

Bloody Little Secrets

By Amanda Zeller

Talia Tale's life had never been easy. Though recent events had caused her to consider the parts of her journey that she'd originally thought of as "difficult" and recategorize them into "not entirely awful". She had many happy things to focus on: a husband, children, a home that didn't include sharing a room with twenty-some-odd other gypsies. But, lately things had gone from good to bad to awful. She'd given her notes on the Draconic Mysteries to the Praetor of the Draco Disciples, and though she felt the weight of that choice, she didn't regret it. In fact, not a single ounce of her being was dedicated to that emotion at all.

Praetor Vinz Clortho had threatened her children's lives, and in exchange for their protection she had turned her notes over. It hadn't been a hard choice, due to its very nature, but that didn't mean she didn't hate herself over having made it. Regret her choice? No. Upset about having had to have made it in the first place? Yes, very much so. Her husband had, of course, supported her, he had even offered to go to Clortho himself and demand them back – but Talia knew that above all else, the Praetor was true to his word. Her family would not die at his or any other Draco's hand. Not while he was Praetor. So when some of the travelling Adventurers had mentioned outright murdering the Praetor, her teeth had been set on edge. Killing Clortho, though an enjoyable thought, would put her family back at risk and she would *still* be out her notes on the Mysteries. Losing once was bad enough, and Talia was sick of losing.

So, she'd spent the last few days pouring over her notes from previous seasons, looking for scraps she'd either omitted or forgotten to transcribe into her "official" tome on the Draco Mysteries. A good bard never tossed a good line, scrap of information, or idea away – she merely recorded it and waited for the right muse to appear. What she hoped to find, she wasn't sure. Perhaps a clue as to what the Praetor hoped to find within her book? A few Draconic words she'd forgotten to inscribe? She didn't know if her search would warrant anything useful, but sitting around and worrying was not Talia's way.

As she poured over notes and tales she hadn't read for almost a decade, a scrap of paper fell out from betwixt the dog-eared pages. It was penned in her own graceful hand and said simply, "*Dracos use blood magic to remain youthful? How?*"

Something in Talia's brain clicked, and her stomach knotted up. She remembered the tale that sparked the annotation on the clumsy scrap of paper, and the entire saga came rushing back to her.

She'd been a young bard trying to build a collection of tales to tell 'round the hearths in the evenings, and horror stories never failed to draw crowds with a few extra coins for wayward bard to fill their belly.

The story was told by someone calling himself an "ex-Draco Disciple", but having come nose-to-nose with more than one Disciple, Talia knew he was lying; Draco Disciples only left the Order one way: in a casket. His story had piqued her interest, and Talia found herself drawn back to the wave of his words. They lit her imagination as no story had before. Even young as she was, she knew the story would find its way into her carefully cultivated collection.

His story began simply enough – a family almost high-born, verging on the edge of nobility. If not actually firmly seated among the gentry, they were rich enough it did not matter. He pitched his voice low to say, "They were legacy members of an evil, secret cult." Talia had

not been surprised he framed the family within the mythos of the Draco Disciples, their particular brand of terror always strengthened a plot. The Disciples were only spoken in whispers, and dismissed by most skeptics outright, but that didn't stop mothers from telling their children to watch out for the hooded Disciples. "Mind your manners," the mothers would say, "lest the Dracos kidnap you! And feed you to the dragon they worship and keep beneath their London palace!" Apparently, the Disciples' pet dragon liked the naughty children best.

Having recently returned from that very estate near London, Talia actually smiled – perhaps for the first time in days. It was true the Disciples kept a vast, expansive estate, but Talia had yet to see a dragon. She also hadn't seen anyone in cloaks or hoods. So disappointing. Then the smile was gone and she sighed. If the people only knew of the real Dracos. Their neighbors with a fondness for red and black clothing, a desire to sew unmitigated chaos, those that derive happiness from atypical sources of pleasure – the "strange" cousins watching from the corners at festival, the barber surgeons with a fondness for pulling teeth and leeches, the judge who seemed to enjoy sentencing the innocent as much as the guilty – those known and often trusted citizens who may seem normal to all around them, but harbored a dark secret. If the common folk only *knew* – it would be a dark world indeed.

As she wound the strands of the long-untold tale around the spindle of stories yet to be spun in her mind, she compared it to the truth of Vinz Clortho. It was dangerous to tell a tale with too many undisguised truths – it drew unwanted attention to both the bard and the truths that were spoken. Nor for the first time, she wondered if she was inadvertently drawing herself into the view of the Disciples. Maybe all that had passed was meant to be.

Unable to ponder *that* particular thread any longer, lest she fall into the emotional abyss that plagued her all the way back from London and beyond, Talia went back to drawing up the threads of the tale. She wound and twisted the threads she'd started, letting the wheel spin its first pass. The thread knit together and she spun the story.

They were a morose couple, plagued by barrenness and disease in every attempt to continue their familial line. The father was a large, strong man with a barrel chest, flashing brown eyes, ebony hair, and a fondness for raw leather. The mother was thin, frail-looking at first glance, with red hair and a fondness for watching small things suffer.

After their twelfth child was lost in stillbirth, the mother pleaded to the great Goddess, Tiamat, for some sort of succor. She stripped off her clothes, let down the waterfall of her beautiful red hair and snuck down to their basement chantry to Tiamat. There, she flayed the thick veins in her wrist open with two quick flicks of a ceremonial blade, and laid down on the altar. Arms crossed o'er her chest, she waited for either the Goddess' to whisper to her why she'd been denied a child or for final death.

As the life seeped from her body, pooling on her chest and into the cup of her navel, the Goddess came to her. Tiamat took a human form, a beautiful, dark-eyed, fiery-haired maiden. The great Goddess seemed less terrifying somehow. In a soft, low voice Tiamat asked the mother why she sacrificed her life for such a thing as a child. The mother answered as only one who wishes to be a mother could: her every fiber wanted a child to love and cherish, a child to raise as a dutiful follower of Tiamat, a child who would shake mountains and follow in his father's great footsteps toward the goals of the Goddess. The mother wished for a Praetor who would succeed in conducting Tiamat's work on this plane.

Tiamat thought, then spoke that all miracles came at a price. Was the mother willing to pay this price? The mother agreed, without thought or hesitation. With a gentle, wry grin, Tiamat

swirled Her fingers in the blood at the mother's abdomen, and then plunged Her fingers straight into the cavity of her womb, as if skin and bone were not there to hinder Her ways. The mother screamed, flailed, and fell unconscious.

It was the screaming that brought a servant. He assessed the situation, tried to stop the bleeding, and sent for the Praetor. The father burst into the room, his leather cape swirling behind him with a flourish, and he used what gifts the Goddess gave him to heal his wife.

She would never wake again. She slept as if under a sleeping curse. Even as her belly swelled with the child she so desperately wanted; she did not wake. But she dreamed, dreamed of a son that would shake the earth with his presence, a son that would be Praetor. And when a daughter was born to her, she dreamt of him still until the blood flooded from her body. Until she was dead. She never opened her eyes and saw the daughter she'd borne: a small, pale creature with her mother's wide, long-lashed eyes, and her father's dark hair. No magic could save her; Tiamat had taken Her due.

The girl grew into a lovely creature; that was undeniable. Her studies of Tiamat's mysteries matched her loveliness stride-by-stride. She was as quick with a blade as she was a pen, and when she sang, magic rippled through the crowd. Her understanding of the depth and breadth of Draconic was almost as fine as her father's. A female Praetor in the making she seemed to be. Things were going so well, she did not even mind when her father remarried. Devoted to the Dracos and her husband, the stepmother made it her duty to prepare the girl for her expected role. Talia could not remember her name in the original tale – Ipah? Ella? Ephra?

The stepmother was neither cruel nor mean, as fairytale stepmothers are often portrayed. She was stern, but motivated by a need to see the girl succeed. She taught the girl old magics and prepared her as best she could. As the girl came of age, the father dwindled in health. His time was coming. When he died, the girl expected to hear Tiamat's call, but alas, another – a man – was chosen. Hoping to secure his place as leader, he took the girl as his wife. He was not a kind or fair man, and there was nothing gentle about him when he consummated the marriage. But, the girl was adamant, and withstood the onslaught with the assurance that this was just Tiamat testing her. All metal had to be tempered in fire, and Tiamat's fires were the hottest known.

Yet, as the years waned, her faith wavered. She was well into her twenties. She'd be an old woman and die without ever living to her potential, forced to bear her husband's awful children. Certain there was nothing left for her, she decided to do as her mother had done – so many moons ago – and sacrifice herself and her blood to the Goddess' whim. Let Her will be done.

She undressed, letting the cascade of her deep brown waves fall over her shoulders. For a moment, she let her pale skin breathe in the moonlight. Then, snatching a dressing gown to swirl about her body, she descended into the chantry, and repeated the ritual. She flayed open her wrists, climbed up onto the altar, and awaited answers or death.

But Tiamat did not come. Not a sound was heard, and the girl was certain her Goddess had deserted her. Just as her vision began to cloud, a warm hand stroked her forehead and covered her quickly cooling body with some fabric. As the warm caress of magic closed her wounds, a familiar voice in her ear said, "Blood is the magic you seek, dearest child." Tiamat had not come, but her stepmother had.

Once she was well again, the stepmother taught her the oldest magic she knew: blood magic. The stepmother taught her to use blood to power spells, to do her will, and to maintain her youth. At first, the blood sometimes had to be the girl's, but soon the blood became victim's in great pools.

Maintaining her youth was the most difficult secret to master. It required she draw blood from several people at once, and then perform a ritual that to an onlooker looked much like bathing. Her stepmother preferred children's blood as their innocence gave her skin a sheen that defied the onslaught of her years. The girl didn't know how old her stepmother was, but she was certain it was many more years than her apparent middle-age. Her stepmother had a wisdom that spoke of many more decades of learning than such a paltry sum of years could explain.

The girl tried to garner the fortitude to bleed so many young orphans – a thing her stepmother had in excess – but for weeks she could not manage it. It was one thing to spill the blood of an enemy, but a helpless child? While the girl debated with herself over the issue for many weeks, she did not remain idle. She plotted and planned of a time when she could kill her vile husband and take his place as Praetor. Surely, she had learned enough to please the Goddess now and be chosen?

After a crippling defeat at the hands of a group that called themselves The Crepuscularica, she decided he was distracted enough to not see her attack coming. As he hauled her into their bed that night to crawl atop her once more, she pulled the small dagger from beneath the pillow and made three quick slashes into his chest. She pressed her palm into the seeping triangle and allowed the blood from the sigils carefully razored into her palm to mingle with his blood. As she spoke the words, she drew the lifeforce from his body and did not stop chanting until she held the core of his soul in her bloody, throbbing hand. She peered at it a moment. It was a cloudy rolling ball of shadow and smoke, dark and oily. The girl didn't mourn for a moment when she crushed it between her slippery fingers. She let the precious essence fall to the floor as useless as ashes.

Having taken the man's life and lifted the weight of his oppression from her being, she thought she heard a whisper. "Patience," was all it said, then was gone. She waited for Tiamat to call to her, but nothing came. No call, no power. She was overlooked again. Infuriated and bloody, she rose from the bed and stormed to her stepmother's chambers. She raged, and screamed, and broke things. Her stepmother weathered the onslaught. When calm finally came, the haggard girl struggling to catch her breath, the stepmother simply said it was time to go.

The girl was confused. Was her stepmother leaving her? When she said as much, her stepmother replied. "Use the tools. Await your turn. Be ready when it does come. I have lingered too long here. 'Tis time I was reborn again; a new name to go with an ever-young Lady. You might do the same, dearest child."

The girl finally understood. She was 29, she had no prospects. She was not the Praetor. It was time to begin again, get it right a second time around. She went down into the dungeons, still bloody, her nightgown torn, her dark curls wild, her fingertips still curled around the tiny dagger she'd used to kill her awful husband. She opened every door, drew out every beggar, thief, child, prisoner, and whore, and bled them all, draining their blood into a large wooden barrel. When the task was done, she was covered in gore and looked a complete and utter mess.

As she spoke the incantation over the barrel, the blood began to swirl. She used the barely recognizable dagger to slice away her nightgown and then carved a score of sigils into her torso, arms, legs, neck, and face. The final sigil, the sacred triangle, she drew over the third eye on her forehead. She began the incantations again and climbed into the barrel. As she sank into the compact space, she continued to chant. As her body displaced the excess, she continued to chant. As the blood came to her chin, she continued to chant. As the blood came past her lips and over the top of her head, the blood slopping into great pools of ichor upon the floor, she continued to chant. She stayed submerged for a repulsive eternity. When she finally emerged, the blood

running from her skin like rain from well-oiled leather, her skin was bright, unblemished, clean. She shone with the light of a maiden. No sigils marred her skin, she was pink and fresh and new. She thanked Tiamat for Her kindness, and vowed to be patient.

Since then, the girl has performed the ritual many times. She has been many things and many people to the Order, always awaiting the blessing of Tiamat to grant her birthright. She has had many, many names. Though she may look just a girl, she is wise, she is powerful. It is said she is well-loved and guarded by the Praetors of the Disciples. She is why no man should ever dare underestimate a Draco Disciple merely because she is a woman. She is why children are kept close, and tucked into their beds at night. She is a perfectly lovely girl, with a dark core. All she needs is a drop of your blood to make you regret ever crossing her.

Talia shuddered as the spindle of her tale dropped, empty. The wheel of stories slowed, and the yarn was complete. She felt entirely unsettled, cold from the inside out. At times like these, she did the only thing she could. She finished her glass of wine in one large, final swig, and snuck into her daughters' room. She paused in the doorway, listening to the soft sounds of their breathing. She then pulled the covers back up around them, brushed the hair from their foreheads with a motherly tenderness, and gently planted a kiss upon each of their heads. They'd grown too much, too fast while she'd been away. She'd missed so much. As the tears welled into her vision, she whisked herself from the room, lest she wake them.

In the hallway just outside their door, she ran smack into her husband. Brushing the tears from her eyes, she buried herself into his chest. Normally a jovial and warm, bordering on almost silly man, he didn't joke or ask a question, merely folded her into his arms. She leaned into him, gathering herself. "Ready for bed, love?" His tone was even, unassuming. She'd had more than a little trouble sleeping since her return. He tried to understand, but she felt guilty all the same.

"Aye, love," she replied. "Just one too many ghost stories tonight, I think."

"Close the books, dampen the candle, and try to sleep? You've two giggling girls to chase about on the morrow." His brow creased with worry as she pulled away, nodding in agreement to his request.

"I will, I will. Let me just jot down what page I am on and a sentence or two so I do not forget my train of thought. Go back to bed. Warm up a space for me there? 'Tis such a cold and damp summer, I think me the chill won't be out of my bones until August if the rains continue." She mustered a smile. It didn't reach her eyes, but she was trying, and he accepted her effort.

"Well a'now. But do not tarry too much longer. 'Twill be morning before you know it." He looked at her once more, before heading back to bed.

Talia went to her desk and closed several books. When she came to the journal where the evening's adventure had begun, she shuddered. She looked at what seemed to be such a simple sentence, "*Draco uses blood magic to remain youthful? How?*" She was struck with a realization: emotion and focus. That was the difference! She almost laughed, it was so simple. The answer to the complicated question: intent. It was all about intent. That was how the girl could perform such acts; that was the key to her winter in London. That was the true foundation of magic, what made some spells work and others fizzle. It was a powerful combination of learning, execution, and will. It was how the caster gathered the pieces together and directed them that made the difference! Intention was where the magic really was.

She nearly cheered out loud, but slammed her fist into her mouth to stifle the crazed laughter. This was a huge breakthrough! She'd finally cracked it! A mere bard from nowhere, a

no one had come to the conclusion all on her own, without a fancy library or ancient tomes!
Talia rushed to the door, turned the lock, and popped her hat off of the hook and onto her head.

She had to tell Master Clortho! He would finally free her; she would no longer be prey to his whims. She could bargain for the return of her true name and – wait, no. She owed him nothing and, though beneficial to herself, she would betray the only people she loved... again. She should go to the camp! She must tell Nikola and Bailey to see if this information proved useful. Useful enough to get her back into the Band's good graces, if she was lucky. She could live a normal life again! Her hand was on the knob, but her feet lingered just inside.

Who did she tell? Which master did she serve? Where did her loyalties lie? After a moment's wavering, she made her choice and strode into the delicious Bristol eve. The air was cool and oddly still.

The choice was made, she would take her chances.