

## August Camp

By Julie McMillin

'Twas cool for an August evening. Talia sat contently under her great black cloak while Lillith brought more wood to feed the fire. Briefly Lillith wondered why /she/ had to carry all the wood, but then she remembered the alternative was worse. She'd hate to be the one set on watch. Canis agreed with Lillith, though neither of them realized it. He sat on top of the wagon and gazed through the trees to the pale moon above. Why did Thoren insist upon a watch when they were safely inside Bristol's walls?

But the Band did not question Thoren – not when it came to, as Vashta put it, 'keeping ya alive.' If he determined that they should keep watch then they kept watch.

"Gaia returns," Canis called down to the fire. With her basket full of whatever the baker deemed too old to sell, Gaia threw an entire loaf of bread up to Canis. 'The one benefit of duty,' he mused. Gaia passed the basket around the fire and each member of the Band ate well that night. They spoke of the Paragons. They spoke of the Guardians. They joked about Adria's ability to make a man weak at the knees with just one smile. For a few moments they forgot to be cautious. Vashta gasped first as Thoren stepped out of the shadows behind Talia.

Talia whirled around and shouted, "Fire, fire burning bright..."

"Save it," barked Thoren. "Canis! Ya did not see me!"

Canis stammered something unintelligible.

"I'll not hear it. This is not a game. This is not one of Talia's stories. If we do not keep watch over ourselves then how can we assist the Guardians? What would happen if someone were to have /killed/ Talia right here and now? We'd be DEAD, Canis. And the only ones who'd mourn our passing are the Guardians." With a groan of disgust Thoren stormed into his wagon and slammed the door.

No one was certain if the cricket they heard was an actual cricket, or if Raven were practicing the noise. None wanted to raise their voice to ask.

Talia whispered, "Have we all returned?" Quickly a few scurried to ensure that the whole Band was within the central camp. After a few moments, mute nods confirmed that they were all accounted for.

Talia nodded and the young ones cleaned camp and banked the fire. Talia, Vashta and Gaia walked to the edge of the camp – well beyond the fire's glow. Just as they had done for countless night, Talia began to chant:

"More great than jewels that glint beneath the sun  
Though father's love would cast the word to shame  
It prov'd itself the greatest gift for one  
That knew to call the blessing out by name  
Though blameless, she received all the fault  
For asking for a meager hand of salt."

There was a shimmer in the air and Talia's cupped hands brimmed with salt. She silently thanked

her father for teaching her the tale Cap O' Rushes. 'Twas easy to cast a spell with a clear picture in mind. She poured the salt into Gaia's hands. Twice more Talia repeated the spell until all three women had handfuls of salt.

Always moving clockwise, they drew two concentric circles around the camp with the salt. Upon completion, they stood in the center, backs to one another. They whispered:

“Ensure our lives with circles twice around  
Let flames engulf all evil on this ground.”

The salt glowed orange for a moment then returned to its unassuming state. Drained from the spell, the three climbed into the Lunar Tribe wagon to sleep.

Canis sat on top of the wagon. He noted the white smoke from a campfire outside the walls of Bristol – and wondered who would bank their fire using water. He worried that it did not bode well.

The loaf of bread sat next to him, completely untouched.