

Joe Barbieri

Merkner

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The Greatest Thief

The Land is a place wrought with danger. No night is safe from beasts or brigands. The King pretends to lead the people, and the people have little choice but to follow. They are trapped in the horrifying repetition of daily life. Very few can break the chain. A little boy at an unnamed orphanage in an unimportant city knew little of what went on in the outside world. He simply wanted to live well, even inside the walls of the orphanage.

The kids were never truly fed enough, and when winter came around, there weren't enough blankets to share. The boy looked around himself, shivering in the cold of the night. Some of the kids had blankets and slept soundly. *Why should they get them but not me?*

It began with nipping warm blankets from beside the fire, taking an extra slice of bread here and there. No one really noticed at first, but when they saw the boy eating more and staying warm, they began to question him. How did he do it? Why did the workers like him? The boy was weary to share his secret, but he told his closet friends about the inattentive nature of the cooks, and the fact that the old woman who ran the linens was deaf in one ear.

And so, the boy, became The Thief. As he grew, his skills did too. Eventually, the orphanage began to take note. Patrols increased and a stricter curfew was put in place. The Thief

and his cronies took the changes as a challenge, and save for the worst out of them, business carried on as usual. The Thief ran into his first real snag in his late teens.

Some of his old friends were becoming greedy. They were beginning to steal from the townspeople at night, and they weren't sharing their goods with the group. The Thief didn't like how good they were getting, and how greedy they'd become. They didn't rely on him anymore, and they didn't need his guidance. They grew cocky. The Thief then made his first foray into a new line of thievery.

His fellow thieves had stolen cases of wine from the local pub. They drank all night and called whores to their small abode. The Thief had not been invited, and armed guards patrolled the outer walls of the house. They were eventually invited in for drinks late into the night. The Thief waited patiently. He had nothing to lose, and nothing to tie him down. When the house grew quiet, and the sun licked the edge of the sky, The Thief crept into the house and slit the throats of his old friends. Not a single tear was shed. No mercy for those who defied him.

With the lesser thieves gone, the crime rate of the city went down. People cheered and the guards were heralded as heroes. The Thief smiled to himself. How ironic that the glory and praise of the people had been *stolen* from The Thief by the city guard! It was no problem though, as the newfound sense of security gave The Thief the exact environment for his work to really take off.

The Thief had no interest in stealing wine or women. He wanted *gold*. Money, gems, and anything that could be sold. He single-handedly formed a healthy underground black market, and soon, this unimportant town was simply too small for his ambition. The Thief was never

discovered, and no one knew his name. After all, he had been an orphan, shunned away from normal society. With the town looted and the people once again living in fear, The Thief left.

So, he traveled The Land for years. His small-time jobs became full on heists. He'd sometimes work with a crew, but they would be dead hours after the successful heist, their portions taken without a second thought by The Thief. Word of his work began to spread like wildfire; he was coined as the "Shadow Thief" and was quickly known as every castle's worst nightmare. Princes, dukes, and lords had no power over The Shadow Thief's tremendous skill. What had started off as a means to survive had turned into a lifestyle. No other thief could hope to do what The Thief was capable of. He stole from the self-proclaimed best thieves, and then stole their lives as a message to any who might try and defy the Shadow Thief himself.

He was still a young man, and he had become the most powerful man in The Land. No king was able to protect their goods from him, and soon he owned a small castle of his own in a secluded part of The Land. Below the surface were the dozens of vaults he'd had constructed. None of the masons or builders were alive anymore; they had to be killed for they knew too much. People were always curious about the Shadow Thief's castle. Who lived there? Why did it almost always look abandoned? No serfs lived under the castle rule. It truly seemed to have sprung out of nowhere.

The Shadow Thief resided here for a time, enjoying the spoils of his skill. He could order any food to be brought from the kitchens, he owned countless pieces of art, and he had virgin maidens wishing to marry him in countless droves. He simply sent these women away, not wishing to be tied down. He also couldn't bear to kill an innocent woman should she discover the true nature of his work.

During these years, the legend of the Shadow Thief spread across The Land, and possibly across the oceans to other lands. He was said to be able to kill with a touch, become a shadow with ancient magic, or steal any woman's soul with a single look. The Shadow Thief became more mythical by the year, and the stories motivated him to return to his old life. Sitting around wasting his youth in his castle estate grew boring. He was the greatest thief in The Land, maybe ever, but there were still things to steal.

Yet, when his reign of terror began once more, he found himself trapped. Nothing held a challenge anymore. Kings and Queens allowed themselves to be robbed, and the guards were so sloppy with their patrolling and swordplay that the Shadow Thief could've killed them with his eyes closed. None of his work brought him gratitude because he was simply *too good*.

In a fit of rage, the Shadow Thief returned to his castle. He took a beautiful wife, and within months, she was pregnant with his child. He constructed an intricate lie about who he was, where he came from, and why he was so wealthy. She applauded him for breaking away from the grind of daily life in The Land. The Shadow Thief merely nodded, not knowing anything of what the grind of daily life was. When his wife spoke of the Shadow Thief, she spoke with disdain and disgust.

"How could anyone be so cruel?" she would ask. The Shadow Thief would say nothing. His wife knew much of the legend, and she had a good ear for rumors and legends. She would often return to the city to be with her family, and she came back to the Shadow Thief with a tale one night.

"Have you heard of the Great Soulstone?" she asked one night, her delicate hands spreading multiple perfumed soaps into the gold bathtub.

“No,” the Shadow Thief replied, not interested in more of her tales. The times she spoke of the Shadow Thief made him depressed and bitter.

She slid herself into the water and looked up at him, “An old scholar in my family spoke of it last time I was at the manor. It is said to be a gem infused with the magic of the ancient race of colossi who lived here.”

“So what?” the Shadow Thief said as he washed his wife’s back.

“The magic emanating from the gem is said to repair the soul. Our souls are said to be the same ancient magic that the colossi had. This gem... It resonates with the soul and would keep a person young and healthy forever! Could you imagine... Eternal life!” The Shadow Thief had begun massaging his wife idly. His mind was afire with the possibilities something like that gem would give someone in his *line* of work.

“I-I mean, it’s all just hearsay of course. My uncle... The scholar, he’s getting old now and—”

“Where is this gem?” The Shadow Thief asked. His wife seemed shocked at his interest.

“Well, it is said to be across the Wastes. In a forbidden part of The Land,” she replied cautiously. The Shadow Thief stood up. He was imagining it in his mind now... Immortality. He could reign as the most powerful and most skilled thief for the rest of time.

“Husband?”

“I need to go on a trip. I will return shortly,” the Shadow Thief said. He turned to leave but his wife grabbed his hand.

“Leave? Trip? Husband... Where are you going?” she asked.

“It does not concern you. You’ll be happy when I return, I promise,” he said evenly.

“How long will you be gone?”

“Long enough.”

“But... what does that mean? Shall we... Shall we make love before you go?” she was desperate for him to stay. Being alone in the castle with the cooks and the maids wasn’t fun. In fact, it was very uncomfortable.

“No,” he replied simply. He shook her hand away and left.

In hours, he had his best horse ready with months of supplies. He had his best gear and all the tools needed for the most difficult of heists. The Shadow Thief knew this would be his final and greatest heist. He had never failed, and once he returned, he and his wife would lead The Land for the rest of time. Quite literally, he intended to steal raw power.

The trip however, would prove to be troublesome. No living creature had ever made it across the Wastes. Beasts roamed freely there with no magical walls to keep them back. The Shadow Thief found himself fighting day and night. Dozens, maybe hundreds of beasts fell to his blade. The Wastes were expansive and empty feeling, and the hot desert sun burned his skin. At night, spirits would try and draw him away with promising whispers and deceptive appearances. He saw his wife many times, and sometimes she was cheating on him with another man. Whether or not these spirits told the truth did not matter; the Shadow Thief would not be deterred. Once he returned home, his wife would come back to him seeing the power he wielded.

Midway through the journey, his horse died. He was beginning to feel an odd sensation inside of him. It wasn’t something he was familiar with. In fact, the only way he could describe it

to himself was how those he killed felt before they died. Perhaps he was finally experiencing the feelings some referred to as fear.

Half delirious from thirst, the Shadow Thief stumbled to the base of a mountain he'd been moving towards for what felt like years. He felt his face and found a long beard had grown. Parts of his armor were torn, and angry red blotches had appeared across his exposed skin. The sands blew for hours at a time, stinging every open wound, and finding ways to break him down. The mountain... *THIS* mountain blocked the wind. The Shadow Thief fell to his knees, embarrassed at his weakness. Nothing had ever made him feel this way before. Never had he faced a problem he couldn't steal his way through. He was the greatest thief of all time... And he was trapped crying at the base of a bland looking brown mountain.

"So you have come searching for the Great Soulstone?" a voice that was hauntingly human spoke from beside him. He looked up to see a thickly robed figure standing beside him. From the voice he could tell it was an old woman. Was this another illusion?

"I have," he replied, still unsure of what to make of the figure. She was short and frail looking, but her robes obscured everything about her. Her hood and face cloth completely covered her face. The old woman laughed.

"You are the first in nearly a hundred years to come to this place. If you had waited any longer, I would be dead, and the Soulstone would go with me."

"You have the Soulstone?" he asked through gritted teeth. At this the old woman cackled.

"Of course not, boy. Do you think I would choose to live as an old woman if I had the Soulstone? I am the Stone's protector, an old witch from an age long forgotten. I have seen many men die trying to obtain this gem. For many years though, no one came. Until you showed up,

crying at my doorstep,” the old woman explained. The Shadow Thief didn’t like being spoken down to, especially not from an old woman living in the desert. He stood up, his height imposing over the old crone.

“You are the protector? I need that stone,” the Shadow Thief said, drawing his blade. The ornately crafted sword still had the stains of beast blood across it.

The old woman shook with laughter, “Are you going to kill me, boy? Did you not hear what I said before? If I die, the Great Soulstone goes with me. If you win the Stone from my protection, then its bond goes to you. This is simply how the magic works, and how it was made.”

“How would you know? How can I trust what you’re saying to me? There are many spirits in the Wastes,” the Shadow Thief said.

“You don’t have to trust me boy. If you would prefer to walk across the desert again, be my guest. I created the Stone many years ago to test my limits as a witch. I used it for many more years until I began getting hunted for it. So, I ran here and created this mountain and this gauntlet to protect it. Only those who survive my trials are worthy of inheriting my magic, my Soulstone. Be warned boy, if you claim the gem, know this: the gem grants immortality, but not invincibility. You will be hunted for the rest of time...”

“I don’t care. No man can kill me, I am too skilled, too powerful. Tell me how to get the gem. I care nothing for your stories,” the Shadow Thief said bluntly. The old woman laughed again.

“You want to get right down to business. I can respect that, boy. It’s simple. I have placed the Soulstone atop this mountain. There is a path behind my hut that’ll take you there. It is

riddled with the most powerful beasts and traps in The Land though. It is my gauntlet. As I said, only those who earn the Soulstone deserve its bond.”

“Beasts and traps do not frighten me,” the Shadow Thief said. He began to push past the old woman, his newfound knowledge giving him strength. The woman caught his arm though, very much like his wife had done so long ago.

“I think you should listen to me, idiot boy. The magic on the mountain path is unlike anything you have ever encountered. Now, I can tell from your soul’s magic that you are a powerful man... Maybe more powerful than any other mortal in The Land. You are also very rich. How about we make a deal?” the old woman said. There was a note of something in her voice that changed. She did not laugh now.

“What could I possibly gain from the likes of you? You were once powerful but now you are old, weak, and poor,” the Shadow Thief said back.

“Old yes. Poor, yes. Weak? You don’t know the powers I still wield boy. I can change the weather on command, raise mountains from dust, even bring back the souls of the dead. You will die in my gauntlet, as have all that came before you. I am an old woman yes, but I want to live out my final years like a *queen*. I am tired of this desert, and this hut. I will give you multiple chances at my gauntlet, but with every death, you must exchange some of what *you value most* for your life. Does that sound... Reasonable?”

For a time, the two were silent, each trying to outthink the other. The Shadow Thief knew she was being serious, and if she created the Soulstone, he did not doubt her power. He was the richest man in the history of The Land. His vaults contained enough treasure to fund the building of a new empire, a new country even. His masses of treasure were the result of his life’s work.

What did he have that he valued more? His wife? Hardly, there had been no challenge in getting her. Yes, he had plenty of gold to give in exchange for second chances at life. The old woman had a point. She wanted a lavish life in her final years. The Shadow Thief could understand this angle.

“Fine. Now let me into the gauntlet,” he said, not paying attention to the old woman any longer. Under her robes she smiled, and simply bounced with excitement.

“Take my hand. We must swear on this. A promise—a magical one—but a promise nonetheless,” she whispered, her voice seemingly growing more ominous by the second.

Without a word he took her hand. Her skin was leathery and wrinkled, but her grip was surprisingly powerful. For a brief second, a burning fire was felt in their joined hands, and the Shadow Thief did all he could not to cry out in pain.

“So, it’s done. Now... Off with you, boy,” the old woman said. She seemed to have a new sense of energy about her. The Shadow Thief paid no mind to this and found his way into the gauntlet.

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It wasn’t long before he found himself waking up in the old woman’s hut. Before he was able to climb very high, a panel beneath the dirt was triggered by his staggering steps, sending powerful spring-loaded bone spikes up from the dirt. One of the spikes easily impaled the Shadow Thief, not even giving him the time to cry out.

“Back so soon are we?” the old woman laughed. The Shadow Thief jumped off the bed he’d awoken in.

“What happened?”

“You died. I brought you back.”

“And my wealth? Where is it?”

The old woman cackled again, “I haven’t the room to store the treasure you’ve gathered in this little hut! I have a cave with some of your gold in it. Oh, I took that painting of the gray wolf as well.” The Shadow Thief nodded. He knew the painting she spoke of. It had been hard to obtain, and now, with the snap of her fingers, it was gone.

“I’m leaving for the gauntlet,” he said. The old woman made no attempt to stop him. Night had fallen, and the Shadow Thief felt much more comfortable under the cover of darkness.

He was able to avoid the trap this time. He remembered where it was, and how it triggered. He advanced up the mountain, killing a number of winged beasts. They all looked the same. They had human heads and vulture bodies and screamed with ear piercing ferocity when fought. The old woman was right; the Shadow Thief had never encountered beasts like these before. He wasn’t ready when a two-headed wolf approached him from what looked like a magical portal of some sort. The thing was vicious and fast, and he found himself being torn apart by it. One of the heads lunged for his throat...

Again, the Shadow Thief awoke in the hut. The old woman wasn’t around this time, and daylight was streaming through the windows. He felt well rested and fully awake. Deciding there was no time to sit around, the Shadow Thief returned to the gauntlet once more. Silently he wondered what had been stolen from his vault now.

The mountain and its magic were mysterious and frustratingly powerful. He liked the challenge this “heist” brought but hated himself for failing. After a few more deaths, he learned to sneak past some of the beasts early on. The two-headed wolf could be easily baited into pitching itself from the mountainside. There was a rock golem that had killed him twice that he was able to bypass. The Shadow Thief hadn’t made it this far before. He noticed his vision was a little blurry. Perhaps from the exhaustion of the gauntlet? His back hurt as well, presumably from all the climbing.

Another death, this time from a riddle giving statue. The old woman was fast asleep in the other bed, and the Shadow Thief felt his blood boiling at the sight of her. He sat in the darkness thinking about how to solve the riddle. During this time, he noticed that the old woman looked a little taller. Perhaps the angle of her sleeping body was playing a trick on his eyes?

Yet, the Shadow Thief’s vision was still a bit blurred. His back still ached. This hadn’t happened before. The hut seemed to be closing in on him, so the Shadow Thief decided to tackle the gauntlet again. This time, his back popped when he was sneaking past the rock golem, and he was quickly smashed into dust.

The hut’s walls looked very blurry when he awoke. The old woman was pacing around outside.

“Still think you’re the greatest thief of all time? You can’t even beat an old bat like me!” she called through an open window. The Shadow Thief pushed himself out of bed and back into the gauntlet. His fortune was probably half way gone by now. He didn’t care. The obtaining of the Soulstone had become personal.

This time, the riddling statue could not stop him. The trail to the top was in sight. The Shadow Thief barely managed to dodge past some well-placed traps. His knees wobbled as he forced himself up the cliff. His breaths were short and ragged sounding. He stopped by a small water spring, shaking with thirst and pain. When he leaned over to drink from the spring, his reflection shocked him.

His beard and hair, once lush brown, was now dotted with gray. His skin looked older, and some of the veins on his arms were hardened. The Shadow Thief quickly decided that this was simply an illusion to distract him. He drank the water from his hand and gagged at the flavor. It burned going down, and soon his vision went dark.

The desert, the gauntlet, the hut... None of it changed. The old woman was seen less and less, probably stuck up in her cave enjoying the riches he was giving her. The Shadow Thief knew not to drink the water, but he made a silly mistake to catch his breath right past the riddling statue. A whirling blade rose from the stone underfoot and sliced his head clean off his shoulders.

Death after death. Day after day. It was becoming harder and harder to move or fight. The Shadow Thief made it less far each time until one morning, he couldn't feel his legs. His eyes struggled to open, but he knew he was in the bed. His body felt stiff and weak. Had the gauntlet finally taken its toll?

"Look at you... The greatest thief of all time. Bedridden and frail," a cold voice said from someplace far away. It was hard to tell where she spoke from, as the Shadow Thief's hearing had changed. It felt like cotton balls had been stuffed in his ears, blocking sound from coming in very well. He managed to open his eyes as a curvy figure placed something on his face. The two

shapes cleared his vision a bit, or at least they helped him see. *Glasses? I've never needed them before.*

"Where am I?" he asked, his voice sounding nothing like it should've. It was old sounding and shaky. Almost as if his lungs were starting to slow down.

"The same place you've been for the last four days. My hut. At the base of the mountain," a woman said. The Shadow Thief squinted at the curvy figure. It was definitely a woman, a beautiful woman too. She wore expensive looking robes and her blonde hair fell around her shoulders. She had a sharp, cold look about her, and her gray eyes seemed to be hyper analyzing every detail of his body.

"Are you that old witch's daughter?" he wheezed. It was getting hard to breathe now.

An eerily familiar laugh escaped the woman's mouth as she spoke, "No. She never had a daughter. In fact, she's here right now. Talking to you."

The Shadow Thief struggled to understand what she was saying. It didn't make sense. He tried to speak, but his vision was beginning to fail. His chest hurt.

"You were blinded by greed. You never had a chance to get that Stone. Pitiful. You didn't stop to question our deal... You never valued your wealth. No, no, no, not when compared to *yourself*, you greedy arrogant bastard. When we made that magical promise four days ago, I was an old woman with failing health. You were a supple albeit conceited thief who thought he was infallible. Funny, you don't know yourself well enough to even realize what you value most. I told you I could revive you in return for a little of what you valued most... I don't own any of your silly treasure. No... I own your *youth*. I stole your soul's energy and repaired my own, but it wasn't really stealing now was it? After all, *we had a deal*."

The Shadow Thief understood very little of what the old—young—woman was saying. He felt his heart pounding, and the pain was becoming worse.

“If you were the greatest thief of all time, and I stole what you valued most... What does that make me? What title do I get, hm? Funny how easily you threw it all away. You were so blinded by your greed that you didn’t even know you were destroying yourself!” the woman laughed. But it fell on deaf ears, as the Shadow Thief had died in her bed. She removed the glasses and crushed them, her now youthful body trembling with renewed magical power.

The greatest thief of all time, the legendary Shadow Thief, spoken of only in fearful whispers, was dead. Few really knew the man behind the name, and The Land returned to its repetitive cycle of life. The wife and child of the Shadow Thief were left with a fortune of stolen wealth and waited in vain for his return. His greed had ended him, just as it had formed his legacy. Eventually The Land moved on, and the name “Shadow Thief” was forgotten with the sands of time.