

## 172: A bard's haunt

Agrona Colby studied the brown-haired woman standing in the middle of her establishment, observing the girl's expression closely.

Agrona had a feeling that this one would be an annoying client to deal with. Her instincts had been honed in these matters for over six decades, so she didn't doubt that she was right. If she'd had more gold saved up, she would have already kicked this girl out, but ignoring work arranged by the Talonborn Circle wasn't something she could afford.

When the young woman still didn't move, Agrona sighed and entered the door at the back of her store herself. "Follow me," she said, not bothering to hide the displeasure in her voice.

A moment later, she heard the noise of old floorboards creaking as her client finally followed suit.

"So, what are you here for?" Agrona asked, briefly glancing back over her shoulder at the woman. "Do you want to curse someone? Charm some fetching young man? You young lasses always fixate on the most pointless of things."

Oh, sure, it was far from common for such frivolous requests to be brought forth to the Talonborn Circle, but Agrona had seen it before. Especially young noblewomen seemed to have the strangest ideas pop up in their heads if they somehow heard of the Circle.

This lass didn't dress like a noblewoman, at least, but she also didn't seem entirely certain what she was doing here. Agrona had verified that the Talonborn token had, in fact, been issued for this girl, yet that didn't rule out the possibility of someone else sending her here. There were many who preferred to keep their affiliations with the Circle secret.

The young woman's curious gaze followed Agrona as they continued down the cramped hallway. "Well, I'll admit that does sound intriguing, but that's not why I'm here."

"Then what business do you have with the Talonborn Circle?"

"Funny question, that. I was actually wondering the same."

Agrona pushed past a worn, heavy curtain and led the girl into the back room. The walls were adorned with old tapestries covered in faded sigils and motifs that Agrona hadn't bothered to redraw yet. A large coffer stood in one corner, and at the center of the tiny room stood a sturdy oak table with two chairs on either side. A rickety wooden ladder leaned against one of the walls, reaching up to the attic where Agrona kept the rest of her stock.

She let out a small scoff and stopped at the room's entrance, turning back to her client. "So you don't even know why you're here."

Whoever sent the last could at least have bothered telling her *something*. This wasn't a nursery.

The young woman responded with a small smile. “I *thought* I was here for oracle wax, and that would have been enough for me. But you seemed so excited about all this ‘talon’ business, so I just followed your lead. I do love the whole ‘secret coven’ vibe you’ve got going for you.”

Agrona held up the Talonborn token the woman had given her earlier. “Do you know what this is?”

“A very expensive but very poor paperweight.”

“So you don’t.” She shook her head. “How did you get this, hmm?”

“Oh, it just sort of happened,” the young woman said, pushing a curled lock of hair to the side. “Someone offered to sell it to me for five thousand solars, and I thought there just *had* to be something special about it if it cost that much, so I couldn’t stop myself. You know how it is.”

Agrona narrowed her eyes. “*Offered?*”

The circle didn’t simply *offer* tokens to any random passersby.

She glanced down at the token again, examining it closely. The inscribed signature at the bottom confirmed that it was genuine and that the woman before her was indeed the client. “And I take it I’m supposed to believe you just happened to arrive at my store as well, hmm? Should this old crone consider this her lucky day?”

“I try to think of every day as one of my lucky days, so maybe some of that rubbed off on you.” The young woman smirked as she stood on her toes, looking past Agrona into the room behind. “The truth is that I *did* only want to get some oracle wax for a friend of mine. You were the one bringing up this talon stuff.”

“Hmph. And who is this friend?”

“Does it matter?”

Agrona fell silent, watching the girl’s face for a few seconds. Then she turned around and stepped further into the room. It wasn’t her business to pry into her clients’ affairs.

She stepped over to the table at the center of the room and supported herself on it as she slowly took a seat in one of the chairs. Her back protested, but it always did that nowadays. She gestured for her client to take the seat opposite hers.

“So you don’t know why you’re here,” she said. “Then I suggest you use that clever head of yours to figure out something you want. I’m not some swindler who will accept payment for doing nothing.”

The woman scanned the room, her gaze lingering on the walls for a while before finally returning to Agrona. “There are lots of things I want, but I don’t really know what you can do.”

Agrona wanted to let out another sigh. “Demonology, ‘occult’ rituals, charms, curses. The Circle has knowledge in many of these areas. If you’re here, you clearly need help with something related to those.”

The girl’s attention seemed to be drawn to one of the walls again, and a small frown creased her brow. Agrona followed her gaze, but didn’t see anything in particular.

“Well... I don’t know about that,” the woman answered slowly as she shifted her focus back to the table and walked over to take a seat in front of Agrona. “I bet if you asked most people, they’d say I ended up here by pure coincidence. Lots and lots of it. Serendipity, if you will.”

“Whether it was luck or not doesn’t matter,” Agrona said. “You’ve already paid, and you’re now my client. If there is something, anything, you want help with that I can assist with, then I will.”

The brown-haired lass leaned an elbow on the table, staying silent for several seconds. She appeared to be contemplating something, and her breezy attitude from just now seemed to fade. “...So you’re telling me you know a lot about strange things?”

“Strange things?” Agrona scoffed. “If that is what you want to call it, then fine. The answer is yes. Know, girl, that I have been dealing with ‘strange things’ since before you were in nappies.”

The woman remained quiet for a few moments longer before speaking again. “Then there is something I want to know.”

Agrona gestured with her hand. “Go on. Don’t dawdle.”

“...There is something wrong with me. There has been ever since I was young. I...see things, and there is...something haunting me.”

“Bagh, is that all? Nothing I haven’t heard before, then. Sounds like a hauntgeist of some kind, or a nightshade if you’re unlucky. How did it start? Did you encounter anything before it did?”

“I...don’t know.” The woman pressed her lips together. “I can barely remember anything from that exact time. Only...”

For some reason, she stopped talking, staring straight ahead with wide eyes.

Agrona scowled. “Yes?”

The woman blinked, as if a momentary haze disappeared from her eyes and she returned her attention to Agrona. “What? Sorry... It’s just...”

“Whatever it is, it’s unlikely it can do anything while you’re awake, so ignore it. Continue.”

The woman shook her head, and then a smile grew on her face as the cheerful demeanor from before came back. “Can’t say it seems happy about me being here, I’ll tell you that. Anyway, sorry to say that I don’t know if I ran into anything in particular before this thing decided to

stick on to me. No clue even to what it is. There's not much I can tell you, but I would be more than happy to hear whatever you might know."

Agrona stood up and turned around, walking over to the coffer in the corner. "What I know could fill books, lass, but there's no point in me wasting time spilling all that to you before I know exactly what we're dealing with here. That'll be our first order of business."

She grimaced as she bent over to open the coffer, revealing its tightly packed contents. She rummaged through it for a moment and retrieved a few dark-red candles and a gold candelabra.

"...Is there a chance that you can remove it?" a quiet voice asked from behind her.

Agrona's lips curved upward slightly. Sounded like the girl had lived a harsh life.

"Can't make any promises, but it's certainly possible."

Turning back around, she carried the candles and candelabra over to the table, placing them down carefully. The candles were arranged in a circle, and she brought out a piece of white chalk to draw a sigil in the oak between them.

"Is that some sort of spell?" the woman asked.

"Hmph. If by 'spell' you mean those things that mages around here throw around, then no. This is an ancient ritual. It connects one with the spirits of the beyond, and *they're* far more likely to tell you anything useful than any priest or wizard is."

Once she was finished drawing the sigil, Agrona placed the candelabra at the center and lit the candles with what rudimentary spells she *did* know. Mages were often so full of themselves, but the occasional blaze spell could be useful.

As she sat back down in her seat, she noticed that the youngling's expression had turned strange again. The girl was sending furtive looks around the room, as if looking for something.

Agrona snapped a weathered finger next to her head. "Pay attention, lass. I'm right here. Focus on me."

The woman blinked, and soon her eyes returned to Agrona. She let out an awkward laugh. "Seems like we're making it feel lonely. It's getting a bit cramped in here."

Agrona studied her for a moment. It was strange that whatever being had attached itself to the girl was this aggressive while she was wide awake. And it appeared to have been growing more aggressive since they entered this room. Clearly, it had an understanding of what was happening, which was curious enough. But what was it up to?

Well, she would have her answers soon. Pushing those thoughts to the back of her mind, Agrona took a deep breath. "Place your hands on this," she said and pointed to the arms of the gold candelabra.

Her client put both hands there, and Agrona reached out to place her own hands over the girl's.

“Now, focus. I will begin,” she said in a commanding tone. Then she cleared her throat, gazing into the other woman's violet eyes. *“Through the shadows of twilight's embrace, I call forth thee. From the abyss of time, I beckon your presence.”*

The young woman's expression turned anxious as the words began to touch upon the fabric of the world, but Agrona could feel that it was working as expected.

“*Hear my voice,*” she continued. *“Resonate through the veils of existence. Illuminate that which is hidden and reveal the nature that dwells within.”*

With her experience in these matters, Agrona sensed as the ritual encouraged the barriers that separated the different layers of existence around them to grow less defined. More fluid. She could begin to detect something from within the woman.

Suddenly, her client's eyes widened as a hint of darkness entered them, and she tried to withdraw her hands from beneath Agrona's.

“W-We need to stop. It's... It's coming too close.”

Agrona firmly pressed down with a strength that she was sure would surprise most.

It would be foolish to interrupt things now. There was nothing to be worried about with the ritual itself. It would simply allow her to perceive that which was not visible to the normal eye, but it wouldn't summon anything here.

“*Grant me the knowledge to perceive the unseen, to discern the dark presence entwining the being. Let the essence be laid bare, that a path can be laid before us.*”

With those final words, she completed the ritual and stared deep into the woman's eyes, peering into the presence lurking inside.

Agrona's heart stopped as she sucked in her breath.

There was nothing but darkness there. Pure, unadulterated darkness. And it was staring right back at her.

It was as if a vice clamped down on her throat, and a weight bore down on her from above. She gawped, wide-eyed, at this being, this *darkness* that grinned at her, and for a moment, she was certain that she could *feel* the young woman's fear.

Suddenly, the old tapestries on the walls twisted and writhed as they turned inside out, and an undulating sea of maggots grew out of them, accompanied by a chorus of sick, squelching sounds. The furniture became distorted and deformed. The chair Agrona sat on sprouted gnarled limbs and jagged teeth from its arms, while the table's sides lengthened, the wooden surface warping into grotesque faces that sneered and leered with wicked delight.

The room itself seemed to shift and warp, its dimensions stretching and distorting like in a nightmare. The ceiling curled downward, dripping with a vile substance that oozed malevolence, and the floor beneath their feet morphed into a wriggling mass of slimy tentacles, lashing out with sinister intent.

Agrona shrieked as she recoiled back from the horrifying sights. From the woman who stood at their center.

The ritual ended, and she felt the connection to the beyond dissipate.

But the terrors persisted.

“A-Away!! Away! Away with you!” she cried, desperately trying to free herself from the twisted abomination she was now sitting in. The young woman in front of her said something, but her words were drowned out by the cacophony of squirming noises.

“N-No, no!” A tentacle coiled around Agrona’s foot as she managed to escape from her chair, its slimy texture crawling its way up around her ankle and making contact with the exposed skin under her dress. It felt frigid and disgusting, sending a wave of repulsion through her.

She stumbled back, landing on her behind and slamming into the wall. The feeling of hundreds of tiny creatures moving and pressing into her back made her face turn pale.

Something grabbed hold of her hands. She panicked and tried to break free, but then she realized it was her client. The woman knelt before her, a sweaty and pained expression stuck on her face as she leaned closer, her mouth forming words.

“—ts not real. Ignore it! Focus on me, please!”

Agrona froze as she once again accidentally gazed into the woman’s eyes. The terrible, terrible darkness was still lurking within them. Laughing at her. Smirking at her insignificance.

She pushed away with her arms, and the woman fell back, colliding into the overturned chair. “No, no! I don’t want anything to do with you! Leave! Please, leave!”

Pressing her hands to her head and closing her eyes, her breath strained, Agrona tried to block out the horrors around her, wishing they would all vanish. This wasn’t something she could handle. This wasn’t something *anyone* could handle. It was too much. Too much!

Her hands were grabbed hold of and pried away from her face, and she looked to see the woman kneeling beside her once more, gritting her teeth as there was blood on her fingers.

“Please, tell me. Did you see something? Anything?” the woman asked, almost begging.

Agrona shook her head fiercely. “I don’t know! I don’t want to know!” She forced one of her hands free, bringing it to her breast pocket and bringing out the Talonblood token, pressing it into the woman’s palm. “Here! Take this and leave! I can’t help you! I won’t! Away!”

She tensed as the floor beneath shifted, and another tentacle grabbed onto her right leg. It also felt as if something fell into her dress from her neck. But she couldn't shake loose, as if all the strength had left her body.

The other woman didn't budge, even as Agrona tried to muster what energy she had left to push her away. "***Please***. You saw something. Tell me. I'll take anything."

"I said I can't help you! This is your fault! Leave!"

Foolish girl! She had no idea what she was harboring, and now she bringing its malevolence onto everyone else!

The woman's expression froze, and tears began to run down her cheeks. "...I know..." she mumbled, the words barely reaching Agrona over all the noise. "That's why...please... Tell me. I don't want this anymore."

Agrona let out another shriek as she felt something crawl down her spine.

"Malachi! Seek out Malachi!" she cried. "You can find them in Crowcairn! outside the city! They might know more!"

She didn't care what the girl did, only that she left and took these nightmares with her.

The brown-haired woman leaned even closer to her face, and Agrona faced as she shied away from those desperate but terrifying eyes.

"Malachi? Who's Malachi?"

"They're someone who might know more about this," Agrona pressed out. "But she is dangerous, so approach her at your own peril. Just don't involve me in any of it. Now, please leave!"

The woman hesitated, but eventually, she moved back from and stood, turning her back as she made to exit the room. Agrona's eyes were locked on the woman's back until she disappeared completely, at which Agrona couldn't stop some of the sobs that escaped her throat. The sights that had been close to her had slowly started fading, but the memory of them still remained, etched into her mind. And those dark, dark eyes...

Clutching her knees, Agrona regretted ever letting this client into her home, and admonished her own weakness.

But beyond all, she pitied the girl who had that *thing* living inside her, and the fate that awaited her.