

Rhydian's Missive

By Michael Fuchs

"Today is going to be brilliant." Rhydian had spoken those words many times to himself as the day passed. He had even believed them at first - that is before he had dropped the muckinger Ysolt made him in the muddiest of puddles on the way to Arte of the Booke. Now, it was a muttered reassurance to himself, especially after he found a hole in his coin purse that had been there for only the Lord of Light knows how long.

He wanted to gift Ysolt a fancy quill, one whose beauty only paled in comparison to her own. She deserved it after the verbal scolding that Robert O'Coppe had given her after the contract the Band of the Twisted Claw had signed with the now Lord Praetor of the Draco Disciples. The smirk and so oft-spoken words of sass were gone from Ysolt's lips, and he hated to see her that way. He remembered the look of betrayal on her face when the Council had been forced to agree to reinstate the Draco Disciples to their official county positions. Her mood in recent months was darker than the drenching skies of today. He had tried all of his usual charms on her, and not once had he made her smile. This was the last idea he possessed. He had always thought that material gifts were below personal gestures one could make, but beggars cannot be choosers.

Attempting to shake the dampness that had permeated his cloak, he entered the establishment. The owners had always been friendly to him and those in the Band. The shopkeep scoffed at the water he was spreading about, and then smiled at him. "Welcome! It has been awhile, Rhydian. Acquired any new wares on one of your excursions we might sell?"

Rhydian shook his head. "Nay, I only be here ta' purchase a quill. The most beauteous ye' have!"

The woman, with elbows on the counter, pressed her chin onto her entwined fingers and laughed, "Oh? Special occasion? Or...special someone? You have that look in your eye of someone smitten. It would be folly to attempt to deny it."

Rhydian tipped his cap. "Aye, ye' read me like the Bishop reads his scriptures."

The woman smacked the counter and laughed again. "I know just the thing then!"

She stepped away from the counter, stepping over various goods of paper, wax, and ink. There was a charm to it all, and she had been one of Rhydian's dependable clients of fencing what he smuggled into Bristol. It seemed she hadn't changed in recent years. It was welcoming to see something stable and in good spirits, unlike the Band. The woman placed a box on the counter and opened it. The click of the hinges brought Rhydian out of his thoughts, and he marvelled at the oaken quill. "May I?"

The woman nodded, and Rhydian picked up the quill. It was a beautiful piece, and the iconography etched into the wood leading to the quill's tip was stunning at such close range. "Alright, lass. Ye sold me. How much?"

She smiled. "Normally, I would charge twenty-five angels, but since you are such a good supplier, twenty for you."

He frowned as he counted the remaining coins that hadn't escaped his coin purse. Seeing the trouble look on his face, the woman spoke. "Hmm. I misspoke. That is for the box and the quill. If you only wanted the quill, I could part with it for what you have in your purse there."

Rhydian beamed and emptied his purse onto the counter. "It is a deal!"

Moments later, Rhydian strolled out of the shop. Ysolt would love it! Today was starting to look up! He'd take it back to her, present it to her, and hopefully she would smile as she so often used to when Talia and her would draw together.

Rhydian twirled the quill between his fingers. His fingers deftly moved it about as he smiled to himself.

"Oopfh!" He coughed as the air forcibly left his lungs. A burly man in commoner's attire rushed passed Rhydian with a look on his face as if he had a mission. Cursing the man, Rhydian dusted himself off to ensure he was alright. He flexed his fingers. Wait. Where was the quill?!

He frantically searched the ground, and that's when he heard the sickening crunch of the man's foot finishing off Ysolt's gift. The man continued down the street, seemingly unaware he had bumped into Rhydian or ruined his day.

Rhydian sighed and slumped down onto the muddy street, cradling the pieces of the quill. Now Ysolt wasn't going to smile. He smashed a fist into the filthy water and discarded the pieces of the quill. Perhaps he would tail the man and give him a piece of his mind. He continued to think of ways that he could make himself feel better, when he noticed the man had also dropped a scroll when he had bumped into Rhydian. "Good...at least I should be able to figure out who the wee bastard be."

Rhydian opened the scroll and consumed its contents. He paled for a moment at its words, and then the biggest grin played on his lips. Praise the Lord of Light. This would surely make Ysolt smile.

Ysolt sighed. "Why did you force me to come meet with the Council, Rhydian? The less I have to deal with Robert and Falco the better."

Rhydian brandished the scroll and smiled. "Now, now. I'll reveal your present soon! I am quite certain that what I have found will make your night. Perhaps your entire month!"

The Council shuffled into the Band of the Twisted Claw's training camp as a single body. Robert O'Coppe, council member for the warriors, led the group. He was followed by Vashta Nerada, council member for the mages. Behind her, Falco Amadeus, council member for the bards, muttered to himself as he flipped through the pages of the tome he carried. Lillith Sparrow, council member for the rogues, shifted behind him and attempted to encourage him to walk more expediently.

Robert nodded at Rhydian and Ysolt. "Very well. Rhydian, Ysolt. You asked us to gather. What urgent business do you have with the Council?"

Rydian toss the scroll at Robert. Raising an eyebrow, Robert asked, "What is this?"

"The solution to how we will reinstate the Dracos to their positions." Rhydian smiled.

Ysolt sighed. "You mean us to think that you randomly obtained a scroll that answers all of our problems? The Council got us into this mess. It has been months and they have no solution. Honestly, you are worse than Falco and his nonsense he prattles out."

Falco's face twitched for a moment. He looked Ysolt in the eyes. "As a bard, I can tell when one speaks truth, and when one speaks lie. Rhydian is telling the truth, or at least believes he is."

Vashta nodded. "Come, lass. I know you da' not like the contract. None of us do. We di'nt have any choice."

Lillith smiled softly. "We must remain as one family. We will create a better future for all of us this way."

Robert cleared his throat. "If you all are done, I have read the scroll." Robert looked to Rhydian. "Where did you get this?"

Falco peered over Robert's shoulder. "What does it say?"

Robert ignored the bard and asked once more. "Where did you get this, Rhydian?"

Rhydian shrugged. "I was walking down the road and a man bumped into me. He dropped it."

Robert set down the scroll and pushed it away from him. "This is much larger than us if it is true."

Lillith snatched the scroll from the table. "Now, now. Share with the rest of us!"

She unrolled the scroll and read. "My patience is thinning. His spies evade us and muddle our efforts. If we are to poison her so that I may claim what is rightfully mine, it must be done soon. On the eve of the winter solstice, administer the poison. Elizabeth will die and the people will panic. Then we will march in, sweeping away the rest of her pitiful court. You will receive the tincture at a later date. For now, get as close as you can to her. Signed Mary Queen of Scots."

There was a silence in the training camp. Falco grabbed the scroll from her hands and reread it. "Oh."

Ysolt paled. "If this is true, Her Majesty is in danger."

Vashta's face hardened. "We will not let that happen."

Falco nodded. "I will alert my spy network immediately and see if we can arrange a meeting with Sir Francis Walsingham."

He ran off, leaving the other Council members alone with Rhydian and Ysolt. Rhydian smiled grimly. "It is a dire situation, but it is the opportunity we need."

Peter's Goddess

By Analisa Mundell-Wachowiak and Sandra Howard

Efah stood in her darkened study, deep in thought. It had been a long day—several long days strung together in fact—but at last she was beginning to feel that she had done what she could to protect the new Praetor from dangers that were beyond the purview of Liam or Aiden, competent though they might be. Lord Hellebore faced dangers far more dire than a physical threat in his position and power, dangers that Efah understood all too well. She had failed the last Praetor; she would not fail again. The mere thought was worse than a knife to her heart.

Lord Hellebore had given her a great gift at the last Feast of the First Praetor: two small vials of his own blood and trusted her to put them to good use. One had already been used to craft the amulet he now wore at all times. Some of her own blood had gone into the making of that one, and it contained some of the most powerful wards she had ever invoked. Yet she feared it might not be enough.

There were always dangers that she could not foresee, and the fatuous advice to “expect the unexpected” was hardly sufficient. She would have to delve deeper, seeking things hidden, plots perhaps not even yet formulated, to protect him even further.

Her mind finally settled, she prepared for a deep scrying. Moving into the tiny inner chamber of her quarters, she lit the candles and incense that would help her see through the mists, laid out her scrying stone, and finally brought out the small vial of the Praetor's blood. Seating herself in her favorite chair, she let a few precious drops of blood fall onto the stone, and opened her mind to receive what it would reveal to her. When the vision came, though, she was more puzzled than enlightened. This was a puzzle that was not hers to solve though -- in the morning she would seek out the Praetor, that he might make of it what he could.

Efah was there waiting as Peter approached his office the next morning, and she lost no time in drawing him into his office and closing the door. Once in his office, though, she hesitated to speak, instead pacing nervously to the window and back. “My lord Praetor, I must speak with you on a very urgent, and very private, matter.”

Peter had never seen, never even imagined, a nervous Efah. “Please, Lady Efah—speak your mind freely, whatever it may be.”

At length she turned and faced him. “My lord, I had a vision that I find most troubling. Last night I attempted a scrying, seeking any hidden or unknown dangers that might face you, that I might strengthen the wards and protections I have already begun. To strengthen the scrying, I used a few drops of the blood you gave me. At first I saw nothing, but at length I saw a door before me, shrouded in mist. As I approached it to see what this hidden danger might be, a hand drew a curtain across the doorway, blocking me from entering, deliberately keeping the sight from me.”

Here she paused, steeling herself for what she must say next. “The hand, my lord, was yours—it is you who keeps some secret that poses a threat to you or perhaps to the Disciples. I did not seek to pass the curtain, for I would not dishonor your wishes thus. But I beg of you, look into your heart, and ask yourself—ask our Goddess Tiamat—what it is that so threatens your

safety, or ours. If it is something with which I may help, you need only ask. But whether you share this secret with me or no, I beseech you to take precautions. The Disciples have need of you." She turned and left without further comment, leaving him to ponder her words.

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It had been months since this encounter, and it had given Lord Peter Hellebore time to think about how he approached his methods. He was fully aware of the threat his secret posed to himself -- to the Disciples even -- if it were to be discovered. This was why he kept the secret locked away from even himself in the coming of his Praetorship. It took so much strength of mind in order to keep a Keeper as strong as Efah out. However, pondering on the matter only gave the lock upon the door more strength. The door had been kept locked for so long, it was no match for anything to break through.

In a sudden surge of emotion, Peter reached for his quill and began to think hard on what words would flow. It only took a few seconds before he began to write every single detail that came to mind. It had been too long since he had written a letter of this length and passion. What could he possibly say to describe such beauty and grace that he saw so long ago? Who was he kidding? What he saw was surely as beautiful in every way possible since the day he first saw her. He was overcome with a warmth in his heart. He thought of his Goddess once again and smiled. The mere thought of her made his hands tremble for a fraction of a second before he regained his composure once more to continue his missive. Peter was in a paradox of writer's block where he could write forever but at the same time was stuck on what to write next. It is so hard to describe when there is too much perfection for words. It was she who was his true inspiration for his spirit, a stimulus for affection, a muse for everything creative in his very being. With a final thought, he closed his letter with a shower of compliments to her. It was the only thing he could think of to do. He had not spoken to her since the summer and with his recent title of Praetorship he had become far too busy to actively speak to her. It made him sick to think that he was ignoring her, but finally with the calm of winter he could face the feelings he kept hidden for so long.

Peter folded the letter in his hands and lifted it to his face where he planted a brief kiss on the fold. The letter was then met with hot wax and a stamp of a seal to show that it was ready to be sent off for delivery the day next.

"To my Goddess." Peter whispered.

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The morning snow sparkled under what sunlight could peak through the clouds. The wind was still, and the only noise that could be heard so early in the morning was the sound of Lady Efah carefully transferring notes from one page to another as she sat at her desk. The Draco Pavilion was unusually void of Disciples or Acolytes, and Lady Efah took the chance to catch up on her notes. They all would be back soon, as they always are. With a winter day as serene as this, it was only smart to take advantage of it and get any more supplies they may need to carry on their comfy living inside the Manor.

As she reached over her desk to re-dip her quill, she felt a disturbance from behind as the pavilion curtains were drawn away to reveal her Praetor.

“Lady Efah,” he started, as his faithful Keeper carefully placed down her quill and stood to meet her Praetor with respect. “did my sister give you a time as to when she would return? I have a letter that must meet a postrider by sunset, and she must be here to deliver it.” He fiddled with the letter in question between his hands. Peter looked off into the distance as if she were within eyesight of the manor, however this proved false.

“My Praetor, I believe Lady Poppy was to return in but a few moments. She spoke of reading cards for a family a few doors down from the military station.” Efah explained what she was told an hour ago before Poppy’s leave, “However, if it is urgent I could make my way to the gate and deliver your missive in her stead.” She extended her hand to take the letter from Lord Hellebore.

“No!” His hand pulled back fast before she could even come close to it. There was a moment of silence before Peter cleared his throat to say something. Realizing he may have been far too curt, he quickly tried to explain.

“No. I am quite sorry, but Lady Poppy is the one who must take it. I hope you understand. It is quite a walk away and I need you here at the manor.” His eyes did not meet hers as he spoke.

Lady Efah furrowed her brows at Peter’s hasty response. Surely her Praetor could trust her with a simple letter? There was the slightest bit of uneasiness in Peter’s voice as he spoke, but Efah chose to put her own concern aside. Efah lowered her hands to once again clasp them together at her front. “Of course, my Praetor. As soon as she arrives I shall be sure to escort her to your study.”

Peter smiled and nodded at the woman before she returned back to her ink and quill, and he in turn returned back into the shadows behind the curtain. His walk back to his study was rather short since he strode in quick long steps. Once he closed the door behind him he proceeded to finish signing a few more official documents and read a few legal deeds he was handed. Seconds turned to minutes, and minutes to hours, and as time grew so did Peter’s agitation. He rose from his chair and began to pace back and forth between his desk and the mantle of what was once a much used fireplace across the room. Peter needed to get the letter sent *now* if it were to reach its destination in a timely matter.

Walking faster from one place to another, Peter was just about to finally take the letter to the postrider himself before he was interrupted by a knock at the door. Relief washed over him as he went to let in Lady Poppy who closed the door behind them.

“You know, you have a fine working pair of legs yourself that are perfectly capable of delivering these,” she said as she shed her winter cape onto a nearby chair. She had just started to kick the snow off her boots when Peter thrust the letter towards her to take.

“I do not wish to be seen by any of the Travellers corresponding outside the gate. They will become panicked if any of their rogues see me trying to sneak things out in the open like this. Besides,” His glare became intense, and was as sharp as the paper he had written on, “I cannot keep my Goddess waiting. You and I both know this.”

Despite the seriousness in her brother’s voice, Lady Poppy let out a sigh. She had just gotten back to the warmth of the Manor and now she once again had to trek through the snow.

"You're lucky it is a lovely day outside. Perhaps you would enjoy it if you came out of your office more," she teased and took the letter.

Peter rolled his eyes and chose to ignore his sister's comment. "Be sure it gets to the postriders before nightfall."

As Poppy left the room, another figure glided past her before the door could close. A door never closes in Lady Efah's face.

"My Lord Praetor," Efah began, "please excuse my intrusion but I feel I must express something as I could not help but overhear the last part of this conversation. In all due respect, if the letter was for the sake of our Goddess, I, of course, am always willing to be of service."

Peter looked perplexed. Efah, also a tad confused herself that her Praetor seemed to not understand what she was expressing, elaborated on her statement. "Allow me to explain. You were in need of someone to deliver a missive to a postrider regarding our Goddess. If anything ever is needed to appease her or needed to show her our support and admiration for her then I wish to be a part of making sure it happens. It was a matter of fact for a Disciple to do what it takes for our Goddess, even the simplest of tasks are not excluded from this."

As her words registered in Peter's head, he nodded in agreement, "Of course! That is what you meant, and that is what I was speaking of with Lady Poppy. *Our* Goddess, of course. Praise be to her, and grammercy for your concern!" his words were as choppy as they were awkward. The unlikeliness of him saying something so different from his character was an immediate mental red flag to Efah. The emphasis on 'our', though frequently used before when speaking of their Goddess, seemed so...strange in the tone he used it in just now. As if he were surprised that the Goddess that she spoke of were any other. Truly there are many gods or other aetherial beings within the Astral Realm, Efah of all would be familiar with this. Regardless of this fact, there is only one Goddess that is Tiamat. Before she could even so much as open her lips to say another word, she found that her hand had been taken into Peter's as he escorted her to the door.

In an attempt to weasel his way out of an awkward situation, Peter transitioned the subject matter to another. "Once Liam and Lady Poppy have returned, we should speak of the matter of the Travellers. I want to be sure we keep in touch with them so as not to rouse suspicion by keeping them in the dark for too long. The plan itself may take a few weeks to construct, I am sure. Which is why we must act fast in creating it as soon as we can." It had not taken them long to reach the door where Efah turned on her heels to face Peter. She wanted to say something. To tell him that he was acting off, daresay even question him.

"Yes, my Praetor." she nodded. Efah turned to walk down the hall and return to her seat at the front of the Pavilion, leaving Peter to once again work in his study.

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"Excellent. Then you all know what to do." Peter stood before his Disciples, and with a final phrase concluded their meeting, "Go in chaos, and serve our Goddess."

They all murmured in unison in response to their Praetor, "Praise be to Tiamat." Then one by one, the Disciples made their way out the doorway as Peter sat back down at his desk.

All had finally left, except one. Lady Poppy stood before Peter for she had urgent business to discuss with her brother. Ever since the day Peter rekindled his motivation to write these letters, poor Poppy had been running errands left and right for weeks - all of which had been delivering his mail to the postrider to be further delivered. Years before Peter's Praetorship she had been helping him do this, and to be honest she took a bit of revelry in the few months where she finally had a break from all the secret corresponding.

"I cannot keep doing this forever, you know." she said frankly, "I have been helping you hide your little secret from mother and father, even from our own Disciples for as long as I can. Do you not think they will find out soon enough?" With one hand on her hips, she used her free hand to gesture to another slip of paper that had already started to be written upon, "And a horse can only move so fast with a man and paper on its back. More letters are not going to make the delivery process any faster!"

Peter forced his features to project the impression of full attention, though in truth his mind wandered far afield as he listened to Poppy, once again, express her concerns over what sacrifice Tiamat was going to require of him to cement his position as Praetor. And her even greater concern that he, himself, seemed not in the least concerned. At length she paused, and he regarded her with a loving, if slightly condescending, smile. Peter cocked his head as he thought, but was interrupted before he could speak.

"Peter, you cannot keep this going. I want to be supportive of you, and I want to see you be happy. However, I have an inkling that our Disciples may be becoming suspicious of your...activities. What if a Keeper's hands get on that letter, even the quill that you even wrote it with?" she stopped to take a breath. Peter looked down at his hands which had been stained with ink. He had tried effortlessly to clean them in hopes of hiding how often he had been stuck in his study writing his letters instead of reading the legal documents handed to him by Liam. "They will know, Peter. You and I both have seen the powers of a Keeper, and surely even Lady Efah herself could get an idea of what is in that letter if she so much as brushes against it"

Peter held up his index finger in a shushing manner, and there was a force around Poppy's face that compelled her lips to suddenly lock shut. "I can sense you are distraught by my efforts, and for that, I apologize. If it means anything to you, I will admit I was a tad too hasty in sending out so many letters." he lowered his hand. Though this action was also meant to allow his sister to speak, Peter fondled the half-written letter in his hands.

"Dear Poppy. As always, I appreciate your concern for me. But we have been through this time and again, and you really must put your fears to rest. My selection as Praetor was like no other. We should not expect the other aspects of the tradition to remain unchanged either. Times are different-- I am different --my election was different. Tiamat needs no further assurance of my devotion and loyalty to her. Clearly she has all the confidence in me that she needs, and there will be no more demanded of me. Now please, stop fretting, and cease rehashing a topic which I will now consider closed." With that, he turned back to the paper in front of him and left Poppy to take the hint and leave him. Following Poppy's leaving, there was a sudden but faint knock on the door. He raised his head before carefully hiding the letter beneath some other papers, "Come in."

Lady Efah opened the door, and in her hand were about a dozen of the letters Peter had written in the previous weeks. The look on Efah's face was not one of anger or disgust, but a cold look of sternness. Though deep in her eyes was pity. Peter tried to hide how surprised he

was; however, he could feel a single drop of sweat begin to build at the top of his head. For the first time in so long, he felt nervous.

“Lady Efah.” he gestured for her to come in.

“My lord. There are times when the answer to a mystery reveals itself to be more painful than the previous uncertainty.”

He looked at her, confused— even for Efah this was a rather cryptic opening. Before he had a chance to ask what in Tiamat's name she meant, she continued, “As the Chosen of Tiamat, you have, as you know, my loyalty and my obedience. I would not presume to pry into your business, to read you or anything of yours without your leave. However, there are times when, as a Keeper, I cannot shut out the truth of something that comes unbidden to my hand. One of the letters that came for you this day spoke to me thus. Nay, it shouted to me — in anger and hatred, or near to it, such as I have not felt in a letter since...well, since I wrote my final letter to my son Edmund.” she paused to pull out a single letter from the bundle which were addressed to Peter. “I understand many things now — my mysterious scrying, your reluctance to allow me to carry letters to ‘our Goddess’ for you, and of Poppy's unease. I will leave you to peruse it yourself now, while I retire to my study to ponder what has happened.”

Efah placed everything on Peter's desk, and left without any more words. He would know soon enough.

Peter sat at his desk, took up the top letter -- yes, he recognized the hand and knew at once who had sent it -- and read:

*Lord Peter Hellebore,*

*Though I find myself in no small way afear'd lest I offend your esteemed person, nonetheless my anger and dismay is now such that I can be silent no longer.*

*I know not what madness or ill humour has overtaken your Lordship, or whether it has merely seemed amusing to you to torment me and destroy our childhood friendship, but I beseech you to bring it to an end. I chose to view your first missive from a few weeks prior as no more than an ill-chosen jest. That you have continued to write with increasing amount, and increasingly disturbing ardour, cannot be so easily dismissed.*

*Are you descended into a mad illusion that has allowed you to imagine some "eternal love bond" in place of our childhood friendship? Or do you perhaps imagine that your exalted title and position allow you to construct a world to your liking, compelling those of us beneath you to bow to your whims?*

*Allow me to speak in plain syllables -- you have destroyed what friendship there was between us with your unwelcome ravings. I have shown your missives to my father. Should you persist in this madness, he will carry them to your father. Do not, I pray you, attempt any further communication. Any future letters will be returned unopened, and the servants have been instructed not to admit you to our home.*

*--Rebecca Appleyard*

At first he was stunned, unable to comprehend what he was reading. He read the letter again, and then a third time. He ran his hand over it, seeking desperately to make some sense of what he was reading. At length he ceased his attempt to understand, and sat staring at it, almost unseeing, until he heard a soft knock at his door and looked up to see Poppy enter. She immediately saw the piles of returned mail on Peter's desk and knew that what Lady Efah had told her in passing down the hall was true. Poppy had an inkling something was wrong when none of the letters had gone responded, however this was far worse from what she thought the reason would be.

"Peter..." she began.

Peter raised a hand to indicate that he wished for silence for the moment. He read the letter again just to be sure that what he had in his hands were true. That what Efah said was true. From the paper, he too could tell there was a sense of disgust that seemed to scream from the paper at him.

If he had any less self-control, Peter would have torn the paper up and gone to confront Rebecca himself. Right now, he was too busy using that control to keep himself from letting all his tears flow forth from the deep despair he was feeling. Years, he and his dear Rebecca had exchanged letters of love and sweet thoughts. A childhood friendship which bloomed into an eventual romance. In their early adult years, Peter and his sweet goddess had been together through so much. In their youth, Peter's family would not allow someone of his station to marry a lowly Appleyard girl. As much as they tried, their attempts to convince their family was in vain. As it turned out, Mistress Appleyard's parents were not too fond of the Hellebore family. They heard rumors that they were apart of a "cult" instead of following the church of the state. It was heresy, and their daughter would not be wed to a family of a religion that were not their own, regardless of how rich they were.

This did not stop the sweet lovers from meeting, however. They would always exchange words of loving promise in their letters to one another and meet secretly in the apple orchard behind her family's home. So how could she suddenly take all of that back? Was it because he had not written her since his Praetorship? Surely it was only a few months, and they had known each other for so long she would understand if he had suddenly gotten too busy to write. It was as if the Rebecca he wrote then was no longer the Rebecca that was now.

"Peter." Poppy interrupted her brother's train of thought. "I did not speak long with Efah. I had seen her earlier with the bundle of letters and knew it was too late to stop her from knowing what was written. All she said to me was 'Tiamat always takes what she needs' and I knew she had already spoken with you."

Peter thought about these words that were spoken to Poppy. He handed her the letter, and pondered still while she read it. He could not look at her, lest her reaction destroy what little control he had. As she finished the letter, the door opened again, and Efah quietly entered the room.

"To be the sole voice of Tiamat, to be intimate with her as no other may be, is a great gift. And the gifts of Tiamat come always with a great price. Learn from this,

and rejoice that she has found you worthy. Tiamat expects to be loved solely. You cannot hold another Goddess above her.” She turned and left as quietly as she had come, leaving Peter to take what comfort he could from Poppy’s love and sympathy, and the knowledge that he was, above all else, the Chosen of Tiamat.

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**A Yuletide Plot**  
By Kody Raslawski

The Council sat in reflection on the excitement of recent events. Vashta worried over her staff; it would be safe to say that all of the marks, and there were many, would pale in the comparison the amount that would soon cover it. Robert paced like a caged buck, eyes searching for the nearest threat that wasn't there, at least not in the room. Lillith fiddled with her most recent puzzle, though the concern showed in even the youngest council member's eyes. Falco wrote in his journal, and swore under his breath every time he pressed too hard upon the page, making a mess with the ink. The Band may have saved the world from dragons, evil cults, and horrific snake goddesses; all of these however, paled before their most terrifying foe of all time: courtly politics.

This newest foe was indeed terrifying, but the Band was more quick on their feet, and nimble with the warp and wend of the mind than one would expect.

Robert broke the silence, "Alright, Falco, your spies have made contact with Sir Francis Walsingham, aye?"

Falco smirked, "Aye, Robert, we have made contact and only presented the barest taste of the information we have to guarantee a meeting with Sir Francis. I do believe it will go wonderfully."

"Very good, lad, that is one of the Queen's advisors in on the meeting. Now we need only convince Baron Burghley," said Vashta.

Lillith spoke up, "Aye, about that, I had spoken to the Disciples as we discussed, we should be hearing from them soon en--"

The room silenced as the door opened to Robert's home, their base of operations for the plan. "Well, well, well, what a pleasure seeing all of *you* here." The mocking tones of Kit Mandrake's voice scraped against them like a rasp

"Kit, I assume you're here with proper cause?" growled Robert.

"Oh, of course, Robert, I would *never* intrude on the business of the peasantry without proper cause."

Robert bristled, but Falco cut him off before he could respond to the rogue, "So, the Disciples have contacted Lord Burghley then? Has he agreed to assist us in this most...delicate manner?"

"Yes, Master Amadeus." The rogue grinned seeing Robert bristle more. "You will find Lord Burghley awaiting you alongside Sir Francis."

"That's grand, now get out of my house," sneered Robert.

"Gladly, Robert. You may need to replace the lock."

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Sir Francis watched the assembled Council like a hawk looking over its prey. William Cecil, the Lord Burghley, looked upon them with a look less predatory, but no less threatening. This was perhaps the most important part of the plan for the Band.

“So, thou hast mentioned that thou hast acquired a missive from Mary Queen of Scots, our sources affirm the truth of this statement. However, we would like to see it with our own eyes,” spoke Sir Francis.

Falco produced the missive, “Of course, Sir Francis. Here is the missive that one of our agents did acquire from one of Mary’s spies. You will see that it is indeed authentic, and in her own writing.”

The two nobles studied the scroll, and Lord Burghley’s brow furrowed. “Thou shouldst have brought this to us sooner. The winter solstice is not that far off!”

“We are aware of this, Lord Burghley. However, we have already set in motion a counter strike, and with your assistance, we guarantee the success. Is that not correct, Lillith?”

“Aye, it is, Falco. My Lords, we have Scots among our own within the Band here in Bristol, and we have already gotten a few of them within Mary’s spy network within the city. Not only have we identified their members within the city, but with your assistance, we will be able to without a doubt, make certain Mary is implicated in the attempt on Her Majesty’s life.”

The two nobles stood in stoic silence for a moment contemplating. “Alright, thou mayst explain.”

Robert stepped forward, “I am glad you are willing to participate, my Lords. Here is how it we have planned it. One of our spies has worked their way into the group that is going to attempt to poison Her Majesty. They will stop the attempt before it e’en begins. Furthermore, some of my handpicked men will be there to stop the runner from getting the message to Mary’s troops. Once we have captured the messenger, they will be delivered to your doorstep, Sir Francis.”

Lord Burghley nodded. “This sounds all well and good, but what is it that thou planst to get out of it?” His eyes scanned over the Council members, waiting for one of them to slip.

Vashta piped up, “Ah, my Lord, ye are as wise as ye are cunning. We only ask two things o’ ye. One, be that in the course of these events that none of our own will be harmed by your troops, and two being that you pass a good word of us, the former Justice of the Peace, and all o’ his own for us. For ye see, Master Bloodroot, and all of his assistants did assist us in rooting out the spies.”

The noblemens’ eyes shifted, and made contact with one another. Sir Francis replied, “That can be arranged.”

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The winter solstice. The longest night of the year. The perfect time for a plot or to foil one. The pieces were in place -- all that needed to happen was for Mary's men to make their move. The warriors and mages were in place; Robert and Cale hone their blades, while Vashta and Holly readied their spells. Falco and Ysolt were in disguise waiting for the opportune moment to reveal the spy, while Lillith and Rhydian hid in the castle waiting for the moment to steal the poison from Mary's assassin. Meanwhile, Sir Francis and Lord Burghley waited near Her Majesty in the event that the Band failed, Lord of Light forbid.

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Suddenly, like a gust of winter wind, everything was set into motion. Mary's spies set out from their place in the servants quarters, making their way to the dining room where Her Majesty was waiting for her meal. At the same time, a runner was sent to rendezvous with Mary's troops.

Two spies sent to poison the queen's meal went off to the kitchens -- they didn't notice they were being tailed. They also didn't notice when their pouches were swapped with two others by the two master rogues. The only addition to Elizabeth's meal would be a little bit too much salt. Rhydian and Lillith had done their part, now it was time for the rest of them to do theirs.

Inside the dining hall, the nobles were enraptured by Ysolt's dancing and Falco's prose. Little did they know that a bard is always alert. When the two of them saw the two servants marked by the emerald green pouch upon their belts enter the dining room, they paid attention. The moment they saw them attempt to add something to the dish about to be placed in front of Her Majesty they called for alarm. The guards, all of which had been hand picked by Sir Francis and Lord Burghley moved into action to apprehended them. The spies attempted to bolt upon being caught, but almost like they had been expecting this very thing, guards appeared blocking every door. What a strange coincidence, it was almost like it was planned.

A look of concern appeared on Vashta's face as she and Holly peered into her scrying bowl. "Robert... I believe we have a problem."

"Something had to go wrong." Robert, dressed in his winter clothes, and fur, truly played the part of his Viking roots. He trudged over to Vashta, "I overheard Falco say earlier 'what's the worst that could happen'". Robert leaned over the scrying bowl and saw the image within. The runner was indeed coming, however, so were his four guards. Robert frowned. "Bollocks."

The team lept into action. Vashta immediately entered the throws of casting a magical root, thin as a string, but strong as steel. It sprouted from the ground and stretched across the path. The perfect trip wire. Holly readied her spell, one that she had been saving just for this occasion.

Robert and Cale were a little less refined in their preparations. Cale centered himself and held his blade before him. Robert drew a stone from his pocket and focused on it, by the time he had put it away, a strange feral glow shone from his steely eyes.

They hear the echo of footfalls off of cobblestone. It was time. The first of the guards ran through the gate, only to fall head first to the ground, knocked out cold by the trip root. Vashta smiled at her handiwork.

Cale, buckler in one hand, and sword in the other stood off against the other front guard. The guard went high, as did Cale's sword. However, the guard failed to pay attention to an important detail. He only noticed this when Cale's buckler hit him dead in the face. The guard collapsed with a groan.

The runner though sped off leaving his other two guards behind in a last dash to escape. Cale cursed, and Vashta said, "Language." Holly smiled at the exchange as she spoke the activating words of her spell, and a beam of pure force struck the runner and knocked him out cold, launching him off the road.

Robert squared off against the two remaining guards. His sword held at the ready and a cold rage across his face. One of the guards lunged at him. Robert just barely dodged taking a slash across the chest. He appeared unphased. Robert responded by striking furiously against the guard with a blow hard enough to launch the blade from the man's hand. He went down quickly in surrender. The final guard held his blade at the ready -- he was clearly the better fighter. Robert let out a low growl and advanced. They traded blows, and he and Robert each took their hits. The guard wasn't looking well, and Robert appeared unphased. They locked blades, and suddenly Robert kicked out and connected with the guard's knee. The man went down and looked up only to see the descending point of Robert's crossguard. The blow silenced the field.

Vashta ran over; she didn't have to get close though to see, "He's dead." She turned to Robert and saw him with that same cold look in his eyes, "Snap out of it, Robert! You're better than this!"

Robert shook off the trance upon hearing the healer's words. "No chances could be taken. We had to ensure the plan went through without a hitch. The death of a traitor is an acceptable consequence." He turned to the man, who kneeled before him, "You are being taken before Her Majesty under charge of treason. Know that I likely did that man a kindness, even though his blood now stains my hands...What was his name?"

The man stammered, "His name was Conrad, Conrad MacFife."

Robert nodded, a tiredness in his eyes, "A good name that, I will remember him." Robert turned to the others, "Let us make sure they will behave for the trip. Holly, the runner, you didn't kill him, aye?"

Holly nodded, a pride filled smile on her face, "Indeed he is alive, a new spell I've been working on, completely non-lethal, but it will hit even a grown man hard enough to knock them senseless."

"Excellent work, dear! Do ye hear that lad, ye'd best be on yer behavior with the lass," said Vashta with a mischievous look at Cale's direction.

Cale blushed furiously, but spoke, "Mistress Vashta and Master O'Coppe, the prisoners are bound for the trip, and the wagon is ready. What shall we do with the one that you..."

"That I killed, lad. I will load him into the wagon, and we shall cover him and hand him over to her Majesty's guards." Robert smiled, "We did good work tonight. We assisted in saving Her Majesty, and lifted a weight from our own shoulders."

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The Council, and their assembled Band members were called before her Majesty. As was expected, they revered before her, but Her Majesty, in her Grace, bid them rise. "I hearest from my advisors," she indicated Sir Francis and Lord Burghley, "that thou all wert indispensable in thwarting this scheme against my life, and for that I cannot thankest thou enough."

Lillith beamed, "It is all in a day's work your Majesty, we were just pleased that we could help you."

Queen Elizabeth nodded, "My advisors have also informest me of thine request, and do not worry, for all of the work thou hast done for the crown, we shall grantest thine request. That is the least that we might do for such diligent members of our kingdom."

Falco clapped and grinned, "We thank you, your Majesty, truly and deeply. If there is any service that you might require, we are always at your service" After Falco finished preening, he stepped back.

The Queen remained noble and stoic throughout, "The Band of the Twisted Claw has done good work for the city of Bristol since I granted citizenship. Once more, we thankest thou for thine noble work. However, it is late, and we must be rest for the evening, but know that I shalt rest easy, knowing that thou have made it so I may sleepest another night. Even if in the eyes of the public I cannot acknowledge thy works."

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The Band members were all pleased with their work. One by one, they nodded off in the vardo as it rattled along the roads back to Bristol. Robert smiled as he looked back from the driver's bench -- he saw Vashta curled up in her thick wool blanket, Falco was mumbling in his sleep, Lillith was curled up in her nest of cloth, and Cale and Holly snuggled together. They may all be a bit of a pain, but they were worth it too.

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## Efforts Rewarded

By Evan Devries & Michael Fuchs

For all the trouble the Band had been in the past, working alongside Robert O'Coppe had been more pleasant than Liam could have expected. That is except for the constant reminders of the friendship that they once had. It was hard to ignore the tension between them.

Since the Band's success in thwarting the assassination attempt on the Queen, Robert had been spending most of his days within the Manor and shadowing Liam on trips to Disciple outposts, only returning to the Band's plot to sleep and take part in Council affairs. It had been like old times. Neither of them had spoken much to each other at the onset of their new arrangement and it took quite a bit of effort from Robert to not rebuke Liam's orders at first. Eventually the two started to lock into sync with each other and a great deal of the formalities disappeared.

"Master Bloodroot." Liam's thoughts were broken by Lady Efah Gozerian addressing him from the doorway of his study.

"Aye, What news have you? Were our efforts successful?" Liam barely looked up from the map he was studying as he spoke.

"The Band of the Twisted Claw reports that the efforts against the Queen's life were foiled. I have arranged a meeting with their Council for within the hour," She replied.

"Ah, wonderful news. Let us summon the Praetor." Liam rose, grabbed his rapier, cloak, and hat, and then offered his arm to Efah and the two headed together towards the great room of the manor.

Upon reaching the room, Liam found the Praetor deep in thought in his chair. Liam reverenced the leader of the Draco Disciples and spoke. "Lord Praetor, Lady Efah has reported that the Band's efforts were successful and the Queen has promised our reinstatement - we meet with the Band within the hour. The only step that remains is to enstate Robert as Bailiff. "

"Worry not, Master Bloodroot. I am very aware of how we shall accomplish our task." Peter smirked.

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At the Band's encampment, Robert swung feverishly at the training dummy with his sword. His blond hair plastered to his face by sweat, despite the winter chill in the air. What had he done? Why did he agree to the deal in the first place? Bailiff was no position for him, given his temperament. How could he fairly and justly execute the laws of Bristol upon the group that took him in?

"Love?" Came a sweet yet trepidatious voice.

Robert turned to see his wife, Robin, standing behind him holding a pitcher of water in one hand and his best clothes in the other. "You are going to be late to meet Master Wright."

"To hell with this meeting," retorted Robert, half-heartedly. "I only agreed to do this to save the Band."

Despite his resistance, Robert took the pitcher, removed his chemise, dumped the pitcher's contents on his head, and let the water run down him in a half attempt to wash away the sweat. Without drying off, he took the clothes his wife had brought for him and hastily changed.

"You are too good for me, you know that?" Robert said as he kissed her on the cheek.

Robin smiled as rose tinted her cheeks. "Go, my love."

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The Town Square Public House was easily the largest of all the drinking establishments in Bristol, which made it a perfect meeting location. Safe, secure, and plenty of witnesses. Robert sat at a table, a cold glass of ale before him untouched.

Lord Peter Hellebore strode into the room and the air hushed. He surveyed the room as the citizens gave him deference, and then he waved his hand. Conversation soon started again. He made his way to Robert's table and sat himself down. Robert scrambled to reverence him, but Peter bade him stay seated. "Master O'Coppe, it has been far too long since we have had any dealings. I have seen you flitting about the Manor with Master Bloodroot, and I do hope you are finding him...respectful. Now that you two shall be working together, all things must be peaceful."

Peter raised his hand and a serving girl ran over. He looked at Robert's ale then her, and she hurried away to bring him a glass. She returned moments later. He thanked her and had a sip. "In truth, I was never much for ale. But one must always make changes."

Robert sat in silence.

Peter smiled. "Of course. Forgive me, Master O'Coppe, but I had hoped I would be meeting with your full Council this day. Master Bloodroot informs me your mission was a success."

Robert sneered. "They found themselves busy with other matters. I wished to spare them of such dirty work."

Peter laughed. "You amuse me, Master O'Coppe. I am glad that it is so, for I sent word this morning to the appropriate channels in the county. Come tomorrow, you will be Bailiff in service to the Lord Justice."

Robert's expression darkened. "What an honor, Lord Hellebore."

Taking another sip of his ale, Peter continued. "That is, of course, assuming you can produce a missive that states that our official positions within the county have been restored. I would hate for you to see the ramifications of breaking one of the tenants of our contract. You did sign it in blood, after all."

Robert tossed a parchment onto the table. "Here you are, Lord Hellebore. Signed by the Queen herself for our efforts in thwarting...that matter."

Peter reached over and rolled open the scroll. He quickly read over it. "Excellent. It pleases me to see that you had the foresight to have our members named by name and not by our organization. I am certain that prior mention was a foresight."

Robert sighed. "Indeed. Falco did some prying with creative wordplay, and it seems that the Queen had merely signed a missive produced by Master Wright before without writing it herself. He stated that she has no knowledge of the Disciples, as unfortunate as that is for us."

Peter smirked. "Come, Master O'Coppe. Let us take one day to not worry about Disciples and Travellers. Today begins a wonderful partnership."

As Peter drank and forced Robert into conversation, his ale continued to sit untouched before him. The meeting was long and tiresome, and for a man that did not drink, he felt very tempted at that moment.

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"As the Bailiff, I must adhere to the law and will be under the scrutiny of the Lord Justice and the Hellebores. So it is in your best interest to not break any laws." Robert paced in front of the members of the Band of the Twisted Claw.

Liam and Peter strode into camp, a brave move considering the power that could be thrown against them, but this time was different than the many times that they had waltzed into the Band's encampment before. "Master O'Coppe, please turn to face me. It is with great honor and the highest esteem that I bestow upon you by the Queen's order, the position of Bailiff of Bristol and the surrounding county." Liam produced a small bag and pulled out a gleaming black leather doublet and deep crimson shirt. "I believe you'll find the uniform of the Office of the Justice of the Peace suits you quite well."

The Band sat silently, uncertain of what to make of the situation. Robert eventually spoke up and accepted the gifts. "Gramercy, Lord Justice."

"I know it is a lot to take in." Peter smiled and began to walk away. He paused, turned slightly, and spoke, "As I said before, Master O'Coppe. This is the beginning of a wonderful partnership."

"I do believe the two of us will do great work together." Liam threw his arm over the shoulder of his former friend. "You'll see one way or the other that this was always how it was supposed to be."