

Tairen Soul: Lady of Light & Shadows

by

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*I dream of wing and fang and pride, I dream of venom swift and sure.
I dream of song and cloud and sky, I dream of flame that scorches pure.
I dream of dancing crystal winds, and soaring high above the world.
I dream of enemies and prey that flee my dread and fiery roar.*

Tairen Dreams, by Jion vel Baris, Tairen Soul

Ellysetta Baristani stood in the dark, fire-lit cavern of Fey'Bahren, the fabled nesting lair of the tairen. Nearby, six leathery eggs lay incubating in a thick, cushioning layer of hot black sand. A massive, cinnamon-furred tail curled protectively around the eggs, its black tip rising and falling rhythmically, raising clouds of fine dark dust as it thumped the sand. The dust swirled about Ellie like shadowy mist, darkening her skirts with a fine layer of sooty ash. Unshed tears clogged the back of her throat and stung her eyes.

The tairen were dying.

Ellie couldn't explain how she knew it. The knowledge was just there in her mind, and it felt familiar, as if it had been there for a long, long time.

Calah, the last fertile female of the tairen pride, was growing feebler with each passing day, her life's essence draining as she struggled to maintain the viability of her six unhatched kitlings. The last hope of a future for the tairen rested with those tiny, unborn lives—three of them female—their life force weakening even as their small bodies matured in the egg.

The mother tairen's cinnamon fur was dull and shedding. Her proud feline head—larger than Ellysetta's body—rested wearily on her forepaws, and her piercing golden eyes were closed. Breath heaved in and out of her enormous body in great windy gusts. She had not eaten in two weeks. Her mate, Merdrahl, was frantic with worry. He paced restlessly by the entrance to the nesting grounds, brown wings rustling, massive paws padding not so silently back and forth across the sands, low growls emanating from his powerful chest and rumbling through the cavern like thunder. His dark brown tail curled and uncurled, flicking in agitation. His fur was ruffled, his ears laid back, and his fangs dripped deadly tairen venom. Every so often, he would pause, dig his claws into the rock, and heave an angry jet of flame.

If Merdrahl could have slain something to bring peace to his mate and protect their offspring, he would have. And Ellysetta would have helped him.

A growl sounded overhead. She looked up into the gleaming, pupilless green eyes of Sybharukai, the wise one, oldest of all female tairen and makai—leader—of the Fey'Bahren pride. She crouched on the ledge above, her unsheathed front claws curling into the rock of her perch. Her dark, silver-tipped gray fur gleamed like thunderclouds and smoke in the flickering light of the cavern. The rounded points of her ears flicked continuously. Her dark gray tail

swished restlessly in the air, and the lethal bony spikes hidden in its furred tip stabbed at the rocks around her. Her wings unfolded and stretched high above her back, flapping twice. The sharp claw at the mid-span joint on each wing gleamed like a curved mei'cha blade in the flickering light.

***I will find a way, Sybharukai.** A deep, masculine voice sang the vow in the rich, vivid tones of tairen song.*

Heat curled in Ellysetta's belly, drawing inner muscles tight in a series of small, rippling shudders of remembered pleasure. She turned and found Rain standing beside her.

Rainier vel'En Daris, the Tairen Soul, the legendary Fey shapeshifter who had once scorched the world in a wild, grief-stricken fury over the death of his beloved mate, Sariel.

Rain Tairen Soul, King of the Fey, who had stepped from the sky to claim Ellysetta as his shei'tani, his true mate, the only woman ever born with whom he could form a soul bond even stronger than the love bond he'd held with Sariel.

His long black hair hung down his back, straight and fine, framing a face of breathtaking masculine beauty. Black Fey leathers hugged broad shoulders, slim hips, and long, lean legs. His deadly swords and the scores of throwing knives tucked into the bands criss-crossing his chest gleamed golden in the flickering firelight. His lavender eyes were glowing, his beautiful mouth grim.

"I will find a way," he said again, aloud this time but still addressing the majestic gray tairen. "I will not fail you."

Turning, he strode off the nesting sands towards a wide opening at the end of the cavern. Ellie hurried after him and together they jogged up a long, winding passage through the mountain and emerged on a wide, sunlit ledge high above the Fading Lands. Ellie raised a hand

to shield her eyes, blinking at the brightness of the Great Sun.

When her eyes adjusted, she gave a gasp of awe-filled wonder. They were standing near the top of the steep, dark mountainside of Fey'Bahren, the tallest volcano in the majestic Feyls range that formed the northern border of the Fading Lands. Below, the rippling golden grasses of the Plains of Corunn spread out for miles. She drank in the breathtaking scenery, which seemed at once familiar yet new, like a forgotten memory, freshly renewed.

“Oh, Rain,” she breathed. “It’s so beautiful.”

Beside her, magic gathered as Rain summoned the Change.

Ellysetta’s body tingled as the surge of energy swept around and through her. A fine gray mist billowed about him, about them both, and she threw back her head on a swell of pleasure so intense it bordered on pain. Though it was Rain, not she, who was the shapeshifter, she felt his body dissolve and expand as if it were her own, felt the echo of awareness as his Fey senses grew even more acute. Fur sprouted, wings spread, claws speared the rock.

Moments later the mist cleared, and a magnificent death-black tairen with huge lavender eyes crouched on the ledge where Rain Tairen Soul, the Fey king and Ellysetta’s betrothed, had stood. The tairen spread his enormous ebony wings, gathered strength in his haunches, and sprang into the air with an echoing roar.

Behind him, standing alone on the ledge, still trapped in her human form, she cried out, “Rain, come back! Don’t leave me!”

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Ellysetta woke with her heart thumping and tears cooling on her cheeks. Another dream, one that seemed so real. The emotions still held her heart clutched tight, making her want to weep in despair for the dying tairen and the terrible, grieving emptiness that struck when Rain

took to the air and abandoned her on that ledge.

**Another nightmare, shei'tani? ** The familiar sound of Rain's Spirit voice, low and husky with sleep, sounded in her mind. An arm tightened around her waist. There was a warm, heavy weight pressed against her in her narrow bed—and it was most definitely not her twin sisters, Lillis and Lorelle, cuddling up with her as they sometimes did.

She turned her head slowly, and her breath stalled in her lungs.

For the first time in the last five days, there was no little courtship gift beside her when she woke. There was, instead, a great big one. All black leather, white skin and inky hair, Rain lay beside her on her narrow bed, his long limbs draped over her.

Thinking she must still be dreaming, she closed her eyes, inhaled, opened them again.

He was still there, solid and warm, his face pressed to her neck.

She should leap up and get dressed before her mother came in and found her like this, but she couldn't seem to move her limbs. Instead, she lay there, staring at him in dazed wonder. Through her bedroom window the first pale rays of the rising Great Sun shone down upon them. Dawn was breaking, and Rain Tairen Soul was in her bed.