing about 'um tha' made any sense at all." Robert observed, which elicited a collective nod from the others in attendance.

Soon, Piper found herself in what looked like some sort of town square. The road continued southwest (unless Piper missed her guess), past what looked like a ramshackle barn. Directly to the east was a trio of large buildings, labeled clearly as 'St. Elmo's Middle', 'Junior High' and 'High School' respectively.

To the north was a pair of smaller buildings; 'PreSchool', and something called the 'Government Building'.

Regardless of what they were, they all seemed empty. Probably locked, at that.

"Is there... is there no one else here?"

No sooner had the words left Willow's lips than the heavy silence in the night air was eroded away by a low, guttural sound.

Perhaps the closest likeness would have been some sort of lupine growl... but the louder it became, the more it seemed to contort and twist until it sounded more like the final, frantic bellows of a drowning man.

"PIPER!!!" Effie's tiny voice suddenly shrieked, and Piper- though not a warrior- was blessed; Perhaps not with above-average reflexes or instinct, but with uncanny luck as she spun around.

The iron blade of Robert's sword suddenly found itself lodged between the gnashing jaws of a hideous four-legged creature, vaguely canine in appearance.

Its fur was mottled with bare, discolored patches of skin. Rings of congealed blood had formed around what looked like stab wounds in its throat, and its eyes... its eyes were gone entirely, replaced with vacant, fetid sockets.

Although the sword had very much saved Piper's throat from being torn apart, the thing's lunge continued unabated. It careened forward, crashing into Piper's body and knocking her heavily on her back. Piper reached up and palmed the flat of the blade, grappling against the thing's thrashing, biting maw.

The basket flew from Piper's hand, rolling and spinning on the dirt road and sending its contents- Poppets included- flying in all directions.

"Watch it!" Helena staggered, barely able to cling to the wicker vessel.

"The Poppets could not focus on Helena's demand. What sight they had was engrossed with the horrifying grapple in front of them. All their energy was focused on how to save Piper, who was now beyond the point of screaming in terror."

"W-What's happening!?" Willow cried, very much panicked by this point.

"Piper's in trouble!" Percy shouted back. "Y'have ta help get rid'o that thing!"

"What thing!? Where!?" The mage answered in a frustrated squeak, trying to stagger to her feet and make out where the sound of the fight was coming from.

"Go help Willow!" Robert called over to Effie, who nodded firmly and did her best to run as fast as she could to the Lunar Triber's side.

This done, Percy and Robert nodded to each other and ran toward where Piper was pinned down.

The hideous dog-thing clawed and bit, though doing the latter in vain, and Piper thankfully wore her thicker autumn dress which provided some protection from the thing's broken and yellowing claws.

"What're you waiting for?" Helena called from inside her wicker fortress, glaring down at Alice who was cringing near the outside of it. "Go help!"

"I... I..." She trembled, unable to respond. She could see they needed help, but there was something about this whole situation that felt entirely *wrong*.

One thing y'go'a admire about 'at one: her unyeldin' optimism.... S'pose it's what comes from fakin' Soothsayer too long.

Alice covered her eyes with her cloth hands, shaking her head, trying to force the wicked voice out of her mind. Finally, she raised her head and, without thinking- in fact, doing it in an effort to drive all thoughts *from* her head- ran forward to join Percy and Robert as they crawled up onto Piper's body and further, leapt onto the dog-thing's scrabbling paws.

At first, the thing didn't seem to notice the Poppets' presence... until it let out a sickly snorting sound.

Perhaps she'd grown used to it by that point, but Piper had forgotten that the Poppets had been filled not only with cotton, but with fragrant herbs and spells of protection.

Whether it was the former or the latter at that moment, it didn't matter a bit to her. The thing leapt back off of Piper, releasing its fanged grip on the sword.

"Get off'a tha' thing!" Piper shouted to Percy and Robert as the monster danced and flailed, trying to kick them away before reaching down with its putrid jaws.

Percy fell off straightaway, having a difficult time enough holding on with his backward body, but Robert wasn't as lucky. The thing managed to catch him in its fangs, yanking him off of its leg and thrashing like mad. At last, it threw Robert away, sending him to the ground.

The warrior-Poppet struggled back to his feet quickly, groaning and disoriented. He hadn't suffered any real damage. Considering the situation, it could have been far worse.

Case in point, Alice skidded to a halt as she watched her friends being thrown aside... the hideous thing now turning its eyeless gaze directly upon *her*. She began to step warily backward, but the dog lunged forth with a terrible, gurgling bark... only for a glinting blur to flash down from the heavens and cleave down the thing's brain-pan through its upper-jaw.

The force of the blow sent the thing down into the dirt... but to the horrified awe of the Gypsy and Poppets, the thing only scrambled back up to its feet despite its sundered skull, and retreated clumsily back into the darkness.

Alice fell to the ground with a sigh of deep relief, looking up at her savior, who looked equally relieved.

After taking a while to catch her breath, Piper reached down with her free hand and scooped Alice up, glancing around.

"Is it gone? What was it?" Willow asked weakly, and Effie began to explain the whole mess to her.

"Aye... Is everyone alright?" She called.

"More alright than I ought'a be." Robert murmured, finding no trace of holes or tears in his body or clothes... just a mess of dust and saliva he imagined probably smelled awful.

"Ye shouldn't'a run in like tha'!" Piper said, scolding him and Percy as well as Alice, but smiled immediately afterward. "But I prob'ly wouldn'a be here if ye didn't."

Percy and Robert nodded to each other proudly, and Alice bowed her head bashfully.

"Well, now we know we're not *alone* here." Helena called from the basket as they all began to reconvene there.

"Aye..." Piper said again, going about collecting the Poppets... but leaving most of the scattered items where they lay.

"Don't forget my things!" Helena protested, moving to crawl out of the basket for the first time since the transformation.

"We're not spendin' any more time here in the open jus' ta pick up your junk!" Percy frowned at her, but Helena didn't seem to be listening, only continuing to stalk toward a few of the fallen objects.

"They're not junk! They're *mine*!" She shouted back over her cloth shoulder, but she was stopped as Piper reached down, easily picking her up and carrying her back to the basket.

"We can get you more things for your basket later!" Effie assured her, but Helena only continued to struggle even as she was put back inside and she was held by Percy and Robert.

"N-No! NO! They're MINE! You have to pick them up! You people just don't understand because you don't *have* anything! LET ME GO!!!"

"Be quiet! Those things will hear us, whatever they are!" Alice pleaded. "We'll get you new things when we get home! Better things! Bigger, shinier things!"

"Those things were *mine!* They... *They* gave them to me! *Me!* B-Because they cared! Because I'm *important!* More important than *all* of you!" Helena persisted, shouting and- for an instant- all of them caught the faintest catch in her voice... a barely-restrained hiccup... a sob.

At last, even as Piper was beginning to stand and look for the nearest shelter, several of the Poppets sighed and looked up to the remaining human Gypsy.

Staring down at the trembling Helena, Piper took a deep breath and let it out as a long sigh. Putting down the basket, she went about collecting all the scattered articles, placing them one-by-one into the basket while the Poppets kept watch from inside. Effie kept close to Willow to help direct her in case another creature attacked.

Soon enough, though, the basket was full. Piper took up Robert's sword and the basket as well.

Without another word, she walked in the opposite direction from which the dog-thing had attacked... traveling down the eerily aptly named 'Helena Road', further into the dark town.

Chapter Four

"So..." This time, Robert was the one to break yet another in a series of long silences, "any of ye got a notion'a what in Hell tha' thing was?"

The party- rather, Piper carrying the rest of the Poppet-Band- had walked down Helena Road, turning where it branched into St. David Avenue.

Despite her penchant for Lunar Tribe style behavior, Piper had decided, ultimately, that this was not the time or place for stealth. Whatever lurked in this town was probably watching her every move since they had arrived here. Best, she thought, to travel the path of cautious expedience.

"Looked like an undead dog, to me." A now-composed Helena said offhandedly.

"Oi, but there're *types* o' undead." Percy explained. "If it were a mere animated corpse, it would'a collapsed when Piper cleaved its brain in two... There're *alchemical* undead, that're given certain post-mortem infusions tha' keep a corpse movin' no matter who' happens to 'um, short'a burnin... which tends ta make 'um explode."

"Surprise-surprise." Helena rolled her eyes.

"Did ye notice if it was dripping ooze when Piper struck it?" Willow asked, her lack of vision growing increasingly inconvenient.

"Nay, I don'a think so." Piper answered, her eyes ever-vigilant, darting from one side of the street to the other.

"What about 'soul possession'?" Willow inquired. "I heard of Simeon Malificus using such a technique to possess living souls. Could that spell be used on a corpse?"

"The soul wouldn'a have to leave the body no matter how grievous the wounds. S'definitely a possibility... but it's like we been sayin'." Percy drew back to Willow.

"This place *feels* different. Any'a the things we suggested would'a felt *familiar* as it'd be magic similar ta what we *know*... but I think..."

He didn't need to finish. Willow and even Alice both nodded in agreement.

At last, Piper reached a humble brick structure with a large awning, and a sign proclaiming it to be 'O'Callahan's Pub' (and also that 'Ladies Night' was on Thursday, whatever that meant).

"One could do worse than a Pub, when speakin'a shelter." Piper shrugged, pushing at the door... which opened in a silent swing despite everyone's expectations.

The interior of the place was almost pitch-black, letting in only minimal light from the moon outside.

Frowning, Piper hurriedly switched Robert's sword for Willow's wand (her real wand, rather than the tiny toy in the Poppet's hand).

Although she could never claim to be any sort of accomplished mage, Piper's brief time with the Gypsies had granted her a limited degree of magical prowess, and a small library of minor spells.

With a wave of the wand and a few magic syllables, the tip of the wand flickered with a dim glow; just enough to barely reveal the Pub's inside.

Carefully, Piper placed the basket on the floor, from which the Poppets hurriedly disembarked. She then switched hands, placing the illuminated wand in her left hand, and taking Robert's sword back into the right. This done, she made her way to the center of the tavern, her friends remaining close at hand... or foot, in their strange case.

The pub had already been ransacked, it seemed. Its uniform wooden tables and extravagant (by Gypsy standards) cushioned metal barstools were overturned an scattered all about. Broken bottles and empty metal containers lay everywhere... which- for some reason- prompted a soft chuckle from Percy.

"Oi, look."

"What?" Willow asked softly, glancing toward Percy's voice, but almost afraid to make any noise at all.

"Look there;" he began, gesturing to some of the bottles and cans. "Jameson... Hennessy... Guinness."

"Doesn't surprise me somehow..." Piper muttered quietly as she turned slowly, eyes scanning over the room.

There was a large mirror behind the counter that had been shattered, and what shards of it remained affixed to the wall were covered in dried ruddy-brown flecks.

"Looks like there was an attack here..." Robert observed, "or a *murder*..."

"Are any of us supposed to be surprised by that?" Helena asked as she reluctantly left her basket to join the others.

"Nay, I suppose not." He shook his head, reaching out and tugging on Piper's skirts. She reached down and picked him up, placing him on the countertop for a better view of their surroundings.

"Was it... was it the dog?" Alice asked softly, hating to use that word- hating to think that that thing that had attacked them was once a poor, innocent little puppy in some past day.

"Nay." Robert shook his head. "At least, I don't think so. See?" He gestured to the counter, and to the floor around the other Poppets: "No claw marks. No dirt."

"So there may just be *more* monsters we just haven't *met* yet." Helena muttered to herself. "That's encouraging."

Suddenly there was a loud, wet sound- almost a grinding noise that made them all jump; like rapid whirring of great mucous-covered stone gears.

"...Snoring?" Effie murmured, her tone one of bewilderment.

"Aye." Piper nodded, equally puzzled as she and the Poppets turned toward a sturdy looking door at the rear of the pub.

"There's someone in there." Effie concluded. "...Should we...?"

"Nay." Piper interrupted, speaking quite plainly. "I've heard tha' snore many times... he's sleepin' off... prob'ly most'a *this*." She gestured down at the bottles and cans carpeting the floor.

"Considerin' the other locals, I don't rightly blame 'um." Percy shrugged. "Do we leave 'um here, then?"

"Well, I doubt he'll be goin' anywhere else." Piper answered. "He'll be right here when we get back, I wager."

None of the others could argue, considering what they themselves had already witnessed.

After a fruitless sweep of the place for supplies, Piper and the Poppets regrouped at the front door.

"Did ye find the body?" Percy asked, gesturing to the broken mirror, glancing at Piper and Robert who had searched that particular area.

Both of them shook their heads.

"Great."

Three sharp *BANGs* broke the uncomfortable silence after the final bit of banter, jarring them all from what could be poorly named their 'state of calm'.

It was a trio of gunshots, most of them could tell.

Instantly, the Poppets were climbing into the basket. Which was in turn swept up by Piper's sword-hand. The lit wand extinguished itself as it was dropped into the basket with them, but Piper didn't remain in the dark for long.

Bursting free from the darkened pub, Piper looked in the direction of the gunshots.

Her gaze turned back toward the town's main road, just outside of a building they'd passed along the way; the town clinic.

"What are we doing?!" Helena asked, though happy to settle in her 'nest' again. "I thought we were trying to *hide* from these things!"

"We're going to help!" Effie answered in a matter-of-fact tone.

Piper nodded a swift confirmation.

Just outside the clinic stood an early-middle-aged tall man dressed in white pants and a matching buttoned-down shirt. His hair was dark and surprisingly well-kept under the circumstances. His build was slender, not appearing to be the fighting kind... which didn't help his present situation.

He held a strange object, a pistol, most of the Band guessed, though they had never seen one of its make before. From the looks of things, he had just finished firing it wildly into the darkness.

This time, rather than a ravenous undead dog, what accosted the man in the midst of the storm of bullets looked to be a sickly marionette... but on closer inspection, was a small boy perhaps four or five years of age.

His pants and shirt were covered in dirt and leaves, his hair terribly mussed... but most troubling was his neck.

It appeared as though someone had taken a firm hold of his head and pulled until every vertebra in his neck had popped out of place... until finally giving up and letting it flop about his shoulders.

A freakish grin seemed painted on the boy's face, eyes rolled back in his head.

His arms were outstretched, and his body- as mentioned before- seemed to be controlled by the poorest of puppeteers; staggering and jerky. His knees did not even bend before he leapt, simply rising off the ground by unseen strings and gliding down at the frantic man. The bullets from the pistol did little to deter him, only knocking him away a short distance... which became shorter each time.

At last, the firearm let out a blood-freezing *click*.

The thing sailed forward, intent on finally claiming this stubborn victim... but at that moment, Piper appeared in a skidding cloud of dirt. Using all of the one-handed might she could muster, combined with her forward momentum, she brought the sword around and down to swat the thing out of the air.

It crashed to the ground with a hollow wheeze, actually bouncing off of the road and rolling to a halt some distance away.

She had cleaved a healthy gash in the thing's side, but as was the case with the dog, it didn't seem to be enough as the unseen force tilted it back up from its prone position.

"In here!" The man gasped, giving Piper a quick, thankful smile before digging a ring of keys from his pocket. Shoving one into the clinic's front lock, he twisted it and yanked the door open.

It slammed shut behind the two of them, right in the face of the swiftly pursuing child-thing.

Quickly, Piper looked down to make sure none of the Poppets had been left outside with the gruesome creature, letting out a thankful but brief sigh before continuing to catch her breath.

After a moment of relieved panting, Pipet looked over at the man who extended a gentle hand.

"M-Morton Sheppard." He said, correcting himself almost immediately, "*Doctor* Morton Sheppard."

"Piper Starling." Piper returned the smile... not that she entirely trusted this man, but he was a damn sight better than any of the other things she'd seen here thus far.

"A pleasure, Miss. Starling."

"What about *us*?"

The doctor pulled away sharply, eyes darting to the basket from whence the voice- Alice's voice- had come.

Twitching for a moment, his features gradually softened and he smiled.

"And here I thought I was through being shocked." He said at last.

"These are my friends... such as they are." Piper explained tentatively, blushing a bit.

"What'cha mean by tha'?" Percy demanded, glaring up at her, but she only shook her head.

"Tha's Percy the Alchemist. The Redhead is Effie Cue, The one with tha' hat an' wand is Willow Spellworthy. That one's Robert O'Coppe, Alice Well, an' that's Helena Handbasket."

"Her... last name is 'Handbasket'?" Sheppard asked cautiously, "or you named the hand basket itself?"

"She meant me!" Helena spat back. "Honestly, how can you be a *doctor* and say such a foolish thing?"

"We've met Doctors more foolish than this one." Effie pointed out quickly, and Helena had to grant her this.

"Why are there zombie dogs and long-necked children attacking people?" Alice asked bluntly, staring up at Sheppard with her best Poppet Equivalent of 'Puppy Eyes'.

"I would be interested to know where *you* all came from," he replied, "but I suppose matters threatening one's life *are* more important. Besides, I owe it to you for saving me." He gave Piper another rather bashful smile. It was an unattractive and childish thing for a man his age, but... somehow very much like a man the Band might have produced.

Slowly the man stood, taking up an object from a small table near the front door. It was a metal rod, nearly the length of his arm.

With a soft *click*, a ray of focused yellow light pierced the darkness, revealing their surroundings; the floor was covered in a wall-to-wall carpet of unimpressive beige. Uncomfortable looking chairs and couches lined the walls and the center of the room, and on one side of it was a desk and two doors leading to areas beyond.

Escorting them to the leftmost door, he opened it and took point as a cramped hallway descended into a basement area... that smelled vaguely of decay.

"We had a service elevator for cadavers, but it hasn't worked since the blackout..." Sheppard explained, glancing over his shoulder at a puzzled Piper.

"I beg your pardon... 'elevator'?"

"I know it's not a big building, but we have a large elevator installed for..." He began to explain, but seeing nothing in the way of comprehension in her eyes, his own eyes widened.

"You... have no idea what I mean by 'elevator', do you?" he murmured, glancing down at the puppets. Perhaps it was at that moment he truly took the time to examine Piper and the things she carried.

"...Sword... a basket of living dolls... patchwork clothing... where did you come from?"

"The monsters. Please." Piper said, feeling somewhat awkward... she hadn't felt this fawned over since Bristol's Faire.

"Right." Sheppard nodded, leading her into a room made almost entirely of metal, its walls decked in small but sturdy doors.

"Well, this is the morgue... until recently, we've been keeping dead bodies here, but as you've noticed, that's changed."

"As we've noticed." Helena echoed with a roll of her eyes.

"... Lately I use it as a safe house. Usually if I stay down here long enough, the things leave and I can go outside again... by the time we're through telling our stories, Billy will likely have moved on."

"You named that thing 'Billy'?" Effie asked, raising a nervous eyebrow, but Sheppard only shook his head.

"No... he was Billy Dobbs before he is what he is now."

"So they *were* alive once." Piper asked, having placed the basket down and used a hand to cover her mouth and nose with cloth- a vain attempt to block the stench of both decay and the chemicals that hoped to stem it.

"Yes..." the doctor nodded somberly. "I can't say for certain *when* all of this started happening... it started with the blackout, and suddenly I... B-Billy Dobbs had fallen out of a tree at some point before then. You might have noticed the large stump in the park on your way in?"

"We did not." Helena answered flatly, and the others nodded; they had had other things on their mind at that point.

"Nevertheless, he wasn't the first or only tragedy this town's seen in its time..."

"Th- The dog?" Alice piped up weakly, leaning forward where she sat in the basket.

"He was a neighborhood dog. Nobody owned him particularly." Sheppard gave Alice a glance, clearly uncomfortable having this conversation- or *any* conversation- with a creature no bigger than his hand. "Hunter was his name. Sweetest thing; wouldn't hurt anyone or anything unless it threatened one of the townsfolk. Loyal, too... then someone stabbed him. Said he'd gone rabid, attacked someone and had to be put down."

He slumped slightly, moving back to lean against the wall.

"They brought his body to me. I've got no training as a veterinarian, but we have no alternative. Next nearest one is out-of-state... but from everything I could find online, I didn't see any signs of rabies... Billy was first. Then the dog. Then... then..."

Piper stepped forward, reaching out and putting a hand on his arm to comfort him, but spoke.

"Do ye know of a man named 'Danny Priest'?" She asked carefully, not knowing how she might react.

"Priest... no." Sheppard answered almost immediately. "I know everyone in this town, and I've never heard the name... at least, I *knew* everyone in this town before a few minutes ago."

His attempt to be charming was lost on the Band. If this man hadn't even heard of Danny Priest... then again, he could have been lying...

"So it hasn't always been dark like this?" Effie asked.

"No." Sheppard replied. "It was normal; sunny and normal, just like anyplace else. Back when Billy and Hunter and Kelli... Kelli Dobbs were still alive."

Piper noticed a strange, shuddering tic ripple across the man's demeanor, but as she opened her mouth to speak, he said quickly:

"She killed herself."

"Why do you stay here?" Helena asked, narrowing her eyes at him. "There's zombies and apparently eternal night and nobody here to treat... why do you bother?"

"Because I'm looking for someone." Sheppard responded immediately, the swiftness with which he was now answering questions almost unsettling.

"Maybe... maybe we can help you find them?" Alice offered, and although some of the other members of the Band may have protested... it wasn't as though they had anywhere else to be until they found Thoren and the others, or Danny, or at the very least, a way out of the town.

"Who is it?" Piper offered at last, finally agreeing with this silent concurrence.

"My son." Sheppard answered dreamily. "I lost him here some time ago... I know he's still here."

"Suuuure." Helena nodded slowly, glancing warily to her fellow Poppets.

"Can ya describe him?" Willow asked, thinking perhaps Will's 'Finding Spell' might be useful again.

"No." Sheppard replied. "I've... we've never met."

The Gypsies looked at him in bewilderment.

"Estranged... at birth, you could say... but I know he's alive, and I know he's somewhere in this town, and I won't leave without knowing he's safe."

With a long sigh, Piper nodded.

"But I couldn't ask you to go wandering around here alone, a lone woman and... and you all." Sheppard persisted as the Gypsy turned to leave the morgue.

Piper only turned back to him, giving him a doubtful smirk.

"Please." She said simply, before making her way back upstairs...

Hopefully 'Billy' had moved on...

Chapter Five

Piper hadn't expected much out of Doctor Sheppard when she told him- as best she could- of where she and the Poppets had come from.

Indeed, he listened with confusion apparent upon his features as she told him of the Band of the Twisted Claw, of Bristol, of the Draco Disciples, and how the Poppets had reached their current state... of Danny Priest.

"I can see now why you would be so fixated on finding him..." Sheppard said with a slow nod. "...but I'm afraid the name just isn't familiar to me. And nobody around here has been turned into a doll."

None of them quite liked his tone when he said those final words. It was as though- despite the presence of undead monsters and living puppets and a woman wielding a sword and a magic wand, the ideas they put forth to him were somehow outlandish.

It wasn't long until they took their leave of him, taking great care as they left through the front door of the clinic... lest the broken-necked boy or some other unearthly thing fall upon them from the rooftops.

"Why did you not ask him about the snoring man?" Alice asked softly as Piper closed the door behind them. "The one in the pub?"

"He was startin' t'act a bit... wrong." Piper answered uneasily. "A few'a the things he was sayin'... an' the way he was sayin' em, I thought perhaps it'd be best ta leave 'em to his own devices for a bit."

"He would probably have said the same about you." Helena pointed out.

"What if he gets in trouble?" Effie asked. The look on the man's face when his pistol had run out of ammunition... but then again, it was strange, seeing a firearm that could hold more than one bullet at a time; it was probably easy to lose track of just how many bullets one had.

"If he doesn't have tha good sense ta stay indoors, then it's a wonder he lasted this long." Robert answered for her, nodding firmly, and the others followed suit.

"Aye." Percy nodded. "Ne'er send a man ta do a woman's job, roit?"

He gave Robert a hearty slap on the back- such as he could with tiny cloth arms- unable to see from his angle the slight tremble that went through the warrior-Poppet's body.

You're the one whose bollocks Adria keeps in a box under 'er mantle.

"Best to keep 'em where he'll do 'imself the least amount'a harm."

Even as the shudder had nearly finished raking across Robert's small form, it seemed to leap across to Effie's...

How's tha' 'Adventure' you were seekin? Have you found it where the Band dropped you?

"Willow." Piper concluded, looking down to the center of the hand basket, "Findin' spell."

Willow nodded quickly, repeating the waving gesture of her wand and letting it begin its gentle, tugging lead.

"Are we not going to help Doctor Sheppard, though?" Alice persisted, looking fairly confused... though that wasn't exactly new. "What about his son?"

"Once we've found a way out'a this place, we kin go back an' find any survivors 'a whatever is happenin' here." Piper answered pointedly, setting off at Willow's direction.

Continuing down the town's main road, they passed by a few other strange buildings whose purpose the Gypsies could not discern, as well as a 'Junkyard'.

There was something unsettling about this place in particular.

The things around them- like the 'automobile' Percy had told them about- were strange and frightening enough. However, broken down and piled up as they were it looked like a hive in which anything could be prowling, or worse, that they might come to life themselves...

Moving gratefully past it, they crossed a sturdy stone bridge built over still, black water, where Willow's wand suddenly led them to a sharp right, taking them off the road.

Walking warily through the grass, the Gypsies passed yet another building, coming to stand between a small pond and a fenced-off area of about equal size.

"We're very close." Willow said quietly.

"I was afraid o' that..." Percy murmured back as he looked up at the fenced area's large iron gate.

- Pequid Pond Cemetery -

"Are ye... sure yer wand innae' pointin' some other way?" Robert asked, though his hopes were thin at this point as Piper pushed open the creaking door and walked inside.

The stillness in the air felt thicker and more imposing here than anyplace else they'd yet visited in this terrible place. Even the Poppets- devoid of any physical sensation- couldn't help a shudder.

"Straight ahead." Willow said. Although she couldn't see where they were, couldn't see the pale grass and rows of granite slabs that stood like silent sentinels, her voice quivered lightly.

"I dunnae' like tha' the path ta Thoren leads into a cemetery." Percy said, stating plainly what most of them were thinking at that moment.

"P- Perhaps it's just leading *through* the cemetery."

Alice's hopeful smile faltered almost immediately after she had spoken... as Piper came to stand before a pair of shadowed headstones at Willow's behest.

Immediately, Piper drew the wand back out, and conjured up a faint glow at its tip.

Although she was almost afraid to look- afraid of what she might find- she was relieved- and in fact, somewhat confused and intrigued when she recognized the engraved names as being those Doctor Sheppard had mentioned before.

"Billy Dobbs, Beloved Son... Kelli Dobbs... I can only make out 'and Mother'... the rest..."

She hesitated to say.

Both headstones had been severely scratched, and heavily defaced. The Gypsies didn't understand all of the words painted and scratched into the granite faces, but they could guess them for the most part...

"Not much for respectin' the deceased." Robert said, squinting at the messily scrawled insults. "An' it looks like it was all by the same person."

"Looks as though," Helena began, being the authority among them of less-than-civil speech and conduct, "someone thought Kelli was a bit of a *lightskirt*. And that Billy was loose in the pate..."

Of course the words engraved in paint and scratches and gouges were far more extreme.

"Do you think the Doctor wrote this?" Effie asked, but sounded doubtful of this even as she said it.

"I wouldn'a think so..." Piper replied, although she herself was not quite convinced one way or the other.

"Whoever did, it looks fresh." Robert added quietly, reaching out and pointing at the paint, which still glistened in the moonlight.

"...The snoring man?" Alice suggested quietly.

"More likely." Effie answered softly. "Especially if he was drunk. That would make a *great* deal more sense."

"But why would the findin' spell take us here?" Willow asked, and would have quirked a brow if she had one. "What do the two of them have to do with Thoren?"

"Look." Percy said suddenly, pointing at Kelli's headstone. "Near the right side, there."

All eyes turned to where Percy pointed.

They had nearly missed it due to the massive amount of scratching and graffiti, but embedded in the stone surface was a small keyhole.

"...That's interesting." Piper nodded. "An' the Doctor had a whole ring'a keys..."

"We might be closer ta getting' out'a here than we."

Suddenly, there was a small explosion of dirt and grass... a pale, soil-covered hand bursting out from Kelli's grave and crashing into the basket.

All of the Poppets staggered and cried out in shock as Piper stumbled away from the grave.

The hand withdrew for a few seconds, but slowly the grass began to swell until it split and crumbled around an emerging figure.

It wore a pale white dress- again, stained with dirt- her hair a mess of tangled black that cascaded over her head.

With jerky motions, it shook off the dirt and took a slow step toward Piper.

As it moved, its flowing hair fell aside, revealing a pale, smooth-skinned face with the sunken features only a corpse could bear.

At first, the keener eyes amongst the Gypsies might have thought she was wearing a choker... but the truth came in the form of a sickening pun.

Her throat was discolored from bruises, from a choking force so intense that her skin had broken thereabouts, reddish-brown stains flowing down from the wounds all over her neck and chest.

But that only drew attention to her stomach.

The female undead thing possessed an unevenness about her abdomen which suggested something too ghastly for any of the Gypsies to consider.

The Gypsies said nothing. Piper only turned and began to run back the way she had come.

"PERCY!"

Switching out the wand for the sword again, Piper spun around at Robert's shout, only to see the shuffling, hacking and gurgling revenant in hot pursuit. She was not running, but her strides were unnaturally long as though the ground moved with her.

Looking down to the basket, she saw to her dismay that Percy was, indeed, missing.

He had been plucked from the basket when the hand had first lashed out, but the shock of it was such that nobody had noticed until Piper had already took to her heels.

"Where is he!?" Piper shouted... but they knew.

They had seen the hand withdraw for that terrible moment.

He was down there.

Beneath the soil.

"Go back for him!" Effie shouted, but none of them could hold back entirely the terror inside them as Kelli drew ever-closer.

"I..." Piper began, but... at that moment, something emerged from the corner of her eye.

It was the bounding, wraithlike figure of Billy Dobbs, leaping over the cemetery fence, staring at Piper with maniacal eyes.

"RUN!" Helena shouted, but Piper stood there, her feet seemingly anchored to the spot.

You're out'a your depth... you're out'a your depth... you're out'a your depth...

Then she was running. Back toward the gate and to the main road as fast as her feet could carry her. She didn't have to turn to know the things were after her. Didn't have to hear them. They made no sound *to* hear.

She crossed the bridge, breaking off the road and running through an alley between the Junkyard and a garment store to reach the clinic directly.

"Open the door, Sheppard!" She called out at the top of her lungs, pounding her fists upon it. "Doctor Sheppard, it's Piper! They're comin'! Open the bloody door!"

The Poppets watched her back, looking across the street through the buildings as the pallid ghouls rapidly approached... only to hear a low, guttural growl from just around the corner of the building.

Hunter was already there.

Shaking, Piper spun to face the corner, waiting for the thing to dash out and pounce upon her.

"Try the handle!" Helena shouted.

Piper had seen how quick Sheppard had been to lock the door when they'd first arrived inside the clinic, and wasn't sure if he'd retreated to the morgue after she'd left. Further, there was a chance he wasn't even there and had locked the door behind him...

...which made it all the more unnerving that the door swung open at a single frantic touch.

Piper hesitated for a split-second, but the instant Billy and Kelli set decaying foot on St. David's Ave., she spun around and ducked inside.

Slamming the door behind her and *dropping* the basket to the floor, she clutched her head in her hands and fell to a seated position against the door.

"Piper! Piper!" Robert immediately staggered up from where he'd fallen out of his ride. "Piper, pull yerself together! Get up!"

"We have to get back and help Percy!" Effie nodded.

Piper only continued to pant, her not even looking at the Poppets; rather, she stared at the ground, eyes focused intently on nothing.

"I don't-" was all she could manage to say before she was cut off by Alice Well's tiny, gasping voice.

Letting her eyes wander upward, Piper saw the foot... legs... body of Doctor Sheppard laying face-down on the carpeted floor of the clinic-

...blood pooling from multiple stab-wounds.

"...That's not good." Helena said quietly.

In a fit of horrified awe, Piper crawled toward the Doctor's lifeless body. In truth, both she and most of the Poppets were afraid she might come back as one of the revenants they'd seen.

"Just... just get his keys, and go." Willow said softly. "Once the things are-"

"They didn't do this." Piper suddenly said sharply, recoiling from the body and standing staggeringly to her feet.

"What?"

"The unlocked door! The stab wounds- Did you see any of those monsters carryin' a *knife*?" Piper continued, fumbling until finally picking up Robert's sword.

At that moment, there was a sound of footsteps, and the creaking of the stairway door at the rear of the clinic as a large figure stumbled out from it... carrying a long, bloody knife in one hand.

Chapter Six

"Stay calm, Percy... stay calm."

Despite the increasingly frantic mantra, the Alchemist was anything but calm.

While the dirt above him only amounted to about a foot or so of loosely packed earth, to Percy's tiny body, it was an insurmountable weight, which his cloth-and-cotton physique was in no way equipped to overturn.

From the moment he had been seized and pulled under by that rotten hand, he had struggled and squirmed in some effort to escape, but all for naught as he now lay pinned in place by the soil.

The one positive point in all of this was he did not need to breathe, as his lungs had been replaced by herbs and folded paper, but considering it was pitch-dark, silent, he was unable to move and he had no idea what had become of the others...

Why had they not come to help him? They had to have realized quickly after the fact that he'd been snatched from the basket. They had to realize where he was... didn't they?

After all, they had no reason, no reason at *all* to leave Percy the Alchemist- Full Mage of Her Majesty's Court, appointed by Doctor John Dee himself- stranded in a terrible place like this. He was like a badge of honor for the Band that could be presented in an hour of need.

Danny Priest had no idea what he was talking about, of course.

Sure, there were all the unplanned explosions he'd caused in the pursuit of greater knowledge of alchemy, but it takes broken eggs to make an omelet, as they say.

Then there was that bit about the evil staff that had nearly possessed him, sure, but again, one risks certain things in one's quest for true mastery of his subtle art... although that one had been close. Had it not been for Lady Drucilla...

And of course there was his duel with Will Spellworthy... in which he could not have succeeded without the Lightbringers' intervention. And which had required a chemical 'Sneak Attack' on his part. And during which he had accidentally destroyed the priceless relic, the Crosier of St. Patrick...

It's a bloody marvel the Gypsies ain' abandoned you by now... like everyone else.

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!!!"

All at once, it was silent again. Silent and dark.

"Shut up..." Percy repeated weakly to the suffocating shadows... if for no other reason to drown out the terrible thoughts creeping through his mind like so many gnarled roots.

"Wh- Who are you?!" Piper demanded, her thoughts still scattered from the events that had unfolded in the past few minutes.

"You like playing with dolls?" The man answered in a slurring, slaving voice, "I got a game we could play, now that that slutty little bitch is dead..."

The man did not bear the same pallid complexion as the monsters the Gypsies had seen thus far, but his presence was about as welcome and comforting as any of theirs had been. Perhaps this was worse; Inhumans could be expected to act inhuman, after all.

He was nearly as tall as Thoren Grymm, but unlike him, very little of his mass was muscle; he had a bulging gut, drooping eyes, dark and messy hair, unsightly stubble about his face and an overall dirty form (even by Gypsy standards).

He wore what might have been the least appealing wardrobe in any time or place, consisting of short blue pants and a white shirt near-transparent with unpleasant smelling saturation. There was definitely the stench of alcohol, but beyond that, it was hard to know precisely what he reeked of.

"Why did you kill Doctor Sheppard?" Robert tried again to make some sort of verbal contact with the oaf... and although he answered, it surprised all in attendance that he seemed unaffected by the talking Poppets...

Then again, from the way he was looking at Piper, he seemed focused on something more *basic* at the moment.

"The little prick had it coming." The man replied, not seeing- but dissatisfied at- a male presence in this equation. He slowed his advance, keeping his knife raised. "Thought he could go behind my back with that stupid whore... you know, I felt *sorry* for her back when her retarded kid fell out of that goddamn tree." He grumbled, spitting on the floor before continuing. "They blamed *me*, right? For *negligence* or whatever. Yeah. The case got thrown out, but she couldn't stop sobbing about the little dumb-ass. Blamin' me. Even the goddamn *dog* took her side, but I taught that rabid little bastard a lesson..."

As though remembering what was going on, he looked back up at Piper with a grin.

She wanted to be out of there. Immediately. But she still didn't know yet what had become of Doctor Sheppard's keys, nor could she be certain if those hideous wraiths had made their way elsewhere yet...

"So she started seeing *this* ass about all her poor sad little crap... and then she gets herself knocked up like I wouldn't notice!"

There were other words, but a sudden bellowing tone made them incoherent.

"So... you're Mr. Dobbs, then." Effie concluded in a voice that just exuded a loathing for the man before her- a sentiment which all the other Poppets shared; Even Piper was no longer afraid, snapped into a sense of righteous anger.

Regardless of Danny Priest, it seemed as though a large amount of the twisted events in this place were a direct result of his actions.

"So, that boy- your son- fell and died, your wife went to the doctor to help her broken heart, they fell in love, then you killed them both in once you found out she was with Sheppard's child?" Piper asked, just as angry as any of the others, but trying to piece together how it all related to Danny Priest...

But then it came to her. It was so obvious with all of the other pieces in place.

"I'm done talking... let's get started." The man smirked, moving in slowly, hardly wary of Piper's sword. "Where'd you get that fancy little knife? You know you're only gonna hurt your-"

He didn't get time to finish, as Piper swung around with Robert's blade. It cut a gash into the man's arm, he being far too inebriated/hung over to manipulate his body properly. It didn't seem to affect him, the alcohol spiking his tolerance for pain, but the splatter of blood was enough to give him pause.

"Don't you take another bloody step at me!" Piper snarled, glancing down at the Poppets. "You keep your distance, and tell me what'cha did with the Doctor's keys!"

"Aaaand why would you want these?" Dobbs replied, reaching down and patting at a bulge in the pocket of his soiled pants "If you want 'em, you can reach in my pocket an' get em, babe."

"I think he could use another few holes in 'um." Robert shouted.

"You think you're gonna hurt me with that? You don't have the balls." The man said, outright laughing at her... but blinked as- instead of charging- Piper reached to her satchel and pulled out one of Percy's vials.

"Piper..." Helena said warily, cringing a bit in the basket as the others instinctively moved back into it.

"What the-?" Dobbs began, watching Piper bite into and pull out the vial's cork.

There was a slight flicker of light in the dark lobby of the clinic before an arc of yellow-orange flame flew out from Piper's hand.

The chemical contained within the glass vessel had ignited upon contact with the air, and Piper instantly hurled it at the unsuspecting man.

With an almost cruel grin of satisfaction, Piper watched as the initial splash of the liquid struck the man across the face, much of the rest splashing down on his clothing that were just as flammable as one might surmise they would be.

With a shriek and a bellow, the man clawed at himself, falling to the ground and trying to bat the flames out, only succeeding in spreading the blazing liquid all about.

Hurriedly, Piper ran forward, and planted a violent kick at the man's head, stunning him long enough for her to crouch, and yank the Doctor's key ring out of his pocket.

Stepping away from the groaning lout, she hurriedly looked over the ring until finding a small golden key that seemed unlikely to open any doors to the buildings in the town...

"What's happening?" Willow asked Effie, who had been describing these events as they played out before them.

"I think she found the key." Effie replied happily.

"Good, because I am through with this place." Helena said plainly.

For once, the others could relate.

Leaving Dobbs on the ground- the fire spreading about the waiting room, but this fact not deterring his wild flailing- Piper made her way to the door, scooping up the basket once again.

"We're not going to leave without Percy, are we?" Alice asked softly.

Throughout most of the exchange with Dobbs, Alice had remained in the basket with her ears covered... he was the most horrible man she had ever met in her young life. He could probably have given the Praetor a run for his money...

"A'course not." Piper said quickly burst from the clinic and ran for the cemetery, leaving the entrance wide open.

Even as she left to the sound of Dobbs' screams, she allowed herself a slight smirk as pale forms converged swiftly on the building behind her...

She made her running way through the town and across the bridge, keeping an eye out for any of the three revenants that had assaulted them up to this point... and just in case Dobbs had followed them. Not that he would be easy to miss; he'd been on fire.

"You've figured somethin' out?" Robert asked as they ran, recognizing an expression of intense focus when he saw one.

"I think so... but it doesn't matter right now. When we get to the grave I want ye all to stay in the basket an' keep a close eye on each other; don't let anybody get the drop on ye. An' Willow, I'll need ye to protect 'em if somethin' comes around."

Willow nodded; though she wasn't entirely sure what use her wand would be against the undead things, she agreed nevertheless.

They rushed past the cemetery gates, into the rows of silhouetted headstones.

"I'll find Percy. He must be in the dirt someplace. Once he's found, I hope the key will."

"Good evenin', love."

Her words fell away instantly, skidding to a halt in the grass with such abruptness that some of the Poppets nearly toppled out of the basket.

Seated- more like *perched* atop the grave of Kelli Dobbs was the grinning form of none other than Danny Priest himself.

Chapter Seven

"Danny Priest." Willow said softly, just to make sure she'd heard that cockney-saturated voice correctly.

The other Poppets- though careful to watch their surroundings- cast a series of glares in his direction as Piper righted herself.

"Or would ye prefer 'Danny Sheppard'?" Piper asked with a hardened edge to her voice. Her knuckles were white from her grip on Robert's sword.

Danny continued to stare at the assembled Gypsies (minus Percy, of course), but the mischievous grin melted away from his features. Slowly, he stood up from his perch on the headstone, standing irreverently on Kelli's upset grave-soil.

He spoke... but this time, his voice caused a ripple of bewilderment among the Gypsies.

"I told you once before, Piper Starling... call me 'Danny'."

He spoke plainly, without so much as a trace of the accent he had become so infamous for.

"Wait... y-you are'n't-?" Alice asked, her bead-eyes wide.

"Of *course* he is'n't!" Helena cut her off. "Did you even *listen* whenever he spoke? *Nobody* talks that way!"

"Have you finally grown weary of the charade?" Robert asked, looking back over at the darkly dressed man in-between watching Piper's back.

"You've survived this long... I think I can finally start taking you kids seriously." Danny replied simply, the small smile returning briefly to his face. It melted away quickly, however, as he regarded Piper.

"You're right. My father was Doctor Sheppard, and my mother was Kelli Dobbs. *That* happy tale ended after that morally-bankrupt *thing* Willard Dobbs stabbed him, strangled her, and... I wasn't even born, but that didn't stop Willard *or* his crowbar." He trembled... and perhaps it was the Gypsies' imagination, but it felt as though the ground trembled as well.

"Willard drove his car into the river not long afterward. And that was the end of it."

Piper shook her head. There were far too many questions in her mind to keep track of them all.

Luckily, Robert managed to pick out the most important of them.

"Where is Percy?" He demanded, but Danny only sighed. Reaching out with one leg, he tapped his toes into the soil before him.

"He's not going anywhere, believe me." He answered casually. "Nobody goes anywhere- does anything in this town without my knowledge and permission... even living and dying here are only toys I use to pass the time, in case you hadn't noticed from all of the zombies and the humans who should have been dead when you got here."

"What in hell *are* you, then?" Helena asked with a dubious expression.

"After I died- or was never born, whichever- my soul was stolen away from the limbo souls like mine end up in. I was repurposed, given a new body and blessed with power I could never have imagined before. I was 'reborn' into a demiplane populated by Muses. As you might imagine, they were too engrossed in the betterment of themselves- and by association, humanity- to notice me.

That was when I gave myself the name Danny Priest. Among the Muses, I passed myself off as one looking for religious enlightenment. I was, really. At the time I had no idea who or what had made me what I am, only that I wasn't normal. Not the same as the Muses, or the mortals who they inspired. I was something *different*. Day after day I sought out my meaning, my origins, and honed my inherent power.

Then one day- on the day he thought I was *prepared*- He came to me, and took me from that place... He was the one who I would come to call *Master*."

"This 'Master' a yours... who or what is *he*?" Piper asked, her mind trying to construct a plan that would get her to Percy and the keyhole without losing her head or the Poppets in the exchange.

"It's less about what he *is*, and more about what he *represents*." Danny answered softly, looking up to the stars. "Do you know why I brought you all here? I'd say it's a bigger question than any other you've got rolling around in your head, so you probably ought to ask it."

Piper glanced down at the Poppets. They were all probably thinking the same thing.

With Danny's eyes briefly averted, Piper slipped the ring of keys into the basket, then addressed him warily.

"Why?"

"This place isn't just an illusion. It's not a hallucination I cooked up just to scare you; that's one thing I don't do, is lie. I just tell unpleasant truths... although I guess you could call that *accent* a lie. Whatever.

This town... I suppose you could call it an *example*. It, like most worlds- like *your* world- started out as a bright and eager place, full of promise for the future: Color and happiness, loss and fear, hatred and war, friendship and family... the forces of Good and Evil would clash time and again. Sometimes bystanders knew of the conflict, other times they didn't. But with every battle, one side wins, one side loses, losses are suffered, and collateral damage is inflicted on those who never asked to be a part of the war. One side is cast down, and cries out for vengeance. One side is triumphant and reigns for a time, but neither Peace nor Chaos last forever.

Someone always has to play the hero. Someone always has to grab for power. To begin again from the beginning.

On and on it goes, the cycle playing out in a nigh-infinite loop until this,"

Danny hesitated, making a grand gesture at the still, stale-aired graveyard around them.

"...is the result."

The Gypsies stared at him, some trying to absorb the things he was saying... others not wanting to.

"The Band of the Twisted Claw, the Draco Disciples, and any number of factions and individuals that exist in your world continue their worthless conflicts, never seeing the great, cosmic flaw, even in the end. The very Gods and Goddesses themselves have it programmed into their nature; fighting each other eternally, and drafting unsuspecting mortals into their dispute..."

He hesitated, looking down upon Piper and the basket she carried.

"Just as the Band has drafted *you*."

The Gypsies looked at each other, uncertain what to say.

"...And this 'Master' you serve... what is *his* plan to change the world you see as being so flawed?"

Danny took a long, slow breath before looking to Effie with an unnatural smile.
"Change? No." He answered with a chuckle.

"He plans to clear the board *entirely*."

There was a sudden, deafening crack of thunder, causing Piper to stumble for a moment.

Bracing herself, she looked defiantly at Danny, even as of disbelief continued to wash over the Poppets.

"Existence is meaningless if this is all there is to it at the end; a rotted-out husk full of silence and corpses. Even in the hereafter, there is nothing but servitude or punishment. Nothing changes. And nothing ever will if it's allowed to continue.

My Master wants nothing less than the obliteration of reality. No burning the world to the ground that it might rise from the ashes. No smashing it all to pieces to be rebuilt in the image of another... only nothingness. And *that* is what He represents."

"W- what?" Willow called out, suddenly gripping her wand a little tighter in both cloth hands. "You mean your Master can... un-make worlds?"

Percy had spoken once about 'matter', and how aspects of the world could neither be created from or reduced to nothingness, only transformed into other states.

But neither he nor any of them had dealt with anyone quite like Danny before...

What sort of entity could his Master be?

"What do ye want with us?!" Piper snapped at last. "You've already said you're not lookin' to enlist us., so why put us through this? Is this a sort of *game* to you?"

"Of course I'm looking to enlist others... but as you were- as a bunch of children bickering around a campfire- I had no use for you. You never would have *understood*. I need people who realize that there *is* no hope for existence. That no matter how hard you try, there is only one inevitable end, and by that same token, only one alternative: Endless suffering, or the eternal peace of nonbeing. Life at the whim of the Great Balance, or blessed release after suffering from an incurable cancer that has lived and will live longer than it ever deserved to."

He slowly looked to the Poppets and Piper, his face stone.

"What say you?"

The long silence that followed was interrupted at last by the sound of a feeble little 'hiccup'.

All eyes turned to Alice, the little Poppet wiping nonexistent tears from her face.

"It is... it is just so *sad*..." She managed, quickly conscious of all of the eyes upon her. "You... You have no friends or family, or anybody else... do you?"

Danny stared blankly at her for a moment.

"If you want, we could see if you might be allowed to join *us* instead!"

"Is that what you think this is about?" Danny asked, his voice beginning in a low murmur, but steadily rising to a rumble. "I divulge the truth of Existence to you, and you take it as some attention-starved adolescent's 'Book of Faces' Status Update?!"

Suddenly, the ground began to tremble again, soon growing into a full-on quake.

"I take back what I said before. After all of this, you're still too soft to be worth taking seriously. You're not worth *anything*. The Band was right to dismiss you as they've done, but now you won't be a hindrance to them, or anyone else."

"Piper..." Robert said warily as he pointed out into the distance.

The town was beginning to fall away, the grass, trees and buildings dropping off as the horizon began to approach them, a vast plane of nothingness swallowing it all piecemeal.

"Better to put the lot of you out of your misery."

At that moment, Piper lunged forward, swinging her sword at Danny. As one might predict, however, Danny was not there to be stricken, reappearing a short distance away.

She was not concerned with him, however.

Rather, she had fallen to the dirt, thrusting one arm into the loose soil and groping for anything made of squirming cloth.

She had dropped the basket to the ground, the Poppets tumbling from it with the keychain held in their collective arms. Instantly, as Piper sought out Percy, they ran for Kelli's tombstone.

"...Cute." Danny murmured, reaching out with one hand... a sphere of misty gray materializing in his hand.

Just then, a pale figure loomed up behind Danny, seizing him about the arms and pinning him in place.

"What the hell-!?" Danny cursed, thrashing and squirming as he looked over his shoulder.

Standing at his back was the bloodied form of Doctor Morton Sheppard, holding him with all his might.

"Hurry!" Sheppard shouted. "Take your friend and go! Hurry!"

Neither Piper nor the Poppets had been paying any attention to Danny, and as such were only somewhat surprised to hear the voice of Doctor Sheppard calling out to them.

Taking no time, Piper shoved her other hand into the dirt, digging and searching frantically, until her hands closed around a tiny flailing creature. With a grunt, she produced a dirt-caked Percy the Abjurer from the grave soil.

Simultaneously, the Poppets climbed clumsily atop one another- Willow and Helena atop Robert and Alice, with Effie on the very top bearing the Doctor's keychain.

With a squealing grunt of effort, Effie plunged the key into the hole embedded in the granite surface.

Suddenly, the granite slab was lost, replaced by a shimmering field of luminous gold... and just as suddenly, the Poppets let out a united cry of surprise as all five of them tumbled forward into what now seemed to be a brilliant portal of light.

Piper blinked.

Looking down at Percy, the two nodded to each other before Piper lobbed the Poppet-Alchemist into the basket.

Snatching it, the sword and the wand, Piper took one final look at the town, and at the snarling Danny before hurling herself through the gateway... just as the rest of the cemetery fell into the void.

Chapter Eight

Piper couldn't know how much time she spent hurtling through the nexus of golden light. She had even lost the sense of holding Helena's basket, or even of Percy's shouting; he'd been asking why it had taken them so long to come for him, but soon both of them were caught up with staring all around them.

On and on they fell (or flew, it was hard to know for certain) until with a peculiar thrill, she found herself staring into the bright oranges and yellows of the Band's campfire... back from whence they'd come.

Blinking her eyes, trying to understand when or how the transition had taken place, she looked up from the flames, only to see the bodies of the other Gypsies where they'd fallen... only now something was different.

They were moving.

Piper straightened with a gasp of surprise, relief, and a bit of joy mixed in as well. She said nothing though, perhaps staggered by the sheer roller coaster of emotions she'd experienced in the past few moments.

Robert and Effie, Percy, Helena, Willow and Alice were in the midst of groggily sitting up, and gradually coming to realize their sudden change (or 'change back').

"My head..." Helena groaned, reaching down and groping around for her dropped glasses.

"Mine, too." Percy agreed, rubbing his head... but suddenly, he blinked. "Wait, my *fingers!*"

"I can see!" Willow shouted, hardly minding her own headache.

All of them were smiling, some even laughing with relief as they hugged themselves and checked to make sure their possessions were in order (Percy, Willow, Robert and Helena taking theirs back from Piper in due course).

"Where's Priest?" Robert demanded, stumbling to his feet and staggering over the other Gypsies to reclaim his blade.

"I think he was left behind." Effie surmised, brushing her hair from her face and smoothing out her dress a bit.

At that moment, as if on a signal, all six of them (sans Piper) looked around them frantically, and at last- with sighs of relief- picked up his or her Poppet from where the lot of them lay haphazardly on the ground.

Alice hugged hers tightly, even as Percy brushed the dirt off of his with a wary distaste.

"Too much to assume it was all a dream?" the Alchemist asked, frowning.

"I'm afraid so." Piper nodded with a staid expression. "We've evidence enough that it was real; The dirt on your Poppet, the blood on Robert's sword, and... I think the fact we all remember it is evidence enough."

"Do you suppose he died?" Willow asked softly, examining the wand in the Poppet's hand. She would have to thank Davem and Lillith again at some point. "Danny, I mean?"

Piper's doubtful expression was echoed by the others.

"We would have been finished, if it were not for Doctor Sheppard." Effie spoke again, finally satisfied with her own hair, and now fussing over that of her Poppet.

"Somehow... I doubt it had anythin' ta do with luck." Robert replied grimly. "Remember what he said."

Nobody goes anywhere- does anything in this town without my knowledge and permission... even living and dying here are only toys I use to pass the time.

"So?" Helena shook her head. "He's not as all-powerful as he thought he was."

"Are you sayin he *wanted* us to escape?" Willow asked, quirked an eyebrow at him (eager to take full advantage of her ability to do so again).

"I dunno what I'm sayin'." Robert sighed. "Jus' that it all seemed too easy at the end, there. Too convenient."

"I missed a lot'a that." Percy said flatly.

After a moment, Piper sighed and explained to the Alchemist what he'd missed; about Doctor Sheppard's death, the nature of the town and its inhabitants, and about what it was Danny had truly wanted from the beginning... or claimed to, anyway.

"He was jus' playin' with us." Percy murmured. "From the start when he came ta the camp. He was lyin' to us, goadin' us, tryin' to..."

He stopped.

Looking to the other Gypsies, he found his voice would not come.

They were all thinking the same thing.

He had never lied; only told 'unpleasant truths'.

The battle between the Band and the Dracos, their relationship to the preexisting Band, the nature of the Balance and of reality, their own inner demons and failings even they hesitated to admit, even to themselves... all of it... not that they bought into all of what he said, but the thoughts his words provoked seemed so insistent.

There was a long period of silence among them, until- for whatever reason- Piper looked up to Alice.

Alice Well had been silent for the most part, with the exception of an occasional squeal over her Poppet self.

At present, she was just looking at the other six. Clearly, she had been just as troubled as the rest, but now, despite her paled complexion and trembling hands, she was smiling... and reaching out to them with arms open.

Glancing at each other with gradually lightening expressions- the absurdity of Alice's reactions both then and now- touching them in a way all of them sorely needed. Even Helena, despite her sarcastic mutter, sighed and crawled forth with the rest.

Piper was last, looking at the six of them... rather proud. This whole thing could have gone much, much worse. And whether or not the fact that it *didn't* was Danny's doing, she had much to be proud of. They all did.

To hell with Danny. For that matter, to hell with the Band of the Twisted Claw; if they operated under the notion that she- or any of the ones embracing before her- were any less talented and accomplished?

Then good luck replacing us. She answered herself with a smile, before walking over and kneeling in with the others, joining in the group-hug.

"Did... did we miss something?"

Immediately all seven of them looked up, quickly recognizing the form of Lillith Sparrow as she emerged from the brush with a great rustling.

After another moment, the seven Gypsies broke apart from their hug, still smiling at each other and looking to the cutpurse.

"I *told* you they wouldn't abandon us." Alice said, quite matter-of-factly.

"What?" Lillith cocked her head to the side, stepping fully out of the bushes and moving aside as the sounds of the other Band members approached just beyond her. "Why would we abandon you? It took us ages to throw this together."

"What thing?" Percy called... then let out a bashful groan as the Pussycats appeared, carrying a very large makeshift tray.

Spread out upon its surface was a reasonably well-crafted mural of Marchpane- more of a *sign* than anything else- that read 'Welcome to the Band', with a few additional flourishes by either faction, each trying to outdo the other (and a few pieces of scenery crafted by more neutral parties).

"Whot do ye think?" Thoren asked as the rest of the Gypsies filed into the clearing.

The seven of them stared agog at the wonderful surprise... and almost immediately afterward, six of them turned to glare at Alice, who only shrugged and smiled innocently.

As the newly reunited Band enjoyed the treat between various conversations, Gaia Vedeia managed to catch Piper's attention, beckoning to her.

"I wanted to give you something... by way of thanks for all of your assistance to Thoren, Talia and the Band."

Reaching into her flowing garments, she procured a small, carefully crafted Poppet... one bearing Piper's features and garb at an appropriate scale.

Piper simply stared. Despite her temptation to recoil from anything even remotely Poppet related at that point, she instead sighed, taking it delicately into her hands.

"I thank ye... I'll keep it well, indeed..." She hesitated, clearing her throat a bit, "Although, if it wouldn't be too much trouble, perhaps... would it be too much trouble to make 'er a sword?"

Gaia blinked, but smiled, and immediately went about getting Lillith's attention, that she might assist in the endeavor.

Danny Priest sat alone in the fully reconstituted town, leaning in silence against the headstone of his mother.

His head was craned back onto the granite surface, looking up into the endless night sky... He knew full well that the stars weren't really there. Nothing outside of the town was real; only illusions crafted around a single fragment of reality that was the town itself.

Suddenly his lips parted, speaking to someone- or something- unseen:

"Too much *Faith* in that lot..."

Danny glanced away from the false heavens, back to the grave dirt beneath him.

"Doubt and Faith cannot live in the same house. Yet, Doubt is every bit as prolific. It's just a matter of pushing the right buttons. Turning the screws enough.

Perhaps they are unified and peaceful now, but they'll remember their time here. In the days to come they'll enjoy their happy times adventuring with the Band, but... when the dark times come, when the weather starts to grow foul and their beliefs begin to crack beneath the weight of reality, they'll begin to wonder 'Was he right?'... at the slightest quarrel with a fellow Gypsy, as their friendships crumble, they'll begin to think, begin to *remember*."

Taking slow breath, Danny smiled to himself.

"In the nights... they'll know better."

Looking up once again, the unnatural unobtrusive presence beyond the illusory sky had dissipated, leaving Priest alone to his thoughts.

He nodded to himself, his words wilting in the stale silence.

"They'll understand... in time."

(After the events of The New Kids, a landmark event occurred in the fandom of Bristol RenQuest: A Live-Action Roleplaying Event entitled 'VoidTreaders'.

In the aftermath of the events of 'The New Kids', Danny Priest continued his efforts to the end of erasing the Bristol Faire Multiverse. Using his ability to destroy and reconstitute his hometown of St. Elmo's Corners, he melded the town- in which he possesses nigh-unlimited power- with a small settlement some distance away from Bristol. In doing so, he sought to summon his master directly to the Bristol Faire universe using this patch as a shortcut.

However, in this new effort, Danny was followed by several mysterious entities- personages hailing from other alternate universes who had already suffered the fate of having their worlds erased: Alternate universe versions of Gertrude Normyl, Necromancer Lord Aldrazar Necromis² and Werewolf Privateer Gwendolyn Gwilt³. In addition, a strange Tarot Reader known as "Miss" Maybel Jacobs⁴ appeared in the mix as well.

"Miss Maybel"

² Character created by Robert McKeown.

³ Character created by Carynne Dati.

⁴ Character created by Julie McMillin.

by Julie McMillin

Miss Maybel Meets the World

Dingdingdingding!

The little copper bell rang furiously above the purple door. The man double checked the faded gold script, "Fate and Fortune by Maybel". Yes, this was the right place. All manner of cloth hung from every horizontal surface – even the rafters were not spared the fabric assault. Yet, the parlor was free from all smells of dust or incense (as so many spiritually inclined persons seemed to delight in). Rather, it faintly smelled of soap. Were the fabric removed, along with the gas lamps in a rainbow of colors and the numerous decks of tarot cards stacked neatly on a sideboard, it would be a respectable parlor. The man chuckled at the thought of calling anyone who claimed to play with Fate, "respectable."

On cue, Maybel called from behind one of the draperies, "Jus' a moment, love! Do pour us both a spot o' tea and I'll join you presently!"

The man set his satchel next to the guest chair, carefully picked up the piping hot teapot and poured two slightly sweetened cups of strong tea. The three tarot cards spread next to the pot confirmed his suspicion. As he turned with cups in hand he was not surprised to see the woman scowling at him.

"I'll thank you kindly for the tea, sir, but state plainly that I'm not interested in whatever it is the likes of you is peddling."

With a grace that can only be born of practice, he set the table and pulled Maybel's chair. Once everyone was settled he smiled with thirty perfect white teeth.

"Well now, Maybel the fate lady, what do ya see that's got yer knickers in a twist?" he grinned.

She giggled, likely a reaction of shock to his vulgarity, and placed her cup back upon its saucer. "First, you wear no jacket despite the chill. So either you are a busy man who keeps his warmth by work, or you have dashed here in a fit of emotion and simply forgot your jacket, *or* you care not for practical convention and are quite mad."

He nodded and sipped his tea.

She continued, gaining momentum with every word. "Second, you placed no hat upon the rack. This removes the first theory of being a busy man for only those of poorest means would wander the lanes without his head covered. Third, you were able to not only pour, but also serve the tea which means that some facet of you has or continues to serve leading me to conclude that it is no fit of passion or addling of your senses that drove you here, but a choice. A choice that screams that you care not for the civil trappings of society and are therefore quite mad. Finally, as you may have noticed, you left your cards upon my sideboard: Eight of Wands, The Devil, The Tower. A decision resulting in swift action, a person contrary to my best interest, a destruction of grand proportion. So you see, dear sir, I'll thank you for the tea but will pass on your further offers."

He took another sip of tea and watched the sugar swirl as he lowered the cup. "Hmm," he mused but did not comment further.

An entire moment passed while the two drank their tea in silence.

He returned his cup to its saucer, so deftly did he place it that it did not clatter, and met her eyes.

"If I might offer a few words for thought?"

She nodded.

"It seems 'ta me, Miss Maybel, that you're slowly drowning in your parlor. You enjoy what you do, that much is clear, but no one else does. If anyone with half a brain came to actually hear their life's story they'd realize that you give them the hard truth without any of that fancy mumbo-jumbo so many sprinkle around. Why, I don't even see any animal bones in the parlor!"

She chuckled.

"But I do see a lady on hard times."

Her eyes narrowed.

"For all the fabric that you have in here, I see the same three patterns over and over. Certainly you've used both sides of the fabric so you have to look closely to notice the inverse, and you've placed them as far from each other as possible, but the fact remains that you've been pinching pennies. Your cups don't match, even though you painted them to be a set. You've hemmed and patched your wardrobe with a fine hand. And..." here he paused to let the tension build and drive home the point in a way that he knew would strike her to her core. "Your tea has gone stale."

To her credit, she only paled slightly. "You are correct. Especially with the notion that my clients do not possess even half a brain."

His Cheshire grin widened, "Girls looking for love?"

She rolled her eyes. "Ugh, the debutant ball is next month and none of them desire to leave the room single."

He affected a high-pitched mocking tone, "If I cannot find a husband then surely I would rather die!"

She joined him, "I heard from Mary that you told Anastasia that she would find love with an inventor! So you can tell me that I'm going to marry that dreamy distant-cousin to the Duke of Pembroke, yes? Tell me yes!"

They giggled for a time. Maybel went to take another sip of tea, but pushed the cup away. "No use pretending. It *is* bloody awful. But it's all I have."

He leaned in slightly, "It doesn't have to be."

"I already told you..."

"I will not deny your cards. Or your accusations. I do not have *anyone's* best interests in mind. Possibly not even my own. But for the sake of argument – what is it you want, Maybel?"

Her answer came almost too quickly, "A place to read everyone's story. A place that recognizes there's only truth to words if the listener *believes* in the words."

"I do not have a place for you... but I may have a time."

"A time? What in the nine hells does that mean?"

"I'm going to a country festival and was hoping to find a companion for the day who had a whole brain and doesn't mind bawdy humor and awful puns."

She looked at her cards, and the silent warning they represented.

"We're just going for a walk, Miss Maybel. I'll promise on whatever gives you comfort that you shall return here with your entire physical, mental and emotional self intact."

She returned the three cards to her deck, and placed them in a small leather bag. As she gathered a few necessities she glanced to the man who was actually finishing the dreadful tea.

"If we're to be spending the day together, may I at least know your name, love?"

He rose, bowed deeply and extended his gloved hand to hers. As they crossed the threshold to the wide world beyond he stated,

"You may call me Danny."

The parlor door slammed closed from a gust of wind.

Dingdingdingding!

Miss Maybel Meets the End

The festival day was a whirlwind of strange activities. Exotic stalls in the marketplace, musicians playing ancient instruments, the Queen's court stepped out of the books to dance and parade... even stranger were the other visitors to the faire who seemed just as out-of-place as she and Danny, but who wore fashion that she hadn't even conceived of. Actors doled out jokes that the visitors understood but left Maybel thoroughly confused. Maybel was invited to join a few lovely ladies in song, which she did with gusto (if not pitch). Then Danny handed her a sword... a SWORD of all things... and an entire group of newly-created companions thoroughly beat each other with the practice weapons simply for the joy of physical violence, it seemed.

But she found her true joy when dozens of people asked her to read the cards for them. She needed no gold-painted door. No draped fabric. No oddly-colored gas lamps. Just the cards and a story. Maybel had found her audience. And she loved them.

Yet all days draw to a close, and this one was no exception. The two unlikely companions were enjoying a final cup of (newly purchased) tea back in Maybel's parlor as the midnight hour approached.

"Only disappointing part of the whole thing was none 'a 'em fell off a tree," mused Danny.

"That would certainly give the papers something ta print in the morning," Maybel smiled. "Maybel sings in local amphitheater. Man breaks both legs."

They chuckled.

Maybel placed her empty cup back on its saucer. "Thank you, Danny."

"I need no thankin, love."

"But genuinely, without you I never would have seen what the world has to offer me."

"Had."

She blinked, "Pardon?"

Danny cleared the table with consummate grace. "Had ta offer ya, love. That was a time and place from long, long ago. Society's grown up since then. Ye've got papers in place o' town criers. Operas instead 'a players. Bloody hell, ye've got light where they had candles and darkness. Society isn't going back to that festival's way of life any time soon."

Maybel was lost in thought.

Danny collected his belongings and bowed over Maybel's hand. "I should be going."

Maybel finally looked up. "Will I see you again?"

Danny offered a sad smirk, "Sorry, love. I'm hopeless."

They exchanged the customary pleasantries and Danny vanished into the night.

Maybel spent those early morning hours tidying up while completely absorbed in what Danny said. If society had progressed as he said... and it obviously had... then was it any wonder that the only people who patronized her establishment were those of simple minds? After all, who needed to hear a story from a person when so many were printed in the papers, let alone journals, every morning and evening. Society had outgrown fate and fortune tellers.

As Maybel opened her doors the next day she was greeted by a sight she'd never seen before: a line. An entire line of people who wished for her counsel. But it was all the same – girls wanting to know if they would be single by night's end at the debutant ball. Maybel waited to weep until they were all gone. It all fell in to place over and over again: simple minded girls, ancient cards... relics of an age long past, Danny's claim that she was drowning in her own parlor, an actor's statement that the only time she had was her own, her own card that showed the Tower... and Danny's parting words that she should not hope for the hopeless.

It was all true. By showing her what she could have had... Danny had destroyed the last amount of happiness she had in her world.

Another insipid girl arrived to see the cards.

Maybel died a little more as she opened the door.

Dingdingding!

~

(Danny Priest's aim in all that he does is twofold; The first of these is to cripple the happiness and joy and passion that a world's inhabitants have for their lives. This, in turn, makes his second and ultimate goal of erasing a world easier, as the aforementioned inhabitants no longer have the will necessary to keep it alive.

Having followed Danny Priest all this way intent on stopping his plans and avenging her lost home, the Alternate Gertrude Normyl used her abilities to summon a group of Questers, Lightbringers, Heroes, even Nobles, Barbarians and at least one *Draco Disciple* from several Bristol universes.

Scene 0 - <http://youtu.be/rev41rN2N1k>

Scene 1 - http://youtu.be/seHPXTX62_0

Scene 2 - <http://youtu.be/YALRAS-00D8>

Scene 3 - <http://youtu.be/g8wvxK4c5A8>

Scene 4 - <http://youtu.be/YodZRcoGKbl>

Scene 5 - http://youtu.be/B_MuMuEgRE

Scene 6 - <http://youtu.be/f7cqt9inMmw>

Together, this motley crew of adventurers traversed the town of St. Elmo's Corners, braving its population of unliving Shades and anachronistic horrors. Along the way, they encountered the Alternate Universe versions of Aldrazar and Gwen, as well as Maybel Jacobs. Over time, the group developed unsteady alliances with each of them until the time came to confront Danny Priest himself.

Scene 7 - <http://youtu.be/JwnO9kj8WnM>

Scene 8a - <http://youtu.be/3M0UQ0osEJk>

Scene 8b - <http://youtu.be/hLMlwtcst90>

Scene 8c - <http://youtu.be/ilqXmNWzxMU>

Scene 9 - <http://youtu.be/BWy3drdnSaQ>

Gwen, Aldrazar and Maybel looked on as the 'VoidTreaders' marched toward the final battle, but knowing what Danny was capable of, there seemed to be little hope... if any at all.)

"Before The End"
by Carynne Dati

The trio looked after the group as they walked off towards almost certain death. Each of the three knew how powerful Danny Priest was. They had all failed against him in their own way. Could this larger group of people led by a witch fare better than them? Their plan was solid and they knew what they were getting into. Still, the pirate, the necromancer and the tarot reader remained in the shelter awaiting the outcome of the battle.

Gwendolyn paced around, waiting for her potion to kick into her system. It took a bit of time, like any medicine would. Once it settled in, her wolf would remain suppressed for a few hours. She would retain her humanity long enough to keep focused. But every second longer she had to wait, the more anxious she became. Maybel's revelation about the Void Cannon made her even more nervous. There was no way for anyone to defeat it. She mused in her head a way to possibly stop him. Focusing on that thought kept her calm enough to keep the wolf at bay.

It did not help that Aldrazar sat in the corner of the shelter watching her pace with a twisted smile on his face. She tried not to look at him, but just knowing that he was watching her made it difficult. Her discomfort amused him. His game was that of waiting, and it was a game he was very good at. These travelers may have had zeal, but they were still young. There was much about this world and their own that they did not (or could not) grasp. He knew that they would all fail.

Sitting between them, Maybel looked after the party. The continuing thuds of the pirate's footsteps were starting to grate on her ears. The added feeling of helplessness that filled her made it all the worse. She hated that Danny did not reveal that there *was* hope, but she could not forget that he was the only person that had been honest with her. How could she forget that?

Finally, the pacing grew tiresome.

"Will you stop that damned pacing? You sound like a troll with how hard you stomp!" she complained, turning back towards the pirate. "I already told you: there ain't no way to stop Danny's Void Cannon. Once he starts usin' it, nothin' can stop it."

Gwen shook her head. They had given the new travelers every bit of advice they could give. "There has to be some way. No one is ever truly invincible. All magic can be countered somehow."

"It erases *kilometers* of existence at a time!" she exclaimed exasperated. "I dunno what mages you fought in your time, but that's not something you just defend yourself against!"

"They used the Mother's Embrace to enhance their weapons, which none of us have..." Maybel threw up her arms as Gwen now began to speak her thoughts aloud.

"God's rotten teeth! You may be a wolf, but you're stubborn as a bloody mule!"

Gwen ignored her, pacing around the perimeter of the shelter.

"You're wasting your time, girl." She tried to block out Aldrazar's venomous voice, speaking her thoughts louder now, hoping to drown out his voice. "You've hunted mages, what, most of your life? Even a mutt like you knows what sort of power Danny holds. You really think he's going to go all out on them right away? No. He'll play with him like a cat with a mouse. And once his fun has run out, he'll just destroy them all. They've all gone to their death. Why are you so eager to meaninglessly throw your life away?"

Gwen pursed her lips together. All she had on her mind was killing Danny. If it meant helping those travelers do it, then it was all she cared about.

"You show such little faith for ones who have overcome your own spells," she spat back, never looking at him in the eye. She twitched when she heard him scoffing.

"They certainly took their sweet time to figure that out. Besides, Danny defeated my spells with far greater ease than those young travelers did. The only reason they even stood a chance against me was that I let slip how the mages of old defeated me. Had I not underestimated their intelligence--"

His explanation was cut off by Gwen's laughter.

"No wonder you failed against him the first time."

Aldrazar's eyes flared towards Gwendolyn. His red gaze met her golden glare. "Your arrogance is astounding. For one who claims to use devil's pacts so often, you fell into Danny's trap far easier than some mutt did."

Aldrazar laughed, sending chills down the women's spines. "You think that makes you better than me?" he calmly asked, standing tall and pointing his devilish cane at Gwen. "What's more pathetic: someone who fails because someone was better at the game than them or someone who fails because they have just given up?"

Gwen advanced, her fists balled into white knuckles. She ignored the pain in her burned hand as her nails dug into her skin.

"Your ego blinds you, *old man!* What do you think will happen *if* they fall? Please, tell me how you plan on getting through his Void Aura? I'm just dying to know!"

"Why would I tell you that?" the necromancer asked as he advanced towards her. "Why would I give some mangy dog a spell that only I can use?"

Gwen's fangs glistened in the sunlight as she burst into uncontrollable laughter. "There is no spell that only you can use. You have no spell to circumvent his defenses, do you? You have no power over *anyone* in this world and you're too bloody stubborn to accept defeat!"

"Power?" he laughed deeply. "What do you know of power? You think you've power now that the beast inside you is tamed? The darkness inside of you is stronger than you can possibly imagine, but you do not have the will or the wit to use it. You could have used this dark gift to make something of yourself, but you've spent your life trying to kill it all because you're afraid of that potential. Instead of accepting your fate and embracing who you are, you're ashamed and try to destroy it! Your own self-loathing is the sole reason that your world is gone --"

"And your pride is the reason yours has fallen!"

The hunter and the necromancer stared each other down barely a foot apart from each other.

"Were we in my world," Aldrazar spoke through gritted teeth, "you would be nothing more than a mindless slave, following my every order without question!"

"And in *my* world, I would have devoured you whole while you wondered why your magic failed on my feral mind!"

"Oh good God! Both of you just shut up!"

Maybel's surprisingly harsh voice silenced Gwen and Aldrazar instantly (which was no small feat). "I can't take any more of this blabbering! It's making me sick! Now ain't the time to argue whose tragedy is worse. You both realize what's at stake, yet you choose to spend your time trying to justify why you let your world fall in the first place! What good is it to argue about the past when the future of every world in existence is in danger!?"

The two stood in stunned silence. Maybel wouldn't have let them speak anyways until she spoke her mind.

"Aldrazar, you say you will watch them fight and if they fall, you will raise them up again. What do you think Danny will do with the Medallion? Did you miss the part that said he is made of Void Energy. If he can't destroy it outright, he can damn well contain it and you'll be right back where you started: stuck with an army that can't move a bone.

"And Gwen, have you forgotten about your other self? I mean your human side. You've been fighting against a monster and all you've thought about is revenge. But think of all the good Gwendolyn has done, not what the wolf has destroyed. Isn't that worth something? Isn't that..." Maybel trailed off for a moment before she finished, finding more power in those last words. "Isn't that worth fighting for?"

"So now you wish to fight?" Aldrazar mused, surprised at her new vigor. "Whatever happened to 'I cannot face Danny, ever after what he did'?"

Maybel clung to the Strength card that she could not put down. She could still feel the power it held since it was not used in her ritual. Her fingers tightened around the edges.

"Those travelers showed me that no matter how dire things may get, there is still some small semblance of hope. They go out to face Danny knowing full well that this plan might fail, yet their own hope sustains them. It is a strength I have not seen in myself. They are..." She hesitated yet again, recalling when they convinced her to come to their side. "They are what I aspire to be."

"And what can be done against him?" Aldrazar asked sardonically. "We all know that we need more than just 'hope' to stop Danny."

Maybel gazed at her feet, unable to answer. The three let out a heavy sigh, believing that everything might have all been in vain.

Then Gwen's eyes lit up.

"You said that Danny needs to channel all of his power in order to use his Void Cannon, right?"

"Aye," Maybel asked skeptically.

"Something that powerful... he needs to concentrate, right?" Gwen advanced towards Maybel, clutching her shoulders. "Right?!"

"I... I dunno, I never seen him use the damn thing!"

"He'll need time to channel it," Aldrazar continued. "If he has all the party in a time freeze..."

"And he subdues the one with the medallion..." Maybel continued.

"He can take all the time he needs the time to charge his attack," Gwen finished. The plan seemed to collectively bloom into their minds.

"Maybel, can he use his Time Freeze again?" Aldrazar stepped forward.

"Not so long as he has one active already."

"Then that leaves us free of his spell." Gwen felt her heart racing inside of her. "We can get up to him and hold him back. If he is restrained, he can't concentrate. He can't concentrate, he can't channel his power to make the Void Cannon."

"All right, but you're forgetting something." Maybel's voice remained grim, excitement all around her. "How are you planning on circumventing his Void Aura? If he's got everyone in a Time Freeze and the one holding the medallion is incapacitated, you've no one to grant the Light's Warmth. How do you plan on making it to Danny without his Void Aura harming you?"

Gwen bit her lip and her eyes darkened as she looked towards Aldrazar. His face said the same thing hers did.

"We don't."

Maybel's breath shuttered. "You know what this means, right?"

"My crew is dead," Gwen replied. "My world is gone. I've got nothing left. I can at least die knowing that I've saved another world... and there's another me somewhere that still has a chance to defeat this curse. If my life is the price I pay for her success, then I gladly pay it."

Maybel turned towards Aldrazar, whose face was equally grim.

"It's time I paid for my mistakes, as well. If I had not underestimated him, things might have turned out differently. I wanted a world of peace. What good is peace if no one is around to savor it? Besides, I cannot let Danny win over me."

Gwen swallowed hard and nodded. "Then it's settled. We hold Danny long enough to ensure that anyone is healed that needs to be. You can do that, can't you, Maybel?"

"I can only use the card once," she replied, looking at the portrait upon the unused Strength card.

"Then make it count," Aldrazar added. "Preferably the one with the medallion."

"Then we've no time to lose. Maybel, you go back towards the woods. Find a spot where you can hide behind the crowd. Danny will be too focused on the one with the medallion. He and I can sneak behind him. When he starts charging up the Void Cannon, we'll charge him and stop him. Then you act. Understood?"

Maybel quickly nodded. Looking back towards the forest, she gathered her materials. Just before she left, she took one final deep breath and turned back towards Gwen and Aldrazar, who were headed towards the battlefield.

"Just do me a favor, you two." Each of them stopped in their tracks to catch a faint smile from the tarot reader. "Don't kill each other before that happens."

With barely enough time to reply back, Aldrazar and Gwen made their way towards the field where the final battle was taking place. Maybel's gaze remained on the two before turning towards her own task, rushing through the woods.

It was a remarkably short distance to where the fight was taking place. They hid in the bushes watching as Danny shoved a shade aside and snapped his fingers. The party instantly froze in their place, save for one.

"There's the time freeze," Gwen reported aloud. "We're in the clear."

"You know what to look for?" Aldrazar asked.

"I've killed hundreds of mages. I know what I'm doing." Aldrazar nearly scoffed at the proud remark her until she continued. "It'll be a grand gesture of sorts. Probably using his arms to gather the energy. He'll need stable ground for such power, especially if it's focused blast, so we know he will not rise to the air. If we restrain his arms, we stop his concentration."

"How do you know it will be a focused blast?"

ily, "With a name like 'Void Cannon', it's really self-explanatory."

The necromancer looked towards her impressed. Pity she would never see that approving smile as she focused on the battle.

The party was doing a somewhat adequate job of avoiding Danny's projectiles, though some did succumb to his Void Spheres. When the medallion was given to the barbarian, he stepped towards Danny as far as he could get, trying to deflect Danny's projectiles back at him. The hammer he was proving to be more of a task. Gwen moved to advance to the other side of the field until a cold hand upon her shoulder restrained her.

"Let go of me," she almost growled.

"Wait until one of them hits him first. Then we know they have his undivided attention."

The captain could not nod, but still she obliged. Despite the fact that Danny and the barbarian were going back and forth, his eyes still wandered the field. She had to wait.

Finally, the barbarian got a lucky swing, hitting Danny in the leg. It was enough to cripple him. He ran back towards the eldest healer, who rushed to heal the rest of the party as much as she could before blessing the barbarian.

"For what it's worth," Aldrazar's hand squeezed Gwen's shoulder (she hadn't even realized it was still there), "you would have been the greatest ally in my army."

A smile escaped from Gwen. Perhaps the first time she smiled in a long time.

"And you would have been the best hunt I would ever have."

Suddenly, they saw it. When the party was fully restored, she rushed towards the barbarian. The light of her magic bathed him as she handed the medallion off to him. The barbarian roared as he swung his gigantic hammer, hitting Danny squarely in the side.

This was it. The time had come.

"See you on the other side," Gwen remarked before she bounded off towards the other side of the field.

Aldrazar let out his own chuckle.

"No, you won't."

~

(Scene 10 - http://youtu.be/_Wl1mqtuFvc)

In the end, the heroes managed to defeat Danny Priest, and with their collective will, banish St. Elmo's Corners and the Void Angel back from whence they had come, but not without cost. The otherworldly versions of Aldrazar and Gwen were both slain, thus joining their lost worlds in oblivion.

Nevertheless victorious, the VoidTreaders returned to their own worlds to resume their lives, although this experience had left strange scars upon each and every one of them; Danny's message had been implanted within their minds, perhaps to be forgotten...

... then again, perhaps the 'cost' was greater for the VoidTreaders than simply two lives...)

"Thomasina's Epilogue"

by Kathryn Jones

The celebratory feast was over. The Gypsies, the Lightbringers, and all who were assembled parted ways and headed to their respective homes. All left with bittersweet memories of their great quest replaying in their minds. And Thomasina was no exception. She hurried back to London as fast as the pony's legs would carry her. She had important news to deliver.

A servant clad entirely in crimson waited for her in the stables. Thomasina dismounted and approached the young woman. "Where is she?"

The attendant curtsied respectfully. "With her advisors, Mistress."

Thomasina nodded and turned to go inside. The day was nice out, but still chilly when the wind blew. She removed her gloves and held them behind her. The attendant took them immediately and Thomasina began to unclasp her cloak. As soon as that was done, the attendant took it from her shoulders and away to be cleaned.

After a long walk and a few deep breaths, Thomasina arrived in front of a solid oak door. A pair of yeomen kept watch and Thomasina knew another pair kept watch within. This was ambiguous; her presence would be welcomed, her news, possibly not.

After another deep breath, the door was opened for her. The arguing stopped instantaneously. The two women met eyes and the redhead spoke, "Gentlemen, you may leave us." Only Burleigh and Walsingham tried to object, but they were ignored.

When the chamber was cleared, the two women sat before the hearth as the attendant from before brought in warmed wine. "Please tell me it is done."

"It is, but not without casualties. A necromancer and a werewolf sacrificed themselves to the aid. Without them, it would have failed without a doubt."

Thomasina sipped her wine, warming from within as the queen spoke, "And Priest? What of him?"

"Seemingly gone. As far as I could tell, never to return."

The queen could hear the tiniest of hesitations in her companion's voice. "Howe'er...?"

"Howe'er," Thomasina picked up, "The void angel could return after considerable time to heal, if creatures of void energy need healing."

Thomasina recounted the store of the adventure quite accurately despite her growing sleepiness. In the end, the point was clear – it was now a waiting game. Thomasina set down her empty goblet and yawned widely.

"Go rest, my little talisman." She stroked the dwarf's cheek with a thumb gently.

The dwarf glared at the monarch from under her tired-sore eyelids. While Thomasina appreciated that the court, and surprisingly to her, the queen as well, believed she had a connection to the mystical and 'the other realms' as she occasionally heard it called, that didn't mean she appreciated being treated like a good luck charm. Though she wanted to reprimand the queen, she was too sleepy and knew she'd have no hope of winning this fight. Instead, she stood, bowed, and turned to go.

Just before the door, the queen called back to her companion, "Thomasina, when you were all facing the Void Angel, calling out wherefore you all fought, what was your reasoning?"

Thomasina turned back and looked her mistress in the eye, "To keep England and Your Grace safe," she lied perfectly.

She gave her dwarf an appreciative smile, "Rest well. You have earned it." Thomasina bowed again and left.

In the hall, the girl in crimson who followed Thomasina back to the queen's privy chambers spoke gently, "What was your real reason for fighting?"

Thomasina's eyes glazed over for a moment as she revisited the fight's final moments. Everything was a mess. Gwen was gone, she silently admired her. Aldazard was gone, sad but he was an unknown entity, so that might be for the better. The mass of light bringers and gypsies surged towards the void angel. Grease's voice was clearest over all the other shouting, "I fight for my brothers! I fight for my sisters!" The other voices met his volume and his words were no longer clear. At the back of the crowd, Thomasina followed slowly, wondering why she was fighting, 'it was the right thing to do' didn't seem good enough; at that moment and at this, one small answer came to her mind, 'to be wanted'. But even she didn't fully understand her own answer.

A brief moment after the attendant asked her question, Thomasina responded, "For the safety of my parents."

In the queen's bed chamber, the attendant helped Thomasina change to go to sleep, but Thomasina laid there with her eyes closed, thinking, 'What did she mean she fought to be wanted? Wasn't she? The queen loved her, took care of her – treated her as a pet more like. The court adored her, delighted in her jests – and took as much humor in deriding her. Her parents were looking out for her when they sold her so that they could all have better lives – but now she was one less mouth to feed, plus she sent money home too.' She knew all of that was the truth, but it didn't hurt any less. And though the company seemed so happy to see her when she arrived she didn't feel terribly useful during the journey. She had needed healing as often as she had healed. A surge of guilt ripped through her.

As she continued to lie there, the slim image of Danny filled her mind. He wasn't right, he couldn't have been. Just because she was unhappy at court didn't make him right. But the lines of right and wrong now seemed a bit blurred, they'd have to wait and see. But all the same, the question taunted her, 'Was she wanted?'

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(As would be seen, the end of the VoidTreaders story was merely the beginning...)