

FIRST TALE of the LIFESONG

THE RIDDLER'S GIFT

GREG HAMERTON



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The Riddler's Gift is the first novel in the Lifesong cycle.

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The Riddler's Gift

First published June 2007

Publishers

ETERNITY PRESS
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Constantia, 7806
Cape Town, South Africa

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Printed by Thomson Press

BIC : FM

ISBN 978-0-9585118-4-1

PREFACE

There is a song that drifts on the breeze through all the world. Its rhythms are echoed in our breath, the music is caught in our laughter, hidden in our language, woven through our life. Singers reach for the melody, but it is too delicate to hold and too elusive to remember. As the Ages pass, so the Lifesong retreats under the sounds of our time, its potent beauty and danger ever more a mystery.

Few know how the Lifesong has shaped our world, for those who hear its tune would rather sing than write, and to grasp its tale we must go back, far back beyond our brief and incomplete history, to when the world was changing, when Life was shadowed by a mighty legend.

In that most vital era, when the destiny of Humankind was balanced on a blade, the inhabited Earth was known as Oldenworld. Magic was a raw force then, released from the confining code that so tightly binds it today, yet to master that magic required great patience and even more wit; few apprentices became casters, fewer still became masters.

So much power in the hands of so few. Ever has it been the cause of woe. At first those gifted masters wrought works of great beauty in the rising civilisations of Oldenworld. But they became distracted by the powers they had discovered, seeking majesty, seeking mastery. Seeking might.

And so those who had first been hailed as the Wise, the wizards, now fought amongst themselves, determined to prove one lore over another, to justify one vision of magic as superior, all-encompassing and absolute.

The battle for power was fierce. Those wizards who did not fight to prove their lore, fell.

At first the wizards used principles of Dark and Light for their spells. Such an elementary form of magic came to be known as the first axis. After much study the Wise discovered a second axis, but this only intensified the conflict as those who summoned raw Energy now rallied against those who could command solid Matter. The wizards were driven by the escalating violence to find a resolution; Oldenworld could not sustain such a conflict. Their urgency led

them to the third and most advanced axis, a lore of Order, a lore that promised ultimate peace.

There was a hidden price to pay. Order demanded perfection. Order demanded knowledge and structure, it demanded control. The wizards could see no danger; they eagerly developed the magic of the third axis, hoping to mold Humankind into ever greater stability. How different the world would be, if wisdom preceded action.

Too late they considered what might develop on the opposite pole of their third axis, too late they noticed the one who had mastered Chaos.

He swung the third axis like a warhammer: Ametheus, the Sorcerer, the Unbinder. The bringer of Ruin. He tore apart their ordered web of control before the wizards had even recognised their common foe; he smashed their College and their future with it. When the wizards gathered again, they numbered only twelve of thirty-three. By the time they had agreed to unify in one Gyre, they numbered only eight. And eight, they found, was too few.

They had failed to prepare for the coming of the tide, and Oldenworld began to change. The entire lowlands north of the great mountains fell to the Sorcerer's way, one realm after another corrupted by the spreading web of silvered essence, the horror named Wildfire. The people were ravaged with such change they could not recognise their own kinfolk. Beings which should have had no place in the history of Humankind walked the face of the Earth.

The Gyre fought to restore Order, they fought to save the precious networks of commerce and culture, but Ametheus severed the veins of every system and corrupted the blood of every resistant soldier. Such was his hatred for the wizards and their Order.

Those who could, retreated south, to the heartlands, where for a time the Sorcerer's power could not reach. But all things that slumber, awaken renewed. When his influence began to spread again, the Gyre suspected that Oldenworld faced its doom.

Ametheus. Some said he was mad from the first. Some began to whisper that he was the shadow of another, more ancient evil, for it was true that he reached beyond the knowledge contained in any of the wizard's lores; he drew his inspiration from a mightier source.

The wizards of the Gyre even began to fear that their own reasoning had become affected by Chaos. They trusted their perfect foundation of knowledge, but they fought amongst themselves, and had begun to serve the Sorcerer's ends in so doing. They needed a champion to

resist the Sorcerer, someone with a special talent, different to their own. Yet such a champion would have to be born in a place where nothing was known of Amethus, where no trace of his power lurked. And so they conceived of Eyri, the most secret of secrets, a realm to be sheltered from the very essence of Chaos for as long as possible. The wizards chose an unknown region in the southern mountains beyond the heartlands—the furthest territory from Amethus which lay fertile and populated, and as yet untouched by the scourges to the north.

The Gyre wove a powerful shield around Eyri and devised a complex network of rules to ensure that the realm wasn't tainted from within. They selected a precious talisman of power and set it in place. They chose one member of their circle, the one best suited to sift gold from gravel, and they bade him farewell. Then the seven wizards departed from that precious jagged-rimmed realm.

They tried to forget what they had done, for even a secret held in mind might not be safe from the Sorcerer. They dared not think upon it, and yet they dared not forget it, because without the crucible of Eyri they would face Amethus without hope.

The battle for Oldenworld continued, and in the years that passed, the Gyre began to understand their foe. They found ways to bring peace to places he had ravaged, they struck blows that shattered his cruel inventions, and they survived, as a pack of wolves survives when facing a bear. Yet before their eyes Oldenworld continued to crumble. So much was lost, so many lives were stamped into the mud of battlefields that should not have been trodden upon, so many people lost their lives to despair.

The wizards of the Gyre grew tired. To assert Order required continuous effort; spreading Chaos took no effort at all. Amethus surged into the heartlands, his presence pouring in from both the west and the east. As the beleaguered Gyre fought, their fear grew, for they suspected that the Sorcerer would not stop until he had disrupted everything. He reached for powers that should remain untouched. He would bend the course of Time upon itself until it ruptured. His vision was of all Order ended, replaced by an existence so far from our natural course that nothing precious would remain, not a leaf, not a light, not even the tale of the Lifesong. The Sorcerer reached for the End, and no one could stop him.

The only hope lay in Eyri. And yet, for years, there was only silence from that mountain-rimmed realm.

1. THE GLEE OF GENESIS

“The strength of a song can be marked
by the silence that surrounds it.”—*Zarost*

The shadows were long. The fading sun rested among the tall western peaks. The forests which carpetted the slopes around the high village had begun to darken, and the wind had a bite to it—a warning there would be snow before winter thawed. The scent of smoke lingered in the lee of the buildings; indoors there would be warm hearths and watchful hounds, but the people would be gone.

Tabitha quickened her pace through the empty streets, worried that she would be late. Her soft boots hardly made a sound on the cobbles, only the fabric of her dress whispered with every step. A curl of hair blew across her face, and she tucked it hurriedly behind her ear.

She knew that she shouldn't have lingered for so long to practice, but she had been determined to perfect her recital. She had tuned her familiar lyre again and again, but it wouldn't hold the notes to match her voice, as though the instrument knew of the contest tonight and shuddered under her nervous fingers. She wanted to win a place amongst the three best singers, and so earn a chance to perform in the King's Challenge. All the villagers of First Light would be at the inn, and a good many visitors besides. She should be there already.

The street held a tense air as if the neighbourhood waited for Tabitha to pass. A building moved, or its shadow shrank against a wall. Her mind was playing tricks with her. She turned away from the imaginary disturbance to take a short-cut, but just as she did so, a toddler tottered into the street up ahead.

He was a lone little figure in a hooded red coat, small between the looming buildings. The child wobbled uncertainly, then turned towards Tabitha. She recognised him, and she guessed that he had only just realised he was lost. Kip was too curious for his own good, and his mother was often too distracted to keep a constant eye on him. His expression showed that his curiosity had once again led him beyond the limit of his bravery.

A tall man rushed from a doorway beside Kip. Although his back was to Tabitha, his black robe seemed to pull the shadows in his wake. He snatched the toddler from the cobbles, and strode off toward a side

alley, with Kip's head protruding from under his arm. Kip gasped like a fish, but didn't make a sound. Tabitha stared after him, too surprised to move.

A queer shiver ran down her spine; what she was seeing could not be true.

"Hey! Wait!" she shouted. The man threw an angry glance over his shoulder, and disappeared into the shadows of the alley at a run.

"Stop! Child-snatcher!" Tabitha shouted, but the street was empty of help, and the windows dark. She ran for the alley before she could consider the consequences. Her lyre bounced hard against her back on its strap, and she lost a moment securing it under her arm. The alley was gloomy, and the cobbles were slippery underfoot. The man was so fast that only the flutter of his robe showed where he ducked around the corner. He seemed to blend with the shadows.

Kip still hadn't made a sound. He should be bawling his lungs out.

Tabitha sprinted. Her foot slipped at the corner, and her dress tangled around her legs, causing her to careen wide of the turn. She caught herself against the far wall of the alley. When she gathered her dress and ran again, the child-snatcher was out of sight. The street into which she emerged was empty, but for a broken-down cart which slumped against a wall, and too many shadows.

The sound of running came from her left, and she chose the first break in the buildings to dart that way. The passage opened onto another deserted street, where the last of the sunlight was fading from the roofs. Tabitha slowed to a jog. The little one had to cry out soon, and she would follow that sound.

But there was nothing to hear—only the wind moaned through the eaves.

Her stomach knotted tight. She tried to ignore her mounting dread, and peered alongside every building.

What kind of man steals a child?

A smudge of red caught her eye, but when she turned her head, there was nothing there. She tiptoed between the buildings and into a short dead-end street. A jumble of crates occupied the wedge of two converging warehouse walls.

Then she caught sight of a little face behind a latticed crate-side; a panicked prisoner within the discarded cage. Kip's face was screwed up, his body shook, but although it was clear that he was crying, he still made no sound. Tabitha looked nervously around. The doorways

nearby were empty, the doors closed deep in the shadows.

The strange dark man was gone.

Relief made her legs weak. The black-robed abductor had been more than just a stranger; the way the shadows had clung to his shape, his swift movement, like a predator, stalking. He had preyed upon a child! She hoped that she would never see him again.

“Oh, Kip, it’s all right, it’s all right!” she called out, making her way to him. She tipped the crate aside, and reached for the little adventurer.

A sudden, cold gust crept up her skirts. The street darkened at her back, and she realised she was not alone.

“Hullo, pretty.”

Something sharp pressed against her ribs, and a dry hand caught her neck. “Not a word, or you’ll feel my knife in your heart. I care nothing for your life.”

It was not the words which made her weak, it was the certainty in the declaration. I care nothing for your life—she knew he meant it, she could feel his ugly menacing spirit. She clutched Kip close, and tried to resist shaking. The man’s touch was cold, so cold. He bent his cowed head close to her. One glance at his face and she turned quickly away. Cold, grey eyes watched her, marbled orbs with yellow-stained whites, eyes devoid of mercy. Her shivering became impossible to control.

“The Master could use you as well,” he said. “Walk with me a while.” It was a mocking invitation. The pressure of his knife compelled her to turn. She lifted Kip to her chest to keep ahead of their captor.

He forced a quick pace toward the outskirts of the village. He moved to her side, with an arm around her shoulder, as if to pretend there was nothing unusual about their procession. Tabitha didn’t dare break from his hold, his grip was cruel, the blade was too close against her, the tip cold and sharp where it had pierced her clothes and found skin. The darkness seemed to follow them, as if the shadows thickened when they passed.

Something shot low over their heads, a dark winged shape born upon a whistle of wind. The man snaked his arm around Tabitha’s throat, and brought her to such an abrupt halt that she almost lost her grip on Kip. Her lyre pressed painfully under her arm, but it was the knife she suddenly felt the worst. She tried to arch her back away from the pain. She prayed he wasn’t about to sink the blade home.

A raven croaked at them from a rooftop, then heaved itself into the air. The man didn't move; he watched its flight, then cursed when it croaked again.

"You've led someone to me, bitch." He gripped Tabitha by her hair, pulled her hard against his chest. "I'll be back for you." It was not a threat, it was a statement—he believed it. Tabitha believed it. As he released her, his cloak must have brushed over her eyes, for a sudden darkness passed across her vision. Tabitha wondered if she was about to faint.

"You'll say nothing to give me away," he said, his stale breath close. "Silence!"

She gagged against a sudden cold in her chest, and coughed. The knife at her back was gone. Her vision cleared.

She didn't dare turn until she was sure of her balance, in case he was still there, in case the sound of fleeing footsteps was just a fantasy. She clutched Kip tight. He was warm, but his body still shook with his silent cries.

The footsteps came back, a pounding, heavy tread. Tabitha didn't bother to check where he was, she just ran.

"Stop!" boomed a man behind her. "Stop, in the name of the King!"

She fled down the street, but something in the commanding voice made her glance over her shoulder.

The figure who charged after her was not the black-robed man after all. A Sword, one of the King's soldiers, all muscle and burnished steel, raced up the street. Not just any Sword, she realised, as she came to an abrupt halt. The powerful man in the blue cloak of office was unmistakable. Glavenor, the Swordmaster of Eyri. She could not have imagined a more welcome sight. The highest law in the land had arrived.

The Swordmaster wasted no time in catching up to her. He halted close enough that Tabitha could smell the freshness of his oiled leather, see the reflections in his armour. His expression was fierce.

"Where are you taking that child?" he demanded. He reached for Kip, and she pulled back in reflex. She searched his face in alarm, and began to answer his question, but found that she could not speak. She formed the words; nothing came out.

The Swordmaster gripped her wrist.

"Someone called out the alarm for a child-snatcher, and here I find the child. Explain yourself, young lady."

Tabitha choked on her panic. She had lost her voice. When she cleared her throat and tried again, nothing more than a wheeze passed her lips.

“Come with me,” said the Swordmaster. “I’ll see this child returned to its mother. Then you and I shall have a chat.”

Oh, Mercy, he thinks I’m the child-snatcher.

She shook her head violently. She held Kip with her right hand, and Glavenor had her left, so she was forced to point with her chin down the street, to where her captor had escaped. The gesture appeared idiotic, no doubt, and there was nothing for the Swordmaster to see when he finally caught her meaning. The street was empty, there was no trace of the black-robed felon, nothing within the shadows, or without.

When Glavenor turned on her again, his voice was as forgiving as an iron bar. “It’ll go easier on you if you just come along, without a fuss.”

The stranger will get away! she tried to say. Not even a whisper passed from her lips; she had lost her voice, and so had Kip. That was more terrifying than anything she had endured.

“The child,” he said, extending his free hand. She let the Swordmaster take Kip. He placed the tearful boy high on his shoulder. She offered no resistance when Glavenor led her away.

The route the Swordmaster chose took them toward the centre of First Light. The villagers would be gathered outside the Tooth-and-Tale, the inn which was hosting this year’s singing contest.

The contest! Tabitha realised with alarm. *How am I going to sing at all?* She tried to free her hand from Glavenor’s grip, but he shot her a forbidding glance.

She knew Glavenor was a good man. He had brought justice to the village in the few times he had passed through. He was a hero of Eyri, young for his rank, but peerless. To be led in his hand like a bad girl was deeply embarrassing. That he might consider her to be a felon was worse, but she couldn’t talk to save herself.

As they drew nearer to the people, she quailed. People from all over Meadowmoor County, some of them she didn’t even know. She was supposed to stand before that crowd tonight and entertain them with her singing. She could not be led before them like this. Not by the Swordmaster.

Glavenor seemed to understand her distress, for he eased his grip on her wrist. “You try to run, I’ll catch you.”

Tabitha nodded, mute. The Swordmaster allowed her to walk beside him unrestrained, but he was near enough to fall upon her in an instant.

As soon as they neared the sprawling inn and joined the edge of the milling crowd outside, a stout woman cut a path towards them. Mrs Quilt brooked no nonsense, and the innkeeper's eyes were firmly locked onto her toddler.

"And where have you been?" Mrs Quilt scolded, with only a cursory nod to Glavenor to acknowledge his presence.

Glavenor handed the child over. Mrs Quilt hugged Kip close.

"Thank you, Swordmaster! And Tabitha. Where did you find him?"

Tabitha gagged on her reply, then hid her inability with a cough. The shock grew worse, every time she tried to speak. She dropped her eyes.

"This young lady was trying to escape with your child," Glavenor said, at her side.

Mrs Quilt was instantly offended. "Tabitha? A child-snatcher?" Surprised faces within the crowd turned their way. "Don't be ridiculous. He's wrong, isn't he, Tabitha?"

Tabitha shook her head, then nodded, then paddled in the air with her hands. How could she explain chasing the man in the black robe, and the horror of being caught? She gestured toward her throat, then held up an open palm.

"I take it this young lady is a mute?" asked Glavenor.

"Tabitha Serannon is our truthsayer!" Mrs Quilt said. "What's the matter, Tabitha?"

But Tabitha couldn't answer.

Glavenor's eyebrows rode upwards. "This is Trisha Serannon's daughter?" he asked. "She's changed a lot since I was last here." His expression softened, though in his disciplined features, it was hard to be sure.

Two years. He had last been in First Light two years ago. Tabitha remembered lingering wherever he was in the village, and wishing she would one day find the courage to talk to him. She was surprised Glavenor remembered her at all.

Glavenor watched her with a level gaze. "Why did you run from me, when I first saw you with the child?"

Tabitha touched her throat, and shook her head again. Dry, terrifying silence.

“Maybe she’s been practising too hard for the singing tonight,” suggested someone within the crowd. Tabitha pointed to the toddler, then back to herself, and mimed speech.

“What’s wrong with the youngling?” someone called out.

“There’s nothing wrong with my Kip!” Mrs Quilt exclaimed. She held Kip at arm’s length, but it was plain for all to see that he was trying to cry, yet making no sound.

“Wait! I’ve seen this before,” Glavenor said. His brows were gathered like storm clouds. “Be damned that it could happen here! Is there a Lightgifter in the village?”

“Only Tabitha’s mother, but she’s out on their farm,” replied Mrs Quilt.

“Any spritesalt?” he demanded. An uncomfortable mutter passed through the crowd.

“I have some,” offered a prim little lady who Tabitha knew as Fran Semple. “It’s expensive,” she added. That was no lie; the healing spritesalt was not something to be thrown about.

“Heavens, Fran! I’ll pay for it,” exclaimed Mrs Quilt.

“The King’s coin will pay for it,” Glavenor corrected. “If this is what I suspect, I must act fast.”

Fran Semple offered the Swordmaster a small vial. The blue glass glowed with an inner light. Glavenor removed the stopper with care. Even so, a few sprites spilled to the ground. Fran Semple frowned, but said nothing. Glavenor took a pinch of spritesalt, and slipped it into the toddler’s mouth. Kip pushed his tongue out at what Tabitha knew to be a sharp taste, then he swallowed.

Tabitha waited with the hushed crowd. If this didn’t work - She didn’t want to think about it.

The toddler coughed once, drew a rasping breath, and howled at the top of his lungs. Despite the appreciative murmur of the crowd and the toddler’s wail, Glavenor’s quiet curse found Tabitha’s ears.

“Shadowcaster.”

She wished she had not heard that word. It made her hand quiver as she took a hasty pinch of spritesalt for herself from the vial Glavenor offered. A Shadowcaster could not have come to First Light. Their kind were only heard of in Fendwarrow, leagues to the east. She noted how Glavenor had clenched his jaw.

She recalled the stranger’s predatory eyes. The way he had wrapped the gloom around him. The way he had forced cold into her throat. She had not wanted to consider the possibility, she still did

not want to. She had been touched by a Shadowcaster. The sprites worked their magic, releasing the Light essence, and she coughed against their sudden warmth.

“Kip was taken by a stranger,” she announced. Her voice was scratchy, as if she had sand in her throat, but it was a voice, at least. “I chased after them. I found Kip, but the man was hiding, and he came up behind me, with a knife. He was taking us both out of the village when you arrived, Swordmaster. He fled, but he said he would be back, and that I should remain silent. That’s when I lost my voice. He used the Dark essence, I think. He wore a black robe. He was a Shadowcaster.”

So saying, she confirmed the truth, for she was the village Truthsayer. Her skill compelled honesty, and her word was true. The man who had abducted her, here in First Light, was a Shadowcaster, no matter how chilling it was to believe.

Through the telling of her story, Glavenor had become still, though he was anything but calm. He was a cat, tensing for the hunt. A large and dangerous cat. He nodded, slowly.

“They evade the law like rats in the dark,” he said. “Describe him.”

“He was tall, like you, but—thinner. I didn’t get to see much else but his grey eyes, the whites were all yellow.”

Glavenor grunted. “Jurrum. They all use it.”

“The tales of the Shadowcasters are real?” challenged Mrs Quilt.

“The casters are real, all right,” the Swordmaster answered. “I have too many reports to say otherwise. But I wouldn’t believe half of the tales about them. When I catch this vermin, I am sure we shall find that it squeaks.”

“But what’s he doing in First Light?” Mrs Quilt demanded.

Garyll shrugged. “It’s always been lone farms and Lightgifiers they’ve harassed, until now, I’ve not heard of them in a village, and never this far from Fendwarrow.” He backed away from Tabitha and the others. “When he left you, which way did he run?”

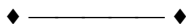
“Toward where you came from. I thought you were the Shadowcaster, returning.”

“Swordmaster! What should we do?” someone cried from within the crowd.

“Get indoors, and keep a closer eye on your children. I shall rouse the Sword and scour the village. We shall find him, or cause him to flee.”

The Swordmaster caught Tabitha's eye last. His level gaze made her stand straighter. In that moment, she forgave him for arresting her. He was the Swordmaster of Eyri; he carried the weight of the sword of justice. He had to be thorough, and firm. Then he turned, and was running.

She wished she could have asked him how she had changed in his eyes, that he had not recognised her.



The Tooth-and-Tale was crowded, even though it was enlarged for the contest night. The wall furthest from the bar had been swung back on its giant hinges, and the common-room was linked to the hall beyond, an innovation which had seen the Tooth become the place for all village gatherings, back when the Tall Hall had burned down.

A singer, on the hearth-side stage, strained to be heard over the clamour. Tabitha was kept too busy serving drinks to worry about the unfairness of the noise on contest night. She couldn't quieten the patrons—she was the one they were talking about. Her and the Shadowcaster.

As the wisdom of fermented liquids took hold, the inspired opinions became louder. More than one patron held the door with a wary eye. Any newcomer dressed in a dark cloak generated a gust of silence before the clamour returned, redoubled.

Tabitha just wished her voice would heal in time; she would have to hold a strong voice tonight to be noticed. She took a quick sip of Honeydew when she reached the bar. It soothed her throat, but not her nerves.

“Five Dwarrow, two Dew,” she called out to Mrs Quilt, and set the coins on the bar. Mrs Quilt checked the payment with a tireless enthusiasm that would have made her late husband proud. Old Stamper Quilt had been very enthusiastic about money. Too much so, some said. It was gold that had led him to his untimely end—the hope of an enlarged profit from dealing direct with the winegrowers in Bentwood County. A bridge had given way. Nothing could be proved, yet they all suspected the tale had a dark side; it didn't pay for innkeepers to bypass the wagoneers and agents when acquiring wine. Almost a year now, since Old Stamper had braved the road to Fendwarrow. Mrs Quilt forged on without him now, and she didn't show signs of strain so long as she was selling wine and collecting coin. Mrs Quilt filled Tabitha's glasses with a practised hand, set the

dark reds beside the two of pale gold, and sent Tabitha on her way. It was tricky to balance the loaded tray through the crowd and reach the patrons who had ordered the wine without spilling it on the way.

Most of the orders were for the Dwarrow wine. Two barrels had arrived that day, and they stood high on the end of the bar in clear sight, the characteristic brand-mark burned in the tap-ends. The price of the Dwarrow rose with every barrel as its lusty reputation grew. A large profit could be turned by trading in such a wine.

Two men began to fight, and Tabitha backed away from the commotion, keeping her tray high. The unrest subsided as she rounded it when others pulled the men apart, yet the argument continued to simmer below the surface of tight expressions. She hoped that the bystanders were wise enough to keep those men apart all night, and to change their drinks for something milder.

Such was the cost of trading in Dwarrow. Everyone who drank it seemed to become boisterous, or angry. Yet they hollered for more, and as they demanded, so Mrs Quilt sold. At a profit.

Tabitha dispensed the drinks, and heard a new voice take up the challenge from the stage. She turned to watch Lyndall for a moment. She hoped the innkeeper's daughter made the cut for the King's Challenge. Lyndall Quilt was a good friend. The sturdy blonde was singing Fynn Fell Down, and that meant it was almost time. Tabitha would be next. A nervous thrill skittered through her stomach. She hurried back to the bar, to steal a last few sips of Honeydew before her voice would be put to the test.

A skew-toothed youth thumped away on an empty wine-casket to the beat of Lyndall's song. He kept a reasonable time, and folks began to follow his lead, clapping, or beating their tankards on the tables. The dancing began on the open floor, and Lyndall had to compete with the revelry. She was doing well, though. She had caught the crowd, and that would count in her favour.

Even little Kip was trying to clap his hands in time to his sister's song. He was sitting where he had been placed, in clear view upon the bar beside Mrs Quilt. Tabitha waved to him, and he googled and smiled, all his tears forgotten. Tabitha wished she could forget so easily; she could still feel the dry grip of silence that had held her captive.

The sweet Honeydew wine was cold and clear, as if it retained all the sunshine and freshness of Flowerton, but the glass wasn't deep enough, and Lyndall's singing seemed to end too soon after it had

begun. Before Tabitha could even test her voice, she found herself approaching the stage through the waning applause for Lyndall. She collected her lyre from the corner. She plucked the strings gently to settle her stance on the stage, and to announce her readiness, though she was not ready at all. Butterflies had taken permanent residence in her belly.

The judges for Meadowmoor were seated close by—the three Elders from First Light, and one each from Russel, Cellarspring and Brimstone. Similar trials would be taking place in each county around Eyri—the town of Wright would hold Westfold’s contest, Flowerton would stage Vinmorgen’s, the singers in Rockroute County would be tested in Respite, and in Fendwarrow the sultry voices of Bentwood would be driving the revellers wild. Tabitha wondered just how many singers were singing that night in Eyri, and if she would be lucky enough to meet them at the King’s Challenge.

“I’m to play the Glee of Genesis,” she announced. “Could you set me down a glass, of your choosing?”

The elder from Russel, a spry lady with a delicate shawl about her shoulders, sat forward on her seat. “You can do that part of the song?”

“I hope so.”

The placing of the glass on the edge of the stage brought a new surge of speculation from the crowd, and it was to a returning clamour that Tabitha strummed the introduction to the Glee. She abandoned herself to the music. She could do nothing about the crowd, except win their silence by singing.

It was a beautiful song, and one she loved to sing. Her mother had taught her well, and yet Tabitha had surpassed even Trisha’s singing of it. There were few singers who could perform the Glee of Genesis as it was intended, and reach the high Shiver. She stroked her lyre, and gave voice to the myth of creation. Her voice held.

The Glee told of the Creator’s first elements and how they warred. Air rushed through Fire, blowing the red flames high and far. The melody rose. Fire was angered so deeply it burned gentle Water, and thus set great clouds to fill the Air. The notes went higher. Water appealed to Earth, and so the rocks rose up and swallowed the Fire whole, for Earth and Water were lovers. But even the Earth could not contain the anger of Fire, and so great streaks of flame erupted from the rocks, and the surface of the ground was scorched.

The notes of the Glee climbed to the sky, and Tabitha’s voice held.

The Goddess Ethea threaded music through the elements, bringing balance to their strife, weaving currents in the chaos, binding the elements into a sphere filled with the infinite patterns of life.

Tabitha followed the final melody of the Glee of Genesis, raising the notes. The crowd barely murmured. She wished there was a way to fill the gaps in the room with her sound, to touch the people with the vibration of every note. She felt the lack in her singing most keenly, she sensed there could be more to it, but tonight she had to settle for the fact that most of the village listened, and waited for the ascent, the final high note.

The wine-glass resting on the stone caught the orange light of the lamps overhead. She followed the path of the pure notes, upwards, to her limit.

The crowd was hushed. She could feel the imperfection in the glass waiting to turn her voice. She reached for the note of the Shiver.

In the legend, the sphere of the elements exploded to a million fragments upon that note. All life was set free in the Universe, bound only by the skin of time. In the Tooth-and-Tale, before the crowd and judges of the Singer's Contest, the glass shattered.

Tabitha wound the Glee of Genesis to a close with the last few words, of how the Goddess Ethea's song was now just an echo, heard by few, but the crowd had already erupted into applause, and her voice was drowned. She knew she had done well, for the stamping and whistling was louder than it had been even for Lyndall.

She guessed that the Dwarrow wine had much to do with the applause, but she still felt a surge of pride. Her throat tingled, but her voice had been true to the end. It had been her best performance. Only when she rose from a curtsy to the crowd did she notice the magnitude of what she had done. Embarrassment flared across her cheeks.

Not only the selected glass had been shattered.

All around the stage, drinks had spilled from glasses broken in hand. Mrs Quilt eyed a jumble of shards on the bar, and worst of all, the Swordmaster was there, seated amidst broken glass. Glavenor was gripping his forearm. She hadn't even seen him enter. He picked at something embedded in the flesh, and set it on the bar. A red bloom spread from his wound. He pressed a cloth to his arm, and shook the remaining glass from his lap as he stood.

The world spun around Tabitha, with the thunder of applause.

Glavenor looked up at her. His crimped smile held no anger. He

joined the applause. For the first time in her life Tabitha wished she had not sung so well.

“Sorry,” she said to one and all, when the clamour subsided at last. “I’m terribly sorry.”

Some of the patrons laughed. Lyndall was already sweeping the floor; a girl well accustomed to accidents in the common-room.

“I saw six glasses burst, and I saw who held them,” Mrs Quilt called out. “You six may come aside for another, on the house.”

Tabitha left the stage feeling stunned and not a little stupid. She hadn’t realised it was possible to cause so much damage with the Shiver. She had never sung the Glee with so much passion before. The spry old lady from Russel was still clapping her hands with great merriment. At least one of the judges had enjoyed the joke. She hoped the others would remember her singing, and not the accidental extra damage.

The Swordmaster bowed slightly as she approached the bar. He had quenched the bleeding on his arm.

His jaw was clean-shaved, his cheeks reflected the oil-lamp at the head of the bar. He was looking directly at her.

“Care for a drink?” he asked.

She clutched her lyre tighter. “What?”

Glavenor had deep, dark eyes. “Would you care for a drink, Miss Serannon?”

Her blush was renewed under his gaze. She could feel his attention holding her. The smile he gave her could have melted ice.

Tabitha was too startled to answer. The great Swordmaster had just been assaulted by her exploding glass. Yet his voice was deep and warm, not at all the hard command of justice heard earlier, or the harshness she still expected now.

“I’m still on duty, Master Glavenor. I’m not supposed to drink while —”

“You’re off duty for a while,” cut in Mrs Quilt, leaning over the bar. “You’ve just sung, and Lyndall’s out cleaning and serving.”

“Sorry about the glasses, Mrs Quilt. I’ll pay for the damage.”

Mrs Quilt folded her arms across her ample bosom. “No you won’t. Better this, than the damage that would have been, had you not found my little Kip. A few glasses can be replaced, my child’s life cannot. I’ll cover the cost.”

“I feel so silly about it. I sang too loudly.”

“You did us proud with your singing, though I’ve learned something

tonight. When there's a handsome man at the bar, I'll be hiding my glasses when you sing to him."

At that comment Tabitha knew she blushed rose-red. She tried not to look at Glavenor's arm, where the fresh cuts glistened as he removed the swab.

"A drink?" repeated the Swordmaster. She couldn't avoid his attention any longer.

"I'd love to. H-honeydew," she answered, taking the stool he offered. She balanced the lyre on her lap. Even the air seemed tense around Glavenor, as if he commanded that space as well.

"I'll have a touch of the same, Madam Quilt," Glavenor said.

"Not the Dwarrow?" Mrs Quilt asked. Hopeful for a higher price, if Tabitha guessed correctly.

"It has a kick it didn't have in the old days. I prefer to keep my thoughts whole."

Glavenor took the glasses, and offered Tabitha one. "I wish to apologise, for being harsh, earlier. You are a beautiful young woman. I did not recognise you for the girl I last saw here."

His aura of strength pressed against her. He smelled of leather and steel, and his tightly-bound hair glistened darkly against the light.

He eroded her composure more with every flattering comment. She had to turn the conversation. "What happened to the Shadowcaster, Swordmaster Glavenor?"

"Please, call me Garyll. You'll wear your sweet voice out if you use my title every time we speak."

She gave a little laugh, and looked away from his steady gaze, pretending to note the next performer begin on the stage. Garyll. She savoured the word, but couldn't bring herself to say it out loud. The Swordmaster must have been young when he earned the title; he was still younger than many in his service, yet he was at least fifteen years Tabitha's senior. He was a grown man.

He was still watching her. "We scoured the village," he said, keeping his voice low, "but I believe the Shadowcaster has fled. A horse was stolen from Hemsens's stable. With the traffic of the contest, it was impossible to track him in the dark further than the High Way. I'll send a patrol out in the morning, but for now the men are on guard. Which is why I am here, to see the gathering is safe."

He would make sleeping in a bear's den seem safe, were he near. He bristled with martial alertness, even while he sipped at his wine and watched her.

“You play the lyre very well,” he said.

Her answer came out in a rush. “It’s my mother’s old lyre, the first one she had, but she’s got another one carved by the crafter in Stormhaven which plays a deeper tune than mine, and has twice as many strings, so it gives a richer music, but it’s more difficult to play, and I’m not good enough to pluck the deep-lyre and sing at the same time, so this one serves me best.” She stopped suddenly, realising how much she had said in only one breath. Saying the first thing which came to mind was a terrible idea.

She turned the lyre in her hands, and fiddled with the end of the taut strings. *I’ll bite my tongue, if I have to.*

“I’ve never met a woman who could stop six men drinking, all at once,” he said, with an earnest expression.

When she realised he was teasing her, she glowered in mock anger.

“No, really, it was wonderful piece of singing,” he said, raising his hands as if to defend himself. He smiled. “You’re good. You’re very good.”

“Thank you.” She turned quickly away before he could see how wide her smile was.

He’s just being polite, stop getting all worked up about his eyes.

And yet his compliments seemed genuine, unlike the flattery she had learned to ignore from those shifty-eyed patrons who stayed too late.

A youth from Brimstone was singing on the stage, the last of the contestants. He couldn’t hide all of his nervousness from his voice, but his lute-work was brilliant. The judges would have a hard time choosing, this year. She hoped she was one of the three who’d have a chance to travel to Stormhaven at Yearsend, to play before the King.

She turned to face Glavenor again. “Is Stormhaven really roofed in gold?” she asked. She regretted the vapid words as they fell from her lips. He smiled, and didn’t tease her ignorance.

“In a manner of speaking. A few roofs in the Upper Quadrant have gilt capping. Of course there’s the Palace, and the very tops of the battlements too, but for the most part it’s stone, and the ancient stonewood. In the mornings, when the mist from the lake is thin, the gold catches the sun, and the glow fills the city. For that time, Stormhaven is the most beautiful place in all of Eyri. You can feel the history under your feet, you can feel the strength of the city walls, the order that binds all of Eyri together.”

“I hope to travel there, some day,” she said, wistful. Garyll’s description had made her want to pack for the King’s Isle that night.

“You’ll surely sing in the King’s Challenge this year.”

“I have to be judged worthy.”

“And so you will. You have the most beautiful voice,” he said, a glint to his eye.

She took a breath.

“Thank you, Garyll.”

It sent a thrill up her spine. Garyll. She had called him by his first name, and he didn’t seem to mind. The Swordmaster of Eyri, talking to her, and she had called him Garyll.

“It’s been a while since I’ve been in Stormhaven myself,” he admitted. “Too much unrest, elsewhere. Lone farms. Lightgifters in trouble.”

“Around Fendwarrow?”

He nodded, and spread his hands. He had strong hands. “There is always good in the bad, and bad in the good, but in that village, things are rather darker than most. It’s as if the wildness comes with the Black River, and seeps into everything. We have to transfer the Swords in that station every year. There is more work for a Sword trying to uphold the law in that small village than there is in the entire city of Stormhaven.”

He pushed an empty glass across the bar, then rose.

“Which reminds me I’d best patrol again, before I become entranced by your smile. All seems well here. It may not be so elsewhere.”

Lone farms and Lightgifters. Her parents stayed on the farm. Her mother was a Lightgifter. A nasty little worry crept up her back.

“Miss Serannon, I enjoyed your company. My apologies again, for the misunderstanding.” He lifted her hand to his lips, and kissed it. The gesture was acceptably polite, yet it sent shivers up her arm. “Good night,” he added, letting her hand slip from his. When she only nodded, he bowed, and made his way to the door.

Tabitha couldn’t make her tongue work. This time, it had nothing to do with the strange magic of the Shadowcaster.

“Thank you, and good night too,” she said, at last, to his retreating back. Too late, but maybe he had heard her.

“You can call me Tabitha,” she whispered.

But the door to the common-room swung open, and the Swordmaster was gone. Master Glavenor. Garyll.

She became aware of the clamour of the inn again. The Tooth

would not empty for a while yet, the judges were still deliberating, and Lyndall was weaving through the crowd with a tray held high.

Mrs Quilt leant on the bar beside Tabitha.

“Now that’s a man we could afford to see far more of around these parts,” she said.

“Do you think he’ll stay for long?”

Mrs Quilt harrumphed. “A man like the Swordmaster travels all the time. Don’t you get your heart set on him, you hear? He’ll be off before the week is out, and never come back for a year. That’s his duty, as Swordmaster of Eyri. He must go everywhere, see everything. He is the hand of justice, and he is needed elsewhere than in this sleepy hollow.”

“Would one see more of him in Stormhaven?” said Tabitha, shifting on her stool to face the matronly innkeeper.

Mrs Quilt puckered her lips. “Forget him, girl. He was just being polite with you. Chasing him will give you nothing but a sore heart.”

Tabitha nodded, but kept her thoughts to herself; Mrs Quilt was mad. You did not forget a man like Garyll Glavenor.

A bell rang from the stage, on and on, until the noise of the crowd subsided, and the judges of the singing contest could be heard. Each of the elders had their say about the wonderful quality of the singing, the fresh new talent, the importance of such events, and thanked the people for their support. The discourses only served to wind her nervousness as taut as a lyre string. At last, the spry old lady from Llury stood to the fore, to pronounce the result.

“Lyndall Quilt from First Light, Peter Prookle from Cellarspring, and Tabitha Serannon. Congratulations, you are selected for the King’s Challenge.”

Applause filled the common-room like the sound of heavy rain. Lyndall emerged from the crowd, and took her hand as Tabitha joined her to approach the stage. Tears fell bright on Lyndall’s cheeks, but her smile was enormous. When they accepted their tokens from the senior judge, the crowd whistled, hooted, and stomped on the floor. The gilded disc suspended on Tabitha’s ribbon had the King’s seal stamped in the centre of the cross. The King’s seal.

She couldn’t wait to show her mother. Trisha Serannon would be so proud. Sunday evening suddenly seemed a long time in the future, and the farm at Phantom Acres a long way away.



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