

(This is fanfiction of the Live Action Role Playing Game known as RenQuest, playable at the Bristol Renaissance Faire.)

Years Earlier...

Davem of the Davemport stared wordlessly into the flames before him as he leaned back against a stocky little tree. The campfire he now tended crackled softly, lending its unique brand of music to the otherwise silent night.

It would be his first evening away from Bristol since setting foot in that place... and yet, unlike most, he was not loath to leave- to say goodbye to those he had met, and was not quick to wrap himself in the 'warm memories' of the many experiences he'd had while there.

Quite the opposite, in fact.

He could think of few instances in his life that were more embarrassing, emasculating, frustrating and ultimately tragic as his time among the Gypsies and the Draco Disciples had been. Although there were bright spots, they had been few and far between... and one of those had been stamped out with such ferocity that he had come to wonder if the pain would last his whole life long.

Estella was gone.

With a shivering sigh, he drew his legs in, resting his chin upon his knees.

Nearby, his pack rustled and twitched before a strange little creature popped out. It was apparently trapped within- nay, made *from*- an old sock, with maroon buttons sewn on to form its eyes.

Davem didn't notice as Toil the Wormling struggled to escape, finally tipping the bag over and inching his way toward the 'Lorekeeper'.

"Hrm... Lorekeeper..." Davem said, his voice choked. "A great deal of good my 'lore' did anyone. Perhaps if it could bring back the dead, but..." He finally shot a sidelong glance at Toil, whose button eyes were staring blankly up at him. He raised a weak hand, scratching the little creature on the tip of its nose. "Why did I even come here? What was I trying to do?"

Toil offered no response, gently rearing its snakelike body up to nuzzle Davem's hand.

"It isn't fair... this whole thing is unfair... why did I have to be sent here? To... to know her, only so I could watch her die? Not even *watch*- just... just to *know* it happened, powerless to prevent it? Why would she let it happen? Is this what she wanted? Did she... really miss her mother that much?"

Finally, Davem's head fell forward, buried into his knees as he finally broke down. He was unrepentant, held nothing back now that there seemed to be no one there to watch him except Toil, who didn't seem about to tell anyone.

"Damn her... damn me... damn those bloody cultists and damn the Gypsies... they don't even *care*... they don't even *CARE!*" He sobbed, clenching his teeth and bringing his eyes up to the flames again. "They just laughed at me. They pitied me, like they always did from the second I stepped into that place. 'Lorekeeper'... what a damned joke."

Turning, he looked to the small pile of books and sundry items he had left Bristol with- his many tokens of his experiences among the Band.

It took a concerted effort not to take the lot and cast it into the campfire- to watch the

memories burn.

"Fie on the lot of them..."

After a few moments, he finally gave an unseemly snuffle and brought his sleeve up to his eyes to wipe the tears from them.

"Estella... I don't understand..."

"Understand what?"

Davem stumbled forward in surprise. Barely catching himself before landing squarely in the fire, he struggled to turn about... and his breath caught in his throat among the sobs he was trying to swallow back.

Although his eyes were red and bleary with tears, he could recognize her instantly.

Those short fiery locks, that slim, agile body, and that mischievous, almost *mocking* grin...

"... Y- you're..."

Estella said nothing. She only stared at him with those bright emerald eyes and Cheshire grin.

"Am I dreaming again?"

"Hrm." She snorted at him, taking a mountain of amusement from his awe. "Move over."

Before he could say another word, she crawled out from where she'd been prowling behind the tree, and sat down at Davem's side. She gave Toil a passing glance before leaning in to stare at Davem- close enough to make him uncomfortable.

"I cannot remember the last time anybody was this happy to see me."

"What happened?" Davem asked, his red eyes darting back in the direction of Bristol. "You... you were *dead!*"

"If that's what everyone thinks, then everything worked out as it should have." She declared, smiling in that catlike manner as she leaned her head onto his shoulder.

"Then... if you're not dead, how did you-"

"A bit of illusion magic. I'm no master, but apparently good enough."

His eyes widened as she reached around him, plucking Toil up off the ground and looking him over.

"You know what this little one reminds me of?"

"N- no." Davem waved his hands, sensing an innuendo and not wanting to hear the punchline. "If you're not dead, then what are you doing? Why come out here?"

"Why do you think?" She asked, quirked an eyebrow at him "We talked about it."

Davem's mouth hung open, speechless. She turned her face toward his, smiling again at his confusion.

"I considered it, and made my decision."

"What?"

She rolled her eyes in that way she had seemingly taken years to perfect.

"You must be getting *senile* in your old age. I'm leaving, and I've decided to let you tag along with me."

He swallowed, his mouth trying to move, trying in vain to form some kind of response.

For her part, Estella sighed and sat back, dropping Toil back into Davem's lap before turning to gaze into the campfire.

"Perhaps it isn't what my mother would have wanted, and I know what the Disciples want from me. They want me to kill Gypsies or they want me out of the way. You? I don't even know *what* you want- aside from the obvious..." At this, she shifted about in her bodice with a smirk,

"... but seems to me that you might be the only person in the world who cared about me *half* as much as my mother did, whatever the reason. So I figured 'why not?'"

"You're... You're serious." Davem finally managed, his hands fumbling as Toil writhed and straightened in turns, anticipating further scratches.

"I know. Unsettling, is it not?"

Davem stared down at her for a while... before finally dropping Toil aside. Without warning, he drew the girl in a tight embrace, his head falling against her shoulder. Tears were beginning to flow freely once again, only this time they were accompanied with a giddy laughter, barely restrained.

"Oh, God's death, get a hold of yourself..."

"Nay, let him enjoy the moment, fleeting as it shall be."

The two of them shot upright, as though prodded sharply. Estella stood up in an instant, while it took Davem a hair longer to stagger to his feet.

From the brush surrounding the small clearing, there appeared two figures: One short but stately, a pair of glasses reflecting a devilish orange thanks to the firelight. The other was a tall woman wearing an elegant gown. The both of them were dressed in striking crimson and black with golden trim, similar to Estella.

Davem immediately recognized Vinz Clortho- Simeon's bean counter. The woman, however, was completely unfamiliar to him.

"You might have fooled Simeon with your little trick, but do not assume that we are all as dull-witted as he is." Vinz declared.

"Oi, Vinz." Estella said, without any sort of surprise or fear on her face. It was as though she'd *expected* him. For a moment, Davem wondered if this was all an elaborate trap...

"Where do you think that you are going?" Vinz demanded. "Off on some holiday, then?"

"I would have considered it clear enough." Estella shrugged. "We both know one leaves the Disciples only after death. Faked or not, consider this my resignation."

"Clever." Vinz smiled behind his glasses. "But as it is, we cannot allow you to leave... things are moving, Estella. Great things, and you stand to play an integral part in it."

"Hm?" Estella tilted her head, folding her arms as she looked from Vinz to the woman and back.

"May I introduce Zula Gozeryen" Vinz said, making a sweeping gesture toward the woman. "She is a sorceress who has been gifted by the Dark Mother with a plan that will rid us of Fianna's killer once and for all. Your treacherous father will pay for what he's done... but we need your aid."

"Estella..." Davem began, looking between the two as well. He could feel Toil crawling up his leg, but paid him no heed.

"What sort of aid are you talking about?" She asked, narrowing her eyes. "Seems to me that one's got all the power you need."

"Indeed, she is skilled and her magics potent." Vinz nodded, "but we need you. As one who shares Simeon's blood, you are critical to the ritual's success."

"... Not another one of those 'sacrificial' rituals, is it? Where you need me to die so you can take his power?"

Immediately, Davem stepped forward and pushed her back behind him.

"No! No deal. She's not going with-!" He was cut off as Estella, irritated, shoved him aside

and stepped back around him.

"Please, Davem, you couldn't hold back a *sneeze*. As for you, Vinz... I think I said all I needed to say when I faked my bloody *death*: I'm done. You can do what you like, but I'm bored. I'm leavin', and I'm takin' this old man with me." She said, turning and throwing a hand back to strike Davem lightly in the chest.

"I know not who you are trying to spite here, Estella, but you are doing a fair job of it. We are friends, are we not? We both wish for our revenge against Simeon, is that not still true?"

Estella shrugged.

"Zula." Vinz finally said, taking a step back and nodding to his companion.

"My apologies, dear." Zula said, speaking in a voice that oozed with cruel sarcasm. "Like it or not, that haughty fool needs to be destroyed, and you are the key to that end."

With that, she raised her wand and flicked it in Estella's direction.

Estella swiftly drew her own wand- the old, broken heirloom she had carried around most of her young life- and managed to parry *most* of the energy that hurtled at her. That which remained managed to knock her back, her body thudding against the tree she and Davem had been leaning upon.

The younger woman grunted, raising her broken wand again.

"It'll take more than that to kill me." Estella declared with a goading smirk.

"I know. I simply wanted you out of the way." Zula countered, now pointing the wand at Davem.

Estella's eyes widened, but before she could move, Davem made a swift motion... sending a small missile of green and white hurtling at the Draco Sorceress.

"Distraction!" Davem shouted.

Zula hesitated in confusion, wand faltering for that precious second as she decided whether to bat the writhing, squirming thing away or just blast Davem.

That second was all Estella needed.

The girl held her half-wand in both hands, bringing it around and shouting with defiance. A small burst of magical energy launched from the wand, rocketing past Davem and the mid-air Toil before striking Zula in the chest.

Estella's attack couldn't have killed anybody, weak as her wand- as her attack magic- tended to be. However, it knocked the Sorceress back, causing her stumbling feet to catch on her skirts. Falling backward, her head collided with the trunk of another nearby tree... knocking her unconscious.

"Zula!" Vinz looked from Estella down to Zula, dumbfounded.

"Davem!" Estella said firmly, "We're leaving. Now."

"R- right!" Davem nodded, rushing forward to pluck Toil from where he'd landed. Vinz scowled and took a step forward to stop him, but hesitated as Estella spoke.

"Not another move, Vinz." Estella warned, smiling at him. "I appreciate everything you tried to do for my mother's sake, but it won't stop me from laying you out right beside your new friend, there."

"You do not know what you are doing..." Vinz hissed. "Without you we may never be able to defeat Simeon."

"My advice?" Davem called as he rushed to his pack, stuffing Toil inside, "talk to the Gypsies. They're pretty good at it."

"Come on!" Estella shouted, before Davem nodded and stood. Hefting the pack over his shoulder, he nodded to the girl and, together, the two ran off into the woods, leaving the campfire

to crackle and burn behind them.

Vinz stared after the pair, his eyes narrowing behind his glasses. He could easily catch up to them, but looking down at Zula, he thought better of it.

There were other ways to foil Simeon... and perhaps he could find one that wouldn't cost Estella her life.

They were friends, after all.

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Davem finally collapsed on all fours, letting the bag fall from his shoulder. Its contents- Toil included- scattered on the ground, but Davem wasn't paying attention. Panting, he watched Estella slow and finally turn to face him.

"Don't tell me you're exhausted already, old man." The girl grinned, though she was also rather short of breath. "You can't expect to keep up with me if a little run is enough to bring you down."

"Sh- shut up..." Davem said, trying to catch his breath. Looking behind him, he drew in a lungful of night air. "You know they'll... they'll try to find us, right?"

"They can try." Estella shrugged. "They might catch *you*, but me? Good luck."

She fell to a cross-legged sitting position in front of him, watching with her usual amusement as he fought to recover.

"So it's... it's true then?" Davem asked. "You'll really... with me? Stay?"

"For a while, anyway." She replied, leaning back on her hands. "Maybe longer, if you're worth keeping around."

Davem smiled at her for a moment before pushing himself up onto his knees. With a deep sigh, he looked up into her eyes.

"Do I have to keep calling you 'Estella'? Can I call you... 'Ellie' or something like that?"

"God's rotten teeth, no." She said with distaste. "You already *look* old enough to be my grandfather; no need to *sound* like him, calling me a name like that."

Davem nodded quickly, flushing with embarrassment.

Another moment passed.

"... What about 'Tess'?"

Estella stared at him, as though thinking it over until she rolled her eyes and smiled at him.

"'Tess' it is, then?"

"What do I get to call *you*?"

"Anything but 'old man'." Davem replied with a cynical smile.

"No promises."

Slowly, he opened his arms to her. After a moment of making him suffer- a feeling he knew he would have to get used to- she crawled to him and let herself collapse against his chest.

His eyes closed, a feeling of warmth spreading in his body as he held her- a contentment that he couldn't put into words.

At last they stood once again... but after a moment, Davem shrugged off his pack- keeping only Toil, who he tucked into his sleeve.

Estella- Tess- gave him a curious glance which Davem answered with a small, wry smile.

"Who reads this nonsense anyway?"

Tess' mischievous grin returned.

With that, she turned on her heel and sprinted off with Davem in hot pursuit, the two disappearing into the night.