

Princes of the Apocalypse

As told by Groin, LLC.

Episode 5: Feathergale Showdown

As the Wyvern entered the great hall, ten feet above the floor, it dropped the body of a Manticore which splintered the large oak table as if it were a child's toy. Riding on the Wyvern's back, covered in blood, his armor in pieces, his hair disheveled, his face showing a deadly scowl and three clear red scars running across its former perfection was Lord Commander Thurl Merroska. Thurl landed the Wyvern behind the table and it began to feast on the Manticore's body. As Thurl swiftly dismounted, the Eldest of the Feathergale Knights, David, whom the others had been deferring to, stepped forward with his head bowed, and kneeled.

"Sir, we have defended the keep in your absence. It appears we have been betrayed by the Temple of Divine wind. They have attacked our guests, grounded our mounts, and have now brought a *daemon* to destroy us all!"

"You are right, David. We *have* been betrayed, but not by our brothers of the wind. It is our "guests" who have come under false pretenses and act against our interests. They are agents of the earth cult sent to collect information, disrupt our honorable society and sabotage our activities. They are interlopers and spies, and their trespass shall be punished! Seize Them!"

For a brief moment, there was hesitation as the knights all looked to each other, confused.

"And you can guarantee her safety, can you?" The patient old man narrowed his eyes mischievously.

"Of course not. But I *can* give her the means by which to defend herself." The girl's face brightened at Perry's words. "and, more importantly, the discipline to see to her own safety." Perry looked around him, at the near-dozen servants cramped into the little hidden cellar, at Sonja sitting nervously beside him, and at Larmon, who was sitting alone in a corner looking lost and bewildered.

"Anyway, safety is an illusion. Do you think you're safe down here? Waiting to find out who your boss is going to be at the end of each battle? Waiting for someone to take control of the keep that's evil enough to kill you all?" The Halfling was getting agitated, and he quickly resumed his almost constant practice of controlled breathing. The old man smiled.

"I understand there is usually a fee associated with sending a child to be educated in your ways. We have very little..."

"I am not interested in collecting a fee." Perry quickly dismissed the idea.

"Nonetheless, a fee is owed." The old man looked to the even older woman who had been quietly listening. She set down her tea and looked at Perry.

In a kind and frail voice, she began; "What I am about to tell you, you must never share..."

Ganon stepped forward, taking advantage of the Feathergale Knight's hesitation. "We are NOT allied with the earth cult. This man speaks lies! He has gotten you all involved with an organization that is just as dangerous and insidious, and he **THREW ME OFF THE ROOF!!**"

From the balcony above, Crotch's deep voice boomed down "We fought with the earth cult and disrupted their operations in a nearby town, where they sought to subvert the local government. We have made ourselves their enemies, as Thurl has made himself ours."

Suddenly, from the nearby window, a man in white robes stepped in and took a position behind Thurl's shoulder, giving wide berth to the feasting Wyvern. The man stepped forward with his head low. "Sir if I may, my fellow initiates and I became suspicious of our guests during the feast. My brother Jayce, though I'm afraid he acted without permission or guidance, did search their effects and found this." From somewhere within his own robe, he produced the dirty brown one Perry had stolen from the tunnels under Red Larch. At this, several Knights turned to the adventurers with suspicion on their faces.

"That sounds... useful. Really, any castle?" Perry leaned forward, imagining a room like this somewhere in every keep and castle he'd ever been in. "I had no idea..."

"That is, after all, the point. But listen, this is for you and Sonja only. You must not tell your companions, or anyone. *Ever!*" The old woman was stern, yet she seemed to be enjoying the role.

Perry sat for a second, thoughtful, "I just give them the password, and..."

"Guaranteed safety." The old man said, with a wink. "Such as is possible, of course."

"I don't like keeping things from my companions," Perry said, somewhere within his robe he touched a finger to the Miribarian Guard badge he had lifted from one of the bodies the previous morning "but I'd say that covers your fee and then some!"

Ganon, incensed and red faced, pointed his finger angrily at Thurl. "This man is a **VILLAIN!!** He has turned himself and this noble society over to the evil whims of this temple... this **CULT** of AIR! Do you not see that these religious zealots parallel the earth cult in their desire for power and control?"

Crotch continued as well; "We collected that robe as evidence, so that we may identify our enemies with it. It was our investigation of the disappearance of a Miribarian Delegation, some of whom I call friends, that led us here. We have found correspondence that links Thurl to their fate."

Ganon turned and looked to the knights surrounding him. "Do you need more evidence of this man's true nature than the Demon that waits atop this very spire to tear us all limb from limb? The pile of bodies the beast had already left at the foot of your spire?"

A few of the knights turned to Thurl with quizzical looks; one could be heard muttering "It *is* a fiend. I never signed up for this..."

"MEN! Are you going to allow these lowly minstrels to waver your faith? It is true, I have not been completely forthcoming with you about the nature of our relationship with the Temple, but it was for your *protection*! Protection from the enemies of the Temple, enemies like them!" He pointed his sword at Ganon, "It is from enemies like this that I swore, as you ALL did, to protect our city of Waterdeep. My men, with the power that the Temple offers us we will not only protect our city, but RULE the city from ABOVE as we were *meant* to!"

"oh, Thurl..." one knight was heard saying, while another shook his head; "he's nuts..."

Swords were lowered as Thurl became visibly unhinged, his expression getting more desperate with each sentence.

"The correspondence I speak of illustrates his true loyalty, not to Waterdeep but to his Queen; Aerisi Kalinoth. Is she your Queen as well?" Crotch asked, looking to the knights around him.

"Aerisi is prepared to make us her Personal Elite Guard! If we try to break from the cult now, we will all be destroyed! That demon was sent as a test of our faith. If we dispatch or deliver these intruders to our Queen, the demon will leave. If not... It resumes its feast."

When this was met with no reaction from the knights, Thurl collected himself, wiping spittle from his chin. "Men, I am the Lord Commander of this facility and I order you to ATTACK!"

The knights on the balcony with Crotch scoffed. David, down on the main floor with Thurl and Ganon, stepped forward. "Sir, I have served at your side for twenty years, without question or hesitation. For the first time in all those years I must ask you to reconsider. My sword" (he lays it at Thurl's feet) "remains yours as always, yet my hand stays..."

With one swift movement of Thurl's longsword, David's head was bouncing along the ground. To the horrified faces of those around him who had served under him, some of them for years, he raised his sword to the sky and the Demon at the spire's pinnacle let loose a shriek that rattled the teeth.

"Stand Down." Ganon ordered.

Thurl's face darkened even more as the corners of his mouth crept up in a mad grin. "Soon... there won't be a single man left standing."

"What has he done?" said Kale, a young knight standing near Savra.

She turned to him for a moment, while loading her crossbow. "He's bringing the fiend."

Savra stepped to the side, looking for a clear shot at the man who had betrayed her. A crossbow bolt struck Thurl in the shoulder from the balcony, and he roared. Somehow, she knew it was Crotch's shot. Spears rained down on the Wyvern, who backed against the wall and hissed, raising its barbed tail.

Savra had to hold while Ganon rushed the fallen knight, pushing Talon into his thigh. When Thurl leaned back to evade the following shield swing, his dodge took him right where Savra had aimed, and her arrow sank into his torso. From across the crowded room now broken into frenzy, their eyes met. Hers fighting back tears, his bloodshot with mad rage.

The Wyvern lunged for the balcony with a hiss and snapped its jaws inches from crotch, while its tail lashed wildly at a nearby Feathergale knight. The knight ducked, and the tail's barb sheared a section of tapestry, but when the Wyvern tried to pull back, the tapestry became tangled around the barb, tethering the furious creature to the wall. Crotch and the knight instantly began swinging their weapons, too panicked to strike true. Diamachus planted a foot on the railing, and leapt onto the back of the beast, and raised his two swords high over his head. Before he could bring them down in the killing strike, the thrashing beast tipped to the side violently, and the Halfling fell to the floor.

The cultist left the brown robe lying on the floor as he slowly backed out the window he had come in, praying no one noticed his retreat. As soon as he was on the outside ledge, he cast a spell and was off, running as fast as the breeze that whistled through the spire.

Inside, Thurl was not ready to retreat.

"You! This is all *your fault!*" he howled with rage as he threw every last bit of strength into a dramatic choreographed maneuver which Ganon easily parried, causing the grandiose flourish to end with Thurl's sword ineffectually skidding across the floor, instead of imbedded in Ganon's abdomen, as was intended.

Putting his foot on Thurl's sword, the knight Kale raised his own level with Thurl's throat. Ganon's eyes went from Diamachus kneeling where he had landed gathering his strength, to the knight leveling his sword at Merroska. They locked eyes for a second and Ganon nodded slowly. The four knights gathered around followed suit raising their swords, while the others in the room continued to pepper the Wyvern with spear and arrow.

"I promise to write! And I'll come back one day, with loads of treasure and the finest things for all of you, I will!" Sonja tearfully said into the old woman's shoulder.

"You will do no such thing, child. You leave us now to begin a new life. You shall never look back, and never return. One day, when you have become something great, you will sit in a castle and know not where the food is prepared, nor how the linens are cleaned."

"Never! I will never forget where I have come from, or who I am."

"Child, you know not yet who you are." The woman comforted.

Perry, fitting himself with the new title of guardian, took on an appropriate tone with the girl; a tone slightly less comforting and a little more like his own master's. "She's right, Sonja. This is goodbye."

The girl looked to him, her eyes welled with tears, but before she could speak the secret door was opened from the floor above. Everyone in the cellar tensed, but a servant poked his head down.

"Sir, it appears that fighting has broken out in the Great Hall!"

"Between who and who else?" Perry asked.

"Damned if I know!" The servant was lowering himself into the cellar and did not appear to be planning on going back out.

Perry put his hands together, closed his eyes, and focused. He took a deep breath and for the first time, Sonja could feel the energy collecting in the small frame of the monk. This was not the arcane magic that the knights and cultists used, nor was it the divine power of the gods. This was a force that came from within the monk, and she could feel its weight in the room, as if the Halfling had gotten bigger without changing shape. As he slowly exhaled, he opened his eyes.

"I'll be right back" he said, and in the blink of an eye the Halfling was up the rope ladder and out of sight.

The Wyvern wrenched its tail free of the ruined tapestry in a wild flail. The barb found the heart of a knight, whose body jerked as it leaned against the railing dripping black ichor from the mouth and nose. Crotch's crossbow bolt sank into its flank and it backed away from the balcony, into the vaulted great hall.

Ganon picked Thurl's sword up, trying to see Kale as he truly was in the light. Like most of the Feathergale Society, Kale seemed a good man. Ganon felt that this was a judgement the gods shared as he peered into the knight's soul.

"Bind him." he said as he put Thurl's sword into his own scabbard. He had just decided that he would later give it to Kale, but now was not the time.

Seeing Thurl subdued, Savra redirected her rage into a spear throw that struck the Wyvern true. The beast was so shaken that it turned its attention to the woman, swooping down and clamping its jaws on her leg. While the beast chewed on her armor, its tail thrust into the back of one of the knights engaged in binding Merroska. The knight screamed in pain.

Sensing his opportunity, Thurl gritted his teeth and pulled against his half-finished binds while his former student fell to the ground beside him retching from the Wyvern's poison. His arms tore free, and he broke into a sprint for the window, the swords of his captors swinging past his head. Only Diamachus managed to throw a dagger that struck Thurl's calf, causing his retreat to stagger.

Immediately after throwing the dagger, a Wyvern wing passed just over Diamachus' head. He reached up with his sword and rent a tear in the wing that took the ability to fly away from the beast, as another volley of spears and arrows was loosed from the surrounding knights.

Perry burst forth from the stairwell on the balcony level, to see Crotch fire a crossbow bolt at the Wyvern on the ground floor. Unsure of exactly what was going on, he tried to shoulder past the few Feathergale Knights that were crowding the hallway in order to see what was transpiring below.

Ganon growled when he saw Thurl retreat, but the Wyvern was too close to ignore; its dangerous tail was flashing back and forth and could strike again at any moment. He hurled a javelin at the beast as a bolt of magical energy raced across the room from Kazzius' outstretched hand to Thurl's exposed back. This brought a slight smile to Ganon's face that broadened when he heard Crotch singing his praise from the balcony above. He looked up and the two exchanged a hurried nod. Thurl roared with pain, but maintained his course for the window, scrambling over fallen knights and remnants of the great oaken feasting table. As Savra's crossbow bolt struck the Wyvern expertly in the throat, the monster's constant hissing and screeching turned into a gurgle. The beast shook its head, tried and failed to vocalize one more time, and then thrust its tail straight at Ganon who easily dodged the blow thanks to the inspiring and adrenalizing song of his bardic companion. Just as he squared his feet to face the Wyvern once and for all, he saw Diamachus follow Thurl out the window. The Wyvern flapped its damaged wing as it backed against the wall, baring its teeth at the surrounding knights and holding its barbed tail above its head in a ready position. The sound of another pair of wings beating filled the air, and the sunlight streaming in from the great hole high on the east wall was blocked by the demonic avian form of the Vrock.

Eyes wide, Perry readied a spear and hurled it at the fiend. In his haste, he failed to account for the full distance of the room and the spear fell just short of the wall, clattering to the floor. The Vrock raised its gaze to where the spear had come from. It sized up the group gathered on the balcony and started to beat its wings. As it clumsily took flight, Crotch let loose a string of insults, some directed at the creature's aerial agility, some at its gruesome appearance, most had to do with the alleged race of one or both of its parents, and the beast hesitated in mid-flight as it shook its head violently. Enraged, the beast resumed its haphazard course for the balcony.

Ganon stood firm against the Wyvern, striking it in the abdomen as it snapped its jaws inches from his head and he noticed Savra's crossbow bolt sailing wide. He gritted his teeth as the creature's tail reared back for a strike, but a bolt of energy lanced the beast, this time coming from Skelator. Ganon saw Kazzius send another identical beam up to the demon that was now hovering in front of the balcony, a yellow cloud of dust issuing from its mouth accompanied by a disgusting noise akin to flatulence. The men on the balcony all began holding their noses, one even retching from the noxious spores.

Diamachus poked his head out the window cautiously, but then laughed as he saw Thurl before him, crawling along the window ledge muttering insanely. Unable to tell whether the man was praying, casting a spell, or just talking to himself the Halfling strode up behind him and, crossing both drawn swords like a pruning shear, removed his head. He looked up to the hole in the wall, wondering if there was a way to lure the demon outside.

Perry threw another spear at the Vrock, this time striking true. Crotch leaned over the balcony and continued his viscous insults, but this time as the Vrock shook off Perry's spear it locked eyes with Crotch. The Dwarves mocking words were halted as a voice, alien and uninvited, pierced his mind.

"You're not even funny... Or worthy of my time!" the voice taunted, and the Vrock quickly folded its wings and dropped to the ground level. An arrow went singing through the air the Vrock had just occupied and Savra's curse rang in Crotch's ears even up on the balcony. Perry and Crotch immediately climbed over the balcony's railing and grabbed the thick tapestry that hung down to the floor. Crotch sized up his agile companion and handed him the edge of the tapestry with an over-polite "After you."

"Well, don't mind if I *do*." Perry retorted, stepping off the balcony to repel down the wall easily. Crotch made sure to take extra care when doing the same; monks had a way of making things *look* simple.

As Ganon drove his sword into the Wyvern's heart and felt the beast die on his blade, the Vrock landed in the middle of a circle of Knights. It swung its arms around it and let loose a shriek that made more than one man drop his sword and curl up on the ground with hands over ears. The fiend grabbed the nearest fallen man and clamped its jaws on his thigh, rending armor and tearing a chunk of flesh from the man's leg as Skelator's spell-bolt missed its head by mere inches. While Skelator roared in frustration a volley of spears and arrows assaulted the demon from the collection of Knights around the Warlock. Perry, stepping deftly within the creature's reach, landed two heavy blows to the Vrock's head and abdomen, and then twisted his body weight to send the beast tumbling to the floor where he landed one more strike to the neck. Crotch followed with his axe, removing one of the creature's gnarled black wings while it twisted on the ground. Finding its feet, the Vrock rose up again just in time to be finally run through by Ganon, who plunged Talon's enchanted blade into its back.

The men, adventurers and knights, stood panting for a full minute before finally accepting the battle as won. They clapped hands on shoulders, complimented each other's bravery, and passed a round of ale, all while cautiously looking to the windows.

Ganon found Kale, and pulled him aside. "You have shown much bravery, and in your heart I sense nothing but good intentions. Until the Feathergale society finds a new Lord Commander, I have decided to leave this in your care." With a bow, he presented Thurl's sword. Reticently, Kale reached for the blade, then returned the bow and sheathed it. When he turned back to his men, they were already on one knee with a fist over their hearts.

Savra stood at the window, looking out across the valley at Knifepoint Gulley, a black scar on the face of the far canyon wall. "We're not done."

Crotch agreed "Right, they could come back at any time, and we—"

"No." Savra continued. "If they come back, it will be tenfold and every man here dies. We have to go to them. I know where the Temple is; I think I can even get us in..."

"You wish to assault the Temple of Divine Wind?" one of the knights asked, disbelief in his eyes.

“There is no ‘Divine Wind’. It’s a fake name they use to mask their true nature. They are the ‘Cult of the Howling Hatred’ and yes, I do think we should assault the temple. I think if we-”

“We will go to this temple, and destroy them all.” Ganon said, “But first, we need rest.”

As he said these words, every one of the adventurers knew it was truth. They had been up for almost thirty hours, and spent most of that time engaged in revelry or combat. The day had taken its toll hours ago, and now they could scarcely keep their eyes open.

Kale placed a hand on Ganon’s shoulder. “Get your rest. I will double the watch while you do. When you rise, we will have you outfitted for the assault.” He looked to the side, and called to a particular knight “Gladran, do you need measurements?” The knight looked Ganon over quickly and nodded “no”.

“Then you shall have a full suit of plate ready by the time you rise. You’re an honorary Feathergale Knight now, Sir Ganon, you should look like one.”