

May (2015) Story: Twas He Alone Against Five Men Grown
By Julie McMillin

A letter from Talia Tale to her husband, Randall Roarback. The letter has been crumpled many times and passed to every member of the Band of the Twisted Claw. It finds its way to your hands with the instruction to continue to pass it along until everyone has read it.

Randall,

I love you.

Forgive my bluntness. I feared if no other part of this message were to reach you then let it be those three simple words. During these weeks of never ending night, 'twas the thought of you which sustained me. I am jealous that this simple parchment shall know your touch before I can again lie in your embrace. My body may be trapped far beyond your reach, but my thoughts and my heart have not left your side.

For all my pain and fears, I am whole and I shall be coming home upon Midsummer. I know if I write of my work here in the Manse then this letter shall never leave the Praetor's hands. Thus, I shall send this story and this warning.

Most evenings the Praetor and I take a brief walk through the city. It is a welcome relief to the glares I receive at the Manse, though 'tis certes that my comfort is not the Praetor's primary concern. It is possible that the glares from the Disciples of late are due to the amount of time the Praetor and I spend upon these walks. All his Disciples seek his audience, that he spends much of it with me has not gone unnoticed.

We walk the city discussing our studies. There is little need for secrecy when discussing Draconic. You or I could speak an entire saga, but it would not have the power needed to truly be the language of creation. But when the Praetor speaks, with the full force of his goddess's blessing, then all of creation will tremble. Yet, he has not mastered the language. There is still too much to uncover before he could wield his gift in full. My purpose, which he knows, is to present what I have learned in such a way to persuade him to not use it. I argue that the time of the language of creation has concluded. The power is not needed. He listens, dear Randall. He genuinely listens to my pleas to abstain from the path of destruction. When he replies, it is with great thought. Our discussions of good, evil and those who wield power to a cause are invigorating. Perhaps my words will give him pause to consider his actions in the future. I pray it so.

Upon the cold night of this story, we discussed the conjugation of verbs in Draconic which should give you the barest idea of how deeply we study the language. 'Twas the first time in days that the wind had stilled, and we enjoyed that we could conduct our conversation with ease.

In a small lane, that we walked many a night before, two very large men stepped from the easements and blocked our path. We stopped instantly. Neither of us are so foolish as to charge the physically superior. A third man, smaller than the brutes yet still larger than the Praetor, sauntered into the middle of the lane. The moonlight reflected off his broken tooth smile as brightly as it reflected off the daggers the men carried. The Praetor glanced over his shoulder. By the way his frown darkened I did not need to ask if we were surrounded.

The small man with the broken tooth smile wasted no words. "We'll have your purse, my lord, and you shall have your blood."

To my surprise, the Praetor removed his purse and tossed it to the man. There was a startled silence as if the men could not believe their luck. The Praetor paused for only a moment before stating, "I am not a man of such greed that I value it beyond my life. Now remove thyself from this lane."

The small man picked up the purse and hefted its weight with appreciation. "Seems to me," he mused quietly, "that a man parting from his purse so quickly must have something more valuable than a song of angels about him." The broken tooth smile grew wider. "We'll have all your valuables, my lord. And the loan of your wench."

I am not so prideful to omit that my breath hitched in my throat. But the Praetor did not as much as blink in surprise. "Thou shalt have nothing else from me," he replied calmly.

The small man's smile disappeared. "Tis a shame, that. Kill 'em, lads."

"Molik," the Praetor stated.

Not a soul moved. I blinked in confusion. Wherefore were the men not already upon us? In the dim moonlight I realized that the three in front of us were straining to move. I turned to the men behind us, they were likewise immobile. I whipped around to face the Praetor. Surely 'twas not he alone... against five men grown?

The Praetor clasped his hands behind him and began to slowly walk to the man with the broken smile. "Tis bloodshed thou desirest? Very well." The two pairs of men turned to each other. Without a sound they plunged their daggers into each other's hearts. May the Lord of Light protect me, I did not hear the Praetor even utter a command.

The Praetor stood before the small man. "Kneel," he whispered. The man fell to his knees and a small whimper escaped his throat. The Praetor stepped behind the man and pulled a knife from out of a brute's heart. He held the knife and seemed to judge its balance. His gaze flickered down to the man. "Nothing more to say? Just as well."

He gripped the man's right thumb and held it above the man's head. "This is for theft," he stated as he cut the man's thumb off. I stood, transfixed. The Praetor grabbed his other thumb. "Twice," he said and removed his other thumb. The man made no sound. It was so efficiently done that I did not have time to become sick over the bloodshed.

The Praetor placed the knife on top of the fallen brute and walked back to face the kneeling man. He placed his hand upon the man's head with his thumbs over the man's eyes. It was too much for me to bear. I tried to protest on the man's behalf, "Prithee, good master..." The Praetor glared at me with such rage that I pray to never receive such a gaze again. I turned away and tried to ignore the horrible noise that the man's eyes made as they burst.

I heard the Praetor pick up his purse. I turned around to see him place a coin in the man's hand. "Thou wilt survive, knowing darkness and dumbness. Take this angel as thine first piece of charity. Thou shalt know the life of a victim as thou hast given it to so many others."

Numbly, I followed the Praetor from the lane. We were several lanes away before we heard the man's scream pierce the night. No one upon the streets seemed to take notice. Screams in London are all too common.

We did not speak to each other for the rest of our walk that night. There was nothing to say. We have not spoken of it since then.

Randall, I beg of you. Tell the Band not to provoke the Disciples without cause. Though my story tells of the Praetor's swift brutality, it also tells of the code he follows. His is a cause of justice. He rewards those who follow the law and punishes those who break it. Heaven help me as I say this, but he is fair. I have come to understand the basics of his code... and he is fair.

Share this letter with the Band if you must. I know I am not in everyone's good graces. I can only hope that sharing the truth of what I have learned will give enough warning to everyone. We must set aside our differences and stand together against the enemy. And you, my family, my Band are not my enemy.

With love and humility,
Talia