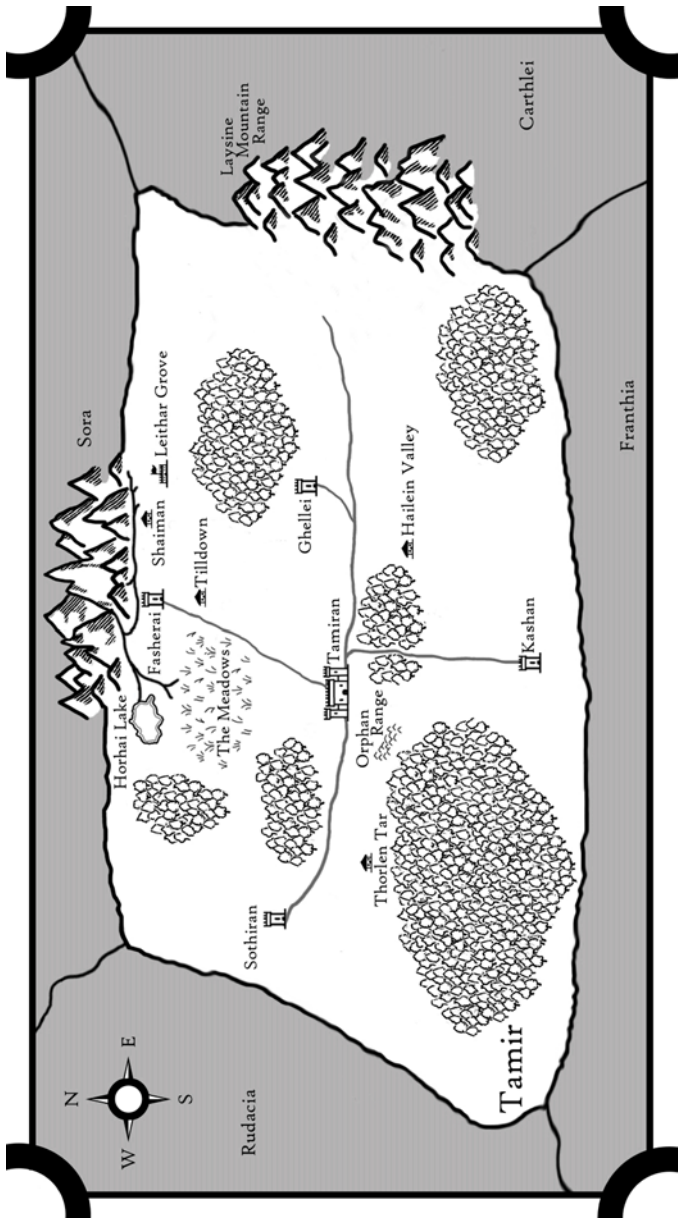


The Whisper of Dreams

Ben Hennessy

Inspired Quill Publishing



Sora

Carthlei

Franthia

Laysine Mountain Range

Horhai Lake

Fasherai
Shaimer
Leithar Grove

Tilldown

The Meadows

Ghellei

Hailein Valley

Tamiran

Kashan

Sothiran

Orphan Range

Thorien Tar

Tamir

Rudacia

THE TOWER WAS a monument to solitude. It rose from the ground, up towards the overcast skies, straight and perfect. There were no cracks in the brickwork, no rough edges or decoration. It was devoid of character and lacked evidence that a hand had ever touched it. The door was lacquered wood, belted with a single steel band. A brass ring had been set in its centre, waiting to call for attention. There were no windows except for at the very top, where a dull orange glow emanated from within, a useless lighthouse without a coastline to protect. The tower sat in the bowl of a heavy mountain range, termed by the bordering nations as the *Ethariana Krul*; The Eternal Cage. The peaks of the mountains stabbed at the clouds, colossal claws of the earth for which the tower served as an anchor, giving a sense of perspective.

Within the tower there was no noise. The spiral staircase, lit by the occasional candle which never dripped and never faltered, echoed no sound save for the footsteps of whomever used it. Again there was no sign of a personal touch; a lack of history within except the very ambience of the structure. No portraits hung from the walls. No vases held flowers. No carpet softened the stairs. It was a stifling, claustrophobic place.

A huge room at the top of the tower met the final few steps. Here, at least, were some possessions and furnishings. A broad table upon which sat a neat stack of books, a feathered quill and an ink

well. A high-backed chair, cushioned and padded, suggested the desk saw regular use. The walls were lined with shelves containing a variety of jars, scrolls and vials. Books were set in a very meticulous order – the spines announcing the contents were listed alphabetically. An oval rug blending varying shades of red covered most of the stone flooring. The light breaching the only two windows in the tower was created by a heavy fireplace within which logs crackled and spat as flames danced along their surface.

There, against the eastern side of the circular room, stood a bed. Wrapped within a heavy quilt and propped up by pillows was a very old man, gaunt and sickly, with beads of sweat dotting his papery skin. In the glow of the fire he appeared to be made of bronze. Dishevelled hair matched an unkempt beard. His chest rose and fell with a gentle depth that hinted at a peaceful slumber.

Beside the bed was another chair, this one built for comfort. In the chair was a second man. He flicked through a book, reading the pages without ever seeming lost within the words. One leg crossed the other. He held the glasses he wore with one hand, as though they would fall if he released them. They remained in position when he reached down to turn the page, and he would hold them again regardless. His scruffy hair was similar in colour to the bed-ridden man's, and his age was comparable, but he seemed much healthier. He wore a robe of deep maroon which fit his old body to the inch. The fire kept the room warm but he did not sweat beneath the heavy fabric of his garments. He read his book and patiently waited.

Hours passed. Just as the seated man came to the end of his book there was stirring. He looked up, snapping shut the cover of the tome, just as the sleeping man slept no more. Their eyes met.

“Corliani,” the newly awoken man murmured, his voice hoarse.
“Tyrrial.”

With a yawn, Tyrrial pressed against the mattress beneath him and sought to push himself upright. Suddenly his eyes widened and he yelled out, his right arm faltering.

“Be careful, brother. I would expect that hurt,” said Corliani as he folded the arms of his glasses inwards and placed them atop the book in his lap. “You’ll need to take it easy for a few weeks.”

There was a pause. Tyrrial lifted the quilt and examined himself. His jaw tightened at what he saw there.

“You have been sleeping for almost a month.” Interlocking his fingers and leaning forward in his chair, Corliani watched his compatriot. “We have taken it in turns to watch over you and nurse you back to health. Shigasi and I switched places only two days ago. Mubuto was here the week prior to that. We have been very worried, my friend.”

“I suspect Shigasi performed the surgery,” Tyrrial replied.

“Aye, he did. Such a skilled, steady hand. I would wager he is the finest doctor the world has ever seen. *Will* ever see, for that matter.”

Tyrrial smiled. “A few centuries of practice don’t hurt, I suppose.”

“Would you like some water?”

“Yes, please.”

Corliani turned to the jug next to him. Despite the warmth of the room the surface of the jug was dotted with condensation. He filled a cup and handed it over to Tyrrial, who accepted it without a word and took several long swallows. There was a sigh of satisfaction once the water was gone.

“How thoughtful to have cooled it.”

With a chuckle Corliani took the cup from him, but gave no reply. Tyrrial lay back against his pillows, gingerly adjusting his position.

Minutes passed. Corliani watched Tyrrial, and Tyrrial watched the fireplace. Smoke poured into the chimney, feeding a labyrinth of vents which ran through the wall itself, designed to heat the stone. Now awake, Tyrrial seemed much less the frail being he had whilst asleep. His amber eyes were alert and his demeanour was proud, despite his current situation.

Eventually he spoke. "Out with it, Corliani. I can hear your thoughts churning."

A single nod. "Very well. What were you doing?"

"Proving my fears correct, it seems." Tyrrial turned his eyes towards his friend. "The girl almost killed me."

"Had you not chased her across Tamir and murdered her brother, I suspect things would have been rather different."

Tyrrial grunted. "So it *was* her brother."

With a smirk, Corliani continued. "As far as I understand, you slaughtered over two hundred people in Leithar Grove."

"Is that so?" Tyrrial sighed. "Unfortunate. But I suspect an example has been made...?"

"Oh, yes." Corliani nodded once more. "The people of Tamir have been terrified by your little visit. Once the truth came out regarding Prince Remelas' plans to invade Carthlei, there was a national outcry. They're trying to have him removed from succession."

"So I averted a war."

"In a manner of speaking."

Tyrrial reached up to run a hand across his forehead. Corliani produced a handkerchief from the left sleeve of his robe and handed it over. Tyrrial accepted without a word and mopped his face dry.

"What of the girl?" he asked.

"She has gone into hiding."

"She must be dealt with."

“No, she must not.” Corliani’s words were stern. “You have meddled in Sarene’s life enough. Let her be. She is not interested in world domination or in hunting us down. Had you left her alone in the first place, she would most likely be back at her home with her family by now, content to stay in her village. Goodness knows her dealings with the Tamir Royal House should have put her off politics and military ambition for good.”

“If they had started their war the—”

“*If* Tamir had crossed into Carthlei, I would have dealt with it. Tamir is within *my* territory. I am not quite as clueless as you seem to think, my old friend.” Corliani paused, taking a deep breath. “As it is, the Tamir army is standing down, Remelas has a deeply unhappy populace to deal with and Sarene is nowhere to be found. You have done enough.”

Tyrrial fell silent. He looked down at the wound beneath the quilt again.

“We were scared, Tyrrial,” Corliani added. “When we arrived here you were an unconscious, bleeding mess upon the floor. I cannot allow you to risk yourself like that again.”

It was true. As angry as Corliani had been to learn of Tyrrial’s actions, the fear of losing the man he had called his brother for almost six hundred years had been crippling. He had acted with diligence and care during his time at Tyrrial’s side, but alone he had been restless and shaking. He barely slept. He ate little. In his most paranoid moments of the last few decades Corliani had started to doubt whether he loved this calculating, cynical and bad-tempered man any longer, but the idea of losing him had been unbearable. He had felt an ache in his heart during the surgery which had saved his life. Shigasi had removed the blade, all six inches of which had been buried in Tyrrial’s side, and sewn him back together. The verdict was that Tyrrial had simply been lucky. For all his power, his experience and skill, he had survived by chance only. If the dagger

had struck an inch to either side he wouldn't have made it back to the tower at all.

Tyrrial merely nodded. "Thank you for taking care of me, Corliani. I will share the same sentiments with the others when they arrive. Please inform them that I shall be paying a visit soon."

"Of course. But you should rest, my friend. I will tell them to come to you."

"No," Tyrrial replied. "I need some time to myself. To think on what has transpired. A brush with death is quite a thing to process, brother."

Corliani didn't like the idea, but Tyrrial was not a fool. He would not be babysat or coddled.

"As you wish."

Smiling softly, Tyrrial allowed his head to fall back onto the pillows. "Is there any food?"

"It can be arranged, of course."

"Good. I would greatly enjoy some of your beef casserole."

"Coming right up." Corliani rose from the chair, returning the smile. Some of the tension dropped, and he felt easier than he had in weeks. He turned towards the fireplace, snapping his fingers. A bowl materialised over the fire, already laden with the ingredients needed for his signature dish.

"Corliani?"

He paused, looking at the two bowls now in his hands. "Yes?"

"I meant it. Thank you. From the bottom of my heart."

Chuckling, Corliani shrugged. "We are kin."

"Yes," Tyrrial said behind him. "Yes, we are."

Chapter One

ETHANEI PUSHED AT the door with a gloved hand. The tavern was lively even at this early hour; warmth and conversation washed over him. The drone of voices helped him to leave his issues in the street. He moved towards the bar and waited for the tavern keeper, a thin and wiry man named Ghural, to notice him.

Leaning against the counter he scanned the crowd. About forty people filled the place – not a common occurrence on this side of the village. Every chair was filled and every table surrounded. He saw farmers, traders and merchants, some he'd grown up with and others he'd only seen for the last few years. Thorlen Tar was growing by the summer, and what had been a community of a few dozen families when he was born three decades previously had swelled into a populace of over eight hundred. The status of Tar had been bestowed on the township six years ago. Lord Tharesan, a direct descendant of Thorlen himself, was delighted at the increased prominence his title held. He'd thrown a feast in honour of the township, at which Ethanei had danced with his wife, Clarai, and watched the sunrise with her the next morning, sitting beneath their favourite tree and sharing his last ale.

The memory brought back the image of Clarai's legs wrapped around an old friend of his, and a fresh pang of self-pity took hold. He slapped his hand against the bar top.

“Come on, Ghural! I'm dyin' of thirst over 'ere.”

“Be with you in a minute,” the tavern owner called back without looking up, as he handed a flagon each to a pair of men he recognised as part of a group which had arrived that evening. They seemed polite, thanking Ghural for the service, but their eyes never stopped moving across the crowd. The rest of their band were commanding the broad table in the centre of the room. One of their number, a tall man who still wore his grey hood pulled up over his face, was leaning back to speak to two other men nearby. They laughed together at something he said.

A tankard, sodden from being freshly dunked, slammed onto the counter before him. Ethanei looked up, realised what had happened, then started fishing in his pocket for coin.

“There you go, you impatient bastard.” Ghural grinned. “I’ll add it to your tab.”

With a chuckle, Ethanei left the coins where they were and reached for his drink. He lifted it, tipped, and swallowed a third of the contents in seconds before giving a long sigh. “Since when did you start givin’ tabs?”

“Only for the regulars, like. I know you’re good for it.”

“Much obliged.” He lifted the tankard, nodding across the room. “What’s the deal with the grey cloaks over there?”

“Haven’t got the slightest. They’ve spoken to half the room, though. Seem a nice bunch.” Ghural nodded to a waiting punter, and stepped off towards the ale casket. “Maybe you can get a drink out of ’em,” he called over his shoulder.

Ethanei smiled, taking another pull from his ale. The fresh delivery of alcohol was stirring up what he’d already consumed, and he could feel the dulling effects begin to soak into him again. He glanced across the tavern once more, searching for anyone he knew well enough who happened to have an empty seat next to them.

He recognised several faces. Cullan, a man with a face only his mother could truly love, sat holding court with some of his hired

season hands. A successful farmer who was careful with his money, Cullan had a reputation for telling stories and trying to charm ladies through words alone. It must have worked, for he had recently married a girl almost ten summers his junior who was pretty to boot. Ethanei smirked, catching a punch line of something involving a bolting horse. Those at Cullen's table cackled and roared, applauding as the farmer took his seat again.

Beyond them sat the local doctor. The cooper. Shaerer, a skilled carpenter he'd known since a boy, was wedged in between two of his eldest sons. Several more hired workers from the surrounding homesteads. A few who, like him, had been discharged from the army following Prince Remelas's disarmament. One of these, a scary looking chap named Khellien, nodded to him. Ethanei raised his cup in response but, noting the lack of a nearby seat, remained where he was.

Those he didn't recognise ignored him but conversed happily with each other. The ale was flowing and the three barmaids, all daughters of Ghural, slipped and sidestepped between the clientele and the tables with practised ease, gathering empty cups and returning full ones. The eldest and prettiest, Helaina, was working double duty as the waitress. She occasionally disappeared into the back area before returning with plates of food. The dishes were simple in the Duck and Well – mainly cold cuts of meat with bread and cheese – but the cook did a decent mutton stew, and the smell of it mingled with alcohol and people. The crowd itself had a distinctive scent, as men stopped by here straight from their jobs.

Watching Helaina move over to the far corner of the room, where a small booth was tucked against the wall, he saw a spare seat. Helaina handed two plates to those already seated there. They were both hooded. One was slight and wore a deep mauve cloak, her mannerisms and small hands suggesting a young girl, though with her back to the room he couldn't be certain. Opposite her was a

hulking brute of a man, a prominent beard visible from beneath the thick cowl he wore. He took the plate, tiny in his giant hand, and gave no sign of gratitude. Helaina moved away, leaving them to eat.

“Another one, my friend!” Ethanei called aloud, before downing the rest of his drink. He wanted a seat, and there was no reason why he couldn’t take the free one he’d spotted. The atmosphere was lively and welcoming, and he could be charming enough when he needed to be. Once Ghural had taken his tankard and dunked it, he moved across the room. Drips of golden yellow liquid dotted his path, and he managed to keep himself stable as he passed through the crowd. He exchanged brief greetings with Khellien, clapping him on the shoulder and cracking a quick joke. His eyes met with one of the grey cloaked men, who nodded to him. Ethanei responded in kind.

Reaching the booth, Ethanei raised his tankard in greeting. A small amount spilt from the rim but, luckily, landed on his trouser leg rather than on the table. The mauve-cloaked youngster – definitely a girl – offered him a courteous smile. The man with her continued eating.

“Evening, folks,” Ethanei said. “I notice there’s an empty space here, and I was wonderin’ if I could put meself down for a while?”

The girl looked at her companion. The man finished chewing before digging his fork back into his stew.

“No.”

Ethanei laughed. “Come on, friend. There’s no need to be rude. I’m simply looking for somewhere to rest me bones for a while.”

“There are plenty of other chairs in the room,” the man replied, lifting a piece of mutton to his mouth.

“Aye, but they’re all taken. I don’t mean to impose, but I would truly appreciate the chance to sit with you until another seat’s free.” He grinned, gesturing to the space on the bench making up the

booth. "I'd carry it away but it appears to come as a package. I doubt I could pull you along with me."

The girl brought her hand to her mouth, covering a smile. Her huge companion regarded him for the first time, chewing. The revealed eyes were *hard*. Ethanei brought his tankard to his lips to cover his faltering smile.

Eventually the man exchanged looks with the girl. She nodded cautiously at him.

"Fine," he said. "Go ahead."

"Much obliged," said Ethanei. He made to sit himself next to the girl, noting the greater space afforded there. The man spoke again, dipping a piece of bread around the bottom of his bowl.

"Next to me."

Pausing, half crouched, Ethanei smiled once more. "O'course. Wouldn't want to seem rude, eh. Name's Ethanei." He slid across the edge of the table and sat on the bench next to the man, who paid him no attention. The situation struck him as quite unusual, and he chuckled. The ale was really starting to hit him again and he placed his hands on the table to prop himself up, straightening his back.

"So what brings you both to Thorlen?" Ethanei waved a gloved hand across his face before speaking again. "Sorry. Thorlen *Tar*. Keep forgetting that. Wait..." Fixing a stare on the massive stranger, he leaned forward. "Do I know you?"

The man pushed his bowl to the side before wiping his mouth between thick fingers. He reached for his own ale. "Just passing through."

"Oh right. That's a shame. Quite a nice town, this is. Growing by the year." Ethanei gestured over his shoulder with a thumb. "See this? Everyone 'ere talking and laughing. Ale flowing. It's a sense of community, y'know? Even with new faces migrating by the season, we've kept that community. Its *togetherness*." He slurred the final

syllables, but made up for it with a proud grin. He saw the girl smile in kind.

“Seems so,” was all the man had to say, sipping his drink.

“I mean, back when I were a lad, this village had maybe a hundred yards of buildings surrounded by fields. I used to be able to walk for ‘ours, exploring, and feel like I were the only person in the world. You know that feelin’, my friend?”

The man grunted. “I believe I can understand.”

“Well, that’s good.” Ethanei took a long pull from his ale to gather his thread. “But aye, that was then. Nowadays there’s places poppin’ up all over the land. We got a guesthouse, two taverns, shops, stables... We even got a market on the week’s end! People coming in from the other villages ‘ere in the west. On account of it being cheaper to set up a stall in Thorlen than in Sothiran.” He looked to the young girl, who was watching him quietly. “You ever been to Sothiran, lass?”

She shook her head, placing her hands in her lap.

“Well, it’s not nice. Loads of filth everywhere. All the buildings are bloody tarred. The whole place stinks like a tanners and looks like a cemetery. Full of bastards, too.” He chortled, rocking back in his seat.

“How many of those have you had?” asked the man, gesturing to the tankard in Ethanei’s hand.

“These? Oh, enough. Nothin’ wrong with a good drink. I must say, I’ve picked up a taste for it recently. What with bein’ discharged from the army an’ all.” Ethanei belched. “Oops. ‘Scuse me, my lady.” He winked at the girl.

“A shame about the army,” said the man. “It left a lot of men without a career.”

“You’d prefer if they’d kept us all on?” Raising a brow, Ethanei leaned back forward again. Something on the table soaked through

the fabric of his shirt. “He were gonna invade, you know. Take us to war.”

“Do not misunderstand me,” the stranger replied. “I was referring to the Royal House’s decision to recruit them in the first place. The whole plan was flawed from the start.”

“Can’t argue there,” said Ethanei. “But they paid us all off well. Still don’t ‘ave to take up the shovel or pick *just* yet.” He gave another laugh. Despite the hardships and the lack of employment now, he *was* still secure for money. True, if he didn’t find himself a job within the next few months he’d end up with nothing in reserve, but it wasn’t quite time for that yet. His marriage had fallen apart and some memories had yet to be drowned out with alcohol. He’d heard one merchant, travelling through from the capital city of Tamiran towards Rudacia, claim that the national treasury had bankrupted itself with the pensions paid to so many. There was talk of numbers ranging from a thousand to a *hundred* thousand men. Nobody knew the truth for sure, but the size of the pension paid out to each soldier had been sizable.

“Anyway,” Ethanei added, “Can I interest the pair of you in a drink at all? My round. Wouldn’t want you to leave Thorlen Tar with the impression we weren’t a welcomin’ crowd, eh?” He turned before either of them gave him an answer. “Barmaid! Service, if ya please!”

Before anyone responded, there was a commotion behind him. Ethanei turned in his seat, looking to the left. One of the grey cloaks – the one with the hood – had leapt up onto a table and was clapping his hands. The sound bounced around the room, and eventually everyone fell silent.

“Ladies and gentlemen of Tamir! A moment, if you would?”



KANDERIL TURNED. THE man who now commanded the attention of the room was tall and confident. Besides for him and Sarene, the grey cloak was the only other wearing a hood. The edges of the cloak were thickly lined with wolf's fur.

Those around him were watching, calm and expectant. Kanderil waited.

"Thank you," said the man, giving a formal bow. The other grey cloaks had already moved the flagons and tankards out of the way, giving their colleague a clear platform from which to address the tavern.

"Now you kind folk, mostly inhabitants of this fine town, may be wondering who I am. Indeed, who my friends are also." He motioned to those seated at his table. "Perhaps we are a travelling group of minstrels, here to play you a song. All we need are some instruments and you could sing the night away..." He played a note on an imaginary lute, inciting laughter from some of the crowd.

"Regrettably, that isn't the case. Neither are we mercenaries, nor military of any kind. We are simpl—"

"Then why are you wearing swords?" asked a brash voice from the back. Kanderil noted a bearded man with red cheeks, his hands resting on a bloated stomach.

"Merely for protection," replied the hooded speaker without skipping a beat. "We all know these are tough times. With the nation still simmering with ill feeling over our Prince's actions, it is wise to keep oneself armed when travelling as much as my companions and I do."

The red-faced man nodded, looking at his own group of friends. There were sounds of agreement throughout the tavern.

"And that's the point, my friend. My *friends*. That's why I'm here today, to ask that you lend me your ear for a short time." The man stood straight, his posture commanding, and folded his arms. "My companions and I are sons of Tamir. We've lived in this

wonderful nation all our lives, and will continue to do so until we are called from this life and into the next. We're here to remind you that you, too, should share our pride in calling yourselves Tamir."

The crowd applauded, with a few calls of affirmation thrown in. Kanderil listened. He had heard speeches like this countless times before; from bards, merchants and officers in the Kalethi. Usually the words were intended to build a rapport, encouraging the listener to trust – right before the sales pitch was delivered.

"I'm sure many of you have been affected by the actions in Leithar Grove." Immediately the hooded man held up his hands. "Now, I need not remind you of the tragic events which took place there in late summer. I shouldn't have to repeat the name of the man responsible for bringing the wrath of the Four upon our brave soldier's heads. But, for clarity's sake, let us speak it."

"Prince Remelas."

There was a low murmur from those present. Kanderil saw some of the crowd turn to those next to them, muttering in agreement. Ethanei raised his mug, spilling a little of the contents across the floor, offering a toast. Kanderil then turned to Sarene, who met his gaze. She shrugged at him.

"We were deceived, my friends. The man we turned to for leadership, given the frailty of our beloved King Runath, built an army of incredible number with which to bring war and terror back to our lands. He was to send our countrymen into battle across the borders, into lands we have no right to invade. Despite the years of history we have, all the stories and tales of the Four and their infinite wisdom, Remelas was going to use violence on a grand scale to subdue our Carthleid cousins." The hooded man nodded as some of the crowd shared glances. "Yes, Carthlei and Tamir were once a shared nation, did you know that? Our distant history mentions times where we lived as one great clan, sharing our lands and our wealth."

“History...” The speaker wagged a finger, turning a small circle on the broad table. Kanderil noted the sureness of the steps, his movements uninhibited by the limited space. “History is important. Tamir has always been a dignified nation. We have protected our borders against those who would wish us harm, but we have never sought to initiate violence. Ever since the creation of this kingdom we have been governed by a strong sense of justice. Most here will remember the name Aldion, our greatest champion during the clashes with Soralis a little over a century ago.”

More nods from the crowd. One drunken man at the bar broke into the first line of the song ‘*Aldion the Brave*’, but was hushed down by the tavern owner. A few laughs broke out, followed by a wry cheer.

The man on the table smiled beneath the hood. “Aye, that Aldion. The man who led our forces to victory and pushed back the Soraliath forces. But did you know he never set foot across the border? I have studied his journals. He wrote ‘*It is not my place to seek revenge, or to impose my will upon the citizens of other lands. I will fight until I can fight no more, I will give a pint of my blood protecting a square yard of our homeland, but I shall never march across terrain which does not belong to me.*’

“That, my friends, is how we should be remembered. How we should be viewed by our neighbours.” He brought his hands together, pointing with loose fingers towards the crowd. “We have long held the respect of Rudacia, of Carthlei and Franthia and further afield yet. But with Remelas’ plans we have been weakened in their eyes. We are now viewed with suspicion and fear. Any man which raises an army a hundred thousand strong *must* be held accountable; believe me, my comrades, this is *exactly* how our neighbours see it. They see Remelas as a threat.”

Kanderil ground his teeth. He turned in his seat and rested his elbows on the table, cracking his knuckles. When they arrived in

Thorley Tar earlier that evening he had intended to wait until later before eating, when the crowd would be thinning out. The tavern owner had refused the suggestion of eating their meal in their room. The people of Thorlen Tar were infatuated with the idea of community, it seemed. But Kanderil had skipped breaking for lunch during their travel here, and Sarene was famished by the time they arrived. He'd relented to her pleading to take an early meal, allowing them to eat with main evening crowd.

Now he was caught in a propaganda display. Thankfully it was directed at the Prince and not the *other* reasons for Tyrrial's visit.

"He's right isn't he, mate," Ethanei said, peering over his shoulder. Kanderil was surprised the drunkard could even focus on him. "Good that someone's got the bollocks to say all this stuff, eh?"

"He speaks well," Kanderil replied.

The hooded man crossed his wrists at his belt and stood straight-backed. "My name is Anaburan. My friends and I make up the Sons of Tamir. We are here for one reason only: to encourage debate and thought. We love every one of you as family, and we want Tamir to be safe. We fear further reprisals against our lands, not only from the Four but also from the bordering nations. We feel that Remelas must step down as the next King, for he represents danger in the eyes of other rulers."

"You should be careful," said a shaven-headed man near the table Anaburan spoke from. "You'll be arrested by the Guard for talkin' like that."

Anaburan smiled, spreading his hands wide. "Since when was a man forbidden from speaking his mind? These aren't the lands of the Cho'Nanj or the Shu'Cha or any of the other northern races. We have no intention of storming the House of Tamir and seeking bloody retribution. I'm not inciting rebellion or pleading for you to take up arms. I'm just speaking out for those of you who cannot speak for yourselves. With enough support, I will seek an audience

with Remelas himself to give you a voice, to shine a light on our concerns.”

“The Gathire might see things differen—”

“The *Gathire* are another symptom of the paranoia and decay from which our ruling house suffers! To be given such freedoms to terrorise and suppress our people whenever and however they like is a travesty of justice.” Anaburan shook his head. “Let the Gathire hunt me down. I will stand against them just as I stand against the Prince. With my head held high and my ideals for a stronger, safer Tamir on my sleeve.”

There was a round of applause then, encouraged by the other grey cloaks sitting around Anaburan’s table. The atmosphere grew with an excitement which had been missing at the start of the speech. The air tingled with anticipation, a united fervour building to a crescendo.

“These are important times, my brothers,” continued Anaburan, his voice matching the heightened state of his audience. “We have to stand up for ourselves, just as we have always done! Whenever those who intended us harm crossed our borders we fought them off, and now we must do the same within our homeland. I’m not asking for your pledge or your sword-arm. I’m asking for no sacrifice. Just lend us your support by *thinking!*” He tapped the side of his hood. “Don’t be afraid to think, and don’t be afraid to speak your mind! The Four judged us, butchering hundreds of our countrymen, and Remelas’ egotistic schemes were responsible. We mustn’t be frightened to demand that our Prince answer to those crimes and give penance for the lives lost on his behalf.”

He knows how to perform, Kanderil thought to himself. Sarene was watching Anaburan with her chin propped against her palms.

“Come on,” he said in a whisper which still rumbled. “We’re going back to our room.”

Sarene's tawny stare moved to him, and she nodded against her hands before sliding out of the booth. Kanderil tapped Ethanei on the shoulder.

"Excuse me."

"Eh?" The drunk craned his neck around as if he hadn't realised someone sat behind him.

"Excuse me," Kanderil repeated.

"Oh, right. Wait. Don't you wanna hear what he 'as to say?" The words sounded disconnected from the man; a confused slur dragging them out of his mouth. He stood up and slumped against the table. Kanderil stood and eased his way past. Ethanei looked up at him. Kept looking up.

"Oh, wow..."

Kanderil headed for the stairs leading up to their room. Sarene held onto his belt, keeping close. Eyes were turning to him as they often did. The pair had to pass the central table to get to the other side of the room.

Anaburan paused, folding his arms once more. "Do my words bore you, my large friend?"

Kanderil said nothing. He pushed his way past one seat, stepped through two standing onlookers, and continued moving.

"Do you disagree with my sentiments?" The question was more insistent this time. Kanderil saw the whole crowd looking at him now. He felt Sarene's grip tighten at his back.

"You speak the truth," Kanderil replied without slowing. "We are merely tired."

"Of course. Sleep well." Anaburan's tone was sincere. Kanderil understood the sentiment. The man had brought the crowd this far and didn't wish to spoil the national pride by challenging anyone who seemingly disagreed. He clearly understood where nationalism became fascism.

The sermon started up again behind them as Kanderil climbed the stairs.



SARENE CLOSED THE door behind her. The room she shared with her guardian was a two-cot space with a window, a table and a threadbare throw on the ground. She exhaled sharply, looking across to Kanderil. The giant Hunter viewed the street beyond the window before checking its latch.

“Lock the door.”

She did so, before moving to her bed. Sitting upon it, the frame squeaking in response, she tugged off her boots and wriggled her toes. The boots she’d been bought were a shade too small and her feet were often hurting by the evening.

Kanderil pulled back his cowl and offered her a bemused smirk. “Next time, we wait before eating.”

Sarene nodded, smiling. The comment eased her. That speech in the common room had been fascinating, spoken with meaning but carrying an ominous undercurrent which she couldn’t quite put her finger on. She presumed that it was her experience at Leithar Grove which made her aware of it. After all, she knew the facts of what had happened. The Prince was not the sinister figure Anaburan made him out to be. He had ambition, this was true, but he hadn’t wanted to invade Carthlei to wipe them out. Remelas was not a blood-thirsty ruler.

Kanderil tugged the strings of his jerkin and slid it from his broad shoulders, along with his shirt. His torso fascinated her as it always did: rigid with ugly stacks of muscle, undefined but wholly solid, spotted with scars and marks from years of military service. Sarene watched him sit down on his bed and loosen the straps of his tall moccasins. She followed suit, unclasping her cloak and popping

the toggles from her tunic. She kept her undershirt and breeches on as she always did, slipping beneath her blanket and resting her head on the thin pillow.

“We will leave early, at first light.” Kanderil lay back, pulling his blanket over him. It was too small, reaching from chest to calf only. “I would like to put some distance between us and these Sons of Tamir.”

Sarene nodded, looking up at the ceiling as Kanderil snuffed out the lantern. The room went dark, the faintest of glows from outside reaching the window, casting shadows on the wall beside her.

She and Kanderil had been travelling together for almost five months now, ever since he'd found her in the forests along the highway leading from her village to the capital city of Tamiran. This was only the third time they had stopped in a city since he had pledged to protect her following the events in Leithar Grove. Following the death of her brother, Jared. She grimaced in the gloom, closing her eyes as her thoughts began to wander.

The past season had been hard. Sarene had believed herself capable of handling grief ever since she had been forced to flee her home following a visit by the Gathire, the secretive special wing of Tamir's military. The image of her mother, scarred across both cheeks and bandaged around the face, had kept tears close to the surface for weeks afterwards. Her sense of loss, knowing that she would not see her family again for a long time had clamped to her heart like a heavy rock. It had pulled at her spirit and kept her subdued for long periods.

Jared's death at the hands of Tyrrial had made a mockery of her assumptions. The pain she felt had all but crippled her. Kanderil was forced to care for her like a child, making her eat and tucking her into her bedding at night. He would walk beside her at all times, even going to the trouble of purchasing a horse to carry her while he led them from place to place. Sarene barely remembered those early

days. She had never cried so much and even now, with the summer long since ended and winter on the horizon, thoughts of Jared brought more sorrow than joy. She felt guilt; it was her unique position within the world which had led Jared to his death. Had it not been for her immunity to the powers of the Four, he would still be alive today.

A tear ran from her eye, passing her temple and trickling into her hair. She sniffed as quietly as she could. Kanderil did not respond, though he surely recognised the sound by now. He'd heard it most nights.

The other two involved in that fateful night had left. Prince Remelas returned to Tamiran. He offered sanctuary for Sarene's family, but she did not yet know whether they had accepted. Following the attack and the ensuing revelation of his plans to raise an army to invade Carthlei for resources and land, there had been an uprising of ill-feeling towards the House of Tamir. The future of the royal family was in doubt. The King of Tamir had taken ill and was near death, reportedly losing himself to madness. Few now trusted Remelas, blaming him for Tyrrial's retribution. Anaburan and the Sons of Tamir had been proof of how far that feeling ran away from the capital.

She could understand Remelas's departure – it would have been stranger had he stayed with her. But Spasmodic, the odd little creation of Tyrrial who had decided to accompany her along her bizarre journey, had not been seen since she had left Leithar Grove. It had mumbled something about wanting to see more of the world and, one morning, had simply disappeared. Amplified by the loss of her home and the death of her brother, she'd experienced a distinct sense of abandonment. The creature had quickly become a fixture of her life, offering a degree of protection Kanderil could not. The Hunter had a deep sense of justice which did not permit him to kill;

while Sarene hated violence, Spasmodic had no such restraint, and had ensured that none could touch her.

But now it, too, was gone. All she had was Kanderil, who had been her rock. He hadn't once questioned his responsibility as her guardian and never made her feel like a burden. Even if he could be grumpy and strict at times, it was never without reason, and he *had* kept her safe. That much was never in doubt.

A floorboard creaked outside their door as someone made their way to another room. She heard Kanderil stir at the noise and turned her head, seeing a shadow move past the thin strip of light at the bottom of their door. Then a hinge squeaked and a latch clicked shut. Sarene rested her head back once more.

Sleep claimed her soon after, and her dreams were troubled.