

The Tale of Vermilion – from the notes of Effie Cue

By Julie McMillin

“I have to ask one of you to do the most difficult tasks we’ve been asked to do yet,” Talia sighed. “I’ve been summoned to speak before the Dracos this afternoon, and I need one of you to be my eyes and ears.”

I looked to Falco for a moment before he offered, “I can continue to train the new bards while you go, Effie.”

I grinned, excited, and turned to Talia. “I can do it! What do you need me to do?”

Talia smiled sadly, concern still upon her face. “You’ll be there to serve the Adam’s Ale. You need not say anything, just serve those that motion to you. Your true purpose is to watch the Dracos, especially with all the visiting Dracos in Bristol this day. Tell me where they sit, who is higher in their pecking order, how do they react to the tale, and anything else that you’ll be able to see while I’m engrossed in the story. Does that make sense?”

Relief must have washed across both our faces when I agreed.

A few hours later Talia and I walked to Draco Manor.

“Effie?”

“Aye, Talia?”

“I’m terrified.”

I couldn’t contain my surprise. “You? Wherefore?”

Then I noticed how Talia gripped her goblet and how white her fingers were. “For I have never told this tale before, and these are the Dracos and... well, I am glad that I do not have to face them alone.”

We arrived and were set to wait upon the Praetor’s pleasure. He had other business to conclude, and I watched Talia try to remain calm as the moments passed. As each visiting Draco arrived, Talia took another deep breath and continued to look to me for reassurance. True to my task I noted the Dracos as they arrived and learned their names. Crimson Terra, both mage and warrior, arrived with Aldazar Necromis, who seems not to be a Draco Disciple proper but certainly dresses as a sympathizer. Another man and woman, who had no names, strolled in followed quickly by Shendiru Nightfang, a mage of darkness. Last in was Regina DeWinter, a mage of extraordinary power who seemed to command deference from several of the Draco Disciples. I could not pin her rank completely, but she is certainly highly regarded.

Unexpectedly, it was Regina who stepped toward Talia to offer words of encouragement, of all things. I could not tell if it was a spell, but she seemed genuinely concerned about our Mama Bard.

We were called before the Praetor. Talia invited everyone to sit. Aside from Vinz and Zula, it didn't seem that rank played a part where people sat. I did notice a man off to the side wearing black leather that I did not see arrive, but he kept his distance from all the rest of the assembled Dracos.

Briefly, Talia seemed not to know where to place her goblet since putting it on the Praetor's table would be such a breach of decorum that even the best practiced tale may not be enough to distract from the slight. Upon the ground she placed the goblet and took two steps into the assembled circle. I remembered an early lesson where she spoke of a 'bardic dance' and the importance of steps as well as gestures, but I hadn't thought long on that lesson since I had yet to figure out how to turn the small steps into a circle that wouldn't distract the audience.

I had let my mind wander too far. Talia was in a reverence while thanking the Praetor for inviting her to the manor. I felt no sense of irony in her words. She was speaking only pure truth.

Talia straightened up and spread her arms to encompass all the Dracos seated before her. "My good, gentle masters. You have called upon me to tell a tale of Draco victory."

She paused, swallowed, and intoned, "Upon the honor of my office do I swear this tale is true. I tell you now the story of Vermilion, the last Praetor of the Draco Disciples to face the Elemental Paragons and win.

"When the Elemental Paragons still walked this world, and dragons still flew through the skies, there arose a Praetor among the Draco Disciples who took the name Vermilion. She was a sorceress, very rare among those who seek to become a Praetor. As a sorceress alone she could control the most primal forces of the world. As a sorceress and a Praetor she could transform herself into all of the Dark Goddess Tiamat's five aspects and her lesser forms.

"Yet Vermilion had one task, one quest set before her by the Dark Goddess Tiamat. She was to use her unparalleled magic to find the last clutch of true dragon eggs in this world. Tiamat knew the eggs existed, but she knew not their location. Vermilion used all the magics she could command to try and scry the eggs, but although she could not hear them (for they were far too young) she heard a faint voice – a human voice – who could communicate with the ancient beasts... even if he did not yet know he possessed the ability.

"With a target in mind, Vermilion sped away to the north and was not seen for many years."

Talia paused, let the image settle into the Draco's minds, and continued, "In the north there is a small town that still exists to this very day. In the center of town there is a thatcher who had a single son who helped him repair the thatch on all the homes of the town. The boy's name was Jeremy. Jeremy learned very quickly to remain silent while working on other people's homes, and soon the town thought him a mute. So they continued their lives while the silent boy worked

above them. After all, there's no need to stop an argument, or a tryst, or a good bit of juicy gossip just because the mute boy is watching. But Jeremy saw everything in town. Knew secrets about everyone. And saw how horrible his neighbors spoke of one another when they thought no one was watching.

“Jeremy was not mute. Indeed, he had a single friend who understood his every word and who agreed that his town was full of horrible people. His friend? A small lizard. She could speak to Jeremy's mind, and her words were a comfort to his whirling thoughts. He loved his friend, and was always amazed at how well she blended into the woods. She was green during the high summer, black at night, red during the autumn colors, blue as the sky when sunning herself upon the highest branch, and white as snow during the coldest winter.”

I watched as Talia stepped back, purposefully removing herself from the audience. “Of course,” she stated in a conversational tone, “We all know that this was Vermilion adopting one of Tiamat's lesser forms in order to win the trust of the boy. She was patient, this Praetor, and waited until the boy was near enough a man in order to tap the fullness of his ability to communicate with the dragons. Yet he was still lacking in two things, strength of body and knowledge of the Draconic language.”

Talia stepped back into the circle created by the Dracos, and locked eyes with Vinz Clortho. “So Vermilion already knew Jeremy's answer when she crept toward him that afternoon and whispered ‘Come with me... come with me and I can save you from this village. I can teach you of the power within you. Come with me and finally live the life you were meant to live.’ You can hear Jeremy's breathless agreement for it echoes with each Draco that takes the vow.”

‘Twas as if Talia had cast a spell upon everyone. No one moved, not to drink, not to breathe deeply... even Liam had stopped eating.

“Vermilion stepped away from Jeremy then and with each step she shed away her lizard form and took on that of a young human girl. Jeremy said nothing, for his deepest wish had just happened right before his eyes. With a wave of her arm Vermilion intoned, ‘Ot vaeri’ and the world around them dissolved until Jeremy found himself standing before a group of wagons festooned with black and silver. ‘Twas easy for the wandering gypsies to take in the poor boy and the mute girl into their camp, for how could the Lunar Tribe turn away those in need? With their help Jeremy soon learned the Draconic language, and began to hear the far-off voices of the infant dragons in their eggs. The Elder of the Lunar Tribe was thrilled with discovery of the boy's talent. If the Lunar Tribe could find the eggs then perhaps they could raise the dragons themselves and control them to show the world that dragons were not evil.

“This idea did not sit well with Jeremy. How dare the Lunar Tribe talk of controlling the dragons? Vermilion smiled. Jeremy had learned everything she hoped he would from the Lunar Tribe.

“With a wave of her arm Vermilion intoned, ‘Ot vaeri’ and the world around them dissolved until they were in a camp bedecked with blue and gold. Jeremy's pleas to study the martial arts of defense were met with hearty acceptance, for how could the Order of the Sun turn away a

poor boy who wanted to defend the small mute girl that traveled with him? Under their guidance he gained the strength and stamina he would need to keep up with the hatchling dragons. Then one evening the Elder of the Order of the Sun overheard the boy muttering in Draconic and confronted him. When Jeremy confessed his ability to hear the infant dragons, the Elder made ready to march. If the Order of the Sun could reach the eggs first then they could rid the world of their evil ways forever.

“This notion also did not sit well with Jeremy. The Order wanted to destroy the beautiful voices that called to him in his dreams. He found Vermilion alone in the forest. ‘I have seen men for what they truly are. I want no part of them. Their thoughts and actions are only for themselves and no one understands the beauty of the voices like you do.’

“Vermilion smiled. ‘Then tell me, dragon hatcher, where can we find the eggs?’

“By this time Jeremy could hear the dragons clearly. They were not far. He described the place to Vermilion and with a final wave of her arm and a final ‘Ot vaeri’ they were steps away from Vermilion’s lifelong goal.

“Jeremy’s eyes widened with joy. Five perfect eggs, each a color of one of Tiamat’s aspects, lay nestled among the stones. As he approached they all began to shudder and crack wide. Jeremy’s mind flooded with the tiny voices as they shouted in joy upon feeling the wind and sun on their scales for the first time. ‘Joy! Warm! Warm! Joy! ... hungry... Hungry! HUNGRY!’

“And in their haste to free themselves from the confines of the eggs, one tiny hatchling tore its scales upon the egg shell. With the smell of blood in the air, the hatchlings tore at the nearest source of food... each other. Jeremy’s mind, once filled with the joyful cries of freedom, rang with screams of pain as the dragons devoured each other.

“Vermilion watched all impassively. She knew the strongest of the lot would survive. So when one hatchling remained, she scooped it up and vanished before the beast could consume Jeremy as well. His mind was clearly broken by the hatchling’s massacre and Vermilion had no further use for him.

“Thus, when the Lunar Tribe and the Order of the Sun arrived to find an empty nest, and their poor, broken boy rocking back and forth on the ground whispering, “Eaten. Eaten. All Eaten.” They assumed that the eggs had been consumed by scavengers. Still, the loss of the eggs was the final straw in their feud. Blaming each other, the battle between the Order and the Tribe resumed in earnest until the Elemental Paragons knew they could no longer control their flocks and they quit this earthly sphere for generations. Wherever she was, Vermilion had the last laugh. Her patience beheaded the armies of the Lord of Light and completed her task set by the Dark Goddess.

“Yet, what became of Vermilion and her hatchling?” *Talia gazed at each of the assembled Dracos in turn.* “I cry your pardon gentle masters, but though my research has brought me thus far, the answer to that question lies within your tomes as you undoubtedly know. Yet, ‘twas the

Tale of Vermilion and the last dragon that you desired and thus have I told.” *With as much grace as she could muster, Talia sank to one knee and awaited the Praetor’s judgment.*

Vinz Clortho flicked his hand to bid Talia rise. *I would not say that he had awe in his tone, but it was not his typical curttness that I’ve heard in times before. “Grammercy, bard.” He paused, almost said something but seemed to think better of it. Instead he simply dismissed us. “Be gone with you.”*

On our way back to the camp I smiled at Talia. “You did wonderfully. You were almost noble.”

Talia snorted. “My heart is pounding louder than Adria in her forge. Yet, it was a good tale.”

“Aye! I’ve never heard it before!”

Talia smiled wryly, “You have, if only a small part. The end of Jeremy’s tale is the end of the tale of the Great Split. Think back to when I tell the long version of Sir Gabriel and Sir Henry. I do include Jeremy in there as a named character.”

I had to ask one question before Talia and I parted ways. “Talia? When you looked to the Praetor...”

“Did I make eye contact?”

“Aye.”

“I did.”

I gasped. “But the Praetor can see into your soul, can he not?”

“I have no doubt that he can, Effie. But in this instance, I know he did not.”

“A spell?”

Talia laughed. “You know full well that I have no such power. Nay, I know the Praetor did not see my soul when he looked at me because he was not looking at me. He saw Vermilion enticing Jeremy. He may have even seen Tiamat during his own ascension, if he’s ever seen her at all. I’m sure if I ever asked that particular question of the Praetor ‘twould be the last knowledge I gained before my death. Nevertheless, the power of a tale told true is that the audience does not see the speaker at all. I am confident even now that fully half of the Dracos do not even remember my face at all.

“That is why we must always strive to tell the truth, Effie. At all times. As soon as your audience doubts you, then they will never be able to hear your stories. Each lie undermines every story you tell.” She chuckled. “’Tis why you’ll never find a true bard among the Draco Disciples.”

With that, we parted ways for the day.