

Fencing Lessons

By Julie McMillin and Shane Hill

8 years ago...

Talia tried to calm her breathing and focus on her footwork. The packed leaves were wet with morning dew and moving would be treacherous. She held her sword-arm level, tip pointed up to her mentor's eyes. He nodded. She lunged.

His blade batted hers aside with a speed she'd never seen before. In a full extension she didn't have time to counter and aim again. By the time her foot fell into the lunge his off-hand was at her throat.

"Tis good I have not a dagger, eh?" he laughed. He tossed his shaggy black hair and offered a calloused hand to help her up.

Talia ignored the hand, pushed herself back into stance and panted. "Again," she whispered.

"How did I see your lunge, eh?" he asked.

Talia shook her head. "I do not know, Master Pietro. You're faster than I."

"Nay, dear one. You bounced."

"Bounced?" The word came out as a startled exclamation. How on earth could she bounce? A lunge wasn't supposed to move any muscles in your feet or hips – just extend the knee and shoot the shin forward. If done correctly it was a devastating move. If done incorrectly... Talia rubbed her throat and wondered what it would have felt like if Pietro had a dagger.

Under his thin mustache an easy grin toyed with the corner of his mouth. "Si. You worry about your feet. You came up on your toe before shifting for the lunge. I saw the bounce and parried. Do not bounce."

Talia balanced evenly between her feet. She leveled her sword and lunged. Pietro parried. Balance, lunge, parry. Over and over. Her arms on fire, her feet numb from the cold wet leaves, she gasped for breath. She chided herself not to bounce. She begged herself not to bounce. She cursed high heaven and low hell that she continued to bounce. And in doing so she forgot to worry about her feet.

Pietro's blade made contact an instant later than the previous lunges. Talia heard the familiar rasp of metal and waited for her blade to continue its course harmlessly to Pietro's left. But her practice blade struck Pietro's back shoulder, fixed in place, and flexed a full three inches. Talia remained in the lunge and stared at her sword. She had gotten through his defenses!

Pietro nodded. "Your back can be straighter. You will have a longer extension. But you did not bounce."

Talia reset herself and let Pietro roll his shoulder. Even though they used practice foils, a lunge still had a full body's power behind it. He stepped back into parry six. Talia leveled her sword. "Again."

7 years ago...

It was a dance. A beautiful, steel dance Talia realized. She planted her feet and parried using only the even-numbered forms. The simplicity amazed her. Her own speed amazed her. She wished she could sit back and watch.

Her sparring partner, Alvaro, saw the slightly glazed look in her eyes. He feinted high with his main sword. Talia parried it easily. Alvaro's off-hand sword struck her nearly in her armpit. Talia's sword fell from numb fingers and she reeled back several paces to escape the wall of steel.

"HOLD!" bellowed Pietro. Talia clutched her side. The foil had not broken skin, fortunately. "Come here, girl." Pietro commanded. Talia reached for her sword. "Leave it," Pietro growled. Ashamed, Talia stood before her master.

"Just how long do you expect to live, eh? Your mind is off with your stories and your body is dying!"

"I am sorry, mas--"

"You are not sorry! You are dead! Think, girl! You must end the fight before you are distracted. Strike your opponent before he strikes you!"

"Master, I will parry faster."

"You will do no such thing. You parry fine. You lunge fine. You do not attack." He studied her young face. "Why do you not attack?"

Talia searched herself. If this was a steel dance, why did she not lead? She hesitated before answering.

Alvaro chuckled at her hesitation. He'd been her sparring partner for months now. She attacked when forced, or when it was part of a drill, but she always opened with the same movements. So predictable. All her 'perfect parries' that the other students mooned over wouldn't keep her alive for 3 passes if they were fighting with live steel.

Pietro saw the blank look in her eyes and shook his head. "You do not have the warrior spirit, girl. I have nothing else to teach you."

Talia fell to her knees. "No! Please, master! I can--"

"I am not your master. Nor can I teach you how to kill." He began walking back to the rest of the students at camp. "You find a reason to fight and then we will train."

"But I--"

"Warriors do not beg. Go home, girl. Go back to your stories." Pietro left the grove.

Alvaro tossed the girl's foil to her, but it clattered against a rock. He shrugged and followed his master. He, at least, knew why he fought.

Once their footfalls had faded, Talia drew the foil up onto her lap. The rock had put a dent in the bell-shaped guard. Much like the dent Alvaro had put in her side. She stared at the sword. It had a dull edge and a blunted point – it could not damage anyone. And Talia realized that neither could she. Pietro was right. She had no reason to attack. She fought to be a part of the dance – but if you do not lead in the steel dance then you will die. Despite all the training... she was no warrior. She was just a dull blade.

There on the wet leaves where no one could hear, Talia wept.

4 years ago...

"We already have magic users from the Lunar Tribe. I need warriors." He noticed the pommel of Talia's foil peeking out of her blankets. "Can you use that?"

Talia shook her head. "I trained for a few years. But I do not have the warrior spirit. I can defend myself well enough, but I cannot hire myself as a warrior."

The man leaned forward to pour himself another drink from his brass pitcher. "Why are you here... Talia, was it?"

"Aye." Talia squared her shoulders. She had to impress this man or she'd never be able to meet Thoren. "I am here, sir, because I am neither a warrior nor mage. I have trained as both,

but have not succeeded as either. Where I **have** succeeded is in my lore. I know the story of the First Champion of Elements. I know how she caused the two factions to be founded. I know the tales of the battles between the sun and the wind. I can recite the tale of the hero of love and water, and the mouse against the mountain. I've been to France to hear tales of roses. I've been to the Germanies to hear tales of monsters and millstones." Talia leaned over the table and lowered her voice. "But most importantly I've been to Padua and La Selva de Fendes to study fencing, to learn the tell-tales of a lie... and to gather rumors of those in power who would use people as marionettes. I have these rumors. I have their symbols and their secret language. I would give them to Thoren Grymm and to no other."

The man scratched his beard and left his hand on his cheek. "Thoren is not here. He and the rest of the Band have traveled north. But if you were to give me these rumors, I would make sure he receives them."

Talia shook her head, "Just because I do not bear the warrior spirit does not mean I give up easily. I will give these to Thoren. None other."

The man shrugged. "Suit yourself. I already told you, Thoren is not here. And he's only passing interested in rumors and secrets. Like as not he'd turn you away before you even said anything." He saw her shoulders fall ever so slightly. "Now before you ride off all night trying to catch them, sit and share a cup."

Talia shook her head. "I'm too close to finding them. I should move on."

The man stared up at her and did not blink. "Sit down," he growled. Talia sat. "Good. Now calm yourself and share a cup with me." He placed the cup on the table between them.

"I thank you kindly for the offer, but I really should tend to my horse. He—"

The man slammed his own cup on the table causing Talia to jump in her seat. "I am not accustomed to repeating myself. I said drink."

Talia took a swig of the ale. It was warm and even bitterer than she expected.

"Ye call that a drink? I said, drink."

Talia held her breath and finished the mug. It burned her throat. While she was accustomed to finding dregs at the bottom of bad wine, she'd never before had dregs at the bottom of beer.

"That's better," said the man. "Tell me where you hail from. I'd know more about you before I tell you where the Band has set up."

Talia wiped a bit of foam from her mouth. "I can find the Band of the Twisted Claw myself," she replied stubbornly.

“The north is a large place. Have you been there before?” The firelight glinted in his dark eye.

“No,” came the sullen response. “But I’ll find them all the same. I found my way to Maestro Pietro in La Selva de Fendes. I’ll find the Band.”

The man poured them both another mug of ale. It seemed to Talia that the brass pitcher glowed in the firelight. “And after you left the Forest of Fiends in Italy...” he inquired.

“I traveled up to the city of Eze in France. There I started work on my spells. I studied all the great poems and the forms.” She sighed and took another drink. “I know the rhyme and the meter for the best spells... but I do not have the gift.” She stared at the fire and drained the second cup. “All my rhymes and I cannot use anything more than a simple binding or ward. God jests with me.”

The man nodded. “He jests with many of us. So what of your family?” He gestured for her empty cup.

Talia handed the mug to him and took a deep breath. “I never knew my mother. My father is the one who brought me to Italy so many years ago. He... passed... only too recently. Does your pitcher never empty?” The man grinned.

Talia continued, “If I have any siblings then they are lost to me.”

He handed the full cup back to her, “So why is it that you seek the Band?”

She looked offended. “I told you. I need to find Thoren. And you’re keeping me from him.”

“Of course, of course. The Band is not too far, but we’ll get there soon enough. You mentioned you have a horse? Have you had him long enough to know if he is sound?”

Talia continued to answer the man’s questions. She was so close to finally meeting the Band, she knew it. If only she could make this man see that she was genuine. He seemed pleased the longer she spoke. Perhaps he was finally warming up to her and would take her to see Thoren. Speaking of warm, was the fire growing hotter? Talia was not certain how much time has passed, only that her throat was dry from talking. Fortunately the brass pitcher never seemed to empty.

The man noted Talia’s half closed eyes and how she swayed slightly on her stool.

“It sounds as if you’ve created a few great spells that our mages should try. Have you written them down?”

“Of course!” Talia leaned heavily on the table. “What self-respecting mage wouldn’t have a spell book?”

“You have it on you?”

“It’s safe in my pack.” Talia looked mournfully at the bottom of her empty mug. She hadn’t seen the bottom in quite some time.

“Have you memorized any of your spells?”

Why did he keep asking so many questions? “Yes,” Talia mumbled. “The few I can use.”

“That’s good. In case something were to happen to the book...”

Talia shook her head. “Nothing can happen to the book. If I lost it I would lose everything I learned in the forest. I have to keep it.”

The man smiled, “And why do you need to bring it to Thoren?”

Talia bleakly gazed up at him. “He knows about the old Draco Disciples. And he can stop them – he has both bloods.”

The man leaned in and angrily whispered, “Where did you hear that?”

“’s in my book. Find Thoren. Find... the Band. Find... family.” She leaned crazily to one side. The man put out a hand to steady her. Talia clutched his wrist to help right herself. She gazed at the leather bracers, traced his arm upwards and gazed at his face. She blinked slowly and noted that the man never blinked. He couldn’t. He only had one eye. It finally dawned on her. “You’re Thoren!” she slurred.

“And you’re going to hate me in the morning,” he replied as she passed out on the table.

* * *

COLD! Talia yipped as she was startled awake. She was soaking wet and had bits of straw stuck to her. She tried to say something angry to the stable hand who had splashed her, but all she could do was moan in pain. The headache hit her harder than the cold water.

“Save it,” the young man said gently. “You’ve had quite a journey.”

Talia rubbed her forehead. “Aye. And I’ve quite finished with traveling.” She squinted through the sunlight at the stable door. The man placed the bucket near the door and turned back to her. His pointed brown hat cast a strange shadow on the ground.

“So you’ll be staying here in town?” he inquired.

“No. I’ve got to catch up with the others. How much—”

“No charge for passing out in the loft, miss.”

“Well thank you. But how much for my horse?”

“What horse?”

“My *horse*,” Talia replied slowly. “That I left here last night.”

“Your friend paid for him. Said he was just taking him back to camp and that you’d follow in the morning.”

“My friend?” Talia wondered if she may still be drunk.

“Aye, the fellow with the eye patch. Left you and your sword and took the horse.”

Sure enough, there in the hay was Talia’s practice foil. “But where is my bag? My clothes? My BOOK?” Talia began digging through the hay hoping to find her precious book.

“He had a bag with him. Can’t say what was in it, though.”

Talia swore profusely.

“Now, now, miss. No need for all that.”

“You don’t understand. He stole my book! EVERYTHING is in that book. The stories, the rumors, the translations! And my spells!”

“I’m sure you’ll find him,” the man offered gently.

Talia stood and brushed the straw from her sodden skirts. “Oh I’ll find him. And then we’ll see how he likes my book when he loses his *other* eye!” She thrust the sword through her belt and stormed off down the road.

The young man removed his hat and peered through the rising sun after her. “Good luck, dear,” Raven whispered. “You’re going to need it.”

* * *

“I said stop!” cried Adria. Raven jumped up from the campfire and raced out to her sentry position. Adria stood, her staff in hand, trying to block another woman from passing. Raven gasped. It was that girl from the stable. She must have been following them for the past month.

Adria had never seen anything like the woman in front of her. Her brown hair hung limply down her back, her clothes were covered in mud and likely ripped beyond repair. Yet her boots appeared solid and her feet were dry. But she was pale, thin and her eyes had a haunted look that spoke of nightmares that Adria did not wish to dwell upon.

“And I said that I will see Thoren,” Talia rasped.

Adria stood fast. “You do not wish to fight me. I have trained.”

Talia drew her foil. “Nor do you wish to fight me, child, for I have trained with thieves and scoundrels in the forest.” She settled into stance and noted that Adria still had not moved in the dying sunlight.

Raven had seen enough. “Talia,” he said with his eternal gentleness.

Talia’s eyes widened and she quickly glanced at him. “You,” she hissed. “You are one of them as well?”

Raven took a few cautious steps forward. “Aye. And you will not fight this fight. Please, drop the sword.”

Talia’s foil clattered to the ground and she fell to a knee. She angrily plunged her hands into the rocky soil. “I’ve been played a fool.” Her hair fell to cover her face and it seemed to Raven that she wept. He glanced at Adria and the two of them shrugged.

Raven knelt down before Talia and noted that she had cut her hands upon the rocks. She was clutching tightly to the dirt. Raven assumed it was from the pain. But as he leaned in he realized that she was not weeping, she was muttering to herself.

“As stone to mud with water’s embrace

Does muscle to bile with blood’s cruel taste

Without the strength to releve

For one score min thou shalt give way.”

Her wild eyes peered through her matted hair. Raven barely had time to shout.

“Adria, run!”

But Talia pointed a bloody hand at each of them and shouted, “Virlymin Molik!” Both Raven and Adria collapsed in a swoon.

Talia discarded the rocks in her hands, retrieved her foil and grabbed a new handful of dirt. She broke through the tree line and approached the campfire. A very young blond boy looked up from the flames. He tugged on a woman's long sleeve.

"Aye, Canis?" she asked. Canis pointed at the angry woman approaching the fire. Vashta rose and called out, "Who be you?"

Talia ignored the challenge and began to chant:

"Twas mud and blood, an emperor's word

With breath and passion the bodies stirred

The music moved his people by

With warmth they did solidify..."

But Vashta recognized a spell and did not wish to see the outcome. She quickly rattled off the couplet:

"I say do bind it tight, the orifice

And thus her keening wail we all shall miss"

And Talia's jaw clamped shut – her spell unfinished. She grabbed at her cheeks, smearing mud and blood on her face, and it seemed that she would have howled in rage if she'd been able to open her mouth. With anger contorting her eyes she advanced at the pair.

"I'm here, Talia."

Talia whirled around at the sound of Thoren's voice... and stared at the length of his sword. She sneered and flung the dirt at his feet. Drawing her foil, she removed the small wooden cap on the tip of the blade. She settled into her stance and leveled the deadly point at his eyes.

There was no scream – no noise at all – as she charged at him. But within her mind she howled and cursed with every thrust. She felt the blood pounding in her temples, heard the crash of metal as their swords collided but saw that Thoren had his feet planted. He did not retreat. She continued her assault, thrusts and parries wild, but still he stood there. Eventually she realized that he was goading her!

"You know how to use that pig sticker. So use it!" She thrust at his shoulder and he easily parried. "There's that rage that you were missing. That Italian fool called it 'spirit.'"

Despite what happened at the end of her training, Talia would not stand for an insult to Master Pietro. She lined up for a lunge.

“That’s the rage every warrior needs.”

Talia lunged. Thoren parried again. “Good! Use rage. Strike me.”

Vashta held Canis close as they watched the battle. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Adria and Raven limping back to the campfire.

Talia couldn’t form a coherent word if she tried. She closed the distance between them and tried to use a corps-a-corps that she’d seen Alvaro use several times. Thoren finally shifted his feet to sidestep her attack. She spun back around to face him.

“The rage will fuel your focus.”

Talia swung her blade around and tried a high attack. Thoren’s larger blade kept her from attacking down the center line. She pressed the low line, but still he kept her off-balance.

“But first you have to burn off the excess. You’re a keg of black powder ready to explode right now.” She tried the lunge again; Thoren sidestepped out of the way.

“Raven!” he called. “My flask!” Raven uncapped the small metal flask and tossed it to Thoren. Talia could have screamed again. In the middle of a battle and he was still drinking?!

“Vashta!” Thoren shouted. “Free her.” Vashta recited the counterspell.

Talia wasted no time. “You bloody whoreson! You pox-ridden mouse scrap! You stole it! You stole EVERYTHING!”

“Course I did.” He took a pull from the flask. “But if you truly wish to strike me, you’ll drink this. It’ll help you focus.”

She caught the flask as he tossed it to her. “Last time I drank with you, you stole everything.”

“And I still have it! You’ve got nothing to lose. Drink the bloody drink and then hit me!”

Talia took a pull from the flask. The pounding in her ears died down. She could see beyond the battle in front of her. She finally realized that the rest of the camp was watching the battle. She hadn’t even noticed that Raven and Adria had already recovered from the spell.

“Now,” he said, “of course I stole the book. You already told me everything I needed from you. Why should I buy the cow when I could take the milk for free?”

Talia threw the flask upon the ground and growled. “You callous, uncaring maggot. I chased you for more than two years and this is what I find?”

“Only two years? You must have run across some luck. There’s no way an untried girl could find us herself.”

Talia balanced.

“So where’s your knight in shining armor? Or did you just enact the double-backed beast with him so you could steal his horse?”

Talia lunged.

Her blade slipped just to the outside of Thoren’s guard. She waited for the blade to fix in position and flex as it always had. But she had removed the cap. The sword bit deeply into Thoren’s arm.

Her foot hit the ground.

She heard the click as Thoren leveled the barrel of his pistol at her eyes. “Enough.” Reason finally pierced Talia’s rage. She had learned one thing about firearms: if you don’t have one of your own – back down.

Talia lowered her back leg and knelt. She dropped her sword and held her bloody palms up.

“Now you’re ready,” Thoren said. He gestured to Raven who ran to Thoren’s wagon. “I know what you’re made of. You knew my secrets – I needed to know if I could trust you to keep them.” He waited for Raven to return. Talia could see the blood in his arm seeping into his chemise.

Raven returned carrying Talia’s bag. She choked back a cry. Thoren nodded and Raven handed the bag back to her. She upended the bag and scattered clothes and stale biscuits everywhere. They didn’t matter. There, still wrapped in her good maroon skirt, was her book. It was still tied closed. Thoren hadn’t read any of it.

Thoren reset his pistol and put it back into his belt.

“Keep the flask,” he said and he walked off into the shadows of the forest.

The rest of the night was a bit of a blur for Talia. Clearly she had passed Thoren’s test. The Band helped her up, cleaned her wounds, fed her supper. She tried to apologize for her spells, but even Adria admitted that there was no harm done. Everyone wanted to hear about her

travels and how she learned to fight. Where did she learn her spells? How did she learn about Thoren?

Talia tried to answer all their questions. But Vashta stepped in and sent the young ones to bed. She took Talia to her own wagon and offered her the spare bunk for the night. Talia was asleep almost before her eyes closed.

It was the best night's sleep of her life. She was finally safe.

The day after the Champions' Ceremony...

Morning. Grease carefully wrapped his practice weapons and laid them in his travel bag. The journey to the next village was not long, but he took no chances when it came to protecting his weapons. He heard a twig snap up by the gypsy camp. With a handful of daggers he spun around – ready for anything.

Talia froze and waited for Grease to recognize her through the morning mist. A tense moment passed before Grease grunted and put the daggers back in their oilskin. “You look like hell,” Grease stated. Talia envied his bluntness.

“No sleep,” Talia replied. “I couldn't shake the image of Druscilla and...” even now she choked up.

“What that witch-lady did to the dragon? Not sure I understood it all – but no one should play with the dead. She's asking for trouble.”

Talia nodded. “We can only hope.”

Grease stood up and brushed off his tattered leg armor. “What brings you down here so early?”

Talia tossed him a small bag. Grease caught it easily and grinned when it jingled. “I brought you a bit extra,” Talia said. “To repair your gear.”

Grease scanned the bag's contents. “There's more than that in here.”

“Aye. I have a favor to ask.”

“We're leaving soon. It needs to be a small favor.”

“I need to spar once.”

Grease stared open-mouthed. “You?” Talia stood tall, never more serious in her life. Then Grease noticed the small foil she held in her left hand. “Not with that frog-sticker. I fight with a real weapon. Here.” Without looking, Grease grabbed the smallest sword he owned and tossed it to her.

Talia caught the blade, albeit awkwardly. The blade was twice as heavy as the foil. She knew instantly that all her work with the parries would be useless. She’d be moving half as quickly as she once did. She placed the foil next to a tree and tried a few parries with the new sword. It was clumsy. She hated it.

Grease found the small sword’s mate and stood on the packed ground. At least she knew to swing the sword and find a proper grip, he thought. “Show me how you stand.” He waited for all the typical mistakes. He was going to enjoy smacking a bit of sense into a ‘high-and-mighty’ magic user.

Talia settled into stance: side presented to the enemy, feet shoulder distance apart, knees bent slightly, front foot ready for a lunge, back straight, off-hand on hip, sword arm level at the waist, guard to the right in parry six, sword tip straight at your opponent’s eyes. Grease studied her form for half a second and began laughing. Despair washed over Talia – had she forgotten so much already? “A real fencing stance!” Grease exclaimed. “This should be more fun than I thought.” Talia exhaled with relief. At least she could still stand correctly.

Grease extended his sword. “Tap for honor.” Talia tapped her blade against his and the fight began.

“Raven!” Lillith hissed. “Get up! Talia’s fightin Grease!”

Raven rolled off his bunk, careful not to step on Canis. Not that it would matter much – Canis was known to sleep through anything. Grabbing his jerkin and hat, he ran after Lillith.

Talia warily circled Grease. She already had a bruise on her shin from his ‘reminder’ that a hit anywhere was a hit. His reach was greater than hers by nearly a foot. So she’d have to press inside his reach if she ever wanted to strike back. She would have to attack.

Grease saw her thinking. She was planning something. But she was thinking far too long. He advanced with a quick strike at her sword arm.

Talia parried – and retreated. Grease easily lined up the next attack and walloped her in the side. Talia grimaced and reset. “Again,” she said. Grease was more than happy to oblige.

Raven leaned against a tree and watched Talia try to hold her own against the seasoned mercenary. Two out of three times she was successful. But when she failed – she failed spectacularly. He flicked his gaze down at Lillith. “Have ye told Thoren?”

Fear crossed her face, “I’ll not wake him up! You tell him!”

Raven felt something change in the sparring ring. He couldn’t quite place his finger on it. “I’ll tell him in a moment,” he replied absently.

Talia stepped back and lowered the sword. She panted from exhaustion. Grease grinned. “Enough already?”

The grin was insufferable, Talia thought. The sword was clumsy, her skirts kept getting in the way and why was it so bloody hot this morning? She was frustrated – and she wouldn’t let him have the satisfaction of seeing her beaten so quickly. She settled back into stance. “No,” she said. “Again.”

And this time Talia advanced first. She pressed Grease to render his reach useless. She swung up quickly and attempted a lunge. He parried – but only just barely. They reset and started again. And still he grinned.

Talia couldn’t shake that blasted grin. Pietro had it as she worked her lunge drill just as Alvaro grinned every time he proved faster than her. And Lady Tso had the same grin when she gazed at the Gemstone of Souls. Talia screamed and lunged at Grease.

The practice blade found its mark in Grease’s unarmored armpit. Grease swore and backed off a few paces. He rolled his shoulder a few times. Satisfied that there was no lasting injury he stepped back. “Good! You’ve finally attacked. Now do it again.” And he grinned.

Thoren stood on the stoop of his wagon, his own frustration apparent on his face. She’d kept him up all night as she revealed all the secrets she’d been keeping these past four years. There were no secrets left between them anymore. But now she woke him up this early with her sparring? Unacceptable. He’d seen enough of the match. It was clear she still had a long way to go. Two out of three wins wasn’t going to keep her alive out in the wilds. Better she stick with her small spells, he thought.

He sighed. He had a lot of thinking to do before the Band parted for the winter. They weren’t going to like it. But he couldn’t drag them all across the countryside during winter – especially since they had been granted leave to remain in Bristol to stay with the egg.

He noticed Raven standing near a tree, watching Talia with a keen eye. But next to him was Lillith who watched with a child’s wonder. She held Talia’s practice foil in her hand. It

seemed to be the right size for the girl. Lillith wouldn't understand why he and Talia had to leave. Thoren could only hope that she'd stay out of trouble while they were gone.

Thoren heard Talia scream in frustration again. "Get it out, little sister," he thought. "You and I have work to do." He placed his hat on his head and headed out to find a drink. His headache had returned again.