

The Rogue

The Paladin

“I have a plan,” the Rogue said, pulling his hood down.

Oh dear God, Peridora Proudhawk, Paladin of Calavia, thought. Please, please don't be like your last plan. Or the one before that. Or the one before that. . .

“Your plans are always so *interesting*, Rowan,” the Druid said, perching her chin on her palm.

“Yeah ‘interesting’ isn’t quite what I would call them,” the Wizard said. “Are we going to know what the plan is *before* or *after* you get us all killed?”

Rowan smiled. “Oh *please*. I won’t get you all killed! Have I ever let you down that badly?”

“Yes,” the group said, though Peridora held her tongue. It was against her oath to display such a lack of faith in her peers, even if she sometimes thought it was justified. Instead, she tried to calm her mind and relax her thoughts. She needed to be a hero today. She needed to lead her friends. Everyone had a role to play in this upcoming battle. The Rogue’s would just be unique. Like always.

“Oh, come on,” Rowan said, still smiling. “This time will be different. I *promise*. Everything will work out fine—I just need you to keep the dragon distracted while I prepare my knives.”

“You don’t even *use* knives,” the Fighter said. “Hells, I’ve never even seen you touch one of my sharpening kits—what on earth are you planning?”

Rowan only shrugged. “You’ll just have to trust me.” He winked at Peridora.

Peridora sighed. “We do trust you, Rowan,” she said. “You and your plan.” She’d decided to stop arguing with him long ago. Rowan always found a way to convince the others anyway, and they needed all the time they could get; afterall, they had a battle to win.

“Rowan will prepare his ‘knives’ while the rest of us deal with the dragon,” Peridora said, leaning into her leadership voice. “Now—Brann says he can call the dragon to us after Rowan sets spies inside his lair, so we need to be prepared with soldiers in the plaza, medics in a safehouse, and a way to keep the dragon from flying away.”

“I’ll have our armies ready to intercept the dragon,” the Fighter said. He was always reliable. Unlike Rowan, Peridora was completely comfortable depending on the Fighter for support in the upcoming battle. “We can hold Deathsarr off while Dreyrn and Wyndra cast their spells, but with all the attention focused on us we’ll need the help of you and your acolytes to heal our wounds, Cairn.”

The Cleric nodded. “You shall have our aid, Fellstar.”

“And I will prepare my circle,” the Druid said softly. “We will call on the earth and wind spirits to hold Deathsarr to the ground. He will be unable to flee this fight.”

Everyone turned to the Wizard, who had remained silent. She sat, pensive, scanning the battle plans and flipping quickly through pages in her spellbook. Then she closed her book, took off her glasses, and sighed, “Yeah okay what the fuck why not. I think I might have a dragon-killing spell.”

“It’s settled then,” Peridora said. She smiled at everyone standing around the table. These were her allies for nearly a decade now. They were the best friends she could’ve ever hoped for—even if that included the Rogue. “Heroes of Calavia! Let’s go save the world.”

The Bard

Brann Bragen, Bard of Calavia, yelped as Deathsarr descended on the plaza. *Perhaps my calling song worked a little too well*, he thought, dashing towards the safety of cover, soldiers pouring from alleyways behind him like folk hearing a free performance at the theater. *He was supposed to be sleeping, not wide awake and angry! Damn that Rogue, he woke the dragon early!*

“**YOU MORTALS THINK YOU CAN PLAY WITH ME!**” the dragon roared as he landed, a wave of heat rolling across the plaza and washing over Brann’s back. “**WHAT A DISGRACE. YOUR CORPSES WILL BECOME MY THRONE!**”

Brann slid beneath an archway and ducked through the adjacent building’s open door—just as a ball of fire narrowly avoided his head as it whizzed down the alley, melting the surrounding wall tiles as it went. Breathing hard, Brann glanced to the side where the Cleric, Peridora, and the Wizard watched the dragon through a slit window in the stone. He shifted to look as well, finally getting his first real glimpse of the titanic creature.

Deathsarr was enormous. Jet black scales across his body almost seemed to absorb the sunlight radiating behind his crown of spiked horns. Deathsarr’s wingspan stretched across the entire plaza, covering the area in shadow while he swept at converging soldiers with his claws. Behind the soldiers, the Druid and her followers had begun chanting, their voices like shifting earth and rushing wind, calling on nature spirits to bind Deathsarr to the ground. There could be no escape for the dragon. This was Calavia’s last stand. Today they fought against a future of fire.

But the Rogue was nowhere to be seen.

“Where’s Rowan?” Peridora asked. “He was supposed to come with the dragon!”

“Abandoned us, most likely,” the Cleric said. *She’s always hated that Rogue*, Brann thought. “Good riddance, I say. We won’t need his help, not with Mother Moon and her blessings.”

“Right well whenever your God wants to start healing those soldiers tell her they’re ready,” the Wizard said, shouldering her satchel. “I’m gonna go blast a hole in that thing’s heart before everyone dies.” Before she left, the Wizard turned to Peridora. “It will take a while for me to set up. Keep Deathsarr distracted for me.”

The group split off to join the battle, Cleric to the backline, Peridora to the front, and Wizard to the rooftops. Brann’s role was hardly finished either; he slipped back into the alleys, dashing through

side streets. Finally, he came to a low, heavily fortified building with several large open windows. Inside, his Orchestra sat nervously in their seats, clearly shaken by the dragon's arrival. Nodding to his students, Brann unsheathed the flute strapped to his hip.

"Alright! Orchestra—Ready—Your—Instruments!" Brann shouted, raising his flute to his lips, a combat hymn surging through his veins, ready and willing to burst forth. *It's gonna be a long day*, he thought.

But that's exactly why I'm here.

The Fighter

Fellstar Freeblade, Fighter of Calavia, had always believed he was good at killing. From the moment he picked up a sword he had a knack for cutting, a talent for dipping beneath an oncoming sword blow and sweeping his blade across his opponent's chest—sometimes taking a limb or two with it. It had been that way since he practiced on training dummies, to when he joined the Heroes of Calavia to hunt the Basilisks of K'morr, and to when he cleaved head from shoulders of Gormizon the Grafter, Vampire Lich King of San Derrigan.

Until today.

When the hundredth sword strike to Deathsarr's black-scaled leg ricocheted with an ear-splitting *clang*, overwhelming the sound of Brann's battle hymn and startling Fellstar from his combat stupor, Fellstar decided he had only ever been as good a killer as a tavern chef. Looking at his sword, named Kammeron Ilsiir by the elves of Wynderdal, he saw the edge had been chipped to uselessness. *Time to fall back on defense*, he decided. *Come on, Rowan. Where are you?*

"Soldiers!" Fellstar cried, trying to shout above the dragon's mocking roars. "Hold strong! Protect the mages—Protect each other!"

"**FOOLS! FOOLS! FOOLS!**" Deathsarr bellowed, sweeping his enormous tail through several ranks of soldiers. Fellstar watched good men and women fall to the blow, their screams cut short by their spines breaking. He grit his teeth. *You can't save them all.*

Then he saw the claw descending towards him.

Even as he leapt to the side, Fellstar was caught by the dragon's great talons, a sharp pain lancing through his side. He was lifted into the air by the attack, soaring over Deathsarr's spiny back, spinning wildly. A shout rang from below, and suddenly he slowed to a stop, hanging in midair.

Fellstar looked down to see the Wizard holding her crystal staff towards him, eyes flashing with arcane energy. She'd caught him with a spell.

As Fellstar floated towards a nearby rooftop, he got a good look at the battlefield. Deathsarr fought, surrounded by four armies, at the center of the plaza. Rushing wind clamped the dragon's leathery wings to his sides, but even still the creature wreaked havoc with his talons, carving through

rank upon rank of soldiers. Each strike was catastrophic, laying waste to dozens of lives. There was no way for the surrounding healers to save the soldiers fast enough. Their blessings fell on dead ears.

So much death, he thought. *And yet, it must be done. We cannot let Deathsarr have Calavia.* If the dragon was allowed to live, then everything else would burn in his wake. Everything these people had ever worked for would become ash. Nothing could survive in Deathsarr's world, where fire and rage ruled eternal.

Just before Fellstar landed, he watched Deathsarr unleash a wave of fire across his troops.

The Druid

Dreym the Decent, Druid of Calavia, watched bodies burn, crying because she could not help them.

If she moved, if she spent even a moment away from her circle of druidic followers, then their chant would falter, and both earth and wind spirits would lose the strength to continue binding Deathsarr's wings to his side, keeping him in place for the armies to attack.

The first wave of fire had been horrible to watch. The second was worse.

Like a tidal wave, the flames washed over hundreds of soldiers until crashing into the buildings surrounding the plaza, splashing and throwing up sparks and melted rock. Soldiers screamed as their bodies turned to ash. The Cleric's priests were collapsing all around, bodies unable to keep up with the demands of constant prayer and healing. From the surrounding rooftops, volleys of magical arrows rained constantly on Deathsarr's scaled hide.

They barely scratched the creature. The monster.

In the chaos between bouts of screaming and draconic roars, Dreym heard music. She'd always hated Brann's chorus of string and pipe instruments. It made her feel like she should be happy. Should be brave. But she was neither. The Bard was always trying to make people feel *good*, to take away their pain and sadness. But what if she wanted to feel pain? What if she wanted to cry and ache and hurt because that's what everyone else was feeling? So instead of listening to the music, Dreym focused on the pain echoing around her. It wasn't peaceful, or calm, or good. But it was what *she* needed.

"HOW MANY OF YOU SHALL I SLAUGHTER TODAY? A HUNDRED?" the dragon roared. **"A THOUSAND?"** The crash of claws piercing metal. **"A HUNDRED THOUSAND?"** The scrape of scales on shattered stone. **"EACH AND EVERY ONE OF YOU?!"** The dragon laughed, a cruel, echoing sound. **"YOU FIGHT BECAUSE YOU THINK YOU CAN WIN. YOU FIGHT BECAUSE YOU HAVE HOPE. LET ME CHANGE THAT."**

Dreym watched Deathsarr drag himself across the plaza, nature spirits clinging to his body as he went. Then she saw Fellstar and Peridora, chasing the dragon.

"Dreym—how is he moving?! I thought we bound him in place?" the Fighter shouted at her.

“I—I don’t know,” she stammered, straining her hold on the spirits, and on Deathsarr. They were screaming at her. They couldn’t keep the dragon in place much longer. The chant wasn’t strong enough. The spirits weren’t strong enough. And when they let go—Deathsarr would be unstoppable.

“Hells, Fellstar! He’s going for Brann!” Peridora hissed, and the two dashed away. Towards the dragon. Towards Brann. Towards the music.

They were all too late. The dragon tore away from the spirits holding him to the ground and flung his body onto the armored building containing Brann and the Orchestra. Then, clamping his jaws against one of the wide, open windows, Deathsarr breathed fire.

Dreym heard no screaming. She heard no music. Only fire. And the spirits were gone.

The Wizard

Wyndra Wye, Wizard of Calavia, did not need to see the battlefield to know Deathsarr had risen to the sky, and was raining fiery destruction on the city. She heard his taunting roar from beyond the tower’s walls as she raced up flight after flight of stairs, ascending Calavia’s clocktower.

“FEEBLE CREATURES! THIS NIGHT WILL BRING ABOUT THE DAWN OF A NEW ERA. AN ERA OF DRAGONS. AN ERA OF ASH. PREPARE TO BASK IN MY GLORY!” Deathsarr’s voice echoed.

Wyndra had known the nature spirits would break, long before Dreym had lost her hold on them. That was the way with nature magic. It was unreliable. Inconsistent. Uncontrollable. Arcane magic was different. Wyndra could always wrestle it into submission, make it obey her demands, make it *listen*. She was like a mother, and it, her child. No matter how much it wanted to change, to run, there was always a price that could be paid to win.

It was time to pay that price.

The Rogue hadn’t arrived. Wyndra had never believed he would. The boy was unreliable, too. Everything was left to Wyndra now. The fight was in her hands. She was their only hope.

The final staircase came into view, a door at the end, and Wyndra burst through it, dashing out onto the clocktower’s balcony. Grabbing hold of the thin, copper railing she steadied herself, observing the changed battlefield.

Deathsarr swept across the sky, breathing fire and burning buildings in his wake. His enormous wings stretched far and low, cutting through the taller houses and walls throughout the city. Below, on the plaza, bodies burned in great piles. Soldiers hid in alleys. The Cleric’s acolytes had nearly all succumbed to fire or fatigue, a spare few dragging the wounded to safety. Brann’s music had died out when Deathsarr had melted the Bard’s Orchestra. Fellstar and Peridora fought side by side, each firing enormous crossbows at the passing dragon.

The Wizard took hold of her staff from the sling on her back, and prepared to cast her final spell. The words came easily. The rapid finger motions felt like second nature. Spellpower filled her body, churning like a tempest within her.

Deathsarr turned in his flight, swiveling his spined head towards Dreyms and her circle of druids, who had climbed atop another building. Wyndra watched it all, as if in slow motion. The druids shouted for walls of stone, but Deathsarr descended on them like a hawk on a mouse, lashing with talons and fire and wings.

Wyndra realized she was screaming when the dragon's head swiveled towards her, eyes glinting red in the firelight. His wings carried him high up and above the tower. It was time. She was next.

"PETTY FOOLS. BELIEVING YOU COULD FELL A DRAGON," Deathsarr laughed.

The dragon dove, and Wyndra released her spell with an ear-splitting explosion.

The Cleric

Caira Quelldark, Cleric of Calavia, fell to her knees. Her mind barely registered the pain, blood oozing from her many blisters and bruises. Around her, Calavia burned.

The clocktower had crumbled on the other side of the plaza. Soldiers stood around Caira, watching Fellstar and Peridora run into the ruins, digging for their fallen friend. It was as if no one had noticed. As if no one but Caira knew.

Wyndra had *missed*.

The rubble exploded apart, revealing first a black wing then a massive claw that swept Fellstar away, slamming him into a cracked wall. Deathsarr's head emerged next, quickly followed by the rest of his gargantuan form. He clawed his way out of the ruins, unscathed by Wyndra's spell aside from a gaping hole in his left wing. His bloody teeth clacked, and a blaze of fire consumed the Paladin.

Peridora screamed.

"YOUR HONOR BURNS IN FIRE, PALADIN!" Deathsarr roared, striding forward.

Caira whimpered, her mind trapped by grief and fear. *Wyndra missed her spell. She died for nothing. Dreyms died for nothing. Brann died for nothing. And we're next.* Again, Caira tried to call on Mother Moon for aid. Again, she was met with silence. An absence. The night sky was empty, devoid of light. Mother Moon did not care if Caira burned.

All around her, the people Caira was supposed to protect were dying. Peridora was unmoving, her body charred by dragonfire. Fellstar lay in a heap beside the rubble, limbs twisted and broken. Her acolytes had fallen long ago, overwhelmed by heat and the constant need for healing.

Deathsarr approached Caira, last hero of Calavia, and lowered his head to address her. **"LITTLE GODLING. YOU HAVE FORGOTTEN YOUR PLACE. BOW! GROVEL! SUBMIT—OR DIE."**

Caira was already on her knees. She could bend over and bow, then perhaps she might live. And yet, what was there to live for if everyone she cared about was dead? If her God had abandoned her? So she stayed kneeling, limp and exhausted, but not bowing to Deathsarr's rule.

"No," she whispered.

"SPEAK LOUDER GODLING, YOUR MASTER WOULD HEAR YOUR MUMBLING."

"No," she said again, this time louder as she hauled herself to her feet and looked Deathsarr in the eyes. "You are not our master, and we have not yet lost. Calavia will *never* be yours, Deathsarr."

And that was when she noticed the little gold halo which had appeared around the dragon's neck.

"I HAVE KILLED ALL OF YOU. THERE IS NOTHING LEFT TO HOPE FOR. AGAIN YOU MORTALS FAIL TO UNDERSTAND YOUR OWN INSIGNIFIC—"

The Rogue

Rowan the Ready, Rogue of Calavia, *bated* monologues.

That made his arrival in Calavia that much worse, when, as he emerged from the golden gate—having instantly teleported from Deathsarr's lair to the city's central plaza—he heard Deathsarr in the middle of a villainous monologue. It didn't even make sense. Why talk to your victim before killing them, revealing your dastardly plans, your devilish secrets? Just kill the little rat and move on. Gods, Rowan would make a much better villain than any of those sorry-ass wannabes.

"Just *shut up* already," he said, whipping his blade across Deathsarr's neck.

The blade—stolen from Deathsarr's dragon hoard and glowing with magic runes, a vorpal enchantment—slipped cleanly through scales, tissue, muscle, and bone, exiting the other side without even a spray of blood.

Nice and sharp, Rowan thought. *Just the way I like 'em.*

The dragon's head slid slowly from the neck, green blood bubbling around the stump. It hit the stones with a wet crunch, and Rowan landed next to it in a crouch. His work was done; the plan had been a resounding success.

Deathsarr was dead.

"Well, well, well," Rowan said, straightening and smiling at Caira. He hardly recognized her with all the blood on her face. *Must have been a tough fight*, he guessed. "Sorry I'm late—my *knives* were being awfully dull."

And from the golden gate—which still hovered a few feet overhead, shimmering where Deathsarr's scaled head used to be—poured Rowan's knives. His thugs. His assassins. His spies. They all tumbled out of the gate and into the plaza. Each and every one of them was laden with gold. Gold and gems. And paintings. And enchanted items. And chests filled with gold and gems and armor and

daggers and swords and all kinds of things worth stealing. Deathsarr's hoard had been *enormous*, bigger even than the bastard himself. It was enough loot to buy Calavia twice over, maybe more. And that wasn't even counting the trinkets—Rowan had hundreds of spell scrolls, artifacts, and old tomes from ages long gone. A true treasure trove. And well worth the time spent collecting it all.

Maybe everyone would start calling him Rowan the Rich? Or Rowan the Resplendent?

Jon

“And *that* is why Rogue is the best character class, and why we should all just play Rogues all the time,” Jon said. His friends stared at him, wide-eyed and slack-jawed—he knew they were amazed, that was probably the best story he'd ever told.

Hanna coughed. “Welp, I think that's enough chit-chat, we should probably start the session so we can finish before midnight—You guys all ready to delve into the Dungeon of Barkatha Rexi, Lichlord of Super Doom?”