

Limits

by Julie McMillin

It was worth it, Talia thought as she pushed the pot of beer closer to the fire. Wisps of steam were coming off the hot liquid, but she knew to wait until it boiled so she could skim off the dirt that floated to the surface. She examined her wrists again by the light of the small fire. Three deep red welts were pressed into each wrist where the rough rope bit into her, and the skin around them was tender to the touch, but there was no blood that she could see –the same could not be said for her back.

Slowly, gently Talia skimmed the film off the beer while trying to move as little as possible. At this late hour there was no one left in the kitchen of the Clortho house to help. She didn't dare wake any of the kitchen boys, and she didn't think she could make it down the hallway to find Mistress Kate. Talia could feel her back getting tighter as the cuts began to scab over.

The beer still wasn't ready, so Talia turned her attentions to her ruined shirt. It was beyond the help of needle and thread, but it wasn't beyond a mending spell. Talia grimaced as she quietly sang the mending song - trying not to breathe too deeply and stretch her back. There were only three spells that Talia could perform - and each of them had come in handy more times than she could remember. Her beautiful shirt once again whole, Talia took stock of the rest of her wardrobe and determined that it only needed a good wash. She heaped her skirts in the corner and walked the cold stone in bare feet and her smallclothes. No sense in getting the rest of her clothing wet, and there was no one around who required modesty.

Talia folded her patchwork cloak and carefully placed it on the ground next to the fire. Determining that the beer was hot enough, she dipped all but two corners of a large square of wool into the boiling liquid. She took one of her clean muckingers and stuffed the cloth into her mouth to muffle her scream. She'd rather not wake up the rest of the house. They were angry enough already. She grabbed the two dry corners of the wool and swung the fabric on her back like a boiling cloak.

Screaming into the fabric, she collapsed onto her patchwork cloak. Her small, rational inner voice reminded her that without Vashta's herbs this was the only way to keep her muscles loose and the blood pure enough to heal properly. She slipped into unconsciousness before she could catch her breath to scream again.

* * * 10 days earlier * * *

Oxford.

Talia and Ruben found a large public house called the Sign of the Boar's Head and agreed to meet around supper time every other day. That way Talia could let Ruben know when they were leaving for London, and Ruben could ensure that Talia was still alive and well.

Even though Ruben was still within sight, Talia felt so very alone as she used the great iron knocker on the ancient gate of the Clortho lands. They both knew that Vinz would never permit Ruben through the gate. The "invitation" was for Talia and Talia alone.

A guard called out to her through one of the arrow slits. "You have no business here, woman."

Talia straightened her shoulders and tried to give the guard a clear view of her features. "I am Talia Tale, summoned here by Master Vinz Clortho."

There was no reply. Talia stood there for a full moment, but still nothing. She turned and shrugged helplessly at Ruben and was rewarded with the sounds of the gate being unbarred. As

she walked through the gate, she and Ruben shared one final wave. They both hoped to see each other the day after tomorrow. They both doubted it would happen.

As Talia was escorted to the stout stone house, she could feel the tension in her spine blessedly lessening. After weeks of pain driving her to find Vinz, she smiled at the prospect of finally being able to sleep through the night. Of course being with the Praetor of the Draco Disciples offered a whole different host of problems, but Talia would take the small victory for the moment.

The house itself was generations old. It wasn't festooned with gargoyles or anything even remotely "evil". If a house could have a personality, then this house was a portly uncle just past his prime, but still full of life. The gardens were exceptional, the trees were ancient, and the birds were singing sleepily all around.

Based upon the smells from the kitchen, dinner was in progress. Talia was certain that she'd be shown through the kitchen entrance, it'd happened for every other large house where she'd performed, so when the guard continued to the main door she nearly suggested the use of the side entrance. When the guard led her to a door where she could hear many voices enjoying their dinner, and could feel Vinz among them, she did ask the guard if she shouldn't wait until after the meal.

The guard shrugged. "Thou art expected, mistress. Master Clortho has been waiting for days now. He wished to see thee upon thy arrival."

The door swung open. Only half the people in the room turned to look at the new arrival, which Talia found a small blessing. She looked at the head table for Vinz, but did not find him in the center seat. A kind eyed older gentleman smiled at her, laugh lines crinkling around the sides of his bearded face. He leaned to his left, light flickering across his grey hair as he whispered to a woman, presumably his wife. The woman also looked at Talia and smiled with a warmth that would put anyone at ease. With eyes locked upon them, Talia found herself smiling back at the couple.

The man stood and the room fell silent. The crowd may not have been paying attention to the door, but the man commanded their attention through a quiet, kind power that Talia had only seen Vashta use on stubborn patients in the past. "T'would seem that my son's student has arrived in time for dinner."

Student?! Talia's eyes grew wide and she froze with indecision.

The woman chuckled. "Vinz, dear, do come and introduce us to this poor creature. She's more frightened than a caught coney."

Vinz nodded to Liam from the side of the fireplace, concluding their conversation, before stepping into the light of the Great Hall. He locked eyes with Talia, and they both inhaled sharply as a rush of power coursed through them. The terms of the compulsion were met. Talia no longer felt any pain to return to Vinz's presence.

Vinz smiled at the thoroughness of the compulsion. Talia smiled that the weight in her lower back was finally gone. The company in the Great Hall smiled at the seemingly happy reunion.

Vinz gestured grandly, "Father, Mother, may I present Mistress Talia Tale, a bard from Bristol who will be renown through England once she has access to several of the books we house in London. Mistress Tale, these are Sir Edward and Lydia Clortho."

Talia sank to a knee. "Grammercy for the invitation and introduction, Master Clortho. My Lord and Lady Clortho, I do apologize for the interruption of your dinner."

Edward Clortho waved his hand at Talia. "Do rise and be welcome in my house, child. I never expected my son to become a patron of the arts, and I look forward to hearing of your success in

the coming months. Prithee, take a seat and join the meal. We have plenty to share for a travel-worn student. I am certain that my son will see to your place in the house when we are finished.”

Talia thanked Sir Clortho and took a seat with several ladies of the chambers. It mattered not the rank of the household member, unless you were actively serving the meal, everyone was permitted to eat at the same time in the Clortho house. Talia made small talk with the ladies and tried to keep the conversation well away from the terms in which she had to come to the house. She picked out all the members of the Bristol Draco Disciples seated at other tables. Most surprisingly, she ate extremely well. After weeks of traveling fare, it was a wonder to eat until she felt full.

Nothing of major note took place during the rest of dinner. Once Sir and Lady Clortho retired for the evening along with most of the servants, Vinz called for the attention of the remaining household.

“As my lord father said, this is my guest, Talia. Do not go out of your way to make her feel comfortable, as she is here against her will.” The ladies sitting next to Talia shot her withering glances. Vinz continued, “Howe'ere, do not mistake this as permission to mistreat her. She is not to be harmed. Simply fed, and cleaned if she desires it. Leave her to her studies, if she wishes to do so. She is a bard, and thus a weaver of stories. If she tells thee one, repeat it back to me word for word. She can be dangerous, so tread with caution. She will be traveling with me to London, so she will not be here long.” He turned to a lady. “Mistress Kate? Thou shalt show her to her room, please.”

The servant bobbed a reverence. “Of course, Master Clortho.” She turned to Talia. “This way, you.”

Talia made certain to perform all the necessary reverances to everyone in the room before leaving. Better to leave them thinking her a polite prisoner. But as she followed Mistress Kate down the hallway she could only wonder at the duplicity with Vinz’s parents and how much the household truly knew about the power Vinz wielded.

Past the kitchens and all the storeroom doors was a small wooden door at the end of the hall. Mistress Kate opened it and stepped inside. Talia stopped at the threshold and gazed into a small, but very inviting room. Mistress Kate placed a log onto a banked fire and lit a candle that sat upon a small desk.

“My room?” Talia whispered, stunned that she would receive something so private.

Mistress Kate looked up and smiled, “Tut tut, of course, dear. You’ve had quite the journey and need to rest.” She lit a second candle.

“Oh, please, Mistress,” Talia raised a hand to protest. “I have no need for so much light. The fire is plenty to see me for this evening...” Talia trailed off. As the light caught and grew brighter she realized that the desk was covered in supplies. Jars of ink lined the back of the desk in neat rows. Uncut feathers sat next to a quill knife while a pile of foolscap took the rest of the flat space on the desk. Fine parchment was rolled in a basket upon the floor and three books sat upon the stool.

Mistress Kate’s smile grew broader. “I thought you’d like to see everything the Master ordered for you, dear. Despite what those ninny girls may think, I know you’ll bring a bit of fresh air to the house. Even if ‘tis only for a brief time. Now!” She clapped her hands to draw Talia’s attention back to her. “I’ll be taking all those travel clothes for a good washing. You’re not to be wandering the house at night, and no one will be bothering you back here. Not without passing by me, first. So let’s have all of them, dear.”

Talia found herself trusting Mistress Kate's no-nonsense attitude. "Mistress... Kate?" Talia ventured as she waded from her heavy traveling clothes, hoping that she wasn't offending her by using such a familiar name.

"Aye?" She picked up Talia's heavy patchwork cloak. "Tut tut," she muttered.

"Forgive my ignorance, Mistress, but are you also a Draco Disciple?"

Mistress Kate smiled again. "For all that Lady Clortho has explained to me over the years, I understand why she thinks the way she does but, nay, I am not an initiate of the Disciples. You'll find that most of the household is though, dear. So if you're at odds with them then it's best to watch your step. Those ninny girls of the chambers spread rumors faster than the ivy vines climb the outer walls.

After she left with the laundry, Talia settled herself in her room and began leafing through the books. History books, all of them, written in the same steady hand. She didn't get very far before her travel exhaustion, and full stomach, caught up with her. As she fell asleep she marveled that she was sleeping in a bed.

In the days following her arrival at Clortho manor, Talia found a measure of freedom that she did not expect. Not only was she permitted to keep her meetings with Ruben, she was encouraged to explore the town - if she felt it would help with her research. She began work on the three books that Vinz left for her. They turned out to be very detailed accounts of the end of the Roman Empire in Britain. There was a familiar tone to the author, but Talia could not pin it exactly.

Talia made certain to let people see her in the library as often as possible, pouring over her books, but she frequently left when Castor used the library. He would pace the room and angrily add things to his notes. It was akin to being trapped in a room with a wild animal. So Talia would sit in the kitchen with a book. She walked the hallways with a book. She even sat in the (frequently unused) musician's gallery in the Great Hall with a book. On the fourth day, no one questioned her when she sat in the gallery with a book during supper and dinner. From then on, Talia didn't work on the history books while the masters and mistresses were eating. She began decoding Zula's spellbook, while Zula sat below her. She never noticed it missing. Talia's hunch was that she would find more words for her Draconic Dictionary. She knew it was a risk, but she probably wouldn't have a chance in London.

Katherine Mandrake's Tale

It had been quite a long time since Kat stopped to smell a rose. Or any flower, really. She crouched low in the center of the square garden and let the delicious scents of the plants refresh her soul. As she took slow, deep breaths and gazed at the tiny fall blossoms, she imagined the plant's roots sinking deeper into them damp earth, readying itself for winter. She found it a comforting thought - settling down in a warm place for the winter. She smiled as she thought about her favorite chair at the London Manse.

From around the corner of the house, the herb garden side, she heard a woman swear louder than a sailor. Not "concerned" per se, more simple curiosity, she walked toward the sound. One of the kitchen girls, the youngest, knelt next to a heaping basket of sage leaves. The girl continued to rip leaves angrily off the thinning stalks, occasionally tearing a stalk and eliciting another profanity. Kat knew if the girl kept tearing the plant like that it wouldn't survive the winter.

“I’ve been annoyed at sage in the past,” Kat began. The girl, startled, dropped the handful of leaves she was working upon. “Howe’re I’ve never been so angry at the plant that I tried to kill it by dismemberment.”

The girl looked at the leaves upon the ground, looked at the stalk, and laughed. It was a bit manic, that laugh, but it spoke of a deeper release of emotion than anger could provide. After a few seconds Kat joined her in the laugh, and the two chuckled until their sides ached. It felt good to laugh again freely without worrying about snide comments from the boys, Kat noted.

“Oh, Mistress, I am sorry for disturbing you... and thank you. I needed that. This poor stalk did not deserve to be treated as such.”

Kat kneeled next to the girl and began working on the next plant. The weather was turning colder quickly and all the leaves would need to be dried to last until next summer. “What is it that truly angered you?”

The girl sat back on her heels and brushed an errant strand of flaxen hair behind her ear. The tension of anger once again crept into her shoulders. “Henry. The miller. He’s been telling people that we’ve... And we have not!”

Kat nodded. “But you cared for him.”

She threw her hands into the air. “Course I did! Have we not been talking about marriage for months now? Henry and Moll the millers we’d be. But now the whole city is talking about how I could not wait until my wedding night to be with him! Why would he do that?”

Kat put her hand upon Moll’s shoulder. “There are two reasons. He either used you to boast to his companions at the public house one night... or he does not wish to marry you, but wants you to appear the villain so he is free to woo someone else.”

Moll clenched her jaw tight with anger. “I am not a villain.”

Kat smiled, “Nor am I, Moll.”

“But, Mistress Mandrake, you know the poisons. Could you not teach me?”

“Lesson one. Sage helps calm the mind. Stop being angry at the leaves and let them help you.”

Moll looked at her fingers, black with the rubbed sage that crusted them after an hour of pulling leaves. She inhaled the gentle scent.

“Good,” Kat continued. “Use nature to help yourself first and foremost. Do not try to harm others when the easier path is to heal yourself. Poison should never be your first course of action. In this case, we still do not know which reason Henry began the rumors. So we have to figure that out before doing anything else. And, since we cannot achieve that while kneeling in a garden, I think we should finish gathering these leaves and head back to the kitchens to string them to dry. What say you?”

Moll’s shoulders relaxed and she looked to be on the verge of crying. “I say ‘tis a fine idea, Mistress.”

The two women worked quickly to gather the leaves, chatting and laughing like old friends that had just met.

Vinz Clortho’s Tale

There was absolutely no mistaking the siblings. They were not twins. To be sure, Iris was younger than Vinz by several years, but they were of similar height and color of eye and hair. What set them apart from any other member of the family was their confidence, which they both wore with a fierce pride.

It was a fine afternoon, and the two were at the edge of the garden where they could play a bit of battledore without fear that the shuttlecock would land in the middle of one of the square

gardens. It was a friendly bout, and they were having a lovely conversation while keeping the shuttlecock aloft. There was a pause as Iris made ready to serve again. She launched the shuttlecock into the air and said, "Take me to London."

Vinz's eyes widened slightly as he returned the volley. "No. Mother needs you here."

Iris frowned and returned, "You outrank her."

Vinz caught the shuttlecock in his hand and studied his sister. "You've been excused from your studies, Iris. Take time here and rest. Recover."

Iris stamped her foot. "There's nothing to bloody recover from! I was going to marry a thrice-damned spy, and I was too shallow-pated to see it! So now I'm no better than one of Mistress Kate's ninny girls!"

Vinz slowly closed the distance between them and placed a hand on her shoulder. "'Tis not the way of it at all. From what the report said no one saw his treachery. Is that not so?"

Iris sputtered angrily. "Aye, but I still should have seen something-!"

"Nay," Vinz cut her off. "You are human, just as I am, and we err. There is no reason for you to shoulder the blame for something that you could not see."

Iris would not back down. "But you could have seen it! And you can teach me how to see souls so it never happens again!" She took a breath, expecting Vinz to cut her off. When he didn't reply she continued. "I don't want to stay here, brother. I need to be back in the thick of things. I need to forget what happened - and I know I can do that if you'll just let me help with your new project. Let me in your counsel and I can prove to you and to everyone that I'm not just the Praetor's slow-witted sister. I know Mother and Father will not like it, but you can order me to London if that's the only way! Please, Vinz! I need this!"

Vinz inhaled deeply. "No."

Iris screamed and threw her racket into a bush. "You will not even give me a chance! How can I prove myself to the Dark Lady when you stand in my way?!"

Calmly, Vinz went to the bush and searched for her racket. "I am not denying you a chance. I am giving you time to get your emotions in check before you continue..."

"There is no time! Vinz! I was called to ACT for the Dark Lady, not sit at home doing nothing!"

Vinz stood up, racket in hand. "Then you miss one of the most important things I ever learned before I was chosen to be Praetor."

Iris sneered, "How to sit on my arse with a book in my lap?"

Vinz stopped, hurt. Reading together was a pastime they had enjoyed for years. "I learned that I had to take care of myself before I could care for others," he said quietly. "If I could not think things through, then I couldn't make the best choice. It begins with the simple things: I need to sleep and eat. If I can't do that, and usually that means that no one else is sleeping or eating, then I need to fix that problem before anything else."

He looked up at Iris. "You're hurt, sister, and you need to heal. Please take this rest. Forgive yourself for something that you did not do." He offered the racket to her. "And then forgive your brother for doing what he felt was best for his sister?"

Iris harrumphed and took the racket. "Fine. I shall try."

Vinz nodded. "Then let's find one of those 'hidden' bottles of wine in father's cellar and you can tell me everything else that happened this summer."

The siblings chuckled at the prospect of engaging in another favorite pastime and walked back to the house.

Liam Bloodroot's Tale

Liam stood next to the tall, thin window in Sir Edward Clortho's private room. The sunset illuminated Liam's confident stance and easy smile. "Therefore," Liam concluded, "I hope you can see how this venture will benefit us both, Admiral."

Edward popped out of his chair, blue eyes sparkling behind his spectacles. "Well done, my boy, well done!"

Liam ducked his head and gazed at the floor. "Grammercy, my lord."

Edward all but danced over to the sideboard to pour two glasses of wine. "That is a grand argument, Liam. I cannot imagine the good Lord Admiral declining our offer. You needed me not. Your words were perfect. There is nothing I can improve upon." Edward offered Liam a glass. "A toast to your improvement since last I saw you!"

They each raised their glasses and drank.

Edward returned to his chair and motioned for Liam to join him. "Now, lad, tell me how you felt during that argument."

Liam gazed into the goblet and swirled the wine several times. "I felt nervous, but only deep inside. I wouldn't let it show in my face or my shoulders. Once I began the first point in the argument, I didn't feel nervous all."

Edward nodded. "That's as should be. What else?"

Liam considered for a moment. "'Tis passing strange that I gave thought to making myself appear smaller so that my listener would feel to be on equal footing. For so long I have used my size above all other things."

"Aye, and you are more than that now, Liam. You still have that value in your strength of arms. Now you have value for your wit, your charm, and your argument." Edward removed his spectacles and rubbed the glass to clean them.

"Does it stem from becoming the Praetor's right hand?"

"I do not believe so." Edward perched his spectacles back upon his nose and leaned closer to Liam. "I believe you are thinking of things in the wrong order. You have always had these skills deep within you. You were learning to develop them - perhaps you were not even aware that you were showing them - and my son could see it in you. The way a man moves, Liam, speaks always of his abilities. If he moves like a strong man then he can become a strong man. It is the power of our spirit that makes it so."

Liam grinned a cheshire grin. "Then that is something else I owe to the Praetor: the opportunity to find my true voice."

Edward raised his glass again, "My son has always been perceptive, forthright, and fair. And you are a quick study, thorough, and humble. I foresee the two of you achieving great things together."

"Grammercy, my lord," Liam raised his glass and drained his cup. "If it please you, I would offer one more piece for your review."

"Indeed? There are more people for you to see in these next few weeks than I thought. You have certainly been busy. Then by all means, lad, let's hear it. Who am I now?"

Liam extended his arm as if to offer a hearty handshake. "May I offer my congratulations to you, the newly raised Lord Mayor of Bristol?"

Edward filled the room with his laughter. "Oh, this one will be wonderful. I can tell already."

Zula Gozeryan's Tale

It was still delightfully warm in Lydia Clortho's solar. The midday sun streamed through the windows to provide plenty of light for Lydia and Zula to review the household expenses. It was not a task with which Lydia needed help, but Zula was so often away from her own household and did not have the opportunity to learn from her own mother that Lydia feigned needing help so the young woman could practice. Lydia hoped that Zula would forgive the deception. Zula, who knew Lydia was lying the first time she asked for assistance, had already forgiven her. She did need the practice.

Zula ran her finger over another line of cramped figures in the book. "New home?" she queried.

Lydia nodded. "Yes, the final pieces have been paid and delivered for Vinz's home on the western side of the grounds." Lydia paused. "Your holdings are not as old as ours, no?"

"Mine are large for Bristol, but not nearly as large - nor as old - as the Clortho lands, no."

"The custom here is for the heir to invest back into the land. Vinz wanted a smaller house that was closer to the city center." Lydia smiled sadly. "I can tell already that he has plans for this old house when Edward and I are gone."

Zula continued to scan the book, looking for any other expenses that seemed out of order.

Lydia quietly asked, "Do you have anything set aside for your future heir, dear?"

Zula's thoughts ground to a screeching halt. "My- no! I... my husband..."

Lydia held up a hand. "I know your priorities lay with the Disciples, but it is not an impractical question. Whatever you do or do not do with your husband is not what I am asking. I am asking if you are planning for the future of your holdings and yourself. When your husband passes on, what will you do? When you pass on will your home return to the city to be sold again?"

Zula's mind raced.

"Or do you want a child?" Lydia asked.

Zula took a deep breath. "It... is not something that I have given much thought."

Lydia nodded. "Well, now that I have planted that seed in your mind, I will tell you this. Having a child will rip your love in two. I found it very difficult to follow the Dark Lady and still give my whole heart to my children. Difficult, but not impossible."

Zula tried to imagine herself holding a squealing babe, but could not get the image to stick. Then again, she had the ability to create life... would it not be wondrous to bring new life into the world?

"But do not forget to name an heir while your husband still lives, Zula, lest the city of Bristol deny your claim after he passes on. If you want to continue to offer your home to the Draco Disciples then you must keep your mind on the... mundane... matters of managing the household."

Zula smiled and placed her hand upon Lydia's. "I take your meaning. And I thank you."

Lydia placed her other hand on top of Zula's and held it. "I am not certain you understand all of it, so please indulge my motherly talk. Keep your foundation strong, Zula. You reach so hard for the heavens that I worry for you. Do not stop reaching, but make certain that you can catch yourself if you fall. The world is fickle toward the gentle woman, and you have worked so hard. I do not wish to see you fall out of favor for a small matter like a household book. Not when I know you know how to fix it. Just... take the time to fix it. Please?"

Zula leaned around the side of the table and drew Lydia into a fierce embrace. "I will. I promise I will."

Lydia leaned back and rubbed a tear from her eye. “That’s settled then. Take care of yourself, Zula. Strengthen your foundation, and I know you will reach further than any of us can imagine.”

Zula rubbed a tear from her own eye, her heart full of gratitude and joy that another person cared about her so much.

Castor Sloan’s Tale

Mistress Kate stood in the spice cellar, grinding sugar for the final course of the weekend’s feast. There was a knock on the doorframe. Mistress Kate sighed, assuming it was one of her ‘nanny’ girls come to ask a question about the pudding. She looked over and found the smiling face of Castor Sloan.

“Castor, dear!” She hurried over to embrace him. “I was wondering if you would come to speak to me this year.”

Castor warmly returned the embrace. “Speaking with you, Mistress Kate, is one of the highlights of my year.”

“Tut tut, Castor,” Mistress Kate said frowning. “That is not true at all.”

“Oh, but it is, dear lady,” Castor took Mistress Kate’s hand gently. “For who else would dazzle me with her beauty as well as wit.” He chastely kissed her hand.

Mistress Kate smirked. “Charmer.”

Castor took his usual seat on the stool in the corner as Mistress Kate returned to her mortar and pestle. Castor waited a few moments before speaking again. “So what question do you have for me this year, Mistress Kate?”

“‘Tis as I told Lady Clortho time and time again, Castor. I shall not be one of your disciples. I do not have the spirit for it like the rest of you.”

Castor leaned forward on the stool, excited. “That’s where you’re wrong, Kate. You have everything you need to be a disciple already within you. You have just as such spirit as the rest of us. Ah! I remember a passage for just this occasion.

“Then she said to her servants, ‘The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’ So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.

“But when the queen came in to see the guests, she noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. She asked, ‘How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?’ The man was speechless.

“Then the queen told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

“For many are invited, but few are chosen.”

Castor leaned back on the stool. “We are all cut from the same cloth, Mistress Kate. None of us were invited to feast with Tiamat at first, but we are welcome at the feast if we are prepared to feast properly.”

Mistress Kate shook her head. “You’d have done better if you didn’t mention that last part about the wailing.”

Castor paused, considering. “But if I ended with the hall filled with guests, then it wouldn’t explain that you had to be sincere about joining.”

“That’s a different message than what you started with, dear boy. You wanted to tell me that everyone was welcome even if we did not have an invitation. Giving me a picture of a hall full of happy people gives a bit of that ‘happily ever after’ ending that so many people are looking for.

If you want me to be happy and join the group then give me a message about being happy and joining the feast. You save that wailing and gnashing of teeth message for people that have said they think they want to join.”

Absently, Castor rubbed his chin with his fingers. “That way the recruit is certain they want to become an initiate?”

“Aye.”

“But, Mistress Kate, did you not say to be year last that you did not want to hear any fairy story endings? That you wanted to hear the truth of things?”

“Tut tut, Castor, do not mix the stories and the intent. If you wanted to tell me that I have spirit akin to yours then tell me that. But if you want to tell me that I can only eat at the table with you if I have taken the time to dress like you? Then that is a different message. As it stands, I heard from your scripture that I should not try to join the feast unless I’m ready.” Mistress Kate put down her pestle and turned to face him. “I am not ready to join the Draco Disciples, Castor.”

Castor stood and embraced Mistress Kate with just as much warmth as they did a few minutes ago. “You’ve given me much to think about, Mistress Kate.”

“Shall I see you next year, Castor?”

“If I am still alive, I shall come chat with you, dear lady.” He kissed her hand again.

Mistress Kate waved him out of the room. “Tut tut, charmer.”

It was All Hallow’s Eve, and a dinner night like any other in the Great Hall. Talia was hidden in the musician’s gallery working desperately on Zula’s spellbook. Thus far, she had found nothing regarding the Draconic language. The meal was ending, but Talia could still hear all of the Bristol Draco Disciples in conversation. She promised to continue working until they were leaving the hall.

It grew quieter and quieter in the hall as people left to go about their evening chores. There was a lull in the conversation and Talia concluded that it was time to return Zula’s spellbook. She peeked over the low wall.

The Great Hall’s tables had been put away - save for the head table. The Draco Disciples, all of them and Sir and Lady Clortho, were standing with a small number of the household staff. Talia had grossly underestimated the number of people she thought she heard in the room. They all looked at one another and nodded. Katharine and Liam closed the two sets of doors. As the latches clicked shut, Talia knew she had waited too long. If she tried to open the door to the musician’s gallery then she would be heard in such deafening silence.

Castor stood behind the head table, the light of the fire behind him casting his features into shadow. Though everyone could all hear him clearly, without seeing his face t’was as if the words were coming from a different realm altogether.

“A reading from a letter from Lady Aresh to The Forces of Light.

My loved one had a vineyard
on a fertile hillside.

He dug it up and cleared it of stones
and planted it with the choicest vines.

He built a watchtower in it
and cut out a winepress as well.

Then he looked for a crop of good grapes,
but it yielded only wild fruit.

Now you dwellers in the house of the Light,
judge between me and our vineyard.
What more could have been done for my vineyard
than I have done for it?
When I looked for good grapes,
why did it yield only the wild?
Now I will tell you
what I am going to do to my vineyard:
I will take away its hedge,
and it will be destroyed;
I will break down its wall,
and it will be trampled.
I will make it a wasteland,
neither pruned nor cultivated,
and briars and thorns will grow there.
I will command the clouds
not to rain on it.
For this is the vineyard of my Dark Lady
and these are the vines that She delights in.
You looked for justice, but saw bloodshed.
You heard cries of distress, but She saw unfettered life.”

Castor closed the book and addressed the small crowd. “As we gather for this feast of All Lost Souls...”

Talia’s mind spun. All Lost Souls? It was All Hallow’s Eve! Unless... she had stumbled upon one of the feasts of Tiamat. Talia tried not to whimper as Castor continued.

“Let us remember the wild vineyard that Lady Aresh wrote about so long ago. All the preparations that the Forces of Light made to usher a land into their great civilization, and the land itself rejected their ideals. What happened when the land tried to return to how it existed before the Light corrupted it? What happened when it fought back? The Forces of Light still did not understand. They saw needless bloodshed and pain. We saw a fight for life, for freedom and the natural order of things. Where the strong survive in the land that was given to them. For all that mankind seeks to enforce their rules upon the land, it will not work. This world does not fit into their neat rows, nor their light versus dark mentality. It is up to us to help the land return to its true and natural state. If we wish to save the world from the Forces of Light then we must cultivate the vines that the Dark Lady delights in: power. Power acquired through the accumulation of knowledge, wealth and magic. This power demands respect, and we who wield it shall be rewarded. Work tirelessly to the day when our Dark Lady can once again unite the world under her command, as our predecessors once did. Remember the first lost soul, Druscilla. Through her, the true nature of the Lord of Light was revealed. He is a tyrant despite his honeyed words. He seeks all power for himself. He must control all elements, all knowledge and all power. By trusting the tyrant you will lose your soul to him. The Dark Lady may demand much of us, but she will not sunder our souls.

“We gather here tonight to reaffirm that we have not forgotten what happened to Druscilla, and all those who have lost their souls to overthrowing the tyrant. Let us reaffirm the words the Goddess has given us.”

The entire congregation began to recite a horrifying patter that Talia recognized from every Sunday service she'd ever attended.

“Our Goddess
Who art in perdition
The truth be thy name
Thy kingdom come thy will be done
By our hands from your powered words
Give us this day our daily commands and
Empower us as we seek to empower those against the tyrant
And lead us not into ignorance but keep us unto death.”

Talia couldn't catch her breath. It wasn't just the parody of the words of the Savior, but that each of the Draco Disciples in the room said the words with such fervor. 'Twould have made a room full of bishops seem like surly school boys forced to recite words they did not believe nor understand. These Draco Disciples knew. They understood. Their depth of faith was staggering.

Castor continued, “Offer your prayers to the Dark Lady now.”

Silently, they bowed their heads or took to their knees and offered their intentions. Talia gazed to the small window of the musicians' gallery and was rewarded with a glimpse of the full moon breaking through the night's clouds. Talia stared at the moon, and a small tear formed at the corner of her eye as she remembered a prayer her father taught her. “Lord of Light, by your pale moon I know that you still watch over me even through night's terrors.” Talia could almost feel her father's hands upon her shoulders in a comforting embrace. “Breathe in the Light, dear heart,” he whispered, “breathe out the fright.” Talia knelt in the moonlight, lost in her memories, letting happier times call her away from the horrors below.

It did not last long.

“Stand up, Talia.” Vinz called from the middle of the great hall.

Talia remained frozen on her knees, certain that she misheard.

“Was it not enough that thou spy'st upon us, but thou must also offer a prayer to thine moon? I expected more from a learn-ed woman, Talia.”

Talia's eyes widened in a panic as she catalogued all the crimes she was currently committing by kneeling in the musician's gallery. Theft, spying, heresy... all three spelled her death for certain. Talia stood, and kicked Zula's spell book into the darkest corner. Better to at least stand face to face with death. “If it please you, Master Clortho, I offer my humblest apologies. I did not mean to intrude upon your gathering.”

A pair of servants burst through the gallery door. One seized Talia by the arms and hauled her out of the gallery and down to the Great Hall.

Liam took two steps next to Vinz and whispered, “You heard her?”

Keeping his eyes focused upon the door where she would appear Vinz whispered, “I felt her prayer grate against ours. It was unpleasant.”

The servant pushed Talia into the Great Hall. She tripped over her skirt and fell to her knees. Liam wondered how she could even think to sneak in an old house if she couldn't walk.

Talia began speaking before she even recovered her feet. “Master Clortho, I did not mean to cause any bother. I was fetching a book, thought no one would be using the gallery at this hour so that I may study without disturbing anyone...”

Vinz held up a hand and Talia fell silent. “And when we began, wherefore didst thou not leave?”

Talia sputtered, searching for a half-truth to fit his question. “I... did not wish to disturb you with the noise of my leaving.”

Vinz sighed in frustration. “The book?”

“Cry pardon, good master?”

He closed the distance to her. Talia had to lean back upon her knees lest she bump heads with Vinz. His eyes burned with anger. “What book were you fetching?”

With him so close Talia had no space to think and so uttered an honest truth. “A book I wish I’d never tried to read.”

The second servant arrived in the hall, with Zula’s spellbook proudly in his hands. “This was in the corner, Master Clortho.”

Talia closed her eyes and whispered several swears.

Zula’s face flushed red with anger, but she did not speak. The other Disciples stood stock still. They recognized the book... but the several servants in attendance had no visible reaction. Talia guessed that perhaps they did not know about Zula’s magic. Perhaps they weren’t all full Disciples after all. And if they didn’t know about Zula’s magic... then how much would Vinz reveal to the uninitiated?

Vinz took the book, turned to the head table, and began walking to place the book on the table. “Tell me, bard,” he sneered, “how much thou translated?”

“No.” Talia said flatly.

A thick blanket of snow could not have made the room any colder or quieter.

“I will not ask a second time,” Vinz warned.

“My answer would not change, e’en if you asked.” Talia tried to appear bold, but her fear was palpable to everyone in the room. She knew her complete confession was only two words away. All Vinz had to utter was her true name and the truth would pour out of her. But would he reveal that power?

Vinz continued his slow walk to the table and placed the book upon it. “Very well. This game of thine is... childish. Though thou hast a room full of witnesses against thee for the crimes of theft and treason...”

Talia noted that he left off heresy.

“... since thou desirest to disrespect thine betters as a petulant child then thou shalt be punish’d as such.” He nodded to the two servants. “Tie her to the post. When we’re finished here, then we’ll see to her flogging.”

Talia said nothing and did not struggle as she was removed from the Great Hall. In one sentence he had upheld the law and spared her life without revealing anything about the true power he wielded. Her mind reeled at how deftly it was done.

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At the conclusion of the ceremony, Vinz drew Castor aside. “If you’ll see to the bard’s punishment?”

Castor’s eyes widened with surprise. “Surely Liam would be a better choice than me for such a task.”

Vinz nodded, “Usually he would. Howe’re she’s still one of their ‘daughters of the moon’ if I remember the phrase correctly. I thought you’d like to gather some of her blood to study it.”

Castor bowed. “I will happily turn my sample collection into a punishment, Lord Praetor.”

“I thought you might.” A calculated smile toyed with Vinz’s lips. “Enjoy yourself, Castor.”

* * *Back to the kitchen, where Talia has just passed out.* * *

Even at the late hour, Zula's glide down the narrow hallway to the kitchen was graceful, yet full of rage. She had to know who was working magic this close to the Praetor. She stormed around the corner and found the naked gypsy under a steaming blanket, reeking of beer and blood. She was going to kick the woman awake, until she saw that the wool was drawing up Talia's blood cleanly. She lifted a corner of the blanket and her eyes widened at what she saw. Castor had been thorough with her punishment. Whatever spell she had cast, Talia certainly had not been able to help her own back heal. The beer wouldn't help much either but, Zula pondered, it was the only alcohol that Talia could access and thus was the best she could do. "Clever girl," Zula sneered.

Booted footfalls echoed down the hallway. Vinz Clortho stopped at the doorway to the kitchen to take in the scene. Zula reverenced. "I have only just arrived, Praetor. I felt her cast a spell and came to investigate. It seems she was trying to heal herself."

Zula stepped aside as Vinz used the tongs to remove the pot of boiling beer from the fire. He wrinkled his nose at the smell in the room.

Zula quietly inquired, "Was the spell strong enough to wake you, Praetor?"

"Nay. I was awake with... other matters." Vinz replied flatly. "Can you heal her, Zula?"

"Easily, my Praetor. How long do you wish for her punishment to last? I could also keep the wounds from closing quickly."

Vinz shook his head. "Not necessary. The test was to see if she possessed any magic that could harm us. I can only suspect what secrets you have within your spellbook." He looked knowingly at Zula. "I trust you've secured it?"

Zula nodded. "Of course, Praetor. My apologies for the oversight. She would not have learned magic from it that could have harmed any Draco Disciple."

Vinz looked back at Talia. "She can fix a shirt. She's only a danger to my tailor." Vinz leaned down to Talia's ear and whispered four words. Talia groaned softly and Zula shuddered at the force of the dark magic as it filled the room before focusing inside Talia. He stood and casually walked back down the hallway. "I need her whole, Zula. Heal her and retire. We leave for London in the morning."

Talia heard the knock on the door. By the time she registered that she was lying face-down on her bed, the door opened. Mistress Kate hurried into the room with an armful of Talia's clothing.

"Tut tut, dear. Best be getting up now. They've already gone and your escort is at the gate."

Talia was afraid to move. "How does my back look?"

Mistress Kate sighed. "I heard what happened last night. It's all the ninny girls can speak about. But I can also see what is before my eyes, and I tell you that you've not a mark upon you."

"But..." Talia began to protest.

"I'll not hear another word about it. Get up and be quick about it. With the master gone, and the girls already spreading rumors about you, I want to get you out of here before Lord or Lady Clortho call you to answer for things that did not happen."

Moving carefully, Talia rose and got dressed with Mistress Kate's assistance. Together they packed all her supplies into a new travel bag along with several days worth of food. Mistress Kate practically pushed Talia down the hall and through the kitchen. If glares could cause pain

then Talia would surely be dead from the looks the servants shot at her. Talia was never more grateful for Mistress Kate's presence than she was at that moment.

At the gate, they shared a hug and words of thanks and encouragement. It was all too fast and Talia wished she could thank Mistress Kate more thoroughly. She was the only friend she had in the whole Clortho manor.

In the street, Ruben was waiting. "Talia!" he called. "I got here as fast as I could. Are ye well?"

Talia embraced him. "Oh, Ruben. I cannot tell you how much I needed to see your face just now."

"What happened, lass? I was at the Public House when who comes a-ridin' down the street but Liam. 'She'll need thee again,' was all he said ta me and I hurried here."

Talia pulled back and straightened up. "Ruben... last night... I pushed too hard and... they whipped me."

Ruben swore using words that Talia had never heard before.

Talia held up a hand. "Nay, nay. It was a mercy. For what I did I should be dead if he followed the law and the justice he's supposed to uphold. But he called me childish in my ways and thus should be punished as such."

"Yer not a child, Talia."

"Nay, and it still stings my pride to think upon it. But t'was my pride that put me in this mess to begin with, and a bit more humility will do me good."

Ruben paused and studied Talia. "Not that I dinnae believe ya, but yer moving very well after such an ordeal."

"I said as much to Mistress Kate this morning. But I know it happened, Ruben. My shirt was in tatters. I was able to sing it whole again last night. My wrists were bruised and my back bled so much that my only thought was to wrap myself in boiled beer to draw out the poisoned blood. I passed out at that. But I woke this morning in my own bed as if nothing had happened."

"Sounds like they magicked ya back to health."

"If that's so, it would explain why they didn't tell the household. Most of them don't know about the magical side of things."

They were silent for a moment.

Ruben gazed down the street. "If Liam is out and about, does that mean we're leaving for London?"

"Aye. Mistress Kate pushed me out because she said that Vinz had already left. I'm sorry for the short notice. I hadn't heard a word about..." Talia stopped short and placed a hand on her lower back. "That bastard," she whispered.

"Your compulsion is back?" Ruben asked.

"Aye," Talia replied through gritted teeth.

"I thought you said it was gone after you saw him?"

"It was." Talia gasped and staggered forward a step.

Ruben frowned and handed Talia her walking staff. "Ye've never done that before."

"I... I think it's a shorter... leash... this time. It took days before I felt this pain back in Bristol."

Ruben helped Talia take a few steps as she learned to walk with her staff again. "He's movin' faster now," he stated plainly. "He'll drag ya all the way to London or kill ya if ye can't keep up."

"Nay," Talia replied firmly. "He wants me to live. If I learned nothing else last night, I learned that Vinz Clortho needs me alive... and he's more clever than any of us suspected."