

The Tale of Katherine Mandrake – from the journals of Talia Tale  
By Julie McMillin

It was evening at the training camp and I sat next to the fire to coax it back to life. Only a few paces away, at the herbalist cart, three members of the Band of the Twisted Claw were about to uncover a horrifying secret.

Vashta the healer absentmindedly brushed a silver strand of hair behind her ear as she slowly leafed through her herb journals. She paused and stared at a small drawing on one page. “Hmm... I suppose it could be a mandrake root?”

Lillith the young thief looked up from fiddling with her latest lock. Vashta briefly wondered how the girl managed to obtain the locks, figure out how to pick them, and return them to their owners before they were noticed missing. Lillith frowned, “I waited at the Draco Manor all afternoon to prove to Phil that I could swipe something, and all I nicked was a bit of poison?”

Vashta was lost in her drawing and missed the ‘where’ the poison came from. “It’s so dry,” Vashta murmured. “It must be very old.”

Gaia the Keeper of Knowledge heard everything Lillith said. “You stole from where?” She grabbed the pale, dry root and froze stiff. “I remember,” she whispered.

Lillith smirked. “A’course you do. I just said I got it from the Manor when they weren’t looking.”

Gaia’s voice gained a little strength. “Mother warned me long ago when she gave this to me: Remember your vow.”

Lillith tilted her head, her busy hands finally falling still. “Your mother gave you poison?”

Vashta shook herself from her notes. “Gaia?”

Gaia smiled, her thick accent falling away with every passing word until she was speaking like a member of Her Majesty’s court. “Oh yes, I remember it well. It was on my wedding day. Mother pulled me aside and handed me this. ‘Remember your vow,’ she said, ‘Remember you still serve him even though you have wed this boy. If your husband turns out to be like your father, then use what I have used. You are not breaking your wedding vows if you are following your vow to him.’”

Lillith reached out to place her hand on Gaia’s shoulder, but Vashta firmly gripped her wrist. “’Tis a vision,” the elder healer hissed. “What did you steal?!”

Gaia continued, drowning out any further conversation between Vashta and Lillith. “I’d forgotten about this little trinket for a time. We ran the shop together and business went well. Then it began to slowly change. You didn’t want me in the shop. I could no longer use the herbs to help the midwives. You suspected I was harming people more than helping them. Did you forget how all your rivals fell ill over the years? Did you forget that doxy who claimed you sired a bastard on her, ended with no bastard at all? Did you forget that I married you only because you took my maidenhead before we were wed? Did you forget that I did all those things for you? Why then when I started on mine own enemies is it witchcraft?!”

Gaia gazed lovingly at the root with her brown eyes, lost within the monologue of the root's previous owner. "You know nothing of witchcraft. Just place three drops of blood, easy enough to take while you were sleeping, upon this tiny root while it lays in fresh cat's milk. Overnight, your health is tied to it. Or perhaps you have not noticed how weak and dry you feel? Some days are better than others when I remember to water you? But now you are so frail that you cannot even leave what was once our bed."

A grin crossed Gaia's lips that I had ne're seen from her before. Equal parts malice and delight, I could only imagine the true face that wielded such an emotion. "Last night I made the decision to wait until I could tell you all this. You needed to know the 'why' before I'm gone. My first vow will always be stronger than our simple wedding vows. I am, above all, the most loyal in my Order."

Gaia leaned over the herbalist cart as if she were leaning over a bed. She whispered, "It finally happened, husband. The Praetor needs me. And I no longer need you."

With a gasp and a sob Gaia dropped the root and crumpled into Vashta's waiting arms. Vashta murmured soothing nothings while Lillith picked up the root for a closer examination.

As Gaia calmed down, Lillith looked at the two women and whispered. "She stabbed it, didn't she? I can see the line from a dagger right here on the root. She killed her husband."

Gaia nodded weakly, "Aye, she did. Just as her mother did her father."