

The Legends of Anlièasiá Series

The SECRET CRUSADE

Book One



R. THOMAS LIFE

The SECRET CRUSADE

Prologue & Chapters 1-3

R. THOMAS LIFE



The Secret Crusade
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To request permissions, contact the author at
fireshadowbooks@gmail.com

fireshadowbooks.com
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*I dedicate this book to Mike and Angie,
whose coaching helped my story evolve,
and to Kathryn, Fran, and Karen, who helped it become ready.
Most of all, I dedicate this story to my family,
especially my mother, whose encouragement
and love of reading started it all.*

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Prologue

A PANTHEON OF EVIL



THE WIND RUSHED THROUGH THE night, bringing with it a scent that would change the world. In the darkness a Dorocho crouched. It looked like a man but stood taller than most. Yet it held no substance, given form only by its gauntleted hands and dark cloak. A hood was pulled over its head, but where a face should have been, just empty darkness that seemed to swallow the faint patches of moonlight.

Sniffing the air, the Dorocho recoiled with surprise. They were here! The Dorocho turned to address its companion—identical in clothes and lack of physical form.

The Dorocho spoke in a low voice as hard and cold as ice. “Find cover behind the trees and bushes. Stop whoever is coming, or Synder will flay us alive!”

The second Dorocho nodded; silent as a shadow as it moved into position. An owl let out a screech, and the Dorocho raged silently at the bird. It thirsted for the feather creature’s flesh but didn’t move. It could not afford to lose its composure tonight. Tomorrow it would hunt.

The Dorocho remained motionless until the bird streaked out of sight into the darkness of the trees. With the owl gone, the Dorocho waited. It was almost completely dark in the forest, but that only made them near invisible.

In the darkness, they waited. And waited. And waited. The minutes turned into long hours. The scent must have wafted ahead of its owners. The Dorocho sniffed again, and the scent was much stronger this time; they were close at hand now. Turning, it rasped. “Now.”

Its companion hissed in acknowledgment, and they drew their swords. They were thin enough to slip between a pair of ribs, yet stout enough to hack through the hardest armor. A sickening smell emanated from the blades as if they had been dipped in rotten fruit.

Together the Dorocho waited in silence, sword tips twitching in the air. It had taken numerous plots and much pain to get to this point, and it would do no good to lose control now.

Suddenly they saw faint smudges emerged in the darkness along the trail. Three horses cantered forward, their heads high and proud, their glossy coats shining in the moonlight. Two females and one male rode atop the horses.

The first rider was a young woman with a slim but sturdy build. A powerful bow was slung on her back, and a sword was strapped to her side opposite a quiver of arrows fletched with eagle feathers.

The second rider was as poised as the first, though several years younger than the woman. He held a spear in one hand, and a jeweled dagger was sheathed at his side on his belt.

The final rider was the youngest of the trinity. Her long hair was pulled back in a braid over her shoulder, and a silver circlet rested on her forehead. Her eyes were alert, continually shifting back and forth for danger and shining with a driving force. Her clothes were unadorned, yet her exquisite beauty was undiminished. At her side was a golden sword sheathed in a bronze scabbard, the pommel topped with a yellow diamond. She gripped the sword tightly, tension rippling through her entire body as if she expected to be attacked at any moment.

The young man leaned and said something to the younger woman. She answered with apparent authority and nodded as they changed formation. The young man with the spear took the lead, holding his spear in a readier grip. They passed the ambush site without any suspicion.

The Dorocho were already savoring the victory when something went amiss. With snorts of alarm, the horses tossed their magnificent heads. The three riders tensed, eyes flashing from side to side, then wheeled their mounts around and galloped away. The youngest woman's horse surged forward, leaving the other two far behind.

Forsaking cover, the Dorocho leaped forward, as weightless as the darkness itself and they screeched. The forest seemed to quiver at the unnatural, nightmarish sound. The youngest woman's horse whinnied in fright, but she urged it forward. The Dorocho slashed the horse across the chest with its sword, with a high-pitched squeal, the horse toppled, plowing into the ground. The woman leaped off the horse and rolled to her feet, whirling to see what had become of her two guards.

The Dorocho's sword had already made quick work of the man and woman. A cry of anguish escaped from the young woman's lips as she beheld

her dead companions. She took a step toward them, saw the two creatures advancing on her, and cursed the two of them and bounded into the forest.

“After her!” the Dorocho screeched. “She is the one we need!” The other Dorocho hissed, stood, and moving with incredible speed, raced after the woman.

While the other Dorocho hissed through the trees, the leader climbed a piece of granite jutting out above them. From the perch, the Dorocho could see all the surrounding forest. There was much shouting, then a scream, and the Dorocho caught a glimpse of the young woman running back up the trail. When the woman ran into an area where the trees were less dense, the Dorocho saw its fellow after her.

The young woman fled toward the jagged piece of granite. The Dorocho examined the ground twenty feet below, jumped and landed swiftly in front of her. She skidded to the side and sped back to the trail.

Before she had gone twenty paces, the second Dorocho, appeared. The leader followed to the woman’s left, blocking her only escape routes. The young woman’s head whipped around as she tried to find a way out. Seeing none, she drew herself up with regal disdain.

“Get her!” said the Dorocho.

The woman drew her sword, the long golden blade flashed wickedly yet beautifully in the light as she raised it above her head, while her lips formed frantic words.

The Dorocho shouted, “Stop her!”

The two sprinted toward her a pair of missiles flying toward the woman, but they were a second too late. As her words stopped, her blade shone as bright as the sun, and they fell back, screeching. The sword disintegrated in golden petals glowing with power and encircled her, in a shapeless flurry of light shifting continuously.

With a shout, she gave the now bladeless handle a ferocious swing. The undulating radiance snapped around and slammed into the Dorocho, hurling them back with tremendous force as the paper-thin petals of light shredded its clothing. The Dorocho screeched as they flew back. They got up instantly, as she gave another swing of the sword, but the first Dorocho moved into her blind spot, and smote her in the side with its sword. The young woman screamed in pain as the secretion on the metal ate away at her skin like acid, leaving black marks on her side.

The Dorocho slammed into the young woman, now stunned and vulnerable. She flew across the trail, slammed into a tree, and crumpled

to the forest floor. The two stared down at the young woman.

“Will she live?” asked the second Dorocho.

“Yes,” said the lead Dorocho. “Synder wants her alive. I wounded her, but that was unavoidable. We’ll tend to her later. Retrieve her sword and be sure we are well enough to leave.”

The Dorocho picked up the woman’s fallen blade and carried it off to the side as the lead Dorocho tended to the wound on the woman’s side, preventing the acid from eating away at anymore of her flesh. It looked up at the cold stars before turning back to her unconscious form. Her beauty was exquisite and stunning by human standards although it held no charm for the Dorocho. The Dorocho turned as its companion returned bringing with it their horses. The Dorocho lashed the unconscious woman to his mount and got into its saddle. The Dorocho nudged their mounts in the side, and they trotted forward to parts unknown.

THE DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH



AREN KNELT IN THE BED of trampled reed grass; his well-trained eyes studied the tracks. The deer had been traveling all day, and it wouldn't be long before it bedded down. Aren nodded in satisfaction; the tracks were still fresh, so the deer couldn't have passed through more than an hour earlier. The time was ripe, and he would emerge victorious.

It was the fourth night of the hunt, and his food was nearly spent. If he failed to fell his quarry tonight, he would have to return empty-handed to town, and he couldn't let that happen. He needed to make this kill—not only for the meat he would get from it, but most importantly for the coin. He would need every ounce of it to survive the journey ahead.

Aren began to creep forward, the sky above was crisp and dark, and a light breeze whispered through the air. A silvery cloud drifted across the sky between the peaks that surrounded him. Its edges glowed with a light cast by the waxing moon nestled between the mountains. Streams flowed through the mountains from the stolid glaciers at the peaks. Dark trees surrounded him, and Aren warily felt he was being watched.

At fifteen, Aren had the pinched, slightly unhealthy look of someone who had grown a lot in a short space of time. He had a thin face, high cheekbones, knobby knees, and disheveled black hair with bangs that rested just above his intense, deep-blue eyes. His clothes were dirty, and travel worn, but still sturdy. A skinning knife with a bone handle was sheathed on his arm. He carried a pack with a bedroll sticking out of the top.

In his hand, Aren gripped his faithful yew bow and a quiver of arrows were slung across his back. The buck had led him deep into the Forest of Ascetir that rested on the eastern shoulder of Ascetirshire of the kingdom of Erenähl. They were filled with rushing rivers, glittering lakes, and the crisp scent of pine. Many hunters and trappers came to these mountains for game avoided going as far as Aren. The forest was

dangerous prone to mudslides, flooding, and deep snow in the winter. All of which was only worsened by the highway men who haunted the few established routes on the outskirts. So far, Aren knew he was the only one who tracked game this deep into the ancient forests. However, Aren wasn't worried. Having practically grown up in the forest, he'd explored much farther than anyone else he knew of.

Though Aren wouldn't say he possessed the courage of the legendary heroes he'd been in awe of since his childhood, he knew he was an adept survivor. Throughout his life, he had proven to be unusually capable of escaping tight situations, though not through any gift. It was more likely due to his vigilance, sharp reflexes, and creative problem solving.

With quiet assurance, he paused, then moved stealthily through the forest, pausing when he heard the scraping of something against wood. Silent as a cat Aren crept forward until he arrived at a glen where moonlight shone through the trees and cast feathery shadows on the ground. With the moonlight Aren saw the buck by a tree, rubbing its antlers against the bark, removing the velvety coating, leaving behind only the sharp tines. It was young, Aren figured, feeling the shame in needing to kill the creature, but even so he was already counting the coins he would make for the pelt, meat, and the antlers. Nocking an arrow, Aren drew back the bow. All his work over the past four days and nights had led up to this. *This is it!* Just as he aimed for the doe, the earsplitting screech of an owl pierced the night air.

The bird's cry startled Aren, and he jerked the bow back in alarm. The arrow flew, striking the buck in the haunch, which cried out and bolted. Startled, Aren stood suddenly and smacked the top of his head on the lower branch of a tree.

Aren felt like his head had been split open. His eyes streamed with tears, and he swayed on the spot before staggering into the glen, trying to dispel the stars that danced before his eyes. He reached down and picked his bow up, brushing off the dirt that had coated it.

Aren stared silently for a time before finally going to the spot where the buck had been, staring at the ground. He saw the glimmers of blood on the grass. He'd hit his mark, and the deer wouldn't get far on that injured leg. But now he was going to have to find it before something else did. Though he did not fear the forest, he knew that the predators in here were nothing to sniff at. He had to find the buck, for himself and the poor creature. Aren knew that he would have to put it out of

its misery or let it die a painful death. Sighing he stood up and charged into the bush, following the trail of blood, his head throbbing painfully with each pounding footfall. Aren knew his situation was precarious even without the wildlife, he was nearly out of food, and he didn't have enough to make it to the city of Argentum without starving.

Ah, said a nasty voice in his head, *that's what you always get, isn't it?*

Aren had no way to counter this. In truth, the most accursed black luck had followed him throughout his life. A simple farm boy, Aren had originally grown up in a small village in a region beyond a point called the Ridge of Ascetir, Ealdor. His had been a lonely existence. He had no friends; while most of the children avoided him, a few were brave enough to pick on him. Most people in the village looked at Aren with fear and contempt, whispering and gossiping about him, calling him daft if not dangerous.

The terrible truth was that Aren was far more than a simple farm boy. He carried the burden of a secret that would lead to his certain death if it were to be discovered.

Aren sighed and shook his head, he had to keep focused on the trail. The blood was getting thicker, meaning that the buck was bleeding more profusely. He slowed his pace and listened, hearing a hard breathing, Aren walked forward before he found the buck. Lying on the floor, panting, and quivering. Aren swallowed before he stepped forward and drew his skinning knife. The buck looked up at him with its large, black eyes. Eyes full of pain and confusion. Aren knelt next to the head and began to stroke the head, whispering words of comfort as the blade flashed. The buck tensed, struggled for a moment, but then fell still, the light going out of its eyes. Aren stared at it for a time, remember what his mother had told him once. *It's not pleasant, but we owe it to all those we hunt to ensure they suffer little. Remember that, Aren.*

Aren did remember, but the thought did little to help him. He had long ago gotten used to the grizzly business of hunting, but for the most part he like to make his kills quick and clean, but tonight was not one of those nights. Still, he had to get to work on the buck or else he would be drawing attention from scavengers. Aren began his work on the buck. He was at work for several minutes when he sensed something and saw movement out of the corner of his eye. Turning, he saw a pair of gleaming ice blue orbs staring at him. Then a creature emerged from the wood, a silent as a shadow.

The creature was a wolf, but massive. It was easily four feet tall at the shoulder with fierce blue eyes, a sturdy body that was lean, fit, and covered with snow-white fur. The wolf walked toward Aren who didn't even look up as he continued skinning the buck. It was only when the wolf stopped, towering above Aren that he turned and looked up into its fierce blue eyes, "Hello, Blizzard."

A voice spoke in Aren's head. *What took you so long?*

A slight smile tugged at the corners of Aren's mouth. "An owl hooted and startled me, so I had to track it down."

An owl, eh? Blizzard replied.

Aren continued his work, not really that worried now that Blizzard was with him. He knew that Blizzard's large bulk was enough to stave off all, but the largest of beasts. "Anything of note for you?"

No, answered Blizzard. *Besides, I already had that doe when we first camped. I still won't have to eat until tomorrow at least.*

Good, said Aren. *Because I need to save as much of the meat as I can to trade in Argentum.*

What about the rest? Blizzard nodded to the head of the deer. *Those would fetch a penny or two.*

Aren sighed. He knew that Blizzard was right, but he was hesitant. *I don't want to dull the knife blade. It's hard enough to sharpen with my old wet stone.*

It still would be worth it, for the coin you would get, replied Blizzard. *Do what you will, I'm just suggesting. If it takes a while, then I will keep the wildlife away.*

Aren thought about it, weighing the odd. It was true that the deer's head would make for more money than he would get without it, but his skinning knife wasn't designed for cutting through bone. Eventually, Blizzard's argument won out. Aren sighed and began to work on the head, hacking and sawing at the bone, muscle and sinew knowing full well that he would be smelling of blood. Finally, he sighed and turned to Blizzard, "Can you help please?"

Blizzard stepped forward, paced around the head for a moment, before he opened his mouth, his razor teeth gleaming in the light and bite down on the head of the deer. Aren held the carcass as Blizzard gave a powerful twist and the head tore free of the neck. Aren sighed with relief, *Thank you.*

No worries, said Blizzard. *I was about to take pity on you.*

Aren smiled and tended to the pelt before he stood up. "Come on," he said. "It's late, let's find a place to make camp, tend to these meats, pelt and antlers before going to bed."

Agreed, said Blizzard.

Aren stood up and, carrying the prizes in his arms left. Heading back the way he had come through the forest. As they walked Aren said, "Thank you for the help, Blizzard."

Blizzard snorted. *No thanks are needed. The head was barely connected at all, still, I feel that you waste your time on these deer. I would prefer to stalk an elk or a moose; now that would be a worthy hunt.*

Not taking his eyes off the treacherous ground Aren said, "I couldn't carry that much meat without the smell attracting predators."

I would help you carry the meat.

"You would eat the meat," countered Aren, "as you did last time."

So?

Aren gave another small smile. Eventually they found a spot to camp under the roots of a large, fallen tree by a gurgling river. Aren took the time to clean his hands and arms of the dried blood. Afterward he set about lighting a fire, trimming the meat, cooking a sizable piece of it while wrapping the rest. Then he made a spit over the fire and hung the deer pelt to dry. He removed his meat, tossed a piece to Blizzard to snapped it up and pulled out the bread and cheese in his pack. Eating that with the venison, Aren was satisfied as he pulled out his bedroll and set it on the forest. Blizzard curled up next to him.

Good night, Aren.

"Good night," replied Aren. He closed his eyes and slipped into his dreams.

CONSCRIPTION



THE DAWN CAME IN A dazzling display of red and gold. The fresh air was sweet and pleasantly warm, and a river chattered nearby. After a breakfast of cold porridge, Aren packed up his campsite, and he and Blizzard headed south toward the Appian Way.

The rough game trail was quite worn; in many places, it was nonexistent. Aren followed it for he knew it was the swiftest way to the Appian Way that extended from the southern border to the center of Erenähl. The kingdom of Erenähl was one of the Five Kingdoms, the great lands which Emperor Tenebrae couldn't claim as his own. Though his rule reached over the near entire world, some provinces and monarchies were able to avoid him or repel his forces. Erenähl was one of them.

He and Blizzard continued their brisk pace, and the leagues steadily disappeared. In the late evening, they arrived at the edge of a precipitous ravine. Far below, the Appian Way cut through the forest as it stretched northwest to southeast. Aren knew that once they made it to that road, they would follow it until they reached Argentum. Aren would normally have been very excited about traveling to the most important city in Ascetir, but this was not going to be a cheery visit. Before Aren had set out on his hunt a representative had been giving out the shire levy. All eligible men of fifteen to sixty years old were required to report to the sheriff of their shire for military service. Due to the continuation of the War, King Richard needed new recruits to reinforce his army.

Aren was eligible for the recruitment but knew that he would most likely not be participating in the conflict. At least not yet. He hopped that his letter would be satisfactory. The sheriff, Vaisey of Argentum, had a feared reputation in the shire. Though he was loyal to the king, he was known for his brutality and ruthlessness in his conscriptions and the heavy taxes he enforced. Aren reached into his pack and pulled out

an official looking letter which he opened and read through it along with the royal purple wax seal. It showed a griffin with two snakes wrapped around its hind legs. He hopped that this seal was all the sheriff needed. Aren and Blizzard made camp in a thicket of bushes lining the ravine, watching the rising moon before going to sleep.

Aren and Blizzard traveled quickly and saw little of the skittish wildlife as they followed the Appian Way north. Finally, they arrived at a slate outcropping that the road plunged down.

From the outcrop, the city of Argentum was laid out in the center of a wide, empty space, with the city itself at the northern most point, nestled at the base of the trees. White smoke curled from the chimneys of the houses in town. Aren stared at the city, it was grim and forlorn, as had many cities gone in the last decade. With dark grey walls that looked old and decrepit and a castle made up of two towering structures.

He and Blizzard started down the trail and followed the road that led to the walls that encircled Argentum. As they approached Aren saw that people were staring at Blizzard in terror and were giving them a wide berth. Aren sighed and stopped Blizzard and said as he pulled out a length of rope. "I'm going to have to put you in a harness Blizzard."

He sighed as Blizzard gave him a disgusted look, "I know you don't like it, but I need to be able to enter the town, now do you want to wait outside the walls for me or put on the harness and come. It's going to be one or the other."

He knew, deep down, that Blizzard, however aggravating some laws were, would follow them to the letter if it meant staying with Aren for as long as he could. Blizzard did not like letting Aren out of his sight for extended periods. Aren tied the rope around Blizzard and secured it to his wrist as the two of them made their way into the city. As they approached the gate they saw four guards present, all of them wearing a simple shirt of mail, with a nasal helm atop their head. In their hands they gripped a polearm and at their side was a sword. Over their chainmail was a barbet of midnight blue trimmed with gold and a silver falcon stitched onto the chest. Soldiers of Argentum.

As Aren approached, they crossed their polearms and one of them said, "You there, wha's ye'hr business in Argentum?"

"I'm here to see the sheriff," said Aren. "The shire levies."

"What about the animal?" asked the soldiers pointing at Blizzard who flattened his ears in annoyance.

"He's mine," said Aren. "He's well trained. He won't cause any problems."

The soldier eyed him for a time, seemed puzzled then said, "Very well, you may pass, but if that wolf causes any trouble, it'll be on your head."

"I understand," said Aren. He tugged Blizzard through the gates, and they entered the market street. Before Aren would meet up with the sheriff, he wanted to sell the pelt and antlers of the deer. First, he needed to find the town's tanner. He asked around and found the tannery. He entered and recoiled at the foul-smelling fumes from the mixtures that were used to cure the hides. "W-wait outside," coughed Aren to Blizzard.

He went into the room and found the tanner. "Hello there," he said. "Names Gedric. What can I do for yeh?"

Aren took off his pack. Reached in and pulled out the deer hide. "I was hoping to sell this."

Gedric took the pelt and examined it for a time. "It's in surprisingly good condition," he said. "Did you kill this recently?"

"Fairly," answered Aren.

Gedric set the pelt onto the table and studied it with a buyer's eye before he asked, "How much were you hopping to get?"

"Whatever I could," said Aren.

Gedric scratched his chin, "Well it's a fine pelt, but unfortunately I don't have much to go around, so I suggest you take my bid of three crowns."

"What?!" exclaimed Aren. "That a miserly bargain. It must be worth more than that!"

"I know that it is," said Gedric. "But what can I say? The sheriff want's leather armor for his men, in lieu of taxes: taxes that I cannot afford to pay because nobody has the money to buy my product."

Aren frowned in disappointment, but knew the man was right. The cost of the War was driving prices painfully high so that many of the kingdom's citizens we're living in poverty, famine was on the rise, and the economy was in threat of collapse due to lack of workers, trade, and income. Sighing Aren said, "Fine, I'll take the three crowns."

"Good, I'll get the coins. Not that it matters, but why are you here? You look young. Are you a conscript?"

“Yes,” said Aren as he held out his hand for the coins. “But I’ve got a letter for the sheriff as well.”

“Well good luck with that,” said Gedric as he handed Aren the money. “The sheriff is not a pleasant fellow as I’m sure you know. Been in office for the last seventeen years, on the word of Prince Orrin.”

“I see,” said Aren as he pocketed the coins. “Well, thank you for your troubles.”

After leaving the tannery, Aren found the local pub, the Fulsome Feast, where he planned to trade the antlers of the buck with the barman. A fellow named Borin. He set down the antlers on the table and Borin took to examining them. “They’re beautiful,” he said. “I must say that you tend to your spoils well.”

“Wouldn’t do me any good if they were ruined,” said Aren.

“Not really,” said Borin with a smirk.

Aren shrugged, “How much?”

Borin thought about it then pulled out his purse, counted the coins and held them out. It was as fair a price as Aren could expect. Tucking the coins into his pocket, Aren nodded toward a crowd of people sitting around a pair of official looking men. “Who are they?”

“Mercian tax inspectors. Came to count the taxes of the north, now they’re telling wild stories, expecting us to believe them.”

Aren frowned, “What kind of stories?”

Borin snorted. “They say the Vardän have formed a pact with the orcs and are amassing an army to attack us. Supposedly, it’s only through the grace of the Empire that we’ve been protected for so long—as if Emperor Tenebrae would care if we burned to the ground . . . Go listen to them. I have enough on my hands without trying to understand their fibs.”

The first inspector was a young man a little older than Aren. The second was an older fellow, probably his father with salt and pepper hair. The boy shook his head, “You don’t understand. It is only through the Emperor’s unceasing efforts on your behalf that you can argue with us in peace. If the Empire withdrew its support, woe unto you!”

A voice hollered, “Load of tosh! If the Empire really was trying to help us, he’d stop the War and leave us in peace. You’re continued attacking has made our live more difficult! Notwithstanding the terrors Tenebrae has inflicted on others, I’ve heard about the thousands being affected by famine, the forced labor camps, the mass slaughter, and the

increased slavery. Our king already looks after us, and he's done a fine job of that! We don't need you!"

The inspector started to answer, but his father intervened. "We weren't suggesting that. We know that the King can look after his subjects, but he cannot look after everyone; that is why the Empire has been establishing foothold on the outlying regions. They are what keep orcs and other abominations from overrunning the kingdom."

Waving his hand expressively, the inspector continued, "You're angry with the Empire for a legitimate concern; the Expansionism Campaign has cause great harm in many ways, but it has aided so many others. Our Emperor has managed to create a well set command economy with the unification of agriculture under his control and strengthened industrialization. The Expansionism is simply the Empire's way of sharing its greatness with the rest of the world. In our hands is the most successful empire ever created. Emperor Tenebrae wishes to share it with us all. But not all governments can please everyone. There will inevitably be arguments and conflicts. It's the way of life in politics. Every country has some small group of dissidents who aren't satisfied with the balance of power."

"You would call the Vardän small?" asked a woman.

Exasperated, the young man said, "We already explained that the Vardän have no belief in justice and honor. That's only a falsehood brewed by the separatist traitors from the Crown Wars in their attempts to upset the balance of power. Their only goal is to usurp the governments and take possession of our land. We humans have always been at their mercy, the dwarves, elves, fishmen, minks, those abominations have always kept us under heel. The Emperor is the only man who has attempted to subdue their influence and make humans the more dominant power in the world. They have spies everywhere, even amongst our own races. They could even be here now. There have even been reports about how the Attack was the Vardän's doing"

Aren didn't believe that, but the man's words were convincing, and people seemed in agreement. He stepped forward. "I know your kind," he said. "What the Empire does isn't taxation. It's extortion."

"I count the wealth of the world boy," said the inspect. "I don't judge it."

"No," said Aren waving to the patrons, "we judge it."

"This is 1192, lad," said the inspector. "The time for heroes has passed. Now is bookkeeper's age."

“How do you know about these truths?” asked Aren. “Could you be a spy? Prove what you said.” The villagers fell silent while the men glared at him.

Avoiding Aren’s eyes, the tax inspector asked, “Have your children been taught no decorum? Do you let boys fight your battles?”

The listeners fidgeted. Then a man said, “Answer his question.”

“It’s just as it is,” said the son, sweat beading on his brow. Riled, the villagers resumed the dispute.

There was a powerful hatred of the Empire in Erenähl that was almost hereditary in nature. More than a hundred sixty years ago, Tenebrae had declared a war of unification on the entire world. Utilizing his power and vast resources, Tenebrae had launched an attack on the kingdoms of old, placing all under his iron dictatorship. As Erenähl was one of the only powers in the world left to resist the Empire, it stood in opposition to Tenebrae’s control, but the war had caused famine and pestilence, along with an increase of taxations that left villages and even entire cities broke. Moreover, the continued assaults from the Empire meant that many conscripts were being sought by the military, which forced trade to a standstill, further straining the kingdom’s economy. He felt satisfied in his disagreement with Emperor Tenebrae’s mercy, but he did speculate about the Vardän.

The Vardän was a rebel group that repeatedly attacked the Empire. It was said that many members of the nonhuman races had left the Empire’s fascist rule to join the Vardän. Their leader was as mysterious as who formed them following Emperor Tenebrae’s rise to power. Not much was said about the Vardän except that if you were a person who hated the Empire, you would be accepted among their ranks. The trick was finding them—though they were a military presence, they primarily operated in cell divisions over the world.

His other speculation was concerning the other matter the trader had discussed. The Dragon Attack. It was a story whispered in fear by all. More than a decade ago, a single dragon laid waste to the Imperial Capital. The attack came from nowhere, without warning. Thousands of lives were lost, and the city suffered so much damage that some regions were beyond repair, the ground beneath them still burning with the dragon fire.

As the argument threatened violence, Aren left. It was early evening outside, and the sun was falling rapidly. Aren needed to see the sheriff

as soon as he could. Aren was walking down the road when he bumped into someone.

“Ouch,” cried a merry voice.

“Sorry, I—” Aren stopped as he saw who it was standing before him.

He was easily the most noticeable person in the street. He was a very short man, so short that his curly brown hair barely came up to Aren’s elbow, with a rosy complexion, a long brown beard that extended past his sternum, prominent, gooseberry eyes, and numerous wrinkles around his eyes showing that, though he was clearly old, he was constantly laughing. He was wearing a bright blue jacket, brightly green colored boots and an old, patched tall hat with an elaborate plume sticking out from the side, though it had fallen off when Aren had run into him.

His name was Trümpelen Forn, a local bard who nomadically traveled the shire and beyond. He had been in Aren’s village of Ealdor years ago before it was lost. Aren had one time asked him how old he was and he simple laughed saying, “Old Trumpy, old? Ah you’ve got a bright mind sir, you do! Old Trumpy was here before!” Perplexed, Aren went to some of the village elders and inquired about him, but they had said that he’d simply come to the shire more the eighty years ago. To the villages he was known as the Old Man of the Hill and soon began to call him Old Trumpy which he seemed to love.

“My apologize boy!” said Old Trumpy, merrily. “Old Trumpy was not watching where he was going. Old Trumpy was excited for tonight!”

“No,” said Aren, stooping down and picking up Old Trumpy’s hat, brushing it off and holding it out. “I wasn’t paying attention either.

“Ah, thinking about what Old Trumpy will say tonight, eh?” asked Old Trumpy as he took the hat and placed it back on his head. He moved like his feet had springs attached to them. “That good, Old Trumpy knows many things. Many interesting things.”

“Um . . .” said Aren. “I’m just here to talk about my conscription with the sheriff.”

“Eh? You no want to hear? You should. All sort of things, Old Trumpy know all,” said Old Trumpy. “Tonight, Old Trumpy will tell, but some may not believe, what will you do?”

“Um . . .”

Old Trumpy waved his hand, “No, no, no, that will not do! You need to learn; you need to train. Visitor of you past will tell you the way.”

“What?” asked Aren.

“He speaks from beyond, Old Trumpy knows, Old Trumpy sees,” said Old Trumpy. “A great storm comes, must be stopped or we all dead, heh, heh, heh! Old Trumpy will watch and see himself! Tah, tah!”

“Wait!” cried Aren, trying to reach him, but Old Trumpy simply danced out of his reach and still smiling joyfully vanished into the crowd.

Aren tried to fight his way through the crowd, but Old Trumpy had vanished from sight. What was all that about?

I don't know, said Blizzard. *He's a strange creature.*

Strange is right, thought Aren. *Well, I suppose now we'll have to see the stories.*

Perhaps, said Blizzard.

Lips still pursed in confusion Aren turned and with Blizzard in tow, headed up the street toward the castle where he knew the sheriff was making an announcement of the latest conscripts. He was still pondering what Old Trumpy had said when he passed under a wood and iron portcullis. He stepped into a large crowd and showed his letter to a soldier who nodded toward a large cluster of men and boys around his age. They all stood at the foot of stairs that led to the entrance of the castle. Aren took his place among them and waited. There was silence then the door opened, and a man strolled out of it. He was a short man, hardly any taller than Aren who looked to be in his late fifties. He wore sleek and silver furs over his thin build.

He spread his hands and said, “Welcome to Argentum,” he called to the crowd. “You have been called upon to serve our King during these troubled times.”

Vaisey of Argentum had a fruity, unctuous voice; and a smile that did not meet his cold eyes as he surveyed the men. His hat covered his head, and his salt and pepper beard and mustache didn't completely hide his rather weak chin and when he spoke, Aren saw that he had a gold tooth amidst his crooked, rather yellow teeth. “Many of you were called to serve our kingdom as the Empire continues to assault our borders. As you know our efforts have been met with mixed results. We need new troops. Now I know that many of you have never raised a sword in your life, but you will learn.”

He surveyed them as if they were something unpleasant on the sole of his shoe. “But you will learn,” he said. “If not, then you will serve our King in his efforts to protect our lands by helping supply his armies.

You will work in our mines, tend our fields, cook their food, refurbish their arms, and sharpen their swords amongst other things. If you're not good enough to suit the requirements of our army, or continue to whine about other, then you shall pay. Good day."

He turned and walked away as soldiers began to call the men into positions. Aren walked up to the soldier who said at once, "Get into position and your orders will be given to you."

"I need to speak to the sheriff," said Aren. "I'm not enlisting."

The guard gazed at him, "On whose authority?"

In answer Aren held up the wax seal and the soldier's eyes widened then he said, "Very well, come with me, but leave your beast out here."

Blizzard flattened his ears, but Aren soothed him as he followed the soldier into the castle. "Wait here," the soldier said as he opened a door and disappeared for a few minutes, then he reappeared. "The sheriff will see you."

Aren entered the great hall and walked up to the table where the sheriff sat in a high-backed chair. He had removed his hat showing that he was bald save for a tuft of hair in the center of his pate and the fringe around his head. Vaisey put his hat back on his head as Aren approached, still not looking at him.

"My lord sheriff," said Aren. "I apologize for the intrusion . . ."

"Shh!" said Vaisey. "Would you like to be the king, in Aacren. No. Trying to hold our western borders on a finite supply of available men. You are fifteen, of age for service, yet you come here stating that you're not going to enlist."

He turned and gazed at Aren who answered, "It's not that I don't want to it's just that . . ." He halted as he saw that the sheriff's face had gone slack and he was staring at Aren, his brow furrowed in confusion. "My lord?"

"You seem familiar," said Vaisey still staring hard at Aren. "Have we met somewhere before?"

"N-no my lord," said Aren.

"I don't take it upon myself to remember the faces of peasants," said Vaisey. "To me they're all the same. Filthy, unclean, and not worth my time. But your face,"—he said, pointing to Aren as he stood up from his chair—"I've seen somewhere before."

"My lord, I've never been to Argentum before today," said Aren as Vaisey came around the table.

"What village are you from?" asked Vaisey.

“Ealdor sir,” said Aren.

“Ah,” said Vaisey. “Well, that would explain it. Anyone from that village looks like they have his face on them. That thrice blasted lord. *Talian*,”—he spat the word out with distaste—“a more irksome and vicious fly in my ear I’ve never known. Glad he’s dead.”

“Ealdor is no more sir,” said Aren. “It was destroyed three years ago. I’m the only survivor.”

“Hmm, what a shame,” said Vaisey uninterestedly. “Serves it right for birthing the Lightning Flash.”

“He was a hero,” said Aren, bristling. “He died a hero.”

“Oh, well rejoice for the dead hero,” said Vaisey sneeringly. “Now, down to matters, you said that you won’t enlist in the army.”

“My mother didn’t want me to enlist yet,” said Aren.

“Well, let the bells sound around the land,” said Vaisey. “So, the King is short of men and you, his faithful subject, have failed him, but ‘my mother didn’t want me to enlist yet,’ he said in a mocking tone. “I am the sheriff of this shire. As the king’s representative, I am the highest authority. Nobles, knights, and the riffraff all answer to me. Yet you have the audacity to defy my summons to war to defend your country, simply because your mother said not to.”

“Not just her,” said Aren coldly as he tore the note out of his pocket and handed it to the sheriff. “The Court Physician.”

Vaisey frowned, “A member of the Royal Court is soliciting you?” he asked. Taking the letter he opened it, saw the purple seal on the parchment, then gazed back at Aren, the note, then Aren again. “Well,” he said grudgingly, “who am I to ignore a personal summons from the Court Physician.”

He pulled out, quill, ink, a seal, and melted wax. Jotted down something on the letter, then stamped it with his seal. Afterward he tossed the letter onto the table, a sour expression on his face as he said, “Get out.”

Aren took the letter and put it back into his pocket and bowed before walking back toward the door. He was just opening it when Vaisey called, “Boy.”

Aren turned to face him, “Never did catch your name.”

“It’s Aren.” And without another word he left the great hall.

INTERSECTING SAGAS



AFTER HIS CONVERSATION WITH THE sheriff, Aren saw that traders and troubadours had come and were bustling through the town. Aren also joined them, moving through the crowd walking from one booth to another, evaluating the goods with a buyer's eye, despite resolving not to spend any money. Still, he couldn't resist getting a small cherry pie. He licked the syrup from his fingers, wishing for more. It was late in the day, so the troubadours would come out to conduct their displays of performances and tell stories. His favorite stories were about magic, gods, and, if they were fortunate, the Toa warriors.

He walked up to Blizzard and untied him. *Successful?*

"Aye," said Aren. *Vaisey is every bit the charmer that everyone says.*



Dinner that night came and went. It was a hearty event, filling with shouting, teasing and much laughing. When the plates were empty, everyone followed the traders to their small camp and watched the troubadours and minsters play their games, sing their songs, and tell their stories. Old Trumpy was among them, his ever present grim still as present as the sun in the sky as the events began. First were the plays of pure entertainment, full of bawdy jokes, jesters, and the like. But as the time passed, and candles sputtered low in their sockets, Old Trumpy stepped into the light with a spring in his step. He was holding a walking staff and held it up as he recited thus:

"In ages past, Old Trumpy knows, there were those who live, yet now they're gone. Old Trumpy sees the sands of time pass as the cycle of life. We can't relive that which has happened, but Old Trumpy does remember. That which you shall hear is fragmented, yet cherish it, or it will vanish forever!"

His sparkling eyes inspected their interested faces as he began to do a jig while speaking in his overly cheerful voice.

“Before your kingdom was born, and yea even the kings of yore as Old Trumpy saw, the Toa were formed. Protect and serve was their mission, and for thousands of years, they succeeded as Old Trumpy can say. Good was only ever wrought from their powers, and under their tutelage, grand cities were built, and great knowledge was gathered. While they kept the peace, the land flourished. It was a golden age. The elves were our allies, the fish folk our benefactors, the dwarves our friends, and our compatriots the magical beings, so says Old Trumpy. Wealth flowed into all cities and every civilization prospered. But while the Toa flowered, so the seeds of their destruction were sown.”

Old Trumpy began to do his jig around the campfire as he continued.

“Free from their enemies the Toa were, but Old Trumpy knew that they couldn’t guard against themselves. And thus, at the height of their glory, was born in in the kingdom of Navûre into the aristocratic house Tenebrae, which is no more. At ten, Tenebrae was tested, and great power was discovered within him. The Toa accepted him.

“In his training, his skill grew, exceeding all others, save for Old Trumpy. Gifted with a sharp mind, healthy body, and prodigious talent, he quickly took his place among the Toa’s ranks. He continued to master all forms of arcane knowledge and even began to study even dark aspects of magic. Those who saw his abrupt rise as dangerous tried to warn others, but the Toa had grown arrogant in their power. Alas, so said Old Trumpy, that was the beginning of the end.

“Years after his training was finished, Tenebrae took a trip with two friends. Far north they traveled, night and day, and passed beyond De Fells Stygian. It was there that Tenebrae became enamored by the dark powers that resided there. The seeds of evil had been planted. While in that evil place, Tenebrae met a dark lord who ruled the realm beyond the mountains on a barren land of volcanic rock. It was there that the words of the dark lord seeped into Tenebrae, and he desired to pledge his loyalty to this dark lord. However, he needed to prove himself to his new master, so without warning or mercy, Tenebrae killed his friends.”

Old Trumpy brough his walking stick down on the ground with a resounding crack, that made everyone jump, his grin broadened.

“Old Trumpy knows well: With the deed done, he turned to the Dark Lord who still refused his apprenticeship. It was then that Tenebrae

planned a way to join the Dark Lord. Within the plan he faked madness at the death of his friend and sought death in what could be described as a hopeless fevered mindset. He threw himself at everything in sight. Orcs and monsters soon fled from his malevolent form. He knew could hunt, but he made sure that rare was the animal he could find. Thus, when his feet finally found safe havens, he was on the brink of death. A nomad found him collapsed and summoned the Toa.

“Still as a corpse, he was taken to their great temple in Alessium, where he slept for a week while his body healed. Upon awakening, his dark deeds then and what had yet to be where unknown to all but Old Trumpy. He was brought before a tribunal to judge his actions and the death of those who had joined him. Chamming and a master manipulator, Tenebrae convinced the Toa that he could no longer remain in the Toa Order as his actions of defying the High Council and venturing to the dark realm had meant he was unfit to stand as a Toa anymore. The High Council convened and discharged him from their ranks, thus sealing their inevitable doom. The following year Tenebrae returned to his home where he charmed his family with his praise before ruthlessly killing them all in the sitting room. He burned their manor down and framed the murders on marauders. The dark deed done, Tenebrae returned to the Dark Lord and pledged his loyalty to him. Impressed with what had been done by the young man, the Dark Lord accepted him.”

Old Trumpy gazed around.

“To the public, Tenebrae and his mater appeared to be good natured politicians, but from behind closed doors the two planned and plotted. In that time Tenebrae entered his dark apprenticeship, learning secrets and forbidden magic that should never have been revealed. When his instruction was finished, Tenebrae revealed himself to the world, with an army at his side. Thus, the Crown Wars began. Old Trumpy saw Old Kingdoms torn in two as various monarchies sought to join Tenebrae, but it was not to be in the end. Tenebrae fought any Toa he met. With each kill, his strength grew. The Toa were unprepared and fell beneath the onslaught in a mass genocide. As Old Trumpy saw, the free peoples, human, elf, dwarf, fishman and everything in between fought bitterly against Tenebrae, but their leaders were struck down, and they were forced to flee to their secret havens, from whence they leave never more. But many did not escape and were captured by Tenebrae. There he broke

and twisted them into his servants, corrupting them in way so foul Old Trumpy will never say.

“Only Vasil, leader of the Toa, could resist Tenebrae. Wise and powerful as knew Old Trumpy, he struggled to save what he could and keep the secrets of the Toa and the survivors from falling to his enemies. In the last battle, on the Toa Temple’s thresholds in Alessium, Vasil defeated Tenebrae but hesitated with the final blow in a moment of indecision. Tenebrae took advantage and struck a crippling blow. Grievously wounded, Vasil fled, hoping to gather strength. But Old Trumpy wept, for all Vasil’s hope of escape, Tenebrae found him. As they fought, Tenebrae kicked Vasil re-wounding him. With the underhanded blow, Vasil faltered, and Tenebrae gained dominance. With a sword as fast as lightning, he removed Vasil’s head. With that, Tenebrae used Vasil’s death as propaganda to initiate the legendary Toa Genocide. There he killed thousands of Toa in a single day, the rest who escaped were hunted down during the Great Purge. With his rule secured, Tenebrae’s master and he celebrated, and there drunk with wine his master was. His weakness to his advantage Tenebrae slew his master with a blazing sword, for the power to rule shall be his and his alone, on the night Tenebrae anointed himself, Emperor.

“And from that day, he has ruled.”

With the completion of the story, Old Trumpy started to dance away saying, “Now, Old Trumpy is tired, so Old Trumpy goes home to sleep! Be kind, be grateful, and most importantly, never turn your back on rabbit. Vicious things they are.”

Everyone stared after Old Trumpy as he gambled away, whistling a merry tune. Aren stared after him, completely taken aback by what he said. *Rabbits? Vicious? He must have gotten into the grog.*