

The Tale of Elbrus - from the Journal of Talia Tale
by Julie McMillin

To say, "Talia was frightened," would be like saying Walter Raleigh did a little bit of fighting in the streets of Bristol. I stood at the Vardo, completely lost in thought, praying that what I was about to do was the right choice.

"Broccoli, cheese and bacon?" Ruben Walsh asked from behind me.

The sight of the fried food caused my stomach to flip over. "Nay, grammercy," I whispered. "At least... not until I come back from..." I couldn't even finish the sentence.

Fortunately, Ruben knew. "You've been called back to Draco Manor?"

I could feel my fingers tighten on my goblet. "Aye. Once more to tell them a tale."

Ruben looked at the food in one hand, and his spear in the other. "I'd like to stand with ya, lass, if you need me."

Relief filled me from head to toe. I wouldn't have to face the Disciples alone. "I'd like that very much, Ruben. Thank you." With one of the Heroes next to me I wouldn't have to explain to the Band why I appeared before the Disciples alone. I wouldn't have to watch one of their faces when I finished the tale of Draco Disciple victory.

Ruben and I sat at the Dirty Duck while waiting on the Praetor's pleasure. We talked about things, I'm sure, but I can only recall the pain in my gut as we waited and waited. Peggy arrived after a time and claimed Bailey sent her to stand with me as well. I couldn't argue against her, not with my stomach turned in knots, so when the call finally came that the Praetor would see me I walked to the manor with two companions. I prayed that the Draco Disciples would not take it as a show of force.

With every other step I took to Draco Manor I reminded myself of all the performance tips I could remember to calm my stomach. 'Shoulders down, deep breath, head high, chest out, strong voice, gliding steps.' I was nearly there. The sheer number of visiting Disciples made my head spin. How on earth could I do this alone? Then I remembered that I was not alone. I could already see eyes moving away from me to gaze at Peggy and Ruben. No, no, no. If I was to captivate them with the story then I needed to command the room.

I hit the edge of the imaginary circle the Draco Disciple formed and threw my arms wide. "My gentle masters and mistresses, I am honored to appear before you again."

In my mind I was chanting, 'Look at me, look at me, look at me.'

"With your permission, Master Clortho, I would provide some small entertainment for you and your guests." He waved his hand dismissively. Perfect. If Master Clortho was indifferent then the rest should, at worst, should only be mildly annoyed. So long as they were not openly hostile then I should be able to fold them into the story and prove my usefulness.

I placed my small basket on the ground behind me. I wouldn't need it until the end.

With a smile, and a flourish in my reverence, I began the tale.

“Upon the honor of my office, I swear the tale I tell you now is true. This is the tale of Elbrus.

“The Forces of Light marched forth from Rome to fold all the world into their mighty empire. Where the empire was, darkness was banished. Disease left the cities as quickly as the aqueducts could be built. Farms flourished mightily... for a time. Then the land would produce no more. And the empire would need to expand again. “Goodness” was burning the land, not letting it decay to grow again. But the Forces of Light saw no darkness, therefore their empire was perfect.

“A single spot of darkness lay on the edge of the empire around the mountain Strobilus - also called the Pinecone Mountain. There were pools of water so hot that no fish could live in the waters. Animals could not drink from the pools without becoming sick. Trees were stunted. The ground was hard. The Forces of Light would not let such a blemish remain on their land. They vowed to destroy the darkness, and the people who lived there.

“On the eastern side of the Pinecone mountain, a village prospered. In balance with the wild land, the village knew little of the mighty empire that would cut down their forest to make way for roads and farms. A young girl, Katjusha by name, wrote a silly rhyming couplet for her beloved warrior every day. Her father declared that she was finally old enough to wed when her warrior returned from defeating the nameless, faceless men that wanted to fight them. Katjusha skipped to the messenger who was riding up the mountain that day. For what did the girl know about invasion?

“High on the peak of Strobilus stood an army of barbarians (so called by the Romans) but we know they were Acolytes of Tiamat led by the Warrior General, the Draco Disciple Elbrus.

“Elbrus, defending his homeland, kissed the love letters from his beloved Katjusha, placed them close to his heart and stood ready to face the Forces of Light.

“The Mages of the Light had long since tried to cleanse the mountain, but had been unable to find a way for the land to heal itself. Thinking that the root of the problem lay deep within the mountain, they cast their scrying spells within the bowels of the rock and found a being full of fire and patience. This, they thought, this is the giant who will set the mountain free from the darkness that grips it so tightly. They called forth the power of the Lord of Light above to awaken the giant and destroy the darkness.

“But the Acolytes of Tiamat knew what the foolish Romans had forgotten. This was their homeland, and they knew the older names of the gods. There was no giant within the mountain. It was the Titan, Prometheus, Titan of Fire and Foresight.

“The ground began to shake and the Acolytes of Tiamat began to flee down the mountain to be with their families in their final moments. But Elbrus remained at the peak and gazed upon the Mages of the Light.

“YOU. You brought this disaster in your fear and ignorance and you **should** pay the Titan’s price. But I will not allow my village to suffer for your vain glory.”

“The ground before the mages burst open with fiery rage, as if a mighty fist punched through centuries of patience. The ground beneath Elbrus’s feet shook, and began to rise. The Forces of Light watched in

horror as the dirt melted away, revealing a single, giant blue eye. Liquid fire flowed where the Titan broke free of his imprisonment. Elbrus, steadfast Elbrus, stood atop the earth that still covered the Titan's mouth. Smoke darkened the heavens, the ash from burning trees nearly smothered all the poor mortals around the mountain. The Titan, nearly finished sitting up, tried to spit out the earth in his mouth. But he could not. Elbrus had taken his mighty sword and wedged it betwixt the Titan's teeth. Unable to expel the cursed earth that had contained him for so long, Prometheus could not draw breath and perished in a shower of liquid fire.

"The new mountain was ten times the height of the old Pinecone Mountain. When you view it from the village in the East, the two peaks look very much like the Titan's open mouth. Young Katjusha, a widow before she was wed, took solace that the new mountain bore her beloved's name. Elbrus: Tall Guard. It remained a boundary of the Roman Empire as long as the empire stood."

I paused. Outright smiles greeted me from the visiting Disciples. The Draco Disciples who resided in Bristol had a calm veneer over their expressions, except for Liam who seemed downright pleased with the tale. Master Clortho kept his display of indifference. Based on his lack of reaction from last year's tale, I assumed I was once again successful in wrapping him into the story. Inwardly, I cheered. This was going to work. I was going to save my entire family with a single tale.

I took a step back to indicate an epilogue to the tale.

"Many years later, the Forces of Light searched the area for any trace of Elbrus, or the sword that killed the Titan. They found no trace of either, but found what we believe was the source of the waste that once engulfed the mountain. We have kept them, studied them, but they are too light to be anything but hollow shells. Nevertheless, the symbol and status that they represent cannot be compared. "

I reached behind me and picked up my small basket. I removed the cloth to reveal five perfect dragon eggs.

"Gentle Master Clortho, I would give you these five eggs in exchange for a pardon for five lives. My two children, my husband, my niece... and my brother." I knelt before the Praetor of the Draco Disciples and extended the basket of eggs.

"No."

With just one word... two letters... I knew I was wrong. I may have won the rest of them, but I underestimated the power of Vinz Clortho. I did not ensnare him enough with the story so that he saw the characters and not me. Now I was kneeling at the complete mercy of the most powerful living Draco Disciple. I, Talia, Teller of Tales of Epic Wins and Epic Fails had just told what may be the biggest story failure in my life. If I lived much longer.

Vinz stood up slowly, never breaking eye contact with me. "Why should I allow you to give me what I can take? What would you do, smash them? Nay. For if you did I would kill you on the spot. Then your brother, then your niece, your husband and your eldest child. The youngest I would raise as my own. Oh, she would know love. And oh the stories she would one day tell."

I clutched the basket to my chest as I fell to my bottom. I didn't even have the strength to remain on my knees at the horror story he painted.

He leaned in closer. "If you would gamble with the lives of others then at least offer me something I need." He stood back and addressed the assembled crowd, swaying them to his side just as I had tried to sway them to mine. "You are an educated woman, Talia. You have studied in many places and gathered knowledge from many sources. I would have your notes on the Draconic Language and the True Names of things."

I couldn't breathe. What he asked for was too much.

"Surely," I whispered, "You have that knowledge already. I would have nothing you do not." Though I was trying to stall for time, I believed what I said. For surely the very Praetor of the Draco Disciples - he who has spoken with Tiamat, the Dark Goddess - would know more about the language of dragons than I would.

"I will compare our notes," he smirked while looking at his fingernails. "So tell me, your notes or your children? The choice is yours."

Two heartbeats. I'd like to say that during those heartbeats I thought about the choice I had to make. But all I saw in my mind's eye was my eldest daughter holding her newborn sister and exclaiming, "I love my sister!"

I couldn't rip open my pouch fast enough to pull out my notebook. Vinz grinned.

"There is no choice," I whispered and extended the book.

Vinz snatched it from my hand. "Then be gone and leave my eggs."

I fled. As I raced through the crowd I saw other Draco Disciples leering at me, and concerned faces from members of the Band. But how could I face them? How could I face any of them? I'd sold my true name to the Draco Disciples in exchange for five pardons.

The rest of the day passed in a blur. I do not remember any of it. When I returned home, my youngest daughter was still awake. I held her and sang to her for hours until she fell asleep on my lap. Even then, I could not bear to put her down. It was quite some time before my husband called me to sleep. I told him about the pardons for our family, but I haven't yet told him the true price.

The next day Ruben asked me only one question. "Was it worth it?"

I tried to meet his gaze with confidence. "If you had seen the love and joy in my daughter's eyes last night then you'd know. It was worth it. I gave everything for them."

And I hope, one day, someone will remember why I gave my notes about the language of creation to the Praetor of the Draco Disciples.