

Queen of the World

Ben Hennessy

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Most people say that magic doesn't exist. To some extent, they're correct. Magic is a product of human imagination. People would like the ability to fly, or conjure fire from their fingertips. Those early days of childhood, where anything seems possible, stay with us. They help form our future and linger long after we have matured. A boy may stop pretending to be a famous hero, but the dream of fame never fades completely. Neither does the ambition of being the greatest swordsman or the finest archer in all the land. The world admires those skilled in the martial arts; the ones who are able to protect the common man and keep their loved ones safe.

The world wants heroes.

Nonetheless, the reality of life dictates that admiration is earned in other, more conventional ways. A man who provides for his family is respected. A loving parent is, in turn, loved by her children. The king of a nation who rules with a fair and steady hand is given the loyalty of his subjects. These roles, among many others, are prominent within lands which have enjoyed centuries of harmony. For most, life is peaceful.

It was not always so.

The world was once savage and cruel. Respect and obedience were demanded by the strongest and the most barbaric. Loyalty was given to those who were most feared. Nations were forged by warlords, chieftains, and tyrants who ruled through brute strength and merciless punishment. Such leaders governed with iron fists and held little regard for the common wants and needs of their people, making vicious examples of all who stood against them. Those who would not fight worked the fields and were regularly mistreated by the very soldiers who claimed to protect them. War was common as opposing factions fought for territory, resources and power. Lives were short and brutal.

Then came the Four.

None could say where they came from or why. The Four walked separate from one another, each journeying to a different corner of the land. As the years rolled by, they came to each warlord and chieftain in turn. Some looked upon them with suspicion, others with intrigue. Most cast glares of derision and scorn. The Four would ask for an audience. Sometimes their polite request was granted, but often it was denied.

The Four could be persuasive.

It is said that they could do anything. Anything. The legends tell of mountains cracked apart by the wave of a hand. Whole cities brought tumbling down with a casual glance. Rivers made to boil and the sky turned to flame at a thought. Men were shaped to appear as beasts and women as birds upon a whim.

The warlords and chieftains listened.

The Four came with a simple message. Those in power would use their position to help their people. They would make peace with one another and focus on advancing culture, education, and science. They would protect those who lived under their rule and no longer terrorise them. They would ease the burden of taxes and let the people support themselves as well as each other. They would

promote trade. They would provide sanitation and medicines.

They would do all this, or they would be removed from their rule forcibly.

One should not argue with a God.

Some did, of course. Some tried to silence these arrogant men who made demands of them. They did not live long to regret their choice. The more intelligent of the warlords, the smartest of the chieftains, were the ones who survived. They did as they were asked, and they pledged to lead their people into a new age of prosperity and peace.

The Four, once satisfied, left. They did so with a warning.

If ever your people fall back into darkness, then we shall return.

Since that time, over five hundred years previous, no nation has dared to test this promise.

Chapter One

The thump against her bed brought Sarene hurtling back to reality, her dream forgotten in moments.

“Come on, girl. Those eggs won’t wander in by themselves.”

Winching against the sunshine as the curtains beside her bed were drawn open, Sarene brought her arm up to shield her eyes. She shook her head, rolling over to pull the blanket around her thin shoulders.

The thump came again, rocking the frame of her bed.

“Not today. We’ve a lot on, so the sooner we finish breakfast the better.”

Sighing, she peeked out through her dark hair. Her father was standing over her, clearly amused. He offered a hand but she waved it away.

A few minutes later, Sarene was rummaging through the small chicken coop beside their homestead. Twelve eggs. Enough for the morning but it wouldn’t leave much for supper. The thought of porridge for the umpteenth day in a row made her grimace. She foraged amongst the nesting for a few more moments before rising to her feet. Brushing dirt from her knees, she looked across the valley fields, behind which their house stood at the crest of a gentle slope. Already the farmers were working through the wheat, toiling against

the hard earth. It had been a few weeks since the last rains, and she could see a vague overlay of dust rise and drift in the breeze as the soil was turned. The sky above bore a single cloud, but it threatened no rain.

As she walked in the front door of her home, a small figure burst from the entrance, almost knocking her over. She stepped back, keeping a tight grasp on the basket of eggs. One of her younger brothers tore off towards the village's main street.

"Sorry!"

Sarene shook her head with a frown, turning back to the door.

"Sarene? Come on, the water's ready."

She stepped inside, moving to the kitchen area where her mother sat over a pan of simmering water. A dozen thick slices of dark bread lay spread on a platter beside her. She placed the basket next to the pan and received a warm smile in return.

"Thanks, love. Would you mind checking the pantry for some butter? I think we might have a little bit left over. Remember to wash your hands, too."

Sarene did as she was asked, placing a small clay pot beside the bread. The eggs were already in the pan, cheerfully rolling around in the bubbling water. She knelt down beside her mother, who was sewing the heel of a sock. The fabric already showed several battle scars from previous repairs.

"I sometimes wonder if Aiden has hooves for feet," said her mother after a few moments. "I've never known a boy go through so many."

Sarene yawned, rubbing at her eye with the base of her palm. Her mother gave a disapproving glance, tugging at the needle.

"Tired again?"

The girl nodded.

"I'm starting to worry, you know. It's not right for a girl your age, always waking up yawning."

Sarene shrugged in response, letting her hand drop back to her lap. She looked over at the bread, before tapping her

finger against the clay pot.

“Oh, yes, if you would dear. The eggs won’t be long now.”

She shuffled across the floor to the platter and picked up the long knife lying alongside it. As she started scraping around the inside of the pot she heard movement behind her. A glance over her shoulder revealed her sister Taylei framed in the doorway, arms wrapped around a dripping basket.

“Have I got time to hang these before food, Mam?”

“Had better do. Your father wants all the chores done as quick as can be, so you can get over to town.”

“Okay. Don’t let them boys eat all the eggs before I’m back.”

Sarene returned to the bread, buttering away with what little remained. Her mother bit the last of the thread from the sock before placing it beside her, tucking the needle into her apron. When both were finished they looked at each other. Sarene drew her legs up to her chest, placing her chin on her knees. She sighed softly.

“You should start getting to bed earlier. A good night’s rest would do you well. You might even enjoy the mornings a little more.” Her mother reached over to ruffle Sarene’s hair. The girl pulled back a little in response, wrinkling her face in displeasure. Chuckling, the woman turned her gaze back to the boiling pan, absently toying with the speckled, tawny Jaithran feather hanging from a small braid behind her left ear.

“Is breakfast ready yet, Mam?” cried a voice from the doorway as two young boys scurried in. Both immediately charged for Sarene. She saw them coming a moment too late and tried to lean out of the way before they inevitably fell over her, three bodies crumpling to a heap on the floor.

“Mind out for the pans, yer fools!”

“Sorry Mam,” one of the boys apologised, giggling. “Was jus’ wondering cos we’re both hu-ow!”

Sarene thumped him on the arm before turning to exact the same revenge on another of the writhing tangle of limbs

still crawling all over her. A second yelp of alarm resounded through the cottage.

“Aiden, Astl, get off of her. Sarene, stop hitting your brothers.” Their mother’s voice was stern. All three obeyed, though Sarene did so grudgingly. She’d been ambushed, after all.

“Now set the plates, the pair of you. Try not to break anything as you do.”

The boys did as they were told. Soon afterwards Aaron, the third brother, entered with their sister Taylei. As the food was being plated up their father Sameran also returned, his kind features marred with stress. He offered a thin smile as he took a plate.

“Problem, dear?” said his wife, Aislyn.

“Sodding wagon hasn’t arrived.”

Aiden put a hand to his chewing mouth, expressing shock at his father’s language which elicited a giggle from the other two boys. Sameran frowned at them. They stopped.

“You won’t be laughing when it turns up, lads. You’ll be breaking your backs with the rest of us. The later it is the harder you’ll be pushin’.”

Sarene watched them return to their food without further comment.

“What do you want us to do, father?” Taylei asked as she broke a slice of bread.

“You and your sister will be making sure the men have enough water and towels. Weather like this, it’ll be sorely needed.”

The two girls exchanged glances, Sarene offering her first smile of the morning. She nodded her understanding, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear before continuing with her food.

“And make sure you don’t pay too much attention to that Kellan lad, Tay. I don’t like the way he looks at you.” Sameran dragged the last of his bread around his plate, mopping up pools of escaped yolk.

“Now Sam, I don’t think that’s really necessary,” said Aislyn.

“You haven’t seen how the boys in town are acting, stripped to the waist and flexing their birdcages. Anyone would think they’d been asked to give a horse and pony show instead of hard graft.”

Taylei blushed, but said nothing in reply. Sarene grinned at her.

“Would that mean pretending to be a horse, Pa?” Astl asked. His father ignored the comment.

“Come on, finish up. We should be in town before the mortar arrives.”

The sun was beating down by the time they arrived alongside the mill’s work site. Most of the village men who were not working in the fields were already here, along with a few of the younger women. Sameran moved towards a group of men standing around a table which had been brought out onto the grass. She recognised the town elder, Leryn, poring over a large parchment spread upon it. The three brothers ran across the street to meet the other village children. Sarene watched the youngsters as she walked beside Taylei towards the nearby well. Aiden was already the centre of attention, his animated movements accompanying a story of some sort. Those around him were giggling. Sarene smiled, wondering once again how triplets could be so different. Her trio of sibling boys were something of celebrities in the village, with Aiden most definitely the ringleader.

“Here, girls. Take one of these each, and fill them with water.”

Sarene turned to see Neive, the baker’s wife, holding out two battered canteens. The woman was visibly sweating; her large bulk not doing well in the early morning heat. The girls did as she asked, each taking a canteen along with a wrapped linen towel which they draped over their shoulders.

“Make sure the boys don’t run dry during the day. We all know how much they can complain when they aren’t being looked after.” Neive winked, drawing laughter from the two girls, before moving on.

“She’s always cheerful, she is. I guess being surrounded

by cakes all day would be a good thing,” said Taylei as they walked.

Sarene nodded, before puffing out her cheeks with her eyes wide.

“Sarene!” Taylei made a poor job of hiding her amusement. “That isn’t very nice.”

The elder of the two winked, smiling. She bowed her head in a gesture of acceptance at the rebuke.

They filled the canteens, taking a moment to drink deeply from the cool, fresh water left in the pulley bucket. It tasted sweet on Sarene’s tongue, as though someone had poured honey into the well.

The wagon didn’t arrive for another hour, by which time the enthusiasm for the task in hand was beginning to wane. With the exception of the men around Leryn’s table, who were still talking in gruff tones of discontent, the majority of those gathered were now sitting in groups on the ground, basking in the sun. The sisters made their first rounds with the other girls, handing out the canteens and offering towels to mop at sweat-beaded foreheads. Sarene could see the boy their father had warned about, Kellan, though he didn’t appear to be paying her sister much attention. Taylei, on the other hand, was quite obviously keeping out of his way, being sure to move along the other groups. Sarene wondered if anyone else saw this as plainly as she did, or if Taylei would be making the effort if their father hadn’t said anything.

When the delivery of mortar finally arrived, a muted cheer went up from those gathered. Sarene caught the sandy smell coming from the back of the large wagon. She moved towards it as several of the men moved to the rear with sacks ready, Leryn amongst them. His target, however, seemed to be the wagon driver. They spoke quietly, but Sarene saw from his expression that he was not impressed. Sarene turned her attention to one of the lead horses; four had been used to pull the wagon, but this stallion was the best of them in her opinion. She ran a hand over its chestnut hair, stroking at its sleek neck. The horse snorted, dipping its head to nudge at her chest. Sarene smiled.

“Watch, it, watch it!” came a cry from the rear of the wagon, before a chunk of mortar plopped to the floor with a loose thud. “Ah, by the Four...”

“It’s not going to run away, Keith.”

“Guess you won’t need to chase it, then. Get it in the sack.”

“You’re meant to get it in the bleedin’ sack. I’m shovelling.”

“You’re throwing it all over the ground, more like. Get here, we’ll swap.”

Sarene shrugged, patting the stallion once more before moving back towards the well to refill her canteen. By now most people were back on their feet, moving towards the work site. The first of the rocks to be used for the foundation, large slabs of granite which had been shipped to them three days previously, were carried towards the centre, where a group of the younger men were directing operations.

The morning’s work was hard, but few complained. They had time to spare before the mill was required to be operational, but Leryn felt it was important to be ahead of schedule for the harvest. Sarene knew little about the mechanics involved, but she understood the importance of making sure that everything was working beforehand. The harvest wasn’t looking to be a good one, judging from the lack of rains this year, but her father had explained that with the mill they could sell flour directly to Kashan, the largest city in the southern region. Cutting out the necessity for another village’s assistance meant greater profits. The details were of little interest, though. All Sarene knew was that everyone had their part to play in its construction. Her part involved carrying water and handing out towels. She doubted she’d be given an honour for this task.

As the call for lunch came, Sarene glanced across the crest towards the valley a few miles distant, where the road out of the village led towards Tamiran, the capital. The hills rose sharply either side of the trail, which disappeared out of view, bending to the left. She often imagined herself walking

along that path, never to return. Her imagination was vast, and she would conjure up lifelike scenarios heavy in details whenever she let her mind wander. She often considered the adventures she would experience if she ever made the journey along that trail leading to the Highway. Sarene enjoyed her life in the village, but the restrictive boundaries were a little too high. Like other girls her age, she was expected to marry off and produce children while the men worked towards the yearly harvest. In between were the occasional town dances, birthday celebrations for the elders past their sixtieth summer - which was rare, but traditionally a very special age - and the annual Shalith festival. Sarene enjoyed Shalith. It had long lost its meaning, but the stories of the Four always held her captivated no matter how many times she heard them. She didn't believe the Four had ever existed, of course. Few did these days, at least in the villages and towns out here in the country. But the stories themselves, of men with extraordinary power, were too good to ignore. She often wondered what she would do with such power, when she lay in her bunk trying to sleep. There was little else she *could* do at that time.

Sleep was becoming a problem.

It wasn't so much that she had bad dreams; if she did she never remembered them. And she certainly felt tired. But during these last few months she had found it increasingly troublesome to drift off. She felt as though her mind had to climb a mountain to reach the sanctuary offered in slumber. There was an intangible obstacle between her waking mind and her subconscious, and she couldn't figure out what it was.

"Sar?" A hand touched her shoulder. "I was calling you. Daydreaming again?"

Sarene turned to her sister, nodding with a wry smile. She lifted her hand to her mouth, mimicking a yawn, before a genuine yawn passed her soft features.

"You're just lazy." Taylei winked. "Come on, we've got bread and jam to hand out. It's that apple stuff Pledaran's aunt makes." Sarene's eyes lit up at the mention, which

made Taylei chuckle. "Yeah. Try not to go silly with it this time."

After the girls had finished moving from group to group, passing out the pre-spread food, they sat apart from the rest to enjoy their own share. Sarene's dollop of the glistening yellowish compote was larger than Taylei's by a fair way, but she made no protest. They ate in silence. Around them the workers shared amiable chatter, the air occasionally punctuated with laughter. After the meal was finished the two girls removed their slippers and sat leaning back, faces turned up to the sky to allow the sunshine to radiate down on them. They sat in an almost identical pose, right ankle crossed over the left, hands spread on the ground behind them, and Taylei's long tawny hair tucked behind the right ear in the same manner as Sarene's own dark strands. Shortly before they were due to return to their tasks, a group of shadows fell over them. Sarene opened her eyes to see Kellan standing over them with three of his friends. All four of them were shirtless. If Sarene were to make a wager, she would say at least two of them were trying to tense their arms in a manner which was she presumed was meant to be casual.

"Afternoon, ladies." Kellan bowed his head, flashing a handsome grin. Sarene tilted her head to the side, appraising him for a moment. One of the larger boys behind him nudged another, a skinny lad with reddish hair and an abundance of freckles brought out by the sun.

"We'd been wondering if we'd done anything to upset either of you. We noticed that you'd kept your distance all morning."

Sarene closed one eye against the sun, pursing her lips. She looked over to Taylei, who shook her head. "My father asked me to stay clear today, is all."

"From me?" Kellan seemed impressed.

"Aye."

"What for?"

"You're a rascal."

Kellan laughed, his friends joining him with noises and claps. Sarene rolled her eyes.

“I guess I should be flattered. I think. Do you agree with him, Tay?”

Taylei turned her head to look across to the worksite. Sarene could tell she was trying to stop another of her common scarlet flushes from touching her cheeks. “I haven’t worked that out yet.”

“I can give you a hint, if you like.” Kellan grinned, his face becoming impish.

Sarene snapped her fingers, catching his attention. She shook her head pointedly.

“Sorry, Sar. I already told you, not until you give me a song.”

Sitting forward and brushing her hands, Sarene started to whistle a light melody, pulling a syrupy sweet expression; before anyone could comment she stuck her tongue out at the group and blew a raspberry. Kellan laughed.

“Very pretty, but I’d best not allow *both* of you to become enchanted with me. Your father would have my arse in a sling.”

“Who said I was enchanted!?” Taylei said in a pitch which rose with each word.

“Did I say enchanted? Sorry, my mouth sometimes acts before my brain does.”

“That suggests you have a brain. Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

Sarene grinned at the retort, as did Kellan’s friends. Kellan himself simply nodded his head, spreading his hands before him. “A rascal needs to think on his feet.”

Taylei opened her mouth to respond when a horn blew from the work site. The other groups started to get to their feet. Sarene reached over to her slippers and pulled them on before rising with her plate in hand. She tapped it as she looked to her sister.

“That’s right. Hand over your plates.” Taylei held out her hands. “I think you’ve got more stones to throw around.”

The ginger boy at the back pointed to the lopsided stack of plates behind them. “Down there. Fetch ‘em up, eh?”

“I’ll fetch you a slap, firebrand. Get away.” Taylei shooed

them off, sneaking a glance at Kellan as they turned. He caught it and winked in return. The blush she'd been fighting off now flourished across her cheeks. Sarene sniffed, shaking her head, as the two of them began collecting plates which had been left discarded on the grass.

"What?" Taylei snapped, embarrassed. Sarene shrugged vaguely. She had nothing against Kellan, but their father was right. He had the makings of a true heartbreaker. Taylei would do well to watch herself.



The creature giggled to itself, hidden away from the crowds passing by its hiding spot.

This was a good hiding spot. It was completely invisible to the outside world. It wondered idly if it could stay there forever, just watching. It decided that would make life fairly unadventurous, though, so such an existence wasn't really an option. Still, for now, it could enjoy the hiding spot. Hidden, watching, and giggling.

The crowds moving past were oblivious to the creature. They moved this way and that, talking in the street and waving at each other. They laughed and pointed and pardoned. They shook hands and bowed heads. They shoved and glared and swore. They bought and they sold, and all the while were blissfully unaware of the creature and its hiding spot.

The creature was hungry, and it was waiting to see what it could steal. It had no money; money was a very odd concept. It felt things would make more sense if people just took what they needed. If there wasn't enough to go around, then the strong would thrive while the weak would not. However, it was beginning to understand that the weak were often the most intelligent. The weak created ways to emerge victorious over the strong.

The creature noticed that, from time to time, an obviously wealthy little man would be followed by an obviously less wealthy large man. In a sensible world, the large man would take the little man's things for himself. Everything except the

clothes, because they wouldn't fit and that would just be mean. Funny, but mean.

But instead the large man followed the little man around. The little man who had somehow convinced him to do so. He had successfully made the strong serve the weak.

The creature wouldn't ever serve the weak. It would serve only itself.

It giggled again in its hiding spot. It would do what had to be done.

And it would find the girl.



That evening, after the sun had set and the day's work had drawn to a close, Sarene walked back towards the cabin with her family. The sky to the west was a deep lavender, the last of the light illuminating from below like a great fire. The reason why such colours appeared in the sky during the first and last minutes of the day – ranging from a deep purple to a fiery orange – eluded her, but that was a thing for better people to understand. She looked back towards the valley leading from the village, as she often did before it was lost to the night.

“Shouldn't be more than a few weeks before it's up and running,” her father was saying at the head of the group, his hairy arm wrapped around her mother's slim shoulders. She smiled at the sight. “The foundations were practically finished today. The walls only take time because of the trouble carrying stone upwards, but the lads did well. So did you all.”

“I'm...” started Aiden, but he was cut off by a yawn. He shook his head, being nudged by Aaron. “Sleepy.” He shoved his brother back.

“I think you'll sleep well tonight, lad.” Sameran looked over his shoulder. “Maybe even you will, Sar.”

“She prefers daydreaming to actual dreaming,” Taylei said. She was using a small twig to clean under her fingernails as they walked. “I kept catching her staring off

into space today.”

Sarene wrinkled her nose at her sister.

“Even so, you’d all better get some rest,” said Sameran. “It’ll be the same again tomorrow.”

As they reached their home, a figure was waiting at the gate to the chicken coop. He leaned against the wooden frame, arms folded over his chest. Sarene’s eyes lit up as they drew closer, before she burst into a run. She reached the man, whose arms had opened to pull her into a tight hug, laughing as he did.

“Easy there, Sar! You’ll have us both over the fence!” He ruffled Sarene’s hair, looking up to the rest of the family. “Been busy?”

“Aye, but it’s good to see you, son.” Sameran stepped past Sarene as she drew back, reaching over to clasp the man’s shoulder. “You should have sent word you were coming back. We could have prepared one of the chickens for dinner.”

“Already have one over the fire inside. Thought you might appreciate it after the work in town. I did consider coming to help, but...” He winked.

“Ah, nevermind that, Jared. You must have had quite a ride.”

Jared continued along the row, passing out hugs and pats to the rest of his siblings, before embracing Aislyn. “You’re looking well, Ma. I didn’t realise we were supposed to look younger with each passing season.”

“Oh, pssh,” Aislyn said, chuckling. “No need to flatter, unless that’s part of your training these days?”

“There’s not really much call for flattery in the Kalethi. We’re supposed to stay out of sight, after all. I guess it might work if I ever got caught.”

Sarene tugged at Jared’s shirt sleeve, shaking her head.

“Nope, I doubt I will be either. Never lost a game of hide and seek in my life. You should know, the hours you spent wandering around looking for me.”

Sarene grinned, giving him a playful jab to the arm.

“Come on. Let’s get inside before the chicken burns. It

won't turn itself, as much as your fancy pose was a sight to behold." Aislyn began to usher the triplets inside.

"Will be right behind you. I need a moment with Sarene first."

Sarene peered at her brother, curious. Sameran nodded and moved in after his wife, Taylei holding his arm. Jared watched them leave before turning.

"It's good to see you again, brighteyes. Sorry I didn't write back, but you know how it is."

Sarene nodded, the corner of her mouth pulled up into a smile.

"Yeah, I'm lazy as well. Anyway, I got you something." He reached behind him, pulling a paper-wrapped object from his belt. The wrapping crackled a little under his touch. "Thought you might like to be able to sing once in a while."

Sarene snatched the object from her brother, tearing at the paper. Jared laughed at her enthusiasm as she did. As the wrapping fell to the ground, Sarene discovered a set of pan pipes. She bounced on her toes, a beaming grin on her face. A moment later she was wrapped around Jared again, giving a hug so fierce it forced a cough from her brother.

"Sar, I'm glad you like it but it's becoming a little tricky to breathe...!" He spread his arms to loosen her grip, which she did after a few more seconds. Stepping back she lifted the pipes up high, admiring them in the dim light.

"You always said you wanted a set, but that little flute you got for your birthday always sounded a bit off to me. You'll have better luck with these – I had them made especially by a crafter in Tamiran."

Sarene nodded eagerly, clutching the pipes to her chest. He was right – while she loved her flute, the instrument hadn't been of the highest quality, and it had taken so much work to sound clean she'd lost interest in playing.

"How have you been, anyway? Keeping out of trouble, I hope."

Rolling her eyes, Sarene offered another nod, this one dismissive. Her smile became amused.

Jared shrugged. "I have to ask, y'know. With the boys no

doubt causing havoc, you should be helping Ma keep an eye on them.”

Sarene looked down to the pipes. Bringing them to her lips, she mimicked playing a tune on them, dancing on the spot for a few steps whilst waving an arm behind her as if leading a crowd. Jared laughed. “Aye, you could guide them around like a troupe. That would be a sight. You would strike fear into the hearts of any honest man.”

Sarene gave a silent giggle, the one gesture she knew her brother enjoyed most. Holding out his hand, Jared inclined his head towards their home. “Come on. That chicken won’t take much longer, providing I didn’t burn it already.”

Sarene took the hand in a tight grip as they walked together back into the house.



That night Sarene lay in her bunk, staring up at the ceiling. She was tired, but once again sleep would not claim her. Not yet.

Jared’s visit had been a welcome surprise. She loved him fiercely. As the two oldest siblings, they had shared a special bond growing up, always exploring the village and its surrounding lands together. ‘Thick as thieves,’ their father would often say after yet again catching the pair doing something they weren’t supposed to. Like the time they had decided how wonderful it would be to live the life of a pig, lazing in the sun all day whilst being brought meals by the owner. The pig farmer, Uronei, had found them rolling around in the mud of the sty, covered in filth. They’d noticed how the pigs liked to do so and presumed it was the common thing for a pig to do. Uronei had dragged the pair back to their shocked mother, their huge grins a statement of how they saw most things in life. Jared had explained that they weren’t doing any harm, but that hadn’t stopped them receiving a hiding and a good hour in the bath together, scrubbed from head to toe with a coarse hair brush.

Jared’s patience with her had also been something Sarene

was eternally grateful for. With hindsight she understood how difficult it must have been for him to communicate with her, when all she could do was point and wave and cry when she wanted to tell him what she wanted to do or convey how she felt. She couldn't remember him ever taunting her, or laughing at her spitefully. He had always taken the time to work out what she wanted to say, his young features screwed up in thought.

When he had left to join the army two years previous she had cried for days. All of her family were dear to her, of course, but Jared's departure had somehow signified that their childhood was over, that the special bond they had shared was loosening with every passing season. She had begged to join him, but of course that was impossible – the Kalethi, Tamir's scouting regiment, did not take on females due to the dangers inherent in the job. Sarene had resented that, feeling she was being punished for not being a boy.

However long Jared was here for this time, Sarene was going to make sure they spent as much of it in each other's company as they could; mill or no mill.

She sighed, the breath turning into a long yawn. Right now, the most important thing was sleep.

She finally achieved it three hours later, less than four before sunrise.



The work on the mill continued for the rest of the week, Sarene's days quickly becoming tedious. She passed out water and held out towels, nodding and smiling and waiting with impatience for the horn at the end of the day. To her sister's credit, Taylei bore her absent mindedness with no complaint. Sarene was aware Taylei always felt a little pushed aside whenever Jared was around, but it was never mentioned. She had always appreciated the bond her two elder siblings had, and never tried to seek the attention of Jared over her sister.

Sarene was quick to pack up her canteen and baskets and

head on to wherever Jared was when the day was over, which was usually the tavern. He'd developed something of a reputation in the village. As the only man there who had joined the Kalethi, he was often sought out for tales of life on the frontier. Tamir hadn't endured military action for over a hundred years, but the army still commanded a respect from the general populace for its professionalism and dedication to the defence of the borders. Jared was usually sitting at the bar, talking to the patrons like an orator. He had a presence about him, his easy-going nature making people warm to him quickly.

On this day, though, as Sarene pulled open the door to the tavern, her brother was nowhere to be seen. The place was empty except for two of the elder females eating supper and Raleth, the tavern keeper, running a cloth around a clay mug. The place smelt of onions and stale beer, a combination Sarene had always found distasteful.

Raleth looked up at her, shaking his head. "He's not here, girl," he said at a volume which wasn't necessary to reach her. "Haven't seen him all day."

Sarene nodded, taking a quick look around anyway. She stepped back outside, the door to the tavern creaking at the hinges, where the first of the workers were returning to the high street. She moved back past them, weaving between the groups in search of her brother. Nothing.

After a half-hour, Sarene walked back towards her home. She held her hands together, fiddling with her fingers as she looked across the fields. It was possible Jared had simply returned home early, but he *had* left that morning with the rest of the family to head into town. She found Aaron cleaning out the chicken coop as she returned. He waved at her, and she waved back. Pointing to her eyes she held her hand above her head, as if measuring a height.

"Jared? Nope. We thought he was with you?"

Sarene shook her head.

"Oh. Don't know then." Aaron went back to placing fresh nesting inside the coop, chickens clucking around him as they waited to return to their sleep.

Stepping inside her home, Sarene saw her family sitting around the table. Her father was talking about the mill, and how much longer it would take before they could expect to have shipments of flour ready to transport out to the surrounding county. Sarene moved past them with a wave, giving a broad smile to hide her sense of disappointment. She was hesitant to let them know that she had returned for the one member who wasn't here. Moving to the kitchen area, she found two slices of bread left over, beside a couple of tomatoes and a sliver of ham remaining from the previous day. She took them to the table and started to eat.

"Where's your brother?" asked Aislyn. Sarene shrugged, looking up at her mother as she chewed. Aislyn frowned, glancing to Sameran.

"Strange. I suppose he's telling wild tales again."

Sarene shook her head. She mimicked taking a large drink, then crossed her eyes and staggered her shoulders. She then spread her hands.

"Not at the tavern? Hmph. Must be visiting friends then."

Sarene nodded. Jared had always been popular, and it would make sense there would be people from their past who would want to catch up with him. Maybe Quarin or Thastlen, two other boys who had often been caught up in their escapades together.

Sameran grunted. "I still think he would have been useful on the mill site."

"Now, dear," Aislyn replied with a fond smile. She reached over to touch his hand. "We've discussed this."

"Aye, I know," he said, placing his hand over hers. "Even so, would be good to have him there, even if only to see him a bit more often. Between Sar dragging him away and his nights in the tavern, we've hardly spoken two words to him."

Sarene winked, chewing.

"Not to say you're being greedy, girl." Her father smiled. "We know what you two are like."

"Say, now you're back, think you could help me lay the sheets on the beds?" said Taylei, peering at her sister. Sarene

clapped her hands in mock excitement, before slumping her shoulders and pointing at her food, her expression pleading.

“After you’ve eaten, silly. Don’t rush yourself. Those old beds are quite patient, y’know.”

Sarene rolled her eyes, not for the first time that day.