

Autumn

By David Manley

- Co-Written with Julie McMillin -

Queen Elizabeth left the city of Bristol, and Vinz Clortho and the rest of the Draco Disciples did not remain long in the city after the court departed. It was only a handful of days after their retreat that Talia Tale, bardmistress of the Band of the Twisted Claw, became ill. It was a simple cold at first, but soon even Vashta could not find a cure. Talia's illness left her wracked with such pain that she couldn't eat or sleep. The Band tried to find a cure... Talia's husband tried a more direct approach.

Two weeks after the Queen left, Randall asked the Band to watch their two young daughters for a night so he could demand the truth from his wife.

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Randall Roarback, Talia's husband, wore his weariness like a winter cloak. His clothing was disheveled - something the vain Towne Crier never showed to the outside world. His entire frame slumped as he sat on a bench at the main camp. He stared at the ground while the gypsies moved about him, not really understanding what was happening. He only looked up when Vashta pressed a cup of Adam's Ale into his hands.

"Drink," she said simply. "You are pale."

Randall drank a bit.

Vashta straightened. "Now tell me what's happened since I last saw her."

Randall clutched the cup in both hands and gazed into the shaking liquid for a few moments before speaking. "She knows what's wrong. It's a compulsion, near as I can tell. She's supposed to follow that bastard Clortho and every day that goes by where she doesn't..."

Vashta nodded, "She becomes more and more ill."

Randall looked up. "'Tis more than that. She's not ill. She's ignoring herself."

"I cry your pardon?" Vashta asked.

"Master Clortho placed the command within her True Name. By not following him she's destroying her true self... her soul... her spirit... whatever you need to call it! She's not ill, she's dying!" Randall leaped to his feet, the forgotten cup splashing upon the ground. "And she won't follow him because she believes that you lot would see it as betrayal! She'd rather die in front of all of us than follow that madman to his thrice damned library! She asked me, begged me, not to tell you - but this is my wife! She can't die for this! Not for a bloody word from her bloody notes! We have to talk some sense into her!"

"Aye."

The assembly of gypsies fell silent as they recognized the voice of Ruben Walsh calling from the outskirts of the Camp. He'd been leaning against a tree, seemingly lost in his own thoughts... but from the way he stood and stared intently at Randall, he had been listening to every last word said.

"Ruben?" Randall asked, his brow quirked. He'd heard Talia mention the Irishman at least once in the past, but the two of them had never spoken in earnest.

"Master Roarback, I've watched this whole mess play out from the moment it began... after Talia bargained for the lives of her family. Fact o' the matter is she did betray the Band. Already. The moment she decided t'offer the Praetor *anythin'* without consortin' with her

friends'r family, it were an act of betrayal... but she did no more 'r less'n' what any o' us might'a done. She did what she did fer the same reason the Band tried t'steal her notes *back* from Vinz; to save the people they love. This whole thing's jus'... t'were a mess o' choices, none of 'em good."

"Then perhaps it would be best to let her deal with the repercussions." Robert O'Coppe stated flatly. "If it prevents any more ancient secrets from falling into enemy hands, we will have to endure the sacrifice. It is a fate she brought upon herself, and we cannot let any more of ours suffer the consequences of her actions."

Ruben shot a cold look at Robert- a look most of the Band was unaccustomed to seeing from him.

"Be that as it may..." he began again, "I dinnae abandon the lot'a ye in this crusade fer the artifacts, n'matter how mad it became. I dinnae abandon Talia when she gave her story, the eggs an' her notes to the Praetor n'matter how little I may have agreed with it. I dinnae abandon the other Gypsies when they tried t'get it all back... I wouldn'ae abandon you, Robert, were ye in her position, so I'll nae abandon Talia now."

"Well, she's in no shape to travel, especially not alone." Vashta said with a rueful shake of her head.

"... She'll nae be travelin' alone." Ruben concluded before turning to depart from the main camp.

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Ruben heard the happy squeals of the young girls as he crested the hill up to the camp glen. The elder Roarback girl was stacking wooden blocks while the younger would crawl over to a stack and push them over. The crashing blocks sent both girls into giggles.

A few paces away Talia sat huddled beneath her patchwork cloak, shivering despite the end-of-summer heat, with a sad smile on her face. Ruben sat next to her and watched the innocent play for a few moments.

"Randall tells us that you do not plan to follow the Draco Disciples."

Talia sighed. Ruben could only now see how pale she was and how her hair stuck to her sweat covered brow.

"I will... NOT... give them everything," she whispered. Each word was a struggle for her to form.

"Ye're not well, Talia. Vashta cannae fix this."

"Then at least I saved everyone."

"That's not how we see it. Ye've got more locked away in yer stories than any of us know. We need them, and only ye can tell them. Randall needs ye. He took ye to wife because he wanted to spend the rest of his life with ye - not mourning ye."

Tears spilled down Talia's cheeks. "But I save more people with my death."

Ruben pointed at the girls, "And that's what Randall will say to yer daughters, then, when they ask why mommy cannae tell them any more stories."

Talia's resolve shattered into a thousand pieces and she sobbed into her cloak. This set both girls to worrying about their mother and they crawled into her lap. In turn, Talia cried harder. It was a messy cycle that lasted long enough for the shadows on the ground to move nearly across the camp.

Red eyed, but no longer crying, Talia looked over the two tiny blonde heads of her children to Ruben. "How can I leave them, Ruben?"

"On yer feet, or in a wagon. Howe'er ye must." Ruben replied, "with a promise that ye'll return when the summer again comes to Bristol... t'least, if *I* have any say in the matter."

"You?"

"'Tis as I told yer husband, ye were jus tryin'ta help yer wee ones. 'Twere a noble goal that ended poorly. Ye said it yerself, these lasses are safe fer now. 'Tis time fer ye to go off on yer adventure."

"I cannot travel alone. When I was younger I could pass as a boy. But now..." Talia paused and their eyes met. Talia could see how earnestly his eyes burned.

"I'll take ye. Wherever 'tis ya need to go."

"I... am humbled. I did not think anyone would... well... travel into the den of the snakes."

Ruben smiled, "Yer confusing yer animals, but at least ye can string more than a few words together at a time."

Talia took a few deep breaths. "Aye. Now that I've made the choice to go breathing is a bit easier. But I don't expect to be fully well until we reach..." Talia closed her eyes and tilted her head slightly as if listening to a song only she could hear. "Not London... he's gone too far north to be London."

"Is there someone he knows in the north?"

"Oh." Talia's eyes widened. "His family is from Oxford. He may be stopping there before the winter storms set in."

"I more expect his family *was* from Oxford... bein' a Draco Disciple an' all." Ruben nodded and rose. "Then that's where we'll be heading once ye've put yer affairs in order and we've both said our goodbyes."

Talia began slowly gathering the children and their toys. "Ruben? It would weigh on me if I didn't say this at the beginning. I do have coin for this folly. I would never expect you to escort me all the way to Oxford and London for renown alone. Still, if you want to reconsider, please do. The likelihood of both of us returning to Bristol as the people we are now is... small."

Ruben stiffened, but shook his head as a soft smile came back to his features.

"N'matter what Bailey may think, t'weren't fer points of renown that I chose t'follow the others in their search fer yer notes in Draco Manor. I knew they- Raven, Lillith, the other Questers- couldn'ae be stopped no matter what I said or did. Only reason I joined 'em was t'make certain none'a them came to harm. An' now I'll do the same fer yerself."

With that, Ruben turned on his heel, departing to leave Talia and her family to say her farewells and make her (for the moment) final arrangements.

He had his own to deal with.

- Co-Written With Julia Huryk -

The Band's status as citizens of the city of Bristol carried with it both benefits and detriments; While the Gypsies enjoyed any number of benefits being a citizen entailed, being free to roam around the streets often made any one of their troupe difficult to find- as much so as it was when the Queen had visited not so long ago.

Thankfully, though, not everybody had the intention of remaining in Bristol for the coming seasons.

“Nikola?” Ruben called out, arriving at the at-the-moment sparsely populated Training Camp. He’d known she- as well as Leonardo- would be departing for the New Library soon enough. For a moment he prayed he hadn’t missed them.

“I am here!” Nikola responded, she was seated near last night’s campfire making an attempt to strap a small bedroll to a rather worn bag that, from the looks of it, likely contained every item she owned. The straps unfortunately kept slipping as she tried to tie the roll on due to how over full the bag itself was. “I was certain this all fit ere we reached Bristol...” She muttered under her breath as the ties slipped from her grasp once again.

“It happens, lass.” Ruben said with a small chuckle as she looked over her things. “Come to a faire, an’ y’suddenly have more n’ y’did when y’came... if I may...” he made his way over to where she struggled with her bundle, offering to take a chance at reorganizing and tying it off himself. “I’m glad I caught ye. I thought perhaps y’and the Maestro’d left.”

Absently, he glanced at their surroundings; There were still remnants of the gaiety from the recent celebration, but there was still a certain ordinary emptiness to it.

“Don’ know if y’heard... I’ll be joinin’ Talia Tale in her trip t’Oxford, meetin’ the Disciples fer their research.” He began again, a note of obligatory distaste in his light brogue with the mention of their cultist adversaries.

The young Italian paused in her fussing with the straps and her grip tightened for a moment before she gave in and let Ruben have a go, “I had not heard yet, but I am glad for it. I fear no good can come of this and... I worry for everyone. I almost... I know not what to do with myself!” She set the bedroll aside and pulled a handful of items from the bag in the hopes that something else would settle into place and make some room. “Ruben... I am going to miss everyone, so please take care of Talia if you can? And keep your eyes out for yourself as well!”

“Aye, this whole situation is like t’get worse b’fore it gets better.” He murmured, frowning his brow as he worked with the bag a bit, nodding to Nikola as she relocated a few items. “I’ll do my best t’care for Talia. I know the Disciples have nothin’ t’gain from her death, but... tha’s ne’er stopped ‘em b’fore. Dun’ hurt t’be careful.”

At last, he tied off the bag with a sigh and stood up. He turned to face her, a soft smile on his face.

“As fer m’self... Make no mistake, I have every intention’a returnin’, but it’s nae m’self I’m worried for.” He took a deep breath, letting it out as a gentle sigh before continuing, “Nikola, y’couldn’t be in better hands with Maestro Da Vinci... but ne’ertheless, ‘tis *you* who...”

He looked away, his cheeks a fair bit flushed. Just then, however, he twitched and squirmed in that old familiar fashion before reaching into his vest, and drawing out Toil the Wormling-dressed as always in his new barding.

After a moment, he extended his hands, offering Toil to Nikola’s hands.

“The company I’ll be keepin’ fer the winter seasons is nae a place fer this one, an’ I cannae be there t’watch over ye on yer trip t’the Library... I’d like it very much if Toil could do so in my stead.”

Nikola’s jaw dropped as she accepted the wormling, her hands instinctively scratched his head as she held him. “Ruben I...” she looked down and sniffled a bit, “I accept his protection then, but you must promise! In a year we shall both return to Bristol, when the summer trees are

blooming we will both meet here again. You as well, Toil!" She smiled through the tears in her eyes as she set her new companion on her shoulder.

Of course, Toil seemed to have no real cognizance of what was going on, merely accepting Nikola's attentions with nuzzling affection and cuddling up when set upon her shoulder.

Ruben simply smiled that charmed smile he invariably showed in her company, nodding and finally gathering her into a hug.

"I shall return, lass. Summer next, we'll sit an' enjoy somethin' from the bakery, I'll tell ye all the adventures Talia an' I had, ye can tell me the wonderful things you saw in the Library..." He pulled away, looking into her eyes and nodding, "an' no matter what the Disciples're plannin', we- an' our family-... we'll put a stop to it. 'Tis a promise."

"Excellent well then, molto bene," Nikola wiped the tears from her eyes with a sleeve and pulled away slightly, "I know everything will be well, though I will miss thee, and everyone here in Bristol, if you have promised I know you will keep it." She smiled and heaved the pack onto her back now that the bedroll was properly attached. "I must see to Maestro and ensure the artifacts are safe and stowed for the journey. As they seem to say in this city, I will see you in a moment, whether days or years have passed, I will see you in a moment."

"In a moment, then." Ruben smiled, reaching up to wipe his own mounting tears a bit. Shaking his head, he nodded to her, then looked to Toil with a stern expression. "An' you remember yer job, aye? Keep 'er in one piece."

The wormling looked back at Ruben, leaning out for a bit of scritchng which Ruben gladly gave. After this- and a final quick embrace to Nikola- he stepped away and nodded.

"Anon."

With that, he turned away and made for the city's front gates.

He still had one more visit to make.

- Co-Written with Robert McKeown -

The change in the overall mood of Bristol could be felt everywhere... except for one place.

Ruben slowly walked through the headstones of the Bristol cemetery, careful not to step on any of the graves themselves. More than once he found his eyes drifting to the small courtyard where the Disciples had nearly unleashed the Black Plague, and where- one year prior- magic had been temporarily banished from the world by virtue of the Mors Magicae.

The place was silent, the mumble of the hustle and bustle of Bristol having long faded.

At last, he came to stand before the large mausoleum at the rear of the necropolis.

By that hour in the day the sun had set, casting a red glow to the sky above the building's dilapidated rooftop. However, Ruben's eyes were cast not upon the skies, but upon a figure who stood upon the grass and dirt at the mausoleum's long-sealed doorstep.

"Aldrazar." Ruben addressed the figure softly.

The other man stood silent for a moment, lost in thought. Finally, he slowly turned his head to address the newcomer. "Ruben. Quite an...interesting time here at Bristol since we both arrived." It was a statement, not a question. "Much has happened." He paused, looking over the building before him once again. "You have need of me?"

"Aye." Ruben nodded, unfazed by the necromancer's cool countenance. "I'll be goin' with Talia an' the Draco Disciples t' Oxford. I figured ye had little interest in the matter."

His last few words came with a wry tone; Aldrazar had had little regard for the entire situation, it seemed; Indeed, he seemed to do as he always had, staying toward the back and making snide comments at the Gypsies' expense.

It could be said he was 'neutral', leaning toward the Gypsies' side for the most part... but he certainly wasn't pleasant about it.

"Whate'er path you're like to pursue in the coming seasons, I'm rather glad I won't be there t'see. Y'couldn't be bothered to stop yer grinnin' when Nikola was nearly carried off by the Danse, nor when Angus was killed..."

"If you have a point to make," Aldrazar replied, that smirk of his appearing gradually as he leaned on his cane, "I suggest you make it and be on your way. Without Gwendolyn here, there is very little between yourself and... let us call it *unpleasantness*."

"Mistress Gwilt's presence was ne'er a boon to my confidence, nor was it a hindrance to yerself." Ruben replied. "Dun' think I believed otherwise; if ye wanted me dead, ye could have done the deed at any time."

"Then what is it that stopped me, Irishman?" Aldrazar queried, leaning forward a bit. His tone seemed genuinely curious, in spite of the mocking smile. "Fear of the Gypsies? Fear of your 'Balance'?"

"Nay." Ruben shook his head. "In sooth I know not *what* it is that stayed your hand... I know not what makes ye side with the Gypsies. I know not what had you rushin' into the World 'a Shadows t'save me an' the others... 'Tis nae the acts of the man who would have murdered me in the street not long ago, the man who stands idly by with a smirk as those he might call his colleagues die before his eyes..."

There was a moment of silence, biting like a chill wind throughout the graveyard.

Ruben slowly reached up, opening the clasp on the Sinner's Pendant and gathering it in one hand. Rearing back, he tossed it in a gentle arc.

Aldrazar reached out and easily caught the gold-filled vial in one hand. He stared down at where it rested in his palm, brow quirked with bewilderment.

"I dunnae think- fer all yer power an' experience- that y've truly come t'understand who y'are." Ruben said after another beat. "I cannae tell ye that. Gwilt couldn'ae either. Nor could any o' the Band or the Disciples. The best any o' us can do is point out tha' there may be more to ye than e'en you're *willin'* t'admit t'yerself."

The necromancer gazed down at the pendant for another moment before looking up to Ruben with a chuckle.

"Now, see, why did you not do this to begin with? Was this truly so hard to part with?"

"I dun' need it anymore." Ruben shrugged. "Perhaps I ne'er did. But I can say I learned a few things from it... perhaps you'll be able t'say the same."

With that, Ruben gave Aldrazar a quick reverance and turned away to depart from the graveyard.

"Anon, Master Necromis." He called over his shoulder. "Perhaps I'll see thee summer next."

"Perhaps." Aldrazar nodded absently, turning back to the mausoleum as he closed the pendant within one firm fist.

"Perhaps."

- Co-Written with Mamaa Yungwirth -

“How’s it lookin’ back there?” Ruben asked with a soft wince as Vashta Nerada fussed over his scars. For the most part they had been stitched up and had started to close, but they were still a bit painful to the touch. At the very least, he could wear his clothing without extreme discomfort. “We’ve enough coin, Talia n’ m’self, t’take a few farmer’s wagons, so I’ll nae be jostled about too much.”

“Ye would do better to not be jostled at all. And who are ye gonna have remove those stitches?”

“I’m certain there’ll be doctors’a some sort in Oxford. If nae, there’ll be somethin’ along the way. An’ failin’ *tha*, then perhaps Talia can manage somethin’. I’m sure she’s heard stories’a surgeons or some such thing..” he sounded much less confident the further along in his list of possibilities he got, but either way, he shook his head.

“I don’ have much choice in the matter; if I take the time t’ let the wounds mend completely I’ll miss our departure time, an’ I cannae have Talia makin’ any length ‘o the trek on her own. T’won’t be pleasant, but...”

Vashta gave his back a poke, causing Ruben to twinge in pain. “Never trust the doctors in Oxford...they be puddin’ heads. They have no understanding of herbal remedies. But aye, I know ye needs to leave now.” She rummaged through her basket, handing Ruben several bottles of various herbs and tinctures. “Be sure to soak clean linen with the brown liquid, sprinkle it with the goldenrod and sage, and then have Talia put it on your back and wrap it snug to keep it in place. If ye start bleedin’ or such, for God’s sake, take some time to rest!”

Ruben gave a soft chuckle, accepting the various items and carefully placing them in his pouch. “I’ll hafta write that all down- my memory’s atrocious.”

At last, he pushed himself up and carefully slumped off of the cot. Afterward, he put on his white shirt and the vest over that. He refrained, however, from tightening it all up with the belt at that point- he’d have to wait for the herbs he’d taken to numb the pain down to take full hold before that.

At last, he turned to her and smiled.

“Gramercy again, Vashta... I honestly think I’d be in *pieces* by this point in m’ life were it not fer yer skill.”

“Just try to stay out of trouble so I not be needin’ to sew ye up again. Your skin is much too close to the bones, it makes it a little more difficult to get a good stitch.” She turns and starts straightening up the blanket, suddenly clutching it to her chest and turned back to Ruben with tears in her eyes. “Take care of yourself...and Talia. You both better be back soon and in one piece. By the way, I be most sorry for this...” Vashta dropped the blanket and wrapped Ruben in a big bear hug. “Be safe!!”

“Gah!” Ruben squeaked with surprise- and some amount of discomfort- as she embraced him. In the midst of his twitching and flinching, he did his best to return it- his pained grimace interspersed with involuntary laughs. This sudden change drove from his mind the tears that had nearly emerged in response to her own. “‘Tis as I told Nikola. I’ll return, and I’ll do everythin’ in my power t’ made certain Talia does the same. After all the Band has done fer me, ‘tis the very least I can do.”

At last he pulled away, smiling down at her, and giving her a final hug- gentle, but earnest.

“One way ‘r the other... I’ll return t’ Bristol summer next. I’ll expect t’ see you an’ the other Gypsies demonstratin’ yer status as fine, upstandin’ citizens... such as y’ are.” He offered her a teasing smile. “Until then...?”

“Until then. Love ye, lad. Now, get on with ye, Talia is waitin’ on ye.”

“Aye.” Ruben nodded, giving her shoulder one last squeeze before turning to collect his other effects, departing the Vardo and making his way out into the city.

- Co-Written with Carynne Dati -

Ruben made his way through Bristol, his eyes caught here and there by the now dwindling bits of color in the port city.

Aye... He thought. Even after everything that had happened, it had been easy to forget the Faire was, in fact, over. The Gypsies were still present for the large part, and the only time he had ever really *seen* Bristol was during a celebration of some sort.

In the aftermath of the Queen’s visit, all evidence of the Faire was dissolving just as the warm summer air was beginning to tinge with that familiar chill of autumn.

As he reached the waterfront, he hesitated. Looking over the docks, he could see several large crates- likely belonging to performers or merchants who had come to the Faire- being packed en route for departure.

Seeing the ships bobbing lightly in the small ripples of water, he was reminded of one more person he’d failed to see off...

“You’re off too, I see.”

Almost as if he willed her into existence, the familiar voice called out from the side. Up the gangplank of the nearest ship (which certainly looked as if it had seen better days) stood the form of the hunter who had assisted him throughout the summer. He, like others, had wondered about her sudden disappearance, yet the look on her face was one that almost acted as if she had not noted her own absence.

“Gwen!” Ruben said, more of surprise than legitimate pleasure at seeing her again. He moved to meet her at the bottom of the gangplank, looking her from foot to face. “Yer lookin a fair bit better ‘n y’were when last we parted...” Of course, the both of them were a bit worse for wear in the aftermath of the battle with Blacklough. He’d known she’d survived- given the rundown of the battle by Vashta and Nikola who had- in turn- been informed by those present for it. “How’re ye feelin’?”

Turning back, she called out to one of her shipmates. “First mate Nemo has the deck!” A roar of “Ayes!” echoed in the harbor as she sauntered down the gangplank. Instead of stopping before Ruben she nodded her head in the direction she was walking.

“I cannot say that I have ever engaged in a battle against the fey, let alone the Lord of Shadow. My expertise lay with the monsters of this world, not any others; perhaps I should invest in some cold iron for myself and for my crew.” For the slightest moment, Ruben couldn’t tell if he heard a hint of disdain in her voice or just sardonic banter. But he couldn’t help but notice that her amber eyes stayed forward, never glancing at him. “But all things considered, I suppose I am well.”

“Aye... y’have my thanks fer whatcha did.” He said, looking up at her even if she seemed to have no intention of returning his gaze. He seemed about to speak further on the subject, but thought better of it and held the words back in favor of one of the other many thoughts on his mind.

“... Do I have ye fer a while? Y’ look rather busy with things...” He gestured up to where her crew busied themselves. “A quick jaunt to the Three Sheets wouldn’ae be too far... there were a few matters I’d have liked to discuss...”

“There are for myself, as well.” she replied softly.

Almost as if on cue, the two of them arrived at the Three Sheets. Without pausing, she pushed open the door and went inside. Following her in, he watched her glide through the crowded pub as if she were wind in the trees. Upon approaching the barkeep, she paid for some mead and placed herself in the corner, away from the commotion, but easy enough for Ruben to get to.

Ruben was a bit unnerved by her response, but then he probably expected she might have a few questions.

"I'm goin' north." He began, taking a seat across from her. "To Oxford, with Talia Tale. She's to meet with the Draco Disciples... y'were away when the mess of tryin' t' recover her notes from the Praetor happened, but it didn'ae end well. Vashta's given me 'er blessin's t' travel, an' I've left my effects wit' Nikola an' Aldrazar... fer all the good that pendant'll do 'em."

"Sounds like you're going to be a busy man." A small smirk appeared on her face, perhaps one of the few times he had seen a smile upon her. "And you needn't recount me with the details for either story. Word spreads like wildfire among the Lightbringers and they are not as quiet as they think with such endeavors. I need not have wolf senses to hear their gossip. As for the Sinner's Pendant, I noted that you relinquished it as you approached my ship."

Ruben nodded, taking in that smirk of hers with a mix of amusement and apprehension.

"After everythin' what happened here this year, I figured there were no further point in holdin' on to that old relic... I think it's done all the help it can fer meself. B'sides, I'll be up to me neck in dark things in the seasons t' come; what the pendant provided'll probably be little more 'n another drop in the bucket." He let out a heavy sigh, looking to her mead then back to her. "What of yerself? What've ye planned now that yer ship is back in order? An' fer that matter, where've ye *been*?"

Her mug lowered as she swirled the contents. "My absence as of late can be attributed to overseeing the repairs of my ship. As of last night, the Fenris is ready to depart. However, the repair has depleted the last of my resources." Her voice grew soft and quiet in the already noisy pub. "The one thing that I was good at, I have not done in three years, but I have no doubt that I can quickly pick it back up. I'll need to train my crew again, of course. But as soon as we are ready, I will hunt again..." she took a quick swig of mead, savoring the sweet flavor. "... and Aldrazar is coming with."

Had Ruben been drinking himself, he might have spat the contents of his tankard all over her.

"I cry thy *pardon*, Gwen?" Ruben asked, eyes quirked in stark bewilderment. "Tha'... p-perhaps I need a bit o' *context*..." That, or a strong drink. Perhaps something to counterbalance the pain herbs Vashta had given him before. Apparently he was still suffering after-effects. "I wouldn'ae *e'er* have considered the two 'a you any sort'a travelin' companions... we could barely stand t' keep together five minutes in Bristol..."

"At the beginning, aye," she admitted, "and I would have called myself foolish to even consider this. However, if I'm going to be hunting again, I need more mages. While the one I have is skilled, he is still inexperienced in the world. Aldrazar also adds another variety of magic to the ship to utilize in the hunts and train the crew. I think he would make a fine addition to the team, do you not?" The smirk disappeared with another swig. The mead trickled down her throat before she set down the mug. Her fingers squeezed around the handle, stopping Ruben from inquiring further about the necromancer; she had some of her own questions. "Will Blacklough come after me? I need to know that my crew will not suffer because I had a stroke of good conscience."

"I doubt it." He shook his head. "T'be honest, I'm nae sure he survived, an' if he did, he'd likely have blinders fer all but m'self. It's in the fae's nature to stick to a single grudge. Fer

generations, if necessary. But tha's assumin' he dun' have bigger fritters t' fry. If he takes orders from the Mornin' Star, he may have other matters t' deal with." Of course, given his own indirect dealings with Lucifer, chances were just as good as not that Blacklough would still be out for Ruben's blood.

"Ne'ertheless, I doubt you, Aldrazar 'r the Gypsies'd be high on his priorities. At this point, I'm more worried about the Disciples- what they're plannin'."

"The True Names..." Finally her eyes lifted to meet his. Ruben did not know what she had witnessed with Talia when Vinz invoked her own true name and the terror that filled the Bardmistress, but her voice told him that she understood the gravity of such a thing. "Sounds serious."

"Clortho has the True Names 'a the Elemental Paragons, an' the means to command others. S'why Talia is unable t'resist the order ta join him." Ruben said thoughtfully, "But from what I unnerstand, the Paragons're gone now... disappeared after the Year of the Quest 2010. I cannae put my finger on what he wants from Talia, nor what he plans t' do with what he has already. DaVinci was fairly certain they still intended to raise Bloodtharcken. I doubt they'll let me anywhere near where they'll be researchin', but if I can learn *anythin'* from this journey, I'll be a step closer 'n we would'a been otherwise."

Ruben paused, glancing behind him at the bar, then back at Gwen.

"D'ye have any designs 'a returnin' t' this place?"

Her fingers were drawn into her pouch where a familiar relic lay. She could not deny that some of the band had a suprisingly strong effect upon her so quickly. Had Nikola not had such a profound position as DaVinci's apprentice, she would have asked her to join her crew (such intelligence would have been highly valued). Yet despite the memories that the simple port city yielded to her, all she could reply to Ruben was one word:

"Mayhaps."

"I'd thought so." Ruben nodded slowly. "Dunnae what it is that endeared the Gypsies to ye, but it seems they've every bit a place in yer heart as they do mine... so perhaps we'll meet again after all."

At last, he stood up and out from his side of the table, catching a glimpse at her wandering hand. He quirked his brow.

"Gwen...?" He asked, nodding to the pouch.

She choked back another laugh before closing her fingers. "The Paragons... are not gone. Not entirely."

His breath stilled before she also stood up. Finally, her hands pulled out the tourmaline rune. She remembered the silver glow it used to emit, but she hadn't needed it for a long time.

"Do you know what this is?"

"Nay." He shook his head. "I dinnae attend any 'a Doctor Dee 'r Amyrite's lessons in Rune Magic."

"Isa," she whispered. "The rune for ice and stability. A long time ago, the Water Paragon bestowed it upon me when we first met to help control my transformations. Before she left this world, she told me that there were other relics containing their power. Some of which were even lost to time, the Sword of Ignis being one of them."

Her eyes met his again, this time with a hint of import. "If that is the true purpose of the Disciples, to harness the power of the Paragons again, then maybe someone else should take command of them first."

“I know how you feel about the Draco Disciples, and while you are wise enough to not underestimate them, at least understand that there is more dissention in their ranks than you might know. That is why they are doomed to failure unless this is remedied.”

“‘Failure’?” he echoed. “Dissention or nae, ye’ve seen what they’ve done; Burning into Gaia’s arm, toying with Philomena and Avis, what they did to Vashta- they bloody murdered Angus in the street! And that is *with* the dissention that you speak of. If anythin’, they’re more dangerous now than year last an’ cannae be ignored. E’en if it turns out I cannae protect Talia, I have t’be ready t’ stop them when the time comes tha’ they make their move.”

“So indignant.” His righteousness aroused an amusement in her that Gwen could not help but let out a small, almost sultry laugh and shook her head. “I never said that they should not be stopped. You are right in observing that they are a threat. Imagine what will happen if they cease the petty squabbles and start working as a cohesive unit.” Though her tone had a sense of sarcasm behind it, there lingered an impending threat behind them. As quickly as the affirmation came, she took his hand, squeezing it once. “But until then, I’ve no reason or need to impede their progress. You will do fine without my help.”

Again, Gwen used a surprising amount of grace and gentleness to place the rune in his hand. He felt the rune was cold as the ice it was attributed to on his skin. A soft shiver ran up his spine.

“In the meantime, perhaps this will aid you. Nais and I did not part upon the best of terms, so right now, this only serves as a reminder that the forces of Light and Darkness are more gray than we think they are. But I think you can use her power in a more ideal manner than I. And if that will not do...” The pause almost seemed foreign to her, as if for once in her life, she could not express the appropriate words when she always found them. Eventually, she uttered out the first that came to mind, though the last word seemed strange to say out loud.

“Use it to remember an old friend.”

He blinked, looking down at the rune. The chill of it almost had him dropping it to the floor, but he forced himself to trap it in a tight fist. He opened his pouch and dropped it within with a sigh.

“Gramercy. Somethin’ tells me I’ll need what help I can get.”

With that, he looked back up to Gwen, and extended a hand.

“Well... I suppose I’d best be off. You watch yerself, especially with Aldrazar darkenin’ yer doorstep... er, the ship in general.”

Her hand clasped around Rubens wrist, her fingernails almost piercing through his sleeve. Her smile barely wavered.

“As if my ship is not dark enough already with a werewolf as a captain.” Once her hand was released, she slammed the rest of her drink, wiped her lips on her arm and attached her mug to its proper place. Gwen gave one last listless smile to Ruben before walking out. As she passed by, he caught the faintest whisper from her:

“Happy hunting.”

By the time Ruben turned back around, Gwendolyn Gwilt was out of sight.

- Mostly Written by Julie McMillin -

One final kiss. It wasn’t the longest, or most tender, or even the one with the most slobber. It was a simple kiss, and easy to remember because there were hundreds just like it. It was over too quickly. Randall smiled as he stood up and gazed upon his wife. She did not look exactly as she had when they met nearly ten years ago, but she was wearing the same patchwork cloak and carrying the same thin walking staff. She wasn’t the same person she was ten years ago, either.

She was stronger, braver and smarter... if just as impulsive. She loved him - and that made her more beautiful and perfect than any other woman. His eyes caught a hint of movement across the road and he pressed his finger against her lips before she could say anything else. "Go for your morning walk with Raven. I shall be with the girls until you return."

They both turned and walked away without looking back. Looking back would have made leaving impossible.

Raven paused at the corner of Guild Hall Row and Farnham Way to allow Talia to catch up. He smiled easily and simply said, "Good Morrow." He didn't press her for conversation. He just smiled and walked in silence with her toward the old oak tree.

Talia was tired. She was still sick, didn't get much sleep, and just wanted a stiff drink before leaving Bristol for who knew how long. But Randall's words kept replaying themselves in her mind. "Go for your morning walk with Raven. ... Go for your morning walk... your morning walk..."

Talia stopped in the street. "Raven?" she whispered.

Raven took two more paces then turned to face her and quirked an eyebrow. "Aye?"

"We've turned this walk into a summer tradition, and I haven't realized it until now."

Raven's smile returned. "It doesn't matter if you realize it or not. We're the only ones awake this early. Best for us to check that the dragon didn't find a soul overnight... or that the horde is still locked."

Talia laughed. "Aye, or that the Cauldron of Ceridwen was sealed, or that the egg had hatched, or the Guardian's protection spell was still around the nest."

"All in a morning's walk, Talia. 'Tis what we do."

They both chuckled quietly and paused under the branches of the oak tree. Everything was quiet, just as it had been for six years. Talia rested her hand against the trunk of the tree. "It'll still be here long after we're all gone, won't it?"

"As long as the Heroes don't cut it down, aye. And you'll see it again next summer."

"Help me sit, Raven? I told Ruben I'd meet him here. Seemed a fitting place to begin a new adventure."

Raven offered a hand and Talia sat against the tree. He leaned down and hugged her tightly. "You've faced gods and stage fright. You'll be fine."

As he stood back up his hand lingered on her shoulder. She placed her own hand on top. "Don't burn the Vardo down while I'm away, cousin."

Raven turned her hand over, kissed it, and walked back through the morning fog to the camp.

With his pack snugly on his shoulders, Ruben stepped into the clearing around the oak tree, eager to begin the journey. Talia sat at the base of the tree, lost in her own thoughts. Ruben nudged her foot before she even looked up at him. Then he noticed something strange.

"Lass?" He queried. "Not meaning t'pry, but wherefore have ye a coin upon yer shoulder?"

Talia plucked the coin from her shoulder and recognized it as one of Raven's lucky coins. "Because Raven remembered something I said a long time ago... Every adventure needs to begin with a little magic."

With that, Ruben reached down to help Talia to her feet.

Then, with a final backward glance and nary a word, they set off from the clearing toward the nearest road north.