

## The Great Split

By Julie McMillin

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The nearly-full moon hung high over Bristol. The stars flickered brightly in the crisp air. If you were prone to daydreaming you might notice the Dog Star anxiously following the moon toward the horizon. Dogs do not like being separated from the pack. No breeze came down from the heavens and the stillness sat as heavily as the cold on Thoren and Talia.

Talia huddled miserably under her cloak and wondered if it might be better to sit *in* the fire. She pulled her small traveling book from the pouch inside her bodice. After nearly losing the book in the last town she visited she wasn't taking any chances by keeping it in the saddle bags. She whispered a thankful prayer to the Guardians that came to her aid that day, clutched the book between frozen fingers and tried to find comfort in the old stories.

Thoren took a pull from his flask and contemplated fixing himself a pipe. It would be just the thing to take the chill from the air, he decided. He rummaged easily in his pouch and started assembling the leaves. Once complete, he inhaled deeply and relaxed. Though the day-to-day worries of running the camp still hung heavily upon him, he was not about to let such dark thoughts ruin a perfectly good pipe.

Talia sighed and rubbed her hands together over the flames. Thoren quirked an eyebrow. "No writing?"

"Nay, not in this cold. All the translations are complete – not that they tell us anything of use."

"Written in riddles?"

Talia shook her head. "Riddles we could try and puzzle out. These are just fragments of the tale of The Great Split. Descriptions of the battle, Carrington's reluctance, the death of Sir Gabriel... nothing we did not already know."

Thoren chewed a bit on the end of the pipe. "Tell me the story."

Talia was genuinely surprised. "But... you have heard the tale..."

Thoren waved off any further protest. "Not the short version you told to the Guardians. All of it."

The silence between them hung as heavy as a ham to be smoked. Talia shook off all thoughts of food (while cursing her overactive prosaic imagination) and began.

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The small group of scouts raced back to camp as fast as their tired legs could carry them.

Although the forest was dense, the men knew each tree. This was, after all, their homeland. They could not hear their pursuers, but they knew they did not have much time before they were overtaken. Seeing the firelight of the camp, one of the scouts called a warning. By the time the scouts broke through the line of trees the camp was armed and ready.

They were a sorry group. Weary, and with more than half the force injured, they could only will their bodies into some semblance of fighting order. They knew that they would be killed to a man if the enemy overtook them. But fear was no longer an emotion they felt. They would kill this threat to their families, or they would die trying.

A golden light began to grow within the forest. The men tightened their grasp upon their weapons. They still could not hear the enemy, but clearly they were carrying the light. There was no other explanation. The captain signaled his men to hold steady and wait for his command. The light grew brighter and brighter. The men leveled their pikes and squinted against the glow.

A deep male voice called out from the forest. "Men who fight for the forces of light! Your salvation is at hand!"

The men did not even glance at each other. They had been tricked by the enemy before.

The voice called out again. "Permit us four to step out and we shall prove it to you!"

A twig snapped as the branches at the tree line shifted. The captain lowered his arm and the archers fired their first volley. The arrows sped toward the sound of the voice with an accuracy that spoke of the untold hours of practice. Just as the first arrow should have clipped the leaves, a burst of wind fell straight down from the sky. The arrows landed in the dirt as if the archers had intended to strike the ground. The wind stopped and four men stepped out from behind the trees. The light nearly blinded the poor soldiers. Squinting through it, the captain realized that the four from the forest were not carrying a lantern... they were glowing.

One of the shorter figures glanced at the arrows and nodded approvingly. "Well aimed, soldiers. We shall have need of your skill in the battle to come." The captain gaped. The voice was that of a woman.

The light began to dim and a second male voice rang out. "You see, gentlemen, we do not mean you harm. We come to aid those who stand with the Lord of Light."

The captain took two paces forward. "The enemy has lied to us in the past, but never before have they called the Lord by name."

The fourth figure, another woman the captain saw, gazed deeply into his blue eyes. She smiled broadly. "Captain Sir Gabriel Newberry, search your heart. You have seen the signs."

The captain wondered briefly how the woman knew his name. But as the four figures grew clearer to his eyes he finally understood. A man in brown and green with a staff as tall as he... A man in red and black with sword and hammer in his hands... A woman in blue and green with a

bow upon her back... A woman in pale grey and white with pouches and potions upon her belt...

Captain Gabriel fell to his knees. "The Elemental Paragons," he whispered breathlessly.

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Talia took a pull from the flask that Thoren offered. She nodded to the rest of the Band as they gathered to hear the tale that they had heard hundreds of times. Cloaks and shawls pulled tightly against the chill, Talia wondered briefly why they would have left the warm haven of the wagons and the inns to join her at the fire.

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Newly-promoted General Sir Gabriel stood atop the hill overlooking the forces of the Light. The men had proudly renamed the company the Order of the Sun after their beloved glowing Paragons, and neither the General nor the church saw any reason to change the name. It seemed the Pope would rather bless a group called the Order of the Sun instead of using the blessed Lord's name. Gabriel knew he would have to contend with the church another day as to who would have command of the army once the battle was won... but first he had to win the battle. He noted the last supply wagons pulling into the camp before turning and pushing into the command tent.

Ignis (the Paragon of Fire) and Nais (the Paragon of Water) were the only paragons in the tent at this hour. Terranus (the Paragon of Earth) would be overseeing the troop formations and Aria (the Paragon of Air) would be organizing the off-loading of the supply wagons. Though Gabriel gave his customary bow, neither paragon noticed his entrance. They were arguing tactics.

Before the discussion grew too heated Gabriel gave a polite cough. Ignis and Nais finally realized they were not alone in the tent.

"Ahh, General," Ignis smoothed his doublet as he stood up. "Thank you for being so prompt."

Nais nodded. "We've called you to see what you know of the enemy."

Inwardly Gabriel sighed. He had made this report to his human superiors hundreds of times. Now he must report to the Paragons as well?

"With all due respect, Paragons, the Order of the Sun has been fighting the enemy for years. We have encountered all manner of beasts, serpents, fowl, and even fought against men turned against their brothers."

Ignis nodded. "Order of the Sun... a fine name..."

Nais was not as impressed. "You say you have fought for years, yet you do not know your enemy's name?"

"The enemy has no name. The creatures are corrupted by the dark influence and seek the destruction of our homes and our lives."

“Were that it was so simple,” Nais sighed and pushed an errant strand of brown hair behind her ear. “The enemy has a name, Gabriel. She has led the forces of darkness for generations.”

“She?”

“Aye.” Ignis’s gaze hardened. “The Dark Goddess eternally opposed to the Lord of Light – Tiamat.”

Gabriel made the warding sign against evil. “The Dark Goddess herself? But she would not dare move openly against the Lord.”

Ignis struggled to find the words. “That was true for many hundreds of years. However... something... someone... has empowered Tiamat. And she believes that with this new power she will be able to win the war.”

Gabriel was stunned. “Someone? Who on earth would seek to empower the Dark Goddess?”

Ignis thought it was best to simply state the facts. “A dragon called Bloodtharken. A fearsome red and black creature... more powerful than anything you’ve fought thus far.”

The General and the Paragons discussed all the known ways to slay a dragon. They knew that they had to defeat Bloodtharken before they could have any hope of fighting Tiamat and surviving. Somehow the two creatures were linked, but Gabriel could not determine their relationship. At the end of the evening, and with a plan in place, Gabriel took his leave of the Paragons.

Nais glanced at the closing tent flap. “I worry, Ignis. They fought for years but did not determine they were fighting Tiamat.”

Ignis shrugged. “They are soldiers – men of action. Is this not why we stepped in to lead the army? To end the fighting before more innocents fall prey to Tiamat and Bloodtharken?”

“Aye, you have the right of it. But still...”

Ignis clapped her on the shoulder. “Worry not! We have an army and a plan. The Order of the Sun WILL defeat Tiamat!”

But for all of Ignis’s confidence, the Order did not defeat Tiamat in that first battle... nay, not the second battle nor the third nor the fifteenth. Time and time again the army met a bitter, bloody defeat at the doorstep of the Dark Keep where Bloodtharken and Tiamat made their plans. Rarely was the great red dragon seen on the battlefield (Tiamat never appeared) and the men counted their blessings that they did not have to face such a foe when the dark horde was more than they could hope to defeat.

While despair and hopelessness crept into the camp (unwanted visitors to be sure), the Paragons

raged and fought against each other.

“Clearly we need a new plan,” Aria stated.

Ignis snorted, “We would not if the army could just hold a line.”

Terranus took offense, “Hold a line? You would have them stand there until they died!”

“Aye, as soldiers should if it means protecting the rest of the company!”

“Enough!” Aria’s voice cut through like the crack of a whip. “I have a new plan. What we shall do is send a single rider to the dark gates under the white flag. While he negotiates, he shall remove the pin from the hinges of the door. The followers of the dragon will still believe the door is securely locked, but all we need do is push upon it on the other side. Tomorrow night we send in a few men to slay the beast under the cover of darkness... and the enemy is none the wiser. This way we gain access to the castle, slay Bloodtharcken, win the war... and no more lives are lost. It is the perfect plan.”

“Brilliant,” stated Ignis.

“Deceptive,” Terranus whispered sadly.

“You would have us become no better than the enemy!” railed Nais.

“No, sister,” sneered Ignis. “She would have us win this war.”

“But at what cost?”

“At any cost! If t’will save the lives of the men, then we must act!”

Terranus stepped back from the table. “Action without thought is a reaction only. We must consider the kind of action this is... it is deception.”

Aria threw up her hands. “I *have* been thinking. And this is the only way I can see to proceed. I did not come to this conclusion lightly – but now that it is made we must enact this plan.”

Nais began pacing the room. She felt trapped. “But you suggest to violate the tenants of the white flag. Do no harm. Should we cast aside such a symbol? Show mankind that they can disregard the rules of battle if it ensures victory?”

“Of course!” Ignis was pleased that Nais agreed with him. “What is a symbol compared to the lives of the men?”

Nais scowled. “Everything, Ignis. The symbols you would have them cast aside are what separates mankind from the beasts. Shall we cast them back to fighting with stones and sticks?”

Shall we remove their written language? Force them back into the caves? We lead this army – let us lead it by their rules. Else, they are no better than savages.”

Very quietly Aria replied, “What good are language and symbols if everyone is dead?”

The four paragons argued late into the evening – but the four could not agree to the plan. They left that night with the issue hanging over them. Ignis and Aria retired to fight another day. But Nais and Terranus had a different idea.

The mages’ pavilion was small compared to the rest of the camp, but no less defended. The warriors knew that the Order’s mages protected their weapons from foul enchantments and researched vulnerabilities in their enemies. But at this late hour the mages should be asleep to prepare their spells for the upcoming day of fighting. Nais and Terranus smiled when they saw one lone candle flickering through the back wall of the tent. They could hear a boy muttering to himself and the scratch of a quill on parchment.

“Henry?” Nais called softly.

There was a startled gasp, the bang of a knee on a table and a pale boy with dark hair pushed through the tent flap. “Who...?” he began. His eyes widened and he fell to one knee. “Paragons, I... I did not know it... at this late hour I did not think...”

“Hush, Henry. And do stand up,” Nais wished the boy wasn’t so formal at all times.

As Henry stood, his still wet parchment slipped out of his trembling hand and floated to the ground. Terranus picked up the page and quickly scanned it. “I have not seen this spell before.”

In a moment Henry forgot to be nervous. “No, sir. ‘Tis a new spell I created. A spell to stun the enemy where they stand.”

Terranus frowned. “We have not used magic in such a direct fashion before.”

“True, sir, but only because we have acted to enhance the army. Our spells protect their steel and their minds from the enemy’s control. They are reactive and defensive spells only. But why have we not used our magic to attack the enemy?”

Nais scanned the spell over Terranus’s arm. “Magic is slow. Attacks would be countered.”

“If we insisted upon calling on all four elements in every spell – yes. They would be ponderously slow. However, if we only use one or two...”

Nais smiled, “Then the spell is shorter and could be a capable weapon in the hands of a skilled mage.”

Henry beamed with pride.

Terranus nodded. "So this is what you have been working upon all these evenings."

Henry deflated. "As I have told the other mages, sir, I can concentrate better during the night. All the noisy distractions of the day fade away and I can focus on the magic that hums through the earth. 'Tis easier to feel and listen at night than during the day."

Nais did not understand why Henry seemed sullen. "The other mages do not understand this?"

Henry laughed. "No, lady, they do not. They do not understand my magic, so they ignore me. Oh, they call upon me when they need to complete a mage circle for a powerful spell. Other than a circle... I am left to my research. It is an arrangement that suits us all wonderfully."

Terranus noted the downward turn of the boy's voice and the slump in his shoulders. With his thin frame and mop of dark hair it was no wonder he stood out from the stocky blond ranks of the rest of the army. He caught Nais's eye and nodded.

"Henry Carrington," Nais stated. "We have a task for you."

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"SIR Henry Carrington!" Adria called out.

Talia blinked at the interruption. Her limbs hummed with the warmth of the tale. Her cloak lay on her stool and she stood on the stones that circled the fire. She had been *living* the story and thus forgot the world right in front of her.

"Sir Carrington!" Adria shouted again. "He was a knight!"

Talia shook her head. "Before the Battle of the Dark Keep, Henry Carrington was a mage like any other. He had not yet been knighted. The only true 'knight' in the Order of the Sun back then was General Sir Gabriel Newberry. After the battle Ignis will knight the survivors that distinguished themselves in honorable combat."

Lillith piped up, "But I thought the Lunar Tribe was founded by a knight – not a knight of Ignis."

"Henry Carrington will not be knighted by Ignis... but that's jumping ahead in the tale."

"Humph." Lillith folded her arms across her chest. "How do you know what the Paragons said to him if everyone was asleep?"

"That's a bard's secret, dear one. But for you I shall tell you my tricks. Sir Gabriel Newberry kept detailed notes about the Paragons in his journals. The Lunar Tribe has the records of how Sir Henry Carrington founded the Tribe. Sir Carrington did not keep his conversations nor his childhood a secret. By combining the two accounts I can pull out pieces of the truth."

Thoren snorted a derisive cloud of smoke. "Aye, and the rest be creative license."

“What e’er you call it,” Talia ignored Thoren, “I do know that Carrington did not want the assignment. He was too young, he protested. There were other mages more skilled. It would be less of a risk to ask someone fuller in their power. But Nais and Terranus did not want any other mage. They wanted Carrington. And so, as false dawn blossomed in the night sky, Carrington approached the Dark Keep alone and unarmed.

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The small door in the back of the keep was open, just as Terranus said it would be. Henry stood at the threshold and steeled his courage. “I come to speak to Druscilla,” he managed to squeak out.

There was no response. Nais said there might not be any. Taking a deep breath, he entered the Dark Keep.

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Back in the general’s tent, Ignis could not believe his luck. “No one has seen them?”

Gabriel hated repeating himself. “Neither the Water nor Earth Paragon are in the Order’s camp.”

Aria was flustered. “But without them how can we-”

“We shall proceed with your plan.” Ignis’s tone brooked no argument.

“Then we must choose the rider quickly. There is not much time before the sun rises.” Aria searched her brain for a likely candidate from the ranks of men and wished Terranus was there. He knew the hearts and abilities of the men far better than she did.

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Carrington stumbled down the dark stone hallway and tried not to trip over his robes. He rounded a corner and saw the glow of candlelight in a room to his right. He crept up slowly and let his eyes adjust to the newfound light. The room was vast – the tiny candle could not hope to illuminate the four walls, let alone the ceiling. But Henry could clearly see the young woman sitting at a wooden table... staring right at him.

“Good morrow, Aquarius.”

Henry gaped. “I am...”

She rose too gracefully for a human woman. “You are an earthly man, touched by the running water, who has a head full of ideas and facts but dreams in fiery passion. You were sent by our opposing army for one reason or other to try and discuss my surrender.”

Breathlessly Henry whispered, “Tiamat?”

The woman laughed. “The Dark Queen? Me? Oh, did they send us a man or a boy?” Her shoulders shook with laughter and Henry noticed the way her smooth brown hair framed her face

and cascaded down the front of her chemise.

“Nay, boy, I am not my mistress. She stands behind me.”

Henry dragged his gaze away from the woman and tried to peer through the darkness to find the Dark Queen. When he saw nothing at the level of the ground he turned his gaze upwards – and was surprised to see the fading, flickering stars. They were in a courtyard! But why, he wondered, was the darkness so thick at the ground. It was almost as if it were... solid.

Henry gasped as he saw the shapeless darkness coalesce first into a female form of gigantic proportions then melt into a huge wolf. The black wolf snarled and advanced two paces toward the petrified Henry.

Henry chanted, “As stone to mud with water’s embrace/ Does muscle to bile with blood’s cruel taste!”

The wolf melted back into an impenetrable darkness. A deep ringing laughter filled Henry’s mind. He clutched his ears as the sound drove him to his knees. Convinced that he would never again hear the sweet words of magic, he waited for the Dark Queen to finish him. Thus, he was quite surprised when the young woman tugged on his sleeve to get him to rise.

“That is my mistress, foolish boy. You called me by name when you approached the door. It is the only reason we let you enter.”

Henry’s head still rang with faint evil laughter. “Druscilla...” He could not remember what Nais told him to say. Druscilla stepped... ‘No, that’s the wrong word,’ Henry thought... She glided until she was inches from his pale face. All other thoughts fled his mind as he was overcome with the smell of the first rose blossom of spring.

“Poor Aquarius,” she whispered. “So lost in our big battle.” Her delicate fingers trailed up along his jaw and gently behind his ear. He shuddered. “You called out a spell; do you fancy yourself an elemental mage?”

Henry’s eyes widened. “Why, yes! My first spell!”

She took his hand and gently led him to the wooden table. “But you called only upon two elements,” she purred. “How can you hope to have any power with only half your magic?”

Henry was lost to her charms. Here before him was a beautiful woman interested in him AND his spell. “The four elements together do not always create the strongest magic. Using two is simpler and faster.”

Druscilla nodded. “Excellent well. Of course... why waste the power if it is not necessary?”

“By isolating the elements the individual verses are more powerful.”

“If you only desire a spell to open the earth why bother invoking fire...”

“That was my theory... but the spell did not work.”

Druscilla waved her hand over the table and dozens of musty leather-bound books appeared.

“The spell did not work, my darling Aquarius, because you do not know the ancient language of magic. If you help me with my spell, I can teach you.”

Henry gazed into her pleading eyes and saw the wealth of information in their depths. How could he refuse?

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Back in the general’s tent, Ignis and Aria could not choose their rider.

“While Paul is strong enough to remove the pin, he does not have the negotiator’s gift! They would see his true intentions plainly.” Aria sighed. “Yet I cannot think of anyone else.”

Gabriel put his journal down. He had finished his final report on the leaders of the Order of the Sun. “I will ride,” he said simply.

Aria and Ignis turned slowly, incredulously.

“I would not send another to perform this task. I would not ask them to accept the responsibility, the danger, or the stain to honor. Therefore, I will ride.”

Aria tried to interrupt.

“It is my duty,” Gabriel said before she could give voice to her protest. “And it is my right to protect my men.”

“Of course, general.” Ignis nodded to the journal. “All of your affairs are in order?”

“Yes, Paragon.”

“Then ride you shall.” Ignis pulled aside the tent flap just as the first ray of dawn pierced the sky.

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Henry studied the small, crooked tip of the dragon claw. “Since you will use the artifact, it should be named first. For the rhyme to scan properly why not phrase it as, ‘A Twisted Claw, A Serpent’s Hide?’”

Druscilla scratched the words onto a piece of leather. “Yes, dear boy, do continue.”

Henry gazed at the book of draconic words and began to piece together the spell’s intent. Even though Druscilla continued to gaze at him (and he was weak in the knees from the attention), he knew that the spell was too powerful to be in the hands of Tiamat and her pawns. A draconic

phrase seemed to leap off the page in front of him and Henry knew that he had what he needed.

“Henry?” Druscilla grew uncomfortable with the silence.

Henry copied the two words into his spell book and prayed he could pronounce them correctly. He would only have one chance.

“No more,” he said.

A low growl came from the top of the western wall. Druscilla narrowed her eyes. “You will help us complete this spell.”

“No, Druscilla, I will not.” He finally remembered Nais’s instructions. “You have given yourself over to Tiamat and have forsaken elemental magic. I cannot allow mankind’s traitor to assist the Dark Queen.”

“Fool boy!” Druscilla screamed. Her rage echoed through the courtyard and was joined by a roar that Henry hoped he would never hear. The first ray of dawn pierced the morning sky and illuminated the top of the Keep’s walls. Clinging to the western wall, green eyes narrowed in anger, was the red dragon Bloodtharken.

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Gabriel rode across the fields that divided the Order of the Sun from the Dark Keep. The wind blew into his face causing the snow white banner to open above him like a cloud of peace. His horse’s hooves tattooed the hopes of the Order onto the barren wasteland. The morning sun caused his armor to gleam with a silver purity that could blind evil at 50 paces. General Sir Gabriel Newberry was every inch the leader of the Order of the Sun – and he was not afraid to challenge the Queen of Darkness.

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The darkness in the courtyard ceased its shifting cloud-like pattern. It hovered, inches from the floor stones, and began to solidify.

“A rider approaches, my daughter. Your boy has betrayed you.” The evil tone to the words caused Henry’s head to spin.

Druscilla sneered. “I shall not be betrayed again. You will die first!” Bloodtharken threw back her head and roared a column of flame a league high into the air.

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Terranus felt Druscilla’s words travel through the earth. “Nais,” he whispered. “She will kill Henry. They will ignore Gabriel and the army will have no way into the Keep.”

Nais took a deep breath. “Then we must entice the armies to face each other.” She put an arrow to her bow and aimed over the walls of the Dark Keep.

“But Druscilla will kill Henry.”

“Not if you trust him. Henry will hold them long enough.” She drew the string and whispered to the arrow, “Forgive us, Gabriel. By this you have saved mankind.” She let the arrow fly.

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Aria saw the column of flame from Bloodtharken. “Ignis,” she whispered. “She will kill Gabriel. The army will have no way into the Keep.”

Ignis scowled. “Even the dragon’s disciples would not ignore a banner of peace.”

Aria trembled as the arrow came over the walls.

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Gabriel was mere yards away from the Dark Keep. His goal in sight, and no opposition on the field, he knew the day was his. A broad grin spread across his face. He would open the way to victory. He heard a whistle above him and tilted his head to see what caused the noise.

He did not see the arrow before it pierced his neck. He did not feel himself fall from the saddle and slam into the ground. But he saw the fletching on the arrow and he heard Nais’s words fill his mind. And Sir Gabriel knew the elation of victory before passing from this world forever.

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Ignis bellowed his rage, but the Order of the Sun needed no orders to attack the Dark Keep. They raced across the wasteland to avenge their fallen leader.

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The darkness that Henry knew as Tiamat solidified into a snake of monstrous size. As Henry watched the snake’s head divided nine-fold and he knew he faced the legendary hydra. Henry also noticed that Druscilla and Bloodtharken seemed to be waiting for a command to kill him. He took the opportunity as it presented itself. “Without the strength to releve, for twelve score year thou shalt give way.” Henry bit the inside of his cheek. Hard.

Druscilla laughed. “You already know the spell does not work.”

The hydra hissed and slithered closer to Henry. He spit into his hand. There was blood mixed with the spit. He smirked, “It works now.” The hydra lunged. Henry threw his hand out, one finger pointing to the fell beast’s chest, and screamed, “Virlymin Molik!”

He stood, one finger pointing, and waited for the end to come. The hydra’s jaws inched closer and closer to his head and Henry believed that the spell had well and truly failed. But, after blinking a few times, the hydra did not move. It hadn’t collapsed to the ground as he had hoped, but it did seem to be petrified. He let out a whoop of joy.

Pain lanced through Henry’s skull. He fell to his knees and clutched his ears.

“That is QUITE enough, boy.” Tiamat’s booming voice threatened to tear away his sanity. “I shall deal with you in a moment. Druscilla, your incompetence is surpassed only by your ignorance. Leave the keep now before the army tears down the doors. You as well, Bloodtharcken. I will not see you fall back into their hands when we are so close to reversing the curse.”

Druscilla sank to her knees. “Great Queen, I am sorry...”

“You shall be dead if you do not leave.”

Druscilla leaned in close to Henry. “Where are your paragons now? You have done what they asked of you and yet they abandon you to the darkness. You are their pawn, Aquarius, nothing more. And one day you will learn that mankind can be greater than the paragons themselves. Once we free ourselves from their curse.”

There was a reverberating boom from the front of the keep. Tiamat howled, “Fly, daughter, fly from your oppressors!”

Although his vision swam with pain, Henry could see Druscilla race down the hallway while Bloodtharcken took to the air and flew from the keep. There was another boom from the door accompanied by the sound of splintering wood.

“Clever boy, you could have been useful to me.”

Henry gritted his teeth against the pain. “I would never serve you.”

“No?” Yet another boom came from the door. This time there was the sound of wood shattering.

“And yet...” Tiamat continued, “Do you kneel before me?”

Henry felt as if a great weight were pushing upon his back. He braced his hands upon the ground and panted from the exertion. Looking at the flagstones he saw that he was bleeding from the nose. Still the question echoed in his brain, growing louder with each repetition. “Do you? Do you?”

“Yes!” Henry screamed. “I kneel!”

Tiamat chuckled and Henry wished he would die from the cascading laughter trapped within his head. “And did you study magic with my disciple?”

On hands and knees, Henry wept and screamed with the pain. “Yes! Please! Stop!”

“You will defeat me today, but I have one final foothold in this world.”

Like a clarion call, one of the captains of the Order called, “The Queen of Darkness falls today!”

Henry had not heard the Order arrive. With Tiamat paralyzed as she was, it took only a single sword thrust to pierce the hydra's heart and slay the beast. The darkness faded to insubstantiality and rose from the ground as morning dew rises with the dawn. Henry coughed and gasped as he tried to recover his senses. He felt someone stand over him. He raised his head to thank his rescuer, only to find the tip of a sword at his throat.

The man spit in his face. "Traitor. We heard."

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Ignis and Aria remained at the general's tent and watched the captains slowly bring the corpse up the hill. Reverently, they placed the body on a blue winding sheet. Ignis himself removed the arrow from Gabriel's neck. The Paragon of Fire said a few brief words of praise for Gabriel's bravery before retiring into the tent with Aria. The captains shrouded the corpse and arranged the pyre to be built at the gates of the Dark Keep.

Inside the tent, Ignis threw the arrow on the low table that Gabriel once used to write in his journal.

Aria glanced at the arrow. It confirmed what she had heard on the wind. "It was Nais."

"KINSLAYERS!" Ignis raged through the tent. "Oath breakers! Betrayal of the foulest kind! They would betray our plans to the enemy and see their own men perish! How many could have been saved this day if not for her actions? I shall call her sister no longer!"

Alarmed, Aria rose, "Ignis, think before you say-"

"No! It is SHE who has gone too far!" Ignis upended a goblet of water upon the ground. Standing above the mud he reached for his sword, but it was not on his hip. He took his hammer, which burst into flames at his touch without being consumed, and raised it high above his head. "Let all hear these words echo throughout time. We do swear that NEVER again shall Earth and Water work with Fire and Air." He slammed the hammer into the mud so both Nais and Terranus would know what magic had been wrought.

The tense silence quivered in the tent. It was not until Ignis retrieved his hammer and placed it back into his belt with a sigh that there came a polite cough from outside the tent.

"Come in, Robert," Aria called to Gabriel's squire.

"Begging your pardons, Paragons, but the men were hoping you would be present at the pyre."

Ignis nodded. "We shall be there shortly. Fetch my sword, boy. There are many who have earned their spurs this day and I would celebrate Gabriel's deed by ensuring the Order remains noble."

The camp was turned upside down that evening, but Ignis's sword was well and truly missing. He used Sir Gabriel's sword to knight the captains of the Order, and any he had seen act with exceptional bravery. The new knights were given the honor of lighting the funeral pyre and the

piles of the dead dark horde in the keep's courtyard.

It was in the courtyard where Henry was left for dead. The Order had long suspected him of treasonous plots, but Tiamat had confirmed it. Since Gabriel was no more the captains who found him took it upon themselves to mete out justice. Beaten and bloody, Henry was bound and thrown in one of the piles of the dead to burn with the other spawn of evil.

The fires were lit, the captains raced out of the courtyard before they were caught in the inferno. Henry coughed and tried to wiggle out of the pile, but his bonds held fast. The cloying smells of the smoke and dead beast made his eyes water and he gasped for air. The image of Druscilla swam before him. "They abandon you to darkness... You are their pawn... nothing more."

Henry choked and whispered, "Nais... hear me. I am... still yours." Henry slipped into unconsciousness and did not hear Terranus's shout that he found the boy.

That night, Terranus, Nais and a newly-healed Henry sat around their own fire several leagues from the burning Dark Keep. The Order had not seen them escape from the back of the Dark Keep. As far as they knew, the Order believed Henry dead. The fire crackled quietly between them.

Terranus broke the silence first. "Where will you go now, Henry?"

Henry shrugged, "From what you've said there is no place for me with the Order."

"They could forgive you, Henry," Nais jumped in. "After all, you were acting upon our request."

Henry shook his head. "Ignis decried you, lady. Whereas I freely accept the knowledge the two of you have given me." He sighed. "I did not dream of gaining knowledge to become a traitor. But mistake after mistake piles upon you and there comes a day where nothing you say makes a rat's fart of difference. The Lord of Light may forgive, lady, but his children do not." A weak smile toyed with the corner of his mouth. "I'm your man, paragons. And once word spreads, you can wager there will be others to follow you as well. What a fine tribe of wanderers we shall be." He gazed to the heavens. "Following the moon..." he whispered.

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Talia let the silence hang in the camp for a few moments as people wiped away tears and tended to the fire.

"Did Ignis find his sword?" Canis asked.

Talia smiled. "Nay, and it remains one of the great mysteries of the Order of the Sun. Some say that Gabriel himself had the sword when he rode to the Dark Keep and thus the sword is buried with his ashes in the rubble. Others claim that it was Robert, Gabriel's squire, who thought the sword belonged to the Newberry household and returned it to their keeping. So the sword could be lost in a family storeroom, or given as tribute to any of the monarchs or conquerors that

passed through the ages. Perhaps the sword was lost and then found by the Fairy Queen herself and presented to Saint George when he slew the dragon. No one knows where it was, where it is or what it even looks like. But we do know that when Ignis first appeared he held a flaming sword. He has only been seen with his hammer since then.”

Vashta tsked, “Somebody should have gone on a quest for it by now. It must be somewhere.”

Gaia smirked, “Aye, and many a merchant be selling pieces of the true cross as well. If the legends speak not of its description, how are we to know the true sword?”

“Even so,” agreed Talia. “It was that very question that drove the Order and the fledgling Lunar Tribe to battle one another. ‘What is the truth?’ indeed. The Order of the Sun sought, as they always had, to protect mankind. They had been betrayed and they could never accept duplicity from anyone in their ranks. Trust and honor were valued above all else. The Lunar Tribe sought the compromise and acceptance that Henry was denied while in the Order. They saw the Order as oppressors and valued knowledge of the world above all else.

“As the years passed and the Order and the Tribe fought it would have made no difference if Tiamat were loose in the world. Mankind seemed intent on doing as much evil to one another even without her assistance. Neither side understood the other. Neither side <i>wanted</i> to understand the other. Once the Order discovered a threat to their families or their way of life, they eliminated the threat. The Tribe sought to befriend all magical creatures with varying degrees of success... and a great loss of life.

“There are many different stories of the paragons while they commanded the Order and the Tribe. But it is their final act that changed our course. For you see, rumors reached both factions that a small boy named Jeremiah discovered the last nest of true dragon eggs. These are not Bloodtharken’s eggs, for Bloodtharken had not been seen for years and years, but the TRUE dragons of the land – kin of the mighty beast that Saint George slew. The Order set out to destroy the eggs before they could hatch. The Tribe raced to save the eggs so they could raise the dragons and learn their secrets... even though no dragon had spoken to mankind since Bloodtharken’s creation. When the paragons learned of the other’s intent, they cursed one another.

“‘The Tribe will get themselves killed!’ shouted Ignis. ‘They protect evil creatures and gladly sacrifice innocent blood for the knowledge!’

“‘The Order is blinded by their rage!’ shouted Nais. ‘They would take away all knowledge and magic from mankind!’

“Both Aria and Terranus tried to calm them. ‘Perhaps they have learned something over the years.’

“At the same moment, though not in the same place, Ignis and Nais shouted at the heavens, “No! I will not become like our Enemy and their blind devotion to their ideals!”

“The words echoed through earth and air. Terranus and Aria nearly wept at what they had all become. ‘Our siblings are not the enemy,’ they whispered. ‘We would do well to leave this world until we remember who it is we fight.’

“That was the last time the legends speak of the Paragons. The Order and the Tribe faced each other at the nest of true dragon eggs... only to discover that the eggs had been eaten by predators. When the factions realized that the paragons were no longer on Earth to guide them, in a moment of unsurpassed clarity, they vowed to stop fighting and leave the other alone. Of course, the younger members of the factions did not understand the vow and soon the factions were fighting each other with the passion and abandon of the young. No one remembered the paragons and their reason for leaving.

“Or,” Talia concluded with a nod to Thoren, “People simply believed the tales of the paragons and Druscilla were legends spun by wine and bards.”

The Band of the Twisted Claw chuckled. They knew better than to dismiss legends. With warm embraces, or pats on the shoulder, they thanked Talia and retired for the night. Thoren emptied his pipe ash into the fire.

“Grammercy,” he said simply. “You would do well to think upon the lessons of your own tale.” He headed to the warmth of his wagon and left Talia in the stillness of the winter night.

The silence was broken only by the sound of the embers popping in the fire pit. Cold once again, Talia sat and pondered. “There are so many lessons in the tale... which one?”

The moon finished her race to the horizon well ahead of the poor Dog Star. He hung in the sky, winking plaintively, alone.