LANTERN & SHADOW

A First Light in Lumenvale

Three Stories



CHADWICK RYE

A Free Sampler

Blindspot Publishing, A Division of Blindspot Studios

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Welcome

Thank you for opening these pages.

Lumenvale is a world of quiet wonder, where ordinary people keep faith, keep home, and keep choosing the next right thing when it would be easier not to. These three stories are a first light in that world — a bandit who learns to grow something instead of taking it, a trader who carries home with him on a hard road, and a family that keeps gathering even when it isn't a holiday.

They are yours, free. You don't owe me a thing for them. If they stay with you, there are more stories waiting at chadwickrye.com, and books whenever you're ready.

God bless you,

Chadwick Rye

The Stillness After Surrender

A Bandit's Quiet Redemption



The early morning mist clung to the field like a shroud, transforming the familiar landscape into something ethereal and strange. I knelt in the damp soil, fingers working methodically through the rows of tender green shoots that had emerged from seeds I'd planted three weeks prior. My knuckles, once split and scarred from countless fights, now bore the honest dirt of honest work.

Strange how the world changes when you stand still long enough to let it.

Two summers ago, I would have been prowling these same roads with a different purpose, watching for merchant wagons, calculating risk against reward, the weight of my blade a constant reminder of the man I had become. Kerick the Swift, they called me, though there was nothing swift about the reputation that followed like a shadow. Bandit. Thief. Cutthroat when necessary.

The village of Oakhollow lay just beyond the eastern ridge, close enough that I could see smoke rising from morning cookfires. Close enough that some might recognize the hollow-cheeked man who once demanded their coin or goods at knifepoint. They called me other names then, spoken in whispers and curses.

I lifted a canteen to my lips, the cool water washing away memories that still visited when I closed my eyes. The change hadn't come in some dramatic moment of revelation, no divine light, no near-death experience that poets might romanticize. Instead, it arrived quietly during a rain-soaked evening when I took shelter in an abandoned shepherd's hut.

There, huddled against damp stone walls, I found a journal bound in cracked leather, its pages filled with the simple observations of a solitary man. Descriptions of seasonal birds, sketches of unusual plants, notes on weather patterns and stars. The unknown shepherd had found meaning in stillness, in observation, in connection to something larger than himself.

I read those pages until dawn broke, something inside me cracking open like parched earth receiving the first rain after drought.

The seedlings beneath my fingers now represented the most profound change in my life, I had planted roots. Literal and figurative. After years of taking, I had committed to creating, to nurturing, to giving time for something to grow.

"You've got the touch for it," Old Willem had said when he first caught me clearing this abandoned plot behind his property. I'd expected fury, perhaps recognition. Instead, the weathered farmer had studied my work with a critical eye before offering unexpected praise and, later, unexpected trust.

The land wasn't much, rocky soil on the edge of what anyone would consider arable, but it was mine to tend through an arrangement that still humbled me. Food and modest lodging in exchange for labor and a share of whatever harvest might come.

My first weeks had been agony. Muscles accustomed to quick violence rebelled against the slow, repetitive work of farming. Hands that knew the perfect grip for a dagger blistered when wrapped around a hoe handle. Sleep came in exhausted, dreamless spans that left me more tired than refreshed.

But something changed as winter gave way to spring. The persistent ache in my shoulders transformed from punishment to familiar companion. Calluses formed where blisters had been. And most surprisingly, the constant vigilance that had kept me alive during my years on the road—the need to watch every shadow, to measure every stranger for threat or opportunity, gradually eased.

For the first time since childhood, I began to experience moments of genuine peace.

I stood now, stretching my back as the sun burned through the morning mist. My small garden was nothing remarkable by any measure, a few rows of vegetables, some herbs, flowers planted along the borders because they pleased me rather than for any practical purpose. Yet it represented something I had never possessed before.

A future that extended beyond the next meal, the next score, the next escape.

"Ho there, Kerick!" Old Willem's voice carried across the field. "Thought you might want some of this morning's bread while it's still warm."

He approached with his customary uneven gait, a cloth-wrapped bundle in his weathered hands. His eyes, remarkably sharp despite his years, took in my morning's work with approval.

"Tomatoes coming along nicely," he observed. "Another week and they'll need staking."

I accepted the bread with a nod of thanks, still uncomfortable with kindness freely given. "I've been collecting good branches for it. Should have enough by then."

Willem settled his frame on a nearby stump, a resting spot he'd claimed during his frequent visits to what he still referred to as "the back field," though we both knew it had become more than that.

"You know," he said between bites of his own bread, "Elmridge Market's looking for regular suppliers. Their usual garden man's moved north to his daughter's place." He said this casually, as though not suggesting something monumental.

“They wouldn’t want goods from,” I stopped myself, the old identity still too close to the surface.

“From a man working honest soil?” Willem finished, his gaze steady. “That’s all they’d see, son. That’s all anyone sees when a man chooses differently than his past.”

I looked down at my hands, dirt embedded beneath fingernails, a small cut on my thumb from where I’d been careless with the pruning knife. Hands that could still kill if necessary, but that now knew how to nurture life from seeming nothingness.

The simple change, from taking to growing, I had altered everything else. My breathing. My sleep. The way I held my shoulders. The thoughts that occupied my mind as stars wheeled overhead each night.

“I’ll think on it,” I promised, meaning it.

Around us, birds called to one another across the brightening sky. A gentle breeze rustled through my carefully tended rows. And somewhere in the distance, the sounds of Oakhollow going about its morning business drifted on the wind, no longer a target to assess but a community I stood on the edge of, watching, waiting, perhaps someday belonging.

I had planted seeds. Some had grown. Others might yet.

The Heart Stone



The morning mist clung to the Borderland Pass like gossamer veils, transforming the familiar trade route into something ethereal and uncertain. Gareth Stormwind pulled his traveling cloak tighter against the predawn chill and guided his pack horse, Steadfast, along the narrow mountain path that connected Lumenvale to the outer territories. Twenty-three years he'd been making this journey, carrying goods and messages between the civilized realms and the frontier settlements that dotted the wilderness beyond the Crystal Spires' protective influence.

His calloused fingers found the leather pouch at his chest, feeling through the worn material for the reassuring weight of the most precious cargo he carried. Not the bolts of Lumenvale silk wrapped carefully in his saddlebags, nor the vials of healing

potions cushioned in lamb's wool, nor even the sealed letters bearing the Council's diplomatic seal. The most valuable thing he carried was no larger than a child's fist, warm against his heart even in the mountain cold.

The Heart Stone.

To most observers, it would appear unremarkable—a smooth sphere of crystallized moonstone shot through with veins of silver that pulsed with their own inner light. But this particular stone held twenty-seven years of his life, compressed into crystalline memory like pressed flowers preserving the essence of seasons long past.

Gareth's thumb traced the familiar grooves worn into the stone's surface by countless hours of use, and immediately the device responded to his touch. Warmth spread through his chest as the Heart Stone activated, its silver veins brightening until they cast soft shadows through the leather pouch. In his mind's eye, he could feel the network awakening—thousands of similar stones throughout the known realms, each one a node in the vast web of connection that bound families and lovers and friends across impossible distances.

"Show me home," he whispered, the traditional invocation that focused the stone's power on his most important anchor point.

The world around him shimmered slightly, the mountain path overlaid with ghostly images that only he could see. His wife Meredith materialized before him, translucent but unmistakably real, kneeling in their kitchen garden behind their modest house in Lumenvale's Merchants' Quarter. Dawn light caught the silver threads that had begun weaving themselves through her

auburn hair, and her face bore the peaceful concentration of someone lost in simple, meditative work.

She was harvesting the last of the season's herbs, her movements carrying the unhurried grace of someone who had learned to find joy in daily rhythms rather than seeking excitement in distant adventures. Gareth's heart clenched with familiar longing as he watched her work—the way her hands moved with absolute certainty among the plants, the unconscious humming that meant she was content, the small smile that played at the corners of her mouth when she discovered a particularly fine specimen.

"My love," he said softly, and her image looked up, seeming to meet his eyes across the impossible distance.

The Heart Stone's true magic wasn't just in showing him what he wished to see, but in allowing genuine communication across the barriers that separated them. Meredith's face brightened with recognition, and she sat back on her heels, wiping soil-stained hands on her apron.

"Gareth? You're early today." Her voice carried perfectly through the crystal link, warm with affection and touched with the concern that always colored their dawn conversations. "Is everything well on the pass?"

"All's well, heart of my heart," he assured her, guiding Steadfast around a treacherous switchback while maintaining the connection through practiced skill. "Made good time yesterday, so I'm ahead of schedule. Should reach Thornwick's Keep by midday, weather permitting."

"The weather worries me," she admitted, her gaze shifting to something beyond his view—probably the window that faced north toward the mountains. "The wind's been strange these past days. Elsbeth mentioned storm-signs in the cloud formations."

Gareth felt a flutter of anxiety. Meredith's intuition about weather patterns had saved his life more than once over the years. She had learned to read the subtle signs that preceded the sudden squalls that could trap unwary travelers in the high passes, turn familiar paths into death traps of ice and wind.

"I'll be careful," he promised, meaning it absolutely. "Extra rope, emergency shelter, provisions for three days instead of two. You taught me well."

Her smile bloomed like sunrise across her face, the expression that had first captured his attention in the Harvest Festival marketplace twenty-eight years ago. "See that you remember those lessons, merchant mine. I've grown rather fond of having you return home to me."

The Heart Stone held more than just communication magic—it was a repository of their shared history, a crystalline memory palace that preserved the most important moments of their life together. With a thought, Gareth could access the stored impressions: their wedding day, when young Meredith had woven wildflowers into her hair because they couldn't afford the traditional crystal crown; the night their daughter Lily had been born, squalling and perfect and impossibly tiny; Lily's first steps, her first words, her acceptance letter to the Academy's preparatory program.

And the darker memories too, carefully preserved because grief shared was grief halved: the stillborn son who would have been named for Gareth's father; the fever that had nearly claimed Meredith three winters past; the long months when Lily had been away at advanced Academy training, and the house had felt too large and too quiet.

Every important moment, every significant conversation, every declaration of love and instances of worry and expressions of hope—all of it stored in the Heart Stone's infinite crystalline matrix, accessible whenever distance threatened to make their connection feel abstract rather than immediate.

"How is our Lily?" he asked, shifting his weight as Steadfast negotiated a particularly narrow section of trail. Below them, the valley dropped away into morning mist that concealed depths he preferred not to contemplate.

"Brilliant as always, stubborn as her father," Meredith replied with the fond exasperation that marked her discussions of their daughter's academic career. "Her latest letter mentions some breakthrough in applied thaumaturgy that has her professors excited. She's been invited to present her research at the Spring Symposium."

Pride swelled in Gareth's chest, complex and bittersweet. Lily had inherited her mother's intuitive understanding of magical principles and her father's determination to push beyond established boundaries. At nineteen, she was already showing promise that might carry her far beyond Lumenvale's protective walls—perhaps to the floating academies of Aethermoor, or the crystal libraries of the Deep Reaches, or any of a dozen other

destinations that would take her away from the simple life her parents had built in the Merchants' Quarter.

"Send her my love," he said, the words carrying all the complicated emotions of a father who wanted his child to soar while desperately hoping she would choose to build her nest nearby. "Tell her I'm proud of her, and that I'll be home in time for the Equinox Festival. We'll celebrate her achievements properly."

"I will," Meredith promised, then paused, her expression shifting to something more serious. "Gareth, there's something else. Master Aldric from the Messengers' Guild stopped by yesterday. There have been... incidents on the outer routes. Bandit activity near the Thornwick territory. He wanted to know if you'd consider taking an escort on this run."

The Heart Stone's warmth seemed to dim slightly as fear touched Gareth's heart. He had been traveling these routes for more than two decades, had faced bandits and weather and worse with nothing but his wits and Steadfast's steady courage. But he was no longer the young man who had first ventured beyond Lumenvale's walls with dreams of adventure and fortune. At forty-eight, he had learned to value survival over profit, caution over bravado.

"I'll be careful," he repeated, the words carrying more weight now. "The routes I know, heart. Every hidden path, every safe shelter, every sign of trouble. And I have you watching over me."

He touched the Heart Stone again, activating a different function—the one that allowed it to store more than just memories and communication. Over the years, he had

programmed it with detailed information about every route he traveled: safe camping spots, reliable water sources, the locations of emergency supply caches he had established at key points along the major trade paths. Weather patterns, seasonal hazards, the territories controlled by various bandit groups, the names and dispositions of contacts in every settlement from Lumenvale to the furthest frontier posts.

More than information, though, the stone held his identity in crystalline permanence. If something happened to him—if bandits proved too numerous, if weather turned deadly, if any of the thousand dangers that haunted the borderlands claimed his life—the Heart Stone would preserve his final message to his family, along with detailed instructions for recovering his remains and any goods that might be salvaged.

It was a morbid function, but a necessary one for someone who made his living in the spaces between civilization and wilderness.

"The sun's full up," Meredith observed, her image becoming slightly less distinct as the Heart Stone's power focused on maintaining the connection over increasing distance. "You should concentrate on the path. These mountain passes don't forgive inattention."

"As always, you speak wisdom," Gareth agreed, though he was reluctant to end their connection. These morning conversations had become the anchor that kept him steady through all the dangers and loneliness of his traveling life. "I'll call again tonight, once I'm safely in Thornwick's hospitality."

"See that you do," she said firmly, then softened her tone. "I love you, merchant mine. Come home safe to me."

"I love you too, heart of my heart. Keep the light burning."

The connection faded gradually, Meredith's image dissolving like morning mist until only the mountain path remained. But the Heart Stone's warmth lingered against Gareth's chest, a constant reminder that he carried more than mere goods and messages in his travels. He carried the love and concern and daily reality of two people whose lives were intertwined with his across every mile and every danger.

The path ahead wound higher into the mountains, where the air grew thin and the rocks bore frost even in the warming sun. Bandits might indeed wait in the shadowed valleys beyond the next ridge. Weather could turn deadly with little warning. Any of a dozen misfortunes could befall a lone traveler in the borderlands.

But Gareth pressed onward with confidence born of more than experience and preparation. He carried with him the most important thing any person could possess: the absolute certainty that he was loved, that his safe return mattered to people who would never stop hoping for his homecoming, that his life had meaning beyond the cargo in his saddlebags or the profit in his purse.

The Heart Stone pulsed gently against his chest, a crystalline heartbeat that synchronized with his own, carrying him forward into whatever dangers the day might bring. As long as he bore it with him, he was never truly alone, never entirely cut off from the people who made every journey worthwhile.

In his saddlebags, the silk and potions and sealed letters represented his livelihood. But pressed against his heart, the

smooth sphere of moonstone and silver represented his life itself—everything that made survival worth fighting for, everything that transformed mere existence into a story worth telling.

The most important thing to carry, Gareth had learned over twenty-seven years of loving and being loved, was proof that someone waited for you to come home.

The Between-Season Table

A Story from Lumenvale



Nobody had officially declared it a holiday.

That was the thing about the Between-Season Table — it had no name in any guild calendar, no recognized status in the Festival Records at the Chronicle Tower, no official date. It fell somewhere between the Harvest Festival and the Festival of Ascending Lights, in the narrow corridor of weeks when the city was catching its breath between celebrations. The first gathering had happened forty-three years ago because Hessa Caldwell had looked at her family scattered across three districts and decided, without ceremony, that they were going to eat together.

They had been eating together every year since.

Cael arrived early, as he always did, because arriving early meant a few minutes alone with his mother in the kitchen before the rest of the world showed up.

Hessa was already at the stove. This was a constant of Cael's life — she had been at this stove every morning of his childhood, every holiday of his adult years, every occasion that required feeding more people than the table could comfortably hold. The kitchen in the house on Amber Lane smelled exactly as it had smelled when he was seven: woodsmoke and roasted root vegetables and the specific sweetness of the spiced cider that simmered on the back burner from mid-morning onward.

"You're early," she said, without turning around.

"I'm always early."

"Your father is still asleep. You know how he is before the family arrives."

Cael poured himself a cup of cider and leaned against the counter and watched her work. She moved through the kitchen the way she had always moved — with the unhurried efficiency of someone who had made this particular meal enough times that her hands knew it independently of her attention. She was seventy-one years old and had been making the Between-Season Table since before he was born and she showed no signs of delegating any part of it.

"Linden is bringing the honey bread," he offered.

“I know. She told me three times.” Hessa adjusted something at the back of the stove without looking. “And Brisa is bringing the children early so they can help set the table, which means they will scatter everything that was already set and we’ll start from the beginning.”

“Brisa’s children are seven and four.”

“Yes.”

“That’s what seven and four does.”

“I know what seven and four does.” She turned to look at him over her shoulder with the expression that had never changed in forty years — fond and direct and not particularly patient with obvious statements. “I also know that your father will give them each a piece of sweet-root from his pocket the moment they arrive and they will be completely unmanageable for the next two hours, and I know that Linden’s husband will spend the first hour standing in the corner nearest the door because he still doesn’t know where to put himself in a room this full of people, and I know that your Uncle Harwick will arrive last and claim it was the canals when it was the tavern.” She paused. “I know all of this. I have known all of this for decades. I make the table anyway.”

Cael looked at his cider.

“Is there something you wanted to help with?” she asked.

“I wanted to see you before it started.”

She turned back to the stove. A moment passed. “The root vegetables need turning in about twenty minutes.”

* * *

They came in the way families came — not all at once, not in any particular order, with the loose coordination of people who had been doing this long enough that the logistics had resolved themselves into something organic.

Brisa arrived first, as promised, with her two children who immediately located their grandfather in the sitting room and extracted sweet-root from his pocket within forty seconds of entering the house. Amos Caldwell, sixty-eight years old and retired from the Artificer's Quarter, distributed the candy with the expression of a man who understood exactly what he was doing and had no intention of stopping.

Linden arrived with the honey bread and her husband Pol, who positioned himself near the door with the careful unobtrusiveness of a man still learning the specific gravity of this particular gathering. Cael's wife Rue came in behind them with their daughter on her hip and the particular expression of someone mentally calculating how many people were going to want more wine than had been brought.

Then the aunts. Then the uncles. Then the cousins who were old enough to come without their parents and young enough to immediately form a separate group in the back garden despite the cold.

The house on Amber Lane was not large. This had never been a problem because the Between-Season Table had always understood itself to be a matter of proximity rather than space. People ate in the kitchen and the sitting room and on the stairs

and wherever a surface presented itself. Children sat on laps. Cousins shared chairs. The table itself, extended with the boards that lived under the stairs all year waiting for this occasion, seated twelve if everyone was willing to be slightly closer to each other than was strictly comfortable.

Everyone was always willing.

* * *

Cael found himself, as he always found himself at some point in the middle of the afternoon, standing in the narrow corridor between the kitchen and the sitting room, watching both rooms from the middle.

In the kitchen his mother and his two sisters were engaged in a simultaneous argument about whether the roasted marrow needed more salt and a conversation about something that had happened at the Harvest Festival that he had apparently missed. The argument and the conversation were happening at the same time and involved the same three people and neither was impeding the other.

In the sitting room his father had his youngest niece on his knee and was telling her something that made her eyes go wide. His Uncle Harwick, who had arrived forty minutes ago blaming the canals, was asleep in the corner chair with a plate still in his hand. Pol had migrated from the door to the edge of the sitting room group, which was progress. Rue was talking to one of the aunts with the ease of someone who had done this enough times that it no longer required effort.

The cousins had come in from the garden cold and been absorbed into the various rooms without disrupting anything essential.

The table had been set and scattered and reset twice and was currently set correctly, as far as Cael could tell, with the mismatched plates that had accumulated over forty-three years of Between-Season Tables — the ones that had survived from his grandmother's house, the ones his parents had bought when they first married, the ones Linden had contributed after an estate sale three years ago. No two were the same pattern. This had never been considered a problem.

His mother appeared at his elbow with a plate.

"Eat something before service," she said. "You always forget to eat during service."

He took the plate. "How long until we sit?"

She looked at the room. Something passed across her face — not quite calculation, not quite feeling, but something that combined both. "Twenty minutes. When your Aunt Dessa finishes telling the story about the spice merchant. She tells it every year and it takes exactly the same amount of time." She paused. "Though she adds a detail or two each year, so I suppose it's not entirely the same story."

"Do you ever get tired of this?" he asked, and then felt immediately that it was the wrong question, or at least imprecisely stated, because he did not mean it as it had come out.

She looked at him with the same expression from earlier. "No."

“Even the parts that are the same every year?”

“Especially those parts.” She looked out at the sitting room, where his father was now teaching the youngest grandchild a handclap game that Cael recognized from his own childhood. “The sameness is the point, Cael. The sameness is what you’re making when you do this every year. A thing that exists in more than one time. A thing they’ll all carry.”

He looked at the mismatched plates. At his sleeping uncle. At Pol, who had moved another foot closer to the center of the room without appearing to notice.

“Go eat,” his mother said, and went back to the kitchen.

* * *

They sat at service the way they always sat — too many people, not enough chairs, every problem solved in the improvised way that had become its own tradition. The food came out of the kitchen in relays and was distributed with the organized chaos of people who had been doing this together long enough to have developed a system that looked like no system at all.

Hessa sat at the head of the table, as she had always sat. Amos sat at the other end, as he had always sat. Between them the generations arranged themselves in whatever order they landed.

Before the meal began, Hessa did the thing she had done every year for forty-three years.

She looked down the length of the table. She looked at all of it — the mismatched plates and the too-many people and the

youngest grandchild who was already negotiating with the oldest cousin about something that would require adult adjudication before the meal was over. She looked at Pol, who had ended up in the middle of the table and appeared, for the first time since Cael had known him, to be exactly where he was supposed to be.

She did not say anything. She simply looked.

Then she picked up her fork, and the Between-Season Table began.

* * *

After the meal, after the plates had been cleared in the same improvised relay that had brought them out, after the children had been retrieved from whatever they'd gotten into and the uncles had resumed their argument about a topic Cael had never been able to follow, he found his mother at the kitchen window.

The house was still full of noise. It was a specific kind of noise — layered and warm, the particular sound of people who had been close long enough that their voices had learned to occupy the same space without competing.

"Same time next year?" he asked.

"Same time every year," she said.

Outside, the city was settling into its between-festival quiet, the Crystal Spires holding their amber dusk-frequency in the darkening sky. The canal below the lane caught the last of the light.

Hessa watched it for a moment.

“The table doesn’t happen by itself,” she said, to no one in particular, or perhaps to him, or perhaps to the forty-three years of tables behind her that had each required the same choosing. “Someone has to decide that the people they love are worth the trouble of gathering them.”

She turned from the window. There were dishes to do, and Linden had already started, and Brisa’s children had gone suspiciously quiet in the direction of the pantry.

“Come on,” she said. “The evening isn’t finished yet.”

Where to go next

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The Stillness After Surrender — https://youtu.be/uPczUBJAexM

The Heart Stone — https://youtu.be/WitQ5rupolA

The Between-Season Table — https://youtu.be/USHEdK98t5c

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