

The Paragons (Part 1)

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The chill autumn fog clung to Bristol that morning, a reflection to the chill of sorrow that clung to the hearts the Band of the Twisted Claw and the Elemental Paragons. It was depressing enough that Druscilla's soul had been stolen in the moment where she would have known release, but it would seem that it was time for another farewell – that of the Paragons. To some of Bristol's denizens this was a farewell said much too soon. There were friends who did not know the true nature of the Paragons: such as Aria's companions at the Dirty Duck Inn and Nais with one of Robin's merry men. There were those who befriended the Paragons and knew of their nature like Oksana, the witch who'd not only befriended Ignis but helped create spells to augment the Guardians' protection of the egg, and Terranus' friend Arabella Bryd who made the great mistake of taking the paragon's staff and getting a first hand look at his unique nature when he came to retrieve his property. Then it came time for the Paragons to bid farewell to some of their dearest friends of all: The Band of the Twisted Claw.

Thoren and his band met the Paragons at the nest of Bloodtharken at dawn. Thoren and Ignis were the first to break ranks and walk toward each other. The two met between two groups where the air of sadness and seriousness was at its thickest. The two then extended hands and exchanged a fierce handshake.

“Paragon,” Thoren said respectfully.

“Thoren Grymm.” Ignis replied in his usual stern voice “Now we must take our leave. Our place is with Druscilla, to free her from the Gemstone of Souls.”

“I know,” replied Thoren. “I've learned that Lady Tso left for London. The witch is probably resting safely in some fancy estate by now.”

Ignis's voice was grim. “It is there we shall find her and end her. Worry not. I have London guarded. I am certain it shall remain safe until we arrive.”

The rest of the Band came forward. Lilith had tears in her eyes as she looked at the Paragons but she refused to cry. All of the gypsies seemed adamant about hiding their emotions. The Paragons also kept up stoic looks, except for Aria who seemed distracted by something in the North. The Paragons tasked Adria and Gaia to watch over the Order of the Sun camp and the Lunar Tribe camp respectively. They discussed much of their plan and charged the two camps to work together in Bristol. Once they finished their goodbyes the Paragons left through Bristol's gates just as they had arrived – together.

The Paragons entered the lush woods around Bristol heading east. The green of the oak trees bent over the road to form living arches of protection. The air was frigid and tranquil around them as fog clung to the ground at their feet. Ignis kept to the rear of the group, his eyes searching the trees and paths for possible danger. Aria was in front of him, her eyes calculating

some new idea. Nais, like Ignis, was also surveying the path before them with her hand on her pistol. Terranus was leading them with a smug grin on his face like a cat that had just discovered a bowl of cream. Ignis didn't like the smug look on his brother's face.

"How are we to get to London before Tso enacts her plan?" groaned Ignis.

"Dear Brother," Terranus spoke sarcastically, "I already told you I have our transportation covered."

And so the Paragons walked until they reached a cave near Bristol's shores. The cavern was small, dark and smelled of dank mud. The Paragons made their way into the cave; but before Ignis could call up fire to light the way Terranus waved his hand at the ceiling and caused the crystals to emit an eerie green light to illuminate their path. The cave's ceiling was covered in stalactites that reached down like teeth ready to gnaw and devour any who came into this place uninvited. It was evident to the rest of the Paragons that this place was very important to Terranus and was very much protected by him. At the cave's center the ceiling was decorated with ancient runes that shared the same green glow as the crystals that illuminated a tall circle of standing stones. Looming over the rest of the room like elongated tombstones, the rectangular blocks seemed to come to life at Terranus' approach. It felt as if the stone were somehow now... awake.

"What is this?" Aria asked, exploring the stones with outstretched hands.

"Do NOT touch my stones!" Terranus snapped back. "They hold a vast amount of power given by my very element!" He paused and gazed at the stones almost lovingly. "They are also our way to Stonehenge, and a smaller circle beyond, where we should be one day's travel from London proper. It's our fastest route to London."

Ignis gaped. "You mean to tell me you have an ancient form of traveling from Bristol to Stonehenge? And you neglected to share this information? This is far too... convenient."

"Some of us, dear brother," Terranus grinned, "Believe in the power of forethought. I have many such circles so I may travel quickly without expending too much power."

Ignis geared himself up for a response when Nais interrupted. "I must say, Terranus, it seems to have paid off. This is quite wise."

Aria bounced to the center of the stone circle and gazed hungrily at the glowing symbols. "Yes, yes, he's so very clever. But HURRY! I must see how it works! If we don't hurry we'll miss everything!"

The other three Paragons looked at Aria with raised eyebrows but merely shrugged and entered the circle. Terranus began chanting in a tongue no mortal knows and the eerie glow of the crystals grew brighter. Instinctively, the four joined hands and a white light surrounded them. It began to feel as if the Paragons were being pulled into the earth then through it. It was much like falling but without fear. Rather, it was a natural, joyful sensation. Terranus kept at his chant and

each of the four felt warmth fill them. This buzzing warmth was most welcome as it seemed to fill empty spaces the Paragons had not known they had inside themselves. It was their ancient feeling of unity. As the Paragons went forth into the strange light Terranus had conjured each of them knew the truth. Whatever came next, they were in this together.

The white and green light began to fill with billowing fog and fierce noises. The shouting words of men, the cry of a horse and the crack of thunder rang through them. The Paragons felt as if they rose through the ground in the middle of Stonehenge, but the stones were smaller and the circle was complete. Not Stonehenge then, thought Ignis, but a smaller copy. The world snapped into focus and the Paragons stood in the midst of battle. A tall young man tall with brown skin and modest dress stood amidst several unconscious Draco Disciples with his staff drawn and a vial in his hand. Two black cloaked figures remained and advanced. Throwing the vial at one of the cloaked figures, Talis muttered unintelligible words of magic and his staff erupted in electrical buzzing causing the Draco Disciple struck by the potion to writhe and scream as the magic forced him to the ground as a twitching heap. The other disciple looked down at his fallen comrade and threw back his hood to reveal a man with long black hair, steely grey eyes and a face covered in runic tattoos. Ignis sought to move forward and help the young mage fight against the Disciple but Aria held him firmly in place with her stern eyes. "He will be victorious," she whispered.

The Draco Disciple raised his arms and shouted, "Talis Riverwind, Dark Queen as my witness you shall NEVER fell one of my brothers again!"

Talis gripped his staff in two hands. "Mark Korvis, God as my witness, you and your ilk shall never fell another innocent again."

"Powers of the darkest Hell, kill this pustule with this spell!" chanted Korvis.

"Powers of the Universe, reverse this spell reverse this curse!" Talis countered simultaneously.

"Shathra Noxere!" Korvis's tattoos glowed a bright violet and he sent a noxious ripple out of his hands.

"Reddere Stregallum!" Talis cried forcing the energy around him to form an invisible barrier to reflect Korvis' spell back upon him.

As the spell connected Korvis shuddered as all assembled heard a violent ripping noise from within him. Korvis's eyes dimmed as his lifeless corpse fell to the ground. Silence reigned over the field. The Paragons stood impressed at Talis's feat – not many mortals had found a counter spell for a soul ripping curse. Aria beamed with excitement at Talis's victory.

"I knew that spell would work! Oh, it was simply MARVELOUS!" Aria cried as she ran to hug Talis. "I'm glad we didn't miss it, we'd have seen the whole thing but my siblings are so SLOW!"

"That spell was of your design?" Nais asked.

“Well of course it was!” Aria said impatiently. “I figured if I could train our more powerful mages to reverse the powerful dark magic cast at them by reflecting back the energy that caused them then we would gain an upper hand against our enemies and be able to destroy them much easier with their own magic rather than expanding power on more powerful spells that we’ve tried unsuccessfully in the past! And it worked! Brilliant!”

Nais was sorry she asked.

Ignis embraced Aria and laughed. “I must say Aria, I do regret telling you that it was a waste of time to try to figure out a way to counter dark magic. This is a most ingenious way of conserving our power for larger battles! It certainly kept Talis alive this den.”

“Paragons,” Talis dropped to one knee before the deities. “It is an honor to serve you. I foresaw your arrival and subsequent sabotage and arrived to stop the Draco Disciples from attacking while you were vulnerable.”

“Tso,” Terranus replied. “She must have gotten word of this mode of travel I have somehow and came to destroy us upon arrival. That harpy truly knows no bounds when it comes to cowardice and low behavior.”

“So much for the honorable nobility of England,” Nais rolled her eyes.

“Not ALL of them behave in such a fashion. You’d do well to remember that.” Ignis retorted

“There you go defending humans again over everything else. You pretentious-”

“And there YOU go judging them without due thought of who they are you cold-

“ENOUGH!” Terranus rarely raised his voice and for the briefest of moments it seemed as if the world rippled with long contained power. “We have more important tasks to do right now than bicker amongst ourselves or have you forgotten that Lady Tso still has Druscilla’s soul trapped in that Gem of Souls.”

“So that’s what Hob meant by the Gem and the Darkness surrounding Bristol,” Talis muttered to himself.

“What?” Nais asked.

“My apologies, Paragons. I must get you to London quickly!” Talis replied hastily. “There isn’t much time.”

And with that Talis whistled a high sound like a tea pot. From behind the stone structure came out a glorious white horse gleaming in the Sun’s light followed by four other brown horses that seemed somehow dull in the mare’s presence.

“Come. London is but some few hours ride from here.”

“How did you know to bring more horses with you?” Terranus asked.

“As I said, Master,” Talis boasted with a wolfish grin, “I foresaw your coming. Fear not, I do that sometimes.”

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The ride was hard and the reward was not what the Paragons had in mind. They had expected the capital to be a beautiful place but London was a far cry from the natural beauty to which they were accustomed. The city had a stench to it. Every street seemed to reek of waste and decay. Though the buildings were beautiful and bustling pace were a refreshing change from Bristol’s shores, the Paragons soon found themselves missing the old port. As they rode they glimpsed some of the noble estates and the beautiful White Tower of London, but also the poor struggling in the crowded streets to make ends meet. Talis guided the Paragons to a modest looking house by the south bank of the River Thames – which had frozen in the unnatural October cold. Talis helped the Paragons dismount, flipped a coin to a boy to take the horses back to the stable, and showed the Paragons into his house. Talis’s home was as modest inside as it had been outside. There was not much to declare of value in the home, but everything was pristinely clean. The table in the kitchen was as rickety as the chairs. There was only one bench next to the living room fireplace, but the walls were lined with old books. The fireplace crackled merrily, the axe beside it gleamed clean and keen, but the dust and shards in the corner spoke volumes – very likely they used the last of their wood to light the fire in anticipation of the Paragons. The bedroom held nothing except a very fancy bed that seemed greatly out of place in this house – obviously a gift from Talis’s late mentor Lord Benjamin Atlee. The matching crib in the other room held two small babies who held each other as they dozed peacefully in its regal embrace, another gift it seemed.

“It isn’t much,” Talis said, wrapping his arm around his wife’s waist as he watched the Paragons investigate his home. “But it’s what I’ve earned on my own and it’s what I’ll keep.”

“Didn’t Lord Atlee ever offer you...better living spaces?” Terranus asked. “He had quite the fortune and held different houses and properties. Surely–”

“Lord Atlee financed my magical studies. I won’t let him take care of anything else. It’s my life I’ll find my own way through it.”

“Too proud to accept his help.” Nais snorted disdainfully. “He only wished to show you his love.”

Ignis glared at her. “But Talis wanted to make him proud by showing honor and earning his way in this harsh world.”

“Yes,” Nais replied, rolling her eyes. “Honor and all that nonsense. All it does is deny those who love you from helping you. In the end, no one is happy.”

“Honor brings glory and hope, Nais.” Ignis responded.

“It also brings death and pain, Ignis. Someone always dies for honor.” Nais chided.

“Will you two please cease speaking?” Aria whined, her hands over her ears. “I liked it better when you two didn’t talk to each other and you’re making my head ache.”

Talis looked between the two Paragons and though he most soundly agreed with Ignis – he dared not enter into the affairs of those greater than himself. Powerful mage or no, the affairs of Paragons were beyond him. Instead, he changed the topic. “It is quite fortunate that you have returned to London. I need your help with the Draco Disciple case I’ve been working on. I’ve discovered that it was the one of the local bakers, Master Grey, who murdered Lord Atlee and Rowella Bobbins. With you here, he’ll stand no chance of getting away with these heinous crimes. According to my sources a large amount of Disciples are gathering tonight and with your help we should be able to-”

“Talis,” Ignis interrupted gently. “I’m sorry. We cannot help you.” Ignis tried to ignore the hurt look from Talis. “We are here on a different quest. Lady Katherine Tso, leader of the Draco Disciples, has come to London. We need to figure out why she’s here and what she intends so that we might liberate the soul of Druscilla from the Gemstone of Souls.”

“Gemstone of Souls?” Talis asked his voice a mixture of curiosity and fear. “Is it powerful enough to hold the soul of a Dragon?”

“It is powerful enough to make us work together in order to keep it from mortal hands.” Ignis replied flatly.

That statement made Talis’ blood run cold. He knew Ignis’s hatred of the Lunar Tribe ran deep and strong and that the Paragons had always, at least as far as he’d known, worked in pairs but never as four. If this gemstone was able to cause the Paragons to work together it surely had to be beyond them in some way. And if something that powerful had fallen into the hands of the Draco Disciples, God help them. Talis couldn’t very well ask the help of the paragons when they had an important task to do.

Aria’s mind was replaying the conversation. Her lips were pursed together in deep thought as she calculated solutions to the present problems. “I’m not certain about the two problems being separate, Ignis. If this Master Grey killed Lord Atlee and Rowella Bobbins then maybe it was at Tso’s command.”

“It does stand to reason that the murders and Tso’s presence are related,” Terranus grudgingly agreed. “If she’s here now there has to be a reason.”

Ignis’s face lit up with understanding. “Then this is simple. We shall wait for the Disciples to meet tonight, as Talis says they will, and then we can destroy them once and for all!”

Exasperated, Nais countered, "It figures you'd suggest such a thoughtless plan. If they're dead they can't tell us anything. I say we subdue a disciple or two as they're leaving so we can extract information."

"Why, so Tso can get away? Nay, let us take them all down before she can escape or use the Gem of Souls to defend herself!"

"If we just kill everyone we will never learn anything about Tso's plans! We need to think about the future here, IGNIS!"

"And if we just subdue the Disciples and lose Tso we leave Druscilla in that whore spawn's hands. We need to think about the potential danger to others, NAIS!"

"Are they going to argue for a while?" Talis asked.

"Sadly," Aria sighed.

"Yes," Terranus completed.

Talis shook his head. "Then I shall do what I can to prepare for the battle ahead." He lifted a trap door near the hearth and descended. "I'll take the Draco Disciples myself if I must," he muttered. The Paragons did not hear Talis. Their shouting had woken the children and raised the most powerful voice in the room: that of Talis's wife.

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Night had fallen around the Paragons and they knew that soon the Draco Disciples would meet to conduct whatever plan it was that Tso had enacted. But before they and Talis were ready to face off against the forces of the shadows they had one matter to settle.

"So we're agreed then," Aria spoke. "No more fighting?"

"You BOTH recognize that we have much bigger battles to fight than each other," Terranus stated.

"Yes." Ignis and Nais still would not look at one another.

Terranus shook his head. "Fine. We should fetch Talis-"

Nais froze and drew in a sharp breath. Her gaze unfocused, she appeared to be looking inward. The fear in her eyes unsettled the usually stoic Terranus who rushed to her side and grasped her shoulders.

"Sister? What is it?"

Nais's voice was distant. "Talis is crossing the River Thames. I feel him, his anger, his fire, he

means to go against the Disciples alone. If he enters there... I have a terrible feeling.”

“A feeling?” Ignis asked skeptically. “You mean to tell me that we should trust you based on a feeling?”

“Her feelings were usually right, Ignis” Aria whispered. “Or have you forgotten?”

“Where is he heading now?” Ignis asked impatiently.

“I know not,” Nais said faintly. Regaining her usual composure she added, “He’s passed beyond water.”

Lifting the trapdoor the Paragons descended into a laboratory filled with exquisite beakers, vials and other alchemical fineries. In another corner they saw tomes, books and scrolls as well as a map with a small amethyst pendulum lying upon it. The Paragons knew that another seer mage in Bristol, Gaia Vedeo, often used such a pendulum to divine information. Gaia’s pendulum, however, had never glowed. The crystal hummed softly and pointed to a house a short ride from Westminster Abbey: The house of the late Lord Benjamin Atlee.

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Talis noted the familiar, ornate gardens of Lord Atlee’s estate as he and Glory rode in to the manor. The manor no longer had the same luster inside as it had in the gardens. With Atlee’s passing the servants no longer took care of the house and cobwebs and mildew had begun to grow upon the walls and rafters. The entirety of the house, which seemed to lay empty and dark except for the magical fire he held in his palm, was covered in dust. Seeing the place as it was now saddened Talis; he remembered when the home was full of servants and life, much like his master had been. Suddenly, in the corner of Talis’ eye a black figure appeared and a sulfuric smell began to over take the room. The figure muttered something beneath his breath and a dark blast of energy surged toward the young mage. Talis countered with a gout of flame from his right palm that sent the cloaked figure to the ground. As the cloak fell away the fire’s light revealed the face of the very man he’d come to dispatch: Master Eric Grey, the man who’d taken the closest thing to a father that Talis had ever known.

“Riverwind,” Grey hissed as he struggled to rise. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

“You bastard! You will pay for what you’ve taken from me!” As Talis shouted the fire in his palm leapt higher with his rage. He thrust his right fist toward the Disciple and shouted, “IGNITUS!”

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The Paragons raced to the Atlee estate. From outside the house the Paragons saw flashes of orange light from within one of the second floor windows. The house shook with power and the Paragons knew that if whatever struggle inside wasn’t contained soon not only did they risk losing Tso they risked drawing unwanted attention from the city’s guards. Finding the open door

to the manor, the Paragons, again feeling the strange ancient bond of unity, walked into the house. They were not met by an empty room covered in dust, they weren't greeted by cobwebs, and they weren't alone. The great hall was full of at least one hundred cloaked figures carrying daggers and in the center was the cloaked figure of a woman carrying a gem emitting a dull grey light.

"I was wondering when you scraps would show your faces" The voice of Lady Tso floated above the silent crowd. "The Elemental Paragons. How many times must I defeat you?"

"Save it, Tso!" Terranus shouted. "Gem or no you are mortal and have not the power to defeat us!"

"Oh really, puppet?" Tso chided. "And what makes this battle any different than the battle we had in Bristol?"

All four Paragons lowered their cloaked heads to the floor. Lady Tso began to cackle her ugly laugh – but was cut short when Ignis's voice fell like a hammer. "Because this time, Tso, there are no innocents to be injured by our power."

The Paragons raised their heads. From within their cowls four sets of glowing eyes glared at the Disciples before them. The Draco Disciples all flinched. Lady Tso stepped back in the crowd.

"KILL THEM!" She cried. "KILL THEM ALL! ATTACK, YOU FOOLS!"

With that command the black cloaks of the room began to shift as if they were weightless black wisps in the night. As one prepared to strike at Nais her blue eyes shone brighter. The hapless Disciple was encased in a block of ice. Nais grinned.

"FINALLY!" Nais cried. "I was wondering when this was going to get exciting!" She drew her pistol, fired into the ice, and was drawing her second gun as the frozen shards tinkled upon the ground.

Terranus drew a bag of stones from his waist and with a gentle wave of his hands sent the stone from the bag crashing into several nearby Disciples and then ricocheting into other disciples in arcing strikes. Aria's yellow eyes glowed brightly as she fired a lightning bolt from her finger tips watching the bolt hop from disciple to disciple until at least two score had fallen to twitching heaps on the floor. Striking his blacksmith hammer against several of the Disciples Ignis left nothing but dust behind with each strike preferring to meet the Disciples in vicious melee combat. Nais formed Icicles in the air and sent them hurdling fatally into many of the surrounding disciples, several of them landing in their throats sending them gurgling to their

deaths. The Disciples were formidable but the Paragons were simply beyond them and the battle took them only moments to dispatch. As the Paragons stood over the fallen, exchanging glances of pride, there came a sonorous boom from upstairs.

“This is the end of you, bastard!” came a voice from upstairs.

“Talis!” Aria shouted. “We have to help him!”

The Paragons dashed upstairs, all four elements ready to strike out to save Talis’ life. As the Paragons reached the top of the stairs they followed the screaming to the library and pushed the shards of the scorched door out of the way. Within they found Talis standing over the burning body of Master Grey his entire torso to his crown naked and covered in writhing scarlet flame. Across the room from him was Lady Katherine Tso holding two scroll cases in her left hand. One gold and one silver each bearing the symbols of both factions. In her other hand she held the Gemstone of Souls pointing at Talis. Her eyes were calm as she watched Paragons enter.

“Ah, there you are.” Tso spoke “I was wondering what took you for so long. I’m sorry about the distraction – I just needed a few moments to locate my prize.”

“What?” Talis asked. Lady Tso’s eyes never left the Paragons.

“It was simple, really. I’m disappointed you didn’t unravel this mystery earlier.” The smug satisfaction in her voice was palpable. “Lord Atlee and Rowella Bobbins were the latest descendents of the two bloodlines you tasked with guarding over your secret, the location of the Dark Gate of Tiamat!”

The Paragons suddenly knew what it was that Lady Tso was after. And it made all of their veins pump blood like ice.

“You.... cannot!” Nais cried “The way is guarded against mortals. The spirit guardians alone will-“

“Spirits!” Tso laughed. “Have you forgotten the power this gem possesses? No mere spirit guardian can stop me. The Dark Queen has prepared the way. I, alone, can give her the two things she wants more than anything in the Universe.”

“At what do you think you have that Tiamat wants so badly, little girl.” Ignis scoffed.

“A new student to begin with,” Tso hissed at Ignis. “One who will learn all she has to teach. One who will become more powerful than any mere Guardian you have to protect your precious Egg.

And secondly? The soul of her beloved Druscilla.” Tso caressed the gem with her voice. “She does miss her so.”

“Monster!” Talis screamed. The fire in his palm flared from scarlet to white. “You know we will stop you!”

“What I know, Master Riverwind,” Tso sneered, the Gemstone of Souls now glowing brighter, “Is it will not be by YOU!”

“IGNI–” Talis began.

“Shathra Nictus!” A black light from the Gemstone of Souls struck Talis full on in the heart. A white light shone out from Talis’ eyes and a ripping sound was heard from within him as he was flung back across the room to crash at the Paragons’ feet, dreadfully still. Ignis’ eyes glowed an even brighter red as violet flame filled his hand.

“You witch!” Ignis screamed “I’ll–“

“Do nothing if you wish Talis Riverwind to live.” Tso said aiming the gemstone at him “You know that your power cannot harm me. But your combined power could heal the wound to Riverwind’s soul. If you work fast enough.”

Ignis clenched his jaw and stared at her with the rawest of hatreds.

“Fear not Ignis, your errand boy will live. And I’ll be seeing you,” Tso glided toward a secret passage in the wall behind at the scroll cases. “I believe you know where my Queen’s door is. If you wish to stop us...you’d better meet us there. If you believe yourself powerful enough.” And with a fierce flash from the Gemstone of Souls, Tso was gone.

“She means to contact Tiamat.” Terranus spoke quietly. “May the Lord of Light help us all.”

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A faint white light faced Talis as he began to rouse. Soon, the light dissolved away and standing over him were five figures. Four sets of hands belonging to each of the Paragons and the teary-eyes face of his wife. His wife welcomed him the way any wife who almost lost her husband would. She slapped as hard as she could across his face, and then she kissed him deeply.

“You damnable fool! What were you thinking, you bastard! You could have been killed!”

“Part of him was killed.” Ignis spoke solemnly.

“What?” Talis asked as he bolted up causing stars to swim in his vision. “What do you mean by that?”

“It means, Talis,” Nais said, “That the damage to your soul was quite extensive. We were barely able to save you in time.”

“We tried Talis,” Ignis spoke angrily. “By God’s LIGHT we did...but she took your fire away.”

Talis didn’t understand.

“She somehow bound your fire magic.” Aria explained, “From what we can tell she has somehow disconnected you from accessing that element. And we cannot undo the binding. I’ve never seen a spell like that before...ever”

“This presents us with another problem.” Terranus spoke. “If she can strip elements from Talis she can strip elements from our Guardians. And now that she has the Map to the Dark Gate, if she gets through and learns the fifth element...”

Terranus couldn’t finish his sentence. No one really wanted him to. The room stood silently for a long time, pregnant with fear, save for the crying children in the other room.

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The morning sun usually brought Talis hope but this morning it brought him guilt and fear. He’d not only cost the Paragons a victory against Tso, he’d now allowed her to escape to gain terrible and unspeakable power. He soon felt a hand on his shoulder as he stared out at the sun rising in the east. It was Aria, smiling her usual joyful smile, a living inspiration of keeping one’s wits about them.

“Never be bothered by failure.” Aria spoke in her usual pleasant gentle voice. “For ‘tis only by falling that we learn how to walk or run. Worry not about what you’ve lost. I’m sure a mage like you will find ways to make up for it.”

As she smiled looking into the sunlight Talis could not help himself but to smile. He knew that somehow her words were true and that he’d make it through. As if each breath he took brought him closer to being himself again. The view of London may not have been glorious, but for now it was where he belonged.

“Where will you go now?” Talis asked.

“To Italy and the Dark Gate,” Aria said stroking his cheek like a loving mother. “Worry not, we will stop her. She’ll not hurt anyone else.”

“Take the horses. Lord Atlee left them to me.”

“He left you much more than that child” she added looking from Talis to the white mare and back. “That’s an amazing horse. Take good care of her. I like her.”

“Take care of yourself.” Talis said. “I had a dream last night of a hatching egg surrounded by a shadowed hand. We’re going to need some help. Lots of help.”

“Worry not Talis,” Aria added her smile growing “It’s all an adventure, just one more task, one more quest.”