

January (2015) Story: Code
By Julie McMillin and Nedda Corrigan

Late November. London.

Talia was no longer certain what day it was. She was not certain if they were in London proper or still somewhere in Westminster. Neither the 'when' nor the 'where' much mattered. Only the pain mattered. And she could practically see an end to the pain through the doorway. She stumbled toward it, heedless of the press of bodies in the busy street.

Ruben placed a gentle hand upon her shoulder, stopping her from being hit by a surly man with burnt bread. "Talia," he called, hoping to pierce through the fog that had seemed to settle in her mind.

In the doorway, Katherine Mandrake stood up and searched for the voice that had called. She saw the tall form of Ruben, met his eyes and scowled.

Ruben grit his teeth and turned Talia around to face him. She was so weak and exhausted. Ruben had to make her see that she wasn't prepared to face the Draco Disciples in their own home.

"Talia, I cannae let ya go in there alone. 'Twouldn't be right. Yer not thinking like yerself. I can help. Once we're inside..."

"They will kill you, Ruben." Talia's voice was weak but her tone brooked no argument. "You did not bring me all this way only to die at the end of the journey."

"I said I would protect ya. I never agreed to abandon ya when ye're most vulnerable." Ruben could see Katherine shift in the doorway impatiently.

Talia smiled at Ruben. "You've been protecting me, Ruben, even before you made a formal promise. You are the single reason I am still alive today. And as I've told you nearly every day since we left Oxford, I will not die here in London. If Vinz meant to kill me he would have done so already.

"But..."

"If he meant for me to die in the street then why would he send his favorite to bring me in the door?"

Ruben looked over to Katherine. Her scowl deepened.

Talia leaned in to Ruben to give him a hug. "I need you free from their grasp, Ruben. Tell my family that I made it here alive, if you make it back to Bristol. Do not give the Draco a reason to kill you before I can see you again."

Ruben returned the hug. "I still dinnae want to leave ya alone with them."

Talia looked up with tears in her eyes, "I have no choice anymore. I started down this path by my own foolish choice and now I have to walk it. But I will send word as often as I am able. Please, Ruben, let me go so I can end this pain."

Ruben sighed, placed Talia's hand upon his arm, and walked her to the waiting Katherine Mandrake. He matched her scowl.

Katherine waved her hand dismissively before Ruben could speak. "The promise to return her to Bristol by Midsummer still stands," she said blandly. "We thank you for bringing her to London. Your services are no longer needed."

"I suppose you lot think that's enough?"

Katherine practically growled. "Thou shalt have nothing else from me, Irishman. Go before I summon the guards."

Talia leaned upon her staff. "Please, Ruben. You will hear from me soon."

Katherine snorted derisively.

Ruben took two steps back. "May your Lord of Light protect you, Talia Tale."

Talia nodded. "And may the Paragons guide you, Ruben Walsh."

Ruben adjusted his spear upon his back and walked down the busy street without looking back.

Katherine opened the door to the London Manse, the seat of English Draco Disciple power. "This way, bard," she grinned and stepped into the dim light of the manse. Talia took as deep a breath as she was able and followed.

Talia's eyes could not adjust to the haze of the small room. The smoke and smell of incense nearly choked her. A dark haired boy entered through a servant door and swung a censer five times at Katherine and Talia. "May you be cleansed of worldly ignorance by the fires of knowledge," he chanted. Katherine inhaled deeply. Talia tried not to gag and leaned heavily upon her staff.

The smooth wooden door before them opened wide and the incense smoke rolled out and up as Katherine strode from the room. Talia stumbled to the threshold to try and fill her lungs with clean air. She couldn't see, couldn't breathe, couldn't think through the pounding pain that forced her to move ever closer to Vinz. She placed her staff into the room and paused with surprise when it struck stone instead of wood. "Stone?" she wondered briefly.

Katherine whirled around in annoyance. "Stone, bard. Or did you think we'd keep our knowledge where fire could destroy it?" Talia had no reply and simply gasped for breath. Katherine turned and continued walking down the short hallway with Talia struggling to keep up.

If Talia could have seen where she was, she would have paused to marvel at the manse. In a city made of wood, this was a stone monument to knowledge. The vast central room held tables and benches for study. The walls were lined with stone shelves filled with tomes and scrolls of all shapes and sizes. Arches between the shelves opened into small galleries, filled with more shelves and scribe desks. A second floor perched upon the vast library, with small rooms instead of galleries for each Disciple to call his own place to sleep, and the walkways between the rooms formed the shape of a pentagram. But Talia saw none of the manse. Nor did she see the Disciples leaving the galleries and rooms to watch her pass. All Talia felt was the pull of the Praetor.

She came to the base of a stairway and tried to ascend. Katherine put her hand to Talia's neck in warning and hissed, "NO one may climb these stairs."

Talia could feel Vinz in the room at the top of the stairs. He was so close, but the pain wouldn't end until her eyes met his. "Please," she croaked. "Please, Mistress Mandrake, I must see him."

Several Disciples snickered at Talia's demand. Katherine held steady and let no emotion cross her face. "We will wait upon the Praetor's pleasure. Do not embarrass yourself."

It seemed an eternity. Every breath Talia drew felt as if it were searing her throat. Her legs burned with the need to race up the stairs. She leaned further and further upon her staff just to remain upright. Finally the door at the top of the stairs soundlessly swung open, but Vinz did not emerge.

Talia cried out with dismay and fell to her knees. Tears clouded her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. "Please, gentle master!" Talia gasped, "Please grant me release!"

Vinz Clortho slowly stepped from his room, a smirk of victory painted on his face. His eyes locked with Talia's. For the first time in a week, Talia felt the weight of pain lift from her lungs and she was able to draw a full breath. She crumpled to her hands and knees and sobbed in relief.

There was a stunned silence in the manse. Every Draco Disciple in residence had seen the display and they waited upon the Praetor's words.

Vinz waited a few moments for Talia's sobs to subside, then over the quiet cries of the woman he addressed his Disciples. "This is Talia Tale, Bard of the Band of the Twisted Claw." There were angry murmurs throughout the crowd and Talia finally looked up to a veritable sea of hatred gazing back at her. Vinz continued, "She is here to study Draco lore, because she sees things differently than we do. She is not to be left alone. Two people will guard her at all times. One to keep her in sight, one to fetch her any materials she lacks." Vinz looked down at Talia again, "That said, she will not be requesting much." Talia hung her head in dismay. Vinz again addressed the room, "I will be going over her notes every third day, and speaking with her myself on occasion."

Vinz paused just long enough for a few Disciples to shift uncomfortably. Talia turned her gaze back to Vinz and held her breath. Vinz nodded. "Let me be perfectly clear. She is my prisoner, and she shall not be harmed." Talia exhaled with relief.

Vinz grinned, "Lest I command it, of course."

Talia gasped. A few Disciples chuckled. Vinz turned his back to the assembly and returned to his room. As the latch clicked closed, a rough hand grabbed Talia by the shoulder and hauled her to her feet. The crowd erupted into angry conversation and jeering.

It was impossible to match voices and faces in the cacophony. "Even the Band supports Praetor Clortho!" "How does it feel to be a Disciple, Band-traitor?" "I'll not stay in the same manse as that... thing." "Perhaps the Praetor will let me put a little Disciple in thee, bard." A woman's voice commanded above the din, "Put her in the cell until I figure out what to do with her!"

Talia was half dragged past the stairs and into the darkness beneath the upper balcony. A man opened a thick door and Talia was shoved into a small cell. The door slammed closed, blocking out all noise and all light save the single candle in the corner of the windowless room. Although Talia could no longer feel him, she knew without a doubt that Vinz's room was directly above hers. "Bastard," she whispered. "Happy with your performance?!" she screamed at the ceiling. Talia knew it was futile. Vinz couldn't hear her. She tried to catch her breath and still her heart, but when she could not she crawled over to the candle and prayed for the Lord of Light to protect her... and hoped that He had heard Ruben's blessing as well. Talia knew she was going to need all the help she could get.

Late December. Bristol.

Life in Bristol for the Band of the Twisted Claw was, simply put, wonderful. The Band could walk the streets without fear of having their ears nailed to the gates. Those who called members of the Band, 'friend,' could invite the former Travelers into their homes without fear of spending a day in the stocks. All the members of the Band found work, food and warmth for the winter – and nearly all of it was completely legal.

Of course, every time something went missing the city's eyes turned to Lillith, Philomena and Avis. They might have been responsible for some of what went missing, but Lillith ensured that they were never caught. Still, Bailey was tired of the constable knocking on the vardo door every day. In the spirit of putting a bell on a cat, Bailey declared that the rogues were going to look after Talia's daughters: 4 year old Anne, and 1 year old Rose. Randall was grateful for the help. Bailey was grateful for finding something that would keep the rogues busy. Lillith was grateful that there was a ledge from Randall and Talia's window that would allow them to continue to sneak on the rooftops. After all, it didn't take three teenagers to watch two nipperkins.

One morning, in Talia and Randall's home, Philomena got up and replaced the book she had just finished back on the shelf next to its companions. Despite her many weeks attending to Talia's girls, a multitude of unread books remained. She still felt the same shiver of delight she had the first time she laid eyes on Talia's library and Randall had given her permission to access them.

She noticed a bit of string on the floor, picked it up, and tied it in a loop. She began to idly work her way through cat's cradle, her fingers building up speed until she was flashing through the figures.

Anne set down her doll and stared wide-eyed at Philomena's hands. "How do you do that?" She marveled.

Philomena stopped for a moment and smiled at Anne. "Would ya like me tae teach ya?" Anne nodded vigorously. "We need tae find ya a piece of string." Anne scurried off to a basket in corner and procured the item. She handed it to Philomena who tied it together and placed the loop on Anne's hands. She picked up her own loop. "You are goin' tae take your finger like this.... And then do the same

thing with your other 'and." She watched as Anne attempted to replicate the movements, her brow furrowed as the string tangled and slipped off her fingers. "Just keep tryin', you shall get it."

With Anne thus occupied, Philomena continued to weave her way through the series over and over again, her mind wandering. "I got it!" Anne piped up.

"Excellent well!" Philomena could not help but smile back at the beaming little girl. She helped Anne work her way through the next step. "Now try by yourself."

They both continued to pick away at their strings when Anne spoke without looking up from her fingers. "You're the older sister, and I am the older sister, and Rose is my little sister, and Avis is yours, so we're the same."

"That we are," Philomena agreed, "and do ya know what older sisters do?"

Anne stopped and looked up at Philomena. "What?"

"We take care o' our little sisters, protect 'em, make sure they stay out of trouble. Unless," she said with a twinkle in her eye, "you are getting' into trouble with 'em."

"I help Daddy put Rose to bed every night."

"Ya are a most excellent elder sister. I am certain your da appreciates the assistance with your mum bein' gone."

Anne's face fell. "I miss Mommy." She crawled into Philomena's lap.

Philomena hugged her. "I know ya do, but she shall be back before you know it. Mums always come back."

"But when?"

"She is comin' as soon as she can. Ya got to be patient."

Anne wiggled around until she was facing Philomena. "Where is your mommy and daddy?"

Philomena felt her heart drop and tried not to betray her feelings on her face. "My Da is... my Da is dead."

Anne looked down for a moment. "Oh," she hugged Philomena who smiled slightly at the gesture. "Is your mommy dead too?"

Philomena swallowed hard. "No, she is... gone. She had to go somewhere too."

"But she'll come back, right? You said mums always come back," Anne looked worriedly at Philomena.

"Aye," Philomena said, her voice catching as she held back tears, "Mums always come back."

That afternoon found Philomena and Avis trying to teach Anne how to sneak behind someone to tickle them. It was fairly hopeless. Anne couldn't walk more than four paces without bursting into giggles. Philomena sent Anne back into the hallway to try again while Avis played with Rose and the small wooden blocks. Philomena frowned. The parallel between Anne and Rose and her and Avis... who had a loving hard-working father... and a mother who was only heaven-knew-where consorting with Draco Disciples... Philomena shook her head. 'No,' she thought. 'Talia is not my mother.' But she only half believed it.

There was a loud knock on the door and Philomena stood to answer it. It was about the time Randall was due home. Even little Rose was struggling to get to her feet to run and greet her father.

Philomena stepped into the hallway and her breath caught in her throat. Anne had beaten her to the door – when did she finally learn to move silently? – and opened it. Liam Bloodroot filled the frame. He looked up to Philomena and grinned wickedly. Anne tilted her head to the side and asked fearlessly, "Is mommy home?"

From behind Philomena, little Rose noted the large man at the door. She saw two things: a chance to be held in someone's arms, and a chance to be high in the air. Her sister saying the word 'mommy' sealed the deal. The man was the best thing to happen ever. She took off running as only a one year old can speed down a hallway. She squealed with happiness and hugged Liam around the kneecaps babbling "Mamamamamama!"

Liam froze with shock. Philomena and Avis froze with shock. Rose bounced on her toes hoping that the tall man would pick her up. Anne stomped her foot, "Where's mommy?!"

Liam got down on one knee and scooped the baby into one arm. He smiled warmly at her and she giggled in return. He turned to Anne. "Thy mother is far away in London, working with a great number of books. She will return at Midsummer."

Anne looked down at her stocking feet. "I miss her," she whimpered.

"I know, nipperkin, and she misses both of thee as well. She gave me a letter for thy father. Wilt thou give it to him for me?"

Anne nodded solemnly. "This is for daddy 'cause I can't read yet."

Liam handed her the parchment and stood up. He walked the few paces to Philomena and put Rose into her arms. "Do not teach them to get into trouble," he warned.

Philomena glared at Liam. "Do not teach her ta forget her family," she snarled. Liam chuckled and walked out the door.

If time had paused when Philomena realized that it was Liam at the door, then time moved twice as fast when he left. The wind blew through the open door, Rose began to cry, Anne ripped open the letter and everyone could hear Randall calling from the street as he raced home.

Once it was established that everyone was, in fact, fine then Avis took the girls back into the bedroom and Philomena presented the letter to Randall.

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To my husband and all the Band,

I hope my love flies over the miles to you. Please know the Disciples treat me well enough and I will return long before Gertrude begins to recruit summer maids. If he is back at the camp then Ruben explained the Bristol to Oxford to London journey. True, this journey was not the easiest but summer winds shall remove the winter's cold. Genuine love shall guide me home and new roads and new quests shall guide initiates to our family. I love you.

Talia

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Randall smiled. He handed the letter to Philomena. "The other message is for you, I assume."

"Me?" Philomena was surprised and confused.

"Aye. She told me that the code in each letter would be the number in the 'To' line. It must be important since she called for all the Band."

Philomena rubbed her eyes. "So there's a code that involves the whole Band? But we're not all here!"

Randall shook his head. "My apologies. I'm no good explaining these things. I don't think she means every single member of the band. She was very specific in her wording to me – and we both know that Talia means what she says. The code is the number in the 'To' line."

Randall and Philomena leaned over the letter and began to pull out the second message that Talia sent.

Dear Players of RenQuest,

Pause here if you wish to solve the coded message yourself. The answer is revealed on the next page.

Happy Solving,

Julie McMillin

The code is the number of words in the addressee line. Seven. Pull the 7th word from the rest of the letter.

Correct answer: The disciples will recruit at Bristol this summer. Genuine new initiates. Talia

Yes! It's true! The Draco Disciples will be opening their doors at Bristol for the very first time – YOU can play through an entire 3 day plotline as a Draco Disciple. Have you longed to learn their secrets and join in their fight against the Band of the Twisted Claw? Now you can. We encourage you to create your Draco Disciple character and play an entirely different quest line than those who fight with the Band.

(The Draco Disciple quest line will have a limited number of players each day, but will be available all season long. We encourage our season-long players to enjoy both sides of the story in any order you desire – space permitting.)