

The Night The Paragons Left
by Julie McMillin

October

It was a calm and clear night, for all the screams that came from the Vardo. Thoren sat, stabbing a long stick into the fire, chewing anxiously on a root of licorice. Across from him paced Talia's husband, Randall. He had returned from the wars in one piece physically, but at any mention of trouble, or of his rank and involvement in the war itself, his demeanor changed and he believed himself to be a hero called "Captain Wunderhund". The captain's method for dealing with everything largely involved running away and letting his comrades from the Order of the Sun handle the problem. Thoren's task tonight was to ensure that Randall remained Randall.

Another scream ripped through the chill night air. Both Thoren and Randall winced, that one seemed to have more pain behind it than all the others. Randall stopped before the wagon's door. "I should be with her," he whispered.

"Nay, coz" Thoren replied gently. "She's in the best hands we know. 'Twill be over soon." Yet the words rang hollow in his own ears. It had been well over a day, and neither had any notion of how much longer she could hold out.

Another scream. This one longer and louder, still. Only this scream then dissolved into weeping... accompanied by an infant's wail. Thoren rose next to Randall's side as Vashta's smiling face pushed aside the curtain over the door.

"Ye have a little girl, Randall" she grinned, tears of joy in her own eyes. As she stepped aside they could see an exhausted Talia clutching a tiny bundle.

"Randall?" Talia gasped between tears.

"Aye. I'm here, love. I'm here." Randall leapt into the wagon and into Talia's embrace.

Vashta let the curtain close on the new family, and she and Thoren waltzed to the Dirty Duck to deliver the good news.

February

Talia held little Alexandra on her hip and peered through the small slat in the wagon door to see if Randall was returning yet. There was a strange feel to the air; Gaia and Vashta confirmed that something large was going to transpire this night. It felt as if the very earth were holding its breath, and Talia believed it did not bode well if Randall were to be caught out in the storm. Alexandra's eyes darted about the room, gazing intently at any object that sparkled in the candle light.

With a sigh of relief, Talia opened the small door as Randall trudged through the rising winds

with his cloak clutched tightly betwixt his hands. He smiled at Talia, “Everyone is back at camp, love. We’re all here.”

An uneasy smile toyed with Talia’s mouth. “’Tis well, then. Nothing left but to wait out the storm.”

As if the very heavens had been waiting to hear that the tiny town was prepared, a wind fierce enough to rip the faction flags off their poles tore through the night sky accompanied by a groan in the land that set all their books and bottles to shaking on the shelves. Talia and Randall steadied all their supplies before they tumbled to the ground while Alexandra squealed with delight at the strange faces her parents were making.

After ensuring that everything was secure, Randall lifted the inner wooden panel on the head of the wagon so they could gaze through the waxed parchment at the storm. ‘Twas as Talia and the rest of the Lunar Tribe had predicted, a storm like nothing they had ever seen before. Snow and ice rained in sheets so thick that ‘twas impossible to see the remains of their campfire not but five feet away. Randall gathered Talia and Alexandra into his warm embrace as they stared, stunned, at the very sky itself falling.

A bolt of lightning and the thunderous crack that followed startled them from their reverie. Another flash of lightning quickly followed. Then another. A gust of wind blew the pile of snow straight upwards and, as it danced around one of the great oak trees, another bolt reached down to the canopy and lit but one single twig aflame. Talia and Randall gasped as both could feel their ties to the elements cry in sorrow and joy all at once. Wind, snow, twig and flame floated up through the clouds. Impossibly, the clouds parted for the briefest instant and the stars twinkled brightly to welcome the four tiny elements home. The clouds closed, the snow fell, the wind roared... but ‘twas nothing but a simple storm once more.

Talia and Randall both released the breath they did not know they held. With tears in their eyes and smiles upon their lips they glanced down.

Tiny Alexandra stared with open mouth at the spot where the stars had so briefly appeared. Talia and Randall gasped as a bolt of lightning was perfectly reflected in her wide blue eyes.