

## Lillith's Lesson

By Mohale Matsapola and Julie McMillin

Bitter snowstorms blew through England. Winter had arrived. As the cold settled in for the foreseeable future, the populace drew tight their purse strings against the unwanted visitor. Word had it that some food stores had frozen into ice, becoming unusable. Fish refused to be caught as they left in search of warmer waters before they froze like London's Thames River. With not much to be had anywhere, Bristol's citizens resigned themselves to scant meals as they shared in Demeter's grief.

The goddess's grief enveloped the Band of the Twisted Claw. With purses around Bristol drawn thin no one saw Adria for tinkering, Gaia for fortunes or Vashta for healing cures. No one came to Talia who'd gladly sing to villager or traveler alike of the world's tales and legends in exchange for a modest donation. Nor did any man at the pubs wish to gamble with Connor for fear he'd lose what precious little he had. While the village of Bristol was barely making ends meet the Band wasn't making them meet at all. Inside Thoren's wagon Talia was agonizing over half-finished lyrics, trying to determine which bits she could possibly sell to Dan the Bard, when Thoren spoke up from the bunk.

"Talia," Thoren said patiently, "If you be selling half your works then we must set out and search for food."

"Nay, Thoren," Talia pleaded. "We cannot. I've only just returned to the Band – let us not part ways."

Thoren's eye hardened. "We have no choice. You know as well as I that Bristol no longer has coin for the likes of us."

"But we cannot leave Bristol, not while we have duties to perform."

"And how are we to perform these duties without food?" Thoren's temper flared.

"We cannot abandon the duties given to us by the Paragons! We must protect the Egg!" Talia shouted back.

"We cannot protect anything if we are dead! How many times must I tell you, this is not one of your stories! 'Duty' will not keep us alive! We must recall some of the Guardians while we split up and look for food."

Talia surrendered. "True. True. Splitting up gives us a better chance to find enough to survive."

Thoren nodded. "I shall lead the Order's members and you lead the Lunar Tribe. We return to Bristol after the thaw."

"I shall tell the rest of the band." Talia sighed heavily, swung her cloak over her shoulders and headed out to the fire.

Thoren did not like crushing his sister's dreams but she had to learn to live in the real world... where there were so few happy endings.

Talia stepped out into the cold. At least the wind had abated. She did not see the small footprints beside the door. She did not know that Lillith, the youngest of the gypsies, had heard the conversation from the moment Talia shouted about the Paragons. She did not see that the footprints turned from a stumbling disbelief into a flat run as the girl made her escape. Talia only saw the duty before her.

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Gaia awoke from her vision with a loud gasp.

"Thoren and Talia be coming. They mean to split us up to scout for food elsewhere." She said sullenly to Vashta.

Vashta shook her head. "Really? And I thought ya said that the food would last, to have hope."

"I did, and you should." Gaia replied flatly, not wishing to enter into another argument. "I am told that all shall be well."

"By who?" Vashta asked

"Well, by the spirits, of course." Gaia answered patiently.

"Ach, soon we'll be spirits ourselves if we keep listening to you!"

From the northwest Talia entered the circle of the fire's warmth. Canis was the first to run up to her with the white rat he'd found under a wagon... only to have Talia walk right past him. In that moment the Band knew something was wrong. The camp fell silent as Talia willed her face to stoic stone.

"I know not how to say this," Talia spoke slowly. "Truthfully I loathe suggesting the idea, let alone issuing the order. But my own feelings are not important. It is what we must do and there is no other way. We have tried everything else. Food and money have both been hellishly low this winter. There is no life for us here...the Band must break."

Stunned, the members of the Band gazed blankly at one another. Never in their history had the Band of the Twisted Claw separated. The shouting and questions came almost immediately.

"I know! Trust me I do," she said speaking over them. "But if we do not look for alternative sources for food NOW we will die!"

"Who's going to watch over the egg then, eh?" Canis asked.

“We even now are working on recalling some of the Guardians to watch the egg.”

“Then we’re just going to leave?” asked Canis. “And what if Tso comes back while we’re gone?”

“Then she can either make her way to the Egg over our dead frozen corpses or stride by without them... ‘tis your choice. This is not one of my stories and no gallant knight is going to come riding in to save us this time. We must save ourselves. That’s what Thoren always says is it not?”

Talia took in the reactions of the camp. Gaia seemed unfazed by the news. But then, being a seer, Talia had banked on her knowing beforehand. Vashta, the mother of the group, kept up a strong reassuring appearance to show the others that this was no reason to panic or to grow weak. Canis was clearly disappointed. Since learning of Talia and Thoren’s shared ancestry he’d started treating her as more than a storyteller. She was a leader and, more importantly in his mind, an example of someone who would do the right thing no matter what – just like the heroes in the stories. Talia tore her gaze away from his pained eyes and noticed something wrong.

“Where is Lillith?” she asked.

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Even Lillith was not sure where she was going. She moved through Bristol’s streets quickly, dagger concealed in her sleeve where no one could see. Several villagers hurried past with glances of distain and suspicion. All held their purses close. But they were not Lillith’s goal. Not today. Her cheeks stung from where she’d let tears freeze. She left the icy tracks on her face to remind her of the day her parents abandoned her in the wilderness. On that day she learned that no amount of tears will save you. Tears will only leave their shedder to die. Lillith had no intentions of dying anytime soon. Nor would she allow the Band to die.

She turned down High Street and braced herself as a gust of wind smacked her square in the face. The wind brought the smells of a storm... and alcohol. She picked her way down the hill and discovered the Lord Mayor happily stumbling out of Tuscan Tavern. He sang off-key as he wandered home and his purse seemed near to bursting as it hung at his side. Lillith snorted. Only the Lord Mayor could make money WHILE he drinks. She wiped the ice from her cheeks and pulled her threadbare scarf tighter around her neck. She watched and counted... with every fourth step the Mayor’s purse swung outside of his warm, fur-lined cloak. “Well, Lillith,” she whispered. “Robin Hood never fed his merry men by cowardice.”

Lillith let the dagger fall from her sleeve and hunched her shoulders up to her ears. Quickening her pace, she was simply another poor waif rushing to get out of the cold. But her eyes never left the purse. The Mayor did not notice Lillith’s approach or, if he did, he chose to ignore her in his stupor. At his fourth step Lillith shoved the Mayor with all her weight, cut the strings on the free-swinging purse and ran as fast as her legs could carry her. Lillith smelled the Lord Mayor’s noxious gasp even at 10 paces away.

“Halt! Thief! GUARDS!” The Lord Mayor shouted.

Lillith smiled. She'd be three streets gone before-

"No further." A mailed hand cuffed Lillith in the back of the head and sent her sprawling. Dazed, she saw she was surrounded by boots. The guard hauled her up by her borrowed jerkin and held her so her feet dangled uselessly above the ground.

"You, child, are in very dire straits," he sneered.

It was then Lillith noticed that she'd cut too far with her dagger. She had never before tried a mark as large as the Lord Mayor and he hadn't moved very far despite her shove. The dagger had cut through his cloak and his doublet. There was blood seeping from his hip.

Dire straits, indeed.

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The Band of the Twisted Claw returned to the fire.

"No one found her?" asked Thoren.

The Band only shook their heads and exchanged worried looks. No one had seen Lillith, but they all heard the rumor that there was a murder who tried to take the Lord Mayor's life. Some feared that the criminal had found the young girl. They had all searched high and low for the girl. Except Gaia. She alone had remained at the fire, mumbling over crystals and incense.

Vashta was tired of the smoke and mirror nonsense. "Look, Gaia, 'tis time we stopped-!"

But Gaia could not hear Vashta. She was lost inside her vision:

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Lillith tried to remain brave as she stood before the townspeople of Bristol at the gallows. The people cheered as a noose was tied around the girl's neck, and the tears cleaved clean paths down her dirt-smearred cheeks. A guard took his position at the lever.

"For the crime of thievery and attempted murder against the Lord Mayor the gypsy girl, Lillith Sparrow, is to be hung from the neck until dead. May the Lord, Our God, have mercy upon thy soul."

The lever pulled. The floor fell out. A scream. A snap. And silence.

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With a wail, Gaia snapped from the vision to the stunned expressions of the rest of the Band.

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"For the last time, girl," shouted a guard. "Why did you attempt to kill the Lord Mayor?"

In a sing-song voice she rhymed, "My name be Lillith Sparrow. I be a little girl. Oh, woe to thee who harms me. For pain shall fill his world."

“She’s bewitched.” The guard spat upon the ground and made the warding sign against evil. “Confess the witches in those wagons put you up to this and you can go free.”

“My name be Lillith Sparrow. I be a little girl,” she repeated firmly, casting hateful glances around the room. “Oh, woe to thee who harms me. For pain shall fill his world.”

He sighed. “Put her in a cell until we get the warrant for her death.”

The second guard wrinkled his nose as he got closer to the girl. “How long before we get that, sir?”

The Lord Mayor stared down his nose disdainfully. “For a filthy gypsy? Not long, I’d wager.”

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Thoren’s jaw hung in disbelief. “She’s going to be hung for murder? You are certain?”

“Yes, Thoren,” Gaia’s voice was filled with impatience and fear. “Or do you question my gifts as well?”

“Nay,” Thoren reassured her. “I just cannot see Lillith doing such a thing. What would drive her to such madness?”

“What do we do now?” asked Adria. “We cannot let Lillith die!”

“I have a plan,” Talia stated. “Gaia, Vashta, Canis... I have need of you.”

The three of them stood up immediately as the others stared, confused. Thoren took a breath to protest.

“Only we can save ourselves,” Talia cut him off. “Aye? ‘Tis what you’ve said to me time and time again. Then let me save this day. And to answer your next question: No. You do not wish to know. We take no undue risks – trust me, please.”

Reluctantly, Thoren nodded. He liked this as much as he liked a broken wagon wheel.

The four gathered at Talia’s storytelling chest. She tossed costumes everywhere while muttering about scraps from Verona. Once she found the long black garment she revealed the plan. Canis grinned – it was like stepping into one of her stories. As the three raced off to gather their props Talia prayed to God and His angels that this time she got a happy ending.

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-KNOCK KNOCK-

“Who goes?” called the commander.

“I am Thomas Weatherbee of the office of Master Francis Walsingham!” The boy continued proudly, “I come seeking the Lord Mayor and all the guards involved in this bad business so as to determine if a warrant for this girl’s death can be properly dispatched!”

“Welcome! Welcome!” The commander opened the door with as much reverence as he could muster. “It is an honor to serve Master Walsingham.”

The boy sauntered into the room as much as a Puritan saunters anywhere. He held a flagon of wine in one hand and a stack of papers 4 inches thick in the other. If the Lord Mayor or the guards had paid any attention to Walsingham’s servants then would have seen that this boy was not in the spymaster’s household. Talia had bet that they hadn’t noticed the boys. She was correct.

“For certes!” Canis replied in his best London accent. “This is everyone involved in the incident? All the witnesses? Excellent. Now, good masters, as you can see there is much work to be done to make this good and proper. However, Master Walsingham understands that you may need a bit of, shall we say, fortification before beginning. Please, a toast to God’s good work in punishing wickedness.” Canis poured the cups himself and smiled briefly as each man who had seen Lillith that afternoon drank deeply of the wine. “To continue, we must take special care with this decision, gentlemen, as it is possible to set an unwanted precedent among the magistrates if we do not carefully consider...” Each man’s head thudded into the table as they passed out. Canis could not help but giggle.

Vashta and Gaia crept in. “This be no time to laugh, Canis,” Vashta reprimanded.

“Sorry,” he whispered. He found the key ring and tossed it to Gaia who hurried back to the cells. Canis emptied each man’s purse onto the table and placed a set of dice near the Lord Mayor’s hand. Vashta searched the Lord Mayor and found the wound on his hip. It was only a scratch and was already closed. With a muttered spell, she closed the holes in the fabric as if the dagger had never pierced them. She noted that Canis had finished setting the table and cast one final charm. “You all have been playing dice today. The Lord Mayor was losing badly at one point and laughed that he was being killed at the table. A servant misheard and thought that someone was attempting to murder the Lord Mayor. There is no murder – only misunderstanding. You are all fine, and thank the Tuscany Tavern for providing such potent wine.” Satisfied, Vashta and Canis waited anxiously at the door for Gaia and Lillith.

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Gaia could hear Lillith half-singing half-sobbing before she found the cell.

“We’re the Twisted Claw  
Fa-la-la-la-la  
Come to the wagons-oh-oh  
We do our best to fulfill our quest  
We are the Band of the Twisted Claw...”

Lillith huddled in the filthy cell. Her hair fell around her face in a ragged halo, her clothes were disheveled and at her feet was a small damp spot where tears fell unnoticed.

“Dear child,” Gaia whispered as she tried the first key in the lock. “What has driven you to this madness? To kill the Lord Mayor?”

Lillith’s voice was high with despair. “My name be Lillith Sparrow. I be a little girl. Oh, woe to thee who harms me. For pain shall fill their world.”

“Lillith?” Gaia tried to coax the girl back to awareness. “What mean you by these words?”

“I have no home, you’ve come in vain. As long as the band is to split I shall die before I am alone.”

“Lillith...”

“I WILL NOT RETURN TO LONLINESS!” she raged. “JUST LEAVE ME HERE!”

“Lillith you misunderstand... we split only because-“

“That we split at all is sin enough! Family does not split, does not leave! We face everything together and no one gets left behind! We’ve already lost the Paragons AND Maddy! Who else are we to lose?!”

Gently, so very gently, Gaia replied, “I cannot speak for the rest of the Band...but I promise, Lillith, I shall never leave thee.”

Vulnerable, wide eyes looked up at Gaia and hoped against hope that she spoke truly.

The key clicked loudly and the cell door opened. “But if we are to stay together, you must first leave this place.”

Lillith fell into Gaia’s embrace with a sob. The seer held the child until she calmed and hastily wiped the tears from her eyes.

“But how will we get past the guards?” Lillith asked.

Gesturing toward the sleeping men at their game of dice, Gaia smiled. “We walk.”

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Thoren was not happy. “Ye risked too much.”

Talia watched as Vashta washed the dye into Lillith’s hair. “You’d rather we left her?”

Thoren threw his hands up in exasperation. “No! I’d rather you didn’t risk Canis...”

Talia rounded on Thoren. “He accepted the job of his own free will. We took a risk, yes. But a risk that was planned. If it hadn’t worked then I had a different idea to get them both out.”

“Dare I ask?”

“No.”

Thoren grunted in what Talia assumed was agreement. They watched Lillith try to squirm out of Adria’s grasp when the older girl attempted to get the younger into a proper bodice. Although the Lord Mayor would not remember the attempted robbery, Thoren was taking no chances that he might recognize the girl in boy’s clothing. Lillith would dress as a girl for the winter. Laughter echoed around the fire as Lillith learned that she no longer moved as quickly in the new clothes.

“Thoren?” Talia whispered.

“Hmm?”

“We should stay in Bristol – if only for a few weeks more. Something is bound to come our way. The young ones have faced enough change and loss for one year.”

Thoren sighed. “Aye. And mayhaps someone will be in the Christmas spirit to offer us a way to remain.” He had never sounded more doubtful.

Talia chose to blatantly ignore his tone and focused instead on his words. With a small grin she lifted the flask. “From your mouth to God’s ears.”

“Aye.”