

# State of the Nation

July 1825

## Dragon Days

Rumours proceed the *Times* special edition, rumours of some sort of attack on the south east of London, targeted at the court at Guildford. Depending on who you ask, it is either the Formori, the Welsh Dragonmen, the French or even the Spanish. Clearly, nobody really knows.

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The army is ordered into the area then, abruptly, the orders are countermanded and they are put into a rough holding line between the south east and central London, a stringy line, rapidly backed up by strange, huge war machine something like galvanic cannon, but not quite, hauled from old LGC warehouses at the behest of Professor Brandy. Fraser is seen riding these battle lines, not communicating much with anyone as ever. The royal society is setting up ritual circles, together with the 1<sup>st</sup> Arcane, and equipping any trooper who can handle it with amulets to protect against acid. The plans to defend London seem fairly well oiled, which is something of a relief.

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There is no new news for a day, but a lot of speculation. The troops are ordered to dig in, but not even the officers really seem to know what is going on. Sir John Cuffley – a mage of some considerable skill, usually to be found in Brighton, is seen talking to Fraser. It starts to rain.

Then the *Times* special edition. The Prime Minster calls for calm. The court at Guildford, the paper reports in measured terms, has been destroyed, along with an unspecified number of Bollingbroke's troops. Henry is missing; the implication is that he is dead. The Commission members, of course, know he cannot be -they would have felt it. The attacker would appear to be a dragon – a black one 'akin to that of Morgana'. Guildford and the surrounding areas are reputedly an acidic wasteland.

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Although it is not *turmoil* in London everything is shaken, people are uncertain and scared and many wastelanders in the Commission are on the move seeking to be of aid wherever they can be. The armed forces are pretty much all recalled to 'the line' and whilst there is no curfew people huddle inside after dark. Churches begin to hold mass ceremonies.

In their hearts, despite their minds being occupied elsewhere, all of the Commission Wastelanders still feel it.

A cracking sensation, a jarring and a splintering. As one they all catch breath.

Canterbury, the house of Mithras in the realms linked to London fragments away and falls into the wastes, stirring them up massively. It's descent into the wastes disrupts the 'channels' that exist through the sea and many seamen find themselves adrift with no way home. Train routes are sundered, and those people travelling between the realms are thrown into the emptiness of entropy.

The few reports there are would say later that twisted men with monstrous arms and terrible pustule ridden eyes, dripping with poison, descended on Canterbury. An organised and well trained Formori force not merely ones and twos had devastated the defences which had been long meagre in the realm, indeed thought of as an 'easy posting'. The churches swords had tried to stand against them but had not really stood a chance in the face of such a devastating assault, clearly it had been planned for some time although the timing may have been coincidental. There is no sign of them working 'with' anyone else. In total the battle had lasted perhaps a few hours, no more. The terrible force was led by a Formorian trio – one some 7ft tall when hunched over, it's skin so scabrous as to obscure any real features, open wounds dripping puss, holding a mammoth club that glowed a sickly yellow colour from within. The second a bulky brute with an arm the size of a tree trunk, going by the name of Tomas Greigkin, shattering anything that got in his way with one deft swing. The third a small, almost dwarf like man with no eyes at all, wearing armour made of knotted wires.

There are few wastelanders available to check but at least one account says that of Canterbury there is no trace, almost all the people there lost.

For now London knows its efforts must be focused upon the present dangers. Time to mourn and time for revenge would be later...

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Nothing much happens for several days, at least to the perception of most of the population, though there is still widescale panic, some rioting and some looting - this generally targeted at anyone who 'looks odd' and thus might be something to do with the *Get*. Generally, people seem to feel that a fairie tale villainess is bringing London down, there are frequent reports of

sightings of 'Morgana' and several unfortunate women who have the misfortune to be wearing black and look a bit witchy are lynched by impromptu mobs.

As the rumours, and the news, that Canterbury has been destroyed, attitudes get worse. There are Puritan backed riots and assaults, as they seem to think the whole thing is an Isian plot – Morgana is or was a woman, after all. Though things are certainly nowhere near as bad as they were during the collapse, they are far from good and getting worse. Cooper, however, is convinced that the Realm is unchanged, except for the obvious.

The few brave souls who venture south - Reece and Morris amongst them – soon find themselves up against the most *torrential* rain, rain that is most certainly magical (and Lord North confirms this, as do numerous members of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Arcane) and, it would seem likely, something done by Canute. The rain is far worse in the south east, though covering much of London and making the lives of the soldiers on 'the line' miserable. The rain makes progress into the area pretty much impossible, and horses simply will not go in. It also makes scrying into the area very difficult – glimpses of a huge black form and of scattered people forging their way through the rain.

Elizabeth tours the line, waving and speaking, her entourage in tow - including one very worried looking Otocha, who is convinced unless something from outside the Realm changes things then it is all going to go horribly wrong.

Of course, assuming this is Morgana's dragon, or one like it, and not a Formori creation or something, then occupying the minds of many is how to kill the damn thing. Rumour starts to circulate, with various details varying depending on who tells the tale. Byron - and a fair few other learned men and women - know the details of the story without even looking it up, and for everyone else it is a famous story, though some of the details might be obscure and there are many versions of the story. The most likely true one though, is:

The Black Dragon of Morgana - which can simply be called the Black Dragon, as there is not another one – was slain by Snt George. He battled it in several places around the British Isles, before chasing it out of the country and across the continent. Before the collapse there were numerous pools of acid which resisted being dispersed in any way which gave credence to this - after the collapse, one such is near Gravewater, which is in the Snt Albans Realm.

Snt George had two main advantages when fighting the thing. Firstly, he had a lance, though it was probably more of a long spear, made in honour of

Mithras' own spear, created from four separate woods (though which ones differ) and tipped with star iron. Secondly, 'no dirt could soil him' – a legend which hints that he was of Tuathan blood (something taken as a fact, and much loved by the Irish, he being the English Patron Saint). This also appears to mean that acid did not stick to him, it just 'fell away' and he stayed gleaming white – not a small advantage.

Snt George wounds the Dragon many times, a notable battle happening just outside Constantinople, at the Brace of Saint George. Finally, in the town of Bayreuth, near Damascus, in the holy land he stabs it through the heart and kills it. The town was a tourist attraction before the collapse - there was a shallow 'acid lake' there.

Snt George does not come back to England at once, instead founding the country of Georgia (which he is also patron Saint of) and fighting against the Golden Horde. Some legends have him coming 'home' before he dies, though he is said to have lived a very long time.

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Two more days pass quietly, at least on the front. There is still considerable disturbance in London, though the yeomanry and the bow street runners are starting to get it under control - though rather savagely in some cases. Princess Elizabeth leaves 'the line' and heads into the more central parts of London to try and quell trouble with words - she has some success.

Things start to get a little worse, however, as the initial shock of the destruction of Canterbury fades and people start to consider the political consequences for the church. It would seem the only Mithraic Cardinals not in Canterbury were Boleyn and Richard Chains of God. Boleyn, being of both churches, is not eligible to be master, making Chains of God de facto master of the Mithraic Church - this is a man who only accepts Isis as the 'consort' of Mithras and has close friends and allies amongst the Puritan movement he heads who believe women do not have souls -an opinion he has never refuted, though not supported. The only other Mithraic in the linked Realms who could be a Cardinal is the Bishop of Peterloo - and he is not, because the Convocation of Bishops (who appoint Cardinals) have never made him such on account of him being, very obviously, demon blooded and slime dripping. Some people seem to think Chains of God arranged it all to get a promotion, some think it a sign for Mithras, showing the true way the church should progress. Some just assume the Knives of Isis will get him soon enough - though rumour has it several attempts on his life have failed before.

Meanwhile, there is rumour that Fraser fought a magical duel with Morgana herself at Kew Gardens. He is not saying much - in fact, nobody seems to be certain where he is - there are a few eyewitnesses, but the reports are vague. Apparently, he drove her off, but not before she had done some considerable damage to the gardens.

Commissioner Brown has been attending the Prime Minister and has visited Brighton - in fact, he has been rarely still. Callowfield has apparently hobbled into the Wastes, in the company of Susan Hill and Malvess.

Then, late on Friday night, some people come staggering out of the rain. It is a party from the court at Guildford, mostly women, led by Henry's extremely competent daughter Phillipa and his enigmatic ritualist, Ragged Alice. There are only about ten of them, and a couple would seem to be Viking women, though they rapidly slip away.

Phillipa relates to the Times that Henry, his men (leaving most of the womenfolk behind, him being a bit medieval and all), and sons went out to fight the Black Dragon, which flew over him and attacked the court itself. The whole area has been massively acid burnt: this group only survived thanks to the rituals of Alice, and Phillipa doubts many of the court have

survived, but stresses she is convinced her father lives - she makes no comment as to the fate of the several thousand men, including all his sons, who went with him. Canute, she mentions, was there also, negotiating a diplomatic solution to the present troubles. He went with Henry to defend the Realm. She is plainly distraught: her sister Blanche is most certainly dead, the Guildford court destroyed.

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Four days pass. It rains. People panic. There are near riots - a lot of civil disturbance, and getting worse. Peterloo is ready to go up like a powder keg - they love their Bishop and the de facto master of the Church has made it very plain he dislikes anything that looks nonhuman. There is talk of open revolt, and of declaring independence whilst the army is otherwise occupied: only the words of Thomas Paine, advocating a political solution, keep things from escalating. However, his solutions do include vastly restricting the power of the church, notably removing the right of the swords to bear arms.

It rains some more, all over London, though still mostly in the south east.

Out of that rain stumbles Bollingbroke. He is alone; the armour he was wearing tatters on his body, his sword a pitted wreck. He talks to Phillippa and a lot of soldiers see them have an argument, a real blazing row of the type medieval princesses are not supposed to have with their fathers, in which Henry insists she not do something, though it is not at all clear what.

Henry is pretty much immediately surrounded by a coterie of important people - not his own important people, as most of his court appear to be dead. The two Viking women appear to be back, Fraser and Cuffley talk to him at length, Lord Canning seems to be liaising with him on behalf of Parliament. He spends some considerable time with Princess Elizabeth.

He declares a state of emergency (which he can do, and basically puts him in complete charge), makes it clear that civil disturbance will not be tolerated in any form and orders the riot act to be read at the first sign of trouble. Cuffley seems relieved - he had been acting for King George, but was clearly not too happy with the role. Canning heads back to Westminster - the commons will have to vote on whether they support the state of emergency or not if it is to last more than seven days.

He specifies that he is NOT calling the Commission to military service, though he could.

He is seen holding a spear - a rather rough made looking one, at that. Phillippa is always with him, as if she had been ordered not to leave his

side. The sword of Temporal Power is delivered to him from the Tower of London, and he wears it constantly.

The commission is called to talk to him, and Brown makes it plain that he thinks it best he go alone, firmly but politely.

Sneaking into a meeting with Bolingbroke proves impractical; he has commandeered a manor house in the middle of 'the line' and, whilst the line itself is chaos and pretty much anyone could wander around, the house itself is tightly guarded - though by regular troops, rather than Bolingbroke's own men.

Morris, however, is let straight into the meeting, much to Brown's annoyance. Edwin, after refusing to take 'no' for an answer is likewise, finally, admitted. Callowfield, they find, is already there - again, much to the thinly veiled annoyance of Brown, and Callowfield greets him with a tight grin. It might have been a grimace of pain, though, Callowfield is sitting down (which Bolingbroke does not like in his presence) with one heavily bandaged leg extended and looks very ill indeed.

Bolingbroke is to the point -he explains that Callowfield and his cohorts tried to track the dragon, which had come out of the wastes. Callowfield says it was pretty easy: the thing has stirred the whole place up, and there are creatures made of acid in great number - though Tom has gone a long way to reducing their number. The dragon seemed to emerge from a long, impenetrable barrier - one Callowfield has not seen before, though he says the last time he was in that area was several years ago. Susan Hill, however, is convinced there is a way through, if it can be found. Callowfield says he tried brute force, but was unable to pass - the barrier is a realm.

Bolingbroke wants the commission to split into groups of ten or so and explore the area, looking for a way in. He wants everyone in the commission on it - he badly hopes that wherever the dragon came from will give some clue as to how to kill it.

Callowfield adds that Susan thinks time is of the essence, and anything found is to be followed up on immediately by whoever finds it.

Bolingbroke clearly has no interest in chatting and dismisses everyone. Callowfield does not seem to know anything more. Brown starts organising the commission to do what they have been told.

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All along the 'line' troops are gathered, looking out into the rain. Bolingbroke is back, and in charge, and this comforts people, but the fate of those who fought beside him the last time he faced the Black Dragon of Morgana comforts nobody, for all are dead.

Great war machines, hauled from warehouses and workshops by London Glass Company workers, and said to be some variant on the galvanic cannon worked on by Proff. Brandy, and which the navy wished to keep secret, have been set up behind the makeshift entrenchments, entrenchments that the troops vainly hope might keep the Dragon's acid from their frail, though mostly ritually protected, bodies.

Spirits are up at least, with Princess Elizabeth back from Westminster and touring the lines, with always a cheery wave and a smile for the soldiery.

Rumour is grim, however: it is said that at least someone has been to Guildford, where the Dragon struck, and that the place is unapproachable, the ground scorched by acid, all structures obliterated, everyone dead, no living thing to be seen.

The rains still beats down. They say it is Canute helping, though everyone would love to be dry, if only briefly.

Meanwhile, Kew Gardens burns. Fraser, and senior members of the bough, have been struggling to put out a curious sort of what has been described as 'ebon fire', that refuses to be extinguished. Why Fraser seems so obsessed with Kew at a time like this remains a mystery.

Everyone seems to be waiting, but one can only suggest that waiting for a creature of this power can only lead to defeat. Perhaps the Commission, dispatched into the wastes to find where the creature came from, will have some success.

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News from Kew: they have the fire out. A runner from Fraser arrived at Bollingbroke's makeshift headquarters and left clasping the spear that he has been holding at all times. One can only imagine it is a copy of the spear said to be used by Snt George to slay the creature, which in turn legend would have it is a copy of the Spear of lord Mithras.

Richard Chains of God has arrived at the lines, preaching to the troops, using phrases like 'good and pure men of England' all the time. Much of the army seem to be well taken with him, especially the Coldstream guards. The man certainly can orate! Elizabeth in turn has made a point of conversing with female troops - though they only number about one in ten - troops Chains of God is known to have said should not be allowed, as women are too frail for the battlefield.

Reports are coming in as I write: the Black Dragon has emerged from the worst of the rain near Bromley. Brandy's great cannons have fired, hurling great brass balls at it by all accounts, but it responded by devastating the whole area. The machines are destroyed, at least five thousand are dead, civilians and troops alike.

There is a great scar over its heart, which causes consternation - all rumour says the spear through the heart is needed to slay it, and every rumour suggests - some originating with diviners, we imagine, that its heart has been removed.

Passing the line, beatings its way on great wings, but stopping to breathe and destroy almost anything it sees, the great Black Dragon is flying straight for central London, a direct line for Westminster. It bears a few scars from Brandy's war machines, and a few from spells flung by the second arcane at Bromley before they were burnt to nothing by gouts of acid. Somehow, both the First Arcane and the Royal society are managing to rain ritual strikes down upon it. At least twenty significant ritualists are dead as a result of it sending their attacks back to them, but they persisted and seem to be harming it, at least a little.

Bollingbroke stands on Westminster Bridge, a spear in hand. It is the same spear as before, though now appears to be even rougher made. Canning, Castlereagh, Cuffley, Ragged Alice, Fraser, a man in a white suit accompanied by a huge black moor and a host of others, most of them mages, stand with him.

The dragon swoops, magic lashes it and it roars. More magic, and great wind and fire. A huge meteor strikes its head. It is forced to land.

Bolingbroke leaps, and plunges the soar deep into its heart, a look of quiet desperation on his face. Everyone on London feels him drag on the power of the Realm, throwing it into the strike.

It is not enough. The creature breathes. Westminster bridge, and all who are on it, vanish in an acidic cloud. Bolingbroke tugs on the Realm again, just saving everyone there as they plunge into the Thames, which seems to rear up and welcome them.

The creature lands on Big Ben, its body curled around almost the entire length of it, and bites the top off it.

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There is nothing to stop the creature. It breathes on the - evacuated - Houses of Parliament, virtually destroying the building. It then takes flight, scours the rebuilt Westminster abbey with acid, and moves on to almost methodically start to destroy the surrounding area. Ritual strikes still rain down upon it, and it seems (to the very few eyewitnesses who survive) to be somewhat slowed and woozy. Still, it continues a methodical destruction of pretty much every building in the Westminster area - the Abbey, Westminster school, the houses of Parliament and the Florentine Cathedral, as well as a host of housing, both rich and, as the creature moves north, poor.

By now, acid is *streaming* into the Thames and the London sewer system. The streets start to collapse and the acid spreads underground, via the mostly underground Tyburn river and through the sewers. The creature seems happy to pump out acid in this area, knowing it will flow and spread and cause untold damage

Scattered reports indicate that Princess Phillippa was in the area, seemingly making her way to where the dragon was, a burly bodyguard in hot pursuit, one she had clearly given the slip to.

Bolingbroke and his coterie haul themselves from the Thames. He looks at his now broken spear, and up at the dragon, sighs deeply and prepares to have another go. Magic flies from Canning, Castlereagh, Fraser and Cuffley, the four most potent magi in London, it is commonly believed. It is not doing much good. Bollingbroke moves forward, spear in hand, dragging his feet, exhausted.

The dragon howls and twists, then it howls and twists again, and again. Spells and ritual rain upon it and it is forced back. Bolingbroke stabs it with his spear shaft, though it seems not to help - he penetrates its hide, but causes no harm. It swats him aside with one claw and he is thrown fifty feet into an acid drenched wall, collapsing it. Somehow, he lives, not even all that hurt.

The dragon is getting its wind back after its howling, and breathes, Rituals cast by Ragged Alice ward everyone, but are torn away.

Now, a scattering of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Arcane have managed to drag themselves from the Thames and start hurling magic - perhaps ten have survived, all masters of their art, and the dragon once again is forced back.

Cuffley waves a pearl necklace and invokes something, and a great shooting star strikes the dragon on the side of the head. It actually staggers, but then

rights itself and falls on the crowd with tooth and claw. Cuffley has his arm almost torn off, five of the Second Arcane's brightest and best die.

Numbers swirl maths from some source. The dragon slows a little and is confused.

Then it roars again and black blood spurts from its chest. Four more roars, four more spurts of blood, and the thing spasms and collapses, dead.

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## Aftermath

It has become widely known that the Wasteland Commission saved London and slew the dragon. The reputation of the group is at an all time high. Bollingbroke's reputation and general popularity have, likewise, soared.

After the thing fell, it started to rain *very* hard. This washed a lot of the acid away and into the Thames, though a great volume of water and acid has almost wrecked the London Sewer system, many streets (all over London) have collapses, there is a shortage of water, a great risk of disease and a desperate need to rebuild.

The rain is attributed to Canute, who Bollingbroke admits to have been privately negotiating with on behalf of himself and the King. He presents a bill to Parliament, which recognises the area of London east of Dartford (which is still rain soaked and Canute is de facto ruler of) as Canute's territory, confirms Canute as a King in his own right and allows him Kingship over any parts of the British isles that predate the Norman Conquest which may or have been discovered, and any parts of Scandinavia likewise, subject to them not being a sovereign nation of someone else. In exchange, Canute will accept British law -which would severely curtail the Kingly powers he is used to. Parliament, not big on old style Kings, has very mixed feelings.

King George, meanwhile, though rather inactive during the crisis, has leapt into life, starting plans for a massive new, wide road to run from Guildford to Westminster, and for the reconstruction of a new abbey and Houses of Parliament. He has grand plans, though many feel the money would be better spent on a high quality sewer system. Statues of those Wastelanders are to be included in squares which will dot the route, and it is intended that the road will allow for a great deal of new housing and business development. It might not happen, at least, but George is the King, and this is one of the few times he has sought to wield his considerable personal power to actually get something done.

As to the church of Mithras: the Convocation of Bishops will be meeting soon, who really have only two options – they can confirm Chains of God as Master, or they can make the Bishop of Peterloo a Cardinal and confirm him. If Chains of God becomes master, it is going to turn British society upside down: the church penetrates the whole of society, and his beliefs are at odds with the majority of the clergy and most everyone else. However, he is a man only in his early forties, who might have many years to work his will upon the structure of the church.