

Lillian

By Claire Henry

Prelude

Once upon a time, in a far away land, there was a young girl named Lillian. She lived with her mother and father in a house in the middle of a small town. But there was something different about her. She had dangerous magic, magic that kings and queens would kill to have. Lillian's parents didn't know this, though, and that would prove to be a mistake.

One day, when Lillian was playing outside, a sorceress approached her. She said she heard about Lillian's power, and offered to train her. When Lillian's parents saw the sorceress speaking with their child, they attempted to confront her. This enraged the woman, who with a flick of her wrist killed them both. She then stole away Lillian, taking her to a hidden tower in the woods. The sorceress erased Lillian's memories, ensuring she remembered nothing but the tower.

The sorceress began to train Lillian, molding her into the perfect weapon. She enchanted Lillian's hair to grow long, long enough to reach to the bottom of the tower. All entrances, except for a window at the top, were blocked off. Lillian's life remained the same, until one day when she was seventeen.

The Story

"Again," the sorceress said, circling Lillian. They stood in the center room of the tower, a straw dummy in front of them.

“Yes mistress,” Lillian muttered, holding her hand out in front of her. She closed her eyes, channeling her magic. A pink bolt of light burst from her hand, hitting the dummy and encircling it in chains of light. Lillian lowered her hand, looking to the sorceress for her approval. But the sorceress scowled at her.

“That was a good attempt, but still not enough. You keep holding back. A real opponent won’t go easy on you, so you shouldn’t go easy on them.”

“I’m sorry, mistress. Do you want me to try again?”

“Another time. I should be leaving now. I’ll be gone for a couple days, and I expect you to keep your skills sharp. You will be tested when I return. If you have not improved, there will be consequences.” Lillian nodded, walking over to the window and throwing down her braided brown hair.

“I understand. I will do my best to improve.” Lillian shivered as the sorceress placed her hand under her chin, tilting her head up.

“Your best isn’t good enough. It never will be.” The sorceress climbed out the window, using Lillian’s hair to reach the ground. Once she was gone, Lillian pulled her hair up and closed the tower window. Secretly, Lillian was relieved when the sorceress left her. It was always refreshing to not have her every move criticized.

But this relief was short lived, as Lillian heard a voice calling to her from the bottom of her tower. Had the sorceress forgotten something? Lillian went to the window and threw her hair down again, expecting the sorceress. But that wasn’t who climbed up. It was a boy, with light skin and deep auburn hair. He was barely older than she was. Lillian screamed, beginning to channel her magic. The boy stepped into the tower, and she jumped back.

“Hey, I don’t want to hurt you. Who are you?”

“I don’t have to tell you that. Who are you? What do you want from me? Did someone send you here?”

“I don’t want anything from you, I didn’t know anyone lived here. My name’s Briar, I’m a traveling musician. Please don’t kill me.”

“Why not? Give me one reason why I should trust you.”

“Because I have no reason to hurt you. Like I said, I didn’t know anyone lived here until you threw down your...is that your hair?”

“Yes. You truly have good intentions?”

“I do.”

Lillian lowered her hands, the pink glow slowly fading away. “What’s your name?”

“Lillian. I live here with my mentor. She’s training me to harness my magic.”

“Any reason she has to do it in a remote tower?”

“My magic is powerful. It’s the type of power rulers begin wars for. She’s keeping me safe.”

“If you say so. Is your hair a part of your magic?”

“No.”

“Why is it so long then?”

“It’s the only way in and out of the tower. Don’t worry, I’ve gotten used to people climbing it.” Lillian walked past Briar, pulling her hair back up. “So you’re a musician?”

“Yes. I left my guitar back at the inn I’m staying in, though. Could I come back tomorrow?”

“If you want. But be careful. If my mistress comes back and sees you here, she will not be merciful. She will not be back for a couple days, though.”

“Have you seen anyone besides her?” Lillian shook her head.

“No. It’s too dangerous. But you’re okay. Stay for as long as you wish.”

Briar stayed the rest of the day, telling Lillian about what the world was like beyond her tower. He returned the next day, bringing his guitar. Lillian had never heard music before, and she found herself enchanted by it. The two devised a system so Briar would know when it was safe to visit. If the window to Lillian’s tower was closed, she was alone. If it was open, the sorceress was there. It worked for a few weeks, until one day.

“Lillian! Let down your hair!” Lillian heard the sorceress’s shrill voice, and quickly ushered Briar away to her bedroom.

“Hide under my bed,” she said. “I’ll tell you when she’s gone. Don’t make a sound.” Lillian rushed off, throwing her braid down to the sorceress. When she reached the top, the sorceress pushed Lillian to the floor.

“What took you so long? When I call for you, I expect an answer immediately. “ “I’m sorry, mistress. My mind was elsewhere. I-”

“Save it. Go set up your training dummy. I’m testing you.” Lillian did as she was told, but she was barely able to concentrate. Her fear for Briar overtook anything else. She failed the first test the sorceress gave her, then the second, then the third. By this point, she was enraged with Lillian.

“Mistress-” She was knocked to the floor by a hard slap. “I don’t care. You worthless girl, was all my training for nothing? Keep trying, you won’t stop until you get it right.” The

sorceress's threat was true, and any mistake Lillian made was met with a fist or a kick. Finally, the sorceress's torment came to an end. Lillian was on her knees, bloodied and bruised.

"What did you learn today, girl?" "I...I will not neglect my training, mistress."

"Good. Let your hair down, I should be leaving. I will be back in one week's time, and I will test you again. If you fail, there will be severe consequences."

"I understand," Lillian said, gathering just enough strength to stand and throw her hair out the tower window. Once the sorceress was on the ground and out of sight, she stumbled up to her bedroom. She collapsed by her bed, where Briar was still hiding.

"She's gone. You can come out now." Briar crawled out from under the bed, gasping when he saw Lillian's condition.

"What did she do to you? I heard her talking to you...hold on." Briar picked Lillian up, gently setting her on the bed. "I can heal you, just stay calm."

"No! Don't heal me. These wounds aren't supposed to be healed by the time my mistress returns. She'll get suspicious, and she'll find out about you."

"Good thing you won't be here in a week."

"What?"

"Lillian, I know who your mistress is. She's a sorceress named Pyhrra who's killed hundreds. You're not being kept safe, you're being trained to be her personal weapon."

"Why should I believe you?"

"I came across her once, a year ago. I'd recognize her voice anywhere. Please Lillian, you're safer away from here."

“How do you know she will not find us?” “I never stay in one place for too long. It’s part of being a musician.” Although Lillian was reluctant, she trusted Briar. And a life traveling with him was better than a life where she would be a weapon.

“I accept your proposal. We will leave at sunrise, tomorrow. My mistress should be far away by then. Now I believe you mentioned you could heal me?”

“Oh, yes. Just...don’t ask any questions until I’m done.” Briar reached for Lillian’s hands and began to sing. Lillian was confused, until gold light began to circle her arms. Her bruises began to fade, and Briar moved one of his hands to her face. It felt as if the sorceress’s assaults had never happened. Briar then drew his hands away. Lillian looked at him in awe.

“Did you heal me by singing?”

“Yes. It’s a part of my magic. My voice is enchanted. I can heal, but I mostly use it in my performances. People really like the golden light.”

“It’s beautiful. I’m eager to see your performances. And the rest of the world. I’ve never left this tower.”

“Well, you will tomorrow. Is there anything I can do for you?” Lillian reached for his hand.

“Stay with me. Tell me more about your world.” Briar laid next to her, and Lillian pulled him in close. She felt something for Briar, something more than friendship. But she didn’t quite know what it was.

That evening, Lillian and Briar began to prepare for their journey. Lillian didn’t have many possessions, besides her clothing. But there was one difficulty.

“What are you going to do about your hair?” Briar asked. “It’ll be a hassle to deal with outside of your tower.”

“I never thought about that. It’s the only way out of the tower, but I suppose once we’re on the ground we can cut it. I’ll miss having it so long. But I’ll adjust eventually.”

“I’m sure you will. Do you want me to stay here tonight?”

“Yes. It will make things easier for tomorrow if you don’t have to leave and return.”

Lillian laid back, watching Briar continue to move around her room, making plans for their journey. But she wasn’t listening to him. The feelings she had felt earlier were back, and stronger. She then realized what they were. Love. She had never felt love for another boy or girl before, but she knew what her heart’s desire was.

Lillian stood up, walking over to Briar. She pulled him into a hug, unsure of how to confess.

“Lillian?”

“I think I’m in love with you,” she whispered. “Please don’t let this ruin everything.”

Briar gently pushed away Lillian to look her in the eye.

“This doesn’t ruin anything. I love you too, Lillian. I’ve loved you since the first time I came back to you.” Lillian kissed him, running a hand through his hair. For the first time, she didn’t have any fear about leaving the tower.

The next morning, it was time. Briar left first, climbing down Lillian’s hair. Once he reached the ground, Lillian stepped up onto the ledge. It wasn’t that she was scared of the descent. She’d climb up to the towers’ rafters sometimes, and was used to using her own

hair as a rope. It was the realization that she was leaving her tower, her only home, that scared her.

“You’ll be okay, Lillian. I’ll be here for you.” Finally, she jumped, closing her eyes tight. The wind whipped against her face, and she opened her eyes just in time to stop herself just before reaching the ground. Briar smiled at her, and Lillian let go of her hair to step into the grass. It was soft beneath her bare feet, a new sensation to her. She turned to look at the forest around her.

“This...this is amazing. It’s so beautiful up close.” Briar reached for her hand.

“This is just the beginning. Now, what are we going to do about your hair?” “Hand me your knife.” Briar gave Lillian a knife from his belt, and Lillian used it to sever her hair from where it was hanging from the tower. When she stepped away, her hair fell down to her waist. Briar smiled.

“You’re beautiful. Now, let’s go. Our new life is waiting for us.” They walked to the town Briar was staying in, and Lillian found herself enchanted. Everything was so new, and strange, yet familiar at the same time. She wondered if she’d lived there before. But they left by nightfall, Briar wanting to keep them on the move.

The pair stopped in a secluded alcove in the middle of a forest. It was surrounded by thorny bushes, with stepping stones over a rushing river being the only way to enter or exit. Lillian laid down in the grass, Briar next to her. She kissed his cheek, smiling. “I could get used to this. How could such a beautiful world be dangerous?”

“Like I told you, this kingdom is a beautiful place. There’s so much more for you to see.” They fell asleep together, but their peace was short-lived. For the sorceress had seen

Lillian and Briar together, and was desperate to get Lillian back. She approached the sleeping couple and pulled Lillian up by her hair. Lillian screamed, and the sorceress forced her to her knees, a hand over her mouth.

“Be quiet, girl. Did you think you could escape me? And you,” She glared at Briar, who was frozen in place, one hand resting on his guitar. “I recognize you. Do you think you’re some sort of heroic prince? You’re nothing but a con.”

“Don’t hurt her!”

“Oh, I won’t do anything to her. If she behaves, that is. As for you, I can’t allow you to tell others about this.” The sorceress flicked her hand, and thorns from the bushes began to circle Briar. He fell back onto the ground, his body going still.

“No!” Lillian screeched. “What did you do to him!”

“Oh stop crying. He’s not dead, only asleep. Not that he’ll be waking.” Lillian struggled against the sorceress, until everything went dark. When Lillian awoke, she realized with horror that she was back in her tower. Steel chains encircled her wrists and ankles. The sorceress stood above her, grinning.

“Hello, Lillian. I’m so sorry it had to get to this point.”

“How did you get me back here? You can’t enter without my hair.”

“Oh stupid girl. I have my ways. How do you think I got in here with you in the first place?”

“What did you do to Briar?”

“I just put him to sleep. Maybe if he’s lucky some young maiden will come give him a kiss and wake him. It will not be you, though.” Lillian scowled.

“I know who you are. Briar told me everything. Were my parents among the hundreds you’ve killed? Did you erase my memories to make me your puppet?”

“Of course I did. Now, I know you may have had fun, but I cannot allow you to remember. You’re more important to me than you realize.” The sorceress stepped towards her, and Lillian snapped. She channeled her power, breaking her chains in a burst of pink light. The sorceress reached for her, but before she could cast her spell, Lillian threw her against the wall, binding her with chains of light.

“I’m not going back to you,” Lillian hissed. “Your reign of terror ends now.” She shot a bolt of light at her, and the sorceress vanished into a burst of black dust. Lillian collapsed to her knees, in shock over what she’d done. She was finally free. She slowly stood up, noticing a trap door hidden in the floor where a rug had been.

As she escaped, the only thing on her mind was Briar. The alcove where they’d been wasn’t far, and when she stepped over the stones, Briar was still there. Lillian rushed over to him, trying not to cut herself on the thorns. They were embedded into Briar’s skin, but there were no wounds. Lillian kissed him, and when she pulled away Briar was enveloped in golden light. The thorns receded, leaving golden marks where they’d been on his skin. Briar opened his eyes, and Lillian pulled him into a hug.

“We’re safe, Briar. She’s gone.” He smiled, but it faded when he looked down at his skin. “These weren’t here before. They’re kind of pretty, though. Are you okay?”

“Yes. I’m so glad you’re awake.” Briar kissed her, and they fell back into the grass. Lillian let herself get lost in the moment. She and Briar were alive, with their whole lives ahead of them. Why would she not enjoy it?

~~~~~And they lived happily ever after~~~~~