

The Tale Of Lys

by Mary Diamond

Lys stared out the window of the small tavern at the late afternoon street outside. The loggers had all gone out to the forest for their labors, and the women and children of the town were busy preparing the night's meals, cleaning and fetching water or supplies.

Ever since her mother had disappeared last year, Lys had been struggling to carry on. She suspected her father's abuse was the reason she had been orphaned (for all intents and purposes). No letter, nothing even packed for the trip -her mother just hadn't been there one night when she returned home from her employment as a serving girl at the tavern down the street. The two of them fought so often, Lys wondered how she'd ever been conceived. The night her mother went missing was the end of her moderately bearable life with her father.

He seemed in a sour mood that evening, more so than all the others that preceded it. They had walked to the tavern together, he tight-lipped and pushy and she with a heavy heart and a slow step. He drank there every night, and she waited on him just like the others. His presence seemed to keep the grabby hands of strangers at bay, but that was where his protection ended. She was fairly certain that he wouldn't have stopped them himself, but people generally assumed it was a bad idea. He himself was a pig to the other girl working that night, and it was hard for Lys to watch her friend endure his mockery and lewd advances.

That was also the night he had learned to fear his daughter. Ever since she had come into her womanhood things around their small hovel had been tense. Her father's drinking had trumped their needs as a family ever since she could remember. Although it was small, the structure in which they lived was large enough to house strange lights at times and whispers that seemed to be heard by only one

person -her mother. Lys herself went unmolested by all this, but her father frequently had to bat and swing at what appeared to be extremely bright fireflies hovering near his head.

Occasionally his dinner dishes would upend themselves into his lap while he was bellowing at his wife for some imaginary affront or another. When these strange events began, Lys and her mother would chuckle silently at her father's torment. Then one day she realized they were manifestations of her own dislike for him. He was ignorant and opposed to anything but hard labor and physical gain, forbidding even talk of magic or adventuring in their home. All her life, Lys had watched him spit on the floor at the mention of spells or wizards. Her mother had always been silenced by his reactions, sometimes glancing nervously at her daughter before moving on to her next task. Late at night, however, she would whisper stories into Lys' ear as she lay on her mat. Tales of wizards and battles, of regular people who came into phenomenal powers and found great adventures. It broke her heart to think that she'd never had a chance to show her mother what she'd discovered about herself before she was gone.

After some months and much practice between hours spent cooking at the tavern during the day and serving there at night, she learned to control the lights and the whispers. Other abilities soon manifested, and with help from the hedge witch, she learned about herself as the months went on. She discovered the old woman in the forest just outside town one day, while she was out walking off her frustrations and the medicine woman was collecting herbs for her poultices. The witch (as her father had hatefully referred to her many times) had been hesitant to help her, but Lys offered coin and occasionally scraps from the tavern. This was more than the old woman could hope to gain elsewhere, and a tentative contract was forged.

As they walked to the tavern that evening, she had to remind herself

not to let the hurt seep out into manifestation, for her father's ire would not serve either of them if it were aroused. Coming into the tavern, he nodded to a hooded stranger and moved to sit by him without a word of parting to her.

She went straight into the kitchen and grabbed the sackcloth apron that Glenna had fashioned for her out of a potato bag. Wrapping herself in it, she realized absently that she would soon need a larger one for her growing 16 year old figure. The corners of her mouth were tugging downward when the matronly cook came over and placed a hand on her shoulder gently. Her smile had always warmed Lys, even on the really bad days, but today there was nothing for her heartache. Seeing that this was an especially poignant unhappiness, Glenna pinched her cheek painfully and reminded her that they'd all pay the price if her customers were served by a crying maid.

Heaving a heavy sigh, Lys grabbed a tray of mugs for her father's table and pushed the curtain in the kitchen doorway aside with her hip. She practiced a fixed smile and so began one of the best and worst nights of her life thereafter.

It was well past the end of dinner, and several rounds of ale had been downed, when her father barked her name across the room and waved his huge hand in a summoning gesture. The stranger from earlier had long been gone and the loggers had filled his table with gloomy postures and hooded looks. Each of the scraggy-looking men cuddled a mug between his dirty hands, mugs that Lys had filled over and over that evening.

When he first suggested that she retire that night with his good friend Thom, the same good friend who had won their last feasting pig in a game of dice and arrived to take it on the morning of the special day, she balked and stood there speechless. This man had merrily removed her mother's fine cooked meal from their family table right before her hungry eyes. He was short, shorter than her,

but stocky like a dwarf. She often wondered if it were possible for him to be the bastard son of a dwarven passer-by from the looks of him. Maybe he was just unlucky -for his features were just as displeasing as his form.

She sighed again, and turned wordlessly on one heel to head back to the safety of the kitchen. That was when it happened. He had offered her to his friend for the evening, most likely in exchange for coin or a favored tool in the logging camp. He was not about to have that negotiation go to waste, OR be disrespected by a girl in front of his fellow loggers. As his right hand clamped around her elbow and spun her to face him, his left arm curved up over his shoulder in preparation for the blow. Simultaneously, Lys dropped her empty tray and clutched the small rectangular strip of cured leather she had crafted with help from the medicine woman at the edge of the village. For months she had been visiting the old woman in the few hours between her shifts and learning what little hedge magic she could. The leather reminded her of the mysterious rangers and smelled like their flexible body armor. She had finessed one of them into giving her just a little strip of it for a tip one night, as he had been carrying a freshly cured skin to market. It was pressed with her name and a few flowers, to make it look like a decoration.

The blow landed across her cheekbone and sent her flying across the next table, which by fortune was empty of patrons. Spun around by it, she landed on her stomach on the table's surface, dazed by what had happened but also by the fact that her face was not broken. In fact, she had flipped one hand up in a gesture of shielding and gripped the leather strip with her other hand just as she saw the backhand coming. Her cheekbone was a little sore... but not nearly as painful as it should have been. Playing possum a moment, while her drunken attacker heaved for breath and turned a darker shade of red, she realized the leather strip which had hung at her waist from a tattered length of hemp twine was gone. She grabbed for the small wooden trinket hanging around her neck.

She had bribed the kitchen boy to carve it in the likeness of an archery target just last month. A whole night's tips had gone into his money pouch for this small thing, and she had not yet had occasion to use it on a person. As her father straightened to his full height and began his first step toward her, Lys turned over and sat up on the table slowly. Clutching the small wooden circle with tiny rings carved into its surface, she slid down onto her feet and glared at her attacker. Just then there was an odd scrabbling sound at the door, which popped open as if someone hadn't dropped the latch all the way down on their way out. A gust of chill night air blew into the room, carrying upon it a few scuttling leaves and a huge grey owl with claws outstretched.

Gasping, the few patrons who remained (mostly all seated at her father's table) turned as one to see the door open and began scrambling from their seats. The bird had an impressive wingspan, especially in such close quarters and with such an unexpected entrance. It came at her father immediately, pulling at his hair and scratching at his cheek. Lys took advantage of the moment and threw her first real right-hook right at his face. Her focus was on disabling the person who would do her harm, and the owl's flurry of claws had distracted him just enough that her blow landed square on his jaw. He fell like one of the many trees he had downed in the great forests of Athoreen. Tiny puffs of dust went up around his heavy frame as it slammed into the wooden floorboards. He was knocked completely unconscious by a 16 year old girl, bleeding from a long gash across his face.

The awkward silence that followed was broken only by the dropping of coins onto the table's surface and the heavy shuffling of work boots as her father's cronies left the bar. Thom's cheeks were flush and his eyes hard as he glanced back over his shoulder at the prize he had just abandoned, and the question in them became evident as he turned to go. Was she really a prize after all?

Her father's life would only get harder afterward, and despite an increase in his suspicion and general aloofness, Lys found herself largely unmolested. He grumbled and treated her like a servant... occasionally she caught him staring at her with something like hatred and lust in his eyes. The grey owl had remained, always visible to her on a chimney or rooftop. People sometimes whispered about her when she turned away, but no one ever approached. Even the old medicine woman seemed to grin with a perverted sort of understanding when she opened the door to find Lys waiting outside. She was comfortable nowhere and ready to flee at any moment. Still, her mother had raised her here in Homewood, and she'd never been more than half a day's journey away from the town. She went to work everyday and tried her best to hide her abilities. But her father knew what she was; somehow he always had. And he hated her for it.

