

Behind the Walls

Galatyne Knightwyng

A dark presence is menacing the towns and villages around Illyr. The paladins of Illyr have had difficulty tracking it down. Now, one person walks into the shadow hoping to shine a light into the darkness... and he'll need Falana's help.

“Name?” one of the guards asked as he stepped away from the glowing brazier where he warmed his hands.

The bent figure stopped in the snow before the gatehouse and leaned heavily on his walking stick. He peered up at the guard from beneath the hood of a thick, woolen cowl. He was clean shaven, but the layers of dirt made it difficult to determine his age. His eyes, however, were bright and sharp. “Almaric,” he said without hesitation. His voice was well weathered. “Almaric Ver’kashe.”

“It’ll be dark soon,” the guard said. “I suggest you find your destination before then. Of late, the streets of South Gate are not safe for such as you.”

The stooped man nodded and shuffled through the gate. His staff clicked sharply upon the stones, and with each step he paused as if to gather his strength for the next.

Such as him... Almaric knew what that meant, had learned it on his journey here as people passed him without so much as a nod of greeting or sideways glance to acknowledge his presence unless it was accompanied by a pitying look and perhaps a tossed coin. The first time, he’d almost left the coin laying in the snow, but then thought better of it; he had little enough and would welcome the chance to sleep by a hearth when the opportunity arose. Still, it stung to be presumed a beggar because he didn’t stand straight and walked only slowly with the aid of a stick.

As for safe, nowhere seemed safe of late... for anyone. A darkness lurked in the villages surrounding Maidenstone Lake. Something preyed on people who walked the streets alone at night. No one ever heard anything unusual, but in the morning a body would be found – less anything of any value, sometimes beaten or raped, sometimes apparently untouched. In *every* instance, the body was found curled into a protective ball, eyes wide open. In one particularly disturbing incident, a man had apparently been staked out as if for a sacrifice or execution. He had dislocated his joints and snapped bones as he curled in on himself.

Now, the darkness stalked the streets of South Gate. Extra guards stood the walls, and the city watch walked the streets at all hours, but when the sun set, it did not seem to matter.

Almaric had a task to perform, and he knew the risks – they were really no lesser or greater than those faced by everyone else – except that he was willing, and prepared, to face them.

He made his way down Artisan Street, between the Crafter’s and Merchant’s Quarters. At the end of the street stood his temporary destination – the *Dragon Tree Inn*. It was named after a tree with slate-hard bark and foliage in brilliant reds and golds that grew only from scorched earth. The *Tree* had been built after a fire destroyed the warehouse of a wealthy, but rather unscrupulous merchant. It catered to the common man, but it was respectable and comfortable, which was as much as anyone should ask. Besides, good fortune or ill, he did not expect to stay there long.

As Almaric passed in front of a cobbler’s shop, only two blocks from the inn, he paused.

Something was not right... only a distant sense, but still—

“Get out, you lazy swine!” bellowed a voice within. “You’ll not steal from me and expect to learn here!”

The door to the shop flew open with a sharp bang, and a burly youth stormed out. Behind him, the cobbler stepped into the doorway wielding a hammer and cudgel. “And don’t show yourself here ‘bouts again, Tom; I’ll not have you driving off my customers. I’ll call the watch! You hear?”

The big youth ignored his former mentor, but he did take notice of Almaric. “What you looking at, cripple?”

Almaric realized he was staring and hurriedly resumed his trek. No one followed him, but he felt the eyes on his back right up until he closed the door to the *Tree*. The “not rightness” had emanated from the youth.

Inside, Almaric used the little coin in his purse to order a meal and secure a place to sleep in the common room; he didn’t have enough for a private room. Then he sat down at a table near the hearth to warm himself while he waited for Tia, the barmaid, to bring his food.

The *Tree* did a fair business in the winter months. Aside from himself, the common room hosted a small merchant company, a few warriors for hire, and a scattering of travelers. In one corner, a group of locals played at sparrow tiles. Even so, Almaric felt alone. No one paid any attention to “such as him,” and if by chance a glance did alight upon him, it slid away as if he weren’t there. He hadn’t come for conversation anyway, he reminded himself, though he couldn’t help but listen to the talk of the city’s troubles.

“...knights of Illyr try to keep the peace...”

“...chasing shadows they are...nothing to fight...gone with the sun...”

“...even the paladins of Lyfaye have failed...senses their light...melts away before them...”

Tia set a steaming bowl of stew and a hot small-loaf of bread on the table before him. “Here you are, good sir. Can I bring you ale?”

Almaric shook his head. “Water please.”

Tia smiled and hurried back to the kitchen. She seemed genuinely kind, not feigned or forced.

The stew smelled wonderful, and no thin broth this – plenty of meat and vegetables in a thick, brown gravy. Almaric broke off a chunk of warm bread and dipped it into the bowl.

His hand stopped halfway to his mouth. The “not rightness” was back. The door to the common room opened. Almaric knew without looking that Tom had just entered. He stuffed the gravy-soaked bread into his mouth. It *was* good. Only then did he look up.

Tom wasn’t alone. His friend was not much older but tall and thin and richly dressed with tufts of lace sprouting from sleeves and collar. He even wore a plumed hat – looked like a peacock, Almaric thought. The peacock felt wrong too.

Tia swept by and set a mug of water in front of Almaric then quickly headed off the two newest patrons. Almaric watched intently as she said something in a low voice, frowning and shaking a finger at them, then hurried off to the kitchen. The peacock swatted her, earning him a scathing glare.

“Hey,” Tom nodded toward Almaric, “there’s that nosy cripple. He was eyein’ you and Tia.”

Almaric quickly turned his attention back to the stew, hunkering low over his bowl, but he knew it was too late. Heavy footsteps announced their approach, and meaty hands thunked down on the edge of the table opposite Almaric. Almaric looked up. Tom was very big.

“You’re a new face,” the peacock said.

“Just passing through,” Almaric said, remembering not to make eye contact.

“Well, rover,” the peacock said, “you stopped at our favorite table. It’s cold out, and we want to

sit by the fire.”

“Sorry, didn’t know it were anyone’s table.”

“Lerrick!” Tia scolded as she passed by with some mugs of ale for the mercenaries. “Leave him alone. There’s another table by the hearth over there.”

“We like this one.”

Tia glowered at Lerrick and hurried back into the kitchen.

“You slow as well as cripple?” Tom said, then laughed at his own wit.

Almaric sighed and picked up his bowl.

“You have a problem, rover?” Lerrick asked.

Almaric shook his head. “No sir. Just moving to another table.”

“Well, you’ve been long enough about it. Tom, help him out.”

Tom shoved the table hard and knocked Almaric back over his bench. His stew spilled onto the floor. The room went suddenly quiet. Almaric looked around, but most of the patrons had found a sudden interest in their food or the scenery through a window, or even the beamed ceiling. One of the mercenaries looked on disapprovingly, but stayed seated. Everyone could sense the “wrongness,” even if they didn’t know it.

“Here now!” shouted a gruff voice as the innkeep hurried out of the kitchen with Tia at his side. “Tom, Lerrick, that’s enough! Tia warned you and asked you not to make trouble!”

Tia knelt and helped Almaric to his feet. “Don’t say anything,” she whispered. “Let Innis take care of it.”

“Was ‘im making the trouble,” Tom grumbled, looking hurt.

“Out!” Innis bellowed. “Out now, or I’ll call for the watch!”

Tom looked as though he wanted to hit someone but couldn’t decide who.

Lerrick looked around. The mercenary had taken active notice now, hands braced on the table; his companions set down their spoons. “Come on, Tom,” Lerrick said, clapping his friend on the shoulder. “We’ll go to the *Hind*. Better ale there anyway.”

Lerrick sauntered out the door. Tom followed looking like he still wanted to smash something.

Tia helped Almaric back to his seat and brought him another bowl of food. When Almaric reached for his purse, she shook her head and patted his hand. “Don’t worry about it. We have plenty.”

When he had finished his supper, Almaric stretched out his bedroll off to the side of the hearth and lay down. It was early, but he had walked far today and needed a little sleep before finishing what he had come to do.

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Tia was still cleaning up behind the bar when Almaric woke. Most of the patrons had gone to their rooms. A few others lay on blankets nearby. The group in the corner still played their game.

Almaric scooped up his stick and climbed to his feet. As he hobbled toward the door, Tia called out to him, “There’s a privy out back the stable. You can use the kitchen door; not so far a walk that way.”

Almaric smiled and waved his thanks. “I’m just going out for some air.”

“Well be careful... And don’t go far. The streets... You’re not... It’s dark and...”

There was no easy way to tell someone that they were helpless. “I’ll be careful. Shouldn’t be long.”

Almaric stepped outside and pulled the door closed behind him. It was snowing again. He

picked his way down the street and through the Crafter's Quarter. The lower end housed the tanners, dyers, and the like – things people didn't want too close. It was also where the poor lived. He turned up a shadowy street. Darkened two story buildings leaned in close on either side. This looked to be a likely spot...

Almaric hadn't gone far when a chill crept up his back, like icy fingers tracing his spine. He turned. Only shops and houses peered down on the him through the snow, and only shadows peeked from the darkened doorways; but something sinister lay unseen. Almaric felt it all around, waiting.

A cheerful whistle drifted out of the snow behind Almaric. He turned and saw a long, lanky figure striding toward him wearing a cloak and a plumed hat... Lerrick.

Almaric's steps quickened, and his walking stick clicked faster on the stones.

The whistling stopped. "Don't hurry on my account," Lerrick called out. "I'm a patient man."

Almaric shuffled passed an alleyway. A hulking shape lunged out of the darkness and slammed into him. The impact knocked his walking stick out of his hand and the wind out of his lungs and sent him sprawling in the street. As he fumbled through the snow for his stick, he heard Lerrick laugh. "Not too hard, Tom, me boy; you'll break him. Don't want that yet."

Almaric's hand closed on smooth wood. He rolled awkwardly to his knees and held his walking stick protectively before him as he blinked cold snow from his eyes. A booted foot slammed into his chest, knocking him back to the ground, and his stick was kicked out of his hand.

"Uh-uh," Tom said. "You don't get to do no hitting." He pinned Almaric's arm to the ground with one foot. "That's just for us."

Lerrick's face appeared out of the falling snow and hovered in the darkness above Almaric. "You just don't know your place, do you, old rover? Well, you're about to learn it." The lanky man reached beneath Almaric's cowl and took his purse and a little knife he always carried. "Planning on cutting us, rover?" Lerrick asked.

Almaric shook his head vigorously.

"I think you were." Lerrick took the knife from its sheath and drew the cold blade across Almaric's cheek. Warm blood welled up and ran beneath his ear. "That's all he has, Tom. Let him loose."

Tom lifted his foot, and Almaric rolled onto his side, cradling his bruised arm.

"Here's your walking stick 'old man,'" Lerrick said.

Almaric sat up and reached for the offered stick. Lerrick drew it back and swung it. Almaric saw the blow coming and moved just enough to avoid the full impact but was knocked back to the ground nonetheless. Knowing what was coming next, he coiled himself into a protective ball.

Kicks and punches rained down on him along with an occasional swat from the stick. Through the pain, Almaric felt the darkness intensifying somewhere beyond them.

"It's time, Tom," Lerrick said. "She's here."

Tom bent down and lifted Almaric from the snow and dragged him toward the dark alley. Almaric had blood in his eye and couldn't see well, but he thought something writhed in the darkness. Malice radiated from the alley like foul breath from a beast's maw; even one without Almaric's gift could have felt it.

"In you go," Tom said, "Ain't no little girls here to tell on us this time."

"May be we'll go visit your girlfriend," Lerrick said. "Perhaps we'll even bring her back here to you after."

Tom heaved Almaric into the alley, and Lerrick tossed his walking stick in behind him. Then the two men walked off down the street, Tom laughing, Lerrick whistling.

Almaric pushed himself to his knees. Blood ran down his face from the cut on his cheek and another on his head. He flexed his arms and legs, felt his ribs – only bruised, nothing broken.

All around him the darkness twisted and slithered. As he'd suspected, Tom and Lerrick were merely servants. This, at last, was the true enemy, and at last, Almaric would know its nature. He climbed to his feet.

A shadowy tentacle reached out and stroked him, nuzzling, caressing. Almaric stood still, but reached inside, unlocking his first line of defense. The tentacle wrapped around his arm, and fire shot through his flesh, and Almaric caught his first glimpse of the foe whole and complete. It was not simply a demon or an avatar of raw hatred. It was a shadow of humanity – born of that part of the self that a person buried deep within, behind the conscious mind.

Primal, base, brutal, and utterly without remorse, it was more beast than intellect and so foreign and frightening that most people did not even acknowledge it, hiding it away. Consequently, it also became the repository for all that a person could not accept in himself – every dark impulse denied, every fear avoided, every pain repressed.

Such inner darkness often emerged singly in a variety of ways – flight from a confrontation that risked exposing one's weaknesses, judgment of others for what one feared in oneself, and nightmares where one's own darkness manifested in twisted fantasy or outright horror. But this... blackness... this was something else... a coalescence of all the shadow-essences torn from its victims. It was raw untapped potential for evil. But it was still shadow, and as such, it would not abide in the light.

"Hlatha Schaduwn," Almaric said, head bowed, "Mistress of Shadows, I know you now; our masquerades are done." A blue light spread outward in a circle around him, and the darkness drew back. He raised his head and pulled back the hood of his travel-worn cowl, revealing eyes that glowed blue. "Innae Galatyne Knightwyng; tana iltana i'haasta Lyfaye... You do not belong here."

Galatyne turned his focus inward, to the bindings he had placed around his power so he would not be sensed. One by one, he tore down the barriers, and the light about him brightened. The shadows reeled back, swirling in anger, and coiled as if to strike. Galatyne summoned fire, but it was still beyond his reach.

A tentacle of darkness lashed out. It cut a swath of blackness through the circle of light and struck the paladin. Galatyne stumbled, and his protective circle flickered. Wherever the light waned, darkness crept in like cracks in the ice. He worked at the bindings on his power, felt them fall away from the heat of the rising fire, but could not yet call forth flame.

Shadows surrounded him, caressing, raking, burning. A black claw shot out of the writhing darkness and buried itself in his chest, and tentacles wrapped around his arms and legs. He would have screamed, but when he opened his mouth, something burrowed down his throat and into his stomach. Deep inside, he felt a darkness uncoil, and with sudden clarity, understood his danger. The foe lay within, not without. Touched by the dark mistress, his own shadow broke free of its chains and rose up. It reached out and closed a black fist around the last bindings on his spirit, and the fire died. The circle of light collapsed as Galatyne turned all his energy inward. About him, the shadows rushed in to aid their brother.

Suddenly, blue flames arced through the alley from the street, cutting through the darkness, and shadows scattered. The black mistress hissed and lashed out at the new threat with a many-armed scourge of shadow-tentacles, but the attack was met with fire and blessed steel.

A melody – vocal, yet without words – drifted out of the swirling snow above the alley. A lithe figure, wielding a blade that pulsed with light in rhythm to the music, dropped in amongst the shadows and darted between flame and tentacles, slicing here, slashing there, cutting shadows away from Galatyne. Where the blade met darkness, shadows fled shrieking into the fire that flashed from

the street.

At the mouth of the alley, armoured knights wearing the cross and circle of Illyr edged forward.

“Tell your men to have a care, captain,” warned a feminine voice. “I blessed your swords and your armour, but you are not as fast as the WyvernStryke, and the shadows can slip between the plates. Just cause them worry... give him time.”

Shrouded in shadow, lost in the depths of his psyche, Galatyne waged a war for control of his being. He dared not face his shadow directly, for he knew that to look upon it whole and complete, to come face to face with his feral survival instinct and all his perceived flaws and failings in a single instant, would be his end.

So they circled – the shadow fought to assert its dominance, but Galatyne kept it just at the edge of his sight as he sought a way to return it to its domain. Every now and then, he caught a glimpse of something just beyond the shadow – a pool of radiant blue-white... a pool of spirit. But whenever he tried to reach it, the shadow blocked his way. Perhaps the shadow was not only prisoner, but guardian as well... the last ward before the portal to the infinite spirit that bound all beings together. A line of protection so basic and instinctual it could not be bent to one individual will. Perhaps combating it was not the answer...

Galatyne halted his circling and closed his eyes. *Shadow!* he called out with his spirit.

He felt the darkness approach and stand before him, close as the air he breathed.

You ward the path to immortal spirit. You are survival. Through you, I can bend the blackness beyond to my will and crush all those who oppose me. With such power, there are few who could stand before me.

He felt the shadow swell with pride.

You have opened this path to me, but to walk it is not my will. Galatyne knelt. *I thank you for the reminder and will remember your offer.* When he rose, his shadow rose with him and they moved as one. He unlocked the last bindings on his fire and turned his attention to the battle in the alley.

A blue glow surrounded him, and cobalt flames flickered over his arms and shoulders. The shadows screeched surprise and anger and flinched back. A few were too slow and brushed the flame. They vanished in a flash of light. Galatyne gathered the fire into him, and for a moment the flames flickered out, though his eyes glowed a bright blue.

In that moment of silent warning, Falana coiled into a crouch and launched herself into the air, springing cat-like from sill to sill up the wall of the building.

Galatyne released the fire in a surging wave. The shadow beast collapsed into a hoard of individual shadows. Those that escaped the initial upsurge of flame fled, and a boiling wave of blackness rolled toward the mouth of the alley. It broke against another wall of roaring blue fire. The few shadows that made it past fell to prayer-honed blades. On the rooftops, Falana’s light-sung blade cut apart any shadow that sought to flee after her.

A high pitched wail filled the street as the fires converged on the shadows. Then suddenly, there was silence. The flames hissed and vanished, and Falana alighted beside Galatyne in the alley. Together they walked back to the street where they were greeted by another white mantled paladin. Her long golden hair framed a face touched by elven blood.

“Isilene,” Galatyne said as he clasped her hand, “Thank you. And you Falana, I am glad you were still able to follow me.”

“I could not so well before you lowered your wards. I would have preferred you not make us remain beyond the walls.”

“The Shadow would have sensed Isilene’s presence otherwise. I needed her to be ready to do battle, and she needed you to find me.”

“Is it finished?” Falana asked.

“Not quite. We felled the tree, but there are seedlings to be uprooted.”

Behind Isilene, Captain Theta Tarn and a squad of Illyrian knights waited at the ready, swords still in hand.

“Captain,” Galatyne said. “We have an appointment with two young men. I think we will find them beneath the sign of the *Tree*.”

* * *

Galatyne, opened the door to the *Tree*. The common room was quiet. A few people slept on the floor by the hearth. A plumed hat lay atop the bar. Galatyne paused and reached out with his senses. There was a faint darkness— He turned and went back outside.

“Stables,” he said.

Behind the inn, lamplight flickered in the stable windows. Theta Tarn sent half her squad around to the back. Two of the knights pulled open the doors, and Galatyne strode in flanked by Isilene and Theta Tarn. Falana slipped silently off to the side and melted into the shadows.

The stable boy lay on the floor in front of one of the stalls. In the center isle, Tom held Tia’s arms behind a column so that her back was pulled tight against the rough wood. Lerrick stood in front of her. The two men wore their shadows like a cloak now. Though their Mistress had been destroyed, the shadows within them had already been given life.

When the doors opened, Lerrick turned. In his hand he held the little knife he had taken from Almaric – Galatyne. The barmaid had tears in her eyes. The laces on her bodice had been cut, but she seemed unharmed otherwise.

“Let her go,” Galatyne said.

“How did— Who *are* you?” Lerrick asked.

“Don’t matter none,” Tom said. He let go of Tia and stepped around the column, flexing his fingers. “I’ll fix ‘im for good.”

The back door of the stable opened and three knights rushed in. Tom strode forward, oblivious to the newcomers, but Lerrick’s eyes darted from the knights, to the paladins, to the doors, and he chewed his lip. The shadows around both Tom and Lerrick writhed. A high pitched screech pierced the chill air, and Tom suddenly charged the paladins.

At the same time, Lerrick lunged toward Tia with the knife. The little blade skated off Falana’s sword as the nimble elf dropped down between them from the rafters. She punched Lerrick in the face with her sword hilt, and he stumbled back, blood streaming from his wrecked nose.

Galatyne and Isilene stepped aside as Tom rushed forward. Theta Tarn and the knights met him and bore him to the floor. It took all four of them to bring him down.

“Galatyne!” Isilene shouted. “The shadows!” Her eyes glowed blue-white.

During the flurry of activity, shadows had detached themselves from Tom and Lerrick and scurried up the walls and across the ceiling. They skittered toward the stable door.

Blue fire arced out from both paladins, and the shadows erupted in a cascade of light in the doorway.

Tom and Lerrick lay on the floor, drooling and babbling incoherently.

“What’s wrong with them?” one of the knights asked.

“They’re missing a part of themselves,” Isilene answered.

Galatyne nodded. “We each have a shadow. It is an integral part of who we are. If we destroy them, or lose them, we are broken. If we ignore them, they grow too strong, and we become slave to them. What we show the world is only a mask, and that is as it was meant, but we must learn to walk

in our depths as well.” He gestured to the two broken men. “Get them up. We need to find their families.”

As the knights wrestled the two broken men to their feet, Isilene knelt by the stable boy. After examining him briefly, she smiled and extended a hand over his head. A faint light sprung from her palm.

Galatyne cautiously approached Tia, who cowered behind Falana.

She straitened a little when Galatyne stopped before them. “You’re one of the paladins.”

Galatyne nodded. “I’m sorry they—”

Tia shook her head. “I’m all right. But why did you let them treat you like that? Why didn’t you stop them before...”

“They served a darker mistress. Had we dealt with Tom and Lerrick first, she would have hidden and simply replaced them.”

Tia nodded.

Galatyne reached beneath his cloak and pulled out a gold coin. He pressed it into Tia’s hand. “You were kind when no one else was. Thank you.”

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The Illyrians and Falana remained in South Gate for another few days while the paladins swept the city searching for more seeded shadows. They found only one, in a mercenary guard about to ride out with a merchant caravan, and were able to subdue it without destroying it or the young man’s mind.

They also paid a visit to the families of Tom and Lerrick. Tom’s family was wanted nothing to do with him. They’d thrown him out a year ago and said he got what was coming to him. Lerrick’s father would have nothing to do with a half-wit son who could not take over his merchant route. Galatyne decided to take them back to Illyr. He hoped the priests might be able to help them or could at least find them simple work in exchange for their care.

When at last they rode out beneath the city’s walls, both Galatyne and Isilene wore drab linens and brown woolen cloaks.

“We should circle through the villages on the west side of the lake,” Isilene said. “That’s where the trouble began; I think that’s where we’ll find most of the shadow-seeds.”

Galatyne nodded. “Agreed. I have another worry, too. That creature we fought in the alley... it didn’t just come into being. Our dark, inner selves don’t just rip themselves out and rage across the countryside. Someone out there created it for some fell purpose. Bound within us, shadows are not evil; freed they are its greatest potential.”

Isilene sighed. “It’s going to be a long ride home.”