

The Nightmare
By Julie McMillin

The snow fell gently on Bristol that night. In the morning, townsfolk and farmer alike would curse the long winter, but such worries would not trouble the dreamers. After all, the Band of the Twisted Claw had so many other thoughts to disturb their dreams.

Under the huge pile of blankets and laundry of questionable cleanliness, Canis huddled. Vashta had told him time and again to put things away, but Canis enjoyed falling asleep in his 'nest' on the bottom bunk. Although the blankets were warm, Canis's dreams left him shivering.

~~ Canis could feel the warmth of the sunlight on his hair as he approached Master Terranus. Terranus was holding a small locket and gazing inquisitively at the portraits of a woman and a boy. "Canis," Terranus asked, "Do you know these people? I found this locket and... they seem familiar." Canis took a shaky breath. Yes, he knew Terranus's wife and son... but how could he explain what happened to them... when Terranus himself could not remember? ~~

Elsewhere, Raven's eyes twitched beneath his lids. He rolled on his side and tried to push his blanket off his body. But, as happens when you sleep, his dreaming mind did not complete the action.

~~ Raven could hear voices shouting at the Order of the Sun camp. He raced down the streets of Bristol, his feet kicking up clouds of stifling dust in his wake. He skidded to a halt when he saw Thoren and Aria in a heated argument. But no matter how hard he tried, he could not understand the words they were saying. Then they turned their angry gazes upon him. Raven threw up his hands to ward off their glares, but that only seemed to anger them further. With red faces, Thoren and Aria loomed over him and demanded answers to questions he could not understand. ~~

On her bunk, Isabella thrashed. Blankets and chemise tangled hopelessly around her body she gasped for breath as she tried to free herself from the fabric.

~~ Isabella tried to pry the cold hands from her skirts. Nais's face was blue as she wheezed poisonous breath and tried to claw at Isabella for help. The pale eyes begged for help and Isabella screamed that there was nothing she could do to counter the poison. Nais's hand shot forward and gripped Isabella by the throat. The two of them gasped for air in their struggle against each other. ~~

Near the warmth of the forge, Adria mumbled as she tossed. "No... NO!" she shouted in her sleep.

~~ Adria set down the length of gold chain that she was mending for Thoren and rolled her shoulders. She tilted her head from side to side and groaned with relief as she felt everything pop back into place. The door to the forge slammed open and embedded itself into the wall. Adria jumped off her stool from surprise. The flames of the forge burned a bit brighter as Ignis entered the room. "FOOLS!" he screamed. "OATH BREAKERS!" The flames leapt higher into the air with each exclamation. "BETRAYAL!" The fire burned brighter than Adria had ever seen

before. “Ignis...” she cautioned. “THEY SHALL BURN!” Ignis tilted his head back and screamed his frustration to the sky. The flames of the forge erupted upward, consuming all in their path... including Adria’s face. “NO!” she shouted. ~~

From the stillness in her shared wagon, one would think that Talia did not dream that evening. Yet even though her breathing was steady and even, Talia’s dream was anything but peaceful.

~~ Talia fell through an impenetrable darkness. She could see herself glowing slightly silver, but the light was not bright enough to illuminate anything else. Talia heard laughter, but could not find the source. It seemed to come from everywhere and no where at once. “I wish to thank thee, Talia,” whispered Lady Tso’s voice through the laughter. “For without thine research I would not have been able to complete Grandmother’s spell.”

Talia shouted above the wind, “I gave you nothing, Tso!”

“Ahh, but thou didst. Dost thou not recall?”

A twisted claw, a serpent’s hide,”

Talia heard the words spoken by Lady Tso... and Sir Henry Carrington from so many centuries ago.

“So lost and weak you’d roam.

The years have turned and still you bide,

This path will lead you home.”

“Stop it, Tso!” Talia screamed. “Stop this!”

“Stay your tongue, carnal beast, and let Dark cover Light!

Rejoin, imprisoned soul, and feast with the Dark Queen tonight!”

Talia gasped, horrified, as the darkness began to creep up her legs. “I did not share the work!

You could not have found it from me!”

Tso chuckled, “Thou didst not share it, but neither didst thou hide it when thou left the city of Eze. We followed thee, Talia. And thou led us home.”

The darkness crept over Talia’s belly and she doubled over from the pain. She did not have the breath to scream as the darkness slithered up her face. Before she lost herself completely to the darkness she saw a small silver light fall away below her. “Mama!” screamed a child’s voice.

Talia was powerless to reach out to it. ~~

Talia stumbled out of the wagon and retched behind a tree. Vashta quietly followed her with an extra shawl. She waited until Talia finished and wrapped the young woman in the warmth of the shawl and a hug.

“S-sorry...” Talia blubbered through her tears.

“Think nothing of it.”

“I-I dreamed... I lost the...”

“Your child?”

Talia’s face went white. “You know?”

“I know the signs to look for. I do not think the others know. But you should tell them soon.”

Talia nodded and wiped the tears from her eyes. “But it called out to me in the dream.”

Vashta smiled and stroked her hair comfortingly. “Twas only a dream. Do not place any faith in it.”

“But I heard Tso.”

“Shh. Tso cannot harm your child. Set aside such fears. Now, come back to sleep.”

But as Vashta ushered her back into the warmth of the wagon, Talia couldn't help but wonder if she had given Tso the key to capturing Druscilla's soul. Talia shivered – but not from the winter night.