

SONG
OF
SILVER

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SHADOW WRAITH

The Shadow Wraith was born out of a dream I had about a creature that suffocated people. Maybe I had seen too many horror films, but the image would never go away, and it finally became a story that I chose to inflict on poor Anwyn.

The forest ended abruptly, and the shadowy world that Anwyn Baldomyre had traveled opened into a wash of bright light. Before him lay an open moor of rolling ground that rose like the foundations of an old hill fort. Boulders littered the ground that was not a carpet of green sedge and summer thistle.

“Is that a patch of blackberries, I see?” Anwyn asked aloud.

“*Could be,*” Glynnanis replied.

“Lunch is served, then,” Anwyn said and started to march across the course tufts of springy grass, whistling an air that matched the glorious sky overhead. He could not recall seeing a day so bright and clear since he came to Lamboria.

He climbed the nearest hill and stopped at the first patch of blackberries and using his makeshift staff to push the prickling briars aside, he harvested some of the fruit. The berries were sweet and ripe and made his mouth water for more, so he collected a few handfuls into a bit of linen that had once housed a crust of bread and gingerly placed it atop the wrapped wedge of cheese in his satchel.

“That should last me a few days,” he said as he stood up.

And paused.

A spire rose visible to his eyes now. He had not seen it from the forest below because the hill was in the way. But now he could see that

it was but the top of a keep over the hill. So he climbed on to the rim and stopped there to take in the view.

A lake centered the open plain, with but a single bridge lined with monoliths at intervals that crossed to the island on which the keep stood. All around the edge of the lake were menhirs placed at regular intervals, and matching stones circled the shore of the island itself. The stones of those menhirs and of the keep were black as pitch and cast no hint of light under the sun. He could see no doors or windows from here. Just a shape of solid stone. A monument? A tomb? He vaguely recalled Rhystar of Far Reach mentioning that men sometimes built tombs to honor their most important dead. But why would anyone build such a structure in what appeared to be the middle of nowhere in particular?

“What do you suppose that is, Glynнанis?” he asked.

“*Something I suspect we want nothing to do with,*” the harp replied.

“But it’s so strange. Let’s go down for a closer look.”

“*I have no choice in this?*” the harp complained.

“Well...not really,” Anwyn said and smiled a little. “Unless you plan to grow legs.”

“*Fine,*” Glynнанis said, and the single note rang sharply in Anwyn’s head. “*If something goes wrong, I just want you to remember that it wasn’t my idea.*”

“You’re such an old grouch,” Anwyn said. “It’s a beautiful day and that looks like a mystery. And anyway, it can’t hurt to just look.”

“*Where have I heard that before?*” Glynнанis asked.

Anwyn rolled his eyes, adjusting the strap of the harp sack and the satchel. Staff in hand, he strode over the hill and picked his way down to the lake. The closer he came, the cooler the air grew, as though he was stepping out of summer and into winter’s chill. Yet, the sun still shone just as bright here as it had elsewhere on this plain.

At last, he reached the edge of the lake, cautiously approaching one of the menhirs. It rose twice his own height and was carved with glyphs and runes. Too bad he had no idea what it said. He could read, but these runes were not like the ones he was learning from Rhystar.

Anwyn squinted silver eyes at the keep once more. From here, he could see the shapes of doors and windows cut into the very stone, yet none of them were open or possessed anything resembling glass. Why

would someone so elaborately decorate a giant rock to look like a keep? The imagination that had carved such intricate work into the inky marble must have been an eccentric.

He abandoned his viewing of the stones and approached the bridge. Like the menhirs and the keep, it was black and rune embedded.

“I wonder what these mean?” Anwyn asked as he drew the harp around so Glynnanis could see the stones.

The unicorn head atop the white wood twisted to one side and the other.

“Something about protecting the borders of light and binding shadows,” the harp said. *“Doesn’t look promising. We should just go on...”*

“On?” Anwyn said. “As in towards the keep?” And with that, he took several long strides onto the flat surface. He was a third of the way across the water when the harp’s voice rang sharply inside his head, forcing him to stagger a step from the irritating sound.

“No, no, no!” Glynnanis sang. *“When I said go on, I meant go one elsewhere! Not onto the bridge! Have you lost your mind? That’s water down there, and you know I don’t like water. What if you were to fall and drop me into the lake. I would be ruined! Now, get back onto the shore and leave here before something really bad happens!”*

Anwyn sighed. Perhaps Glynnanis was right. Besides, there did not appear to be anything more to see. So he turned and started to step away from the bridge, when the grating sound of a stone door sliding open caught his attention. Anwyn glanced back over his shoulder at the keep.

Something came sweeping out of a gap that barely appeared visible at all, and it took Anwyn a moment to realize that what was thundering out of the keep and onto the stone bridge was a horse and rider draped in shadows. Like a jousting, the barely visible horseman and his mount hurried onto the stone bridge.

“I told you!” Glynnanis shouted.

Told or not, Anwyn felt certain that running was probably going to be his best bet, so he sprinted back towards the shore, eager to get onto land before that shadowy thing could catch him. But the horse was taking long strides, billowing like smoke in a strong wind, and Anwyn could no more outpace it than he could have chased a hawk on wing. He was mere strides from the end of the stone bridge when the shadow

flowed over him, cutting off his view of the world. In a panic, he flailed around with his staff, only to have it knocked from his grasp.

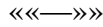
And then something laid a hand on his shoulder and snagged the strap of Glynnanis' cerecloth sack. He heard the panicky cry of the harp and he tried to find it in the brackish fog.

"Glynnanis!" he shouted in vain.

Notes rang from the harp as it moved away, and though Anwyn heard its voice in his head, he heard that thrum with his ears. With a cry of triumph, he lunged towards the sound, but in the dark mist that surrounded the horse and the rider, he realized too late that he could see nothing.

Which was why he did not know he had run full tilt into one of the menhirs on the bridge until he felt the pain of contact.

And after that, darkness of a new kind enveloped him.



A fiery glow was the first perception Anwyn had when he rose from his dark slumber and opened his eyes. His nose felt tender. He groaned and reached up to brush at it and flinched when pain scolded him. By the Four, was it broken? He hoped not.

Hissing, he tried to sit up and appraise his surroundings. He was on a luxurious bed in a large chamber where a huge bonfire burned so bright, no shadows could be cast in its presence.

"It's about time you woke up!" a familiar voice scolded.

"Now, now," another said in a gentler manner. "He's taken quite a nasty blow, Glynnanis."

Who? Anwyn turned so that he was looking towards the fire. To one side of it he perceived a chair, and in that chair was a man in embroidered robes of blue and gold and white. His features reminded Anwyn of the Thaugen he had met in his travels into Lamboria's borders. His hair was black as midnight, and his eyes were the coldest silver Anwyn had ever seen. They seemed to pierce the harper to his very soul and made him uneasy. *Why is he staring at me that way?*

"Allow me to introduce myself," the man said, and planting his elbows on the arms of the chair and lacing his fingers together, he cocked his head. "I am Thalliard, master of this keep."

Anwyn glanced around. This keep? Inside was as out, cut into the

stone. The windows were relief carvings. The only difference was the color. The stone inside this chamber was white, adding to the unnatural glare of the fire.

“What is this place?” Anwyn asked.

“It is called Shadowgard,” Thalliard said. “Do you like it?”

“What was that thing that attacked me on the bridge?” Anwyn asked. “And where is my harp?” He glanced around, seeing his satchel and the empty cerecloth sack on the floor beside the bed.

“My, my, so many questions,” Thalliard said. His silver stare never left Anwyn. “That which greeted you on my bridge was merely an illusion of smoke. I find it effective for frightening unwanted visitors. Your imagination made it more. Of course, in your case, as soon as I saw Glynnanis, I knew whom you had to be—or so I thought. Glynnanis has assured me that you are not *him*.”

Anwyn noted the vehemence that filled that last word. *Him? Who?*

“As for your harp, it is safe—for the moment.” Thalliard drew his hands apart, and one long finger pointed overhead.

Anwyn’s gaze traveled up. It took him a moment to realize what he was seeing. Glynnanis’ white wood blended so much with the stone, and that only the glint of the harp strings and the fury in the harp’s sapphire eyes gave it away. Glynnanis dangled like a chicken about to be dropped into the stewpot—over the great fire that brightened this room with daylight, yet did not seem to heat the room.

“What? Why did you do that? I...”

Thalliard slipped out of his chair and crossed the chamber as Anwyn staggered to his feet. The Thaugen was tall, and at close range, his pale skin revealed wrinkles around his eyes and faint slashes of silver in his braided-black hair. He leaned so close that Anwyn was forced to sit on the bed to keep from falling over. Thin fingers seized Anwyn’s chin, drawing his face up. He froze, uncertain. The touch was like ice.

“Silver eyes,” Thalliard said with a smile. “And hair like burnished copper under the sun.”

Anwyn trembled as he slapped the hand away and drew back. He rolled across the bed and lurched off the other side. Thalliard laughed.

“And so modest,” he said. “You have nothing to fear from me, my young friend. And since you clearly have not made your sacrifice for power, I have nothing to fear from you.”

“What do you want?” Anwyn asked, trying to sound fierce and hoping the panicky thunder of his heart could not be heard.

“Oh, nothing of importance,” Thalliard said. “Just your assistance.” Anwyn frowned then. “My assistance.”

“Yes,” Thalliard said. “You see I have a little problem.”

“And what would that be?” Anwyn asked, not certain he really wanted to know. Thalliard’s eyes continued to rake him in a manner that made him nervous. Were it not for that, Anwyn would have suspected the man was blind. One of the sacrifices one made for power was to relinquish one of the five senses.

“Ah, to the point,” Thalliard said. “You will go far, though not for a while, I hope.”

“What do you want from me?”

Thalliard glanced up at Glynnanis. “You should have told me that he asked so many questions,” he said.

“*I will tell you nothing!*” the harp’s voice rang with anger and agitation. “*No more than Rhystar would.*”

Thalliard’s expression turned sour. “You never were a very tactful creature even when you were still a unicorn.”

“Wait—you know what Glynnanis is?”

“Well, of course I know,” Thalliard said. “After all, where do you think Rhystar stole the spell of transmuting life from her sorry old bones into that wooden form?”

“You know Rhystar?” Anwyn could not stop frowning. There were so many things about Rhystar he did not know, he realized. “How did you know him?”

“Well, certainly not in the manner I suspect *you* have known him,” Thalliard said dryly. “He was always more fond of redheads.”

Anwyn felt his face flush and he looked away, trying to hold down the rare moment of rage that flooded him.

“But all that aside,” Thalliard said, “it was my spell knowledge that gave Glynnanis life in this new form, knowledge Rhystar stole from me with false promises of a trade.”

“*He never promised you anything!*” Glynnanis shouted. “*It was you who tried to steal knowledge from him. You came to Far Reach seeking his knowledge, pretending to be his friend, but you betrayed yourself to him when you tried to use Colyn to gain the knowledge you lacked!*”

“Dear, Glynnanis, I do hope that is not the old rope,” Thalliard said with a sneer.

The silver eyes bore into Anwyn again.

“Rhystar stole the spell from me,” Thalliard said, “and then he cast me out in favor of a certain young harper he had become enamored of, and so now here you are, carrying Glynnanis, and I know you are not that same young man, but you have clearly won Rhystar’s heart or he would never have given you so great a gift. So, I have a trade to offer. I will give you back your harp and let you leave this place if you will do a task for me in exchange.”

“And just what would this task be?” Anwyn asked.

Thalliard smiled, and the sight sent cold dread through Anwyn. He knotted his fists nervously.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that,” Thalliard said. “You’re not *my* type. Now, lie down and rest. It’s night, and you will need your strength. Tomorrow morning, I will tell you what it is I desire of you. For now, I have other matters to attend. You will find food at your disposal. Good night.”

With that, Thalliard turned and started towards the walls. And though Anwyn watched, he did not see how the mage managed to leave. It was as if he merely walked through the walls and vanished.

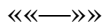
“Glynnanis?”

“*I’m fine,*” the harp sang, “*though it is getting a little warm up here.*”

“What do you suppose he wants from me?”

“*I have no idea,*” Glynnanis said. “*But if I were you, I’d rest.*”

How can I? Anwyn thought and shook his head. He glanced at his surrounds and wondered if he could find the door.



Anwyn must have walked the perimeter of the lighted chamber half a dozen times before he stopped seeking an exit. He was admittedly intrigued by the craftsmanship that produced the realistic carvings that made up his prison. But the stone doors refused to open and the windows revealed nothing of the world.

Perhaps if I had made my sacrifice, he thought. Perhaps if he had

been a real mage instead of a harper with a few magic songs, he would not be in this mess. Granted, he could have used his gate song to leave this place on his own, but that would have meant leaving Glynnanis behind, and there was no telling what Thalliard would do to the harp if Anwyn were to leave.

“Stop fretting,” Glynnanis said. “You should be resting as Thalliard said, since clearly the only way out of this mess is to do as he asks.”

“How can I sleep in this light?” Anwyn said bitterly and threw himself down on the bed, lying on his back and glaring up at the harp. “It’s eternally daylight in here. Why does he keep it so bright?”

“Perhaps he fears whatever lies in the shadows below,” Glynnanis suggested.

Anwyn arched an eyebrow in puzzlement. “What lies in the shadows below?” he asked.

“I’ve barely a sense of it,” Glynnanis said. “But there is definitely something there. Something that is not happy to be imprisoned.”

Oh, wonderful, Anwyn thought. Something else was a prisoner of this place, then. He sighed.

“Did Rhystar really steal the spell from him that gave you life?” Anwyn asked.

“No, he traded fairly for it,” Glynnanis said. “He gave Thalliard a spell for the spell. But Thalliard was greedy. He came to Far Reach not to trade but to steal. Rhystar had the knowledge of containing heartstones and Thalliard wanted that power. Rhystar would not give it to him. He said controlling wraiths was dangerous even for a mage of great skill. So Thalliard tried instead to steal Rhystar’s staff, and he tried to use Colyn to do it, claiming he just wanted to look at it. Colyn didn’t know any better. He didn’t know that the staff contained the life of a shadow stag. He just thought it was a decorative item. He didn’t know that the creature within it was a sort of shadow wraith, bound there in ancient times by another from whom Rhystar took the staff when he defeated them.”

“Did Colyn take the staff?”

“He tried to,” Glynnanis said. “He waited until Rhystar was asleep and fetched it to show it to Thalliard. Of course, Thalliard tried to leave with it, and I tried to stop him, old as I was. I was the guardian of the forest in those day. The First Herald to whom all visitors to Far Reach were required to speak. Thalliard sought to use magic against me, and

it was nearly my undoing, but Rhystar arrived in time to stop him, to regain the staff and to throw Thalliard out of the valley himself. I thought he should have killed Thalliard—I thought he would be angry with Colyn too. But Rhystar loved Colyn too well to blame him.”

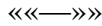
Anwyn frowned. “Is Thalliard going to try and use me to avenge himself on Rhystar, you suppose?”

“Let us hope not,” Glynnanis said. “I don’t think Rhystar would accept such a betrayal as well now. Age has made him a little irritable about such things.”

Anwyn shook his head. *I don’t think Rhystar would hold anything against me.*

Still, if that was Thalliard’s game, then perhaps Anwyn would try and do what he could to rescue the harp and escape.

He closed his eyes and soon slipped into fitful slumber.



“What I want is a heartstone,” Thalliard said while Anwyn sat in a chair on the opposite side of a table Thalliard conjured near the fire so they could have breakfast, and contemplated the length of his nails to keep from meeting that relentless stare. He had no idea if it was really morning because his sleep had been so restless. But at least he had not used any of his spell song in the last day. “It lies in a pool of white light in a cavern below this keep, and that pool is guarded by the creature whose heartstone is trapped there—a shadow wraith, to be precise.”

“Shadow wraith?” Anwyn felt his heart skip several beats. Like the one in Rhystar’s staff? Memories came flooding from his past. A wraith! Fire and flames burned the corners of his thoughts as he remembered far too well the fire wraith he defeated some years ago, and how he nearly lost his own life in the process. That creature wanted Anwyn dead, and another had bargained with it to save his life. The creature agreed to leave Anwyn alone if he would help free the wraith’s heartstone from the one who held it and commanded the wraith. Of course, it had lied. All it wanted was its stone and vengeance against Anwyn for spoiling its plans. “*A wraith’s word is like the wind,*” Rhystar once said. “*It may pass quickly or slowly, but in either case, it is gone before you can cling to it.*”

Shaking those memories from him, Anwyn glanced up at Thalliard's smiling face. "What exactly is a shadow wraith?" he asked.

"Well, as I am certain you have been told, there are all manner of wraiths," Thalliard said. He lounged in his chair and used one of his long black braids like a paintbrush, following the whorls of the table's surface. "The elemental wraiths are the most common, and often the most deadly. But there are other wraiths as well, variations on the elemental ones and wraiths that are imbued with certain life forces. I am surprised Rhystar has not told you this. Shadow wraiths are quite useful creatures. They make excellent guardians of treasure. With a shadow wraith in his control, a mage may make himself as one with the shadows and not be seen by his enemies until it is too late."

Anwyn shivered, glancing at Glynнанis. "But if it's only a shadow, how can it have enough substance to prevent you from claiming its heartstone?"

"Trust me, it has more substance than you would think. It can envelope you in its own darkness and suffocate you there—or rend you limb from limb. Of course, like all creatures of magic, it has a weakness. Bright light and large fires."

"That explains all this," Anwyn said, remembering what Glynнанis said about the runes on the bridge. *Holding darkness in...*

"All this," Thalliard said and smiled. "It was like this when I came here ages ago and laid claim to it from the she-wolf who called it home."

"You stole this place from another mage," Anwyn said and frowned.

"Hardly," Thalliard said. "I defeated her in a fair fight."

Why do I find that hard to believe? Anwyn thought darkly. Thalliard did not strike him as someone who played fair in any manner. Rhystar once mentioned that mages were notoriously territorial and frequently battled for power and possessions. "Then why can't you deal with it yourself?" he asked aloud. "You are a true mage, after all."

"Once I possess its heartstone, I shall make it do as I please," Thalliard said. "This shadow wraith served the former mistress of this keep. Since it cannot take its heartstone and leave, it is bound to guard those magical treasures the old crone hid before I defeated her. She was quite clever in that respect. She had placed a spell barrier between these chambers and the catacombs which only the shadow wraith or herself

could remove or pass. That barrier repels all other mageborn. It prevents their passage by attacking them through their sacrifice.”

Their sacrifice? Anwyn’s flesh seemed to shiver. “But I am not a true mage,” he said.

“Precisely the reason you should be able to pass the barrier,” Thalliard said. “It cannot repel you.”

“But the shadow wraith...”

“Must have darkness to survive. The light of day would kill it. My fire keeps it from projecting itself out of the catacombs and into this place. The spells outside keep it from slipping out when darkness takes the land. It swore it would have me for what I did to its mistress, which is neither here nor there. It will try to kill you if you fetch the heartstone, but I am certain you will be able to deal with that little problem. Rhystar taught you Colyn’s Songs. Why else would he have given you Colyn’s harp.”

“You hated Colyn, didn’t you,” Anwyn said. “Still hate him, even though he’s dead.”

Thalliard smiled. “Colyn meant nothing to me, if that is what you are thinking,” he said. “He was an end to a means and nothing more.”

“You used him to try and betray Rhystar!” a musical voice seemed to fling across the emptiness to fill Anwyn’s mind. *“You wanted to steal Rhystar’s staff of power because it would have given you the secret to controlling shadow wraiths, and you made Colyn steal it.”*

“Glynnanis!” Thalliard roared, standing up and glaring at the harp. “Heat can very quickly fray a rope! Shall we see?”

He raised a hand and it glowed like the fire. Anwyn shot out of his chair and charged around the table, grabbing Thalliard’s arm. Thalliard turned a frightful gaze on the young harper then relaxed.

“Clever harp,” the mage said. “Convince me to burn your rope so that this young man can rescue you before I have what I want.” He shook loose of Anwyn’s grasp. “Come. The morning is gone and the time has come for you to fulfill your task.” He snagged Anwyn’s arm, pulling him along. “Once you are past the barrier, the main passage will lead you straight to the chamber where the heartstone is to be found.”

Anwyn glowered. “I can walk on my own!”

Thalliard smiled and let go, continuing towards a corner that looked like nothing more than a relief carving of warriors at battle. But as the mage stopped and gestured, the relief disappeared revealing an archway

that sloped down then turned back on itself. He continued to drag Anwyn along like a recalcitrant child until he reached the bottom.

The torches that burned in this space revealed a wall that blocked the passage, and yet... There was something fuzzy about the surface of the stones that greeted Anwyn's gaze. The young harper reached out to brush them with a hand and found nothing, save the icy cold that kissed his skin. Hissing, he drew back. Thalliard smiled.

"Yes, it is very cold," he said. "And if you have made your sacrifice, very frustrating. I have attempted to enter it on several occasions, thinking to break its hold. It repels me every time."

"And what makes you think it will let me pass, even if I have not made my sacrifice," Anwyn said.

"That is something we shall soon find out," Thalliard said.

"And what if I fail?"

Thalliard narrowed his eyes. "If you fail to return, I shall assume you are dead, for there is no way out of this place save this tunnel or magic you most likely do not possess, and I suspect that only your death would keep you from coming back for Glynnanis. If you return without the stone, then you will watch Glynnanis devoured by my flames."

"But what if the barrier itself will not let me pass?"

The mage shrugged. "If that be the case, I am certain I can find other uses for you. Servants are very difficult to come by, and I do get bored being alone..." He touched Anwyn's cheek playfully. Anwyn drew back, not liking that implication at all. *By the Four, just let me live through this, and I shall give serious consideration to making my sacrifice!* Which did not mean that he would, but if the promise of considering the sacrifice would please the Four, he would make it. Then again, if he had the power he repressed in himself, he would not be in this mess. *And I am a fanciful fool!*

Anwyn looked at the barrier and felt the chilling buzz of power. His gaze flitted to Thalliard, and the dread grew like a knot in the young harper's belly. He closed his eyes and drew up the image of Glynnanis hanging over the fire, and of Rhystar's face the day the white-haired mage had given Anwyn the living harp. Slowly, he opened his eyes.

"May I take one of these torches with me?" he asked.

Thalliard gestured towards the walls. "Whichever pleases you."

Cautiously, Anwyn selected a light. The flames at the end of the

torch crackled with magic power. *Oh, Glynnanis, I wish you were with me to guide me.* Anwyn felt fear slowly seep into his heart and soul at the thought of not having at least that much council. He thrust his hand into the barrier wall. With a deep sigh, he stepped forward.

So cold! Briefly, his vision waned, then the soft light of his torch revealed that he stood in a long hall descending into the depths of the earth. He turned to look back and gasped, retreating. His eyes perceived what looked like fine wires glowing bright blue, weaving themselves back and forth over a wall of black gauze—like a veil had been draped across the opening. So small and seemingly insignificant. How could such a thin barrier possibly stop Thalliard?

A soft whisper, like cloth brushing stone, hissed behind Anwyn. He turned quickly, gazing down the long hall. Was it his imagination—tricks of his eyes and mind—or had the shadows grown thick and inky along the recesses beyond his light? He shuddered and swallowed hard. *Don't be such a coward! Think of Glynnanis!* Anwyn raised his torch, increasing the size of his amber pool, and started more slowly down the gentle slope.

His light flickered off rough-hewn stones, broken there and there by small arches that opened into dark passages. Pausing before one, he thrust his torch inside. The shadows were so thick here, like a black mist, refusing to let his light reveal much beyond his own presence. And something here made his senses buzz with warning. *I do not want to go in there,* he thought and pulled back from the gap, continuing down the main passage, only to pause.

A wall of darkness rose and blotted out the passage. It moved, undulated and pulsed with life as it advanced up the hall. Terror seized Anwyn. He stood, mouth gaping, as slowly, the darkness shifted, rising tall and taking on a vague chiropteran assemblage of wings. From the black depths, twin slits opened like eyes under a horned hood. Then a third slit opened, and Anwyn saw fangs.

The shadow wraith!

“Who are you, fool?” a noise snarled, like the voices of many speaking in unison.

Anwyn swallowed and answered with some difficulty, since his tongue wanted to stick to the dry roof of his mouth. “M...merely a humble harper on a quest,” he said.

“Harper?” the voices said. “I see no harp!”

SHADOW WRAITH

Anwyn spread his hand in a gesture of futility. “Is has been stolen, taken by he who now calls himself master of this keep. It is he who sends me on this quest.” His legs quivered under him. *Lords and Ladies, what shall I do?*

The blackness spread its filmy wings as though seeking to surround him. *It will swallow you in its darkness... suffocate you...*

“So Thalliard sent you,” the shadow wraith said as though musing its victim’s fear. “Just what is this quest?”

No! I will not be a victim!

“I have come for your heartstone,” Anwyn said.

The shadow wraith reared upright, filling the air around him. “Then you shall die!”

Anwyn thrust his torch at the creature. His amber fire seemed feeble against the shadow wraith’s wall of darkness. In desperation, he searched for a magical song, the Song of Light, and opened his mouth to send forth the piercing notes. The Song flared light within him, and he felt like a beacon as he directed the power of light into the flames of his torch. It flared ten times brighter than normal, brighter than the sunniest day Anwyn had seen. He closed his eyes and cringed.

The multitude of voices shrieked, filling his ears with the wretched sound. In a moment, silence blanketed the air, but the ring of those cries still filled his head. Anwyn opened his eyes and found himself alone. The dark was still around him, but it was not alive. Just shadows leaping and fleeing the spread of his light.

He sighed and moved on with more determination now. Find the pool! Find the stone! He had a weapon now. A light bright enough to kill shadows for quite a distance in either direction. With the brilliant torch raised high over head, Anwyn hurried down the passage, following the downward slope until he came to an archway from which he could see a strong glow.

Through the arch were stairs, and a huge open chamber that looked like the lower walls were made of polished glass. The upper reached resembled a cave with stalactites by the score. At the center of the room was a pool of white light so brilliant Anwyn could barely make out the pedestal at its center.

The stairs wound down the walls until they reached the obsidian floor. Anwyn eagerly followed that wind until he reached the cavern’s

base. A glance upward made the height of the ceiling difficult to fathom, so he set silver eyes on the pedestal, shading them with a hand, and started towards the center.

The patch of pure black he found at the center of the white seemed so odd, like it canceled all light that touched it, never reflecting anything on its smooth surface. He could feel the taint of that stone even as his fingers stretched outward to claim the prize.

“NO!” The multitude of the shadow wraith’s voice filled the air. Anwyn’s gaze shot up, and he saw a blackness descending like a falling blanket, only to be stopped by the sharp edge of the white light. “PLEASE!”

Anwyn frowned, meeting the red glare. The edges of those eyes had rounded into a gentleness totally belying its fearsome nature. He’d never heard of any wraith begging with such sincerity.

“You said please,” Anwyn said.

“She who was my mistress taught me that,” the creature said with a great deal less vehemence. “She often told me it was a word that was the most powerful any creation of the Four could learn.”

Anwyn couldn’t help a wisp of a smile from spreading over his lips. “Who was she?” he said.

“Fiana of Bright Moon,” the wraith said. “She was my mistress before Thalliard took her life. For long years, he has tried to force his way down here to claim her treasures. But I will not allow him to enter this place! For what he did to my mistress, one day I will devour him!”

The vehemence was coming back. “Why have you not sought to destroy him before now?” Anwyn said.

“His pit of flames burns eternal, and he surrounds himself in light,” the wraith said. “He knows I cannot cross light without dying.”

Anwyn thought of the pit, and of Glynnanis dangling over that fire by Thalliard’s will—Thalliard who had deceived Colyn and used him to steal from Rhystar—who would force himself on Anwyn. Silver eyes flashed at the heartstone. Here lay the means to his freedom, and the return of his harp. Tears flooded his eyes, blurring the visions of dark and light.

“You weep now,” the wraith said. “Why?”

“Because Thalliard has stolen my harp, and if I do not bring him your heartstone, he will burn Glynnanis in his pit of flames,” Anwyn said, his voice edged with pain. “Yet, how can I...”

SHADOW WRAITH

“You are a mage,” the shadow wraith said.

“But I have not made my sacrifice,” Anwyn said.

“Yet, you sang forth a light bright enough to harm me,” the wraith said. “Can you sing darkness as well?”

Anwyn shook his head.

“Water, then?”

The young harper’s gaze shot back to the wraith. It had shrunk itself into a smaller, more vulnerable looking entity and was hovering patiently at the edge, eyes still round with sorrow.

“Yes,” Anwyn said. “I can call water with a Song.”

“Then use your power to drown the pit of flames,” the wraith said. “Once his fire is dead, I can deal with him while you and your harp get away.”

“But Thalliard will stop me from singing...”

“Not if you distract him with my heartstone,” the shadow wraith said. “Demand that he give you your harp before you hand over the stone. While he drinks deep of his believed triumph, drown his fire with your song. Since that chamber has no windows, I will not be deterred by the daylight that still lights the outside world. Once your spell does its work, you would be wise to leave.”

“Leave?” Anwyn said.

“In my frenzy to feed, I may forget our bargain and devour you as well.”

The word of a wraith is like the wind... Anwyn stared at the creature. “Why would you do this for me?”

“I do nothing for you, harper mage. I want my freedom. That is all. And I want Thalliard’s life to pay for that which he took from my mistress. No wraith likes being captive, but she was a kinder mistress than most. Placing my heartstone here where I could protect it from all others was her way of showing her trust in me. I owe her Thalliard’s life for that alone. Now, will you agree?”

Slowly, Anwyn nodded. To free himself and Glynnanis was all he truly desired. *If he can truly provide me with the means, then I will have vengeance for Rhystar as well.*

“I will agree,” Anwyn said, his heart thundering in his chest.

“Then take the stone and go quickly,” the shadow wraith said before disappearing from sight.

Anwyn closed his hand over the black heartstone. It felt cold and weightless in his hand as he drew it to his chest and fled for the stairs.

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“It’s about time,” Thalliard said, contempt knifing every word. “I was beginning to believe the creature had devoured you. Do you have the stone?”

Anwyn stood with his back to the barrier wall and nodded. “I have it,” he said.

“Then give it here.”

“Not until you free Glynnanis and return the harp to me,” Anwyn said, meeting the silvery stare of the mage.

“You are not in a position to make demands, my lad!” Thalliard said.

“I’m only thinking of Glynnanis,” Anwyn said. “He harp might warp if it’s not taken down now. Or perhaps, you think to trick me again. Besides, I’ll just step back inside the barrier and leave it there, as I am certain the shadow wraith will be waiting to claim it, and then where will you be.”

Thalliard sighed and grinned like a wolf. “So you think you are clever. The wraith would take your life, and I would destroy the harp.”

“Better that than living here as your slave,” Anwyn said.

Thalliard laughed. “So there is a strong will behind that innocent looking face. Oh, very well. If you’re going to be such a child about all this, then I will give you back your harp. Once I have that stone, you mean nothing to me.”

As if I would believe that for a minute, Anwyn thought. How could he even think of trusting one who had no morals?

“Come along,” Thalliard said. “We waste time.”

He turned and stalked up the hall, returning to the main chamber. Anwyn followed at a safe distance, noting how dim the fire pit seemed after where he had been. He trailed over to the edge of the hearth. Thalliard raised his hands with simple motions, and the rope that bore Glynnanis aloft began to unwind on its own. The harp shifted over to one side of the flames before being lowered into Anwyn’s arms. He could feel heat in the white wood, but it appeared undamaged.

SHADOW WRAITH

“Satisfied?” Thalliard said and held forth his hand. “The stone now, if you please.”

Slowly, Anwyn reached into his belt pouch and drew forth the blackness. He laid it in Thalliard’s hand. He practically ran over to the side and snatched up the cerecloth sack and his pack. He slipped Glynnanis into the sack. Thalliard was too busy admiring the heartstone to notice.

“By the Four, that feels better,” a musical voice quipped.

Anwyn stood up, holding the satchel and the harp sack. “We’ll be leaving now,” he said.

“I hardly think so,” Thalliard said in a coy fashion. “I am not ready to let you go just yet, my young friend.”

“But you promised!”

“So I lied. I would prefer to share your company a little longer,” Thalliard said and held the stone aloft to admire it in the firelight. “Rhystar owes me. Colyn owes me, and I think I will keep you around to repay that debt.”

Anwyn shook his head. “You are a greater monster than that which is imprisoned below,” he hissed.

“And you are a fool, but then Rhystar was always a fool too. Now, look at it, Anwyn. Isn’t it wonderful? With this stone, all that was once Fiana’s shall be mine!”

And more, you wretched creature! Anwyn thought. He filled his mind with the Song of Water, throwing the strap of the harp sack over one shoulder and flinging back his head. The magical song poured from his lips. Moisture collected in the air until Anwyn thought he would drown. He saw the startled look that graced Thalliard’s features before the mage snarled, “How dare you try one of Colyn’s songs on me!”

Anwyn willed the water to materialize over the fire pit. A great gush fell from the air, like a waterfall spilling out of nowhere, slamming down on the fire pit.

“NO!” Thalliard shouted. “You fool, you’ll get us both killed!”

Water beat the flames to naught, and a great hissing cloud of steam billowed towards the darkness that formed above them. Out of the mist descended a black shadow, red eyes blazing, mouth gaping.

Thalliard brought up his free hand in preparation of conjuring a spell, but there was little else he could do. The blackness of the shadow

wraith flowed over Thalliard. His shrieks of agony filled the air, forcing Anwyn to cringe and cover his ears. Then they died under the laughter of many voices as one.

“By the Four, Anwyn,” Glynnanis sang. *“Let’s leave!”*

The shadow wraith turned red eyes like twin coals upon Anwyn, and the glare of frenzied hatred was enough to break him out of his momentary trance. The thing unfurled, revealing that nothing, not even a patch of clothing, remained of Thalliard’s graceful form. The creature flew up into the air like a massive bird, and Anwyn broke into a mad run for freedom.

But which way was out? It occurred to him that he did not know as he found himself racing towards the only route of which he was certain, into the catacombs. Anwyn could hear the cloth-like whisper of the wraith pursuing him down the slope. There was no place to run where he would be safe—unless he could reach the pool of light. *Too far!* Nor could he sing the song of Light again until he had slept.

“Which way is out?” Anwyn gasped between breaths.

“You need no door!” Glynnanis said.

“No, but I do need lungs to sing,” Anwyn said. “And I would have to stop!”

Down the hall, through the barrier he ran. With Thalliard dead, there was no light anywhere now. The spell that kept his torches burning was gone. Anwyn heard the wraith’s shrieking laughter vibrating through the air as it followed him into the dark catacombs. It had to be close, but he dared not look back, concentrating instead on reaching the glimmer of light through an opening at the far end. Wisps of cold brushed his neck in a playful fashion. The edges of living shadow grew to either side of him.

“Oh, please, by the Four! Let me live!” he cried aloud.

“Please?” the wraith repeated. The creature stopped and laughed as though amused by those foolishly sincere words, and that was all the time Anwyn needed to plunge through the arch at the end of the hall. He practically fell down the curving stairs and ran into the pool of bright light. Once at its center, he stopped, leaning against the empty pedestal to catch his breath and turning towards the entrance.

The shadow wraith hovered around the edges of the light. “You didn’t leave,” it said.

“I didn’t know how,” Anwyn replied.

SHADOW WRAITH

“There is no way for you to get out of here,” the wraith said. “Come, give yourself up now. Because you have helped me free myself, I will be gentle. It will be like falling asleep in your mother’s arms.”

Anwyn shook his head and grinned. His father’s lap had always been his sanctuary for naps when he was small—his mother was captain of the guard and always wore armor. “We made a bargain,” he said.

“True, young fool. But what good is a wraith’s word?”

“It would seem to have very little value once the wraith has its heartstone back,” Anwyn said. “Now, you are free to leave this place—to go out and wreck your harm on others at night.”

“And so I shall once darkness comes. Step out, young harper mage, and let me feed.”

“I have no intention of leaving this circle as long as you are alive,” Anwyn said.

“Starvation is a slow death,” the wraith said and chuckled.

Anwyn shook his head. “I will not starve,” he said. “Nor will I stay here once I have dealt with you. Glynнанis, is it really still daylight outside?”

“*Why, yes,*” the harp replied.

“Then, I will bid you goodbye, creature of darkness,” Anwyn said. “And I am sorry. I have never heard a wraith say please, but I do know that your kind will say anything they must to get what they want. Rhystar taught me that.”

Anwyn opened his mouth to sing the Gate Song, thinking of the sunny moor he had enjoyed so well that morning. Notes of such purity willed the magical portal to open around the shadow wraith.

“NO!!!” the multitude of voices shrieked as the creature was ripped from this dark realm and thrown out into the light of day. Its last scream of agony died as the portal closed.

Anwyn sat down, leaning against the pedestal and slipping Glynнанis out of the sack. He pulled the harp’s sound box against his chest and smiled.

“There must be a lot of fine treasure hidden here,” he said. “What say we look around and see if there are any books or items that might please Rhystar?”

“*A fine idea,*” Glynнанis agreed. “*I am sure we can find something he’ll fancy. But we still don’t know where the exit to this place lies.*”

“Tomorrow, once I have rested, I rather doubt that will matter much,” Anwyn said and touched fingers to Glynnanis’ strings to make them hum.