

BIRTHNIGHT

by Michelle Sagara

On the open road, surrounded by gentle hills and grass strong enough to withstand the predation of sheep, the black dragon cast a shadow long and wide. His scales, glittering in sun-light, reflected the passage of clouds above; his wings, spread to full, were a delicate stretch of leathery hide, impervious to mere mortal weapon. His jaws opened; he roared and a flare of red fire tickled his throat and lips.

Below, watching sheep graze and keeping an eye on the nearby river, where one of his charges had managed to bramble itself and drown just three days past, the shepherd looked up. He felt the passing gust of wind warm the air; saw the shadow splayed out in all its splendour against the hillocks, and covered his eyes, to squint skyward.

"Clouds," he muttered, as he shook his head. For a moment, he thought he had seen ... children's dreams. He smiled, remembering the stories his grandmother had often told to him, and went back to his keeping. The sheep were skittish today; perhaps that made him nervous enough to remember a child's fancy.

The great black dragon circled the shepherd three times; on each passage, he let loose the fiery death of his voice -- but the shepherd had ceased even to look, and in time, the dragon flew on.

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He found them at last, although until he spotted them from his windward perch, he had not known he was searching. They walked the road like any pilgrims, and only his eyes knew them for what they were: Immortal, unchanging, the creatures of magic's first birth. There, with white silk mane and horn more precious to man than gold, pranced the unicorn. Fools talked of horses with horns, and still others, deer or goats -- goats! -- but they were pathetic in their lack of vision. This creature was too graceful to be compared to any mortal thing; too graceful and too dangerously beautiful.

Ahead of the peerless one, cloaked and robed in a darkness that covered her head, the dragon thought he recognized the statue-maker from her gait. Over her, he did not linger.

But there also was basilisk, stone-maker, a wingless serpent less mighty than a dragon, and at his side, never quite meeting his eyes, were a small ring of the Sylvan folk, dancing and singing as they walked. They did not fear the basilisk's gaze; it was clear from the way they had wreathed his

mighty neck in forest flowers that seemed, to the sharp eyes of the dragon, to be blooming even as he watched.

And there were others -- many others -- each and every one of them the first born, the endless.

"Your fires are lazy, brother," a voice said from above, and the dragon looked up, almost startled, so intent had he been upon his inspection. "And I so hate a lazy fire."

No other creature would dare so impertinent an address; the dragon roared his annoyance, but felt no need to press his point. It had been a long time since he had seen this fiery creature. "I was present for your last birth," he said, "and you were insolent even then -- but I was more willing to forgive you; you were young."

"Oh indeed, more insolent," the phoenix replied, furling wings of fire and heat and beauty as he dived beneath the dragon, buoying him up, "and young. My brother, I fear you speak truer than you know. You attended my last birth -- there will be no others."

The dragon gave a lazy, playful breath -- one that would have scorched a small village or blinded a small army -- and the phoenix preened in the flames. But though they played, as old friends might, there was a worry in the games -- a desperation they could not speak of. For were they not immortal and endless?

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"They do not see me," the unicorn said quietly, when at last the dragon had chosen to land. The phoenix alas, was still playing his loving games -- this time with the harpies, who tended to think rather more ill of it than the dragon had. They screeched and swore and threatened to tear out the swan-like fire-bird's neck; from thousands of feet below, the dragon could hear the phoenix trumpet.

"Do not see you? But sister, you hide."

"I once did." She shook her splendid mane, and turned to face him, her dark eyes wide and round. "But now -- I walk as you fly, and they do not see me. I even touched one old woman, to heal her of her aches -- and she did not feel my presence at all."

Dragons are proud creatures, but for her sake, he was willing to risk weakness. "I, too, am worried. I flew, I cast my shadows wide, I breathed the fiery death." He snorted; smoke cindered a tree-branch. Satisfied, he continued. "But they did not even look up."

"And," one of the Sylvan folk broke in, "my people cannot call them

further to our dance without the greatest of efforts."

The dragon turned his mighty head to regard the small, slender woman of the fey ones. And what he saw surprised even he. He lowered his head to the earth in a gesture of respect for the Queen of all faerie.

"Yes," she said, with a smile that held the ages and used them wisely, "I too have come out on this road. Something is in the earth, my friend -- and in the air. There is danger and death for all of us." She reached out and placed a perfect hand between his nostrils. He felt a thrill of magic touch him.

He snorted again, and the fire passed harmlessly around her. "I am no foolish mortal."

Her smile held all the beauty and danger of the reaver of mortal men. "Ah? No, I see you are not, mighty brother." She turned, swirling in a dress made of water and wood, fire and wind, and walked away to where her people waited to pay court.

"She is not without power," the unicorn whispered, long after her presence had faded.

"No, little sister, she is not. Nor will ever be, I feel. But she, too, is worried." He walked slowly and sinuously by the unicorn's delicate path until the sun splashed low upon the horizon; the wound of the sky, and the beginning of day's death. Then, he took to air, that his wings might hide the stars and bring the lovely night to those below.

And in the sky, shining as it had been for these past few days, a star burned low and impossibly bright. There was magic in it, and a fire, that the dragon envied and feared. And he had been drawn to it, as had all the immortal kin.

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Although they all, in their way, could move more quickly than mortal man can imagine, they chose the road that only they could see, and followed it in a procession not seen since magic's first birth. The harpies became hungry and vexed, and in time even the good-natured bird of fire grew weary of their company. He never landed, although occasionally he elected to skim the surface of grass and tree alike, touching just enough to curl, never enough to singe.

The unicorn and the dragon kept company on the road during the day; only at night did the dragon yearn for, and take to, the open air. For there, hovering by the strength of his great wings, he could see the star that never wavered and never twinkled. Days they travelled, and those days became

weeks for any who cared -- or knew enough -- to mark time's passage, but the star never grew closer, never larger.

Others joined them in their strange, unspoken quest; the hydra with his nine mighty heads, the minotaur with his one, and Pegasus, creature of wind and light -- a rival to the unicorn's beauty and grace; a thing of air. Each asked, in whispers, why the others walked, but no one had any answer that they cared to give; immortals seldom speak of their own ignorance.

Last came the Sphinx, with her cat-like gait and her inscrutable features. For so mighty, and so knowledgeable a personage, the dragon came down to earth, although it was starlit night.

"Sister," he said, touching ground with a beard of scale.

"Brother," she answered. "What is old as time, yet newly born; brings life to the dying and death to the living; is born of magic and born to end magic's reign?"

The dragon sighed; many years had passed since he'd last seen the Sphinx, and he had forgotten how she chose to converse. Still, her riddles held answers for those skilled enough to see them, and the dragon had lived forever. The game of words distracted him for many hours -- well into the sun's rise and renewal, before he at last shook his great head. "A masterful riddle, sister -- *that* is the one you should have asked."

She glared at him balefully, and he did not further mention the single failure that marred her perfect record.

"What is the answer?"

But she did not speak it; instead she looked up and into the daylit sky. There, faint but unmistakable, the aurora of a single star could be seen; pale twin to the sun's grace.

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"But what does the riddle mean?" The unicorn asked quietly; she did not have the black dragon's pride behind which to hide her lack of knowledge. "And what was the answer?"

"The answer?" He snorted; he did that often, and the trees bore the brunt of his mild annoyance. "She does not give answers for free -- and only mortals have the coin with which to pay her."

"Oh." The unicorn cantered over to the unfortunate tree that had stood in the path of the dragon's fire. Very gently, she laid horn to burnt bark -- and slowly, the black passage of his breath was erased. "Maybe mortals have the coin with which to pay us all?"

It was a foolish question -- one unworthy of an immortal. But as it was

she who asked, he thought on it -- and when night returned, and the sky beckoned, he was no closer to a comfortable answer than he had been to the Sphinx's riddle. But he felt that he preferred the latter's game to the unicorn's open vulnerability.

The night brought answers of a sort, although not in the way that the dragon had expected or hoped for.

As he flew, he watched the road below -- and saw, at the furthest reach of his vision, three men on camel-back. They were dressed against the chill of the night, and they passed between the trees of the road-made-real by the Queen of faerie, as if those majestic trees did not exist. They had retainers who travelled on foot; at their beck and call were wagons and caravans fit solely for mortal kings.

Three princes, thought the dragon. Where do they travel?

He swept down, out-racing the harpies, but his wings did not even panic the camels. The princes did not look up at all from their quiet conversation. The harpies followed; they plunged downward, glinting claws extended, and hit ground before they hit men. Somehow, they had missed, and they rose, shakily, to try, and try again, to make victims out of those who travelled.

But there was no stopping the three and their procession as it came closer and closer to the heart of the travelling beasts. Still, at last, at the break of day, they chose to call a halt to their wandering. Their servants immediately began to set up tents and canvases to protect them from the sun's light.

Only when all was settled and quiet did the Queen of Faerie approach. She wandered, sylph-like but more majestic, into the heart of their gathering, wearing the guise of a mortal maid too beautiful to ignore. Her gathered robe of the elements she disguised as the finest of pure white silks; she looked young, vulnerable -- the dream of every foolish youth.

The three princes were seated beneath the largest tent; they drank water from golden goblets, and kept careful watch on the ornate boxes that rested on each man's lap.

Quietly, she approached the most seemly of the men, and ran a gentle finger along the line of his beard. He looked up, his eyes narrowed.

"What is it?" The oldest of the three said, concern and fatigue in his voice.

"I thought I felt something; it must have been the passing wind. It has been a very long journey, and I am tired."

"It has been long, yes," the third man said, "and kings are not used to so

arduous a travel -- but we are truly blessed, who can undertake this pilgrimage."

The oldest man smiled beatifically. "Yes," he whispered, his hands caressing the inlaid jewel work of his magnificent casket, "we are blessed; for we are mortal kings -- but we will see the birth and promise of the king to end all kings -- God made flesh." He stood slowly, and walked to the edge of the pavilion. "There -- you can still see the star in the sky. We are on the right path, my friends."

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If the Queen of all faerie dared to hold court in such a way that demanded the attention of all the immortals, none cared to complain about it openly. Indeed, when she returned, all ice and cold anger, from her foray into the human encampment, the gathering knew that the unimaginable had come to pass: She had gone, in her own royal person, and failed to call a mortal's attention when she had decided upon it.

The great black dragon lay close to the cool grass, scales in dirt and moss. His head, he rested upon his great forepaws; his wings he curled in upon the expanse of his back. His unlidded eyes were fixed upon the fey and delicate fury of the Queen.

"You see," she said softly, in a whisper that might have shaken the underworld, "what we must do, my brethren."

The harpies screeched their agreement. They had passed beyond hunger now, and were ravening; at any moment, the dragon feared that they would begin to attack their kindred.

"We too have been drawn onto the course these mortals follow, although we tread the path-made-real at my behest. We too have seen the star in the sky -- no natural star, nor any magical one that I have encountered before." She lifted a hand, and a ray of light, tinged with an eerie shadow, leapt skyward in her anger. "We are no mortal ephemera, to be called by the whim of a mere godling. Gods have come and gone, and we have remained, steadfast and true, in the darkneses and dreams that they cannot touch."

"Until now, sister," the unicorn said softly. "Can you not feel it?"

No other creature would have dared to correct the Queen of faerie, and no other creature would have survived it unmarred. But the unicorn was special, dear to the queen, and earned only a dark frown in return for her question.

"Indeed, dear one, we feel it. But now that we know the cause, we know well what we must do. There is a godling being birthed even now.

"I call for that godling's death." So saying, she raised a second hand, a darkness limmed with eerie light also joined her flare in the sky. "This is my curse as Queen undying."

As her words echoed and faded in the near scentless wind, the dragon felt something he had never known before: fear.

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They left the three princes -- or kings, as the Queen had called them -- to the shadows of the mortal realm, with its hot sun, its icy nights, and its endless, barren desert. The star burned brightly, ever brightly, as it laced the sky with shards of cast-off light, and the dragon flew when it was at the height of its brilliance.

He saw the mortal villages pass beneath the shadow of his mighty body, covered now in sleep and silence, now in merriment and celebration, now in mourning and wailing. He saw lives turn beneath him, impossibly fragile, impossibly tiny. He yearned for the breath of fire, for the sounds of their fear and falling bodies -- but he knew that until the death of the godling, this grandeur was denied him.

Watching was not.

The phoenix flew beside him in the air, and as the days passed, he grew a little less brilliant, a little less radiant. "The time is coming," he said softly, for the dragon's ear alone, "when the fires will die."

"I will breath upon you again, little fledgling," the dragon replied, "and you will know new life. You are almost a worthy child to a dragon." It was a lie, of course -- no creature would be worthy of that -- but he felt compelled to offer it anyway; he did not know why.

"Your fires, I fear," the phoenix replied, all song stilled, "will never again be hot enough to kindle life."

Angered, the dragon roared, startling those below who were in the habit of being taken unaware. He drew a great breath; the wind sailed into his mighty lungs like a storm upon the open sea. His jaws opened wide, and his teeth glittered in the light from the solitary star. Wings flashed black against the sky with so much power the phoenix was driven off course.

The dragon breathed *fire*.

Fire of the first-born; fire to melt and cinder the very bones of the earth. An endless stream of blue light and heat surged through the air, wilting tree top and grass alike. And when the roaring of voice and fire combined had stilled, the dragon searched the sky for a sign of the phoenix.

It seemed brighter and perhaps just a little renewed.

"That is my fire," the dragon said, with more than a little pride.

"Almost, you give me hope, brother," the magical creature replied.

Satisfied, the black dragon continued to glide, but he roared no more that eve, and although he would not admit it, not even to the gentle one, he was suddenly very weary.

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"I have never killed a child before," the unicorn said quietly, as the road stretched on beneath her delicate hooves.

"All mortal men are children," the black dragon replied, equally quietly. "If we sleep, they turn in their season, and wither as trees do. But they emerge into no spring. They are born, they age, they die."

"True," she agreed, but her tone was hesitant.

"What worries you?" The dragon ducked under a playful plume of phoenix fire. He inhaled and returned the volley without changing the nature of the game.

"I remember," she said at last, "When the world was a forest. There were men then, yes, but they were few -- and we ruled and played as we desired, teasing their dreams and creating new ones.

"The world is no forest now. Men are harder to reach, harder to touch; instead of seeking us, they have turned away. This invisibility," she added, as she trailed her horn across the air, "is new -- but is it so very different? We are already fading."

The dragon thought long on this, but not deeply -- although depth was usually his way. "When we kill the child, all will be as it was."

"So you believe the Queen?"

"Of course." He paused. "Do you doubt her?"

"I have never killed a child before."

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Starlight trailed down the spirals of her horn like pale, silver liquid. Although he longed to take to the skies, he remained at her side. He felt an odd tremor, a strange desire, as he looked at her silhouette in the night sky. Gold and jewels and magical things had once inspired him -- but in time they had lost their lustre and importance, and become just another cold, hard bed, undifferentiated from the rocks of his cavern.

She was different, and although he did not desire to possess her or hoard her, he felt something that reminded him of his... youth. The star flared suddenly brilliant, and his eyes were drawn to it. Before he understood

why, he had opened his great jaws; the sound of his trumpeting filled the quiet night with yearning.

And as he turned the corner of the bending path-made-real, the forest suddenly ended in mid-tree. A blanket of cold, dry sand lay underfoot, and beyond it, so far away that even his eyes could make out no details, lay a small mortal town. High above it, a heart exposed, the star burned in beautiful relief.

They were almost upon it.

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There was nothing but for the Queen of Faerie to lead the regal procession through the uncomfortable desert. The cold, of course, bothered no one -- but the very disappearance of her magically called trees displeased her. She bore the circlet of silver across her flawless face, and her hair, pale and fine, draped from her shoulder to the hem of her magnificent cloak. Her people attended to her in their own way; they played beautiful, haunting melodies on pipes and harps and chimes; they danced and whispered her praises in their soft, fey voices. It did not lighten her mood.

At night, the streets were still; the animals slept away from the cold of the night air in tight little boxes that no dragon would have fit in, had he cared to try. People -- and the town had the look of a busy, crowded place -- had also disappeared into their dwellings, which were, for the most part, even tinier than those built for their animals.

They tread the road in silence; even the voices of the sylvan folk dropped away into a hush. The phoenix hovered an inch or two above the ground, which was as close to earth as he ever came, except in the dying; the harpies' endless stream of abuse and obscenities had run dry. The unicorn spoke once, and no one would have urged her to be silent.

"Can you feel it?" She whispered, as her hooves did a delicate little dance, "can you feel it?"

There was something in the air; something familiar -- a word that hovered close to the tongue without quite being caught and uttered. The dragon shook his mighty head, as if to clear it, but before he could answer, the manger came into view.

It was as the other buildings to the eye; straw strewn about the wood and mud floor; ox and mule within stabled walls, sheep and goat without, in a fenced enclosure. But above it, the star burned bright, burned direct; and there was a tingle in the eyes and heart that viewed this humble building that was undeniable. One door, a ramshackle old eyesore, was off its hinge,

and it swung in the wind, creaking.

Except that there was no wind. The air was dead and cool.

They had come to kill a child. The child waited. His parents -- the black dragon could not think of who else the haggard, sleeping couple could be -- lay to either side of him, faces buried in their dirty, tired arms. They slept. But He did not.

His eyes were wide, unblinking -- as beautiful and deep as a dragon's unlidged eyes. His face was peaceful; he wanted no milk, no food, no sleep. He stared out upon them, as if they had come to pay him court.

The black dragon lost his breath a moment, as he viewed this perfect, tiny child. No gold, no jewel from the earth's bowels, had ever been so flawless. He felt a tug, like hunger, and knew a pang that he had not felt since his early days in a younger world. He almost rushed forward, to pluck the babe from matted straw and carry it off in a rush of wings to the safety of his caverns.

And then the child spoke. "Welcome."

It was the voice of magic's birth. The babe lifted his hands in no infant's gesture. Palms up, in offering or welcome, he greeted them all from his coarse throne of straw and hay, in his rough robes of peasant infancy. He did not ask why they had come.

"Changeling," whispered the Queen of Faerie, a tremor in her voice.

"No," the child answered. "I am born of a mortal parent."

From behind the ranks of her court, she came. Her face was fair and pale -- as perfect and blemishless as his -- yet her walk seemed stiff and oddly ancient; there was no grace left in it.

The child looked up at her.

She did not speak of what she saw in his eyes, but she froze; meeting the gaze of the basilisk or the Medusa would have had less effect. She could not move forward, and at last retreated, with just a whisper of forest darkness in which to veil her failure.

And she was not without power; calling upon the green, she whispered a single word as she made her passage. "Sister."

The unicorn bowed her head; her horn touched ground, gleaming in the unnatural light. She approached the child, taking delicate, hesitant steps; the weight of the Queen's request was tangible, terrible.

And because she could not lift her ageless, open eyes, she met the child's gaze, and her horn shuddered to a stop, an inch away from his covered

breast.

"Sister," he said, and his delicate, tiny fingers touched the tip of the golden spirals. "We do not war among ourselves."

"You are not of our number," the Queen of faerie replied, before the trembling unicorn could speak.

"He is." It was not the child who answered, but the Sphinx. She was large, although not so magnificently vast as the dragon, and she could not approach the newborn godling, but nonetheless she made her presence felt by the side of his ephemeral cradle.

The dragon turned an eye to the side to catch her inscrutable profile; he listened carefully, to better hear the word-game that was certain to follow.

For the first time in the sphinx's long history, no riddle came. "He is the last of our number; there will be no more."

Not even a whisper disturbed the stillness that followed her pronouncement. The star flared suddenly; the sky turned the chary gray of misted day. The godling began to rise, to float in the air as if it were a solid and fitting throne. His fingers still held to the unicorn's horn, and her head rose as he did, until all could see the anchor that she formed, unwitting.

"He said that he was born of mortal parents," the Queen protested. "He did not lie." But she stared, transfixed.

"Mortal parent and endless magic," he answered softly. "I have come to show you rest and peace, if you will have it."

"What peace?" The Sphinx asked.

"There is a garden that waits for you, as new and green and perfect as this world once was. Sister," he said, gazing down upon the unicorn's face, "there are still pools and endless forests; there is silence and beauty; there is a home that waits your presence. Will you walk it?"

"And what of this world?" She asked, in a voice so tremulous, even the dragon barely heard it.

"It is old and tired, as are you, who echo it. You have become the dreams and the nightmares of mortal, dying men. Wake, and walk free."

She gazed up at him; the black dragon tried, and failed, to catch her expression. "I will walk in your garden."

"Then go." He said, and suddenly, the unicorn began to fade.

Startled, the dragon roared. His breath plumed out in a cloud of red fire and wind. It disturbed nothing.

The godling floated away from the manger, and came next to the Sphinx.

"You knew," he said quietly, and she nodded, lifting her face for his infant's touch.

"I have grown tired of riddles and endless questions. My thanks for the final answer." And she too faded from view.

To the harpies, he gave the promise of comfort and lack of hunger. To the phoenix, he gave the heart of his star -- youth eternal, perfect glory. One by one, the immortals gave ground, until the streets were near empty.

The Queen of faerie stood among her people; the black dragon stood alone. It was to the court of the Queen that the child went.

"What do you have to offer me?" She said proudly, a hint of fear in her eyes. "For this world of mortals is my world, and their dreams are my life. Will you take them from me?"

"No, greatest of my sisters," he said, and his voice grew stronger, fuller; his eyes were the colour of starlight. "I am born of mortals, and to them I offer my garden as well. They will dance at your behest, live and love at your side, and know ... paradise. You will have circles wider and greater than any, but you will never lose these loves to death and decay."

"It is their dying that makes them interesting," she answered coldly.

"It is now; it was not always so. Their death has tainted you."

"And you would give me death to relieve that taint?" Her lips turned up in something that was not even close to a smile.

"Yes," was the stark reply, for no one with mortal blood can lie to the most terrible of Queens. "The choice is yours."

"And if I refuse?"

He shrugged, but his face showed pain. "You refuse. But they will go, in the end, to those gardens -- and you will never know them. You will dwindle; the forests will shrink and die at the coming tide of man."

She closed her eyes, knowing as always the truth of what she heard. "I ... will go."

The black dragon thought her more beautiful, then, than she had ever been, as she preceded her people into the unknown.

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"There is only you, now." It was true; but for the black dragon and the godling, the streets were empty, and the first rays of dawn were turning the skies. "Will you go?"

"Yes," the dragon answered quietly. There was no hesitation in his voice. "But why have you left me for last?"

The little godling made no answer. But he seemed frail now, as if the passing of each immortal had robbed him of substance.

"What will you be, when we are gone?"

"Mortal," the child answered, in an oddly still voice.

"Mortal?"

"Yes. But not to other mortals. I will be their light and their darkness. I will give them hope, and I will be the cause of their despair. I will be miracle and mundanity; I will be magic and the law that ends all magic. You have killed thousands, brother -- numbers undreamt of will die in my name. The peerless one healed hundreds, and numbers greater will also find healing. You were their dreams; I shall take your place."

"And what will *your* dream be?"

The child laughed at the gleam in the dragon's eyes. "There will be gold for you in paradise; it was hard to manage." But the dragon was not to be put off by humour, and the laughter faded into stillness. "My dream? Paradise." He looked at his own tiny palms and perfect feet. Shivered.

"And how," the dragon asked quietly, "will you reach paradise? Who will give you passage?" Dragons think deeply, when they choose to think at all.

"You were not listening," the godling said sadly. "I will be mortal, and I will die. My people will kill me slowly." The starlight faded from his eyes, and left a film in its wake. "Will you -- will you wait for me there?" It was the first and last time that he sounded like a child.

The dragon took a deep breath, and a hint of smoke curled round his nostrils. "Will I have true fire again?"

"Forever."

"Then I will wait."

The child reached out with a shaky hand, but the dragon shied from his touch. "No, no, little godling. I will wait here."

"You can't," was the flat answer. "When the sun crests the horizon, there will be no immortals left."

"Then you lied to the Queen!" The dragon's roar was the breath of a chuckle.

"I lied."

"What will happen at full sun-rise?"

"You will be mortal."

"Human?"

The child nodded, his gaze intent.

"I will die as you do, then. But still... I will wait."

"You will remember me; I can promise that much -- but I think I will forget this as I grow." Again fear touched his features, and he spoke quickly; sunrise was almost upon them both. "Remember what it was like to be old and tired -- to be only dream, with no reality. Remember that, and when the time comes, do what must be done to free me."

The dragon bowed his mighty head, and the child touched his nostril. Where once a huge, black serpent had towered above the ground, there now stood a very young boy. He caught the child carefully in his arms as the sun came, and gazed up to see the dying, and the birthing, of an age. Then he crept into the manger, kissed the quiet child's forehead, and laid him back down against the straw.

Three decades later, for thirty pieces of silver -- a metal he had always disdained -- the dragon found a way to bring the last of the immortals home.

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