

Tairen Soul: Lord of the Fading Lands

by C.L. Wilson

Prologue

Loudly, proudly, tairen sing,

As they soar on mighty wings

Softly, sadly, mothers cry

To sing a tairen's lullabye

The Tairen's Lament, Fey Nursery Rhyme

The tairen were dying.

Rain Tairen Soul, king of the Fey, could no longer deny the truth. Nor, despite all his vast power and centuries of trying, could he figure a way to save either the creatures that were his soul-kin or the people who depended upon him to lead and defend them.

The tairen—those magnificent, magical, winged cats of the Fading Lands—had only one fertile female left in their pride, and she grew weaker by the day as she fed her strength to her six unhatched kitlings. With those tiny, unborn lives rested the last hope of a future for the tairen, and the last hope of a future for Rain's people, the Fey. But today, the painful truth had become clear. The mysterious, deadly wasting disease that had decimated the tairen over the last

millennium had sunk its evil, invisible claws into yet another clutch of unhatched kits.

When the tairen died, so too would the Fey. The fates of the two species were forever intertwined, and had been since the misty time before memory.

Rain looked around the wide, empty expanse of the Hall of Tairen. Indeed, he thought grimly, the death of the immortal Fey had begun centuries ago.

Once, in a time he could still remember, the Hall had rung with the sound of hundreds of Fey Lords, warriors, *shei'dalins* and Tairen Souls arguing politics and debating treaties. Those days had long passed. The Hall was silent now, as silent as the long-abandoned cities of the Fey, as silent as Fey nurseries, as silent as the graves of all those Fey who had died in the Mage Wars a thousand years ago.

Now the last hope for both the tairen and the Fey was dying, and Rain sensed a growing darkness in the east, in the land of his ancient enemies, the Mages of Eld. He couldn't help but believe the two events were somehow connected.

He turned to face the huge priceless globe of magical Tairen's Eye crystal called the Eye of Truth, which occupied the center of the room. Displayed on the wings of a man-high stand fashioned from three golden tairen, the Eye was an oracle in which a trained seer could search for answers in the past, the present, and the infinite possibilities of the future. The globe was ominously dark and murky now, the future a dim, forbidding shadow. If there was a way to halt the relentless extermination of his peoples, the answer lay there, within the Eye.

The Eye of Truth had been guarding its secrets, showing shadows but no clear visions. It had resisted the probes of even the most talented of the Fey's still-living seers, played coy with even their most beguiling of magic weaves. The Eye was, after all, tairen-made. By its very nature, it combined pride with cunning, passion with often-wicked playfulness. Seers approached

it with respect, humbly asked it for a viewing, courted its favor with their minds and their magic but never their touch.

The Eye of Truth was never to be touched.

It was a golden rule of childhood, drummed into the head of every Fey from infant to ancient.

The Eye held the concentrated magic of ages, power so pure and undiluted that laying hands upon it would be like laying hands upon the Great Sun.

But the Eye was keeping secrets, and Rain Tairen Soul was a desperate king with no time to waste and no patience for protocol. The Eye of Truth would be touched. He was the king, and he would have his answers. He would wrest them from the oracle by force, if necessary.

His hands rose. He summoned power effortlessly and wove it with consummate skill. Silvery white Air formed magical webs that he laid upon the doors, walls, floor, and ceiling. A spidery network of lavender Spirit joined the Air, then green Earth to seal all entrances to the Hall. None would enter to disturb him. No scream, no whisper, no mental cry could pass those shields. Come good or ill, he would wrest his answers from the Eye without interruption—and if it demanded a life for his impertinence, it would be unable to claim any but his.

He closed his eyes and cleared his mind of every thought not centered on his current purpose. His breathing became deep and even, going in and out of his lungs in a slow rhythm that kept time with the beat of his heart. His entire being contracted into a single shining blade of determination.

His eyes flashed open. Rain Tairen Soul reached out both hands to grasp the Eye of Truth.

“Aaahh!” Power – immeasurable, immutable – arced through him. His head flung back beneath its onslaught, his teeth bared, his throat straining with a scream of agony. Pain drilled

his body like a thousand *sel'dor* blades, and despite twelve hundred years of learning to absorb pain, to embrace it and mute it, Rain writhed in torment.

This pain was unlike any he had ever known.

This pain refused to be contained.

Fire seared his veins and scorched his skin. He felt his soul splinter and his bones melt.

The Eye was angry at his daring affront. He had assaulted it with his bare hands and bare power, and such was not to be borne. Its fury screeched along his bones, vibrating down his spine, slashing at every nerve center in his body until tears spilled from his eyes and blood dripped from his mouth where he bit his lip to stop screaming.

“Nei,” he gasped. “I am the Tairen Soul, and I will have my answer.”

If the Eye wished to cement the extinction of both tairen and Fey, it would claim Rain’s life. He was not afraid of death, rather he longed for it.

He surrendered himself to the Eye and forced his tortured body to relax. Power and pain flowed into him, through him, claiming him without resistance. And when the violent rush of power had invaded his every cell, when the pain filled his entire being, a strange calm settled over him. The agony was there, extreme and nearly overwhelming, but without resistance he was able to distance his mind from his body’s torture, to disassociate the agony of the physical from the determination of the mental. He forced his lips to move, his voice a hoarse cracked whisper of sound that spoke ancient words of power to capture the Eye’s immense magic in flows of Air, Water, Fire, Earth, and Spirit.

His eyes opened, glowing bright as twin moons in the dark reflection of the Eye, burning like coals in a face bone white with pain.

With voice and mind combined, Rain Tairen Soul asked his question: “How can I save the

tairen and the Fey?”

Relentlessly, absorbing the agony of direct contact with the Eye, he searched its raging depths for answers. Millions of possibilities flashed before his eyes, countless variations on possible futures, countless retellings of past events. Millennia passed in an instant, visions so rapid his physical sight could never have hoped to discern them, yet his mind, steadily commanding the threads of magic, absorbed the images and processed them with brutal clarity. He stood witness to the deaths of millions, the rise and fall of entire civilizations. Angry unfettered magic grew wild in the world and Mages worked their evil deeds. Tairen shrieked in pain, immolating the world in their agony. Fey women wept oceans of tears, and Fey warriors fell helpless to their knees, as weak as infants. Rain’s mind screamed to reject the visions, yet still his hands gripped the Eye of Truth, and still he voiced his question, demanding an answer.

“How can I save the tairen and the Fey?”

He saw himself in tairen form, raining death indiscriminately upon unarmed masses, his own tairen claws impaling Fey warriors.

“How can I save the tairen and the Fey?”

Sariel, his beloved mate, lay bloody and broken at his feet, pierced by hundreds of knives, half her face scorched black by Mage fire. She reached out to him, her burned and bloodied mouth forming his name. He watched in helpless paralysis as the flashing arc of an Elden Mage’s black *sel’dor* blade sliced down across her neck. Bright red blood fountained –

The unutterable pain of Sariel’s death—tempered by centuries of life without her—surged back to life with soul-shredding rawness. Rage and bloodlust exploded within him, mindless, visceral, unstoppable. It was the Fey Wilding rage, fueled by a tairen’s primal fury, unfettered emotions backed by lethal fangs, incinerating fire, and access to unimaginable power.

They would die! They had slain his mate, and they would all die for their crime! His shrieking soul grasped eagerly for the madness, the power to kill without remorse, to scorch the earth and leave nothing but smoldering ruins and death.

“Nei!” Rain yanked his hands from the Eye and flung up his arms to cover his face. His breath came in harsh pants as he battled to control his fury. Once before, in a moment of madness and unendurable pain, he had unleashed the beast in his soul and rained death upon the world. He had slain thousands in mere moments, laid waste to half a continent within a few days. It had taken the combined will of every still-living tairen and Fey to cage his madness.

“Nei! Please,” he begged, clawing for self-possession. He released the weaves connecting him to the Eye in a frantic hope that shearing the tie would stop the rage fighting to claim him.

Instead, it was as if he had called Fire in an oil vault.

The world was suddenly bathed in blood as his vision turned red. The tairen in him shrieked for release. To his horror, he felt his body begin to dissolve, saw the black fur form, the lethal curve of tairen claws spear the air.

For the first time in twelve hundred years of life, Rainier vel’En Daris knew absolute terror.

The magic he’d woven throughout the Hall would never hold a Tairen Soul caught up in a Fey Wilding Rage. All would die. The world would die.

The Tairen-Change moved over him in horrible slow motion, creeping up his limbs, taunting him with his inability to stop it. The small sane part of his mind watched like a stunned, helpless spectator, seeing his own death hurtling towards him and realizing with detached horror that he was going to die and there was nothing he could do to prevent it.

He had overestimated his own power and utterly underestimated that of the Eye of Truth.

“Stop,” he shouted. “I beg you. Stop! Don’t do this.” Without pride or shame, he fell to

his knees before the ancient oracle.

The rage left him as suddenly as it had come.

In a flash of light, his tairen-form disappeared. Flesh, sinew, and bone reformed into the lean, muscular lines of his Fey body. He collapsed face down on the floor, gasping for breath, the sweat of terror streaming from his pores, his muscles shaking uncontrollably.

Faint laughter whispered across the stone floor and danced on the intricately carved columns that lined either side of the Hall of Tairen.

The Eye mocked him for his arrogance.

“*Aiyah*,” he whispered, his eyes closed. “I deserve it. But I am desperate. Our people—mine and yours both—face extinction. And now dark magic is rising again in Eld. Would you not also have dared any wrath to save our people?”

The laughter faded, and silence fell over the Hall, broken only by the wordless noises coming from Rain himself, the sobbing gasp of his breath, the quiet groans of pain he didn't have the strength to hold back. In the silence, power gathered. The fine hairs on his arms and the back of his neck stood on end. He became aware of light, a kaleidoscope of color bathing the Hall, flickering through the thin veil of his eyelids.

His eyes opened – then went wide with wonder.

There, from its perch atop the wings of three golden tairen, the Eye of Truth shone with resplendent clarity, a crystalline globe blazing with light. Prisms of radiant color beamed out in undulating waves.

Stunned, he struggled to his knees and reached out instinctively towards the Eye. It wasn't until his fingers were close enough to draw tiny stinging arcs of power from the stone that he came to his senses and snatched his hands back without touching the oracle's polished surface.

There had been something in the Eye's radiant depths—an image of what looked like a woman's face—but all he could make out were fading sparkles of lush green surrounded by orange flame. A fine mist formed in the center of the Eye, then slowly cleared as another vision formed. This image he saw clearly as it came into focus, and he recognized it instantly. It was a city he knew well, a city he despised. The second image faded and the Eye dimmed, but it was enough. Rain Tairen Soul had his answer. He knew his path.

With a groan, he rose slowly to his feet. His knees trembled, and he staggered back against the throne to collapse on the cushioned seat.

Rain gazed at the Eye of Truth with newfound respect. He was the Tairen Soul, the most powerful Fey alive, and yet the Eye had reduced him to a weeping infant in a mere moments. If it had not decided to release him, it could have used him to destroy the world. Instead after beating the arrogance out of him, it had given up at least one of the secrets it was hiding.

He reached out to the Eye with a lightly woven stream of Air, Fire and Water and whisked away the faint smudges left behind by the fingers he had dared to place upon it.

Sieks'ta. Thank you. He filled his mental tone with genuine respect and was rewarded by the instant muting of his body's pain. With a bow to the Eye of Truth, he strode towards the massive carved wooden doors at the end of the Hall of Tairen and tore down his weaves.

Marissya. He sent the mental call to the Fey's strongest living shei'dalin even as he reached out with Air to swing open the Hall's heavy doors before him. The Fey warriors guarding the door to the Hall of Tairen nodded in response to the orders he issued with swift, flashing motions of his hands as he strode by, and the flurry of movement behind him assured him his orders were being carried out.

**Rain?* Marissya's mental voice was as soothing as her physical one, her curiosity mild

and patient.

A change of plans. I'm for Celeria in the morning and I'm doubling your guard. Let your kindred know the Feyreisen is coming with you.

Even across the city, he could feel her shocked surprise, and it almost made him smile.

* * *

Half a continent away, in the mortal city of Celeria, Ellysetta Baristani huddled in the corner of her tiny bedroom room, tears running freely down her face, her body trembling uncontrollably.

The nightmare had been so real, the agony so intense. Dozens of angry, stinging welts scored her skin...self-inflicted claw marks that might have been worse had her fingernails been longer. But worse than the pain of the nightmare had been the helpless rage and the soul-shredding sense of loss, the raw animal fury of a mortally wounded heart. Her own soul had cried out in empathetic sorrow, feeling the tortured emotions as if they had been her own.

And then she'd sensed something else. Something dark and eager and evil. A crouching malevolent presence that had ripped her out of both dreams and sleep, bringing her bolt upright in her bed, a smothered cry of familiar terror on her lips.

She covered her eyes with shaking hands. Please, gods, not again.

Chapter One

“Ellie, don’t be such a soggy *dorn*.” Nine-year-old Lorelle Baristani pouted at her older sister.

It was, in Ellysetta’s opinion, an adorable pout. Lorelle’s out-thrust lower lip was plump and pink, her round cheeks soft as satin, and her big brown eyes heart-tuggingly soulful. The whole enchanting picture was complimented by masses of mink brown ringlets, and more than one seasoned adult had been known to abandon common sense in the face of such considerable infant artillery. Unfortunately for Lorelle, Ellie was made of sterner stuff.

She smiled and bent to kiss her sister’s cheek. “A soggy *dorn*, am I? Just because I don’t want to spend the whole day caught up in what’s sure to be the worst crush in the past year? And for what? To catch a brief glimpse of a Fey warrior as he walks past?” Ellie shook her head and punched down the bread dough she was making for tonight’s dinner rolls.

Tomorrow was the much-anticipated annual visit of the *shei’dalin* Marissya v’En Solande. Her arrival was always a spectacle as she and her guard of one hundred fierce leather- and steel-bedecked Fey warriors entered the city and marched down the main thoroughfare to the palace.

A week ago, Ellysetta would have gone, no matter how long the wait, just for the chance of glimpsing the glint off a Fey blade. But that was before that disturbing nightmare and before the dark dreams that had continued to haunt her ever since. When she woke each morning, her skin felt tight, her muscles inexplicably sore and weary, as if each night she fought a battle in her sleep. As if she were fighting to keep something out...or worse, to keep something in.

Memories flashed—horrifying convulsions racking her body, Mama’s fear, the Church of Light exorcists with their fervent, shining eyes and merciless determination to drive the demons from her soul.

She shuddered from the awful memories and quickly sketched the sign of the Lord of Light. No, all things considered, now was a bad time for Ellie to go anywhere near the Fey and their powerful magic.

“Besides, I’m busy tomorrow,” she told Lorelle, grateful for the genuine excuse. “Lady Zillina ordered an entire new suite for her receiving room, and Mama wants me to get started on the embroidery for the pillows.”

“But, Ellie, the Feyreisen is coming!”

Ellie’s breath caught in her throat. The Feyreisen? Despite her well-founded fear of magic, she’d dreamed all her life of seeing Rain Tairen Soul in the flesh.

Then common sense returned, and Ellie cast a stern sidelong glance at her sister. “Who told you that bit of silliness? Everyone knows the Feyreisen hasn’t stepped foot outside the Fading Lands in a thousand years.” Not since the end of the horrendous magical holocaust known as the Mage Wars.

“It’s not silliness!” Lorelle protested indignantly. “I heard it straight from Tomy Sorris.” Tomy Sorris, son of the printer, was the local town crier and usually well on top of the latest news and gossip.

Ellie was unimpressed. “Then Tomy’s been smelling too much printer’s ink.” She transferred the dough back into its rising bowl and covered it with a damp cloth.

“He has not!” A stamp of one small foot expressed the child’s outrage.

“Well, perhaps he’s just misinformed then,” Ellie replied. If Rain Tairen Soul were coming, they’d have heard about it long before now. The Fey who’d once nearly destroyed the world in a rage of tairen flame wouldn’t simply end his thousand-year exile without someone knowing about it in advance.

With a few quick swipes of a clean cloth, she swept the light dusting of flour off the tabletop into her palm and disposed of it in the waste bin beneath the kitchen sink. She cranked the sink pump twice and rinsed her floury fingers beneath the resulting cold spurt of water, and cast a glance back over her shoulder at Lorelle.

“Besides, why would the Feyreisen come here? He never had much use for mortals even before the Wars.”

She recalled a story in the yesterday’s paper about a small caravan of travelers attacked near the Borders by *dahl’reisen*, the frightening mercenaries who’d once been Fey warriors before being banished from the Fading Lands for the darkness in their souls. Would Rain Tairen Soul come to Celeria because of that?

She dismissed the idea instantly. All her life she’d heard tales of *dahl’reisen* raids—such tales were so common they were used to frighten small children into behaving—but none of those stories had ever lured the King of the Fey beyond the Faering Mists that circled the Fading Lands. No, Lorelle must be wrong.

Ellie untied her apron and hung it on a wooden peg in the corner of the modest, cozy Baristani family kitchen and smoothed slender hands over her serviceable tan muslin skirts. Her shirtsleeves were bunched up around her elbows, and she tugged the plain cuffs back down to her wrists, unable to stifle a wistful sigh as she imagined a fall of ivory lace draped over her hands. It was, of course, a foolish daydream. Lace would only get dirty and torn as she went about her chores.

She smiled at Lorelle, whose pout had now become an outright scowl. “Come now, kitling, don’t be cross. I’ll take you to the park instead. It won’t take up the whole day, it’s bound to be less crowded, and we can still have a fine time.”

Lorelle crossed her arms over her chest. “I don’t want to go to the park. I want to see the Feyreisen.”

Before Ellie could reply, Lorelle’s twin Lillis came skipping into the kitchen, all atwitter. A mirror image of her twin, Lillis would have been indistinguishable from Lorelle except for the radiant excitement stamped on her face, which contrasted vividly with Lorelle’s dark scowl. “Ellie! Ellie! Guess what!”

Ellie made a show of widening her eyes with exaggerated interest. “What?”

“The Feyreisen is coming, and Mama says you can take us to see him enter the city tomorrow!”

“Ha!” Lorelle exclaimed. “I told you so!”

This time the breath that caught in Ellie’s throat stayed there. Tomy Soris might have sniffed too much printer’s ink, but Mama was never wrong. Seeking confirmation, Ellie glanced towards the door.

“Mama? Is it true? Is the Feyreisen really coming to Celieria?”

Lauriana Baristani nodded, her fingers deftly untying the bow of her large brimmed sun hat as she crossed the threshold and entered the kitchen. There was a light of excitement in her eyes that Ellie had never seen before. “It’s true,” she confirmed.

Ellie watched in astonishment as her mother tossed her hat and woven shawl over the back of a nearby chair rather than hanging them neatly on the wooden pegs provided for that purpose. Her mother was a firm believer in a place for everything and everything in its place. Something was going on, something that had nothing to do with the unexpected ambassadorial visit from a twelve-hundred year old Fey who could turn himself into a tairan.

“Mama?” She picked up the hat and shawl and hung them in their place. “What is it?”

She gave her mother a searching look. Lauriana was a handsome woman in her mid fifties, with a solid build and strong arms that could help her husband move heavy pieces of handcrafted furniture or hug her children close. She had the same rich brown hair as the twins, though her soft ringlets were threaded liberally with silver, and her eyes were a pleasant hazel. Her brown dress was neatly made of sturdy, sensible cloth, and her shoes were sturdy, sensible brown leather to match. But at the moment, she did not look sensible at all. She looked...*giddy*.

“Oh, Ellie, you won’t believe it!” Lauriana reached out to grasp Ellie’s hands. “Queen Annoura,” she said, squeezing Ellie’s fingers tight, “sent Lady Zillina to commission your father to produce a special carving in the Feyreisen’s honor. He’s to have it finished and ready to present to the Feyreisen at the Prince’s betrothal ball!” When Ellie gasped again and the twins squealed, Lauriana beamed and nodded. “Commissioned by the queen. At last!”

“Oh, Mama,” Ellie breathed. “Papa must be singing with pride!” After ten years as a master woodcarver, Sol Baristani had finally received a coveted royal commission. When word got out, nobles and rich merchants would be banging down his door to commission his work. Money, always rather scarce in the Baristani household, was sure to flow into the family coffers.

Lauriana flashed her eldest daughter a devilish grin. “And won’t that just put Madame Rich and Snooty Minset’s knickers in a twist?”

“Mama!” Ellie gasped, giving her mother a shocked look.

Her mother – definitely not her staid and sensible self – laughed out loud, then clapped a hand over her mouth. “Oh, that was evil. Just evil.”

Ellie couldn’t help but laugh herself. It was so unlike her calm unflappable mother to say something nasty, even about the social climbing Madame Minset, the banker’s wife. Though if ever a woman deserved something nasty said about her, Madame Minset did – and that went

double for her daughter Kellisande.

“But Mama, why is the Feyreisen coming to Celeria?”

Lauriana shrugged. “No one knows, but it’s sure to be a spectacle. And I promised Lillis you would take her and Lorelle to see the Feyreisen.” Ellie stared in surprise, and her mother blushed a little. “I know what you’re thinking, and this doesn’t mean I approve of Fey sorcerers. I don’t. Not in the least. But, the Bright Lord did select Rain Tairen Soul as the vehicle through which He has delivered this latest blessing upon our family. I wouldn’t want Him to think us ungrateful. You will take the girls, won’t you?”

Ellie glanced at Lorelle, who was now sporting a grin as large as a dairy cow, and had to laugh. “Of course I will,” she agreed. The twins shrieked with happiness and danced about the kitchen.

No matter how dreadful her nightmares, Ellie would never have missed this once in a lifetime opportunity to see the one and only Rain Tairen Soul. He was living history, the Fey who’d once in a fit of grief-induced madness almost destroyed the world.

How many ballads had been written about that terrible day? How many plays? Celeria’s Museum of Arts held no less than twenty enormous oil paintings that commemorated the entire series of events, masterpieces painted by Celeria’s greatest artists over the past thousand years. Ellie couldn’t count the number of times she’d stood in front of Fabrizio Chelan’s immortal, “Death of The Beloved”, and wept at the unspeakable anguish the great master had depicted on the face of Rain Tairen Soul as he held Lady Sariel in her death swoon and cried out to the heavens.

To see Rain Tairen Soul in the flesh. It was more than she’d ever dreamed possible.

She wagged a finger at the twins. “You two had best plan to go to bed early. We leave at

the break of dawn, so we can be sure to find a place with a good view.”

Her mother shook her head. “You and your love of the Fey.” But for once, she didn’t add her usual lecture about the evils of magic and the danger of temptations that wore a pretty face.

Though Ellie shared her mother’s fear of magic, all things Fey had still fascinated her since she was a small child. “That doesn’t mean I’m any less excited about your news, Mama.” She reached out to grasp her mother’s hands. “Indeed, I want you to tell me everything. What, exactly, did Lady Zillina say? Don’t leave out a single detail.”

Lauriana pulled up a stool and related the whole exciting event, including the ultimate pleasure of having Stella Morin, the neighborhood’s biggest gossip, witness the whole event. She’d come into the shop to tell Lauriana that Donatella Brodson, the butcher’s youngest daughter, was officially contracted to wed the third son of a wealthy silk merchant.

“Oh,” Lauriana snapped her fingers. “That reminds me. Den is coming for dinner tonight.”

“Den?” Ellie repeated with dismay. Den Brodson, the butcher’s son, was a stuffed pork roast of a young man. And ever since his first wife had died in childbirth six months ago, he’d been following her around like a starving hound on the trail of a juicy steak. He’d made a habit of catching her in dark corners, standing so close she could smell the reek of onions and bacon on him, and looking too intently down the neckline of her dresses as if he could see straight through the fabric to the soft curves beneath. His thick fingers were ever clutching at her arm, as if he had some right to her. She shuddered with revulsion. She’d never liked him much, even as a child. Now he made her skin crawl.

Beside her the twins rolled their eyes, and clutched at their throats, making gagging noises. They didn’t like Den either.

“Mmm.” Lauriana paid no notice to the rolling eyes and gagging faces, but she did shoo

the twins out of the kitchen. “Go play in your room, girls.” Then, to Ellie, “Wear your green dress, kit. It makes you look rather pretty.”

“Why would I want to look pretty for Den?”

A stern hazel gaze pinned her in place. The laughing, flighty Mama was gone. Practical, no-nonsense Mama was back. “You’re twenty-four, Ellysetta. That’s long past time to be making a good match and starting your own family. Look at your friends. All of them long since married, with at least one child walking and another on the way.”

“Kellisande’s not wed,” she reminded her mother.

“Yes, but Kellisande’s not lacking for offers.” The stern look in Lauriana’s eyes remained the same, but her voice softened. “She’s got beauty, girl, and wealth. You don’t.”

Ellie ducked her head to hide the glimmer of tears that sprang to her eyes. She knew she was no beauty. She’d seen her own reflection often enough to know that. And Kellisande Minset had always been happy to point out her shortcomings in case she missed them.

“Even though you’ve got a fine kind heart,” Lauriana continued, “and a strong back to make any man a treasured helpmate, young lads and their parents don’t look for those blessings first. The lads want beauty. The parents want wealth. The queen’s commission will probably be enough to bring Den’s family up to scratch, but you don’t have the time to wait for Papa to make a fortune so you can take your pick of men.” Unspoken was the common knowledge that if a girl was not wed by twenty-five, she was obviously defective in some way. Spinsters were to be pitied – and watched carefully lest the hand of evil that had blackened their futures laid its shadow over those around them.

Ellie couldn’t believe what she was hearing. It was obvious her mother had already decided whom Ellie would marry. “But I don’t love Den, Mama.” To her horror, her voice wobbled.

“Ellysetta.” There was a rustle of skirts and then the unexpected warmth of her mother’s arms wrapping around her thin shoulders and drawing her close. “Ah, girl. This is my fault.” Lauriana sighed. “I should have done my duty by you long ago. But you were such an...awkward...creature, and we were poor. I thought you’d never be wed, so where was the harm in letting you keep your dreams?”

Awkward. Such a mild euphemism for the fearful truth Mama never voiced. Ellie knew her parents loved her, as did Lillis and Lorelle. But that had not stopped her from hearing the talk of others—or seeing the fear that Mama could never quite hide whenever...things... happened around Ellie.

“But you’ve changed Ellie, and so have our circumstances. You’ve grown rather pretty in your own way, and this royal commission puts a few coins in our coffers with the promise of more to come. Look at me child.” Obedient to the command and the accompanying hand raising her chin, Ellie met her mother’s solemn gaze. “Life is never certain, Ellie. This is your chance to wed, and you must take it.”

“But, Mama —”

Lauriana held up a silencing finger. “Despite everything that happened when you were young, I’ve never curbed your love of Feytales or your dreams of truemates and happy endings, but that’s for Fey, not mortal folk like us. We don’t have centuries to wait for true love.”

“I know that, Mama.”

“Love will come in time, Ellie.”

“But not with Den, Mama!” How could it, when the very thought of his touch revolted her?

“Hush! You’ve not even given him a chance, Ellysetta. Den’s not a bad sort, and he’s certainly shown interest in you these last few months. His family’s well-enough, both in manner

and position, and your children would never lack for food. Believe me when I tell you there's nothing worse for parents than hearing a child cry for food they cannot provide. Even if that child is not of their own blood."

Ellie dropped her gaze as the reminder that she was not their natural child knifed through her. Almost twenty-four years ago, on a journey from Kreppes to Hartslea in the north, Sol and Lauriana Baristani had found an abandoned baby in the woods near Norban. A girl baby with a shock of orange hair and startling green eyes.

Despite the fact that they were grindingly poor—Sol's hands stiff and nearly crippled by an accident that had left him unable to work as a journeyman woodcarver—they had taken in the baby rather than leaving it to die. And they had kept her, even while Sol barely eked out a living on pennies a week as an apprentice carpenter, his broken hands managing to hold hammer, nail, rasp, and lathe though they could no longer do the intricate detail work he loved.

They kept her even when mysterious, violent seizures afflicted her and the priests declared her demon-cursed. They'd even left their home in Hartslea rather than cast her out or give her into the Church's keeping as the exorcists and the parish priest advised them to do.

After that, thankfully, the family fortunes changed. Sol's hands had miraculously healed, and he'd been able to return to his first love, woodcarving. Ellie's ghastly seizures had dwindled, then stopped almost completely—a fact that Mama attributed to Ellie swearing her soul into service of the Light at her first Concordia in the Church of Light.

Still, Ellie had never forgotten all they'd sacrificed on her behalf. Now there was a chance for her to wed, if not well at least well-enough. It would ensure that Lillis and Lorelle would have the opportunity to make a truly fine match.

"You must trust your parents to do what's best, Ellysetta. For you and the family."

“Yes, Mama,” she whispered. She owed them that much and more.

“I know he’s not the man you’ve dreamed of, but give Den a chance. And if another young man of good family asks to court you, we will consider his suit as well.”

“Yes, Mama.”

“And wear your green dress tonight.”

Ellie’s shoulders drooped. “Yes, Mama.”

* * *

That evening, Ellie donned her green dress and tried not to feel like a lamb being led to slaughter. At her mother’s insistence, she wore Lauriana’s bridal chemise beneath the green gown, and aged ivory lace fell over the backs of her hands, looking beautiful and feminine and delicate. Ellie wished she were wearing her own plain cuffs instead.

She stared hard at her reflection in the mirror. Startling green eyes stared back at her, looking too big in a too wan face, accentuated by prominent cheekbones and a slender nose. In the last year or so, her eyebrows and eyelashes had darkened to a deep auburn shade. The slashing wings of her brows were now exotic rather than pale and washed out, and once her eyelashes had darkened, their thickness and length had become quite apparent. She had been grateful for that, though at this moment she could have cheerfully wished them back to the transparent pale orange shade of her childhood. Her mouth was too wide, she acknowledged critically, her lips too full and too red. Her teeth, however, were white and straight, one of her best features.

She decided not to smile tonight—at least not so she showed any teeth.

She had ruthlessly subdued her wild tangle of hair into a knot on the top of her head, and for once was glad of its bright, unfashionable color and the rather severe style. She stepped back

from the mirror. Unfortunately, Mama had been right about the dress making her look nice. The green color was flattering, and the bodice, laced tight to push up her breasts, made her look slender rather than skinny. She was still too tall to be considered feminine by Celierian standards. Flat-footed, she could look Den straight in the eye. Ellie thrust her feet into her highest heels and immediately grew three inches.

Satisfied that she'd done exactly as her mother asked, and as much as possible to mitigate any hint of prettiness, Ellie made her way downstairs to the family parlor.

Den was already there, sitting across from her father on one of Sol Baristani's finely carved settees and chewing a chocolate caramel with relish. His stocky body was clothed in what looked to be a new dark blue plaid suit, cut just the tiniest bit too tight, with a yellow neckcloth tied in folds about his thick neck. A gold pin, shaped like a rather ungainly bear, glinted from the folds of the neckcloth. His brown hair, greased with a strongly scented pomade, was slicked back from his face, with a puff of curls carefully formed at the top of his broad forehead. His skin was ruddy, his nose partly flattened from a series of childhood scuffles, and his eyes were pale blue rimmed with stubby black lashes.

He was attractive enough, in a rough, butcher's son sort of way. That wasn't what bothered Ellie.

He looked up, caught sight of her, and jumped to his feet and crossed the room to stand uncomfortably close to her. His gaze swept over her, then homed in on the swell of bosom thrust up against the delicate fabric of her mother's best chemise. A bosom that was three inches closer to his face thanks to her decision—poorly considered she now realized—to wear high heels. His tongue came out to lick his full lips.

That was what bothered Ellie.

Fighting the urge to cross her arms over her chest, she forced a stiff little smile—no teeth—and said, “Good evening, Den. How nice that you could join us tonight.”

“You look very pretty, Ellysetta.” That came from Papa, of course. Den was still salivating over her bosom.

“Thank you, Papa.” She was grateful for the warm love shining from Sol Baristani’s eyes. And for his presence in the parlor. The gods only knew what Den would have tried had they been alone. Judging from the look on his face, she wouldn’t have liked it much.

“Mmm. Yes,” Den agreed, licking his lips again. “Very pretty.” His pale blue gaze traveled up her neck and paused for several seconds on her mouth. When finally he met her own gaze head on, there were spots of color in his cheeks.

For a moment she imagined she felt a disturbing hunger. His hunger, she realized, and it wasn’t for food. Sudden panic roiled inside her, tying her stomach in knots, and making her break out in a clammy sweat. If he touched her, she knew she would be sick.

“Ah, Ellysetta. Good.” Mama’s voice snapped through the strange emotions that had captured Ellie, and she dragged in a gasp of air. No wonder she felt ill. She’d held her breath until she was dizzy!

“—to ask you to help me in the kitchen,” Lauriana was saying, “but I’ve changed my mind. You look far too pretty to risk soiling your gown in the kitchen. Don’t you agree, Den?” It was an embarrassing maternal attempt to draw a compliment from Den, but the young man didn’t hesitate to oblige her.

“Indeed, Madame Baristani.” Den bowed at the waist as if he were a Lord’s son rather than a butcher’s. “Ellysetta looks lovelier than I have ever seen her.” The smug smile was back.

“Sol, perhaps you would give me a hand instead?” Lauriana suggested with a pointed look.

Ellie's eyes went wide with panic. "I don't mind helping you, Mama!" She heard the shrill desperation in her voice. "Really, I don't."

"Nonsense. You stay here and entertain your young man. Your father is happy to help me." As they exited the room, her mother flashed an indulgent smile at Den and said in a coy entirely un-Mama-like voice, "We won't be but a few chimes, children."

There was no mistaking her humiliating obvious scheme, and Den was quick to take up the unspoken invitation. As soon as Lauriana's skirts disappeared down the hall, he stepped closer to Ellie, his square hands reaching for her. She stumbled backwards to escape his pursuit, only to find herself backed into a corner, trapped between his arms, staring in horrified revulsion as his thick, wet lips tried to attach themselves to hers.

Ellie escaped the kiss with a quick twist of her body, and tried to duck under his arm. She wasn't quite quick enough, and her slender muscles were no match for his solid bulk. After a brief, undignified tussle, she found herself back in the corner, pulled tight against his body.

"Come on, Ellie." His breath was starting to come a little faster. "We both know why your parents left us alone. There's no need to play the coy maiden. I don't want anything more than a kiss or two." He grinned, showing two rows of sharp and slightly crooked teeth. "For now."

"Den, we hardly know each other."

He laughed. "We've known each other since childhood, Ellie."

"But not like this...we've just been...er...friends." They'd never been friends. He'd been a taunting bully who liked to make her cry.

"I want to be more than friends now." His hands roved over her waist, and his lips descended, glancing off her cheek as she jerked her head away. Den drew back his head and chuckled. "I've been watching you for some time now, Ellie," he murmured, his voice thick and

possessive. “Granted, you weren’t much to look at as a kid, all orange hair, freckles, and knobby knees. But lately, you’ve started to show a little promise.” That smug, secret smile flashed again, and one thick-fingered hand came up to cup her chin. “I’ve decided to make you my wife, Ellie Baristani.”

He didn’t ask. He just said it, as if she had no choice in the matter. She stared at him, aghast, wondering how in the names of all the gods she was going to get out of this with any measure of grace. “Den, you...er...honor me, but—”

“Ssh.” The hand on her chin moved to cover her mouth. “There’s no need to say anything.” Her eyes widened in outrage and sudden fear as the hand on her mouth clamped down harder, and Den lowered his head to her neck.

Her stomach lurched as something warm and wet touched her skin. Was that his *tongue*? A stinging pain at the base of her throat made her yelp against his silencing hand. The little bloat toad had *bitten* her! He sucked at the spot he’d just bitten, and once more that warm, wet tongue licked at her. Oh, gods, she was going to be sick!

Outraged and repulsed, she grabbed two handfuls of his hair and yanked. Hard. She kicked his shins, too. He just grunted and shoved her against the wall, pinning her with the heavy, unmovable weight of his stocky body. Before she could draw breath enough to scream, his mouth was on hers. His lips were wet and slippery, and that horrid tongue was on the loose again, this time trying to get inside her mouth.

Without warning, one hand closed around her breast. Instinctively, she opened her mouth to scream. It was exactly the wrong reaction, and one he’d obviously been counting on. His hand shot up to hold her jaw open, and his tongue thrust deep into her mouth. Her screams, muffled by his mouth, came out as frantic little squeals that seemed only to excite him further.

Never in her life had Ellie been assaulted this way. Where were her parents? How could they have abandoned her to this...this...mauling?

Beneath the revulsion and feeling of helplessness, a darker emotion burst into smoldering life. A wild, fierce anger. Her skin flashed hot and tingling, drawing tight as if something inside her flesh were struggling to get out.

Terror grabbed her by the throat as the room began to tremble.

* * *

Two hundred miles away, beside a campfire burning in the chilly night, Rain Tairen Soul felt a woman's emotions stab into him. Fear. Outrage. Desperation. He leapt to his feet, his nostrils flaring as if he could scent the emotions on the wind. His mind raced to find their path, to identify their source.

Another wave of feelings arrowed into him. Revulsion. Rage. Then stark terror. A wordless cry screamed in his mind. She was calling out to him. She was afraid and he was not there to protect her.

He flung himself from the ground into the sky, flashing instantly into tairen-form. Flames scorched the night sky and his roar of fury rent the air as he followed the path of the mind that called out to him in fear.

But then, as suddenly and the call had come, it fell silent. Confused by the abrupt termination of the connection, Rain faltered in mid-flight. His fury was still there. Licks of flame still curled from his muzzle and venom pooled in the reservoirs in his fangs, but his rage had lost its focus. The woman's fear and desperation were gone, no longer fueling his wrath. Banking right, he circled the sky and reached out with his mind, trying to find the one who had called. He found nothing but silence and the worried calls of the Fey warriors he'd left behind.

Then the even more worried call of Marissya.

The warriors, he might have ignored, but not Marissya. All Fey men were bound to protect the females of their race, even from worry.

**Rain?* Marissya didn't try to hide the concern in her mental voice. She was a mere century older than Rain, had known him all his life. She was his friend. **What happened?*

She called out to me. She was afraid.*

Who?*

He hesitated. **I don't know.*** Keen tairen eyes pierced the night. Far away in the distance, he saw the glow of Celeria. **But I'm going to find out.*** He dipped one wing and banked again, heading towards the city in the distance.

* * *

Ellie sat at the dinner table and couldn't stomach the thought of putting food in her mouth. The terrifying anger and the disturbing sensation in her skin had passed almost as quickly as they'd come, with none but Ellie the wiser. Though she could have sworn the parlor had actually trembled, no one else appeared to have sensed it. Was she going mad now? Had the demons that had haunted her youth found a different, more subtle way to work their evil on her?

Ellie knew not to let herself get upset. All her life, she'd worked to keep her emotions in check lest she accidentally trigger another seizure. She forced herself to take deep, even breaths, and filled her mind with calming thoughts.

Still, as she glanced at her mother from beneath her lashes, she couldn't quell a spurt of anger and resentment as Lauriana made pleasant small talk – small talk! – with Den Brodson. How could Mama even contemplate wedding Ellie to that odious rultshart?

Did Mama know what Den had been doing in the parlor? She had to have known. She'd

made a series of intentionally loud noises before coming back in. What had that been all about except to let Den know he should stop his assault on Ellie? He had, thankfully. With a final wet kiss and a last painful squeeze of her breast, Den had released her and said, “You’ll do, Ellie.” As if she were a haunch of beef he was approving from the slaughterhouse.

Ellie’s relief at being freed had rapidly turned into a sense of betrayal. How could Mama know what Den had been doing and not be outraged? Surely Mama didn’t know about that awful pink slug of a tongue.

Outrage and resentment clashed inside her. She was not going to marry Den Brodson. Not now. Not ever. Anger flared, quick and hot.

Suddenly, there was a feeling in her mind. A probing touch, as if someone or something was trying to reach inside her head. She had a distant sense of scarcely banked fury and a stronger a sense of something powerful rushing towards her with grim purpose.

Ellie’s spoon clattered to the table. Everyone looked at her in surprise.

“Ellie?” Papa’s brown eyes radiated concern. “Are you alright, kit?”

She put a shaking hand to her head. “I – I think so, Papa.” The feeling was gone. Had it been her imagination? Another sign of impending madness? She forced a wan smile and tugged at the neck of her chemise. “I mean, yes. I’m fine. Just a little tired.”

“What’s that on your neck?” Lorelle was staring at the spot where Den had bitten Ellie’s neck, the spot that Ellie had unwittingly just uncovered.

In an instant, everyone was staring at Ellie’s neck. Embarrassed, she clapped a hand over the spot. She hadn’t looked in a mirror. Had Den left a mark on her?

Apparently so, because her father was now staring hard at Den. That shameless *klat* just smiled his smug smile and met her Papa’s gaze straight on. Mama’s eyes darted from her

husband to her daughter's suitor. There was a look in Mama's eyes that made Ellie's heart stutter. Embarrassment faded—even fear of what was happening to her faded—as worry slithered up Ellie's spine.

“Girls,” Papa said. Ellie had never heard his voice sound so emotionless, so hard. “Go to your rooms.” The twins jumped to their feet and scurried out. “You, too, Ellysetta.” He didn't look at her, didn't take his unblinking gaze from Den's.

Ellie did not immediately obey. Did her parents not know what Den had done to her after all? Was it possible that they hadn't left her alone with him in the parlor for that very reason?

“Papa?”

“Go!” he barked, and Ellie all but fell over herself rushing from the room. Snatching up fistfuls of heavy green skirts, she raced for the stairs and took them two at a time, not slowing down until she was ensconced in the safety of her small bedroom.

Needing to know exactly what sort of mark Den had left on her, she went to the small dressing table tucked in the corner of her room. Her fingers shook as she struck a match and lit the oil lamp on the table. Soft golden light filled the room. Ellie leaned close to the mirror, tugging the neck of her chemise to one side to reveal a small, dark, oval mark at the base of her throat. In the golden glow of lamplight, the mark looked like a smudge of soot. She rubbed at it, but it didn't come off. She felt invaded somehow, violated, and suddenly very afraid of what was going on downstairs.

She sat on the edge of her bed, and waited. She didn't know how long she sat there. It seemed like bells before she heard the creak of the stairs and the slow clomp, clomp of her father's boots. She rushed to her bedroom door and pulled it open.

“Papa?”

There was disappointment and sadness in his eyes when he looked at her. “Go to bed, Ellysetta. It’s getting late.” He looked tired and worn. Old.

“But, Papa...about Den.” What could she say? She couldn’t very well tell her father about the embarrassing things he’d done to her. “I...I know Mama thinks he’s a good match, but Papa...I don’t like him. Please, I don’t want to marry him.”

Her father stared at her for a moment, then shook his head and turned away. “Go to bed. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“But Papa – ”

He just continued walking down the hall and into his room, closing his bedroom door behind him.

Ellie returned to her own room and undressed in shadowy darkness, hanging the green gown and her mother’s chemise in the small wardrobe resting against the wall. She didn’t want to wear either of them again as long as she lived.

After donning a cotton nightdress, she sat down beside the window and unpinned her hair. It spilled down her back in long, springy coils. Brushing it with steady strokes, she stared out at the night sky. Both the large moon called the Mother and the small moon called the Daughter were three-quarters full. It was a bright night.

Please, she prayed silently, fervently, hoping the Celierian gods would hear her. *Please send me someone else. Anyone else but Den.* She laid the brush in its place on her dressing table and crawled into bed, pulling the covers up to her chin and closing her eyes.

She didn’t see the shadow fall across her room as the light from the Mother was blotted out by a large black tairén winging through the night. She didn’t see the lavender eyes, glowing like beacons, turn their light upon the rooftops of Celieria. Searching. Seeking.