

SECOND TALE OF THE LIFESONG



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IGHT

GREG
HAMERTON

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by GREG HAMERTON

Second Sight

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FIRST THINGS FIRST?

You can enjoy this book on its own, even though it is part of a series. Here's what they said about the First Tale of the Lifesong:

“Utterly compelling...with a blistering climax.”

Terry Grimwood, Author: The Exaggerated Man

“I felt quite immersed in his creation.”

Nerine Dorman: Cape Times, South Africa

“A highly recommended fantasy novel—enormous fun to read and extremely easy to lose yourself within.” *FantasyBookReview (UK)*

“When you reach the end of The Riddler's Gift, you're left wanting more. Highly, highly recommended.” *FantasyBookCritic (USA)*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Greg Hamerton is fascinated by magic and is a disciple of transforming paper into gold, one word at a time. Originally from Cape Town, he lives near London with his wife and a small stone dragon.

He is an adventure enthusiast, extreme-sports writer and film maker, but mostly enjoys soaring over mountains on his paraglider and writing imaginative fiction.

Second Sight is his second novel in the Lifesong cycle.

Find out more on greghamerton.com

THE FIRST MOVEMENT

FROM EYRI

A song in heart, borne through the veins,
to live in simple silence;
the knowledge that the song remains,
to die in perfect peace.

1. A QUIVER IN THE STRINGS

“How can you understand the language of music, if you will not be an instrument?”—Zarost

There was a time when the winds of change blew across Oldenworld, scattering the dry leaves of autumn like manic heralds through the avenues. The winds might have been recognised, had there been anyone wise enough to interpret the subtle signs. Filaments shook free from the cotton plants in western Orenland, only to be caught again in the thorn trees further east, where they flapped like tattered pennants in clusters of three. Fretful fires began in the forests of Koraman, brief blazes that suffocated upon their own smoke as the wild wind passed. High over Moral kingdom, threads of lightning crossed a bruised and purple sky as whirlwinds stalked beneath the clouds. The harbinger swept onward over the Winterblades, twisting and tumbling through the grasslands until it reached the smooth sands of the southern deserts and there, at last, found its peace.

The people of the Three Kingdoms had been warned, but they had become too learned to pay heed to omens. They feared no one in those years. Order ruled their culture; order built upon the advancing lore of magic. Into that time did the Destroyer choose to plant his seed.

Celebrations were held to mark the end of another plentiful summer. In the town of Fairway, three days north-east from the capital city of Kingsmeet, the bells pealed long and loud. A night had come that could not be missed: the festival of Summerset Eve. It brought troupes of entertainers from far and wide to Fairway’s tiered Rank-hall. Actors, jesters and musicians filled the pits. There was something for every class of citizen, from cock-fights and cheap ale for the grovellers in the basements to fine food and song for the trading families. In the uppermost chambers, the high nobility attended an elegant exclusive ball. The servants scuttled among these levels bearing all manner of wines, delicacies, and other pleasures more discreetly offered.

Of these pleasures, none was as popular as the saccharine dust called Joy. It was said that from the greatest refinement came the sweetest sugar, and Joy was the taste of that elegance. The wizards had originally devised it to bring happiness to those prone to melancholy,

but strangely enough it was most sought after by the nobility, who surely did not suffer at all. Yet, it was accepted that one should have some of the wizard's white powder to cap the celebrations at the stroke of midnight.

The Baroness Elam-Rye had enjoyed the ball. As the recently widowed wife of a minor baron, Katrine Elam-Rye had inherited a small estate, but also the first rung on the ladder of nobility, and she was determined to climb higher. She noted the men who turned their eyes toward her that night, even some whom were married, and she offered them thimbles of the sweet dust at the turn of the celebration. She consumed much herself.

And so the strictures of ceremony dissolved with the Joy in her veins.

Summerset Eve surrounded her with wild delight. The gilded ballroom swirled to become a dance of coloured lights and liquid passions, captivating in its intensity. The Baroness lost track of whom she danced with, and whether they promised to court her. The effect of the Joy dust should have begun to fade, but Katrine found herself falling further and further into abandonment. Perspiring beneath her long gown, she tore it off above the knees. She sang, almost in tune with the musicians. The dancing and drumming grew wilder and wilder. She found herself in the lower levels of the Rank-hall, lower than her class afforded her, and yet she was excited and entranced and bewildered by it all.

Wine that bubbled, fingers that dipped into cream, cherries that filled her mouth with juice as their ripe skins split upon her teeth—men, strong men, young men, laughing with her, kissing her, wanting her.

Faster and faster the world turned. The room grew dim. The sounds encircled her, like a chanting crowd then like rabid dogs, barking and snarling and closing on her as her knees ground into the floor. She rode the rhythms of her body's climax in a dark corner somewhere in the lowest level of the Rank-hall. She couldn't see, couldn't feel. She couldn't understand what was happening to her. But she knew enough to be scared.

Then an ancient face that filled the darkness with its fire rose before her. A sonorous voice spoke in a language of echoing tones, unintelligible yet filled with a hunger that rushed through her, carrying an awful heat, an awesome power. The shimmering silver patterns upon his deep eyes made her weak. His presence dominated

her, even though she understood that He was not of this world; that He was separated by a gulf. She experienced only a sliver of what He could be. He watched her a moment longer then reached into His face to tear the left eye from its place. He thrust it toward Katrine, thrust it into her, and she cried out.

She was burning, burning, burning.

Katrine came to shaking uncontrollably, pressed to the floor on her knees in a curtained alcove beside a rough wooden stage. The effect of the Joy dust had worn off. Stealing a cowed actor's robe to cover her shamefully torn dress, Katrine ran from the vile basement.

But she could not run from the sin she had committed that Summerset Eve, and from the sin that had been committed upon her.

She threw up in the morning, into the waters of her bathing pool. She told herself it was because of bad cherries, but the heat of the nightmare still clung to her, and soon she could not bear to wear any clothes at all. After a month of terrible pains and sweating, Katrine called a great wizard to her chambers, and he confirmed what she dreaded. She was with child. At once she demanded of the wizard that he provide her with a foetal poison to end her pregnancy, and this he did, for a large fee, but after another month the foetus still clung to her womb like a terrible cancer. The wizard suggested using a needle of cold steel, but as soon as it entered her it burned the wizard's hand to the bone. The wizard staggered away, clutching at his ruined hand, while tearing the air with threads of light as he tried to heal himself. He did not approach Katrine Elam-Rye again, demanding that she tell him the full story of the night of conception. Afterward, he hurried away to consult his lore.

When he returned, he said he knew what was within her, and that there was nothing to worry about, but he spoke too loudly, and beads of sweat ran from his bald head. He told the baroness he would use his magic to kill what was in her womb. For a long time he turned the scattering pages of his collected notes, spoke slow words of power and covered himself with magical wards. Then, at last, he touched his hand to her swollen belly and called out a spell. He didn't finish the words. Suddenly rigid, the wizard dropped to the floor—dead.

Katrine Elam-Rye was terrified of the child she carried, but after the wizard, she could do nothing but count herself ever closer to the dreaded month of delivery. She cried at the injustice of her condition. Some of the men who had enjoyed her Summersend advances came to seek her out. One was even an Earl. She could not receive him.

Katrine hid in shame and nakedness, her body red and bloated. No one answered further visitors at all, because she dismissed the servants for fear they would speak of her condition. Among the nobility it would be whispered that the Baroness Elam-Rye had squandered her meagre wealth, and that she was likely to slip below even the humble class of her own parents, who had been *traders*.

The callers stopped coming. They did not wish to court a peasant.

No one guessed what was really happening to her.

It was high summer in Oldenworld, and the month of her great heaviness ended when her waters broke. She staggered to the forest, where there would be no witnesses. She took a butcher's knife with her, pretending she would use it to cut the umbilical cord, but in secret a darker thought turned over and over in her mind. She could kill the abomination that had brought her such shame, ending its terror forever.

But she fainted from the pain of trying to pass the enormous child. When she awoke there was a great amount of blood, too great to stop. A small fire burnt among the leaves, throwing smoke and heat against her face.

Something had latched onto her breast, something bulbous, deformed, devil-marked. She gave a small cry, and the thing upon her lifted its head. She looked into its eye, and screamed...

A single eye set in a pallid, crushed face. So close, the eye too focused, the dark iris marked with shimmering, spiralled silver patterns. The babe looked at her as if it knew what she had done to it, what she had tried to do.

There was too much blood, too much to stop.

She died looking into that single eye, the last of her life having soaked into the leaves beneath her.

Ametheus: deformed from the magical poison fed to him, scarred from the spell which had sought out his mind and divided it in three, abandoned by a mother who left only one offering of milk to him before her breasts went cold beneath his bloodless lips.

He would be persecuted; he would be blamed and cursed and feared all of his life.

Ay, he had reason to hate magic and all those who wielded it.

2. TROUBLED CLEFF

“In the middle of power is the little word owe;
the duty you have to use what you know.” —Zarost

Magic was a treacherous craft, Tabitha Serannon decided, because it gave one a sense of power yet made one so terribly weak. She hadn't slept at all for two days, she was tired and hungry and her throat was sore. Yet her art demanded more of her. Because she could heal people, she had to. They came, in their hundreds, to her hall in Levin, to be touched by the Wizard. She could not escape from her duty. She could not escape from her magic.

Echoes of the Lifesong quivered through her veins. The more she worked with the song, the more she understood how it was drawn from the sounds of the world around her, and how the sounds themselves defined the shape and form of what was real. She was wrapped in a melody; the kingdom of Eyri was a melody.

Dawn over Eyri had been spectacular and the sky had been filled with that subtle music she heard ever more within her soul, the call of the many voices combining to form the day. When the mist had burnt away from the great central Amberlake, the softer, whiter sounds among the chorus had been lost, the song becoming clearer. The warm hum of the Amberlake grew richer and deeper as the waters became visible. That sound was divided by the high tone of the long and narrow black causeway stretching away from Levin to the distant glittering settlement of Stormhaven upon the King's Isle. Tabitha's gaze was drawn to the glistening white peak of Fynn's Tooth, which stood sentinel on the western horizon, its ice and bare rock jingling in her ears. Below the Tooth grew a rumpled skirt of forests, and below that, the distant green hills of Meadowmoor County rang with their verdant health.

So much music blended she could hardly discern the melodies. The sun playing against her hands was the coloured symphony of full daylight, the air against her face, the soft dampness of the dew on the grass, the arching blue sky... All cast a music toward her. All resonated to form a harmonious and ever-changing theme. So many things touched her with their sound, and she was connected to

them all. She realised then how little she used to see, before she had become a wizard. Eyri was more beautiful than she had ever known. It pulsed with the golden sounds of living creatures, of people, of dancing lights and silent shadows, and the ever-shifting patterns of the elements. All that was real, was song.

Yet now, as the afternoon drew on, *her* song was failing. Although the music sustained her spirit, she sensed the other theme below it—the deep fatigue gnawing at her bones.

She sank to the floor then gazed about her domain. The hall was full—fuller than full. Wherever a blanket could be laid upon the straw there were two. She had asked them to bring bunches of flowers to sweeten the air, but nothing could hide the ripe smell of blood and sweat. The petals had been trampled and scattered upon the floor. The same could be said for many of the injured men.

They had seen her sit, so they expected her to perform again. Those who could rise began to converge on her, stumbling between the makeshift beds. Some dragged their blankets with them, some were clothed, and some crawled closer through the dirty straw.

The world closed in upon her, a gathering crush of needy humanity; the men who had been caught in the horror of the battle upon the Kingsbridge. Only the circle of her wardens kept Tabitha from being overrun. She had to ignore the many pleas for healing, because she had already chosen her sufferer when she had sat beside him. She could serve no more than one at a time.

His lips were parched and cracked, his face pale. A bloody crust stained his chest where an arrowhead protruded through his breastplate. A second shaft had been broken close to the fabric of his trousers, where the wound wept angry colours into the threads. The true danger lay deeper, though, an infection near his heart. Tabitha could see the approach of death in his eyes.

“Help me. Heal me,” the man pleaded.

She bowed her head, but gripped the man’s hand, to let him know she would try. To heal him, she had to deny someone else a chance at healing. That was difficult to bear, but there was no other way—she was too tired to heal them all. Some of them would have to die.

The wounded man pulled weakly on her hand. “Please,” he said.

Tabitha raised her lyre. She had sung her first stanza of the Lifesong so many times that it came to her without any effort. It had once been an inspiration, to release such wonderful power, but with every iteration, the Lifesong became more of a burden, a responsibility.

When she plucked the first note from the lyre, the crowd thickened even more. Some of the patients had missed her preparations, and they wailed and ran to get as close to the source of her magic as possible, to be near the Wizard, who could save them from their misery.

Hands reached out to touch her. Fingers brushed against her hair. Someone touched her lyre briefly. A child tugged at her dress. It was as if they believed she was a charm that needed to be rubbed for the magical effect to be passed on. Tabitha hunched over to avoid the crowd's pressing need. She reached inward, to that place of solitude, wherein the Lifesong rang clear and true.

Heads pushed in past the wardens' defensive circle. Soon the crowd would crush the man she was trying to heal. It always happened, no matter how many times she tried to explain the truth to them: only the place that she held in mind would be touched by the magic of the Lifesong. The people believed her mere presence brought healing, and if they could touch Tabitha or one she had healed, they would draw some of that healing power onto themselves.

Too many hands touched her. Hands crept all over her body. People pressed too close.

Tabitha didn't scream, or move, or fight against the crowd. She had learnt it was futile, for if she shouted, her words touched more of them, and so more were drawn. There was only one answer to their need.

She sat quite still, and waited.

A sighing, mournful whisper spread through the crowd. Those closest to her knew what to do. They knew the spell had been stopped; the Wizard was not singing. They tried to push back against the press of the crowd, but it was fifty deep, and most of the people were still trying to move inward, to get as close to the Wizard as possible, to be touched by her healing aura as she worked her magic. Tabitha waited for the jostling and shoving and whispered arguments to spread. At last the people fell back, but only slightly, just enough for her wardens to re-establish their circle. At least the people weren't touching the lyre any more.

She began again. Her ring warmed, and her eyesight sharpened. Clear essence danced through the air all around her. Despite her use of it, there always seemed to be more clear essence, as if it was intrinsic to everything. The clear essence shimmered as she sang. Swirls of rainbow colours hinted at where her voice touched.

She considered the wounded man. The two arrows had brought

infection along the length of their shafts. They would complicate the healing.

“Bastion!” she called out, keeping the melody of the Lifesong thrumming through her lyre. “Bastion! I need the arrows removed, both of them.”

The tallest of her wardens came to her side. His loden cloak hung almost to the floor, the cowl hiding his face completely. He would not emerge from that cowl in public. The crowds had to believe he was a warden, one of many healed men who strived to repay the wizard through devoted service.

Bastion squatted down. He set the stump of his left wrist against the dying man’s chest, and gripped the arrow shaft in his right.

“Ready?” he asked.

Tabitha gathered the clear essence, and nodded. As Bastion tore the shaft from the man’s chest, she guided her essence into the fresh wound. Thankfully, the arrow had a slender, armour-piercing head, not the broad-heads some of the men had taken, which opened them terribly. A bloom of blood spilled across his breastplate nonetheless, and the man gaped with the pain. He croaked as Bastion pulled the second arrow free.

Tabitha had to be quick. She had learnt it was crucial to be focused with the first stanza. One stray thought and the clear essence would turn into whatever she fantasised about. She had to imagine all the flesh that would be replacing the injury; she had to envisage all the organs in their perfect state. There were so many delicate complexities in the human body.

As she visualised the healing, she sang with all her heart.

Five small birds arrived, as many had of late, to frolic in the air above her head. They added to the Lifesong with their short trills and warbles, as if they were part of the performance. Tabitha welcomed their joyous calls, but did not let them distract her from the task.

There were splinters in both wounds. She envisaged flesh sealing the splinters, harder flesh, to protect the rest from damage. She saw the dark poisoned areas within the man, and saw them as healed. She visualised the man as whole and complete in the place where he had been wounded. The power of the Lifesong flooded through her. She touched the place of silent thunder, where a hundred voices joined in song, beyond the clamour of the crowd. She became a channel for the return of life to a place that was dead.

Then the song was done.

An awed murmur passed through the crowd. The small birds swirled one last time over Tabitha then flitted through the hall's open doors. The man on the floor sank back against her knees and breathed a shuddering sigh. His blue eyes were clear of pain. She stroked his forehead.

"Thank you, your Holiness," he said. "Thank you."

Holiness? She shook her head. *I've been called Seraph, Saviour, Glory and Enchantress, but never yet Holiness.*

"Rest a while," she answered. "You need to recover, so eat at our kitchens tonight—eat well. By the morning you should be strong enough to leave, but I urge you to stay and help, if you can. I need strong wardens and I would be honoured to have you helping."

The man grinned and nodded.

A slim youth reached through one of the warden's legs, and laid his hand on the healed man's foot, before he was pulled away. The needy palms turned to Tabitha again. Poor folk of Levin, scared folk of Stormhaven, wounded Swords, people of all age and condition. They pressed close; the pleas for favour soon became a clamour, then a roar.

"My head, my head, touch my head, wizard," urged a man close to the front of the press. He had dirty bandage wrapped under his chin and over the crown of his head. She recognised him. He came regularly, in various guises, just to be touched.

"Sing to me, sing to me," cried a woman as she pushed the bandaged man aside. "I am dying from the sickness, wizard. Look!" she cried, and shamelessly lifted her shift to reveal her scabrous skin and swollen breasts. "Heal me."

The woman would not die. Tabitha had to conserve her strength for the serious ailments. She tried to turn away from the pleading masses, but they were all around her.

"Touch me!"

"Heal me!"

"Save me!"

"Make me beautiful."

"Riches! Wizard, I offer you gold! Make me young again!"

Tabitha covered her ears with her hands.

"Bastion, get me out of here!"

He dropped to one knee before her and turned so that she could mount his shoulders. He took her weight, and rose. She was lifted above the sea of heads and palms.

“Make way!” he commanded. “Make way! Wardens, an escort!”

The wardens fought through the press of humanity. The people didn't part easily. Hands reached up to touch Tabitha's legs, her boots and her robe. She clutched onto her lyre, so it would not be pulled from her. The crowd followed them, like a school of hungry fish feeding on a lump of raw meat.

They took too much, always too much.

She could sing no more.

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Tabitha collapsed onto the bed.

The door was closed, bolted and barred against the flood of followers outside. Their room was cool and almost quiet. Bastion sat beside her and just held her for a time. She hoped it wasn't his desire to touch the magic of the wizard that made him do it. Then she recognised her own callousness born of fatigue and she returned Bastion's embrace. He was strong and he smelled of healing oils and wool.

She must not forget who he was.

It was better that the crowds did not know the truth about him. Garyll Glavenor had wanted to leave Levin altogether, because some regarded him a traitor. His word had led them into the false battlefield. His command had opened the gates to the Shadowcasters. Such critics ignored that it was his blade that had slain the Darkmaster and without him there might have been no survivors at all. Still, he had made a deal that troubled Tabitha. How could he have traded the defence of Stormhaven just to keep her safe?

He was no longer respected, as he had once been. He had set the title of Swordmaster aside. He stayed in Levin because she needed him, to keep her safe among so many people.

“Will they ever leave me be?” she asked.

“If you stop performing for them, perhaps.”

Tabitha reached for Garyll's cowl. He stayed her hands, an automatic reaction, but then he accepted her gentle touch. Tabitha looked into his eyes—so dark, so deep, those complex currents which hid the hurt.

“How can I stop, when they are in such need?”

“Aye, I understand that you cannot stop. But rest, regain your strength. You wither before my eyes.”

“People are dying while I sleep, Garyll. People are suffering and

crying.”

“You cannot change all the world, my love. You have done more than anyone to bring life to Eyri. Rest now. You really need to sleep.” Garyll kissed her gently on the forehead then rose and went to the hearth.

Tabitha smiled. Her skin tingled where he had kissed her. There was a warm place in her heart, and the warmth softened her body’s brittleness. Garyll had his own kind of magic, though he was not aware of it. She wished he had kissed her lips.

He began to lay a fire. It was not really cold, but Tabitha understood his habit. It would be a companion, to hold back the night. He didn’t like it being completely dark, anymore. Garyll struck a spark off his flint and blew on the kindling.

Their cottage was small, by Levin standards, but it was perfect. Tabitha hadn’t intended to stay for long, but the healing work demanded that she be near the hall. It was still difficult to accept the way the occupants of the cottage had so suddenly offered her the place to stay, for as long as she wished, for free. Her fame had strange consequences, honours and noble preferences that rested uncomfortably on her shoulders. But, sometimes, such privileges could be useful. They had the cottage to themselves.

“That’ll catch ablaze in a moment,” said Garyll, straightening from his task. “I’ll leave you, then, your Grace.”

“Garyll! Please don’t call me that again. It might serve Bastion in the hall, but I’m Tabitha when we’re here together, not Grace or Eminence or anything like that.”

“You are too humble of your abilities.”

“What I do should not come between us.”

“How can it not? You gift life! I have only ever captured, punished, or killed. Sometimes I feel very small, beside you.” He made for the door to the next room.

*Small?* Tabitha thought. Garyll Glavenor was a towering icon of justice in Eyri. Or so he had been. The Darkmaster had taken much from him.

“Garyll, wait,” she said. “Don’t go.”

He paused. “It would be best for you to get some rest now,” he said gruffly.

“Stay with me tonight.”

He turned slowly, but shook his head. “And repeat that night in Stormhaven?” He didn’t need to explain. The heartache she had

caused by trying to seduce him was still fresh in her memory.

“Will you ever forgive me?” she asked.

“You? It was never you who needed forgiveness.”

“Garyll, I—”

But he was gone, in a swirl of his green cloak. Silence, as he stood waiting, or thinking. Then the bed creaked in the room next door, and his boots thumped to the floor, one after the other.

*I forgive you, damn it!* Tabitha thought, but she had told him that before, and telling him had changed nothing. The only way for Garyll to find peace was for him to forgive himself. The more she came to know his discipline, the more unlikely that seemed. She wished he wasn't so severe with himself.

But then he wouldn't be Garyll. He set his standards so high, that he was made taller just by reaching for them. Any other man would have given up trying to be Garyll Glavenor long ago. She wanted to be close to him so badly, but there was a chasm between them—a divide scribed in darkness.

She considered demanding he return and lie beside her; compelling him. Then she knuckled her eyes. She was too tired to think straight. It was a stupid idea—she didn't want to use her power to manipulate. That was how the trouble had begun in the first place, in his quarters in the Swordhouse in Stormhaven.

Tabitha's thoughts turned over and over; despite her exhaustion, she couldn't sleep. She stared at the flames as they rose higher through the wood Garyll had left in the hearth. There had to be a way to heal the man she loved.

A small sound came from the kitchen. Tabitha couldn't see past the reed screen. The glow of the fire was suddenly too dull. Her hearing sharpened as her need activated the Ring and brought a rush of clarity.

Breathing. There was somebody in the kitchen, someone who shouldn't be there.

Something skittered on the kitchen floor, and the intruder cursed under his breath. Tabitha backed to the fireplace. Her hands found the fire-iron.

Garyll came through his door in a blur. There was a surprised yelp from the kitchen, scuffling then angry whispers. Tabitha tiptoed to the edge of the screen.

Garyll held a waif by the back of his collar. “Please, Bastion-sir,” he croaked, “I just wanted a see the wizard, I not be stealing anything,

please mister-warden-sir.” The boy’s face was pale in the moonlight and he shivered with fright.

“Garyll, it’s alright,” Tabitha assured him. “I—”

“No,” he hissed. “Treat with this urchin now, and tomorrow there’ll be another fifty trying to get in this window if he tells of his success. I’ll not have it! He’s not even injured. Out you go, rubbish!” Garyll lips were firmly set.

“You’re not Bastion, you’re the Swordmaster!” crowed the boy.

In his haste, Garyll had forgotten to raise his cowl. It was dark in the kitchen, but evidently not dark enough to hide his characteristic square jaw and sleek black hair from the urchin’s sharp eyes, and she had named him Garyll.

“Out!”

“No, Master Glavenor, no, I must see the wizard, I must, I’m dying, I’m sick, very very sick.” The urchin coughed, and clutched at his chest. “All I want is a healing, a touch from the wizard.”

Suddenly there was another figure in the window, and a third person muttered urgently from outside.

“No, out!” commanded Garyll, and head-butted the urchin hard, releasing him to stagger back toward the window. The muscles in Glavenor’s neck were corded; his jaw caught the light from the lamps like a hard fist.

“Garyll!” Tabitha called out in fright.

A mug fell from the intruder’s pocket and shattered upon the tiles.

“Stealing as well?” Garyll gripped the boy again.

The boy began to cry. “It’s a thing what the wizard used, it’s a blessed thing, it’s a holy thing—anything what is near the wizard is.” He squirmed in Garyll’s grip, trying to reach the nearest piece of the broken mug, but Garyll jerked him upright and lifted him clear of the floor.

“You’ll take nothing with you—you’re hoping to sell it, this talisman. Begone! The wizard deserves peace!” He thrust the boy roughly through the open window, flailing legs and all.

“And don’t you come back, or I’ll break your bones, all of you!” he shouted into the night after the sound of hastening footsteps. He closed the shutters and bolted them before closing the windows again. “There’s always a hole the wardens can’t close,” he muttered as he crossed the kitchen to where Tabitha still hid. “You alright?”

“He was just a boy, Garyll. Just a boy.”

He didn't meet Tabitha's eyes. "He was making bad choices."

Garyll left. There was a long moment before his bed creaked in his room.

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Later, when the fire had burnt so low the coals only peeped from their covering of ash like rubies in old snow, Tabitha reached for her lyre. Garyll slept at last. She could hear the steady rhythm of his breathing in the next room. She drew her nightgown close, and tiptoed through the silent cottage.

He was stretched upon his bed, still fully clothed except for his boots.

*Oh Garyll, the battle is over,* she thought. *We have won.* His foe was still with him.

His brow was furrowed. His cheeks were still hollow, though he had regained some of the weight that the tortures at Ravenscroft had stolen from him. His scarred eyelids flickered as his eyes danced in the clutch of a vivid dream.

Suddenly he arched his back then reached out his hand as if to grasp something in the air. "No!" he cried out. "You said their lives would be spared!" He curled inward upon the bed. "What girl?" he cried. "Cabal! She must not come here!"

Tabitha recognised the nightmare. In the depth of his tortures, so he had told her, he had made a pact with the Darkmaster, to save Tabitha from harm. But the Darkmaster had compelled him thereafter, to return to Stormhaven and betray the city's defence. He saw it as the moment when he had become a traitor.

"So dark, so cold," Garyll murmured. He gripped the fabric at his throat. She knew he held an imaginary Darkstone in his clenched fist. She had released his orb, but in his dreams he remembered what it had been. For a terrible time, he had been a Shadowcaster, bonded to Cabal's will.

"Forgive yourself, Garyll, the darkness within you has gone," she whispered.

Garyll kicked out at the air and writhed on his blankets. A new scene was playing its torture across his mind, another betrayal from which he would find no release. "I shall hold the Gate!" he cried. "I shall hold it. I shall hold it." Garyll rocked from side to side.

Tabitha brushed the lyre with her fingertips, just a tracing of music, like a breath of air through a willow tree. Garyll's fists slowly

unclenched. Tabitha had to resist the urge to reach out and touch him where he lay. If he awoke she would lose her chance, for he would not accept healing from her when he knew how fatigued she was. Her legs shook they were so weak.

She hummed the familiar melody of the Lifesong but didn't sing, for there was little wrong with Garyll's body. She had healed the battle injuries long ago, and he would not allow her to work on his severed hand. She needed something else besides her first stanza. The second was too deadly to even consider. She closed her eyes. There was more to the Lifesong than the words. By opening herself to the power as she hummed, she could reach an awareness beyond language. She followed the delicate currents of sound with her mind to their source. Somewhere, beyond the seen world, was the Goddess Ethea—that presence she had touched before, that potent soul who sang with many voices, who filled her with inspiration. Tabitha suspected that if she could reach out to the Goddess, she might receive an answer to her need, if she was sincere. Maybe she could learn a song that would bring strength to Garyll's wounded spirit. She sharpened her senses to hear beyond the lyre's accompaniment. She spread her feeling as she moved along the thread of the Lifesong, upward, tracing the vein of power back to the heart, through faint patterns and symbols, through music, through vastness...

Quite suddenly she was wrenched away, pulled downward by an overwhelming force. A wailing cry grew in her ears as she spiralled down and down. Tabitha was scared, but she held onto her purpose, because she could feel the Goddess drawing close. She tried to reason her fear away. She told herself the sensations of falling and danger came from her unfamiliarity with the dimension she was in, but her heart beat faster and faster. There *was* something pulling at her, something awful that had interfered, something that gripped her and the delicate threads of the Lifesong with steel talons. She fell down and down, into a mounting pressure. The wailing cry grew intense. Blaring horns crashed against her. The Goddess was there, in the midst of the chaos. In an instant she saw a great feathered form, iridescent wings splayed wide against a grey stone wall, a high-cheeked beautiful face raised towards her, lips parted in that cry. Tabitha was flattened by a wave of anguish. Ethea, trapped in that place of heaviness and heat.

Tabitha called out. The vision exploded in a bright flash that stung her eyes.

The room lay before her; dark, silent, real. She felt numb.

Garyll turned toward her sound in his sleep.

She covered her mouth with her hands.

What she had seen could not be true. She sank onto the floor.

Sweet Goddess! Who had enough power to hold her, who would wield power in that way?

Tabitha felt weak, helpless and violated. Tears spilled down her cheeks. The vision played over and over in her mind. Something terrible had happened. The sound of Ethea's lament...it was so wrong, it rebelled against Tabitha's senses. That voice should have been singing the Lifesong, it should have been triumphant, liberating, free. Instead, Ethea was trapped.

Tabitha sat on the floor, in the dark corner of Garyll's room. She sat there for a long time.

She wanted to be close to Garyll, she needed him, but she couldn't offer what he needed in return. She could not lift Garyll's spirit by singing, any more than she could lift her own.

"I grow weak, my love," Tabitha whispered. She feared what might happen in the morning, when her duty to her people compelled her to call upon the Lifesong again.

Garyll's chest rose and fell. He did not wake.



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