

## The Watcher: Stars & Dust

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It was strange, being dead. Lord Peter Hellebore, former Praetor of the Draco Disciples had always considered the possibility of dying -- just...not sacrificing himself to weaken the Lord of Light and Tiamat to destroy them with the combined forces of the Band of the Twisted Claw and the Draco Disciples. How odd that fate should reveal the two gods were once one. How cruel that they should try to destroy the world for its impurities. When he had thrown himself into the aether portal that the gods had open, he was fully ready to cease to exist.

Then his sister had other ideas. Poppy had worked with the adventurers to bind his soul to Bristol. They succeeded, and tied a piece of him there. Now he was bound, unable to move on from the mortal plane. It was now his place to watch Bristol for the remainder of the mortal world's life.

He paused his thoughts.

It felt as if there was a tugging at his soul.

For a moment, he appeared again in Bristol. Was it Bristol? It certainly looked like it. But it felt off. Strange. He grasped the tarot deck his sister had used to bind him. The piece of his soul contain within wiggled away as he attempted to grasp it.

He understood.

The Disciples had always preached that the flames of Tiamat would burn the world so that it could be made anew. That was not what was happening. No. This was something else entirely.

He heard a voice, so very faint, in the nothingness with him. *You too must remember, Watcher of Bristol.*

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Sunlight sliced through the oak canopy, dust motes dancing, and Peter saw her. She was slight of frame, folded in upon herself. The old tome had her complete attention. Avis. Her name had been printed indelibly on his brain. What was once done to Drucilla, he inflicted that same dark deed onto her. The child was Paragon descended. Mayhap she would fare better than Drucilla.

He did not approach. He was captivated by the serenity of the scene before him. He lingered in the stillness. It was a pleasant relief from the chaos that churned through Bristol's summer. He watched a shadow detach and creep near the girl. He thought to call out -- to warn her -- but he realized there was no need.

Avis tipped her head, almost imperceptible, toward the movement. Her voice, quiet and profound, "You cannae rogue a rogue, Rhydian." Her eyes never left the book.

The shadow chuckled. Rhydian manifested and leaned in towards Avis. His eyes danced about, seeking anyone who might overhear. Rhydian whispered something to the girl. He then stood, stretching slowly. His eyes always watching. Avis hesitated a moment, set the book aside, then rose to her feet. Rhydian put his arm about Avis's shoulders and pointed to something beyond the Traveller camp. Again, he whispered to her. Rhydian smiled and winked. Avis leaned into Rhydian and he gave her a hug.

For a moment, Peter swore he saw a light in Avis' eyes at the prospect of mischief.

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Gazing over the little green bridge, Peter saw Talia jump up from a bench under the old oak tree and dash to embrace a woman with long black hair.

"Illyria!" Talia laughed. "It's been too long!" She raised her gaze to the stoic man clad in black leather and throwing knives. "And Daggs," she nodded solemnly. "It is good to see you both still traveling together."

Talia took a step back and confusion crossed her face. "But there are no other Guardians, yet you are here..."

Illyria settled her prize bracers back upon her forearms. She tilted her head to meet Talia's gaze. "Talia? Is something wrong?"

Talia's hands fluttered with panic. "Yes! Something is wrong. In my book..." she patted her skirts and pouches looking for her long-used black book. "I have it not. I gave it... to Morgan?" She shook her head fiercely as if trying to force her memories in order.

Daggs's stoic facade cracked a tiny bit. "Morgan is dead, Talia. Years ago."

Talia gazed at nothing upon the ground. "Yes, of course," she muttered distantly. "It was for Khatheri. About Morgan. I think."

Talia's hand closed upon something in her pouch. She stiffened and inhaled sharply. Her eyes flickered as if they were watching something only she could see. With her exhale, her entire body loosened again and she pulled a small black drop-pearl earring out of her pouch. Peter held back a cry of anguish.

Talia's face turned stone-serious as she looked to Illyria and Daggs. "This earring is the memory key for Rebecca Appleyard. It will show her the way to the final gift from the late Lord Hellebore. I couldn't remember to give it to any of the Godslayers... but nevermind that now. You two must find Rebecca. If she accepts the earring then, in theory, the spells within it should overcome the memory charms. Then, we'll have fulfilled the final wishes of Peter Hellebore. If not you, then deliver this to Derian Solarii - leader of the Order of Dusk and Dawn. He'll know who can assist you on the mission."

Illyria nodded and wrapped the earring in a muckinger before tucking it into her pouch. "Derian I know, but who is Rebecca? And why can you not come with us?"

Unwilling to hear the tale again, Peter left before her could hear Talia's reply.

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Kit sat at a writing desk, penning a letter. As his quill scratched across the surface he cackled to himself.

Madeline peered over his shoulder and smirked. "Dearest brother, why must you be so cruel? To write another letter to her, even though you have rejected her love."

Kit chortled. "Do not pretend you do not understand, my sweet sister. You continue to make poisons, and there is no one left to poison anymore."

Madeline smirked, eyeing the poison, and then her brother. "You are correct. You never know when you'll need them."

Kit's hand rested on the dagger he had hidden on his lap. For a moment, they sat looking at each other in silence, each of their hands on their respective weapons.

Then, laughter from both of them interrupted the silence. In their own, strange way, Peter realized they were happy.

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Peter saw Ysolt, Falco, and Talia sitting on a bench together in the glade. They seemed strangely sorrowful. Peter realized that this moment was important between the three bards. They were the progression of the bardic arts in the Band of the Twisted Claw. Talia Tale, the bard who taught Falco everything he knew of the art. Falco Amadeus, the bard who eventually became the Bardic Council member for the Band of the Twisted Claw. And, finally, Ysolt -- Falco's apprentice; the one who would eventually take his seat on the Council and move the bardic arts forward. They sat in silence.

Suddenly, Ysolt began to sing, just as she had earlier that summer. However, Peter realised that last verse was different. There was another line.

*Trapped once again in our Bristol to stay  
For as our world crumbles, only Saviors can away.  
Is this the end or beginning, who is to say?  
All we can hope is they Remember our names.*

She finished their song, and for awhile, the three bards sat there, unmoving. Peter was uncertain they knew how intune with Bristol's story they really were.

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How long had Peter been observing the mortals he had known in life? Days? Seasons? Years? It was difficult to tell. It was as if a shadow were cast over his vision. Sometimes things were so dark. He had to struggle to make the light appear again, so he could reach out once more. Was this normal?

He chuckled to himself. What was normal, really? In life, it was making plans to get revenge on Tiamat for what she had done to his true goddess, his true love -- Rebecca. How he missed her....

No. He needed to focus. On...whatever was happening. Just as the adventurers had to remember, so did he. He was the Watcher of this place. The one who would see every moment and remember it all for their sake. That they would not be forgotten to time. That they would not be gone forever.

It was a struggle, but the light appeared once more.

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Mimsy clapped her hands to a beat as Lucretia continued their game. It started off as a little activity of finding words that rhyme with each other, and soon it became a song as most games with Bards do. The second Strix sibling, Priscilla, had originally brought it up to the other two as something fun they could play in collaboration with one another to pass the time. Swaying to the hums of her sister and Mimsy's claps, Lucretia sang, "Down by the docks, where the ships sail 'way, back to their home, seafarers say," before she looked to her right.

Priscilla beamed, a bright smile on her face as it was her turn again. She paused for a split moment of time before she bounced in her seat. She sang along with Mimsy's beat, "Have you ever seen a fish, granting a wish!" she said through her giggles.

The other two paused to laugh as well before the game continued. Priscilla repeated the chorus, "Down by the docks, where the ships sail 'way, back to their home, seafarers say," then looked to Mimsy.

The Traveller Bard continued her clapping as it did not take her long before she spoke, "Have you and your friend, not want your story to," then she paused. Her hands were about to come together again before she slowly let them rest on her lap. She pursed her lips as she tried to think of a word to rhyme. Just before Mimsy had lost the word, Priscilla's humming had come to a cease just at the same time Lucretia tilted her head in thought. As if the air around them had absorbed the word Mimsy was about to say next, they too could not think of a word either. There was a moment of silence, no, a moment of shifting.

Peter blinked as the unspoken word was absorbed by the shifting aether within Bristol. The reason Mimsy could not speak the word was simple. It need not be spoken. It had already begun.

Lucretia's head tilted upright once more as she let out a huff. Her gaze went from Mimsy to her sister and she smiled. Picking up the beat by patting on her lap, Mimsy joined along by clapping her hands as Priscilla hummed.

Lucretia lightly swayed herself back and forth as she began the song, "Down by the docks, where the ships sail 'way, back to their home, seafarers say,"

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The clink of coins and rhythmic scraping of stone on steel drew Peter towards the old camp of the Band of the Twisted Claw. Vashta brushed past him, carrying a spool of string, and he followed her, unseen. The table at the camp was a mess of herbs, parchment slips, and coin stacks.

Lillith quickly counted out coins, placing them onto the parchment slips, each with names of those who had once been Travellers or Dracos. He spotted a slip with his own name and carefully brushed it away while Lillith counted the coins in her hand. Beatrice knelt in the dirt beside a pile of weapons, running a dagger across a whetstone on the bench. Vashta bundled sprigs of rosemary together, tying them at the top, and cutting the string with her dagger.

One of Vashta's sleeves caught a readied bundle and knocked it to the ground next to Beatrice. Beatrice set down the dagger roughly, and Lillith paused her counting at the sudden sound, looking across the table to the former zealot with some remnant of suspicion. Beatrice picked the bundle up, and handed it to Vashta. Lillith nodded to Beatrice, and all three women shared a slight smile.

"Debts?" Vashta asked Lillith.

"Paid in coin." Lillith replied. She turned to Beatrice. "Blades?"

"Sharp enough to cut out a traitor's heart" Beatrice replied before turning to Vashta. "Herbs?"

"Ready to hang."

Lillith held a final few coins in her hand, wondering how she had counted wrong, for a moment before setting them on the table and helping Vashta carry strands of herb bundles into

the vardo to dry. Beatrice held the dagger to the light. Her eyes glazed for a moment before she exhaled sharply, gritted her teeth, and turned back for finishing touches on the dagger.

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Poppy shuffled the deck one last time, the tarot cards weaved in and out, ready to intertwine and reveal suggestions of the future. Each card holding a specific memory of a Draco, or a Traveller. Some more than others. She let out a deep sigh, and finally accepted that a card was missing. Since the turbulent events of the summer, she had been shuffling her cards more and more and was now certain that a card had fallen out at some point. She took a measured breath and gently wrapped the cards up, then placed them all in a small ornate box. Poppy held her gaze on the box for some time before she locked it and slid it out of sight.

Peter sighed and whispered, "My dear sister. Stop fretting. It is time to move on."

For a moment, Poppy turned. "Peter?"

There was no response. Her face darkened as she left the room.

Also out of sight from her, was Lord Pippin Hellebore, eldest son of the Duke of Hamilton. With Poppy absent, Pippin crept in and pulled the box back out. His eyes swept over the familiar box and he quickly finessed the lock open without much effort. Taking a moment to delicately unwrap the cards within, he replaced a missing card back to its home. Then in another moment he was closing the box and locking it back up. A soft smile took to his lips and a single word barely above a whisper slipped out, "Rogued".

Peter was uncertain whether to be proud or annoyed with his brother's antics. He himself had never been the type for stealth and slight of hand -- rather, he excellent at manipulation of social situations. Still, it was good to see his brother trying to pull his sister from her habits in his own way. Poppy had always been far too serious. She needed to learn to relax -- to enjoy life.

Before Peter vanished, he chuckled. "Well done, brother."

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Darkness had fallen, and the city of Bristol was quiet. Winter had come, the first snow falling early that morning, and the early dark and biting cold had everyone snug in their homes

already. Efah walked through the quiet streets, keeping to the dark, away from the few lights that lit the occasional window.

The snow had been beautiful and serene when it fell this morning, but now, after a day of people, horses, and carts traveling the city, was churned and muddy. Efah's boots kept her feet warm and dry, and passed silently through the streets as she made her way to the gates of the city. She was wrapped in a thick, warm black cloak, and carried a bundle in her arms.

Passing through the gatehouse, though the guards would not remember her in the morning, she made her way cautiously to the barrier. Invisible to the ordinary population of Bristol, its precise location had been carefully mapped and memorized by the Disciples and the Band, for it marked the extent of their world now. One step too far and.... Abruptly, she shook her head, dispelling the temptation to cross that barrier now, before her task was done. Throwing back the hood of her cloak and taking off the gloves that made her hands clumsy, she placed her bundle on the ground, and opened it.

First out was the Lord of Light's dagger. It was powerless now, and she held it with unprotected hands as she tossed it silently across the barrier, watching without emotion as it burst into stardust. Next came Aria's prototype gem. It, too, flew across the barrier, burst into stardust, and was no more. Vlad's Chalice came next; even that failed to break her composure as she continued her task of destroying the last of the artifacts of the Old Days. There remained only a single item in her bundle, and she held now in her hand the Orb -- the Orb that had once contained the Vault of Tiamat.

The twice-damned and blessed Orb. The artifact that Edmund had sought, hoping, she knew now, to please and impress her. Until the foolishness of youth had convinced him that love was more important than duty, and he betrayed the Disciples for the life of a foolish girl. Her anger at him had long since died, her disappointment turned instead on herself. Now it was all she had left of him, and she would take it herself into the stardust.

And why not? She was herself a remnant of the Old Days, useless in this new world without Tiamat to serve. *"You shall not die so long as I have use for you."* Her promise and her curse from Tiamat. She had expected to die when Tiamat did, yet she lived long enough to bring it all to a final end -- the last of the artifacts, the last remnants destroyed so the new days could begin.

She let her cloak fall to the ground, and held the Orb in both hands, heedless of the cold, cradling it gently. She looked into the darkness, and could almost see the barrier, hear its whisper, feel it calling her, pulling her.



Slowly she felt the warmth of a peaceful mind envelope her. She had fulfilled all of her obligations, put all of her affairs in order, even severed the last of the blood bond she had to the orphans of the city. At last she could walk beyond the barrier with the Orb, with her son, and let those left behind move into the new world they faced.

*"Alone and unguided."*

The words invaded her mind, startling her back to the present. She looked around--no one was there. *Foolishness*, she thought. *I've fulfilled my obligations, and now I can go. I'm the last thing that can hold them back.*

*"The last to remember."*

There it was again. The last to remember what?

*"The last to remember what has been sacrificed, what price has been paid. The last to remember the lessons learned over the centuries."*

Damn. They might not want her "wisdom" any longer--certainly it was unlikely that any of the Band would -- but this could be her purpose. To be there if needed, if wanted, to offer the wisdom won of pain and sacrifice, to be a teacher again.

She stood a moment longer in silence, then tossed the Orb, gently this time, across the barrier. As it burst into stardust, she picked up her cloak and sack, and walked back into the city, as silently as she had come.

Peter stood in silence as he watched the battle within Efah. It was not his place to intervene. For once, he wanted her to be able to make a choice for herself. He was glad with the choice she made.

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Peter didn't know why he was here. This wasn't in Bristol. It was a scene of the countryside.

He heard her laugh, and he knew.

Rebecca.

His true goddess. His only love.

It was hard to make her out. The light was so dim here.

He saw her take something and put it on. Was it...?

Yes. It was. The earring.

As she put it on, he saw his memories fill her. She saw things through his eyes. Their love. Their promises. Every moment.

Peter stood before her for a moment. He knew she couldn't see him. He had no tie here.

Then, she looked at him, and she smiled. "My Peter. I will always love you. No matter where you go. No matter what you have done. In my heart, I will always remember our times together."

He smiled and reached out to her. He held her in his embrace. It was just how he had remembered it. "Rebecca... I'm so sorry. For everything."

Rebecca looked up at him and smiled again. "Quiet, my love. I understand. I think I would have done the same, if I were you."

He continued to hold her even as she began to fade in his hands. He looked down, and only dust remained.

He stepped away, but instead of feeling sadness, he only felt peace. This was how it was meant to be. The natural way of the word. As he walked from the orchard, he smiled to himself. "I will always love you."

And then, where Peter had been standing, only dust remained. He was with Rebecca at last.

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Dark.

It was so dark.

Peter tried to make the light appear once more. He tried to see them again. But the darkness was too much. He had to remember. He knew how important it was.

Remember...what? It felt so important.

He heard a voice whisper in the darkness. *Remember.* Did he know that voice?

*Peter! Remember! Please!*

He blinked. There was the finest spark of light. He grasped at it desperately. The voice was so faint. It seemed so far away. But he knew it. The sound of many voices together. The adventurers that had been in Bristol for many years. Together. As one.

*You must remember! For their sake! As we are!*

He saw them for a moment. He wasn't certain how. They were not bound here as he was. Prometheus, the most devoted to the cause. Derian, the tired soul who had found a new purpose. Dragon Wizard Joseph, who had sacrificed so much. The images started to appear faster. Miranda. Reyna. Maddy. He heard their voices louder. Fenn. Khatheri. Faylinn. So many others. They flashed faster and faster. He reached with all of their strength.

He touched the light.

He saw Bristol once more. Not as it was. No. His perception of creation had changed. He saw the world as it was -- made of stardust. All of it. Even in Bristol. However, he felt a peace in what he saw. The light was so bright in Bristol. He saw specks gathering dust around themselves, as if encasing themselves to guard them from whatever was coming. There was such hope in the very souls of those he had known.

He looked outside of the gathers of Bristol, and his soul shuddered. The light that was in the city did not appear there. There were pockets of darkness through the world -- places completely void of light. They swirled violently, and as they did so, they devoured the stardust of creation.

Bristol would be fine, though. He would remember. The adventurers would remember.

Right?

Then he saw it. There, in the center of the city, a tiny fleck of darkness appeared. It was no bigger than a pebble, but it began to swirl. One of the specks of light got too close, and then it was gone. The void pulsed, and grew. As it did so, it began to swirl more violently, consuming more of the stardust within the city.

No! He knew what that meant! Those souls that burn so brightly...

He tried to remember harder. He couldn't lose more. He had sacrificed himself so that they could be safe!

The darkness continued to consume and speck after speck of light vanished within. As he felt the tears falling from his face, something happened. The specks of light that remained began to flash. One by one their light grew. One by one their light began to link together. It flared out.

Peter was blinded. He blinked. He could no longer see Bristol.

He was not certain how to feel. Had his eyes played a trick on him? For a moment, right before he was blinded, it almost seemed as if the flash of light had forced the darkness to shrink until it did not exist.

He did not know.

The only thing he knew is that he must remember. He must remember as the Watcher of Bristol. If he did not remember, if no one did, how could he guess what the future would hold?