

THE  
TOWERS

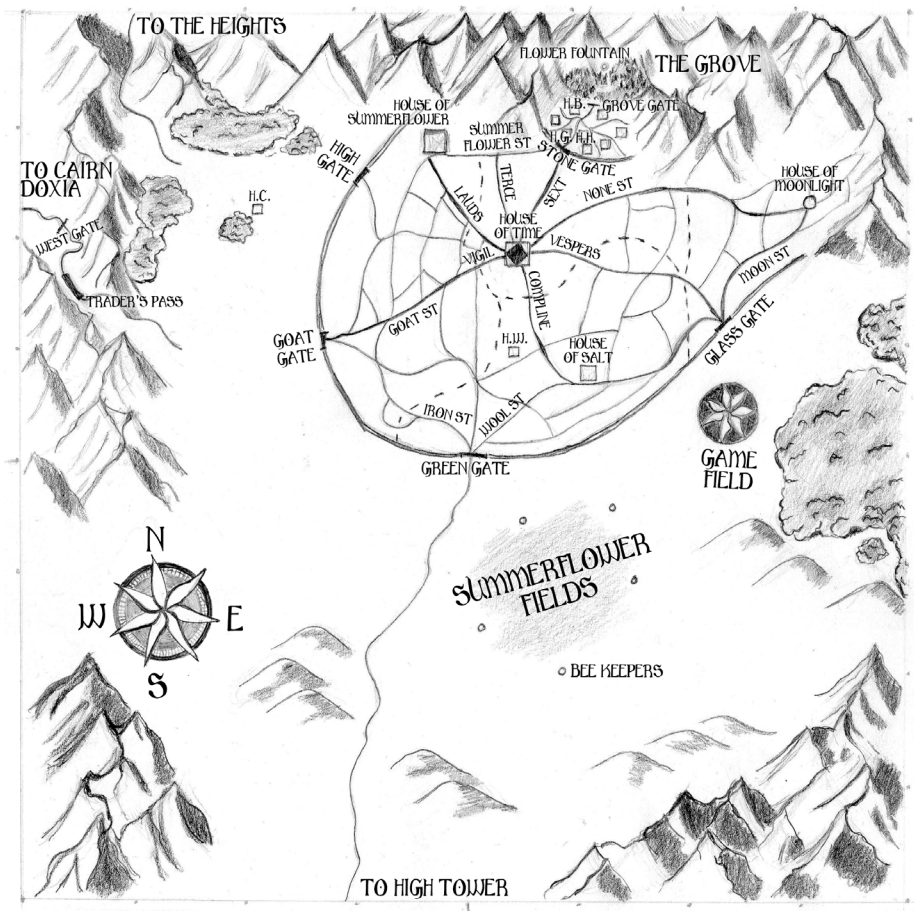
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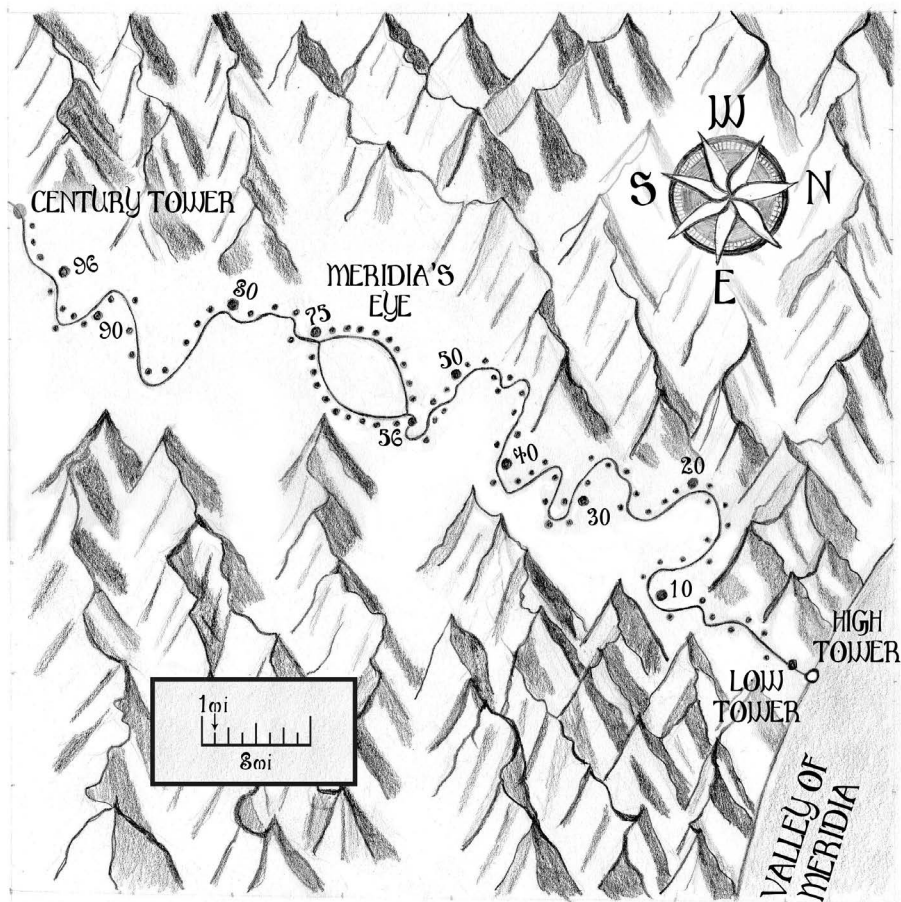
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# CAIRN MERIDIA



# ONE HUNDRED TOWERS



*Part One*

*Neither more nor less than one hundred towers shall shield you from the Nightmare. For each tower is a Prohibition, and each Prohibition is a tower. And the towers alone can save you from the death the Nightmare brings.*

— The First Prohibition

*And he will be like a living tower, a walking stone, a sword of light. He will wake from the Nightmare as one forever Unshamed, destroying all bonds. He will wake broken and alive, ever bleeding, ever dying, ever laughing, ever smiling. And he alone will save you from the death the Nightmare brings.*

— From *The Mysteries of Meridia*

CHAPTER ONE  
**Blood on the Rocks**

**T**he blood trail stretched out ahead of them, following the shattered rocks of the mountainside toward the valley, near a mile below them at this point. The sun was high in the south, and Garrett was sweating under his heavy white wool. But fog still gripped the valley floor, in spite of the heat, sitting just below the treetops like a dark gray blanket.

“I don’t like it,” Cringe said, wrinkling his pug nose and frowning. “Doesn’t smell right to me. Can’t you smell it?”

“It’s just blood,” Garrett said, though privately he was thinking much the same. It looked odd somehow, the blood. Too wet. “No more than a few drops.”

“You said it makes a trail?” Crack asked Garrett, bent over the blood. The big man was sweating even more than Garrett, his massive shoulders hunched.

Garrett nodded. “I didn’t follow it far, but it leads down the mountain for a quarter mile or so at least.”

“I’m telling you, it smells rotten,” Cringe said again.

Cringe wasn’t his real name, of course, no more than Crack’s was his. Sergeant Floramel had given them those names when they’d entered the Tower Guard together. Akryn and Krayken, their real names were, brothers from House Haeland. They were house brothers, not related by blood.

And it showed. Where Cringe's face was shallow and pinched, Crack's was broad and bulbous, and his neck was as thick as a ram's. A red petal decorated Crack's breastplate, a sign of the grace of bravery, the blessing of Ior's strength. Cringe had the silver petal of faith on his chest, and Garrett's own was emblazoned with the orange of diligence. There were plenty of men in the guard who possessed none of Ior's graces, but the scouting teams always included one brave man, one diligent, and one faithful. Brave to fight, faithful to see, diligent to run.

"I smell our dinner," Crack said finally, straightening his big frame. "We haven't had a good bit of meat for days. That bow of yours has been useless."

"Can't shoot what isn't there," Cringe said, which was true enough. Cringe was the best shot in the company though, Garrett had to give him that. He'd seen the man bring down a streaking falcon at a hundred yards, just as easy as throwing a rock downhill. And he was a good tracker. Better than Garrett, anyway. The grace of faith did that, gave men a feeling for things, sharpened their senses in odd ways. But the mountains had been eerily quiet during their descent out of the high passes, deserted of all life save for the flowers and moss. They'd seen neither hide nor hair of game for nigh on a week.

"May be a pronghorn nearby, injured by a cougar," Crack said. "It can't have gone far."

"There's not a lot of blood," Cringe said. "Just drops. Probably not enough to really hurt it."

"Who cares," Crack said. "It's fresh blood, so the thing is close. And all the better if it's not ravaged. We'll take it clean, and sup on venison tonight."

"I don't like it," Cringe said stubbornly.

"You can shove your likes," Crack grunted. "Seeing as how I've got the command here. We're going after some meat."

There was nothing Cringe could say to that, so he fell in behind his house brother, still glancing about and sniffing the air like a ferret.

The blood trail rolled out ahead of them, sometimes clear and bright red on the rocks, sometimes fading away on darker ground, but never disappearing completely. It led them lower and lower downslope, and stuck mostly to the trail. Crack led the way, with his house brother close behind. Garrett took the rear, mopping his brow. Winter snow still held the high passes they had left, but here in the foothills spring had come in force. The air was ripe with the smell of wet earth and grass, and spring flowers



dotted every crack and crevice of the mountainside, white chickweed and yellow glacier lily and bright red widow glass. Beautiful to look at, though it was dangerous to look too long. The foothill paths were cracked and treacherous, full of loose gravel and rotten stone. Garrett's mother always said that Tarn Harrick had broken the mountain to pieces when the first free men came, just to make it harder for the Nightmare to follow. But Garrett thought it likely had more to do with the constant freezing and thawing here. Ice was the only thing stronger than the stone. Ice and time. They had both ravaged these lower passes for generations, and a false step here could drop a man twenty feet, or pin him beneath a boulder as big as a house. Old Ahab, the castellan of Century Tower, had gotten his foot trapped that way, trying to raid a ptarmigan nest for eggs. He'd lost the leg for that, though he'd kept his life. Garrett supposed he'd have made the same trade, if it came down to it. But it was best to keep one's eyes on one's footing, and not on the flowers.

"It's leading us to Tarn's Bridge," Cringe said suddenly, and Garrett realized he was right. Goats and pronghorns and birds had many paths into the mountains, but men and Nightmare had only one: Tarn's Bridge. It wasn't a bridge in truth, but a narrow path that hugged the south-facing cliffs in a long, steep ribbon of stone, no wider than a man's shoulders. The bridge was two miles long at least, and spilled out onto the valley below, amid a tumbledown of boulders and rockfalls. Garrett had been on it once before, and had no desire to relive the experience.

"What's that?" Cringe said, pointing to a small hollow off the path. "Huddled under the overhang."

"Might be our pronghorn," Crack said, leading them over to investigate.

It was. The body was seemingly untouched, no wounds or injuries, no blood on the ground, save for the same few, scattered, wet-looking drops. From the size of the antlers, the animal looked like it had been full-grown in life, but in death it was little bigger than a newborn fawn, more a husk than a corpse, shrunken and dry.

And there was something else too, a horrible smell, something strange and rotten that made Garrett gag, bile rising in his throat.

"There," Cringe said. "You've got to smell that."

"You quit your complaining," Crack growled. "That nose of yours is going to get you in trouble."

"You must smell it," Cringe said. "Garrett?"

"I smell...something," Garrett admitted. "Could just be rot, but..."

Crack glared at him over Cringe's head, but his expression softened

soon enough. "Well, might be I smell something, too," he muttered. "What of it, then? It's a dead body."

"The smell of an open grave," Cringe said. "And hot blood rotting on the ground."

Garrett looked about uneasily, loosening his dirk in its sheath. He knew what Cringe feared now. Every boy and girl in Cairn Meridia knew what a trail of blood and the smell of an open grave meant.

Horror.

"Don't be a fool," Crack said, and Garrett realized he had just spoken the word aloud. "Ain't no horrors this close to the mountains, as you seem to have forgotten. They stay in their tunnels down south and bloody their knives on slaves."

"Except when the Nightmare comes," Garrett said.

"Which ain't for another twenty years," Crack said. "Or have you forgotten how to count, too?"

"The neck," Cringe said. "Look at the neck."

He pointed at a single, dark line running vertically down the pronghorn's neck. *That's where the knife would have gone in*, Garrett thought. The knife that drinks blood.

"There, you see," Cringe said, the fear palpable in his voice. "What else kills that way, if not a horror?"

"Rock lions kill at the neck," Crack said.

"Wound is too neat," Cringe said. "And no rock lion would leave prey uneaten."

"Krayken, might be we ought to arm ourselves, whatever it is," Garrett said.

Crack sniffed the air again and prodded the pronghorn with his foot. The hide ripped like brittle paper, exposing a few yellow ribs. "Right," he muttered. "Arm up then." He pulled a pair of stout, thick handled axes from his pack while Cringe strung his bow and nocked an arrow. Garrett had nothing but his dirk, and that he left on his belt. He could pull it quick enough if need be, and he wanted his hands free in case of a fall.

"Keep a clear head," Crack said. "If it's a horror, it's our job to deal with it. With any luck, it's slipped and smashed its hooded head on the rocks already, but if not..."

If not they would have to fight it, and kill it if they could. The Tower Guard was sworn to protect Cairn Meridia with their lives, and destroy any creature of the Nightmare on sight. They were two weeks hard march from Cairn Meridia though, and far from any tower. Alone.

They started down again, moving slower now because of the weapons. More dead animals dotted the path along the way, a few at first, and then more and more, coming closer together, until they lined the path in a gruesome trail of corpses—hawks and hares and weasels, pronghorns and rabbits and white-pelted goats, black foxes and tree bats, even a brown bear. Every one of them was drained of blood, every one of them had a knife wound in its neck. The bear was so shrunken that it looked no bigger than a dog, its great, shaggy coat hanging loose on its bones. And the smell was near overpowering, and waxing stronger as they drew closer to the bridge.

“He’s killed all the animals,” Garrett said. “That’s why we haven’t seen any the last few weeks.”

“It,” Crack corrected. “Horrors ain’t men. Not any more. And more likely most of the animals have fled. They know the smell of the Nightmare better than we do. Likely these are old kills.”

*He’s admitted it’s a horror we’re tracking, though,* Garrett thought. He didn’t know if that made him feel better or worse.

The path took a sharp turn to the east, down a steep slope of treacherous gravel and scree. They slid down on their butts, feet first, Crack and Cringe still holding their weapons at the ready. A pile of animal corpses greeted them at the bottom. The men had no choice but to break their fall on them, boots crushing the poor dry things beneath their weight. Garrett scrambled over the top of a pair of wolves, holding his breath as corpse dust billowed up around him. At some point in their descent, the warmth of the sun seemed to have faded. Fog still gripped the valley below, though Garrett saw wind start to move the tops of the trees, and he could hear the sound of it whispering.

Whispering.

“Garrett!” Crack barked.

He looked up, and there it was, not a dozen paces from him. The horror.

It was a stooped figure, thin and hunched and clad in inky black wool. Its face was hidden behind a red mask, painted with the snarling face of a demon, and in its hand was a small, slim dagger, slowly dripping blood. It looked just like a horror from the books. Somewhere far off, Garrett was amazed by that. Exactly like it did in the books.

“Feather it!” Crack said.

Garrett heard the twang of Cringe’s bow, and an arrow whistled over his head, taking the horror full in the chest. The thing didn’t seem to

notice. It shuffled forward, staring right at Garrett, whispering, whispering, mask grinning its horrible grin, knife dripping. The daggers always dripped blood, men said, even when the horrors hadn't killed for a long time. Some said it was sorcery, and some that the horrors cut themselves often, to keep it fresh. The stench of death was overwhelming; Garrett groped awkwardly for the dirk at his belt, trembling. *When did it get so cold?*

"Garrett, get behind us!" Crack said.

Another arrow buried itself beside the first, but the horror paid it no attention. Garrett couldn't seem to get his fingers to work properly. It was no more than five steps from him now. He could hear the whispering clearly, a strange rushing that he felt like he could almost understand. His breath was fogging in front of him, his sweat had turned to ice on his brow. The horror lifted his bloody dagger.

And then Crack was between them, broad and bull-necked, swinging an axe in each hand. The horror hissed and slid backwards, supple as a willow. Crack came hard after it, trying to crush the thing under his weight. It slipped away again, but a third arrow whistled over Crack's ear and sprouted in the horror's neck. *How many is it going to take?*

Garrett realized he finally had the dirk in his hand, though he couldn't remember drawing it. Anger flooded through him, washing away the fear. He had just lain there like a babe, shivering and cold. Even Cringe was fighting. His little dirk wasn't much use here, but maybe if he got behind the thing...

Crack gave him little chance though, continuing to press the attack, axes spinning in his hands. The horror fell back and back, staying out of reach, knife probing. Another arrow took it in the knee, and finally this one seemed to bother it, slowing its steps. With a roar, Crack leaped and brought both his axes down, burying them in the horror's shoulders. It fell to its knees, and a final arrow slipped past Crack's side and took it in the eye. The hooded figure collapsed, and the whispering went silent.

Then Crack slumped to the ground, and Garrett saw the knife in his gut.

"Krayken!" Cringe said.

They knelt at his side, Cringe holding his brother's hand. The knife was buried to the hilt, but no blood leaked out. *The knife that drinks blood.* Garrett grabbed hold of it and tried to draw it forth, but he might as well have been trying to pull it from stone. Crack looked like he was shrinking, his face sinking in on itself as the knife drained him dry. A horror's blade never failed to kill.

“Leave it,” Cringe said, pushing his hand away from the knife. “He’s climbing the heights now.”

“I’m sorry, Cringe,” Garrett said, forgetting to call him by his real name. “Your brother fought bravely. Braver than me. You both did.”

“Garrett, look,” Cringe said, pointing over the valley. “For help us, look.”

He looked, and at first he thought the fog had merely darkened, turned from dark gray to full black. But the sun was shining brightly, and the fog was moving in a strange way, boiling like water in a pot. Then he saw the banners waving in the wind, the glint of sunlight on steel, and realized he was not looking at fog.

He was looking at an army.

*It can’t be.* His mouth had gone bone dry. There were twenty years yet. Twenty years of peace.

But the Nightmare had come.

Garrett was on his feet, fear in his legs. “We...we’ve got to get back to the city,” he said. “We’ve got to warn them.”

“You go,” Cringe said, pulling arrows from the horror’s body. “I’m staying with my brother.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Garrett said. “He’s dead.”

“I bloody well know he’s dead,” Cringe snapped. For a moment Garrett thought Cringe might strike him, but the anger faded from his face and was replaced with a strange, calm expression. “You’re much faster than me, Garrett. I’ll only slow you down.”

“So follow behind on your own,” Garrett said. “You’ll still beat them to the city. If that’s where they’re going,” he added lamely. *Could it really be happening now? Decades too soon?*

“I love my brother,” Cringe said, looking at Crack. What used to be Crack. He was shrunk up to almost nothing now, just like the animals had been. “It’s what he would have done. I’ll meet them at the bridge. They’ll have to come up single file, and I’ll have good cover. Might be I can slow them down a day, a few hours. Give the city more time to prepare.”

“Your bow would be more use in a tower—”

“Every man is a tower that stands in a narrow pass,” Cringe said.

“Don’t quote the bloody Mysteries to me,” he said.

“I love my brother,” Cringe said again. He pulled the knife from Crack’s dusty belly, and handed it to Garrett. It came out easily enough, now that its work was done, the skin collapsing around it to form a thin black line. “Take this to the General. He’ll believe you.”

“But Cringe, I mean, Akrin—”

“Love is one life laid down for another,” Cringe said, resolved. “I love my brother. And he loved me. You understand?”

He didn’t, but he saw the look on Cringe’s face. They stared at one another for a moment.

No more than a moment.

Then Garrett took the knife, slipped it in his pack, and set off at a run. It was a two week journey to Century Tower. He aimed to be there in five days.

He did not look back.